

The Big Fella

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He threw his pack and swag in the back seat where I pointed and jumped into the front.

"G'day. Steve."

I gripped his proffered hand.

"Yeah, g'day. Doug. Doug Williams."

I slipped into first, checked the mirror and pulled back onto the Kidman Way heading to Jerilderie from this siding just down from Coleambally.

"Where are you heading?"

"Where are *you* heading?"

I faltered only for a nanosecond.

"I'm heading home. South for about four or five more hours to Melbourne."

"That'll do me."

I laughed out loud and playfully thumped him on the shoulder.

"Stone the crows. I've picked up a swaggy. A fair dinkum modern day swaggy."

When I think about it, that's probably why I stopped. In the instant as I approached, with the late afternoon sun burning the right side of my face despite the transposed sun visor, I'm sure I perceived a bush traveller in silhouette beneath a hat brim of verandah proportions. It was a straight, simple, capable silhouette with a pack, seemingly two thirds its height, soldier-like beside it and a swag laying at its feet like a drover's dog.

Steve didn't have any trouble talking. He had been in Tweed Heads the morning before and caught a ride with a couple of Africans heading for Wagga.

"Couldn't understand a bloody word they said most of the time, but they were good people. I think one of them was heading to Wagga to meet his girlfriend and the other was going to look for work. They wanted to drive all night, but they got tired and asked me to do a bit. Didn't worry me. Then a woman picked me up this morning some time and dropped me at the intersection where you found me. Did you see that big machine there? Some sort of digger. The plaque says it was just driven there and left as a monument. Must be some sort of tourist thing, 'cos there's a tap there too. I had a wash, me feet were a bit filthy for a start, and I had been tossing up whether I would throw me swag down for the night. There's a picnic table and I always use one of them if can. Ya' never know what

might wanna share ya' swag if ya' sleep in the dirt. But is seemed like there might be a bit too much traffic for a good sleep so I had just propped meself on the side of the road and you pulled up."

One car every hour or so. Yeah I suppose that would be a bit much traffic.

"So, you really don't care where you go? Does it work like that for you all the time?"

"Yeah," jutting his ginger and grey curly beard towards the roof, "pretty much. The Big Fella looks after me."

"Of course, but I'll bet there's a woman in your story somewhere."

"That was a while ago. I was married once; still keep in touch with me kids; Number 2 son just got back from working overseas. But I had to get on the road and the Big Fella looks after me. Before I lay me head down at night, I thank him for the day. When I wake up in the morning I thank him for keeping me safe through the night."

"Now I lay me down to sleep I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Stimulated by Steve's conversation, the words drifted into my consciousness shrouded by the semi-darkness of my childhood bedroom, mum's silhouette and the swishing of shadowy pine trees outside my window.

Four hours driving, a stop and revive break with the CFA at Finley and a shared meal at the Yarroweyah Roadhouse extended the conversation quite a bit. Steve continued to do most of the talking. Perhaps I ask too many questions. But I did interject my experience on one occasion.

"Sometimes I get a bit of a feelin' to go to church when I am in some town or other ... But I never do."

"You should. Why don't you?"

"I just look at meself and reckon they wouldn't want me there."

I told him about my experience in Canada. I had been riding for days in driving rain and I was on the edge of some city - Toronto maybe. The highway was a mess because of construction works, the darkening dusk sky was further burdened by water-logged dark grey clouds, I could barely see 50 metres and I had had enough. I pulled into a cheap looking motel and took a room. Above my bed the hand-made tapestry confirmed 'For God so loved the world that...' John 3:16. I remembered it was Sunday tomorrow and, to cut the story a bit, I stopped to worship at the first church I saw out of town. I clomped in wearing boots, my motorcycle leathers, bright yellow waterproof strides, saturated gloves and helmet ... and was welcomed. They even celebrated my birthday - which it wasn't. I still exchange Christmas cards with the widow of the minister.

He thought for a while before responding to more of my questions.

Steve trained as a rigger and did well. Married, had kids, the whole suburban thing - well if you call Lithgow, where he grew up, and Portland, just down the road, where he began waltzing his matilda, suburbs. Then he broke his back in a motor cycle accident and spent 8 months in hospital in a Boston Brace. Steve had owned dozens of bikes; I have only owned two. I didn't have a story to match this accident, so I let him talk.

"I can still see me kids' faces when they visited me in hospital. They were worried sick. I willed meself to walk again."

But it's hard to find a job when you've been crook. Rigging was out and no-one else seemed to want him either. No worries; he and his wife started a little business and it was going all right.

"Till me wife got a bit fancy with the cheque book."

The business failed. The marriage failed. Steve failed.

Insidious depression grew and overwhelmed him. He was treated with drugs for depression and drugs for back pain.

"Every time I went to the doc he tried out a new pill on me. It was like I was a guinea pig. I didn't get any better. Things just got worse. Then one day I just chucked it all and hit the road. That was 2001. I've been travelling ever since and I've never been better. Been around the country twice at least."

"How do you keep in touch?"

"I've got me phone."

I told you, a modern swaggy. For me, it's a badge of honour that I don't have a phone.

"How do you pay for it?"

"I pick up a bit of work sometimes, as long as there aren't too many people involved. I still get edgy around a mob of people. Got picked up by three Aboriginals up in the Kimberley. That's probably the longest I've stayed anywhere. Spent a few weeks working on their station. Had a bit of an accident up there too. Stuck a fence post through me leg. It was bright red and filled with pus the next day. The old mum just went out into the bush, peeled a bit of bark off a special tree, boiled it up and made a poultice. Couple more days and it was good as new. And I've got me pension."

"I suppose they pay it into your account and you can access it anywhere these days."

"Yeah, but I'm not in towns much; too many people. Mobs are still a problem for me. With the Big Fella it's all about timing."

"What do you mean?"

"Well there was once when I was really hungry out in the desert. I was a bit dejected, just walkin' the track and blow me down there was a sandwich on the ground. It was as good as gold, all wrapped in plastic and there was a cake in the package too."

"Amazing."

"Yep and another time I was up around Katherine and I was out of water. I reckon I could fill me bottle out of the river, but the crocs had me a bit worried. You never know where they are. I reckoned I could bolt down the bank, scoop up a bit and back up to safety before any of 'em saw me. I only took the first couple of leaps when I spied something out of the corner of me eye. It was an unopened bottle of spring water. Yep," he added respectfully, "it's all about timin' with the Big Fella."

"Yeah, I reckon you're right. It happens like that in the Bible too. Like when Moses was out in the desert with all the travelling Israelites and there wasn't much food left. They were getting a bit stropy and then one morning they woke up and there was this stuff called Manna growing everywhere. They reckoned it was a great feed. Talkin' of feeds, it's about time we had one. There's a roadhouse I know just across the river. We'll be there in fifteen. Tell me more."

"Well, one time, I had all me stuff pinched. The pack, the swag, the lot. I only had what I stood up in. I coulda let it get at me, but I didn't. I just decided to trust the Big Fella and keep walkin'. Kinda see what happened. I'd only gone a coupla hundred metres and there was a wind cheater on the ground. It was perfect. Just what I needed."

It was almost dark when we headed south again from Yarroweyah and over dinner it had become clear that Melbourne wasn't where Steve wanted to be.

"I came along the Ocean Road once and a bloke dropped me off in Melbourne. Too crowded. I had to catch a tram up to some place, Coburn was it, and get back onto the highway."

"I think you mean Coburg. That's where you get to Sydney Road and that gets you to the Hume Highway. So if you don't want to go to Melbourne, where can I drop you? Shepparton's just down the road. That could give you a good start in the morning."

"Nah, I think I remember that place. I like to sleep where I can't be seen and I think that was the town where I found a bridge to sleep under and there were so many needles I couldn't put me head down. That put me off the place. Don't worry about me mate. Just put me down where it suits you and I'll be right."

"Yeah, I know you will, but I'd like to think I dropped you somewhere reasonable. Hey I know. We have to cross the Hume Highway the other side of Shep. There's a great wayside stop just before it.

Well off the road, protected from traffic noise, toilets, wash basin and I think I remember a picnic table too. I've stopped there for a power nap a couple of times."

"Yeah that'll do. I think I'll head up towards Sydney. Might give me Mum a call tomorrow and see how she's doin'. Maybe I can drop in for Christmas."

So, the deal was done. We would soon be travelling separate tracks again. But I had one more question.

"Steve, I understand the pension going into your account, but don't the government have to send you administrative letters sometimes. How do they find you?"

"Oh, I've got a mail box. Mum clears it for me."

Yep, a forty-nine year old modern day swaggy, who, if he hasn't cured himself of depression, has certainly taught himself to live positively with it.

Somewhere around 9:30 we pulled into the wayside stop. I headed straight for the conveniences.

When I came back his gear was out and he was standing beside the car. We gripped hands again and I opened the driver's door.

"I've been thinkin' about that advice of yours. I might follow it up next time I get the feeling."

"Do it mate. You'll be right." I said, trusting in the Big Fella myself. "See ya'."

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