MOMENTS OF A LIMITED KIND

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The question came to Adrian as he finished towel-drying the piccolo face of his first born son.

The bath time routine was a significant event for Adrian—smoothing water over his son’s plump little body helped him slough the muck of his working day. He’d been teaching English at an all-boys high school in Western Sydney for seven years and already he felt the onset of career burnout. Quite often these days he got through lessons by entertaining himself with esoteric theorems; for instance, in one lesson he arrived at quantitative proof that fuck was the only word worthy of incorporating into one’s vocabulary due to its remarkable flexibility and frequency of use. He tried to get the students to do some creative writing but Adrian had no idea what he was doing and anyway the boys said that writing was for poofters. He tried to get them to write about social media; he even tried to get them to text message lines of prose to each other to compose a class short story but that only devolved as a fresh picture of someone’s genitals did the rounds.

Today, he’d been attempting to teach Patrick White’s Voss to Grade 11 but the idea of Laura Trevelyan and Johann Ulrich Voss engaging in psychic copulation across the nation was too much to bear for the students. So while the boys thumped their desks and began intimating telepathic sex across the classroom (failing to see the prevailing contradictions) Adrian felt an affinity with White when he wrote that, in this ‘disturbing country’ you ‘will be burnt up most likely, you will have the flesh torn from your bones, you will be tortured probably in many horrible and primitive ways…’

At lunchtime he had the privilege of playground duty on the oval—which was really a rectangle but who cares about using language accurately—where the boys exacted physical distress upon each other in a game of tackle football. Adrian was supposed to stop this kind of activity but he always let it ride because he gained a certain pleasure from the culturally acceptable form of brutalisation. Plus, they always thanked him for his leniency: which was the only leniency they afforded him.

On the way home from work today he drove the M4 thinking about Voss and the child Mercy and he couldn’t wait to see his young son’s expression through the window as the key audibly slid into the front door lock. To Adrian, the boy was his one true mercy.

And the boy hadn’t yet let him down.
bodily bracing himself for the unanticipated evening. These dinners were gruelling events. His mother’s desire to spend time with her son’s family was genuine but Bruno only arrived with coercion. His mother said things like ‘Your father’s made up his mind’ and ‘Your father’s decided to come along anyway’—phrases that made it sound like Bruno had better things to do and Adrian should feel grateful or guilty or both. But when they turned up on the doorstep Bruno always trailed behind with his soft Esky full of cans and the demure expression of a dog.

Bruno had never said anything about Adrian marrying a Vietnamese woman; a slight shake of the head at the wedding was all it took to establish his sentiment. Adrian didn’t know why he’d even looked at his father at that precise moment of the ceremony but it occurred to him that perhaps, in some masochistic corner of his heart, he desired his father’s approval. How predictable. How sad. Especially considering when he first introduced Nguyet to Bruno he’d laughed about her being flat-chested and speculated on the possibility of her being ‘One of them Asian girly boys’ He couldn’t pronounce her name so instead he persisted in calling her ‘Lim’—in her company—or ‘Lim the Shim’—without her company.

The arrival of Tam didn’t change much. The boy’s androgynous name had been a source of confusion for Bruno—Tam meant “heart” but the translation altered nothing for Bruno who, when the name was announced, gave nothing more than a derisive ‘Rightio.’

Now, wrapping Tam in the towel so that he looked like a little monk, Adrian kissed a line between the boy’s forehead and nose and felt the familiar swell in his chest. Nguyet always said that he would eat the boy if he could and while he laughed with conformity it wasn’t really like that. He did hunger for the affection, for the contact of his lips on the boy’s bright skin, but it was more about proximity—that the small space between them was an intimacy wholly theirs. Unbreached. Still, Adrian sometimes imagined putting the boy’s entire body in his mouth, if only to protect him from everything and everyone else out there.

Adrian had no memory of his father ever giving him physical affection. Bruno made it clear that to kiss another male—to place male lips to male skin—was the epitome of disgust. He thought it possible that his father may have kissed him as a small child, and for a moment he mused over the idea of asking his father if he did. He even contemplated asking during dinner that evening, perhaps while his father was reaching for another lump of the inevitable potato bake, but he knew how that question would transmute to the old boys down at the bowls club. Because, after all, jokes were the only way to feel at ease with social discomfort.

Adrian also knew that these moments were of a limited kind. The boy was growing quickly and would one day reach an age where to kiss his father would become wrong. When that would come about exactly, Adrian had no idea. And this was the question which came to Adrian.

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The answer came to Bruno as he finished towel-drying his face after a firm shave. It was a good shave. One of those shaves which made Bruno feel a new man. And that was precisely what he needed at that very moment—especially after what had happened.

Bruno was a car mechanic. He worked at a small workshop where the space was limited and proximity sometimes a bit too close for comfort. This is how it happened.

Joel was a youngish guy doing his apprenticeship. He was blond, had clear skin and a slightly feminine profile. Earlier that day, Bruno was showing Joel how to work on the transmission of a Mitsubishi Triton. Joel had had his hands in the engine bay and he’d washed them using the heavy-duty soap “With a touch of lavender.” Bruno liked this soap. Since the receptionist had bought it, it reminded him of something he couldn’t quite place—a delicacy he found almost sensual. Perhaps the scent of a woman he banged as a young bloke. Or that’s what he liked to think. So when Bruno had his hands deep in the machinery and turned to tell Joel a thing or two, and instead found Joel’s hand unexpectedly there beside his face, close enough to touch, smelling of that lavender-edged soap, it surprised Joel as much as it did Bruno when Bruno leant in to kiss the back of that clear-skinned hand.
Bruno pulled away from the engine, stood and looked at Joel, expecting...he didn’t know what to expect but in any case Joel smiled that fresh and exquisite smile the boy knew he owned and said nothing. Bruno went to the bathroom and spat in the sink. He saw the man in the shitty mirror and watched him as he washed with that lavender-scented soap which no longer smelled of a long lost lover but instead of something unfathomable.

Bruno left work straight away. And the receptionist was directed to purchase ‘None of that girly crap soap any more.’

On his way home Bruno pulled into a service station and bought a packet of cigarettes. He hadn’t smoked in two years; ever since the doc told him that if he didn’t quit he wouldn’t see his grandson on his first day of school. While his own son was a reason to take up smoking, he thought Adrian’s son might be a good reason to give it up.

He stopped at a local park and chain-smoked a half dozen cigarettes before he thought a man might have looked at him a bit strangely so he took off before things got out of hand. When Bruno arrived home his wife looked at the clock—a theatrical gesture as she knew exactly what time it was because she’d been watching the potato bake she promised to bring to Adrian’s place that night, because potato bake was his favourite, and Nguyet sure didn’t know how to make a decent potato bake, being Asian and all. When she asked Bruno why he was home early he said he ‘Felt a bit crook’ and went to have a lie down. When she asked Bruno if he’d be right to go to Adrian’s for dinner he said ‘Sure, sure. Wouldn’t wanna miss the show when the circus is in town.’ And tried on a laugh.

Head on the pillow, Bruno knew this wasn’t a gay thing. It wasn’t like the time when, as a young bloke, he let his mate sleep at his place because he’d been kicked out of home and at some point during the night the mate left the couch and found Bruno’s bed. At which point Bruno punched him in the nose and made him homeless for the second time in a day. No, he was certain it wasn’t a gay thing. But just because he knew what it wasn’t didn’t mean he knew what it was.

Bruno listened to Glenda in the kitchen. He knew her movements well after all these years, could picture her easily enough as she bustled between fridge and counter and sink and bin. The tedium of her sighs. The grunts of small effort. The click of knees and lick of fingers. This was the centre of his knowledge of intimacy these days, and while he did occasionally look at the receptionist or the girl behind the counter at the bottle shop and imagine the shapes their bodies could make, he had given in to his choices a long time ago.

He tried not to think of Joel. He was a good kid who worked hard and maybe it was surprising to see how little he knew about engines, but Bruno was an apprentice once and he still had a vague memory of how the hormonal brain of a late teen readily fails at common sense. Is that why the kid had smiled? Maybe he thought it was a joke, a prank—they pulled pranks in the workshop all the time; like when he’d filled Joel’s Coke bottle with sump oil. And if he did think it was another prank then what did that say about Bruno leaving straight after?

Again, Bruno tried not to think about it.

He especially tried not to think about it in the shower. But he couldn’t help it. It was the soap—its residue. The residue of guilt? No. He lifted his fingers to his nose then put them to his lips and felt the maleness of his own skin and somehow, in some way, he began to feel better. Reprieved. For some reason he was okay about it all. Perhaps because in that moment he began to understand the limitations of who he had always been.

And while Bruno shaved, as each stroke cut the stubble from his chin, he looked at the human in the mirror and there he found his answer.
The evening began as expected. Glenda's lip-kissing in the hallway and Bruno's nod. The potato bake was plonked on the counter beside the cha gio and goi ga and after Glenda said 'Here's my favourite boy' and wiped at Tam's hair the women began their busy-ness.

Bruno went straight out the back. He had the taste for cigarettes but knew if he lit up they wouldn't let up. He opened a can.

Adrian went outside and put Tam in the clam shell filled with coloured plastic balls. He crouched behind him, his fingers dangling between his jean'd knees, ready to catch the boy if he fell. He knew Bruno was watching on—caught him in his peripheral vision. An unexpected stare. As though he was admiring or critiquing Adrian's fathering. Adrian couldn't tell which but Adrian didn't really care—his beer hummed in him, as did the last throw of Daylight Saving.

'Ford's still going,' Bruno said.

They both knew it should have been a question—Bruno had been on about this for over a year. Adrian purchased the Laser way back as a second year student, tired of the bus–train–bus hike out to Kingswood. Bruno knew a bloke selling a decent station wagon for a good price but there was no denying Adrian's attachment to the old yellow thing—a remnant of his less responsible days. They both knew this, too. As father and son they did share unspoken knowledge. Despite everything.

'Old habits...' Adrian said, and twiddled Tam's ear lobe.

He didn't look at Bruno, who drained his can and, for a paranoid moment, wondered if there was some chance Adrian knew about the cigarettes. Or other things. Only for a moment, though.

Tam played in the clam shell. He was picking up the plastic balls and throwing them onto the grass. Adrian returned the balls and Tam laughed, then threw another and another. Adrian feigned a growl and grabbed the boy around his waist and lifted him into the air, upside-down. The boy giggled at his world suddenly topsy-turvy. His pants slid a little. As did Adrian's grip.

'Watch him,' came Bruno.

'I got ya,' Adrian said. He righted the boy and held him to his chest. 'I got ya.'

A highchair was brought out as well as the food. They sat and plated up.

There was small talk situated around the usual topics: Tam's milestone accomplishments, Adrian's curriculum, Glenda's recipes. Nguyet was satellite to conversation and Bruno thought it was a language thing but really she heard and understood every word of it. She was just busy spooning food into Tam's mouth—a delicate operation akin to docking a space shuttle and quite often involving space shuttle allusions and noises. The fact that Tam was too young to know what a space shuttle is was beside the point—it was all about stimulation as distraction while the food was piled in.

Nguyet was unknowingly mimicking the mouth shape she wanted the boy to have, and Bruno looked at her like she was some alien thing. Then he said, 'There was a receptionist girl at work named Tammy. She was a strange bird, always ate with her fork and knife in the wrong hands.'
great gob-full.

‘Like father like son,’ Glenda said.

Then Tam began to choke. Potato wedged in his throat so that the only sound to come through was nameless and grave. Nguyet dropped the spoon and Adrian said ‘Somebody do something’ and when the boy was found in Bruno’s hands Glenda said ‘For goodness sakes.’

Bruno did well. He manoeuvred the boy expertly and the lump fell, cleanly, onto the table. And it was over. Just like that.

So was dinner. The potato lump was quickly removed, as were the dishes of leftovers. And later, while the women were back inside with the plates, Adrian sat on the step and watched his father wandering at the edge of the floodlight. But Bruno didn’t realise. Bruno was both here and elsewhere, now and at another time, his face bent to the cheek of a small boy who loved him all the same.