

Broadbeach Bargain Bin

by Matt Potter

"I've got a gift for Dad so I should get one for you too," I said.

"It's enough that you come up here for Christmas," said Mum, sitting back in her chair. "So what does Boris eat? The forecast for Tuesday is a stinker and I don't really want to spend all day in a hot kitchen."

I sipped my Bundy and Coke, savouring the rum on my tongue. A cool breeze blew off the sea and with each zap of the mozzie zapper, I thought how lucky I was to be sitting under the verandah on a balmy summer holiday evening watching the sun set over Main Beach and the Pacific Ocean. That and how I really didn't want to think too much about Christmas Day two days away.

"Your father won't be back from Noosa 'til tomorrow night so I want the food all sorted before he's home."

"I think Boris likes lamb," I said. "Maybe a lamb curry."

Mum looked at me like I'd grown rocks in my head. And taking a lump of ice from her glass, put it in her mouth. "Thamthon, no one hath lamb curry for Christmath lunch," she said, her tongue around the ice cube. "Not even in India. And thertainly not here."

I love Christmas. And I had always thought coming to understand and learn about cultural differences could be fun but I had never reckoned on them being so ... different.

"Just don't put garlic in it, whatever you cook," I said.

The ice in Mum's drink clinked as she rolled the glass across her forehead. "Ith that a gay thing or ith that a vampire thing? 'Coth I'm finding thith all a bit confuthing." She cracked the ice in her mouth with her teeth and started making sucking noises.

I sipped from my own glass again. Funny how some things scream certain places: I never drink Bundy in Tasmania but enjoying the rum holiday summer Queensland sub-tropical taste is an integral part of visiting my parents at Christmas.

"That's a vampire thing," I said. "Antonio loved garlic."

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Mum sighed, swallowed, and lifted her glass at the sun setting through the palm trees. "Aah, you were stupid to let him get away."

"Antonio is old news, Mum." I put my glass in my lap and stretched my legs out so my feet rested on the railing in front. "Anyway, Boris is much better looking."

"He needs a bit of sun though."

I slapped my leg. The mozzie zapper wasn't working as well as it should.

"And why does he sleep in so long?" she asked. "It's a waste of a good day."

I downed the last of my drink. And shading my eyes with my hand, looked out at the darkening horizon.

"Hello, Sunshine," Mum said, as Boris stepped out to join us. "You look like someone walked on your grave."

"It's the heat and humidity," said Boris, pulling his jacket out from under his armpits. He looked out at the night sky. "But it's wonderful it's so dark so early here."

A shiver of excitement coursed down my spine and through my pelvis as Boris leaned down and kissed me. There was always the possibility he might forget himself and greet me in a different way.

Sitting on the chair next to mine, he put his feet up on the rail too, black winklepicker boots beside my own bare, dirty feet. Then leaning over and taking my hand, he kissed it, with a playful lick at the end.

No one ever told me vampires could be so throbbingly romantic.

"Well, it's further north here than Tassie and we don't have daylight saving, either," said Mum. "What about braised kidneys in blood sauce? That sound Christmassy?" Mum had brought her laptop out and was cruising the net. "It's an English recipe, it says."

"English, Spanish, Romanian," said Boris, putting my hand down. "Anything's okay with me, Christmas has never been a big thing in my family." He pulled his long dark hair into a ponytail and fastened it with a rubberband he kept on his wrist.

"You don't know what you're missing out on," Mum said. And she looked at me as if to say, well, that's another piece of weirdness.

I looked out towards the beach.

"You're a bit of a snappy dresser, Boris," said Mum. "You're putting us all to shame with your suit and tie."

Boris laughed. "I inherited my individual style from my parents, I'm afraid."

Mum snapped her laptop shut. "It'll be a madhouse tomorrow so I want to get the last of the shopping done tonight."

"There's a large bat colony up here somewhere on the Gold Coast, isn't there, Maureen?" Boris smiled.

Mum stood up to go inside. "Yeah," she said. "At Helensvale. They just hang around in an old swamp. It's not a big tourist attraction." She tucked the laptop under her arm. "We can drop you off and then go on to Pacific Fair. It's not on our way, but we can do it."

We dropped Boris off at the bat swamp (he would catch a return cab) and doubled back — way back — to Pacific Fair. Back through Helensvale, Labrador, Southport, past Main Beach and through Surfers Paradise, and then on to Broadbeach, back through gaudy highrises and Deco-inspired palms, pink boxes piled high against a blue sky, a long coast-hugging strip of holiday-makers, noisy traffic and shopping.

Pacific Fair, the hub of Broadbeach, was its usual Gold Coast shopping centre self — suntans and muscles and tattoos, set amidst theme park turrets and slides and brightly painted signs. Which ride were we there for?

"You should buy Boris some shorts," Mum said, as we walked into Coles pushing shopping trolleys. She put her handbag in the trolley and took out her large shopping list.

"He's comfortable dressed that way, Mum." I headed for the meat section at the back of the store. "If you let him be himself you'd see what a great guy he is."

The store was full — chock-a-block — so it took some time manoeuvring between trolleys and grandmas and the Christmas rush. Strawberries and cherries were at their season high — overpriced and cynical — and passing by the pineapples and pungent mangoes, it felt like I had only been there yesterday.

Coming to the meat section, I caught my reflection in the mirror behind the counter. I looked like everyone else, a bit sweaty and a little dry, hot and summery and an unkempt fuzz. Already a bit Christmas done over. Is that all it took? Just under 24 hours and I was already a native in my tank top, shorts and (though I couldn't see them in the reflection) thongs.

"It's not normal for a man to wear a suit in late December."

"Give it a rest, Mum," I said. "He's a vampire! He's not normal anyway!"

I turned to the display and started sorting through the trays of meat.

"I'm just saying," she said. "No need to snap my head off, Samson."

She grabbed her trolley and turned on her heel.

I didn't know what to do. Kidneys, liver, tripe, sheep hearts and lungs ... were blood pudding or blutwurst big sellers on the Gold Coast? Boris usually did his own cooking but in truth, I'd never really seen him eat much: a dry biscuit here, a lump of something else another time.

Fuck those bats, I thought. He should be here now helping to decide what to cook and winning Mum over.

I looked up as Mum came barrelling towards me with her trolley, jaw set.

"I just want it to be a nice time," she said. "Ever since we retired up here you've looked down your nose at us and we're sick of it."

And she turned the trolley around again and disappeared down the cereal aisle.

I looked at the kidneys and liver and what appeared now to be an old haggis. A woman walked past — older, tanned face a mass of crow's feet, a string bikini holding her skin together — and gave me

a dentist-perfect smile. I sighed, and thought of Tasmania, where twenty-nine degrees is a heatwave and a tan usually comes out of a bottle and only for weddings.

I found Mum in the toilet paper aisle.

"You think it's easy for us to see you with these strange men, Samson?" she said, piling a twelve-pack into her trolley. "I just want a nice traditional family time." And she blew her nose on a tissue, which she then put back in her bra.

"I've never had normal boyfriends," I said.

"Antonio was normal."

"He had a gambling problem and stole your car to feed it," I said. "That's hardly normal or traditional."

"He always came to Midnight Mass with us."

I piled a twelve-pack of toilet rolls into my own trolley. Why, I have no idea. "Well, that's something Boris won't be doing either."

Her face fell. "Why?"

I stepped out of the way as a couple charged towards the checkouts. "He's a vampire! He doesn't do the whole cross thing."

"Stab me in the heart, why don't you?!" she said, choking on her words. She grabbed another twelve-pack from the shelf and threw it in her trolley. "Another tradition gone." And then shoving the trolley into the kitchen towels, she stormed off.

I caught the eye of a man in his 50's as he grabbed a twin-pack and put it in his trolley. He raised an eyebrow and I shrugged my shoulders.

Then Mum's voice came from the end of the aisle. "I just wish there was some kind of vampire guide I could read so then I'd know what I'm doing."

I paid for the toilet rolls — thirty-six of them — and pushing the trolley through the sliding doors, saw Mum sitting on a bench in the rain. Other shoppers passed by, on their way to their own pre-Christmas dramas, scattering as a storm gathered force.

The drops splashed cool on my shoulders.

I started walking back to the car and Mum fell in behind me. We passed a bookshop. Hard to believe, but there are a number of bookshops on the Gold Coast, and a sign outside said 'Bargains! 5 for \$10'.

I stopped to look through the bargain bin and Mum walked past me into the shop. I thumbed through the books. They were the usual bargain bin fare: memoirs of radio jocks with bad accents and ghosted supermodel bios. And by a stroke of luck, some Anne Rice novels.

I bundled five together and spying Mum in the cookery section, marvelled at my luck: cheap and — given circumstances — educational, the perfect Christmas gift.

"Would you like those gift-wrapped?" the willowy shop assistant asked.

I smiled and nodded. "Aha."

She pulled wrapping paper from a large roll on the counter.

"Finished your Christmas shopping?" she asked.

"Yes, thanks," I said. "I have now."

