

## The Long Way

I'm driving from Bairnsdale to Melbourne, off to the AC/DC concert and singing along to one of their CDs: *You think it's easy doin one-night stands, try playin in a rock and roll band!* Bon lets rip with his bagpipe solo, I turn it up until my ears sting and, just for fun, I toot the Monaro's horn. Magpies fly off a fence and I give them another toot for their journey.

I'd been out at Bengweeran the last few days, planning and building a burn off. Hard work. Even after Ange had washed my Parks Victoria shirt, some dirt hadn't budged below the *Healthy Parks, Healthy People* logo. But I'm brand spanking now, in a clean Highway to Hell t-shirt. I grab a sneaky stubby from the travel esky and I'm about to crack it when Nifty calls.

'Hey numb nuts, guess what? It's out of control!'

'What is?'

'My *dick* . . . Waddaya reckon, Lewis? The burn off!'

'Jesus.'

'Yep, and all his apostles.'

I don't bother asking Nifty how it's happened. It'll be the CFA, the Country Fire Authority – the *Chook Fuckers Association* to us. If the chookies aren't stirring up some flames to piss their hoses on they're not happy. I mean, they did it tough at Kinglake, like we all did. So why couldn't they just let a burn off be a burn off?

'Nifty, you *know* I'm not comin back.'

I'd missed Acca Dacca in '96 because the kids were little. And only then because the whole three of them and Ange had the flu. But that was then. Tonight I'm rocking out, and no two-bit bloody chooky's cock-up's going to stop me.

'I don't care if you haven't seen them since Methuselah was a pup,' Nifty says. 'We need your arse back here. Now.'

'Bullshit.'

I hang up on him and put the phone next to the esky. There's a text chime a few seconds later but I don't check it. Bugger him, he can sort it out. I mean, if he can't control a burn off he doesn't deserve his job.

*It's a long way, such a long way . . .*

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A few days ago I'd told everyone concerned that the decision was final: we were going to torch the paddock the abandoned FJ was in. And old Tom Heath had taken it in his stride.

'Yeah, nah, I understand Lewis. We've got to put safety first.'

He'd put his pen down on the table and everyone else in the porta office had shuffled their papers. But nobody had got up to leave.

'Look, I'm real sorry Tom . . . ?'

I had a soft spot for him; good at his job and his wife had finally passed last year. He'd barely smiled since.

'Nah look Lewis, you're doing what's right. No choice. Just how it is.'

And he'd got up and walked out. No more arguments. Suddenly the FJ's cremation was fine by him. That was a shock. Tom had been first at every morning meeting, navy CFA polo on, sharp grey hair and clean-shaven, throwing up a new way to save his late father's FJ. And I'd shot them all down. Except one.

'We could try moving it,' I'd said early on, even though I'd no intention of doing it. Tom had put the khybe on that idea himself.

'We can't mate. Thing'd fall to bits.'

The thing in question would have been a fine motor vehicle in its day. Now it was a rust bucket with no glass in its window frames and grass growing on its seats. But it still had a little bar above the bumper proper that looked like a moustache. In the '50s that FJ would have pranced up Bairnsdale's Main Street, winking with its sun visor.

'We'll have to find another way,' Tom had said and he'd trooped away from the wreck. As I'd watched him join his sons for a smoke, I'd wondered why he didn't care about the shell of his grandfather's house. Flames might give it a lick over as well if we weren't careful. I could have asked him about it all I suppose, but I didn't get around to it. Too much work on.

Bengweeren is 150 square ks of shitfight. As if Tom's grandpa's paddock hadn't caused enough grief, the rest of Bengweeren is the only place in Victoria where Parks Vic, the chookies and the bloody Department, the government boys who always think they've got rank but haven't, can have a say on how to manage the burn offs.

And didn't they all give it a go. When I got there the first morning, it was the chookies, in their yellow coats and hats, flipping around like stained cabbage moths. They were reeling hoses off the trucks and slip-ons, the smaller fire trucks that I wish there were more of, just in case a bloody fire started before we got one going.

I shouldn't rib the chookies too much; most of them do a pretty good job. Tom, for instance, he's pretty reasonable when you get him on his own. Knows his way round a long-term fire plan, too, not just the whooshing end of a hose. But blood's thicker than grass.

'Grandpa's old stretch,' he'd said as soon as I'd buzzed down the window of my Parks ute. There was a broken windmill off in the distance behind him and flies were scouting his cap peak.

'Still got to sort out the area, Tom.'

'Yeah . . . Lot of memories here though.'

The grass was high enough in his grandfather's paddock to hide an infantry unit. It had to be flamed. And once it was, the dirt underneath would offer protection for another couple of hundred hectares. I took my sunnies off, put them on the dashboard and got out of the ute.

'Beautiful part of the world,' I said, shielding my eyes.

'My Grandpa used to say it was God's own country,' Tom replied.

We looked at the gums and pines parading the borders of the hay-strewn paddocks. Some of them got greener and hillier out where the hidden waves banged away at the coastline, trying to carve it into a new shape. But its shape wasn't changing and everyone in this little corner of the world knew it. Blackfellas, whitefellas: we all thought we owned that spread from the highway to the waves, and we liked it just the way it was. Except for the long grass.

'Place needs a bit of hell to keep it in good nick,' I smiled and Tom turned to the FJ. 'My old man bought it new in '56. Grandpa thought it was a piece of shit, apparently. But Dad thought it ran on honey.' Probably did then, I thought, and hauled my computer bag from the backseat and set up in the stinking hot porta office.

All week I argued with the chooky big guns, Department geeks and every other bastard who thought God's own country gave them a right as fat as the Bible to say how to manage it. Took four days before I got the plan sorted. And now it was on: cleared, dug and set. But I'd told everyone I wouldn't be there to light the torch. The only fire I wanted to see was coming out of an AC/DC stage cannon. For those about to rock, we *saay-loot-yoo!*

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*Getting ripped off, underpaid.*

On the outskirts of Bengweeren this afternoon, I'd checked my sideburns in the rear-view. Nicely clipped. Bit grey, but neat. I'd even shaved. Don't know what that was about. It wasn't as if Acca Dacca needed me to be presentable. But, shit, it was a big occasion. Kind of like a wedding. Bigger, really, but I'd never tell Ange.

She had to have a violinist on our wedding day. But he'd looked bug-eyed when he'd found out he was going to have to play an instrumental version of 'Ride On'. It was my compromise: we have a violinist, he plays AC/DC. I even compromised more: he could play a ballad. Ange laughed under her veil as the poor bastard grimaced and dragged his bow across his instrument. Sounded sweet to me though.

Some people have got religion, I've got Acca Dacca. Missing that concert in '96 was as bad as when Mum had her cancer. Not something you tell too many people, but there it is. I've got a room at home dedicated to the boys. Dolls of them playing a gig, posters covering every inch of the walls, AC/DC mirrors on the ceiling. I've got all their CDs, DVDs and most of the vinyl stacked in milk crates in the shape of one of Angus's guitars. And there's an AC/DC emblem in there on the carpet that I made out of cotton over 14 years.

Once I'd got through the 80 k zone, I'd let the Monaro roar, put one hand on the wheel and formed the other into a fist for a microphone.

*Gettin beat up, broken bones, gettin bad, gettin took, I tell you folks . . .*

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I'd left my phone in the porta office last night after work. I'd driven back to get it, moonlight snow-capping the paddocks, and there was Tom, standing against the FJ. Spooked me, but I suppose he was just saying his goodbyes. He sipped his stubby and waved me over.

'Nice unit in its day,' I said and he gave me a beer. The stubby was icy, I cracked it and gulped. Tom smelt of cologne, something musky.

'I grew up in this car,' he said, banging on the hood. 'Went everywhere in it. When Dad was a buck they couldn't get him out of it, either. . . ?'

He took a long look at the dark horizon. Then he let out a strangled laugh.

'Jesus . . . Lewis, I don't know . . . it's . . . ?'

He shut up and I wanted to talk for him. It makes you feel something *real*, Tom. It matters and you can't figure out why. It's way more than just your old man's car, but you don't know what that means, either. I had an Angus Young solo in my head, but then I realised it wasn't; I was making one up, different notes but Angus's style. Stupidly, I wanted to tell Tom, even hum it to him. But I just tapped the car.

'They don't make them like this . . . ?' I said and Tom finished for me.

'They don't make *anything* like this anymore.'

His eyes had been bright in the moonlight, but now they looked liked sucked plums. I dropped the empty back in his esky.

'Gotta go Tom.'

I waved at him when I drove off and he touched the peak of his cap.

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. . . *it's harder than it looks* . . .

My mobile rings. Again. I turn the car stereo down.

'What now?' I ask Nifty.

'It's Tom. He's in the FJ. And he won't get out. Won't listen to us. Fire's comin on him . . . ?'

Christ, Nifty, I think, you're the boss, manage the situation.

'He's grinning like a baboon,' Nifty goes on, 'and he's pointing a shotty at us. Keeps raising the barrel when we come close. . . ?'

Nifty keeps at me, all huff and puff. Tells me to get my arse back, save the day. And all the time he's rabbiting on I can see Tom in the FJ, the crazy old bugger. But more than that, I can *feel* him. I feel his muscles tensing up, his heart beating faster, heat fanning through his non-existent car windows. I feel the eyes of all those chookies, parkies and Department clipboard carriers on him, thinking, *What the fuck are you doing Tom?*

They've got no idea, have they? They don't know the steering wheel in your hands feels like it's on a tall ship, they don't know it's a long way to anywhere worth going. And pretty soon, I'm going to be there too. Acca Dacca aren't getting any closer at this rate, so I give the Monaro some juice.