

Lucas Grainger-Brown

Four Hour Pilgrim

Have you ever been driving at night, with only the headlights for company, and thought to yourself: “just a nudge to the left?” Just a nudge to the left and the punctuation to my life would be a bright-burning fireball; metal concertinaed against a pole, maybe severing the power to the nearby town or the city. All those people, left in darkness. Just a nudge. Then, quick as the rain against the tarmac, the next thought: the ending would be more memorable than the life before it. All those people left in dark—the widest ripple I can send out.

These are the thoughts that consume me come Friday. Or rather, Friday evening, when the sun is in its last throes and the streets around the city are clogged like the arteries of a fat, dying old man. Which is kind of ironic, because the travellers doing the clogging are usually fat, dying old men; their collars unhitched and tarnished yellow because they gave up on washing their clothes after Tuesday, their ties thrown across the back seat, their eyes fixed on the horizon beyond the buildings. They pour out of Canberra in a desperate stream, headed for the country. For their stately manors, or their quiet retreats; headed for their families or their mistresses.

I tag along, one set of wheels among many. But I have no retreat. I have no mansion. Instead, I go home. Home to the mid-highway town that’s only a petrol stop and a change in the speed limit for most people. One of the dozens that’s only recognisable by its direction and distance from Canberra.

This Friday night, same as last Friday night, I pull up 230 kilometres south west of Canberra and I step down and look around and see

nothing much. I go in through the plastic strips of the one pub on the street.

I look at the girl behind the counter and she looks at me, smiles and says, “Hi, Rob. How’s the big city treatin’ you this week?”

I smile back and check that I’ve taken my wedding ring off before I put my hands on the bar. Because even though I’ve known Cindy for fifteen years, she still doesn’t know I’m married, and I’d like to keep it that way. If she knew, it would change things in some way that I can’t describe but definitely don’t want.

I lever back into one of the bar stools and she gives me a beer and leans on the oak with each hand cupping the elbow opposite. There’s two other people in the big dusty room, but they’re alone and absorbed in their drinks and the rugby on the television.

“It treats me fine, Cindy, it treats me fine. How’s things with you?”

“Ah, same old. Always same old. Old man Burt’s givin’ me grief again.”

“Oh?”

Burt’s the owner, and her dad. He moved out here to get away from Sydney’s bustle, and now spends all his time trying to speed things up. She throws her hands up and turns away to refill a brickie’s empty glass. Then she goes out back to do something to the kegs. We’ve shared all the conversation we have to share. One time, Gertrude had a baby, that topic lasted us for at least five minutes. It’s always an act, anyway. Cindy thinks I come out here to see the folks, see the family home. I do sometimes, but only every two months or so. Most of my visits go unannounced and unknown to anyone but Cindy and the odd barfly.

I drink the beer quickly, put the empty down. Then I take a last look at her back in the gloom of the open doorway. The colour in her clothes is fading fast. Her hair looks lank and unappetising. The scar from her melanoma shows on her freckled shoulder, even from this distance. The girl I just drove two hours through rain and fog to see. We haven’t spoken properly in four or five years.

Outside, my feet sink into mud where the bitumen car park has withered away. I look up at the sky and see crushing blankness instead of threatening clouds. Either there’ll be a biblical storm fit to flood all the crop rows, or the sun will rise into sullen stillness that gradually dissipates. I get in the car and spin my wheels all the way across the lot, unable to get a grip on the shifting gravel.

I worked my way out of this town. I studied and planned. And all my plans started with Cindy. Cindy was the moment of inspiration that drove me out and grew me up. I had just turned thirteen when Cindy moved here from Sydney. There were only a few of us in the class, and only a few of them were girls, and all five of them put together weren't half as tantalising as Cindy Blackett, the girl from the Big City. I spent the remainder of high school staring at the back of that freckled neck with its golden, woven pigtailed and imagining marrying her on the hill that overlooks the town. It was all over for me as soon as I saw her. In that open-windowed classroom I felt a stirring, and, in my mind, there's only a heartbeat separating then and now.

The rear view mirror reflects the little town, shrinking into night proper. The few cars going the other way have their headlights on high beam, like a blinding visitation. I can hardly see the white lines for a full minute after each one passes me by.

Time laid itself out slowly and wonderfully before I was thirteen. But then Cindy turned up and all of a sudden I was aware that the floodgates had been slowly easing back for some time. In a matter of months none of my clothes fit, and twice-weekly I furtively shaved the dirty fluff on my top lip with mum's leg razor. A moment after that I was fighting my way through traffic morning and night, wearing inhumane clothes and measuring my hours with a bank account that never quite balanced against a mortgage, a wife and a cat that takes every opportunity to pee on my pillow. I've always hated cats.

I remember I thought at the time, as I watched those plaits nuzzled by the summer breeze, that I needed a good, sensible job. Something that paid a lot of money and was located somewhere important, where I could be important, whilst still earning enough to buy Cindy a house and a horse and the time to raise a litter of kids that would have noses just like hers. I went home and threw away my unfinished story drafts, and writing notebooks, and sketches. I decided right then and there. I was going to be an accountant, not a writer.

The road back to Canberra narrows to a single carriageway each way, twisting and turning through green vineyard country. On a road like this, on a night like this, the wheels slide infinitesimally when you round corners and the steering wheel guides you only shakily along the path you want to take. Every minute or more you get an indication

that you have less control than your body seems to be telling you; less control than years of practice and patterning would have you believe. Things loom out of the dark, and then resolve themselves into familiar shapes which disappear as quickly as they came.

Once a week, when the wife is at toastmasters, I like to come out here and speak a few words with the girl I had a crush on when I was thirteen, and share a beer with silence.

On the way out, I think to myself: just a nudge to the left. What if?

On the way back, I concentrate very hard on steering as best I can, until the white glow of Canberra appears from between the cradling hands of the mountains. It takes only four hours a week to relive and revive a lifetime.

In between these pilgrimages I forget. But on this Friday night, same as last Friday night, when I finally roll up the driveway and into the carport, I sit in the car and pace both my hands on the dashboard and feel overwhelming gratitude that the ceaseless motion has stopped, at least for a moment. I remember the other, elder, pilgrims that left with me hours before in such haste, and wonder where they are now. They have even further to travel. When you get old, it must be a marathon to get back to the point where it all began.