

SETH

Alby blazed into the warehouse with an energy we didn't see often, and one that might have made the previous two years' drudgery worth the time. Someone to chat with, to get to know. Someone not from here. Someone not resigned to a life of hauling crates and making inventory. There was so much of that here it became difficult not to just ease in and let it take you away. Forty years of the drudge, forget your dreams, forget your hopes, just wait for the gold watch and oblivion. Find a partner with as few ambitions as you have. Add a couple of kids. Pick up a mortgage in a run-down neighbourhood to be inexorably gentrified before your eyes. Either grumble at or delight in progress. Die far too early but wish for the release on your death-bed, with no real clarity aside from a nagging thought that once, once you were going to get out of here. That was the reality for a lot of these men. They were locked up tight as clams, with no interest in being pried open by another punk kid on the floor. The only way to find a way in was to be one of them. Stop asking about 'what else' they wanted to do, or what they did on their vacations. So when Alby entered the space, with his drawling:

ALBY

(entering from off stage, moving to SETH,
hand outstretched)

G'day. You the boss?

SETH

I saw something different. That accent! A promise of other things. A sense there was a world outside of these hopeless walls. He'd been put here by a temp agency, although I don't think this is what he had in mind when he walked in.

(to ALBY)

You must be...

(looking at an imaginary clipboard and
shaking his hand)

Albert Baker. Welcome to Transcore.

ALBY

Alby. Just Alby. So you're the boss?

SETH

I'm supervising this shift. Not really the boss. Seth.

ALBY

G'day. Alby. Good to meet you. Orright, well, can y' tell me where to go?

SETH

(back to the audience)

I wanted to be his friend from the moment I met him. He was exotic, like some kind of craggy, haunted beast with a mighty beard and a restless eye that for whatever reason had

shown up just as I was getting ready to surrender to the inevitability of what my life could be. He wasn't the usual kind of person I'd imagine as a close friend, but somehow, that's what it became. From his first day, Alby Baker was hope. This man, seven years my senior but seemingly so much older, gave me a reason to think that in this shrinking world there is no point to giving up the fight. Here was a man who had lobbed on the doorstep of a packing company at the other side of the planet from where he was raised, ready to work, even if he wasn't sure what he was there for. I set him to sweeping filings and to hosing the decks. He worked methodically, intensely. He didn't say much those first weeks. He was always late. Always. At least twenty minutes every time, but when he was questioned, he would wink, with that winning sparkle in his eye, and blame:

ALBY

Bloody subway, mate. It's a mess.

SETH

He lived way out east but commuted all the way for this lousy job. I'll never know why. It didn't take long for him to start asking questions:

ALBY

Seth, eh? Funny to see a name like that on a bloke like you.

SETH

(to us)

He had a way of being blunt but endearing.

(to ALBY)

It's a nickname, actually. From my last name, Sethi. I've gone by Seth since I was twelve.

ALBY

(very blunt)

What for?

SETH

Well, I discovered very early in the ninth grade my actual name - Yakshit - was a really good way to get beat up. I adopted the nearest western name I could find.

ALBY

Crikey. What'd your mum and dad reckon?

SETH

Yakshit means 'one who is made forever'. To give that up? I am not sure my dad has forgiven me yet.

ALBY

Names have power, mate. Even the ones you don't want.

SETH

(to us)

I often thought about that, years later, after my father had passed on. There'd still be time for Yakshit.

ALBY

(to us)

When the girl first sent me to the warehouse job I thought she was having a laugh: hear the accent, see the resume, assume the worst. Oh, here's another useless shiftless bloody bogan, shoot him off to the manual job and call it a day. The money was alright though and I shared a transit pass with my flatmate, so it meant getting around wasn't costing me much, and I could stop moving for a while. They have places like this at home: the refineries at Kwinana; the pits up north and out in Kal. The fisheries depots down in Albany. Places for blokes who want to work with their hands and not be bothered. But for me, that was never really the point. The point back home was to avoid it at all costs. I grew up in that environment, watching my father slog to work every day, coming home stinking of fish guts, seeing the spark flicker and die until the accident saw him laid off and started the inevitable decline which killed him. The inevitability of how it'd would be my life too. Watching my mum slog her way, working at the TAB days and at the pub nights to look after me and my sister, after dad shot through. Moving us from town to town until we finally landed in Busso. I was determined it wouldn't be the way for me. I didn't know what else might happen though, and growing up in a town like Busso I didn't get much sense of where it might be better.

Busselton back then wasn't the Busselton of now. Today it's all coffee shops and fancy cars and rich bastards from up in Perth in their holiday homes, demolishing the kinds of places I grew up in so they could put up a flashy modern beach house they could use four weekends a year. A stop off on the way to the wineries for their traditional yearly slough-around to pick up cases of cleanskins and a seriously dangerous tasting buzz as they staggered from vineyard to vineyard.

(running his hand through his beard)

Those Perth types: Dalkeith mothers with their kids in tow, all with eighty dollar haircuts and six-hundred-dollar body boards to dink around in Geographe Bay, were the kinds of people I associated with Perth. I hated them, as the influx grew through my teen years. My grandmother's broken-down weatherboard house, where I played as a kid and lay awake at night terrified at the creaking sounds of shifting timber and creeping possums, was stolen away by a real estate agent who did a job on her and took it off her hands for cents on the dollar. A cheque for eighty thousand dollars for an old shack you put up with your own hands sounds like a pretty good day's business, but when the new owners immediately pull it down, throw up a mansion and put it back on the market for two point four mil', then you know you've been

hosed. That was the Perth I knew. Unscrupulous land grabbers who didn't care about the history of the town. The people who built this place.

(ALBY breaks off to consider himself in the mirror.)

Even then, my beard was a shield. As a fifteen-year-old, I grew it as soon as it would come. It was something to stamp me as having either one foot out the door of the joint or getting a head start on working the fisheries. Either way, the beard gave me something to hide behind. Something which emerged from within me, dormant my whole life, sparked by puberty and an echo of my hirsute ancestry. Patchy to start but never the bumfluff other kids tried to pretend was worth hanging on to. No one at school cared. Early experiments with shaving, the awkward, furtive attempts using a blunt straight razor and my dead grandfather's old shaving mug. The beard became sacred for me then. A link to the past but a hope for the future. A beard meant I was growing up, and unlike leg hair or underarm hair or the rest, I could display it for all to see. Girls hated it. I didn't care. I loved that beard more than I could have loved any teenage girl. Then, the beard was just something I wore on my face. It was something I use to enjoy glimpsing in a shop window, or even, as it grew longer, out of my peripheral vision when I looked down. It wasn't a weapon yet.

SETH

(to ALBY, back in time)

So, Australia? Where in Australia? I've always wanted to go.

ALBY

WA. South West Coast.

SETH

So... Perth, right?

ALBY

Yeah, nah. Not Perth. Perth's north a few hours. I'm from a little surfing town on the coast down there.

SETH

Oh, you're a surfer?

ALBY

Nah. 's a lifestyle you really have to commit to.

(back to us)

I barely travelled to Perth as a kid: a couple of times with family we'd go up and stay in an old motel in Scarborough near my aunty's place so we could play on the beach with the hordes of cousins where there were real waves - and real sharks - all in the shadow of Alan Bond's looming Observation City, a boondoggle if ever there was one. The sea was rougher and so were the kids. There was nothing comforting and calming like the tranquility of Geographe

Bay, the isolated, protected spot where the water was like glass and the stingers lurking underneath'd cut you like it. I loved that town, but by the time I was done with high school it wasn't a place I recognised anymore. I wasn't going to be following the rest of the kids into TAFE or trades or working checkout at Woolie's. Most of my mates wound up gutting fish like my dad did, a bit further down the coast at Cape Naturaliste or Albany. But I had a secret. And on the spur of the moment, I made the call.

NATALIE

Alby's sister once told me of the shock she felt when she found out he was going to move to the city go to university. He'd always done well enough in his high school English classes, but the fact he was still writing - secretly - came as a shock to everyone.

ALBY

Writing was my thing. My outlet. The thing I did at home when no one was around.

NATALIE

He never told anyone because he was sure the other boys would make fun of him.

ALBY

Are you kidding? The boys at the footy club would crucify me. They shared my disdain for the Perth types, and already looked at me sideways when I'd use bigger words or keep my head down when they talked about labouring. I was never much of a footballer - my kick was mediocre at best - but they loved having me on the team because I was the big, scary biker-looking bastard who would tackle anything he saw all day long. Didn't want much to do with the footy myself, but I'd cream anyone who came near me with it. In my last year of high school I think I kicked a single solitary behind, and that was an accident. Most of the boys went on to Colts, on the way up to try to play league. One of my mates got picked up by Swan Districts. All he ever wanted to do was play in the AFL, didn't care what team, and going up to Perth to play in the WAFL was the first step along. The scouts had a look at me too, but they didn't like the way I handled the football. There's no room in footy for a man who can't kick the thing. "Work on your technique mate, try again next year," as though this devastating news would drive me all year long. Rather, it was a release: finishing school meant I could finish footy, and could finish with this increasingly unfamiliar town. I had to try something, or I was going to get stuck there, just like me dad did. So I got out, went up to Perth, and went to the only uni that'd have me with my TEE scores.

SETH

(to NATALIE)

I couldn't believe it when he said he was a writer. To hear him talk, you'd assume he was some kind of... I don't know, farm boy? Someone from the bush.

NATALIE
(conversational)

The first time I laid eyes on him he was in my bad books for blowing off one meeting and being criminally late for another. My undistinguished university career led to a half-hearted Bachelor of Commerce at U of T, and a side-step into a Certificate of Human Resource Management at Ryerson. At the end of the first degree I briefly wondered whether I should get out of here. A few hours on the internet investigating international graduate programmes - and their fees - put an end to that. And anyway, that would require moving out, moving up, moving on. Better to stay safe. So, I took the casual distracted advice of an overworked U of T professor who said Human Resources might be a good landing spot for someone like me. I guess I did well enough with the people skills and had just enough of a lack of ambition to not want to kill myself at the idea of a career in an office. I'm sure he mentioned a few options, but HR was the first on his list, and it was there I fixated.

Getting into the programme was easy. Life successfully deferred for another year. Check. Of course, the thing no one ever tells you at the start of a programme is just how little the workforce needs more people with the same degrees in the pool. New graduates outflank retirees, deaths, and transfers so new jobs are tough to find. So, as one of a graduating class of 39 - surrendering youths, zealous second-career hopefuls, and all in between - I quickly found the HR business is pretty set for new agents. Limiting myself to a fifteen-block radius in the Toronto downtown core didn't help, of course: if I wanted to work HR for an insurance company branch in Churchill, then by all means, the jobs are there. Interested in relocating to Fogo Island? Great! Sign here! I was subjected to the humiliating process of applying to a temp agency, sitting in front of a HR agent, trying to put the best possible spin on a Human Resources Management certificate I knew was worth exactly zero.

Every temp job available was as awful as the last - typing, answering phones, making coffee and, worst of all, were always temporary. In this cycle of temp work, I found myself wondering whether my own limitations had set a course for my life I didn't know how to fix. The day I decided to quit the temp jobs was the day I got a call from the agency asking me whether I'd be interested in coming in for a chat. One of their agents had up and quit, and there was a position at the agency itself. "This is highly unusual but we see real potential here." Benefits, dental. Using my degrees. Stability. Zero risk. Beat. So of course I took it. The temp agency was a bit different from the other side of the table,

but not much. It was a death trap. I was good at my job and my clients seemed happy enough, but I could see age 25 rushing relentlessly at me. My parents were happy enough I still lived at home. My love life was limited to sad fumbblings with over-anxious internet dates, forty horrifying minutes on Tinder, and the dreaded "I have a friend I think you'd like" connections from well-meaning co-workers. I lived simply, easily. I didn't have to worry about money. I lived in the house I'd grown up in and I had my health. Nights were home with books, playing out the string with my parents. Nothing was wrong. Which is why I was so depressed. It was in one of these moments Alby Baker swept into my life.

(ALBY steps forward. As he listens, he fiddles anxiously with his beard)

Already on strike two, he'd booked a second appointment to meet me to talk about temp work after he'd skipped the first one. I'd seen his meagre resume on the system, with a creative writing degree from somewhere called Murdoch University, which the internet told me was in south western Australia. I found Australians overwhelming: a mix of cockiness and vulnerability was both attractive and repellent. The few Australians I knew at university were loud, direct, and loved to drink. They were fixated on how unique they thought they were. I found myself hoping Alby Baker was a Canadian who'd gone to school in Australia for the weather. It'd be easier to deal with, and he'd be easier to let down when I told him there wasn't much call for Creative Writers in the Toronto workforce. So, my heart sank when he stepped in to the office, twenty minutes late.

ALBY stops touching his face. He transforms from the anxious-looking man into a cocky presence. He moves over to NATALIE.

ALBY
(enquiring)

Nat?

NATALIE
(back in time, bristling right away)

It's Natalie.

(standing to shake his hand)

Mr. Baker, welcome.

ALBY
Alby. Call me Alby.

NATALIE
(to us)
I thought I had him pegged from the moment he arrived.

ALBY
(to us)

I knew her the moment I arrived.

NATALIE

(to us)

The over-exaggerated accent and the late entrance. It wasn't until I got to know him better I realised none of it was for effect. He was self-contained, with a confidence you might mistake for brashness if you didn't know any better.

ALBY

(to us)

There's something about American girls.

NATALIE

(to ALBY)

Canadian.

ALBY

(to NATALIE)

Fine, fine.

(to us)

Still. Something about the jawline, or the overall attitude. The hardness of multiple generations of enduring winters. Something about it. I've always liked them. And this one struck me right away.

NATALIE

(to us)

It was those eyes I noticed first. Piercing blue. They locked on and never let go. A wry smile both drew me to him and got my back up immediately.

ALBY

(to us)

She didn't fall over herself when she heard the accent. Intriguing. She seemed... to not even see me.

NATALIE

(to us)

I wasn't going to play his game. I stuck to the script. He didn't seem interested in discussing why he was in Canada, only to say that:

ALBY

(to her)

I won't shoot through without telling ya, don't worry.

NATALIE

(to us)

I'd seen his type before. They wanted to temp because it seemed like the easiest way to earn a paycheque without having to commit to a single place for a length of time. The exact reason temping nearly drove me crazy.

ALBY

(to us)

She was businesslike, forthright. Pale skin, with a spray of freckles across her nose. I'll always think of those freckles first. Green eyes that dared you to hold their gaze. Long neck. Tiny hands. I remember it all, like flashes. And her disinterest sent me into overdrive. It wasn't about proving a point or convincing someone they really want you - it was a refreshing moment when I wasn't some foreigner, some blow-in from the bush.

NATALIE

We spoke only briefly: I had the defensive shields up out of principle. You show up late, you slouch and lounge around the place, you look at me with an attitude like you know you're the most charming person in the room.

(to ALBY)

When did you arrive in Toronto?

ALBY

A couple of weeks ago. I was going to be passing through but I thought I'd stick around a bit. There's a lot going on here.

NATALIE

(to us)

I didn't yet know he was flat broke, or that he'd never stayed anywhere for longer than a few months since leaving Australia.

(back to ALBY)

Okay then. Now. Let me see.

(glancing over a paper)

From this, I would characterise your office experience as... limited?

(to us)

His résumé was two lines long, which either meant he hadn't put everything he'd ever done on there, or he'd actually done next to nothing. There was something endearing about it. Most inexperienced workers lied, and made something up. Did a paper route as a kid? Oh, put down three years' experience as an Executive Media Distribution Liaison. Not here. Two bar jobs, random labouring, and a creative writing degree. Mercy. Nothing at all for the last three years.

(to ALBY)

Your last recorded job was at a bar in Ned-lands?

(emphasis on the last syllable)

ALBY

It's Nedlands.

(emphasis on the first syllable)

NATALIE

And since then?

ALBY

A few cash-in-hand jobs in Thailand for a bit, but nothing worth putting down there. Bouncing. Fruit picking. Some deconstruction. Mostly travelling. Living simple.

(to us)

I thought I'd impress her by getting expansive on the transient life of the last three years: hitching rides, sleeping on couches until the welcome wore out, trying to see how far I could stretch my savings. Turns out it was the time it took to get from Vancouver to Toronto. By the time I got here, I was out of money, out of options, and out of inspiration.

NATALIE

(to us)

Outside I was impassive but his casual discussion of his tramping across the country felt dangerous, out of control. A life I couldn't possibly imagine. A life that scared me out of my wits. Despite myself, I started to warm to him. I hoped he didn't notice.

ALBY

(to us)

Nothing I said had any effect at all.

NATALIE

(to him)

What do you aspire to?

ALBY

(to us)

Dinner with you.

(to her)

Finding myself.

NATALIE

(to us)

In my mind, I couldn't have rolled my eyes harder, though I think I covered it well. Here we go, the standard interview-speak. Next he'll tell me he 'works too hard' and 'cares too much.'

(back to him)

Finding yourself?

ALBY

(to us)

She actually rolled her eyes at me. She's fearless.

(to her)

Yeah. I know how it sounds. I'm just... looking for the next step, and I tend to go where the wind blows me.

NATALIE

(to us)

My diametric opposite. And all it took was meeting this man from the other side of the planet to find it.

(to us)

Someone who is looking for something so temporary is hard for us to place: we need our clients to be reliably present.

ALBY

Nah, nah, I'm good. I'm here for a bit. Recharging, saving up. Get my thoughts together. I write.

NATALIE

(to us)

This was an interesting wrinkle. He didn't look like the introspective type.

(to him)

Anything I might have read?

ALBY

It's not for other people.

NATALIE

A hobby?

ALBY

Nah. Not a hobby. It just doesn't much matter t' me what other people think.

NATALIE

(to us)

Later, much later, I read some of his work, which he customarily destroyed. He had an incisive eye. The beauty of this man's words existed directly in competition with the external character he cultivated. He wrote because he had to, to purge ideas from his brain, to calm the mounting thoughts. When he wrote, he left himself alone. It's one of my greatest regrets that our marriage directly coincided with the dwindling of his work. He just... stopped doing it so gradually I didn't even notice he'd started to obsess about other things.

ALBY

(back to the past)

My work visa lets me take shorter jobs, so I thought temping might match that. I can do whatever you like, type letters, answer phones, stack crates. Phones are a bit dodgy: people here never understand me. When I say the letter 'A' here they think I'm saying the letter 'I'.

(testing it out for her)

A-I? Ayy-Eii?

(to the audience)

The amount of mail I've had delivered to

(bad Canadian accent)

'ALBY BIKER' is ridiculous.

NATALIE

As he warmed up, so did I. I couldn't resist little jabs. Just to see.

(to ALBY)

Can you rein in your accent a little bit?

ALBY

Nah. This accent's part of me. What would you say if I told you to stop speaking in your accent?

NATALIE

(to us)

I won't trouble you with the accent conversation, but it was clearly something he'd thought about carefully. Pre-loaded, ready to shoot, safe from comeback or argument. This man's accent was his identity. It was a weapon he used, stretched, manipulated to influence the people in his immediate vicinity. He knew it was powerful. He could make the weak weaker with a well-chosen word in the laconic style of his. People hung on his words when he had something to say, and the slow drawl drew them closer. His accent became so integral to who he was that even years later, after I had spent every day with him I would find myself noticing the fundamental Australianism of the man infused in his voice.

Many soften their accent after a little bit of time away, some will adopt a new accent entirely. Children will adapt in part out of influence and in part out of pressure from their peers: when my Canadian children were finally enrolled in Australian schools, their accents melted away in weeks. The vowels lengthened, consonants dissolved. It was even more so when they were around other kids alone: the shocking realisation that your identity, wrapped so tightly in your demeanour and style of speech, can be shrugged off to survive. Our Australian-Canadian children would one day negotiate the dangers of sounding like you're from somewhere else in the cruel schoolyard. Aussie kids who think nothing of mocking the 'American kids' with their best - or worst - impersonations of accents heard on sitcoms or cartoons. Repetition of strange-sounding 'R' sounds and constant snickering during in-class speeches did strange things to the way those children interacted with their new world. Within weeks, they were Australian kids, in a desperate attempt to fit in to the ochre and azure new world so far from home.

Alby refused to loosen his accent, even a little bit. He clung to it like it was the last vestige of what made him him. To relinquish this would be to let go of home, even though that home was one he no longer identified strongly with. Alby lived in a limbo where home was always far away: no matter where he lived, it wasn't quite right. This was the restlessness I identified in him the first day in the temp agency. He wanted security because he had bills he

needed to pay, but a job in a permanent position was too great a commitment. To his mind, temping meant he'd spend a couple of weeks in a different office each time, to give him sufficient space to charm all of the office workers who would blush when they heard his voice, but couldn't stay long enough to grow tiresome. Chronically late? Threatening to all the straight men in the office? No worries, on to the next job. That accent was the key. That accent.

(to ALBY)

I have to move on to my next appointment, but I will be in touch about where we might be able to place you. Would you prefer office work, or warehouse work?

ALBY

One or the other, eh?

NATALIE

Not necessarily. With your experience you might lean more towards warehouse fill-ins, although I'm sure you would get a great deal from learning the ropes in an office.

ALBY

Maybe an office.

NATALIE

I'll be in touch.

(to us)

I started him off in a warehouse. Just to see what he wanted.

ALBY stands and shakes NATALIE's hand. He lingers just a second longer than he should have, self-assured about his own allure. NATALIE drops the handshake first. They part ways.

ALBY

I dreamed about her that night.

NATALIE

I was certain I'd never see him again.

Blackout.

SCENE 4.

Lights up. ALBY steps out to the edge of the stage, engaging the audience in his facial hair. He runs his hands through it. Maybe he invites an audience member to do the same. Projection: a pre-recorded extreme close-up of the