

Circles

He lifted the navy-blue Kanga's cap off the top of his head and wiped at the flow of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Goddamn it was hot.

Boiling hot. The humidity drenched him like a warm bath.

He'd been at it since five that morning. He flicked the cap inside and out a few times over the crushed wheat that passed beneath him under the tractor wheels before collecting in the harvester. He rolled his shoulders back and forth and looked down at the seemingly motionless minute and second hands on his watch. The sun reflected off the glass and into his eyes from just above the horizon line as he approached the fence at the end of the paddock and slowed down to navigate the turn.

It was harvest time, which meant circles.

Circles all day long.

Up and down. Over and over and over.

The aerial for the radio didn't work, so the only company he had was the cassette player, which would occasionally jam and then spew tape out all over his lap. He had long since learnt to copy his new ones onto blanks before risking them in the tractor. He might get one run of it or he might get a hundred, but eventually, they'd all end up as piles of tangled black webbing.

His mind drifted from one thing to another. He thought about the time him and his friend Dan had blown up a dead kangaroo with explosives they had stolen from his Dad in this same paddock. Or the time he hadn't quite made it home one night and passed out in the field while trying to take a shortcut to the house. Inevitably, his mind wound up returning to how numb his ass was on top of the tractor seat which haemorrhaged faded yellow foam padding all over.

When he wasn't reminiscing or daydreaming, his thoughts turned to the only thing in his life that brought him any happiness.

His 1968 Danson Charger HG KTS.

The first time he saw her she was a rusted-out heap. He bought it from some city guy whose wife had told him to choose between it or her. Idiot chose her. Every cent that he made since (that wasn't put away down at the local or used to pay his considerable speeding fines), went into her.

She was beautiful. She barrelled down the dirt roads outside of the town, announcing her presence to everyone. They all knew who she belonged to and the tourists that came through the town stopped to get photos of her when she was parked on the main road.

His father was the only one that hated her. When he told his Old Man how much she'd cost, he blew a fuse and told him he should be saving his money and not pissing it away on a stupid car.

'*Save for what?*' Cam thought. He knew what he was going to end up doing with the rest of his life. Just like his father, and his father before him, and his father before him.

Cam had always been firmly ensconced in what his father called “the reality of the situation”, being that he would stay at the farm until his Old Man retired and then he would end up working it with his own children. There was no money to be made; that was understood, but there was the fact that they were farmers, and farmers farmed.

No, his father wasn’t expecting him to save money for a “better life” or to do something that he wanted to do. He was just jealous. He didn’t have a car like that when he was his age. Cam knew he wanted one too. He would hear about the cars his father’s friends had with the Old Man perpetually stuck shotgun until *his* Old Man brought a new ute for the farm and handed the old one down to him, like the shirts and pants they passed down as well.

Both of those utes were still sitting in the back corners of two different paddocks where they finally gave out and wouldn’t budge. Now they were half-hidden with grass growing over them; covered in rust and bullet holes, hollowed out from salvaging, and filled with shit from the animals that called them home.

Evening came and went and the night wrapped the sky around him in the paddock. He finished the field with his headlights and pulled the tractor into the shed.

He made his way inside where his mum had his food waiting for him on the kitchen table. The Old Man sat opposite him — just as covered in dirt, dust and disillusionment as Cam was — and his two younger brothers sat in between. Cam’s Mum did the dishes behind them. She would eat alone later once everyone was finished. The two boys dove straight into their food, while the older men chewed their vegies, potatoes and chicken slowly.

‘We’ll have to do that paddock behind Simpsons’ tomorrow,’ his father said.

Cam, not bothering to look up responded, ‘Yep.’

‘And the back paddock after that.’

‘Yep.’

‘What are you up to tonight?’ the Old Man asked.

‘Head into town, catch up with the boys.’

‘Goin’ the pub?’

‘Probably.’

‘Reckon you oughta stay in, get some sleep instead. Can’t do much with a belly full of piss tomorrow.’

‘I’ll be right.’

‘Reckon you can stay out of trouble then?’

Cam stopped eating and raised his eyes to his fathers.

‘How many days is it next time?’ The Old Man asked.

‘The Sarge reckons I lose it for three months.’

The Old Man paused before responding, ‘well, it’ll be the only way you’ll learn.’

‘Yep.’

Cam circled the fork around his plate and finished off the last bit of his potato. He stood up and put his dish in the sink of water that his mum was working through.

‘Thanks, Mum,’ he said, kissing her temple. She smiled warmly at him before he left to go upstairs to shower and change.

When he came back down in his going-out jeans and button up shirt his father was asleep on the couch nursing a beer and his Mum was knitting a pair of boots for his newborn cousin in town.

‘Going out, Mum.’

‘Did you want a couple of dollars?’

‘I’m good, put it toward the uni fund.’

She laughed softly. The uni fund had been a long-standing joke between them. He grabbed his keys from the hook next to the door and went outside and into the shed. He hit the overhead fluorescent lights which slowly flickered on over his sleeping pride and joy under a tarp.

He lifted her blanket carefully from the front and pulled it over the vehicle in one quick, sweeping motion.

And there she was in all of her glory; beautiful as the day she was born.

He jumped in and fired her up. The engine roared into life with every rev and instantly filled the shed with a cloud of exhaust. Cam smiled. He gripped the metal T-bar of the steering wheel and rested the palm of his hand on the gear shift. He brought it down quickly in unison with the clutch at his foot. She sprung forward, wheels spinning fast onto the gravel driveway. He tore around the corner of the driveway and out onto the bitumen road.

Cam pulled up outside the police station in the middle of town and crossed over the road to The Broadway.

Nick was already at the bar and half a schooner in.

‘Howdy,’ Nick said, as Cam sat down on the stool next to him.

‘How’s it going?’

‘Same shit. Different day.’

‘Yep.’

Tommo, the proprietor of the establishment, was wearing his normal tight jeans that lifted and accentuated his gut over his belt, and had permanently stretched out the bluey he wore every day. He noticed Cam and came down from the other end of the bar.

‘Beer?’

‘Yeah, only if you can manage it, Tommo.’

‘It’ll all be froth if you keep talking shit,’ Tommo replied as he started pouring.

‘It’s usually froth anyway,’ Cam said as he threw a fiver on the table.

‘That’s because of all the water in it, isn’t it Tommo?’, asked Nick, as Tommo set the glass on the bar.

‘You’re welcome to drink somewhere else,’ Tommo said. They laughed. There was no somewhere else.

‘We’d miss your fine company,’ Nick said.

‘Yeah, I reckon you would too,’ Tommo said as he went to serve one of the old, retired cockies that spent their remaining afternoons and nights at the bar.

‘You finished harvest yet?’ Nick asked Cam.

‘Nah, not ‘til next week, you?’

‘Another day or two. Rog’s worried about the forecast for next week. Reckons rain’s gonna come early this year, so he put another guy on, some blow in from up North.’

‘Any good?’

‘Seems alright. Got a hell of a car though.’ Nick looked up from sipping on his bar to see if Cam took the bait.

Cam paused for a second. ‘Oh yeah? What’s he got?’

‘A ’73 Nixer with a turbo.’

‘Don’t see many of them.’

‘Certainly don’t.’

The boys drank their beers before Cam asked the inevitable question. ‘So, where’s he staying?’

‘Who?’

‘Fuck off “who”. Your mate with the Nixer.’

‘Just out at the place.’

‘Is he comin’ in tonight?’

‘I told him to, said he’d see. Says he’d take the Danson any day of the week.’

‘Yeah?’, Cam said before waving his beer glass, ‘Tommo! Re-fill.’

An hour later the engine of the Nixer roared through the main street before pulling up next to the pub. They put down their beers and went outside to take a look. The owner, their age but with long hair and a beard, had just popped the bonnet.

‘Wes, this’s Cam; Cam this’s Wes,’ Nick introduced them.

‘Good to meet you,’ Cam said, shaking his hand.

‘You too,’ Wes said with a Northern twang in his voice.

The boys gathered around the front of the car to inspect the contents under the hood. Nick lit a smoke and offered the pack to the others. Cam declined, but Wes took one and lit it.

‘Nice,’ Cam said as he bent over to check the side of the motor.

‘Yep, just replaced the gear box so I could throttle the fuck out of it. Hits a hundred in about twenty seconds now.’

‘Damn.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Reckon you could take it?’ Nick asked Cam.

‘One way to find out,’ Cam replied.

‘That yours?’ asked Wes, pointing to the Danson across the road.

‘Yep.’

‘Done much to it?’

‘Almost the lot. She was just a shell when I found her.’

From the outside smoking area, a half-dozen of the older patrons watched this ritual, as they had done many times before, some of them for over fifty years.

Cam popped the hood and they repeated the same process, this time Wes checking it out while Cam beamed with pride.

‘What do you guys race for?’ Wes asked.

‘Shits and giggles,’ Nick said.

‘Fair enough. Whereabouts?’

‘There’s a stretch of road just out of town, called Reynolds Lane. It circles back around onto the main road after about five kilometres and leads back to where you start from. It’s mostly straight, but it’s got some nice turns as well,’ Nick said.

‘Dirt?’

‘Bitumen. We’re not that fuckin’ poor here.’

‘Sounds good. Wanna go now?’ Wes asked.

‘Nah, not yet.’ Nick gestured his thumb to the police station behind them. ‘The cop shop has changeover at ten, if we go then, they’ll all be in there.’

Wes looked at his watch. Twenty to nine. ‘Cool.’

‘Want a beer?’ Cam asked.

‘Yeah, I could do a beer,’ Wes replied.

Nick and Wes threw their butts into the gutter as they headed back into The Broady.

At 9:40 a pair of headlights briefly hit the bar at a familiar angle from the station across the road. The boys all turned around and saw one of the town’s two police cars pull in to the driveway. They watched as The Sarge, with his lanky build and shaved head, got out of the car, and walked into the station without giving the bar so much as a backwards glance.

Nick put his cup down on the bar. ‘About time now.’

‘The Sarge sees you boys fucking around on that road again he’ll raise hell,’ said Tommo.

‘That’s only if he catches us,’ Nick replied.

‘Your funeral.’

‘Throw some roses down for me, will you?’ Cam said as he finished the last of his pot.

‘Pfft, I thought pansies were more your style,’ Tommo retorted, which the old guard found especially amusing.

‘You put a round on the house for my memory and you can piss on my grave for all I care.’

‘Hey, you seen the sign?’ Tommo pointed behind him to the sign that had sat above the bar since his father had opened it:

‘There’s nothing free in life. That includes drinks at The Broady’.

It was right next to the sign asking certain clientele (barely any of whom ever actually came through White Creek anymore) to use the back bar.

‘Tight ass,’ Cam said, before turning to Nick, Wes and the other boys that had gathered by. ‘Let’s go.’

They all finished their drinks before exiting en masse.

‘Don’t die out there, you fucking idiots,’ Tommo called out from behind them.

The convoy of cars, with Cam and Nick at the front, came to the ‘T’ intersection that joined Main Road and the turn into Reynold’s Lane. All the cars, except Wes’s, pulled off onto the bank on the shoulder of the road. The yellow grass which covered the surrounding area had never been given a chance to set in, instead the shoulder was mostly mud with tyre tracks dried into it.

Wes wound down his window and called over to Cam, whose car was next to his, ‘Just gonna do a quick lap to see what’s what.’

‘No worries,’ Cam replied, waving him off.

‘What do you think?’ asked Nick.

‘Easy.’

‘That’s the spirit. Too bad we didn’t try and get some money off of him.’ Nick was always trying to convince Cam to turn a profit with this past time of theirs.

‘You think a guy like that has any more than a weeks wages at most? Doesn’t much seem worth fleecing him for it.’

‘That’s not so bad. It’s more than I’ve ever got after my child support goes through.’

The boys sat silently for a minute before Cam could see Wes in the rear view. He pulled up next to him again.

‘Good to go?’

‘Yep.’

‘Good luck,’ Nick said, as he left the car and lit a cigarette, ‘don’t smash.’

‘I’ll try not to.’

Cam pulled up next to Wes. One of the other boys, Johnno, moved between the cars with a small sawn off shotgun in his hands and a rollie between his lips.

‘On the signal.’

Cam turned to get a measure on Wes. He could see the beads of sweat running down his head even though the night had cooled the air and taken the edge of the humidity from the day.

Both cars revved their engines. Wes’s was louder.

Johnno raised the shotgun above his head and fired. Cam and Wes both dropped their clutches at the same time. Wes’s back wheels spun for a moment before finding their grounding. Cam flew ahead into the stretching oblivion of the small-town backroad.

Cam had already come to a stop and was getting out of the car as Wes pulled up behind him in a cloud of dirt.

‘Fuckin’ hell!’ he shouted, slamming his door.

The boys looked back at him before glancing back at each other.

‘Fuck, you really had the jump on me at the start, eh?’ Wes seemed to cool down mid-sentence and then shook both of their hands rapidly. ‘Rematch next week?’

Cam smiled, ‘yeah, sure.’

‘See you then boys, let’s put some coin on it though. Make it a bit more sporting.’

Wes had turned and gotten back into his car before they could respond. He spun the wheels around and pulled back onto the road, before gunning it back towards the town.

Cam and Nick got back into the Danson and followed.

‘You could really make it as a driver if you ever get sick of smoking these muppets,’ Nick said, right before they hit the town line.

‘Yeah, maybe.’

‘Good thing Sarge didn’t find his way out, eh?’

‘Yeah.’

They came back into the centre of the town and Cam pulled up next to Nick’s ute.

‘Thanks for the lift.’

‘No worries.’

Nick opened the door and got out.

‘Have a good one,’ Nick said, as Cam was changing the station on the radio. ‘Bet you wouldn’t have the guts to do some circle work out here in front of the cop shop?’

Cam smiled and waved him off, ‘have a good night.’

‘Yep,’ Nick said, walking over to his own car. He was barely inside when he heard Cam’s motor rev and the wheels of the charger sliding out on the asphalt and smoking up the street in front of the police station.

Circle after circle, painted black onto the road beneath him.

The door of the police station opened and a bulky figure with a bald head stood out backlit in the doorway, shaking his head.

The charger came to a brief pause before driving off at the speed limit down the street leading out of town. Nick watched as The Sarge casually walked across to the driveway, got into his cruiser and followed out after him.

Fuck it's hot. Boiling hot.

It's even hotter than yesterday, only now he's contending with three hours of sleep and a hangover.

He's approaching the fence.

He circles.

All day long.