

Tommy

It's a hot Melbourne summer. I can see the city skyline through the exhaust fumes over Smith Street. It's too hot to bother with shoes so my sneakers are in a green Coles bag slung over my shoulder. A man sits on a milk-crate in the shade of a shop awning with a cardboard box between his feet.

'Hey,' he gives me a gappy smile, 'got any spare change?'

There's a kitten in the box, curled up in a dirty blue towel. I fish in the pocket of my black jean shorts and give him a handful of coins, some gold, some silver.

Walking past Kent Street café, I see Curtis, a guy I know from around, drinking coffee at an outside table. Curtis is the best pool player I've ever met and has a faded tattoo on his arm that he says is a raven but looks like a pigeon. He waves me over and I sit down, one leg tucked up under me. The sole of my foot is black from the pavement.

'Hey pretty lady, what's been doing?' Curtis asks. I shrug.

'The usual. Just livin' the high life as a low life.' His friend laughs.

'This is Tommy,' says Curtis. Tommy is forty-fiveish, whip skinny with a massive smile and an open bottle of port tucked between his legs. Mid-morning and it's already half empty. I reach my left hand toward him, an

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awkward back to front handshake while I rifle through my bag for my pouch of Champion Ruby.

‘How’s it goin?’

‘Aight, a bit homeless.’ He laughs, lines wrinkling deep around his eyes. He has a thick Glaswegian accent. A ratty backpack leans against his chair, a sleeping bag poking out of the broken zipper.

‘Yea I’m pretty homeless too.’ I shrug and finish rolling my cigarette, perfectly straight, filter flush with the paper and no tobacco hanging out the end. I hate when loose paper gets wet in my mouth.

‘Bet I’m more homeless,’ he says.

‘Not anymore.’ I say, scrawling an address on an empty Tally-ho packet fished from my bag. I don’t like losing arguments.

‘I just changed the locks on an empty in Thornbury. There’s a room spare if ya want it.’ I slap a key onto the table. ‘Who’s more homeless now?’

I stop to buy a longneck on my way back up Smith Street. The price has gone up and I’m fifty cents short. I see the man with the kitten across the road out the front of 7-11. The kitten is on the pavement eating tinned cat food out of a takeaway container.

‘I’m short for a cider’, I gesture to the shop over the road, ‘do you have fiddy cents? You can have some if ya want.’

‘I don’t drink.’ He says. He gives me fifty cents though and I give him a salute, touching two fingers to my forehead as I cross back to the bottle-o.

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I get home after dark and Tommy's already in the back bedroom, sitting on a pile of blankets, reading a paperback by the light of a candle in a jar.

'Want some port?' He holds out the bottle.

'Any port in a storm, eh?' I say. 'Come on, there's a couch in the lounge.'

A big bay window faces the street, covered by grass growing wild up the front of the house. When the sun shines through, it turns the room green. But by candlelight it feels like the house is buried. There's a dark brown water stain on the moulded ceiling like a cut onion, layer after layer from a slow leak in the roof.

Tommy and I sit on an old couch up against the wall. He smells like soap and Port Royal tobacco. He hands the bottle to me.

'Got a spare dart?' he asks.

'Are durries ever really spare? I mean I'll smoke 'em all eventually... kinda like when someone asks to borrow a tampon.'

I pass him my pouch and he rolls a cigarette, trumpet-shaped and filterless, tobacco trailing out the end.

'So, tell me things,' I say.

'What sort of things?'

'I dunno, whatever.'

'I've got a daughter. Don't see her a lot.'

'Why not?'

'She's with my ex. Not my biggest fan.'

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'You should do something about that.'

'Aye.'

It's another hot day, the kind that feels like it'll never end.

'Wanna drive out to Eltham?' I ask, twirling car keys on my finger. 'It's at the top of the Yarra before it gets too gross to swim in.'

'I cannae swim.'

'What? That's nuts!'

He comes anyway. I park my car and we walk through dry paddocks and a stand of pine trees, dust coating my bare feet as we crunch over the dead grass. It's private property but there's a well-worn track down to the river and it's always crowded on hot days. Tommy sits and drinks a six-pack of cider while I swim. It hasn't rained in ages and the water is muddy and lower than I've ever seen it. It's better than the air at least, and I float around like a fly in the dregs of a pint glass. He's on a rock, black jeans pushed up to his knees, his skinny white legs dangling in the water. He holds out the bottle of cider, the pearl snaps on his cowboy shirt straining as he leans down.

'Nah, gotta drive.' I say.

'Ppppft. Amateur.'

I flap my hand at him.

'Why'd you never learn to swim?' I ask.

'Just ne'er did. Scotland's feckin' cold an' the beaches are shite.'

'You could still learn.'

'Nah. '

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'It's pretty shallow, you should come in.' I stand up, the water only up to my waist.

'Nah.'

'I swam across this swimming hole with a whole slab of beer in a milk crate a few years back.' I say.

'Just to see if you could?'

'Yea, and to drink beers on the other side of the river I guess.'

He kneels near the water, sticks his head under and shakes it until his wet grey hair is sticking straight up.

Two weeks later workmen come to demolish the house. They give us a couple of days to get out. I chuck my stuff in my car and head out of the city.

It's winter and I'm back. The parks are full of bare trees and an Antarctic wind whips across the city. I run into Tommy at a tram stop. He's carrying a heater that looks like it doesn't work.

'Where ye livin?' He asks.

'Around. Here and there.'

'I've got a sweet gaff on the go, water and 'leccy and everythin'. Come stay.'

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Tommy's gaff is an old miner's cottage down the end of a fancy street. We go through the side gate and walk to the back door, past an outside toilet that looks like it would fall over if it weren't for the vines holding it up. There's a hole in the kitchen floor that Tommy has jammed two milk crates into. The glass doors to the dining room are closed.

'I don't go in there,' he says. 'That's Thelma's room.'

'Thelma?'

'Lady o' the house.' He slides the door open with a flourish. On the mantel is an ornate gold urn, *Thelma* engraved on the side.

'Hi Thelma,' I wave to the urn and close her door.

We spend the night playing cards and drinking boxed wine out of bone china. I wake on the couch. Tommy is asleep, curled in an armchair. We are both covered in dust.

I haven't seen Tommy for a few days. I call Curtis.

'Hey, you seen Tommy? Haven't seen him for a bit. You can never find him when he owes you fifty bucks, eh?'

Silence. Something bad has happened.

'Tommy's dead.'

'What?'

'He drowned.'

'What?... How?'

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'In the Yarra.'

I open my mouth but no words come out.

'He swerved round someone on the Fairfield bike path and slipped down the bank,' says Curtis.

'Fuck...'

'He grabbed onto a branch but the river was raging...'

'Yea, so much rain...' I say.

'They called triple-O... people on the footbridge... but he got pulled under just before search and rescue got there.'

'Fuck... I... Fuck.' I can't think of anything else to say.

'We're having drinks in the Gardens for him on Sunday.'

On Sunday the park is cold and it looks like rain. I don't know anyone except Curtis. We sit under a leafless tree and share a bottle of scotch, the brand Tommy drank on payday. It's getting dark and some guy invites everyone back to his flat on the south side of the river. I'm drinking a longneck of Mercury cider on the train and someone from the park is playing a guitar. Badly. I am holding onto the hand-strap and swaying on my feet with the motion of the train, singing, also badly.

We sit in a boxy white lounge room drinking and telling stories about Tommy.

'Classic Tommy, dying when he owes me fifty bucks.' It's a shitty joke at a shitty time and I feel shitty after saying it.

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The guy with the guitar says, 'I owe him thirty. Here.'

He takes out his wallet and hands me a crumpled twenty and a handful of change. I feel even worse.

The next day I wake up on the couch with a jacket over me, twenty-eight dollars in my pocket. The apartment is empty. I catch the train back to the north side and drink a six-pack next to the river.