

Larry came in through the back door and sat down at the empty bar. For five years it had been his weekly ritual. In brighter times he and Mack would come here for a drink or a meal with their families. In those days Mack always had a story to tell, or new plan bubbling up.

Now Larry came in during the week. He sat, as always, on the chrome-legged stool that gave him a clear view of Mack through the glass front doors. The late afternoon sun was still bright outside but inside it was always dim. The dark wood panelling, the deep burgundy carpets, the dirty stained glass windows shrouded by a wide veranda, all colluded to deny entry to the outside elements. In it's day this room had welcomed many farmers, coming in for relief from the heat after a day spent working on Queensland's Darling Downs.

Mack wouldn't be able to see him inside the dark pub, not that he ever tried. He sat silent, hunched down, staring at the footpath.

The only sounds Larry heard came through the glass doors on the left, where jangling, discordant screeches bounced off the walls and the high, pressed metal ceiling, creating a sense that something was about to happen. Five people sat expressionless in front of the carnival coloured poker machines, looking as though they hoped that it would.

Stephanie placed a cold beer in front of Larry. He looked at it and nodded his thanks. She leaned forward against the bar.

'You should try talking to him again Larry.' She pushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear and wiped the drip tray under the beer taps.

'Is there anything left to say?' Larry picked up a cardboard coaster and stood it on its side, moving it through his fingers from corner to corner. 'Maybe it's better to leave him be. He won't go back to his farm. Here he has a room; he's got his dog with him. Maybe this is it for him now. Mack's lost everything. What can any of us offer him?'

'When I take in his dinner, I always try to talk to him, but Kelly and I were best friends. I feel like when he looks at me all he can see is the past. All he sees is Kelly.'

Resting one elbow on the bar he dropped his head onto his rough, worn palm. 'Well he's not exactly going to think of the future looking at me, is he? Larry shifted on his stool.

'Maybe it's his daughter you miss and you think that if you can help Mack, Kelly might come back. Maybe you should try to get in touch with her.'

His half empty glass hit the faded towelling bar mat with a slight thump. The beer tasted stale, like it had been waiting for too long to be released from the keg. He ran his hands down his thighs, along the thick camel coloured drill pants which were stained at the knees. Although he wouldn't say it, Larry also yearned for the old Mack.

Steph picked at the edges of a coaster, prising apart the layers. 'He used to be so alive. When Kelly and I were kids he would take us on the tractor to look at the sunflowers, thousands of them. There's never enough time on a farm, but he always made time for us.' Her voice trailed around the room like stale smoke.

An impish picture of a cheeky young Mack in shorts at primary school flashed out of nowhere. Steph was right, Mack had been a dynamo, always researching and trying new things, getting other farmers to think beyond wheat, beef and sheep. He was one of the first to grow sunflowers in the district back in the 1970s. In the nineties he started growing chickpeas, when others hadn't even heard of them. Fields of their purple flowers sprung up defiantly among the subdued colours of the wheat paddocks. 'Double the protein of wheat, good winter rotation crop,' he could hear Mack saying. Larry had done well for himself following Mack's lead.

'It's been five years now, he's only sixty-five Larry. It's so hard to watch him just sitting there everyday.'

Looking out through the glass doors he could see Mack sitting on the bench outside, where he always sat, staring at the ground, his dog lying in a thin slice of sun near the kerb. He seemed to have shrunk inside his clothes, his check shirt and dirty dark blue pants looked like they'd been dragged out of the charity bin. His battered hat was pulled down low.

'If anyone can get through to him it's you Larry. He needs to talk about what happened.'

'You know, some things are best just left, they only rise up to stab you all over again if you dig 'em up. Talking can't solve everything.' Larry pushed his heels out from under his stool. As his boots scraped against the worn carpets, a furtive shot of acrid beer and smoke

rose up. It had been two years since people were allowed to smoke in here, but the smell clung resolutely to everything.

A movement outside caught their attention. Mack got up and walked, head lowered, around the side of the pub. Daisy, his black and grey kelpie, was close behind. Larry and Steph followed his silhouette moving past the coloured windows on the side of the pub. They saw him reappear in the concrete yard at the back.

Mack picked up a beaten metal bowl and filled it with dry food for Daisy. He sat down on a weathered Bentwood chair to watch her eat. His shadow fell along the ground, slipping into the cooling evening. When she'd finished, he walked over to the other side of the yard with her bowl and turned on the tap; his once-strong hands struggling with the old rusty handle.

Daisy came up and sat beside him, her head placed gently on his lap. He stroked her behind her ears. Mack stood up and uncoiled the chain he always left wrapped around her neck. He pulled a key out of his pocket, opened the padlock and locked Daisy to the side of the old wooden crate that would be her bed for the night. Turning slowly, he walked in through the back door.

They watched Mack's ritual in silence. He didn't look inside the bar; he went towards the small room beside the kitchen for his dinner.

'Please Larry; couldn't you just try one more time?'

Larry stood up, moving away from the bar. 'I'll think about it.'

A few days later Larry was in town to pick up some supplies. As he drove down the street he saw Mack sitting on his seat outside the pub. He parked his ute in front the old milk bar, its faded signs advertising products no longer sold. As he stepped out of the shop, he put a small white paper bag in his pocket.

Larry walked towards the pub and sat down on the bench. Mack looked up but didn't say anything. 'Hey Mack, how's Daisy doin'?'

'Getting on a bit Larry, like the rest of us.'

The answer was unexpected. The last time Larry had tried, Mack had ignored him. Daisy moved closer to Larry.

'The old girl still likes the attention then?'

'Yeah, she always did.'

'I've been watching the sheep trials up at the show Mack, got some good young pups there.' Most of the town was there, leaving the street behind them deserted.

'Yeah, guess they would.'

'You got Daisy at the show didn't you?'

'Yeah, bloke said she was a runt, was gonna drown her.'

'Well, you made her into a fine dog Mack.'

'Yeah, turned out good, best sheep dog I ever had, never even nipped 'em, just stared to get them where she wanted.'

Pulling the crumpled paper bag out of his pocket, he held it out to Mack. 'Couldn't resist the milk bottles,' Larry said with a nervous laugh. He could see a flicker cross Mack's face. As boys they had spent all their pocket money on lollies.

Mack took one and squeezed it, testing its freshness before he ate it. Larry stretched his legs out in front of him. In autumn the afternoon sun could sneak in under the veranda, and he enjoyed the warmth on his back.

'You know, I was down the side paddock fixing a fence last week, looking across at your old shed. I still remember the day it fell down. Heard this almighty crash and it just half sunk into the ground, the back still standing. You shoulda pulled that old thing down years ago,' Larry laughed at the memory.

'I guess, but my Dad built that shed, first building he put on the farm. Lived in it for two years while they built the house.'

'Must've been bloody cold in there.'

'None too pleasant in the summer either. The lass liked it. Took a photo of it and used it in her Year 12 art folio, called it *The demise the 20th century farm, the modern farmer, on their knees to external forces*. She was always taking photos of odd things.'

'Kelly was quite the wit back then wasn't she?' Larry paused, but not long enough to think things through. 'You ever hear from her?'

Mack's skin tightened. Larry knew he had relaxed too much and taken one step too far.

'No, tried to ring her a few times, wouldn't take my calls. She used to call her mother now and then, I'd come in and hear Jan talking on the phone and then she'd go quiet and hang up. But I always knew. Jan thought she could spare me, but I always knew.' His eyes misted over and he moved a little away from Larry, his focus returning to the footpath.

'Remember when that roll of wire came off the back of the ute, when we were doing the fences? Did that ever travel! Couldn't believe the speed it picked up, undoing all our hard work along the way.'

They had been moving the wire to the top paddock, so it would be ready for them in the morning. They always did the fencing together. Mack hit a bump and the huge coil of wire, which Mack hadn't tied down, because he wasn't going far, had jumped over the tailgate. They stood by helplessly as it bounced all the way down the hill. A ferocious barbed tumbleweed.

Larry was talking fast, trying to find somewhere safe, but everything led back to the same jagged place. Mack had been a great farmer, one of the best, but he was slack with safety, always had been.

Mack's casual approach to safety had killed his five year old grandson.

It was Larry who had found young Ryan. He'd known he was too late as soon as he saw a bit of red plastic poking out of the dirt at the bottom of the silo. It was one of the little red tip trucks that the boy carried with him everywhere.

Always a keen climber, and enticed by the silo's ladder, Ryan had clambered up and crawled through the hole at the top. Mack had left the lid open, not expecting rain. The vast hill of grain inside would have looked like an irresistible secret playground to a boy obsessed with trucks. In seconds the grain would have drawn him down like quicksand, suffocating him.

The volunteer fireman had got Ryan out. Larry could still see him, covered in dust, coming towards them, one slow step at a time, the young lad cradled in his arms.

Kelly's scream when she saw Ryan had sliced like razor wire through everyone waiting below. Thinking about it now raised the hairs on Larry's arms; he looked across at Mack,

whose eyes had clouded again, and guessed it was what he heard every day as he sat staring at the ground.

'You did this,' Kelly had yelled at Mack. 'Mum and I begged you for years to fix this place up, but you just ignored us.' Mack had stood there, frozen.

Larry knew Mack had intended to put some kid-proof guards on the lower steps of the ladders leading into the silos; in fact he'd been in town with him the day he bought them. Mack had just never gotten around to putting them up.

That Sunday they were celebrating Jan's sixtieth birthday. He and Mack had been having a few beers and laughing by the barbecue. Nobody saw Ryan go down the back behind the shed.

The young boy's death had destroyed Mack's family; Jan died less than a year later, unwilling to face another birthday. Kelly's marriage had not survived and she moved to Sydney, her two brothers were in New Zealand.

About five years ago Mack had walked into town with Daisy and just never left. Larry looked across at his old friend; he still couldn't understand how the Mack he'd known could sit so still. Everyone in town had become used to him being there, most looked away as they walked past.

Ryan's death had sent a shiver through the small Darling Downs community. In the weeks and months after the accident there had been a quiet cascade of activity around the local farms, as guards were dragged out from the backs of sheds, dusted down and put back on machines, safety shields appeared on power take off shafts and dipping pits were covered or drained, locks were put in place, gates were fixed and fences sprung up around farm houses. No one talked about what they were doing, but they all shared Mack's guilt, knowing it could have been their nephew or grandson pulled out of that silo.

Moving around on the hard seat, Larry picked up the white paper bag, but it was empty.

'Why don't you come over to the show with me tomorrow? We could check out the rodeo too.'

His words tripped over themselves, but Larry knew there was nowhere Mack wanted to go. He turned around, trying to find a way to leave, when a bright red Toyota parked outside

the pub. He saw Mack pull his eyes from the footpath, and look towards it. Larry knew that car. He'd gone to Toowoomba with Mack to pick it up; he'd bought it for Kelly the year Ryan was born.

Larry couldn't see the driver's seat from where he sat, his view blocked by the veranda post. It took some time before anyone got out. Daisy roused from her half sleep and stood up, tail wagging. A young woman, dressed in grey jeans and a white t-shirt, stood beside the car, scanning the street like someone seeing an old place through new eyes. Mack sat up and smoothed his crumpled shirt, a thread of a smile lifting his furrowed cheeks.