

Lauren Keenan

The School of Life

Within minutes of arriving at the plant nursery, Marcus knew he'd overdressed. The career adviser at university said it was safer to overdress than underdress; you could take off a tie, unbutton your top button, and voila¹: interview Monday to casual Friday in a few small steps. Marcus looked at the mud-stained clothes worn by the people around him, then down at his pressed T-shirt, clean jeans and new Vans². The career adviser was wrong; there was no voila moment to be had. [...]

5 A man [...] walked towards Marcus and held out his hand.

"You must be George's boy. I'm Hoppy."

Hoppy's outstretched hand was caked in dry mud. Marcus winced as his hand was squeezed and pumped up and down. Ow. [...]

10 "Great to have you for the holidays," Hoppy said. "I'm sure you'll get on well here."

"Thanks," Marcus said.

"We don't usually take varsity students³, but of course I made an exception for George's boy. We go way back, me and him. Good times."

"Thanks," Marcus said again.

15 "Let's get you started then. Follow me."

Marcus hunched his shoulders and trailed after Hoppy. People stood around in clusters, pretending to be busy as they shot surreptitious⁴ glances in his direction. They wore baggy tracksuit pants, faded jeans and oversized T-shirts. Marcus mentally sifted through his wardrobe. What could he wear tomorrow so he didn't stand out so much? His old Barkers⁵ pants were too small. What about his new jeans – the ones that were specially faded and torn? No, he couldn't wear those; they'd cost over a hundred bucks. Besides, he wouldn't wear them on principle. They were the jeans that had made Dad say Marcus had to pay for his own flights to Dunedin⁶ from now on. Marcus kicked at a lump of dirt, wishing it was Dad. This was his fault. Hoppy had no idea. Marcus being here wasn't a favour to Marcus' dad. It was torture that Marcus' dad had dreamed up because he was an autocratic, oligarchic⁷, dictatorial sadist who was obsessed with making Marcus stay "in touch" with where he was "from", whatever the hell that meant. Hoppy opened a wooden door to a large shed filled with piles of dirt on platforms. A motley⁸ group of men scooped the dirt into small black pots. The local radio station's Y2K countdown⁹ blared from a tinny speaker.

Hoppy motioned towards the men. "And this is the team."

30 The men turned and smiled and mumbled. "Hi." "Hello." [...] One of them [...] tilted his head upwards in acknowledgement of Marcus' eyes on him. Marcus looked away; he didn't know if that

¹ (fransk) there you are

² sneakers

³ *varsity students*: universitetsstuderende

⁴ skjulte

⁵ dyrt tøjmærke

⁶ universitetsby i New Zealand

⁷ *autocratic, oligarchic*: enevældig, eneherkende

⁸ broget

⁹ *Y2K countdown*: nedtælling til år 2000

meant “hello” or “I’m going to beat you up.” A third man wore a T-shirt that said “Tupac¹⁰ 4Eva”. Marcus sighed. What would he even talk to these people about? Wasn’t there anyone here like him?

Hoppy slapped Marcus on the back. “You’ll be in good hands here. I’ll leave you to it.”

35 Marcus stood at the dirt-covered platform, looked up at the mountain of dirt, down at his clean clothes and then at the pots stacked to his left. He picked up a limp rubber glove with his thumb and index finger. What was worse: putting on the glove or touching the dirt without it on? Yuck. It was like one of those moral dilemmas he’d learnt about in Philosophy 101¹¹, but less hygienic.

A young man with a shaggy mane¹² stood at the platform on his right.

40 “Marcus, isn’t it?” the young man said. “Remember me?”

Marcus turned and widened his eyes. “Rewi! Oh my God. I haven’t seen you since we were kids.”

Marcus scratched around in the recesses¹³ of his mind to remember more: Rewi – always dirty, talked a lot about being a fireman when he grew up. That’s right. Fancy seeing him again, here, of all places.

45 Rewi laughed. “Yeah, it’s been ages. [...] I still think about your old place – I used to love it there. Your mum was primo¹⁴.”

Marcus had completely forgotten Rewi existed until a minute ago, but he wasn’t going to tell Rewi that. [...]

50 Marcus looked Rewi up and down; unlike the others, Rewi wasn’t smeared in dirt, and he wore a T-shirt that even Marcus would wear. Thank goodness, there was another normal person here. Maybe things would be okay after all.

Rewi explained to Marcus what he needed to do to pot the plants, and the work began. After what felt like five hours of potting, Marcus looked at his watch. Only twenty minutes had passed. Was his watch broken?

55 “How do you stand this job?” Marcus asked [...]. “It’s so mundane¹⁵.”

Rewi shrugged. “It’s pretty good,” he said. “After tax, you get sixty bucks a day. [...]

“Sixty bucks a day,” Marcus said. He did his maths [...]. That would tide him over¹⁶ until his loan kicked in.

60 Other people’s conversations drifted over to where Marcus stood, but he couldn’t find an opening to join in. “Did you see the game?” ... “Coming to the barbeque on Saturday?” [...]

Marcus needed to think of something [...] to say; he needed to show everyone that he was cool. Besides, when they weren’t talking, the Y2K countdown filled the silence, and Marcus hated that sort of music. [...]

“This music is terrible,” he said to Rewi. “Do you ever listen to stuff that’s more worthy?”

65 Rewi laughed [...]. “I like this song.”

“I got my Tupac CD in my bag,” the man in the Tupac T-shirt called out. “You like Tupac, homeboy?”

¹⁰ amerikansk rapper (1971-1996)

¹¹ introduktionskursus

¹² *shaggy mane*: uglet hår

¹³ afkroge

¹⁴ alletiders

¹⁵ trivielt

¹⁶ *tide him over*: hjælpe ham igennem

“Not really,” Marcus said. “I learnt about Tupac in anthropology¹⁷, though.”

“Eh?” The man wearing the Tupac T-shirt said.

70 “It was interesting,” Marcus said. “Tupac sang in a genre that is both empowering and misogynistic¹⁸. It’s an inherent contradiction¹⁹.”

The man in the T-shirt threw back his head and laughed. Further down the line, someone snorted. Marcus felt the redness creep up his neck, over his face and to the tips of his ears. He should have known that these people wouldn’t understand.

75 “Tupac forever,” the man in the Tupac T-shirt said.

Rewi turned to Marcus. “Don’t worry, I don’t like Tupac either. By the way, how are your parents?”

Of course Rewi didn’t like Tupac; Rewi was normal, like him. Rewi probably agreed with Marcus’ point about rap’s inherent contradictions but was too shy to speak up.

80 “Mum’s all right,” Marcus said. “My dad’s a douche though.”

Rewi shot Marcus a sympathetic look. “Yeah, I know what that’s like. When did you last see yours?”

Marcus frowned; what an odd question. “This morning. He dropped me here.”

Rewi didn’t reply.

85 They turned back to their plants: one pot, two pots, three pots. Eighty, ninety, one hundred. Marcus’ back creaked and his feet hurt. He should have worn more comfortable shoes. Rewi and the other men bopped along to the music and laughed at the DJ’s inane²⁰ banter. They talked about “the game” some more without ever explaining what the game was or what the result had been. They argued about what they’d do with one million dollars: someone would go to Vegas – the real one, not Roto-Vegas²¹. Someone else would buy new cars for everyone in his family. Rewi said he’d buy his mum a house. Marcus opened his mouth to speak, but he couldn’t find a gap in the conversation large enough to slide in. [...]

95 Two hundred and sixty, two hundred and seventy – a plant in a pot, then another, then another. The dirt caked Marcus’ gloves, crept up his sleeve and covered his front. Marcus sneezed into his handkerchief and recoiled²² in disgust; the dirt had even found its way up his nose. That was repulsive.

“Hope the job’s not too mundane for you, new boy,” someone said from down the row.

“Is it what?” a second man said.

“That means boring, dumbass. That’s what he said to Rewi before. Didn’t you hear him?”

100 Marcus pinched his lips and concentrated on his pots. Three hundred, three hundred and one, three hundred and two. These people were just jealous that he was going somewhere and they weren’t. Three hundred and three, three hundred and four. That reminded him – he’d forgotten to ask Rewi what he was doing. [...]

“So, what are you doing at university?” Marcus said to Rewi. “I’m going to be a lawyer.”

¹⁷ videnskab, der beskæftiger sig med mennesket som kulturelt og socialt væsen

¹⁸ kvindehadsk

¹⁹ *inherent contradiction*: indbygget modsætning

²⁰ tåbelige

²¹ Rotorua, by i New Zealand med mange hoteller og neonskilte

²² (her) trak hovedet tilbage

105 Rewi turned ever so slightly away from Marcus. He mustn't have heard over the terrible music.
 "What are you training to be?" Marcus said. "I might work for government, but I think going
private would be better."
 Someone at the other end of the platform laughed. "New boy's talking about privates²³."
 "Privates are so mundane," someone else said.

110 Marcus pinched the bridge of his nose, accidentally smearing dirt on his face. What was wrong
with these people?
 "What do you study?" Marcus asked Rewi again.
 Rewi turned back to Marcus and smiled although the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I'm at the
school of life."

115 "Where's that?"
 "I'm not at university," Rewi said. "I'm not clever enough for that. I never even finished school."
 Marcus widened his eyes. "Oh."
 "School of life forever," the man wearing the Tupac T-shirt said.
 "School of life ain't mundane," someone else said. [...]

120 Marcus picked up a pot and scooped in a handful of dirt. How could Rewi do this all day, every
day? Four hundred and ten, four hundred and eleven. A handful of dirt, a new pot, another handful
of dirt. Five hundred.
 He turned to Rewi. "Don't you want better than this?"
 "It's a good gig," Rewi said. "I'm cut up²⁴ to be leaving, to be honest. Today's my last day."

125 "Oh, you've got another job?" Marcus said. "Where?"
 Rewi ran his hands through his hair. Clumps of dirt sat on his forehead. "Not sure yet."
 "Poor old Rewi's been cut loose," someone said. "We'll miss you, bro."
 "Someone had to make space for the boy whose dad goes way back with Hoppy," someone else
said. "Last in, first out."

130 Marcus concentrated on potting his plants. Six hundred, seven hundred. Seven hundred and fifty.
 "I'll find something," Rewi said. "My mate's cousin might know someone at that big farm over the
hill."
 "It's not right," someone said.
 "It is what it is," Rewi said. "Anyways, I brought some beers in, you lot better be joining me for a
cold one after work."

135 "Rewi forever!" the man in the Tupac T-shirt said. "Of course."
 It was five o'clock. Finally. Marcus peeled off his gloves and threw them in the bin. It was
disgusting; his hands would need a good moisturise when he got home. Marcus walked out of the
shed, glancing back to see Rewi sitting on a plastic chair, box of beer at his feet. The other men were
140 drawing up chairs around him, and someone had turned up the music. Marcus gave Rewi a small
wave, but Rewi didn't notice; he was too busy laughing at something the man in the Tupac T-shirt
had said. Hoppy fell into step beside Marcus as he walked towards the front gate.
 "Good first day, lad?" Hoppy said. "You're not having a beer with the boys?"
 "Not today," Marcus said, ignoring the first part of Hoppy's question.

145 Hoppy waved. "Give my regards to your father."

²³ k nsorganer

²⁴ cut up: (her) rystet over

“I will,” Marcus said. “See you tomorrow.”

Marcus waited at the side of the road for Dad to pick him up – his father, the autocratic, oligarchic, dictatorial sadist. Marcus looked down at his dirty clothes. He needed to find something to wear tomorrow so he wouldn’t stand out so much. [...] Maybe he could borrow something from Dad? Of course he could. Dad had plenty of old clothes filled with holes. What a good idea. There was no point in buying something new; he’d be gone in a couple of weeks anyway. Sixty dollars a day wasn’t enough to make him want to go to the school of life.

A car pulled up [...]. Finally, Dad was here.

(2019)