

A Line in the Sand

On a desolate street in an industrial area of the city, a young man lay huddled in the corner of a bus shelter. He often chose this place on weekends because it was deserted, no one to move him on or look on him with loathing, disdain ... pity.

Although he was young in years at just 34, his appearance would suggest that he was much older. His sallow, drawn face, framing sunken eyes, already showing the beginnings of lines at their edges, and his mouth drawn downward with white, dried spittle at its corners. The tattoo on his neck wasn't the proud image of an eagle as it had been when he first had it done, it now hung like a wounded vulture on the loose skin of his wasted neck.

Only five short years ago, before he descended into the amphetamine-driven drug hell he now occupied, the tattoo went on to smooth olive skin, covering a muscular neck, conditioned by years of hard work as a builder and honed by hours of work in the gym. However, at this moment his thoughts were not of his personal appearance or his decent into hell, his mind was scattered, flashes of the last 24 hours and how he would spend the next 24 were top of mind.

He didn't know what day it was and had no intentions of catching a bus. He was taking shelter from the cold and the rain which sheeted down at a 45-degree angle from the south, ricocheting from the pavement and spraying up at him as he lay on the seat, tucked as far into the corner of the shelter as he could, curled up into the foetal position with his great coat pulled up around his ears.

His first thoughts, as he roused from his stupor, were for his apparatus. *Where was his needle and the rest of his gear?* He felt in his worn coat, a purchase he had made from St. Vincent's op shop in better days, he searched for the lump which would represent the roll containing his implements and perhaps some remnant of his drug stash. Relief, it was there.

His second thought was how soon he could "get on" again, *was there any gear left in his roll?* He searched around through bloodshot eyes to see if he was alone, then when satisfied that he was, he pulled out the roll and inspected it. He found what he already knew he would,

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no ICE. *He needed to work on getting more.* He rubbed the dried blood from the syringe then, returning it to the bundle, pushed it back into his coat.

His brain started working slowly, he ran possibilities through his foggy mind, possibilities he had gone through on many days such as this.

Where could he get on? There were a couple of places, but he already owed them money. He had none, and his dole wasn't due for another week. He might be able to borrow some; But who from? Who hadn't he hit up for a while? The only "friends" he had left were in the same boat as he was, or he owed them money or product. How long since he had asked Mum? No, she didn't believe him anymore, she had told him as much. She would feed him and give him shelter, but money, never.

He sat upright on the seat, his head swam with thoughts of hopelessness, self-loathing, self-pity. Anxiety washed over him. He couldn't count the times he had promised himself that he would clean up. But there was always a friend or a new friend to "get on" with and turn his plans to shit.

He had lost almost everything, cars, boat, other toys, credibility, and he would soon lose his home and his kids. She had driven him to this and now she had driven him out and away from his children. Her bullshit DVO kept him away from his house and family. It was too easy for dishonest women to get a DVO these days, he had never laid a hand on her, but they believed her lies. He blamed her for everything. However, deep down he knew, the choices were his and only he could change his life.

He sat with his head in his hands for a long time, his thoughts now back to exploring the possibilities of getting drugs or money.

He had nothing left to hock, he had thousands of dollars of goods in Cash Converters now and the possibility of paying the interest on them this month was nil, let alone getting them out.

The only thing he kept coming back to was *Dad*. He knew his father would try to help him;

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he always did. But each time he tapped him, he felt the guilt. As with most sons he had always wanted his father to be proud of him, and he had achieved that for a while, he had been a successful builder, he had given him grandchildren, they were good mates. All the things that fathers are supposed to cherish. But then it all went to down the drain, and now he knew that he was the cause of much worry and stress in his father's life. Each time they saw each other now, he felt the pain in their relationship. He felt the loss of joy in their companionship. He didn't feel a loss of love, just a sadness.

The thing he hated most was that when he worked up the courage to face him and get over his feelings of regret and sadness, he would again phone him for help. He would come up with some story to ask for the money, a story he suspected his father would see through. However, he was so desperate that he would again use the unconditional love to get the money.

He already knew which story he would use. He had several of his work tools in hock and he would tell his father that he needed one of the more expensive ones for a job he had lined up. His father would do one of two things, he would either give him the money, in which case he would have the cash, or he would go with him to get the tool out of hock and then when his father was gone he would go to another Cash Converters and hock it again. A Plan, he felt better already, pushing his guilt aside for the prospect of getting what he needed.

He checked his phone and peered at the screen, finding what he already knew, he was out of credit. He sent an emergency auto message to his father, "Can you please recharge my prepaid mobile service". Dad always paid that. He knew it was to ensure he had a means to contact him. Minutes later he had mobile credit, and seconds after that his phone rang. It was Dad.

"What's going on mate? You alright?"

He put on his best voice, "Yeah, good. Just got a bit of a cold. I've got work next week."

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He could sense his father's relief through the phone. "That's good to hear mate. Is it good work? How long will it go for?"

Now's the time to ask, while he's happy. "Yeah, it could go for a while, but there's only one catch, it's reno work at a friend of a friend's house, and I'll need to get some of my tools out of hock."

A few moments silence on the phone, then. "How much?"

He noticed the happiness gone from his father's voice.

"About two hundred." Holding his breath now.

"Shit mate it never ends."

The guilt comes to the top. "I can get it back to you from the first pay, but it doesn't matter if you can't, I'll sort it."

His father knew that it wouldn't come back, it never did, he didn't expect it. He wasn't even sure that there was a job. Benefit of the doubt. "Where are you? I'll come and get you."

He gave his father the address of a girl-friend's unit near-by, he would wait out the front, "Give me a couple of hours, I have some stuff to do first."

He called the girl and arranged to go around and get cleaned up, with the promise of obtaining money for drugs. She readily agreed.

A BMW pulled up outside the unit at the agreed time and all plans changed.

As he got into the passenger seat, his father spoke. "This is where we draw a line in the sand mate. I've booked you into a rehab place, a top-of-the-line clinic run by a friend of mine. We are going there now. You'll be there for three months. I need a list of all your remaining tools in hock and where they are, as well as a list of tools you will need to get back to work. They will be waiting for you when you get out and as an incentive, I'll throw in a new work ute. This stupidity ends today."

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Jacob sat in silence for a full minute, then looked across at his father, tears now rolling down his face, they embraced for a long while, both emotional, before they slowly sat back in their seats, his father started the car and they drove to the clinic in silence.

The spring day on Bribie Island was perfect, blue sky and bright sunshine, with a light breeze and calm sea. Jacob sat alone on the beach at Bongaree, gazing at the small waves lapping against his boat, anchored at the shoreline. He was deep in thought, reflecting on the year just passed and what had transpired since he and his Father had decided to draw a line in the sand and reclaim his crumbling life. He had beaten back the horrors of meth addiction and was back working, however, what gave him a real feeling of pride and a determination to succeed, was the reconnection with his family, something, in his darkest days, he despaired of ever gaining again.

A commotion from along the beach broke his reverie, “Dad, Dad, can we take the boat out now? We could try up there on the point, remember? We got flathead and whiting there last year.” A feeling of joy rose in him as he heard his 10-year-old son’s excited voice.

Last year? That seemed so long ago now. Before the line in the sand.

He smiled as his son approached. “OK mate, get Granddad and your brother and let’s go. You can drive.”