

Dark

Dark. But not dark enough to conceal the yellow stain from last summers bees, whose hive in the ceiling had left sticky honey trailing down the wall. The grime on the lino made horrible shadow patterns, swirling clouds of muck that no amount of mopping could erase, interrupted by the hulking silhouette of a single chair. It was still dark enough to conceal the threadbare patches that wore away at the fabric of the seat.

Five am. The red numbers burned Steven's eyes as he registered the familiar squalor of the room around him. He staggered out of bed and stripped off his singlet, drenched in sweat again. Another nightmare. He didn't remember this one, only the terror it left behind and the face of a little blonde kid, screaming as he held a hand out for help. His brother. Christian.

Tonight must have been worse than usual, even his pillow was soaked with perspiration. He tossed it on the floor, on top of his stinking singlet. No need to turn on the light. Sixteen steps across the lino, a path worn under his feet from the countless times he had made this trip through the darkness. He reached for the handle of the bathroom door. Stuck. He jiggled and it creaked open reluctantly.

The shower spluttered as it came to life, yellow-brown water from some of the oldest pipes in the city. They were probably copper and should have been replaced years ago, but Steven didn't care. Steam rose in clouds and inspired the colony of mould on the ceiling while the water scalded his chest and eased out the knots in his muscles. Under the fizzing spray he tried to forget the brutal August morning. His tiny radiator was loosing the battle to keep this flat warm.

There was a thumping on the wall. Bang. Bang. Bang. He shared a hot water service with his neighbour, a seedy looking accountant who rose early every morning to shower and examine the performance of his stocks in the daily paper. Steven hated him. Couldn't understand why he didn't just pack up and leave this public housing disaster. Surely accountants made enough to pay market rent?

Resigned, he turned off the tap and stumbled back to the bedroom to dress. It was too early to get ready for work, he didn't start till eight. He pulled on his tracksuit pants and a thick woollen jumper before contemplating Frosties for breakfast. But he wasn't hungry. He could really do

with a few more hours of sleep. He never slept again after a nightmare though, he'd been having them for long enough now to understand that. Nineteen years ago Christian had disappeared and they hadn't stopped since then. He sighed as he pulled on his socks. He needed to go to the park.

He had grown up with this park. When he was a child he had lived opposite, in a house that had since been demolished and replaced with a block of squat, concrete flats. The tenants of this eyesore had scrawled angry graffiti all over the playground. The slide was covered with words that made it a hazard for any child who was able to read.

However, it wasn't the equipment that interested Steven. Behind it, an open drain that used to be a creek marked the border of the park. Its banks were infested with willows and blackberries and it only held water after a major storm. He had spent many hours when he was young playing in that jungle with his brother. Now he would sit on the single park bench in the mornings, observing the birds and insects go about their busy lives. Clearing the fog from his head.

His park was always empty at this time of morning, but not today. An old man, wisps of hair escaping wildly from his furry, black beanie, sat in Steven's usual place. He was dressed in tracksuit pants and jogging shoes but he looked as though he were barely capable of shuffling, let alone running. Steven veered sharply off course and moved to sit on the swing.

"Scuse me, have you got the time?"

"Nah." Steven wasn't used to communication this early in the morning. He wasn't very good at it any time of day really. He sat with his back to the old man, hoping he would take the hint.

"Please? I've been resting a while and I think my wife'll be worrying about me." The old man wheezed as he spoke. He sounded like he shouldn't have been let out of the house at all.

Steven shook his head without turning around. "I haven't got a watch." *Go away old man. Get off my seat.* He just wanted quiet. He needed silence to force the image of his little brother back into the depths of his mind.

What was this man doing here anyway? No one ever came to this park. Children weren't allowed to come because of the syringes in the grass and the rubbish in the playground. Joggers

didn't come; there was no scenery and the track had potholes you could lose a man in. Only junkies came, and they came in the night when no one would see them. And Steven, who came in the mornings.

The man was persistent. He clearly couldn't see Steven's need to be alone and he tried another tack. "Could you pass me my shopping, it's just there on the ground?"

"Get it yourself." Steven kept his head down, oblivious to the plastic bag that lay split on the grass a few steps from where the man now sat.

"Sorry. No offence. If you could just help me up, I'm going. I'm just a bit dizzy."

Steven wasn't in the mood for helping elderly whingers across the road. The swing was uncomfortable and he had to twist to see the creek. He stood and set off at a jog, back the way he had come.

"Wait. Please." The old man was ignored.

Steven was exhausted when he returned home, although he had only run a hundred metres then slowed to a walk. He could go back to bed now and get another hour in before work. But he wasn't ready to sleep again, his brother was still waiting to confront him behind closed eyelids.

Once Steven's insomnia had ingrained itself into his routine he was forced to find a hobby that would fill the hours of darkness. He had begun building model aeroplanes which, although they didn't calm him like the park, were as good a way as any to pass time. It had been something that he enjoyed as a small child but Christian was always too rough with them. He would throw them across the room as though they were made of paper and they would smash into a million tiny pieces against the wall. So he had stopped. But now there was no one to break them and nothing else to do with his time and he had become quite an expert. He was a little unconventional in the hobby world because he never built war planes. He liked light aircraft, little two seaters that could just pick up and launch into the sky at a second's notice.

At the moment he was building a Cessna 150, 1/48th scale, and it was nearly finished. He unpacked his tiny paints and laid them out carefully on the scuffed laminex dining table which

still bore the scars of a mishap with one of these pots. With his glasses on and his head down, painstakingly filling in the tiny areas of colour, his scrawny body could be easily mistaken for an unusually meticulous child. His breathing steadied as he worked and his nightmare receded just enough for him to face the rest of the day. At seven, he was putting the finishing touches on the wings and it was time to get dressed for work.

So he roused himself, packed up his paints and crossed back to his bed where he contemplated his meagre pile of clothing. Black pants, white shirt, no tie, polished shoes. The other employees at the call centre, who were mostly uni students desperate for a bit of extra cash, wore jeans all the time but Steven never did. It was his one attempt at projecting himself as a respectable member of society and he always kept it up, no matter how little he slept.

Steven walked on the right hand footpath on his way to the bus stop because facing directly into the traffic made him feel stronger. He straightened up, took longer strides and pretended he was a successful business man on his way to close a deal. He did this every day as he walked up his street and onto the main road, through the classier end of his suburb with its enormous houses and shady trees.

Wattletree Park was on the opposite side of the road when he reached the bus stop. This park was about as far removed from the overgrown junkyard that he had played in as a child that it was hard to believe they were provided by the same council. It was safe for kids to play in here, with a new wooden playground sitting atop the highest quality safety matting. It was surrounded by trees you could have all kinds of adventures in and it was fenced off from the road with green schoolyard wire to prevent any catastrophes. Sometimes Steven would pause and watch the children playing. They made the corners of his mouth turn up at the edges and for a moment, as he watched them run, his steps on the pavement would become just a little bit lighter.

He had a seat on the bus at first but he gave it up for a pregnant woman who got on after him. With this small act of civility he arrived at work content, this morning's nightmare and the encounter in the park pushed into the darkness at the back of his mind. Someone else sat at his desk on the days that he wasn't there and there were papers and files all over the place today. He switched on his computer and began to sort through the mess.

Today was Friday and that meant an early finish. On Fridays Steven could generally avoid his boss, who provided a constant criticism of his performance. He was always being lectured about the need to sell harder, and warned that his job was on the line. Any day he could escape this was a good day, it made it bearable that none of the other employees would speak to him. They were frightened by the black circles under his eyes and the nervous twitch he developed at the computer.

He made it through the day with one sale and no confrontations and at three thirty he packed up his desk and walked back to the bus stop. As he stood waiting, there was an uneasy feeling in his stomach that he couldn't quite explain. He shifted from one foot to the other and checked his watch so often that it seemed to stop working. The driver had the radio going as he finally got on the bus and he took a seat at the front, enjoying the inoffensive melodies of some new pop supergroup. Steven leaned his head against the window, leaving an oily mark on the glass and pricked up his ears to listen as the song was interrupted by the jangling of the four o'clock news theme.

An elderly man was found dead this morning in Morrison Park. Concerned residents of a nearby housing complex called an ambulance when they noticed the man lying on the ground. He was pronounced dead at the scene and is yet to be identified. The death has been ruled non suspicious.

That was his park. The old man had said he was feeling dizzy. Why hadn't he stopped to help? Guilt pierced Steven's stomach and he doubled over, clutching the rail in front of him. What was wrong with him. Why did he always do this. He was so selfish. Always, always, so selfish. That park. They should have just knocked it down years ago. Covered it with public housing or turned it into a car park. It was a miserable place. Had no right to claim that it was fun. And Steven. It made Steven a bad person. Or he was just a bad person anyway. He was rotten. And now he had two lives on his conscience. The park had nothing to do with it. He would be rotten whether it was there or not.

Two lives. Steven's brother had disappeared from Morrison Park when he was six years old. Steven had been nine. They were playing in the jungle by the creek and Steven wanted to play soldiers, but Christian didn't want to. He was collecting insects. So Steven kicked over his bug

catcher and they all escaped. His brother started to wail and Steven ran home to tell on him. but his mum had no sympathy. She was furious that he'd left Christian by himself.

“He could get hurt,” she'd screamed. “He's six years old, you're supposed to look after him.”

They ran back to the park together. “He'll just be crying on the ground. He's a sooky bed wetter.” But terror had gripped Steven's body as he yelled these insults.

Christian wasn't crying on the ground. He wasn't there at all. They searched and searched then they called the police. There was a full scale investigation and all the neighbours were interviewed and they said horrible things about his mother. But they never found even a trace of him and it was all Steven's fault. And now he'd done it again.

His skinny body was shuddering like someone had run an electric current through it. He was going to vomit. How could he have let this happen? He couldn't let anybody find out. He was unpopular at work already and all his neighbours talked about his oddities behind his back. He just wanted to live quietly, make up for what he had done to Christian. He didn't need this. He lived...His...He was going to make it better and now it was happening again. His fault. Murderer.

Panic had set in now. He had to get off the bus. Two more stops. The asthma that had plagued him as a child was returning, squeezing his lungs like a kid trying to pop a balloon. He gasped for air, scrabbling in his backpack for the Ventolin. Was it in here? People on the bus were starting to stare. He coughed. The driver glanced in his mirror. Act normal. He hadn't had asthma for so long. Was the puffer still in here? One more stop. His fingertips brushed the plastic cylinder and he closed his hand around it. He inhaled deeply, grateful to the medication for the clearway that it burned down to his chest. His stop. He lurched up and staggered off the bus, waving away the concerns of the driver. Exhausted, he collapsed into the bus shelter, gratefully pulling the oxygen into his lungs.

As Steven's breathing gradually returned to normal, his panic was replaced by an overwhelming feeling of despair. He sat quivering in the little glass box, turning his puffer over and over in his hands. What would have happened if he hadn't found it? Asthma was like drowning and he'd heard that drowning was the most peaceful way to go. Maybe he could believe it too, now that

the screaming pain in his lungs had been replaced with mere self loathing. Probably the driver would have saved him. He would have made everybody late and then he'd have something else to add to this burden of guilt.

He raised his eyes and stared vacantly across at Wattletree park. There was a group of boys running alongside the fence. They each held a large stick which they wielded like a machine gun.

“eh-eh-eh-eh-eh. You're dead. I got you, you're dead!”

Their voices floated across the street but today Steven was too preoccupied to pay them any attention. His shoulders remained hunched over. His body, glued to the seat by an unbearable magnetic force, was unable to respond. Thick fog swirled in his head, much thicker than usual. He might never be able to fight his way out of it.

“I said, you're dead! You have to die when you get shot. That's the rules!”

The war games were escalating. The reverberation of a branch hitting the metal fence forced Steven to lift his head. Someone was screaming. The long, thin wail of a child wounded in battle pierced through Steven's reverie. The smallest boy had been knocked to the ground. His wispy blonde hair spread like sand over the grass and his freckles stood out like a burning rash in the perfect white of his face.

That little boy, the freckles. Steven was going to get in big trouble, he was supposed to be in charge. They had to be good or nobody was getting fish and chips for tea. That's what his Mum said and if she looked up and saw Christian crying there was going to be big trouble. But it was his own fault. He shouldn't play with sticks. Steven told him not to but he didn't listen. That kid never listened. He wasn't good like all his aunties thought he was, he broke Steven's planes and he wandered off all the time. He was always naughty but Steven got blamed for everything.

“I'm coming.”

Steven's body belonged to him again. His legs and arms tensed and he sprang up, ready to race across and sort things out. He didn't look for traffic. Usually it was Christian who would step out onto the road and Steven would have to yank him back. But not today. He didn't see the

black Subaru and presumably the driver didn't see him because it was still doing fifty when it hit him. A sharp crack resounded in Steven's ears and he felt his knees explode as they collided with the bumper bar. As he was thrown to the ground, his head bounced on the bitumen and rolled to one side. His eyes met those of the little boy.

The last thing Steven saw was that face. The sandy hair tousled and standing on end above a dusty t-shirt and the mouth ready to cry. But it was the eyes, filled with the kind of haunting terror that would stay with him for life, that etched themselves into Steven's mind. He saw himself there now. Christian was gone, the burden of him passed on to this small child.

The little boy had stopped wailing and was drawn to the fence with the others when they heard the thud. Their knuckles gripped the railing and their jaws hung slack like the muscles had been removed. The freckled kid was in the middle. Stinging tears ran down his face at the sight of the crumpled body but he didn't make a sound. He wondered who the man had been yelling at and why he hadn't looked before he crossed to road. Didn't his mum ever teach him to look?