

Don't get too attached, he said.

I was sitting right up the front, to prevent motion sickness. People don't want to sit right up the front. Second row's okay, but up near the driver is a bit desperate somehow. I didn't care; I'd spent my life sitting up the front.

The woman beside me didn't care either.

'My son's schizophrenic,' she said. 'He'll be thirty this year. Diagnosed at twenty-one, but I could tell something was wrong, even as a child. How old are you?'

'Twenty-two,' I said.

'You'll be all right then, can't get it now. Got any brothers or sisters?'

'Just a brother.'

'And how old is he?'

'Twenty-four.'

'He'll be all right too. What about a boyfriend?'

'Yeah. Well... yeah.'

Don't get too attached to me. Just in case, he said.

'And how old is he?'

'My age.'

'He'll be all right then. You can tell pretty early on usually, with schizophrenia, that something's not quite right.'

It was a long time between towns. I liked their names: Bordertown, Kaniva, Nhill.

We didn't actually stop anywhere but it was interesting to look at the main streets on the

way through. There were kids standing outside the supermarkets eating ice creams and old women pushing shopping buggies into the post offices. The parking spaces were filled with dusty utes and four wheel drives.

Along the highway the scenery was all paddocks, sheep and cattle. The tar snakes on the bitumen were melting. I kept an eye out for the big green signs on the side of the road but wasn't sure if I felt better or worse as we got closer to Melbourne.

'I don't visit my son much,' said the woman beside me. 'Adelaide's a long way, and I won't drive by myself. I'm okay around the city, but freeways scare me.'

'Freeways scare me too,' I said. 'And dirt roads.'

'It would be easier to fly, of course,' she said, 'but I have a plane phobia. My doctor prescribed Xanax when I had to go to Hobart last year. I took too many and forgot which hotel I was staying at then tried to pay the taxi driver with my Fly Buys card. So, no more Xanax, no more planes.'

'I don't mind planes,' I said. 'But Keith doesn't have an airport.'

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Keith had a fountain and a jeep on a pole. You could buy postcards at the shop that showed both attractions. There was only one pub. On my first night we went there for tea, just me and Charlie. The other shearers saw us leaving the house, holding hands, and yelled 'Gay!'

'Piss off!' said Charlie, and apologised to me for the uncouth behaviour.

There was nothing vegetarian on the pub menu, so I had a bowl of salad and a bowl of chips. The woman behind the bar said ‘And for your main?’ and I said ‘No, that’s it thanks,’ and she said ‘Just two sides?’ and raised her eyebrows.

The house was the dirtiest place I’d ever been in. The bench never got wiped; the table never got wiped. The floor was covered in bottle tops. There was a towel in the bathroom that had never been washed. The shower curtain was covered in mould: a neat gradient from light grey to black. There was a small tv in the lounge, sitting on the floor, but it only picked up one channel.

Six of the seven shearers living in the house had names starting with D. Charlie shared the back room with Des. When I arrived they rigged up a curtain between the beds and Des said ‘You on a promise, eh?’ Charlie’s single bed didn’t have sheets, just a sleeping bag and an old stained doona. I made him get in first to check for snakes and spiders.

‘There won’t be any snakes,’ he said.

The end-of-season cut-out party was at Midge’s place. He was the shearing contractor and lived with his wife and kids in a modern four-bedroom brick veneer with a double garage. In the bathroom there were stencilled sea horses on the walls and seashell soaps on the hand basin.

Charlie brought a slab to the party and I took two Lemon Ruskis. There was a barbeque and five different salads. All of the men had chops, sausages, white bread and sauce and the ladies had marinated chicken wings and salad. I just had salad.

‘If you were any skinnier your legs’d snap off and go right up your arse,’ said Midge.

We stayed until well past sunset; I talked to the ladies about babies and renovating and Charlie talked to the men about shearing and cars. By the time we started walking home I was so cold I couldn't stop shaking. Back at the house I got straight into a hot shower and then Charlie made me put on his trackpants and hoodie and we squeezed into the sleeping bag. It took me half an hour to warm up properly. Across the room Des snored loudly.

'He has epilepsy,' said Charlie. 'Sometimes I can hear him having a fit in his sleep.'

The next day Charlie took me on a tour of Keith. He showed me the jeep on a pole ('See? It's an actual jeep!') and the fountain ('Looks much better when it's on. Last year it was on.') and we went to the bakery to get rolls for lunch. The woman behind the counter was wearing an entirely purple outfit, crystal earrings and several brooches. Thick blonde hair sat neatly on her freckle-covered cleavage.

'Got a day off?' she said to Charlie.

'End of the season,' said Charlie. 'Going home tomorrow.'

'Where's that then?'

'Wycheproof. Northern Victoria.'

'Oh right. Dry over there.'

'Yeah.'

We took our rolls and sat on a bench outside.

'I'll probably come back here next year too,' said Charlie.

'Does Midge want you back?' I asked.

'Yeah. And Roger wants me to go up to Mungindi in a few weeks.'

'To drive tractors?'

‘Yeah. So, you know, I’ll be away a fair bit. I can’t really drive down from Queensland every weekend.’

An elderly couple walked past. They had matching towelling hats.

‘How long will you be up there?’ I asked

‘Probably two months,’ said Charlie.

‘Right.’

‘So, well, you know, don’t get too attached to me. Just in case.’

‘Too attached to you?’

‘Yeah, I mean—’

A piece of beetroot fell out of Charlie’s roll and landed on the footpath.

‘What time’s your bus tomorrow?’ he said, picking the beetroot up and putting it back in.

‘Ten-twenty,’ I said.

‘A sleep-in then,’ he said. ‘That’ll be nice.’

The bus was right on time. Charlie and I stood on the footpath while the driver put my bag in the luggage compartment.

‘Ring me up when you get home,’ he said, putting his arms around me.

* * *

The woman beside me pulled a packet of fruit pastilles out of her black handbag.

‘Lolly?’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ I said, taking the green one at the front.

‘When I was young I had a boyfriend who used to ride from Melbourne to Mildura on his motorbike just to see me,’ she said, taking a fruit pastille herself. ‘Eight hours, what a waste of time.’

‘What happened?’

‘Married him.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’re divorced now. On good terms though.’

I wondered if Charlie and I would be on good terms.

‘Still, I’ve got three lovely children. We’d just planned to have two, but then I wanted to try for a girl. So, three boys of course. One lives up in Queensland now. I don’t see him much. Long way on a bus, Queensland.’

I imagined myself on a bus all the way to Mungindi. Buses probably didn’t even go that far. Eight and a half hours to Keith was almost unbearable anyway.

‘We’ll be stopping in Ballarat won’t we?’ said the woman.

‘I think so,’ I said.

‘Not far after that, thank goodness.’

I wondered if Charlie was already back in Wycheproof, filling the washing machine with his stinky shearing pants and opening a Carlton long neck.

My phone beeped.

I miss you, it said.

I looked out the window at the dry paddocks. Two more hours to Melbourne. Two more hours, and I could wash my hair properly, and go to the supermarket to buy veggie burgers, and sit on my clean couch with a cup of coffee.

I was still holding the phone when it beeped again.

Might give mungindi a miss after all.

I smiled. Charlie must be on his second long neck already.

‘I hope my neighbour remembered to feed my dog,’ said the woman. ‘I have to cook him special meals because he has a genetic bowel condition, so I made enough for seven days and put them all in separate containers in the freezer.’

I wondered if I was going to end up living on my own and cooking special meals for a dog.

‘He likes chicken casserole best. Wolfs it down.’

A dog probably wouldn’t like lentils much though, or tofu.

I wondered if I could borrow Mum’s car and drive up to Wycheproof instead of catching the bus. There were freeways and dirt roads, but it would be all right.

See you on the weekend then, I wrote, and pressed ‘send’.

‘Another lolly?’ said the woman.

‘Yes please,’ I said.