

An unexpected party

EDITED BY SETH MALACARI

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CONTENT WARNING

The following stories contain potentially triggering content. The editor has endeavored to keep all explicit forms of transphobia and homophobia, including slurs, out of this book, though some themes of queerphobia and dealing with this are present. Potential triggers within this anthology include violence, assault, misgendering, death, grief, mentions of drowning, police brutality, swearing, gore, blood, hospital settings, murder, emotional abuse by a parent, body horror, vomiting and supernatural themes.

These stories are predominately science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction, dystopian, or light horror. They contain depictions of mythical and supernatural beings.

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INTRODUCTION

Seth Malacari

This book was edited and published on stolen Whadjuk Noongar boodja. Genocide, land theft, systematic racism and ongoing colonisation has erased and repressed much of the gender and sexual diversity amongst First Nations people. We acknowledge and pay our respects to the traditional owners of this land. Sovereignty was never ceded. This always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

There are two versions of the queer experience in mainstream media: rainbows and pride parades, or violence and death. These extreme ends of the queer spectrum do exist, but most of us live somewhere in between. I am a bisexual non-binary trans man. That makes me sound quite cool, but I'm really just a (literal) dad who on Saturday nights can be found curled up on my couch with some take-out, binge watching reality TV. I love my dog, the beach, hiking in the forest and hanging out with my family and friends. Society seems to have a hard time wrapping its head around queer people like me. I'm visible in the trans community, but when I'm at the shops doing my groceries I'm just some guy. I live a decent life, though I recognise much of this comes from holding a certain amount of privilege as a white male who passes as cis and had access to tertiary education. My family supports me and I have a loving partner. In mainstream media, people like me are rarely seen.

As a kid growing up in Boorloo in the 90s I didn't even know trans masculinity existed. The history of trans representation in the media has largely been that of trans women: trans women as jokes, trans women as objects of disgust, trans women as victims,

or trans women as criminal men in drag. That was the extent of my knowledge of the trans experience as a kid. Trans men were rarely portrayed, though the few examples in mainstream (American) film or television, such as Brandon Teena, Max Sweeney or Viola/Sebastian Hastings reinforced the same ideas: to be trans is to be hated, feared, or laughed at. There was no such thing as trans joy on our screens or in our books, and there were certainly very few trans people who were given the platform to suggest otherwise. Couple this with the AIDS pandemic of the 1980s that wiped out a generation of trans and queer voices — people who today should be elders and mentors, people who should be in positions of power in publishing houses, on the boards of arts organisations or sitting in government — and what we are left with is a void. Trans representation in so-called Australia is simply not good enough. This is part of the reason I failed to recognise myself as trans until well into adulthood. What would my life have been like if positive, nuanced, and diverse trans characters existed in mainstream media as I was growing up?

Queer YA fiction in Australia has come a long way in the last decade. There are more queer books being published than ever before, some of those books win awards, and a rare few get made into movies and TV shows. What is 'queer' though? When we say queer we mean the whole LGBTQIA+ spectrum and all the intersectionalities of that. When we look at the queer YA books being published, one thing becomes obvious: Australia still has a diversity problem. Contemporary gay and lesbian stories are more abundant than ever (though nowhere near the numbers of heterosexual YA being pumped out every day), and many even

have happy endings. Gay and lesbian youth, particularly white ones, can find multiple examples of themselves in literature today. These stories are important. Gay and lesbian teens deserve to see themselves in literature. But what about everyone else? In early 2022 an Instagram post went viral that listed all the Australian YA books with a trans or gender diverse main character. There were only seven of them. Five were by Alison Evans. We love Alison Evans, but it is completely unreasonable for one person to carry the weight of representing all gender diverse experiences. So where are all the trans stories? Where is the rest of the LGBTQIA+ representation?

This anthology was born out of the pure rage of not seeing the stories I wanted to read being published. I don't mind the odd contemporary, but I grew up on monster stories, problematic classic sci-fi and feminist fantasy. Give me sentient robot clones and Earthsea wizards over meet-cutes any day. I wanted stories about all that juicy middle ground of the queer experience. I wanted stories of friendship, family, and finding yourself (but with magic and ghosts and stuff). I wanted stories by people who have been denied a voice for too long. That is why this anthology contains only emerging writers, those who have not had a full length novel traditionally published before. Eighteen (nineteen including myself) new queer voices who have now been given a chance to be heard, to be recognised and to push the boundaries of what Queer YA in Australia is. Many of them are under thirty. There wasn't an age restriction, but it has been incredible to see so much young talent emerging.

This book features many trans and gender diverse voices, asexual, aromantic, bisexual and unapologetically queer voices.

The writers are as diverse as their stories. We are intersectional. We use pronouns how we want to. We challenge stereotypes. We write weird stuff. The stories range across genres, but mostly fall into the SFF categories. Some are funny, some are bittersweet, some are shocking, some are hopeful. And yet, we haven't covered it all. Not every queer identity is here. Not every intersection is explored. I hope this book leads to greater opportunities for queer writers in mainstream publishing so that eventually all queer people can find multiple examples of themselves in literature.

If you are a queer person reading this, I hope you find a hint of yourself amongst these pages. For everyone else, take note: the queer experience is more than just rainbows, 'equal love' and death. The queer experience is every minute of every day for us. It is the mundane and the magical. The inbetween. The unexpected.

Trans lives matter. Queer lives matter.

In solidarity,

Seth Malacari (he/they)

An
unexpected
party

SIXTEEN CANDLES (BUT WITH DEMONS)

Shaeden Berry

It was 7pm on the 19th of September and Tal had turned sixteen nineteen hours ago. but his family and friends had completely forgotten. No one could deny the parallels between his life and the iconic 1984 comedy *Sixteen Candles* wherein Molly Ringwald's Samantha Baker was left bereft after her parents forgot her sixteenth birthday. The only difference Tal could see was that he had infinitely better hair than Molly — although he would have killed for those lips.

Tal liked to think he was a lovable person. He liked to think he was a good son and brother to his single mother and younger sister. Kind, considerate, occasionally grumpy — but who isn't when you're a raging ball of hormones and your little sister likes to hide under your bed to eavesdrop on your conversations and then promptly blab to your mum that 'Tal's art teacher ran him over with a truck!' This was incorrect. He'd said he'd *wanted* his art teacher to run him over with a truck, which was an entirely different thing.

But anyway. He was a good brother (mostly), and a caring friend (at least to Rowena, his best friend). And yet his sixteenth birthday, the big 1-6, and he was alone in his house, abandoned

by his mother and sister for a sleepover and forgotten by his own friends who hadn't so much as texted or called. He had purposefully not planned a birthday party because he expected Rowena to organise a surprise party — he'd dropped enough hints — and yet, nothing.

Dramatically, Tal collapsed spread-eagled on his back to glare moodily at the ceiling. With the darkness of night edging out the sun, similarly grey thoughts started to slither their way into his consciousness. Maybe he wasn't a good son? Maybe he was a terrible friend? After all, for everyone to completely forget his birthday surely that had to mean something was inherently flawed in his personality? Tal closed his eyes. He was teetering on the verge of thinking very bad thoughts about himself and he very firmly told himself to stop it.

He returned his focus to righteous fury again. How dare everyone make him think he was some sort of hideous person when he wasn't even that bad. He could be so much worse.

It would serve them right if this moment — this moment of abandonment in his time of need — was his turning point. This would be the scene in the documentary of his dastardly life when they would be shaking their heads, crying silent tears in their interview. 'He just changed after that moment and it was all our fault!' His villain origin story.

Only he didn't actually want to hurt anyone or do anything bad. Maybe he could just scare them a little. Rowena had told him about a boy named Dayton who'd been missing from school for a week because he was undergoing intense counselling. 'They found all these Satanic symbols in his closet and apparently he'd written plans to sacrifice a goat,' she'd told him. Tal had asked

where, in the middle of suburbia, he would even get a goat, and Rowena had shrugged and suggested, 'eBay?'

Tal decided he would channel his inner Dayton. He'd draw symbols all over his closet, leave it just slightly ajar enough for his mother to see and then reap the benefits of the guilt when he told her he'd only done it in a fit of loneliness after she'd neglected him on his birthday. Passive-aggressive perfection.

He googled 'dark scary-looking symbols' and took chalk from his sister's playroom, because he wanted the symbols to be easily removable, and then got to work drawing them. He chose the prettiest and more ornate symbols because he was good at drawing and why not show that off a bit, and then added a few Latin words for good measure. Things that said 'demon' and 'conjure' and 'dark forces'.

He added the last dot, the final flourish, sat back on his haunches and said, 'Perfe—'

There was a flash of red, a burst of heat across his face and something knocked him backwards onto the ground with a terrible thump. Darkness tumbled across his vision, thick black smoke filling the air. He scrambled at the floor in panic.

'WHO DARES CONJURE ME?'

Tal launched himself to his feet and flung himself away from the closet towards the door to his bedroom. Only in the archway did he stop and chance a look backwards. A very tall figure in black robes was standing in his closet. Tal emitted some sort of strangled noise that sounded like *eep* before he ran down the hallway.

He could've sworn he heard someone say behind him, 'Hey, wait, I haven't finished!'

He ran downstairs with the wild idea in his head that he would grab the landline and dial 911 when, at the bottom, he realised two things: he was in Australia, and 911 was not the correct number and also, it was 2022, they didn't have a landline, because no one had a landline, because everyone had mobile phones. Like the one he'd left on the floor upstairs.

There was a creak on the stairs behind him. Tal spun around. The tall figure was standing there. They were translucently pale, draped in robes and had eyes that were completely black, like two pieces of coal shoved into their face. And they had horns.

'I died,' Tal said aloud.

'Oh, cool,' said the horned-figure. 'Listen, you realise you didn't let me finish my spiel, right? Kinda rude.'

'Sorry?'

'You should be. It's a really good speech. I've tweaked it and everything. Really dramatic. But, your loss. Also, I don't think you're dead. Dead people can't conjure demons.'

'Demons?' Tal echoed. He needed to sit down.

'Well, yeah. What did you think you were summoning? Or were you trying for the ghost of a relative because I have to tell you, you were way off with your symbols if that was your aim.' They leant forward conspiratorially. 'Ouija boards. That's the ghost portal. That's how you get the dead relatives.'

'I—I don't want dead relatives.'

The creature straightened up. 'Ah, so you did mean to summon a demon then.'

'No!' Tal blurted. 'God, no! I didn't — did you say demon?'

Tal put his fingers to his temple, screwed his eyes shut and tried to think. He'd obviously hit his head and passed out.

This was a twisted coma dream. Or the sheer loneliness of his forgotten birthday had caused his brain to create an imaginary friend. Something poked him on the nose. His eyes flew open. The demon was peering intensely at him.

'Are you alright?' the demon asked. 'You've gone quite pale.'

The skin of the demon was so translucent Tal could see black lines spread like spiderwebs shifting beneath their skin. But sure, *he* was pale.

'I don't know what's going on,' he said.

The demon rocked back on their heels. 'Well, let me catch you up. You summoned a demon, rudely interrupted their introductory speech and now you have me until midnight tonight to do your bidding. Which, incidentally, I'm curious about. What deeds will you have me perform?'

'Deeds?'

'Yeah, deeds. You know, jobs. Tasks. I'm yours to command.' The demon clapped their hands together. 'So, let's get to it. Why did you summon me?'

'Because everyone forgot my birthday and I wanted to make them feel bad,' said Tal to his own feet.

The demon frowned. 'By summoning a demon?'

'I told you, I didn't mean to summon anything.'

The demon ignored this. They rubbed their chin with a clawed hand. Tal swallowed.

'So, I guess ...' the demon started slowly, 'you want me to wreak havoc, rain hellfire on their homes, tear them limb from limb and shatter their bones?'

'What? No! They're my friends and family. Why would I want that?'

The demon was starting to look cross. Tal felt this was unfair because if anyone was in a frustrating and absurd situation warranting getting upset, it was him.

‘What do you want me to do then?’ said the demon, with a small stamp of their foot.

‘I don’t know,’ Tal said, as he threw his hands in the air.

‘You’re the worst summoner.’

Tal breathed out through his mouth. ‘I’m not—’ he started, then stopped and rubbed his face in frustration.

The demon watched him intently. Whilst Tal’s fear had subsided somewhat, the soulless voids staring at him were still incredibly unnerving. He gestured toward the lounge room.

‘Can you just sit over there and ...’ he racked his brain for how to keep the demon out of trouble for the next few hours until midnight when they would, apparently, vanish, ‘... and not do anything.’

‘For five hours?’ The demon closed their eyes briefly and Tal thought they looked like they were counting to ten. ‘Look, kid, I don’t think you’re quite getting this. I’m a demon. You can’t just waste an opportunity like this.’

‘Fine,’ Tal sighed. ‘What do people normally do with you?’

The demon opened their mouth.

‘That doesn’t include raining hellfire on everyone,’ Tal hurried to add.

The demon closed their mouth. For a moment the demon gnawed their lip, then finally confessed, ‘You’re the first person who’s ever summoned me.’

‘What?’ Tal blinked.

Demons, it seemed, could not blush, but this one still

managed to look incredibly embarrassed.

‘Well, the thing is, I’m only a new demon.’

‘A new demon?’ Tal repeated. ‘What does that even mean?’

‘It means just that. I woke up a demon only a few hundred years ago and I’ve never, you know, been called out to do anything. Until now.’

Tal contemplated this. ‘Woke up where?’

The demon fixed him with a stare. ‘Can’t tell you that. Trade secrets. Strictly forbidden.’

‘By who?’

The demon planted their hands on their hips. It reminded Tal of his mother. ‘Stop avoiding the question. What are you going to have me do?’

Tal sighed and walked into the lounge to finally enact the dramatic flop atop the cushions that he’d been dying to do for the past five minutes.

‘I don’t have anything for you to do,’ he told the demon. ‘It’s my birthday. I’m all alone and everyone has forgotten about me.’

Saying the words gave birth to another fresh wave of hurt, and he turned his head slightly, trying to hide the way his jaw tightened with the effort of not crying. There was a moment of excruciating silence before the demon spoke.

‘What would you usually do on your birthday?’

Tal shrugged. ‘Eat cake, I guess?’

The demon nodded slowly, and then looked around the lounge room. ‘Right,’ they said. ‘Let’s make a cake then.’

‘Okay. Wait, what?’

‘Make a cake,’ the demon repeated.

‘You’re a demon. Demons don’t bake cakes.’

‘Demons do whatever their master commands. Including baking cakes.’ They turned and set off from the room.

Tal struggled upwards to his feet. ‘Where are you going? Are you seriously going to bake a cake?’

The question seemed to be answered when Tal entered the kitchen and found the demon rifling through the cupboards, pulling out pots and pans at random and placing them on the counter.

‘Okay, here’s the thing,’ they said, holding a rice cooker in one hand and a kettle in the other, ‘I don’t actually know how to bake a cake.’

For the first time that day Tal felt a little bubble of laughter in his throat. ‘That is incredibly unsurprising.’

‘I just need instructions,’ the demon hastened to say, ‘then I’ll be up and running.’

Tal hesitated, then he headed to the stack of recipe books his mother kept slotted between the microwave and the pantry. He tugged out a cake recipe book, *Women’s Weekly Kid’s Birthday Cakes*, and started to flick through.

‘Here, we’ll choose one from this,’ he told the demon, who came to stand alongside him. ‘I think there’s some cocoa powder in the pantry. Maybe a chocolate cake?’

The demon seemed spectacularly disappointed by his choice, but when Tal pointed out the time constraints, and then finally told them they could decorate the cake with sprinkles and chocolate M&Ms, they got on board with the idea. For a supernatural being that had so far indicated an alarming predilection for raining hellfire on humanity, they seemed quite excited at the entire premise of cake construction.

What ensued was possibly the strangest hour of Tal’s life. He perched himself on a stool at the kitchen bench and read aloud the instructions. The demon proceeded to efficiently, and with vigor, carry out everything that Tal told him to. The sight of clawed fingers carefully holding a mixing bowl as the electric mixer spun the ingredients into a smooth batter was one Tal was sure he would remember for a good few years to come.

When the cake was baked, cooled and iced, the demon used M&M’s to write Tal’s age on the top. They ran out of space though so instead there was nothing but a big ‘1’ and a lot of sprinkles. With a flourish they cut him a slice, presented it on a platter and watched intently while Tal ate it. The demon practically vibrated with anticipation. Tal made sure to make appreciative noises, nodding his head.

‘Delicious,’ he said, which wasn’t entirely untrue.

‘Of course it is.’ The demon tapped their claws on the kitchen table. ‘Now what?’ ‘Presents?’ Tal ventured, then shook his head, ready to abandon the idea.

‘Presents, right!’ the demon enthused. ‘No problem. How do you make a present then?’

‘That’s not ... look, I don’t really have anything on my wish list that we can make. It’s mostly, you know, things.’

‘Things?’ the demon repeated.

‘Like a new iPad,’ Tal explained.

The demon looked around the kitchen. ‘This ‘iPad’: where would you get it?’ they asked, peering intently as if an electronic tablet was going to tumble its way out of the pantry any second.

‘There’s no iPad here,’ Tal told them. ‘Look, forget the presents.’

The demon frowned. ‘We are not forgetting presents. If we

can't make them, what about something you want to do instead?

Tal thought for a moment. 'Well, I'd like to learn how to drive a car.'

The demon pointed a triumphant claw at him. 'Excellent, let's do that then.'

'You didn't even know how to bake a cake, how are you going to teach me to drive a car?'

The demon was already headed out of the kitchen. 'Minor details. Besides, this is all about the experience. Now, where do you keep the cars? Upstairs?'

'Up—' Tal spluttered as he rose to follow the demon. 'Do you even know what a car is?'

The demon shifted their walking direction from the staircase to the front door. 'So, not upstairs. Where then?'

'My mum took the car. There's only her work vehicle parked in the driveway but we can't take that.'

The demon was already out the front door. Tal stood for a moment, considered not following, but then thought of his mum taking his sister to a sleepover — a sleepover! — on *his* birthday. He grabbed the car keys from the side table.

The demon's idea of teaching Tal to drive was to clamber their hulking form into the passenger seat, wait for Tal to get himself settled in the driver's seat and then shout, 'Okay, now drive!'

Tal had watched his mum drive enough times, and that one time when he was ten he'd reversed the car out of the driveway with her help, so surely he could manage this.

It took a total of half an hour to go less than a kilometre down the street because Tal refused to let the car get above ten kilometres per hour and braked heavily several times when he

saw shadows that he swore were cats, small children, dogs or deadly pinecones. Nonetheless, when they finally returned home Tal couldn't help the flush of triumph that raced through him.

'I drove!' he said, all but levitating from the car with excitement.

The demon clapped a hand on his shoulder. 'If that's what you want to call it, sure. So what now, birthday boy?'

Tal walked into the lounge to flop himself onto the couch. 'I don't know. I think that's probably it.'

The demon frowned. 'Really? A cake and slow driving? That's all a birthday is? Seems kinda dull to me.'

'Well, people have parties as well. Usually with friends and family. If they remember.' Tal dug a fingernail into the couch, scratched the fabric, and tried to play off the bitterness that had crept into his voice. 'But whatever, that's not really important.'

'You gotta stop with the 'no' and the 'not really'. Remember me? Supernatural creature? Your literal bidding is my command. You want a party, we have a party. Also, what's a party?'

A short snort of laughter escaped Tal. 'Okay, sure. I mean, a party is just a gathering, I guess, with snacks, music, activities.'

The demon brightened. 'Oh, right, like a sacrificial ritual?'

'I mean, sure?' Tal offered, eyebrow raised. 'Minus the sacrifice.'

'Boring,' the demon rolled their eyes. 'But fine. Right — snacks. Kitchen? See, I'm learning. I'm getting the hang of this.'

'You're a regular party-planner,' Tal deadpanned.

'Thanks!' The demon seemed unaffected by his sarcasm, and bounded to the kitchen. 'What snacks do you want? What about this stuff? Is this stuff snacks?'

Tal entered the kitchen. The demon spun around from where they'd been exploring the pantry and extended a tin of beetroot.

'No. I think there's a packet of chips in there though?'

The demon put the beetroot back in the pantry, pulled out a bag of chips and shook it with a doubtful expression on their face.

'Just this? We need more snacks than that. What else?'

'Well,' Tal laughed to himself, 'we could make fairy bread?'

The demon's face darkened. 'Fairies?' They growled as if they were a dog.

Tal stared at them. 'What the hell was that?'

The demon stared back. They sat there staring for over a minute.

Tal gave up. 'The jar of sprinkles is back in the pantry,' he said.

The demon took the jar of sprinkles out and Tal fetched the bread and the butter from the fridge and plonked them onto the chopping board. The demon seemed doubtful when Tal explained how to make fairy bread and less enamoured by the human race at the conclusion of their making. Tal didn't blame them. It was hard not to look at fairy bread and feel just a little dubious about humanity afterwards. But it sure did taste amazing.

The demon used a claw to poke at some stray sprinkles on the chopping board. 'Now we get the people over,' they said.

Tal inhaled sharply mid-mouthful. Sprinkles shot to the back of his throat and he choked. 'What? What people?'

'Your friends and family.'

'I already told you. They forgot my birthday. That's why we're

in this whole situation in the first place.'

'So remind them,' the demon said, like it was that simple. 'It's simple.'

'It's almost eleven at night.' Tal put his half-eaten fairy bread slice to one side. He wasn't hungry anymore. 'It's too late to be inviting anyone over.'

'They had all day to come over on their terms,' the demon said. 'Who cares if it's inconvenient to them now?'

Tal shook his head stubbornly. 'I'm not inviting people over. Besides, what are you supposed to do while they're here?'

'I could provide the music.'

'You can sing?'

'I can wail,' the demon said proudly.

Tal shuddered. 'No thank you. And anyway, I meant, what would you do while they're here because you look — well, like a demon. They're likely to call the police or something.'

'So I dress as a human,' the demon said. 'They won't know the difference.'

Tal eyed their horns. 'I think they will.'

'Has anyone ever told you you're really negative?'

The fact that a demon — a supernatural creature aligned to the dark side of life — viewed his energy as negative hit a nerve. Tal led the demon upstairs into his mum's room, because he was not sacrificing his own clothes to be torn by horns, and besides his mum had (against his sartorial advice, he might add), a big collection of hats. He found the floppiest, widest-brimmed hat and gave it to the demon, then scrounged around to produce a fabric floral face-mask. The effect, when Tal stepped back to look, was of a demonic creature with a floppy hat and a face mask on.

That is to say, it was not a particularly effective disguise.

The demon looked in the mirror. 'I look *just* like a human! Whoa!'

'You look like three Kobolds in a trench-coat.'

'A what?'

'It's a *Dungeons and Dragons* ... never mind.' Tal stopped his explanation and admitted to himself he was slightly terrified that the demon might react to the term 'dragon' the same as they had 'fairy'.

Tal watched in fascination as the demon twirled in front of the mirror, absolutely delighted by what they saw.

'It's uncanny!' They dropped their tone into a weird, oddly gruff voice, 'Hello there fellow humans!' They returned to their normal voice. 'How was that? Just like a human right?'

'Well, for one thing, we don't call each other 'fellow humans', said Tal.

The demon seemed unaffected by Tal's criticism. 'So are we summoning friends now?'

Tal sighed and turned to leave his mum's room, wandering back to his own. His phone was still on the floor. He picked it up. He could feel the demon looming behind him as he opened Rowena's number on his contact list. He hesitated, huffed, then went to sit on his bed, putting the phone to one side.

'We're not calling anyone,' he said. 'It's stupid and pointless.'

'Okay,' the demon said, and Tal was momentarily surprised at the easy acquiesce before the demon took two steps forward, grabbed the phone, and pressed the screen multiple times until the unmistakable sounds of ringing emitted from the speaker.

Tal's mouth hung open. 'Are you actually kidding me?'

The ringing stopped. Rowena's voice came through the line. 'Tal? What the hell, it's like eleven o'clock.'

'Give me that!' Tal leapt to his feet, grabbed the phone from the demon's claws.

'Give you what?' said Rowena.

'I- sorry, that was. You know what, never mind, sorry.' Tal backed away from the demon and glowered at them.

'Are you okay?' asked Rowena. 'Why are you calling so late?'

'No reason. It's fine. Um, hi, how are you?'

'I mean, I'm tired and in the middle of studying.'

The words were pointed. Tal bit his lip, and then turned his back to the demon.

'Right,' he said. 'Just, you know. Anything you want to mention? Maybe?'

'What?' Rowena sounded confused.

Tal's shoulders sagged, the last shred of hope leaving his body.

'Tal, I really need to go,' said Rowena.

'Okay, no worries.'

'You sure you're okay?'

'Fine and dandy,' said Tal.

There was silence on the other end of the line. Then Rowena said, 'Okay, well if you say so. See you on Monday at school.'

The phone made a *bloop* sound as the call disconnected. Tal's face burned, his throat burned, his eyes burned and he stared hard at a spot on the wall, a tiny fleck of black on the white surface, because if he focused hard enough, long enough, he could ignore the way his body felt like crumpling into a heap and crying.

Tal heard the demon shuffle closer. 'Sorry,' they said quietly.

Tal wasn't sure if they were apologising for calling Rowena, for pushing so hard, or for the bigger picture of Tal's hurt, but it genuinely felt nice, because Tal didn't think demons apologised very often.

'It's okay,' he said, and he was relieved that his voice didn't shake.

'Is now a good time to wail?'

Tal snorted a startled laugh. 'I- yeah, I think we'll pass on the music part of the party. I don't feel much like dancing anyway.'

The demon twisted the face mask in their claws, the fabric tearing at the seams. Tal had successfully made a demon feel awkward with his terrible social situation, and he wasn't sure whether to be sad or proud.

'So what do you want to do then?' the demon asked finally. They took off the floppy hat and laid it on the bed. 'What party activities are up next?'

Tal mulled the question for a moment. 'How about we watch *Sixteen Candles*?'

The demon nodded. 'I have no idea what that is, but bring it on.'

There was an odd sense of companionship as they both settled on the couch and Tal lined up the movie. At fifteen minutes to midnight he picked up the remote and pressed pause.

'Thank you,' he said, 'for tonight. For everything.'

'You do realise I had to do your bidding,' the demon pointed out.

Tal shrugged. 'I know, but still. You didn't have to enjoy it. And you did. I think.'

'I did,' the demon confirmed quietly. 'Listen, about your friends and family and this whole birthday thing. The thing is, humans, you're all flawed. All of you. Some more than others.'

'Inspiring so far,' said Tal.

The demon flapped their claws. 'Let me finish. Humans — they basically suck, to varying degrees.'

'Bloody hell.' Tal didn't know whether to be offended or not.

'There's a point to this, okay? I'm trying to say that humans do bad things. But there's a difference between doing bad things because you're a flawed human, and doing malicious things. People do bad things, but they don't necessarily do it to hurt you. So, this whole situation: your friends, your family, forgetting. It's bad, they did a bad thing, but it's not personal. It's not malicious.'

Tal took a moment to fully absorb the words. He fiddled with the TV remote. He could feel tears building.

'I'm not saying it's okay what they did,' the demon continued. 'I'm not even saying that you need to forgive them immediately, or even at all. Maybe this is where you decide what you put up with in the future and what you don't. But don't let it get to you. You got a lot of years ahead of you. This is just a blip. Four hundred years from now you won't even remember this birthday.'

'In four hundred years I'll be dead, but that's ... actually good advice?' He couldn't help the questioning inflection at the end of his sentence. The demon didn't seem to notice.

'And, look, if it was malicious and not just selfish, silly human stuff, if they ignored you on purpose,' the demon continued, warming to their topic, 'then—'

'They're not my true friends,' Tal finished.

‘—rain hellfire and shatter their bones!’

‘Ah,’ Tal said, ‘and we’re back to demon advice.’

The demon grinned, big and wide, exposing rows of pointy, fanged teeth. Tal couldn’t help but grin back.

‘How about if they forget again next year,’ said Tal, ‘we do this again.’

The demon laughed and a part of Tal wanted them to respond to the invitation, to confirm that they could come back, but they just gave Tal’s shoulder a good-natured clap.

‘Thanks for the good night,’ they said. ‘How about you put the movie back on?’

‘Okay,’ he said, and clicked play.

He tried to focus on the television screen, but his gaze kept flicking to look out of the corner of his eye at the demon, back and forth, as the time ticked closer to midnight. Until, in one glance, the demon was gone. It was abrupt enough that Tal jolted where he sat, his heart doing a little leap from his chest to his throat. He had expected something more — smoke, a bang, a huge black creature dragging the demon screaming into the beyond — but the demon had simply vanished.

And all that was left was a slight indent in the cushion where they had sat, and a sense that the room felt slightly lonelier, slightly emptier, yet it was undoubtedly the best birthday Tal had ever had.

SHELLSHOCKED

Aidan Demmers

Framed against the glittering vault of open space, the Starscraper looks like a nutri-bar that’s been chewed up, spat out, left to moulder for ten years, then picked up by a neon-obsessed four-year-old for their first ever Arts ’n Space-Crafts.

‘Damn, that thing is ugly,’ says Nancy 7.

In the shadowy reflection of the viewport, she sees Jana shoot her an unimpressed look.

‘Get those paws off the glass,’ Jana says. ‘You’ll smear it.’

Nancy tears her eyes from the sickening sight of the Corpo ship, and puts her hands up in surrender.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

In the dark of the viewing room, the only illumination comes from the Starscraper’s lurid neon lights. They flicker across Jana’s face — in red, purple, green — catching upon her large black eyes, thin silver nose-ring, and the curve at the very corner of her mouth.

Their captain’s voice breaks the moment, crackling through the faulty intercom.

‘Nancy, Sanjana,’ Ngairé says. ‘As you may have noticed, we are approaching target. Please make your way to Command.’