

The Stuart Hadow Short Story Competition 2019

Title of Story: "Wrong Side of the Tracks"

Pen Name: Geoffrey Wilkinson

Wrong Side of the Tracks

“She comes from the wrong sides of the tracks.”

I looked up sharply at my mother. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Come on Jordie, don’t be like that. I mean she’s just not good enough for you.”

“For fuck’s sake, Mum! You’ve been on at me throughout dinner about Carrie. She’s not tall enough. She’s too fat. She’s got pierced ears. She didn’t get a good enough HSC and now she’s got some problem with the railways.”

“I just want the best for you, Jordie. You’re such a talented young man.”

“You don’t even know her, Mum!” By now I could feel an uncontrollable rage building up inside me and I knew if I didn’t get up from the table and leave I would do something stupid. “I’m going out!”

After deliberately slamming the door hard enough to make the side window rattle in its frame, I surveyed the street. Cars were jammed head to tail the entire length of the road. I could probably get my little Hyundai out of the tight spot but I wouldn’t get it back in — if a spot was waiting for me when I returned — so I turned left and walked down towards the station. What the fuck did she mean by her comment about the railway? I’d been going out with Carrie for all

of three weeks and Mum, as usual, didn't like her. She hadn't liked Leanne, or Sophie either and I hadn't dared take Aimee home — she was Asian.

With Mum quietly, and not so quietly, undermining my relationships with any girl I showed an interest in, I felt more and more angry towards her. What the hell would she know about relationships? Hers had hardly been a roaring success. The only reason I knew I had a Dad was my earthly existence. “He left before you were born, Darling,” was the best I got out of her. No matter how many times I had asked, she said that she “didn't want to talk about him.” That was okay for her to say but she didn't feel as though a piece of her was missing. I remember when we did an exercise in biology and had to draw our family tree. Mine was more like a wind-broken gum than a strong spreading oak. One entire side was missing. At least I wasn't alone and the teacher got in trouble after that exercise for blowing out the waiting list for the counsellor.

I kicked a Pepsi can and it clattered down the road. I should have picked it up but I was pissed. Pissed with Mum. Pissed with the world. I should have been looking for jobs to keep my Hyundai on the road but what was the point? I'd walked up and down Forest Road all last weekend enquiring at cafes, oil-soaked take-aways, and two-dollar shops and none of them had vacancies.

“Sorry mate.”

“Nah, not making a buck me self.”

“Try next door.”

“Not employing at present, thanks.”

“Leave your CV? No point. We’re closing down next week.”

“Sorry, we’re after someone a bit older and experienced.”

Mum had wanted me to register with Centrelink but even that made my blood cold. Some of my mates had registered and they had to write some God-awful number of applications a week. Ethan just spammed SEEK but there just weren’t any jobs. Not for year twelve grads with an A in English but only a C+ in maths. Not here anyhow. Carrie was the only one who provided any spark of light in my drab life. Mum reckoned that I used words well and could become a journalist. I looked at her and just laughed.

“Who reads these days?”

“I do,” she replied.

“Yeah and you’re thirty-four and don’t even use Facebook.”

“Journalists work for TV too.”

“Who watches TV?”

“What?”

“Netflix maybe. YouTube perhaps. Channel bloody Seven News? You’re joking.”

She sighed and bent down to pat the dog.

I know that she isn’t happy. Her job at the doctor’s is a drag — she’s always coming home with some new cold or flu bug. Who’d be a receptionist?

“Hello, Doctor Amir’s office, please hold the line.”

No wonder she wanted something better for me. But what. Could I leave? Leave Mum? No. That wasn’t an option.

I sat down on a bench outside the railway and stared at passing people. There was a bowed, white-haired woman struggling with two dangling bags of groceries through the throng and towards the pedestrian lights. The little man went green and she tottered out into the road and started crossing. Shortly, the man flashed and I could see her speed up but she wasn’t even halfway when the man went red and stared at her accusingly as she tried to complete her trip. A taxi behind the patiently waiting Prius blared its horn. The woman startled and dropped her bag. I heard a crash as the glass in the bag smashed on the tarmac. I turned my head and looked the other way.

• • •

“Carrie’s on the phone,” Mum called from the kitchen. The tone of her voice speaks of railways and tracks, and being on the wrong side of them. As soon as I can afford to fill my sim card I won’t have to deal with her criticism every time Carrie calls.

“Thanks,” I say as I take the phone from her. I don’t mean it.

“Carrie?”

“Jordie. I need to see you.”

“Sure. When?”

“Now!” Her voice is desperate.

“Okay. Where shall we meet?”

“Can I come to your place?”

I look at Mum. She’s glaring at me. She can hear Carrie’s tinny voice over the phone.

“I’ll come to you.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Dad’s chucked me out.”

I look at Mum again. She’s rolling her eyes. They say accusingly “I told you so.”

“I’ll see you at Sinbad’s. I’ll buy you dinner.”

“Sure?” she says, her voice breaking.

“Sure,” I say. Not looking at Mum.

“Your dinner’s ready. I’ve spent the last hour making it and you’re going out?”

“Sorry, Mum. You heard.”

“Jesus, Jordie. Don’t waste your time with her. She’s not worth it. There are many other fish in the sea.”

Mum's good with the sayings. Just not very good with life.

"You're not one to lecture," I reply. "What about Dan?"

"He was a bastard."

"And John?"

"He wasn't nice to Jess."

Jess bit him. I hope he tasted horrid. "Tim?"

"No hoper."

"Yeah, and yet you tell me that Carrie's 'from the wrong side of the tracks'?"

At least she doesn't steal from us." That was a nasty remark. Mum looked away and out the window to the broken back fence and dangling power lines. Her last boyfriend left taking the new television. Mum had saved for six months to buy it. He sent her a postcard from Cable Beach, last week. It had a naked woman on the front with big tits. On the front it said, 'Greetings from Cable Beach'. On the back it said in barely discernible scrawl "Don't wish you were here. The TV scored me \$500 bucks — luv ya! Scott." God knows where he found a stamp or knew what it was for. I didn't even know he could write. Play COD sure, but write?

I should have said 'sorry', but I didn't. I went to meet Carrie.

• • •

“Hummus, garlic or thousand island?” I asked her as I stood up to order at the counter.

Carrie looked at me with big red eyes. Her mascara was smeared down her cheek. I wished she’d wipe it away. She didn’t answer.

“Nevermind,” I muttered, “I’ll decide.”

Sinbad — actually his name was Ertugrul Güteryuz but nobody could pronounce that — wiped his hands on his apron and in a broad Australian accent asked for my order.

“Two lamb kebabs with thousand island. No onion. Oh, and two Cokes.” The instructions rolled off my tongue. I was surprised Sinbad didn’t know them as I had been repeating them every Friday night for years when Mum gave me \$20 to buy us dinner. It was her one luxury night, when she didn’t have to cook and she could put up her feet in front of the telly. Not that that was an option now.

I sauntered back to the brightly lit cubicle with the stuttering fluorescent tube winking on and off above my head and issuing forth a high frequency buzz that normally drove me nuts but tonight I ignored it. Carrie was upset. Very upset. She’d barely said a word to me when I arrived. I squeezed down next to her and found her hand under the grey laminate table and held it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“Dad’s thrown me out,” she eventually said.

“You’d said. But why?”

“I can’t tell you.”

I tried to look into her eyes but they were downcast — avoiding me.

“Carrie... It’s okay. I won’t get mad.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

She stared at me for a long while then so quietly that I could barely make out the words she said, “I’m pregnant.”

The buzz of the tube pierced my brain. It got louder and louder and the light flickered viciously. I felt her hand squeeze mine.

“Jordie?” she said in a small voice. “Jordie?”

The screech subsided and I glared at her and threw her hand off mine. “How? I mean who? Why? I thought that we...”

Tears streamed down her face and she buried her face in her arms.

Sinbad arrived and looked at me and then looked at Carrie. “Two kebabs, two Cokes. No onion. Thousand island.” He sounded like an automaton. “Err, do you wanna...”

“Thanks Sinbad. Just leave them here. She’ll be right in a mo.”

Sinbad rapidly retreated to the rotating vertical spit. A place much safer than next to a teary girl.

Mum was right. Wrong side of the bloody tracks. Cheating on me. Fuck! I wanted to grind her face into the kebab and scream. I'd been so fucking kind to this bitch and she'd taken me for a fucking ride...

“Jordie...”

I didn't want to talk to her. I stood up. She grabbed my hand — tightly. Very tightly. She whispered something I couldn't make out and stared at me, imploringly. Wanting something from me. A kind word? Understanding? I wrenched myself free.

I fled.

• • •

The streets of Perth at 2am are strangely silent. Especially in Armadale after all the shops have closed and the drunks have found their way home. I knew Mum would be worried but I didn't care. I didn't care about anything much. I'd only cared about two people in my life before. Mum and Carrie. Now Carrie had betrayed me. She'd got herself pregnant. Pregnant! Up the fucking duff! And who with? Had she said 'Dan'? But I didn't know any Dans. 'Brad' perhaps? There were no Brads in our year at school. Someone outside school? I needed to know. It was eating me. I needed to transfer my anger solely from

Carrie to the bastard that she had shagged. I needed to abhor both of them.

Equally.

My feet were sore after walking for hours around the suburb. I headed home and into our street. The little fibro cottages with their fake Federation finials, etched against the city-grey sky, stood erect like the finger I wanted to give the world. I fumbled in the dark for my key and opened the front door. Jess greeted me with a thump of her tail on the stained floorboards.

“Jordie?” called Mum, from her bedroom.

“Yeah.”

“Where have you been? I’ve been worried.”

“Out.”

“With Carrie?”

“Yeah.”

“All okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. We’ll talk in the morning. Night.”

“Night, Mum.”

I stood in the hallway not moving. I needed to know who Carrie had been screwing. I crept to the kitchen, quietly shut the door, and lifted the phone from the cradle. From the glow of the streetlight I dialled her mobile. It rang and rang and then a very small voice said, “Jordie?”

“Yeah. It’s me. I want to know one thing.”

“Jordie, I’m at the railway. I’m so cold. Please can I come and stay with you?”

I could not believe what I was hearing.

“Shit Carrie. Go and sleep with the prick you’ve been screwing.”

Silence and then “Jordie... it’s Dad. He... he... forces himself upon me.”

I could no longer pretend it was ‘Dan’ or ‘Brad’. She said it clearly. In barely a whisper but clearly. It was ‘Dad’.

I banged down the receiver.

The door opened and Mum clicked on the light. She stood in the glare in her long yellow nightgown and fluffy pink slippers. “Jordie, what’s happened?”

I stared at her. What would she know? What could she say?

“You’d not understand,” was all I could think of saying. A cliché if there ever was one. See, I could be a journalist.

“Try me,” she said, taking me by the arm and guiding me to the couch. We sat next to each other, staring at the fireplace that had never been lit in all the years I had lived in the little fibro house.

“Carrie’s pregnant.” From the corner of my eye I saw Mum start. “Not me,” I added quickly. “I’ve only known her three weeks, remember.”

Mum breathed again.

“Jordie, I’m so sorry.”

I stared at her. “Sorry? What? I thought she was from the wrong side of the tracks?”

“You still liked her. It was wrong of me. You’re nineteen. You can make your own choices now.”

I struggled to make sense of this rapid change of tack.

“What will you do,” she asked quietly.

“Dump her.”

“Poor kid.”

“Who? Me or her?”

“Do you know who it was?”

I pause.

“Yeah.”

“Do you know him?”

Well, I had met him on a couple of occasions. A big man. Fat. Red-faced. Loud mouthed. Demanding.

“I’ve met him.”

“Did you know that she was seeing him? Is he her ex?”

“Why all these questions, Mum? It’s over. Over!”

“I thought you’d like to talk.”

I wanted to tell her. I wanted to. I really did. So I told her.

• • •

It's 4.30am. Carrie is asleep on the couch in the living room. Mum and I are having a hot chocolate sitting on her bed.

"I'm sorry I made rude comments about your girlfriends, Jordie," she said. "It's not something for me to judge."

"It's okay. I'd never heard of 'wrong side of the tracks before.'"

"It's a phrase that my Mum used to say. Silly saying really."

"What shall we do with Carrie?"

Mum smiled at me and put her arm around my shoulder. "Well, we'll let her sleep. She's safe for the moment. Tomorrow we'll have a chat with her and see what help we can get."

Mum fell silent. When I turned to look at her, her eyes were moist. "It's not her fault, you know."

Mum had tears in her eyes when she said that, and I don't know why.

2506 Words