

Kid in a bin

From opening till closing time, Anthony lives inside the wooden flip-top rubbish container which houses the plastic rubbish bags at McDonalds. His skin has become whiter and his brown hair is long and greasy – his eyes are cat-sharp. He is less than four feet high which allows him to stand up straight inside the bin. In the mornings there is plenty of room for him to stretch, scratch, turn around or even curl up and doze. By mid-afternoon the empty foam cartons of Big Macs and Cheeseburgers and McFeasts swell the plastic bag and choke out the light and space forcing him either to stand thin against the back wall or to lean into the rubbish, until one of the counter crew changes the bag.

At different times, Anthony touches his finger against the inside of the used chicken containers which are made from cardboard and have a small piece of tissue paper where salt sticks to the splotches of grease. Old men use the most salt, followed by boys, girls, older women and younger men. The least users are younger women – about the age of Miss Tomagin, Anthony's third class teacher, last year. By licking the salt stuck to his finger, Anthony guesses the age and sex of the chicken eaters. When the cartons come through the flip-top bin, he touches, tastes and guesses the owners before they reach the exit door. Anthony likes to watch the customers. For a really good look he waits for the flip-top lid to be pushed inwards by a depositor, otherwise he has to be content with one horizontal slit and two perpendicular ones about one centimetre wide surrounding the lid. Anthony's world comes in slices.

At 11.30pm the night manager switches the air conditioning off, closes and locks the restaurant, and Anthony comes out to make his dinner and prepare lunch for the next day. There is a mouse who lives in an empty Quarter-Pounder box alongside Anthony. They go in and come out, mostly at the same time. Anthony calls the mouse Nigel.

It is Sunday, 11.40am. Outside the wind spits needles of rain. The customers are bursting through the doors, shaking like washed dogs, and laughing. Anthony is almost asleep in his bin – the air is humid and smells of sodden shoes and wet hair. Outside his bin is a boy exactly the same height as Anthony. The boy sees Anthony's eyes as he pushes his tray of rubbish through the swing-top. He pushes the flap again, and Anthony ducks down inside. He is too late, the boy sees his head disappearing behind the garbage. The boy pushes the flap once more and then reaches his arm in as far as he can in the direction of Anthony's disappearing head. His arm is too short to reach Anthony. The boy's mother sees what he is doing and shrieks at him to get his hand out of the filth.

The boy goes to his mother. 'There's a kid in there.'

'Sit down, or I'll slap you.'

'There's a kid in the rubbish box, I saw his head.'

'Wait here, I'll get you another coke.'

The boy waits for his mother to reach the counter and then goes back to the bin. 'Hey, you in there.' He tries to see inside by holding the flap open. 'What are you doing in there? You're not allowed in there.' A group of high school girls are giggling and nudging each other to have a look at the boy talking to the rubbish box. 'Why don't you come outside?', the boy says. The high school girls splutter into their thick shakes. The boy's mother returns with the drink, which she decides to give him in the car.

'It's probably a cardboard clown, or something,' she says.

'No it isn't, it's got real hair and real eyes, and it moves.' The boy's mother sees the high school girls looking at her and drags the boy out into the rain.

Inside the bin, Anthony eats one of the three Junior Burgers he prepared the night before. He watches the boy being dragged to the door, and the coke being spilled as the boy looks and points back towards him. Anthony eats very slowly. Nigel is not in sight but Anthony pulls off a thumb-sized chunk of bun and places it in his box. A newspaper comes through the flap and Anthony rescues it, saving it for later, when the shop is empty. Almost every day something to read comes into his bin. He has a small collection of torn-out newspaper items and one colour magazine article which has a picture of him, his mother and father and his sister. The newspaper ones have pictures of him alone. He carries them all in the pocket of his jeans, which are so tight that he has long since stopped doing up the top stud. The newspaper cuttings have begun to crack and split along the crease lines, from repeated opening and folding with greasy fingers. The magazine article is his favourite. Throughout stretching days in the dark bin, he feels the wad squeezed into his pocket, waiting for the eaters to go and the noise to stop. On wet nights the closing of the store takes longer – the floor is washed twice by the tired counter crew whose lips press together and whose name tags flop in time with the swing and pull of the mops.

Anthony listens for the sequence; air conditioner shut down, lights out, door lock click, and total quiet, except for the refrigerators humming downstairs. He waits several minutes in case the night manager has forgotten something and because he likes to anticipate the coming pleasure. He opens the hinged side panel of the bin from where the rubbish bags are removed and steps out into the customer area. The space rushes at him. Anthony closes his eyes for a few moments and then slowly opens them. His legs and back are stiff and tight.

He sits at a side booth made of blue plastic and watches Nigel run to the kitchen. It is still raining outside, he can see the drizzle sliding down the outer windows. With just the dull security lights on, he can see no further than the

glass boundaries of the store. Once, earlier on, he attempted to look further by cupping his hands against the window and pressing his face against the pane, but all he could see was black, with some tiny lights too far off to matter, and some moths beating against the carpark lights.

He goes to the men's toilet, switches on the light and empties his bladder into the stainless steel urinal. He washes his face and moves it from side to side in front of the hot air drier. Holding his hair back, he inspects his face reflected in the mirror. There is a tiny freckle-like spot on the bony bump of his nose which he feels gently with his fingers, screwing up his eyes for a closer evaluation. The remaining skin is the white of his mother's scone mixture before it was cut into circles with a tumbler and shoved into the oven. Anthony leaves the toilet and goes into the kitchen. From the under-counter refrigerator he takes two containers of orange juice. He switches on the hamburger griddle and the french fry vat and sits at the booth near the security light. From his pocket he pulls out the newspaper and magazine articles. He opens them carefully, bending the folds backwards and pressing them into flatness on the table top. With his fingernail he levers up the edge of the foil top sealing the orange juice and tears it away, some drops spill on the newspaper. He brushes them away with his sleeve and reads again under his photograph, with his finger sliding along beneath the words.

8 YEAR OLD BOY STILL MISSING

The search continues for eight year old Anthony O'Neal who disappeared from his home on August 9th. A police task force has interviewed Anthony's school classmates, neighbours and relatives with no leads to the missing boy's whereabouts. Anthony's mother . . .

The griddle is hot and it is time to cook. Anthony stops reading and folds the articles back into his pocket. Outside he can hear the rain spitting at the glass, and the trucks changing gear in the distance. Nigel is running underneath the tables.

Anthony leans against the rubbish bag, he wants to go to the toilet and regrets drinking too much orange juice in the night. He concentrates on the customers through the slits. A tall lady with six children has come to have a birthday party. The children put on cardboard hats and make noises with balloons; one of them squeals every time the others take their attention from him – he is the birthday boy who shouts at his mother when he spills his thick shake across the table. His mother mops at it with table napkins and tells him he can have another one. He throws a piece of lettuce at the child opposite him who has turned his head away.

At the table alongside the birthday party sits a man and a girl. They are not talking, the girl has her back to Anthony and eats her chips one at a time and

licks her fingers after each one. The man reads the *Saturday Morning Herald* and Anthony can see only the backs of his hands and the top of his head. As the man lowers his paper to talk to the girl, Anthony wets himself. It is his father, except that he looks older and his skin looks greyer. The girl is his sister, Meredith. Anthony feels for used paper napkins in the garbage. He finds some and attempts to blot up the urine before it leaks under the wooden bin and out into the customer area. Some of it escapes and sneaks across the floor and under the seat of the birthday boy.

Anthony presses his eye up against the horizontal slit. It is his father. Meredith appears to be bigger than he remembers. The floor crew supervisor discovers the leaking bin and despatches a mopper to fix it. Anthony wriggles around to the other side of the bin to avoid detection when the side panel is opened. There is something he wishes to tell his father. A message he wants to pass to both of them. He takes an unused napkin from the bin and feels around until he locates a sundae container with some chocolate flavouring still in the bottom. He dips his forefinger into the container and prints his message in chocolate letters across the napkin. He folds the napkin delicately, careful not to smear the sauce all over the paper, he places it in an empty Big Mac box and watches through the crack. When everyone in the customer area is looking at something other than his bin, Anthony flicks the Big Mac box through the swinging flap and on to his father's table. Meredith jumps and showers chips over her father's paper.

'Someone threw a Big Mac at me', she says.

'What?' her father puts down his paper and collects the loose chips.

'Someone threw this at me', she says again, picking up the box and looking towards the birthday party group. She opens the box and takes out the napkin, unfolding it carefully. She wrinkles her face at the chocolate sauce.

'Throw it in the bin, Meredith', he says.

'It says words, Daddy.'

'What do you mean?'

'The chocolate says words.'

'Let me see.' He reaches for the napkin. 'It does too.'

'What does it say?'

'It says STAY . . . OUT . . . OF . . . THE . . . something, . . . STAY OUT OF THE . . . SUN.'

'What does that mean, Daddy?'

'I don't know.' The man's face looks puzzled. He stares at the birthday party group for a long time. There is no one else close enough to have thrown a box on to their table. He places the napkin and the box and the stray chips on to a tray and goes to Anthony's bin. He tilts the opening flap and tips the tray's contents in. Anthony has a close-up flash-view of his father's face. He sees the

same ache as he sees in the men's toilet mirror. He watches his father and sister disappear through the exit door.

And the days and nights pass. Anthony's father and sister do not come into the restaurant again. Nigel becomes sick from eating rat poison and a lot of his hair falls out. Anthony drinks less orange juice and keeps checking his face in the toilet mirror. He cuts his hair with scissors from the manager's office. One night the manager comes back an hour after closing. Anthony is in the toilet. He switches the light off and hangs on to the clothes hook behind the door of the second toilet cubicle. The manager goes to his office. Anthony waits behind the door. There is a new message written on the back of the toilet door, he has not seen this one before, it says – 'Flush twice – the kitchen is a long way off.' Anthony does not understand the message. If the manager comes into the toilet, Anthony will lift his feet off the ground by holding on to the clothes hook. There is no sound coming from the manager's office. Anthony waits. He thinks of being inside his bin curled up against the fat of the plastic garbage bag, with the murmur of customers and FM music filtering through – impregnable. The fear of being discovered outside his shell is worse than nakedness – worse than peeling the rind of his sanctuary.

Anthony feels something brush against his ankle. In the darkness, his eyes search for movement. It is a large tom cat. The manager has brought his cat to hunt for Nigel. Anthony thinks that Nigel will die quickly this way. He kicks the cat in the stomach, anyway. It hisses and runs out of the toilet.

Within an hour the manager is gone. The restaurant is safe again and Anthony prepares his next day's lunch. He sees Nigel run into the kitchen and he smiles about the big cat. Waiting for the oil to heat, he spreads his collected articles on a table top – he smooths the magazine one, and looks at the picture of his family. He remembers when it was taken – on Meredith's fifth birthday, she got a bicycle with trainer wheels and it was in the background of the photograph. Anthony remembers giving her a large hazelnut chocolate which got left in the sun and which stuck to the foil and would only bend and stretch, rather than snap off in pieces.

Where the paper has been creased, some of the letters of the words have come away but this does not disturb Anthony, he has memorised most of them. He slides his finger under the words beneath the picture of his family. He reads aloud as he was taught in school, and sounds out the difficult words which like many messages to Anthony, don't make much sense.

Missing schoolboy, Anthony O'Neal pictured here with his parents and sister, Meredith, was last seen at his home on August 9th. Police believe his disappearance may be related to the death of his mother six weeks earlier. Mrs O'Neal died of metastatic melanoma, of which she was diagnosed six months previously.

(Malignant melanoma is a virulent form of skin cancer caused in most cases by exposure of skin to the sun.) A large number of reported sightings of Anthony have been investigated by the Police, with no success to date. Fears for the boy's safety have increased as no indication of . . .

The griddle is hot and it is time to cook.

Anthony peers out through the horizontal slit in the bin. It is cold outside and the faces of the seated customers go pink around the cheekbones from the warm McDonald's air. The rubbish comes in, tipped from its plastic trays. Anthony waits with Nigel for the store to close.

MICHAEL O'NEILL

Upheavals

For weeks now they've been digging up the road.
Mustard-coloured gas-pipes. Cordoned trenches.
'It's worse than the War!', grumbles a neighbour
– Weather-beaten veteran of the terrace.

Our doors close on a drill
That jars the chill afternoon. I drop my bag,
Uncurl numbed fingers, then glance at my watch.
Good . . . Enter the man from the *Halifax*

To check our loft-conversion. 'My bolt-hole',
I joke, 'should our adoption plans work out'.
He smiles politely. While I lead him up,

A young girl – local – maybe shivers
In a bus-queue, enduring her secret . . .
Clouds float above skylights. She counts the months.