

PLEASE
DON'T TAP
THE GLASS
by Rose Lu



Annie's late. She overtakes a group of boys from school – they're throwing a rugby ball back and forth, taking up too much of the footpath. The group erupts in laughter as one of them pretends to fumble a pass. Annie recognises the boy. Ryan, the only year 10 in the first fifteen. She's never seen him fumble anything.

The dairy's humming when she gets there. Her dad's stationed behind the ice-cream cabinet, frowning as he quickly rolls scoops. There's a small crowd waiting. One kid leans on the cabinet and taps his coin on the glass. Last week, she'd overheard her dad talking to Auntie Yan back in China. "They don't think about it," he'd complained in Mandarin. "The noise is deafening."

Annie goes straight to the cash register. She motions to the customers who aren't queuing for ice creams. Three cans are plonked in front of her: two energy drinks and an iced tea. "That comes to \$9.70," she says to the man. She takes his ten-dollar note and hands back his change.

It's busier than usual, but Annie can keep up now. After three months – the time it has been since they left Auckland – she's finally starting to feel comfortable in the dairy, and maybe even in this new city. It's easier now she has the prices memorised; she doesn't have to crane past the customers to check the signs.

Her dad catches her eye and looks over to the main drinks fridge. Annie sees the thinning rows and nods. After two more people, there's a break, and she goes out to the storeroom. She fills a basket with their most popular drinks and carries it into the shop. At the fridge, she brings the chilled cans forward and puts the new ones at the back, but before she's finished, she senses someone behind and quickly moves out of their way. It's Ryan. He takes his time, propping the fridge door open with his leg, yakking to his friends while he decides what to buy.

At last, Ryan closes his hand around a can of cola. He frowns. He looks at the drink, then he looks at Annie. "Hey, shop girl. Can I have a discount cos it's not cold?"

Annie feels her cheeks heat up. She looks at the floor and shakes her head.

"Is that a no?"

Annie doesn't move.

"Probably can't understand me." Ryan shrugs to his friends, and they laugh and walk away.

Now Annie's cheeks are burning. She has two classes with Ryan: PE but also English, which is her best subject. She opens her mouth, but he's already heading for the counter, and besides, it's not like she knows what to say. She looks round to see if anyone was listening, but people are absorbed by their own conversations, so she puts the last few cans in the fridge and picks up the empty basket.



But now Ryan's in the middle of the shop, right in her way. Her dad's back at the cash register, and Annie decides to wait till Ryan leaves so she doesn't have to walk past him. She surveys the shop, trying to look busy, and spots a guy standing at the other fridge. He has his back to her, and she can't see his arms, but there's something odd about his behaviour. Annie moves to get a better look just as the guy takes a can of drink and slides it up his sleeve. He puts his hands in his pockets and walks casually towards the door, head down so that his thick brown hair hides his face.

Annie clenches her fists. Her hands feel clammy. Her eyes dart towards her dad, and she motions towards the thief, who's almost at the door.

"Hey!" her dad shouts. The shop falls quiet. "Stop!" he says, striding out from behind the counter.

The thief starts to run, and the can drops out of his sleeve. It falls with a clatter, bouncing a few times before spraying open. Annie's dad stands in the doorway, watching the thief take off down the road. An excited crowd has gathered behind him, careful to avoid the fizzy puddle.

"Did you see that? He just bolted!"

"Who was it?"

"It's only a can of drink!"

"Oi, I got sprayed!" Ryan announces. He points at his socks. Annie can see a few damp patches. "My dad's a cop," he continues. "He definitely would've caught the guy if he was here."

Annie's dad comes back inside. His anxious face takes in the energised crowd. "No troubles," he says, but no one hears apart from Annie. "No troubles," he repeats, louder this time.

"My dad's a cop, mister," Ryan says. "Want me to call him?"

Annie's dad shakes his head. "No troubles." He picks up the sticky can and walks out the back. Something in the air dissipates once he's gone. The kids turn away from the puddle, and Annie goes to serve more customers.

When her dad returns with a bucket and mop, Ryan starts up again. "You're just gonna let that guy spray his drink and walk away?" he asks loudly. He checks to see if anyone's listening. Annie's dad dunks his mop in the bucket. The water's grey and chalky. When he pushes the mop over the floor, the grey water swirls with the pale yellow drink, making it all look like runny vomit.

"My dad catches bad guys all the time," Ryan says.

Silently, Annie's dad pushes the mop forward and back.

"But you're just happy to let him spray and walk away. You're the spray and walk away guy!" One of Ryan's friends sniggers. A few of the others shuffle and shift their feet. Ryan mimes mopping, and Annie's dad places the mop back in the bucket. The floor is wet and shiny. He looks over at Ryan, who's still pretending to mop, and frowns. The familiar heat burns Annie's cheeks, but it's different this time. The feeling is coming from deep in her belly.

"You're the spray and walk away guy, eh!" Ryan says again, eyes bright.



Annie's dad picks up the bucket. "Walk away. Yes, walk away," he says slowly. Ryan and his friends burst out laughing.

Annie's throat feels hot and tight. She forces out her words. "Stop it!" A hush falls. None of the kids at school have ever heard her use a voice like this.

"Stop what?" Ryan asks innocently.

"You know what. Leave." Annie places her hands on her hips and stares straight at him. From the corner of her eye, she sees an older boy frown.

Ryan breaks eye contact first. "Whatever, shop girl. We were going anyway. We'll spend our money somewhere else."

"It's Annie."

Ryan ignores this and returns his cola to the fridge. Then he leaves with his friends. The people in the dairy go back to talking, their noise loud enough to mask the sound of blood rushing in Annie's ears. The boy who frowned comes up to the counter with a packet of chips and smiles apologetically. Annie doesn't return his smile. She quickly serves the remaining customers, careful to avoid her father's gaze.

When he comes over and places a hand on her shoulder, Annie sees that his eyes are shiny. He's upset. Annie unclenches her teeth, tries to make her face less hard.

Her dad notices and smiles. He holds up a marker and a small piece of paper.

"Can you help me write a sign, Annie?" he says in Mandarin.

"What should it say?" she asks.

"Please don't tap the glass."



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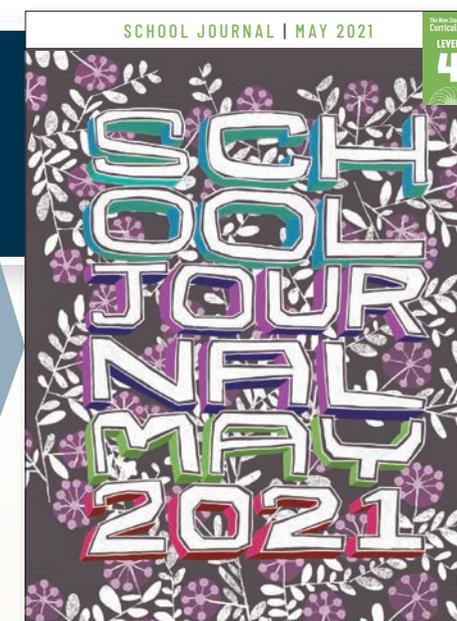
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