

Dad's Car

Here I am, camped out in my father's car. At the top of a lumpy rise I found by accident, I stand and listen to clicks and creaks as the car cools behind me. I'm here because I'm broken in half. After a drive at full pelt, after escaping tired handshakes and embraces and embarrassing sympathy from a thousand unremembered faces, I watch the sun go down. At last. At last. Unanswered questions melt into the how, when and where life's events churned my stomach, bruised my heart. The steep drop four feet from my boots is no invitation, no threat. I could dance here, eyes closed, and never fall.

At some point on my escape, the outer suburbs turned into small towns. The region expanded around me, a bit too far. Stopped for petrol [*Last fuel for 170 km!*]. The vista shrank to a column of road ahead lined by vertical walls of pine plantations. Then peppermint gums, then wattles. Then plantations again.

I heard for myself the shift in sounds, smells, sights, the accent of the girl at the servo. Came close to starting a conversation, but didn't, even when she put a free orange from the basket on the counter in my hand. Shot out and down, further down, waiting until the lines on the road faded and fell away. Until the emergency lane drifted into soft shoulders and ungraded gravel and dirt and roadkill.

Far to my left now, the sky turns orange and everything before me is thrown into silhouette. The shapes of forever. The shapes of never. I'm here because I'm broken in half. I stand at the centre of things. In front of and behind things. I realise as I write this I was never one for compass points. Things are either up ahead or behind me, to the left or to my right. I drive, straight on, straight on, is how I do it, and find locations—if I have to—using landmarks.

Past the church

About five minutes past the airport

Sharp left when a hill's dead ahead

Second to the right after the painted silo

If I see the general store I've gone too far

The countryside below me—my kind of map. My sort of mud map, a Fred Williams painting, nothing like what Burke or Wentworth rolled up and pushed into saddlebags. Bigger than the stories, smaller than the moon. Nothing like the map in Dad's head. Bush, scrub, paddocks, buildings in the distance with a church tower in their midst waver like reflections in a dam. Can see it all from up here. This rise flies the sight like a kite. I could count four mobile phone pylons if I stare long enough. They shimmer white in the setting sun. Two or three ant-like cars take the curve of road behind all that, at the start of the freeway down the coast to the rolling ocean, where I'm heading in the morning.

Morning—there's nothing to stop it coming.

To me, morning is when I come awake. On this trip, when I hear birds, or rain. Rain sheets diagonal out here, grey and far wetter than between buildings. At home, it's when wind thumps the bit of loose iron on the roof. At home, morning means breakfast noises in that tiny kitchen with the sloping lino floor. And Dad, who'd call, 'Coffee—and lots of it.'

Electric kettle hum

Toaster creak and snap

Fridge door thump

Radio mumble

Traffic hiss outside

None of that here. The bush gives up its own teeming, creeping, seething noises. Birds, small bush creatures, feral cats, those roaring frogs, the odd pygmy

possum. If you know where to look, that is, among strands of what we now call grasstrees. Last one I saw, a handful of grey with black eyes like marbles, was at some distance. Some twenty thousand strides from here. From where I stand, broken in half.

This is a stretch of scrub that's silent and not silent, full of the scratching of its creatures. They're there if you listen hard. Bushwalkers—those Bibulmun diehards in new hiking boots—join in a concert they don't know they're giving. City voices, hushed, dulled, dwarved by the bush. Behind me, wind in the gums sounds like the rush of the ocean. Would fool the numbed-up ears of the uninitiated, but I've heard it before; an unmistakeable swishing, switching, sougling of boughs and limbs that would brain me if I dared walk down there. Ah, falling gum branches, a hazard I learned from a near miss out walking with Auntie Janey. She spoke of Whadjuk and Binjareb traditions and songs and tucker and stories and lost me when she rambled on. But Dad had said, 'Listen to her, listen. She knows it all.' And she did say the hissing of gumleaves in the wind sounds like surf crashing on a deserted beach.

I might get to it later, that sound of real waves rolling on tight-packed sand, if I follow my nose down that freeway. Now the sun is down, down, almost down, shedding its white and pulling on a dull orange. I make ready for the night in the light that remains. A routine learned in childhood takes over; one Dad taught me, one that cannot be altered, one drummed into me by observation, by obedience, by time, by habit. The automaton child in everyone takes over when sleep prods and pings the backs of eyelids.

Eat dinner

Tidy up after myself

Stow it all away

Brush teeth

Visit the long-drop loo

Roll up tightly in the back of Dad's car

Push the lock down with the side of my hand

The night in the car [its chill, its condensated windows, its mildewy smells] give me a stiff neck. Urgency pushes me to a half-blind squat, my back to the bumper in the dark, and a fumble for the radio, but I give up when it hisses and spits something unintelligible. Then that moment of heart-stopping fright when something, the knuckles of the night, knock on the metal door near my head. I'll never know what it was.

My head clears itself of sleep slowly. My cheek holds the pattern of dimpled leather backseat. I know and I don't know why I'm here. Now I have a desire for doughnuts, rather than UHT milk and a ziplock of cereal I packed. I discover I left clean underwear and socks back home. Know exactly where they lie, clean and rolled.

Forgetting and remembering. The smell in Dad's car brings on tears. I know why I'm here. Isn't often I cry.

When Mopsie Rabbit escaped

When Ash at school held hands with someone else

The time I broke my ankle at netball

Caught my thumb under a mallet

Shirred a shin bloody with Dad's razor

Discovered Mum cooked Mopsie Rabbit

Straight down the freeway, billboards announce sights in large fonts. Letters loom taller than me, taller than me, but I'm broken in half. They blaze in a hundred colours. Up ahead—caravan parks, resorts, motels, interesting caves, museums, a dolphin centre. I'll get there by and by. Dad would read everything. 'Read the world,' he said. 'All notices, all signs. They're not there for nuttin''

He always smoked in the car, elbow out the lowered window. He forked fingers grey with engine oil through hair grey with money-fear and anguish. He carted around bags of cement, star pickets, bales of wire. He hitched canvas trousers up with the insides of stout wrists. Shrugged that ancient matted jacket on and off. Pushed cloth cap or dented Akubra back with a pointed index. I sometimes helped with the picket tool, wishing I was the one to invent it; so neat, so simple, so clever. Learned to drive a ute looking at his feet, looking at his hands, all cracked and veined from working the paddocks. All age-spotted from too much sun. Watched his mouth when he talked. Talked about Mum, Mum, Mum and how she just faded away. He was in pieces. Talked how he always thought he'd go first. I missed some words wondering about that white scar on his chin, a thin crescent that never grew hairs. Knew from the way he mouthed bald advice he wanted me to do better. 'Have yer afterthoughts first.'

Wanted me to think better.

Better than him and Mum

Better than Joe who ran away to Sydney

Better with money so I could choose

Better habits so I wouldn't die of lung cancer

I'm camped out in Dad's car. Its mine now. So's the ute that's laid up with a bust alternator. So's the house whose blunt [north?] side—the side that gets the roaring heat in January—needs jacking and stumping. All my time's mine. I still have the picket driver and wire, stacked in the ute under that shelter he put together out of old pipe and corrugated tin. The tightener's still in there, I think. Could go knock on a few doors. But will they put a girl to fencing? They all like to tell you it makes no difference these days but it does. They look at you with heads tilted sideways, mouths twisted one way, then the other, with fingers scratching backs of heads. They wonder how the shearers will act. Or whether the manager's wife will want you spreading butter on five thousand sandwiches in a kitchen sizzling with heat from all angles, turning out slabs of cake and dozens of pies. It comes at you from all sides, the heat. From the oven, the oven, and the white sky at the back door. Food disappears in places like that. Just plain disappears in one quick lunchtime.

Faster than rain stops when you think the drought's over

Faster than I ran out of school as a kid

Quicker than Dad's hands shuffling cards

Rapid as his talk and gear changes

Fast as he faded away that last hour

I'd rather bend wire round six thousand pickets, thanks. Fences last longer than pies. Would rather grill a thick corned beef sandwich for one, over an open fire, on Dad's old grating, kept wrapped in a bit of sacking in the boot, than stick around a kitchen.

Look—it's time I got on the road towards that line of grey freeway, until I see the blue line of the ocean. Must remember to turn left at the lights when I get to

them. Left, left. I was never one for compass points. Dad was the same. 'Learn the landmarks,' he'd say. Everything is now ahead of me. And he is so far behind.

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