

Martin Smith's first cut

Pat HOFFIE

Martin Smith bought his first camera when he was in year nine. It was a 35-millimetre SLR - one of a batch that his school was selling off as they moved over to new courses in film and TV. Photography was being dropped from the curriculum. "It was the only subject I was good at," he says.

A kind of poignant humour is never too far from Martin Smith's work. It stops just that bit short of sentimentality and seems to enjoy the dangers of teetering on the edge of cliché. There is also what might be described as an in-built self-destruction in many of his series. In the cut text series, hand-cut letters perforate the surface like a net, and lie on the floor beneath the works, in front of the feet of the viewer. This form implies that there are at least three planes of consideration important to the understanding of this series: the plane of the floor (the point of view of the viewer); the surface of the image itself (photograph punctuated by text); and the space that might lie behind the image.

Many of the images Smith uses come from the places of his childhood and early adolescence: Brisbane bayside suburbs with wistful dreams of elsewhere captured in names like Shorncliffe or Redcliffe or Nashville, where Tanya from the chemist shop - the girl from *The Two Shops Shared a Car Park* (2006) - worked. Other images come from inner city suburbs taken much later in life. But the texts Smith lays over these images are never directly linked. They come from different times and serve not to explain the image, rather text and image sit on top of each other as arbitrarily selected aspects of a life lived.

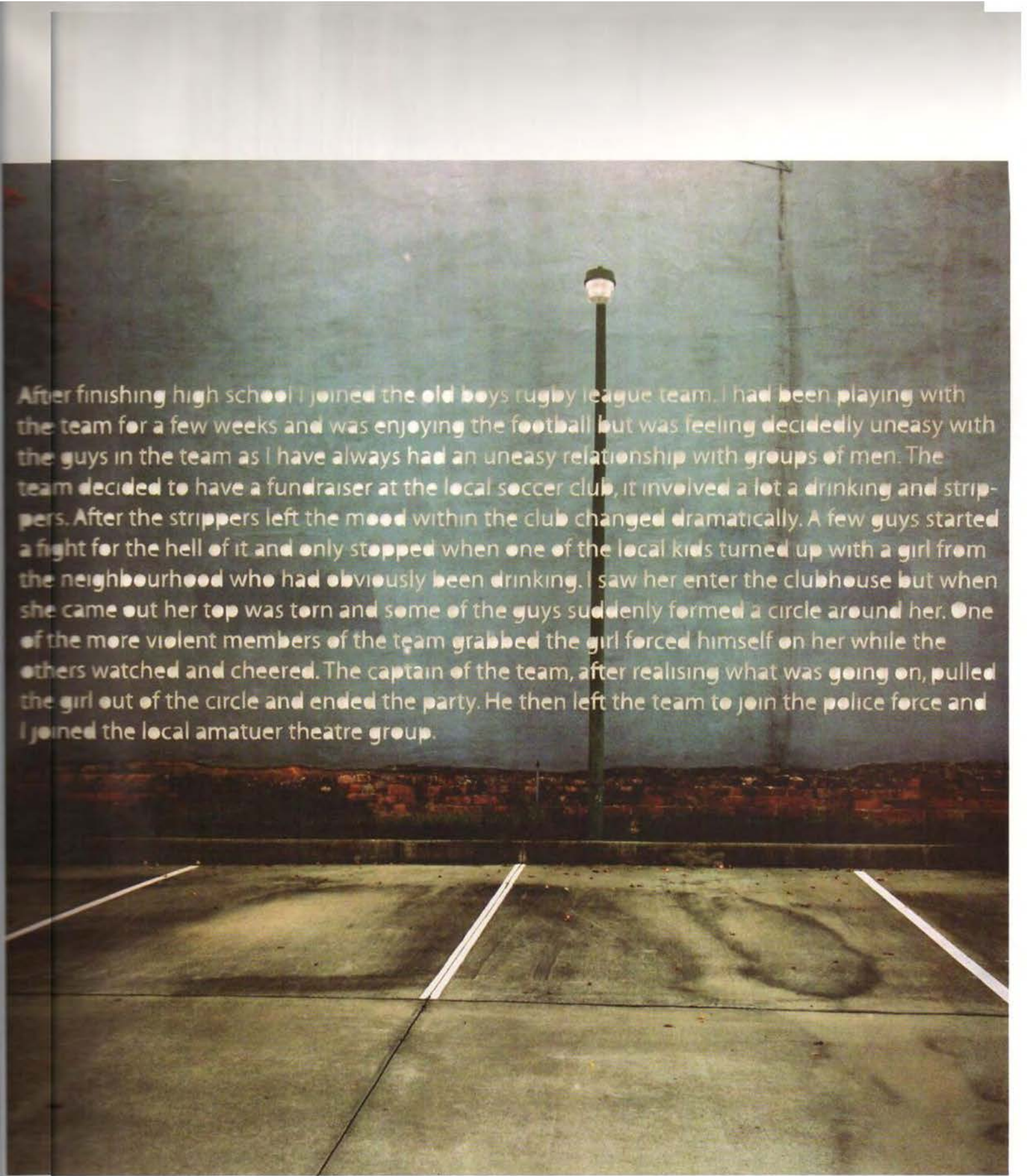
Except that even the briefest look at the cut text series throws open questions about just how that selection might have been made.

Martin's first cut text work was made in 2004 after the death of his father. Titled *Ronald Desmond* (2004), the words of Johnny Cash's 'I Walk the Line' are incised into a long (1.5 metre) narrow image featuring a blurry snapshot landscape. It's true that his father had been a Johnny Cash fan, but he'd also been a Neil Diamond fan and a Waylon Jennings fan. There'd been plenty of lyrics to choose from. But like so much of Smith's work, this piece, and this series, has drawn strength from the artist's keenly refined ability to make precisely the right choice, bringing together exactly the right tentative couplings. There is a mesmerising awkwardness to these introduced relationships between wilfully selected amateur images and incisive texts.

The letters cut through and into the still banality of the scene. "I keep a close watch on this heart of mine / I keep my eyes wide open all the time." The words are a paean and an elegy. And they are so well known, so completely linked to a time and a place and a particular delivery that they cut through and into the featureless sameness of the suburb like a wound.

This particular marriage of art to text confirms that the artist is well aware of the dangers of flirting with responses that are too easily associated with a pop-culture approach to memoir. The work titled *Just for One Day* features a mundanely bureaucratic office interior sliced through by the words of David Bowie's 'Heroes'. In Smith's work, bland walks closely by the side of a heroic propensity to dream.

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After finishing high school I joined the old boys rugby league team. I had been playing with the team for a few weeks and was enjoying the football but was feeling decidedly uneasy with the guys in the team as I have always had an uneasy relationship with groups of men. The team decided to have a fundraiser at the local soccer club, it involved a lot a drinking and strippers. After the strippers left the mood within the club changed dramatically. A few guys started a fight for the hell of it and only stopped when one of the local kids turned up with a girl from the neighbourhood who had obviously been drinking. I saw her enter the clubhouse but when she came out her top was torn and some of the guys suddenly formed a circle around her. One of the more violent members of the team grabbed the girl forced himself on her while the others watched and cheered. The captain of the team, after realising what was going on, pulled the girl out of the circle and ended the party. He then left the team to join the police force and I joined the local amateur theatre group.

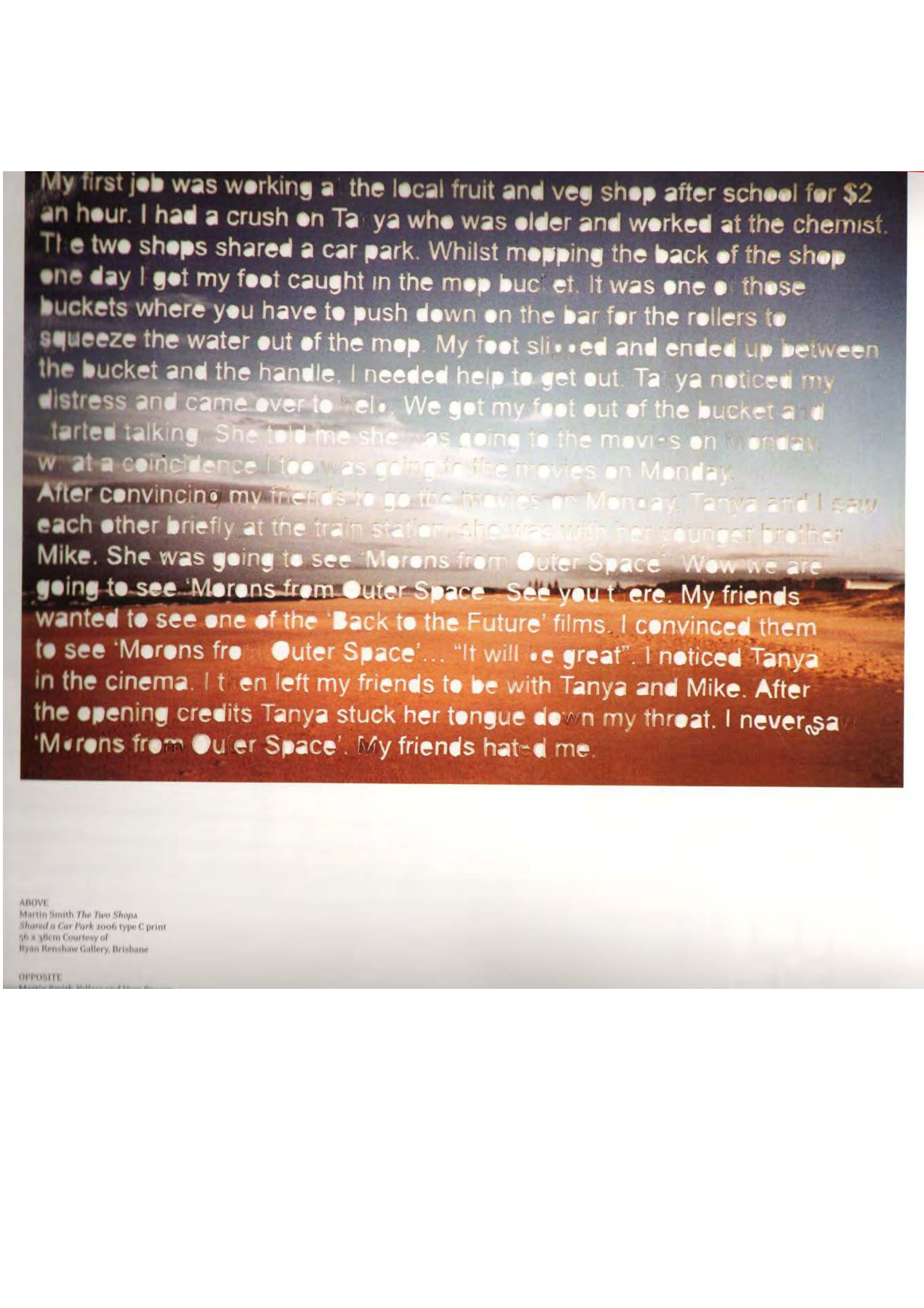
Martin Sharp: *After Finishing High School* 2006 type C print
100 x 100cm Courtesy of Ryan Reynolds Gallery, Brisbane



I had been living with Uncle Vincent's family for a few days and not really enjoying the experience. Uncle Vincent's youngest daughter was being a bitch, I didn't know how to use the electric blanket so at night I was slowly being poached in my own sweat, Uncle Vincent had forced me to eat a pea (I hated peas) and they ate Weet-Bix not Vita-Brits. Lost, confused and alone I had no idea what was going on. At breakfast one morning I was sitting down eating my inferior breakfast bix when the phone rang, Vincent answered it and called Aunty Margaret into the room. She emerged a few minutes later obviously upset but trying to hold back the tears. He then called his eldest son Warren into the room with the same reaction. Peter then Sharon was next, both returning to the table upset with Sharon crying next to her mother. I was stunned - what had happened to their family to warrant such a reaction. I was then called into the room. I had never been in there before, as I was not normally permitted. Uncle Vincent sat me at the end of the bed, as I looked around I noticed that they had a really nice electric bedside clock, yellow and very spacey, he proceeded to tell me that my sister was diagnosed with bone cancer, it was rare and the only option was to amputate her left leg.

Amputate meant chop off - They used a saw - A wooden leg - You will be staying with us.

It was then I broke down, I didn't know what anything meant. I just wanted to go home.

A photograph of a sunset over a beach. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, with the sun low on the horizon. The beach is in the foreground, and the ocean is visible in the distance. A large block of text is overlaid on the image, written in a white, sans-serif font.

My first job was working at the local fruit and veg shop after school for \$2 an hour. I had a crush on Tanya who was older and worked at the chemist. The two shops shared a car park. Whilst mopping the back of the shop one day I got my foot caught in the mop bucket. It was one of those buckets where you have to push down on the bar for the rollers to squeeze the water out of the mop. My foot slipped and ended up between the bucket and the handle. I needed help to get out. Tanya noticed my distress and came over to help. We got my foot out of the bucket and started talking. She told me she was going to the movies on Monday, what a coincidence I too was going to the movies on Monday. After convincing my friends to go to the movies on Monday, Tanya and I saw each other briefly at the train station, she was with her younger brother Mike. She was going to see 'Morons from Outer Space' Wow we are going to see 'Morons from Outer Space' See you there. My friends wanted to see one of the 'Back to the Future' films. I convinced them to see 'Morons from Outer Space'... "It will be great". I noticed Tanya in the cinema. I then left my friends to be with Tanya and Mike. After the opening credits Tanya stuck her tongue down my throat. I never saw 'Morons from Outer Space'. My friends hated me.

ABOVE
Martin Smith *The Two Shops*
Shared a Car Park 2006 type C print
56 x 38cm Courtesy of
Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane

OPPOSITE
Martin Smith *Yellow and Blue* 2006 type C print
56 x 38cm Courtesy of
Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Brisbane