

Running Total

1.

He drags feet across the Centrelink carpet, slapping his Youth Allowance form. Staff members swap looks. Is one thumbing a buzzer to call for her supervisor? He grins at a girl in the queue. How good does he look, hair cut to stubble, rings through his eyebrow?

2.

The counter woman asks if he's been seeking work this fortnight. She's got a voice like slamming doors.

'I go around shops and factories, all right? I'm registered.'

'Keep your shirt on, Drew. We have to ask. There's a form to fill in.'

'Done it.'

'Another form.'

He grabs the pen. Bullshit. No way can he meet his debts in a pissweak job. He does better ripping off decals and flogging custom numberplates, or frightening rich kids at the station, nicking their laptops. There's not much in doing over ticket machines or a phone box. He's getting behind. Each hit feels weaker than the last.

3.

At the counter he thumps fingers, waiting for the idiot with a calculator around her neck.

'Come on.'

She's so thick. Can't even get the answer with a machine's help. A dickhead in a tie double-checks the computer. That's where they lock Drew's details: bank and school and court records. But they can't tap into his head, where he keeps accounts. Some days he makes a profit, others he's behind. When he's in the red, he sometimes wonders if he'd be better off back in the youth training centre. But tonight will change that. Macca will see he makes a proper earn.

4.

Electric doors open. He cops a mouthful of dust from roadwork. As he pushes his face to the wind a chill cuts through shirt sleeves. At 7-Eleven a mate with spray-cans eyes off girls. A wog car rumbles past, fat tyres and spoilers, speakers throbbing. He hears sirens, not the jacks, only an ambulance. As everyone turns to watch, Drew flicks his match through an open window of the wog car, loses himself in a crowd. He's only slowed by chewing gum on the path that sucks his shoe like fingers grabbing.

Sparrows scatter for him. Both sides of the street buzz with bakeries and greengrocers, the shop signs in Vietnamese or Arab. He sniffs peaches and sneaks an orange. He slips down a lane between shops, fingers cracking the peel. Juice rolls down wrists like he's cut himself.

5.

He picks his way through playground dog turds like a minefield. Wind chucks leaves and siren noises and the smell of blood and bone. Paint strips hang from the weatherboards. The letterbox spews junk. He pushes open his front door. Kids are squawking above TV noise. A woman barges in yelling, her nightie about to fall open.

6.

'Oh, Drew. Glad you're here. Run and pick up Kelli from school. Won't take a minute. Here's the keys.'

'No way. If I get sprung again they'll chuck me back in.'

From the bedroom a man coughs. His mother's eyes pink, hair fake black.

'Sorry, love. Forgot. With your brother away... Be a pet. Take the bus. They'll be out at half-past.'

'Who's your bloke?'

'Just go and get Kelli. Buy her an ice cream.'

'Why should I?'

7.

In the kitchen he rattles dishes, pulling open the fridge, grabbing a carton. Outside he pours saucers. Yanking open the shed door he laughs as kittens spill from a blanket. Drew holds the saucers out of reach, then watches kittens pounce, scrambling over each other.

When they've finished drinking he grabs a tabby, rubbing its fur.

'G'day, little bugger.'

Other kittens climb the arm. One licks his ear, fur motor revving. Two more wrestle in his hand. It tickles. A ginger tom blinks from under the weeds, then begins licking paws.

'How do, Red?'

He strokes its back. Red jumps, sprinting up a tree then along tiles and guttering. Others sniff mint or wash themselves. Sun peeps through the crack of clouds. Drew is feeling quiet and soft, like a good hit. Then someone bangs a ball on a backboard nearby. One kitten paws its shadow, or an ant. Warm milk smells bring back thoughts of when his old man was home. He doesn't want to think about that bastard. Digging fingers into a flowerbed, he crumbles dirt rings around one of the kittens. He kicks an old tub, underneath crawling with slaters. A train shakes the house, squealing brakes.

Rain prickles his neck. A man coughs. Drew remembers his mother's bruises from the last one. Red is jumping on other kittens. With a laugh Drew squeezes just enough to let it know who's boss. A helicopter skims clouds. He won't look up, won't give them satisfaction. But the noise panics his kittens.

'It's cool,' he soothes. 'Can't hurt you.'

He itches, probably fleas. His mother used to scrape his skull with a comb. And the old man would show off, burning ticks from his own legs with a smoke. Pissed most nights, that bastard didn't care who he whacked. The house walls were thin. Drew didn't want to hear his parents having sex, mother crying, father swearing. One day the old bastard upped and pissed off to Kalgoorlie.

'For gold,' he said.

Yeah, right.

Lifting Red, he touches the wet nose.

'Bring you something later. Have to pick up Kelli. Then I gotta go score.'

He bolts the shed door, promising to be back.

8.

His head bangs with speed, only enough to get him sparked. But it bites. Ready to spew. He stumbles past black faces and turbans going to church or bed. Doesn't reach the market car park until past midnight.

'You're late,' says Macca. 'What you got that on for?'

'Me brother's. Nicked it when he went back inside.'

Studs on Drew's jacket crunch as he climbs into the van. Macca is ropable.

'I said dark gear, not dork.'

'Keep your pants on, mate.'

Drew is pulling at the jacket, wriggling out of it. Now he and Macca are dressed alike, baggy pants, tops with hoods, beanies.

'C'mon. Wasting time.'

Macca chucks him gloves. The cabin stinks of plastic from a packet.

'Nice wheels, Mac.'

'Not mine. Let's go.'

Thoughts bounce in his sick head like spilling ping-pong balls.

9.

Day one of high school, he told the others not to call him Andrew any more. At morning break they watched a Year Ten arsehole putting the squeeze on Year Sevens. Big Mac, he was called. When he grabbed hold of Drew, the kid surprised Big Mac, fighting back. Drew kicked those fat shins. In dirt he rolled, his shirt in ribbons. At home the old man belted him, but said he liked his guts. Big Mac quit school later that year. Drew and others would see him around the local shops. He preferred to be called Macca.

10.

One afternoon Macca found Drew with mates, chroming behind an arcade. He offered them a capful.

'Just a freebie,' he said, 'for the thrill.'

Drew hadn't used before but he didn't want others to see him scared.

Before the end of year he quit school, went on the dole. He got nabbed for nicking a car. The magistrate said she was doing him a favour, giving him a bond. He didn't thank her. Then the jacks caught him driving his mum's car, under age. Court gave him six months in correctional services. When he came out he signed up for Youth Allowance. He'd learned some things inside. He was on the gear. He turned fifteen.

One night Drew and a mate were hanging outside the Lord Liverpool. A fight started between a fat bloke and two Lebanese.

'That's Big Mac,' said Drew's mate. 'It's two on one.'

'Serves him right.'

Drew threw an air punch, itching.

'They're Lebbos. Big Mac hates Lebbos.'

'Me too,' said Drew.

Taking a run-up he king-hit one. Mac cracked a bottle over the other head.

'Who are they?' asked Drew.

'Dunno,' said Macca. 'Asked for it, but.'

Sirens squealed.

Only the Lebanese remained, bleeding. Othes scattered. Past driveways and over fences, Mac had to stop for breath. Sirens went quiet. Blue light faded.

11.

Drew offered him gum, made a change from handing over dollars for a fix. Ugly bugger, Mac's head didn't fit his body, like it got left behind when the rest went fat. A birthmark dribbled down one side of his face. A smart bastard, not a user. Big dealers trusted Mac not to waste shit on himself. And until now Drew was just another chaser scabbing dosh.

'Fancy doing a job? Straight up cash.'
He told Drew to call him Macca.

12.

Bats zoom overhead, giving him the shivers. Sliding a gate open, he sees Macca cut a hole and lift out the pane using suction, concentrating so hard his tongue sticks out.

'Empty?'

'Gone skiing. Alarm is fake. I sussed it. You take the lounge. I'll do the bedrooms.'

His pulse drums. Drew pulls out drawers and feels behind for cash or jewels. Fingers sweat under plastic. Shoes squeak on shiny floorboards. There's a remote for heating, another for the hi-fi. CDs cover one wall, and so many books. Must be teachers. Who else would read so much? Drew needs only one book. He keeps it between his ears, ins and outs, the going rate for a fix, dates for lodging his form, a tally. How far he's got in front or behind. Tonight he'll be streaking ahead.

Macca chucks him a couple of backpacks. Forget books about statues and old buildings. Drew unplugs a flat-screen TV, scooping handfuls of CDs and DVDs, filling the backpack. He squeezes in an X-Box. He grabs two mobile phones he finds lying around, all new stuff, hardly used. He hears Macca in a bedroom, going through drawers and slashing a mattress, in case there's valuables sewn in.

In a kid's room Drew finds a second computer, jar of coins, and snapshots of a girl, face freckled like somebody's shaken up a beer and opened it in her face. He clears the shelf with one hand, chucking toys and climbing on the bed. Macca stamps in.

'What're you doing? Put it away.'

Drew is pissing on dolls, soaking them. Macca laughs, unzipping his fly. Not smart. But too good to resist. They spray over the bed, steaming. The room stinks. Macca shakes himself, zipping up with a bend of the knees.

'Come on. Don't forget to check the freezer.'

Chucking out frozen meat and pizzas Drew finds no hidden jewels. He unplugs the microwave, carrying it to the van.

Then a dog starts barking.

'Shut him up,' hisses Macca.

Drew finds biscuits in a cupboard, opens a window and lobs the box over the fence. The animal goes quiet.

'Won't stop him for long. Time to go.'

Another dog starts. Then the first one again. Speed slams Drew behind the eyes. Running out, he knocks a vase. It smashes on steps. Chinese maybe. Macca revs his engine and they floor it down the lane.

Then he brakes.

'Christ...'

Some bloke, lying face down on flagstones, not moving. Pissed maybe.
'Move the prick.'
'No way.'
'Do it.'
Pulling up sleeves, Drew climbs down. In jogging clothes, the bloke could be late fifties. Drew frisks pockets. No wallet. He grabs the arms.
'Shit...'
And runs back.
'He's carked it.'
More dogs join the barking. Macca snaps.
'Move him.'
Drew tries not to look. A dead guy. He props it against a back fence. Dried blood around the man's nose, from when he hit the paving. Gloves feel sticky. Drew tries wiping them but the plastic rips. He can't get the smell off. This bloke isn't really here any more. But someone will be waiting for him. They'll ring cops. It stinks. Must have shit himself.
'Come on.'
Macca spins wheels. Drew jumps back in. Dogs are wailing. Through a side mirror he watches the dead guy vanish, blue as Gibbo was.
That day the stuff on the streets had been cut with baking soda or Ajax. Gibbo was grabbing at his collar, trying to breathe. Drew heard an ambulance but couldn't wait. He took off. When he looked back he saw Gibbo on the ground, turning blue as his jeans.
The old jogger is out of luck, dying in the dark, never getting older. Even if there was time Drew wouldn't take those Nikes.
He's about to spew. Pain slaps his eyes. He feels like one of his mum's old albums, scratching a needle across.
'Where to?'
'Mate of mine,' says Macca. 'Ten minutes. You okay?'

13.

The middleman looks like a dealer, rings under the eyes like he's smudged dirt. Drew's brain is coming down, eyeballs cooking. He watches the middleman open a safe, sees the gun inside, wonders if maybe he could snatch it. The bloke might be quicker than he looks. He'd have mates. Drew knows not to chat. He learned that inside. Talk too much and he could end up in hospital, or like that runner in the lane.
Macca hands him a roll of 50s. Way in front.
'Dump the wheels, mate. Wipe for prints. Catch you tonight. We might do another. If you're up to it.'

14.

His armpits stick. He feels like the dead guy is grabbing his ankles. Did the old bloke have kids, a son maybe?
In a mood to punch someone he can only yawn. Got to shoot up. Air rushes through the window, lungs hot, then icy. He swerves, missing parked cars, and scrapes a steel post, crunching glass and duco over the road.
Wheels squeal. He burns into his street. So tired, empty as that runner. Bugger this. He'll dump the van later. Got to find a bed. No parking spaces left. He cruises up the rear lane overgrown with weeds, just wide enough for a van.
'Hey...'

Braking too late. Just before impact, movement in his headlights, small and orange.

He jumps out. Underneath he finds it, ginger-coloured, wet. A spasm in his gloves. Then it's meat.

He stares around, mouth open.

Someone.

Some shitty little...

'Fuckers,' he screams. '*Fuckers...*'

He yells at the house, at whoever has let them out, idiot sister, slut of a mother, that man. Collapsing on stones, voice busted, he doesn't give a shit if they find him next day leaning against the fence for some needle-dirty kid to find.

But no one comes. No one.

Holding onto Red he stands. He spins around, kicking in the headlights. Waits for running footsteps. Doesn't care what the jacks do to him.

Nothing. No sound from the house, not an echo in the lane, no arms, no eyes, never been born. Daylight sticks its nose in.

From streets away a tyre screeches. He looks around. All hush again, not a thing, as far up as stars. Drew chucks his cat in the van and drives to dump both, foot to the floor.