

Stephen Coates – Open Division, 3rd Place

Brendon Varney Opens the Door

Brendon Varney opens the front door. The faded mat offers him an upside-down welcome as he steps onto the patio with his chin high. The fingers of his right hand twist at his wedding ring.

After three paces, his determination wavers. The sky is blue and cloudless, and at the edge of the veranda he stops, squinting in the unfamiliar light. The scent from the climbing roses on the trellis – one red and one white – makes him giddy. He stares at his sneakers, takes slow breaths against the pounding of his heart.

Then he makes his way down the steps and tiptoes along the path. The grass on either side is as distant as the sea churning at the base of a cliff. At the midpoint, the concrete bends and sways like a circus slackwire, so he reaches out his arms for balance. With quick, shuffling steps, he hurries for the safety of the gate. A final lurch and he grabs at the post with both hands.

Outside, the tarseal stretches vast and terrible towards the row of flats across the road. He focuses on the dust-streaked window of the Subaru in the carport. Then he shifts his eyes to the stone letterbox, his goal for this expedition.

From the security of his couch, it had seemed far less daunting. Just pop out and fetch the mail, he told himself. His cheque from the Lotteries Commission should be arriving soon. His invitation to be guest of honour at a civic reception for something or other, which he would gracefully decline. A postcard from Queenstown – flame-coloured willows on the banks of Lake Wakatipu, the Remarkables towering in the background – where Suzie went to visit her cousin. ‘Having a wonderful time, wish I was there.’

I sink to my knees on the carpet, fists clenched beside my head. Someone whimpers.

‘That’s a decent total,’ said Tony. ‘How about a pizza for the innings break?’

I muted the TV and squirmed in the beanbag. ‘You mean get one delivered?’

He rolled his eyes, peering down at me from the sofa. ‘No, I thought we’d wander round to Spag’s for a *margherita*. Of course I meant delivery, you prat.’

I let my head loll back. ‘Well, that’s all right, then. But won’t Jen be pissed if you don’t get home for dinner?’

Tony sighed and brushed his hand over his hair. ‘She’ll be pissed at me either way. I’d rather be here.’ He dug out his phone and placed the order.

‘Hey,’ I said after he ended the call. ‘How come you always turn up here when there’s a game on?’

‘Coincidence, mate, pure coincidence. I just enjoy your scintillating company.’ He paused. ‘Plus she hates cricket.’

‘Ha. I guess I should be flattered that I’m your first choice.’

‘Are you kidding? You’re the fifth person I tried this afternoon, but every other bugger was out.’ I flicked a bottle-cap at him, but missed. ‘At least I know you’ll be home.’

‘Hell, no, hectic social calendar, me. You were lucky to catch me in.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he said. ‘When was the last time you went anywhere? Maybe I am lucky, though – every time I see you, my own crappy life doesn’t seem quite so bad.’

‘Shut up. My life’s fine.’

I knew this to be false. I tilted my empty glass at him, raised my eyebrows. He jerked his chin in agreement, so I struggled to my feet and headed for the kitchen.

‘Look on the bright side,’ he called. ‘When the next round of COVID hits, you’ve already got a head start on lockdown. While we were in Level 4, did you even notice?’

‘COVID? What’s that?’ I opened the fridge. ‘What’s your fancy? IPA or brown ale?’

‘Whatever,’ he yelled back. ‘Hey, Bren. Does that car of yours have a tow bar?’

Brendon Varney freezes like a living statue, the tips of his outstretched fingers resting on damp glass. ‘Sure.’ His voice comes from the other end of a long tube. ‘Don’t know if it’s still running, though. I haven’t used it since – well, for a while. You might have to change the spark plugs, or recalibrate the thrusters, or whatever it is you do.’

From far, far away, I hear Brendon Varney making a joke.

The fridge door beeps, and the living statue moves again. Its chilled fingers grip the necks of two bottles. It picks up the opener from the bench and flips off the tops. I carried the beers – Epic Hop Zombie – through to the lounge and passed him one. He poured it slowly, watching the foam froth up to the rim of the glass.

‘You can borrow it any time,’ I said. I counted the bottles lined up on the floor beside the bookcase. ‘Well, maybe not tonight.’

He chuckled. ‘Nah, I’ll get an Uber tonight. But thanks.’

‘So, why do you need it?’

‘Oh, I just need to take some stuff to the dump,’ he said, rubbing his cheek with his free hand.

I gave him the side-eye. He pretended to be engrossed in the silent experts analysing the Kiwi bowling attack on the screen.

‘So what do you really want it for?’

He started to argue, but then deflated. ‘Ah, fuck it. Yeah, I’ve found a place out in Halswell. Bit of a shithole, but there it is. I’m moving in at the end of the month.’

‘That sucks.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good thing we’ve got plenty of beer, then.’

I am drawing. With a graphite pencil, I am sketching the outline with light strokes. On the left, an enormous conifer encroaching onto the footpath. This was my landmark, where I would slow down and turn my blinker on as I drove home from work. Suzie dubbed it the toilet brush tree. The memory makes me smile. Then I remember some more, and I stop.

To the right is the red brick church – St Something’s – that was used as a polling station for the last election. It must be early morning, because there are no cars. Usually this stretch of the road is packed with mums dropping off or picking up their children at the Catholic primary school next to the church. Or perhaps today is a holiday. Sometimes I lose track of the days. I think about adding a car, a grey Subaru, but decide against it.

In my picture it is cold, that quiet stillness that presages snow. If there was a person in this drawing – Brendon Varney, for example – he would be bundled up in his

black padded jacket, hands deep in his pockets. But there are no people. It is, after all, a holiday.

And of course, Brendon Varney is not in this drawing. He is in his house, hunched over the dining-room table. Heartbreak music, his own playlist, flows from the speakers. Perhaps he will be drawing.

In the centre of the page, I am drawing six letterboxes like little white hutches. They are different from my letterbox. One of them has lost its number. They serve the flats that line either side of a long driveway. The left flat at the back, that is not in my picture because I cannot see it from the street, that is Marta's.

I opened the door.

'Take this,' said Marta, shoving a large Tupperware container into my arms.

I looked at the dishes stacked on the veranda. More Tupperware, a casserole and two, no, three bottles of bubbly.

'Um,' I said.

'Is Christmas, ja?' She made shooing motions at me. 'Now go, go. Before gets cold.' She picked up the casserole and herded me through to the kitchen.

'This is very kind of you, Marta,' I said, 'but you don't –'

'What, you busy, big plans? You go on date, restaurant with pretty girl? Pfff.' She set the casserole on the stove-top. 'Open wine, ja? Getting *részeg* at Christmas, old Hungarian tradition.'

She made another trip to bring in the rest of the food. Then she named each dish as she placed it on the bench. 'Is fisherman's soup, stuffed cabbage, chicken, cucumber salad, *bejgli*. Get table ready, OK?'

I took the china plates from the cupboard, the ones we kept for special occasions. Rinsed two champagne flutes, dusty from lack of use, and poured our drinks.

'*Egészségedre.*' Marta looked me in the eye and downed her wine in one swallow. Then she waited until I did the same.

'This smells delicious,' I said 'But why?'

'Hnnn,' she shushed me. 'You remember my first Christmas here? One week after I move in, two weeks after divorce from stinky bastard, every day crying, crying. Ja? Suzie, she knocks on my door, brings me here. Feeds me lovely meal, lots of wine,

we start laughing again. You remember? Even a present she gives me. Suzie, good woman, *angyal*.'

Brendon Varney rearranges the knives and forks, staring at the table. Unfolds a napkin and folds it again. Marta changes the subject, tells him about her sister in Budapest.

'Gabi is doctor, how you say it, orthopaedic surgeon.' She giggles. 'I got the beauty, she got the brains, ja? Last year her husband walked out on her, two kids in school. Her boy, fifteen, is gay. Under Orban' – she makes a spitting face – 'is no life in Hungary. So I bring them here. I will be sponsor.'

I clear my throat. 'That's great. Will they live with you?'

'Ja. Now I am every day going to the Immigration, paperwork, paperwork, paperwork. All in English, is killing me.'

'I can help you with that, if you like,' I hear myself say.

Her face brightened. 'Ja? Thank you. I bring papers tomorrow.' She topped up our glasses. 'Today, we eat, drink, pretend we are not lonely. OK?'

The outline of this picture is already finished. Now I am using my 2B pencil to draw in the dark shadows, the trunks of the trees and the low wooden fence. I am humming, humming along to Rival Sons. They are singing a haunting song about loneliness and loss. I join in on the chorus as I switch to my H pencil to fill in the mid-tones.

It is warmer today. Perhaps it is early spring. I think it is spring because there are buds on one of the trees in the park. I do not know what kind of tree it is, but I am drawing the buds. It makes me happy that spring is coming.

Sometimes we would walk there, in this park. You like to watch the children climbing on the jungle gym. Once we had a picnic on the grass in the middle of the rugby field, but the wind was so strong that it blew our sandwiches away. How we laughed.

Now, in the foreground, right at the edge of the frame, I am drawing Brendon Varney. I am drawing him from behind, because I am not good at faces. I am using the faintest of lines, since he is not sure if he wants to be there. Only the back of his head is visible, and one shoulder. Perhaps he is going to the mall. Perhaps he will go shopping

in the supermarket, pushing a trolley down the intimidating aisles. Perhaps he is meeting a friend in a Robert Harris café.

No.

I take my eraser and I rub out Brendon Varney. He is still hiding in his house. I keep rubbing at the corner of the page until there is only a void where Brendon Varney used to be.

‘We have bourbon.’ Tony held up a jute bag in his left hand. ‘And we have gin.’ A striped bag in his right. ‘What’s your poison?’

I leaned against the door frame, cradling my coffee cup in front of my chest. Today I was drinking from Suzie’s mug. It was purple-blue, like a mallard’s wing, and precious beyond rubies.

‘Sorry, mate,’ I said. ‘I’m not really in the mood today.’

‘Yes, you are,’ he replied as he ducked past me. ‘You just don’t know it yet.’

From the kitchen I heard a metal top being unscrewed, the hiss of fizzy drink. He returned with two tumblers and set the bottles on the carpet.

‘It’s a house-warming. My warming, your house. If the mountain won’t come to Mohammed, Tony will come to the mountain, bearing booze and snacks and witty conversation. Oh, and I brought your car back. The keys are on the bench. Thanks a lot. Well, gumby.’

He clinked his glass against mine and gulped a huge mouthful, gave a contented burp. I took a tiny sip. Then he scuffed off his shoes and sprawled on the sofa.

‘And unless I’m very much mistaken,’ he said, ‘the one-dayer should be starting any second now.’

I took another sip, slightly larger. Then I jabbed the remote at the TV and lowered myself into the beanbag. An overcast McLean Park, a chyron saying the match had been delayed by a wet outfield, play expected to commence in twenty minutes.

‘So,’ he said. ‘You haven’t asked me how the move went.’

I grunted. ‘How did the move go?’

‘Great. Dave gave me a hand, and it only took a couple of hours. One advantage of having bugger all stuff, I guess.’

‘And how was it? Your first night in the new place?’

‘Bloody brilliant. I got fish and chips, watched *The Walking Dead* and was in bed by ten.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. I thought I’d be miserable, you know, but I got the best night’s kip I’ve had in ages. Do you have any idea how relaxing it is not being bombarded with hate vibes from the other side of the bed?’

‘Can’t say I do.’ I raised my glass to my mouth, discovered it was empty.

Tony drained his own glass and refilled them both. Then he sat down again, gazing out the window towards the roses.

‘Today’s her birthday, right?’

Brendon Varney gives a tight nod, makes a strangled noise that could be interpreted as assent.

‘I thought so,’ said Tony.

Brendon Varney stares at the TV. His vision contracts to a long, dark tunnel. At the end of this tunnel, bound with iron chains, lies his heart. It is pulsing, but barely.

In Robert Harris, in the chair at right angles to his, there is Suzie. She is resting her chin on one hand. Probably they are talking – in fact, he is nearly certain of it. The scent of her jasmine perfume tickles his nostrils. He does not tell her about his allergies. He knows that he is grinning, and he suspects that he looks foolish.

He is waving his hand to make some point. As he does so, his arm knocks against his cup. Lukewarm latte sloshes across the wooden surface, soaking his trousers. He pats frantically at his crotch. Suzie’s lips are clamped shut, but her eyes sparkle with amusement.

I am sitting at the dining-room table, and I am drunk. Tony has gone home in an Uber. The muscles of my cheeks ache, and I think I can smell jasmine. I am clutching a postcard. ‘Having a wonderful time, wish I was there.’ My hand waves to make some point. Lukewarm latte sloshes across my trousers.

Again and again and again and again and again.

A hollowness forms deep in my throat. I feel it spreading through my body. It consumes my tongue, my vocal cords, so I cannot cry out. It is consuming my internal organs, starting with my heart. It eats me from the inside, until I no longer exist. All that

remains is a limp suit of flesh that was once Brendon Varney, sitting at the dining-room table.

I open the door. Marta looks at my expression and her face goes slack. I give her a half smile, step back to let her in. She turns down my offer of coffee and we sit side by side at the dining-room table. I fan the forms out in front of us, click on the Immigration New Zealand website on my computer.

‘Is impossible, ja?’ she says, squeezing her hands in her lap.

‘Nothing’s impossible,’ I say. ‘But it’s not easy either. Look, these are the criteria for being a sponsor. Citizen or resident, yes. Enough money to cover living costs, like food and healthcare, you can do that. Can provide accommodation directly or indirectly – you say that your sister will stay with you, so that’s fine. Enough money to pay for a return ticket to Hungary.’

She swats my explanation away. ‘Yes, yes, I know all that. What is the problem?’

I scroll up and drag the cursor to show three lines.

‘It’s this one. ‘Must have spent one hundred and eighty-four days in New Zealand for each of the last three years.’ In your passport it says that you were out of the country from February to August last year. Right?’

‘Yes. My mother, she was dying with the cancer, so I went home to be with her. So?’

I look away, scratching my nose. I did not know about her mother. ‘Well, I did the math. Last year, you were only in New Zealand for a hundred and seventy-three days. You’re eleven days short.’

‘So those eleven days, I can’t bring Gabi out?’

‘Hmmm.’ I tap my pen against the table. ‘You can apply anyway, and maybe they’ll let it slide. But if they go by the book, then you won’t be able to do it for another three years, until you meet this final condition.’

She launches into a rumble of Hungarian. I do not know if she is swearing or praying, so I just wait for her to stop.

‘I would like that drink now, please,’ she says. ‘But not coffee. You have vodka? Lots of vodka?’

I have never been to this department, so I cheat and use Google Street View. It is on Hereford Street, inside an arcade. I must have walked past it many times before. I have drawn a bookshop, a Burger Fuel and a Robert Harris, though not my normal branch. I am using my finger to blend in the charcoal on my drawing. I have wrapped a tissue around my finger. Today there is no music.

Hereford Street is under repair. Traffic has been reduced to a single lane, lined with wire-mesh fences. A yellow steamroller is parked to one side, and several workers in hi-vis vests are clustered round a hole in the ground. Hereford Street, like me, is a work in progress.

Now I am taking my eraser stick and marking in the highlights. The curlicues on the bookshop sign, the sun glinting off a car windscreen, the stripes at the tops of the orange traffic cones. This is my favourite part, because this is when the picture comes alive.

In the white space I draw Brendon Varney. He is striding along the footpath, just about to turn into the arcade. He is wearing a suit. Perhaps in reality his shoulders aren't quite that broad, but he is walking with confidence and purpose.

I look at my laptop to check that I have got it right. My eyes flick from screen to drawing and back again until I am satisfied. Then I close my laptop and push it out of the way. As I do so, my sleeve brushes the paper. I have smudged Brendon Varney. Brendon Varney is a smudge.

I take up my pencil and eraser, and set to work to fix the damage.

I am putting on my suit, the one I keep for job interviews and weddings. I am not thinking about the last time I wore it. I have ironed a white shirt, and my fingers remember how to tie the knot in my tie. Brendon Varney has polished my shoes until they shine.

I examine my reflection in the bedroom mirror. I look professional, respectable, trustworthy. I do not look like a hermit, or a hermit crab. We do not look like someone who has not left the house in over a year.

Suzie would approve. 'Who's that handsome stranger?' she'd say. 'I might have to leave you for him.'

Brendon Varney's appointment is for nine o'clock. The woman on the other end of the phone sounded surprised, but didn't reject the idea out of hand. Perhaps, if things go well, I will pop into Robert Harris afterwards for a flat white and a piece of caramel slice.

For the fourth time this morning, I check my briefcase. Passport and driver's licence, bank statements to prove that I'm solvent, last month's rates bill. Copies of all the documents that Marta gave me. I have not told Marta of my plans. I do not want to get her – his, my, our – hopes up.

I look at my watch again. It is time. I study my drawings spread out on the dining-room table. I pay particular attention to the drawing of Hereford Street. Brendon Varney moves with confidence and purpose. I pick up my briefcase and my keys. I open the front door.

I am opening the door.

Brendon Varney opens the door.