

Take Care of Her

Michael Botur

I'm drivin and Boner's havin a nana nap and I notice Boner's gotten a bit of blood on the steering wheel so he'll be in big shit with Wolf if he doesn't lick it off. Maybe I'll lick the cuff of my bomber jacket and wipe it off when we stop at the lights. I don't wanna touch it, I'll probly get AIDS off the cunt, numbera hoes he's rooted. His specs are planted into his deep, hollow, black eye sockets. The glasses seem like a dare to punch him, an invitation. I've seen him scrap before and they never come loose when he's scrappin. It's a bit drafty, so he's got my Confederate flag, full of cigarette burns, wrapped round him, since he left his bomber jacket at Val's. I don't call him Nigger Eyes like the others do, I wouldn't rark him up like that, even while he's sleeping, he'd probly waste me. I'm pretty skinny, my tats just look real scary and I've got all these scars on my scalp so when I shave my ginge-fringe off I look real mean, like a real peckerwood. I slide up behind these homies as I'm waiting to turn past the sugar mill and they're all wearin blue scarves over their faces and lookin at the Val but they take their eyes back pretty quick. Can't blame 'em for staring – it's a Chrysler Valiant Regal 770 hardtop, Sahara, that's the paint shade, Sahara like sand burnt, almost white. It's been a big day, you can tell I've got a temper, we had us a bit of a maul at the mall – ha! That rhymes - I should tell Val about that – and it's actually made me a bit upset, the ruckus, there's a whole story behind it, and I don't think we can go back there anymore which sucks since it's a good excuse to see Val at work.

Boner said he needed to see me actually steal some shit before he could trust me, he's been tellin all the other brothers he think I'm, like, wiretapped or whatever. Thing he don't know, though, is I nicked some coon tunes on disc.

I slip a KRS-One CD into the head unit. KRS-One is real old school. I'm just learning about all the old hip hop, going back to the start, catchin up on, like, this whole solar system that I never noticed before. No one's s'posda know I listen to that shit, I'll get the hell beating if someone snitches on me. Me and Boner were lifting a few CDs from this record store, like, last week when Boner was getting all up in that Punjabi chick's face, calling her a Jewish puppet and that, and I stashed a few rap albums down my jacket, and Boner started hassling these gooks in the food court and we had that big ruck with the Indian security guard and he recognised me from the thing and—

Boner yawns and twists. Luckily his eyes don't open. I stare at the bald patch taking over his scalp and shake my head. How old is this guy? If you ask me, he can only smash everyone 'cause he's so grown up, the brother's like 30 or some shit. I drop the Val down to like 40 kays. Don't wanna wake him over a speed bump.

The Valiant's mine to drive for the week 'cause I won skols against Bubba and Piglet and some of the other boys. All of us patched boys, the Brockworth Boots, we all got puke on our jeans that night, that was a legend night, a Norse epic, we all got egg burgers and had a food fight in the fountain. Lucky that Boner wasn't there. That cunt would drown ya if he had the chance.

There's only five of us actual patched boys with the proper swazzie b burned into our hands and the patch sewn into our jackets. Wolf's the main one, then there's me, Piglet and Bubba, right, and Boner just sorta became a

main dude when I was away overseas. Aw, there's Val, I spose, Wolf's little sis, but she really just soaks the blood out of our jackets. She whispered the secret one time and I got a hard-on 'cause her tongue tickled my ear. *Cold water, Ginge. Make it cold.* You should see how tight them black jeans are on her little candlestick legs, how she folds her arms and hunches her shoulders, standing at the traffic lights when we get into scraps with boy racers, like a aunty, all concerned about ripping our clothes, 'cep she's only like 17.

The Valiant isn't even Boner's, we've been holding it for Wolf, Val's bro. Wolf got the car off his olds, and it's been in the family for like thirty years and you're not allowed to eat in it. Wolf'd got sent up a while back and he told us to take care of her. He was my best mate. He'd been minding a tinny house for another brother from one of the country-boy crews, out in the Boondocks, when they found him – all to do with that manslaughter – well, the paper said it was a manslaughter. I wouldn'ta called it that.

I glide into the Eagle's Nest real calm and leave Boner kippling in the front seat. Soon as he wakes up, he'll go on about how he wasn't sleeping at all, that's typical of him, like a robot, pretends to have no weaks aspects. I'll be able to hear what he's up to 'cause there's no glass left in the front door of the Eagle's Nest and you can hear people comin up to the house. I have a quick look round the kitchen. It's all sparkly and the tomato sauce has been wiped off the wall and the American History X poster's been fixed with sticky tape. Val musta been round, wearing yellow rubber gloves crusted with Jif and an old rugby shirt, Val makes anything look good. I think she's vacuumed the can tabs out of the couch too and chucked Bubba's bandages in the bin. She has this chin and cheekbones that would shatter with just one punch, man, that's why we

always make her sit in the middle of the back seat of the Valiant when we go out and smash up the cemetery or whatevs. She sits in the car. We don't even swear around her, or talk about kykes or nothin. We told her bro we'd take care of her.

The Nest is a bigarse haunted house with enough rooms that if you fall asleep with a beer in bed and it leaks all through ya mattress, you can just chuck the mattress in any old room upstairs, no one goes up there. I step down into the basement where it's warm and shut my bedroom door nice 'n soft in case Boner hears and fire up 14wwwwords.blogspot.com, that's my blog, and start rippin them coon tunes onto my hard drive. I stop in at Stormfront.org but I don't post anything. I went through this phase around the time I went to the Old Country where I was making tonnes of connections, like real political stuff, and we were gonna have a actual revolution, and I was yarning to Val heaps online about white values at first, then it turns into chats about just, like, stuff, you know, like tapes we used to listen to when we were kids, and whether our belly button's a innie or a outtie. Stuff not even relevant to Rahowa and the End of Days. Stuff like how Boner caught me in the shower rapping into the shampoo bottle and he just left the shower door open and he's never said nothin about it, like it's ammo he's got saved up. I never found the guts to hang out with Val on her own, no matter how intimate our chats got, it's never been just us two. I'd need an excuse to go round to her parents' place, pretend I'm there to get some of Wolf's gears to send to him Inside.

I finish ripping the music off the CDs I've pinched. I got a feeling mine won't last long if Boner finds them. Just, like, even saying Wassup to a nigger's enough to get

you kicked out of Brockworth Boots. You're sposda have your tat burned off it's hard to burn a burn. We just drove over Squirrel's hand the one time we had to de-patch someone, made him get all liquored up and lie in the driveway and close his eyes and we had to drive over it a couple times but it mashed up his hand like a hedgehog and the infection made the swastika go all smeary. We still didn't get blood on the Val then.

I keep going to the curtains and checking that they're pulled tight. I don't like Boner sleeping in the Val, she's not a toy, she's got a 360 cid six engine, she's got a 110 inch wheel base, she should be my ride, not his. Well, yeah, okay, it's Wolf's, but Wolf's mainly my mate, Boner's just the Johnny come lately. I kick the toilet door in, expectin to see Boner studying me with them glasses of his.

In the Old Country, he said his son liked this kinda music, I remember, and those words felt warm.

'This here's between you and me,' I go to the computer. The desktop background is a picture of me, Wolf and Val. Val's between us, but her tits are pressed against my arm. Val's Valkyrie88 online. She's always good to talk to when you're on curfew. Just staring at the little piccie of her face in the chat box is enough to give you a semi, it's the challenge that gets you, like her face is a padlock you have to grope in the dark to find the combination of words to open, but it feels so good once you let that butterfly-laugh loose.

The door turns to daylight and Boner crosses the floor in one step and punches me hard in the guts and I fold like a bent staple, sliding CDs under the bed with my boot.

'Shoulda woke me,' he goes, and leans in real close. His breath smells like dead seaweed, old and rotting on a

beach. I can hardly see him 'cause my eyes have gone all wet. He snatches the Valiant key off my computer desk and turns around to leave, but then he takes my chair and opens up my email, staring deep into the computer, making it afraid of him.

'Got some spam on here. From, what, Egypt by the looks of it.'

My heart explodes.

'Right here, in ya computer letters,' Boner's going, 'It's all written in googly talk. Indian. This ya mate, one of ya Indian mates? Ya mate, eh, ya mate? Tell me all ya sins, Peckerwood.'

'Probly meant for you.'

'Wanna say that one more time? Eh? Didn't think so.' He deletes my email and says he's gotta go finish something, and borrows my samurai sword, and comes back later with a week's worth of Kronic, and this porno with a blond teenage cleaning lady getting put on the block that he makes me watch.

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Val's flat's in a posh part of town where there's some grass in front of the houses instead a out back, and trees that drip little fruits on the pavement, plus park benches with no tag on them. We used to go there when her parents were away at political conferences and have the mean piss-ups, and she'd always do the vacuuming the next morning while we lay snoring on the couch.

I'm on the BMX 'cause Boner won't give the Val keys back unless I arm-wrestle him for them and he'd waste me if I tried. I drop my bike on the grass, but then I just stand there on her doorstep. Before I ring the bell, I've gotta get my conversation ready. I shoulda done some baking for her, baked cinnamon rolls or something. I get this memory coming back of when she was screaming at

these tourists outside the club, I couldn't even tell where they were from, Timbuktu or whatever, and Wolf ended up doing these big hooks with a fistful of car keys 'cause he didn't have proper metal on him. Shit man, he's lucky he didn't get blood on her that night. Val can't really fight, she just starts the fights and us boys finish it for her.

I turn around and step down.

'Oi oi, white boy. Where ya garn?'

Val's standing in her doorway, wearing a singlet, turning an apple round in her hands and sniffing for a good place to bite it. Her hair's stacked in a bun on top of her head and I can see beneath where her singlet ends there's oven cleaner on her belly. I stare at her possum slippers because I can't handle the way the morning sun makes all the blue burst out of her eyes and her freckles glow orange and how her hair puts out light. It's not the blondest hair you can get, not like platinum blonde, but I like her hair 'cause it's like a living thing, it's the colour of a tropical beach, banana with caramel under it, and it's not even dyed.

'Nothing. I mean, nowhere.'

'There's nothing new from Wolf, if that's what you're here for. I would've texted you if there was.'

I half-turn around, facing the fence that run down the driveway.

'You were here to talk about Wolf?'

'I guess.'

'Well were you or weren't you?' She has the **TINIEST** little shorts on, bro, she must've had them since she was, like, 12, and it's weird to see a singlet on her, it's better than Wolf's Blood & Honour t-shirt that shrunk in the wash and only fits her, it's like a whole different dimension of her... like you know how you

look in a suit when you've gotta stand in the dock and tell the judge you're doing all these anger management courses and you promise to be a good widdle boy.

'Get your bald head in here.' She puts a cup of tea on a magazine beside me and I slurp it real noisy then I say Sorry.

'Don't apologise, dick.'

'Sorry.'

'You're such a dork sometimes.'

'I know.'

I stare around the room, looking out the window and shit, then I pulled a red box from a pocket and go, 'Ciggy?'

'I quit.' She puts her apple on the table and spins it.

'Me too.' I crumple up the pack, thinking *FUCK ME! THERE WAS STILL SIX OR SEVEN IN THERE!*

'You made that tea real quick.'

'I put the kettle on like ten minutes ago. Saw you standing at the end of the driveway on ya bike and I was like, Better make myself useful.'

'You're always useful,' I go, then look at the fireplace, the TV remote, anything.

'So I saw you in the mall,' she goes, and my cock and balls shrivel up for a moment. 'Like, in the music shop.'

'What's these?' I go, pretending I didn't hear her. I reach forward and lift up the Durex box on the coffee table. There's some fingers of sun stroking her hair.

'I said, I saw you in the mall.'

'These yours?'

She laughs. 'No. I just totally leave somebody else's random condoms on the coffee table.'

'Wolf know you got these?'

'Quit changing the subject. So, hey, I saw you shaking hands with, like, that coon security guard?'

‘Vikram.’

‘Yeah – eh? What? You sound like you’re friends with him.’

‘Just a guess. They’re all called that.’

She crosses her legs. I don’t think there’s anything in the world smoother than the legs of a 17 year old. I can remember her pestering me and Wolf when we were playing WWE, trying to make us bounce her on the tramp. I can remember the purple scabs on her tiny little knees. ‘You gonna talk to me about that? You been running with them people instead a us, rolling in the mud?’ She slides along towards my armchair and whispers and I can see down her singlet just a smidge. Her tits are so small, they don’t even hardly make a bump. They’re all nipple, bro. *‘Tell me all your deepest blackest secrets.’*

‘Put your phone away,’ I go, ‘I know you’re recording me.’ She folds it up and plops it into her handbag and goes, ‘I wasn’t.’

‘You should be in school. I’ll drop you – I’ll get a taxi– sit on my handlebars – ’

‘Tellmetellmetellme! Boner gapped it and you, like, did you bribe the guard or something? Like, you were speaking Swahili to him or what the fuck?’

‘He can’t go back to the mall.’

‘He’ll be dropping me off, in the mornings. I’m going for a job there, in the jewellers, that’s where I was when I saw you.’

‘Can’ta been me.’

She folds her arms and makes a double chin. ‘Your tea’s going cold. He needs to hang on to the Valiant. Wolf said to take care of her.’

I rock forward and almost stand up. ‘Not my decision to make.’

'IT'S WOLF'S. And he said Boner could take me out.'

'You're too little.'

'YOU ARE, MISTER BMX.'

'If you say so.'

'I do.'

Her eyes are two stones that stand out in a clear river. What does she do when she's not with us boys? I don't think she hangs out with girls, just chats on Facebook and works and comes for cruises and starts new courses that she doesn't finish. Hair and makeup school, drama classes, fuckin' barista school.

'Before you go –

'Yup, yeah I was just –

'You should probably know we're dating.'

'Who? You and... ? You can't – what, who?'

She laughs and goes into the kitchen and runs the tap and squirts dishwashing liquid into the sink. 'You're a bonehead,' she goes.

'Boner? You and that prick? Get the fuck out.'

Val lights a smoke and blows it straight at me. The smoke obeys her pretty, cruel lips. Her parents will kick her to the kerb when they come back and smell it. 'You shoulda taken me first,' she shrugs, and takes her top off and walks out into her hallway. I twist and stare at her neat, angular naked back. Someone's put a big fuck-off eagle tattoo across her shoulders and the letters spelling *FEATHERWOOD* in big Goth letters, they've marked her, defaced my rightful property. 'I have to get ready. He's taking me to my second interview.' I hear a rumbling outside and dash over to the window and pull the lace back.

'Stick around, Boner's after you,' she calls from the bedroom.

‘Me? What’d I do?’

She reappears wearing a Blood & Honour shirt, long sleeves, black, tight and tiny as they come. ‘Don’t ask me. It’s between you two.’

So she’s wearing THAT to a job interview? Pride is pride, but damn... too far. I linger on the doorstep. Boner reclines in the driver seat and revs the engine while his arms spread out like condor wings, long and sharp across the seats. I hope he’s cleaned that damn blood off her.

I get on my bike and hover at the foot of her steps as she locks up. ‘What’d you mean before, “You should’ve taken me first?”’

Val blows Boner a kiss and tosses her keys up and catches them. ‘Taken me to my *job interview*, retard.’

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You have to pick a brother up from work, that’s a rule... besides, it’s scarier to NOT pick him up than to pick him up. Don’t ask me how I managed to score the Val for the day. Boner brings home these mean pure red cuts of meat and I know that’s half the reason Wolf and him became mates, the free feed hook-ups, Val told me on chat when I was in the Old Country hiding out. I’d get these mental images of the boys wiping the palms of their hands on their boot-cut jeans and burping and scraping dried barbecue sauce out of the TV remote and Wolf jutting his chin up at Val and goin, ‘Want some meat, Boner? Take her. Take as much as ya want.’

Boner’s got his metal apron on and it tinkles as he steals the driver’s seat while I’m standing in a dried mud-puddle having a ciggy, and the whole car wobbles and he doesn’t even unlock the door for me, I have to reach through the passenger window. Fuck he’s a rude bastard, after I’ve come all this way. He hasn’t given me gas

money or nothing, all he's done is give me that boning look that shears your meat off your skeleton and exposes ya core to him.

He turns the ignition and the Val purrs perfectly for him.

'Then he switches off and sits there in his armour.

I feel sick for a second and reach under the seat and fish around to make sure there aren't any coon tunes under there. I have so much hidden nigger-loving shit stashed inside my head, it's like I've hidden a whole country and there's an explorer who's gonna be famous when he conquers it. One time I even got with a Islander chick, I'll be in mega-trouble for that if anyone narks. I was wearing a cap and she couldn't see my shamrock tat.

'Bet you wish they still made Valiants, eh. One of a kind.'

'Make one yaself. Factories've all gone Gook.' I look at his cauliflower ear. His head is a pineapple, jagged nose like SS lightning bolts and a real pointy chin and real sharp teeth 'cause half of them've been broken. He's two inches taller than me and his Doc Martens've got the biggest heels out of anyone.

There is a long bit of white noise. We stare straight ahead onto the highway running past the meatworks and roll smokes but we don't light them right away. I'm wondering if I have any knives that'd go through his chainmail. I doubt it.

'Boner? Drive already.'

'Wood: there's bin another letter.'

'I didn't get no letter?'

'Maybe he doesn't trust gingers.'

'What'd it say? The letter?'

'Said for us to take care of her.'

‘He said *us*?’

Boner just turns the key and stomps the pedal.

It’s Wolf’s Day and we all meet at the park overlooking the boondocks where you get a sweet view of the city. You can see this swamp that gets pink in the sunset. There’s heaps of seagulls over it. There’s more than one car we’ve pushed into the swamp when the engine started smelling like burning puke. Coupla stolen ones too that we done some dark shit in and had to dispose of.

We all wriggle out of the Val and crack cans of bourb and light smokes and take photos on Bubba’s iPhone of us doin some salutes. That’s half our typical day, I swear to God, saluting and smoking in photos. You light a smoke when you sit down inside; you light a smoke when you stand up outside; you always find a reason to smoke. Val’s sucking a smoke out of Boner’s packet of B&H and he’s lighting it for her. He reckons B&H secretly stands for Blood & Honour and they’re the only smokes not made by Jews.

There’s a parcel of fish and chips in the boot. The Sand People used about a whole weekend newspaper to wrap it, there’s like ten scoops of chips in there. Bubba tries to give me a deep fried hot dog but I don’t feel like eating. I keep checking the gravel with the toe of my boot, turning it over to see if there is still blood on any of the stones. It shoulda been me that went down, that got sent up, however ya wanna put it. Wolf’s the only one that know about all that.

‘This here’s where Wolf got done for that murk,’ Piglet goes, cramming a fistful of chips into his mouth. I don’t know how the cunt eats when he’s got a neck brace on. He’s usually got a cast on one arm from punching car windows in, he’s got the mean road rage.

‘Manslaughter,’ I correct him.

‘It was a murk,’ Boner goes and punches the window. He’s lucky it doesn’t crack. I’m sposda take care of the Val and I’d have to take him out if he hurt her. ‘Murder of justice.’

‘He did technically get done for manslaughter’s all I’m sayin.’

‘IT WAS FOR THE BROTHERHOOD.’ Boner’s looking straight through the windshield and no one is breathing. ‘I yarned to his lawyer. Bet you didn’t know that. Talked to him, I did. There’s bin letters from a witness. Someone’s got it on their phone, a video. Might get a retrial. Where were you again that night? We never sorted that out.’

Piglet puts his fistful of chips back in the newspaper and wipes his hands on his jeans. Bubba’s mouth goes tiny and hard.

I spot this foursome of tropical monkeys sharing shellfish from a bucket and a bottle of Pepsi. I spot people like that pretty easy... comes with the territory when you’re a Boot, you’re always on the lookout for who’s gonna smash you or who you’ve gotta smash. I walk away from the boys and stomp right over the monkeys’ tabletop without looking at them – Boner should dig it, but when I look over at him, he’s just kicking a rubbish bin. The monkeys are eye-to-eye with the eyelets of my boots. Bubba and Piglet start drifting over towards me and the monkeys move to the far corner of the park. By the time the boys get to me, I’m a hero again, just for stomping on some niggers’ dinner. I only done it so I wouldn’t get my own stomping. If Boner gave the command and Piglet was tweaking...

Val sucks her smoke and says she’s cold. Boner comes up and yanks my arm and wraps it around her

and we huddle at the foot of a big, shiny red slide. The air is blue, now, and the shrinking headlights of the monkeys driving away mean we're all alone on this planet together. 'Here's some warm,' he goes, 'Our Ginge here wants to fuck you, he does. Fuck her, brother, fuck the woman. He wants to fuck you. Fuck her. Go on, do it. Make babies.'

'Do not,' I go, burying my hands in my pockets and stroking my pocket knife. Feels like someone's smashed warm egg on my face.

'Too bad for you,' Val goes, 'I'm *magnificent*.' She laughs and catches the laugh with her hand like a sneeze. At least making fun of me warms her up one percent. Boner can be such a dick, Wolf only brought him in 'cause we weren't gonna have enough soldiers with him locked up. I hope Boner gets what's coming to him, I oughta talk Bubba and Piglet into jumping him, except I'd probly have to slip them a few bucks. Might need some of the East Side boys on the case too. I don't even like to think about jumpin him by myself. It'd be like trying to fight a lamppost.

'GINGE!' he screams, out of the fuckin blue, 'I arksed you a question before.'

'What question?'

'I ARKSED where you were the night Wolf got done over for that fuckin' murder, well, wasn't even a murder, it was a stitch-up. Since we're all here and it's the anniversary of him getting done, you better talk.' He's let Val go and she's locking herself in the car and he's rising to his feet. I feel like he's caught me reading his emails, not that he can write, probably.

'She's not a featherwood, officially, by the way. You shouldn't've inked her up.'

'The only one who ain't a Wood is you, brother.'

‘How come you never done time?’ Bubba or Piglet go, standing metres away in the night. I can’t tell which one’s said it. They’ve got literally one brain between them, bro.

‘WE ASKED YOU– ’

‘BOOOOOOOOOOOOYS!’

A scream from the car. *Val*. I bolt quicker than ever, trying to control my breath so I don’t drown or stumble. My jeans rash my thighs and the zippers on my bomber jacket tinkle. ‘WHAT, VAL?!’ She’s in the passenger seat of the Val with her feet out, flinging something out of the seat towards the bin.

‘EEW, GET IT AWAYYYYYYY!’

I hit the car at the same time as the other boys, we’re all panting. ‘YOU OKAY? What the hell is it? Those monkeys say somethin to you?’

‘EEEEEEWWWW! They’re here!’ She’s holding a CD booklet away from her by her fingertips, and has her nose clamped shut with her other hand, and Piglet and Bubba’s faces start melting. They spit their smokes out and stick their fingers in their mouths and start making puking noises like YUUUUUCK, GROOOOOSSSS as they snap my rap CDs and flick through the booklets.

‘Gimme the keys, Ginge,’ says a voice from behind me.

They catch me on the edge of the forest. They don’t budget their punches evenly. There are these triplets and combos of punches and kicks and elbows and half their punches miss and get wasted on my jacket, then long spaces when I think they’re done, then they do new shit to me while I try to cover my head. Someone sticks their finger in my ear. I watch the grass carpet to see if Boner’s specs’ll fall off but they don’t, no matter how hard he stomps me. It’s just science to him and he needs

his glasses to see the cause turn into effect. Piglet and Bubba boot me like a soccer ball until their chainmail aprons fall out of their bomber jackets and swing over me and that says that they're invincible and I need to give up looking for sharp sticks and just hug my knees.

I lie there in the muck for ages afterwards and it tastes gritty on my teeth and I can't see anything except the winking red planes a billion miles above. I can tell it starts raining because my lips have split open like burst water balloons and I need those sweet cold droplets on my lips to cool them. I'm a board of plaster that's been dropped from a roof into a dumpster, shattered but held together with a thin skin of paper.

I fall asleep with my arms for a blanket and when I wake, there's fog and the grass is wet. I hear him calling for me, but I stay silent. I have a bed of wet leaves, and swollen, hot ears for a pillow. My hands feel like gloves and there are chips of stone under my bleeding fingernails.

Vikram is his name, Vikram Chatwal. Security guard. I fucked his brother up, turned the guy's ribs to mush, made my ankle hurt; Wolf left his jacket under the guy's head "cause we thought he'd choke to death on his own blood if we just fucked off and left him. Thing was, we didn't call an ambo and it got mighty chilly overnight and he froze.

They done Wolf for it, because he left his jacket there. His mum'd wrote his name on the tag. I went back to the Old Country to make things right – see, that's where the Chatwal clan's from. Same place as me, even though I'm Aryan and they're, you know, mud people. I said I was goin over to study white culture in the Highlands and all that, learn how to read runes, but I

spent half the time washing dishes for the Chatwals and putting the word 'Sorry' into new sentences.

Now, Vikram pours his torch onto me and the light hurts; I just want to be left alone in the cold dark leaves. 'You are all dirty,' he tells me, 'Your skin is filthy. Why you are here? You should go home.'

'Preachin' to the converted, Vikram.'

'You can able to walk?'

'I think so. Ankle's a bit sore.'

He tsks and tuts and pulls me to my feet. It feels like I've been tumbled in a washing machine. 'Very dangerous here at night.'

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He drops me on the far side of the sugar mill, where people my colour ain't meant to go. I'm too bummed-out to say Cheers for the ride, and my jaw is made of glass anyway, it shatters every time I swallow. No one's ever told me my skin's dirty and filthy and disgusting before. I've lost the car keys to Boner, plus it would hurt to drive, anyway, with the skin on the palms of my hands black with dried blood and gravel and dust. She could be anywhere by now. You got to realise, Wolf won't inherit the car unless something happens to his sister. It's technically her car when she turns 18, I've even been there when Wolf and Val's pares are having posh dinner parties and talking about the estate. No wonder Wolf set up his own thing and didn't wanna go into the Party.

Everything drags, everything takes forever. My feet are these hefty clumps of flesh like the Elephant Man. Probly some broken toes. I see cats scurry away from me up ahead like I'm a leper. The night infiltrates the cracks on my scalp, frost creeping into my brain, chilling my head. A mum dressed in a apron comes out of a office building. Why has she got her kids with her? It must be

like 2am or something. The little curly-haired boys help her load a vacuum cleaner and mop and buckets into the back of a van and the niglets are going, Who's that man mummy? Why does he smell like a garden, mummy?'

'This way, this way,' the mum goes in her funny accent. 'He is all dirty.'

I walk right through this black neighbourhood, feeling creepy when the streetlights aren't on my back. This wouldn't be happening if I had the Val. I don't do Staunch Eyes, I just watch my feet dragging, the whole time. These niglets ride up on BMXs but they can smell that I'm too shagged-out to fight. There are leaves in my boots and I make a memo to myself to stop dressing in this rude boy bullshit and just wear sneakers and shorts, do you know how comfy that'd feel right now?

I recognise the hood more than I thought. In the blue moonlight, it's funny to see that it looks like the hood I come from – nails stickin outta the fences, boats on cinderblocks on people's lawns. I musta driven through here a few times, probly chuckin' eggs at the elders. Churches keep coming up. Some of them are open – at this time? Seriously? I start thinkin about Jesus and how sucky it must've been when the Jews and Romans were all whipping him. I think my stepdad used to take me to Sunday School when I was like five. Jesus would hate me so much right now.

I stand still on a manhole cover. I can't go on, I have to sit down, have to get a drink. This church calls out to me, it's not even a peaked church, just a flat building that looks like it used to be a fire station. There is a heat coming off it, a pulse, the smell of bodies. I can taste blood in my mouth, yeasty marmite, a bit salty, and sort of sweet, sort of familiar, I dunno, like instant coffee.

Before I know it my nose is against the glass of the front doors and my heart is thumping to the rhythm of the lungs inside. They've put Cain and Abel into a song, and it's real catchy, and it gets me thinking.

*

By the time I get to Val's place the birds are screaming in the trees and there is a stripe of orange across the sky and I can see the sky filling with smoke as the factories light up, their smokestacks like giant ciggies planted in the earth. The Valiant looks like a huge cream pitbull sculpted out of the driveway. Its grille is a set of gleaming sharp teeth.

They're going to be inside. They're gonna fuck me up some more, but I'm too tired to save myself. Would I even run with these boys if we didn't hate on people together?

I meant to go to the Eagle's Nest, I think, but I'm not sure. I'm at Val's, anyway, it's where my feet have driven me. Her front door is open and there is music on, jagging guitar making the air full of spikes. Each cussword makes the air angry and dangerous. I just want to fall into her shower and sit on the floor and turn the water up hot enough to burn my skin off.

I walk into the centre of the lounge and it takes my eyes a few seconds to take in what I'm seeing. They're these columns of flesh the colour of a cuppa tea, except for their boots, big black glistening caterpillars with yellow stitching, and their undies and jeans crumpled round their ankles. Blue light comes from the media mixer on the computer screen. Val is riding Boner while the white smoke from a cigarette loops and darts around them. Her body is half blue, half tan; Boner has more shadow clinging to him, except for his arms, which are colourful, they look like green snakeskin, all those

intertwining dragons and crosses and lightning bolts. He is sitting on his metal armour, it's useless, he's naked, he's mine. There is blood on Boner's white boxer shorts, making his lap shiny. Val is bleeding on him. It looks like she is being tossed on a wave, trying to ride it, wincing, grinning. She is a newborn baby to me, eyes tightly squinted closed, tears making her cheeks glow, mouth gnashing. I hate seeing her cry. We aren't supposed to get blood on her.

Boner notices me standing just inside the door and tips Val off him. He doesn't stand up. She sits on the carpet and wraps her arms around her knees. Boner reached for his smokes. His dick is sneezing as it deflates.

'I'm'a take care of Val. You can't stop me.'

'Wolf didn't kill that coon,' he goes. 'The other boys don't know yet.' I don't say nothing. 'You killed him, I'm positive. And you went a'hiding. Did you even go to the Old Country?'

'I did, but my brain was sorta here the whole time.'

'Fuck's that sposda mean?'

'Unfinished biz.' I nod at Val. She's all big eyes, inflamed and raw, and as I look her over. She reaches for a smoke and starts rubbing the goose flesh on her arms. I wonder if she even enjoys smoking. Boner doesn't even chuck her a blanket or nothing. One time we snuck into this golf course and had a picnic and it got all overcast and I wrapped a Third Reich flag around her and made up stories about how many people I'd wasted and she kept squeezing my forearm with, like, excitement. The red flag made her skin glow. That was then.

'You checked the videos on her phone? She recorded the whole thing, the beat-down and everything.'

‘I’m entitled to anything I want on my phone,’ Val goes, shuffling back across the carpet. Boner isn’t worried. His eyes are fixed on me, wondering what I’ve got inside my bloody, muddy jacket. I lick the salty boogers dangling from my nose like icicles.

‘Brother – they’ll let Wolf out, they see that vid. Lock you up instead. He’ll want his car back.’

Val is reaching for something in her purse and me and Boner both yell out, ‘LEAVE IT.’

‘THE LAW SAYS YOU’RE NOT ALLOWED TO TOUCH MY PHONE!’

‘I’m takin care of her, brother. Been thinkin about a few things, I have. Cain and Abel, shit like that.’

‘Go on then,’ Boner goes, finding his glasses on the back of the couch. ‘Tell us the story, brother.’ Val trembles as Boner sits there with his undies around his knees, blowing smoke, and I sit on the arm of the couch and tell him the Cain and Abel story, watching the reflection in the window to see if Bubba and Piglet sneak up on me.

After I’ve given him the story, and the sky’s turned yellow and blue, Boner goes, ‘And what about her?’

We both look at Val. She stands up and hides behind the curtains, saying something about Who’s gonna take things to Wolf in lockup, yack yack yack.

I go over and lock the front door and slide the chain. ‘She ain’t part of the story,’ I go, and snatch Val’s phone out of her hands and start deleting all her vids. ‘Take care of her, brother.’

‘I’ll make some room in the boot,’ Boner goes, standing up and stepping into his jeans, going to work.

