Little Red Car

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They’d decided over a few dozen lines of speed, a few bongs, and a lot of beers that they’d go “outback” and frighten people—really scare the shit out of them—and maybe, if the opportunity arose and it looked as certain as possible that they wouldn’t be caught, to inflict some damage on said persons. Torture, rape, murder were all discussed. Unlikely, they agreed, that it would “progress” that far, but with minds open to possibilities they felt a collective adrenaline rush that would compel them to drive out where there were few people and little accountability.

They got the idea when Jobe’s parole period came to an end and he was free to pretty well do what he wanted. They were all urban boys, had all gone to the same suburban high school, played on the same footy team, and had the same obsessive interest in drugs and violence. The two were connected in their minds as manifestations of choice and power. They shared a house from which they dealt large quantities of amphetamines, but also anything else that came their way from higher up the pecking order. They hated women though bragged of their conquests. Prostitutes were part of their clientele, but they never saw themselves as clientele of those same prostitutes.

They got the idea one evening watching a bunch of films about the warpedness of the outback, of the lopsided looks that mean terror out in the backblocks. Fucking inbred farmboys, said Jobe, Wouldn’t you love to fuck them up? I mean, city boys like us go out there and these bentheads hogtie us and fuck us up the arse, and rape our bitches to boot. I’ll be fucked. Let’s go out and do it to a few of them. The others got into the spirit of the thing and a plan was hatched.

Though they dealt a lot of drugs they used a lot of drugs and money went through their hands fast. They each had a car but three
were broken down and the one that was working—Joel’s “back-up” car after his V8 Commodore had been repossessed while he was inside—barely fitted the four of them. It was a little red hatchback “Jap job.” But they piled in, packing no luggage but placing screwdrivers, a machete, an axe, and two baseball bats under blankets in the back compartment. The tools of their drug trade.

They were big blokes and the little red car rode low on its axles as they sailed out along the highway toward the ranges. It was around sunset and when they turned into the sun Spud said, You fucking ripper—check that out! They planned to drive all the way to the Nullarbor and back, which would be a night and a day and a night drive—they would keep sharp on speed and swap driving duties, take a few hours off here and there for a drink if they felt like it. They would decide their approach to the situation when they felt far enough out there. Keep it simple, they agreed.

Jobe was their leader, having done hard time for violent crime, but Benny was an able deputy with a history of tormenting cats and anally violating prostitutes no matter how much they called security (who were usually buying from The Four Corners of the Earth, as the friends in their dealing capacity were unaffectionately known on the scene), while Joel and Spud were ready for any eventuality, able to argue the hind leg of a race horse. They loved fights at bars on Friday nights, and went to all the Adelaide Crow footy matches. They were pronuclear and wanted mosques to be bulldozed down. They believed in ID cards, and the culture of their parents and grandparents whom they detested. It all made sense. In fact, in the top right-hand corner of the back window was an Australian flag but the background was white and not blue.

The countryside went by in a flash; they overtook everything, the engine almost popping. People would have laughed at the heft of the occupants as the little red car shook and wobbled as it overtook. They almost emptied a tank of fuel, refuelled and crammed down burgers and took more speed and shared a bottle of Jacks and drove on. They made good time in their going to the nowhere that needed pulling down a peg or two.
Jobe, at the wheel again, said, And then this psychologist says to me, you need to get in touch with your humanity, with the loss you experience in all you do to yourself... yours is a very human story. Can you believe the dickhead, a very human story? Then he asks me if I want to see my son again. And I say, Why? And what business of yours is it? Family court fucked me over.

Each had his say, and the little red car ate the road like it was manna.

The family of five had turned their people mover into extensions of their personality. This trip across Australia and back was a highlight of their family life, except for Alicia, who was angry her phone signal had gone and was angry her friends were far away and was angry in general. But the family managed to ignore that unpleasantness and to exclaim at everything out of the ordinary they saw on the way. And really, Alicia was okay most of the time, and was more complex than her phone made her out to be. She loved seeing wombats escaping the brutality of cars and trucks, and the myriad birds-of-prey hanging in the roadside air, and the sudden appearance of scrubland after the vast emptiness of the paddocks. The town of windmills thrilled her and she took numerous photos to send to friends when the signal came back strong enough. On and on they drove. The parents were social workers and tolerant of many excesses in their children. It was what you might call a Labour in the house and a Green in the senate family.

The elderly couple, as they considered themselves with ironic humor toward the youth-obsession of the world, had wanted to drive the Nullarbor all their lives. Their Winnebago was their retirement gift to themselves, and they’d done many trips within their home state of Victoria, but had saved up The Big One for “the future.” Now into their seventies, the time was right. This was the future. It is now, they said. Their drive was leisurely and they camped out at sites on the side of the road with others in camper vans, usually Gray Nomads fulfilling
their “travel round Australia” dreams. Many evenings were spent glorifying the qualities of the “essence of Australia” as inflected in sunsets, sharing the intensity of national pride with fellow converts and visionaries. The elderly couple had handed the running of their farm over to their daughter, which was radical in their world, but she did an excellent job in all her endeavors as the district acknowledged and she had married the local-district-high principal just to consolidate this respect. There were two grandchildren. They voted conservative.

The little red car carrying The Four Corners of the Earth racketed along the highway toward the Nullarbor. The men were laugh-arguing about switching allegiances from One Nation to Reclaim Australia. They were a long way from towns now, and as they passed other cars they eyed-off their contents and discussed how best to intercept one. Or we could find an isolated farmhouse, said Joel. There are no more farms out here, said Jobe, But let’s pull over a car and get started with that, then head back toward Penong and maybe go down a side road and find an isolated farmhouse or something.

None of them had slept for two days. At their last stop Spud had shat blood. I reckon we should do something soon then turn back—the Nullarbor is just a big nothing and too exposed, everyone can see everything out there and all these fucking trucks nearly blowing us off the road and I’m fuckin’ shittin’ blood. And we don’t want to drive farther than half a tank of fuel because we need to get back to fuel.

The Four Corners of the Earth processed this in their usual way, with Jobe making the decision and Benny backing him up. Okay, it’s as deserted as it gets out here. There are trucks every ten minutes or so, so let’s find a carload of victims in one of the roadside pullovers and do some horrifying.

As they’d decided, they raced right up to the bumper of the next car they gained on—the family’s people mover. Alicia, headphones on, happened to glance out the back window and screamed, Dad, there’s a little red car behind us and it’s going to hit us! Dad had noticed, of course, watching it approach fast in the mirror, but had decided
to remain calm and steady. Let it pass, don’t cause any unnecessary stress.

And thus it began, about eighty kilometers before the scrub ended and the Nullarbor Plain rolled out with its vast treelessness, the karst flat taking all moisture into its deep caverns, its secrecy. About eighty kilometers before the Nullarbor with the sun approaching its high point in the sky on a late September day. Da! screamed Alicia, there are some country hoons on our bumper and they’re going to ram us! Dad! Dad!

Nah, we won’t ram them, this car is too small, said Jobe, hunched over the wheel and breathing fast and heavy. I’ll just freak them out for a while and wear them down. They’ll pull off the road eventually then we’ll have them. Look at that slut in the back screaming! I’ll fuck her, said Spud. You’ll wait your turn! said Benny, patting Jobe on the back as Jobe planted the horn. Look, said Joel, The gutless bastards are slowing down already; we’ve got ’em.

But father only slowed down and didn’t stop. He flicked on the indicator to say, Pass! Pass! but they ignored it. He lowered his window, the air-conditioned air escaping into the dry, and waved them on. He was driving at thirty Ks an hour and the little red car matched it, right on his bumper. The two young boys were delirious, and the mother was squeezing father’s arm saying, Pull over, pull over, darl!

No, said father, If we stop they will do something bad.

Alicia screamed again and excited the little red car, which rocked back and forth in time with the hefty flesh inside. It looked like an angry pulse. The father accelerated, and all the family gripped their seats as the people mover climbed toward a hundred-and-forty and a hundred-and-fifty and a hundred-and-sixty Ks. Father had never driven so fast, not even when he was a boy on the farm, long before he moved to the city and trained to be an accountant. The family lived in a well-off suburb, but not really a rich suburb, now, and went to church, but it was a liberal-minded church and they loved visiting the bush in the hills on the weekends, though not so much Alicia these
days though to be fair she spent a lot of time protesting for the rights of the oppressed everywhere online. That counts, she said without irony. She had politics and she meant them. Even though one of her teachers had written home intimating that she might have mental and emotional health issues, which her parents said came borderline close to harassment.

But the little red car, almost having apoplexy now, matched them.

Fuck, Jobe! This bug is going to fucking expire if you keep pushing it. But Jobe was in a frenzy now. Middleclass fuckers. I’ll fucking learn them, I will. Jobe, Jobe, said Benny, It might be a good idea giving in on this one. Jobe went birko and shrieked and bashed the steering wheel and the car swerved violently and started to lift on two wheels and should have rolled but the weight of a spooked Joel and Spud took it back to the horizontal.

They’re going mental, Dad! said Alicia, who wanted to give them the finger but knew deep inside that it would be fatal to do so. She was taking control.

The little red car started dropping back and mother yelled, For God’s sakes, slow down before we die anyway. But father wouldn’t, and he drove at one hundred-and-sixty till the red car had vanished and two approaching trucks had flashed their lights seeing something crazy coming toward them, mirages bending the sides of the road into one.

Look Dad, cried one of the boys, Eagles! And in the hazy distance eagles on the side of the road, perched on a roo carcass, heralded the end of the scrub and the impending Nullarbor. They’d driven seventy Ks in the flash of an eye, in the flash of an eye, in the flash of an eye. And then Dad dropped down to a hundred-and-thirty and they didn’t stop until they reached Nullarbor Road House where they all tumbled out and touched the ground and prayed and told everyone at the road house their story—people backing away thinking they were touched and/or dangerous.
Fuck fuck fuck! The Four Corners of the Earth were out of the car and lined up along the road, pissing into the dirt and scrub. Two trucks passed them and blasted their air-horns and Spud gave them the finger, one after the other, and waved his truncheon dick in their direction while still pissing. Watch out Spud, ya dirty mongrel! as piss splattered everywhere.

The little red car was hissing and fizzing on the side of the road, crackling as its overheated engine block contracted. It hadn’t boiled over, it was still intact, but it was stressed. Joel took out a deal bag of speed and it being still as death—not even a glimmer of a breeze—he sorted four long lines on the car bonnet, which was so hot the crystals began to splutter. Fuck, Joel, you’ll ruin the shit. Joel snorted the fuming amphetamines, burning his mucous membranes and hooting loud! They all did the same. Spud started doing mock Kung Fu on Benny, saying, Ah, Grasshopper! And Jobe went to the back of the car where the weapons were stored and shuffled things around emerging with a full-sized Australian flag. Fuck, Jobe, where did that come from? asked Benny. Packed it last thing—can’t go into the heartlands without our claim to authority, mate. Did you know these are called “Aboriginal Lands”—I saw a sign miles back but you fucks were all too hyped up to notice, I spose. I noticed, said Joel, inconsequentially. Well, it’s fucking our land, mate, all of this. We’re fucking Aussies and it’s as much ours as anyone’s. See what happens when you stay locked in the fucking city—you don’t notice how much is being kept from you. They’re stealing it from us, I reckon. I’m going to tie this flag on the bonnet—help me you bastards, there’s some wire in the spare wheel well. Wire and duct tape—never travel without it. Can fix anything.

As The Four Corners of the Earth secured the flag another three road trains, two sedans, and four four-wheel drives passed on the other side. Most beeped horns or waved or flashed their lights in approval at seeing the heavy-set large tattooed tank-topped blokes with pigtails and beards expressing their patriotism. No point in being obscure about this—this was their Eureka, their Gallipoli, their New Guards.
on the Sydney Harbor Bridge moment. They were finding their politics in the outback. The bush had given them purpose. And as they worked they expressed their hatred for Muslims, Chinks, Coons, and Poofters. They remembered grandfathers who’d fought in World War II and uncles who died in Vietnam, they opined over the Corulla riots which they’d been part of, drafted east on holidays by a few mates and finding their feet in the process.

And then there was a vehicle coming their way on their side of the road. A camper van of some sort. They hooted and cheered and stepped out onto the road to wave it down.

The elderly couple were alarmed to see four big blokes blocking their way but slowing as they approached caught a side glimpse of the Australian flag and felt reassured. These fellas had obviously broken down and were in need of assistance. The elderly lady was driving and she edged the van off the road, kicked up as little dust as possible as she drove on the road shoulder—slowly slowly—to sit just behind the other vehicle. Leave the engine running, hun, said the man. Uh hu, will do. He wound down the passenger window, stuck his head out and said, Can we help you fellas? Broken down are ya? Benny went over to talk with the old bastard, while Jobe went to the hatchback and removed the axe, hiding it with his body. Spud and Joel walked to the front of the vehicle.

Nah, we’re right mate, but a bit low on fuel. Had to fang it a bit for a while and used more fuel than we’d planned for, said Benny.

Well, said the elderly man, who smacked his hand across to his wife’s thigh as he spoke, giving her that squeeze that was loaded with fifty years of marriage, and fifty years of farming together; that carried a knowledge of isolation and the vulnerabilities it carried. We’re not carrying spare fuel, said the old man, But we can arrange for a truck to bring some from Nullarbor Road House . . . We’ll ask a truckie heading this way to bring a drum out to you. They do that sort of thing these long-haul truckies; they know the roads and the ways of them you see. You’ll just have to pay them when they arrive. Benny’s eyes were
bloodshot and he was shaking and sweating and the old man could smell him.

Jobe was almost there and Benny got distracted and instead of pulling the old man through the window for Jobe to strike, to behead, he yelled, Kill the old bastard, Jobe! And as Jobe lifted the axe and the other Corners of the Earth ran to the driver’s side to yank the old bitch out and do her, the woman dropped the vehicle into gear and hit the accelerator and the axe struck the metal of the door hacking a wound deep and Benny got caught by the side mirror and Spud and Joel arched back just in time. And the Winnebago fishtailed off, the old woman booting it and handling it like a tractor in boggy ground or a car sitting on a hundred and ten on gravel. A life of it. A life of it. It was a political and a-political moment for their marriage, their time together.

After them, fuck! Fuck! Fuck! shrieked Jobe. And holding the axe as he climbed into the driver’s seat, he started the car before the others were fully in, spinning the wheels. And on to the bitumen the little red car gathered speed, with the Winnebago lumbering ahead. It took a few minutes but the car caught the camper van and swayed out into oncoming lane to overtake, but the old lady booted it harder and jammed the wing of the van into the little red car which lost control and caught the far shoulder of the road and went up on two wheels and Joel and Spud leant the wrong way and it was tipping over over over and then the flag bit the dirt hard.

Don’t stop, leave them to die, said the elderly man. Don’t need telling twice, said the old woman. And they drove to Nullarbor Road House and told people there how they’d hit a roo the night before, picking red paint from the self-inflicted wound on the flank of the Winnebago, not explaining the deep axe wound on the other side. And they heard the story of the other family, a story which had been left to simmer and spoil, and they said, Fancy that! We never saw anything…nothing like that up the road.
Bizarrely—or maybe not so bizarrely—there was no causal link made between the “incidents” (though the old camper van couple never really came into the realm of consideration) and the dead in the little red car. A photo was shown in the Adelaide newspaper of the flag hanging in shreds from the car. *Horrific Accident on Eyre Highway*, it said, Four Men Senselessly Lose their Lives... Drugs and Alcohol believed involved... Police issue warning that patrols of that section of highway will be increased.