

The small kitchen was all lino and cracked veneer, and silent with anticipation. Chris, young and thumb-shaped, spooned sweetened yogurt into his mother's mouth and she thanked him with a vacant smile. It was a smile that had recently begun to replace the one he used to know in Chris' memories. The one that recognised Chris. Knew him. Another spoonful. Too much for her little mouth and the excess dripped out. Chris swore to himself and grasped around for a teatowel. He glanced down at his phone sitting on the table - still inert - wiped his mother's mouth and started scraping the dregs of yogurt from its container walls. Another large spoonful, barely managed. The phone buzzed and the spoon clattered onto the tabletop. A message from Salvo: 'Flinders 1230. Don't forget ur whites'. Chris' eyes flicked up to the time on the phone, and then confirmed it with the clock in the room. "Shit." He leapt up, found his wallet. His keys. Ran water over his face and decided he'd have to brush his teeth later. He wheeled his mother into her place in the lounge, the wheels of the chair settling comfortably into their familiar indents. He belted her in. Once before he'd come home and found her on the floor. Nothing was broken, but her skin was a sea of purple and black currents for weeks. He had the belt fitted the same day. As Chris lay her blanket over chair and legs and belt, he suddenly felt her hand on his cheek. The warmth of it startled him, and when he looked up he saw her smile. Her real smile. The one that knew him. "You're a good boy." Her soft voice was thunder in the silence. He could stay. He could sit here all afternoon, make sure she had enough to drink. Make sure she stayed clean. He could. Then his phone buzzed again and he stood and kissed her on the head, "I'll be back by 'Wheel'". He locked the front door behind him.

Chris sat very still on the train, feeling it rock against him. His hands were in his pockets. His eyes were closed and the intermittent sunlight flashed on his eyelids like a morse code of orange and black. Even though there were a few people standing, no one had squeezed in next to him. He didn't mind that, not at all. They weren't his kind of people. His thoughts threaded their way back home and he saw his mother sitting in the same spot watching the same tv. In his mind she seemed smaller somehow, and the small house much larger. Dangerously large. His hands became fists in his pockets. The once-pleasant-but-now-distorted voice of the train intercom pushed out the visions of danger and home and mother, announcing that they were approaching Flinders Street. Chris opened his eyes. Across the aisle, a young boy was staring at him. He was dark-haired, dark-eyed, dark-skinned, and for a moment Chris didn't notice. He was wearing a Spider-Man shirt. The woman next to him talked loudly into her phone in a language Chris didn't know. She wore a hijab or niqab or

something; Chris couldn't remember which was which. When the train came to a stop she pulled the boy to his feet and out of the train; her still talking, the boy still staring. Chris waited until they were out of sight before getting off the train himself.

When Chris made it to the steps of Flinders Street, Salvo was already waiting, eyes fixed on the ebb and flow of pedestrians on the street below him. He stood out from the others, not because of how he looked, but because of his stillness. It's what Chris liked most about him. Everyone else flitted about, full of self-importance and hurry, but Salvo was unflappable. Unmovable. Certain. And when Chris was with him, that's how he felt, too. Everything just made more sense when Salvo was around. Chris apologised for being late when Salvo turned to see him. Salvo just shook his head, his eyes hidden behind a pair of reflective Pit Vipers. "Did you remember your whites?"

Chris held his breath, his look of panic saying 'no' for him.

Salvo swore. "Bloody waste of space, you are. Think Frank'll have some when we get there, but jeeze mate, it's not a good look."

Where Salvo walked, the people parted. It was like the crowds weren't even there. Chris trailed in his wake, like a dinghy attached to a yacht, and together they sailed down St. Kilda Rd toward the Shrine. They saw others going to the same place, some already wearing their whites: bleached neck gaiters. Most wore sunglasses and a cap. Chris started to feel naked without his face covered. Luckily, Salvo's mood had improved. As they walked, he flicked through photos on his phone, telling Chris of the latest country escape for their Network. "It was bloody brilliant mate. Just a nice little camping trip, you know?" Every face is covered in the photos. Salvo said previously that's to stop the media from targeting their members if the photos are leaked, because "we all know who runs that racket." There were photos of the guys sitting around campfires. Perched on rocks in the middle of the bush. In one, they're all lined up in a cave with the Network's flags held proudly. Salvo smiles at Chris. "You have to come next time."

Chris nods. He wants to. But his mum can't be left for long. His mind falls back to her tiny frame in the large house. The television rolling through program after program, each meaning as much as the last, none shifting that blank smile. He checked his phone: he could still make it home for 'Wheel'.

Nearer the Shrine they could hear the bullhorns, the tinny Barnsey and Farnham from phones. Those in whites were in the majority now. Salvo disappeared for a few minutes and came back with a gaiter for Chris, who apologised again.

“Don’t worry about it, mate. I told him you brought it but some of those bastards grabbed it.”

He nodded his head back toward St. Kilda Rd; there, standing behind a row of police, a throng of people in shifting formations and colours stood waving placards, lifting signs, and shouting at Chris. The way their lines flowed, collapsed, and reformed reminded Chris of a school of fish: a thousand shiny scales flitting through the filtered sunlight. Last week he and mum had watched one of those Attenborough docs on the ocean. It was just like that. They talked for a while. Salvo introduced Chris to a few of the guys. They grabbed Chris by the shoulder and told him he was brave and good for being there. An alarm sounded, and the Network started forming something of a line.

“We drilled this at camp,” Salvo said, “But don’t worry, just follow me, alright?”

Chris nodded; Salvo’d look out for him. They were all lined up, shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the shoal of angry protestors. A few of the Network held flags. Chris was given a sign to hold. It said ‘Australia For Australians’, and to him that sounded reasonable, especially after everything Salvo had been telling him. The Network Chapter leader was there. He was wearing a mask too, but Chris recognised his broad frame and military-style buzz cut. He walked up and down the line, talking into a bullhorn. He tells Chris and the others that they’re made of blood and honor. That they won’t kneel and die. That they had duties to be warriors. Heroes. That sounded good. Most days he didn’t particularly feel like a warrior, but he could sense the men beside him and those behind him: here and now, he felt like one. His grip on the sign tightened. Some of the Network suddenly shouted in unison to the chapter leader’s call. Chris hadn’t learnt that part, and was happy to be wearing the mask so that no one could see that his lips weren’t moving. His cheeks flushed. He felt his phone start to vibrate in his pocket; it was the alarm, telling him he had a half an hour before he needed to head back to the station if he was going to make it back in time for ‘Wheel’. He carefully stilled it, making sure not to let the sign he was holding slip.

“Have a bloody look at them.” Salvo whispered to Chris between chants. He was looking beyond the police to the shoal of protestors they faced. Chris ran his eyes down their line. No masks. Salvo’d say “they nothing to fear from the media”. Chris studied their faces. They were angry. About what? Making sure Australia was a safe place? Protecting kids? His eyes rested on a woman on the left. She was much older than the others. She’d have been about

mum's age. She was helping to hold a banner that said 'Love is natural, hate is learned' next to a picture of the planet surrounded by different coloured hands. Salvo scoffed. Something shifted. Shouts came up from nearby, a police horse reared and suddenly Chris was being jostled around as bodies ran past him on all sides. The Network and the shoal, now thrown together, were mostly grabbing each other by the collar, some were throwing punches. The few police left nearby were trying to separate the groups but they may as well have been trying to hold back the tide. Someone barrelled past and knocked Chris' sign from his hands. He let it fall, searching the tumult for the woman he'd seen, pressing through the waves toward her. He remembered his mother's bruises. The blossoming purple that covered her. Made her wince. He found the woman, still holding the banner, pressed in with a few of the other fish. The police were trying to move them on. One shoved her. Chris shoved him. Punched him. A school of police dragged Chris to the ground. He was drowning. Then a light. Salvo stood over him with a few of the others. They dragged the police off, lifted him to his feet. They ran together. They only slowed on the other side of Flinders Street, their whites tucked in their pants. They stopped at Maccas and Salvo bought Chris a meal for "socking that copper". A young boy watched them eat from nearby. Salvo barked at him. The boy shrieked. Salvo smiled. So did Chris. A few of the others came by and Salvo told them all about how Chris was giving it to the 'blueys'. Chris felt their hands on his shoulder. Their recognition. Chris promised to come to the next camp. Salvo nodded at him.

The television was finishing the weather report as Chris finally unlocked the wheels of his mother's chair. The smell had been there as soon as he had opened the door. He rolled her to the shower. There, he undressed her, swearing when he saw how much of a mess she'd made. He propped her on the stool in the shower and turned it on before wheeling the chair outside. He'd have to hose it down before bed. Back in the bathroom, his mother looked up at him through the growing steam, seeing him again for the first time since he returned. She watched him direct the shower stream to clean off the caked up parts first, before rolling up his sleeves and squirting some body soap onto the loofah. Then he scrubbed. She watched him and smiled. Her real smile. The one that knew him. "You're a good boy," she said. Chris stopped scrubbing for a moment and caught her eye. He watched as the real smile slowly gave way to the other one. He finished washing her. Fed her. Gently put her to bed. As he hosed the chair down in the backyard, Chris didn't feel like a good boy. He felt like a hero.