

Last Drinks

She could taste the dust. She could feel the dryness in her nostrils and throat, just as she had on the bus on the way in. It had bumped across the short bridge which spanned an almost dry creek bed, over small pools of dirty water. Then it stopped.

She had caught the eye of the driver in the rear-view mirror. "This is it luv," he laughed.

It hadn't been difficult to find the pub. It was one of only three buildings of any size: the servo, the Council office, and the pub.

Every morning she cleaned the toilets, sloshing disinfected water around the tiled floors and walls. She put "piss biscuits" in the urinal and replaced the toilet paper. The bar itself was wood panelled with a row of windows which faced onto the main street of town. The morning sun streamed through the windows, dust mites floated in its rays and the space was lit as if by some divine design. The light from the row of spirit bottles behind the bar reflected onto the ceilings and walls. The walls were decorated with sporting memorabilia of cricket and rugby league "legends" who meant nothing to her.

From the windows she could see the Council building and the servo. The town. The main street was wide; wide like they had expected the town to be bigger, more significant, but it wasn't. Maybe it had been, a gold rush, thousands seeking their fortune, crowding this very bar, clamouring for drinks, and then gone. She didn't think so.

It was afternoon and things didn't get busy until just after 4 when the Council finished. The vanners sat at one of the tables looking at maps and sipping slowly on their beer. They were grey haired and good natured. There were thousands of them spread across the country. The town's caravan park was packed all year. They stayed a few days, maybe a week, and then moved on leaving no imprint of their time here. They made a difference to her though. They were different.

The door of the public bar swung open and a big man in an orange fluoro jacket stood in the doorway. It was Jack, knocked off a bit early. "Whose fuckin' white Toyota is parked in my spot?" It was a bit of a joke, almost all cars in town were white Toyotas, even the Council ones.

The vanners twitched. "Ah it could be mine, but I can move it."

"Nah, don't worry mate just buy me a beer." The grey-haired man got up.

"Nah, I'm just kidding."

Jack collapsed into a stool at the bar. Everyone sat at the bar in a semi-circle around her every weekday afternoon. She bet with herself on who would arrive first. It was mainly Jack. He parked his ute right outside the door as close to the bar as he could, to wring out every second of drinking time.

"Four ex thanks luv."

She had already started the pour as soon as the door had opened. Everyone drank four ex, except Sean who drank bundy and coke. Jack was probably in his fifties. He wore the Council uniform. A fluorescent shirt and navy shorts with work boots. His orange shirt was slightly too short due to the bulge at his belly, a sign of the time invested at the bar. He had a bundle of keys clipped to his belt which demonstrated his importance and announced his every movement.

“So how are you feelin’?”

She had made the mistake of coming to the pub on Sunday and over doing it. She was feeling regret. Regret that this town was so small.

“Geez you can put ‘em away.”

She took the glasses out of the dishwasher and unpacked them with intent, checking each one.

Glenn sat at the bar near the pokies. Glenn was outside when she opened, and he was still there when she called last drinks. She wasn't sure if he was an alcoholic. He drank all day but slowly, every hour or so he sat at a poker machine, the light adding colour to his face. He pressed the buttons expectantly. What would he do if he didn't come here? He looked old. His face was like crepe paper and his sunken, yellowed eyes followed the conversation around the bar. He never spoke but she could tell he liked the company.

The door swung open again. Fluoro everywhere as Ben, Steve, and Carol, who was usually the only other female, sat at the bar. She kept pouring. Steve was a thin young man with a scruffy half-grown beard, which he should've given up on years ago, and long thin blonde hair to his shoulders. Ben was heavier and darker. He was heavily suntanned and heavily tattooed. He had a tear shaped tattoo under his eye. She couldn't help but look at it, not because it interested her, it was just the stupidity of it. Carol was a funny one. She worked hard to be part of the group of men. She drank beer and swore and talked about the Council. She was small beside them. They accepted her but took delight in jokes and language which might show her weakness.

They all worked for the Council. Every day they came in, they drank, and they talked about the Council. Today they had been working on the digitisation of the road signs. This had been a discussion for some months. Every day Ben drove around in his Toyota with a collection of metal sheets which had warnings and information printed them. He added the information to various road signs throughout the Shire. The Council had decided that great efficiencies could be had by digitising these signs and being able to change them without physically driving out to them. So efficient that Ben wouldn't need to do his job anymore. In the spirit of camaraderie, the others said it would never work and it would be more trouble than it was worth, but they knew it would work. She was just starting to pour the next round when the door swung again. It was Ken. He was wearing the same faded and frayed checked flannel shirt and jeans that he wore every day. He drove 20kms to town to have two beers and feel and experience humanity such as it was in this town. As he sat down the others nodded in acknowledgement. They never spoke to him.

“What would you like?” she asked.

Ben always pondered this question, as though it was a critical decision which could swing either way. “4 ex thanks luv.”. He always had four ex. He leaned over the beer and cupped the glass in his hands as though it would tell him his fortune. Ken spoke to no-one but listened intently to the conversation. She wondered if he sat around the dinner table with his wife when he got home, ‘You won't believe what they're doing to the signs....’

She looked up through the dirty glass windows towards the Council depot and she saw the others driving out. They drove straight across the main street turning across the front of the pub and then reversing into the gutter. Car doors slammed and the door swung open. It was almost dark and for a moment the three figures were indistinct against the fading light behind. It was the rest of Jack's crew. She poured another round. The bar had become noisy. A dog, Ben's dog, kept sneaking in through the back and stood beside Carol eating chips from her fingers until Ben saw him.

“Get out you bugger.”

No one minded the dog, but it was acknowledged by all, including the dog, that he should sit outside the door until Ben had finished. Sean had also come in. She hadn't noticed him. He sat at the bar amongst the Council workers with his fluoro jacket as if he was one of the crew and he was, until an efficiency had meant he was no longer needed. He still came in just after 4 and loved to talk about the Council. She didn't know what he did during the day. He didn't work. There were no jobs except with the Council.

The experience had become too “local” for the vanners, who put their empty glasses on the bar. The man bent to the dog and scratched his ears. They left. No one noticed and nothing had changed.

Stacey and Mike were a couple. They were out of place in this town. They were young and animated and full of energy. She wondered why they stayed. They grew up here, met here, would get married here and have children and die here in a frustrating lack of realisation. They didn't normally come in on a Monday night, and when they did come in, they sat at the bar with the rest, but now they sat on their own at a table. Their heads were almost touching. Stacey slightly animated with her long black hair swinging back and forth, towards him and then away. Mike sat motionless, a hand on her wrist and spoke continuously in a low whisper. She couldn't hear, but she could see Stacey's eyes moistening and then she saw the tear overflow and escape. Stacey flicked it away and glanced towards the bar. She looked down. The door closed and Stacey was gone. Mike sat with his beer and looked at the wall. The framed photograph of the men who had captained their State team to victory. Pride and honour and dependability. Mike leant back in his chair, stretched his neck from side to side, drained his glass and was gone.

The conversation had ebbed and flowed, sometimes so loud you couldn't hear the road trains that rumbled through the main street, slow and restrained between the town signs before being released into the darkness. They never stopped. Sometimes the bar became so quiet she felt self-conscious standing in the middle of them as if she should start a conversation or tell a story. She didn't. They acknowledged her, asked for drinks, but never engaged. She would be gone, and they would stay.

She rang the bell and called last drinks. She had already started to pour the last round. The conversation had been exhausted. Most were silent but her call led to a flurry of chatter about start times and the weather tomorrow.

The door opened and Jim stepped into the warmth and light tucking his cap under his arm. The stiffness and smoothness of his uniform at odds with the crumpled fluoro and creased faces of the others.

“4 ex thanks luv.” He stood, acknowledged and surveyed the bar. “Better leave your keys with me Jack. You can pick them up from the station in the morning.”

Jack mumbled and grumbled but handed his keys to Jim who tilted his head back as if checking an imperfection on the ceiling and then threw the contents of his glass into his mouth. His throat contracted and relaxed, contracted, and relaxed. He placed the glass on the bar accompanied by a sigh of satisfaction.

“Come on lads, that's enough.”

The door closed one more time. They filed out to the accompaniment of backslapping, ‘see yahs’, the slamming of car doors, the staccato of engines coming to life and the low groan as they moved off.

She packed the dishwasher, wiped the bar, replaced the sodden bar mats, and spread fresh coasters. She closed the door behind her, slid the bolt across, set the padlock and then stepped into the night. She felt something in the darkness. Big hands pushed her to the hard ground. There was a swirl of orange and yellow around her. Familiar voices. She felt the weight. She felt the heat.

“Come on lads, that’s enough.”

She could taste the dust in her mouth and feel the emptiness. The bus bumped across the short bridge, the creek bed was dry as the last puddles of liquid had turned to mud and then hard cracked dirt.

There was nothing to be done.