

Urban Legend

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Sarmila's gone and called Josh a couch potato and she really shouldn't have done that 'cause it's encouraged him to lie there envisioning THE couch potato. Like, the *character*. Josh Paniora presents: The Couch Potato. Like what if an actual Marvel character had the properties of a potato? Like getting blasted with fire only makes him stronger. And he can, like, go into a mashed form and slide under doors.

Or maybe it'd be more of a DC character. Yeah, DC comics would give him \$2m for the rights to the Couch Potato, definitely. Crazy characters can sell. Just look at *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

'Tell me,' Sarmila says, shifting the li'l baby from right arm to left. 'Tell me what you're thinking.'

Josh opens up a fresh *Angry Birds*. He knocks a pig out of a pond, firing a banana at it. 'Nah. It's stupid.'

'Your case manager signed off a letter. Says you have to apply for that air force thing or it gets cut off.'

'It?'

'Your benefit. *Our* benefit. You have to do this air force test... I think they've got a place they need to fill. You have to do this.'

'I don't hafta do nothin.'

'You'll do awesome, baby,' Sarmila says. Sarmila has a boy up to her knees and has a boy in the crook of her arm, playing with her earrings. Her third boy is drawing on the—fridge? The little—

'DREDD!' Josh barks from the couch. 'Cut that out

right this instant, ya bloody...' Josh mumbles 'fucker.'

Dredd glares at him. Who'da thought a six-year-old could hate a grown-up. Dredd doesn't really enjoy doing much else in life except for drawing on stuff. Big fat Crayola markers are his favourite. They come in about 60 different shades and he knows all the names and Josh texts him occasionally, when he feels like playing stepdad. Josh knows Dredd pretty well for a kid he doesn't *have* to know that well, seeing as the kid's not even his.

Sarmila's sisters, they're all in education, and they've always judged Sarmila's boyfs like they're on *American Idol*. Josh has never rated well. Meh. He could ankle this family shit if he wanted, any time. They're lucky he's here at all.

Josh doesn't want to sit up. It's easier to lurk in a bath of sleepiness. His arms have got a good heat goin on, under the pile of community newspapers and Countdown mailers. The mailers make good blankets. There might be an invention in that. Sarmila never should have woken him. He would've dreamt up more aspects of the Couch Potato if she hadn't woken him.

'Aren't you going out? Shouldn't you put them in the car and... you know.'

'You said YOU'D take them, Jacob.'

The teeny little boy is eating the big hoop earring now and it's bothering Sarmila, Sarmila winces and says 'Ow.' Why's Sarmila bother getting all prettied up around the house? What's the point? It's just a dumbarse flat. No one cares how she looks at home. He oughta sit her down and tell her the realities of life.

'If you can't be "fucked", as you say, then I'll do it.' Sarmila tugs Rocky's Disney backpack off its hook, fills three bottles with juice, puts the juice in with three bags of chips.

'Sweet. Love ya, Mila. Bye-zee-bye.'

He is Macauley Culkin. He is Ferris Bueller. This is his

day off. There is no more titillating sensation than being left home alone, nothing in the world feels more exciting—except getting smoked.

He shakes off the newspapers and circulars and kicks them under the couch. He turns the best ring on the stovetop on, the one he always scrubs with steel wool to keep it in perfect condition.

Next: Josh fetches his spottle. He keeps his spottle in that li'l cupboard that's too high for Sarmila or Dredderick or Rocky or Jonn or anyone to reach. He pulls it down, carefully unwraps it from its towel.

He takes his packet of Kronik from the cupboard, careful to pull out the precious little cake of happiness without spilling any powder. He inserts his two favourite bone-handled flat non-serrated butter knives into the element rings. The knives turn orange in 30 seconds. He bites the mouth piece of the spotting-bottle. You get a perfect spottle when you heat the base of a V energy drink bottle then chip off the base, leaving a glass pipe with two open ends, one suckable. He thinks, briefly, of his bud Oscar Grofsky who used to use V bottles exclusively to break peoples' noses at parties. Come to think of it, Grofsky wasn't that much of a friend, just someone Josh was always generous to so Grofsky wouldn't kick his arse. He thinks of hovering outside Grofsky's prison before doing a U-turn. He thinks of how the Corrections department did nothing when he snitched about Grofsky Facebooking from a mobile phone in his cell. He thinks of how he could've been a gangster, once, if he'd tried hard enough. He never saw the point in doing sit-ups or pulling gay-ass 20kg barbells towards his chest.

Every rep, every step of exercise feels like your muscles are windscreens being smashed with a hammer, and besides: all the people Josh knows who exercise are dickheads. Like

Sarmila's sisters, with their rock climbing and their tryhard surf lifesaving.

The knives are losing their glow, turning black again. He'd better get sucking quickly. He presses the little cake of Kronik between the knives, bent over the stovetop elements, holding his head steady. His neck gets more powerful every time he tokes up, he thinks. That must count as exercise.

He sucks burning, sticky, noxious smoke inside him. His throat glows. The high travels out his bronchioles and spreads through his arteries. Even his toes get high.

He trudges into his study, lifts the Air Force application form off his laptop, opens up RedTube. He types in 'Real teeny lovers real feet.' He watches a Czech guy pick up a Russian girl at a bus stop. The girl is wearing jandals; her toenails are painted lime green. The video cuts and lurches more than he likes. It takes him a few seconds longer than usual to squeeze his dick until it becomes a semi. The video races through a stairwell seduction to passionate kissing in the bathroom to the girl running the shower snake over her legs. She's soaking wet and has kicked her jandals off. Josh has to throttle and tickle his dick extra-quickly to keep up and come at the same time Mr Czech Guy comes on the girl's nipples.

Then he goes back to the kitchen and has another powerful toke with his powerful neck before flopping onto the couch and opening the *Top Gun* video file with the Xbox 360 remote.

Yeah, fuck Sarmila's sisters. Josh is not a write-off. He could be something if he wanted. He could be a jet pilot. Pilots need strong necks, don't they, to hold up their 20/20 vision.

He falls asleep watching *Top Gun*, dipping into a bag of Signature Range toast. Toast bread is the deluxe version of sandwich bread. Toast bread is thick, creamy, white and

sweet. You don't even need marge on it.

He wakes up briefly when Sarmila comes back in with the kids wearing Burger King cardboard hats. Dredd almost clambers on him, then toddles away. Rocky and Jonn cry about something. They hardly ever try play with Josh. He pulls a bit of weekend newspaper over his head. He notices Sarmila's brought a Subway platter home. Subway platters are \$29.90. Yeah, Subway's the only way Josh will eat his veges, but that's pretty much all the grocery money gone, till next Thursday.

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Regal Recruitment has shitloads of cars on its flat roof. Josh works out that the car yard two lots down the street has a ramp to drive the cars up onto the roof. How does he work this out? Same paint scheme on the rooftop and on the car yard, motherfucker: so they're thematically linked.

Thematically linked—phrase Maverick used in *Top Gun*, aiiiiit. Spotting shit that's thematically linked is the sign of a good pilot. He's noticing more and more amazing qualities about himself. God damn, Sarmila's sisters are gonna be pissed when he walks into their parents' place and announces the air force have recruited him for basic pilot training. Sure, there's a fitness test, but his neck will ace that.

Josh sits down at reception and shakes his head at the Regal Recruitment pencil—*PENCIL!*—he's been given, and looks around. Josh doesn't quite look like any of the dudes waiting with him to do their induction. One dude's got a Lakers cap on, and Josh hates Jeremy Lin and haaaaaates Kobe Bryant. Josh should walk out right now, just on principle, to defend the Celtics, but Sarmila would sit in the kitchen crying if he walked out and they cancelled his Jobseeker's Allowance. And her sisters...

One of the bros asks him what some of the words on the application form mean, pointing at his clipboard.

‘That’s Conviction,’ Josh says. ‘You gotta write down all your criminal convictions. *Con-vic-tion*. Like that movie? With Sam Rockwell?’

‘Who? Raquel?’

‘It had Hilary Swank in it. Bout the dude who got locked up for killing someone but he never did.’

‘Don’t I know you from *The Rock*?’

‘Now *that’s* a badass movie.’

‘The *Rock*, bro. Mt Eden.’

Josh shakes his head. ‘Never been locked up, bro.’

‘You watch a lotta movies, eh.’

JOSH PANIORA?’

Josh stands up and takes his application form over to the receptionist. She’s got little fluffy hairs all over her skin, sticking straight up, and her fingers are pink ’cause all the skin’s been nibbled away from her fingernails. That all means she’s an anorexic. He learned that on *Investigator* on the Crime Channel. Pilots are a type of investigator.

Pilots *investigate* weather patterns to identify jet streams.

He’s imagining pushing aviator goggles onto his face and strutting toward a runway as the anorexic receptionist motions him through to an ugly room he’s pretty sure doubles as a kitchen, ’cause it’s got a jug and a microwave in the corner and bread crumbs on the desk. He zones out during the health and safety video (not a DVD—a actual video, bro) and the boot-fitting, and the urine test they make him do in the cleaning closet. He’s thinking about that flick where Christian Bale passes the piss test by squirting clean piss up his dickhole with a turkey baster, *Harsh Times* it was called, siiiiiick movie.

He’s wondering what his fighter pilot movie can be called. He should Tweet John Travolta. Travolta’s an actor

and a pilot. It's about a kid from the streets who soars like an eagle. It'll start with *Urban*. Urban's an edgy word. And it needs to rhyme so it's catchy. Urban Suburban... nah. Urban... bourbon? Damn, motherfucker: Josh needs a drink.

He gets off the bus one street over from WINZ on his way home, waits 40 minutes in reception, reading AintItCoolNews on his phone, then hands a slip over to his case manager. The slip from Regal Recruitment is proof he's signed up to look for work. They won't stop his dole after all. *Aiiiiiit*. Now Sarmila's evil sisters got nothin on him.

'Cause he's not getting hanged today, Josh blows some dole dollars on Burger King. For eleven minutes, somebody else is serving him, he's wearing a crown, even if it is a floppy cardboard crown, and he's had a smoke of his pipe in the toilets, so nothing depressing can hurt him.

Urban King. He texts those two words to himself. Follow it up later. See on IMDB if it's taken as a movie title. *Jet King*. *Jet Legend*. Jet Li is: The Legend.

BK at Sylvia Park's the best in Auckland. There's this passageway from BK through the mall to the Feathered Goose pub, and since it's all dark no one tells him off for taking his chicken tenders into the pokie room. Chicken tenders are gangsta, and the protein's good for your brain. You need a healthy brain if you're gonna go from the streets to the sky.

He's got six two dollar coins and a one left. He starts getting only dynamites on the pokie machine, shouts, kicks the machine, goes into the disabled toilet to suck some Pineapple Express down into his toes. Smoking's not as good without Spottle. He misses Spotty. She's his girl. She never makes him feel like a dropkick.

He comes back out, thinking of Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale*. James Motherfuckin Bond. James Bond was losing high stakes poker and had a heart attack 'cause some

gangstas tried to kill him, almost died, then came back and carved shit up against that bad guy who plays Hannibal Lecter.

He wonders if Grofsky could take James Bond in a fight. Grofsky started doing mixed martial arts when he was, like, six, so he's pretty tough. His sister was tough, too, sorta this weird body, real flat and lean, only A Cups, zero tits, and a mean pointy mouth, but she would hold her body in these real staunch poses when she was smashing other chicks, and that'd turn him on so bad he had to bust a nut in the toilet stalls one time.

Why is he thinking about Oscar and Jaimee Grofsky after five years out of school? He must be epically smoked. He chuckles and puts two bucks in the slot.

Josh dips a chicken tender in the sweet 'n sour sauce, resumes his stool, gulps his brain food down, fingers tingling, head floating just above his neck, and puts his last two bucks in the machine.

He started with nothing. He wore the ultimate poker face. With one bold pull, he won back everything. Starring Tom Hardy as Josh Paniora. Written and directed by Joshua W. Paniora.

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Sarmila must've put his application in the post, because the Air Force has come back, sent a bulky envelope. She also musta filled out the application for him. He's hurt that she faked his signature. Josh Paniora's a creative genius. She's not allowed to fuck with his trademarks. Them signatures will be in demand one day.

Opening the Air Force package is an all-day mish. He pretends to sleep till Sarmila's aunty's picked up Rocky and Jonn, and Sarmila's taken Dredd to school, then gets his smokey 'n masty out of the way, has another nap, and

prepares some food. He makes breadballs. Breadballs are where you crush pieces sandwich bread into little balls and pop them into your mouth. You pretend they're popcorn chicken.

He eats 20 breadballs with tomato sauce, takes a shit then does five push-ups. The push-ups shatter his arms. He thinks about going to WebMD to check the symptoms of a broken arm. Instead, he opens the heavy Air force pack.

How many trees died to print all this shit, honestly? Blue form to get stamped when he gets his eye test done, green form for the diabetes test, yellow form to write his CV on, white form for criminal convictions check, pink form to attach written references from past employers...

The piece of paper that trips his brain up most is one that says an appointment has been booked for him to do a running assessment. A fitness test. Running: when your body is a cold car you've got to push uphill, and you look like a fool, and you trip over your own track pants and your hoodie gets too hot after two minutes. That's what running is. Something you should only do if Oscar Grofsky's chasing your arse.

He badly wants to hold out his phone with a selfie stick, make a video of him burning the form, and post it on YouTube so it goes viral, but WINZ will rape him up the arse if he misses this interview.

You never see Maverick filling out forms for three hours in *Top Gun*, he thinks. Urban Urchin wouldn't tolerate paperwork. No, wait—Urban Urchin's a shit name. Urban... *Urge. Urge For The Skies. SkyUrge.com.*

He slides the forms off his lap and finds Spotty and gives her a passionate kiss on her mouth and sticks the knives into the rings on the stovetop.

He lies on the couch until that scene comes on in *Top Gun* where Maverick seduces whatsherface and you see

Maverick's abs.

That's not a six pack. That's an eight pack. How'd Tom Cruise even get a body like that?

Josh rolls off the couch and gets into a push-up stance.

His face turns red, but he does ten push-ups, all in one go. God pays attention. God whispers *Good shit, Josh*.

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His eyes open. Sparrows mynah birds are screaming. How can anyone sleep through this shit? The outside light is purple.

Josh takes a piss and stands in front of the mirror, pinching his belly. He wants egg sandwiches for breakfast so fuckin bad, with a little salt and pepper, maybe some of that periperi sauce you get at Nando's. You get that sometimes—go to bed smoked, wake up smoked, wanting food so bad it's like a sexual thing.

He puts his feet on the floor but doesn't take the bedsheet off him. He's never been up at six, has he? It's hard to remember. Do they still have that one image that stays on screen all night? Or infomercials? There's gotta be infomercials. Shit, he'd phone up and order a coupla Ab Circle Pros right now if his credit cards weren't all maxed out.

He looks at Sarmila in bed and mutters 'Lazybones' just loud enough for her to hear.

He walks into the lounge, drops into a push-up position, then gets on his knees.

Someone's there.

Seated in front of the TV, hypnotised like *Poltergeist* starring Craig T. Nelson—the voice of the big dude in *The Incredibles*—is Dredd.

'Morning li'l cuz. Almost didn't see you there.' Dredd

doesn't look behind him and doesn't say anything. Dredd is holding a plate of uncut toast, no spread, no marge. Dredd lifts the remote control and turns the volume of his cartoon up a notch. *Fairly Odd Parents* is the cartoon. Josh likes that one. He likes all the work of producer TZ Ibrahim. Dredd and Josh should hang out more. 'When'd you learn how to make your own breakfast?'

'Sssh,' Dredd says, not even looking at Josh this time. 'Can't hear.'

Josh can't smoke Kronik while the boy's here. Josh knows he's a failure and he ought to pop 100 Panadol and die this week, but he'll still never ever encourage the kids to smoke herbal highs. Doesn't matter if he's their idol or not.

He takes some chicken tenders out of the fridge, admires them, puts them back. Dredd watches TV, his back to Josh. Josh shakes the bark chips out of his running shoes. How'd bark chips get in there? One of the kids been fucking with his shoes? Maybe he shouldn't've left them untouched for two years. He tightens the draw cords on his hood and pants, softly shuts the front door on Dredd and his dawn cartoons. Running to keep his dole is as good a reason as any. Maybe Rocky Balboa was on the dole. He plunges into the blue and white mist, blinks as orange light pricks his eyes. He'd forgotten what happens to shadows in the morning.

Two minutes: he remembered right. Two minutes is how long it takes to get a regular stride going. Two minutes is how long it takes before what he's doing is agony on the legs, and his back feels stiff, and he's almost definitely got a hairline crack running through his metatarsal, why else would it feel so sharp? It feels like Sarmila's sisters blogging about him. It feels like what they said to his face at Christmas just because the presents he got the kids weren't exactly brand new.

Every metre he treads is one less letter from his case

manager. One less critical Instagram comment. One less Hindi joke from Sarmila's dad that everyone cracks up about except Josh. Snot his fault Hindi's, like, impossible to learn.

He gets up to the big green power box, pauses, sits on it, checks the time on his phone, makes a playlist on his phone. Then he gets off, turns back down the hill, heads for home, except when he stops outside his house, his legs are asking for more. They're warm, supple, they're flexible, they're bouncing rubber. Like how Jaimee used to run on athletics day, even though she stank of cigarette smoke, she'd annihilate the hurdles. Her whole family destroyed anything they wanted to. They were Urban Commandos.

Jake can be an Urban Commando if he wants. A warm fire is burning inside him as he jogs. It spreads some kind of hot, happy chemicals deep into his hamstrings. He even squats with one knee on the ground and stretches. Rocky bests Apollo Creed. Tommy Gunn skips through alleyways. Joel Edgerton fights Tom Hardy to become the ultimate *Warrior*.

Josh opens his front door, and Dredd looks up from the TV for a good few seconds. Sarmila walks into the lounge, brushing her hair. Josh tells her he's figured out a way to fail the air force entrance test without flunking out of WINZ. He waits for her to say she's impressed.

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This is buzzy, he thinks as she sits down in Wendy's. Epic-buzzy.

Jaimee's got herself a Baconator Mushroom Melt. 'Protein,' she goes, 'Heapsa protein in Baconators.'

She's got Grofsky's sunken-back cheekbones that say it'd be pointless punchin him, or her, 'cause he/she wouldn't even feel it. See, Grofsky was in Rize 2 Tha Skyz, this hip

hop dance crew, and he went to, like, Geneva and shit—but then Grofsky would waste people at parties with a V bottle. He even hit a paramedic, at this one party. Them Grofskys is energetic people.

‘You said in your message you wanted to get abs,’ she goes, destroying her burger, glaring at Josh real harsh. He notices she doesn’t have a tray and she hasn’t taken advantage of the little packets of Heinz ketchup. You can get ten if you ask the right person.

‘No fries, Jaim? No drink?’

Jaimee shakes her head and swallows. Her tight bun of hair wobbles only a little bit. It’s a severe bun, it’s pulling her eyes slanty. Her eyelids have something sparkly on them. When she’s swallowed her mouthful, she goes, ‘Gotta keep a lid on the carbs.’ She pulls Josh’s tray away from him and rummages through his chips, tipping them out, and opens the lid of his drink and frowns at what she sees inside.

‘See these chicken tenders? You’re allowed them. Plenty of protein in chicken.’

No one’s ever pulled Josh’s chips away from him before, let alone his L&P.

‘Josh—’

‘Call me Joshua. Joshua’s my screen name.’

‘Screen name?’

‘For movies and stuff. I’m an actor. And a screenwriter.’

‘This is all energy. This food here, even your ketchup: pure energy. When I was Inside, our food didn’t hardly have no—’

‘You were inside? In prison? I *knew* it!’

Jaimee picks the meat patty out of her burger, chomps it and biffs her bun and pickle across the table at Josh. ‘Got shorts on, like I told ya? Stand up.’ She looks at him like a car she’s thinking of buying. ‘Good enough for now. Let’s roll.’

The fire returns to his legs. He hears comments from the

radios of passing cars. He's pretty sure they're mocking him.

'What's the food like in jail?' Josh goes as they cross a park. Jaimee is behind him, but her voice travels.

'Shut up,' she goes. 'Tell me about these movies you write. Or was it direct? You a director, sthat it?'

'Nah... it's dumb.'

'Want some more chin-ups? Didn't think so. Tell me. I'll make you tell me.'

Josh stops as they come out of the park, and leans on a recycling bin on someone's berm. Jaimee kicks him in the knee and he hobbles and starts jogging again. Sweat is dribbling into his eye and he can hardly see.

'There's, like, this one that's sorta inspired by *Top Gun*. It's like *Top Gun* meets *Lion King*.' Josh takes a huge swallow of air, tries to stop, and she kicks him again. 'It's about a ace, *oof*, pilot who fights his uncle 'cause his uncle, *uck*, killed his best bud pilot in a training accident 'cause he pushed him—'

'OHMYGOD he pushed him off a cliff!'

'—cause he pushed him too hard. Can I stop for a sec?'

'How long you got till your air force test?'

'Two weeks.'

'Then the answer is no.' Jaimee moves ahead ten metres, spins around and jogs backwards, glaring at Josh.

'I'll stop if I wanna. It's a free country.' Josh tiptoes his way through dry dog shit and finds a good berm to hover on. Bending over, putting his weight through his hands onto his knees, Josh pictures the flames cooking his skin settling until they're low, and then his flesh heals and the charring fades and his skin turns caramel again.

'Stop, then—'

'Uck. Cheers.'

'—if you want me to tell Oz.'

Oz... *file not found*... wait. Josh remembers who her

brother is and starts moving again.

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Up here in the hills, Josh can see his place. Well, not quite his own place. He can see the block of flats. There's 20 flats. One's his. Well—Sarmila's. There are advantages to not having your name on the place or the kids. You can ankle the place at any time.

Jaimee comes from high up; Josh lives low down. That's clear. Grofsky will find a way to hurt Josh if he fucks up and disappoints Jaimee. That's clear too.

The driveway is as near as he goes to the Grofsky clan's mansion, with its boxing gym and two garages. The parents own a lot of motorbikes, and there are always uncles. Uncles used to pick the Grofsky twins up from school. Their bikes were epic-loud. Their leather vests had winged skulls on them.

Jaimee blows the whistle swinging from her neck, spits out her cigarette, descends the hill for 50 metres, stops and lets Josh go ahead. She can plunge into any exercise at any time. She is always warmed up. Her muscles are bigger than Josh's.

They loop cul-de-sacs, they go through a playground and haul themselves up the brightly painted structures, they drop and do crunches and get up and do jumping jacks. This is \$50 per session. Each session is two hours. To get the money, Josh did something he hadn't done in three years: rolled a drunk person at the pokies. A chick, even, well, chick'd be the word for it if she were younger, but she was like 60. Pushed her into the door frame of her car as she was getting into it. This was in the underground parking lot. He tugged her handbag till it came loose then sprinted.

He was impressed with his own sprinting. Real

impressed.

He scored about 40 two-dollar coins. That almost paid for two sessions with Jaimee, two sessions of her Lycra chest and her tight hair and fierce eyes with the sparkling eyelids. Jaimee, who gets a frosting of sweat but doesn't suffer the big rolling droplets of saltwater than make Josh blink too much.

Jaimee whose lipstick stays intact throughout the workout. Jaimee with the eyebrows perfectly plucked.

Jaimee makes a big stink when he hands her a shoe box of coins. It's a real decent Adidas shoebox. She leaves it in the postbox as they jog past.

A nice, cooling breeze comes from the city, drying his shiny shoulders. It's a secret up here, it's elite. Josh has been allowed above the lower people. Jaimee makes him do push-ups every 50 metres. Stop, drop and shup, she calls the micropunishments. This is her way of hurting him. Her brother smashes V bottles on the foreheads of university kids who have never been in a fight before; Jaimee makes people's joints weep lactic acid.

That's another word ace pilots should know: lactic acid. Pilots should know where the burning in their biceps comes from.

Three weeks ago, Sarmila stopped asking Josh what he got up to in the middle of the day. She's been taking the wee ones, spending the day buying up GrabOne deals and onselling them from her sisters' houses. He asked Sarmila one time why she had to leave to do computer stuff (obviously she wasn't allowed on his laptop.) She said home was an unproductive place.

'But *I'm* home,' Josh said.

'SHE'S A DISTRACTION,' Jaimee rules as they stretch against big thick oak trunks in a park. 'Listening?' Josh is staring at the tattoo of a scorpion on Jaimee's flat tummy.

It's bluey-green and it's massive. Today is the first day she's exposed her midriff. She's pretty much as hot as Megan Fox.

'Listening,' Josh mutters.

'The wife. The kids. They're not trying get into the air force. Know who is? YOU. YOU, Joshua Paniora, are trying to make the grade. Pressure makes diamonds. Stop letting yourself get soft.'

She's a cheerleader. She's a promoter at car shows, giving away USBs and lanyards. She's comfortable around biker guys and league guys and UFC guys and Muay Thai guys. She can seize anything in the world she wants.

'Got you this, by the way.' She lobbs a t-shirt at him. On the front: *Snitches Get Stitches*, and beneath it: *Support Your Local Hells Angels*. On the back, in Gothic letters along the top: URBAN LEGEND.

'Five days left,' Josh says sadly.

'Don't think I'm gonna go easy on you,' Jaimee goes.

When they jog past Josh's, halfway through the sesh, Josh needs a drink of that Coke with his name on it real bad, and dips inside the flat, but when he raises the bottle to his lips, Jaimee pulls the bottle away and stands in front of him.

She's gonna knock him out. She tugs the bottle out of his hand.

'Anybody home?'

'Nah... just us.'

She squeezes his moustache with her lips, and her tongue scrapes his gums, and they knock magnets off the door of the fridge, and her hips press into his stomach.

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It's noisy at the air base, not from planes, though, it's heaps of cars and trucks muttering at five kays as they go over the judder bars, and tonnes of cicadas chirping in the

trees, reminding Josh how hot it is. Sarmila's not there and Dredd's not there and Rocky's not there and Jonn's not there and his aunties and uncles from the lake aren't there and the bros he grew up with aren't there and the goldfish he had when he was ten isn't there. Just Jaimee.

He supposes he doesn't mind paying her that much but the thing is she's becoming a bit fixated on him. And she's way more into sex than gaming. She said she had a good luck charm for him when they were warming up at 4.30am, and she got down on her knees while Josh stood up, this was at the end of her driveway where anyone coulda driven past, and she used this nodding motion as she sucked his dick, like she was bobbing for apples, perfect consistent rhythm, and when he came in her mouth he was receiving the gold statue for Best Picture at the Oscars for *Urban Legend, the story of how one unlikely coach found the potential in the world's most humble underdog*.

He's thinking about how this sorta coachy, instructor-y looking chick with no earrings and the same tightly-pulled hair as Jaimee comes over, hugging her clipboard. She's got real interesting patches sewed onto her left tit and one of those French hats. She's all in camo gear. She doesn't smile as she goes Good Morning and checks his driver licence and ticks his name off the list on her clipboard.

There will be two whistles, she explains. Then you may run.

They warm up. Josh's dick kinda hurts from the aggressive blowjob. Sarmila never hurts it like that. Josh's stomach complains. Jaimee goes over to the shaded spectator box, standing beside the tightbody instructor. Two hard, uncompromising, dangerous muscular women.

There are eight other dudes, seven Islanders and one white. They do 16 chin-ups. They do 40 push-ups, in lots of 20. They do 99 sit-ups, in lots of 33. The instructor shouts at

them.

On his back, grunting, he's trying to picture whether Sarmila's bitchy sisters could do this many exercises, and then he's trying to squeeze in a quick fantasy about *Urban Legend* again, when that second whistle stings his eardrums and everyone launches.

The first lap is about hanging off the shoulder of the race leader. Just stay precisely to his side, so you're not over-pressured, and you're motivated to be, for the first lap at least, unbeaten.

It's when he's got the first lap sewn up that the agony creeps up from his feet, and there is no let-up. It's Mark Wahlberg in *The Fighter*. It's Louis Zamperini in *Unbroken*. It's Demi Moore in *GI Jane*. It's a rising dread, it's a conveyor belt he can't get off. Jaimee has told him to use his bulk and gravity to run slightly towards his opponents to encourage them to sit back.

Jaimee has trained him to think of the worst thing that's ever happened to him as the path. Every step he takes on the path erases a bit of that hurt. It's a hurt 3.6 kilometres long, two miles long, 10560 feet.

10,000 feet is 2500 steps, and then the bulldoze with abs and no tits and no makeup will let him into the airforce and he'll have a regular salary, free feeds and free dental care, plus he'll get to fly planes and compose the *Urban Legend* screenplay as he goes.

He doesn't finish first. That white dude is pretty epic. He does this funny motion with his arms to pump more air into his lungs. Sorta like a bellows; sorta like the bellows in *Hugo*.

Josh, though, is ahead of six dudes, and that's pretty epic. Jaimee is shaking her head with approval. *No*, her head is saying, *no way you could have done better*. She might even be crying, or is that sparkling dried sweat?

Josh jumps across the finish line and goes 'THIS IS

SPARTA!' and stomps under a lemon tree and lies down in the shade.

'I am never doing that again,' Josh pants.

'I think you'll find we have a session on Tuesday,' Jaimee tuts.

Jaimee toes the dirt. Josh is blatantly violating the rule about not relaxing too hard after a workout. Makes you soft.

The other dudes are sitting down. Couple of them have even cracked open cans of Woodstock.

The hardass tighbody instructor tours the men. They're all sitting or lying in the shade under the trees. She doesn't squat to speak to them, just stands. Like Jaimee.

'Recruit, you may have just made it to the final phase of your application,' the instructor says, handing down a form which Josh signs. Run Time: 14.33. Not bad.

'I'll give you a bell next week,' she says. 'Getcha signed up.'

'I don't got a phone,' Josh goes.

'He doesn't know what he's saying,' Jaimee growls. 'Give her your email, Joshy.'

Jaimee hands him a bottle of mineral water. When his sweat starts to dry and he can't be fucked sitting in red dirt under a tree getting nibbled by ants, he gets up and heads for his car. He fights to pull open the door. It's rusted and crumpled and paint flecks fall off each time he tries to open it.

Jaimee goes round to the passenger side. Josh slides in, doesn't unlock Jaimee's door. He starts the engine, tries to reverse over her toes.

She comes back round to the driver window, frowning.

'Are you gonna let me in?'

He winds the window most of the way up. He's hoping to crush her head, but she pulls it out of the way.

'I don't wanna join no gay-arse air force. Just had to do

all this shit to keep my benefit. Ain't you seen *Cruel
Intentions?*'

