



## SLQ Young Writers Award 2012 – Runner Up

### *The Minutes Turn to Ours*

by Shastra Deo

#### **epilogue, part i.**

HE AND HEATHERR ARE on the fire escape when he gets the call, and a chill wind buffets past with such force that for a moment all he hears is static.

“I’m at the station,” Seth says. Jack’s breath catches in his throat.

“Where? Which station?”

“Roma Street. Catch me?” Seth laughs or sighs or maybe both, an exhale shaped like a ‘ha’, and hangs up before Jack has a chance to respond. He pulls himself up while Heatherr clings to him, laughing prettily until she realises he’s serious.

“What? Who was that?” Her brows knit in confusion as he turns away and fishes in his pockets for his keys.

“No one,” he says. The lie feels heavy in his chest. “I have to go.”

#### **the minutes turn to ours.**

SETH DISAPPEARS FOR DAYS weeks months at a time but he always comes back, always calls from some train station or a bus stop or the side of a freeway and cons Jack into bringing him home.

After three weeks of radio silence Seth calls one night and says, “I’m in Ipswich.”

Jack presses his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. “Ipswich.”

“Yeah.”

“*Why* are you in Ipswich?”

“I don't know, the train, like,” Seth huffs, and Jack can imagine him batting at the air, gesticulating wildly. Seth always talks with his hands. “The train did a *thing*, and there were announcements about buses and stuff, and... I don't know.”

“*Ipswich*,” Jack shakes his head. “Are you still at the station?”

“Yeah,” Seth says, sounding sharp and miserable and impossibly young.

“Alright, just... just wait there. I'll come get you.”

Seth is standing at the edge of the parking lot when Jack arrives an hour later, his duffel bag slung over his shoulder, and he clammers into the car without so much as a hello-I've-missed-you. The tips of his ears and nose are pink, his cheeks flushed from the cold. He turns the heat up full-blast before tilting each vent towards his face, and a vaguely contented noise escapes his throat.

They don't speak, and it's odd that Jack never really notices it until they're together again—the fact that they have re-learn how to interact with each other.

They've always been sticklers for ritual though, and that's the reason Jack pulls into the drive-through of the 24-hour McDonald's in Newmarket.

“Hey, can I get—”

“Two double-cheeseburgers with extra-extra pickles,” Seth shouts, leaning past him to get as close to his open window as possible. There's a worryingly long silence from the speaker. Seth tries again. “Like, a whole layer of pickles. So that every bite has pickle in it.”

Jack makes a point of shrugging apologetically at the operator when they drive up to the next window; Seth's smile is almost predatory.

He parks on the roadside as Seth efficiently disassembles the cheeseburgers, taking all of the pickles from one and adding them to the other.

“There's something wrong with you, Seth, seriously.” Jack takes the pickle-free burger for himself and resists the urge to call him disgusting—the last time he did, despite it being in jest, Seth was gone for two months.

Seth takes a bite and Jack can practically hear the crunch of pickles in his mouth as he chews. Disgusting, so ridiculously disgusting.

“Pickles, man. You know how long it's been since I had pickles?” Seth sighs.

“Ah, do they not have them in Ipswich?”

Seth ignores him. “This is what divinity tastes like, I swear.”

Jack wrinkles his nose and splits the difference. “You're ridiculous, you know that?”

Seth just grins.

\*

IT STARTS LIKE THIS: Jack is fourteen and he's golden, all gilded blonde hair and bright blue eyes, rough and tumble but soft around the edges with the kind of *goodness* you only have when you're a kid. His mother works second shift at Mater Hospital and his father is non-existent, so he makes his own way home from Craigslea State High to their tiny beige-brick apartment in Chermside.

He takes the fire escape—he's never once remembered his key; these days his mother just leaves the back door unlocked—and can't go any farther than the third landing. A boy-shaped lump blocks his path up the narrow stairway.

On closer inspection, the boy-shaped lump is actually a boy, Jack's age, probably, dressed in a crumpled Wavell High uniform. He's wiry, brittle, sticks and bird bones and stark black hair and the palest blue eyes Jack has ever seen.

“Sorry,” the boy says, “don't freak out.” He moves to lean against the door on the landing and idly waves a hand towards the stairway.

“Uh, it's cool,” Jack replies, glancing at the door and back at the boy. His face is defiantly blank. “Are you locked out or something?”

The boy glares at him, then huffs. “My dad hasn't come back from the... well, my mum's...” He shrugs and stares at his shoelaces. “He'll be back soon. It's no big deal.”

“Okay,” Jack says uncertainly. He starts making his way up the stairs, stops, starts again, then turns back. “Hey, you... I mean, if you want, you can wait inside. At my place. Just upstairs. It must be boring out here.”

The boy stares up at him, eyes narrowed in suspicion. Stranger danger and all that. Jack's almost offended; he and his mother have one of those Neighbourhood Watch stickers on their mailbox.

“Why? You don't even know me.”

“Well, I'm Jack,” he says, “and you're...?”

“...Seth,” the boy says slowly.

“And now we know each other.”

Seth stares at him for what feels like forever; his jaw shifts and his fingers flex and it's like he can't stay still, like he can't stand it, and Jack swallows because this feels like something he doesn't even have a name for.

Seth nods once, sharp and sudden, and follows Jack inside.

\*

SETH NEVER SAYS ANYTHING about it but Jack overhears things, when Seth's dad comes up and talks to his mother at the door. There are words like 'terminal' and 'hospice', and Jack doesn't know what to say so he doesn't say anything. Sometimes Seth smiles at him like he's grateful.

All Jack knows is that there are nights when Seth's dad doesn't come home at all, and Seth sleeps on their couch. Every afternoon Seth sits at their kitchen table and tries to teach him factorisation while Jack tries to convince him to play Mario Kart, and eventually Seth relents and they end up sitting shoulder to shoulder. What he knows best of all is that Seth's chest always trembles when he's about to laugh.

And all Jack remembers from the day Seth's mother dies is white walls and the blistering heat of the summer, Seth's wet breathing and the chill in his bones. Seth stays with them for weeks afterwards and neither of them sleep. Lying with his chest pressed against

Seth's back, Jack thinks he looks like a dead thing. He concentrates, makes sure he can feel it: the tremble of the bird-heart in Seth's chest, trapped within the cage of his ribs.

He thinks that if Seth could regulate the rhythm of his heartbeat, he'd just make it stop.

\*

JACK'S SEVENTEENTH BIRTHDAY FALLS on a Thursday but he's having a gathering on the weekend—just some friends from school. Heather specifically, because she's pretty and her smile promises all sorts of things. And Seth too, though Jack never knows how to introduce him these days: sometimes friend, sometimes brother, sometimes something he still doesn't have a name for.

The fire escape shudders as Seth climbs up; he shoves a paper McDonald's bag into Jack's hands—double cheeseburgers, extra-extra pickles, no doubt—before disappearing inside and into the bathroom. He returns within minutes, smirking around a toothbrush, a glass of water in hand. Seth's started smoking because he thinks it makes him look impossibly cool, and it kind of does but Jack won't admit it, not ever.

Jack takes the pickles from one burger and adds them to the other as he waits for Seth to settle down next to him, legs dangling over the edge of the fire escape. Their elbows touch as they eat and Seth flinches as though he's been burned. He cocks his head to one side and studies Jack intently—Jack raises an eyebrow in reply. It's late afternoon and the sky is getting darker, the streetlights flickering to life just below. The light plays strangely on Seth's face.

"If I jumped," he says quietly, and Jack can barely hear him over the traffic. He takes a sip of water and licks his lips, then lets the glass drop from his hands. "If I jumped, would you catch me?" Seconds turn to minutes. A century passes before he hears the glass shatter on the pavement below.

Jack never knows what to say so he says nothing, and does his best not to wince when the warmth behind Seth's eyes goes cold. Seth scoffs, pulls himself up and stalks back inside the apartment. He doesn't come back, not straight away, and for a long moment Jack thinks he's gone.

The door creaks open again and Jack stands quickly, offering clumsy apologies, wanting to say whatever it is that Seth needs to hear. Seth just shakes his head and hushes him, a chocolate-frosted cupcake in hand, one candle stuck crookedly in its middle. He pulls his lighter out of his pocket and sets flame to wick.

“Happy birthday,” Seth whispers, sidling in beside him. He leans close to press his lips to Jack’s cheek—a brother-kiss, forgiveness, maybe—and he smells like ash and peppermint toothpaste.

Jack grips Seth’s neck without thinking and *looks* at him, really looks at him. He’s all angles, eyes blue as a glimpse of sky in deep winter. The cut of his smile seems lethal in the half-light, full of wanting, and Jack wonders if his bones are as white as his teeth. Absently, he trails his fingers along Seth’s jugular. The muscles in his throat shudder beneath Jack’s palm as he swallows. He looks translucent, sinewy, and some base instinct makes Jack want to dig his fingers into the hollow at Seth’s neck, between gristle and collarbone, and pull until he feels something snap.

Jack closes his eyes and makes a wish.

That night, curled up in his bed, his forehead pressed to Seth’s chest, against the spot where his heart’s supposed to be, Jack breathes deep and says,

“I would jump with you.”

Seth trembles, murmurs something in his sleep, and turns away from him.

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### **epilogue, part ii.**

JACK AND HEATHER ARE curled up on the fire escape when he gets the call, and for a moment all he hears is static.

“I’m at the station,” Seth says. Jack forgets to breathe.

“Where? Which station?”

“Roma Street. Catch me?” Seth laughs or sighs or maybe sobs, and hangs up before Jack can tell him everything he needs him to hear.

\*

HE'S SITTING ATOP THE hill that forms the mouth of the train tunnel, knees pulled to his chest, and he manages a weak smile when Jack approaches. Jack stares up at him, exhausted, and he's starting to wonder if the day's coming when Seth will fall all the way apart and he'll never be able to put him together again. A jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing, or a story with a beginning and an abrupt end.

"Hey," Jack says, arms folded against his chest.

"Hello," Seth says, "I've missed you." Jack sags visibly and rubs his eyes.

"You're ridiculous, you know that?"

Seth hums softly in agreement. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Huh. And when was the last time I didn't come running when you called?"

"You look tired," Seth says, ignoring him. Jack just shrugs.

"I should be used to it by now, right? You always leave."

"Because I always have somewhere warm to come home to."

Jack scoffs, holds his arms open wide and meets Seth half way up the hill, catches him by the shoulders as he skids down. And maybe he'll never have a name for this but it's enough, to have someone more than a friend more than a brother more than anything else in the world.

"Listen," Seth says, leaning close, "there's a spot further down the train tunnel that's just wide enough. You can see the lights before you can hear the train coming, before you can even *feel* it."

Jack swallows. "What are you talking about?"

"Stand on the tracks with me," he shivers in Jack's arms, "and when it's nearly on us, when there's no time left, we can pull away and hit the tunnel walls and it'll pass right by us, I swear, we really won't die."

It's probably the wrong thing to think, but there's something perfect about the tension in Seth's jaw, the way he can't stay still, like he can't stand it. And maybe they weren't built to

last, living walking breathing in a constant state of collapse, but Jack's gotten used to life in the rubble.

Seth shifts under his gaze, tearing the fabric of the moment, muscle willing bone into a different configuration, brand-new but broken in.

"You said you'd jump with me." His tone is accusing, but his eyes give him away.

Jack laughs. "I thought you were asleep."

Seth smirks and leans back on the balls of his feet; Jack doesn't know what he sees in his eyes but Seth smiles in earnest, like he's won something he didn't even know he was playing for. And it might just be the light but Seth's eyes are shining, feverish and bright, and he actually looks *alive* again.

"Jack," Seth says, almost uneasy, "I need you to understand, this has never been about you—"

"Shut up," Jack cuts in. "I get it. I'm sorry too."

"...Why are you so nice to me?" Seth's smile is catching.

"Because we know each other," Jack punches him lightly on the shoulder, pulls him close, "and because I like you. But you're a bit slow sometimes, honestly."

Seth bites his lip to keep from laughing, and something flutters in the cage of Jack's ribs, slowly but insistently, all in its own time.

Jack takes his hand and they jump.