



## SLQ Young Writers Award 2013 – Runner up

### ***On the Mend***

by Nabila Ahmed

Neon lights wink blarily through the rain, fuzzier, a little more gaudy than usual. A faint whiff of piss lifts off the asphalt and lingers in my nose. *Mmmm yes, a fine vintage, and do I detect a hint of rubbish? A well rounded bouquet, indeed,* I think to myself. I have a brief urge to relay my thoughts to Andrew but I don't feel like saying anything. We walk in silence together. It isn't a comfortable silence. I once heard that being comfortable in silence with another person is the mark of a true friendship, that sense of being free of the pressure to constantly fill a lull in the conversation with idle chatter. This silence is charged with a strange, unspoken undertone. Andrew has that look on his face, his brow furrowed, a muscle twitching in his jaw. The look that suggests he can see a point on the horizon, beyond what everyone else can, and he doesn't like what he finds. At this moment, I hate that look.

A beaten up Corolla rolls past, carrying a load of loud teenagers. One of them hangs his ass out the window and the rest laugh hysterically and scream swear words at us as they hoon off. "Fuckin' come on. Really?" Andrew asks of the empty street. "Why in the fuck would you get a tattoo of Elmo on your ass?" He seems genuinely perplexed. I burst out laughing and, after a second, so does he. We laugh for a long time, a gasping, hiccupping laugh, tears rolling down our faces as I clutch at his arm for support. I feel lightheaded, relieved even.

We walk on and I slip an arm around his waist. I look up at him and throw a cheesy smile. He smiles back, but it becomes more like a grimace. He looks away quickly. Under the fluorescent lights from the takeaway joints around us, he looks ill. His skin appears stretched over his features and the hollows under his eyes appear deeper, more cavernous. He feels taut under my skin, like he's readying himself to spring away from me. I cough, remove my arm and reach into my bag for my phone; I need some pretence to dilute the discomfort.

“Fuck, we’re going to be late,” I remark. He grunts. His aloofness suddenly infuriates me and it’s all I can do not to beat him over the head with my clutch. What would he even do? Maybe grunt and stare at the ground the whole time. I can hear it in my mind: *thwack*, grunt, *thwack*, grunt.

The rain begins to pour in earnest and I wonder why I thought it would be a good idea to wear high heels and a cocktail dress but to forgo a blazer. In winter, no less. Andrew wordlessly shrugs off his leather jacket and drapes it over my shoulders. I finger the woollen collar and my eyes fill with tears. “I just hate looking at your chicken skin when you get cold. It freaks me out. So gross.” He says as he shudders. God, I hate him sometimes.

Meaghan’s twenty-first birthday party is in full swing when Andrew and I arrive. Waiters stroll around with silver platters holding glasses of champagne and hors d’oeuvres as guests mill about, dressed to the nines. Andrew whistles between his teeth and saunters inside, hooking his thumbs through the belt loops on his ‘artistically’ torn jeans. He turns to me, flashing a wolfish smile. “Some reeeaal classy digs, innit?” There’s an acerbity to his tone.

“Please do not do your London accent, not tonight. We are in Hamilton, for god’s sake. This is a nice party for nice people, fancy people. Just... Just please.” I say through clenched teeth, a grin plastered to my face.

“Don’t get your panties in a knot, innit. You’re right about the fancy people, though. Maybe I should’ve worn my tuxedo t-shirt?” He sneers.

I sigh, thinking it would have been an improvement over the one he was wearing; it reads ‘Blink if you want me’.

Meaghan suddenly appears in front of us, resplendent in a sequined purple gown, hair perfectly coiffed as always. “Ohmygosh, Hannah, I’m so glad you caaaame!” She squeals in one breath, almost bowling me over with a bear hug. “Of course I came! Happy birthday, sweetheart!” I exclaim, matching her pitch. “This is my friend Andrew, by the way.” Meaghan beams at us and points out the vast array of drinks and food on offer. “There’s even a giant chocolate fountain! I’m so excited, guys, you don’t even know.” She says this in a low voice, eyes wide, like she can’t quite believe it. “Ugh,” Andrew spits, after she’s dashed off to greet more guests. “Chocolate fountains- those things are so full of bacteria, they’re basically cesspools. Tacky as all hell, too. Guess money can’t buy class.” He says with a curled lip. “Cesspools of deliciousness, more like!” I return brightly, looping my arm through his. “Come on, let’s get some grub.” *Maybe you’ll cheer up a bit, you asshat.*

We wade through the throng of people to get to the bar set up on the deck. Meaghan's house overlooks the Brisbane River. Standing on the illuminated deck with the moon above the water and the sky lightly dotted with stars is, to my mind, nothing short of magical. Andrew sidles up next to me, holding out a drink and keeping the other close to his chest. "Ah, you wonderful man," I murmur, taking the glass from him. We stand sipping side by side, as we gaze at the water and this time the silence is a bit easier. As if on cue, Andrew begins to hum the *Titanic* theme. I roll my eyes. He hums louder. He takes a gulp of his drink, downs it all and pointedly informs me that he is going to get plastered tonight. My hand grips the balcony railing a little tighter. I say nothing. A few months ago I had casually suggested that maybe Andrew ease back on his drinking a bit. He responded by getting himself hospitalised for alcohol poisoning that night. In the corner of my eye, I see him give me a satisfied smirk before he strolls away. He doesn't come back.

*Fuck him. I didn't come here to run around after him all night, I'm not his fucking nanny.* At this, I hear my name called. I turn and see old girlfriends from high school. I don't see Andrew anywhere. I force myself to let it go, grabbing a glass of champagne on my way over. It's a veritable storm of hugs and air kisses, comments about who's lost weight, how everyone looks great. "Do you still hang out with that weird guy?" asks Emily with a titter, swaying slightly. The others exchange looks and shift uncomfortably. I regard her with genuine confusion. "Weird g- oh, you mean Andrew? Ha, yeah, we're still good friends. We share an apartment in Paddington." This is met with a few raised eyebrows. "Oh, so you're together now?" asks Sarah, a girl I never much cared for. "Well, no, seeing as how he's gay and all." I reply, perhaps a touch too defensively. This generates a gasp of surprise, though I suspect not many are actually surprised. "Ohhh, I always thought you two were a thing!" exclaims Emily, her slur a little more pronounced. "No, just good friends. We basically grew up together," I snap. The conversation moves along and I feel myself relax.

It really is a great party. Music pumps throughout the whole house, no small feat, considering its size. A dance floor has been set up inside, complete with flashing coloured tiles. Everybody goes a little bit nuts when the Backstreet Boys come on; I see a waiter duck in the nick of time as a girl begins throwing her elbows everywhere, eyes closed, intent on hollering the lyrics to 'Backstreet's Back'. The booze continues to flow and the food is delicious. There's a cake the size of a small tent, covered with sugared, photorealistic illustrations of Meaghan. I find it a little creepy.

The music begins to die down, much to the dismay of Elbow Girl. The tell-tale *tink, tink, tink* of someone tapping on glass casts silence throughout the room. It's Meaghan's father who stands on the landing, an expectant smile on his face, glass in hand. Just as he opens his mouth, someone lets out a great whoop. We all turn to see.

A gasp goes up from the crowd, like a Mexican wave. I crane my neck over the heads in front of me. Andrew stands with his back to the group, jeans around his ankles. He appears to be peeing into the chocolate fountain. I feel the blood drain from my face. "Backstreet's back, ORRIGHT! Innit!" He screams in the silence. I push through the wall of people to get to him, hoping that lightning will strike me dead right at this moment as people begin to whisper and point.

I reach him and plead with him to put his pants back on. He's not having it. "Well looky who it iss. Miss I'm so perfec-hic- so perfect! Hannah's cool as a cucum...cucumber!" He cries before trailing off, mumbling to himself. From somewhere far away, I hear Meaghan's father yell about calling the police. "Come on, Andrew, please, let's just go home, we can watch all the *Die Hard* movies and I won't complain once, I promise." It's all I can think to say. "Nnnno!" He prods a finger against my forehead. "You're jus' a robot! A bitch robot! I am Han-hic-Hannah! Does not compute!" He slurs, moving his arms in what he must think is a robotic fashion. That does it. I bend down to grab his jeans and begin to hoist them up over his knees, fighting back tears of rage. He struggles, trying to push me away as I stand up, bringing the jeans higher. I look up and catch him watching me, his eyes filled with hate. It startles me. With the slow deliberation of the inebriated, Andrew wrenches the waistband from my hands and tugs them upwards, his eyes fixed on mine. I purse my lips and stand straight, but can't stem the escape of tears. His brow furrows and he squints at me, as though trying to catch me out on a lie. He wears that same expression as he topples sideways into the fountain.

We get a cab out of Hamilton back to the CBD and stop outside the bottom of the Botanical Gardens. We hike up the gentle hill, my satin heels digging into the grass and mud. I wrench them out each step with quiet anger. Andrew, miraculously almost completely sober, lights up a cigarette as we park ourselves on our customary table, the one with the little tin roof. It isn't raining anymore. Insects hum and buzz in the distance, occasionally accompanied by the squall of a feral cat. A possum suddenly skitters across the roof above us and Andrew, startled, drops his cigarette onto his crotch. "Fuck! Balls!" He exclaims, leaping up. He brushes off the ash and looks at the cigarette on the ground for a moment before trampling it

underfoot. He lights up a new one. The dim orange light outlines the dark splotches on his face and shirt. The smell of chocolate and cigarettes is delicious, though I don't mention it. I look away from him and out to the garden. It's pretty in the daytime, but transforms at night. The trees and shrubs take on an almost eldritch quality, swaying gently, of one mind, in the cool night breeze.

"Thank you." He says haltingly. He doesn't elaborate. I prod him anyway. "For what?" I ask, ignoring the look of disdain he shoots me. "For being there. For helping me." This time there's no edge to his words. I look at him, sitting hunched at the table, head in his hands, cigarette in a good position to set his hair alight. I sigh and cross to his side, gently pluck it from between his thumb and forefinger and take a deep drag. "I'm your sister. It's what I do."

I feel him tremble next to me and I know he's crying. I've heard him cry every night since the accident. He stays awake until the sun comes up and I hear his breathless sobs through the wall. Some nights it's just silence. He goes to bed with a bottle of Johnny Walker and I hear nothing. Those are the nights I want to bundle him up and hold him. I would if he would let me. I feel it too. My heart stops when the phone rings late at night. I've gazed a moment too long at a bottle of prescription sleeping tablets. I've felt that suffocating grief that attacks you in the middle of the night, in the middle of the day, wherever you are. I feel it every single day. I can't cry anymore. I want to tell him all this, but can't bring myself to say the words.

When Dean died, it was like the light had gone out of both our lives. My twin brother, his boyfriend. It's been years but the pain is every bit as raw as the day it happened. He and Andrew had fought one night and Dean had gone for a drive. He was in a head on collision with a drunk driver and died on impact. "I need help." He mumbles quietly through tears. "I'll help you get help." I tell him, silently promising him. Without a word, he finds my hand and holds it, fingers interlocking with mine. I grip it tightly.

We stay like that until the first rays of sun stretch through the garden. We must be a sight for anyone unfortunate enough to catch a glimpse of us so early in the morning. Me, dress and hair awry, make up all run down my face, shoes slung haphazardly from the edge of the table. And him, utterly dishevelled and covered in chocolate. I can't help but smile at the thought. I look at him and begin to giggle. So does he. It escalates. We roar with laughter, tears of joy and grief coursing down our cheeks. After a while, it dies down. I feel a sweeping calm spread over me. In the quiet, I watch the sky's metamorphosis from violets and lavenders, to tangerines and saffrons, to azure blue. I know Dean must be laughing at the

pair of us right now, that asshole. I smile and glance sidelong at Andrew, his head now on the table, tongue lolling out of his mouth as he snores. I brush his hair out of his face. He snorts and sleepily bats my hand away. It occurs to me that we might make it through.