

Along The Sunflower Trail

He knows sunflowers are her favourite, he places them neatly, back to back in the vase on the kitchen table, every time, so that maybe their vibrancy will cheer me. I used to love them. When we were in love. We live out at Branson's Paddock, which is twelve miles from anything at all. We grow wheat and we grow sunflowers. In the early days, I would walk up the back acreage trail every day to see the saffron fields waving toward me but they no longer interest me. By the late afternoon the ones in the vase are crestfallen. Their severed necks stoop helplessly until the next deliverance, a rehearsal I have grown to despise.

Ruth was in no state to cook for me this morning, she looked bloody shocking and anyhow my stomach was twisted up again. I can't look at her too much unless I give her something and our flowers remind me of the night we met. She was wearing that floral dress and I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Things are different now, she's like most of the women out here, always complaining about something. I told her I don't want our neighbour, Bess, bothering us anymore. She's nosey and her gums flap too much. I don't want her meddling with our business and I don't want the town folk knowing stuff about us, I'll sort it out myself.

Grant has been worse than ever this week, his boundaries have almost completely disappeared. He won't go to see a shrink, so I'm faced with fewer choices now. The headaches started again last night, coming at me like an army, like him, so I have to fake sleep. Life is easier that way. My sister is supposed to be visiting before the weekend, what will she think when she sees me this time? What if she gets hurt? I'm tired of all the hurt. I'll find an excuse. Yesterday Bess arrived unexpectedly, she doesn't come around as often as she used to and I have missed our chats. Grant works in the nearby shed and it makes her anxious but this time she spoke her mind and even offered to teach me how to drive. I knew Grant wouldn't like it and he knows every inch of our property, he would find out, so I had to decline. I don't know if I will see Bess again but I won't argue with Grant anymore. God I need a break, even just one more night.

My anger has subsided again and my Doctor insists I talk with Ruth. I don't know if I can because I don't know how to. She knows the drugs are dictating me, but how do I explain that I stand outside of myself on those crazy nights? I'd sound like a real joke. The Doctor says the rash is another reaction, he's prescribing more medication. He warned me it could clash with the other drugs but that's nothing new. I talked him into it because I need something more...some days I could kill with these bare hands...some days I could kill my wife. Never thought it would come to this. The Doctor has suggested we get away for a while, go on a holiday, it might take my mind off things a bit. Think Ruth could do with a break from this shit hole.

Grant is talking about us going away on holiday by the coast. I told him it sounds like a good idea. It will buy me some time to prepare for myself whilst he's busy organising the details. The swelling needs a chance to go down and there are other things I need to attend to. Yes, it would be good to have a holiday.

'There are a few things we'll need then,' the wife suggests 'if you're planning to fish, be sure to buy a sharp gutting knife and you used the last of your course grade line last time.'

'Might do just that, we'll see.' he replies.

The clock is stubborn as it chips moments into hours, into days. The following weekend arrives and Ruth is standing alongside the Chrysler taking one more look at the old homestead frontage. A sudden wave of sadness turns on her but it falls away as a sparrow darts by with a playful swiftness, then arcs upward into the clear blue. Touched, she is delivered a recollection, vague and distant, of a spirited teenager in a world unfolding new possibilities. She was a player then and she knew what laughter was.

The old tank starts up with a crackling whir and they exit the front gate, then pass along the sunflower trail. As usual, Grant is insular, going through his motions with a cool preoccupation that has become his own thorn. At his distance, he fails to see the ignition in her eyes and so a cunning glimpse is overlooked. He doesn't know her anymore, she's never really known her and now it is too late.

Have I got everything? She thinks to herself, it's the safest way.

The trip from Clackline to Esperance is five hours. The hills roll by, dotted by a familiar yellow that streaks past, like oil on canvas. The cabin is saturated in silence and mottled only by the wireless fading in and out as they cross towns. As they enter a lonely pump station, a distinct voice clears through the wireless, Tracy Chapman is singing:

And I had a feeling I could be someone, be someone

He cuts it off with a flick of the wrist. 'Better refuel 'ere,' he utters, wearied. She tries not to fiddle, tries to maintain composure, it's a long shot. His thickset hands release his safety belt, it snatches back across his wide girth. He is set loose.

'You want anythin'?' he drones, looking away whilst he feels for his wallet. He checks for his card, it's missing.

'What's up?' she asks, with a calm pretence.

'My card, it's missing, must be in the suitcase, in the boot' he says, shifting his focus.

She is quick to stop him, 'Here, take mine' she hands her card over, knowing the cash balance is stashed elsewhere. With a summons of courage, she instructs; 'See if they have *Marlboro milds* and while you're at it, a Sarsparilla would be good too.'

'Christ woman...yeah, ok!' he cuts, then pauses, '...aren't you a Nazi today.'

Their eyes gravitate momentarily, she resists and returns to her passenger view. Dusk creeps over the stretch of scrub ahead of her, the focus is on a ribbon of dirt that winds toward the horizon, offering an invite for only a little while longer.

He is gone. She checks her bag one last time, the knife, the wire, the line, it's all there. It may not be needed, but it's there. She scans for other vehicles, for potential search vehicles, the place is isolated but in five minutes it may not be, so she must act now. The car door swings out and she stoops with eyes wide, focused to the left through the car windows where two figures are immersed within the luminescence of the station. Soon there will be only one and he will return. Adrenaline surges, she tries to stay clear, tries to blank out the shadows but they hang in front of her, ugly and adolescent, reminding her of why her escape is paramount. And so her bitterness finds its own clarity and pushes her pulse toward the boot lock. He has overlooked the spare boot key.

She lifts out her future from beneath the spare tyre, a knapsack with her only belongings and then crouches to deflate the passenger side tyres. It's not enough, there is time and the knife will not be wasted. It's raised quickly and blow by blow the tread is pierced with a violence that is familiar to each of those blood spitting years and to everything he has broken; every cracked tooth and bone, every dream she had ever placed her hope in, until now. He's sick, he would be pressed to keep up the pace. She pledges this will be the last wave of violence she will ever hold her hand to and then she turns her back to the madness.

Her victory is burning brightly as she stands before an unknown landscape that does not reveal itself to her as an enemy, rather as her paradise, whatever happens to her. And as she slips away into the twilight, familiar yellow faces appear amongst the saltbush and Mitchell grass. This time, a smiles finds its way into the crevices of her lips. The weight of a thousand tonne has released itself.

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