

SJ FINCH

THE KID ON THE KARAOKE STAGE EMPTIED HIS BEER AND CRIED. MEN THREW HIM A LINE

This is karaoke at the Waterford.

I have just turned eighteen.

I am at the height of my coolness.

There is drunkenness in the air, amber fuzz infusing our chests, vibrating from the moment that Robbie King takes to the stage in a cheap sparkly-gold jacket and shows us his falsetto. Our eyes shine expectantly. The Malaysian Elvis Impersonator spreads his proud legs, wiggles his pompadour, holds the mike high, and, eyes closed ... *'AhhhheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE hum hum ahhhway.'*

We laugh in our dinner suits. We fall to the ground or on each other's shoulders cackling. We spill beer – at eight dollars a jug, it doesn't matter.

Robbie King is a totem pole. He contains mystic powers, unleashed when the tribe gathers around. The chiselled karaoke man. He sings for us. When we laugh at him, he

lifts his head and laughs at himself as if he is the greatest entertainer in the world.

But when the disco lights and campfires burn low, when the smoke machines clear, Robbie will only say polite niceties.

‘Hey guys. Haha. Welcome.’

‘Nice to see you. How are you?’

You can see that he is only wood, only an empty vessel for his onstage facade. I have never heard Robbie tell me a joke, yet I have laughed at him for years. Am I wondering about the real Robbie, the man hidden behind Elvis masquerades and karaoke nights?

No.

I am on my third jug of beer. Thinking no longer concerns me. I lean against the bar, watching the scene play out. The boys of the Bullcreek–Leeming footy club assault the d-floor (dancefloor) with the chaotic and cocky struts of Vikings at a Midsummer festival. Any guy on stage will have his ass slapped. Fat ladies on the d-floor will have multiple dance partners, all at once. Laughter and whistles ring loud and crazy. The Boys greet each other with sexual innuendo and smiles. They embrace like bears. We are all equal.

We are all superstars. I watch them, and I feel excited, satisfied and proud. I am cool. I have earned this kind of coolness.

I have built my reputation on dropping my pants.

I stroll up to my physics teacher at a high school costume party, grinning. I am seventeen and terrified. The diminutive, moustached man opens his mouth to say hi. I straddle his leg and tear off my snap-on pants. He is horrified and disgusted. In only a bow tie and a g-string, I dance around the Fremantle Sailing Club. I have written the words Party and Boy on each butt cheek. The footy boys slap my bare ass hard. The next day

they will give me a standing ovation in class. From then on, they will invite me out.

(My childhood was spent alone or with a book, but never with friends. I was always unsure around people and conversation. I spoke my own language. It was usually silence.)

That summer, I worked hard to find the right words to say ... the right things to like ... the right ways to be. In a series of escalating dares – from growing a mullet, to playing football, to sexually assaulting my physics teacher (again), to knocking on a random door, naked, drunk and asking the resident for clothes (he gave me a T-shirt and said, ‘Don’t come in. I’ve got kids.’) – I became uniquely known. I was Finch, the ‘footy-dropping, g-string wearing, ex-mulleterer, and (possibly gay) sexologist extraordinaire.’

It was the first time I ever felt like someone.

(Sometimes I would miss being no one. There was a safeness in my childish language that I threw away. Sometimes I would be seized with stifling disgust. I would sit in my room. I would want to die. I would pine for alcohol and everybody.)

When Tristan invites me to come to the Waterford, I think of this karaoke night as the logical conclusion. This is my plateau of cool. Now I can sit back and watch other people make asses of themselves. Tristan has other plans.

‘Are you sure you don’t want a drink, Finch?’

I beam at the offer, keeping my eyes on the karaoke stage.

‘Nah I told you. I just wanna watch.’

Tristan scrutinises my face, then shakes his head.

‘Fuck you, Finch,’ Tristan says. ‘Don’t fucking come out if you’re gonna be all sadman and ruin my fucking night.’

The words hit me like ice. I keep my smile frozen. Tristan walks away. Something terrible crawls into my throat and empties out my chest. I wait, naked, unmasked of poise, and then I walk to the bar.

Tristan never explains this, but we both know why he says it. It's the unspoken contract. He invites Finch out because Finch guarantees a good performance.

What else can you do when your friends depend on you for their entertainment?

I order a jug of beer for myself.

I think only of recovery. I am going to get drunk and jettison my boring ways. I am going to dig deep, and perform like no other. Just fucking fly and leave myself behind. No one will ever have reason to talk to me like that again.

(It never occurred to me that lightness would be loneliness. I was only emptying myself into the glass they held for me.)

I will wear my mask and sing for you.

I take a shot of vodka and grenadine, a fire engine. Robbie is on stage, singing on his knees, passionately pumping his fist. To my right is Kyle Oakley, a newcomer. His famed drunken moment is a makeout session with a large tree. He sits down at the bar because he can't stand up. He leans on his elbow, giggles into his palm. After he sings tonight, Kyle Oakley will no longer be known as 'Sexyroots'. He will be dubbed 'The Performer'.

He will not know what he is singing; he will be too blind to read the lyrics. But someone will whisper that the song is about washing men, and onstage he will stumble and slur about how he loves to wash a man. He will slowly take his shirt off. Us karaoke connoisseurs, we will nod our heads and speak of it as the finest performance of all time. Kyle Oakley will have proved his worth to us.

After Robbie finishes the lion king, he hops up, wipes his brow, and peers behind the karaoke counter.

‘Okaaay, next we’re gonna get ...’

Robbie squints. This is the moment I am nicknamed and knighted by Robbie King’s inability to read my handwriting.

‘Finjo, FeFch, Fincer, Barry ... The Fonz. We got The Fonz, ladies and gentlemen.’

I took to the stage that night and fell in love with myself. I don’t remember taking the mike from Robbie, but man, do I remember holding it.

I look up. The crowd is a panoramic view of dark mountains and starfilled skies. I am standing on the stage, on the sun. Disco lights glitter through the smoke. In this moment, I am free to be myself, to be anyone. I am completely pretending. I can do and say anything.

I put the mike against my mouth and splutter.

‘Hello ... hello ... hello.’

Drums kick me off. I scissor-jump in the air and scream real high.

‘Get down!’

I burst into song, filling up with bubbling electricity. Glancing at the crowd, I see my friends and fellow champions laughing excitedly, pointing out to each other as I do this or that falsetto flourish. My insides spasm into glee. My consciousness separates.

I am The Fonz, screaming, flailing, and air-guitaring insanely. I am having fun.

I am Finch, standing outside my body, watching The Fonz’s performance. Invisibly laughing. Silently agonising. Is it good enough?

Afterwards I stagger off the stage as one person. My insides,

recently reunited, take a while to settle. I am on a cloud of self-awareness. As I walk to the bar – and the boys clap me on the back or grab my ass – I think on that performance as something solid and accomplished. We all do. Our best moments of youth ring and ripple through the years before and after, like neighbourhood stories repeated through the streets.

We couch ourselves in legends. We are everything and we are now. We are centrestage in the game of young manhood. When we karaoke there is nothing outside our group. Do I care that the boys throw condoms and shoes at an old hag onstage? Do I care that they viciously guffaw at fat, red-haired and Pakistani girls, even as they pretend to flatter them? No. I'd do the same. I pay no heed to gravity. I smile my niceties; I fly on to the next performance.

‘Okaaaay, we’re going to get ... Q-ball! Up here to sing us a song. Give a big hand for Q-ball.’

‘Give it shhhit Quickerman!’

Dean Quickerman is a sex symbol. Tall, broad-shouldered, brown-eyed and baby-faced. He takes the mike. A hush falls over the bar.

‘Thank you, Robbie,’ he says, faux-serious.

His low voice croons over a quietly throbbing bassline.

*Stick it all in a bowl, baby
Stir it with a wooden spoon
Mix in a cup of flour,
You’ll be in heaven soon.*

A saxophone barummps! Q-ball animates with sexy fervour:

Say everybody have you seen my balls?!
They're big and salty and brown!

Barump bah bahbarummp. He spins,

If you ever need a quick pick-me-up
Just stick my balls in your mouth.
Oooo! Suck on my chocolate salty balls!
Stick 'em in your mouth and suck 'em!

By the second barump, I don't recall anything but blind laughter. Through amber-bleary eyes, I see Quickerman straddling almost the entire stage with his limbs, power-gripping the mike.

We are outside. To the side of the bar Quickerman pisses against a tree. Oakley groans, lying on the floor of the parking lot. Tristan staggers in front of me and grins.

'Let's walk home.'

'But that's like four hours! Why?!'

Tristan starts walking off.

My memory skips.

I'm standing in a swamp and I can't see anything but dark reeds two metres high. My shoe sinks off my foot, and I fall over into the mud, cackling.

'Bwahaha. This is so fucking stupid.'

'Nah, this is going to be the best night of our life. Think of the cab money we're saving.'

I lift my foot, which feels a little light.

'Just think,' Tristan says. 'Now you can say you've walked

through here.’

‘You mean now I can say I’ve lost a shoe here.’

‘Oh shit, hold up, Finchy lost a shoe.’

We clear through the reeds and come to a river. There is a pipe running across. There is no way back. In dinner jackets, holding our dress shoes, we stumble to the other side, over seagull shit, wobbling, thankful that the hour through the swamp has sobered us.

We stop on the other side. I look down. My white socks are black and green.

‘Fuck this.’

Tristan orders a cab. He leans against the car window.

‘We could have been home and sleeping by now, Tristan.’

‘Not the point, Finch. Now we have a story to tell.’

Whenever I drove past that pipe, I thought of us: four drunken guys in suits, silhouetted by the moon, cursing loudly, stumbling over seagull shit. Those nights were our history before they even happened. We conquered the karaoke stage and dared ourselves to explore the dark, wild night, just to stamp a record on the streets, to feel our infinite youth ablaze.

There is an unspeakable loss that shadows our youthful desire. I will never walk across that pipe again, but I will always want to. Even when the Waterford is emptied of novelty and we move on, move forward, grow up, there will always be the image of a magical and massive night, of cheap beer and great friends, of good times and adventure. It looms on the horizon, vibrating across the desert of our sad lives, shadowing everything inadequate about reality.

Kyle Oakley and I reminisce about the Waterford on a Rottneft drinking trip. The conversation lulls. I take a swig

of my beer.

‘You know what was so great about the Waterford?’

I look at Oakley. ‘What?’

‘It was like the first time I got drunk. The feeling that Everything Is Okay With The World. Like you’re a kid again, you know.’

We both get it. I stare at the bottle in my hand. I can’t look Oakley in the eye. Oakley looks away too.

‘It will never be that fun again,’ Oakley says. ‘But we always search for that.’

That night, I stride into the Rottnest shops determined not only to get dinner, but to have fun. I shove squid rings and scotch-filletts down my underpants. I am wearing only my underpants.

The police station sergeant and the store manager escort me back to our Rottnest unit. After a two-minute search, they find Quickerman’s bong. We now both have potential criminal records. The sergeant leaves. I stand alone in my room. There is quiet.

Then, I hear Quickerman’s voice.

‘I’m gonna FUCKING BELT HIM.’

The door bursts open and Dean Quickerman grabs my collar –

‘You Stupid Fuck!’

‘I’m sorry.’

Tristan pulls him off. ‘He’s not worth it, Dean!’

‘That’s a criminal record YOU DICKHEAD.’ Dean’s face is twisted and red as he screams this. His red-rimmed eyes are black with anger.

Tristan ushers him out. I thank Tristan.

‘Fuck off, Finch.’ Tristan shakes his head. ‘Why the fuck did you do it?’

He walks out. I did it for a laugh. I did it for a story.

Hot shame rises to my face. It expands until I almost burst. I stand rigid, waiting for this moment to pass, but it doesn't and I failed and I'm not going to cry and then it comes. My vision floods. I hear a whine like a beaten puppy. As lonely and sad and pathetic a sob as there has ever been.

We've been kicked off Rottneest. I watch the ocean move past, churning and silent. I feel my cool self separate, and I fall away, untethered. I am filled with self-loathing and guilt for all I tried to be before, for all the racism and misogyny and arrogance. I will never speak like one of these boys again. I ask my future self if I will ever stay true to myself, if I will ever be cool.

Will I ever get out of this?

'No,' I tell him. 'There will always be lies ... sadness ... that feeling of pretending. But it's okay to feel less than true. You have the memory of moments that will never go away. You have the feeling of hope that you keep. The weight of what people want you to be, the weight of silent expectation ... dance on it, jump off it ... you only have to pretend to be yourself and for yourself. Don't stay true ... make believe.'

My court appearance is brief. A production line. I give the defence attorney two character sketches: one by my brother, one by Tristan. The attorney presents my case and appeals against the establishment of a criminal record; the police attorneys half-heartedly protest. The judge is glaring at me. I feel prickles rise from my fingertips, from every moment in my future. Then the judge nods, and smiles.

A year and a half later, I meet Oakley at the Waterford. Just Oakley and me. He drinks beer. I drink water. We do

our performances for old times. When I come off the stage, Oakley leans over.

‘How do you do it, man? How do you go all out like that?’

I try to explain that it’s not really me, it’s me pretending. He doesn’t get it.

I think of Yeats: *O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, how can we know the dancer from the dance?*

Oakley walks to the bar to buy another jug. I sit alone, thinking about Oakley’s question. My heart is curling around my chest. I look at the stage. I smile and I’m not sure why. A silent truth wraps itself around my body. Maybe this is freedom. Maybe this is the residue of the past, vibrating through my body, for one timeless moment, free, safe, and gleeful.