

## Roadhouse

Harry pulls into the flat yard sending wide arcs of dust off the front axles, the red clouds shrinking beside the solid bulk of the semi. Hisses down the brakes, clicks off the engine's rumble. In the fresh-killed quiet he pulls back his arms to feel a stretch in his thick brown shoulders and glances at the other trucks standing like cattle in the sparse lot. No-one he knows.

The roadhouse is dwarfed, machines the only shapes worthy of the flat, dry, samey landscape. Get a job so you can see a bit of country, end up looking at highways and the backs of cars and motor homes slipping into nothing in your mirror. Anyway, thinks Harry, it beats sitting still.

Another pneumatic hiss and he lets his seat down, climbs out of the cab, and strides stiffly for the pisser. Learning to force out the yellow stream when you can and not when you have to is like keeping awake; your body changes to fit the road. He splashes a little water on his face and walks round to the shop.

The place has been recommended, though not to him precisely; he's picked it up on the CB as a spot where the girls have a laugh with you and the grub's alright. A few plastic tables, red chairs, big wheeler posters fading on the fake pine walls. Four others, all older than him, each sitting alone. One of them, a grey, narrow fella, is reading a book, claw-hand automatic. No-one he knows.

Pie and chips, Harry tells the girl, who doesn't seem any friendlier than the rest of her kind.

Sauce?

Yair. Ta. He guesses they get to know you after a while.

Harry takes his plate to the table closest to the door. He stares out at the lifeless scrub, picks at his chips. He hasn't got the hang of wolfing his food yet. Looks over at the fridges. Thinks about an ice coffee. Notices the book man looking at him, cautious as a bird. Harry nods and the fella smiles close-mouthed, wry and dry but genuine enough, before shutting himself off again behind the pages. Harry picks up his knife and fork with the wrong hands, has a go at the pie. He decides he will get that ice coffee and when he's up, ask the bird man what he's reading. He pushes some warm chips around in the puddle of sauce, his fingers taking in grease, and hears the door swing behind him.

Arr, ya bludger, this a fucken lib'ry? The six-foot, curly-haired man has a voice that fills the room. He seats himself opposite the old bird. Gotta log it, bird replies, closing the book with a deft dog-ear. The big one swivels in his seat.

Deb! Burger witha lot ay? No salad extra chips.

Harry sets his fork down, wipes the crumbs off the table with one hand, and steps out into the heat. It's a couple hundred k before he wants the ice coffee he's forgotten.

Two, three weeks later and he's back on the same run, bad country radio fizzling in and out and the tiresome, flat, unbroken earth stretched out on all sides. He pulls into the roadhouse, faded today under a colourless sky, and switches the machine off in noisome increments. A few other trucks, but he can't tell if he recognises any.

He thinks about a burger, no salad extra chips, but gets the pie again. Debbie pushes the sauce bottle at him without asking, but does nothing else that admits to a previous acquaintance. He carries his plate to the same table, thinking mental note, ice coffee. Picturing the carton even as he sets about eating. A quick glance spots no familiar faces. Two gruff-looking fellas, one with an armful of indistinct ink. Harry doesn't have any tatt's. He's never been to prison or to sea. Doesn't know what he'd get anyway. Decisions aren't his strong point. *Half-arsed*, says a voice in his head, *can't you just stick with a thing?* Pulling his eyes off the blue-dark arm he spies a book beside the empty plate a table over. Maybe he's forgot it, he thinks with a sudden brightness, but the Debbies of this world take care of that kind of thing.

The bird man steps out of the piss'er, wipes his hands on his jeans, checks his watch, and moves toward the door. Harry stands to grab the book, but the bird's already there and they're left standing foolish over the empty plate.

Bird takes the book up, knocks it against his forehead like he's testing a nut. Forget my head, he says. You headin south?

North, says Harry. All the way.

There are only two directions, most of the country. In and out again. Harry can't describe the secret of it, heading across the heart and back, his tracks weaving a map of maps.

New to the run? asks bird, eyebrows raised, open.

Few months, says Harry, and almost explains but doesn't.

Names's Don.

He mouths it, Don, putting the shape of it in his chin. *The man's waiting, Harry.* He says his name.

Alright Harry, Don nods with another closed grin. See you next time ay.

He leaves a decent interval, remembers the ice coffee, and steps out to see which truck is leaving. Makes a mental note of it.

Another time, bit later. Debbie brings his plate to his table now, which Don's colonised. He still brings his book in but doesn't open it.

Them roadworks finished, Harry offers. Clean run down now.

Don chews this, digests it, making Harry wonder what kind of bird. Crow? Too mean.

What are you reading? he asks instead.

What, this? Don asks like he's just noticed the book in front of him. 'S'bout Mexico. You ever been Mexico?

Harry shakes his ragged head. Binta New Zealand once. Doesn't count but. He means it's not a different country. Not like this place. But he doesn't say it.

Harry and Don are idly listing off their respective bosses' shortcomings when the big curly man comes in again, all expanse of arms. Bludger, he throws out, slapping at Don's bony back. Harry flinches for him, but Don's not fazed.

Ay, Stan-the-man, he says. You know Harry here.

Six foot Stan sizes him, making him set his face like in a strong wind.

This one s on a good gig, Don continues like the conversation wasn't broken. Owner driver. No idiots tellin him how to do his job.

Nah mate, rejoins Stan, just the fucken road cops. I'm switchin' to WA, no more fucken log books. He claps his big hand on Don's frame again with an easy, fraternal physicality.

They carry on talking to Harry but really to each other, just through him cause he happens to be there. It's a relief when he gets back in his cab with the familiar rattles he has come to think of as its character. His hands, big and easy like his father's used to be, curl around the wheel's hot vinyl. Yesterday they soaked blood from the sheets, wiped at a corner of his eye. *Oh, be a man for chrissakes.* It's the bleach, he'd mumbled, but the lie got lost in a rack of coughing.

Months clock like kilometres. Debbie says Hot today, or Not too hot today. The books change.

You read?

Harry shakes his head. Picks up the book in one hand, fingers all sausagey on its skin. Doesn't mention the bad ear he got from a blue. Stopped showing up at school after that. *You deaf as well as stupid?* They fixed him up now anyway. Don's looking at him funny. Galah? Nah, too simple.

Russian bloke, Don says, nodding at the book. Bout a crazy woman. Good but. He takes it out of Harry's hand, sets it down as if it's made of glass. You gotta keep your mind busy, he says.

Thirty-two, Harry says to the dash as he passes another carcass. The grey roo has a cluster of crows going at it like sharpened shadows. He reaches for the esky and his ice coffee, opens the carton with one hand and takes a deep swig. Thirty-three, he adds, a few k's down the track. You gotta keep your mind busy.

Thinkin of retiring, Don says one day, pushing his plate off to the side. Maybe got enough for a bit of land. The ex-wife's in Queensland. Easier on the girls. He leans back on the red chair. You got a family?

Nah, says Harry, and then, Oh, me old man.

Young bloke like you, says Don, oughter be fighting 'em off. Watcha do on your days off then?

Sleep, says Harry. He thinks of the cot bed in his father's house, the coughing that keeps him awake at night. The old man's hoarse calling all hours, sometimes for water, sometimes in his sleep. Of changing the bloody pillows, and of standing over the hollow body in the dark, hearing the ragged breath struggle, out... in. Marking the time between. The time he's got left.

Still, plenty of time, Don says, with his lopsided smile. Harry looks so startled Don presses a claw against his forearm. To muck around I mean. The hand, surprisingly gentle, lifts away, leaving the shape of kindness in its wake.

He's crook, Harry, says, hearing the voice cross the table like it's someone else's. Got the emphysema.

Don's clear eye watches, calm, his head on a tilt.

Magpie. That's it. He almost says it aloud. Instead his hand goes to the spot behind his ear where he cracked his head on the step, forgotten to turn the water on again, but Jesus, just a kid. There's not really a scar anymore.

He's dying, he says.

Shit, says Don, and breathes in through his teeth. You lookin after him?

Harry nods once, dry, at the table. Can he remember a time he's said this before? It never mattered much. Everyone's story. Maybe it's the space out here lets you unwrap yourself.

Bastard drove Mum away, he says. Hit us.

With the driving, he's half run as well. But only half. Half-arsed.

Ah well, he says finally, cracking a rare smile. Choose yer friends ay. Don nods, tipping the chair back, and the two men sit for a while looking out at the country, at the scrub struggling up out of rocks, at the grasses spreading silently over the vast red plain. In a corner of which, their trucks lean side by side like cattle, facing into the land.