

Hot!
Bible!
Short!
Stories!
Michael!
Botur!

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DEDICATION:

I am dedicated to Sarsy, Abe and Violet, in that order. Sorry Vi.

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Excape from Mr Hate

We was playing Excape from Mr Hate at my place. The Browns was playing with us, 'cause there's not enough normal colour kids down our street for two teams. They didn't have no shoes. I'm not allowed to play in Browntown. There's nails and broken glass in Browntown, and all these wasps 'round the rubbish bins. We was using pinecones from my Poppa's wood pile as grenades, but don't tell him. You had to blow up the enemy and nick their soul before Mr Hate got you. I don't like how they call my poppa Mr Hate. You're supposed to write it *Hejt* 'cause he's from the Old Country but the Browns all get it wrong 'cause they're no good at our language.

Our grass was the only green grass on the street even though it had prickles. Most people had yellow grass. My poppa says they're lazy. He says Gooks don't know Thing One about keeping a home 'cause they all live in huts where they come from and their apartments is even smaller than my poppa's War Room and that's pretty tiny seeing as it's only a closet. They make sabotage cars what'll kamikaze on you. My poppa drives a Dodge, does yours? He got it from Detroit. That's in a Merica.

Do you know how to play Excape from Mr Hate? All the brown kids were sposda go behind the gate, and us normal kids in front of the gate, to keep them in the concentration camp. The Browns weren't even playing it proply, you're not allowed to tackle people, I said You gotta be like a cat and go along the fence, else make a distraction and run to the other guys's side before they can catch you, and steal their blue flag what's actually a Charlotte Hornets singlet.

The Browns had to excape the Hollowcause before Mr Hate got home from work, 'cause he was the Common Dance of the concentration camp. I said the Browns had to be the Juice 'cause they had curly hair but they didn't wanna, and the biggest Brown threw a grenade and it got the girl from the birthday cake in the eye and she walked around the willow tree in circles like when you put Sellotape on a fly and rip its wings off, her eyes went all hay fevery and smudged, and she got her mum's phone number off the label of her jumper but she couldn't read it 'cause she got tears on the paper and the numbers went all smeary, but it wasn't a actual grenade, it was only a pinecone.

Big Brownie, he's so high he can honestly do a slam dunk on the basketball hoop at school, and sometimes when he talks to you, you can't see the sun 'cause he's so high, he took one of Poppa's tomato plant stakes and snapped it over his knee and started smashing the heads off Mum's old flowers 'cause he said there was a bee and I was like You better not! and he was like I'm just weeding and they were looking at the colour of the skin on their palms and giggling at me and then Big Brownie started poking the normal colour girl who was crying with the stick, and I needed to get Poppa's Medikit for her, like GI Joe's got, but it was in the locked secret War Room that looks like a linen closet but it's honestly not.

Big Brownie shooshed all his bros quiet while I tiptoed up the steps and crept inside. It's not the first linen closet, it's the second one. I tiptoed over the stuff Mum left in the hallway, her fossils and horseshoe crabs and whale teeth and bromeliads and geodes and this one Prolific rock with zillion year-old water in it. Mum liked things from before there was people on the earth. She said it was less complicated, then.

It was dark and dry and smelled like inside a box of leather school shoes, and there was no bees humming and everything was green and tan just like our camo curtains that made us invisible. Even the safe was painted camo. The War Closet's not locked 'cause Poppa says I'm his Loo Tenant and he trusts me not to touch anything. I've only ever seen in, like, three times in my whole life, when Mum used to vacuum it and you snuck a peek from the laundry.

There was five medals in a glass picture frame what used to have a picture of Mum in it from the black and white days. There was rifles, and pistols, and bullets separate, I didn't know what ones went with what, but I knew how to clip a rifle together 'cause I seen Poppa doing it for when the revolution comes, the Native Uprising could happen any day. And there was Shells, but they were way harder and more goldeny colour than any turtle shell, and cold, like they didn't want you to touch them. And there was Poppa's flag with the bent cross sign on it that the Browns always scratch into the desks at school, I honestly seen them. And there was a box with extra clay, Claymore it said, with wires hanging out of it. I think Claymore's like Acme, you know, that Wile E Coyote uses to blow up Roadrunner? It's the same one as Poppa tried to use on that tree stump, anyway, before the thing happened to Mum.

I could smell the cold chemicals as I opened the MediKit and rust-dust was falling off the latch when this cape of light was dumped on my shoulders and Poppa put a crab-pincer on my ear, and his bike helmet bumped on the front door as he marched me outside and he pulled my pants down and smacked my bum in front of the Browns and bent my thumbs 'til I let go of the Medikit and the bandages spilled down the steps and Big Brownie was like, Mr Hate, I need it for my mum, and Poppa glared at him mean-as.

'She needs it for her smoking, Mr Hate,' Big Brownie went and my Poppa was like, 'She does not NEED them, she WANT them,' and his chest was going up and down like when you jump on a waterbed and he went and stood in the middle of the street until the Browns had all cleared off and the normal girl'd got picked up and he didn't even see me hide the box in the bushes and when he came back, he was going, 'This, you stay out off,' and dabbing the shininess off his brow with his hanky. I'm pretty sure he was saying to stay out of the War Room but it looked like he was talking about his head.

*

The Native Warriors were coming to raid us.

I heard this swooshy sliding sound, then I saw this yellow fuzz growing around the edges of this big scary black guy. The sweeping sound was Poppa's army socks. They were real thick and warm and they swept dust as you went, which was good 'cause Poppa hardly had time to do the cleaning no more. Big Brownie's mum used to do it but then, nah. I asked Poppa every spring if I could pretty please do the cleaning and I even put the apron on and everything but he said Take Zis Off. There is whole tribe of people who they should do for us, yes.

'What's that sound?'

He unbuttoned my jammies and put his hand on my chest. His palm felt like warm sandpaper. 'Breathe,' he went, and I gasped. The whole bed groaned as he sat down. 'I want you should give this back.'

'Give what back?'

'You know what.'

‘But I don’t, honest.’

We could both hear my heart slowing down. Poppa went, real calm, ‘I am going to giff you three, and then I’m going to take you out there and giff you de rubbing on de backside. Now: One, Two– ‘

‘I DON’T HAVE IT!’

‘THREE.’

‘OKAYOKAYOKAY!’

I started pulling the rifle out by the barrel and it seemed to go on forever, it was so long it reached right down to where my blankets were tucked in, and the wooden handle had got all warm against me and suddenly I was cold without it. The *tock* and *ffffflud* noises meant that he was breaking the rifle down, and you could sort-of see from the outiest reach of the kitchen light making the wood glow. My Poppa can break down a rifle in forty seconds, can yours?

I pulled the cover back to get a better look, and this whole case of bullets fell out and donked on the floorboards and rolled around, louder than ever, it was forever before they stopped.

‘What is? What is?’ He was pulling a stuck round out of the chamber.

‘It wouldn’t go in so I hit it and it got stuck... .’

‘NEFFER NEFFER NEFFER force de bullet.’

He slapped my face and this burp of air came out of my mouth, but I didn’t cry. My cheek went all hot and it felt nice.

‘You this neffer. Neffer neffer neffer. Blow up in de face, ja?’

‘SHOW ME HOW! Show me how to load it!’

‘You want other slap? Hrmn? Go to bed.’ There was a squeak as he got up off the bed, then the sweeping noise again in the blackness.

‘Are they coming back?’

‘No.’

‘Can we go after them?’

‘Go to bed.’

‘I’m in bed, already.’

‘Just go to bed, ja?’

‘When are we gonna get ‘em?’

The yellow fuzz flickered out, and everything was black. D’you reckon Big Brownie’s ever shot any guys?

*

I found this thing in Dad’s War Room called a Canteen. It’s like what if a drink bottle was hard and bulletproof and had metal inside and it takes ages to screw the cap off and if you drop it it goes DONK, totally different sound to a normal drink bottle. When you put regular water in, it turns into War Water. The Brown kids just had a two litre Coke and they all slurped it out of their hands at playtime going Gizza sip cunt else I’ll smash you. Big Brownie did the pouring. He poured these real exact amounts and didn’t spill none. I said, What’s that you wrote on your knuckles? and he jabbed me in the face and it looked like the F word but it might’ve been his Mum’s name and I went You’re gonna get in sooooo much trouble and I wanted to say I’d snuck the Medikit into the bushes but he pulled his hood over his head and went, Tell Mr Hate wassup.

‘Um, okay. Tell your Mum wassup too.’

‘You getting smart?’

The Browns got in trouble ‘cause we was drawing pictures of our family and the teacher said they had way too many people in their picture and their Poppa wasn’t even in it, plus you weren’t allowed to draw gang stuff at school and Big Brownie said it wasn’t a gang, and

Miss said Well tell me why it is they're all wearing the same colour, and Big Brownie said 'Cause we're at a funeral, and he got sent to the office, and Miss saw my drawing of me and Poppa and tonnes of empty room around us and gave me a gold star sticker. It was like getting one of Poppa's medals, but not as good.

Halfway through lunch, a Brown kicked the ball over the fence into the factory with all the dumpsters so we played Cowboys and Indians instead, and the Browns was sposda be the Indians but they didn't wanna and I was like, But you hafta, and they all said they didn't wanna be the bad guys, and I went, But you're sposda, and Big Brownie threw bark in my face and I sneezed heaps and my bogies came out all black and I had to swig heaps of War Water from the canteen and he robbed it out of my hands and his bro ran away with it and I called him a Richard Head and he called me a Homo Sapien so I went, 'I HOPE YOUR MUM'S DEAD ALREADY.'

After lunch my poppa coached rugby in his prison guard uniform and gave us all slices of lemon at half time, and we had to pull our shirts over our heads for shade, and no one ate the lemons, and the Brown kids waited for their coach as the caretaker mowed the grass. Their uncle was the league coach and he was late but when he came, he was completely black and shiny, like the leather sofa in the waiting room, and his back had a giant fist on it, and there were two other coaches too, wearing black jeans and all them boys got ice cream but we didn't, and I could see them spitting in the War Water Canteen and flicking it on each other and kicking the canteen.

Poppa was trying real hard to show this one boy how to catch the ball real good but the boy was hardly even listening, just staring over at the Browns at league practice, and Poppa just kept saying stuff into the boy's ears and a ball hit Poppa in the side and Poppa got mad and Poppa saw me standing there and said, You heff misplace your drink? and he pushed a drink bottle into my hand and I thought about losing his canteen and I pretended I had hay fever 'cause my eyes went all pink 'cause I didn't even want a drink but I didn't want to hurt Poppa's feelings. I kicked one of Poppa's medicine balls and it hurt my foot. Man I was thirsty, it was so hot your spit fried on the tarmac, but I didn't wanna drink normal dumb tap water. I stared over at the Browns. They hardly even had to do any training, it looked sweet, but then Poppa clamped his fingers on my shoulder and squeezed. 'First to shoot,' he said, and his breath made my ear hot, and he went 'Pop-pop,' pointing his finger like a gun across at the far side of the field,

where the people rippled in the heat.

The league practice finished early 'cause Big Brown started smashing one of his cousins. He kicked the swings as he went out through the playground. Then all the little browns followed him, spitting these big hoikers of snot on the concrete as they went, and kicking something hollow and metal as they went. Their pools of snot and clear spit looked like fried eggs. Their auntie picked them up from the edge of the motorway. She tipped her fish bones out of the van window but she didn't get out of the van. When she pulled away, one of them was doing the browneye against the window but I didn't know whose bumhole it was. His bumcheeks went normal colour against the glass. His bumhole was bright red. I wondered what colour mine would be if I done a browneye, 'cause you can't see your own bum.

The canteen, they must've been kicking.

When I was sure the guy's bumhole couldn't see me, I aimed at the van.

'Pop-pop.'

*

The night was a heavy black jersey pulled over my head. I couldn't sleep after story time. I didn't hear if the Gooks won or the good guys won in Poppa's story, 'cause there was a helicopter hovering over Browntown, all this light and noise but then it brummed away and a minute later the dogs shut up and I needed to pee real bad. I couldn't even remember what story Poppa'd read to me, Escape from Colditz, I think. I heard these crisp clompy footsteps like the Clydesdales at HistoryMysteries and the door opening and did you know the rumbling was coming from the street. I peeled back the curtains and I could see elbows sticking out of a low, growling car. It rumbled like after a huge bomb in those brown and white movies Poppa always put on. I saw a shadow wriggling and it was Poppa crawling along the driveway with the rifle slinged over his shoulder and in his hands was this box, and one of the men jumped out of the car, saw the box, and jumped back inside and they revved real hard and it sounded like a chainsaw and Poppa was trying to put the Claymore box on top of the back wheel but they drove forwards

then squealed in a circle and it stinked like the fires at the rubbish dump and Poppa picked the box up and he stood there for like a whole hour as my breath turned into drops on the window then he marched back up the driveway and I had to slip the curtains shut again 'cause if he saw one whisker of light, he'd tell me off so bad, and I heard him slam the door and do up all the latches and the chain and then these empty, asthma sounds and then this tinkle. Dad was drinking regular water from the tap.

*

When I went to wee at lunch in the Boys' Toilets, Big Brownie was holding his next biggest bro's arm out and the brother was crying and Big Brownie had a actual smoke, not a candy one, and he was pressing the smokey end on his brother's arm and lucky they didn't see me and I ran into a stall and I needed to poop but he might hear me so I held it in and it hurt, sharp, like Jap bamboo torture. There was just the sound of wet lips and the boy blowing his nose and the coughing urinals getting wet.

When I came out, I had a heart attack. Big Brownie was just standing there, on his own. His arms was swaying by his sides like the wind chimes Mum left. His arms had spots on them, like dark chicken pox. His eyes was black and cold, like the barrel of Poppa's rifle. He took a five buck note out of his pocket. Have you ever seen one of them? Me either. I took the five bucks. I took my bag off the coathook and pulled the box out and gave it to him. He sniffed it and went,

'She don't need no clay.'

'It's medicine. You just undo that thing and pull the thing.'

He squinted at it. He's real good at inventions and he can get Miss's desk drawers open when she's not looking. He put the thing in a shopping bag. The five bucks was dirty and oily and smelled like Big Brownie's pockets. I think it had fried chicken on it. I don't get how come you can eat that much fried chicken and still always be hungry. I was washing it in the hand basin when he came up behind me and clamped his elbows over my ears and I thought he was scalping me like a Indian and I stamped on his foot and screamed, 'I'LL GET MR HATE ON YOU!' Then he let me go, and we stood there 'til we got

our breath back, then he walked out into the light, clutching the Claymore mine for his stupid Mum.

The top of my head was all warm, after. He was only giving me a Noogie.

*

The motorway was so wide and loud like when that brown lady used to do the vacuuming and the motorway had so many broken headlights on it that I wanted to just sit down and close my eyes in the middle of the road and cry until when I opened my eyes, Poppa would be standing there, but I had to find Big Brown. I headed straight towards the prison. Most boys's dads are in there. It's higher than anything, you can't miss its walls. I couldn't wait.

The Browntown streets was empty, I think they musta all been at choir or something. It felt like I was the only boy on Mars. The grass had lots of mud and puddles in it. Did you know that's what No Man's Land looks like? There was paint on the things that shouldn't've had paint on, like the footpath, and there was no paint on the stuff that should've had paint on, like people's fences. The cars were all blue or black, and people had ginormous Mack trucks parked on the sidewalk outside their houses (I didn't know you were allowed to do that) and all the washing on people's lines was black, there was heaps of those blue scarves with the white patterns, flapping in the gentle wind. There was bags of rubbish on the strip of council grass even though it wasn't rubbish day. It was hot and sticky and there were locusts and grasshoppers and flies, and t-shirts in the gutters, and I checked all the packets of smokes but there weren't any smokes in them. Big Brownie would have a smoke, I betcha. Didju know he said you can get free refills if you take the empty cigarette packets back to where you bought 'em?

I found the Browns's house. It's just one of those things that you know. I think I must've been there when I was a little baby, for a party or something. Everyone knows where everyone lives, just like everyone knows about the rudie nudie calendar in the shed where the caretaker parks the ride-on mower, and my Poppa's Secret Room.

The Browns had a weird green and yellow flag nailed into their porch with Bob My Lee on it. The porch steps were all crumbly.

They had heeeeeeeaps of bottles on the porch, in these wooden boxes. I had a hammer in my bag and I wanted to smash the bottles. I got a massive fright 'cause there was this tiny little boy on the lawn, pushing a lawnmower that was way too big and it wasn't fair, it was real grinding and squeaky and kept getting stuck and it wouldn't budge and the boy was grunting.

'How come you've got a wheelchair?' I said to him. It was just on the porch. I'd never seen one without someone in it.

The boy didn't say nothing. He was fighting with the lawnmower. I pushed the front door open and when it banged on the wall, I pooped myself, just about. I heard each footstep groan. My heart was slamming and my ballsack was all thick and hard like a tennis ball. My backpack was feeling real heavy. I tried to step over all the cigarette butts but I couldn't, and not just those, there was little brown bottles, and Band-Aids and tubes too. There was this door in the hall saying NO ENTRY so I pushed it open. It was like the gateway to Narnia or something. Down some steps was this jungle of plants even taller than me and real hot lights above, like the fireworks were gonna be tonight. But I could tell there were beasts hidden in the thick rows of bushy, stinky plants so I turned and sprinted back up out of there to the porch where it was shaded, away from those real bright lamps over the plants. I had to dump some ballast. I had to go Number Twos, soon as I'd found Big Brown. Poppa said you have to when you're on Covert Ops, you always have to dump something. I didn't need the grenade so when I got back on the porch, I chucked it in the long grass. The boy could grind it up with his lawnmower. But I went out into the silent street then came back. I asked the boy where everyone was. He said they were all at a tangy. Like the lolly? He said It's a funeral. He said They're over there. He pointed to the pointy top of a church.

I started sprinting towards it. I could see Poppa pinning the medal on my chest and going, Pop-pop-pop. I ran into a alleyway and got to a safe spot and found somewhere with no dog poop to kneel and my panting slowed down. I looked around and realised it wasn't a church, it was a corner of the prison.

I pulled out the stock and barrel and had the rifle together in about two minutes. My hands were all slippery and I nearly stuffed it up. I'd oiled it real nice, got the metal and dust out. I screwed a bear-

net on. It was real heavy and bulky and cold, like a heavy fishing rod. A bear net isn't like a net for catching bears, it's a long sharp knife you put on the end of your rifle to poke bears. I put a bullet in the chamber but it wouldn't close. I tried to close it again and again. My heart was beating and my bumhole felt like having a baby. I had to hurry. I'd have to hammer the bullet in to make it fit, that must be how you do it. I forced the bullet in as much as I could, then took out my hammer, and moved my thumb out of the way, and held the rifle real stiff, and held my arm back, aimed the hammer at the bullet and took a humongous swing.

Body Without A Head

They leave pets buried in backyards in lots of cities and they're not allowed to put decorations on the walls because mum and dad will be in trouble with the landlord. Daddy makes films everywhere and Mum stars in films everywhere and there are always parties. She finds his videos of Saturday Night Fever and 54 and his stacks of dance music tapes, but there's no clubbing for her, so Jezz sets up her own club. There is a huge box that the refrigerator came in and they're allowed to paint it and turn it into a club and it doesn't matter so much each time they move, as long as the box stays. Jezz and Clyde don't need to be watched when they're in the box.

Clyde brings home some skirts with a different girl's name written on the tag and Daddy kicks him for the first time and Jezz thinks it's a weird thing to do to someone, to kick them like a football, and Clyde never tries to give things to Mum and Dad again, although he supplies everything to the kids at whatever school they're at. Usually it's erasers and boxes of juice. From her corner, hidden under the tablecloth, Jezz always sees the big girls at Mummy and Daddy's parties swishing their drink in these real skinny glasses, like the tiny vases at restaurants that you put a single rose in, so Clyde borrows a whole box of the tiny vase-glasses and they're all Jezz will drink out of. Sometimes they have to go to restaurants that are only open when the sun goes down, and there's only food and fizzy drink to play with, and their stomachs get sore and it doesn't even taste exciting after you have three of them, and the lights are too flashy and sharp. Clyde has to read Jezz the cocktail menu because her eyes don't work properly because Mummy's glasses don't work on her.

Clyde makes friends everywhere because people are scared of him. He never gets in trouble because no one ever watches him. Him and his friends work out which houses read their catalogues and newspapers the most quickly, and they deliver to just those houses, and dump the rest in a donation bin. Clyde borrows Mummy's treasure for her, tampons, earrings, picture frames, rings, but she has nothing to sell him and he tells her he doesn't want any money. He shows her real interesting notes and coins with pictures that she would've never thought of. Jezz falls in love with all the boys in all his gangs. She loves how their skin colour and hair changes in the different cities across the continents, and she writes them songs. Every song is about love, love which can make the tropical summers cool

and love that can make the northern snows cosy. All of Gloria Estefan's songs are about love, Madonna's and Roxette's, the timeless ones that make her feel like she doesn't have to listen to gravity.

The Cardboard Club is beside a barbecue in a backyard, then it's in the storage room of an apartment building, then it's in the carpark on a ferry. It goes wherever Jezz goes, and Jezz goes wherever Daddy is making movies. It has a door where you have to show Clyde your ID and he puts a sticker on your hand. You put on a hula hoop as you go in. Jezz glues glitter on her face and performs her songs inside. She's taped backing music off Hitz FM. Jezz has six tapes of songs. Clyde sticks his fingers down his throat and pretends he's puking, but no other boys are allowed to do that or Clyde will hit them. When she's played both sides of her tape, Jezz kisses all the boys on the cheek, the sons of waiters and loaders and actors, and Clyde isn't sure if he should beat the boys up or not. There will always be boys in the next city.

Clyde borrows her packets of CDs and tapes for her birthdays, and sometimes on ordinary days. She writes her name painstakingly on the stickers, with entire rainbows of felt pen. She has to carefully time her songs so they fit perfectly on the tapes. Her mum dies without a warning and they burn her into fairy dust and Jezz has a hard time putting together a perfect tape, they make them too short, the tapes are supposed to last an hour but she can't even fit the whole 100 minutes on them, and there's a new mum that Dad never shows them.

It only takes her a couple of years to watch most of the movies in the whole world and sometimes she pauses them so that Elizabeth Taylor will linger longer on screen. She rewinds and rewinds and says the actors' lines perfectly. She's afraid to do better acting than Elizabeth Taylor. She does exactly the same acting as Elizabeth. Some of the teachers cuddle her and cuddle her and Clyde watches through the windows. Most times they begin a new school, no one has even heard of Clyde, so he has to let them know who he is.

* * *

Her brother's friends can't stop giggling as they touch the Twins. This huge, jutting spear sticks out of their pants and they laugh and battle them and when they pee, it goes on the ceiling. The boys are still giggling as they hand their money over to Clyde. He gets mad with

how cramped the Cardboard Club is and tells Jezz he's taking it down. Jezz pulls down her t-shirt and stares at Clyde. He grabs his friends roughly and pulls them into the den to play GTA Vice City. Jezz doesn't know what to do so she makes some powdered juice and shakes it up. She has to drag a chair into the kitchen to stand on, to reach the good cocktail glasses. The new mum has far more cocktail glasses than regular glasses. Dad throws out old mum's stuff all the time and Jezz has to save whatever she can from cats and crows. One of the rose-glasses drops and when it shatters, the broken pieces are bigger than the whole glass was. It's hard for Jezz to figure out how these sharp, differently-shaped pieces could go together. She stares at the fragments for a bit with her mouth open, then she turns back and takes down the other glasses real careful. She pours the juices just right and puts them on a tray and carries them through into the dark den with the glowing TV. The PS2 is telling them what to do.

'Here's your martinis, gentlemen.' She places the glasses beside the boys. She knows they're used to drinking out of plastic. They can't even look at her. They're trying to fold their boners away. Clyde can't sit down, he's telling everyone which buttons on the controllers to push and how hard. Jezz crouches behind the boys' couch, peeping over their shoulders to see the cool game they're playing. They elbow each other in the guts and, snickering, one of them writes on a bit of paper torn from the TV Guide and gives it to Jezz.

'It's a cheque,' he goes. 'It's your tip.'

It's the bit with the price, \$2.95. She stands up and lifts up her shirt again. Her shirt's over her head, so she can't see anything. 'Don't you wanna see me again?' she says, muffled. But the boys are snickering too hard so she goes away into the kitchen. Clyde is already there ahead of her cleaning up the mess, pouring the dustpan into the rubbish bin. His bare foot is stamping the linoleum with buttons of blood.

'Get lost,' he says, 'You don't have shoes on. You'll cut yourself.'

Jezz tosses her yellow hair behind her head and says, 'Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn,' and shivers her eyelids like butterfly wings.

'You so owe me,' her brother says, 'I got better stuff to do.' He

doesn't need a chair to pull the paper towels down from the high cupboard. His arms are powerful. He puts the whole roll of paper towels in her hands as he barges past her, not looking at her on purpose. Jezz takes the cardboard tube from the centre of the paper towels and follows Clyde back into the den. 'Do one more show for the boys,' he tells her, and when they say they've gotta get home and eat dinner, he tells them never to come back or else he'll punch their heads into their bodies like a turtle. He's moving town soon, so their brothers won't do anything.

She asks him, 'Wasn't my music good?'

* * *

The piercer tells her to hold her singlet up. Jezz winces and tries to hold her phone above her eyes, texting. The pillow under her head absorbs two neat, hot tears and her friends, sitting on vinyl chairs, swinging their legs, giggle and gasp and show each other how to roll cigarettes.

'I know your bro,' the piercer whispers, 'The nigger's solid. Tell him I said Wassup.'

'What does solid mean?'

'He got patched, didn't he?'

'I'm Jezz by the way. I'm a singer. What's your name?'

'Yeah I already read ya tat,' he says, pointing to Jezz's name sashaying across the bottom of her back. 'Who done that for ya?'

'Clyde. He's got his own gun.'

'Tat gun?'

'And one of those, too.'

'I've got some work for him, if he's available. Give him my card.' He reaches down her shirt and puts his business card between her nipple and the cotton singlet. Then the piercer squeezes a clamp and a

barbell slides through the pinch of skin below her belly button, and he screws the butterfly onto the ring and adjusts it. He tells her to pull down her pants and he wipes her with a damp cloth, and she writhes and tries to hold her legs together and to finish her text.

‘Got some scar tissue here,’ he says.

‘They cut us apart,’ Jezz says, ‘We’re twins.’ She blinks so that her eyes will sop up her tears.

‘Okay if I keep rubbing? You girls get out. Scat. Go to school or something.’ The other girls somehow make it down the stairs even though they’re not looking where they’re going, and Jezz tries to sit up, not sure who needs her more. The man shoves her down and his hand is so heavy and she can’t quite finish the smiley face she’s punching into her phone.

‘STOP. Quit it for a sec?’

‘This better be good... .’

She makes him promise he’ll do another tattoo on her, another name, on the front of her hard, flat belly, opposite to where she got Jezz inscribed. It stings, the time Jezz spends lying on her back while he jabs and scrapes and pierces her, but Clyde will be totally stoked.

* * *

Jezz gets sent out of class for cutting the bottom inches off her school shirt and making everyone ask about her tattoos. While they type up the form that deletes her from school, she sits in reception picking dried gunk from her belly button. When the piercer came all over her guts, the piercing got infected, and she thinks it sort of warped her tattoo.

She has more friends outside of school than inside, anyway, and she brings them home, hoping to catch Clyde in between burglaries. The house is theirs, with Daddy selling production rights to kings with black curly hair, and Clyde is filling all the unused rooms and the three car garage with PS3s and laptops and exercycles and toasters and cell phones still in their boxes. They have cartons and cartons of Singstar and Guitar Hero but he never plays with Jezz, he just likes to take

them and keep them. She spots him every few nights and each time he's wider, heavier, his arms are the same thickness as his legs now and his fingers are like rebars and he is shaving his skull with Daddy's razors and trying to grow his chin hairs long. He can command any vehicle - it used to be BMXs, now he looks natural in BMWs and squeezing motorcycles between his thick thighs. He wears gym gear all the time, singlets and mini shorts, and he's slowly getting prison stripes tattooed from his shoulders down to his ankles, and there's a ball and chain inked onto his foot. Every weekend he gets another stripe, from this guy that actually toured with this band that opened for the Rolling Stones. When she tries to introduce girls to him, he waves them towards his friends. It's not possible that he's a virgin, but she knows he's never had sex with anyone. Clyde won't say where he got it from, and no one knows how to set it up, but he's got an amp and turntables and twenty boxes of cocktail glasses. Vanloads keep coming and coming, and his friends get older and older, some of them even have grey hair and long things on their chins. Clyde has got something you can't get at any tattooist: cracks in his forehead and at the corners of his eyes. He's only an hour ahead of her - what could have happened to him in an hour?

She's moved into Mummy's old bedroom now and the wallpaper is completely covered up with posters of her idols, carefully cut from magazines, the windows too, and the sunlight makes the teeth of the idols glow. Clyde squints when he absolutely has to go in, always looking at some project at the front of his mind. He walks like he's got a nail in his shoe, always showing his teeth and frowning and hobbling slowly. He carries so much weight on his body.

A rainy day is as close as they're going to get to night time, so they pull all the curtains shut and only use the light of their cellphones and they party, just six girls and four scaly men, and Jezz riding the notes like Falcor and thrusting with the beat on a little stage made from a washing basket tipped upside down, and Clyde like a pillar standing in the hallway with his arms folded. She stamps his anvil hand, whispers into his ear that it's free to get in before 11 tonight, but she licks his ear without meaning to and he headbutts her and the next thing Jezz knows, her friends are pulling her up and pouring cold Coke onto her lips and she wants to cry but crying is for songs, not for real life.

She's wondering if there will ever be a graceful way to leave the bathroom when Clyde kicks the door in and tells everyone he'll burn

their houses down if they don't vanish off right now and he drags Jezz by one arm into her bedroom and flops her on her back. A leathery man hovers around the door and Clyde presses his chin against his and he goes back to the club and Clyde kicks the door closed. She lets him spread her with his hand, like smoothing a sheet. Her legs open automatically, if he wants to. He says, 'Hold up a sec,' and goes away and comes back with a needle and a handkerchief and a lighter and sunglasses. Her arms are riveted to the mattress. He slides on the shades, lights a cigarette and presses the needle against it.

'Where'd you get that?'

'Mum's sewing stuff.'

Clyde takes off his singlet and she can see the word PROSPECT and a number curving across the top of his chest and she's excited and wants to show him her tattoo so they can be tattoo twins but he keeps flattening her and sticks the orange needle into the lump around her piercing, and Jezz's rigid stomach tenses and she says, 'GodJesusGod,' but her eyes are dry and Clyde isn't making any sound at all. She makes a mental note to always wear sunglasses at all times, forever and ever. There are 60,000 party napkins in packets of 100 in stacked boxes in the corner, and he punches a hole in a box, rips a napkin from its packet and gently dabs pus with red swirls in it from Jezz's belly. Then he unscrews the butterfly jewel on her ring, holds it up to the light, squints at it, and says, 'You shoulda checked with me first... '

Clyde reaches for his singlet but Jezz picks it up with her big toe and bends her foot behind her head.

'Gimme that.'

'Gimme something for singing tonight.'

She wraps her pine-coloured legs around him and he squirms, twisting like there's a net on him, but the thick black denim and buttons where his stomach funnels into his pants are pointing straight at her, a big bulging arrow, and when she unbuckles his belt and tugs his jeans down, he doesn't waddle away pulling them up, he merges with her and, gritting his teeth, punishes her for irritating him. There is the wooolp of a police siren and Clyde peels a curtain away from the window and pastes the curtain back and moves away like the curtain's

electrified. His back's against the cupboard and he grabs Jezz's ankle and goes, 'Find out what one called the cops. Promise me.'

'Anything.'

'You can't have none of this junk,' he says, sweeping his arm over boxes and boxes of Heineken underneath a pallet of blow dryers, 'It's not even mine. Some boys might be round to pick up the bikes. Don't touch nothin.' He finally hauls his undies and jeans up and pulls Jezz's shirt down and smooths it over her belly button. A patch of darkness blooms just above the hem, she's still leaking bloody pus and her butt is sticking to the bare mattress they made love on. Her legs try to pin him like forceps but he sweeps them off.

'I gotta do a little Sing Sing,' he says, trying to make his belt buckle connect, 'Year or two, I'd say. Don't let any of these dickheads fuck ya.' He leaves Jezz on her back, and pulls some keys from his pockets. Do they belong to a jetski, or a helicopter, or a snowmobile? She can't hear what happens because the floor and walls are rattling and it sounds like someone is banging on the wall over and over, and an engine revs, but behind her eyes she can see him getting tackled and his arms pinned behind his back, and she thinks, Sad Smiley Face.

* * *

Two Korean guys are both trying to have her. She tries to sing over the disco music but it's impossible, so she sings under it. She tells the two guys to kiss each other, but they start fighting and one of them gets shoved into the road by a bouncer. In the handicapped toilets, Jezz's knees get soaked black. This karaoke bar has no food menu, so she has to suck a whole cocktail shaker to get the taste of the man out of her mouth. She's allowed all the alcohol she wants from the bar, but she doesn't like drinking that much, to be honest, it makes it hard to remember her song lyrics. Jezz's favourite thing in the whole wide world is watching people's feet tapping to the rhythm of gigantic speakers while she sings. Harmonising with the speakers can make the pool tables disappear and make her feel less dirty. She does a lot of private parties, and this show at the strip club where she has to open her mouth as wide as it can go, but she writes on LinkedIn and Facebook and Twitter that her heart belongs to Sing Sing, and she is the house singer here and here only. The walls aren't cardboard and she lost all her pinups, but this is a comfortable place before she

explodes and becomes a spray of stars in the sky. Whole gangs of Koreans adore her, but they keep trying to buy her, and they keep asking who her manager is, the manager written on the business cards she printed on her HP Deskjet - who is Mr Sing Sing? How can we sit down with him? What is his price?

She's brought girls who she friended but they disappear from the door and Jezz rushes after them. She's not even sure they realise that she is a 110% professional singer (two nights a week, at least), or that she can get the high score on every edition of SingStar, and that her voice is so, like, omigawd that you can't even tell if you're hearing karaoke or not. The wind is vicious and they all get goose bumps as it reaches down their tops without even paying. Jezz only friended these girls because they get paid by the karaoke bar managers to bring customers in but they've turned out to be pretty average. One girl has black skin and red hair. She stops a taxi and bangs on the bonnet, then as she walks away laughing, her heel snaps and she lands with her feet pointed in different directions, one ankle twisted, and she laughs instead of screaming and it scares Jezz. Jezz can't go into the next club without her friends, really, what if they stop coming to her gigs and don't download her EP? A bouncer tries to shove her deep inside a club that's all green but they aren't going to ID her, so she pulls her ID out anyway because it's nice to be reminded how young she is. He speaks firmly and clearly over the bass. He has a nose as square as a box of matches and his ears are like knobs on a bedside drawer. 'You're the one who sings hard-out. From the karaoke place.'

'It's Jezz. Most people forget.' She takes his hand and kisses it.

'Go and say What Up to the DJ. Tell him Vincent says 38. Hear me? 38. He'll give you the mic, let you do vocals.'

'Why 38?'

He picks her up, carries her a few metres and dumps her between two gay guys and she pretends not to panic, just sticks her arms up and cuts through the black t-shirts and sparkling jeans and dropped ice cubes and white cigarettes and climbs a twist of stairs into the DJ booth and says '38' and the DJ taps his headphones and shrugs and hands her his iPad, and she types it in, and he nods and within two minutes, her song comes through the blackness. From her handbag, she pulls a yellow high-visibility vest. Now it's impossible not to notice

her. She leaks the first notes into the mic, and it accepts her voice. It's a horse which hasn't thrown her. She gets inside the song, sings it from the inside out because she loves it more than the original singer. If you neglect something, if you don't love it enough and leave it behind, someone else will love it. She doesn't even know where she gets the courage from, there used to be her old life but now she is standing over two billion moshing, steaming people, pointing her fingernails at them, and she's absolutely sure she sees Clyde's face and shoulders here and there and over there, and she tries not to move ahead of the beat although everything in her wants to race through time and finish the night and pull out her iPhone and update her status and create the Jezz Fan Group and tell her 2000 friends to Like Like Like.

She's - she's still singing! She hasn't ruined it! The DJ is looking down at his laptop and scheduling songs and he's turned the backing vocals down and it's just her lungs and tonsils and tongue out in space, putting colour in the earth. Time moves as slowly or quickly as the song moves. The crowd is a churning black ocean lapping at the legs of the oil rig she's on, and all she can see of them is their white teeth and sloshing earrings and sparkling hand bands. To them, in her hi-vis vest, Jezz looks like a body without a head.

She sits on ProTools until the sun comes up, for entire seasons made only of night, and when she finally wakes at the same time as a morning, she's in bed, her eardrums still shuddering, her fingertips and toes twitching. She delays showering as long as she can because she loves having sticky Red Bull on her throat and she loves finding lemon seeds and straws in her pockets and losing credit cards and finding all the cigarettes in her handbag crushed and wondering where all her Durex went. Sunday afternoons, she takes the pillows off her bed and drags them into the lounge and cuddles up with them and watches sitcoms about happy families with shiny hair and skin that isn't burnt pink. She hydrates with isotonic, vitamin-enhanced water, from the local café. The convenience store is cheaper, and a lot more convenient, but she likes being seen in the café. That's what you're supposed to do, you're supposed to be in cafes all the time. There was this show on TV where all these friends never had to make their own coffee, they lived in a cafe. She likes to take a long time to pay for her vitamin water while she skims the Sunday newspaper. The news is important to her.

Sometimes she thinks she sees herself in the celebrity pages and gives a little shriek, she's almost got the look right, her stomach has almost flattened out again and her nipples aren't like big coasters any more. It won't be long before it's actually her and she doesn't have to squint at the paper and pretend. Her timing is... she checks her watch and frowns. She pays for her water and drives her Jeep the quarter mile back around the corner and returns to the lounge floor, her cushions and blankets. She sings along with the theme songs of her shows and draws smiley faces with lipstick on paper. Clyde's friends have scored an apartment and everyone says it's full of weird weapons like you see on movies, like samurai swords and crazy stuff like that. They don't trust using the phones, and Jezz gets upset because she can't understand the code words they keep dropping, so they come around in their Jeeps and search the house for Clyde, convinced that he's behind the wallpaper, and Jezz squeezes her legs shut tight until they've gone.

A lawyer gets Jezz to come into his office and write her real name on some forms that mean all of Daddy's stuff now belongs to her. If something happens to Jezz, the stuff will go onto her baby daughter.

'Can you find out where she's living?' Jezz begs him, 'If she's safe? What name did they give her?' She holds up her iPhone with Facebook open. 'I should add her.'

Jezz gets a cute IT boy to come over to her house and show her how to build her own website. She is giddy after making the booking, and rubs browning lotion into her legs and arms and cheeks, and has enough energy for an entire spring clean – under the bed, under the vases, behind the boxes of loot and EPs that men are really interested in, everywhere. The mirrors, especially. She turns up the stereo and murmurs lyrics as she polishes mirrors from countries she used to think were only on the travel channel. She polishes the wing mirrors of three motorcycles. She hoses the dune buggy that she's never used, and the scuba gear and skis. She wishes she lived by the coast, the global beach that edges all the lands on earth. The beach cleanses everything with its refreshing salty air.

The IT boy arrives on a bicycle. She is wearing her bikini and has a towel around her shoulders. She's flushed her hair in the shower so that it looks like she has just come out of the pool. She tells him to ignore the boxes of Hennessy and CDs and petrol vouchers that are stacked everywhere. He is shaking so much that he gets his satchel stuck on a parking meter which is slumped against the breakfast bar, all bent, its bottom shiny from where Clyde hacksawed it. She realises he's staring at her platinum hair. It's so bright that you can see it in the dark, so people won't think she's just a body without a head. She knows he probably recognises her from her YouTube channel, or from the MTV Clubz channel, or because he's been to Cl@ssy and seen her singing, or Fatale or Luna or one of the other clubs. The boy installs Flash animations which make her name, sparkle and shimmer on the page. She asks him to spell everything in American. He gives her a program called Dreamweaver, says it'll make her dreams come true.

They stand by the road having a cigarette before he drives away.

'You'll have to add me.'

'Ah... who are you, actually?' he asks.

'You're funny.' She brushes his arm. 'I'm a singer.'

'Nah, but, like, for a job?'

After the IT boy has left, she emails everyone about her website. People write some stressful things on her Facebook, they seem to think that she's just singing along to Boney M's songs, and Whitney's songs, and that's just a big dumb lie: if the music comes out of Jezz's mouth, then it is original, because she is the one in the world most passionate about it. She believes in the words more than Floyd or Fleetwood, so why shouldn't the songs belong to her? It's not fair that someone got to those feelings before she did. She phones up the IT guy and asks him if there is some way to check where people are viewing her page from.

'It's so cool you saw my page! I fully stalked you! I can't believe you work here! What one's your girlfriend?! I fully have to

meet her.?’

‘Be serious,’ Clyde growls, sliding the ashtray off the tabletop and not looking as it shatters. Benji Fraulich, king of Berlin beats, slides into the booth with his producer Sambo from LA. Clyde isn’t as thick and large as he used to be, but his face has stopped smiling completely, like a smashed watch that will never work again, and that is scarier and sadder than any muscle or wide back or steel boots or blade, or black belt or Baretta. His skin is full of holes and dents, like the floorboards of a church hall, and those blue bars creep up his neck, and his lips are white and his hair is slicked back with shiny gel and he wears tight black jeans and a long-armed black cotton shirt with flames going up both arms. It says the name of his gang across his chest and on his back. She thinks his eyes have been replaced with painted glass balls, unreflective.

‘She’s mine, she’s all good, she’s reliable,’ Clyde tells the cool people in a voice you can hear through the music, ‘I supply only reliable people. I’ve known her forever. You know who I am. What I am.’ Sambo nods. Benji clicks his fingers and grins. ‘I’ll give you the vocals for all them samples you’re wanting, but she’s not got the rep yet for a tour.’

Benji Fraulich reaches across the table and takes Jezz’s floppy hand and says, ‘Tell me in your own words, Jezz, what you are do for life. For make life, career.’ Jezz looks at Clyde for the answer.

Clyde wraps his fingers around Benji’s thumb and peels his grip off Jezz. ‘No touchin the girls.’

She starts to pull her sparkly bra up. ‘I’ve been singing, like, since the day I was born,’ she explains. Benji doesn’t want to look at Jezz any more, he has to study Clyde’s knuckles and rings.

Sambo opens his suit jacket and takes out some forms and flattens them and Clyde takes one look at them and nods. ‘Now you can touch her.’

‘Jezz,’ Benji drools, twisting on his chair so that Clyde is behind him, ‘He says you are best singer in this city, this you feel?’

‘That is soooo Clyde! He’s silly. Yes, I fully do! I have, like, sooo

many mp3s. I should tag you.'

'Modelling?' Sambo from LA asks, 'Go or no?'

'I'll be a model, sure! Cly, is that cool?'

'You'll do what I tell ya. She'll do what I tell her.'

'Omigawd, is this really happening?' Jezz's eyes drop as she sends a tweet on her phone to tell the world. Clyde grabs her wrist. 'Youch, let go!'

'There's a thing in there about not getting pregnant while you're on tour. Don't fuck it up again.'

'Thank you all,' Benji Fräulich says, getting up from the table, his legs stiff in their black leather, 'I haff other commitment. You haff contract.' Clyde shoves a pen into Jezz's fist and she signs the contracts and Clyde says, 'I ain't putting shit on paper,' and he slides the papers off the table and the world's top dance music promoters have to scramble in a puddle of beer to rescue the documents and they all shakes hands and when she realises they're all leaving her, Jezz blurts out, 'BUT I HAVEN'T SANG, you you you wanted me for, to- ' and Clyde's eyes turn to slits and he says, 'You're their problem now.'

'But I wanted you to see me -

'Didn't I get your fuckin' foot in the fuckin' door?'

'No it isn't,' Jezz pleads, looking at her foot.

'I ALREADY SEEN EVERY SONG YOU'VE EVER DONE. Don't make me tell you again.' Then he punches a bouncer in the arm and they do a special handshake from chest to chest and punch each other in the back and chest and neck and suck each other into the crowd. She could pull her shirt and skirt and panties off and turn herself inside out and they still wouldn't come back.

She wakes up to a vibration under her hip. She wonders why she can't stretch her legs, why the air tastes so stale. Outside are lights and grey concrete, as if she is in...

It's her phone. It's throbbing like a racing heart. It's like Cyndi Lauper is calling. Whose car is this? What country is this? It's so spacious inside, the interior is perfect, not a blemish or scratch, the leather is tight and glowing, and it that steering wheel velvet? Omigawsh.

She answers her phone.

'Benji'll take you on tour,' Clyde says. 'I twisted his arm. One year at a time. Europe and LA, mostly. Be at the airport at ten with your shit, you're flying out.'

She gets a huge fright and her blood tries to burst out of her. There is a man snoring in the driver's seat. He has grey and black hair in his ears. His tie is riding over the gentle waves of his chest. She whispers as lowly as she can, 'TEN?! Ten? AM or FM?'

'First stop's London. Instore promos. Mostly giving away free mp3s on USB drives and that, photos and shit, giving posters to kiddies. Mess it up, you mess with me. Crystal clear? Solid.'

Jezz tries to escape before she can answer, but her body is trapped – her feet just kick against the door of the car, and it's perfect, too good for her, grey leather interior with wood-marble panels. There's a bottle of champagne sticking out of a drinks cooler full of cold water. She looks out the window. Gosh the sky's grey, she's parked on the motorway or –

No, she's in an underground parking building. This is not her car. Looking around, she sees those flags that she knows from the backs of Minis, the flag from James Bond's parachute. She has never felt more moved to be in London and she knows that this is when you must write down what you are feeling. There is an app on her phone that lets her type the poetry that is the most intensely passionate, emotional that could ever have existed, more moving than anything written during any war, more plaintive than anything ever written from any dungeon or lost at sea or floating above the world in space. There is a random selection of fifty word-tiles on the screen and she gets to

choose which ones to use.

She's hunched in the Lamborghini but her mind is within the music video, she can hear the snare drum and horns and breaks and beats. She can hear girls and boys chanting *Most Wanted*.

You're the most wanted one

In love with your gun / you're on the run

Can't we live as one / under the sun

My hands in the air / but I just don't care

Are we better off apart? / you're breaking my heart

Nothing is fair / when you're not there

But I still care / but you're not there / but I still care

And you're my number one / most wanted one

She leaves a CD on his chest and eases out of the car and clacks in her heels towards the elevator and gets a taxi and hopes the man she is leaving in London doesn't awake.

Benji's arm is in a sling for a month, so his name stays on the posters and tickets and websites but he has an apprentice do the actual DJing, and Jezz sings until her lungs are charred, and Sambo keeps selling Jezz's original vocal track with Benji's beat to DJs in weaker countries who keep mixing it up. Sometimes she's in Moscow and he's in Helsinki, sometimes he's in Reykjavik and she's in the Hilton. Always, she has a box of CDs to sell, and always men buy them off her in one single go and pay her a really precise, exact amount of Euros with lots of zeroes. She is allowed to share the recordings on her fan sites. She can't get over the difference between each of them, such range of expression from something as simple as lifting the underscore or tweaking the reverb, or slowing the BPM so it feels like when you've been sitting down for ages and you stand up too

fast and your head gets full of fizzy drink. There's *Most Wanted (Club Mix)*, *Most Wanted (Fever Mix)*, then there are the *Disco Mix*, *Txt Mix*, *Reinvented Mix*, *Libra Mix*, *DJ ZOne Mix*.

One night in Tokyo, the dancefloor a volcanic pit full of cyclists in fluorescent orange and green lycra and she's at the bottom on a glowing circle, using her music to plea for release. The lawyer gets in touch to say that he's packing up the house and selling everything and he asks for her bank account number and she asks him to describe the house because she can't remember what it looks like. The only places she has in her life are inside her, behind her, outside her, on top of her, and away from her.

Most Wanted is what they call a Seven O'Clocker, Benji tells her over the Sargasso Sea, it's a song to put people in a serene mood as they are leaving the club and going home to shower and crawl into bed with their lover.

'Gosh that's good, right?'

'Jezz, how I say in English... This song, it is the last thing people hear in the head, you understand this?' Benji taps his skull. 'Everyone haff most wanted, haff love they lost. You haff lost love, I have lost love, Sambo has lost love.'

'What about Clyde?'

'I don't know this man's head,' he says, shaking. 'This song will Number One, Number One, Number One. You get this?'

Jezz shakes her head. 'No, I don't get him.'

The begging in Jezz's voice that makes her song an essential in every club from west to east. Jezz's name goes on the posters and websites and tickets and even if she's not singing, she's on stage or coming out of fifty speakers harmonising in an invisible bubble that bobs over everyone like a beachball. Her icon is the golden butterfly in her belly button - a five inch wide designer piercing. It appears on posters above the stencilled image of her panties and the tops of the C-L-Y-D-E letters she had tattooed back in the blurry years. One night she can't find any of the new Benji Fraulich tracks in iTunes, the next, Benji Fraulich feat. Jezz is in the top five Heatseekers. She begins

to orbit the Earth and barely touches down.

Did you know that lots of the Chinese people in Taiwan speak English? Have you ever flown over Sydney at midnight in full daylight? Do you know the difference between Singapore Airlines and Malaysian Airlines? Did you know that everyone in show business has a manager who's only a phone call away except her?

Sambo takes some of Jezz's phone calls because Benji is just too busy. Yes, he says, Yes I will pass these words onto Benji, he says, Yes thank you for sending through the vocal cut for *Your Own Way*.

Jezz sings it for him over the phone because he has to hear it from her.

Loving you

Isn't the right thing to do

How can I

Ever change things that I feel?

If I could

Maybe I'd give you my world

How can I

When you won't take it from me?

Sambo reminds her that her contract expires on February 6 and she will be free. Jezz thought that she was free already. This is what freedom feels like - plummeting off a diving board on your own into a crowd.

The Indian Ocean breeze puts a finger up her nose. It smells like yachts and warm sand, it's divine. She left the ranchslider open and now she's being caressed awake by a balmy seabreeze.

Convinced that she's dreaming, she murmurs the words to her single, then sings at full volume, lying on her back, her throat fattened with the wind the lifts seagulls, her diaphragm free.

She's not sure which ocean it is. The one by the beach.

She rolls across the bed and grabs her iPad. Facebook says that she has 11, 208 fans. That is a dream come true. The KFC commercial was the smartest thing she has ever done. Benji is going to get sick and tired of @nya any time now, because he only told Jezz to go away because technically her contract had expired and he felt sorry for @nya or something. Benji had said it once herself, she was the Queen of the Clubs, and anyone who's Queen of the Clubs should dry those tears and come out of zis toilet, ja?

The year passed mostly on planes and in black rooms full of ice buckets and glass tabletops and bikinis, but it will never end as far as Jezz is concerned. Whoever controls time is doing it wrong.

While filling the hand basin, it occurs to her that the belly button piercing is Benji's way of plugging her up. She slides it out and plays with the hole it's left in her, and realises the scar looks like a purple vein running across her stomach. She has to slide the piercing back in and carry on.

She gets a fright when the housekeeping woman talks to her in American. She's not in the Seychelles, she's in Malibu. She asks the cleaner to come back later and loads the lyrics to Another Lonely Day. The song has been lurking inside her lungs and her fingers and her brain for years, and now she's finally ready, it's the new one, it's the next step. The lyrics are the most incredible thing yet, and so natural – it's like she's had them inside her for years. It's like somebody else wrote them and then died and she was reincarnated as that person.

When he reads *Your Own Way*, he'll beg her to put her vocals against some studio beats and return to him in Paris or Manchester. She flicks the TV on and it takes ages to find the channel with dance music, and the rhythm helps her finish her song. She pulls out her iPad. She has got to, absolutely GOT TO tell Clyde about this. She wishes Clyde used email. He's so vanilla sometimes.

Benji Fräulich feat. @nya comes on, and @nya's voice slices

through everything. If you listen to doves / to a voice from above,
@nya sings over some footage of two glaciers morphing into mouths
and kissing,

You'll be one / you'll be one /
with the gun / that you love /
that you love / number one
/ you'll be one / and your gun / you'll be one...

After she hears the song, strings slot into her shoulder blades and her brain goes mouldy and later, Jezz can't tell the paramedics just what she swallowed or what she washed it down with because basically it was everything, Jezz tried to put her entire reality inside herself and implode with it. She climbed over the balcony and tumbled into nothingness and she was supposed to be obliterated on the concrete and leave the world with the RIP page she posted and posters on bollards outside a club in Prague.

The producers of *Nation's Most Wanted* make her sign a form agreeing that they are not discriminating against her because she limps because she had hip surgery. They are not allowed to do that. A man wearing a tie shouts at her until she goes quiet. They're even angrier at her than when they banged the gong and shouted at her to stop singing, for God's sake, woman, how old do you think you are? She needs to go pee-pee real bad so she shuffles out of the lights, behind the curtains and the panel of judges buzz the next contestant on. She can hear it's a stand up comedian, nothing like her. He can't even sing, lol!

If she can get a babysitter, she sings in the Santa Parade, or at shows for veterans, or at launches for new flavours of Coke, or at the beach. They use her voice on the radio for adverts for leathery new cars with tyres so black that they shine. You can hear Jezz on that advert for nappies. You know her voice from that jingle telling you what to do when there's a fire in your kitchen.

Her baby asks her why she reads the newspaper at the table. She

tells them that she's concerned about the war in that country with the desert. She's fibbing - she's looking for her name, but it's not there. She has faded from Google and those stats showing how many people are looking at her YouTube videos make her want to crawl into a cardboard box and fold the flaps down over her. They use one of her songs at the gym when pregnant women are rolling on Swiss balls and she complains at the desk that she didn't say they could use her song, and it takes a month, then there's a meeting with the gym manager and his lawyer who get to the bottom of this: Benji Fraulich owns Most Wanted, not Jezz.

'If he didn't pay you for the use of your voice, we definitely need to talk,' the lawyer tells her, tapping his business card on the table. 'I could make things turn out veery well for you.'

'Can I have two? I collect them.'

The lawyer doesn't give her his card. The gym manager yawns and stands up. 'So'd the guy rip you off or not?'

Jezz shakes her head. She doesn't want to say.

'You need to talk to your manager. Anyone I'd know?'

She's friending people to try and get over 4000 Likes again when a chat box boops on Facebook. It's Clyde. He says Ul never guess where I am. He's in Pelican Bay. She says that sounds sunny. He says she has to bail him, he's gonna get done in here. He'll get done in the laundry and they'll pour bleach on the fingerprints.

What u mean dun?

No more Uncle Clyde.

U r not Uncle Clyde n e way.

Please Jezz pls pls pls u hav to. u r lucky i get interpol convention they hav 2 let u access computer 4 a loyer

*loryer

Y didnt u jus ring me or right?

Hw am I suposed 2 know where u live?

I live in our place. I bort it.

Y?

Thatz not ur home lufthansa iznt my home dis iz my home

DONT U UNDASTAND I NEED U

She closes the chat bubble and uses this real nifty thing called Metacrawler to find those old interviews with her and photos of her at the launch of that new country beside Russia with all the balloons and flags. She goes and picks the kids up from school in the convertible. She notices how scratched the Benji Beatz CD is. She thinks about Benji feat. Jezz, and B. Fraulich + @nya, and Benji/Brunhilda, and Benji Bros. and all the other girls Benji has been seeing. They're so talented, she wishes them sunshine and a fortune. Benji's a wanted man. He's been on top for so long, maybe there is no down for him.

Claudette won't sleep, she keeps wanting hugs, and Jezz gives up and lugs her through into the lounge. Jezz never plays her songs on her phone anymore, she puts on the TV and has to keep flipping through the channels. There's something on Deutsche Welle about international gang boys, some DJ has been shot in a club in Berlin and there was a panic and a riot and Interpol are all sticking their noses into CDs with ecstasy soaked into the cardboard of the booklets and girls being used as drug mules. It's all too confusing, like one of those books from the olden times – what does a mule look like? Like a boy pony, right? Finally something calms Claudette down, a nature doctormentary about pink flamingoes and those big white birds, pelicans. Claudette doesn't blink for long, stretched minutes at a time, then before Jezz knows it, Claudette is a snoring bundle of rags in her arms and Jezz molds her into the soft mattress in her cot and coaxes the door closed. On the computer in the den, she Googles Pelican Bay, thinking she might take Claudette there to see her daddy.

Rubbernecker

All it takes to do a frontways flip is confidence, bro.

BMXing's about looking forwards, not back. Back's for fags, back's gay. You guess that's why BMXs are the shit, coz bikes only roll one way, dead ahead. They're badass.

You're down at the Barrows instead of in PE, coz you can't look at the PE teacher and all her boobs and legs without boiling. The Barrows are, like, these mega-normous mountains of dirt where they're building the new development. They're not legit mountains but they're big enough to make the diggers look like Tonka trucks. They make the clouds look like the cotton wool buds Dad's girlfriend leaves in the bathroom when she stays over.

You stand on the seat and do some bunny hops. Your hands is bruised where they squeeze the bars. Your arms shake. J-bars eat the jolt. You bust through warning tape into, like, this area by the cliff where you're not sposda be but you don't look back. Helmets are for nerds and you forgot to wrap your bandana round your face and you get a feed of crane flies buzzing into your mouth but so what, the wind ruffles your hair like Mum used to. They reckon chicks is good at multi-tasking eh, and that's 36% true, she'd be scratching your head at the same time as Tyse's or she'd be rubbing your scalp while she did the ironing. She was spesh. She went away after Tyse did. Tyse was pretty full-on, she'd give him a action figure and he'd twist its head round til it snapped like five seconds after she'd just bought it for him.

There's this series of bulldozed steps into the hole, it's the lowest part of the Barrows, and you glaze down some of the gentle-arse slopes, spilling dirt. Tyse woulda dared you to do a flip right now. You're a whitewater rapid. Rocks and mud is tumbling beneath your front wheel but you're like, Whatevs, No rubbernecking, no backwards.

You hit the lowest point in the giant hole and lookin up, you see the supervisor, the Big Dude, resting his blubber on his shovel handle. He's a real quiet brown dude. You're pretty sure he doesn't know you bin watching him.

He's the only other one who knows how come Tyse had dirt on his dick. They thought Tyse'd been fiddled with, like, sexily.

Dumbasses.

>

They sent you home, said you bin acting up like Tyson. They expect you to be a total nerd now that Tyse's bin took away. They reckon you bin changing, but that ain't it: the rest of your world's what changed. Stuff's always diff if you look at it as you're movin away.

If any of them teachers had given a stuff about you, they'd've asked you What's up, Dare, and you'd've told them how the teacher saw Tyson's name on the attendance roll and went, 'Funny, he should've been deleted by now,' and you lost it after that, pulled the whiteboard til it came off the wall. They bin fixing to suspend you anyhow, for selling Tyse's Ritalin in the boys' toilets, the good pills, the pink ones, Tyse's bestest colour.

On the way home you rumble these little Boy Scout faggots in the alleyway. Their pamphlets say this bullshit about Helping Out Our brothers in Africa. It makes you red hot angus, that help-your-brothers junk. You knock the coins out of their hands and the little one drops his L&P and it foams everywhere. The bigger one of em starts crying and you think you're gonna puke, suddenly the walls of the alleyway is looking real close and your balls mega-hurt. Everything's gay after the big one cries. The big one's not sposda cry.

Your eyes blur like on Photoshop. The rusty chain squeals as you hoon off and leave the Girl Guide faggots behind you. This one was kind of a dumb bike to steal, it's real slow, you needed your bro's say on this one, he was mean at stealing.

It's only when you get to the Barrows that you chill out a bit and the air tastes more smooth. On the bridge, you stop to throw some rocks at the ducks; you find a stick what looks like a boomerang and hiff it at the beehive and jump back on your BMX and boost. Tyse always reckoned Mum and Dad fighting in their bedroom sounded like bees, if you put your ear against the bathroom wall, this sorta violent hum, like a electric fence. You spose he just needed to make something fun out of it, it was making the holidays real stink.

The horizon's like a clean bedroom out here at the Barrows; the hood falls off your head and there's wind on your gums and you hold a wheelie for ages then slam it down and a whole wave of mud comes up and you're like, 'Random!'

You keep a eye on the sheds in the distance.

Secretly, in the pocket of your hoodie, is your bottle of L&P and pink straw. Your bros don't know you come down here and sip L&P, coz if they seen you and the pink straw... yeah.

Not that they're your bros really... Not *legit* bros. You only get one bro in your life and if you could make a new bro out of mud, like a Golem bro, like on that movie, you still wouldn't do it.

You go around expecting peeps to arks you all the time, *What happened, did he get pedo'd for real?* but if you look back to think about it, you'll get hurt. It's called Rubbernecking, you heard them say it on Police Ten 7 about peeps who crash because they shouldn't've stared at a car wreck.

Up a newly-grassed hill you can overlook the hole they're fillin in. It's a monstrous-arse hole, bro, like the holes in Tyson's gums after his teeth came out, you hate the big hole-supervisor more than anything but you feel stink for him trying to fill that hole in. Around it, they've seeded the dirt and the grass is like little green pubes on a shaved fagina. You pop wheelies, carve some decent ruts, and catch yourself lookin' back to check no one's eyeballing you. You don't want no one to see you fuck up 'cept Tyse. You pop a jam-tilt, pull off a 540 even though all the pressure hurts tonnes on your split-open knuckles.

No one sees the 540. Well, Tyse probly sees.

Now that they've nailed the wood and poured the concrete, they're smoothing out the land, filling in the hole as if shit's back to norms and this massive great feature of your life wasn't never even there. At the bottom of the hole, there's this heinous clay-water. In the water is dead fish and alien weeds and the mosquitoes is so thick you can hear em before you see em. That's where Tyse drank his first beer, until you told him that it was just a can you'd pissed in. They've built the skeleton of a bridge across the hole and they're heaping earth around the foundations and stuff. It's weird to see something as

normal as a bridge stripped down to skinny bits of steel. You wonder if, under their overalls, all strong people look like that, uncoated and naked.

You wobble on the edge and whole plants drop away. It's deep down there and you stare into it, dead-on. Tyse was the first to lose a bike down there, you couldn't believe that shit! He woulda bin sooooo busted, nine times outta ten, but you knew what he was thinkin: walk home, right, say somethin badass to Dad's girlfriend, get her all riled up so's Mum has to come home and have a Family Conference, everyone forgets about the lost bike: sussed. You could boost a new BMX easy as, anyway, you may as well get a few in before they kick you outta school. Tyse was a brainbox when he got his shit together, it's just with his brain-thing.... Y'know, it's hard for Special Needses to concentrate on spelling tests. He used to rark people up somethin fierce before we got split up.

As you start to tip, you stop pedalling and shit just floods into your head, like the brown water squeezed out of the mud as your tyres roll over it. The last time you got to see Mum, you had to munt the springs on Dad's bed, jumpin on it, folding the mattress in half and that. Mum was pissed but she kept giggling into her hanky too, she seemed secretly happy that Dad and his lady couldn't sneakily root in the bed no more, and that she got the afternoon off work, and you and Tyse did your secret handshake under the table, like Mission Accomplished, bro. Didn't get rid of Dad's girlfriend though. FML.

The ground's crumbling underneath you like a gingernut that's been left in Milo too long. You spaz out, knock the bike on its side. A meganormous, car-sized shelf falls into the hole, the big pit, these big chunks of dark, nasty earth like brown icebergs.

Do it Dare! Do it, Pussy! Puuussssy!

There's a ledge beneath you, different kind of rock, where the cliff's not as steep. It's only like ten metres and there's gorse bushes to land in.

Do it, Darek!

Shut up, dick. Take a chill pill.

Wanna try one?

Mum said you gotta take it. She said, bro.

For a sec, the BMX is slippin out under you, then the world kinghits you and the handlebars go someplace else and it's weird to see mud fallin slower than you.

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This chocolate face peers over the edge of the hole, sees you're not dead, and vanishes.

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The Big Dude's got a winch on the back of his ute and he lowers it right down to the bottom of the hole.

He hauls your arse up outta there and sits you down and there's this faggy pedo silence and you think he's gonna say somethin about the broken window of his ute, which he still ain't got fixed, then he offers you a smoke. He's got a sausage roll in the chest pocket of his overalls and a smoke in his lips and there's this shiny bit of sausage grease on the gold bit of his smoke. His back is like a bookcase and he blocks out the view. You wonder if he could take your dad in a fight... Dad's pretty staunch, Tyse would nut out some days and come at him with rakes and shit and Dad would turn away so his back would take the impact til the rake broke and Dad was covered in muddy rake-marks. Then Dad would put his Hirequip uniform in the wash and make tea for us without sayin nothing, not dissing Mum, even.

You didn't figure, watching the dude from ages away, that up close you'd only come up to his chest. His hand's the size of a Frisbee, bro. It's heavy and warm on your shoulders like a backpack with two scoops of chips in it.

You don't look back at him as he marches you over to the work camp. Things here are pretty much done once they've cementalled the bridge legs and filled the hole in, so there's stuff-all workmen around. The sky's bruise-colour and the cold wind is the only person talking.

He makes you sit on the barrel, and you wait, drumming with your

heels. He comes back with your bike and uses coffee from his own thermos to wash the dirt off your knees and it feels like a warm bath and he scrapes your bike clean and lays it down on a tarp. The way he sets it down real gentle is like how Mum would put your hot, ironed laundry down outside your door when you couldn't hear her knock coz you was playin GTA and Tyse was screaming about the pink cars. Him and pink, bro... the only pink he didn't mind was his diddle, he used to play with it all the time, like in the movies and shit.

They're gonna fill the hole eighty percent, he reckons, Leave a circlar lake around the outside. His words are the loudest thing in the whole valley, but there's something munted about his talk, he sounds like a Downer. You're surprised, for a second, that he even needs to speak, coz yous two sorta had a understanding. They'll chuck geese and swans and all that gay crap in the lake.

'Like, a moat?' you go. His big head wobbles.

You ask the Big Dude where you and Tyse are sposda practice your flips and jumps and he goes, 'Chew should not be dooink dancherous fink.' He can't pernounce shit properly with his big lips and nose and ears, like he says 'fink' instead of 'things' and he says 'chew' instead a 'you.' He probably doesn't talk to peeps much, looking like how he does.

He gets up and you think he's gonna waste you and your close your eyes and lean away and your dick fills with piss but the Big Dude just hands you a Big Blak Sak. He's got one himself and he starts fillin it with workmen's rubbish, BK cups and smoke butts, pie wrappers and used car ads and Miss June. He doesn't say nothing. You groan and pick up a napkin with tomato sauce on it, and a Coke can, the horse pages, a random graph and lots of squares of broken ute window glass, and after you've filled a hole bag, he takes your hand, the one you used to punch the whiteboard, undoes a strap on his overalls, spits on your cut knuckles and wipes the black blood off.

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Mum was being a total skank, she was paranoid, bro. Dad would *never* pash your PE teacher, Mum musta bin on crack. Mum was on edge all the time coz it was usually her that took care of Tyse and she hardly got enough from the caretaker's benefit and it stressed her out

to the max, and on that day Dad'd psyched out at Tyse for making a moat on the lounge carpet with his L&P with the red food colouring in it when you were playing Castle Baghdad and Mum came back with some shit about the bedseets bein folded the wrong way and TELL ME WHO MADE IT and you were hiding under the table filmin it on your iPhone and crackin up and Mum heard and yelled at you to *Piss off And Don't Come Back.*

You stopped your bikes out front of the Punjabi shop and you bought him a L&P. He almost stopped crying, and sucked the snot back down his throat. You went back inside the dairy and asked without even swearing for a straw, a pink one, and that stopped his tears better than any hanky.

'Shot Dare,' he went, licking bogies off his top lip. He looked up and grinned at you. His mouth was dark and pink except for his bottom teeth.

Wheeling past the hole, headed for the big shed, you dared him to do a front flip off the edge of the cliff and land in the bottom of the hole; he started giggling and touching himself.

If you rubbed the diesel smog off the glass and stared into the blackness of the workmen's shed real hard, you could see calendars with titties on them. You had to hold Tyse back 'cause he wanted to see so bad but there was only room on the oil barrel for just you. He wanted to see them titties so bad he pitched this stiffy in his pants that actually pulled the pants away from this stomach! He had to get off his bike and push, that's how hard his stiffy was, bro! You shoulda seen it.

So, coz there was no proper chicks around, Tyse and you builded this woman out of mud, but she looked too much like Mum so you changed the face. Tyse had this wig he'd found under Mum and Dad's bed after Dad's secret girlfriend stayed over, and he had it stashed down his pants and soon as you finished drawing the fanny on the mud-chick with your stick, Tyse put the wig on her and dropped to his knees and, like, started banging this mud-chick. Turns out you built her a bit short coz Tyse's knees was, like, touching his elbows, but he was into it, and I was like, Bro, you're sick, so I stuck Miss March on the mud-head and weighted it down with a rock.

How is it?

It's dry, he went, Pass my L&P, Dare, pass it.

He cracked it open and poured L&P on her fagina and banged it harder coz she was frigid and, *bro*, he fully jizzed! There was even like a second spurt when he stood up! So, like, his dick was black with mud and he was spitting in his hand and wiping it off while you and him shared L&P through the straw.

Look, Dare, bur bur! Now it's pink!

You're a full-on pedo, bro.

After you'd had a go of the mud-woman yourself, Tyse started laughing at you, cause he said you were drinkin his jizz.

Whatevs!

You were trying to karate chop him but he was too quick on the BMX, and anyways you were laughing too hard and it hurt your abs so you said, Chill, I'm not gonna waste ya: you gotta do a dare instead.

You dared him to smash the window of the ute coz you'd seen smokes and a Playboy in it. Tyse hadn't taken his medication so he was game-as. He picked up this massive rock and busted the window and grabbed the Big Dude's Playboy and boosted.

Honest, you wish you'd never dared him.

Thing is, the sides of the hole looked all good if you had time to straighten up while you were falling. If you got right to the bottom of the big hole, you could run to the other side and it'd be way hard for the Big Dude to catch you.

So yous were biking around the outside of the Hole, looking for a bit that wasn't too steep to jump from. You were supposed to jump first, coz you were his Big Bro.

The Big Dude rumbled up in his ute, lookin out the broken window, lookin pissed and you were like, *Bail!*

C'mon Darek, he went, Just go forward, but you couldn't find those

hard structures in your legs, your legs was mud with skinny thin naked chopsticks in the middle. Just go over the edge, land on the side, ditch your bike, nick a new one later, no probs... plus the flip, you haaaad to flip it, else you were a fag.

But you couldn't dare your little bro back, coz that would make you a piker.

He pulled in front of you. His big Ford was too massive to go around. He was halfway outta the cab quicker than any human shoulda moved, specially a dude bulky as him. He grabbed Tyse's handlebars and flipped him off like Tyse was just a spider or somethin. You thought he was gonna smash Tyse but he helped Tyse to his feet, and Tyse didn't like that: Tyse just went for it.

The Big Dude was wearing that bright orange vest that meant he was a supervisor. Tyse was kicking holes in his fat orange guts, pounding and pounding, and the Big Dude was having a hard time holding him out of kicking range. Tyson screams when he's having a proper spaz, and gets all this foam on his chin like bubble bath. I don't think Tyse liked the colour of the Big Dude's vest.

The last time Tyse had screamed like that was when Dad had said he'd Had Enough. Dad'd said it was Just Coffee With The Boys' Teacher, and Tyse'd jumped on the bonnet of Dad's car and ripped the windscreen wipers off and bitten them til his teeth folded and his gums went purple for like a whole month.

Tyse and the Big Dude were getting hella close to the edge of the hole and you cracked up when Tyson's shoe clobbered the big cunt in the dick – he was fully gonna take him! The Big Dude even stumbled back, but he musta done boxing or something coz the dude had good footwork, you shoulda seen it, he caught his balance on the back foot, stepped forwards and – swear to God bro, you didn't even see his arm – he grabbed Tyson's fist and whirled him around like a tango, bro, not even telling him to calm down like the Teacher Aide would've. But Tyse – not looking backwards, all full of mental – took another swing.

You don't smash someone that's holding onto you. Tyse shoulda knowed.

It was like someone'd hit the Delete button, bro, suddenly Tyse

just wasn't there. You thought, just for one tiny second, *Hang on bro* – forget the dare. Cancel the dare, it's too steep, don't –

The Big Dude was already in his ute, flashing lights on top, rubbernecking and driving away.

That was the first time you jumped down the cliff – well, *fell*. Ordinarily Tyse woulda held you back.

It's too slopey, Dare.

The crumbly ledge hadn't held him – he'd fallen through the gorse so his lips looked like squashed strawberries. Even though he had dirt in his eyes he was lookin at you. His head and his body was facin completely different ways, he was rubberneckin, lookin back at you. That's what happens when your neck's broke.

Vandals

The proprietors open their establishment at 0800 hours, a full three hours subsequent to my arousal, calisthenics, a brew and a blacking of the boots, and two hours subsequent to my setting the pot to boil on the stove (a boiling pot is a trick to fool vandals into thinking someone's at home.) I am the first customer inside the Kathmandu store. I monitor the time on my pocketwatch (a quality British-made model I picked up in Johor) as I must be returning promptly home to check on the stove.

I purchase the Everest 1400 and the staff look at me cock-eyed. It's khaki coloured, camouflaged. They ask me if the tent is for my son: No, tishn't, I haven't a son, although Debbie did. I'm still living on the hill in the same pad in which I lugged Debbie over the threshold on our wedding day, I mention, and they laugh, and my face burns. They ask if I'm sure I can afford this item, and I tell them I'm no bloody pauper. Besides, I've no wife to look after any more, thus the ol' Super payments stretch a tad farther.

But I don't leave the store immediately: they have a compact foldable shovel on offer and, after turning it over in my hands and biting the lacquer (I used to have a similar model when stationed on Puncak Jaya), I purchase the thing, along with an extra set of tent pegs which are exceedingly sharp.

The Negress at the counter assures me that the Kathmandu Everest 1400 is toward the sturdier, more reliable end of the spectrum. I pay what is demanded of me and exeunt while she frowns and consults her manager.

I see when I get that home that someone has dressed me in my pyjamas and slippers and left a pot boiling on the stove, which is bloody dangerous. I leave a note instructing my wife not to do such a thing again.

I peg her down in some of the softer, mushier soil. Peg the tent, I mean – not the wife. The winter is attempting to settle, dotting the orbwebs with dew, flogging us with hourly rains, and we're not

even that far into the day, ten o'clock at best.

If I hadn't my sense, I might be tempted to say it was autumn. I lose track sometimes, and have to call for Debbie to confirm the date. Certainly the lack of deciduous trees in this confounded country doesn't help one to establish the time of year.

The enfortment which I erect overlooks a square of yellowing grass which has been redeemed as a softball pitch. This is all quarry land: the hill is being eaten by diggers, for its bauxite rock is valued. The diggers will soon devour my house and my neighbours', which is why I am the last tenant on the mountain. Yes, the vandals are sacking my hill and they're buying old Van out for a few hundred grand. I don't require money, but they don't accept this. They don't understand that I've been assigned a hill to protect. They send a different lawyer every time, as if testing a new weapon on the ol' Dutchie.

It is on Sundays that the baseball pitch is occupied by Orientals; during the Weekdays, the pitch is occupied by duskier brethren, Feejee Islanders, by the look of them. They make robust infantrymen, those Feejee men, I can tell you, and their backyard taro plantations smell much like Java. Your Feejeean is not a patch on your Gurkha, but he's not bad either. They're pious, eyes-down folk, some of whom lugged in supplies during my term on the mountainside. Yes, I can certainly eliminate Feejeeans and Gurkhas from my list of vandalous suspects. It is a duet of Goths, actually, who dress entirely in black and wear lipstick and have earrings, for God's sake, whom I suspect of causing the vandalism on my property and that of my neighbours. It so incenses me that my fists shake.

I often shake... I must take medication to palliate the shaking.

I realise that I am kneeling in wet dirt clutching tent pegs. The skyscrapers are looking on in a curious crowd. I hammer the pegs in firmly. Then, an intercrossing of poles provides an X which curves from an elevated meeting point until it plunges into four holes, which roots the frame to the base of the tent flaps. Fancy waterproof nylon indeed... a bivouac would have sufficed perfectly, as plenty of bamboo grows on my mountain, it's just that it's difficult to bend anything at my age as my bones have become weak as pipe cleaners. Also, I don't mind parting with \$350 for a tent so long as Debbie's son doesn't get our money. His children are vandalising brutes.

I dash back inside and I'm alarmed to see a pot of water boiling on the stove. I scald myself turning the stovetop off, and yell out to Debbie, but she doesn't respond. She's in the garden, then, presumably.

I stand in the kitchen for a moment. The house is as silent as frost. With my fingernail, I scratch a notch in the fuzz of mildew which has darkened the kitchen. The ceiling is baubled with droplets and a cloud of steam. Debbie must attend to the spring cleaning.

Returning to the surveillance tent with a rousing cuppa, I observe that my vest is heavy with sweat. I sit on the upturned wheelbarrow and take a respite, noting a packet of Holiday tobacco on the grass: the Vandals smoke the same brand as I, then. I know the grass under the wheelbarrow has yellowed and died, but my wife, you see, was moving that very same wheelbarrow moments before she was seized by a heart attack. I scarce not move the wheelbarrow.

Someone – or *something* – has left footprints in the garden bed.

You know, when I was a teacher, freshly returned from Kuala Lumpur and fortified from surviving a bout of malaria, I never put up with the scallywags who sat at the back of the class and they soon came to know it. If the Board were going to label my discipline Misconduct, why, they should have let me back into the Reserves. (I'd been discharged from the army due to.... certain matters which I am now perfectly well medicated for.) I am forced to hear the creak of my bending knees as I check the footprints in the soil, for you see, Vandals have trespassed on my property and trampled Debbie's flowers. Like Beowulf, like Ajax, like Montgomery, I have felt it imperative to take a stand against such invasion. The hibiscuses have been rumped, many of them snapped. These hibisci, it belies me to inform you, were the planting project of my late wife Deborah, or "Debbie" as I was fond of calling her in private. The date upon which Debbie planted the hibisci escapes me... it was the date I first carried her into our new home, but which year?... Gosh I'm sorry. My memory's.... sieve-like, today. I do apologise.

The reason for which I have kept such close scrutiny on the flower plot is that I want to catch the blighters in the act of vandalising the flowers Debbie tended with such affection. The sun has peaked and I hope they'll come before dark. Debbie, you see, had her passing two months ago, approximately, depending upon which day of the week it is now, and following the passing of my wife, our chickens also perished, apparently starved to death. Oh, the Vandals will certainly pay for that too, worry you not. Could the Vandals have followed me home from the hiking supplies store? Quite possibly.

Nobody witnessed Debbie's passing. I was inside at the time, boiling the billy. I recall the paramedics informing me that her allergy to the ammonium phosphate in the fertiliser is what triggered her allergic reaction. Yes yes, I told them, and explained the incident years earlier when Debbie had suffered a seizure from airborne particles whilst I was drying my rifle with ammonium sulphate fertiliser (which is a ruddy decent degreaser, mind). It rumbled me to see them prying her frozen fish fingers off the lip of her blouse, so that they could attempt CPR. Heart Seizure was the culprit, I was informed, although I wasn't listening terribly closely, just standing in the chook guano, nodding, wanting to machete the wimpy foppish hand patting my shoulder in sympathy. A real man shouldn't be seen to be weak and emotional. I recalled what it felt like to have the hands on my shoulders in Borneo – intrusive, invasive, and shocking after an entire tour of duty, alone with only rain and leeches and my precious letters.

I recall thinking it ironic that I'd trampled Debbie's hibisci in my panicked flap around her corpse when I first saw her keel over. I'd been preoccupied at the time trying to locate a six pack of lager which I had stashed in one of our linen closets some time ago at a party when the Pigeon Boys had rocked up and caused a commotion. The Pigeon Boys, I'll bet, are all in a home for old fuddy-duddies, now, their retirement watches sliding over their bony bird-hands, ha-ha! All I found, in my rootings and diggings between the couch cushions, was a bottle of dermatitis pills which, for some reason, Debbie appeared to have ordered in my name, as my name was on the bottle. It was when I strutted across the flowers to give her a sample of my knuckles that she first seized, and clutched her collar bone, as if witnessing the Madonna. The bag of fertiliser softened her landing; the flowers were ruined under my feet.

A note on the Besiegement: There remains, in the black volcanic soil, what looks to be the imprint of Debbie's brow, cheekbones and eye sockets, a sort of Shroud of Turin in soil. Daily, I pick the leaves from the dent. The hibiscus stems remain snapped, the flowers floppy and brown.

Whichever Vandals trampled Debbie's flowers have a thing or two coming to them, believe you me. I shot them dead in Irian Jaya, you know, shot them from my hillside. Commies, those Vandals, wreckers of huts and poisoners of wells. Five months in the drizzle, leaves for bog paper, bullets which I had to keep dry against my flesh. My letter paper and pencils were swathed in three layers of leather. Dysentery and diarrhoea, yes, certain things haven't changed... I still find, on occasion, that some scoundrel has tipped casserole into my underpants and I think that I must get more tannins down me.

Up to a thousand head of cattle, you used to find on this hill. There were unsealed roads not ten minutes from here. You could see the roads from our hilltop, palled with brown dust. Hayseeds in the wind, the stink of manure. I taught down there at the college, taught classical verse... Dryden returns to me, Dryden who silenced the vandals at the back of the room, scribbling mucky ink on the school's textbooks, horrible rhymes I pretended not to hear.

Mr VD has a hole in his head!
Mr VD woulda been better dead!
Mr VD got VD in Indonesia!
I hope the hole in his head has a seizure!

I've just a few lines in response. If you'll allow me:

Rome raised not art, but barely kept alive,
And with old Greece unequally did strive:
Till Goths, and Vandals, a rude northern race
Did all the matchless monuments deface.

No, I wouldn't want to be a Goth and have that said about me.

On the assignment goes. My shovel bites into the soil like Debbie's grandson devouring chocolate pudding, spilling it all over his

non-regulation shirt. I have to retreat inside the house at least once to cool my brow. You know, in Johor, when we'd have a decent sweat on, we'd remove our shirts, squeeze the sweat into a canteen and pass it around! He who'd sweated the least had to drink the sweat of the victor, ha ha!

Inside I see that Debbie has overheated some bubbling pot on the stove, and I call out some words of discipline, but she refuses to confront me. Debbie's always been flighty. I see she's left her pills in the kitchen, too. The label on the bottle now says *dementia*, not dermatitis. Quite queer this vandalism that's occurring – quite mean, quite sinister.

In the yard I resume shovelling. I wink the sweat from my eyes and sup from the garden hose. Have I mentioned that in the Orient, we had to boil all our drinking water? Once the hole is a good metre deep (just enough to slow the Vandals down), I take Debbie's tomato stakes (she shalln't need them: she's dead) and whittle the ends off with my machete and stick the stakes, and the sharp tent pegs, into the generous soil at the bottom of the hole, which yields half a foot. That's a satisfactory depth. The Vandal, you see, runs across the top of the hole, unaware of the punji sticks beneath him, and falls into the hole where the blighter is impaled.

I pull Debbie's tomato sticks from the tomato bed, a good dozen of them, and tear the leaf matter off and lay the sticks in a lattice over the hole. I then cover the sticks with a handful of oak leaves until the hole is entirely concealed.

Your Malayan Gook has been known to smear faeces on the stakes, a move which is primitive, devilish, and quite simply ingenious. I've little trouble squatting over an ice cream container and half-filling it as the evening's fog comes sniffing around the yard and I begin to paint the stakes. I do hope I have a nasty stomach bug to pass onto the vandals.

Diggers and earthmovers look like so many Tonka trucks from up here. They're tearing out the wild hibiscus, and it's quite a sight, but I notice that every passerby gets his glimpse of the Dutchie Man. I'm glad that the Everest 1400 zips up securely.

I leave the tent just once, to fetch a cuppa from our kitchen. We've a mildew issue in the kitchen: Debbie really must stop leaving the pot on.

The sun moves away from me and the air becomes wet. The Royal Dutch Second Infantry abandoned me too, which was why I was forced to switch queens.

I am almost certain that autumn has been passed over this year. I don't recall authorising leaves to fall from the oaks... perhaps I will write the Editor of the newspaper. The leaves smells like basements, like fungus, piled and orange-brown and sludgy. Debbie stuffed a handful of giant fig leaves down the back of my coat one gay May stroll along the Batavian boulevards, and I recall laughing at it, and Debbie running ahead, as if she sought for me to follow her. I climbed a curvy tree and when, weeping, she returned down the track, I ambushed her, taught her a jolly wicked lesson about being observant. We rolled about in a thick bed of leaves and then I cocked an eye at her and she blushed and bit her top lip.

The farthest mountains blaze orange before giving in to night. The perfectly-camouflaged punji hole, concealed by sticks and leaves, becomes invisible in the dark. I used to watch every sunset from the wet hillside, cleaning my rifle, setting traps in a circle around the bivvy, carefully unfolding and re-reading letters from Debbie, tracing her handwriting with a fingertip.

It's almost as if Debbie's son waits by the phone; the bastard answers immediately when I telephone, "Van? Hey, that you?" I cannot stand the halfbreed, but I let him send his twin progeny around to my residence. The two of them subscribe to a fashion which calls itself Goth. What this "Goth" lacks in sensibility it makes up in logic, considering that the Vandals were offspring of the Goths. I taught history, you know, to schoolchildren upon my return from Kampala. I should have mentioned this to you earlier – my brain suffers from a touch of dry-rot, you see, it's as if some larrikin has sneaked in during the night and vandalised my memories.

It's almost amusing when the boys arrive in the rain which hangs in the air like a bead curtain, and search the house and backyard for

me. They check the tent, unaware that I'm concealed underneath it in a depression which, while chilly on my pyjamas, conceals me effectively. They call my name but not their grandmother's: quite rude. Thankfully, they don't hear my whiffling nose from where I'm hid. I see one of them spit on the lawn, and I'm tempted to reach out and strangle the brute.

I emerge from the chicken coop in the dark lavender of the night and steal back to my tent, feeling unalone. Vandals are like a man's back: always behind you, but impossible to confront.

The Vandals conquered any Moors whom they encountered; the Vandals made trouble for Germanic specimens including my ancestors in Vlaams; and ultimately, the Vandals were responsible for the sacking of Rome, the desecration of the gardens of the Dordogne... good God, man!

Droplets have collected on the bridge of my nose and my nostrils are leaking sludge. For now, I withdraw into my nylon fortress, alone on the dripping mountain. There are but two sounds: That of Debbie's pot bubbling in the kitchen, and a sharp cracking and then the sensation of plummeting when, leaving the tent to piddle on the lemon bush, I step upon a pile of leaf-covered sticks which Debbie must have left out here.

*

July 1, 1944

Debbie Dearest,

I'm find myself sitting upon the foothills of Puncak Jaya, the loftiest of all the peaks in Irian Jaya, overlooking a marshmallony, ambrosiac froth of cloud which, once it has absorbed enough sun, results in a downpour of localised rain not unlike being under a waterfall. Steam wets this paper, unfortunately. I hope my words aren't blurred. Are you intimate with Dryden?

I long for the crispness of Auckland's winter. I long for the crispness of your fingers, leached of moisture from your pottering in the good soil. Your skin crinkles like newsprint; there is irascible dirt in the deepest cracks of your fingertips. (I am not quoting Dryden here. I am myself.)

Did you know that tropical soil has a pH level low enough to prevent most crops from growing, but that hibiscus thrive here? I should post some plantlets for you. Remarkable place, it really is – even the sugarcane must have a tough skin to survive here! The guerrillas have been sacking what few plantations exist, removing the topsoil and pouring bags of salt into the earth. Dastardly vandals. Knowing such things makes me agonise about your exposure to allergens in the fertiliser they sell in that country of yours – do take care, dear. You're an autumn leaf, thin and quivering. Do hang onto that branch, won't you?

Please know that, although I have been permitted to build only a camouflaged bivouac (your Mutinous Insurgent can detect English canvas from two valleys over), I have made it a perfect bivouac. Its frame is sturdy; I selected particularly robust saplings for the Y-frame.

I intend to put a real roof over you when I return, Debbie, but roofs are only

fit for married couples. So: a certain question arises.

I shalln't be long. Why, a joker even suggested to me that if I were to contract a head injury, my secondment to the Antipodes might come sooner than otherwise budgeted for, ha-ha! At first, I chuckled at his little spoof, but alone here on the mountain with only my back for company, I find myself giving the man's queer suggestion some consideration. Certainly, my jaw is just wide enough to accommodate the barrel of my rifle if I really wanted to expedite matters.

I anticipate our reunion. Until then, I'll continue to keep watch and protect you from those who would vandalise the noble things in this world.

Lovingly yours,

Private R. J. Van Dabl

Latter Day Lepers

I told G there was some junk I dug about the Bible, like Madonna and the immaculate collection and how Mary was, like, a feminist. G laughed, called me a freak. I said, Whatever, you the freak. This was up in in that snobby part on the hill what used to be broke but they'll never admit it, the 4-8-9, where you can see all people's rooves, look down on them from above. We got, like, perspective and stuff. G was trying to look beyond it, back to the States. I didn't wanna look at nothin, I just squirmed in the seat and scratched under my bra and waited for G to lead us.

She turned the motor off. Neither of us wanted to get out of the car and into the Assembly, but the peeps who was hanging outside started to go in, so that was the signal. Plus the weather was packin' up, the clouds were bruised and swelling. Assemblies of God's sposda be real welcoming, like a ark, all about love for lepers and homeless dudes and that. We was there to settle a old debate. G's mum, when they was growin up in the States, used to take her to Assemblies. G'd heard mad shit about the church's policies since she came out here.

I went, You sure stuff's more, like, tolerant now? She went, A true Christian follows the word of the Bible, sticks to the scripture, and what the script says is that Jesus loves everybody. Even parking wardens. I thought stickin to the script sounded like they couldn't adapt. G wouldn't hear of it, she was all trusting, said the script was solid. Me, I got told that Santa and the Tooth Fairy and Jesus and shit aren't real when I was, like, five, and I remember how it made the world feel like cold bath water so I didn't want G to feel like that.

The church was a Salvation Army hall. We walked in, holdin hands, last ones in the ark. Our legs went first, we was a bit reluctant. G wanted to close the door; I went, Keep it open. G's all about the PDAs. She goes, Be loud and proud, you don't needa stick to the script. I go, Thas a contradiction. She laughed, Thas church. The congregationers must've liked what they saw, two chicks holding hands, coz they smiled at you, straight up.

This forty-somethin Island fulla with gold teeth sat down the end of our row. He introduced himself as Timosi, said he was the caregiver for this spasticated girl who slouched beside him, drooling. His tie didn't match his shirt, not even close, but neither did mine, I

had the tomboy skinny tie look going, modern styles. All good, we was all on the ark together. Just as I got my slouch on, put my feet up on the chair in front of me, everyone rose up. There was a greeting in Island language, translation projected with they dodgy projector. They needed to register Powerpoint first before the message was displayed. It was classic, see, these people, they didn't need approval for nothin else. The message on the wall was all like, Faauta, o le mea matua lelei ma le matagofie lava, pe a nonofo faatasi lava o uso and stuff. Shyeah, I grew up on the West Side, the best side, fuck the rest side, I could tell what them words meant, I could read that message from aages away.

So anyway, this Timosi dude explained the concept with a graspy, calloused hand. Always good to have a interpreter handy, even if his ears were full of hair. The translation was more for G's sake than mine. He was like, 'Brothers, it is good we dwell in unity.' He gave us a smile, for real. I think the script served him right. *Sisters* was missin though, he shoulda gone *sisters*.

There was this inbred mental fulla up front who got real into it, man did his head tilt back far, looked like his head wanted to rock right off his body, he was that into it. I tried to keep my slouch goin as much as poss but these Assemblies – okay, yeah, G'd warned me – these Assemblies, they're all about *ascension*, that means flying up to heaven. Which would explain why the mental stared upways the whole time, wanted to fly. There was tonnes of crosses on the wall, above the band. The crosses was mostly cardboard cut-outs, plastic and crépe paper, DIY styles. I could see why the mental looked up and flapped his arms and felt at home, there was legit love there, for reals. Sweet as, I thought, Choice enough.

Them hymn words, like the script to the song, was projected for me and G's benefit mostly, 'cause if you looked around the place, we was the only ones out of place. There was only like ten words in their vocab and they just rearranged them for each song, like a remix of praise, *Jesus, love, hallelujah, embrace, sing, forever*. G's top eyelids got heavy and she started not dancing so much, just rocking her head and swaying. She had a hard time pulling me out of the chair but I got up for her sake. She had some memories goin on and I think she was chanting scripture to herself. She rubbed the mental's head, and the heads of some of the other weirdos there – a fulla with skin disease, a few niggas in wheelchairs, people with, like, pink blotches on their faces. Latter day lepers. All of them had minders, dudes like Timosi. I

don't have a problem with those freak people, I thought it was all G. Fully reminded me of bein on a ark though, these people came in twos, cripples and caretakers. Even the lepers that was on they own looked like they had a dude beside them. I ain't talkin bout Timosi, I'm talkin about *Jesus*. Get it? Jesus ain't ashamed to sit beside nobody.

Just as the mentals really started spreading saliva around and swinging their arms like they had no joints, it was our time, the church told us, Timosi fully tried to tip G out of her seat and get into the healing, up there with the rejects, like as if there was something to heal about us!

When we were all praised out, we moved our arses into the tea room out back. I was like, *Praise getting' the fudge outta here*, I didn't like what was brewin in the kitchen. The decorations was okay, I spose. The hall had noticeboards with loadsa notices with typos, obviously done on laser printers with clip art. Them colour cartridges is expensive – I thought it was sweet that they spent money just to spread the love. And there was a illustration from the Sunday School tots, of animals on the ark makin' babies. I goes to G, What did the GLBT animals do? Throw a parade?

They had us sit down, I think 'cause G seemed like a weirdo, standing there scratching her shaven head, playing with her nose ring, and they gave us choice biscuits like Squiggletops. G kept scratching her arm so I held her hand. Timosi got a downer to make our drinks and the dude only spilled like ten per cent of my coffee, it was a miracle, hallelujah! There was a guy with tubes in his nose in a wheelchair who joined our table. I got nothing against handicaps, they're like lepers, but, like, it was unusual, that they was bein real inclusive. Like the scripture says shit should be. Like G says the script says.

I got right down to it and asked about Assembly of God's policy. I might not've piped up if G didn't hold my hand so tight. You feel stronger with someone at your side. She was really holdin onto somethin. She couldn't bring herself to arks the question.

Timosi goes, 'The message of Iesu–'

G goes, 'Oh I know the message, yup.'

Timosi looked surprised. He went, ‘Jesus, he love the tas collecta, he love piostitute, he love leper, he love sinner.’ He looked real kind, gave me the warm fuzzies hard out. I asked Timosi what he meant, seeing as he was from some kinda banana republic. Always good to have a interpreter. Timosi scratched his arm. He went on, ‘Jesus, he heal the plostitute, the sinner, the G. You come to da right ples.’

G’s hand was firm and tight, white knuckles. G goes to him, ‘Um, we don’t *need* healing.’

‘Plis,’ Timosi goes, not hearin her, like he was a telemarketer phoning up during dinner time, readin from a script. ‘Jesus, he walk wis the tax collector, the leper— ‘

While the guy listed all the freaks we were comparable to, for like the third time, G squeezed my hand so tightly that when she stood up, I came with her. The hall hadn’t gone quiet, peeps was all safe on they ark, they could pull up the plank any time they wanted and be, like, a island. I thought about the door we’d left open downstairs.

G goes, ‘We are not *prostitutes*.’

‘You are,’ I went, and elbowed G.

‘This is serious,’ she went, and I shut up big time.

I looked around us. The dude in the wheelchair was lookin up. I checked out the ceiling. Just paint and lightbulbs, so why was he lookin up? And why was everyone standing around us in a circle all of a sudden, with water and hoses and cloths, ready to scrub?

Even when I tripped on the stairs, even when some of them giggled at us holdin hands and I gave them the evils, G was holdin on tight. It was darker outside, a storm had brewed while we’d been inside, and I had to admit man, it’d been warm and bright like a laundromat inside

I locked the car doors, in case the rain got in. I hoped the church would get flooded.

When we stopped at the lights, we were supposed to talk, I guessed. I wanted to know if this was the same Assembly she remembered from when she was a kid, it couldn't've been, and what the hell was in her script that she thought would protect her against leprosy. I was pissed off and tried to shake her hand off mine, but G was holdin on tight, like she'd come out of a audition and she was clutchin a script rolled up in her hand.

'I nicked a calendar,' I said, at last, 'Off the wall, on the way out. Nothin' else worth taking eh. They were dicks.'

'Gimme that calendar, bitch,' G went, 'They owe me a few months. Years, actually.'

My Secret Identity

It was the part of the afternoon when the sun runs out of battery and I walked into Dad's bedroom to thief one of his belts to take to my audition for the IRDs. It was freezing and the windows were all murky and dribbling. I found Dad kneeling at the foot of his bed with this whole big life-size poster in front of him. His overalls were peeled down, the straps around his feet like giant shoelaces. It was a poster of a hot woman in a bikini with big, glowing, liony hair, G. When he turned to look at me, he looked like JFK's bitch in that clip we watched in Social Studies, when she's all worried and panicky and trying to push the brains back inside her man's head. Today day it was my brains leaking, bro. The fuck was he doing with them posters?

'Wait,' he said to me.

I slammed the door. My heart kept slamming after. We don't keep secrets in this house, we don't *deceive*. That's one of the words on my spelling list.

I sprinted all the way to the Dumpster Dump, that's this secret area behind the Special Ed block where all the Down Syndromes moan and stumble around. I could tell my dinner was gonna be cold when I got home again. There was a secret gap between two of the dumpsters and when you got in, there was this whole pit surrounded by big tall steel bins and piles of old, soggy wooden pallets. We were at the bottom of the world, where the dirty bath water drained to. The dumpsters blocked out the hills with the snob houses on them. I stopped thinking about what Dad was up to soon as I saw Ricky Brown. He only had two other dudes there, this tall, really black dude from Ethiopia that's in my PE class and is real dope at long jump, and this short white fulla with freckles and studs in his ears whose face looked like he had a bee trapped inside his mouth. *Inflamed*. That's another vocab word I've gotta learn, else they might expel me, bro.

'You're late,' Ricky went. The whole school'd gone home ages ago and the sun was all diluted like how Dad makes powdered juice 'cause we can't afford juice with pulp in it. Ricky had on this black singlet and it made him look real hard, like he strangled animals for a living or something. He'd drawn muscles and tribal tats all up his arms with a black vivid. If that was his superhero costume, it was doooooope. I needed to get me one of those, a superhero costume I

mean.

‘Sup with the late?’

‘Sorry, Ricky. I was—

‘Shut up.’

‘—getting a belt to try that thing you told me about where you hang yourself and you jack a masty at the same time and —

‘Gotta pay the tax for lateness.’

You know how in the comics, the hero can normly always stop a train, whether it’s by brute strongness or sticky web or running away like The Flash? And the only reason he gets injured is ‘cause of his one weakness? Something musta been making me weak, ‘cause I couldn’t stop the train that slammed into my head. Getting punched in the head was my one weakness.

*

Turning the key in the lock made me wince and that made my broken teeth hurt. The metal door handle was freezing cold. I knew dad wasn’t in, coz there wasn’t much steam on the window. Dad loves deep frying and sometimes the kitchen gets so steamy that you can write on the glass, and that’s where we write our spelling if I’m finding the lines on the refill pad too small, not that he’s had time to help me with my spelling in, like, aaaaages. I trudged upstairs and my black knees hurt and bits of gravel was still falling out of the cuts and I breathed on the window and thought about the word written into the glass. Dad was out fighting crime. He’s sort of like Commissioner Gordon. I didn’t know when he’d be back. It was foggy and black outside and the orange streetlights kept spazzing and humming.

I was wondering if I’d made it into the IRDs or not. Probly I’d have to write Ricky a Sorry card and try again. A good card, one of them \$4.95 ones.

Our apartment is above this hairdresser store. We were basically squeezed under the roof upstairs. You could hear water splashing into the toilet tanks from behind the bricks in the wall. Dad’s got these

faggy ecobulbs that take a hundred years to light up, ‘cause he says it’s saving him money in the long run, and I flicked them on but they made the house feel even darker coz of their pissy-weak light. My chest was thudding as I opened Dad’s bedroom door again. I got a fright and needed to take a shit – there was some ho in his room – nah, the poster, still on the bed, I saw on the far side of the room quite a few same ones laid out, and more interesting ones coiled up in those long poster tubes, and I stood there for ages listening to the sirens on the next street over, before I spotted the panes of glass. They’re really sposda be lifted by two dudes, he shouldn’t’ve brought them up in here if no one was helping him (he’s got fucked-up knees and he hardly ever goes easy on himself.) He’d need me to help lift them back down to his van. The posters, bro, they were just ads, he was just putting some ads together, that’s all, Dad hadn’t been wanking over some billboard supermodel, he’d been flattening the poster out on his bed. I wanted to text a sad smiley face to him to say sorry, but I didn’t have his number any more ‘cause I deleted it ‘coz I was angus at him and I’ve never been able to tell him. I don’t want him to think I’m his arch-nemesis, that’s mean. I need a nemesis, though. Every hero’s got a evil nemesis.

I got a bag of mixed veges out of the freezer and I gasped when I held it against my eye. I sat there on Dad’s bed until the whole packet had defrosted on my smashed face, listening to the sound of nothing, thinking about my spelling list, thinking about Smashman, then I poked a hole in the plastic and ate some of the veges and they were pretty interesting. They were all interesting colours, like there were these red ones. I’ve never eaten a red food, I don’t think. Dad thinks potatoes are the best veges, but they’re not really veges, they’re more like meat.

I got out my spelling list but it was too hard to re-write them and find the definitions in the dictionary on my own. I knew I was gonna get in trouble with the principal but it wasn’t my fault, Dad was sposda be home to help me. In the inside of the front cover, Dad had wrote this stupid quote that he made up to motivate me: “A rich vocabulary is the ultimate wealth.” It’s honestly not, though: a ginormous pile of money is the ultimate wealth. That pool full of money that Scrooge McDuck dives into is the ultimate wealth. Having enough to go to St Ped’s would be the ultimate wealth. Not having to pour food colouring into my O-rings and pretend they’re Froot Loops would be the ultimate wealth.

I scraped dried blood out of my ear and I started crying. But don't tell anyone. Smashman doesn't cry, he just washes his face with salt, 'cause he's tough, yeah, that's what I was doing: washing my face with salt.

*

The black fog poured into my ears. I had to move now. I bent over the gutter, wrapped my fingers around a sewer grate and hauled like fuck. Those things are sooooo heavy, bro, it was like lifting a car up, like on the Smashman Issue 1 cover, I mean *Superman Issue 1*.

I held it above my head, stumbled forwards and almost lost it and half-threw, half-dropped the sewer grate. The sound followed a second later, this massive *GLANG*, and my hand shot up to my mouth like OMG. It sounded like a dropped box of Lego. Little pretty cubes of safety glass fell in segments for a few seconds and then stopped clattering.

I was already about twenty houses away when I stopped to look back for just a sec. This red light comes on in the HQ of the bus company when the glass has been comp- comp –COMPromised, Dad told me. I'd put a hole right through the shampoo chick's paper guts.

C-o-m-p... Compton. Compromised.

I ducked into a phone booth and got changed into nerd clothes. I wasn't gonna let the po-po catch me, 'specially not Commissioner Gordon.

*

In computing class I put my bag in front of me and practiced drawing the Smashman logo on the desk and I got told off again and it was like, Why bother being good when being evil is easier? I could be chillin with the villains.

To get into the IRD Gang (it stands for the Inland Revenue Department, coz they tax everyone's money), all you have to do is smash someone. I didn't know who, though. I wanted to make it easy if I could, but look tough. I was sorta thinking about taking out a Downer, but some of them kids with Down Syndrome are real

chunky, you could smash, like, 70kgs worth, but they're unpredictable, what if one of those 90kg ones hulked out and bit you and you got downer-rabies and it turned you into a downer-zombie?

In Science, I lended Ricky Brown a Spiderman 3 pen and some refill and he used it to write this note that said I had 24 hours to smash someone, else he was gonna put out a 187 on me, plus my Dad, too, he reckons my Dad's a nark 'cause Dad's sort of like a late night cop, I spose, almost, I didn't think wanna think about how gay his job actually is.

It's real hard to sneak out when Dad's in the house 'cause he's big on leaving ecobulbs on for when you drain the snake at 3am, he thinks I'm still a four year old and shit, so I waited 'til he got called out at, like, 5am and then I got some shorts on and my skate shoes real good for sneaking up on people and I borrowed the spare key from its hidey hole.

I'd been sleeping all day and it was only at night, out on the streets, that I felt awake and full of electricity. I was swept up in a black rapid river which shoved and spun me past the parked cars with their white, frosted windscreens, past the council guy in his street-sweeping buggy, past the dairy where the guys were unloading milk (Smashman had to use his cloaking device to get past those guys), and the night-rapids hurled me into this average street where the big old trees were hanging over the pavement too much, dribbling seeds and cones and flowers.

There was a secret entrance to my school at the far end of an alleyway. I stopped sprinting and started creeping. I saw a cat's eyes glowing. There was only one ute in the parking lot, but it was the caretaker's, that's always there. There was no one in the Plaza – no Asians, no Indians, no cool kids, no gangstas ('cept me). I went behind the Noticeboard just to check if any bloodhounds was following me, sometimes your nemesis does that to you, sends dogs after you. The noticeboard had swimming team results and what the Christians'd been up to in Bangladesh. If you wiggled the panes of the noticeboard just right, you could slide them out. That's what I done, slid the two panes out, then I was like, Smashman's gotta practice. I placed them on a bleacher and karate-chopped them and I had to do it harder and harder before the first one actually broke and it was so sharp that you hardly felt it slice you, and for the second pane of glass, I twirled

around and done a massive discus throw and I was already the fuck up outta there before it hit the ground and shattered. I wasn't thinking about who I was gonna smash until I got past the parking lot and my sprinting slowed down a fraction. I saw that someone was bleeding all over the sidewalk, they must've been smashed real bad and had a bleeding nose, then I was like, Click: that's why my hand feels weird. I started thinking I could become a reptile-based villain coz, like, my hand had been split open between the middle fingers so bad it was like a forked tongue.

*

I could hardly write, I couldn't text and don't even ask me how long it took to wipe my butthole (ages.) They didn't even let me off classes coz of my fucked-up hand, bro, that's how I knew I was in serious shit: They were keeping me INSIDE school.

I got kicked out of cooking class for bleeding in the flour bin and spoiling, like, a whole tub of flour, and Ricky told the teacher I had AIDS, so I lay in the sick bay and worked on my spelling list because Dad'd been working too much to teach me. *Commission*... I could hardly even read that... *Duplicitous*... That one was a dinosaur, I think. Or that hairy Australian duck that lays eggs.

Eventually Principal Mo called me into his office and he honestly went, 'I put it to you that you vandalised the school noticeboards Monday night' before I'd even sat down and eaten some breath mints. And I was like 'Don't I get a lawyer?' but I couldn't look at him while I said it in case I started crying, and to be honest, I didn't say it, I just thought it. My lips went all wobbly and heaps of snot poured out of my nose and my hand hurted. The whole room melted 'cause my eyes became waterfalls, must've been my allergies. I looked straight up, staring at the fire sprinklers so the tears would go back into my eyes, but it didn't work.

'I honestly didn't,' I went. You gotta protect your secret identity at all costs. 'It was... '

'It's okay to "*nark*,"^x he went, putting his nail clippers down and making little speech marks with his fingers. 'I'll even sweeten the deal. Here.' He tossed me a school pen wrapped in plastic with nice gold bits and the school's web address on it. It was annoying, though – he

couldn't be my nemesis now since he was so nice to me.

‘Ricky done it. Ricky Brown.’

He wrote something on his pad. ‘I’ll determine that. Your father is repairing the noticeboard today. Be sure to get a late pass. You may leave.’

Afterwards, I saw that Dad was in Reception the whole time, just sitting in a seat reading the school newsletter and shaking his head. That’s when I really started crying hard-out, like a little baby bitch, and I had to pull my shirt up over my head so no one would see me. I saw through this peephole between the buttons that Dad didn’t even look at me, just pulled his sleeve off his watch, looked interested in the time, strolled out the front door, got in his work van and hooned into the plaza. Do you know how embarrassing his work van is? It’s got our family name writ on it and a real cheesy photo of dad. It’s the only vehicle we got, Mum took the other car after she smashed in the windows of Dad’s van and left crystals all over the driveway. The van always has glass hanging off the ledges on the sides or piled in the back. I hate it hate it hate it, but Dad can’t afford nothing else.

I found myself standing in the middle of the plaza. I was late and my Late Pass felt so heavy, there was no way I could give it to Ms Marsh, for real. My hand shook when I held it up. I found a puddle full of muddy meltwater and I could see my reflection in it and I stomped it and my sock got all full of water and leaves. Everything was fucked-up in my life, I needed to just run home, flip my bed over, build a Fortress of Solitude and stay in there and draw Smashman’s logo with my best coloured pencils and never come out.

Someone came up and shoved me and I fell over and cut the palms of my hands. ‘Time’s up, nigger. I bin looking for you.’

All the energy was out of my body. I felt like if I smacked him in the face, my fist would turn to ash and blow away in the wind. Ricky’s eyes were too scary. Have you noticed how eyes are only like one percent of someone’s body, but they’re the scariest part of a guy? Second scariest was his ponytail, it’s like a heavy, oily snake wrapped around his neck like as if to say ‘Strangliation doesn’t even hurt me.’

Someone was behind me, hooking their arms under me, hauling

me up out of the puddle. I turned around and saw it was the World Vision guy, the African one. Didn't he have any marathons to run? They started slapping me with my late pass and calling me names, and Ricky stomped on my toes and kicked a puddle onto me. The bee sting-freckles guy was there too, sucking on his inhaler. He spat on my jersey and went, 'You missed a spot.'

Ricky walked laps around me with his hands linked behind his back, like Hitler. (Hitler would be a dope nemesis, G.) I stared at his facial hair.

'Cool goatse, bro,' I said to him. 'Can you draw one on me too?'

'It's a called a goatEe, not a fuckin... and it ain't drawn on, whatchu talkin bout?'

'Sorry Ricky. Your boogers is just making your moustache run.'

He wiped the moustache off. 'Gimme your phone, any movies on here?'

'Of me smashing someone? Not really... not many... nah... .'

'Reckon you're gonna smash me, eh tough cunt? Think you're Batman, G?'

I looked around at Dad working on the noticeboard. He knew what was happening to me, he had to know, but I wasn't allowed to call out to him, it was just a rule. 'No.'

'Here. Take my blade, fuckin' take it. You're gonna need it if you're fighting me.'

It was just a spork with a serrated edge. He musta been in Scouts. He'd wrote his name on it with Twink, even though it said Woodwork FRD11 DO NOT REMOVE. 'I don't wanna... .'

Ricky stopped doing his MMA pose and stood up straight. 'You don't get to be in my gang then, fuck off.'

'Sorry, okay.' I began squelching away but they tripped me up and

made a triangle around me again.

‘Fuck off, you’re in. It was a reverse-test. You passed.’

I wanted to slice them all up with the spork, but I was scared of using it, and my good hand, my wanking hand was weak and still had stitches in it. I wanted to scream, *I DON'T WANNA BE IN YOUR GANG, I'M SMASHMAN*, but all that came out was, ‘I’m Sma...’

The bell rang and people came out to lunch. The low-ranking guys in the gang looked towards it, but Ricky was focused on me, like a guard dog.

‘What was you gonna say? Say it again.’

‘Nothing...’

‘I’m *smashing* you? You’re SMASHing me, uh? That what you was gonna say?’

‘No.’

‘You got another 24 hours, else you’re dead.’

‘Want your knife back, Ricky?’

He spat between my eyes and I saw it hanging off my forehead. I couldn’t tell if it was a yes spit or a no spit. All I knew was that I had discovered my nemesis.

*

I rung our landline from my mobile to get Dad out of bed and distract him, and while he was in the kitchen listening to silence and going, ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to speak up,’ I sneaked back into my bedroom and dove into bed and pretended I was asleep. There was something jabbing me in the back and I picked out a cube of safety glass from tonight’s work and I was like WTF?

I had this bad feeling when I found the cube of glass on top of all the credit card bills Dad wouldn’t open but wouldn’t throw away. I felt

like I'd left something behind when I went out smashing, but I couldn't remember what it was.

I heard Dad's knees creak and snap as he crouched in the hallway and did up the laces on his left boot – all the way to the top – and then he stood up, swapped knees, cricked and groaned and did up the right boot. His knees didn't used to click, G. He doesn't have enough money for the operation on his knees, that's the thing, and it's not as bad in summer as winter, that's when the house dries up and we don't have to get the mop and scrub the black mold off all the ceilings. I heard Dad gasping as he pulled on his gloves. They're like some rubber/metal compound with strands running through them that's supposed to be shockproof and impossible to rip. Dad and the other men replace the posters in bus shelters around the city, plus Dad's got the contract to fix up phone booths and do late night patrols of the school and to fix the noticeboard windows if those get slid out and smashed. He has to fight other dudes to get the work though, he told me. Why would anyone be that desperate to work? Work blows.

I pulled the covers over my head and twisted and snuggled and buried myself deep and thought about the Adventures of Smashman and I never wanted to come out. I could see and talk through the microscopy holes in the fabric that Dad didn't know how to fix.

Smash in a jewellery store: Bro, that was a dope idea. The money from it could pay for me to go to St Ped's where you aren't allowed to bully people.

I burrowed into the molten core of my bed and planned the whole thing.

*

At breakfast, Dad's eyes was all pink, all red strands laced like Spiderman's web. He was keeping secrets from me, I could tell, like drugs, I'll bet. Did you know Ricky Brown smokes drugs?

There was something in my school shoe, bugging me. I took my shoe off to make it take longer for Dad to drop me at school.

'Was work cool, Dad?'

He swallowed real loudly and slammed his cup back down. He's had that cup my whole life. I could feel a grenade rumbling where my heart should have been. 'Are we going to play this game, are we?' He rubbed his eyes. They looked like walnuts that had been dropped into a teacup. 'I work ev-er-y sin-gle bloody night. Sleep right through, you do. Like a sloth. Lazy bugger. 'Cept when you're up, which is more often than is appropriate. Working on our vocab until dawn, are we?'

I held my bowl of Froot Loops up to my mouth but I was too frozen to slurp it. You have to put Froot Loops in the milk to make the milk taste good, coz Dad pours a cup of water into the milk to thin it out, make it last.

'Studying. Your vocab. I take it that's what you're doing up so late?'

'But I wasn't... .?'

He folded his newspaper up. 'Then how'd you know I've been going out to work?'

I stared into my bowl of soggy circles. Dad reached out and opened up my vocab book. 'A rich vocabulary is the ultimate wealth. Stop looking like a stunned mullet – I know you're trying.'

'Dad, you don't know–'

'We don't keep secrets in this house.' His mouth dropped into serious mode. 'I happen to've been called out to work last night, yes indeed-doo.' He pushed back and swished the grains in the bottom of his coffee cup. If you met him for the first time you'd know he's got the hell grump issues, he's like the Green Goblin, bro, and the clients make him real mad if they stuff up the work he does, fixing glass at five in the morning. He's a hero. I feel real bad for being a villain. 'Don't think me a fool,' he went, and started to lace up his work boots and carry the posters down to his work van. I took off my school shoe. There was another cube of safety glass in it to pick out... Smashman shouldn't've worn his school shoes when he went out. And I'd left something up at that bus shelter that was gonna get me in the helllllll trouble.

Dad went to warm the van up (it takes, like, 15 minutes to get

it warm enough to crank the heater and defrost the windows). I held the cube up. I decided that it was a diamond, and held onto it. Diamonds can cut through anything. I was gonna need it to get out of bad situations later.

Dad had put floor cleaner in the dishwasher bottle again instead of the proper liquid so I had to pour boiling water in it to flush the floor cleaner out it wouldn't sting in my reptile mutant hand as I done the dishes. Then Dad started honking the horn and I had to go to Judgement Day. I said Goodbye to the house as I clomped down the stairs.

The bit of council grass along the street was all white with frost, and the sky was the colour of milk. Before he opened the van and we locked the front door behind us, Dad went, 'It'll be alright. We'll manage.'

'Vocab is shitty wealth, dad.' I thought about the diamonds I could get him. I watched his breath freeze and scatter and pretended like I didn't know what he was talking about.

'Give us your bag, then, invalid.'

'Nah, I got it... '

'You're not Professor Wolverine. Give it here.'

'I SAID IT'S FINE, DAD, JESUS!' My breath made a big flame of mist go up.

'Christ that's... What is this? What's in here? What's all this, then?' He held up one of the rolls of toilet paper I had in there that I'd got from school yesterday and forgot to take out. 'You needn't... steal... You needn't. Promise me you'll put this back. We'll manage.'

'Manage what?'

'St Ped's. They still take midyear enrolments.'

'It's seriously heaps, Dad, seriously. Just let me withdraw and get a job. I'll be your apprentice if you want.'

‘I’ll make it work. No dearth of broken glass to fix – that’s one for you to learn, *dearth*. Get in the bloody van.’ He was holding the door open for me. His teeth were chattering and I could see a purple finger sticking out of his gloves.

‘YOU SHOULDN’T GOTTA WORK ALL NIGHT. IT’S NOT FAIR. IT’S GAY.’

He shrugged and went, ‘Find me your list. We’ve some words to work on. To the Batcave!’ He fiddled with the heater and puffed into his fists.

‘But I’ll be late...?’

He meant inside his van, amongst the big squares of thick glass. It was too late: he was taking the keys out and opening up our secret lab in the back of the van.

*

A big, black, dad-lump sat on my bed. I didn’t recognise the numbers on my alarm clock, they looked wrong. All of the streetlights were on in the blackness outside. He was slapping a piece of paper.

‘Is it hailing?’ Dad was trailing these little see-through beads: Diamonds. He said Sorry and scooped them up and he was heading for the bin in the bathroom but I was like, ‘Don’t biff ‘em, put ‘em in mum’s bead box,’ and he did.

‘You still have this?’ He sloshed the bead box so the beads rattled. I had my diamond in my pyjama pocket.

‘Listen – where are we going next?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘They’re suggesting you switch schools before they’re forced to expel you, like the letter from Principal Mo says. Onto your second strike, it says here. There’s a whole process with the Board before you’d get expelled, but it’d sure be ugly.’

‘St Ped’s?’

Dad bent forwards, started undoing the laces on his boots, but then he yawned and just sat there, bent in half, staring forwards.

‘You can.’

‘I was only playing...’

‘Where’s your enrolment form? There was one in the info pack, was there not?’ He yawned and got up.

‘Aren’t I even in trouble?’

‘You tell me. Are you?’

‘The school thing. Where’ve you been GOING at night, huh? Seriously.’

‘Please be more explicit.’

‘I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS! YOU NEVER TEACH ME NO MORE!’ I punched my pillow. The only light in the house was over in his bedroom, so all you could see of dad was a black polygon, like he was in a body bag.

He flipped on the light and took my spelling list off the tipped-over chilly bin that I use as a bedside table. He rubbed his glasses clean and went, ‘Virtuous... Definition: sturdy, right? Noble and that?’

‘Yup.’

‘What was next... *Commission*. Define it, pronto.’

‘You don’t have to, Dad... You’re going too fast, anyway...’

‘DEFINE IT. COMMISSION.’

‘Um... what Commissioner Gordon... does?’

‘He’s from your Batman film? The bad guy? I don’t follow.’

‘He’s not a bad guy. He’d a good police guy.’

‘He works in cahoots with an outlaw, and he’s a good guy? Listen, commission means *arrangement*. Commission is what I get paid for every job. Fluctuates depending on whether the glass is in Mayweather or in Browns Ave. School pays alright and all.’

‘What’s flucturate?’

‘I mean I’m paid commission for every pane of glass which I replace, and there’s been a fair few of those lately.’ He got up and the springs creaked with relief and he paused in the door way, hands on the sides, leaning out, speaking into the hallway, closing my door behind him. ‘In fact, if the damage continues, I’m looking at rather a lot of commission indeed.’

I was in trouble. I started pulling my safe blankets over me like a cape.

‘How much is it? Peds’d keep you out of the gangs, wouldn’t it? Channel your energy elsewhere? Too right. I’m glad that Rocky character’s not misleading you no more.’

‘Ricky, not Rocky.’

‘Should be history, that boy. Police’ve picked him up for a whole load of vandalisms. They found his knife where I was fixing the Cineplex ads and all, and he’s been scratching tags, too, some such silliness in the glass. IRD? That’s his little gang, is it not? Town needs a new smashman, it does.’

He winked at me. I stuck my head out of the cover a bit.

‘Don’t switch the light off, Dad.’

He just stood there and waited for me.

‘You get com-commission for every broken bus stop? Is that how come you always work so much? Tell me, Dad. Who smashes them for you?’

He flipped the light off, and I was in the dark again.

‘Dad?’

thousand-strong sticket of people who hate each other and want to fuck and dance all at the same time. She's trying to knee you in the groin but she can't, she's too skinny and weak and viral and her black panda-eye-rings are dribbling.

'You've never had one of me,' you shout, and she nods but keeps her eyes pointing everywhere but at you. Her earrings look really big compared with her horseshoe collar bone, her heavy head almost wobbles like a plastic person on your car's dashboard. She has black crescents under her sleepy eyelids, thick and wide like cappuccino cups. Black crescents are painted on with eyeliner. She has a boy's haircut, and you can see how snappable her neck is. It's the thinness that makes her eyes bulge. Her flesh is like skim milk, bro, you can see the skeleton underneath, and those cheekbones? Like a skull, you swear to God, a talking skull. Then you shout right in her face, and the vibrations make her look into your eyes. 'You've got the Love Virus?'

Her head and her chin are nodding, though it could be the *üinst üinst*.

The taxi screeches away and she clutches the frame of her front door and the world stops spinning. Her keys keep falling out of her hand. 'Don't worry about that idiot,' she goes, laughing and putting on these sunglasses like pools of black vinyl.

'That big tall guy, he's a Positive, right? That tat on his neck? Your minder, pimp or something?'

'Positives don't get in punch-ups with dickhead bartenders. So: no.'

'What, some trendy tat on his neck makes him cooler than me?'

'Least he doesn't think he's superior. Getcha pants off. Be with you in a tick.' She worms out of your grasp and barricades herself in the bathroom and you can hear some liquid pouring into the toilet. You think you hear pills rattling in a bottle. Few left.

'Go wait in the lounge.'

'You shou've pop those bab boys at the club.' Your mouth has gone all rubbery from grinding your teeth. You're still not sure if

someone punched you. Woman is your favourite depressant. With some woman in front of you, you feel nothing else. It's warm between their legs and you don't have to shout or drink or spend money while you're there.

'LOUNGE.'

'Wha are you popping? I wan some.'

'None of your business.'

You look over all her photos and her framed degree and her licence from the council and all that shit. She probably doesn't even work a day job any more. You wish she'd turn the light on so you can see if her neck's marked with a big Plus sign, but then, the bugchasers' forum said, it's what you don't know that keeps you going in life. When there's nothing left to know, then you die. She doesn't look sick in none of the photos. There's one with a guy with his arms around her like he's built her himself, but that man makes only one other appearance, holding a baby, one of those real little ones like a loaf of bread. The way the dude looks at that baby, you can tell it's mostly his.

The lounge is a tessellation of tall black grids from the windows, and glowing greys, and shards of light on the bulges of her vases, on the curved screen of her squat TV. Her photos say that she can smile when she wants to. She must not've had the virus, then. Virals only smile on the outside.

The light goes out and she is pulling off the lower third of her legs, leaving her shorter, tinier. A shard of moon shines on the shades she hasn't taken off her eyes. She hands you a bottle of something thick and bitter. The oily, sour fluid makes a hollow sound as it sloshes against the heavy glass. You like to think you can taste her spit on it, taste the danger.

'I'm not convinced you've thought this through,' she says as you knock back a whole mouthful of wine and wipe the back of your hand across your mouth.

'What, you're afraid of swapping juices or something?'

'Afraid for you.'

She tugs you down the hallway and you recall what you read in the chatroom: Soon as we're born, we're on the road to dying. Your head bobs in the ocean of your shoulders and you feel satisfied, now, like you're on a retreating boat and the pier has disappeared. You've had bitches in the toilets at City Hall, bro. You've had bitches in the handicapped toilets of a fucking fire station, God's own truth. You've even fucked a woman all cuffed up who said she was a Fed, dawg. Never a Positive, though, you've never been there –

'You think you know,' she goes, stroking open the door to her bedroom. Her double bed is a frozen lake of black silk. Some part of her must have been longing to fill up those wide metres of mattress with someone. People with The Virus fuck like crazy before they die, they know they're spreading it, they want everyone else in the city to be in the same sitch as they are and party to death with them.

You laugh at what she's said, about fucking a Positive. As if.

'SSH. Shut it down.'

'Why, you got a kid?'

She sits on the edge of her bed and takes a wet wipe from a packet with a photo of a baby on it and wipes the black from the rims of her eyes. Her last layer of protection is her shirt and when she's taken it off, she lies down on her stomach, shivering, and stretches her legs out until you grab them. A truck passes outside and the room is momentarily lit by a strobe light. Her back looks like bone-white pantyhose tossed over a pile of bricks. Her spine is so obtrusive that you want to pull it out of her back like a fillet of tinned sardines. There are panties and two pads to remove. You've heard that they bleed a lot, the Pozzies. You kick the panties under your own discarded jeans, to add to the collection you keep in the box in your hot water cupboard. When you've had a thousand people, bitches, dudes, anyone, you will retire from it all. You just need to get those numbers up.

Then she catches her breath and holds it and shrinks her mouth. 'What if – how do you know I'm not *positive*?'

'Love virus? 'Sall good,' you drool into her ear. Vera, her name is, Vera with the black hair and fingernails and lipstick. *Ünst ünst ünst* in

your ear drums. She arches her tunnel up, inviting you in, and you're like, 'You sure you don't wanna face me?' and she gasps, 'The injection, prevench, it's, the 7/11, just – justputatowel,' she begs, '*Putatoweldown,*' but you push her head into the pillows. Her eyebrow rings get caught in the silk sheet but she's used to everything stinging.

*

You awake from a nightmare of heat, lawns, children, chicken pox, air conditioning, lawn mowing. You're too scared to get up and grab a glass of water. You need your cigarettes, though.

She ain't in the bed.

You can't cope with the smell of what's cooking, spitting oil, crêpes or fried bananas or something. Food, for you, is just something you grab as you're passing through the kitchen at work to make your breath smell better after a smoke.

For ages, you stand on Vera's front doorstep shivering, repairing last night's events, taping the shattered vase back together. You really can't remember why you pursued this bitch – because she was mean to you, wasn't it? Something about getting even. She'll make a great story, this ravenous she-beast, if you can manage to get some boys together to listen to your stories. Whose numbers do you still have on your phone? You pat your pockets – no, your phone's lost, gone. Your phone is the last two years of your life.

It's dusk already, somehow you slept all day on her mattress built for two, the air is unfriendly and it stings and turns your fingertips into purple rocks, and there's an orange ribbon wrapped around the sky. You shiver and bury a cigarette butt in a pot plant then you tap her door, and she's there, wearing those sunglasses that keep you out of her eyes. 'Come and eat with me.'

She has trouble sitting down – she's sore, down below, and her bones creak. You wonder if she's changed her bandages and pads. They must be well hidden. It's so quiet that for a while, you can hear her chewing every bite. You picture it sliding down her throat and into her stomach. You wonder if her insides have sores and photosensitivity, too. You know that if you look at her teeth in full daylight, you'll see the edges all frayed and rotting. You pinch a

cigarette out of your box and you're hoping she'll lose her cool and kick you the fuck out, send you on your way, otherwise you'll just sit at the table dipping cigarette butts in your lemon sauce, waiting for the world to end.

You both realise you can hear the clock ticking.

'Spit it out,' she says.

'I wasn't... Nothing.' *Vera: How often do you have to go to A&E and all that? What kind of meds you take, Vera? They get you high? Got any to share?* Thing is though, ask a Poz if they're positive and they'll deny it, that's the rub, bro. They'll always say, Not me, I practice safe sex, all those old excuses. They get their backs up, like it's their fault they're positive, like it's their fault Normals don't go to their clubs, but it's all backwards. What they're covering up is the most intense, hair-raising bugchasing ride anyone could ever have. Making love to a Poz is like swallowing razor blades and hoping they'll pass cleanly through your system because you don't *mean* for anyone to get hurt.

As soon as she lays her fork down pointing straight, you snatch it up and wash her plate and wineglass too, and dry them and put them away, and pull everything out of your pockets. Swipe card to get back into the box you live in; smokes; lighter; bottle opener; her phone number written on the wet receipt.

'You smell that? Reeks of alcohol, bro. You got a bottle of vodka in here?'

'Must be you. The smell. Your shirt.'

'I don't really need this,' you say, pretending you ain't heard her. 'You're trying to get me to take it off? Devious, you are.' You remove your shirt.

She rises from the table, bumping her knife. 'Let me put a load of washing on –

'The fuck you will! You throw her phone number into the insinkerator but it won't wash down so you put it back in your pocket and say, 'Another drink, ha-ha,' opening one of her bottles and sliding some cupboard beers into the fridge. They fall out. The fridge must be

on an angle, the floor must be sloped, it can't be you. You take a piss and stumble out of the flushing room, doing your belt buckle up, but you can't be bothered finishing it.

'Bring it through. The bottle.'

She steps out of her pants as she moves down the hallway. The V between her thighs is shy, it's hiding from you. You have to get a story for the boys.

*

'You're big-time late. Manager's looking for you.'

'Well I'm looking for him, so we're even.'

You actually ain't. He's going to fire your ass, probably. You pour yourself a beer so cold that you're afraid to drink it, and pause, and put it all down in one go, and wince. You bite into a lemon. The burn seems healthy in some way, it means you don't gotta brush your teeth. The bar tries to shift under your glass, so you hold it good and tight. When did the bar turn into a galleon and set sail on jagged seas? The room tips and lurches all over the place. You attempt to top your glass up with something harder, to save time, and tap the rhythm of the song the deej has on. It's afternoon and you own this place, your blood is muscular. The bottles are swaying all over the place and it's hard to get the sharp brown liquid into the glass. You go to pour yourself a schnapps, next, but this big furry hand wrenches the bottle off you. 'Something's come up. Don't bother. Manager says you should come back when you've had a wash and a shave. I concur, bromes.'

'Let go, Bounce. My shift, my rules. Get back on the door, anyone could come in.'

'I oughta twist your arm, Mr I'm-Too-Cool-To-Answer-My-Phone, break it a little.'

Bounce thinks he's the city's conscience. He's from the tropics and he goes to church on Saturdays. He thinks every time he twists someone's arm that he's got this heavenly blessing to do it. You let go of the bottle and shatter an ice cube between your teeth. You hope

that doesn't give Bounce any ideas about shattering your arm.

'What you're doin is disgusting,' he goes on, 'You're a flippin animal. Do the right thing, you cockroach. Get a checkup. Get botha yous a checkup. Call it a double-date.'

'You don't know nothing.' You reach over to the lemon board, groping for a knife or at least a glass to smash over his head, but all you get is lemons squishing between your fingers. 'I ain't even seeing her any more. Shows what the fuck you know.'

He squeezes your shoulder like you're a little kid. You envision punching him hard in the guts, but your hand would probably shatter like the ice cube. What's that shit that makes your bones strong? Carbon? Whatever it is, you don't have enough in you. 'This is serious. You're being serious. You're not a bad man, even a flippin' bro on a good day. Don't risk yourself. Get checked up.'

You're so pissed-off you go out back and stand on the fire escape stairs and smash bottles in the dumpster, listening to sirens and people screaming, then you stack kegs in the icebox and clean the hoses and load the dishwasher and stay the fuck away from Bounce, then when your shift has five minutes to go, you untie your apron and tell the customer with the fifty in his hand to forget about it and Bounce yells out after you as you jump over the velvet rope and run past the heat lamps and the line of people in tight black jeans and you stumble and the bottle of schnapps tumbles out of your sock and makes that horrible cracking sound of wasted booze, and you fall down and lick the fire off a shard of glass, and sit in the gutter, worrying about your wound. Say a person's got the virus, couldn't you bleed it out? You have to ask Vera, she'd be the one, except – except you never went back there. You won't even wear your black jeans coz her number's in the pocket. You don't even use your phone any more 'cause you know she's been ringing.

To get her off your case, you have sex with her every day until the rusty leaves let go of the trees and there's ice on the windows in the mornings, and your unending days are only interrupted by nights of squishy, slippery sweaty naked wrestling, pins and holds and bent legs, slippery meat trying to stand up. You turn out all the lights and

nail her black satin sheets against the windows and flip her over and come away with your penis hiccupping and strands of black hair caught between your fingers, and scabs on her knees leaving these potato-stamps of blood and goo on the sheets. She's getting rashes on her knees from what you do together on the rug in the lounge. You keep finding her black hairs under your wedding ring.

She keeps offering to launder your clothes. You keep telling her you really must be going. She asks your name at one point water, shifting point in time.

*

ImmYOUne is stashed down one of those laneways that's too narrow to fit your car down. It's stacked head-high with black bags of garbage. No one in the line is wearing anything on their top half and a lot of them have forks and spoons stuck through the holes in their ear lobes. A lot of people are sitting on the dumpsters sucking syringes full of blood and squirting them into each other. Some people are inside the dumpsters, texting, smoking, wearing clothes suitable only for shredding, being alive and cold and numb, trying to speed up their deaths from cold or flu or exposure. A nipping wind drives you inside and you stick your key ring through your ear lobe and they let you in 'cause you look incorrigible and you pull your very last work shirt off and fling it into the flapping black thicket of bodies. The ceiling is a giant canopy dripping with condensed sweat, with a forest of heat lamps in the centre, and beyond there are these winding canvas alleyways that go past dark tables where tattooed monsters sell insane ethnic trinkets and you keep tripping over wet floor signs, and there are pools of reflective liquid on the ground leaking from drips and catheter bags, some red and some white, and you slip and take your shoes off and throw them into a brazier. People are squelching, squirming, grinding, slurping each other's lips, women are biting the goatees of men, necks are getting nibbled, people are sixty-nining right there on the ground. Women are pressing their ribs against each other. Everyone seems skeletal and exhausted, but the bass beat is a slavedriver to them. Your cock pulsates with the music – screaming metal sped up 300bpm, songs about nullification. There is an animal in your pants. You have to fight to bend down to touch your toes. Something is jabbing your foot, broken glass, right? You move on, but what's holding you won't let go. You raise your foot out of its shoe and pull a needle out with about a third blood left in it. It's fun to squirt on some guy. He rouges his cheeks with it and licks his red lips.

Looking up, you see that the wall at the ultimate end of the club is brick, painted black, and what you think are TV screens are sewer grates and pipes leading into black holes. You're all dancing in a sewer.

You insist on buying an entire bottle with your last surviving credit card, some cracked thing with your ex-wife's name on it beside yours, a card some department store signed you up for. You put the bottle of sticky, fiery chemicals to your lips and let the napalm burn your guts. You carry the bottle with you in one hand, drinking for strength as you eel through the crowd, trying to stay away from any Exit signs. No one wears a smile, they just mosh and let their dyed fringes flop into their eyes, and lick their cracked black lips and rip the dressing off their sores. Their kissing is thirsty, desperate for saliva to moisten their throats. You pour alcohol over your head. If somebody were to light you on fire, you'd dance until you charred, and then you'd shake yourself into fragments. The middle of the crowd is like being at the edge of the galaxy, looking at the earth as a pinprick a million light years away. Stings, shards, fragments keep stabbing the bottoms of your feet, and you keep swaying and pulling needles and glass out of your flesh. There are a hundred underground hours between midnight and morning.

*

She comes in at the start of your shift, wearing a big fat dress under her hoodie, and you can't remember her name, only her condition. What was her number? Tucked about ten back, you estimate. You've doled out the last month in cigarettes breaks with Bounce out the back, trying to describe the blurry bitches you bent and split and dissected with your dick, trying to talk him into coming bugchasing with you.

'I just wanted you to know,' the V-woman begins, metres away from the bar, fucking pre-empting you, trying to look you in the eyes, 'I just wanted you to know that the test came back positive.'

'Venus,' you say, and it sounds wrong. 'No – it's not – Viola. Vera, I mean.' She is wearing some kind of a blanket or shawl. She has on a woollen hat with ear flaps but you see clues that her black hair has grown back twice as thick. Her legs are buried in thick pants with frost on them. This is the first time you've seen her without face paint on. Her eyes stand out against a purple background. Her skin is thick,

puffy and too glowing too much to go out. She must have dropped out of the party scene.

‘Vera– ’

‘I’m getting it cured. Fixed.’

‘D’you want a drink or something? You’re not really looking for, like, a relationship and shit? Here – here’s a tissue.’ You hand her a thin cardboard coaster.

‘You left your ring.’

‘What?’

‘At my house. When you slept over.’

‘What am I gonna do with a wedding ring? What do I wanna get married again for? Did I say that? Do I look like I wanna commit?’

Her staunch blue eyes dribbling, she takes the ring out of her handbag. She looks sore as she moves her arms, and she’s sweating. The ring is in a stupid little plastic baggie, and she handles it with so much respect, it’s aggravating.

‘You buying a drink or not?’

She pulls open the flaps of her black coat and tries to show you what was underneath, and you shut your eyes and fling a towel at her. ‘DO I LOOK LIKE I SHOULD BE DRINKING?!’

As she storms towards the lady-toilets, you throw the ring at her. It lands in some ashtray.

‘AND DON’T COME BACK!’ you yell after her. ‘GO GETCHASELF A BLOOD TRANSFUSION.’

Bounce lets go of the toilet door he’s been holding open for her. You break eye contact first, damn it. ‘She can’t hear you, son. She’s in there throwing up. You’re lookin at your future right there.’

*

You annihilate your wages in four days; the next week, two days, but here you are, slinging drinks around with more arms than an octopus. With your overdraft overdrawn, you have to take a bit out of the till – you know, to survive. Survival. Survive. No one else'll hire if they find out about... the thing. Word is getting around. Bounce says there are people coming up to him, asking if this is a Bug Bar, officially, as in registered under the Health Code and stuff. Does that skinny guy work here? The one with the blue crescents under his eyes?

It takes you days to work out which skinny, dying guy they're asking about.

Some dance parties last two moons and a sun. You go into a stall, lock the door, sleep for an hour turned around, hugging the rear of the toilet, your head resting on a roll of TP, then you tumble back into the party. You can't tell what one another looks like in the dark, there is no welcome, no warmth. You are greasy all the time, stinking, bathing in jizz and fishy juice, scabbed up, bony. You get forced to do a blood test that you buy from an all night convenience store. You can't seem to find time to actually sit down and grab a drop of blood and put it into the centrifuge. Your work desk becomes an overflowing pile of bills and threats and Model Hobbyist magazine with miniature Fokkerwulfs. You can't be fucked cancelling the subscription, too much effort. You pick up a Frisbee with jagged bits on the side where your dog used to chew it. You can't remember what the dog was called. Your dog. Its kennel is full of leaves now.

You plunge straight back into the clubs. Underground, TranceFuzion, Rhesus, all of them are safe. They keep the light off your skin, and you never hear birds or traffic any more.

You wash your spasming, crusty eyes with ice cubes. You are in a bathroom. There are white puddles on the ground, and a Band-aid. You have a guy fucking you and it hurts but in the centre of the pain is a new dimension, an undiscovered colour. It doesn't make a difference, you have a hole, that's what matters. His friend props you up against the wall and whispers into your ear. A song that you used to love but no longer understand is playing. You slump into the man's

car. You're going to live with them forever, apparently. He pukes words into your ear which have strange barbs and curves to them, comic book speech bubbles. He is saying things you can't envision, strange words which sound real but which you are convinced are authentic, so no need to clobber anybody. The club stops spinning and the toilet stall door opens and you are in the back seat of a jeep. The walls are concrete with lights embedded in them. The ceiling is low. *'Chasing rabbits or roaches?'* one of them asks, and holds your head and another one parts your lips with his tongue and slips a tablet of baking soda into your vinegar head and it bubbles up and your ears snap and pop. You are made of clouds and you can enter buildings through the top floor. Your card is declined. They give you a thick roll of cash. You are on your knees in a bedroom. Someone places a heavy coat over you and you can't shake it off. That major world sports tournament lives in the tiny TV which murmurs in the background. You're on your knees, offering your arse up to the party, and every time you try to move, your spine is extracted and shoved into your back and your tailbone aches. The man groaning into your ear is a tall, thin, black-skinned guy wearing glasses. He has the studious look of a scientist. His chest looks like a coral reef, it's covered in weeping scales. He has a small crowd watching and sipping drinks. They all wear hospital scrubs. Some have IV drips coming out of their elbows. You want to vomit, you want to get what's inside of you out, but it's easier just to take it and scream and take it some more.

*

The birds tell you that it is daytime, but they don't say which day. You pull your underwear on, groaning with agony. There is something brown that has cracked, little panes, shapes, dark brown. Dried blood. Even worse, though: there is a text on your phone asking you to dinner, hot, roasted meat with trimmings. She wants you to come home inside where it's warm, before she has to go into hospital. You grope for the Delete button but you hit Save instead.

*

Everyone knows you're The Cockroach and who you've been letting inside you. There is no one out there who hasn't seen your tattoos. Everyone knows that you live out of the till. Everyone knows that you wash by rubbing ice cubes on your face, and turn your t-shirts inside out to freshen them. They only keep you on because you

can clear a crowded bar in one minute flat. The entire fucking Positive community seems to be showing up at the bar. They have decided you're one of them.

You head out back behind the dumpsters and smoke a cigarette while somebody sucks the filth out of you and you eyeball Bounce and even this big prick, the most dangerous man in the club scene, blushes and looks away.

You do a priest, you do a paramedic. You consume them all. It's the way your flaky lips purse, the thirst they can see, the task of filling you up and sending you on your way. You hear so many pillow stories and say See Ya Round to so many strangers. You scrub your butthole with a toothbrush because you've heard that it increases the risk of infection. A bit of your intestine flops out. You get rashes and random nosebleeds. They know your name and condition at the all-night A&E. They're expecting you to move in there as soon as your lease at nowhere is up.

You piss off Bounce real good one night and he punches you in the ribs and you fold in half. You're still hurting ten minutes later when he finds you in the chiller, sitting on a keg, holding a six pack against your guts. You haven't had any proper food in forever, all you ever take in is cocktail fruit and cigarettes.

'You oughta work out,' he said. He offers you a hand to help you up. You stare at his jeans.

'They're too tight on you,' You go, your voice still thin and raspy. 'Your jeans are.'

He shrugs and taps a cigarette out of the packet without even looking at it. 'She rang for you, by the way. That Viral.'

'Change the phone number. Throw the phone in the rubbish.'

'You ain't thinking straight. You need a check-up. I told her your brain's sick, diseased. You used to be alright.'

'Who cares.'

'You know she's been seen? Spotted, I mean, going into a clinic.'

You heard about this?’

‘Makes sense.’

He flicks his lighter a couple of times, then offers you a cigarette. He glares through the gap between the sliding door and the frame, and checks that nobody is in the coat room, and snaps the inside lock on the door and starts unbuckling his jeans. ‘Too tight, you reckon?’

‘That’s what I reckon.’

‘It’s freezing in here,’ he says, and his belt buckle hits the concrete with a clang.

‘Never get checked, that’s my advice,’ you go, unbuttoning. ‘Dying rocks.’

*

You wake up in a hotel, but it is black outside, and all the buildings are twinkling, and you’re on top of them. You donk your head against the glass to see if you’ll go through. A cleaning lady lets herself in. She thinks you’re dead. You offer the cleaning lady a drink nine times, saying her language’s word for Drink over and over. On the tenth time, she takes a sip. You turn up the stereo. Soon, you have her top off and you’re dancing to the radio, and then you’re moaning and sweating rancid brine while she moans prayers in a language you can’t understand. You’re interested in the photos of her son you find in her purse while she’s in the toilet. You even steal a photo. She won’t stop talking in that irritating language. You’ve had enough. You yell at her, demanding to know who she’s praying for and why she keeps saying your name.

*

You come to in a white room. It’s heaven. It’s too sumptuous to open your eyes in, so you keep them closed, enjoying the bliss. You always wondered what was beyond that black crevasse at the deep end of those dark corridors, and now you know: it’s light. Everything is light compared to the blackness you’ve been wearing.

You spot other colours in the room. The bio-medical waste

bucket is bright yellow. The box full of bandages is clear. The exit sign is green. The nurse wears a red uniform. She says she won't unstrap you. Some of your tears almost get on her skin and she darts back and squirts sterilising foam on her hands and scrubs her arms, and you insist that you're not Positive, you're not not not not not.

'You still require the test,' she says, 'As part of our policies here.'

'What about my things?' you go, 'From the hotel room?'

'What things?'

You make a gradual escape, shuffling out of the room and waddling like a penguin through sixty corridors that all look identical. You take the elevator to numbers you've never imagined. You find a floor that says Delivery Ward and you collapse and the stand holding up your IV bag falls over. The nurses ask you who they need to call, and you pat your pockets. You've got your black jeans on, the ones soaked in booze, and you pull the credit card receipt out of your pocket and hold it up like something you found at the back of your throat. The date of the receipt is still printed in neat black type and you squint as you try to read it, you need about four pairs of sunglasses, you haven't had light on you in... how long? At least with the light you'll be able to see whether or not there's a tat on her neck. The receipt says it was eight months and four weeks and... no... Nine months, it adds up to. Nine months. Vera's phone number has faded away, so you can't call her, but the nurse helps you into a seat, and you sit there in the Delivery Ward and wait for her.

Axe of God

We're standin where the carport meets the road, tryin ta have this conversation over the noisy horns 'n shit.

'Glad you came,' this dick goes, 'You've heard we've been burgled?'

'Woulda come in anyways, workin til six bro. Chris tell you I work weekends?' It's early on Saturday mornin.

'Chris _____?'

'Wimzy – Williams – general manager.'

'General manager for _____?'

'Aw – C-dos, up on the second floor. We do them pictures on the internet.

'You're referring to web design, are you?'

'Yeah whatevs. I'm pretty high up in the company eh. Who you workin for?'

The man looks at me mistrustful as, steppin me out with his eyes. Eyein up my bag too, hard out. Termsa physical stature, I gots the advantages but the fulla's older, like a teacher or somethin. Can't really get away wiv mouthin off ta older people 'less you're in school. That's gotta be the only reason to go back there I reckons, apart from ta bomb the place. One thing I like about standin out here though is you can let shit slip out when the traffic goes past, so I takes the advantage and runs with it, call him this 'n that under my breath under the honks. Loadsa cars is comin past round Biscetti Junction past our buildin eh. Real loud.

'Who you workin for?' I goes again. Bloody traffic.

'Netcom. I'm General Manager. You've probably read about us '

'I can't read,' I goes.

'Your name is _____?'

'G. Big G..'

'It's not G on your birth certificate I'll bet.' He sneers, makes a double chin. This is starting to suck. You can smell rubber in the air from the motorways. The windows get this sticky black dust on them. 'How do you spell your superior's name?'

'W- uh-Y- y'know, howeva ya spell Williams. He ain't superior though.'

The man's cellphone rings. 'Just hang tight alright?'

Hang tight about what? Like this dick needs to be in control. Probly don't hear though, he woulda only heard his mate on the phone. The man goes he's here with a G who says he works for C-dos.

'Yes, we'll wait here. I'll enquire, hang tight.' The man tucks his phone in his armpit.

'You have some sort of ID or proof that you work here? Work permit?'

'Eh? I'm from here, work permit what? Don't gots ta need ID bro – they just gaves us the codes.'

'If you could show me how you entered the building.' The man goes back to his phone call. 'Young lad's going to show me how he entered.'

'Not *that* young.' What a short-arse bloody... I'm sure peeps is eyeballin us from the road. I'm lookin out at the traffic on Union but they don't seem as interested as they should be.

The dick laughs in my direction. Someone on his moby's backin' him up. 'Those people... the bag, oh yes.' He snaps his mobile shut and whistles at us.

‘Can I ask what’s in your bag there?’

‘Lunch ‘n junk.’

‘Are you prepared to show me?’

‘Nahp,’ I goes, holdin my bag real tight.

‘And might I ask why there’s spraypaint residue on your bag?’

‘It’s taggin,’ I goes, ‘Straight up – but, like, coverin up other peeps’s tags.’

‘You admit that you were graffitiing.’

‘Gotta fight tag with tag, bro. I care about my place of ah, what was it, work.’

‘To be discussed. Show me how you got in then. I’m uncertain what’s holding up the – ah.’

A bluey pulls into the carpark while he runs his mouth. Wore my FUCK DA PO-LICE hoodie today. Somethin about it makes peeps look at me all suss but I ain’t sure what. The colour? And I know they’s gonna pull us up about this tag-bag shit again. The poey gets out of its vehicle as I turns to punch my punchcode in the stairwell door. The lift ain’t workin good. There’s hell-as rents in the stainless steel lips which are sposda close on each other with a sigh, like a nice kiss. No kisses now though, just the whine as the motors tries ta force the doors shut and can’t. Rents mighta been caused by a crowby or even a axe. Lift’s got tagged and pissed in, no way we’s goin in it. The mergency phone’s off the hook.

The poey, she’s a piggess, that’s a female pig. She takes a readin of my hoodie and looks a bit angus. She musta think I stole it. If she arkses us about what’s writ on it I’ll tell her I can’t read what it says.

So this short-arse mil-aged dick’s all up in my face:

‘Your punchcode? Show me it on the keypad.’

‘Keypad’s busted,’ I goes, ‘I’m tryin’a show ya – just round the corner here.’ The poey’s prodding the cinderblocks with her fingertips, making notes on her notepad. Not bad lookin for a lady po, real wide hips eh, like Nigella, bros reckon I’m wack for lovin the wide ladies but they’s ignant.

‘Here: code.’ I punches in the code real quick. Someone’s had a go at the buttons, they’re munted.

‘Show me again.’ His arms are folded. I whams the code back in, bit slower for the dumb-arse audience.

‘Satisfactory,’ he goes, smilin all reluctant-arse, obviously still hatin’ on me, ‘but let’s wait here for the officer to have a word with you, hey?’

‘She can have a word with you too bro,’ I goes, on the offensive!

Judiff’s strollin up as well, wearin this thick red coat what finishes below her knees, and it’s got shoulder pads. The dick looks gleefully happy, like somethin’s been caught in his trap. ‘Ah – perhaps this woman can clarify things.’ Judiff has a quick word to the officer, who’s waitin for her break.

‘Break in I understand?’ Judiff goes.

I cut Dickman off before he can make me look bad. ‘Yeah check out the wide-as rents in the elevator, woulda been a crowbar they woulda used,’ I goes to her, just to her, not lookin at my *mate*, the dick. Better arks his name at this point I thinks.

‘By the way bro what’s y–’

‘You work for C-dos do you?’ Judiff arkses me. Man, I’ve stood beside Judiff loadsa times in the kitchen scrapin shit off my lunch plate makin a big-arse effort to show her I care about hygiene and that. And what do I get for it? Disrecognized.

‘You’ve clocked me, like, countless times! C’mon! I’m real high up in... that company what I work for. The one what I said before.’

'He does say he works for C-dos,' Dick goes.

'Oh yes, I suppose so,' Judiff's like, 'you're better dressed most days though aren't you Gary.' That makes us even anguser. Shoulda wored my FUCK JUDIFF hood instead.

'What's in your bag there?'

'Jus lunch eh, ah, Jude.' She glares us up.

That dick goes, 'Left your briefcase in the Porsche, hm?'

Miss Piggy comes up and joins us, done talkin on her radio for the mo. She's got a walkie talkie on one side, countless accessories on her belt eh, pepper spray and capsicum spray and stuff, lookin' like Batman 'n shit. She doesn't waffle on and on like these other cunts.

'Sir, were you here when the burglary occurred, were you the person who called emergency services?'

'Nah yeah well I rang yous and no one answered, what's up with that? Had to call that security firm instead. Mergency phone's all smashed up now.'

'But it's not so smashed that you couldn't call?'

'Used my moby.' I takes out my phone and waves it side ta side.

'What was the police response time?' She pulls out one of her sprays and I recoils a bit. Memoirs of that stuff lingers with ya. Turns out it's a notebook though and she starts writin shit down.

'Arks this guy, they sent him down.' I jerk a thumb at the jerk. He steps in front of me, literary. It's like a eclipse of the sun.

'Security protocol for the firm - that's S-@-F-E Secure, got that?,' he prebbles, 'With an At symbol for the A. Protocol is for S@fe Secure to have a senior employee at the site investigate any disturbances before they dispatch a security guard, due to fiscal foresight.'

‘Fiscal force... wot?’

‘*Money*,’ this dick goes, firmly, ‘budgeting. However my own company, that’s Netcom, you might’ve read about us, has me indemnified for accident or injury sustained while investigating untoward incidents of this nature, Axe of God. Same as the others in the building. Our levies are discounted if their guards don’t have to be called out. Do the investigating myself, obviously, to keep the premiums down somewhat. So, long story short, I’ve come down here this morning with a certain...’ he fishes in the air for a pinafore, ‘...Dutch courage.’

Judiff interventions. ‘This is Dick Netta – he runs Netcom? You’ve probably read about them.’

The officer writes more stuff down. ‘A burglary’s covered as an Act of God is it, Mr Netta?’ She gets Mr Netta to spell his name for her.

‘What’s a Axe of God?’ I arks.

‘Axe of God,’ Judiff goes, ‘are axe for which no one can be held responsible – this means they are hard for insurance to cover, and insurance likes to avoid such claims. Or to make them somebody else’s responsibility.’ She sighs. ‘Comparable to our current circumstances – we’re still to determine why the alarm wasn’t activated.’

Dick steps right into the middle of our four-sided shape, squintin up at me wearin like magnifyin glasses:

“G”, I’m going to ask you this without preamble, because preamble would be both a waste of mine and your time, and that of the good officer here, and Ju– ‘

‘WOT?’

‘Did you see any burglars this morning?’

‘Nahp.’

‘Has anything been taken from C-dos? Or my offices? Or any of the others within the building?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Why’d you call security?’

‘Keypad’s munted. Escalator too.’

Elevator. G, you need to get your superior down here to assess damage, confirm things with Judiff and myself. And to check whether the alarm’s working.’

I want to tell him I don’t have no superior but, whatever, I gets out my moby and gives old Wimzy a call. He says he’s in bed reading the financial news. I arks him if it says who won the league. Then I tells him there’s been some kinda a break-in, nah haven’t been up to see if anythin’s stolen but the excavator’s shot and we got a poey and Judiff, you know her, and some dick standin round tryina suss things out. The short-arse gives me a sick-arse look when I call him a dick. Soon as I’m hung up, he goes to me:

‘Let’s get efficient: did you break in here?’

‘Nahp.’

The poey raises her eyebrows. Judiff’s got her arm folded.

‘Why did you call security instead of the Police?’

‘Told you straight up, I rang 911 and you pricks didn’t answer. This is like what Mum said, like how God only helps them what help themselves.’

‘I’d just like an explanation about the alarm system,’ Judiff goes. The poey finally runs her mouth.

‘I visited S@fe on the way down here,’ she goes, ‘which held me up. They confirmed the alarm system was disconnected this morning. Perhaps by whoever did all the graffiti.’

While we’s waiting for Wimzy to turn up, I goes and fiddles

with the scraps of the alarm circuitry all hangin out of their box. This is round the corner where the concrete gets rougher and there's broken glass all over the show. That short-arse Dick comes round and arks me what the hell do I think I'm doin with evidence and he summonses over Judiff and po-lady.

I go, 'Hey is this a Axe of God?' indicatin the smashed up shit, 'coz it looks like For's carved up wiv his hammer. A hammer's pretty much a blunt axe.'

'For?'

'That Glaswegian god dude. For. For's Hammer.'

'Unlikely,' Judiff goes. But she kinda starts smilin for some reason.

'Who pays for the damage, if insurance don't? And like to replace the stolen shit? If it is a Axe of God.'

The poey chuckles. Dick, who you mighta read about, goes

'The *taxpayer*,' real angry.

I'm like, 'Jeez, I ain't payin taxes – they'll hafta *take* em from me yo.' That sets em chucklin even harder.

So Wimzy turns up wearing his dressing gown and I cracks up. He tries to gimme one a them fist pumps like my main man Obama. Wimzy's got this thing about connecting with the youth, givin us opportunities. He even tries to rap. Introduces himself round to the three stooges, shakes all their hands holdin his gown closed with his free hand. Wimzy's all g but he's kinda one a them effluent fag types what drinks their Lion Red out of a wine glass.

'So, you're in charge of C-Dos, Mr Williams?' goes the piglet

'We are, yes. Hi Jude. Our Godfrey here, Godfrey Scott, we let him come in on weekends and do a spot of web design work. During the week he's,' and Wimzy leans in and gets all conspiracy styles – 'well, he makes a fine cuppa tea.' He rubs my hair so I pulls my hood up, this is stink.

‘Got your lunch there eh?’ he goes to me, chur as, ‘Mum’s egg sandwiches again?’ Stink as. ‘I hope they haven’t given you too much grief, Godfrey.’

But Miss Piggy cuts in, ‘I see C-Dos isn’t registered on here,’ fingering the sign what says what companies is inside. Sign’s a bit old so I know my man’s gonna get a bit of a grillin’.

‘That’s out of date I’m afraid,’ he goes, gives us faggoty wee chuckle like it’s not his fault we ain’t listed, which it is and makes a hassle for me when I get couriers pokin their noses in our office askin if we’re Netcom.

‘Anyway,’ Pigita goes, tuckin her notepad back on them luscious hips, ‘please indicate to me which components of the alarm system will need repairing. I can contact your security provider and insist on expediency. And that’s us.’

‘Right-o, will do,’ Wimz goes, ‘listen, G: you *are* obliged to work today– ‘

I swears at that, but at least I won’t get disturbed if everyone’s buggerin off now. It’s not so bad workin’ in a trashed orifice by myself. I work in mysterious ways.

‘Until what time are you working, hon?’ Judiff arkses me, all concerned and shit, ‘We want you to be secure up there.’

I go, real mournful, ‘Aw, better do my full hours eh.’ Come ON Wimzy, I’m thinkin, intravene! Help me out!

Wimz goes, ‘It’s not safe up there, there are thieves about. Just give my office a clean-up and head home safely. Don’t worry about any programming for now.’ He shakes hands again and retreats back to his Jag. Jude tells Dick to stay away from the office until the cleaners and locksmiths is done their shit.

‘And don’t fret about cleaning my office, Geoffrey. Just give my coffee mug a rinse if you would.’

‘Hang on,’ Dick goes, ‘let’s not exculpate the human element – will anyone be sought?’

'It's less than likely we can identify a suspect. Let insurance clean up.' The po tucks her notepad back into them hips. 'Thanks for your help, G.' She gives us a wink.

I tells her she's welcome. The dick who ya mighta read about tries to linger and give me another earful but the po toots at him. My hood's up and I pull the drawstrings tight and I couldn't hear Dick if I wanted to. They're big but G's bigger.

The switch to activate the escalators is identified by a small red box painted above it. Seen tonnes of these eh. I find this one beside the fake fern. I switches it on, ride the lift up in style. One thing I loves about havin the alarm deactivated is I don't have to remember the code, which is like eight digits long and I don't have time for that shit. I don't wanna linger round here, there's bad peeps about.

The kitchen's just off left from reception. Walkin through, I'm about to grabs a Reader's Digest, they got mean-as jokes in em, but that's a waste of bag space – spray cans be takin up room. I dumps my lunch out on the kitchen table and rip mum's sammies into little pieces and smooch some of them down the sink and chucks the rest in the bin. Mouth's a bit too dry ta eat.

I reckon I'm a pretty faithful employee eh. I follow Wimzy's command to a T and clean out his office real good. Nab his laptop, gold Parker pens 'n shit. Then I moves through to Jude's part of the office, find me some petty cash, lotta prepaid envelopes too, Mum arksed me to pick sum up coz she writes lotsa letters, specially letters to the principal. Hopefully For'll help me not get too weighed down with mum's gear – like mum said, God helps them what helps themselves.

Lasties I move up a floor to Netcom. The door's a bit hard for me to kick down so the li'l axe in my bag does the trick on the lock. Hatrick's what they call a li'l axe. I find the office of Dick Netta: General Manager. I opens one of his draws and dumps Wimzy's laptop and shit in there, and Jude's cash. Mum'll jus be happy with the envelopes.

I remembers just as I'm leavin that I gots ta rinse out Jude's coffee

mug, what's on her desk. Give it some quick lovin under the tap. They'll be needin a new teaboy on the job I reckon when I fill the gen manager openin at Netcom.

I fills out a timesheet, just for the hour's clean-up I's arksed to do. Otherwise it'd be dishonest.

I catch the lift back down and switch er off. I hope Dick's in shit when Insurance gets some detectives on the case. Or maybe he can blame shit on a Axe of God.

Pretend I'm Not Even Here

To be a warrior was a mission. She told Sammy and Marky she'd be back in a heartbeat – warriors were always swift. While everything was still orange, and the birds were screaming, Jodie checked that no invaders had sneaked into her cave overnight and she took the axe from the kitchen wall and put it on the passenger seat of the Jeep and rumbled past the Tenants Wanted sign which she couldn't get rid of and joggled down the stones of the driveway and plunged into the highway. The half mile of driveway could be her friend, giving her warnings when Invaders were arriving, but it could work against her too – the end of the driveway was where Tommy used to be tied up, until he disappeared. His doggy house had been stolen not long after He had left her. One of those monsters in town knew something and wasn't saying. She would slay the monster eventually. Tomorrow.

She sped all the way there and parked on the paving stones in the plaza, read the opening hours on the realtor's office in the morning glow. The sun was about to sizzle the world. Numbers she could read without worry, and she could recognise some letters, and logos. Words were harder – words had to be trusted before she let them in behind her eyes.

Jodie decided that nobody would show up to collect their Town Cryer for another two hours. She heard a chip packet rustle across the cobblestones, and turned around, and stuffed her fingers in her ears and began singing, and pulled one hand out of her ear and hauled really hard and managed to lift the heavy thick plastic lid of the newsletter box and began snatching out the nasty shiny newsletters, pinching their corners so she didn't leave any fingerprints, and she rushed to the rumbling Jeep to dump the pages on the passenger seat. She may as well empty the whole box. With one arm, and still singing la-la-ha-ha, she strapped the seatbelt on them so that they wouldn't fly out of the window. The newsletters were still warm– she supposed they had been printed at three in the morning and trucked here as summer burst open and leaked on the land. With her last armful of newsletters, she knocked the bin on its side and the lid cracked and she was already in the Jeep and some of her hair was caught in the seatbelt because it was so long that it touched her hips, and she drove right over a tussock and went through unending flaxes, squirting bark, upsetting a cloud of dust, and over a big stone island in the middle of

the road, and someone was screaming and she realised it was her, and she kept her foot down hard on the pedal until she recognised the tan stones of her driveway and she could take her shoulders out of her ears.

At home, she quickly checked on Sammy then scuttled inside her base with an armload of paper and the axe fell out of her arms and she forgot it and ran harder. He was on her back, always behind her, pouncing as soon as she went outside. War always finds a warrior.

When the door was locked and Jodie had a serving fork safely in front of her, to stab Them, she tried to read her printed letter in the Town Cryer, the letter warning about the invaders coming, the ones she'd seen fiddling with the phone lines, the ones in the spaceships disguised as clouds. The letter was in a little frilly box with a picture of a round man. It was hard to stop the words and headings on the edges of her vision dancing, but she managed to focus enough that she could recognise her own words. She didn't know if they'd changed her words, she'd have to phone the Reading Boy. They had put her letter in a little square on the corner of the last page. The boy had helped her write it, the boy she paid. She'd ring him up when she was feeling hunched and scratchy about something, and he'd come over and write what she was trying to say. He always sat as close to the door as he could.

She retreated to His study, panting, her ears whistling as she gradually calmed down. There were still some of His things in here, but He would break her if she touched His things. He was away in the Philippines selling the Films with the Carrots. If he heard her touching his things, he would reach across the world and grasp her.

She brought the newsletters in and lined them up, every awful Town Cryer, and began to tear them into even strips. She was ripping the editor's intestines out, she knew they hadn't listened to her warning letter, she could feel it.

She stopped tearing when she saw something, and phoned the Reading Boy. It took him a long time to cycle over and help her turn the words into sounds.

The photo that was looking at her was an introduction from Dr Andrew P-A-L-O-C-Z-Y-K. That was a funny word, spiny, strange:

Pa...lo... Czyk. Something wrong with those letters. She couldn't even say it, only look at it. There were letters missing! Funny word! But Andrew – the writing called him Andrew – had been working on something called the Indo... cheese? Pen-in...sula for the past fourteen years and he had returned to proof his notes and publish a new book while enjoying a little R and R. It was good to be back. He couldn't farm, he said, laughing, his lips chapped with dust, his teeth white, wiping his Gaultier glasses on the tail of his cuffed shirt, but he could share the wonderful wealth of the area.

An-drew.

His friend was from here, the words said, his friend had showed him the Hill People when he was attached to the Service.

Research, he said.

Can I go now? the boy pleaded, My mum said I have to stop helping you soon.

What do those letters say?

Nutter's Corner.

Why is there a round man?

It's a peanut. That's where they stuck your letter, in Nutter's Corner.

What's a nutter? Is it a kind of warrior?

*

Jodie checked the bushes for snipers but they were impossible to spot, anyway, it was hopeless. She picked some dandelions for Sammy while she was inside the hedge. There used to be snipers when she was growing up in the palms with the jungle warriors all around. That was when she was Jo-Thé. When she tried to see it now, everything looked melty. She wriggled over to the hose and unfurled it then crawled on her elbows back to the cave and fed the hose in. The stones turned her elbows yellow with dust.

She checked for intruders on her property, and she especially checked for Line Men because they were fiddling with the phone lines all the time, playing in the spiderweb power lines, and she let Marky and Sammy out of their pen and led them across the rocky driveway to the cellar door, tied them, kissed inside their ears and whispered, "I'm going to marry you," took the hose and sprayed the Yuckiness from under their tails, and asked them to watch over her while she dug. Marky's pretty tiara fell off, so she had to fix it back on again.

She wheezed and a pink circle bloomed in the centre of her forehead as she hauled the cellar doors open. When each door hit the driveway, a cloud of dust exploded and she knew she was being shot at and she ducked and covered her head. The cellar hadn't had any wine for a hundred seasons, it was just a dark cold blue pit with steel and wood doors so strong they wouldn't let a tornado rip them away. The cellar used to have a ladder, because it was straight down, buried in the earth, but water had rotted the ladder and the corks in every bottle.

Marky and Sammy nibbled a few spare flowers which snaked out of the driveway toward the sun. They didn't paw or snort or be naughty. Whenever Jodie was in the cellar, she could hear the tramp of each hoof, even from metres away. Sound travelled so much better underground, and it made her heart slow down to know that no Invaders were coming up the driveway, unless they were invisible.

*

She chipped away for two weeks to make the cellar bigger and squarer, from frost to fry each day. She hardly ate, it was good for her figure, His voice kept saying. Don't let 'em know you're a old lady.

The tornado doors looked like they would cave in if somebody stood on the dry, crumbly, splintery wood. She had to have it tested before They arrived, but there was no one around to test it. Sometimes the invaders winked and flashed from planes; sometimes Jodie would spot small mounds in the brown fields the shape and size of an invader's head. Big pink men inside her cave.

Wearing swimming goggles and a dust mask, carrying a battery torch and a kerosene lamp, she went into His shed, in the rear buildings of the farm, peering through two years of dried moths and

brown haze, and dragged heavy bags of cement out, gritting her teeth, hurting her back, until the bottoms ripped open and little hills of cement powder littered the driveway.

The little arrowhead picture on the cement packet meant that something was on the internet, the Boy had showed her, because the internet was mostly pictures, and the funny pictures with hands and trowels showed her how to mix it.

She pulled the oozing hose down and fed water to the scoops of cement mix, raked it flat and even. Where she had been cutting the dirt away from the wall, showing the bricks, the wall was ragged and the cement had brown hunks in it like chocolate chips, but the oldest layers of cement had already dried and she decided she wouldn't get in trouble. She stirred the stony soup with a broom handle, wetting it every four minutes, until the broom handle refused to turn. She mixed and spread the cement and kept an eye on the wine crates which she had stacked into stairs. She couldn't get out without the crates. They'd begun to squeak when she stood on them. If they shattered underneath her, she would be trapped down here, and then it would be so easy for Them to invade.

*

Jodie returned the next day after her pussy-stretching exercises and her Jumbo Jumble Puzzle Book and dropped onto the stack of crates, and tried to wrench the broom handle out of the new stone floor, and the handle snapped and pricked the underside of her arm. She stood there watching the soft brown flesh under her arm leak little red needles which pooled into a red blob. She stacked the crates and popped open a door and scanned the horizon, blinking a million times, picking a seed out of her eye. She squeezed sweat out of her straight black fringe. She crept out of the cave and showed her war wound to Marky, and Marky licked it. Then she held Sammy's top lip up and scratched his gums until he shivered, and gave him a carrot and told him to put his thing away and calm down. She said Sorry about the films, and Marky blew a raspberry at her.

She shovelled Marky's yucky poo into a pile. Some of it had to be piled beside the cave, there were little mountains everywhere already. She said hello to the pig as she passed him. The pig didn't have a name any more since the Film. She pulled the blue plastic thing off the wood

pile and, one at a time, carried the flat boards to the cave and – checking that there were no dust clouds coming– dropped the boards into the cave. Sneezing and saying ‘Sorry,’ she dropped back into the cave, landing on the crates, which fell over as she stepped off them. There were six wine crates and, when stacked, they were as tall as Jodie was. It was easy to fall in without them, hard to get out without them. They would hold her weight, though.

She put a base of dirty, flat Town Cryers under the boards – it would be sticky, and she laid boards on top of the cement gunk, retreating from it as she went.

The base of the cave was becoming flat and even. When she pulled the doors down, they let in only a blade of light, and when the blade pointed the opposite way to the way it had been in the morning, and her throat was a dry leaf and she needed to go pee-pee but she didn’t wanna because it stung so bad, she stacked the crates again, checked for people coming to split her open, hauled herself out of the cave, patted Marky and Sammy on the bum until they clomped back to their room. She went into the kitchen, slid the deadbolt and the chain in place, drew the curtains, checked between a crack in the curtains for attackers, and then made three sandwiches and ate one herself and gave Marky his favourite and Sammy too.

She felt bad when she peed, she was supposed to save it for the Films, but she couldn’t. She was being bad, and it felt red and hot and tiny little beads tinkled into the potty.

*

The sun was meanest between noon and three o’clock, but at least it made the spy planes wink and flash as they travelled overhead. They were looking for her, looking for a way into her cave, to invade her. She had try and keep her brain painted with camouflage, to keep her hands clenched into fists. The sunny season had gone on longer than it should have and her thighs were always sticky like when those men had that party inside her. It felt funny having shorts on, Jodie hadn’t worn clothes that much and she was still getting used to the feeling of warm fabric on her, like His hands on her all the time, and she kept having to turn around and say, ‘What do you want?’ and all that was there was a hot shiny crust of road.

Jodie wanted Tommy to guard the Battle Cave while she worked, but the village monsters had killed Tommy without even being seen. She'd never found Tommy's body, but it was definitely the monsters that did it. Some of the mean little people had spraypainted their names on the wooden poles at the end of the driveway where the highway flowed past the stupid Tenants Wanted sign. The ones whose cars had the engines that sounded like Him gargling weren't as bad as their dads, though, some of the dads had come out here to record that film, and the day was so hot that the edge of the world rippled like the black rings on top of the stove and He had given the dads six cans each and they dropped cans on Sammy's straw and their handshakes were complicated and they all kept their caps pulled low and black glasses on their eyes and she knew some of them were supposed to be at work, putting out bushfires, and Tommy and all the dads stuck her with their glowing pink sticks and when he was mixing up the movie, He kept saying, 'We hit the jackpot, Jode, this one's big time.' And the men were afraid of Tommy even though he was never allowed off his chain, and He scratched the back of His neck and said, 'Oh I concur, ya Staffordshire's a scrappy fighter, but arks me again in six months, I'm not selling today,' and then He left for Manila to get the DVDs pressed, and He told her to sell the bull, they were done with it, and He wasn't here when Tommy disappeared, and her pinkness was too full of dirt and dust for her to even walk.

*

Jodie was gossiping about Sammy's black new bridle when there was a burst of insects and the ripping of gravel and Jodie's legs turned to wood and she told the horses to get back. The dragon of puffy dust stretched along the entire driveway before the car stopped. Jodie untied the horses' leads and slapped their bums, Go, Go! and sprinted for her cave and hit the crates, kicked the crates away and pulled shadow over her head.

Some of the cement was still squishy and cold on her toes and she had to crouch in it. She could only block out the light-sword by putting both hands over her eyes. **THEY'RE COMING, THEY'RE HERE**, she whispered to the Town Cryer, and her heart slowed down just enough that the invader couldn't hear it.

There was a CLONK and a sound like Him munching cereal loud.

I'm looking for Jo-Thé, the intruder asked the cellar doors. Or Jodie, if that's easier.

No one called her that, that was her forgotten name, so she didn't say anything and tried not to shiver too loudly.

Sprechen sie Deutsch? Ha-ha, but of course you don't.

A rectangle of his face appeared where the lips of the cellar doors met.

He asked her if she was taking a bath. Something sloshed and ice spread up her leg.

He asked her if she was siphoning the water out of the cellar.

She didn't know what that meant, so she didn't say anything.

The intruder man said that her horses hadn't gone far, they must really love her. He said she must be a good mum to them. You should tie them up, less you want to lose \$3000 worth of Danish Warmblood.

He asked her how much she really loved them, out of ten.

There was a thud and a gasp as her back touched the wall.

It's okay, he said. Innumerable cultures have rituals in which women and men lay with animals. I tell you, he laughed, 'Tis impossible to retire when there is so much work to do!

He asked her to come out and talk about the Tenants Wanted sign, Pretty Please With Sugar On Top, but Jodie waited until the sky had turned the colour of grapes and the sun had shrunk to a glowing cigarette tip and the grey porridge sticking to her shoes became crusty and sharp.

*

He boiled a jug of water.

Why'd you put the sign up if you didn't want me to come here?

You wanted me to come. He dropped the name of her husband. He said he'd seen some of her films.

She said, You buy the movies from the internet. Not here. *He* sells them, not me. I don't know where he is, let me go.

No one's holding you here.

The open door cooled their cups of tea very quickly, and she stood with her back against the wall and said Andrew had to leave or she'd get Tommy on him.

That was the dog? Your husband told me all about it. He took off his glasses and his eyes were even rounder than before, drinking her in. There *was* a dog in one of your films – “Doing Dr Dolittle,” correct? Are you quite sure you haven't misplaced your dog? Or has he become a canine gladiator, hm? Dog-fighting, my dear. It's recreation, to some.

She had had people laughing at her in the farm store when she had been to buy supplies. When those people had laughed, it hadn't been funny laughter, like when Tommy had got stuck inside her and He had laughed so hard He couldn't even work the camera no more and had to fix it in Editing because his hands were shaking.

He took something from his car and wrote on it, and spoke into a little metal box-thing. The boy who's been assisting you, in terms of your learning to read and write – I'd recommend you tell him his services aren't required any further.

He drove to where the driveway met the road and Jodie watched him take the Tenant Wanted sign and break it over his knee and pat his hands together.

*

He was there watching and scribbling notes in his little computer-book when she filled Marky's and Sammy's waters, and stirred more pellets into the split drums the pigs ate from, and cleaned Tommy's kennel in case he wanted to come back, and raked the soil and sprinkled grass seed in case they gave Booger the Bull back.

Oh don't mind me, he said. Pretend I'm not even here.

He said that the rent had been in her bank account from Day One, and to please tell him if she needed some more money, money was no object, and she was allowed to ring His accountant, and she did, even though the scorpion-phone shivered in her hand because she wasn't sposed to use it without checking first, and the voice said that the bond and rent money were coming through whether she liked it or not, she couldn't stop money coming in, and there was no legal reason that Dr Andrew Paloczyk could not be her tenant.

*

He never ate until after she had eaten, he just watched her eat while she listened to his fingers on the keys, he watched her stretch and clean her pussy, rolling a carrot back and forth across the table, and gave her interesting things to put up her pussy, watched her pile yucky doo-doo beside the cave and keep the horses off her back. He only ever went to town for three hours at a time, he always came back when he said he would, and she would watch the baking road until the humps of dust rose out of the ground again and a car wobbled towards her and she put her back against the wall of the cool, damp cave and keep her arms on the crumbly cave doors and she only came out when he said everything was okay and it was just Me, only Me.

He asked her if the cave was still wet. He didn't tell her to put more cement in, but when she loaded bags of cement onto Sammy's back and brought them over and took a whole day sprinkling the grey dust into the hole, Andrew nodded and scribbled something in his small book. The floor was thick and slushy yet firm. There was also a little black stick which Andrew whispered into and sometimes held up to his ear and listened to his own voice coming out of.

Now the leaves of the turnips woke up dewy and shivering in the mornings, and the dust stuck to the ground and darkened, and the midges didn't batter her head as she trudged through the doo-doo to say goodnight to her special, snorting, snuffling boys.

The sunsets became more sudden, and she stopped taking the axe to bed, and he stopped sleeping in his car and started lying on the bed and watching her sleep, and then she woke up under a white moon and he was under the sheets, then he was heavy on her back and his

breath sounded like a gale, and when she woke up, all the covers were wrapped around him, and he was writing notes while she shivered, then he rolled over and pinned her and pushed her ankles up against her ears and he dropped his notebook, and wrapped her hair around his knuckles.

If you run, he said softly, Who'll look after your horses?

*

She wasn't allowed to eat out of a pot with her fingers, but she did it anyway one morning and he didn't tell her off. She didn't want him to go to town again, except that he probably needed a new notebook, this one was almost full. And he'd been talking into his voice stick so much. She shifted her seat closer to him and tugged on the cuff of his jersey. He looked down his nose and pulled his elbow away and stared at where she had touched him.

What were you writing?

You wouldn't be able to read it, anyway.

I been learning.

No, I've seen enough of your writing.

Enough for what?

He folded his notebook closed, nodded and rubbed his eyes and said, They're born vicious, even the bitches. That Staffordshire of Jeremy's? Probably pursuing a career in professional fighting. You can never take the fight out of them. Good thing it's gone. It was a war dog, Jodie. That's not you, is it.

Then he brushed his teeth and flopped onto the bed, but she leapt off it and stormed into the Spare House, kicking his suitcase with its long handle and little wheels and threw his clothes around the room and crawled into his bed and wrapped her arms around herself the way the black leather felt and she shivered until he came over and rubbed her back and said, Are you finished?

She told him to be nice to her.

Are you FINISHED?

She put her knees into her armpits to make him happy. She could cross her legs behind her head, if that was what he needed.

No, the Cave, I mean – have you finished the cave? I don't have forever.

*

She only went on the first Monday of every month. If she didn't clear the fan mail, the post office man got really mean on her. A man came one day and tried to give her a package and he didn't even want anything for it, just tried to put the wrapped box in her hands, but Andrew scared him off and she closed her eyes and gripped him around his middle, thick as a tree. She was safe in his shade and she didn't need to think about war if he was watching.

She always forgot where the key was and it always felt alien to drive the truck – He had always done the driving, before he went to Manila. He had nailed up the Tenant Wanted sign and told her He wanted her to keep the income up while He was overseas selling the Petting Zoo trilogy, *Jodie Feels A Little Horse* and *Jodie: Full of Bull* and *Jodie's Dog Days*.

She ducked into the mail room and stuck her key into the box and turned it and the overstuffed post box spewed letters into her sack. The letters had postmarks from parts of the world with weird colours and some of the letters had money in them, she could just feel it, and everything was always handwritten, and usually there was man-perfume on the letters.

She bumped into a farmer that she recognised and he laughed, The Cavewoman's out and about! and she hurried out of the small room. Andrew had parked beside her Jeep and was talking to an evil man who sold lawnmowers and Andrew saw her and said, Exhibit A. The cave'll be featured in National Geographic and you can tell folks you met a famous anthropologist.

Afro... pologist?

At the end of the driveway, he pulled up behind her and left

his car doors open and followed her into the lounge and she punched him in the chest and locked herself in the potty room. She heard noise, voices, a donkey braying, and came out to find him with his arms spread wide over the back of the couch like a giant bird. He was watching *Jodie's Animal Farm*.

He told her to take a seat and kicked the foot rest towards her.

Tell me how it feels, doing these things for Jeremy. His pen was hovering over the paper like a wasp. There was one white page left before he hit the back cover.

She sprinted out of the room and dashed across the dust and stones and threw herself into her cave and slid the iron bolt into place.

After a long time, he came and stood, blocking the last light, and then he said that she couldn't stay down there forever: the cement would set around her ankles. I can hear you smiling, you know.

When her teeth began to clatter, she slid back the bar and went floppy and let him haul her out of there, with his pen clenched in his jaw. She couldn't believe that he alone could lift her up.

I told Him I wouldn't, but very well, he said. I shall endeavour to teach you how to read and write.

*

It began to rain even in the day time now, and some days the sun didn't get out of bed, and Marky and Sammy needed tarps over their backs. There were too many weeds coming up through the dirt clods and the boys had to eat that up. She'd used to hope that all of the crops would fail so that she would die more quickly, but she couldn't get rid of the crops and the cave was too safe for her to die.

She heard the door creak as he pushed it open and he said, I do apologise, and she closed her eyes and when she opened them, her face as stiff as the floorboards in the soggy cement of the cave, he was pulling the bed covers back. He said he needed to stay close to the subject, he was almost finished, he just had to type up his notes. He cut her sealed legs apart with the edge of his hand and then there were two and he said Hmm, This is a tad difficult.

He used his belt to tie her legs to the headboard and said Ahh. She was so dry that she could hear him scraping into her, like a boat grinding and groaning against a wharf. She hoped she didn't have dirt in her, still.

Afterwards he said, You wanted me to come, and he opened up his thin computer and tickled its letters and checked his notebook and tickled some more letters before he slept and she pulled his arm off his keyboard and wrapped it around her and it was warm and smelled like dry towels, like it had never got dirt on it.

She decided to ask him to read her some of the books he had written. He could teach her about anthropology, she knew how to say the word now, she'd been practicing.

An-thro-pollo-jist.

And she wanted to ask about all the pits and scars and scrapes in his arm. Were they from Nam, or had he been seeing other countries?

*

One morning at breakfast, he cleared his throat and took the notebook away from his eyes and said, I can't do this. You're completely inept. The cement is too runny – you'll simply have to mix it thicker. It simply doesn't look right.

But it's mine.

Then he pulled her long black hair until she left her seat and he showed her how to mix it and when she had got it right, he pulled her back to her seat and she carried on eating.

Don't ruin this for me. It's unprecedented. It's unparalleled. If you don't finish that cave... You know, it's quite remarkable, he said. The majority of them aren't as sensitive as you.

Them what?

Special cases.

I'm a warrior. This is my land.

He said, I see, and asked her if she was more comfortable being called a Courtesan. His fingers were hovering on the keyboard. She hadn't noticed the computer being opened, its back to her.

She looked at the hands squeezing each other in her lap, then shifted down the table and stared out at Marky and Sammy.

IT WAS ASKED OF YOU what you would do if your horses weren't there one morning. Would you... draw pictures of them? On the wall of your cave? You know you want to.

He slid a cube of charcoal across the tabletop to her and she tucked it into the boob holder with straps he had made her wear.

*

What he had made her do with the cement was right. He was right about everything. She spread it the same thickness and left the doors open when it wasn't raining and some of it was a little bit dry, and she'd used up all the cement and it was too deep to go in there and there were a couple of days when she didn't go into the cave, and then five days.

As she listened to the rain and mashed her food with her fingers, he closed the lid of the laptop and ripped her out of her seat and threw her onto the bed and sighed as he undid his belt buckle and tied her up, and then he went out of the door and she heard him calling to Sammy, but he was calling Sammy like a cat and she didn't think it would work, but he came inside and took a huge carrot from the bag and she heard the squeak of latches opening and Sammy clopped inside the house and Jodie was so slippery with sweat that it wasn't that bad when Andrew jammed the carrot inside her but Sammy was naughty coz he got muddy hoof prints and bits of hay all over the bed.

Afterwards they lay there, Jodie's heart still hammering. The curls on his chest shook, and then he rolled over and opened the lid of his laptop and rattled a few keys and said, That answers that. He wrapped his fingers around her waist and squeezed. How does he keep you so *tiny*?

What did you write?

You couldn't read it, anyway, he said, and closed the lid.

But you taught me.

*

She surfaced in the middle of the night and she knew half of the bed was suddenly empty and she burst out of the bedroom into the moonlight, her saggy breasts flapping, her thighs clapping. He was closing the trunk of his car and he glanced over his shoulder at her as he slid into the driver seat and pulled the door closed and he locked the door and wound down the window and said, 'I can't thank you enough, you're invaluable, I'll acknowledge you, don't you worry about that,' and pulled his sunglasses onto his eyes, even in the blackness. She held up the little notebook and backed away and he opened his car door and stepped slowly out.

How on earth did you get that? You don't need that.

She stepped back until she heard a creaking, and realised there was a bar of black beneath her feet, and he ran at her, 'Give it to me!'

She stepped backwards and Andrew's foot fell flatly on the cellar door and there was a snap and a wet thud.

*

It was difficult figuring out how to operate his fancy car, but at least he'd left the key in it. It took a few minutes to find which button opened the trunk of the car, it was so dark in there, and it took two armloads to haul his laptop and suitcase out, because they were buried amongst DVDs and video tapes and copies of his published books about cave dwellers and trog...lo...dytes. *Trogloodytes*. There was a picture of a caveman and a cavewoman with Afros doing it.

Trog-lo-dytes.

She had to go inside and haul two chairs out and it took her a while to lower them down into the cave, where Andrew was lying on little broken pieces of wood and trying to get the broom handle out of

his leg. Then it took her another trip inside to get the carrots. When she had lowered the chairs in, she stepped down into the cool dark blue cave and yanked Andrew's torn pants off around his ankles, and he said Thank Goodness you came, Oh Thank you thank you, but he stopped being nice when she shoved the carrots into his crack, slicked with cement, and stood upon the chairs and called to her boys, and when they moseyed over she took Sammy's bridle, and Marky's, and they gently stepped onto the chairs and came into the cave with her, Good boys, and she showed them where the carrot was, and they were heavier than Andrew and they held him down so he wouldn't go anywhere, and she reached for the shovel and went to begin shovelling doo-doo in the cave, but then she didn't. Not yet.

She took the charcoal out of her bra, reached down and drew pretty pictures of Marky and Sammy on the cellar wall, let the ponies out, and slammed the lid down hard.

Joker

The MCG was black except for the spotlight cooking the stage, perfect for sneaking into late. An usher whitened the way with a Maglite. Everyone must've thought Guy was a little kid looking for his olds, his big, searching eyes said he was. Of course the usher was taller than Guy, everyone was. The usher shone the torch on the big girl, who reached out and punched him.

'Get the light off me, retard.' She couldn't let her meaty voice quiet. No one was sitting behind her large head.

'Hey matey.'

'Sup Gai.'

Even in the black, Gail stood out, wide shoulders, head like an upturned bucket. It looked as if she were one person sitting on another's lap. Guy had shown up a good quarter hour early, wearing his *2001: A Space Odyssey* t-shirt, but he'd been chain-smoking by a wet dumpster out back, shivering in short sleeves, wishing he'd brought his pipe, stalling, until he heard the first applause. He wasn't here to see the guest comedian, a dude from a funny-talking country who was selling himself cheaply, doing bits about his culture, selling out.

The comedian on stage spoke more loudly into the mic, some bit about airport security. Gail looked behind her, hoping that the light would come on, the red one that looked like an eye, the light that told a comedian their time was up.

'My beloved,' Guy whispered, tugging a chair under his arse, 'I'm late as. Just got here.'

'I'm late too! Should I keep it?'

'Who's the father? Not my cocksucker brother I hope.'

Gail shunted her chair away from Guy.

'Too far, sorry,' Guy whispered.

‘You’re a joker.’

‘Oi, we gonna get up tonight? It’s Open Mic after Jasdeep’s been.’

‘I think... I dunno. We did last time. I feel dumb. Let’s just watch.’ Her short hair made her head look even huger. Her chin was wattled to her clavicle. Her dot-eyes had heavy, unimpressed lids.

‘You got leave coming up.’

A man ahead of them turned around, tutted, turned away again.

‘Don’t you have leave saved up, Gai?’ His voice was thin, and his neck. His wrists were thin. His jaw was pointy. ‘We both do. We should do something, go somewhere. Camp-workshop-type thing, out in the forest y’know?’

The man ahead of them blew a *shush* over the top of his middle finger, double-insult.

‘Bro,’ Guy said firmly, trying not to squeal, ‘We honestly don’t know anywhere that sells 14 year old trannies at this time of night. Try the shop on the corner. Try Thailand.’

The crowd around them turned and snorted. They covered their mouths to keep their beer down. Their bodies faced the comic onstage; their ears were twisted back towards Guy and Gail. The professional, the one people had paid money for, had to stop his set. He stood there dabbing his brow with his Hawaiian shirt, keeping an eye on the red light at the rear of the theatre, above Guy’s and Gail’s heads, the light which said when a comedian’s time was up.

‘I am just waiting for young couple to agreeing on dowry,’ the professional said in his tropical accent, and wholesome couples chuckled and half-turned their tennis-heads back to the professional.

Gail said loudly, ‘If we *were* together, Jasdeep, Guy’d be a frickin’ lucky man. With me, he gets a free upsize to large.’

‘Big Gail...’ Jasdeep said, and peered into the twilight. ‘Where your husband is?’

'He's not my husband.'

'Where your man is, Big Gail?'

'I know where mine is. Where's yours?'

There were clapping palms in the laughs this time, and they saw some people clean the steam off their glasses. Time slowed for Gail and Guy. They had been called off the bench. They sat up straight to let air into their lungs, as a second spotlight dipped into the audience and found them.

Then eyes settled on Guy, lured by his boy-voice. He was obviously putting it on.

'What was the joke Dad?' he pipped, 'Can you tell us at tuck-in time?'

More claps, and spectators patted their clenching abs. Gail shook Guy's shoulders and whispered 'Keep going!'

'Guy, namaste.' Jasdeep bowed with the mic squished between his palms. 'Lady and gentlemen, this little man, he is pervert, his chromosomes they are XXX!'

'JASDEEP. That's physically impossible. Hope that red light comes on at you.'

'Yeah, epic fail, bro,' Guy continued, 'Chromosomes only come in pairs. Basic biology. You're not funny. The accent kills, but the rest of you's not funny.'

'I am serious,' said Jasdeep, squinting into the darkness, 'I can see you have not Hal. Who you are bringing with you tonight, Gail?'

Gail couldn't shrink, so she put a big hand. over her eyes. 'He's just my friend... '

'Hi, Big Gail! I am speaking you! Biology is pair, should you not be with your fiancé?'

Each handclap was a slap.

‘GO FUCK AN ELEPHANT!’ Guy swatted the tea light off his table and stood.

‘Speaking of elephant, lady and gentlemen,’ Jasdeep continued, grinning and sweating, ‘In my country, we are worshipping very big large—’

‘DON’T YOU SAY IT, BRO.’

Some people were thumping the tabletop. Others were thumbing the Record button on their Samsung Galaxies.

‘Gail, you are sitting there like college sweetheart. Hal, if he is finding out about this, he is not impressed. *Big Gail, hi!* Mr Guy, he is driving you here?’

‘Yeah, that’s it,’ Guy sighed, flailing his hands, urging the spotlight away from them like a wasp, ‘I’m just the driver. Leave it, man.’

‘Funny you are driver,’ Jasdeep said, scratching his head, ‘I did not know you are having your licence for forklift.’

*

‘Fuck happened there?’

Her body and Guy’s faced out from the balcony. In the rain, no one bothered them. It was half time and the dry parts of the balcony were shared with cigarette-smoking comrades who tried to quicken the dull expanses between sets with booze and smokes and speed. The jokers exposed themselves with skimpy t-shirts, low-cut tops, tantalising tattoos. They passed jests around like spliffs. Jasdeep was in another circle and Gail’s big ears were trained on him. Jasdeep was giving his cellphone number out to everyone.

Guy’s eyes were level with Gail’s huge breasts. ‘What do you mean “fuck happened there”? Jasdeep’s set, not ours, dude can say what he likes. Hey didn’t even mean it.’

Guy sucked a balloonful of wet, smoky air into his little lungs. ‘Honestly, if I had a knife—’

‘You’re all talk Guy, you’re a joker. Rubber knife is all you should have on ya, little matey. You’re like that little Nick-Nack guy from that James Bond one with Christopher Lee in it. The one with *Gold* in the title. *Licence to Pan For Gold* or whatever.’

‘Don’t you just love it how we kill when we’re not even doing a set?’

Rain settled on their skin like flies. Guy sucked on his inhaler. ‘We could’ve padded it out if we’d kept on talking, dropped our websites in and stuff, steada letting that dickbutt get the last laugh. Repartee, like those old Muppets up in the balcony.’

‘What’s the deal with them anyway, were they an item?’

‘Brokebalcony Mountain,’ Gail sniggered and wiped the moisture off her face with the sleeve of her towel-sized cardigan.

‘Anyway, it wasn’t our time,’ Guy said, ‘You done a joke, I done a joke. Back to—’

‘—back to starin’ at my tits again?’ Gail produced a lighter, fished for her ciggies by herself, had to light it herself while Guy fidgeted.

‘Your tits, I was, yeah.’ He put his porcelain hands on the railing. ‘The alley rang, by the way. They want their bowling balls back.’

‘Rofl.’

‘Oi, anyway, comedy camp: we should fully do it, just go for it. Get away from all this city junk.’

‘Absolutely, all these hospitals and schools and infrastructure are just *ghastly*.’

‘Don’t be a dick. Cities are, like, full of, I dunno... people judging you.’

‘You’re not serious.’

After a long silence, Guy said, ‘Okay then, I’m not. We’ll stay here. Do the same as we’ve been doin for, like, four years.’

Gail swept her handbag over her shoulder, stuck her cigarette in her mouth and bulldozed through the crowd, making sure the glowing tip of the smoke brushed Jasdeep’s face. Tall men stepped aside.

She rang her fiancé to pick her up. ‘Hurry,’ she said, ‘Flat tack... No, I’m not *joking*.’

Although it was after midnight, she slipped her sunglasses on as she got in the car.

‘What now?’ said her fiancé.

‘Just drive.’

At the lights, a man in an Indian shirt sauntered across the road, and Gail gasped.

‘JESUS, GAIL – what?’

‘He stole my handbag!’

‘Him? That Punjabi cunt?’ Hal jerked the handbrake, cracked his door open. The car behind them honked. ‘You’re positive?’

Gail nodded.

Hal tore the shirt off his chest, and buttons tinkled on the shiny black road. He walked onto Jasdeep’s ankles then punched the man so hard that his body stopped working as if a switch had been flicked. Jasdeep’s legs knotted and he landed on his cheekbone. His arms looked like shoelaces. Hal jumped on the man’s ankles then threw his unbuttoned shirt at the honking car and got back in behind the wheel and took the handbrake off.

‘Oh, my bad,’ Gail said, putting her sunglasses away, ‘My handbag’s right here.’

*

The first thing Guy did each morning was check his emails. Gail sometimes sent emails reading a;slkdgfa;lksdjf;lkaj, because her fingertips were cucumbers on the keyboard, and it didn’t matter what she wrote: Guy would never leave her hanging. Guy transferred all of her good emails, the ones with winking emoticons, to a reserved folder. The secret password for the folder was 16F. If Gail CC’d an email to anybody, Guy would delete it. He was grateful that his bro, Hal, refused to use email. Hal was all about directness - people bought Fords off Hal because Hal cut out the bullpies. It said so on his business card.

They worked on different levels and never managed to find each other in the foyer so Guy practiced his comedy on customers. The plans he and his team sold over the phone changed every fifteen days, two exciting new plans per month, one business, one residential. Occasionally they couldn’t hustle enough and were left with a target at the end of a fifteen day period, so then Guy didn’t mind begging and pleading customers to accept his offer. They had no idea he was just a joker. He exceeded his sales and service targets even though he didn’t really mean to.

Guy, Team Leader, was the person they always saved a *Mormin’* for. All of his memos were gut-busters which would make heads rise out of cubicles and nod and show teeth. Good, dry humour, suitable for the company newsletter, his first writing gig. His salary warmed three bank accounts, just sitting there, no girls to spend it on.

A weblink said there were camping grounds an hour outside the city, in the bush, where the trees outsized the buildings. Gail said she had some crabs she needed to release into the wild; Guy said his trouser snake needed to be let out. Guy wrote a bit about Adam and Eve, fiddled with it, rewrote and rearranged it, practiced reading it aloud in the toilet stall, scheduled it for sending, then deleted it, mashing his eyebrows between his thumb and forefinger.

They ignored their In Trays and exchanged comments about camp, back when they were 12, when Gail’s Summer Holiday boobs

had made her unable to win the cross country and gave Guy a staring problem, when they realised they were the only people in class brainy enough to like Kubrick movies with sharp people overcoming dumb computers that knew everything. Neither had set foot in mud since school and neither of them had any camping gear, which made things twice as hilarious. Gail said there was a bush in her pants, and Guy whistled at the email and said ‘Crumbs,’ and went to make a Milo, bubbly-headed, envisioning it.

While the Rheem boiled, some muted person in the kitchen asked about his day and he said, ‘Pardon?’ then clicked his fingers and scampered back to his keyboard.

- *We'll need to share a tent. Need a Superking tent for your big feet.*
- *I've never seen you pitch a tent before, Big Boy ;o)*
- *Serious – itll be way cheaper 2 share a tent if dat kewl*
- *U r a joker*

He saved her email, took his jersey off and placed it over his lap. He had to go out and chainsmoke three ciggies, lighting each fresh one with an orange spark from the one before. He joked to some giggling girls that chainsmoking was sensible because it saved on lighters. They asked which floor he was on. They couldn't believe he was THE boy that wrote the newsletter, O-M-G.

He couldn't concentrate for the rest of the morning, not even while interviewing a new workie, hair like shiny plastic tightened and moulded over her head, hard tits, skin that glowed like it had been roasted. The new workie kept touching Guy's fingers when he popped the knuckles.

‘Your hands are so *cute!*’

*

Gail tunnelled through her nine hours arranging press releases and placing advertorials. She was in control of any telephone call, could get away with ringing executives in church, could remember their children's judo lessons and make the execs grin and chuckle and authorise.

Oh totally, she told clients, I heart kids. I looooooove the things

that come outta their mouths. The clients would chuckle and say, 'What've you got against kids?'

'The bumper of my car.'

'Ah, Gai. You're gonna be huge.'

'Already am, mate.'

When Guy's emails plopped into her inbox, she received alerts on her Palm Pilot. Her fiancé Hal's last email had been a picture of a cat's pudenda with the word PUSSY. The Spam box caught it.

After he'd eaten, instead of watching while Hal argued with the weather girl, Gail wriggled her wrist out of his clasp and checked her email on the home computer, and yarned online to Guy, and took her dinner out of the microwave and scoffed it because Hal said she wasn't allowed to eat in front of him, it was Revolting, gave him Crook Guts. After chatting, she deleted her chat history.

Her boss knocked on her cubicle and Gail flinched.

'I'm in the shower, Dave.'

David chuckled. 'Japan happy?'

'Nippon is-a very prease-u, san.'

'How's Hal? Boys win on Saturday?'

'I can't remember.'

The boss took his hand off the partition and put it on his hip. Hal was a hero at Gail's work. Hal had made the social soccer team win. He made a good goalie – the ball stayed the fuck away from him.

'Presumably you see him play all the time though? All becomes a blur, I imagine, ha-ha!'

Gail kept her left hand on the keyboard, half-invested, and said 'Not really? I'm mostly busy writing gags in my jokebook. For the

comedy?’ She saved a draft of the email she was composing. Her chair whined as she spun on it. ‘He’s been to my shows, like, twice and he takes bloody headphones so he can listen to the cricket.’

‘Oh yes, yes your little comedy routines, of course. I thought you grew out of that?’

‘No, it pays too much, in fact I’ve bought this building, that’s the only reason I’m still here.’

The boss released some gas from his lungs. ‘D’you think you could put that in a memo somehow? It’d lighten up the junior pool meeting at— ‘

‘Yeah yup, absolutely, Dave. I love writing cheap giggles for the juniors when I’m busy.’ Gail’s chair groaned.

The boss looked at Gail’s back, almost said something, then flapped a print-out in front of Gail’s face. He stood there until Gail had read it.

‘What are you doing, Dave?’

‘Um, what this says, Gail— ‘

‘Says I have leave I’ve got to take,’ Gail nodded, ‘Dave, what are you doing? I’m afraid, Dave. Stop, Dave.’

‘Don’t you want a getaway?’

‘What about my emails, Dave?’

‘Can you not get Hal to check them?’

‘Right, Dave.’

The boss walked a metre away, then stopped.

‘Were you groaning at me a moment ago?’

‘No.’

‘Is there something the matter with your chair?’

‘No.’

‘Well. Oh, and before I forget – it turns out there’s another humorist in the building, on level eight. D’you know him at all?’

*

Guy did sets at the Melanoma Comedy Grotto, on the following two Mondays, and the crowds were up, and some hotties had begun to worship him, just because he was elevated. He was relieved Gail didn’t see the first set, his jokes were about how you *have* to wear a wife beater, you can’t beat your wife in a suit, that’s just wrong. His tinny voice made it hilarious, but he wanted some feedback about the writing. He couldn’t see Gail in the audience at the next gig, or the one after that, and all the adrenaline in his system turned to spoiled milk when she didn’t show. That girl from work was always with her posse in the front row, but their profiles weren’t large enough to stand out.

He couldn’t see Gail’s Tuesday night sets – he was stuck working late, getting time and a half for training the new girl. Her name was Daisy and she insisted that only Guy train her, and squeezed his hand and told him she should, like, *SO* paint his nails, and she stood behind him when he wet his tea bags and whispered into his ear, and her lips brushed his ear lobes and he shivered.

Staff Drinks across the road on Fridays felt like he was staying at work, not getting away and chilling out, he couldn’t even listen to himself as the jokes came out of his mouth, bits he’d written for the next newsletter, bits Gail would have him discard without a second thought. Everyone kept comparing him to Joe Pesci, but he had to squeak even higher so they could hear him over their own guffaws. A pair of adoring eyes never blinked when Guy met them. His phone suddenly buzzed and he dropped it as he tried to answer it.

‘Was that your girlfriend on the phone?’ Daisy whispered, sticking her wet nose in his ear.

‘What, Gail? I wish. Nah, just a stupid thing they want me to do. Telethon and some ads.’

When he excused himself to pee, Daisy followed Guy into the men's room and wrapped her hands over his eyes. Her kissing was hard and her ribs bumped his. It felt strange for Guy to lean down, he'd always practiced kissing upwards.

'My girlfriends totally wanna fuck you,' she gasped, tugging on his belt. It was a small, thin belt, half a dozen extra holes punched into it.

*

Hal only came up to the realtor's shoulder pads, but he kept staring at her with his red eyes until she looked down. Gail took over, made the real estate agent laugh discretely into her handkerchief, and then it was too easy, getting laughs from the agent was like yanking a roll of toilet paper until it spun. Hal said the kitchen was too wee for Gail, and she drew her feet closer together.

Hal's little bro joined them on the deck for a sunset beer. Guy nodded slowly as Hal worked himself into a standing rant about everyone laughing at him on the car yard and thinking they're all that just coz they're built like fuckin' slam-dunkin' fuckin' basketball players, while Gail's arm snaked behind her and fetched her jokebook and pen from her handbag.

They sat on the deck until the ice cubes had melted into the rum. They flicked can tabs onto what would be Gail's flower bed and Hal pinched Gail's flab and told his Little Bro that he missed having him around. 'Who else am I supposed to clown around with?'

Gail stopped scribbling notes for a second, then lit a cigarette and inhaled hard. Hal yanked the packet of Rothmans out of her hands and rattled it. 'Good smokes, these are, cept for the girl germs on 'em. I gave that muck up a ways back, but Rothmans is what you want. They're the Ford of cigarettes, I swear to God. Have one, little bro.'

'I'm good, ta.' Guy pulled out a Marlboro Light and lit it delicately. Hal leaned over, slopping beer on the deck, and ripped it out of Guy's mouth, biffing it onto the deck and stomping it. He stuck a Rothman in Guy's lips and resumed his seat.

'Aw, and love, I forgot to tell ya – I jotted your name down for the social basketball, made you a Forward.'

‘Oh, I’m overjoyed, but why? You too short, Hal?’

‘Stuff off I am.’ Hal stabbed his thumb at Guy, ‘He is.’ Hal seized Gail with his arm while he leaned back and said to Guy, ‘She’s gonna gimme some bleeding massive kids. Mum woulda bin disappointed in you. Can’t ya get a missus?’

Gail peeled Hal’s green, pythony arm off her shoulder.

They sat the remainder of the evening with Hal between them. Guy left without kissing Gail on the cheek.

*

Each time she sank a three-pointer, or slam dunked, Hal headbutted her, and Gail winced. Hal punched a lot of people in the guts, everyone was always standing over him, they weren’t playing fair. When men on the team asked Gail what she did outside of playing basketball, Hal came over and told them, ‘She hasn’t a clue what she’s up to.’

Hal told everybody that Gail wouldn’t move to the company’s Gold Coast branch, to a six figure slot, because she was too tall for the plane.

Gail added without blinking, ‘He’s not joking. Last time they had to stand the plane on its tail so I could fit in there. Damn thing had to fly straight up, vertical, like a space shuttle.’

The mouths of the basketball crew became yawning black holes and their teeth showed and they slapped their guts and knees. Hal folded his block-arms and snorted and wiped the maddening sweat out of his eyes.

Where’dya get this one? She’s priceless! She’s a joker! She’s gonna be HUGE!

‘Honestly though,’ they said, swallowing their hiccups, wiping their eyes, ‘How come you haven’t moved?’

The night they bought the house, Hal slobbered into Gail's breasts like a dog with a trough of water. She stopped chuckling about it all, gave in and devoured him and came quickly. She felt like a loose screw, pulled out and drilled back into its place. His hair made her nose tickle; his head only came up to her chin.

In the cold hours, he came back for another dig and Gail lay there and thought about the house and longed for a cigarette. Gail was Wile E. Coyote, and the mortgage was a ten-tonne weight. There was a blackboard on the back of her eyelids and she wrote jokes on it.

*

'Sure you don't want a brandy? Guy-sy, Guysy, have a brandy, do... You're half thirsty for a taste of... uh.. Tullamore Dew...'

Guy laughed and said, 'Thanks but nah. Gotta drive.' He pulled back his sleeve and looked at his watch.

'He can't handle his piss,' added Hal. 'God it smells foul. Tip it out, Gail.'

'Very well.' She threw her head back and tossed the tea-coloured syrup down her throat then poured another glass.

The low sun drenched the dining table in yolk. Hal was Flippin Stoked With The Flippin Pad and he was wearing his best Ford shirt, the three collar buttons all done up, although the shirt didn't match his red eyes. Gail just liked the balcony, with its pot plants to ditch cigarette butts in. Buying a place with a balcony got rid of the disgusting cash which stuck to her and made Hal open her bank statements.

Forks tinkled plates. Daisy licked her napkin and dabbed Guy's lips. Guy kept his eyes out of Hal's. Gail was beside Hal, but her chair was turned away from him. Hal asked Guy if he was over that vegetarian jaunt yet.

'You ain't sat at the grown-ups's table since we were tiny,' Hal said, smashing the silence. 'Oh – hang on! He still is!'

‘Every man was once a child,’ Guy muttered.

Hal wiped the sweat out of his eyes, jabbed his knife into his fish, held it aloft and jiggled it. ‘It’s easy to catch em when they’re small.’ He bit into the wobbling loaf of pink, swallowed without chewing and said, ‘So how long yous garn inna bush for?’ His eyes searched Guy for bullpies.

Gail’s fingers crushed her little glass of brandy. She was sitting nearest the balcony door, knees aimed towards outside. Her cigarettes sat on the tabletop and she fingered them.

‘I don’t know if we’re conclusively–’

‘We need to write material, clear our heads. Practice. Please, Harold.’ Her spine was humped, her jaw gritted.

‘Don’t call us Harold. Sound like Mum, you do.’ His fists had no fingers. He took another bite of soft flesh. Guy noticed that Hal didn’t have a fork. ‘You know you talk too much,’ he said to Daisy, who was thumbing the phone on her lap, ‘Anyone ever tell ya that?’

‘I’m, er, forced to concur with her, Hal,’ Guys said, ‘It’s hard to practice at home, what with our sets being–’

‘What with ya what? Ya *sex* being?’

‘Sets, I think he–’

‘Gail: the bros are talking.’ He shook his fish at her, flicking her with lemon juice. ‘We’re talking, eh Napoleon! You hearin’ us down there?’

The crunching of fish bones made everyone study the dresser, the ceiling, the ornamental plates. Hal sucked his mouthful down his throat and said, ‘Well this is pretty average. Gai, I thought you said you’d cream your pants if he came over? That was another joke, I’m guessin?’

Guy went to take a piss and came back to table silent except for the sound of Hal sucking the marrow from his fish bones. ‘You know you piss like a girl? That’s ya fourth piss tonight, I bin counting.

You're taking the piss!

Guy was glad that he had to sneeze. His laughs were too expensive to spend on Hal.

'He's takin the piss, I said!' Under the table, he kicked Daisy's shin. 'You heard, eh?!

'That's very clever,' Gail said into her glass. 'Boys and girls, did you know Hal usually eats ear wax and snot for dinner?'

'Know what your problem is?' Hal turned his whole seat so that he faced Gail, and jiggled his fish at her. 'You take nothing seriously, not a one. You won't even buy proper gear for your little camping trip.'

Guy cleared his throat. 'With the camping, Harold, presumably Gail's told you, Hal, you're most welcome to—'

'I know I'm welcome, I know I'm welcome. Everyone knows I'm welcome, even a retard knows that. Should come out with my knives and .22 and show you Townies what's what. Eh, you, oi! Whatcha reckon?'

'I told Guy he shan't be going,' Daisy said, pawing her plate with her fork. She didn't look up as she spoke. 'I don't want him alone with a woman, that's dodgy. Sorry, no offence.'

'None taken,' Hal said.

Gail excused herself, took the dessert cinnamon rolls out of the oven and put them in the microwave on High, and went onto the deck to smoke.

'Who'd wanna be stuck with her smokin' all day and night,' Hal went, and kicked Daisy's shin more softly this time.

*

At nights, Guy put his mouth to the unjudging lips of his bong, and his belly whined and he scoffed sugar, but apart from that,

he didn't eat. He sucked cigarettes down to the filter and tried to re-light them. He had to stay addicted. There'd been the Telethon and those adverts, sure, but his pay hadn't gone up in a while, and Daisy's probationary period had ended and her salary was nudging Guy's. He kept recommending her for promotions which would take her to a different level, tried to get her and Gail to switch roles. He told her he'd been offered a residential gig at a casino in Australia. He told Daisy she should go ahead, take a role at the Perth branch, he'd follow her over in a month or two.

Because he had nothing in his guts, the beers before the Monday set fizzed up into his lobes and trickled down the back of his throat to make his words ripple and warp and run freely, like they did when he fell asleep with his face on the keyboard, chatting to Gail on Facebook. He told Daisy he had to be ready backstage twelve hours before the show, so she'd better not contact him that day. Daisy waited in the front row, smiling, hands neatly coupled on her lap.

Outside, the nude trees shivered in the darkness and the door of the MCG kept slamming. Everyone's necks were scarved or bearded and they started sweating inside. The stage was a bonfire. Up on the catwalk, as the MC adjusted the lighting, he told Guy to make the audience forget that they had work tomorrow, and winked.

'And, listen, hey, tell Big Gail there's a couple producers wanna have a word with her. They're doing a ladies' comedy show.'

Guy burped and played with his Marlboro Lights and said, 'She has been acting for a while...'

'Nah nah,' the MC said, waving his hands in distress, 'Nah you don't wanna put her on screen, God no. Writing role, more likely.'

Guy lurched, met his toes halfway down the stairs, spilling beer from his bottle.

'Oh, and d'you see Jaz on TV?'

'What?'

'Jasdeep – y'know, Indian fulla – got his own show. Man's here tonight, you should meet him. D'you not watch TV?'

‘Nah. Don’t wanna see myself again.’

‘Just be sure to tell Big Gai about the thing.’

The MC hefted a podium along the stage. Li'l Guy was introduced as one of the MCG Mondays Rising Stars, and the MC also introduced Guy's girlfriend, spotlighting her, making her official, sealing them together in a hot sandwich maker. ‘You’ve seen him on the Bright Sparks Telethon 4 Life!’ the MC said, and heads nodded, then the MC made a joke about how Guy would make a fine jockey someday. Guy trudged across the stage, dribbling beer foam, took a long time to lower the microphone to his level, and people chuckled and wiped away tears.

Then he booted the podium over and it hit the carpet hard. With the spotlight in his eyes, he could only see their flashing cameras. He paced until he stepped on the landmine, and had to stay there. He pulled out his notebook, crushed it in his cute hand. ‘I haven’t been sucking helium.’ The mic squealed. ‘This here’s just how I sound.’ Everyone laughed. ‘ZIP IT, THE LOT OF YA’S. I ain’t started.’

Someone walked out.

‘Like, so there’s this girl I sorta dig,’ he sighed, ‘She with us tonight? You in the audience? She probably can’t hear me, she snuck in a few casserole pans and a hip flask of dishwashing liquid.’ A tide of laughter swept through the black sea. A voice in the front row squeaked, ‘Hi! Hi baby!’

‘I’M NOT A BABY.’ Guy could see sparks of light reflecting off of her lacquered fingernails. ‘So, no sign of the girl I love out there?’

A few orphan laughs. He eyeballed the end of the room, where the red light, the eye, could come on at any time.

‘Good.’ A hiccup of regurgitated booze stung his nostrils. ‘This girl, bro, she’s *talll*. Oi, British people call girls birds, but if this girl’s a bird, she’s an ELEPHANT BIRD, man. We’re talking a girl so tall she sleeps on a double bed – it’s *two singles laid together*, end to end.’ Heartier laughter now that Guy had begun talking about impossible things. ‘Serious, people, this one’s *big*. Whiiiiich means she’s pret-tyyy fucking *big* where it *counts*. And by where it *counts*, I of course mean her *fridge*.’

Guy was pacing back and forth. ‘Honest to God folks, you gotta see this shit, tall girls eat a *lot*, know what I’m sayin, this fridge doesn’t have shelves, it’s got *aisles*, know what I’m saying?! Clean up in Aisle 5 yo! It’s got a, it’s... she’s so fucking byuda– ‘

His left foot stuck to the sticky stage and his right foot went over it. When he fell, his hands took the weight. It was funny to suddenly have heavy limbs. People said ‘*Dude,*’ and someone said ‘He’s not... ‘ and the spotlight roasted him. His legs were underwater. Some of the polish had chipped off the fingernails Daisy had made him grow.

There was a ringing in his ear, from the microphone which he had brought down with him.

When the MC helped him to his feet, and Jasdeep offered his crutches, Guy shrugged them off and told Daisy to fuggoff to her seat. He sat down on the edge of the stage and faces appeared in the audience. His lower back dripped sweat into his Wonder Woman boxer shorts. The red eye of the Overtime light was on him.

After he’d told them about the girl, they stood and clapped and whistled, and a big man-shape with heavy footsteps thudded outside, sobbing or giggling, and where Daisy had been sitting there was even a free seat, and he was surprised he hadn’t noticed that. Would’ve been perfect if Gai had showed up then. There was something he was supposed to tell her, plus she could’ve taken the spare seat.

*

The comedian before Gail had prissy posture. Hal flicked coasters at him. His short, thick arms, like railway sleepers, made the tabletop slant towards him. Gail’s posters around town, beside the Ladies Night posters, called her Big News and the MCG was packed tonight, but no one shared the table with Hal. His feet were perched on the stage, armoured with dirty work boots with paint splattered across the steel caps. When Gail strode on, stomping, a pretend-giant, Hal folded his arms and yawned.

‘Bring the pouff back on!’ Hal turned to the couple behind him, blinking his pink eyes. ‘*Blimmin’ freakshow at his place.*’ The couple fluttered their fingers in front of their noses; Hal breathed into his cupped palm and sniffed it.

‘Top o’ the mernin to ya!’ Gail squeaked like a leprechaun, and they laughed because she had to hoist the mic so high.

‘*They’re obviously platforms,*’ someone whispered.

‘Any minorities in the audience tonight? How ‘bout disabled, any handicaps out there? What about vertically challenged people, any midgets? I was thinking of going there but I didn’t wanna stoop to that level.’

Hal laughed like something had bit him, spraying rum on the stage.

Gail visored her brow with her hand. ‘Is my man in the audience tonight? Where’s my guy?’

‘You’re a joker! I’m right here! At ya feet, Big Girl!’ Hal hiccupped then punched his mouth to knock the puke back down his throat.

‘Lots of, um, lots of garbage in the news these days, boys and girls, yussir, let me tell you about–’

‘*GAY-ALL!*’ Hal stomped his boot on the stage. His rum glass and his handle were empty and he banged them on the tabletop. ‘Ya guy’s right here. You garna innaduce us or not?’

A smudge of laughter; snorting nostrils.

‘Dear Readers,’ Gail said, taking the mic and kicking the mic stand over, ‘My Mack Daddy, Harold!’

Slaps of laughter like hands on cheeks.

‘Pimping’s moved with the times though. He slaps me through Twitter.’

‘*I won’t!*’ Hal roared, ‘I’ll slap you with my... bloody... boot.’

‘Your teeny tiny size eight slipper, ooh, ouch Harold! I think your little slipper would come off worse.’ She pulled her notebook from her

back pocket and cleared her throat.

‘You oughta tell em about that girlfriend a yours,’ Hal said, ‘That pipsqueak comedy clown.’

Nervous laughter.

‘From the mouths of babes, eh?’

‘You’re rubbish, you.’

‘Thanks for that, darling. Still: on with the show, no shortage of material up here, oh no, I’ve got some TERRIFIC bits about my short-tempered husband. He’s got short hands and short pockets. He wears shorts every day. Short short short short SHORT!’

Hal put his hands on the table, rose. A young usher rushed forwards to pick up Hal’s spilled beer; Hal shoved the usher, who fell into a table of students.

He clamped his hard-tipped paws on the shoulders of random people as he stood, trying not to sway.

‘I’m serious, love. Tell these gents what paid their ten bucks to come see your fat behind, your ten foot tall flippin– ‘

‘ – it was a *film*, sweetheart, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*. Daryl Hannah.’

There was only the sound of hearts knocking on rib cages until Hal said, ‘No one’s laughin atcha jokes. Let me up there, I’ll laugh ‘em.’

‘Hal, sweetheart, I’ve told you, it’s called a *stage*, mmkay? Makes MOST people taller, mmkay?’

‘Makes your faggoty little boyfriend taller, that’s for sure. You telled these knife – NICE public... he wants to root his brother’s missus?’

They could all hear the click of videos captured on phones. Gail’s

arms had become logs, her hips had become too wide to move, but she unpeeled herself from the stage, hit the floor and thudded out of the club. The red light hadn't even come on yet.

The MC righted the knocked-over mic and cleared his throat. 'Sooo... next up...'

'Give it 'ere,' Hal said, tripping over the stairs, falling onto the stage, pulling himself upright, dropping the mic as low as it could go. Gail had left a shoe on stage and Hal held it up. 'Lookit the size of the thing! It's not hardly Cinderella is it?! I'll bet a old lady lives in here! Hell-OOO? OPEN UP OLD LADY!'

Hal had a whole hour of material about Big Bitches and Li'l Midge, everyone could relate to that, and a gut-buster about a bloke he knew who kept taking the piss. They booked him in for the Saturday night, and begged him to do the Saturday after that.

*

'What's ya missus gunna do while you're out in the woods crackin' funnies?'

'I haven't a clue. She's a modern independent woman.' Guy leaned down and rummaged under the seat until the knife touched his finger and he sat up again.

'I'd better go round there and service her.'

'Please do.'

Hal's nostrils puffed and he red-eyeballed Guy until Guy turned away blinking.

'You forgot Mum's birthday,' Hal concluded.

'WTF? No I didn't.'

'You callin' me a fibber?'

'When did I forget her birthday? You tell me.'

‘When you were ten. You forgot her birthday, ‘member that? Now who’s the fibber?’

Gail opened the passenger door and plopped her bum into the seat. The car dipped. She fumbled under the seat then pushed the seat back as far as it would go, and reclined it. ‘Sure you don’t wanna come, Hal? You scared of poachers?’

‘Nah... got a show on tonight. Oi, little man, listen: what’s your bird’s digits? In case I need her. In a emergency.’

Guy wrote Daisy’s phone number on a page of the map book, tore it out and folded it.

‘You don’t need this page?’

‘Hope not.’

Hal took his forearms off the driver door and followed them onto the road. ‘I’ll pick you up if you want, just yell.’ Guy began reversing, ‘Any problems with the little man, you just text us.’

‘Any problems with the little man,’ Gail replied, pulling her sunglasses down, ‘I recommend Viagra.’

Hal was walking alongside the car now. His eyes were still red, weary. ‘Take care of her, bro. I’ll miss the lot of yas.’

*

Gail stopped checking the rear view mirror, and they stopped for petrol and Guy returned to the car with cigarettes.

‘There.’ He tossed the Rothmans to Gail. She turned them in her hands, then said, ‘Eew,’ and tossed them out the window. She went inside herself and returned with a box of Marlboro Lights and a fresh lighter and a smirk. They shared a Coke with one straw, chanted along to the drums and brass of the *2001* soundtrack, gossiped about dicks from high school who probably sold used cars now. Gail devoured the scraps of Guy’s pie, licked the tip of her finger and dabbed up the last pastry flakes.

‘I’m not allowed to eat in front of him.’

One of Guy’s adverts came on the radio and Gail roared at him to shut up and turned the volume all the way up, and Guy covered his ears. When the ad finished, she said, ‘Hope you haven’t quit your day job.’

Lawns became unmowed; sections quadrupled in size, silos and warehouses bloomed, and concrete factories and fruit farms, and huge car yards full of haymakers and tractors, and then the city gave up and everything greened. Interesting birds played in the highway gutters.

Guy had to relinquish the driver’s seat halfway there because Gail said he was taking bends too slowly. It was Gail’s car anyway. Hal still had the ute if he got called out to sell a fleet.

‘No need to rush,’ Guy said, and Gail drove harder.

‘Shouldn’t’ve come if you didn’t want to get hurt, mate.’

His hand shaking, his handwriting scribbled, Guy jotted gags in his jokebook.

‘Whatcha writing?’

‘Gags.’

‘Tell me.’

‘Nah... it’s gay.’

‘Tell me.’

Guy reached under the seat and brought out the knife. ‘I stole this from him. To cut the tension.’

‘That’s not real,’ Gail decided.

The road became smooth as they passed through a town built around a clock tower, and Guy slipped into sleep. When he awoke, his lips were drooling into Gail’s lap and he had to plug his seatbelt back

in.

Soon they hit the first humps; the surface began disintegrating. Wet dust peppered the windscreen. Clouds cooled the sun. The land had been drenched and there was a rainbow, and steam rising above the hides of cows. There was gold in the wet hay bales, charcoal in the rained-out road, purple in the dripping foxgloves.

‘Gorgeous,’ Guy said, staring at Gail in the rearview mirror.

‘It’s almost spring,’ she said. ‘Shagging season.’

They passed beneath a bridge with a height restriction for trucks, two metres sixty. Gail flapped her hand.

‘Find my jokebook, jot down a bit about the height restriction for me.’

‘Fuck off Gai.’

‘Do it, it’ll get laughs.’

‘I’m not writing that.’

The sealant ran out and the car shuddered. A sign urged Gail to slow down to 25kmh. They passed billboards advising them that the campground was approaching and Guy’s bladder bulged.

You piss like a bitch.

‘So did you mean that?’ Guy shouted over the rattling gravel, ‘About my ad?’

‘Guess not. Go ahead, quit your day job.’

Guy’s tongue rummaged around inside his mouth but couldn’t find any words. The road went quiet again, as if it had stopped clapping.

‘I guess your manager would be all *2001*, like “Dave, what are you doing, Dave, don’t quit me.”’

'Your HAL 9000 voice sucks.'

'Fine, you do it.'

'My voice doesn't go that deep.'

The car ate up long screes of road. Stones flicked against the windscreen.

'How's the girlfriend,' Gail said, 'How's Dandelion? Or was it Ragwort?'

'*Daiyy*. She flushed my stash down the toilet.'

'You two are still on, right?'

'The tumour's inoperable.'

'You texted her today?'

'Nope.'

'Emailed her?'

'I don't waste my email on her.'

'You're not sounding like a happy camper. You gonna ship her back to Russia?'

'Shut up.' Guy folded his arms, pulled his sunnies down over his eyes. Then he said, 'Thailand, actually,' and Gail chuckled and lost control of the wheel. They lurched into a pothole the size of a bath tub. The sedan nearly tipped on its side, but Gail wrenched the steering wheel back toward Guy. They skidded, shaving a puddle, squirting rocks. Guy fumbled in his pocket and managed to locate his inhaler and sucked on it like a bong. Gail rested her brow on the steering wheel.

'If we'd've kept going— '

'—I know, I know.'

They each lit cigarettes, and Guy sucked his inhaler with his free hand.

‘We gotta tell somebody about this.’

‘Us? Or the pothole?’

Gail got out of the driver’s seat and the car rose an inch. She inspected the underbelly of the car. She got back inside and the car sank. ‘Not much dents. You already had a couple dents, I don’t think there’s anything new. Serious though, that pothole’s going to kill someone, they go over it fast enough.’

‘We should tell someone. About the hole, I mean.’

‘Let’s just get to the campground. It’s only a few kays. There’s already a sign.’

‘Don’t lose the map book. Might not find our way back.’

A sign above the pothole read

ROAD PRONE TO FLOODS SURFACE UNSTABLE TAKE
EXTREME CAUTION.

‘I didn’t see that.’ As they launched, Gail said, ‘If this was night time, that hole’d fuck us up.’

‘It’s not night. Sun’s out.’

‘Gee, thanks for that, Hal.’

*

The hedges opened up to let driveways in and out and then the campground was announced with an arch made of bolted logs, and running children and boulders and picnic tables and Norfolk pines and muddy knolls and trotting dogs. ‘Urgh, you’re joking,’ Gail groaned as she pulled into the caravan park. ‘Who’s been making babies?’

‘Oh, yah. My bad.’

‘You and Swampthag make some babies did you?’

‘You sound jealous.’

‘Whatevs. I hate kids.’

‘You like making them though.’

They parked in a puddle. Children on bikes pointed at their car.

‘I said, you like making babies, Gai.’

Gail got out of the car and slammed the door.

‘Anyone other than Hal know you’re out here?’ he said, running after her.

‘No. Does she?’

‘Daisy? Nah. Hey, listen, anyone makes fun of you, tell them I know karate.’

A giggle exploded out of Gail’s mouth, and she stopped and wiped her lips and said, ‘Excuse me.’ She tried to walk a few more metres towards Reception, but doubled over, laughing. The grin had already faded from Guy’s face, and when Gail turned away, he mimed a stabbing motion, right into the centre of her big loud back, where her lungs would be. ‘That a new bit?’

The moustached woman who took their money, tucking it into her bumbag, asked how long they’d been together, and where were their kids, and—

‘I know karate,’ Guy blurted.

‘Let’s boost.’ Gail snatched the keytag out of the woman’s hand. ‘Our camping space is GG.’ She jabbed Guy with the keytag. ‘Check it out, hey Guy, look, that G’s humping the other G! You’re not looking, Guy!’

*

The kitchen sounded like it was full of birds. As she paused in the doorway, a brat squeezed between Gail's legs; others hid behind her until they were tagged. She slipped sunglasses over her eyes and stepped inside. Kids everywhere.

While he was scraping the burnt skin from a skillet, an Indian child with big eyes tugged on Guy's shirt and said to him, 'Come play.' The child was struggling to hold a tennis ball with both of his hands.

'I'd love to, matey,' Guy said, loud enough for Gail's big ears to pick up, 'But I'm sposda be cooking. There's years of misogynist kitchen dynamics to rectify.'

'Why's the big lady wearing funny glasses?'

'Uh... ' Guy scratched his head. 'Coz she's chopping onions.'

The child said, after a pause, 'How old are you? Are you twelve?' and the child's father gave an accented snigger under his moustache.

Gail whirled around, foam on her fists, taking a step forward. 'FUCKIN JAS FUCKIN DEEP!'

The father called for his son to come.

'HE TOLD ON US!'

'Calm down, Gai- '

'Where's my phone, Guy? Where the fuck's my phone?!'

Guy sprinted to the car and came back with Gail's mobile, panting. Gail's hands were crushing the bench. She was destroying the wall with her stare, keeping her back to the other campers in the hall. The rain tapping the window sounded like soft applause.

Guy sucked on his inhaler, stabbed an onion and tore it apart. 'What do you need your phone for?'

*

Guy stood on top of the wet picnic table to see the sun going away for the last time. She stared at his bum. ‘You wanna hear about him? Hal’s hilarious, I got some new Hal stories, I think. Ones you haven’t heard.’

‘Is this you doing your set, or...?’

‘In the kitchen. That was classic.’

‘What do you mean? The kitchen just now? It wasn’t funny, that dick was, I mean, he—’

‘I’m a joke, Guy. Look at me, c’mere, gimme your hand. Look.’

Gail placed Guy’s hand over hers. Gail’s hand ended in fat, hard sticks of dynamite; Guy’s ended in slim, graceful claws.

‘You oughta model watches, mate.’

The sun settled into bed, drawing the night-blanket over itself.

‘Funny.’

‘What, you’re too much of a bigshot to model watches now?’

‘You’re talking about the Telethon.’

‘And the ads. And I know they’re letting you headline at the Mel.’

‘Only when Hal can’t do it.’

‘They’re giving him a lot of slots, huh.’

‘Pretty intelligent audiences, obviously.’

They were both surprised to find their teeth chattering. Their cottons couldn’t keep the cold out. They practiced bits and gags and improv and couldn’t prevent giggling fits and Gail wrapped her hot, pink arm around Guy’s back. There was no difference in Gail’s big lungs between chuckling and sobbing, it was the same shuddering hiccuping. He felt the warm thump of her blood pressing against his

skin.

The bonfire burned only plastic now and its flame was limp and green. They practiced jokes on one another. Guy's were about his lady. She had stormed back into their relationship, ordering him to take him back, shoving him, pinching him. Firing her from work hadn't helped. Daisy had seen Guy's adverts on TV, seen his five minute spot on the telethon, found the plane tickets in the courier bag when she'd stopped round to collect her mail.

'You can practice some of your material about him now?'

'It's not that funny.'

'That pothole was mega,' one of them said, ripping out pages of the map book and dipping them into the fire. The remark faded into the dark blue.

'Rain must've hollowed it out. It's totally gonna waste someone.'

'You'd have to be driving flat-tack. Spose it's the country though, everyone's doing a hundred.'

'A hundred cousins?'

'Lol.'

They poured wine on the fire but it wouldn't go out. The embers were evil eyes, watching them inside the tent. Her hands were strong enough to get to the root of his tension and she crushed his shoulders and he shivered in ecstasy. Then it was Gail's turn for a massage.

Guy barely had to bend as he stood. He was no threat to the tent structure. He jostled round behind Gail, and she grabbed his ankle and Guy collapsed, giggling, onto the jumble of blankets and duvets and tarpaulin. Neither of them had sleeping bags and they had both forgotten to bring pillows.

On his knees, Guy pushed his fingernails into Gail's shoulder. The t-shirt concealed thick, hard skin. He said, 'You must wash your hair heaps, it smells yum,' and there was an abyss before Gail laughed,

and Guy's heart resumed beating.

'You stalker. How go the diamond nipples?'

Guy suppressed a shiver, sloshed the bottle of moisturiser and said, 'You ready?'

Gail grabbed the flab at her sides, found the hem of the t-shirt Guy had given her and raised it above her head like a trophy. Guy cleared his throat and squirted the oil over her vast back. He found her flesh to be bumpy, pocked around each hair follicle, and realised she was covered in goose bumps.

'Put your shirt back on, dopey,' Guy said, and turned away, 'You're chilly.'

'You're a joker.'

'Oi, honest, you don't wanna catch a cold.'

'OOH! Big deal. Hurry up and massage me.'

'I'm not doing this. This is stupid. At least bring ya legs in and zip up the tent.' Guy scrabbled for his inhaler and felled it.

'Your inhaler sounds like Darth Vader.'

'Hilarious. Oi, you'll die if you get hypothermia.'

'I don't give a shit.'

Gail rolled onto her knees, shunted around and faced Guy, big breasts sloshing, her shorts stretched by her log-thighs.

'No one said I was joking.'

'Fuck this.'

'What, you don't wanna see my talent?'

'I'm getting out of here,' Guy said and shuffled backwards.

‘You can’t get past me. Hal’s right, you ARE a pouff.’

‘Your tits are 16-Fs, I’ve seen your bras on the washing line.’

‘He can hear you, mate.’

‘Up yours, Gail. You’re a fucking cock-tease.’ Guy found the rear flap of the tent, unzipped and slipped out. ‘Ha! Secret ninja exit!’ Under the moon, smoking and shivering shirtless, he added, ‘You’re mental in the head. Who knows what your problem is. You’re just a joker.’

Guy saw a blue light come on inside the tent. There were irritating little beeps as Gail dialled the digits. Guy strutted to the car, failed to dent it with his hardest kick, hauled the door open, pulled his phone from the glovebox and rang his agent.

‘Nah nah nah,’ he began, ‘No, thank *YOU*, yeah man, course I received the plane tickets, I meant to phone you earlier.’

Then he reached under the seat, fiddled around, and his fingers found the knife.

Guy opened his eyes and watched the breath pool in the air above his dry lips. He hadn’t slept at all.

Eventually, Gail rolled over and whispered in the darkness, ‘We could burn my blubber for heat? Like whale oil?’

After a black space, Guy said ‘Don’t joke about that.’

‘I told him to hurry,’ Gail said, and that was enough to make Guy turn away and bury his head and try and think about Daisy and his job and his telethons and gigs in the Champagne Room at the casino, just enough to get his head above everyone else’s, and interviews with teachers of the kids he was going to have, and matching curtains and crockery and all those cold, dull stones.

She lit the last cigarette and passed it. It was a glowing red eye.

‘I said it’s an emergency. I told him to drive hard. Said there’ll be a pothole or two, but nothing major. Told him to drive flat-tack.’

After a silence, Guy’s voice poked through the night. His voice had become deep and slow and manly. ‘Daaaisy, Daaaisy, give me your aaanswer doooooo... .’

Little J

Sometime subsequent to our evening meal, when the tiki torches have been lit and slippery couples have begun to grope one another, a little boy drowns across the far side of the pool. This very nearly interrupts my Reflecting Time, as does the injunction from my wife.

I do like to think I can see these things coming, but my head is buried in a particularly engrossing portion of the magazine, and her whine startles me. I have recalibrated a cylinder on the tool which I am building because the whine of the hydraulic piping sounds like Mary, and Mary knows perfectly well that her voice is about as welcome as a mosquito in my ear. She's useful to blame my mistakes on, but that's not cricket now, is it.

'I'm pleased you picked the red trunks, Big J.'

'*You* picked them.' The woman sloshes across the top of the large spa pool toward me and her wake wets the lip of my *Top Scientist*. 'Do watch it, Mary. This water's unpleasant enough as it is without being sloshes about. The bacterial count in this water is... Words fail me.'

'God you're a grump. You're a mean grump. That's your father talking. I'll bet you don't talk to your machine like that.'

She flicks water at me which I shake off my *Top Scientist*. 'It isn't a machine. It's a tool.'

I shift my rump along the ledge. We had supposed we'd better enjoy the pool since we'd invested in four units of this expensive exclusive timeshare resort. Still, one can't pretend that pools of warm water with bits of bistro food floating in them aren't breeding ground for *Staphylococcus* and his kin, and then there are the significant clusters of juveniles and their parents with their dribbling ice creams and white tongues and dripping shoulder tattoos to truly make this investment a disappointment – for myself, that is. Mary, being the way she is, has a content smile on her lips and sounds as if she is orgasming with relaxation. She makes similar sounds when reading Ruth Rendell novels.

I'm wading through the laughable Letters to the Editor from daft amateur twats in Adelaide basement labs when a wave douses my *Top Scientist* and I lose it in the underlit water. Mary has undone the drawstrings of my togs and is rubbing my genitalia as one would two persimmons in the fruit aisle of a supermarket. 'Let's,' she whispers, nasally. Mary has no idea how irritating her voice can be. In her bathing costume, she is as shiny as a clutch of balloons. Attractive, I suppose, if one uses the word literally. Eye-catching, appealing like a new carbon inhauster.

I hold the sopping magazine up to block Mary's face. I try not to register the boy who wobbles past me, his elbows jutting everywhere, mouth agape in demented ecstasy – he's just another splasher, to me. The boy's father should have taught the boy how to swim. I wish I had a child. A chimp's not an appropriate sponge to soak up what I have to teach about compressing matter – believe me, I've tried. Mary's mind isn't expansive enough, God bless her, so the person I mostly complain about the difficulty of reducing visible matter to subatomic size and reversing its atoms spin to direct it backwards in time is my journal. The high GSM pages are empty, kindly ears.

Stuck in tepid water with children drowning and wives attempting to fornicate, I hold *Top Scientist* up high, push Mary to the far side of the pool with a kick against her torso, and for the final time I attempt to enjoy the article on the current state of tools "competing" against my own (for none can hold a torch to my own.) I have to re-read the third paragraph several times while a grumpy-sounding man rescues the struggling, flubbing boy and weeps, "Jesus I'm glad I dived in after you," and other such sentiment unrelated to quantum mechanics. I can't remember from whence the man's clichéd words came, I can't pick the film. If I could swot the boy and the father without further wetting my magazine, I would.

Mary is persistent in licking my ears and tugging my togs as she swims past, and soon a cucumber has been cultured between my legs and I struggle as Mary tows me into a discreet area of the spa and unties the drawstring around my waist and clenches her labial muscle around my staff. It's a distraction from the child flapping and thrashing not far away, I suppose. I wonder where the child's father is. Presumably, he's somewhere in the dark recesses of the pool, where the night lights and mosquitoes can't reach him.

‘Do hurry up,’ I order her, ‘I’d like to check on that cadmium shipment before bed.’

‘*Hard metal,*’ she whispers, peppering my neck with kisses, essentially demonstrating her entire grasp of science. The erection between my legs, I like to think, is not my own. I’m hoping that the fatherly figure who took the boy from the pool reappears in my gaze as a reason to shove Mary off my lap, but she gets her thrills, and I manage to approach the conclusion of my article. There is a sharp pain in the head of my staff although I’m not sure whether I ejaculate or not, I must confess I am preoccupied thinking about the handling of my cadmium rods and trying to recall whether I requested that they be encased in rubber during shipment.

Big Father used to bring me to these pools when I was a juvenile, before they were developed, although his idea of my learning to swim, as I recall, involved my floundering and being criticised and his commending himself for having saved me. Perhaps this is a revenge of sorts, mine and Mary’s aquatic lewdness. It amuses me to neutralise my father’s potential grandchildren my ejaculating into this hot, chlorinated water. Thank God there’s science to redeem the embarrassments Mary always drags us into.

I hear further splashes and a commotion and I announce, ‘Should’ve dived in after.’ One would think the pool poopers would take my advice and move on with their evening but my advice seems to be unacknowledged because a commotion erupts across the pool, and Mary is on the cold, wet tiles shrieking about something or other, and I groan and lower my magazine and take a quick survey of what the issue is.

It seems paramedics have arrived and have leapt in the water, utterly ruining a couple of half-decent walkie talkies as they seize a log of shaggy hair. The little boy is floating face-down and is a peculiar shade of blue, like oily steel. I tug the shirtsleeve of one medic, who is photographing the scene, and he tilts his head towards my mouth as I give him a piece of my mind. ‘I could see that this was going to happen.’

The medic’s head swivels towards me. ‘You could, could you?’ That’s when the police are first contacted.

*

The shift nurse milks 30 millilitres of ejaculate from my penis and sits me down and I decline coffee before the police officer who enters the room has offered it, explaining that there is free coffee available in the warehouse of my firm.

‘It’s Saturday. Watcha workin Saturdays for? What, you go in just for the coffee?’

‘I confess to having taken home coffee from work. If you wish to arrest me, I shall enter a plea.’

‘We’re just interested in the boy, there’s things we haven’t got figured. You see who he went off with? See anyone play rough with him? See the person that said that thing you were tellin us, ‘Jesus I should’ve dived –

‘It was Jesus-I’m-Glad-I-Dived-In-After-You. Is English your first language or fifth?’

‘Don’t make this worse on yourself, sir.’

I can see this fool’s questions years ahead of time. ‘I’m not in the habit of profiling other people with whom I’m legitimately sharing a pool. Are you? Well, actually, perhaps you’re the species of person who is... No, I myself didn’t see a soul. A grown man was obviously playing with his boy – his father, presumably? If security cameras didn’t capture your suspect, then I don’t see how interviewing me will–

‘Let’s move it along. You been going to the pool for years, right? Your dad, he was–

‘ – involved. Consumed. Inattentive. Unloving. Returning to the subject at hand: My peripheral vision didn’t allow for a detailed visual of your villain, I’m afraid.’

‘In English?’

‘I didn’t see who drowned the boy. Yes, I understand you’re seeking a male of my age who was in the pool at the time that this

unattended child drowned, and yes, I understand there was semen on his shorts, but as I have already explained, my wife was sexually assaulting me and you'll have to press charges against her if you're under pressure to secure a conviction.' I stand up and move over to the window. I can tell that the interviewing officer is about fifteen words behind. His cerebral cortex is trying to catch up. 'I happen to have overheard a paramedic on the radio refer to the death as an accident. Does your department intend to contradict medicine? Do you pretend to be a qualified pathologist? Because I'll be needing legal representation if that's the case.'

The police officer opens his mouth and almost continues with his questioning, then closes it and says, 'Very good. Very nice. Some big words there. That sample shouldn't be long, sir.'

'You're using a Senco Centri? A second generation?'

'What?'

'Of centrifuge. To process the semen sample. They're good, those Sencos, if you are using one, that is. Good motor on them – that's what ensures consistency. '

'I don't know what that is.'

'Of course you don't.'

'So am I getting you a coffee or no?'

'I'll decide that.'

'Your old man never said no to a cuppa coffee.'

'I'm not him. I drink hot water only. It's refreshing and non-addictive. One shouldn't be dependent on anything in this world.'

'He in that magazine, still, your dad? He had that famous column, right?'

'No. Just me.'

‘I seen you on *60 Minutes*, you know. You did that job on the cicadas, right? Made ‘em hatch early? You could control their perception of, what was it, light-time? Whatcha building nowadays?’

I roll my eyes. ‘A death ray. Do I require a permit for that?’

He opens his mouth then closes it.

‘I take it hot,’ I say to him. ‘You were about to ask how I take my water. In a mug. 80 degrees.’

He hands me a cup of steaming water and a newspaper. It’s today’s, but it’s already redundant by hours. By writing events in time, we affect their outcome, so that we may as well not have written them at all. Why take an hour immortalising an event of which the permutations are changing every millisecond?

‘Shouldn’t be long, now.’

‘It’s been two weeks, for God’s sake. It is customary here to interrogate men who have been nominated for the Walker Prize in Quantum Mechanics? What’s your medal recognise *you* for? The Fields Prize in Belligerence? Anyone with, hmph, even a B.Sc. would be aware *that the toxicity of the spa water should have killed off any sperm which might have germinated into offspring*. Thus, your extraction of semen from Mary perplexes me immensely.’

‘We ain’t testing for viability. DNA and RNA plus markers, only.’

‘You are aware that I’m impotent? I did ask Mary to tell you. If she’s failed to— ‘

‘Steady on. That ain’t my business. Just finding dead sperm’ll back up your story, sir. Folks saw a man not dissimilar from your description and due investigatory process requires— ‘

‘YOU’RE INTERRUPTING MY WORK!’ I snap, standing up from my plastic chair as Mary emerges from the curtain of the testing room with a female officer in tow, fingers on her shoulder. ‘THE LOT OF YOU! AN ENDLESS INTERRUPTION!’

‘Wanna tell me about this time machine Mary says you’ve been

working on?’ asks the female officer. I can’t recall the proper term for addressing a female police officer – Officerette? – so I ignore her question and try to get my breathing under control. Mary must have said something to her. The officer’s questions are typical of reporters and Average Joes swirling wine at soirees. They’re obtuse enough to actually believe that I would build a death ray, and they’re obtuse enough to investigate me in the murder of some unattended tot. I begin buttoning my woollen coat and announce loudly that I will be telephoning my lawyer as soon as I get home. Mary, snail trail sparkling on her cheeks, seizes my arm and attempts to worm into my warm core.

‘I’m sorry they had to do that to you,’ she pouts.

The Officerette holds open the front door of the police station. The wind makes her earrings sway. They are crosses. The daylight spilling on her face tells me that she is much younger than Mary, and I do a quick calculation which tells me that the Officerette is probably 80% fertile. She’s hovering like a fruit fly, expecting a quote to trade to reporters, likely. Headline: *Son of famous scientist suspected in child killing...* No. *Scientist who deserves to be more widely recognised than his overpraised father suspected in child killing.*

The Officerette says, ‘Tell your lawyer you’re not technically being charged with anything, yet.’

‘I could have told you that. And you can forget the ‘yet’ – you will not charge me with anything, ever. Do you understand?’

‘Ha,’ she sneers, ‘Build that time machine did ya? See into the future?’

‘You know perfectly well from your testing that I was ... *mating*... with Mary at the time of the boy’s accident. I presume you intend to check the alibi of every single person present?’

‘Only the suspicious ones.’

I open my mouth to respond, but I break off to scold Mary for pulling her hair into her mouth and biting into it. I fish my car key from my pocket. ‘You know, a prophet is never accepted in his home town.’

‘Luke 4:24,’ the officerette responds, and boosts her belt. ‘Please don’t compare yourself with the J-man.’

Mary gasps a question at the cop. ‘How long will it take you? To get him?’

‘Can’t prophesy that.’ She begins to pull the door closed and withdraw her feet inside the police station, frowning at a transcription of our interviews. ‘Good luck with the pregnancy, lady. Sir – your wife tested positive.’

*

Despite her taking bends extremely slowly, and taking exorbitant lengths of time to change lanes, Mary’s driving our modest Fiat gives me an opportunity to catch up on my reading.

I have an investors’ report on the timeshare unit. We own four units out of an exclusive sixty, and they have been producing a reasonable degree of profit, however, we’ve only become savvy in our investments by always considering the dimension of time. Time will sour our investment if we aren’t proactive.

As Mary takes the final bend at 30 an hour, I say, ‘We’re selling, today, the timeshares,’ and, upset, she bumps into the driveway. ‘DO BE CAREFUL! D’you have clear-coat to replace any chips in the bumper paint, do you? No?’

Mary swallows and says, ‘Our timeshare units. Yes.’

‘Media attention is unlikely to be in our favour.’

‘You’re talking about the investigation.’

I clap thrice, slowly. ‘An astounding deduction, Mary. It’ll last sixty days, the hype, the headlines. Mark my words. By then, our units’ll be worth half, sixty percent, something like that. Devalued. You shall ring the broker this evening and sell those timeshares before the tabloids get nosy.’

‘Don’t be so mean to me. Yes, I’ll ring her this evening.’

I open the passenger door, but I don't swing my feet out right away. 'These... *problems*,' I begin, looking at her belly, which she's stroking underneath the steering wheel, 'These problems can be eliminated. Gotten rid of. You know I love you, right?'

*

I pursue venture capitalists to move my production along to the next phase, so that I don't have to do monthly calibrations for engineering firms or temporal reports for banks. Mary slows down, generally, taking longer and longer to pour a cup of tea. She kisses my shoulder in the night as if craving intercourse, however I point out to her that as she is already pregnant, sex is unnecessary.

I try to trudge downstairs to my laboratory in the basement just once a day, and get on with a solid ten hour shift most days, but it is too cold and lonely to linger in there for long and I have to fetch my own cups of tea.

One night the moon nosies through the curtains and I can't sleep and I realise that Mary has been waiting for an apology for something or other. I wouldn't mind a child in the house so that we don't always have to be each other's interlocutor. We could use a boy to unite us and to distract my wife.

'Tell me, Mary: the police, did they ask if you killed that boy?'

'No.' She doesn't roll over.

My eyes open and I almost reach for my spectacles. 'D'you mean, Nah, they didn't ask you, or- Am I the sole suspect? - MARY? Respond!'

I reach over and touch her midriff, the centre of her knotted, tense body, and she scratches my hand and rolls out of bed and hugs a pillow to her pregnant core.

'DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM.'

*

Fallen leaves become trapped in ice, and then the ice thaws,

leaving muddy pools in the back yard. I watch it all on closed circuit television from my laboratory. I am omniscient, God-like.

There are periodic visits from the officerette. It's obvious from her persistence – or *pestilence*, if you will – that she has no other witnesses, thus I remain somehow associated with the drowning of the young boy, and the police haven't any other leads, hence the reason why they are hassling me, a revered public figure, a person from whom advice is frequently sought. Nothing quite titillates the tabloids like a murder at a resort swarming with prime movers, the wealthy, the renowned, and prized minds.

The officerette once visits and without realising it, she enters my house uninvited, and I'm too jaded to rebuff her. We have a conversation in which she suggests hypnosis to see if she can extract a description of who pushed the boy in the hot pool. I tell her that a much more straightforward solution to the mystery would be to recreate that day by standing in a sufficiently large beam of light-time, at the timeshare resort, and simply waiting the sixty-or-so days it's been since the incident, and then observing the incident when the regressing beam of light-time arrives in the past.

The officerette does not write this down. I offer to email her some directions for building a rudimentary time machine. Her department might need to appropriate next year's budget to achieve this – but of course when that arrives, she can go back in time, reappropriate the money and balance the books.

She closes her note pad.

I tell Mary to brew a cup of something for the officerette, and invite her to tread with me down the black steps, through the boron curtain and into my laboratory to witness the great tool which I am building. Yes, there are decontamination showers and centrifuges and great stainless steel tables, and a Bunsen burner which can melt stone, but the officerette becomes recalcitrant and toes the stairs. She says she doesn't think my great tool is relevant to the inquiry. She's uneasy. Perhaps she knows that the Buchstaller ring which circles the centre of my laboratory will reduce her to pure invisible energy if I activate it. I could transfer her to an AA battery and discard her in a rubbish bin.

She says I timed the sale of my shares in the resort interestingly,

that they sold just before the media got wind of the death. She's interested in how much money I made. I give her the figure, and she blinks. I was anticipating that she would gasp and commend me for my foresight, my mastery of time.

I point her back up the stairs, telling her she won't find a clue down here. Mary's expanding pot belly means it's taking longer and longer for her to brew a simple cup of tea, or pour me a hot mug of water, and while she bends and squints and pats herself, the Officerette pulls a chair back from the kitchen table and persists in asking Mary how the pregnancy is progressing, if I am giving her massages and support, and from the cool, sterile comfort of my laboratory, where time can't find me, I make quite a zesty joke over the intercom about the preposterousness of immaculate conception, and watch their reactions from my monitor, and Mary does her best to laugh toward the camera, har-har, but the Officerette simply grasps Mary's hand as if she has protective feelings for Mary.

I read the Officerette's lips. She's asking about the drowned boy. She's asking how Mary feels when I bat her with my rolled-up magazine, and growl at her, and why it's taken so many years for her to conceive, and I can see Mary's bottom lip quivering like a loose washer on my tool as the officerette slides across the table a card for one of those pathetic women's refuge clubs.

*

Oh, of course there are interruptions, such as having to drive Mary to the clinic, but I do the best that I can to bring something special into this world. The majority of my time is spent ensuring the Buchstaller ring is perfectly circular – 99% is not sufficient, it must be *perfectly* circular – and having the cadmium plates cut accordingly, for you see, temporary quantum shifts simply require HSP (holistic spherical pressure) – pressure from all dimensions within this universe simultaneously – and while a cubic arrangement of the cadmium baffle plates does have a number of advantageous reflective properties (especially once electrified!), curved plates are ideal, however, these can only be put together if simultaneously mounted, and I must do this myself as I don't trust hired labour, and until the full payout from the resorts, I can't afford all of the plates at once anyway.

If I could go back in time, I would ask for more when selling my shares in the resort complex.

Once each of plates is delivered, I scratch the bubbles from my mask and begin welding them in my foundry, down the twenty-step ladder in the deepest, coolest part of my laboratory, where the walls and the water are black. I don't take breaks to surface and suffer Mary's cups of boiling water, instead, I sit sipping in the dark and try to get the blue vision out of my throbbing eyes. I suppose this was what made my father so irritable. For our last Christmas together, he gave me a document wallet (unwrapped) containing all the shares of his company. I didn't say thank you – he was condemning me to a life of stress and suffering under his legacy. I never saw him again; no one did.

*

Mary gives birth to a wriggling purple baby. The baby's weight and arrival are within a modal rang inside the usual outliers, so quite why she acts like it's a miracle, I haven't a clue. His birth interrupts an otherwise mellow Christmas Day. We name him Junior. They tell me Junior has my eyes, and I wonder if that means he has my intellect, too. When the nurse asks me if I intend to get the boy Christened, I laugh until my abdominal muscles ache.

'Christened? Oh, of COURSE, ha-ha! Let's deliberately force my son into a pool, shall we? We've seen how that works out! Oh, mercy.'

'OUR son,' she says, and bursts into her usual tears.

'This has got to stop,' I want to say, but she has fled. I console myself by listing all of the species which die once procreation has successfully occurred. There's the wolf spider, Charles' Seahorse, the caecilian, several shrews...

*

Little Junior passes through a series of predictable integers – one, two, three – each interrupting my Christmas work. I'm becoming frustrated with my tool, I feel impotent, it must – MUST! – be tested on a living subject, although resource consent for such tests is a nightmare. The problem is that my registration has lapsed and the fee

and auditing requirements for a testing licence are quite prohibitive to scientific endeavour and after eight years, I must admit that I am running out of drive and editing a few theses here and there to pay the power bill – which frequently tops \$1000 a week. Electricity is an expensive commodity, light even more so, and time is the most expensive of all.

Drained, I take the elevator to the ground floor and collapse at the kitchen table. The boy is there, trying to cram a yolk back into a broken egg. ‘If repaired, it still has a viable chance of becoming a chicken,’ I tell him, and his bafflement cheers me up a fraction. ‘No, I’m sorry, that’s a lie,’ I say, and to stop his tears, I have to lead him down into the basement and activate the machine, at a cost of around \$80.00 per minute. He sits on the stairs, sniffing, sucking on the bottom of his t-shirt, until I place his egg in the Charge Bowl and run light-time through it. I give him back his repaired egg. He’s not allowed to tell Mummy, and he’s certainly not allowed in here again unless I say so.

His eyes dry.

It is at the celebration of 1826 Days Subsequent to Birth (5th birthday) that a now grey-haired, po-faced Mary slurps too much champagne and makes a crack to her PTA chums about my vasectomy having been our only poor investment, and something follows about Little J’s conception not having been so immaculate, and their laughter sound like panes of shattering glass, and I descend into my lab and stay down there long enough to grow a beard, surviving on tinned food and decontamination showers.

I must have a live test subject, I must, I must. It is impossible to acquire rhesus monkeys when one’s licence has expired. The housecat grinds against my shin, but a cat is not simian enough.

I write Mary a letter beseeching her to produce another baby, for me to test on. I’ve become attached to our first baby, who’s now a hefty boy who can wash and shampoo and dry himself AND read the signs telling him to keep out of my laboratory.

I can't keep the funders waiting. They expect me to deliver. They know that it is no death ray that I am constructing. I leave the letter on Mary's desk.

I watch on the CCTV as Mary pays for tradesmen to build us a pool, and for Junior to be the star of some birthday party, and his pals attempt to throw him in the pool but Mary intervenes. The boy can't swim – Mary really should be coordinating lessons for the boy. I certainly haven't time to teach him.

I begin to suspect that Mary despises the child: I once catch Mary holding a novel in front of her eyes, drunk on a poolside recliner, as Little J kicks and struggles in the pool, and his head repeatedly falls under, and then it doesn't, and I am sprinting up and out of my laboratory and diving headfirst into the pool to salvage the boy, and dumping his saturated, spluttering log-of-a-body at the feet of the pinup girl for Post-Natal Depression, and she is angry at me for interrupting her novel.

'I thought you wanted to test on him,' she says, and lights a cigarette – something I've never seen her do. I can't believe she knows the technique for lighting one.

'I – I – that's not–

'I've still got your letter.'

Little J rolls onto his side and gasps for air. I stand there with water running out of my coat. 'CAN'T YOU SEE THE BOY CAN'T BREATHE?!' I want to slap Mary, but what she says in response is a slap in itself.

'They're disposable. We can always make another. Your words, not mine.' She turns the page in her book and takes a sip of her cocktail.

*

Our swimming pool becomes out of limits. I would drain it, but it serves as a coolant chamber for the exhaust from the laboratory. With the ring operational, and the plates installed expertly after a few rearrangements, I'm making 500kg masses disappear to wherever I

want in time, and of course the exhaust vapours from such work can get up to 400 degrees centigrade, necessitating a pool to absorb the heat.

It keeps the water warm and carbonated enough that it can kill any small lifeforms – waterboatmen, bacteria... sperm, even.

The boy is too afraid of breaking his gyroscope to play with it, so I take it back to the lab with me and tweak it to power a fly wheel which keeps the pads in the starter motor of my tool turning.

'Tis remarkable how fast the years will pass when one is busy. The house is quiet; the cat was vaporised long ago and never re-materialised. Mary seldom speaks to me, unless it pertains to money. She occupies her time by chairing some philanthropic society. The boy is growing up a tad ratbaggyish. He's definitely in need of some parenting. I often catch Little J with his ear pressed against the door to my laboratory, his bottom lip curled up under the top. He came damn close to losing the spelling bee at his school when it appeared – for just a moment – that he'd forgotten the spelling of *centripetal*.

I try to tell my son once or twice that I don't want him ending up like my psychopath of a father, but Little J simply strokes the cadmium plating on my tool and fails to scrub his snotty, sooty fingerprints off it and, well, I have no choice but to issue him a trespass notice.

As the boy flees from my lab, I call after him, 'I'm simply trying to make you realise that you're destined to end up like *HIM!*' but my son does not look back.

The Foreseer graph correlates initial JOLT tests (Jumpings Of Light-Time), and although I reboot twice, it won't give me a different result, when the passing of seconds is factored in. The simple truth of it is that after perhaps a thousand cups of water down here in the dark, lit only by a titanium filament bulb, I am ready to begin testing, I must, I can't wait. If I do not produce some results, my venture capital loans will be recalled, and insolvency proceedings against me will occur. I will hang myself rather than allow my name to be disgraced in this way.

*

The unveiling has been scheduled for today, venture capital should be just an overnight transaction away, and the press are phoning relentlessly about what they understand to be a death ray. Mary catches me as I come out of the bathroom. Everything that she has buried, concealed, covered up has turned her eye sockets black. Her eyeballs are pink.

‘Is it ready?’

‘Haven’t you any shame? For God’s sakes, I’m, I’m – not ready.’

‘How could you not know they were coming? Your machine –

‘Tell them... heavens, I don’t know... Just tell them some codswallop about Little J. Tell them I couldn’t have done it without him.’

‘Tell Little J yourself, he’s with you today.’ She sucks on her cigarette.

‘HE CERTAINLY IS NOT.’

There is a long, cold silence. Mary sways and chuckles.

‘This is... you’re not the woman –

‘This is on you,’ she says, and wafts into the kitchen and takes the bottle of vodka from the freezer.

THUNK-THUNK. Thunk-thunk-thunk.

‘The little bastard! You let him down there!’

The front doorbell sounds and the both of us flinch.

‘STALL THEM!’

Mary smooths her cardigan and approaches the front door, and there is the sound of a whining child as she pulls the door open. Nobody has oiled the damned thing. I certainly AM NOT going to oil it myself –

But when I turn around, the front door hasn't been opened at all. A child really is crying. I scurry down the steps to the basement. 'Boyyyy! Little J! Are you down here? You'd better not be!'

Oh, but there are sticky fingerprints on the banister, and footsteps in the dust leading toward my tool, the shining platinum on the central cannon, the curved plates, the lighting, the bold pink patent stickers.

The blue ignition light is on, and beneath the hatch are soggy footprints leading inside her.

There is a cup of coffee on the bench. I don't drink coffee. I see myself in the mirror. My hair has whitened. Everything has shifted, aged instantaneously. There is a newspaper on the bench. I never left any newspaper there. Its headline reads *Tot Drowns – Scientist's Son Suspect*.

The shape of a boy is winking in an out of existence. He's waving his arms, as the lifeguards taught him to do on that swimming course he did at school. I dive into the centre of my time machine and try to find a part of him to grab and pull with a lifetime of power and determination and anger and resistance and my chest wraps around his hot, pink body as the chunks of jelly-like energy try to replace portions of my body. Smoke is coming out of his nostrils. I run up the stairs and barge a reporter out of the way and get my son onto the front lawn. I take the garden hose and douse him with it until his flesh becomes opaque again. He's had a billion charged nematodes pass through his delicate body and his lips have turned black. He looks up into my eyes. A whiff of smoke rises from his nostril, but he's unhurt.

'Jesus I'm glad I dived in after you,' I tell Little J, and press my sobbing head against his chest. I can't see into the future, but most people would then destroy the time machine.

MBF

‘How’s ya sister?’

Simon’s fat fingers curl into his palms, so his best friend can’t see his fingers tensing. He doesn’t answer.

‘I’m just tryin’ a make conversation, dog. Don’t kill the party. I’ll talk about Star Wars if you want. What else you like... chess... don’t know nothin about chess... Orienteering, that’s another thing you do. What’s that when it’s at home?’

The bass makes their shot glasses tingle. Simon keeps polishing his glasses with the little cloth inside the NASA case and ignoring Rex. It’s Si’s night, but Rex has been punching him in the shoulder and ordering him to hurry up and get liquored. A stripper writhes along the glazed floor, stretches forwards, raises herself in a push-up stance and puts her nipples on Simon’s eyes. Simon revolves on his stool then gets up and runs away to the men’s room, leaving his wallet on the cushion. The girl plops onto Simon’s stool and crosses her legs and checks the time on the cellphone stashed in her g-string. Her mascara is trickling.

Rex shouts at the girl, ‘What kind of a dumbarse leaves his wallet there like that?’ He reaches across the table, grabs the stripper’s fingers with his long arms, brown and plaited with muscle and scales and burnt hairs, and pulls her into his orbit. The girl winces like she’s got superglue on her fingers. A bouncer appears from the shadows and slams down Rex’s hand and pulls back Rex’s index finger and their forearms scrape. Rex doesn’t even look the bouncer in the eyes, but he gives the prick a quick sniff: ‘bout 20 years old; brown; earrings Rex wouldn’t mind ripping out. He’s locked on the girl, and the bouncer is just an inconvenience.

‘No touchin the girls.’ The bouncer applies all ten fingers to Rex’s hand and begins crushing it.

‘You’re lucky,’ Rex grunts, ‘You must be Irish, you’re so lucky: Lucky I don’t have my .22 on me.’

The bouncer pulls back Rex’s index finger until it’s

perpendicular to Rex's big wide brown hand. He puts his big confident lips right inside Rex's ear, nudging Rex's ponytail aside and whispers through the layers of noise, 'Well, you don't.'

Rex lets go and turns his stool away from the girl and she disappears and he stares at the toilet door, waiting for the master to come out. He's aware that his finger feels like a broken glass, but he's not thinking about it. He's got the scent of the bouncer inside his throat, that nuisance, that prickle. The essence of the big cocky cunt.

The beer glasses are rattling as trumpets and the voices of Motown ladies howl from the speakers. He keeps the bouncer's stench in his nostrils over the scent of tattoos and plastic Foster's ashtrays and greasy titties. He knows Simon's going to come out of the Men's and try to skulk out the exit to his car, but that's not acceptable, that defeats the purpose of coming to a tittie bar with your MBF. Si's fiancé goes by the name of Lesley. Rubinesque, he calls the sheila sometimes, Cherubic: What a load of bullshit. How many times does he have to bark it in Si's face? The girl's a heifer. Don't get him wrong, her personality's gold, and if personalities were a visual thing, she'd be a stunner, but they're not and she ain't. Getting five minutes away from Les is what tonight's all about. Simon chefs too much and gets a rash all up his fat luncheon arms from being sweaty all the time, and his belly button's stretched so wide it looks like a smile under two nipples for eyes, so the man needs a few fresh bitches in his life and a bit of a lap dance or even a suck 'n fuck in the handicapped toilet stall. Les can have him the rest of his life, make him run to the pharmacy for her and massage her and rub her feet and all that nonsense forever and ever except tonight. Tonight, he's meant to be Rex's.

The toilet door opens at last and Simon waddles out cautiously, touching his shiny dome, jeans looking too tight around the arse, crescent of gut showing beneath his Chelsea shirt. He sits down and tries to swat the tentacles of smoke stroking his face. Rex gets one of the waitress/sluts to dump a glass in front of him, and slides it across the table. He uses his bad finger by mistake and gasps.

'I leave for thirty seconds and you get your nose dirty? Already?'

'Got you a bourbon. Drink up, remember this here's like a warm-up for ya stag do.' He's finished most of Simon's other drinks for him. That's Rex's rule: grab it before it becomes ungrabbable. Simon isn't

quick like that. He's a thinker, a sipper, a slow consuming python.

'You didn't even say how your sister's doin. She got kids yet? Any of 'em look like me?'

Simon mulls the shot of bourbon, grimaces and squints like Robert de Niro. Orange light passes over his face, then purple again. He tries to slide the drink back to his best friend. 'I'm not allowed... ?'

'No leashes tonight, nigger. What girl you havin?' Rex twists around and takes in what's new on stage. You can buy pretty much anyone, so long as you get them escorted to the private rooms, you're not allowed to just flop 'em over your shoulder and do the caveman. The rules are harsh. Rex has enough Titty Titty Bang Bang dollars to make anything happen, but really all he wants to do is leap onto Simon's missed opportunities.

Simon is taking out his wallet. 'Good shit bro!' Rex gushes, choking on the ice cube he's crunching. 'The Asian, eh? They love bald dudes, they reckon it's lucky.'

Simon pulls something from his wallet, something square and reflective.

'You read my mind, the rubbers bro! The rubbers all the way! Happy ending for you, bro.'

Simon flaps a small square of paper in front of Rex's face. A photo of Lesley, her cheeks shining and red.

'I'm having *this* girl,' he says, and stuffs his Titty dollars down Rex's singlet and walks out of the strip club.

Rex smears the driveway gravel with the tyres of his truck. He does an oversized leap onto the deck, bounces back when he hits the door frame. 'Told you we shoulda got a kerb crawler,' he says. He howled as he followed his MBF out of the club, and he howled about who got to drive. His long arms reach out and brace him, and he wheezes and shakes out a smoke and lights it and begins to talk, but Simon clamps his hand over Rex's mouth. '*You want us both dead?*'

Rex snorts smoke at Simon as the security light comes on. 'Now you've done it,' Simon slides his key coolly into the lock and sighs before he opens the door to his home.

'Still hurts,' Rex says, sucking his sprained finger, and then he sniffs around. 'She's in there.'

'I'm not sleeping,' Lesley calls from the bedroom. 'Work didn't phone. You should get more hours, we need more.'

'Home, I'm home,' Rex dribbles, 'Honey, I mean.' He sits on the lip of the sideboard, bumping ornamental plates behind him. Upright in the hallway seems like a good place to sleep. He has on a pink Polo shirt. It accentuates Rex's biceps. The muscle on his arms is puffy in places, textured in others. He doesn't really need to go to the gym, he only goes to make fun of Simon and spot him on the bench-press. Simon's still got to pay another 32 months on the gym contract he got duped into.

'How you bin, Lez,' Rex drawls as he passes the bedroom door, 'You eating enough?'

'Ssb. I swear to God.'

'What, bo? The lady wansa talk to me.' He pinches Rex's sleeve and pulls him through into the lounge, away from the bedroom where Lesley is calling for the coconut butter oil. 'Wuz gonna give her a massage...?' Simon gives Rex the cable TV remote then finds a blanket and covers his mate, whose eyelids plummet then hover open, brimming. Rex's hurt, stiff finger sticks out of the blanket. He yawns and smacks his chops. His gumboots stick way out over the end of the couch.

Lesley stomps into the lounge, arms folded. Rex's eyes open a tiny bit. A smile greases his lips as he watches her. The fluffy apricot dressing gown makes her look untouchable, padded, swaddled; he's never had a piece of pussy anything like her, all domesticated. She sits on the other couch beside Simon and tries to hold her dressing gown flaps together over the expanse of her chest. There is a whole cushion's gap between her and her fiance.

They both stare at Rex as he falls asleep and a frond of sunlight

grows through the curtains. ‘Why’s he doing that?’

‘Sucking his finger? I think one of the bouncers beat him up. He always hurts himself, doesn’t even need anyone else to do it for him.’

‘Sun’ll be up soon,’ Lesley whispers. ‘I did, like, four Sudokus. Garth won American Idol. We’re out of milk.’

‘I’ll get some before work, honey.’ Simon shuffles closer to Lesley and puts his hand on her thigh. He can see her veiny breasts until she pulls the flaps of her dressing gown tightly closed.

‘Gross, put it away.’ She stands and takes the remote control from Rex’s lap and heads over to the kitchen. Simon crosses his legs and hopes the jutting erection will fade away. He has to squeeze in a sleep and get up again in two hours and mix pastry to bake two hundred croissants for the hotel’s breakfast buffet. He’s going to shop for a toupee on his break.

Lesley holds her butt against the sink and channel surfs with the volume off. ‘We’ll have to use cream instead. I’m not supposed to eat cream. Thanks to you, that’s two months worth of diet down the toilet. What do you want to drink, coffee or cocoa?’

‘I want you,’ says Simon, patting Lesley’s abandoned seat.

‘Yick, you stink of smoke.’ She switches the TV off, kisses Rex’s knuckles, and tightens her dressing gown as she stomps past Simon and slams the bedroom door closed.

*

Rex spends the season above the treeline where the boulders are the size of washing machines and there are waterfalls every ten metres. He has to come down because his index finger is pretty much bugged, every time he shoots at a goat or carries a rucksack it throbs so badly that he can’t help howling into the valley and the echo scares away every other goat, leaving him with nothing but hawks to blast.

He pours half a bottle of Brut into his chest and walks into Simon’s hotel and analyses the girl behind the bar. Her apron and black skirt muffle her curves, she has some mystery to her, that’s what

Rex likes, something not quite right to sniff around and investigate before lunging.

'I'm a hunting guide,' he tells her while waiting for Simon to take his break, 'For three reasons.' He numbers them off on his fingers. 'One - she's - YAAH!'

'Omigosh - is your finger okay?'

Rex tilts his head back and pours the whiskey directly into his stomach. It doesn't even touch his throat. 'Never mind that.' He uses his thumb to count instead. 'Look, what was it, first, you've got the money your Japs and Koreans are bringin ya. They're not used to our mountains. It's thar and chamois almost exclusive that they're after. There's not much deer left any more. People pay for the chase though anyway, that's ya motivating thing, no one wants to get back to their mates and go 'Sorry, I didn't catch jack.' Third, it's nice to be ya own boss, not have someone tellin you what to do.'

'What about second?'

'I'll have a second of these, sweetheart.' He rattles the ice cubes in his clear glass and she says sorry and pours him another one, a tall one, she's a good girl, she does what she's told, she makes it On The House. He tells her he'll pay her back by taking her to the casino.

'But did they get the bear? That bit your finger?'

Simon pushes the saloon doors open and a ghost of steam chases him. He wipes his whitened glasses. 'Don't listen to this guy. He's fulla crap. You smell like wet dog, bro. Listen, would Sir like an omelette de blanc or an omelette du fromage?'

'What's the lady having, first?' Rex slides his hand across the bar and lifts the girl's hand. 'Give 'er something fattening. She's skinny as. She looks like one a them Somalians. You from Africa, love?'

The girl chuckles and her chins merge into her throat. She pretends to slice lemons, her cheeks burning.

'6.30, by the way,' Rex growls, pretending to sip his whiskey.

‘Still with that system? C’mon, grow up.’

‘What you reckon though? 6.30 on the clock system? You musta scoped her.’

Simon shakes his head. He wants to get on with eating the omelettes. They have feta and gruyere and spring onions in them. ‘Ah... Ten.’

‘Ten outta twelve? Nonsense. Chels, you hearing this? Simon rates you ten outta twelve. Y’insulted or what?’

Simon walks away, and Chelsey says, ‘So what’d you rate me, big man?’ but Rex is already off the stool and scurrying after Si.

They eat their eggs and Rex sucks a milkshake until the glass is empty and everyone in the restaurant turns as he slurps. Si has finished his portion ten minutes earlier. His knife and fork are crossed and he’s playing with a bottle of olive oil. ‘It’s called an omelette du fromage,’ he sighs. ‘D’you have any idea how much care you have to- ‘

‘It’s just eggs to me.’

Si shakes his head and looks out of the window. ‘Notice it was albumin only? Lesley’s put us on a diet. Wonderful. So, I have to be getting back. You’re going to have your way with her, I take it? The home schooled girl, from the bar. The girl who’s only been legal for two years.’

‘The fuck is that? Ablution?’

‘Albumin equals egg whites.’

‘So yeah, nah, I could squeeze ‘er in this arvo’

‘She has a fiancé, Rex.’

‘That’d push her up to a nine outta twelve. Thanks for the tip-off.’

Simon slides his plate away and sips his Diet Coke through a pink straw. ‘Five months to go til the big day. Lesley wants to lose three

kilos to fit into her wedding dress, compensate for the baby. So, no good food round the house and it's still half a year until... the thing. You know.' Si pushes away from the table and checks the text messages on his phone.

'Until? Just say it, bro. Until you lose your virginity.'

'How'd she get pregnant, then?!

'Coulda been anyone.'

'SHUSH REX! My boss probably even heard that!'

'Nah, good for you, though. I was beginning to think you weren't into sheilas.' Rex pours more milkshake into his belly and checks under Simon's fork for scraps. 'Introduce us, then, c'mon. Your boss: she's a woman, right?'

'Dude.' He looks through his spectacles at his best friend.

'What? If you're not having a pop at that little jailbait at the bar then who ya poppin'? Shelley, was it? She got somethin against bald cunts?'

'*Dude*. Her name is Chelsey and she's not as... She wasn't *corrupt* until you came sniffing around.'

Rex throws the Sport section of the newspaper onto the floor and struggles to stand. He disappears the rest of his whiskey. 'I've gotta go bush again in a few weeks, soon as me finger's on the mend. I got a little somethin for you though, before I go.'

'Oh do you just? Antlers or steaks?'

'I'm talkin bout an extra dollar an hour, how's that sound. A pay raise.' He squeezes one of Simon's breasts. 'You don't even have to jiggle these.'

Simon shivers and struggles to get Rex off him. He strides over to the bar, lifts the barrier then locks it behind him and storms over to the rack of aprons and ties one on while Chelsey watches with her

hand over her mouth.

‘Kelsey - what way’s ya boss lady?’

*

‘It’s so close now, I’m giddy just thinking about it!’ Lesley’s naked skin shivers as she giggles. Lesley lists the things which she isn’t allowed to do close to the wedding, because she might hurt herself or the baby, or damage her dress. She can’t drink black tea, go swimming on the West Coast, eat expired foods, leave electronics on at night, clean up cat poo, use flax-based cleaning products...

‘Ooh! There! There! Scratch!’ she coos. ‘Ahhh!’

Rex’s claws are always long. He never bites them and never cuts them. They are dark underneath and full of moss and lichen and splinters. He caresses the muscles on her shoulders, scratches down her spine and digs into the delicate, wobbling blubber at the tops of her arms. He drizzles her with the olive oil he swiped from Si’s restaurant.

‘He’s home in twenty minutes,’ she says, passing Rex his can of bourbon and coke. ‘I wish he was staying on til 12 though. God he’s lazy. Thank you soooooo much for getting him that raise. From all the MacPoyle family. I’m going to make him thank you, I am.’

‘Lead a horse to water,’ Rex shrugs, and works his claws into Lesley’s shiny flesh again. Her neck is interesting to him, soft and exposed as she rolls her head to the side. ‘Mr Master of the Domain’s been avoiding me.’ He pauses and puts on puppydog eyes. ‘I ain’t welcome at the wedding, eh. Coz of that thing I done to his sister, probly.’

She adjusts her bra strap and pulls her XXL night shirt on and hops up onto the couch with him. She squeezes his hand and he winces, his finger is still purple, and she kisses him on the cheek and tells him that he’s a good boy, he did nothing wrong.

Rex takes the bottle of oil across the deck, drops it in the flower bed, scratches out a good hole, and buries it, pressing the dirt back carefully on top. Only the moon knows about the oily massage.

On the couch, they watch the clock. Ten minutes to go. He wraps his arms around her and she shuffles onto his lap.

‘Can I ask you something? When you boys went out on your stag do... ‘

‘Never,’ Rex says heavily, shaking his head. ‘I wouldn’t let him. Root around, you mean, persumably?’

Lesley smiles and relaxes into him. ‘That’s good.’

They skip to the scene of the DVD where the wedding planner and the groomsman have sex in the laundry while the woman is at work, and suddenly there are red lights and a squirt of gravel and Rex lets go of her and presses the Off button and puts the DVD back in its case and Lesley is putting on the Food Network when Si comes in and rubs his eyes and says, ‘Oh. Sup, dog.’ He starts putting groceries into the cupboards. He cracks a can of Mad Dog cola for Rex.

‘Heaps of caffeine in it. You’ll need it for the drive home.’

‘Right, yeah, I best be cruising off... ?’

‘Off to visit Chelsey, are we? Or one of your seven other girlfriends?’

‘Dog, grab a seat with me. Lax out. Shouldn’t your woman be doin that?’

‘I’ve got friends coming over soon, so... ‘

‘What friends?’

‘Friends. People. You wouldn’t know them.’

‘I’ll run out and fetch some brews, then. How many people for?’

‘I can’t drink. Lesley’s, y’know... ?’

Rex goes to the master bedroom and comes back with Simon’s

slippers, one in his hand, one in his mouth. The other hand holds his can of drink. He drops the slippers at Simon's feet. 'There ya go, take a load off.' He stands there, mouth open. 'I don't want you stressing yourself, bro.'

'Can you just...?'

Rex folds his arms and all his muscles bulge. He spits his mouthful of cola back into the can and places the can in the sink. 'Is this about that slapper at ya work?'

'You seen what she wrote on my Facebook?'

Rex squeezes Simon's shoulder. 'You ain't got the gift of game, dog.'

'It's not a game. It's my job. Know what she said to the boss? She reckons I fed her to you like a dog biscuit. Her exact words, it's, I'm in so much - the - frickin - She's all talking about mediation and sexual harassment and the boss has got my performance reviews and litigation and- friggin - friggin - '

'I'll bring her round,' Rex interrupts, 'Don't you worry about that, mate. And I'm seeing your boss on Wednesday, so -

JUST GET LOST, REX! SCAT! EVERYTHING THAT SUCKS IN MY LIFE IS BECAUSE OF YOU!

Rex takes a while to find the keys buried in his pocket. 'Left yous a DVD to watch.' The plates on the dresser rattle as Simon slams the door behind him.

*

Rex talks Si's boss into replacing Chelsey with a freckled redhead with a sliver of a nose and no hips who moonlights as a model. The boss catches Rex chatting her up, and she is sacked and Chelsey is reinstated to the bar, and she keeps sabotaging Simon's orders and swearing at him in front of the lower chefs. He knows that Rex has taken some Americans into the canyons and won't be back for half a month, although he has a nightmare vision of coming out of the saloon doors and finding Rex waiting at the bar again, salivating into

his bowl of whiskey, foot tapping the rungs of his bar stool excitedly.

Simon's boss sits him down for his contractual review. She uses his name more than he'd like, and he hates she way she reads off paper, as if he's unprepared without paper. He's been given goals to meet over the new six month periods he will be contracted to. No, she is not making other members of staff sign such a contract, just him. She tells him to stop feeling so sorry for himself all the time. She says his friend gets along perfectly well in life without feeling sorry for himself. Si should take a leaf out of Rex's book, she says, tossing her hair - which she's just had spruced-up with blonde streaks - behind her ears. She scans Si's contract and says, 'Can he be reached via satellite phone, I wonder?'

'Don't know. It's good having him all that way away.'

'I suppose it's the sort of work where you want to be left alone, rescuing the last mountain parrots... '

'He told you that, did he? Hey - those are new. Your glasses. They're, like, thinner.'

She coos and smirks. 'Rex bought them for me. You've filed a leave application? For the weekend of your wedding?'

'Yup.'

She diddles the pen in her fingers. Her nails are an inch long each and they have three colours on them. Her cheekbones bulge. 'Rexyrexxyrexxyrex... What are we going to do with you... Simon, I wouldn't mind if you'd dial him up on the satellite phone, if you could, please. Don't tell him I begged you to ring, just, I don't know, make up some excuse, tell him his mother's sick. Just get him back for me, would you?'

Si snatches the contract off the table and hurriedly signs it and gives the boss her copy back. 'Um... will do. Are you going to sign this, or... ? I need to know, scuse me, if I can still work here, you know, after, after my wedding, I don't have a - '

'He could have dropped it out of the helicopter, couldn't he, or lost it on a glacier? Sometimes it just rings then hangs up.' She

clenches her fingers as if she is having contractions. ‘Tell me everything about him. You went to school together, I understand? He used to beat up bullies for you, Simon, I gather?’

‘It’s complicated, um, look, I’ll get him on the phone for you, spose I said we needed to order from him, I dunno, a hundred kilos of venison? They come in 25kg bags.’

She stops fiddling with her earrings and blinks her extended eyelashes. ‘That’s exactly it. You’ll ring him tonight, won’t you. Yes yes yes, that order’s not a worry.’

‘I promise. Ah - how’d I get on by the way? With my performance review?’

She spins the piece of paper. She clicks her pen. She nods repeatedly, folds up the papers, pulls them back towards her and says, ‘I’m still evaluating it.’

‘Want me to ring you as soon as I’ve asked him to come back? As soon as I finish my shift, swear to God, I’ll get him to finish up his trip.’

She smiles as if she is having a photo taken. She stops clicking the pen, points it downwards and signs Simon’s contract.

*

Rex comes in through the kitchen trailing mud and sheep shit and a trolley with ten bags of deer meat on it. He rolls his eyes when the kitchen hands tell him the boss wants to see him. ‘Catchin’ up with my best friend first,’ he said. He hefts his gear bag on top of the bar and shunts a stool under his arse. The bag is a metre wide, huge as an art portfolio, and the stool is heavy wood with leather and studs, but Rex has muscle in his hands. His bandaged finger sticks out straight as a pointer. The butt of a rifle is sticking out of the bag’s zipper and a father eating dinner with his daughter asks to be moved to another table. Rex sniffs and remembers Chelsey’s smell and says, ‘You still here?’ He gets her to stow his gun and bags behind the bar. She strokes the barrel of the rifle, mouth ajar, and tries to change the bandage on Rex’s finger. He tells her the thing about guns is you don’t just fire them, you keep them oiled and ready for action at a moment’s

notice. The hands on the clock became unreadable. He watches the races and sips the beers that came out of Chelsey's salary. He tells her the boss lady said to pay him for the venison straight out of the till.

Everything melts and most customers are ghosts except for a few football fans and the stools are upside-down on the tables and even the kitchen hands have rolled their cigarettes and walked out into the wet streets. Simon comes out of the kitchen and hangs his apron up and finds Rex splashed across the bar like a spilled drink. He kicks a stool towards Simon and points his rigid finger. The football fans are occupying the other seats, yelling at the TV.

'I should really get home, see Les... .'

'I already gone and seen her for ya.'

'Please don't do that. Not when I'm not there.'

'Empty nest, lose ya eggs.'

'That isn't an expression.' Simon notices Chelsey tipping whiskey into a tumbler of ice. 'D'YOU KNOW HOW EXPENSIVE SCOTCH IS?! Give him the cheap stuff. Aren't you supposed to be out of here at ten? Pack up, go home!'

Chelsey makes her hands hug and squeals. 'We're moving in together!'

Rex shields his face with the hand propping up his head and rolls his eyes at Simon. 'Siddown, dog.' He grabs the newspaper from further along the bar and pushes it at his mate. 'Paper?'

Simon looks away. The loudmouths are enjoying the game too much, they're giving him a headache. 'Shel – ah, Chelsey – just get us a couple of cokes, please?'

'I'm not your slave,' she pouts. The men further along the bar ask Simon if he wants a curly straw and they all laugh and show their teeth and the cruel whites of their eyes. He looks over at Rex almost snoring on the bar and Chelsey rubbing an ice cube along his finger. 'Baby hurt himself.'

Rex pulls his hand back and sit up straight and yawns. ‘What days does your sister work again?’

‘Look, ah, you’d better spend a few nights with Madeline, hadn’t you?’

‘Who?’

‘My boss. She thinks she’s your one and only.’

‘What are you guys talking about?’

‘Shut up, Shelley. Gives us another whiskey. Si: I’ll doss down at yours tonight.’

‘My sister’s visitin’. Keep away. She doesn’t wanna see you again, Rex. Don’t come round.’

‘And she said that all by herself, did she?’

Chelsey pushes another drink in front of Rex and says, ‘How do you know Si’s sister?’

From down the bar, one of the league fans reaches round and jabs Simon’s belly with a pool cue. ‘Tell ya loudmouth mate to keep his mouth shut, we’re watchin the race. If he wants a sleep, tell him to go out into the gutter like a dog.’

Simon stares straight forward into his own eyes, reflected in the mirror panelling behind the bar girl. He fondles his double chin, pulls on the pudding of his cheeks.

‘Tell him yourself.’

The angry fan walks over and slaps Si, who stumbles backwards, knocking Rex awake.

‘I WASN’T TALKIN TO YA MATE! I WAS TALKIN TO YOU, YA FAT WANKER!’

The man doesn’t see the glass coming as it explodes on his eye,

followed up by Rex's tearing fingernails. Simon doesn't see it coming either, with his eyes closed tightly. He slides down until his bottom touches the carpet and he huddles there, listening to the fight. He can hear Rex growling, gnashing, tearing, dribbling and cracking and Chelsey's gasping, asthmatic voice begging for police officers over the phone.

'Give us that bag a guns!' Rex yells at Chelsey, as Simon holds onto the footrail of the bar, holds onto everything in the world he tried to make comfortable and orderly and predictable.

When he opens his eyes, between his feet there is an ear on the carpet.

*

'So are yous still MBFs or not?'

'What's a MBF?'

'Man's best friend. Like BFFs.'

'We go way back, Les. I used to waste niggers for him, on the netball court, put rocks in my school bag and smack people round the head and stuff. I don't know what's got into him, now. The man wants me to come crawlin back like a dog, that's what he wants.'

Lesley crushes Rex's good hand with her own and says, '*Lower.*' Rex is sitting on the couch, while Lesley kneels on the carpet in front of him. She strokes his woody arms with light fingertips.

Rex pulls his hands away, but only to get more olive oil. 'It's his boss I reckon. She must be putting heapsa pressure on him.' He squirts oil into the palm of each hand then slathers Lesley's belly and huge, purple areolas. 'I had to root the stuffing outta her to get him that raise and she still wants more. Nasty piece of arse that was, horrible, awful.'

'Don't even talk about that lady,' Lesley says. 'I'm just glad you're on our side. Hey, can't you put in a good word for poor old Si, get him a 12 month contract? Pretty please? I'll do anything.'

She turns around and kisses his cheek. Her breasts are squashed against Rex's knees. Rex leans in close. The tip of his stiffy is right beneath her chin. He lets his lips brush Lesley's ear, he leaks his tongue then flicks the ear, and moves the moisture lower, and begins sucking on her oily neck. She giggles and suddenly says 'Finally!' and leans her head back and spreads herself out on the carpet for him.

'*Careful,*' she whispers as Rex descends, holding her pregnant belly, 'You don't wanna hurt him.'

He sniffs her belly, and his beard makes her wriggle ticklishly. He crouches over her on all fours, ready to devour her, but her belly holds him away. He pauses, steadies his hand in front of him, scrapes the soggy bandage off, grabs his purple-black finger with his good hand, closes his eyes, clenches his teeth, yanks the finger backwards with everything he has in him and hooooooooooooowwwwwwwwwls.

The Man Upstairs

‘I thought that we might talk.’

‘What, we can’t talk inside a car?’

‘I’ve hardly seen you. A nice stroll together –

‘ –stretches shit out when it don’t need to be stretched. Just tell me we’re heading home after the bank, Pop. These look like strolling shoes to you? Need ya eyes checked for glaucoma ‘n shit.’

Pops didn’t need to look at his shoes, or the fruit boxes stacked in the shadows of the ethnic shops, or the buildings holding up the sky. He looked at Sonny without blinking. ‘It’s not more than five blocks more. My shoes feel just fine, and they cost not twenty dollars.’

‘Lemme carry that for you, Pops... Your hands’ll snap... ’

‘Tithing is seldom about coins any more. Most people pop notes or cheques into the bag. Heavier than this was carried at Golgotha.’

‘Lemme see, at least.’

Pops paused outside a stone building and put a hand on Sonny’s shoulder. He held the bag of collection money behind his back. ‘I’m not suggesting that you’re going to steal the money, it’s just... ’

‘Just tell me we’re heading home soon.’

‘Everywhere is God’s home.’

‘Real convenient for you.’ Sonny spat in the gutter.

They walked on, but more slowly. Men in suits clicked past. Their cellphones were like icepacks pressed against their cheeks. They all had plenty to complain into their phones about. Pops needed to stop being so chipper. Pops wasn’t ruining handmade leather shoes on the stupid pavement.

‘It wasn’t too dreary for you, was it? The sermon. Tell me. Let your soul speak.’

‘I just don’t dig church, know what I’m sayin? You should let me do your books. I’m more of a behind-the-scenes guy.’

‘So is our Lord. You two should talk.’

Pops squeezed his son’s hand, then wiped his eyes with a finger and pressed the pedestrian crossing button, and let a limousine pass. He waved thanks at a car which waited for them. He didn’t even sprint across to the other side, just walked it, holding Sonny’s hand tightly until, a block ahead, at the wheelchair ramp of the bank, he asked Sonny to hold the tattered backpack of money, and folded in half, his knees and spine cracking as he squatted then fell on his knees.

Sonny could feel eyes on his back. ‘The hell you doin’ now? You done enough praying. Get up, Jeeeesus.’

‘There might... be a little somethin’ in here for us,’ Pops said, his arm deep and black and wet inside the sewer, ‘God’s good like that.’ Pops couldn’t reach it on his knees, so he laid his whole body flat on the pavement. A woman with a cardboard tube and a huge coffee cup stepped over him.

‘It’s dark as shit down there!’

‘It’s okay to be afraid of the dark.’

‘Get the hell out about that. I’m not afraid of the dark no more. Quit bringin that up. I seen stuff you wouldn’t believe, tweakers with no nostrils and shit. What’s up now? Naw, aw, Pops... You did NOT just do what I think you did.’

‘Did you not ask me to stop filching in the sewer? He’s telling me there might be some coins in this parking meter. Here: see?’

‘Lucky break. What’s that, 70 cents?’ Sonny clawed at his scalp and flicked the skin flakes off his shoulder before anyone who knew him spotted them. ‘Can we just do this already and jet?’

Pops hovered outside the bank, rubbing his new coins together.

Maybe Pops was finally going to say it. Sonny was a man now and it was time to hand over the keys to the church and the Prime Minister's home email address. In Sonny's first year of business lectures, they'd cited Pop's church as a model of enterprise with unique economic variables, there was a documentary and everything, stats in the business section and whatnot. Back in school, people'd used to diss him for being the son of a preacher man, God Boy, and believing the scriptures 'til he was, like, 13, but in the real world, money talked, didn't matter if the money came from Churchies.

'Not having a heart attack, are ya? They're, like, fifty dollars for a ambulance callout fee... .'

Pops seized Sonny's ears and pulled his son's face into his own. His eyes were shiny reservoirs in a dry landscape of wrinkles. 'There are yet blessings to be had today.' And he backed away from the bank and touched a woman who was carrying a tiny dog. He asked her if she would spare ten dollars for the church, and she didn't ask which church. She probably recognised Pops from the infomercials. The bank note she gave the Reverend was a colour Sonny hadn't seen in a long time. He felt dirty, like he'd been sleeping in his party clothes all week. Sonny scratched the scabs on his head.

When he'd waved the woman on, Pops bought them both a hotdog, stopping the mustard and relish with a pushed-out hand.

'I want mustard though, c'mon. It's only fifty cents.'

Pops took a bite of his plain hotdog and closed his eyes as he chewed, then said, 'I think we can put that fifty cents in the bag, don't you? It's been a wonderful morning.'

Wonderful for you... Sonny scratched his arms until the skin went red, then ate his hotdog in two bites. The bank had tall columns holding it up, and copper lettering which had turned green over the century. It was sheltered, in there.

'This is the one, right? High Street, National? Don't you keep your will here and shit? I wanna read it, out of interest.'

'You've got your appetite back,' Pops said. 'You haven't eaten like that in years.'

Sonny dropped the rest of the hotdog in the gutter. The bun had too many carbs. ‘Thought you mighta cussed me out, for eating it too quick and stuff.’

‘Bless you, Sonny, bless you. Feeding people is what I do.’

‘Superpriest, huh.’ He punched his Pops’s shoulder. ‘Jokes, jokes. I’ll pay you back, obviously.’

‘I wouldn’t worry about it.’

‘Nah, I got that interview.’

‘Of course you do. Let’s bank this, shall we?’ Pops tried to shuffle up the ramp into the bank, and Sonny grabbed his shoulder firmly.

‘Nah, I’m a pay you back.’

‘But you have no credit on earth, child. Your only credit is with the Lord.’

‘I WILL! LITERALLY!’

‘Do you remember when you were tiny as a bug? You used to sellotape the bed covers over your head when the sandstorms would come up, and chew your pillow and pray for an end, and I would stand at your door. You grew stronger because God was testing you.’

‘It was scary as fuck! You’re off your meds, living under a lightning rod like a retard... You gotta tell me you got rid of that rusted-arse chimney. What – naw, awww come on... Pops, don’t do that... Can’t we just go in?’

Pops had taken Sonny’s soggy bun and gritty sausage out of the gutter and, picking a Band-aid off it, he ate it and smiled, and put the mustard-relish coins into the bag, patted it, and they walked inside the bank where the carpet was maroon and the walls were marble, and the staff blessed Pops and shook his hand with their whole bodies, and helped him to empty the hundreds of cheques and notes out of the bag, and Pops collected the will, too, and Sonny stopped scratching.

*

‘Honest to God, this is unbelievably gay.’ The bus doors hissed as they closed behind them. Sonny scratched his tattoos. They felt infected.

‘Three stages, Driver, please. My son will pay for himself.’

‘You serious? Pops, it’s only, like, four bucks... .’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t a cent to spare on me.’ Pops took his ticket and took a couple of strides toward the rear of the bus.

‘AND YOU COULDN’T’VE TAKEN THAT FIFTY FUCKIN CENTS FROM THE COLLECTION?!’

Pops sat down in the dark end of the bus.

Sonny wiped his face with his hands, then mined his pocket and pretended to discover a fifty. It horrified him to see the note broken into tens and coins and a bus ticket.

He followed Pops to the back, where foam leaked like intestines from the stabbed seat. Sonny ripped his ticket in half then tapped his foot until the bus lurched forwards. He was glad that the windows were tinted by adverts, no one could see inside. He was glad Pops wasn’t asking him to decipher tag again. Last anybody knew, Sonny’d been wearing shirts with perfect cuffs with invisible seams which he gave to his bros after he’d worn them once. His face and shining teeth used to appear on pop-up adverts when you read the news online. His start-up had had so much momentum, he’d never had time to wash clothes.

‘I don’t know if you know, Pops... our colour people aren’t really, you know, sposda sit in this bit... .’

‘This is where a working man sits.’ Pops’s eyes were glowing in the dark. He picked up a paper clip from underneath the seat in front of him, then tucked it into his pocket.

‘The hell you gon’ do with paperclips?’

‘We don’t always know the purpose of something until later.’

‘That is some Twilight Zone shit right there.’

The bus rattled out of the city’s end then into a zone of silos and wind farms and lunch bars selling fried chicken, then it sped up, going into a dry area where the buzzing pylons looked like the legs of steel titans. This was where flash floods ripped trees out of the sand, where houses could be splintered by giant hail stones.

When they’d passed the gasworks and the road got bumpy, Pops sighed and said, ‘You borrow and borrow and beg and see no money at all. That isn’t a way to live.’

‘And what you do isn’t begging too?’ Sonny punched his own palm. His sunglasses started sliding off his nose, and he panicked and pushed them back. ‘The start-up was a circle jerk okay! I didn’t lose the capital, the Gibsons lost the capital. Do I look like a Gibson to you? I got MY NAME out there and that’s like, yo, in YOUR day all the old cunts thought building shit to last was, like, this big deal. Took you forty years to build your name, fuck that! You cats put, like, ZERO effort into brand recognition, ZILCH. Yeah maybe this one went all fatgirl on us but how much future fucking potential can YOU bank? So, whatevs, the receivers get their cut but the BRAND *LASTS*. And that’s YOUR inheritance, Pops.’ He stood up, and the bus joggled him as the road went through a rough patch.

At last Pops sighed and said, ‘I get to inherit your debt?’

‘Isn’t that what your whole stupid cult’s based on? Owing the man upstairs? Suckin his dick for dollars? Why you gotta have DVDs, Pops? You really need billboards and, like, like a radio station? And t-shirts?’

Pops pulled a white handkerchief from his pocket and unfolded it like a newspaper and spent time dabbing his lip, then eyes and nostrils, and carefully refolded it again and stroked it. ‘We’ll not be judged in our lifetime.’

A power station appeared, peered in the windows, and went.

‘Have you faith, son?’

‘I got that interview, don’t I?’

‘You’re talking to the most important man there is?’

‘This again? Serious? Can you, maybe, explain a little, like, W-T-F you have to fall back on, if the church stocks bottom out? You ain’t preached in, like, forever. You can’t go back to that. Me, I’m set for life.’

Pops sighed. ‘Investment isn’t everything: Watch, now.’ Pops produced ten cents from his pocket, let it sparkle, then buried the coin in the crook of the seat cushion between them.

‘Epic fail. Even I got more than ten cents!’

Pops, without breaking the stare of his wood-coloured eyes, stuck a hand in the sticky recesses of the seat until his watch had disappeared, and then half of his forearm, before he pulled out two fifty cent coins, chimed them together and bit them.

‘Faith,’ he said, and dinged the Stop bell, and put the coins in the collection bag.

It wasn’t their stop, but it was cheaper to get out here and walk, Pops said. He helped Sonny to open the child-proof cap in his little bottle of medicine. It was a stony, dusty road that led up to the homestead. It ruined Sonny’s Hush Puppies; he would have to give them to one of his bros.

‘That bus had fleas. You itchy?’

‘Are you plagued?’

‘Shut up. Hey, that the porch? That your house?’

‘Everywhere is God’s house. You don’t remember it?’

‘House looks like shit, Pops. That chimney’s a lightning rod, dawg, honest to God. Gimme your phone and I’ll get the crew round, we’ll knock the bricks out, sand the joint, paint it, put new curtains up, whatevs.’

‘I know you need work, and I thank you for your offer, but I don’t have the money for that. Building up the ministry’s funds is more important.’

‘Still on that? Seriously?’ Sonny scratched his head and looked at the blood under his fingernails. ‘Screw it: we’ll do it for free. Give us ya phone, I’ll ring them now.’

‘Please don’t ask me to do that. You have a non-association order preventing you from seeing those boys, do you not?’

‘I’ll use ya landline.’

‘If you absolutely have to talk to somebody, why not talk to –

‘NO ONE’S TALKING TO STUPID GOD, OKAY? Get over it.’

The door creaked as they entered, and rust-dust sprinkled into the breeze. Sonny pulled flakes of yellow paint off the banister.

‘You shouldn’t be all alone. What if you have a stroke or something?’

‘I’m not alone. And God’s will –

‘–it’s *your* will that’s slipping. This day and age, man? You gotta sort that. You know I’m still a registered financial advisor? They don’t take your registration away, y’know, just coz... y’know... ‘

‘Because you lost two hundred and fifty thousand dollars of the church’s money?’

‘DON’T SPIN IT LIKE THAT. DON’T YOU DO THAT! IT WAS A ACCIDENT!’

‘You’re right,’ Pops said, and reached out and squeezed his son’s hand.

‘AND DON’T SAY IT WAS GOD’S WILL! It wasn’t!’

There was nothing else to do but watch the shadows stretch and paint the house and soon enough he drew the curtains and turned on the six o’clock news. The windows had filled with blackness and Sonny could hear animals outside, rooting around for scraps in the darkness. He mashed his cold beans with his fork while Pops pored over the estate documents and licked his lips, and Sonny paced and lit candles, and afterwards they watched the flickering financial channel until the TV pissed Sonny off too much. The TV was so old, you couldn’t even sell it.

‘You oughta getcha some bodyguards. You ain’t safe out here. The whole place could fall down on ya. Buy a condo. Buy a townhouse. I’m hitting the hay. There’s not gonna be a storm, is there?’

‘I’ll talk to God. Will you, too, pray? For me?’

‘I wouldn’t know what to pray for.’ He aimed at one of the liver spots on Pops’s forehead and gave him a kiss. ‘Want one of these? They’re good for ya bladder. It’s strictly herbal, I promise.’ He pushed a pill into Pops’s lips.

‘I believe you,’ Pops said, swallowing his communion.

‘It is! You never believe me!’

As he clomped upstairs, pulling shut the bedsheet curtains on the sparking grey clouds and wobbling the banister rail, fingering the borer holes, he called down, ‘And you hafta get this banister railing thing fixed, Pops. Thing’s a menace. Them pills’ll make you piss something fierce and you’ll wish you could see in the dark, yo.’ Sonny put a cigarette in his lips and lit it, to recover from climbing the stairs. He wobbled the railing and it shivered sawdust. Wood felt foreign under his fingers, all dry and fragile. Before the clinic and parole and everything, his world had been stainless steel, white leather, glassy vodka, crystal tables. Reflective surfaces.

‘There’s not the money to have the railing fixed,’ Pops said from

the bottom of the stairs, ‘If I can save just a hundred dollars, why, that’s a food parcel for– ‘

‘Bullshit, your shares jumped another two percent, you watched the markets same as me. Thing’s a death trap, man. Never lean on this, promise me. Don’t go pissing in the night. I’ll get the boys, we’ll get some treated pine– ‘

‘There’s not the money for renovations.’ And then he said, ‘I know what you want, and you’re not getting it.’

Sonny took a deep breath in. He smashed and stomped his cigarette ‘til it was dead. The floor was so dry and splintered, he had to get the butt out. ‘That hotdog you bought, I oughta report you, y’know. Wasn’t that the church’s money? And my Lego better still be in the cupboard! It’s a collector’s item now, worth a tonne. Why’s it so dark? Ain’t you replaced the fuckin’ lightbulbs? You sure the stinkin bus didn’t have fleas?’

‘Faith in the Light of the Lord is quite sufficient.’

Sonny screamed as his shin scraped a screw sticking out of his bedroom door.

‘JESUS THAT HURT! Put a bulb in, already!’

He listened to his dad snuffling in the dark, breathing out, making his nose hairs rattle. ‘I’ll follow you up shortly. I take it you won’t require a bedtime story.’

‘Quit fooling. This is retarded. Your church can’t spend forty cents on a lightbulb for its own minister?’

Pops creaked up the stairs and down the hallway to his bedroom, and when he paused, the floorboards groaned. ‘The congregation forgave you a long time ago,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you’ve forgiven yourself.’

‘THAT AIN’T WHAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT.’

‘Goodnight, Sonny,’ he called out, and then, ‘Talk to him.’

‘And what’s he going to say about you stealing fifty cents for extra sauce on your dog?’

‘Don’t let the lightning bite.’

*

There was something wrong with his bed, single bed, stupid kid-sized bed, the fuck was up with this bed? Nails in it or something... the old man had probably tried to save a few bucks by filling the mattress with stones... World War II asshole... .

The window sucked, the air was all hot and restless. Sonny clawed at the fitted sheet which skinned the mattress. The fleas were ripping open his back. There was a frieze on the wall of his bedroom, painted, faded yellow now, hard to see in the dark. It’d been there since he was a kid, when the desert storms had put the shits up him. The words on the wall, he remembered, told him to put everything in the Lord above.

The fleas were in his dickhole, now. When he rolled out of bed to take a piss, he could feel under his heels the dents in the floor where his knees used to fit. He couldn’t even piss, so he crept through into Pops’s study while the old man snored and he looked around at all the framed stock certificates hanging on the wall. He counted two dozen of them, thought No Way, began counting again, lost count. These should be in a document folder, at least. He’d do his dad a favour. He started taking them off the wall, when a crack of light interrupted him.

Fireworks. The Feds. He was paralysed. A wet worm wriggled down his thigh.

He saw the entire hallway lit up – the white banister, crumbling, the weevils partying in the dust they ate, the cardboard-thin rug – and then the thunder harrumphed, and it sounded like Pops, and the piss touched his foot, and he scurried back to his room, and tried to bury his head under the floppy pillow, but his eyes x-rayed the blankets. He scratched his head until his nails got wet, and he cried as another laser-shot of lightning made everything in the house black and white, and then the thunder rubbed it in.

His eyes were salty and wet, now. He was ten million feet high in

a biplane, tossed and buffeted and punished. Yup, a light bulb or ten woulda been nice. The thought of light bulbs calmed him down a bit. Not that long ago, he used to have holes drilled into light bulbs. You could smoke the sweet stuff outta them, get a little buzz, and the pigs couldn't do shit if they raided your pad coz it was only a light bulb, not a pipe in the eye of the –

Another fang of lightning poisoned the sky, he hurled the covers off him, thumped onto the floor, and as the bedroom flashed white as an art gallery, his eyes blacked over and his lips danced and his body rocked and he told God how sorry he was, on his bruised knees, his forehead dribbling, kissing the floorboards, God knew exactly what for, and in the back of his ears, he heard Pops creak to the door, and creak away, and as the toilet flushed, and something massive crashed, and his knees ached, he shook and cried and begged for light.

*

Warm-white-laundry. Fabric softener. Hospital fresh. Ducklings, buttercups. Fucking sun right in his God damn eyes.

He peeled the sheet back. Someone had tipped a bucket of water on him and the white sheet was dark. The house was drenched in good, warm light, not the bad horrible stuff that had spooked him in the night, lit up the entire countryside and set power lines on fire, made everything look strobed, black and white, black as his old man's Bible stories.

His fingers touched the scratches inside his elbow, but he wasn't itchy. He was supposed to be smoking, his head said, but he felt too clean to smoke.

'Pops! Chuck the coffee on!' He rolled out of bed, hit the ground and did ten push-ups, opened the window and smelled the scorched trees and lit a cigarette, and shuffled through onto the landing, where he found the banister rail missing and below it, on the ground floor, his old man smashed as the pile of rotten wood under his back. He was crumpled and twisted like an armload of dropped laundry.

ABOUT THE AUTEUR



Michael Botur wants to work exclusively as a writer but as you read this, he is probably stuck in a spirit-crushing admin job in some office, positioned between an inspirational poster and the recycled paper bin. He probably has the New Yorker website open underneath the spreadsheet he's pretending to work on. He has published fiction and poetry everywhere in NZ.

He gets respect when he's on stage.