

Mid-life / Route 44

“I’ve got one!” the woman screamed and stood up quickly, her camping chair falling over behind her.

Madeline picked her way over the slick jetty to watch the drama as the woman frantically turned the reel handle and pulled on the rod. Eventually, a fish—it couldn’t have been more than ten centimetres long—finished the painful journey from the surface of the murky water to the jetty and the woman’s friend hung out a net to place it in.

“That’s barbaric,” Madeline told Paul, who now stood beside her, shoulder to shoulder. He was balancing their dinner on his hands: fish and chips.

The fisherwoman adjusted her sunhat and turned around, her red parka swishing. “Oh, they don’t mind, they don’t feel it.”

Madeline raised an eyebrow. “They don’t feel a great hook ripping through their flesh and being hauled into air that they can’t breathe?”

The woman didn’t seem to hear this time. She was trying to pull the hook out of the fish’s mouth. She wore black fingerless gloves. Madeline winced both for the fish and the likely smell of the gloves.

“We’ll throw it back in a sec, once we’ve taken a picture,” the woman said, without looking up from what she was doing. Eventually, she had heard.

“You’re not even going to eat it?”

“Mads...” Paul said in a slightly pleading whisper. His face was already pink. They’d been married twenty-one years this August, and her tendency to say aloud what most people wouldn’t still embarrassed him. “Let’s eat.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

The hook came free and the woman held the fish up for a photograph, grinning. Then she threw it back over the jetty and continued her defence of her hobby, expertly baiting the hook again. “We eat the odd one, but most of them we throw back. It’s just for a bit of fun.”

Madeline shook her head. This time, she let Paul lead her away. “Bloody boomers.”

“You’re telling off some stranger for catching fish when you’re about to eat one?” Paul said, as they sat on a bench in front of the car, overlooking the beach. Madeline’s hands and face were almost numb from the biting wind, but she hated the smell of old chips in the car the day after.

“At least these were caught for a purpose other than sport,” she retorted, taking a crab stick from the pile. She took a bite into it and steam swirled out of her mouth. “Why does this have to be such a sport-obsessed country?”

Paul blew on his piece of fish, always the careful one. “People fish all over the world.”

“That’s beside the point.”

They ate in silence for a while.

“It’s getting late, we should head back,” Paul said, rubbing the salt from his hands.

Madeline swallowed her last bite and stood up. “They should ban fishing as a sport. And horse racing. And dog racing.”

“What about hunting?”

“Depends on whether it’s for sport, or for eating or culling.”

“Oh.”

“AFL, too.”

Paul shook his head and followed Madeline to the car. “Now you’re going too far.” He started the engine, while Madeline adjusted the heating. “You better not let Koby hear you say that.”

“Yeah, yeah, he knows what I think.”

Koby was their eldest child. At fourteen, he had been playing football since he was seven, and it had always been a source of worry—one of many—in Madeline’s motherhood. It wasn’t just the potential concussions, it was the early mornings in the freezing cold and rain, the waiting around for him after the game or training. And then she had the twins to think about as well, ferrying them to *their* activities. But this weekend was supposed to be about her and Paul, and Madeline realised that her thoughts had automatically drifted back to the children. As it was the winter holidays, there was no sport, so Koby had gone to stay at a friend’s and Madeline had taken the chance to organise for the twins to stay with their grandparents so that she and Paul could enjoy some child-free, sport-free time for the first time in years.

They left the carpark and joined the long, straight road back north. Madeline willed the car’s heater to come on and tried to think of something to talk about other than the kids. In truth, she missed them. She enjoyed her deep conversations with Koby, Jessie’s energetic chatter and Connor’s jokes. But they were getting older and this weekend without them felt a lot like a taster for the near future, when they would all be busy teenagers with their own lives. After fourteen years of parenting, Madeline wasn’t sure she was ready for that and the whole idea had her on edge. She was the one who had insisted on this weekend to reconnect with Paul but she hadn’t realised it would bring out such complex feelings.

Madeline pulled out her phone, opened a search browser and typed “stiff shoulder woman.” Among the list of injury causes and old age, one word glared back at her: perimenopause. Of course it was. She put the phone back in her bag and went back to staring out of the window, trying to think of something to say.

“I think we should have a word with Connor’s teacher when they go back,” Paul said, breaking the silence. “I think he could do with some extra help on his maths before he goes to high school.”

“What happened to not talking about issues with the kids this weekend?” Madeline teased. She didn’t even admit to herself that she was relieved she wasn’t the only one.

“You’re right, but it’s amazing how much easier it is to think about them when they’re not all making noise in the back seat.”

“True.”

“So... what do you think?”

“Okay... I’ll talk to her.”

Paul nodded, not taking his eyes off the road.

They were silent for a while. Madeline tried not to think about those weird spots on Jessie’s feet and how she could encourage Koby to wear deodorant more and how Connor was probably addicted to sugar and how Jessie had a ballet exam coming up she needed to practice for and how Koby needed new school shoes and Connor needed a haircut and how the fridge had started to make weird noises and how they needed to paint the hallway and fix the leak under the kitchen sink and she needed to call her sister and—

The car slammed on its automatic brake as a kangaroo jumped from the bushes at the side of the road and stopped stupidly in the middle of the tarmac.

They were still travelling at a clip when they hit the animal and the airbags burst from their restraints.

It all happened so quickly, that for a moment there was nothing but the sound of the horn. Paul groaned and moved his body back from the steering wheel. Madeline was panting, her breathing matching her heart rate.

“Are you alright?” Paul said, his words almost slurred into one.

Madeline nodded.

“We better get out, it’s not safe for us to stay here.” Madeline pulled her bag from the tight space around her legs and they climbed out, their limbs moving as if underwater. Paul came around the back of the car and they stood off the road, surveying the damage. The front of the car was crumpled—a kangaroo-sized dent; two lines of rubber trailing behind and left an acrid tinge to the air. The kangaroo lay in a bloody heap metres in the front of the car.

“Poor roo,” Madeline said.

Madeline’s thoughts darted to her kids, then the roo, then images of their almost-funeral. Her whole body was trembling.

Paul turned around, took three steps towards the bushes, and vomited in the grass.

Maddy watched a crow land on the road and hop towards the dead roo. Paul came back and sat in the dirt beside her. His face was ghostly pale.

“You alright?” she asked. She didn’t feel alright; she wasn’t sure she’d feel alright again. They had almost orphaned their children in a stupid attempt at getting some alone time together. In a few years, they would have more alone time than they would ever want. Years and years of it.

Paul spat on the grass and sighed. “Yeah.”

“There’s a car coming,” Madeline said.

The crow jumped on top of the dead animal and began pecking at it.

Madeline roared at it. “Rah!” It cawed and lazily flapped away to a nearby powerline, still eyeing its dinner.

“Car’s totalled,” said Paul.

“That’s what insurance is for. Speaking of which, shouldn’t you call them? Or the police? Someone?”

“I’m waiting for my hands to stop shaking.”

The car—a ute—pulled over on the opposite side of the road and a young man in cargo pants got out. A border collie was chained up in the back. It barked once. The crow cawed as if it was worried something else would get to its meal first.

“Need any help?” the man said.

“We won’t tell the kids,” Madeline said, pacing the room, a glass of wine in hand. After the wildlife people had been called, paramedics had cleared them for concussion, and the tow truck had driven off with their car, the kind young man with the ute had driven them and their bags to their motel, at which time Madeline had managed to procure a bottle of cheap white from the owner.

“Mads, the car…” Paul reminded her. He was lying on the queen-sized bed, TV remote control in his hand and pointed at the TV that was mounted on the ugly eighties brick wall opposite.

“They’ll call soon and I’ll have to tell them something. What am I going to tell them?”

“Just tell them we hit a roo and had to have the car towed.”

“But that’s what happened!”

“I know. Better to tell the truth and dumb it down than lie completely.”

Madeline sighed. Koby would be fine, nothing really fazed him, and Jessie was usually pretty good once she knew the danger was over, but Connor... It was Connor that Madeline worried about. It was Connor that Madeline always worried about.

She reached the tiny kitchenette and started to pivot to pace the other way, but as she did, she noticed something moving among the dark spots on the brickwork.

“Ugh, there’s a big spider on the wall.”

Paul rolled his eyes and flicked the channel. “Just leave it.”

Madeline shivered. “No!” She took off her shoe, still holding the glass of wine in her other hand, and hit it as hard as she could.

“Got it.” She threw the shoe by the sliding door and kicked the other one over there too, unsure if it was a good idea to walk around barefoot on the old brown carpet but decided she didn’t care anymore. She almost died today because of a kangaroo. There was no predicting how and when you would go.

Speaking of which, she wanted to be back with her babies right this instant, not in this tawdry country motel. Whose stupid idea was it to take a weekend away from them? How could you take a holiday away from your kids when you had so little precious time with them to begin with?

Paul flicked the channel again. Madeline knew that anybody else would think that he was taking the accident well. Paul was known for being relaxed and easygoing. But mindlessly flicking channels was not his usual self.

“Paul...”

He switched off the television and looked up at her.

She took a deep breath. "I think we should—"

"Have another baby," he finished for her. He blinked but did not shift his gaze.

"What! No!"

"Wasn't that what you were going to say?"

"No!"

"But... have you thought about it?"

"No!" Madeline's voice rose with each protest.

"Really?"

"Paul! I'm forty-four years old. I'm perimenopausal! I can't do all that again!"

"It's just..."

Paul's words were drowned out as Taylor Swift's Anti-Hero blared from Madeline's phone. Madeline tore her eyes away from Paul's face, vaguely remembering that Jessie had changed her ringtone and that she had meant to change it back. The phone was on the bench of the tiny, dingy kitchen that occupied one corner of the room. Paul's mum's name was on the screen but it was Connor who was calling. It had to be. He was always the first.

Madeline put down the wine glass, picked up the phone and took a deep breath.

"Hi, baby..."