

Young Writers Award - 2002 runner up

The Quiet Death of the Day

by Chris Currie

That's just another scene left smouldering in my vision. Of Des sitting in the cell, his hair swept back the way he likes it, forehead shining, the same way mine does. I plunge my hands into the boiling dishwater, feel for the sponge. Outside, the sky's burning, baking the driveway and pounding its heat onto the kitchen window. I bring my face down close to the sink and take in the staleness of the air. My hair hangs down, long and brown and heavy as hell.

I drive down to Patterson's about five-thirty, the sweat on my legs sticking to the seat. The long green verandah makes the pub into like a giant lizard, stretching out on the flint-hard dirt. It looks ten degrees cooler up on Mount Magnus, and probably is.

Inside, my skin quickly soaks up the moist thick air. There's three shirtbacks at the front bar; I recognise Nat Patterson's large frame almost immediately, and Jamie Pearl, with his dad Kenny next to him. I sit down next to Kenny. He squints at me like he's peering through a dirty window.

"How ya been Kelly?" he says.

"Not bad, Mr Pearl."

"Up in Stanthorpe yes'dy. Heard 'bout Des."

"Did you?"

"Yeah. Bloody shockin'."

Jamie turns around to face me.

"Get you a drink Kel?"

"Cheers Jamie, just a beer."

Jamie nods to Nat, who heaves himself up reluctantly and goes behind the bar, his chequered shirt rumpling up in dark creases of sweat.

"Just want ya to know," says Kenny, from behind the squint, "if there's anything youse need, from the store or whatever..."

Jamie nods, his eyes cast downwards.

"Thanks," I say.

"How's ya mum takin' it?" says Kenny.

"Yeah, she's okay," I lie. "A little shaken up, but no real harm done."

Nat hands me a drink and says quietly, "On the house."

We sit in silence as I sip at my beer. It's cold and bitter and God it's good.

"Elsie comin' tonight?" asks Jamie.

"Dunno," I say. "She was still at work when I left."

He looks disappointed. There's a layer of sawdust sitting on the fair hairs of his left arm. I have an urge to run my hand over his wrist and up to his smooth brown muscles.

Soon enough, the pub crowds up with the farmers and the fruit pickers; scores of red faces and thirsty eyes. Kenny goes off to talk to some of the old characters, but Jamie comes and sits with me in a table behind the door. Nat is run off his feet, as usual, but keeps his own pace.

Three Italian guys come in about eight o'clock and stand inside the entrance, laughing and talking. I recognise two of them from the police station; cousins, Vince and Paul. The other one I don't know. They wave their hands at Nat, tell him to hurry up.

"Wassa matter barman?" says Paul, throwing his arms in the air. "Can we get a drink in this town, or what?"

Nat ignores him.

Paul takes off his jacket. He wears a white singlet tucked into his jeans; a bright, brilliant white.

"Can't be that hard to pull three beers, can it mate?" he says.

"Wait your turn, mate." says Nat.

Jamie rubs his jaw and watches the Italians.

"Fuckin' wankers," he says loudly. "Whadda they fuckin' have to come down here for?"

"Don't worry about it," I say, staring intently into my fifth beer. But it's too late. Vince, in a luminous blue shirt, swaggers over to the table. His hair's thick with gel, the light swimming over his head in little ripples.

"You got something to say?" says Vince.

I see the tension growing in Jamie's arms. I keep my head down, hope things go away.

"This pub's for locals," says Jamie. "F'people who do an honest day's work."

"You a funny man? You a funny man, are ya country boy?"

Paul and the other Italian peel away from the bar. Jamie stands up.

"The only things that's funny," he says, "is your fuckin' shirt."

Vince ignores him. He looks straight at me, and sneers.

"Hey Paul," he says, "remember this little chicky?"

"Yeah," says Paul, puffing out his singlet chest like a songbird. He turns to the other Italian. "Hey Gino, this little chicky's brother was the one screwed over your Uncle Stefo."

Gino stares at me with his glossy, shit-brown eyes.

Jamie moves right up into his face.

"Why don't you fuck off back to your zucchinis," he says.

"You still working for your papa, country boy?"

"You still stickin' your cousin, faggot?"

Gino's mouth explodes and he throws a punch. Jamie ducks it and charges into Gino's stomach. He grunts in pain and Paul and Vince haul Jamie up by the shoulders and Paul knees him in the groin and Gino cracks the palm of his hand into Jamie's face and his neck snaps back with blood like a visor and he's kicked with a cutting arc and Nat and Kenny and the others pull them away as they flail and swing in animal violence and I lose my breath and my thoughts are too many molecules and they jump and spin together with hate and pain and fear and all I can smell is the sweat.

I sit on the deck with the lights off as the sky fills again with spearing breaking thunder, the bulging clouds waiting desperately for rain's release. Elsie's footsteps come creaking up over the timber. She's wearing woolen slippers with her nurse's uniform. She hands me a mug of coffee and for a moment the lightning illuminates her wide face. It's eleven-thirty at night and she's so tired but she's still beautiful. She sits down next to me on the cane lounge with a familiar squeak. It's the sound of a year's worth of late dinners and last drinks and easy words.

"You going to tell your mum?" she says.

"Suppose I'll have to now."

"That was pretty stupid of Jamie."

"He gave them what they came for, I guess."

There's the scene of Jamie being led away with a bath towel over his broken face. The blood creeping steadily outwards against the white. The sawdust on his shoes.

Elsie puts her feet up on the flimsy rail that wraps around our deck. It bends out under the weight.

"You want me to drop you at court tomorrow?" she says.

"Yeah, I guess."

I sigh with a wavering breath and close my eyes.

"Hey," says Elsie. "It'll be all right."

She puts her arm around me and I cry into her soft shoulder. We sit like this for some time. The rain never arrives.

It takes a while for things to start. They can't get the recording equipment to work. The clerk, or whoever it is, plays with leads and cords and power points until it finally whirrs into action. It's a huge room with tall windows that let in far too much light and heat. I had stood outside with Des, before they called him in. He has always looked older than he is, but today he shrinks back to a stooping nineteen year-old in a sagging suit and tie. Only four years younger than me.

Des sits up in the box with the little railing. He pleads guilty to wilful damage of property. For ramming Stefo Pinnatori's rusty truck into a packing shed. Guilty of being treated like shit for his slave work, squatting over squash and zucchinis and capsicum and every other bloody vegetable 14 hours a day. Trying to quit the work and the priced food and crappy shelter but being laughed off. Nothing he could do but teach the greasy fuckers a lesson.

The old bastard Stefo pretends he doesn't understand the oath, won't put his hand on the bible, laughs along with the family with his big red mouth. Des's legal aid looks fresh out of year ten. Nothing the magistrate can do but put Des in jail for a month and hand him a twelve hundred

dollar fine. They lead him out and I can't do anything but watch from my pew-hard seat. Vince and Gino and Paul walk out with Stefo and his wife. Paul blows me a kiss, and I want to be sick.

Elsie drives me back that evening. I give Des a change of clothes and some books before I go. He smiles, but I can see his fear. There's a scene of his face; full of excitement and nervousness, when he would camp in the backyard all through the school holidays, loving the escape. Even in winter, he would plead to stay outside. Still, it was warmer up north.

Elsie and I make pizzas and eat them oven-hot on the cane chair. After dinner, I go into Des's room and pull my computer out from under his desk. I write mum a long email, but I don't send it. My eyes are dry around the edges by the time I go to bed.

Elsie has the morning off, and we walk down to Trewly Park. We sit on a bench by the dried up pond, with its rusted sculpture sticking up from the water.

"You should come in with me today," says Elsie. "Jamie'll be up and talking by now."

"He'll be okay, won't he?"

"I told you, he's fine. His face won't be straight for a while, but he's fine."

"I should probably start planning lessons," I say. "Term's only a few weeks away."

Elsie twists her hands in her lap. She says, "He wants to see you, Kel. I think you should go."

And I can see it's killing her inside.

Jamie's propped up on a pile of pillows. He is pretty messed up. There are rows of stitches across his face, pushing up the skin into little mountain ranges.

"How's it feeling?" I ask.

"All right," he says. "Nothing compared to the hiding the old man'll give me for missing work."

I laugh a little and sit down beside the bed. He looks me in the eyes with a trace of Kenny's squint.

"Jeez, I'm sorry Kel. For what happened. But the way they waltzed in there and it was so obvious and I was so wound up by the whole..." He stops mid-sentence. "Shit. I didn't even ask - how'd it go?"

"One month and twelve hundred dollars."

"Shit, Kel. Look, I'll help you out with the money, you know I will."

I look at him, helpless and fragile under the white sheets.

"You don't owe me anything Jamie," I say, tears stinging in my eyes. "You get your face smashed because of me and now you want to give me more. Everyone acts like it's nothing but it's my fucking brother who has to pay for it and no can help, 'cause I've let him down. Not just him..."

Jamie puts his hand on my arm. His palm is smooth and callused.

He says, "You haven't told your mum, have you."

I shake my head.

And I hate him. I hate Jamie right there. Not for saying the right things, but for meaning them. I don't deserve someone so genuine. What I need is more fake emotion and hollow promises, something I can battle against. Please no more understanding. Please no more fucking help.

There's another scene; mum by the phone, in the green Townsville heat, throwing back her steel wool hair and artists' eyes with her snide patronising calm. Saying, don't worry about a thing. Meaning, I told you so.

A month later, and my legs still stick to the car seat. I'm driving past the pub, with a storm building behind me, and a pile of finger paintings on the passenger seat. When I get home, Elsie and Jamie will be sitting on the verandah, talking and touching, my brother will be a thousand kilometres away, and I will wait patiently for the quiet death of another day.