

*The Guard***Paul Mitchell**

Trevor Randall stood on his nature strip and put a blue plastic lunch bag into his son's hand. Anthony smiled back through his shaggy beard, motioning for Trevor to hug him. Trevor held his son and Anthony grunted. Anthony couldn't speak, but Trevor always knew what he was saying.

*Don't watch me Dad. I can do it.*

Anthony waved his father away and Trevor squinted up and down the road. He saw no traffic, missing the Holden Calais that turned out of a side street. Trevor's back was turned and he was about to open the low iron gate at the front of his house when he heard the screech of tyres and the dull throb of metal on flesh.

The Calais's door flapped open and its driver sat on the edge of his car seat. Anthony was face down on a nature strip further up the road, the blue plastic bag beside him.

A few weeks later, Trevor pushed his breakfast bowl away and opened one of the envelopes on his kitchen table. It was a card with a picture of flowers in a vase and the words, *Thinking of You* on the front. *Come bak SOON* was scrawled in red pencil on the inside. He took it to the lounge room and placed it with the others arranged on the tile mantelpiece, next to the

framed black and white photo of his late wife, Pamela. She was sitting on the beach at Ocean Grove, cuddling Anthony when he was a boy.

At the kitchen bench, Trevor spread margarine—not *too* much—on four pieces of white bread, then cut the crusts from them. Outside, trucks rumbled and horns blasted, long and threatening.

Before his son's accident, Trevor had worked for 12 years as a lollipop man at Windmere Primary School, a few streets from his home. Children said hello to him as he stood in the middle of the road in his white pants and overcoat, a beardless Santa blowing a whistle. He said *G'day* back to the kids, but when parents greeted him, he only nodded or sometimes offered them a muffled, *Hi*. When adults spoke, Trevor felt like he was a boy making sandcastles at the beach, watching waves knock them over. He avoided the parents' eyes and smiled at the kids. But not for too long: he had to concentrate on the cars.

He met their eyes first, the front headlights, then their mouths, the cars' grills. He kept those cars back, the whole milling crowd of them, kept the children safe. Then, once it was clear, he let the cars run off to wherever they had to go.

The kettle bubbled and Trevor poured hot water onto a teabag. He gathered lettuce, cheese and tomatoes and put them on the bench with the buttered bread. He couldn't break the habit of making lunch for Anthony at the hospital, even though a nurse had explained that it wasn't necessary.

'You see those, Mr Randall?'

Trevor had nodded, eying the thin tubes in his son's nose and mouth.

'They're feeding him. He can't eat any real food because he's in a very deep sleep.'

But Trevor had still made the lunch. He had taken it to the school crossing in his coat pocket then, when he got home from his afternoon shift, he'd stored each one in a cardboard box in the garden shed. The smell was terrible now. He hoped it wouldn't waft across the fence and into his neighbour's yard.

When Anthony had been little, they'd had doctors and experts offering all kinds of advice.

'If we can just keep working on Anthony's ability to recognise and react to facial expressions, it will really help...'

one specialist had told Trevor's wife.

'Yeah, I know,' Pamela had said. 'I've been trying. But it's hard, it's just...'

The specialist had glanced at Trevor. Pamela had looked at him too, then back at the specialist.

'I'm doing me best,' she'd said, and the specialist had nodded.

Anthony's communication didn't improve, but after Pamela died he'd at least gotten better at crossing the road. Eventually Trevor didn't need to hold his hand or grab at his arms. He wondered whether one day Anthony might help *him* walk across the road.

A few years after that a nurse, a man from the City Mission and another from Human Services had sat in Trevor's lounge room and decided that Anthony could live his own life, without Trevor. His son had moved to 27 Forrest Street with three other men. The house

was clean and the man from the City Mission, with his long hair, and the nurse in her white Corolla, had both visited him. They sometimes visited Trevor too, and told him Anthony was going really well.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Anthony was picked up in a bus and taken to work at the Brotherhood of St Laurence warehouse. But before the bus arrived, Anthony walked to Trevor's place to collect the lunch his father had made. He reached the end of Forrest Street, turned left and there was his old family house across Penmore Road, that busy river of cars and vans.

Trevor put slices of cheese on top of the processed chicken meat, which already sat on top of the lettuce. The phone rang, shrill, like a hungry seagull. Trevor held a spoonful of sauce above the two sandwiches and listened to the phone screech. He dripped the sauce carefully across the cheese slices—just how Anthony liked it—then shook pepper on top.

The phone stopped ringing.

Trevor cut the sandwiches in half and parcelled them in cling wrap. He found a banana in the fruit bowl that had just enough black and yellow, and an orange, a firm one. The phone screeched again, but Trevor watched it until it stopped. He went to the drawer, pulled out a blue plastic bag and wrapped the sandwich.

News got around Windmere Primary School about Anthony's accident. And how it had happened. Some parents stopped in the road and asked Trevor about his son. Others who used to say hello ignored him and rushed their kids over the crossing.

At school council, Trevor's employment future was Safety Agenda Item 4(a). After the meeting, the principal told Trevor he might be asked to take a break for a while from working at the crossing. A couple of weeks later a vote narrowly favoured Trevor staying on in his job. But, before he found out about the result, Trevor had decided to take a break anyway. Now he wasn't sure how long he'd been away or whether he would go back.

The lunch made, Trevor sat at his kitchen table and looked at the other envelopes. He picked one up, felt it. Another card. He didn't touch the two letters that had the Windmere Primary School stamp on them.

When the phone squawked again, Trevor finally got up, took it from the hook and looked at the receiver. He slowly brought it to his ear.

'Mr Randall, hello, are you there?'

Trevor grunted.

'I'm sorry, Mr Randall, but, as you recall, yesterday we told you that you'd have to come to the hospital and sign the forms...I'm really sorry to have to remind you of this...'

Trevor was silent.

'Are you there Mr Randall?'

He grunted again.

'So we'll see you at eleven?'

'Mr Randall. Are you there?'

'Yes,' Trevor said.

'See you at eleven?'

Trevor hung up. He took his coat from the hook, put it on, walked to the front door, and then turned around. He went back to the bench, picked up the lunch and carried it outside. His wheelie bin was open on the nature strip from the morning rubbish collection. Trevor dropped the lunch into its hungry mouth.