The Health Inspectors – Part One (Anthony Macris)

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(from an untitled novel in progress)

He lies on the worn lino of the living room floor, waiting for his favourite TV show to begin. The room is dark; he has turned off the light so he can feel like he's at the movies. Stretched out on his back, propped up by a couple of battered cushions, the glow of the black and white screen washes over him. There are few moments he loves more than this, to finally have the TV to himself, to be left to enjoy his favourite show in the dark.

He looks about the room and watches the light bounce off the walls. It glances off the gilt letters printed on the spines of a full set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, one of his father's most prized possessions, its volumes heavy to lift and full of words he can't understand. It catches on the gilt edges of the white plastic frame that sits on the side-board, a frame that holds a fading Polaroid of his grandmother, his mother's mother, an

ancient widow in a black dress and head scarf. She lives on Kythera, a tiny island in Greece. He has never met her, and he knows he never will.

The TV show that is on seems to take forever to end. He jiggles his foot impatiently, willing the end credits to appear. When, an instant later, the list of names and job titles scroll down the screen, his body tenses with excitement. All week he has been waiting for this moment, and now it's about to come. Finally, he's about to enter another world.

But he has to wait a little longer. At least until the ads finish.

He props himself up on his elbows and looks out through the double doorway into the shop. It's Saturday night, the middle of rush hour. Under the harsh fluorescent light, customers are crowded into the main serving area, four to five people deep, either waiting for their evening meals or jostling towards the counter to be served. His family are hard at work behind the barricade made up of stainless steel fridges and Formica-topped counters, taking orders, preparing food.

It's a spectacle he knows well and, even from his position on the floor, he can easily picture what each of them is doing. His mother is prodding at the hamburgers on the hotplate, standing slightly back from the stove to spare her work dress the spatters of hot fat and juices that spurt up from the cooking meat. His sister, Helen, the eldest child, will be at the deep fryers, watching over the fish and chips, the dim sims and Chico Rolls. His father, freshly shaved for the big night and wearing his good dark trousers, will be taking orders and generally overseeing the whole operation. And his older brother Paul, the middle child, will be running about doing odd jobs, but mainly handing over the wrapped newspaper parcels to customers and sometimes, against their father's orders, handling the money.

That's usually how it goes when the shop is medium busy. When it gets really busy, as it does tonight, things can get hectic. But somehow it always seems to work out.

The customers, most of them regulars, wait patiently, even respectfully, for their meals. Or, as they so often call it, their 'tea'. This has always struck him as a strange term. Tea is a drink, yet the customers use it to describe food. And, more strangely still, they use it to describe a meal of fish and chips. It's very Australian. His family are not Australian. They are Greek, and Greeks would never call their dinner that. And they would never eat fish and chips for dinner, at least not his family, nor any Greek family he knows. Fish and chips, at least the way they eat it, is an English meal, not a Greek one.

Tea, of course, was the most important drink of the British Empire. He knows this to be true because he learned it at school. As he gets older the British Empire is mentioned more and more often in class: it seems to be behind everything. Most recently, he has learned that it was built on business and free trade. That was how, his teacher said, such small islands could come to rule the world: because of the power of free trade. The British Isles were so small, in fact, that they would fit into Australia thirty times over at least. He wonders if Australia is still part of the British Empire. He thinks so, but he isn't quite sure. But then it must be, he reasons, if it still has the Queen on its coins. And that is why here, in the suburb of Kedron, in the city of Brisbane, in his family's fish and chip shop on Friday and Saturday nights, Australians come in their dozens to 'get some tea', or, as the mothers sometimes joke as they leave the shop with the hot parcels tucked under their arms, 'give the family a nice bit of fish for tea'.

On the TV screen the ads seem to go on forever. He lies there impatiently in the dark and suddenly feels the full force of the noise pouring through the doorway into the living room. It's a noise he has lived with all his life, in this shop or the others they have owned. It's the hubbub of waiting voices, the clank and scrape of metal, the slamming of fridge doors. But above all it's the roar of the exhaust fans, set at full blast. When it's very busy the fans don't seem to cope well, simply churning up the cloud of burning oil smoke that hangs over the waiting crowd rather than getting rid of it. At the height of rush hour the crowd is forced to stand there in the reeking air, full of the sickly sweet smell of deep-frying fish, of batter and potatoes, of all those white things made soft and juicy and turned into melting flesh by the vats of boiling oil.

Once he's noticed the noise he finds it hard to ignore: suddenly he can barely hear the TV at all. He gets up, turns up the volume as loud as he dares, then lies down again on the battered cushions. His timing is perfect. Just as he settles himself his show begins.

The word 'Disneyland' appears on screen, accompanied by a fanfare of trumpets. Tinker Bell floats into view, her magic wand trailing pixie dust. A male voice croons 'When You Wish upon a Star'. Fireworks explode and the famous Disney castle appears, its towers and arches radiating shafts of light. But, only a few minutes into the program, he is surprised to notice that something is wrong. He doesn't seem to be experiencing the same intense enjoyment he is used to. Tonight, no matter how hard he resists the idea, he has to admit to himself that he is starting to find Tinkerbell childish, the crooning voice old-fashioned and boring. It's a feeling that has been building for some time, but tonight it

seems he can't ignore it any longer. This makes him uneasy. He has enjoyed *Disneyland* for as long as he can remember. Why can't he go on enjoying it forever?

He frets for a moment then pushes these considerations aside. He listens intently to the comforting voice of the American presenter calling the list of Disneylands: Frontierland, Tomorrowland, Adventureland, Fantasyland. He secretly hopes this week isn't Frontierland. It can be entertaining enough, but there is something about log cabins, tall-treed forests and men in coonskin caps swinging axes that leaves him cold. Tomorrowland would be preferable: there might be a spaceship or an astronaut or something to do with Mars or Jupiter. Adventureland he can usually do without: it's too much like school in the way it's always about the beauty of nature, and there were only so many times you could watch salmon leaping up rivers against the stream. No, what he hopes for above all is something from Fantasyland. A tale with heroes and villains, set in some magical place where anything can happen. Then, the TV screen truly no longer exists. Then, he is taken away, completely absorbed, transported outside himself and put inside that other place where he is still himself, but somehow something more. This is what he longs for on Saturday night at six o'clock. This is what he had been waiting an entire week for. To be taken to another place where he is more than what he is.

But tonight no such transformation is to happen. Instead, he is to be told 'The Disneyland Story'. He tries not to be disappointed. It will have to do.

He notices his brother flit past the door to where the milkshake makers are. He can feel the pressure of Paul's stare as he passes, the flash of reproach in his dark eyes. He knows all too well what it says. Why wasn't he helping as well? Why should he get to watch TV while everyone else was working? Although he is three years younger than Paul, he is already a few inches taller than him. In his brother's mind, this seems to qualify him for service. Up until recently, no one has any thought of him working in the shop during rush hour. It has simply never been mentioned. He is 'O Microteros,' 'micro' meaning small, 'Microteros' meaning the youngest one.

Sometimes his actual name — Andoni for his family, Tony for Australians — is not used for days.

But his age no longer seems to be the defence it once was. His brother has become resentful of late, and this resentment troubles him. He likes to get along with his brother. His mother and father always encourage them to be good companions, and for

the most part they are. But now there is a harshness in his brother's attitude he has never experienced before, one that makes him unhappy. Once again he tries to ignore his unease, tries to concentrate on the program. Out of the corner of his eye he sees his brother flash past the doorway again, a milkshake container in each hand, their waxed paper straws teetering against the rims. This time Paul's gaze is fixed straight ahead. Intent on filling out the order, he has forgotten all about his loafing younger brother.

Relieved, he goes back to watching his program. But there's a further disappointment waiting for him. Tonight's *Disneyland* is shaping up to be some sort of lesson given by Walt Disney himself. He is used to seeing Walt Disney. He often makes a brief appearance to introduce a new movie or cartoon. A greying man with a cropped moustache, a man of medium build who speaks to children kindly and reasonably, he resembles his father in some ways. But appearance and manner are where the resemblance ends. Unlike his father, Walt Disney wears smart suits of heavy wool and lives in a world of massive wooden desks and equally massive movie studios. Walt Disney is a tycoon, a mogul, words he has heard but does not quite understand, apart from their obvious meaning of great wealth and power.

Tonight, Walt Disney does not simply make a brief introduction then disappear. Tonight, he wants to explain things of great importance about Disneyland, things that children like him need to know. Walt Disney explains that he is expanding his business. That soon he will be bringing his beloved cartoon characters and programs to the entire world in whole new ways.

A few minutes into this lecture he realises that the episode is a repeat, and one he has already seen at least three times. He watches anyway. And as he watches he is surprised to find that, this time around, he understands what is being said in a way he couldn't grasp before. The way Walt Disney talks about the thousands of people he employs, the dozens of shows they make, the way in which these shows will spread all over the world, he could be talking about something like the British Empire. This comparison becomes particularly strong when Walt Disney announces his biggest news of all, the creation of an actual place called Disneyland. With the calm authority of an all-powerful sovereign he announces where it will be built: Anaheim, in southern California. He shows off elaborate maps, detailed photographs shot from helicopters, meticulous scale models of fun park attractions that the camera enters into as if they were the real thing. He explains that Disneyland the place and *Disneyland* the TV show are all part of the same. All the

while he talks about facts and figures, of hopes and dreams. Walt Disney is building dreams. He is making dreams real.

Isn't that what his teacher had said the British Empire was? A dream made real?

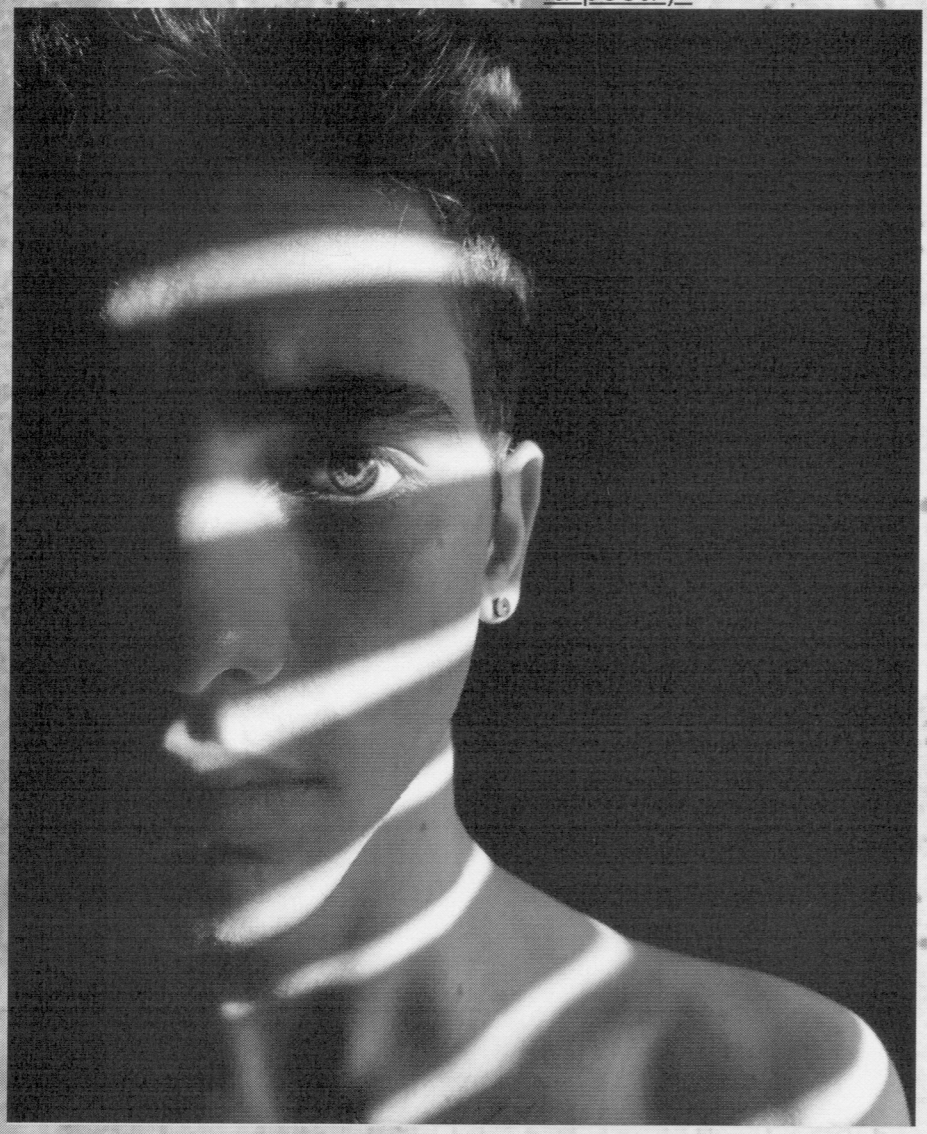
Of course he knows that Disneyland the place has already existed for a long time. But its existence is utterly remote to him. He can't imagine ever going there. The centre of his world is the shop. It's more important than school, than the small Greek community he and his family are a part of. And the shop is where *Disneyland* comes to him. He has to be content with that. And he is. At least for the time being.

For the next half hour or so he watches Walt Disney's vision splendid, which features a large number of cartoons and scenes from favourite movies, like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. And as he watches can't help but feel there is a strange similarity between his family's shop, which he knows is called a business, and what Walt Disney is doing, which is also a business, and the British Empire, which was built on business.

Towards the end of the show his brother comes in and silently sits on the floor beside him: the evening crowd has thinned out a little, and he has snuck away unnoticed. Simply from the way his brother sits so close he knows he isn't angry with him any more. Together, they watch the rest of the show. And, for a brief moment, he feels the all-encompassing happiness of being tucked away in the dark, his brother by his side, his family all around him, the shop chugging away in the distance like the engine room of giant ship. But he also senses that soon things will change. Soon he will have to help out in the shop during rush hour, and most probably not be able to watch *Disneyland* any more. But will that be such a loss? There are other shows he can watch at other times. And besides, *Disneyland* doesn't look so magical any more.

As the show finally ends, the creeping awareness that nothing is as it was grows stronger. The double doorway that separates the shop and the living room is no longer a window he can simply look through as a spectator. Now, it's the entrance to the adult world, one he doesn't feel ready for. And the TV screen is no longer something he can allow himself to be absorbed by so easily. Its thick glass, slightly bulbous like his father's watch, can magnify all manner of meanings, not all of them, he now realises, simple or innocent or apparent. He lies there in the dark beside his brother, both of them silent, and, for a brief moment, he is overwhelmed with confusion, unable to grasp what he is feeling at all.

Anthony Macris is an award-winning Australian writer and author of the *Capital* novels. He is also the author of *When Horse Became Saw: a family's journey through autism*, which was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards: Non-fiction category. His most recent book is *Inexperience & other stories*. He is currently Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Technology Sydney.



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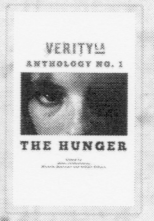

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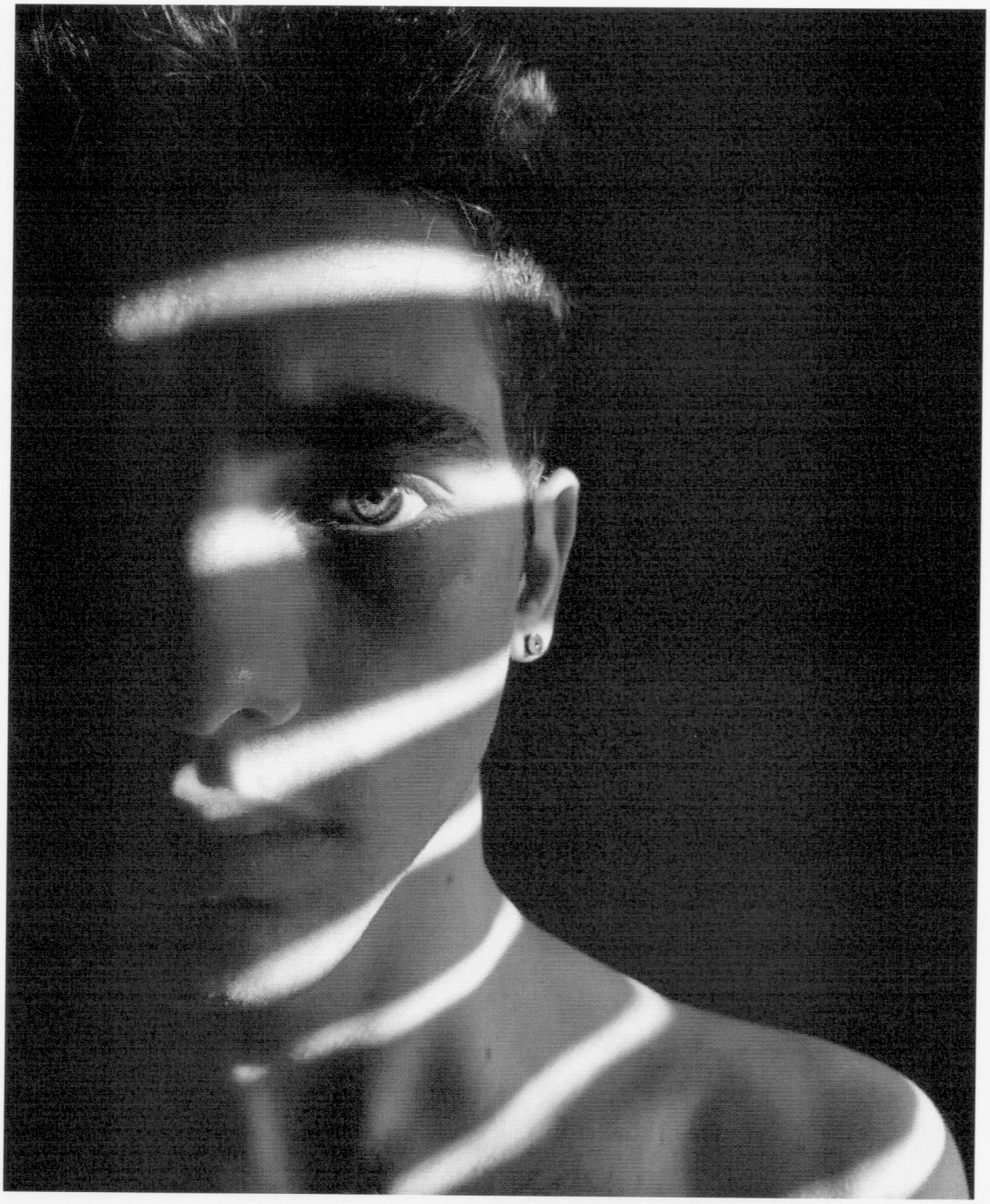

(from an untitled novel in progress)

Later that night, lying in bed, he hears his parents arguing. The tongue-and-groove walls, muffling their voices make it impossible for him to hear exactly what they are saying. He wouldn't be able to understand the details anyway. Their arguments are mostly in Greek, and even though he is told he is Greek, he doesn't really speak the language. There is a reason for this. His father thinks Greek is a peasant's language, and he wants his children to speak only English. When in Rome, do what the Roman's do: that's one of his father's favourite sayings. He speaks only English to his children, but makes an exception for his wife because her English isn't very good.

He lies in bed and stares up at the ceiling of bedsprings that make up his brother's top bunk. His brother is slight of build, his weight making only a slight sag in the mattress stretched out above him. When his brother sleeps, he hardly moves. In the morning Paul has only to slip carefully out of bed and it's more or less made. By morning his bed sheets, on the other hand, are usually in complete disarray, kicked undone, piled on themselves like squashed drapery.

He lies there, listening in the dark. His father's voice is by turns commanding, sneering, vicious in its reprimands. His mother's voice is by turns desperate, hateful, pleading. Even though their voices are muffled by the wooden slats of the tongue-and-grooves walls, they are still piercing, and the emotions they carry penetrate deep into him.

There are tense pauses between his parents' exchanges, and in those pauses he hears Paul's soft breathing. His brother is sound asleep. He hears nothing from his sister's room next door.

He has tried to get used to his parents' arguments, but he never can. No one acknowledges their existence, and they leave him tense for days. While they largely happen off stage, deep in the night, out in the shop, he doesn't find them any less disturbing for it: this, in fact, makes them even more menacing, a constant war that is bitterly fought out in the near distance.

This particular night, their argument goes on longer than usual. From what he can understand his mother is pleading for something, and his outraged father is saying no. Emerging from the stream of his mother's Greek he can make out a phrase that sounds likes English, a phrase she repeats over and over again and that seems to be at the centre of the fight. It takes him a little while to recognise what it is. The health inspectors, she shouts again and again. The health inspectors.

Eventually his parents fall silent. Then he hears his father's footfalls on the lino as he goes from the shop into the house. The footfalls grow louder as he enters the main bedroom directly across the tiny hallway, then cut off abruptly when he closes the door.

He waits to hear his mother come in from the shop. He waits a long time. As he waits all he can hear is the sound of his brother's light breathing and the occasional whoosh of a car on Stafford Road.

He waits and waits, but still she doesn't come in.

He decides to go out and see what has happened to her. He has never done this before. He gently swings out of bed, taking care not to wake his brother. As he makes his way into the corridor, he is surprised to find that he feels more curious than troubled.

The house is very dark. The double doors that separate the shop from the living room are shut. Seams of greyish light seep through their cracks and edges. Also seeping through is the smell of burning oil. This is unusual. The burners should have been turned off hours ago, the oil now cool. He twists the handle softly, gently pulls the door toward him, and pauses on the threshold.

The shop is dimly lit. He sees the slight figure of his mother over by the vats, acrid smoke billowing behind her. She has turned on only half the lights. The front doors of the shop are open to provide some air: she hasn't put on the exhaust fans for fear of waking the family.

He watches her. She is still working, even though she looks completely exhausted. Beside her is a tall metal drum set on a dinted wooden chair. He recognises the kind of drum: it's one the oil comes in. Between her hands she holds a worn bed sheet. It's either his or his brothers'; he can tell from its stripes of blue, pink and white, pale from countless washings. Despite her tiredness, with forceful, precise movements, his mother tears a large rectangle from the sheet. The ripping sound echoes in the dull air. She folds it into a square and places it delicately over the opening of the oil drum. Then she tears off a long thin strip from the bed sheet and ties it around the rim of the drum, securing the square of cloth. The fabric stretches tight. She presses it in with her hand to form a kind of bowl.

He knows what she's about to do. She's going to strain the oil. He has seen her do it before, but never late at night, and never after Saturday night rush hour when she is her

most tired. She usually does it early on a weekday morning when she has some energy. It's a dangerous job. The vats, heavy and awkward to move, must be lifted out of the steel frames that hold them. And the oil needs to be very hot, otherwise it won't flow through the material quickly enough, instead backing up in the cloth and spilling over the sides. But, if it's too hot, and the bed sheet too worn, the cotton will burn through immediately, and oil splash about.

He watches his mother work. She takes a long-handled utensil, dips it into the vat, and starts scooping out the muck that has settled to the bottom. She ladles out scoop after scoop of burnt breadcrumbs, blackened batter and scraps of potatoes onto a thick pile of newspaper. Once she has got out as much as she can, she hangs up the utensil, wipes her sweating hands on her apron, and pauses.

He looks at her hands momentarily hanging there. He knows those hands well. The veins on the back are raised and swollen. The skin on the inside of the fingers is split and calloused. They always seem to be injured in some way, either from a knife cut, some small infection from handling crabs or prawns, or a minor burn from the cooking stations.

She looks over and sees him standing at the doorway. He's afraid she will be angry with him but, to his surprise, she isn't. Instead, he sees an expression in her eyes he does not quite recognise. An expression that he has seen before but can't name, and that makes him feel guilty and uneasy in a way he has never quite felt before.

She tells him, in Greek, to go back to bed.

He doesn't move.

She tells him to go back to bed again.

How can he go to bed when she might burn herself with no one there to see?

He tells her he's not sleepy. He offers to help her.

She tells him he can't help her. For the third time she tells him to go back to bed.

He says he'll stay and watch.

She turns back to what she is doing and puts on a pair of thick, oil-stained mittens.

There are two vats. She lowers her hands into the billowing smoke of the first one, taking hold of the handles he knows are hinged above the oil line. Her arms flex as she pulls, her teeth bared with the effort. She succeeds in hauling it out, her small frame, stooped at an awkward angle, bowing under the weight. Arms straining, she balances it on the narrow edge of the cooking station. Oil smoke envelops her.

It immediately becomes clear that she has positioned the drum a little too far away for her to be able to simply tilt the vat and pour the oil in. She extends one leg and tries to hook her foot around the chair leg to bring it closer. As she does so, the vat lurches on its edge.

His heart starts to race as he watches the vat teeter. He want to rush up to help, but is afraid he will distract her.

She abandons the idea of tilting the vat. Instead she hauls it up into the air above the drum and, arms quivering with the effort of holding it steady, gently tilts it forward. Hot oil pours out in a thin, precise stream. There is a split second delay as it soaks through the cloth. Then he hears it spatter loudly as it hits the bottom of the drum. Slowly, for what seems like an eternity, his mother pours the oil. When it's empty she replaces it with a clang. She pauses a moment, then closes her eyes in exhaustion. Her brow is covered in sweat. For a moment he thinks she might be praying to herself.

She goes to the second vat. The burning oil smoke rising from it is particularly noxious: it has been boiling for too long. Grunting with the strain, she hauls the vat out of the cooking station. He watches its scorched metal sides swing through the air. This time she doesn't even try to balance it on the edge. She wants it over and done with quickly. Besides, the handles will be too hot to hold for any longer than strictly necessary. With the same laboured effort she pours the oil into the makeshift strainer. As the last of the thin stream pours out, her arms falter for a split second.

A glowing stream of hot oil splashes onto her forearm. She yelps with pain. But she does not falter again. Tears streaming down her face, she finishes pouring the oil. She replaces the vat with a clang. Then, sobbing, her shoulders suddenly heaving, she rushes to the sink, turns on the tap, and plunges her arm under the gushing water. She stands there weeping, all the while talking to herself in Greek.

Then she remembers he is there. She turns to him and pleads for him to go to sleep. He wants to go to her, to comfort her. Instead, he tears himself away from the doorway and plunges back into the dark of the house.

He carefully gets back into bed. He lies in the dark, his heart pounding. As he lies there he recognises for the first time the expression on his mother's face when she first saw him at the door. It was not anger. It was not embarrassment. It was shame.

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When he wakes up the first thing he does is look up at this brother's mattress. The slight dip is gone. His brother is already up.

He briefly remembers what happened in the shop last night, but pushes it out of his mind. It isn't hard to do, because everything seems so normal. The summer light strikes through the cream vinyl blind just as it did yesterday morning. His brother's rugby league posters are on the wall just as they were last night. If he wants to believe it, last night never happened. And yes, he wants to believe it never happened.

It's Sunday, and he has come to dislike Sundays. Lately, he just doesn't know what to do with himself. There may or may not be shop chores: it depends on how much his parents force him to do them, and how determined he is to get out of them. There is homework to think about, even if it's not something his parents expect him to do. His teacher is the problem. Recently she has noticed he doesn't do much of it, if any at all, and has started to ask awkward questions. And, it's cricket season, which means it's likely his brother will spend the whole day camped out in the living room watching it, hogging the TV. He has tried to watch it with him, but it bores him beyond belief. He likes playing it with him in the backyard, and when Paul is in the mood they can spend hours playing French cricket, the bat vertical in front of their legs which act as wickets, each trying to bowl the other out with a spin ball. But why his brother so enjoys watching the tiny figures on the screen is a complete mystery to him.

He decides to read a little before he gets up. When he opens the pages of a favourite book, there it is again, a world he can enter into, a world outside this world. It's an experience he constantly craves, and one he needs more than ever now that *Disneyland* seems closed to him. Under his bed, strewn about in cardboard fruit boxes, are his books. There are the Narnia books by C.S. Lewis, books like *Snoggle*, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, *The Sword in the Stone*, and what seems like dozens of books by Enid Blyton: The Famous

Five, The Secret Seven. For many years the Enid Blyton books were his favourites. At the height of his passion for them he would beg his mother to take him on her next trip into town to buy any titles in the series he didn't have. On one occasion he dragged her from bookstore to bookstore, insistent they track down a missing one, nearly beside himself with tears when it became clear no one had it.

As he fishes one out from under the bed, he no longer feels any such enthusiasm. If *Disneyland* has only recently started to feel too young for him, Enid Blyton has long been something only for little kids. Out of habit, he idly looks over the first few pages of *The Secret of Spiggy Holes*. There they are, his now estranged friends, enjoying lashings of homemade lemonade and ginger biscuits, contemplating dressing up as Red Indians and chasing one another.

He hears his mother's voice call out from the kitchen. It's time for breakfast. His food is getting cold. Seated at the table, his brother has already started eating. Bacon and eggs, tomato, often a small piece of steak as well. Meat, the boys must have meat, his mother often says. Paul has one egg, he has two. He watches Paul eat with quick, birdlike movements. Paul never eats the tomato skins, and leaves them in a neat pile on the rim of his plate.

His mother stands over by the sink, doing some washing up. He sees the long burn on her forearm. Red and angry, it vanishes under the cuff of her pink rubber glove. The urge to help her in some way, the one he felt last night, overcomes him again. She goes to take off her gloves to make his toast. He says he'll do it. His brother, surprised, glances up at him disapprovingly. Their mother always makes the breakfast toast. Why is he challenging the order of things? Isn't it enough that he is taller when he shouldn't be? Isn't it enough that he eats more? By the time he's made the toast and sat down to his breakfast, his brother has finished and left.

As he predicted, Paul settles down on the sofa to watch the cricket. The day stretches out aimlessly before him. If he's lucky, Paul may want to go down to the shops before dinner to play pinball, but he can't count on it, and the possibility is hours away anyway. His sister is nowhere to be seen, but that doesn't bother him. He doesn't count on her for company. She is five years older and lives in a different universe.

He wanders about the place, making a nuisance of himself. His father rouses on him from his bed for clattering about: he is still trying to sleep. The house behind the shop is unbearably small, just six cramped rooms. Two of them are absolutely tiny. His sister's room is only large enough for a single bed, a dresser and a desk piled nearly on top of each other. The bathroom is so small there is no actual bath, only a shower cubicle. In the back yard there is a dilapidated shed full of junk. It's dark and dirty and he avoids going in there.

To pass the time he reads, listens to his mother's transistor radio, plays a ball game on the shed wall.

Finally, when it gets too hot outside, he goes into the shop to make himself a milkshake even though he doesn't really want it. There, he finds his mother engaged in a fury of cleaning. Sunday is a slow day and, between customers, it's normal for her to clean some parts of the shop. Throughout the morning, however, he has noticed her doing much more than usual. Crouched on her hands and knees, she has emptied frozen sand crabs from the bottom drawer of the main freezer and chipped out the stinking ice that always seems to build up faster than she can get rid of it. She has scrubbed the floor under the vats with hot soapy water and a large bristle brush. She has taken steel wool to the metal plates that protect the walls of the cooking areas and cleaned them until they gleam. And now she is mopping the floors with a mixture of Ajax powder and Handy Andy. She doesn't ask for any help, and nobody offers her any.

He moons about, watching her. The burn on her arm has started to form a brownish crust. She acts as if it isn't there.

He asks her why she's doing so much cleaning. He doesn't really expect an answer. After a pause, to his surprise, she gives one.

The health inspectors, she says. They might be coming tomorrow. Or the next day. She doesn't know when. They don't say when. Only that they're coming this week. She has to be ready, she says.

She's silent for a moment. Then, perhaps judging that he might be old enough, or perhaps simply because she wants someone to know, she tells him that maybe they will close down the shop.

Close down the shop? He can't believe what he is hearing. Why?

Because maybe it isn't clean enough.

Isn't clean enough? All she does is clean. Cook, serve, clean. How much cleaner does it need to be?

Who are the health inspectors? he asks.

From the government.

He is bewildered. The government? Why would the government want to close down the shop? He wants her to explain. But he senses he will get nothing more from her. The conversation is over. She has work to do.

He goes into the living room. His brother is stretched out on the sofa, glued to the cricket. There is no point in asking him. He hears his mother call him from the kitchen. She tells him in Greek that there's a customer waiting who wants to buy a drink. While he doesn't serve during rush hour, he's often called upon in the quieter times for simple orders like this. He goes into the shop and in the serving area finds a boy his age. His hair is fiercely blond. He's staring shyly at the can of Fanta he has placed on the counter.

'Yes, please,' he says to the boy.

The boy nervously offers him a sweaty coin. Nick gives him his change and watches him disappear through the curtain of plastic strips that hang down over the shop's entrance. Behind him, through the kitchen doorway, he hears the slap of the mop head on the floor. Then suddenly it seems unbearably quiet, and he has the sudden fear that no customer will ever walk in and buy anything again. It's a fear that comes to him from time to time, especially on long quiet days like this. But this fear, intense while it lasts, never lasts long. Just when he thinks there'll be no more customers, another one fronts up as if by magic, and by five o'clock there's always a steady trickle, even when it's not a Friday or Saturday night.

Yet now there seems to be this new, more serious threat to their livelihood: the health inspectors. If they close down the shop, how will he and his family live?

Read the Health Inspectors Part One here.

Anthony Macris is an award-winning Australian writer and author of the *Capital* novels. He is also the author of *When Horse Became Saw: a family's journey through autism*, which was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards: Non-fiction category. His most recent book is *Inexperience & other stories*. He is currently Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Technology Sydney.