

Pieces of a Soul

It wasn't yet mid-morning and they sat in the cab pretending the heat meant nothing to them.

"You going to give it a few more turns?" Chippy asked.

"I'm at fifty-five already," Robert told him.

"I'll throw you in after it if we drop another line."

Robert kept turning the fishing line in his lap, all the way to seventy turns before adding four half hitches and a Rizzuto knot to finish. The wind through the open window stirred the loose fabric of sweat stained shirts. Chippy tapped his forefinger on the steering wheel.

"Tell me that's the fifty-pound braid."

"It's the forty," Robert told him. "More than enough."

"You remember that sailfish? That was on a forty and you dropped it."

"We didn't even bring the tinny. Poppers and plastics at low tide, you said, so I don't know why you're bringing up sailfish."

"I brought one up last year. You remember that? All the way up and into the boat."

"I see. You just wanted to talk about it."

They'd turned to the North after clearing Shothole Canyon and quarrelled in the good-natured way of siblings. The dog took no part. When the boys had packed down the campsite and opened the door of the Hilux, he had leaped into the backseat like a sighthound and waited until they mounted up.

"Damn fine animal, that one," Robert said to his brother as he twisted around to stow the reel behind him. The dog was asleep now, with his hind legs pointed at the roof.

Chippy kept his eyes on the road.

"You think he knows?" he said to Robert.

"That the old man is gone?"

"Yeah."

"Of course. He was here and now he's not."

"You know what I mean."

"He's a dog. He doesn't know what a prostate is."

Chippy took his hat off the dash. It was faded around the brim from his sweat and the discolouration had risen until it was halfway up the crown. He put it on one handed, but the lining was still damp from his perspiration and he regretted it.

“I hate talking to you when you’re like this,” he said to his brother.

“It was a dumb question.”

“Let’s just forget about it.”

So they rode the tide of the land, bouncing on the old suspension as the blacktop ribboned away from them and swathes of wild grass and wildflowers dotted the landscape to either side. Early season Ashburton Peas and Native Foxgloves left splashes of colour through the spring grass. They avoided each other’s eyes until the first tang of saltwater scent reached them over the distant dunes and then the awkwardness was behind them. They turned and they grinned, one at the other, and the dog woke to put his nose out the window.

By late afternoon they stood to their ankles in a low tide and cast about them until the sun was fading and it was then that Chippy had a running battle with a seven-kilogram sweetlip.

“Old boy put up a fight,” he said to Robert later with the fire between them.

“Guess the topshot held up after all.”

Chippy nodded. “You wind on like that and we’ll have no trouble.”

Shadows ran away from the flames and then toward them as if they were lost. A log cracked and fell into the ash and sent sparks spiralling toward the heavens, but the brothers could only watch the shadows as they drank rum and soda. Neither could tell that the other was afraid and so they felt alone.

“We should have brought the tinny. We might have trolled for some macks,” said Robert.

“Josh is over by the Heads,” Chippy told him. “He might let us take the runabout.”

“Do you think it’s good fishing in the reefs this time of year?”

“At this time of year everything has had a lure or bait thrown at its head. A little burley might help our chances though.”

Robert shrugged and went back to the shadows. “I guess we’re not really here to fish.”

“What are we here for then?” Chippy looked at him coldly over the fire. He hadn’t expected this, not from Robert. With his easy smile and his constant badinage. So now he wants to be miserable, Chippy thought. And where does that leave me?

“I’m sorry,” Robert said. His eyes lifted for a moment but returned quickly to the confused shadows. “I just meant we came to remember. It doesn’t matter if we catch any mackerel.”

What was an older brother to do, Chippy thought. Here he was with a flash of anger when the only thing that had happened was Robert speaking how Chippy felt. "You don't need to listen to me," he said. "A man shouldn't leave Exmouth without trolling for something."

"He always said Mum was his biggest catch."

And how the hell were you going to move on when he spoke like that, Chippy wondered. Bringing up the woman who broke the old man's heart.

"We'll go and see Josh in the morning," he said. He knew he was behaving poorly and that grief could be shared, especially between brothers, and also that it wasn't the boy's duty to make him feel better. But he stood and tossed the last of his rum and soda over the fire and went to bed.

It was after four o'clock in the morning when Chippy, who had slept off and on through the night, woke with a sudden start that meant he wouldn't be able to sleep again. He had been dreaming of the day he walked home from a friend's house as a boy and saw his cat lying in the park. Only when he crossed the road and reached down to pet him it was stiff and bloated and its back was broken.

He lay there for a while before emerging from his swag.

"I couldn't sleep either," he heard from the darkness. Robert stood by the Hilux with the dog at his feet. In his hands he held the urn.

"Morning," he said. "You want coffee?"

"You making one?"

"For you. I think the fresh air is better than coffee in the morning."

Robert stowed the urn with the rest of their gear. "I'm okay."

They made a breakfast from the leftover fish and some eggs scrambled in the skillet over a new fire. The early morning was windy and the nascent flames licked at the sand while they ate in silence and Chippy wondered if he owed an apology in lieu of the coffee.

By mid-morning they were packed away again and Chippy pointed the Hilux over the dunes. The clear, blue sky rose and fell before them and the cool air through the windows was a boon. Even the dog was up and about, switching from one window to the other and Chippy figured it was a fine morning for forgetting.

When they were clear of the dunes they stayed off road by unspoken agreement.

There was too much wildness in the day for sealed roads. They were doing thirty in rough, open country, the dunes behind them and only a smattering of trees. The

Hilux climbed a slight rise and then the bottom dropped suddenly out of the road. Chippy felt the chassis slam into the pitted earth and there was a snap which brought everything to a grinding halt.

“You ever hear that sound for a good reason?” Robert asked him.

“It’s not the choicest cut of meat,” said Chippy. He climbed out and stood to one side for a moment. He took a deep breath to let his blood settle as his brother joined him and together they surveyed the damage. It wasn’t obvious at first, not until they climbed underneath and found the shaft broken.

“I guess we’ll two wheel it the rest of the way,” said Robert. While they rested on the rough terrain to examine the underside of the car the dog started barking from the back seat.

“We’re not going anywhere,” said Chippy. He showed him where the broken pieces of the CV shaft had jammed in the joint. “If we don’t clear that it might shred the steering knuckle.”

“I shouldn’t have been so smart about it,” said Robert.

“You didn’t know. Everything is a hoot when your blood’s up.” He reached up to drag himself out from the underside but before he was clear the dog had wormed its way through the open window of the rear cab. It hit the ground, still barking, and with its nose as straight as a coursing hound it disappeared into the grass.

Robert was quicker to his feet and he shouted at the dog and started running after it.

“Take the rifle,” said Chippy. “He’s off after something.”

It was in a checker plate lock box in the tray. Nestled against the rear window and fixed to the chassis with a pair of U bolts. He pulled it free and by the time he was moving he’d slid the rifle bolt into place. He whistled for the dog as he fitted the magazine.

“Pay attention,” said Chippy. “And don’t go further than I can hear you.”

Robert raised a hand in acknowledgement and trotted out of sight. Chippy could still hear the dog barking in the distance and a minute later he was alone with the Hilux. He grabbed the toolbox from the tray and had the wheel off in no time. Next was the brake calliper and soon he was feeling better for the work, as he always did. He took a pair of circlip pliers and cleared the knuckle one piece at a time.

When the wheel was back on he realised he was still alone with the sun riding high. He shouted for his brother as he replaced the toolbox and reached for some water. It

was then that he realised that he had let Robert leave without any and he cursed himself for a fool. Taking a pair of full bottles, he set out after him.

There was a little salt still in the air and the sun was heating up. It was hot for a spring day but that wasn't uncommon in the northern parts of the country. He pulled the salt-stained brim of his hat down low and he could feel his sweat in the lining again. He was very embarrassed to have sent his brother off without supplies and sick to think what his father would have made of it.

As he walked, a shot rang out. The distinctive retort of the 22 Hornet was quieter than most but over the open country it carried clear and bounced off the sky.

"Robert!" he called.

"Yeah. Chippy," called his brother and he sighed with relief as he followed the sound.

The dog met him, bounding ahead with a proud grin and when Robert appeared he was holding the neck of a wild rabbit. "I think we've got a genuine hound on our hands," he said, holding the rabbit high. "Chased it right out into the open."

Chippy handed his brother a bottle and knelt before the dog. He poured water into his hands so that it could drink. "I told you not to go far."

"I had to go as far as the dog."

"Never mind. I'm only angry at myself for forgetting the water." He looked at the rabbit. "That's a decent shot."

"The dog did all the work."

"Still a good shot. On the hop at what? Hundred metres?"

"No. Seventy I reckon."

"Still. On the hop, that's a fair effort. You one shotted him."

Robert took a sip of the water.

"You remember Dad that first year he retired?"

"I remember," said Chippy. "One trip after another. He was dropping foxes at three hundred metres by the end of that year."

"I thought Sophie was going to leave you."

"She almost did. Why do you think I taught her how to shoot?"

Robert laughed. "You know," he said. "It would be a shame to let that meat go to waste."

Chippy scratched the dog behind his ears as he took a drink.

"We could go again," Robert said. "I saw plenty of sign."

He thought he should say no and get them back to the Hilux but a part of him was jealous of the shot Robert had made.

“Let’s give this old boy a run,” he said and gave the dog a swat on the rump.

They gave the dog his druthers beneath the afternoon sun and he coursed to and fro the way their father had trained him. A deep bank of clouds had passed overhead and filtered the sun so that the day was cast in an uncanny, yellow light. Flies buzzed at the damp collars at their necks as the brothers took turns on the stick and Chippy grew more uncomfortable as he watched Robert drop another pair of bunnies.

Chippy held the Savage now in hands grown slick with sweat and frustration and his discomfort settled into his hips. He began to drag his legs, turning slower than ever whenever a rabbit broke from cover. At some point, Robert’s words of encouragement faltered, perhaps sensing Chippy’s growing annoyance, and he imagined that he even saw disappointment in the dog’s eyes.

They took a drink and he swatted at the flies. His lower back ached. He looked up at the sun, hidden pale and sickly behind stratocumulus clouds and he felt pain in the cartilage behind his knee as he stood and it was then that he heard the dog barking. Robert immediately set off into the grasses, not hearing as Chippy did the change in the animal’s tone. Funny what happened when your blood was up. His brother should have noted the change but he didn’t. He should have noted that nothing broke cover and he should have noted that the dog wasn’t coursing.

And Chippy should have said something. Only maybe he was wrong.

He went slow, the rifle loaded and settled in the crook of his arm. His finger was off the trigger as he stalked through the grass and it wasn’t until he heard Robert’s cry that he began to hurry.

The dog was halfway down a natural gully with its weight forward as it growled and woofed at a western brown snake that had reared up.

“Get back,” Robert shouted but the dog was blind with instinct. The snake lunged and the dog was quick enough to sit back on its haunches before leaning in once more.

Chippy shrugged at the flies that crawled at his collar and shouted at his brother to get back. Robert darted in low and grabbed the dog by the collar and hauled at him. But the old boy was strong. He snapped at the brown and this time, when the snake lunged there was a tangle of flesh. Chippy had the rifle up but there was no shot. He

watched, helpless, as Robert fell back and he saw the moment the snake struck and he couldn't tell among the tangle whether it was Robert or the dog.

He was on them quickly and without thought, dropping the rifle down in his grip so that he held it by the barrel and swung it like a club. The brown rose up and lunged but he danced backwards and it struck the dirt at his feet. Robert was scrabbling in the dirt, pulling himself and the dog away as Chippy swung again. He struck it and then struck it again until it fell quiet and still and the light of the day was still sickly yellow.

He walked over to where his brother sat and saw that it was the dog that was bitten. Breathing shallow already as Robert cradled it and looked up at his brother.

"I tried to pull him out," he said.

"I thought it was you bitten."

"He's mongrel strong."

Chippy knelt beside them and put a hand by the dog's ribcage. He could feel the rattle of each shallow breath and he could see the whites of the dog's eyes as it lay in shock.

"How far to town?"

"How far to the car first," Chippy said. "That was a gwardar. Western Brown."

Robert swore and climbed to his feet and looked on, forlorn as Chippy buried a hand in the old dog's hair and petted him for the last time.

"You can go if you want," Chippy said. "It's not a paying gig."

"I'll stand by."

He did it and it hurt every bit as much as it should. When it was done, he searched for the ejected brass because that's what their father had always taught them. He found it in the gully where the snake had been and he took it up as Robert carried the dog and between them they said not a word until they were back at camp.

"It might as well be here. This is where the old man wanted to be," Robert said.

Chippy only nodded and took the camp shovel out of the Hilux. They laid the dog to rest and when it was done they stood by in the now fading light.

"What do you say?" asked Chippy.

"Here is just as good as there."

Chippy took the urn and stood it on the mound of fresh dirt and as he walked back Robert handed him the Savage with a wry smile. They counted off a hundred paces and lay prone with the sun glinting at the edge of the horizon.

He took his time. The familiar retort cracked as he squeezed the trigger and fragments burst from the urn as it exploded outwards. Ash kicked up and into the air and settled over the earth like the pieces of a soul laid to rest.

Robert laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Let’s go home.”