

# One

Danny had a slender, feminine figure and short, dead brown hair. He shut the front door of his house, his eyes lingering on the slumped, snoring form of his mother who was passed out on the couch.

The door closed, his eyes swept across the ground, just above his feet as he moved out over his lawn. His clothes were dark: black jeans and a thin shirt with a large jacket over the top. His face was a perpetual scowl, his smile reserved for the very few.

He went to high school which was a short, ten-minute walk away. When he arrived, the front gates were always alive with younger kids, standing around in groups, sitting on the gates, smoking just outside the school boundaries. He didn't look at them and they didn't see him, he moved through them like a ghost and headed into the building.

Today, a stunted, overweight boy met him at the door. He had a round, red face and an untied shoelace.

'Hi Danny,' he smiled.

'Charles,' Danny grunted. He kept walking, attempting to leave the boy behind but he followed.

'What did you think of the movie yesterday?'

'Which one?'

'In English.'

'It was alright,' he replied. 'Nothing special.'

They reached an open wooden cabinet designed for schoolbags and Danny threw his in. He tried to ignore the boy and reached down for a zipper, drawing out his books.

'I think Mrs. Cooper is a really good teacher. Much better than the one we had last year.'

'Yeah.'

'So you agree?'

A group of their classmates distracted him, wandering in from

outside. One kicked at the door while their leader, Dino, kicked an empty lemonade can across the carpet towards them. Dino was a tall football player with sharp eyes and bronzed skin. His arms were tight in thick muscle he went to great lengths to show off. Dino pulled the nearest bag from the cabinet and put his own in it's place, shoving Charles out of his way with a free hand. 'Sorry to interrupt your little heart to heart,' he said. Danny started off in the other direction, leaving Charles spluttering by nearby windows. 'Is he good in bed?' Dino called after him. Laughter followed.

Math class collected with the noisy pulse of any early morning classroom. Danny sat at the back of the room, far from the door, hoping to be out of sight and out of mind. His fellow students filed in and sat down, joking, swearing and fighting. A large girl with red hair and green eyes sat down next to him, her chubby hands thumping two books down beside him. 'Hi Danny,' she smiled. 'Hi Sandra.'

Smith, their teacher, entered the room and the room fell silent. He was a thin figure, striding up between the desks for the front of the room.

A high-pitched voice burst barked from the centre of the room. 'Mr. Smith, can I have an extension on Monday's assignment?' 'No, you cannot,' the man answered. 'Why. Didn't you complete it?'

'I didn't have time..'

'I'll talk to you about it later,' he muttered, cutting her off with a raised hand.

He sipped a cup of coffee before placing it on his desk and turned to face the class.

'Morning everyone, I hope you're all ready for another day at the books. Seeing as it's Friday we're going to finish off with trigonometry.'

There was a collective groan silenced with the raised hand. 'But we're going to get into something worse next week,' he assured them.

Danny opened his exercise book and leant over his desk like he was trying to hide within. Sandra's hand skirted over his leg and he looked across at her. Her breathing was heavier than normal,

she was swallowing and licking her lips. Her hand crept over his thigh and scuttled between his legs. He removed her hand from his lap and dropped it back into her own.

Smith began outlining practical demonstrations at the front of the room which Danny paid ill attention to. Sandra's hand crept back across his thigh, her fingers pressing between his legs. Danny squirmed.

'I want you.'

Her whisper was warm and moist against his neck. He shuddered, pinned his eyes ahead and leant forwards, dislodging her arm as he knocked a pen to the floor.

Ducking beneath the desk to grab it, she kept fighting for a hold, reaching her arm in underneath to gain purchase.

Pen retrieved, he sat back in his chair, sinking in defeat as the girl's hand clamped against his crotch.

He swept his eyes across the classroom and they fell on Belle. She was the hottest girl in their year. He vied for her attention every day, staring from afar, never saying a word. She was with Dino, the bronzed jock from the hall.

*Would she date him? Did he even have a chance?*

He didn't have the courage to ask. Visions of worst case scenarios flooded his mind. The inevitable reaction he expected. More bullying.

She had long black hair, blue eyes. Smooth legs cut shining beneath a school skirt.

He imagined having sex with her in a cupboard, both of them trapped, bodies pressed together. She was smiling at him, her fingers on his zipper. He took off her jumper, unbuttoned her shirt, pulled it open..

'I wish you'd pay as much attention to your work as you do your classmates,' Smith called.

His gaze cut across the room to the teacher who was sitting upright at his desk, eyes penetrating his Danny's.

'Sorry.' He flushed red and lowered his eyes to his work as the other students turned to look. In the background he could hear Belle and her circle of friends falling into conversation and giggling.

'Quiet,' Smith ordered.

Sandra's hands still roamed between his legs. Danny was hard, but despised the fact. He clenched his fist on the opposing side of his body. Emitting a strangled sigh, he reached a gentle hand between his legs, removed her hand and once again, sat it on her own thigh.

She sighed and he returned to his work, ignoring her. Moments later she was squeezing herself down beneath her desk.

'What the fuck are you doing?' he whispered. One of two students in front of him turned to look at him with curious eyes. She pushed herself between his legs and the desk, coming up between his thighs. He felt his zip being tugged down. She pulled his member out and placed it between her lips. His fist curled into a ball on the desk, his cheeks flushed red.

There was a lurching sound from her throat and a hot, wet, stream of thick vomit coursed between his legs. He pulled back to see vomit running down his lap, between his legs. She looked up at him with apologetic eyes, her chin and mouth were coated.

'What..'

He looked up to see Smith staring across the room at them. The class followed. Sandra tried to pull herself back up out of position and toppled the desk forward in the process. His books and pens flew across the floor. There wasn't a pair of eyes in the room that didn't see his cock, covered in fat girl vomit. There was no escape.

The whole class was laughing as they were led into the hallway.

'I didn't ask her to do it,' he said, 'I was trying to get her to stop.'

'He asked me to,' Sandra retorted.

'What?'

'Enough,' Smith intervened. You,' he pointed at Danny, 'Go the office and get some fresh clothes, clean yourself up. I want you back in class as soon as you're done.'

Danny nodded and moved off.

'Oh and Danny, don't make me come looking.'

The man all but dragged Sandra down the hall towards the office. She had sense enough not to speak now but he knew this wouldn't be the end of it.

He could still hear the rest of the class beyond the door. Some were howling in laughter, others were discussing him in loud voices and then there were all those smaller conversations that

one saved for when the teacher left. He stalked off, heading for the office.

The liquid was trailing down his legs even as reached the administration hallway. The office lady looked on him in a mixture of sympathy and disgust as he came to the window.

'Oh dear.'

'Hi, uh. Do you have any spare clothes?'

'Sure,' she granted him a small smile. 'I'll just go and see what we've got.'

As she moved away he saw her eyes drop to his crotch, the edges of her mouth contorting .

He sat down on the bench opposite the reception window. The hall was empty, the only sounds carried through from the internal offices. The woman returned with a pair of rumpled cargo pants.

'Will these do?'

He rose, approached the window and took them.

'Yeah, sure,' he replied, barely looking at them. 'Thanks.'

'No problem. See you later.'

He carried them to the bathroom, checking the size tag as he walked. They were at least one size too small and a female cut. He unfolded them and studied the legs, finding childish drawings scrawled over them.

The bathroom was a further two minute walk. He changed in one of the toilet cubicles and emerged to wash his own pants in the sink. Small chunks of vomit floated in the water even as it drained away.

Two pairs of footsteps sounded in the entrance.

'Hey, look its Spew,' Dino cracked.

He walked in, accompanied by a friend and headed past Danny towards a set of urinals.

'I think you just earned yourself a new nickname.'

His friend joined in: 'So what's it like getting head from a fat chick?'

Danny squeezed his fists on the pants, wringing a little water out.

'I saw you looking at my girl,' Dino called. 'If I catch you again, you're fucking dead, alright?'

Danny pulled his jeans from the sink and slunk from the room.

Trekking for the classroom, he took a slow pace, in no hurry to

return. Dino's laughter followed him into the hallway and the two teenagers jogged to catch up.

'Hey Danny,' he called. 'Stick to your own kind, eh?'

'What does that make you?' Danny muttered.

'What?'

'I said,' he rose his voice, 'what does that make you?'

'A winner,' he smirked.

'A winner of what?'

'Your face bleeding if you don't shut your mouth.'

Smirks and suppressed laughter greeted him at the classroom. He stepped towards his desk which had been reseated, his books placed atop it. His chair had vomit clinging to the edge of the seat. He looked to the standard box of tissues on the edge of Smith's desk and went to fetch them.

Smith was reading a book, one hand swept beneath his buttoned shirt, massaging his nipple. Danny took the box of tissues in silence and returned to his desk, kneeling to deal with the mess. He was just starting to wipe it off when the bell rang. The class packed up around him and filed out.

'Hold up,' Smith called. 'I want that work in by Monday, no exceptions. Danny -'

Danny pressed three tissues together, sweeping up the vomit and tossing them in small balls onto the carpet.

The teacher approached him from behind and stood over him, hands on his hips.

'I want to know what happened.'

Danny finished cleaning and made a fist on the seat to help pull himself up.

'I didn't ask her to do it,' he answered.

'She said you started it.'

He shook his head. 'I was trying to get her to stop.'

'Well whoever's responsible, I don't want to see this happening again. I'm separating the both of you and if she tries it again, well then you come to me.'

'Alright,' Danny nodded.

'Good. Did you get that work done from Monday?'

'No, I-'

'Danny,' the man frowned. 'Look,' he shrugged. 'I'm going to have to mark you down for it. If you keep this up you're going to end up

failing.'

'Yeah,' Danny's shoulders fell. 'I know.'

'See what you can do about that,' the man nodded. 'Now off you go.'

While Danny replaced his books in his bag, two girls approached him from behind. They cornered him at the cabinet with mischievous red lips and dark eyes. One was short and slim, the other tall and dumpy, both brunette.

'So are you dating her?' the shorter one asked.

'No,' he scowled.

'I bet you asked her to do it,' the second one said.

He turned and glared at her. 'I was trying to get her to stop.'

'I bet you were,' the shorter one smirked. 'So you like Belle, huh?'

'She's okay.' He flushed and turned back to his bag, hiding his face.

'You don't have to hang out with the losers, you know. If you were just a little more normal, you would be fine.'

'Thanks,' he advised her. 'I'll take that on board.'

His lunch period was spent alone by choice. Set apart from the socialites and the "lower people" that clung to him it was a moment of freedom.

In English class he wrote:

"I don't want to be a part of their world. They're all wrapped up in their everyday, pointless little lives. I want something more. They just want a house and a car, a family, the dream of living happily ever after. They'll get it but can they ever truly know, or understand the meaning of happiness or how it feels to be this far down at the bottom. They're so stupid and I can't handle it.

They don't treat me the same so why should I be expected to grow up in their world. I want to be something different, something powerful, something terrific that they can't imagine. One day I'll get there. Then nothing, none of it will matter anymore.

My idealism is a band-aid for broken emotions. A self-imposed disguise for my inability to handle their reality. I am better than them, capable of more, a greater being for ignoring their name-calling and material preoccupations."

He woke late that night to the sound of the refrigerator door opening. He rolled from his bed and sat, turning his stereo down. The crack and hiss of a can carried through from the kitchen. He climbed from the bed and opened his door, venturing down the hallway.

The kitchen light was on, the fridge door open. He heard the TV being switched on in the lounge nearby. He shut the fridge door and followed.

His mother sat on the couch with a can of beer in one hand. She emitted a loud burp and spilt tobacco across the coffee table, from a cigarette she was rolling.

'Hi,' he said.

'What? Hey?' His mother turned and smiled. 'Just had a few drinks, you know. You get yourself some food?' She was swaying in place.

'I was about to. Do you want anything?'

'No, no, it's fine.'

'Okay.'

He moved back into the kitchen and reopened the fridge. It was full, but as he sorted through the food, it was clear that little was edible. He pulled out several packages and dropped them to the floor, ready to be thrown out. After a couple of minutes sorting through the mess he found enough to make sandwiches.

'You should really watch this show, it's great stuff,' his mother called.

He prepared a plate and cleaned up after himself, carrying the sandwiches into the lounge.

His mother had returned her attention to the TV. Her beer lay on the floor, overturned and soaking into the carpet.

'What are you doing?' she demanded, 'You should be in bed.'

'Huh?'

'You heard me, what the fuck are you doing up? It's late!'

'We were just talking five minutes ago,' he blinked.

'Bullshit. What food are you eating?'

'You said you didn't want any.'

She turned around on the couch to face him, her face red and flecks of spit clinging to the edges of her mouth.

'You're a fucking selfish little bastard, you know that? Always



thinking of yourself. Can't even get some food for your mother. Why are you eating now, anyway? You should have eaten hours ago!

Danny tried to keep calm, speaking each word in a slow, quiet voice.

'You said you were going to cook tonight, so I didn't get anything.'

'No, I didn't.'

He sighed and turned away.

'Don't sigh at me. Go to bed. I don't want to look at you.'

He left her, taking the plate and heading to his room. He could never rely on her for anything. If she wasn't drinking, she was never home and even then, she was always negative.

He shut the door and turned his stereo off, sitting on the bed in silence. The television was still audible through the door. He heard music, a slow rise in volume. It grew to the point it could have been his own stereo, playing loud, right beside his bed. He scowled, finished eating, sat the plate on his bedside table and fell into bed.

Two minutes later the door opened.

'What are you doing in bed?'

'Huh?'

'What are you doing in bed? Come on, it's Friday night, come and have a drink with me.'

He stared at her. 'You just told me to go to bed.'

'No, I didn't. Why would I do that?'

'Alright,' he repressed a sigh. 'I'll come out.'

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The next morning the lounge was strewn with empty cans. Two empty pizza boxes sat splayed across the coffee table. Coffee, beer and food had been pressed into the carpet. Kitchen utensils were spread across the couch.

Danny moved into the kitchen to find the sink full of unwashed plates from the night before last.

There was a note on the edge of the table.

"Gone out. Be back later. Would you mind cleaning up? Mum."

He left it pressed there and went outside to the letterbox. The

beginning of a warm day had spread across the town, oblivious to the events that surrounded him. He felt inside and finding it empty, he peered in and muttered to himself.

He stood for a moment, observing the street, studying the neighbours' houses.

*Did they have it any worse?*

Two houses down a removalist truck sat parked across from a pristine residence. The back doors were wide open. A "For Sale" sign was planted in the lawn, marked as sold.

Danny returned to the house and began to clean up. An hour or so later he finished and sat on the couch, flicking on the TV. Minutes later his mother pulled in the driveway.

She burst through the front door, bustling with a dozen cans of premixed vodka swam in her arms. Two friends squeezed in behind.

'Hi Danny,' she smiled.

'I thought you were working?'

'Nope. Got the night off.'

The couple behind her were local barflies and "family friends" by his Mother's definition. Danny never learnt what they did in the real world, but if his mum was having a night of drinking, more often than not, they were involved.

'How's it going?' Claire smiled.

He smiled back, thinking she resembled a skeleton with her skinny frame, round eyes and thin lips. David, a barrel of a man, stuck a thick hand out to shake his hand.

'Good to see you, mate.' he rumbled. 'Up for a few drinks?'

'I don't know,' Danny frowned.

He heard the fridge door open in the kitchen.

'Thanks for cleaning up, by the way,' his mother called, in sarcasm.

'I did clean up,' he replied.

'I've been asking you to clean the fridge out for weeks.'

The two followed his mother into the kitchen. Danny followed them, hovering in silent courtesy.

David snatched one of the vodka bottles from the table and cracked it

'Hey,' his mother frowned. 'Drink your own!'

David passed it to Danny. 'Got to give the kid something to drink.'

'Thanks.'

He hesitated with the can, half wanting to put it back on the table. After stocking the fridge, the three migrated for the lounge while Danny retreated for his bedroom. His mother's voice echoed along the hallway.

'Quit being antisocial.'

By nine the music was so loud he couldn't hear his footsteps. He ventured into the lounge to find his mother yelling to converse with Claire while they were huddled together on the couch.

'Why don't you turn the music down?' he yelled.

'What?' his mother looked up, her eyes bloodshot. 'What do you want?' she shouted. Her breath reeked of cigarettes.

'Why don't you turn the music down?' he repeated.

She reached for the remote and lowered the volume, muttering, 'I can't fucking hear you. What?'

'I was just saying,' he said patiently, 'Maybe you should turn it down. Then you won't have to shout.'

'So what?' she blinked, not understanding. 'I want it loud.'

She raised the volume even higher than before and returned her attention to Claire.

Danny wandered into the kitchen and found David slumped over the table, smelling of a queer, sweet substance. Drool pooled on the table, spilling from the edge of his mouth. Neat lakes formed between empty cans. The front door closed and his mother began yelling.

When he made it back into the lounge, his mother blasted him.

'Where are my drinks?'

'I'm getting them.'

'Actually, why don't you wash up?' She turned her to the television, 'This is great music.'

'I've got homework to do, Mum.'

Her face turned hard as she shot back towards him.

'Why the fuck haven't you done it already?'

'We only got it yesterday.'

'Well you could have done it today,' she leered, her voice snarling, mocking.

'I was going to do it tonight. I thought you were working and I concentrate better at night.'

'You were just too fucking busy being lazy. I swear if you don't work harder I'm taking you out of that school. I should put you to

work in the factory with me then you might be of some use.'

'You can talk.'

'Excuse me?'

'Never mind,' he muttered, turning away.

She leapt from the couch and rose up, glaring at him, 'How dare you call me lazy. I work very fucking hard to look after you and keep this house going. If your father was here...'

'But he's not. You could at least care about me and stop drinking all the time. I'm sick of it. You can get fucked. I'm leaving.'

'No, you get fucked. Go ahead, leave, you ungrateful bastard.'

She turned away, muttering, 'Get out of my sight.'

The next morning, she wasn't home. The results of her drinking were laid about the lounge once again, along with the remains of her guests' presence.

Danny checked the driveway for the car, resisting the urge to clean up after her.

*She doesn't deserve it, he told himself. It shouldn't be my place to feel guilty. Even when I do stuff she never thanks me. Always angry, always negative. Fuck her.*

He found his legs returning to his room. His arms took his backpack and shook his schoolbooks out, dumping them onto the bed. He opened a drawer and pulled out all his clothes, packing what he wanted, leaving old stuff behind.

Meanwhile, the front door opened and he heard his mother's voice call out, 'Geez Danny, you could have cleaned up.'

He took the bag with him, finding her in the kitchen, peering into the fridge. He stood there with the bag in one hand while she looked up and smiled. 'I'm kidding. Come on, I want to get some videos.'

He relented, dropping the bag at his feet.

She didn't speak at all in the car, turning the radio on for company. Her attention was on the road and herself, completely oblivious to his issues. Like the magazines she would leave to make up for a bad night, the videos were her way of bandaging her faults. A cheap offering of atonement for a night-time tirade.

Inside the store, he selected movies at random, not even glancing at the covers. Usually he would spend his time on it, selecting the best and most interesting so as not to waste his time but it didn't matter anymore.

Payment was made side by side with his mother. The manager was another family friend, lips bulging in red, giant hoop earrings hanging like trapeze props on star-sized earlobes.

'How's it going?' she smiled at them.

'Not bad,' his mother responded. 'The usual. You should come around one of these nights, have a drink.'

'Ah, I might. You know. Kids and all.'

'Drop them with the hubby,' his mother winked. 'He's gotta take care of them sometime, right?'

'My Stan? He wouldn't last five minutes, they'd tear the place apart,' she laughed. 'I'll see what I can do this weekend.'

She shifted her attention to Danny, 'How's it going?'

'Not bad,' he croaked.

'You'd be finished school soon, won't you? Remember to come 'round if you want a job.'

'He'll be wanting one,' his mother nodded. 'Something to do over the holidays. He can help pay for the groceries.'

'Save him hanging around the house,' she smiled.

'Sure,' he made an effort to smile back.

His mother took their videos from the counter and waved, ending the conversation. 'I'll see you later.'

'Bye.'

They headed together towards the door, his mother in the lead. Belle stepped inside just after her, blocking Danny's exit. She smiled at him.

'Hey.'

'Hey,' he blinked.

'How's it going?'

His mother was already opening the car door.

'Not bad,' he replied. 'Just getting some movies.'

'Cool. Well yeah, me too. My parents are out of town,' she winked, 'Having some people around. You should come.'

'Me?'

'Yeah,' she nodded. 'Why not?'

'I just..'

'Come on, it'll be fun. I think Dino's getting a keg so there's free beer if you want it.'

'Ah, I'll think about it,' he nodded. 'Thanks.'

'No prob,' she smiled. 'Catch you.'

She continued on into the store, leaving him with the doorway.

Danny returned to the car where his mother had begun revving the

engine. He opened the door and she glared at him.

'Hurry up,' she grumbled.

'Sorry.'

On the drive back he let his imagination float back to Belle. He visualised her body standing in front of him, just as it had in the store.

'I want you to come to my party,' the phantom said. 'I don't want Dino there at all. You and me can find our own private place.

C'mon, it'll be fun.'

Her clothes were tight on her body, a thin yellow shirt across small breasts, thin hips with white shorts and exposed legs. She ran her hand down, across her chest and to her legs. The fingers paused at the shorts and popped a button, undid the zip, dropped them to her ankles. He could see from the waist up, her smile secretive, drawing him in, blue eyes flashing in the light.

When they arrived home the removalists were present again. Two uniformed guys were struggling with a couch on the footpath. His mother unlocked the door and disappeared into the kitchen.

Danny looked over the videos he had selected and dropped them on the cluttered coffee table in distaste.

His mother returned and went straight past him for the door.

'I'll be right back,' she informed him. 'I just realised I forgot something at the supermarket.'

'Okay.'

He let himself fall onto the couch and listened while her car pulled out of the driveway. His hand went to his forehead and scrubbed at his skin, a finger moved down to pull at his lip. He flicked on the TV and went through the channels before rising and making his way into the kitchen. He picked up his backpack and slid it over his shoulder, casting his eyes over the room.

One worker stood on the neighbour's lawn at one end of a double bed. The other was at the back of the truck with only his legs visible beneath the vehicle. There was a clatter as one of the doors was closed and screeching as he pulled the lock tight.

'Everything's out?' the one on the lawn called.

'Yeah, I checked.'

The man at the truck emerged and came to kneel at the other end of the bed. 'Ready?'

'Yup.'

With a mutual groan they lifted the bed and carried it towards the front doors.

'Heavier than it looks, eh?'

Danny watched as they carried it into the house.

'Bye Mum,' he whispered.

He hefted the backpack over his shoulder and ran down the driveway, stalking along the footpath towards the back of the truck. The neighbour's front door was open but the removal men were out of sight.

He reached the back of the truck and found one of two double doors still unbolted, hanging free in the air. Danny leapt up and swung it open, crawled into the back of the truck and pulled the door shut. The cabin was dark on the inside. Every surface was smooth, polished metal. He searched for a way to bolt it on the inside and gave up, using a sharp pull to hold it shut.

Footsteps approached the doors and he took a deep breath.

'I thought you shut that,' a voice commented from the outside.

'No, you were complaining.'

He sat just behind the doors, watching and holding his breath as one of them opened the door adjacent and peered in. Danny could hear him breathing through his mouth. There was the flick and flash of a lighter illuminating a cigarette in the man's mouth. The smoke wafted in after him. He slammed the door shut and bolted it.

A couple of minutes later they climbed into the front seats. The truck rocked on its suspension and Danny scrambled for the back wall. He braced himself in the corner as the engine started and they began to pull away from the kerb.

In boredom, he tried to count the number of turns they made, focusing on an estimate of the direction they were headed in. For one whose mind was too busy for smaller details, he found himself unable to pick up on it.

When the truck stopped, he heard the two disembark. He heard the doors slam shut, their feet crunching away in gravel. No one came to the doors. When he was sure they were out of earshot, he stood, stretched and went to the other end of the container. Feeling around in the dark, he found mounting brackets but no

mechanism to open the door from the inside.

He chewed his lip, thinking, before returning to the centre of the truck and sitting down, drumming his fingers on the floor and humming. A short time later the doors clunked and swung open. A man stood on the other side in a stained uniform, blinking as Danny came into view. His face was unshaven, a cap pulled over messy hair. He blinked.

'How long have you been in there?'

'Oh, hi,' Danny smiled. He stood and slid the backpack over his shoulders. 'Not long. I was just catching a ride.'

He approached the door and jumped out.

'You could have been in there for days.'

'Yeah, well. You know. Thanks for letting me out.'

He ignored the man and walked away. Around him was a vast parking lot, empty but for a few identical vehicles. A brick building stood ahead of them, beneath a rocky cliff face with green fields spread atop it. Danny spied the gate off to his left at the other end of the lot and headed towards it.

'Hey,' the man called after him. 'Hey!'

To his left, a street ran straight, into the distance, showcasing a series of industrial buildings. Most prominent was a large factory with a giant, wide chimney pumping smoke into the clouds. The gates were nameless and covered in warning signs. On the right, a small park overlooked a large, glittering body of water stretching out to the horizon.

He chose the park and headed down, watching couples with their children, dogs running around their feet. One man in a business suit sat on a park bench, speaking into a mobile phone. The road turned at the entrance and ran down to a shore side business district. A long row of shops stretched off to a hill at the horizon with a beach beside it and a brilliant, clear sky overhead.

Danny wandered, peering into gift shops, restaurants, passing doctors surgeries and fast food chains. He came to a busy supermarket and went inside, wandering the store for supplies. He found a video stand within at which a lone girl stood, wearing black jeans and a white shirt. Her eyes were set deep in concentration, scouring a number of titles. A slim hand reached out to take a few, one after the other from the shelf.

He watched her study them from the corners of his eyes while he



pretended to look at the selection himself. His eyes moved over her hair, a long cascading mountain of red curls falling past her shoulders.

He came up beside her and pretended to look at the same movies she was.

Eventually she turned to him with a cheerful grin and back to the case she was holding.

'They don't have much here,' she commented.

'Yeah. Musical?'

'Ugh. No thanks.'

'Well,' he cocked his head, 'it *is* a supermarket.'

'The video store is closed down, otherwise I'd be there.'

'Ah.'

She put her current title back on the shelf and turned to study him.

'You're not from around here, are you?'

'No.'

'..Do you want to watch a movie with me?'

He blinked and returned her stare. 'Um. Sure.'

'I could just do with some company, that's all. My friends are out of town. Noone's home.'

'You're not crazy are you?'

'No,' she smiled.

'I'll come,' he agreed.

She laughed. 'Cool.'

While Danny was preoccupied with questioning himself she narrowed her eyes on one title and snatched it from the stand.

The cover was held up to him, showing John Cusack set in blue against a dark building. 'How about this one?'

'Looks good,' he nodded.

'Alright. Hold my bag for me.'

She peeled the long strap from her left shoulder and held the bag out to him. Danny pulled it over his closest shoulder and ran an eye over her figure. She proceeded to look both ways up the aisle and cracked the case open, shoving the disc down her jeans.

'What are you doing?'

'Shh.'

She snapped the cover closed and shot it back on the shelf.

'Ready,' she smiled.

Her body relaxed and she held a hand out to receive her bag. He pulled it and passed it over, watching as she mounted it on her shoulder.

'Thanks,' she said.

'Do you do that often?'

'No,' she smiled, 'but I'm sure I won't get caught.'

Following her across the parking lot, the afternoon sun burnt into his back.

'So what's your name?' she asked.

'Danny.'

'I'm Sarah.' She pointed to a small green sedan with hints of rust at the joints. 'That's me.'

He waited while she unlocked her doors, seeing an open ashtray within, cds strewn across beige seats. 'I'm just out of town,' she said, 'Where are you headed?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Hmm?' She opened her door and pulled the disc out of her jeans, sliding it into the open glovebox.

'I really just arrived.'

'Oh.'

She climbed in and leaned across to unlock and open the passenger door. He clutched the handle and pulled himself in while she stretched on her seatbelt.

'Yeah, I kinda ran away from home,' he explained.

'Oh, that sucks.'

'Well, yeah. I don't know where I'm going yet.'

She put the keys in the ignition and smiled. 'Well I guess you're lucky you ran into me.'

'Yeah,' he smiled, 'Definitely.'

She reversed out of position and aimed the car for the exit.

'Well you could stay at my place tonight, I guess. I mean, if you're not crazy or anything.'

'I'm not. ..Are you always this open with strangers?'

She shrugged. 'Yeah. Why not? I've got a big bodyguard that will come after you and break you into tiny little pieces if you hurt me,' she smiled.

Danny nodded, his eyes focused on the road, unsure of what to say.

'I'm kidding,' she laughed. 'What sort of music do you like?'

'I'm fine with anything,' he called back.

Their voices were getting lost against the wind. She shut the window.

'Whatever works,' he added.

'Well sure, but what do you actually like?'

He gave her a few names.

'Yeah, they're not too bad. I'm a big fan of Hole. Do you mind?' she motioned at the stereo.

'Oh, no, go for it.'

She turned the car stereo on and lowered the volume.

'Do you normally take guys home like this?' he asked.

She laughed. 'No. Do you normally get in cars with strange girls?'

'I don't think you're strange.'

'Thanks,' she smiled, 'So where are you from?'

'Jericho.'

Her face showed no sign of recognition.

'It's a shithole. No one there but factory workers.'

'Sounds a lot like here. I don't get out much. I work at..' she leaned forwards and jabbed a finger towards a shop entrance. All Danny saw was purple curtains. 'That restaurant, there. With the blue sign.'

'Is the food any good?'

She shrugged. 'Probably the best you'll get here. Only a couple of days a week. Pays the bills.'

A turn in from the shoreline led them up into the hills and she took him on a small winding road of secluded houses and bushland. They came up on the side of a hill to an old weatherboard house on the edge of a paddock. The paint was stained white and peeling. The corpses of two old, rusted cars sat nearby. A collapsing tin shed sat in the distance, and between the two, a wide paddock of tall grass waved in the wind.

'It's not much,' she commented. She shut off the engine and led him to the front door. She fished keys out of her handbag and let him in.

Inside, a short hallway led them past three doors into a lounge. Boxes were stacked all over, the furniture covered in sheets like she was packed up and ready to leave.

'Sorry about the mess.'

'It's alright,' he shrugged.

My parents were moving.'

'Were?'

'Yeah. They died. I just kind of stayed here. There wasn't a lot of point in moving afterwards.'

'Oh.'

'It's okay,' she shrugged.

One wall of the lounge was missing, leading the room straight into the kitchen. She led him to the other end of the lounge, past a woodheater and into a small sun room at the back. There, a small couch sat by the back door opposite a small TV. Tall, stained glass windows looked over them.

'That was my mum's work,' she gestured to the windows. 'Loved the stuff. Do you want a drink?'

'Sure,' he nodded.

'Sit down if you want,' she gestured to the couch.

He sat down and allowed himself to relax while she disappeared towards the kitchen. He could hear the clatter of china, the kettle boiling, the sound of a refrigerator switching on and the door opening.

She returned with two black mugs, passed one to him and set her own down on the TV.

'I really need a coffee table,' she muttered. 'Sorry. I'm just going to get us a blanket.'

'Sure thing,' he smiled. 'Thanks.'

He pressed the mug to his lips and drew the scent in before pulling it away from his mouth. It smelled different. It wasn't something he was used to. As he sipped it, Sarah reappeared with a doona.

'Like it?' she smiled.

'It's okay,' he nodded.

'One of my homemade drinks.'

She draped the doona over him and turned her attention to organising the movie.

Afterwards, she climbed under, with him, and cosied up against his chest.

'I haven't seen this before so I have no idea if it's any good,' she commented.

Danny yawned.

'Me either.'

The credits started and she adjusted the volume.

'So why did you run away?'

'Oh. My mum..'

'It's okay if you don't want to talk about it.'

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Two hours later Danny found the credits running. He was naked beneath the blanket. His vision felt blurred but it was clearing, his perceptions felt heightened and he was warm. He was wrapped in her body, her mouth running over his hips. A car engine rumbled at the back door and headlights swung up on the back of the house, struggling to pierce through the tainted windows. Sarah threw the doona off them, shattering the cosy world.

'Shit. Put your clothes on.'

'What? Why?'

'Grab the doona.'

He struggled to bundle it to his arms as the headlights switched off. She dumped his clothes on top and rushed him towards the kitchen, guiding him into a cold bedroom.

'Wait in there.'

'Alright.'

He threw the doona on the bed and hid on the far side, pulling his clothes back on. Sarah appeared at the doorway and tossed his shoes in after him. He heard the back door open.

'Hey babe, what's happening?' The voice was male.

'Just watching a movie. What's up?'

'Thought I'd come and see how you were. Do I get a kiss?'

There was a moment of silence.

'Sam said he saw you out last weekend,' he continued.

'Yeah, I went for a look. Pretty boring – like always. Maybe you should have come with me.'

'Yeah, maybe. I had to work.'

'You're always working,' she complained.

In the bedroom, Danny had crawled across the floor to take his shoes and had snuck back behind the bed. He pulled at the laces and slid them on.

'I was thinking, you wanna go see a movie this weekend? You know, just like we used to. Do something different for a change.'

'Maybe.'

Their footsteps retreated further into the house until he could no longer make out their conversation.

Danny turned to the bed and crouched down, looking under it, measuring his body to fit.

He crawled to the doorway, peering out along the hall. The light was still off in the small room at the back but another had been switched on in the lounge. He scuttled in, hearing primed for any

hint of his host and her guest.

'I don't like it when I don't know what you're doing,' he was saying, 'This is serious business.'

'I know Tommy, I know. Everything's cool. Relax, okay?'

Danny hid behind the couch as they returned. He crouched down behind it, pulling a blanket down in a vain attempt to cover himself. Their footsteps came closer.

'What's that?' Tommy asked.

'What's what?'

Danny froze.

'The movie.'

'Oh, just a thriller. John Cusack. Got it at the supermarket.'

'Any good?'

They were walking towards him. Every muscle in his body was taut as they came past the couch and stood on the other side.

'Well, I guess I'm off. I'll see you later.'

'Sure. I'd ask you to stay but, you know, I might actually get some unpacking done.'

'Heh. Yeah right.'

'No, really,' she insisted.

'We'll see. Well, give me a hug.'

He heard the rustling of clothes, keys jingling and the guy headed for the door. He could see the man from waist down as he made his way out. Sarah sat down and found the remote, changing the TV away from the film credits. 'You can come out now,' she called.

Danny cleared his throat and stood up, coming around the back of the couch.

'What? What were you doing behind there?'

'I thought I might have to make a run for it.'

She laughed, giving him a wide smile. 'Maybe if I was still dating him.'

'Oh, you're not?'

'No. It's cool. Sit down,' she patted the couch.

'Alright,' Danny frowned. He took a seat beside her.

'He'd be jealous if he knew about you though,' she added.

'I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I left my bag in your car.'

She giggled. 'You can stay here.'

'What was in that drink?'

'Oh, just a little something. You don't mind, do you?'

'No. It was great.'

'Good.' She sat the remote down, climbed on his lap and kissed him. Outside, the car pulled away.  
'I'm glad you don't mind.'

The next morning he woke to a room doused in a blue. Disoriented, he sat up and looked around, struggling to focus. Sarah lay in the blankets next to him, her red hair spilling out over the sheets. Her hair swam across her face, the blankets covering most of her body, one naked breast exposed against the sheets. Recognising her, he relaxed and lay back, watching her sleeping body. She was beautiful. Even with the makeup worn off, there was a natural beauty in the shape of her brow, in the dark eyelashes, the small upturned nose, the broad smile.

He got up and wandered the house, first to find the bathroom and second to ease his curiosity. Most of the rooms were bare but for the furniture packed up by the walls, the white sheets covering it all. One room only held boxes, of which some had been unpacked and lay discarded. A great jigsaw puzzle sat half complete on the floor.

Coming back to the kitchen he found her coming in, naked, the heel of one hand rubbing at an eyelid.

'Morning,' she murmured, half-asleep.

'Morning,' he smiled.

He let her pass and watched her head to the bathroom, leaning against a kitchen bench. He was still there when she came out, self-conscious in the morning light. She was oblivious, wandering across the room towards him where she opened the fridge and bent down to look inside.

'Sleep well?'

'Yeah, I did. Thanks.'

'Cool. Toast or cereal?'

'Cereal is fine by me.'

'I like cereal.' She took a bottle of milk out of the door and let the fridge door swing shut by itself, heading to the counter. He stood aside while she poured him a bowl and together they returned to the bedroom. They ate on the end of the bed, naked, their reflections casting fleeting glances back at them from her dressing table.

'I guess you'll want a ride somewhere,' she suggested.

He took another mouthful of cereal before replying, giving careful

consideration to the answer.

'Yeah. I guess. If it isn't a problem.'

He watched her stir the cereal in her bowl.

'It's no problem. I'll drive you as far as Roxbury. There's a petrol station there with a lot of buses, you can pretty much climb on one and get anywhere. They do tours and stuff.'

'Oh. Cool. You know,' he hesitated.

'Mm?'

They looked at each other through the mirror, her mouth full of cereal.

'I could stand staying another night, if..'

He watched her chew and swallow. 'Thanks,' she smiled, 'but I kind of like my own company. I'll give you my number though – if you want.'

'Yeah, sure.'

'No offence.'

'It's okay.' He turned to the real Sarah, still nude on the bed next to him and leant over to kiss her neck.

'That's not a kiss,' she complained.

He laughed and caught her lips with his own, snogging her and spilling both of their bowls on the carpet.

Roxbury was little more than farmland. They parked at the petrol station she had mentioned, off to one side by the fence line. The two went to meet at the back of the car, Danny's eyes on the station as they approached each other. A multitude of cars were pulling in and out and the swarm of customers that weren't filling their cars were running between them and the main building.

'How long do you think it'll take me to get a bus?'

Sarah followed his gaze.

'Not too long. You could always hitchhike?'

'Yeah, I guess.'

'So, Do you think you'll come back this way?'

'No idea,' he admitted. He turned towards her, lowering his eyes to the boot. 'Thanks for letting me stay and everything. I had fun.'

'Yeah,' she smiled, 'Me too.' She pulled him into a hug and kissed his neck. He pulled her closer and kissed her on the mouth. She relented, sinking against his chest. When she pulled away her voice was husky: 'Give me a ring if you're around.'

'I will.'

She turned to go, rounding the car back to the door.