

**Young Writers Award
Winner
2016**

**Oblivion
by Anne Chen**

The 2.44 bus moves slowly, trundling wearily down the road puffing and wheezing like an old man. I don't mind. It's a beautiful afternoon - soft sunlight filters through the leaves of the jacarandas that line the road on either side, and a cloudless sky rolls overhead. I lean against the graffiti-covered window, gazing up at the ceiling of the world. It scares me sometimes, because I feel as though I could be swallowed up into that endless blue oblivion, never to be seen again. Silly, I know.

Skyscrapers loom on the horizon like a row of steel and concrete teeth. I wonder briefly about the people in there, sitting in their suits, in their cubicles. My mother had worked in one of those offices before she got tired of this city, of us, and left. But that had been nearly six years ago.

When the bus pulls up at the next stop in front of the mall, people flood on, doggedly filling up the last vacant seats. Before the doors flap shut a dumpy old woman hobbles in behind the others. A large straw bag hangs on her left arm. She shuffles up the aisle and as the bus starts moving again, hastily grabs one of the yellow poles with brown, wizened fingers that are as thin as twigs.

I stand up, waving the old woman towards my now-vacant seat. Gratitude lights up her face and for a moment, despite the map of lines etched on her skin, she doesn't look so old. She sits and begins rooting around in her bag. Eventually she comes up with two Kopiko coffee lollies, their wrappers wrinkled from travelling around in the straw bag for who knows how long, and presses them firmly into my hand.

I grin. "Thank you," I say. She mumbles something in a language I can't identify. Spanish? She gestures with her twig fingers. I shake my head to show that I don't understand, but still she smiles.

I get off at the next stop. The two-dollar coin I had found wedged between the curb and a streetlight had only been enough to get me this far, but it's only a ten-minute walk to the primary school from here. I pause in front of the stationery shop, remembering that I had planned to buy my little brother, Max, some art supplies. The kid loves to draw. I find myself wishing that I hadn't given the car keys back to dad. Then he would never have gone out and landed himself in jail for DUI. That two-thousand-dollar fine had eaten up my savings from the last three years and more.

As I walk past the Korean BBQ joint I catch sight of my friend, Cindy, coming towards me. She helps babysit Max sometimes, when I go to work.

"Hey, Cin." I call, waving. But she doesn't wave back, only glances over at me with sad, angry eyes.

I stop and take hold of her arm. "What's wrong?"

She rubs a hand tiredly across her face. "You remember my brother, Ivan?"

I rifle through my memory for a moment and recall an image of a tall man, tottering drunkenly around my house and then smashing a fist through my living room window because a dog outside had been barking non-stop.

"Yeah," I say.

"He stole a car last night. Went joyriding in it. Coppers went after him and chased him down the highway. He was too blind drunk to make a turn and flipped right over the barrier... smashed his stupid head open."

"Oh," I say, my hand dropping limply to my side. "I'm sorry."

Cindy shrugs. "I know you never liked him much, but he was a good brother. He was always there for me. It's just..." she hesitates. "This is going to sound weird, but him being dead doesn't really bother me as much as the fact that nobody cares that he's dead, you know? Nobody really knew him. It was on the news - barely fifteen seconds of footage. They didn't even mention his name, just that he'd stolen the car. When people watch the news at night, they'll just say 'Oh, isn't that sad?' and go right back to eating their dinners."

Cindy's words haunt me long after we part with promises to keep in touch. When I reach Max's school I stand at the gate and watch the kids milling about in the schoolyard. Words and laughter mingle thickly together in the warm air.

When Max sees me a smile plasters itself on his face, all teeth and gaps. I grab his arms and swing him up, my muscles straining. He's almost eight now, and seems to be growing bigger by the day.

"How was school?" I ruffle his hair. He laughs and ducks under my arm.

"Good," he replies. "But I'm kinda hungry."

I remember the coffee lollies and dig them out of my pocket. He snatches them up eagerly.

"Come on," I say, slinging his school bag over my shoulder. "I promised that I'd get you some colouring pencils, didn't I? We'll swing by the stationery shop on the way home."

Outside the stationery store, I peer through the glass front. A lone cashier has her face buried in a magazine. No customers. I meander inconspicuously inside with Max in tow, and we wander to the back, where there is a rack of sketch pads and coloured pencils, all gleaming and shiny in their cardboard packaging. After checking for security cameras, I shove a sketch pad under his jacket and tell him to keep it there and he giggles, alive with excitement. I pick

up a pack of colouring pencils, take Max's hand, and steer him towards the door. The cashier is still absorbed in her magazine.

"Okay," I bend down and whisper conspiratorially next to his ear. "Now we run."

We burst out of the shop and run down the street. Max is laughing with exhilaration, a peeling laughter that sounds so bright and happy, and for some bizarre reason my eyes suddenly prick with tears. I blink them away. I grip his small, hot hand tightly in mine as we sprint down the path.

I slow at the curb. The pedestrian light flashes green. Perfect. I charge across the road, pulling Max along behind me. He's trying not to step on the black stripes on the zebra crossing – it's a game we used to play.

Then I hear the roar of tyres and see a car bearing down on us, a thousand kilograms of red and black at seventy kilometres an hour. The driver's not looking, and she's going fast, too fast. She has one hand on the wheel. Her passenger is watching something on his smartphone and laughing with his head thrown back, and for a surreal moment I wonder what it is he's looking at that's so funny. I see their gazes flick up and fix on us. Eyes widen, like a deer caught in the headlights. Except I am the deer, not them. In the split second that I have I shove Max behind me, as hard as I can, and he falls to the ground, crying out as his knee scrapes across the bitumen. *Sorry*, I want to say, but then the car hits me and the word falls soundlessly out of my mouth. I drop the coloured pencils.

My flesh and bones yield to the metal as my body folds around the bumper, glass stabbing, bones breaking, and the glare of the headlights burning my retinas. Three different kinds of pain, all at once. I'm on the ground before I even realise, staring in bewilderment at the shadows and lights swimming before my eyes.

Consciousness returns to me in pieces as I lie on the ground, the damp rising weirdly around me. Someone is screaming in my ear, a stream of frightened words that seeps into my ears.

Max. I try to move, to say something to comfort him. My lips twitch, but that is all.

An engine revs and the car peels away. I can hear the panic in the screeching of the tyres as they roll by my numb fingers, grinding fallen jacaranda flowers into the ground.

The world slowly falls away, trees and buildings folding into paper shapes. Dimly, I wonder what they'll be thinking about, what they'll say as they clean my blood off the front of their car. Cindy's words come back to me, echoing through the ground, through my bones, reverberating in my skull. *Isn't that sad?* Before my eyes slide shut I see Max's colouring pencils on the ground, crushed into multi-coloured wood chips, a small rainbow scattered across the black bitumen. It's a strangely beautiful sight.