

Stranded

By the second evening, my brother Mike had had enough.

‘Bugger this,’ he said, ‘If we hang around here any longer, we’ll all die.’

‘Just relax,’ said Dad. ‘They know we’re out here somewhere. We just have to wait it out.’

‘We’ve been sitting here frying our arses off for two days. Nobody is coming for us. One of us is going to have to walk out.’

We all knew that Mike was the only one of us who *could* walk out. He was younger, fitter and harder than me. And Dad would struggle to walk around the block, let alone 80km across a desert goat track.

Mike started to put together a kit from our meagre possessions – a baseball cap, sunglasses, a travel blanket, a State-sized map.

‘Just sit down and stop being a dickhead,’ croaked Dad, his voice gravelly with the exhaustion we all felt.

Mike fiddled with his pack.

Flies buzzed and the hot wind blew dust in our eyes and mouths. Talk about a living hell.

‘You’re worse than your fucking mother.’

Mike continued to ignore him.

If there was one thing Dad hated worse than being argued with, it was being ignored.

‘Why don’t you listen to me for once in your fucking life?’

Mike looked at me for support. As if anything I had to say would smooth things over. Or get us out of this shit hole.

‘Maybe he’s got a point, Dad,’ I ventured.

‘You keep out of this. If it wasn’t for you and your half-arsed ideas, we wouldn’t even be here.’

Finally, it was out in the open. This whole trip had been my idea; a last chance at some family bonding while it was still possible. My idea to take that detour. My idea to hire the car. And as usual, I’d fucked it all up.

Dad brooded, I sulked, and Mike contemplated the nightmare journey ahead of him.

After a few minutes, Mike came and offered me his hand. I shook it, but couldn't look him in the eye.

'I'm going now, before it gets too dark. I'll try to keep moving at night, and find some shelter in the hottest part of the day.'

Dad refused to even acknowledge the handshake of his youngest son. Mike shrugged his shoulders and trudged off into the sunset.

And that was the last time I saw my brother alive.

Dad and I endured two more days of the most extreme weather imaginable. During the day it was like an inferno. We created what shade we could by opening the doors and keeping the car between us and the sun, but this was virtually useless. It was deliriously, blisteringly hot and there was nothing we could do to get away from it.

At night, the desert became bitterly cold, and we were forced to huddle together for warmth, shivering like dogs. It was madness: during the day we prayed for relief from the heat, and at night we prayed for the sun to return and warm us again. We were dehydrated and badly sunburned, and what little water we had was long gone. It wasn't hard to work out that neither would survive these conditions for much longer.

Dad's face was badly blistered, and his movements were laboured. It was an effort for him just to speak.

'Do ya reckon that brother of yours has any chance of making it?' he asked. It was his first mention of Mike since their confrontation.

'Yeah, Dad, if anyone can pull it off, it'll be him.'

'Think I was a bit hard on him?'

'A little.'

Dad considered this for a while. In all my life I'd never heard him apologise for anything, or take a backward step. You took Dad for what he was, or be bugged. His stubbornness had cost him his friends, his job, his marriage to Mum. And this latest father/son expedition was supposed to try and rebuild some of the bridges he'd destroyed with his sons. Fat lot of good that had done.

'I was a bit hard on you, too.'

'I deserved it.'

‘That’s bullshit. You were trying to do the right thing. You always do.’

We were finally rescued just before dark. A chopper flew directly to us and landed on a flat spot nearby. It took a long time to rouse Dad.

The pilot’s eyes told the story long before his words did.

‘Your brother was picked up by the side of the road, just out of town. He was in a pretty bad way. I just got the call on the radio. He didn’t make it.’

Dad dropped to his knees and kept his eyes closed for a very long time. Finally he rose.

‘Christ, I wish I’d shaken his hand,’ he said.