

# *Odd Couple* *Slowing Down* By KT. Downs

Neither driver speaks. It is clear to both of them, that neither is injured, but the chaos strewn along the highway is a lot to take in. It's hard to know what to do next.

Emily is still trying to process what just happened. She's a bit dazed, a bit wobbly. Her Mothers' Day plans are strewn along the low scrub, at the edge of the road somewhere between Eneabba and Badgingarra.

The man standing next to her reeks of alcohol. He has tattoos from wrist to elbow where his arm disappears into a dark blue work shirt. Tall enough to be intimidating.

The morning sun is starting to make itself felt. Soon she'll need shelter. There's no trees in this landscape. Shade for birds and reptiles only. Could she make a shade for herself across the prickly shrubs? How long would she be here? She looks again at the contents of her car along the side of the road.

Emily's new hatchback lies in the bush on its lid. The little bike on the back still has a wheel spinning. She frowns at the smashed windscreen she's just climbed out of.

Tatt's asks, "There isn't a kid in there, *is* there?" He was staring at the slowly turning wheel too.

Emily thinks she might throw up, even to think of her little one in there, swallows it down.

"No. She's at Mum's, in Geraldton. Oh God. What the hell happened?"

"Emu," says the bloke alongside her. "You swerved. It didn't. Rolled it."

"Oh. An emu. Are you ok?"

"Yep. No damage except the bottle of cherry brandy I had wrapped up for Mum."

"Oh."

"Fell off the seat and broke when I braked. You better salvage what you can and then come and sit in the truck. I've rung it in, but with no injuries, Mothers Day, n all, could be a while before they get here."

"Right."

"Bob," tattoos extended.

“Emily.”

He keeps a few steps behind, holds things for her as she retrieves them. The pink Yeti water bottle, a zip-up apricot hoodie. One walking shoe. Her iPhone, pink cover matching the water bottle.

“I wasn’t speeding”, Emily says at some point. “I wasn’t over the speed limit, I mean”.

Bob replies, “Oh well, emus don’t know the limit, do they? Neither does anything else that jumps out. Got to be adjusting all the time, I find.”

She gathers that he does a lot of miles, supposes he must have a lot of horror stories. She accepts the seat in his truck, clutching an armload of rescued things to her chest. Unable to imagine what to say to her Mum. Another hour, two, maybe, before they’ll start to worry.

It’s late afternoon before the flashing blue light pulls up behind Bob’s small truck. Lots of time to think about the big billboards saying “Local Police now targeting: SPEED”. Passed by three of them. Lots of time to think about how virtuous she felt not speeding when other people overtook her in unsafe conditions. Time for the lovely taste of satisfaction when the hoon in the big black Triton, that roared past her on double lines, was on the side of the road being booked when she went past him. She’d flashed her lights going past. Time for that taste to turn bitter. She wasn’t speeding, but it was too fast. Time to feel sick, and sicker, that Ruby Pearl could have been in the car. She thinks about her foot wedging on something hard to push herself up, to get out of the upside-down car, and realizes it was the base of the booster seat. She imagines Ruby Pearl hanging there upside down, being hit by her foot. Wants to sob. Feels her nose running. Pats her pockets. Accepts a tissue from Bob.

Bob keeps finding something else in the wrong place and putting it back where he normally keeps it, on the dash, in the cup holder between the seats, over the back.

He's got a thermos and a lunch box of sandwiches. A bruised banana. A packet of tiny teddies. He offers her a cup of tea.

"Never know where you're going to get stuck, this job" he says.

"No, I guess not."

He offers her a sandwich.

"I don't think I can eat", she says. The tiny teddies, the spinning bike wheel, re-animated with the whoosh of each passing road train.

"Your fault it's bruised," he says, peeling the banana and insisting she take half.

They are drinking tea, from thermos cups, when the patrol car arrives. Two officers step out of the vehicle, approaching them cautiously, with that strange walk from the hip that uniformed people seem to have.

"Right", says the man in uniform. "How did this little picnic come about then? Been drinking, have we? Blow into this until I tell you to stop, please."