

Along the Bruce
Short Story: 2571 words

By Kelsey Bricknell

Rental pages lie between us in loose stacks spread across the dining table, the same one we've had for as long as I can remember. Wooden, extendable; never held a meal for either of us—we found it in the local paper, back in some town that I can't remember much of now.

\$50 ono: Good quality. Well built. Sits up to eight people—Mum had been planning to stay.

'We'll be able to entertain,' she'd said. 'Have dinner parties like the neighbours.'

It was a nice thought, but it only happened once, the night before we packed up to leave again—like always, time had got away. But we didn't mind. Not really. Our home was on the road.

Life was how it should be when we drove that endless stretch of bitumen together—exciting because everything always seemed new. We arrived on foreign driveways, after our stuff had been unloaded inside; our engine stuttered loudly alongside kids riding their bikes in gangs along new streets. Each time we unfolded our limbs from their cramped confines, we could feel the eyes of prying neighbours boring invisible holes into our backs. Sussing us out, wondering if we'd cause as much trouble as the last lot—we tried to not give anything away.

‘This one’s nice,’ I’d say to Mum as we walked inside. ‘Interesting curtains.’—or taps, or light fittings. I’d always point out something trivial, something to help Mum forget the big *LEASED* sign still planted in the yard, or the paint that pealed and flaked from the eaves, revealing a base coat of Mission Brown left behind by the seventies, when the house was still young.

Mum would nod back at me with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She’d hang a picture on the wall and we’d live out of half unpacked boxes for the first six months. Eat our meals wherever we could find space—in the lounge-room; out on the lawn, it didn’t really matter as long as we were both there.

When I turned twelve our moves became less spread out. We stopped snaking our way along the Bruce, picking towns based on what “*The Big...*” attraction was nearby, or who had the most interesting looking gravestones in their cemetery. Instead we moved to the city—to suburbs that offered good schools; stable jobs. I learnt to memorise bus numbers and train times in the space that I’d once used to remember where the *BEWARE OF FALLING ROCKS* signs popped up along our highway, or where the coppers usually sat with their speed guns. Mum said we needed consistency—that being somewhere stable, and in the city, would be good for when I went to high-school. I wasn’t convinced.

I’d grown used to being the new kid. In each town, I wore a different mask—thought up better stories for who Mum and I might be; things that would make us seem more interesting than just a duo who couldn’t keep their feet still. In some places we were felons on the run; in others, victims of a messy divorce or a house fire. We were rarely just us. Behind my eyes, our true identity was my special secret to keep—a treasure, until our last move.

‘I’m from up north,’ I learnt to tell people once we settled. ‘Along the coast, I guess.’ It seemed like more of a lie than any I’d told before, like a foreign language on the tip of my tongue. I was uncomfortable exposing my true skin.

Mum tried to distract me at first—introduced me to the perks of being tied down.

‘You can join sport teams,’ she said ‘and still be around for the end of season breakup.’

She told me I could plan birthday parties even though my birthday was mid-year; have friends stay over in the June-July holidays which were six months away. After a while though, the fun of planning wore off. Everything stopped being new and six months seemed like a lifetime away. I missed the thrill of spontaneity.

I noticed then that Mum wasn’t happy either. That her shoulders would slump forward each time we drove up the driveway and saw the rats run across the top of the garage door;

I'd hear her curse softly under her breathe as she forced the shuttered windows to budge. I felt responsible, like my education had confined her to this place. That's when I started collecting the papers—the rental listings piled high on our table.

Where other people might use post-its, or fancy paper with flower prints for recording notes, Mum and I used the back pages of rental listings. Scrawled around images of houses we could never afford—ones with large manicured yards; sensor lights and wooden fences—were numbers and dates for appointments, things we wouldn't remember:

Dr – 10am – Tuesday – ph:3454 2312 and Call Grandma back sometime.

Mostly, it didn't help, but it made sure those pages weren't a waste. Only the first five listings from each agent held our attention, the others were more like a torturous dream.

'One day,' I would repeat the joke Mum had once made. 'When we can afford that housekeeper and the chef too.'

After a while, all the houses looked the same and often because they were—inspected for months, but never filled. We'd thought, at first, that it would make the prices drop, but months into the hunt, it was looking unlikely. I sat opposite Mum drawing lines over the places we'd long since ruled out—made them into mice or cats and taught them how to speak.

'Bloody Brisbane,' I said while Mum reshuffled the papers, pushed her chair back and walked into the kitchen. 'Western suburbs. It's all overpriced crap.'

'Something will come up,' she said as she put on the kettle for what seemed the hundredth time.

I pretended to look again, but my eyes just glazed over as the same group of houses looked back.

'Maybe we could look somewhere else?' I said. 'Go across town, or down the coast.'

Mum shook her head.

'It'll just be the same. And school's over here. You need to be near your friends.'—Mum had grown up three hours away from her school; hadn't had much of a social life. But it didn't mean I believed her about our rental crisis. I just knew not to argue.

'Maybe I could help with the rent this time then?' I offered instead. 'Work a bit more so we could afford something good.'

I already worked weekends at the local bakery, and sometimes after school. But Mum didn't like the idea of me doing too much; *school's too important—study before your job.*

Sitting down, she shuffled the papers again as if she couldn't control her hands. Neither of us talked for a while. I started tapping my feet in a random thwacking rhythm, the echo on the tiles getting louder to try and break her silence.

'You're sixteen, Pos,' she muttered eventually. 'Like hell you're paying rent. We'll be fine. It'll be okay. It always is.'

She didn't need to go on for me to know that she'd resigned us to the idea of staying. That we'd just have to wait it out until the place grew on us. But that was unlikely. Our house was on a creek leading to the Brisbane River and every morning we'd either be met by the thick smell of damp silt, or some kind of dead rodent near our front door. It was a change from the fresh salty air we'd known in all our coastal houses.

'You should sign up for club hockey this season,' Mum went on. Her voice had grown stronger—stubborn. 'We'll be close by, we know that now. Might be fun to play outside of school.'

Her conviction unsettled me and I couldn't look her in the eye. That's when I saw it. On our fridge, there's a faded old magnet. It's been there as long as I can remember; glued itself there over time, the laminated surface snapped off long ago. Like lots of the things we've collected, I once thought it was meaningless. Stuck there by Mum and then forgotten about. But when the Mr. Fixit logos and Eagle Boys numbers fell away, the magnet always remained, as if it had been waiting to tell me something important.

'My precious child, I love you and would never leave you. During your times of trial and of suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.'

As I re-read those words that day, I was reminded of all the times we'd moved, but mostly of the big one—our last, to the city.

The morning we left, I woke up in next door's double bed—in the guest room filled with paper sunflowers and burnt out side-lamps. Mum was next to the window, using what was left of the moon to search for fresh knickers.

'Jump in the shower. I want to be on the road in twenty.' She whispered and pointed to the floorboards, 'Try to be quiet.'

I got up cautiously and saw the side of our old house reflected in the mirror on the dresser. It was gaping, ghostly; our stuff already ahead of us in the van. The awnings around

the windows seemed to droop with abandonment and my trampoline, still in the backyard, looked displaced.

‘We can’t take everything,’ Mum had said while we were packing. ‘Luke can come and use it once we’ve gone.’

Luke was my best friend and the boy who lived in the house we’d stayed in that night. He and his Mum were our dynamic equivalent and our longest consistent neighbours. Although they hadn’t moved as much as we had, they understood our need to go. Why we always moved on. Luke’s Mum was plagued by memories of his father though and couldn’t manage to leave town—the best she could do was change houses when life got a bit much. As I creaked up the hallway I wondered what would happen to my tramp if they decided to change houses too, or, if they stayed, whether the new owners would mind having a small auburn haired boy jumping in their backyard. I tread on, my steps now making the house sigh with the knowledge that I’d probably never find out.

Outside the bathroom, I peeked into Luke’s room. Wrapped neatly in a cocoon of blankets, his freckled lips were parted slightly, making way for drool. If I knew what love was back then, I would’ve probably thought that he was it. But I couldn’t even think things like that then, especially with Kyle, an older boy from up the road, snoring so closely next to him.

Kyle was bigger than me and Luke, older than both of us too. He spent most of his time wandering between mine and Luke’s place—he rarely went home.

‘Can’t you just call his parents?’ I’d asked Mum once, shortly after Kyle had stolen my potato gun and refused to give it back.

‘No. He’s a nice boy and he’s put up with more than you think,’ was all she said—her tone was flat and serious so I knew not to ask more. I had to learn to put up with him. To treat him as the older brother I’d never had.

Kyle was kind-hearted but mostly I’d refused to see it. Whenever we went bike-riding, he made sure I wasn’t dragging the group behind. When we played Tekken, he always let me win.

‘I know you just gave up,’ I used to shriek at him. ‘You don’t think I’m good enough!’ I was determined to be one of the boys in that town, in that street, and I think Kyle knew that. But he still tried to protect me. At the time, it drove me insane.

Watching them from the doorway, I wondered whether Luke and Kyle would remember me like I would remember them; whether they’d wake up after I’d gone and just think of me as a dream. Some girl who told them stories once, about how she wasn’t from

round here because of a flood that had destroyed her home. Maybe this would be the first time I would regret not telling someone the truth. I didn't have long to dwell on it though—Mum's steps up the hall broke my concentration; my heart rate rose like I'd been caught doing something much worse.

'Shower. Now,' her soft voice was coarse and I knew not to say anything, just to do.

Mum said it was better if no one was awake when we left. That we'd all get less sad if they weren't. She was probably right, but it felt like we were sneaking away. I just wanted to say one last goodbye. To tell Kyle thank you and to squeeze Luke on the earlobe—our secret code for a hug.

As Mum and I drove out down that street twenty minutes later, in our cramped canary laser, I closed my eyes from the sun. I could feel its coy rays peaking at us as it had done all the times before, but this time I didn't associate them with freedom. I didn't want them to warm me up.

'Wave to the ocean.' Mum's voice broke as we rounded the corner at the top of the hill.

I sat on my hands and looked the other way.

When we arrived in the city all our furniture was piled up on the lawn. A large dusty van was consuming most of our driveway and men I'd never seen were sitting on our lounge.

'Shit,' Mum cursed with a loud breath and cranked up the hand break.

'Couldn't find a key anywhere,' shouted one of the strangers. 'Been waiting here for a bit.'

He nodded to two small eskies and four mugs of tea resting on top of our upturned bookcase, 'Hope you don't mind.'

Mum glanced at me quickly and rolled her eyes.

'Make yourselves at home,' she muttered.

Getting out of the car, she fumbled in her bag. I stayed belted in, knowing that when I got out, it would all be real.

'Sorry.' Mum's excuses filtered through my open window, 'Gasket burst on the way. Got towed most the way to Gympie and had to wait til it got fixed. I didn't have your number. I'm so sorry.'

Mum always apologised too much.

‘Lucky we didn’t have any other jobs today love,’ one of the men joked. I didn’t see who—they all looked the same to me. Mum just smiled politely and handed over the key. She lingered for a bit, desperate to be busy, but when they didn’t let her help she came back and sat with me.

Side by side, we watched the men lift our furniture up the stairs. Four of them, two pieces at a time. They put my bed in first, then Mum’s, then the lounge. Our fridge was left till last. On it, the old faded magnet: the poem, *Footprints*, a blue sky and some sand.

Those words act like a promise now—I guess they’re my new secret to keep.

‘I’ll stop looking,’ I tell Mum softy, feeling her eyes on the back of my head. ‘It’s okay here.’