

2018 Young Writers Award

Winner 18-25

Everyone Will Be There

This is how it had happened: in the food court outside the new burrito place on a lunch break already stretched beyond any legitimacy, I ran into Bren who worked at the customer service desk on level three. He was waiting to order and I was returning my plastic tray to the counter. We talked for a minute or two about work, about the new rostering system and the Boxing Day sales and how they finally caught the kids who racked the expensive cheese knives.

We laughed a bit about the cheese knives.

Then he told me that, by the way, his parents were on a ten day Pacific Island cruise and that, in their absence that weekend, he was having a pool party.

You should come, he said. It'll be fun. Everyone will be there.

The customer service desk on level three had been my second choice after Young Ladies Fashion. I hadn't even numbered the box beside Napery and Small Appliances but that was where they put me. Up on the very top floor with the table linen and silver candlesticks, with the toasters and kettles and the electric toothbrushes. I was hired as a Christmas casual but a lady in HR had already told me I was staying on, that they had heard positive things about me and to keep up the good work.

The supervisor in charge of Napery and Small Appliances was a guy in his forties called Zelco who had, pretty much since I started, been in the throes of an unspecified personal

crisis. He would come in late and leave early and sit for hours at a time in the stockroom on a yellow safety stool, drinking herbal tea out of a mug that said *create your own magic*.

So I don't know who was saying positive things about me. Most customers in my area were just passing through, but if they did stop to look at a set of placemats or a particular small appliance, all I had to do was tell them how much it cost and they would leave.

I was right near the books, which had once been a department of their own but were now tacked, along with the DVDs, to Gifts and Confectionery. I read behind the counter a lot, and I ate gourmet peanut brittle and Godiva chocolate bars when they were nearing their used by dates, and I put a lot of thought into which Kitchenaid mixer would best suit my needs in the future when I was rich and had my own house.

Sometimes I felt guilty but mostly I was just bored out of my mind.

Still, I was glad for the job. Glad for something to punctuate the distended time between Year 12 ending and university starting. I was desperate for the next part of my life to begin, to turn eighteen and to become literally my best, most perfectly curated self.

The girls who worked in Young Ladies Fashion were their best selves. You could tell. I had tried explaining how to my best friend Nina when she was still my best friend, before the bullshit with the formal and the haircut. But she just rolled her eyes.

The way you could tell, though, was by how the girls seemed almost to glide above everyone else. Like they were weightless. Granted they did all wear strappy heels to work, and were so skinny they wouldn't actually weigh very much, but I meant more that they glided in a radiant, self-confident way. And I wanted more than anything to glide like that.

The bus had stopped halfway down a street of single storey blonde brick houses. It was what my parents would call the *real suburbs*. I was early, limited by the weekend bus timetable, and so I walked slowly enough to take it all in. The pride and joy cars in cul-de-sac

driveways that glinted in the sun, freshly washed. The smell of water that had come out of a garden hose, different somehow from any other. The heat shimmering on the bitumen. The neat lawns and the level footpaths and the gently sloping kerbs. The street signs demarcating all this sameness with places, courts and closes, named either for native birds and flowers or else evocative in some way of glossy Californian neighbourhoods.

It was the exact time Bren had said to arrive but that meant it was really about half an hour before I should arrive and before, presumably, everyone else would arrive.

My license was another thing I was desperate for, another missing element in my best, most perfectly curated self. Nina had gotten hers just in time to drive down with our other friends to Schoolies. I still had fifteen hours of practice driving to do or to convincingly forge before I could sit the test.

I turned into a cul-de-sac and checked Bren's message for the street number. His was the first house on the left, a corner block with a big fence. I took some deep breaths and tried despite the fluttering in my stomach to exude a gliding radiance.

I had, because of the fluttering in my stomach, briefly considered not going. I had considered instead staying home to watch that documentary series about the yoga cult, or to sew something, or to finish reading the Elena Ferrante book I was hooked on.

But it felt crucial that I go, because everyone else was.

Plus, Bren was tall, which I liked, and he had nice hair and an easy smile. Our interactions had consisted mostly of me escorting the occasional customer to him for complimentary gift-wrapping, and to him being on the same escalator at the same time as me, but I had stalked him pretty hard online so I felt like I knew him.

I knew he was studying construction management and that he took some time off last year to work as a ski instructor in Canada and that now he was training for a bodybuilding competition. Which were the kinds of things I should want in a boyfriend.

So I went.

And when I got there this is what happened: someone who was not Bren greeted me at the front door. He was tall like Bren and had massive arms. He introduced himself as Hoffa and took from me the warmish Strongbow ciders I had – with considerable difficulty – managed to procure for the occasion. I followed him through the house to a side patio where Bren was sitting with a beer, adjusting the settings on a Bluetooth speaker that was playing tinny dance music. He was wearing neon boardies and a straw hat that I thought was maybe somehow sartorially ironic.

Bren jumped up, said hey and thanks for coming, that he'd been telling Hoffa heaps about me. He gave me a quick hug and stood back to look me up and down.

I knew my denim shorts were good and new and short, and even though it showed the persistent smattering of pimples across my chest, I was fairly sure the crochet crop top was the right choice. Men had looked at me in that specific way when I'd worn it before.

I didn't know the right word for that specific way men – not my own age – looked at me sometimes. *Hungry* came to mind most readily but the connotations seemed too big and made me feel kind of queasy. The queasy I felt in Year 1 the very first time a boy professed to having a crush on me.

I tried to think of it as flattering, because I didn't exactly want them not to look at me like that. And because maybe it was flattering. Just not in a way I was quite ready for.

As I scanned my surrounds I realised no one else was there yet. I apologised for being early.

Bren handed me, in a way that was not a question, a bowl of corn chips and one of the ciders I'd brought. He said it was all good, that they'd just been getting the music going, and how sick was this new Diplo track, hey?

I had never heard it before and was pretty sure I hated it, but nodded my emphatic agreement.

The three of us sat around the patio table for a while, drinking and talking. Though Bren and Hoffa did most of the drinking and most of the talking.

They talked about FIFA – the Xbox game, I picked up from context clues – and about the gym. Bren told me that Hoffa had recently won a national bodybuilding title, the name of which meant very little to me but explained the massive arms. We all talked about the heat and things we'd been watching on Netflix. I asked Bren questions about construction management and found out that Hoffa worked in real estate. Then I explained to them both how the Arts degree I was starting soon had nothing to do, actually, with drawing or painting.

The whole time I kept glancing back at the house, expecting at any moment for someone to walk through the sliding patio door.

They ran ideas past me for the meme page they collaborated on with their mate Jacko, and told me all about how wasted Jacko had been on New Years' Eve.

I wondered if and when Jacko might be arriving, how wasted he might get today.

They asked why I hadn't gone to Schoolies. I considered explaining the complexities of the bullshit with Nina about the formal and the haircut, but in the end I just lied and said I'd gone to Melbourne instead where I had used my cousin's ID to get into clubs. They seemed impressed by the lie.

Hoffa suggested we get in the pool. I had brought a bikini to change into but reasoned I would put it on after everyone else had arrived, to preserve the makeup and the rub-in instant body bronzer I had laboured over at home.

I was starting to suspect that there had been another party someplace, that everyone else had been to and would arrive through the sliding patio door from together.

The pool itself was kidney-shaped and due for a clean. I sat on its pebbled edge in my shorts, drawing circles through the water with my feet while my shoulders slowly burned, and while Bren and Hoffa quoted lines from *Anchorman*, which I had never seen, and boasted about

recent sexual encounters that I doubted – having now listened to them talk so much – the authenticity of.

Only at the end of an hour spent like that on the edge of the pool did I begin to fully grasp the situation I might be in. I wanted to leave but couldn't find the right moment to interject and couldn't in my mind picture myself standing up and walking out.

There seemed to me two possible explanations: the first was that Bren had been stood up by everyone else. Which begged its own subset of questions. Such as, had Hoffa also for the past hour been expecting others to arrive? Or did he know Bren had been stood up and just not want to hurt his feelings further by mentioning it?

The second explanation was that no one else had ever been invited in the first place. Which begged a subset of questions to which I did not want to consider answers.

Bren went inside eventually to reheat some butter chicken, saying as he went something I did not understand about macros.

Hoffa lowered himself into the deep end and asked if I was having fun.

Heaps, I said. But I might head off soon, actually.

Hoffa laughed, said that was a shame because the fun was just getting started. Then he propelled his national title form through the water to my end of the pool and with a splash his massive arms swiftly encircled my ankles in a way that was not exactly playful.

Which was around about the point at which I realised the second explanation was correct.

Hoffa released my ankles. But when he lunged at me again it was to grab the waistband of my shorts, good and new and short. To pull me into the water and then push me against the side until my back grazed the pebbled edge. I smelt beer on his breath, saw Bren at his shoulder spurring him on like it was a game of FIFA or like they were working out together at the gym.

Then as quickly as it had started it was over.

Whatever *it* was.

As Hoffa detached himself from me I became aware that the tinny patio music had at some point stopped.

I became aware also that someone was standing at the pool fence.

That the someone was a lady with a baby on her hip. She looked from Bren to Hoffa and then to me. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she looked at me in that specific way women – not my own age – looked at me sometimes. *Resentful* was the word that came to mind most readily but I did not understand why.

Brendan, she was saying. I've been trying to call you. Mum and dad wanted me to make sure you've watered the garden.

Not a party latecomer then but a responsible older sister.

I recognised on my way out, in a framed family portrait that caught my eye and stuck in my head, both Bren and his responsible older sister. It was the soft-focus kind of family portrait, taken against a marbled backdrop in a shopping centre studio. She held Bren in her lap. The same age as the baby boy she now held outside while she supervised the watering of her parents' garden.

I wandered back through the same series of places, courts and closes to the bus stop, even though I was fairly sure I had by this point missed the last bus. I waited there for a long

while, sunlight fading, heat slackening. And then I sent Nina a message. Told her I wanted to put aside the bullshit with the formal and the haircut.

Asked if she would pick me up from the *real suburbs* in exchange for a funny story.

And maybe that's what it was. Nothing more than a funny story. Funny. Just not in a way I was quite ready for.