

Dealer Incarnate

Luke Applebee

I WOKE TO a dazzling display: reds, yellows and greens splashed the midnight canvas. More fireworks crackled nearby and boomed like backfiring cars.

“Shhh,” I told the sky with a finger to my lips. Stiff-necked and sprawled on a park bench, the humid breeze wafted through my tattered jeans and ripped t-shirt doing little to alleviate my splitting headache.

I shifted my knee and an empty VB bottle rolled out of my lap, rattled along the wooden slats and landed on a tuft of grass.

A few hours ago, Delphi Reserve teemed with typical New Years fun. A scrawny five year old climbed the bright yellow slide and shouted for his mother to watch him, while elderly gentlemen sat along the stone benches by the shade of the willow tree and reminisced. A group of young guys stood by the monkey bars, smoking, laughing and carrying on. Even the rotting stench of open rubbish bins couldn't overpower the sickly, sweet aroma of spilt UDL cans, which still lingered.

Tonight, everyone had been swept up in the tide of raging parties and had probably washed up on the beach, or found themselves drowning in amber fluids at the Carson & Wilcock Hotel while I waited to deliver the goods.

My pocket buzzed, vibrated. *Sweet child of mine*—in all its guitarific glory—shook me from my alcohol induced daze. I filched my battered Nokia: seven new messages. “Where are ya, Jack?” I groaned.

Shit, it's 12:04 am. I gathered myself in my winter coat, plucked the last VB from the six-pack plastic and staggered to the wooden picnic

table, careful not to trip on wooden beams set in a square around the mulch area.

Everything appeared to be frozen in time. The fireworks had stopped and it seemed the world had stopped too. The houses across the street were black silhouettes and the cars parked by the curb glinted silver, sharing that same light blue hue everything seemed to have under the moon's illumination.

The wooden table was rough and you could feel with your palms where people had etched and burned into the pine. Crude signatures stood out in thick black permo (or Sharpie as my younger brother would say). I leant in to smell whether the ink was fresh. As I did the bushes near the base of the willow rustled.

Someone tall and lanky emerged from the darkness.

"That you Jack?" I shouted, excited, then realised the stranger was too thin.

He—I assumed the person was a he—followed the dirt path parallel to the playground.

Anxious, I popped the VB open and took a sip.

He—I was right—shambled closer, a park light revealed baggy cream coloured cargo pants and an oversized black hoodie. Perhaps he tagged this table?

He looked straight at me and dragged on his cigarette: he wore a red and black bandana around his forehead and his acne-splotched face scowled. Fuck it's—

"Who's Jack?"

Cam, Carlito? No, it's Carlos. Of all people.

He threw his cigarette at me.

I swiped the butt away, but spilt my beer on the ground. He was only a few paces away—and last time we talked, year nine in the school library, he walked away with my pencil case and my second-hand copy of *Hatchet*—so I wedged my mobile and wallet into a gap under the table just in case history repeated itself. The bags of mushies and molly however . . . I decided to keep those deep in my coat pocket.

"Fuck you doin'?" He spat.

The warm fuzziness behind my eyes prevented me from forming a decent comeback.

Something rattled in his backpack. "Waddy lookin' at, cunt?" His breath reeked of acrid smoke and sweet bourbon.

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I was lost for words. I tried to stand but my knees buckled and I couldn't rise from my seat.

Carlos swung his backpack around and off his shoulder, dropped it on the table, tore open the zip and grabbed a spray can. "You better piss off, fuck face before I rob ya." He shook the can with exaggerated vigour and stared with vacant, almost crazed, blue eyes at me.

Carlos raised his can, still shaking it, and gestured to spray me. He grinned.

Scared shitless, I jumped out from the table before he tagged it.

"This is my boys' turf now, dickhead."

"OK." I swallowed all the profanities I wanted to shout and found the will to step backwards—two steps—three, like slow marching but in reverse, to the edge of the mulch square.

Shit, I patted my jean pockets.

My phone.

My wallet.

The high school dropout conducted his vandalism like it was a therapeutic activity. Maybe it was.

His body language seemed more relaxed, fluid. After a few shorter bursts of aerosol he ignored me and approached the slide.

The drunken fucktard was wrecking my childhood playground, the place where my brother was supposedly conceived.

Crouched under the shroud of the willow, my nerves settled a little. Idly stroking my right sideburn, I contemplated sprinting back to the table.

I need my shit back.

"CARLOS? Bro?" Someone called from the other side of the willow. "Boys, oi, he's here."

I rolled behind a stone bench and landed on a garden bed with my hands on my head.

The shouting ceased.

Slowly, I crawled up on the damp soil and rose just high enough to peer over the stone bench. Carlos and a new group of guys, all wearing bandanas, shook hands and clapped one another on the back. One of them said: "Happy-fuckin-New Year, mate! You comin' to the party or what?"

The rest of the group, half a dozen, raised their bottles of booze to the sky and cheered, jumping up and down. They all took seats by the picnic table and shouted over each other.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. It's the whole gang. I'm screwed.

I dropped to my chest, again, and dragged myself through damp dirt. I yelped as I dragged my left leg over something sharp. I froze. The guys in the park didn't hear me. A little further and I'll be able to get away.

Sweet child of mine . . .

The guys stopped talking.

Crap.

"The fuck's that?" One of the guys said.

I reached around the end of the stone bench and pulled myself over to see Carlos answering my phone. Another guy found my wallet; they all laughed and pillaged its contents. All the cards were scattered like confetti: library, student, concession . . .

Carlos, in the meantime, clambered on top of the table and looked all around him. He bellowed: "Tim's not here, fag. But the Sparky Crew is."

Now felt like the perfect opportunity to puke up the last twelve hours of drinking.

Carlos jumped off the table, with my phone pressed against his ear, and checked out the slide, getting closer. "Yeah, well your boy isn't here, Jack. What? What'd you say to me cunt? You wanna start me and my crew you fuckin' prick? Yeah, yeah well I guess I'll string up your fuckin' boyfriend first and . . ."

Why did he stop?

"Boys, bash the fag in the dirt." Carlos screamed into the phone and pelted it at me. I ducked seconds before my Nokia 3120 bounced off the stone.

I stood, maybe too fast. I clutched my guts and hurled at my feet. Rank bile drenched my socks and slopped across paved squares in the garden as I staggered and fell onto the stone bench, desperately searching for where my phone landed.

Hands pressed on the cold stone, I wiped my mouth on my shoulder and I glimpsed the baddies coming my way in my peripheral vision.

Carlos' henchman looked too drunk to land an accurate punch.

Wrong.

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Pure agony paralysed me. Sunlight blazed to the point of washing my vision with white. Seagulls squawked overhead and waves crashed. I could taste the salt on my tongue—gritty sand too. The warmth made me giddy.

“Wakey, wakey.” Jack prodded my ribs. His fat face blocked out the sun and just about everything else.

“Jack?” I coughed and wheezed

Jack kneeled to pick something up. “You’re lucky the cops didn’t find ya first, ’ey?”

“Am I dead?” I felt broken and sore.

“Yep. Sorry buddy. So . . . you s’pose to be workin’ today?”

His lazy eye distracted me momentarily. “How’d you . . . ?” A pinched nerve in my neck cut me off. I tried to sit. Man, my throat was as dry as the soles of my feet.

“I rang your phone.” Jack snorted. “That guy—”

“Ah.” I patted my sides. “My phone!”

“Gone.”

“Far out.”

“What about the wallet and those guys?”

“We, uh, came to an understanding.”

“Thanks, I guess. Saved my life. Must’ve passed out. What’s the time?”

Jack looked at his smartphone, “Quarter past seven.”

I groan. “Seven? So I’ve been unconscious for—”

“Chill, bro.”

“But I have shit to do.”

“Not like this you’re not. Who works New Years Day after a good ol’ bashing anyway?”

“At least I have a job.”

“Do you now?” Jack offered his hand.

I rolled over to my stomach. “Hang on.” I managed to get up on my knees and with Jack’s help I eventually made it to my feet.

Delphi Reserve and the street across the road was as dead as it was late last night.

“Why are you still awake and not pissed?” I asked.

Jack scratched the back of his greasy, balding head. He avoided my gaze and shrugged. “Never drink on a job. Besides . . . I err, sent messages—”

“I could’ve died, man. What took you so long? You knew I was here,

waiting.” Trembling and fighting a sudden chill I leaned against Jack’s side to stay upright.

Jack gripped my arm firmly. “Come on, car’s round the corner.”

“I need a shower.”

His grip tightened.

* * *

“Reckon you could give me a lift to the station?” I called out, scrutinising my flicked-up fringe and black eyes in the mirror.

“Sure.” Jack said from the kitchen.

I cringed; Dad was sleeping in the other room. Quietly, I placed the hair gel, comb, disposable razor and aftershave in the bathroom drawer and closed it gently.

Thump-thump-pok. Clang! A stainless steel saucepan crashed on the kitchen tiles. The reverberation stopped mid-clang. I could imagine Jack, the clumsy oaf that he was, checking the pantry for a packet of biscuits only to knock something off the stove top.

I tiptoed to the kitchen to survey the damage.

His eyes reminded me of a startled animal caught in the head lights.

“I was just . . .” Jack mumbled, cookies in his mouth, and returned the pot to the stove.

“Shut up!” Dad said; his voice muffled by closed doors. “Tryna sleep here.”

“Let’s go.” Jack pointed to the door.

I rummaged next to the front door for my black shoes and followed Jack out the door in a fresh pair of socks.

He opened the passenger door of his Commodore and I winced as I folded my unsteady self inside. I winced again, squeezing my feet into my shoes.

Doors slammed shut, engine rumbled and away we went.

“Hey, Jack. Station’s that way.”

“I know.”

“What? We don’t have time to muck around.”

The car jolted to a sudden halt and with a lurch the seatbelt bit into my tender shoulders.

Jack sat at the intersection and waited. He shifted his gaze from the road to me. His face tensed, his eyes squinted.

“Come on, man. What the hell?”

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Jack's eyes twinkled—two red orbs flashed in his sockets.

I blinked and Jack's face seemed normal again. He giggled and planted his foot on the accelerator, which jerked my back hard against the seat. We just missed a cyclist who gave us the finger.

“You lost my stash to a pack of tools. Welcome to purgatory, motherfucker.”

We hurtled through fog—