

Used Cars

By Gabriel Bergmoser

She probably shouldn't have stopped. Not for a drink, at any rate. Some things had left the rear-view mirror too recently for her to relax. But the car, already battered, was becoming less reliable by the kilometre and her leg was hurting more by the second. Not to mention, the lack of working air conditioning had left her feeling like she was driving a furnace.

Maggie glanced out the window. The pub sat side by side with a roadhouse. Neither conjured especially pleasant memories for her at that moment. But then, it wasn't like she'd ever had much in the way of pleasant memories so she figured there was no point brooding about it. She looked to the cars. There were two parked out the front of the pub; a black, relatively new jeep, and an old grey sedan. She considered them for a moment, then checked her reflection in the rear-view.

She wasn't looking her best. But her clothes, if worn, were at least clean, and the public shower she'd stopped at had seen off the last of the mud and blood. She couldn't change how pale and haggard she looked.

Slinging her backpack over her shoulder, she opened the door and stepped out into the warm afternoon air. The highway stretched away in either direction. On the other side were only brown paddocks and the occasional distant gum. She watched it all for a moment. She listened. She could hear faint music from inside the pub, and distant cars, but no sirens.

She limped into the pub.

It wasn't much. The seats were cracked leather and the tables rickety, by the looks of things. The lights were dim and the crackly music mournful old country and western. There were only two other people here, a man hunched over the bar, and a woman behind it who was just on the right side of elderly. She nodded at Maggie as she came over to the bar and sat, a couple of stools away from the other drinker.

'Just a...' she considered for a moment, 'beer.' She wanted something gentle. Something cold.

The bartender didn't ask what type. She took a stubbie from the fridge, cracked it and slid it across the bar. Maggie paid, as she did examining the label. She didn't recognise it.

'A beer drinker, eh?' the man said.

Maggie didn't reply. She took a sip. It was bitter, pleasantly so. She took another.

‘Don’t see many young girls drinking beer,’ the man went on, as if Maggie had expressed any interest in his earlier observation. ‘You’re a rare breed.’

The song had changed. It was slightly more upbeat. Maggie listened to it for a moment, then realised the man was speaking again.

‘Reckon it would do girls good to get into drinking beer,’ the man said. ‘They’re all so fucking soft these days.’

Maggie wondered if she should mention she’d ordered the beer as her soft option. Before she could say anything, a smell not far off methylated spirits told her the man had moved over to sit right beside her. The bartender eyed him with evident distaste. Maggie took another sip.

‘What’s brought you in here love?’ he said. ‘I’ve never seen a girl like you around here.’

Maggie looked at him. He was overweight. His cheeks were as red as his bloodshot eyes. A few strands of grey hair still clung to his scalp. He was dressed in a t-shirt and dark jeans. Maggie judged him to be in his late forties, despite looking older. Someone who, once upon a time, might have been pretty good looking and was yet to accept that things had changed.

‘I’m just dropping in,’ Maggie said.

The man grinned. ‘She speaks!’

Maggie sipped her beer.

‘What’s your name love?’

‘What’s yours?’

‘Kev.’

She hated that name.

Kev waited for Maggie to speak. She didn’t. He leaned back. ‘Bit quiet, love?’

‘Just having a drink in peace,’ Maggie said.

‘I’d hate to get in the way of that.’

‘Then don’t.’

His smile faltered, just slightly. ‘Only being friendly.’

‘That’s okay,’ Maggie said. ‘I’m just not in the mood for a conversation.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Pretty much what it does.’

The man glared at her for a few seconds. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is the fucking problem. You all think every fucking man is out to get you.’

‘No I don’t.’ Maggie finished her beer.

‘We’re not,’ Kev went on, as if he hadn’t heard her. He leaned close. She could feel his hot breath in her ear. She didn’t like it. ‘Some of us are just being friendly. But you treat us the fucking same as the others. It’s bullshit. You’re not better than us.’

Maggie’s mind moved to her car. The items she had in there. It wouldn’t take long to shift them.

‘Now you won’t even talk to me,’ Kev said. Spittle flecked Maggie’s ear.

She moved her foot.

‘Like I said,’ she replied. ‘I just want to have a drink in peace.’

‘I’m not ruining that,’ Kev said. ‘Just being fucking friendly.’

Maggie’s foot moved around the leg of his stool.

‘Hey.’ He touched her elbow.

Maggie pulled her foot up hard. The stool was tugged out from under the already unbalanced man and with a yelp he hit the ground, his head cracking hard on the wooden floor. The stool followed with a clatter a moment later.

Maggie stood. Her leg throbbed. She shouldn’t have done that. She looked down at the man. He was groaning, his movements feeble.

‘I really just wanted to drink in peace.’ She knelt and felt his pockets. Found the keys. She took them. She nodded to the bartender, whose expression had barely changed, then left the pub.

She opened the back door of her car. She grabbed the blankets, the plastic bag of spare clothes, and her sawn-off shotgun. Moving fast, she crossed to the black jeep. She unlocked it and threw everything into the back seat. She covered the shotgun with the blanket, then took the chisel from the side pocket of her backpack. With a glance to the door of the pub, she hobbled to the back of the car and, in a couple of quick, forceful movements, removed the licence plate. She moved around the front and did the same. She had some spares, but she could put them on down the road a little. Once she was clear.

The door to the pub burst open. Rubbing his head, Kev stumbled out. He caught sight of Maggie.

She met his eyes and held them.

He didn’t move. His mouth opened and closed.

She got into his car. Started the engine.

He staggered forward. He was yelling now.

Maggie reversed on to the highway, swung the car around, and hit the accelerator. She glanced in the rear-view mirror. Kev was an outline in the road, then a speck, then gone.

Maggie's eyes moved to the dashboard of her new car.
She grinned as she turned up the air conditioning.