



## Dark and Purple and Beautiful

Paul Arnaud

**I open the fridge** and my drinks are gone and I think that it's Sara or James, but they're nowhere to be seen and I'm still sober and we're not leaving till two. It's not even midnight yet and the house is still full of people shouting and dancing and against every wall and in every dark corner some guy and some girl. I shut the door and wade through the kitchen till I find a discarded goon-sack resting on the stove, but still intact, and I swallow several mouthfuls before I have to stop on account of the taste and that's when Julie calls me from the veranda and I walk to the sound of her voice. Liam and Lucas are standing over a bucket of ice water with their sleeves rolled up and their arms in it up to their elbows. Around them people are shouting and cheering and someone in the background is vomiting but I can only just hear them over the sound of the music.

I turn from my friends and look into the night and I see dark and purple and beautiful and I feel something that I could never put into words or even understand. And I'm happy. But I'm still sober and it's not even midnight and all of a sudden I can't stand it and I have to leave, so I walk back through the house and out the front door and onto the road. There aren't many cars so I walk along the road and I think about the next stage of my life; my life after high school and everything.

I remember the start of the year when I met my best friend Truman and how he was so different and how I felt so unique and special being his friend and I wondered what my life would be like without that identity. Maybe I'd make my own identity and I'd be the one everyone knew, the name on the tip of every tongue.

The first time I went out with Truman he drank a bottle of cheap champagne and streaked a line of shopfronts, and it was as if he didn't even care about the consequences or what might happen if he was caught, and I waited back with the girls and listened to their stories. They're all here tonight. Truman and Kelly and Julie, Liam, Lucas and all the rest that I can't be bothered thinking about. And I know I'm going to miss them, and I know I'm going to look back at these people with warmth and love and I'll never find friends like them again. But I'm also excited, because things have been dull recently, because everything's been the same and we always do the same stuff. I'm looking forward to uni, or maybe the army, or no, I don't know — anything. I just want something new and different and I'm young and have all the time in the world so it doesn't matter what I do because I can always change and I'm not going to get stuck in some dead-end job like my father or the fathers of all my friends who, like me, are going to live the best and most exciting of lives.

I can hear another party just down the road and I think of rocking up and seeing what happens, but I remember the time when Liam tried it and this big guy with a shaved head threw a bottle at him and it cut his shoulder so bad he had to have 17 stitches; but his nurse was hot, and he managed to take a photo of her when she was leaning over and we all got to see her underwear. So I just keep walking and I take out my cigarettes and light one and feel calm and relaxed and savour the night. It really is a beautiful night. Warm, but not hot; there are clouds in the sky, but they don't distort the moon or the

stars, or at least not the pretty ones and suddenly I have a flashback of all of the girls I'd been with in high-school. They were all pretty, in their own way at least. There was Penny, who was short and cute and always smiled no matter what. There was Kelly from back at the party who was tall with dark hair and a small chest, but her face was so perfect you had trouble noticing anything else. And then there were a bunch I never went very far with and only remember in the context of fuzzy moments against walls or in dark spaces.

I think one of the things I was looking forward to most about growing up was the prospect of a real, adult relationship, but at the same time it scared me because adult meant responsible and I knew that I wasn't responsible and I hated screwing up. Even in primary school I used to screw things up. I'd cut something wrong or I'd put the block in the wrong hole because I'm not very bright and bad at shapes and then the teacher would look at me with this expression that said I had no hope and would never amount to anything and I should just kill myself and I think that's why I had that cutting phase when I was 13. I don't know why I cut, to be honest, other than that it's what depressed teenagers do.

But nowadays I try really hard to avoid screwing things up and I get that look of disappointment less, and my mum's face at my graduation ceremony was so happy and something else I couldn't quite understand but I didn't try to because some things you just don't want to know, so I just waved to her from up on stage and blew kisses to the crowd because I thought it would be funny.

And all of a sudden I take out my cigarettes and throw them into a bush because I'm walking toward my future and I don't want them in my future because I'm going to be smart in my future and I'm going to be good and healthy and nice and make my mum smile again because she deserves to smile and it makes me happy too and I want to make my dad proud

so he'll tell me I've done good and I'm alright and all of that shit. But before I throw it away I light one last smoke because this is my final moment, my final night of being a high school boy and soon I'll be a real adult.

Ahead of me the road seems endless, but I keep walking because something is telling me to keep going and I don't know what it is but I usually listen to these feelings because without them I don't know what to do or to think and I get really scared and don't know how to cope. A car pulls up in front of me and a couple in their early twenties climb out. He's tall and handsome, wearing a long dark coat and carrying a bottle of red wine, she's tipsy and laughing, falling into his arms because she still can't walk properly in high heels. They radiate hope, happiness, laughing as they stumble down the driveway and into the house he's renting to make love and dream about everything to come.

I keep walking and all around me there are suburban houses with their lights on and inside I can see happy families and sad families and I see boys and girls and mums and dads but when I put myself in the picture I'm no longer the teenager playing X-box or staring dully at Facebook; tonight I'm the dad reading the paper and for some reason I picture myself with a pipe in mouth and my legs crossed and slippers on my feet and I laugh at how silly it seems, but it also feels good. But the best feeling is the thought of the wife in the kitchen making pancakes at midnight and calling me *Honey* and *Sweetie* and all nice things that make me feel warm and loved and like everything's going to be okay.

And I keep walking and I can no longer hear either party any more and the houses are all gone now and there's only shopfronts and on one of them I see an advertisement for retirement villages, beachfront houses with hammocks and lawn chairs and a table where you can put your beer or lemonade and nap in the afternoon sun feeling completely

relaxed and without a care in the world. But I don't stick around too long and I walk further on and soon even the shops are gone and in the distance the road is coming to a fork and where it stops is a cemetery, still and silent and peaceful, and even though I'm not a kid any more I still feel uneasy and I notice the two roads splitting off beyond the cemetery and ones called Gabriel Drive, and the other just has an arrow pointing to a dirt road saying 'The Sticks'.

I stand at the fork and I think about my life and all the things I could have changed and how in Grade 2 I kicked Benny in the shins and I never said that I was sorry; and took a step towards the dirt road, but then I stopped and for some reason I thought again about my future and everything good that I was going to do and I dropped my last cigarette ever on the road and turned to walk back to the party, and I thought maybe I'd just have a good time and in the morning I'd go home, but I wasn't going to take the dirt road. No, when I was done at the party I'd come back, and I'd go past the hopeful couple and happy suburban families; I'd see the shopfronts with the pictures of white beachfront cottages and I'd come back here to the cemetery and the two roads. But when I finally did come back I'd take the paved road and it would be a nice trip and I'd be happy and I'd make everyone proud and my future would be something to look forward to.



**Paul Arnaud** wrote this as a university undergraduate in 2012.