

Innocence Waning

[Preview]

Chezdon Mitchell

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1. Chezdon

Staring out the window after a session of vigorous masturbation is complete, I notice for the first time that the season has changed from summer to autumn. It wasn't just a memory evoked by the sound of the last bell at school that liberated our class of teenagers from our daily scholastic duties and associated mundane tasks that sounds in my head. The feeling of semen begins to run down my thigh, prompting me to clean up the mess that I made with my underwear as I acknowledge that time is on my side for a change. The last bell at school rang well over a week ago and it has provided a temporary feeling of freedom to enjoy 'school holidays' which are conveniently scheduled to align with Easter.

When I ponder the colloquial term 'Down Under' or what people usually outside of Australia refer to as the largest island in the world, I think about it in perspective whilst wiping sperm off my thigh. Australia is the size of the continental United States and it is daunting to think that it is an island. The city of Melbourne is referred to as the 'Paris of the Southern Hemisphere' and others refer to it as 'The Sporting Capital of the World' whereas I just think of it as a city that gets cold in the winter and very hot in the summer where there is always good coffee being served somewhere. When I noticed the leaves starting to change colour earlier in the week, I could still be comfortable wearing a pair of shorts with a hoodie outside. It was then that I realised just how much I enjoy this time of the year living in Melbourne.

Whilst on school holidays I enjoy an additional aspect of freedom as my father considers himself too important to take any time off from work. He must run a company and boss people around who mainly reside overseas. This 'offshore

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labour' gets paid in the day what it costs me to buy a coffee and a Big Mac. It is quite common for the parents of my peers to take the school holidays off to spend it with their kids and because of this, the traffic congestion eases in this major city. Even the rabble that 'rally' or should I say protest about the government also take a break. Most Aussies seem to take a vacation in their lounge room. Sitting in front of the television watching the football, shouting and screaming at the various players as the sun sets and the day turns into the night is one of our national pastimes. I don't mind the football but I don't obsess about it like some of my mates do. We certainly never have just a quiet night in watching it with so many other interesting things to do virtually on our doorstep. One girl that I know of became infamous as she was ejected from the footy at the Melbourne Cricket Ground for shouting racial abuse at an aboriginal player called Adam Goodes. Much like how my father enjoys providing expert commentary on the sport and how he demeans the Chinese that he must remotely work with by using various colourful names and slurs, I decided long ago that we are all just a little bit racist. This inherent tribalism, in turn, makes watching the sport interesting. We just don't watch it together as a family.

In the distance behind my closed bedroom door, I hear my father shouting something presumably into his phone followed by the front door slamming a few minutes later. The almost daily morning disturbance motivates me to get my naked body up from the bed. The sun is shining and there must be something to amuse me besides the online antics of my friends or just wasting time looking at silly videos of cats. I am keen to avoid the melodrama of Facebook having just jacked off. I haven't done any physical exercise for a few weeks since we were forced to participate in an athletics carnival at school. Feeling sloth-like as I wander around my room scratching my stomach and yawning, I fondly recall the last athletics carnival. There is not much to do besides undress my peers with my eyes, talk shit and post photos via Instagram every third

minute. Being rather competitive, I take these events very seriously and I strive to run faster than the others. Talking shit and giving a shit are not mutually exclusive when it comes to me. Rather than waste yet another day of my break from high school and feeling motivated after pondering the last athletics carnival, I slip on my black Nike trainers and my associated gym kit and decide to go for a run. At first, I was thinking that I was losing my mind. Nobody that is sixteen years old wants to do anything active or productive at 7:30 AM during school holidays. I know that I am a little bit different though.

Although it is cold outside, I decide not to wear a hoodie since I get hot very easily. I jog towards the footpath that leads me first behind the Crown Casino in Southbank and then on to the pedestrian trail that is shared with cyclists which I follow to Beacon Cove at Port Melbourne. My jog evolves into a run, and I easily finish the four kilometres stretch in twenty minutes. Calling into the café opposite the pier where the Spirit of Tasmania vessel is docked, I order a much-needed coffee and wipe the sweat from my brow using my shirt as I wait for a mug of coffee to be brought to me. Sloth again begins to overcome me as I sit back and watch the tourists disembark from the huge boat that just arrived from Tasmania. Checking my phone for new tweets and text messages lead me to identify a void in my digital life so early in the morning, I then realise that I really shouldn't care about what is happening out in my virtual world. I need to just live in the moment. I don't need music or any distraction and I put my phone into flight mode. After gulping the coffee and doing a cursory scan of a newspaper that someone kindly left behind, I leave the café and decide to run a stretch of Port Philip bay which takes me past a sandy beach and then finally to Westgate Park. This nature reserve not only has a private go-kart racing track but also a saltwater lake and a curiously a freshwater lake. It also seems to be the home for many birds and diverse wildlife. Since it hasn't rained in greater Melbourne for a few weeks, I thought I would continue my jog through the park since the dirt tracks

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should not be muddy and I will not ruin my shoes. Spotting the public toilet before the dirt paths diverge toward the Westgate Bridge, I venture inside.

Urinating is just part of life and it is such a waste of time. It isn't until I complete the mundane task and after pulling my sweaty black cotton Bonds underwear over my flaccid cock that I notice another bloke staring. He is playing with his engorged dick whilst standing at the metal piss trough. Probably because I am going about my business dutifully with the intention to use the facilities for what they were designed for, I didn't even notice this gentleman enter the brick shithouse and stand next to me. My heart begins to beat fast and I can feel my blood pressure rising as I realise that he is getting off whilst leering at me.

I feel like time has come to a stand-still. His hard cock is just a few metres from my hand. My body is seemingly frozen and I am in a state of shock but I am also perversely excited. As I begin to salivate, I watch the stranger push his foreskin over his cockhead and then back down, exposing the pink mushroom head. "Want me to suck you?" The stranger whispers to me in rural accent. He continues to caress his boner with more rigour as he waits for me to answer or to react.

I can only make a guttural sound which emulates something like the wildlife that calls the park home would make. Freeing myself from this wrinkle of time, I retreat through the open door and back into the daylight. I begin to run down the dirt path and toward the Westgate bridge at the opposite end of the nature reserve. I stop once, looking behind me to see if the stranger from the toilet block is running after me. I feel slightly disappointed when I discover that he is not. Feeling like I need to overwhelm my senses and distract me from the filthy thoughts rushing around in my head, I push my headphones into my ears. I find the debut album by one of my favourite

Aussie bands, *5 Seconds of Summer* and hope that once I start the music, it will drown out my lurid thoughts. I start to run again and wonder what it would have felt like getting my penis sucked by the stranger. I smirk as I imagine jerking off the bloke and visualising him cumming on the floor gets me further aroused. I force myself to think about aging politicians, terrorism and other horrible imagery to banish the lurid thoughts from my mind which then tames my erection after some long and painful seconds. I continue to run as if possessed by some unknown force that is willing me forward as fast as I can humanly go. After regaining control of my body, I turn around and sprint back the way I came from at top speed until fatigue begins to overwhelm me. I want to get back to the toilet block and see the stranger again. More importantly, I want to grab his big throbbing dick. I make a noisy entrance as I stumble through the door of the public restroom and I am absolutely gutted when I find nobody inside.

Feeling both physically and emotionally drained, I retreat into the sunshine again, abandoning the potent smells of bleach and piss and sit on a wooden bench. I pull my phone out my pocket and take it off flight mode. The device then greets me with numerous alerts and message just a second later. Multiple queries appear asking me if I want to hang out – the requests stream in at the early hour as the rays of the sun begin to burn my face. Nobody ever sends me a message reading 'Want a blowjob?' or 'Come and fuck my tight asshole senseless' which is very disappointing. Obscene thoughts fuelled by my over-active imagination quickly return and is accompanied by a sense of regret for deciding to run away from potentially my first sexual experience that did not involve my hand or a piece of fruit. I am reluctantly sucked back into reality when my phone begins to vibrate, announcing that a caller with a "Private Number" wants my attention.

"Hello, this is Chezdon."

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Silence.

I repeat "Hi, this is Chezdon." However, this time I add additional emphasis when saying my name.

More silence. I end the call and begin to jog slowly back towards home.

2. Jayden

I am roused from my slumber by a familiar voice shouting through the wall that shares the common wall with my bedroom. A vivid memory of a dream about being in a public toilet begins to fade from my weary head as I stretch, knocking a pillow onto my cluttered bedroom floor. My father has an irritating habit of using the speakerphone functionality on his mobile so he can type on his laptop at the same time he shouts at people, thereby disturbing the early-morning peace in our happy household. Why he is up at 6:45 AM on a Saturday morning working instead of nursing a hangover is confusing me at this early hour. Slowly emerging from my sleepy haze and after wiping crust from my right eye it dawns on me that my dream was in fact linked to a very intriguing reality. I remain in stasis after picking up my pillow and holding it across my bare chest like how I dreamed what I would do with the throbbing cock that I watched dance yesterday.

A cold shower is followed by using the hair dryer on my blond mane which tips off my father that I am in fact conscious. He sends me a text message querying if I want to go out for breakfast. This is how he prefers to communicate with me when I have my bedroom door closed. I assume he is afraid of throwing open the portal to my realm and seeing me pleasure myself as he has on a few occasions. Instead of shouting through the common wall and my closed bedroom door, we agreed that messaging via our telephonic devices is the most prudent, especially when it is such a god-awful early hour on a relaxing weekend. I respond with a straight-forward 'sure' to his kind invite to 'brekkie' as Australians call it since it has been at least a week since I have even seen my father. I begin to rummage through one of the many heaving bags that are filled with clothes that I have yet to wear that rest on the floor of my closet. These unworn items of apparel were recently purchased

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using the spoils of the cash winnings that I gratefully accepted from my father after the outcome of a few horse races were successfully bet on. He generously passed me a wad of sweaty cash and told me to go on a shopping spree with his winnings. I expect that Flemington Racecourse will be his destination again today and selfishly I not only want him to win every meeting so I will profit, but it will mean that there is a good chance that I will have the apartment all to myself. Since he wants to get breakfast and bond, it is a tell-tale sign that he will be going to the track all day to shout at the beasts that run around in circles all afternoon with his mates.

We dine and chat at a café on Southbank Promenade which overlooks the murky Yarra River which is near our residential tower. Breakfast turns out to be a very sedate affair as my father is occupied with sending messages to his mates and reading the latest tips on the horses that will be running today. I enjoy a plate of roasted chorizo in a watery and flavourless tomato sauce along with two poached eggs. When my father is not distracted, I simultaneously field a thousand questions about school, my friends, girls and share my thoughts on current events as I chew on the components of my breakfast. The conversation evolves to the point that he begins to disparage the names of horses that are running later today and like a galloper himself, he suddenly bolts to meet his friends after I give him my sincere wish that he backs many winners today.

Before leaving the riverside restaurant, I order two more cups of black coffee and occupy myself by sending messages to my friends. My best mate Jayden is the first to respond saying that he will take the train into the city centre to hang out. With some plans in motion, I relax holding a glass of water and watch people stroll down the promenade whilst my best mate navigates the intricacies of the Melbourne public transport system. After he sets off from his home in the suburbs, we agree to meet at Federation Square, which is across from the

iconic Flinders Street train station after some hearty negotiation.

Federation Square is a short walk from the restaurant in Southbank and is a popular meeting place because of the many bars and cafés. There is also a huge outdoor television screen in the plaza which broadcasts every iteration of the sport. There is an abundance of improvised street furniture so tourists, teenagers and the corporate lunch-time lovers all have a place to chill out and relax. This is also a great place to people-watch. Lately, I have found more people watching me and my friends hanging out in this public space compared to the other way around though. I have been chatted-up by trashy girls that can barely string a sentence together since I am often there waiting for friends to turn up. These admirers all ask me silly questions which prove tedious, but as I learned from my father, it is always best to be cordial to everyone since you never know how silly words or abrupt actions will impact you in the future. I also would prefer not to get my arse kicked by a group of girls, so I consider my politeness an act of self-preservation.

Like clockwork, Jayden turns up at the agreed time. He is my most punctual friend. He even found a few spare minutes to purchase a blue Slurpee from the nearby 7-11 convenience store. "How can you drink that shit?" I shout at him when he is some distance away after I spot him with the fluorescent drink in his hand.

Jayden matches my volume and returns serve. "It is good to see you. You bloody fucking asshole! How is my anorexic best mate?" His question encourages the nosey tourists taking photos in the immediate area to stop and stare. I feel uncomfortable for a change after the question which a feeling that I don't experience often. To have some fun, I make loud retching noises and bend down holding my stomach. The routine doesn't entertain those that are milling around me in

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the public area as much as it does me and Jayden. The spectators quickly move along but not before a few take photographs memorialising the wayward youth and how they spend their downtime on a lazy Saturday morning in central Melbourne.

Jayden is wearing black skinny jeans which I suspect belong to me and an over-sized white shirt. As a slave to the latest fashion trend, at some point, he cut the sleeves off his shirt, which have left his pale shoulders at the mercy to the morning sun. As we embrace and slap each other on the back repeatedly, I wonder why he is dressed like a slut. "Are you going to walk the project runway? Are we going to try to sneak into a club or something?" Jayden has a girlfriend who also complains about how he dresses. He wants to appear like he is fashion forward but just comes off looking like a teenage male whore outside of school hours. What I do find refreshing is that he doesn't care what anyone else thinks. His nipples, chest and shoulders all alternate being on display since he cut out so much fabric it is hard not to stare at his exposed body.

After sucking blue ice through the straw, my friend stares across the road. My eyes follow his and I look at the mob of people exiting from the train station. Jayden groans and then clears his throat. "I don't care what we do today, but I am not getting on that goddamned train again. Every idiot in this city is coming in to watch the footy today." He takes another slurp of blue ice and then coughs.

I scratch the back of my neck and then push my dirty blonde hair forward over my ears, before interlocking my hands behind my head. "Screw the train and the fucking footy today, mate. Why don't we head down to Port Melbourne?" The suggestion spits from my mouth without giving the logistics much thought. I am not going to tell him what happened in the public toilet block which borders Port Melbourne but I am keen to go have a look at the nature reserve again. I really doubt

he would be very supportive if I told him that casual sex may be on offer in the public toilet though.

Jayden stares at me with a disturbed look on his face. "Why the fuck would you want to go there? There is fuck all to do in Port Melbourne." He takes another slurp from the cup of blue ice and coughs again.

"There is a beach!" I exclaim feigning confidence in my plan. "It is going to be a nice day for a change so let's take advantage of the last of the warm weather before the season changes." I sound like the bloke that reads the weather report on the silly breakfast television show that I watch. "The sun is shining; the birds are chirping." I look up in the sky hoping to find birds overhead. Jayden notices me roll my eyes as a Channel Seven helicopter passes overhead.

Jayden chortles. "Look at me, mate. Does it look like I am dressed for the fucking beach?" He intently watches a middle-aged heterosexual couple walking past us holding hands. "You know I am not much of a beach person."

I cross my legs at my ankles and balance on my toes. "It is something different to do, I am bored. It is not as out of control there as compared to St Kilda and you did say that you wanted to get away from the idiots here in the city. I just don't want to sit around here all day like an asshole." Paying for my friends to partake in various activities, feeding and hydrating them seems to be an expectation now since my father started giving me large amounts of money. He calls it a bonus to my allowance as the result of his winning streak at the horse races as of late which makes me try to bribe my friend. Oh, my father gave me two hundred dollars so hey, we can spend it. Let's just go."

"Fine. After you, sir." Jayden bends down and outstretches his arm in the direction of the closest tram stop.

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Jayden continues to slurp the blue ice from the cup as we casually walk to the tram platform on Collins Street. I notice him walking with shorter strides, his gait being inhibited by his very skinny jeans. In between gossiping about our classmates, I briefly wonder how musty the smell of his crotch would be after walking around for a while on this abnormally warm autumn day. Garish thoughts quickly turn into ones of self-preservation as we jaywalk to the tram stop avoiding speeding taxis, which is positioned in the centre of the busy street.

The tram arrives and is packed with travellers and their belongings. The commuters were most likely residing at the Grand Hyatt and the Westin hotels which are in the immediate area and are travelling to Port Melbourne to catch the Spirit of Tasmania which I assume is leaving at some point later today. My father always rubbishes that boat and refers to it as an overpriced tourist trap. You can fly from Melbourne to Tasmania for around eight dollars in just over an hour. Why would you go to all the effort to take the bloody boat that hauls both humans and cargo on an expensive overnight trip? The rationale doesn't make much sense to me but the gullible tourists still reckon it is a good idea since the service remains in business.

We travel on the tram southbound without saying a word. We endure the abrupt stopping and starting of the tram which jolts me from side to side for the entire twenty-minute journey. The tram tracks follow parallel to the pedestrian footpath which I ran along just yesterday. The journey ends at Beacon Cove where frazzled tourists pull their bulky bags off and onto the platform and we follow. I suggest that we buy drinks from the café that occupies the former train station, where I enjoyed my caffeine hit yesterday. Jayden agrees. Quickly, one coffee turns into four and with some urgency in my voice, I announce that I am ready to go. Jayden expresses his interest in languishing on the deck and basking in the sun like a lazy seal which

immediately frustrates me. I want to go and explore the nature reserve and not sit around here any longer.

Not only did the owner of the café look at me with a curious look as I powered through the fourth mug of coffee like a man obsessed with imported beans, but Jayden provides a running commentary to amuse himself. "The boy won't eat but will live on a diet of coffee and Coke. You should go into politics or try to be a model!" Jayden likes to stir me up, sometimes so incessantly that he just sounds ridiculous. "Did you eat anything today?"

"Why do you care that I drink so much coffee? I like it. You drink so many goddamned blue Slurpee's that you probably single-handedly manage to keep that 7-11 franchise open in Federation Square." I pause long enough to finish the last of the coffee in my mug. "Of course, I ate today asshole. I don't know why you have this idea that I never eat anything." I scoff before abruptly standing up and swat at a fly buzzing near my ear with my hand.

"Yeah sure, you eat. I never see you eat anything." Jayden winks. "Prove it." Jayden pushes his chair back, stands up and follows me as I walk down the stairs which leads to the foreshore.

"What is wrong with you? It always seems like I am eating. I just don't eat the shit that you like to eat." I pause and watch the tram that we arrived on glide away from us along tracks back to the centre of Melbourne. "Speaking of food, I read a tweet earlier saying that the taco truck will be in this area right about now, so I will shout some tacos if you want and prove to you once and for all that I actually do eat." Being an average height with a low percentage of fat in my body, I could have easily pulled on the skinny jeans that Jayden is wearing and not struggle to walk. His discomfort is no doubt fuelling his attitude.

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I lied when I proclaimed that the taco truck is in the area. It does randomly turn up in the industrial estate not far from here as I have tracked it down on multiple occasions in the past. I really like Mexican food, but I have no intention of walking into the industrial estate today. Most of the streets are not even pedestrian friendly and it is the last place that I want to spend my Saturday. I want to stroll along the beachfront and end up at Westgate Park after all.

We follow the footpath that deviates from the edge of the sandy beach that borders the bay. Walking near the industrial estate which borders Westgate Park is when Jayden starts to whine incessantly. He claims that he is hot and demands to know how much longer we must walk. "Where is this damned taco truck, mate?"

I fob him off with a suggestion. "You can use my key to tear up your skinny jeans and turn them into skinny shorts." He looks at me like I have lost my mind.

"Fuck you. Where is the taco truck?" Sacrificing comfort for fashion seems ridiculous. There are only a few people around and who will judge him?

I point at the footpath that leads to Westgate Park. "I need to hang a piss." It is not a lie. I really do need to use a bathroom.

"Maybe you shouldn't have had so much coffee." Jayden lifts his shirt up and wipes his face with it. "Just go ask them across the street."

I roll my eyes and continue to walk towards the nature reserve and Jayden follows. "It isn't like I can walk into one of those warehouses and ask them to use their toilet mate." I continue to plod along the footpath. "Jesus Christ. Let's just go to the park. There has to be a toilet but if there isn't, I will just piss

on a tree." Jayden nods his head and I feel satisfied knowing that I am getting my way.

Being high on caffeine and acutely aware of my surroundings this time around, I notice that the small car park is filled with motorcars as we walk into the reserve. Most of the vehicles have a mere single male occupant just sitting in their car and everyone is staring at us. It is weird that these blokes just drive to the park, only to just hang out in their car. Then I have a light bulb moment and assume something far more sinister is afoot. I am glad that I coerced Jayden on this adventure as I begin to feel very wary of my surroundings.

Jayden gleefully points at the now familiar public toilet block even before I catch sight of it. My head is turned and looking over my shoulder at all the men sitting in their cars leering as he taps me on the shoulder and points in the direction of the shithouse. My best mate leads the way into the toilets which shocks me. This wasn't part of my master plan. I really wanted him to innocently wait outside this public facility and read his social media feeds. I wanted to spend time inside and hope that someone would be in there wanting to touch me. Disenchanted, I follow my friend through the open door and into the public toilets. I immediately notice the strong stench of bleach and piss. Jayden skips into a vacant cubicle and slams the door shut. I hear a latch snap, securing the door from the inside. I scowl as I look at the graffiti on the walls of the structure. My eyes follow the vandalism on the floor and then to the ceiling. After sighing, I stand at the metal trough alone wondering why I thought something erotic would happen in these squalid conditions. I take a deep breath and release another audible sigh and wonder what is wrong with me. Who aspires to hook-up in a dank toilet in a park?

A trifecta is when you place a bet on three horses to finish the race in an exact order. Gamblers can make massive returns betting money in such a way; however, I think it is too complex

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and risky. Why bother adding extra variables when it hard enough to pick just one winning horse? I stand at the trough and decide to just piss. I unzip my skinny jeans and pull down on the band of my sweat-soaked boxer briefs, liberating my cock into the musty air. I release a stream of piss so mighty that it splashes off the back of the aluminium trough. I quickly side-step on the metal grate so that my urine doesn't splatter back on me. The splashing that my piss makes off the shiny metal distracts me and I do not immediately notice when someone walks into the five-star facility. When I first notice the bloke stepping onto the grate next to me, I jump. My heart begins to beat faster as I watch him spread his legs as he balances on the grate. He stands a mere metre from me and begins to unfasten his belt. After fiddling with his jeans, he frees his soft thick cock and begins to piss. Behind the closed toilet door, Jayden releases the longest and loudest fart that I have ever heard in my life. The release of gas lasts for at least five seconds and sounds absolutely eerie.

"Goddamn! I feel like a new man!" Jayden shouts. The words echo through the chamber of old piss, shit and bleach. "Yeehaw!!!" He yells like a cowboy in the wild west would.

My phone begins to vibrate unexpectedly in my back pocket. I recognise the custom rapid-fire vibration I associated with my father's contact card. "Jesus," I mutter. He gives me nearly limitless freedom if I remain at the top of my class but more importantly if I answer the phone promptly when he rings. Time is money or so he says. I try to hold onto my cock and finish urinating. I desperately try to suppress my laughter as the commentary that Jayden is shouting from behind the closed stall door is hilarious. I struggle to retrieve my phone from my back pocket with my free hand. I end up pushing my skinny jeans down to my bent knees as I struggle to pull the phone from my pocket whilst feebly attempting to keep control of the stream of urine. The bloke standing next to me, who I suspect had untoward intentions at first begins to cackle. Jayden starts

to sing a song, clueless as to what is taking place on the other side of the closed door as the words echo through the room.

When I finally get my phone to my ear, I greet my father in a huff. "Hey, dad." My jeans rest on my knees and I desperately try to pull them up with one hand, much to the amusement of the stranger who begins to laugh. I wedge the Samsung phone between my ear and my shoulder and grab the sides of my jeans and yank them up after putting my cock back in its prison.

I step away from the trough desperately trying to fasten the top button of my jeans, embarrassed as the stranger is still watching me with a smile on his face. "Where are you? You had better not be at some pub. Who is singing?"

"Chezdon's father is my hero!" Jayden sings in a falsetto from behind the security of the closed stall door. "There goes my hero, watch him as he goes!" He decides to channel Dave Grohl of *Foo Fighters* fame as I scurry outside, leaving the chaos that the restroom has devolved into behind so that I can have a conversation devoid of distractions.

"No, don't worry, I am near Sandridge Beach with Jayden, and honestly I was just hanging a piss if you really must know." I am confident that my father would have detected a fair amount of agitation in my voice as beads of sweat start to tumble down the centre of my back. "What's up?"

"Why are you in Port Melbourne of all places? There is nothing to do there!" My father exclaims in a bemused way. I explain that we are on the hunt for the taco truck and that we just had coffee in Beacon Cove.

Too much information quickly bores my father. He proceeds to announce that he backed some winners running the first race at Flemington and if I want to buy a new phone that I can today. He continues to say that he bet on a trifecta and there

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are only good times to be had. I consider telling him that I seemingly won a trifecta also. A random guy was getting his cock out next to me. Win. Jayden farting, commentating and singing in the public toilet. Win. Me losing control of my trousers as my beloved father decides to randomly ring. Win. Trifecta.

I watch the horse bolt from the public toilet so to speak as my father lets me in on where he hides a stash of cash in the apartment. The stranger who just a minute ago was smiling at me whilst standing at the trough leaves the shithouse and walks past me laughing. Before ending the call, my father insists that I enjoy myself and to look after Jayden. If he only knew what his only child had on his mind when he rang, I am sure he would be mortified.

Jayden emerges into the sunlight wiping his brow with the back of his hand. "Why are you so red?" My face turns red easily when I am warm or when I am embarrassed. "What is wrong with you?"

My eyes go wide and I think of something to say to distract him. "Why the hell are you sweating?" It was cold and clammy in the public toilet after all.

"Who do I complain to mate? What Council oversees this area? There was no goddamned toilet paper so I had to wipe my arse with my socks and my underwear. Whoever has to clean that shithole will have a surprise waiting for them." Jayden stretches his arms over his head and locks his hands together which reveals his dark brown armpit hair.

I smile and am at a loss for words. "Oh god." Images then come to mind of Jayden wiping his arse with his clothes and I begin to laugh hysterically. "Oh fuck!" I screech.

"Yeah, I left the shit-soiled underwear and socks on the floor, mate. That is right, laugh you fucker. I am sure there is some sick fuck that will get off in there with them too." Jayden yawns and then smiles, knowing that he is amusing me. "I don't even want to think about what happens in that shithouse. It is disgusting."

I continue laughing like a lunatic. A plethora of bizarre thoughts has managed to converge in a matter of minutes. I can't stop chuckling at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. Morbid curiosity pulls me back into the public toilet to inspect the carnage that Jayden abandoned. I open the door to the cubicle that Jayden used only to see two socks with shit smeared on them laying innocently on the concrete floor next to a pair of pink Bonds underwear with a black waistband that is also soiled. The smell of shit makes me gag and I retch.

I scamper outside into the bright light of the autumn day and begin to snicker. "Pink underwear?"

"Shut the fuck up, I like them." Jayden turns around and starts to walk in the direction of Beacon Cove and the tram platform. "I am over this shit, let's go."

I continue to giggle and briefly jog to catch up to Jayden and slap him on his back. "You did like them you mean."

Jayden looks flustered and wipes the sweat forming on his upper lip using the back of his hand. "I never should have come to this shit area. Now I am going to get a chafe."

"Whatever, let's just go. Do you want to go find the taco truck?" I take a deep breath and hope that he will not want to go into the industrial estate and try to locate the truck that I am confident will not be in the area today.

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"No, I am over it. I just want to get out of here." He lifts his shirt again and wipes the sweat off his face.

For the next fifteen minutes, Jayden complains that his skinny jeans are now rubbing him in all the wrong places. He provides me with a blow-by-blow commentary like you would get when watching a boxing match on television. It only takes a few minutes to walk to the waterfront, but Jayden's mood has turned feral. "Stop whining! Jesus Christ!" I cry. "That is what you get for wearing skinny jeans that are too small for you."

"Whatever asshole." Jayden sits on a wall that partitions the shared footpath and bicycle path. He leans back and puts his rests the palms of his hand on the dirt and looks thoughtfully over Port Philip Bay.

"Look." I point. "There is an IGA. It is a shit grocery store, but they probably have some socks at least." I have stopped in this IGA before to buy Gatorade during one of my previous runs through the area. I vaguely recall that they sell some basic items of clothing.

Jayden quickly walks into the small market and I follow. He locates a pair of underwear that is devoid of any style. He has found plain white briefs hanging on a hook next to where mops and brooms are displayed. We both hunt for socks and given my surprise that they have underwear for sale, I am surprised not to find any. Jayden grabs a pair of scissors from the office supply aisle and I follow him to the checkout area. "Get out some cash mate and pay, please." I pull a fifty-dollar gold-coloured note from my pocket and hand it to the attendant and he returns some cash and coins to me.

After walking outside, Jayden points at my feet. "Give me your thongs." I methodically kick them off and they strike him on each of his shins. He sits on the low brick wall nearby and unties his black Converse shoes. He kicks them off with such

force that they hit the Westpac ATM machine mounted on the wall of the grocery store. I am sure many things, including foul language, has been thrown in the direction of that ATM, but never a pair of shoes.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "Can I do anything to help?" I scratch my head.

"I'll be back." Jayden walks away.

Barefoot, I carefully stride to where his shoes landed. I never walk on the pavement or anywhere without shoes which have made my feet unnaturally soft and sensitive. "Where are you going?" I push my blond fringe out of my eyes and off my damp forehead. I wedge the longer strands of hair behind my ear.

"Look!" I follow the direction that Jayden is pointing at. "You see that toilet block next to the café where you drank a litre of coffee? You could have used that toilet and we could have avoided all of this drama."

Jayden walks away with my thongs on presumably because, without socks, walking was painful wearing only the Converse. He disappears into the toilet block which gives me an opportunity to catch up on my social media feeds. Not finding anything interesting, I pull his shoes on, which are a bit big for me but not so ill-fitting that I must walk like a clown.

My best mate eventually emerges and I immediately notice that he took my original advice. He has cut up his skinny jeans and made them into skinny shorts. His snow-white and hairy legs contrast somewhat against the short black skinny shorts that he has produced on a whim. He looks a bit silly but I don't make a comment as I don't want to be abused. Besides, who am I to judge?

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My phone begins to vibrate in my back pocket once again. As my own clothes are properly fitted to my body this time, I retrieve the device without much effort. "Hi, this is Chezdon." There is no response once again from the 'Unknown' person who is calling me. I repeat myself again and then the other party terminates the call. "What the fuck," I mumble.

"Who was that?" Jayden scratches his knee. "You look pissed off."

"I don't know. I keep getting calls from a silent number and the person just hangs up. It is getting annoying." I push my phone back into my rear pocket.

"Oh well, fuck them. Let's go spend your money. What did your father want?" Jayden yawns again. His mood has noticeably improved.

I smile and recall my father saying that I should buy a new phone and celebrate his win. "His wager paid and he is partying." I notice the tram gliding towards us along the tracks in the distance. "The bloody tram is coming."

"He is always in party mode. I love your father!" Jayden exclaims with a newly found sense of vigour and enthusiasm. He follows me to the platform. I hear my thongs making a clicking noise against the balls of his feet as he catches up to me and slaps me on the back.

Jayden walks past me taking an interest in his phone as someone taps me on the shoulder "Excuse me mate, you dropped this." A voice from behind me says. I turn around and recognise the man as being the stranger that was thoroughly amused by my antics in the public toilet earlier. He has a smile plastered on his face. He hands me a folded-up piece of paper which I accept and shove into my pocket. "Thanks, mate" is all say as he walks back to the foreshore. My heart begins to race

again as I am desperate to know what is written on the piece of paper. It certainly does not belong to me.

When I am confident that Jayden is completely engrossed in the world that exists on his phone, it is only then I stealthily remove the piece of paper from my pocket and read it.

Tomorrow. 10:30 AM. Same place as before.

With some subterfuge, I roll the scrap of paper into a small tight ball and shove it back into my pocket.

"Look at this!" Jayden thrusts his phone in front of my face. I briefly see a photo of his girlfriend's breasts. I admire the photograph and notice the elderly couple behind us having a look.

I push the phone back towards Jayden's face. "Nice. Do you want to go shopping or something? I can buy you some new skinnies and some new pink underwear." I snigger and yank my phone from my back pocket again. "I can't believe you wear pink underwear."

"Don't take the piss mate, but yeah. Let's go." Jayden again takes interest in his social media feeds as we board the air-conditioned tram. "I really did like that pair of underwear. It is a damned shame I had to lose them."

I resist the urge to say that I would have thoroughly enjoyed seeing my best mate wearing just that pair of underwear.

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3. Bryce

The journey by tram into the centre of Melbourne seems tediously slow as I sit in the cool carriage with my feet resting on the seat in front of me. The air conditioning blowing onto the top of my head isn't sufficient to cool my body down though. Musing that I should have followed my own advice and cut up my own skinny jeans would certainly have made this excursion more comfortable. The morning sun is quickly becoming excruciating as it traverses the sky above and shines through the window on my lightly tanned arms, face and neck.

Jayden looks up from his phone and stops tapping on the screen. "What the hell is wrong with you, mate? Your face is bright red." He tilts his head to the side and seemingly finds me more interesting than whatever is on his Twitter feed. "You look stressed out."

I begin to rub at the nape of my neck and feel the damp shirt sticking to my back. "Nothing, it is just fucking hot." I rub the side of my head on my shoulder and cross my legs at my ankles, which is my signature pose. "I should have worn shorts."

Jayden rolls his eyes. I am sure that he is thinking that he was the clever one after making alterations to his wardrobe and I should have taken my own advice. I am jealous of his newfound comfort. "You are a strange kid, Chez." He returns his attention to his phone and begins to tap and swipe at the screen swiftly using a single digit.

My imagination kicks into overdrive. Graphic imagery of what the stranger who passed the note wants to do with me inside the public toilets appear like a PowerPoint slideshow presentation in my head. The bloke doesn't want to just talk about footy or the weather, that much I know for

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certain. I am equally intrigued and terrified at the same time. These oscillating feelings are causing me to sweat profusely and have introduced unneeded stressors into my relatively sedate life. The stranger knows what he wants and I have no idea what to do or what to expect besides just turn up for our date. "Why am I strange?" I scrutinise Jayden from head to toe and try to distract myself from my vivid thoughts. "Look at you. You define the word strange, mate."

Jayden smiles. "I am colourful and eccentric." The tram suddenly grinds to a stop on Collins Street, delivering our sweaty bodies back into the centre of Melbourne. We fight our way past the pole-huggers that selfishly obstruct the open door of the carriage and try desperately to push our way off the tram. The next battle is past the influx of rude commuters that try to advance into the carriage before all of the passengers completely alight. It is a bit like a game of rugby I have found. I just put my head and shoulders down and if people don't get out of the way and let you off, they get knocked in the process. It helps to have a fully laden school backpack on weekdays though as you can casually hit people with it. I let out a groan that is drowned out by the noise of the commuters and the sounds of the city as I finally shove myself off the tram. "Emporium, food, coffee?" Jayden shouts. "I am hungry."

"Reverse the order and I will buy," I yell. Jayden then quickly takes the lead navigating past the pedestrians on Collins Street and I follow my comrade.

I am not sure if I really need more coffee since I am already firing on all cylinders, but I do like trying new places and enjoy it if it is brewed correctly with exotic beans. "Let's get lunch at Emporium after coffee," Jayden suggests.

We stop momentarily and watch a busker who is performing a cover of a *Green Day* song in front of one of the many shopping arcades. Jayden taps me on the stomach. "Come on. Nothing

to see here, this bloke is shit. I still haven't heard back by the way." Jayden has been on pins and needles since trying out for *X Factor Australia* a little over a month ago. After the original try-out, he was called back to perform again so whenever he hears a song by *Green Day*, he becomes anxious as that is the band he covered in his first audition.

I follow Jayden through the maddening crowd of shoppers and dawdlers. Whilst walking, I check social media and respond to notifications feeling as if I can walk, type and read at the same time, that I am a true multitasker. I read a message from my mate, Bryce. He writes he is in the city and is keen to meet up for lunch. I advise him that we plan to have lunch in the Emporium food court and invite him to meet up with us.

I have known Bryce for a little over a year and first met him at one of the many athletic carnivals. I first approached him and made small talk about what he was drinking, Cherry Dr Pepper. I thought I was the only one in Australia that enjoyed drinking this beautiful carbonated drink. Originally, I simply wanted to know where he bought it. It is a rare find outside of the United States and I seldom find cans of it for sale in Australia. Bryce educated me as to where I can source the soda in bulk, and even directed me to an online forum that tracks oddities like Cherry Dr Pepper in Australia. Bryce doesn't attend our school so I found it easy to foster a friendship with him because he is not caught up in the political dramas, social circles and gossip rings that affect not only my peers but me. He has hung out with a few of my mates, including Jayden, and finds him tolerable. Since Bryce isn't directly involved with my cliques, it was easy to admit to him that I am gay. He asked me what my sexual orientation is a few months ago after first articulating that he wasn't trying to hit on me or demonise me in the lead up to the question. Bryce, like Jayden, has a girlfriend and despite my penchant for the same-sex, I never felt sexually aroused by Bryce. He just isn't my type. I tried to explain what I am looking for to him but I could not really describe what I

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really like. At the time, I had to just say that I was simply looking. He did make the sage statement that when the right boy comes along, I will know it though.

Jayden and I continue to dodge a phalanx of weekend shoppers, tourists, mothers pushing baby carriages and more buskers. We stumble into one of the last surviving Starbucks in Australia, escaping from the crowds. I now need more caffeine and I expect Jayden to spend most of the time Snapchatting. We queue up, order, give our names and wait patiently staring at our respective phones.

"Bryce is keen to meet up," I mumble and lean against the window. "Do you want to get some Mexican for lunch?"

"What does your boyfriend want?" Jayden takes a selfie with me as I raise my middle finger. He sends it to someone via Snapchat. "Do you blokes hang out every weekend now?"

"Just to chill out and get lunch. Nothing too sinister mate. I suggested we meet at the Mexican place at Emporium." My eyes scan the customers sipping from their coffee cups. "I am hungry, mate. I am shitty that we didn't get anything from the taco truck." I raise my voice just to reinforce the fact that I not I do eat food and am in fact hungry for some Mexican.

"I finally get tacos!" Jayden screams with unexpected enthusiasm. "Tacos! Tacos! More tacos! Give me tacos!" Jayden chants and points at the ceiling. He shouts as loud as he can, "tacos!" Everyone around us scowls at him. He must have had his heart set on enjoying the spoils of the taco truck. At least I wasn't caught out in a lie about my earlier intentions for visiting Port Melbourne. "Jesus Christ, I love their tacos!"

"Really, I never would have guessed." I smile. Jayden's antics are entertaining.

A Starbucks employee with a stolid face and flat nose barks from behind the counter, "Jayden! Grande Mocha with cream."

"He loves the cream, give him extra!" I shout back which makes Jayden grimace. "He will show you his nipples for more cream." Jayden stands at the counter and expresses his appreciation to the worker. He offers his apologies for his obnoxious mate and I, in turn, offer more words to further embarrass him. "Don't worry, he shows his body to anyone who wants a look for five dollars." I laugh hysterically. Jayden quickly walks back holding his cup and shoulder charges me, knocking me against the window. His reaction encourages me to continue laughing.

The now familiar voice from behind the counter barks. "Cheese-don! Iced Caramel Macchiato." I quickly stride to the counter, grab the drink, thank the server and jog through the open door of the store before Jayden starts to mimic how she pronounced my name.

Jayden catches up with me outside the newly renovated Emporium building. We navigate the corridors passing high-end shops and travel on many escalators which take us to the top floor where the food court is. It isn't a typical food court that you find in a shopping plaza. The big-name franchises do not have a presence here. Speciality food outlets that cater to those that want a more refined dining experience after shopping are on offer. We join a queue of other hungry people and wait to order tacos from the Mexican place that I previously suggested. When we finally get to the front of the line, Jayden orders frozen margaritas, however, the clever server behind the counter requests his identification and then is promptly refused service. "Maybe if you dressed a bit more conservatively, someone might believe you are eighteen and not try to card you, mate."

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"Fuck off." Jayden shoves his hand inside his shirt and scratches his chest. "It doesn't hurt to try."

After locating an empty table and sit amongst the feeding herd, we eat our tacos, making guttural sounds in the process. Wiping my mouth, I notice Bryce wandering around. "Bryce! Mate!" I scream and wave my arms.

Bryce spots me and waves back. He casually walks toward our table. "G'day boys, what's shaking?" Bryce asks with as much enthusiasm as Jayden had earlier when tacos were mentioned. "No tacos left for me? I am cut." He sits on the chair next to Jayden.

"You know how it goes, eating tacos and talking shit. The usual, mate." I lament and notice that Bryce is wearing what appears to be the same skinny jeans as Jayden, however with all the material still intact. My eyes are drawn to his shirt, which is a lightweight hoodie with all the buttons undone which reveals his chest. He catches me checking him out and I feel my heart to start beating faster. I am confident that my face has turned red. "Yum. You turned up too late fool." I hope he doesn't confuse my appreciation of the tacos with his exposed chest.

"Hey man, how have you been?" Jayden asks Bryce whilst tapping the screen of his phone. He then tosses it on the table and extends his hand.

Bryce shakes Jayden's hand. "I am a bit fucked off actually. Thanks for asking. You blokes will have a good laugh even though it isn't funny. I was woken up at around 4:00 AM. My parents were shouting at each other. I overheard my father say that my mother farted on him whilst he was sleeping. The fart woke up my father. He wasn't pleased so he started shaking her and swearing at her whilst she was still asleep." He tells the specifics of the story a bit like a newsreader would report the

weather. "I guess my father has a habit of holding my mother at night when she sleeps. A bit of spooning that went wrong. I guess it has happened before at least if the hysterical shouting that I overheard can be believed. She got pissed off and left as she will 'not be shaken like a goddamned rag doll whilst in a deep sleep' and drove to our holiday house."

Jayden begins to laugh and I take a drink from my bottle of Coke. His laughter combined with Bryce's sardonic tone breaks me down and I join in and add to the hysterics. Tears flow from Jayden's eyes as his mirth reaches the volume you would expect from an aeroplane. Diners in the food court begin to stare at us, no doubt curious as to what is so bloody hilarious. "You have to admit, it is funny. Tragic, but funny." I offer in between sips from the straw protruding from the plastic bottle of Coke.

"Yeah, have a good laugh. It is funny. Sort of." Bryce stands up and stretches his arms out and yawns. "I am going to buy a burrito. Do you boys want anything?"

Jayden continues to laugh and recounts parts of Bryce's story in-between gasps for air, slapping the table with glee and wiping his eyes repeatedly. After some time passes, he manages to speak in coherent sentences. "No mate, I am fine. That is a brilliant story though." I shake my head and Bryce immediately understands that I don't want anything else from the Mexican place.

By the time that Bryce returns to the table with a burrito and a bottle of Coke, Jayden has calmed down. "That is the best story ever." Jayden continues. "It beats the article that I read earlier about a woman who lost custody of her children in the United States because she decided to party with her sixteen-year-old daughter and her male friends. The funny part is that they played naked Twister if the media can be believed. The mother thought it would be a good idea to get out a dildo and use it on

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herself before doing some drugs with the kids." Bryce and I begin to chew on our fingernails at the same time as Jayden begins to speak again. "She later got fucked by one of the sixteen-year-old boys there. I guess it became too real for her daughter as it was reported that her sixteen-year-old boyfriend. He supposedly has a ten-inch cock which he tried to put in the mother when she was passed out after she fucked his eighteen-year-old mate in the toilet."

"Jesus Christ, that is mad." Bryce blurts out and begins to chuckle, spitting rice from his mouth. "Did the daughter complain to the cops or something? How did something bizarre like this end up in the news anyway?"

"From what I read, the mother decided to turn her life around after that party and went to Alcoholics Anonymous. She told the whole sordid story to her sponsor. Her sponsor rang the coppers and tattled on her." Jayden pauses and stares at me. I start to giggle which causes him to laugh like a maniac once again. Bryce chews on his burrito, seemingly lost in his thought.

I start to ramble without considering my audience. "That is fucked up. I would think that the daughter, when she saw the ten-inch cock at one point in her life would have said that it wasn't ever going inside of her. Period. I wonder what would have gone through her mind when she saw her supposed boyfriend try to shove it into her mother." I notice professionally dressed gentlemen at the table next to us are all intently listening to our conversation and chomping on chicken burritos.

Bryce touches Jayden on his arm and leans towards him whilst staring at me. "Chezdon, doesn't Jayden have a ten-inch cock? Does it hurt when he rams it up your arse?" Bryce laughs. I am at a loss for words as Bryce is rarely crass. The diners next to

us start chuckling. We collectively look at them and they find their lunch all the sudden to be much more interesting.

Jayden smiles. "Mine isn't ten inches. I will happily admit to that. I wouldn't want one that big. What I have already has scared a few women so I wouldn't want it any longer." I roll my eyes. I must be confusing porn that he watches with real life once again. "I know my girl wouldn't want something that huge in her anyway," Jayden claims to have had sex with his girlfriend. I don't believe it.

"Where did you read that story mate?" I pick up a morsel of chicken that previously fell out of my soft-shell taco and toss it into my waiting mouth. "It is hilarious."

Jayden rubs his eyes and yawns. "It was posted on the Murdoch news website. I read the story when I was taking a massive shit in that nasty toilet block earlier that you took me to." Jayden grabs the bottle of Coke that is resting in front of Bryce and drinks from it. "Thanks, mate."

Bryce verbalises what I have been thinking. "Farting, shitting and ten-inch cocks. Such lovely conversation to have whilst I eat this fat thick uncut burrito. Hey Jayden, are you going to Commercial Road later?"

"No why?" Jayden looks confused and scratches the top of his head before crossing his arms. "Why the fuck would I go to Commercial Road?"

"I thought since you are dressed like a whore today that you would be joining the other prostitutes walking that street tonight offering your shit to the highest bidder." Bryce starts chuckling again having amused himself. It took a while for Bryce to comment on Jayden's outfit today. I expected the prodding to start as laid eyes on him.

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"Are you jealous of my hot body mate? Have you had a good look?" Jayden stands up and pushes his arse out and towards Bryce and starts slapping it repeatedly. "I know that you check out my hot arse. Have a good look mate. Want to grab it?"

Bryce pushes Jayden away and he sits down. "Are we going to go shopping or something or are we just going to spend the day fucking around here?" I break the silence. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"Why don't you just say what is really going to happen, mate." Jayden stares at me which foreshadows that he plans to stir the pot. "This is how it will play out if we go, as you put it, shopping. Let's say we are silly enough to follow you to the Armani Exchange. You will then buy a shitload of clothes in five minutes flat and then whine that is taking too long to pay. You will then proclaim that you are over shopping and will want to go home. Does that sound, right?" Jayden kicks my leg under the table. "Am I right or what?"

I wince and then kick the leg of the table hoping my foot would contact Jayden's shin. "Am I really that predictable?" I pick up another morsel of chicken and toss it into my mouth and then interlock my hands behind my head.

Bryce and Jayden simultaneously shout, "Yes!" They look at one another and then scream, "jinx!"

I roll my eyes and stand up. "Jesus. Whatever. How about I go follow your script and meet you boys back here in fifteen minutes?"

Bryce and Jayden agree that following me around shopping isn't very fun. They don't have any money to buy anything anyway. I am left to my own devices to explore the Armani Exchange shop by myself. I am very brand loyal and like what they usually have on offer, mainly because I know my size and

I don't have to waste time or suffer the indignity of trying clothes on. As my routine never changes if my friends can be believed, I walk into the store, browse for items that I like and strategically not remove anything from the racks until I am ready to leave. I then make a mad dash around the shop and remove everything that I want so I am not hounded by the workers who try to engage in banal conversation. After walking only a few steps from the food court, I casually enter the Armani Exchange shop and begin to browse. I give a cursory look at the price and size tags attached to the clothing as I continue to browse. Mere minutes later, after inspecting everything available in the relatively small shop, I begin to execute my plan and methodically remove clothing from the various racks. The nearest sales associate notices my frenzied activity and literally sprints over and asks me if he can assist me in finding my size. I politely inform him that I know my size and start handing him one item of clothing after another as he follows me around the shop. "I will just buy these." The sales associate suggests that other items in different colours stored in the back room would match my green eyes. I brush off his upselling tactic and for once I am honest and say that I am in a rush to meet my friends. He immediately begins to scan the clothes using a wand located at the terminal and begins to remove the security tags.

"Do you have our VIP club card?" The sales associate asks as he repeatedly clicks the mouse and starts at the computer screen. He is roughly the same build as me and I find his blue eyes are very soothing.

"I don't have the card on me but can I give you my phone number?" After he replies in the affirmative, I say the digits of my mobile phone number. He successfully retrieves my profile from the database. He confirms my name matches what is in the system and then continues scanning tags. When he finishes he begins to carefully fold the clothing and places each piece of apparel carefully into a large bag.

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The sales associate looks up at me and smiles. "Did you know if you spend a mere sixty dollars more in this transaction, I can give you a VIP discount card today so the next time you come in, you will save one hundred and fifty dollars?"

"Oh wow, fine. I am sure I can find something else to buy." I rub the back of my head. My eyes scan the store as I contemplate which way to walk.

"Give me a minute, please. I have a suggestion." The associate quickly disappears behind a door which slams shut. True to his word, about sixty seconds later he appears once again holding a shirt that immediately reminds me of what Bryce is wearing. "This will go nicely with your green eyes and your dirty blond hair if you don't mind me saying." I take the blood-red shirt from him and hold it up, admiring it. I really like it.

"Sure. It looks good, I will have it." After the final amount owing is calculated and complete the transaction using my debit card, the large bag of clothes is handed to me along with a card and an outstretched hand.

"It is good to meet you Chezdon, my name is James. I hope you will come back soon and see me. Here is your VIP card. Don't lose it."

"Thanks, mate. Later." After taking the VIP card, I shake his hand and examine his scruffy yet professional appearance. He is dressed in black Armani Exchange branded clothing from head to toe and is an attractive guy. "Take care." I turn and walk out of the shop.

Upon returning to the food court I find Jayden chewing on a taco. Bryce is speaking to someone on his phone and has his feet resting on the chair that I was sitting on earlier. "You bought the store I see." Jayden smiles. He grabs the bag of clothes from my hand and starts to scavenge around in it.

My phone begins to vibrate in my back pocket. "Jesus. What now?" I mutter. Jayden begins to pull clothes from the bag and tosses items on his chair. I am positive that he is making mental notes of the clothes that he will want to borrow. He stays overnight at my apartment frequently and always borrows clothes and rarely returns them. "I like this shit!" Jayden roars as I place my smartphone against my ear. Whoever is calling would have heard Jayden.

I scoff and grin. "Hi, this is Chezdon."

"Hi Chezdon, this is James from the Armani Exchange store at Emporium Melbourne. You were just in here." I am confused as to why this bloke is now ringing me. Did I leave my debit card in the shop? I shove my free hand into the depths of my pocket. "How are you?"

"Fine. Okay. I am fine." Bryce ends the call he was on and watches Jayden sort through the clothes that I purchased. Finding my debit card in my pocket, I quizzically ask, "what's up?"

"I just wanted to say thanks for coming into the store today." With added enthusiasm, James continues. "Your purchase helped me make my sales target for the week, so I just wanted to say thank you again."

"That is good to hear." I really don't know what to say and feel like I am bullshitting for the sake of it. I recently read an article about Richie Benaud, the cricket commentator and former captain of the Australian Cricket Test team. He only spoke when he had something of value to add to the conversation. I thought the article was apt considering we seem to live in a society where you feel like you need to be constantly communicating in one form or another.

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James clears his throat. "I am hoping that I can buy you a drink sometime to say thanks." I am momentarily stunned and at such a loss of words.

I fumble some words together. "Sure. Cool. Great. That sounds good." I pay some attention to Jayden who continues to wave my new purchases above his head. "What do you have in mind?"

"How about we meet up tomorrow after I finish work?" James asks. "Drinks are on me." I like to think that I look my age and wonder how old James thinks I am. If I was wearing the outfit that Jayden was wearing, there would have been no doubt in his mind that I am sixteen.

"Fine. Just message me, I have got to go as I am with my mates. Chat with you tomorrow." I end the call as James begins to say something.

Bryce tilts his head to the right and licks his lips. "What is wrong, mate? "What happened?" Bryce demands. Jayden begins to shove my clothes back into the shopping bag.

"Nothing mate. It is all good." I resurrect the details of my limited interaction with James and go over it in my head. I was going out of my way not to engage with him or even look at him inside the shop. I assume that he is in his mid-twenties. I fondly recall the black studs that he has jammed into his earlobes. My phone vibrates in my hand momentarily, interrupting my total recall.

A text message appears from a number that is not part of my contact list. It is coincidentally from James who suggests that we meet at the Transport Bar at 5:00 PM tomorrow. Transport Bar is in Federation Square, spitting distance from the 7-11 where Jayden buys Slurpee's. That bar takes the responsible service of alcohol very seriously. Not only I but most of my

classmates have been denied trying to order booze at that bar. I message James and suggest an alternate venue. The one pub that my friends and I have found that doesn't usually ask for identification. It is easy to relax in the low-key beer garden at this place, especially when you have someone else buying the rounds. James quickly responds in the affirmative and agrees to meet me at the pub that I suggested.

"What are we doing?" Bryce taps his fingers on the back of his phone. "I don't want to sit here all day watching Jayden eat tacos. How many can you eat mate?" Bryce tosses his phone on the table.

I lick my lips. "We can go back to my place and watch a movie or something." I offer my own hospitality as I selfishly want to drop my big bag of clothes off at home and not carry it around with me. "There is booze there and I don't think there will be any adults around." Bryce and I offer one another a wry smile whilst Jayden shoves the last of his chicken taco into his mouth.

"Sounds good!" Bryce yells and slams his hands down on the table in unison. "Let's get the fuck out of here." He grabs his phone and walks off obviously not wanting to wait for Jayden to swallow and offer his opinion.

We walk the less travelled path to Southbank, meandering along the laneways that give the city a distinct character. Ironically, we walk past the bar where James agreed to meet me tomorrow. Horse racing is being broadcast on the wall-mounted television in the beer garden. The afternoon revellers appear to be enjoying their pints and are smoking cigarettes under a large tree. I wonder if I should just order a juice when I meet James tomorrow. It would be awkward getting caught out and being refused service. Acknowledging the fact that I am only sixteen-years-old and embarrassing me or him begins to play on my mind. Is this a date or if it will be two mates

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enjoying a beer, talking about footy and his sales targets? I rub the sweat off the back of my neck and wipe it on Jayden.

Banter makes me lose track of time. We arrive at my apartment tower in Southbank in what feels like minutes when it has really been a half an hour since leaving Emporium. After riding in the elevator and unlocking the front door, we enter my climate-controlled home in the sky. "Chezdon?" I hear a woman's voice. "Is that you?"

"Oh dude, have you ever met Melisandre?" Jayden asks Bryce whilst tapping on him on his chest with his open hand. "She is so cool."

Melisandre is the 'Red Woman' in the *Game of Thrones* series. I once told my father that the woman who he has been dating for many years resembles the 'Red Woman' in the television show. My father agreed and even bought her a red robe that she wears around the apartment on occasion. She has never bothered to watch *Game of Thrones* so I am confident that she doesn't get the inside joke. "The bitch from *Game of Thrones*? What does she have to do with anything?" Bryce asks.

Melanie walks into the living room and offers her greetings. I didn't expect her to be around and thought she would be out with my father at the races. "It looks like you have been shopping. Can I see what you bought?"

"Sure, go for it." I hand her my large shopping bag.

Mel goes out of her way to act like my friend. She is cool and never tries to take on a motherly type of role. She goes out of her way to treat me as her peer and speaks to me like I am an adult. She has a great relationship with Jayden and they share many inside jokes, most being at my own expense I would assume. Since she doesn't want to bear children I suppose it makes it easier for us to treat one another as friends. Besides

even if she wanted to have a child with my father, it would be difficult since he had a vasectomy after I was born. My birth mother has suggested that he got the operation because he didn't want a child to begin with and I was, in fact, a mistake. She is an evil bitch. For a mother to say something so heinous to her child is just pathetic.

I leave the bag with Mel who happily begins to sort through the clothes in the same way that Jayden did earlier. My friends and I retreat to my room once Jayden and Bryce exchange stop snickering. Jayden walks into my bathroom and takes the fingernail clippers off the basin. He cuts the price tag off the blood-red shirt that he absconded with before Mel took the bag of clothes from me. He pulls off his slutty cut-up shirt and tosses it on the floor. He fumbles pulling on the shirt that James went out of his way to sell me. I touch the impression of the VIP discount card bulging in my pocket next to my penis which twitches against the pressure of my skinny jeans.

"Thanks for the shirt," Jayden unbuttons three of the buttons so he can continue to fulfil his destiny to represent all the trashy looking teenage boys in the world. "I like this. Good job, Chez."

"You are such an asshole mate." Bryce summarises what I am feeling with only a few words. "You have some balls though."

"It is no big deal. I didn't even want that shirt." I lie. "It was forced on me at the last minute so I could get a one hundred fifty-dollar voucher. I really don't give a fuck." Although I want the shirt and feel like ripping it off Jayden, I decide to brush it off. "It does look good on you Jayden. You can have it, mate."

"Aren't you going to buy a new phone today?" Bryce looks at me. "You have been carrying on about it for weeks."

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"Oh shit. I almost forgot. Thanks for reminding me." My eyes go wide and I push my hair behind my ear again. "I will be right back."

"Where are you going?" Jayden asks as I walk from my bedroom and quickly walk down the hall and go into the room where the adults sleep. I spent all the money in my savings account on clothes so I need to get raid the stash of cash that my father told me about earlier. I rummage through the middle drawer next to his bed and discover a neatly stacked under a book. It must be leftover winnings from gambling but I really don't care. I begin to count out multiples of fifty dollar notes so that I can purchase the Samsung smartphone that I have been talking about for weeks.

I am poked in the side. "Jesus man!" I jump after Jayden startles me. He leans over my shoulder and I momentarily lose my balance. He points his finger and I look inside the open drawer. "We could have a good party with that."

I continue counting money, making a mental note to tell my father later how much I took. "Mind your own business mate," I demand and continue to count currency, ignoring Jayden. His hand dives into the open drawer. "That isn't your business mate, fuck off!"

"Wow, look at this!" Jayden holds up a small sealed plastic bag which contains white powder. "Want to guess what this is? We could have a good party, hey?"

"Put that back mate!" I raise my voice and shove my body into Jayden. I didn't know that my father dabbled with party drugs. "Give it to me."

"Let's do it and see what happens." Jayden slyly suggests.

"I really doubt my father would be too pleased if his stash went missing." I try to reason with Jayden. I can imagine some awkward conversation days or even weeks from now where my father musters the courage to ask me if I stole his bag of cocaine from his bedside table. "Who will be blamed for taking it? Mel?" I giggle thinking about how that conversation would go down.

"If he says anything, just blame it on your cleaner. She is Columbian, isn't she? Oh, I know, we can replace it with flour. Is your father going to write a letter of complaint to his dealer? He will just put the flour up his nose and be none the wiser." Jayden pushes the small plastic bag into his pocket. "We are doing your duty to help him. Think of it that way."

"Jesus," I mutter as I push my father's money into my pocket and close the bedside drawer. Jayden follows me back into my room and pulls the small plastic bag from his pocket. He dramatically waves his score in front of Bryce's face. "Let's get fucked up mate. Let's party."

"Where did you get that you idiot?" Bryce asks incredulously. "Holy shit!"

"Chezdon's father is drug-fucked. He has a drawer filled with cash and coke. I love it." Jayden is really hamming it up and begins to sing. "I am so excited, and I just can't hide it."

"Shut the hell up," I demand. "Jesus, do you think you are one of the fucking Pointer Sisters? The last thing I want is Mel coming in here and asking questions." Jayden starts to laugh. "You make it sound like my father is some version of Walter White. This isn't *Breaking Bad*, mate."

"No, it is *Game of Thrones* judging by who is in your living room." Jayden and I both chuckle. "I wonder how much that

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coke is worth," Bryce asks quizzically. "My sister would probably buy it."

"Let's do it later," Jayden declares and then changes the subject. "Are we going to go out again or what? Chez can buy his phone."

"Yeah, let's go." Bryce is looking at the poster of the four boys that make up the band *5 Seconds of Summer* which is affixed to my bedroom wall. "Is there a JB Hi-Fi around here?"

My phone begins to vibrate again. I glance at the screen and sigh when I see that the caller ID is blocked and divert the caller to my voicemail with one tap. Seconds after the phone stops vibrating, it starts in again. Exasperated, I accept the call this time. "Hi, this is Chezdon." I am not surprised when there is no response. "Goddamnit! Why do you keep ringing me and not bother to say anything? Jesus Christ!"

A voice finally speaks. "Those are some pretty harsh words from such a little boy." My friends look up at me. Jayden taps the small plastic bag against his nose repeatedly.

"Who is this?" I ask tersely. The male voice sounds vaguely familiar but I can't identify it. The call suddenly ends and I quickly get lost in my thoughts. Bizarre phone calls, a scheduled hook-up in the public toilets, a date of sorts arranged at a pub, my best mate holding a bag of drugs and a wad of cash in my pocket. What could possibly go wrong?

4. James

Bryce swipes and taps on the display of his iPhone erratically. After remaining unusually quiet for what seems like an eternity, he finally speaks. "I just checked the Bureau of Meteorology's website and it looks like it is going to rain in forty minutes."

I vacillate between venturing out and staying put. Do I lead my friends to the South Wharf shopping precinct so we can browse the electronics superstore? Purchasing the phone of my dreams is on my mind, however, my thoughts revert to identifying the voice of the nuisance caller. His voice was that of an older bloke, which adds to my frustration. Who the hell could it be?

"Let's just watch a movie or something!" Jayden mumbles after taking the prime position on the corner of the lounge. He grabs the integrated remote control and powers on the Samsung television along with the other audio and subservient components by tapping a single button. My father invested a fair amount of time automating this system. He would frequently become flustered having to look at five different remote controls which just added to the clutter on the glass table which he could not tolerate. "Just get the phone from the Samsung shop the next time you are at Melbourne Central." Jayden offers a suggestion most likely because he wants to avoid being rained on. "It isn't hard."

I cross my arms and ponder what to do next. "I was given a gift card for JB Hi-Fi and I want to use it. It is going to expire in a few days." I patiently wait for my friends to show a hint of motivation to budge off the lounge and stand up.

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Bryce follows Jayden's lead and assumes a comfortable position on the lounge. He places one of the red pillows between his arm and torso and stares out the window. Dark clouds are slowly creeping towards us from the southwest. He pulls off his Converse shoes and then peels the socks from his feet. He isn't going anywhere. "Fine." I simply say and return my gaze out the window. The mysterious caller has left me unnerved. I grab at the back of my head and mess my hair up further. My dishevelled appearance will hopefully distract anyone who looks at me from the blood that is rushing to my cheeks and face. "The hell with going out and getting rained on," I confidently announce. The menacing storm that is approaching from the southwest coughs a bout of thunder. Taking up residence in the lounge room seems like the most comfortable right now.

Jayden begins scrolling through the recently added television shows and movies on the media centre laptop that is connected to the television. Mel walks past with a large bag of rubbish from the kitchen which gives him just enough time to select *Game of Thrones*. The score which accompanies the opening credits of the television show begins to play and everyone hums along in time. "Nope. I have already seen this." He taps the back button and returns to the homepage that lists the newest media that has been added to the system. He curiously watches Mel as she walks toward the foyer and laughs. "It looks like you watched a movie called *Eastern Boys*. What the hell is that about?"

Bryce reads the description of the movie courtesy of the synopsis that is being displayed on the television screen. "Jesus Christ. Don't they teach you how to read at your private school?"

The front door slams shut which startles me. "It is actually a really good movie." I chirp. "It is about a gang of migrants from some old Soviet eastern bloc country that fucks over a

gay bloke. The dude tried to solicit sex from one of the gang members at the train station." I do a double-take and ponder my recent experiences inside the public toilets and roll my eyes for added effect and dramatically point at the screen. "Look at the Rotten Tomatoes score of eighty-seven. There is no reason to judge it." The faceless men and women behind the Rotten Tomatoes scoring system seem to know everything. I point at the screen again so the uninterested eyes of my friends will hopefully provide some validation with a simple nod or at least will offer some sort of clue that they agree with me.

"I am not judging you mate. It looks interesting enough." Jayden says and then begins to scroll through more movies that are stored on the clustered hard drives. "*Nymphomaniac*, hey? Is that on your top-ten list, Chezdon? I read a review of this movie somewhere. It is supposedly long as hell. Shia LaBeouf fucks some chick in it and you can see his little cock." Jayden coughs and clears his throat.

Bryce begins to laugh hysterically and we wait for his glee to subside before contributes to the conversation. "Where do you come up with this shit? Have you watched it? How would you know that Shia LaBeouf has a small cock unless you took an active interest in it, mate?"

"It is the word on the street." Jayden insists. He crosses his arms and then his legs. "I also read that LaBeouf got raped when he was putting on some sort of art exhibit somewhere. It was during some sort of live show in public. How can that be possible?"

Bryce takes a keen interest in his phone and begins to read something on its screen out loud. "One woman who came with her boyfriend, who was outside the door when this happened, whipped my legs for ten minutes and then stripped my clothing and proceeded to rape me. What the fuck?" Bryce looks mortified as he reads an article presumably about Shia LaBeouf

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to us verbatim. "People just decided to do whatever they wanted to him. Since he was in an artistic moment, the bloke couldn't say no or even punch someone in the face when they touched him up?"

"Madness." The story puzzles me and I ponder the ridiculousness of the situation in general. The front door slams shut and it startles me again.

Bryce continues to read out loud. "Hashtag I-AM-SORRY involves LaBeouf sitting silently behind a desk in a room in the Los Angeles Cohen gallery with a paper bag bearing the legend 'I am not famous anymore' over his head. For five days, members of the public queued to be able to sit alone with him in a room with a prop of their choice." We all start to laugh in unison. "How many films can he ride a motorbike in and pretend he is cool? This is such a joke. Who would want to waste their time sitting with this bloke?"

Jayden grasps his hands behind his head and looks to be very comfortable with his feet resting on top of the glass table. "I guess that just means that you can stroke his cock and shove a broom handle up his arse. Why wouldn't he rip the bag off and punch the person who raped him?" Jayden offers in a very animated way. "Things like this make me really angry. What a dickhead."

Mel stops next to the television and looks concerned. "Who was raped?" Mel asks us with a sense of concern in her voice having to overhear the tail-end of our conversation.

"Shia" I curtly respond.

"Oh, is she okay?" Mel asks and appears interested.

Bryce makes it known that this person is the bloke from the *Transformers* movie franchise and from what Jayden

articulated, the movie, *Nymphomaniac*. I add that he will be just fine and was just part of an art installation that went wrong for too many reasons to list. Mel manages an uncomfortable laugh. "I am going to open a bottle of wine. Does anyone care for a glass?"

"It is only 2:30 PM you know," I interject knowing full well that time doesn't matter when it involves the consumption of alcohol in this household. "I will have a glass, please." I offer Mel a wide smile and show her my teeth. Bryce and Jayden also respond in the affirmative. I did promise alcohol to my friends on the way home and fortunately, Mel is delivering.

"Chezdon, you just reminded me that you need to visit the dentist soon. I will make an appointment for you. Bryce, do you know the house rule?" Mel asks. "There is only one rule."

"The rule is if you start drinking alcohol in this place, we aren't allowed to leave unless it is straight home via Uber," Jayden replies as the rule has been ingrained into his memory. "Safety is Mel's number one priority."

"That sounds like a Qantas safety message," I respond knowing that even Qantas wouldn't let a gaggle of teenagers get into the wine so early in the afternoon despite their desire for increased market share. Perhaps booze will take the edge off. I need to distract myself from thinking about nuisance phone calls and public toilets.

Bryce watches Jayden pulls on a few strands of his exposed underarm hair. "What is your drink of choice you freak? Alcohol from a cardboard box mate?" Jayden quickly crosses his arms over his chest.

Jayden chuckles and swats Bryce's chest. "My drink of choice is your mother's milk. I love sucking it from her hard-hairy nipples." Jayden squeals and laughs before scrolling through

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the list of movies again. He stops when he sees *Mysterious Skin* and begins to read the synopsis out loud which will prove to Bryce that he knows how to read. "Aliens, Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Let's watch this."

Mel returns holding two wine glasses by their stems. Bryce offers his thoughts on the movie in a monotonal voice. "Not to spoil the movie for you mate, but your idol Joseph Gordon-Levitt gets butt-raped and plays a teenage male whore. It will be a bit like art imitating life for you I suppose mate." Mel sets the two glasses of red wine carefully on the glass table and begins to laugh. I then explode into hysterics as Bryce starts to cackle.

"Whatever." Jayden selects *The Shining* and taps play on the integrated remote. "You remind me of the fucked up little boy in this film Bryce."

Mel returns with a glass of wine and hands it to me. "Thanks, Mel." She places the bottle on top of the newspaper and then retreats to the kitchen. We drink wine and provide running commentary about the movie since we have all seen before. Half an hour later, I empty the last of the bottle into Bryce's glass and I am tasked to retrieve another one. I walk to the wine refrigerator, taking care not to touch any of the bottles that my father has deemed off limits. The understanding is not to drink anything from the Barossa Valley. Those regional varietals are always in short supply here only because so many bottles are consumed by my father and Mel on a regular basis. Instead, I remove a bottle of Marsh Estate, a wine produced in the Hunter Valley, not far from Sydney. The rain begins to pelt against the windows with force. The front door slams again, which startles me. I return to the lounge room holding the neck of the open bottle of wine at the same time my father walks in.

"Hey, Daniel. How were the races?" Jayden immediately stands and shakes my father's hand. "Have you met our esteemed peer

Bryce yet? He is a tad antisocial, I know, and he apologises for not standing up." Daniel insists on being called by his and detests formality in the family home.

"I am just fine, Jayden, thanks. It was a good day at the races. Tom Waterhouse will not be retiring anytime soon." Tom Waterhouse is the CEO of the betting agency that my father places wagers with. "Yes, I know Bryce. How are you doing, mate?" Bryce stands up and shakes my father's hand whilst holding his glass of wine with his left hand. "Hopefully my favourite son is keeping you boys entertained." It was more of a statement and not a question. He is not looking for a detailed answer. Daniel walks to the kitchen and after hearing the clinking of glasses and some chatter in the distance, I am not surprised when he returns holding an empty red wine glass. "I will have some of that Marsh if you would be so kind, mate." He sets the glass on the table near Bryce.

Bryce slowly pours wine into the depths of my father's glass. "This particular varietal has the distinction of being the only wine in the Hunter Valley region that is only irrigated by rain. Therefore, it will taste earthy. Even dirty." Daniel has long insisted that if we are going to drink his wine that we appreciate the story behind what we are gulping from our crystal glasses.

The scene in *The Shining* where the funny looking wife is explaining to the doctor that Jack Nicholson broke their son's arm is playing out on the television. "Look at that doctor, she looks mortified." My father blurts out and pours the wine in his glass down his throat. "It amuses me that the wife can act so blasé about her son being abused. She smokes a pack of cigarettes whilst telling the sordid story and that only takes thirty seconds." He sets his empty glass near Bryce again. "Does Chezdon tell you boys that I physically abuse him?"

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"Only emotionally," I say and offer a smile. "I only say you abused me before I started puberty though." We both look at the television and laugh.

Bryce casually refills not only Daniel's wine glass but his own. Jayden grabs the wine bottle from him. "Oil!" Daniel shouts and gets Jayden's attention. "Jayden, you should only refill your glass when it is empty. This is one of the few things that upset me as you do not want to disrespect the wine. It will make for a different tasting experience as the wine opens up in the bottle and you don't want to mix it." Jayden gulps what is left in his glass and then fills it. "Look at this bloody weather. I had to leave the races early as the rain killed the track. The bastards were probably going to cancel the rest of the races anyway."

"Why would they do that?" Jayden asks. He pushes his nose into the depths of the wine glass and snorts.

"Management would be fearful that the horses would get spooked by the thunder and lightning." Daniel drinks from his glass and looks out the window. "Also, there would be public outrage if a horse was struck by lightning."

Mel returns holding an empty glass by its stem and kisses Daniel on his cheek. "Why are you bothering the boys, leave them alone and let them have fun." Mel pours what is left of the bottle in her glass and takes a sip.

"He isn't bothering us, Mel." Jayden clarifies. "In fact, I am keen to hear more about the races and how your business is going." Jayden's parents are getting divorced and his father recently moved out of the family home to Western Australia which is thousands of kilometres away. Since the separation, Jayden has adopted my father as his own and now kisses Daniel's arse whenever he has the opportunity.

Both Daniel and Mel sit down next to Jayden. My father starts a conversation with Jayden about horse racing and the wild world of business. Feeling sombre, I walk to the wine refrigerator and retrieve another bottle, refill my glass and then offer Bryce a top-up. I move the empty bottle that we just finished to the side of the newspaper. "Another dead soldier."

Having sat in an awkward position with Mel and Daniel obstructing my view of the television, I lean to the side and recline back onto Bryce, put my feet up and assume a comfortable position. "Thanks, mate, I knew you would be good for something someday." I raise my glass and acknowledge my newfound human pillow from over my shoulder.

My father recants boring stories about his business which mainly involves difficult conversations with Chinese and Malaysian suppliers. Mel nods her head two hundred times and zones out staring at the television and sips from her glass. Jayden somehow manages to devise a thousand questions to ask and Daniel is happy to keep pouring wine and continues to answer them as fast as Jayden can ask them. It doesn't take long before Daniel is on his feet and removing another bottle of Marsh Estate from the wine refrigerator though.

Time passes and the movie continues to play. Daniel and Jayden continue to talk as I lean against Bryce with a glass of wine in my hand. I have wondered how my father would react if he found out that I am gay. For a moment, I consider interrupting the story he is telling Jayden about corrupt overseas business practices. I can tell him a fact that I doubt that he has considered. The same goes for Jayden. I promised myself some time ago that if Jayden asked me a direct question about my sexuality, I would answer him truthfully. He just never has. Neither has Daniel. Finally, my father excuses himself from question time. Mel follows him from the living

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room with the only open bottle of wine, which encourages me to follow them to the kitchen to retrieve yet another bottle.

"Hey Chez, I messaged Austin saying that we are chilling out. Can he come around?" Jayden asks as I return with the uncorked wine bottle. Austin is another friend from school and is the type of person that is friends with everybody. Everyone likes the boy and he is very easy to get along with.

With the alcohol now integrating itself with my blood, I decide, what the hell. "Yeah, tell Austin to come over mate." I reach over and pick up my phone from the glass table after setting the bottle of wine down on the newspaper. I skim messages that have arrived over the last few hours and notice that three of them are from Austin. He was quizzing me as to what I am up to. He must have surmised that Jayden would be with me since we always seem to be hanging out nowadays. I exchange a few text messages with Austin and he confirms that he will come around shortly.

Daniel begins to get nervous when I invite too many people over to the apartment. On the day of my birthday last year, four of my mates and I thought it would be a good idea to start drinking my father's wine. Each of us then thought it would be fun to invite four of our mutual friends around to my apartment when my father was out at the horse races. When he returned home there were eighteen boys and two girls having the party of the year in this place. Guests were found having sex in my room. I was aware of what was happening but because I was drunk, I didn't give a fuck. Another boy and girl were caught by my father in his bedroom having sex. I don't know how many times he proclaimed that I disrespected the property after the party finished ahead of schedule and everyone was thrown out. He will go to the grave repeating that he saw some 'slut fuck a boy like Damien Oliver would ride a bloody horse.' Damien Oliver is one of the most prolific Australian horse jockeys and even nearly a year later I am

reminded weekly of the specifics of my last birthday party. I continually swear something like that will never happen again when my father sees a mere handful of my friends in the apartment.

I review a series of messages from a phone number that is not saved in my contact list and quickly ascertain that it is James. He has announced that he has finished work and wants to meet for a drink today. I look up and mumble. "Today? Not tomorrow?" Feeling buzzed, I respond and suggest that we meet at the Belgian Beer Cafe, which is next to my apartment building.

"What are you doing asshole?" Jayden shouts. Bryce is trying to pull on Jayden's exposed armpit hair. "Stop it. Chez, pass me the bottle, please."

I comply and hand Jayden the bottle and he refills his glass. Memories of the snails which are drowned in garlic and butter that is served at the restaurant next door that I told James to meet me at momentarily overwhelms me. "Oh, Jesus," I utter which draws the attention of both Bryce and Jayden and they both offer me a quizzical look. I must be buzzed. What did I suggest? I quickly read my sent messages. "Shit." His last message said that he would be downstairs in twenty minutes. "Shit," I mutter again.

I look up at the television and to discover that Jack Nicholson has frozen to death in the hedge maze. The credits for the movie are now scrolling up the television. "Hey Jayden, did Austin say when he will get here?"

"About twenty minutes." Jayden turns and looks at me. "Why?"

"I need your help. I need to fuck off outside quickly but I need you to distract my father and Mel if they come out here. You

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know the rules. If they catch me outside of the apartment after getting into the wine, I will be fucked." Not fucked like how Jack Torrance met his demise in the snow at the end of *The Shining*, but it will be a fate worse than death.

Bryce places his phone on the cushion next to him. He looks at Jayden and then they both look at me. "Where do you need to go that is so important, mate?" Bryce smiles and licks the rim of his wine glass suggestively. "I am very keen to know."

I think that I can manage to have a quick pint of orange juice with James whilst I leave my friends in the flat. It is with that silly thought that I come to realise that the red wine has impaired my judgement. My usually good critical thinking and time management skills are now rubbish. If I am away and Jayden starts asking Daniel a further one thousand questions about work and Austin turns up, things will not end well. Bryce doesn't know Austin from a bar of soap either. More bloody drama. I slide towards Bryce, grab the bottle and pour myself another glass of wine, which gives me some time to consider my options. "Never mind, don't worry about it. I was just going to step out and meet James quickly." I hope my simple explanation will satisfy his curiosity as I take a sip.

"Who the hell is James?" Jayden asks. "I have never heard you mention a James. Do we even know a James?" Jayden scratches his head and then his armpit. "Is there even a James at our school?"

"I don't know anyone called James," Bryce injects and stares at Jayden. He then tries to tug one of Jayden's errant armpit hairs again.

I return to the security of my phone and attempt to tap out a message on my phone as Jayden shouts in pain. "Hold on!" I demand and then send another message to James, asking him to meet me here. I glance at my watch and then look at my

friends who are both staring at me. Jayden is rubbing his armpit. Whatever happens, at least it will be entertaining. "James is just a bloke that I was talking to at the Emporium earlier," I say as innocently as possible. "I am just trying to expand my social circle."

After taking a few seconds to process what I said, Jayden speaks. "What school does this kid go to?" An apt question, indeed. Jayden appears intrigued and shoves his nose into his wine glass and snorts. James hasn't even agreed to come to my apartment so I may be creating a drama for no reason at all. "When did you have time to talk to anyone earlier?"

My eyes dart from the left and to the right searching for the right answer. I decide it is not in my interest to spin some lie so I come clean. "James is the bloke that sold me the clothes at Armani Exchange. We just started chatting and he seems pretty cool." I take a sip of wine and set the glass gently down on top of the newspaper.

Jayden looks at Bryce who then looks at his phone and laughs. Like a dog with a bone, Jayden continues to probe. "You couldn't have been out shopping for fifteen minutes and now some retail slut is your new mate?" Jayden eyes have opened wide. "How old is this bloke?" At least by explaining the situation right now, my friends will not be so shocked that they embarrass me and themselves if he does agree to come around.

"Mate, I don't know. I didn't ask him how old he is. He is in his twenties, I guess. Why do you care? I thought it would be fun to have a drink with him." I never thought that the wine would lead me to make such a spontaneous decision. Another message arrives from James. He proclaims that he is keen to come around now and asks for my address. I respond with the relevant details.

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I recount my brief interaction with James to my interested friends. I explain that James simply asked me if I wanted to get a drink as some sort of thank you for helping him make his sales target. I finish the story by raising my voice along with my glass as their laughter nearly drowns out my story.

Jayden looks at his vibrating phone. "Austin will be here in one minute." Jayden's lips skew to the right. I know that he is pondering what to say next. He swirls the red wine in his glass and sets his phone on the glass table.

The video intercom on the wall rings obnoxiously, startling me. The video display comes to life. I walk over to it and see Austin's smiling face staring into the camera. I pick up the receiver that is attached to the intercom unit and yell a protracted "Wassup!" I press the button that briefly unlocks the front door of the residential tower, which will allow my friend to access to the building. That single press of a button also permits him to ride the elevator to my home on the 72nd floor. Austin has been to my apartment many times in the past so he doesn't need any further instruction. I walk to the foyer and out of sight of my friends and wait by the front door holding my glass of wine. Bryce and Jayden continue to laugh hysterically in the living room at my expense.

A knock on the door is followed by me quickly opening it which reveals Austin. His dark brown eyes pair well with his ripped blue skinny jeans and white shirt. My attention is then drawn to his silver DC shoes and then his blond wavy hair which looks a bit more wild than usual today. He always dresses very trendily when he isn't forced to wear the school uniform on weekdays. We exchange our usual greeting, "Sup!" I follow him as he walks past me through the foyer and into the apartment which gives me time to check out his arse.

"Hey Austin, do you want some wine, mate?" Jayden offers him an open bottle. Austin looks around awkwardly. It then

dawns on me that I should be playing the role of host, and not Jayden.

"Austin, this is Bryce Pistorius. Bryce, this is Austin McGuire." Bryce stands up and shakes Austin's hand. He compliments Austin on his shoes. This breaks the ice and the teenagers begin talking about where to find distinctively colourful clothes in the southern suburbs of Melbourne. Jayden jogs into the kitchen and quickly returns with an empty wine glass, fills it and hands it to Austin. The conversation quickly turns to the much-maligned topic of footy. Austin and Bryce quickly find that they have something in common. They roar in unison when they learn that they both support the Carlton Football Club. Technically, Jayden and I should be mortal enemies with Austin and Bryce since we support the Collingwood Magpies, as there is a robust rivalry between the two teams.

"How did the two of you meet?" I take a sip of wine as the inevitable question is asked by Austin. His dark eyes dart back and forth between Bryce and me. I thought Austin would ask Bryce if he is related to Oskar Pistorius, the Olympian that murdered his wife since Bryce has a South African accent and they share the same surname.

I grab the bottle of wine by its neck. My friends all watch me pour wine into my glass. I open my mouth to answer the question but Jayden raises his hand and interrupts me. "Believe me mate that can wait. You should ask Chez how he met the other bloke that is turning up here." Jayden slowly raises his glass to his lips and drinks wine slowly whilst keeping his blue eyes focused on me.

The video intercom rings again and the monitor comes to life. "Oh fuck. Wait a minute." At first, I believe that I have been saved by the bell, but then realise I am just delaying the inevitable. I walk to the video intercom wondering how this is going to end up. Daniel and Mel are not going to stay hidden

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forever as they will wonder for whom the bell tolls and what all the commotion in the lounge room is all about. Fuck my life. The messes that I create.

"This is going to be awesome!" Bryce shouts. "There is nothing too sinister about how I met Chezdon mate, we met at an athletic carnival about a year ago. Did I mention you have some pretty cool shoes?" Bryce compliments Austin's silver shoes yet again as I answer the video intercom.

"Are strippers coming or something? I don't understand." Austin asks looking confused. I turn around and look at him after seeing James appear on the screen. He is looking at the small camera mounted on the keypad mounted on the outside wall near the entrance to the building. I pause and wonder if pressing the entry button will potentially be the worst decision that I have ever made or if I am just overthinking things as per usual. What could possibly happen? We are young adults after all. The wine has given me courage.

"Press the button!" Jayden yells. "Press it, press it, press it." Jayden and Bryce begin to chant.

"Who is it, Miranda Kerr?" Austin asks and begins walking towards me. I think of my father betting on races and how once he said that you win some and you lose some but you should never regret the choices that you make in the end. I press the entry button. The video display goes black before Austin can look over my shoulder. "I am so confused."

I turn around and place my hand on Austin's shoulder. He steps back. "It is just a guy I know called James. He wanted to catch up for a drink at some point so I am killing two birds with one stone." I glance over Austin's shoulder and raise my voice. "Besides, why should you blokes care?" I look at Austin. He quickly pours wine down his throat and then licks his lips.

"I don't know anyone called James. Does he go to our school? Catch up for a drink? I didn't realise you were some barfly. What a laugh!" Austin smirks. Jayden realises there is no wine in his glass and reaches for the bottle sitting innocuously on the glass table. Bryce begins scrolling through the available movies stored on the media centre. He selects the movie *Mysterious Skin* which we discussed earlier and presses play. "I am so confused, I don't know anyone called James," Austin repeats out loud. He pushes his blond fringe off his forehead. He indicates to Jayden with hand signals to pass the bottle of wine that he is holding.

"Just drink up mate and go with the flow," Jayden adds. There is a loud knock on the door. I take a deep breath and walk quickly to the foyer. I take another deep breath before opening the door. What have I done?

"Hey." I look at James. Laughter erupts from the lounge room behind me. "Sorry mate, I am sure you were not expecting to come around to my place only to find my obnoxious friends. They are harmless though."

James looks over my shoulder. I turn my head and find Jayden standing behind me and quickly return my attention to James. "Sorry mate, come in, please. It is good to see you again."

"It has been, what? A whole four hours or something like that?" James smiles and walks past me. He looks Jayden up and down. "Is this your brother?"

"No, thank Christ." I laugh uncomfortably. "This is my mate, Jayden McKenzie." I grimace and point at Jayden. He looks like he is going to start laughing hysterically again. "Jayden, this is James, um. I don't know your surname."

James looks at Jayden. "Wow, you look young mate. Sorry. It is good to meet you." James shakes Jayden's hand. I explain

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that we have been drinking for a few hours and not to take our antics too seriously. James follows me into the lounge room. Jayden stands curiously behind us with his nose stuck in his wine glass. I introduce Bryce and Austin to James. Neither one of them stands up, but simultaneously say "Sup!" and look at each other for a second before taking a drink.

"Okay. I didn't realise that I was going to be hanging out with One Direction today." James says. If he was trying to break the ice, his attempt will have failed miserably. Jayden would take some offence since he considers himself a performance artist and not a manufactured pop star in the making.

Jayden begins to sing a One Direction song. "I still don't know what the hell is going on. Who are you?" Austin demands after pushing his hand on Jayden's mouth. "I am just so confused." Austin finishes the rest of the wine that is in his glass and reaches for the empty bottle. "What do you do James and how did you end up here today?"

Bryce stands up and walks toward the kitchen. "I will get another bottle. Do you want some wine, James?"

"No thanks. I don't like wine. But yeah, I met Chezdon earlier today when he was shopping. We were going to catch up for a drink tomorrow but now I am here. So yeah." James can't stop starting at Austin. "How do you know each other?"

Austin continues to smell the inside of his empty glass and stares out the window. "We go to school together. Well, we don't go to school with this bloke." Austin motions at Bryce as he walks around the corner holding an uncorked bottle of wine. Bryce begins to refill the empty glasses.

"Where do you go? Melbourne?" James asks as he looks out the window at the Melbourne city skyline. "This is a great view."

Jayden holds out the empty glass so Bryce can fill it. "I bet you like the view mate." Jayden winks at Bryce. They both start to chuckle.

I follow Austin's lead and shove my nose inside the glass of wine. The smell of oak transports me back to a more innocent time when I was forced to go on a wine tasting tour with Mel and Daniel in the Yarra Valley, north of Melbourne. Austin stands up and holds out his glass before answering. "Yeah, we go to Melbourne. Great guess." Bryce pours more blood of the gods.

James finally stops staring at Austin long enough to engage in small talk with Bryce. "Where do you go, mate?"

"St Kevin's." Bryce curtly replies and reverts his attention back to the muted movie which is playing.

"Where is that? Can I get a glass of water?" James begins to fidget. I walk around the corner into the kitchen.

"Toorak. It is a damned all-boys school. It is a great place if you like boys." I nearly drop a bottle of water as I close the refrigerator door after hearing Bryce's remark. He obviously noticed James leering at Austin.

"Oh, I see. I have never heard of that University. Is it some trade school?" James says. He catches my eye as I walk into the living room holding a bottle of water in one hand and my glass of wine in the other. I would have thought that Bryce telling him it is an all-boys school would have let the cat out of the bag.

Jayden laughs and sets his glass down hard on the table. "No, you fool, it is a boy's college. He is in year eleven." Bryce begins to laugh hysterically again. His laughter is contagious and Austin joins the frivolity. "At least you picked us right.

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Melbourne Grammar is the place to be." Austin gives Jayden a fist bump and they roll their eyes.

I hand James the water bottle just as he incredulously shouts "Grammar? I thought you went to Melbourne University!" This verbal exchange is so ridiculous I can't help but chuckle.

Daniel and Mel walk into the lounge room. My father looks at us one-by-one. "Hey boys, please keep the crowd limited to just you lot. I don't want this to turn into a party."

Mel stands next to James looks at him in the eyes and extends her hand. "Hi. I don't think I know you." I feel like running out of the apartment, going outside and jumping into the river. I drop my head and realise this is not going to end well as I look at my shoes.

"How old are you James if you don't mind me asking?" Jayden queries what I am confident that everyone is curious to learn. I knew one of my friends would ask James this question at some point, but I certainly did not want the topic broached in front of my father.

James drinks most of the water from the bottle before answering. "Twenty-five."

"What the fuck?" My father goes quiet and appears that he is considering his words. Austin returns to sniffing the contents of his wine glass. Bryce finds a sudden interest in the television. Jayden begins to chew on his bottom lip and takes a sudden interest in the painting hanging above him on the wall.

I need to start talking to distract everyone. I need to get control of the conversation before this gets out of hand. "Pretty cool painting isn't it Jayden?" Jayden looks at me and swirls the red wine in his glass. "The artist, Adam Cullen, died not long ago thanks to a long bout with both heroin addiction and alcohol.

He won the Archibald Prize too." I regurgitate as much as I can remember about the painter. Daniel has told countless people about this painting and the tragic life of the artist.

My father refills his wine glass. "You don't find it odd hanging out with a bunch of sixteen-year-olds on a Saturday afternoon, James?" I am so embarrassed. Fuck my life.

"Look, well, umm, you know, I have to go. It was nice meeting everyone but I have to go." James looks like he is going to hyperventilate as he rubs his neck. I follow him as he walks to the front door of the apartment, opens it and leaves. I catch up to him in the hallway as he stands near the elevator door, the riotous laughter is filtered as the front door slams behind me. James rapidly presses the 'down' button at least ten times. He looks like he would rather be held captive by ISIS instead of being here right now. I want to tell him that I can empathise as when I return to the lounge room, I will be facing my own judgement and perhaps even a beheading.

"Message me?" I ask. The bell announces that the elevator has arrived and the doors slide open. James turns and tosses the empty water bottle at me. It bounces off my knee as I attempt to catch it mid-air. He walks into the elevator and disappears behind the closing doors, presumably never to be heard from again.