Are We There Yet?

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"Are we there yet?" the twins whine in unison from the back seat of the 1972 Land Rover Defender as the Creedon family rumbles along the Barkly Highway. The mother switches on the radio and the twins drift off to the sound of Michael Jackson singing 'Human Nature'.

The mother soon dozes off and the father grips the worn, peeling leather of the steering wheel as he too struggles to stay vigilant. He sits up straight in his seat, grabbing a black paper coffee cup from the cup holder and sips from it. Shadows encircling the car dance in the beams of bright headlights, guiding them along the seemingly endless bitumen that spans out in front of them. The father's eyelids start to feel heavy. His eyes close as he drifts off. But suddenly, as if some mysterious force is protecting them, the car rumbles, jolting him awake. The car groans to a stop. Steam erupts into the cold night air, surrounding the bonnet of the station wagon. The mother awakens as the father battles to push open the door and he steps drowsily out of the vehicle. He walks to the bonnet and hauls it up, using the remainder of his strength. Peering through the steam, he spots the problem. "We're not getting to Mt Isa anytime soon," he mutters under his breath.

The mother stares out along the dark desolate plains that seem to stretch on forever. It has been an hour since her husband had started his wearisome trek back to Tennant Creek, a town about 30 km down the highway. She listens closely to the radio as she huddles herself against the seat, gripping all the bravery left in her. A voice breaks through the static of the radio with an emergency broadcast: "Two dangerous men have recently broken out of Tennant Creek prison. We advise all people in the surrounding area to take caution," the radio host announces in a distinct news anchor voice. She reaches up and switches off the radio; the silence was deafening. She looks back at her two young sons sleeping peacefully in the back seat. She turns back to the window and stares out into the darkness.

Shadows loom around the small vehicle, wrapping the mother in a chilling darkness. As the darkness surrounds her, her whereabouts become clearer with the bright light of the full moon illuminating the desert. She notices small things. Tufts of grass sheltering small animals like potoroos and wallabies, which gives her an odd sense of calmness. Finally, she starts to relax. She looks out to the beauty that surrounds her. She leans back into the warm leather seats, the chirping of crickets and howls of the dingoes accompanying her as she drifts off to sleep.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Fists pounding the window hopelessly. The mother freezes with fear as she sees the two men in torn orange jumpsuits standing outside her car. “Mrs, could ya help us please? We need a bandage!” one shouts with desperation.

She breaks out of her trance and opens the glove box, pulling out a first aid kit, her hands trembling with nervousness. She fumbles to get the door open and steps out, staring at the thick dark blood running down one man’s leg. He pulls up his trouser and she sees it. The cavity created by the fast rip of a bullet. She looks back into her glove box and pulls out a long torch, shining it into the wound. She unzips the kit and pulls out a pair of thin, long tweezers. Slowly, she pushes the tweezers into the gash as the man grips her shoulder in pain. She strikes something hard with the tweezers and grips onto it.

As carefully as possible, she dislodges the bullet and pulls it out of the man’s leg. He grimaces as the woman wraps a bandage tightly around the wound. “Thank you,” the man says and then, just as quick as they came, they were gone. She gets back into her car and sits back still shaking. She switches on the radio and tries to quieten her racing thoughts and calm her beating heart.

BANG! BANG! BANG! Loud knocking on the thin glass breaks through the music. She freezes. Could it be them again? Terrified, she slowly slides down to the floor of the car and clenches her teeth tightly. Two men circle the car, flashlight in hands, while the mother slowly and cautiously opens the glove box in front of her. She reaches inside and glides her hand across the contents, stopping on the item she was looking for. She grips the handle and pulls out the weapon, careful not to fire it in her hands. She pulls the gun to her chest, gripping onto it as if it were one of her sons, hanging off a cliff.

Once again, the men bang on the window three times, sending another jolt of fear down her spine. A beam of light illuminates one man’s face. Although covered in thick red dust, he almost looks familiar. She slowly pulls herself up, just enough to get a better view of the two men. Then one of them pleads, “Margaret, are you in there?” Confusion and relief wrap around the woman as she drops the gun and fully rises from her seat. She gets out of the car and runs around the side to leap into her husband’s warm embrace.

Alongside him stands a man in dark blue overalls, holding a toolbox. “He’s a mechanic,” the husband explains. He’d picked him up about 15 km down the highway and they’d both driven back to the car.

The mechanic proceeds to open the bonnet and looks around inside. “Ahh, you’ve just got a leak in your radiator,” he says as if they should have been able to fix the issue easily themselves.

Before long, they are gratefully back on the road. The woman ponders whether to share the earlier events of the night with her husband. She looks out the window. Out of the corner of her eye, she swears she sees two orange jumpsuits running across the plains. She spins in her seat and peers out into the darkness. They are gone. A figment of her imagination. The man switches on the radio and hears the same radio host announcing the late-night news. The two escapees are still at large. One is believed to have been wounded. Anyone with any information is encouraged to call Crimestoppers.

The twins awaken from their dream state, sleepily asking in unison, “Mum, are we there yet?”