

NO VACANCY

Aaron Mannion

Image Lee McCain

—Sorry. There's nothing left.

—Ah, come on, mate. Please, anything?

I do have a room, but not for you mate: classic lad about town with your toes-out swagger, with your car's deep-throat muffler, with your Hoxton Fin like every other wank-ah. No, not for you, or for any of the two carloads of tossers that I saw you pull up and confer with down the street.

—Sorry, nothing.

—Look at all them keys. What are they for?

—They're extras. And some are rooms that people have pre-booked.

He rears up and throws his head back.

—It's one o'clock. They're not coming, mate.

My throat tightens, forcing the words out faster and higher in pitch.

—I'm afraid I can't help you.

—Youse have something against me. What have I done? Tell me.

I put my best impassive face on. He leans over the counter and then feints, like he is going to head-butt me. I expected it, but I still flinched. I hope it was less than he'd anticipated.

—Snobby cunt, he opines.

—Give it up Wally. Let's go.

This is said by his friend, a fat geezer in a baseball cap, who steps forward and places a hand on his shoulder. Number One snorts and leers and leaves. At the door, the friend pauses and looks at me.

I smile: thanks.

—Fuckin' pommy poofter.

He yanks the door back and swaggers his meal-deal arse out toward the street. The door catches and stands open, setting off a buzzer that whines until I walk over and close it.

—David. Is everything alright?

—Yeah, Oleg. Everything's fine.

—Did they have problem?

—No.

He makes that shrug and grimace that can mean one of a hundred different flavours of okay. This one says

'Okay, none of my business.'

I check that nobody is doubling back to reception.

—Hey, Oleg, do you want a cup of coffee?

He makes the face, but now it says 'Okay, yes, why not?' with a hint of 'thank you'.

They drive past slowly and then hit the gas. The first two cars have darkened windows. I don't know the makes or models, but they look flash. The last is an old white Suzuki. The driver of that is alone.

□

I've been working here about two months. Before that I spent a couple of weeks handing out flyers for a spruiker. Before that I stole food from the fridge and tried to be unnoticeable in the share-house of Felicity, the Australian girl who I'd followed down under, and who dumped me within a week of my landing. For a while I hung on in the house, watching, as over the course of two weeks labels started appearing on the food in the night:

Karen's

Julia

Franks (sic)

And then, the *coup de grâce*,

Flick

I never proved it, but I think her and Franks (sic) had started something. He was one of those hard-working, no-nonsense, Meat Marketing Board-style Australians. A brawny, ain't-steak-great kind of a fucker. She laughed too hard at his shit jokes and when they looked at each other it took them a little longer than it should have.

□

The fronds of the motel's eponymous palm trees are tousled by the wind. They sound like sharp-edged knives rustling loose in a drawer. Reception and the bar are empty. Except for mad Oleg, the guests are all in their rooms. As soon as I'm alone I kill the various radios. I hate music jangling around behind my sphere of attention. Especially now. Sleeplessness has tenderised my nerves, like bleach in a cut. There is no silence here though. If you think it's quiet, it means you've forgotten to listen to the groaning and ratcheting of the fridges as they limp through the night.

—Can I have a biscuit?

Oleg's a short, skinny, hook-nosed Russian. According to my boss, he's an off-his-meds schizo. I don't know about that, but I looked at the booking and there is an authorisation stapled to it from a mental health clinic.

I take the coffee on a tray out to the pool room. I've laid it out nicely: sat the cups upside down on the saucers and perched teaspoons on the side. The biscuits are already on a plate, the coffee's in a pot and the milk is in a little china jug. I think Oleg might get a kick out of having it like this.

—How much money for this?

—Nothing. It's on the house.

That face again and then:

—Thank you. You're good man, David.

He says my name deliberately, like saying it gives him some kind of pleasure.

I put the telly on. There's only sport or one of those old English black-and-white films where everyone seems to be wearing too many clothes.

—Do you like this movie?

—I don't know.

—I like movie with Tom Cruise and Chuck Norris.

—Do you?

I laugh, but he looks at me quizzically and I feel ashamed.

—It is nice here.

—I'm glad you like it.

—May I have a cigarette?

It pisses me off when people bum fags off me while I'm working. You don't get a proper choice, not when you're in enforced nice-mode. I don't mind so much with Oleg. He can't have much money.

—Here you go. I didn't know you smoke.

—I like it sometimes. Only sometimes.

The buzzer goes off and I go to check who it is. Just what my boss calls 'a coupla rooters', two people recently hooked up and wanting a place to do the deed. I ask the guy for his driver's licence. He passes it over, but the girl snatches it. They grapple. She stumbles.

—Easy there guys. I don't want anyone losing a tooth.

—Sorry.

She giggles.

—Caesar R Pantini. Cool.

—Gimme that.

—What's the R for?

—I said gimme that.

—You said Chris to me.

—Everyone calls me Chris, since school.

He stands with his legs apart, his neck thick and angry. She's older than him and a little plump. Her makeup is smudged. As the smirk on her face subsides into the dead flesh of pissedness, she glances over at me. I look away. I would like to touch her cheek. It isn't possible. As they leave, she touches his blushed and unrepentant neck in absolution.

□

Back in the pool room, Oleg's turned on all the lights. He's standing by the window talking to himself, gesticulating like he's looking for a role in *The Godfather*. I turn off all the lights but one, which I dim. When it's dark inside, I can watch who comes and who goes without being seen.

—No problems?

—Nah, nothing. Just a coupla rooters.

—What? What do you mean?

—Ah. Just people wanting a room for sex, for rooting. Sex.

—Rooterse. Yes, I say it correctly. Rooterse.

He rasps his r's out from the back of his throat. I nod. And he nods.

He asks me if I have a hobby: what do I do in my

spare time? Not much, I tell him. I've just started a boxing class. He smiles, bobs his head and throws a few punches.

—Good fun, ya. Russians good boxers.

Then he asks me where I live: how much does it cost? How big is it? He tells me I'm lucky. I think of the porn mags pushed under the pile of laundry beside my bed and I remember the sweet, sickly smell of the sink.

—You laugh. It's not funny. You have place to live. You are lucky.

—I suppose.

I don't want to talk about this. I try to get him chatting instead. He tells me about the town he comes from in Russia. He says that he was once a mechanic, and that his sister drowned herself under the ice in a frozen lake. They only found her in the spring, when the ice melted. In a plastic Coca Cola bottle in her pocket was a note saying she felt lonely. Without pause, as though he's afraid he might not get everything out, he tells me about his haemorrhoids.

—I need an operation.

He grimaces again, but this time it means 'not okay'.

—It's like piece of meat.

While we talk, he scabs cigarettes. Each time, he reaches over and, just shy of the packet, stops. Then, hand hovering:

—It's okay?

The film's over now, signalled by a chorus of violins and a superfluous 'The End'. It's half-past three. I still have to set the tables for breakfast and I'd like to read a few pages of my book. I need to get Oleg to bed.

He hangs around though, trailing after me and arguing with himself. He asks for a pen and paper. He sits and does little sums. He stares at me intently. When I've finished the tables, I tell him he has to leave. I need to check the rooms. I can't let him sit in here on his own.

—Of course.

But he doesn't go.

Outside, stained by a million street lamps and insomniac windows, the night masquerades as a second-rate dawn. Yellow streaked clouds look like they've been pissed on. We walk the edges of the motel and the carpark. I check the rooms for noise and pick up litter and cigarette butts. Oleg shuffles by my side, falling back and then scampering to catch up. He mutters. I hear a scream of tyres and stop for a moment. I'm glad he is there. As I complete my circuit, he comes up on my shoulder.

—David?

—Yes.

—David. I could give you eighty dollars a week for rent.

—What?

—For rent. If you will let me sleep on your floor or on your sofa. I will pay you eighty dollars.

—No, Oleg. I'm not looking for ... I don't want a lodger.

—Just housemate. Eighty dollars, David.

—Sorry. No.

—Okay. Just asking. Just asking.

He says goodnight and goes to his room.

□

It's morning now. My shift will soon be finished. We sit in the pool room, which is filled with sleepy, overcast light. Normally I'd be helping Masia, the breakfast cook, but nobody has come down yet. The receptionist, Grace—one of those large bosomy women who taper like a giant carrot from tits to feet—has arrived. She asks if I want to go home.

—I'm okay for a bit.

I don't actually finish for another forty minutes. She wants to gossip with Masia. Last month she had a fling with a guest, who she's still seeing on and off. Most of the staff know, but she only confides in Masia.

Masia is thirty. She has tight black curls that she hates, that she hides by pulling her hair back tight into a ponytail, until a piece of hair escapes to form a bouncing corkscrew. Then she starts again. Her cheeks are an almost comical pink and she has a firm and apple-ish arse. In the kitchen, we joke about together. She likes my accent: a hybrid of Irish and English. I tell her ludicrous stories. I tell her how my father and his friends used to ride their donkeys to Mrs Rafferty's house on the first and seventh Thursday of every month. That, as I brogue it to her, was washing day and there was a chance the young Pdraigs and Tadhgs and Seamus—uses might, if they were lucky, get a glimpse, locked upstairs behind skimpy lace curtains, of the naked Misses Rafferty, while their knickers snickered in the wind on the line. She laughs again and then asks me serious-faced questions about my father: did he and his friends really have donkeys instead of bicycles?

She is easy to snag a compliment from also. When I set up the kitchen for her, she tells me I'm fantastic, a darling.

—Thank you. Aren't you wonderful? A woman couldn't have done it better herself.

—Ooh, anyfing for you sunshine, I cockney back at her.

Now the three of us—me, Masia and Grace—sit puffing fags and drinking coffee. I tell them about the rooters and the licence and about Oleg.

—Rrroo-terse they are, Comrade Stalin. Rrrroo-terse.

Someone comes in to reception and Grace goes to deal with them. I have the night after tomorrow night off and I'm thinking of asking Masia if she wants to see a film with me. Grace returns before I gather the courage. They chat as I watch a couple of dark grey and white birds, a bit like magpies, fight on the ground in the middle of the carpark. A solitary bird sits at the very end of a low branch and looks on.

I tune back into the conversation. They're talking about losing weight and fitness. Masia says she wants to do karate but she's scared she might be too wimpy. Grace says she should do it anyway.

—I couldn't, I'd be scared.

—But you'd be fine. You don't have to be tough. You do boxing, don't you David?

—Yes.

—See. You'd be fine. You can be wimpy as anything. It doesn't matter.

Masia seems convinced and Grace slaps her hand down on the table, like it's a done deal.

—Well, then. Hey, I just remembered, you know what Kevin said...

I think of remonstrating but it would be useless. Grace announces that her partner is buying a new car. I take her up on covering for me and finish half an hour early.

□

The time between shifts passes both quickly and slowly. I waste hours chasing curly haired, red-cheeked porn around the internet. Having done so, I know that something's been desecrated. I try to sleep but my dreams are of sex and discomfort and hands that wish to get at something deep inside me.

The bed-sit never seems so lonely as when I wake up on a work night. There are four hours to fill in. I am not hungry. I just smoke and surf the web until my bladder aches enough to make me think I've got a kidney stone.

□

Oleg's talking to himself and I'm entering stuff on the computer when they drive up. It's a sports car, a Nissan or something, with a large, swooping spoiler on the back. It's two o'clock and I've locked the door. I wait to see who it is before I open it.

An Asian guy and an Asian girl. I flick the lock. Couples are rarely trouble and neither, for that matter, are the Asians. I ask him if he wants a room and he answers by a short dip of his head. He's about thirty-five, fairly stocky and fairly good looking. She looks a lot younger. She's pretty with cool, coffee-coloured legs and small but somehow generous-looking tits. You have to envy these guys.

Oleg stands beside the girl. He's leaning into her. She seems distressed.

—Oleg. Why don't you go out to the bar?

He looks at me—big, what-did-I-do eyed—and then goes. The girl seems to be crying. She teeters off outside.

—Sorry. He's harmless, really.

The man smiles. When I ask for a driver's licence, he throws his hands in the air in despair, but doesn't speak. I ask for his name. He motions for the pen and writes it down for me. Since he has no ID, I ask him for a fifty dollar key-deposit. I watch the girl, leaning against the car, taking off her heels. Then she runs off.

He takes the key, smiles and goes. You get fellas like that. They look all tough and cool, but ask them to speak English and they get embarrassed. They become as shy as schoolboys. At least, they don't ask where I'm from, hinting, or so it seems to me, that they're keen to see me back there.

—Oleg. Sorry about that. She just seemed a bit funny.

He doesn't answer me, but seems absorbed in his own conversation.

—Do you want a Coke?

He looks up.

—No. Thank you.

—On the house? For free?

—No.

□

Tonight's telly is worse than last night's. I flash past static and infomercials to try to find something.

—Hey. David. David. Someone?

He points out towards the laundry. He's wired today.

—It's nothing.

—I saw ... I saw a person.

—It's nothing.

—I saw. It's the truth.

I go out to calm his nerves. Around the corner, I find a blond kid in a hoody wandering up the stairs.

—Can I help you?

—No. I'm just visiting a friend.

—We don't allow visitors at this time of night.

—I'll just be a minute. He has my phone.

—Sorry. That's the policy.

He pads off, though he'll probably try again in ten minutes. He was only fourteen or so. I think how I should have found out what room his friend was in, so I could keep an eye on them. I wonder what his mother thinks he's doing. I tell Oleg he was right. He's not satisfied.

—No. Not there. There.

I shake my head and follow his finger. I see nothing when I turn the laundry light on, but then there's a noise behind me.

—Oh, fuck.

The Asian girl from before is crouched down beside the mop bucket.

—Don't tell him I'm here. He's wants to rape me.

—Who? Oleg?

—No. The guy I was with.

I bring her through a back door to the kitchen. She sobs. I tell her it's okay, though I don't know what I mean.

—No one can see in here. I'll go see where he is.

Out in the empty bar, Oleg asks me what's going on. I tell him it's nothing. Standing in the dark poolroom, I watch through the window as the guy searches down around the bins and the shed at the back. He finds nothing and comes running back toward reception. I go to meet him. Oleg looks at me distrustfully.

—I'll explain later. Don't say anything. Don't talk. Zip.

The man walks through to the bar before I can head him off. I want to keep him as far from the kitchen as possible.

—Everything okay?

He looks at me and Oleg and then peers into the corners. Then, instantly, he's all smiles.

—My girlfriend. She walk off. You see?

—No. I just saw her leave, go out the door. Just before

you.

He laughs.

—Girls.

He goes out again. He runs up and down, checking behind parked cars. Then he investigates the obvious corners and shadows. He comes jogging back, stops at his car. Then he just starts kicking it, kicking his car. He doesn't stop though. Not one kick, but again and again and again, until I can see that the light falls differently on the door where he's dented the panel. I should have said something. He looks over and catches me watching him. For a moment, I think I'm dead, but then he starts acting the clown, putting his hands up and down and grinning. I turn away but keep my eye on him in the reflection of the window. When he walks off, I go back to the girl.

—He's still looking. He went crazy. Stay here okay?

—Okay.

—I'm going to call the police.

—No. No. No. Please, please. No.

□

Oleg looks at me expectantly.

—Not yet. I'll explain, later.

The man gets in his car. He drives up and down the road. Then he turns into the *cul de sac* opposite. He switches on high beam. The light-bleached houses seem momentarily affronted. Then he reverses up and repeats the process in each and every side street and alleyway.

I make the girl a strong cup of tea. She's sitting up on the bench now. Tears have cut pathways through her makeup, edged by smudges of mascara sediment. She's wearing a short skirt and, though I know now's not the time, I can't help ogling the inside of her thighs. I imagine how it would be as soft as a baby bird's throat.

I go back out. Just in time, as the man has pulled up outside reception.

—My girlfriend. Run away.

—I see.

He grins.

—Girls. You know?

—Yes.

—She make me crazy.

I try to smile and seem amused. He says something else. I don't understand him.

—No room.

He gives me the key. I realise he wants the money for the room, which he will not now use. I give it to him. I remember the deposit and call him back from the open doorway. I hold the yellow note out to him, but he says no.

—You. You have.

I try once again to smile.

□

Oleg is upset. He has watched the man kicking the car. I explain what is going on. It just revs him up.

—We will be killed.

—No. Nothing will happen.

The girl says that he was a family friend. He had given her a lift home from a dance and on the way he wanted to kiss her. She said no, but he forced himself on her. Then he wanted to take her to his house. She said no but he insisted. She said that she told him she wanted to go to a motel instead. She thought she could escape easier there. I ask her again if she wants the police but she says no. I tell her she has to wait in here longer. I want to be sure he's gone. I give her another cup of tea. I try to write down some details in case anything happens.

—What's his name?

—Nguyen Thanh. N. G. U...

—I know. N. G. U. Y. E. N. Where does he live?

—Braybrook. Melon Street.

—What number?

—I don't know.

After twenty minutes, the man cruises slowly past again. He drives with his passenger window down to see better. Once past the motel, he floors it, leaving only black marks, a haze of smoke and fear behind. I make her wait in the kitchen another twenty minutes.

□

It's four o'clock. The girl sits at a table with Oleg. I bring them tea. She says now that her boyfriend is on the way. As the shock wears off, she becomes vivacious. Her name is Lily, but whether that's on her birth cert or just a name she uses among whities, I don't know. She is a little plainer than I'd first thought, but if she wasn't sitting here waiting for Prince Charming, I'd be making a move.

I know that would be wrong, given the circumstances. But these circumstances seem to be receding, falling away as quickly as guilt does once exposure moves over the horizon. She asks Oleg where he's from. He answers and then tells her a little about himself. Thankfully he leaves out the sister and the haemorrhoids. I ask her again if I should call the police.

—No.

She looks towards me. She tilts her head.

—Where are you from?

—Ireland, mostly.

—What nationality do you think I am?

I know what she means, but I make her say it.

—Australian.

—No, silly. What ethnicity?

His name was Nguyen, which is Vietnamese, as is most of this suburb. I know the answer, but to play along I say Cambodian.

—No. I'm Viet.

Her accent is pure Australian, but this last had an oriental twang. I wonder if she put it on for my benefit or if it was the effect of the word 'Viet' on the rest of the sentence.

She laughs in a way that seems fake. She asks if all Asians look the same to me. I don't know what she wants

with this question and I don't give her an answer. Oleg shrugs and holds his hands up: 'Nothing to do with me,' it says. She's a little embarrassed and natters on to hide it.

—Hey. Does a woman called Masia work here?

—Yes. Do you know her?

—Yes. She's my grandmother's neighbour. She's known me since I was a little baby. She makes me laugh.

—Yeah. She can be funny.

—Last week she was telling me about the little gay guy that helps her with breakfast. I swear I thought I'd piss myself. Do you know him?

—I know who you mean.

—Yeah. She's so funny.

I start to get ready for the morning. Oleg and her chat and mooch like they were girlfriends. She takes a picture of him with the camera on her phone. He asks to hold the phone and then he does his funny grimace. It's nuanced to signal approval. In turn, he gets up and does a twirl, showing off his new Adidas top.

—It's good brand. Quality brand. Feel?

—Very nice.

I do my work and wait for her to go. When her boyfriend didn't come earlier, I asked her to call her parents. She um-ed and ah-ed and pretty-girled out of it. It annoys me now. What if he comes back? I'm prepared to do what it takes to keep her bodily safe, but why should I risk anything just so she can play happy families when rapist man comes to dinner? I feel cold and I wonder if I'm going to puke. I think I am jealous of Oleg.

I move them into the restaurant so I can mop the floors.

—Do you want me to help?

—No. It's okay.

She doesn't offer again. She asks Oleg if he likes her nails. He holds her hand in his as he inspects them. Then he gets her to give him her empty cigarette packet as a souvenir.

—Write something on it.

—What?

—Your name and my name, Oleg. For souvenir. O. L. E. G. Oleg.

I think of a beige and lonely room somewhere, the walls covered in cigarette packets with names on them.

□

Finally, the boyfriend comes. He arrives in a souped-up, dealer car. A generic R and B bassline drips from the car onto the night's already defeated silence. Lily is happy. She slips on her heels, kisses Oleg on the cheek and teeters out. At the door, she turns.

—Thanks, bye. Bye Oleg.

She waves as the car backs out. Oleg smiles. He rolls the peak of his baseball cap through his hands, tightening the peak's arch, and smiles. I think how she never asked my name.

—She is like my sister.

I smile too. I know nothing else I can do. Oleg picks up his wallet and his souvenir cigarette packet.

—I will go to bed.

—Have a cigarette with me before. Please.

—Okay. I must go to the toilet first.

This night is evaporating. The girl has just gone and I will never see her again. I listen to Oleg pissing. I thank God he isn't trying to shit and this makes me laugh. I'm tired. I should sleep.

I'm impressed to hear Oleg wash his hands. I give him a cigarette and then light it. We sit in a silence that doesn't seem like a waste of time.

—Oleg. Do you still want a place to live? To be my flatmate?

He looks at me surprised.

—I've thought about it. It might be nice to have company.

I'm embarrassed because I think he might cry.

—David. Thank you. It makes me happy.

—I think it might be nice.

He sits making his face and nodding.

—David. I don't think it's good idea. I must save money for a car. My friend, he has a Jeep. I must save money. With a car, a man has something.

He stops and shakes his head.

—We can be friends and pass the time. It's nice. It's good. But not ... I must save money.

I don't understand. He touches his cheek. I wonder if that's where she kissed him goodbye. I don't understand anything right now but I think that if I had a kiss to touch I might sleep.

Aaron Mannion is an emerging writer living in Melbourne. His current project is a novel exploring failures of intimacy. It's tentatively titled *The third persons*.
