

TORCHED

1996 words

At the end of the main street, there is a sharp turn before the long, empty highway. There will be fewer people here and the road adjacent to this spot will be kept open. This spot is the closest a car will be able to get to the runner's route. Lately, I have been standing in this place at dusk, as the asphalt cools like a body in death, dreaming of what I must do today. I am going to steal the Olympic torch.

I have been training. I have a next door neighbour, Kevin, and he has been helping me rehearse scenarios in secret. Compartmentalisation is the key to secrecy. Kevin is only faintly aware of what we're up to. He is 60 kilos soaking wet and he paints little men, but he has become indispensable to the rehearsal process. Stealing an Olympic torch is not easy. If you google it, the new AI overview says "While there have been several attempts and near misses, a successful theft of the torch is rare". In 2012 two youths in England (real pipsqueaks) tried to snatch the torch in Coventry. You can watch it on Youtube and it's dumb as piss. They make a half hearted perpendicular intercept and get their hands on it for exactly five seconds before they're flattened by the cops. In 2000 a 19 year old in Frankston snatched it for a few minutes. In 2016 a lone man burst through the crowd ahead of a security detail in San Paulo, he writhed for a moment in their arms then disappeared out of view. The top comment on the video reads "why the fuck did he think that would work? the torch bearer is literally surrounded with security guards."

In one training scenario, I rush Kevin and tackle him to the ground, wrenching the torch free (we use a cricket bat of equivalent weight). I am proud of Kevin, he has started asserting boundaries around how often we rehearse this because, in his words, "it's cool for you but it sucks shit for me". In another version I am dressed in a high vis vest I got off Temu. I run alongside him and explain that there is something wrong with the torch and I need to check it quickly. Of course as soon as he hands it over I am gone.

To me this is the winning strategy. Stanley Milgram in the Milgram experiment proved that people are, by and large, highly obedient to authority figures and "professionals". It doesn't matter how cool the torch looks, any sane person would have to be a bit worried about it

blowing up. I have done my research. I believe the runner will be the sort of man who would be relieved to know that someone in high vis is checking on the torch to make sure it won't blow up.

The runner's name is Damien MacLachlan. He is a local football hero and cancer survivor who has become low-level Instagram famous by running marathons without shoes on. I watch his posts, bragging about the revolting, inch-thick calluses on his soles. He has created a lifestyle brand around shoelessness, drawing an implied connection between footwear and cancer. He can get away with this because he is handsome. Australia has a practically insatiable appetite for the Damien type of man. If I waddled about the shops barefoot and said that shoes can kill you I would have violence done to me. I would be put in a headlock.

I am waiting in the pub, watching the torch's progress on TV. They explain that, at the beginning of the Olympic cycle, it was lit in Athens itself using a mirror to harness the sun's rays (like when you burn ants). It has toured Oceania, it has flown on planes, in Australia there will be eleven thousand torch bearers before it reaches its final destination. I ask for another glass of coke because I need to stay sharp, Terry nods and forces a smile.

Most fortnights on a Friday the pub runs Trivia. The prize is a meat raffle, usually pork and fennel sausages, a pair of porterhouse steaks, 500g of beef mince, 4 kangaroo tenderloins and a few chicken kievs. Terry is pissy with me because I win almost every week. Because of this, the pool of contestants is thinning out and they have started giving me a 5 point handicap. We don't prize intelligence in this country. We make our finest minds grill their meats alone. It feels good though, living off my wits. If I win the raffle I can make the meat last the fortnight. That's my 'lifestyle brand'.

I usually eat my meat sitting at a dappled glass table with black metal legs. I smoke and watch the sky shift over the backyard. The yellowed grass is tall where the mower can't reach. There are things on the ground I have dropped, one time or another, that I will never pick up again. I let them bleach in the sun. Sometimes the sky is open and searing, over 40 degrees celsius for days on end, so hot your eyes feel bain-marie warm in your skull. Sometimes the clouds coalesce, bruise and deepen into lashes of indigo rain and you can smell that somewhere, the grass is still alive.

Last night, after one of those blinding days, I sat and watched the stars. As a young man I had thoughts when I looked at the heavens. Thoughts that felt like something precious surfacing in a calm pool of water. I thought about how there was nothing more tenuous than air between the top of my head and the infinity of space. I thought about the constellations and what it meant to see the light from something that might be long dead. Now, when I look up, I see the space between the stars and I think about stealing the Olympic torch.

It is getting closer now. On the TV, Damien is jogging over the dusty highway astride a motorcade. He is brimming with self satisfaction. His feet are mercifully out of shot but I just know they're nude. I get up and head to the toilets down the hall.

Kevin and I share a glance. He is over by the pokies playing Big Buck Hunter with an off putting intensity. In the brevity of a look I try to say- *Steady Kev. We are so close now.*

In the toilets I reach back behind the cistern and stuff a note between two pipes. It reads:

Corner of Kelly and Mitchell, 12:45 sharp. Keep the engine running. Don't look like you're in a hurry.

At the bar I settle up and leave Terry a tip.

Out on the street the air is light and warm. Low clouds scud across the sky like gunsmoke. Crowds are gathering along the main street. Synthetic Australian flags are selling for \$5 a pop, I can't imagine what the Bangladeshi children who make them are earning. I spy a marquee where official types are marshalling. The Mayor is out and about in his big rural hat and a suit that fits like those toddler wedding tuxedos. I mill around the edges of the throng in my vest.

I don't have anything against the Olympics as a concept. People should be able to do what they like. Kevin cops a lot of judgement for painting his little men, goblins and such, and it has hurt his dating prospects which I think is wrong. He has shown a passion for something and a will to improve. What I object to, I think, is what we choose to light a torch for and who we choose to celebrate these days. Where are the outcasts and misfits? The mavericks and

lunatics? Certain sports must have been started by total freaks back when freaks were afforded respect.

A freak came up with pole vaulting and I will not hear otherwise. You'll never learn his name, that mad greek with a stick, but he deserves to be remembered and revered more than the private school athletes who vault now like it's the most normal thing in the world. By stealing the torch I am reclaiming something for a demographic of people who have been pressure washed out of public life. We are ugly and our talents are annoying. We are coming for your torch.

Damien rounds the corner, his head bobbing over the surface of the crowd, the flame smouldering high. I can already feel it will be hard to step out onto the road. History has a forcefield, a dense membrane of air that stops most people from entering its veins. The time is 12:43.

I spill from the crowd into a light, organized jog. In every attempt I've seen or read about, it is these opening seconds that decide the outcome. Security are waiting for sudden movements, for youths and hoodies and lefties and nut jobs.

Damien is taller in person. His neck sparkles with sweat. We are running together and, for a moment, I am so relieved to be alive that I don't hate him any more. In a way I love him. We are running together like brothers, like father and son. He looks at me, a cultivated smile that says he could do this all day. Through gasps I tell him "I need to check the torch gas". The cheers are drowning me out. I am pawing for the torch. I am willing it into my hand. If I snatch it, security will smother me with their enormous fascist bodies and I will become national loser of the week.

Damien looks at me again, this look is quizzical, *you're still here?* "I need to check the torch, the gas" there is a cold tightening in my airways, mucus and the tear of a stitch across my abdomen. He hesitates but then I feel the pre warmed metal fill my grip, the glow of flame heat on my cheek. At the corner of Kelly and Mitchell a mid 2000s silver Toyota Camry is waiting.

I look over the torch with concerned brows. I can feel Damien is keen to get it back. The motorcade speeds up, ever so slightly. I see my opening. I peel off and charge, leveling the torch like a lance. The locals leap from the flame, they scatter. There is much shouting.

I make for the Camry but something is wrong. No Kevin. I throw open the driver's side door and take the wheel. As planned, the engine is running. The first officer thuds against the door, pounding on the laminated glass. I wind the wheel tight and pump the gas, lurching away till I am pointed to the pot-holed road out west.

The needle tops out at 140 kmph and the Camry sounds like a wounded animal. On the sun visor Kevin has left a little yellow sticky note that reads:

Sorry, good luck.

Kevin's mum's car is a fair price for his betrayal. I knew his heart was never really in it.

A few heroes from the motorcade are giving chase, swelling and multiplying in the rear view mirror.

Faintly at first and then all at once I become aware that the car is on fire. That the torch is burning a hole in the passenger seat. Acrid, black smoke curls against the windshield and billows from the open windows.

A few lungfuls and I can feel consciousness thinning. Passing under me and away from me like a blur of road. Thoughts zip and stray. Carl Benz invented the automobile in 1885. Drive was written and performed by The Cars on their 1984 album Heartbeat City. The land speed record is 1277.986 kmph, set by Andy Green in the Black Rock Desert. I am winning, I am holding the lead. The stars are going out. I can smell meat on the grill.