

On the other side of the screen, violence played out in glorious 1956 technicolour. His mother was calling for dinner, but the cowboy was just on the cusp of drawing his gun. For a sharp moment, dust twinkled in the wormhole between Tyler and the television, then the ricochet of a bullet as the screen dilated to a white dot.

“Chicken pie,” her voice rolled. “Couplands.”

“Sure.” Tyler replied. “Whatever.”

His mother had the passive, delinquent air of someone who was stoned, though she wasn’t. Tyler’s Aunt Alice had plenty to say about this – that his mother had always been like it, that once she had been pretty notably dazed while on shift as a teenager at her lifeguard job. So dazed, in fact, that a small child had inhaled large amounts of water and fallen quite quickly unconscious. That had been the neighbour’s son, a meagre boy with a golden cowlick that used to stick up when it wasn’t wet.

“How was your day?” she inquired over a meagre serving of the pot pie, fork shining clean under the LED.

It was difficult for Tyler to keep his eyes open. It was only a quarter past seven, but he had been awake until the dim hours of the previous morning trawling the internet for posts about serotonin shock or videos of people dying in horrific accidents. One of the videos had stood out. Man in overalls, something resembling a beard, shovelling snow off a driveway somewhere in the Americas. The video made no point of explaining how it happened. That out of nowhere the guy was alight and screaming. Whoever was behind the camera didn’t do a thing. Just kept watching. After a fair few minutes, the video had cut out, but by then the man with the shovel was dead, anyway. The only living things left were the dwindling flames, dancing, and whoever recorded it all, deus ex camera, stood, transfixed, eyes on the misery, the footage its own valuable loot in the right circles. On the other side of the screen Tyler had sat, naked, transfixed, replaying the video over and over again. He wanted to dress up in boots and a hat and run away. Two years ago, age sixteen, he had actually played the part, as if he was going to do it, to leave. He had rehearsed the scene in his head a million times before actually trying. Things turned around pretty fast, though, and upon reaching the letter box at the end of the driveway, Tyler stood, locked for a moment in the wings at the edge of the stage that was everything beyond his small enclave. The sparkling, veil-like Tekapo air had encouraged him to turn around and sit with his feet up against the fire, to ignore the secondary, dressed-up version of himself, the one with the Western drawl and the embarrassing hat.

So came the dim response through a mouthful of food. “Whatever. School.”

“Learn much?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

His mother picked up her own full plate and Tyler’s empty one, moving from the table to the kitchen. Here, he knew, she would discreetly open the pantry and pull down a red plaited box she thought was a secret. Carefully, she would select the least appealing looking chocolate and then shovel the leftover dinner from the plate into any empty container that was lying

around. For later, she would think to herself. For lunch today, she would tell Tyler in the morning. Whatever. This ritual had started nineteen months ago when his father up and left. She would repeat the selection process every night until the most exquisite looking sweet remained. When just the one was left, it would be time to go to the supermarket, finally, to do a big shop, one that would maintain herself and Tyler somewhat healthily until the next time that just the lone intricately designed item lay in the tray. She would offer that one to Tyler, on a little white plate. He would take it and put it in a box of his own in his bedroom. He hated the things. They tasted like cardboard. Whatever.

There was an email waiting for him from somebody calling themselves Miss Lu.

Deleted the thing. A waste of time. There were a few incongruous stickers around the place – one, the Indian in the cupboard, seemed a little dated now, but the rest were still interesting to Tyler: Clint Eastwood with undersized shoes and oversized boots, an old Star Wars sticker of Jar Jar Binks, but, best of all, closest to the light switch, a boutique sticker of a Matisse that his mother had bought him at an art exhibition in Auckland that he had downright refused to leave at the pristine age of six. With the lights off, the bedroom seemed a little empty. He had a double bed, but nobody had ever stayed over in it and besides, he had no idea who he would ask anyway. He still slept next to a vending machine version of Woody from Toy Story. Sometimes, if he was especially bored, or horny, he would rub up against Woody and pretend he had girlish blonde hair.

Later, he would look around and realize the bedroom was still empty, even though he was inside it. Another sticker on the wall, Tyler was an image flickering in glorious present-day adjectives.

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in some way, thru something resembling magic / sleight of hand / providence that the audience can't quite see, Tyler will set his mother alight and post a video of it to the internet. maybe he gets arrested, I don't know about that yet