

**REPRESENTATIONS OF THE OTHER  
IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA**

**Volume 1**

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## Abstract

*Representations of the Other in Contemporary Australia* is a thesis consisting of a novel, *Brother Nation*, and an exegesis in a separate volume.

*Brother Nation* is set in Australia at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a time of great political and social change. The novel explores ambiguities in issues of race, crime and moral justice through the eyes of an adolescent who comes of age amidst a chain of disturbing events.

Omar Assaf is a sensitive sixteen-year-old with a problem—he needs to lose his virginity. However, like most boys his age, he is anxious and naive about matters of sex and love.

When a young female friend, Belle, rejects his romantic overtures, Omar is crushed. He rapidly falls under the corrupting influence of his older brother, Sam, and Sam's motley band of miscreant friends. Fuelled by drugs, alcohol and pornography, the boys roam the migrant suburbs of southwest Sydney, alleviating their boredom and frustration by flirting with crime, cruising in cars and pursuing girls.

However, Omar soon learns that being involved with Sam and the boys has dangerous consequences. In compensating for his sense of emasculation, Omar finds himself taking part in a series of attacks, including a betrayal of Belle. Though ambivalent about and at times sickened by his complicity, Omar realises much too late that he and his brother have entered a theatre where their fate will be determined by broader, more powerful forces than he could ever have imagined.

The exegesis charts the creation of *Brother Nation* via the author's movement from a mode of autopoiesis to allopoiesis, through the practice of narrative research. That is, the essay is structured to illustrate how the process of researching the novel resulted in the production of knowledge external to the creative work itself. In doing this I discuss the genesis of the idea to write the novel, the basis and modes of my narrative research, the style of the finished work in relation to the genre of the 'faction' or 'non-fiction novel', and the internal and external conflicts that arose in

relation to the representation of demonised Arabic Other characters in the story. I also contextualise the work in relation to other relevant fiction and non-fiction texts that address similar subject matter, and make a case for holding a non-essentialised notion of cultural identity regarding my own speaking position.

In particular, this exegesis investigates problematic questions in relation to representations of contemporary characters with an immigrant Other background; and, via the framework of Bakhtinian theories of dialogism and heteroglossia, considers the extent to which seemingly incompatible moral viewpoints can be coherently instantiated in fiction through a multiplicity of characters' voices.

## **Declaration**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Rudrakumar Soman

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## One - BROTHERS

### 1

At the age of sixteen Omar Assaf was still a virgin. He knew this was a problem and felt that one day soon he would do something about it.

He lived with his family in Greenacre in the southwest suburbs of Sydney. A line of electricity pylons snaked through their neighbourhood like a collection of dormant metal oil derricks. Planted in small green reserves, the towers dominated the streetscape, adding a heavy industrial touch to the ordinary suburban blocks. In the bony shadow of one of these electric pumpjacks, no doubt bathed in the invisible glow of electromagnetic radiation, was the Assaf three-bedroom orange brick house.

At the kitchen table Yasri Assaf set a plate down in front of her younger son. Omar looked at it for a minute and then picked up his fork. He stabbed at the meat and played with the rice and vermicelli mixture, raising tiny portions to his mouth. He chewed slowly and appeared to be staring right through a curved corner cupboard in front of him.

'Eat,' said Yasri, turning to look at him from the counter where she was preparing her own lunch. Omar mumbled an affirmative. He slowly raised another forkful. Before it was halfway to his lips, the lamb dropped from the tines and back on to his plate. Omar did not seem to notice.

*You stay out late with those boys and you wake up at lunchtime! Look at you! Like an old man,* said Yasri in Lebanese. *You have bags under your eyes. You eat like each mouthful is made of sand.*

'Mmm.'

*Why didn't you clean the van before you go to sleep? Your Baba rang me this morning to say there is hamburger paper and cans in the back. It all smells like grease. How can he put bread in the van like that? ... I am going to walk to see Mrs Budail later today. She just came out of hospital. Her hip, they made it better now. Why don't you come with me? She always asks about you and Sam. She says she never sees you and your brother anymore.*

*'Mmm.'*

*What do you mean, 'hemmm', eh?*

*Sorry, Moma. Too busy today to go with you. I'll clean the van tonight. Was too tired when I got home.*

*Argh. I don't understand you boys sometimes.*

Yasri squeezed Omar's shoulder so hard that he grimaced. Then she gave him a kiss, which landed on the side of his head rather than on his cheek. She placed her own plate on the table and sat down. She began to eat in her methodical and businesslike way, precisely cutting, dividing, combining and then consuming the lamb, green beans, yoghurt, rice and vermicelli.

Omar finished as much as he could and pushed away his plate. *Thank you, Moma. I'll go over to Emad's now. You know that the Haddads, they bought a new computer? Im-Emad can email her sister in Jounieh, once we get it set up. Why don't you try using ours? I'll show you.*

*Ahhh, she replied, waving her hand as if shooing away a fly. I don't know about that.*

*Moma, it's easy, I'm telling you. You could write to everyone back home. Baba can do it and you can do it too. He didn't learn about computers at school*

*either. Everyone uses them now, Moma. It's quick. You don't have to wait around for weeks to get a letter—*

*Ahhh.* Yasri gave another Aussie salute.

*Whatever, OK, I'll see you later.* Omar got up and left the kitchen, but not before stooping down to give his mother a goodbye kiss on the cheek.

As he walked down the street Omar looked back at their house. It was not the best house on the street, but in the running. Moma and Baba were very proud of the way their place looked. Baba mowed the small patch of lawn and hosed down the driveway every few weeks. True, their fifties bungalow did not have arches but they had recently replaced the tired wooden windows with gleaming aluminium frames, and Moma religiously swept the small front porch every two days.

The outside of the Haddad place was a dump in comparison. Emad's parents only cared for *some* appearances. They would buy a new computer with a Pentium III chip, stereo speakers and a sub woofer because Emad told them it was what everyone was getting. They owned a huge new Sanyo 68 centimetre television with a flat screen and square edges. Emad said it had 'a picture so sharp, mate, you could fillet a fish with it.' Emad's dad, who worked as a factory foreman, had a late model Commodore that he washed every weekend. But the Haddad front garden was infested with weeds, some waist-high, and the paint was peeling off their original window frames in curling, brittle strips.

Omar thought back to his own home. Yes, the front of their house was freshly painted and the yard neat in every way but they'd had the same lounge furniture since he'd been a toddler. The big old colour Kriesler was only the second TV set Moma and Baba had bought since they immigrated to Australia. Of course, by now he and Sam had bought their own colour portables for their rooms, but the



Kriesler was still embarrassing when people came over. He didn't know anyone else who had a TV with a wood-grained cabinet that stood like a hippo on its own short legs.

Omar arrived at the Haddads' house. He opened the squeaky, rusting gate and stepped across the weed-flanked path to the front door. Emad's mother answered his knock with her customary smile and waved him in.

*Emad is smoking at the back*, she said cheerfully, motioning him to enter.

Omar thanked her and walked through the house and out the back door. He found Emad stubbing a cigarette into a morass of dirty brown butts overflowing from a plastic ice cream container. Omar smelt the bitterness of the burning filters. Emad was thin, with a larger than average head and eye sockets that seemed to be set back deep in his skull. Once, Sam had called him 'Skinny Frankie', referring to Frankenstein, which made Omar laugh, somewhat guiltily. Though he got on with all of Sam's friends, he generally felt the most comfortable with Emad. They high-fived with their fists.

'What's up?'

'Hey, not much, mate, just doing some things around the house, y'know? Just keeping out of trouble, mate. What you up to? You still got school holidays or what?'

'Yeah, they only started this week, mate. I got this week and next week. Still have to go to work later though. Went for a cruise with Sam and Farid last night.'

'Did you go in the Calais?'

'Nah, took the van. Farid said the Calais was low on petrol and he was waiting for his dole to come in before he could fill it up. Bummer. He lets me drive sometimes—it's fast.'

‘Yeah, it’s OK. Not bad for a heap of shit! Nah, only joking. I reckon Farid should learn how to drive properly. The other day it took him three goes to get into a reverse park. So, how did you go with that girl you said you was going to ring up? The one you saw at Baalbek?’

Baalbek Bakeries was the Assaf family business. Omar worked there most days after school. The previous week Emad had visited the bakery to pick up flatbread for his family’s dinner. He had walked in to find Omar talking to a blonde girl, giving her a rundown of the various types of Lebanese bread and cakes. The girl was young, about Omar’s age, and reasonably attractive. Emad described her later as ‘no supermodel but you’d definitely stick it into her.’

Omar hesitated before answering. ‘Oh yeah, I haven’t rung her yet. Y’know, don’t want to come across desperate or anything.’

‘Well, you better hurry up, mate, that was last week. She’s gonna forget who the fuck you are. I would only give it three days, four, max.’

‘Yeah, I dunno, we were only talking, you know.’

‘Talking? Mate, she was begging you for it! You should ram it in there!’

‘Yeah, I’ll call her soon. I dunno. I’ll see. Maybe she just wanted to talk.’

‘Whatever. It’s your life.’

Omar shifted on his feet. He hoped it was not obvious that he had never got her number in the first place. The funny thing was that, yes, he had noticed she was good looking but on the day, give or take a few erotic thoughts flickering through his head, he had really only been thinking about the bread and cakes and that she was nice. She was friendly—not up herself. If he really thought about it, he hadn’t put any effort into picking her up. He had never picked up a girl off the street before, or from a club, let alone a customer in the bakery.

‘Anyway, Emad, I was wondering, before we do this computer thing we should go over to Bankstown Square to get the phone cable. Y’know, the extension cable you need. Then we can fix the computer to the internet straight away. It’s all worked out with the ISP already, right? Plus, I gotta go pay for something, and we can have a look around. It won’t take long to get the computer set up when we get back.’

‘Sure, mate, why not? Wasn’t like I was doing much here, eh? I wouldn’t mind looking for that Metallica CD. *S&M*. Cool name, eh? *S&M!* Dirty cunts!’

Omar laughed along though he was unsure why. They went into the house and Emad put on a pair of sneakers and strapped on the cream coloured bum bag that he often wore. In Lebanese, Emad yelled goodbye to his mum and they set off down the street. As they walked, Emad unzipped the bum bag and pulled out a pack of Peter Jackson. He selected a smoke and offered one to Omar, who hesitated and then accepted.

‘Good on you, mate,’ said Emad, pausing to light them both up. He resumed his customary gait, feet splayed wide to the sides. It was as if his legs rotated outwards from his slim hips causing each foot to point out at twenty-five degrees.

Omar took a shallow puff. He was not a full-time smoker. That is, he did not buy packs, but accepted cigarettes from time to time from the boys. He was starting to enjoy the practice. He took a deeper puff and his head felt light though he didn’t have the usual urge to cough. They walked quietly for a minute, smoking and flicking cigarette ash. Then Emad said, ‘Got a root the other night.’

‘Yeah?’ said Omar.

‘Me and Ali. We was out with the boys and we picked up a slut from this club. In the Cross, eh? The rest of the boys had already gone. It was about four in

the morning and this chick was as pissed as, bro. She was talking shit and her top's falling down at the front and everything. So Ali tells her we'll walk her to a cab. We end up walking for a while down towards Woolloomooloo. Y'know, she's like staggering a bit and she's got her arm around Ali. Then we take her to this alleyway and that was it. We fucked her, up against some pallets. She was right into it, mate, fucken slut. It was a good root, mate.'

'What did she look like?'

'C'mon, mate! Beautiful! Nice tits and blonde hair,' said Emad, scratching his nose. 'Good arse. She wasn't a ten, sure, y'know what I mean, but she was pretty good.'

'Sounds all right.'

'Yeah, it was.'

'Did you get her number?'

'Nah! She was a slut. We left her there in the alley, looking around for her undies. She was yelling out something to us—I don't know what. We didn't do nothing to her or anything. Just fucked her, y'know.'

'Who went first?'

'Ali went first cos he was talking to her all night, y'know. Then I had a go. She was up for it, mate. I made her suck my dick for a minute first.'

Omar flicked his cigarette butt into the gutter. 'Sounds like a good night.'

'You should come out with us more instead of hanging out at home all the time. Sam's your brother, mate. You should come out with us.'

Sam was the eldest in his group of friends, if only by a few months. This alone might have meant that he would be their leader to a certain extent. However, Omar knew they respected Sam for his sheer balls. They had all witnessed or heard

the stories like the time Baba grounded him at the age of ten after the police had issued an official caution over a vandalised car. Sam had stayed in his room and gone on a hunger strike that lasted two days. Baba had to relent after despairing pleas from Yasri that their eldest son would get sick and irreparably damage his insides.

At thirteen, Sam had been the first in his year to finger a girl. He had described it in great detail to the boys: the slow unbuttoning of the blouse, the surrender of her underwear, and the creamy, wet softness inside her—it was an erotic tour-de-force that was told and retold amongst them for many months. And at fifteen, Sam discovered an entrepreneurial flair that occasionally earned him more money than Baba, though Omar knew it was not always by legal means. Sam tended to keep the details of these enterprises to himself. These and many other adventures, including a sporadic interaction with and healthy disregard for the police, made Sam their natural leader, though this was for the most part unspoken and informal. The boys were a group of suburban friends after all, not a bowling club.

By virtue of being Sam's younger brother, Omar was given a comparatively high status amongst them, especially now that he was sixteen and growing up.

'So last night me, Sam and Farid ended up going to Sylvio's, over in Marrickville,' he said to Emad.

'Any action?'

'Yeah—nah. Y'know. Just played some pool and had a couple of drinks. Just looked around. Farid raged us out with some hydro. For a while I was *too* ripped. Not many people out last night. Sunday night. Pretty quiet. It was good though.'

‘You should get down to the Cross, bro. Friday night, or Saturday night.

Plenty of action down there.’

‘Yeah, I been.’

‘I’m talking about the clubs, mate. You got to grow some hair on your chin. Maybe don’t shave one week and we’ll see if we can get you in somewhere.’

‘I get into Sylvio’s OK.’

‘Yeah, but Sylvio’s is just a shitty pool hall. You wanna go to a club where there’s real chicks, mate. Chicks who’ll suck your dick for a couple of scotch and cokes.’

‘Yeah, I’ll get a fake ID soon.’

Emad turned to look at Omar. ‘You’ll be right, Omar. We’ll go out and get you laid before you know it, mate.’

Omar looked down at his shoes. ‘Yeah, it’s been a while,’ he said.

‘Yeah, mate, sometimes it seems like a lifetime, eh?’

They reached the mall at Bankstown Square and wandered in. They browsed in the Telstra Shop near the fruit market. They checked out new mobile handsets until an attentive salesman started explaining call plans. Then they wandered over to a sports store and looked at some clothes. Emad found a Kappa t-shirt on sale and bought it with scrupulously counted out notes and coins from his bum bag. Omar, in his near new pair of Kappa track pants, felt a faint sense of camaraderie. He looked at the Kappa logo repeatedly emblazoned in a stripe down his leg—multiple silhouettes of a man and woman sitting back to back. He saw the outline of female legs spread centrefold wide that materialised when he covered the top half of the

logo with his fingers. How did a legitimate company get away with that? It seemed that these days everywhere he looked there was sex.

Next stop was GamesBiz, where Omar had put Microsoft Flight Simulator 2000 on lay-by for the last two months. He was familiar with (and in some cases quite skilled at) the more popular PC and Playstation games like Doom, Resident Evil 2 and Gran Turismo, but he inevitably found the adrenaline surge of shoot 'em up and car crashes too short-lived. For him nothing could beat the sustained combination of realism and escapism that a good flight simulator provided. Sometimes the sensation of the airborne manoeuvres even caused his stomach to churn.

Omar made a payment of twenty dollars. Only one more payment to go and it was his.

Next they went to Dick Smith Electronics where they browsed through an array of telephone cables.

'Now, I think if you want to put the computer in the lounge and your only phone point is in the hallway, then you should probably go for this one here,' Omar suggested. 'It's only twenty-five bucks and it'll still be long enough if you want to move the computer to another room in the house.'

'Right,' said Emad, inspecting the packaging. 'Geez, mate, twenty-four ninety-five for a bit of wire, though. These guys make a fortune. It's just a bit of plastic, mate.'

'Maybe it's got real copper in it, y'know,' offered Omar.

'Copper, gold-plated, whatever—it's still pricey.' Emad took it to the register counting out a ten and three fives. The clerk proffered the five cents change. Emad waved it away, emphatically zipping his bum bag shut.

‘Get yourself something nice, ha ha—’ he looked down from the youth’s unsmiling face to his nametag, ‘Gary!’

They walked out, Omar fidgeting with his fingers.

‘What a fucken loser—Gary. At least he could have smiled or something, you know what I mean? Get a life, man! Working in bloody Dick Smith—what a knob. Five cents is five cents. Fucken give it to St Vincent de Paul if you don’t want it.’

‘Yeah, not much in customer skills there,’ affirmed Omar.

They took a stroll through the arcades and did some more window-shopping. The pace in the shopping mall was unhurried at best. Many of the shoppers were mums wearing hijab, pushing their kids in strollers, or elderly pensioners who wore beige overcoats and pulled tartan shopping trolleys. The boys wandered around steadily absorbing the fluorescent listlessness from the atmosphere. After twenty minutes, feeling glassy-eyed, Omar suggested heading back to Emad’s to start on the computer.

When they got there the house was empty.

‘Mum must have gone shopping,’ said Emad. ‘She never says nothing when she’s gonna go shopping these days. Probably cos I ask her to get me the good shampoo all the time, y’know? Not the cheap shit. And you got to change brands every now and again. It fools your hair. You can see for yourself, mate ... Then there’s Macleans toothpaste. I can’t stand that Colgate shit. Colgate, Colgate, everyone thinks the sun shines out of its arse. I tell you what, the sun does shine out of its arse cos it tastes like shit, mate.’ Emad ran his fingers through his hair. Omar noticed that each upright strand seemed to be the thickness of a toothbrush bristle. He imagined a big dollop of stripy Macleans on Emad’s head.



‘Yeah, right,’ said Omar, beginning to wonder why Emad was telling him all this. ‘So, shall we get started on the computer?’ He eyed off the Gateway boxes sitting in the lounge room.

‘Sure, go for your life, mate. Let’s not waste valuable time, eh?’

Omar began the setup. He worked the same way his mother ate—quietly, quickly and efficiently. They opened the boxes and lifted the components onto the old table that Emad had dragged to one corner of the lounge room.

‘Problem is, mate,’ Emad said, popping some bubble-wrap between thumb and forefinger, ‘I’m not gonna be able to look at pornos in here while they’re home, y’know? My mum would freak if she saw that shit. My dad would freak too, but probably not as much, eh? I suppose I’ll have to wait until they go out or something.’

‘Yeah ... I suppose at least you won’t waste too much internet time that way, eh?’

‘Waste time? Who gives a fuck about wasting time? What’s the point of having a computer if you can’t look at some dirty pictures? I swear to God, this thing here cost us nearly three grand, mate! I put in some money for it myself!’

‘It’s a good computer, that’s for sure. Gateway, these guys will be able to give you good service too, if you need it. You just ring this number here.’

‘Bloody thing better not need servicing too soon, mate. It’s brand new. Anyway, when’s it due for its first service? Three months, six months what?’

‘Um ... I don’t think you have to service it like that. You just use it. There’s things you can do to make it run better, y’know, with software and stuff. I’ll show you.’

‘Right. That’s pretty cool then. I’ll tell Baba that, mate. He’ll be happy. He reckons he always gets ripped off when he takes the car to Ultratune. But then I say to him, “Give me the car—I’ll take it to Ali and he’ll service it for you for half the price, cheap parts, no questions asked”. But no way. He’s funny about his car like that.’

Omar connected the required cables between the tower, keyboard and monitor then, using a double adapter, he plugged the dial-up cable into the telephone wall socket.

‘OK, we’re ready to go,’ he announced.

He plugged in the power, turned the machine on, inserted the boot disks and configured the internet settings. In a short while the computer was fully operational. They dialled up and were soon surfing the net.

‘This is sensational, mate. OK, I got to send an email to somebody. Who shall I send my first email to? First ever email from Emad Haddad. It’s got to be special. About bloody time, eh, getting on the internet? It’s the new millennium and everything!’

Omar showed his friend how to set up email accounts for himself and his family members. After some perfunctory internet surfing Emad soon made his decision. His first personal email was to confirm a subscription to *HugeJugs.com* daily picture service.

‘Excellent, mate! The pics come to me. I don’t gotta do anything, and I can get a free tits pic every day! Hey, mate, my mum better not read my emails or I’ll be stuffed.’

Omar showed Emad how to password protect his email account.

'This internet is fucken fantastic, mate. They should have come up with this years ago. Geez, what did we ever do without it, eh?' Emad was back on the web browser, erratically clicking on porn banners as they appeared.

'I dunno,' replied Omar. 'Probably wrote letters, went to the library more, eh?'

'Looked at fucken magazines! Bought videos from the sex shop! See, but you get sick of the same pictures all the time. With the internet, it's a never-ending supply! It's magic, mate.'

They continued to surf for a while. Where possible, Omar explained to Emad how to make the experience smoother. Eventually he persuaded him to close down the browser and its bottomless supply of porn so that he could examine some of the computer's other capabilities. They were looking at *Compton's Interactive Encyclopaedia* when Emad's mother returned, her arms weighed down with plastic grocery bags.

'Can I give you a hand with that, Aunty?' said Omar.

'It's OK, Omar. I walk all the way from the Woor-werth, I can walk from the door to the kitchen.'

'Those plastic bags, they can cut your hands in half, eh?' said Emad, not looking up from the screen. 'Moma, check this out. I set you up with email! You can write home to Tata and Jhidu and anyone else you want to.' *Very fast, Moma, it gets there straight away*, he added in Lebanese. *Plus, look at this encyclopaedia. It's got everything about everything.*

'I don't know. I look later. First I put these bags down in the kitchen,' Mrs Haddad replied in English. She shifted her gaze uncomfortably away from the screen and backed out of the lounge before disappearing down the hall.

‘Mate, I’m gonna have to drag her kicking and screaming to this,’ said Emad, rubbing his chin. ‘It would be good if she could just move into the new millennium with the rest of us.’

‘She might get into it once you show her. Our Baba wouldn’t touch the computer for weeks but then I finally made him send one email back home to his sister, through my cousin’s email address. My cousin translated it for her. Baba got a reply the same night, with a photo of them, and now he’s hooked. Got his own email address and everything. There’s a computer at the bakery now. Just a shitty Pentium II, but that’s cool. It’s not like he surfs or plays 3D games or anything, y’know?’

‘That’s pretty good, mate. I reckon I’ll get my Baba into it. I’ll try my best with Moma. I just don’t want them to get into it too much. I don’t want them hogging this thing, eh?’

Omar made some final configurational adjustments to the computer and helped take the empty boxes out to the Haddads’ cluttered front verandah. Emad’s mother had not reappeared. They could hear her preparing food in the kitchen.

‘It’s gonna be like getting blood from a stone to make her send an email,’ stated Emad.

‘Yeah, good luck, mate. You never know. OK, I’d better head to Baalbek. I got deliveries to do.’

They shook hands and Omar left. He strolled home and picked up his old mountain bike. He was anxious to get to Baalbek because he was feeling a little hungry. He knew dinner would be some hours off yet. Moma and Baba rarely ate before eight o’clock.

He slowly rolled south through the backstreets towards Punchbowl. Once in a while he would zig zag across the road, staring at the occasional double-storey houses with their mottled, blended brickwork in two or three colours; the arched balconies, white balustrades and double, sometimes triple garages. He knew these large fancy places, ornamented with new four-wheel drives and people-movers, were probably Leb houses but while he knew of some of the families who lived in them, he certainly could not say any were friends.

He turned onto Punchbowl Road and saw a familiar figure ahead. A lithe, blonde female figure. She was walking along the street carrying a string shopping bag. It was the girl who had come to the bakery. He frantically tried to remember ... *Belle!* His heart beat faster as he coasted towards her.

‘Hey,’ he said, applying the brakes and slowing to a crawl.

‘Hey, yourself,’ she replied. She was wearing jeans and a blue Rip Curl fleece.

Omar stopped as he came abreast of her. ‘So, how’s it going?’

‘So, how’s it going yourself?’

‘Are you gonna repeat everything I say, or what?’

‘Are you gonna repeat ... nah, ha ha. I’ve just been relaxin’. That’s what holidays are for, aren’t they? This year we get an extra day at our school. Teachers have got a meeting or something.’

‘Wow. That’s pretty good. I wish our school was doing that.’ Omar’s foot fiddled with a pedal.

‘Are you heading to work?’

‘Yeah, no, yeah—I was going there, but there’s no hurry. Do some deliveries later. I was just going to say hi to my dad and, y’know, maybe help myself to something to eat.’

‘Well, you are a growing boy, aren’t you?’

‘Hey, I’m all man!’ Omar smiled at her. ‘What else you been up to?’

‘I went and stayed at my Uncle Wayne’s for a few days. He’s got a place right near the beach at North Cronulla. He’s loaded. Got a spare parts business, twelve guys working for him. It was good, but it’s a bit boring down there, y’know? Not much to do. Wasn’t warm enough to go for a swim or anything. Went for a few walks, though. It was OK, I suppose.’ Belle hooked her thumbs into her back pockets. ‘So ...’

‘So ...’ said Omar. ‘So, what are you up to now?’

She was twisting her body from side to side, in what Omar thought was a very appealing way.

‘Aw, nothing really. I’ve just been in town with my friends and got the train with them to Punchbowl Station. I was gonna walk up to the Square and get the bus home from there ... do you want to come with me? Or do you have to go see your dad?’

‘Nah, not really. I’ll come with you. I can always get something to eat from the Square. We’ve already been there today, my mate and me. Had to get some stuff, y’know, computer parts ...’ Omar cut himself short for fear of appearing a nerd. They turned and began walking east towards Bankstown Square.

‘Hey, are you going to the Olympics?’ asked Belle.

‘Maybe. I dunno. Is it hard to get tickets? I thought they might cost a lot of money or be sold out or something.’

‘Nah, they’ve still got tickets. It’s still like six months away. Anyway, I think getting tickets might be like a raffle or something. You put down what you want to see and then they do a draw and if your name comes out you get to buy that ticket.’

‘You get to *buy* them? Sounds like a bit of a gyp to me. How’s that like a raffle? You’re supposed to win something.’

‘Yeah, it is a bit of a rip-off when you think about it. I suppose they’ve got to give tickets to all the fat cats, so there wouldn’t be that many left anyway.’

‘Yeah, I suppose. Big companies and that,’ added Omar. They walked along, the bike’s gear cluster filling the silence with its rapid clicking whirr.

‘I like the gymnastics and I like the diving,’ said Belle. ‘They’re the ones with the best bodies—the girls as well as the boys. Complete spunks, no joke.’

‘Yeah, you got a point there. But the beach volleyball is pretty hot, you got to admit. But it’s not my favourite. I’m just saying, is all. Yeah, I like gymnastics, the rings and that, and diving’s pretty good too, but the best one I reckon is weightlifting!’

‘Weightlifting? They’re just these really boofy guys lifting big lumps of metal. What’s so good about that? Most of them look really fat!’

‘Yeah, that’s what I used to think, but I got into it when the Commonwealth Games were on. It’s so simple. All you have to do is to lift this really heavy thing. Sure, they’ve got to be really big and muscly and that, but the secret is that it all comes down to mental strength. You gotta have the mental strength to back up your body. Focus. I swear to God. My dad explained it to me one time.’

‘Yeah, right, I suppose that’s true. But you could say that about all the other sports.’

‘Sure, I suppose but weightlifting is pure. You don’t have to mess around with a ball and a court with lines painted on it, or a horse or bows and arrows and shit. It’s just one bloke. One bloke who has to concentrate and try and get this huge, massive thing over his head. That solid metal bar, it bends in the middle, these weights are so heavy. You should check it out this Olympics. I swear to God, it’s a sick sport.’

‘Yeah, if you put it like that,’ said Belle thoughtfully.

They were near Bankstown Square now. As they approached the long line of bus stops Omar remembered his conversation with Emad.

‘So ... you got a mobile?’ he asked.

‘Yeah!’

‘So, do you mind if I get your number? You know, maybe text you sometime, catch up some time? Y’know, whatever.’

‘Yeah, sure, that’d be cool.’ Belle recited her number, which Omar tapped straight into his phone.

‘Excellent, thanks for that. OK,’ said Omar, pushing his phone back into his pocket.

‘Hey, the nine three two, that’s my bus. I’d better run. Be cool.’ Belle smiled at him and gave him a little touch on the arm before jogging ahead and boarding the bus. Omar could see her waving to him as the vehicle pulled away, spewing its murky exhaust. Holding his breath to avoid the black, powdery fumes, he gave her a wave and watched the bus head down the street and turn a corner. Then he locked his bike against some railings, entered the mall and made his way straight to the Wendy’s stand.



A few minutes later he returned with a pink package in hand and soon was rolling away from Bankstown Square. Riding one-handed and happy with the course of events, he pumped the pedals and raced back towards Punchbowl and Baalbek Bakeries.

Baalbek Bakeries stood near the top of the main street in between an orthodontist and a dress shop. The bakery frontage wasn't much to speak of—it consisted of a scratch-fogged plate glass window and sliding door. Pasted in a vertical row on one side of the window were three identical curling Arabic movie posters, from which stared three identical faces of the suave and moustachioed star. On the hoarding fascia, the red-lettered Baalbek Bakeries sign was already fading. It was painted in block letters on the whitewash over the name of the old Aussie bakers. Behind the window, depending on the time of day, you could peer in and see the laminated counters and aluminium cooling trolleys stacked with loaves, packets of flatbread and trays of rolls, surrounded by the white, fully tiled walls.

The bakery frontage was unremarkable but you could not miss the orthodontist next door because of the huge full-lipped grin painted on the front window. It was like a throwback to the old Rolling Stones tour logo. The main difference was that instead of a lascivious tongue leering from the cherry lips, there were only chalk-white teeth complete with gunmetal braces. Sometimes as they drove past the gaudy grin before turning into the rear alleyway, Kamir would mutter to Omar that it made the area look cheap. Sam once told Omar that if you turned your head to one side it looked just like a girl's snatch—with teeth. 'So be careful where you stick it, bro!' he had said with a laugh.

Omar thought it ironic that the orthodontist's smile was about the only bright thing on that section of the street near the top of the hill. Layers of grime seemed to coat the buildings and on a cloudy day it was easy to think the city's

property boom had evaded the suburb altogether. It hadn't. An average-size three-bedroom freestanding brick home could still cost nearly half a million dollars. In spite of this there were few signs of prosperity on the main strip. Omar thought that at least the orthodontist sign provided some colour and cheer. In any case, it was a close and convenient landmark if the Assafs ever needed to give phone directions to the bakery.

That afternoon as Omar entered the bakery his father, Kamir, brushed some flour from his watch. He continued to box packets of flat bread and dry sweets for a late order, silently listening to the talkback that spat, crackled and popped from the old Phillips on a shelf at the back of the store. Omar walked in chewing the last of the hotdog with mustard and sauce that he had been eating as he rode. He swallowed and with a somewhat effete jump shot, tossed the bright pink wrapper towards the bin. It missed completely.

'Hi, Baba, what's up today?'

'Why you late? You get detention from school again?'

'It's school holidays, Baba. I was just up at the Square. What's happening?'

'Why do you eat that rubbish food? OK, today you finish packing the *khoubiz* and some *nammoura* for El-Manaras and then you deliver to them, before the normal deliveries. They are in a hurry again. I tell you one day I'll say no to Rashad ... then stop at supermarket for me and bring six double packets paper towels and some serviettes. Moma is mad at me because I forget to buy them when I went to bulk store on the weekend.'

Kamir glanced up and down at his son as he said this.

'You growing taller, but still so skinny. I see you started shaving! How often you shave? Not every day, I bet! You be taking off skin and not much else! Your

brother, he start shaving with my old Gillette. Doesn't matter it was not sharp because he have nothing to shave either!'

Omar ignored the jibes. He bent down and picked up the pink wrapper and placed it in the bin. Kamir might have been disturbed if he knew Omar was eating Wendy's hotdogs. Better to let him think it was a Zinger or Whopper or Donut Delirium or some other less obnoxious example of local fast food. He knew that once upon a time Kamir himself had been partial to a cone of Wendy's soft-serve ice cream when he visited Bankstown Square. That was until Yasri heard they used pig fat to enhance the texture of the confectionary. Kamir had been very ashamed and it was never spoken of again.

Omar packed the sweetmeats into their white cardboard boxes, each with *Baalbek Bakeries* stamped in dull red letters on the lid, and loaded them into the van. There were about fifteen or twenty boxes in all. Just under half of it was the weekly order for the El-Manaras Restaurant in Haldon Street. Rashad from El-Manaras always left his orders until the very last minute or forgot about them altogether. This would culminate in frantic phone calls just before he opened his restaurant. Today was one of those days but it did not bother Omar. Of all the jobs at the bakery he loved deliveries most because they were an excuse to cruise around the neighbourhood. He could drop in on various friends here and there for a smoke and chat.

With a 'See ya Baba!' Omar left through the rear of the bakery. He carefully backed the van out onto the adjoining side street, glad that Baba tactfully ignored him driving solo while on his learner's licence. He had to wait until he was seventeen to get his P-plates. Baba once told him that back in Lebanon he himself had been an experienced driver at the age of fourteen.

Omar tuned the radio away from Kamir's 2MFM until he found a station considerably less ethnic. The radio had a built-in volume limiter—namely the age of the receiver itself and the redundant quality of the speakers. There was no such thing as bass. At high volume the sound was so distorted that you could not distinguish a rap song from talkback.

Omar drove in the direction of Haldon Street but took the long route past Farid's house. El-Manaras could wait just a little bit longer. Either that or Rashad should get his shit together and put his orders in on time. As he drove Omar ran one hand back through his wiry flat-top. He needed a different haircut. He knew the kind of haircut he wanted but every time he asked for it, it just did not turn out how it looked in the magazines or on other people. They did not taper it right or it was too short or too long, did not hang correctly, or failed to *flop* right. He always ended up with this standard haircut: very short at the back and sides, slightly longer on top, because that was the only thing the hairdresser could do properly. Omar ran his hands through his hair again. Maybe he would have to try a salon closer to the city.

Omar turned into Farid's street off Canterbury Road. He would drop in on Farid and see what he was up to. Farid Hisham was around Sam's age, that is, three or so years older than Omar. He was one of Sam's best friends though it did not always appear that way. As the Hisham house came into view Omar could see Farid's red Holden VL Calais in the driveway. He parked the van and opened the head-high, arched metal driveway gates. He walked to the portico and gave the door a hefty knock. Omar listened hard. The faintest suggestion of noise emanated from the house but no footsteps signalled that the door was about to be answered. Omar knocked again and waited. Farid's parents would still be working at their travel agency and would not usually be home for a few hours yet. Omar wondered what

Farid was up to. Maybe he was out with Sam. The Calais was in the driveway and it wasn't like 'Falafel' Farid to walk anywhere. Then Omar heard the faint sounds of footsteps approaching. Farid answered the door, breathing hard but not quite puffing.

'Hey, Omar, how you going, bro? Come in, come in.'

'Hey, how's it going? Sorry, did I disturb you? I was just going to do some deliveries, thought I'd see what you're up to.'

'Aw, nothing much. I was just having a bit of a nap, that's all. Want something to drink? Some juice, coke?'

'Sure, whatever, anything is fine.'

They entered the tiled lounge and dining room. A large arched doorway led to the kitchen. Farid disappeared there to get the drinks. Omar stood by himself in the middle of the room. He heard the video recorder make a sound and noticed on its display that it was turning itself from pause to the stop position. He knew from experience that some VCRs did this to stop paused tapes from breaking or jamming. The TV screen was off. Omar stepped forward and touched the screen with the back of his hand. He could feel static pulling at the hairs. He looked around the room and noticed a box of tissues on the couch.

Farid returned with the drinks. 'Let's sit out the back. You got any smokes on you?'

'Nah.'

'It's all right, I think there's some of Baba's Horizons out there.'

They went outside and sat on a couple of metal chairs on a patio adjacent to the small rear garden.

'That WRX, mate, just slap me if I don't get one soon,' said Farid.

‘Yeah. Lots of chicks with a car like that, mate.’

‘You know I can afford one if the payout comes through—my lawyer says it will. And if I get a good price for the Calais—which I will.’

Farid had been involved in a serious road accident nearly one year earlier. A court had deemed it ten percent his fault though this percentage might have been higher if it had been known he was under the influence of amphetamines at the time of the crash. ‘They can’t breathalyse you for speed, can they?’ Farid had said, grinning.

Strictly speaking it had not been his fault. He was not speeding, in the velocity sense. A Corolla had pulled out of a backstreet right in front of him, way too late for Farid to even hit the brake pedal of his father’s old Mazda. Now, the Corolla’s unlucky driver, a bloke about Farid’s own age, was in an institution for those with acquired brain injuries. Farid had been told the young man would never drive again, though he might relearn to walk.

‘He should have been looking, eh?’ Farid had said with a shrug. ‘Thank God I wasn’t driving the Calais.’

Farid had sustained an injury to his neck. Even though he had recovered and wasn’t in any pain, his lawyer was arguing that he had suffered some permanent inflexibility. This together with pain and suffering meant he stood to receive close to \$40 000 once the to-ing and fro-ing between the parties was complete. Add to this the sale price of the fully worked red Calais and he was undeniably in WRX territory.

Farid watched the ash build up on his cigarette and stroked the stubble on one of his chubby cheeks before moving his hand down to his chin. ‘I have to go in for another test on my neck. Six months to a year to wait for the money, they

reckon. The only question is whether to buy the hatch or the sedan, y'know what I mean? It's a hard choice but I think you've got to go for the sedan because the hatch looks kind of funny at the back, y'know? A bit bubbly. And it's got to be the WRX blue, y'know? Michael Blue they call it.'

'Yeah, the hatch does look funny. *Mica Blue*. Official WRX colours. The sedan is the only one to go for, yeah. Great car, mate ... turbocharged, horizontally opposed, four cylinder, sixteen valve, multi-point injected double overhead cams—that's multi-point sequential injection, don't forget. You got MacPherson struts, ventilated discs, mate, zero to a hundred in 5.7 seconds or even only 6.9 with the pussy automatic—'

'Yeah, automatics are for pussies. Plus if I get a manual Moma won't ask me if she can borrow it,' Farid said. Then he added, 'Better pick-up with manual gears.'

'You betcha it's better pick-up. Pick up! You better fill the glove box with condoms, mate! Maybe some KY, too!'

After a moment's delay Farid guffawed. 'Yeah, ha.'

'So, today I got to go to Lakemba to deliver to El-Manaras, then a few others near there and one in Belmore and that's all for the day. What are you doing tonight— you doing anything?'

'Nah, I don't know, nothing, mate. Maybe we'll go for another cruise, eh?'

They were interrupted by the sound of someone banging on the front door. Farid got up to answer it.

In a minute he returned with the visitor. It was Sam.



'Hey, bro, how's it going! Hey Farid. Geez, mate, I was knocking on the door for five minutes! What were you blokes doing out here? Pulling each other's dicks?'

'Hey, Sam. Just talking about stuff, you know.'

'It's hard to hear the front door from out here,' Farid said apologetically.

Sam took a seat and helped himself to a Horizon. He lit it and then leaned back with his feet extended and crossed in front of him. Sam was slim with a sinewy quality. From time to time he would unconsciously flex the wiry muscles of his biceps, which were moderately defined through manual work, a few years of taekwondo and the sporadic use of dumbbells.

'What you been up to?' asked Omar. 'Did you see Ali today?'

'Yeah, we went and looked at some trailers. This bloke, he wants two grand for a fucken six-by-four, bro. I could make one like that myself for next to nothing. Anyway, Ali, you know how aggro he can be, right? Too much speed, I reckon. He tells him that maybe he's trying to rip us off and he should rethink his prices cos we're not fucken stupid. So the bloke—he's this big fat skip guy wearing a singlet, covered in tats, beard like Ned Kelly, hairy cunt all over actually—tells him to go and get fucked, go home, stop wasting his time, y'know, like that. I had to hold Ali back because I swear he was going to bash him. Dumb fucken skip bastard doesn't know how close he came. Wasting *our* bloody time, mate—we're the ones who had to go all the way to Beverly Hills to look at some shit trailer that costs a fortune. Anyway, so we leave and then five minutes later Ali's car breaks down in Roselands. Would you believe it? Fucken heap of shit. He's waiting for his dad to come and give him a tow now, so I thought I'd walk up here and see what Falafel was up to, and then I see the van out the front. I should have bloody called you, bro!

It took me half an hour to get here.’ He stretched his legs out and crossed them the other way.

‘Yeah, so, I’ve just been chilling,’ said Farid, not that anyone had asked.

‘Actually, I was having a nap when Omar got here.’

Omar thought briefly of the active VCR, the static of the screen ...

‘You’re always asleep, mate. You sleep more than anyone I know,’ said Sam in a relaxed fashion, his eyes slightly crossed, contemplating the ash of his cigarette.

The boys chatted agreeably, the subject soon returning to the WRX.

‘Don’t get me wrong, the REXY is a good car,’ said Sam. ‘No joke, probably the best bang for your buck. But it seems like these days every cunt and his dog has got one, eh? Me, I’m aiming for a Maserati. Or even a Lamborghini. Probably a Diablo GT. V12. Bright yellow.’

‘As if you’ve got the money for that,’ protested Farid.

‘One day, mate, one day, you just watch.’

After ten minutes of this kind of banter, Omar rose and turned to Sam.

‘Well, I got to go and do these deliveries before it’s too late. Are you going to stay here with Farid or do you want me to give you a lift home—or to Baalbek?’

‘Nah, I’ll come with you, bro. We’ll make the deliveries together. You give me half the money Baba gives you for this afternoon, we call it quits! How about it, eh?’ Sam got up, flicking his second Horizon into a garden bed. He sparred at Omar’s head, spitting air and making ducking and weaving motions. He landed a couple of blows on Omar’s shoulder and arm.

‘Get off! Stop being an idiot!’ said Omar, flinching and retreating from the flurry. He grasped his arm.

'You got to toughen up, bro!' said Sam.

Farid enacted some shadow-boxing of his own, his bulk rendering a slow motion effect to the moves in comparison to Sam's rapid, agile strikes.

Farid walked Omar and Sam through the house to the front door. They exchanged high-fives before the brothers walked out the gate and climbed into the waiting white van.

In the van Sam changed the radio station. From his pants pocket he pulled a pack of Benson & Hedges Extra Mild, withdrew one and lit it. He sat back, hitched his feet up flat against the dash and smoked silently as Omar manoeuvred the van down Farid's street and back onto Canterbury Road.

When they pulled up at a red light Sam noticed a couple of youths at the diagonally opposite corner of the intersection. They were scruffy looking skips. The taller one was in a baggy Dada shirt with equally baggy denim jeans. His little mate was dressed similarly but without the overt branding, save for a reversed Nike baseball cap. The little one swung a ten-litre petrol tin in his hand. They were waiting to cross in the direction from which Omar and Sam had just come, evidently on their way to a BP they'd passed a few hundred metres back.

'Hey, check out these two dopey little shits,' said Sam.

The skips were shouting lewd invitations at a couple of young girls on the opposite kerb. The girls were waiting to cross the intersection towards Omar and Sam.

'Show us your fucken tits, ya mole!' yelled the lanky one.

'Show us your fucken pink bits ya fucken big sluts!' chimed in his mate, swinging the petrol tin.

The green walk signal activated and the girls crossed, the two youths still calling out to them. When the girls passed in front of the van Omar could see that they looked mortified.

‘They’re not bad. Check out those tits,’ Sam remarked. He turned his gaze to the still gesticulating boys. ‘Look at these clowns, would ya?’ he sneered in their direction.

The girls did not look up as they crossed. Omar thought one of them was sexy. She had blonde streaks and even in trackies you could see she had a hot body.

The girls reached the other kerb and disappeared down the first side street. The traffic lights changed to green. The two youths were laughing as they began to cross in the opposite direction to the van. Omar accelerated up the road. Sam twisted around, looking out the back window. ‘Omar, chuck a u-ey, man, up here, just up here. Chuck a u-ey!’

‘Why? What you want to do?’

‘Doesn’t matter, mate. Just do a u-ey.’

A gap appeared in the bitumen median strip. Omar swung the van around and headed back the way they’d come, managing to catch the lights at the intersection. The scruffy pair had made quite a bit of ground. As they sauntered along, the swinging petrol tin glinted in the sun.

‘OK, pull up here, just here, alongside.’

Omar did as he was told.

The youths looked up as the van appeared abreast of them. The smaller youth held up the petrol tin and started to smile, perhaps thinking the van held a friend or acquaintance.

Sam flicked out his cigarette and from the floor picked up a hefty steering lock in his left hand. Brandishing it like a club, he leaned out the window and bellowed as loudly as he could: 'POOFTAHS! Ya fucken POOFTAHS! Why don't ya bum each other off, ya fucking big faggots. Fucken go and get AIDS, mate, ya fucken shit-licking, fucken POOFS!'

Startled, the pair stopped in their tracks. The little one looked crestfallen and seemed fearful of some kind of impending physical assault. He took a couple of steps back. His mate stood absolutely still, coiled, as if readying himself for anything.

Quickly checking the rear-vision mirror Omar gunned the van and veered back into the right lane. Sam was cackling with laughter. At the first opportunity they did another u-turn and passed the pair once more from the other side of the road. Sam waved jauntily as the taller one shouted obscenities at him and gestured with an upheld middle finger and a clenched fist. The little guy just stood there looking unsure, the tin hanging limply against his leg.

'Did ya see the look on their faces? Mate, that little skip, he was going to shit himself, I swear to God, he was absolutely scared shitless. Oh my God, that was so funny.'

Omar was laughing too. It had been pretty good.

'Fucken dopey SUCK-ERS, mate. Ali's going to shit himself laughing when I tell him.' Looking pleased, Sam put his feet on the dash and lit another B&H. They motored on towards El-Manaras and the rest of their business for the afternoon.

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A few hours later Omar pulled back into the alleyway behind the bakery. The lane smelt like a combination of freshly baked bread and the hazy diesel smog that hung over Punchbowl today. The deliveries had gone well. Before reaching El-Manaras they had scored some cheap weed from a friend, Dabir, who they had bumped into on Haldon Street. They'd smoked a joint with him in the van in the alley behind El Manaras. Later, in the restaurant, they'd had a long disjointed conversation with Rashad about the form and fortunes of the Canterbury Bulldogs. They also sampled some *kaftas* that Rashad had just prepared. Sam and Dabir had then gone to price car stereos at a nearby appliances store while Omar completed his round of deliveries.

It was a pleasantly vague Omar who now parked the van in the compact space at the rear of Baalbek Bakeries. He had a giggle to himself as he read the small handpainted sign by the back door. Kamir had erected it to match a sign that had recently appeared at the rear of the orthodontist's. 'NO STANDING – PARKING IS FOR BAALBEK BAKERIES VEHICLES ONLY'. Someone, it must have been Sam, had used a marker to crookedly strike out some letters and add others to the business name. '*Ballbreaker* Bakeries, that's it, mate,' Omar said to himself. He got out of the van, grinning.

Kamir met him at the back door. Apparently he hadn't yet noticed the modification to his sign. 'What you find so funny, eh? I don't give you enough work to do?'

'Nothing, Baba. If you really wanna know, I'm overworked, don't you reckon? Y'know, with school and homework and all this, it's a ten-hour day nearly!'

‘Bloody ten hours! With the report card they give you!’ Kamir playfully whacked him on the shoulder. ‘Did you leave the paper towels and serviettes inside the van?’

Omar stood still for a second. ‘Oh shit, Baba, I forgot all about them! That bloody Rashad, you know how he can talk for hours. By the time I got out of there it was almost five and I had to rush to finish the deliveries. Plus I saw Sam at Farid’s place and he wanted a lift. Ali’s car broke down. The supermarket went completely out of my mind.’

‘Just one simple thing, that’s all I asked you to do. You forget your bloody legs if they weren’t attached to your body.’ Kamir looked doleful and shook his head. ‘Now I have to go to supermarket in the traffic before going home.’

‘Sorry, Baba, but y’know I wouldn’t have forgotten them if you hadn’t forgotten to get them in the first place. So really, Baba, all this is your fault.’ He dodged as Kamir tried to whack him on the shoulder again.

‘OK, idiot, you close everything and lock up. I see you at home later.’

‘No worries, Baba, thanks—sorry.’

Still shaking his head Kamir muttered benignly as he got into his old Camry and drove away. Omar went about his final chores, pausing to read and send a few text messages before locking up and leaving Baalbek Bakeries for the day.

Omar was watching *Today Tonight* in his room. A reporter pursued a sweating, potbellied fridge mechanic down a suburban street. The mechanic tried to get into his old Ford F100 but the reporter held the door open, demanding that he speak. The mechanic's crime had been to charge an old lady two hundred and ninety-five dollars to replace a ten-dollar bullet valve in her fridge—what should have been a fifteen-minute job. *Today Tonight* knew it was only a ten-dollar bullet valve because they had set up the problem and then placed a hidden camera in the fridge. Apparently, this fridge mechanic had fleeced half the pensioners in Sutherland Shire.

Omar knew the tradesman had acted badly but felt sorry for him all the same. He often sided with the investigative subjects of *Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair* as they invariably twitched, darted or lashed out in response to the camera. Omar hated the reporters with their rat-cunning smirks.

Sam strode into the room after a cursory bang on the door. He looked to see what Omar was watching.

'Suffer, you fat cunt!' he said at the TV. 'Hey, bro! Get your hand off it and come out with us. A few boys are going up to Clarence Road—have a few drinks, a few games of cards. C'mon, it'll be fun, believe me.'

'Who else is coming?' Omar asked.

'A few of the boys. Who knows? Maybe a few surprise guests, ha!'

Omar looked at him quizzically.

'Nah, just bullshitting. The boys will be there. Emad was supposed to drive me but something came up. Dumb fuck only just rang to tell me. You coming or what?'



Omar swung his legs off his bed. 'OK, I just got to brush my teeth. I'll be right there.'

'Fuck, mate, you're worse than a chick. OK, I'll be outside warming up the van. I'll drive there but you got to drive back, OK? I might have a few drinks, get a bit loose, eh?'

'Yeah, whatever,' said Omar, making his way to the bathroom.

In a little while they set off through the backstreets towards Clarence Road, Belfield, where Ali's cousin, Taysir, rented an old two-bedroom cottage. The house was rented in Taysir's name, though, like Sam and Omar, he still lived with his parents in Greenacre. The weekly rent of two hundred and fifty dollars was split between Taysir and another ten or eleven assorted cousins and friends, including Ali. A dozen keys had been cut. It was their clubhouse. Sam had been invited to be part of the consortium but had baulked at paying his slice of the rent. 'Fuck that,' he had said to Ali. 'Mate, if I need to take a slut somewhere, I got the van, eh? Why would I want to pay youse twenty bucks a week to go root in that dirty old dump?'

Of course, this had not stopped Sam from attending many of the various parties, card games and random booze-ups that occurred at Clarence Road. Omar knew that his brother had even borrowed Ali's key a few times to take girls back to the house, though Sam tried to keep this from the other guys to avoid being hit up for rent.

'I'm feeling good tonight, bro,' said Sam, a cigarette dangling from his lips as he threw the van around a tight corner. 'I'm gonna get into the pontoon, eh?'

'Pontoon?' asked Omar, his thoughts elsewhere.

'Pontoon. Y'know, blackjack, twenty-one—cards.'

'Oh right.'

‘Geez, bro, you gotta get a life. Why don’t you play tonight? I’ll teach you.’

‘Nah,’ said Omar, looking out of the window. He liked hanging at the Belfield house but could not stand the card games. He hated the posturing and the abuse that went with each hand. It unnerved him and made him forget the rules. Also, the boys played for money. Though the stakes were low Omar would not risk his earnings from Baalbek.

‘Suit yourself, bro. It’s your life.’

Sam began to whistle as they cruised with the windows down through the cool, darkening streets. The aroma of fast food grease and Sam’s cigarette smoke blew through the van. Soon they pulled up outside a dilapidated house with a low-pitched gable roof. A front window was cracked and even in the dim glow of the streetlights the gutters and roof showed off their corroded and rusty tint. In the front yard, a WRX was parked at a studied angle over dry, compacted dirt and the remnants of a dead lawn. Around the concrete pathways that bordered the dirt there were garden beds containing the parched and stooped remains of rose bushes. Three lesser vehicles—a Skyline, Farid’s Calais and a little Excel—were lined up close together along a narrow concrete driveway.

‘All right,’ said Sam, surveying the driveway and street. ‘Most of the boys are here already.’ They could hear voices and the sound of bass as they got out of the van and approached the house. The unlocked front door led them directly into a sizeable combined lounge-dining room. The room had a low ceiling and was quite warm. The lounge area was furnished with a decrepit matching sofa and armchair and some old, sagging folding chairs. The floor was covered with stained and worn carpet that had once been lime green. The dominant smell in the room was a mixture of old and new tobacco smoke.

Sam and Omar walked in to a chorus of greetings. Though he had only been to the house a handful of times, Omar knew quite a few of the boys from around the neighbourhood. In response to the assorted greetings, he nodded his head in random directions and then said hi to Farid, Ali and Dabir, who were seated around a wood-veneered extendable dining table. A game of cards was already in progress.

Taysir, who was as short and dumpy as Ali was tall and athletic, walked up and handed Omar and Sam cans of Jim Beam and Cola.

‘Welcome to the party, boys,’ he said, pulling the top off his own can.

‘All right, cheers,’ said Sam, noticing that a hand had just been completed.

‘So, can I be in on the next game, or what?’

Without waiting for an answer he took a vacant seat at the table and reached into his pocket for the stash of gold coins he had brought as his kitty. As he was dealt his cards he leaned forward and adopted an approximation of a poker face.

Wearing the same slightly contorted expression he proceeded to lose his bets on the next three hands.

‘Fuck!’ he said. ‘This is bullshit! I swear, if any of youse blokes is counting cards I’ll put a bullet through your leg!’

‘Counting cards!’ said Ali, running his fingers through the long strands of hair that grew from the back of his head. Sometimes he tied it in a ponytail but today it was loose. ‘Yeah right! Farid can’t even remember what colour jocks he’s wearing! Counting cards! He’s just a lucky cunt, that’s all!’

Farid, who had won two of the three hands, was stacking his coins into one and two-dollar piles. ‘Youse can suck my dick,’ he said. ‘Fucken bad losers!’

‘C’mon, deal ’em up!’ said Sam, thrusting his hands into his pockets and dumping more gold change on the table.

‘Fuck, I really need to win some cash off youse blokes,’ said Ali. ‘I had to give my dumb little sister two-hundred dollars for her mobile phone. That silly bitch bought a mobile phone and didn’t tell Moma and Baba or nothing. I didn’t know either, until the other day I was driving down Waterloo Road and I saw her standing in front of Abu-Salim Supermarket by herself, talking on it. I got so mad, I parked the car and went straight up to her and took it off her and smashed it on the ground. Mate!’

‘Geez, mate, you should have given it to me. I could have sold it for you,’ said Sam.

‘I stepped on it and everything! She starts calling me a dickhead and goes, “Two hundred bucks it cost me and you smashed it!” So I grab her arm and take her across the road to the cash machine and I take out some money and I say, “Here, have your two hundred bucks. I don’t care who you were talking to—if people see you they get the wrong idea, they start talking, they start saying bad things ...”’

‘It serves her right, eh? Man, she didn’t deserve the cash from you!’ said Dabir.

‘She swears she was talking to her friend Anisah, but I don’t care, it could be some fucken horny guy tomorrow for all I know. If my dad caught her he would bloody do worse than smash the phone, I tell youse.’

Omar sat on the ripped vinyl sofa listening to Ali’s story. He was sometimes glad he did not have a sister. Half for her sake, and half because of the responsibility it seemed to entail. He returned to an intermittent sexual fantasy about Belle that he had been enjoying. It was nothing too hardcore. If anything, it was a romantic fantasy. He thought he could like her. He *did* like her. Omar patted his phone in his tracksuit pocket, taking pleasure in its reassuring presence. The phone

contained her number. Suddenly shouts and profane hilarity erupted from the dining table. Ali had just lost a big bet and was cursing wildly in Lebanese and English. Omar took a sip from his drink and tried his best to laugh along with the card players.

Half an hour later, Omar found himself in the unusual position of sitting between two girls. Their names were Hayat and Danya. Hayat was one of Taysir and Ali's numerous cousins and Danya was her best friend. Both were a few years older than the boys, in their early twenties, and unmarried. They would often be at Clarence Road, joining in the smoking and drinking though, like Omar, they never played cards. They blended in easily, wearing trackies and baggy sports tops like most of the guys. Both girls had shoulder length black hair, which they usually wore in the same style—tied back in a long ponytail.

None of the boys ever tried to crack on to them not from lack of desire, but because Taysir, Ali, and a number of other cousins might be in the same room at any given moment. Sometimes, when relatives were definitely out of earshot, there was speculation that they might be lesbians. Omar had met the girls a few times and did not think so. They just refused to take any shit from anyone, including their parents—that was all. And regardless of how wasted Hayat and Danya might get on these nights, they usually left by midnight. Though more independent than many Lebanese girls, they both still lived with their parents. Freedom from subjection was one thing but staying out all night was another. In contrast, the boys often partied until long after the sun had risen and then slept if and where they could.

'So, Omar, what are you going to do when you leave school?' asked Hayat, blowing smoke from her nostrils and taking a sip from a can of Bacardi Breezer.

'Maybe work at the bakery a bit more, I dunno. I might do a course at TAFE or something if I can get in.'

Omar liked Hayat. She was always straight with him. He appreciated how she looked him in the eye in her slightly mannish way. Though she was not unattractive he found her easy to talk to. It was like talking to one of the boys, except perhaps that Hayat could actually hold a serious conversation.

‘Like what sort of course?’

‘I dunno. I haven’t really looked into it.’ This was untrue. Omar had spent twenty minutes flipping through the TAFE course guide only the day before. ‘Whatever,’ he concluded.

Danya said, ‘My friend just did her diploma of hairdressing. She said it was the best thing she ever did. She was already working as an apprentice at Ashakki Hair over at Strathfield. Her pay’s gone up and everything, since she finished.’

‘Yeah, it can’t hurt, eh?’ said Omar. A scratched CD of Tupac’s *Greatest Hits* was pounding through the speakers of an old stereo in the corner. Omar nodded his head in time to the thumps and rumbles and felt an inner warmth both from the bourbon and this proximity to women.

Some other people arrived. There were two guys and, following them, two girls.

‘Abe!’ Taysir called out from the card table.

‘Tase!’ said the guy. He looked behind him, motioning to the girls to step forward. They were two Asian girls whom Omar had never seen before. They looked only seventeen or eighteen but smiled confidently back at the whoops and hollers from the card table.

‘These are our friends Anna and Kim,’ said Abe. ‘I’m sure you’re all going to be good friends before tonight is over! And most of you know Jimmy, eh?’

There were assorted grunts and hellos. Jimmy and Abe disappeared to the rear of the house with Taysir. Omar looked over at the Asian girls. They were both quite slender. One of them was beginning to dance to the music. She was dressed in tight jeans and an equally tight singlet. The other girl wore a denim miniskirt and a boob tube. She walked up to the card table and asked the guys what they were playing.

‘Blackjack,’ said Sam. ‘You want me to teach you how to play?’

‘Sure,’ said the girl brightly. She sniffed.

‘Which one are you? Kim or the other one?’

‘Not Kim, Anna,’ she said.

‘Well, come over here, eh? You can look at my hand and I’ll show you how to play this game. It’s all right here for practice and that, but the best place is the casino. The high rollers table, eh? You can win mad cash there.’

With a smile, Anna went to where Sam was sitting.

‘Don’t be shy, come right over. You got to see my hand, if you know what I mean. Here.’ Sam pulled her close to him. She sat on his lap.

‘Am I too heavy?’ she asked. Her waist was tiny.

‘You’re just right,’ said Sam.

Kim was in the middle of the lounge and moving freely to the music. A guy named Chami walked up and, drink in hand, began to gyrate with her. Hayat and Danya looked at the scene before them and then at each other.

‘He thinks he’s John Travolta,’ said Danya. ‘Anyway, this friend of mine is now going to learn how to be a colourist. You can earn pretty big money if you’re a good colourist. And if you become the Colourist of the Year, or even a finalist, you



can rake it in. My friend's boss drives a two-door BMW convertible.' She ran her hands through her hair.

Hayat moved closer to Omar. He could feel her thigh against his. 'Omar, what about hairdressing for you? You'd be good, you know. You know how to talk to women. I know what you're going to say but I can tell you, it's not just for gay guys. Believe me, some of those guys in salons that everyone thinks are gay—*phwah*, they're getting off with half of their customers.'

'How would you know?' said Dabir, who was walking by after visiting the toilet. 'You haven't changed your hairstyle for years!' He looked up and ran his eyes over Kim's body.

'You can talk, mate,' called Hayat after him as he walked back to the card table. 'You blokes have all got the same haircut. Too scared to try anything different.' Under her breath she said, 'He should see a doctor about that skin. These days they can give you pills for zits like that.'

She was distracted by the sight of Kim suddenly engaged in a passionate embrace with Chami. Their lips locked together the two of them sidled, crab-like, towards an armchair. They tumbled into it, Chami pulling Kim onto him as they fell. They continued to kiss. Then he straightened his back and Kim slid down in front of him. She ran her hand over his midriff and then up and down his leg. She began to rub at his crotch.

'I can't believe this shit,' said Hayat.

Kim groped around inside Chami's pants and then pulled out his penis. After a quick couple of quick tugs she began to fellate him.

'Oh, bloody hell,' said Hayat.

‘Who!’ yelled Sam from the card table. ‘Hey, your friend’s got a head start, eh?’ he said to Anna, who was still on his lap. ‘I guess nobody’s gonna want to kiss that one now,’ he added, nodding in Chami’s direction.

Sam began to fondle Anna. In a few minutes, his hand was under her denim skirt. She whimpered something inaudible and moved his hand away before sliding off his lap and onto the floor. She too got to her knees.

‘That’s it, baby,’ said Sam as he began to receive the same treatment Kim was giving to Chami.

The other card players were laughing and making lewd wisecracks. The game continued. Sam was sweating as he called for another card from the dealer. ‘Hit me ... this is the life, eh?’ he said. Suddenly, he put his cards face down in front of him. ‘OK, hold it, hold it, hang on. I got to call time out for a second, oww ... owww ... OWWW!’ Anna’s shoulders shook for a moment and then she steadied herself. She got up, wiped her mouth and helped herself to a drink from Sam’s can.

‘You can finish the rest of that, eh. I don’t want any backwash in my drink. All right, whose turn?’ said Sam, picking up his cards after readjusting himself and hitching up his pants.

Kim had finished with Chami on the armchair too. She walked over to the card table. ‘Where’s the drinks?’ she asked.

‘The kitchen’s through there,’ said Ali. ‘Help yourself to anything. But make sure you come straight back, eh?’

Kim went into the kitchen. In the meantime Anna had moved over to where Dabir sat.

‘I was going to wait for your friend but, hey, there’s plenty of time for her,’ Dabir said.

Without any formalities Anna knelt in front of him, unzipped his jeans and took him into her mouth. There were a few more whoops and shouts from around the room. Kim came back holding a can of Jim Beam and Cola. She too was sniffing. She opened the can and took a long swig before setting it down hard on the table.

‘Watch it, watch it,’ said Sam. ‘You don’t want to spill it and make the cards all sticky!’

Kim ignored him and smiled at Ali, who for financial reasons had excused himself from the game and was standing against the wall by the table. She went over to him and allowed herself to be roughly groped. Ali soon had three of his fingers inside her before she pushed his hand away. She reached into his pants and began to caress him. ‘Wow,’ she said, her eyes widening.

After this short warm-up, she knelt down.

‘I want to sit down. I’ll sit against the wall,’ Ali said gruffly, sliding down. Without taking her mouth off him she too dropped to the floor, where her head bobbed up and down between his knees. Ali groaned and leaned back.

Omar sat frozen between Hayat and Danya on the couch. He did not know where to look.

‘I really can’t believe this shit—sluts,’ said Danya to her friend.

‘Fucken little bitches. I’d hate to think what diseases they’ve got. I hope they had a bloody AIDS test before they came.’

Unembarrassed, Hayat and Danya looked over at the antics around the card table. Omar snatched a few glimpses too, but for the main part looked straight ahead.

‘Fuck this,’ said Hayat to Danya. ‘You wanna go?’

‘Yeah, this is making me sick.’

‘Omar, we’re going. You wanna come with us?’

Omar paused for a moment. ‘Um ... ah ... well, Sam’s been drinking and I said I’d drive the van home, so—um ...’

‘Yeah, yeah, fine, why would you be any different?’ With that, Hayat and Danya grabbed their bags and, still carrying their Bacardi Breezers, walked out of the room. Omar heard the front door slam and then a car start up on the road outside.

The other guys seemed too preoccupied to notice. The card game was still in full swing. After short breaks to get fresh drinks the girls moved on to different boys. Omar went to the kitchen to get another Jim Beam. He knew he could still drive well if he limited himself to under three or four drinks. In the dank kitchen with its peeling linoleum, he saw Taysir leaning forward over the counter top, Jimmy with him. On the bench there was a pile of small plastic bags, each filled with white powder. Next to this lay an old mirror the size of a magazine, on which was a small mound of the white powder. Taysir had just counted out a wad of cash. He separated two of the plastic bags.

‘This is for youse blokes,’ he said, sliding the cash towards Jimmy. ‘And these two gees are for the girls ... hey, little Omar!’ He turned and grinned. ‘You look a bit tired, mate. Talking to Hayat and Danya nearly bore you to death or something? Come here and tell us what you think of this gear.’

Five minutes later Omar walked back into the lounge, sniffing and clutching an ice-cold can of Jim Beam and Cola. He moved towards the couch but did not sit down, instead rocking on his heels and tapping his toes to the music. One of the girls, he couldn't remember which was which, got up, coughing and reaching for her drink.

Omar's head spun, his mind clicking and whirring like his bike's rear cluster when he wheeled it along. It was fast but rhythmic and did not feel unpleasant at all. He flopped onto the couch and then leaned back, his arms spread out wide. The girl, he remembered now, it was Anna, stood up again. She took a gulp of her drink and put her can back down on the table, carefully, so as not to upset the card players. She took a compact from her handbag and adjusted her make-up. After a dainty application of lipstick, she snapped the compact closed, put it and the lipstick away and looked around the room as if for a fresh victim.

Omar found himself looking confidently into her eyes. He gave her a broad, inviting grin and with an outstretched hand tapped the seat next to him.

Sam and Omar walked into the kitchen for breakfast. Yasri was preparing some *toositya*. She put the dish of toasted flatbread, chickpeas and yoghurt on the table. Sam went to the pantry cupboard and pulled out a box of cereal. Omar grabbed a plate and helped himself to a portion of the Lebanese breakfast.

‘When we go to buy the new black shoes for school?’ asked Yasri.

‘This milk better not be off,’ said Sam sniffing the plastic bottle.

‘No need, Moma. I’ll buy some black sneakers. I got all holidays.’ Omar said, not looking up from his plate.

‘That school should be shut down. It’s a waste of space, mate,’ said Sam. He was now chewing Coco Pops, staring at the pictures on the back of the box.

Yasri poured two glasses of orange juice from a freshly opened two-litre carton. As she turned to put the glasses on the table her elbow accidentally nudged the carton, which fell from the bench and landed on its side. Juice gurgled from the open spout onto the shiny tiled floor.

*Yaallah!* said Yasri. She put the glasses on the table and stooped to retrieve the carton. Picking up a sponge she dabbed at her sneakers and slacks. Her hair, which was loose, fell forward over her face.

*Not to worry*, she said. *I should be more careful.*

‘Yeah, c’mon, Moma, lift your game!’ said Sam.

‘Ha! Pull your socks up, Moma!’ said Omar.

Yasri smiled to herself as she wiped the spillage with a damp cloth. The boys carried on with their breakfast.

Kamir came into the kitchen. He wore trousers and a white undershirt. His thinning hair was wet and plastered against his head, comb-over style. He began to help himself to the *toositya*.

'Coffee?' asked Kamir launching into the contents of his plate.

'Yeah, I'll have one too,' said Sam with his mouth full of Coco Pops.

'Me too,' mumbled Omar.

Yasri rose from the floor and tossed the dirty cloth into the sink. She switched on the electric kettle and reached into the cupboard for some mugs.

Omar heard the van pull up in the driveway. He closed the cupboard door and sat hunched, his knees pressed up against his chest. His knee joints were already starting to burn and throb. He shifted himself around so that he sat lengthwise. Like this he could straighten his knees somewhat but he was going to get a crook neck staring through the thin wooden louvres. How long was this going to take? He shifted around a bit more, his head rustling the hanging clothes that Moma had purchased over the years; the clothes Sam never wore.

It smelt like material in there, like those depressing stores that seemed to sell only cloth, purchased by ladies who made their own dresses and curtains. Amongst other embarrassments the wardrobe contained a small, once-worn blue suit with narrow eighties lapels, a short terry towelling dressing gown, and a couple of too-small made-in-Lebanon business shirts. All the clothes that Sam actually wore were usually chucked around his room, or piled on top of the dresser like the aftermath of some mad Adidas and Kappa mega discount sale. In the slatted built-in cupboard the rest of his wardrobe remained in exile.

Omar put his head between his knees and tried to relax. In the darkness, he could smell his own armpits, sticky with musky deodorant and the whiff of perspiration. In a few minutes he heard someone come in through the front door and murmurs and muffled laughs. He could hear people walking around the house. Now they were in the kitchen. He could hear the sound of the fridge door opening and closing and the tinkling of glasses. After a few more minutes the door to Sam's room opened.



‘This is it, my room. Check it out. That’s an autographed poster of Jeff Fenech, for real. I got it from my mate who’s a crash repairer. No joke, he fixed Fenech’s HSV Commodore after he pranged it. He got him to sign this poster when he picked it up. *I love youse all*. Always talked straight, you know what I mean?’

*‘I love youse all*. Ha ha. He was pretty ugly though, wasn’t he?’ The girl’s voice was unfamiliar. Omar wondered where Sam had met her.

‘C’mon, have a seat.’

‘OK.’

Omar peered through the slats. He had to move his head up and down the rows to see. He could make out that her hair was long and straight. Brown. Her eyebrows weren’t bushy, he thought. She was wearing black pants, a shirt with a striped pattern and a black cardigan. She looked like one of those chicks who worked at the doctor’s surgery. Not the doctor, the receptionist. She looked nice, pretty, from what he could see.

Sam did not waste any time. ‘So, you must trust me a lot to come back here, you know, with my parents not home and all that. I like that in a girl, y’know? It says something. About what you think of me.’

They were both sitting on the bed now and Sam had her hand in his.

‘I thought we came here so you could get your wallet. You said you’d forgotten it.’

‘Sure, I did. Look, it’s right here.’ Sam opened the drawer of his bedside table and pulled out his wallet. He shut the drawer quickly. ‘See, I did forget it. How am I supposed to take you out with no money—isn’t that right?’

‘You don’t always have to pay, you know. It’s old-fashioned.’

‘Yeah, but it’s actually gone around in a big circle, you know what I mean? A few years ago you took a girl out and everything’s fifty-fifty, like we go halves on the food, I don’t hold the door open for you; you can make the first move, all that sort of stuff. But now it’s OK again for the guy to take control. It’s what chicks want. I know, I read it in a magazine.’

She laughed. ‘Yeah right. What magazine was that? Or don’t I want to know?’

‘Hey! Nothing dodge! Look, wait on, I’ll show you. He opened the drawer again and pulled out a copy of *Men’s Health* magazine. On the cover was a smiling, six-packed man with massive, well-defined arms and a square jaw. Omar did not have to strain to see—he had bought the magazine. They always had some muscly dickhead on the cover, thought Omar. Always skip blokes. Never anyone you would see on the street.

Sam flicked through the pages. ‘Here. *Take control—she’ll love you for it.*’

‘Oh, so that’s just great. Right. Now it’s all clear. Excellent.’ She was smiling, teasing.

‘Yeah, you all wish, secretly, eh?’ Omar craned his neck. He regretted not staying in the other position. The cupboard was getting too small for this.

Sam and the girl exchanged a little more banter about the magazine. She said something about how they just wrote what guys like Sam wanted to hear. Omar thought this was taking too long. Sam usually had them laid down on the bed by now. Peeling off the boob tubes, the tank tops, the jeans or even school uniforms. Just then Sam made a move to kiss her. Took his time, thought Omar. She looked interested enough. They had a pash, a fairly short one, before she paused for a breath.

‘I knew that’s why you brought me up here—besides to show off your Jeff Fenech poster.’

‘Well, how could I resist, you know? Honestly, I don’t usually make any moves on the first date. Even though I said I like to take control I still believe in respecting a woman and all that. But look at you. You’re a very beautiful woman. I had to kiss you.’

‘Yeah right, Cool McCool, like I haven’t heard all of that before.’

‘No really! I swear to God, I mean it! You’re really beautiful. You’ve got something special, I swear.’

‘Keep going, I’m beginning to believe you.’

Sam took her hand and kissed it. He looked into her eyes and kissed her gently. He stood up and pulled her by the hand. ‘C’mon, let’s go. We’ll go somewhere really nice. You can even pay if you want to!’

‘Hey, what a guy!’

Sam led her out of the room. Omar stayed in the cupboard until he heard the front door close and the sound of the van starting up. Then he pushed open the cupboard door and slowly stood up, stretching his legs and rolling his neck.

As far as Omar could remember, there had only been a few occasions when Sam had gotten a girl into his room and not at least put a finger into her. And any failures had always been because of the girl’s desire to leave, not Sam’s. Today was strange. Omar had seen the smooth act before. It was almost always a requirement for sex. But this time Sam had gone all the way—all the way in being nice. They had had a pash and it seemed like Sam didn’t want to go any further. That was so weird.

Omar had long stopped wondering why Sam invited him to these sessions. They first started a few years earlier when Omar was thirteen or fourteen. Of course, he was even smaller and skinnier then. Sam had promised him twenty dollars if, after school, he would wait in the cupboard and keep deadly quiet. There would be a surprise for him. Of course, this had seemed peculiar to Omar, but twenty dollars was twenty dollars. At the appointed time, Sam and a plump girl in school uniform had come into the room. Sam had fucked her, that very first time, with her skirt up around her midriff. That was interesting but the truth was, Omar could not see much, he just heard the commotion and caught the odd glimpse of her flesh through the wooden louvres. There had probably been ten or more other occasions since. Omar learnt that Sam did not always fuck them and that outcomes depended on the vagaries of the situation. Sometimes they were hot for it, sometimes they needed working on, and sometimes they needed to be sweet talked.

If Omar had at first thought it was odd that his brother should invite him to sit inside a cupboard and watch him have sex with girls, he soon considered it a given part of growing up, alongside the *Hustler* magazines, the internet porn and nights like the one at Clarence Road. As they grew older, the rate of invitations had become less frequent and today's was the first in many months. Omar knew he was outgrowing the cupboard in more than just a physical sense. He was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with being a mere onlooker.

Omar left his brother's room and went into the kitchen. Sam, or maybe it was the girl, had rinsed their glasses and placed them by the sink. Now *that* never happened. There was definitely something strange going on. Omar ate a peanut paste sandwich and a banana, more quickly than he would have liked. He had to get to work. Baba would be expecting him in half an hour.

\*

Just after seven that evening Omar returned to the house and went to his room to change his flour-dusted clothes. As he walked past Sam's room he could see light from under the crack at the bottom of the closed door. He could smell the familiar aromas of the kitchen and hear the comforting sounds of Moma cooking dinner. Omar knocked on Sam's door. There was a grunt of permission to enter. Sam was stretched out on his bed, his arms resting behind his head.

'Hey, bro!' Sam said.

'Hey, so ... how's it all going?'

'You know what, bro? Things couldn't be better. Couldn't be better.' Sam adjusted the position of his arms and crossed his legs.

'Did you get a root, eh? Go back to her place or something?'

Sam smiled to himself and said nothing for a few seconds, as if savouring the juicy details. Then he said, 'What you got to realise, little bro, is that some things are worth waiting for, you know what I mean? Now, this chick, this is something worth waiting for. That's why you didn't get to see nothing today. There's not going to be any stunts with this chick. Salwa. Her name's Salwa.'

'OK. Salwa. So, no stunts with Salwa. That's fine I was going to say, that cupboard is getting too small for me anyway. I can't keep still in there for much longer. I think you've got to get a new cupboard or maybe we don't do any stunts at all anymore. Either that or you've got to get a video camera or something and hook it up to my room, cos I'm telling you, if I've got to hide in that cupboard again we're going to get busted.' Omar felt himself getting worked up.

‘Whatever, bro. That’s cool. Whatever.’ Sam was staring at the ceiling, looking dreamy.

‘So, who is this Selwa? Where did you pick her up from?’

‘*Salwa*. It’s Salwa. I didn’t pick her up. I met her. No, we met. Yeah, we met at Roselands Shopping Centre. I was with Ali. We were going to the Kmart to check out some outdoor furniture for his uncle and then we were in the food hall having something to eat.’

‘So you met her in the food hall? She works there?’

‘No, we was in the food hall and Ali gets this idea to go to the credit union to see what you have to do to get a car loan. So, we go to the credit union and Ali’s waiting in the line and I’m just sitting in one of the seats waiting for him and she walks past and smiles at me. So I start chatting to her and we organise to meet the next day at lunchtime, and then again the day after that, and it was on. That was last week. So today, I figure I could bring her back here to my room, y’know. She had a day off and all that. So we meet in the afternoon and we get talking and then that’s when it hit me! Bam! I just realised this girl is special. Real special. *So* special. That’s when I decided there’s not going to be no stunt, not today, not ever with this girl. OK?’

‘Well, why didn’t you send me a text or something so I didn’t have to wait in the cupboard? I told you, I’m getting too big for that thing.’

Sam paused for a moment. ‘Shit, bro. To tell you the truth, I didn’t even think about it.’

‘Oh great, thanks a billion.’

‘I dunno why you’re getting so uptight. Relax.’

Sam leaned his head back and began whistling an unidentifiable tune. Omar left.

Fifteen minutes later when, at Moma's request, he popped his head in to tell Sam that dinner was ready, his brother was still lying on his back in the same position and whistling the same discordant tune.

Omar leaned his bike against the back wall and entered the bakery through the rear door. His face and arms were lightly glossed with perspiration.

‘Sam? Omar?’ Kamir called out at the familiar sound of the flyscreen door banging shut. He did not look up from the kneading machine that was pulverising a twisted tyre-sized blob of dough. Omar often shuddered to think of the damage that the machine would be capable of inflicting on a human arm. He worried for Baba though he knew his father was always mindful.

‘It’s me, Baba,’ responded Omar. *How are you? How is business today?*

*Good, good, everything is good,* said Kamir, smiling at his son as he appeared. Omar kept walking to the front of the bakery. He helped himself to a small cake and returned to the back room. Kamir grunted his approval of Omar’s choice of snack. He then continued monitoring the machine, as if to take his eyes off it for any length of time might encourage it to skive off.

‘So, Baba, you want me to work tomorrow, or what?’ asked Omar.

‘You want to work, you work. You know what I always say,’ said Kamir.

‘Yeah, but you *want* me to work?’ repeated Omar. ‘Do you really need me? See, I could always come in on Saturday instead.’

‘You don’t want to work tomorrow? It’s Friday. Why? You going to city? You going out with Sam and his friends again?’

‘Nah ... maybe ... See, I dunno until I know whether you want me to work or not.’



‘If you don’t want to work, don’t work,’ said Kamir, brushing flour from the counter to the floor. ‘Like I always say—’

‘OK, OK, Baba, how about I come in early afternoon and do the main deliveries and then knock off, eh? Would that be cool? Maybe you could do the late deliveries after you close up the shop—there’ll only be a couple of local deliveries for you if I do all the Haldon Street and Belmore ones ... would that be cool?’

‘If you think it’s *cool*, then it’s *cool* ... if you don’t, then maybe it’s *hot*, eh?’ Straight-faced Kamir switched off the machine and placed the dough on the dusted counter. With a large wooden bench knife he expertly chopped the dough into several smaller segments.

Omar ignored his father’s attempt at humour. ‘OK, then that’s settled, eh. I’ll make it up next week, I swear, Baba.’

‘You do what you want,’ said Kamir. His tone was still pleasant.

Omar was pleased that he had got through the negotiations. If the request was reasonable Kamir never really objected. As long as the deliveries could be completed it did not matter who did them. Kamir was happy to work from the shop and later drink strong coffee and talk with his assortment of friends who dropped by in the afternoons. And Omar was usually paid the same weekly amount whether he worked twenty-five hours or five. That was the way it was and it was a system that had worked well so far.

Sam had initiated this style of work when he used to do the deliveries. Nowadays Sam only worked for Baalbek Bakeries when he was very desperate for cash or company. Though he would not talk about it in front of Kamir, Sam made a fortnightly visit to Bankstown Centrelink to put in his unemployment form. Omar had always told himself that he would find a good steady income when he left

school but nevertheless supposed that at some point he'd probably have to go on the dole too. There was nothing wrong with that as long as there was some other cash coming in—Sam seemed to manage well this way. Of course, Kamir would disagree hotly with this philosophy and considered that it bordered on shameful. On many occasions, he had told Sam and Omar that he had come to Australia to work, because there *was* work, and work was good. Sam would respond: '*You try going out there and getting a decent job. None of those places will give me, or Farid, or Ali a job. They look at us like we're scumbags. I don't want to be a shit-kicker at Bunnings or Kmart anyway!*' he would say, or words to this effect.

Omar's hunger pangs were satisfied for the moment. 'OK Baba, I think I'll go now. What time shall I tell Moma you'll come home?'

Kamir continued to shape the loaves. 'You tell Moma I be home when these loaves are cooling.' *You tell her I will be hungry like a brown bear when I get home.*

When they were kids one of their favourite games involved Kamir crawling on the carpet on all fours making growling noises and nuzzling them with the top of his head. It was the brown bear game. It would end with Sam and Omar crawling and climbing all over him until, screeching and shrieking, they would force him to the ground and sit on his back, triumphant. Sam being the elder would always have the privilege of driving the spear or stake or sword or whatever the weapon was that day, into the brown bear's torso, slaying the evil monster. Sometimes the bear would be beheaded. Omar would sit back and watch, willing Sam not to hurt Baba too badly.

'OK, Baba, it's a deal, thanks, see ya later.'

Omar walked out of the bakery and picked up his bike. He wheeled it down the alleyway, past the orthodontist's ten-year-old BMW 525i and then around the

corner towards the main strip of Punchbowl Road. He wanted to pick up some batteries for his Discman from the Cut Choice variety store across the road. He walked past Jeff Chen's Chinese Herbalist and wondered what Jeff Chen's real name was. Surely Jeff was not a Chinese name? He peered into the shop window. An array of mysterious dried brown and green herbs were laid out in wooden box-trays. Moma had tried some once to cure a migraine. She said it just tasted like eating seaweed. Maybe it *was* seaweed.

Omar bought his batteries, thrust them into his pocket and headed for home. He pulled out his mobile and checked the display. No messages from the boys. No messages from anyone. He had seen Belle on Monday and it was Thursday now. That was all right. Good time to send her a text. He had played it nice and cool. And so much had happened this week. He cast his mind back to the party at Clarence Road. Those girls had gone wild. That evening had been like visiting a live fantasy porn site, although there had not been any fucking. *For two grams of coke these girls are only gonna give youse guys blow jobs*, Taysir had said that night in the clammy old kitchen as Omar stooped down with a nostril poised over his line. After the girls had left, Farid said he had heard that Kim sometimes worked in a brothel in Camperdown but he didn't say any more after Sam loudly announced that he had never and would never pay to stick his dick in a slut.

With his thumb, Omar started punching keys. When he had finished he read through his message. He replaced the word 'cum' with 'go' and struck out 'with me'. It now read: *Do U want 2 go 2 the square 2moro.*

Satisfied, he looked up Belle's number and pressed send. He watched the screen until it reported 'message sent'. He pocketed his phone. If she said yes he

would not tell Sam or the other boys. He would wait until afterwards and then just casually announce that he had been out on a date with a chick.

He wheeled the bike along and then mounted it on the run. He stood up and pedalled furiously for a minute, working up a nice acceleration for the benefit of a couple of small Vietnamese boys who stood watching him from their front porch. Turning onto another street he slowed down to a more comfortable speed, ever alert for the telltale vibration from the mobile phone in his tracksuit pocket.

\*

It was late afternoon and Omar had been lying on his bed for an hour now. His phone was yet to vibrate. He had turned up the volume so that the signal could be heard even if he was flushing the toilet or happened to be in a car in the middle of a snaky or burnout. You never knew when you would receive a text. The usual soothing sounds came from the kitchen. Dinner would be ready soon. From Sam's room next door he could hear the muffled noise of a TV. The stereo might also have been on. However, Sam was not at home. He had left the house thirty minutes ago to go out with his new girlfriend.

A few minutes later Yasri called from the kitchen, asking Omar to turn off Sam's TV. He swung himself off his bed and trudged to his brother's room. After he'd switched off the TV and CD player Omar looked around the room. He thought back to his last stint in the wardrobe the day before. Sam had not mentioned anything else about Salwa.

On a whim, Omar opened the wardrobe door. At the rear, he saw something under an old blanket that had not been there yesterday. He lifted up a corner of the frayed woollen coverlet that had kept him warm as a toddler. Underneath was a red plastic milk crate. Inside were five car stereos. Frayed wires and wrenched ends protruded from some of the units. Omar picked up one of the stereos. It was an Alpine and looked expensive. There were two more Alpines, a Kenwood and a Sony. All of them had disc stacker functions, though there were no stackers to be seen.

Also in the crate was a pair of JBL rear speakers and, at the back of the cupboard, a medium-size bass box. At the bottom of the milk crate Omar found some music CDs, a pair of women's Gucci sunglasses and assorted bits of wiring. He looked at the CDs. They were uninteresting—mainly classical and jazz. The sunglasses had white frames and huge squarish, pink coloured lenses. He thought they looked like something some rich old society woman would wear.

Sam had not said anything about the stereos. He must have got them today. Or last night, most probably. They had definitely not been in the cupboard yesterday when Omar had 'met' Salwa. Omar put everything back in the box and replaced the blanket before closing the wardrobe door and returning to his own room.

Omar stretched his limbs out on the bed again and closed his eyes. In a little while he began to feel the delicious sense of drowsiness that precedes sleep. He vaguely, distantly heard the front door and then Baba calling to Yasri to say he was home. He could hear them talking in the kitchen. A few minutes later he heard Yasri calling him to come and eat. He wanted to ignore her and in his sleepy delirium tussled with the sound of her voice. Eventually he opened his eyes and sat up.

Knowing that it had neither beeped nor pulsed during his little doze, Omar still checked the display on his phone. There were no messages.

\*

After they'd finished their meal Omar helped Yasri clear up. Kamir sat at the table and read a copy of the *Daily Telegraph*. Waiting in front of him was a new edition of the *Middle Eastern Herald*. Later, this would accompany him to the more comfortable environs of the lounge. Kamir sucked on a toothpick as he read. Omar and Yasri moved around him.

'So,' said Yasri as she filled the smaller of the kitchen's two sinks with hot water to rinse the dishes. 'Baba says you don't want to work tomorrow. Why is that? You going somewhere? Why don't you work and let your father come home early, eh?'

In Lebanese Kamir grunted that it was OK and to let the boy enjoy his school holidays. He rustled the paper to signal his impatience with the topic. Omar continued to stack the plates and pots by the sink.

He feigned concentration as he said quietly to his mother, 'I might have something on—with some friends from school, y'know.'

'Don't you see them enough at school time? Why you need to see them during the holidays as well?'

Omar was unsure why Yasri was taking this attitude towards his social activities. She had never objected to anything he and Sam had done in the past.

'Why, Moma? Baba says it's OK. I'm gonna work part of the day anyway. Just not the last few deliveries. It won't take long for Baba to do them, y'know?'

‘If it won’t take long why don’t you finish it yourself?’ she said sharply, violently shaking out the inverted fingers of a bright yellow rubber glove before pulling it over her hand.

‘Whatever.’

As he emptied food scraps into the bin Omar felt the stillness of his phone in his pocket. It lay in there, inactive, like something dead. What was the point of taking the afternoon off anyway? Belle had not texted back. She was probably doing something else on Friday. She might not want to hang out with him in the first place. What was the point? The whole idea had been to have some daylight hours so that there was less pressure. If you hung out during the day it was not as if you were on a date. Not necessarily, anyway. It was cool. It was casual.

Omar turned to Kamir. ‘Baba, it doesn’t really matter whether I go hang out with the guys in the afternoon or later. If you want me to work I’ll finish the deliveries. It’s no worries, really.’

Kamir looked up at him from an indignant headline about prison perks. ‘It’s all right, Omar. I already say it’s OK. I finish the deliveries.’ *You work properly next week, OK?* With that he went back to his article.

Her eyes cast down, Yasri vigorously started to wash the dishes. Omar leaned against the counter, not saying anything. For the next few minutes the only sounds in the kitchen were of banging pots and jangling cutlery, the sloshing of water and the occasional rustling of newspaper.

Yasri paused. She looked at Kamir, who continued to read his newspaper. She appeared to be about to say something when they heard the front door. It was Sam.

‘Moma! Baba!’ he yelled. ‘Where are you guys? Still eating or what?’ In a lower voice they heard him say, ‘Come in this way, in the kitchen.’

Sam appeared in the doorway and then strode into the room. Salwa was behind him, shyly holding his hand.

‘Moma, Baba, bro—I want you all to meet someone special, eh? Someone very special to me ...’

Yasri looked down at Sam and Salwa’s clasped hands. Salwa self-consciously tried to ease her hand away, but Sam only held it tighter. He continued, standing stiffly, solemnly, as if he was making a speech in a packed auditorium.

‘This girl is very special to me and I want you all to meet her, without further delay, eh? Moma, Baba this is Salwa!’

Kamir folded his newspaper. For a moment he looked uncertain as to what to say. Placing his toothpick delicately on the table, he stood up and stuck out his hand.

‘We are very pleased to meet you, Salwa,’ he said, shaking her hand gently.

Yasri stood at the sink, her arms held up like a surgeon in scrubs. Rivulets of soapy water scurried towards her elbows. ‘Yes, we are very happy to meet you,’ she said. She pulled at the wet yellow fingers and with a *thwack* offered a moist, pink hand to Salwa.

Salwa shook hands with Yasri, bending her knees slightly in an unconscious curtsy.

‘This is my bro, Omar,’ said Sam looking intently at Omar. ‘He’s also very happy, I can tell you, to meet you today for the first time. Eh, bro?’

Since it seemed to be the thing to do, Omar too offered his hand. He gave Salwa a too-firm handshake, which caused her to flinch ever so slightly. ‘Yeah, I’m



happy to meet you too ...' said Omar. 'For the first time and everything.'

Then there was silence. The tap dripped three times into the rinse water. To Omar it echoed like they were in some deep, water-filled cave.

'And also we have an announcement to make as well,' said Sam. 'We don't have the exact date or anything like that, but Salwa and me are going to get married. It's official. Check this out.' He grabbed the hand he had been clutching and thrust it out, forcing Salwa to take an involuntary step forward. 'See, check it out, eh? It's official now. I gave it to her today.'

On her hand was a fine silver ring supporting a tiny gem. 'It's a real diamond. It's beautiful, don't you think?' said Salwa.

'That's real, one *ca-RAT* for sure. Not like carrots, OK, Omar? If you are some kind of bloke who's a tight-arse or you got money problems or something you can go right down to oh-point two five *ca-RAT* but that is ONE WHOLE *CA-RAT*.'

Both Kamir and Yasri looked astounded. Kamir picked up his toothpick and put it in his mouth, then remembered himself and placed it on the table again. Yasri pulled off the other glove.

'This is beautiful news!' she cried, and walked around the kitchen table and gave Sam a hug. He responded with warmth.

'I bet you're surprised, eh?' he said.

Yasri was busy giving Salwa a daintier hug. Kamir shook hands with the two of them again.

'So, why you give us such a big shock?' Yasri asked, looking at Sam. 'Why you wait to be engaged before introducing us?'

'Let them enjoy this time,' said Kamir. 'Don't you remember when you were young?' Yasri glared at him as if to say, *I could ask you the same question*.

‘We are in love, y’know?’ said Sam. ‘You can’t plan these things.’

‘Sam only asked me today when we were eating dinner and we came home to tell you straight away. He wanted me to meet you before but I’m a little shy. Also, once we did come past but you weren’t here,’ said Salwa.

Yasri looked momentarily alarmed at the thought that Sam might have brought a girl home when she and Kamir were out.

‘So we just ... kept driving that time,’ Salwa stammered. ‘That was last week or something, wasn’t it, Sam? Sam’s only met my parents once before, and that was just for a short time.’

‘We’re going straight to their place now, eh? To tell them tonight. Catch Salwa’s old man while he’s home. He goes away a lot, eh?’

‘What is your father doing?’ asked Kamir politely.

‘He’s a rep. A pharmaceutical sales rep. He sells stuff to chemist shops.’

‘Chemist shops. I go to the chemist only last week! *Panadeine Forte!*’ said Kamir, gesturing towards a cabinet where they kept their medicines.

‘Hey, bro, I might need you for backup in case Salwa’s dad decides to go for me with a knife or something, eh? You know what dads are like with their daughters. Ha ha!’ Sam let Omar have a quick jab in the arm.

‘He’ll be very happy for us, I know it,’ said Salwa, looking hopeful.

‘Don’t be silly, Sam!’ ordered Yasri, pulling Omar away from his brother. ‘But you should have told the girl’s parents first, Sam! That’s the way it should be done. First you should tell the girl’s parents and make sure everything is all right with them.’

‘Salwa’s parents live in Condell Park, eh? Our place was on the way ...’ said Sam.

‘So you say you don’t know when you going to get married?’ probed Yasri.

‘Well it definitely won’t be this year,’ said Sam. ‘We got to save up for lots of stuff and I got to get my act together with business. You know one day we’re probably going to have a baby and it’s gonna be the happiest day of our lives. Except for our wedding day—obviously.’

‘That is good that *one day* you want to have children,’ said Kamir. Evidently he was relieved that no birth was pending inside the next nine months.

‘We’d love to one day—a little girl maybe,’ said Salwa.

‘I don’t think I can come with you guys tonight—’ Omar began.

‘Listen to this guy!’ said Sam. ‘What a classic! Hey, bro, I wasn’t being serious, mate! It would look a bit silly over at Salwa’s house, wouldn’t it, if you were just hangin’ around on the couch next to us when we told them? I didn’t really think her father’s gonna chase me with the kitchen knife, y’know? Do you think I’d marry someone with a crazy bloke for a father?’

Omar felt his face reddening. ‘Yeah, I know, I was only playing along with you ...’ At that moment he felt the familiar vibration in his pocket. The sound of the tone seemed to reverberate through the kitchen. Omar jumped and fumbled in his hurry to pull out the mobile.

The screen indicated one text message from Belle. Omar put the phone back in his pocket without opening the message. Now was not the time.

‘Loud enough for ya?’ asked Sam. ‘See, he’s a popular guy, my bro, eh? I taught him everything he knows.’

‘Yeah,’ said Omar, ‘he sure did.’ He protectively jammed his hand into his pocket over his phone. The paranoid idea had crossed his mind that Sam would want to know who the text was from.

‘All right then. Without any further going-ons, we should go to Salwa’s house and let them know the good news.’

Yasri stepped forward. ‘But you can’t go just like that! We hardly get a chance to know the poor girl. We don’t even know her family name yet—’

‘Rahme,’ said Salwa. ‘It’s Salwa Rahme. My dad, he’s Egyptian, and my mum’s from Lebanon, from Anfah—’

‘Ah!’ said Kamir, his face brightening. ‘My cousin, he married a girl from Anfah!’

‘And I work at the Bankstown City Credit Union. The branch at Roselands Shopping Centre. That’s where Sam and I met.’

‘Ah!’ said Kamir. ‘You can get a cheap loan for the house. I know this.’

‘Don’t worry about it, Baba. Too early for all that stuff. But she’s got a lot of things going for her. I swear, I took one look at her and I knew straight away, mate. That’s what I said to Ali. This chick has got class, eh?’ He beamed into Salwa’s eyes. She reciprocated. Sam glanced at the kitchen clock.

‘Hey, we really got to get to your place soon or it’s going to be too late. We can’t turn up after they’ve gone to bed, eh? That would be bad, mate. We got to get going, Moma and Baba. You can get to know her a little better next time, eh?’

‘We must have an engagement party. For everyone to come and wish you well. We invite everyone, all the neighbours. But first you must come for dinner. You come for dinner tomorrow in the evening? We meet you properly as a family,’ said Yasri. It was more of an assertion than a question. Omar felt a pang of alarm at the thought of a clash with the message in his pocket.

Salwa looked embarrassed. ‘Tomorrow ... well we could ... but ...’ She looked to Sam for assistance.

‘Moma! Look, not tomorrow, all right? Tomorrow night is bad because I booked a restaurant and everything for us. Just the two of us, that is. Serious, Moma, it’s going to be a proper date. I booked at Vladimiro’s in Ultimo, in the city and everything. Not pizza but a legit Italian restaurant, OK? See, I gave Salwa the ring tonight when we was parked in the car near Haldon Street, after we picked up some kebabs. I couldn’t wait, y’know? I had this ring on me and I couldn’t wait to give it to this beautiful girl. But we were in the middle of eating kebabs in the front seat of the van and that’s not the way it was supposed to happen, eh? So I got straight on the phone after I finished my kebab and made a booking. We got to make this family dinner another day, eh, Moma? And the party can wait a little while too. We don’t want to rush things.’

‘OK, we make the dinner next week. We talk about party and wedding then, all right? You can come for dinner and we do it properly. We eat together and we get to know you like a family,’ said Yasri.

‘That would be nice, yes, I would really like that, thank you,’ said Salwa.

Omar felt relieved.

‘That’s real nice, Moma, beautiful,’ said Sam. ‘See, now everyone’s happy, eh?’ He squeezed Salwa’s hand. ‘OK, that’s sorted. We gotta go now, let’s get this over with, eh?’

They said their goodbyes and left. Yasri went back to the dishes and Kamir picked up his paper. Omar took a clean tea-towel and began drying plates. The sound of the van faded down the street.

*She has a good job,* said Kamir after a minute.

*It’s very quick. They only just met.*

*Sam never mentioned getting married before. We should be happy.*

*He has never had a girlfriend long enough before ...*

*I never met any girlfriends.*

Omar listened and continued to dry the dishes. Kamir asked him if he was happy for his older brother.

Thinking about his answer, Omar rubbed at the glass in his hand until it squeaked. He thought of the newly arrived contents in his brother's built-in cupboard.

'Yeah, I reckon Sam's changed. This girl is gonna be really good for him. Really good.'

When the last pots were dried and put away, Omar's parents retired to the lounge, Yasri to watch Lebanese soap opera videos and Kamir to finish his newspaper. Omar returned to his room and again reclined on his bed. He held his phone in his hand and made himself comfortable. His excitement grew as he opened up the text: *sure meet u @ seats nr priceline 3OK?*

Yes! She would meet him! Near Priceline! Yes, of course, three o'clock was OK! He quickly texted back an affirmative reply.

He dropped the phone on the bed next to him and slid a hand down his pants. He worked away, imagining incredible erotic finales from an afternoon at the Square with Belle. Pausing for a moment, he reached down the side of the bed next to the wall and pulled out a single old soccer sock. With an ease borne of practice, he quickly slid the sock over his penis and thought again of Belle at the Square. She adored him, couldn't wait to see him and stared deeply into his eyes—the way Salwa had done today in the kitchen with Sam.

They kissed softly on the lips and walked hand in hand to a store. A girls' clothes store. Belle wanted to try on some clothes, something sexy, something that

showed skin, probably a bikini or a low cut top. She came out of the change room and modelled it for him and he could see the swellings of her little breasts in the V of the top and then she said, 'I'll try this other one on now. Why don't you come in and tell me how it looks?'

And he followed her into the change room. And then she was taking off the top and facing him with erect nipples, and then her breasts grew slightly bigger and now it was Salwa who stood before him in the change room, the skin of those inflated boobs darkening from fair to olive. But Omar felt a pang of guilty misgiving and then Salwa became Belle once more and the boobs were fair again but still the larger size, and she was saying, 'Omar, thanks for helping me shop for tops. Is there anything I can do for you?'

Then she was kneeling in front of him. She reached out and unzipped his fly. Then she had his dick in her mouth and was sucking and licking and sucking, faster and faster until he withdrew himself and bent her over. There were mirrors all around them—they were in a change room, after all—and he was lifting up her denim miniskirt and pushing himself into her deeper and deeper, seeing the reflections from all those different angles, and she was moaning and calling out his name and then he pulled himself out again and was back in her mouth and then he was back in her mouth ... and then he was back in her mouth ... and then ... he was ... back ... in her ... mouth and he came all over her red lips and on her face and nose, being careful to avoid her nice clean hair—

Omar opened his eyes and removed the sock. He folded it and dabbed at himself before folding it again. He shoved it back down the side of the bed and pulled up his pants. He would get paid tomorrow. Cool. He would be able to make the last payment on Flight Simulator 2000. He wondered how much Sam wanted for

one of the car stereos. Salwa's diamond ring suggested his brother had already made some sales. He wondered if it was a real diamond. Omar looked at the two-year-old PC that sat on his desk. He would love to buy a new computer, like the Haddads. Or a laptop. A laptop would be good.

He checked the display on his mobile. It was only ten o'clock. He felt a little bored and tired at the same time. He wondered what Farid was doing but decided he could not be bothered walking to his place. Sam would not be back for a while either. Omar flicked through the channels until he saw a familiar actor. This show was all right. *Wildside*. It was on the ABC. It was a cop show, but not like other cop shows. It was as if nobody was acting. They all spoke the way real people spoke. They swore continuously and the crims looked passably mean and dirty, not like well-spoken, well-educated actors with manicured stubble and washed hair, as they did on every other cop show. There were no ads either, which made it seem like going to the movies.

Omar folded his arms behind his head and stretched out his legs. He watched the entire episode of *Wildside* and was duly satisfied when the cops finished up getting screwed. The ABC news followed. He flicked through the commercial channels. The usual crap. Omar's eyes were now half closed and in this drowsy state he told himself if he was bored earlier he should have hunted around in Sam's room to see if there was any dope to smoke. He could have got quietly stoned out in the back shed and then come in and watched *Wildside* and it would have been even better. Yes, he should have got stoned. He groped for the remote control and flicked the TV off. He peeled his trackies from his legs and then curled up and under the covers. With a final thought of how nice it could have been to have gotten



really stoned, with Belle, in his room to watch TV, and how he would remember to do it next time, Omar sank into a long and undisturbed sleep.

At the traffic lights, Omar opened his wallet and re-counted the thin sheaf of twenty-dollar notes. Two hundred dollars, the usual amount he paid himself on Friday fortnights from the Baalbek cash register. It was a good wage considering his flexible hours. He reminded himself not to blow it all tonight, if the afternoon did turn into a night out, as he hoped.

The lights changed and he dropped the wallet on his lap and gunned the engine. It was a warm afternoon for this time of year. He wore an old white t-shirt. There were little patches of moisture under each armpit. Omar looked over to the fresh Adidas t-shirt that lay folded on the passenger seat next to him. In the footwell below was a shopping bag containing some Lynx deodorant and Tic Tacs. When he left home for work he had packed the clean t-shirt but had neglected to plan for his underarms and breath. Not to worry. A quick stop at Cut Choice had solved the problem. His plan was to finish the deliveries, drop the van back at Baalbek, freshen up, change his shirt, check his teeth for food and then stroll calmly, sucking on freshmint Tic Tacs, to the seats near Priceline at the Square. There would be plenty of time to get there by three o'clock.

He had already completed a few deliveries in the Punchbowl area and was now headed for Lakemba, where the bulk of Baalbek's wholesale customers were located. The next delivery was to the Alexandria Coffee House on Haldon Street. It had been some months since they had put in an order. Omar presumed they had just found another supplier. He disliked this stop. The Alexandria's owner, Habib, and most of his patrons were devout Muslims and always looked at Omar with disapproval when he entered the premises in his trackies and t-shirts, smelling of

cigarette smoke and glassy-eyed from dope or sleep deprivation or both. Habib never failed to try and impart some of his beliefs to Omar before he could dump the goods and scurry out.

‘You dress like the *kuffar* rap singers. Their influence on you is strong,’ Habib would say. ‘You have become too westernised.’ Or ‘The *kufir* has invaded into your head. Your father should talk to you. Why not come to the next prayer meeting?’

Omar usually just shrugged his shoulders.

He made deliveries to the Alexandria via the front entrance as it was quicker than negotiating the narrow laneway at the rear. Pushing backwards against the door with his shoulder, Omar pulled a hand-trolley stacked with trays into the dingy, single-room cafe. A bell jingled as the door opened. Only one table was occupied, by three men wearing white clothes and pleated Muslim hats. A large water pipe stood at the side of their table but it was unlit. They stopped their conversation and turned to scrutinise Omar as he entered. Habib emerged from the back of the shop.

‘You have returned, finally,’ he said, as if the hiatus in the Alexandria’s orders had been Omar’s decision.

‘It should all be here,’ said Omar, removing the laden trays from the hand-trolley and placing them on the counter. ‘My father says hello, and that he’s glad to hear from you again.’

‘That is very good. Please also give him my regards.’ said Habib, ‘*Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, La illaha il Allah.*’ Pressing very hard with a cracked biro, he signed the delivery invoice that Omar had laid on the counter. ‘Now, when will we see you at the prayer hall? You must not leave it for too long. Remember, it is Allah who has made the earth like a submissive camel for you. Walk on its shoulders and

eat of the blessings that He has provided for you. Also, why not come and work for my cleaning company? I give you a full-time job, more money than this delivering bread.'

Habib was peering into Omar's face. The three men seated men nodded.

'Um, thanks for the offer, but no thanks. My dad says I got to finish at least year eleven. Well, see youse later,' said Omar and hurried out.

Back in the safety of the van he looked at the list of deliveries remaining. There were a few more down Haldon Street and then a couple at Belmore and he was finished for the day. While he was on Haldon Street, he thought he should probably duck into the Lakemba Hotel to use the toilets. He changed his mind, thinking of the moist, smelly carpets and the vacant faces of the lonely looking patrons. The toilets were not that great either. He briefly ruminated on how pissed off the owners of that hotel must have been as they watched Lakemba become a Muslim stronghold and as a result, their business slow down to almost nothing over the years. Omar thought back to Habib. He seemed to be from another planet.

Omar lit a cigarette and started up the van. He checked the side mirror, waiting for an old Tarago piloted by a hijab-wearing woman to pass. So many people-movers in Lakemba, he thought. Impatiently, he revved the van loudly and when the road was clear, swung out fast. He sped not more than twenty metres, past Arja's Fruit Gardens, Sabbagh Patisserie and Lakemba Charcoal Chickens. Then, without indicating, he veered left into a space right in front of Master of Yeeros, where, with considerable ease, he would now make his next delivery.

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At just on three o'clock Omar arrived at the entrance to Bankstown Square mall. He tried to remember where Priceline was. He had heard of the store but had never had a reason to shop there. He vaguely remembered Farid's sister, Rashala, saying how she bought very cheap shampoo from Priceline. Omar traipsed around for several minutes in the vain hope that he would come across it. He decided he would have to ask someone. If he chose the wrong direction he could easily waste twenty minutes wandering the various arcades of the Square, and he did not want to be late. Dick Smith Electronics appeared and he thought about inquiring in there, but through the window he noticed the shop assistant on duty was the ungrateful Gary. Omar came across a charity raffle ticket kiosk in the middle of the arcade. He stepped up to the attendant, a corpulent grey-haired woman, and asked her the whereabouts of Priceline.

She looked at him closely, as if trying to fathom what business he might have there. She must have thought it was a reasonable request, because she continued: 'See the Franklins sign down the end of the arcade here?' She pointed, squinting through her spectacles. They were the type of glasses that automatically darkened in sunlight and the bright lights of the mall had activated the tinting. 'Keep walking straight past Franklins until you get to the Terry White Chemist but don't stop there, keep going! Keep walking around the bend and you should see Priceline directly. It's right next door to Best and Less, if I remember correctly. You can't miss it. Getting something for your mother, are you? And how about a raffle ticket? Fifty cents. All proceeds go to St Vincent de Paul.'

'Uh ... nah ... just browsing, y'know,' said Omar. 'Thanks very much, yeah, I'd better get going. Thanks.'

She sniffed and wiped her glasses with a corner of her smock. Omar took off down the arcade in the direction of the green Franklins sign. He heard her voice calling out after him: ‘They’re only fifty bloody cents!’

As instructed, Omar kept walking and, sure enough, the bright yellow Best and Less sign soon appeared. And there right next to it was Priceline. In front of Priceline were some benches and sitting on one of them was Belle. She did not see him approaching. She was sitting alone, her legs crossed, looking into a compact and applying some lipstick. Omar noticed that she was wearing a black top and, remembering his clothes shop fantasy, his heart fluttered. However, it was not a v-neck top. In addition, she was wearing jeans, tight denim jeans—not a short denim skirt. The outfit, however, was still compelling.

‘Hey there,’ he said as he approached.

‘Hey!’ Belle said, lowering the mirror.

‘So ...’ said Omar.

‘So ... here we are,’ said Belle.

Omar noticed an open plastic Priceline bag next to Belle. A register receipt lay in the bag but nothing else. ‘New lipstick, eh?’

‘Almost a good guess. New compact—on special, five ninety-nine. Not bad, don’t you reckon?’

‘Well I suppose, yeah, it looks like a good one ... mind if I have a seat?’ He hovered, waiting for her answer.

‘Go ahead. You might as well sit down and talk to me while I just put the finishing touches on this work of art, ha ha.’ She went back to applying the lipstick.

Omar sat and fidgeted for a moment.

‘So you been well?’ she asked, slurring her words slightly as she pouted and pursed her lips.

‘Yeah, been working a bit, y’know how it is. Gonna be able to pick up my flight simulator ... yeah ... did I tell you about that? It’s this cool thing where you can fly over all these cities around the world. It’s so realistic, mate, you should see it sometime ... what else? Yeah, I did some deliveries today. Didn’t get any hassles. Didn’t get any speeding tickets. Ha ha. Yeah, it’s been a good week. What about you?’

She snapped the compact shut and dropped it and the lipstick into her handbag.

‘I’ve had an OK time, I suppose. As far as things go. Need to get a job soon though. I can’t live on my pocket money, y’know what I mean?’

‘Mate, no way, for sure. Y’know we don’t even get any pocket money. It’s work or nothing in our family.’

‘My dad says that I should be able to live on thirty bucks a week. That’s a gyp! Nobody can live on thirty bucks a week! I’d like to see him live on thirty bucks a week! Anyway, let’s stop talking about cash. It’s depressing me. What do you want to do today?’

‘I dunno. Whatever is OK with me. I don’t mind. We could just hang out. Walk around for a while and look at stuff ... go get something to eat later. Hey! We could go to GamesBiz and I could show it to you—Flight Simulator 2000. They’ve got a demo, you’ll love it!’

‘All right, let’s go for a walk. Where is this place?’ Belle stood up.

‘It’s on the other side.’

They ambled around the Square making their way towards the games store. Every now and again Belle's attention would be caught by something in a shop window and she would move closer to get a better look. Omar could not help noticing how tight her black jeans were around her rounded, little bottom. They were not indecently tight at the front, though. She did not have what Sam would call a *camel toe*.

Belle said, 'Oh Sportsgirl! Can we go in? I wouldn't mind checking out their sale.'

Omar nodded his assent. It was a clothes shop. A girls' clothes shop. Suddenly excited, he could not think of anything to say. Under his tracksuit pants, in his loose Calvin Klein boxers, he felt the stirrings of an erection.

When they entered the store, Belle squealed at the sight of some greatly reduced accessories, then immediately said she could not afford them. As she browsed, Omar followed, his arms folded in front of him, self-conscious at being the only male in the store. There had been no further development with the hard-on. Despite his fantasy, Omar hoped Belle would not try on any clothes. He did not want to be seen alone in Sportsgirl.

He relaxed a little when another couple entered the store and began browsing. The male, a gangly, crop-haired skip in tan three-quarter pants and a Puma t-shirt, also walked around with his arms folded, giving quiet yet curt comments on items that interested his companion. Belle was now looking at tops. Not v-neck black tops, but shirts—blouses really, with buttons and fasteners and all sorts of patterns and prints.

'I'm just gonna try these on, OK?' she said to Omar. 'I won't be long.'



There was no invitation to accompany her. So much for his fantasy. Omar folded his arms even more tightly. He resisted the impulse to hover near the fitting room door. He drifted by the accessories counter but made a run for it when a salesgirl asked if he needed help with anything. He walked woodenly through the store, feeling that the only option was to keep moving. But to keep moving comfortably through a store you needed to browse. And it was very difficult for him to browse in Sportsgirl.

Then the girl who was with the gangly Puma guy went into the change room, a thick bundle of garments draped over her arm. The tall youth seemed just as alarmed as Omar. He rubbed his chin and looked around for cover. He spotted Omar and unconsciously made a move in his direction. Now the two males silently gravitated toward each other, though at no time were any words exchanged. They were also careful not to stand too close. A spot near a rack of halter neck tops became the unofficial male waiting area.

Then a voice called from over the partition: ‘Greg, could you get me one of those grey jackets in a ten please? These eights are super small!’

Greg looked around with panic in his eyes, as if he hoped that Omar might somehow also be named Greg and that it would be he who was encumbered with this mortifying task.

*‘Greg?’*

Greg’s arms were wound tightly around him as if he was wearing some kind of invisible straitjacket. ‘Yeah, all right, hang on!’ he said in a voice that was at first shrill, then too deep. He looked around the store, hopelessly. Meanwhile the salesgirl, easily assessing the situation, had made her way to where the grey jackets were displayed.

Belle emerged from the change room. The clothes that she had tried on were in a haphazard bunch in her arms.

‘Come on, Omar, none of these fit anyway. Let’s go.’

She dropped the pile on the nearest counter.

‘Are you sure? They could always get you another size?’ He looked over at the salesgirl who, with the smarting Greg, was rifling through the racks looking for a size ten.

‘Nah, I’m sure. C’mon, let’s go. Thanks!’ she called to the preoccupied attendant and hurried out of the store with Omar following close behind.

‘So, what’s the rush, eh?’ said Omar when they were back in the light and noise of the mall. He felt the blood beginning to circulate through his uncrossed arms.

‘Nothin’ much,’ said Belle. Just wanted to get out of there.’ She took a quick look over her shoulder.

‘Whatcha looking for?’ he asked, looking back over his own shoulder. There was the usual throng of shoppers. He looked at Belle. She seemed a little more relaxed. She was fiddling with her top, pulling it down at the front and back. Then Omar noticed a little splash of colour under her collar, a red and white pattern. He noticed the uneven fit of Belle’s top – it had been snug and smooth fitting but was now rucked and lumpy in places.

‘Ha,’ he exclaimed. ‘I know what you did!’

Belle grinned at him sideways. ‘What?’ she said innocently.

‘You scammer! You’ve got one of them tops on underneath! I can see it, mate. You scammer! No wonder you wanted to get out the door that fast. That’s a good one, that is—ha! You bloody went and nicked a top, didn’t ya?’

‘How do you know that’s all I nicked?’ said Belle. ‘Seeing as you’ve got x-ray vision and everything.’

Omar looked her up and down. Her jeans still clung smoothly to her hips like an indigo second skin. He scanned his eyes over her rear once more, just to make sure. ‘Doesn’t look like you’ve got anything on under those jeans—’

‘Is that right?’ demanded Belle. ‘You can tell, can ya? You’ve got a dirty mind, haven’t you!’ She giggled.

‘Nah ... nah ... I didn’t mean it like that! I’m sure you got something on, y’know ... y’know what I meant! It just doesn’t look like you put anything extra on under your jeans back there in the shop. That’s all I meant!’

‘Yeah, but how about this?’ said Belle, quickly looking back over her shoulder again. Satisfied that it was a clean getaway, she stopped and leaned forward towards Omar. She pulled her t-shirt collar away from her skin revealing the red and white top, but also another, a flimsy blue one, underneath.

‘Scored twice – whaddya reckon?’ she said proudly.

As well as the two garments Omar glimpsed a black bra strap and the swelling tops of her breasts.

‘Right,’ he said, his eyes flickering to and from the delicious sight.

When they passed the public toilets Belle disappeared inside to remove her spoils. Omar decided to use the men’s room. He entered a cubicle, dropped his pants and sat down. He thought back to the recent scene in Sportsgirl. The temptation came upon him to revisit his fantasy. In his mind, he began to expand and embellish the scene of Belle revealing the stolen tops. His hand slipped down to his groin.

Then he heard someone else entering the restrooms. Omar paused and sat very still. The man shuffled into the cubicle next to his. Omar heard him wheeze as he fumbled with his belt and his trousers fell to the floor. The thin plastic toilet seat protested as it bore the man's weight. Almost simultaneously, there was a gruesome torrent of splashing and farting. It was the sound of a bucket of soaking tea-towels being emptied into a sink. As the faceless person defecated, his breathing became even more laboured. He grunted and emitted a low moan. A vicious, viscous stench filled the low-ceilinged restroom. Omar fought the impulse to gag. He stood up, pulled up his pants and fled, not even pausing to wash his hands.

'Fuck!' he said to himself once he was back in the mall. Through his nostrils, he took in a deep lung-full of the unmistakable fusty fresh bread aroma of a Subway franchise and, like a yogi, slowly exhaled, cleansing himself of the fetid vapours from the toilet.

Belle came out of the ladies. 'You all right?' she said, swinging her bag.

'Yeah, yeah, fine. Those toilets just don't smell too good, y'know what I mean? C'mon, let's get out of here, eh? Shall we get something to eat?'

They walked in the direction of the food court and stopped at GamesBiz on the way. Omar asked the assistant if they could test the latest Flight Simulator.

'This is cool,' said Belle, as she commandeered a demo Concorde away from Charles de Gaulle Airport. 'This plane is *wicked*. It's like some kind of spaceship. Do they really have these over there?'

'Yeah, for sure,' said Omar. 'And in England, too. The Concorde is hard to fly but you should try taking off in a Bell helicopter. Hey, Bell! It's named after you!'

While Belle continued to play Omar paid his last instalment on the game and took possession of the box. They left the shop and headed for the food court. Belle found a clean, empty table while Omar purchased two upsized KFC meals.

‘Ta!’ said Belle, as Omar placed the tray in front of her.

‘Yeah, no worries, anytime, eh?’ said Omar.

They picked at their food self-consciously at first and then slowly relaxed. Soon they were eating with gusto. While they ate, they debated the merits of various types of food, concluding that McDonald’s was pretty good though slightly overrated, and that on a good day Hungry Jacks was unbeatable, though suffering overall due to a lack of consistency. Belle said that yeeros and doner kebabs were good but a little messy, especially if you had been drinking. Omar agreed but didn’t go further into Middle Eastern cuisine. It didn’t seem cool at that moment. Belle said that KFC was pretty damn good, though a bit on the expensive side, which made Omar feel generous for having paid for the meals.

They finished their burgers and slurped on their cokes, picking at the rapidly cooling chips until they could take no more.

‘That was all right, eh?’ said Omar, wiping his mouth. With his tongue he surreptitiously tried to dislodge what felt like a sesame seed from between his front teeth.

‘Yeah, thanks very much,’ said Belle. ‘That was really nice of you to pay.’

‘Yeah, no worries at all, y’know? So what do you wanna do now?’ asked Omar. He wished he had checked out what movies were showing at the multiplex so he could have had a suggestion ready. Perhaps they could go look.

‘Well ... I actually ... I might have to get going soon. What’s the time?’ Belle pulled her mobile from her bag, while Omar reached into his pocket for his.

‘Aw, shit, quarter to five already! I told my dad I’d be home by five-thirty cos he’s going to drop me off at my mum’s place. I’m going to stay the night there. I usually live with my dad cos it’s closer to school and everything, but most weekends and sometimes in the holidays I go stay with Mum.’

‘That’s cool,’ said Omar, trying not to look let down. He had been sure the date was going really well. ‘That’s cool,’ he repeated, not being able to think of anything else.

‘It’s a bummer,’ said Belle brightly. ‘Because, y’know, I would have loved to hang out a bit more. We could have gone into town or something and hung out there, don’t you reckon? Maybe we should do that sometime, eh?’

‘Yeah, maybe some other time, eh?’ he said. He felt his ears getting a little hot. He looked down.

‘There’s something I should say, though.’

‘What?’

‘Um ... I’ve got a boyfriend. We’ve been going out for five months.’

‘Right.’ If he had been disappointed at her early departure, Omar now felt like a vacuum cleaner had been inserted into his chest cavity and switched on.

‘It doesn’t mean we can’t hang out. I just thought you should know. Is that cool?’

‘Sure.’ Omar did not feel cool with it. He felt intensely betrayed and confused at the same time. Why was she telling him now? Did she want him to make his intentions clear? Did she want him to put in his bid? She said she still wanted to hang out. What for?

‘Well, I should head off then, I suppose.’

‘Yeah, cool. Uh ... I’ll walk with you to the bus.’

They got up, leaving their trays. Belle glanced back at the table to see if she had forgotten anything. Omar weighed up the pros and cons of trying to kiss her at the bus stop, but the matter was taken out of his hands. As they surfaced from the mall into the sunlight Belle squinted over towards the bus terminus. Two buses stood waiting.

‘There’s a nine three two there! There won’t be another one for at least forty minutes,’ she said.

That fucken damn bus, thought Omar.

‘I better run!’ She turned around to Omar and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. ‘Thanks. That was cool fun. Text us or something. See ya soon!’ With that she was off, swinging her plastic bag of booty from side to side as she ran.

Omar watched her go, willing the vexatious 932 to close its door and heave itself away. But it just stood there spluttering and wheezing, like the dumb, unfeeling beast it was. Belle reached the open door and turned back to see if Omar was still there. With a final little wave she wrapped the plastic bag handles around her wrist and hopped on board.

Clutching his flight simulator under one arm, Omar gave a limp wave in return and turned to re-enter the mall. He pulled some change from his pocket. There were a few gold coins and some twenty-cent pieces. More than enough. He was going straight to Woolworths to purchase his first ever packet of cigarettes.

‘She’s a virgin, eh?’

‘Who’s a virgin?’

‘Salwa, who else? Not for much longer, though—she’s totally flipped for me.’

‘That’s good. You’re engaged and all that.’

‘I reckon if I told her to drop everything and have my babies right now, she would. I’m telling ya, mate, she would. I’m gonna marry that chick if it’s the last thing I ever do.’

‘That’s why you got engaged, eh?’

‘She said that we could do it, tomorrow night. She said it’s not important to her that we wait for the wedding night.’

Omar didn’t reply. He continued packing the flatbread into the clear plastic bags, one-two-three-four-five-six-seven at a time.

‘Tomorrow night’s the night. None of this back of the van bullshit, either. And fuck Clarence Road. *As if!* I got us a classy hotel room in Olympic Park. Brand new, just finished—four stars, the Ibus, Ibiz or something like that. Cheap rooms—the hotel’s all built but they got nobody coming until the Olympics. Mate, we could have stayed there for a week if we wanted to! I’m gonna order champagne, chocolates, everything, mate. It’s gonna be the night of her life.’

‘How was it meeting her Moma and Baba last week?’ asked Omar.

‘They were OK. They were a bit suss of course. Y’know. “*Who the fuck are you? You wanna marry our daughter?*” Then I realised. After two seconds you



could see it in their eyes. They're like panicking because they think I've already stuck one up her. Y'know, they think their little girl's pregnant. Her old man, his face goes all red like he's bitten on a chilli. He can't say nothing. Then we tell them that we haven't set a date for the wedding yet, there's no hurry, and I tell them about my business plans for the future. Then they start to relax a bit. You know how it is. Just got to work the old charm a little. Mate, if this was a hundred years ago they'd probably give me Salwa's little sister too!

'Remember, Salwa's got to come over to our house for dinner soon. You promised Moma, eh? It was supposed to be this week.'

'Yeah, yeah, whenever. I told Moma we was too busy this week too. We'll do it next or the week after. Whenever.'

Omar stacked several plastic trays filled with the packets of flatbread and carried them towards the rear of the bakery. Sam remained where he was atop the counter, his feet swinging as he spoke. He raised his voice so that Omar could hear outside by the back door where the van was parked. Baba was at the front of the bakery chatting in Lebanese with some of his friends. Sam seemed unconcerned at the possibility of them overhearing him.

'So, she shows them the ring and if they weren't convinced before they sure were then. I tell you what—diamonds, mate. If you could just work out how to make diamonds you could rule the world. Anyway, this girl—she *trusts* me. That's the thing, bro. When I tell her about my plans she asks me questions about them, not like those other dumb moles. She says stuff like, "How will you raise the capital?" and, mate, I nearly fall off my chair. I think quick and I say to her, "We'll get one of them business loans from the bank" and she smiles and squeezes my hand. She's

not laughing, don't get me wrong. She's smiling because she believes me! That fucken chick is something.'

Omar re-entered the bakery. 'It's all loaded up. Let's go,' he said.

'Here, I'll drive. You relax,' said Sam, hopping off the counter and reaching for the keys that Omar jangled in his hand.

With the van's engine whining they quickly reversed from the alleyway and made their way onto Punchbowl Road before turning off down Victoria Road. Their first and furthest delivery today was in Campsie.

'We got to stop at a chemist or something,' Sam said suddenly. 'I gotta get some frangers for tomorrow.'

They turned left onto Canterbury Road and drove on. After a little while Sam pulled into a small shopping centre. It was made up of a seven-day supermarket, TAB, charcoal chicken shop and pharmacy. Sam hopped out. Conscious of the nature of Sam's purchase, Omar waited in the van.

'You should have seen the girl working in there, mate,' his brother said when a returned a few minutes later. 'Phwoar! Vietnamese chick but tall! Sexy arse! I grab this twelve-pack of Lifestyles and I'm about to pay her and I go, "Wait a minute, I'll probably need a 24-pack" So I come back with a 24-pack and I'm looking at her straight in the eyes the whole time when I pay for it, and I touch her hand when I give her the money. Mate! She was on fire! Looked straight back at me and gave me a big smile. Ha ha! Should drop past here just before they close up, eh?' Sam started the van and revved the engine. They got back onto Canterbury Road.

'She was so hot, bro! Anyway, I've got to keep my mind on the job. Got to make sure it all goes well tomorrow night. It's all right when you're with those

other sluts. You don't have to think about anything much else except where you're gonna shoot your load. But tomorrow's gonna be different. It's her first time, like I said. It's got to be special.'

'Are you gonna go somewhere first?'

'Yeah! What do you reckon? I'm taking her to Unicorn Chinese at Bankstown. It's supposed to be good—Ali went there for his brother's bucks night. It's another proper restaurant. That's the go, mate. Last Friday night when I took her to Vladimiro's, mate, she was almost begging for it afterwards. Just about.'

'When do you think you'll get married?'

Sam thought for a moment, chewing at his bottom lip. 'That's a good question, bro,' he replied. 'It's hard to say. Like I said, Salwa is the girl for me but you don't want to get tied down too soon, y'know what I mean? You want to enjoy yourself for a while, not that you can't enjoy yourself when you're married. But you have responsibilities and things then. You have to think about your business and your house and your children and your wife.'

'Yeah, that's true. Look at Baba. He does a good job. He came out here with Moma and started a business and had us,' said Omar.

'There's a lot you don't know about Baba, little bro.' Sam had a smirk on his face as he gripped the wheel.

'Like what?'

'Don't worry about it. Forget it.'

'I said, like what? Tell me what you were going to say.'

'Nothing. I'm just saying Baba had a life before he got married just like you and me have got a life before we got married. You probably never thought about it, eh? That's all.'

Sam was right. Omar had never really thought about Baba as a young man. At home there were a few old photos of him with thick hair and a thin moustache but Baba never spoke about his youth. Omar realised he didn't have the slightest idea of what his father's life might have been like.

One by one they finished the deliveries through the rest of the afternoon and returned to the bakery. Omar collected the empty trays before Sam took off in the van on business of his own. In the back room Omar was piling the trays on the shelf above the counter when his father walked in from the front. Kamir was whistling in the same tuneless way that Sam did. He grunted at Omar and asked how the deliveries had gone. Omar told him they had finished in record time.

'Very good. When your mother and I are old you can deliver hot bread to us at home!' said Kamir.

'Ha,' said Omar, trying to be good-natured.

Kamir began to potter around the storeroom, tidying things and stacking large sacks of flour and sugar. Omar placed the last tray on the shelf. If there was a chance to ask Kamir about his life before Moma, Sam and himself, it was surely now. But where did you start? He took a deep breath and paused, wiping his sweaty palms on a tea towel.

'See ya, Baba. I'm gonna head home and do some homework,' he called.

Kamir was in the middle of hoisting a ten-kilo sack of wholemeal wheat flour to the top of a pile. Without looking up he grunted a gruff but not unfriendly goodbye. Omar walked out the back door and into the alleyway.

The next night Omar sat between Farid and Sam in the van as they trundled southwest from Greenacre.

‘So she’s got this overhead projector thing going and it’s got a diagram of the side of a cock and another one of a cunt, y’know, like a ... what do you call it? A cutout ... a cross-section! So there’s a cross-section and it’s all really boring. No photos or nothing. And this teacher, Mrs Prabhakar, is saying that you always have to wear condoms, right? She’s telling us how they protect your dick from AIDS and all that other stuff. And most of the class is getting all tense and no-one’s really saying anything because they’re all virgins and wouldn’t know the first thing about it—except for me and Ali. We’re cracking jokes left, right and centre and having a good laugh. Seeing if we could embarrass the teacher. But she’s cool this lady, she’s like an ice-queen. Then she starts going on about homos and how they really have to wear condoms because of the dangers of “A-NUHLL” sex—that’s how she said it—and then the whole class just goes off, yelling and laughing and shouting out “POOFTAHS!” and stuff like that. And she’s screaming for everyone to be quiet and saying she’s gonna give us all a detention. She looks like she’s finally gonna lose it.

‘Anyway, soon everybody calms down and I stick up my hand and say to her, “Mrs Prabhakar, you know how you say you got to wear a condom if you’re gonna roo ... go with a chick? So you don’t catch nothing off of ’em? Well what happens when you got a threesome going? Does that mean you have to put one condom on when you roo ... go with the first chick, and then when you’re gonna go

into the second chick take it off and put a new one on, and then can you put the first one back on when you go back into the first chick, and then what about if you wanna do A-NUHLL with one of them, do you have to use a new one again?" And, mate, I'm saying this with a completely straight face and the whole class is cracking up, especially when I say "A-NUHLL", and she looks at me and she tries to say something then stops, then she tries again and then stops again, and then she starts to shake and then she just loses it and starts crying and runs out of the room! It was sick! The whole class was going off, the chicks and everything!' Sam slapped the steering wheel and laughed.

'I remember that teacher. She had a nervous breakdown!' said Farid. 'High school, mate! We should just go out and get jobs or apprenticeships after primary school, don't ya think?'

They turned into a wide tree-lined avenue in Condell Park and pulled up in a parking space in front of a large two-storey cream brick house. Sam changed his mind and swerved out from the space, driving up the street and parking several doors down.

'Right, youse guys, just stay in the van. No getting out and smoking or stretching your legs or anything. Her parents are away for a couple of days but I don't want any fucken neighbours telling them stories when they get back.' Farid grunted and Omar nodded. Sam slammed the door and walked up the street.

'Mate, she's a nice chick, eh, that Salwa. Who would have thought Sam would get married?' said Farid.

'Yeah, she's different, all right. Got a good brain too. Very good at business, Sam reckons,' said Omar. 'He's taking her out to a Chinese restaurant tonight. The *Unicorn*,' he added.

‘Mate, if I had a girlfriend like that I’d be taking her out for dinner every week. Money doesn’t come into it, eh?’

They sat in silence for a while. In a few minutes Sam knocked on the window and opened the passenger door. Salwa stood beside him. Omar hopped out and shyly said hello, before pulling open the back door. He and Farid got into the back of the van. Salwa climbed into the front passenger seat.

‘So, Salwa. It’s very good to see you today. How are things going at the credit union?’ Farid was taking unusual care with his pronunciation.

‘What’s happened to you?’ barked Sam as he started the van. ‘Are you talking to a Japanese tourist or something? Or did you take a Valium while I was gone?’

‘Very funny,’ said Farid. ‘I was just being polite to your fiancée.’

‘That’s sweet,’ said Salwa, craning her neck around and smiling into the back of the van. ‘What are you guys up to tonight?’

‘I think we’ll go play some pool, eh,’ said Omar.

‘Yeah, probably shoot some pool. You guys should meet us later, eh?’ said Farid. Omar gave him a nudge.

‘I think Salwa and me might go catch a late movie after dinner. Eh, Salwa?’ said Sam.

‘Sure, yeah, that would be good,’ said Salwa, somewhat stiffly. ‘Maybe we’ll come for a game of pool another time.’

‘Yeah sure,’ said Farid, looking embarrassed.

In about fifteen minutes they reached Sylvio’s pool hall. Farid and Omar clambered from the van and waved goodbye as Sam and Salwa took off.

‘How was I supposed to know they were going for a root?’ protested Farid.  
‘I didn’t think Salwa would be doing it yet, y’know?’

‘Forget it,’ said Omar. He didn’t feel comfortable passing on any  
information to Farid. Sam would be crowing about it all too soon.

\*

The next day Omar made his way to Baalbek. He entered the bakery to find Sam  
manning the front counter.

‘Baba’s gone to Lakemba to bank some money. We can start the deliveries  
when he comes back.’ Sam was obviously in need of a little extra cash. Perhaps  
being engaged was an expensive business.

‘OK, cool. I’m starving.’ Omar helped himself to some biscuits from the  
display counter and then took a chair.

Sam did not waste any time. ‘Mate! What a night! WHAT A NIGHT! That  
chick is mine. SHE IS MINE!’

‘So everything went good, did it?’

‘Good? GOOD? It was fucken MAGIC, mate! She loved it! I’ve got  
scratches all down my back, mate, I swear to God! Y’know, I thought she would be  
a bit scared, worried that it might hurt, y’know, that kind of thing, but like I said,  
she trusts me. It took a while to get warmed up but then BAM! Bit of blood on the  
sheets, always a good sign, no damaged goods. But she was sweet. Could’ve gone  
all night but she said she was getting a bit sore after a while. I said, “That’s OK, my  
love! It’s not all about the sex, it’s about us, eh?”’



The bell jingled as a woman with a blue rinse and wearing a floral print dress entered the shop. 'One white loaf, please,' she said, putting some coins on the counter.

'One white ... She loved it, mate! ... Sliced? No worries ... The bathroom had one of those corner spas ... One dollar sixty thanks ... We were at it in that spa for ages. Beautiful. We made up our minds it's the first thing we're gonna get when we buy our own place ... Forty cents change. No worries ... I taught her a few tricks while we was in the spa, that's for sure. Let's say she can use her mouth for more than just talking, ha ha ... Thanks, see ya later ... Anyway, I don't want to go into too much detail, I'm gonna marry this chick, don't forget!'

The bell jingled as the elderly woman departed.

'So anyway, I drop her home this morning and she kisses me really passionately on the lips and tells me she loves me like she's loved no-one else in her whole life. How's that, mate! How's that for a chick, eh?'

'That's great,' said Omar. An image of Belle ran through his mind and he felt a pang of hurt. He did not love Belle but he knew he could and would if only she could and would. He wondered how he could make Belle love him the way Salwa loved Sam. *Adore* him. He supposed that unlike Salwa, until yesterday at least, Belle was doing it. Omar knew. She was a cool skip chick. He wondered who her boyfriend was and where she had met him. Lucky bastard. Could a girl only love you that way if you were the first one? Omar decided that it didn't matter. He would not give up trying with Belle just yet.

Omar unlocked the front door and they entered the house. The entrance foyer was cool and dark. His new friend Wardi followed him inside. The house smelt faintly of cooking odours mixed with the scent of domestic floor cleaner. Wardi looked around and saw some family photographs on the wall.

‘Ha, ha, is that you and your brother?’ he asked, pointing to a portrait of Omar and Sam, taken when they were much younger. They were dressed formally, in a very stiff-necked way. In the photo Sam’s hair, parted to the side, gave off an oily sheen as if he was wearing Brylcreem. ‘My Moma used to make us wear shit like that, too,’ Wardi added.

‘Yeah, geez, I know, it’s embarrassing, mate. And they flip out when they see how much cool clothes cost. Moma’s like, “How much did you pay for that shoe, you shouldn’t waste your money!” and I tell her that they cost seventy-nine bucks and she freaks out: “Why you waste your money, is so expensive, why you need shoes like that?” Imagine what she’d say if I told her these Air Maxes were really a hundred and ninety-nine bucks.’

‘Yeah, my Moma’s the same, mate, they just don’t get it. They’re tight with the cash, except on stupid things. Like expensive plates and cups, y’know?’

They dumped their schoolbags in the hallway and went into the kitchen. Omar poured them each a glass of coke and then led the way to his room.

On the walls were the usual posters of bikini girls and rugby league stars that he had cut from magazines. But Wardi’s attention was drawn to a large poster-size print that dominated one wall, facing the foot of the single bed.

‘Mate, what’s that? Some kind of space shuttle?’ he asked, peering at the array of dials and levers detailed in the poster.

‘Boeing 747-400, mate, full wide-view photo of the cockpit. Flying towards a sunset. Chasing it, mate. I’m gonna pilot one of those one day, I swear to God. Like John Travolta, mate—did you know he was a pilot?’

‘Nah. No bullshit? Travolta, eh. That is weird, mate. He could afford to fly first-class anytime and he wants to be a pilot. Why not just pay someone else to fly you around?’

‘Yeah, but it’s like cars. You win the lottery and you buy yourself an F355 Berlinetta—’

‘That’s a Ferrari, right?’

‘Yeah. A Ferrari. So you can finally afford this immaculate car, mate, you got the chicks drooling and all your mates want to come cruising with you—you’re gonna want to be the one driving it, eh?’

‘So?’

‘So if you can afford to buy a huge jet, y’know, a private plane, right, maybe it would be more fun to be able to fly it yourself, you get me?’

‘Yeah ... right. But not many people are gonna be able to see you cruising in one of those things, y’know what I mean. If no-one can see you, better to be with the chicks in the back from the start. Let someone else do the flying, eh?’

‘Yeah, right, chicks in the back—you ever heard of autopilot? Try that in a Ferrari ...’

Omar switched on the beige PC on his neat desk. ‘Anyway, let me just dial up, man, and we’ll have a look at the Bulldogs site.’

Omar got another chair from the kitchen while the computer booted up. In a couple of minutes they were on the Canterbury Bulldogs rugby league website. Wardi had never visited the site before and was excited at this discovery. He began to read stats from a match report.

‘Check it out, mate, the weekend’s results. Cool, eh? Round eight versus Wests Tigers. *EL MASRI!* Two tries, yes! Halligan six out of six, what a legend, eh?’

Though Wardi’s family had only recently moved from Melbourne he had quickly learnt the rules of rugby league and was already an avowed Canterbury fan. Strictly speaking, Omar was a Canterbury fan too, but for the most part feigned interest in the game to have something to talk about with the boys.

Wardi continued to peer at the monitor. ‘Next week, St George-Illawarra, Stadium Australia. That’s not going to be as easy as beating Wests, you watch and see. Still, if we can get El Masri firing ...’ He rambled on as Omar tidied a few things around his room. They heard the front door open and then Sam’s voice, humming a tune.

‘You home, Omar?’ Sam stuck his head into the room. ‘What’s happening in here, you picked up somebody on your way home, bro? You two gay boys going at it or what!’

‘Yeah right, piss off. Hey, Sam,’ said Omar. ‘This is my friend, Wardi, from school. He and his brother just moved from Melbourne last year. We’re checking out the Bulldogs site, eh?’

‘Hey,’ said Wardi, raising his chin and shaking hands with Sam.

Sam pushed in between the two youths and took the mouse. ‘El Masri unstoppable, eh? That’s cos he’s got fucken balls, right?’

‘Yeah, he’s got fucken balls,’ said Wardi. Omar murmured agreement. The three stared at the screen. Sam began to haphazardly click at links.

‘This thing is full of stats, mate. After a while it gets boring, eh? What’s that new thing called, Omar, the one you showed me, the new one where you can find anything? Gargle? Giggle?’

‘Google,’ said Omar.

‘Yeah, right, how do you get there?’

Omar typed in Google’s address.

‘OK,’ said Sam, brushing Omar’s hands away from the keyboard. He voiced the letters as he began to type. ‘F-U-C, shit, pressed the wrong one, K, that’s it, P-I-C-S.’ Now you hit this button here and press that and there you go. Let’s see what we get, eh?’

In a few seconds the search results appeared. Sam beamed at them. ‘See, check it out, I got over one million answers! Now, all youse got to do is find one that’s free, that’s all. Most of these cunts want your credit card or something before they’ll show you anything, but some of them, they’re free ... OK ... check this out ... *Russian insect girls*, fucken freaky shit ... no, hang on a minute ... *Russian incest girls* ... yeah, right, ha ha, that *is* twisted, mate, let’s check that out ...’

Sam clicked on the link. The screen turned white and appeared to be loading.

‘Wait for it, wait for it, it’s coming, those freaky Russian girls are coming ... these things always take a long time, y’know, for the good ones to arrive ...’

After two minutes nothing had appeared.

‘What a fucken rip-off, mate, how much are you paying for an hour of this internet shit? We should go down there and get our fucken money back, for fucken wasting our time!’

‘You get twenty-five hours a month, flat rate. Try this one,’ said Omar after pressing the back button. He clicked on a link. Soon a gaudy banner and several thumbnail pictures revealed themselves.

‘Then you just click on one of these to make it bigger,’ explained Omar, choosing a thumbnail. The enlarged picture showed a fleshy looking girl fellating an older man on a boat. The man was greying and paunchy and the girl had a faded red tattoo on one of her breasts.

‘What a fucken dog, mate!’ said Sam. ‘And look at the face on that dirty old cunt! His fucken false teeth are going to fall out if he doesn’t close his mouth!’ He leant forward. They viewed the other pictures in the series. Besides fellatio there were several positions of intercourse, a return to the fellatio and then a finale of the man ejaculating over the girl’s breasts. The tattoo was rendered even more indistinguishable.

‘Fucken dog-slut-cum-drinking-whore,’ said Sam. ‘I wouldn’t fuck her if you paid me a million dollars.’ He bent forward again to have an even closer look.

Wardi had been quiet while they looked at the pictures. Now he piped up. ‘That tattoo was shit. What was it? A flower or a love heart or what?’

‘I think it’s a red rose with some writing underneath,’ said Omar. He clicked on another link. ‘*Next free gallery.* Let’s see what this one is.’

Another page of thumbnails opened up. This time the participants both seemed to be of a similar age.

‘She’s all right,’ said Wardi.

‘Better than that last slag,’ said Sam.

The thumbnails showed an attractive woman, aged at least twenty-five, in a school uniform. The first few photos showed her getting into various stages of undress ably assisted by a thickset man whose black plastic framed spectacles suggested he was a schoolteacher. A blackboard and desks indicated they were in a classroom.

‘Probably stayed back for detention,’ explained Sam. ‘Or wants an A+ for something.’ The series progressed to include the arrival of another man dressed in overalls, who might have been a janitor. There was the usual variety of positions. The series ended with the obligatory ejaculation, this time a double emission over the girl’s face.

‘That’s better!’ said Sam. ‘That’s not bad, that one. It had a story to it, y’know? Not just some dirty old cunt with a fucken fat bitch, you know what I mean?’

Omar and Wardi mumbled some agreement, still looking at the photo currently on the screen. Omar clicked back to a scene in which the janitor had bent the girl over a desk and entered her from behind. He had marginally inserted a gnarled looking thumb into the student’s anus. Meanwhile, she performed fellatio on her teacher, who stood in front of the desk.

‘Hope that workman washes his hands before he goes home for dinner!’ said Sam.

‘He better use a nailbrush, eh?’ said Wardi.

‘Solvool too!’ added Omar. They laughed.

Just then they heard the sound of the front door opening.

‘That’ll be Moma,’ said Omar, fumbling for the mouse. He quickly closed the page and then typed an address into the browser. The Bulldogs page appeared again.

‘Hey, Moma. We’re in Omar’s room, eh?’ Sam called into the hallway.

‘Hello, boys,’ said Yasri, sticking her head around the door. ‘You back already. Oh, hello,’ she said, noticing Wardi and smiling.

‘Hey, Moma, this is my friend, Wardi,’ said Omar. He continued in Lebanese. *His father and mother are Abdul-Muiz Wahab and Aminah Wahab. His brother, his twin brother is Nikko. They moved here from Melbourne a few months ago. They’ve got the butcher’s shop on Punchbowl Road. They took it over from Aziz.*

‘Hello, Wardi,’ Yasri said again. *My husband, Kamir—Abu-Sami—has spoken to your father many times already. It is not far from our bakery. You have been to Baalbek with Omar yet?*

*Yes, Aunty, Omar has shown me around. I have tasted your bread. Very beautiful bread. My parents think so too.*

Yasri smiled. *Thank you, we are very proud of our shop. Nineteen years since we have opened Baalbek. Everybody in Sydney knows our shop.*

‘Every Lebbo in Sydney, that is,’ said Sam. He continued. *It’s the best Leb bread in town but Baba still drives a crappy old Camry.*

*OK, Sami, you don’t know how lucky you are to be here. In Lebanon we didn’t have a car—*

*Yeah, right, Moma, no worries ... see you, I got to go call Ali.* Sam left the room, sliding past his mother through the door.



Omar made some nervous clicks with the mouse, hoping he had not left any porn windows open.

*What are you looking at? Football?* asked Yasri. Omar knew that rugby would be enough to make her eyes glaze over.

*Wardi, would you like to eat dinner with us tonight? It would be very nice if you could stay.*

*Thank you, Aunt, but I should be going home soon. My homework, you see. And later I have to help my father clean the shop.*

*OK, another time then.* Yasri smiled and left. She could be heard singing a Lebanese love song in the kitchen.

‘Geez,’ said Omar. ‘That would have been embarrassing, mate.’

‘It’s like it would be embarrassing enough if your dad caught you, but at least he might understand, y’know? But your mum, mate, you would never be able to look her in the eye again, y’know what I mean?’

‘Your Baba’s probably cooler than mine about stuff like that,’ said Omar.

Omar had been clicking idly on links on the Bulldogs site. He closed down the browser and inserted a CD-ROM into the drive. ‘Hey, check this out. It’s cool, mate. Flight Simulator 2000. You can choose your aircraft and everything. It’s as real as it gets, y’know, without actually flying a real plane, eh?’ The disc loaded and Omar chose an aircraft.

‘Yeah, that’s not bad,’ said Wardi. ‘You can learn how to fly from your bedroom. Pity there isn’t something like that for cars, eh?’

‘There is, but it’s just not as good,’ responded Omar as he began taxiing a Learjet 45 onto the runway. He took off smoothly and before long was cruising over the New York skyline.

‘That’s pretty cool, man. Wow, check that city out, mate, it’s like the real thing.’

‘It *is* the real thing. It’s New York City just like it is with all the details. This has got six cities with high-density detail. You got Paris, London, LA, and some more American ones. Then there’s a bunch of other cities with less detail.’

Omar flew around for a while and then showed Wardi how to use the joystick. He had a turn. His plane of choice was a Concorde.

‘This is *cool*, mate. I see what you mean now. This is much better than a Ferrari.’ He was in the process of buzzing the Eiffel Tower. ‘Fucken *excellent*, mate. Hang on, hang on, I’m losing it, I’m losing it. Ha! The Concorde crashed into a large park near the centre of Paris. ‘What’s wrong with this, mate? That’s not a crash. It looks like a paper plane sticking out of some grass. It’s just stopped, eh? Where’s the explosion, y’know, the ball of flames and stuff? They got to put that in, don’t they?’

‘I guess they’re working on it. But this has got much better graphics than those other ones like Flight Unlimited 3. Anyway, why would you want to crash?’ asked Omar, resetting the program for him. ‘Mate, it’s a *flight* simulator, not a crash simulator.’

‘Yeah, but it’s fun, y’know. It’s like watching the motorbike racing. You watch it for the prangs!’ Wardi was again piloting the Concorde over Paris.

‘Yeah, well y’see this isn’t about prangs. It’s about getting used to the real thing. If you wanna see lots of blood and big explosions you should get into *Doom* and *Quake*. In this you’re meant to be able to handle stuff like altitude and weather—turbulence and ice on the runway and shit.’

‘Turbo, turbo!’ yelled Wardi as he pulled back on the Concorde’s throttle. He put it into a spin and directed it towards the Seine. ‘Watch this, we’re going to do a water landing, mate! Put on your life jackets!’ The Concorde hit the water, vibrated and then came to a quick standstill. ‘The river isn’t very realistic either, is it, mate? Like a big tub of jelly!’ said Wardi.

Omar took the controls and chose a Cessna 182S. ‘See, the jet’s cool and everything, but it’s a different challenge to fly a light plane, with props, y’know what I mean? You have to be careful to maintain altitude because you can drop three hundred feet in seconds and not even know it.’

Wardi stared at the screen impassively as Omar guided the Cessna around the San Francisco Bay area. After a few minutes Wardi rose.

‘OK, mate, I’d better get going. Catch ya soon,’ he said.

‘No worries, I’ll see you out.’

Wardi yelled a polite goodbye to Omar’s mother as they walked to the front door. Yasri called out for him to come again soon. Omar waited on the verandah until Wardi had left the front gate and then returned to his room eager to resume his joy flight in the windy skies above San Francisco.

Omar woke up on the couch. He sat up, rubbing his neck and stretching it around and from side to side. Kamir, as was often the case on a Saturday afternoon, sat dozing in his favourite armchair, sinking back into the floral pattern as if a faraway meadow was embracing him with its perfumed flowers and soft grasses. His feet were stretched out in front of him on the varnished pine coffee table. A shaft of dusty sunlight cut across the newspaper pages that lay over his lap.

Omar sat up. The rest of the house was quiet. Yasri must have been out visiting. She often went to see friends in the neighbourhood at this time. He did not know where Sam was.

Kamir opened his lips and muttered something.

‘What was that, Baba?’ Omar asked, quietly.

Kamir remained motionless in the chair, except for the steady rise and fall of his chest. Omar stood up and stretched. Kamir said the words again: *Habibti ... Habibti!*

Omar thought for a second. The meaning of the word filtered through. Sweetheart? Kamir’s sweetheart? Was he dreaming about Yasri?

Feeling guilty of some kind of trespass Omar crept from the lounge and went into his own room, quietly shutting the door behind him. He lay down on the bed and dispelled any uncomfortable thoughts about his parents and intimacy. Within minutes he had once again dozed off into a warm and delicious afternoon slumber.

Omar guided the van through the main car park at Bankstown Square. He looked around for Belle, trying to appear nonchalant, as if he was just searching for a space and minding the traffic. That was the key. Stay cool.

There was no sign of her. He pulled in to a loading zone near the main entrance and lit up a cigarette. Omar was smoking between three and ten Benson & Hedges a day now. He felt fine—if anything the smoke upset his eyes more than his throat and lungs. He waved away some annoying tendrils after taking another shallow drag.

He hoped Belle would be on time. He was also afraid she might ring or text to cancel at the last minute. When Omar had called her after his nap, she seemed happy enough to hear from him but when he had asked if she would like to hang out later that afternoon, she had hesitated for a few moments. She said something about having to visit a friend. Then she had quickly assented. Omar said he would meet her in the car park at the Square near the bus terminus and that she should look for a white van. They would go for a cruise.

There was a knock on the passenger side window. Omar turned to see Belle pressed against the glass, making a face at him. He leaned over and unlocked the door.

‘Hey, didn’t you see me waving at you back there?’ she said as she got into the van clutching her little cloth handbag.

‘Nah, sorry, where were you?’

‘You drove right past me just back there. It’s amazing you didn’t see me the way you were rubber-necking all over the joint.’

Omar let the remark pass. ‘Do you want a cigarette?’ he asked, offering the pack.

‘No thanks, gave up when I was fourteen. Ha ha. That’s sick, eh?’

‘Yeah, I’ll give up too before I get old and get cancer,’ said Omar, glancing at Belle as he turned the ignition key. She was wearing blue jeans today, tight again, and a snug red t-shirt with a darker striped pattern running through it. She wore slip-on leather shoes. Omar imagined his friends accidentally bumping into them walking down the street together, and was proud.

‘So this is the van, eh?’

‘Yep. I’m gonna get something better one day. This is all right for now. You know, A to B. Plus I don’t have to pay for petrol or anything. It all goes down on the business account at the Shell on Canterbury Road. Cool, huh?’

‘Yeah, for sure. It doesn’t matter how you get there as long as you get there in the end.’

Omar pulled out of the car park and made his way around the Square before turning west onto Marion Street.

‘Hey, so where are we going?’

‘It’s a bit of surprise,’ said Omar. ‘Maybe you’ve been there already, I dunno.’

‘Right,’ said Belle. She looked perturbed for a moment but then brightened again. ‘Are you taking me bowling?’ she asked, laughing.

‘Bowling? Why would I take you bowling?’ asked Omar.

‘I went out with a guy, well we didn’t really go out—not for long anyway—this guy I used to know, well, the first time he took me out properly, he took me bowling. Seriously. It wasn’t like he wanted to go just for a laugh or something. He was serious about it. He was right into it. We get there and we put those dumb looking shoes on—he brings his own pair—doesn’t even notice they look funny cos he’s so used to them. And then he’s showing me how to hold the balls and how to choose the best size for how skinny my fingers are, and all that. It was intense. Like, I really want to learn how to keep scores! The funny thing was that I had quite a good time in the end. He was really sweet. He actually loved bowling and really wanted me to have a good time. That’s why I ... well, I did go out with him for that little while.’

‘So, what happened?’

‘Later I found out that he was thinking of becoming a born-again. He’d started going to some whacky new church out at Baulkham Hills. That was way too much to handle.’

Omar did not know whether to feel glad that Belle seemed to be so comfortable opening up to him, or to be resentful that she was obviously so much more experienced than him. He did know that he was extremely jealous of this ten-pin-bowling Christian dickhead. What a loser! At least the fact that he was a Christian might have meant that he and Belle had never had a root. But she’d said he was only *thinking* of becoming a born-again Christian. He had probably not held back from getting a quick one in beforehand.

As these thoughts ran through Omar’s mind, he said, ‘Well, like my brother would say, it’s good to know how to treat a girl.’

‘Dead right, mate,’ said Belle. ‘That attitude will get you everywhere, ha ha!’

They continued to chat agreeably and Omar felt his tension beginning to drift away. He drove unconsciously, working up and down through the gears as necessary, talking freely and occasionally laughing. Before long they had taken a left turn down Edgar Street and eventually a right onto Milperra Road heading west. After some time on Milperra Road the industrial buildings on the right gave way to a strip of grassy, bushy parkland. On the left side of Milperra Road the familiar array of car yards, takeaway franchises and miscellaneous factories and businesses continued along as far as the eye could see.

Omar turned the van right at a set of traffic lights. The narrow strip of parkland had ended. A large, new looking KFC stood brightly on that corner.

‘Hey, right, KFC. You know I love it. Problem is though, I just had lunch,’ said Belle. ‘But that’s cool, you eat. I can get a coke or something.’

‘Nah, we’re not going into the KFC. We’re only going to park the van here. Unless you really want to get a drink.’

‘No, I’m OK,’ said Belle, looking curious. ‘So where are we going?’

‘You’ll see. It’s good because it’s obvious you haven’t been here before.’

Omar parked the van in the KFC car park and they got out. He led Belle towards the narrow strip of park that flanked Milperra Road.

‘Come through here,’ he said. ‘You’ll see, it’s really good.’

They walked into the bushy area, which was bisected by a three-foot deep canal. The canal was a little over a metre wide. Behind them, the canal disappeared under the asphalt of the KFC car park.



‘This is an open stormwater drain, I guess,’ said Omar. ‘It always seems to be dry these days.’

‘As long as it’s not a sewer!’ said Belle. If she was nervous about being led into these surroundings, she was not showing it. They jumped down into the canal.

After walking for a few minutes, Omar paused. From where they were, they could see only see the bushes that flanked the drain, though the passing traffic on Milperra Road was loud and immediate.

‘OK, let’s jump out and cut across now,’ said Omar.

He hoisted himself lightly onto the dirt that bordered the canal and helped Belle up.

‘This way,’ he said.

They walked through the bushes, which began to thin out after a few metres. Then, in front of them was a tall cyclone fence that lined the expanse of the reserve they had just walked through. But what lay in the paddocks behind the fence was what Omar had brought Belle to see.

‘Wow!’ she exclaimed. ‘I wasn’t expecting this! This is bizarre! Sure beats a chicken burger!’

In front of them were up to a dozen aeroplanes of various sizes and vintage. On the dry, sparsely grassed field they were pointed in different directions and seemed to adopt different postures; some alert, seemingly standing to attention and awaiting further orders; some comfortable and relaxed; others slumped, apparently resigned to their fate. Their unpolished condition and ageing designs suggested they had all long been decommissioned.

‘What is this place?’ asked Belle, looking around.

‘C’mon, let’s get closer and I’ll show you,’ said Omar. He proceeded further along the cyclone fence. After a minute, he stopped and pulled at a section of the fence. A rectangular portion hinged up at a point four feet from the ground.

‘Crawl through,’ he said, holding up the wire.

Belle eased herself through and Omar followed. He let the wire slip down behind him. From a distance it would be almost impossible to see that the fence had been cut.

‘I brought some wire-snips with me one day, eh!’ he said.

‘What is this?’ asked Belle again. ‘Is it some kind of plane graveyard?’

‘It’s the Australian Aviation Museum. There’s more planes in that big hangar over there. They’ve got a Mirage jet and anti-aircraft guns and everything.’ He pointed to a large grey corrugated iron structure that stood behind the assortment of aircraft in the paddock.

‘Some of these look really old!’ said Belle. ‘Won’t there be anyone around, though?’

‘Relax, the museum’s only open on Wednesdays and weekends. It’s run by volunteers—old blokes. There’s never any security. Who’s gonna steal one of these things? How would you get it out of here? I’ve come here heaps of times, sometimes at night. I’ve even climbed onto the wing of that MIG 15 over there to look in the cockpit. It’s a Russian fighter.’

Then they heard the drone of an aircraft engine. It was close. Alarmed, Belle looked around them. Omar pointed across the paddocks several hundred metres away.

‘That building with the tinted windows is the control tower,’ he said. ‘And that Cessna is about to land on the main runway, over there. This is Bankstown Airport.’

‘Oh, right! Bankstown Airport! You always hear about it,’ she said, ‘but I’ve lived in the western suburbs all my life and I’ve never come here. I’ve only ever been on a plane once as it is. Flew to the Gold Coast with Mum one time.’

‘Yeah, I’ve only flown twice. Both times to Melbourne to see relatives. When you go to Melbourne it’s like the plane just gets to cruising altitude and then they begin to descend to land. Too quick!’

Belle stared at a large yellow windsock near the control tower. Though hanging limply, it was still inflated enough by the breeze to retain its shape. It swung droopily around on its fixture as the wind changed direction.

Omar continued: ‘True what you say, though, eh. This airport is hidden away, surrounded by all these houses and businesses. Three runways. It’s just light aircraft, services to the country, helicopter joy-rides, that kind of thing. I’ve been here when the museum is open and talked to the old blokes a few times. They reckon that during World War II they used to have anti-aircraft guns set up all around here in case the Japs tried to bomb it. Can you imagine that? The Japs bombing Bankstown! Ha ha. Hey, also, if you buy the right software add-ons you can fly here on my Flight Simulator. No joke! You get charts and everything to Bankstown Airport and to just about any regional airport in Australia. But the scenery is pretty shit—not as good as the big cities. It’s mainly for the hardcore fans, people who actually fly real planes. Anyway, this museum’s in the corner of the airport land. We’re far enough away so that nobody will notice us. Come closer and have a look at these babies.’

They walked amongst the large metal bodies. Omar named a few that he knew, including the MIG 15, de Havilland Heron and a Douglas DC3. For good measure, he approximated and even invented names for a few of the others.

‘You don’t realise how big they are unless you get up close,’ said Belle as they stood by the wheel of the DC3.

‘For sure. You think about it. How can they make this much metal fly? It weighs tonnes. It’s unbelievable sometimes. You shouldn’t think about it too much while you’re up in the air though, eh!’ Omar shielded his eyes from the sun as he stared up at the plane’s bulbous black nose.

After looking at the other planes, they sat on the dry grass and leant side-by-side against the DC3’s rubber tyre, which almost hid them from view.

‘This is kind of freaky,’ said Belle, looking up at the wings above and around her. ‘It *is* a bit like a graveyard, eh?’

‘Yeah, but don’t say that to the old blokes who look after this place. They take it really seriously. History and that.’

‘Yeah, right,’ she said.

Nothing more was said for a few moments. They looked at a line of mynahs perched in a descending row on the tail of the de Havilland. The traffic noise of Milperra Road growled and rumbled, less noisily from where they sat in the middle of the field. The breeze blew lazily through the shade of the wings and fuselage. The DC3 gave the lightest of settling creaks.

The combination of Belle’s nearness, their surroundings and their relative isolation caused Omar’s senses to hum. Meanwhile Belle had closed her eyes as if she was going to take a nap. Omar inched himself a little closer to her. His nerve

ends were singing. He gingerly lifted his arm and put it around her, resting it very lightly on her shoulder, like it was nothing more than a simple ‘isn’t this nice?’

Belle opened her eyes. ‘Hey, Omar,’ she said. ‘Remember ... um ... I told you ... I’ve got a boyfriend.’

‘Yeah, I know, you said.’ Omar looked straight ahead.

‘I like hanging out with you but I told you about him the first time we hung out, so that you wouldn’t think anything, you know. So you wouldn’t think I was leading you on or something.’

‘Yeah ... I know,’ said Omar, his face becoming hot and the words sticking in his throat. ‘I was just getting ... it was nice sitting here, that’s all, you know.’

‘Well, that’s OK. I don’t mind if you leave your arm there but do you want anything else from me?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Do you want anything else from me?’

Omar had never experienced language this direct from a girl before. It was arousing but also terrifying. He wanted to say: *Like sex, you mean? OF COURSE I WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU!* But instead he said, ‘I’m cool with it. That’s cool. It’s good hanging out.’ He hated himself as he said this. And he hated Belle’s boyfriend, whoever he was. He was dying to know who this guy was but could not bring himself to ask.

‘I do like you, you know, Omar,’ Belle said. ‘You’re cute and you’re sweet. Bringing me here to show me this place is a sweet thing to do. I feel really stupid for telling you that dumb bowling story because this is so much nicer. But I’m not up for anything right now, OK?’

*Right now* echoed through Omar's mind. Did that mean there would be a time? He steeled himself. 'Like I said, it's cool with me.' In his ears, the words sounded forced and pinched.

'Thanks, Omar. That means something to me. I mean, Zeljko trusts me and I trust him. It's good for us to see other people and have our freedom—I know he's got girl ... you know, female friends but I know he cares about me and I trust him to be faithful to me.'

Omar wanted to say that he would bet any money that this guy, Zeljko, whoever he was, was probably fucking all his so-called 'female friends', or at least the ones that weren't ugly. 'So what's Zeljko into?' he asked instead. His arm was starting to hurt now. It was taking some effort to hold it there without resting its full weight on Belle's shoulders.

'He's an apprentice welder.'

'That sounds like a cool job. Good money later on, I suppose.' As he complimented Belle's boyfriend Omar felt the self-hatred rise again.

'Yeah, he wants to start up his own business one day. I reckon he will. He's pretty determined.' Belle seemed a bit rigid now, as if she could feel the burning in Omar's arm.

Omar thought he had better act. His arm was beginning to feel numb. Also, if Belle moved to get up first it would represent another awkward rejection. 'Hey, shall we go back to the van and go for a drive around the airport? I'll show you where they park some choppers.'

They got up and stretched, brushing bits of grass from their bottoms. Belle smiled as they stood by the wing of the DC3.

'Thanks for being so sweet, Omar,' she said.

And then she was hugging him. Omar felt the firmness of her breasts pressing against him and he imbibed the sweet shampoo fragrance of her hair. Her thighs were touching his. He almost shuddered with pleasure. At the same time, he felt indignant. The question was: *what did she want from him?*

She let go first and they stood for a second looking at each other. Despite his confusion, Omar felt better for the physical contact.

‘C’mon,’ he said, ‘let’s go for a cruise.’

They drove along the perimeter road that surrounded Bankstown Airport looking at the little clusters of light aircraft, most tied down at the wings with ropes and pegs. They passed the repair hangars and aviation small businesses that offered joy-flights and skydiving, and a helicopter dealership with a few glass bubbled chopper models parked outside on display.

Belle read out a sign. *‘Heliflite – distributor for Robinson and Agusta Westland Helicopters.* For chrissakes, who walks in and buys a helicopter?’

‘Believe me, plenty of people,’ said Omar authoritatively.

Omar did his best to relax. Outwardly he made a good job of it, but inside he was acutely aware of his romantic disappointment and the subsequent hollowness of the act he was putting on. They pulled over to watch a red biplane slowly take off from the main strip.

‘Aerobatics,’ Omar explained.

After the plane had ascended, he offered Belle a lift home and he was not unhappy when she promptly accepted. He would be glad to be on his own. He needed to think. But ever the optimist he thought that a goodbye hug might lead to a little goodbye kiss and, just maybe, a little goodbye pash.

They had a pleasant enough drive back, ably directed by Belle, to her dad's house near the reservoir in Yagoona. It was an old looking Federation house with a rusty iron roof but carefully tended garden. There was to be no goodbye hug, let alone anything else. Instead, Belle tapped Omar on the forearm and looked into his eyes.

'Thanks, Omar, I had a great time, I really did,' she said. 'Are we cool?'

'No worries, anytime. Yeah of course we're cool,' he replied, feeling torn.

'OK, see you.' She smiled.

'See you.'

And with that Belle got out of the van. She closed the door and walked across the footpath to the neatly edged lawn. She turned to wave. Omar gave a little wave back before releasing the parking brake. Desperately wanting to execute the most street-fogging, ear-splitting burnout ever recorded, Omar instead pulled slowly away from the kerb and aimed the van up Belle's street, excruciatingly grating second gear to third. Before turning off, he looked in his mirror thinking he might give her another wave and a toot goodbye, but Belle had already disappeared from sight.



It was Sunday morning. Clutching a hotdog from Wendy's, Omar walked back towards his house. He bit into the soft bun and some buttery tomato sauce oozed from the side of the frank and ran down his chin. He wiped it with his wrist, which he then wiped on his tracksuit leg. He ambled along with the snack held in front of his face, ready for the next bite. He chewed mouthfuls of hotdog and walked slowly, his thoughts meandering on the topics of life and girls. He passed the Haddad house. The weeds were as high as they had ever been and there were some new large empty cardboard boxes on the front verandah. Omar turned the corner into his street.

At home his mother was waiting at the open front door.

*Omar, where have you been? We've been waiting for half an hour. You know we were leaving at eleven!*

*Sorry, Moma, I had to go down to the Square to recharge my phone card. I came back as quickly as possible.*

Yasri eyed off the hotdog with disapproval and disappeared inside the door. The Camry was in the driveway with the boot open. Inside was an old paint-stained esky, a rug and some folding chairs. Omar leaned against the car and finished the hotdog before chucking the wrapper into the wheelie bin. He lingered at the bin and caught the smell of decomposing garbage. He dropped the lid shut. The pungent odour of the household food scraps reminded him of something that he could not quite pinpoint. A faraway memory. With folded arms he leaned against the car, sucking his teeth.

Soon his parents emerged from the house with Sam. Yasri was dressed in her ‘picnic’ or ‘Sunday’ clothes, which included cheap white tennis shoes from Kmart, a long, wide denim skirt, a white cotton button-up blouse and a woollen cardigan. Kamir was dressed as he usually dressed any day, weekday or weekend, working or gardening—trousers, a well-worn business shirt and, if the weather was cool, a thin v-neck jumper. The only concession he made to the family outing were his tennis shoes, which, although a different brand, were also cheap and from Kmart. Sometimes he had been known to dig out an old polyester *galabiyya*, but this was only for special occasions such as a trip to the Imam Ali bin Abi Talib Mosque in Lakemba. Omar could not remember seeing his father in this garb for at least a year. Perhaps Kamir was sick of Sam joking about him dressing like a ‘hippy chick’ every time he wore the loose fitting traditional gown.

Kamir gave Omar a fatherly squeeze of the shoulder before opening the driver’s side door. He adjusted the driver’s seat forward from the near layback position that it had been in.

*I don’t know how you boys drive with the seat like this. Were you driving or sleeping in here?*

Omar grunted and moved aside for Yasri to get into the back seat. She put her seatbelt on and sat quietly with her hands clasped in front of her.

‘Bro!’ Sam said with a wink. ‘Where the hell were ya? We was about to send out the search party, eh?’

‘Yeah, yeah, recharging my phone—got a very good deal,’ said Omar grinning, and patting his pocket. He got into the car next to his mother. Sam quickly hopped into the front seat and Kamir slowly backed the car down the drive. They got onto Canterbury Road and headed east towards the city.

\*

Omar craned his neck to catch the heart-quickenning views of the Opera House and the skyline as they negotiated the Cahill Expressway and crossed the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It was a cloudless day and the harbour and skyline glinted and gleamed back at him. Next to him, his mother was leaning back with her eyes closed. She had been dozing for much of the journey so far.

‘So, Baba,’ said Sam, ‘the best thing to do is to turn right at Military Road, and then we get onto Spit Road, OK?’

*You tell me when to turn, OK?*

‘OK, OK, but you don’t have to go too slow, all right? Just drive normally. I’ll tell you where to turn. We got to go near Manly and then all the way to Narrabeen. Then we have to turn in somewhere and we’ll get to the lakes or wherever it is you wanna go. You wanna go to the national park or the lakes?’

‘The lake is in the national park, isn’t it?’ asked Omar.

‘Whatever. Near to each other from what I can see in this stupid book. Yeah, but where are we gonna have lunch? Are we gonna sit by the lake or are we gonna walk in the national park, or what?’ asked Sam.

‘We’ll see when we get there,’ said Kamir. Then in Lebanese: *Don’t argue, we come to have a nice time. Omar, listen to your brother.*

\*

Eventually, they pulled into a parking bay of the Garigal National Park and with a final rev of the engine, Kamir killed the ignition. Omar wondered why he always revved the motor at the end.

They slowly clambered out of the car. Though it was still sunny, the temperature was cooler in the park. Yasri and Kamir stretched their legs and trudged around the vehicle in an attempt to regain lost circulation. Sam twisted his torso from side to side and juggled his head around on his neck like a fighter limbering up. Omar touched his toes. Kamir began unloading the boot. They each picked up a few items. Kamir looked around for the best way to go.

‘Here’s a sign,’ said Sam. ‘To Deep Creek, McKenzie Falls And Bullock Nature Reserve. Ha, ha, you wouldn’t want to get lost up Deep Creek without a paddle, would ya, bro?’ Omar laughed but Yasri and Kamir gave them a strange look.

‘OK, we go that way. We find some nice place to eat our lunch near this deep creek. That sounds like a nice thing to do. C’mon, boys. Omar, remember to lock your door.’ *Yasri, walk with me*, said Kamir.

The family moved slowly up the path. The park was well-patronised, mainly by families with young children, or romantic couples. Now and then they would pass a lone male walking on the winding path or sitting on the grass. When Sam spotted one of them he would nudge Omar in the ribs and say, ‘Check it out, bro—rock spider, eh?’ and laugh out loud. This was especially so if the man happened to be carrying a camera. ‘Why else would they come here? Fucken *suspect* if you ask me,’ reasoned Sam to his brother.

They reached the creek and set up their picnic in a grassy area shaded by a large gum tree. Omar spread out the checked woollen blanket. Kamir opened the

esky and began to lay out the food. The family sat and leisurely ate their lunch. Later Yasri allowed herself to lie on her side and regally pick at some red table grapes like the wife of some Roman senator. Still, she could not completely abandon herself to her senses as she inspected each grape for a deformity or blemish before popping it into her mouth. Omar and Sam ate *borek* and *kibbi* and talked to each other, sitting cross-legged and hunched over. Kamir too sat cross-legged, slightly stiff but relaxed all the same, eating quietly and reading the latest copy of the *Middle Eastern Herald*. Intermittently he would utter a grunt of displeasure or chuckle ironically.

Eventually Sam stood up. ‘C’mon, bro, let’s go for a walk. My bum’s getting sore from sitting all the time, y’know? Let’s go for a walk and stretch our legs, eh?’ He motioned to Omar with a conspiratorial jerk of his chin.

Omar got up and he and Sam walked up the sealed path that ran parallel to the banks of the creek. As they ambled away Yasri called out to them not to be too long.

When they were out of earshot Sam said, ‘So, bro, you get a good deal or what?’

‘Yeah, it looks like it. Looks like good hydro to me,’ he said, fishing a sachet out of his pocket and handing it to Sam.

‘That bloke’s deals are getting better, I gotta say,’ said Sam, cupping the bag secretively in his hands while he inspected the firm, pungent buds. ‘It’s like I always say, keep the customers happy and they’ll keep you happy, you know what I mean?’

Omar had heard this—just one of Sam’s numerous business maxims—many times.

Sam broke off the end of a bud. He discreetly packed a small brass coloured pipe that he had just produced from his pocket. Again using a cupped hand he offered the pipe to Omar as they walked.

‘Here you go, bro, you start it up when we find a good spot.’ Sam always let Omar start the pipe. It wasn’t necessarily out of generosity. Omar would usually only take one deep toke before handing it back to Sam. From there the little ember would burn just right for the most potent draw from the cone.

They veered off the path away from the creek and headed towards a small thicket of youngish gum trees. The terrain had only a slight uphill gradient. Sam led the way, crunching noisily through the dried vegetation and fallen leaf debris. Omar followed close behind, drinking in the novel smell of leaves and earth, but watching his steps carefully so as not to scuff his new Nikes. After a month they still looked like he had bought them yesterday.

About fifty metres further on they stopped at a spot that was well out of sight of the path. Sam handed Omar his lighter. He took a cigarette from a packet and placed it behind his ear. ‘OK, bro, let’s fire this thing up, eh.’

Omar put the pipe to his mouth and lit the cone. The cold metallic taste of the implement soon gave way to the tarry sweetness of the smoke. He inhaled slowly so as not to burn the back of his throat. His eyes watered slightly as, holding his breath, he handed the pipe silently back to Sam.

‘All right, bro,’ said Sam, taking the pipe and lighter. He held a flame to the bowl and drew back until he had created a glowing coal. Removing the lighter he continued to suck. He relit it as the ember dimmed. In two draws he had emptied the bowl. He tapped it on a tree and refilled it.

‘Bro?’ he said.

Omar took back the pipe and lit the fresh cone. He took a slightly longer  
toke this time and again handed it back to Sam, who speedily dispatched the  
remainder into his lungs.

‘Shit, mate, I’m fucked now, eh?’ said Sam hoarsely, tapping the pipe in the  
same spot on the tree. He looked intently at the small semicircular marks the hot  
brass cone made in the grey bark. ‘Fuck me, I’m fucked, eh?’

‘Fucken, eh,’ said Omar.

‘Fucked,’ confirmed Sam. He took a deep breath and exhaled loudly through  
pursed lips.

‘Shit yeah,’ said Omar.

‘Better have one more just in case.’ Sam packed another cone and thrust out  
the pipe. This time Omar stopped inhaling when his lungs were only half filled. His  
brother finished the pipe but with rather less zeal than before. He slowly tapped out  
the bowl.

‘*Now* I’m fucked. Now I *am* fucked. All right, bro, you done good this  
morning. That skip mate of yours, he’s all right, eh?’ He looked around at the bush.  
As if on cue, a kookaburra began to laugh, somewhere close by. It stopped and  
some wind rustled through the trees. It was only a slight breeze but to Omar’s ears,  
the purity of the sound was like a thousand snakes hissing. He looked at Sam. His  
brother was still gazing around, eventually turning his body a slow three hundred  
and sixty degrees. He suddenly snapped out of his reverie. ‘Let’s keep walking, eh?’  
he announced. ‘We’ll cut through here and see where we get to. I reckon we can go  
cross-country and find that waterfall, eh? Find it ourselves. Fuck that walking path  
with all them other suckers on it. We’ll go cross-country!’

Sam set off through the gum trees at an angle vaguely parallel to the path they had left. As he followed Omar noticed that they were heading uphill. Soon, they were well into the bush.

‘This is fucken all right, eh, bro?’ said Sam, his eyes looking crinkled, red and rheumy. They were almost half closed. Despite this, he walked aggressively through the vegetation. ‘Check it out, mate. Those trees are freaking me out.’

He was referring to a large grass tree that stood a few metres away. It was old and imposing.

‘It’s fucken huge, eh? It’s like a big, burnt pineapple, eh? Like a big bushfire has come through here and left behind all these giant black pineapples. Burnt,’ said Sam.

Omar put his fingers up to his eyes and rubbed them. Did his eyes look like Sam’s? He hoped not. He hadn’t brought any Visine. ‘Fucken, eh,’ he said. ‘I dunno ... yeah ... a bushfire, a burnt pineapple, yeah right.’

‘Yeah, right, ya stoned cunt! Stop copying everything I say, eh?’

‘Ha ha ...’ Omar rubbed his eyes again as they kept walking. He could feel his heart hammering in his chest and his tongue seemed swollen and sticky in his mouth. He wished they had brought some of the Sprite from the picnic. He was still trying to be careful with his Nikes but they were getting scratched and scuffed especially about the toes and at the side of the heels.

Sam had picked up a big stick and was swinging it in front of him like a machete, whipping the crimson tops from some tall wildflowers and smashing protruding branches whether they were in his way or not. He continued on into the open forest. Now the terrain seemed to become slightly steeper to their left and larger rocks appeared on the ground in between the vegetation. Sam seemed



determined to walk at right angles to the slope. Omar watched his strange, limping gait – he looked like that Asian kid nobody talked to at school, the one who had polio when he was a baby. Then he looked down and saw that he was walking that way himself and he laughed out loud.

‘Hey, bro,’ Omar yelled, ‘you’re walking like a spastic! Hey! Slow down for second, eh? Where are we going, anyway?’

Sam stopped and turned. ‘I said, we’re going to the waterfall. That sign back near the car park said there was a waterfall. So that’s where we’re going, eh? Look, bro, if you want to be a pussy you can go back to Moma and Baba. But I’m gonna check out this waterfall by myself, eh? How hard can it be, bro? We’re still going in the same direction as that path, yeah?’

‘Well ... I dunno, bro. I don’t know. How do we know the path didn’t twist around or turn or something, y’know?’

‘Fuck! We only been walking for five minutes. How far away could the path be? It can’t disappear. I swear to God, mate, you’re a worrier sometimes, y’know?’

Omar looked at the eucalypt trees surrounding them. He rocked from side to side and peered in between them but could not see any evidence of the path. He walked a few metres one way and then in another direction. He still failed to make out the snaking bitumen track. ‘I think we been walking for more than five minutes, bro,’ he said.

‘Aw, for fuck sakes, mate, just come for a walk, would ya? We’ll find that waterfall and we’ll have a piss in it and then we’ll go back to Moma and Baba and tell them what a nice little walk in the country we had. C’mon, bro.’

‘Yeah, I’ll come. I’m not worried. I’m just saying that we’ve been walking out here for more than five minutes, that’s all. Don’t you feel like getting a drink or something?’

‘Mate, we can get a drink later. C’mon, it’s not going to kill us. Let’s—’  
Sam stopped and looked over his shoulder. Omar also stared in the direction of a scabbling, shuffling noise coming from some bushes a few metres behind Sam.  
‘What the fuck is that?’ said Sam, his eyes wider now.

‘I dunno,’ whispered Omar. Dropping his machete-stick, Sam bent down slowly and picked up a rock the size of a cricket ball. Still crouching he picked up another large stone with his free hand.

‘Could be a snake. Fuck ... could be ... a fucken snake, eh?’

Omar continued to look intently at the spot, trying to make out any shape in the negative spaces of the leaves and branches. The rustling in the bushes continued. Omar suddenly felt as if he was staring too hard and peeled his eyes away. As he looked around, a black shaded border appeared at the edges of his vision, like he was watching an old black and white movie. He felt a little dazed. In a few seconds, the feeling dissipated and he could see properly again.

Sam was poised with the rocks in his hands. ‘Fuck this for a joke, mate,’ he said. ‘I’m not staying here like some stupid cunt, waiting to get chomped on the leg.’ With that he hurled one of the rocks towards the source of the sounds. His aim was poor and the rock skewed out of his hand and missed the bush, which was at least the size of a Mini Minor, by a good metre. With a cracking, echoing report the rock hurtled into a boulder and bounced off. In an instant a small bundle of brown-grey fur shot from the bush and attached itself to the nearest tree trunk. It rapidly began to scurry up the tree, now seemingly more alarmed at its exposure than

whatever sound it was that had scared it in the first place. Sam's immediate impulse was to throw his other rock at the animal as hard as he possibly could. To Omar's horror, and against any odds that he would have given, the hurtling stone caught the creature squarely on the back of its furry neck. The impact seemed to make no sound. The animal dropped from the tree and lay still in the leaves, its four sets of claws pointed at the smattering of blue sky above it.

'Fuck! Fuck! Oh my God, I swear! Did you see that, bro? What a fucken shot! Did you check that fucken shot? Fucken REFLEXES, mate! It went like a fucken bullet! Aw, mate! That was fucken unreal, mate. Bro, did you see THAT!'

Omar could not take his eyes off the soft dead body on the ground in front of them. The little creature's slightly bulbous eyes were a deep, translucent black-brown. For some reason that he knew to be ridiculous and inappropriate, Omar was reminded of strong coffee at the bottom of a shot glass. He found himself thinking not of the dead animal but of coffee—of espresso coffee, short black, macchiato before its dash, of sweet, strong Turkish brew.

Omar looked up at Sam, who was still standing in the spot where he had launched the missile. He continued to jabber. 'Fucken nailed it, mate. Didn't have a fucken chance! Fucken nailed it! Fucken BAM!'

Suddenly Omar stopped thinking about coffee. He forced himself to look again at the dead possum. Was it dead? He walked towards it and nudged it with a scuffed Nike toe. Through his sneaker he could feel the softness under the fur, the give of its insides. It was not even bleeding. The animal remained motionless.

'Fucken didn't stand a chance, bro. I'm like a fucken blackfella out here, eh? Fucken Aborigine couldn't have done that, eh? Not with a fucken spear, mate. Not even with a fucken gun. Try that with a gun, mate, a fucken shotgun, you fucken

couldn't do it in a million years. Not even in the Olympics, mate. Ask the Telopea Street Boys. Aw, mate, that was fucken unbelievable ...'

But as he babbled Sam stayed where he was. Omar stood above the possum, studying it, noticing the creamy fur on its belly and the long, skinny tail that ended in a curling, hairless little loop. The animal seemed to stare up at him with a questioning expression. *Why?* Omar didn't know why. He turned around to look at Sam, who had quietened down somewhat.

Now Omar did a slow 360-degree turn, taking in the forest. Every leaf and branch, every tree seemed to be in sharp relief. He drank in the smell of eucalyptus and other unidentifiable earthiness that surrounded him. The tunnel vision was gone and he felt as if he was seeing with superhuman clarity. His thoughts swirled and multiplied in his head as if they were being vitamised in a blender. He suddenly felt like he was a blade of grass, a stick or a flower. He looked around at the immense detail contained in the forest and experienced the notion, though he could barely put words to it, of the tremendous odds against being born a human being in this world, with such a multitude of other stuff in existence—the trees, the grass, the dirt, the sticks, the branches, the flowers, the flies, the leaves, this dead possum in front of him with its moist pink little nose. This was followed by a moment of panic. *Don't fucken lose it, mate! That's fucken crazy shit!* The admonition was a thought in his head but it seemed to be Sam's voice he was hearing. *Fuck!*

'Fuck!' said Sam. 'That little fucken rat-squirrel is fucked. I really fucked it up, eh, mate?'

'It's a possum,' said Omar quietly. He forgot what he had just been thinking about. Now he was uneasy and becoming paranoid. He looked around and noticed the very different types of trees. One of the trees had a weird coloured bark.

Nothing around here was one colour. The possum was brown-grey. Its eyes were black-brown. The tree's bark was pink-grey. *Fuck!* It was peeling off in large flakes and underneath it was orange-red! *Fuck!*

'I hope that thing didn't have kids, eh?' said Sam. 'Can't see any little possums around. They'd be in that bush that it ran out from, probably.' He looked towards the bush, calmer now. He picked up his machete-stick and moved towards the bush. He gave it some cursory prods and then a resounding whack, causing it to shiver and shake.

'Nah, no fucken kids in here. Fuck this for a joke, mate. Let's get the fuck out of here. Y'know, that's life, eh?' he added philosophically, making a movement with his head towards the dead possum, but keeping his eyes on the bush.

Once again he set off through the undergrowth. Omar took one last look at the little ringtail. A small rusty coloured ant had already discovered the still warm body and crawled across its forehead. It entered one rounded pink ear. Omar followed Sam, leaving the possum where it lay.

\*

They walked on for another half-hour, trampling through plants and stumbling over rocks. The brothers still travelled at a right angle to the slope, though Omar noticed it now had a more pronounced gradient.

Every now and again Sam muttered a curse or an oath after being scratched by a branch or tripping over uneven ground. He was particularly incensed after stepping into the dung of some unidentified animal.

‘Probably kangaroo shit, eh?’ Omar volunteered, looking at the pebbly little stools as Sam scraped and stabbed at the tread on his sneakers with the point of his machete-stick.

‘Fucken kangaroo, mate! I’ll fucken brain him if I see him!’ promised Sam, brandishing his weapon. ‘It’s like that Bugs Bunny cartoon, eh, where they think that baby kangaroo is a big mouse.’

‘Ha, ha, Yosemite Sam!’ said Omar.

‘I’ll fucken nail that fucker if I see him, I swear to God!’ said Sam. ‘Give me a fucken rock and I’ll fucken nail him, mate. Just one shot. BAM!’ His eyes quickly scanned the ground for projectiles.

They walked on, Omar mostly avoiding the scrapes and pitfalls endured by his brother. However, he could not avoid dung on his shoes and longed to get home to scrape out the treads and run them under some water. His head was clearing a bit and he tried not to think about the killing of the possum.

Suddenly Sam stopped and listened for a moment. Omar stopped too, thinking that maybe Sam could hear the sound of running water.

‘I fucken told you, bro! Hear that? I fucken told you, bro!’ Sam was now jogging down the slope. Omar had no choice but to follow.

They jogged downhill gaining momentum as they went, hurdling small boulders. Sam gave exuberant whoops each time he cleared a rock. Then Omar saw a little splash of colour ahead. A red cap, worn by a small child in a stroller. The child, who might have been one or two years old, was crying. A dumpy and bothered looking young mother was pushing the stroller. The father walked ahead, wearing shorts and lugging an esky and picnic basket.

Omar and Sam had rejoined the path.

'I fucken told you, bro!' repeated Sam.

'Yeah but I thought we was going to get to the waterfall cross-country, y'know?'

'What do you fucken think that sign says?' said Sam, pointing to a wooden signpost. In faded etched letters it read: McKENZIE FALLS -- LEFT 400m -- WARNING STEEP ASCENT. Beyond the sign there was a fork in the path. On one side the concrete path continued to snake its way ahead, keeping loosely parallel to the creek. To the left of this was a dirt track that led uphill.

They stood for a minute, regaining their breath.

'Fucken as good as, mate,' said Sam. 'As fucken good as going cross-country, mate. Don't forget you got to see all that nature and everything. These suckers here, like this loser—' He motioned to the man carrying the picnic basket—'didn't see nothing, did they? Just followed the path. Fucken dopey cunts, mate.'

'So shall we keep going? It'll take us a while to get up that path. It says it's pretty steep so we should go now so we can check it out and get back before Moma and Baba want to leave. Let's get up there and have a ciggie at the top and then we'll come down, eh?'

Sam stood staring at the sign, still puffing from the run. 'You know what, bro? Fuck it. Let's not fucken go up to see that stupid fucken waterfall. I can't be fucken bothered, mate. I'm already all sweaty and my shoes—look at 'em, mate—they're covered in shit. Plus I'm fucken thirsty too. C'mon, let's go back to where Moma and Baba are.' Reaching into his pocket for cigarettes he stalked off. Omar looked back in the direction of the waterfall and then turned on his heel.

'Give us a smoke then—I'm all out,' he called to Sam as he began to follow him back to the family picnic.

The light was getting dim as Sam, Farid, Emad and Omar walked down towards the main strip of Kings Cross. They had parked the van a few hundred metres back on Victoria Street in Potts Point.

Farid and Emad walked rather stiffly, not used to the collars on the navy button-up shirts they were wearing. Farid's long sleeves were rolled to his elbows and down his front the buttons stretched as if they might pop at any moment, no matter how much he tried to hold in his girth. His chest propelled itself outward, swollen by the effort. Omar wondered why he would want to tuck his shirt in, in the first place.

Emad's shirt was a good two sizes smaller than Farid's but hung loosely off him, flapping and billowing out at his back in the breeze. His sleeves were buttoned at the cuff. Thankfully, Omar thought, tonight he had left his bum bag at home. With their flat-top haircuts, Farid and Emad gave the impression that they might have been brothers who shopped together but demonstrated their individuality in small ways. They had coincidentally bought the same shirt at different times at the Jay Jays sale. When they met up tonight neither had wanted to go home to change. There was a standoff for few minutes before Sam had threatened to leave without either of them if they didn't shut up and get in the van.

Omar and Sam both wore cargo pants and newish looking t-shirts. Except for Omar, the boys were all clean-shaven. They exuded an aromatic medley of liberally applied aftershaves and deodorants.

'Right,' said Sam, 'tonight we are gonna get lucky, boys. Tonight *is* the night!'



‘Yeah, boys!’ said Farid, grinning.

Omar walked along thinking about his dates with Belle. He had not yet said anything about her to any of the boys. He might tell them tonight, maybe once he had had a few drinks. Of course, he would omit the unnecessary bits, such as her having a boyfriend and how she had rejected his tentative advances. But there was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that he would still be called to account on whether he had scored. Or when he was going to score. It irked him and made him feel smaller than he already was.

Maybe she was playing hard to get. Maybe there was no boyfriend. She could have made up his name. *Zeljko*. What a prick. Maybe she was just a prick-teaser. He thought about his glimpse of the swelling of her breasts at the Square and felt an ache in his loins. He had revisited his Sportsgirl fitting-room fantasy many times. He had managed to add a whole new chapter to it. And in this improved fantasy she had taken him somewhere private to show him her ill-gained booty. They had slipped in to the women’s restrooms—how different they were to the men’s! They were large and smelt sweet for one thing, and there was soft carpet as well. In a corner was a large, dimpled, maroon leather couch, like the one he’d seen in a picture of the Prime Minister’s office. First Belle had shown him what was under her top—not just a glimpse but by peeling the layers off, one by one. Then she had unbuttoned her jeans to reveal some hot red lingerie, before slowly stepping backwards towards the couch—

‘Hey, check out this fat cunt!’ said Sam. On the other side of Victoria Street a policeman was getting out of a squad car. He crossed the road and walked in front of them, notebook in hand, towards a backpackers hostel. Sam and Farid smirked.

*Kiss imuk! I fucken fuck your mother, fucken pig!* said Farid in Lebanese, a smile on his face.

The policeman looked at them. ‘G’day, boys,’ he said after a moment, and proceeded through the doorway of the hostel.

‘Ha ha,’ said Sam.

Omar had observed Sam looking down at Farid’s belly and was trying hard not to giggle. Just above the belt buckle of Farid’s pants, the two sides of his tucked-in shirt had stretched apart to expose a triangle of corpulent, hairy belly. Sam laughed to himself for a good minute as they walked on. Farid swaggered a bit, looking proud of his slur towards the cop. Emad walked behind and smiled. The boys often said this kind of thing in Lebanese in front of people, especially the police.

Sam stopped in front of a chrome-gilded café with tinted glass windows and laughed again. ‘Check this out, boys!’ he said pointing to a menu board outside. He read out: ‘Fez Café—Middle Eastern eating at its finest—enjoy our late weekend brunch! Today’s Specials: creamy, golden scrambled eggs on toasted pita, twelve fifty, spicy merguez sausages with fragrant cous-cous, thirteen fifty, circus ... circass ... something chicken salad with rocket, orange and dates, sixteen fifty—

‘If that’s Middle Eastern food then I must be from Mars! I never seen that at Al Aseel or El Manaras!’ said Emad.

‘For fucken thirteen bucks fifty the waitress would have to suck my sausage!’ said Sam grabbing at his crotch.

They continued walking and turned left at Orwell Street before heading up Springfield Avenue and hitting the main drag of Darlinghurst Road.

‘Here we are, boys,’ said Sam. ‘Let’s do a lap.’

They turned left and walked along the strip as far as Macleay Street on one side before turning back and walking to Kings Cross Road on the opposite side, all the time eyeing off the girls. Sam gave the strip club spruikers some mouth: ‘We’re not fucken tourists! We’re fucken locals, ya fucken cunt! *Yinaan Abook!*’ Sam would say to their faces as they walked past. ‘Aw, yeah right, normally thirty-five bucks to get in, fifteen for us, whaddya think we are, fucken stupid, mate? To see some old fucken junkie slut take her fucken clothes off ... Give us a fucken break, mate!’ His insolence was met with silent glares and once a bouncer made a threatening move towards them but was held back by a colleague.

At King’s Cross Road, underneath the giant coke sign, they stopped and turned back again.

‘All right, we’ve sussed out all the fucken junkies and the scabby cunted sluts. Let’s go get some drinks, eh, boys?’ said Sam.

They walked back along Darlinghurst Road and turned right into Bayswater Road, looking at what they could through the open doorways of the hotels, underground clubs, garden restaurants and taverns.

‘Some people live here, eh?’ said Emad as they passed a grand looking, private three-storey terrace. ‘Check it out, mate. How could you live here right next to some fucken nightclub? With all these fucken junkies walking around? Mate, they probably pay some expensive prices around here too, eh?’

‘Rich people are fucked in the head, eh,’ said Farid, observing an early model two-door Mercedes parked on the street. Its rear quarter window had been smashed and was now covered by black plastic stuck down with gaffer tape.

‘Should buy a fucken house with a driveway and a lockup garage, eh? Don’t park a fucken classic SL on the fucken street!’

‘They don’t fucken care, mate!’ spat Sam. ‘Why the fuck would you care? That’s why you got to get rich in the first place, mate, so you don’t have to give a fuck about anything anymore. Don’t you get it? Your window gets smashed. Big fucken deal. You just get it fixed. Some cunt boosts your Porsche—mate, insurance pays for it, you get a new one. You get a *better* one, y’know what I’m saying? It’s too fucken easy. You blokes got to get with it—geez.’

‘Yeah, but ...’ said Farid, pausing momentarily to chew his bottom lip. ‘But you still wouldn’t park on the street if you didn’t have to, would ya? If you was really rich?’

Sam ignored him as they stopped in front of a large terrace that had been converted into a hotel. A stairway led down to a basement club. Foreboding bass rumbled from the darkness within.

‘Here we are, boys,’ he said, motioning them in. ‘Falafel, mate, either tuck your shirt in or tuck it out. These bouncers here are fucken serious, mate, believe me. I didn’t get dressed up and come all this way to town to get turned back at the door.’ In a low voice he said to Omar: ‘Bro, just be cool and follow me. Don’t look down. Look ’em in the eye and don’t let any of those cunts tell you nothing. You’re nineteen and that’s all they got to know, OK?’

Omar fingered the growth on his chin. This morning he had shaved his three-week stubble into quite a reasonable goatee. It was definitely not bum fluff anymore, Sam had told him when they were getting ready.

‘No worries, bro. Just watch me, eh?’

Sam led the way down the stairs towards the entrance, followed closely by Omar, Emad and then Farid, who was prodding and goading his shirt back into his pants. A tall bodybuilder with a shaved head and no discernible eyebrows inspected the boys as they walked by. Omar did as he was told and kept his head up and his eyes straight ahead, though he did rub his goatee as he walked in. The bodybuilder raised a bald brow as Farid walked past but otherwise did not react. There was a ten-dollar cover charge to get in. Sam gave the expressionless door-girl a twenty-dollar note and motioned that it was for him and Omar. They stuck out their wrists for stamps. Then they were in. Emad and Farid were soon behind them.

‘See what I mean, bro? No fucken worries. When you’re with me, no fucken worries, eh?’ Sam yelled into Omar’s ear. He put his arm around his brother as they walked to the bar.

It was a mid-size club capable of holding four or five hundred people. The place was already half full, presumably because the cover charge doubled after ten o’clock, but the room’s energy was still low. On the dance floor a few young women swayed from side to side with drinks in their hands and handbags by their feet. Amidst an array of intelligent lighting, a lonely disco ball spun its glitz around their half-hearted two-steps.

Without asking anyone what they wanted Sam bought a round of four Jim Beam and cokes. They found an empty bar table and pulled up some stools in a semicircle, giving them a good view of the dance floor. They sipped their drinks slowly and silently, surveying the comings and goings.

‘This place is all right, eh?’ said Sam to Omar, resting his drink on the table.

‘Some nice chicks already,’ replied Omar, motioning towards a particular trio moving self-consciously together on the dance floor. ‘Those ones there are OK, don’t ya reckon?’

Sam looked in their direction. ‘What you’ve got to realise, bro, is that you can’t rush into these things. You got to take your time, y’know what I mean?’ On his stool he leaned back against a concrete pillar behind him. ‘Yeah, those chicks are all right, that’s true. But now isn’t the time, y’know what I mean? Look at ’em. Way too sober. They probably got here just before us.’

‘Yeah, plenty of time, eh.’ Omar wanted to lean back too, but there was no pillar behind him so he just sat there, straight-backed. In a few minutes he again began to slouch.

The boys sipped their drinks and chatted occasionally, although it was hard to hear above the booming music. Emad bobbed his head up and down keeping indiscriminately bad time to each song. Farid sat uncomfortably on his bar stool, his position placing extra pressure on his shirt tuck and trouser seams. When they had all drained their glasses he got up and fetched another round of the same drinks. Halfway through the second drink Omar began to feel the alcohol’s effects.

Sam and Emad got up to ‘check out the options’. Sam walked as if the alcohol had slightly inflated his chest and arms, and Emad scurried to keep up with him, holding a lit cigarette from which he took nervous drags. Omar and Farid watched them as they did a circuit around the increasingly smoky main room of the club.

Sam approached a pair of girls who appeared to be sitting by themselves in a booth. He squatted down to talk to the girl nearest to the end of the red padded bench seat. Emad remained standing with his thumbs hooked into his jeans pockets.

Sam and the girl conversed for a few minutes. Everything seemed to be going well until a couple of unsmiling, thick-necked men arrived. They handed each of the girls a drink before sliding into the booth at the other end. They scrutinised Sam and Emad and said a few words into the ear of the other girl. Every now and then they would throw a glance at Sam, each one dirtier than the last. Sam appeared to ignore their presence and kept talking to the girl, kneeling down on his haunches. In a little while he got up and, with a small circular wave of his hand, walked on, followed by a relieved looking Emad. They moved further around the room, stopping to stand and survey or to talk to any other young women who might be on their own. A few times Omar lost sight of them in the now crowded club.

Sam and Emad returned about fifteen minutes later.

‘Very useful little look-around,’ said Sam, picking up his drink. The boys leaned forward, craning their necks to the side to catch what was being said.

‘Plenty of potential, this place,’ said Emad, appearing philosophical and lighting another cigarette.

‘Potential is nothing if you don’t use it, eh?’ said Sam, looking in the direction of the booths again.

‘Mate, so what happened with those chicks when those other blokes came and sat down, eh? They didn’t look happy,’ said Farid.

‘Aw nothing, mate, no hassle. I was just being friendly, y’know? No hard word or nothing, just putting on a bit of the old charm. Asked them how their night was going, whether they were from around here or tourists maybe, y’know, that kind of thing. Turns out they’re from Macquarie Fields but we won’t hold it against them! Then these dopey cunts come and sit down, all aggro. But I don’t even look at ’em, and just keep talking to this chick. Makes ’em even more angry! What are

they gonna do, eh? Let 'em stew a bit. Then in a good amount of time, I say, "It's been nice talking to you, you're a very lovely young lady, have a good evening" and we keep walking! Fucken dopey cunts can't do nothing, can they?"

'I was right behind you anyway,' said Emad.

'That's right! And lucky for me the bouncer was right behind you! Anyway, the main thing is, in the chill-out room we found a couple of very nice ladies. I invited them to come over to our table to talk later on, and they seemed very keen. One of them's got great tits, isn't that right, Emad?'

'Like this,' said Emad, indicating with his hands.

'The other one is kind of flat-chested, skinny looking. But she's got an OK arse,' said Sam, 'so together they got the lot, eh? No wonder they're friends. Nice tits, nice arse! Teamwork! Ha ha! Anyway, I asked them to come and talk to us when they feel like getting out of the chill-out room. The one with the tits is from Maroubra and her friend is visiting from somewhere else. She reckons they just got to finish what they were talking about. Y'know, they were having a bit of a D & M. So I says to this chick, the one with the tits, "I hope everything's OK, cos now that you mention it your friend does look a bit sad" and she tells me her friend has just broken up with her boyfriend cos he two-timed her. So, it's looking good, boys.'

Sam's expression became solemn, almost pensive. 'Always good when chicks have just had some bloke do the dirty on 'em. They reckon they don't wanna get involved with no-one else but really all they wanna do is get fucked really hard, for revenge and that, plus it proves that they can still pull a bloke, y'know?' Sam took a deep breath. He lit a cigarette and again leaned back on his bar stool. Everyone else leaned back too, as much as they were able.



The boys chatted as they surveyed the floor and slowly relaxed. Emad bought a round. Then it was Omar's turn. Sam slapped him on the back as he got up to go to the bar.

'Just look 'em straight in the eyes, bro.'

At the bar Omar clasped his hands on the damp bar-cloth and waited to be served. He held a fifty-dollar note folded lengthwise between two fingers like a cigarette. Within minutes he was served without question. Cradling the four short glasses against each other he returned to the table trying not to grin.

'That's my bro!' yelled Sam.

Omar put the drinks down and Sam slapped him on the back again. Sam picked up a drink and raised a toast to his brother, which was loudly supported by Farid and Emad. Omar took a gulp of his drink and felt the cold spirits warm his stomach. He suddenly felt like he was glowing all over. This was getting good. He thought about how much he would have liked to fuck Belle, right then, and imagined doing it to her on one of the red leather booths at the side of the room. In the background of his fantasy the voices of Sam, Farid and Emad trickled through, jabbering, laughing and gesticulating amidst the commotion of the smoke-filled club.

Omar returned to the here-and-now when he noticed a couple of young women walking towards their table. Sam was in the middle of relating an underage drinking story of his own to Farid and Emad.

'Hey, boys,' said Omar.

Sam looked up and smiled as he saw the girls approaching. They seemed tentative. 'Ladies!' he said brightly, as if to reassure them. They smiled and said hi.

Sam did the introductions. Their names were Polly and Louise. Polly was the more voluptuous of the two.

The girls allowed Sam and Omar to give up their seats for them. They placed their bags under the table and said a few words to each other, giggling.

Sam stood angled towards Polly, his arm resting on the table. 'So,' he remarked, 'you girls going to the Olympics, or what?'

'I wouldn't mind seeing Cathy Freeman run,' said Louise. 'I used to do running at school. We had an athletics team until it got cancelled one year.'

'My friend here, believe it or not, used to be an excellent runner himself,' said Sam, waving towards Farid who, it appeared, could not hear what was going on from where he sat. 'He coulda been a champion, y'know.' Sam mimed running on the spot, exaggerating the arm movements. 'But what happened was, he tore a muscle and his career was finished. Did his groin. Bang. He ended his career with a dodgy groin. Now look at him.'

The girls laughed out loud.

Farid hunched himself forward. 'Hey? What was that?' he asked.

'Just talking about your boxing, I think,' said Emad, who was sitting on the other side of the table next to him. A few of the boys had trained in a boxing gym at one time or another.

Farid performed some of his customary feints and jabs into the air and resumed his position back on his bar stool. The girls laughed again.

'So, ladies, I'm going to the bar. Can we buy you a drink?' asked Sam gazing into Polly's eyes.

Polly thought for a second and said, 'Sure, I'll have a beer, if that's OK.'

‘Yeah, a beer would be good, yeah thanks,’ chimed in Louise, nodding her head.

‘C’mon, girls, how can I buy you just a beer, eh? What kind of man would I be? I swear to God, I could not buy a classy couple of chicks such as youse a beer when I’m drinking top shelf stuff, y’know what I mean? Do you think I’m some kind of a cheapskate or something? It would be like an insult, wouldn’t it? We would be very ashamed. Let us get you something a bit nicer. We’re drinking Jim Beam. How about a scotch and coke? Or a rum and coke? I know—Kahlua and coke! That’s got to be a good drink, eh? C’mon, whaddya say?’

Polly and Louise looked at each other. Polly saw the nearly empty drink in Omar’s hand and said, ‘Well that’s pretty nice of you. What about a scotch and coke then?’

‘Yeah, I wouldn’t mind a gin and tonic, I suppose, yeah,’ said Louise.

‘OK, that’s more like it! Bro, come to the bar and give us a hand, eh?’

Sam and Omar left the table. Emad pulled his bar stool closer to the table and began to make conversation with the girls while Farid looked on.

At the bar Sam pulled his wallet from his back pocket. ‘Fuck, mate. This round is going to kill me. Bro, you got any cash? Put in for this one, will ya?’

Omar produced a ten-dollar note from his wallet and gave it to Sam. He watched as Sam ordered four Jim Beam and cokes and two scotch and cokes.

‘Hey, Sam,’ he interrupted, ‘she wanted a gin and tonic, or something like that.’

‘I know, I know, but what she really wants is a scotch and coke,’ replied Sam, placing the money on the bar in front of him. The drinks arrived. As he took the money, the barman indicated which drinks were scotch and which Jim Beam.

‘Thanks, mate, yep, I saw ya pour ’em,’ said Sam. ‘Ya dumb prick,’ he added under his breath.

Omar made a movement to take some of the drinks from the bar.

‘Hang on, hang on, what’s the hurry? Remember what I said, eh? All in good time, eh, bro?’ Sam picked up a Jim Beam and took a sip, looking back towards the table. Omar could see that Farid had joined in the conversation. The girls appeared slightly bemused.

Sam turned his gaze behind the bar. It was busy and the bar staff were working frantically. Sam picked up three of the drinks, including the scotches, and Omar picked up the remaining three.

‘Come and stand here at the end of the bar for a minute, bro. Just one minute and we’ll head back. Let’s check out the scene a little bit, eh.’ Sam placed the drinks in a no service area a few metres down the bar. Omar followed.

‘OK, OK, let’s see what we got here,’ said Sam glancing around and surreptitiously rummaging in his pocket. He pulled out a small folded piece of white paper. Holding it down and out of sight he unfolded it to reveal several small white tablets.

‘You got some Es!’ said Omar. ‘You didn’t tell me you were gonna be bringing some Es.’ Omar was excited. He had heard good stories about ecstasy.

‘These aren’t Es, bro. I hate to disappoint you, but these are roofies, y’know?’

‘Roofies?’ asked Omar.

‘Roofies—roheys—whatever. You’ve heard of them, haven’t ya?’ As he said this Sam looked around again and discreetly dropped one pill into each of the scotches. With a straw he stabbed at the bottom of the glasses to macerate the

softened pills and then stirred them vigorously into the liquid. He lifted one of the glasses and held it up against a light behind the bar. He put it to his nose and sniffed it as if sampling the bouquet of a fine wine.

‘Beautiful. The company that makes these—I heard about it from Ali—now they make them so that they go blue when you put ’em into a drink. So you got to make sure there’s coke in the drink or the drink will turn blue. Vodka and soda, gin and tonic, beer, lemonade, whatever, it’s no good. But coke is good. You get me, or what?’

Omar nodded.

‘All right, *yallah*, bro,’ said Sam, picking up the glasses and beckoning Omar to follow him.

When they arrived back at the table Sam manoeuvred himself between Farid and Louise and carefully placed the drinks in front of the girls, making sure to grab a Jim Beam for himself. Omar put his three Jim Beam and cokes down on the table.

‘You wouldn’t believe those jokers,’ Sam said to Louise. ‘They ran out of gin and the guy says he has to go to the storeroom to get some more bottles and so I said, “Nah, don’t worry about it, mate, just another scotch and coke now but make sure you got gin by the time we come back to the bar next time, eh?” Mate, I was so pissed off I nearly asked to see the manager. But I figured that it would take too long so here you go, just have a scotch and coke this time. I swear, mate, I don’t know how they expect people to come back to this joint if that’s how they’re going to run it, y’know what I mean? With the Olympics and everything. What if some athletics stars came here and that’s how they got treated?’

Louise eyed the scotch looking doubtful. ‘Well, it’s just that ...’

‘Y’see, she hates scotch. The smell of it,’ said Polly. ‘Can’t touch it. She got too pissed on it at her eighteenth and can’t handle the sight of it now. Didn’t that ever happen to you with something? It’s riesling with me. Phwoar, can’t stand it! Even if it’s out of a bottle! I tell you what, I’ll have Polly’s scotch and I’ll go get her a vodka or something. That’s cool, isn’t it? Do you feel like a vodka and tonic? Or maybe they’ve got the gin by now.’

Farid and Emad had been leaning forward following the conversation. Then it appeared that Farid had a brainwave.

‘What about Jim Beam? Do you like Jim Beam and coke?’ he said, sliding his untouched glass forward. ‘Why don’t ya have my drink and I’ll have yours? I like scotch. It’s all the same when it comes out the other end, isn’t it?’

‘She doesn’t want your drink after it’s been in your dirty mouth,’ said Sam. ‘Never know what she might catch, eh?’

‘What are you talking about, mate? I haven’t touched it! I’m still finishing my other one, see?’ Farid displayed the dregs of his previous drink.

Louise looked uncomfortable at having created this minor drama. ‘It’s OK, it’s fine,’ she said. ‘Actually I like bourbon, it’s just scotch I can’t handle.’

‘But they’re exactly the same!’ said Sam. ‘How can you say you don’t like scotch, that it makes you chuck or whatever, but you can still drink Jim Beam? That’s weird, mate, that’s the weirdest thing I ever heard! C’mon, I’ll go buy you another drink, right now.’

‘I’ll get it,’ said Polly.

‘Look! I’ll just have his Jim Beam, all right? It’s cool. It’s no big deal. It’s quite nice of him to offer and it’s the easiest thing to do so no-one has to go wait at

the bar again. Check out the line-up.’ The bar was now three-deep with people.

Louise grabbed the drink that Farid had offered and took a slurp to end the debate.

‘See? Nice.’ She slid her scotch toward Farid. He downed his old drink and then took a big gulp of the scotch, just in case anyone had any doubts. He caught Louise’s eye and raised his glass to her with a suave wink. She raised her glass back and then looked towards the dance floor. ‘Why don’t we have a dance, anyway? They’ve been playing some good songs. Anyone wanna come?’ she said, looking around the table.

‘Yeah, darl, that’s a good idea,’ said Polly.

‘Yeah, I’ll have a boogie,’ said Farid, looking eager to make further inroads after this promising start. He picked up the scotch and, leaning his head back, drained it. He pursed his lips and spat some ice back into the empty glass.

Polly had a sip of her drink and returned it to the table.

‘Why don’t I join youse up there?’ said Emad, bobbing his head like an emu and sliding off his bar stool at the same time.

They moved off towards the dance floor.

‘THAT STUPID FAT CUNT! WHAT A DOPEY FUCKEN DICKHEAD!’

Sam yelled in Omar’s ear, watching the motley group walk away.

‘He drank it all!’ said Omar.

‘I know he fucken drank it all!’

‘How come you didn’t tell him before?’

‘How come? I didn’t want the dumb cunt to give the game away, did I? If I left it up to Farid he’d be trying to shove those pills up their fucken arses. He’s nearly fucked it all up anyway. Now when those drugs start working we got three bimbos to look after! Anyway, I didn’t say anything because I wanted to surprise

youse. We'd get 'em really smashed and then go for a walk to the van, have some fun. Fucken Jesus, mate!' said Sam, rummaging in his pocket again. He shook his head, apparently reliving Farid's unintentional switcheroo. 'Stupid dopey cunt.'

Sam found the pills and dropped one into Louise's Jim Beam. After a quick glance towards the dancers, he dunked the bottom of his cigarette lighter into the drink and gave the submerged tablet a little pounding and a stir. He sucked the lighter to clean it off and then wiped it on his pants.

'I heard that a tiny bit of this stuff can be fun,' he said to Omar, smacking his lips. 'But tonight's not the night for experiments.'

'We can always watch Farid,' said Omar.

'Ha ha, this could be funny, mate.'

They turned and looked towards the throng on the dance floor. With very pronounced yet nonchalant gyrations Farid was trying to work himself in front of Louise. The dancing Emad was more restrained with his limbs than Farid but compensated by nodding his head with renewed vigour. Louise and Polly danced casually facing each other while Farid and Emad circled them like seagulls vying for chips on the beach. The song finished and the girls headed back to the table. Emad and Farid ambled behind them, Farid looking a little glassy-eyed.

Sam nudged Omar. 'Keep an eye on Falafel,' he said. 'Lucky he's such a big fat cunt—it shouldn't hit him too hard.' He turned to the girls, who were sipping their drinks. 'I like your moves out there, eh, ladies. Next time a good song comes on I'll show you a few moves myself. Not this stuff now—it's too disco for me. I'm more into hard house, trance-core, a little bit of ambient techno, you know what I mean?'



They both nodded, though with blank expressions. Meanwhile Farid was in an intense conversation with Emad, who was looking at him strangely. It was unlike Farid to be so passionate and eloquent. Omar, as instructed, was observing their rotund friend. He leaned forward to hear.

‘Fucken great club, mate!’ Farid was yelling in Emad’s ear. ‘This lighting is wicked, mate. Check out those lasers—aw, look at that one there! We should go out in the city more, mate. The people are different and everything. These chicks here, mate, not up themselves or nothing. They were dancing with us and everything. I reckon that Louise has got the hots for me, mate. I was gonna try the lambada on her but then the song finished.’

Emad said, ‘She probably would have smacked you in the mouth.’

Omar watched as Farid’s condition slowly deteriorated. The girls seemed thirsty after their exertions and finished their drinks quickly. They too became very animated in a very short space of time. Sam obliged by getting another round of drinks. This time he did return with a gin and tonic for Louise.

‘You got to get the next round of drinks,’ he hissed into Omar’s ear when he sat down. ‘These spirits are fucken killing me. Hang on, I got a better idea. Get Farid to give you the money. Tell him this Louise chick has got the hots for him. Tell him that all he’s got to do is buy her a couple more drinks and she’ll fuck anyone—even him.’

They finished that round of drinks and Omar relayed the message to Farid, though in a more diplomatic way. Eager for another drink himself, Omar offered to accompany him. Farid lurched his big frame off the stool and made his way to the bar where he proceeded to order the usual round of Jim Beam and cokes for the

boys. 'And we'll have a double gin and tonic and a double scotch and coke,' he demanded, giving Omar an unsubtle wink.

They ferried the drinks back to the table and put them down. The glasses were quickly set upon. A little while later Farid heaved himself off his stool again. His brow was a little pinched, as if he was struggling to focus. Omar imagined the drugs and alcohol pitched in an epic battle with his physical bulk.

'Omar, come to the bar with me again,' Farid ordered. In a few minutes they wandered back with yet another round identical to the last.

The girls were now more than sozzled and didn't seem to have noticed the increased strength of their last couple of drinks. Farid was watching them, particularly Louise, with hungry amusement, as if he knew something the rest of them did not. *He's probably imagining her lips wrapped around his cock*, thought Omar, surprising himself.

Sam watched Farid watching the girls, presumably gleaning some entertainment from the unexpected turn of events. Polly dropped a just-lit cigarette into her open handbag and made a squealing, screaming scene of retrieving it, burning her hands and causing the cigarette to fly in the air and land on the floor. Sam stepped on the glowing end and picked up the rest of the cigarette. Using his own cigarette, he relit it for her and handed it back.

'Looking for this?' he said slickly, allowing his eyes to dwell on her breasts.

'Thanks,' said Polly. 'Far out, I'm getting *pissed as!*' She took a deep drag on the cigarette. 'Let's have a dance,' she said to Sam, grabbing his hand.

'Your wish is my command,' said Sam. He allowed her to lead him to the dance floor where they disappeared from view into the middle of the swarming mass.

Farid stood and sidled forward into the vacant space. He gave Louise a particularly lingering look. 'I think you have a really nice body,' he gushed, breathing all over her. 'I think you have a body like an athlete. Not one of the fat chicks, the shot-put or dixer or anything, and not one of the short-arse ones either like gymnastics ... they're too young anyway—jailbait. You have a nice body, like a runner. Like a dancer, though they're not allowed in the Olympics.' This was the longest and most eloquent speech he had made to any woman, including his sister and mother.

Louise looked slightly perturbed by the intimacy of the remark, but she was flattered too.

'That is very sweet,' she said, stroking her hair.

Farid leaned forward a little more.

Louise mirrored his movement. 'I used to love running,' she said.

And then they were kissing. A clumsy little kiss on the lips at first, which soon escalated into a suction-powered, tongues and all pash. It looked quite awkward because of the size difference between them and the fact that Louise was still sitting on her bar stool but their sincerity could not be doubted. Omar and Emad stared in amazement.

The couple stopped for breath and to take a slurp from their drinks. One of Louise's eyelids was clearly drooping. Her eyeliner had smudged a little. Farid's top lip was covered in beads of sweat. Or was that saliva? It was on his chin too. Omar tried not to think about it.

At that moment Sam and Polly reappeared. Sam had his arm around her and was propping her up, though she was relating something vivaciously into his ear.

‘Boys!’ Sam said, interrupting her. ‘Time to get out of this joint, whaddya reckon? About time to get some fresh air, don’t youse think?’

Farid looked aggrieved at the interruption of his progress with Louise. Omar watched him as his face momentarily clouded over, his eyebrows bunching and bottom lip protruding. ‘Outside?’ he grunted.

‘Yeah, outside, mate! This place is getting boring,’ said Sam.

‘Right now?’ asked Farid.

The girls were engaged in a hug, partly made up of affection and partly to steady their balance. They laughed and giggled as they veered from side to side in their embrace.

Sam cocked his head towards the exit and glared at Farid. He hissed into his ear: ‘Yeah outside, ya fucken idiot! How far are you gonna get with her in here?’

Farid nodded slowly in comprehension. ‘Hey, yeah, maybe we should get some fresh air, that’s a good idea. It’s getting a bit boring in here, for sure, mate,’ he said loudly. He picked up his drink, which was nearly full, and skulled the contents. Polly and Louise disentangled themselves and also expressed agreement that it was time to leave.

‘Here you go,’ said Louise, pushing her glass towards Farid. ‘Finish that for us. I don’t think I should really have much ... any ... more.’ It looked like she was having trouble focusing. Farid obliged by picking up her glass and quickly swallowing the contents. He managed to get a partially melted ice cube stuck in his throat and coughed. He grabbed the edge of the table for support.

‘Hey, big boy!’ said Polly. ‘While you’re at it, you might as well finish this one. You bought most of ’em after all.’ She slid a half-full scotch and coke across the table.

‘No worries,’ slurred Farid with as much charm as he could muster. It took him two large gulps to down the scotch. His eyes rolled in his head for a few seconds as he fought to keep it down. ‘All right,’ he said, sucking his stomach in. ‘Letsh geddoudhere.’

Sam retrieved the girls’ bags for them. He put his arm around Polly. Emad made as if to assist Louise but Farid gruffly intervened, placing a chunky arm around her waist. Both girls did little to discourage the attention, probably realising by that stage that they were quite wobbly on their feet. Led by Sam, they threaded their way through the crowd to the exit. They said, ‘See ya,’ to the hairless bouncer and climbed the steps out into the fresh air. Sam and Polly led the way towards Darlinghurst Road. Omar and Emad followed behind the two couples. Emad was looking down as they walked.

‘She *has* got an all right arse, eh?’ he said to Omar quietly.

Omar glanced down at the staggering Louise and nodded. Farid and Louise were taking a zigzag trajectory along the footpath. Farid was doing a fairly good job of holding Louise up, but every now and again one of his own knees gave way and his whole body buckled. He corrected himself by sheer force of physical will and they continued on their way.

As he walked behind them Omar was reminded of some old news film from the Vietnam war that he had been shown at school—in grainy colour footage an exhausted soldier propped up a seriously injured buddy as the two of them staggered to a waiting medical chopper in a jungle clearing. The pair collapsed before they could reach the helicopter and then the clip ended. Omar did not know whether they had made it out or not. He knew that someone had to be filming the scene with a camera so they must have been able to do something. He thought that

maybe that was why the footage had ended. The cameraman had probably given them a hand.

\*

The unsteady party made their way through the revelling pedestrian traffic of Darlington Road and then turned into the relative quiet of Springfield Avenue. Sam, who seemed to be quite in control of himself, was providing a strong arm for Polly. They were a few metres ahead of the others. They came to a small park at the cul-de-sac end of Springfield Avenue. Sam and Polly sat themselves down on a bench that was shielded from the streetlights by overhanging trees. The others caught up. Farid plonked himself on the end of the bench, pulling Louise onto his lap. They started kissing straight away.

Sam let his hand slip down to Polly's breast as he kissed her. 'You having a good time tonight, or what?' he said.

Polly laughed and kissed him again. She was indiscriminate mouth, tongue and lips and Sam pulled himself away. 'Go easy,' he said, though his hand still caressed her breast. She flopped her head down and rummaged haphazardly through her bag.

'Sheez, where's me fucken smokes?' she breathed. 'I wanna shigarette.'

'Here, have one of these,' said Sam quickly, as she made to empty the contents of her bag out onto the bench. He took a cigarette from his pack, lit it taking a deep drag for himself, and passed it to her. He replaced his hand on her breast and traced circles over her nipple with his finger.

Omar looked over at the other couple. As they kissed, Farid's blunt fingers moved quickly all over Louise's body as if hunting for the clasp or catch that would open her up and reveal her to him. Louise raised her head and asked Polly for a drag of the cigarette.

'I don't know if I can walk anymore. Fucken Jesus, I'm smashed!' she said, blowing smoke out through her nostrils. 'Where are we going anyway?'

'We'll go pick up our car and then get some munchies. The car's near here. I could do with some munchies, eh?' said Sam.

'I could definitely do with some munchies,' said Emad, the palm of his hand resting on his stomach. 'Drinking, mate, you gotta have something to soak it all up, y'know?'

'Yeah, right ... that might help us sober up,' said Polly.

Omar nodded assent. Sam took his keys from his pocket and handed them to Omar. 'Youse two go get the van,' Sam ordered. 'Just come up that street there and beep the horn and we'll meet you. Go on, go now, don't keep these ladies waiting!'

Omar took the keys and looked at Louise, who was slumped over Farid, the two of them now motionless. He was reminded of a picture he'd seen at school, of two dead lovers, hugging each other, buried alive when a volcano had erupted in Italy a long time ago. Emad looked as if he was about to say something but held his tongue. Polly was taking a final drag of the cigarette, which was well and truly down to the butt. Sam smelt the acridity of the burning filter and turned his head to the side as she tried to kiss him again. He placed both his hands on her breasts and then buried his head between them.

'You are so beautiful,' he said to her chest.

Emad and Omar walked off in the direction of Victoria Street to fetch the van.

\*

Without the encumbrance of their lurching friends they made quick time. About twenty minutes later, they returned, pulling into a loading zone in front of a laundromat in Orwell Street. It was in a position almost adjacent to Springfield Avenue. They could make out a few figures in the dark area of the little park but could not definitively spot the others. Omar gave a few beeps of the horn. Emad leant over and added a couple of extra long blasts.

In a minute two figures emerged from the gloom. It was Sam and Polly. She had her head slumped on Sam's shoulders and seemed to be sleepwalking with him towards the van. Omar hopped out.

'Quick, open the door, bro, she looks like she's about to pass out,' said Sam. Omar opened the door and moved some rubbish and cardboard that had collected there. Sam sat Polly down with her feet out of the van. He picked up her legs and swung her into the back.

'Where's Farid?' asked Omar.

'Fucken dopey cunt's passed out,' said Sam from inside the van where he was helping Polly sit with her back up against the driver's seat. Her eyes would open to slits and then close and she was murmuring something unintelligible. 'OK, she'll be all right. You stay here, Omar. Emad, come and give me a hand with the other one,' commanded Sam.



The pair set off back into Springfield Avenue. They were gone for about ten minutes. At one point Omar considered locking up the van and going to look for them, but then he saw them approaching. Sam and Emad were on either side of Louise, helping her to walk. The boys hurried her along like trainers escorting a concussed footballer from a field so that the game could quickly resume. Louise could barely move her feet to walk. Her chin rested on her chest.

As they approached the kerb on Orwell Street a middle-aged passer-by looked at them with interest.

‘Too much booze, eh? It’s a bad thing,’ said Sam to him, cheerfully, as they passed. The grey-haired man gave them a sanguine nod, slipped his hands into his cardigan pockets, and kept walking.

Omar slid open the van door and they positioned Louise in the opening as Sam had done with Polly. She was not as easy to manoeuvre as her friend. After much grunting, cajoling and murmuring (and some gratuitous groping by Emad), she was finally in the van. She leaned back next to Polly with her head slumped to one side. Louise was still conscious. She was whispering something to herself about having a dance.

‘Fucken hell!’ said Emad, puffing and wiping sweat from his forehead. ‘These chicks can’t handle their alcohol or what? And Farid! Mate, I’ve never seen him get paralytic before. It’s like he was goin’ crazy on all those drinks. I reckon the sneaky cunt must have had an E or something else before we came out, eh? Never seen him that fucked up. Fucken bastard, not saying nothing. He didn’t say anything to youse, did he?’

Sam didn’t respond. Omar shook his head. Sam hopped into the back of the van. ‘OK, boys, let’s go,’ he said. ‘Bro, you drive. Let’s just find a quiet little street

somewhere around here, eh? I reckon further up this way near where we parked before should be all right.'

'What about Farid?' asked Omar.

'He's all right,' said Sam.

'Sleeping it off on the grass near that bench,' said Emad. 'He's out like a light, mate. There was no fucken way we were gonna be able to carry that fat bastard to the van even if we wanted to, y'know?'

'We'll pick him up later,' said Sam.

Omar drove up Orwell Street and turned left onto Macleay Street before making another left back into the side streets. They drove around the dark, narrow lanes for a few minutes until Sam indicated a quiet little tree-lined street of mid-size apartment buildings, not far from Springfield Avenue. It was suitably dark and did not appear to be any kind of thoroughfare. 'Perfect,' said Sam as Omar parked the van. 'Hey, bro, come and join us back here.'

Omar got out of the van and slid open the main door. Sam was sitting in the middle of Polly and Louise with his arms around both of them. Polly seemed only partially conscious. Louise was awake but looked very groggy.

'Where are we?' she asked weakly.

'We're just on our way to get some munchies,' said Sam. 'But we stopped to pick up something to smoke, didn't we, boys?' Emad and Omar mumbled confirmation. 'So hey, Emad, why don't you go see *our mate* and go pick it up, eh? Bro, step in and keep us company.'

'Why can't Omar go?' said Emad. 'I'm nearly two years older—'

'I said, go for a fucken walk and see *our mate*,' barked Sam, with menace in his voice. 'I want my brother to keep us company. So fuck off now, all right?'

Emad wandered off, muttering. He walked a few metres away and sat on a low garden wall, smoking and cursing. Omar got into the rear of the van and slid the door shut behind him.

‘Omar, why don’t you sit with Louise while I make Polly more comfortable,’ suggested Sam. He was unbuttoning her blouse. Omar glanced down as the line of her cleavage was revealed. Polly might have tried to brush Sam’s hand away but it was hard to tell. However, with her lips parted she clumsily searched for his face to kiss him. He avoided her attempts and continued to fumble with her buttons.

Omar sat down close to Louise and put his arm around her. He could smell the cigarettes and alcohol on her breath. Her eyes were half open. She nestled up to him.

‘You’re a sweet man,’ she said.

Omar wondered whether she thought he was Farid. ‘You’re sweet too,’ he said.

‘Hmm, hmm,’ she replied and nuzzled his face.

Omar kissed her softly on the lips. He grew excited and moved his hands over her chest, feeling that though she was not big, her nipples were hard and surrounded by firm circles of flesh. They kept kissing and his hands wandered down to her thighs and buttocks. He remembered what Emad had said. She had a nice arse. She did have a nice bum. He thought of some porn he had seen on his computer, featuring a girl with a similar type of body. Then he imagined that he was with Belle. He was very hard in his pants now. He took one of her hands and placed it between his legs. She drew her hand away.

‘You’re a naughty boy, aren’t you?’ she slurred.

Omar looked over at Sam. He and Polly had moved towards the rear of the van. She was on her back and Omar could see her breasts, spilling out like large white saucers on either side of her torso. Sam was kneeling above her fiddling with his pants. He pulled them down and began to rub his penis over her face and lips. She seemed barely conscious of these unsubtle advances. With a guiding hand Sam placed his penis between her lips and slowly thrust himself into her mouth. It was difficult to tell how awake she was. Sam bent forward a little and Omar's view was obstructed.

Omar looked at Louise again. She was breathing a little more heavily now, though it did not seem to be from any kind of ardour. He rubbed his hand between her legs and she sighed, but then her face contorted slightly and she pushed his hand away. Again he kissed her and felt her chest and thighs. He assumed a kneeling position and undid the buttons of his pants. He took Louise's hand and draped it on his penis. Her hand clung to him for a second before falling off. He moved closer to her and rubbed himself on her chest. She did not respond. As best as he could, given the low roof of the van, he moved himself up so that his penis was level with her mouth. She looked at him and raised a hand to push him off. Omar deflected her hand with his own and continued to move forward. He pushed himself against her lips.

'Nah,' she slurred.

He pushed his penis into her mouth. She gagged and coughed so he eased out and then pushed it in again. She did not resist or attempt to bite him but he felt her teeth grating against his foreskin. Her head was wobbly and her breathing uneven. He quickly withdrew but continued to rub his penis against her face.

He tried to put it into her mouth again. He had more success this time and gave a few gentle thrusts. He was very aroused. Again he imagined that he was with Belle and felt that he might come. But then Louise gagged once more and drew her mouth away.

She coughed in a sick, rasping way. Omar waited for her to finish so that he could resume. She leaned forward slightly, moaning. Then, with an involuntary heave of her chest, she vomited a great stinking, curdled torrent that covered Omar's erection and most of his groin in a sticky, warm goo. It flowed into his open cargo pants, and down onto the floor of the van. The mushy, pungent liquid formed a soggy puddle around Omar's knees.

Omar knelt in the mess, too shocked to move. He could feel the wetness collecting on his groin and the insides of his thighs. He heard scrabbling behind him.

'What the fuck? Oh my God, what the fuck?' said Sam, turning around from Polly.

An awful stench filled the van. Omar still could not move as he looked down at his now flaccid penis and soaking pants.

'What the fuck?' repeated Sam. 'You FUCKING FILTHY DOG!' he shouted. He did up his own pants and scampered on all fours as quick as a monkey to the van door, which he violently slid open. 'Get the fuck out, NOW!' he yelled. 'Move it, now!'

Louise had slumped to her side, supporting herself on an elbow. She moaned and did not move. Sam jumped out of the van and grabbed her by the legs.

'You fucken dog!' he said, taking her by the feet and dragging her out of the van. Louise was forced to crawl backwards on her hands and knees, past Omar and

through the puddle. Sam let go of her legs when they were out of the van and she found the pavement. She backed herself out and dropped on her bottom onto the footpath like a toddler.

‘MOVE!’ ordered Sam, again. ‘Get away from here, you fucken slut dog!’

Without getting up, Louise moved back a few more feet.

Omar had taken a few backward steps too, still on his knees.

Sam jumped back into the van and retrieved some cardboard. He tore a piece and began to scoop the mess out of the door.

‘You got to take them off,’ he said to Omar. ‘You can’t put ’em back on, you got to take ’em off.’

Omar sat back and gingerly removed his pants. He pulled up his sticky underwear. From the pants he took out his wallet, mobile and keys, and handed them to Sam, who placed them on the front seat. With the clothing rolled into a ball, Omar dabbed at himself and then mopped the van floor as best as he could. Meanwhile, Polly lay motionless on her back. He saw Polly’s bare breasts but there was no longer any interest. She was just a fat slut lying there in this shitty, stinking mess.

‘Are you gonna get her out?’ Omar asked Sam in a thick voice.

Sam walked around to the rear of the vehicle and opened the hatch door. He grabbed Polly’s shoulder and gave her a rough shake. ‘Hey! Hey! You got to wake up! You got to wake up and get out.’ He jumped back into the van and grabbed her under the armpits, helping her to sit up. She opened her eyes groggily.

‘What’s going on?’ she said.

‘Your fucken pissed slut friend chucked up over everything, that’s what!’ said Sam. He grabbed her shirt and bra and thrust them into her hands. ‘Get the fuck

out now, you fat slut!’ He did not wait for her to get dressed but grabbed her by the arm and pulled her out. She screamed as she fell from the van.

‘You fucken bastard,’ she said. ‘You didn’t have to do that.’ She unsteadily put her bra on and then her top, before going to comfort Louise. ‘Are you all right, doll?’ she asked, rubbing her back. Louise was still sitting on the footpath, cross-legged, with her head in her hands.

‘I’ve got the worst fucken headache,’ she said thickly. ‘Fuck, fuck, fuck ...’

Sam turned from them to look at his brother, who was stuffing the reeking cargo pants into a plastic shopping bag he’d found amongst the rubbish. Omar looked back at him with shamed, wide eyes and then looked down. He put the bag in a corner of the van and with some cardboard scraped out as much of the vomit as he could. He tossed the sodden cardboard out onto the road and then sat in a clean spot with his knees up.

‘Close that door, could you?’ he asked Sam.

Sam slammed the back door shut and walked around to the side. He looked down at the girls. ‘Look at youse fucken sluts in the gutter. That’s where you belong, eh? Fucken dirty little sluts,’ he sneered.

Polly looked at him. With a hand on Louise’s shoulder she made a wobbly effort to stand.

‘Could youse take us back to the Cross? We need to buy some water. We’ll get a taxi from there. I didn’t know she felt like being sick, did I? It must have been the Chinese. I dunno where the fuck we even are. Where are the munchies?’ she rambled, barely coherent.

‘I’ll be fucked if you go near that van again!’ said Sam. ‘After what that fucken disgusting slut did.’ He looked up the street. Emad was nowhere to be seen.

Sam slid the side door shut. He stepped over Louise and around to the front of the van, hopping quickly into the driver's seat. He started the motor. With a howl they took off down the road, leaving the bewildered and groggy girls staring after them.

After getting his bearings Sam turned the van back towards Springfield Avenue. He had let forth a steady stream of invective about the girls but so far Omar had made no response from the back. He sat there with his legs drawn up and his arms around his knees.

They turned up Orwell Street and parked in the same loading zone where they had first put the girls in the van.

'I'm just going to look for that fat sleepy bastard. You stay here, eh?' Sam left the windows unwound and the sliding door half open.

In the throes of his humiliation, which was made worse by the stinking, vomit-soaked briefs that clung to his haunches, Omar did not bother telling his brother that it was unlikely he would be going anywhere in public right now, no matter how late the hour and sleazy the location.

In a little while Omar heard the sound of Sam's voice. As usual, he seemed to be giving directives. Omar opened the back door and took a look out at the street. He saw Sam and Emad guiding Farid towards the van. As they made their unsteady way across Orwell Street they were passed by the same grey-haired man they had met when guiding Louise to the van. He was coming from the other direction this time.

'God bless! It's good work you're doing, boys,' he called loudly as he passed them, glancing at the white van. 'It's a thankless task, but the Lord knows



it's good work you are doing. God bless you and the Reverend Noffs!' He walked on, purposefully, with his hands clasped behind his back.

'What the fuck is that old cunt on about?' said Sam.

'I got no idea,' said Emad.

They arrived at the van and Sam slid open the door while Emad, with some difficulty, held Farid balanced against himself.

'Hey, Omar. What a fucken bitch. Don't worry about the fucken bitch, eh?' called Emad into the darkness of the van's interior. Sam had obviously told him what had happened. 'Plenty more fish in the sea, eh?' he added.

Farid was conscious but by no means in a conversational mood. He also appeared unwilling to get into the back of the van no matter how much he was spurred on by Sam and Emad. Deciding to use the proven method, they sat Farid in the doorway of the van. He appeared to notice the smell and his face crinkled up like a child's. He continued to breathe heavily.

'I'll get in the van and hold him by the shoulders,' said Sam, his nostrils quivering from the odour. 'You grab his legs and swing them up into the van and then I'll pull him back. All right, let me hop in ... right ... one ... two ... THREE.'

In unison, the two heaved in their allotted directions. To maximise the chances of success Emad had taken a strong grip under each of Farid's knees. He tried to swing the bulky legs up and over. This made Farid double up and sharply exhale. He then groaned and swung his arms wildly, causing Sam to lose his grip. Farid bent forward and gave another sweaty, deep moan like a beast from the deep. Leaning towards Emad, he paused for a second, his expression puzzled, his eyes searching for some kind of meaning to the terrible motions swelling within him. Then with a deep, hawking holler he heaved up the bubbling contents of his girth. A

great deal of the hot, bitter emission struck Emad's legs and shoes and the remainder pooled on the step of the van, separating into relatively solid and liquid elements, the latter oozing serpent-like down into the gutter below.

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Sam steered the van through the Elizabeth Street traffic. The late night noises of the city entered through both open windows. The late night smells of the city were beaten back by the odour of the fresh vomit. Emad sat in the passenger seat, chain-smoking in an attempt to ward off the stench. Farid lay snoring in the back, his belly and breasts wobbling with the stops and starts of the vehicle. They had used his new shirt to mop up Emad's pants and shoes, and then to rewipe the floor of the van. They had ditched the shirt in the gutter, reasoning that Farid would no longer want it back. Besides, it was too small for him.

Next to the buxom Farid was the lithe figure of Omar. The smooth olive skin of his legs provided great contrast to his friend's hairy, trembling torso. Omar was awake and, though he tried not to, was revisiting the events of the night. Sam's words echoed in his head but now they seemed to be in his own voice. Omar's voice. *Fucken bitch! Fucken dirty bitch!* He felt the crustiness of his briefs and urged the van to go faster, so that he could get home and rip off the disgusting clothes and soak himself in the shower. But he knew they had to stop and clean the van first and that he had little choice but to sit there and suffer quietly until what had to be done was done.

\*

Omar woke up not long after midday. The house was quiet and he could tell that Moma had gone out. Baba would be at Baalbek. He yawned and stretched. The skin on his face felt dry and a little flaky. He had stayed in the shower for nearly twenty steamy, soap-scrubbing minutes when they finally got home, just as the light of dawn was weaving itself through the electricity pylons and into Greenacre.

He had put his underwear into the same bag as his cargo pants and then into another plastic bag, which he had hidden in the back shed. He would have to remember to put them in the washing machine this afternoon. Whenever he thought of the clothes, he felt like he could still smell the sour nastiness of the vomit.

Before coming home they had phoned Ali and then stopped by his place. He had sleepily met them with a broom, some rags and a bottle of bleach. He had accompanied them in the van to the large lockup shed at his father's panelbeating business, where they had given the vomit-affected areas a good scrubbing. The van needed a clean anyway and this would be something positive to report to Baba. A faint fruity smell lingered despite the disinfectant they had used, but Ali was sure that it would disappear after a few days and a few cigarettes.

Omar got out of bed and went to the kitchen. He put some bread in the toaster and began to eat a bowl of cereal. Shortly afterwards Sam appeared in the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and announcing a murderous hunger. He gathered the toast that had just popped up and sat at the kitchen table.

'What a fucked-up fucken night, don't ya reckon? Fucken dogs. That chick was giving me an excellent head job and everything. She was going mad.'

'Yeah,' said Omar, not looking up from his cereal.

‘Don’t worry about it! Don’t look so sad. We’ll just go and get some more chicks. Don’t worry about it,’ said Sam. ‘It’s not like this kind of thing happens all the time. Fuck, I’ve seen some sluts sometimes but never any that have done that. I guess they had too much to drink. Fucken Farid, mate. He shouldn’t have bought them so many drinks.’

‘What about the pills? Don’t you think it was the pills? You know the rohey, the roughie, whatever?’

Sam inspected the crust of his toast for a few seconds. ‘Well ... to tell the truth I’ve never given anyone one of those before. Well, no-one that I’ve stayed around with for some action. We gave this chick one a few weeks ago at this nightclub but me and Taysir met some other sluts afterwards so we left her there with Emad and Ali. Emad didn’t know about the pills then or last night. Still doesn’t, ha! I don’t think Ali told him. I think they both fucked her, though. So, anyway, maybe this lot we used last night was a strong batch or something. But then again it’s made by a company, it’s legit, you know? So they should be all the same. Not like speed or smack ... I think taking one is OK. It shouldn’t have hurt ’em or made ’em chuck like that. No, that chick just drank too much, probably ate too much earlier, fat bitch. Yeah, fuck that shit. Good for a laugh but makes everything a bit messy. Hey, we’d better not tell Farid, OK? He’s probably not going to remember much anyway so that’s even more reason to keep it quiet, y’know what I mean?’

‘You got any more?’ Omar asked.

‘Any more roughies? Yeah, I got what was left in that little packet. There’s about three or four there, I think. Why do you want them for? You’re not going to

try one yourself, are ya? Better go easy on the drinks if you do. Mate, you saw what they did to that—'

'Nah, not for me. I just thought maybe, y'know, they'd be good to have around ... just in case, y'know ... if I was going out with a chick ...'

'What's this? You got a chick lined up? What chick? C'mon bro, you should tell me these kinds of things. Who is she?'

Omar paused. He did not seriously think he would or could ever slip Belle a roofie.

*Could he?*

The answer was definitely no. 'Forget about the pills. I did meet this chick though. Aussie chick. Nice body.' The words felt alien coming out of his mouth. He tried again. 'Nice tits. I nearly saw her tits the other day. She's a little thief, too. I was out with her and she nicked these clothes right out of the shop. It was pretty funny actually.'

'You didn't tell me you were out with a girl. When was this? What's her name?'

'Belle. We went to the Square. And I took her down to see the planes.'

Sam looked at his little brother as if seeing a new, different aspect to him. 'Belle, eh? You could have told me, mate. Any action? Skip, eh? Does she root? Did you get any action? Did she suck your dick or something? Did you lick her out? Don't fucken tell me you licked her out but you didn't even get a fucken head job out of it! Hang on, I know. Don't tell me—you fucked her in the van, didn't ya? Or did you fuck her in the grass by the aeroplanes? Nah, you wouldn't have done that. You fucked her in the van, didn't ya? You seemed like you were keeping something to yourself, I swear.'

Omar stood up with his bowl. ‘Well, I could have ... at the Square we had something to eat and it was all cool and then she had to go ... she was going somewhere. She had to be somewhere else.’ Omar could not bring himself to repeat the details. He stammered on. ‘I could have—it was goin’ really well, but she had to go ... she wants to hook up again, though. She wants to see me again, so—’

‘Well, when are you gonna see her?’ Sam stuffed toast into his mouth as he talked and then got up to make more. ‘Just tell me when you see her next and we’ll make sure you get your dick wet this time. Nice body, you say, eh? I’d love to meet her, what about it, bro?’ Sam rambled as he stuffed bread into the toaster.

‘Yeah,’ Omar said, eating the last of his cereal. He got up to put his bowl in the sink and then opened the fridge looking for something cold to drink. ‘Yeah, maybe I will tell you when we hook up next. Why the fuck not?’

Omar imagined peering at Sam and Belle through the wooden slats of the cupboard. The thought inspired in him fractured feelings of titillation and regret. After a few seconds he banished the picture from his mind, poured himself a glass of juice and, hearing the pop of the toaster, helped himself to a slice of Sam’s hot toast.

## Two - WILDINGS

16

The boys ran on to the platform at Marrickville station but the train was nowhere in sight. They had been playing pool at Sylvio's on Lurline Street and had left hurriedly to catch the seven-twenty train. They were puffed from their jog. As they walked along the platform Farid gave a loud belch that seemed to come from the depths of his belly.

'Ha, mate, I told you, you can't hold your booze,' said Emad.

'What hold? I only had three schooners. There's nothing there to hold, mate. You some kind of retard or what? The other night must have been something I ate, I swear to God. Food poisoning. You tell me when that's ever happened before.'

'I don't need to tell you anything, mate. I saw all I need to know.' Emad began to lurch around, holding his arms out like an ape. Omar and Dabir grunted in an approximation of laughter.

'I wish I could have seen him,' said Dabir.

'You never saw so much spew in your life. Plus he still owes me for those shoes. One hundred and nineteen dollars.'

'Fuck off. They were probably old anyway,' said Farid. 'You never buy new stuff, you cheap cunt.'

'Bullshit they were old! Mate, I had to chuck them in the wheelie bin. There was no way I was going to clean all that stinky spew off with my own hands,' said Emad. He glimpsed Omar's face and looked relieved to see the train. 'All aboard, boys,' he said.

Omar was glad to see the train too. He had tried to cast off the memory of last Saturday but the embarrassment still festered. He looked at Farid, who again had sweat beading on his upper lip. He did appear a little tipsy considering he had only knocked back a few beers at the pool hall. During a game, he had boasted how close he had come to ‘pulling that chick with the nice arse on Saturday night’. Emad had responded by taunting Farid about his fancy speeches and attempts at chivalry. He had asked why, if Farid was so good with the chicks, had he ended up asleep in the park like a wino and then later covered in his own vomit. Farid had become belligerent and, swearing madly, taken his anger out on the white ball, cracking it hard during his shot and knocking it off the table. The proprietor had shouted out a warning, further darkening Farid’s mood and adding to Emad’s fun.

Emad, Farid and Dabir had continued to trade insults and brag about their sexual conquests, conspicuously leaving Omar out of the conversation. Though they undoubtedly meant well, Omar felt excluded and self-conscious about his lack of experience, and further humiliated by the events of Saturday night. Though it wasn’t an ideal situation, that night in the van could have been his big moment. Instead it had turned into something that could not be more disgusting, and now here he was doing his best, as usual, to laugh along with the guys while he hated himself inside. His worry was compounded when he thought about what they might say when he wasn’t around.

On the platform Omar glanced again at Farid’s perspiring, bad-tempered face and wondered if Sam’s pills had long-lasting effects. It was four days later. Surely, they couldn’t still be in his system?

The train doors opened. The boys got on and sidled into the first empty seats. Omar and Emad sat facing Farid and Dabir. Farid leaned forward.



‘Have a look over there, would ya? What have we got here, fellas? I reckon you know that chick, Omar. Look at her, she’s nice, mate.’

Omar spun around. It was not Belle.

‘You know what they say. If they’re old enough to bleed they’re old enough to root! I reckon we saw her at the pizza bar in Punchbowl and Omar said she’d probably suck you off for one dollar ... mate, what’s her name again?’ said Emad. He was making a simpering kind of expression as he tried to catch her eye.

She did look like a skip girl they had seen a few weeks ago while getting a takeaway from Istanbul Kebab and Pizza. Though he didn’t know her, Omar thought he had seen her at his school. For no other reason than to make an impression on the boys he had suggested that she just might be the kind of girl who would go all the way if she was your girlfriend. That is, she rooted. But it was Farid who had said she would ‘suck you off for one dollar’. Omar looked around. Except for the four of them and the girl who was sitting at the opposite end, the carriage was empty. He stared at her face but could not be sure she was the one.

Through the windows, the lights of the inner west raced past but for the most part the streaked glass reflected back the interior of the carriage. Omar began to feel claustrophobic. The boys were quiet as the train made the stop at Dulwich Hill. A few people moved to and from the other carriages but no-one got into theirs.

‘I think it’s the chick from the pizza bar. Maybe. But anyway, I don’t think ... I really don’t know her,’ Omar began to stammer as the train moved off.

‘She’s all right, isn’t she?’ said Dabir, as if he had not heard.

Farid was already in the aisle and making his way towards the girl. Emad dutifully followed. After a moment Omar and Dabir also followed. By this time the

young girl was very aware of the attention from her fellow passengers. She looked up as Farid approached.

‘Hi, there ... Annette isn’t it, eh? How you going?’

‘That’s not my name. I don’t think I know you, do I?’

‘Yeah, we’re all friends of this guy’s. You know this guy don’t you? He says he knows you from school. We saw you at the Istanbul that time. You live in Punchbowl, don’t ya?’ Farid motioned towards Omar.

‘Yeah, Punchbowl ... near the Istanbul. Well, kind of ... but I’m not sure I know you. I don’t think we’ve actually met.’

Farid stood facing her. He moved closer to her seat, leaned back and thrust his broad hips forward. ‘Do you suck?’ he asked. He said it casually, as if he was enquiring whether she smoked.

‘Fuck off! Don’t talk to me like that! Just fuck off.’ The girl put her face down into her *Who* magazine. Undeterred, emboldened even, Farid sat next to her. He put his arm around her. With his other hand he reached over to her leg. He began to stroke her thigh and moved his hand up towards the crotch of her jeans.

‘How about a fuck then? C’mon, you’ll like it, it’s really big. I’ll give it to you Leb style.’

‘FUCK OFF! GET OFF OF ME!’ She pulled his hand away and disentangled herself from his arm. She pressed herself against the train wall and window.

Omar thought that Farid seemed possessed, as if he was channelling the aggression from the pool hall towards the girl in front of him.

‘You’re a slut, will you come out with me? C’mon, we’ll go somewhere nice. How about it? I know you’d like to.’ Farid shot a small globule of saliva as he

spoke. It landed on her collar. She wiped it away with a tissue and shrank even further away in disgust.

‘Yeah, come on, you’re a slut, why don’t you come out with us?’ Emad said as he stood in the aisle with his thumbs hooked into the belt of the cream coloured bum bag. Omar noticed how dirty and worn it was, especially around the zipper.

Farid made a move as if to paw her again and she pushed his hand away. Suddenly he punched her in the arm—a hard left jab.

‘Ow. FUCK OFF! Are you fucking crazy, piss—!’ Her voice was piercing and angry but she stopped short as Farid again jabbed her hard in the same spot.

‘What’s wrong? Like it rough, is that it? It’ll be easier if you just came with us. It’ll be fun.’

Emad had moved to the seat behind her. He took a condom from his bum bag and ripped it from its packet. He draped it on her head and ran it across the back of her neck and then over her nose and across her eyes. She looked straight down, frozen, her side pressed against the metal body of the train. Then Farid stood up quickly and pulled his pants down. He took out his penis and stroked it, a foot away from her face. It was evident that he was enjoying the interaction. Next, from inside his jacket pocket, he too produced a condom. He quickly unwrapped it, placed it over his penis and resumed stroking himself.

‘See, nothing bad’s going to happen. It’s going to be fun, that’s all. I told you it was big.’

She closed her eyes and screwed up her nose. It was as if she could smell Farid. He was so close to her face that she quite probably smelt the odour of latex and lubricant, too. Omar was both repulsed and fascinated by the sight of Farid’s erect penis bulging against the transparent pink skin of the condom, and could not

imagine what this girl was feeling as she sat there on the train. He had never seen an erect penis this close up in real life before. Had she? This wasn't like Sam's wardrobe. This wasn't like porn. This was something entirely different. Omar looked around nervously in case a guard or another passenger should enter the carriage.

'You wonder why people don't like the Lebanese!' the girl said. She raised her eyes and met Farid's, trying to ignore what was in front of her.

Farid stopped what he was doing and slapped her. He was untidy with his blow and it connected with her cheek and the tip of her nose. The girl was stunned. Then she whimpered. Her eyes moistened from the clout to her nose. With her fingers she wiped at some mucus that had emerged from a nostril. At this Emad and Dabir laughed. Omar hung back in the aisle with his head slightly lowered and one arm clinging limply to a hand strap. He was dismayed by the turn of events. He wished Farid hadn't done that. Omar's body swayed this way and that according to the motion of the hurtling train. Then the carriages began to slow down as they approached another stop. Before they entered the next station Farid packed himself away, chucking the condom on the floor at the girl's feet. He sat next to her, very close, making it clear she would not be getting off at this stop. He extracted his mobile from a pocket. Punching in a speed dial number he waited for the other end to answer.

'I've got a slut with me, bro, come to Punchbowl,' he said.

Emad and Dabir whooped a chorus of approval. The girl sat very still with her head bowed, the magazine closed on her lap. The train reached the station and she glanced towards the end of the carriage. There were two or three heads to be seen in the next car but they might as well have been on another train to another

destination. She rose to try and leave the carriage but Farid shoved her down again. He pushed his crotch towards her face.

‘C’mon, come for a fuck.’

‘No.’ She vainly tried to push him away.

‘Come for a fuck.’

Silence from the frightened girl. Emad whooped again and Dabir joined in. Omar still hung back.

‘Why don’t you give me a head job then? I know you like doing it. Omar told me, didn’t you Omar?’

Omar didn’t respond. He could not look at Farid in the eye.

‘After you give me a head job you can give all of them a head job. Come on, I know you like doing it.’

Dabir was getting positively animated. ‘C’mon, you slut, suck his fucken dick.’

Farid made another phone call. This time he spoke in Lebanese except for the odd English word, including ‘Punchbowl’. He looked disappointed and ended the call.

‘Bummer, my cousins can’t come.’

Omar noticed that the girl was beginning to tremble. Farid put his phone away. He put an arm around her waist and again started to stroke her thigh. She tensed and tried to curl up into herself. Omar could see Farid’s hand on the outside of her jeans, busy like some plump burrowing animal trying to find its nest. Farid left her legs and foraged under her sweat top and up to her breasts before returning between her legs. Emad and Dabir closed themselves around the seat, intent on the show. Omar watched from where he was, hanging from the leather strap, still

swaying. Despite his alarm at the violence he had felt a guilty shot of arousal as Farid had fondled the girl's breasts.

The train was nearing Punchbowl station.

'All off,' said Farid, placing a hand under her armpit. He stood and tried to heave her up. 'Let's go.'

She struggled and he punched her very hard on the arm. He raised his fist as if to hit her again. She stopped struggling. In the middle of them she was shepherded from the train. After grabbing her magazine from the seat, Omar brought up the rear feeling bothered and slightly sheepish. They were the only passengers to alight. They left the platform and trudged to the street. Farid had the girl by the arm and kept his other hand in the small of her back, pulling and pushing. Emad assisted every now and again, conveniently letting his hand slip over her body.

Up ahead they saw someone. Pointing, Farid shouted, 'There's my mate! My friend wants a head job!'

The girl, who it seemed had been waiting for her chance, chose this moment to break away from Farid and bolt. She sprinted away from them, giving short, terrified screams, in the direction of the station. Emad and Dabir set out after her but gave up before they had covered twenty metres. The girl disappeared around a corner. Omar watched as the boys trotted back, panting, loyal and dumb.

'Fuck that slut,' said Farid.

The person up ahead had now reached them. It was Sam.

'Where the fuck is she? Don't tell me I came all the way out here for nothing?'

'She got away, bro. We had her, but she ran like a rabbit, mate. You should have seen her,' said Farid. They milled around for a few minutes smoking cigarettes and chatting. Farid sent a few texts. Omar was silent, thinking of what might have happened. The possibilities were frightening and yet he was titillated.

Suddenly Emad piped up. 'Mate, check it out, who's this?'

Farid looked up and loudly proclaimed, 'Here comes the slut!'

The girl from the train and a woman who looked to be in her late thirties were marching up the centre of the street towards them. The girl was pointing at the group and the woman was shouting something incomprehensible. Omar could not believe the guts of the girl, not to mention the woman. Was that her mother?

'Ya both wanna have a go, do ya?' Farid yelled.

'I always love a threesome!' shouted Emad.

'I don't think you're a yummy mummy type!' yelled Sam.

The boys let fly with a few more insults before running up the street to where Sam had parked the van. They piled in and slammed the doors shut. The inside of the van still smelt of bleach mixed with a faint, blue cheese odour from the vomit.

Instead of driving away Sam did a u-turn. He accelerated up the road towards the pair. They were still yelling but their anger turned to panic as they realised Sam did not intend to brake. They scattered in different directions as the van, with its lights off, screamed towards them.

'Ha, ha, fucken sluts!' Sam yelled as they passed the now frantic looking woman on their right. Omar thought he saw a definite family resemblance. A side street appeared and Sam swung the van heavily into a turn, almost lifting it onto two wheels. Omar, who was sitting in the front, had to grab his seat to stop himself from

falling onto Sam. With his other hand he still clutched the *Who* magazine. Farid, Emad and Dabir were thrown against each other in a pile.

‘Whoa!’ Farid yelled as Sam made another violent turn up a cross street, clipping the kerb as he went. In a matter of a minute they were a kilometre away from Punchbowl station.

‘Did you see the look on that old bitch’s face!’ asked Sam, laughing as he drove.

‘What a dumb little slut,’ said Farid. ‘We should have stopped. Imagine that, mate. We could have got ’em both in the back here!’

They continued to weave through the side streets and eventually merged into the ever-present traffic of Canterbury Road. In much the same way as they made their Baalbek deliveries, they took a wide arc, making their furthest drop-off, Dabir, first, before heading back towards Greenacre, letting go of Farid and finally Emad.

‘Close call, eh?’ said Sam when he and Omar were alone on their way home.

‘You mean that girl’s mum? It looked like she could have been her mum.’

‘No, fuck that old bitch. What I mean is youse probably would have got a root with that chick. Farid said she was a slut, you’d seen her by herself before at a pizza bar or something.’

‘Yeah. I dunno. Maybe.’ Omar’s thoughts wavered between the distressing, wounded look on the girl’s face after each of Farid’s blows, and the dark but compelling excitement that had risen within him at the sight of her being groped. He remembered how lustful, how achingly hard he had been in the back of the van with Louise. He could have done anything with her if she hadn’t ... if she hadn’t been such a disgusting slut.



‘C’mon, mate,’ said Sam. ‘You got to be more positive. Just be patient. It’ll all work out for you with the chicks. Just wait and see.’

Late the next afternoon a belching Farid motored the Calais down Parramatta Road towards the city. With him were Emad, Dabir and Omar. Riding in the van ahead were Sam, Ali and Ali's cousins, Taysir and Mal. Omar was getting to know Taysir quite well, especially after the cards party at Clarence Road. However, he had only met Mal a couple of times. Mal's dad owned a successful import business in Lakemba. Omar sometimes made Baalbek deliveries to their office if they were hosting a function there.

Mal never said very much. Both he and Taysir were engaged to girls back in Lebanon who they would marry next year and, in the meantime, like the rest of the boys, were pursuing sex with as many girls as they could. Mal, though quiet, was often successful at picking up girls in the clubs they went to. He possessed a quiet yet swaggering confidence. Omar noticed that though Mal's eyes were often averted or downcast, his chin was always held up. Omar suspected that Sam and Farid only tolerated Mal because he was Ali's cousin and, more importantly, had a '99 WRX STI. Sam often said that he suspected Mal of being a 'sneaky bastard'. 'You never know what that guy's thinking,' Sam would say.

Mal was riding in the van tonight because his car was in the shop getting a CS Spec system put in. Omar knew that Farid was insanely jealous and was dying to replace the Calais with a WRX of his own.

Omar and Dabir were in the back seat of the Calais. Omar was still feeling the remnants of euphoria from a pipe he had smoked that afternoon. He let his head loll this way and that, dictated by the motion of the car and the bumps on the road.

They drove past the University of Sydney and down Broadway. The sun was just setting and streetlights illuminated the ubiquitous Sydney 2000 banners that lined the streets of the CBD. Both vehicles stopped at some traffic lights and Omar watched the scurrying office workers, students and shoppers who seemed completely unconcerned about the impending Olympics and just as disconnected to the lives of Omar and his mates in the Calais.

He looked up and saw Sam's head poking, along with his elbow, out of the van window. He was yelling something inaudible to a couple of well-dressed women who were standing by a parked Peugeot hatch. One of them wore a skirt with her business attire. The skirt was only marginally on the shortish side. Both women carried grey wigs and, over their arms, black barristers' robes. At Sam's call they looked up, scowled and turned their backs on the van. This encouraged Sam to yell another catcall before giving them the finger as the lights changed and the traffic surged forward.

'Yeah, suck my dick, bitches,' they heard Sam yell.

In the Calais, Farid glanced over at the same women and said, 'Aw, the sexy secretary look, mate, I love it.'

'They must be going to some kind of fancy dress party after work,' said Emad, adjusting his pants around his crotch.

They continued along George Street and as they passed the multiplex, Farid turned up the stereo and slid his window down. The Calais pitched menacing bass as they cruised past a milling throng of mostly Asian teenagers who congested the wide footpath and steps leading up to the cinemas. Up ahead in the bass-less van they could see Ali motioning to some girls from the passenger side, but with no success. They drove on and Omar found himself becoming mesmerised by the tail-

lights of the cars ahead. In the Calais, everyone turned silently and stared as a black Porsche 911 Carrera 4 glided past in the opposite lane. The driver was invisible behind the heavily tinted windows.

‘Fucken bigheaded cunt!’ said Emad after a moment.

‘Probably some small-dicked lawyer wanker, eh, mate?’ said Farid.

They made their way to Clarence Street, continued along the Bradfield Highway and then they were on the Harbour Bridge. Omar looked back at the view and felt a roller-coaster lunge in his stomach. To him the skyline was unnerving in its size and spectacle. It inspired in him an urge to yell and whoop, and the feeling that right now, being in the centre of such beautiful immensity, fantastic things could happen to him. Anything. Whenever he crossed the bridge and saw this view, especially at night, he felt this anticipatory tension inside him, an exhilaration that waned the closer he got back to Greenacre.

They crossed to the north shore and took the Pacific Highway. Here, Farid could really show what the Calais was made of. At one set of lights he succeeded in burning off a Nissan Skyline import and then, at another, a worked-looking HQ Monaro, although Omar sensed that the Asian driver of the Nissan was somewhat unenthusiastic. This did not seem to bother Farid.

‘Those fucken Nips should put something under the bonnet, mate, instead of spending all that money on spoilers and stickers!’ he said.

But the Monaro occupants were pissed off and let the boys know it with a cavalcade of middle fingers and fists thumping the air as they peeled off into a side street. Lacking so much horsepower, the van was now lagging behind. Farid slowed to let them catch up, remarking that he hoped they’d seen the drag with the Monaro. As they drew near to Chatswood the van roared past them and cut in front.

Eventually the convoy arrived at the Westfield Chatswood shopping centre, the van leading them into the car park nearest the Hoyts cinema. They parked next to each other a short distance away from the entrance where there were a few spaces. The boys got out and milled around the cars. Farid and Sam leaned on the Calais bonnet.

‘OK, boys!’ said Sam as he lit a cone. He inhaled vigorously. He finished it before passing it to Farid to repack and smoke. Meanwhile Dabir had another pipe going and was passing it around. Omar only had a quick toke. He did not want to overdo it and get paranoid. In a while they were all done and with a great deal of overlapping chatter they made their way towards the bright glow of the mall.

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Ten minutes later Farid stood under the neon shop sign that read *KENNY’S CARDIOLOGY*. He was chuckling to Sam as he held up a Larsen birthday card. ‘Heh, heh, it says “School for the Gifted”. The front door says “PULL” and this dumb cunt’s pushing! Heh heh!’

‘He’s warped, that Larsen,’ said Omar.

‘Yeah right, dumb cunt,’ said Sam as he looked around the mall. Farid was looking for a birthday card for his sister, Rashala, who was turning fifteen later that week.

‘C’mon, man, hurry it up, all right?’ said Sam, shuffling his feet. The others were milling about, right outside the store, waiting expectantly. It was not the toughest of stores to be seen hanging at.

‘OK, OK, I’ll buy this one. I’ll be two secs, don’t freak out,’ said Farid. He paid for the card and carefully put his change back in his wallet. They walked on.

Ali, Sam and Taysir led the way in the centre of the group. They ambled past the lines of shops, from time to time shouting to each other to be heard above the cacophony of competing noise.

Sam noticed two girls looking in a store window. He elbowed Taysir in the ribs and motioned towards the pair. They looked about seventeen or eighteen and were dressed similarly in tight jeans, slip-on sneakers and sports tops. One of the girls wore her bleached hair in pigtails, while her friend's, also bleached, hung down to her shoulders. Peripherally, the pigtailed girl seemed to sense the boys' gazes and she turned and observed them before making a sidelong utterance to her friend. They both turned and looked, eyes slightly narrowed and chins raised, and then made their way further down the arcade.

Sam turned to Taysir. 'Dying for it, mate, just dying for it.'

'I'd take that Britney one any day. Nice ass on it, y'know?' Taysir said.

'Yeah, you wish. What we should do is follow them. See what they're up to. C'mon, boys.'

The group sauntered down the arcade after them. The girls had not progressed very far. They were now standing outside the Esprit Megastore. They were peering at the window display, apparently looking at a mannequin's flared jeans. Sam and Taysir strode up to them.

'Hi, girls, how's it going today?' Taysir offered.

'All right,' said the girl with pigtails.

'So, checking out the fashions, eh? Can you believe those pants? Flares back again!' said Sam, running his eyes up and down the mannequin, whose tight white t-shirt failed to conceal visibly erect fibreglass nipples.

'Bit stupid if you ask me,' said Pigtails. Her friend giggled.

Sam locked eyes with the giggling girl. ‘My mates and me saw you before and I thought that you had a very nice look about you. Like you were nice girls, y’know. My mates—and that guy there’s my little brother too—we were just about to head outside to get some fresh air and maybe have a little smoke. And then Zac here, he said, “Maybe we should ask those two girls if they’d like to come with us for a little smoke?” and I said, “Don’t be stupid, mate, girls like that, they’re way too nice, they wouldn’t be interested at all.” But then our curiosity got the best of us and so we had to ask youse—’

‘Yeah, so how about it, feel like something nice to smoke?’ Taysir cut in.

The Giggler looked at Pigtails with a hopeful expression. Pigtails seemed undecided.

‘Look, no pressure, girls, we was just trying to be friendly, that’s all. How about I give you my number and you text us. It’s only early and we’ll be here for another hour or something. Me and my brother have to get a birthday present for our mum—y’know, we’re a close family. By the way, my name’s Ben and this is Zac, like I said.’

This seemed to encourage Pigtails to lighten up. ‘I’m Suzie,’ she said. ‘I didn’t want to sound up myself or anything before but, you know how it is—’

‘Hi, I’m Carol! I wouldn’t mind a smoke!’ chimed in the giggler. She looked at Suzie as if making a plea.

Suzie continued: ‘Maybe. Maybe later on or something. We’ve still got some stuff to do, y’know, shopping and stuff.’

‘Yeah, we’re going to look at some clothes. Maybe an Armani suit for me, y’know. I got a few already but I need a new one,’ said Taysir.

Sam interjected: ‘My friend here, he’s always mucking around. OK, I tell you what. How about we meet you in an hour at the exit near to the food court and the cinemas? That’s close to where we’re parked. You can think about our generous offer until then, girls, eh?’

‘Sounds cool,’ said Carol.

‘Yeah, well, let’s see how we go,’ said Suzie.

They parted and when they were out of earshot Sam prodded Taysir’s ribs. ‘Armani suit! What are you on, mate? These chicks wouldn’t know Armani from Target! Should have offered to buy her a kebab if you wanted to impress her! But oh my God, that Carol wants it so bad! A real drug slut, obviously, but mate, she wants it bad!’

‘I reckon this Britney Spears chick will come around too, mate, you’d better believe it. I’ll spear her all right. Yeah!’ replied Taysir.

They walked over to a Sunglasses Hut and a few of them began trying on frames and posing in front of the mirrors. Omar tried on a few pairs but soon felt self-conscious ogling his own image in the mirror in front of the other boys. He replaced the frames and stood back watching.

A group of schoolgirls walked by, talking quietly amongst themselves. They were wearing school uniforms—tartan skirts and white blouses with ties knotted loosely around the collar. Two of them even wore boaters and a few carried schoolbags, the large vinyl type with the school crest emblazoned across them. Omar thought they looked very different to the girls from Strathfield South. The boys paused to scrutinise them as they walked past.



‘Catholic schoolgirls, mate,’ leered Dabir with authority, though he had no way of knowing whether that was true. ‘I saw a movie the other day with girls just like that in it. *Teacher’s Pets IV*. Mate, what a flick!’

‘Do it to me another time!’ yelled Sam. He skipped after them making various entreaties but the girls just looked straight ahead and kept walking. Sam returned after a few minutes. ‘Asked them if they wanted a smoke and they told me to piss off. That’s gratitude for you. I tell youse, it doesn’t pay to be too generous in this life. Fucken snobby bitches.’

The boys spent the next forty or so minutes wandering the canyons and caverns of the huge mall. They thumbed through CDs at Sanity, tried on Kappa and Adidas clothes at Rebel Sport and at Crazy John’s were reminded of how rapidly their mobile phones dated.

‘Just shoot me if I don’t get one of those Nokia 8890s by the end of the year!’ said Farid.

All the while, they looked for and, where possible, accosted passing girls. Except for a couple of vague responses mouthed in the course of walking away, the boys failed to arouse any interest in their offer of a smoke.

‘I don’t know what it is around here,’ said Dabir. ‘These chicks are so up themselves.’

‘I think maybe it could have something to do with that big zit on your chin, mate,’ taunted Taysir. ‘It looks like you’ve got some kind of cancer growing there! Or like a volcano that’s about to erupt! Maybe you’re scaring them off! Me and Sam, mate, when we operate as a team—no problem! The girls, they come running.’

Dabir's face grew dark. 'Yeah, go shove it up your arse, Taysir. How about I tell Safa's family about those blisters you got on your dick? They wouldn't be so happy about that six months before the wedding, would they?'

The boys, except for Ali and Taysir, all laughed. Between them it was generally known that a few weeks earlier both Taysir and Ali had contracted gonorrhoea from a girl they had picked up in a Marrickville pub. A few days later Taysir had experienced an agonising stinging sensation while urinating and he'd been terrified that it was herpes or AIDS and that he would be rendered sterile or, worse, impotent. Even so, for several days he would not see a doctor. Ali, who was experiencing the same symptoms, had to push and cajole Taysir to visit an STD clinic for the treatment.

'What if someone sees us there, mate? They'll think we've got AIDS or we're poofers or something!' Taysir had protested, or so the story went.

Ali had persuaded him that his dick would eventually drop off if he did not visit a doctor. On the way back from the clinic, antibiotics in hand, they had driven to the girl's squalid Tempe housing commission flat where they'd been on the night they got infected. She was not at home. With a tyre lever, they forced open the front door and trashed the flat. Using some lipstick they found, they wrote large epithets on her bedroom walls: DIRTY SCUMBAG HOLE SLUT. DICEASED CUNT U FUCK FACE BITCH. GO AND DIE DIRTY PIG SLUT.

Then, to Ali's surprise, Taysir had pulled down his track pants and defecated on her bed and pillows. He had originally intended to piss in her wardrobe and in a carton of milk in the fridge, but could not because it was still too painful. Ali told Sam about the incident, emphasising how funny it had been watching Taysir trying

to squat on her stale-smelling, unmade bed. The yellowing mattress sagged so much that once or twice he had almost tumbled into his own sloppy turds.

Of course, Sam could not keep a great story like this from Omar and the other boys. It was funny but also a salutary lesson about sluts. You had to be careful, and it was better not to fuck unless you wore a franger. If you did not have protection, you should only ever take head jobs. These days it was probably advisable to wear a condom even for that. Of course, Sam was known to occasionally forget his own advice.

Now, Taysir was not impressed that Dabir had brought the issue up. The look on his face made it clear he had hoped the memory would fade away, much like the stinging sensation in his urethra. He summoned up a response: ‘You fucken dumb cunt, Dabir. At least I wasn’t a virgin until two months ago! And my face doesn’t look like a cauliflower! And at least I *am* gonna get married some day, you fucken ugly, sad case.’

Everyone laughed, except Dabir. He lowered his eyes and cursed.

‘Shut your fucken face or I’ll shoot a cap up your arse, dickhead!’ he said, turning red.

‘Yeah right, mate! Are you still a virgin, is that why you’re so worked up?’

‘I mean it, mate, you say that again, next time I see your face I’ll fucken put a fucken hole right between your eyes.’ Dabir seemed calm now. ‘Bam,’ he said, pretending to fire a handgun at Taysir.

‘You wish,’ said Taysir.

‘You fucken wait and see.’

‘Everybody wants to live on Telopea Street, eh?’ said Sam. ‘Everybody wants to be a sick cunt.’

Omar and a few of the others laughed. Telopea Street was in Punchbowl. It was an average looking street for the area, perhaps wider than most, predominantly lined with weatherboard bungalows and the odd brown brick house. The street had become notorious in 1998 after the fatal stabbing of a fourteen-year-old Asian boy. The Asian kid and some friends had wandered into the driveway of a house on Telopea Street, mistakenly thinking a friend's fifteenth birthday party was being held there. A fight had somehow erupted with some people who were at that house, leading to the Asian boy's death by stabbing. Since then various young male residents of Telopea Street had been blamed for all manner of ram-raids, assaults, car-jackings, armed robberies, protection rackets, standover tactics, bomb threats, four or five murders, and even a spray of machine gun fire on Lakemba police station.

Omar did not know if any of this was true. He was not sure whether the Telopea Street Boys were responsible or, for that matter, whether they even existed as an organised group. It depended on who you talked to and which magazines and newspapers you read. After the death of the Asian boy, there had been a crackdown in the whole Bankstown area. That was not fun. There were dawn raids by armed police on houses in Telopea Street, and for weeks the cops stopped and searched young guys of 'Middle Eastern appearance' all over Bankstown, Greenacre and Punchbowl.

The major result of this was to give every young Lebanese guy in the district a good reason to hate the police. In the end, nobody was surprised when somebody decided that enough was enough and shots were fired at the police station. The cops had still not caught whoever was responsible for the stabbing murder or the shooting up of the police station, so no-one knew for sure if the perpetrators were

from Telopea Street, or from somewhere else in the suburbs of Sydney, but because of these and other incidents, the reputation of the Telopea Street Boys continued to evolve. Whether or not the gang was as organised and efficient as the rumours and media suggested, it was without doubt a badge of honour to live on Telopea Street. There was no arguing that fear bred respect.

Even though Dabir lived nowhere near Telopea Street, Taysir decided not to say any more about his friend's manhood. 'Yeah, in your dreams,' he grumbled, and looked at a matching set of Samsonite luggage in a shop window. Dabir smirked and puffed himself up a little.

With some kind of equilibrium restored, the boys wandered toward the exit near the food hall and into the car park, fanning out of the mall doors. Farid and Mal lit the cigarettes that they had at the ready in their mouths. Sam looked around. Carol and Suzie were sitting on a bench at the bus terminus.

'Hey!' yelled Sam. 'You waiting for the bus or you waiting for us?'

'Maybe neither!' said Suzie, and at this Carol giggled and dug in her bag for cigarettes. They both lit up as the boys walked towards them.

'This is my brother, Adam,' said Sam, grabbing Omar and pulling him to the front of the group. 'He's a nice looking fella, isn't he, girls?'

'He's all right for a little boy,' said Suzie.

'Little boys can be very naughty,' said Carol, and laughed again. 'So, what are you guys doing now?'

Omar felt the need to pump himself up, to say something hard, but the feelings inside him remained shapeless, unformed, and no words came.

‘Well, what are *you* doing now?’ said Sam. ‘Have you had a think about our offer? Cos it’s, like, getting late and we’re going to have to go pick up the gear before long or it’s going to be too late, y’know what I mean?’

Suzie did not look too happy about this. ‘You’ve got to go pick it up? Where from? I thought you had it on you.’

‘Nah, we got to go meet our friend not far from here. I’m not sure what the suburb’s called. What is it again?’ Sam scratched his head.

‘Lane Cove,’ Taysir volunteered.

‘Yeah, Lane Cove, or somewhere near there,’ Sam said. ‘How about it? It’ll be good smoke.’

‘Your friend lives in Lane Cove?’ asked Suzie.

‘We didn’t say he lived there. He’s just going to be there, that’s all. This guy is busy, he gets around,’ said Sam.

‘Yeah, well I don’t know how we’re supposed to get home from Lane Cove.’ Suzie was looking worried again.

‘Well, where do youse live?’ asked Sam. ‘We’ll go pick up the dope, have a nice little smoke in the van and then we’ll take you home. Both of you, wherever you want to go. As long as it’s not Rooty Hill or something.’ There was a grunting chuckle from Farid.

‘That sounds all right,’ Carol said. ‘C’mon Suze, it’ll be fun. These guys are OK.’ She was making eyes at Sam as she spoke. Sam responded with a black-eyed stare, seemingly all pupils, a thin smile on his lips.

‘So, we’ll have a smoke and you’ll drop us home?’ Suzie asked doubtfully. ‘We both live in North Ryde.’

‘Sure, girls, Ryde—yeah! You go up Victoria Road at Gladesville, or what?’  
said Sam.

‘Yeah! It’s not far from Victoria Road,’ said Carol.

‘Too easy, we’ll take you there after. C’mon, let’s go before our friend  
thinks we’re not going to turn up.’

Suzie did not seem to be totally convinced but they all started walking  
towards the van. Sam introduced the girls to Mal and Ali, who were walking just  
ahead of him. Mal was Mack and Ali was Al. Sam handed the keys to Mal, then  
spoke in Lebanese: *Head towards home, OK?*

Mal grinned and nodded, jumping into the driver’s seat of the van.

Sam turned to Omar. *Come with us, bro. We’ll have some fun! Let Mal drive  
so you can call the blokes in the Calais if you have to.*

Omar thought it might be good to be where the action was. He got into the  
front middle seat, followed by Ali. Sam opened the side door for the girls.

‘In you go, girls, step into our limousine,’ Sam said gallantly, holding the  
door. The girls hesitated and then climbed in. Sam and Taysir followed. They sat on  
the carpeted floor, leaning against the walls two-by-two. Taysir and Suzie faced  
Sam and Carol. Mal started the van and carefully reversed out of the parking space.

Within a minute, Sam was on the phone to Farid, though the two vehicles  
had not even left the car park.

‘Hey, Falafel,’ he said in English. ‘How’re you losers going back there, eh?  
Hey, I hope your mate’s home. That weed was awesome last time, y’know?’ Then  
he switched to Lebanese: *We’re gonna head towards the park ... nah, Northcote.  
What are they gonna do about it? ... North Ryde ... of course not ... They’ll be all  
right. Just follow us. If you put your high beams on, mate, you’ll see me getting my*

*dick sucked through the back window. Ha, ha. We'll take Parramatta Road, OK?'*

He hung up and turned to Carol. 'Everything's looking good, let's go get

STONED!'

Mal exited the car park with the Calais following. They went back the way they had come. Soon they were on the Pacific Highway again. Mal drove more erratically than Sam, speeding up and racing through some lights, and then inexplicably slowing down and stopping for amber lights at other intersections. They lost the Calais a few times. Omar would ring Farid or Dabir and let them know, in Lebanese, exactly where the van was. Not that it was always necessary but because possessing a mobile meant that he could. The red car always reappeared in the rear-vision mirror within a few minutes.

In the back of the van, Sam could be heard trying to impress Carol: 'Yeah, we've only got a couple of outlets now, but we're planning to open a few more, first up at Bankstown Square and then a few more around the place. Pretty soon it'll be a full-on chain, y'know, Ben's Bakeries. It's not easy being a managing director so young, but y'know with my father's sickness and everything, I had to take up the challenge. That's why these guys here respect me so much. They are fully aware of my business and leadership capabilities.'

Omar turned around and could see that Carol was smiling to herself as Sam talked about the fortune he was making. He moved closer to her and peered into her eyes as he crooned. By the time they passed through Gore Hill, he had put his arm around her and by North Sydney he had kissed her. As they drove on they kept kissing. Soon, with some quiet murmurs, Sam propositioned Carol to go a bit further, taking her hand and placing it between his legs, asking her if she would do anything else, such as 'a little blow job maybe'. But with each time she resisted and



pulled away. Sam had to start all over again by kissing her. ‘You’re so stunning,’ he would say. ‘I can’t control myself.’

Taysir and Suzie had been having a less romantic time. Taysir had started by telling Suzie about his exploits in the boxing ring. It was true that, like Farid, Taysir had trained in a boxing gym for a few years but he had only had one competitive fight. Omar, Sam and Ali had gone to the Belleview Centre in Bankstown to cheer him on. Taysir opened with a flurry of ill-directed jabs and hooks. His opponent ducked, weaved, stepped back, and then, at the first available opening nailed him with a straight left—BANG!—on the soft part of his nose. Taysir had felt the POP of cartilage turning to jelly and then he was on the canvas, still conscious but not capable of moving for the whole ten-count, staring blankly through a crimson fog of blood that was pouring from his nose back into his eyes. The fight had lasted all of forty seconds. And that had been the end of his short boxing career.

‘So, in the ring, the main thing you got to have, right, is speed. It is no good doing heaps of weights and coming out there all built and ripped with huge arms. That’s wrestling, mate, that’s WWF. That’s not boxing, y’know? You can punch a hole in a heavy bag but it doesn’t matter unless you got speed. Fitness too, y’know? You ever seen that movie about the Rumble in the Jungle—y’know, Mohammed Ali?’

Suzie shook her head, her eyes devoid of any interest. She was looking behind Taysir through the side window.

Taysir rubbed the bridge of his nose and continued. ‘This movie, *When We Was Kings*, y’see, it’s not made up like *Rocky* and that, it’s the real thing. It’s about when Mohammed Ali went to Africa—Africa has lots of little countries inside it—so he went to this country with a cool name, Zaire ...’ Taysir continued talking

about the fast hands of Mohammed Ali while he tried a few moves of his own on Suzie. He slid a hand onto her thigh, and was quickly repelled. He tried another hand on her shoulder, slipping it down to her breast, but was parried. ‘Aw, c’mon, what’s the matter? Why can’t you relax like your friend here? She’s—’

‘HEY! Fuck off!’ said Suzie, crossing her arms.

The van came to a stop. Suzie looked out towards the front. They were at a tollbooth. Mal squirmed in the driver’s seat as he searched through his pockets. Omar was searching in his pockets too, for change.

‘Why are we getting on the bridge?’ Suzie asked loudly. ‘We’re heading into town! You said we were going to go to Lane Cove to pick up the weed. What are we doing getting on the bridge?’

Carol straightened up from where she had been nuzzling with Sam. She peered out the side window and then looked towards the front.

In the front seat Ali passed Mal a fifty-dollar note. ‘Here, use this. I got no change either,’ said Ali. He twisted around. During the drive thus far, he too had been making and receiving calls on his mobile, speaking in both English and Lebanese. ‘It’s all right,’ he said, holding the phone out by way of evidence. ‘I was just talking to the guys in the other car. Our dealer mate wants to meet us somewhere else now. He’s not at Lane Cove anymore—he left cos we took so long, so if we want the dope we have to go get it from where he is now. It’ll be worth it, I’m telling youse.’ He gave the mobile a little wave with his hand.

‘Well, where?’ Suzie demanded. ‘Where are we going to get this weed from? How long is this going to take? I don’t want to be out all night.’

‘Just over in the inner west, near Stanmore. Not far to go now,’ said Ali.

Sam pulled out his mobile phone from his pocket. He punched in a number and remonstrated into the mouthpiece: 'Falafel! ... What the fuck do you mean he left? Why the fuck didn't he wait for us? Aw, that guy, mate, he's all over the place! We told him we was coming, didn't we?' He pressed the end button forcefully, as if he were slamming down a landline handset. 'Bloody idiot, that guy, mate. I dunno why we give him our business.'

'Well, what are you going to do? Are you still going to drop us home?' Suzie asked.

'They'll take us home, it'll be OK, Suze. Relax, it'll be cool.' Carol seemed to have gained confidence from Sam's kisses and compliments.

'That's right, believe me, it'll be cool,' Sam said. 'Don't worry about a thing. You won't be sorry when you have some tokes on this weed, I'm telling you!' He dialled Farid's number and spoke to him in Lebanese. *Hey, mate, pull over at the McDonald's at Stanmore. We'll meet you in the car park there. I reckon we'll have to give these chicks a smoke. They're getting too uptight.* He ended the call and announced, 'It's cool, everything's going to be cool, you'll see.'

They passed through the city and Broadway and were soon heading west on Parramatta Road. Before too long the glow of the golden arches appeared. Mal pulled the van into the car park.

'OK, who's hungry?' said Sam as he opened the van door. They piled out, stretching their legs. Sam helped Carol out but Suzie declined his hand. The girls moved a few steps away but Omar, who was standing quietly by the front of the van, could make out snatches of their conversation.

'I reckon we should go ...' Suzie was saying.

‘C’mon, Suze, why? We’ve come all this ... haven’t even had a smoke ... get something to eat while we’re here?’

‘I reckon we should go ... halfway across town ... fuck knows how we get home ...’

‘Yeah, but ... had a smoke in ages ... van reeks of dope ... I’m only pashing him, not going home with ... I promise.’

‘You’d bloody better not ...’

‘I said I won’t ...’

‘ ... promise?’

‘Yeah!’

Their conversation and Omar’s eavesdropping were interrupted by the red Calais pulling up next to the van in the car park. The rest of the boys got out.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’ said Sam.

‘We got pulled over for fucken speeding on the way, eh. *No joke!* Fucken pigs. Seventy-seven in a sixty zone.’ Farid waved the ticket. ‘A hundred and twenty-five bucks plus two demerit points. *Seriously!* Cunts. Lucky they didn’t search the car, cos have a look here! Success! Check it out!’ He walked over to them and, taking a quick look around opened his fist to reveal a small plastic bag of marijuana buds.

‘Nice one!’ said Ali, perhaps a little too enthusiastically.

‘All right!’ said Sam. ‘He came through.’

‘Sure did.’

‘Let’s get back in the van. Girls?’

Carol jumped straight in, but Suzie hesitated.

‘C’mon,’ said Carol. ‘What are you waiting for?’

'I suppose,' said Suzie and clambered back in.

The boys squeezed in after them until there was no room, leaving Omar and Dabir to look on from the front seats. Farid produced a small pipe and a lighter and packed a cone, which he passed around. The boys only took small tokes, encouraging the girls to finish each pipe once it was well lit. After half a dozen rounds, the girls appeared well and truly ripped.

'See, what did I tell youse?,' said Sam, more to Suzie than Carol. 'We keep our word, isn't that right?' He kissed Carol again and she clumsily reciprocated.

'I need a drink. I need something to drink,' Suzie announced. 'Carol, come get a Sprite with me.'

'Nah, I'm all right here,' replied Carol. 'I'm too out of it to go in there ... I couldn't face going into Macca's.'

Suzie slumped back.

'I'll get youse a drink,' Sam said.

'Thanks,' said Suzie.

'Falafel—go get some drinks!'

Farid, who was also very stoned, mumbled a protest before saying, 'I wouldn't mind a cheeseburger anyway.'

Emad and Mal got out to let Farid through. He hauled himself out of the door and returned a while later, licking his lips. He leaned into the back and handed a couple of large cokes to Carol and Suzie.

'Here, my shout, girls.'

They thanked him and slurped on their drinks.

‘All right, boys, we should get back on the road, eh? We’ll go for a little cruise and then drop the girls home, eh?’ Sam said. He added, *Follow us, head towards Greenacre.*

‘Sounds good,’ said Farid.

‘I’m not sure, maybe we should just get a cab from here.’ said Suzie.

‘C’mon, Carol, you’ve had your smoke.’

‘I don’t want to spend all my money on a cab to bloody North Ryde. I don’t even know where we are. We probably haven’t even got enough money for a cab. Anyway, they said they’d give us a smoke, and they did. We can’t just smoke their weed and piss off.’

‘I reckon we should go home from here, that’s all.’

‘Suzie, Suzie,’ interrupted Sam. ‘Can’t you see your friend wants to hang with us for a little while? Ease up on her a bit, y’know, you’re making everyone feel uptight.’

Suzie looked sullen. Carol grabbed her hand and nothing more was said about leaving.

\*

The two vehicles continued west along Parramatta Road. Sam assured the girls that they were just going for a little roundabout cruise that would eventually get them home via the Gladesville Bridge. But instead of making the right-hand turn that would take them through Five Dock and back up towards Gladesville, the van turned left and headed south. Mal had had a few deep puffs on the pipe and was

driving more conservatively now. A stoned Farid had no such qualms and was madly tailgating the van before being told by Sam on the mobile, to back off.

Also on Sam's instructions, Ali phoned Farid a few times on the pretence of telling them how to get to North Ryde. During these calls Ali conversed in English and Lebanese. 'Yeah, you take a right at Great North Road and you head into Five Dock and then you keep going until ...' *Meet us at Northcote Park, bro! Just cruise for five or ten minutes, give us some time with them, then turn up. Yeah Ryde! For sure! That's where we'll take 'em—for a ride!*

Sam began to focus back on Carol. 'So can we go from where we left off?' he asked. He kissed her again and felt her breast. She kissed him back, hesitantly, and removed his hand.

'Ben, I said I didn't want you to do that.'

'OK, how about a head job then?' he asked, laughing. Carol looked away.

Taysir had moved on from the subject of boxing, finally registering Suzie's indifference. In the front, Omar was relieved. He had been following Taysir's efforts and was embarrassed. He was sure he could have done a better job of chatting up Suzie.

Unfortunately, Taysir's new topic of conversation was top fuel funny car drag racing. While he described the finer points of monster garage makeovers and fourteen-inch drive tyre slicks, Suzie looked out the front windscreen trying to determine whether they were going the right way. It seemed that she had no idea where they were. Every so often her eyes would skitter to the side window. As he talked, Taysir's groping and pawing became more frequent, though he was not rough in an outright way.

Sam had started to crack ruder and ruder jokes to Carol, seeming to relish the lewd punchlines himself. At one point, he looked over and met Suzie's eyes. She looked down. Then he looked back into Carol's eyes. She too averted her gaze. She turned to her friend.

'Hey, Suze, we'll be home soon, it'll be cool,' she said, but the easy assurances at McDonald's had given way to a voice that sounded forced and strained.

\*

It was after 11 pm when the van cruised down Waterloo Road in Greenacre. They pulled up outside a park. Mal cut the engine and Sam opened the van door. 'Girls, it's a nice night. Let's get some fresh air, how about that?'

'We're fine,' said Suzie. 'You said you were going to take us home.' She folded her arms and remained seated in the van. 'No way.'

Omar got out and stretched his legs, wondering whether he should try and talk to the girls, try and get them to relax. That would be a way to get involved. That would be a start.

Then, Sam lunged into the van and grabbed Carol hard by the arm, forcefully dragging her out. Carol was shocked and let out an involuntary scream.

'What the fuck are you doing?' yelled Suzie. 'Let her go!'

'Don't fucken scream. C'mon, you fucken bitch,' Sam said quietly but with menace. To reinforce his words he slapped Carol across the cheek. She appeared to be too stunned to say anything.



A couple of streetlights near the road bathed the outer edges of the park in a soft light. Towards its centre, the reserve deepened into darkness. Sam grabbed Carol high up on her arm and marched her in that direction.

Meanwhile Taysir had taken Suzie from the van in a headlock and was dragging her towards the toilet block. She began to scream.

‘Shut the fuck up,’ said Taysir. ‘Shut the fuck up or you’ll get bashed.’ Suzie responded by kicking him in the calf. He stopped, momentarily raising his calf behind him. Then he put his foot down and hit her on the side of the head with the fleshy base of his fist. It sounded like someone flattening a ball of pizza dough. Suzie went very quiet.

Taysir said, ‘I told you to fucken shut up. I told you what would happen if you did that.’

Omar was sickened by the violence in the same way he’d reacted on the train. The aggression scared him and interfered with any desire on his part. He could not understand the seemingly opposite effect it had on the other boys. He wanted to cry out to Taysir that he should ease up. He felt panicky, as if he might be hit next, but then forced himself to consider the absurdity of the thought. Why would Taysir want to hit him? He was Omar. He was Sam’s brother. And he had to be cool. In any case, Taysir did not hit Suzie again as he led her, stumbling, toward the toilet block.

Mal and Ali had gotten out of the van but stayed near the passenger side door, smoking cigarettes and looking on. After a minute they walked in the direction that Sam and Carol had taken. Omar hesitated and then followed.

The three stopped a short distance away from Sam and Carol who were murky shapes in the darkness ahead of them.

'Now give me a head job!' they heard Sam say.

'I said I didn't want to. You said we were going to have a smoke and then you'd take us home.' Carol's voice was beseeching, terrified.

'Look, you knew what was going to happen if you came with us. You should just give me a head job.'

'No, I don't want to.'

'Just do it now, before the other car comes. If you don't do it they will probably bash you for leading us on like that and not doing anything. It will be better for you to do it before they get here. Then I'll tell them you don't do anything and they'll leave you alone.'

Carol stuttered, apparently struggling to fathom Sam's logic. She rubbed her cheek, possibly at her smarting skin, perhaps to wipe away frightened tears. 'What ... what do you mean?' she pleaded. 'You just said they were going to bash me. Why ... why would they listen to you, anyway?'

'Like I told you, they all respect me and I'm the oldest.'

'OK, I believe you ... but I still don't want to do anything.'

'I'm telling you, do it now, just do it now and get it over and done with before they come.'

Just then they heard the noise of a car pulling up. Carol squinted as the headlights momentarily illuminated the area where she and Sam stood. It was the red Calais. They heard the doors opening and the sounds of the boys talking over each other and to no-one in particular. Omar's eyes were getting accustomed to the darkness. He saw Sam grab Carol's arm and twist it behind her. He forced her to kneel on the ground. He unzipped his fly and took out his penis. With both hands he held her head by the ears.

'Ben, please, I said *I don't* ... *I don't* want to do it,' she implored.

Sam forced his penis into her mouth and began thrusting. Carol gagged and tried to remove Sam's hands from her head. He held her tighter and thrust deeper into her mouth. Suddenly he wrenched her head back roughly. He raised his hand as if to slap her again.

'Be careful! Don't bite me, you fucken bitch!' He jerked her head up once more, glaring at her. 'Be careful, OK?' He thrust his penis back into her.

Mal and Ali laughed. Omar looked on, transfixed. He felt the familiar surge of intense desire as he saw Carol appear to become passive.

She stifled a gag as Sam continued to thrust. After a few minutes, with a small grunt, or maybe a curse, Sam leaned into her, causing her to gag again. He withdrew. Carol retched and spat several times. She stood up unsteadily and took a few steps back from Sam, who was fastening his pants. She turned around and walked away further into the park. Voices, yelling could be heard from the direction of the red car. Then there was the sound of thudding on the grass, like horse hooves at a racecourse, but without the majestic rhythm. Omar saw Ali and Mal run forward to join whoever had just sprinted past them from the Calais.

Carol was tackled to the ground. The impact appeared to bewilder her. She could not scream. And then the boys were kicking her in the legs, for some reason only in the legs. Omar was horrified. He felt dizzy but did not know what to do. He knew that he didn't have the guts to intervene and could only stand there, watching. His eyes had adjusted and he could see what was happening quite well now, which oddly made the events all the more dreamlike.

They had stopped kicking Carol. Someone picked her up. It was Ali. He picked her up right off the ground and threw her into a bush. She went limp in the

bush, probably happy to be left there, perhaps hoping it was some kind of sanctuary—an end point. But she was hauled out. Now she was on her feet again, screaming and crying and stumbling towards a bench. Carol sat with her head in her hands sobbing. Then Sam, who had been standing quietly near Omar, walked over to her again.

‘I told you that would happen. I warned you what they would do, didn’t I?’

‘You didn’t tell me ... they were going to go mental ... they bashed me ... they ... hurt me!’ Carol managed to complete the sentence between sobs and sharp intakes of air.

‘Yeah, well if you don’t do what they want you to do, that’s what happens. So, do it. Then they’ll leave you alone. Do you wanna get bashed or not?’

‘No ... but I don’t understand ... they ...’

Sam walked away.

Then Mal, Ali, Farid and Dabir walked over to the bench. Carol stared down, looking shocked and broken. They all demanded head jobs. Mal asked if she wanted to get bashed again. Then Farid was in front of her. He pulled down his tracksuit pants. Carol seemed to recoil. He forced his penis into her mouth. He began to thrust and came within minutes. Carol gagged and retched. She spat what she could onto the ground. Then another one was in front of her. There was some jostling.

‘Hey, I’m the one with the WRX! I should go next. Give me a head job and do it right or you’re gonna get bashed again. Do you want that?’ It was Mal. Omar had never heard him speak this strongly about anything. Mal forced himself into her mouth.

When Mal was finished, Farid came back asking for another head job but Ali pushed him roughly out of the way. It looked like there was going to be a fight between the two heavyweights but then Farid walked off into the darkness. Ali now stood in front of her, taller than the others with his broad, flat back. He was fumbling with something in his hands. It was a condom, which he put on his penis after stroking himself several times. He held her face with one hand then thrust his penis into her mouth. However, he withdrew himself after only one or two thrusts. Something seemed wrong. Pathetically, almost making Omar want to laugh, Ali masturbated to encourage his erection. He thrust himself into Carol's mouth again, more roughly this time. He pushed and shoved, clumsily, it seemed. Carol gagged, spluttered and intermittently moaned in desperation.

'Hey, she's not doing it right,' Ali yelled after a short time. 'This chick's shit at head jobs!' Then he stopped and flung the condom in the bushes. He fumbled with his pants. Then he left her alone and she just sat there on the bench, perhaps too afraid and exhausted to move.

Omar stood frozen in the darkness at the edge of this domination. He felt as if he was invisible. And maybe he was. The boys, intent on feeding their desires, hardly seemed to notice him.

Sam returned to Carol. Without a word, he unzipped his pants again. Again, he forced his penis into her mouth. He took much longer than before. He held her by her hair, guiding her head backwards and forwards, groaning and muttering what sounded like words of self-encouragement. When he finally finished Carol spat the semen into the grass. Sam silently did his pants up and walked away.

Farid had rejoined the line. Again he demanded that Carol give him a head job or she would get bashed. She sat still, her eyes down. Farid forced himself on her again but it appeared he could not finish. He left spitting out Lebanese curses.

Another one was in front of her. It was Dabir. Instead of reaching into his pants he said, 'Your friend reckons you've got AIDS or herpes or hepatitis or something like that. She says we shouldn't touch you. Is it true?'

Carol looked up, into his face. 'No way. No I don't. I don't think Suzie would ever say that because I don't.' She sounded very matter-of-fact, almost robotic in tone. Omar could not see her face clearly but he imagined it drained of expression, her eyes flat and dulled like those of a fish.

Dabir said, 'I swear to God, if you're lying we'll get you.' Carol flinched and put her hand out to ward off a blow. But he walked away.

Omar looked over towards the toilet block. He could make out Suzie on all fours. She was spitting or maybe vomiting. Then it appeared she was grasping for something on the ground. She picked up what looked to be her necklace and tried to put it back on around her neck.

Some of the boys were shouting to each other. Omar could hear Farid yelling out for them to hurry up. An engine started and then the headlights illuminated the area again. Doors slammed shut. The Calais was leaving. But it was not quite over yet. From the direction of the toilet block, where Suzie was sitting on the ground, Omar could see Taysir walking towards Carol. As he approached it became clear that he had his hand inside his pants and was rubbing his crotch as he walked.

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Omar climbed into his bed. He felt physically exhausted and yet his mind raced. As he lay there, images of the night's activities returned to him. Inwardly he recoiled as he replayed Sam's stinging slap on Carol's cheek and the stupid, needless thud made by the heel of Taysir's fist on Suzie's head. The recollection still troubled him. As a distraction, he forced himself to think of the Clarence Street party. He began to relax and his hand moved down to his groin. He pictured himself once again on the torn couch with Anna's head moving so deliciously over his lap. He remembered the unparalleled physical ecstasy to which she led him. More than anything, he savoured the amazing feeling of authority that she had inspired while he sat stroking her hair and shoulders. But the triumph was short-lived. After his breathless climax he had pulled up his pants and then a few seconds later, without thinking, asked her if she was doing anything the following week. And she had thrown her head back and laughed as if he had cracked the funniest joke ever. He had gone along with her, smiling and nodding, reaching for his can of drink, but all the while smarting inside.

Fuck. He had gotten off track. Now Omar wanted to be distracted again. Pushing aside the violence, he pictured Carol kneeling in front of Sam in the park. The scene changed and Sam became Omar, and Carol was down in front of him, willingly doing her utmost to please him. That was better. The two of them were now lying on the ground together, naked. Omar was on top of her. He began to stroke himself harder and more rapidly. He was masterful. He took what was coming to him. This is what should have happened *tonight*, he told himself, as he came over his sheets.

*It should have happened. Next time.*

The train pulled to a halt at Belmore. A young woman boarded. She was of above average height, slim and wore a lot of foundation on her face. She was dressed in a knee-length wraparound black skirt and maroon v-neck top. Over her shoulder she carried a small, cheap handbag. The girl looked around the carriage before choosing an empty seat.

‘Check out the way she walks. That’s a slut if I ever saw one,’ said Farid, nudging Omar. ‘This is your big chance, eh?’

Omar shifted in his seat. The morning after the trip to the Chatswood Mall he had woken up with a sense of clarity. He knew that he had to act and act soon or he was going to be dismissed by the boys as a wuss or worse, gay. That this was a crucial time had been confirmed during the week when he’d hung out with Sam and the boys a couple of times. Every time the conversation turned to the events at Northcote Park Omar easily interpreted the paralysing force that seemed to descend on him. It stopped him from being able to say anything simply because he had done nothing. Equally, this was why the boys seemed to tactfully avoid his eyes as they swapped their barbs and bragged. But instead of feeling deflated and weak Omar had experienced something new. It was a feeling of resolve. He would rely on himself for a change. Instead of being a wimp he would *do* something. Now here was a chance.

‘She’ll probably do,’ Omar said quietly. He put a hand to his sternum and took a deep breath. ‘Better than the fat chick who got off at Canterbury. We’ll be all the way to bloody Liverpool if we don’t meet a chick soon,’ he added.



Today there were three other boys in the group. Nabil, Boog and Abey. They were from Marrickville and may or may not have been Farid's cousins. Farid, in a lordly manner, had introduced them as 'my boys', like he was trying to compete with the multitude of Ali's cousins who always seemed to be around. It was the first time Omar had hung out with 'Farid's boys'. He was enjoying it so far. They were keen to try anything and had provided a steady stream of banter and jokes on the train to the city that morning. The group had loitered on George Street and at Circular Quay for a while, laughing at tourists, eating burgers and messing around before heading back to the suburbs. At each stop they had thrown whistles and leery invitations at any girls who boarded their carriage, so far without any success.

The doors closed and the train began to move. The only other person in the carriage was a young boy wearing a private school uniform. He had his head down, immersed in a Gameboy.

After receiving another nudge from Farid, Omar stood up and walked towards the girl. Figuring that it seemed to work for Sam, he said, 'Hi, I'm Ben. What are you up to?'

She looked into his young face. 'Just going to see a friend,' she said.

'Cool. Yeah, that's what we're doing as well, eh? What's your name?'

'Shayna.'

'Shayna, that's a good name.' Omar was trying hard to channel some of Sam's smoothness.

'Yeah, thanks ... so?' She ran her hand over her dark hair.

'How would you like to come and have a smoke with us?' Omar blurted.

She looked uncertain. 'I don't know. I've got to be somewhere.'

‘C’mon, it’ll be fun. It’s good stuff. Get off at Bankstown with us and we’ll have a smoke. Then all you have to do is get back on the next train. It comes in twenty-five minutes.’

‘Nah, I’d better not.’

‘C’mon ...’

‘I don’t think I should.’

‘C’mon, I’m sick of hanging around with these blokes all day. They got BO, eh!’

Shayna smiled. ‘I don’t know.’

‘I tell you what. Come and have a smoke with us and I’ll give you the rest of the bag to take with you. I got plenty of this shit. On tap. Let’s say I got good connections. Look.’ Omar languidly pulled a bag from his pocket and handed it to Shayna. She opened the top and sniffed at the green, downy covered heads.

‘Gnarly buds. But why would you want to give a whole fifty-dollar bag away?’

‘I told you, I got that stuff on tap. Connections. It’ll be fun. Don’t you like making new friends?’

Shayna looked out the window. The warm afternoon sun hit her face. ‘OK, why not?’ she said. ‘But you promise I can take the bag with me?’

‘I swear to God,’ said Omar, with a little grin.

They chatted for a few minutes. Soon Farid joined them, followed by the others. Omar, sitting straight-backed next to Shayna, regally made the introductions. The boys cracked some jokes and solicited a few laughs from Shayna. Every now and then they would speak to each other in short bursts of Lebanese. Eventually the train pulled into Bankstown station.

They walked out through the station turnstiles and headed towards the nearest public toilets, which were accessible from a side street.

‘No-one will spring us here,’ said Omar, who walked in the centre of the group. They arrived at the entrance of the toilet. It was indeed a quiet spot. Omar pulled the bag and a pipe from his pockets.

‘Which one of youse has got a lighter?’ he asked.

‘Here, use mine,’ said Shayna, extracting one from her bag.

‘Thanks, beautiful,’ said Omar. He packed a generous amount of marijuana into the pipe and then took the lighter from her. He lit the cone and had a couple of tokes before passing it to Shayna.

‘Here you go. No worries, eh?’ he said breathlessly.

She took the pipe and put it to her mouth.

‘Shit!’ said Farid before she could light the bowl. ‘I just saw a cop car go past. I swear it was the pigs, eh! Wouldn’t want to get busted if they drive down here. I can’t afford to get done. Maybe we should go somewhere else ... But you got to get back on the train,’ he said, looking at Shayna. ‘Maybe we should just go in there and smoke this.’ He motioned towards the men’s toilet.

Shayna looked up the street, the pipe concealed in her hands. There was no sign of the police car. She looked doubtful for a second. ‘Yeah, maybe you’re right. I wouldn’t want to get busted either—again. Ha ha.’

‘You guys go in, I’ll keep watch out here,’ said Omar. ‘That way we’ll be safe, eh?’

Shayna walked into the toilet, followed by Farid and his boys.

Omar took out his mobile, dialled a number, put the phone to his ear and began walking away.

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A couple of hours and several mobile phone calls later, Omar drove the white van through the Chullora Industrial Estate. It was an old, depressed industrial zone off the Hume Highway, containing a lot of quiet and relatively isolated roads where street drags were held and stolen cars dumped. The area was studded with large corrugated-iron industrial hangars that overshadowed clusters of transportable offices on concrete blocks. It seemed that the majority of lots were vacant.

Omar found the no-through road he was looking for and drove to the end before pulling up in front of a neglected looking warehouse. A big weathered, '*For Lease*' sign stood at the front of the premises. Dabir's red Lancer was parked on the wide verge. Sam, Dabir and a few of the boys were milling around the car. The spot was quiet and isolated.

'Hey, here's the man, my bro!' said Sam as Omar got out of the driver's seat.

'Hey,' said Omar, looking around and nodding to the other boys. Emad got out of the passenger seat of the van. Wardi emerged from the back together with another boy who was obviously his twin brother. They both sported fluff on their upper lips and carried themselves similarly—hands in pockets, shoulders slightly stooped. They looked around and then stood, eyes down, waiting to be introduced.

'BOYS!' said Sam. 'Everyone, this is Nikko and Wardi. Mates of Omar's.'

'Where do you boys come from?' asked Ali. 'How come we haven't seen youse before?'

‘We go to school with Omar,’ said Nikko.

‘Moved up from Melbourne,’ said Wardi.

‘They moved to a place in Greenacre, eh?’ said Omar. ‘Our new work neighbours too, eh? Their dad bought Aziz’s butcher shop on Punchbowl Road.’

‘Good stuff. So, youse come to clean up the slops, eh! Only stirring, this slut’s juicy all on her own, y’know?’ said Sam. The boys smiled and looked towards the car. They stood where they were and looked down again. ‘Well, boys, let’s not stand around here all day wasting our time. Who’s next then?’

Emad stood forward. ‘I reckon I’ll have a go,’ he said.

‘We been using the Lancer all afternoon it seems like,’ said Dabir. ‘Why don’t youse guys go in the van. More room.’

He opened the back door of his car. Shayna was in the back seat. She had her legs drawn up to her chest and was singing a soft, melodious song to herself.

‘C’mon, you crazy slut, time to move. That seat better not have any stains,’ barked Dabir.

Shayna offered no resistance as Dabir grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the car and over to the van. Omar noticed how rumpled her skirt and top were. Her knees were red and she had an ugly bruise on her calf. She looked terrible. He took a breath and steeled himself. Today on the train he had been a spectacular success. Now all the boys were here. He wouldn’t fuck it up.

She clambered in the back without looking up at the new arrivals, and sat down in a corner, her head on her knees. Emad climbed in behind her and slid the door across. He emerged five minutes later with a very self-satisfied air, tossed a used condom onto the road and refastened his shabby old bum bag back around his waist.

Next Wardi entered the van. A few minutes later, when he had finished, Omar gestured that it was Nikko's turn.

'Omar, mate, he always wants to go last,' said Sam. 'I dunno what's wrong with that bloke, maybe it turns him on or something. Maybe he's just gay! My own brother! Ha ha! Hey, only joking, bro!'

'Yeah right, whatever!' said Omar. And then, knowing how pathetic it would sound, 'It takes one to know one.'

'Aw, he's just, y'know, naturally ... polite?' offered Wardi.

During this time Dabir had been poking around outside the vacant warehouse. He had found an unlocked gate and disappeared behind the building. He emerged with a coiled length of dusty green garden hose.

'Look what I found. I reckon the Lancer could do with a wash, eh, boys!' he said. He fitted the hose into a tap adjacent to a strip of garden by the side fence. Judging by the arid state of the garden and the dusty stiffness of the hose, the warehouse had been unleased for quite some time.

Before turning on the water Dabir threw down the hose and took a towel from the boot. He opened the doors and beat down the back seat with it. Then he bent over and, like a digging dog, scooped rubbish from the rear footwells, including some empty drink cans, a plastic bottle bong, a pair of twisted panties—presumably Shayna's—and a few unopened condom packets.

'Look what I found under the seat. Left over from last time,' he said, holding up a battered looking Durex. 'Fucken dumb slut that one—smelly snatch, remember?' He chucked them over his shoulder.

With the inside of the car now clean Dabir started to hose down the outside, whistling and scraping stubborn bits of dirt with his fingers. 'I tell youse, it only takes a couple of days in this city and your car's filthy, mate!'

Nikko came out of the van, raising an eyebrow towards his brother. He too disposed of a condom, flinging it onto the garden bed. He exchanged a high-five with Wardi.

'OK, go, Omar! That's my bro!' yelled Sam. He pressed a condom into Omar's hand. Taking a deep breath Omar set his jaw tightly and entered the familiar confines of the Baalbek Bakeries delivery vehicle.

Some time later the van door slid open and Omar emerged. He took his cigarettes from his pocket.

'Didn't you wear the franger?' called Sam. 'You should learn from these boys here,' he said, motioning towards Nikko and Wardi, and then at some discarded latex, glistening in the dirt a few metres away.

'I took a head job ...' said Omar, lighting his cigarette.

'Still, mate, you young blokes should be careful. You never know,' said Ali.

'Yeah, sure, OK, next time,' said Omar quietly.

'Fucken dirty sluts, you never know, do you?' repeated Ali. He went to the van and called to Shayna. 'Hey, come out, it's time to go.' He reached in and pulled her out by the arm. She stood in front of them, one arm folded across her body, looking away. Under her breath she began to sing and hum again.

'Fucken bitch has gone crazy,' said Emad.

'She wants more cock,' said Ali. 'Probably isn't satisfied yet, y'know?'

They laughed and talked amongst themselves for a few minutes. Shayna found her underwear on the ground where Dabir had chucked it, and snuck a quick

glance over at the boys before raising each of her feet to slide her panties back on. The boys seemed oblivious and were chatting amongst themselves as if she was no longer there.

‘Olympics are going to be good for this city, that’s for sure, mate. You think about all the money those tourists bring in—good for business,’ Emad was saying.

‘If you believe that you’ll fucken believe anything, mate,’ replied Sam. ‘Like these rich tourists, they’re all going to get on the Punchbowl train and come and spend their money on shitty stuff from your uncle’s boutique. Like, they’re gonna say, oh my God, how come I never seen a pair of forty-dollar brown trousers or a polyester shirt as good as this in Paris?’

‘Yeah, but if it’s good for Sydney then it’s good for everyone, y’know ... really puts us on the map,’ said Emad, his hands in his pockets.

‘Who gives a shit?’ Ali concluded.

Dabir was still spraying the Lancer with the hose, concentrating on some stubborn bird dropping that had stained the bonnet and seemed to be eating into the paintwork.

‘Oi, Dabbi man, give us that hose, you motherfucker. Give us it here!’ Ali strode over and yanked the hose from him. The boys nearest to Shayna scattered as Ali turned the hose on her. She screamed and shrank away but Ali followed her with the spray. He aimed the stream all over her. Then he held her still with one hand clamped on her shoulder and directed the jet between her legs. In a few minutes, she was soaked. She stood there, somehow even more cowed and destroyed than before. She trembled as she dripped.

Sam laughed. ‘I always knew you were a fucken animal, mate,’ he said to Ali.



‘Fucken dirty little slut. Did her a favour. She’ll thank me for it. Now when she gets home she doesn’t have to take a shower. Save on water, eh?’

Everybody laughed.

While this was going on Dabir was towelling off the Lancer and cleaning the glass with a rubber stripped window wiper. He chucked the towel and the wiper back into the boot. ‘C’mon, boys, I got to get home. I got stuff to do,’ he called. ‘You guys can drop her off in the van.’

‘She’s all bloody wet,’ said Sam. ‘We only just cleaned the van the other day!’

‘She’s been wet all day, mate!’ said Ali. ‘Give us that fucken towel!’

Dabir retrieved it from the boot and threw it to Ali. He wiped his own hands before throwing the towel to Shayna. ‘Here you go, dry yourself off,’ he said.

‘This is yours too,’ said Dabir, picking up her handbag and tossing it to her.

He got into the Lancer and was joined by Sam and Ali.

‘See ya, boys!’ yelled Sam through the window as they took off. Dabir tried for a burnout but the tyres failed to spin. The Lancer turned the corner. Its engine could be heard fading away through the industrial estate.

Omar turned to Shayna. ‘You want to go now?’

‘Yes I want to go now,’ she replied, not meeting his eyes and squeezing more water from her top. With the dirty towel wrapped around her and clutching her bag she slowly got into the back of the van, though at any moment she might have expected another hand grasped firmly around her arm. To Omar it looked as if she did not question his motives because she was totally and utterly defeated.

Wardi and Nikko sat in the back with her. They did not say anything, nor did they look at her. Emad jumped in the front while Omar started the van. He gunned

the motor and they left the cul-de-sac. In a while, they were back on the Hume Highway and then Liverpool Road. Except for the odd request from each other for a cigarette or a light, the boys were silent. Shayna did not say anything at all. At one point she went through her handbag as though she was searching for something. If there was money or something else missing, she did not bother speaking up. They turned onto Homebush Road. It was still busy. The sun was setting and the boys' faces were serious. Omar pulled over in front of a small strip of vacant shops.

'Here you go,' said Omar, turning around as Wardi slid open the door. 'This is near where you said you live, isn't it? Hang on a minute.' He reached into his pocket and then handed her the bag of marijuana. She clasped it in her hand, staring blankly at the step of the van. 'You want a cigarette before you go?' Omar asked.

Shayna did not respond. She alighted from the van. Wardi slid the door shut. As he drove away Omar looked in the side mirror. He could see Shayna, trembling in the vibration of the mirror and rapidly shrinking. She had her arms folded and her head down as she walked unsteadily along the footpath beside the noisy stream of traffic that carried the van away.

It was five-thirty when Omar arrived to pick up Belle from her dad's place for their next date. He had not seen her since their trip to the airport and was feeling apprehensive. He beeped the horn. Belle came out the front door and smiled when she saw him in the driver's seat of the red Calais. The smile lost some of its verve when she saw Farid. It disappeared completely when she saw Emad in the back. Farid got out and gave up the front seat for her, making a 'be my guest' gesture with his hands.

Belle gave Omar a quick look before getting into the car. Omar noticed the slightly annoyed glance. If she wanted to be friends she should not have been surprised at meeting his own friends, he thought. Then again, maybe she had broken up with her boyfriend, Velcro, or whatever his name was. Maybe she wanted to see him alone. When Omar had called and asked her to come for a ride to the city she had said yes almost immediately. He had talked about going for a drive to George Street and maybe Darling Harbour. Now his palms were sweating against the steering wheel.

'These are my mates,' said Omar. 'This is ... Ramzi and that's Mick.'

'Hi there. Belt up now!' said Farid and sniggered a little bit. He would be Ramzi today.

'How's it going? Ah yeah ... make sure you belt up,' said Emad.

'How *are* you going?' Omar asked as she slipped the seatbelt over her shoulder. It had been a sunny day though it was cooling down rapidly. Belle tucked her jacket between her knees. As she fastened the buckle Omar noticed the way the sash cut between her breasts, defining them tautly against her t-shirt. Sam had first

alerted him to this phenomenon one day when they caught a bus down Canterbury Road. They had been looking into passing cars for female drivers and passengers. The best ones were always in the BMW X5s and the Land Rovers. *The rich bitches*, as Sam had called them.

‘I’m all right,’ Belle said. ‘Dad came back from Wentworth Park in a good mood. Gave me twenty bucks on top of my usual pocket money.’

Farid was on his mobile, speaking in Lebanese. Omar heard him greet Sam. Farid was repeating a dirty joke that Emad had told them earlier. It sounded strange in Lebanese but Omar laughed anyway.

‘What’s so funny?’ Belle asked, looking at Omar.

‘Aw, he’s just mucking around. Some joke about a backpacker and a Scottish guy.’ Omar looked straight ahead and fiddled with the knob on the radio. He found a station that was playing hip hop.

Farid finished his conversation with Sam and dialled another number. He started to speak in Lebanese again. Omar didn’t know who was on the other end. He hoped Farid would not make too many more calls. They headed down Stacey Street and then into Greenacre, past the weatherboards, the arches, and the mottled two- and three-brick blends.

‘I thought we were going to the city?’ said Belle.

Farid answered. ‘We just got to stop here and meet up with somebody. A bit of business, y’know? This bloke, he owes me six hundred dollars. We have to meet him around here to get it.’

‘Yeah,’ said Omar. He wished he could think of something to say to make her feel like having fun. Sam had told him to get her to relax, to enjoy herself. Omar changed the radio station back to rock.

They were now on Boronia Road and had reduced speed to a slow cruise. Belle was fiddling with a torn bit of the seat-cover. The vinyl underneath was torn too and she picked at the mustard coloured foam. Luckily Farid, who was engrossed in another call, could not see her do this. She looked through her purse and checked her mobile. Omar saw that it was a relatively recent model. It was a Motorola flip, like they always had on American TV shows.

‘That’s not bad,’ Omar said. ‘How much?’

‘Mum gave it to me. She got a new one free on a plan. I’m nearly out of credit though. Might get a recharge card in town.’

‘Good games?’

‘Not really. They’re OK, I suppose. Answers when you open it.’

‘I got an Ericsson but I’m gonna buy the new Nokia with Kart Racing, soon.’

‘We could have a look at some mobile shops in town?’

‘Yeah, sure.’ Omar kept his eyes on the road.

The light was getting low as they rolled through the suburban streets. It was quiet. Omar turned left up Hillcrest Avenue where they passed a large park. It was well maintained and consisted of a playground, a lower soccer pitch, and some grassed banks that led up to a second soccer pitch. At the furthest end of the top pitch was a modest clubhouse and storage shed. There was a sign on the little clubhouse saying: *EAST BANKSTOWN SOCCER CLUB: FRED MILROY PAVILION.*

At the near end of the bottom pitch were two concrete water tanks that stood perhaps four or five feet high, and a little brick building. A man walking his dog was just leaving the park. It was otherwise deserted.

‘Chuck a u-ey, Omar, park the car,’ said Farid.

Omar wound the steering wheel around with his palm like a truck driver. They parked in an empty bay in front of a fenced children’s playground. In the mirror Omar could see Farid and Emad exchanging a glance.

‘Everything is made of plastic,’ said Belle, nodding towards the playground.

‘Yeah,’ said Omar. ‘They’re right into safety these days, eh?’

‘So, Belle, Omar says your family, they’re into dogs, is that right? They breed dogs?’ said Emad. Farid chuckled.

‘Dad has a few wins. Mum not so many.’ Belle didn’t turn around.

Emad appeared interested. ‘It’s good when you get a win. Does your old man make big amounts of cash from his dogs?’

‘Not really. Enough to make it worth his while. Who are you meeting?’ she asked. ‘Are they gonna be here soon because I thought we were going to town. What’re you really doing anyway? Buying a bag?’

‘I told you, we got to pick up some money,’ said Farid. ‘Don’t worry, he’ll be here. Whaddya been up to today anyway? You get your hair done? It looks really nice.’ Farid leaned forward and stroked her hair.

‘Don’t.’ She pulled her head away.

‘Touchy, touchy, eh?’ said Farid, and yanked lightly at a strand of hair. Belle grimaced and pulled her head away again.

‘So,’ Farid said after a few moments of silence, ‘you been having any fun lately?’

‘Not since I saw your face.’

‘This one, she’s got fire, hasn’t she, boys? It’s all a sham I bet.’

Omar squirmed in his seat. His balls were rucked up in his boxer shorts. He had put on his Calvin Kleins again today, as if it was another date. He could not get comfortable. Omar wondered whether the whole thing was a good idea.

Farid made another attempt to touch Belle's hair.

'Fuck off!'

Farid and Emad made a big deal of laughing though their shoulders seemed stiff.

'Whatever you say, love,' said Farid slapping his inside thigh.

'So, where's your friend? I *really* thought we were going to town.' Belle turned around this time.

'Yeah, that's right, where is he?' said Farid, looking indignant. 'Omar, you and Emad go see if he's waiting at the other side of the park. I'll stay here in case he comes.'

'Right ... OK. We'll be right back,' said Omar.

Omar and Emad quickly got out of the car and slid over the low fence into the playground. Omar looked back at the car but did not meet Belle's eyes. He and Emad began to walk slowly across the deserted bottom pitch.

Ten minutes later they returned to find Farid sitting on the bonnet of the Calais. Belle was still in the front seat. Her arms were firmly crossed and she did not immediately make eye contact with Omar.

'That guy is nowhere,' Emad called out as they approached.

'This fucken bastard, he hasn't turned up, eh,' said Omar loudly.

Farid said quietly to Omar, 'Your friend, mate, she's frigid, I reckon.' Then he loudly proclaimed, 'You should have made sure he was coming, man, before you

dragged me all the way out here! My time is precious. I haven't got time to waste here with you dickheads and dumb slags when I could be doing other things!

'Fuck, man, I told you he was going to come here and he will, man, believe me,' replied Omar. 'You got to be a bit more patient.'

'Yeah, patience,' chimed Emad.

'I'm warning you, man, I haven't got long to wait,' Farid bellowed. He slid his rump off the bonnet and adopted a resolute posture. 'I'm telling you, Omar, I don't know what I'll do to you if I don't get that cash tonight. I'll fucken slap your head up your fucken arse if you waste too much time.'

Belle had wound her window down. She was looking at Farid as he threatened Omar. There was the trace of a smile on the corners of Farid's lips.

Omar adopted a placating tone. 'OK, OK, we'll go have another look for him. Maybe he got held up. Or maybe he thought I said seven instead of six? Look, this time you come with me, and Emad you stay here in case he comes. We'll go have another look, eh?'

Before Farid could reply, Belle cut in from where she sat. 'No, that's not happening. I know what's going on, Omar, do you think I'm stupid? Do you think I'm dumb? You're not going to leave me alone with this guy so he can try and sleaze onto me too. I know what you guys are up to and it's not happening. I'm not gonna do anything with any of you so you might as well stop trying now, OK? And I guess I was wrong about you, Omar,' she added. She made as if to get out of the car.

'What d'you mean, Belle? We come here to pick up that cash. Farid's gonna give me a fifty and we could go to town, do whatever we want. Come on, don't get all upset on us. Just stay with Emad.' Omar took a cue from Farid and stood straight



and strong, trying his best to broaden his narrow shoulders. He had to hang on, just for a while longer. He could not give up now.

‘We’ll that’s fine then, I’m walking home. You’re not leaving me with these people.’ Belle opened her door.

Farid stepped up and held the door, preventing Belle from getting out. ‘This is a dangerous area,’ he said. ‘You never know what could happen. I’m telling you, it’s dangerous around here after dark, you don’t wanna walk home, OK?’ His voice had taken on a low snarl.

‘It’s all right, it’s all right,’ said Omar.

Belle pulled the door shut again. Farid had to let go of it quickly to avoid getting his fingers squashed. Omar got back into the driver’s seat. Farid and Emad climbed back into the rear.

They sat there for a few minutes listening to the radio.

‘I swear he’ll be here soon,’ insisted Omar in a plaintive voice.

After a little while they heard the sound of a car. The white van pulled up and parked a few spaces away.

‘Finally!’ said Farid.

Sam was driving. Dabir got out of the passenger seat. Ali and a couple of other boys Omar didn’t know spilled out of the back. They stood around looking muscular and serious and did not offer any greeting. They lit cigarettes. One of these guys dropped his lighter and bent over to pick it up. Under the streetlight Omar could see he needed a haircut—there was a woolly growth running down the back of his neck and, as he stooped, the same kind of fuzz could be seen coming out from his bum crack.

The two unfamiliar guys leaned against the van, not saying anything, standing still except for quick draws on their smokes. Dabir and Ali stood nearby and also lit cigarettes. Sam walked over, hitching up his pants and straightening his baseball cap. No-one in the car said anything as Sam came over to the passenger side window. On Farid's urging Belle wound down her window, but only halfway.

'Howdy, boys,' Sam said, looking in at Belle. 'Oh, we got a visitor? Omar, why didn't you tell me you was bringing a friend. She is a friend, right?'

'Yeah, we were going to go to town, have a look around the shops, George Street, Darling Harbour, y'know, just hang out.'

'I see, I see. Well, a friend of yours is a friend of ours, right? Hi, I'm Ben, Omar's older brother,' said Sam.

Belle took a quick look at his face and said quietly, 'Hi, I'm Belle.'

'Ben and Belle, eh? BB! That's good, that is. Maybe we were made for each other.'

'Yeah, right.' Belle appeared unconcerned as she fiddled in her bag. She pulled out her phone and started playing with the buttons, flipping it open and closed in a businesslike way.

Sam turned to Farid. 'Eh, why don't you talk to Ali about that new stereo you was asking about. I know he's got one with a stacker.'

'Yeah ... right, maybe I'll do that,' said Farid and slid out from the back.

Sam got into the seat behind Belle. Emad remained in the back, a smirk on his face.

'So, nice hair, Bellie, did you wash it today or what?' Sam ran his fingers through her hair.

'Maybe it always looks like this. What is it with you guys and hair?' she said, pushing Sam's hand away.

Sam raised his palms in a peace-making gesture. 'Just giving you a compliment, that's all,' he said.

'Yeah, good one.' Belle stared out across the park. There was lighting around the playground and near the clubrooms but it was getting very dark in the centre.

'So, Belle, how about we go for a walk around the park, eh? Get some fresh air?' Sam was leaning forward, his arms folded against the rear of the headrest. Omar could hear that he was talking in his smooth voice, the one he had heard so many times through the cupboard slats.

'No thanks.'

'C'mon, it'll be fun. We'll just go for a little walk and then we'll come back here and you can go to town or wherever youse were going.'

'I said no thanks. Omar, are we gonna go soon?'

Omar took a little breath as if he was going to say something but then decided against it.

'Omar wants to drop you off early and then go home for a good wank and sprog all over his pillow, that's what Omar wants to do,' said Sam. He gave his brother a clip across the back of the head. Not hard, but a clip all the same.

Omar felt his ears getting hot. He grabbed the keys from the ignition and the radio went dead. He swung his legs out of the car and, leaving the door open, hopped the fence into the playground. He took a seat on the middle of a red seesaw, fuming with shame. Fuck Sam sometimes, he thought. Folding his arms, he started digging a little hole in the bark chips with his sneaker. The shoes were new white

Filas. He had bought them after his Nikes were all but ruined in the national park. As he dug a little brown stain appeared on the toe.

He looked over and could see Farid in conversation with Ali. Dabir and one of the unfamiliar guys were talking by the van. The hairy bum crack guy walked towards the Calais. He stopped near the front passenger door and, with his arms folded, watched the proceedings in the car. With the interior light on, Omar could see Sam's face. He was slinked around the front headrest, talking to Belle, making shapes with his hands like some kind of hip-hop MC. Emad would interject every now and again. Belle was staring ahead, in Omar's direction, though he was sure she was not looking *at* him. He did not think Belle could see him properly in the gloom.

Then it looked like Belle wanted to get out of the car, but Sam put his hand on her shoulder and appeared to stop her. Omar assumed Sam's smooth voice would be going into overdrive right now. It appeared he was still asking Belle to go for that walk because she kept shaking her head. Then Sam grabbed a length of her hair and gave it a hard yank. She cringed, scowling, a hand pressed against her scalp.

The hairy bum crack guy opened the passenger door. Belle was shaking her head again. Sam opened his door and got out. To Omar it looked like a little theatre show, lit by streetlights on the stage of the parking bay. He got up off the seesaw, using his hands to steady himself. He slipped and almost fell over. He looked up to see if he should be embarrassed. It seemed no-one had noticed. He walked back towards the car. Things were progressing.

'*Yallah*, boys!' said Sam. He reached into the car and grabbed Belle by the hair. He dragged her from the Calais. With her head bent to one side by the force of

his grip, she could not resist. She still clutched her bag. She was obviously very scared. Omar thought her eyes looked pinned, like the junkie prostitutes at Kings Cross.

Emad and the bum crack guy helped Sam to push her across the soccer pitch towards the stained grey water tanks. Again Omar found himself ambling behind Sam and his quarry. They reached one of the small water tanks. Sam let go of Belle's hair and pushed her forward. She leaned against the tank with her back to its wall, her bag hooked through her folded arms. Even though the light was very dim now Omar could see the dark patches of sweat under each of her armpits.

Sam said, 'How about a head job then?'

'Fuck off.'

Ali, Dabir, Farid and the other guy had also followed. With Omar they stood in a group a little way back.

'If you don't, you know what'll happen, don't you?' said Sam.

'I want to go. I want to leave now.'

'If you don't, you know what'll happen? They'll bash you.' The velvet had disappeared from Sam's voice.

'Fuck off. I don't want to. I want to leave. Omar! Omar, what the fuck are you doing? I know what you're doing! You planned this. You're not leaving me here with these guys. This guy is a fucking dickhead!'

Omar had begun to walk away. He turned and called, 'I've just got to go find this guy. Got to get that cash. I'll be back soon.' He paused and reached into his pockets. 'Hey, here's your keys,' he called, tossing the bunch to Farid.

'What the fuck? Omar! You brought me here. You can't leave me. Omar!'

Omar walked back towards the road. He heard Belle give a short scream, like a yelp. Turning around he took one last look towards the water tanks before leaving the park and heading north up Hillcrest Street towards home.

\*

It was two days later. Omar's thumb seemed to take on a life of its own as he jabbed at the phone. It kept hitting the wrong button, or it insisted on pressing three times instead of two or two instead of one. He was usually quite proud of his skills on the text but not today. He steadied himself and in a few frustrating minutes had punched out the message he wanted. *'HEY HOW RU LOOK IM VERY SORY ABOUT WAT HAPEND THE OTHER DAY I GOT INTO PUNCH UP WITH THEM CAUS OF WAT THEY DONE TO U SO PLZ REPLY BACK 2 ME OMAR'*.

He stared at the screen for a couple of seconds and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. He pressed 'send'. He did not expect Belle to reply. Or maybe she would. He didn't know. He only knew that for two days he had been feeling very, very uneasy.

Yesterday he and Sam had walked to Waterloo Road, Greenacre's main strip, to get burgers. On the way back Sam had noticed his mood.

'You got to snap out of it, bro, y'know what I mean? You got to forget about it. She wanted it. You got that? The slut wanted it. Not that much happened anyway, like I said.'

Omar had just nodded his head, without meeting Sam's eyes, and kept walking. Yeah, she had wanted it! Sluts want it! What could you say to Sam? But

he could not forget the look in her eyes when they had dragged her out of the car. Her eyes had gone dead. She had been terrified and this was disturbing him.

He threw his phone up in the air and caught it. What was she going to do? Would she reply? He had not even got anything out of it. Maybe that was what was bothering him the most. He was in exactly the same position as before.

Omar could not bring himself to ask Sam exactly what had gone on after he had left, though it was clear enough that something had. He thought of the repulsive, stocky friend of Sam's, with his hairy neck and rump. As he often did when confronted by unsettling things, he cast the image from his mind before it could get out of control.

\*

When Omar was ten and Sam had just turned twelve their Tata Monaj had become very sick and no-one would explain to him that she was going to be OK or, alternatively, that old people got sick and eventually died.

She had come all the way from Tripoli to stay with them for a couple of months and then two weeks into her holiday had suffered a stroke and a few hours later died in a hospital bed. He had heard the doctor explaining the physical consequences of the stroke to Kamir and Yasri but he had to work the rest out for himself. How it was natural for his mother to cry when Tata Monaj, her own mother, had suddenly stopped, expired, disappeared from their lives without saying goodbye; how, when his father went quiet, even surly, it was really just his way of

showing support—because nobody knew the words that could make someone feel better.

He had not even known his grandmother—after two weeks in the same house with her, he had concluded that her most interesting qualities were a sharp tongue and facial hair. He had felt almost surprised at being so upset when she died. Why had he cared so much? Back then, in his childlike way, he thought he was sad because Moma and Baba were sad. And he was partially right. But then when he was fifteen and Moma's sister died back in Lebanon, in a wartime explosion, it somehow became obvious. He did not want the same thing to happen to Moma or Baba or Sam or to anyone he loved. However, being a ten-year-old kid it was not the type of knowledge that he could put into words. It was just a heavy, terrible ache that sat between his chest and stomach and would not go away. The ache permeated upwards into his head and seemed to affect his every waking moment. It was like a slow motion, blunt-edged panic.

And the strange thing was that this same type of pain, this same malaise of spirit, had begun to make its presence felt within him since that stinking, humiliating night in Kings Cross; and increasingly so after the trip to Chatswood Mall and then the luring of that girl Shayna from the train; and unmistakably, dreadfully so since two days ago when in the gloomy evening at Gosling Park he had left his friend Belle in the company of Sam and his mates.



Sluts were sluts. Omar had gone out with Sam, Farid and the boys enough to know this. He had resigned himself to the fact. And over the last few quietly spent weeks, the torment, the feeling of aching unease, had gradually subsided. Traces might still have been there, surreptitiously lurking, but for the most part Omar went about his daily routine in much the same way that he always had—school; Baalbek; homework, when convenient; and a few relatively uneventful cruises with Sam and the boys. Omar felt he had learned quite a bit in the last few months but that perhaps Sam and the boys moved too quickly, too harshly even, for his liking. He was in no mood to delay proceedings but would go at his own pace from now on. Everyone had their own style. He felt confident that soon opportunities would arise for him to take that final elusive step into manhood.

The Olympics were to begin in a few days. Omar sat at the kitchen table picking at his breakfast and glancing through the previous day's copy of the *Sun Herald*. Kamir and Yasri had already left the house and Sam was still asleep. Omar flipped through the pages of items on the Olympics and then, on page fourteen, discovered an article that quickly catapulted his dormant anxiety back to a nauseous ache.

***RACE RAPE RAMPAGE—AUSSIE GIRLS ATTACKED***

*Police have issued a warning to girls living in south-western Sydney following reports of a number of sexual assaults. Victims have described their attackers as being young males of Middle Eastern appearance ... In a disturbing racial development, some of the victims said they were asked if they were Aussies before being assaulted ...*

Omar's palms exuded dampness on to the newsprint. He rose from the table and tore the page from the newspaper. He crumpled it up and pushed it deep into the kitchen bin before sitting down again and trying to calm himself. He stared at the newspaper as he continued to thumb through it, absorbing nothing, the words swimming in a meaningless, sickening fog of worry. He rose and retrieved the stained and crumpled page from the bin. He walked out the back door and placed the page in the wheelie bin, being careful to cover it with a smelly bag of household garbage. He went back inside and washed his hands at the kitchen sink before hurriedly leaving for school.

\*

The Olympics hit the city. To Omar it was like a blast of hot, gritty, polluted wind that was strewn with snatches of gold dust. With the exception of weightlifting, the events he would have liked to see, such as table tennis and judo, were rarely screened on television, particularly if there were no Aussies competing. Nevertheless he found himself watching the endless telecasts featuring green and gold clad celebrities that no-one had ever heard of only a few days before. He

realised that he was paying particular attention to the divers' physiques. Belle had liked their bodies.

\*

Flight Simulator 2000 was losing its edge. The graphics that had once seemed so full of depth, so keen in perspective, were now mere approximations of what real cities and real skies might look like. Worse, the sensation of piloting the aircraft had also dulled. He no longer felt the visceral thrill of acceleration and lift-off, nor did his heart beat faster with anxiety as he made an approach to land. For well over a week his unplugged joystick had lain under his bed, neglected and almost forgotten.

Strangely enough, Omar felt a similar disinterest when he looked up porn on the internet. The multitude of positions and endless variety of sex acts were uninspiring and ultimately arousing in only the most mechanical of ways. Sometimes, he felt a joyless awareness of the futility of what he was doing even before he came into his sock. He knew he was yearning for the real thing—but what was that? Was it just a repeat of the images on the porn sites, played out with flesh and blood in dark parks and the back of the Baalbek van?

\*

The 'best Olympics ever' were over and the city endured a dirty, rubbish-strewn hangover. In the weeks since seeing the dreadful article, Omar had been scanning each page of the *Sun Herald* and *Daily Telegraph*, every day. He had even bought

the *Sydney Morning Herald* a few times but soon stopped—no-one else he knew read it. He also became intent on catching the evening news on television. He would often watch the five, six and seven o'clock bulletins in succession, changing the channels as soon as one finished so as not to miss the lead story of the next one. Kamir and Yasri said it was good that he had taken an interest in current affairs. They were not yet aware that his school grades, usually around a B average, had plummeted, though they would of course find out before the end of the year.

Omar had not told Sam about the article. He meant to but did not know how to broach the topic. The problem was that Sam was so insistent that the sluts had asked for it. And they had, hadn't they? Sluts were sluts, right? Omar could not quite decide.

Several weeks had passed and he had not heard anything else about the *sexual assaults*, as they had been described. He shuddered when he thought of the word *rape*, a word that had also been used in the article.

Summer and the holidays came, as did Omar's bad school report. Yasri chastised him about the fall in grades but Kamir was less concerned. The boy would be all right, he said. He had only failed one subject, biology. By the time Sam had left school in year ten he was hardly passing *anything*.

The holidays progressed with no further disturbing news stories and Omar's spirits gradually lifted. He spent less time devouring the tabloids and being glued to the TV news. He went out on some cruises with Farid and Sam but there was no action to speak of. Though the conversation was never very far off the topic of girls, it seemed like the boys were holding back too. Or maybe it was just the lack of opportunities.

Omar kept an eye out for Belle, but did not see her anywhere around the neighbourhood. At Baalbek he would look up when a customer entered, half hoping to see her walking in like she had that first day. At the same time he was aware of how absurd a proposition this was. Predictably, he had received no reply from his apologetic text message and did not try contacting her again. He decided that it was best to forget about her and everything that had happened.

\*

It was a sticky afternoon in the middle of February. School had been back for a couple of weeks and Omar had begun the year with some positive contributions in class.

Now he was in the driveway rinsing suds off Kamir's Camry. He had been borrowing it a bit lately to go cruising by himself. He thought that he would do his Baba a favour. A little stream of soapy grey water ran from the driveway out into the street. Omar sprayed the bonnet and with his thumbnail rubbed at some bird shit. He heard a car pull up. It was Sam and Ali. They exchanged a few words before Sam alighted and slammed the door. Ali put the Valiant into gear and took off with the customary urgency.

'Just been down the courts, eh?' said Sam. 'Fucken Burwood Local.' He was wearing his good cargo pants and a shirt with a collar and buttons.

'What for?'

'Ali had to go in for that failing to stop after an accident thing, you remember from last year? When we sideswiped that dumb cunt in the Magna station wagon and kept going? Yeah, well the driver or someone must have got Ali's

plates. I told the fucken idiot to get those panels fixed straight away. What does he do? Leaves it for a week and the cops finally get to his place and spot the dents on the Valiant, match up the paint with the Magna's, and book him. His old man is a smash repairer, for fuck's sake! Fucken thick cunt deserves it. So anyway I went along to be a witness. Told 'em, "Yeah, there was a collision but it was definitely the other guy's fault. We just kept going because we was late for an appointment." I was gonna say that the Valiant's a piece of shit anyway so we didn't worry about the dents but Ali made me promise not to.'

'So what happened?' asked Omar, finishing the rinse and stooping to turn off the hose. He started winding it up.

'Ali got a fine. A couple of hundred bucks and a few demerit points. Plus court costs. Now the other guy's insurance company is going to hassle him for the cost of fixing that fucken Magna. If he was insured, why didn't the other cunt just get it fixed and not bring the coppers into it? His insurance would still have to pay. No-one got hurt or nothing. I just don't get some fucken people, eh?'

'He would have to pay excess, maybe. But yeah, some people are fucked up, eh. Fucken carrot up their arses.' Omar was now wiping down the Camry with an old white singlet.

'Saw your friend outside the courthouse, eh,' said Sam. He gave a little snicker and picked up the window wiper, tossing it in the air. It did a little somersault before he caught it.

'What friend?' asked Omar, attacking the rear bumper.

'That chick, you know that chick, the one you reckon you went on a date with. The slut that we took to the park that time.' Omar stopped and looked up. Sam

appeared unconcerned. 'Yeah, she looked right at me. Fucken slut. Probably wants another go, eh?'

Omar's face became hot. 'Did you say anything to her? Did she say anything?' he asked. 'What was she doing there?'

'I don't fucken know, do I? Probably up for some thieving charge. You're the fucken ones that went out shoplifting together, not me. She had some straight looking bloke next to her, a skip with a moustache. Might have been a lawyer. Might have been her dad. I didn't say nothing to her. They were over the other side of the entrance. Me and Ali were waiting to go in for his hearing. I was thinking about what I was going to say.'

'So what happened?'

'What do you mean what happened? That's it. I just told you. I just saw her down at the Burwood courthouse. That's it.' Using the wiper, Sam began to clean the drops from the windshield. 'Oi, bro, there's still some squashed bugs on this window. What kind of job did you do here, eh? Geez, those deadshit losers at the traffic lights clean windows better than this. Fucken hell! Check this out, there's still some bird shit on the roof. What's Baba gonna say when he ...'

Sam went on but Omar was not listening. He was thinking about Belle and wondering whether she had been caught stealing. He thought of ringing her as soon as he finished drying the car. He knew he would not.

Sam finished the windshield and chucked the wiper onto the driveway. 'I'll catch you later, bro. I got to have a nap before tonight. I'm going to a movie with Salwa and I don't want to fall asleep again.' He disappeared into the house.

Omar finished drying the Camry and returned the wiper, bucket and sponge to their place in the shed. He saw a bottle of car polish and some rags and took a

look at the light outside. The sun would not go down for two hours at least. He grabbed the bottle and a clean rag and went back out to the driveway to renew his attack on the Camry.

\*

Almost a month went by. Omar made an effort with his schoolwork. He had been looking at the possibility of doing a TAFE certificate course to become an aircraft maintenance engineer. He thought it might be cool to work on a plane's electronics. Avionics they called it.

'Avon calling!' Sam had said when Omar told him. But the course looked good and afterwards they provided on-the-job training. He needed to pass year eleven with good grades in maths and science to get in. He knew that with a little effort this was entirely possible. Omar decided to try.

It was a Tuesday afternoon and Omar was alone in the house doing his homework. He was attempting to solve a calculus problem. He found calculus quite appealing, when he could get his brain around it. The way that it hurt his head in the meantime was bearable because getting the solution was such a rush. The moment was like clearing a pressure blockage in his brain. Realisation flooded in bringing relief, lightness and pleasure.

Omar was distracted by the sound of the front door slamming. He paused, expecting to hear Sam's customary yell.



*Omar, Omar! Where are you? Quickly, Omar!* It was Yasri. Her voice was panicky and breathless. Omar thought there might have been an accident at Baalbek. In his mind he saw Kamir's old dough-kneading machine. He jumped up and met Yasri in the passageway.

'What, Moma? What is it? Where is Baba?'

Yasri was pale and distraught. *It is Sam. The police have taken Sam. I don't know why! He is with the police. Sam rang your father from the police station and told him. Your father asked me to come to look after the shop and then he went to him. But I was so worried, so I closed the shop and came here—*

'What for? Why? Which police station? Where Moma?' Omar felt unsteady on his legs and thought of Ali's driving conviction and Sam's false testimony. But inside, he knew it was not that. He wished it was. He swallowed and overcame the urge to vomit.

Omar got as much information as he could from his mother but it seemed that she was genuinely ignorant of the reasons for Sam's arrest. Omar tried Sam's mobile and then Kamir's, but neither was answering. He tried calling Farid.

'Sam?' said Farid. 'Nah, haven't seen him since we went out on Saturday night. You missed a good night that time, mate. Geez, you should have seen me carve up this series four RX-7, mate, it was wicked—' Omar cut Farid off, saying that he had to go.

He tried Ali, who was also unaware of Sam's whereabouts. Omar did not mention Sam's arrest to either of them. He felt he should have but then he might have to explain what he'd read in the *Sun Herald*. There was still the slim possibility that it was another matter, like the car stereos, but in his aching chest he knew it had something to do with the newspaper article.

Omar and Yasri waited in the kitchen. Omar tried Sam and Kamir every fifteen minutes. Finally, at around half past four, they heard the Camry in the driveway. Kamir appeared in the doorway by himself. Immediately, Omar and Yasri peppered him with questions.

*He is still with the police. He is there but he has a lawyer with him,* Kamir said, sitting down. He stood up almost immediately and got a glass of water. He shook his head as he sat down again.

‘What’s the charge, Baba? What did they get him for? They must have told you something,’ said Omar.

‘A girl has said Sam did things to her,’ replied Kamir.

Omar bit his bottom lip so hard that he almost drew blood.

‘This girl says Sam did some things. *Sharmoota!* Sam says he doesn’t know anything about this girl. He says this girl must be crazy, she must be making all these things up in her head ...’ He trailed off.

Yasri began to beseech him in Lebanese. *Why you leave him there with the police? What girl? He is engaged to Salwa. Why did you leave him alone inside there? Why didn’t Sam come home with you?*

Kamir looked up at Omar. ‘The policeman say I should come home and talk to you. He says you know this girl. He says that this girl is your friend too. You know any girl like this? You know who this is?’

Omar suddenly felt like he was lost in the national park again. Kamir and Yasri’s heads loomed large in front of him against the swirling backdrop of the kitchen. Their faces seemed like the large rocks that jutted from the sloping ground and behind them all the kitchen appliances and paraphernalia seemed resonant,

alive, like bits and pieces of the forest. Omar literally shook himself, like a wet dog. He was not stoned. He was at home and this was for real. He had to think.

‘I dunno, it could be this girl we know, but I don’t know why she would say such bullshit. It’s bullshit, it’s not true. Moma, don’t worry, it’s not true. It’s just some girl, some crazy slut. Some crazy bullshit story. Where is Sam?’

‘Burwood police station. And this policeman’s name is—’ Kamir fished in his pocket and produced a folded piece of paper. ‘Detective Paul Zammit, and the lawyer is Mr Sutherland,’ he read slowly. ‘Burwood police station,’ he added again, as if this might provide a vital clue to solving the problem.

*What will we do? What will we do?* asked Yasri.

‘We’ll go and get him out, that’s what,’ said Omar. ‘They can’t keep him there. They got nothing on anyone. They’re just trying to scare him. They can only keep him for a few hours before they got to let him go. We got to go there and bail him out or something. Don’t worry, I’ll talk to the coppers. Come on, Baba, we got to go. Moma, you got to stay here. It’s best you stay here. You don’t wanna be down at the cop station.’ Omar grabbed the Camry keys from the kitchen table.

Kamir seemed heartened by Omar’s resolute plan of action though Yasri was still pacing and fidgeting with worry.

In the Camry Omar fought through the peak hour traffic, swearing and cursing at slow-moving vehicles in front of them. They arrived at Burwood police station some half an hour later. There was a small queue at the front desk. They waited impatiently. Omar was sure that the police could not make anything stick on Sam. He was sure that whatever was going to happen, they would be able to leave with Sam today.

Their turn came. 'I got to see my brother, Sam Assaf. You've locked him up for some bullshit that he didn't do and we want to see him right now. He doesn't know nothing about it and that's it! Sam Assaf!' said Omar.

The constable behind the desk referred to his computer screen and then some files that were stacked on the counter. He opened a file and slowly thumbed through some papers before pulling one out. 'Mr Assaf was transferred to Bankstown police station forty minutes ago. I'm afraid he's in for further questioning today and he'll probably be in there for the night.'

Omar was shattered. In Lebanese he relayed the news to Kamir.

*You fucken fat pig cunt bastard. Kiss Imuk. Yinaan Abook,* Omar added to the constable, and they left the desk. 'All right, Baba, we have to drive to Bankstown police station now. It's all right, he's going to be all right. They just didn't have enough room here, that's all.'

'Room for what?' asked Kamir. 'Why do they need room for if they are going to let him go today?' Omar had no answer. Not much else was said during the drive to Bankstown.

At Bankstown they were made to wait for an hour before being told they would not be able to see Sam at all that day. When Omar complained that he wanted to see 'the manager', a tall and ruddy staff sergeant soon appeared. He looked Omar up and down and then stared at Kamir, whom he then proceeded to ignore, perhaps assuming that he would not understand what was being said.

'Mr Assaf, your brother is fine and has had access to legal advice. He has been charged with two counts of aggravated sexual intercourse without consent, with other charges pending. He has been placed in remand awaiting a preliminary hearing, which will be held in due course at a time to be advised. But he is at this

point in time confined to a holding cell within the station complex and I'm afraid I have to inform you that the time allotted for visiting hours has now elapsed. If you return to this station tomorrow between the hours of ten am and twelve-thirty pm you will be allowed to see your brother subject to his conforming to remand regulations and your agreement to abide by the ... uh ... said regulations. Is that clear? Do you have any further queries?'

'I swear, he's done nothing ...' Omar searched for more words to say to the policeman. Then he looked at Kamir and shrugged his shoulders. 'Come on, these pigs are going to keep him here tonight. There's nothing we can do. Let's go.'

They walked out of the station and back to the parked Camry.

\*

The next morning Omar awoke after a twitchy, agitated, sleep. The muscles in his legs felt tense and tingling, as if he had done barbell squats the day before. It was late and he heard Kamir and Yasri moving about the house, exchanging rapid, staccato conversation. Omar showered, dressed and entered the kitchen to find them sitting around the table. Kamir sat with an unread paper, solemn, his eyes blank. Yasri looked as distressed as she had the night before when they had returned from the police station without Sam.

Omar felt the ache in his chest and throat and willed himself to be strong. He could not cry, not again. Last night he had broken down in front of them and wailed like a child. He had given them a censored version of how he had met Belle and the events of the night they had taken her to Gosling Park.

‘She was one of those girls,’ he had said, sobbing heavily, yet somehow very aware of how delicately the story needed to be imparted. ‘She was just one of those girls and everyone knew it. I dunno why she would be doing this to Sam. I was like a friend to her, y’know?’

Kamir had put his hand on Omar’s shoulder and patted him, looking away. Yasri had exhibited no such restraint and vacillated between outpourings of grief and vicious rants directed at the girl, the police and then Farid, Emad, Ali and any other associate of Sam’s she could recall.

*Why they pick up Sam and not those other boys? Why my Sami? If he did something those other boys also did something. They always together! Every night they go somewhere together, always late! And why the police always look to us? They always pick on Lebanese boys. Why is this? What will he eat inside there? What will they give him?* Then she would crumple her face into a tea-towel and weep. Exhausted, Omar had gone to bed and left them at the kitchen table.

This morning when Omar entered the kitchen it was as if they hadn’t moved. Only the fact that they were wearing different clothes and that Kamir’s hair was wet signalled that they might have gone to bed and risen again. Yasri hardly acknowledged Omar’s presence. She stared forlornly through the small window above the kitchen sink as if she and not her son was inside the prison cell.

Kamir looked up as Omar walked in. Omar swallowed hard when he saw the dark pouches under his father’s red eyes.

‘Baba, it’s OK. We’re gonna get him out of there,’ he found himself saying. ‘I’ve got an idea.’

‘What idea? What can we do? They no give him the bail today. We have to wait for hearing. The policeman at Burwood say they fight the bail anyway.’

‘Nah, nah, that’s not what I meant,’ said Omar, selecting at random a thought from the tumult in his mind. ‘Where’s that bit of paper with the cop’s name on it? The one that you had yesterday?’

Kamir’s hand went to his shirt pocket. He pulled out some folded papers, receipts and a small wad of money. He extracted the relevant piece of paper and handed it to Omar.

Omar unfolded it. ‘Detective Paul Zammit. That’s it then. I’m gonna ring him—and he’s gonna let Sam go. You watch me.’ Omar strode to the lounge room followed by Kamir.

‘You calling lawyer?’ asked Kamir as Omar picked up the telephone book from underneath the phone.

‘Nah, just wait, Baba, just let me do this.’ He found a number and dialled. It was answered quickly. ‘Hello, is this New South Wales Police? ... OK, listen up. I wanna speak to this detective, this guy Paul Zammit ... It’s Omar Assaf calling, that’s who. I want you to put me through to that c ... put me through to him now, I got to speak to him ... Nah, that’s between me and him ... OK, I’ll hold ...’ He put his hand over the mouthpiece. ‘They’ve got to transfer me to Bankstown police station,’ he said to Kamir as confidently as he could.

‘Hello, hello? Yeah, it’s Omar Assaf. I wanna speak to that detective, Paul Zammit ... Well where is he? Oh, OK, so you’re handling it, are ya? Well, I want to speak to you about that girl who got my brother locked up. I got to tell youse, that girl, the slut ... that girl was my ex-girlfriend. Yeah, no bullshit ... and I’ve got her voice recorded and I’ve got her on video camera, I’ve got tapes of her doing all sorts of things, mate. I’ve got everything on her and that bullshit story that she

fucken made up. I promise to God, mate, youse are gonna get sued, mate. I've made five copies of the tapes. Are you listening to me?'

It was cool in the dimness of the lounge room but Omar was visibly sweating and his hands were shaking. Kamir listened intently, looking very worried. He made a half-hearted grab for the phone but Omar turned away and kept talking.

'All I want to say, mate, is that I'm gonna fucken sue this motherfucker, all right? That motherfucker Zammit for locking up my brother for no reason? It's ... it's, what do they call it? ... wrong arrest, wrongful arrest, that's what it is. You tell him that message, all right? Because I've got it all recorded and that bullshit story of yours, what's gonna happen, mate?'

At first his voice had been unsteady but by now Omar was almost screaming into the phone, his face contorted. 'I promise to God, I've got her voice and everything recorded from A to Z on video camera, doing everything, you name it. She's like that, she is. All right? You tell him that. That lying fucken bitch Belle, that fucken slut, eh? So, youse are gonna get fucken sued and youse can then stick your jobs up your arse, eh? Meet up with me at court and I'll show—'

Kamir made another grab for the handpiece and this time succeeded. He stammered into the phone. 'He gets a bit cranky, hello? My other son, Sam, he not do anything wrong, OK? You let him go, he not give any trouble again.' Kamir's voice faltered and his words sounded stifled, constricted in his throat. 'He done nothing wrong, OK? You let him go, you let my son go ...' He found that he could no longer speak and pressed the button to end the call. He slowly replaced the handpiece on its base. He joined Omar, who had flopped onto the couch in defeat and together they wiped away quiet tears from their faces before going back to the kitchen to Yasri.



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Later that morning they tried visiting Sam again. This time Yasri insisted on coming. There was a different policeman behind the desk at Bankstown station and he seemed altogether more helpful. He asked them to take a seat while he made a call and entered some information into his computer. Perhaps it would be easier today because they had arrived during visiting hours. Visiting hours reminded Omar of hospital. He thought of his anguish when Tata Monaj was sick and they had gone to see her lying in her bed, half paralysed, oblivious and near death.

In a few minutes the policeman called them to the counter again and asked if they would mind being subjected to a search—it was policy for all visitors. He gave them a cursory pat-down. He also had a quick look through Yasri's handbag and inspected the contents of the small parcel of food and clothing she had brought for Sam.

'Hey, that stuff looks all right,' the cop said pleasantly. 'You'd make some of the other blokes around here really jealous with tucker like that!'

As they waited a couple of men in suits entered the station and walked through the waiting room, taking stock of Kamir, Yasri and Omar as they walked past. One man in particular seemed to smile at Omar. With a bulbous forefinger, his colleague punched a security code into a panel by the door and they walked through to the offices or cells or whatever else that lay behind the wall in the restricted area. Omar thought he could hear muffled laughing as the door closed.

Then the cop behind the desk motioned for them to come forward. He led them through the same security-coded door. Beyond was a fluorescent-lit corridor

with shiny linoleum floors that smelt of bleach. The walls were an unremarkable white except for various signs posted here and there. There were three security cameras fixed to the ceiling in this one corridor alone. They came to some double doors. The policeman entered his code again and waited until a voice crackled from the wall-mounted intercom: 'OK,' and then a buzzer sounded. The cop opened the double doors and motioned them inside.

Omar felt physically sick when they walked into the visiting room. It was empty except for several cheap white tables and plastic chairs. The room featured a large rectangular window through to an office area, in which two guards sat watching them. Omar could see the guards making comments to each other. One opened his mouth in a sneering, muted laugh. The other stroked his goatee as he smirked along. Omar thought they looked just like crims themselves but with uniforms on.

The Tata Monaj feeling was strong as Sam walked in. Omar had expected him to look sick, his face gaunt and his body thinner, even though it had only been twenty-four hours. But his brother walked with as much swagger as ever. When he got up close Omar thought that the skin around his eyes appeared darker, like a panda's.

'Baba, Moma, hey, bro! How are youse?' he said, warmly but without really smiling. Though it was not their normal family practice, he gave each of them a hug. When it was his turn Omar felt the muscles of his throat tightening. He tensed up so as to keep the tears inside him. He let Sam go and there was a short silence.

'Aw, c'mon!' said Sam. 'It's bad enough in here without youse coming to see me looking like death, eh? Lighten up! I'll be out of here soon, I swear to God. They got nothing on me and that chick's a fu— a liar. *Sharmoota*, eh, Baba?'

‘What did this lawyer say?’ said Kamir. ‘When can you leave from here? Why can’t they give you the bail yet? We can pay them money and they let you go until you go to the court. That’s how this happens here, no?’

‘That lawyer, he’s an all-right guy but I think he’s a bit of a soft co—y’know, you know the type. This bloke, he does everything by the book. He says I got to do this, that and the other. I says to him, mate, I don’t want to hear it—just get me out of here! Just tell ’em that I never seen that lying slut before and that she’s the one who should be locked up, mate, not me!’

Yasri gave Sam the food package. He held it for a moment, expressionless, and then, remembering himself, thanked her.

*Where you sleep? Is it warm? How you wash your clothes?* she asked, wringing her son’s hand.

‘It’s all taken care of, Moma, don’t worry. I got bigger things to worry about in case you haven’t noticed. But thanks for this stuff. Now, the lawyer says the quickest my bail hearing will probably happen is the day after tomorrow. Then I can get out of here. But the most important thing is ...’ Sam lowered his voice and looked at Omar, ‘... the most important thing is that you keep your trap shut, bro. That goes for all of youse. You tell that fat bastard Farid, you tell Emad, Ali, your little mates Wardi and Nikko—all of them to keep their fucken traps shut, eh? Moma, Baba, you don’t answer any questions without a lawyer, OK? Don’t believe anything those coppers tell youse. If they wanna come and look at my room don’t let ’em in without a search warrant. I mean it. They’ll come in acting all friendly and say it’s for my own good and that it will help and all that but don’t let ’em in whatever you do.’

Omar thought about the box in Sam's cupboard and its contents of car stereos with their frayed wires. If it was still there, he would move it as soon as he got home. He could leave it at Wardi's house maybe. Or perhaps he should find a rubbish skip somewhere and just dump the goods. The police might go around to all their friends' places for all he knew. His neck began to ache as the solid core of worry grew within him.

'Don't worry, bro, it's all taken care of, eh?' Omar managed to say, nodding to Sam. In his desire to steel himself from crying his voice was an octave lower than it usually was. He decided not to tell Sam about his phone call to Detective Zammit. He knew that Kamir was unlikely to mention Omar's gambit either, given the content about Belle and the videotapes. It struck Omar that Kamir had not asked whether any of the claims he'd made during the phone call were true. 'We'll get you out of here, bro, don't worry. We'll fucken sue their arses, eh?'

'Too right ... too right.' Sam sounded hesitant for a second but then he perked up. 'So, Baba, who's looking after the shop, eh? We can't lose any business just because of this. Ha. In a year, mate, we'll be laughing about this, I swear to God. We'll get damages money off of them and start up our franchise!'

Yasri looked disbelieving. She lowered her eyes down to Sam's laceless sneakers and said nothing.

They chatted about some inconsequential things for another five minutes. It was as if Sam lived on the other side of town and they were merely paying him a visit. Then an officer entered and told them their time was up. They stood, uncertain how to approach the leave-taking. Sam instigated the goodbye much as he had the hello, by giving them each an awkward hug. He added especially cocky strength to

his embrace with Omar. He slapped him on the back and then focused on his brother's eyes with a determined gaze.

'We'll get through this, bro, just you watch. You don't worry about nothing. I'll see you at home soon enough and we'll be out cruising in that van, no worries, just like before. Just you wait, eh.'

As they left the room, Omar looked back to see a tall beefy guard leading Sam away. Now there was no swagger in his brother's step—indeed it was the guard who was walking like a cowboy. With his eyes downcast Sam looked like a small boy being marched to the principal's office. Omar felt a ringing in his head and hot tears formed in his eyes as they walked back through the station.

Nobody spoke until they were out in the car park and Kamir was fumbling for the keys to the Camry. Yasri began to mutter softly, and soon gave way to uncontrollable crying. Kamir took her into his arms and his own shoulders began to shake as he did so. Omar, in the face of his parents' sadness, was left to fend for himself. Snorting back his own tears he took the keys from Kamir's hands and opened up the car. He sat in the driver's seat and waited for Kamir to console Yasri to a point where she could get in. When they were in the car and had shut their doors he started the motor and tuned the car radio to something decent. He pulled out and drove, for Yasri's sake, very carefully and deliberately back to Greenacre.

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That afternoon Omar watched some daytime TV. It was more depressing than usual. He went for a walk to Farid's. There was no answer to his knock at the door. It was funny. Earlier he had tried to call Emad and Ali but they were not answering their

mobiles. Omar had returned to the house to find Yasri and Kamir taking a nap. By then the tight knot in his stomach had given way to a nervous, sick kind of hunger. He was taking some bread and tomatoes from the fridge when he heard a knock at the door. He dumped the food on the counter and trudged down the hall. He hoped it might be Farid or Emad. He badly needed to discuss strategy with someone other than his parents.

Omar undid the latch and swung the door open. Standing on the front porch were two men in dark suits—the same two men who had walked through the waiting room of the police station.

‘Omar Assaf?’

Omar nodded.

‘Omar Assaf, my name is Detective Senior Constable Paul Zammit. This is Detective Constable Justin Motteram. I believe that you two have already met? Well, in a fashion, that is. Your rather heated phone conversation this morning?’ Detective Motteram gave Omar the same smile that he had flashed at him in the waiting room.

Omar felt strangely removed from the situation. He was calm, as if the scene was not really happening. He had heard that when you drowned, after a while you stopped struggling. Everything became serene. Everything felt just fine. Except that you were about to die. Omar became confused. Maybe he was thinking about another thing he had once read. It was what happened when a shark attacked you. One minute you’re swimming along, the next minute *whoomph*—it’s come at you with the speed of a train, and with those multiple rows of razor sharp teeth, it’s bitten your leg right off. You may have felt a bump but you have absolutely no idea

that your leg is missing. You're still kicking along, swimming or treading water. Until the beast comes back for a second bite, or you bleed to death.

Omar roused himself to speak. 'I don't know what youse are talking about. What's all this about?'

The two detectives were brandishing their identification. Omar found himself looking at their badges and ID cards. The badge was blue and had an eagle or some other large bird on it. It looked American. He read their ID cards. Paul Jason Zammit. Neville Justin Motteram—*Neville. Ha ha!* The two detectives looked at Omar as if it was strange that someone should bother reading their ID, let alone smiling afterwards.

Detective Motteram put his wallet back in his jacket pocket. 'May we come in?' he asked. Omar retreated and the detectives stepped into the entry vestibule. The three of them stood there, the afternoon sunlight reaching in to them through the open door.

Detective Motteram cleared his throat and continued to speak. 'We were surprised to hear that you'd come in to the station this morning, so soon after your phone call. But then again, you had to see your brother, didn't you? Anyway, that was an interesting telephone conversation this morning, Omar. You sounded pretty sure of yourself. I'd be interested to have a look at this tape. Got a copy handy? It's of you and your ex-girlfriend, is it?'

Omar felt his face reddening. His arms felt itchy and he crossed them. He picked at the skin on his triceps. 'I don't know what youse are talking about. I said I don't know nothing about this.'

'C'mon, Omar, that's a bit rich, isn't it? You gave your name to the operator and also to me. In addition you mentioned a girl named Belle. Now you're saying

you don't know anything about it? Don't fucken waste our time, buddy.' A nasty slant had entered Detective Motteram's voice.

'I tell youse ...' Omar was scratching and rubbing at his upper arms. He tried to compose himself by jamming his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

Now Detective Zammit spoke. 'So you don't know anything about this phone call? You're *swearing* to us that you didn't make this phone call? You haven't got some dirty little tape of you and your girlfriend screwing on the couch? Or is she sucking you off while you hold the camera? Is that it? Or, you're telling us the phone call never happened? You're saying it was someone else who rang us up, pretending to be you? You're sure about that?'

'I'm telling ya, I don't know nothing about it.' Omar folded his arms again and set his jaw.

'OK, that's fine then. You say it wasn't you. Of course, now that we've spoken to you in person we can go back to the station and have another listen to the recording of the telephone conversation. I suppose we'll be able to tell if the voices match. It's an excellent quality recording. Good machines they've got down there,' said Detective Motteram. He smiled again.

Omar's head began to whirl. *Neville. Who the fuck named a baby Neville?* He stood still and said nothing.

The two detectives looked at each other.

'The pertinent thing is though, Omar, we didn't really come here about the phone call. Y'see, buddy, we were going to stop by here anyway. Isn't that right, Paul?'



‘Yep, that’s right, Justin, I think we would have made it our business to swing around here this arvo, phone call or not. Do you want to do the honours or shall I?’

‘Go ahead. Be my guest. This clown’s wasted enough of our time as it is,’ said Detective Zammit.

‘Omar Assaf, I hereby place you under arrest for unlawful detention and sexual intercourse without consent, committed on—’

At that moment Kamir appeared in the passageway. He was wearing one of his old white singlets and his hair was tousled. He rubbed his moustache and spoke in Lebanese: *Omar, who are these men? Why did you let them in? You heard Sami this morning. Don’t speak to anybody about this business. Why you let them in the house?*

‘Mr Assaf? I’m Detective Senior Constable Peter Zammit, this is Detective Constable Justin Motteram, New South Wales Police Service.’ They again produced their ID.

‘Look, sir, I am sorry to inform you that we are in the process of arresting your son, Omar, for the alleged offences of unlawful detention and sexual intercourse without consent.’ Detective Motteram looked from Kamir back to Omar. ‘Now, where was I? I hereby place you under arrest for one count of unlawful detention and sexual assault ...’

Omar looked at Detective Motteram as he spoke. He found himself nodding at a couple of points in the spiel, such as the part about his right to remain silent and anything he said being used against him in court. The detective droned on for another twenty seconds and then unclipped his handcuffs from his belt and waved them in front of him. Omar offered up his wrists and he was cuffed. The cops led

him to the car. Omar noticed it was a Falcon, unmarked, only a V6 but probably heavily modified.

Kamir followed them down the driveway, asking questions and gesticulating: 'Why you take him? He don't do anything! Why you taking him? You got no proof of anything!'

In response Detective Zammit looked back and said, 'Mr Assaf, if you haven't already, I strongly advise you to seek legal representation for your sons. It will be easier for you to organise good representation than for them to do it while in custody.' He added that they would be taking Omar to Bankstown police station but that he would not necessarily be held in the same cell as Sam. He added that since Omar was still a minor, Kamir should be present at his questioning.

Omar did not want to look at his father but he made himself turn around. 'Don't worry, Baba,' he said. 'It's all a big mistake.' He felt the detective's hand on his head, firmly but gently guiding him into the rear seat.

As they drove off he turned and looked back. He could see Kamir standing on the road watching the car with his shoulders slumped. He saw Yasri join Kamir, her hands held out in question. *What's happening?* she would be saying. *What's all the noise about? Where is Omar?*

Omar swallowed and gave an involuntary sob, like a puppy's whimper. He tried to put Yasri out of his mind and stared down at the shiny metal on his wrists. In the front seat the two detectives were lighting up cigarettes.

'Cheers, mate,' said Detective Motteram as he leaned over to accept a light from his colleague.

Omar felt the car swerve a little and then shudder momentarily as it was corrected.

‘Whoops ... so, what else we got on today, Paul?’ Motteram continued, the cigarette dangling from his lips.

‘Well, it’ll be around six by the time we get this bloke charged. That’ll be just the right time to go down to Campsie to pay Jimmy Tranh a visit.’

‘Jimmy! Now that’s not a bad idea!’ said Motteram. ‘How could I forget about that bastard?’ He let out a sleazy whistle. ‘I hope he doesn’t think we’ve forgotten about him and his dirty little knock shop.’

‘Yeah all right, go easy, we’ll talk about it on the way there,’ Detective Zammit said, nudging his chin towards the back seat. He turned around to look at Omar ‘You OK back there, son? Sorry to have to do that in front of your old man. At least your mum wasn’t around. Anyway, I hate to say this but you’re in a pack of shit. A whole heap of shit, do you understand? You and your fucken greasy mates. Just letting you know it’ll be a lot easier for you if you cooperate at the station. Your brother’s been fucking us around. Won’t say a fucken thing. Thinks he’s some kind of fucken smart cunt. We’ll see how fucken smart he is after three weeks in remand. Oh yeah. You’ve got fuck-all chance of bail. Not your sort. Happens too many times. Judge gives ’em bail and *phweeet*, out of the country. Back to fucken Lebanon, or Kazakhstan or Pakistan or wherever it is. Nah, mate, if I were you I’d be thinking carefully about cooperating when we get you in, because it’ll speed things up for everyone. You understand me?’

Omar looked back at him and nodded, though he had no intention of saying anything. Sam had said not to say anything.

‘Do you *understand* me?’ Detective Zammit repeated. Omar nodded again.

‘Good man. Wanna ciggie?’ Omar nodded a third time and a cigarette was lit and passed to him in the back seat. He immediately adjusted to smoking while

handcuffed. You lifted both hands to take a drag. It was obvious really. Detective Zammit watched Omar exhale the smoke and grunted to himself before turning back around. They started talking about red tape and before long Detective Motteram had started a bitter rant about how the force was going to shit.

Omar sat quietly in the back, not listening and not caring. He wondered what Belle was up to today. What would she be doing? Would she be glad that he and Sam were in the shit? Would she be celebrating? He could not believe that she had done it to them. He could not believe that she had done it to *him*. He had not even done anything. As for Sam and Farid and the others ... NO! It was all bullshit. No-one had done anything that she didn't want them to do. It was all bullshit and she wanted it in the first place and now she was making them pay. Omar cursed under his breath. *'That fucken slut.'*

'What's that, Omar? Bit early to start your statement. We've got to take you in and charge you first! Hold that thought!' Detective Zammit let out a nasty laugh. Detective Motteram looked around and with a wink gave Omar his most avuncular smile yet.

Omar turned over on the thin mattress. It was comfortable enough—he slept on a very firm mattress at home. Contrary to what he had heard about gaol, the cell was also warm. There were no visible ducts in the little room but something was keeping out the chilly autumn air. The cell was basic though. There was a metal dunny, a round metal sink and a bunk. The room carried the odour of cheap disinfectant and the bed linen smelled of mothballs. He had been in there for thirty minutes and badly needed to do a shit, but couldn't. A dunny shouldn't be so close to a bed, he thought. He wondered if some of the other cells had TVs in them.

Omar lay on his back and looked up at the smooth metal ceiling, only three feet away. He was on the top bunk. The bottom bed was empty. They had put him in remand by himself on account of him being underage. Underage. Too young to drink, too young to vote, too young for this prison.

The Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre was quiet at that time of the afternoon. Still, every now and then someone would bellow something out or scream a curse. Omar heard one of the cops say that it got busy after dark and apparently on Friday nights it was like a casualty ward crossed with a mental institution.

He had just gone through the process of being charged, a routine that had been fairly predictable. He knew what to expect. But when they were charging him, one of the cops, the custody manager, had mentioned something about a strip search. That had been unnerving. He had not wanted to take his clothes off in the brightly lit room in front of at least six other people—two of them women cops.

There was no way he wanted to do that. That had been the scariest part of the whole procedure. The survival mechanism that had switched on when he was arrested, the cold hard detachment, had disintegrated when they mentioned the strip search. He had felt his anus clench. He also dreaded someone saying something about his ribs, which he knew were all too visible under the thin hairless surface of his torso. Then there were his narrow biceps, invisible triceps, nonexistent calves, and the puny thighs—he remembered one time outside Sylvio’s when there was a hassle over one of Taysir’s speed deals. Omar had been leaning against a brick wall waiting for it to blow over. Then that skip cunt had yelled out from across the street: ‘Look at the size of those legs wouldja! You’d make a real good prop forward wouldn’t ya mate!’ With an evil grin, he had roared off in his HiLux leaving Omar hot-faced and not wanting to raise his eyes. Sam was always saying Omar should go to the gym but there was too much ground to make up. It was more than a lack of muscle—it was his thin bones too.

So, Omar had shuddered at the charge desk that afternoon when the custody manager had mentioned the strip search.

Then another cop said, ‘The little turd’s only sixteen. We can’t strip search him unless he’s in the presence of his lawyer or a parent.’

Omar had allowed himself to relax. His relief was palpable.

‘Ya can still wipe that fucken shit-eating smirk off yer face, though!’ said the cop who had cited the regulation. ‘You’re not out of the woods yet, mate, not by any stretch of the imagination!’

And then there were the charges. They had got him for aggravated sexual assault in company. That must have been about Belle, even though, strictly speaking, he had not been there. Then there were two other charges of aggravated

sexual intercourse without consent. It was not difficult to work out which incidents the cops were referring to. He thought back to the newspaper article and wished he had mentioned it to Sam. But what was the use of a warning? What could they have done about it? Leave the city? Go into hiding? Telling Sam would not have made any difference.

After he was formally charged the police had taken his fingerprints and finished typing up his details. He was then led into a cell, still handcuffed. They had shut the door. He was told to put his hands through a lunchbox-sized opening in the locked steel door. Only then had they removed the handcuffs. They told him he would have to stay here until he was questioned, after which he would be transferred to a juvenile detention centre. That sounded better than being here. But then he would be further away from Sam. It was strange to think that Sam was also locked up somewhere in this huge place.

When his cuffs were removed he remained facing the closed door, running his fingers over the large rivets rounded smooth by the thick layers of paint. Omar had actually tested the door, for no reason other than he felt he should. After that he had stood by the toilet. Squatting down next to it he saw that when seated on the commode his eye line would be exactly level with the hole in the door. After considering this he had stood up and hoisted himself onto the top bunk where he now lay.

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There was the sound of someone at his cell door.

'HANDS!' came the yell. 'HANDS! Come on, shithead, we haven't got all day!'

Omar jumped off the bunk and went to the door. He peered out through the wide slot.

'I said HANDS, didn't I! I didn't say bloody EYES, did I! Give us your hands!' Omar heard the rattling of handcuffs. He placed his hands through the opening. His wrists were pressed up against the hard edges of the steel slot and he winced as the cuffs were thrown on and snapped shut.

'STEP BACK!'

Omar did as he was told. He heard the sound of a key in the lock and the bolt moving. The door opened to reveal two officers he had not seen before.

'Ready to answer some questions then, are we?' said the one who was fastening the key chain back onto his belt. The accompanying officer remained silent.

They led him down past the other remand cells to an interview room. On one wall of the room there was a broad area of black glass. A small video camera stood on a tripod by the other wall. The officers instructed Omar to sit on a chair and not to touch anything. They removed the cuffs and left the room, closing the door behind them. In a few seconds, Detectives Motteram and Zammit entered, and then Baba walked in with a man in a wrinkled suit. Omar was relieved to see his father.

'This is John. He is the Legal Aid lawyer they give us. He help us today,' Baba said. 'You OK?' he added. He was calm. Perhaps too calm.

'I'm all right, Baba,' answered Omar with as much stoicism as he could muster. Baba's presence made him feel like crying, but he would not.



‘Hi, Omar. I’m the Legal Aid duty solicitor. I’ll help you out today and then another solicitor will be appointed to handle your case afterwards. Given your age, your father and I are legally required to be present during this interview,’ said John, who looked like he was only a few years older than Sam. ‘I’ll let you know if there are any questions that you shouldn’t have to answer. You can also exercise your right to silence. Do you understand what that means?’

‘Don’t worry, I ain’t saying nothing,’ said Omar.

‘So, Omar, here we are again,’ began Detective Motteram after they had all sat down. He arranged a few papers in front of him. ‘At this point I have to inform you that this interview will be videotaped and a separate audio recording will also be made.’ There was a mini disk recorder and microphone on the table.

Motteram fiddled with the wrapping on a blank mini disk, inserted it into the machine and pressed the record button to begin the interview. Zammit stood up, pressed a button on the camera and then resumed his seat. Motteram stated the time and repeated the charges that had been laid against Omar before asking some cursory questions about his name, address and schooling. Then the real questions began.

‘Before the commencement of this interview I have to ask you: has any promise, threat or offer of advantage been held out to you?’

‘What? Nah. Whatever. Nothing.’

‘We are investigating a sexual assault on Ms Belle Campbell that took place in Greenacre on the twelfth of August, 2000. Do you know anything about this at all?’

*Sam had said, say fucken nothing!* ‘I’m not saying fucken nothing.’

‘Now, as I said in the car, it will help everyone and speed matters up considerably if you cooperate with us. Your brother has been less than cooperative and God knows it hasn’t helped him out at all,’ said Detective Zammit.

‘Whatever,’ said Omar, looking down and crossing his arms. Something that felt like a cricket ball was pushing to escape his bowels. He was not scared of the cops but he was scared that he might soil his pants.

‘Now, Omar, I’ll repeat the question. Do you know Belle Campbell?’

Omar sat silently. The pressure in his bowels was making him sweat. ‘I need a toilet. Now. I got to go to the toilet right now,’ he said. Immediately he wished he had kept his mouth shut. They would probably torture him by not letting him go.

‘OK, sure, if that would help matters. Interview suspended at four-seventeen pm to allow interviewee to have a ... to go to—’

‘To evacuate his bowels,’ interjected Detective Motteram. ‘I assume that’s what he wants to do by the way he’s sweating and the look on his face.’

‘Yes, um ... interview suspended. There’s a toilet right across the corridor.’ He pressed a button on the recorder. Zammit and Motteram rose and guided Omar out the door, turning off the video camera on the way. The air seemed colder and fresher out in the passageway. Omar clenched himself as he walked, feeling queasy and light-headed from the restraint.

‘Don’t get any smart ideas while you’re in there,’ called out Detective Motteram as they stopped outside the men’s room door. ‘The windows are barred.’

Omar walked into the toilet, entered a cubicle and shut the door. He was gratified to find the latch worked. He sat himself down. As he relieved himself he drifted into a fatigued kind of euphoria, as if he had just taken a hit from a bong. He wished he had a marker to write something on the cubicle wall. *Cunt pigs suck*

*cocks!* That would be sick! He scratched the wood with his thumbnail and achieved a faint CU before giving up. The spaced-out feeling in his head and guts passed all too soon. He finished up and washed his hands. He noticed the windows were indeed barred. He emerged back into the corridor, wiping his hands on his pants.

‘Took your time, didn’t you, mate!’ commented Zammit.

‘I told you he was shittin’ himself,’ muttered Motteram with a straight face. He looked at Omar and broke into a grin. ‘Just joshing’, mate. Geez, take it easy. If looks could kill, ay?’

They joined Baba and John back in the interview room. The camera and mini disk recorder were reactivated. Detective Motteram leant into the microphone and announced the time and that the interview had resumed.

‘So, Omar, let’s start again, shall we? As I’ve already told you, I’m investigating your involvement in the alleged sexual assault on Ms Belle Campbell at Gosling Park on the night of the twelfth of August 2000. Do you know anything at all about this matter?’

‘I told youse, I don’t know nothing about it. I don’t want to get questioned about it. That’s it, all right? Are you guys deaf or something?’

Detective Motteram looked as if he was tempted to answer the question. Instead he decided to persevere. ‘Do you have anything to say about the phone call you are alleged to have made to the Bankstown police station at approximately ten-thirty am this morning? Are you in possession of videotapes or other recordings featuring images or the voice of Belle Campbell?’ he asked.

‘I told youse I don’t know nothing about this. I don’t want to get questioned.’ Omar folded his arms and looked down.

‘OK,’ said Zammit. ‘Let’s wrap it up.’ He spoke a few concluding words into the microphone to officially end the interview. The camera and mini disk were once again switched off.

‘OK, Omar,’ he said. ‘If that’s the way you want to play it.’

Sam had said *say fucken nothing!* And he had said nothing at all. He had given them shit too. Now here they were trying to psyche him out and he was not about to fall for that either.

All this should have made Omar feel better but he didn’t. He wished that Baba and John would leave, and that the two cops would get out the Sydney Yellow Pages—both L-M as well as A-K—and lock the door and then bash him until he cried and blurted out the whole story from beginning to end, from Belle to the Chatswood sluts, to that fucken dog at the Bankstown toilets. Most of all, he wished that they would force him to confess about that off-her-face, dirty little bitch who had spewed on him in the van at Kings Cross. He wanted the cops to bash the truth out of him until he started to bleed from the mouth from internal injuries—he knew phone books did not show injuries on the outside. The bastards had to beat it out of him. He had talked. He had had no other choice.

Outwardly he sat there with his head down, sunk into the moulded plastic chair. He appeared at a loss for words and drained of audacity. But the inner Omar was living a rich fantasy of spilling his guts to the cops under the most extreme duress. In a few minutes this imaginary violence and letting of blood, this heroic capitulation, made Omar feel just that little bit better about the nightmarish turn his life had taken.

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It was Sunday and the day was appropriately cloudy and slow. It had been three days since they had taken him to the Kariong Juvenile Justice Centre, where he would be held in remand. The centre was miles away in Gosford. Omar was not even sure where Gosford was on the map. But Kariong itself was OK. He had his own room with a TV and there was privacy for showering and going to the toilet. He had not been hassled though he had been given some filthy looks by some of the tougher looking skip inmates. He had kept his eyes down and had not spoken to anyone who did not speak to him first. He figured this was as good a policy as any, wherever he ended up.

The best thing about Kariong was the visits. Baba and Moma had come to see him almost every day, even though the return drive took a couple of hours. They had brought some extra food and clothes for him.

It was early afternoon and Omar was watching daytime TV in the recreation room. The programs were boring but he felt entirely passive. A few of the other inmates sat with him, in armchairs, on the couch, or sprawled out in the red vinyl beanbags that were scattered around. No-one said anything that was likely to lead to a conversation. Instead they grunted and made comments in monosyllables at various intervals. Ads were consumed and commented on in much the same way that programs were. In here more than anywhere, television was total entertainment: all content.

Pat, one of the centre workers, walked into the room. He clutched a Penrith Panthers coffee mug. 'Omar!' he called. 'We got your brother on the phone for you. C'mon, man, I think he's only got five minutes.'

Omar jumped up from the couch. This would be the first time he had been allowed to speak to Sam, who was still at the big remand centre. The cops had wanted to finish all their questioning before they would let the brothers communicate. It would be good to let Sam know that he had kept his mouth shut. He followed Pat into the office area and grabbed the phone that was held out to him.

‘Hello?’ said Omar.

‘Bro! How are you, mate? Living in luxury over there, eh? I heard all about that place. Mate, is it as good as they say it is? We got fuck-all here. All we do every day is watch TV until the screws lock us in our cell. I watched *Temptation Island* last night. The chicks in that are awesome, mate. Made me horny as anything. I had to use up a phone call to ring Salwa. Told her that’s where we would get married, Temptation Island. She was right into it, mate. Could even end up living there, have a little daughter and everything. Annelise, we decided. Annelise—cool name, eh? Anyway, you doing all right or what?’

‘Yeah, I’m OK. It’s OK, I suppose. I’m just keeping my mouth shut—’

‘Yeah, well that’s great, bro, keep it up especially now on the phone, eh? I swear to God, it’s good that they finally let us have a phone call but you can believe me, bro, they’ll be recording this. Don’t give ’em nothing because what they’ll do is take any little bit and make up a whole lot more bullshit. We done nothing so we got nothing to worry about is what I’m saying, eh? But we can’t afford to let our defences down, cos if we do they’ll make up crap and fucken try and shaft us that way, you got me, bro? You understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yeah, yeah, no worries. You don’t have to worry about me. It’s easy up here in Kariong. We even get Domino’s pizza once a week.’

‘You been hassled at all, bro? Any of those cunts giving you grief?’

‘Nah, like I said, it’s OK. I’m just keeping to myself, that’s all. What about you? You OK? How’s that place?’

There was the slightest of pauses. ‘It’s a fucken piece of cake, mate. No cunt’ll touch me. Don’t worry. Hey, did you know they got Farid and Ali too? They’re in here with me. Mate, it’s like that camp we went on back in high school!’

Omar felt as if the noose was being tightened. On their last visit, he had asked Moma and Baba if any of the guys had called. His parents had shaken their heads with a worried expression. They had heard nothing from any of the boys, nor from their families. Even Emad and his parents, just around the corner, had not contacted them. This seemed to suit them, though. The news of Sam and Omar’s arrest had been in the newspapers and on the radio and the shame of the publicity was already great and growing as the boys’ trials grew closer.

‘No. No, I didn’t know they got them. How are they? What did they say? Did they say anything to the pigs?’

‘I dunno, bro, I haven’t seen ’em yet. They’re keeping all of us apart. One of the screws told me that they’re in here on remand as well. Same charges as us ... me. Anyway, they won’t say nothing because there’s nothing to say, eh?’

‘That’s it,’ said Omar.

‘So you met your lawyer yet? What’s she like? Is she all right?’ asked Sam.

‘It’s a he. He’s all right, I suppose. He seems pretty smart, I think. He says it’s early days and it’s gonna depend on the testimony of the girls—’

‘All right, all right, don’t get into it now on the phone, all right? Remember what I said. Anyway, mate, you won’t believe this—my lawyer is fucken hot! I swear to fucken God, she’s this hot chick. Dark skin, Pakistani or Indian or something, but beautiful. She’s fucken beautiful, mate. Nice face, like a model’s,

and totally hot body. Tall, too. She's my height. Brains as well. Ice cool, classy chick, mate. I swear to God, I'm gonna fuck her in the meeting room one of these days. Mate, when she comes in to talk to me, I'm gonna give her the treatment. She already wants it, mate. It's too fucken good to believe! Not only is she gonna get me outta this fucken shit-hole, I'm gonna get some top class pussy until that happens. Too fucken much, mate!

'What'd she say though?' asked Omar. 'About the charges? What does she reckon?'

'Fuck knows, mate. She's fucken smart, though. I just told her it was all bullshit. You watch, she'll get me off. She'll be getting me off in more ways than one, mate! Ha ha!'

'Yeah right,' said Omar, beginning to smile. 'Fuck, mate, I wanna swap places with you. Why couldn't I get a chick for a lawyer?' He began to laugh. For the first time in almost a week, he felt the genuine warmth of a joke. 'Yeah, that's her job mate, getting you off! Ha ha!'

'Yeah, bro, it's gonna be fucken sweet, don't you worry about a thing.'

'OK, bro, that's cool. Hey, did Momo and Baba come and see you? Did you get some stuff from them?'

'Yeah sure. It's all cool. Yeah, Salwa came too. Mate, I gotta keep her separate from this lawyer chick. If she takes one look at this lawyer, I'm in trouble, mate! Ha ha! Yeah, but she's cool. She comes in and she's all crying and everything and saying, "It's all lies! Baby, I know it's all lies! When you get out we're gonna be married, just like we said, and I'm gonna have a little baby girl." We will get married, you wait. But now even the bloody newspapers have got her phone number. No joke, mate. They got her number and they're hassling her about all this.'



Can you believe that shit? Did Baba and Moma tell you that all the newspapers and TV called them up as well, asking questions? Some of those cunts even came to our house!’

Omar swallowed something hot that had worked its way up the back of his throat. This was indeed news to him. ‘No, they didn’t really say anything. You know how they are. They’re upset when they come here and it’s such a long drive, we don’t get much time to talk—’

‘Mate, you better believe it. Those journo cunts are onto it. The screws told me they been asking questions around here at the remand centre too. And to the cops and that. It’s like we’re gonna be famous.’

For the last few days Omar had been looking out for any mention of their arrests on the TV news. So far, he hadn’t seen anything.

‘Omar, you still there, bro? What’s goin’ on?’

‘I’m still here, Sam, it’s OK. I was just thinking about what you said. About the newspapers and that. Did the screws say it had been on TV or anything?’

‘Nah, mate, they didn’t say it had been on. Just said that they’d been asking questions.’

Omar felt relieved. ‘All right. That’s cool. Anyway, I wonder when we’ll get to meet up. I wonder how long we’ll have to be in here. It was a bastard not getting bail, eh? Those magistrates are cunts, eh?’

‘I’ll fucken put a fucken bomb under that cunt’s car if I ever see him. The way he was looking at me it was like I had murdered somebody. Fucken stupid cunt. He probably hasn’t had a fuck in ten years or something.’

‘Yeah, mine was a lady, eh? She said I presented a danger to the witnesses if I was let out on bail. That’s such bullshit, eh? Like I would do anything.’

‘Yeah, for me too. Danger to the community. Likelihood of ascending, ascending ... whatever it’s called. As if, mate. Where are we gonna go? Back to Lebanon? Haven’t even fucken been there before—’

Omar could hear some muffled voices in the background at Sam’s end. He pressed the receiver hard against his ear to try and hear what was being said.

Sam soon started talking again. ‘All right, bro, I got to go. Time’s up. All right, it’s good talking to you, bro. We’ll see each other soon, I swear to God. You take it easy in there, all right? You don’t fucken worry about nothing, y’hear me?’

‘Yeah, I’ll be cool. You too. You take care of yourself.’ Omar felt himself choking up. He tried hard to dispel images of himself and his brother at home with Moma and Baba in Greenacre. ‘Say hey to Farid and Ali if you see them.’

‘Ha, ha, that’s a good one. It’s just like everything’s normal, eh? Yeah, I’ll see if they want to go for a cruise down to Bondi or something! Pick up some Swedish backpackers! Ha ha. OK, I gotta hang up. This fucken monkey in a uniform is giving me dirty looks. All right, bro, remember what I said!’ And then the line went dead.

Omar struggled not to cry as he hung the receiver back up on the wall. It was OK in here but he wanted to be with Sam. His lawyer had said there was a good possibility that he could be tried as an adult. Omar was almost willing that to happen so he could at least be in the same building as Sam. There were so many things that he had to find out about. They swirled around and around in his head. He didn’t know where to begin asking questions. And when the lawyer came in, all he did was ask Omar endless questions so that he didn’t have time to ask any of his own. He slumped against the wall in the glass-partitioned office.

Pat came back in, still carrying his Panthers mug and a folded-up newspaper. Omar wondered how much instant coffee one person could drink in a day. No wonder Pat's breath stank. Omar felt bad immediately. Since he'd been here Pat had tried talking to him about his situation. Omar had revealed little to him but appreciated the effort all the same.

'Heey, Omar, how's your brother? Good to finally catch up? Is he goin' all right?' Despite his matey tone, Pat looked fidgety.

Omar nodded. 'Yeah, he's OK. He's pretty tough, my bro.'

'Cool, cool, excellent. Hey listen, I thought you should see this before any of the other blokes do. Not that many of them would even read a newspaper but if it's got something to do with an inmate in here you would be surprised at how much they suddenly want to read. Anyway, you should check this out. Sit down in here and read it if you want.' He handed Omar the folded newspaper and quietly left the office.

Omar scanned the front page, his face expressionless. He kept reading as he backed towards a swivel chair and sat down.

It was the *Sun Herald*: '**70 GIRLS ATTACKED BY RAPE GANG, POLICE WARNING ON NEW RACE CRIME**'. A little further down it said: '**CAUCASIAN WOMEN THE TARGETS**'.

Omar read the small columns on the first page. He turned over to page three where the story continued. How the fuck did those cunts come up with *seventy* girls? There must be other blokes out there getting a lot of action because it wasn't him, Sam, Farid, Emad, Ali and Dabir. No fucken way. Seventy! Police had made a number of arrests and were warning girls in southwestern Sydney to be vigilant. He read on:

*In one of the worst incidents a young girl was lured to a park in Greenacre by a young man she had known for the previous two months on what was supposedly a date to the city. The young man persuaded her to go to the park on the pretext that he had to pick up some money that was owed to him. What followed was described by the girl as 'the absolute worst night of my life'. She was allegedly held against her will at the park and raped repeatedly by up to six men ... she was eventually rescued by a passer by who was walking his dog and heard her cries, but not before having a pistol pointed at her head and being threatened with execution if she told anyone.*

It must have been Dabir's gun! Bloody Dabir! He had always talked about having a piece but Omar had never seen it. Sam had said that he had seen it once. It had to have been Dabir's gun and he had pointed it at Belle's head. Why the fuck did he need to do that? That stupid dickhead, he thought. The paper said there were six of them there, though Omar remembered eight or nine.

Omar read through the story again. He had a flashback of Belle at Bankstown Square. He remembered the curve of her breasts as she flirted with him and he thought about her clothes being ripped from her and the other things that the boys might have done. He had always dismissed these thoughts before they could become images. Now, for the first time he actually imagined the scene in detail. They must have fucked her. He thought about what it might have felt like. But she must already have been putting out. She had told him that she had a boyfriend. They had been going out for over five months and he was not the first. She must root. Most skip chicks did. Why then did she hang out with Omar and go with him to the

mall? She had flirted with him. If she had a boyfriend, why would she go walking in the bushes near Bankstown Airport with him, no questions asked? He remembered the post-rejection hug and the perplexing thrill of her breasts pressed firmly against his torso.

He returned to the scenes that had been playing out in his head. He tried to imagine Belle's face that night at Gosling Park, surrounded by the boys. His mind kept returning to the club soccer games that took place there. He tried harder but could only imagine something vaguely like porn. There were images containing sex in all different positions and from different camera angles. There was a close-up of it going in and out complete with slurping, slapping sounds. The girl looked like someone who looked like Belle. He could even see Ali in the picture. Everyone said he had a big dick. Ali had fucked her. He must have. And as Omar replayed the shadowy, flickering images in his mind he saw Sam, there in the park, bent over Belle and thrusting too. Now the image became clearer and he could see Belle's face in some kind of moaning ecstasy with her back arched and her hands grabbing Sam's bare bum. But then he saw the others gathered around and the image became shadowy and vague again. Frightening, in fact.

Omar involuntarily shook his head, as if to clear the image from his mind. He returned to the article hungry for more information, a distraction.

There was a brief mention of two girls who had been abducted from Chatswood. That was fucken bullshit! Abducted! As if they had been snatched from the streets! He read on. There were various other incidents that he knew nothing about. Must be bullshit. Unless it was something that Farid, Ali, Dabir and Emad had got up to with that girl Shayna. Surely if Sam had been involved he would have told Omar.

They kept talking about *the gang*. Apparently they were *operating* in the suburbs of Bankstown and Greenacre. A gang! What a laugh! It was like they all walked around with the same jackets on, with a name ironed on the back. *Sweathogs, Jets or Warriors!* Like those pissweak American shows. In Australia bikies were in gangs. They weren't to be fucked with. They were real gangs. He knew that some Asians had gangs. Nips eating noodles and dealing drugs. He had heard about the 5T and Four Aces at Cabramatta, as well as other triads from Hong Kong. Omar did not know anyone who was in an Asian gang because they were so secretive. Could you say the Telopea Street Boys were a gang? Maybe. They didn't seem that organised. Sure, you would never fuck with them. But they were just blokes who lived on or near the same street in Punchbowl. As well as many other guys who wished they did. To call Omar and Sam, Falafel Farid, that big-dicked idiot Ali and Emad a gang—that was just a joke. It looked like Dabir had a gun but Omar was willing to bet money that he had never fired the thing, that he did not even have the bullets for it.

He read on. The gang was Middle Eastern and the girls had been singled out because they were Australian. In Omar's mind it was simply a question of odds. No-one else was going to root and there were far more skips than anyone else out on the streets. It was not as if Hayat, or Danya or Salwa would meet you down the park at night, or come cruising in the van, smoking cones and pashing anyone who politely asked. As if. Some of the Islander girls from school were known to have put out but, really, they were Australian too. It wasn't like anyone looked at them differently.

But the article said they, *the gang*, had asked the girls if they were Australian before they had ... they had ... he hesitated at the accusatory word the

newspaper used ... Rooted them. It should just say rooted them. What happened to innocent until proven guilty? Omar did remember that Farid and some of the guys had said some bad things to the girls while they were messing around with them. Sometimes it got out of hand. It had sounded bad then and it sounded bad reading it here in the paper.

They, the gang, used racial insults and degraded the girls, he read. *I'm gonna f\*\*\* you Leb style*. Farid. The stupid fat cunt. Omar knew it was a dumb thing to say. What was Leb style anyway? There was no Leb style. It was not as if they were Greek. The kids at school always said the Greeks had their own style—right up the arse! But of course Omar did not believe that all Greeks did it that way. If they did, how would they ever have kids?

He finished reading the article but stayed seated in the office. If some of the other blokes read this he might even get more respect in here. He would have to make sure they also heard the real story though—what had really happened. *Seventy chicks*. He still could not work out how they might have come up with that number. Some dumb newspaper reporter must have made it up. Or maybe the cops made it up to try and clean up their unsolved cases. Oldest one in the book. After a few minutes, he chucked the *Sun Herald* on the office desk and went back into the recreation room. His spot on the couch had been taken and there were no other seats left. Omar stood at the back watching the drab daytime programming and waited impatiently for the next newsbreak.

Omar sat in the conference room at Kariong and doodled. He had been given a spiral-bound exercise book in case he wanted to take notes or write down anything that he thought might be useful for his defence. So far, he had sketched a weird zigzag lightning pattern and also a very workmanlike side view of a Harrier Jump Jet.

Opposite him sat Colin, his Legal Aid lawyer. Colin was in his mid-twenties and very tall. He had long bony arms and his hairy white wrists protruded from his sleeves a little too much. He did not wear a tie. Omar wondered if Colin wanted him to think he was different to all the other suits. Earlier in the week when they had first met he said that he had grown up in Bass Hill. He seemed like an OK guy and Omar got the sense that he genuinely wanted to help but he wished that Colin would just tell him what was going on. He wanted him to get to the point. Enough of these endless rounds of questions. Right now Colin was hunched over his exercise book, adding to his pages and pages of notes. Omar noticed that Colin wrote in small, cramped but uniform letters and ignored the margins. He apparently did not like to waste a single square centimetre of white paper.

‘So you’re saying that she accompanied you to Gosling Park willingly for the purpose of having sexual intercourse, but that you then left the park to go home. And that she remained at the park. And that beyond these details, you aren’t aware of what happened at the park afterwards?’

‘Yeah, it’s something like that,’ said Omar, pressing harder into the paper. ‘You know, she was the kind of girl who would go with anyone. Go with whoever was around, y’know?’



‘Did you ever have sexual relations ... sex ... with her?’

Omar said nothing. He kept doodling.

‘Omar, I need to know. If you have had a sexual relationship with her then we need to say that in court. The police already have evidence from this phone call you made to them saying that she was your ex-girlfriend. Even if the stuff about the videotapes was made up, the fact that she *was* once your girlfriend may tip the jury towards believing your version of events.’

Omar felt his face reddening. He added some large undercarriage rockets to the jet. He was unsure if Harriers carried this type of weaponry but they looked cool. They were rockets with nuclear warheads, no less.

‘Omar? Please answer the question. Remember, I’m on your side. What you say to me remains confidential.’

‘How can it be confidential if everyone in the whole court gets to hear it, eh?’ asked Omar rhetorically. ‘Whatever. All right, all right. It’s just a bit personal, that’s all. Yeah, we had sex. We had sex all the time. She wasn’t, like, my girlfriend or anything. But she’d fuck anything that moves, mate. She would. I’m not kidding, OK? That’s why I didn’t want to sleep with her no more. Because I knew, mate, she was fucking somebody else, she’d fuck anything that moves.’

Colin had stopped writing and was looking intently at Omar. He put his pen down and pushed the exercise book a few centimetres away from him. He straightened it so that the pages were exactly square to the edge of the table.

‘When did this relationship begin? The physical side of things? You said prior to the events of that night you had known her for about eight or nine weeks. So at what point did your relationship become physical?’

‘Ah, let’s see ... let me think ... I dunno how this is important to youse guys. OK, let’s see. Yeah right, she sucked me off one day. We was in a store and she asked me to come into the change room to tell her how she looked, you know, when she was trying things on. So I went in and she shut the door and, I swear to God, she gave me a head job right there in the change room, no joke.’

Colin said nothing for a few seconds. Omar thought he might have been playing the images out in his head. He took a deep breath. ‘OK, Omar, but what I need to know is when this happened. How long had you known Belle at this point?’

‘Well, let’s see, eh. I think it must have been pretty early on. Probably a couple of weeks.’

‘And how many times had you seen her in that first couple of weeks?’

‘Aw, probably about two or three times.’

‘So you’re telling me the relationship became a sexual one on your third or fourth meeting?’

‘Mate, that’s what I’m telling ya. Girls like these, they don’t muck around. They get straight into it, you know what I mean?’

Colin closed the exercise book and put the lid back on his pen. ‘Omar, for us to continue I need to know that this version of events that you’re relating to me is a true and accurate version of events. I need to know that in order to be able to assist you as best I can.’

‘Yeah, whaddya reckon? Why would I want to make any of this up? The chick’s a slut and she’s got it in for me and my brother. I dunno why—maybe because I didn’t want to fuck her no more.’

Colin took another deep breath. ‘OK, Omar, that’s good. I think what we’ll do today is leave it there. I’ll go back to the office and look up some case law

examples that relate to this matter. We'll also see what else we can do to try and prevent them from trying you as an adult. Now, what I need you to do is think about those questions I've asked you and try really hard to remember if you've left anything out. Anything at all, no matter how small it may seem.'

'Sure, I suppose I can do that. I'm sure there's other stuff I can remember, for sure. I mean, you're asking me to remember stuff from a long way back. This stuff all happened ages ago, mate. It's ancient history. It's bullshit that they have to drag us through this. It's bad for the family too, you know? It's like we're all on trial here. Me and my brother, my mum, my dad, everyone down there, the whole fucken lot of us. The news reports and all that stuff. It's all bullshit, mate.'

'I know it's frustrating, but we have to get it right. If we're going to get you released we have to do this. I have to remind you this is very serious, Omar.'

Colin gathered up his things and left promising to return the next day. Omar was relieved that he had gone. He thought about the Sportsgirl scene and rubbed his crotch before heading down the corridor and locking himself in the toilet.

\*

Life at Kariong became somewhat less boring for Omar. The comparative quiet of the first week had given way to daily tension and paranoia. Guys from every race came to Kariong to live. Australians, Aborigines, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Maoris, Islanders, a couple of guys from Sudan, a few Lebbos like himself and even a kid with a strong Scottish accent. The crimes they were alleged to have committed, or had already been convicted of, ranged from assault with a dangerous weapon to armed robbery; from car theft to dealing in drugs of dependence. He had heard there

were one or two other guys in there on rape charges but no-one else in the centre had had anywhere near the press coverage given to Omar's crimes. Not that anything had been proven yet.

'Everyone in here's innocent,' said Manal, smiling broadly. He was a Lebanese youth who had been convicted of multiple car theft and misuse charges, all before the age of sixteen. He was becoming a good friend of Omar's. 'Oh, mate, everyone's innocent in here, that's for sure.' He laughed as if this was the first-ever telling of the joke.

It was the press coverage that made life tense for Omar. It was now all over the media that Sydney's Lebanese youth had gone on a rampage against Aussie chicks, and the Aussie guys in Kariong did not like it. One day a lanky youth with overdeveloped biceps and a scarred number one haircut walked up to Omar in the courtyard. 'You're one of those blokes they talked about on the radio, eh?' said the boy. He was about Omar's age and went by the name of Trigger.

'Maybe.'

'Nah, one of the other blokes said. You're one of those Lebbo cunts who was fucken raping Australian chicks, weren't ya?'

Omar looked away. Sam said *say fucken nothing*. And then Omar doubled over in agony. Trigger's fist had shot into his midriff from barely half a foot away, so fast he had not even seen a blur, let alone the hand. Omar backed away, tears flooding into his eyes. Trigger followed him and let another one rip into the top of his shoulder, just under the collarbone. By accident, Sam had once nearly dislocated Omar's shoulder with a rubber mallet when the two of them were trying to knock out a dent in the van. Trigger's punch to the shoulder was somehow even more

painful than that. The punch to the stomach had severely winded him, but the blow to the shoulder felt like it had gone right through the damn *bone*.

‘Augggh, augggh,’ was all Omar could say, and quietly at that. He had backed away and collapsed onto a bench, grabbing at his shoulder.

Trigger did not follow. From where he stood he said, ‘That’ll fucken teach you to go fucken raping Aussie chicks. Fucken greasy little Leb scum!’

A few days later Omar found out that Trigger had been in and out of Kariong for a range of crimes including aggravated assault, housebreaking, car theft and, curiously, sexual assault. Apparently he was awaiting trial for indecently assaulting a pregnant housewife who he had encountered during a botched burglary. Manal, who had supplied Omar with this information, could not answer his friend’s query as to whether or not the pregnant woman was Australian.

A deep red bruise had come up on Omar’s shoulder and his stomach muscles were still sore. However, the pain carried a pleasant ache with it. He knew that a few boys had been in the vicinity at the time and that someone must have witnessed the incident. Of course, no-one was going to say anything. And as long as Omar didn’t say anything, there was a moderate measure of respect to be earned.

Omar and Manal stuck together for the time being. Trigger and some of his mates had threatened Manal the same day that Omar was punched. Though Manal had strenuously denied having anything to do with Omar’s case, and this had been backed up by some of the other inmates, Trigger had repeated his threat to ‘smack the living shit out of every dirty, sleazy Leb rapist in the place.’ So, Manal and Omar decided they would be better off watching each other’s backs.

They also recruited another Leb in Kariong, Maz, to be part of their group. Maz’s trial date was coming up soon. It was his second time in on the charge of

dealing in small amounts of heroin. An Armenian guy named Nazar, who with his short wiry hair and tan skin was perceived to be Lebanese by almost all of the other inmates, was also included in their little posse. Like Manal, Nazar was a car freak. He had been caught taking part in a vehicle rebirthing scheme based in Auburn. The scheme was like immigration in reverse. Expensive Mercedes Benzes and Porsches from the eastern suburbs would arrive at the Auburn workshop and with Nazar's help would emerge days later with fresh new identities or neatly dismantled as parts, ready for the markets of Asia and the Middle East.

'Sometimes it can take an hour to crack the immobiliser in a new Statesman,' Nazar said. 'But a Statesman isn't as hard as a Merc or an Audi. Bro, sometimes it takes so long you got to roll them down the people's driveways and then work on them in the streets for half an hour in the middle of the night!'

The four boys got along well. Sometimes they were joined by a Sudanese boy, Mousa. He had been convicted of breaking and entering offences, though he claimed to have been wrongly identified by a neighbour. 'There are many Aborigines in the suburb where I live,' he said to Omar.

Mousa's skin was very dark and almost velvety in its appearance. He was very tall, very thin and was possibly the only inmate at Kariong who could genuinely slam-dunk a basketball in the exercise yard. To Omar he looked nothing like an Aborigine. Omar was surprised to find out Mousa was a Muslim. Even more surprising were the details of Mousa's family dynamics.

'My father has three wives. I have three brothers and two sisters,' he revealed one day as their little group ate lunch together in the canteen. 'Before we first come to Australia, the government says a man can only have one wife. That is the law here. So my father brings his first wife but he brings all of us children. My

mother is his second wife. She stayed in Sudan. It is the same with his third wife. But after two years, the Australian government let me bring my mother here to be reunited with me—her son. They say a son and his mother cannot be apart. Then I was very happy. They also let my younger sister bring her mother here. Then the whole family is together again. We are very happy. But then the police catch me and the judge makes me live here. My family is once again very sad.’

Omar took this in and wondered if Kamir could have more than one wife. What would Yasri say to that? It would be like two-timing, wouldn't it? He thought of the word *infidelity*. Omar knew that beyond the world of Flight Simulator 2000 real pilots trained with equipment called high fidelity simulators. There was even a company he had read about on the internet called Fidelity Flight Simulation. So, infidelity was two-timing. High fidelity was just like the real thing. But Muslims were apparently allowed to have three or four wives. That was not infidelity, but neither could it be high fidelity, surely? And then who or what was an infidel? It was getting to be like a calculus problem. Omar tried to dismiss these frustrating, contradictory thoughts from his mind. At that moment Naz said something funny and Omar, not knowing why, laughed along with the group. Within, he felt a confused longing for his parents, mixed with a guilty sense of titillation.

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Trigger and his mates had taken to listening to talkback radio for long stretches during the day. They had commandeered the recreation room stereo, seemingly obsessed by the possibility of hearing something about Omar's crimes. The topic of the sexual assaults was running hot and talkback callers and the shock jocks were

damning in their appraisal of the 'Lebanese gangs'. Every time a caller or the announcer made a point on the subject Trigger and his mates would react with a chorus of shouts and whistles. Most of them had been in the centre for months and this broke up the routine. This was something with which they could get motivated.

'It's like when Pauline Hanson came on the scene,' said Trigger. 'We can do something about this. Fuck all the bullshit. Something's gotta be done now!'

During these enforced AM radio broadcasts Omar and his crew made sure they were somewhere else. While there had been no repeat of the violence, they did not want to be in the same room going over the finer points of the debate with Trigger and his boys.

However, from where they usually took refuge in the courtyard, the boys could still hear the radio. Though the opinions expressed still stung, Omar had always dismissed the talkback ravings as crap. He was mainly interested in news reports, especially the nightly television news bulletins, which often carried an item or two about the 'gang rapes' affecting southwest Sydney. A total of nine 'gang members' had now been arrested. There was Sam, Farid, Ali, Emad, Dabir and three others whose names, like Omar's, had not been publicly released because they were yet to turn eighteen. This was of little comfort to Omar. It seemed like the whole world already knew of the Assaf family shame. Omar was amazed, given so much time had gone by, that the police had located all the boys. He wondered how they could have tracked them all down, one by one. Surely Belle would not have known their names, let alone where they lived? Had someone dobbed them in?

Omar's seventeenth birthday came and went with a small one-hour celebration in the visiting room. He told Kamir and Yasri that next year, when he



turned eighteen, they should expect things to go off with a bang because he would be having a huge party at home.

Colin would come in every two or three days and give Omar an update on the legal situation. By now Omar only wanted news on major developments. One such piece of information was that the prosecution had succeeded in their application to try him as an adult. He and Sam would be tried together in the same court.

The beanpole lawyer shook his head in apology as he relayed the news. 'It's the bloody *Daily Telegraph* and those shock jocks. They want blood, even if it's the blood of a minor. And the worst thing is this government's too gutless to stand up to them. So, one of the things that we're going to argue is that all this adverse ... bad media attention is going to jeopardise your chance of a fair trial. The jurors aren't going to be able to make a decision with impartiality. They will have heard so much unfavourable ... so many bad things about you and your brother, um, I mean the case in general, that they wouldn't be able to consider the evidence before them in an objective manner.'

Omar pondered this. What did it mean? It was bad enough that he was seventeen and they were going to make him go to an adult court. That was bullshit. He could not even legally go into a club and have a drink but those cunts wanted to send him to an adult prison. He could not get his head around it. If they could not have a fair trial then there should be no trial at all.

He thought about ringing Sam to vent his frustration but decided against it. What was the use?

\*

The weeks went by and Omar got used to life in Kariong. There was no more overt violence from Trigger though the threats and insults came steadily enough. Trigger had been put on a warning by one of the staff who had seen him rough up a fourteen year old from Cabramatta. The kid had been unlucky enough to find himself alone in the exercise area one morning. Trigger had smacked him on the side of the head and then given him another on the nose. A story went around that he had been trying to extort some dope from the kid, but Omar thought that he could just as easily have done it for fun. As a consequence of the warning Trigger had to watch himself or risk getting moved to the Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre at Silverwater, where Sam and the boys were. Omar would have loved to see that happen.

With Trigger on good behaviour Omar, Manal, Maz and Nazar felt they could relax. Mousa had left. His brief break-and-enter sentence had ended and he was presumably once again living with his three mothers and father in their large and happy family.

Moma and Baba were regular with their visits and phone calls, and Omar was allowed to ring Sam once a week so that they could discuss their case. Omar got into a routine that revolved around sleeping, eating, watching TV and shooting basketball hoops in the exercise area. Other inmates came and went. Maz's court date arrived and he got off on a technicality. The stupid pigs had actually lost his file. It was as simple as that. Maz had rung Kariong from the courthouse afterwards to say goodbye to Omar and the rest of the Leb boys. Omar was happy for him but felt depressed after his departure. The four of them had really been turning into a solid little posse. Also, thanks to Nazar, he had managed to learn, in theory anyway,

almost everything there was to know about stealing and rebirthing luxury European cars.

\*

The time for court came. It was great to see Sam. He and Omar chatted excitedly in the courthouse lockup before being taken in for the hearing. When they walked into the courtroom Omar was surprised to see how crowded it was. The judge and the barristers wore wigs and gowns. Omar thought they looked stupid in that old, musty smelling room, pecking away at their skinny laptops and shuffling their papers. Colin had explained that he would not be speaking in court, but that their barrister would represent them. He had outlined the different roles played by a barrister and a solicitor. Omar found himself turning off. It just seemed like an excuse for these cunts to make more money. Whatever, he told himself. As long as Legal Aid was paying for it.

During the hearing Sam had leant back in his seat, appearing relaxed and cool. He did not look around except to give Kamir, Yasri and Salwa, who were all sitting together, a quick wave and smile. After waving to his parents Omar found himself searching for Belle. He realised that he had intended to give her a wave. Luckily, she was not to be seen. She might have reacted badly. Then again, who knew? Maybe she would not hate him. After all, it was Sam, Farid and ... Omar managed to stomp on the thought forming in his mind as if it was a loose coin rolling towards a grate. Why the fuck did he still think about that slut? She was the whole reason they were here.

As the hearing progressed, Omar sat forward, listening intently. He wanted to make sure that no-one from the prosecution tried anything too smart. After some lengthy and boring statements by both the prosecution and defence the trial was adjourned to a later date.

Sam's summation of the hearing was, 'That Crown prosecutor looks like a real fucken bitch, mate.'

Omar and Sam were to remain in custody until the next hearing. Omar was disappointed, but not because he had anticipated being bailed. Colin had advised him not to expect that. Rather, Omar had just wanted something to happen today, anything at all that would make him feel like things were moving forward. At the moment everything was up in the air, floating like millions of particles of dust at three in the afternoon in a sunlit schoolroom. He felt like he was one of those tiny, buoyant, uncommitted specks of dust in a space as big as a universe, when what he wanted to be was a chair or a desk or something else that was solid, heavy, real, and grounded firmly by gravity to the floor.

It was the second week of September and the breezes that swept through the Kariong yard carried a warm, pollen-laden smell, though the nights could still be cold in the small single bedrooms that served as the inmates' cells. Omar felt a little more optimistic. It was not the kind of thing he would admit to his new mates but spring was the best time of year. It made him feel happy for no reason and this sentiment was proven especially true in Kariong. He had passed the winter without too much change in his daily routine of sleep, meals, TV and shooting baskets.

With so much free time he had thought about using the small weights room, which was supposed to be open to all inmates. But, Trigger and his mates monopolised the bench with their grunting presses and groaning curls, and the atmosphere was far too menacing for any of the Leb boys to concentrate on regular workouts. Plus Omar had heard that the weights room was probably the most dangerous place in the whole centre in terms of available weaponry. Though the room was strictly supervised at all times rumours abounded in Kariong of horrendous assaults with dumbbells and tricep bars that had taken place in prison gyms across the nation. So, Omar and his friends' main outdoor activity continued to be shooting baskets where there was plenty of room and no heavy blunt objects immediately to hand.

One Wednesday after breakfast, Omar and several other inmates had flopped down in the recreation room to digest the large serves of bacon, eggs, cereal and toast they had consumed. The TV was switched on. Immediately the screen was filled with pictures of two large burning buildings.

‘Ha, that’s like *Towering Inferno*. Me old man’s favourite movie!’ someone said.

Omar recognised the images at once. ‘Shit, that’s the Twin Towers in New York. Both of them, eh! The Twin Towers are on fire!’

With Flight Simulator, Omar had cruised over the World Trade Center many times. On a few occasions, he had even attempted to fly between the buildings, though this would invariably set off altitude warnings and alarms and had once resulted in a horrific crash into Trinity Church.

The surreal pictures were evidently not live. The footage cut to different images which were even harder to believe—both towers had fallen and there were slow motion replays from different angles of the towers, one at a time, gracefully sinking into billowing black clouds of smoke and debris. Then came shots of people running for their lives, the evil cloud in hot pursuit. Omar had never heard of *Towering Inferno* but he was reminded of a trashy old horror movie he had seen. This cloud was one hundred times bigger than *The Blob*.

Things got even stranger. Next was earlier footage of a plane hitting one of the towers. So, the fires had been caused by a plane crash? Omar thought it must have been engine failure on a landing approach, or total instrument failure. It was strange that the pilot had lost control to the point where he could not even ditch into the Hudson or Upper New York Bay. The last place you would want to ditch was in Manhattan. But next there was video of another plane hitting the *other* tower. Now both buildings were burning. Two accidents? How could this be? Then Omar read the ticker tape caption at the bottom of the screen: ‘*WORLD TRADE CENTER HIT BY AIRCRAFT: TERRORIST ATTACK SUSPECTED. PENTAGON ALSO HIT BY AIRLINER: SECURITY ALERTS SPREAD WORLDWIDE*’.

The commentators confirmed this seemingly unfathomable news with urgent details. No blockbuster, no video game, no comic book had prepared any of the inmates for anything like this. All day the TV and radio were saturated with news of the attack. Omar felt a growing sense of horror that was somehow dulled by the unreal nature of what he was seeing. Could this be happening? What was going on in the world? The footage was played and replayed until it was indelibly etched into every viewer's mind.

Trigger had not been in the recreation room that morning, but for the rest of the day he was propped in front of the set. 'People diving off skyscrapers! FUCK! Can you imagine it? Can you fucken imagine that? A wall of pure, white-hot fucken flame right behind you and right in front of you a bloody eight hundred foot drop onto solid fucken concrete. What's worse? What would you do, mate? *What would you do?*'

Omar wanted to say that from eight hundred feet it would not make any difference if you dropped onto concrete, soft green grass, water or a giant bed of marshmallow, but he held himself back.

Talkback radio callers alternated between venting outrage and outright fear. It seemed like the terrorists' plan had been very well executed and people were not happy that they had got away with it.

Omar imagined himself aiming the nose of a Boeing 737 towards a shimmering glass wall of the World Trade Center. The picture in Omar's mind was clear. Buildings like that would seem to inch closer and closer, looming gently in your view, the gigantic object growing ever so slowly until it totally filled your windscreen, but by then it would be screaming towards you and then BLAM!

Oblivion. Omar liked that word. It was the first time he really appreciated what it meant. He had always thought it meant something to do with nothing. Nothingness. Being dead. But now he realised it was not *all* about nothingness. No, you did *experience* what oblivion was. It was the moment you felt a microsecond after impact. Only then would everything evaporate into nothing.



The terrorists were Muslims. And Lebs were Muslims. It was as simple as that. Trigger, in his Neanderthal way, had put the two and two together: ‘Fucken Muslim psychos have gone and started a war with America. Fucken psychos. And then we got youse blokes raping our chicks. What are you gonna do when you get outta here? Gonna blow up the Harbour Bridge?’

Omar tried to ignore him as they watched yet another CNN report in the recreation room. Pat was sitting with them, drinking International Roast and trying to keep Trigger under control.

‘Trig, you might want to think about your language. And also the rules about confidentiality and respect while you’re in here. Other inmates’ charges shouldn’t be discussed publicly.’ He took a slurp of coffee and moved his eyes back to the screen.

‘I wasn’t publicly discussing nothing,’ said Trigger. ‘I was just sayin’ that these guys are fucken dangerous, that’s all. A danger to the free world. Ha ha.’

Omar tried hard to keep his mouth shut. He had spent a lot of time with guys who said stupid things, but Trigger was such a moron it was unbelievable. He made Farid seem like a professor. Omar refolded his arms and continued staring at the screen.

‘The thing is but, the thing *is*, that they got no respect for *us*, do they?’ Trigger appeared thoughtful, which involved lowering his brow onto his eyes. ‘They want to obliterate *us*. The Free World.’ Omar suspected that Trigger had been watching too many CNN interviews.

‘You might have a point about the terrorists,’ said Pat, ‘but c’mon, Trig, you know there’s bad eggs in every group. You can’t just lump everyone in the same basket.’

‘You can if you have to,’ was Trigger’s rejoinder.

‘What do you mean if you have to?’

‘Well, if that’s the way it is. You’ve got to.’

Omar rose and left the room. As he walked out he heard Trigger’s sneering laugh. ‘Can’t ya handle the truth, Omar? What’s the matter, Omar? Worried you might not have a leg to stand on?’

‘Go and get fucked, you skip cunt! *Kiss imuk!*’ Omar yelled back down the corridor.

‘See? See?’ he heard Trigger say. ‘I told you that little wog faggot had a problem with us!’

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It was a Saturday night and a lot of inmates were in the recreation room. They had settled back to watch a DVD that one of the duty workers had rented for them. Omar had seen the Australian comedy, *The Castle*, several years before and had laughed almost all the way through. He was looking forward to watching it again.

He sat and chuckled at the antics of the eccentric Aussie family and their oddball neighbours as they battled to save their homes from the giant airport corporation’s expansion plans. As the movie progressed, Omar felt it significant that the Kerrigan family also lived adjacent to giant, humming electricity pylons and near an airport. This had not resonated with him he had first seen it. Perhaps it was

his changed circumstances, the enforced distance from home, or maybe he was always going to pick up on more detail the second time around. Of course, the Kerrigan house backed onto Melbourne Airport, while Bankstown's airfield was a few kilometres from the Assaf home. The similarities nonetheless made him pine for home and family all the more, and added to his sympathy for the Kerrigan dilemma.

Nearly an hour into the film Omar experienced a more uncomfortable sense of identification, this time with Farouk, one of the family's neighbours. Omar felt indignant that this Lebanese tradesman could not read English—he meekly had to take his notice of acquisition letter to Mr Kerrigan for him to read out. Omar felt denigrated on Farouk's behalf.

Later on, the plot took a nasty turn as the airport corporation hired a standover man to warn the battlers not to make things difficult or risk facing dire consequences. After this, at a meeting in the Kerrigans' shed, Farouk related that he had scared off the gangster by saying that he would send his own 'friend' around to the gangster's house: *'My friend come to your house and put bomb under your car and blow you to fucking sky!'* He then told his impressed neighbours: *'I don't really have friend like this but I'm Arab and people think all Arab have bomb.'*

There was uproarious laughter from the inmates in the recreation room. And suddenly Omar felt he was not enjoying the film as much. He felt a flush of disenchantment seep outwards from the centre of his chest. Inevitably, an inmate made a comment about the recent mayhem in New York and then Trigger directed a taunt at Omar and Manal, who were sitting next to each other at the rear of the room: 'You got to watch them, those Lebs. You fuck with them and they come right back at you with twenty times more blokes—and knives, guns, fucken rocket

launchers, bombs—the works. It’s fucken true! Eh, Omar? What about it? When we get out of here are you and your fifty cousins going to come around and blow up my place?’

There was more laughter and hooting. Omar remained expressionless, determined not to take the bait again. Manal continued to stare at the screen. The duty worker paused the DVD to remind Trigger about Kariong’s rules on the use of racially insensitive language.

Omar decided he did not give a shit about the insults. What was disconcerting was the memory that a few years earlier, when he had first watched that same scene in *The Castle*, he had laughed himself silly at Farouk’s well-chosen words.

### Three - RESPECT

25

Yasri visited Omar the morning before the first day of the trial. She was wearing a new tasselled rayon hijab. It had not struck Omar as odd that she had taken to wearing the veil since their arrests. He would probably want to hide his face too if his children were in so much trouble. She had brought him some new clothes to wear to court. There was a blue and white checked collared shirt, some sand coloured chinos and black leather shoes.

‘The lawyer say you look respectable for the judge,’ said Yasri, patting her son’s shoulder. ‘Your father, he visits Sam with new clothes too. We go to Mensland at the Square yesterday.’

‘I hope it’s not exactly the same thing you bought for Sam,’ said Omar, inspecting the brand name of the shirt. ‘Don’t want to look like we’re little kids again. Boydex? But thanks anyway, eh, Moma! It’ll be cool. This gear, it’s all part of the game, I suppose.’

They chatted about life outside the detention centre. Omar asked Yasri if she had heard from Emad’s parents.

*They no talk to us ever since the day the police came to take Emad, she said, looking at nothing in particular at a point behind Omar’s shoulder. Same for Farid’s mother and father. They say nothing. But your father, he hears things in the shop. People tell him that Farid’s mother and father are saying that Sam started everything, that Sam was the first always to do these things with the girls.*

‘That’s bullsh—that’s not true, you know it, Moma. That fat bastard’s just trying to save his own skin. He’s panicking and the only thing he can do is to blame Sam—blame me and Sam. They’ve got nothing, Moma, don’t worry.’

Yasri dabbed at her eyes with her hijab and then took a crumpled tissue from her bag to finish the job. *This thing is always in the newspapers and on the radio. Your father doesn’t go out anywhere anymore. Just to Baalbek, then the deliveries, then he comes home. He doesn’t visit the coffee shop or want to go anywhere to visit people. Most of his friends, they don’t come to Baalbek anymore. It’s because people are always talking about it. At least Salwa still comes to see us. She comes and talks to me and tells me everything will be OK and that her and Sam will get married and she will give us a granddaughter.*

‘What are they saying, Moma? What are they saying in the papers and the radio?’ Omar had a fair idea of what was being said but was more interested in what his mother was *hearing*. To him, she lived in another world, and he was able to intuit that the same TV and radio that he heard came to her via a different set of filters.

In answer to Omar’s question Yasri sniffed and said, *The news, it’s all the same.*

Omar disagreed but did not press the point. The news could never be the same again when your own sons featured prominently in the daily headlines. He knew that this was killing her and Kamir. Not just because they were worried about their sons’ futures. It was their whole life. Everybody in Sydney, probably everybody in Australia, knew about this. Omar was sure it was not just Kamir who would not want to step out of the house at this time. He strongly suspected Yasri would be even more housebound than his father. At least Kamir would go to the

bakery and do the deliveries every day. He imagined that because of the humiliation, Yasri's only contact with the outside world was when she went to visit him and Sam. This was not the outside world! This was the *inside* world! Poor Moma was being sucked down into it with them. At least with the trials there would be a change of venue. And there would be less travel time. For a few weeks, at least, she could travel to the city and see them in the dock of the courtroom.

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Omar did not understand the legal complexities but Colin had told him that he and Sam would have to undergo three trials, one each for Suzie and Carol, Shayna, and Belle. The *Crown*, as Colin called it, was alleging that Sam, Omar and the rest of the boys had raped all of these girls. However, Omar and Sam were going to be tried together, and Farid, Emad, Dabir, Ali and the others would have their own individual trials.

Omar and Sam would have the same judge for all three trials. His name was judge James Mulvaney but Omar would soon forget it. In court, everyone called him 'Your Honour' and outside the trial he and Colin only ever referred to him as the judge. In their own discussions Omar and Sam called him the judge and then, later, *the cunt*, and then mainly, *the old cunt*.

On this first day, the judge regarded Sam and Omar with a cold neutrality. He was a lean, broad-boned, wrinkly old man who wore his reading glasses all the time. When he was not reading he would look over the top of the rims in such a way that you could not tell if he was grimacing or smirking. His dry, papery cheeks also

had a red sheen to them as if he was permanently worked up about something. At first, Omar found him and the courtroom procedures quite unnerving.

Sam, however, seemed unperturbed by it all. Mimicking the solicitors' quiet conferrals with the barristers, he would sometimes slowly lean over as if to whisper a pertinent observation or some salient legal point in Omar's ear. 'Check out that arse, mate! I'm gonna bone her before this trial is over!' he would murmur, gesturing towards his solicitor. Or, 'Just fucken slap me if I don't get a head job out of her before the end of the week. I betcha she swallows it down like vanilla custard ...' He would then slowly straighten up and adjust his shirt cuff, pretending to pay attention to the proceedings.

The first day was spent going over a lot of the statements about the facts of the case. It amazed Omar that the Crown could know about every mobile call they had made on every day of the months during which the incidents had happened. That's what Colin called them—*incidents*. Omar knew what the papers and the TV were calling these 'incidents': *Gang rapes*. It sounded bad. He had heard the term 'gang bang' many times before and had seen various websites devoted to the pastime. The gang bang sites were Emad's favourites. However, the expression 'gang rape' had sickening, nasty overtones and it was this kind of association that he really wished Yasri did not have to absorb. But it was too late now and getting worse all the time. That morning, for the first time, he had seen the newspaper refer to the incidents as *Lebanese gang rapes*.

'Why the fuck is it *Lebanese* gang rapes?' he asked Sam in the holding cell while they were waiting to be escorted into the court. 'What's that got to do with anything?'



‘Ask that fat fuck, Farid,’ said Sam, chewing on his thumbnail and staring at the wall. ‘He’s the one who was always talking about giving it to ’em Leb style and all that. I dunno why he has to go on about that all the time. He’s never even been to Lebanon, mate. Probably to make up for the fact that he’s a fucken total spastic in the sack, mate. He couldn’t give a chick an orgasm if he tried. Not that he would try, but you know what I mean.’

Later in the day the Crown prosecutor or Ms Crown, as the judge sometimes addressed her, also brought up the matter of the racial name-calling. She was another ‘good-looking lawyer chick’, aside from the fact that she was the ‘bitch who is out to get us’. She had turned swiftly on her heel while making a point to the jury. The black barrister’s gown, worn open in the usual fashion, had swished and swirled about her, temporarily revealing a deep, thigh-high split in her skirt.

‘Phwoar. Check out the legs on her. With that wig on she’s like some fucken sexy granny! Twisted, eh, mate?’ Sam had quietly said to Omar.

Omar thought that at times she was flirting with the jury as well as the media contingent that sat up the back. She swaggered slightly and sometimes gave a hint of a smile as she talked about the degrading racial names that Farid had used. Omar thought it was weird, the way she acted while repeating all those horrible stories. He eventually decided that he was powerless and the men and women of the jury would make up their own minds. Besides, Farid, the fat dumb bastard, would have his own opportunity to defend himself.

It was apparent that Suzie and Carol had been given a makeover before appearing in court. They both wore slacks and suit jackets and had their hair up. They both wore make-up but not too much. Sam remarked that they looked like Salwa when she went to work at the credit union. ‘Except that Salwa’s all class and

these sluts are still fucken sluts however you dress 'em up—and always will be,' he had spat out under his breath in the courtroom.

The Crown had used the data from the boys' mobile phone records to piece together their movements on the night in question. They had managed to find the Sydney Harbour Bridge tollbooth operator who testified that he remembered some Middle Eastern males in a white van using a fifty-dollar note to pay the two-dollar toll that same night. The Crown had also discovered that a short time after this Farid received a speeding ticket on Parramatta Road near Stanmore. There was no question that the boys were together at the locations and times described by Carol and Suzie in their statements to the police.

'New South Wales. It's a police state,' said Sam to Omar. 'How do they work all this shit out? They say it's a free country—ha! It's like they're watching you all the time. They got fucken satellites and cameras everywhere. Anyway, I don't care if the pigs have got a picture of me taking a shit and wiping my arse. It was just one tollbooth operator and a speeding ticket for that fat fuck Farid. It doesn't mean they can tell whether I was in the van or with Farid or whatever!'

Sam was apparently not willing to be moved by his lawyer's advice that this evidence, in combination with the mobile phone records, might indeed be incriminating in that it showed the red car and the van were close by and in virtually constant communication on the night in question.

On the evening of day three of the trial, after a telephone conference with Sam's legal team, Colin advised Omar that his brother had instructed his defence to present no further evidence either orally or in writing.

'Well that's what I'm doing too then,' said Omar. 'That's my instructions too. It's all fucked anyway, eh? Why bother with all this other shit?'

‘This is a very serious mistake, in my view,’ said Colin. ‘You can imagine the jury are going to react to this in the worst possible way and the judge will have to take this into consideration when sentencing ... if there is a guilty verdict. Are you sure you understand the implications of this?’

‘Yeah. Whatever. I know what’s going on. We don’t stand a chance anyway,’ said Omar.

Colin sighed and banged his notebook shut. ‘OK, I can only do as much as you instruct me to. I can only do what I can.’

And so, the trial went on. Carol and Suzie each gave tearful and whimpering testimony. On one occasion, Sam was cautioned after making lewd gestures towards Suzie. As she walked to the witness box he had stretched his hands outwards at chest height and fondled the air. Then, turning his palm upward, he had lowered it down to crotch level and made a fingering motion. Suzie looked shocked and several members of the jury cried out. The judge was consulting his papers and missed what Sam had done, but after he saw the trampled look on Suzie’s face, he swiftly gave Sam a withering rebuke in any case.

Later that afternoon, Sam and Omar were surprised when the prosecution announced that Farid would appear for the Crown the next day. Apparently, he would testify that Sam had been with the boys that night and had indeed been in the back of the white van with Carol.

‘That fucken dog!’ hissed Sam as Farid was led into the courtroom the following morning. Sam glared at him and swept his index finger hard along his throat, baring his teeth like a cornered mongrel. ‘Dog!’ he hissed. Farid looked away and then down. He took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on a spot below the bench. Omar thought their one-time friend had lost some weight in the months spent

in remand. However, in his mind Farid was still a fat-bellied, dumb-looking bastard by any definition.

Omar thought that the prosecutor had noticed Sam's gesture towards Farid but she said nothing. Looking indifferent, she continued to sort through her papers and jotted a few notes. The jury filed in, the judge entered, and another day in court began.

Later in the day, the prosecutor decided to bring up the incident: 'Your Honour, when Mr Hisham was brought into the courtroom earlier today, he looked across to where Mr Sam Assaf sat in the dock and it was my observation and that of several other people in the courtroom, that Mr Sam Assaf drew his finger under his chin in a threatening manner, as if to indicate a cutting of the throat. I would put it to the court, Your Honour, that this was a blatant attempt to intimidate the witness.'

A couple of the more elderly jury members looked aghast. The judge wrinkled up his forehead and looked annoyed.

'I got no idea what you're talking about. Geez, mate, get a life,' said Sam, picking at some imaginary dirt under his thumbnail and flicking it in the prosecutor's direction.

At the end of the day, Sam's barrister said the prosecutor could have unwittingly given them grounds for appeal: 'I'd say that diminished your credibility—you see, the jury weren't yet in the courtroom when you did whatever it was that you did. The prosecutor effectively told them that you had threatened to kill someone. That was tantamount to putting it to you that you had threatened to kill somebody in the court—and had in fact *made* that threat in the very courtroom. So therefore, the jury became unfairly prejudiced.'

'I would never have a tantrum about killing that cunt in court,' said Sam.

The next day the boys' defence team applied for the jury to be discharged. The judge refused: 'I will instead give strong directions to the jury on the matter,' he said. 'The trial will proceed.' With his lips fastened in their customary downward curve, he rearranged his papers and that was the end of that.

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Sam and Omar were found guilty of everything that Carol and Suzie had accused them of. As the verdicts were read out, Carol and Suzie screamed and hugged each other. Sam released an expletive but remained calm otherwise. The judge allowed a few seconds for Carol and Suzie and their friends and family to congratulate each other before asking for quiet. He then informed the court that he would withhold sentencing the brothers until all three trials had been completed.

Omar turned around to see Kamir and Yasri looking towards them. Kamir was giving them a resolute stare as if to say, *be strong, my sons*. Sam had turned around too. He smiled and nodded at his parents with a patient expression, as if to reassure them: *These dumb turkeys will soon realise it's all a big mistake*.

Omar tried to repeat the gesture in his own way, searching out Yasri's eyes. *It's OK, Moma*, he wanted to say. *This will blow over in no time and we'll be home with you soon*. She looked back at Omar's widened black eyes and his earnest, open face and began to weep, and then sobbed into her hijab, pulling it across her cheeks in an attempt to conceal her face from the prying eyes of the world.

Omar was resigned to putting up with the same degree of tedium and minute attention to detail in the next two trials. Quietly, he even expected the same verdict. Nevertheless, despite the crushing boredom of the courtroom process, his instructions that no further evidence be given in his defence, and his tacit acceptance of the inevitable outcome, Omar refused to plead guilty. He was with Sam all the way. Those sluts wanted it. And yet sometimes within him there faintly flickered the disturbing feeling that he should have known trouble would be coming their way from the moment he had seen Carol being dragged from the van.

Of more immediate concern, Omar was worried that he, and consequently Kamir and Yasri, might have to endure a fourth trial. He had heard from his parents that Farid and Emad had been charged over another ‘incident’, apparently involving the other young girl on a Bankstown train—the one who had got away and then returned with her mother. Omar was annoyed. That idiot Farid again—he had got his cock and condoms out on the train, and he had smacked her a couple of times. If Farid had shown a little self-control, it might not have looked so bad for all of them now. Omar hoped that Farid and Emad would see no reason to drag him into another trial. After all, he had not even spoken to the girl.

Though Omar knew too well that it was him and Sam in the dock, he found himself referring to the different trials by the girls’ names. It seemed fitting, especially now that he and Sam were no longer giving evidence. Let them do all the work.

Shayna's trial seemed to attract more media attention than the previous one. The courtroom was full from ten o'clock on day one and when the charges were being read out, the judge, at times spitting in rage, had to scream to quieten various sections of the court. At one stage a man from Shayna's support group was ejected after he tried to leap over some seats, hollering and ranting, to get at Sam. This occurred when the Crown alleged that Sam had hosed Shayna down after she had been repeatedly raped at Bankstown and then Chullora. Omar and Sam knew it was Ali who had turned the hose on her. The Crown had screwed that up.

The strange thing was that Sam did not deny the accusation. He just smirked and rolled his eyes as the statement was read. Then he stood up in the dock and with his hand made a small movement in front of him as if he was directing a stream of urine. That was when the short, heavily built man yelled an unintelligible oath and jumped up to try and get at Sam in the dock. Two officers apprehended him and marched him out immediately. At lunchtime, Colin told them that the ejected man was Shayna's current boyfriend.

Sam snickered. 'Fucken hell! She's got a boyfriend! That poor cunt. No wonder he's so angry, mate. He's just realised he's going out with the biggest slut in Sydney!'

Shayna gave testimony for a full half-hour in the witness box before reaching the episode involving the hose. Looking as if she was relying on her last reserves of strength, she glanced at Sam as she described how he had aimed the hose directly between her legs, laughing and insulting her while he did.

'It was the final humiliation,' she said. 'After everything they'd done to me for hours, I was just crouching there soaked to the skin like a drowned rat. I felt like

I might as well be dead.’ She broke into wracking sobs and covered her face with her hands.

Meanwhile Sam just rolled his eyes again and chuckled to himself.

‘That’s bullshit, mate,’ Omar whispered to him. ‘You never did that, did ya? That’s fucken bullshit.’

‘It doesn’t matter, mate. What do you fucken reckon this whole thing is about? We never did nothing. What are you getting all worked up for about the fucken hose? I wish I *had* hosed down the dirty little slut!’

Omar looked back at Shayna, who was now going through the last details of her testimony: ‘... then they burned off in their car and the only ones left were Omar Assaf and two of the others. They said they would take me home. After everything that had happened I was numb. I didn’t have a clue where I was and I had no energy at all. I was so, so very tired. I thought about running but didn’t want to get thumped again if they caught me. And like I said, I didn’t have the foggiest idea where I was. So, after everything, I got back into the car with them, and I thought to myself, *what if they take me somewhere else and it happens all over again?* And I suppose they could’ve. But by then I guess they’d all got their ends in, y’know? They’d all had a go. So they ended up dropping me off on Homebush Road. I remember getting out of the car and I felt like I was in a dream. I didn’t feel anything, like I couldn’t feel any pain, inside or out. Just nothing. I got home and had a shower and crashed out on my bed and then when I woke up I could barely move I was so sore and it all came back to me and I was just terrified at what had happened. I was just terrified in case they somehow got my address and would come back for me and do it all over again. So I rang my friend and told her all about it and she came straight over and took me back to her place where I’d be safe. And



we called the cops and I made my statement and had the medical examination. I stayed with my friend for the next week until I could find somewhere else to live. It was weird. It seemed like I wasn't safe anywhere no more. I wasn't safe in my own home, in my own bed at night, even with all the doors locked, y'know? I didn't really feel safe anywhere. It was bad not having a home to go to ...'

The prosecutor let her continue on like this for a short while until Shayna looked as if she would break down again. Then the prosecutor stood and beamed at her witness. 'I think the court can now begin to appreciate the full horror of what you experienced. Thank you for exhibiting such remarkable courage here today.'

There was not much else of interest during the remainder of Shayna's trial except for the screening of some closed circuit television footage. A projector was brought into the courtroom and the lights were dimmed.

'Cool,' said Sam. 'It's like when you get to see a film in class, eh?' He leaned back and crossed his arms with an air of anticipation.

The footage showed a service station and numerous cars driving in, being filled up at the bowsers and driving off. The prosecutor drew the court's attention to the upper left of the screen where a red Lancer could be seen pulling into a parking bay.

'This recording was retrieved from the Yagoona Shell Service Station on Liverpool Road. It is CCTV footage taken on 30 August 2000 between the hours of four and five pm. The swift police response in investigating this sexual assault report meant that the tape was able to be recovered before it was reused by the service station proprietor. You can see that the red vehicle, a 1997 Mitsubishi Lancer sedan, New South Wales plate number, WF37JA, registered to a Mr Dabir Abdul-Baari, of 15 Wyalong Crescent, Belmore. Mr Abdul-Baari is currently in

custody on charges relating to these crimes and is due to stand trial at a later date.

Five occupants can be seen in the car. Mobile phone records place Mr Sam Assaf in the vicinity at this time and the Crown asserts that he was a passenger in the vehicle at the time this footage was taken.’ She paused as the video played on.

‘Damn,’ said Sam as he watched a tall, muscular figure leaving the Lancer and walking into the service station. ‘That is *so* Ali. He aint got a hope, mate.’

The prosecutor provided a running commentary. She described how, after Shayna had been lured off a train with the promise of free drugs, she had been repeatedly raped in a nearby Bankstown toilet block before being passed on to another carload of young men to be used for their gratification. They had taken her to the Chullora Industrial Estate and on the way had stopped to buy condoms and cigarettes at a service station in Yagoona. There, the courageous victim had seen her chance to escape. The video clearly showed some kind of disturbance or scuffle in the back seat of the Lancer.

‘It is at this moment when Mr Abdul-Baari produces a gun from the glove compartment and points it at Shayna’s head,’ said the prosecutor.

‘You can’t see no gun!’ Sam whispered to Omar.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Omar whispered back. ‘It just looks bad, that’s all it’s got to do.’

‘Cunts!’ said Sam.

‘Cunts!’ replied Omar.

They both laughed.

The prosecutor caught the exchange and paused momentarily. Sam gave her his cheesiest grin and made his eyebrows dance a little.

‘It appears the defendant finds the threat to this young girl’s life as amusing as the rest of these proceedings,’ she commented. ‘Lights, please,’ she said to a court official.

The projector was switched off and the lights flickered back on. Omar stretched himself, cracking his fingers over his head. He was disappointed it was over. He had been enjoying the break from the routine.

The rest of the day dragged on with some technical arguments over who had done exactly what to Shayna, when, and in what order. The lawyers provided details of this according to the statement Shayna had given to police. She was not present during this session. The details were very graphic and, like the retelling of the hose incident, not always entirely correct. Omar looked around to where the reporters sat. Almost all of them had their necks craned forward, striving to catch every nuance.

‘It’s like they’re watching a porno, eh?’ he murmured to Sam.

‘No way, who’s got a porno?’ said Sam, looking around.

‘Nah, those blokes. The journos and that. It’s like they’ve come here and they’re watching a porn movie. Those reporters. And probably half the other people off the street who come in every day. They’ve come in to get off on the dirty stuff. Listening to every bit of juicy detail. I bet half of ’em got a stiffy when Shayna was talking about what happened, eh?’

Sam laughed out loud and slapped his brother on the back. ‘That’s fucken sick, mate! That’s a good one! Watch porn—and bash a few Lebs!’ he chortled quietly, but again not quietly enough. The judge gave him a fierce stare and looked as if he might reach for his gavel. Sam pulled his most solemn face and made an approximation of the sign of the cross in front of him. He cast his eyes downward

and clasped his hands together like a monk. With a benign smile he whispered under his breath, 'Go and get fucked, you stupid old faggot.'

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The jury deliberated the verdict for exactly thirty-six minutes before filing back into the courtroom. Sam and Omar remained expressionless as the judge read out the verdict. They had been found guilty on all counts. Omar knew that there were many errors of fact in the Prosecution's case. Shayna's memories of the day were, perhaps understandably, jumbled. So many boys, so much had obviously happened. And yet, when he heard the judgements all he could do was shrug his shoulders and look down.

'Not one wog face in that fucken jury,' said Sam to Omar as they sat in the cell awaiting transport back to their respective prisons. 'Not even any black guys or Nips. They're out to fucken get us, bro. They want our balls.'

'Yeah, what do you expect?' said Omar to humour him. He felt conflicted, witnessing one of Sam's rare vulnerable moments. While, he found himself wishing that for once Sam would just listen to what was going on around him and face the reality of their situation, at the same time, he needed Sam to be entirely himself, to continue facing off the inevitable with all his considerable bluster. Omar needed Sam to provide them with some sense of fight, some sense of dignity in their battle, because Omar felt deep within him that this was all that they had.

On the first day of Belle's trial the courtroom was positively bursting. Also, it felt as if someone had turned up the thermostat. The room sizzled with anticipation. As Omar and Sam were led to the dock, they saw Kamir and Yasri in the public gallery, and returned their smiles and waves. In a few minutes, they stood as the judge entered and took his seat. He surveyed the courtroom with his usual look of icy severity.

After the preliminaries were seen to, the prosecutor began to outline the Crown's case. She was her spirited self and seemed to have the jury enthralled. At times, even Omar found himself watching her with admiration, but only in regard to her style of delivery.

Sam nudged him in the ribs, stirring him from his musings. 'What the fuck are you doing? Stop nodding your head like—' Sam cut himself short as he saw the prosecutor turn towards him. Her attitude hardened as she directed her words at him.

'... in addition the Crown alleges that the accused, Sam Assaf, also questioned his victim as to her ethnic origins before sexually assaulting her. It is alleged on the night of 12 August at Gosling Park, Greenacre, as the accused led his victim across the park, he asked, "*Are you Australian?*" It is the Crown's view that this kind of provocation, together with the earlier mentioned comments attributed to Mr Farid Hisham, served to humiliate, denigrate and strike fear into the victim, before and after these terrible assaults took place.'

'This fucken bitch has got it in for us, eh?' whispered Sam to Omar. 'Fucken ice queen, mate. She needs a good fucken shafting. Fucken right up the arse, mate. That would make her relax a bit, eh?'

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Day two was exciting for Omar. Belle was in the courtroom. When the boys were led in and saw her sitting near the front, Sam stifled an exclamation. He seemed to reconsider saying anything and simply stared at her face, jeering, challenging her to meet his eyes. She glanced up, met Sam's gaze and then quickly looked at Omar. An expression of disgust crossed her face, as if she had just trodden in vomit, and she turned her face away. She barely looked at Omar and Sam again for the remainder of the trial. This gave Omar a long time to study Belle. It was the first time he had seen her since he had turned and walked away from her in Gosling Park.

She looked very different to the girl he knew. The tight jeans and the sporty tops were gone. Dark trousers, a white blouse and a black suit jacket had replaced the casual clothes. She had also done something to her hair so that it was a few shades lighter—in fact, now she looked like a *real* blonde instead of a bleached blonde. And instead of crimped waves, her hair was dead straight. Or at least that's how it seemed, pulled back in a tight ponytail behind her head. Omar thought that Belle could have passed for a lawyer herself. He spent much of that day observing her as she sat quietly, for the most part expressionless, watching the proceedings.

'It's like she's from the North Shore, eh?' remarked Omar in their holding cell during the afternoon recess.

'If that's the way she wants to play it, fine,' said Sam. 'They'll work out what a lying bitch she is. If we were really guilty of doing something bad, you'd think she'd be spewing. She'd be yelling things out and carrying on. She'd be

wanting blood, mate. She's too cool, way too cool. They're never gonna believe that slut, I can tell ya.'

Omar was not sure what to make of this analysis so he said nothing. Instead he picked up a snack-size tub of yoghurt from the tray of refreshments they'd been given and offered it to Sam.

'Yeah, thanks, bro,' Sam said, accepting the small container. Without warning, he hurled the tub of yoghurt against the cell wall. It burst open with a loud smack, splattering unnaturally white and gloopy curds. Omar was startled and shrank back. Rivulets of yoghurt began to trickle towards the floor, as if the wall was weeping tears of paint.

'Sorry, bro, sorry. Look, I didn't mean that against you, eh? It's just all this bullshit. It's killing me. Mate, cos we're Muslim and all. You know what I mean? They're out to fucken get us. After that fucken New York nine-one-eleven thing, they just want to put suckers like us away. We're not gonna get a fair trial. They're gonna fucken shaft us. They fucken hate cunts like us. It's racial prejudice, that's what it is. They fucken hate us because we're Lebs and we're Muslims.'

Omar thought his brother might have a point, though he and Sam had not been to the mosque for at least five years. The last time they had visited Sam had sworn never to return. 'It's too fucken serious in there, mate. Freaked me right out!' he had said.

And they had never even been to Lebanon. But whenever they had to fill out forms that asked about race and religion, they always wrote *Lebanese* and *Muslim*. It was just what you wrote down. It was what Moma and Baba said to write down. It didn't matter that you were born in Australia. To outsiders they were clearly Lebanese and, what now seemed equally as bad, definitely Muslim. What

else were the dopey cunts in the media going to say when they saw Yasri in her veil? And all those chicks had been young and white. So, now it was Omar and Sam versus the whole country. They did not stand a chance. That bitch in her silver wig was going to shaft *him and Sam* right up the fucken arse.

Instead of becoming dejected, the realisation made Omar feel detached. Things were so far beyond his control he could now switch off from the trial. He did not need to pay attention anymore. He would just turn up and go through the motions. What else could he do? What would happen would happen.

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A few days later Belle gave her testimony. After some warm and encouraging words from the prosecutor and a sympathetic gesture from the judge, she described the events that had taken place at Gosling Park.

‘... so the fat guy, Ramzi, was talking on his mobile a lot, making different calls and telling jokes and laughing. And then we got to this big park that I’d never been to before and Omar parked the car and said this was where they had to pick up the money. They parked the car and that’s when they really started to become sleazy.’ Belle paused here and seemed to quiver a little. She bit on her bottom lip and clutched at the wooden sides of the witness box.

‘In your own time,’ the prosecutor said.

‘They started to get really sleazy in the car. Trying to put their hands on my ... breasts and on my leg.’



‘Please, could you tell us exactly who did what to you while you were waiting in the car?’

‘Well Omar and the other guy, Mick, the one with the really in-built eyes, got out and said they were going to get the money. It all seemed a bit weird. They went and then Ramzi got in the front seat and started trying to y’know ... chat me up, I suppose, but I wasn’t interested in anything he was saying. Then he put his hand on my leg, at the top, right up here on my thigh. And tried to feel my boobs. I was really shocked so I smacked his hand with my mobile phone and told him to ... told him to take his hands off me and that I wasn’t interested in him. He looked kind of angry and then got out of the car and sat on the bonnet. At that stage I was more pissed off than anything.’

‘Can the record show that Miss Campbell has previously identified the person who was introduced to her as Ramzi, as Farid Hisham, from a police line-up. Miss Campbell has also identified the person who was introduced to her as Mick, as Emad Haddad, also in a police line-up. Of course, the jury is already aware that Mr Hisham and Mr Haddad will be tried separately on charges relating to these assaults. Now, sorry, if you’ll be so kind as to continue.’

‘So then Omar and the other guy came back and said they couldn’t find the guy with the money. Then they all had this stupid pretend fight. That’s when I really began to think that it was a set-up. They were pretending to have an argument about the money they were supposed to pick up but I was watching and I saw that they didn’t have their hearts in it. I even saw one of them, he couldn’t help himself, the fat guy, he was smiling when he threatened to beat up Omar. So I knew they were making it all up. And then Omar asked the fat bloke—Ramzi— to go with him and

they were going to leave me alone with the other guy this time, and I said, “No way!””

‘What else did you tell the boys at this point in time?’

‘I said, “Do you think I’m stupid?” I said, “I know what’s going on here!” I told them straight out that I was onto them. I told them that if they tried that stunt again I was going to walk home by myself. I was really disappointed in Omar because the times when we’d gone out before he was sort of a bit dreamy and different and I actually had thought he was nice—’

‘Could you please tell the court how they responded to what you said?’ coaxed the prosecutor. It seemed as if Belle had started to go down the wrong track.

Belle rubbed at her hair behind her ear, as if she was worried that strands might be coming out of place. But Omar could see that her hair was still pulled back as tightly as it had been that morning.

‘Oh yeah. When I said I was going to walk home they said that the area was dangerous and that I had better wait with them or else. I wasn’t sure whether to believe them but it was getting dark and I didn’t really know how to get home from there. It was getting kind of cold too so I sat back in the car. But I kept telling them that I wanted to go home, for them to take me home. This went on for a couple of minutes, me arguing with them and them telling me the story about having to wait for this guy with the money. It was really like they were trying to keep me there, to hold things up. Anyway, then suddenly this white van pulls up and all these guys get out.’

‘How many of them were there?’ The prosecutor had a very concerned, alert look on her face, as if this was the first time she was hearing all this. It was as if she was demonstrating to the jurors how they should grasp each detail.

‘I think there were about five or six of them. They came up to the car, and one of them knocked on the window next to where I was sitting in front. I didn’t want to open the window but everyone in the car was saying, “Open the window, dummy, open the window” so I opened it. The guy stuck his head in and said his name was Ben and that he was Omar’s brother. His face was right up close so I could see that he looked a little bit like Omar. So he starts to chat me up for a while. He asked the fat guy to go ask one of the other guys about a car stereo or something. So Ramzi leaves the car and then Omar did as well. I remember Omar leaving cos his brother said something rude to him ...’

Omar tensed up. He remembered the moment all too well. He was terrified Belle was going to repeat Sam’s comment to the courtroom.

‘So I’m left alone with these guys, Ben and Mick.’

Omar relaxed.

‘So, Ben’s sitting in the back right behind me where I can’t really see his face and he’s chatting me up like he was really desperate to sound cool. And then he pulled my hair. Just lightly at first. I told him to get stuffed and not to touch my hair. And so he kept chatting me up but then said straight out, “*Can I have a head job?*”’

‘What was your response to that question?’ asked the prosecutor with great indignation.

‘I told him to fuck off. Sorry about the language but I was so angry that’s what I said. “Fuck off.” And then he gave my hair a really hard yank. It really hurt, and I said it again—I told him to F off. That’s when he got really angry and called me a fucken slut and then he got out of the car ... and then ... they both got out and they dragged me ...’

Belle sounded as if there were invisible hands grabbing and squeezing at her throat. She paused and looked at the prosecutor, nibbling her lips and fiddling with the buttons of her cuffs.

‘Take a minute, it’s OK,’ said the prosecutor.

Belle did take a whole minute. Each second of her silence intensified the atmosphere in the courtroom. Omar wriggled in his seat and realised he was feeling embarrassed for her.

Then a feverish, crazed sounding voice cut into the air. ‘*KAZAAB! KAZAAB!*  
*THIS GIRL TELLS LIES ALL THE TIME. ALL THE TIME! LIES!*  
*SHARMOOTA! SHE WENT WITH THEM!*’

The throaty cries shocked everyone. The court collectively jumped as if a car had backfired in the room. Belle shook violently and clutched at the dock to steady herself. The judge jumped from his seat and began to thump the bench with his gavel. The prosecutor spun around to see who had interjected, though as her gown swirled this time, no thigh-revealing split was in evidence. Omar and Sam already knew the interjector’s voice. They turned around to see a trembling and red-faced Kamir glaring at Belle. He was shaking his fist in the air. ‘*SHE IS A LIAR, A LIAR,*’ he shouted again.

After a couple of seconds of silence during which time the full resonance of the outburst was absorbed by the court, there erupted a cacophony of shufflings, mutterings, groans and gasps.

‘*SILENCE! QUIET IN THE COURT! I SAID SILENCE!*’ The judge was apoplectic. ‘Mr Assaf! I understand the emotional strain that this has caused for you and your wife ...’ He gestured with his hands towards the media contingent at the back of the court as if to neatly explain away the publicity of the last several

months. 'But by rights I should have you removed from this courtroom immediately and charged with contempt. However, in light of the difficult circumstances and the nature of this case I'll overlook this incident at this time. I can assure you right now, though, if you interrupt proceedings again you will be immediately ejected from this room and charged with contempt of court. Do you understand me?'

With all eyes on him, Kamir was now staring down at the floor.

'Do you understand me?' the judge repeated. His voice had taken on its most threatening tone yet.

The prosecutor was looking at Kamir with an expression of outrage, her hands astride her hips.

'DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?' This time the judge bellowed the question.

'Yes, yes,' said Kamir quietly, maintaining his downward gaze. Beside him, Yasri looked disconsolate. She began to cry quietly, her hands clasping at her black hijab. This set off a big lump in Omar's throat.

'Fucken Jesus, mate!' said Sam in Omar's ear, none too quietly. 'For fuck's sake, this cunt's already got it in for us without Baba fucking it up even more. Shit, mate!'

The judge, who was glowering at Kamir, shifted his vitriolic stare to Sam. Sam stared back at him blankly as if he was simply playing blackjack at Clarence Road.

'Sam Assaf! You will keep your language in this court decent at all times, or you too will be charged with contempt! Is that clear?'

'Sure, yeah, whatever. Whatever you say, Your Honour.' Sam was sneering at the judge as he said this.

‘Miss Campbell. Would you care to resume your testimony now?’

During the interruption, Belle had taken some deep breaths to compose herself but now she began to stammer, not remembering where she had left off.

‘You were describing the moments after the two men alighted from the vehicle.’ The prosecutor was sitting in her seat again, her hands clasped elegantly in front of her.

‘Oh. Oh yeah.’ Belle looked very agitated. ‘So Ben got out ... he got out and he came around the front ... and he opened the door on my side ...’

‘Yes. We appreciate how difficult this is for you. In your own time.’

‘... and he grabbed me really hard, grabbed my hair. He pulled me out of the car by my hair and called out something like, “Yally boys, let’s go”, or something like that. And he dragged me by my hair out of the car. I had no choice. When I say he dragged me out it wasn’t like I was being dragged along the ground—I had to kind of get up because he would have pulled the hair out of my head. It absolutely killed, no-one had ever done that to me before, no-one, not even my brothers when I was a little kid ...’

‘Please go on,’ trilled the prosecutor.

‘Well, then, then some of the others came over and ... and ...’ Belle began to cry again, taking sharp, sniffling breaths in between the sobs. Her skin seemed to stretch more tightly over her face and appeared dappled, as if she was suffering from some kind of rash. Her eyes were red and puffy and now strands of hair were beginning to escape from their tie. It looked as if Belle herself was beginning to physically unravel.

Omar looked at Sam. He too had been engrossed in Belle. Noticing Omar’s look he leant over and whispered, very quietly this time, ‘This is great, mate. I told

you she'd lose it. She's fucken cuckoo, mate. The judge, the jury—everyone's gonna know. She's gone crackers.'

Omar looked back at Belle. The prosecutor had gone to her with tissues and a comforting hand on her shoulder. The judge asked Ms Crown if she would like the court to be adjourned for fifteen minutes. After murmuring with Belle for a few moments, the prosecutor announced that the witness would try and complete her testimony.

Belle took a deep breath and dabbed at some tears. Looking towards the prosecutor she seemed to draw strength and continued: 'So he grabbed me by the hair and said, "Yally boys", or whatever it was and, "Let's go!" and the others came over. Someone else grabbed my arm too, and they dragged me across the park to a spot where there were some concrete tanks and they dragged me behind them where you couldn't really be seen from the street. I could see Omar standing just behind where Ben was and I said something like, "Don't let them hurt me!" or "Don't leave me with these guys", or something like that and he ... he just left me. I'll never forgive him for that. He just left me with them and walked off. He said something about that bullshit story—that he still had to go get the money from his mate. And he just walked off.'

Belle's face had contorted into a grimace as she said this. She took a deep breath.

'They chucked me down on the ground and they were all around me. All I could feel were hands, their hands all over me. They were putting their hands under my top and feeling ... feeling my breasts ... and they put their hands down my pants and felt me all over ... they felt inside of me with their fingers and everything. It hurt. And I was screaming and telling them to fuck off and leave me alone but

they were just laughing and speaking in Lebanese or whatever and it was like I wasn't even there.

'Then they held me down so I couldn't move and there was nothing I could do and they took my pants off and my undies and then Ben, him there ... got on top of me and had sex with me. He raped me while I was lying on the ground and the others were holding me.' Oddly, Belle seemed unemotional now. She was looking at the prosecutor as if she was simply retelling an anecdote that someone had related to her. She paused and took a deep breath as if to try and maintain this calm for as long as possible.

Omar turned to Sam. He was going to whisper something along the lines of 'Bullshit!' for moral support, but he noticed the expression on Sam's face. It was a familiar look. That was the thing. It was the same expression that Sam wore when Omar watched him through the slats of the bedroom cupboard. The look was kind of dreamy and faraway and almost slightly cross-eyed, like he was somewhere deep into himself. Omar realised what it was. It was how Sam looked when he was *fucking*.

The expression was only there for a second before Sam snapped out of it. He looked at Omar and hissed, 'Fuck me! This girl is crackers, mate! I'm telling ya, she wanted it!'

'Yeah, that's just what I was going to say,' said Omar.

Belle was speaking again: ' ... he had sex with me, he raped me for maybe five minutes or ten minutes. He was on top of me and he was being rough and saying filthy things to his mates in Lebanese and in English too, on purpose so that I would hear—that's what it felt like. *So that I would hear*. And all this time I was crying and saying "No" and for them to let me go but they just kept laughing and



watching me get raped and talking amongst themselves like they were down the pub or at the footy.

‘Then he finished and another one of them came up. One of the guys who had been in the van. He pulled his pants down and I didn’t want to look but I could see that he was already ... he was already ... ready. And he said something like, “Now it’s my turn”, and he got on top of me, they were still holding me down, and he got on top of me and he raped me too. I had my eyes open some of the time, and sometimes I had them shut because I was so frightened and I just wanted to block it all out. But once when I had them open I could see Ben standing right there doing up his jeans and looking over and just laughing at me like I was scum, like I was nothing but dirt. And this was while the other guy was raping me. Then another guy, the one with a ponytail, said something in Lebanese to the guy who was on top of me. I don’t know what it was, maybe something sarcastic, I don’t know. He’d been in me ... he’d been raping me for ages it seemed like, but when the ponytail guy said whatever it was to him then he stopped. It was like he couldn’t do it anymore ... *it* had gone down, so he got off me. I sat up too, and then he pushed me away really hard so I hit my head on the concrete tank thing.

‘I was really dazed and then someone else came up behind me and I could feel something being pressed against the side of my head. I turned around and I could see it was a gun. I’d never seen a gun before, in real life. After everything they’d already done to me ... it was so, so shocking. When I saw the gun pointed at my head and ... I was so scared they were going to kill me, I froze. I just couldn’t say anything. I almost couldn’t breathe. I was so completely terrified. He kept pointing the gun at me and said if I told anyone anything about what happened that he would kill me. That I would get shot dead.

‘I didn’t know what to do. There was absolutely nothing I could do. I was just sitting there kind of in shock. And then for no reason, he kicked me in the stomach, really hard! Just out of nowhere. It really, really hurt and I was winded as well. When he did this the others just kept standing around talking and some of them even laughed.’

Belle stopped for a second and stared into space. Then her face seemed to collapse again and she was crying and sobbing, almost uncontrollably. She put her head in her hands. The prosecutor walked over to her and placed an arm around her shaking shoulders for a few moments. She let go and approached the bench.

The prosecutor exchanged a few quiet words with the judge. ‘The court will break for fifteen minutes,’ he announced.

The Corrective Services officers led Omar and Sam out of the courtroom back to their holding cell. On the way Omar managed a quick wave to Kamir and Yasri who both waved back, failing to hide their despondent looks. Kamir’s face no longer contained any of the fighting spirit he had shown earlier. Sam blew a kiss to Salwa, who had arrived mid-morning. She kissed her fingers and returned the gesture with a smile, though Omar thought her lips trembled ever so slightly.

‘She’s a good woman, eh,’ Sam said to Omar as they sat in the holding cell. ‘I swear we’ll go to Temptation Island yet.’

‘Who had that gun? Was it Dabby’s or has someone else got one?’ asked Omar very quietly, remembering the hairy, brutish looking friend of Sam’s. He had never bothered to ask his name. In these circumstances, it was better not to know names.

‘No, it was Dabir’s. One of Ali’s cousins got it for him. I think he got it from a firing range with some false ID. Dabir paid six hundred bucks! This

wouldn't be so bad if those dumb cunts had a brain. We're copping heaps more shit now just because of fucken Dabir and his fucken piece. Anyway, don't talk about it in here no more, bro.'

'Yeah, no worries. I was just wondering, that's all.'

They drank iced coffee from small cartons that had been given to them, and talked about Kamir's outburst.

'I've never seen him look so worked up. Then so sad,' said Omar.

'Nah, not even when I got arrested that time for that damaging property thing.'

'Nowhere near it, eh.'

'Baba must be spewing, mate. All the papers and TV. The fucken government too. What are they doing to us? Those cunts. We're their fucken terrorists! Gives all those dopey wankers out there in their little houses something to be scared of—the cunts in charge can wheel us out any time it suits them.'

Sam stared at his empty carton. He closed the spout and folded down the ridge of cardboard to make a small cube. He stood up, placed it on the ground and brought his heel down heavily onto it. The little cell had acoustics like a bathroom. The resounding POP echoed all the way down the corridor. At the sound of an officer's panicky footsteps, Sam quickly picked up the flattened carton and opened it up again. With his hands cupped around it, he sat there nonchalantly pretending to drink iced coffee as the officer arrived and peered at them through the bars with narrowed eyes.

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Belle continued with her testimony. She looked much less anxious and the smeared mascara around her eyes had been wiped away. It looked like she had applied fresh make up. She had also redone her hair. Omar thought how funny it was that a girl could make herself look attractive again so quickly, after being such a sorry mess only twenty minutes earlier. Belle stood with her back straight and her arms hanging loosely by her sides as the judge re-entered the room.

‘Now, you were telling the court that a gun was pointed at your head and you were then kicked in the stomach,’ said the prosecutor after the usual preliminaries. ‘Would you care to continue from there?’ She looked warmly into Belle’s eyes.

‘Yes, thanks. Well, like I said, he just came out and kicked me in the stomach, for no reason at all. And even though it killed, it hurt really bad, I realised that I had to get out of there. I had to get out of there straight away because I didn’t want to get kicked again, or anything else, and plus I really believed they might kill me.

‘My knickers were still around one foot and I pulled them back up. Then I reached out and found my pants and pulled them on slowly while I was sitting on the ground. My bag was right near me so I reached out and grabbed that too. The boys were all still kind of milling around talking and laughing. I think one of them was actually telling a joke, a dirty joke, in English. They saw me pulling on my pants but they didn’t do anything. I sat there for a minute with my head on my knees and then I just got up and bolted really quickly, heading for the road. I ran as fast as I could. They were chasing me and I was screaming and yelling. As I headed towards the van I realised the guy with the ponytail was sitting in the front seat. He must have gone back to the van while I was putting my pants on but I didn’t notice.

He saw me running and he yelled out something like, “Hey, jump in, there’s a mattress inside!” Then he kind of looked angry and yelled, “Get in the fucking van”. He got out and it looked like he was going to tackle me but I kept running anyway. And then Mr Nielsen, Peter, appeared from around the corner—’

The prosecutor interrupted: ‘Mr Peter Nielsen resides in a block of flats adjacent to Gosling Park and had been out walking his dog during the time of the alleged assaults. He will be called as a witness in this trial and appear in due course. Sorry, do please go on.’

‘Well, I was running and screaming and then Peter came around the corner and I just about ran into him. I was babbling something to him, I can’t remember exactly what but it must have been pretty crazy. He saw the boys were chasing me and stopped. As soon as they saw him they stopped too and the guy with the ponytail and Ben got back into the van. The rest of them ran across the park. I was so happy to see Peter I could have cried. Except I was already crying ...’ Belle looked down and smiled to herself.

The prosecutor coaxed her further: ‘Please tell the court what happened next.’

‘Well, I told Peter what had happened and he was really nice and told me not to worry and took me up to his flat. He calmed me down and gave me some water. But then I felt really scared again knowing that they were out there. I started shivering and crying again. Peter tried to help me and I ended up giving him Zeljko’s phone number and he called him to come and pick me up.’

‘Could you explain to the court who Zeljko is?’ asked the prosecutor, her brow furrowing a little.

‘Oh yeah. Zeljko was my boyfriend at the time. He’s not here anymore. I mean he’s no longer with us. He died last year. In a car accident.’ Belle looked down and bit at her lower lip again. It appeared she might burst into tears once more but then she raised her eyes to the courtroom. ‘But he came and picked me up that night and took me back to my dad’s place. But when we got to my dad’s place he’d had a few drinks and was sitting in front of the telly and I couldn’t even begin to explain to him what happened. It was all too much. I was still in shock or something. So the next day I went to see my mum and I talked to her about it and that’s when we rang the cops. And the next day I got a text message from Omar saying he was sorry and that he hadn’t known that the other guys were going to ... attack me, and that he was sorry and that he’d got into a punch-up with them over it. He asked if he could see me. Again, I couldn’t believe he was serious. After everything that had happened, he thought I would just say, “OK, let’s meet up and hang out at the Square”. I thought he was crazy and I didn’t reply but told the police about it and showed it to them when I made my statement.’

Of all the things that Belle had revealed today, Omar found it most compelling that her boyfriend, Zeljko, had died in a car accident. It saddened him and yet there was a time when he would have wished it to happen.

‘Can you summarise how the attacks made you feel then and also tell the court how they have affected you to this day, to the present time?’ The prosecutor’s tone was the gravest it had been for the whole trial. Her voice was slightly deeper than usual but quite hushed.

‘Like I said, at the time I was terrified. Shocked and hurt, it hurt really bad. I felt like they were treating me like an animal. Or it was more like they were a pack of wild animals and I was some meat. You don’t know what’s it like to have

someone do something like that to you. To use you like that. Just to take you and do something so horrible to you again and again. And then on top of that when I saw the gun pointed at my head I thought I was going to die. It was like the worst nightmare anyone could have. Being trapped and abused and laughed at and then have a gun put up to your head.

‘And the thing is, the thing is now it’s got worse. It’s hard to explain how but it stays with you every day like it’s still happening. I don’t go out anymore and I’m nervous at night time. I have to have every window and door in the house deadlocked before I go to bed. And I have nightmares about that night and see their faces all the time. I go to counselling every week and that’s good, like it feels good to talk to someone about it. But it can’t take away what happened and the memory of it’s always there. All the pain’s inside now and in a way I’m still as terrified though it’s kind of deep inside me. It’s not like I have to scream and yell but it’s still there. There’s nothing I can do to forget about it. I used to have lots of friends but, like I said, I don’t go out anymore and it’s really lonely. And during the day I can’t even go to the Square anymore and hang out because I’m terrified I’ll see some of them up there. I know that not all of them have been locked up yet. It’s bad enough having to see them in here.’ She gestured in Sam and Omar’s direction. ‘I couldn’t take being looked at like that again, laughed at like that again. Like I said, it’s bad enough in this room, but out there in the world, it would just be too much to take. That’s all. I think that’s all. That’s all I’ve got to say.’

Belle stopped and looked down again. There was a slight murmur in the courtroom. Omar looked over at his parents. Yasri’s face was expressionless but Kamir’s face was darkened and he was punching a fist into his thigh with a

monotonous beat. Salwa was staring towards the witness box with an expression of pure hatred.

Sam leant over to Omar. 'I'm fucken glad that's over, mate. I couldn't fucken bear another minute of that. She thinks they're gonna believe that! What was she doing there in the first place? She got into a car with three blokes! Three of youse!'

Belle was excused from the witness box. As she walked back to her seat she stared straight ahead, doing her best to ignore Sam's leering grin and marching caterpillar eyebrows. Omar found himself looking at Belle's blouse, which was exposed beneath her unbuttoned jacket. As she walked to her seat, he noticed a suggestion of the curve of her bust underneath the crisp white material. He remembered the shoplifting day at the Square when he had glimpsed her black bra and seen the smooth white mounds of the top of her breasts and there in the courtroom, even as his freedom lay on the line, he felt a luscious pang of that same sexual excitement.

Belle sat down with her parents and friends. A woman who must have been her mother hugged her and many of her other supporters reached over to pat her on the back, offering a murmured chorus of congratulations. Belle quietly sobbed and nodded as she received this approval from her well-wishers. This went on for what seemed like an interminable length of time but the judge just sat in his seat waiting for the court to quieten down.

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Over the days and weeks of the trial, Omar had slowly realised what was coming and had been gently fending off Sam's rants and raves about how crazy Belle appeared and how the jury could see right through her. Sam had been equally disparaging of the other Crown witnesses such as Peter Nielsen, describing him variously as a racist, a complete junkie bullshit artist, a wanker poser and 'so obviously just wanting to get into that dirty slut's pants' himself. So, regardless of all Sam's assertions Omar was unsurprised when, on the day the verdicts were handed down, the jury found them guilty.

The judge read out each charge followed by the verdict. At first, Sam seemed ready to explode, swearing and cursing under his breath and pumping invisible tennis balls in his hands. However, with each charge and each pronouncement of 'guilty', he became quieter, and seemed almost introspective when the judge said they would be sentenced at a later date.

Afterwards in the holding cell Sam said, 'That's fucken typical, eh? They draw out the whole fucken thing to make it as hard as possible for you. Why the fuck didn't he just give us our sentence now, the stupid cunt?'

Omar stared ahead. He spoke calmly and with an authority that made Sam look at him twice. He said, 'Bro, we ain't seen nothing yet. This is just the beginning. This is just the fucken beginning.'

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Back at Kariong the next day, Colin gave Omar a brief rundown of the situation as it stood.

‘Overall, you’ve been convicted of eleven charges, including two of aggravated rape. Sam has been convicted of a total of twenty-one charges. He’ll definitely go straight to gaol, I can’t put it in any better than that. What he’ll get depends on judge Mulvaney. As you already know he’s notoriously tough so I imagine it could be bad—maybe even as much as fifteen years. You, Omar, also have to accept that you’ll probably be incarcerated for quite some time—however, we’ll do our best to see that you get to spend at least the initial period in a youth detention centre, here at Kariong ideally. Now of course all of this is pending your appeals, which we’ll begin working on straight away. I’m assuming you do wish to appeal the decisions?’

Omar nodded as Colin rambled on about the details. He felt hungry and hoped there would be Domino’s tonight. He did not feel any immediate concern about their sentences. The judge had set a sentencing date for March. It would be weeks before they received their penalties. Anything could happen between now and then.

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Omar spent the next few weeks in Kariong smoking the odd cone of dope and watching TV. He did no exercise and talked little to the other inmates.

His routine was interrupted one day by a frantic call from Yasri, who asked if he was OK. Omar assured her that he was fine. He had only seen her and Kamir the day before. Yasri told them that a stranger had rung the house. ‘They say that both of you get bashed up inside the prison. They said that you hurting very bad. That Sam have a broken skull and attached to the machine in the hospital. We get

very worried and call the prison. But Sam, he is OK. We told the police about this phone call. Then the prison officer, he calls us and say that they move Sam by himself so he can be safe.'

'I'm fine, Moma,' said Omar. 'This place is a breeze compared to where Sam is. This is just a juvenile detention centre. I got friends. Besides, if anyone tried anything here I'd bloody make 'em sorry. Don't worry, Moma.' He continued to assure Yasri that everything was all right.

Later that afternoon a worried looking Pat did tell Omar that he had spoken to someone from the Department of Corrective Services. 'Yeah, mate, someone made a threat to your brother and so we have to put you on special watch here for a little while. It just means that we have to put an extra worker on so there's always someone around wherever you're hangin' out. That's all. It'll all be cool. Oh by the way, we've organised a telephone call to Sam for you later tonight, just so you know he's OK.' He left, presumably to refill his Panthers mug with International Roast.

For whatever reasons, the other guys left Omar pretty much alone, even Trigger, who might have sensed that now was not the time for any goading. Omar realised that at Kariong he had finally earned some respect. Death threats and the prospect of doing real time in a real gaol were no joke.

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A few weeks later Sam made a call to Omar. He said that he had been talking to his lawyer. Apparently, like Colin, she was not confident about their sentencing prospects.

They talked a bit about Salwa. She had been visiting Sam every week, bringing him food, cigarettes and other luxury items.

‘Shit, mate, what with the stuff Baba and Moma bring, I’m living large in here! Are you doing all right over there in the kindergarten?’

‘It’s not so bad. We get to eat takeaways a few times a week. Y’know, pizza, Chinese, that kind of stuff. It’s a bit boring. It’d be nice if there were chicks here as well. Y’know, co-ed, like at school.’

‘Ha ha. That’s a good one. You’re a crack-up, bro! Co-ed! Ha ha! OK, I got to go now. They’re letting me into the exercise yard. I get my own special time in there alone. It’s cool. None of those other stinky bastards around. I’ll talk to ya later. See ya!’

Omar hung up. He had been half serious about the co-ed thing. Why not? They could always have separate sleeping areas. After all, at Kariong you heard about things happening when the inmates’ girlfriends visited. Apparently, one of the guys had got a head job off his girlfriend while some of his mates had distracted the centre workers with a staged brawl. Omar felt envious of whoever that inmate had been. A co-ed detention centre would be just the thing.

The day arrived when their punishment would be revealed. It was a day that Omar had been looking forward to. This was it. At least now they would know what they were up for and exactly when they could get out and go back to their lives. Today they would see the bottom line.

They were marched into the court and took their usual places in the dock. As always, Omar had been very happy to see Sam. Under the shifty eyes of the officers who watched the holding cell they had given each other a quick hug to celebrate the imminent end of the courtroom ordeal.

Now Omar and Sam stood up, slouching, as the judge entered carrying his papers. He sat down at the bench and carefully arranged the documents in front of him. Omar remembered that this was one of Colin's habits too. As the rest of the court took their seats again, Omar happened to make eye contact with the prosecutor. She shot him a short look of triumph. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, as if she was being sporting or perhaps did not want to be seen gloating. With her shapeless black gown and grey wig Omar imagined her as a vulture. He thought of her flying high above the city skyline looking down in greedy anticipation as his and Sam's bodies gave their final twitches.

Omar noticed that many of the seated reporters were straining for a better view of him and Sam. During the trial a court artist had been given a good seat at the front. Sam had put on quite the show for the artist, pulling faces and baring his teeth in vampire impersonations. Omar had seen enough of news reports to know that the artists' impressions of the accused were never very flattering. He suspected the drawings would contain bloodshot devil's eyes and swarthy five o'clock

shadows worthy of convicted gang rapists. *Lebanese gang rapists*. He supposed the artists had to make it interesting, fun even. *Give them what they want*. He assumed the reporters had to do their jobs in much the same way.

He looked around the courtroom. Belle was there with her support group of parents, relatives and friends. Her father narrowed his eyes as he saw Omar looking over. As usual, Belle looked anywhere except at the dock. Omar saw Shayna, Carol and Suzie, also waiting expectantly. He could not see the stocky figure of Shayna's boyfriend. Omar suspected that he had been banned from the court. Or maybe he had just realised he would be much better off without her.

The judge began his sentencing remarks with some praise regarding the courage the girls had shown during each of the trials. The prosecutor could not help herself. She turned around and beamed at them. *That's my girls!* she seemed to be saying. Though he knew it was absurd, Omar felt a pang of resentment. What about him and Sam? More to the point, what about Moma and Baba? It took bloody courage to face this pack of hyenas every morning for weeks on end! Knowing that every cunt in the press gallery wanted your head on a stick. Not for anything that you had done but because of *who* you were.

Because you were the parents of MUSLIM LEBANESE GANG RAPISTS. The thought of this injustice caused Omar to give a dry, involuntary sob. The judge leaned forward and peered over his glasses at Sam before beginning to read from the documents in front of him:

'The offender was the ringleader of a vicious gang of rapists who, on three different occasions, raped four young women. He and his gang spread terror in Sydney in August 2000 just before the beginning of the Olympic Games ...'

‘What the fuck has it got to do with the Olympics?’ hissed Sam to Omar.

Omar shrugged.

‘The gang was made up of various young men, perhaps up to fourteen in number. Some of the gang members are still at large. Those who have been apprehended and brought to justice thus far were either identified by the victims or entered into guilty pleas because evidence had been found to connect them with the offences.

‘The gang members used mobile phones to carefully plan and coordinate their activities before each attack. In each instance the victims were treated with substantial cruelty and callous disregard. It is the responsibility of this court to protect society from the possibility that the perpetrators of these offences will enter into these activities again.

‘For these crimes, for which he has been proven guilty, I hereby impose on Mr Sam Assaf the following sentences: for count one of sexual assault in company there will be seven years of imprisonment to be served concurrently with counts two, three, four ...’

The judge itemised each of the counts that Sam had been found guilty of and applied a sentence for each. As he progressed the numbers seemed to add up to what was like a hundred years, but Omar had a vague idea that the word *concurrent* meant that each sentence would be served at the same time as the other ones. He was sure it meant you were locked up for much less time than you had been given.

Ripples of restlessness seemed to be moving through the courtroom.

‘... the end result of this is that Sam Assaf will serve a head sentence of fifty-five years, with a non-parole period of thirty-eight years. The head sentence

will conclude on the eleventh of February 2056 and his non-parole period will conclude on the eleventh of February 2040—’

There was a collective gush of emotion. People could no longer contain themselves. Someone from Belle’s support group let out a whoop of joy. Another person even attempted to start a round of applause. There were hugs and cheers. The prosecutor, however, was looking intently at the judge, nodding her head and willing him to continue. The judge called for silence, and to nobody in particular shot out his customary threats of ejection and contempt charges.

When the noise had abated, he looked at Sam and continued. ‘In nearly two decades on the bench I have never come across a sexual assault case as sinister and distressing as this one. It’s clear to me that Sam Assaf was the leader of the pack. He is clearly a liar, a bully and a coward. He is cruel and mean and a menace to any civilised society. He is the worst of all offenders and throughout this trial has not shown a shred of remorse. He has conducted himself as if the proceedings were a joke—’

‘I’M INNOCENT!’ Sam screamed. ‘I REMAIN MY INNOCENCE UNTIL THE DAY I DIE, YOU CUNT!’ Omar put his arm on his brother’s shoulder. Sam shook it off and pumped his hands open and closed in impotent fury. An officer stepped forward as if to grab him but he had said his piece. He hung his head forward as if trying to comprehend the numbers contained in the sentence.

‘This is the kind of outburst that typifies your utter disregard for your victims and for the laws of this country. I will now read the sentence for Mr Omar Assaf ...’



Omar was not listening as he looked at his brother. From the way his fists were clenched Sam was still agitated but his face gave the impression that he had withdrawn somewhere inside his own skin. His eyes were downcast and still.

Omar said, 'It's OK, bro. Those lawyers will sort out our appeal. They can't do that to you. Don't worry, bro, it's going to be all right, eh?' If Sam heard, he showed no sign of it.

The judge called the court to order and then turned his gaze to Omar. 'The court has established that Sam Assaf was the ringleader of these terrible crimes. However, there can be no doubt that Omar Assaf was the lure or the bait for the traps that were set for these defenceless victims. He enticed a young woman, who had been a friend for two months, into going for a ride with him but then transported her to five or six men, including his brother Sam, who were clearly intending to rape her. After the assault and despite being threatened with a gun this extraordinarily brave and determined girl—' He paused to give Belle an admiring glance and then refixed his gaze on Omar—'managed to escape from her captors with the help of a bystander who had come across her predicament. And yet, within days Omar Assaf had the gall to attempt further communication via a text message and to request forgiveness from her as if the events that had occurred were simply trivial matters. Needless to say those requests were refused.

'On two different occasions he lured three other girls to similar fates. He is a vicious, cowardly bully—in addition to being a rapist. Like his brother, he is a menace to civilised society, which must be protected from him. It is hard to believe young men brought up in modern Australia could behave like such wild animals ...'

The judge droned on: ' ... and for count fifteen the court imposes a sentence of fourteen years to be served concurrently with the sentence for count fourteen.

Both sentences will be partly cumulative with sentences for counts one and two. The consequence of this is that Omar Assaf will serve a head sentence of thirty two years with a non-parole period of twenty years. The head sentence will conclude on the second of January, 2033, and his non-parole period will conclude on the second of January, 2021. The sentences shall be served in an adult prison.'

The numbers whirled around in Omar's head. They were space-age numbers written in a space-age font. 2021? 2033? He had read you would be able to buy holidays to the moon by that time. Surely he could not be going to gaol for that long? They could not lock up a kid for that long. And the judge had said it would be an adult gaol. Omar briefly thought about the implications of this. Then in a reflex act of self-preservation he switched off the thought.

He would get out on good behaviour long before 2021, for sure. But wait. That was what a non-parole period meant, and the old cunt had said that *that* was in the year 2021. It was like calculus all over again. He felt pressure behind his eyes and screwed up his face as he tried to mould this equation into a shape he could reckon with. There was no answer and no release.

The court responded to Omar's sentence with only slightly less celebration than they had to Sam's. There were some hoots and yells like you might hear at a tennis tournament. Here and there heads bobbed as people leant towards each other in muffled discussion of the sentences.

Sam continued to stare straight down in front of him. Omar turned and saw Kamir looking at them. He raised a clenched fist at his youngest son. Omar smiled at him. This was not happening. This judge could go and get fucked. Omar smiled because he had to. What else could he do? He clenched his fist and waved it back at Kamir.

Immediately after the sentences were delivered Omar was taken back to the holding cells. The court officer told him he would begin his sentence in an adult prison the next day. When he arrived back at Kariong, Omar went straight to the recreation room and sat in front of the television. There were five or six inmates in the room. Omar did not say anything about what the judge had given him—or rather, taken away. The vacant expression on his face did not change when an hour later he and Sam led the six o'clock news.

Around the room there were exclamations and sharp intakes of breath at the incomprehensible length of the sentences. Halfway through the item Omar was surprised to see Colin's face appear on the screen. Up until now, Colin had made no comment to the media.

'I believe that the sentence was manifestly excessive and at the very least the younger brother, Omar Assaf, should be allowed to spend the first two years of his sentence in a juvenile facility where he might, amongst other rehabilitative activities, be afforded the opportunity to undertake a weights program to give himself an even chance in adult prison,' said Colin, without blinking or appearing to take a breath.

Omar was ashamed to have these implications broadcast on national television. He felt like he had somehow been pushed into even deeper realms of humiliation. That cunt Colin was supposed to be on his side. This news report seemed to be going on forever. Were they going to spend the whole bulletin talking about Omar and Sam?

‘It was the sort of sentence the community expects,’ said the Premier, looking very grave and at the same time exceedingly satisfied. It was as if the Premier had passed the sentencing judgement himself. To Omar he resembled a python that had swallowed a dog, or even a child. The face might look the same—innocent enough— but further down the body, there would be no mistaking the huge bulge.

‘I hope he rots in gaol,’ said the Leader of the Opposition in his deepest tough-guy voice. He made other gruff, belligerent noises and though he was mostly referring to Sam, Omar felt just as persecuted.

‘COCK SUCKING PARASITES!’ someone yelled at the screen. ‘FUCKEN ARSEHOLE *HIPPICRITS!*’ Omar looked up in surprise. It was Trigger. He was leaning against the doorframe with his hands jammed into his hoodie pockets. He did not attempt eye contact with Omar. Omar realised that Trigger’s trial date was fast approaching. Now he was probably shitting himself.

Omar turned back to the screen as the Commissioner of Police mouthed yet another predictable response. The newsreader concluded by saying that Sam would be eligible for release in 2040 and Omar in 2021. The now familiar numbers seemed to wash over Omar but in the recreation room there was another collective intake of breath. Nothing at all was said during the ad break. Omar endured the heavy atmosphere for a few minutes, sitting very still and staring at the screen. Then he got up. Doing his best to avoid any of the other inmates’ eyes, he shuffled to his room where he stayed for the remainder of his last night in Kariong.

The next morning, after being given a few minutes to say an awkward goodbye to Manal and Nazar, Omar was transported to Silverwater Correctional Centre. It was a minimum-security prison in the same complex as the maximum

security Metropolitan Remand and Reception Centre where he had spent one night after being arrested, and where Sam had stayed for the duration of the trials. Sam was no longer there. After the sentencing, they had taken him straight to the maximum-security prison at Long Bay.

Omar arrived at Silverwater feeling tense and glued up inside. The day before, Sam had given him some advice as, escorted by their respective guards, they parted ways after the sentencing hearing: ‘Just make sure you get onto some good Leb boys inside,’ called Sam. ‘Don’t take no shit from no-one. If anyone gives you shit, tell ’em they’d better watch out for a bullet when they least expect it, eh? When they least expect it!’

Sam’s words rang in Omar’s ears as he was processed into Silverwater. However, even Dabir’s gun would not have helped Omar feel more secure now. He was terrified that the adult inmates might recognise him as being the subject of an article on page four of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, headlined: ‘Puny Brother A Cowardly Bully’. One of the guards had laughingly handed the paper to him in the back of the transfer van. It had been opened to that page. The article featured quotations from the judge and repeated Colin’s humiliating comments. Omar had never before felt such a mix of disparate emotions. Here was the most profound sense of insult combined with a deep, stomach-knotting fear.

After processing, he was immensely relieved to discover he would not have to share a cell. Most of the other prisoners shared their cells but in consideration of his age, Omar was given a small cell of his own with the same basic facilities as those at the remand centre.

According to Sam’s instructions, Omar eventually planned to make alliances with some of the Lebanese inmates. However, he decided his initial survival

strategy would be not to look at anyone and certainly to avoid talking to anyone who did not talk to him first. In light of today's newspaper article, it might be a good idea to let the publicity of their case blow over before he tried to make any new friends.

He looked back to his time at Kariong and thought how it was like a little country town where everybody knew his name. In comparison, Silverwater was a vibrant, teeming city. There were suburbs here that Omar would never see, faces he would never meet. As at Kariong there were racial and class divides but in Silverwater the distinctions were sharper. Even within the ethnic families there appeared to be an enforced pecking order. If you were seventeen, short, unconnected and had skinny arms, you started at the very bottom. The implications of this were not lost on Omar but he would immediately force any shadowy possibilities from his mind. He told himself that there were other Leb boys here and soon enough he would surely have the security of friends.

Omar felt like life could not be half as bad here as it now was for Sam. Recently, Baba had rung with the news that his brother had been transferred to a brand new gaol in Goulburn. The authorities had failed to inform the Assafs that Sam was being moved. Yasri and Kamir had turned up at Long Bay for a regular visit to be told that Sam was not there but two hundred kilometres away.

The new gaol boasted the tightest security in the country. Omar remembered reading an article in Kariong about the new facility's grand opening. It was as if the government was opening another Bankstown Square or Chatswood Mall. The papers had dubbed the gaol SuperMax. Being held in SuperMax was a notorious honour reserved for the state's most dangerous inmates.

However, it seemed Sam had been sent to SuperMax for his own safety. The Long Bay prison authorities had discovered that three inmates were going to obtain a syringe and coerce some infected blood from an HIV positive prisoner. Then, so the story went, they were going to ambush Sam (probably when he least expected it) on his way from the protection area to a medical check-up. There, they were going to hold him down and inject the infected blood into his veins. The thought made Omar want to cry. He imagined the sight of his brother being held down, twisting and fighting. It made him choke and then want to scream out loud. Imagine doing that! Imagine having that done to you! *It would be a bloody life sentence!* Ha ha! Omar appreciated the irony of this thought. As if Sam did not have a life sentence already.

Someone had overheard the three inmates talking about their plan and ratted to the prison authorities. That was when they decided to take Sam to SuperMax. It was just so much further for Yasri, Kamir and Salwa to travel. Omar thought the authorities should have placed the three conspirators in SuperMax. After all, they were the ones who were planning a murder.

Omar and Sam spoke on the telephone a few days after the transfer.

‘Those fucken cunts, mate! Don’t worry! I would have got that needle off them and shoved a blast of AIDS up each of their arses! Now I’m stuck here, miles away, and they got me in even worse protection than before—‘non-association’ they call it here. Anyhow, I got a bigger cell than in Long Bay. It’s got the usual—TV, dunny, shower. But the TV is new, and the exercise yard is better up here so that’s all right, I guess. Twenty-two mill, this place cost, did you know? The guard told me. I’m in the High Risk Management Unit. H-R-M-U. *Harm-You* they call it! What a psycho fucken lockup! That’s what it takes to keep a guy like me down!’

After the phone call, it was nearly time for lockdown. Omar went back to his cell and stretched out on his bed like he used to at home. He thought about Sam's new life in SuperMax and tried to comprehend what twenty-two million dollars could buy in the way of razor wire, cameras and metal doors. He made an involuntary murmuring sound to himself and in his half-conscious mind agreed with his brother. It took a lot to keep a guy like Sam down.

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Omar was in his cell listening to the ABC news on the clock radio that Kamir had brought in for him. He heard a report beginning with the all too familiar, '*Notorious gang rapist, Sam Assaf ...*' This time Sam had earned a disciplinary reprimand after carving *Salwa Rahme* into his right arm and *Sal* into his left. He had done it with the serrated edge of a plastic dinner knife and the wounds had become swollen and infected. Sam had apparently told the guards that the pain was nothing because he would love Salwa until the day he died. Omar thought it was a very romantic gesture, although he was concerned about Sam's health. He wondered if Salwa thought it romantic.

What would Belle have made of such an act? That is, if Omar had carved *Belle Campbell* and *BC* into his arms? Of course, it would be a ridiculous thing to do now, but back then, way back then before ... when they were both friends ... well he didn't really know her well enough then, did he? They had not really been in love, had not even really been boyfriend and girlfriend—Omar caught himself and scowled into the air. This was as stupid as when he wanted to wave to her in court. Why did he keep having these dumb thoughts about Belle?



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*KEEP YOUR FUCKEN MOUTH SHUT!* It was one of the first things you learnt inside. Omar found that this unwritten rule complemented his strategy for survival. In the white fluorescent interiors of Block C's meals and recreation area, Omar found himself hugging the walls and trying to keep out of sight. He ate his meals alone sitting at the end corners of the long round-edged tables, and hovered at the fringes in the TV viewing area. Omar would always head back to his cell long before the call for evening lockdown, avoiding the peak-hour rush down the corridor. The less you spoke the better. Keeping quiet allowed him to withdraw, to go deeper inside himself. After all, it was the only direction in which he could run.

Being in a minimum-security environment did not rule out the possibility of harm. Because of his age and size Omar was deemed an 'at risk' prisoner, albeit in the lower category. But the sense of menace was palpable. On a few occasions, Omar had been the recipient of some catcalling and what he thought were indecent suggestion from other prisoners. He did his best to minimise his time in the yard and spent as much of his free time in the comparative safety of the recreation room.

After the first few weeks had passed without incident, Omar was allocated work in the prison library. The wardens had decided this was an appropriately sheltered place for him to begin. The job suited him. It was quiet and away from the frenetic energy of the other prisoners. Since coming to Silverwater, he found himself getting quite tired during the day. It was as if all he wanted to do was curl up and sleep in his cell. After the glare and publicity of the last year, he was unsurprised that he felt the urge to isolate himself.

The job was quite easy—the main tasks were to catalogue new and donated books and magazines and re-shelve returns that came back piled high on trolleys from the cell runs. Another more experienced prisoner who worked in the library undertook that job. Cataloguing the incoming magazines and newspapers afforded Omar many opportunities to consume news of the outside world that he had left so far behind. He received a wage for his work—\$2.50 per day. Despite the dismal rate, he was altogether surprised that they would be so civilised as to pay him a wage. After the vitriol that he and Sam had endured from the media, and the sentencing comments from the judge, Omar had come to believe that once criminals like them were sentenced and deposited inside, the prison institution would own them entirely.

After some time Omar began to realise that, as in the outside world, so too in prison was your place in the social order largely aligned with your place in the economic system. Of course, in Silverwater, the inmates' consumer choices were heavily constrained and since all basic items that were necessary for survival were supplied by the state, the three items of any consequence that could be traded were drugs, cigarettes and protection. In fact, the prison economy was 'really all about drugs,' according to Leny, the first and only Lebanese inmate Omar had thus far acquainted himself with.

Leny had run his own property development company. He was doing a minimum two-year sentence for fraud, tax evasion and trading while insolvent. He told Omar that years ago he had started training as a doctor but left university to work and help support his family. He had started in the building industry and worked hard. Just over ten years later he had his own company, an S class AMG Mercedes and a house in Rose Bay. Then, of course, things had started to go wrong.

Leny was very different to Omar's friends back in Greenacre. For one thing, when he had to write his religion on a form, he would put Christian, though, like Omar, he had never really believed in a God. Leny spoke English like a skip and, strangest of all, was known to do weird yoga moves in the exercise yard. But he was Lebanese and swarthy and hairy enough for the rest of the population to apportion him his share of blame for September 11. Leny had been in Silverwater for one year now and knew enough about the running of the place to give Omar some good advice.

'The way I see it is that a bloke like you has got a few choices open to him. You get in with the other Leb boys and take your chances. You get into the dealing, get onto some smack or speed. It just might make the time go more quickly. The boys will look after you but you'll have to fight their battles with them. It's one in, all in. Serious shit. You'll have to arm up—make yourself an ice-pick or a shiv, whatever—take the chance of getting seriously hurt.

'*Or*, you can go it alone and try and stand up for yourself. Earn yourself some respect so that you can walk tall, buy and sell what you want when you want, without anyone else having a slice—but to do that you have to fight every bastard who crosses you, big or small, until they get sick of hassling you. They'll all eventually have a go at you, the Kooris, the Vietnamese, the Maoris, the Aussies, even the Turk boys and the other Lebs—whoever. No offence, mate, but I'm not too sure how you'd go with that ...

'*Or*, you could pay for protection. Hand your wages over to one of the top boys—you'll work out who they are—and they'll look after you, most of the time, anyway. I mean, the word would be out that you're with so and so but somebody will always take the chance to bail you up, rob you of your ciggies, your shirt, a

chocolate bar, whatever. Or worse ... you know what I'm talking about, don't you, man? It's not a great way to live and you're basically at the bottom of the pile, not far above the rock spiders.

'Still, this is only minimum security and there is one other option. Do what I'm doing—do your time on your own. Just put your head down, go about your business, don't try and buy or sell anything for a profit, take the few knocks that'll come your way, and just keep on keeping on. You keep your mouth shut and you keep to yourself. You just forget about time. You don't even think about the day you get out. Now, I know that might be hard when you're facing as many years as you've got, but you have to have a plan. It's just like life on the outside. You have to have a plan.'

Omar was grateful for Leny's advice. It seemed a little more practical than telling potential enemies to 'expect it when you least expect it'. He already knew that 'doing his own time' was the course of action he had naturally taken. Sometimes he thought it would have been nice to be part of a gang or a crew for the extra protection. But he soon realised that Leny was not exaggerating when he said being part of a gang entailed the possibility of organised attacks and retribution.

One day during recreation time Omar saw a Koori inmate walking through the yard by himself. One second the man was sauntering along smoking a cigarette, then next, WHACK! Two Asian inmates had marched up to him and started to brutally whip him with what appeared to be long football socks half-filled with rocks or pavers or something equally heavy. The Nips were all over him for less than two minutes before they loped away, calmly, their weapons hanging loosely at their sides like Christmas stockings. The Koori was left semi-conscious, bleeding and twitching on the yard floor until some guards came and dragged him away.

Omar found out later the attack was payback for a similar assault on an Asian by Lebanese inmates. Kooris and Lebs were friends inside and often worked together, so the Nips had got to one of the Kooris for revenge. In this case, the violence was related to a long-running dispute over some stolen methamphetamines. Omar had also heard that in Silverwater, besides being allied with the Lebs, some Kooris even converted to Islam but he had yet to meet any.

He also found out later that the weapons he had seen were indeed football socks. However, the solid, heavy objects stuffed inside them were not rocks or bricks but cans of baked beans smuggled from the kitchen. The unlucky Koori had been *canned*.

At meal times from then on, Omar could never look at baked beans again without wondering whether they had been responsible for bashing in some poor bastard's skull before finding their way back to the prison kitchen and his plate.

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One dim morning in the library Omar opened the *Sydney Morning Herald* to find yet another headline about Sam: 'RAPE LEADER'S MUM BANNED FROM PRISON'.

By now Omar was used to press and TV reports about him and Sam. It was a twisted version of celebrity. You were really famous except that everyone hated your guts. Usually the news items were a *beat-up*. Colin, who was still advising him on the progress of his appeal, had introduced him to this term and it was one that Omar liked. The pain of constantly hearing bullshit about yourself and your brother in the news was like being routinely beaten up. In fact, it was worse. It was like

being *canned*. Most of the time, it seemed as if the politicians and the media were just looking for an excuse to sink in the boot.

Not long ago an opinion piece in the Daily Telegraph had contained the lines: ‘I am very pleased with the idea of Sam Assaf spending the next fifty years in a maximum-security prison being chased around by a large hairy inmate who likes being called Dorothy ...’. Omar was not sure if this was quite what was meant by a *beat-up*, but the article nevertheless inspired in him a desire for vengeance on behalf of his brother. If only some of those cunt politicians and journalists could feel what it was like to be *canned* themselves.

Sometimes, such as today, there would be some real news—that is, some new news. Omar wondered what Sam had done to bring on a visiting ban. The day after his birthday too! He scratched at the skin on his stomach as he began to read:

*Mrs Yasri Assaf, mother of the gang ringleader sentenced to 55 years’ jail for three pack rapes, has been banned from visiting her son for two years. Her son, Sam Assaf, who turned 21 yesterday in an isolation cell at ‘Super-Max’, the state’s highest security gaol at Goulburn, has received a one-month ban on visitors.*

*The bans were imposed by the Department of Corrective Services after Mrs Assaf was caught trying to smuggle two letters out of the prison ...*

Two years! Omar put his head in his hands for a minute before forcing himself to read the rest of the article. The upshot was that security cameras had caught Sam handing Yasri two letters that he had written to Salwa. Yasri had hidden

them in her socks but had later been ‘challenged’ by prison officers who had been watching her via the cameras. There was a surprising bit:

*What alarmed Corrective Services chiefs and placed them on a high security alert was that Sam Assaf had drawn two detailed maps in one of the love letters.*

*One drawing showed his cell and its sparse furnishings and the other was a floor plan of surrounding locations, including the courtyard where he exercises ...*

Omar suspected that Sam was just trying to show Salwa what his day-to-day life was like. He knew Sam was not so stupid as to think that he could escape from SuperMax. Sam was the one who always went on about the tight security—twenty-two million dollars’ worth of tight security. Sam knew he could not escape.

Omar remembered a newspaper article he had read in Kariong about the opening of SuperMax. It had been a two-page spread that featured a detailed colour map showing the layout of the cells, exercise yards and other areas of the complex. If a newspaper could print a map like that, how could the prison authorities say that some stupid drawings in a love letter would seriously help Sam to escape? The drawing of his cell must have been for Salwa. After all, since Sam had been moved to SuperMax she had only been able to visit him once a fortnight. Now she could not see him for a whole month. And two years was going to kill Yasri. Omar thought his mother could not survive two years without seeing her elder son.

The library phone rang and was answered by the supervising prison officer. Omar had to report to the office immediately. The governor wanted to see him. That

was strange. He had not met the governor before. It occurred to him that something bad might have happened to Yasri. He tried not to panic.

Omar went to the administration wing and was let through by a guard. He waited on a plastic chair outside the governor's office for ten minutes before the receptionist told him to go in.

The governor was sitting at his desk, pen in hand, working on a document. He was a big man with grey hair and an enormous paunch, which was wedged tightly against the desk as he worked. He was underlining words, making notes in the margins and crossing out whole paragraphs with bold, noisy strokes.

'Sit down, Omar,' he said, not looking up. 'Give me a minute. I just need to finish rewriting this release. Bloody clowns in Public Affairs can't string a sentence together between them.'

The governor scratched and fiddled for a few more minutes before signing the document with a flourish. He leant back in his chair and thoughtfully surveyed the prisoner before him.

'Shit, there's not much to you, hey?' he said gruffly but with some warmth. 'Aren't they bloody feeding you in there? Looks like you've lost a bit of weight since you came in. I've only ever seen you moping about on the closed circuit screen. When you got in you looked bigger. Or is it just that our food's not spicy enough for you? Ha ha. OK, let's get straight to the point. I'm not sure whether you're aware of this but there's been a serious breach of Corrective Services regulations on the part of your mum and your brother. In short, your mum was caught trying to smuggle out letters, perhaps some sort of escape plan, from SuperMax—oh, you've heard, have you?' He paused as he saw Omar nodding. 'Well the long and the short of it is that they've given her a two-year ban.'



‘Yeah, I know,’ said Omar. ‘I was just reading about it up in the library. I work in the library.’

‘Oh well, that’s good then ... well. Gosh, mate, you seem to be taking it very well.’

‘It’s going to be hard for my mum. Sam’s the eldest, you know. What do you want me to say? It’s bad enough for both of them already. Now he can’t even get a visit from his own mother for two years. And for a whole month they banned anyone else from visiting him too. That’s going to be hard on our father and Sam’s girlfriend.’

‘You were saying you read about this in the paper? From your demeanour, I gather it only mentioned your brother?’

Omar nodded.

‘Yes, I suppose he is the notorious one. Well, I need to tell you that the ban on your mum applies to all Correctional Services facilities in New South Wales. Your mum is no longer allowed to visit *you* either ... for two years, that is. Of course, your dad can still come. The ban doesn’t affect him here. So that’s that, then. Sorry, mate, but that’s the way it is. The department has to demonstrate that it’s serious about enforcing regulations ... OK. Please shut the door on your way out.’

The governor picked another document from his in-tray and began making marks on it. Omar rose and walked to the door. He felt sick. While waiting for the governor to see him, he had been thinking about how he would try extra hard when Yasri next came to visit. He would have to make up for her not being able to see Sam. He would pretend to be happy by cracking jokes and talking about his job in

the library. Now he could not even do that for her. Now she had been given a sentence of her own. For what? This was really going to kill her.

Omar went back to his cell for the rest of the day. He tried to forget about the news but the awareness of this new level of isolation continued to torment him. As he imagined life for the next two years without Yasri, it crossed his mind that all this could have been avoided if he had never met Belle. He felt a fit of anger but almost as soon as the feeling hit him, he knew it to be unfair. If they, the boys, had just left *all* those sluts alone, they would not be in this mess, would they? It was a difficult thought to stomach. Whether you believed it was a crime or a root, worth a life sentence or maybe just a few years, the idea that all of this could somehow have been avoided, that he, Sam and all the boys could have contributed to this terrible situation in some way, was both terrifying and comforting at the same time.

In his cell that night he cried softly for a good fifteen minutes before falling into a leg-twitching, sweat-soaked sleep.

The next day Omar managed to get Sam on the phone. Sam seemed tired and not willing to talk about it. Finally, he confirmed what Omar had thought: 'They were just drawings so that she could see where I live, bro. Just so she can imagine being with me, y'know? Imagine how hard this is for Salwa. Now it's ten times worse. I've put Moma in it. I shouldn't have asked her to take the letters out of there for me. I shouldn't have asked her. I should've just posted them ...'

Omar warmed to Sam's despondency. It was a rare moment of frankness. He tried his best to be supportive though he was frightened that Sam might collapse entirely. 'It's all right, bro. It'll be cool. It's not forever. We can still talk to Moma on the phone. We can still see Baba whenever he comes to visit.'

The unusual display of vulnerability was all too brief. 'Fuck those cunts. I'll stick a fucken bomb under 'em,' Sam said. 'I'll have those fucken screws whacked. Every one of those cunts. I know blokes who would do it for nothing ... do it for fun.' Then he began to ramble about Farid and Emad and how they were sucking up to the authorities and were probably getting special treatment and what he would do to those dogs if he ever saw them again. He spat curses at the media for turning him into a devil. He promised he would have a long memory, and a long list of names, no matter how old he was when he got out. A few minutes later, when their telephone time had elapsed and they had said their goodbyes, Omar was in a much better frame of mind.

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Two weeks later, Sam was in the news again.

***GANG RAPIST'S HORROR DRAWINGS OF WOMAN WHO  
STUCK BY HIM***

*Convicted serial rapist Sam Assaf has turned on his once loyal girlfriend and drawn pictures of her being sexually violated and executed with a machine gun.*

*The five drawings found in Assaf's maximum security cell at Goulburn Jail's SuperMax have horrified prison officers because of their images of violence and sexual depravity.*

Omar didn't believe this was true. It had to be bullshit. This was the media inventing all sorts of crap again, to make the Assaf boys look bad. He read through the article. Apparently, there were a few different cartoons, though they were not printed in that edition of the paper. One cartoon supposedly showed a soldier firing a machine gun into a woman while some other blokes were gang banging her. Another one was said to portray a woman, by all accounts Salwa, lying on a couch with a long line of guys forming a queue. A man stood over her saying, 'Hurry up there's 50 others waiting! Make sure you wear a condom, she might have AIDS!'

And yet another was supposed to have shown Salwa being fucked by a dog and also being tricked into drinking urine from a glass. In a sidebar, the newspaper described each illustration under separate headings: '*VIOLENT, VILE, DEPRAVED, JUVENILE*'.

Omar wondered why he never seemed to read anything about other prisoners. Were he and Sam the worst criminals in New South Wales? Surely there were serial killers and other—he hated using the term—rapists they could write about? There never seemed to be anything about Farid, Ali or Emad. He knew they were in Long Bay. Also, why did the prison authorities have to release the cartoons to the newspapers? How would Salwa feel when she read about them?

For that matter, in his whole life Omar had never seen anyone else's mother have their picture printed in the paper, being shown visiting her son in prison. Yasri had been photographed sitting with Sam during the letter incident that resulted in her two-year ban. The newspapers had been given stills from the prison security cameras. Why? Omar thought the cameras were there for security, not for the news.

Omar tried to shrug off the latest insults and cast his mind to the cartoons themselves. He could not understand it. Sam said he loved Salwa. She had stuck by

him through all of the trials and had even told the newspapers that Sam would never rape anyone because 'he wasn't a sexually deprived human being'. Omar was impressed when he realised the implications of her statement. That was a big admission for a young Lebanese girl to make in a newspaper. Omar wondered what her parents would have put her through after reading that. He had felt even more respect for Salwa from that point on. Sam, however, had never mentioned it.

Later that evening Omar rang Sam at SuperMax to ask him about the cartoons. After some delay, Omar was put through to speak to his brother. Apparently, that day SuperMax had received many calls from journalists wanting to quiz Sam about his newfound talent for illustration.

'What a fucken laugh, eh?' said Sam to Omar. 'They've gone ape-shit, mate, the stupid cunts!'

'What about Salwa, though? I thought you were getting married and all that. Y'know, she stuck up for you and everything.'

'Hey, bro, haven't you heard? I'm not getting out of here for a while, mate, and last time I checked they don't let you have weddings in SuperMax. She's better off on her own. Fucken cow. Can't talk to her, can't screw her. Better off breaking up with her. Dumb bitch. Did you hear what she said about me when they told her about the drawings? It was on the radio news at three o'clock. They said she called me a piece of shit and said, "I couldn't care less about him". Ha! That chick was so in love with me it's not funny, mate. She was into me deep! Not as deep as I got into her though! Ha ha. But she'd fucken do anything for me. Anyway, the fucken screws and dumb cunt reporters fell for it completely, didn't they! Fucken all dancing around like they've got something else on me! Dopey fucken cunts! Why do you reckon I fucken drew the stupid pictures in the first place? The screws are

probably listening to this phone call now for the next juicy thing they can tell the papers about. Arseholes, mate. The lot of them. All I got to do is blow a fart and it's on the TV news, mate. Wait until they see what I've got for 'em next! They wanna play games with me, well they'd better...' Sam rambled on about his next move.

Omar thought he understood. How would anyone else react to being Public Enemy Number One? Still, Omar was perturbed by how Salwa might feel about all this. Also, when Salwa and Sam were together, it seemed like there was some hope for Sam and by default for Omar too. Omar felt a seed of irritation germinate within him. Sam did not know how lucky he was. He suspected that Sam might have just abandoned the one thing of beauty that he had left in his life. Omar would have given anything to have a girl like Salwa. Why would Sam do that? What was the point?

'Fucken government, fucken coppers, fucken journo cunts, eh? I gotta go, bro. Talk to you soon,' said Omar to Sam before hanging up. There was no use trying to broach the subject, let alone discuss it with Sam. He was like a big unfeeling block of wood sometimes. If only he would shut up and listen just once, he might realise that other people were in this too. People like Omar and Salwa, and Moma and Baba. As Omar walked back to his cell, he rubbed at the itchy skin under the sleeve of his green prison windcheater. What kind of detergent did those fucken bastards in the laundry use? Itching powder?

That night Omar had terrifying dreams. His brother was huge and climbing a city building, like King Kong. Planes and choppers circled the tower firing machine guns at him. But unlike in the movie where the bullets were mere irritations to the giant beast, each of these bullets opened up a gaping, bloody wound in Sam's body. Instead of trying to fight off the aircraft, he was screaming in pain and cowering.

There was nothing Omar could do to help, though he desperately wanted to. There was no way for him to act. He was just sitting in the cinema watching the movie.

Though the prison cell was cool, Omar woke up covered in sweat. Constantly waking up shivering and clammy was just another one of the many little things that had been plaguing his life at Silverwater. Before being sentenced Omar had not imagined adult prison life at all, other than as a series of very grim, grey-toned images and shapes, all suffused with the implicit threat of violence. Then and now, he did his best to repress the knowledge of what happened to some people in prison—young, slim men in particular.

Omar peeled off his sweat-soaked t-shirt and pulled his blanket up over his shoulders. His nerves felt like untuned guitar strings strummed by an invisible hand. He clenched his jaw and then released it, taking a deep breath. He needed to steady himself and get some sleep. He needed to recuperate. He had known that life inside would be stressful and depressing but he had not expected that it would pound him so hard physically.

The weeks went by in Silverwater and Omar grew accustomed to his new environment, though his mood would sometimes spike into depression or paranoia. He was not surprised that he often felt lethargic and at times extremely fatigued. He put it down to boredom. In terms of day-to-day routine, his life had altered so greatly since his arrest that the adjustment to this, the last phase of *when everything got fucked up* (as he inwardly referred to it) seemed relatively easy.

He liked his job in the library. It provided sanctuary and a little stimulation and helped the time pass. He was adapting quite well to doing time 'on his own'. Each day he found it easier to think less in terms of the broad outlook of the future, of the crushing years left of his sentence. Increasingly, he just thought of his life as being lived in gaol. It was where he was now, in the same way that when people might once have asked him where he lived or where he was from, he would simply have answered Greenacre. Greenacre and Punchbowl, where Baalbek provided the family's livelihood. These and the surrounding suburbs comprised his world, however many cruises were taken to Marrickville and Chatswood Mall, or expeditions made to the nightclubs of the Cross or Sydney city. At Greenacre and Punchbowl, his pulse slowed and returned to normal. Now his home was his cell and those excursions were memories, replaced by risky, scurrying movement to and from the yard, recreation room, dining hall and his job in the library, combined with the excitement of Kamir's and, until recently, Yasri's, weekly visits.

He had never really thought about leaving Greenacre for a better place, though he knew somewhere inside of him that he was not destined to stay there for the rest of his life. In comparison to most of his peers, Omar's unusual tolerance for



reading newspapers and his hours in the cockpit of Flight Simulator had exposed him to much of the rest of the world. This and the fact that he had used the internet as more than an inexhaustible source of porn meant that he could talk about the centres of, say, Paris, New York, Beirut and London in ways his friends might never have expected. But who would have thought that when he left Greenacre he would only make it as far as Silverwater! Just a few suburbs north. That was an outcome nobody would have predicted.

Omar had not yet made many friends at Silverwater, though he would sometimes chat with Leny on his occasional visits to the yard. Omar was on nodding terms with the Lebs and Turks, though by no means an associate, and his only other social interaction had been a few conversations with Karl, his co-worker in the library.

‘Strictly speaking I *was* a crim but I’m just a boofy, middle-aged bloke now,’ said Karl, when he had introduced himself to Omar.

Karl’s job was to operate the ‘mobile lending station’, which meant pushing the creaky book trolley through the cell blocks, handing out reading material and noting down the borrowers’ details. With his thick handlebar moustache and short haircut, he resembled the cricketer Merv Hughes. He often helped Omar with the cataloguing when his rounds were done. At first, Karl had been fairly quiet and kept to himself, almost shyly, though in his peripheral vision Omar could sense that the older man was often watching him. By the third week, Karl had become friendly. One morning they started chatting and he told Omar the story of how he came to be inside.

Karl was nearly at the end of a minimum ten-year sentence for armed robbery and embezzlement. He had been in maximum security at Long Bay for

most of his time but had been transferred to Silverwater two years ago to see out his sentence. He had been a successful lawyer until he had developed a savage gambling habit. To support his spiralling debt he started using funds held in trust for a number of elderly clients. Then, as the hole in his books became ever more gaping and his fraud looked ever more likely to be discovered, he decided on a plan. A bank robbery. After all, he was a lawyer and so much smarter than your average crim. It would be a cinch.

‘How hard could it be?’ he asked Omar. ‘The essential requirement, y’see, is intestinal fortitude, and without wanting to blow my own trumpet, I had that in spades. Match the balls with the brains and surely, I told myself, I could pull off one big job, single-handedly, to permanently cement over the fiscal pothole I’d let myself fall into. Just the one job, that’s all. Fix up the books and then enrol in one of those twelve-step gamblers anonymous type programs. I had it worked out. I’d get my life back together in three or four months and my wife and kids wouldn’t even know I’d had a problem in the first place.

‘So anyway, I went about the planning and execution of this job in a very businesslike way. I walk in to this credit union in Cremorne Junction, show them the pistol, order them to fill up the bag and, bingo, the tellers just shit themselves and start piling in the notes by the bundle. I walk out of there with the bag stuffed full to bursting. I pull off the ski mask and sprint across the street and get right out of sight down this railway pedestrian underpass. That underpass was *made* for a getaway—nobody can get a good look at you and bam you’re out of there. I come up out the other side and quickly head to this alleyway nearby where I strip off the old blue workers’ overalls. Of course, underneath I’ve got on my you beaut nine hundred dollar Pierre Cardin suit. I transfer the cash from the sports bag into a

briefcase that I'd stashed in the alleyway that morning, slap on some Ray Bans and walk calmly out into the sunshine. Bingo! I'm a respectable lawyer again!

'Now, here's the beautiful part about the getaway. Listen to this. I walk straight to the pub on the next cross street, the Fox and Hare it was. It's one of those renovated pubs, all done up with chrome and glass and there's a nice bistro out the back that does fancy pub meals. I walk into the bistro, sit down and order a whitebait entrée followed by a medium rare kangaroo fillet with a chocolate chilli sauce and a side dish of stir-fried crispy Asian vegetables—it was that kind of place. So, I'm waiting for my lunch and I'd barely had a sip on my schooner of pilsener and I'm about to put the first coin into the pokies when the sound of sirens came in from the street outside. I tell you what, that was pretty scary. I'm thinking, "What if someone's seen me?" and I'm just expecting those sirens to get closer and closer and stop right outside the pub door. But they fade away and I hold my nerve and stay in the pub for a good three hours, even managing to enjoy my lunch and flirt with the barmaid, though I did drop a quick two hundred bucks on the bloody machines. "Not to worry", I said to myself, "It'll soon be all over".

'So at around three o'clock I walk back out into the sunshine and go on my merry way. I get to the station, jump on the next train to Central and I'm home before four. I'm pretty happy to get there, I can tell you. Later that night when the wife and kids are asleep, I take the briefcase into the garage and count the cash on the bonnet of the Jag. Yep, I drove a racing green XJS back then. Seventy-eight thousand, eight hundred and seventy dollars. Mixed denominations, all used notes. It was a great feeling. Bloody great.'

'So why did you end up in here?' asked Omar. 'Did you leave something behind, a clue or something? Did someone dob you in?'

‘No, Omar, it wasn’t anyone else who did me in. It was all me. You may know that gambling is as strong an addiction as any drug there is. Well, I had all that cash on me and I thought, it won’t hurt to put a couple of grand on the roulette table, will it? After all, if I won big, I could double or even triple the robbery money. Then I could balance the books at work *and* pay a big chunk off the mortgage. How good would that be? Well, needless to say, Omar, I lost the first few thousand dollars on the roulette table. I came back home to the garage where I’d stashed the cash, and got out another couple of thousand. It was straight back to the casino with that, and then when I lost that, back home again. This happened every night for the next five nights, except each time I’d take in just a little more cash than before, just in case. Oh, I won a few times. At one stage I was one hundred and twenty-two thousand dollars up, overall. Think about that. That was early on day three. But no. It all went pear-shaped. The whole lot went down the gurgler. So, to cut to the chase, I decided I had to do another job. Same modus operandi. Another credit union, another long pub lunch. It worked so well the first time, it seemed stupid to change the plan. Plus, I always loved a bloody long lunch!

‘So I stake out another place. It was on the north shore as well, Mosman—it seemed logical that there would always be more money in the branches up there! Same kind of deal, worked out a good getaway plan with minimum visibility. But this job didn’t quite get that far. Sure, the customers were on the floor and the tellers were shitting themselves again. They’d started shovelling out the cash. Then I notice one of the customers staring at my gun. Not frozen with fear, but just looking at it closely, studying it. Of course, it’s only a plastic Browning from a mail-order hobby shop. Would have had trouble killing a cockroach with that thing. So this dickhead decides he wants to be a hero, and yells out, “That’s not a real gun!” I turn

around and tell him to shut the fuck up and make like I'm going to shoot him but he doesn't even flinch. Anyway, so this dickhead's yelled out and the bank tellers all hesitate. And then he comes towards me, cocky bastard, and I decide that I'd better bail out. Cut my losses and run. So I try to leg it out of there but he sticks out his big bloody RM Williams boot and trips me over. Suddenly there's three other guys on top of me—yeah, they're all really brave now—and the game's up. All over red rover. One of them kept belting me in the head until the others made him stop. I nearly passed out.

I find out later that the dickhead hero is New South Wales Vice President of the Sporting Shooters Association. Brett Masterson. Represented Australia at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics in the pistol shooting. Silver medallist, no shit. Knew his firearms pretty well, I suppose. Yeah, I found all of this out later when the bastard testified against me in court. Cunt. The cops came and arrested me and later I told them everything. They went through the books at work and I get done for embezzlement as well as armed robbery. And so that's that. Here I am. Eight years and two months done and only fourteen months to go before I hit parole. Then I'm a free man. Free to go out and do it all again. Ha ha. No chance, mate, no chance.'

Omar liked Karl. He was good to talk to. Plenty of the other prisoners, especially the younger blokes, were very willing to tell their stories. But with the knowledge that he would be inside for three or four times longer than most of them, Omar found their crotch grabbing and exaggeration hard to take. Karl spoke in a relaxed way, like the conversations you had with someone when you went out cruising. There was no hurry.

‘Shit, I guess you was too addicted to hang on to all the cash without having another gamble, eh?’ said Omar. ‘Like giving a smackie some heroin to sell, eh? Or something like that.’

Karl laughed with him. ‘You got it in one, Omar, got it in one.’

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‘Hey,’ Omar said to Karl as he walked into the library one morning. Karl was at the lending trolley, which was piled high with returned books and magazines.

‘Hey,’ Karl said with a smile. ‘I thought I’d give you a hand with these returns from yesterday. It looks like there’s some cataloguing to do as well.’

They began work. After thirty minutes, the duty prison officer locked them alone in the small library room and skived off to do some business elsewhere in the complex. This particular guard would often disappear from the library for up to half an hour at a time. According to Karl, he distributed smack, speed, marijuana and other contraband throughout Silverwater. Omar welcomed the absence of the uniformed overseer. Briefly, he could slip into the illusion that he was not actually in custody and that this was his regular job in the outside world—a respectable white-collar job at that.

Karl held up an open magazine. ‘Check out this National Geographic! I swear it hasn’t changed in thirty years. Still showing black bitches with their tits hanging out! I used to wank over these when I was in school. Until we were old enough to get real pornos!’ He thrust the open magazine towards Omar. The pictures showed families of tribespeople—mothers, fathers, adolescents, girls and

boys. The women and girls' breasts were indeed bared and the children were completely naked. In some photographs, the males' penises were also exposed.

'*National Geography*, eh? Never heard of that one.' Omar surveyed the pictures. 'Yeah right. Ha, some of these chicks are high school age. Check 'em out. Pity they don't let us use the internet here, eh? We could get on to some real good stuff on there.'

'Yes, we certainly could, Omar,' said Karl, searching out Omar's eyes.

He moved towards Omar and put a hand on his shoulder. Omar was surprised.

'Hey, mate, Karl, what's the—'

Karl stepped forward and placed his other hand on Omar's other shoulder. He pulled Omar towards him and held him tightly for a moment, seeming to feel out the youth's body with his own. Then he kissed him roughly on the lips. Omar felt the peculiar, bristly sensation and man-smell that he had experienced on the rare occasions when he embraced Kamir. But this was something altogether different. The physical sensation was very disturbing. The lips were hard and aggressive, not soft and yielding like a girl's. The friction of Karl's stubble was harsh on Omar's skin. Besides the intimate feeling of a man's face and lips, what was most disconcerting was the grip. It was the grip of someone far stronger than himself. Being set upon in this way by a larger, more powerful man, a man who felt and smelt something like his father, was terrifying, yes, but moreover, even in light of the murky gaol paranoia he'd tried so hard to suppress, it was a feeling of total, astonishing surprise. He tried to push Karl away.

'What the fuck are you doing?' Omar broke away from him. He wanted to say the word but couldn't. He didn't have the courage to say it, or even mouth it. It

resonated silently in Omar's head, neither in accusation nor self-recrimination but somehow in both: *POOF!*

'What are you doing, Karl?' Omar repeated, taking a step back. In his ears his own voice sounded high-pitched, girlish.

Karl did not reply. He stepped forward and, like a grizzly bear, swatted Omar on the side of the head. His heavy fist made a soft thud against Omar's scalp, like a softball hitting a catcher's mitt. Omar was stunned. Karl raised his big forearm and struck Omar again, harder this time, causing him to reel backwards. Karl grabbed him before he could fall, pinning his arms to his sides. He pushed him between the shelves until his back was against the library wall. Karl began to grope him, feeling between his legs and around to the cheeks of his bum. Omar could feel and smell Karl's moist, heavy breath—toast and Vegemite, a hint of banana, the rank, stale mix of cigarettes and coffee. He turned his head to the side and tried to writhe out of Karl's grasp.

'No ... no fucken way,' Omar managed to stutter.

Karl clubbed him once more. It was a big open-palmed slap, again to the side of the head. Karl's hands were thick and weighty. Omar felt like he was being smacked hard by one of the Wilbur Smith novels on the trolley. Or a phone book. The thought that his body might not physically show the signs of this beating ran through his mind. He could not bring himself to utter anything. There were no words to express his shock. It paralysed him, though his limbs remained loose and even supple. Karl was pawing at him, a meaty hand down the front of the green prison issue trackies. He spun Omar around against the wall and yanked down his pants and undies.



Omar closed his eyes tightly as he felt Karl's fingers part his bum cheeks and search around his anus. Karl explored slowly at first, and then inserted one chunky finger hard inside the opening. Omar clenched himself and groaned but it only seemed to make Karl work harder, his finger becoming like a steel claw. After a few seconds Omar felt the finger withdraw and heard Karl hawking like an old wino in a doorway. Then he spat and in a moment Karl's finger was inside him again, deeper, more probing. Omar grimaced and cried out, arching his back as far as he could. Karl pushed him forward so that he had to use his hands to save his forehead from banging into the wall. The finger continued to thrust, lift, explore. Then it withdrew again and Omar felt a strong hand gripping his rump ... and then ...

'Oh yeah ... that's it ... that's ... that's ... a good lad,' grunted Karl.

Omar let out a scream.

*SHUT THE FUCK UP!* This was conveyed not in words but by another numbing thwack against the side of his head. It made him dizzy. This pain in his head seemed to subside after a minute or two but the other agony remained. Omar leaned forward with his palms against the wall, his face contorted and his teeth grinding. He felt like he was being murdered. He had never experienced—or for that matter imagined—such overwhelming, subjugating dominance. And yet, impossibly multiplying his horror and confusion, he felt himself hardening. He looked down in disbelief. Indeed, he had an erection. Here was death ramming into him, brutally entering his being—he believed he was going to die there in the library—and he had a hard-on.

As well as Karl's breath he could now smell sweat and then the unmistakable whiff of faeces—his own. Karl was thrusting deeper now and a

stiletto of pain shot up Omar's trunk towards his sternum. He cried out again and received another violent command to be silent. Keeping a firm grip around the boy's waist, Karl used his other hand to masturbate Omar. His palms were calloused, dry and rough. After an imperceptible passage of time, amidst this total and complete terror, Omar also felt intense consternation as he realised he was ejaculating. There it was, his own semen spilling from him onto the carpet, together with a simultaneous, ghostly thread of an orgasm, which darted a path through the agony that Karl still imposed. Omar wondered, delirious with hurt, was this his soul leaving his body?

And then with a grunt and a triumphant cry, Karl leaned forward and rested his weight on Omar's back, gripping the boy's stomach tightly. Omar felt the shudders running through Karl's body as the man came. He thought of the rhythmic, quivering haunches of a Rottweiler that he had once seen humping a mongrel on a Greenacre street.

Karl took some deep breaths and with short intervals in between, thrust into Omar a few more times. Omar cried out again but there were no repercussions. Then Karl gasped and panted, and almost tenderly laid his head on the nape of Omar's neck. Omar felt him withdraw. The relief was incredible. He felt a strange sense of satisfaction, an evacuation, as if he had just taken a very big, satisfying shit. He heard Karl pulling up his pants. Omar did the same, clutching down around his ankles for his undies and trackies, his side pressed to the wall so that he would not have to further expose his back to Karl, nor face him. With his shoe, he ground the globules of his own semen into the carpet. Its very presence was an upset and mystery that he could not fathom.

He heard the man walk away from the shelves. Then came the sounds of books being picked up and rearranged. For Omar the paralysis remained. He did not know what to do. He found that he was shaking and covered in sweat. He straightened up and now pressed his back against the wall, trying to extract some comfort from the cold plaster. Any sense of relief had evaporated. Now it hurt him to move. It hurt him to think.

Karl was whistling as he placed books on the shelves.

Finally he spoke: 'You'd better get a move on with some of these magazines, Omar. The screw will be back soon. You don't wanna fuck up this job. You won't get another one like it in here, I can tell you that much. It's good in here. It's safe. You wouldn't want to be out there in the yard by yourself all day, take it from me.'

Omar turned around and leant against the wall. He remained where he was. He stood there for another ten minutes until he heard the sound of the library door unlocking. He heard the prison officer returning and the squeak of the cheap office chair as he sat at his desk. Karl started chatting to him.

'Hey, you oughta check this out, eh. Check out some black tits and arse, eh! Ha ha!'

'Yeah, whatever, Karl. Where's the young bloke?'

'Just doing some reshelving. Quick learner, that Omar! Same time next week?'

'Don't push your luck, Karl. You'll fuck up your chances of parole ... hey, check out how perky this black bitch's tits are. She'd have to be at least fourteen. I'd marry her!'

They both laughed.

Omar stayed between the shelves for the rest of the morning. When Karl came close by to replace a book Omar stared ahead, frozen. Karl simply ignored him and cheerfully whistled as he worked. The prison officer did not address Omar until just before one in the afternoon.

‘C’mon, Omar, come out from behind there. Karl’s gone for lunch. You’ll be all right, son. Go on. Go back to your cell and have a shower. You can stay there for the rest of the arvo if you want. I’ll say you’re feeling crook and not up to work today. Go on, hurry up before I change my mind!’

Omar slowly came out from between the shelves, fearful of a trap. The pain in his behind made him move slowly in a kind of stooped creep. He paused in front of the prison officer and looked into the man’s small, close-set eyes.

‘Don’t look at me like that, son. You didn’t think it was going to be like the boy scouts in here, did you? Hang on! Maybe it is a bit like the boy scouts! Ha ha! Don’t worry, mate. You might even begin to enjoy it after a while. Just remember, though, a dog won’t last long in here. Better this than being a dog. Got it?’ He turned his gaze back to a car magazine. Omar left the library and, fearfully looking around for signs of Karl, made his way slowly down the corridor towards his cell block.

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That night Omar woke up several times, each time soaked in a cold sweat. Once he cried and sobbed. He felt incredulous shame at the thought of his arousal and climax, however faint and disembodied it had felt. *How could this be?* Then he would lie tense in his bed straining his ears for any footsteps outside his cell. He

was hypersensitive to every minute noise in the corridor, thinking that Karl might be outside, poised to enter and strike. Omar thought about calling for the screws. Maybe he could ask to see the governor himself. He decided against it. He thought that if Karl had some kind of deal going with the library guard, he could have any number of deals going with the governor, the cell guards, the cops, the judges, whoever bloody else. He was a lawyer after all. That's what people always said about lawyers. They screwed you.

Omar hugged himself as he drifted in and out of a restless sleep. He had a nightmare of running and hiding from something and then crocodiles and big jungle cats were trying to savage him. At one point a leopard had his forearm and wouldn't let go. He could see the big canine teeth penetrating his flesh and the red globules of blood that dropped onto the ground, splashing into smaller droplets in slow motion.

Omar woke up, his t-shirt clinging to his body. His head throbbed from where Karl had clobbered him yet he did not appear to be bruised, from what he could gauge from the stainless steel mirror above his sink. It was strange how he had predicted that, right while it was happening.

He curled into a foetal position. His anus was raw and sore, though he felt much better for being clean. Before going to bed he'd had a sloppy bowel movement that hurt with such intensity he thought he would pass out. And all the while the thought of Karl's fluids leaking from his own body into the steel toilet bowl had filled him with such disgust and nauseous hurt that he nearly vomited. The urge to expel this putrid substance then made him push harder on the toilet, intensifying and prolonging the agony. As he strained and squirmed on the cold seat Omar tried to curb the terrifying thought of infection. What if Karl was an AIDS carrier? He did not look like he had AIDS. Those people were skinny with bloody

scabs all over their bodies. Karl was built like a retired front rower. But he might have something else. Anything was possible, Omar thought. That cunt had been in gaol for nearly ten years.

Next morning Omar found an empty table in the meals area and sat down to eat his breakfast. He put his head down and tried to blend in to the noisy, manly hubbub of the breakfasting inmates. Periodically, Omar snuck sidelong glances around the room. If there was a conspiracy against him nobody was showing it in here. As usual, nobody had even so much as acknowledged him when he entered the area. This was some kind of small mercy. Omar chewed his breakfast in a vacant daze.

Leny stopped by the table with his tray. He was a tallish, even lanky, upright man. Omar thought that Leny might be in his early forties though he looked younger. Maybe all that yoga in the exercise yard kept him skinny. Until yesterday's incident with Karl, Omar had trusted Leny. Now, as Leny sat down to join him, Omar again wondered if there was a conspiracy. Were all these older cunts going to crack on to him? Was he going to be the bum-boy at Silverwater?

'Hey, Omar, man, how's it going?' said Leny in a low, serene voice as he put down his plastic tray.

'Fine,' said Omar, not looking up. He continued eating. He hadn't been able to eat lunch or dinner yesterday. This morning he at least had an appetite for toast.

Being moody was not a rare quality inside Silverwater. Leny took the hint and began his breakfast.

He let a few minutes go past. 'So, what's up?' he offered.

'Nothing,' said Omar.

'Nothing, eh?'

‘Nothing.’ Omar slowly rose, still chewing. Taking his tray he shuffled to the counter, doing his best to walk without appearing to hobble. He got another helping of toast and some cereal for good measure. He turned and surveyed the meals area, looking for another empty table. There were none. It would have to be Leny. At least Karl was housed in a different cell block and didn’t take his meals in the same area.

Omar headed back and placed his tray on the table across from Leny. Trying to appear nonchalant he gingerly lowered himself down to a sitting position. Leny could not help but notice the grimace that passed across Omar’s face.

‘What’s up, Omar, man? You put your back out? I said the other day, you should stretch, man. You young blokes need to stretch too, y’know?’

Omar did not answer. He started on his cereal. He had not quite raised the first spoonful to his mouth before his hand began to shake and tears slid down his cheeks. His face turned in on itself in despair. He dropped the spoon and put his head in his hands. He delicately adjusted his seating position, wincing as he did so.

Leny seemed to realise the truth. Maybe he had once witnessed it himself. ‘No, no way, don’t tell me,’ he said. ‘You poor fucken little bastard. That’s fucken sick that is, this place is fucken sick. Am I right? You can tell me. I’m straight down the line with you, you can tell me, Omar.’

After the horrendous deception of the day before, Omar was now suspicious of any apparently generous overtures. He shook his head.

‘None of your fucken business, all right? Just forget it, eh? Just fucken leave me alone!’ he said quietly, trying not to attract attention to himself.

‘That’s cool,’ said Leny, raising his palms and leaning away. ‘That’s cool, man. I just want to say, though, if you wanna talk about it, it’s cool with me. I’m

safe, man, straight down the line ...with the emphasis on straight, y'know what I mean? I'm just saying, is all. But that's cool if you want to be alone. I can understand that.'

Taking his tray, Leny got up and went to another table. Omar regained some composure but found he had again lost his hunger. Nonetheless he forced himself to finish the cereal and another slice of toast. He knew what he had to do. He had to eat. To survive in here he had to get big.

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For the next couple of days Omar stayed in his cell except for mealtimes, though his rapid-fire weight-gain plan was impeded by nausea and a general aversion to food. He had also been experiencing a general itchiness over his legs and torso that no amount of rubbing or scratching could quite pacify. Regardless, he felt that he had managed to eat the equivalent of three meals each day. But when he lifted his shirt his ribs still seemed to be all too obvious and his arms, had they been darker, might have belonged to an African marathon runner or, worse, a Sportsgirl model.

Omar had gained exemption from his library duties for the rest of the week, claiming he was unwell, which had not been difficult to demonstrate. The prison doctor had seen him in his cell and perfunctorily diagnosed the flu or maybe just a bad cold, and signed off on a certificate. In response to a hopeful suggestion from Omar the doctor curtly commented that he was not so sick that he needed to be transferred to the hospital wing.

On Wednesday night Omar lay on his narrow bed and thought about what he would do when he saw Karl again. Maybe, like in a movie he had seen, he could



make an ice-pick by sharpening up the end of a toothbrush on the asphalt of the exercise yard. He would stab Karl in the guts with it. But an ice-pick could take days to sharpen up. And if he used it he would have to kill him. He could not go halfway by stabbing him in the arm or the leg. He would have to put it into his neck, or his eye. Omar already knew the extent of Karl's physical strength.

Omar was unsure whether he had it in him to try and murder Karl. It did not stop him from having visions of bashing Karl to death with his bare hands, smashing his head against a wall until his skull cracked, until the bones splintered and the brains and blood began to emerge, sliding out of his head like jelly. Then he would lie him down on the floor and, looking him in the eye, stomp hard on his face and crush it, saying, 'YOU FUCKEN POOFTAH!' And he would stomp and stomp until Karl's head looked like a meat-lover's pizza. He would then let him die, if he was not already dead. And then he would calmly walk out of the library and back to his cell.

In another revenge fantasy he imagined that he would torture Karl with razor blades. He would tie the cunt up between the same set of library shelves and run the razor down sections of his skin, laughing at the man's bloodcurdling screams. He would peel off sections of skin, taking small bits of flesh as he went, and torment him by rubbing the portions over his face. He would then stuff the pieces into Karl's mouth so that he would *shut the fuck up*. He would turn Karl around and shove the sharp end of a long crowbar up his arse before leaning on it with such force that it ripped the sick cunt's bowels right out of his body. Then he would cut off his dick and his balls and shove them into Karl's mouth too.

These images segued into another flight of the imagination. He and Karl were in the library and Omar was pummeling Karl with his fists and screaming at

him, YOU FUCKEN SICK BASTARD! And Karl was laughing at him so Omar was hitting him harder. The punches were connecting and they felt good. But then Karl had grabbed him by the shoulders and was pushing his head down. Suddenly Omar was on his knees and pulling down Karl's trackies and he had Karl's dick out and it was growing in his hands and he was sucking on it, *oh my gosh*, and he was sucking on it in a really hungry way, like Anna at the card game in Clarence Road, like the head jobs in so much of the porn that he had watched, and then he felt the man tremble and Karl was coming—

Omar hit himself hard on the chest. He did it again, even harder, and then turned his fists onto his own head. He felt like he was cracking up! That was too sick. How could he have thought up something like that? The image popped into his head again and Omar groaned out loud. He smacked himself again. He got up off the bed and drank some water. His head felt clearer now. It was like a nightmare but he was sure he had been awake. He had been enjoying letting his thoughts run wild with all the things he would do to Karl and then—*that?*

He was frightened that he was gay. But some deep internal logic told him that he was not. He could think of no man that he had ever desired in the way, say, that he had desired Belle. Then how—?

Omar felt as if he was going mad. He had been spending too much time alone in his cell. He wished he could see Moma. At the moment that was the only thought that could calm him. The image of Yasri's face. He pictured her face again and he felt better. He lay down on his bed and concentrated. Yasri, before it all got so fucked up. Yasri, unveiled, in a t-shirt and her loose, light blue jeans with ironed creases down the legs, laughing and clapping at his five-year-old singsong rendition of *Row, row, row, your boat*; Yasri putting plates of *labneh* and flatbread in front of

him; Yasri pulling a singlet over the top of his squirming little boy head; Yasri dropping him off at primary school and coming back to cuddle him when he cried; Yasri tucking him in at night; Yasri holding him to her and hugging him tight and singing to him ever so softly. The images sent pleasant sensations running through his body and in a few minutes he managed to drift into sleep.

\*

The next Monday, Omar reported back to the library. It took a great deal of effort to drag himself there. The usual prison officer was on duty.

‘Morning,’ he said, briskly ‘Feeling better, are we?’ He gave no indication that anything out of the ordinary had occurred the week before.

Omar mumbled a greeting. He felt inside his pocket for the reassuring presence of a plastic fork from last night’s dinner. If Karl tried anything today he was going to get it straight in the eye. Omar would gouge the bastard’s eyeball out if he so much as came near him.

‘Your mate Karl won’t be in today,’ said the screw. ‘He’s on day release today. Lucky cunt’s going to a funeral. Death of an immediate family member. Service is down at Roseberry. Not only does he get to go out for the day, an officer has to accompany him. Fun for everybody. Governor didn’t pick me, though.’

Omar was relieved. That is, if the guard was telling the truth. For the rest of the morning Omar was alert in case Karl walked in. He did not appear.

At lunchtime Omar decided to go out into the yard. He sat on a bench. He could walk and sit without flinching now and there was only real pain during bowel movements. He surveyed the rest of the motley bunch of inmates of his block as

they paced, threw hoops, consorted, made deals and exchanged abuse. Some of the younger Kooris had started a cypher circle. Though Omar could not make out all the words he enjoyed following their freestyle rhythm, which was punctuated by loud affirmations and whoops of laughter.

He saw Leny standing near a corner of the yard, ramrod straight, eyes closed, with both arms extended towards the sky. He had removed his shirt and the muscles of his stomach seemed to tumble and somersault with each intake and exhalation of breath. He folded forward from the waist, gracefully, and grabbed his ankles so firmly that his spine formed a sharp ridge jutting from his back. He stood straight again and then lunged forward with one knee bent, his arms held up and palms glued together. Omar found the movements as mesmerising as the Kooris' rapping. When Leny had completed a few repetitions of his sequence, he saw Omar and walked over to him.

'Hey, what's up?' he said, taking a seat next to him, breathing deeply through his nose.

'Not much,' said Omar, uncomfortable that Leny knew about his secret. Also, he could smell the man's fresh, unimpeded sweat. The proximity was making him nervous.

'So, you OK?' Leny asked after a minute.

'Yeah ... I'm OK.'

'Do you feel like tell—'

'Do I feel like telling you what?'

'Anything, whatever.'

Omar was quiet for a moment. Then he blurted, 'It was that cunt Karl, OK? I know you're going to keep asking me, so there you go. I swear to God though, if you're in on this, I'll fucken stab you too, OK?'

'Hey, hey, I'm cool, man. I swear, I'm cool. I got two kids outside of here and one of them's only a couple of years younger than you. I swear I didn't know anything about it. Karl you reckon? Not Karl Boxall from E block?'

'That's him, yeah. The cunt lawyer guy. Works in the library.'

'Karl? Karl Boxall's not a lawyer. Did he tell you he was a lawyer? Nah. He was some kind of shonky building contractor, mate. BLF scams in the eighties, unfinished work, standover tactics, bashings. Believe me, I'd heard about him in the industry even before he got done for causing death by dangerous driving and leaving the scene of an accident. It was in the papers. Killed a little girl—knocked her over on her bike in his Fairlane. Apparently happened on the way back from a leagues club after a big lunch. He hit her at a crossing and didn't stop. A witness got his plates down. Cops found him later that afternoon, passed out in his lounge room. It was over two hours later but I heard he still blew something like point two. And I think it was his third or fourth drink driving offence. Bastard. That girl was only six.'

'Are you serious?'

'Yeah, Omar, I wouldn't bullshit to you, mate. He's a snake, man, I can't believe they left you in the library with that dude. He's a cunt. The only reason he hasn't been knocked off inside is because his brother-in-law is sergeant-at-arms for one of those big bikie gangs. Yeah, if he wasn't connected he'd be gone for sure. He's a snake all right ... I guess you already knew that much anyway.'

Omar digested this information with a feeling of disquiet and also a strange sense of wonder. Even after what had happened, even after finding out that Karl was a poofter, Omar had no reason to doubt his bank robbery story. In Omar's whole life, no-one had ever deceived him with that much slickness, that level of detail. No-one had ever ... had ever *fucked him over* like this before. He smiled at the twisted irony and then immediately felt revolted at himself. What was this place doing to him?

'I reckon you've got to fight him, Omar. If he tries it on you again, you've got to fight him. You either fight it or you take it. That's the way it goes in here. Whatever you do, don't tell the screws. Don't be a dog or they'll all come down on you. And if they don't get you first, you'll have to be put in protection and that's worse. It's like solitary confinement but you'll always be left wondering if a screw will accidentally leave a door open so that they can get to you one day. You can't ever relax. You'll regret it, believe me, I've seen it happen to blokes. So just fight him, OK?' Leny was giving him his most intense and troubled gaze. Reluctantly, Omar felt that he had to trust him.

'Yeah, I'm gonna take his eye out with this fork,' he said, patting his pocket. 'He'll fucken be sorry, mate, I swear to God.'

\*

That night as he lay in his cell Omar held the fork and stroked the prongs. They bent to the slightest of pressure. He would have to hold it low in his fist with only the prongs protruding, and gouge as hard as he could. He practised some hammer thrusts in the air. If Karl ever came near him, he was going to stab that cunt in the

face. He did not care if Karl was friends with bikies or the mafia or the governor himself. If he came near him once more he was going to lose something.

With the fork still in his hand Omar fell into his customarily troubled sleep. He awoke after an hour, again drenched in sweat. But this time it was not the sweat that had woken him. Instead he felt a downright chill and his legs kept twitching around. He felt like his teeth were chattering, though they weren't. Meanwhile his head was filled with dark thoughts of murder and gore, and the horrors of submission, nakedness and shame. He eventually drifted off into another tortured version of sleep, his body constantly in motion with twitches and shakes and 180-degree rolls.

He woke to see sunlight shining through the small opaque rectangle of window that skirted a corner of the cell's ceiling. Omar sat up and caught something below his line of vision. He looked down and saw a pie-size dark stain of blood over the front of his t-shirt. There was blood on his pillow, too. He panicked, and for a crazy moment thought that Karl had snuck in to his cell and somehow pierced his heart while he slept. Then, licking his lips, he tasted the blood. It was oozing out of his nose, a viscous, rich red flow dripping onto his lip and down to his chest. What now? What else was there to torment him? He drew his knees up and tilted his head back. He pulled up the sheet and used it to try and staunch the flow.

Later, when the cells doors slid open for rollcall, he stayed where he was. A prison guard soon entered, ready to give him a dig in the ribs to get him out of bed. Surveying the bloody sheets, the officer could have been forgiven for thinking he had a suicide on his hands.

Omar looked up from the bed. 'I need to see the doctor again,' he said in a nasally whine, pinching the flesh of his nose and dabbing at his face. 'I really think I'm coming down with something.'



‘LYM-PHO-MA,’ the doctor pronounced carefully. ‘The biopsy has come back and I’m afraid it’s lymphoma. I’m sorry.’

The words meant nothing to Omar. What the fuck was lymphoma?  
*Whatever, mate. Just give me the fucken pills and I’ll get out of here.* He stared sullenly out the window of the prison clinic. He could see out to the street from here. Through the cyclone fences and razor wire there were buses and cars going by.

Noticing Omar’s lack of expression, the doctor elaborated. ‘Lymphoma is a type of cancer. It’s a cancer that affects a type of white blood cell. These cells are called lymphocytes. They are the immune cells that normally protect you from illness, from getting sick. Are you with me?’

Omar responded with a vague flicker of movement over his face.

‘Cancer, to put it simply, is abnormal cell growth. Cell division is not balanced by cell death. So, a characteristic of cancer cells is that they have growth and survival advantages over normal cells in your body. In your case, a specific type of white blood cell—that is, a specific type of lymphocyte—is dividing abnormally. At this point I should say that lymphoma is not one kind of cancer but rather a collective name for a range of cancers that can occur when a lymphocyte becomes malignant. Interesting word, *malignant*. At med school I remember the definition of *malignant* was ‘showing great malevolence and being disposed to do evil.’ I guess over the years they would have softened up on that kind of language in teaching. But anyway, I’m digressing—’

A rising sense of indignation broke through Omar's torpor. 'So, doctor, you're saying I've got a whole group of cancers. How can that be? That's just my fucken luck—'

'No, Omar, that's not what I meant. I said there are many types of lymphoma. You have one of them. To be exact you have what we call Burkitt's lymphoma, sporadic Burkitt's lymphoma to be exact. It's an aggressive form of the disease and as such will require aggressive treatment. The disease may respond well to intensive chemotherapy but of course every case is different ...'

Omar's irritation subsided. He found himself turning off as the doctor rambled on with more medical terms and details. *Diagnosis, prognosis, b-symptoms, lymphocytes.* What was the point? It was just like the courtroom and the judge all over again. Words and more words, most of them too long to pronounce; sentences rendered meaningless by their density. The long strings of verbiage echoed through his head in an endless amorphous loop. Then the longer words started to fall away and the clearer, more concrete ones remained: Head sentence, t-cells, cellblocks, nosebleed, non-parole ... the overall message was very clear. His life was fucked. Instead of all that legal and medical jargon it now came down to a few simple facts: *He was seventeen. He was doing thirty-two years. He'd been fucked up the arse. And now he had cancer. He was seventeen. He was doing thirty-two years. He'd been fucked up the arse. And now he had cancer. seventeen. Thirty-two. Fucked up the arse. Cancer. seventeen. Thirty-two. Fucked up ...*

He imagined being in the Koori boys' cypher circle. Though there was no rhyme the words played themselves out over and over in his head with an addictive hip-hop pulse. To the surprise of the doctor, Omar started nodding his head to this

invisible beat. He smiled as he thought that maybe these were the words they could write on his gravestone.

\*

Omar was exhausted. But at least he was out of Silverwater. He had just been transferred to a secure section of the Prince of Wales Hospital. He had his own room here too. The door was not locked but there was a Corrective Services guard stationed permanently in the corridor. In a few days he was going to start chemotherapy. He had no idea what this was. Maybe they zapped you with x-rays or something. They would explain it all soon.

They had brought him straight here after the doctor had told him the test results. In all the mumbo-jumbo the doctor had spouted in response to Omar's cryptic, guarded questions, one thing had been established. His illness was nothing to do with AIDS. In his imagination, he relived the excruciating double-disgust of Karl's seminal fluids violently entering and then later slinking from his body and used these images as fuel for a violent revenge. At the same time, he did his best to repress the memory of his own shameful physical response to Karl's ministrations. *That fucken cunt. That fucken, sneaky, dirty, lying, bastard, poofter, cunt.*

Omar had not seen Karl since that awful day. After his nosebleed Omar had been deemed too sick to go back to work in the library. Largely this was a relief but in some ways Omar regretted not being able to use that fork on him. The lymphoma diagnosis had given Omar the go-ahead to kill that motherfucker. Since the news, in a very quiet, calm way, Omar knew with absolute certainty that if he and Karl were alone in the library again, he would kill him. He would find a way.

The first night in hospital, they had given him kebabs on bamboo skewers for dinner. After chewing joylessly on a cube of overcooked, unmarinated lamb, he had extracted two of the sharp sticks and hidden them under his top sheet. He could make something with these. He moved the rest of the bland meat around the plate and put the metal cover back over it before pushing away the tray. He would build up an arsenal to take back to Silverwater—if he ever went back there. He would build up a weapons collection and even if they searched him and found most of it, he would surely get something through. If the September 11 terrorists could bring down the World Trade Center armed with little knives for cutting up cardboard, how hard would it be to get Karl?

And if he never went back to Silverwater, if he stayed here at the Prince of Wales ... then he would be dead.

Omar tried not to think about the possibility of dying alone. He sat up in the bed and hugged himself, feeling his bony arms and the grooves between his ribs. He could even see the yellowish tinge on the skin of his wrists and hands, like some voracious nicotine stain or a self-tanning experiment gone wrong. What would his face look like? But they had told him that people recovered from this. He decided that if he did get better he would find a way to put all that weight and more back on. He would get Moma ... no, Baba, to bring him in some bodybuilding powder that came in those huge plastic tubs. Yes, it was better to think about living and going back to Silverwater. Then he could make it his life's work to kill Karl. What did he have to lose? Omar had already got more than most murderers ever got. Could they give him another life sentence? Concurrent or was it cumulative? He could not remember which was which and decided that he no longer cared.

Omar surveyed the room. This was a hospital. Maybe he could find some roofies or other drugs. Back at Silverwater he could dope up Karl's morning coffee in the library and catch him off guard later. He wondered where they kept all the medication.

There was a TV fixed high up on the wall. The screen was so small that Omar could barely see the New Price Is Right dollar scores. From his hospital bed even the toothy host, Larry Emdur, could have been anyone. He switched the set off and kept himself amused by replaying a collection of violent images in his head. The colourful things he would do to Karl. His bloodthirsty Silverwater daydreams had largely replaced any teenage sexual fantasies. When he first arrived at Kariong Omar had masturbated each night in his room, often using Belle as the object of his desire. But he had hardly given her a thought since that day with Karl in the Silverwater library. The urge for sex seemed to have been replaced by the urge for revenge.

Thankfully the sheer violence of his new fantasies also overwhelmed any unconscious repeats of that dreadful daydream of giving Karl a head job. Omar felt queasy and guilty about this distant glimmer of a thought—of what he might be capable of. Was giving Karl a blow job only the beginning? Was being a poof contagious? What if something had changed forever inside Omar? If it had proven not to be unthinkable it was still definitely unspeakable. It was wrong and it had to be stamped out. And nothing worked better to stamp out the thoughts than violence. Blood and guts.

If there *was* any kind of sexual content at all within these new and improved daydreams, it usually involved the slow mutilation of Karl's genitals. To facilitate the fantasies Omar managed to smuggle all sorts of equipment into Silverwater:

steak mincers, cattle prods, serrated hunting knives, revolvers, red-hot poker, machetes, meat cleavers, samurai swords, lightsabers, and a couple of times even Kamir's old but powerful dough kneading machine, which produced a particularly satisfying snapping of bones and mangling of flesh.

When they brought him into the hospital room they had taken away the usual bedside phone. They brought it back in once a day for half an hour during which time he was allowed to make as many local calls as he wanted.

On the first day at the Prince of Wales, Omar was too tired to even contemplate ringing anyone, let alone Yasri and Kamir. He felt the same on the second day. He knew the governor had already informed them of his transfer and that Kamir would be coming to visit him soon. Of course, Yasri was not allowed to see him. Omar's eyes stung when he thought about how Moma would take the news. Now he might have a death sentence. He hoped that when they called his parents to inform them of his illness they had had the good sense to ask for Baba. Yasri would have gone mental if she had to cope with hearing the news via the telephone from one of those cunts. She would have abused them and they would probably have extended her ban to five years.

On his third day in the hospital Omar decided to call Sam. He did not know whether his brother had been told yet.

Sam was cheerful. 'Hey, bro, how's it going? I hear you got the fuck out of gaol! Nice going, bro! Nah, seriously, how d'you feel? I hear they can fix this leukaemia or something. A bloke in here, his kid had it and they fixed him up, though it took a couple of years and he went bald and the whole thing. That's cool though. You just wear one of those banana, bandana scarf things on your head. I

know they look a bit dorky most of the time but you got a good reason, y'know what I mean? Then again, I suppose you could just wear a baseball cap! Ha ha. Bandana! What am I saying! Anyway, how you feel, bro? They treating you well there?'

'I'm tired, eh. It's lymphoma, not leukaemia. Similar but different things. It's all got to do with the white blood cells or—'

'Those doctors, mate, they talk a load of shit. Anyway, you're going to be all right, eh?'

'I start chemo soon. They told me about it. You're right, the hair might fall out. They said they could freeze some of my sperm for me cos I might not be able to have kids later. Can you believe that? But it's better than being dead, right?'

There was an unusual pause at the other end. 'Yeah, right,' said Sam after a moment. 'Yeah, fuck that ... but hey, it'll be cool, I know you, mate, you're a fighter, right? Just like Fenech. *I love youse all!* Just like all of us, eh? Fighting these cunts. Speaking of cunts, did you hear that that fat fuck Farid is getting transferred up here to SuperMax? He threatened to put a contract out on a screw and have his whole family shot. As if. It's a pity I'm locked up in here by myself in non-association, mate, because if I ever got my hands on the dog cunt I'd have to fucken give him brain damage. I'd fucken put a dumbbell through his skull. Give him even more brain damage than what he's already got! Ha ha.

'So what else do they give you in that hospital, eh, bro? Good drugs? Any hot nurses? C'mon, tell me, there must be at least a couple in that whole place. I tell you what, mate, if I was you I'd be getting as many head jobs as I can, I swear to God, before you got to go back inside. Those nurses, mate, their whole job is to be all caring, like, to make you feel better, right? So, you just got to use the right

words, nice and smooth, act like you're not showing the pain, then show a little, then act strong again—that's it—show 'em your *vulnerable* side. Chicks, mate! Especially nurses, they love that sensitive shit. Before anyone knows what's going on you've got her bent over the side of the bed and you're sticking it in all the holes, mate. They probably got lots of lubricant there, eh? It's a hospital! So, did I tell you that I got in the papers again because—'

Omar lowered the receiver down to his lap. He could still hear the chirping, transistorised noises Sam made, as if his brother was a battery operated toy. Omar stared at the red second hand of a round white clock on the wall. After a full minute Sam was still talking. Omar hung up the receiver. He felt no guilt, only a comprehensive, debilitating fatigue. It was as if Sam's call had leached out the last miserable reserves of strength left in him. He lay back, closed his eyes and tried to dampen the ricocheting reports of a lifetime of Sam's words that echoed through his dizzy head.

\*

Omar lay in the hospital bed. It was well after visiting hours and quiet. Earlier he had been feverish, with aching limbs and a furnace that seemed to burn within him. The doctors had given him something before he ate dinner and now he felt calm and even rested. For the first time since his arrest and his forced separation from his family he felt that he was being looked after. Even if the doctors and nurses were not overly friendly they did appear to be genuinely concerned about his pain. It seemed that his skin was returning to a normal colour though it was hard to tell now as the nurse had dimmed the lights so he could watch TV. They had described the



chemotherapy that would start tomorrow but he had tuned out, jaded by details. One thing that sunk in was that he would be there for weeks, if not months. In a few days, if he was lucky, he would turn eighteen in hospital.

The ABC evening news had just finished. It was time for their current affairs program, the *7.30 Report*. It was boring compared to *Today Tonight* or *A Current Affair* but Omar did not switch channels. It was tolerable, he supposed. But after a few minutes he turned the volume down and closed his eyes. He felt he could sense the light from the TV flickering through his eyelids, small flashes and circles of brightness against the miasma of milky red.

After a little while he opened his eyes again and gave a start. Belle was on the television screen. Her back was to the camera but it was Belle all the same. It was not the Belle from Bankstown Square, but the groomed, made-up Belle of the courtroom, in a blouse and black pants with matching jacket. He had seen her for so many days in those clothes in that courtroom that he would know the image anywhere: her figure, the shape of her head, the tightly pulled back hair, her whole being. The clip showed her from behind, walking arm in arm between a man and a woman, along a city pavement and up the steps of an old building. Then there was a shot of her leaving the same building, in the same clothes, with the same people. This time she was facing the camera but they had pixellated her face. It was Belle and she was with her mum and dad. A surging throng of reporters and cameras waited for them.

Then Omar realised where they were. He too had been to that building many times, though he had entered and exited via the rear metal gates in a locked Correctional Services van. The footage was of Belle leaving the District Court. It was Belle before and after his trial.

Omar turned the volume up but the story was concluding. There was no mention of Sam or Omar, which was a welcome change, although he might well have missed that part. The reporter was talking about the difficulty of rape victims facing their attackers in court. There was the possibility of using video evidence in appeals, for future trials. The presenter began to introduce the next story. Omar turned down the volume and closed his eyes again.

He dozed and half dreamed of things that made no sense. Suddenly the horrifying image of Karl returned, with Omar down on his knees in front him. Omar screwed up his face and tried to block out the image. Then, magically, Omar, transformed into Belle and it was her kneeling in front of Karl, tears running down her cheeks, crying, 'No! Omar! No!' And then Karl was Sam and Belle was still screaming, and then Sam became Omar. Then Belle was attacking him with a pickaxe, inflicting strange, bloodless punctures. Next Yasri and Kamir entered the picture, understanding nothing except their son's pain, wailing and shouting and crying for help, and when Omar could take it no longer he cried out so loudly that he woke himself. A nurse ran into the room.

'It's nothing, it's nothing,' he said to her, wiping at his eyes. 'I was just yelling at something stupid on the TV.'

The nurse gave him a curious look and took his pulse. She left the room after a few seconds, apparently satisfied that he was OK.

Omar thought of the lithe, sexy Belle, in those office clothes, in heels, with her hair expertly dyed and pulled back so perfectly, yet unable to hide the unalterable sadness in her face or the shaking of her hands. Belle's face morphed into Shayna's, alone in the back of the van after her long, long afternoon at the hands of the boys. Omar remembered her like this when, after his turn finally came,

he failed so wretchedly to arouse himself to enact one last piece of violence on her. How she had lain curled in the corner and looked at him with empty eyes as his hand worked vainly in his own underwear. He knew at best, his guilty failure was only a chance speck of mercy for her in a day of tortuous horror and at worst, he was entirely responsible for all she had been through.

His thoughts went back to Belle and that night at Gosling Park, against the concrete of the water tank, in her t-shirt and jeans, surrounded by Sam and the boys, sweating with fear, and the expression on her face as she called after him, repeatedly, to help her. As if a huge anvil had been lowered down onto him, his chest began to ache and he knew it was not a symptom of his illness. It was much worse. This was an ache that was in his flesh and in his bones and extended to the tiniest fibres and cells of his body and yet somehow also far deeper within. It was like the ache of witnessing a dying Tata Monaj but Omar knew that there was nothing he could do in the years ahead, if he had years, to change the unarguable fact that this time it *was* simply all his fault.

\*

Omar was dozing when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Someone was giving him a little shake. A gentle, familiar shake—not the slightly formal prods the nurses used when they needed him to take his medication during the night. A soft, light hand stroked his forehead. His eyes fluttered a little as they opened and adjusted to the light. He was disoriented but could tell it was daytime.

*Omar! My beautiful boy! Why this has had to happen to you? After everything! They broke all of our hearts and now they have made you sick! I cried*

*myself to death all these months! My heart burnt up inside me! It would be better if I died!*

And then a soft cheek was resting on his. He felt a trickle of warm teardrops on his skin, now merging with a tributary of his own. He hugged Yasri for the first time in over three months. He felt some strength return to him as he clung to her. But he still wanted to be lifted up further, with his feet off the ground and legs wrapped around her, to be held tightly and embraced within her folds, never to be let go again.

Kamir stood by Omar's bed with his hands clasped before him, his eyes melting at the sorrow of his wife and son. Yet, by the way he shuffled his feet and cleared his throat, he appeared awkward and slightly cowed.

Yasri slowly ceased her sobbing and lifted her head to look at Omar. This brought on a renewed spate of crying.

*Your eyes, they sink into your head. This place they keep you in, it's killing you I can see it—*

Kamir, seeing distress in Omar's eyes, put his hand on Yasri's shoulder.

'Please, *Martu,*' he said in English. 'Please, let us be happy they let you come and see him. It does not mean he is too sick to live. I speak to the doctors, I told you. This does not mean he is going to die. Look at him, he is strong!' With this, Kamir too bent down and gave Omar a hug.

Being roused from sleep and the surprise of seeing Yasri again had already left Omar feeling light-headed. But when he felt the coarseness of Kamir's two-day growth and smelt the unperfumed, mannish odour of his skin, he panicked. His legs involuntarily shot up from the end of the bed and he turned his face away in terror. Kamir recoiled.

Omar tried to regain his composure. 'I'm sorry, Baba ... I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything. I just ... um ... I just had a pain in my leg. It was nothing. It's um ... you know, you can get restless legs with lymphoma.' Omar was still wild-eyed even as he searched for a way to comfort his father. *It's good to see you, both of you*, he said in Lebanese, the words sounding thick and clumsy in his head. *Moma, I missed seeing you! Moma!* He couldn't restrain himself from reaching out to her. The gesture set off a fresh outbreak of tears and they held each other until Yasri's back could no longer bear the strain of sobbing and stooping. She pulled a chair to the side of the bed and clasped Omar's hand. They slowly began to converse, starting with questions and answers about the food at Silverwater and in the hospital, moving on to TV soaps and game shows, then to news of a relation's wedding in Lebanon and soon they were chatting and babbling excitedly about seemingly anything at all that came to mind.

Kamir perched himself at the foot of the bed, tears still in his eyes as he watched his wife battling through her grief and his youngest son mustering all his strength to connect all of them together again in a way that for a brief moment, for a sliver of borrowed time, banished the nightmare of the last miserable year to a place that was distant and unknowable.