

Impasse

Mairi Neil

Kevin negotiated the Mack onto the ring road, pent-up tension eased and his shoulders relaxed. The last leg of his Melbourne to Sydney round-trip ending. The long night had passed without incident, the stars fading pale to insignificant as a rosy dawn swept away the darkness. Concrete walled sound barriers hid suburbia, except for a patchwork of tiled roofs bathed in early morning sunlight.

Despite *No-Doze* tablets, Kevin struggled to stay awake after twelve hours of almost non-stop driving. The radio crackled just as an aeroplane droned overhead. *Leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again...* Kevin clamped his lips and scowled. The cancellation of the once-in-a-lifetime adventure to Hawaii, planned for his 50th birthday, still hurt, and by the time Teresa finished with him, he'd be lucky to keep his truck, never mind afford a holiday.

A glance at the solicitor's letter protruding from the glove-box revived the shock of its contents. Resentment had helped him stay alert on the interminable journey, but his anger dwindling like a punctured fuel tank. The double-header shift, legally wrong but financially necessary, could be the pattern of his life after the divorce. His logbook would become 'the book of lies' the critics of the trucking industry believed.

He shook his head as tears gathered while the radio continued to sing... *already I'm so lonesome I could die.* The hours he worked to give Teresa the comfortable lifestyle she wanted, created a gap which she filled with line dancing, and an affair soon to become a permanent relationship. For the past twenty years, Kevin had spent as much time as possible driving trucks as an owner-driver. Lengthy trips meant drive, eat, and sleep for him but gave choices to Teresa. He looked at the two pairs of miniature cowboy boots dangling from the mirror as if to mock him. A swift lunge yanked them from their silver cord. Kevin threw them to the floor before he swung the Mack off the main road. A stab at the console silenced John Denver and the start of the six o'clock news. He pushed a CD into place and accompanied Jason Kemp, *No-one loves this truck like me...*

Kevin's mood changed, as did the view; the dramatic contrast never ceased to amaze him. A dense housing estate appeared on his left while grassland dotted with gnarled shrubs and windblown stunted trees decorated the right. He checked his mirrors. The flashy green MG he'd observed lane hopping a few kilometres back had followed him off the highway. Bit of a lead foot, he thought, as the car gained ground.

He pressed the console and switched from homegrown favourites to the disembodied voice on the CB radio. He eased off the accelerator as the news of Dave Dudley's death sank in before rummaging in the box of CDs at his side, and exchanging Slim Dusty's Aussie vocals for Yankee Dave's, *Six Days On The Road*.

Emotion added a quiver to Kevin's baritone as he crooned the truckies' anthem. *I got ten forward gears and a Georgia overdrive, I'm taking little white pills and my eyes are open wide. I just passed a Gemmy and a White: I've been passin' everything in sight. Six days on the road and I'm gonna make it home tonight.*

Music had helped him endure the long, lonely hours of driving through some of the toughest and remotest parts of Australia. *Well, it seems like a month since I kissed my baby goodbye, I would love a lot of women but I'm not that kind of guy...*

When did Teresa fall out of love with him? Grey suburbia and dry, colourless grassland blurred as Kevin relived their last row. The litany of criticism hurled about his frequent absences, his obsession with the footy, his appreciation of a beer - even his taste in music. A final heartbreaking accusation that his affection for the Mack greater than his love for her, and how she hated everything to do with trucks. As if aware of his turmoil, the Mack grunted as he changed gear.

They visited Collins Street specialists the first fifteen years of their marriage spending thousands on IVF. But the extra bedrooms in their dream home remained empty. His failure amplified by being the only sibling in his family without offspring. He worked long hours to fill the void and to compensate Teresa with material comforts. Their life always satisfied him, but Teresa changed. She became complicated. Never seemed happy.

At first he noticed the touch of sadness colouring almost everything she said. Smiles rare, and laughter rarer. When he asked what was wrong she'd reply, 'Nothing,' but the stiffness of her mouth and the lingering sadness of eyes, said otherwise. Sometimes she stared at him in such a disinterested way he could be a billboard she passed everyday on the way to work. He convinced himself it was imagination until the bombshell of her packing her bags and leaving. The big truck rumbled. Kevin intoned, *I'm a little overweight and my log's three days behind, but nothing bothers me tonight...*

The MG approached and Kevin snorted in disgust at the slip of a girl driving the sports car of his dreams. In the long side mirror, he saw the MG gaining ground. Probably Teresa's bloody lawyer rushing to take some other poor bastard to the cleaners. The sleek green streak moved in and out of his vision. A smart arse in a hurry... think you own the road, missy? Been to one of those all night rave parties poppin' Ecstasy? Typical Gen X, want it and flaunt it.

The MG driver blasted her horn. Kevin raised an eyebrow, tilted his head sideways and stared into the mirror. She waved her arm, and pointed, intimating she wanted to overtake. Kevin saw the road ahead narrow because of roadworks. What a nerve ordering me to move! You need to learn patience, missy! I'm doing the speed limit. If I lose my licence, I lose my living.

He tweaked the power steering and positioned the Mack blocking the MG driver's view of the road ahead, and continued to sing, *Well my rig's a little old, but that don't mean she's slow. There's a flame from her stack and the smoke's rolling black as coal...*

Kate revelled in the MG's comfort, and a high performance outclassing her eight-year-old Torana. She couldn't believe her father had offered his precious possession this morning. He must still feel a sense of duty to her mother. She cursed aloud as she changed gears. Resentment at being stuck behind the enormous truck dampened her satisfaction at the smoothness of the ride. If the lumbering rig hogged the road, she'd lose valuable time.

She stared at the tall, skinny tree on the horizon, bleached and stark. It reminded her of her fifty-nine-year-old mother. Tears, never far from the surface, pressed on her eyelids. Her hands tightened around the steering wheel. Sunlight emerged from the clouds and bounced off the car's bonnet. Grateful for her sunglasses, Kate sighed. It promised to be a glorious summer's day, yet her mother lay dying.

It had been devastating to see her mother connected to the life-support system after the first heart attack thirteen months ago. Hospitals and their paraphernalia part of Kate's daily existence as an intensive care nurse, but that was like a punch in the chest. She licked dry lips, remembering the wasted arms and laboured breathing, the look of defeat and fear in lacklustre eyes. She shivered, remembering the moment she realised how fragile her mother had become. She sniffed and willed the tears to stay away, blushing with guilt because although filled with a terrible grief, she knew she cried for herself, for the dark, cavernous, lonely space her mother's death will create.

Lifestyle choices had contributed to her mother's ill health, not least the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter drugs, supplied by her pharmacist husband. Kate swallowed hard, knuckles whitening as she gripped the steering wheel. Her father's collusion in his wife's attempts to stay slim had destroyed their marriage. She may have looked like a fashion model for Vogue, but the irrepressible warm personality disappeared; replaced with a humourless, nervous tension, and compulsive obsession about appearance. No doubt this changed her parent's relationship. Kate sighed. She didn't want to go there.

This morning's urgent message meant twenty-four-year-old Kate feared a life without her mother. Memories and reflection made her appreciate how essential her mother's tower of strength had been. Her encouragement, wisdom, and unconditional love had seen Kate through studies, failed relationships, and the carving of an independent future. She dialled the familiar telephone number to share a wonderful, or disastrous experience, if needing advice or reassurance. The infidelity of her father with his assistant pharmacist and subsequent abandonment of thirty years of marriage had emotionally damaged them both, but had taken a frightful physical toll on her mum.

Since the first heart attack, her depressed mother fretted. With Kate's support she had gradually regained a measure of strength and confidence to look beyond the impending divorce, plan an alternative future without the dominating presence of her extrovert husband.

Kate inhaled the morning air. Grateful for the wind whipping her hair Medusa-like around her head, keeping her awake. Night duty had been ghastly. The youth admitted at midnight with multiple reactions to the latest designer drug in the rave party scene lost his battle at 4.36

am; five minutes before the telephone call announcing her mother's second heart attack and emergency dash to hospital.

When Kate picked up the MG, she disturbed her father kissing his girlfriend. It had shocked her. Not the physical embrace, but the naturalness and complete pleasure they took in each other. It made her realise how her parent's relationship had deteriorated over the years. Cuddles and desire belonged to a distant past Kate couldn't remember. Her father's current joy highlighted how devoid of passion his marriage had been with displays of affection cursory and insincere.

The MG weaved in and out of the light traffic and from checking the mirror, Kate knew no cars had turned off the highway when she followed the Mack. She glanced at her watch; she'd made reasonable time, but the towering truck slowed her down. And now the road narrowed to one lane. She eased her foot off the accelerator. Several months nursing road trauma victims had instilled the importance of sensible driving. She gritted her teeth. How frustrating the truckie not prepared to share the route. Must be on wages and billing some poor sucker for extra hours.

A gigantic cloud raced across the sky, but the sun peeked through like a bright thought. No vehicles were coming the other way and Kate tooted at the truck and signalled the driver to move over. He should let her pass if he would not pick up speed. She planted her foot, trembling with the adrenalin rush as she steered the MG alongside the roaring Mack, the vehicle a green speck dwarfed by eighteen gigantic wheels. A David and Goliath race.

Kate blinked as a yellow and black Road Works Ahead sign sprouted into view. Through dry lips she murmured, 'come on little car, you can do it!' The groaning colossus beside her slowed, and with an audible sigh of relief, she manoeuvred in front. A beeping came from her mobile phone lying in its cradle near the gear stick. Mother? Her heart raced, and she froze.

The momentary distraction enough for Kate to miss seeing a gigantic pothole. The MG hit the crater. Used to her ancient Torana, she pulled hard on the wheel, forgetting the MG had power steering. She saw the horrified look on the truck driver's face as she spun out of control and he strained to avoid a collision. The Mack slewed, then jack-knifed. The monster splattered hailstones and soil. Gravel and lumps of bitumen scattered like confetti. The two vehicles stopped after what seemed hours of a hideous slow motion dance, but the drifting and spinning only lasted a nightmarish few seconds. Separated by a cloud of dust and miracle inches, the MG rested atop a buckled road works sign. The Mack displaying orange horns as two fluorescent witches' hats protruded from its grille.

His patrol car parked beneath a clump of straggly gum trees, close to the scene, Senior Constable Gordon Bragg poured the last of the tea from his thermos. He settled a hairy arm on the wound down window and sipped slowly, inhaling the rich aroma and savouring the lemony Earl Grey. The drink a welcome refreshment to ease the hunger the night produced. In the words of his Irish grandmother, at least it was 'wet and warm'. A prisoner to boredom and

monotony from being stuck in the patrol car for hours; he glanced at his watch. Not long until he could sit at home filling up on mouth-watering bacon and eggs. Those final sixty minutes before finishing at 7.00 am, always the worst and this shift more tiring and boring than most.

He ruminated on why an experienced senior constable ended up stuck in the middle of nowhere watching traffic, or more likely feral dogs chasing sheep and an occasional hoon pushing a clapped out Holden or Ford to its limit. Not a zealous cop, Gordon always played by the book. A policeman for fifteen years and a railway security officer for fifteen years before that, he tackled whatever job he had to do to with the attitude 'if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well.'

Last Saturday he had stopped an erratic vehicle being a danger to others on the road. The attractive blonde driver refused a breath test, claiming indemnity as an off-duty police officer. Gordon insisted and booked her for exceeding .05. Instead of being commended for behaving 'without fear or favour', they had sent him to coventry and gave him the graveyard shift in the sticks. The blonde constable, Miss Popular, had friends in high places.

Gordon closed his eyes and rested his head against the door frame. The light shower of rain during the night had washed weeks of summer dust from the wildflowers. Their sweet nectar mingling with eucalyptus from the gums, drifted into the car, a pleasant, if brief mask over the body odour and misery etched into the patrol car's upholstery. Nature's silence was peaceful, so different from being ignored at work, and the sullen silence at home. After twenty-five years of marriage, his relationship with Sue a partnership in name only. Platonic friendship too kind a description, more an alliance of sufferance, a show of unity when the kids and grandkids visit and separate lives when they leave.

He settled back into the seat to have forty winks when the sound of screeching brakes shattered the stillness. Instantly alert, he winced at the crunch of gravel and grinding of metal and held his breath as a big Mack slid and skewed to miss a spinning MG by the narrowest of margins. Acrid burning rubber and brake fluid clawed at the air.

In a matter of minutes, Gordon arrived at the accident scene; relieved to see both drivers struggle from their vehicles. The truckie emerged dishevelled and pale. About Gordon's vintage, he sported day old whiskers and hair like straw hanging from a cart. He exhibited all the signs of being on the road too long for one stretch. The MG driver an attractive woman, close in age to his daughter but that's where the similarity ended. With a toddler and reduced hours at work, Leah could only dream about driving such an expensive machine. This young lady had more money than sense. Another Miss Popular, no doubt.

Gordon put his hat on and buttoned his jacket before pulling a notebook from his pocket. His reflection loomed large in the windows of the police car, considerable shoulders rounded under the pale blue shirt, and a developing paunch jutting above a thickening waistline. He sucked in his belly and made a mental note to attend the gym more often before straightening up and marching towards the drivers.

Kate's auburn hair spilled over her dark jacket. She balled a white fist against her temple. Slumped against the car to steady herself, she tried to stop her legs from shaking. Relief at being alive washed over her like a warm shower. Perhaps guardian angels existed. Two middle-aged men walked towards her, and she braced herself. This pair did not look the angelic type.

Kevin barked before he reached her, 'you okay, girlie? What the hell did you think you were doing?'

Gordon stated the obvious as he drew near, 'you are one very lucky lady!' Turning to the truckie he added, 'a nice bit of driving, sir, from what I saw.'

Kevin nodded his acknowledgement of the compliment, but the fear in his eyes and ashen face revealed how close he had been to death, or worse. Images and stories of others he knew living with broken bodies and minds because of road trauma crammed his mind. Brain injury or paraplegia, a lifetime sentence of pain and disability he feared.

Gordon addressed both drivers, 'now, if I can just have some personal details and each of you give me your version of events?' He turned to Kate, 'Ladies first?'

Kate's mercy mission and excuses exploded in a breathless stream. She spoke to Kevin, 'thank God you controlled the Mack after I hit the pothole,' then raising her arm in a sweeping gesture, 'I hope to hell my dad's car is okay, I must get to the hospital!'

Her exquisite perfume wafted towards the men and for a moment, eclipsed the diesel fuel on Kevin's clothes and the night shift staleness of Gordon's uniform. Kevin choked back his prepared tirade, announcing instead, 'I'll have you out of there in a jiffy love, and with your mum in no time.' Gordon nodded his agreement.

At the mention of her mother, Kate retrieved her mobile phone, abandoned in the passenger seat. The text message, a request from a girlfriend to meet for coffee, and not an urgent update about her mum. Gordon pursed his lips, considered questioning Kate about whether she had been talking on her mobile, but turned away. He noted Kevin's red-rimmed eyes and blanched face, but didn't ask to see his logbook. The truckie looked like he needed a lucky break too.

The police officer snapped his notebook shut and slipped it into his jacket pocket. His shift ended five minutes ago. The paperwork involved, if he recorded this incident, would take hours. The insurance companies could sort this one out. He helped Kevin check the MG was drivable and retreated to his car. Kate thanked the truck driver as they exchanged addresses, 'Please let me buy you a coffee sometime,' she insisted.

A smiling Kevin climbed into the Mack and as he watched the MG move away, he remembered The Truck Driver's Prayer, *Dear God above, bless this truck I drive and help me keep someone alive...*