

Kidney Thief

Michael Botur

Mitchell takes his glove off. Sweat breaks free of his hair and sprints down his cheek. He holds his fist in front of Ski's pointy, girly chin and fat lips.

'You won't enjoy it, when one of these lands.'

'Hold up a sec. Then you can gimme a hiding. Or not. We'll see. I'll try not to kill ya. I'd hate to leave my boy without Uncle Mitchie.' Ski is blinking like he's got something in his eye, and touching his armpits like a chimp, and wincing. His knees are touching. He's embarrassing the old pale Irish boxers on the posters around the gym, men who didn't need muscle for their power, just desperation. Ski's ping-ponging the ropes and spreading sweat across his face, trying to scratch an itch with his gloves on. He's looking anywhere but into Mitchell's eyes. 'What was I... aw yeah,' he goes, 'You got girly wrists, old m-m-man.'

There's a sparrow fluttering on his tongue. He's trying to rest his top half on his knees, bent over, steaming like a hot bonnet.

'You'd better not be horsing around, mate. Oi, and remember, I'm, what, two months older than you? Watch who you're calling an old man.'

'And ya never let us forget it. Ready to die now? Good-o.'

Mitchell shrugs, reaches out of the ring and presses play on the iPod dock, delicately, using the thumb of his shiny black gloves. Mitchell hates it when things get dirty, or break, or fail. Some spastic Bob Marley/Shaggy mashup resumes playing. Music for idiots, by idiots: Ski's music. Mitchell's feet dance in and out of Ski's range. Ski holds his mitts in front of his chin for two seconds, then sits down on his arse, shaking his head. Softcock.

'Think I got that Asian bird flu,' Ski goes, showing his teeth, rolling his head. 'Musta been that Asian bird I rooted.'

Mitchell picks up a bucket, lowers his face and gently deposits some saliva into it. Mitchell Michael Warne does not spit. He's obviously wasted his time sparring with this clown. The doctors ain't specifically diagnosed what's up with Drawski, fuckin Bangladeshi fuckin quacks. Mitchell knows Ski ain't been faithful about goin to every appointment, refusin to have any fingers inserted into his lungs or tight butthole (well, not so tight, considerin the shenanigans Ski used to get up to on his OE, trying to sell his organs in Cairo and all that silliness.) Ski, whose name ain't hewn out of sensible English stone. Ski, who's always moved too fast for the Grim Reaper to catch up. Till now, that is. Ski's caught himself some wicked flu.

'Bro. You on the pipe? You're boxing even shitter than normal.'

Ski used to hold his own in their rubber-dust-moustache playfights, using pieces of wire and handfuls of dust and hairpulling and scratching, while Mitchell used only orthodox Greco-Roman (freestyle is cheating) wrestling holds and clean jabs to the face, plus a hook from time to time. Mitchell confronts things head-on, refuses to budge. It's Ski that finds ways to slither under and around things.

There's no fight in Ski. They leave the ring without saying nothin. Mitchell has to lift up the ropes because Ski's struggling to get through. It's been, what, 20 minutes? Far as Mitchell is concerned, 20 minutes is just the warm up zone. It's only when you feel the burn that you know you're smashing carbs and cal's. Mitchell's always stuck to footie and boxing while Ski's tinkered with about ten different sports, never stuck to nothing much. Funny, then, that a good woman stuck to Ski but not to Mitchell. How fair is that? Is God humouring Ski like Mitchell humours the joker?

In the changing room, Mitchell shakes his head at the colours on Ski's singlet and undies—they're hi-vis yellow, poncy poofter colours Ski's convinced give him an edge, 'cause bright colours travel faster or something. This is a bloke who believes in balance bracelets, remember. His gloves are signed by Muhammad Ali. The autograph's probably smudged off by now. It is ridiculous that Ski fights in them, that he stays up late nights puffing on that pipe of his, eyeballing auctions, hardly blinking, giddy as a little kid, while Leisha reads *50 Shades of Grey* in her nightie.

They sauna for twenty mins in silence, except for Ski's waterproof bloody phone vibrating. It's that missus of his. Leisha the Preacher. Leisha the Creature. They rub their love in everyone's face. Show-offs.

Leisha the Leash.

Mitchell gets out of the sauna first—he's the oldest, after all. Can't be seen as indulgent. He checks a body-length mirror (stomach's lookin good; quads are nice and square) to see if Ski's gonna come up behind and kinghit him, but Ski's still lurching around wincing, faking the sickness. It's a buncha Hollywood, honestly. Ski probably just smoked too many rocks and his guts ache. Seriously, there's gotta be a golden throne in heaven for Mitchell. God'll come up to Mitchell and say Sorry I put you through everything. Thanks for being his mate. It was all a test. You knew all along nobody as hopeless as Ski deserved a best bud, but you sacrificed yourself. You're not JC, but you're not far off, Mitchell Warne.

They shower in two neighbouring stalls. Ski keeps his gelled hair and piercings out of the water. He plays with his bowling ball belly. Silently reaching over the stall walls, they share a bottle of Mitchell's shower gel. Tip-toeing over the wet tiles in his towel, Mitchell clocks a big bruise like spilled ink above Ski's bumcrack. It covers pretty much the whole area from Ski's shoulderblades to his bumcheeks, and the watery colour gets deep and intense around his ribs. It might be some silly new tattoo. The guy's got Popeye tatted on his forearms, for Christ's sake, and Kick and Me written into the flesh of each bumcheek. It was a dare. It was Ski's 18th.

'Y'know you shouldn't be training in the first place,' Mitchell says. He's packed his bag, emptied everything out, packed it again, flattening the air out of each towel with his forearm before rolling it up tightly, but he can't leave the change room, so he leans against the wall, arms folded, talking into the shower. 'Sick's sick; sick's not half-sick. If you're on the pipe again, it's same as bein sick. For Pete's sake, bro, if you can't—'

‘Back in the ring, then, Big Mitch?’

‘I’m not doin this, mate. I’m not playin ya little games.’

‘Fraid a sickie’ll beat ya?’

Ski gets up off the bench, hissing and squinting and touching his lower back. His towel falls away. Mitchell can see the purple stain better now, in the light. It’s creeping from his back around under his bulging belly, like a tap is leaking.

‘C’mon. We’ll fight skins. Getcha shirt off. Pants too.’

‘If your kid could see you this wild... *Mate.*’

Mitchell sighs. He picks up his bag again and hoists it over his shoulder. He’s tried to have a conversation with the cunt, it hasn’t worked, so fuck it. Later. Outta here.

‘Yeah, punch a invalid then gap it, ya pussy. Leisha always said you were dickless. Said she was gonna go lesbo after you porked her, you were that bad, ya—’

Mitchell sees himself walloping Ski before he’s even sure he’s done it. His fist decides to land right under Ski’s tits. The sound is like dropping a heavy bag of flour on a benchtop, *DOUFFT!* Ski folds up like a hurt spider and uses his toes to revolve his body while he cradles his chest, and scuttles under the bench. He’s in a cold puddle under a bench in the middle of the changing room, knees touching his shoulders.

Ski cries in front of his mate for the first time since they put that baby bird in the microwave. He says the ambo’s number is only three digits, *HFFFFFF*, ya prick, *HFFFFFF*, *Can’t breathe HFFFFFF*. Hurry *HFFFFFF*. Call my son’s *HFFFFFF*. Ring directory, I dunno the *HFFFFFF*.

‘I didn’t even hit him that hard,’ Mitchell tells the paramedic, ‘honest to God.’ Wet droplets sprint down his cheek.

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Mitchell reads a National Geographic in the waiting room of the renal ward. He won’t promise to BUY the SLR Canons and Fuji FinePixs advertised in the mag, but if somebody went to all the trouble of placing the ad, well, the ad deserves to be READ. It’s common courtesy. Someone in this world’s gotta be courteous, don’t they. Mitchell also makes a point of reading everything on the walls. You should treat a waiting room with the same respect you’d treat any other room.

The conference room doors open and interrupt the thoughts he’s juggling. Good timing, too—he didn’t want to have to buy an iced coffee from the vendie. There’s heaps of fat and sugar in them iced coffees. It’s time for some big talk. There’s a different vending machine in the conference room, and some different mags. Mitchell, the doc, and Ski’s family find positions. Ski’s late, he’s still in the handicapped toilet, probably having a crafty suck on his pipe. Nothing’ll stop the dumbarse smoking, not even a near-death experience. A slideshow is projected onto a wall and the doctor dims the conference room lights. Why’d the joker let—

LET!!!! ALLOWED!!!!—Mitchell to punch him like that? That's the first question, Doc. Answer that. *EGGED ON! BAITED!* There's some mental condition, right? Ski's not all-there, right? Always has been—or *hasn't* been... It's a head condition, not a body...thing. Right?

Ski bursts in and parks his wheelchair. He smells like ciggies. It's a warm smell. Disgusting as it is, smoking smells like warmth. Ski clicks his fingers and his boy, Bronson, gets up and shuts the door behind him. The boy's jaw's lookin nice and firm. Nothin like his dad's. The family conference is on.

Leish is there in the darkness. Leisha Legs. Leisha Labia. Her lips form a triangle, that's always the first thing he notices on her, the Cupid's bow, like somebody's tightened the neck of a sack. Lips ready to kiss. Leisha Lickmyballs is conspiring with Dr High Noon, or whatever his name is, or maybe just whispering into his ear. She's probably saying how Mitchell's punches were really unfair, too hard, below the belt. Ski didn't really land any hits, did he. It was like fighting a sleepwalker.

'Td ask you not to go around battering men in need of intensive SURGERY,' the doc is saying, breathing only at the end of his sentences, as if the words were a heavy beam that he's hauled and set down. He takes a slurp from his smelly mug of flower-tea and gulps loudly. 'Seeing as the time to act to repair the organic damage is fairly LIMITED.'

'Ya dad's just a glassjaw, Bronzey.' Mitchell winks at the pale boy in the Celtics singlet. His words don't break up and melt. Whew. When he was 12, Mitchell squealed while announcing Player of the Day. He's always kept his speech nice and neat and contained since then. People are always judgin ya.

Leisha looks at Mitchell like he's interrupted a movie and is asking what he's missed, noisy, bothersome. She's spinning a shiny box of gold on the tabletop. Benson & Hedges are really too pricey for her, and too strong. If she gets bung lungs, she could leave her son without a mummy. Old Leishy helped Mitchell pass some time at high school. He needed someone to practise rooting on, she had a puss and she wasn't classy enough to introduce to the Parents. Perfect. Like a driving instructor, really. After you've got ya driver's licence, ya don't treat the driving instructor all courteous now, do ya. Mitchell had a bit of free time between soccer and study, a few sexy cuddles to give. Aleisha applied and he gave her the job. Then, when he let her go, she went and worked for Drawski, well, UNDER him. Mitchell gave her a glowing reference, good luck to her. So what if he still gave her a bit of extra dick on the side? Wasn't his fault if she wanted his babies. Nothing's Mitchell's fault.

Technically, Ski had no right to pork her, let alone maintain a relationship with and marry and father kids with her, or root all them sheilas in Nepal and, what was it called, that wild little kingdom he made them collect calls from. The number of women that Ski's had on the side that he hasn't told Aleisha about outnumber the ones that he's confessed to. Every day Mitchell keeps those stats to himself, Mitchell deserves another medal.

He also keeps hush-hush about Leish writing those all-sacrificing letters of love and worship to Mitchell, the ones he used to pass around class. *Peep this. Look how bad she wants me.* Who'd wanna marry someone that desperate? Dirty Drawski can have her.

The doctor clicks through some pages—a graph, and lots of photos of guts, and some drug company logos with TM after them, therapies he's recommending. He's got this thing about elderflower tea, always sipping these mugs of it with a big cloud of smelly smog around his face. He talks about how you can expect to feel once you have donated; why it is illegal to expect a fee for donating an organ; the quality of life you're likely to have following organ donation; whether you yourself are likely to suffer from donating; how incredibly generous the act of kidney donation is, and lastly, how few people do it. You'll feel dope after the hard bit's over. You get to chill. Wicked. Phat.

Why's the doc talking like a 14-year-old? Drink ya queer juice, mate.

The only person in the room that'd respond to that kinda talk's young Bronson! As if! Young fella's not about to donate a blimmin kidney!

Close relatives are most desired for transplants, he's saying, Especially considering the hereditary nature of the defect within the renal blah blah blah. Mitchell looks at his watch. He's given up six hours and twenty minutes of paid work to help Ski book a surgeon, all the rides back and forth, letting Ski make long calls on Mitchell's mobile, missing planning meetings, what else... oh, yeah, slipping Leish a couple hundy to help with the groceries. Buying Ski that new breakfast burger that Ski ended up chucking out the window before they'd even left the drive-thru. Mitchell has helped out on World Vision famine appeals, charity runs, given away tickets to the All Blacks, driven Bronson virtually every Friday night to how many blimmin basketb—

'EARTH TA MITCHELL. COME IN MITCHELL.'

'Eh? Hereditary, you said a moment ago?'

'Wake up, sleepyhead.'

'Before, he said hereditary? Ssh for a minute. Doc—hereditary, you said? His kidney thing's not heredit—'

'We were all agreein: You broke it, you bought it, hur hur hur,' Ski chuckles from his wheelchair. 'Nah, we're only jokin. While you were off in la-la land, we were talkin 'bout how Bronson's obviously the perfect match, blood-wise. Just hopin you'll support him with a coupla dead prime ministers. Just a wee chip off the ol' six figures, bud.'

'Hold ya horses,' Mitchell goes. 'I'm tryina...'

'FATHERS AND SONS share most haplotypes,' the doctor goes, looking into the bottom of his cup and swishing it. 'Those outside the bioLOGICAL family need not apply.' Then he closes his notes. Everything's sorted, apparently. 'A seamless transplant procedure can be booked for September. The Drawskis could use your help logistics-wise.'

'You don't wanna do a transplant, though, Bronze. Do ya?'

‘Hold up.’ Bronson finishes the text he’s writing, scratches that big chin of his (it’s gotten even bigger, just in the last hour) then locks his iPad. ‘They said I hafta. I have to get, like, jabbed so they can check.’

Mitchell half-rises. ‘What if he doesn’t?’

‘C’mon, Bronze,’ Ski goes again, ‘Sign the paperwork. Even Unkie Mitch wants you to donate. Lend us a kidney or two so I can get back in the ring with Uncle Dickhead.’ He coughs so much that his eyes water and his throat turns pink. He rolls over to the vending machine with Leish’s purse and buys a Red Bull. ‘You better believe your days are numbered, Tough Guy.’

‘It’s actually yours that are numbered, Mr Drawski, pardon the phrasing,’ the doc goes. Then the doc swallows. ‘I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said such a... Look, 40 days: 40 days is what you have. We need to have a separate conversation about alcohol and caffeine intake. Can we book a time? Late afternoons are generally good my end.’

Everyone is silent. Ski ought to bust out a killer joke right about now. Mitchell puts his phone in his pocket, walks away from the family of sickness and opens the door, flooding everyone with white light. This meeting is old news. He fishes out his keys.

‘Doc—book this little guy in ASAP,’ Ski goes. ‘Ta, son.’ He winks at Bronson.

‘I’ll get heaps of time off school if I give you my kidney, Dad, you said, eh,’ Bronson mumbles. He’s still swiping his screen. ‘Is the food good or sucky? How many games am I gonna miss?’

‘They’ll put your exams in the post,’ Ski goes. ‘Half a year off school, eh? You lucky little shit. Wish I was you.’

Leisha pulls her wedding ring off, slides it back on. Pulls it off, slides it on.

‘Do I get, like, paid and shit?’ Bronson goes, pressing his thumbs on the screen now and tilting the iPad. ‘I’m not even scared. Sean Elliott got a transplant. He’s San Antonio. Dad, can I do that Make A Wish—’

‘HE’S THE WRONG BLOOD TYPE. I’M TELLIN YAS.’

Everyone stares at Mitchell. Ski strokes a cigarette. Bronson pulls his hood over his head and tightens the drawstrings.

‘JUST BOOK ME IN. YOU DON’T NEEDA CHECK THE WEE ONE’S BLOOD. Can I sign this business, get it over with? My blood type’s O, same as Drawski. I’ll bloody do it.’

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There’s tonnes of benefits to being an organ donor. The crutches give Mitchell great stories to tell honeys that stop by the office to calibrate the photocopier. Showin off the stitches is a good excuse to take his shirt off. You should see Mitchell’s lats, all sticky-outy from using the muscles in his armpits. He admires the tag Bronzo drew on the bandage wrapped ’round Mitchell’s abs. It wasn’t a plaster cast, but Mitchell didn’t tell the laddie that. Just let him draw. They had a coupla deep-and-meaningfuls, just the two of them, door closed, Bronzo

slumped in an armchair with his feet up on Mitchell's bed (which pretty much counted as Bronze sitting on the bed.)

When the bandage is off, he's going to keep them drawings, frame them, laminate them. The boy's art should be nurtured. Mitchell is pissed-off when he has to return the crutches and catheter. He stalls, driving up and down the four-lane, passing the clinic, then he remembers where *The Broadcast's* office is and talks this tiny Scandinavian reporter chick into doing a wee story on the donation for the paper. He gives her a fact sheet he found online about how smoking rocks causes, what's it called, systemic organ failure, like how ya kidneys basically leak sewage into the renal vein and it gets pulled up into ya heart. It can kill ya if some angel doesn't donate. He's got the hospital photos all ready to go on his flashdrive, she doesn't even need to leave her desk.

When they've finished their coffees, he takes the stairs down from the newsroom. There's the chance he might fall and get a nice bleed going in his stomach so the nurses'll swoon over him. Mitchell emerges into air that tastes like tyres. There's no one to pick him up or do up his seatbelt for him, and his bandage isn't even blimmin necessary any more.

He drives to the gym and puts his bandages in the rubbish and dabs at the black scab that runs from his belly button to his knee until you can hardly see it. He's onto unpaid sick days now. Fuck it. He has to ask, like, three guys before someone agrees to spar with him, this dumb cunt who works as a shearer. 'C'mon, I got the jaw for it don't I?' He thumps his blunt chin. Mitchell winces as he crawls into the ring, then explodes, thrashing and swinging. His concealer and foundation melts and runs into his eyes and he doesn't see a big hook heading for his ribs. He feels a bit of piss leak out of his willy. His guts throb like a worried heart. He tells the shearer to stop saying sorry. I's only havin a breather. Caught me off guard, is all. He sits in the corner, bites off his glove and unravels a zigzag of stitching from his fingers. He can't remember the number for the life insurance guys, so he phones directory listings and they put him through and, what do you know, it doesn't cost that much to extend his life insurance to young Bronson. For himself? He's got hardly any coverage left at all. Oh, his lawyer'll deal with that, sure as sure can be. Fit as a fiddle, Mitchell is. Wait and see.

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Mitchell is in hospital for ten extra days. He keeps reminding the nurses they never said it wasn't safe to box again. It's their fault he's here. Ski keeps coming in to borrow his credit card to buy ciggies. Not cheap ones, neither—always Bensons. Then, on the final day, when Mitchell gets a transfusion of fresh blood and antitoxins and wonders who the heck is paying for the gooey stuff goin into him, Ski limps in—not even wheeling anymore—with three male strippers dressed as nurses—BLOKES!—and balloons and bottles of liquor from European kingdoms and they handcuff him to the bed and party around Mitchell until he pulls a sheet over his head and sends Ski a text message. He can hear the bulge in Ski's pants vibrating. Ski takes out his phone and shows the male MALE MALE MALE

FUCKIN MALE strippers and cackles until he touches his back and goes and sweet-talks the nurse into giving him a palmful of morphine capsules, leaving Mitchell hiding under a sheet so he doesn't have to see three men with superior muscles checking the time on their phones.

Leisha is angled like a 7 in the door frame, filming on her Galaxy. Her hips stick out. They feel good in a man's hand. Her favourite food is brie cheese. Her old man's favourite team is Wolverhampton. Her hair used to taste of strawberry, from that shampoo he took ages choosing at the pharmacy.