

Once at the mall

Maxwell Fletcher

I WAS EIGHT, maybe twelve.

My dad lived there when we lived there, and he stayed there when we left.

We would visit often. We would eat pizza and fried chicken and drink Bickford's cordial.

We regularly went to the mall with Dad to buy chicken and video games.

Underneath the abominable building there are places for cars, and for motor bicycles, for trolleys and for disabled folks. The doors opened for us, they knew (I knew not how), and rolled back with the slight creak of weather warping — it was so cold for most of the year (I recall watering cans filled with the contents of the kettle, grasped by frozen fingers, pouring their hot blood over a windscreen frozen opaque.) A small glass cabinet display was built into the wall to the right of the entrance, a large brass plaque proclaimed: 'On this very sight, not two hundred years ago they dug for coal, *here are the rusty spades and blunted nails to prove it!*' In front, ahead, two escalators ascended into a man-made paradise. Self-sustainable living reached its inevitable conclusion the mall — see the fat girls in the pink Wendy's uniforms? I would not be surprised to know they work here, they eat here, shit here, shower here, shop here and socialise here (with other fat girls in different pink uniforms).

So we rode the escalator. I shone my canvas shoes on the dirty plastic hair that embroiders the edges of the animated

stairs, existing, I assume, to prevent stray laces becoming tangled in the obstinate machinery. *Chugg Chugg Chugg*, the metallic carpet struggled under the weight of the eager shoppers — challenging my complete faith in the marvels of machinery — but ground on to spit us out into the horde, into the warm dead-air product of the heavy breathing of shoppers exhausted by their taxing existence I like to think, into the light, the thin, arrogant, indifferent neon light, and into the noise.

Every conversation that has ever taken place inside a shopping mall affirms my every isolation.

‘Oi bro don’t get that one it’s’ ... ‘Please mum I swear this is the last time I will EVER ask you for’ ... ‘One gigabyte, is that enough to’ ... ‘Hey I really like your’ ... ‘Where are you going?’ ... ‘I haven’t seen you in soo long, are you still with Jess?’ ... ‘Yeah, I totally saw her this weekend at the mall! Hey do you think you could buy’ ... ‘I love you’ ... ‘Nah, just get the scratchy I need this last’ ... ‘and then I shot him through the back of the’ ... ‘you are so not fat!’ ... ‘Oi that was so dog, no, no, you don’t even say’ ... ‘Just the double mint choc thick shake thanks, yeah with cream yeah’ ... ‘I love you’ ... ‘I can find the bathrooms?’ ... ‘I’m sorry sir did you say throbbing gristle?’ ... ‘You can’t smoke in’ ... ‘You can’t f\$!*\$#*g touch me pig’ ... ‘Dear heavenly father’.

The talk within the mall was cushioned by a barely audible ambient fog that slinked between legs and manifested itself in the hollow corners of the roof. I couldn’t see any speakers, but that just reinforced the belief that the mall music was in fact the mesmerising hum of some greater being manifesting itself within the walls of that twisted paradise, benevolently lulling his sheep into the lobotomy that is spending too long in the mall.

A shrill cry rang out above the mess of voices and cut through the fog. Most heads turned towards the escalator we had stepped off not a few minutes before (? time is vague in

there). This sound was different. This wretched plea was whetted with pain, innocence and helplessness; this was human. All heads turned, our heads turned. A girl not past four was kneeling at the mouth of the thing, screaming insolently, begging an indifferent machine — man-made though it was, though devoid of any of his compassion — to release her fingers from its grinding maw. She had, I assume, been flirting with the same black plastic brush I had absentmindedly dragged my shoe along not a few minutes before (though as I said, time is vague in there); however, the brush the girl had stroked existed not to shine shoes but to obscure the opening into which the rubber hand rail runs on its hidden journey back to meet, perpetually, the sweaty palms, nicotine browned fingers, long nails, hairy knuckles, swollen paws etc. of the people who file into this, their sanctuary.

The gripping rubber tongue and its grinding metal teeth would not, could not, compromise their task for bones or flesh, especially not those of an infant child — these would give very quickly.

I could hear the machine grumbling in a foul harmony with the child's pain-stricken wail; it was tiresome with its resistance, many were tiresome of, or perhaps not fit of stomach for the spectacle, and had wandered off into the warmth of complete familiarity, the warmth of monotony. I stood and watched; my father stood, holding his uninjured daughters to his side, and watched while they listened. I watched the girl's father dash over and, in a heroic rush of paternal adrenaline wrench her from the machine and hold her close to his chest. I watched him weep. I watched her weep, and I knew she had met pain for the first time. I watched the people disperse after noting she was missing parts of her fingers, and I watched the dammed crowd gush onto the downwards ramp. And then I listened, listened to the cold, indifferent hum of the neon lights, or was it the song of that omnipresent being

manifesting itself in the corners of the roof? Behind the walls and in the unseen parts of the escalators, chewing on fingers ...

It took so long for some humanity to respond to the call of anguish. It seemed like an age, the hot thick air slows everything down I guess, the hum dulls the senses — but, like I said, time is vague in there.



Maxwell Fletcher wrote this in 2013 when he was in Year 11 at The Illawarra Grammar School in New South Wales.