

## DETENTION

Hamish Baguley

“Nah bro she was like 90. Still sad obviously but not tragic. And the funeral was so AIDS, all these fucking hymns. I wanted to kill myself.”

Mr P's office gave an excellent view of the daily stampede for the buses, though on Fridays it wasn't as bad since more elected to walk into town. They'd be at Macca's soon: Bro where's Trev? Who cares... “She would've hated it,” he continued, determined to have a better conversation than they were. “Would've had oldies music — bad music but like, alive. No dress code either.”

Jack, who had all four grandparents intact, had stopped listening. He was breathing, counting, trying to purge his nervousness, but it had already reached his hands. Trev looked fine of course. He took life by the hand, danced with life, kissed life, fucked life in the dark. If Jack had a shred of that...

The door banged before he finished the thought. In stomped Mr P, taking his seat below the old portrait of an old boy killed in action. “I'm disappointed, boys,” he said at length, “very disappointed.”

“In fairness sir you shouldn't be. Feel like we've had this talk a couple times.”

Such impertinence would trick a weaker spirit. He straightened his back as if to rally behind him the thirty years he had given the school. “Take your bloody headphones out. Do you think abuse of school property is funny. I bet it was the funniest thing in the world as you were doing it. Now you'll act all penitent. Sorry sir, won't happen again sir. Where's the change. What makes the Trevor of today so much wiser than yesterday.”

“I'm in mourning sir.” (What a punchable smile.) “Family bereavement.”

“I lost my father just last month,” said Mr P, “and I didn't feel compelled to graffiti up the bathrooms.”

“Oh.”

“You need to take responsibility for your actions.” But now he was thinking of Dad. They'd barely recognised each other on the last visit; it was probably for the better he'd faded into memory. Time was hideous, a wet eel curling up the spine. “I've arranged a conference with you and your parents tomorrow.”

“Can't,” said Trev proudly. “Playing the doolies.”

“Not anymore you're not.”

“Sir!”

“I talked with your coach. You should feel lucky you haven't been expelled. As for you,” he addressed the other one — Jasper? Jacob? — “you've been quiet. I've seen many a smart kid think they're too good for school and go down the drain. Just try to make your choices more wisely in future.”

“Yes sir.”

After Mr P wrung an apology out of them he led them to the scene of the crime, where a bucket of warm water, a bottle of methylated spirits, and rags already waited on the floor like torture instruments. He was wrong: the cave drawings, sharpened by the winter sun, were objectively funny. Jack had to bite his lip. But then Jack laughed at anything, even the little ironic things people said that lost their effect when laughed at, like Mr P saying now, “I need a coffee; you boys want anything.”

“I'll have hot chocolate sir.”

“Sure thing.” With a last glance at the desecration he left them alone. What a sorry shadow the school was of its past!

“Fuck it's cold,” said Trev, utterly enervated. He almost hadn't come to school today; he had thought, watching the clock from his bed, I could stay here forever and no one would care. Mr P cared, apparently.

But Jack wasn't having it. “Look alive bro. The sooner we get done the better.”

“Alright sir.” They started from opposite walls; the smell of alcohol overwhelmed the shit. It

was very awkward, like they were trapped in an elevator together, united only in their punishment, as any men, friends, strangers, sworn enemies, revert to stoic soldiers to surmount a task.

“So bullshit,” muttered Trev, “so fucking bullshit. Five years hundies on cricket for this. Probably replace me with that gay cunt Thomas Cartwright.”

“Tom’s a good cunt,” Jack protested, still embarrassed that Mr P had called him smart. Just that Monday he’d been called up at Assembly for a maths award, a stupid little medal, with the applause a bit too long, a bit too loud to be genuine. He’d wanted to shout at everyone: This isn’t who I am! I hate this! The graffitiing was the most exhilarating moment of his life (even if he mostly watched Trev do it), the only time he’d gone off-script. Now he’d been exposed as a fraud.

“Nah he’s a gay cunt.”

“Nah he’s a good cunt. Always gives you a chip if you want it.”

“But the way he does it is really annoying. He’s like, chip? Chip? Just shoves it in your face.”

He was left hanging on the cliff. Trev’s friends — he missed them with a weird jolt — would have agreed even if they thought otherwise. No wonder no one liked Jack. No, enough people liked him, he just didn’t have any friends. Spent his lunchtimes circling the school like a ghost. When you invited him to something he shrugged and said another time. No point to guys like that. (Jack, for his part, was hit with the high-pitched feeling of having done something wrong but not at all knowing what.)

They worked till their knuckles cramped but couldn’t entirely scrub out the boldly minimalist phalli erected upon the walls like a tribute to Priapus (or Freud); it only smeared, crying in the face of the cruel ephemerality of the world; beyond them now.

“Oh fuck off,” said Trev. “Good enough.” Life was so much easier when you realised it was optional. All the homework, the truancies from last year? Vanished. He raised the bottle in triumph, admiring the sunset struck in the purple harbour. “Dare me to chug it,” he gloated.

“Bro. Shut up.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll do it.”

“You’d just throw up.”

“Least something would happen. Nothing ever happens.”

Jack ignored him. He could drink the whole thing if he wanted. Some people, Jack often theorised, feed on attention. You could tell from how their eyes shifted round whenever they said anything. So Trev, deprived of his 1st XI status, writhed and moaned like a wounded dog. He looked up just in time to see him tilt it to his lips.

“Fuck’s sake,” he said, trying to pull it from his hands. But Trev was strong, stronger than him. They were soon engaged in something between the regular playfights particular to boys and a deep struggle for power. The bottle fell, mixing with an adjoining puddle of piss, and still they gripped, twisted, grunted.

“You don’t get it,” said Trev. “You’re not me.”

“You’re not me either. You don’t care about anything.”

“Care about you.”

“No you don’t.” Jack released him, stared in terror. “What do you mean bro.”

But he never knew; Mr P had returned. He cast a dangerous eye over the place, far messier than before.

“The meth doesn’t really work,” Jack explained. “I think it’ll have to be painted over.”

Mr P smiled, and the boys wondered if it was his plan all along to humiliate them. But just as soon the smile dropped. “Then you’ll be here early tomorrow. And fix the uniform,” he barked, snapping his fingers at Trev’s loose and rather dirty shirt. “You should be proud of it.”