

Young Writers Award - 2003 winner

When I was Rising and Falling in the Sea by Chris Somerville

medical centre at palm beach

I was at work, hung-over, when a slight, ashen, blonde girl came in with her mother. The nurse let them go straight through. The only other person in the waiting room was a guy who had cut his foot and was bleeding all over the floor. He flipped through a magazine, he didn't seem all that fazed. I filled out a few Medicare forms, for processing, and then the doctor slowly walked out of his office, carrying the blonde girl in his arms like he was saving her from a fire. The mother followed them quietly as the doctor carried the blonde girl outside. No one said a thing.

'She's going to be okay, she had an overdose,' the doctor said when he came back inside. 'She's going to get her stomach pumped at the hospital. Can you give them a heads up?'

I nodded and picked up the phone.

'Hell of a thing for her mother to see.'

I nodded again as I dialled the number. The nurse made a 'tut' sound. I don't remember her name, but I called her 'nurse' all the time anyway. It was Christmas morning, 1998.

pilot

I woke up one morning to find a guy floating in the deep end of the swimming pool in the apartment complex I was staying in. He looked like a pilot and in the water next to him was a parachute, like a great, yellow jellyfish. The pilot wasn't moving but he had a bright orange life jacket on which seemed to have kept him from drowning.

I ran down to the edge of the pool and dived in but once I got to the guy I didn't know what to do so I wrapped my arms around his body and held him.

'Who's this?' this old guy called Po said once he had walked out to see what was going on.

'I don't know, I think he's a pilot.'

'Should I call an ambulance?' Po said.

I looked at the pilot, he seemed to be asleep, and his head was bleeding a bit, but the situation didn't feel like an emergency, more solemn, like a baptism.

'Maybe you should call an ambulance, yeah,' I said.

The ambulance officers turned up in their white, short-sleeved shirts and black pants and shoes, with a stretcher and a small winch. There were a few people around; I was still in the water, cradling the pilot.

'We'll take it from here,' one of the ambulance officers said and jumped into the pool.

I waded over to the shallow end to watch. The ambulance officer who was in the water unhooked the parachute; it glided for a second before again going static. The ambulance officer who was kneeling on the side of the pool lowered the winch into the water.

'Someone said there was a plane crash last night. A long way away from here,' Po said to me.

'The plane'd have to be pretty high,' I said.

Po nodded. The pilot was winched out, put on the stretcher, rolled away. I listened to the ambulance's siren grow softer and softer. I went back to my apartment and smoked a joint. All the excitement had made me thirsty for oblivion.

heaven sent

My friend Stevie told me about a guy he knows who'd let you do anything to his sister, as long as you were paying.

'It's ten for a touch, twenty if you want to get a hand in her pants and give a fifty and you can do anything.'

'Okay,' I said.

'There's a catch.'

'Yeah?'

'The sister's in a coma.'

'Oh.'

Stevie nodded his head solemnly.

'And the guy has a taser if you get out of line.'

I thought that you'd have to do something way out of line for you to be electrocuted while fingering a coma patient.

'He's in the room with you?' I said eventually.

'Another catch.'

I told Stevie that I wasn't interested in that sort of thing, but he looked like he didn't believe me. I figured that if we went out, got drunk or high and met a couple of girls he'd forget about it.

But I was wrong and we went to the guy's house, the brother's place, which was a dingy little place on the highway that looked like the perfect setting for a crime scene. There was a sofa in the living room and I could see the corner of a hospital bed through an open doorway. All the windows were blocked by curtains.

'Maybe we should go,' I said to Stevie.

'Nah.'

We went into the bedroom where there was a guy sitting next to the hospital bed, reading a paperback. Stevie nodded to the brother but the guy didn't respond, he probably thought we were lower than he was. There were a lot of machines about, I also noticed the taser on the bedside table. The sister was pretty enough, lying on her back and not moving, but she also looked worn out and tired, as if she longed to free herself from all of this. Her helplessness was child-like. Whatever was going to play out I would have no part in it.

'Well?' the brother said.

'Um...ten,' Stevie said.

The brother raised an eyebrow at me. I faltered, said, 'ten.'

'Could you give us a minute?' Stevie asked the brother.

'I don't know, I-'

'You can trust us,' Stevie interrupted.

The guy nodded, he was weaker than we were, he left the room.

'This is wrong,' I said.

'I know, it turns me on.'

'I'm serious.'

'Okay.'

'I'm leaving,' I say. 'I'll wait in the living room.'

As I moved out the door Stevie wet his lips with two strokes of his tongue. I glanced back and faltered, they were both too close to death.

I waited in the living room while Stevie did whatever it was that he wanted to do. The brother sat on the sofa next to me, smoking a cigarette, shooting up. After the needle was out he sank backwards into the sofa.

'I started with her morphine,' the brother said, nodded at the bedroom. 'Before she went comatose. She didn't use it, the doctors gave it to us just in case. No one knows what she has.'

'I see.'

'I need the money.'

'Especially round here.'

The brother wiped his nose on his sleeve.

'Your friend's been a while.'

The brother got up and walked into the bedroom, I followed him carefully. The brother gave a shout when he entered the room. I couldn't see what was happening but I did notice that Stevie had his pants down around his ankles.

'Stevie you idiot,' I said.

The brother grabbed the taser, without thinking I guess, and thrust it into Stevie's leg. Stevie went haywire and he still must have been making contact with the sister. The machines went spastic. The girl sat up, made a 'hoof' sound, then fell back into the bed. Stevie buttoned up his pants and turned to me.

'It's time for us to go,' he said.

high points

My friend Bryce Bowen and I were trying to break in to this guy's house. This was when we were nineteen and we didn't really have anything to do. I think the guy we were ripping off was called Mitch. We were trying to steal back a stereo that had been stolen from Bryce's sublet room in Broadbeach. Somehow Bryce had got a name and that was enough.

I jemmed open a window of Mitch's apartment with a screwdriver and we both slipped into the place.

'Turn on a light,' I said.

'No,' Bryce said. 'We need the darkness.'

I started to poke around, although I didn't really know what to do.

'We should have brought a torch,' I said.

'Shut up. Did you hear that?'

Then we were covered in light, and Mitch, if he that really was his name, had caught us. We all looked surprised, then Mitch grabbed Bryce in a headlock.

'Bryce you fuck,' I shouted.

Mitch was huge and fat and kept saying, 'What you do-in, what you do-in,' over and over again, like a chant.

'Fire, man,' Bryce managed to say.

I had a gun tucked into the belt of my jeans, Bryce had given it to me. I tried to level it and I pulled the trigger. The noise was louder than I expected. Dogs started to bark. I had fired while the guy had had his back to me but somehow the bullet had managed to implant itself in Bryce's arm. They stopped fighting. Bryce looked like he was going to be sick and he started to moan.

'Maybe you should take him to the hospital,' Mitch said.

While Bryce was being treated I stayed in the car. He told me to leave, that he'd go in alone; obviously a bullet wound was going to draw a few questions. So I drove off and left Bryce to his own devices.

suicide

I went driving with my friend Susie one night, up and down the highway. She told me about this old boyfriend of hers who had obsessed over her after they broke up. The boyfriend even went as far as covering himself in petrol with the intent of killing himself.

He left a suicide message on my friend's answering machine. The problem was that the boyfriend covered himself in petrol inside his sublet apartment, with all the windows closed, and he passed out from the fumes before he could strike a match. Eventually a neighbour smelt the petrol and broke down the door.

'What's he doing now?' I asked.

'I'm not sure. I think he works at Snow World.'

gaol

The day Alex Frost got out of gaol we were sitting in a bar, my friend Bryce Bowen and me, listening to a jazz band. This was before I shot Bryce in the arm, because after that he too did some time. We started talking about Alex Frost and Bryce remembered that he was getting out of gaol today. He said that this was a reason to celebrate. We left. The girl I had come with was still dancing in some dark corner of the bar with a guy whose name I didn't know but I did know he had a moustache and rode a motorcycle.

'Where's that girl?' Bryce asked when we were outside.

'She's not coming,' I said.

Once we were outside I dug my hands into my pockets and pulled my scarf a little tighter around my neck. We went and bought some wine from a bottle shop but when we walked back to where we had been we couldn't find Bryce's car.

'I think we parked on grass, like a paddock,' I said.

'Why am I not recalling a paddock?' Bryce said.

We walked around a while longer.

'Maybe we should just walk to Alex's,' I said.

'But I need my car.'

'We'll find it in the morning, in the light.'

'I guess.'

We headed off, but we had opposing ideas of just where Alex Frost lived. And by then, after walking around and drinking the wine that we had bought, we decided to abandon the idea. Neither of us had anywhere else we wanted to go.

'It's just one of those nights,' Bryce said.

too much

I had been living in this apartment complex for a while, where there were pink stucco walls, big white lettering and cheap rooms. I had a bed, a stereo, a sofa, not much else. A lot of it had been sold for various reasons. I was meeting a girl called Sara who I had known in high school and she had just got back from Europe. I didn't want to face her with all my senses working, so I searched my place for something that would help. I was feeling too much. The best I could do were sleeping pills, I took three, washed them down with water.

Sara was talking to me. The sun reflecting off her hair helped me talk.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'Me? Oh I'm super-duper.'

We were in the park near my place, I was cross legged on the grass. The sleeping pills made me drowsy for a second then made me wired, wide awake. I could fight it, but now and then I gave in. It felt like I was rising and falling in the sea.

'Good, anyway I had a bit of trouble flying over. We had to transfer three times.'

'I hate to fly,' I said.

'Really?'

I nodded. I had trouble focusing on her face. I promised myself that if I made it through this that something would change. It was the same old story though.

'Ooh, do you have the time?' Sara asked.

'For what?'

'No, what is the time. I have to go to work.'

I told her that I didn't know, that I was sorry.

'I've had a good time today,' she said.

I didn't have the nerve to ask her why.