

The Return

by Max Hayward

The grass and low scrub of the heathland shook in the hot northerly wind as Dane tore down the same old track, flicking up sticks and dry leaves in his wake. Techno music thumped in his ears and the morning sun beat down on his slick forehead. He wondered about Ryan, his tight boardshorts, that messy hair, those glistening shoulders coming out of the surf last January. He pedalled faster and faster till he reached the main road. A Hilux roared past and a teenage girl yelled out something like 'cool sunglasses'.

Mum sat in her usual spot, leafing through a glossy magazine, commenting on celebrity homes and sipping milky tea. Dad adjusted ropes and straightened tarps, pottering around like the campsite was his vegetable garden. Lola played with Lilly in the dirt, creating a warzone for battered Barbies – something Dane used to play with Lola not long ago. He had a vague urge to sit down and play with the girls, dig trenches and fight an invisible army, but he also knew this would prompt Mum to say: 'You should find some kids to hang out with! I saw some teenagers down the beach!'. So, he slipped off his shirt, shoved in his earphones and sunglasses on, and sat there quietly. He looked down at his vivid white skin and light hairs around his belly button.

'You're looking a bit skinny darling,' said Mum, still reading the magazine.

'I think I might go down to the beach,' said Dane.

'Good thinking. It's getting hot up here! I might join you.'

'Oh no, I think I saw someone from school. They might be down there.'

'That's great!' said Mum, unable to contain her surprise, 'Put on some more sunscreen.'

He walked down the splintery stairs from the campsite and through a thick band of tea trees and banksias. It smelt like damp bark and dead wombat. The whooshing sound of a big surf was getting louder as the dirt path became sandy. He suddenly needed the toilet, but there were surely snakes in the undergrowth, so he held on.

In a clearing before the dunes, a green wooden toilet block sat behind a row of empty picnic tables and a long-neglected barbeque. A small gravel car park with a singular station wagon adjoined the picnic area. Dane bounded toward the toilet, looking around to check nobody was watching his awkward dance. He was alone.

The smell inside was thick and salty, like kelp but with a vinegary overtone. It wasn't just old urine, but something pungent and fertile, like a sweaty sock left out in the sun. Every surface was coated with a film of salt – the clouded mirror, the door handle and toilet seat, the cubical walls. He peed as he ran his fingers across the walls. They'd been painted since last summer. They used to have balloonish dicks and phone numbers scrawled

everywhere, but now only a couple of phrases in thin blue pen – ‘Suck my cock’ – and angry Sharpie – ‘Fuck off, we’re full’.

He heard boys approaching, with low voices, grunts and jeers. He heard the crack of a towel being whipped at a leg. He quietly slid up his shorts and stood frozen, softly breathing. Two sets of flip-flops slapped across the concrete floor, then the sound of pee spraying onto steel.

‘Oi, do you reckon she’d give me a gobbie?’ one said.

‘Yeah mate, she’d give anyone a gobbie,’ said the other.

They broke into a blokey laugh, and one left. The other loitered. Dane saw the boy’s feet, splayed wide and tanned on top, poking slightly under the cubical wall. The boy coughed, then spat into the urinal. Dane rattled some toilet paper from the dispenser, for the illusion of doing something other than listening and watching. Another few seconds passed, then the boy snapped back his boardshorts and joined the others. Dane finally flushed and slowly washed his hands.

He emerged from the toilet block and the boys had run back to the beach, but one hung behind the gang. The boardshorts were looser and the messy hair was cut neat, but it was still Ryan.

‘Hey,’ he said, nodding up.

‘Uh, hi,’ said Dane, half-waving.

They lingered ten metres apart for a few seconds. The seconds felt like minutes, the metres felt like inches.

‘I’ll see ya ‘round,’ said Ryan, returning to his pack.

Dane stood there, dizzy in the sun, spellbound by those smells, and Ryan’s lingering foot.