

the rip

MARK BRANDI

 hachette
AUSTRALIA

Now, where were we?
You tell me.

We were talking about what was found in your room.

You were talking about it.

Some sort of chemical, right?

No idea.

You don't know what it is?

Nah.

Was in your room, you know.

So?

It's not a big room.

I know that.

Stinks something terrible.

My room?

The chemical.

Didn't really notice.

How'd it get there?

Dunno. Already there, I spose.

In the room?

Yep. When I moved in.

Which was when?

Couple of months back.

Never thought to ask what it was?

Why would I?

Well, forensics are looking at it now.

Right.

We'll get the answer, one way or another.

If you say so.

Back to the girl then.

What about her?

Care to tell us what happened?

Already told ya.

We've just checked those places, mate. No record.

Dunno then. Must be a mistake.

No mistake.

No kidding.

CCTV is coming. Should have it in the next hour.

And?

Well, you can see where this is heading, can't ya?

No idea.

Look, mate, accidents happen.

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That's true.

We're not here to judge.

Fair enough.

So why don't you just tell us, yeah? What happened?

before

one

Anton wakes me. He's always first up in the morning. A real early riser.

'Getting up?'

'Piss off,' I say.

He lies down beside me, like he's trying to spoon me. But not in a sexual way or anything. He's not like that, Anton. Never tried anything on me, which is good.

'You were back late last night,' he says.

I can feel his breath on my neck.

'C'mon. Sun's shining, birds are singing.'

I pull the sleeping bag up over my head.

'C'mon,' he says, and pulls it back down.

'Rack off.'

He laughs and starts tickling me, which he knows I can't stand. It's like bloody torture, but I kind of love it too. Sometimes.

I start wriggling, and Sunny comes in and he's licking my face, and I realise it's all pretty much no use. I sit up slowly.

It's cold, and I keep the sleeping bag up to my chin with one hand. My bra strap is digging in something fierce, so I reach up under my t-shirt.

Anton smiles. He has pretty good teeth compared to most in the park – a bit yellow, but none missing or busted.

He waves around one of those squeegee things, like the window washers use. 'Look at this, will ya?' he says, tilting it to the light. 'Our ticket to fame and fortune.'

He starts laughing, but it becomes a cough pretty quick.

'Where'd you get it?'

'Servo on Victoria Street. One with the 7-Eleven.' He pats Sunny, coughs again. 'C'mon, know a good spot. Easy money.'

'Nah.'

'C'mon. If we get there by peak hour, we'll smash it.'

I can see he's had a bit of a wash under the tap, because his hair is wet and slicked back a bit. He reckons he's the bees knees, looks-wise. He told me once how girls used to say he looked like Dave Navarro from the Red Hot Chili Peppers, but I reckon he probably made that up. I know the Red Hot Chili Peppers, but I don't know which one Dave Navarro is. I did like that 'Under the Bridge' song, though.

I need a piss something terrible, so I put Sunny on the rope. The toilets at the park are pretty crap and stink a bit. They

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have one of those stainless steel mirrors that's scratched to shit. I suppose it isn't glass so teenagers can't break it, but a steel mirror is pretty pointless. At least they clean the joint every couple of days, and the women's ones are pretty quiet mostly. But not so much on the weekends, because that's when the parents come with their kids and do the whole happy families thing with barbecues and frisbees and all that.

Anton reckons he needs a piss too. He doesn't like using the men's ones so much, because he reckons they're a beat. That's where guys meet sometimes to jerk each other off and give blowjobs and that kind of stuff. He isn't into that sort of thing, which is fair enough, though I wonder how he knows about it.

I get Anton to wait outside with Sunny. It isn't like Sunny will run away or anything, but I'm worried that someone might nick him.

I put toilet paper on the seat, which is something I've always done. And not just in public toilets either. It's just more hygienic, I reckon, and it feels better on your arse. Especially when it's cold. I don't know why more people don't do it.

After, I wash my hands carefully and the water is nice and cool on my skin. I put my mouth under the tap and have a long drink. It tastes a bit metallic and I need to get a toothbrush something terrible – it's been ages.

Anton calls out, 'Hurry up, will ya?'

'Yep, all right.'

I have a look at myself in the mirror, but I can't see much because, besides being scratched, it's a bit warped – almost like something from a carnival.

Probably just as well.

* * *

Anton says we should go to Victoria Street, because there are like eight lanes there, and we're sure to make some cash.

'What am I supposed to do?' I say.

'Keep me company. And keep an eye out for the cops. You can get the water too, if you want.'

He doesn't have a bucket or anything, so he fishes an empty water bottle out of a bin. It's one of those ones with the funny top, so you can squeeze it out.

'What about detergent?'

He looks at me all stunned, wide-eyed, like he hasn't even thought of it.

'Don't need it,' he says. 'Water's enough.'

That doesn't sound right, so I'm guessing he's never actually done window washing before. I mean, it isn't like something you need training for, but detergent seems pretty obvious.

'You know what you're doing?' I say.

'Yeah. Used to be a shearer, remember?'

'What's that got to do with it?'

He shrugs.

Anton had told me soon after I met him about how he used to be a shearer. That was why he was used to getting up

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early – a routine that kind of stuck. But he got in a bad fight once, which is why he went to jail. And when he got out, he had no one. All of that's true, he says.

He's not on the gear or nothing, just booze and pills mostly. Fentanyl or Endone. Hillbilly Heroin, some people call it. And he smokes.

Here's the thing with smokes – and this is completely bizarre – they've gotten really expensive. Worse than being on the gear, which is pretty mental if you think about it. I've never been into smoking much. Bit of dope, but that used to make me paranoid. Full on. Especially on the bong.

Anton points over to the tram shelter. 'You wait there. I'll let you know when I need more water.'

'Where am I gonna get it?'

He frowns and gives me this look, which is like – *that's your job*.

A lot of people just wave him off at first. So I tell him he has to give them 'the free one'. That's what Mick – who was this old hippy who stayed at the park (he's dead now) – that's what he used to do. He used to give them 'the free one', and then some of them would feel guilty and give him some coins. He used to do pretty well out of it, and always had plenty of good gear. Which was actually what killed him in the end.

Anton tries 'the free one', and he starts getting money probably two out of three times. I add it up and I reckon we have about thirty bucks so far, which isn't too bad.

'Would've done better with Eftpos,' he says. 'No one has cash anymore.'

‘Maybe dealers might start taking Eftpos too.’

He laughs.

I find a tap in the garden of this old church, which is right on the corner of the intersection. I’ve taken Sunny over with me for a drink. It isn’t that warm or nothing, but he’s panting like he’s thirsty, and he’s probably getting a bit hungry too.

But before I can even open the tap, I hear Anton yelling out. I turn around and he’s sprinting across the road like a mental case.

‘Run!’ he says. ‘For fuck’s sake, run!’

He bolts towards me, eyes like saucers.

Up the road, I see a divvy van flying down the tram tracks with lights flashing, but no sirens. Maybe one of the drivers called the cops, which is pretty shitful. Or maybe the cops were headed somewhere else. I mean, window washing isn’t the crime of the century or nothing, but Anton has a bad record so can’t risk getting caught for anything.

Me and Anton and Sunny run behind the church, then down a lane, and we get behind some houses before we stop to catch our breath. After a bit, Anton starts laughing.

‘It’s not funny,’ I say.

‘Don’t worry. They won’t come looking for us.’

Still, we wait a while, until we’re sure they’ll be gone.

Turns out Anton dropped the squeegee somewhere when we were running. We look, but can’t find it. I count up the money again and it’s \$35.40 exactly, which is pretty good. He gives me half for getting the water, which means I just need another twenty.

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‘How you gonna get it?’ he says.

‘How do you reckon?’

He hesitates, scratches his chin. ‘Want some more then?’

‘Why?’

‘So you don’t have to . . . you know.’

That’s the thing – Anton doesn’t like me turning tricks so much. He doesn’t even like talking about it. It isn’t like he’s my boyfriend or anything, or that he’s jealous, but it’s still pretty obvious he doesn’t like it. It’s probably because he’s seen some of the trouble it can cause me.

‘I’ll manage,’ I say.

* * *

We go down Victoria Street to the shopping centre, because I remember I need to get a toothbrush.

‘You wait outside,’ I say.

‘Why?’

I give Sunny a pat. ‘Someone has to stay with him.’

I don’t mention it, but there’s also this security bloke who works in the shopping centre and he’s a bit of a dick. If it’s just me on my own, I won’t be as likely to get followed. But with two of us, it looks completely suss.

I head to Aldi because it never seems like they have much staff working. It’s really bright in there, and I notice how they don’t have any music playing – which is a bit weird – but I can’t remember if it’s always like that. Coles and Woolworths and those places have music on all the time, and it’s nearly always shit.

I go to the back of the Aldi because that's where the toiletries and stuff are. I get a toothbrush – a red one with soft bristles for my gums – and shove it down the back of my undies. Suddenly, I need a piss something terrible, which always seems to happen when I'm nicking something.

There's a few strange things about Aldi, like the chainsaws and gym equipment and random stuff they sell sometimes. Another thing is you can't get out except by going past one of the checkouts, so I always pick one which is pretty busy.

There's one with a Muslim who has a trolley full of stuff – cans and bottles and all sorts – like she must have twenty kids or something. A skinny bloke is working the checkout and looks pretty new, a bit slow and unsure, so I walk around the Muslim as quick as I can, and the skinny checkout bloke says, 'Excuse me', and I can tell he's saying it to me, but I keep walking like I don't hear him. Which is – so you know – exactly how you do it.

But then, someone grabs me hard, very hard. Hurting my arm.

Shit.

'What you got?'

The security bloke. He smells like aftershave or deodorant or too much hair gel.

'Fuck off.'

This probably isn't the smartest thing to say, but he's really hurting my arm.

He grips me harder, smiles, and pulls me in close.

'Listen, you junkie fuck, if I see you back here again, I'll smash your teeth in. Understand?'

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He says it rough and hot and breathy in my ear, and slides his hand up between my legs and squeezes me there. He gets me so hard it hurts.

I shake loose and run up the escalator, past some teenagers who are heading up to Daiso to buy some Jap shit. Daiso is this place that sells everything for \$2.80. Anton reckons it's almost like getting it for free, but not quite.

The toilets up near Daiso are new and nearly always clean. It's all dark grey tile and sparkling chrome. They have one of those fragrance spray things on the wall, and a fancy Dyson hand dryer, and I suddenly feel like I need a long hot shower more than almost anything in the world.

I stop in front of the mirror, which is a proper one this time. I take off my beanie and my hair is a bit greasy, but not too bad. My skin looks dry, but no pimples or sores or nothing. I don't need to piss anymore, so I get the toothbrush out of my undies, rinse it under the tap, and give my teeth a good go until my gums start bleeding.

Even though it hurts, my mouth feels much better after. I look at myself, then into my eyes for a bit. Probably too long. And it makes me wonder if my eyes are like what hers were like.

And I decide they are, that mine are exactly the same colour. Even if there's no way I could ever remember.

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