

1

‘Promise me you won’t leave the house,’ Mum says.

She sits on the edge of the bed and places her hand on my forehead, closing her eyes as if darkness will make her touch more sensitive. She’s wearing a blue smock, cream stockings and sensible shoes. Her shaggy blonde hair is tied in a ponytail. I can feel the cool of her wedding band on my forehead.

‘It’s my stomach, Mum, not my head,’ I moan. It’s neither actually, but I’m doing my best to avoid Monday and a double period of Maths.

Mum removes her hand and walks to the bedroom door.

‘You can stay home if you promise me you won’t leave the house,’ she repeats.

I cross my fingers under the sheet. ‘Sure.’

Mum glances at the picture of Dad on the bedside table. I can tell she’s hoping he’ll be witness.

I took the photo two years ago. He’s leaning on the fender of our Holden. In one hand he has a packet of roll-your-owns and in the other a can of Tooheys. He wears the smile of someone embarrassed to be standing in front of a camera. It wasn’t long after he’d returned from hospital. Mum was inside drawing up a *FOR SALE* sign for the Holden. The car had been in our family longer than me.

‘Don’t accept anything below ten grand,’ he’d said, as I’d steadied the camera.

‘Hold still, Dad,’ I answered, before clicking the shutter.

‘It’s a classic, Luke. Three gears on the column. Everything original.’

‘It’s falling apart, Dad.’

‘Just like its owner.’ He laughed and rubbed his hand along the faded red paint job. His shirt hung loose on his skinny frame. Too many smokes and not enough food. He spotted a mark on the bonnet and stretched his shirt to wipe it off.

When he wasn’t looking, I’d taken another shot.

In the photo, he’s smiling, pleased to be cleaning

his car of every last speck, making it shine again.

The front door slams. Mum's footsteps shuffle down the path. I stay in bed until the car starts. Not the Holden. Mum bought a new Mazda2. Dark blue with grey trim. A yawnfest on four wheels.

When we'd driven home from the car yard, she'd fiddled with the radio, searching for an easy-listening station. Billy Joel blasted from the speakers.

'That's an insult to music,' I said.

'It helps me forget,' Mum answered.

'What? That you've got no taste in music?'

She sniffed. I wasn't sure if it was a dismissive sniff or a leave-me-be-sad-in-peace sniff.

We didn't talk until Mum turned into our street.

'Anyway, I couldn't operate a column-shift,' she added.

She'd pulled into the driveway. Our house looked smaller. The window to their bedroom was open, the venetian blinds hanging crooked.

I hear the Mazda rolling down the road. Mum will be fiddling in her bag, looking for a cigarette. She's doing well at giving up. She promises herself one on the way to work and one driving home. Better than her previous pack-a-day habit. She needs her small pleasures, stuck in this suburb, working eight-hour

shifts cleaning rooms at the resort, forced to wear that uniform for minimum wage.

I shiver even though it's hot. I can feel the sweat between my toes. Sweat in strange places. Mum would say that's a sure sign of fever.

I walk down the hall to the bathroom, strip off my shorts and hop in the shower, closing my eyes and trying hard not to think of Dad or school or boring blue cars. I think of Billy Joel. The water runs cold.

I go back to my bedroom and dress in jeans and a black t-shirt, faded and worn. Dad's old shirt. I went through his stuff before Mum took it to Vinnies. I rescued a pair of black trousers and a few t-shirts. Mum gave away his overalls, most of his shoes, even his favourite broad-brimmed hat he used to wear whenever they went to the horse races. He called it his lucky hat. It had a wide red sash around the brim. He looked as though he belonged to a secret society. Special handshakes and passwords. The only group Dad belonged to was the footy-tipping comp at the pub.

In the kitchen, the dirty dishes are piled on the sink and scattered on the benches. There's nothing in the fridge except a jar of strawberry jam and a slice of last Friday night's pizza, cold and yellow. I hold it close to my nose. Salami, cheese and mushroom.

I put it under the grill to heat some flavour back into it.

I look out the front window. Today is cloudy and warm. A breeze from the east blows the stink of the rubbish dump my way. Across the road, Mrs Grady picks up the local paper from the footpath. She's wearing her nurse's uniform: blue dress, dark stockings, white shoes. Mrs Grady doesn't have children. Maybe that's why she talks to me. I say something to her whenever I walk by. Especially when Mr Grady isn't home. I keep hoping she'll invite me in. I reckon they'd have real food in her house. Fillet steak and roast potatoes, fresh fruit, stacks of beer. Mrs Grady looks up at the sky. The sun comes out from behind a bank of clouds in the west.

I take out the pizza. The cheese is brown and slightly burnt but chewy enough. The onion is crisp. It's not the worst breakfast I've ever eaten.

If I walk along the bush track at the end of Mort Street a few blocks away, I could be at the reservoir in twenty minutes. If I get caught, which I won't, I can always say I went swimming to get my temperature down. For the fever I don't have.

I go into my bedroom and put my swimmers on under my jeans. Then I grab my schoolbag and carry it into the lounge room. I open the zipper and turn the

bag upside down. My textbooks tumble on the lounge and then a laminated photo falls out.

How did that get there? I certainly didn't buy it. There are better ways to spend thirty dollars.

Then I remember.

Last Friday, I'd noticed Mrs Vance from the school office had forgotten to lock the cabinet where all the class photos were on display. I'd looked both ways down the hall before sliding back the glass and unclipping the year eleven photo from the board.

In the photo, eighty-two students are lined up in three rows against the Science block. In the centre of the front row is Mr Dexter, my Maths teacher. It's the first time I've seen him wear a tie. All of the boys are cultivating a tough-guy look for the camera. My mate Blake and I lean back, sneering as if we've been asked to clean up a mess of dog shit. Most of the girls are smiling, except Charlotte Walsh who looks bored, and Hayley Cochrane who has her mouth wide open as if someone has just pinched her from behind.

'Are you going to draw a moustache on Mr Dexter?' a voice said.

I turned to see Charlotte leaning against the opposite wall. No-one else was around. Charlotte stepped forwards, too close for comfort. She smelt of spearmint and soap.

‘You ... you scared me,’ I stuttered.

‘Just then, or in general?’

‘All the time.’

She almost smiled.

She’d only been at my school for two months and this was the first time I’d seen any look on her face other than utter boredom. Blake and I called it the ‘Charlotte Default’, but not to her face. Rumour was she’d got expelled from a private school in Sydney. Whatever she did, it was enough for her parents to move the family away from the city and, as a perverted punishment, send her to a public school.

Charlotte leant in close and stared at the photo. ‘I’m the only girl with long dark hair,’ she said.

‘It looks good,’ I answered. I couldn’t think of anything smart to say.

‘Is that a compliment?’ she said. ‘You didn’t stay scared for long.’

‘I mean ... I ...’

‘Luke Saunders!’ A male voice boomed down the hallway.

We both turned. Mr Pakula, the principal, walked towards us, his eyes on the photo.

‘I believe that’s school property,’ he said, holding out his hand.

I was tempted to reach out and shake his hand good morning. Instead, I gave him the photo.

‘What, may I ask, is this doing in your possession?’ he added.

I wondered if he talked like that to his wife and children at home.

‘Luke was about to take it to the office, sir,’ Charlotte interrupted. ‘We found it on the floor. Someone had forgotten to lock the cabinet.’

Mr Pakula held the photo as if he wanted to wave it in front of our faces and shout ‘guilty’.

‘Charlotte.’ He sighed. ‘There are lots of wonderful students in year eleven.’ He glanced from the photo to me and it was very clear what he meant.

‘Luke has been helping me settle in, sir,’ Charlotte answered. ‘He’s everything I like about this school.’

Mr Pakula went red before glaring at me once more, turning and striding down the hallway.

‘You just insulted Pakula and me in one sentence,’ I’d said.

Charlotte had smiled. ‘I know.’ And she’d walked off down the hall in the opposite direction to Pakula.

I hold up the school photo. How did it get in my bag? A gift from Charlotte? For the first time in years, school suddenly seemed interesting.

But not enough to miss a day at the reservoir.

2

I walk along Mort Street where Mr Rosetti is watering his lawn. When he sees me, he turns the nozzle off and walks across to a mandarin tree. He picks a ripe fruit, holds it close to his nose and then tosses it in my direction. I catch it with one hand.

‘*Faccia a culo,*’ he shouts.

‘What’s that mean?’ I imitate his fruit-sniffing routine.

He walks to the fence. ‘Assface,’ he says.

‘*Faccia a culo,*’ I say, emphasising the hard *F*.

‘*Bravo,*’ Mr Rosetti says.

So far I’ve learnt *stronzo, porca miseria, fanculo* and my

all-time favourite *testa di cazzo*. It's comforting to know that the word 'dickhead' is universal.

The front yard of Mr Rosetti's place is crammed with vegetable gardens and fruit trees. He offers me a piece of fruit and a rude word every time I pass.

At Christmas he gave me a ricotta and fig cake he'd baked. It was the best thing I'd ever eaten in my life. In return I promised to take photos of him in the garden. I printed one in town and gave it to Mr Rosetti for his birthday. In the shot, he's pruning the fruit trees with what look like oversized scissors. He's wearing a pair of baggy trousers, a t-shirt and has a hankie tied around his neck, a shadow falling across his face and a smile in his eyes. It's one of my favourite photos.

I hold up the mandarin in thanks and wave goodbye, calling out, '*Faccia a culo!*'

He smiles and gives me the thumbs up.

Further down the street, a dog at the corner house runs along the fence barking as I walk by. It's the type of dog that chases its tail because it's bored. I stand still to give it something to do. The mutt goes crazy. It tries to jump the waist-high fence, barking nonstop.

The windows of the house are shut and curtains drawn. The driveway is vacant. The lawn is gravel and weeds. I can't remember seeing the new tenants, just a

dented Falcon in the driveway and headbanger music pounding through the front window in the evening.

I click my fingers and call the dog 'Fella' a few times to let it know I'm not scared. It stops barking when it hears my voice, then wags its tail. I say 'Fella' again. The dog smiles. Can dogs smile?

It's a big dog with a mottled brown coat, skinny legs and saliva-filled mouth. I walk to the fence and lean over. 'Here, Fella,' I say.

The dog cowers behind the timber. I pat it anyway and he starts licking my hand. From man-eater to kitten in a few seconds. The collar has a tag attached. I flip it over to show the name.

Buster

What a laugh. *Pussycat* more likely.

'You want to come for a swim, boy?'

Buster jumps up and follows me along the fence. I open the gate and he stands looking at me, tongue hanging out, tail wagging. I clap my hands. He bounds through the gate.

'That's how easy it is, Buster,' I say.

Buster jumps up and licks my hand. I've got a new best friend. Headbanger has good taste in dogs, if not music. I'll bring the dog back. Probably a little wet, but a lot happier.

Buster runs ahead on the track, nose down, searching for food or the whiff of another canine. He stops

occasionally to check if I'm still following, before bounding off again. The sun works its way through the clouds by the time we reach the reservoir.

Buster trots to the water and takes a drink, his tongue lolling from side to side as he slurps. I walk around the shore, following the rutted path, stepping over the swamp gum roots to a patch of sand along the east side. Sometimes, Blake and I come here to fish and escape summer. We tell each other tall stories of fish we've caught when we were here alone. I check my watch. Blake would be in Maths now, squinting at the whiteboard as Mr Dexter writes convoluted algorithms that make as much sense as computer code.

I take my jeans and shirt off, stuff them in my bag on top of my camera, and hide it under a fern. I don't want Buster grabbing it and running away when I'm in the middle of the reservoir. He sees a starling in the bottle-brush and races through the undergrowth, barking and growling. He jumps at the bush. Too late.

I sprint into the shallows before diving headfirst. I surface, spluttering and laughing from the cold shock. Without looking back, I stroke out to the far side of the reservoir.

Dad taught me to swim here when I was ten years old. He'd stood in chest-deep water, holding my arms in front of him and pulling me along. He'd told me to

stick my head under, open my eyes and exhale. When I had no air left, I'd poke my head out and breathe in. He encouraged me to repeat it until air and not water went in my mouth. I spluttered and swallowed and spat and cried and laughed and finally got the sequence right. Then Dad showed me how to roll my arms over, like a slow windmill. By the end of the day, I could flap along without him holding me for twenty metres. When we'd shown Mum, she'd said I was drowning by degrees.

The water is the colour of rust, stained by the ti-trees lining the banks on the far side. Over there it's Crown land and strictly off limits, a sanctuary for frogs and snakes and wallabies and two-metre high waratahs. Blake and I camp there some nights in his uncle's tent. It's creepy silent and pitch black. The stars look closer from the illegal side.

I stop swimming when I reach the centre and stand on tip-toe in the sand. The water is so clear, I can see small fish swimming around my legs. I lean back and float with my eyes closed, the sun on my face. This is better than school.

In the distance, a freight train hauling coal rumbles up the mountain. I think of Mr Hartzig, my Science teacher, pronouncing the end of coal mining in the next five years. He tells us about wind and solar and

tidal power, but all I hear is the sound of the train whistle, blowing through the night.

I swim back to the bank and sit on a log, my feet dangling in the water. The crows squawk in the grey gums. Buster has disappeared. I imagine him back home, pacing his fence, figuring out a way to get back inside. Or if he's smart, he's run into the bush, never to return. I bet the owner would buy another dog within a week. He'd call it Tyson or Brutus.

I pick up a smooth, flat rock and skim it across the surface of the water. At least four skips. There's a whole bunch of rocks at my feet. One day I'll beat my record of nine skips. One day.

Not today.

'You should be at school, kid.'

The man's standing on a rise. The sun is behind him so I can't make out his face. Just his shape. He's tall, skinny and wears a pair of mechanic's overalls: grey with dark trim. He has big black boots and they crunch the undergrowth as he walks towards the reservoir. We're separated by a stand of banksia and water ferns.

'I'm sick,' I say.

He stops at the water's edge. His overalls have blank patches where the insignia should be. On one leg,

there's a grease stain. There's a hole in the toe of his right boot. A dirty blue woollen sock sticks out.

'You didn't look sick swimming across the reservoir,' he says.

His voice is gravelly, like he wants to cough. He takes a cigarette packet and a fancy silver lighter from his chest pocket, pulls out a fag and flicks the flint wheel. The lighter makes a hollow noise, like the loading of a gun. He draws slowly on the smoke. His teeth are stained brown.

I casually step into the water and swim a few strokes away, putting extra space between us. 'Smoking makes your breath smell and rots your guts,' I say.

He sucks deeply on the cigarette and laughs. 'I ain't kissing anyone soon and my guts are my business.'

I don't want to talk to this bloke. I could paddle across to the opposite bank and ignore him. And if he tried to follow me by walking around the reservoir, I'd swim back across. Or I could just practice my Italian on him. *Stronzo! Faccia a culo!*

'Is the dog yours?' he asks, and grins.

A chill goes down my spine. My eyes roam to where I last saw Buster. I could call out his name, but that would show this bloke I'm worried.

'What dog?' I say.

He flicks the butt into the water; it sizzles on the surface.

‘Easy come, easy go, kid,’ he says.

‘My name’s George,’ I lie.

He laughs. ‘Yeah, sure it is. I’m Rodney. I boost cars and dump them out here, after they’ve been stripped.’

There’s always burnt-out wrecks at the end of the bumpy fire trail. I think of his solid silver lighter.

‘Do you set fire to them?’

He scratches his three-day growth. ‘It gets rid of fingerprints.’

He takes out another cigarette. Before he lights it, he offers the pack across the water.

I shake my head. ‘It’s what killed my dad. It’ll do you in too.’

He spits into the water, a big solid glob that floats on the surface. ‘Don’t tell me your troubles, boy.’

He takes a step closer to the water and then stops, looking down at the hole in his shoe. He shakes his boot and curses. His fingernails are dirty and broken, like he’s been ripping the cars apart with his bare hands. A crudely drawn tattoo of a snake curls up his neck. He looks down at the water and grimaces. He can’t swim. I’m sure of it.

‘Soon you’ll start wheezing and coughing,’ I say.

His eyes look down at the rocks near his feet. Is he going to use me for target practice? I take another step further away, ready to dive under if I need to.

‘It’s an—’

‘Shut up, boy! Shut your fucking mouth before I ...’
He glares across the water. His fists are clenched.

I dive under the surface and swim a few metres further out. I can tread water for hours if need be. I open my eyes; the water stings my lids. I wipe them as I look towards the bank. He’s standing there with both hands on his hips.

‘What gives you the right, boy?’ He paces along the edge of the reservoir.

I hope he doesn’t see my bag under the ferns.

He points at me and swears before taking another drag of his cigarette.

A funnel of smoke drifts away.

I close my eyes and see my dad lying in bed, coughing into a handkerchief, the stubble on his sunken cheeks. He made a sucking sound as he breathed, like the wind blowing through gaps in the wall. I sat beside him for days, my feet up on the mattress, listening to him sleeping. When he woke, I’d hold his hand and tell him how much school I was missing on account of him. That’d always make him smile. He’d ask me to get him some water or a magazine from the shops, offering a few coins he kept in the jar by his bed. Mum would bring him takeaways on a plate. He didn’t eat much, passing me his plate and telling me not to waste it.

★

Rodney says something I can't hear. When I don't answer, he walks away from the bank, kicking rocks with his worn-out boots. He picks his way slowly around the edge of the reservoir, trying to act like he's not interested in where I am.

He picks up a rock and motions to throw it at me. I dive instinctively, swimming deep and listening for the splash above my head. I stay under as long as I can.

When I surface, Buster is standing on the bank, barking at me. My eyes scan the shoreline.

Rodney's gone.

Buster runs along the shore, his tail wagging furiously. He takes a step into the water, then quickly backs out.

The clouds have blown east, leaving an infinite blue. I float on my back and let my ears dip below the waterline. A fly buzzes around my face but doesn't land. The crows start up in the gum trees again and Buster keeps barking.

Nearly two years ago, Mum sat in the lounge room watching *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* I sat beside Dad as he slept, listening to Mandy from Chapel Heights win a fortune. The crowd cheered as she answered every question just right, as if it was all planned beforehand. When she won the big one, I stood up to watch as her two kids raced from the

audience and hugged her tightly. The cameras zoomed in for a close-up. Mandy hovered somewhere between tears and laughter.

I turned to share the good news with Dad. He was still and lifeless, his mouth sagging open. I touched his cheek and shivered.

In the lounge room, Mum called Mandy a lucky bitch.

I leant over Dad and kissed his forehead. I wanted to whisper how much I loved him, but the words stuck in my throat. It was too late. I'd missed my chance. I kissed him again and hoped he knew.

I went to the bedroom door. Mum turned around to tell me about Mandy's win. She knew immediately what had happened. She switched off the television. Mandy's life was changed forever. Mum wrapped her arms around me. We stood in the doorway, between Dad and Mandy.

The priest at the funeral made a speech promising Dad was in a better place, nearer to God. All of Dad's work mates squirmed in the pews. His place wasn't in heaven; it was behind the counter at the bottle shop, telling jokes and offering tips on the races that no-one in their right mind would accept.

When the crowd filed out of the church, Mum and I stood either side at the exit, shaking hands. Dad's boss

gripped my shoulders and promised me a job when I finished school – said any son of Bruce Saunders was always welcome at the Railway Hotel.

Mum and I drove home in silence.

For all of my life there were three of us in our house.

Now there were two.