

Dustlines

The highway shimmered in the heat, a silver vein stretching north through country that seemed endless. Liam drove with the windows down, hot wind tangling his hair, dust settling on the dashboard. The guitar on the back seat rattled with each bump, but he hadn't played it in weeks. Not since Claire left the house key on the kitchen table. No note, just the key, and a neat fold in the dish towel she'd been holding when she decided she was done.

He told himself he was heading for a gig in Darwin. In truth, he was chasing something less tangible—maybe a song, maybe a reason to keep trying. The breakup still clung to him like red dust on boots. Nights were worse, when the quiet pressed in and he couldn't write a single line.

At a roadhouse near Tennant Creek, he stopped for fuel and coffee. Inside, the air was thick with the smell of fried food. At the counter, an older man leaned with both elbows, his hat wide-brimmed and sweat-stained, the sort you only ever saw in country songs or cattle yards. The brim shaded his eyes, but his voice carried, worn and gravelly.

"We're all pilgrims on this road," the man said when Liam sat down, voice rough with years and cigarettes. "Some are running away, some are running toward. Maybe both. Hard to tell which is which most days."

Liam sipped the bitter coffee and nodded. He wanted to ask which one he was, but the words stuck. Instead he studied the road maps pinned to the wall, all those lines cutting across vast spaces, destinations scattered like promises.

When he stepped back outside, the sun was falling low, casting long shadows over the trucks and fuel bowzers. He looked at his guitar through the dusty window of the ute. He didn't pick it up. Not yet.

By late afternoon, Liam had left the last town far behind. The road narrowed, the edges broken by dust and stone. On a whim, he pulled off onto a track that curved toward a low ridge of red rock. It didn't look like much—just an escarpment rising out of flat country, a few twisted ghost gums leaning against the sky.

He parked the ute and walked a little way, boots crunching on gravel. The air was dry, carrying the faint smell of iron and spinifex. He climbed to where the rock opened into a shallow shelf and sat down, guitar beside him.

It was quiet, but not empty. The kind of quiet that feels like it's holding its breath. From somewhere down in the scrub came the croak of a crow. Overhead, a pair of galahs swept past, their wings flashing pale pink against the hard blue. Then the silence closed again.

Liam strummed a chord, but the sound seemed small, swallowed by the space. He stopped. The place felt as if it carried its own story, one he couldn't hear but could almost sense—like a conversation already happening that he wasn't part of. The air pressed in on him with a weight that wasn't hostile but wasn't welcoming either. Just there, immovable, like the rock itself.

He leaned back, staring at the sky as it began to deepen toward dusk. Something stirred in him—an ache behind the ribs, a pressure like unshed tears. He thought of the words the old man had spoken at the roadhouse: running away, running toward. He wanted to answer, but no words came.

The land gave him nothing clear in return. Just a presence, steady and inscrutable.

When darkness came, Liam rolled out his swag on the stone shelf. He lay awake, watching stars multiply in the cooling sky, brighter and sharper than he'd ever seen them. He couldn't name what he'd felt there, only that it had brushed against him and left a mark.

Years later, Liam sat on the veranda at a mate's place. The air had cooled, though the boards underfoot still held the day's heat. Smoke drifted from the barbecue, dogs nosed around under the table, and a dozen of them sat with beers in hand, laughter rising and falling like surf.

Someone shoved his guitar toward him. "Go on, mate. Give us something."

He tuned it slowly, then let a song slip out—steady chords, words shaped by long drives and red dust, by questions that trailed him like shadows.

When he finished, the sound seemed to hang for a beat. A pause followed, not long but noticeable. One bloke twisted the top off another bottle. "Yeah... that's different," he muttered. Someone else called toward the kitchen: "Hey...are the snags ready yet?" A laugh broke from the far end of the table, too loud, covering the quiet like a rug thrown over something fragile.

The talk shifted quickly—footy next weekend, who was driving, whether there'd be enough eskies. Bottles clinked, chairs scraped, and the ordinary noise swelled back.

Liam stilled the strings with his palm, smiling faintly. He never explained.

Across the table, one of the quieter men caught his eye. He leaned in just enough, voice pitched low so it didn't carry. "Nice song, mate," he said. "Not sure if it's sad or hopeful. Maybe both."

Liam gave a short breath of a laugh, looking down at the guitar before meeting the man's eyes again. "Hard to tell which is which most days."

The man nodded, lifting his bottle in a small salute, then looked away, letting the conversation flow back around them. It was just a passing moment, tucked inside the noise, but it was enough

Later, as the chatter rolled on behind him, Liam leaned against the railing and watched a bird lift suddenly from the fence line, wings flashing once before vanishing into the night. For a moment, he felt again that same presence he had stumbled into years ago on a ridge of red stone—the silence that spoke louder than any song.