

Room 209  
by Lisa Onland  
Second Prize

“Got a dollar?”

“Nah,” Brandon said, eyes down as he walked past the man sitting on the bottom step of the two-storey motel complex. He remembered how shaken he’d been as a teenager coming to the places his father lived after Brandon’s mother left him. Shelters, hostels, dodgy friends’ houses. Places kids shouldn’t go. Full of people clinging to the edge of society, trying not to lose their footing.

Rounding the top of the stairs, Brandon walked down the hallway and knocked loudly on the door of room 209. He could hear the television blaring, then hurried footsteps, the chain removed from the latch. The door opened and his father appeared in dirty jeans and one of the t-shirts they gave out for free at the Vinnies. *Relay for Life 2002*, today’s shirt announced.

“Come in,” the man said with a distracted smile. “Busy day.”

Brandon raised an eyebrow as his father stepped back into the room, returning to whatever was keeping him so busy. It certainly wasn’t a job. Or more specifically: a job that paid. He hadn’t had one of those since Brandon was ten years old. His ‘work’ was a never-ending quest to make money with the least amount of effort. Pyramid schemes, card counting, gaming the welfare system. Brandon wondered what dubious strategy would be revealed before he made an excuse to leave, slipping his father a handful of cash on the way out. This was why his sister never visited. He stopped telling her that he did.

“You wouldn’t believe the kind of crap they’re pulling at the TAB.”

Horse racing, Brandon grimaced. He took in the newspapers covering the kitchen table, the roar of the raceway on the TV.

As his father sat back down and began his tirade, Brandon stepped into the small kitchenette. The counter was strewn with dirty dishes. He ran the hot water, making a stack of plates by the sink. They were as depressing as the motel. Stuck fast with the remains of instant noodles and burst baked beans.

“Stop that,” His father snapped from the table. “You’re not a maid.”

Brandon’s mother was unfazed when he came out to her last year. He’d got around to it late, now in his early thirties, and would’ve preferred to have never made mention of it. There hadn’t been a particular reason, more to assuage her growing concern about his lack of female acquaintances. But he never told his father. Eventually his mum must have said something because the old man began to slip in the odd comment. About the way he dressed, things he said. It wasn’t hostile,

more corrective. As though his father wanted to save him from being too gay. Whatever he thought that looked like.

“You’re going to wake up with a cockroach in your ear if you don’t clean up after yourself,” Brandon replied, dunking a plate of crusted noodles into the soapy water.

“Leave it, come sit.”

Swayed by his father’s interest, Brandon turned off the tap and sat down across from him.

“What have you been up to?” his old man asked.

Not for the first time, he considered mentioning Mike. They’d been together almost two years, and despite a concerted effort to maintain his signature amount of emotional distance, the man had slipped beneath Brandon’s defences. Six months ago they moved in together. His heart still beat a little faster when he heard Mike’s key in the lock.

“Not much,” he said finally. “Mostly work.”

His father fixed his gaze on the newspaper in front of him.

“That boy of yours, Mike, came round last week.”

Brandon blinked, sure he had misheard.

“What?”

“Your mother must have given him my address.”

The thought of Mike in this dump made Brandon’s stomach turn. He’d gone to great lengths to avoid the two of them meeting. To think his mum had sabotaged him like this. Why hadn’t Mike said anything?

His father’s face flickered as though he couldn’t decide on how to arrange it.

“He came to ah,” the old man stopped, clearing his throat loudly. “He came to ask for my blessing.”

Brandon felt a warm flush spread along his neck. The air stalled in his lungs.

His father looked up, finally catching his eye.

He had learned not to want things from this man. But in that moment Brandon was desperate for something only he could give.

“And?” he asked, voice constricting.

“I gave it to him.”