

BONESLAND
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"You fucken nailed it!"

Scot Gardner—famous author, total legend, on *Bonesland*



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The country train we came in was stuffed with drab and defeated people. Ghosts with grey faces making the Melbourne pilgrimage to donate their dole check to the casino.

But I belong with the people on this city train. It has colour and energy and anticipation.

I look around as we push off from Footscray. Across the aisle there's an Asian family. The adults murmur in a different language and their three little girls nap on each other's shoulders like tumbling dominoes. A bunch of lanky dark-skinned guys in tight, ripped-knee jeans and kaleidoscopic jackets stand near the doors. One of them does chin-ups off the ceiling handrail while the others laugh and film him on their phones.

My eyes dart around and devour the beauty of this mess—beards, bags, work suits, tracksuits, phones,

tattoos, dresses, jeans, babies, boys, girls, brothers, mothers, fathers.

‘Oy, let’s play Spot the Aussie,’ Tyson says too loud. His mouth pops open and his rubber neck rotates left to right, like those clown games at carnivals. ‘There’s not many on here, eh?’

‘Keep it down, bruz,’ Leon whispers. ‘They’re probably all Australian.’

Tyson’s gobsmacked. He jabs Jimmy.

‘Nah, blud. Fuck that game.’ Jimmy’s gold bracelet jangles in time with his fingers drumming on his phone. ‘I got one better. Just hold up a minute, I’m typing it up.’

Please forgive Tyse for his Caucasian-location contest. He’s just your standard ignorant Year Ten from Banarang. The dump we call home has one Indian restaurant, a Chinese takeaway and a kebab shop, and the families that own each place account for the town’s entire migrant population. Banarang is white bread. Melbourne is multigrain. Multigrain is better for you.

All I’ve got to do is survive twenty-seven more months in Banarang, then I’ll move here. Finally. So tonight, I’m going to have fun for the first time in a long time. Because tonight I get to taste the future.

Our train rounds a corner and the cityscape unfolds like a pop-up book. Melbourne’s a theme park to me, a panoramic playground. Matchbox cars hurtle home over a towering copper bridge on stilts, as the glimmering skyscrapers behind stretch out to meet the peach sunset. I could eat it all. I could scoop the plump, white marshmallow clouds into my mouth. They’d be light

and sweet and get stuck in my teeth.

I bite my lip to stop my face cracking into a dumb smile.

‘Aight, my wiggas, let’s play for points tonight,’ Jimmy says. ‘There’s gonna be plenty of bitches chasing BMT, so we can come through and sweep up his rejects.’ He clears his throat and recites the rules off his phone: ‘You get three points if you smash or get sloppy topky. Two points if you bring her back to the crib and slip in the finger-roll. And one point for your basic, boring make out. Fair?’

Jimmy smiles. The fluoro ceiling lights are beaming off his braces, making them glitter like disco balls. He could have had the clear ones but he demanded a mouthful of diamonds.

Almost everything Jimmy says is gross or ridiculous, but he’s not serious. No one can talk with that Australian-accented New Yorker whine and expect to be respected. He’s a genuine fake. He’s making his own fun and making fun of himself—I think. Anyway, he’s a good friend and, once he moves to Melbourne, he’ll stop saying dumb shit about girls, I know it.

‘Sex isn’t a sport, you idiot,’ Leon says.

‘And I think there’s already a sex-as-sports analogy,’ I add. ‘The one about the baseball field.’

‘Yeah, Bonesy, I know,’ Jimmy groans. ‘But baseball players ain’t *ballers*. And I’m a baller, shot caller.’ He claps his hands together and rubs them like he’s starting a fire. ‘Besides, any points you crew score tonight are gonna be alley-oops from yours truly, Jimmy the OG.’

‘I like baseball more than basketball,’ Tyson muses. ‘Kinda reminds me of cricket...Footy’s best, though.’

‘Thanks for that, Tyse.’ Leon sticks up two thumbs and grins.

Jimmy places a sympathetic hand on Tyson. ‘And bruh, you get triple points if you get *anything*. And dudes don’t count in this game, so Leon’s out. And Bones has never even had a boner, so he’s gone too!’

That’s not true. Though I’ve never seen the appeal of them. When it does snap up in the morning I just find it an inconvenience that delays my walk to the shower.

‘So I guess it’s just me playing tonight, then,’ Jimmy says. His laugh starts up full power. It’s all vibrations at the top of his throat—it kind of sounds like the last bit of bath water getting sucked down a drain.

‘J.K., J.K. You can all still play the game.’

He does dress like a baller, at least. Albeit one with the height but none of the muscles. Tonight he’s wearing a too-big blue-and-yellow Golden State jersey. Under that, he’s got a black long-sleeved compression top that matches his dyed-black buzz cut. And as usual, his Jordans are obnoxious—the ones he chose tonight are white and metallic gold. He likes being the loudest in the room—in colour, in voice.

Me, I wear clothes to *not* get noticed—navy jeans, navy T-shirts. It doesn’t work in Banarang, though, because people know everything about me. Or they think they do. A lot of bullshit goes around, and the stuff they say went down last year didn’t. Don’t believe it if you hear it.

Leon flicks Jimmy's knee. 'Jim, these points don't mean anything. Are you gonna put money on them? Plus, you've already got a girlfriend. So why are you so excited?'

'Nah, blud. Soph and me are done for real this time. So I'm taking all comers tonight. I think I should get a bonus if I shoot a three-pointer with Naya, though, cos that would be a straight crazy rebound.'

'Are you sure she's even going to want to come out after a long flight?' I ask. 'Maybe you should let her rest.'

'Fuck no, bro. When you're that jetlagged you enter a zone beyond tired, and it can only be cured by partying.'

Jimmy would know. He's the only kid I've met who's been overseas.

Part of the reason we were allowed to go to this concert is to look after this Naya girl. She's an American exchange student who will be staying with Jimmy's family for the next six months. Jimmy's mum and dad couldn't pick her up from the airport because they've been away in Paris on some urgent business thing. So they booked a hotel room for tonight, and they're meeting Jimmy and Naya there early tomorrow morning when they get in.

'She said she's down to meet y'all too,' Jimmy says. 'Check it, I finally found her Instagram.'

Tyson bends over Jimmy's phone screen.

'Fuck, she's hot as,' Tyse says.

'Yup. Look at that ass—damn! I love thick girls.'

Tyson rubs two fingers up and down the phone screen, simulating a ‘fingerbang’. Jimmy’s chest jitters in another laughing fit. Personally, I’m not interested in sticking my urinary tract inside anything, so I don’t even look at the picture to pretend I’m excited.

Jimmy has been talking about Naya for weeks. She’s meant to be really smart, which he says is definitely a turn-off, but ‘she’s also really hot, so that makes up for it’. She’s also a youth ambassador for the United Nations or some stupid do-gooder thing like that. Our principal has talked about her at assembly a few times, as if she’s a dignitary and we all have to pretend that the school isn’t a madhouse when she gets here.

Truth is, though, she sounds like a nutcase herself. These change-making, world-saving, fund-raising charity kids are basically the new generation of religious door-knockers. They do my head in.

‘Oh shit!’ Jimmy stamps his feet on the ground in glee. ‘The bad bitch from Brooklyn herself just messaged me! She says, “Hi James, I’ve made it to your wonderful country. I’ve checked in and I’m going to take a shower. When and where should I meet you to go to this concert?”’ Jimmy sniggers. ‘She called me James, lol. Should I tell her to save the shower, cos we’ll be taking one later...together?’

‘Yeah,’ Leon says, ‘if you want her first contact with you to be a slap, that’s a great reply. And *there’s* another flaw in your points game: you’re the only one with a place for someone to sleep. Bones’s gran’s floor isn’t exactly enticing.’

‘True,’ Jimmy says, tapping his lips with his fingertips. He jams a hand in his jeans pocket. ‘Lucky for you boys, then, cos you ain’t staying at Bones’s gran’s.’ He pulls out a glossy black card with ‘SOFITEL’ emblazoned across it. ‘I got you boys a room on the top floor near me!’

‘Shit yeah!’ Tyson hoots and snatches the card.

‘Well, third from the top,’ Jimmy clarifies. ‘We won’t be sleeping much, but I set you boys up with three single beds anyway. That’s a bit better than bunking on the floor in Footscray, ain’t it?’

‘Fuckin’ aye!’ Tyson’s hair spikes shake and his head bumps back and forth. He kind of looks like an echidna, and it’s not just the hair. He’s round all over, from his face to his feet. And his plain white T-shirt flaunts his rolls, especially the love handles that hang over his belt like soft balls of pizza dough.

‘How’d you do it, Jimmy?’ Leon’s brown eyes narrow. ‘You nick your mum’s credit card again?’

‘Not even. I bought a bonus room on points through Dad’s loyalty card thing. He’s got tons.’

‘Oh, so you stole from your dad this time. Got it.’ Leon grins.

It’s nice of Jimmy to set it up, but I don’t want to stay at a hotel. Gran is expecting us tonight, so we should go. She’s probably laying out the mattresses in the lounge room as we speak, and she’s got a prosthetic hip so it can’t be easy. Plus, Leon, Tyson and I are meant to be meeting my brother, Trav, at midnight to catch an Uber there together.

‘I don’t know,’ I say. ‘We...we should probably... Well, I’m still gonna go back to Gran’s. You guys can go to the hotel, I’ll leave with Trav.’

‘Bones.’ Jimmy sighs as he brushes at the crop of ripe red pimples on his cheek. ‘It ain’t no thing that you not interested in stacking hoes. I accept you—it means more pussy for me anyway. But just come through for the crew tonight, though, yeah? For the boys, like the old days.’

I shake my head. ‘Sorry bro.’

Jimmy scratches his sparse stubble then licks a finger and counts through several pink notes clasped in his bulging gold money clip. He pulls the fives out and holds them up.

‘Here. If you last the whole of BMT’s show—which you will—and then come party at the hotel with us a bit, then I’m a give you fifty clams straight to the face. Oops...’ He slides up two more notes. ‘I mean sixty. Your lucky number.’

Jimmy knows I need every number in my life to be divisible by three. That’s a rule.

‘Go wild for the night just once, Bonesy, that’s all I’m asking. It’s an adventure, like we used to do before you got weird on us. I mean...got *weirder*.’

I look at the bundle and think of how I would spend it. I’ll get Mum something. A vase, maybe. Her special green one shattered when she threw it in the general direction of Dad at the start of the year. No. I’ll get her a haircut, so Aunt Connie doesn’t do it again. Connie can’t cut straight—she actually put a bowl on Mum’s

head and cut around it to do her fringe. It's still wonky two months later.

'You in?' Jimmy asks.

I feel saliva pooling in my mouth. The germs fornicating and duplicating.

'I don't know.'

'Okay, listen, your gran is leaving the key out, right?'

'Yeah. So?'

'So she'll never know you weren't there. Old people go to bed straight after dinner cos they've got nothing to do.'

'But will we get back to Footscray before she wakes up?'

'No doubt, bruh. You gotta be outta my room by three a.m. anyway—the parentals will be arriving around then.'

'What about Trav?'

'Bonesy, baby, please, we all know Trav ain't gonna come and pick you up.'

He's right about that. I breathe out slowly. Jimmy rubs his hands together again. Slower this time, like a sensual massage.

'C'mon, blud. Sixty bones for Bones to have fun just once. Deal?'

The money could do some good. I just have to hang in for a few hours.

'Okay...deal.'

'Dope!' Jimmy smiles wild and clicks his fingers.



Just a few hours ago, Trav and I were in Mum's car sputtering along on the way to Banarang train station. I was next to Mum up front and looking out the window. The lake shimmered in the white afternoon sun and the grassy hills in Memorial Park looked like they'd been spray-painted pea green. I could almost see how it would look pretty to a weekend visitor with a way out.

But it's not pretty when you live in it every day. If you don't escape Banarang straight after Year Twelve, you've got two options—you make a bunch of kids with your high-school girlfriend or you smoke ice all day and start pub fights at night. There are plenty of guys who manage to juggle both.

I'll be one who makes it out, though. As soon as I finish school, I'll have the car packed. I'll thunder past the dull cardboard boxes that Banarang calls shops, I'll skim over the Bridge Street potholes without feeling a bump and I'll fly up the freeway, bound for the city and civilisation.

I'll have my own clean apartment in Melbourne. Mum and Dad will be living together again, and I'll be able to get a decent job, save up and buy them a house of their own.

I will dissolve in the colour of the city. No one will notice me. It will be perfect.

I'm not asking for much—big dreams are for the deluded. I'll make an okay life in Melbourne. And I won't be hounded relentlessly by morons like Trav's

best mate, Chase Barnes. He hates me. He thinks it's my fault his mum left his dad and moved to Queensland. It's a long story, but all you need to know is he's a dog, and he definitely lives up to his nickname: Shitty. He was originally nicknamed it because everyone thought he was a 'bit of a shit bloke', but he loved it so much he told everyone to call him it. He reclaimed a character criticism and made it a badge of honour.

He was kept down a year too, so now he's doing Year Ten with us. He's still the school kingpin somehow. People like him don't even exist in Melbourne, and if they did, they'd be ostracised not idolised.

He is close by right now—I can smell the Lynx Africa deodorant he takes a bath in every day. He's at the other end of the carriage with Trav. Family loyalty doesn't mean much to my brother. He's meant to be coming on this trip to make sure Tyson, Leon and I get safely back to Gran's. Instead he invited Shitty and they're going to try to sneak into the casino.

Jimmy texts Naya to meet us out front of Playland in fifteen minutes.

'I have laid the booty trap,' he says as he slides his phone into his pocket.

'That makes no sense,' Leon says.

'Whatever, peep this.' Jimmy slides out four tattered plastic cards from his money clip. 'Here we go, my Banarang bluds.' He hands Tyson a Queensland driver's licence.

It once belonged to blotchy-faced nineteen-year-old Darren Smythe from Kangaroo Point. It's not bad: you could almost get him confused with Tyse.

But I scoff when I see the next one.

'Err, that doesn't look like Leon at all,' I say.

'Who's Leon?' Jimmy pretends to be confused. 'This is Samir Malik, twenty-one years old, from Parramatta.'

'Thanks bruz, but they're not gonna buy this.' Leon shakes his head. 'I don't look Arab.'

'Wanna bet? Security guards are dumb as fuck, bruh. All brown people look the same to them. And Samir's wearing a black T-shirt like you do every damn day too.'

'I don't get it, though,' I say. 'Aren't we going to an all-ages gig?'

'Yeah, but these mean we can drink, Bonesy. Or should I say...Tim Smythe from Ringwood East.' He holds out the ID. 'You might have to take your cap off to get in, though.'

He's joking. My blue Brooklyn Dodgers cap doesn't leave my head. That's a rule.

I try to take the ID but Jimmy pulls it away, then he whips my cap off. I snatch at it and miss. I run my fingers through my hair so it's not so flat, and I look out the window and pretend not to care.

'You look good without the lid, my G. I don't know why you don't let it all hang out.'

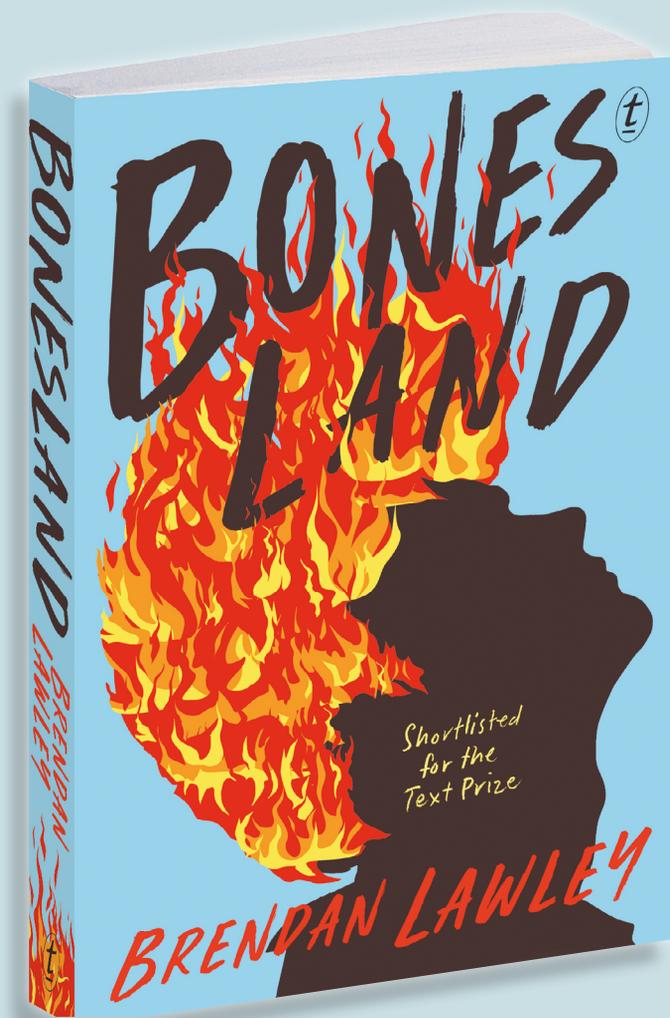
'Give it back, Jimmy,' Leon orders.

Jimmy drops the ID in my hat and hands it to me.

‘Sorry, blud. My bad.’

Tim O’Keefe has blaring orange hair and a pale white face that makes him look almost albino. Why are gingers generally so ugly? There’s just something not right about most of us. I think I got relatively lucky with my appearance. Tim O’Keefe’s hair is way brighter than mine—mine’s almost brown in the right light—and his hair is dead straight and greasy. Mine’s kind of wavy.

As we cross the river into the city, Jimmy starts his Instagram story with a video pan around the train and out the window. He snaps a pic of our gang, deletes it, takes another, deletes it, then takes another and types over it: ‘BOUT TO MOB OUT! BMT @ Playland tonight bitches. Best night of our lives!’



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