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TEXT prose

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Thalatta

I walked past the old wrought iron gate to the heavy wooden door of the Paddington terrace. There were thick metal bars across the ground floor window. Through the bars I saw movement inside and the warm glow cast by the lamps. I heard laughter and music. There was the sound of chair legs groaning and screeching as they were pushed back hard on wooden floorboards.

I used the central knuckle of my middle finger to rap on the flaking black paint of the door, ignoring the big brass knocker. The sound wasn't very loud. I walked to the window and put my eye to the crack between the curtains.

A large group of people I didn't recognise were standing around the coffee table. I heard a familiar voice shout, 'James'.

A palm was pressed against the inside of the glass. I placed my palm against the window. I returned to the door. When it opened Michael threw his arms wide and shouted, 'James! My very good fine gentleman friend James.'

We embraced.

Mike said, 'How is my very good friend James?'

I said, 'You know, I'm very, very well.'

Mike kept an arm draped across my shoulders and steered me to a room at the base of the stairs which contained a fire place and the long wooden dining table. Most of the places at the table were occupied.

In the adjoining room, which contained the window that looked onto the street, were many well-dressed people standing and socializing vociferously. I sat down at the last unoccupied place at the table. On the table were cheeses, salamis, olives, and soft drinks.

‘Happy New Year’s,’ I said to everyone who was seated.

‘James,’ Matt said.

‘Hello mate,’ Min said.

‘James,’ Anh said. ‘Can I get you a cider?’

She reached into the white plastic bag by her feet and fetched a bottle of cider away from the cardboard that was keeping the other bottles together. She offered the bottle to me. She smiled and then I smiled too. I took the bottle. I unscrewed the top. I put the cap on the table and took a drink.

‘Hello Hayley,’ I said to the woman sitting next to Min. ‘And Liz too. Is that everyone?’

‘Victoria is upstairs,’ Min said.

‘And Jim will be coming back later,’ Anh said. ‘Rob’s in the kitchen.’

‘Hello,’ Rob shouted from the kitchen.

I looked at the hands of the ornate analogue clock on the mantelpiece behind Matt’s shoulder which gave the time as 9:17.

From the people in the room adjacent came a loud chorus of laughter. I turned and saw the women were wearing colourful summer dresses and sandals. The men wore variegated button up shirts with sand hued chinos and brown or black leather shoes.

I leaned in close to the table and said, ‘Who are?’ I flicked my head towards the second group.

‘Friends of our housemate,’ Matt said. ‘You know David.’

I said, ‘Oh yes.’

Rob entered the living space from the kitchen, holding four wine glasses. He put these on the table then retrieved a chair from kitchen and sat down next to me.

‘Who are these people?’ I said to him intimately.

‘You know David the Rhodes scholar. He came top of every one of his subjects at Oxford. He got the medal for best all round Oxford student.’

‘Crikey.’

‘He’s about to start his PhD at Harvard. Sally is a scientist, something to do with the brain. She’s at Princeton. The others are mostly at Oxford and Cambridge too.’

‘Sweet mercy.’

‘It’s a high-powered group.’

‘Wearing a lot of collars,’ Min said.

Min’s shoulders were at that moment high and tight, her face wan. She wore a T-shirt with a faded but visible paint stain over the right hand side of her stomach. She had on her jeans and some shoes with checkered canvas over the toes.

Min stared down at the table after her remark. I turned to Rob and raised the eyebrow that was not visible to Min. Rob raised both his eyebrows in return and looked down at the table.

Liz said, ‘Well yes. It’s lovely to see you James. How have you been?’

‘Well. Well thank you Liz.’

‘What have you been doing?’

‘I have been doing regular things. I have been studying, and doing some writing. Anything except getting a job. How have you been? Anyone here a Hollywood star yet?’

Liz said, ‘Vicky’s been cast in the next Mjölfnir superhero movie.’

‘Amazing. Huge achievement. So what’s the plan tonight?’ I asked.

Mike said, 'Well, we were thinking dinner. Then either get a cab somewhere to watch the fireworks, or watch them on TV again. Best view in the city is on TV.'

'I thought you would be at your parent's,' I said. 'Surely that's the best view in the city?'

Mike said, 'We're on a break.' He walked behind my chair and started massaging my shoulders. He said, 'How have you been my big sexy boy? We don't see you no more.'

'You have to invite me over more.'

Vickie began coming down the stairs.

'Vickie,' Liz said.

'Oh yes, hello everyone,' Vickie said with a quick flick of the wrist. 'My fiancé will be joining later. Not before dinner.'

'Alright,' Rob said. 'Time to go. What are we thinking? Does Japanese work for you James?'

I said, 'Yes. Japanese is good for me. It's mostly milk and gluten that're no good so Japanese is generally pretty good.'

Rob asked, 'Everyone happy with Japanese?'

There were nods and shrugs of agreement. People stood up and began pulling on their coats and jumpers and gathering up their alcohol.

'Do we take booze with us?' I asked.

'Yeah, that should be fine,' Matt said.

Mike said, 'I'm going to hang out with the other team. Soz.'

People began to forward out. Anh and I were at the back of the group. I put my arm around Anh's shoulder. Then I took it away.

'How are you, dear Anh?'

'Well, Jamesy. How are you?'

'About the same. Looking forward to getting away.'

'That's right. Where are you going?'

‘Pearl Beach. For a couple of nights. Just to clear my head and write. See if I can make something out of that manuscript.’

‘Yes. What is it?’

‘It’s an old historical account I’ve been trying to turn into a novella.’

‘But it’s racist?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Sounds tough.’

‘I think there’s something in it that can be used. His name was William Buckley. He was an early settler. A convict. Lived with Aboriginal groups for thirty years. When old sources have a lot of nasty views, I start wondering whether it’s worth trying to turn it into fiction. I start thinking I shouldn’t be trying to revive interest in the document. I guess it’s something that people who write historical fiction work out for themselves. How is Anh Le?’

‘I’m well. You know. Just usual things.’

We walked on the busy side street, toward Cleveland Street which was bumper to bumper as the hordes taxied and Ubered around the city. I saw glowing neon signs. The dazzling headlights of cars as they turned into the lane.

I said, ‘I never know what’s happening with Anh. If I sneeze I tell you. But you get cast in major productions that I don’t find out about it until the thing’s nearly over.’

‘Well.’

‘Just modest.’

‘Oh, not really, James.’

We turned onto Cleveland Street and weaved silently in and out of the other pedestrians until we came to the glass door of the Japanese restaurant. I saw the others were already seated and flicking through menus.

‘I can only stay for a few minutes,’ Anh said quietly.

‘Don’t leave me,’ I said.

I made a pouty face then pushed the door open and we sat down across from each other at the table at the two seats closest to the entrance.

Min said, 'Lots of collars in here too.'

I looked down at my own collared shirt. People looked at menus and then placed their orders with the waiter.

Anh said, 'I won't order. I have to make the bus if I'm going to get to this other party.'

'Oh no,' I said.

She kissed everyone and said her goodbyes and was gone. The group watched the door close behind her in silence.

Vic said, 'Why don't we go around and each say what we've been up to?'

The sushi came on big platters. I had a miso soup. I drank more cider from the six pack in the plastic bag that Anh had left behind. Everyone took a turn to speak, except Vicky who I noticed remained silent.

I said, 'So what have you been cast in, Vic?'

'Oh, just Mjölnir.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Why don't we ever go and celebrate these things? We should go out on the town every time something like this happens.'

Matt scoffed. Vicky looked away abruptly. I looked at Liz who met my gaze evenly.

We ate from the plates of sushi which kept coming and coming. There were seven large empty plates on the table when we had finished. When all the sushi was gone, and the conversation had begun to wane, Liz stretched and then put her hand into the arm of her jacket. People began collecting their belongings and standing up.

'How will we pay?' I asked.

Matt said, 'The normal way.'

Liz said, 'Let's see how far we can get with cash.'

She looked at the bill and divided it by the number of people. We each began searching for thirty-two dollars. The money piled up in the centre.

I said, 'I've only got a ten and a twenty.'

Matt said, 'I will cover your two dollars, James.'

I saw him lock eyes with Min.

Matt said, 'Remember when you forgot your wallet, James?'

Liz said, 'OK, we've got it.'

She carried the heap to the till at the wall furthest from the door. 'Thank you so much,' the cashier called. The door was held open by the waitress. She bowed slightly to each as we left.

I fell behind as we returned to Vicky's share house. The night air was warm. It was quieter a few paces back, away from the group. Liz peeled off to join me.

'Hello,' I said.

'Hi. Enjoy dinner?'

'Yes.'

'Did you enjoy the food?' Liz asked.

'I thought the food was great, thank you. Really, really great. Did you like it?'

'Oh yes, of course. Jim should be at home when we get there.'

I said, 'Wonderful. That's really wonderful news. Anything new?'

'Just working,' Liz said.

'I'll have to give it a go.'

She said, 'You going to get a job soon?'

'Good things come to those who wait. Right?'

'Seek and ye shall find.'

I said, 'Aren't writers supposed to write full time? I read that if you don't write full time, you're unlikely to make a living as a writer.'

'Didn't Agatha Christie write two thousand words before work in the morning?'

We walked slowly in silence. When we arrived at the terrace, Vic opened the front door. Jim appeared in the hallway. The pitch and volume of people's voices rose as they greeted him.

All the lights were turned back on and people began to settle in the television room. Some drinks were poured and people began to get comfortable. The television was turned on and switched to the cricket highlights.

I relaxed into the deep couch. I tuned out for a few minutes. I looked at the television while it played reruns of the nine o'clock fireworks over the bridge. The television was muted. Jim sat down next to me.

I said, 'Fishing.'

He said, 'Yeah mate.'

We both looked at the television.

I overheard Rob say, 'You need ten thousand hours of practice.'

I said to Jim, 'Fishing soon?'

Jim said, 'Yeah mate.'

I turned my face to the wider circle. Rob was talking earnestly in his South African accent about the Myers-Briggs System.

He said, 'James, you'd be an INFP I think.'

I said, 'What's that?'

'Intuitive feeling perceiving. It's the mediator. Artsy. You would be that too Anh. My mum is INFP.'

'Ooo, Bronwyn is an INFP,' Vic said. 'You should get in touch, James.'

The room returned to silence. The television was playing adverts on mute.

'Any sport on?' Rob asked.

Matt and Jim began talking about cricket.

'I will go,' I said. 'I've got a long drive.'

'Where are you driving?' Liz asked.

'I'm driving to Pearl Beach.'

‘Oh. Who are you going there with?’ Vic said.

I saw Vic and Min make surreptitious eye contact. Liz, over the top of her wine glass, made quick eye contact with Vic also.

I said, ‘Just going by myself. I booked a motel. Need a few days. To start the year. And finish writing something I’ve been working on. Sometimes it helps me to be isolated to finish a project. Be sure that I’m getting the best clarity I can get. Not being influenced by something. Or someone.’

‘Ooo, exciting. What are you writing?’ Matt asked.

‘Just reworking an old historical document. It’s quite racist but I think there’s something in it that can be rescued.’

‘Sounds interesting,’ Matt said. ‘You will have to let us know how it goes.’

I said, ‘Bringing a finished project into the world is a good feeling. I can’t afford kids.’

I looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was ten minutes to midnight.

I said, ‘I might as well stay for the fireworks actually.’

‘Yes, stay for the fireworks,’ Matt said.

I sat down.

‘So,’ I said to Jim in a lowered voice.

People turned to listen.

I said, ‘Been playing sport?’

Jim said, ‘Just a bit of tennis. But that’s coming to an end. How about you?’

‘No. Have you heard that Churchill quote about exercise? How every time he felt the urge to exercise, he would lie down till it passed.’

‘That’s very funny, James,’ Matt said.

‘Thank you, Matt,’ I said.

The group sat quietly.

‘Nearly time for the fireworks,’ I said.

Matt said, ‘Ooo yes. Let’s watch the fireworks.’

Jim switched the TV to the right channel. We listened to the reporters at the water’s edge talking excitedly about the entertainment, and the atmosphere, and the fireworks. Then there was a count down and the fireworks began. I heard them on the television and also the distant rumbling of the explosions themselves. The colours were bright, dazzling, luminous.

When they had petered out, I stood up and said, ‘Time for me to go.’

‘On your retreat,’ Matt said. ‘To begin the summer of writing and editing.’

He looked around. I didn’t see anybody make eye contact. People were looking at their laps.

‘Alright, it was great to see you all,’ I said. ‘Really great. Happy New Year.’

I moved towards Rob to shake hands but then waved to the group and began walking towards the front door.

‘Good luck with the writing project,’ Matt said.

‘Thank you, Matt,’ I said. ‘Goodbye everybody. Thank you. Good evening.’

I drove north through the bush until I saw Umina beach passing way down beneath me on my left. I saw the outline of the curvature of the sheltered beach in the moonlight. I plunged into the bush again.

Then the incline was steep and when I finally came to the top of a ridge I looked up and saw the moonlight dancing on the water. It was Pearl Beach I was looking down on, and in the distance were the heads and between them the open sea. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* I felt that effervescent clarity coming.

Oliver Wakelin is Southerly Reviews Editor, and a fiction reader at Overland. He is a USYD law grad, and a PhD candidate at UNSW. His reviews have appeared in ArtsHub, Audrey Journal, Southerly and elsewhere. Short stories in Seizure, Southerly, and TEXT. A couple of his plays have been read at Sport For Jove Theatre Company. His novel Aos Sí was selected for the longlist of the Kill Your Darlings Unpublished Manuscript Award.