



Storytelling Competition 2023

Open Age Category

Haze by Chris Maher

The asphalt shimmers and the road sways. Nothing else moves. Even the crows have taken cover from this day.

The fuel light flips from orange to red, and I shut the aircon off and open the windows.

What's happening?

Fresh air.

It's a hundred out there.

Just for a minute.

We take the servo offramp, swinging through a forest of black trunks and the bitter stench of burnt tar. The bowser has ninety one at a dollar eighty. That's nearly sixty bucks to get there and home. I count the litres, pay with cash, and park on the sizzling apron.

He's silent as I grab the clothes from above the back door. A pinstriped suit, a brown jacket, two shirts and my good pair of jeans. There's stains under the arms of my jacket, and mould in the crutch of his pants.

I open his door, trying to sound up.

Come on then.

What?

Come on, we got to go inside.

Inside? We getting a shake?

We're getting changed.

What?

I'll get you a shake.

His legs poke out from his shorts, motely sticks of saggy skin and liver spots. He puts one tentative foot on the concrete and immediately pulls it back. I reach past him, grab his thongs and slip them onto his feet. I help him stand.

It's hot.



Sure is.

We cross the concrete. The heat pushes down like it wants to crush us. I hold his arm, and we go slowly.

Inside, the cold dry air is a reprieve, but I see there's no Maccas, only Olivers.

I steer him to the toilets, open a cubicle and sit him on the closed seat. I hang the suit on the door and take off my shorts. The floor's wet, and I do a little dance to avoid it as I pull on my jeans. I take his trousers to the basin, wash the mould off with a damp paper towel, and dry them under the hand dryer.

I'll help you with these.

I pull his shorts off, trying hard not to accidentally take his worn white undies too, and put them on the cistern.

Come on. One leg at a time.

The trousers are several sizes too big. You could fit two of him in there. And of course, I forgot to grab a belt. He looks like a scarecrow in his suit, each hand holding a side of his pants, every step tentative in his thongs.

I sit him at a table and look through the souvenir rack. There's no belts. When I come back, he asks about his shake, so I go to the food counter.

How much is a thick shake?

Don't have shakes, got smoothies.

Okay, how much are they?

Which one you want?

The cheapest one.

Thirteen fifty.

You're kidding? They're two bucks at Maccas.

These are healthier.

They'd want to be. You have small ones?

Got yoghurt cups with muesli. Eight ninety five.

I give her my last ten and take him the yoghurt.

What's this?

Breakfast. Eat up.

What about my shake?

They don't do shakes, just eat this will you.

I don't understand, why are we doing all this?

For Caleb, remember.

Oh. Caleb.

He nods, but I can tell he doesn't remember. He somehow manages to eat all the yoghurt without touching the muesli, then pushes the cup away like he's finished.

My phone beeps.

You far away?

Not far. You got a belt?

A belt?

I dig around in the boot and find an old ratchet strap. I feed it through the loops in his pants and bring it around the front, slip it through the ratchet and pull it tight.

Hey!

I ease off a bit. The ratchet is like a buckle, and the strap is blue, so it sort of looks passable. Sort of. I help him into his socks and shoes, and put mine on too. Sweat's already drawing a little map on the front of his shirt. He tugs at his collar as I help him into the car.

We head out on the feeder road behind the servo. A fire truck is parked on the dirt, framed by leafless black trees. In front, a woman sits in a camp chair under a beach umbrella. Two young girls stand near the road, one holding a bucket, the other a sign. *Help Our Heroes.*

Better give them something.

I feel in my pocket. Dollar five. An insult.

Stop here, here they are.

I open the window and drop the coins in the bucket. They make a pitiful thunk.

Thanks so much.

The one holding the sign smiles, but I look away. For some reason I feel like crying.

It's ten minutes to the church. Kate and Martin are waiting for us as we pull up.



We all hug. Dad beams.

Kate. I didn't expect you.

Of course she'd be here Dad.

Her eyes and nose are red. Her hair frazzled.

Martin is holding a belt. We swap out the strap on the old man's pants.

Why are we here?

For Caleb Dad.

He looks around. *Where is he?*

Kate opens her mouth. She covers her eyes and takes a single deep breath, then turns her back and walks into the church.

Martin looks lost. I put my hand on his shoulder.

It's okay, you go with Kate.

I hold Dad by his wrists.

Caleb got caught in the fire Dad. It was the smoke. He couldn't breathe.

Caleb?

I can't say anything. My head stings with the tears that can't escape.

Little Caleb? How can that happen?

His lungs Dad. All that smoke, he couldn't take it.

Oh, oh no. Not little Caleb.

He crumples onto the road. Wailing, a quiet sound, but with the force of a life ebbing away. I sink down with him, hugging his brittle bones. Holding him tight.

And tears finally come, flooding over us both.

