

Pruning

By Michael Earp

Aunt Carmel's tone belies her concern. "You getting on all right?"

The sound of the trowel in the soil stops him from answering. Its grainy sluice punctuated with the chink of gravel on metal makes him rethink the reply that had been on his lips.

The question hangs for a moment as he takes a long mouthful of tea to justify his silence. Zach isn't much help when it comes to her plants, but she's glad for the company. She says so enough.

There's a relief knowing her attention is on the weeds around her rhododendron, not on him. When she brushes a fly from her hairline, he speaks. "Yeah. I've been seeing someone."

She drives the trowel into the ground and turns to him. "You've kept that quiet."

Standing from the deck chair, he puts his almost-done mug of tea on the grass and walks the short distance to her pile of pulled weeds. As he gathers them, he says, "Not quiet. Close."

The green bin is open at the end of the path. The limp plants join the others, already wilting.

"I really like him," he doesn't take his eyes off the discards as he speaks.

"Of course you do, Zach. And you're allowed."

Allowed. The word rolls around the garden and his head. Is he allowed? Who gave, or denied, him that? Was there a universally acknowledged timeline for this?

"I know," he says so quietly he isn't sure Carmel hears.

She stands, groaning dramatically. "And the dreams?"

Dread flashes in him. There's no escape from those dreams. He shakes his head just once.

“You poor love.” She holds his gaze for a moment before looking around the garden. There is care for him in everything she does, even looking away.

Zach follows her gaze around the small yard. It’s generously scattered with all variety of plants in as many pots.

“I just love them, you know?” She means her plants. “Some grow easily. Some die. That’s the way of it.”

She smiles at Zach, and he feels an affection he can never find words for.

“I need to dead-head that lily,” she says, “and some of the others. It’ll do them good.”

A shiver passes over Zach’s body. The idea of pruning makes him uncomfortable. Never sure how much to trim. Would he kill the plant with overzealous secateurs? All that death for the sake of life. All that history severed.

Carmel steps toward him and accidentally kicks over his mug. The remaining tea spills onto the grass and is gone in an instant.

“Oh, silly me! Let me make you a new one.”

As enticing as it sounds, he shakes his head. “I better get on. I’m seeing him tonight and meeting a bunch of his friends.”

“Well, I won’t keep you from that.” She bends to pick the empty mug up with more agility than her previous groaning suggested was possible and gives him a one-arm hug. “Tell me more, next time, eh?”

The car is warm from the sun, a welcome change from the chill of the breeze. He waits until his phone has connected to the stereo before edging out into the street. The music starts

mid-song. He's tempted to start the track again, but it's about to get to his favourite bit so he lets it play.

The traffic is heavier than usual for a Saturday. It makes him decide against driving to dinner tonight. If he catches the tram, he can have more than a single drink. Enough to calm the nerves of meeting Oscar's friends.

A new song begins, its opening bars cutting through his thoughts. He used to like this song. After all, it's in his digital library. All-songs-shuffle. But now it conjures a flashback. The sickly panic he's been waking up in too often. An apparition of that man.

He stops at the lights and touches his phone in its cradle. A double-tap opens the music app to the song currently playing. He works quickly, racing before the singer starts. He unlikes the track. *Let's pretend that never happened*, the app reads. And presses skip just as the first words come through the speakers.

"Won't you..."

The next track starts with bright and joyously abrasive beats that were only ever his taste. He exhales and applies pressure to the accelerator; the lights have changed to green.

Once parked, he opens his door and notices sand in the footwell.

"How did...?" he asks no one in particular, cutting himself off when he remembers how, three nights ago, Oscar suggested they go to the beach and walk down to where the rocks meet the water because the sunset would make a better photo there.

He smiles as he brushes as much of it out as he can with this hand, remembering the way the dying sun had caught the hair of Oscar's beard. When he's unable to get it all out, he doesn't mind.

It's the clear day, he decides, that has brought out people in these numbers. Amazing what clear skies can do, even if it's not summery enough to go without a jacket. He walks from the tram slowly, through the city towards the pub. Gentle catastrophising about the night slows his steps. He's early, so he doesn't see it as an issue.

He watches the Saturday-evening pedestrians as he walks. Aimless speculation distracts him; what events and choices led someone to be walking down this street, in that outfit, at this time of day. Had that woman chosen her well-fitted black dress and heels to impress someone, even if it was herself? He hoped her night held as much promise as the outfit suggested.

But knowing there was an endless string of choices and events which led her to be here, less than a metre from him on this street, makes him feel less untethered from his own life. After all, here he is, too.

What if it all goes wrong tonight? He knows he is capable of holding a conversation, but new people make it difficult to construct sentences. Also, he wants Oscar's friends to like him. All their shared history is a wall he will have to climb. He takes a deep breath and looks closely at a teenager in a scraggly singlet top and shorts. Doesn't he feel the cold? Or didn't he plan ahead?

Zach exhales slowly.

The pub is just on the edge of the city centre. A corner building renovated a couple of years back to be schmick inside without destroying the old pub façade. It's a combination that clearly works. The noise of the crowd hits him as soon as the door opens. It's the kind of place

he would normally avoid. The bouncer nods blandly and Zach nods back, trying not to let the fact that he's the first one here overwhelm him.

He's surprised when he finds an empty table for six in the beer garden, scattered with some abandoned pint glasses. He sits at the wall-end of the table so he can observe the room and texts Oscar.

I'm early. I got us a table. Not sure how many of your friends are coming.

He rereads it five times, wondering if it sounds desperate.

A girl appears on the other side of the beer garden. She has bright red hair he hopes is her natural colour, but only because he likes it on her so much. She stops to look around the busy space. She's wearing navy overalls, which Zach appreciates greatly. The bright yellow tee under them has some writing on it which he can't read. He wonders if the overalls were a second-hand store find, or if she bought them new. He enjoys thinking of her as someone who likes the thrill of opportunity shopping. He realises he's playing his personal histories game when he sees she's heading his way with a significant smile. There's a spike of panic before he grasps she must be one of Oscar's friends.

"Zach, hey," she says. "I'm Sarah."

"Yeah, hi!" Zach never knows what to do after this moment. He extends his hand, but she deftly navigates the stools between them and hugs him. Zach likes hugs but is never sure of them from strangers. The personal politics of body-space is a mind-boggling minefield.

"I recognised you from pictures," she says.

Zach's face flashes with warmth. Oscar's been showing pictures to his friends. Talking about him. That means something, right?

“How long have you known him?” Zach didn’t mean to interrogate so soon, if at all. He assumed he’d be the one being quizzed.

Sarah doesn’t flinch. “Since Uni, so about 6 years. He’s a good egg.”

Zach smiles. He knows that without confirmation. But, gently, gently as he steps out into this, having his feelings echoed is encouraging.

He’s about to reply when he catches sight of Oscar moving into the crowd with the ease of a swimmer in water. Oscar puts on a comfortable grin which makes Zach realise that his wave to say, *here we are*, is redundant. Right behind Oscar must be Kieran, his long black hair recognisable from Oscar’s socials. When they reach the table, Oscar leans in and kisses Zach, their lips lingering for one, slow inhale and exhale.

“Hi,” he says to Zach quietly when they part. Then he turns, “Sarah! Hey, hey!” He’s loud and full of life.

“Hey man, good to finally meet you.” Kieran extends a hand and Zach shakes it. “This one won’t shut up about you.”

“I’ll get first round,” Oscar announces over the others’ laughter. He looks at Zach. “Wanna come and help me carry them?”

Zach’s relieved. A moment alone that he didn’t have to orchestrate. “Sure,” he says.

At the bar, Oscar puts his arm around Zach’s waist as they wait for their drinks. “How you doing?” he asks.

Zach knows there’s weight to the question. Oscar’s proven himself attuned to Zach’s anxieties repeatedly. So, Zach applies equal weight. “Yeah, I’m good.” He pauses before adding, “I hung out with Aunt Carmel today.”

“Awesome, how is she?”

The fact that Oscar hasn't met the woman but asks after her as if he knows her makes Zach grin. "She's well. We gardened."

"You mean, she gardened?"

Their drinks are up and they join the others.

Ted feels the conversation flowing like a game of jump rope. Sometimes he can clearly sense the timing and knows exactly when to join in. He feels he's getting to know the rhythm of these friends. Their laughter is light, and the stories lean towards the endearing dumb shit Oscar has done in the past.

They're onto their second round, which Sarah insisted on buying when Kieran says, "My ex would never let up about that. They'd never say explicitly, but they had to have final say on any movie we watched together."

"Oh yeah!" Sarah says, "Remember when we went to the movies and they just wouldn't stop going on about how much they really wanted to see that new comedy, whatever it was called."

"Wiped it from my brain," Oscar interjects.

Sarah continues, "And so we all relented and none of us laughed at all except them?"

As if to punctuate her point someone laughs loudly on the other side of the beer garden.

Kieran nods. "There was more to it than that, obviously, but I'm glad it's done."

"Not that I can talk," Sarah says. "Remember Dan? He was a dick. I don't know why I even dated him."

Oscar points at her and with a sly smile says, "I remember why."

Kieran's laughter is loud, "Oh yeah! You said he was huge."

Zach feels himself stumble internally. The conversation has gone double-Dutch and he can't see a way in. He doesn't want to talk about exes, because it's only a matter of time before he will be expected to contribute. There was only the one. One that stretched back so far it tainted his entire adult life. One that infects his dreams with crippling terror that he will never be free of him.

As if to kick Zach over the edge, the song he'd skipped that afternoon in the car begins to play over the pub speakers. What had been background music snaps into focus and there is no escaping it this time. Zach thinks that maybe he can step out for some air, just while it's on, but as he's about to move, Kieran asks him a question.

“How about you, Zach? Any horror stories?”

He freezes. Stories. He's got a whole bunch of stories, but they'd end the laughter quickly. He doesn't want to be that guy. But how is he supposed to relate when he can't share.

“I,” Zach pauses. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

He pushes past Oscar and makes his way to the bathroom in the corner of the courtyard. He's only a few steps away when he overhears Kieran say to the others, “What did I say? It was only a question.”

Zach locks himself in a cubicle, puts the toilet lid down and sits on it, his head in his hands. He realises his mistake. The music that was muffled by the crowd outside is clearly audible in here.

“Don't you forget about me...”

His breathing is heavy. He doesn't want to cry, but vice-like fingers squeeze into his life and no matter how hard he tries to pry them off, his mind won't allow it. The sense that he is always being watched is relentless. Even if Zach can make it through the day without a single

thought of his past, he has no defences when he's asleep. This fear never happens when he's awake. It surprises him now. The panic of the nightmares grips him and a voice in his head rings loud and clear. *He will never let you go.*

Zach concentrates on his breathing, as laboured as it is. It drags into him and pushes out. Drags in, pushes out. Slowly, he feels like he's gaining control again. The song ends and everything gets a tiny bit easier.

Aunt Carmel saying, *It'll do them good*, comes into his head and again Zach wonders how much to prune.

When he thinks he can manage it, he leaves the cubicle and splashes his face with water from the basin. He takes a paper towel and dries himself off. Determined to re-join the group. As he approaches, Oscar looks at him with a questioning expression.

He smiles, pretending nothing happened.

Sarah gives him a reassuring look and Kieran's brow is furrowed and wary.

"I've heard the pizzas here are pretty good," Zach says. He's permitted them to move on, and they know it. They start to talk about what they want to eat. While they're deciding, Zach gets another round of drinks, mainly because he feels the need for another one himself.

Oscar comes to help him carry them back.

"Are you okay?" he asks when they're waiting at the bar.

Zach is about to say a default response but decides Oscar deserves better. He chooses his words carefully. "I had a moment, but I don't want it to dominate my night."

Oscar considers Zach, then leans in to tenderly kiss him.

The feeling of Oscar's lips on his eases a lot of the tension in his chest.

When they're saying their goodbyes, Sarah says to Zach, "It was lovely to meet you," leaning in to hug him.

"Yeah, man! Was great," Kieran is quick to add, also reaching for a hug.

Zach says, "You too." Meaning them both and hoping they understood.

Then it's just Oscar and him, standing outside the pub. Saturday night in the city happening around them, all darkness and lights and people.

"Wanna," Zach stumbles, feeling nervous like he'll never have earned Oscar's attention.

"Wanna come back to mine?"

Oscar's grin sets him at ease in a small way. "I thought that was the plan."

"Yeah, but I don't like to assume."

Oscar steps closer and takes Zach's hand. With a light kiss and gentle ushering, they walk towards the tram.

There's too much zipping up his arm from their joined hands, too much excitement arm-wrestling with anxiety in his brain, for Zach to play his game wondering about passers-by. He's too caught up in the fact that all his own choices and events have led him to this moment, this outfit, this street, this hand in his.

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Waking in a panic, Zach sits up, his breathing tortured and heaving. His chest banging like it's twice its normal size. He had been running, being chased. No one was helping him. They were all faceless crowds and that man was getting closer. The dread and sense of futility linger. He falls back onto his bed.

A hand slides across his chest and he almost calls out in fright, thinking he's still dreaming until he realises it's Oscar's. The relief crashes on him like a wave.

"You okay, babe?" Oscar asks, still half asleep.

Zach's mind races, what to say? He knows he could easily avoid it all by not answering. But he doesn't want to be that kind of person. "Yeah, just another dream."

Oscar curls into him. "Oh, that's no good. Wanna talk about it?"

Zach knows he could. He could describe it all and Oscar would hear him out and not judge him. They've talked about it before. But he decides that this time he hasn't denied it or avoided it, but he doesn't have to give it power.

He says, "It'll fade."

His past lies behind him like string, catching on to all the things that have happened and the choices he's made, sometimes tangling into a knot. He curls himself into Oscar, feeling their skin touching. He whispers, more to himself than to Oscar.

"I go on from here."