

BOOT CAMP

by Shanna Fa'aita

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The car was filthy. The same empty drink bottles, chip packets, and half-eaten sandwiches strewn across the floor – the same sour stink of creeping damp. Liyah could smell some tacky air freshener he'd spritzed before she jumped in – another failed attempt to mask the chaos.

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"Didn't get round to it. I will, though. Tonight."

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They drove in the strange half-light. Liyah liked this in-between time, with the streetlights still on and nobody up. Uncle Joey's fingers picked at the radio dial as he searched for stations, but he soon gave up. An awkward minute passed before he cleared his throat. "How's your mum?"

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"That's good."

"You should come over on Sunday, after church. She'd like that."

"Really?" Uncle Joey looked sceptical. He hadn't seen his youngest sister for a few months now.

"It'll show you're trying, yeah?" Liyah said. "She likes hearing about our sessions at boot camp."

Uncle Joey nodded. "I'll think about it."

Liyah's mum had always been close to Uncle Joey, but after he broke up with Liz, something in him shifted. He moved back from Sydney, tried to find a job. A few months went by. Then a few more. No job and still living with Nana. They began arguing – about his long-term plans, his friends, his drinking. Nana wanted him to make a clean break, maybe live with his cousin Sana in Auckland – but Uncle Joey wasn't interested.

Mum defended her brother. She told Nana to go easy on him. He just needed a bit of time, their support. Then came the fight on Mother's Day. Uncle Joey said stuff – Liyah never knew what – but he moved out that afternoon. Now he was living with his friend Sammy. Still jobless, still drifting. Sometimes he made boot camp, sometimes not. That was the deal. No one ever told Joey what to do.



At the community centre, Marcus was still setting up. Liyah loved the early morning rush that came from working out – Uncle Joey not so much, though some sessions were better than others. The first few minutes were always hell until they found some kind of rhythm. If they didn't, the torture went on and on.

"Let's go," Marcus called.

They started at the tyres. It was one of the worst places to begin, but Marcus believed in mixing things up. Crunches were rough, time trials were pretty bad, too, but Liyah especially hated the bulky, cumbersome tyres, which left dirty marks on her hands. Uncle Joey started the task of flipping them over, his face blank with effort. Liyah looked away. It was the same face she'd seen that night when Mum had picked her up from Sina's.

They'd been heading home to cook dinner – lasagne – but had needed tomatoes, so they stopped at the dairy. Liyah was walking back to the car, carrying the stupid can, when she saw him in the alley: Uncle Joey. He was nutting off in front of two cops, leaning sloppily against the fence for support. There was a carton of cigarettes on the ground. Maybe he'd nicked them; it was hard to tell what was going on. When one of the cops took out her cuffs, Liyah ran to get Mum.

They ended up at the police station, waiting on hard plastic chairs, dinner

forgotten. When Uncle Joey eventually appeared, he looked terrible. He was sober now, the shame on his face too much. They dropped him off at Sammy's, driving in complete silence the whole way.

Five more seconds, then they flopped onto the tyres to catch their breath. Liyah passed a water bottle to Uncle Joey, and he took long, gulping mouthfuls. Already his face was a deep red, and his T-shirt clung to his back. "You all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, doll. We're good."

"You know it." She held up a hand, and they slapped palms. Uncle Joey was in a good space. Determined. It was going to be one of their better mornings.

The hooter sounded, and they moved to the next station, where ropes had been carefully arranged on the Astroturf to form a horizontal ladder. Liyah watched as Uncle Joey went first, his arms and legs pumping like a mechanical toy. She followed, not minding the effort, then jogged back to the end of the queue.

A song by King Kapsi came on: "Salvation". It was an older one that Uncle Joey knew. He began to nod his head, his posture relaxed. He even sang along for a bit. The session ended with laps round the building. Liyah was dying – she needed food – but Uncle Joey was in the zone. He stayed by her side, encouraging her to ignore the tightness in her chest, her burning legs. She tried breathing slowly,

to push through the pain, but all the while, her eyes never left Marcus, willing him to call time.

When he finally did, she dropped to the ground in exhaustion. Uncle Joey waited patiently until she'd pulled herself together. "Nice work, Uncle."

Uncle Joey laughed. "You too, bud. Now breakfast. My shout."

She'd never seen him this happy. Their sessions were definitely helping.

Back at the car, Liyah waited while Uncle Joey rummaged in the boot. He wanted a clean shirt before they went out. "Where do you wanna get a feed?" he called.

It felt like a day to go someplace nice. "That café by the beach?" Liyah said.



Then she noticed them: Uncle Joey's old mates. Three of them in hoodies and trackies – their uniform – the same clothes Uncle Joey had started to wear. They hung around the back exit like three black crows.

"C'mon, let's go," she called. "I've got school at nine."

It wasn't too late. They could leave the carpark the other way.

Liyah held her breath, waiting for Uncle Joey to get in the car. When he finally hopped in, he wasted time adjusting the air-con. Then he checked his side mirror, getting ready to reverse out. It's OK, Liyah told herself, he might not see them.

But he did see them. His face closed in, and his hands began shuffling over the wheel like they had earlier that morning. "Just leave," she said quietly. "We don't have to talk to them."

Now the three men were right there. One of them, the older one, tapped on

the glass, smiled a too-big smile. Uncle Joey opened his window a little way and peered out.

The guy tapped again. It was an order, even Liyah could see that.

"What do you want? I told you I'm out," Uncle Joey said.

"No such thing. You know that."

Uncle Joey shook his head. "Forget about me."

"You need us."

"I don't. Get out of here."

He'd overstepped the mark. Liyah could feel her chest pulsating as Uncle Joey wound up his window and hit the auto-lock button. Then he shoved the gear stick into drive and shot forward.

An angry fist hit the car boot. One of the men called out. Liyah couldn't see which one, and she didn't catch what he said, but he yelled again, angrier this time.

"You need us, Joey."

illustrations by Andrew Burdan



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