

Gone Fishing

Jake traced a line in the dust along the window sill trying to avoid the dead blowies as he went. Leaning his shoulder into the wall, he slowly drew his finger in a straight line along the frame to meet his nose.

“Get outta that.”

Jake looked up. His Dad frowned at him, shook his head, then turned back to his beer.

Jake looked out the window at the quiet main street.

Robbo’s voice rose to a shout. Dad and his mates roared in response.

“Bloody hell, Robbo!”

Jake blew at the dust, momentarily resurrecting the dead flies.

“Jesus, Jake, can’t ya sit still?” growled his Dad.

“Ah, he’s bored. It’s been a long day, sitting around, waiting. Hey, mate?”

Jake starred at Pauly. He was alright. He preferred Pauly to the rest of his Dad’s mates. He always had a few friendly words for him, and hard-boiled raspberry drops in his pocket.

“Medicine, Jake – keeps the diabetes away,” he always said when offered Jake a sweet.

“Do you want a Coke?”

Jake’s eyes widened. He nodded. He never got to drink Coke – only the cheap cola on offer at home. Pauly put a couple of coins into Jake’s hand. Jake starred at the coins. He felt a sharp smack to the back of his head. “Well, what da ya say?” his Dad demanded.

“Thank you.” muttered Jake.

“Go on then.” Pauly smiles and ruffles his hair as Jake walks to the bar.

The pub was full – 5:30pm on a blistering hot afternoon in a small country town, the pub offering the only respite from the heat. The noise levels were rising as quick as the cool beers were going down throats. The television on the wall replaying the races and the soft bop as balls on the pool table hit each other were background noise to the chatter.

Jake squeezed between two old blokes sitting on the green vinyl stools at the bar. He stepped on the brass foot rail to prop himself up to get Mrs M’s attention.

But Mrs M wasn’t looking at him struggling to stay on the rail. Jake felt the pub go silent. Not a single voice could be heard except the man on the TV calling the horses down the home straight.

Jake was knocked off the rail by the old bloke swivelling his stool round for a better look. He held a low moan. He didn’t know if it was the old bloke or Mrs M.

He picked himself up off the tiled floor and stood up, knocking his head on the underside of the bar. “Ow!” he rubbed his head, but no one heard him. He shrunk down under the bar, against the wooden veneer.

A man with a plastic shopping bag was standing in front of the pub door. He was staring towards the bar, at someone above Jake. He took one step forward and looked around the bar. Jake saw him take a deep breath into his chest and move towards the bar.

A stool scrapped back. Pauly stood up blocking the man’s path. “I don’t think so.”

The man looked up at Pauly, his mouth firming into a hard line. Pauly’s shoulders went back. Robbo and his Dad stood up.

“No.” Mrs M said firmly.

“Now, Carol. I...” started Pauly.

“No,” she said more quietly.

Pauly slowly stepped aside, letting the man walk to the bar. The man never took his eyes from Mrs M.

The two old blokes peeled off their stools muttering as they went.

Jake was looking at the man’s legs from under his fringe as he stopped at the bar. His legs were blocking his exit. Jake wanted to leave but was afraid he might touch this stranger as he tried to wriggle out.

From his spot he could see almost everyone in the room. People were turned to the bar, looking at the man, waiting.

The plastic bag dropped in front of Jake.

The man spoke. “Hello Carol.”

“What are you doing here, John?”

A pause, then the clink of glasses as Mrs M gathered up the empties. Jake saw his Dad, Robbo and Pauly sit down. People turned to each other, exchanging looks and quiet comments, while keeping their eyes on the man at the bar.

“I needed to see you...”

Jake did not know who this man was, but he knew something wasn't right. Here he was still stuck under the bar inches from the man's legs. Jake hunched down, with his feet under the rail, hugging his knees.

The plastic bag was open in front of him, and Jake could see inside. He saw some clothing – it looked like a jacket – and a couple of books. One of the books looked fancy – it had a black leather cover and gold letters on the front. He saw a photo. Jake pulled at the edges of the bag, revealing three photos.

The photos were small and square. In the first photo there was a boy and girl, about Jake's age, with their arms around each other, pulling funny faces at the person taking the picture. The second photo was of the same boy holding a fish – it looked like a perch – a bigger perch than anything Jake or his Dad got today. The man at the bar was in the photo, holding the boy's shoulder in one hand and a smaller fish in the other. The final photo looked like it was taken the outside of the pub. It showed the man with an arm around Mrs M's waist and another arm around the boy's chin. The girl was leaning into Mrs M's arm. All were smiling.

Jake starred at the photos. Who are these kids?

"Whata ya doin? Get away from there would ya?" His Dad dragged Jake out by his t-shirt.

Jake dropped the photos. Over his shoulder he saw the man pick them up, gently wiping them with his sleeve.