

SMILING.

by Duncan Ley

It's cold out here, very cold. Not that I can do anything about it.

I wait for Dave to notice. My scarf hangs limp from his jacket pocket.

Please Dave. I'm freezing, mate.

But he's too busy standing and yelling and cheering with the rest of them. Men, jumping up and down, screaming. Sometimes between bodies a gap opens and I can see the field. They're down our end now, attacking, moving the ball between them as smooth as milk. They need to attack. It's 12 – 4 with only ten minutes remaining. It moves from McClinden to O'Hara – O'Hara to Davico, who busts up the middle – tackled – no, wait, he manages to offload to someone else – who? It's –

The gap closes. I can only guess what's happening by the noise growing, swelling, expanding, surrounding me. Thousands of voices topple into one roaring boom. My head hurts.

The boom flattens to a groan. They must have dropped the ball, knocked it on, something. I don't care much. I just want my scarf.

C'mon mate. I'm bloody shivering.

He won't be able to hear me though, not above the screech of the mob. And I can only manage a whisper at the best of times. This isn't the best of times.

Please, please Dave. Just give me my scarf.

He's got his fingers in his mouth trying to wolf-whistle.

Dave, for Christ's sake, I'm fucking freezing!

Dave looks at me. He's grinning. "Bloody close that time, eh? Did you see it?"

I nod. It's the right thing to do. I don't want to disappoint him. After all, he didn't have to bring me out here. There are better ways to enjoy a footy match than bringing along a paraplegic.

"You going okay?" He asks. "Need anything?"

Yes, Dave – my bloody scarf!

I shake my head, smile. He gives me a pat on the shoulder and winks. Why would he wink? None of my mates ever winked at me before. It would be funny having a mate wink at you.

Happens all the time now. I don't really know why.

His attention is called by the game. I look up at the sky. Not a cloud in sight. It's the brilliant crystal-blue swimming pool sky of a Canberra winter. You know, if the earth were the sky and the sky the earth, you could swim in that beautiful blue air, you really could. And I know it's stupid, but I like looking at the sky. It's funny to think it goes on and on, up and up, eventually turning into black, and beyond, into space. And yet all we see is this... this...

Oh for Christ's sake, what the hell am I carrying on about? Fucking stupid. Who gives a shit about the bloody sky?

There's a tear in my eye, from the wind, I bet: that cold, cold, ice-cold Canberra winter wind. The kind of wind you don't venture into without wearing *a fucking scarf!*

Course, it's not Dave's fault. He's not to know, is he? It's Kath's fault, really.

Kath should have known better.

I think... I think, maybe she did.

Thank God I can move my head. Only thing I can move. A doctor said I was lucky. Unusual for a case as bad as mine. So I'm not totally hopeless.

And I can hear. And see. I can still see. Thank the Lord for small mercies, eh? 'Course, I'm not religious. Never have been, never had the time for it. Mum and Dad were never really into it and I think that makes a difference, in the long run. And if I did believe in God... well, I'm sure there are a few phrases I could come up with even He's never heard.

The bastard.

Mind you, it's only been four months since I've been out (of the hospital, that is) so I guess I've got plenty of time to calm down. Get more 'used to it'. That there – that's the phrase – getting 'used to it'. It still echoes in my ears. It was all I heard in the hospital.

"Don't worry Kenny. You'll get used to it."

"Now this might feel funny at first, but you'll get used to it."

"It's okay, Ken. It's fine to be angry. It's normal. It won't last. You'll get used to it."

"Kenny, I know it doesn't sound appealing. But there are many more people wearing catheters than you might think. You'll get used to it."

Of course, they all assume that getting 'used to it' is a great thing. That you want to get 'used to it'.

Dave wouldn't have known, but this is probably the last place I wanted to come. To the League, to the game I used to play. The game I used to get paid to play.

Why oh why would I want to watch it if I can't *do* it?

Thanks, Dave. Thanks a bunch.

No, it's alright.

I'll get used to it.

Pandemonium. They must've scored a try. I almost get hit in the face by a waving hand. God, the noise is deafening. I can't see a thing – not even the big screen where they show the replay. They're standing all around me. Standing and waving and cheering.

It's okay. I'm feeling a bit better. Game's only got four minutes to go and then we'll be off. Dave said we're going to the pub after the match. The boys will be there. They've got a surprise for me.

It'll be warm in the pub. I'll get to have a beer and sit at the table, with the boys. Can't ask for better than that.

It's not true, by the way. You don't get drunk quicker sucking beer through a straw. It's bullshit actually.

“Hey Kenny! One more try, mate – we need one more try.”

I smile at him. Nod my head.

“That's the way, mate!” He smiles back.

we smile we smile we all smile now it's the way we get around what we don't know what to say so instead we smile we smile all day I smile until my mouth hurts but

He's including me and that's nice of him. Dave's always been like that; a nice bloke, always helping people out. One of 'nature's good turnouts', as my mum described him once.

There's a piece of paper lying under the seat in front of me. A flyer, or something. It's crumpled, so I can't read the print. Just a bit of paper. A5 - is that a size? Is that what they call it? It's funny – there are roughly fifteen thousand people in this stadium, surrounding twenty-six men on a field who are sweating and panting and crashing into each other to get a ball over a line. Then there's me, sitting here, looking at a small bit of paper. It's just me and a piece of A5 paper. And how did it get there? Now there's a journey to consider. To think it was once part of a tree in a forest somewhere. The tree stands silent for years, growing. Birds nest and pick its skin. Insects inspect it from trunk to leaf. And then one day it's chopped down by a logger in a blue vest, yellow hard hat, sweating and swearing. The tree is stripped bare, taken to a saw mill, pulverised to wood chip. Wood chip is taken to a paper mill. Wood chip becomes paper: a large roll of broken beige paper. It's taken somewhere - not quite sure where - but there it's cut down, dyed, sorted into tight reams, then taken to a stationers or a printing place to sit on a shelf for a while. Months, maybe. Then unwrapped and put into a photocopier. Words printed on it. Brought here. Handed out. Read. Crumpled. Discarded.

And now looked at by me.

Bloody hell.

I do that often these days: find myself fixated on the ordinariness of things. It passes the time.

I'm feeling sleepy now. Not so cold. I barely register that people on all sides stand as one and scream. They're all mad. I can't see a thing, but I know what's happened. The Raiders have scored. They've won the game. They got that one more try.

This time someone does knock me. It's an accident of course. Dave stops celebrating and says 'careful, mate'. 'Yeah, sorry' from behind. Dave checks I'm alright – I am alright – and returns to the cheers and the applause.

I make an effort too, for Dave's sake mainly. Smile and nod my head, for as long as I can.

Go the Raiders. Go the Men in Green. The Green Machine.

Go. Go. Go.

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It takes an age to get to the pub. Dave doesn't complain. Always takes ages to get out of Canberra Stadium, but especially for a guy pushing a wheelchair slowly through crowds hungry to get to their cars and then home. I'm in no particular hurry to get home. I see a lot of home these days.

So we've arrived at the pub. And there they are: The Boys. There's Phil and Brian and Pete and Mario and Johnny, and now Dave and Kenny.

the boys

why do we call grown men the boys does it make us mischievous does it make innocent everything a lark nothing too serious are we hiding something here oh never mind

I haven't seen them all together since... since... oh, yes – the hospital visit, back when I was 'doing better'. They had all bounded into my room and there had been presents, claps on the back, condolences, 'you're-a-special-mate' comments; the whole works.

It was nice for a while, though it did tire me out by the end.

Funny, when something like this happens suddenly everyone reckons you're a 'special person'. At least that's what you're constantly told by friends, doctors, relatives and complete fucking strangers. So guess what? I'm a special person. A very special person.

It's as if the accident somehow brought all my shining personal qualities to the surface, as well as partially crushing my windpipe and irrevocably damaging my spinal cord so I'll never be able to walk again or tell when I've shit my own pants.

How nice.

They all look different. What is it? Oh, yeah. They've dressed up a bit better than usual. Clean shirts. Ironed slacks. Polished shoes. They've made an effort. Good of them, I suppose. We used to go drinking in jeans and whatever shirt hadn't made it to the laundry basket. Oh well.

They all cheered when Dave wheeled me through the door. Glasses raised, claps on the back, "How are ya, mate?", "Enjoy the game?", "Time for a beer, Kenny!", "You're a legend, mate. A bloody legend."

It's a homecoming party, if that's the right expression. An 'Out-of-hospital-in-a-wheelchair-but-getting-his-life-back-together-and-capable-of-drinking' sort of party.

It's nice having mates who care. I make a cheeky "woo-hoo!" sound. More cheering. Brings a few tears to my eyes – real tears, this time – I struggle to hold them back. I don't want anyone feeling uncomfortable.

It's nice and warm in here, at Ollims in Ainslie. They've got an open fireplace and orange flames lick at the round pieces of wood stacked high in the hearth. There's that great smoky smell of smouldering timber. Reminds me of how fishermen used to smoke their fish – it was on a documentary I saw on the television lying on a hospital bed – about old ways of preparing food, or something like that – and the way they did this was to have a

large fire in a confined space, using lots of damp wood, and then the fish would be tied in a certain way and... and...

...what the hell am I doing? I'm out with the boys, for God's sake! Who cares about bloody smoked fish! Jesus.

Mario's buying me a beer. What'll I have? VB? Tooheys? Squire? I give Mario a cheerful nod when he says 'Reschs?' and everyone smiles. Good old Kenny's back, isn't he? Can't really talk above a whisper and he'll piss his trousers whenever he wants, but it's still our Kenny. Still wanting his Reschs.

What a legend.

I can only drink slowly. Get the usual jokes about drinking beer through a straw. I just grin at everyone. Lots of laughter.

Dave recounts the League game, as the Foxtel replay won't be on for another half-an-hour yet. He keeps looking at me throughout, as if we're both telling the story. I nod whenever he looks. It seems the polite thing to do.

I keep wanting to stare at the flames. At the fire in the hearth. Don't know why.

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It's later now. They've wheeled me into the function room. There's a portable stereo on the floor. The boys are grinning. They've had a few drinks by now. I've had two. I'm a bit light-headed. Johnny had asked the barman if everything's ready and the barman had said 'yes' and smiled in my direction.

So there's only me and boys in this room. What's the stereo for?

Suddenly the door opens and this nurse enters.

She nods to Johnny who walks over and presses 'play' on the stereo. Music starts. Hot Chocolate, or something.

The nurse moves over to me and leans down. Takes my chin in a lacquered hand, forcing me to stare at her cleavage.

She isn't a nurse, of course.

This is my surprise. My welcome-back present.

A stripper.

The boys are hollering and clapping. Crazy, they're urging me on. "C'mon Kenny!" I mean, what do they think I can do? She's dancing, gyrating around my chair. The little white cap comes off. She shakes her hair down. It's blonde and dry and smells of bleach and the boys clap in time with the music. Her short dress comes off in one neat practiced movement. She smiles fixedly at me the whole time. Her lipstick is very red. Her hips don't stop gyrating. The boys whoop and whistle. She's wearing a small bra and g-string. The bra is the next to go, but slowly, for maximum tease. I try to smile back at her, make her feel that this is all okay. The boys cheer her on. She drapes the bra on my head. Mario and Phil are in hysterics. Brian and Pete and Johnny are loving it. Dave is smiling faintly. The g-string comes off. I strain to keep the smile. She straddles the chair and licks my nose. Cries of "Go, Kenny!", "She's yours, man!" I smile feebly but I don't want to anymore. She gets off the chair, turns round, bends over. I can't move so I see everything. She does stuff to herself with her fingers. I'm trying so desperately to smile, but tears are welling in my eyes.

please don't cry please don't cry please please my mates are here please don't cry

And then it's over.

She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek, collects her clothes, picks up the stereo and is gone.

We're all exhausted

we've all made love together

and the boys clap me on the shoulder and ask "How was that, mate?"

I look at them. Smile.

"Woo-hoo!"

They cheer the roof off.

Half an hour later, Dave takes me home.

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Kath is watching something on television. She's got her dressing gown and slippers on. She gets up as Dave wheels me inside.

She smiles at Dave.

"You boys have a good time, then?"

Dave smiles back at her.

"Yeah, we did. Didn't we, Kenny?"

He looks down at me. I smile at her. Nod my head. She smiles again at Dave.

"Thanks Dave. You're a good friend to Ken. Isn't he, Ken?"

I nod.

“His bag... catheter thing... probably needs changing.” Dave says, awkwardly.

“Make yourself a cuppa. We won’t be a minute.”

She takes the chair from Dave and wheels me to the bedroom.

Kath’s got this neutral expression on her face, as if concentrating on something of no particular importance. She always has this look when changing my catheter. I notice something. She has a small wrinkle under her left eye. It’s new, I’m sure. I don’t comment on it. Instead I whisper ‘thank you’ when she’s done.

She smiles back at me, but it’s a half-empty smile. I’ve seen that smile for the last month now. It’s understandable. I think maybe it will be another month before it becomes an empty smile. Then another three or four months before she doesn’t smile at all.

Again, it’s understandable.

Thing is – to me, she’s as beautiful as ever.

I whisper “I love you”. She pats my head. Ruffles my hair. Doesn’t say anything in return. Wheels me over to the hoist. Puts me to bed.

Stands there for a moment, looking down at me, as if deciding something. She leans down and kisses me on the cheek. Says something.

Goes out to Dave in the kitchen.

I think she said “I love you too.”

They’re talking in the kitchen now. It could be Kath is crying, I can’t tell for sure. I can see out of the bedroom window into the twilight. The house is on a slight hill and we

have a view over the suburb. The sun is setting and the streetlamps are on and car lights twinkle in the distance and it's bloody beautiful.

I try to banish the image of that stripper with her soft thighs and breasts and fingers doing things to herself. I look at the wedding photo on the bedside table. God, I look tall. I look so damn confident.

Kath is wearing the white dress, smiling her full smile.

They're still in the kitchen. She's stopped crying now. I don't think they're even talking.

I want to tell them something, but they wouldn't be able to hear. I want to tell them
to tell them

It's okay. It's alright. I know. Don't feel guilty. I'm pleased for you. Especially for Kath. She needs it most. Just someone who can do that to her, do that for her. I know it's hard but I forgive you. Because really - let's face it - we're all human. We all have needs. Some of us. So there's really nothing to forgive.

It was my mistake, anyhow. We all know that, don't we? It was eight beers instead of two. One hundred instead of sixty. Tree instead of road. Hospital instead of home. Hard instead of easy.

I have a plan though.

I'm getting one of those new chairs. You blow in this tube to make it move.

There's a long flight of concrete steps leading from the veranda to the garden.

No gate.

It's a simple plan.

It helps everyone.

But not yet. I'm not ready just yet. You see - and fuck you if it sounds silly - but I'm starting to enjoy things. Just little things, like the sky and the paper and the fire. Things that everyone else doesn't stop for, but for me pass the time and... well, *intrigue* me, if that's the right word. It's almost as if I'm discovering things – secret things – about the world. Things we see but don't notice, unless you have the time. I have the time.

And here's the really silly part, but hell, I feel – not all the time of course, not when I'm being rubbed to stop sores developing or having my neck manipulated or getting those damn headaches – sometimes I feel I might be capable of learning things, new things. Like... how to smoke fish, say. Just an example, of course, but you know what I mean.

Before I left hospital this bloke from the local disability service came to my room and showed me all these contraptions. There was this device, a real simple thing, it was. A wire headband with a long curved needle attached. They strap it on and put you in front of a keyboard. You move your head up and down, the needle pressing the keys.

A simple device, for writing.

Kath can get it for me.

I'll record some of this. Use that computer in the study. Shouldn't be too hard to figure out. As I said, I've got time, haven't I?

My mum used to say I had a knack with words and I always got good writing grades at high school. In Year 10 they said I had a talent for language. I was more interested in sport and I left six months later.

I wonder if I still do? Have a knack, I mean. Does that sort of thing disappear over time? Or does it stay there, waiting for you to pay it some attention? Maybe I'll find out.

Yeah, might start writing a few things down, see where it gets me.

And if it gets me somewhere, then that's fine. Who knows what'll happen?

And if it doesn't – well, I've always got my plan.

It's a damn good plan, too.

Doesn't hurt anyone.

But not yet, mate.

Not yet.

First, let me give it one more try.