

## TURNED SKYWARD

*Charlie Craig*

Standing alone. Swaying over the urinal. Things seemed easier for Charlie. Though fuzzy headed, things seemed clear, watching his piss drain into the trough. It was like filling his truck with diesel from the bowser—easier. Just had to try not to spill any when he pulled his spout back into his pants. But he always spilt a bit of diesel over the tank and he didn't much care tonight if he left a bit of piss on himself. His new blue singlet could hang over the front of his shorts.

He was pissed and couldn't feel his bad joints. He always reckoned the beer did the job—if ya drank enough. Made ya forget things and got ya talking about things ya knew nothing about. Ya didn't bother about the crap others put on ya.

The world needed more beer, he reckoned, watching his piss slow to a dribble. With a big dick he reckoned he would do better. Break the bloody drought. Give the dirt a good spray. Irrigate. Give everything a good wash in Charlie's piss. He managed to dribble some down his shorts before he zipped up. "Ya bloody messy prick."

Back out into the hotel's corridor, a lady was coming his way. He tried to walk steadily past her and pick himself up a bit, suddenly wanting to look sober. He slurred, "G'day."

She twitched a smile, quickly looking the other way. A real good-looking sort she was. Fresh, smellin' sweet—not of sweat and stinking fly-bitten animals. He didn't see many of those at the pub. Didn't see any at the bar—a different circle all together. He reckoned the husband had brought her in for

a bit of a feed in the dining room. Probably had some cleaned-up kids with her. Probably had ten bloody thousand acres to go back to—probably all bloody cotton, irrigated. Another holiday in the bank.

She seemed like another breed to him. She was bloody taller too, lookin' down on him like everybody else. He was baldy headed, yellow toothed, with skin as dry and coarse as the tobacco he rolled. The brushy beard covered most of his face.

Even in his dreams he found it hard with those sorts. Could only expect a slap in the face. He would have to pay for the real thing, but still couldn't get a good kiss out of them. Ya could get anything from them, except that fuzzy feeling.

His better dreams were of a few horses now, a few acres to keep them on. His idea of getting a woman only came around when he was drunk and foolish and happy to play the arse. It was still a bit of fun to stir a few. Though these days, even the ugly sorts had got themselves pretty much hooked-up. The ones with potential were getting out of town fast. Ya had to snap them up when they finished school. And he was a long way too old for that. And too bloody ugly. The few sorts he had wasted his time with as a young fella would be well worn and wrinkled by now.

He made it back to the bar without stumbling. He propped onto a stool and rolled his tobacco carefully with a few bent-up clumsy fingers, looking as if he had never done it before. There wasn't much going on. The bloody flies were holding off for the morning. It was only the ceiling fan stirring things, while somebody was getting shitty at the pool table and cracking the cue against it. And a pair were losin' it in front of those blasted poker machines.

The cotton chippers sometimes picked things up around the bar. There was some variety in that hoe-swinging lot: Russian, Swedish, Dutch... Though they'd piss off out of town in a couple of months, havin' culled a few weeds and added to their kitty. Anyhow, for now they were keeping to themselves, hanging back against the wall. Pity. At the other end of the bar a few farmers were talking bullshit. They reckoned water was getting hard to get. The more crap he heard, the more he had a mind to throw a mouthful at them.

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What do you expect from a fucken drought? Y'know you'll get one every few years out here. I've been in this game for forty fucken years. I reckon I know somethin' after forty fucken years. Started workin' for you blokes when I was fourteen. I used to shear those bloody mongrel sheep ya had.

They pissed Charlie off. Half of them didn't know a good day's work. They were still living off the 'old' money—grandfather's. These days they only wanted him to cart their bloody lousy stock for them—always complaining about how hard they were doing it. How much things were costing them. How their stock weren't worth enough. Then they come with these big bloody ideas to get rid of their stock. Flatten their country and plough it up to plant cotton. Make a heap of money after sucking the river dry. And still complain while driving the flash 4WD. Tell him how much it's costing to send their kids to boarding school.

Charlie had another beer, mumbled a bit, then got bored with his own company and whatever he was watching on the TV. He looked around the bar for somebody sitting like he was—a mate, another truck driver. The last dope he had been talking to had left, not even with a skinful.

What was the bloody point of that? Ya had to give somebody a bloody stir before ya left.

Roza, doing her bit as the barmaid, was along the bar, just starting to chat up a few chipping fellas from Ireland, trying to show off her fat tits—pear-shaped hangers like her mother. Hadn't she turned out a sweet thing, with a rump like a bloody rhino?

Mouldy the barman was starting a tiff with the missus, smack in the middle of the bar. How those two got together, he didn't know. It didn't seem right. Doris was a good sort. She could be a prudent bitch, but who blamed her? Day in, day out, Mouldy spent the best part of the day sittin' on his arse, puttin' bets down on the dogs, horses, or whatever was running around on the TV. A bit of work had him goin' red in the face these days. No doubt the bastard could turn on the charm when he wanted to. He'd manage a romp in the bed with the missus when he needed one. Bastard. The nickname had

stuck—he'd only dip his end into the missus to stop it turnin' green. That was what Charlie had been told, anyway.

Everybody else seemed to have a beer and somebody to crap to. For some reason they didn't want to talk their crap to bloody old Charlie. Even the chippers looked at him funny—and it was his bloody town. But he couldn't understand most of those chippers. They were from too many different countries. All they did was swing at those weeds so the cotton growers got a better crop. Hell, it wasn't the experience he'd be looking for. Why come out this way to put blisters on your hands?

He downed his beer, thinking he might stir a few of them up before he left. He was pissed enough. The chippers were looking on at the pool table. He might even have a game of pool, show them his stuff. About to make a move, he stubbed out his smoke. Then an Asian-looking girl pulled up at the bar, just a couple of stools along, wearin' some funky kind of pants. Something different there, he reckoned. Blackfellas were the only variety he was used to. He might be getting lucky.

Bloody Roza had an orange juice for her quick enough. That bugged him. He couldn't buy her a beer, but after a couple of minutes there still wasn't anybody talking to her. She might be on her own.

“Do ya like your orange juice?” he asked in his best voice.

“Vodka and orange.”

“That's better. What's your name?”

“Call me, Corea. I am from Korea.”

“Right-o. Call me Charlie. I'm from this place. Ya by yourself?”

“Yes.”

She seemed bright and happy—a good sort. The body wasn't bad. Her tits and arse would keep him happy. The Asian look wasn't bad on her, either.

“Chipping cotton?”

“Yes.”

“Like it?”

“Yes.”

“Ya sure about that? Bloody tough in this weather, I reckon.”

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“Yes.”

“Ya like it here?”

“Yes.”

“Are ya mad?”

“Yes.”

The way she was nodding and smiling had Charlie grinning and showing yellow teeth. Probably couldn't say much more than bloody yes. She had him thinking, though, the sort of girl she was to be travelling. She must have some go in her getting out this way. There was an ocean out there to get across. He had only ever jumped across a few towns, without doing much. It had pretty much always been the same bloody place for him. Hadn't known anything else. The thing about getting a mail-order bride had him thinkin' a few years ago.

When he got his head back to the bar, his hand was wrapped around nothing. Without a beer in his hand? He must've been pissed.

He slapped over his pocket for some money. The five dollars left was for his hamburger across the road. Corea was turning away from him, looking to get away. He supposed he was getting bloody hungry anyway. Time for Charlie to go.

He got off his stool and leant against the bar next to Corea. What was he going to say to her before he left? Something bloody stupid, no doubt.

“What about it? I'll give you fifty.”

The smile wasn't so sure. “What you mean?”

He was just stirring. “Come on. You know what I mean.”

“You funny man.”

“Bloody funny.”

Roza called out from behind the bar. “Leave her alone, Charlie.”

He didn't bother facing Roza. He kept his eyes on the cute Korean girl. “Ain't I allowed to talk to her?”

“What are you mumbling about?”

Ignoring Roza, he showed a sad face and leant a bit closer to Corea. “I'm sorry, mate, I'm not even allowed to talk to ya. She's a bit of nasty work, isn't she?”

“What you mean?”

“She bad woman,” he said, trying to get his voice down.

“Why?”

When he looked over to Roza, she had the meanest eye aimed at him. Shit.

“Just don’t listen to him. He’s pissed,” she called over to Corea.

Charlie tightened his lips. Bloody hell. Best for him to ease up on Roza before something was thrown his way. One day he was going to get a root off her—everyone else had. Though for now, Roza had stuffed it for him.

Looked like he was going now. Wouldn’t hurt to ask. “We go now.”

Corea didn’t catch on.

“Ya coming with me?” He brushed through the beard that covered most of the divots in his face. “Time for me to go, I reckon. Go get meself a hamburger across the road. Just got meself enough money to get a hamburger. Fall asleep in the truck, then. You don’t want to have a look at me truck, do ya?”

She shook her head. “Thank you, no.”

“No worries. Enjoy ya orange drink.”

Charlie left it at that, not wanting to bother her anymore. She was going to find a better mate than him tonight. With a bit of luck, she might find somebody half decent. He held himself at the doorway, careful not to trip the step.

“One step after the other, Charlie,” Roza called out.

“See yas all later,” he slurred to nobody. “Charlie’s leavin’, if you want to know. Goodbye, me Korean mate.”

He got the step out of the way and steadied himself outside on the footpath. Outside, he belched, then slouched up against the verandah post. The air was warm and still, not even the swish of a bull’s tail. Nobody was about. What were those kids doin’—gettin’ pissed too? Stupid kids, ya gonna end up like me... Nah, one of a kind, I am. Who knows what will bloody happen to them? They could be on that flamin’ Internet—talkin’ about makin’ bloody bombs. Ya just wouldn’t know these days. People rushin’ about and gettin’

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nothin' done—poor bastards. The kids might do best gettin' stuck out this way. That bloody city is a mad place.

A few streetlights brightened what little there was in the main street, but either way, night or day, there wasn't much to look at in old Elura—bit of a pity. Though out this way most towns were the same—nothing bloody particular about them, some a bit further off the track. But he was born close to the place, so he was probably stayin' close by—a poor bastard, he was. He'd keep coming back. He'd be stayin' long after those chippers had pulled out. No doubt he'd stay for the next bloody drought. Things would have to be real crook for him to move on.

Slouched up against the verandah post, he decided that he could get his truck going and get out in the morning: the truck did a job gettin' him around a bit. He supposed he was even a traveller of some sorts—across the flats, at least. He knew plenty of pubs. Some good pubs, too.

Though sometimes he got away from the drink. He'd park the truck in the scrub for a camp; if he could snare a woman, he needn't come back for a good while—live like a bloody blackfella. He'd come back to town, though. What kind of woman was he gonna snare in the scrub? Anyway... he'd keep turnin' up in town, like a mangy old fox. There were enough places to drink. He was up against the middle pub, his favourite. He'd jump across the street in a minute to get his feed at the café. Two other pubs and the RSL took up nearly all the street's corners. In between were the shops: supermarket, butcher, baker... a couple of agents for those whinging farmers. Throw in a school or two, a couple of wobbly churches down the way, and a few haunts that weren't bothered with anymore, and you pretty much had it. Not much other than that, but for a garage on each side of town to keep the fuel up to anyone comin' or goin'. After that there wasn't so much as a broken fence line.

But when he was growin' up, the town hadn't been a bad place at all—different for him, anyhow. He'd had a bit of fun back then as a young fella, don't worry about that. Hootin' up the main street, with the cops on ya tail. Headin' off to a rodeo to be bucked and bruised through—it was a laugh. Just gettin' out to the river with a box of beer and a couple of mates was a top

thing, drinkin' and swimmin'. He'd had his first root out there—she wasn't too bad, either. What the hell had happened to her? Moved on long ago... Who'd been holdin' back behind a broken fence line for him?

His head rolled back against the post as he took a look up at the stars, wondering how it could all be so pretty up there. The sky was glittering, so bloody pretty. And if he was up there, what would he see? Old Charlie... stuck up against the verandah post.

“Enough of this shit.” He pushed off the post and began to stagger across the street. “No point in feelin' sorry for yaself, old boy.”

He made it across the street and managed the step into Rosita's Café. Then he was against the counter, trying to look a bit sober, though he couldn't help havin' an ogle while her back was turned to him. Isabel already had the hamburger cooking on the griller. She was a real pearl, a real treat, that girl, the way she'd turned out. Pity she hadn't remembered him—you didn't want to remember a night like that.

He'd stumbled across a few things in his droving days. Being pissed brought some things back to him. He'd found them all in that wreck—nearly ten years ago—mucked over in the missus's blood.

Ya never forget somethin' like that. The crash had spooked the cattle from a good mile away. Another car drove away from the accident, passed him as he galloped back on the horse. When he got to the wreck, the howling cry of a blood-soaked little girl was enough to turn his guts. He hadn't seen a death like that before, either. Butchering beasts hadn't prepared him for it. That beautiful woman had really got messed up from the branches—ripped her bloody face apart.

The father and boy hadn't had their safety belts on either and were knocked about too. He had tried to quieten the girl, wipin' off her mother's blood. Her cries didn't leave him, his blood curdled until he was a good mile away as he went for help. The horse just about buckled beneath him, so hard did he ride it that night. He'd sent the ambulance back out and told his bit to the

copper. He told the bloody copper that the cunt driving the other car had to be hunted down.

He reckoned Isabel had put it behind her pretty well. She sure had turned out. The way he was looking across the counter, he was a dirty mongrel for sure, but she was something different altogether, out this way. No freckles and flab like her mates. Good Italian skin, dark and dammed silky waves that fell across her shoulders, tits that had to be grabbed, a tight bum to get behind. She wasn't an empty head, either. If he were a young fella, he'd be gettin' into a lot of trouble with her.

He pinched at his face through his beard—a bloody mongrel, he was.

Further along the counter Tony Vivaldi was washing up—that bloke had lost himself without the missus. Poor fat wog. How did ya end up with a daughter like that? That Rosita must have been somethin' special, all right.

Tony glanced up and caught Charlie's look. Charlie threw back a smile, sensing a protective father. "Come on, big fella. She knows how to cook a hamburger. Old Charlie is harmless enough, ya know that. Always been harmless—ever since I was a young fella. Didn't even fight back when Dad beat me up."

Tony's expression didn't change. Charlie was getting the growl of a heavy dark brow.

"Go on, big fella, stop looking at me like that. Just because I've had a few beers." Charlie looked out the front of the shop. The wog carried a bloody big bucket of a gut with him for sure, but he was as big as a bear, with those blocky shoulders. It didn't take Charlie much effort to see his scrawny arms being ripped off. He had to watch himself.

The vinyl under his feet was about worn down to the boards. The counters were chipped and faded, like the whole joint. He supposed Tony hadn't done a thing to the place since the missus had gone. He supposed Tony was going to miss Isabel when she moved on. They all would.

Isabel looked to Charlie while buttering his hamburger beside the griller. That look from her brown eyes changed Charlie's thinking, made him feel real bloody guilty. Those bloody eyes, if nothin' else. They got inside him,

went straight for the heart. Understanding, perhaps seeing what other people didn't see in him. He reckoned he could fall in love—if a fella like him could feel that way.

“Ya mother would be proud of you,” Charlie let slip in a drunken slur.

“Because I know how to make a hamburger?”

“Yeah—ya might become a champion like ya Dad.”

“I’ll leave that to my brother to work at.”

Her brother, Joey, was as useless as tits on a bull; his brain turned jelly after the accident. Tony had the bad leg. Isabel had come out without a scratch. She was something special, all right. “Yeah—I reckon ya will. You gonna do somethin’ different?”

“I am.”

“Then what are ya gonna do, love?”

She gently bit her lip and began wrapping the hamburger, until a mischievous smile lined her face. “Something different.”

“How about drivin’ a truck?” Charlie kidded.

She placed the hamburger on the counter in front of him. “Nice try. Think again.”

“Mmm...don’t want to get covered in a red cloud of dust, eh?” Charlie called over to Tony. “And what’s this one gonna do when she grows up?”

“She wants to be an artist.”

“An artist.” Charlie stood straight. “Well, I reckon she would be.”

“And how’s that?” Isabel asked.

Charlie rubbed through his beard. “It’s what you should do. . . and I just might be right about it.” Charlie then pointed his finger at Tony. “Mate, if she was mine, I wouldn’t have her here. Get her out of town. Send her back to Italy.”

Isabel leant against the counter and gave Charlie a big wink. “What about paying for the ticket?”