

Meet me at the Mango Trees

“Just keep an eye out for Davo,” Deon said, as we left the dining hall. “He’ll still be up smoking durries.”

We didn’t need to name a place. By day, rotting mangos piled up on hot bitumen under a dense canopy. Fruit flies sheltered from the tropical sun, erupting into angry clouds when disturbed. The ground had been paved over decades ago, but the twisted roots were fighting back, cracking the thin bitumen with blackened veins. By night it was an eerie place, teeming with possums and rats, drunk on the fermenting fruit. It was shadowy, hidden from Brothers who were on the lookout for troublemakers who had left their dorms after lights out.

Troublemakers like us.

“This isn’t my first rodeo,” I replied, grinning in anticipation of the night ahead.

I didn’t ask any questions. Deon always came up with the plans. Some nights we broke into classrooms to watch movies or smoke weed by the cattle yards. Sometimes we just hung out in the bell tower and talked about the future.

“Hey, poofs.”

I instinctively tensed, bracing as a body crashed into us from behind. The impact pushed me into a garden bed where I fell to my knees among the chip bark and jacaranda flowers. I kept my head down, my spine tingling in fear of the next blow, the next jeer.

It didn’t come.

I looked up. It was Ted, but he hadn’t stopped. He spun around, gave us an arrogant grin and kept walking.

“Fuck off, dickhead,” shouted Deon, as he grabbed my arm and hauled me to my feet.

The taunts and jeers never got him down. I had recoiled, waiting for Ted to do his worst. Deon wasn’t like that. He didn’t lie down; he wanted a fight.

Most of our class thought he was a weirdo. He wasn't a jock or a nerd. He didn't hang with the cowboys, despite growing up out west. He was a bit odd. Different in a way they couldn't pigeonhole. Some kids thought he was violent and unhinged, others whispered that he had rooted half the girls at Grammar. He was my best mate. My only hook to sanity in a lonely world full of Ted's.

I easily evaded Mr. Davidson, whose sleepless laps of the dorm grounds were folklore. The disembodied ember floating across the grass helped. Deon was already waiting, two towels hanging around his neck.

"How about a swim?"

I was confused. "The pool is all lit up. We'll get caught."

Deon smiled deviously. "I don't want to swim in grade eighters' piss. Let's go to the beach."

The night was warm and a swim would be fun, but we'd never broken out of the grounds before. I wasn't sure. "Sounds great. But I didn't bring boardies."

"All good. We'll just swim in our jocks." He threw an arm around my shoulders and dragged me in the direction he wanted to go.

I wasn't going to sneak back to my room and return. Deon knew it.

I relented. "Fuck it. Let's go."

Deon laughed, "Atta boy."

Twenty minutes later we were standing on the beach. At low tide the water withdrew from the breakwater across miles of spongy flats and muddy gutters. Right now it was high tide, with small waves scouring the water's edge. It wasn't a postcard beach. But tonight it was empty and bathed in the blue light of the full moon. The soundtrack of crashing waves was a soothing metronome.

Deon broke the reverie. "Let's go."

He stripped down, not even pausing to take his shorts off and fling them at me as he sprinted off into the darkness. All I could see were two pale butt cheeks bouncing towards the water before he was engulfed in the foam.

I was wearing jocks, but Deon had set the challenge. I stripped off and sprinted after him, relishing the freedom. I ploughed into a small wave that reared up and swallowed me. The day was washed away, salty water releasing me onto the other side, cleansed. The Brothers talked a lot about rebirth and redemption, maybe this is what it felt like.

I stood up, water up to my stomach and saltwater dripping down my chest. Deon always had the best plans.

I started looking around, panic bubbling up as I realised I was alone.

Wooooosh

Sheets of water arced over my head as Deon exploded from the surface next to me. I retaliated, launching myself and tackling him around the waist. We both crashed under the water, struggling for the upper hand. We'd always wrestled. Rolling around on mattresses we'd stolen from neighbouring rooms, or numbering up in muddy games of league. I always lost.

After he'd thrown me across the water a few times, I went limp and he let go. We were both laughing now, unrestrained laughter that rolled on and on, each of us provoking the other until we were left breathless, with tears running down our faces. The warmth of our friendship and the intimacy of the moment overwhelmed me with feelings I didn't understand. If I didn't laugh, I would explode.

Eventually the laughter retreated to chuckles and then smiles. Before the silence became awkward, Deon pitched back and cast his hands wide, floating away while looking up at the stars. His chest was rising and falling after the exertion of wrestling and laughing. He looked peaceful. Deon's mind was normally a jumble of agitated thoughts and half-baked plans. Seeing him just floating in the ocean was beautiful. I fell back and joined him.

Time vanished as we lay there, suspended in the saltwater with the sounds of rolling waves to soothe us. Streaky clouds created patterns against the pinprick stars. Occasionally

we would bump into each other, surprised at the presence of another body while we were lost in our thoughts. Mine were wandering, loose and unhindered, picking up threads and discarding them before finding others and stitching them together.

The silence strung out, taut, waiting for me to prick it.

“Are you gay?” I instantly wanted to swallow the words. I didn’t want to start here. I didn’t want to start at all.

I was met with the sound of small waves lapping the sand as we drifted closer to the beach.

I sat up. “Look, I’m sorry. I...”

The kiss was softer than I expected. Although, I didn’t know what to expect. I had never imagined it, but for some reason, I didn’t expect it to be so charged with promise, so achingly tender. It tasted like the ocean.

The tenderness was soon replaced with urgency as Deon put his hand through my hair and pulled me in tighter. Our lips crushed together as he forced his tongue into my mouth. I grabbed his hip pulling him closer, feeling his firm, angular body. This was raw and real, far removed from what I had imagined for my first. My head was on fire with desire. He ground his hips forward, seeking more contact.

I pushed him away.

“I...I am...I...” I couldn’t find the words. I couldn’t find the thoughts.

“Well, I guess you know now,” Deon said, rising.

He was standing in knee-deep water now, facing me with the ocean behind him. We’d seen each other naked, in the showers after footy games and swimming on the holidays. This was different. Now it felt salacious. I didn’t know where to look. Guilt and shame crested and broke over me. I didn’t look away.

The moment was shattered.

“Hey, who’s that,” Deon shouted, “Oi, you. That’s our stuff.” He ran past me, knees lifting high to clear the water and race towards the beach.

I turned around to see someone running off. Deon started in pursuit before he realised he was naked. He stopped, returning to where we had dumped our gear. I hurried out of the water to join him, finding our clothes cast about. He was already searching through them.

“He got my wallet.”

“Any money?” I asked.

“No. Nothing valuable. Fuck.”

We stood there, naked, the moment lost. I was thankful. I was terrified of what to do next. What would have happened?

We dried off and pulled our clothes back on in silence before starting the walk back to school. It was weird, we normally had dozens of conversations we could pick up at any moment. An inane argument about some band, a joke about the teachers, a scrap of gossip about one of the boarders. Tonight, we had nothing. Now there was a wall. I had never wanted normal more than then.

We made it the entire way to school without a single word. I kept looking across at him, but he kept his head down as he set a punishing pace. When we made it back to the Mango Trees we stood across from each other, still and silent. I was terrified.

Deon broke first. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.” He still wouldn’t look at me.

I breathed out. He could tell I was relieved. “Yep.” I turned away before he could say more.

I snuck past Davo and made it back to my room, but sleep evaded me. A weight was pressing down on my chest. Self-doubt, fear, uncertainty. What would happen tomorrow? Had I lost my best friend? Did I kiss him back? But I liked girls. The magazines under my mattress said I liked girls. Why did I kiss him back? Why couldn’t I stop thinking about him standing there, bathed in moonlight with the ocean behind him, shadows across the curve of his hips...

I must have slept, because I missed breakfast and almost missed chapel. Sneaking past a few pews to find my seat, I sat as opening prayers started. He wasn't there.

I was distractedly searching for Deon as we filed out, so I didn't notice the principal until he spoke.

"Julian, may I steal you for a moment?"

Brother Mike was friendly. About as friendly as a principal could be. You could tell he cared about us. There was a rumour he was sleeping with one of the teachers. Maybe that's why he wasn't as mean as the other Brothers.

He led me to some benches and smiled encouragingly as I sat down. The image of Deon standing in the moonlight rushed back to me. My stomach clenched with apprehension.

"When did you last see Deon yesterday?"

No pleasantries. Straight to the point.

I paused. I probably looked thoughtful, but my mind was a jumble of raw emotions. "Just after dinner. We walked back to the dorms." The lie settled between us, extending out into an awkward silence. I couldn't stand it. "What's happening, is he okay?"

Brother Mike looked sad. Like I had failed a test that he wanted me to pass. He seemed to weigh my answer before he replied.

"Deon is fine. He won't be at school today."

He stood, looking at me like he wanted to say more. Instead, he walked towards the chapel, leaving me to continue with my day.

I didn't see Deon for that entire week. Then, I didn't see him for the next. No one seemed

to know why he wasn't at school. The teachers told me he had gone home and couldn't say when he would be back. I tried calling him, but no one would pick up. I was alone now. Alone and confused. The feeling of Deon's kiss intruded into my thoughts daily, his body carved in shadows was never far behind. I had no one to talk to, even if I could explain how I felt. I continued with boarding life, hoping for things to get easier. They didn't.

One night after dinner I was walking the boarding grounds. I didn't want to go back to the dorm. It was always rowdy before lights out and I needed to be alone. I wandered aimlessly, like Davo. No destination in mind, just lazy loops and private thoughts.

Eventually I found myself at the Mango Trees. Base camp for our many adventures. The floodlights were on, casting shadows through the grove of gnarled trees. I sat on one of the circular benches that ringed a trunk. I just sat there, looking out at the oval. A few kids wandered past. Their laughter was jarring as the school was preparing for sleep. I just sat, staring at the ground.

"Julian, shouldn't you be in bed?"

I looked up numbly as Brother Mike approached. I had avoided him since our chat after chapel. He didn't look angry.

"Yes, sorry Brother. I'll head back now."

He sat next to me before I could get up. "You look like you need to talk."

I didn't move. I didn't speak. I was close to tears.

"I guess you're wondering what happened to Deon?"

He didn't wait for me to answer.

"Deon was suspended. The police contacted us that morning we spoke. They found his wallet in the wrong place, with the wrong people."

I looked up, confused.

"We sent Deon home while they investigated. He claimed he had his wallet stolen. He

said he was with you that night”

I felt sick. “It did get stolen. I was with him. At the beach.” My voice was flat.

Brother Mike smiled sadly. “I know. Today they picked up the kid who had Deon’s wallet. He claimed he found it on the beach. He said that he saw two of our students in the water.”

Brother Mike didn’t explain what else the kid had seen.

“The police have stopped investigating Deon and he has been invited back to school.”

I didn’t know what to say. I felt the world crashing around me. I had been caught out in a lie. The principal knew I had broken out of the school. Did he also know...But Deon was in the clear now. He was coming back. The taste of his lips intruded into my thoughts.

“When is he back?” I couldn’t look at Brother Mike. I kept my voice level, head down studying the cracks in the bitumen.

“He isn’t. His parents are sending him to another school.”

I looked up, the tears were almost there.

“I am sorry, Julian.”

He looked awkward now. Christian Brothers didn’t have the tools for this. He placed a hand on my shoulder and I flinched. He withdrew the gesture of comfort.

“If you are late for lights out, tell Mr. Davidson that you were with me.”

Then he stood and walked away.

The floodlights switched off, decaying to glowing filaments amongst the canopy. Alone, and shrouded in the protective darkness of the Mango Trees, I cried.