

Carpark

by Tanya Vavilova

The sun beats down on their bare heads.

They've been sitting out on the balcony for hours, watching the carpark at the back of a strip of shops. Cars and people coming and going, dogs tied to posts while their owners pick up parcels and cold drinks.

Stace offers Jarred some sunscreen, but he shakes his head. Skin cancer isn't on his mind. He's probably thinking about exams, his dad, whether he has enough money for a Coke.

The baking concrete reminds them of the Kingsford runway.

'Ow!' she yelps. She'd forgotten the table is scorching. 'Who has metal tables?'

'Dad's idea.'

She moves her matching metal chair closer to the railing.

'You could fry an egg on the bitumen.'

Jarred agrees.

The carpark is a stark concrete oblong, surrounded by scarred gums and benches, faded yellow lines marking the car spaces. There's a dumpster by the automatic doors buzzing with flies, black garbage bags spilling out onto the sidewalk, an empty pink box of Huggies.

They watch people shuffle from their cars to the squat building, and back again.

A school girl clutching a yellow gerbera gets into a Holden, turns the radio up and almost backs into another car before careening down Alice Street. Stace laughs.

He blows smoke into her face. 'Soz,' he says, tapping his ciggie. They'll empty the ashtray outside before his dad gets home.

Stace doesn't smoke, her mum's lungs are bad.

She turns her face away. Maybe they could find some coins behind the couch cushions.

Or in the pockets of his dad's overalls. They'd be asking for it, wouldn't they?



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They watch a woman in denim cut-offs struggle across the bitumen with her shopping bags. She opens her car boot and just throws them in.

'I hope she hasn't bought eggs.'

'Yeah.'

Even from this distance, it looks like the woman hasn't slept in weeks.

He takes another puff.

So far today they'd watched: a toddler cowering on the ground from a magpie, men in fluoro vests eating meat pies, and some council workers lopping off tree branches grown too close to the powerlines. Plenty to see.

Stace notices something else. 'Look.'

'Where?'

'Under the banksia. There.'

Jarred squints into the sun.

Two boys in school uniform are having a pash.

'Good for them,' he says, surprising her.

She'd expected the usual macho crap.

'Wish I had someone to kiss,' she says.

'You can kiss me.'

'F-off.'

They'd met each other at one of those stupid co-ed school dances, but they didn't like each other like that, though they sometimes pretended they did. It made it easier for them at school, especially for Jarred.

'My dad thinks we're a couple.'

'I don't care.'

They watch as the tall boy takes the other's hand and he smiles and says something.

They clasp their mouths together again. And then, just as quickly, the shorter one is climbing down the grassy verge, leaving the other leaning against the tree trunk, watching him go.

'Someone's gonna beat them up,' Jarred says.

'What about marriage equality?'



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The bill had only just been passed.

'You don't know shit, Stace.'

She knows that Jarred's dad beats him up.

'Whatever.'

She also knows Jarred likes boys, even though he's never said anything to her.

Why hadn't she brought her hat? Her scalp is burning. She slaps some more sunscreen on her forehead. 'You want some?'

'Nah.'

Stace observes the boy, now sitting on the grass, unzipping his school bag. He pulls out a notebook and a pen, probably to do some homework. She'd practiced on oranges, but would like to kiss someone IRL. Maybe Benjie in geography.

A postie in a floppy hat stops at the locked metal box beside the carpark and slips its contents into her trolley. Mostly wads of letters held together with elastic bands and a few parcels.

'So that's what they're for.' She'd always thought those slim army-green boxes had something to do with electricity.

'Yeah.'

He'd probably seen everything from this balcony. Fights, car crashes, kids tagging the brick.

The postie pulls the tarp over the mail like a mum with a baby blanket. They watch her trundle down the street towards Myrtle Lane.

Maybe she could be a postal worker.

'You hungry?' he asks.

'What have you got?'

'Cheese, bread.'

'Sounds good.'

She never brings food to school, scabs money off the other kids, twenty cents, fifty cents, a dollar if she's lucky.

They go inside, the interior dark and shadowy.

'I can't see shit,' Jarred says, flicking on the light.



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They bang around in the cupboards and fridge.

He arranges two slices of Bega on two plates with multigrain and half a wrinkly tomato.

'That ok?'

'Great, you got sauce?'

'BBQ?'

As soon as they bring their plates outside, the corners of the cheese start to melt.

'Look at that,' she says. 'Sun-grilled sandwiches.'

The cheese is salty and delicious. She'd been starving, but was too polite to say anything.

If her mum had taught her anything, it was good manners.

He can't take his eyes off the tall boy. Brown hair catching the sun, angular body bent over school work. She's thinking, if he could concentrate like that at school maybe he'd be doing better.

'You okay?' she asks.

'Yeah, why?'

'No reason.'

He rubs his bicep.

'Must be hitting the forties.'

'Yeah.'

Both sense the growing menace in the air. You can't escape the heat. But still there are the usual things to do: errands to run, kids to feed and pick up from school, homework, dishes to wash, dogs to walk, groceries to buy.

Below them, a woman in shorts crosses the carpark with a black garbage bag.

Jarred takes another mouthful. 'Think it's a chopped-up body?'

'Yeah. Her husband's.'

The woman swings it into the bin, looks left and right.

'Dodgy as.'

'I bet it's like industrial waste.'

'How come?'

She tells him what she'd read in the paper about businesses illegally chucking chemicals into dumpsters.

'Cheap fucks.'



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They've polished off their cheese and bread.

'You want some more?'

She knows there's nothing left in the fridge. 'Nah, I'm good, thanks.'

He refills their glasses from the kitchen tap, comes back outside.

The fireball-sun moves lower down in the sky, but the temp won't drop for a few more hours. She pictures skin cells multiplying like on that ad with girls in bikinis. Her bum is sticking to the seat.

A P-plater skids to a stop at the lights.

'Probably Mum's Ford Ranger.'

'Yeah.'

Someone's telly is tuned to Jerry Springer, which Stace thinks is the best show in the world.

'It's stupid.'

'I like to watch it with Manda,' she says, 'when she's in town.' Her sister mostly stays away.

It's too stinking hot to be watching telly. They can hear the angry voices from here.

Someone accusing someone of something or other.

She's thinking of Damien's mouth. Cherry pink bow. Chapstick lips. She knows he made out with Jarred behind the soccer pitch, before his mum pulled him off the team.

When he finishes his dad's pack of Horizons, he moves his chair closer to Stace. They sit like that, arms draped over the balcony railing, watching the world go by. There's lots to see if you bother to look. Like where do the seagulls come from? They're forty kilometres from the sea. She watches them soar above the faded shop awning, dip down to peck at chips and rubbish, squawking and screeching like hangry kids.

The carpark starts to fill up as school finishes for the day, and they watch kids join the queue at Charlie's Chicken. The tall boy is still there, reading under the tree, oblivious to the cars whooshing past, kids clutching greasy paper bags, laughing and shouting, their cans of soft drink sweating in the sun.

'I could go a Coke.'

'Yeah.'

'Dad's gonna be home soon. Wanna go to Charlie's?'



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It was always a good idea to be gone before Mr Boosalis got home. He had a temper that flared and shrivelled, the damage done in seconds (like the sun in that government sponsored ad).

Jarred checks his wallet. 'I've got like six bucks. You?'

She looks at the coins in her palm. 'Three, four? Five bucks.'

'Alright.'

He empties the ashtray into the outside bins, while she washes up their plates. She pushes the tomato stalk down the sink. They know how to erase all traces. To move like ghosts through space.

As she's wiping the crumbs off the metal table, there's a shout from the carpark.

'Jarred!' she calls.

A group of boys is taunting someone.

'Jarred, look.'

He leans over the railing next to her. 'That's the boy...'

'The one under the tree?'

'Yeah.'

A man with a walking frame glances at the teenagers before upping his pace and disappearing through the glass doors.

'He looks scared.'

'Wouldn't you be?'

They can't hear the words but they feel the aggression. There are six or seven of them, half in school uniform.

'Fuck. What if they really hurt him?'

He looks deflated. 'Fucking idiots.'

The boys are closing in and one of them swings a punch.

'Why isn't anyone doing anything?'

The carpark is full of people.

'People are fucking shits.'

They recognise faces from Jarred's school. A kid called Aiden and his sidekick Johnny, Noah with the cauliflower ear, a few others from the year above.

'Reckon we should call the police?' she asks.



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'Someone probably has.'

'What if they haven't?'

Johnny smacks his fist into the side of the boy's face. Stace knows he wears rings: the boy's face will be tenderised like a fillet of beef. Another kid chucks a Coke can at the boy. Even from up here, they can hear the jeers, the word faggot.

The tall boy sways with the punches. The boys are hyenas.

Stace leans over the railing, looks up then down, to the side. 'Jarred, look, they're all watching.'

The neighbours have come out to watch from their balconies. Even the sullen Mr Reilly. She turns to look at him. 'We need to call the police, now!'

'I'm sure someone already has.'

'Seriously, what if they haven't?'

As the boy slumps to the ground, they lose sight of him. All they can see is a scrum of kids swinging their school shoes. Some passing girls in school uniform look on, before joining the queue at Charlie's.

'Fuck, Jarred, if you don't do it, I will.' She disappears inside and comes out with the cordless.

'Give it here,' he says.

He doesn't need to look up the number of the local police. Knows it off by heart.

'Hello, hello,' he's saying into the receiver, 'Someone's being beaten up pretty bad ... in the carpark outside Noreen Street, outside the mall.'

'Hurry up,' Stace is screaming. 'They're killing him, fuck, Jarred. The little shits are killing him.'

He raises his hand. 'Shut up. I can't hear what she's saying ... Corner of Noreen and Boundary. Near the playground. North side, on the grass.' He grabs Stace's arm, makes her face him. 'They're on their way.'

The jeers and slurs are rising up from the baking concrete and even though she can't make out the words, she knows they won't stop till they've killed him.

He hangs up the phone, drops it on the table.

Stace juts her head out over the railing, screams at the neighbours. 'Why the fuck didn't any of you do something? Can't you see what's happening?'



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Some blank faces look back at her.

'They saw everything that happened, that's why,' Jarred answers.

They can't look away. It's too horrible. She wants to say something comforting, but what?

'Are you crying?'

'F-off,' he says.

At last, they hear sirens in the distance, and the boys, hearing them too, scramble down the grassy verge, scattering like marbles, as the ambos swerve into the carpark, followed by the blue and white of the police.

They have a clear view now: the boy spreadeagled on the concrete. A puddle of blood around his head, red-brown tracks made by the attackers' shoes.

'He's not moving, Stace.'

Car doors slam and then the two paramedics are crouching on the ground. Their thick bodies shield the boy. The police move more slowly. Onlookers gather with shopping bags and cold drinks.

'Where the fuck were all you fuckers before?'

She pulls Jarred into a hug, and he leans against her, watching as the boy is lifted onto the stretcher.

'Do you think he's gonna be okay?'

'Who knows?'

Two officers stand around the brown puddle, one of them jots something down, the ambulance speeds towards the highway.

'Just 'cos he likes boys.' She lets the words hang, but he's already turning away—

'Dad's home.'

She strains to hear feet on the stairs.

Already, the sirens have faded into the distance. It's like nothing's happened, all the neighbours inside, behind closed doors, watching the telly now there's nothing to see outside. Some gulls pick at the hot chips left by the boys.

She picks her schoolbag off the ground.

'Hi Dad,' Jarred calls from the balcony. 'Stace's here.'

The sheer bulk of Mr Boosalis always surprises her. He's squat like a washing machine, and strong.



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He pokes his head outside. 'Hey Stace, my favourite girl.' He tries to smile. 'Why don't you kids get some fresh air? I'm beat.'

'Sure, Dad. We're just on our way out.'

They grab their bags and call out bye, but Mr Boosalis is already opening a beer. They jog down the stairs, turning away from the redbrick block, heading towards the shops and the grim-faced police officers with notebooks.

'I'm gonna give them some names,' Jarred says, as they walk towards the glistening pool of blood on the bitumen.



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