

## A Dirty Sky

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Jack threw a bottle at the tunnel wall. It was stupid but the other kids were stupid drunk and they threw their bottles the same as him. Harder. Spits of glass hit his skin and Jack thought of the ocean. How it started where he couldn't see. How it rolled to foam then flattened to nothing.

There were tunnels back home but they led somewhere. The mouth of the river. An inlet. This one was meant to connect the shops to the road but the builders must have called a smoko and never gone back. The unfinished end faced onto a paddock at the bottom of a hill. You walked up and surfaced where the cars hit a hundred on the highway. The council had funded a tunnel for old drunks to sleep in during the day and young drunks to party in at night. They'd dug a short cut to danger.

'This town is stupid,' Jack had said a week after they'd moved. 'There's nothing to do.' His dad had kept unpacking; he'd pulled out a red jumper, elbows still shaped in the wool. 'If the quiet doesn't kill us the pollution will.' The red jumper had landed on the charity shop pile. Jack had run.

Out towards the purple mountains. Winding round the track that ran beside the old railway line. The pollution faded in the

space of the bush; he'd followed the smell: sharp eucalyptus and heat. It reminded him of tracks back home, of the way his mum cut quickly through scrub to reach water. 'You can feel the end coming,' she'd always said, and somehow in the scabble of running and the spin of Jack's breath that morning he'd thought he was home, thought he was chasing her to water like old times. He'd run as hard as he could and then sunk to his knees. His hands had stripped bark from a tree.

Campers or bored kids must have left the bottles behind. Jack had thrown one against a trunk and the sound made him throw another and another. He lobbed them as hard as he could. Birds furred into air. Hurlled wide then knitted tight patterns and were gone.

He'd run every day and night since then. In the dark he played games. Moving close to trees and dodging at the last minute. Moving silently behind women in red tops then belting past. One night the sky had emptied on him and he'd run into the tunnel before he'd noticed the beery shadows. Kelly had called to him as he backed away. 'You're the new kid? John.'

'Jack,' he'd said, and walked towards her voice in the dark.

It was almost a month now, since that first night in the tunnel. Jack watched the smashing bottles. The kids around him drank quicker to smash more. One of them, Jack couldn't remember his name, made a sound like a dog. One farted.

'You're disgusting,' Kelly yelled, and pulled a sleeve over her nose. As she did her eyes moved towards Jack. She swayed a little. He looked past her.

The street lamp at the end of the tunnel blinked. His mum would've made a joke about that. He wondered again what she saw after she closed her eyes that last time. Darkness or light?

Nothing or something? Gardens or clouds or dirt? He'd asked his dad what he thought on the drive to this town.

'I need to concentrate, Jack,' he'd said, and pushed the car to 120. They'd hit the country roads without slowing till they felt the thump under the wheels. 'What was that?' his dad had asked, and pulled to the side.

'We'll never know,' Jack had answered while they stared at the mess. Without talking, his dad had taken off his coat, wrapped the animal and picked it up in his arms. He'd walked to the side of the road and tucked it under leaves.

They'd sat in the car till the sky bruised. 'What's worse than moving to a shitty house in the country that's close to a power station?' Jack had asked after a while. No answer. His dad had stared towards the side of the road. 'Sitting on the side of the road in a shitty town and never getting to the shitty house,' Jack had said.

'I got a smart-arse for a son. Thank God.' The last two words had been almost lost under the sound of the engine.

Kelly swayed like she was dancing. She bumped the sides of the tunnel. Jack thought about Jasmine, about how she'd asked him out yesterday. He could have been with her instead of here with the swaying Kelly.

'Some of us are going to the movies tomorrow night,' Jasmine had said, leaning on his locker so he couldn't open it. 'My mum can pick us up.' She'd slid a ring along her neck chain. 'I liked that story you read in English about your mum dying. Was it true?'

'Made it up.'

She'd slung her bag over her shoulder and the strap had caught hair. 'Help,' she'd laughed, and he'd taken the weight so

she could shake free. They'd bumped hands and she'd been so close Jack had needed to go to the toilets till the situation was under control.

He'd sat for a while, staring at the toilet walls, thinking about the last time he'd laughed. It had bubbled in him at the funeral, sitting in the church listening to that music his mum liked so much. 'This is shit music,' he'd said, leaning across to his dad. The song had been about love; Jack had thought about the last time his mum and he had talked. 'You'll fall in love one day, Jack,' she'd said and he'd told her to piss off.

I didn't mean it literally, he'd thought, staring at the coffin. The church had echoed with his laughter. He'd laughed some more, wondering how she fitted into that tiny box. She was too tall to be in there. Maybe they'd curled her legs underneath like she was sleeping. Jack had laughed till his dad half-carried him out of the church and made him drink water. 'Tastes fishy. And like metal. Fishy metal.'

His dad had leaned back and covered his eyes. 'You and me now.' Jack was sick on the ground between them.

'Not interested,' Jack had said to Jasmine when he came out of the toilet yesterday. Eyes ahead, he'd run home so fast the smell of his uniform made him gag. 'You,' his mum would have told him, 'are feral. Jump in the pool before you come inside.' He'd have whooped and dived to make her laugh.

But his pool was back home. Here he had only paddocks that ached all the way to the power station. He'd run across them till he came to the dam as big as a small town. He'd swum under warm, muddy water and surfaced to the strangest feeling. One person floating on a liquid world. He'd taken a breath and gone under again.

'What are you thinking?' Kelly asked, one word slumping into the next. Jack didn't say he was thinking about Jasmine. About how he wanted to be at the movie with her and not here in the tunnel with Kelly. He might have, but the kids appeared. A group of maybe ten. In the dark Jack couldn't see faces. He figured from their size they were thirteen years old. Brothers of the kids here, sent to bring them home.

But then one of them threw an egg. It hit Jack on the face and dribbled down his skin. It didn't hurt but he shouted anyway. Laughter bubbled like it did at the funeral. Kelly and her shadowy mates laughed with him. He looked around for bottles to smash.

David woke in the net of a dream. Some nights he was trapped in the tunnel. Tonight the tunnel was in him, a concrete burrow that ran through his centre. He felt her footsteps under his skin, the tunnel lengthening as she ran. In the nonsense of the dark he thought she was knocking.

He opened the door and expected her on the other side. The police stared back. Behind them the sky was a ditch. Before they'd moved, David had promised Jack there'd be stars; the pollution from the power station ate them quick as city lights in the end.

'Mr Kelt, is your boy here?' one asked, icing-sugar face dusted over a meaty body, legs stretching the seams of his pants.

David blinked. 'What's the time?'

'That wasn't the question, Mr Kelt.'

'It's my question,' David answered.

The older one held back his meaty partner. 'It's five in the morning, Mr Kelt. We're investigating an assault on a thirteen-

year-old boy.’ A twitch worked in the corner of his face. ‘Is Jack home?’

‘Been home all night.’

The men scrawled notes on little writing pads. David looked away from the guns on their hips and rehearsed Clint Eastwood ways to ask for a warrant. ‘You’ll make a statement to that effect?’ the older one asked. ‘You and Jack, at the station tomorrow?’

David nodded. He closed the door and the shaking started. Knees creaked as he knelt. The pilot light of the heater made a sound like whispering. ‘He wasn’t home. He’s out every night,’ she said. ‘You know that.’

Not out kicking heads, he thought. He never answered aloud. Hearing the dead was one thing. It was talking back that made you crazy. He put on the kettle and ran his hand over the dints in the wooden bench. Twenty. ‘It’s 5 a.m.,’ she said. He dug his nail into the softness. Twenty-one.

David’s skin settled when he saw the shape in the bed. Jack lay on his side and hugged his knees. A boy with the body of a man. A strange half-creature with twitching shoulders. David fought the urge to turn on the news.

He sat in the darkness. Sixteen years ago he’d watched Jack sleep for the first time in the hospital. ‘Still worried you won’t love him?’ she’d asked. He’d looked at her and been filled with a feeling that doors had appeared in their world. Openings to terrible possibilities. He’d tightened the blanket around Jack. ‘I know,’ she’d said.

Legs creaking, David left Jack’s room to make more coffee. He drank it looking across the hills to the towers of the power station. All that sky made dirty. His son’s reflection appeared in the window.

‘You’re up early. Hungry?’

‘I’m late for work.’

‘Eat then I’ll drive you.’

‘I said I wasn’t hungry.’

‘You get out of bed on the wrong side?’

‘I had nightmares about a weird guy staring at me.’

‘Well that must have been unsettling,’ David said, and Jack walked off without answering.

David followed. ‘I have to drive you. The police came round early this morning. Asked if you’d been home all night. We have to make a statement that you were.’

‘How do you know I was home?’ Jack asked.

‘I checked on you about nine and midnight.’

‘You checked on me?’

‘It makes me feel better, knowing you’re in the house.’

They stood on either side of the mess in his room. Jack searched in the pile for a clean shirt. The one he put on was frayed around the sleeves and grubby.

‘Moment of truth,’ she’d have said. ‘Were you home, you little bugger, or is there something you need to tell us?’ She’d have laughed, ruffled his hair and shoved him playfully. ‘I was home,’ Jack would have answered. She’d have known if the note in his voice saved or betrayed him.

‘I’ll wait in the car,’ David said. He sat with the windows rolled up and the air conditioner on. You dumped me in this thing alone, he thought, and drifted to places he didn’t usually go. Sitting on the couch with her, their wife and husband shapes worn into the cushions. They’d watched the news every night. Sometimes there were stories of kids who’d done things. Kids who’d fallen into trouble. Drink driving, school pranks. ‘They don’t have their frontal lobes,’ she’d said once, tapping her head.

‘I’m pretty sure they have their frontal lobes. It’s that part of the

brain that factors in risk that they're missing,' David had said.

'Plus they have the penises.'

'What's that got to do with it?' he'd asked. They'd laughed and forgotten what they were talking about in the first place.

'What would we do,' David had asked her later that night, lying in bed, 'if something terrible happened?'

'In terrible times you face the truth,' she'd said, and in that moment, years before his wife died, David had the feeling that she wouldn't always be there and it drowned him. He'd pulled her close to breathe her smell.

Jack got in and slammed David out of his memories. 'Car's a piece of shit,' he said as the engine struggled to turn. They drove quietly through the scrub. Please don't let us break down in the middle of this. David thought the same thing he always did as they passed the spot where it was too far to walk home or to the town.

'You need a new car,' Jack said. 'We'll get stuck nowhere one day.'

Inside the police station David rang the bell. He tried not to look at their reflections staring from the glass behind the counter. At the lines dug into his face and Jack's tangle of limbs beside him.

Jack wrapped his arms around his shoulder blades while the detective spoke. 'We're really after witnesses. We know the kids who frequent that area.' He spoke in a low voice. 'You're not in any trouble.' Jack unwrapped his arms and leaned forward.

'He was sleeping the whole night,' David answered for him. 'He didn't see a thing. Any more questions, you ask our lawyer.'

'We don't have a lawyer,' Jack said as they left the station.

'We will in half an hour.' David checked his phone messages for jobs. 'I need a plumber,' a voice told him. 'Last one stuffed up the job. I got gas leaking from somewhere. I can smell it.'

Jack kept his back to the car as his dad drove away. He pulled his jumper over his mouth. The air here was shit on a good day. Kids crowded the plastic tables out the front. 'Good thing they're nailed down,' the manager said at least once every shift. 'They'd steal anything that wasn't.'

The smell of sugary meat took over the pollution. Back home he'd worked at a bookstore. His mum knew someone who knew someone and he hadn't even had to apply. Here they'd made him take a test to prove he was Einstein before they'd let him fry burgers. His mum wouldn't have let him take the job. 'I can smell slaughter on you,' she'd have said. His dad asked him to bring home burgers and fries for dinner.

The crowd of kids from the tunnel sat in the corner, smearing sauce on the table and laughing. One slung an arm around Kelly's shoulders and touched a chip to the edge of her mouth. She opened her lips and let it drop inside.

Jack ran to the toilets and came back with the taste of vomit in his mouth. 'You hear about that kid?' the manager asked him. 'Turned off the machine this morning. Shouldn't have been out in the night. What's the world coming to?'

David sat in the car and read the newspaper report of the attack. He felt his wife leaning over his shoulder. Felt her hair brush his cheek. He pushed his hands under his legs to keep them still. 'They're the kids he's been hanging out with,' she said. 'You have to talk to him.'

David didn't answer. He thought about the last time she'd said that. 'Talk to your son, Dave. He's got all his bits and he needs to know how to use them.'