

Truckdriver

Laura Solomon

I left Sydney on a Sunday. There was a song in my heart - I was glad to be getting out of Punchbowl. My wife and I bought a small flat there twenty years ago, when property in the area wasn't worth much and I could pick up a two bedroom unit for a song. 'Punchy' used to have a bad reputation, but lately we've been getting our own back and yuppies and trendies have started to come to the region in search of cheap housing and an up-and-coming place to live. Swings and roundabouts. Every dog has his day. Punchy's day could be right around the next corner as far as anybody knows. That's what they're predicting. I fed Shep before I left; a big hearty slice of Tux dog roll. He wolfed it down. Good to see that he's got an appetite on him.

My gut bumps the wheel as I drive. I am the proud owner of a protruding beer belly that hangs down over the edge of my trousers and shakes when I walk. I grew a moustache last spring; I groom it carefully each morning. No eye candy, I am amazed my wife has stayed with me for so many years, and been faithful as far as I know. Heaven knows, I am not much of a communicator and she

always complains that she has no idea what I have on my mind.

I deal in cows. Cattle is my trade, it's how I make my money. Lugging the beasts from coast to coast, down Australia's long highways, and along its byways, delivering from cattle station to abattoir. Love a good carcass, me. Some of those cattle ranches can be awfully isolated. You have to be a special breed of human to handle life out there.

This is my tale of the road. The road that stretches on ahead of me, vast and wide and open.

It's a clear morning and the sun burns high in the sky as I head towards that national and international landmark, the Sydney Harbour Bridge. I'm headed for Brisbane today – that's where the road will take me. It's a ten hour drive and in the passenger seat sits a plastic bag full of food my wife has packed for me; cut ham sandwiches with mayonnaise, lettuce, cheese and tomato, two apples, cheddar cheese segments and a thermos flask full of chicken soup. Gotta keep the tucker box stacked. A man needs fuel if he's to survive in this dog eat dog world and God bless her immaculate soul, my good wife knows that and acts accordingly. She looks after me well and after twenty-five years of marriage I have no complaints.

My truck is an old volvo. She goes by the name of Rosie. The famous World War 2 image of Rosie the Riveter is stencilled on the side. I don't own Rosie, I lease her from Gibson and Partners. They've been good to me over the years and let me off when I missed a couple of

installments. My truck has three large roo bars across the front. I work for Carlson's Cattle Transportation Service. My boss is named Joey. I have mixed feelings about my job. Some may see me as an agent of death. It's the abbatoir I'm shipping the animals to. Taking them towards certain death.

My wife and I met when we were just eighteen. Well, I was eighteen my wife was one year younger. She was good looking back then, her looks have faded with time. I can say that, can't I, being her husband. I can get away with it. Without a slap, hopefully, as long as I don't say it within her earshot. She had shoulder-length mousy brown hair which she would peroxide bleach blonde and lovely green eyes that I fell into as if diving into a well. Her name was Johannah, which is the feminine form of Joannes meaning God is gracious. When she told me her name I repeated it softly to myself several times, as if I had mild brain damage. Maybe being in love is like being delicately brain damaged; you don't think clearly, you have the blinkers on, you do stupid things, you trip over yourself, you go all tongue tied in the presence of your beloved. If you're anything like me.

I am planning to pick up hitch-hikers. A long distance journey across Australia can be a lonely trip; a man needs company during the sustained stretches of open road. I am headed North for Brisbane, along the Pacific Highway, a ten hour trip that I do not want to make alone. I pick up the first hitch hiker just outside of Eleebana. Long in the tooth, supported by a black cane and carrying what looks

to be a tent, it doesn't take long for him to confide in me that he is a recent escapee from Happy Valley Retirement Community located in Newcastle.

"Oh, but conditions were dire there", he declares as he cranks up the air-conditioning to shut out the golden summer heat. "Some people had bedsores, they weren't being turned in their beds and some of them were unable to turn themselves. Management were too stingy to shell out on an adequate supply of wheelchairs and walking frames, so people who were unable to walk due to strokes or other such injuries were left sitting in chairs in the same place for many hours until a harassed looking staff member could get around to helping them shift to a different location. The food was disgusting; inedible chewy lasagne with the pasta half cooked, saveloys coated in greasy cheese and mushy peas, mayonnaise sandwiches. On a Sunday they'd serve up all the food that was leftover from during the week. Place was a real hell hole. A dumping ground for old people whose families couldn't care for them at home. Some families visited; some didn't. That was the worst of it; the loneliness. The long days and nights, unbroken by guests."

"Sounds awful."

"Awful's the word. I couldn't wait to get out of there. At least I had escape as an option. Some of those oldies can't walk and so they get stuck there. Once you're in the place management frown upon the idea of you leaving. They have some goddamned foolish notion in their pretty little heads that some of us can't look after ourselves in the big

wide world and sometimes they ban us from going out without family members. You'd think that would be illegal but they get away with murder. Me, I had to climb the back fence to get way. I did it at dusk, just before dinner yesterday evening, when nobody was looking. Took a cab to Eleebana and spent the night in a cheap hotel. Was jumpy as all hell. I felt like a fugitive, kept thinking they'd come looking for me, hunt me down and force me to go back to that cesspit. Elder abuse was happening in that place too. People's money was going missing. The staff were notorious for befriending vulnerable elderly ladies and convincing them to sign power of attorney documents over to them, or to write them into their wills, or just to straight out give them sums of money in exchange for taking them on outings. Terrible stuff. I saw the darker side of human nature in that place."

He shudders, then says, "Sorry I haven't introduced myself yet. Jimmy's the name. Jimmy Saunders. Age eighty three and three quarters and still with a fire in my belly. They haven't quenched that yet."

"Pleased to meet you", I say, taking one hand off the driving wheel and extending it for him to shake.

We drive on, along the vast expanse of open road that stretches out in front of us.

"I'd appreciate it if you could drop me off in Myall Lakes National Park", says Jimmy. "I plan to do some camping."

We pass through Newcastle and head on towards the National Park. Jimmy entertains me with stories of

growing up rough in Manchester, living in a council estate with an alcoholic mother. Sounds like his childhood was no picnic. My upbringing probably seems like a dream in comparison. My parents had a stable marriage and we lived reasonably happily on the outskirts of Sydney in Chatswood, a suburb more prosperous than good old Punchy. I guess you could say I've slid down the socio-economic scale somewhat. My father was an electrician who worked all the hours that God sent. I have sleepy memories of him coming home at around midnight and making himself a mug of hot milk to help send him to sleep. My mother was a housewife. She kept a tidy house and our three bedroom bungalow was well maintained. At the front of it was a neat flower garden where roses, gardenias, freesias, tulips and daffodils sprouted happily together, blooming under the burning Australian sun. I was well educated, although I was never the brightest spark and bought home only Ds and Cs as grades and left school at the end of the 5th form. Dropped out. I worked for three years in a supermarket, then applied to a local truck driving school. I was lucky to get in. I studied the commercial driver's manual from cover to cover. I sat and passed both parts of the licensing exam, and then passed the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulation exam which covers federal traffic law along with hearing and vision tests.

To my delight I was accepted into Theodore's Truck Driving School, where I concentrated fiercely and flew through graduating with a lovely certificate which I had

framed and rested upon the mantelpiece along with some family photos.

I rested briefly, then applied to Carlson's Cattle Transportation Service along with five others, and attended a number of interviews, but Carlson's was the one who hired me. They're not a bad company to work for. Joey, my boss, is a good sort and we get on well. We often share a beer and a joke. Joey cracks me up.



Laura Solomon has a Masters degree in Computer Science (University of London).

Her books include *Black Light*, *Nothing Lasting*, *Alternative Medicine*, *An Imitation of Life*, *Instant Messages*, *Vera Magpie*, *Hilary and David*, *In Vitro*, *The Shingle Bar*, *Sea Monster and Other Stories*, *University Days*, *Freda Kahlo's Cry*, *Brain Graft*, *Taking Wainui*, *Marsha's Deal* and *Hell's Unveiling*.

She has been short-listed in Bridport, Edwin Morgan, Ware Poets, Willesden Herald, Mere Literary Festival, and Essex Poetry Festival competitions.

She was short-listed for the 2009 Virginia Prize and the 2014 International Rubery Award and won the 2009 Proverse Prize. She has had work accepted in the Edinburgh Review, Orbis and Wasafiri (UK), Takahe and Landfall (NZ). She has judged the Sentinel Quarterly Short Story Competition.

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