

Young Writers Award 2011 winner

Freedom Mangoes

by Daniel Foskey

It was early morning, the first fickle golden fingers of Brisbane sunshine beamed off the water beaded on the bonnet of the Kingswood. Blake was slowly waking in sleepy Doomben. The Eucalypt lined streets, in between the race courses and football fields, provided shade at sunrise while still letting enough of the warmth trickle through to warm the car. If life was sentimental attachment and worldly possessions, Blake's pride and joy was his flamenco red '78 Kingswood. Left to him by his late grandfather, the car had been looked after by his old, steady hands for over twenty years. A genius with all things pre-computer chip, his deft hands had been adept to tuning rich-running carbies, fixing mistimed belts and replacing cracked heads. He had kept the car running with the steady cadence of a healthy heart. They were good days growing up with the old boy. He had stuck by Blake through all of it. Blake missed his grandfather, but thanked him every day for the Kingswood.

The car got cold at night, but Brisbane's winter savagery was a tame mildness compared to the blistering frost of Sydney. On a cold day in Sydney the winds blew off the Blue Mountains and you could stick your tongue to your windscreen in the morning; Blake knew because he'd tried. As soon as he'd scrapped together enough money for some new tyres and rego for the Kingswood he'd shot through to the Sunshine State. Bloody oath, he thought, get me some warm air, some work and some freedom. His plan was to head north and find some work picking fruit in the tropics. Maybe he'd get onto some boats. Coming over the Riverside express way with less than a hundred dollars to his name, sticking around as a matter of necessity, he'd decided to try and make some coin before moving on.

Hands had been needed on the docks around Pinkenba, loading and unloading cargo ships. The work was tough, dangerous and the hours weren't constant. Life in the car suited him fine - content to persist he'd laboured on and was steadily saving to keep moving north. Calamity is a heavily sprained shoulder, slipping in a public shower block on your day-off. He hadn't been able to work for weeks and money was dwindling. It was five A.M., surprisingly cold despite the northern latitude and Blake rubbed his aching shoulder. He turned on the radio and began rolling a greyhound of a joint. His last few crumbs; at least his shoulder was almost better and sleep was slowly feeling natural again.

Sinking into anaesthesia, Blake listened to the early morning ravings and fascism of shock jock rhetoric. The giddy highs of the THC were slowly being coaxed into a moral predicament by the moody, parochial chants of AM radio. The vogue issue apparently now even closer than the backdoor. New-age paranoia fuelling the greedy, sensationally-stimulated populace; legislative suburban warfare ignited over

wedge-issue politics. People stuck in the middle of political crossfire and sniping from the electoral extremists.

“..... and what happens? The insolent buggers hunger strike. It takes due time to process these asylum claims. If we let everyone in, they just send more boats and we get the bad ones. It’s a matter of national security that we analyse these people. What happens when the government takes a soft stance? Breakouts, more boats, centres filled beyond capacity..... It’s a mockery of the system.”

Brisbane wasn’t happy. Apparently some of the asylum seekers had been shackled up at a hotel nearby in Hamilton to ease the strain. Blake loved his freedom, looking at his own ability to move from Sydney to Brisbane as the Australian way. He remembered the brief encounters with social services and foster care after Granddad passed. The memories of uncertainty and isolation made him feel nauseous. In the eyes of several public servants, he wasn’t old enough to make decisions. A few existing problems with local police had merely highlighted this issue and Blake had been put in a limbo area between adolescence and independence. He’d finally been granted the right to live by his own accord, after an intense period of beauracatic jargon, forms, signatures and the help of a young, overtly optimistic and skilful legal aid, Sarah. She’d held it together while he thought he was losing it. Blake knew what it felt like to have his future in the hands of the system. He silently thanked his grandfather, Sarah’s good-will and rubbed the dash of the Kingswood. Bean counters using human beings for a political mandate and popular opinion, politicians were the same everywhere. Hopefully Sarah’s existed in the world of the asylum seekers.

Blake’s hand reached for the dials of the Kingswood’s old radio with the delayed reactions of the five A.M. high. A lonely figure darted across the streetlights one hundred yards from the car. Barely visible through the frosted windscreen, two silhouettes broke for freedom across the soccer field one block further up the street. Probably kids making trouble, safety a stone’s throw away, home close enough for a fleet footed retreat. He inhaled deeply, blew some smoke rings at the figure now walking ominously down the street. He wasn’t sure if it was the weed talking, but as the radio host reached a climax of mouth-frothing aggravation, the figure kept looking more and more suspicious.

“It’s only a matter of time folks. Some of these people are military trained and they are dangerous.”

Having lived in his car for the better part of six months, Blake knew what it was like to be paranoid. Police search cars, drunks harass, early morning joggers stare with disdain, having learnt his lessons he tried to remain inconspicuous. He turned down the radio, leaning down into his seat below the level of the dash as the figure approached. A maniac with his head on a swivel, the man seemed to be looking everywhere at once, scanning the horizon, windows, the street, his eyes finally passing over the Kingswood. He looked twitchy. Blake’s grandfather had owned a little block of land, where Blake had also lived for most of his life, in western suburbs of Sydney. The bloke’s idiosyncrasies reminding him of the shady drug addicts that used to mill around Blacktown train station. Mind blown states of paranoid delusion, their addled brains would be working in overdrive. Skinny bodies looking empty as spent shells, minds racing at fever pitch to spot the police, some spare change or the next mark.

Blake was convinced the man was going to charge right past. At the last second, he changed course. Taking his shirt off and wrapping his hand, the man swivelled, took

two quick steps towards the front passenger seat of the Kingswood and pulled his fist back. Not the bloody Kingswood mate! With a surge of adrenalin Blake pushed the door open as quickly as possible and caught the man unawares in the mid-section. Completely oblivious to the cars occupancy, the unexpected blow caused the man to crumple. He exhaled hard as his diaphragm spasmed into his lungs, the door frame crushing the wind out of him like a popper getting stepped on in the schoolyard. Junkies can't take a hit but they'll kill themselves trying, Blake thought, as he rushed out of the car. He picked the man up and threw him onto the pavement, skidding off like a discarded ragdoll. Reacting with methamphetamine induced agility, the would-be thief bounced back to his feet. Blake thought about the possibility of a shattered window on the Kingswood's remarkably straight exterior. While not wanting to get in trouble for another fight, he unquestionably deserved a good roughing. Blake cracked his knuckles and stared straight venom. Blake's shoulder injury arced out in pain. Adrenalin subsiding, rage semi-averted, he stood tall near the car.

"Way to wreck a perfectly good joint mate. Get lost you bloody junkie, I've got a cricket bat in the car if you want to hang around."

Startled, the man paced back a few steps, his eyes reflecting his loss of will; confused and apprehensive. Blake took the initiative and grabbed the weapon from under the passenger's seat. The man's head scanned the street quickly; Blake took the chance to size him up. He's not really a man, he's probably my age. Bloody hell, he's skinnier than I am, Blake thought. Never had an Indian bloke try and rob me. Good luck mate. Blake raised the bat menacingly. In split seconds even the most intense situations degenerate into farce. Collapsing onto his knees the man began to cry, holding his hands up while protesting in a broken pigeon English spattered with a weird Texan tinge. The pleading came out in exasperated sobs.

"Help me, please, stop. I need help."

Pity and compassion are beautiful things that I was once taught by a young legal-aid named Sarah. Pity allows you to hear out the man that just tried to break into your car. Compassion provides the empathy to warm up a cup of coffee and help him out. I'd roughed him up pretty good and to be honest, felt sorry for the bloke. After trying to break into the Kingswood and consequently breaking down, he'd pulled out a hundred dollar note that he said was his last. He needed to travel north to find his parents. He was lost, lonely and didn't know where to go. He'd offered me the hundred dollars to get him as far north as possible; it wasn't until we reached the outskirts of Hervey Bay that afternoon that reality hit home. Timmy was taking a leak as I filled up the Kingswood at the servo. Some decisions are like ticking time-bombs; an explosion of consequence at the end of a fuse burning down to a revelatory flash-point.

"...this morning four asylum seekers fled from their secure compounds in Brisbane. Three of the men have been found. They were captured seeking safety in the home of one of the escapee's relatives in Brisbane's South. Thanks to a public tip-off the men have been taken back into custody. Due to extenuating circumstances the Immigration Department are asking the government for help apprehending the fourth man, an 18-year old known as Roshan."

Very few choices in life polarize your thoughts as much as deciding a man's freedom. When I asked Timmy about the breakout, I felt like I was sixteen again. Only this time

I was the judge, the solemn figure watching a young man walk into my courtroom, his life sitting between the proverbial rock and hard place, the judicial bench and gavel. Courtrooms and interviewing docks full of questions, allegations and unyielding lawmen. Responses hollow, a sense of confusion and unknown swirling behind the eyes. Timmy looked spiritually detached, undoubtedly feeling the same soul crushing feeling that I felt when I was younger. The rug pulled out, the darkness and the unhealthy isolation. Destitute; locked down in desolate government buildings where the only feng shui is the lack of hanging points. We talked about it all over a bottle of Bundaberg on Toogum beach while throwing lines into the Pacific. What would Sarah do?

Timmy talked about his home, his upbringing and never knowing his Mother. He had learned English while helping U.N. workers for spare change. His father, a Tamil leader had always instructed if anything happened to him to take their safekeeping money and leave Sri Lanka. Two weeks after his sixteenth birthday, Timmy's Dad was tortured for leads and executed for cooperating with the rebels. No body to bury. No family left. Using the last of his family's money to leave the country, Timmy was originally destined for Europe. One of the smugglers along the way had sent him to the wrong destination. A maze of different languages, shady business deals and cargo holds, he'd ended up in Australia after six months. Incarcerated on their way into Australia, he'd sided with a group of Sri Lankan compatriots with family in Australia. They'd flipped on him when they found out his Dad was a Tamil, using him as decoy-bait upon escape. By the time he'd made it to the Kingswood, he was at his wit's end. Timmy opened up for the first time in years and we spoke for hours until the deep of night. He cried when he talked about the feeling of being free again, laughing at the stars as tears swelled. I made the joke of calling him Timmy the Timid Tamil. He's never looked back.

We marched north. Trekking up Australia's long roads; hammer and tong up bitumen corridors breaching scrub, marsh and rain forest. The stretching highways offering freedom in their vastness, refuge in their isolation. Roads intercepting remote one shop towns, the expanse between populated by hulking petrol beasts moving from petrol oasis to petrol oasis. Dust churning, 18-wheeled, fuel guzzling behemoths marching their lives towards a solitary elephant graveyard in the desert or the salty air of a coastline wrecker. We drove through the rainforests of Queensland, Giant Red Cedar's and Curtain Figs standing watch over the undergrowth; old sentinels creating a canopy covering a harmony of wildlife, valleys of ferns, dragonflies and lush vegetation. Old lands scarred by volcanic battles, we climbed the ridges of the Great Dividing Range. The Kingswood flexing and groaning; the old gears coaxed into life by the steady demands of the accelerator.

We found work in the fruit fields of Cardwell in North Queensland; the kind of places where people go to forget. As long as you work hard and get on alright, people don't ask too many questions. The most insidious enquiry – "d'ya needa cuppa mate?" - North Queensland is filled with secrets bigger than the cane fields. Timmy's one of them and you'd never know it. Those first twelve months were touch-and-go, brain bewildering paranoia at the sight of any government agency, particularly police. Hard yakka, we kept it to small farms, working reasonably brief one or two month stints before moving on. Good liars need back-stories; Timmy was my cousin from overseas and we were using the fruit picking money to see Australia.

Timmy made good with a girl, Sally, from Cairns that worked at the local transport and roads authority. I told Timmy to keep his lips sealed, but after a few months I

guess he just couldn't bear lying to her anymore. I'd underestimated the foxy little lass. She knew exactly how to solve the predicament, forging him a birth certificate and a driver's licence by less than legal means on a slow day at work. Timmy's a bona-fide Australian at heart these days. Ten years on we've started our own farm, Freedom Mangoes. We throw a big party at the end of harvest-time every year. We always have a quiet drink at our own table, now filled with both our families; a toast to old mates, mangoes, the outback, Granddad and his Kingswood.