

## **University of Canberra**

### **Anthony Eaton**

### **Birthday wish**

Biographical note:

Dr Anthony Eaton has been writing professionally for children, young adults, and adults since the late 1990s. He is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Canberra where he is researching the changing nature of young adult fiction in Australia, and the lived experience of creative practitioners at the nexus of creative and academic work. He is currently president of the Australasian Children's Literature Association for Research, and co-editor of the journal, *Write4Children*.

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‘The problem, Mr. Andrews, is not your ability to meet the required funding for your son. Under normal circumstances a direct temporal debit from your estate would offset that financial burden until such time as your offspring can either repay the resource allocation, or until the averaged expectancy for both of you reaches zero. The problem lies in your son’s diminished future potential.’

Fabian Andrews stared at the man sitting on the other side of the desk, his face a mask of trepidation.

‘So you’re telling me that even though lifespan averaging is legal ...’

‘Only in cases where both parties have the requisite level of future potential,’ the man interrupted. ‘And unfortunately, in this case, the department cannot justify the reduction in your own temporal allocation – given your efficiency and contribution output – in favour of your son, who, let us be honest, would appear to have done little for overall national progress.’

‘But you don’t understand – Alex is, has always been ... different. His, I mean, what he does is incredible ... beautiful ...’

Andrews trailed off, struggling to find the words.

‘Mr. Andrews, as you are well aware, the department of national administration has a responsibility to ensure the ongoing maintenance of the GDP, as well as the continuing reduction of our national debt. Under the provisions put into place by the U.S. Department of State in the Amendments to the Constitution of Australia Act of 2075, our only obligation is the management of the Australian economy to that end. It is a long established principle of law that this task must include management of the entire social context which supports that economy, and both you and your son are elements of that economy.’

‘So, you’re telling me there’s absolutely no way that we can ...’

‘That’s exactly it. Lifespan averaging does not apply in this case. The only way you could extend your son’s temporal allocation would be through the purchase, in advance, of a further period. As we have already established, however, your son’s productivity is nil and, given his age, his consumption levels are only going to increase in the next few years so the purchase of an extended temporal allocation will be prohibitively expensive, especially for someone like you, already on subsistence income.’

‘But ...’

‘I really don’t have the time to explain this any further, Mr. Andrews. The nation has supported him for the requisite twelve years and cannot afford to do so any longer. Your son’s temporal allowance expires in one week and your request for lifespan averaging is denied.’

The auditor punched a couple of keys on his machine.

‘Good day, Sir.’

Fabian Andrews stepped numbly out through the front doors of the Department of National Administration. This appeal had been their last hope; even a couple of years

would have given them enough time to try and increase Alex's future potential, to find him a skilled position in a factory, or try for some sponsorship – perhaps from one of the few remaining cultural philanthropists, for another temporal allocation for the boy.

Now, though, there was no hope at all, and the fact reflected in the dull greyness of Fabian Andrew's eyes and in the drop of his shoulders as he shrugged his coat tightly around himself.

An icy wind blew up Collins Street as he picked his way along the pavement, jostled and shoved in the perennial throng that swarmed the streets of the capital, and Andrews allowed himself to sink further into his misery. Only once did he stop and look back at the stone edifice of the Department. Against the dark Melbourne sky, the building loomed, ancient and cold. Impervious.

'Hey, Buddy! Move it!'

A sharp shoulder jostled him aside and he almost fell into the path of the traffic.

'Sorry ... I ...'

But his assailant had gone. Hurrying off to be productive.

Andrews lowered his head and allowed the bustle of the crowd to sweep him along towards his stop. As usual, the tram was crowded – the stench of packed humanity tickled at his nostrils as it rattled him away from the city. Clattering over the bridge, Andrews ducked his head slightly, catching a quick glimpse of the Reclamation Centre through the grimy windows. It stood out from all the other buildings; clean, freshly painted, its front door brightly lit, welcoming and throwing long paths of light out across the forecourt and pavement. From his vantage point Andrews couldn't make out the enormous neon-lit spire, the visible symbol of productivity, but he knew it was up there, standing proudly atop the centre and shining its message to the city across the river – Produce! Recycle! Help your nation GROW!

The Reclamation Centre vanished into the gloom as quickly as it had appeared. He could remember when they used to perform operas there.

It was raining solidly when he climbed down from the tram, and Andrews trudged the last couple of kilometres home as slowly as he dared. In his mind, he turned over the problem of how he was going to tell Alex the news,

*I'm sorry, son, but we've still got time to find you a sponsor ... no. False hope.*

*It's probably all for the best ... A lie.*

*It won't be like you imagine ... and how could he know that?*

Finally, he arrived at his tiny, one-bedroom unit. Alex was already home; a sonata – Mozart, he thought – trickled from the house into the street, slightly out of tune, but that was the piano. With a sigh, Andrews trudged up the front steps and into the house.

'Dad!'

At eleven, almost twelve years of age, Alex was just shaking off his childhood in favour of more gawky adolescence. As soon as the front door opened, he stopped playing and swivelled to face his father.

‘How did it go?’

‘It ...’

Fabian Andrews said no more. He didn’t need to. His face spoke for him. For the briefest of seconds, a flicker of disappointment, of fear, flashed in his son’s eyes, but it was quickly masked again.

‘It’s okay, Dad.’

Now Alex stood from the old piano and crossed to his father, awkwardly reaching for him.

‘We knew there wasn’t much chance, anyway.’

Andrews looked at his son for a moment, before grabbing him, holding him. Trying to imprint the feeling into every last synapse of his memory.

‘Play,’ he said. ‘We’ve only got a week left. I want to hear you play.’

Alex offered his father a sad grin as he returned to the keyboard.

So Alex played. For the next six nights. He was playing when Fabian arrived home, and continued well into the evening. Concertos, operas, entire symphonies. Alex filled their tiny space with the long dead works of long dead composers. Until the final night, when he stopped, suddenly.

‘What was that?’ Fabian Andrews asked into the sudden silence.

‘Schubert.’

‘Are you going to finish it?’

‘No.’ Alex shook his head. ‘No. I’m finished, now.’

He stood, closed the lid, and walked across to the little kitchenette, where his father was sitting.

‘Will you come with me in the morning?’

For a long time, Fabian Andrews held his son’s gaze.

‘I can’t. I asked my supervisor, but it took all of my annual leave to go into the department last Wednesday.’

‘Oh.’

‘I could come anyway, bugger the consequ ...’

‘No.’ Alex Andrews shook his head. ‘No, Dad. You can’t afford a productivity drop. They’ll take it out of your temporal allowance.’

‘I don’t care.’

‘I do.’

They sat a couple of moments longer, and the single light bulb that lit their house flickered a couple of times.

‘It’s almost shutdown.’

‘I know,’ Fabian replied. ‘Are you going to sleep?’

‘No. Not tonight. I think I might go for a walk. You go to bed, though, and I’ll be in later ...’

Standing slowly, Andrews hugged his son, just once, quickly, and then made his way through the thin curtain that separated the bedroom from the living area. A couple of moments later, the front door opened and closed.

The sun was just kissing the horizon when Alex Andrews arrived at the doors of the Reclamation Centre. All night he’d wandered, aimlessly, but inevitably, it seemed, towards this place. In the grainy dawn, he stood outside, in the forecourt, gazing up at the spire as it broke the heavens – a finger of light reaching up into the beyond.

Alex closed his eyes. He was too young to remember this place as anything other than a reclamation centre, but his father had told him stories and, just for a second, he almost thought he could hear music, floating ethereally out from the brightly lit double doors. Then the music faded and, for a few moments, he thought about running – turning away from the light and fleeing, anonymous, into the back lanes and alleys of the city.

But, of course, he couldn’t. They’d find him, easily. There wasn’t anywhere to hide.

So instead he walked a little way around the building, following the curve of the wall towards the river until he reached a spot where a patch of shadow fell across the smooth concrete. There was a camera cluster just a few metres away, its panopticon cluster of low-light lenses already locked upon him. For a moment, Alex stared directly into it and then, reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a black, almost-exhausted marker pen. It only took him a few seconds: A filled circle, a line, two gently cursive tails. He turned away, leaving a single semiquaver sketched on the otherwise unblemished Reclamation Centre wall.

Then Alex Andrews threw the marker away, quickly retraced his steps, and walked through the front doors into the bright-lit marble foyer.

‘Yes, can I help you?’ A woman in a starched, white uniform looked up from behind the reception counter.

‘Alex Andrews.’

She punched his name into her terminal.

‘You’re early. Most of your lot don’t come in until just before midnight. Like to leave it as long as possible.’

Alex just shrugged.

‘May I please have your identification card and your public passes?’

The woman held out a large hand, and Alex handed over the cards, which went directly into a shredder by the desk.

‘Right. All done.’

The woman punched a couple of final commands, and then read her screen for a second.

‘You’re in room One – just through that door, along the corridor, then the third door on your left. Once you’re settled, press the red button. The rest is automatic.’

‘Thank you.’

Alex stepped towards the door she had indicated, then stopped.

‘Can I ask a question?’

The woman had returned to studying her terminal, and didn’t even look up at him.

‘You want to know what happens.’

‘Yes.’

‘Fertilizer, mainly. Phosphates and so-on. For the farming effort.’

‘Thanks.’

He walked along a corridor until he found the door marked ‘One’. Beyond was a small room, not much larger than a cupboard, and a steel chair. He closed the door firmly behind him, settled into the chair and, humming an aria from Puccini, pressed the red button.

Then Alex closed his eyes and settled back in his chair, to enjoy the rest of the concert. Across town, Fabian Andrews woke, alone in his bed for the first time in twelve years.

‘Happy birthday, son,’ he whispered to the struggling dawn, as he pulled on his tattered old work overalls.

## Research statement

### *Research background*

Dudek locates the role of the child protagonist in critical dystopia as central to the masked utopian reading that the text invites: ‘an impulse whose imperative it is to see difference and to resist uniformity, into a dystopian space’ (2005: 65). Ming Tan argues that the role of the child resistor protagonist in dystopic spaces is a vehicle for contemporary adult concerns: ‘this phantom – the child who never existed ... is often indicative of fears for the future. Child sacrifice is a common trope in our society ... beneath it lurks questions of desire, identity, and humanity’ (2013: 55).

### *Research contribution*

This dystopic short story explores the degree to which the embodied role of the child protagonist in contemporary young adult dystopia might function simultaneously as vehicle for both hope through resistance and existential and political despair. The story is informed by research into the cultural significance of the popularity and impact of dystopic narratives in the children’s and young adult marketplaces.

### *Research significance*

*Birthday wish* contributes to current discourses around the construction and role of the embodied young adult protagonist, and to examinations of the function of dystopias and critical dystopias by scholars such as Dudek, Bradford, Mallan, Stephens and McCallum. It also acts as an extension of the author’s previous creative exploration of the function of dystopia as social commentary within a contemporary Australian political context.

## Works cited

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