

## Good Work

He was on the tram ride into work when he saw it. It was the middle of June and the tram was sliding along the wet street, past terrace houses on one side and the old cemetery on the other. The sky was the colour of milky tea, all mixed together. People on the morning commute were staring at their phones and listening to music on headphones or tiny ear pods. He was scrolling through the news app on his phone and then he saw it. His father, the writer, had been awarded one of the major prizes in literature. It was one of the awards that would feature on every biographical note about his father from now on. It would be at the start of any subordinate clause whenever his father was introduced. It may even end up on his gravestone. His father would forever be someone who had reached that height in the field.

Kieran looked around at the other passengers, searching their faces for some kind of recognition. He had a habit doing that during the important moments of his life, as if the group of strangers who happened to be near him at those times could sense something important shifting. It was as if he expected them to react to something, as if the ground below them had rocked and they were trying to regain their balance. In the seat across from him, a woman dressed in jeans and a raincoat sneezed into her hand. A man in a grey suit, standing in the aisle, chewed on one of his fingernails. The tram moved on.

Kieran's body was still but his mind was active. Emotions fired inside him, causing physiological changes that made him feel embarrassed. His heart raced, his face reddened. Sweat was beginning to form on his forehead. He wanted to be having these feelings in private. He wanted to be having them somewhere isolated like a forest or a cabin near a body of water, where the feelings could consume him and he could act them out in whatever way

he pleased, far from the attention of others.

He was happy for his father, of course he was. All the same, it was going to take a while until he felt good about this news.

The tram was moving south on Swanston Street, past one of the campuses his father taught at for a few semesters years ago. Students, hunched over in coats and hoods, walked north dodging puddles and gripping coffee cups. The tram reached the big shopping complex opposite the state library. From his window seat, Kieran saw people with backpacks climbing the steps to the library, in front of the wide neoclassical columns. He was often one of them on the weekend, searching the reading rooms for a quiet place to write. At that moment, he wanted to run out of the tram, climb those steps and find a corner of the library to sit. He wanted a thick pad of paper and a pen. He wanted to be making something.

Kieran had just stepped off the tram at the Collins Street stop when his sister Alice called him. He looked at her name on the screen of his phone and let it vibrate in his hand. He watched his phone for a moment and then picked up the call.

‘Did you hear?’ asked Alice. Her voice was flatter than he was expecting.

‘Yeah,’ said Kieran. ‘I just read it. It’s amazing. It’s a big honour, that’s for sure.’

‘Yes, it’s great for him,’ said Alice. ‘I don’t know though.’

Kieran was crossing the street, walking downhill past business people on their way into work, past cafe workers setting up signs and positioning chairs.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s a bit, I don’t know, morbid, don’t you think?’ asked Alice. ‘It’s like he’s dead or something. Isn’t that the sort of thing they give writers his age just before they die?’

‘Not necessarily,’ said Kieran. He concentrated on adding some brightness to his voice like dropping spoonfuls of sugar into tea.

‘Okay then,’ Alice said. ‘If you say so. Anyway, what are you doing this evening?’

‘I don’t know. Nothing, I think. Tessa’s mum was going to cook or something.’

He heard Alice sigh. It was easy to sense how she felt about his living situation. She thought he needed to strike out on his own, or Tessa and Kieran needed to strike out together, more like it. They had been living in a granny flat out the back of Tessa’s parents’ place in Coburg for the past four years. They’d moved into the cramped, damp flat to save for a house of their own but they had barely made a dent on a deposit. What had once been conveniently explained away as a temporary necessity by Kieran and Tessa to their friends, and even themselves in that first year, had now become an awkward topic, especially with Alice. Ever since their mother died, near the end of their teenage years, she’d taken on a level of judgement about Kieran’s life that extended beyond that of a big sister.

‘You’ll have to eat quickly,’ said Alice. ‘Dad wants us to come around.’

Kieran looked down at his watch. His class was due to begin in twenty minutes. He walked faster, slipping a little on the smooth stone footpath.

‘Why couldn’t he tell me that himself?’

‘Look, I don’t know,’ said Alice. Her voice was straining and Kieran could tell that she was rushing to work. ‘I’m just the messenger. Talk to him yourself. But make sure you’re at his place by eight tonight. I’ve got to go now. Bye.’

Alice hung up before Kieran had a chance to reply.

‘Today, we’re going to pick up where we left off with our writing exercise.’

Kieran was standing at the front of his class. The classroom was inside an old office building and had the impression of a hasty conversion. It was as if office cubicles had been

shifted out in one grand sweep of an arm, carpet torn up to expose the concrete below, and a dozen shabby tables tossed into the space. He'd been teaching a few classes and doing some admin work at the adult education centre for a few years. His friend Anton, the manager of the centre, had got him the job. His class consisted of twelve older ladies and one elderly man. Each one had spent years working and raising children, putting aside their passion until a later date. That time had come and now they were here in Kieran's intensive. He was their guide in their long-awaited renaissance.

'I think I've made a mistake,' said Colleen, a lithe older lady who, early in the course, told Kieran she used to be a model at Myer. 'Were we supposed to write in the first person?'

Colleen looked worried. She looked from Kieran to the page in front of her and back again.

'That's completely up to you, Colleen,' said Kieran. 'Remember, we're borrowing a scene from one of your favourite movies and basing the piece on that. It could be written as a letter to the main character, from the point of view of the director of the movie or it could be a straight reproduction in third person limited. What you do is up to you. It's just a way to prompt your writing.'

'Oh,' said Colleen. She nodded but a frown was forming on her face. 'I remember.'

Kieran imagined Colleen as a young woman, hair pinned up and smooth shoulders on display. He imagined her trying on expensive clothes. He imagined her posing, looking to an art director for instructions. He smiled, trying to put Colleen at ease. He started walking slowly around the room. A woman named Elaine raised her hand. Kieran gritted his teeth. There was only one subject Elaine was interested in talking about with Kieran.

'Did your father ever do this exercise?' she asked.

Kieran cracked the knuckles on his hands. He looked at the ceiling, pretending to search

his memory. Every class, without fail, Elaine had asked at least one question about his father. Kieran could sense Elaine's questions leading up to something. Since his mother died, women had gravitated to Kieran. They had sought him out and engaged him in conversation. They had waited until a reasonable amount of time had passed before making their enquiries. At first, he took their interest as a sign of the beginning of his sexual maturity. He was in his late teens and was starting to feel bold about himself. He thought the women were responding to something about him. His deeper voice, his broader chin. Women, some of them more than ten years older than him, picked him out. They paid him attention, they locked their eyes on him. It wasn't long until he noticed that each of them gradually moved the topic of conversation to his father. They would ask fewer questions about him and more about his father. Was he still living in the same house? Was he ever lonely? Was he getting out? Were there places he like to go to socialise?

'He's never mentioned it to me,' said Kieran.

He watched Elaine. She blinked and then nodded. Kieran imagined Elaine filing the information away somewhere in her mind, next to other facts about his father.

Kieran spent the rest of the morning helping his class with questions about character and sentence structure. He talked to his class about their writing, complimenting them on their word choice and dialogue. His students smiled and continued putting pen to paper. Elaine asked him if his father kept in touch with his writer friends and Kieran said he wasn't sure but that he believed a lot of them were dead and so probably not. Elaine nodded and went back to her writing.

The class broke for lunch. Kieran walked upstairs and into the office. Anton and a few other employees were standing over by a whiteboard, talking quietly.

'Kieran,' said Anton. 'Big news. We were just talking about it.'

Everyone turned to face Kieran. They looked at him, scanning his face, unblinking.

Kieran forced a smile.

‘Yeah. It was a big shock,’ said Kieran. His chest felt tight, like it was weighed down with bricks. He cleared his throat. ‘A really good kind of shock, I mean. We’re really thrilled for him, Alice and me. And Tessa. I haven’t spoken to her yet but I’m sure she’s really thrilled for him too. We’re all thrilled. Really thrilled.’

Anton and the others exchanged glances. The two employees stood up and said they had to get to lunch and passed on their congratulations. They walked out of the room. Anton smiled.

‘And how about the big guy, is he over the moon?’

‘I haven’t had a chance to talk to him yet, to be honest,’ said Kieran. ‘I only found out on the tram. He kept it all a big secret. We’re going over there tonight though so I’ll find out the details then.’

Anton smiled and nodded. He glanced at his assistant Kelly, who was typing on a laptop a few desks away. He waved, gesturing for Kieran to follow him. They walked into Anton’s office and he closed the door behind them.

‘Have you given any thought to my offer?’ asked Anton. ‘It would be great to have you on board, you know, in that way.’

Two weeks ago, Anton had stopped by Kieran’s desk at the end of a workday. He was wearing a suit, which usually meant that he had gone to a board meeting. Anton told him that he’d just been speaking with the higher-ups and would Kieran be interested in taking over the management of some of their programs? Anton had told him that it would be a full-time position, on a good salary. There’d be benefits, like rostered days off and a full annual leave load since he’d be a permanent full-time employee.

Kieran had stood there in the class, watching Anton's face. The word 'permanent' stuck in his mind. He played the sound over and over in his head. He imagined the word, the letters side by side. He imagined it as a physical object in the office. The letters were grey and bold block shapes. They crowded around the tables and whiteboard markers and sticky notes. He told Anton that he'd think it over.

'I've been thinking about it,' Kieran said. 'It's a really great offer. I'm not sure, though. I've got my writing, you know. I need some time for that. Don't get me wrong, I know a lot of people would kill for a job like that but I feel like I'm really getting somewhere with my work right now. I'm not sure I should pull back from that at the moment.'

Anton looked worried. His forehead became a mess of grooves.

'The writing isn't going anywhere,' he said. 'This might be a good step, you know.'

Kieran looked out the window. He saw the wet sky beside grey and black office towers. It all seemed so close and overpowering.

'I don't know,' said Kieran. 'Can I get back to you on it?'

Anton took a step back. He blinked a few times and then his face softened. He smiled.

'Sure. Sure,' he said. 'We've got to make a decision soon but I'll check back in with you before then. Talk it over with Tessa. How is she, by the way?'

'She's good,' said Kieran. 'She's really good. I'll do that. I'll let you know when I've had a chance to talk to her about it.'

Anton ran a hand through his hair. He was ten years older than Kieran and his hair was half and half, dark brown and grey. They'd met through some people his father knew. Back when they met, Anton was a regular at bars and breweries and parties but that was in the past. He had a young family and spent his weekends at junior football and netball matches, and pushing shopping trolleys around department stores. Kieran still went to the same bars and to

the parties people threw at their rental houses. He still stayed out late and nursed his hangovers with electrolytes the next day. Anton and Kieran's lives had moved apart. There was a fissure forming between them, inching wider and wider every day.

'You better get some lunch,' Anton said, 'and I better get back to work. These spreadsheets won't fix themselves.'

Kieran left the office and walked out into the street. He bought a sandwich and walked down to the river. The water was brown and high, full of silt and the heavy rain that had been falling for the past few days. He watched ducks glide along the surface.

Kieran's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out and saw a message from Tessa: *Just heard the news. So good. Let's celebrate. Mum is making moussaka tonight btw.*

He locked the phone and put it back in his pocket. Two of his students, the older man Ravindra and a woman named Jane, were eating on a bench nearby. They spotted Kieran and waved. He waved back.

Class ended just before four in the afternoon. He waited until his students left, waving and saying goodbye to each of them. He avoided the office on his way out of the building. He pressed the elevator call button four times before it arrived. Once he was on the ground, he walked quickly out of the building, down the street and over to a waiting tram.

He took the back way from his tram stop, moving down the laneway and past the back fences of houses, each one leaning at obscene angles, almost falling down. He walked slowly along the bluestone lane, avoiding puddles. There were no people in the laneway, only the occasional cat stalking the cracks between stones or sunning itself in the last of the afternoon light. He let his body relax. He let gravity work on it, pulling his muscles down, lowering his



shoulders.

He opened the back gate and ducked under the olive tree, crouching as he walked to the entrance of the granny flat. He could hear Tessa talking on the phone. When he walked inside, she held up a finger in his direction. He sat on the couch and pulled off his boots, and waited until she finished the call.

‘There’s the boy with the famous father,’ said Tessa, after she’d put down her phone. ‘So, is he excited?’

‘Not sure,’ said Kieran. ‘Haven’t had a chance to speak to him yet.’

She untied her hair and shook it out. It was long with tight curls, dark and almost wet with shine, the way paint looks on a palette when you mix all the colours together.

‘When are you seeing him?’

‘Alice called,’ said Kieran, pulling off his socks. ‘I’m supposed to go over there tonight. That reminds me, can I take the car?’

Tessa walked over to him and placed her hands on his shoulders. She sat on his lap, easing down slowly.

‘That depends,’ said Tessa. She started to unbutton his shirt. ‘Do you have any good news for me?’

She stared into his eyes as she worked on the buttons, twisting fabric around the smooth surface and letting the shirt pop as each button passed the threshold. He held her gaze for a while and then looked away, down to a dark stain on the beige couch.

‘I told him I’d think it over,’ Kieran said. ‘I’ve got to decide if it’s the right move.’

Tessa stopped unbuttoning. She eased back on his lap and lifted his chin with one hand. Kieran glanced at her face and then looked away again.

‘What do you mean? I thought you’d decided to take the job. Isn’t that what we talked

about?’

Kieran moved his head away from her hand. He sighed and shook his head.

‘I didn’t make up my mind,’ he said. ‘I never said that. I just feel like it might trap me, you know, and I won’t have the time I need and then it’ll be too late for me.’

Tessa leaned back and then stood up. She ran a hand through her hair.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Tessa. ‘It’s a job, not a life sentence.’

She walked into the kitchenette. Kieran looked around the room. From his place on the two-seater couch, he could almost reach out and touch Tessa in the kitchen. The roof slanted down on one side so that the fridge almost touched the ceiling. The tap dripped like a metronome. There was mould growing around the sink. On the other side of the kitchen was a door that led to the bedroom, just enough space for a double bed and two clothes racks.

‘We said we’d put the same amount of money away every month but it’s only me adding to it lately,’ said Tessa. She was standing at the sink, gripping the sides and leaning in. She was looking away from him. ‘You know, when my grandparents came to this country, they had nothing. They had to start again. They had to learn a new language. They had to save every cent. No theatre or books or holidays. Just work. That’s all they did. They worked and they ate and they slept and that was it until they had enough money to start their shop. They would’ve given anything to have the opportunities you’ve had.’

Tessa’s face was flushed. She picked up a glass from the drying rack next to the sink. She filled it under the faucet and then drank the contents, drawing it down in loud gulps.

‘I don’t know how much longer we can stay here,’ said Tessa. She waved a hand, gesturing at the tight space in the flat.

Kieran stood up and walked over to Tessa. He wrapped an arm around her waist. He could feel her muscles tighten.

‘I never said I wouldn’t take it,’ said Kieran. ‘I just need a bit more time.’

There was a knock at the door. Hard knocks: one, two. It must be almost time for dinner. It was an unspoken agreement with Tessa’s parents that they would knock like that and then walk back to the house. The main house was where they all met and ate and talked. Tessa’s parents never came into their space. The flat was Tessa and Kieran’s private area but, even if they invited Tessa’s parents in, there wouldn’t be enough room for everyone to stand. Tessa moved her hips, moving out of Kieran’s grip.

‘Coming,’ she said, calling out over her shoulder. She walked into the bedroom and closed the door behind her.

Kieran stood next to the sink. The window opposite him was partly open, the thin blinds in front of it shifting in the breeze. He could smell the meal coming from the main house, a sweet smell of caramelised eggplant. He felt a slight nausea rising in his belly. Tessa opened the bedroom door, fastening a necklace behind her.

‘Ready?’

‘I think I’ll take a dog for a quick walk before dinner,’ said Kieran.

The sun had dipped below the horizon. Faint light covered the trees and cars in the street. Footballs and scooters and frisbees lay in front yards. There was a sense of transition in the air, of moving from one place to another. The street to the home. The air was chilly. He pulled his jacket higher on his neck.

He turned a few corners, the dog pulling on the leash. They walked up a street beside the train line. The distant horns of the trains reached him on the wind. Cyclists wearing colourful helmets rushed along the footpath next to the train tracks.

The dog stopped to relieve itself in front of a house. Kieran waited next to the dog and looked over at the house. The front garden was a collection of small shrubs surrounded by smooth white stones. An olive tree rose from the centre of the garden. An old man stood in front of the house holding a hose. He directed its spray onto the driveway, washing dirt down into the street. The man nodded in Kieran's direction.

'A healthy dog,' said the man. 'Good boy.'

Kieran pulled a little green plastic bag from his pocket. He rubbed the edge of the bag until the opening came loose.

'It's a she, actually,' he said. 'Sorry about, you know. You never can tell when they're going to go.'

The old man waved a hand. Kieran reached down and picked up after the dog.

'A healthy dog,' said the old man. 'He go whenever he like.'

Under the olive tree, an old three-piece outdoor setting stood out in the faint light. It was wrought iron, painted white, and had leaf and flower details. On the table, was a jar of pickles and two forks.

'Much on tonight?' asked Kieran.

The old man pointed at his house. Kieran looked at the house, at the light-brown bricks and faded tile roof.

'My wife and I make salami tonight,' said the man. 'We string them up in the garage. Very much salami.'

Kieran imagined the old man and his wife bent over shiny metal appliances, hand-cranked machines screwed into a long table. He imagined meat filling thick tubes, inflating like balloons.

'That sounds pretty fun actually,' said Kieran.

The old man screwed the end of the hose, shutting off the water. He laughed.

‘Not fun, no,’ said the old man. ‘Work. Lots of work. Very messy and we get very tired but it is good work. Work is good.’

The dog kicked at the grass. She snorted and then relaxed, nibbling at an itch in her fur.

‘Have you been making salami for long?’

‘Oh, very long,’ said the old man, glancing up at the sky and then returning his gaze to Kieran. ‘Since before all this. Before here.’

‘Before Melbourne?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said the old man. He pointed at the ground. ‘Since before this side of world. I come from the other side. But it feel a lot like this place. Very warm and people very friendly.’

The dog pulled on the leash, trying to move on up the street but Kieran stood still.

‘I like making salami,’ said the old man. ‘It make me feel like I’m home and it feel good to make for other people. We give it to everyone we know. Children, grandchildren, neighbours. We give to everyone. We made salami last night also. You want to look?’

Kieran nodded. ‘Definitely,’ he said.

The old man waved a hand and then turned, winding the hose between his hands as he walked up the drive. Kieran led the dog past the ornate gate at the entrance to the property and followed the man into the garage. The old man flicked a switch and a single naked bulb lit up. They were in a small garage with faded grey walls and a concrete floor. There was shelving to one side, with glass containers of different sizes piled to the ceiling. Inside the containers were olives and colourful vegetables suspended in liquid. On the other wall, there were old faded posters of somewhere in Europe. Rocky hills, olive trees, small boats in light-blue water. Above them, on racks attached to the ceiling, lengths of salami hung like

Christmas stockings, dangling in the air. There were two rectangular tables with metal appliances and empty plastic containers on top, and half a dozen metal chairs.

The old man pointed up at the salami. 'Good?'

'Yeah,' said Kieran. 'Very good. I can't believe you made all this yourself.'

The old man shook his head. He held up his hands and smiled. His hands were small and wrinkled. Kieran looked into the old man's eyes for the first time. They were cloudy and damp.

'Many years,' he said. 'Many years to make salami.'

Kieran walked beside the shelving, looking at the containers of pickled food. The dog sniffed at the containers on the lower shelves.

'Where do you get all these vegetables?'

The old man pointed past Kieran to a door on the far side of the garage.

'We grow,' he said. 'In the back. Big garden. And the olive come from the front. You know, big tree with the chairs under?'

'I saw that, yeah,' said Kieran. 'What do you do with all this? Sell it?'

The old man frowned and shook his head. He held a hand to his belly.

'We eat and we give to family to eat. Same as salami,' he said. He looked at the ceiling, his eyes following the lengths of salami. 'Back home we make everything. Bread, cheese, yoghurt and olive oil. Much olive oil. We don't need to go to supermarket. We have our own animals. Sheep and goats and chickens. We grow vegetables. We have land and we make every day. The sun come up and we go work. The sun go down and we go sleep.'

The old man made a pillow with his hands and rested his head against them. He laughed.

'We have no money,' said the man. 'Good to work on the land but we have no money for anything. If a sheep die, big problem. And always trouble on that side of world. Always

fighting. We have to leave. We have to leave for our children.’

Kieran nodded. He glanced at his watch.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I have to get going, I’m afraid.’

‘Yes,’ said the old man. He nodded quickly and wiped at his eyes with one hand. ‘Of course. Yes.’

‘I really enjoyed the chat,’ said Kieran, ‘and thanks for showing me the salami.’

‘Come back,’ said the old man. ‘Come back whenever and I give you salami.’

Kieran, the dog and the old man walked down the driveway. The old man stopped at the gate and waved. Kieran waved back and then walked up the street before turning at the next corner. The dog pulled hard on the leash. Kieran looked at the doors and windows of the houses he passed, each one glowing with light from inside. His thoughts drifted to his father. Kieran looked forward to seeing him. He decided to stop by a bottle shop and buy some champagne on the way to the house later that night. He was going to make a big show of the prize in front of his father. He was going to cheer and clap his hands together. Kieran promised himself that he would tell his father how proud he was. He would congratulate him on winning the prize and he would shake his father’s hand for as long as he shook back.