

A Boy's Best Friend

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Even if he mis-timed the dive, he wasn't going to die. Well, he was 99% sure of that. Looking down at the blue-grey ocean pulling away from the rock face below, he felt like it was sucking his guts out with it.

"So we go off head first, yeah? That's what you agreed on? Right?" Jethro's nasal voice cut straight through the sea breeze whipping round Kelvin's face.

"Right?" the voice persisted.

Kelvin looked at his wiry new classmate. Jethro had the weathered bronze skin and sun-faded hair of so many of his new friends who'd grown up on the coast. He'd scrambled effortlessly over the jagged rocks with his leather-soled feet, sending an occasional glance back at Kelvin with a cocked eyebrow and barely concealed smirk. Try as he might to find smooth footing, Kelvin seemed to find a different jagged edge with each footfall. He had focussed his energy on concealing the jolts of pain routinely firing up through the soles of his feet.

Kelvin had always worn thongs when exploring rock pools with his family as a kid. Two and a half months after doing so with his classmates, he was only getting called 'soft' every other day. So, his feet were soft. How was that not normal for a human being?

As Kelvin stood looking out over the surging sea, his mind scrambled, trying to recall how he'd found himself here. Standing on sun-warmed rocks as the water shifted several metres below. He'd seen kids as young as five diving from this exact spot the weekend he arrived. marvelled at their blithe recklessness. Shared a laugh with his dad about their stupidity.

Yet earlier that day when Jethro suggested diving off the Drop at Diggers Beach, Kelvin had blandly agreed. It came so easy, feigning a nonchalance he did not possess when partaking in any surf-related activity other than swimming between the flags. And even that was a bit much when the swell was big.

He replayed the conversation in his head, searching for the blunder his past self had made.

"So you've been living at the Head since the start of school and you've never been off the Drop?" Jethro could make the most innocent question sound like a pointed insult.

"Oh, nah. I've jumped off it a few times. We came up here on holiday heaps when I was younger, so ... yeah."

"Jumped off?"

"Yep."

"Like, feet first? What were you, ten?"

"Nah, younger I reckon."

"But just a feet first pin drop?"

"Mmhm."

Kelvin felt the familiar stirrings of fear and inadequacy in the ensuing silence. He knew what was coming out of Jethro's mouth before he saw the superior gleam in his eye.

"So you've never actually dived off, then?"

How could one raised ginger eyebrow make him feel so inferior?

"Well..."

"Like head first, you know?"

"I haven't dived off that rock, no. We had a pretty big cliff above the river back home, though. Pine Island. Pretty murky water there, and hell deep. Couldn't touch the bottom. Dove into that a few times."

"A river?" There was that damn eyebrow again.

"Yep. Big one."

"Bigger than the Pacific, you reckon?"

"Well, obviously ..."

"So you want to dive into something that's actually big? I mean, you're not really a soft city boy like the guys at school are saying?"

Had Kelvin thought to ask who the guys were, or considered whether he valued their insights into his relative hardness, he may not have found himself perched on the edge of the rock, blinking sea spray from his eyes as each wave thundered below.

"Now you want to make sure you don't go straight down. There're some pretty serious rocks just under the water. Hit them head first and no more 97% maths tests for you, professor."

“You’re seriously still pissed about failing that test? What was that, four weeks ago?”

Kelvin shook his head. Such a petty fool. Yet here he was trying to impress him. Idiot.

“Look, maybe you should just climb back down, kid.”

Seriously? He was trying reverse psychology. Why the hell was it working?

Kelvin tried to conceal the tremble in his knees by crouching down and squinting at the writhing water below. As each wave receded, he could see the black shards of rock lurking with sinister intent below the surface. Focussing on his breathing, he shifted his gaze to the rock pool by his foot where a clump of sea stars was clamped to the rock’s edge. Lucky buggers. They were clearly tough; nothing to prove to anyone. Kelvin sighed. When you found yourself envying a creature with no brain and a bum on top of its head, it was time to rethink your life. His knees cracked as he stood.

Jethro’s smirk was like a slap. Standing there confidently with his barbed wire body, all ropy sinew and sharp knobs for knees and elbows.

“So you manning up, or what?”

The sea seemed to suck the breath from his lungs as he tried to answer.

“Yeah.” Damn. Couldn’t conceal the voice wobble ...

“Kelvin Anthony Giles, get down here now!”

The sounds of the buffeting wind and roiling ocean were immediately silenced by the voice from below. Three names. Never a good sign.

Kelvin didn’t need to look where Jethro’s outstretched finger was gleefully pointing down onto the sand behind them.

“Mum?”

“I can’t hear you, Kelvin! Down here. Now.”

If there was a particular vocal pitch that could create instant humiliation, Mum’s voice had nailed it.

“Better go, then, mumma’s boy.” Kelvin’s hushed taunt lacked its usual venom. Mum’s anger had that effect.

Glancing back at the water, Kelvin felt a flicker in his brain telling him to dive anyway, but it vanished, powerless to compete with the voice from below. He took extra care to look at the rocks for safe footing as he made his way down to the beach. Though the razor sharp oyster shells may be less painful than the daggers being levelled at him from Mum’s eyes.

"I'll let you know how my dive goes at school tomorrow. After mummy drops you off."

Kelvin didn't even turn to acknowledge the voice floating down from above. He scrambled to gather his clothes and phone from the sand. Keeping his head down, he followed his mother's footsteps back across the sand. Why did she have to wear a bloody caftan to come and collect him? The pink flamingos on her back seemed to be jeering at him as they walked up the wooden stairs to the carpark.

"I don't understand. Have I done something wrong?" Mum's question broke the uncomfortable silence that had settled in the car on the drive home. Bloody electric car seemed to make it even worse. At least the roaring engine in the old diesel beast would have offered some comfort.

"Geeze, Mum, did you have to be so ..." Kelvin continued to stare out the window.

"What? Caring? Responsive? I can hear your eyes rolling from here. What were you even doing up there?"

"Well, Jethro ..."

"Jethro. He's the moron in your maths class you were telling me about ..."

"Can I finish?"

Kelvin waited for another pointed comment from his mother. Her ability to let the final word slide was limited.

"Go on."

"Yeah. Jethro just cornered me I guess. Challenged me. In front of a bunch of other year eleven boys. You know ... tough guy stuff. You wouldn't get it."

"If thou dost do it, then thou art a man."

"Huh?"

"What are they teaching you in that English class?"

"That was English?"

The smile in Kelvin's voice thawed the tension in the car.

"Anyway... Thanks for coming to get me. I thought you mustn't have seen my text."

"Some of us are still working at half past four. And your request to come and get you from the beach right away didn't quite convey the urgency of your predicament. It just seemed like standard teenage rudeness."

"So the, like, five exclamation marks were too subtle?"

“Look, I can’t keep up with all your teenage text codes. After you managed to corrupt the innocent eggplant...”

“Ok, Mum. Anyway, thanks for making it down. I guess it’s better to be the guy with the psycho mum than the guy who chickened out of diving off the Drop.”

“Psycho? I may have been a little ... overzealous when I saw what you were contemplating up there, but ... psycho?”

Kelvin’s gaze didn’t shift from his window. He had never been good at knowing where the line was with Mum.

“Ah, you mean like in the movie – ‘A boy’s best friend is his mother?’”

Kelvin couldn’t help but grin as he looked at the now placid ocean gliding by outside. He didn’t even offer his usual complaint when his mum started belting out whatever crappy 80s ballad started playing on her radio station. He knew she’d appreciate that.