

Cruising in the Meadows

Nick Cowling

IT WAS SOMEWHERE in between sunset and sunrise. Clocks were useless to us; all that mattered was the night and it was ours for the taking. We were hurtling down the road at a speed the odometer didn't seem to register. The street lights blurred into streaks and flashes. Of course they weren't our concern, all we cared about was going *faster*.

Stan spoke first: 'Jesus Christ Alex, can't your mum get a faster car?'

'Yeah . . . I'll bring that up next time I see her.'

In the blur of lights strobing past the car I could just make him out shaking his head. Of course Stan missed this motion because he was in the back seat. John, who was breathing onto his side window and drawing faces in the condensation, spoke next: 'turn the heater up man'.

Alex shook his head more liberally this time, 'I told you before we left that the heater was busted. And besides, it's July and you're a Melburnian, what in the hell are you doing in a t-shirt for crying out loud?'

John blushed, 'It was laundry day today' he replied meekly. Alex snorted while negotiating the roundabout at the intersection of Merton Street and Central Avenue one-handed.

Any other time of the day this patch of asphalt was an absolute pain in the arse to navigate. At this time, however, not even cats were skulking about the streets. The speed and momentum of the Nissan sedan bounced us around and threw us off balance. We laughed in exhilaration and breathed deeply as we passed the local KFC. Despite its Siren smell we knew to avoid the temptation, unless we wanted our faces to look like the surface of the moon.

Looking around restlessly I turned to Alex. 'So what's the plan anyways?'

Nothing's open at this time in the Meadows; you know that.'

Alex nodded, 'there is *one* thing open.'

Stan and John groaned 'Aww jeez no! C'mon man!'

Their protests shredded against my ear and made Alex chortle, 'Suck it up ladies, you're overreacting . . . anyway this isn't a democracy. It's *my* car and I say where we're going.'

'But it's your mum's car.'

'Shut up John!'

This is the way our group worked: Alex was the de facto leader, John was the straight-man, Stan was the other guy, and I was the mediator. It had always been this way. We all knew our places.

The Nissan continued to bounce along the road. Potholes and poor resurfacing had destroyed any notion of a smooth, continuous ride for too long anywhere in the suburb. These were The Shakes, and they sure made you appreciate, and abuse, a good suspension system.

Alex pulled up in the car park, wearing a look of sadistic glee. 'We're here,' he said in a sing-song voice.

John and Stan looked like they would rather *not* be here and I tried to brace myself for what was coming. Alex turned off the car and stepped out into the night. I remember thinking how odd it was seeing him standing there bathed in the yellow glow of the giant neon 'M'. I turned to face John and Stan, who seemed resigned to their fates.

'I knew as soon as he took Central we were coming here,' John muttered.

'How are we gonna do this? It's a miracle that *he* can even do it! Come on Max, talk to him. This is torture!' Stan exclaimed.

I sighed. Stan always made the most sense.

'Listen, guys,' I began. 'I know this isn't . . . *ideal* . . . but we did agree that next time we were here we would give it a go.'

John was on the verge of tears 'But it's gonna kill us!'

I chuckled. 'It very well may, but you know he won't let it go.'

Stan nodded slowly and opened his door, he turned to John 'C'mon mate let's get it over with.'

John rolled his eyes and sniffed, leaving the car in an exaggerated fashion. I was not looking forward to this at all, but I held the slimmest hope that Alex would reclaim his sanity sometime soon. These hopes were dashed immediately with Alex's next words: 'Let's get it on boys!'

Alex may have been the leader but he always had a penchant for the

crazier, and riskier, aspects of life. We generally left him to it while we coasted in the slow lane and were amused by his antics as he tried to get us to participate. Last time we were at McDonalds we were talking about the fact that between our four Quarter-Pounder burgers we had a Full-Pounder. Alex then got the bright idea that we should ask for a Full-Pounder next time. Realising we were cornered, we said 'yeah, sure'. Then we didn't go to Macca's for weeks. We thought we were safe.

We were wrong.

We walked towards the restaurant like condemned men. I couldn't really hear anything, a dull buzzing had taken up residence in my ears. Somewhere in the distance I could hear John complaining about having heart palpitations.

The doors swung open and the alluring smell of frying beef and onion assaulted our nostrils. Alex was already at the counter ordering our 'meals', and judging by the look on the girl's face he was ordering the Pounders. We found a booth and tried our best to hide from our executioner. John was again stirring up dissent and revolution. 'Guys, I love meat, don't get me wrong . . .'

'We know you do buddy . . .'

'Shut *up* Stan! The point is, this amount of meat is not natural for human consumption. I'm sure even the guys on *Jackass* would second guess this move.'

Cocking an eyebrow I spoke, 'I don't think they would.'

John chewed his lip and slowly nodded 'Whatever. The point is, just because we said we would, doesn't mean we have to. I don't know about you guys but I'm getting out of here before I end up in Werribee Mercy having a colostomy!'

Stan smirked, 'Do you even *know* what that is?'

John blushed, 'N . . . no, but I'm *still* getting out of here!'

John made a movement to stand just as Alex arrived struggling with the four pounds of meat. Alex, wearing a broad grin like he'd just won the lottery, dropped the tray on to the table. 'Grub's up boys!' he roared in a mock Southern drawl.

I glanced around although I knew that we were the only customers in the place. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the girl who had served Alex peering intently in our direction, her jaw still hanging loosely.

Rolling my eyes I sighed aggressively. 'Fine, let's get this over with,

but,' I pointed my finger at Alex, whose smile dipped a little, 'for the sake of everyone at the table who has two brain cells to rub together we are NEVER doing this again!'

Alex shrugged, 'Getting you guys to do it even once is a triumph.' Opening the burger box in front of him we glimpsed a mound of brown and yellow, ' . . . We should eat these now. Trust me guys you won't want to eat them cold!'

I quickly opened my own box and the other two followed suit. The 'burger' loomed in front of me. All I am able to remember is that instead of one pattie it had four, which was three too many. *How am I going to eat this damn thing without cutlery?* I thought.

I looked around at my friends. Alex had somehow managed to unhinge his jaw and aggressively jam the mass into his mouth. Despite how disgusting it looked I had to admire the guy's dedication. Sensible Stan had pressed it down as much as possible, and was taking manageable bites. Last was poor John, who was prodding it with his finger and looking at it from multiple angles. Wanting it over as soon as possible I hefted the . . . *thing*. It felt too warm and damp, almost like a living being. Closing my eyes I lifted it up, inched towards it and took my first bite.

I can't fully describe the taste but it felt like I would never breathe again, or regain full use of my jaw. Swallowing my hesitation and my first mouthful I put on a brave face and continued further into the First Circle of Hell.

I will spare you the full horror of the 15 minutes it took us to consume our respective Mounds of Pain. Needless to say after the final bite we all felt terrible. In the wake of our meal we sat there, completely static, slumped in our seats. We all wheezed, mouth-breathing. I looked over at Alex, who was gazing at nothing in particular while clutching his chest 'You're . . . you're such an arse Alex,' I exhaled.

Stan and John were roused out of their comatose states by my comment. Both murmured in agreement. Stan closed his eyes and sat there shaking his head. John was far more melodramatic: waving his hand in front of his eyes feigning blindness.

Alex looked at all of us and chuckled, 'Well . . . the least you can do is thank me . . .' he breathed, speaking just louder than a whisper.

Our eyes bulged in amazement at this declaration, 'You're insane. Why would we thank you?!' shrieked Stan.

‘ . . . you can thank me . . . because I shouted you dinner.’ With that he laughed and began breathing heavily with the pain that laughing caused. Recovering slightly he said to himself, ‘Totally worth it!’