

WAVE
LENGTH AJ BETTS

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$$\textit{Stress} = \frac{\textit{Force}}{\textit{Area}}$$

Earplugs aren't enough. Oliver covers his head with a pillow to muffle the clinking and clattering coming from the kitchen. But nothing can dull the sound of metal against metal at this time of morning.

He knows his mum is making an effort to be quieter. She's sliding spoons into the sink. She's easing trays onto the counter instead of slapping them down, but even so, it's enough to wake him and keep him conscious. Stainless steel wasn't designed to be used before sunrise.

The mobile phone tells him 4:16. Ideally, he'd have drifted right through to the 7 am alarm, then stayed in bed for another half or so, coasting in and out of dreaming.

But mornings here are mental and they're getting worse. With his bedroom so close to the kitchen, there's no chance of a sleep-in, and once he's awake it's all over. He hears every knock, scrape and chink.

'Turn the negative into a positive,' his mum had said yesterday. 'Think of it as extra time to study.'

'I *can't* study at 4 am!'

'There's no such word as ...'

'I'm *not* studying at 4 am. That's not normal. I need to sleep.'

'Well if you went to bed earlier ...'

'I can't ... I won't. This sucks.'

'Look,' she said, pointing a pink silicon spatula at him. 'You've got to make lemonade out of lemons. Besides, you know it's not forever — just until the new oven is in. Then we can both sleep till five, maybe even five-thirty. I'm doing my best, okay?' She handed him a packet of earplugs.

Oliver had suggested swapping rooms with Reagan and Lizzy, but his mum was right — his room is too small to fit two single beds. He has nowhere else to go.

'Cut me some slack,' she'd said.

But there's only so much slack you can cut at 4:17. Oliver peels the pillow from his head and shouts, 'Mum!' A crowing erupts from the rooster in the back yard, confused by an unexpected rival.

‘Mum!’ he yells again, sending the rooster into hysterics. But Oliver’s tired and shitty and doesn’t care if the crazy bird wakes the whole suburb. He yanks out the earplugs and fumbles about on the floor for his pyjama bottoms. He doesn’t know what he’ll say to his mother when he rips open his bedroom door, but he doesn’t get to find out. He trips over the rolled-up towel she’s wedged there in an attempt at soundproofing.

Susan looks at her son sprawled on the floor with his pyjama bottoms back-to-front.

‘What are you doing up so early babe? You should be sleeping.’

Oliver just lays there, the anger winded out of him.

‘I want to sleep.’

‘There?’

‘Anywhere,’ he says.

‘Sorry hon, I’m trying to be quiet.’

‘I know, but ...’

‘Go back to bed. I’ll mute the microwave.’

‘It’s not the microwave. It’s *everything*.’

Susan crouches on the floor beside Oliver. There are smears of dough on her cotton tracky-dacks. From where he is, Oliver can see sleep in the corners of her eyes. How can she get out of bed so willingly at this time, he wonders.

‘Everything?’ she asks.

‘Mum, I can hear you sift flour.’

Susan laughs. ‘Geez, you’re getting uptight. I’ll get you some herbal sleeping tablets.’

‘Why can’t you start baking later?’

‘Ol, you know why.’ She looks at him closely. ‘Why don’t you try my bed?’

Delirious, Oliver lets his mum lead him to the other end of the house. On her double bed, the purple doona is scrunched up and inviting.

‘Now sleep,’ she says, brushing his fringe with her doughy fingers.

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It’s almost eight when Oliver wakes again, baffled by the sweet scent of lavender. He’s nestled in the silkiness of purple pillows and it slowly dawns on him where he is. There’s something not right about sleeping in your mum’s bed when you’re seventeen. Smelling like your mother is not cool.

He’s been in the shower only thirty seconds when Lizzy starts banging on the bathroom door.

‘I’ve got to pee,’ she squeals.

‘Go in the laundry tub.’

‘No. I’m seven!’

‘Well hang on then.’

But Oliver wraps a towel around himself and opens the door. Lizzy is holding the crotch of her Bratz boxer shorts.

‘Don’t look,’ she shouts, sitting on the toilet.

‘Geez, I’ll try not to Liz.’

Back in his room, Oliver turns off the phone’s alarm which is frantically trying to wake him. His room looks the way he feels. Clothes are heaped in a corner. The desk is hidden under notebooks and dirty plates. The Physics notes and Chemistry revision papers are here somewhere, but digging doesn’t find them. At times like this he wishes he could be more organised, maybe with bookshelves or those magazine holders, or a filing cabinet like Jack has. Something.

Beside the light switch, the post-it note with ‘80%!!!!’ in red text reminds him of the urgency.

‘Mum, have you seen my Chem?’

Susan is in the kitchen, back from her early deliveries and well into the second shift. She’s packing cardboard trays with layers of Chunky Blueberry Blitzes. Her hands move dexterously — she’s a one-woman production line — filling each tray with nine muffins then covering them with baking paper. At the same time she is listening to the news on *Sunrise*.

‘Have you seen my Chem?’

‘Is Reagan up yet?’

‘I don’t know – I slept in! Where’s my Chem?’

‘Can you get Liz to wake him then?’

‘I’m up,’ Reagan says, leaning against the bathroom wall, waiting for the toilet. He bangs on the door with his fist. ‘Hurry up Liz! Do your hair in our room.’

Oliver groans. He’s knackered already and the day’s just beginning.

‘I can’t be late on my last day. Can you give me a lift Mum?’

‘You know I can’t Ol.’

‘Shit!’

Lizzy comes out of the bathroom with one big ugly pigtail sticking out the left side of her head. Reagan laughs but Oliver doesn’t have the energy.

‘That’s new,’ says Susan.

‘Katie has hers on the other side,’ Lizzy informs them. ‘We can be back-to-front twins.’

‘Have some brekkie, beautiful. Ollie, can you get the kids some toast?’

Oliver sucks in a breath to steady himself. Just once he’d like to sleep until a decent hour in his own bed. He’d like to make his *own* breakfast and get *himself* to school like everyone else he knows. But nothing in this house is ever normal and it’s always up to him to sort things out.

Susan writes on the sides of cardboard boxes with a fat texta – Chunky Pineapple Paradise, Chunky Date

Walnut Delight, Chunky Cherry Choc – while Lizzy sucks on some white chocolate buttons. Meanwhile, Reagan is in the bathroom, no doubt examining himself for signs of puberty. Oliver knows – he caught him once standing on a stool in front of the mirror.

‘I don’t want toast. Katie eats Cheerios for breakfast.’

‘Katie is *imaginary*,’ Oliver reminds them all.

‘Shh, she can hear you,’ Lizzy scolds.

‘I want poached eggs,’ shouts Reagan from the bathroom.

‘Ollie will make you toast. What do you want on it?’

‘Cheerios.’

When Reagan emerges from the bathroom his hair is gelled up in soft spikes, a style he’s been perfecting over the term. Since he hit Year Seven, Reagan’s hair has risen in direct proportion to his attitude. Oliver could chart the correlation on a graph.

He doesn’t have patience for hair experimentation at 8:11, especially when they’ve got to be at the bus stop at 8:20 sharp. He slides four pieces of frozen bread into the toaster.

‘We’re going to miss the bus Mum,’ Oliver says, grabbing a couple of muesli bars and apples and chucking them into his backpack. ‘Can you give us a lift?’

Susan carefully slides hot trays of Chunky Savoury Sensation out of the oven and onto the bench. ‘I have to

be at Zara's Café in ten minutes, then the Belly Deli. I don't start my school run until ten nowadays.'

'But you know it's my last day and they're handing back our practice exam results. I can't miss this. Have you seen my notes?'

'What colour are they?'

'What? They're white! Sheets of white paper with typed questions and handwritten answers. It's not that hard.'

'You're seventeen Oliver Price, you're supposed to organise yourself.'

'And everyone else,' he mutters.

Susan slips him a look that's supposed to make him feel guilty. It doesn't.

Reagan shoves two Chunky Choc Shock muffins into a plastic bag. He thinks he's too cool for sandwiches, or even lunchboxes. He gets away with too much, Oliver thinks. When he was that age, Susan would fill his lunchbox with ham and pickle sandwiches, carrot sticks, frozen juice and jam drop biscuits. And every afternoon, she'd reward him with Saos and Vegemite. They'd sit down then and fill in pieces of a jigsaw on the kitchen table.

But somewhere along the line, Susan's jigsaw days ended and so did the lunchbox patrol. The responsibility

was handed over to Oliver, but he's got more important things to think about. Like getting eighty per cent.

He pulls the anaemic toast from the toaster, smearing each slice with butter and peanut paste, then chucks them on the counter. 'Eat on the way. Come on,' he tells them.

'But I want Cheerios!'

Oliver sprinkles a handful of Cheerios over the peanut butter and shoves it under Lizzy's face. 'Here!'

As they leave, Susan kisses them on their foreheads. Her skin smells of cinnamon and nutmeg.

'Be good.'

She hugs them quickly, her hands enclosed in purple oven mitts. 'Love you,' she says, already turned away, peering through the oven door.

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They've missed the 8:20 bus and have to wait for the 8:45. Oliver and Lizzy sit on the bench, but Reagan stands, chomping on a last mouthful of toast. Year Sevens don't sit on bus benches, apparently. Oliver can't remember ever being so full of himself at that age. His stomach growls out loud, reminding him he'd forgotten to eat. Bloody muffins, he mumbles, and searches his bag again for the Chem practice test.

Reagan checks there's no one from school in earshot

before saying, 'Liz reckons you slept in Mum's bed,' followed with a smart-arse grin.

Lizzy's eyes go wide at being caught out as a dobber. 'There's a girl called Carol in Year Two who still does that,' she giggles behind her hands.

Oliver looks at his traitorous siblings. 'Shut up or I'll mess your hair. Both of you.'

Reagan takes a step back in defence. 'So it is true! My mates better not hear about this. I'd never live it down.'

Ollie launches himself at his brother but Reagan dashes out of reach, laughing.

'I'll get you later, pube-prober.'

'What's a pube?' Lizzy asks.

'Something Reagan's yet to find.'

Oliver empties his schoolbag onto the seat but there's definitely no Chem paper amongst the loose sheets, textbooks, wallet, phone, food and pens. He doesn't know how this could have happened. He's always been pretty messy, but can generally find important stuff when he needs to. Maybe the sleep deprivation is getting to him more than he realised. Mr Morgan will go mental.

Lizzy entertains herself by sucking two fingers and swinging her legs.

'Don't suck in public,' Reagan hisses. One of his classmates is approaching.

'Be nice to your sister,' Oliver says, 'or I'll tell your

friend that you still share a room with her.’

Reagan abandons them both for his buddy, making pretentious conversation about an unfair offside ruling in last week’s soccer round with Highgate Primary School. According to them, the ref’s bias was ‘geographically influenced.’

Reagan may look kind of similar to Oliver — with the same strawberry blonde hair, green eyes, and even the same weird webbing between his toes — but Oliver often wonders if they’re really related. How can two brothers be so different? Where does Reagan get his confidence and ego? There he is, parading about like he’s running for the US presidency. Reagan manages to shmooze through each day with slick style. He’s Mr Popularity with an arrogant streak that Oliver watches from a distance. Reagan wasn’t always that way — it’s taken years to become such a tosser. And their mother is letting him get away with it.

On the bus, Reagan sets himself up at the back, Lizzy chooses the front and Oliver opts for somewhere in the middle. Around him, kids of all ages talk and laugh the way they do every Friday morning, already in weekend mode. They’ve still got another two months of school before the Christmas holidays kick in, when their biggest decision will be which X-Box game to play first.

Oliver doesn’t have time for such luxuries. By the

end of today he'll have officially finished twelve years of schooling, with just his final set of exams left to make or break him.

The bus pitches forward suddenly and his stomach somersaults as if there's nothing to hold it in place. He's not ready for today.

Perhaps he'll feel liberated on the other side of his exams but right now there's a pressing dread. He's done all the calculations, based on the percentage weighting of each assessment task, and he knows exactly what marks are required to keep him on track. The number eighty drives everything. And it might be just out of reach.

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It was seven months ago at the Careers Expo that the number eighty became so significant. The four of them — Jack, Spud, Ruth and Oliver — had spied free Fantales at one of the university's Engineering stands, so they took refuge there, chewing and reading celebrity profiles out loud from the wrappers. They helped themselves to complimentary rulers and erasers.

It was when the five-minute video presentation began that their interest swung to something more substantial than lollies and promotional stationery. They saw a vision of their future.

The slideshow was of a promised land up north: FIFO jobs of eight days on, six days off; their own rooms with private en suite, Foxtel and in-house movies; a cricket pitch, tennis court, and twenty-five metre swimming pool; playing footy after work, and going for drinks. And more money than Oliver had ever dreamed of.

‘I’ll give you a tip,’ the rep said when the film was over. ‘Engineers are common on the ground these days. The best jobs, in terms of pay and choice, are in Geology. Mines are headhunting Geology students in their second year of uni. They’re starting on ninety grand a year. Think gold and iron ore. Think big. You’d be crazy not to.’

Ninety thousand dollars was more money than Oliver’s mum would ever make in a year, and it wouldn’t involve working his guts out at three am, or trying to please fussy café owners. Being a geologist was a career, more substantial than a small business built out of baked goods. It could be his ticket out of here.

Ruth popped another Fantale into her mouth and grinned. ‘Let’s do it.’

Maybe it was the buoyant atmosphere of the Careers Expo, or perhaps it was the sugar rush, but on that day a pact was made. All four of them were in on it, and the only thing they needed to get into Geology was eighty per cent. It had sounded easy then.

Oliver opens his Chem text, aware of how this Public Display of Geekiness will horrify his little brother. The chapter on Redox has been dog-eared, highlighted and covered with pencilled annotations, but parts of it are still foreign to him. Even the section on ionic bonding that he'd studied for his practice exams seems new again. The book shudders and shakes, the diagrams seeming to rearrange themselves on the page.

Jack had tried to explain it to him before the mocks. 'Remember *OILRIG: Oxidation Is the Loss, Reduction Is the Gain*. Jodi's big on mnemonics.'

'Jodi?'

'My tutor. You met her that time at my house.'

'I thought she was your Maths tutor.'

'That's Julie.'

Jack said this casually, as though every Year Twelve student had a whole army of tutors on standby. A current of envy surged through Oliver. How could he compete with that?

'Jack, how many tutors have you got?'

'Only three,' he shrugged.

Oliver looked at his friend afresh. Jack really had it good: the youngest child in a rich family that valued education and spent a fortune on helping him learn mnemonics. The enormity of Year Twelve packed a fresh punch to Oliver. Getting through required a team effort,

but he was expected to do it — and everything else — off his own back.

‘Relax, you’ll be fine,’ Jack said. ‘I forget most of what I do with the tutors anyway. I’d tell you if there were some magical strategies out there. You know that.’

Oliver wasn’t annoyed at Jack — they were mates. He didn’t begrudge him anything, but he felt ... let down. If he was upset at anyone it was his mum. Susan should be giving him the opportunities that other kids had, instead of putting her ‘business’ first. Those stupid muffins. She lavished more care on them than on her own kids, as if she thought they could change the world. As if they mattered.

The bus pulls to a stop outside Leederville Primary School and Lizzy and Reagan step off. Lizzy skips off towards the admin building while Reagan struts behind, keeping no less than ten metres away in case he should be recognised as her brother. Oliver likes the view of their backs as the bus lurches into action.

But the driver’s not paying attention and takes out the *No Standing* sign, swiping the side mirror clean off the bus. He hits the brakes hard and Oliver’s books slide off his lap.

‘Oh crap,’ the driver says. ‘Oh no.’

He reverses the bus, *beep beep beep*, into the *Bus Only* zone, then turns off the engine. Oliver kneels down,

reaching for his books on the dusty floor. He can hear the driver phoning headquarters.

‘No. Yeah. It jumped out at me. Ha ha. Like that one on St Georges Terrace. Ha! Yeah. Yeah, just a school kid and a few seniors. Yep, no worries.’

Books recovered, Oliver sits again, his face burning.

‘Well, there’s good news and bad news,’ the driver explains, turning to his passengers, his large arse still in the driver’s seat. ‘The good news is we’re all okay. The bad news is the bus is undriveable.’

‘But it’s just a mirror,’ Oliver hears himself say aloud. He’s about to go spare.

‘Occupational Health and Safety. And I won’t be arguing with policy. You can wait for them to come and fix it, but you’d be better off jumping out and getting the next bus.’

If Oliver was thinking rationally he’d realise that walking to school would only take fifteen minutes from here. It’s one of the first equations he learned in Physics: Speed equals distance over time. But his mind is scrambled with stress and weeks of interrupted sleep.

It’s 9:13. By now his whole Chem class will be in D12, holding the marked practice exams in their hands, going through the correct answers and making notes. Every minute he misses could be the difference between passing and failing his finals.

Time was more flexible when he was younger — he could muck around for hours without consequence. It didn't feel like every minute had to be accounted for the way it does now. He hasn't got time to waste, so he gets off the bus and calls his mum by the side of the road. He tells her to pick him up, that it's an emergency. The stress in his voice does the job because the van arrives in no time.



The Chunky Muffin van is not something you can miss. It has a giant fibreglass muffin on the roof, complete with chunky goo-like bulges and a corrugated muffin paper lining. There's even a big round 'strawberry' on the top, resembling a police car siren.

'Wow, your mum's the Chunky Muffin lady?' the bus driver says, admiring the van. 'You're a lucky kid hey. What's your favourite?' The driver seems to have nothing better to do than make chit-chat while waiting for the repair vehicle.

'I love the Chunky Fudgy Caramelooze,' he continues, licking his lips. 'But Chunky Oatylicious is good too. Bit more healthy. Good for digestion, you know? Fibre. But golly, look at it — that muffin could keep an Ethiopian family going for a year, I reckon.'

There's a commotion coming from one of the

Leederville Primary School classrooms as twenty kids lean out of the window to point at the amazing Chunky Muffin van. Reagan – whose soccer mates’ parents drive champagne-coloured four-wheel-drives – will be packing his dacks if he’s up there, Oliver thinks. The shared humiliation of the van and all things muffin-related is at least one thing the brothers have in common.

The outrageous van rolls to a stop beside the verge where Oliver is sitting. Susan leans over to wind down the window.

‘What’s happened Ol? Are you all right love?’

Oliver picks himself up from the grass and walks past the drooling bus driver. He sits in the passenger seat, closes the door and winds up the window. Soon, he’s swamped by the heady odour of two hundred muffins. It fills the front of the van like a doughy cloud.

‘What happened?’

‘The bus broke down.’

‘It didn’t hit you?’

‘No.’

Susan breathes with relief and then, ‘Oliver Godfrey Price! I thought you were in trouble.’

‘I am! I’m late for school and there’s only five minutes left of Chem!’

‘That’s not my fault.’

It’s Susan’s butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-my-mouth

innocence that strikes a match in him.

‘Are you serious? It’s *all* your fault! If you hadn’t woken me up with baking I wouldn’t have slept in your bloody bed and missed my alarm. If *you’d* got the kids ready like normal mums do, I could have found my fucking Chem, and I would’ve got on the right bus, at the right time, and be in class now, getting my practice results back and preparing for the most important exams of my life.’

‘They’re not the most ...’

‘They *are!* You should *know* that. You should be telling that to *me.*’

‘All right, they are. But you’ll do fine, you always do.’

‘I have to get seventy-three in Chem. Do you know how hard that is? And at least sixty-nine in Applicable Maths.’

‘You don’t have to—’ Susan begins, but stops herself. Now isn’t the time to remind Oliver that she never went to university, and neither did Richard Branson, ‘and look how he turned out.’

‘It’ll be okay Ol. You’ll do your best and it’ll be good enough.’

Oliver groans and punches the dashboard. She still doesn’t get it. It’s not about being good enough.

‘I blame *them,*’ he says, turning to address his anger at the steaming baked goods in the back. ‘These stupid

muffins have taken over everything: the kitchen, my sleep, your life. Do you know that's all Reagan and Liz eat at school?'

Oliver digs into his diary and pulls out a 'Letter of Concern' from Lizzy's Year Two teacher. It has a diagram of the healthy food pyramid stapled to it.

'The school's worried about what she's taking for lunch, and you're not. At home she eats chocolate chips and condensed milk on white bread and you don't seem to notice. Why should I have to worry? You should be worried about me; getting drunk, wagging school, wild parties.'

'Should I be worried?'

'I wish!' He takes another breath. Something in him says stop but he can't. 'You should be worried about Lizzy sucking her fingers when she's seven and having an imaginary friend. You should be worried about Reagan losing his head up his arse before he hits high school. This isn't my job.'

Susan leans her head against the window. 'You know this is a busy time for me.'

'What the hell do you call my exams? I've worked hard all year and it's going to shit because of your stupid muffins.'

'Oliver, those stupid muffins are keeping a roof over your head.'

The pounding in his temples worsens, but still he can't stop.

'Those muffins are more important to you than us. I'm babysitting when I should be studying. Shit Mum, I'm sooo tired. You bake in the morning, deliver, bake again, deliver, then sneak a nap in the afternoon. When do I get sleep? I'm supposed to be studying my arse off but I'm so shattered. I don't even have a tutor!'

'You know we can't afford that,' Susan snaps. 'I'm a single mother Oliver, do you understand how hard that is?'

'You're not the first single parent in the world. Dad could have done it.'

'Don't be cruel.' Susan's voice shakes. She grips the steering wheel in her small fists. 'I'm not just earning a living, you know, I'm running a business. It's tough having to do everything. I know you help. You're my right-hand man. I can't ...' she begins, then stops. She's always the one who says there's no such word as can't.

Before his mother turns her face to the window, Oliver sees a vulnerability in it. He's reminded of how she was in the time between her separation from his father and starting the business. In those three years she seemed hollow, as though she could crumble with a word. She was sad a lot, and Oliver didn't know how to fix her. He wants her to be happy — he does. But this time it's not about her.

Quiet settles between them. Oliver breathes in deeply, his lungs filling with humidity and spice. He hadn't wanted to upset her like this.

'My exams are going to kill me, Mum. I need eighty per cent. I *need* it.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I've got a week of study and I need quiet. And sleep. And a table to work at that isn't covered with goo. I need to just worry about me.'

A gentle tapping comes from outside the window, which is now completely fogged with the moist steam of the muffin load. Oliver winds the window down.

'Any chance of a Chunky Fudgy Caramelooze?' the bus driver asks. 'The big muffin is making me cravenous, if you know what I mean.'

Susan gets out of the van and opens the back to offer a muffin to the driver, free. Oliver sits, guiltless.

When she gets back behind the wheel, Susan drives Oliver to school in silence.

'I'll sort something out,' she says, pulling up.

Chemistry is over so he heads to A block for English. The teacher doesn't ask him why he's late, just hands him his marked paper with a mark of fifty-eight per cent. Outside, his mum teeters under the weight of three cardboard trays on her way to the canteen.