

All Clear
A *Marginalia* story by Laney Cairo

Manually working the hand pump for the beer kegs in the oppressive heat of the bar was wrecking Quint, sweat drying on his skin instantly.

His boss, Froot, put a jug of water, precious clean bought water down in front of Quint and said, "Take a break, dude."

Quint slumped against the bar and gulped long swallows of the sweet water, then said, "Do I look that bad?"

"Darker then forever in here," Froot said. "You could look like a corporate enforcer and I wouldn't know, not with the generator shut down and the kero lamps off."

The only light in the bar was a pale luminescent solar storage strip, right over the cash box. Froot had priorities, and making sure none of the punters passed bad coin was at the top of the list.

Quint carried the rest of his jug of water to the door of the bar, in the misguided hope of finding a breath of cooler air. Outside, the air still shimmered with the scorching strength of the day's sun, despite darkness having fallen hours before. The city outside was in full darkness, the catastrophic fire warning sirens having shut down everything during the day: all generators, all pumps, all vehicles. Tiny patches of solar glow showed all the way down the hill to the train station, but the train wouldn't be running, not when a stray spark from the wheels on the tracks might start an inferno.

Quint emptied the jug of water and sighed contentedly. He liked the hot dark nights.

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The hint of dawn was all the light Quint had when he left the bar at the end of the night. Things scurried around his feet in the darkness, either big insects or small mammals. Flying things, mosquitoes large enough to leave a bruise when they collided or perhaps bats, swooped around Quint.

He could have stayed in the cellar at the bar, slept the day through there, until the catastrophic fire warning was lifted, but he had a place to be down in the city, a bed waiting for him.

Quint's lover, Bailey, lived in the daytime corporate world. He had a smooth job, working for SirenCare as a surgical technician inserting cosmetic and recreational implants into the wealthy and dissolute of Sydney. Quint, who was

one of the poor and dissolute, found this hilarious. All those rich people, handing over all that coin, so Bailey would cut them up? Bailey cut Quint just because they both wanted it, and the thought of that made Quint rub at the horn implants growing proudly on his forehead.

People passed Quint in the gloom, heading to the harbor for a swim, perhaps, or still making the long hot walk home from their work, in the absence of trains and pedicabs. Quint nodded to those who were close enough and ignored those who hugged the deeper shadows.

The street Bailey lived on was empty, the houses and shacks silent apart from a baby crying in the distance. Quint climbed the stairs to Bailey's apartment cautiously, avoiding the creaking treads and checking the flickering grey of complete darkness in the stairwell for movement in the air.

The electronic ID recognition system would be offline, along with the entire city, but Bailey had passive security in place as well. Quint approved of how suspicious Bailey was.

Uninvited, Quint would have shimmied up the outside of the building to Bailey's roof terrace and then dropped in through the ceiling. With an invitation? He was much politer, and knocked.

Seconds passed, sweat trickled down Quint's back, and above the building currawongs and seagulls called. The bars across the other side of the door lifted, scraping and creaking, then the door opened in the grayness.

"Hey," Bailey said sleepily, pulling Quint into the apartment, his hand smooth and cool on Quint's arm. "You smell of beer."

In the bathroom, Quint found the covered buckets of recycled water by touch alone. The water was unpleasantly warm, at room temperature, when he lifted the lid off the first bucket. Behind him, he could hear Bailey's bed creaking as Bailey settled back on the mattress, then he emptied the first dipper of water down his back, so the clean water streaked through the salt, dust and beer on his skin, washing away the hot night.

It took both of the buckets Bailey had left him to get Quint clean, and the catch pan under Quint's feet turned gritty and foul before he stepped out of it. Tomorrow, or the day after, whenever the fire warning was lifted, Bailey would empty the catch pan back into the purifiers, run the water through again. Not now.

Now, Quint padded across the apartment, footsteps drying behind him, to where the shape Bailey made on the mattress was just visible in the growing blue of first light.

Quint never felt cleaner than these moments, the times when he lay down on Bailey's crisp sheets, still damp from bathing, and Bailey turned and sighed,

settling smooth perfect skin against Quint's.

"Do I still smell of beer?" Quint asked, kissing Bailey's temple.

"Clean," Bailey said distinctly, sliding a thigh over Quint's hip. "Wanna?"

Bailey, who was the most complicated and confusing person Quint had ever met, could sometimes achieve moments of delicious, single-minded clarity that it took Quint's breath away.

"Wanna," Quint agreed, rolling on to his back and pulling Bailey with him, so Bailey was astride his hips.

The fabric hanging loosely in the open window lifted and fell as the stifling air in the room moved. The smell of the harbor became stronger, rotten seaweed and fish, the welcome smell of cooler air finally beginning to blow in from the ocean.

Quint sighed with relief and Bailey licked at Quint's smallest horn stub, on his left temple.

Bailey's teeth scraped and nudged their way across Quint's face, finding each and every one of his mods: horns, bars and rings in ear cartilage, lip stretcher, labret and tongue. The light from the window had shifted from deep blue to pale to gold, and the noise from the street and the apartments around them had begun to echo through the open window when Bailey reached the studs down Quint's sternum.

The all clear siren sounded, a long sustained note on the city-wide sirens, echoing off the buildings nearby and into the bedroom. On the street below, people cheered, their voices continuing after the siren had faded and ended.

Quint opened his eyes to the dawn light reflecting off solar collectors on the building adjacent and into the bedroom, and Bailey's mouth slid wetly down Quint's cock, tongue finding each of his beads.

Motors and pumps hummed as the building woke and mechanical music played out on the street as some enterprising and prepared vendor wheeled a cart out into the parched city.

Bailey's eyes were gleaming when Quint reached down and lifted Bailey's chin up and nudged a knee into his ribs.

"Swap?" Quint asked, and Bailey shook his head.

"No time," Bailey said. "I'll have a long list today after the heat shutdown yesterday, need to go to work now."

Quint waited, counting his own heartbeats, and Bailey just kept grinning at him.

At five beats, Bailey said, "Oh fuck it, as long as we don't hang around."

Bailey climbed over Quint, settling over him, and Quint held his own cock steady for Bailey. Bailey had some damned fine corporate mods of his own, hidden away, and Quint loved that, loved the way the mods made Bailey groan and shudder as Quint slid in.

Bailey was loud, moaning and shouting, hanging on to Quint as he ground down harder, part of the morning city. Cooler air rushed in through the open windows, so the sweat stayed on their skin, making them both slippery.

Bailey's cock slid and pushed in Quint's hand, and Quint hung on until Bailey yelled and came, before letting his own knees drop looser and his body unwind in a long, slow wave.

"Leave me any water?" Bailey asked, rolling off Quint and stumbling to his feet.

"Dunno," Quint said. "It was dark."

Quint stayed where he was on the crumpled sheets, enjoying every breath of cooler air, while Bailey splashed and hummed in the bathroom. Must have been some water there, Quint guessed.

Bailey padded back into the bedroom, dripping wet, and pulled his corporate clothes off a shelf.

"Staying?" Bailey asked, and Quint nodded.