

With all the addled
insight of a
teenager halfway
to manhood,
Casey Tunks gets
ready to chase
his dreams.

Story Trent Dalton
Photography Russell Shakespeare



e's afraid of two things – spiders and adulthood. He thinks his mum is crazy, ever since she chased him with a bamboo stick threatening to thrash him for a misdemeanour he can't recall because there have been so many misdemeanours in 15 years. He has a school friend named Luana who loves him like a brother because she can tell him things that she would never tell anyone else.

He thinks his father looks like a gorilla when he plays *Call of Duty* on the Sony PlayStation. He is trying to introduce a new adjective into the teenage lexicon: "damon". He works Sundays at the BP service station near his family's home in Wamuran, 6km from Caboolture to the north of Brisbane, with his ►



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older sister, Amber, a 23-year-old red-haired lover of birds, horses and dogs. His favourite band is Breaking Benjamin. His favourite film is *Dude, Where's My Car?*

He dated Luana in Year 7. She dumped him on Valentine's Day. He isn't sure why any 15-year-old would want to kill themselves, nor why Queensland has the highest incidence of youth suicide in Australia, but he suspects it might have something to do with isolation and pressure and friends who aren't really friends and the fact a place as rural and numb and dead and so utterly *mum and dad and the horses* as Wamuran is so tragically lacking in a skateboard park that he was forced to write a letter to his local council:

Dear Blah, Wamuran needs a skate park. We should be keeping up with all the other towns in the area. Blah, something, blah. Teens have nothing to do so they hang around the shops and stuff and they get in trouble for loitering. Something, something, thanks. Sincerely, Casey Tunks.

His room smells like spray-on deodorant with hints of sweaty sock and a possible banana hidden deep within his built-in wardrobe.

His life and mood from Monday to Friday are largely determined by the crumpled A4-sized piece of paper on his bedside table. It's a printout of the Year 10 timetable for his school, Grace Lutheran College, Caboolture, a cluttered graphic of double-maths stormclouds and infrequent sun rays of afternoon sport.

Today is Saturday. Saturday is *damon*. He's off to the city. The city is *damon*.

A collection of soft-drink can pull rings hangs from the handle of the bedroom sideboard. A row of Lemony Snicket hardbacks. An Egyptian smoking pipe. A small backpack over his shoulder. Purple Vans sneakers. A blue flannelette shirt over bony, sun-browned arms. Blue denim skinnies. Ready. Ready for anything and nothing in particular.

Casey likes to lean. He leans against walls, leans on the back of council benches, leans on the edge of the family lounge suite. He's in a constant state of cool repose, or "chillaxing". In the kitchen at eight on this Saturday morning, he rests his weight on his right elbow and chillaxes on the bench near the sink.

His 44-year-old mum, Jane, stands beside him sipping coffee. His 45-year-old dad, Warren, rubs weary eyes. Warren is an earthmover working in the mines in western Queensland. He works five days on, five days off.

Jane loves her youngest child with such intensity that the thought of his birth – the thought of seeing his face for the first time – brings tears to her eyes. She lets him know she loves him by telling him she loves him.

Warren shows his love with a laugh and a scruff



of his son's hair. He shows his love by spending four hours in the work shed with Casey welding a snapped pole on a go-kart. Warren can build things with his hands and he built a life for his family, created a rural paradise for his five kids to grow up in, a sprawling brick-and-timber home on a gently rolling slope trod by horses and five irrepressible dogs. He put in an inground pool. And a barbecue area where Casey and his sister and three older brothers – James, 18, Ross, 19, Brett, 22 – could hold parties. But Warren never left room for a City Beach store, a McDonald's and a Tokyo photo booth.

Warren's four-wheel-drive pulls up at Caboolture railway station. "Got your go card?" Warren asks.

"Yeah," Casey says.

"Got money on it?" Warren asks.

"Yeah," Casey says.

"Back by 2pm," Warren instructs.

Casey nods, sliding out of the front passenger seat. "Back *by* 2pm, not leave at 2pm," Warren clarifies.

Casey laughs: "By 2pm. I got it." Trust.

Almost a year ago, aged 14, Casey arrived unexpectedly at the door of his home. He had a bleeding gash on his knee. He was incoherent; dazed. Jane and Warren thought he was concussed. He mumbled he was going to the toilet and on his way from the toilet to the shower he passed out. Returning to consciousness, he explained that he had consumed a large volume of cheap liquor in an extremely short period of time.

"Fessin' up to my parents that day, that was

the hardest day of my life," Casey says. "Because I'd broken their trust." He swipes his go card at Caboolture train station. "But I've got it back now," he says. "I don't touch alcohol now. It hurts. That's what I learned that day."

The go card reader flashes: "Insufficient funds". He slips \$10 into a pay machine.

"They're pretty awesome, Mum and Dad," he says. "But they frustrate me all the time. Because they're pretty dopey. They don't really understand stuff. Like, normal people stuff. They're pretty weird. They don't understand stuff, but then you try to explain it and they reckon they're right. But they don't understand. I just give up and go to my room."

His mum and dad each created Facebook home pages to stay in touch with their kids; to get an insight into the ways of the young. Jane's Facebook photo shows her laughing, riding a skateboard in a bicycle helmet, beside a message: "It's better to have a few true friends than lots of fake friends."

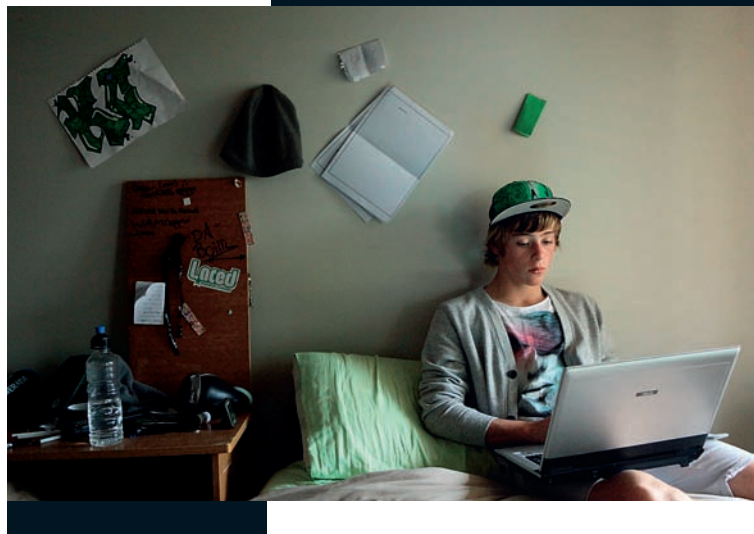
Casey's friend Jade is waiting at the platform wearing a shirt showing an astronaut scratching a turntable. He wears a leather necklace holding a stick of green jade. Jade's a true friend.

The boys meet friends Beth and Danielle on the train. "There's nothing going on between us," Casey says. "We're all just mad friends."

It's an hour-long train ride to Central station. The group shares a four-seater booth on the train across the aisle from two senior women in taffeta dresses, sapphire blue and deep purple, with decorative sunhats. The women wear white plastic name tags: "Bev" and "Shirley".



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"I got a haircut," Casey announces. He had a fringe that fell over his nose. Then he gave himself a buzz cut. "It looks golden!" he shouts. Jade kicks a random foot in Casey's direction. "Stop saying 'golden'," Jade shouts back. "It's not working."

"What?" Casey says. "It's working, 'golden'! I love it: 'Golden'!"

Bev and Shirley grip their handbags on their laps, staring at the group the way they might regard a Reeperbahn burlesque show.

"Guess what?" Casey says. "I left my headphones at school! Have you got your beads?" Jade passes Casey a set of earphones. He plugs them into an iPod, listens to a song by Breaking Benjamin called *Dear Agony*:

"Dear Agony / Just let go of me / Suffer slowly / Is

this the way it's got to be? / Don't bury me / Faceless enemy / I'm so sorry / Is this the way it's got to be? / Dear Agony."

Facebook statuses are updated by phone. "We're not seeing a movie today," Jade says.

"Every time we see a movie something bad happens," Beth says.

Last time the gang of four saw a movie, a friend was dumped before the opening credits and the event destroyed the movie-going experience for the friends of the girl in question, as well as the girl in question.

A well-regarded schoolmate has sent Casey a text message. "He's my boy," Casey says.

"No, he's *my* boy," Jade contends.

"No," Casey stresses. "He's my boy because I'm his mum!"

Bev and Shirley share looks of confusion.

A look of dread fills Jade's face. "Guess what? Mr Miles is talking to me on Monday about the wall," he says.

"But you didn't do that?" Beth says. Casey and Jade share conspiratorial looks.

"But why is Mr Miles talking to you?"

"Because he's acting in Swinny's job?"

"No, he's not."

"Wait, what is Swinny's job?"

The group goes quiet, pondering Swinny's job, then heads begin to bang to a shared song. "This band is *sooooo* gay," Casey says.

Danielle is angry with her dad. Before he dropped her at the railway station he warned her about messing around with boys. She hates the fact he mentioned this because the insinuation that she would mess around with boys insults her.

"I think the world's going to end today," Beth says. This sounds appealing to Beth's friends. "Did you hear about that Jesus dude, he reckons he's Jesus reincarnated," Beth continues.

"My stomach is rumbling," says Danielle.

"Have you ever heard of this thing called breakfast?" asks Beth.

Casey scans Jade's face. "Hey, where's your earring?" he asks.

"My mum made me take it out," Jade says. "She's like ... " Jade does an exceptional impression of a harried suburban mother.

"... '*It's non-negotiable!*'"

The group howls with laughter. "She went off!" gasps Jade, clapping his hands, causing Bev to turn her head to the train's window, a look of bewilderment on her face as this alien world rushes by in blurs of green and gun-metal grey.

BRAD THOMSON DIED IN A FREAK TRAIL BIKE

accident during his school holiday break. It was September last year. He was 14 years old and loved by all who knew him, including his longtime friend Casey. Brad was test-riding his new motorbike on his parents' property in Woodford, 20 minutes west of Caboolture, when he crashed into a fence. Some 200 people attended his funeral at nearby Kilcoy Memorial Hall. Casey saw attendees spilling out into the carpark and thought that was a fine tribute to his late friend, a boy he believed was incapable of being unkind to another human being.

Casey's been thinking a lot about Brad lately. "He was just so young," he says. "Fourteen, that's nothing."

Casey sips a Top Deck thickshake in the McDonald's seating area at the bottom of the Myer Centre in Brisbane city. Jade, Beth and Danielle eat cheeseburgers and fries, nodding heads sympathetically – each of them possessing, in this quiet moment, the conversational maturity ►

and grace of diplomats. Casey speaks: “I was up at the Whitsunday Islands with a friend sailing and we went on Facebook because we had a Wi-Fi connector. He was just like, ‘Brad died’. ‘Brad who?’ ‘Brad Thomson’. And I was like, ‘Nut, couldn’t have happened.’ And it was true. He was dead.

“And that same year, at Christmas, Brad’s grandad, Col, died. Col was the nicest man. He was the school bus driver for years.”

Casey stirs his thickshake with a straw, pushes it away across the table. “I keep thinking about Brad’s parents,” he says.

Life’s short. People die, even teenagers. The thought has brought a seriousness to the table.

They discuss drugs: “It’s always around but, really, why would you?”

They discuss divorce: “I don’t have many

stealing glances at a male shop attendant, early twenties, hair like ’80s goth band The Cure’s Robert Smith. “See that guy over there, he jerks,” Danielle says. Jerking, she says, is a form of dance. It’s breakdance meets hip hop meets Africa meets tight clothing.

“Go ask him to jerk for you,” Beth whispers to Danielle.

A female shop attendant hands Casey a pair of tight black jeans in his size. “Just make sure you try them on before you cut them,” she says.

Jade tries on an Eskimo hat. “Let’s get Mr Miles a hat,” he says.

“Oh, hells yeah!” Casey laughs.

The group walks to City Beach, to Jay-Jays, to a store called Off Ya Tree that sells marijuana bongos and pipes. In a women’s fashion store called Ice, the girls try on dresses while Casey

Casey runs a thick blob of waxy gunk through his hair. “It smells golden!” he says.

“Stop saying that word,” Jade says.

Casey laughs: “All right, that smells *diamond*, okay? That smells *diamond*!” Jade rolls his eyes.

The group poses for a photo. They beam; bright, wide, joyous 15-year-old smiles. They can write a message on the photo. Beth taps her right forefinger on a computer keyboard. “What should I write?” she says.

“What about ‘Best friends?’” suggests Danielle. Cautious glances are shared among the group. An awkward silence. Danielle drops her head selfconsciously. Then Casey smiles, gives a gentle nudge to Danielle’s shoulder. “Hells yeah!” he says.

ONE MONTH LATER, ON THE FIRST DAY OF

mid-year school holidays, Casey sits on the family lounge suite rubbing his eyes with his palms. His friend Hayden sits at the family computer checking his Facebook updates. Hayden is a true friend, going back to pre-school. He calls Jane “Mum” and Warren “Dad”. Jane loves it. Warren hates it.

“There’s 150 of us online,” Hayden says. “Slow day.” They were up late last night in the den downstairs playing *Call of Duty*.

“It’s been a hectic month,” Casey says. “School and assessment and stuff. I did pretty well. I’d like to do better, but I don’t know. I get a bit lazy.” He cracks a knuckle. “And I’ve now gotta be figuring out where I’m gonna go with the rest of my life. And that’s just ... really ... difficult.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I guess I’m worried about just ... not getting anywhere.”

Casey and Hayden plan on de-stressing today, using his mum’s exercise fitball and ten life jackets. “You get, like, ten normal-sized life jackets on and then you put a small-sized life jacket around your head,” explains Hayden. “Then you get one person to take an exercise ball to the top of a hill. Then he runs down and hits the person in the head with the exercise ball and ...” Casey leans forward in hysterics. “... and they just go flyin’,” he says.

Hayden clicks the mouse. “Oi, Jess is online,” he says. Jess is Casey’s new girlfriend.

“In Year 8 she came to my school and then she left and then she came back at the beginning of Year 10 and we just kinda started talking and then it happened,” he says.

“She came to your party,” Hayden says, twisting barefoot on a swivel chair.

“Yeah, she came to my party. Nothing bad happened, but my mum doesn’t really like her that much. It was nothing bad. She was just making out with my mate Cody. And my mum walked down and saw them and she got angry ▶



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friends whose parents are actually still together. It’s like having divorced parents is the normal thing.”

They discuss betrayal. The often unbearable weight of expectation from parents. Peer pressure. Cyber bullying. “I actually wish Facebook never was invented,” Danielle says. “It’s actually really horrible.”

“You know what I wish?” Casey says. “I wish Mum and Dad knew that I was going to be okay. That I’m not doing anything bad. I don’t want to do anything bad and I don’t plan to do anything bad. I wish they knew that.”

The group sits silently for a moment. Beth checks her phone for messages: “Isn’t it so funny how you always check your messages even though you know there’s none there.”

Casey slaps his hands on the table. “Oi, I want to get some black skinnies,” he says.

In a fashion store down a set of stairs off the Queen Street Mall, Danielle and Beth are

and Jade are transfixed by a glass chandelier. They blow the hanging and reflective *faux*-crystal chandelier pieces and marvel at their movement. Then Casey is struck with an idea. “Asian photos!” he hollers.

The group scurries into a Japanese photo store in the Myer Centre that appears to have modelled its decor on a piece of strawberry bubble gum. There are several private photo booths in the store, like mini karaoke rooms. They are places to hang briefly, goof off.

The store’s speaker system plays a Japanese version of Madonna’s *La Isla Bonita*. Teens are encouraged to illustrate the hot pink walls with scribbles – mostly outrageously proportioned breasts and vaginas and messages: “*Suck me later*”; “*Don’t forget to smile*”; “*Tom Scanlon is a shuffle fag. Love you Tom. I love you, too. From us.*”

Jade digs a tub of hair wax from his backpack, runs a glob through his hair, passes the tub to Casey. “How good does that smell?” Jade says.

and I'm like, 'It's nothing bad'. But then she was all, 'Grrrrr'. Man ... my mum doesn't really ... well, she does like her now ... but ..."

There's a picture of Jess: pretty, happy, blonde hair. Casey walks over to the computer, smiles coyly. "She's just good fun," he says. "She's mad to hang out with. Heaps cool. But, you know, we're 15, so I'm not gonna take anything too serious."

There's a photo of Warren on the Facebook page, unusually clean-shaven. "That was taken at Pop's funeral," Casey says. "My pop was a mad bloke. He wasn't really married to my nanna, but they were pretty much married and she's living over there now." He points to his next-door neighbour's house. "They were always going out places, but since he passed she goes out, but she's got this little dog called Blaze and ... yeah ..."

Casey goes quiet, deep in thought. "I feel so sad. He was the maddest person."

There's a wall of family photos in the lounge room, portraits of siblings as children. "That's me when I was, like, one," he says. "I was one fat little baby."

There are touch football trophies, archery trophies, sports certificates, antiques. On the TV cabinet is an old black-and-white photograph of an elderly man working in a yard. "Ummm, I don't really know who he is," Casey says.

He slips some shoes on. "You wanna come over and meet my nanna?" he says.

His grandmother, Julie, sits with a rug over her legs watching Kerri-Anne Kennerley on TV. Julie's dog, Blaze, bounces around Casey's shins. "He's a lovely kid," Julie says. "He comes up and gives me a cuddle. It means a lot."

"When he was little he was so loving, such a happy kid. But he's getting angrier as he gets older. More fights with his brothers. But he's a good boy. He's just growing up and getting more independent." Casey nods, embarrassed. Julie stares at him, commands his attention. "He's thoughtful," she nods, matter-of-factly. "And he has the world at his feet. If he puts his mind to it, he can do *anything*." Casey nods tentatively, not sharing his grandmother's confidence.

Later, he walks to his front yard, scans the family property. Light rain falls on his shoulders. He makes random lines in the muddy dirt driveway with a stick. "I've been here since I was five," he says. He breathes deep, smiling, lost in his memories. "All the Christmases and stuff, all the cousins coming over and we're all in the pool. So many fun weekends. I love this place."

He throws the stick toward his favourite dog, Blondie. "But I know I'll have to leave one day."

He walks into Warren's work shed. The shed is a tribute to male mechanical endeavour.

There are welding masks and shovels, hammers and axes, three dirt bikes, four surfboards, a fishing boat, mowers, bicycles and a calendar showing 12 months of buxom women in togs.

Because of this shed and because of a dad who has devoted every weekend of the past 23 years to his children, Casey knows how to fibreglass a surfboard, how to fix a tyre on a motorbike, how to replace a faulty on-off toggle switch on a petrol-powered go-kart. "There's always something to do with Dad," he says.

He leans down to his go-kart, grips a bolt on its hulking homemade frame. "The other day he had us all up in here re-welding the bolt on the front here," he says. "He showed us how to do it, then he made us clean up the shed and then, when we were done, he took us for a ride on the kart." Casey knows the lessons in here

He shrugs his shoulders. "Mum said I should."

Because Jane knows how much her boy loves words. He loves them so much he's invented his own. She knows what a natural storyteller he is, how he can tell you about jumping off a six-metre bridge into shrubbery and fill the story with such electricity that you wonder when you lost your own zest for such exploration. She knows what a brilliant communicator he is, how he listens before he speaks. How, like any writer worth the title, he's curious about life and the people around him. How he cares about the things that other people are saying, which is why Luana tells him things.

"But then I just think how hard it would be to get into something like that," Casey says. He flexes the brake. Shakes his head. "And I'd have



are invaluable, something akin to a ten-year TAFE class. "I would like doing something one day with my hands," Casey says. "It's difficult because I'd like to ... " He tests the brake lever on the go-kart. "... but I want to do something different from my brothers."

He pushes the go-kart out into the driveway. "One brother's a chippy, one's a boilermaker and one right now is making canopies for utes." He stands up, dusts off his hands and considers his thoughts. "So I want to do something like that, but I think ... well ... I don't want to be that sort of person, you know. Just like my brothers and be just another ... " He searches hard for the right word. "... *one*. Just another Tunks."

He smiles, like his next thought is just an aside, a lark. "I was thinking of doing something with creative writing," he says. "Because I'm smashing up English right now."

to go for an OP ... and ... I just don't know."

He pushes the kart down the driveway. Luana and another school friend, Beau, have dropped around to watch Casey and Hayden tear around the back paddock on the go-kart. The boys have constructed a terrifyingly steep jump out of soil at the end of a dirt track.

Casey slides into the go-kart's seat. He sets his legs in place, gives the motor some revs.

"You gonna go for some air?" Hayden asks.

"Yeah," Casey says.

He slams on the accelerator, carves through some tall gum trees, over fallen branches, up an incline and then down again, taking a long curving bend, building pace into the final straight. He reaches top speed at the base of the jump. He leans back, grips the steering wheel with his bony 15-year-old arms, bracing himself for whatever the hell is going to happen next. ■