

## National Park

An old man with deep lines in the outside corners of his eyes was parked by the Dam. There was a footbridge across the Dam wall and a walk trail that was dotted with granite boulders and grass trees. The van was a 1962 Kombi that had first been painted yellow but was now distinguishable by the patina of rust which hugged every curve. The summer tourists had gone home and two local boys remained, dangling string in the ankle-deep water by the shore as they fished for yabbies. The old man remained also. He had nowhere else to go.

I'd seen him the day before and I suspected that I knew his situation. There were many more like him, but they usually moved on within a day or two.

I'm sorry, but you can't stay here, I told him.

I don't have anywhere else to go.

The sun was setting behind me and he had to squint. That was how I saw the crow's feet in the corners of his eyes.

I'm sorry, I said again. It's a National Park.

I was here last night.

I know. And the three before that.

I grew up in New South Wales. My dad used to take me camping in the National Parks there.

You could try the caravan park on the highway. I tried to sound sympathetic.

They charge thirty-two dollars a night.

He looked like he was on the verge of anger. His clothes were clean and you could tell that he had pride in his personal appearance. I supposed that he had plenty of pride in general. He wore a side part in his hair even though it was starting to look long at the back. I knew it was longer than he would have liked.

Where did you serve?

He relaxed and the crow's feet deepened as he smiled. It was the smile of someone who has been recognised when they expected not to be.

You saw my bumper sticker?

I did.

I was in Vietnam.

Army?

Airforce. I was a door gunner on an Iroquois chopper.

You must have seen some stuff.

He nodded.

I saw some stuff. We used to conduct cordon and search operations to dig out insurgents. I saw some stuff.

Where do you come from? In New South Wales.

From Grafton, he said, and the crow's feet returned.

I could see that it gave him pleasure to think of his hometown.

I can remember how purple it was.

Yeah?

It's the Jacaranda, he explained. The town runs alongside the Clarence River and the soil is rich. The streets are all lined with jacaranda trees and in late spring the town turns purple with flowers.

That must have been a sight.

I was the first of the young men to leave. In the end there were seven of us who went to Vietnam. All of them were my friends, except for Danny Thomas who I only pretended to like.

He was more relaxed now.

Did you ever go back?

I went back as soon as I came home. But after a while it felt too small and I left to travel around the country. I think maybe I'd seen too much to be satisfied with living in a small town.

I was watching the shoreline of the dam where the boys had been netting yabbies as they pulled them up on their string lines. The last light of the sun was flaring red along the horizon to the left and right and the dam stood now like a pool of blood. The trees were still in the motionless, summer air and among their high branches were black cockatoos that wailed, mournful at the approaching dark.

Did you make it?

Did I make it?

All the way around.

I did. His crow's feet told me how special the memory was to him. It took two years and I had to stop whenever I ran out of money. One time I took a job as a grave digger in the Northern Territory just so I could fix the van.

The same van?

The very same.

You've been through a lot together.

She's on her fourth motor. Could you imagine if people could just get a motor swapped out when everything started breaking down?

My dad got a pacemaker last year.

My old man could have used one of those. It was him that bought me Bessie. He slapped his hand on the side of the Kombi.

He must have been proud.

The old man nodded.

Before he died, I took him to the Australian War Memorial. They have a photo of three Iroquois choppers coming in to land at Nui Dat. If you look with a magnifying glass, you can see me in the gunner's position in the first chopper.

That's pretty special.

Pretty special. But they don't give you any money for a thing like that.

No?

Not a silver penny. I never even knew it was there until Danny Thomas wrote to me about it.

The two boys came up along the path dressed in board shorts and thongs and they were carrying their bucket. They stopped to show me.

No marron? I asked.

No way, Mister. Just yabbies.

They scampered off and stood their bikes up from where they had lain against a granite boulder. The boy holding the bucket looped the handle across his handlebars and after they rode away it was only me and the old man. I started thinking about how I was going to end the conversation.

You think I can stay long enough to heat up some eggs and ham? I have a little cooker in the back.

I have to drive back this way on my way out of the Park. If I say yes, I feel like I might see you here still when I come back.

There's nothing you can do about turning a blind eye?

Sir, I've been blind all week. But you can't stay here. I'm sorry about that.

I could see his irritation was returning. His eyes narrowed a little and the crow's feet quivered.

I've got some kind of luck.

What kind of luck do you have?

It's not the good kind. I thought it was. I went away and came back safe when plenty of others didn't. I met a woman and raised a family. Now I'm 73 years old and I've got nothing left but Bessie.

I'm sorry.

You keep saying that.

Well, I mean it.

He looked at me and I could see he was tired. He had nobody to share his worry with. His irritation died inside him. It just kind of drained away.

Oh well, he said. I guess I knew I couldn't stay here forever.

Where will you go?

I'm pointed at South Australia. I figure I'll follow my nose until I get there.

You know anyone out there?

I don't anyone anymore.

You don't know anyone?

Well, there's Danny Thomas. I suppose I could write ahead. He always liked me more than I liked him.

Okay then. I wish you could stay.

Yeah. You're sorry about it. But you can't stay anywhere forever.

Maybe you can somewhere.

He shrugged his shoulders. Forever always ends a day early.

He put two fingers of his right hand in his mouth and whistled and it was only then that I saw the last two fingers were missing. A black dog that I had mistaken for a rock uncurled itself by the shoreline and walked slowly towards us. I stopped myself from telling him that dogs weren't allowed inside National Parks.

You're sure I can't stay?

I don't write the rules.

Well maybe I'll meet the guy who does one day.

He opened the passenger door and the dog, which was old and greying around its snout, gathered itself and sprang up into the footwell of the passenger side. It curled up again on an old beach towel and I could see how I'd mistaken it for a rock.

The old man got behind the wheel and wound down his window by hand. You don't see that kind of thing much these days.

Don't feel bad about it, he said. You're only doing your job.

The road out of the park was undulating and I followed him out. The sun was gone, but it had left a little light behind, which still loitered along the horizon in a ribbon of glowing orange that was slowly being consumed by the indigo of dusk.

I'd read about a bushfire in the eastern states that had killed a man who was sleeping in his car. I reminded myself about that story as we left the National Park, in the hopes that it would make me feel better.

It didn't work.

Instead, I only thought how maybe not dying in a bushfire was the last piece of good luck that the old man would ever have.

I was only doing my job. But I could have given him thirty-two dollars. That's something I remembered for a long time.