

**Salt**  
**by Sara Allan-Park**

“Are you sure you don’t want some?”

A month after their father is arrested under suspicion for the murder of his girlfriend, Sean and his stepbrother Scott sit in the McDonald’s at Taree, unspeaking in the sticky, morning-rush air. At a table they’d snagged from a fleeing mother of three, Sean—twelve and too smart for his own good—shakes his chocolate thickshake temptingly.

Scott is nineteen and not tempted. Though he shared not a strand of DNA with Sean, their father Steven, or Steven’s now-dead girlfriend Julia, to Sean he was his brother all the same. He had shaggy hair, a nose ring, and acne scars that left his skin pitted, pink. Sean was sweet-faced and pale.

“No, I’m good.” Scott didn’t look up from where he was slumped, his head in his arms and face-down into the laminate-top table. He gestured without glancing towards his own drink, a McCafe mocha that had already gone cold.

“Hashbrown?” Sean waved the grease-stained packaging in front of his brother. “I got half left.”

“Nup.”

“You haven’t eaten.”

“I’ll get something later.”

“O-kay,” Sean said. Then he wiped his hand clean on the front of his hoodie and flicked open the next page of his book.

Although the Taree Maccas was probably the nicest one Sean had ever been in, and it was starting to clear out, slow and steady, he felt uncomfortable. Overwhelmed. So many lives touching each other but not quite intersecting for the twenty minutes or so it took for each family to finish their meals, use the bathroom, stretch little legs on the playground and then—*finally*—get gone. Sean liked to people-watch, liked to imagine he was one of those Happy Meal kids on their way to or from a Happy Family holiday, but he was itching for a quiet moment of his own.

Before he was arrested, his father had been a property manager in Penrith. When things got bad for him at school, Sean was allowed to tag along with Steven to work. The boy usually sat in the corner with his face buried in a book and his earphones in. He missed a lot, but he didn’t mind.

“Whatcha reading?” Scott’s voice brought Sean back. Sean lifted his book so he could see it. It was a school library copy of *Slaughterhouse-Five*: bright red with a brighter yellow skull on the front, covered in contact that had gone brown over time. A *Property of Kingswood High School* label was on the back, partially obscured by a cartoon dick drawn in faded Nikko.

“O-kay,” Scott said, peering, imitating his brother. “That looks... fun. What’s it about?”

“Stuff.”

“Oh, *stuff*. Very interesting.”

“You probably wouldn’t like it.”

“No?”

“No.” Sean dog-eared his page. “It’s about a war veteran who gets... I dunno. Kidnapped by aliens, apparently, then travels through time.”

Scott stared.

“It’s how he copes.”

Scott stared some more.

“That’s a bad explanation, sorry. It’s pretty weird and I’ve just started it. No aliens yet.”

“You got it from school?” Scott reached for the book and opened it to the beginning. Sean watched, unsure what his brother could possibly be looking for. “For an assignment or something?”

“Nah, my term book is *Bridge to Terabithia*.”

“I’ve read that, I think. It’s depressing.” Scott scrunched up his nose, closed the book, and slid it back across the table. “Why’re you reading that one, then?”

“My friend said I should.”

“Which one? The Grade 12?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I don’t think you should be friends with Grade 12s.” Scott frowned. “Grade 12s shouldn’t be friends with you.”

Sean frowned too, shrugging. “He sits in the English classroom with me at break. He helps me with my homework.”

“I could do that.”

“I guess.” Sean looked away. “I need to use the bathroom.”

Sean went to the bathroom while Scott waited outside, a watchdog with his little brother’s book tucked under his arm. When Sean returned, Scott gave it back. “You know you’re never gonna return that, right?”

“You don’t know that. I might.”

“I could take it back for you if you finish it before I go.”

“*If*. Are you sure you’re not hungry?”

“I’m sure. I’ll get something on the way if I feel like it,” Scott said. “But I dunno. We probably shouldn’t stop again.”

“Okay,” Sean said.

“Do you think we’d be friends if we went to the same school?” Scott’s shitbox radio was broken. All it could play was a CD it had eaten a few years ago: *So Fresh: The Hits of Summer 2009*. Even then it skipped half the songs, all the ones Sean happened to like.

“Well, we didn’t.” Sean went to Kingswood, while Scott graduated from a strict Catholic K-12 a few suburbs over. “And I would’ve been grades above you anyway.”

“But if you weren’t?”

Scott was quiet for a bit, his eyes glued to the road. He had his sunglasses on, five dollars from the Chempro near their house. Finally, he said, “Probably not.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’re too mature for your age, it’s weird. And you’re much smarter than me. I’d just piss you off.”

“I’d still want to be your friend.”

Scott didn’t respond. Sean smiled something small at him, like that might change his mind. When it didn’t, he settled on watching him, wishing for words. None came. He went back to his book.

They had to be in Queensland by dark, at Sean’s mum’s request. She half-abandoned Sean a few years ago, half-abandoned in the sense she was trying to make up for it now. She had a room for him, she said, in her little apartment on the Gold Coast. Close to the Robina Hospital, where she worked as a nurse.

Sean could not imagine it. He hadn’t seen his mum in years, her place in his life superseded by Scott’s mother who eventually divorced Steven and left both brothers; then Julia, who’d picked Sean up from school once, maybe twice in the year she’d dated his dad. Sean couldn’t imagine a world outside of his father, really. He’d never even left the city before—let alone the state.

This road trip was all-around new for Sean. Tedious for Scott, who assured his brother he knew the way. Regardless, Sean had printed out a map at the school library the week before they left, and as they passed each town on the route he crossed it off.

They were approaching Kempsey now, Scott’s *kinda-halfway* point. Real specific: *six hours and then you’re home safe*. Sean watched the big green road-side signs disappear behind him into the irretrievable. Then he looked back at his brother, who had one arm out of the driver’s-side window so he could smoke.

When Sean was ten, his father had taken him to a unit out in the suburbs on a last-resort house call. The tenant had first failed to pay rent for the week, then to make contact past seven days’ notice. Sean followed his dad through the door. When the smell hit him, he knew what they would find.

The tenant had paid two months’ rent in advance, then slit his wrists in the bath.

Back in the car now, Sean stared at Scott’s arm. On the inside of his wrist there were scars small and thin, old as the acne-pits on his face, white upon already pale skin.

When Scott caught him staring, Sean looked swiftly away.

“Scenic route or shorter?”

“Scenic, please.”

Scott wanted a pie but he skipped the Caltex service centre that would’ve saved them time; he drove *through* Kempsey instead. Houses turned from timber studs and gabled

roofs, brick, to brown grass then green. Kempsey to road to Frederickton. They stopped for the pie at a place called Fredo's—then kept going. It was houses again, then trees: narrow, pole-like pines.

Then graves.

They rose up from the Frederickton cemetery like teeth. A grave was being dug in the furthest corner. Sean wondered whether the plot had been pre-purchased, pre-planned, or if it had been an arrangement a mourning family had been forced to make after the fact. Grief a long-time-coming; or sudden, shocking death.

The tenant Sean found was cremated almost immediately after the Penrith police closed their investigation. Julia's was short too, because everyone and their dog knew who did it, and her funeral was about two weeks after they found her dead. Sean wanted to go, but her mum asked him—over the phone, through tears—to stay home. So he did.

Scott came over for the first time in months, bringing with him sour straps and cup noodles from the service station where he worked nights as manager-by-default. They played Xbox until Scott got bored.

“I want to go to the Big Banana.”

“Why?”

“Cause?”

“Can't stop again.”

“But we already did. For your pie.”

The cemetery long gone now, Scott shot Sean a look. “Funny.”

“You want a pie, I want a banana.”

“You want a *banana*.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I'll consider it.”

Guy Sebastian played for the fourth time that hour. Scott reached over, yawning, and turned him down. There were scars on that arm, too.

The Big Banana proved to be underwhelming. As it turned out it was just a regular banana but *big*. Sean was not impressed. The brothers picked at an overpriced banana split in the café, finishing less than half. At Sean's insistence, they investigated the gift shop.

He lost interest quickly, reading his book standing up while Scott sifted through various banana-themed objects: fridge magnets, stubby holders, lip balm.

“Have you read the Bible?” Sean asked suddenly. Because Scott had been to a Christian school, he thought maybe he could help him.

“Once-through, at school. When I was your age, probably.” At Scott’s school, chapel attendance was mandatory. Twice a week, Mondays and Fridays. Sunday church too, if you wanted to be good.

“You know about Lot?”

“Why?”

“He was mentioned at the start of my book.” Sean watched Scott try on a banana-shaped mood ring. Mood: relaxed. “His wife, I guess.”

Scott closed his eyes, thinking. “Oh, yeah. She left *whatsitcalled*, got told not to look back. But she did.”

“Got turned to a pillar of salt.”

“Yeah.” Scott stared at an anthropomorphised banana paperweight. “This one teacher tried to use that as like, the moral-of-the-story during sex ed. Like, look at a girl and you’ll turn to salt!”

Sean laughed. “You’re kidding.”

“Nup. He was an idiot.”

They got back in the car and Scott, seemingly having abandoned the deadline, took them to the Forest Sky Pier. They sat at an undercover picnic table by the outlook, one brother a side, watching families less fractured than theirs pass by, marvel at the view, get into their six-seaters, and go back to their lives.

Scott lay on the bench, eyes closed. Sean thought he might be asleep, but asked anyway: “Are you gonna come visit me?”

His reply was almost instant. “Do you want me to?”

“I guess.” Sean suddenly felt sick. “You could stay with us for a bit.”

“Maybe,” Scott said. “All my stuff’s back home, Seany.”

“Mine is, too.” This was true—save for a backpack and a box or two of clothes in the boot, Sean’s entire material life was back in Penrith. “You could go back to get it, then drive up again.”

“Dunno.”

“Is it because of Dad?”

Scott sat straight up. Cut Sean a sharp look. “No.”

“I feel bad for him,” Sean said before he could stop himself.

“Why the fuck do you feel bad for him?”

“He’s all alone?”

“And?” Scott spat. He shook his head, laid back down, and shut himself away.

Sunset had come and gone, leaving the sky bruised and the observation deck abandoned. Sean left his brother and his book at the picnic table in search of the restroom, earphones in, music on, oblivious to the world around him, missing it, missing everything.

Scott woke up alone.

When he realised Sean was gone, he was up in an instant. Squinting into the night and seeing the lookout empty, he began towards the public restrooms. That old, learned panic started to set in, thick and dark, inescapable.

“Seany?”

No reply.

“Sean?”

There was silence for a second—then a shout, *no, scream*, sharp and familiar through the cool, night air. How many times had Scott come home to their father, angry again, drunk again, hurting again? Scott kicked into a sprint, closing the distance, shoving through the men’s bathroom door. The next moments were a blur, over-exposed frames of a film spliced together, spitting red and blinding.

After: his little brother cowering over the broken body of a stranger, face and sleeve stained with snot, tears.

After: the skin on Scott’s knuckles split open, seeping.

“Sean, we gotta go.”

“Scott—”

“*We gotta go.*”

He helped his brother do up his jeans, both their hands shaking. Then he led him back to the car, swallowing the taste of blood and tears in his mouth, something sharp, something like salt.

In the car, they don’t speak. Sean didn’t realise he’d left his book behind until they crossed the border. He didn’t care. Just stared at his brother’s face as he drove.

People used to say Scott looked like Steven. They'd fumble over themselves when he told them they weren't related. *But I can still see a resemblance*, they'd say.

Sean understood. Scott looked nothing like their dad. He looked everything.

They arrived in Queensland just after eight.

"You're welcome to stay with us," Sean's mum said, fussing over them both as if it were reparations for her years of absence. Leave one child, take back two. "Thank you again for this, Scott."

"It's nothing."

"Have you boys eaten? How was the drive?"

Sean slept in the bedroom his mum prepared for him; Scott on the floor on a Kmart air mattress. Throughout the night, Sean heard his brother get up, pace, throw up into the toilet down the hall, pace some more. Cry.

"Do you think he's dead?" Sean asked, sitting up against his headboard. Scott's silhouette was stark in the doorway, backlit by the bathroom light, a deep, devastating absence.

"Go to sleep, Sean."

When he woke up in the morning, his brother was gone.

Sean was not stupid. He was practical. He considered it all over breakfast: maybe Scott's gone home, back to Penrith—back to their father and his temper, his violence.

Maybe he's turned himself in.

Or maybe, just maybe, he was somewhere across the universe. Scott could picture it: a fleet of alien spaceships, UFOs, real cartoon-like, descending upon his mum's apartment complex.

Seeing his brother, stealing him. Trapping him in a bright blue beam and sweeping him up—taking him far, far away. Somewhere strange, somewhere safe.

*Did he even look back?*

Sean closed his eyes and let himself be taken, too.