

The following short story was shortlisted in the Commonwealth Short Story Competition for 2006, receiving a 'Highly Commended Story' award. It was subsequently recorded by the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association in London (featuring the voice of Australian actor Matt Dyktynski), and played on radio stations across the Commonwealth in 2007, and has been published in a collection of short stories by Oxford University Press.

The Commonwealth Short Story Prize brings stories from new and emerging voices, often from countries with little or no publishing infrastructure, to the attention of an international audience. For more information:

<http://www.commonwealthwriters.org/short-story-2/>

Down South.

By Peter James

'That's the weird thing,' Mike announces, 'the other characters are solid - the one guy that doesn't work is Seinfeld himself.'

'What, are you kidding?' Ben says in a mock New Yorker accent.

'Seinfeld can't act. It's like a ... like a stand-up routine for him.'

'So the show shits you?'

'No. I like the show, it's Jerry that shits me.'

'Well Jerry *is* the show. If Jerry shits you, the show shits you.'

The engine of the four-wheel drive complains bitterly, the back wheels slip sideways and spew mud out across the bushes. The steady drone of the windscreen wipers is like the start of a Pink Floyd song. It's toasty in the cabin. It's icy outside.

'My wetsuit's wet,' Mike says dejectedly, 'I hate getting into wet wetties.'

'*Everyone* hates getting into wet wetties,' Ben challenges.

‘Funny how you hate it so much but it’s only a few minutes of being in the wet wetty and then you’re in the water anyway.’

‘But if I had a choice, I’d rather get in a dry wetsuit, *then* get wet,’ says Ben, happy in the knowledge his wetsuit is bone dry.

‘Get out and open the gate,’ Mike spits at him in disgust.

‘How much further you reckon?’

‘Gotta be close, don’t we?’ Ben says, levering his feet from muddy boots and placing them over the heater in the dash.

‘Your feet stink like shit.’

The ute edges up the track and around a tight turn, high pitched screams of the weather beaten bush on the duco fill the cabin as the ocean finally reveals itself.

‘Whoa! ... Solid! Gotta be ... 6 to 8 feet?’

‘Bigger I reckon,’ says Mike excitedly, ‘that’s a long way down there.’

‘Do we walk from here?’

‘Fuck knows... I s’pose.’

There’s a frantic ten minutes of action with boards whipped out of covers and clothes thrown haphazardly into the back seat as they ready themselves for battling the elements.

‘AAAAAAAARGGGGHH,’ Mike grimaces as he pushes a leg into the dank, cold wetsuit.

The realisation that the waves are considerably bigger than they first thought dawns on them both as they make their way along the narrow track. The cold sand is already leeching the feeling from their toes.

‘How big?’ Ben says with little confidence.

‘Big enough. Any theories on getting out?’

All excitement has evaporated now as they reach the shore. The ocean is steel grey and forbidding. The offshore wind whips past their ears angrily, racing out to sea to fan the huge waves breaking in slow motion in front of them. The ocean looks more alive than they feel. They are small and inconsequential. There is danger in the air and the cold underlines it. But they are committed, standing there in wetsuits on the edge of the shore. The waves push up the sand toward them, grabbing at their feet.

Ben’s eyes search the first hundred metres of water for a way out.

‘Through there I reckon.’

‘This doesn’t look like it’s going to be fun,’ says Mike.

‘A good caning won’t hurt us.’

Ben takes a step forward. A step he can’t take back. Another step and a wave pushes past. He launches forward and lands on his board, paddling hard.

Mike stares out to sea. Something’s not right. The sky is grey. The water is grey. His wet wetsuit is making him shiver. He takes a step. Then another. Then launches forward and lands on his board, paddling in behind Ben. Icy saltwater seeps through the seams of his wetsuit and the ocean heaves with delight.