

MERMAID FOOTWEAR

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Their lounge room window looked out on to the car park of the empty shoe factory across the road. Laurel remembered when there had been a metal arch over the car park entrance. In cut-out letters that had formed part of the arch and the shape of a woman with a tail, it had spelled *MERMAID FOOTWEAR*.

Someone had stolen the arch one night, and from across the road Laurel and Peter, sleeping, hadn't heard a thing. Around that time Peter had said, 'I think it's time we got a dog,' but they hadn't done anything except talk about it, stumped by which breed to get.

At night Laurel would lay her hand on Peter, under the sheet, and feel his narrow, unfleshed flank. The skin felt dry, ageing, leathery. She would feel fear rise in her chest like water in a well.

His breathing, a solid snore of the same pitch and volume hour after hour, night after night, was as comforting as the sea. She remembered a holiday when they had first been married, how at night they had laid together in the small rented house at the cliff's edge, the sound of the sea enclosing them both. That was what his snoring reminded her of.

Each weekday morning, cars would start arriving at the car park at five-thirty. At first the cars arrived singly, then in pairs. By seven o'clock there would be a line that went up the street. By seven-thirty the air in the street would be thick with patient exhaust fumes.

The people who used the car park came from suburbs further out, from places where the gardens and streets were full of indigenous shrubs, and where

trains and buses didn't go. The car park was used by people catching trains to work in the city. From here, the city was an hour away by train, forty-eight minutes by express.

Peter often said he wished he owned the land the car park was on, or just the right to it. 'Someone's making a killing,' he'd say so much that Laurel would sometimes have to cover her mouth so as not to say, *It's never us, though, is it?*

Peter would watch the cars pulling in to the car park. Early in the morning it was easy to see which person belonged to which car. He had nicknames for the obvious ones. *The Prime Mover. The Wanktress. Bimbo the Great. Hotshot Lawkid. Mr Tragic. Miss Prissy. The Rock Star. Beamer Boy. The Bad Suit. The 'Do.* He would try to imagine what job each person did and what salary each was on from the cut of the suit and from the car's make and model. With women, it wasn't just the car and the cut of the clothes, but how many different clothes each woman had, and how much she mixed and matched.

Peter kept count of the cars each morning. He would stand on the front verandah and sip his tea from an enamel cup that he said made the tea taste better than a china cup ever could. According to him, the car park made in a day what it had once taken him more than a week to earn at the factory. He would give Laurel figures every now and then, and tell her again how he wished he owned the land the car park stood on, or even just the right to it.

He rarely talked about the shoe factory. For two years after it had closed he had worried over and relived it incessantly until Laurel had thought of leaving him, perhaps by suicide. Then one morning not long after his fifty-seventh birthday there had been cars pulling into the car park, and he'd been full of wonder and joy and tearful relief until it had finally hit home that the cars had nothing to do with the factory.

'Something's gone skew-whiff, don't you think?' he'd say to her now, and she understood this to take in not only the car park, but the empty building beside it, the reversal in significance between the two, and the course their life had taken.

On their toilet wall was a Mermaid Footwear poster from the days when Peter had been young and confident enough to despise his job. The poster was little larger than a sheet of typing paper and had been laminated long after it

had begun to yellow. Posters like it had once hung in shoe shops when there had still been such shops in suburban shopping strips. It showed the Little Mermaid, her tail in two and its tips forming two feet, in a pair of shoes that obviously gave her pleasure and relief.

Justin, the car park attendant, had turned fifteen last birthday and had what Laurel thought of as a footballer's haircut—all spikes and dyed highlights, astonishing on an otherwise average boy. He would tag each car with a paper ticket as it pulled up, taking each driver's money and giving them change out of the black nylon pouch slung around his waist.

Justin had a little tin shed to sit in that was no bigger than a toilet cubicle. He had a tiny television in there, and always wore his MP3 player. He had an old kitchen chair that on warm days he would bring out of the cubicle. He would sit with the chair tipped back against the cubicle's tin-clad side, his thumbs texting incessantly on his mobile phone.

'He's going to fall on his arse one day,' Peter would say. 'But you can't tell these kids anything.'

When the weather was hot on weekdays, Peter would often take Justin a can of no-name soft drink of the kind Peter bought in cartons and kept in the laundry on the shelf under the long, segmented concrete trough. Occasionally, on a very hot day, Peter would go over and persuade Justin to come and do his texting in their lounge room, while Peter kept watch from the verandah in case anyone wanted to park their car. Once, Laurel had fallen between the toilet and the wall, and Peter had at first been unable to get her back into her chair. He had been all set to get Justin to come over and help, and Laurel had had to plead with him not to.

Justin was polite and embarrassed with Laurel, and if Peter had been out of the room for a while always asked Laurel if there was anything he could get her, perhaps from somewhere else in the house. No matter how hot the day, she always made sure to cover her legs when Justin came, because the muscles were shrunken and she didn't think she could bear the untempered gaze of a fifteen-year-old boy.

Sometimes Laurel and Justin spoke, most often about Justin, who was going to be apprenticed to a plumber the next year and who invariably ended

such conversations with: 'I'm going to earn a fucking packet and get out of this shithole.'

At one o'clock each weekday the man who leased the land the car park stood on would come to collect the takings from Justin. The man drove a grey BMW convertible and dressed in flashy, expensive suits, and in shirts and silk ties that Peter thought were handmade. Peter had decided early on that the man was a real-estate agent.

The man would only be there two or three minutes, rarely getting out of his car, but pulling in at the car park entrance just as a customer might, so that Justin had to get up and go to the car window. Peter and Laurel would watch from their lounge room as the man thrust his hand out of the car window, open, ready to grasp. Even from across the road, the man's hand looked big and fleshy, as though it took up more space in the world than a hand had a right to. Peter and Laurel would watch as Justin passed the takings over in a plastic shopping bag, which, once the hand had gripped it, disappeared into the car without ado. The man would back out and swing into the street with a wide reversing arc that anticipated neither resistance nor other cars.

(end of excerpt)