Free For All

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I ROLLED cold into our Fairmont's passenger seat, my eyes closed to the stark light and to what mum had on the dashboard; three sets of cheese toasties, each double triangle kept warm in a serviette. Our car has four doors. We need two. *Don't make them like that anymore.* One of Mum's sayings. She got it from Dad, just like the car. I told her to give it up. Even if we had the money, she wouldn't have the inclination. Another saying of Dad's I've got to purge myself of.

I count on sleeping my way to the market, but Mum talks my eyes open so I look through glass to pavements and wide brick houses whose windows hide behind white columns; above us a drying cement sky. We pass the Preston Cemetery where Nonno's buried and I sneak a sign of the cross on the left side of my leg, at the same time that Mum's hand moves down and across on her chest.

'What is it with wogs,' I ask as if I'm not one, 'and concrete? You'd think we're all mafia with something underground.

'We'll be carrying our bags back, too, I suppose?' I'm asking about the walk back from the market to the car, but her door is closed.

The hall between the meat and deli stalls has no roof, not even a corrugated Perspex sheet. Looks like men with greying stubble and coarse eyebrows who talk and sip or smoke have taken every plastic table. Air goes through me. It's freezing and smoky with Penfold's 5 and Vittoria Expresso Beans.

Mum grabs at me with a strength that's surprising for her skinny arms.

'Stop yanking me!'

She knows better than to listen to the dragging of my feet.

We squeeze through glass doors where too many languages swirl in under my coat's upturned collar. I'm tasting air now: pizzas with tomato and

cheese and olives cut in squares; almonds, walnuts, brazil and more nuts in boxes with prices written in pen on cardboard; pistachios in salty shells; biscotti made of hazelnut meal that are irregularly shaped and small, each parcel decorated with one roasted nut or a purple or green candied cherry. Behind glass are cured artichokes and mushrooms, Vienna bread and mortadella. The glass has a collection of fingerprints like my old colouring-in books that I'd still doodle with if no one caught me. The prosciutto looks so good in open air but it's a stinker in a high school classroom. 'Mum,' I yank her skirt. 'Buy ham.'

Why'd I think that she'd do this now, in my final year?

Her lips sit plump like they have their arms folded and will not move, even though her hands are going all over the place.

I look to the lino floor. It, like the walls, is that bright white which like my skin, could be florescent blue.

Mum's blush suits her perfectly. It's subtle, but gives depth to her olive cheeks and copper hair. She wears it, along with copper lipstick, on the doorstep, in the garden, on the tiles of her wet bathroom floor. 'It's up to a woman to make the best of herself,' she says under breath.

I keep walking.

'The right colour blush,' she adds, 'would do you a world of good.'

We've moved on again and I could thank her for bringing me to fruit and veg over meat, but I can't get out nice words for her and now she's stopped at a corner stall 'cause one-dollar-a-kilo-apples are in a crate. I want to tell her, if she thinks I look bad, she should take a closer look at those apples. Last night's sleep is again a brick in my throat. 'Doughnuts,' I mouth.

I haul her to the stand where doughy rounds laze on dunes of sugar.

Her hand gives over loose change.

My white-waxed bag crinkles as I bite into softness, sugar dotting my lips. Hot jam drips down my chin.

She's mopping me up with her handkerchief.

I brush her away.

A guy's coming my way and he's kind of good looking.

Not that many are interested in my gangly ways.

It looked like there was a hint of something, a raised eyebrow maybe.

Now he's gone I'll never know.

She's walking where I don't want to go.

'Mum! God!' The air here stinks of fish and raw slabs of meat. Butchers and the like yell in dollars and cents for rump steak and fillet of flathead. Lemon slices and parsley sprigs garnish silver-pink scales behind wet glass counters. Knives sharpen.

The butcher is lassoing her with his latest special—*Only for the next ten minutes.*

'Meet you here at one,' she says.

I point to the corner with the double glass doors, the one we've both learnt, over time, to come back to. 'That corner.'

She's gone already and in the space she leaves, I almost half miss her. 'Just you and me this time,' I whisper.

Last night she made up three plates. Two she set on the table. Who knows when the third moved from oven to bin? She must have waited until a secret hour tucked somewhere between midnight and dawn when she realised Dad wasn't coming home. She's been doing this for a year now.

I'm near the corner of windows where men smoke while their wives fill plastic bags to get them through the week.

My guess is that in a city, like Adelaide, Dad's got another wife and kids. That's why he spent so little time at home before he left us. I imagine them in the backyard with their aboveground pool, him jumping out of the water, them panting around him like puppy dogs. Here, where windows bring in a dull, white light, shadows dance on the floor. A crowd gathers. A yellow plastic crate flies through the air.

I want another doughnut.

The crowd is gathering me in.

Boredom! I scream up where the sounds flash into nothing.

People push together.

There's this tall guy in front of me.

'Can't see?' The tiny woman beside me has wide cherry cheeks and raspberry icy-pole lips. She seems to have access to the stage that I don't have, like the crowd has parted for her and not for me.

'What's happening?'

'A man's on a crate, in a costume. Can you see now?'

'Nup.' As tall as I think I am, the man in front of me is taller. Maybe I'm not tall, just tall for a wog. I want to dust dandruff off the back of his collar.

The stand man sounds like an old crooner.

I learnt about that part of history in Year 8 theatre. Mrs Stimison said I could sing. I'd pick him for Harry Connick Jnr but Stimison'd pick him for a cross between Frank Sinatra and Michael Bublé.

He's raised it up a notch now. 'I've just had a shower and a shave, so dear people, I'm just about the freshest thing here in this market. You've been pushed and shoved for an eternity. Today you will be rewarded for your patience. What I have to sell, you won't see sold again.'

'What's he look like?' I whisper to raspberry lips.

'I told you. Clown.'

'As in circus?'

'Cone hat. Purple, yellow and red.'

'Painted face?'

'Open shirt. Hairy chest. Cuffs on wrists. But my,' she turns to me, 'you are tall.'

'Like my dad.' I don't mention how I keep looking for him every time I open our cellar door.

'Not sure what he's up to.' Her lips stay wet. 'He's got a black texta…'

The texta stops squeaking. A small kid yells: 'A treasure!'

She sighs. 'He's gone an' put a cross on his heart.'

I listen for new sounds, but they do not come. Butchers have stopped their ruckus and raving, all over a kilo of porterhouse. Fishmongers have hushed their cries that squid can run out the door on its own at this ridiculous price. Even the flies hovering about racks of fresh meat have stopped their buzzing and humming. It is quieter than the lounge room at home when I've gone to bed and mum's still up waiting.

I want to knock someone over so that I can see for myself.

'Another crate's down. Someone's up. Oh, she's my age,' says wet lips, 'real pretty.'

'Would you like my heart?' he says.

I hear a shy giggle.

He asks her, 'How much would you pay?'

In the crowd, fingers are up to mouths. People make calculations.

He asks, 'How much do you think I'm worth?'

More silence.

'Answer me,' he belts.

Everyone but me jumps. It's been so long since I've heard that sound.

His voice softens. 'Oh, just give me an estimate.'

I edge forward.

Red lips grabs onto my jumper.

I am pushing through spaces between shoulders and elbows and hands. The crowd in front of me is a load of dirt and my arms are those of a bulldozer shovelling. I could be a Caterpillar dozer. One of those excavators Dad used to dig out the graves with when it was his duty to pay for my school uniform, and my job to bring home good grades. I am standing in front of him now, my heart drumming hard.

The crowd must have left with the shoo-shoo of the fishmonger.

I search the white paint for something that I know, the bend in his nose, the mole by his chin. His face is longer than I remember it. Sweat trails down his painted cheeks like it used to on hot January days.

'Your mother,' he says softly but he can't hide his amusement, 'comes

every week for the meat.'

You left us a year ago! I want to pull at him. *Piss off!* I'm holding all the months of waiting around for something to happen in the spots on the back of my arms just above my elbows. My hands are fists of cement that are buzzing with lightning. I want to punch them into the buttons down his shirt but then he drops the smile and I see the lift of his eyebrow as if he is sorry for something.

The tear that drops down his white makeup cheek is thicker than sweat.

I'm a wall still standing and I'm willing him to go away. I can't see him anymore, only the fishmonger who carries the crates back to the stand with yellow chalk on dusty blackboards. I wait for the fishmonger to disappear behind the counter. I start to make my way back to the corner.

Mum appears, with plastic bags full of meat and fish and chicken.

I take some from her.

We walk over burning tar to the screech of a hotted up car somewhere in the distance.

We're walking down the path and there is our eyesore. Royal blue when everyone else, these days, is buying into cobalt or night black. She's taken away the fluffy dice at least, or maybe Dad did when we weren't looking.

Mum stops to place the bags down on grass. Her fingers loosen away from the bags.

I can see the dents the handles have made in her fingers, over a muscle near her thumb and on her wrists.

She lifts the boot.

I stare into the dark.

We should have knotted up the plastic bags because now oranges roll out.

My hands scramble after them, fingers lunging into the corners of the boot. I want to scream but I force myself to whisper: 'I like apples, mum. You do too.'

Mum grabs an orange and cradles it.

'Citrus gives you a rash,' I urge. 'If he wants oranges, he'll get them himself.'

Mum keeps her arms straight and her hands on the rim of the boot. Her arms are branch thin.

I count the oranges in my head. Seven. One for each day before she comes back to buy again.

I pick up today's orange, begin to peel.