

# Long Paddock

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*A Drive In The Country*

The city shrunk behind them as they drove and the sky shook free the grey particles that clung to it and unrolled before them cobalt and crinkle free. The car wound past crop after crop and they took turns to guess what they were as they sped past. She sat and stared out the passenger window while he drove. Fields of canola seemed garish after the flaxen stalks of wheat they left behind, like a sea of bulrushes. After several kilometres they came upon cotton, a blanket of low cloud sitting above scraggly and spiky shrub.

It was a hot day, the windows were wound down and blasts of warm air stung her eyes. She wished she'd brought her sunglasses. She swung her feet up onto the dashboard and pressed the small lever under her seat to make it recline. He glanced at her legs as her dress slid down her thighs and noticed the fine downy hairs lit up by the harsh sunlight. Her legs were long and slender, knobbly knees with little-girl scabs on them. He wondered where she got those grazes and was about to comment on them when he saw her shoes. Red wedges, open toed with patterned stitching, that matched her toenails painted red.

"Heh aren't those shoes leather?"

She turned to face him. He was staring ahead again, hands slack on the wheel, shirt sleeves rolled up against tanned sinewy arms dotted with freckles. He saw her shrug, out of the corner of his eye. She wore a green summer dress with thin straps and a heart-shaped cleavage line. The dress suited her and she knew it. Her skin was fair and her cool lime coloured eyes reminded him of the leaves of a succulent plant.

"But you're vegetarian," he spoke into the wind blasting between them.

They were new to each other, having met the previous month and were still to decide if they liked one another. They looked good together, tall and slender limbed. He was narrow where she was wide so that when they lay together he fit snug between her hips and his broad shoulders covered her upper body, a heavy human blanket. They liked that. He liked her because she made him laugh. She was clumsy at times and mostly adorable. The child-like expressions she uttered without thinking, at times made him truly envious. She wasn't speaking now though; she was staring straight ahead at the white line marked on the road as the car raced forward it seemed never-ending.

He relished what he was to say next because he liked to tease her and hear her illogical and unfortunate answers when she was caught off guard. It endeared her to him.

"Didn't you once say that people who eat meat should try killing the animals themselves and then see if they are comfortable with the idea of eating it?"

Her gaze blurred as she tried to focus on the white line. It seemed fuzzy and slightly

suspended above the ground. She wondered where he was going with this—he always did this, nothing that escaped her mouth could be excused as being flippant to him. Everything was for storing, and later while he was raking over the stores he would find a little gem to question her about and check and triple check what she meant by saying it in the first place.

He was keen to know her, know all of her, not just the delicate and soft places that hid secret moles, almond in size and colour. When they first met he had said, “I am despicably lonely.” She had been intrigued and wondered what he meant. This was their first day trip together, he was driving her to a distant watering hole, this was the first time he had seen the green dress and the red shoes.

“So, what about people who wear leather shoes? Should they also try killing animals themselves?” he continued.

From side-on his face seemed calm and serious. She was playing with the hem on her dress, holding it with the palms of her hands to stop it sliding down her thighs while she unhooked her crossed legs and lowered her feet from the dashboard. He turned and looked away from the road to stare into her small feline eyes. She sat still, unblinking, her lips pushed slightly forward, her shoulders fallen. She suffered in the heat of the car and was stuck to the vinyl seats. The wind had made a nest of her hair.

His eyes burned on her, it frustrated him when she didn’t answer. She looked back to the road, and focussed on the chalky line she chose to follow. Ahead of them she saw a flash of orange, a nose pointed forward in the air, a trot so light its feet barely touched the road, a proud tail fluffy with an abrupt white tip, it went under the front bumper. She forgot to call out.

They felt a bump when they hit it with the back wheel. He kept driving, a look of concentration on his face “Stop! Pull over,” she slapped his thigh.

“I guess I should check the bumper,” he braked and shut off the engine.

She unclipped her seat belt and opened the door; as she stepped onto the road the seat made a suction noise where her damp skin pulled away from it. She ran a couple of hundred metres behind the car where the fox lay on one side in the middle of the road. She bent down gingerly to touch its middle and felt its bones in pieces, sliding beneath her hands. It breathed with difficulty, blood pooled at the edge of its mouth and overflowed into the soft fur underneath its chin.

After walking slowly around the car and squatting to look underneath for damage, he walked over to her. “It’s in pain,” she stared at him, pushing her hair from her eyes and squinting into the sun that fanned out behind him, whiting out his features so she couldn’t see if he was looking back. He stood towering above her; his face winced as he watched the fox choking on its own blood.

“C’mon let’s go, it’s a pest, they’re an introduced species...”

She stopped listening. She hated him at that moment. Blood pooled on the hot asphalt near where she squatted in her red shoes. The air was without breeze and she felt trapped in the sun’s intense glare. She stared at the crop closest to the road, dirty green fan-shaped leaves wilted in the heat. Tobacco, she guessed. He turned to walk back to the car waving for her to follow. She cupped the fox’s muzzle in one hand, raising it a little, and placed the other hand on the back of its skull. He heard the clean break and stopped without turning, for just a second.