

GO



Jack

I'm not unemployed.
I'm just not working at the moment.
School now seems a distant shame
 of ball games, half-lies at lunchtime
 and teachers fearing the worst.
I'm not studying either.
Yeah, I got into uni,
 so did Annabel.
Two Arts degrees does not a life make.
So we both chucked it.
University is too serious.
I'm eighteen years old:
 too young to work forever,
 too old to stay home.
Annabel and I make love most afternoons,
 which, as you can imagine,
 passes the time
 but
I don't think we can make money out of it,
or learn much, although, we have learnt something ...

I want to leave town,
I want to leave town,
I want to leave.

Jack's dad

What can I tell you about my dad?

Years ago I would have said
an ill-fitting suit, brown shoes,
a haircut of nightmares
and a job in the city.

That's all.

That's what I would have said.

And a dead wife.

Long dead. Dead yesterday.

No difference.

But not now.

Now, he tries.

He reads the paper with courage.

He never shakes his head when I'm late home.

He's forty-two years of hope,

seven years of grief and

two years of struggle.

Let me tell you this one thing about my father,
and leave it at that.

Friday night, two months ago,

I'm trying to sleep,

when I hear this soft bounce, every few seconds,

and the backyard floodlight is on.

It's midnight,
and there's a man in the yard.
I grab the cricket bat from the hall cupboard,
check my sister's room – she's asleep,
still in her Levi's and black top.
(I like that top – I gave it to her
for her birthday, and she always wears it.
Sorry, I'd better go bash this burglar ...)

Where's my father when the house needs defending?
At the pub? At work?
Not at midnight, surely?
I grip the bat,
wish I'd taken cricket more seriously at school.
I open the door slightly,
think of newspaper headlines –
HERO DIES SAVING HOUSE,
CRIME WAVE SOARS OUT WEST,
HIT FOR SIX!

There's that bounce again,
and the figure bends to pick something up.
(A gun! A knife!)

A cricket ball!
What?

He runs and bowls a
slow drifting leg-spinner, hits middle stump.
Dad turns,
whispers, 'Howzat!'
and walks to pick up the ball again.

What can I do?
My dad, midnight cricket
and a well-flighted leg-spinner.

I walk out to face up,
tapping the bat gently.
Dad smiles and bowls a wrong-un.
The bastard knocks my off-stump out.
He offers me a handshake and advice.
'Bat and pad together, son,
don't leave the gate open.
Let's have one more over, shall we?'

He goes back to his mark,
polishing the ball on his pyjamas,
every nerve twitching,
every breath involved.

The stumbling bagpipes

We make love every Tuesday afternoon.
I kiss her eyelids
and rub my hand along her arm
to feel the soft hair
that shines in the fading light.
Sometimes the clouds float
up the valley
and the rain dances on our window
as the parrots fly for home.
I kiss her shoulders and her neck
and we try breathing slowly, in time,
under the doona.

There's a young boy next door
who's practising the bagpipes.
He stands on the veranda
and scares the hell out of the dogs.
They howl in time
as he blows himself hoarse.

We love that sound:
discordant, clumsy, feverish.
It reminds us of that first Tuesday afternoon,
two years ago,

trying to make love before
Annabel's parents got home.
We agreed on further practice.

That's why we celebrate like this,
every Tuesday,
me and Annabel,
and the stumbling bagpipes.

What Dad said

This is what Dad said
when I told him about me and Annabel
wanting to drive and not come back
for a year or so ...

‘Son.’ (When he says ‘son’ I know a story
is not far behind.)

‘Son. When I was eighteen
I’d already decided to ask your mum to marry me.
And I had my journalism degree half-finished.
I wanted my own desk, my own typewriter,
a home to put them in, and I wanted your mum.
She said yes, and the rest followed.
At twenty-two, we had this home.
At twenty-two, I learned gardening.
You know the big golden ash in the corner?
I planted that, first year here.
Most of our friends were going overseas,
taking winter holiday work in the snow,
or getting drunk every night at the pub.
At twenty-two, your mum and I
were sitting on the veranda with a cup of cocoa
and a fruit cake.
I’m fifty-two years old this August.
You’re a smart kid, Jack. A smart kid.

I think you and Annabel should get out of here as fast as possible. Have a year doing anything you want. My going-away present is enough money to buy a car – a cheap old one, okay? You'll have to work somewhere to buy the petrol, and to keep going. But go.'

Let me tell you,
it wasn't what I expected.

But maybe, just maybe,
I understand the old man more now.
More than I ever have.

For once in my life

When Jack told me last night
about leaving,
what I really wanted to say
was *NO*.
Like a father should.
NO.
And I had all the words ready,
all the clichés loaded,
but I couldn't do it.
He looked so hungry,
so much in need of going,
that I gave him my first big speech in years,
only this time it was one he wanted to hear.
So that's it.

When Jack was asleep last night
I went into his room.
I sat beside his bed
 and listened to his breathing.
I don't know for how long.
I listened,
and with each breath
I felt his yearning and confidence
and strength.
I walked out of his room
sure I'd said the right thing,

maybe not as a father,
but as a dad.
I'd said the right thing,
for once in my life.

A 1974 Corona

It's a 1974 Corona sedan
that's been driven by a
middle-aged, single bank manager
called Wilbur who never went out on the weekend,
except for a Sunday morning drive with his mum
to church five kilometres down the road,
and enjoyed cleaning its dull brown ducos
every Saturday instead of
 watching the football,
 getting drunk,
 doing overtime
 or playing with snappy children.

All I had to do was give him \$1,200
and a handshake to drive it home,
through a mud puddle or two,
and take that crucifix off the mirror –
give it to the kid next door –
and maybe even consider a paint job ...

But no, let's leave it brown.
Bank manager brown.
That's my car.
That's my ticket with Annabel, out of here.

Annabel on Jack

Jack reads too many books.
He thinks we're going to drive all year
and have great adventures.
He thinks the little money
we have will last.
He wants to sleep in the car,
cook dinner over an open fire.
I'm just waiting for him to
pack a fishing line, smiling,
saying, 'We can live off the land.'
Jesus Christ.
I'm not gutting a fish and cooking it.
But
I do want to go,
even if it only lasts a month or two.
Even if we drive to Melbourne and back
and don't talk to another person.
I want to go.
Why?
Because I've never
been more than two hundred kilometres from home,
and that was with my parents, on holiday.
And because Jack's smart,
but not that smart, if you know what I mean.
You watch.
First week, we'll be out of money,

sleeping near a smelly river,
eating cold baked beans out of a can.
The car will have a flat battery
and Jack will be saying something like,
'Isn't this great? Back to nature.
Living off the land. Not a care in the world.'
Jesus Christ.

Jack driving

I love to drive,
to blast back to boyhood
when I dreamt of a highway,
a car with a floor-shift
and nowhere to sleep for a week;
burning rubber and a dare
to take every bend
faster than advised.
Even now
I think of a blow-out
as a test for how steady
my hands are on the wheel,
my knuckles white with impatience.
Me, Annabel and
the stereo sing,
trucks threaten our dreams
like thunder.
As we reach the hill,
curse the oncoming lights,
I strain to keep the revs up
as we crest the rise,
I snap into top,
glide down the mountain,
escape ramp five hundred metres ahead.
We don't need it.

Two days out

Two days out.
Last night we slept in the car.
Yes, by a river, as I predicted.
Not smelly, though.
Clean. Surprisingly clean.
Jack and I had a bath in it.
A naked, goosepimple bath.
We raced each other from bank to bank.
We even used soap –
my mum's going-away present.
Soap-on-a-rope. It floats!

We lay on the grass.
The sun dried our white bodies.
We did nothing for as long as possible.

In the quiet afternoon
we drove for hours.
Jack said, 'I'm hungry,'
and the bloody car slowed to a stop.
Jack looking at me,
me at Jack,
and neither of us knowing why.
Then I looked at the petrol gauge.
Empty.

Empty; and food, cold river baths
and the nearest town
were all a million miles away.
Two days out ...

As I stood on the lonely back road,
I'm sure I heard birds –
kookaburras –
laughing ...

The ride

‘You two heading anywhere special?’
he says, changing down gear, double-clutching
and churning the old truck’s insides loud.
Annabel and I look at each other.
What’s this mean?
I decide to answer a question with a question.
I learnt that in Year 9
and it hasn’t failed me yet.
‘Why?’

‘Why? Because I got fifty acres of ripe apples
and a town full of unemployed kids that
hate the sight of them, that’s why.
And my kids and I can’t pick fifty acres
in two years, much less two months.
I’ll pay you, give you a place to sleep.
That’s if you’re interested?’

The truck cabin rattles over potholes.
He winds down the window
and flicks his cigarette out.

It’s not what I’m expecting.
Two days away, out of petrol and offered a job.
I wanted to get as far as possible,
not a few hundred kilometres down the road.

But it's money. And a place to stay.
Annabel squeezes my hand and I know
it's a *yes* squeeze.
I squeeze back and before I can answer
Annabel says,
'Sure, mister. We'll take it. I like apples.'

George smiles and says,
'You'll be picking, miss, not eating them.'

But he's all right.
Anyone who drives a truck this old can't be too bad.