

In the Shell

Five afternoons a week Jason puts on his grey pants and shirt, walks down his dirt driveway and drags his steel gate open. He walks across the road and magpies squawk on the powerlines above him, while trucks groan on the distant Hume Highway.

He climbs the McPherson's front fence and walks a couple of kilometres through two of their paddocks. He keeps an eye out for cow manure in the first and their black bull in the second. When he gets to the end of the second paddock, he climbs another fence and walks across a dirt road. Then he puffs his way up an embankment, its longer grass, until he reaches the concrete next to the yellow skip. He walks around to the front of the service station and waves through the glass at Tony, who's usually sitting at the console, reading a newspaper. Once Tony knows he's there, Jason heads back to the skip, has a smoke and watches the sun setting like an over-ripe orange. Next to it, Mt Twyford's green is slowly turning black.

Jason throws his cigarette butt onto the concrete, grinds it senseless under his boot and walks through the Shell's automatic doors.

'How are ya, Tone?'

'Busy as batshit.'

'Look it.'

Tony folds the paper and meets Jason's eyes.

'Do anything today,' he says.

'Part from *jerk off*?' Jason offers.

'Not interested.'

‘Bullshit.’

Jason thinks Tony should have at least smiled at that comment. He’d been a barrel of chuckles for the last few weeks, more than his usual jolly self – you know what they say about fat people. But he just looks down at his paper.

‘Shit day?’ Jason asks.

Tony looks out the window towards the highway. The top of a truck slides along the grey wall that protects some of Murchville from the noise.

‘Got me mum comin to town next week.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Her and Dad’re comin down.’

Jason looks at the rack of magazines. Kylie Minogue’s on one cover, looking over her shoulder at him. He looks up at Tony again, who’s still staring at the highway. It’s not as if his parents are strangers to the big boy, but judging by Tony’s droopy face you’d think he’d been asked to put a couple of politicians up at his house for a few days.

Jason takes a magazine off the rack and flicks it. ‘Buy a few beers ... have a good one ...’

Tony lifts his huge frame and waddles out from behind the console. He grabs two chocolate donuts from underneath a clear plastic lid and throws some plastic coins onto the counter.

‘No worries, Tone, I’ll ring it up for ya ...’

Tony says nothing, doesn’t even turn around as he heads through the automatic doors.

‘Sad sacks,’ Jason whispers, watching Tony walk across the concrete to his white Kingswood station wagon. Behind the console, Jason slides the fake coins into his hand

and opens the register. He puts them in a special tray for ‘purchases’, smiles to himself and knows they’re both good employees – the camera never lies.

He watches Tony’s wagon grumble across the spillway and onto the service road. Though he can’t hear it too well through the thick glass, he knows it will be grunting as much as it can, heading up the entry lane’s incline before veering right onto the Hume Highway.

Jason can’t see the wagon anymore, but after a kilometre Tony will turn left and drive three kilometres before slowing down as he comes into the Murchville 60-zone. Once he’s pulled into his driveway, Tony will get out of the Kingswood and drag his 37 years and girth onto his porch and through the door. He’ll have a smoke in the kitchen and leave the butt in a thin silver ashtray. Then he’ll go out to his shed and pull a red Adidas bag down from the top of an old cupboard. He’ll get back in his wagon and drive to Mount Twyford where, by torchlight, he’ll find his normal fishing spot near the river and shoot himself through the head with his pig-hunting rifle.

That night seven cars pull into the Shell: three late model Holdens, two Ford XR8s and one Toyota four-wheel-drive. Jason marks them all down on a piece of paper – he keeps a weekly tally and then awards a prize on Sunday to the leading car manufacturer. He keeps a tally of all the weekly prizes and awards a Premiership to the winning car company at the end of the year. Last year Holden won, just, but this year Toyota’s out in front of Holden with Ford not too far behind.

Jason used to give Tony the result from the day before. Now Tony takes only a passing interest in the weekly winners. After Tony’s dad gave up the fruit farm, he took over a Holden dealership, before it collapsed, too, and he and his wife moved to

Queensland. Half of Murchville went with them in the mid 90s, after the highway turned thick and three-laned. Then Telstra and all the banks left. Jason tells himself he'd leave, too, if there were somewhere worth going.

Tony's always talking about leaving. Jason comes into work and he's sitting there, flicking through the *Herald-Sun* job pages.

'They're lookin for console ops in Braybrook.'

Jason grabs a meat pie from the warmer and throws some fake coins on the counter.

'That'd be fucken ace, *mate*. Same crap job just busier.'

'More chicks in Melbourne.'

Jason looks at Tony's massive gut, the section rising above the console. 'Yeah,' he says, lifting an eyebrow.

'*What?* Don't you reckon I could pull the chicks in the big smoke?'

'Maybe if you can pump them up.'

It was only a rumour that Tony had a blow-up doll: Jason had never seen it.

Tony flicks through the paper.

'Be alright. Get out of this shithole.'

Jason smiles and swings his arm, motioning Tony out of the console seat and Murchville. 'Go on then. Fuck off.'

'I might,' Tony says and he picks up his blue backpack.

'You won't piss off, Tone.'

'Never know.'

It's tradition in Tony's family for the casket to be open and the body on display. But Tony's lid is closed on the altar, in the hearse and right up to the gravesite.

Jason looks around at the crowd outside the church, the people out of the woodwork for Tony's funeral. Cousins in black and dark-green suits, an aunty in white jeans smoking a long cigarette. That bloke – *Roger?* – with blond hair and tats on his hands who used to work at the Shell. And, *Fuck*, he almost says out loud, there's even Lisa McLaren from school.

Christ, he hasn't seen her since the last day of HSC. She was dressed up as a punk that day, with a short black leather skirt and tight pink undies, not that Jason was looking. And there she is, the name-in-lights newspaper chick from Melbourne, at Tony Di Risio's funeral.

Lisa teased Tony relentlessly at high school. Now here she is with her hair dyed black – because she's *intelligent*, Jason supposes – fifth row and listening to the priest's voice echo through the church. When everyone files back onto the church steps after the service, he wants to go up and ask her what the fuck she's doing here, but he doesn't because she wouldn't remember him.

But she does – at the wake.

'Jason, how *are* you? I hear you worked with Tony ...'

'Umm ... sort of ...'

Jason sees a black leather skirt, but she's wearing dark denim jeans.

'At the Shell service station?' Lisa says, twisting her head and smiling like a teacher.

'We don't actually work together – I come in and he goes ... he *went* ... he's ...'

He looks at her.

'Gone now?' she offers, then looks at the glass of red wine in her hand.

‘Yeah ...’ Jason says and feels his face burning up.

She stands and looks at him as if he has a piece of chewing gum stuck under his lip. Jason doesn’t ask her what or who she thinks she’s looking at, but he does ask her why she’s here. *Stuff it – stuck up bitch ...*

Lisa looks at him like the chewing gum is blowing a bubble by itself.

‘It’s the first death from our year ...’

She walks through the dark suits, jeans and dresses and sits down on a chair against the lounge room wall. She looks across at Jason then at the talking mob holding wine glasses and cans. She takes a pad and pen from her black bag and starts writing. She stops, looks around the room, then starts writing again.

Tony’s parents waddle around with silver trays full of salami and olives, nodding their heads and accepting embraces. On the kitchen bench there’s a plate of chocolate donuts, untouched. Later, Tony’s mother stands in her son’s quiet lounge room, next to her always-silent husband, and makes a speech about how much water Tony used to splash out of the bath when he was a little boy. She drags up a small laugh and Jason sees the cousin next to him smile. Then Tony’s mum cries and everyone looks at the brown carpet or Tony’s pictures of J Lo and Matthew Lloyd on the wall. A woman blows her nose and sniffs behind Jason, but everyone else is quiet, waiting to see if Tony’s mum will start talking again. But she bows her head and her husband leads her away to a back bedroom. Somebody turns the stereo up again and Jason lifts his can to his mouth.

The stereo gets louder as the afternoon goes on. Lisa McLaren leaves, waving to Jason from a group of people at the door. He watches her go and tells himself that Tony had to do something pretty special to get a chick like that into his house. Wine glasses are re-filled and beer cans are scrunched into green garbage bins.

People look at each other and say, ‘I can’t believe it. You’d never have picked it.’

‘He was always a happy bloke,’ some whisper. ‘He’d never hurt anyone,’ the bloke with the tats on his hand says. And Jason thinks, Well, he never *did* hurt anyone. Then he remembers the sealed up casket.

Jason goes to sleep that night with his head on a Melbourne Bitter spin, and dreams the Shell is a white, late-model Commodore and Tony’s driving it, yelling out the window, *I’ve won the Premiership*, and manoeuvring the building-wagon onto the Hume, pointing it towards Melbourne. Then a flock of sleek Toyotas, flapping their two doors, swoop down and scrape their tyre-claws on the sides of Tony’s Shell Commodore. His eyes are wide open above his big cheeks and Jason wakes up shouting. Before long he feels his eyes starting to cry, his stomach moves up and down and he feels like he’s listening to someone sobbing in the room next-door.

Jason gets four weeks holiday a year and he’d always spend two of them in shitty Murchville hanging out with Tony.

On days that he’d normally be walking across the paddocks to the Shell, Jason would get in his Cortina, pick up a pizza he’d phone-ordered, then grab a dozen cans. He’d drive to Tony’s and think, every time, *Shit*, I should have bought more pizza.

The pair would sit on brown vinyl chairs that Tony’s parents gave him, along with the house to rent, when they left for Queensland. They would watch pornos until they got bored or Tony headed to the toilet – Jason would wait until he got home. Some nights they rolled a joint and Tony always let Jason take the last tug. When they smoked they always ended up in beanbags in front of music videos, eating corn chips and gabbling to each other.

One night Tony talked about Fiona Beecham, some girl Jason couldn't even remember. Apparently they both went to primary school with her. Then Tony said she'd teased him all the way through Grade Three, and Jason remembered her.

'She was a horror head ... and she wasn't the only one ...'

He saw Tony looking at him through his red eyes.

'The only horror head?'

'No, ya tool. She wasn't the only one teasing you.'

Jason threw him another bag of corn chips. Tony opened them up.

'Do you think you'll ever get married?'

'To *you*? Nope.'

Tony looked at him and grinned. Waiting for more *deep and mournful*, Jason figured.

'Nah, too fucken expensive.'

Tony didn't smile and Jason felt his eyes on him.

'Do you think you ever will, Jase?'

Jason shook his head: there was no pleasing the boy.

'I spose, if I find the right chick ... probly.'

'You still seeing Karen from Just Jeans?' Tony asks.

'No ... that's, nah ... that's all over. She wanted to move.'

'To Melbourne?'

Jason kept watching the video, a band dousing themselves with paint.

'Anywhere,' he told him. 'She didn't care.'

Guitars thrummed and the scene cut to a girl in black lingerie.

'Don't think I'll ever get married?'

Jason laughed. 'Don't say that mate. You've got your blow-up doll. Wadda ya call her?'

Tony didn't say anything more for a while, then he started talking about Essendon and whether they'd make the finals. Soon he was snoring in his beanbag so Jason turned off the television and left.

Jason walks across McPherson's two paddocks every morning now. By the time he reaches the skip, the dew has darkened his fading black boots. If Shell doesn't get a replacement for Tony soon he reckons he might have to buy a special pair of 'work' gumboots. Another twenty bucks gone.

At least they've got Peter what's-his-name to cover the nightshift. So Jason just has to handle the couple of busy patches during the day. Early in the morning a few trucks come through, then there's the after-school rush. The rest of the time there's a steady trickle of cars and trucks for quick petrol and Mars bars before they race on.

Jason looks out from the console desk, into the growing darkness and the Hume Highway. The top of a truck goes past, a muffled scream from its motor as it powers south to Melbourne.

Where the chicks are.

The rumour's stronger than the blow-up doll, but no one laughs when they tell each other this one: Tony organised a Filipino bride, but she saw a picture of him and decided not to come. He couldn't face telling his mum, *No, actually, I won't be getting married now.*

Tony probably sat here at the counter writing letters to the village girl, grinning at his reflection in the window as the day darkened. He was probably making secret trips to

Bendigo or somewhere, trying to get a suit to fit. Jason smiles to himself and then gets a tightness in his guts and neck, the same one he gets every time he thinks of Tony. The driveway is empty so he heads out to the skip for a smoke.

The sun's leaving its orange peel everywhere and he looks at the emerging stars, the tip of Mount Twyford pushing up as if it might have something to say to them. All around the base of the mountain there are fires, farmers burning off. One of the blazes is bigger than the others and the smoke is heading right up to the mountain peak and the stars that are getting brighter every minute.

Back at the console, Jason flicks through the newspaper. For a joke he's been looking at the personals most days: guy seeks guy – he laughs; mature woman wants younger man. He looks through the Murchville and Bendigo columns. Sometimes even Melbourne: girl seeks guy, 30+ for fun times.

'And maybe kids and a mortgage,' Jason says, and closes the paper. Then he opens it again and takes another look at the Melbourne column. He's still looking and munching a donut when Pete walks in.