

## Allegiance – Jai, Year 12, NSW

I grew up in the Lower North Shore – Hunter’s Hill. Next door, there were trees that looked like they belonged in a forest. Really tall. Green all year round. It had one of them modern-looking kitchens – all greys. A bunk bed in my room for my brother and me. And one of them carpets with the city printed all over it, with the roads and that. That little carpet was luxurious at the time – a landscape of long laneways to become lost in. And Hungarian goulash. The smell all through the house. I’m part Hungarian with a bit of Italian. The goulash was always made by grandad, so the house has got that beefy smell to it.

“Hey kid, let’s go for a ride.” That’s what Grandad used to say every Sunday arvo. I would feel goosebumps going down my spine in excitement as I got into his Lamborghini Sparta. He loved that car like Jay Z loves Beyonce. Its engine start-up sounded like a lion in the wild. We’d park up in Balmain, near one of the old lookouts where you could spot the Harbour Bridge. But we didn’t go there for the city lights. We would lay down on the bonnet of the car, just staring at the stars.

Happy. If you asked me what being a kid in that house felt like – it’s pretty simple. I was happy. I was a good kid, mind you. Never talked back or anything. Always did the dishes after dinner. Life had a little bubble around it. It was 2019 and, in my world, there wasn’t any Brexit, no trade war with China, everyone was screaming something or other about Trump, but I wasn’t listening. It was a deep summer and all I remember is that it was the first time I broke one of my dad’s rules.

It was hot. So hot. The kind of heat that brings the flies out – the fat ones that hurt like heartbreak. And you’re smothered in sunscreen mixed with sand and it’s all grit and grease. It was 4am when Mark, one of the boys who lived next door, hammered on my window. “Oi! Getcha ass up, let’s go.”

When I didn’t budge, he reached in the open window and grabbed my foot, shaking my leg. I wanted to box him like we were Evander and Tyson. And I’d end up biting his scrawny ear off just like Tyson did. The little cockroach, finding his way in when no one wants him around.

“Nah bugger off, Mate,” I mumbled.

“Ya scared? Ya scared.”

“Of what mate?”

“Don’t wanna get caught, do ya? Everyones comin’ bruv.”

There was no point in arguing. I sat up, digging my fingers into the corners of my eyes and finding great hunks of crusty sleep. I kicked on some thongs, hauled myself out the window and followed Mark as he skittered up the stone paved steps, all jumpy with excitement.

“Where the hell are we going?” I whisper-yelled as he began skipping further ahead.

“The lookout ya pansy. Everyone’s gonna be there.”

“What for?”

“The sunrise, ya git.”

I could hear the screams of fruit bats and see the silhouette of a possum, stealthy as a furry John Wick scampering over the rooftops.

“It’s great you came bro because we’re havin’ a bonfire and everything,” explained Mark. He was calling it out over his shoulder, always three steps ahead so I got to see his whole body jolt – like someone had tasered him right in his special place – when a train horn blasted out of the night’s quiet. I could practically hear his pulse in my ears.

We scampered the rest of the way there. The lookout came into view: burned sticks, cola cans everywhere, and not a soul in sight. That’s all I saw when I arrived at the so-called ‘lit lookout’.

There was a crash as Mark booted a garbage can over. Plastic cups and bags and hamburger straps spilt over the ground, the evidence of the people who came and went. It’s like Mark was a cup of water overflowing. His fists were balled and there were bad words spewing from his mouth. I was next to him in an instant, dapping him on the back.

“It’s okay Mate. I’m not gonna tell anyone.” The sky was on fire. He looked up and smiled at it. “Don’t get me wrong though, if you ever drag me out of bed at sparrows fart again I’ll tell the world.” A bunch of rusty train-tracks wove through across the landscape, a dull version of the iridescent clouds.

We stayed too long and when I looked at the time it was dangerously close to my Pa’s morning coffee hour. I ran like Ferris Bueller home. I stumbled down those stone stairs and looked back at the sky, one last glance and it was getting coloured like a bruise. I thought I was safe. I carefully opened the door. Closed it soft as I could. My ego ballooned. I thought I was safe. I looked behind and gasped softly. It was my Grandad in the kitchen taking his early morning meds.

He asked politely, “Did you sneak out?”

I thought to myself...and thought...I can’t lie.

“Yeah, I was just out with my friends.”

“Don’t worry I used to do this all the time when I was your age, there’s nothing to hide.”

I was speechless. I thought my Grandad was going to snitch.

“This will be our secret alright,” he winked and walked back to bed.