



A short story by T.J. Beach

Jet lag woke Rhys at the crack of dawn. He pulled on shorts and a tee-shirt and went for a walk to get away from the heat and dusty smell at the backpackers.

Hoping to find an all night coffee shop in the city, he headed that way until he saw a bus with a sign saying Scarborough Beach.

Didn't he come to Australia for surf and sand? The seaside would be perfect to welcome his third day in his new home.

Rhys ran to the stop and flagged the driver down.

The bus took him right into the beach car park. On one side were a hotel, cafes and restaurants — all closed — on the other manicured lawns led to the Indian Ocean — as blue as the cloudless sky.

He liked the weather, so far.

Rhys crossed a promenade, busy with early morning dog walkers, cyclists and runners. He rolled and took a seat on the top level of steps, built into the dunes like a concert bowl to watch surfers waiting for rides on head-high waves, and pretty girls pulling wetsuits over their bikinis.

Rhys *really* liked the scenery.

With no one selling caffeine, he joined the exercise crowd and wandered north, along a cycle path, enjoying a fresh, salty breeze.

The dunes were fenced off for 'restoration' not that he'd have ventured among the low, thorny bushes anyway when the signs warned 'snakes active in this area'. Perhaps that's why the pristine beach was all-but deserted. It would be clogged with rental loungers and German tourists in Europe.

After half an hour, he came upon another car park, high above the ocean with an open weather-board cafe built to take full advantage of the glorious view.

He ordered eggs Benedict and sat back to watch the toned, tanned world of figure-hugging active wear come and go for coffee.

"Are you finished?" a waitress asked.

"Thanks."

"Anything else, another flat white?"

"Don't mind if I do."

A pretty walker in yoga pants turned from the counter, smiled his way a little uncertainly and wandered over clinging to a takeaway cup.

"Hallo," she said. "Is that a Birmingham accent?"

Rhys couldn't believe his luck. Just his type, long blonde hair pulled off her face in a no-nonsense ponytail, sunglasses perched on a baseball cap, big blue eyes. She looked about twenty, so a bit young, but who'd complain about that? He half rose to offer the spare seat at his table. "I'm from Aston, actually, you know, the home of Aston Villa."

"I'd pick a brummy anywhere. I'm Hannah, from Egbaston. It's good to hear a voice from home."

"I'm Rhys."

"Hi, Rhys, small world isn't it?"

"I dunno, it was twenty-four hours on the plane and you don't get morning's like this in the black country."

Hannah took Rhys' breath away with a smile. "It's a *really* small world. A month or so after I got here, when I was thirteen, this girl came up to me at a party and said I looked familiar. It turned out she came to England once to stay with her Grandma, two doors down from us, and she played with my sister all summer."

"Wow." Rhys didn't much care.

"You didn't come to Egbaston one summer, did you? You look familiar."

"I think I'd remember a girl like you."

Her cheeks coloured, by heck Hannah was good looking.

"Anyway, nice to meet you," she said. "I've got to get to work, but maybe I could show you around some time?"

"You bet!"

"Give me your digits."

Rhys almost dropped his new Samsung in his haste to remind himself of the number he'd been allocated the day before.

Hannah typed it into her phone and snapped his picture with a grin. "There. I've got a face to put with the contact, not that I'd forget yours!"

Rhys kicked himself for being too stunned to get her number, but he didn't have to worry.

Hannah texted him that night:

See you at the cafe tomorrow? Same time?

He gave it ten minutes to pretend he hadn't been glued to his phone all day hoping she'd call, and sent back a nonchalant:

Okay

Rhys beat the sun up again next morning. He showered, brushed his dyed-blond hair — if the new colour pulled hotties like Hannah, he'd keep it, and the beard — put on his best jeans with a business shirt he'd bought for interviews, and was waiting outside the cafe before it opened.

Hannah turned up as the waitress delivered his coffee mug, trailing another girl, a few years older but another looker. Rhys jumped up and grabbed an extra chair from the next table.

"This is Sally," Hannah said.

"How's it going, Tony." The new girl grinned. "How long is it you've been in Australia, Tony?"

Rhys frowned. "A few days. Look, sorry, I don't want to be an ass, but my name's Rhys, not Tony.

"Is it?"

The look Hannah's friend gave Rhys set his pulse thumping, and not in a nice way.

"I told you about my sister's friend, didn't I?" Hannah said.

"What?" Rhys struggled to recall.

"The one who stayed two doors down from us one summer. This is her, Sally."

Rhys shrugged. He checked the route through the tables to the exit.

Did he imagine it, or did Sally shift her chair a little so it blocked his path?

“My sister died,” Hannah said.

What was that? Her sister carked it? What the hell?

“Mum and dad are still gutted. My sister stayed in England when we came over here. She got into bad company, drugs —“

“Bloody hell,” Rhys said. Where was the waitress? He should get the bill.

“But she was really happy just before she died — it makes it worse really — she’d got a job and a new boyfriend. The last time she called my mum, my sister sent a picture.”

Hannah glared at him. How did he ever think she was pretty?

She opened her phone and showed Rhys a photo. “I can’t get over how much it looks like *you*.”

Rhys went cold from head to foot. He jabbed at the phone. “Bollocks it looks like me. The hair! He hasn’t got a beard!”

“Sally did a facial recognition thing.”

“Well,” Sally said. “I got someone to do it for me, but the picture Hannah took yesterday matches the one her sister sent.”

Hannah leaned across the table, her lips trembling with emotion. “My sister was *murdered* by her asshole, junky boyfriend. The piece of shit stabbed her and legged it — got clean away.”

Rhys kicked over his chair, barged past Sally and went straight into the arms of two police constables who materialised from the kitchen.

Sally brushed herself off, and squeezed Hannah’s shoulder.

She strolled across the cafe to stand an inch from the prisoner’s nose.

“I should have introduced myself properly, Detective Sergeant Sally Brooking, and you, Anthony James Wilkinson, are under arrest on suspicion of murder.”

As the cops wrestled him into the car park, Hannah stood on the steps of the cafe and yelled.

“Small world, Tony, isn’t it?”

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