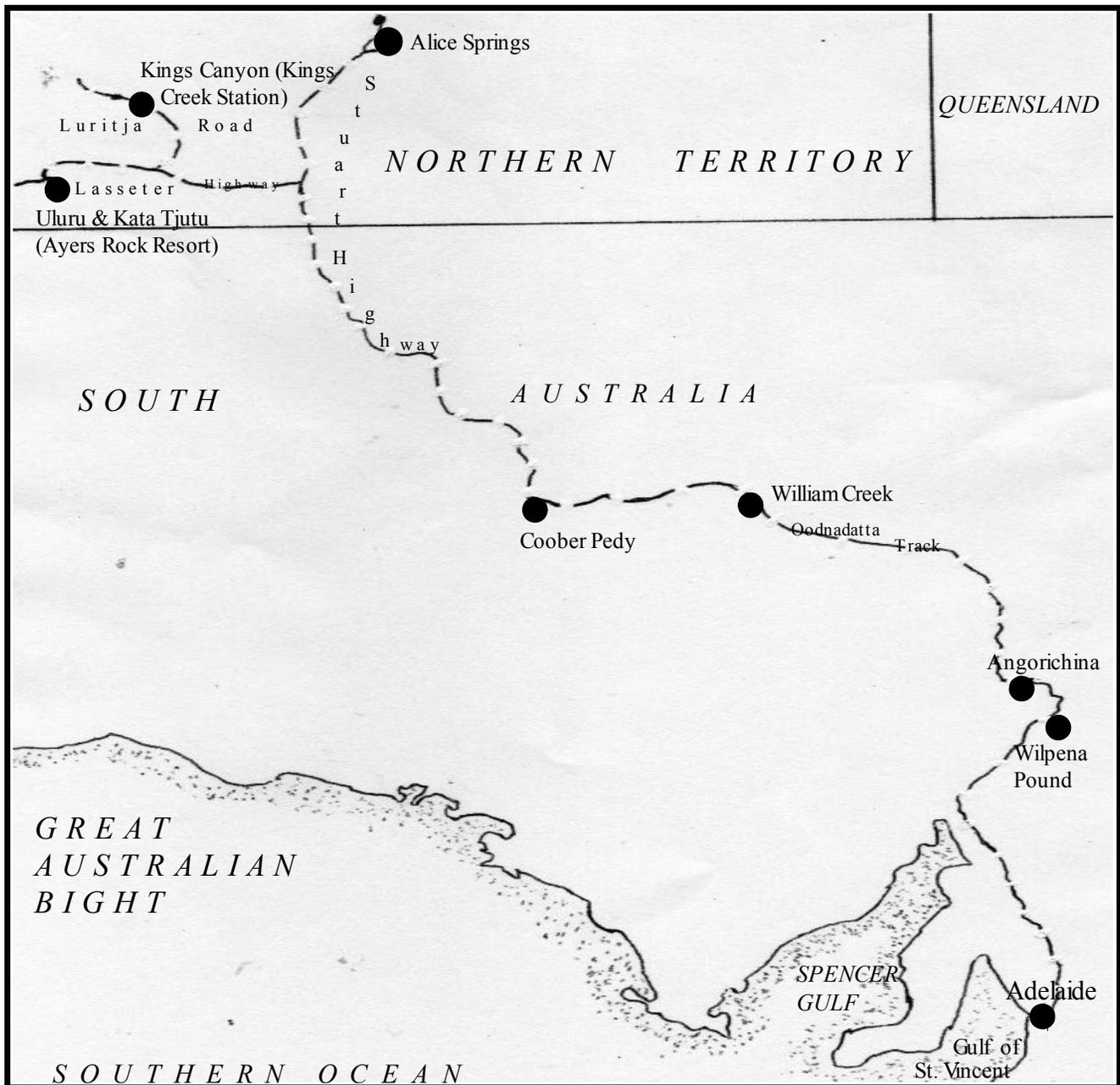


—CAPÍTULO SIETE: A WAYWARD BUSFULL FACES THE OUTBACK—



“Dad, ¿Donde Va? Where are you going?” Katarena fairly screamed at me as I wandered toward Todd Mall, holding my Smart Café Mug full of pressed coffee. *“This is where we will be picked up. Don't you remember Gloria telling us yesterday that the stop is right here on Parson Street?”*

“You should know me well enough by now, Katarena, that I always investigate other possibilities.” I calmly replied.

“Uh, she's right.” intoned Enrique. “The receptionist was very clear yesterday that this is the stop. I feel the instructions were without question, and you are obsessed with this looking around.”

“Yeah, Dad. Don't spoil this by making us miss the beginning of my fifteenth birthday present! Besides other people are waiting here, too.”

“*Mira*, I was just...” when the bright headlights of a minibus showed that I was, once again, wandering too far as the bus parked precisely in front of them. I stiffly walked across the road and was last to clamber in.

It was an eerie quiet in the dark as the seven of us sat separately on well-cushioned bench seats while the driver deftly snaked around a few streets. He stopped beside a small building that was signposted “WAYWARD BUS”

[www.waywardbus.com.au] on George Crescent Circle, which we had noticed while exploring Alice Springs yesterday.

“G'on inside. I need to get this looked after afore we go anywhere. Its a long trip, youse know.” he told us as he pointed to the door.

Inside was a lopsided queue of lively young people, although it seems as though *I* didn't fit in—*everybody* I saw now appeared young! I didn't have to figure this slowly advancing mass out—the line was to pay for camping gear, and a fuel surcharge. When it was my turn, I didn't particularly object much to the \$8AUD/\$5.91USD per night per person for the swag and sleeping bag, which came to \$193AUD/\$141.89USD for the outing.

“Dad!” shrieked Katarena. “Are you all right?”

She had seen me redden and nearly choke on the next tab: \$150AUD/\$110.85 per person fuel surcharge, or a whopping \$450AUD/\$332.55USD.

Swallowing several litres of air, I recomposed myself, and, reminiscent of when we sat with Mark back at the YHA Tour Office in Melbourne or at Reef Magic in Cairns, I aspirated, “Happy Birthday, Katarena!”

“Do you remember the last time we saw that face?” Enrique mentioned to Katarena. “Every time he hands over that VISA charge card...”

“Yeah, Enrique,” she cut him off, “but this time it is my birthday present and *he* was the one who wanted us to dive with Reef Magic. And you know his philosophy to save wherever possible, but spend when needed. You've got to admit, we are pretty economical, always staying in hostels, buying in grocery stores, traveling by mass transit.”

“OK you two,” I said to Katarena and Enrique, “this'll have to do. We'll see and do a huge amount over the next eight days 'till Adelaide. Go ahead and find a sleeping bag and wait for boarding instructions.”

We didn't have to wait long.

“G'day. All youse goin' to Uluru, the official Aboriginal name, or if youse're goin' to Ayer's Rock, the former name, but both are one an' the same, it's quite a few stobbies to go, so use the dunny first. Let's get out the door to the caravan. Bring youse dilly bags with youse.” announced a cleanly-shaved, slightly paunchy man dressed in jeans, t-shirt, with a beaten red bandana around his neck who appeared to be about my age and height.

I knew the wisdom of his words—many were the times that I've given similar instructions (I've never heard stobbies used that way, but inferred it meant a long way) before I began the day's journey. As could be expected, there was only one water closet available, but that gave me, a male, a certain advantage. I found a discrete location outside to relieve my own aching bladder while examining the

bumper of a van in the repair yard. I doubt it rusts because of the minuscule amount of moisture I left on it.

At the same place on George Crescent where we had been discharged an hour before was parked this exceptionally clean, white mini-bus, the same that had picked us up from the hostel. This was the first time that I had the opportunity to see this vehicle in the light of day and wasn't surprised that it was a Toyota.

"There you go!" I said to Katarena and Enrique. "Same as the FourRunner, [www.toyota.com] even the same color!"

"Dad, even though they are both by Toyota, it is *not* the same! This is a much larger vehicle, and *clean!*" Katarena corrected me, with emphasis on certain attributes. "I'll bet it even *smells* better!"

"She's got you there," Enrique added. "This is a mini-bus with colorful identification signs, not painted your Hayburg White with garish, mismatched colors you spray painted to cover up scratches and gouges."

"Hey!" I defended my Toyota, "That Four-runner got us all over the lower forty-eight, Mexico, Canada, and Alaska. Don't you go knocking it. In fact, I'm not surprised to see Toyota being used here— it is such a reliable vehicle!"



The only way to travel! (www.waywardbus.com.au)

Going back to the door on the left side of the van, the driver with a red bandana around his neck continued, "Now let me 'ave a look at youse tickets. We're goin' just down the road, to Uluru, but not all

of youse are finishin' the trip in Adelaide. I need an accurate count, but youse can sit anywhere. Onya, let's load up an' get underway."

I smiled, knowing that it wasn't quite as close as he implied. I had read in Bill Bryson's book, In a Sunburned Country, that Uluru (Ayer's Rock) was actually quite far from Alice.

Some in our group were ahead of the ball, and had started to put their bags in a clean, white trailer hitched to the rear of our bus.

"Look, mates, don't just throw youse stuff in any old way. Food an' fixins' at this end, swags in first, then youse billy bags on top once all the swags are in. Let's be smart about it now so its easier later. Youse'll see." he spoke like the seasoned veteran he is. "I'll tell youse more while drivin'."

Katarena and Enrique took a seat across from the door, but I saw that the passenger seat in front was vacant and knew my place. The oldest would sit up front, while youngsters filled the rest of the bus.

"Youse may not know each other now," the driver spoke into his microphone when he settled in behind the steering wheel, "but I expect all of youse will do so within the few hours it takes to get there. First, names—I'll learn youse soon enough, but I'm Gangles, your Australian Tourism Operators Association certified guide."

Quiet talk (except for one voice that was several decibels higher) filled the bus, all of it in English, albeit the accents aired from a clipped, very proper English of the Mother Country to lovely Irish lilt to second language English to the inquisitive Australian roll to flat Far West Texas tongue. I said nothing, except to the driver, "Is this seat available?" as I pointed to the shotgun position as I entered the bus.

"Looks like it to me, unless someone is invisible." he said curtly.

Clambering over the transom into a comfortable bucket seat, I buckled the seat belt. Gangles smiled appreciatively when I mentioned, "This is my throne back in the states."

"Right, mate. Just don't think you're driving—that's my job!" came the friendly response.

"Just as well. I paid the rest of my arms and legs for this journey a half hour ago." I replied. "However, I do have a lot of experience driving. I drove a school bus in the early eighties while pursuing my undergraduate degree, should you ever..."

"Nigh, mate," he cut me off. "Like you said, Wayward Bus an' my service aren't cheap, an' I'll deliver. Besides, there have been lots of complaints, even deaths, about youse people comin' here and drivin' on the wrong side of the road. Despite your experience, can't risk it, an' its illegal. You understan'?"

"Sure, no *problemo*. Drive on, *Jaime*." I said with a smile. "By my count, there are seven females—my daughter Katarena has to be the youngest at fifteen— and nine males, me being the oldest at the half-century mark, with only one vacant seat, directly behind me, though others have only one person on them."

"Thanks. We're about the same age. What's your name, anyway?" he asked.

"Juanito." I replied. "As you've already heard, my daughter's name is Katarena, and my son's name is Enrique."

"Youse their oldie? She does look a lot like you, and he's the tall one, right?" Gangles asked.

"*Sí*. Yes. It's hard to believe that they both used to so small..." I said, somewhat wistfully as if seeing a glorious Sunset that is inevitably followed by the darkness of night.

"Believe it, Juanito. Me own daughter's nineteen and livin' on her own now. They do grow up fast. 'scuse me, but right now I need to tell everybody where we're goin'."

Adjusting the microphone, he began to speak, but nothing came out except unintelligible electric sawing. He quickly hung it back up and boomed out, "OK, no worries. This didn't get fixed, so I'll speak up. Everybody hear me alright?"

"Yeah!" came a slew of high- and low-pitched voices from around the buses interior.

"First," he said, "A bit about Wayward Bus Tours. In nineteen ninety-four or so, the founder,

Ralph Jackson, traveled the Great Ocean Road an' took on some other young travelers—like most of youse! A used VW Combi van with a split windscreen was the vehicle of choice, an' got them all around on their own schedule. It was a huge success, but now we use these Toyota Coasters—no more split screens, but plenty of viewing, quite reliable. Unfortunately, that first Combi van was vandalized by delinquents within the past two years. Ralph took the company name from one of John Steinbeck's books. We are an independent—that's the key word—company, not part of any organization.”

I looked behind me an saw several people recognize the author's name, John Steinbeck, but not the title. Gangles continued his commentary.

“So we're now leaving Alice Springs, second largest city in the Northern Territory. If youse want the truth, it is also the last city up here, because the largest, and capital, is Darwin. Youse probably heard this part of Australia called the Top End, especially if youse took one of our tours to Kakadu National Park out of Darwin. This is the Face the Outback tour, which begins here an' concludes eight days later in Adelaide. We're goin' to spend our first three nights campin' in the Outback, also called the Red Centre or Never Never, visitin' Uluru, previously known as Ayer's Rock, *the* outback symbol, an' other features. One person'll join us at tonight's camp, an' some of youse are goin' to leave us after Uluru. From there, we'll go to Coober Pedy for some Opal mining an' sleepin' underground. If our timin's good, we'll visit 'Crocodile Harry', the original Crocodile Dundee. We'll swag again at William Creek, then we may also see water in Lake Eyre, the lowest point in Australia at twelve metres (39 feet) below sea level. Most of the roads are sealed, though a few, such as the Oodnadatta Track are not. Not too worry, we're in a well-practiced Toyota Coaster. There's plenty of wildlife, particularly camels an' 'roos an' birds an' snakes. I'll let youse know about getting your cameras ready. Talc Alf may be in, we'll see the largest mine in Australia, an' bunk in Angorichina. Then we're swagin' again at Wilpena Pound in the Flinders' Ranges, an' sample fine wine before finishin' in Adelaide. Make yourself comfortable, though we'll be takin' breaks every coupla' hours an' some good hiking, too. Shout out if youse have any questions.”

Gangles had turned left on Larapinta Drive and was about to turn right onto the Stuart Highway when he swerved and hissed: “Bloody fool on a mobile!”

I saw that most important Down Under driving symbol of frustration and consternation as Gangles contorted his face into an a silent angry question mark while he deeply shrugged his shoulders with his hands palm-side up at the driver of a dark-red Toyota Kluger.

“Brand new car like that, an' they don't know how to drive! 'specially while chatting away on a phone! Not worth a zack—oughtta' be illegal!” he muttered.

“No offense to you, Juanito, but those plates mean it's a rental an' I'll bet they're from youse country. That's why youse won't do any drivin' in my place, regardless of youse experience. Just too easy to forget which side of the road youse're on.”

“Well, Gangles, like you said earlier, I've paid handsomely for you to keep the wheel.” I continued, “That Toyota looks exactly like a Highlander back in the states, which I've been looking to replace my FourRunner with. Ever since we got a bargain price on a used Camry from my in-laws, we found that it easily handled multiple trips across the lower forty-eight *and* the one time the timing belt went out, it only cost a hundred and fifty dollars to fix. We didn't have to buy a whole new engine because of non-interference. One of my brothers-in-law had complained that when the timing belt went out on his van, a Detroit product, it cost him nine-hundred dollars for a new engine. So now I'm a committed Toyota man, and have bought both—a FourRunner for me in 'ninety-three, a Corolla for my wife in 'ninety-six when she gained paid employment with the Clint school district, twenty miles—thirty-two clicks—East of our home, from a really good local dealer, Hoy-Fox. It makes all the difference when you can get a reliable vehicle from a quality source.”

“Right you are about that, mate.” he confirmed my monologue with a slight grin. “This Coaster [www.toyota.com.au] has over four hundred thousand miles on it, an' never a problem with it. It gets rough treatment out on tours, but is strictly maintained as soon it comes in.”

Now speaking much louder, he announced “The primary road we're takin' is called the Stuart Highway, named for John Stuart, a Scottish explorer, who established this track in 1862. We locals call it 'The Track' an' sometimes the 'Explorer Highway', which is what we're doin'. This is smooth compared to what were going to be on in a bit. Our first stop is Rainbow Valley, just a bit off the road. At the turn-off, we'll find a place to leave our trailer before going on a rougher track. We have to go fast over the corduroy road, so we can 'float' over the bumps, an' youse may want to put on seatbelts for it.”

Within an hour, we turned East, just as he said, then South into a brushy field. It was as desolate as back home, with scrub trees and sparse grass. Circling around, I recognized the reason: here is where we would detach the trailer and make our dash into Rainbow Valley. Gangles had barely stopped the Coaster when I was already pulling myself over the transom to get out.

“I'm extremely familiar with this process,” I mentioned to Gangles, “A lot of times I pull a family heirloom, an open trailer, behind my FourRunner for Scouts or a dump-run or some other bulky reason. I'm very used to blocking the wheels and pulling the hitchpin. However, I think I'll just supervise for now—I had my knee worked on last year, and it's still not entirely right!”

“That's OK, Juanito.” he replied. “Plenty of younger people aboard who can do the heavy work. But youse'll have to be the assistant to the supervisor—me.”

It was easier said than done.

“You're just going to leave it here?!” I queried Gangles.

“Yeah. Nobody comes out here to *take* anything, but to *leave* stuff, usually because it is too much trouble in the desert.”

Shouting out loud, “Here's the tricky part I told youse about earlier. There are seat belts if youse want, but hang on. It's a bit green, an' we may hit some water or mudholes, so we gotta' have speed.”

Within a half-hour, we had indeed sloshed through a mostly rutted dirt path, and came to rest in a parking area. Between us and a weathered extrusion of rock was an outhouse, obviously placed by someone who knew priorities to travelers! A bit beyond was a viewing platform, where Gangles had already positioned himself.

“If youse'll come over 'ere, youse can see a bit of reflection from the recent rain. We are in a part of the Simpson Desert, more of which we'll see on the Oodnadatta Track. Our timin's not so good as to catch this with the Sun just right, but at least youse can see a rarity—ponded water. You can walk on around a bit, if youse want.”

He was obviously speaking to everyone but me. I was slowly approaching the viewing stand when some of our group was already traipsing along a beaten path. Almost everyone had a camera, the viewfinder held close to their eyes, ready to snap the most memorable photo of the jagged red-and-white colored extrusion and its reflection in a smooth liquid mirror. Katarena and Enrique were in that photo bunch, but I was satisfied with just seeing it from the overlook, as was Gangles, who has undoubtedly seen this a multitude of times while a tour guide. Within an hour, we were back on the Stuart Highway, after performing a near-perfect flipside to when we had left this fine sealed road in the bright Sunlight.

“Doesn't look too much different from where we live in the 'States, Gangles.” I said, after a short doze.

“Yeah?” he replied.

“We're from El Paso, where the USA and United States of Mexico meet, the junction of three states: Texas, New Mexico, and old Mexico, in the Northern Chihuahua Desert.”

“Yeah.” came his quiet response. “I've heard of the town but not the desert.”

I was amazed. “You have?”

“Yeah.” he elaborated. “Right famous song there by Marty Robbins about Rosa's Cantina.”

“Sure enough!” I continued, “Well, that is another facet to our 'Hidden Gem of the World'. Actually, the similarity I was thinking is the deserts—both are arid with lots of scrub. And the roads

look the same in the distance, as if water is all over the road.”

“Yeah, mirage's must be the same all over.” he commented.

“Say, I haven't seen a road train nor a speed sign yet. Most everything that seems to make the news from here is the Great Barrier Reef, Ayer's Rock, the Sydney Bay Bridge, the Sydney Olympics, the Crocodile Hunter, Crocodile Dundee, and the road trains. And what I saw on the map, this is the only North-South Road.” Then I asked, “I'd think there be a whole lot more traffic out here. Why isn't there more?”

“Can't say 'bout the trains or anything else not out here. But I can tell youse that Sydney is way overblown, and the tractors can't pull more than three wagons now. They did use to be real long, but their length was a problem. Did you visit the National Transport Hall of Fame back in Alice?”

I shook my head “no” and mentally added it to my list of reasons for returning.

“Well, now youse have to look for them on postcards. Still,” he paused for a moment, “I think the problems are drink drivers an' foreigners who don't know left-hand drivin'.”

“I agree with at least fifty percent of you statement— boozing and behind the wheel don't mix, Gangles.” I said, not ready to admit that I might be challenged with driving a motor car Down Under.

“See the bend in the road ahead?” he asked me. “That's where a Ferrari driven by a couple of Japanese blokes plowed into a check station durin' the last Canon Ball Run here a few years ago. That was the bingle that started more talk about havin' a speed limit on this road. 'course the problem with a speed limit is that goin' to slow out here puts drivers to sleep.”

“You speak the truth,” I heartedly concurred, “there's nothing worse than coming up on a vehicle going too slow. Several years ago, my family and I were in our FourRunner going East on Interstate Twenty after Sunset. We were probably going about seventy miles an hour—over a hundred and ten kilometers per hour—when I came upon a dumptruck lumbering along at half that rate. What really made it dangerous was that there were no tailights on it and it was pitch black out. Fortunately, I was able to swerve into the other lane at the last minute. We were all scared, and the roadway had gotten so full of troughs left by trucks like that, that we got off the road at the next exit and took a back road North.”

Now he was nodding his head in agreement, “Speaking of trucks, that's a Road Train were goin' to pass. Can yo see how I know?”

Somewhat indignantly, I replied, “Obviously. In the 'States, those signs would read 'Wide Load' instead of 'Road Train'.”

He picked up the CB microphone and spoke into it. “Southbound Train, this is Wayward. I'll be passin' your right here. How's it look?”

“Go up, mate. Ta for the call, good bloke. G'day.” squawked a gruff reply that came out of a speaker in the dash.

“We're turning on the Lasseter Highway,” Gangles boomed out after two hours, “named for an Aussie who claimed to have found a reef of gold out here in 1929. He died while exploring his big find two years later. His body was brought out and buried in Alice. We'll be stoppin' soon at the Mount Ebenezer Roadhouse for lunch an' a lookabout. It's owned by the Imanpa Aborigines, an' they are artists with a gallery inside. I need to warn youse, though, don't take pictures here, especially of the Imanpa. Its disrespectful without permission, an' they feel like youse are takin' their souls away. 'course, they might allow youse to photograph them next to their artwork if youse buy it. If youse do want to buy any, hold up, because I can stop here in two days, on our way back to the Stuart Highway. Youse'll find most anything, but don't be thinkin' about alcohol—yet.”

Enrique made a bee line for the only computer, continuing his habit of always updating back home. I was a bit annoyed by it, until I realized that we hadn't yet figured out our accommodation in Adelaide, which was sure to be at the AYH. Enrique took care of it *muy pronto*.

Though the various tribal pieces in the adjacent gallery were rather impressive, I was most struck by their common-sense notion of photography, art, and money. Of the many artists (starving or

otherwise) I've spoken with, they *always* put their life into their work. Obviously, not being compensated for the work in which they've committed a piece of themselves is a form of theft, a "takin' of their souls", only partially made up for the sale price. I guess the more expensive the piece, the more life-force used up—or vice versa.

Unfortunately, no one took advantage of supporting displaced lives, now or later, only maintaining our own bodies. We wanted to get to the reason for our being out here in the first place. We stayed long enough to eat a basic lunch, consisting of processed meats, cheese, mayo, mustard, white bread, lettuce and fruit.

"This is it, mates. Dig in." Greg showed what he had laid out on a picnic table. "For the four of us who are vegetarians, youse can skip the meat and have some extra cheese and fruit. Just get in a line an' make youse own. Afterwards, everybody must clean up their own plate, an' help with anythin' communal."

It was the cleanup that made me a bit queasy, and I was certain the toilet would see much use tonight. Palmolive dish soap is excellent for washing plates, utensils, and all, but the rinse was merely cold water. Maybe this is the antipodean answer, cold water kills the microbes and bacteria instead of hot?

"LOOK!" rang out the exceptionally loud voice, **"THERE IT IS!"**

Suddenly, the Coaster dangerously listed. Was that because half our group rushed across the narrow aisle to the portside to see it? Or because Gangles had turned right off the highway onto another paved road? Or was it a flat tyre? Or worse? Maybe all those conditions caused it? I was glad to have my seat belt on.

Katarena, displaying her superb acuity as always, spoke up, "The sign says 'Mount Connor Overlook' and nothing about Uluru."

Enrique quickly followed with, "This is just like back home, you can't tell exactly what you see at a distance."

I glanced over at Gangles, who had brought the Coaster to lurching stop and was grinning at me. "Youse kids have a full quid there, Juanito!" he said to me privately, then loudly to everybody else, "The Hayburgs have it straight. We're goin' to stop here and have a squizz at 'Mount Fooluru', so named 'cause, as youse already know, it takes a long time to get out here. This is the first lookie-see of what's to come, and they could all be part of the same. Anyways, this is actually Mount Connor, named for a politico in eighteen seventy-three for helpin' white people settle out here. Same thin' happened around the world—the Aborigines who already live here were ignored, as was their name for it—Atila. It's also called Mount Toothbrush, which youse could see if we went close that it's more oval, not rounded. Now that youse are all deflated, the real one's tomorrow."

Continuing along in the bright day, Gangles was intently scanning the road and scrubland around us. Besides this constant demonstration of superior driving skills, he was obviously searching for something. He gave the silent command of **PAY ATTENTION!** as he slowed the Coaster and eased it off the road, stopping it next to several downed trees, some still partially buried by the granular red topping that characterizes this area.

"Now, mates, scavenge as much dead wood as youse can for our campfire." he said, then nonchalantly added, "Could be a snake or two hidden underneath."

Knowing full well Australia's reputation for having some of the most poisonous snakes on earth, all of us timidly approached the scraggly trunks, carefully watching out for anything coiled or slithering. Of course, all the dead limbs looked exactly like camouflaged serpents, hence our increased hesitation.

That was until a grinning Gangles role modeled collecting the timber by confidently grabbing whole logs and flinging them on top of the trailer. Despite the fact that this is the ideal environment for snakes to make their dens, we realized that his talk of "hidden snakes" might be a tad overblown, we

scattered about, bringing back multiple gnarled deadwood branches. Hoisting himself to the top of the trailer, he began to arrange the crooked wood we handed him into a stable load.

“This should be enough.” he said, tying one end of a long rope to the toprail. Flinging it high over the pile to me, I looped it around the opposite toprail before throwing it back.

“I’m quite familiar with this, too.” I shared. “I often load my trailer back home in the same way, usually with more palm tree fronds above than inside.” Was I trying to identify more with Gangles than with the group? I didn’t mind the distinction—I *am* the ‘old man’ here!

“I’ll just tie it down, then we’ll be off.” he told us.

Seeing my questioning eyes, he initiated our conversation. “This wood’s free to anybody who wants it. No restrictions here about fires ‘cept in the cities—or where too many people live in the bush.” I remembered that was very nearly the same thing Nez had told us about the fire in Kakadu a few days ago.

Back on the road heading into the Sun, Gangles said to all “We have one more stop before camp tonight, at the Curtin Roadhouse. What youse’ll find most interestin’ is that this is the last place youse’ll get cheap beer. Youse can get it from a store close to where we’re stayin’ tonight, but it’ll cost youse.”

Gangle’s words were gospel in the Coaster, and many of our group (primarily the males) were sure to stock up on cases of Aussie brew.

“Gangles, open up the trailer so we can put these in the esky” the loud one yelled as he carried two cases of Tooheys New, followed by others carrying greater quantities of Victoria Bitter.

“Stuffin’s, mates,” he replied, “I guess you really worked up a thirst earlier. There’s not enough room in the trailer. Youse’ll have to take most of it on board with youse. We’ll be a regular booze bus! Fortunately, we don’t have far to go now.”

It had been a quick stop, for one reason only, and not enough time for Enrique to take over the computer.

Driving West, Gangles announced: “As we get closer to Kata Tjuta, any of youse can tell me what it looks like. I’ll give you a hint—its a right famous cartoon here, but it comes from America.”

I felt an undue pressure upon hearing “...it comes from America.” That tagline immediately qualified me to know anything and everything about our great country, which, of course, I don’t.

Sitting directly behind the windshield, I would have the first opportunity, although it would be a nanosecond before anybody else, to see and identify the physical feature. When I saw it, I knew. But I kept it to myself, giving others the opportunity to show off, although the answer could be misinterpreted.

“Cripes, mates,” Gangles once again announced with some aggravation in his voice, “it’s a bloody number one cartoon program here.” He looked at me for a moment, knowing full well that I knew, but simply hadn’t verbalized. He was about to question me directly when Enrique shouted,

“It’s Homer Simpson....”

“Bloody right!” an exasperated Gangles interrupted. “He’s laying down, see it?”

I wasn’t the only person onboard who gave a rather embarrassed, “Oh, yes, of course.” or “Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!”

Within a hour, Gangles stopped the Coaster at Wayward Tours camp 78, Ayers Rock Resort, [www.ayersrockresort.com.au], Yulara Village, which was a surprising set-up, from expensive looking accommodations to more primitive, do-it-yourself campsites, like ours. I loved it!

“Go ahead an’ take the wood off, put it over there, on the far edge, then open up the trailer an’ get youse stuff out, along with your dilly bags an’ a swag while I work on our meal for tonight.” he instructed.

Following that was easy, but the twilight brought a familiar cold.

“This is the same as in El Paso.” I made a general announcement. “Warm, even hot, during the day but as soon as the Sun is gone, a real chill sets in....”

“Dad,” Katarena initially scolded me, “it’s Summer there right now and it’s warm all the time!”

“Yes, Katarena; before you interrupted me....” I said when interruption occurred again.

“Being in the Northern Hemisphere,” Enrique clarified, “El Paso is in the Summer season while here in the Southern Hemisphere is the opposite season, Winter. This is like El Paso in the Winter.”

“We come from England, and we know that, too.” stated another guy, while a young woman declared similarly as her home is in Switzerland.

“OK, OK,” I said. “I brought a world map and we can all share our homes, but later. It looks like Gangles has the food ready.”

Our camping area was actually composed of two distinct sections with cement tables and electric outlets in the center, a mirror reflection of the other. The large cement pad had a solid overhead, but the sides were of fabric tarp that can be adjusted as needed, as well as storage lockers, which formed a barrier between the gravel road and dining tables. Further distinction between the two sections was achieved by two gas-fired barbecues, positioned so that they are used by one side or the other. I guess we could have used the mirror-image since no other party was in that space, but we had no need—Wayward planned precisely the number that each site can accommodate. Excellent large washrooms and toilets were positioned across the roadway, just on the other side of another huge camping area.

Just as we were finishing our meal, a dark-haired woman in her twenties—the mean age of everyone there—came around the corner as a motor vehicle roared off.

“Is this Gangles' tourgroup? I'm Lori.” she knowingly asked in very proper English. “The reception at the front desk said you had arrived an hour ago, about when my plane landed at Connellan Airport.”

She was welcomed as if she was the prodigal daughter, given food and—what else?—a beer.

I stood to the side, next to a World Map that I had taped to the tarp.

“It is ironic that this is the same map I had taped to wall of a compartment of two Aussie women, Sharona and Topsy, *two* years ago. Then, we were on International Train K3, from Beijing to Moscow and did this same thing: show our homes. To continue that irony, they were putting alcohol away unlike I'd ever seen anywhere—no one can drink like you Aussies, so it was no surprise to see you buy out the roadhouse!”

“Hey!” shouted the loud one, “I'm not from Australia, and, from what I've learned, most of us aren't!

That brought much laughter as well as longnecks hoisted high, clinking together, and “Cheers!”

“Anyway, my name is Juanito, and my two children, some of you already know, are Katarena and Enrique. We are here on a Summer break from school; they are students and I teach. Our home is here (I pointed to the appropriate place on the map) El Paso, Texas, USA, Hidden Gem of the World. You can read about places all you want, but there is nothing better than actually going there. And with the help of an inheritance, here we are!”

All of a sudden, the loud one stood up and walked over to the map, pointing to the Middle East. “My home is in Israel, I served my required three years and am now traveling the world. My name is Foghorn, something bestowed upon me by Yank soldiers during a joint combat exercise. Something about being able to talk strongly...! Allow me to bring up my good friend since Byron Bay.”

He motioned for another man, slim but full of mirth, to approach. “My name es Nairolfo,” he said in halting English, “my home es Italy. I am on student holiday from school. We (he pointed to Foghorn) meet on beach, drinking, diving, eating. We both want to climb now.”

A dark-haired woman rose next, and, in careful English, told us “My name is Desire. I come from Switzerland, close to Germany. I have finished college and am staying in Australia for six months to improve my English. Then I go back to for more college and to become a psychiatrist.”

She was followed by two 5-foot, 6-inch (1.7 meters) women who were remarkably similar to Stephanie. (She was the woman whom I had helped get by the Chinese guards at the Chinese International Travel Agency in Beijing two years ago when purchasing train tickets. Stephanie and I

had had a faux marriage, followed by an equally faux divorce, a half hour charade which enabled her to secure passage.) But that was then, and these women had no intention of manipulation. The more slim (and they were both exceptionally slender!) pointed to France, while the other stated, in slightly inflected English, “I am Ofilía, and she is Cárla. We also are on vacation from school. Our home is here.”

Three people stood up, and one walked to the map, pointing at England. “We are from different cities in England, which is definitely not at war *except* for Bush and Blair (everybody chuckled)...”

“Dump John Howard into that billy with'em” came a voice from a brunette across from them.

They continued: “We seek more world cooperation. (A rousing “YEAH!” erupted from all of us.) I am Seiva, my brother is Estéban (he raises a hand), and he is Mac (he raises a fist). Estéban and I are on a year-long sabbatical from work in school, and Mac told me he saved money from a job to travel here. I'll pre-empt any questions you may have regarding our names by letting you know that our grandparents were refugees from Guernica, Spain, in the Spanish Civil War. They were among the children who did not repatriate, instead choosing to settle in Southampton.”

Seiva had spoken with pride, but I felt she also was carrying some genetic angst, unresolved from nearly seventy years before. “You'll have to tell us more later,” not quite barging into her soliloquy with my own tale of displaced ancestors and, maintaining my role as moderator, said, “but let's keep the introductions going.”

I tapped a skinny, bespectacled guy's shoulder sitting closeby, “And who are you? Where do you come from?”

He was clearly uncomfortable to be in the spotlight, and took a long pull on his VB before responding. “I'm Mark, and Auckland, New Zealand is my home, also on break from school.” Then with a shy hint of pride, he almost whispered, “I'm a Kiwi. I would be pleased if you call me that.” and sat back down, drawing another long pull.

A stocky gent came up next, pointing to the map, saying, “I'm Trevor. Please call me Trev. My home is in England and I'm taking a few fortnights away from work at the uni.”

“England is a nice place, but my country is as fiercely independent as possible, given that we've been part of the Crown since the early seventeen hundreds, when Queen Elizabeth the First died. Her nephew, James the Sixth inherited the throne and became known as James the first, ruling over both England and Scotland.” said another grinning man, who stood up, came over and pointed just above England. “My name is Galvin, the First, as far as I know, and my home is Scotland. I used to work earning the Pound, now my work is easy—spending it.” No longer a chuckle, loud laughter ensued his declaration. It seemed to early for the alcohol to be having such an effect!

“England is doing such impressive work at keeping the peace on the island! May we help it expand around the world.” said a raven-haired woman. “My name is Maggie, and Ireland is my home. It is intercession, and my students are on holiday. I had to come here after so many of my colleagues told me of their experiences.”

“I guess that leaves me,” said the John Howard brunette with a comical sigh, “and I am the only Australian here. Other than Gangles, that is. My name is Anya, and I am a nurse from Melbourne.”

The Hayburg clan began clapping, while I shouted “Our home away from home!”

In the dim light, I could her cheeks redden with pleasure, while she continued, “I graduated from Uni and run a clinic in North Melbourne. This is the first chance I've had to come to the Outback.”

“Best not to forget me,” Gangles shouted from the firepit. “I'm from Vic, but not Melbourne. If youse finished, clean up, come over an' sit by the fire. I know a drinkin' game we can play.”

Directing his next comment to me as all of us found seats around the roaring blaze, “You bein' the father an' all, it's against the law for youse kids to have any alcohol.”

“Quite alright, Gangles.” I told responded. “I am role modeling for my children how to travel and enjoy life without the poison.”

Gangles took me aside. “Don't say that too loud, Juanito. The Australian national past-time is to

get plenty pissed by puttin' away many a pint, an' you might have worries talkin' like that.”

As if he had just told me a secret, I quietly said, “Thanks.” A bit louder, I gave an urgent message. “Hey, all of you are more than welcome to visit us in El Paso Texas USA. I have some favorite places that are excellent to visit in both the USA and USM. Please put your emails in my logbook.” Everybody nodded in agreement, and added their e- addresses to page 62. I felt warm and confident that we'd all become regular correspondents, even if we never did meet again after the conclusion of this tour as we went our separate ways.

Then I added “What say we Hayburgs use a bottle of *water* instead of a bottle of *beer*?” More laughter. We bonded strongly over the next few hours, as we played games, made toilet trips due to full bladders, talked, toilet trips, laughed, toilet trips, sang, toilet trips, fed the fire, toilet trips, played games, and toilet trips. I won't divulge the game details—you'll have to Face the Outback with tour leader Gangles for that—but being able to see the Moon in the Spoon and Receiving Crossed Utensils are great fun activities. One of the most enjoyable activities was Katarena playing her Didgeridoo in accompaniment to the progressively worse singing. The inebriated individuals did declare their increased ability to sound *better* with more beer ingested, though, to my way of hearing, their harmonies truly did need repair. I suspect alcohol was the cause of the less-than-superb vocals, especially since she had only recently acquired her Didgi and was not yet overly skilled with it. Another entertaining game was played, but I couldn't figure it out. The only accounting for my inabilities that was perhaps my age.

After seemingly hours Gangle issued a caution: “No more tonight, mates. Youse better get decent shut eye for tomorrow's a big day!”

Most everybody had been fine in the circle, but as soon as we moved toward our swags, away from the fire, the desert Winter brought several complaints about how downright cold it had become.

Gangles yelled out, “The fire is closer to all youse, but I'm not. Just get into your swag. It'll keep you plenty warm.”

I called upon my many years as Assistant Cubmaster and Assistant Scoutmaster while involved with Enrique's progress through the programs, and added “You absolutely must change out of your day clothes. Even though they feel fine right now, your body has perspired into them and you'll wake up half frozen. Put on dry nightwear, along with a knit cap, and you will sleep alright.” Though I did my best to not sound like a teacher, I probably did. They humored me, undoubtedly due to my age.

My own pattern of sleeping little continued, and woke to the coldest part of the day, about an hour before Sunrise. I put on my sweatshirt from yesterday, followed by a knit cap and Scott e-Vest™ before I moved to the dark firepit. There, I scraped away soot to reveal a few embers, upon which I put a few twigs broken away from the imported wood. Initially, I used my hand and blown air to see the remains glow red-hot, and smoke begin to rise. Unfortunately, I very nearly fainted from the effort. Slowly getting to my feet, I thought for a moment and quickly seized the lid from one of plastic tubs that held our cooking gear.

“That's quite smart, really.” I heard Trev say as he pulled himself out of his swag, put on more clothing, and stand close, just as I had done. “I watched you work it up from nothing, but couldn't hold enough breath to keep it on.” The flames burst up as the coal, sustained with a steady supply of oxygen, rapidly consumed the wood. “Using that lid was crackerjack, yes it was. And perfect timing for me to warm by. I just don't like all the smoke in my face. Thanks.”

I next dumped the remaining water from the electric kettle, and set a new potful to heat. There is nothing that can take a sharp morning chill off better than a hot campfire and a cup of hot chocolate or coffee. I was particularly proud of my Smart Café Mug, and the fluid it contained served to keep my throat rather well lubricated as my vocal cords had nodules on them, the result of excessive talk. (We teachers tend to do that!) I began stockpiling toasted bread, believing that to be one less task for everyone else.

“No, mate, don't do that.” Gangles said when he came around the edge of the tarp from the bathroom. “Everybody has to be responsible for their own, that way no one can complain about gettin' shortchanged.”

“Ah, yes,” I replied. “Take all you want, but eat all you take.”

“Quite right, mate,” Gangles told me. “Just don't want people not eatin' what they didna' fix. An' no worries about that fire.” as I began to separate the burning branches.

“Are you sure?” I questioned him. “As a scouter in the 'States, we always make sure our fire is out, dead out, before leaving it.”

“The only state youse are in is the Northern Territory, and its desert here.” he told me. “That fire is goin' nowhere. Only people with problems about it are those who put their homes in the bush, where fires are natural.”

Raising his voice several decibels, he announced, “After a quick brekkie, we'll start the day with this outstandin' Sunrise view of both Kata Tjuta and Uluru. These constitute World Heritage Sites, as well as significant National Parks [www.environment.gov.au/parks/uluru]. Then we'll do the Valley of the Winds walk, before it gets windy. It's in the Kata Tjuta, or The Olgas, which are quite related to Uluru an' Mt. Connor as they're part of the Petermann Range, most of which is subsurface. They're outcroppins', maybe six hundred million years old, give or take a few million years, an' are the deposition of what was once a great inland sea, the Amadeus. Over that long time, they're cemented an' uplifted an' folded an' buried by other sediment, with waters retreatin', refillin', an' erosion, givin' what we see today.”

I felt badly about being so slow, especially when we needed to go the viewing area so quickly. As I ambled toward the Coaster, the group was rushing toward me. “Hey, everybody, where are you going? Don't we need to leave *muy pronto*?” I asked the crowd.

I heard a potpourri of responses: “someone really cracked open their lunch”, “quelque chose est morte dans l'autobus”(something died in the bus), “un vraiment mauvais parfum”(a really bad perfume), “der geruch ist widerlich”(the smell is revolting), “Somebody came back from the loo too early!”, “Somebody needs to go back to the loo!”, “sembra che Roma, odori come Napoli, e abbiamo pagato come Milano”(looks like Rome, smells like Naples, and we paid like Milan), “Somebody needs to change their undie daks”, “nobody can get inside 'till its breathable”, and one recognizable voice: “Dad, somebody passed gas and it really stinks!”

The Coaster stopped at the carpark of the Kata Tjuta dunes viewing area, where Gangles directed us: “Just hike up that walkway to the platform and youse'll see both Kata Juta *and* Uluru. Be quick, now, Sun's about to rise.”

We were quick about it, crowding together on the wooden overlook to ward off the early morning chill along with noisy verbalizations.

“**Shut up!**” barked a spry gray-haired lady as she pointed to Foghorn. “**We don't want to hear your crap!**”

I felt some relief, but knew that I was part of the noise too. That brief moment of respite lasted about as long as my eye blinked, for in the next moment she jabbed that finger in my direction, stating unequivocally, “**You, too!**”

We both became quiet immediately, appropriately humbled by this woman.

The Sun arose squarely between both of the great natural wonders, and, appropriately, everyone gathered this morning were speechless.

Returning to the bus, Gangles asked, “I heard you had a bit of trouble out there.”

That ferocious woman was still behind us; how could Gangles know?

“Yeah,” said Foghorn, “If she was younger, I would have told her a thing or two....”

Driving to our hiking destination, Gangles told us more:

“Kata Tjuta means 'many heads', referrin' to the distinct 36 domes, the tallest of which is 546

meters (1791 feet) high. Famous explorer Earnest Giles named it Mount Ferdinand, after Ferdinand Mueller, a renowned explorer and botanist from Germany who had arranged Giles' expedition. Maybe Mueller was just shy, but he demanded that it be renamed Mount Olga, who was queen in Württemberg and helped with the finances. Giles probably felt that his right in naming was violated, so he wanted the swampy area that had kept him from passing named for Mueller. Lots of egos, they had. The lake was named Amadeus, after another relative in the European monarchy system. I am so glad we don't have a king or queen or any of that nonsense Down Under." As if he realized that several in the present company might take offense and he might need some back up, he added, "Right Juanito?"

Glad to be of help, I responded, "Abso-bloody-lutely right, Gangles!"

His real back up came from mid-bus, when Anya spoke.

"Actually, I know some drum about *Sir Doctor Ferdinand von Mueller*, who considered Melbourne his home, which, as you know, is also my home. I learned loads about him because I so enjoyed going to the Royal Botanic Gardens, where he was the bees knees first director in the mid-eighteen hundreds. Even though he had been eminently successful in Germany, where he obtained a PhD, he came here for a more healthful climate. He was a naturalized Aussie, a truly good bloke who was totally married to his work—his wife's name was 'Botanist'. He was well-recognized around the world for his botanical studies and travels, though he was a bit of a prickly one. Something like you, Gangles, he didn't care much for the monarchy manner, even though the accolades he received from it fully supported his expeditions."

"Your blood's worth bottlin'! Gangles said appreciatively.

We arrived at the trail head for the 6 km(4 miles) Valley of the Wind walk under a blustery, cloudless, aqua blue sky. I was the last one out of the Coaster, locking the door behind me, when I heard Gangles explaining the trek.

"... is easy goin' for the first part, then we'll come up on the steep part. Be sure youse take plenty of water, and I hope youse like chokkie 'cause I'm bringing Tim-Tams for us at that point. Let's move out before we get any more wind. And remember, this is as sacred a site to the Aboriginal as the well known Uluru."

My personal philosophy is that "Wherever I go, I try to leave it cleaner than when I arrived." Therefore, I first find—this is typical of me—a plastic bag put garbage in it. I usually don't have to look too hard to find the ubiquitous modern adornment of our Planet. There are very, very few places on Earth where Humans have tread and *not* left a plastic bag in our wake. Not only will I remove the unnatural bag from the surrounding environment, it will become the temporary repository of other unnatural items I pick up along the way.

I didn't think the hike, especially to our midway point, would take nearly as long as it did. In fact, it didn't take the others very long—just me. I caught up with them as some were heading out. They had just finished refreshing themselves with water and Tim-Tam cookies.

"Dad!" Katarena shouted. I felt my spirits soar as she rushed toward me. "Where did you get that Wal-Mart bag? There aren't any in Australia!"

"She's brilliant, Juanito!" Trev added. "Wal-Mart has knocked a lot of our stores. I used to go to Booths often, but now that Wal-Mart is in town..."

"It goes by a different name up North in Scotland," Galvin added. "We dislike such a monopolizing business, so it is trying to sneak in as 'Asda'."

"Trev and Galvin are both right," said Desire. "We won't let it make inroads in Switzerland, and Germany is doing it out."

"Lots of clever people in this group. I'm not surprised to see that bag. We may not have Wal-Mart here, but bloody tourists bring in those bags." Gangles commented.

I tried to keep my mouth closed, because I had some of these bags separating my clothing stuffed inside my backpack, but I had a point to make.

"Yes, there are grievous complaints about the number one retail store in the world. However,

most people I know, specifically my wife and my VAC chair, Berretta, have told me that the low prices, quality of merchandise, and being able to combine multiple shopping trips into one stop makes going elsewhere ridiculous. Consumers don't bother researching stores anymore when Wal-Mart provides everything. Look, I always look at other stores when I shop, and avoid Wal-Mart if possible. But the fact is that Wal-Mart started out like any other business, small."

Seeing that I was not winning any friends with my argument, I tried a different tactic. "When I finished my undergraduate studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Sam Walton, the founder of this massive store was the keynote speaker at graduation. I heard his philosophy about providing service to the customer, that that is the sole reason for any business to exist. He had learned from previous big-name stores, such as Woolworths and Ben Franklin's Five-and-Ten, and used the idea of providing a massive amount of quality items at low prices in spacious, clean, well-lit stores to capture market share. Then, with the fall of the 'Wall' and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, entrepreneurs were able to exploit even more of the market. We are surrounded by and are part of capitalism. If we, and I mean all of us, the consumers, are so put off with Wal-Mart, then we simply need to take our business elsewhere. We are not being forced to buy there. What we are missing is the Wal-Mart gives back to us, not only with the low prices, but also with donations to the community. I'll bet none of the non-profits or NGOs would turn down money from Wal-Mart. To be sure, the various student groups that I participate in back home are always looking to raise funds. One of the first things done is to formally request money from Wal-Mart, which, if given enough time, always cuts a check."

I must have beat them into submission with my monologue. Now I needed some back-up: "Right, Gangles?"

He cleverly redirected the attention of everyone by sympathetically saying to me,

"Youse must be hurtin', Juanito. Here's what's left, and there is a water tap if youse need more to drink. Do youse need me to stay with youse, or can youse make it over the next part? It gets real steepy now."

"Not so much hurting, Gangles. I merely suffer from a combination of old age, sleep deprivation, and knee surgery last year." I replied. "Talk about the irony of it! I try to bicycle three to five miles everyday specifically to avoid having physical problems as I get older. One fine morning, I had biked a block when my left knee gave me a strange pain. I massaged it out, kept pedaling, and didn't think of it again. Until I was at work the next day, when it became extremely painful. Limping around school, I found several people who had had similar problems. One person in particular, a grizzled former Bosn's Mate, Señor Ososo, gave me especially good advice. *Both* of his knees were shot. One knee had been operated on, while he let the other heal 'naturally.' He doesn't run anywhere, but he was more mobile than I was at that moment. He did tell me that he uses a lot of painblockers to get through the day."

"Bloody oath! Not about the injury, but the painblocker." Gangles told me with a grin. "Deadset, I drink middies of it every night..."

"Say, Gangles, these cookies are delicious!" I exclaimed. "What're they called?"

"Tim-Tams," he said, with a mild air of surprise. "After ANZAC biscuits, these are THE Aussie bikkie. Never seen it before?"

"No!" I replied. "Where can they be found?"

"Just all over, mate." He replied with disbelief, then asked, "Youse been here for how long?"

"So now I know." I spoke with relief. "They're wonderful!" and stuffed my mouth with the last one.

He strode off while I filled my water bottle for the second time. I followed, a bit slower.

The path was indeed much more challenging. Not only was it steeper, but it was filled with loose rocks and gravel. The more direct evidence of humans struggling up the path was shown by a marked increase in the trash along the path. Continuing to slowly ascend, I found more bits of trash: scraps of paper, bits of plastic, tins, and the single item of garbage I most despise, cigarette butts.

"Well," I rationalized to myself, "I'll honor the Anangu by showing my great respect for their

most sacred site by cleaning it. That should give me an ample amount of good karma, and I'll certainly need as much as possible since I plan to later climb their other sacred site, Uluru."

I had quite a bagful by the time I had gotten over the pass. "I'll bet this is loads of good karma and it'll serve as my pillow, too!" I said to myself, lying down in a wide spot in the trail.

"Are you alright?" asked a gentleman standing to my side, his wife carrying their child standing on the other side.

I opened my eyes with a start, and spoke "Oh, I'm fine, just resting. It was quite a climb up."

"You were wrong, Ellen. I told he was not ill." he said victoriously to his pregnant wife. Then he spoke to me, "Oh yes, I can understand. You're from the USA, aren't you?"

"Texas. How can you tell?" I asked.

"I wouldn't have thought so because I hear Missouri, actually, the Ozarks, as you speak. But not Texan." he corrected me. "You haven't got that 'twang'."

"Amazing!" I said. "I have spent an enormous amount of time in Missouri. Not only visiting relatives, but I finally obtained my undergraduate degree from Mizzou in 1984. We moved to her new job in Ohio, which is where my wife and I married, then we went to my new job in Medellín, Colombia. Our return to the 'States took us to Springfield, where we lived for two years before moving to El Paso, where my grandparents had lived, in far West Texas. How could you discern my accent?"

"I am from Oxford, England, home of the most proper English. I also graduated from uni there." he replied with an especially distinct air. "However, my specialty is linguistic dialects around the world, and I had the pleasure of spending a Summer at Missouri State University in Ozark Studies two years before. It was fascinating!"

"This is fascinating quadrupled! Southwest Missouri State University finally got its name changed! That is where my wife was a reference librarian for two years in the mid-nineteen eighties before relocating to my new job with Whysleta Independent School District in El Paso. My son was born there, but my daughter is a Texan. You may have passed them earlier. He is the tall one, and my daughter looks like me."

"No, can't say we did." he said apologetically. "You are the first person we've seen on the trail—pardon my grin, but I do like a good pun..."

"John, do stop it!" his wife ordered. Then, directing her attention to me, "You are only encouraging him with your laughter, but I have to live with this twenty-four hours a day. I thought it was cute at first, but my parents warned me that I was setting myself up for a lifetime of disappointment."

"Ellen, your complaining again." he scolded her. "Didn't they also warn you to not be such a shrew..."

Ignoring him, she continued "Ever since he received his Master's in Linguistic Studies, from *Oxford*, no less, and the humour is wearing. You can only imagine how unbearable he is; and to think that he is teaching this to our young son Erik. He is even trying to pass it onto Katherine (she patted here large belly) by talking in riddles, rhymes, and other non-sense when we are alone."

Her outburst may have tired her, as she adopted an infinitely more congenial tone, "I grudgingly admit that we have an interesting life..."

"Quick now, repeat that, only louder..." John interrupted. But she continued, as if he hadn't spoken.

"... I have traveled far more than I could have ever imagined. It so irritates me when he starts looking at maps."

How weird! No wonder I felt a kinship!

"Do tell me," she asked, "since you seem to be stable down there, would kindly you mind taking a photo of us, with the Olgas in the background?"

"Sure, but you have to promise that John will give me a hand up afterwards." I requested of her (because I knew she was the boss) while taking his camera and framing a shot with them at the center.

“Oh, my name is Juanito.”

I was a bit unsteady on my feet once up, but merrily waved to them as we parted company. They looked and acted in a familiar way. But it was the universal scene of a husband and wife sniping at each other for seemingly minor indiscretions. She was right, of course; I had only known a few minutes of amusing discourse, not 24 hours a day, 365 days a year of it. I wondered what she does that annoys John? Her tireless harping or perfectionism....?

This was a spooky encounter, and the pining I felt for Eléna overwhelmed me. I winced, and a few tears rolled down my cheek. I missed her. In some ways I felt sorry for her because she had taken employment with the city back home, and could not leave her library to travel with us. By the same token, she was also managing our finances—being absent from home for an extended period of time like this meant I could not pay the bills, bring in the paper, eternally fix the running toilet, repair the swamp cooler, put out the trash...!

Feeling only a *little* better, I moved along, realizing that, although this might seem like a sort of vacation to some people, it was actually laborious; camping, spending money, and, most importantly, being a role model and chaperón for our children. Regardless of the expenses, this was priceless, something few parents can afford. I was among those privileged few who had both the time *and* money. Indeed, I *knew* this would be beneficial to Katarena and Enrique in the long run. Since I was in the position to give them this opportunity of a lifetime, I couldn't see *not* doing it. In fact, to do otherwise could be construed as a violation of my obligation as a parent.

In a few minutes, I was back at the trailhead and began boarding the Coaster.

“What's this?” I thought. “Someone is in *my* seat.? Oh, well, they aren't assigned” and I took a quarter of an orange that Gangles had put out.

“Hey, mate, who're you? And why're you eatin' our rations?” asked a *woman* in the driver's seat. I looked around. I didn't recognize anyone. I had gotten into the wrong bus!

“Oh. Wrong bus. I must be *really* tired.” I apologized, and stepped out. I went five paces, and found a duplicate Coaster, except *my* seat in the front was vacant, patiently waiting for me.

After plopping myself down, I apologized again. “Folks, I must be really tired. I got on the wrong bus. And before I forget anymore, I need to tell all of you that I am taking notes while on this trip. I will be writing a book of our adventures, and plan for the title to be La Familia Hayburg: Down Under. I was remiss in not telling you last night, but I'd like to include you in the chapter that covers our Wayward Bus tour. If you don't want to be mentioned, please let me know and I'll take you and your email out of my logbook. If you want an idea of how I write, please look at my website, www.juanitohayburg.com. You can also see pictures of other trips we've made, and read a paragraph out of my third book. Most important to me, though, will be your comments once I write a rough draft.”

Some of them were exhilarated and some were extremely miffed. The most upset were none other than my own flesh and blood, Katarena and Enrique; he shouted “He isn't that good of a writer!” which she followed with “His first book is, like, in five hundred *thousandth* place on the Amazon best seller list!”

I was suitably humiliated as guffaws filled the bus.

“No worries, mate.” a smiling Gangles said to me. “My kid was the same growin' up. Youse kids'll remember this forever. Youse're doin' a great job.”

I didn't worry. I did slump under the seat belt and fall asleep, exhausted.

“The first thing that must be done is visit the cultural center [uluru.info@environment.gov.au] an' youse'll gain an understandin' of why the traditional aborigine owners, the Pitjantjatjara an' Yankunytjatjara people—don't call'em that because they prefer the name Anangu—don't want you climbin' Uluru. Far better than what I can express to youse, particularly about their origins in 'dreamin'.” said Gangles. “It's also a good place to kip, if you need more, Juanito.”

“Tell me Gangles, did you ever climb Uluru?” I asked, ignoring the comment that I had gone to sleep, if only for a half hour.

“Once.” he replied, “The first time because, well, 'cause everyone did then, but no more, especially since all tour guides are expected to follow local traditions.”

Then he said to everyone, “I'm tryin' to discourage youse from climbin' because it is disrespectful to the Anangu, but climbin' is youse decision. However, you need to learn about your actions beforehand.”

He was right on all counts. The climate controlled buildings were a welcome respite from the wind and the heat, and the information gave solid reasons for not climbing the massif. Except one, which was a photo that showed antlike humans scaling Ayers Rock in the February 1966 issue of National Geographic.

“That's the biggest single rock in the world, Juanito,” I can remember my *abuelo* telling me. “If I ever get the time or money, that's what I'd do.” He read the article aloud, filling my head with images of being the youngest person to every make such an ascent...! Well, that certainly is an impossibility now, but that didn't mean I couldn't fulfill my decades-old yearning. Besides, I had plenty of good karma from earlier.

The only climbing we saw this afternoon was in and out of the Coaster, because the pathway had been blocked by a wire rope.

“Climbin' this arvo is canceled due to high winds aloft.” Gangles said as we pulled into the car park. “I know some of youse are disappointed, youse'll avago tomorrow morning. This is OK to be put off, 'cause we need to get the best viewin' spot early. Youse'll see what I mean.”

He was correct. At another designated car park, perfectly situated a bare kilometer from the West side of Uluru, we took ownership of the only picnic table.

“Trev! Norialo!” yelled Alon. “Bring more cases of Vic—I could only carry my cases of Tooheys New.”

Other people began arriving and moving toward our prime real estate.

But we held our ground, and they respected the Aussie rules.

We undoubtedly looked a bit bizarre, a handful of us creating a wedge from the picnic table to the fence with that uninterrupted, stunning landscape, Uluru filling the center.

“Hey, Gangles,” all of us said in uneven unison, “THANKS!”

It was hard for him to not beam with pride and said with professional demeanor, “I know this is the best, and youse all paid for it. Did youse see behind us?”

The car park had filled with vehicles, most empty as the occupants had bunched up around our first arrived, first occupied zone. A few, though, had pulled out lawn chairs and were sitting besides their cars, sipping cocktails and eating hordourves. As the lower edge of the Sun touched the horizon, a huge bus, at least twice that of the Coaster, pulled into the carpark and stopped on the road precisely behind us and in front of the previously mentioned settled-in folks. Adding even more blockage, the inhabitants climbed up the ladder and became newly settled in with their own chairs, drinks, and eats.

Perhaps I was being insensitive to the others, but I found myself almost gloating to Foghorn, “I am *so* glad we got here when we did!”

“*Oy vey!*” he replied with a shrug. “We paid for it.”

Uluru showed it's many colors until we were surrounded by darkness, broken only by the tail lights of departing vehicles. When it was totally dark, Gangles announced “OK youse, nobody else is here, no lights, no clouds, perfect for the sky and stars. This is going to be complicated bit of yabber, but once youse know it, youse will always know it. Put youse left hand toward Uluru an' face this way. Go up some ten degrees to the first bright star. This is Alpha Centari, one of the pointer stars. Angle a wee bit to the left to the next bright star. This is the second pointer star, Beta Centari. Draw an imaginary line between them, then bisect that line with a perpendicular going to your right. Don't forget it. Is this goin' OK, mates?”

After the assorted grunts of agreement, he continued. “Now, go up a little bit more to the left and youse’ll see a cluster of five stars. This is one of the most recognized constellations in the Southern sky, the Southern Cross. Youse’ll see a regular cross between four of them, with a fifth smaller star close to the intersection of imaginary lines. Now, continue an imaginary line from the left star to the right star and beyond. Don’t forget that. All doin’ fine?”

More sounds of agreement.

“Remember the imaginary line from the pointer stars I told you to not forget? Draw it out until it intersects with the line from the Southern Cross. From that point, draw a line straight down to Earth, and that’s the South Pole. This is how mariners made it around the seas South of the Equator.

Several group members were expressing delight—“I see it!” “Yeah, yeah, yeah!” “Do you want some help?”

I needed no help, as long as I was looking for the Big Dipper and North star, but this was different.

“See it, Dad?” Katarena asked.

When I didn’t respond immediately, Enrique provided the answer. “He hasn’t found it yet. He isn’t too good in the Southern Hemisphere.”

“I...” came my indignant stammer, but Gangles continued to speak.

“That was easy. Findin’ the Runnin’ Emu is decidedly more difficult. But once you find it, you’ll see it, no problems, mates.”

Despite the disparaging comments from my children, I did see the Southern Cross (I think). However, true to Gangles’ words, the Running Emu was definitely more difficult.

“Oops, mates, we got worries. The Runnin’ Emu has a risin’ moon that’s keepin’ us from distinguishin’ it. Maybe tomorrow night. Let’s get back to camp and eat. It’ll be another early up ‘cause Uluru alone at Sunrise is a great view.”

ARR78 was much more congested this time, as another Wayward Bus tour group had shown up and were getting settled in. This group was primarily composed of Japanese, about the same age as our group (exempting myself and Gangles), and I recognized the guide.

“Not only did you want to eat our snacks this morning, now you want to crash our camp!” said a smiling Rebecca. “You know what he did this mornin’? Strewth, Gangles?”

“Strewth, ‘becca.” Gangles replied with wry twist in his lips. “Don’t beat up my oldie. He’s got a pair of right smart ones with us. They got the fire rekindled, and he’s workin’ on our meat while I get the noodles goin’.”

“Hi, Becca.” I said to her with a smile as I picked up on her name. “Don’t hold this morning against me—I was exhausted and your coaster is a spitting image of Gangles’ Coaster...”

“No worries, mate.” she replied, eyes sparkling. “Any Wayward tourer is welcome amongst all of us, as long as you don’t eat our mess.”

“Gangles, do you have any more propane?” I asked. “The flame just died on this.”

He scrounged around in the locker and came up with another tank. After jury rigging a hose to keep gas going to the griddle, I kept the meat cooking until the red was replaced with a crusty gray ‘well-done’. It was a merry sort of encampment that I observed, with both Wayward groups gathered around their separate campfires engaged in more drinking games. I noted that both Katarena and Enrique were quite involved with animated discussions with their counterparts, and felt certain that this was an excellent means for them to have their own needed spaces.

We soon came together once Gangles had combined the succulent meat and pasta, along with the greens and bread. Three of us washed this meal down with water, while quantities of beer helped the others.

“Three cheers for Juanito and the meat!” Gangles shouted, to which I replied, “Three cheers for Gangles and the propane without which the meat could not be cooked!”

“Cheers” that evening became a code word for “have another (alcoholic) drink, mate” and there were numerous calls for it. The last call was from Gangles to clean up an prep for an exceptionally early morning rising.

“...an' don't add anymore wood to the fire. We've got just enough wood to last tomorrow night's camp.”

I guess that meant *he* wasn't involved in the games as he locked up the toaster and propane, then took to his swag. Enrique followed his lead, then me, and eventually everyone was down as we were all exhausted.

Up early as always, I staggered a bit to the washroom, and returned more bleary eyed than refreshed, with a full moon still up high. Despite Gangles command to not add any more wood, I put a log on and stoked it. The flames knocked the chill off the air, and I was glad for it as were a few of the other guys who had gathered around the warmth.

Then I heard a beeping followed by another. Yet more electronic trills filled the air, this time from the other campsite, and shortly it sounded as if a morning chorus of frogs had swallowed electric buzzers. After turning on the pavilion lights, I saw the source of the electronics—numerous cell phones plugged into gang outlets for recharging.

The leaders put out toasters, bread, butter tubs, jams, electric water kettles and hot drink mixes before they themselves took care of their washroom needs. I quickly filled our kettle and set it to boiling, then put a layer of fresh grounds in my plunge cup and four slices of white bread in the toaster.

Campers in both sites were rising and running to the washroom, moving quickly because of both the personal hygiene needs and cold. Although my reasons for getting started earlier were the same, I was glad to have been alone and not in a crowd, which undoubtedly makes for a toilet availability issue. My rapid movement also allowed me to be first to have hot coffee and delicious marmalade toast, although I did share with the latter with Katarena and Enrique.

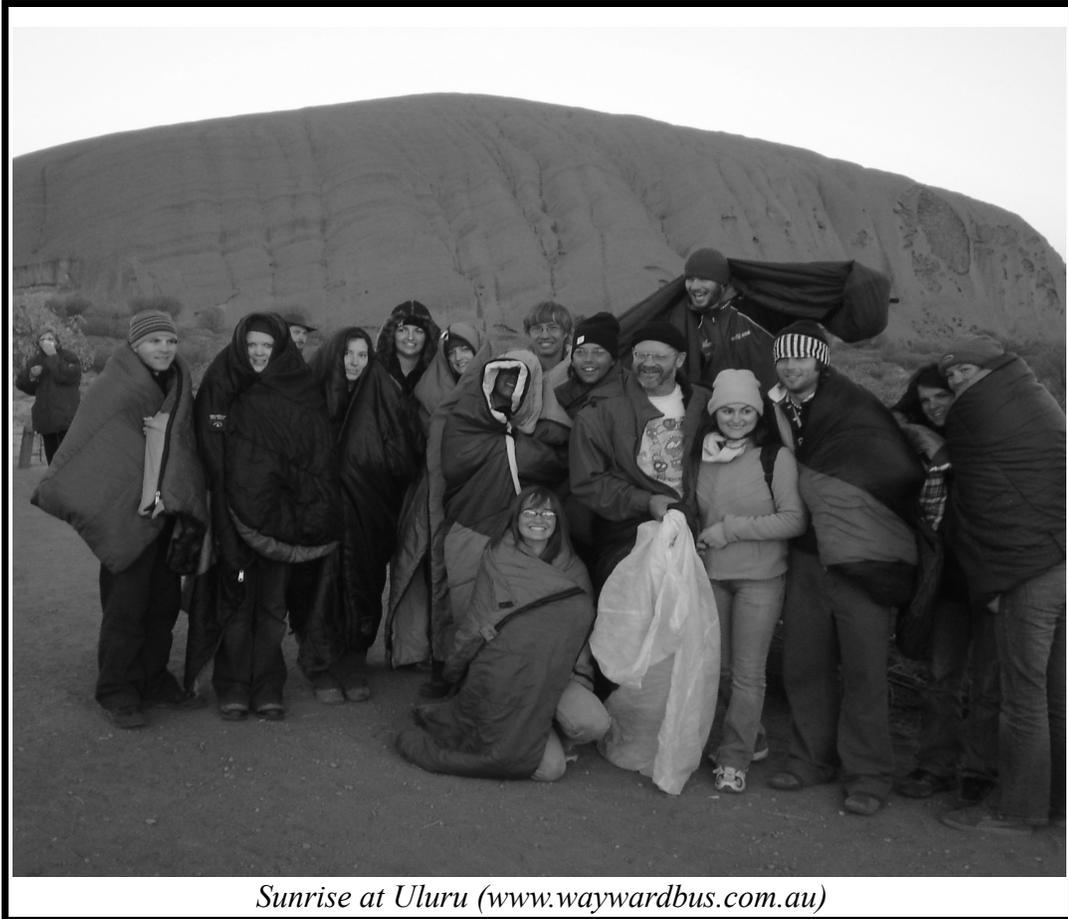
“Mates,” he looked directly at me, “I had said to not add more wood. Knock it apart. We need to skedaddle!”

The other Wayward group was going through the same process for they too were going to the best morning view site of Uluru. I watched as one of the Japanese fellows put his bread into an available toaster that happened on our side of the low barrier. I watched that same fellow's eyes widen and mouth drop open when Gangles grabbed the toast that soon popped up, and began to butter it for himself.

“Too bad, mate,” Gangles told him, “like 'Becca told Juanito yesterday, any Wayward tourer is welcome amongst all of us, as long as you don't eat our mess. Whilst the bread may be yours, the toaster is ours, so everythin' inside it is ours.”

The fellow just stood there, unable to comprehend why *his* bread became *our* toast, until Rebecca translated into Japanese. Even then, he continued to look suspiciously at Gangles, as if some kind of compensation was forthcoming. We busied ourselves with the clean up, this time loading our swags into the locker, our gear into the trailer, logs on top, and ourselves into the coaster. Then most everybody got a bit more shut-eye on the bus seats, with sleeping bags keeping in vital body heat. As the Coaster pulled away, I saw the Japanese mate still standing there in a catatonic stupor below a flickering light bulb of ARR78.

Gangles knew exactly what to do and we were once again first at the other designated viewing site. This time, however, we did not claim an area just for us, but walked a short distance to share a site as the Sun began its rapid ascent. We wanted to share the site as much as possible in the cold morning air—our closeness was certainly advantageous to mutual warmth.



Sunrise at Uluru (www.waywardbus.com.au)

It was almost a festive atmosphere as Elvis was present, along with John Lennon and Ned Kelley. Where else should they arise along with the Sun? It was magnificent seeing them along with a reverse of the myriad of colors we had seen with yesterday's setting Sun. And then they were all gone as the Sun rose to a height that gave everything a daylight color.

Gangles took us back to the same place we had been yesterday, at the car park close from where we could be doing our horizontal or vertical hikes, except now the wind was calm and the air clear.

“It looks great, and we're here early enough to get it to ourselves. This is claimed to be the single, outcropping in the world, but there is another in Western Australia called Mount Augustus. Besides that, the difference is this is that this is part of a monocline, or a series of uprisings—remember when I said Mount Connor, Kata Kjuta, and Uluru were all related?—whereas Augustus is a true monolith, and stands alone—about three times as much of alone! It doesn't get near as much attention though.”

Here, our group clearly divided; a portion, including Katarena, were clearly respectful of Uluru, while I tailed five others climbing Ayers Rock. All of us passed a large, multi-language sign requesting people to not climb because it was sacrilegious to the Anangu people. I quickly read the sign advising climbers to be aware of the inherent dangers, both spiritually and physically, about climbing this immense massif, giving the warnings the same less-than-serious consideration as everyone else.

I went around the sign, deciding that it would be fun to count my steps up the well-trod path into the blue sky.

Breathing hard and stripping off a layer, I abandoned that idea at step 47.

This was going to be a bit more difficult than I had thought.

Looking ahead, I saw that I was still on a relatively flat rise, but in a few more steps up, a hip-high inch-link chain was strung between stanchions drilled into the rock every two meters (6 feet) for climbers to hold onto while the rock pitched at well beyond the angle of repose. Looking uphill, I could see the line of people slowly trudging, hand over hand, their shapes becoming the human ants I had seen forty years prior on the National Geographic cover. I resumed my own slow stepping, determined to follow through with my *Abuelo's* dream.

I was ever so glad for the chain. It was shiny, polished by hundred of thousands, probably millions, of hands that had done exactly as I was now doing, with one possible exception. Every several feet, I let go of the chain. I crabbed slightly off to the side, where I lie on my back, eyes closed, gasping. When I felt my pulse had gone below cardiac arrest level, I opened my eyes, rolled back toward the chain and crabbed up for more climbing.

I had to overcome at least two difficulties in this process: I couldn't go too far from the chain or I would exceed the angle of repose and become a victim of gravity, one of the ways mentioned on the sign below that can result in death; my dizziness, which caused me great disorientation. One time, I held a handful of air, not grasping the chain. Fortunately, I did think to pancake my body, with the resulting friction stopping my downward slide.

Since I had ceased counting my steps some time ago, I don't know how far I had gotten when I reached a broad level spot interrupting the steady climb. This wasn't an area specifically dug out, but a point where erosion had created a wide niche, exacerbated by the innumerable humans who climbed and sat here. In a shallow spot, I saw Trev sitting, his head down as breath harshly barked in and out of his lungs.

Concerned, I walked to him and queried, "Trev, are you going to be OK?" I *almost* volunteered to help him back down, but knew that if I went down now, I wouldn't come back up. I was relieved to hear him tell me, between heaving coughs,

"...yeah...thanks...Jua...ni...to...but...this...is...as...far...as...I...go...see...you...lat...er..."

With new resolve, I grasped a new chain to help climbers ascend to another erosive level. It was much easier now, not nearly as steep but much windier. Obviously, the chain's purpose now was to keep us from getting blown away. Looking behind me, I didn't see too many human ants, although a few were still ahead of me. I couldn't see Enrique, Foghorn, Kiwi, or Nairolfo. I hadn't seen them since we deboarded from the Coaster, what felt like hours ago.

The climbing angle was much less severe now and the chain itself was no longer in existence. The rock itself had a broader round surface, with an immensely diminished opportunity to go over the side, although the wind could send me flying if I stood straight up...!

A line of white painted dashes marked a path that ensured not only safety while crossing, but also less sacrilege(?), I came to the crown. I saw that my next move was down into a shallow crevice, then up the sharp incline of another part of this massif. Topping that, a similar pattern was repeated several more times, with the last ascent to a broad rounded plain.

"Enrique! Foghorn! Nairolfo! Kiwi!" I exclaimed.

"Hi, Juanito." said Foghorn. "If you want, we can stay some and take group photos over at the center, marked by a Geodetic Survey cairn. Can't go any farther though. Apparently that's really bad for your future lives."

"Thanks." I said. "It'd be nice to have some group photos. Say, did you see Trev? He looked to be in a bad way when I passed him."

"Yeah," said Enrique, "if he needs any help we'll catch him on the way back. I'm glad you made it, though I'm a bit surprised. I thought you'd be wiped out, instead of Trev."



Father, son, and the spirit of abuelo on top of Ayers Rock (www.waywardbus.com.au)

“It wasn't easy.” I replied. “I almost turned around. It got real windy, and I think the climb has been closed because of that. I didn't see many climbers coming up behind me.”

“Enough of this.” Kiwi said. “We need to go back. Now.”

Slightly irritated because I had just arrived, I told them “Go on, I'll be along in a moment. See you at the bottom.”

I watched the three of them bound off, recklessly ignoring the dashed lines, careening down one crevice to the slow going up of the next, in a carefree youth manner.

“I hope they don't end at the bottom *too* fast,” I thought. Then I remembered that I would doubtlessly be doing the same thing, *if* I was thirty years younger! Alone at the windy terminus of this climb, I reflected upon my achievement. No longer enervated, but re-energized with the knowledge that I completed my *abuelo's* dream as I stared at the horizon around me. I felt an enormous uplift, not only because of satisfying the dream, but I also had to grasp the monument to keep from getting blown away. I experienced the same feelings as my most gratifying Navy experiences, when I was a signalman, high atop the ship, pulling into port. The difference, of course, was no water was evident, just dry land and formations. Another marked difference was that instead of the surrounding sea appearing as if it was to swallow me and my ship because our location was at the *bottom* of a bowl with the horizon of water forming high sides, the land horizon just faded away in a vague blue-brown blur. Regardless, I found it extremely pleasing, in every sense, whether contemporary, historical, or exhaustive. I took another swig of water and continued my look-about.

My curiosity about the specific geography was answered as I looked at the worn copper compass rose on top of the waist-high, heavily-graffitied (Sun)burnt-orange pedestal. Posted in collaboration with the Northern Territories Reserves Board, the monument, besides showing the cardinal and inter-cardinal compass points and physical features in the distance, gave the single most important information I could ask:

AYERS ROCK
HEIGHT ABOVE SEA LEVEL 335 METRES

“Hmmm,” I silently figured in a most convoluted manner, “a kilometer equal about six tenths of a mile. Three hundred thirty-five meters is about a third of that. So, one-third of six-tenths is six-thirtieths, or one-fifth, of a mile. Back in junior high, I used to run the quarter-mile, which about did me in every time. So now, nearly four decades later, I have hiked a vertical distance of slightly less amount and it still about does me in. Good job, Juanito!” I thought a moment longer about figuring the actual distance, but I'd need the x-axis distance to triangulate...

Descending along the same path that I had just ascended, I was slower. I *was* the only person on the rock as the wind had increased significantly, another reason to stop climbers. I didn't have to rest as I had coming up, but I had to go slow, sometimes crawling on hands and knees to keep a low profile. At the chain, I was buffeted around by the wind, and sometimes had to sit down to creep along on my bottom. Climbing back into the Coaster, I went through what was becoming a routine apology for my tardiness.

“Not to worry, Juanito.” Gangles told me with a hint more of irritation. “Youse are a paid part of our group. What your doin' for Katarena and Enrique is important, an' a lot of the people here are learnin' somethin' about parenthood just by watchin' youse.”

“Only you and I are parents, Gangles, none of the others.” I said. “When I was their age, being a parent was the last thing on my mind, and I suspect its last on their minds, too. I'll bet that's also true for you.”

He looked thoughtful for a moment, nodded “yes”, and started the Coaster.

“OK, all youse.” he shouted. “it's totally different at Kings Canyon, which is a short ways up Luritja Road from here. We'll eat our lunch at the viewing area from yesterday, an' get along.”

“I know youse have gotten a good work out at Uluru and are probably tired, but this afternoon is the best time for hikin' Kings Canyon Rim. This is a part of Watarrka National Park, [\[www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/find/watarrka.html\]](http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/parks/find/watarrka.html), so named because of the prevalence of the Umbrella Bush. The aborigine owners of this area are the Luritja, and it is their word—Watarrka—that means 'Umbrella Bush'. I personally like it the best because it has King's Canyon, a rarity out here in the

desert. Youse'll see the Lost City, the Garden of Eden, areas that are as old as the Olgas, fossils of sealife because this was all covered by ocean some five hundred million years ago, an' ancient flora that survives here is due to the protection afforded by the canyon. It's a six kilometer walk, but Sunset on the rim is well worth it.”

Then he added, in the same manner as when he told us to watch out for snakes two days ago, “We'll be takin' the sidewalk a short ways before we get to Cardiac Hill. That's the only difficult part, and if any of youse feel weak, youse can keep goin' up the sidewalk to an overlook under the rim. Any problems with that, mates?”

With a few nervous glances amongst us—we hadn't seen *any* snakes earlier while picking up firewood despite his nonchalant warning—perhaps this was another sort of 'suggestion' on his part? None of us volunteered to take the easier route.

We hadn't gone more than 100 meters (328 feet) when we came to a slab noting Jack Cotterill, the first non-Aboriginal to see this area and recognized the tourism potential. More interesting, though, was a plaque noting that an Englishwoman had suffered a heart attack and died in attempt to walk the same trail we were about to hike. Especially significant to me was the fact that, at 47, she was a few years younger than I! Still confident of our choice, we abruptly veered to the left onto a rocky path, beginning the ascent immediately. I could see numerous switchbacks as my eyes lifted up until blinded by the Sun.

Just as when we had joined Mikes Bike Tours of Amsterdam two years ago, I was last. But in 2004 that was by choice, before my knee surgery; this time was by default. My knee, enervation, and curiosity combined to make me plod slowly, a strategic pattern of carefully placing one foot in front of the other. A few pebbles would slip away, but at least I didn't do that also. I found myself wishing for a hiking staff, of which I have plenty— from a plain yucca stalk to an expensive PBS pledge stick that had an intricate carving of Father Wind in the handle. Unfortunately, those fine sticks were 14300km(8900miles) Northeast, back home, at 8991 Aquawing in the closet, not in my hand where I needed one. At long last, I came upon a broad spot in the path where Anya, Seíva, and Estéban were gathered. Anya was stooped over, simultaneously gasping and spewing disparaging remarks about Gangles and Wayward Bus Tours.

“The brochure said ... MODERATE...physical condition...required, not...OLYMPIC...!”

All four of us stood there as she nearly hyperventilated.

“Anya, I'll go back with you if you want. This trail is awfully rough on me, too.” I told her.

“Are youse alright?” Gangles said as he came down around the bend. “Now youse know why this is called 'Cardiac Hill'. Youse gotten over the worst part, very little left and then flat. Can youse make it?”

“At first I thought, 'Noer'; but now I've rested some. I guess I'm ready to get on.” she replied in a backhanded release of her anger.

I had never heard this unbelievably wonderful word of negation, stretched out over two syllables and sounding of a taste as smooth as an original vanilla milk shake. I was enchanted, and especially pleased that she was from Melbourne, our home away from home.

The question was, “Why had I not heard it when we were there two weeks ago?”

No difference, I was caught in an aural spell, and would do anything for her.

Staying close to her side, the four of us stepped up the loose rocks onto an ancient sandstone platform, for a total of 100 meters (328 feet) higher than the Coaster. Once there, we were found an isolated emergency telephone and stopped to consider our actions.

“If that had been back where I stopped earlier,” Anya spoke with great irritation in her voice, “I would have used it. But now that I've caught my breath, I'll see this through. Lets catch up with others, over there.”

“...here youse see some of the most abundant fossils around here, of an ancient life form gymnosperms called cycads. This is a kind of plant that existed with, and eaten by, dinosaurs some two

hundred million years ago. There are numerous examples of these around the world, but the specific one you're lookin' at is called the MacDonnell Ranges Cycad. Scientists call them *Macrozamia Macdonnellii*, an' they don't exist anywhere else in the world, which makes them quite rare. These are what the government call 'vulnerable', so don't be thinkin' of exportin' any on youse own—seed thievery is not highly regarded. Shortly, in the Garden of Eden, youse'll see more than six hundred different kinds of flora, much of it similar to this, and are called 'living fossils' just because of it's heredity. Please allow me to connect the dots for youse: because these plants are the basis of coal, hence the foundation of the industrial revolution, an' finally our high standard of living.”

I looked at the fossil and saw a fern imprint. Looking around, it was obvious that this came from much earlier times, when the climate and landforms would have encouraged such growth. It was very much like seeing fossils of ocean life on the main library walls back home, which had been locally quarried and indicative of a time when seawater actually covered the area where much of the Chihuahua Desert now exists.

“Over here is one of the most common grasses found in Australia, the Spinifex.” said Gangles. “As some of youse have already found out, this is a terrible plant that causes nothin' but aggro if youse get too close. Do be careful with youse steps.”

“Very similar to a number of plants we have back home,” I mentioned to the group. “Like different cactuses, the Palo Verde Tree, or sand burrs, those little spines can puncture the skin and cause huge pain just by brushing them.”

“Speakin' of huge pain, over here is a tree call the Mulga.” Gangles said. “This is actually useful tree, especially to the Aborigine population. It's incredibly hard an' has been a digging stick, spear, food supply, an' even a chemist's lab.”

Then he elaborated: “On one of my longer tours, a mate got a piece of Mulga wood imbedded into the top of his head whilst loadin' the top of the trailer with firewood. He just got into worse an' worse pain, finally askin' another mate to have a look. It was downright ugly! He spent a bit of extra time in the Alice Hospital, gettin' antibiotics for the infection. What a problem he was.”

Almost as an afterthought, he added in that same nonchalant tone we heard about the snakes and th is walk, “An', no reflection on our Hayburgs, he was from the 'states! Of course, there is no predictin' about injuries, who is goin' to hav'em, when, or where. Lots of strange things happen in the Outback. All of youse are doin' great so far.”

He ambled away on this red-parched, Mars-like red surface with the apparently dead Spinifex and Mulga barely hanging onto life as we gave each other raised eyebrows, and followed Gangles into the setting Sun.

Gathering around him again, he pointed to a series of well-eroded mounds, and asked:

“Imagination. Use it with the shadows. Can all of youse see how this is known as 'The Lost City'?”

There was a large murmur of agreement before we followed him to the next site, again he gave a specific nonchalant instruction: “See that rail. That keeps youse from the cañon edge, which is real crumbly, and a three hundred metre (984 feet) drop. I doubt a visit to the Alice Hospital would do youse any good after that tumble.”

All of us stayed a good distance behind the rail as we moved along on this top-side hike.

“OK,” he said, eventually stopping at a wooden platform, “take a good look around. See what its like, 'cause its about to change completely. You won't believe your eyes.”

Not only was our descent on the wooden steps into a shaded chasm, but the loss of the withering Sun gave way to a moist, darker realm that was flooded with an intense variety of flora. The “Cool!s” “Ooooohs”, and “Ahhh!s” that filled the air compensated for my not seeing the beauty. It wasn't that I couldn't believe my eyes, it was just that I was wearing my Sunglasses.

At the bottom of the open stairwell, we took a small path that opened into a good sized pool of water. The bands of reflected Sunlight gave the mistaken impression that it might be warm water.

“This, my friends,” Gangles told us, “is the water source that permits more than six hundred types of ferns and palms to flourish in this otherwise unforgiving terrain. Welcome to the Garden of Eden. Youse can dip in here if youse want, and no snakes will bother youse.”

Hot and sweaty, but not particularly ready to plunge into the unknown water, none of us did more than dip our shirts or hands into it. Some of the group jerked there hands out as it was near freezing.

Three of us was undeterred by the obvious chill, plunging into it.

The first pair was Foghorn and Nairolofo. The Israeli wasted no time throwing himself completely into the spring, quickly followed by the Italian. Both surfaced very quickly, and the former Israeli fighter emitted a sound not unlike what a ship signals to another while passing close aboard during the night. His counterpart gave a strong tenor equivalent.

I was the third waterdog. Upon my limited immersion, I merely shivered, and agreed that it was “mighty cold” before I rejoined our group for the ascent. I complimented the other two bathers: “Now I wish I had gotten in as completely as you—this is amazingly hot, climbing up again!”

Close to where we would once again emerge from the depths of this oasis in the desert, Gangles had stopped. “I want all of youse to look toward the outflow. Youse've seen the huge variety of flora. Now try to see some intricate rock formations. Do youse see the Aladdin's Lamp? Do youse see Lilliput? Both are so named because of the resemblance to their storybook namesakes.”

Again, most of the group replied with comments of amazement and agreement. Except for me. Wearing Sunglasses in an already shady part of our hike, I was lucky to see the next step. I was delighted to step onto to the cañon rim in the waning Sunlight, continuing on the last kilometer (6/10 mile) of this six km (3.6 miles) hike. I was also pleased that we were returning to the Coaster because I feared a repeat of Kakadu, where the Sunset had enveloped me in darkness, made even more so by my Sunglasses. Shortly after we took another look over the cañon ledge, practicing safety first by crawling on our bellies to project only our head over the side, instead of standing and shifting our center of gravity too high, my fear became very real.

“Mates,” cried out Gangles, “this is the very best part of the Rim Walk—Sunset. And like Uluru, youse can see the myriad colors whilst the Sun goes to twilight.”

Unlike Kakadu, where hundreds of people watched the Sunset who directed me in descent, there were barely a dozen of us watching this Kodachrome moment, which was predominantly a dark green to me. I couldn't afford to be slow now, and had to get close to the group. There was no one around who could help me navigate the ups and downs as we slowly returned to the sidewalk. Yet, I became spooked when I missed a turn and continued walking on a hard corrugated area, left by sea waves five hundred millennium ago.

“Dad,” I heard Katarena behind me, “you need to come back this way!”

I turned around to make out her shadowy figure, and carefully walked toward her. She patiently waited for me, then took my hand as we stepped down a stony stairwell.

“I remember how you were stuck at Kakadu.” she said. “You couldn't see where you were going then with your Sunglasses on, just like now. Stay with me, I know the way.”

“I was afraid this might happen.” I said to her. “Thank you for helping your old man—again!”

Pride and honor radiated from her as she easily delivered me back to the Coaster.

It was quite dark when we pulled into Kings Creek Station [www.kingscreekstation.com.au] and Gangles confirmed our site with management at the front office. Back aboard the Coaster, Gangles asked, “Look, mates, we're here later than expected, so we need to work together. I need some of us to work on the fire, some to work on grub, and other to disperse the swags. I'll also need some volunteers to finish off the amber fluid. Again, it'll be up early 'cause some of youse need to get dropped off at Eraldunda Station [www.walkabout.com.au/locations/NTEraldunda.shtml] to connect for the transfer back to Alice.”

In the short three days we'd been together, Gangles had formed us into a well-working group. I

know of at least one or two football coaches who have spent a career trying to achieve that, and had only minimal success. After all the minor details had been worked out, and the overriding tasks seen to by Gangles, we were once again gathered around the fire, this time being our last together.

For most of us, that is. I had to sack out, too much physical exertion for me. I had put my swag at a fair distance away from the fire ring, with the intention of not hearing the growing chorus of voices, as had Enrique. He bedded down soon after me.

“Not a bad place to sleep—I can barely hear them.” Enrique hoarsely said to me.

Thank goodness for Foghorn.

I awakened to hear him bellowing in a drunken tongue “...you say that instruments are the most important part of a game?”

Apparently he was unsuccessfully trying to mediate an impending conflict between Katarena and the other guys about which came first: the band or the game? The talk was innocent enough, but it was as serious a situation as I could have ever imagined, and, with a surprising loud and strong voice, I shouted from my bedroll, “**KATARENA! GET TO BED!**”

“**I’M SURPRISED AT YOU GUYS! SHE’S A JUVENILE, YOU KNOW!**” I scolded them.

I stayed awake long enough to see her move from the fire ring to her own swag, closer to the other women.

The next morning, my greatest concern was about the events of last night. After ensuring that we were prepared to go, Katarena and I strolled away from camp for some private time.

History was repeating itself, with a 24-year gap.

During late July 1982, I had been on a bicycle tour with Nacho and a Canadian, Glenn. We were pedaling west on the Yellowhead Highway, with frequent moments of us alone on the pavement that cut a swath through the immense forest of beautiful B.C. There were always bridges to hide beneath, campgrounds, roadhouses, and communities spaced along the road that meant we always had someplace to camp, plentiful food and potable water. One day, I found that the steady rain was making me desirous of being in a dry shelter, not a wet tent. Other factors, such as I was hungry and getting chilled, both of which can lead to hypothermia if not remedied, influenced my want. Pedaling up a hill and around a bend, we came to a small, brightly-lit lodge 60km (36mi) East of Prince George. Purden Lake Resort [www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/explore/parkpgs/purden.html] was perfect, and we wasted little time locking our bikes before going in to enjoy a hot meal. Nacho and Glenn thought it extremely funny to play certain songs on the jukebox: “Raindrops just keep falling on my head”, “All I needed was the rain”, “Baby the rain must fall”, “Fire and rain”, “Baby the rain must fall”, “When it rains it really pours”, “Rainy night in Georgia”, “Riding through the rain”, “Rainy days and Mondays”, “I can see clearly now”, were some that I can still remember from that most poignant moment. The one song that stands out most was “The long and winding road” which seemed as appropriate, if not more so, than the others. Eventually, after I had satiated my hunger and warmed up, I approached the owner about possibly staying overnight in a back closet or underneath a table. Bob peered at me, then Nacho, and finally Glenn. He glanced outside to see the rain pelting ever more furiously and our bicycles looking as if they were getting an unwanted cold bath.

“I don’t normally do this,” replied Bob, “but I guess its possible that you can stay below on the patio. And because all other diners have so enjoyed the songs you selected, I’ll charge you only for hot showers.”

I was especially grateful that we were going to sleep dry that night.

Then I nearly ruined it.

After receiving the pergra to stay overnight, I invited our waitress, Suzanne, to carry on an

extended conversation about our adventure, after she got off work. The owner, overhearing my invitation, immediately barged in.

“By thunder, you pursue that and you'll not stay here!” he lowered the boom. “She is my newly graduated niece earning money before going to uni. My brother wanted me to keep an eye on her from the likes of you!”

I reddened, then pleaded my case, “Sir, I greatly appreciate you allowing us to stay here overnight, but in no way do I have any intentions other than telling her about my travels....”

“You'll do no such thing! You may either get back on the road or down to the patio right now!”

I recognized the jeopardy that I had put our wonderful stop in, and humbly went with my two *amigos* to the patio for a dry night.

Twenty-four years later, I was no longer that free-spirited, hunkie, mid-20s bicyclist, but now the wary, chunkie, *older* owner.

I attempted to tell my daughter what to do without belittling her.

“Katarena, you had no business being up as late as you were last night. You were the only woman among five drunk men.”

“I could handle it, Dad.” she disputed me, then tried to lay a guilt trip on me. “If you were that concerned, why did you even sign us up for this? You know we're underage, but *you* put us into this situation!”

I was more forceful than ever. “This is your birthday present, and we all agreed to it with Mark back in Melbourne. You need to pay attention to the signals. When all the other women had left the fire ring, you should have turned in also. All that was left were drunks, and they can be very unpredictable. Again, you should not have been up so late around the fire ring.”

“Dad, I wasn't tired! I can handle it.” she said more weakly. “They were trying to tell me that the game is more important than the band...”

“Katarena, I know you felt gratified that you were the center of their attention, but that discussion only *seems* like it was about band and a football game. It could have gotten out of hand, and I never want you to do that again.” I corrected her, then repeated: “Pay attention to your situation; Specifically when all the other women had left the campfire, you needed to do the same, not be the only one female left among drunken males. *¿Entiende?*”

Now, she mutely hung her head, accepting my directive.

Returning to the campsite, we had missed the boarding the bus. We had no idea where Gangles had taken it, but I didn't think he would have left us. We walked to the front, no bus, then returned to the campsite. Out of the dark, a pair of headlight flashed upon us. Relief filled me when I noticed that they were getting closer. Gangles stopped it within a few feet of us, slammed the doors open, and we got into our seats. It was exceptionally quiet, and I felt as though I had just gotten caught in elementary school passing a note. The teacher had just asked me to come to her desk to render the note. It was so still that a pin drop could be heard, all eyes were focused upon me.

“Thanks, Gangles, for waiting for us. I...” as I began another one of my apologies when he cut me off.

“Can't talk now. I've got to be spot on to drive.” he said through thin lips.

He pushed the Coaster along at a fast clip while totally focused on the road ahead, as did I. Suddenly the Coaster swerved and began to slow down, narrowly missing a wild camel.

“This time of day is dangerous.” he murmured. “Sun's comin' up in my face, animals are active, it takes absolute concentration.”

Pleased that he was at least talking with me now, I agreed, “It's also one of the worst times to bicycling....”

“Sorry, mate.” he cut me off. “I've got to pay attention...” but he didn't finish. Instead, he brought

the Coaster to a stop, then did a u-turn and retreated several yards before another u-turn.

“Mates, I know we're in a hurry, but I just saw a snake off on our side.” he announced. “They come to road for warmth. It looks like it may have been hit. You can get out to look and photograph it, but if you get too close, could be a bloody nasty bite for you if it strikes.”

Getting out of the driver's seat, he found a long branch and moved forward in the headlight beam. At the edge of the illuminated area, he pushed something with his stick. All of us on the bus were quiet except for the clicks from cameras. After a few minutes of pushing the snake off the road, he returned and clambered into the Coaster.

“It was a Brown, just one of the deadliest snakes around.” he commented nonchalantly. “Youse were all pretty smart to not get off, though I was surprised to see it that lethargic. Let's keep going, our rendezvous is at Erldunda Roadhouse, corner of Lasseter and Stuart, is about another hour—if I hurry!”

The Sun was still creating distinct shadows when we pulled into Erldunda Roadhouse. It was a beehive activity as many vehicles, all from differing tour companies, were massed in the car park. Gangles pulled the Coaster went around to the far side, and stopped alongside a duplicate Coaster.

“All youse going to Alice, that's youse bus.” he said aloud. “First, get youse dilly bag out of our trailer an' get ready to set it in their trailer. Everyone else, get youse some more food, use the dunny, and be ready to depart in twenty-five minutes. Juanito, think youse're OK with this?” he said with a grin.

I understood the implication. “Gangles, I'm *not* going to have any trouble!” I replied indignantly. I did cause a bit of trouble, though, with my goodbye gift by keeping our fellow travelers from getting off the bus.

“So what's different about me?” I queried.

“You're *more* old, *more* slow, and definitely *more* in the way!” Foghorn said with a grin.

“And you're *more* loud, Foghorn,” I replied, reflecting his grin, “so both of us are *more* changed. In fact, I'm extremely appreciative of your volume. I hope you don't change that, no matter what little old ladies say!”

“Yeah. I is what I ...” he began when Lori jumped into the fray.

“That lady was right, you two are *more* full of crap!” she insisted. “Really, Juanito! I've got a plane to catch in Alice. Do be courteous and tell us the difference!”

“Of course.” I said sightly ashamed and stepping aside. “I've changed shirts. You remember the 'Class of thousand five' shirt? Now I'm wearing a 'chemo roller coaster' shirt.”

“I do remember that they are both United Blood Service tees, but why are you pestering us about such insignificant details, Juanito?” Maggie sharply asked.

“After Gangles challenged us with how to 'Find the Moon in the Spoon' and 'Passing Crossed Utensils' for the past few nights,” I said in attempt to justify my actions, “I thought a pop quiz would be easy for you....”

“Look, Juanito,” Mac cut me off, “you must be mental. We're not drinking any beer and now *nothing* makes sense!”

“I still have a blooming headache from last night.” moaned Trev.

“Anyway,” I gave a last warm note, “all of you are welcome to come to El Paso. I'll be your personal tour guide through our Hidden Gem of the World!”

They smiled wanly and gave me high-five as they got off, following Gangles instructions.

This was a fairly interesting stop. I noted that Enrique was *again* on the only computer available.

“We haven't had a change of plans.” I questioned him. “What could you be changing from yesterday?”

“Actually, I couldn't get access yesterday, so I have to do it today.” he replied. “I also want to check upon my customers.”

“Your customers?” I responded credulously.

“Yeah.” he flatly replied. “I can do work for them remotely.”

“You can't get much more remote than being on the opposite side of the World.” I marveled, and began wandering. A zoo of sorts existed here, composed of a few hugely oversize inanimate critters, including an armadillo, which can only be seen in these parts. And I thought Texas did things big!

The numbers in our group was greatly reduced, with only Gangles, Desire, Anya, Katarena, Enrique, and myself in the now-spacious Coaster when we drove South on the Stuart. Shortly we pulled into our last stop in Northern Territory, Kulgera Roadhouse. This friendly stop had everything short-term visitors (us) could ask for, from food to fuel to toilets to an internet computer (Which Enrique again monopolized.) to accommodations for the longer-term visitors. In other words, it was very similar to the other roadhouses where we had stopped, and, like those stops, it was most welcome.

Pulling out of the car park in the roomy Coaster, Gangles began telling us, “The road you see on the right is called the Gunbarrel Highway, so named because its straight as a gun barrel in many places. It was surveyed by one of the last great explorers, Len Beadell, in the 'fifties. The goal was to retrieve rocket parts from the Woomera Test Range in Western Australia, and a number of the roads he cut out there are collectively called the 'Bomb Roads'. If Wayward Bus is able to expand to WA, I'm first in line to guide there.”

“We're about to leave the Northern Territory.” he continued. “That marker is the border with South Australia.”

“Get a picture!” I yelled to Katarena and Enrique while reaching up to adjust my Sunglasses. They fell from my face, snapped in half at the bridge.

“Looks like you need to visit an optical shop,” Gangles commented, “but there won't be any 'till Adelaide, four days from now. Will you be OK?”

“Sure. Did you see how they broke right when we crossed into South Australia? It's a sign that I wasn't supposed to see the sign!” I replied, chuckling at my own sense of humor. “Actually, they had belonged to my father, and he wore glasses most of his life. That makes these quite old, and I've broken them a number of times, usually in about the same place. But I'll take it to Bonifacio, who owns Frame Fixer Incorporated back home. He'll get these looking as good as new. I'll just be blind to our next stop, when I can get into the trailer for my other glasses.”

“I can pull over now if you want, but, if you can wait,” he offered then announced, “we'll stop at the Breakaways.”

“No need, Gangles.” I said. “I can put up with this inconvenience. It makes me feel more Australian, who will tolerate a lot of annoyances. Maybe that only my perception because I am a tourist, but all of you Down Under seem to go out of your way for us. Even if overwhelmingly busy, you make an exception. When we were in Melbourne and going from Spencer Street Station to the YHA travel centre on Hardware Lane, where I bought the tickets for your tour, I crossed paths with a barrister name Greg. He was fast walking between the Supreme Court houses but slowed down to talk with me. When he learned I was from Texas, he completely stopped and gave me his full attention, which amazed me.” Our conversation went like something like this:

“Thanks for stopping, your Honor. I have always wondered: How do you like wearing the wig?”

He looked at me with the high gravitas I'd expect from anybody so intimately involved with justice, then he gave a slight grin, and spoke with a chuckle, “These horsehair hats? I hate them! But they are the appropriate attire here.” Then, as he began rushing away, I heard “Enjoy your visit to Australia! G' day!”

Gangles had that all-knowing grin—he knew exactly why the barrister had stopped, particularly so after having known me for the past few days.

“Yeah, I can just see you haltin' somebody—anybody—in the middle of the road an' talkin' with them.”

He turned East onto a dirt road, and the Coaster left a lingering rooster tail clearly showing our movement through this arid region. Within a half-hour, Gangles had made the promised stop, and I was able to carefully replace my intact clear-lensed glasses with the two halves of my Sunglasses. Despite

being temporary blindness by the fierce Sun, I was finally able to see through squinting.

Gangles announced, “This area is a bizarre area of differing rock formation, and like much of what youse already seen, is hundreds of millions of years old. I'll be parking at explanatory plaques, an' youse can look at where more than a dozen movies were made, including Mad Max, Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Ground Zero, and Pitch Black.”

The Breakaway Reserve truly seemed to be almost a separate, distinct part of the landscape, broken away, even more desolate than the rest of the bleakness. The plaques confirmed what Gangles had told us, and I could see salt-and-pepper mounds dotted the area, heavily eroded remnants of harder rock (silcrete) on top of softer rock. The closest to this back home might be The Badlands, Monument Valley, or Death Valley. We loaded back into the Coaster, and Gangles drove us down into the valley for a close-up view of those exposed outcrops and other geographic features.

“The Antakirinia and Muntunjarra people consider this area their school for the Wati, or young men, thus only their bloodline knows everything about it. Be that as it is, I am permitted to tell youse that this is where they get their Ochre to color their ceremonies. The salt-an'-pepper domes youse see are called Pupa, or two dogs. One is a yellow dog an' the other is a white dog, both sittin' down, an' that peak over there is the owner of the dogs. All those other breaks in between are Emus.”

Within a half-hour, he had stopped for another view of what seemed to be a high fence of chicken coop wire.

However, Gangles delivered a most interesting, if not surprising, message:

“This is called the Dog Fence, an' its to keep the wild Dingoes in the pastoral cattle zone separate from the sheep pastoral zone, built around nineteen-hundred. Its the longest single fence in the world, an' nobody agrees on the length, though it is longer than the Great Wall of China. I'll go with a posted sign that has it at nine thousand, six-hundred kilometres (6000 miles), with the Pacific Ocean terminus close to Surfer's Paradise, Queensland, windin' an' twistin' its way North, West, and lastly South to a Southern Ocean terminus in the Bight, close to Ceduna, South Australia. Initially, the construction was by individual landowners wantin' to protect their own sheep, but it was too expensive. But sheep, shearin', an' wool are a big part of what made Oz, so the government took responsibility for the whole, bloody long line after World War Two an' maintains it today.”

I thought The Great Wall of China which had a similar evolution albeit several thousand years earlier, with the desire to keep human populations separate. Ironically, what may have been a spectacular failure so long ago now brings humans together, for the purpose of ancient admiration and a strong financial motivation.

“Youse see the dustcloud kicked up over there?” He asked as he drove toward it. Soon, we were beside it, with the Dog Fence separating us. “That's a Toyota Hilux, one of the mainstays of the Fence Riders who keep this fence in good shape. If youse can believe it, the crews initially used camels for the work, but they caused a lot of the problems. As I said, it was built to keep the wild dogs from chewin' up the sheep. On that side are the dingoes and cattle stations, this side has sheep stations. Over a hundred years ago, the land was available to anyone not aborigine for settling. There were a mild attempt at controllin' the claimants, but squatters took over an' they brought in the sheep. There are over a hundred million of them here now, makin' Australia one of the top producers of wool in the world, an' until not too long ago, it was the major business of Oz. Since sheep, shearin', and wool was, an, still is in many areas, of huge importance, the expenses of maintainin' this phenomenally expensive fence came to be a government obligation. Back at the end of Summer 'eighty-nine, these unbelievable torrential downpours wiped out much of this fence, beyond what the Fence Riders could keep up, and the Dingoes came across, killing twenty *thousand* sheep. That single event proved that keepin' up this barricade is well-worth avoidin' that loss in revenue. It was felt at almost every level, from the pastoralists to truckers to tanners to sheepers, even to tour companies like Wayward—I didn't mind the break from guidin' but I had no income, either. It paralyzed everything. The economy is based upon those four-legged animals.”

Another immense dustcloud was being kicked up in the distance. Just as when we had passed the Hilux earlier, the Dog Fence kept us apart from a massive yet perfectly dimensioned road grader.

“Gangles! That's a *Volvo*!” I exclaimed, clearly impressed.

“Youse are almost as skilled as the youths with observations.” he dryly quipped. “That motor grader you saw was keepin' the maintenance road in good repair, better than this track. But if I drive on it, well, that's breakin' the law. This back road I'm drivin' on is the Dog Fence Scenic Tourist Drive through a gibber plain. Youse can see why this is also called 'Moon Plain.' ”

Now speaking loudly, he said “In a short while, youse'll be in Coober Pedy [www.cooberpedy.sa.gov.au], likely one of the most unique communities in Australia and probably the world. Almost all of the dwellin's are built into the Earth, somethin' they call 'dugouts', and most of those were started as mines that played out. It didn't take long for people to figure out the easiest way to beat the Summer furnace is to stay underground, and beat the taxman by accidentally finding more Opals when expanding their homes. In fact, youse'll be bunkin' in Radeka's Dugout so you can know what its like, but don't count on finding any Opals there—it's against the law to mine in the city.”

“Not to belittle the subterranean accommodations, Gangles,” I mentioned, “but whenever we visit family in Missouri during the Summer, the basement is always the more preferred location to sleep because of that same reason—the temperature is always lower, a steady sixty to sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. It is fairly well known in the 'states, though water drainage might be why it is ignored in El Paso, which is a lot like Coober Pedy with the desert heat and all. Seems back home would be as about as natural place for basements. The other reasons there not built there might be because it ramps up the cost of a home to dig a basement and protect it against other hazards, such as radon gas.”

I really wasn't trying to irritate Gangles anymore than I had already with the delayed departure this morning, but there was a perceptible edge in his voice. “Of course, youse don't *have* to stay below—I myself will be up—but sleepin' like most of the people here is part of the experience youse paid for. I also encourage youse to use the laundry at the hotel. Juanito, I recall youse bragging about wearing that UBS tee shirt for three days. It needs a good machining, and I've got some high-powered soap for youse, too! After youse stow youse gear, the rest of the day is youse.”

The tension was erased as his dig caused much laughter, and he swept his hand toward a bizarre looking landscape to our right. “Up there are the Opal fields, full of pegged claims by individuals. Those conical mounds are the remains of shafts, which begin with a hole dug down to a vein, then horizontally till no more opals. The tailings are vacuumed up to the surface, an' left in the piles. Chunks of good Opal can still be found in them. ”

Then he asked. “Can youse tell me where the homes are?”

Since there was no response, he provided the answer. “See those tubes coming out of the ground. Those are vents for the homes, at least one per room. The more stacks per lot, the bigger the home. There's some mansions here, but not the usual kind—these are underground. See that big screen? That's the town movie house, without the house. They show four films every month, Friday and Saturday evenings. That building is the medical center, an' this is where youse get to make a fortune.” he said, stopping alongside an empty lot. “Youse'll be able to go noodlin', or fossickin' here without fear of fallin' down mine shafts. A person last month found a beaut here last month an' earned a substantial reward. Go on out there an' dig around.”

“An' remember,” he cracked, “should you make good with the opals, I get fifty percent!”

I will readily admit I knew nothing about what I was doing, and it appeared that nobody else knew, either. After a half-hour we traipsed back to the Coaster.

“What's that you have there, Juanito?” Gangles looked at my handfuls of colored dirt-clods. “Not too bad for a newbie, but youse have nothin' more than highly irregular potch. Here's a nickel for the lot, an' I'm payin' you four cents too much! The only reason I don't give a penny is because we quit makin' them back in ninety-two. They simply weren't worth it. Now we round everythin' off to the nearest nickel.” (The right smart Ozzies abandoned using the one and two cent coins because they

knew that inflation had rendered such small amounts useless and began rounding off. This is a lesson for the USA—the copper-clad penny is much more a nuisance.)

I hesitantly accepted the coin, but was doubly insulted when, after completing the exchange, he threw my time, energy, and pride out the window.

“I recognized that poor stuff because there really is far more junk in there than anythin' valuable.” said Gangles, referring to the gravel he had just bought from me. Then he followed that with a smile, saying, “Sorry, Juanito, but neither of us are goin' to be quittin' work anytime soon.”

He continued, “Interestin' place, this Coober Pedy is. Much of the world is represented here, considerin' that there's only about four thousand people that call this home. Immigration has been an important factor, especially when fortunes can be made in exactly the same way as youse attempted. That's why there is such a variety of the churches here—people takin' the chance, but needin' the backin' of their God. Most out in the bush are the Antakirinja Aborigines, an' they don't bother to come into town unless they need somethin'. Everyone, though, is leery of the government an' unafraid to express their opinion, even if that means a little damage.”

“All of youse will see that dynamite and blasting caps are sold at many of the stores here. Alcohol is usually sold in those same stores. Now it doesn't take much brainpower to understand the combination of both items can lead to explosive situations. What happened was that an irate reader so intensely disliked an article in the Coober Pedy Times that he placed charges around the editorial office an' rather blew it apart. His other option, I guess, would be to write a letter to the editor, but that probably wouldn't have had the same impact.”

I would think not.

Since I often write letters to the editor back home, I well know how unexplosive my comments are, but I will never use a real explosive device, especially in this heightened age of terrorism.

Filing into Radeka's Downunder Motel and Backpackers Inn [www.radekadownunder.com.au]. The Oz culture pervaded as the owners, Yveline and Tony greeted us individually as we filed into the main reception area. Opals, both for sale and for viewing dominated the room.

Seeing my gaze at some of the stones, Yveline said “Yes, they are beautiful. But you really must know more, and I encourage you to go to across the road to the Umoona Opal Mine & Museum. Once you've had a few lessons about Opals, you will be able to make an informed purchase.” She personified what has made our visit down under so fantastic; instead of trying to sell us opals right off, we were pushed to learn before investing.

“First, mates,” said Tony, “you'll want to drop your loads below. Go down and make yourself comfy.”

It was quite an experience, descending the stairwell and feeling the temperature drop significantly. My comparison to basement stays in Missouri was similar only in the physics behind the reason. In the light of pale, energy-efficient fluorescents, we passed by several rooms, either closed off by a door or a plastic chain from which hung a plastic reserved sign. We came to the end of this dim passage, each of us selecting a bunk in the 18-bed Diggers Down.

I laid down for a moment, taking off my glasses and enjoying the coolness of this cavern as my body sank into the mattress. I quickly put my glasses back on and took several efforts to get myself up. “Can't sleep in this one, much too soft.” I made as a general announcement.

“Try these over here,” came Enrique's voice out of the dimness. “they're quite firm.”

After shuffling to another bottom bunk, I repeated the procedure, this time finding it most satisfactory and closed my eyes.

“Dad, don't go to sleep now!” Katarena exhorted. “Gangles said the rest of the day is ours. Let's explore!”

I grumbled something about not needing to go immediately, but returned my glasses to my face. I turned on an exceptionally nice personal light and began to examine a map of the area. I started to write in my logbook, except I couldn't find it.

Always helpful, “Its behind you.” said Enrique, as he accurately interpreted my dilemma. Sure enough. The orange Post Australia cloth bag that I had bought in Katherine for one Australian dollar was exactly where he said. Maybe I was getting too old...!

“You go without me,” Desire said from another bunk in the dark. “My foot hurts.”

Anya, who had taken the adjacent bunk to her, turned on her personal light and gasped. “Desire, I can't believe you've been able to walk anywhere. That ulceration is bloody seeping. I saw a pharmacy across the road, and we can get you a plaster. You stay here with your foot elevated.”

“She's the doctor here, Desire.” I jokingly said. “Better follow her instructions!”

“Noer, Juanito,” Anya retorted, “you misrepresent me, which is a violation legal, ethical, and morality. I'm trained as a nurse, noer where close to being a medical doctor. Let's get on to medical supplies for Desire's foot.”

With a definite purpose in our immediate life, we left her in the darkness and went up to the light. After crossing Oliver Street, we stopped at the gas station for a moment to explain the situation to Gangles, who had just finished refueling the Coaster.

“Sounds like youse are right on target, Anya.” said Gangles. “Let me know if I can help.”

“Noer, you don't need to do anything.” she replied. “I'll make her right after the pharmacist gives us a word.”

We turned onto Hutchison and went into Opal Field Pharmacy, asking the pharmacist for her recommendation.

“Don't wanta disappoint you, mates, but I'm not a pharmacist, thus I'm not qualified to make a suggestion.” she informed us. “However, you may wanta buy this salve and plaster to put on the hole after draining the pus.”

Satisfied with her non-suggestion, we made the purchase and returned to Desire. I noted that Gangles had finished refueling, and *two* Coasters were now parked in front of Radeka's. Going below, we found Desire asleep, and roused her enough to apply the bandage before leaving her covered with a sleeping bag.

Back outside, we considered our actions. Katarena, Enrique, and I went across Hutchison Street, to the recommended Umoona Opal Mine and Museum [www.umoonaopalmine.com.au].

“It's five dollars per person to enter!” I said as my eyes opened wide.

“Dad, Enrique and I are both students. We can get in for less.”

“Like everything else,” Enrique answered my exclamation, “when are we going to do this again as a family?”

“True, so true,” I replied. “You're mother is going to have more fits about how much money I'm spending.”

Regardless of the future conflict with my beloved wife, I knew, as every expense thus far had been, that this was money well spent.

Like most museums, everything is explained, spelled out in an exacting, precise manner that can might possibly be deliberated by someone who knows the subject through and through. The name “Umoona” is the Antakirinja description of a tree that means “long life”, which I speculate might refer to the fact that *anything* growing natural in this desert would either be very short-lived or adapt and live a long while. The museum itself is actually an old mine that had been converted into a very comfortable living quarters. At least half of the population of Coober Pedy lives in such a home.

As has happened so often throughout history, the founding of Coober Pedy occurred by an accidental discovery. It was 1915 when James Hutchison, leader of a gold prospecting syndicate from Adelaide, had camped in the vicinity of the Stuart Range. James' 14-year old son, William, had been assigned campwatch duty while the others spread out to look, not for gold, but for something far more precious in the desert—drinkable water.

Perhaps the lad was tired of watching nothing but the Sun and mountains in the distance. The camp certainly wasn't going anywhere, no intruders were apparent. Heck, company might have help

alleviate his boredom. Or perhaps he was uncertain about the adults returning with essential water—it was well-known that many a death in the desert is the direct result of the lack of that lifesaving elixir. Whatever the reason for his decision, he up and walked off, pail in hand, ready to find water on his own, or die trying. Willie knew his geography well enough that altitude meant condensation, and the eroded mountainsides in the distance were indicators that torrents of rainfall—or perhaps a slight but steady trickle from a seep—had created such a landscape. It was dark by time he returned to the campsite to a much disgruntled father, ready to punish his disobedient son. The anger soon turned to gratitude because Willie brought back both good water *and* opals.

“Might not be gold, Pater,” he told his father, “but I know it's'a good stone. An' lots'a water.”

“He's gotcha' there, James.” said one of the ragged members, wiping his mouth after a swig of that sacred juice. “He done better'n' any of us.”

Possibly one of the worst ways to be acknowledged for such an reliable source of of the world's Opal production would be dying before recognition, which is what happened to Willie. After the opal discovery, he drowned a half-decade later on a cattle drive, along the Birdsville Track while crossing the Georgina River. An inauspicious fall to his equally inauspicious rise. At least the main street, the road which served as our strand through town, bears his last name.

Coober Pedy has boomed fairly continuously, with occasional market downturns, and now produces most of the world's Opals. It's water supply is currently saved by a deep bore, along with strong recycling and conservation means. That is why this is possibly one of the most intriguing and unique towns in all of Australia, one that will survive for time immemorial—or until the price of Opals bottom out!

Another exhibit that I felt was underplayed was about the plesiosaur fossil, even though we had immense assistance from one of the docents, Christina Athanasiadis. The first bits of this aquatic reptile had been found over several decades, when, a partial skeleton was found a few hours Southeast (near Lake Eyre South, which, a hundred million years ago, was a large Southern sea). A nearly complete skeleton was found closeby in 1987 and nicknamed “Eric” by paleontologist Dr. Paul Willis, but it needed a proper scientific name. Appropriately, the scientific title, Umoonasaurus, came much later, during this year. I guess it could have been called “Cooberasaurus” or “Pedyasaurus”, but that would have been more drubbing of the already maligned Antakirinja language.

It actually took several decades to piece this skeleton together, with some of the first discoveries in 1968 by Molly and John Addyman in the Andamooka, a few hundred kilometers South, but hundreds of pieces came from around here. Many ancient bits of this ocean-swimming dinosaur have been found exclusively in the opal-bearing fields (hence the other title, “Opallionectes” or “Opal Swimmer”) when the gemstone searching was conducted by hand. The pick-and-shovel method back then mostly kept the fossils from getting pulverized, which happens now because machines are used to extract the ore. Commercial interest obviously ruled as I saw no indication that environmental impact studies were ever conducted, which could cause additional impairment to research. To further complicate finding such a significant link in the long-past record of life, the object was to find *opals*, not *fossils*, so little regard was given to anything but the beautiful rock. According to Paleontologist Dr. Ben Kear of the University of Adelaide, the Umoonasaurus helps fill the gap between the “older” (170 million years Before Present) plesiosaur fossils of Europe and the “newer” (65 million BP) plesiosaur fossils of Antarctica and Patagonia.

I personally think 105 million years is quite a gap, although I am exceedingly grateful for that time period. Without it, and evolution, I doubt I'd be writing this nor would you be reading it.

Beside bridging two extremes of plesiosaur fossils, there is an indication of the world climate millions of years ago. The plesiosaur is a warm water creature, with ample fossils found in areas known for heat. Yet the Umoonasaurus fossils were found in an area of high latitudes, when Pangaea existed, before the continents began assuming their current position. Was it warmer then? Is our climate

returning to those times? Will Humans go the way of the dinosaur (both land and sea dwelling), which seemed to fill most every niche, just as we have?

In the Aboriginal section, the now familiar Rainbow Serpent touched Earth here, reappearing as the opals. I also learned that the town name is actually a corruption of the Arabana Aboriginal tongue, 'kupa piti'. It seemed completely logical that "kupa" means "white man" and "piti" means "hole" which, combined, meant "white man's hole" or "white man in hole", obvious because of the dugouts. I also found the Aboriginal museum particularly useful in answering nagging questions about the Aborigines. Not too different from the USA, the indigenous population is finally receiving recognition for having the first human presence here, sustaining itself with a complex cultural system of survival that was in concert with the environment. And, just as in North America, their concept of not owning is widely validated around the world with local, state, and national parks / world heritage sites for everyone to enjoy. However, this idea is still subordinate to the law and the whims of commerce, which has long been contradictory to the environment. Again, another disturbing similarity, albeit disappointing, is the genocide that was committed upon the Aborigines. When the first English arrived, over 200 distinct languages existed, with an equivalent number of Aboriginal populations speaking them. Now there are barely a 100, and many of those are on the endangered and threatened list as the speakers are dying off before transmission of such a fundamental cultural element is accomplished.

One of our last stops in this amazing complex was concessions and gifts.

"Dad, these are so nice." Katarena said. "Mom would love this one." picking out an exquisite broach.

Recognizing that this easily within my purchasing power, I gave my VISA credit card to the cashier.

"I notice you didn't grimace this time when you paid." Enrique flatly commented.

"The bill is only *two* digits to the left of the decimal," I replied, "and your mother will appreciate it! Don't you wish she was with us?"

"If she was here, we wouldn't be doing this."

"Oh, Enrique, you don't know that." said Katarena, then added. "I think she would, and it is beautiful."

Owing to the high quality of the Umoona Opal Mine and Musuem, I reversed my position about the entrance fee because every penny, rather, every nickel, was well spent. This was one of the best museums, if not the best, I have ever been inside. It was the perfect size that didn't leave me exhausted from either walking huge distances or taxing my brain with too much information. I did not feel overwhelmed, but a sort of pleasant contentment, the same kind of satisfaction that comes from correctly completing all of my documentation at school.

After several hours admiring this true-to-life exhibition, we exited, crossing Hutchison, and entering Lucas's dry goods and general store in search of potential foodstuffs to snack on while in the Coaster. We still had four nights, 1050 km(652 miles), until the conclusion of this tour in Adelaide. Inside the store, stocked up on gedunk (lots of Arnott's Original TimTam 200 gram bags, a Mamee Monster Variety 12-Pack of chips, Whitaker's Dark Chocolate Bars, ETA salted peanuts, and, for quick consumption, ice cream: Golden Gaytime compound chocolate & biscuit, and Nestle Peters Billa Bong chocolate). We did not buy any blasting caps or mining equipment.

"I always eat here when in Coober Pedy" said Gangles as he led us into John's Pizza and Grill. "John helped save me from bulldust hole a few years ago. I tried to take a tour bus too slowly on a dirt track and it became mired in the fine silt. John was passing by in his truck and pulled us out. Been coming only here since, and I think youse'll find it a good choice." Both he and John were laughing, as if he hadn't spoken the entire truth—bulldust is another Aussie euphemism that means a fictional story with little basis in fact. "Youse can go elsewhere if you want. We won't leave 'till tomorrow."

However, hunger helped us to not disagree with his choice. Drinks had just been delivered to the two picnic tables that we had pushed together when a smartly-dressed young man approached us.

“Are you Gangles' tourgroup?” he inquired in precise English.

Seeing our heads nod “yes”, he pulled up a chair while speaking. “I'm Gerry, from Rebecca's tourgroup. We shared the campground at Uluru, where you stole that one fellow's toast.”

Everyone smiled and laughed at the memory while he continued.

“I think I was the only person who didn't speak fluent Japanese, and whilst I don't mind learning another language, it is not on my schedule at this moment. I heard all of you speaking English so Rebecca made an arrangement with Gangles. Additionally, they were going to Kangaroo Island, also not on my schedule. I missed the trade-off at Erldunda Roadhouse—the fellow whose toast you stole also got a bit lost when he got off the bus to take photos of a deadly poisonous Brown Snake. Rebecca was fearful that he might have met up with one of the Brown relatives and was laying deceased somewhere closeby. We spent an hour looking for the bloke and finally found him taking pictures of camels. That was, begging your pardon, 'the straw that broke the camel's back' and I was glad to make this transfer even though a half-day late.”

“No worries, please sit down and join us!” said Anya as we welcomed him.

I didn't have the map for him to identify his home, the very well-known London, England. We neither needed it nor did we care, after he shared his reason for being in Australia.

“I finished up my Computer Engineering degree a few years ago, and have been a freelance techman since. I currently rent an apartment in Sydney, and am rather between jobs at the moment. Seeing this part of Australia is a swell way to spend some of my earnings, and give me a chance to use my new camera. But not tonight; too many clouds and the peripheral lights are too distracting.”

“Looks like youse've brought in our new companion perfectly.” said Gangles, who rejoined us after visiting the kitchen crew. “I'll tell youse what, since we don't have to be off before first light like before, sleep in a bit, clean youse clothes, wander around some. The plan tomorrow will generally be more tour an' talkin' about the area, possibly includin' Crocodile Harry if he's up, an' swagin' at William Creek Station. I brought out a special pizza made just for me—'The Bulldust Hole'.”

Between all the palaver and eating, a few more hours into the night were consumed. Gangles took care of the bill, and all of us returned to Radeka's. Walking back, I said to Katarena and Enrique, “Let's put all our clothes needing a wash inside my tee shirt. That way I'll take care of them first thing in the morning. OK?”

They both readily agreed, glad for a chance to sleep in.

The best way for me to end this long day was to shower, removing the days accumulation of sand and bulldust. This was my first bed since Alice, and, like earlier, I fell into a deep slumber in the totally black, calm, and cool darkness that was so sweetly silent that I was left with no other choice.

Unfortunately, the imprinted pattern of waking early continued, which was fine as I quietly crept upstairs with our collected clothes to the laundry room. Even though I knew I would succeed in washing, I hesitated. I remembered the frustration I had experienced with a similar machine that had the same markings as the washer in Narvik, Norway, two years before. My fear of that disastrous cleansing was beaten down as the instructions were in English, as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish. This is very typical of youth hostels, accommodating travelers from the world over.

Moving to the self-serve kitchen, a couple who were driving around Australia shared their trip with me. Actually, I wouldn't let them alone, especially once I found out their itinerary. I needed to glean every bit of information out of them for future reference, and they were happy to divulge every detail.

“What's the best thing you've found so far as you've gone on your walkabout?” I asked them.

“Well,” he said, “we are on a 'drive-about', and I've liked everything.”

“Jim, darling,” his wife said, “don't be mistaken. You haven't seen everything yet.”

Then, to me, she stated “We've been around the perimeter, and are now bisecting the country.

Our last stop will be in Tasmania. Then we'll go back home to Earlwood. Its cooe to where Prime Minister John Howard had a home."

"Yes, yes, you are correct, Gillian." agreed Jim. He quizzed me, "Juanito, I'll ask the same of you; what is your favorite place in the USA?"

"Actually, I'm a bit like you; I like it all. But, I guess my favorite place is probably my home in El Paso, Texas. My wife and I moved there seventeen years ago from Springfield, Missouri, with our household in the Ryder truck and towing her Datsun Nissan hatchback. Our infant son was in a baby seat between us on the bench seat as we left the Ozark environment of trees, grass, and green. Substituting for that were cactus, sagebrush, and brown of the desert. We were sure we couldn't stay beyond a year. Then Winter came; we looked at each other and said 'There's no ice on the road! We're staying!' You see, Gillian and Jim, we had come from the Queen City of the Ozarks, and it shuts down every Winter because of the inevitable ice storms, going to a city that has few natural disasters. We haven't looked back since, although we do return to Missouri to visit family every year or so. I am a teacher in the Whysleta Independent School District—which is why I am here with our children on our Summer break, and my wife—she's a librarian for the city and is occupied with opening up a new branch, which is why she is not here now. We have found El Paso to be a truly Hidden Gem of the World, and would be most hesitant to relocate now."

"So you'd recommend El Paso as the place to go in Texas?" asked Gillian. "What about Dallas? Where the television program took place. Isn't that in Texas?"

"It is the second largest city in Texas, after Houston." I replied with increasing enthusiasm. "But that is in *East* Texas, not *Far West* Texas where El Paso is. I highly encourage you to visit. And if you do, look me up and I'll give you a very specialized tour. What I think is the finest site there is actually in our sister city, Juarez, called Parque de Madero, on the South side of Boundary Marker Number One. That's because access to it from the USA is so restricted that you almost have to enter from Mexico, drive through the city to Anapra, a Northern suburb. I actually don't mind that, it's another reason to visit that wonderful country, if only for a short while. Mexico has taken excellent care of their portion, and even though the last bit of road to it can be a challenge, it is an excellent destination for locals and tourists. Unfortunately, the USA has all but ignored the potential of this vital area and allowed our side to degrade into nothing more than a Border Patrol turnaround."

"You certainly are excited about your region." said Jim. "We may have to plan our first overseas trip to your city."

"Unfortunately, it won't be easy." I said with pained regret in my voice. "The airport name claims international status, but it hardly is—you have to connect through other cities, and there are only regional flights to other cities within the USA. Much of the blame, presumably, is due to President Bush's overworked euphemism, 'nine-eleven'. Why, a decade ago, the airport was international as I, one of my brothers, and a cousin were able to fly from El Paso to Chihuahua, where we connected to Los Mochis. From there, we rode the ChePe to Chihuahua, flying back to El Paso. But no more. It is so disgusting!"

"Maybe we won't go there anytime soon..." Gillian started before I interrupted her.

"Well, if I ever become Mayor, I'll fix that problem!" I spoke with a faraway squint in my eye.

"You become Mayor," laughed Jim, "and we'll definitely visit!"

We parted company in good humor, and I moved our spun-damp clean clothes into a dryer. So much better than the washing fiasco I engineered in Narvik! Or so I thought.

"Dad!" exclaimed Katarena later. "All my clothes are dry, but their pink! What happened?"

"Here's the problem." Enrique stated after a short inspection. Holding up a pink neckerchief, he continued, "You didn't check the machine before washing. This was in it, got all mixed in, and was even dried with our clothes. Good thing this is so old, not much color left to completely mess up our clothes."

With a smile he said, "Still, Katarena, at least they are dry—remember when he couldn't even do

this in Narvik?"

"Yeah," she agreed, "we had to carry everything separate because it was"

"Look, you two," I interrupted, "no more complaints. Besides, you can barely see any pink!"

Hearing a horn, we threw our clothes into our bags and rushed out to the Coaster.

"Do youse see the that treeless land over there?" Gangles asked us while pointing to a barren sandspot from the Coaster. "With the dark blotches? Those are the 'greens' of the golf course, probably the only one in the world that is nothin' but a sand trap. Regardless, its considered one of the top most distinctive courses in the world. Golfers carry a small bit of plastic turf with them whenever they need to tee off."

We rounded the corner and turned off on a rougher track, finally stopping in front of slope that had a cave entrances. I was a bit spooked by the thought of going into such an enclosed environment, but resolved to tough it out.

"This is the lair of Crocodile Harry, the real *Crocodile Dundee*, and is on our premier visitation list amongst other Coober Pedy sites." In a lower tone, he told me, "Juanito, it is quite risqué inside, an' Katarena is young. Think she can handle it?"

After a moments pause, remembering her telling me 'I could handle it' back at the Kings Canon campground, as well as our extensive travels.

"Gangles, she's pretty worldly, considering her youth." I responded. "I don't think she'll have any problems."

We followed Gangles into the surprisingly spacious shelter, which I thought the ultimate in Earth-contact dwellings, and found it festooned with cards or messages scribbled upon the walls in a multitude of languages. Hanging from the ceiling in a haphazard manner were numerous women's undergarments, which gave the space an almost-laundromat feeling, excepting, of course, that often an amorous message was written upon the fabric, or had a note attached. Indeed, it was virtually a carnival atmosphere, warm, inviting, and intriguing all at once.

Then Gangles emerged from a more subterranean room with a gray-haired, scrawny Crocodile Harry, who spoke: "G'day. I was just snoozin' some. Glad to have ye' here. Please sign the guest book, if ye' don' min'."

I was taken aback by his less-than-robust demeanor, but in looking around, I saw a number of photographs and other remembrances of heady days gone by. In them, I could see the former Crocodile Harry who did indeed look very much like a frontiersman, unafraid to take anyone or anything on. Now, many years later, he lives on his notoriety.

He graciously allowed us to walk about his rather large dugout, which looked fairly comfortable considering there were few modern-day conveniences present. Had it not been for the obvious remains from many visitors, including us, he easily could have been a recluse, subsisting on local handouts until he had found the great Opal that would turn his life around.

In fact, I was reminded of my Great Uncle Brub, a strapping farmboy who had left his clan in Lake Spring, Missouri, shortly before Black Thursday in 1929, to "make it big" in New York City. I visited him briefly while in December 1976, while shifting commands from my first ship, the USNS Marias (Mayport, Florida), to my second ship, the USS England (San Diego, California). I was the last of any family members to see Uncle Brub alive in The Big Apple. He was glad to see me, and I still have photo of the two of us in period clothing atop the Empire State Building, he the gentleman, I his squire.

Despite our blood tie, he was secretive, and when we entered a seedy hotel (all of the Times Square area was remarkably filthy, dominated by prostitution and houses of porn!), he whispered to me, "I'd take you to my room, but that's where my perpetual motion machine is. I wouldn't want you to get hurt by knowing about it—don't tell anybody. The oil companies have been after me for years because my invention would ruin them." The secret died with him a year later, and his perpetual motion machine never did make it to market, nor threaten any oil companies, big or small.

Back into town for a quick lunch at John's Pizza and Grill, I was suddenly overcome with a last thought, and it was going to be my lifesaver. I stuffed the last of my sandwich into my mouth, mumbled to Gangles,

“Don' leef withou' me. I'll be righ' back, I need to buy gems for my Missouri relations...” and I rushed across Hutchison, back to the Umoona Opal Mine and Museum. I knew exactly what had to be done. I rushed by Aborigine Interpretive Centre, straightaway to Christina in the gift shop. Quickly looking over the most expensive gems to the less-expensive merchandise, I bought two broaches and a stickpin, each decorated with a nice triplet opal. I was ensuring a smoother future by remembering the other all-important women to me: *Madre Beatriz*, *Tia Luiza*, and *Suegra Maria*.

Going outside, I found our Coaster in the parking lot but nary a person inside.

“Hey, Dad!” I heard the familiar voice of Katarena shout. “We're over here!”

I turned to see her and the others gawking at the various props from different movies shot on location in this area.

“This was in the Pitch Black movie, and that was in one of the Mad Max movies, Dad.” Katy gleefully pointed out.

“Yeah,” Enrique added, “this whole place is like a movie set, although a lot of it has been altered to suit the needs of the local population. Even Crocodile Harry was in one of the movies.”

“I can't say I remember seeing it, though it makes sense.” I replied. “Even if the Opal trade gave out, Coober Pedy could probably survive on tourists, like us.”

“All right, mates,” Gangles boomed out from the driver's window of the Coaster, “we need to get along. We're swagging at William Creek tonight.”

Driving up Hutchison to the Stuart Highway, an Aborigine was stumbling on the sidewalk. Gangles saw me staring and commented: “She may have had some alcohol, which is illegal to give the Aborigines. They have a genetic weakness, just like in your country.”

“But you see the youngsters over there?” Gangles pointed to the other side of the street, into a littered alleyway. “The ones with the cloths on their faces? That's the new generation getting high from the diesel fuel. Its called 'Petrol Sniffing'. Very dangerous, can cause serious brain damage an' death.”

I shuddered as I remembered dangerous things youths (and older people, too!)—commit in pursuit of a 'high', that altered mental state that causes a person to be totally disconnected from reality.

“I'm familiar with that, Gangles.” I told him quietly. “I had abused alcohol when I was in the Navy. I lost three days after drinking a mix of beer, wine, and the high proof stuff when my first ship was inport Massawa, Ethiopia. I could have died and not known. Scared me no end, and I have been on the wagon ever since. I don't even like going to sleep at night because I'm afraid I won't wake up.”

“Yeah, Juanito,” Gangles replied. “I don't drink much either, just enough to socialize. Youse remember how much those other blokes tossed it down back at Uluru? It is kind of scary.”

“What's worse,” I said to Gangles, in a voice loud enough for my children to hear, “is that Petrol Sniffing you mentioned. In the sixties, there was lots of drug experimentation, from marijuana to LSD. But the sniffing then was of airplane glue, which has the same effects that you just described from Petrol Sniffing. And back home, I've seen guys wildly out of control in streets, their faces discolored from 'huffing' paint. I tell you, Gangles, it scares me.”

“Yeah.” he agreed. “It's frightenin'. Their comin' out with a new kind of diesel fuel, called Opal which is bein' marketed first to where higher concentrations of Aborigines are. It's supposed to not dope up inhalers.”



“OK,” he spoke out, “youse remember yesterday, when I showed youse the mullock piles an' explained their presence. Well, this is the kind of rig used to vacuum the rocks out, into the barrel at the top of the riggin' on the truck. *That* is the symbol of Coober Pedy.”

“Most of youse,” he continued, “have seen those warning signs of how to walk here? Well, some bloody tourists have died because they concentrated so much on takin' pictures that they didn't pay attention to their surroundin's and walked into a mine shaft. That's none of youse, of course.”



I watched that magnificent symbol of Coober Pedy get swallowed by the rooster tail kicked by the Coaster and trailer after Gangles turned East on the William Creek track. I had nothing but compliments for the Opal Capital of the World and plan on making my fortune *next* time I'm in town.

I turned my attention to Gangles and told him “Well, I did machine wash our clothes this morning like you suggested, and you might notice that we now have a pink tinge...”

Gangles jammed on the brakes and the Coaster skidded to a halt on the gravel. Then he turned a wide 180 degrees and returned to Radekas Down Under. Throwing the emergency brake on and leaving the engine running, he jumped out, and bounded into the laundry room, returning with an armload of clothes.

“Ta for remindin' me, Juanito.” he said to me, then louder to the others: “It won't take much off our schedule, but Juanito reminded me that I had left my clothes in the dryer.” He quickly drove the Coaster back over the same ground we were just on, then stopped again, this time in front of a large warning sign:



“Youse were sayin' somethin' about a pink tinge, Juanito?” asked a relieved looking Gangles.

“Oh, sure, Gangles,” I said. “I gave all our clothes a good washing, which, in fact, may have been *too* good because a red rag snuck into the machine and bled. That's why our clothes look slightly pink.”

“Do you still have the red cloth?” he asked.

“Probably so.” I replied thoughtfully. “It was already in the washer, then I unknowingly put it with our clothes in the dryer. By the time I got to sorting, you were learning on the horn, so I threw it all into my bag.”

“It belongs to me.” he stated. “Its my bandanna. I thought I'd lost it. Had it for years, on all my tours. Youse can give it to me later.”

“Definitely, I'll give it back, but it looks like it has spent *decades* here.” I agreed.

“Not just here, but I also used to run tours in Munich.” he elaborated. “That bandanna was an identifier to me mates in the pub crawls. Only bad thing about those tours was that they spent so much on booze that they didn't have much left to donate to their tour guide afterwards.”

“Sure sounds similar to a tour we took in Berlin two years ago that was run by Chris Sandeman.” I remembered aloud. “The tours were free, but donations were accepted at the end.”

It was the first time I'd ever heard Gangles expressing any surprise.

“Streuth?! He was the same bloke who hired me to do the pub crawl in Munich. He specifically wanted me to be the last person so I could help anybody who might be havin' trouble.”

Not that I hadn't expressed lots of wonderment Down Under already, but it was another bonding moment for us;

“Gangles, I had that same position on Mikes Bike Tours in Amsterdam a week before the Berlin tour. That tour leader, Jeffo, asked if any of us knew bicycles, which I certainly do. When I blew my whistle—the same one around my neck right now— he immediately authorized me to be the last person. In fact, we have a special title: Assman.”

“Jeffo! The transplanted Canadian! He's a corker of a tour leader, among other things!” Gangles marveled before continuing. “Yeah, that's exactly what we were. It's a good thing, too. On one crawl, one of my girls, not much older than your Katarena, had a wobbly boot on and was being accosted by two German blokes. I politely asked them to leave her alone, but they didn't. So I became un-polite, and left'em in the dunny, suckin' on trough lollies, regrettin' their actions. Yeah, Juanito, we serve an important function.”

“So how long were you in the military learning your combat moves?” I asked.

Gangles now looked extremely uncomfortable, and took on the thousand-yard stare of a veteran who's seen too much. He spoke with evasiveness: “Can't really say I've ever been in the forces. I just kinda' know how to do right.”

“I see that tattoo on your bicep.” I pressed him, and mentioned other possible identifiers. “You were in Germany, and know Jeffo in the Netherlands. It's OK to not tell me about your Special Forces involvement, but I'll bet you are fluent in multiple languages and are skilled with self-defense. Not to worry, I won't tell anyone.”

“Juanito,” he spoke directly to me, “I'm not involved with anythin' military, but I do know enough to take care of me mates. The tattoo comes from a long time ago in high school, the Fitzroy Lions. I know some of several languages, but that's due to me havin' mates in Europe. I'll be goin' to see them in another month. After meetin' in Amsterdam, we'll go onto Greece. Listen, forget this rubbish about the military. I never served.”

We fell silent, but I stared at him and saw his eyes, which seem to reveal what few have seen unless they've been in combat. I knew that distant yet pragmatic realism that accompanies life-and-death scenarios vicariously, starting with my relatives.

My *gran abuelo*, Waldo Henrio Porfirio, who I scarcely remember because I was so young, has appeared in numerous family home movies, all silent of course, but the photos speak tomes. It is a fact that he was a member of the West Point Class of 1901, but the whispered reason for his abrupt “departure” from the school was that “... he couldn't pass French...” There were likely other reasons for his departure, undoubtedly related to the hazing scandals that had resulted in the death of cadet Oscar Booz, leaving *cadet* Douglas MacArthur in convulsions, and *cadet* W.H. had left the famed school. I have rarely seen a more determined facade of someone who will not be pushed around anymore than W.H.

The other who bore the far-away look was that of my father, Waldo Porfirio Hayburg. Even though he did not see direct action in World War Two, he was a member of the occupation forces in Europe. He would occasionally be assigned to cool off hotspots of those who refused to acknowledge surrender, those who were willing to give their life up for a lost cause while taking the life of the victor.

Two of my neighbors, Armand Chavez and *Senior* Figueroa, both combat veterans in the “Forgotten War”, Korea. Both possessed that demeanor of soldiers who know death first hand and a country that would not accept a bloody conflict so closely upon the heels of WWII.

I have two close friends, Lt. Colonel Gee Tee (retired), and Major Kilo Jalisco (retired), who have seen heavy action. Gee Tee is part of the student recovery project on campus, and when I see him, he wears the humble countenance of a VietVet still suffering the loss of his men in Vietnam. KJ is careful not to state the challenges while assigned to stabilizing of the fragmentation of the former Yugoslavia.

And of me? Not hardly a combat veteran, and bickering with the boss (who *was* a VietVet) doesn't count. A First Class Signalman was directly responsible for ensuring that the chain-of-command absolutely be followed. He could barely tolerate his Second Class Signalman (me) because I “missed”

Vietnam action, instead receiving a plush, two-year assignment aboard an MSC ship, the USNS Marias, T-AO57, before receiving orders to a regular Navy vessel, the USS England, CG22.

So, in my analyzing look at Gangles, I saw over a hundred years of military combat service that bestows upon an individual a particular countenance, accomplished no other way than armed conflict.

Slightly embarrassed, I looked away, becoming intent upon the passing scrub terrain, occupied primarily by a several cows and water tanks. I saw very little grass, or anything green, for that matter in this sandy and rocky brown landscape. It brought to mind the first time Elena and I moved to El Paso 17 years ago, and the world morphed from the Queen City of the Ozarks to the Hidden Gem of the World. Thank goodness for Wayward Bus Tour and tour leader Gangles! Without their Coaster and his insight, this would be little more than just an arduous way to travel through Australia.

“OK, mates,” he boomed out into the Coaster, causing us to shake awake, “To the left, youse can see a ditch-like depression that has trees growin' bankside, which is a dry river into Lake Cadibarrawirracannaover, the longest place name in Australia. On youse right, there are emus, the third largest bird in the World. Youse shouldn't have any problems with photos if youse got a fast camera settin', especially since this road keeps us from goin' too fast. If youse're goin' to have a problem, it'll be keepin' up with the birds. They can run as fast as sixty clicks per hour (36 mph). I'll see if we can get closer, and pull over.”

We might have been able to get closer, but, true to Gangles words, those long-legged, flightless birds ran away faster than we could motor on the gravel track. The scrawny cattle, however, were the opposite; those steak and rawhide machines were domesticated and not inclined to move far from the water tanks nor particularly worthy of memory stick space.

We pulled into William Creek [www.williamcreekhotel.net.au] as the Sun approached the horizon. I saw a few buildings and trees standing up from an otherwise featureless earth, broken only by the roadway, fence, and rolling topography. Rolling past the William Creek Hotel, Gangles brought the Coaster to a stop in a broad camping area. Along the North edge of this field stood a long, low building that housed a few sleeping quarters, a shower room, and loos. A galvanized pipe rising from the ground, strapped to a light pole for support, was capped with a well-used spigot, that provided potable water for us and any other campers in the area. As before, I noticed cell phones being plugged into an electrical substation-like unit number 12.

It wasn't long before a flames were licking high from the fire ring, knocking a strong chill from the air. We could see the sky going through all the stages of the visible light spectrum as the Sun crept below the horizon, making for some dynamic photography. Gerry had already set up his expensive digital camera and tripod for the Sunset, but a slight wind high aloft blew a few clouds overhead and stargazing was not going to happen tonight.

“Unfortunately, no stars tonight,” Gerry said upon his return, “but the low clouds do make interesting photos.”

We sat around the fire, enjoying the ample warmth. Then we rotated our bodies every so often, warming up the chilled half that had been hidden away from the blaze. Most of the small talk dealt with some of the seeming absurdities we had seen during the day. Several individuals—all of them—took delight in the plastic bag of chips I had purchased at Lucas's.

“I *did not* get it because of the Sesame Street characters parading on the outside!” I protested.

“Noer, Juanito, you bought it only for the variety of chips inside!” Anya said sarcastically.

“Yes,” Desire analyzed as a future shrink. “I've watched you from Alice and you demonstrate blue tendencies. You definitely are an Elmo.”

“Dad, I never knew you were a Sesame Street fan!” Katarena teased.

“Yeah,” Enrique threw in, “I can remember you watching that at home.”

“Go ahead, Gerry and Gangles,” I told them in mock self-defense, “pile on. Kick me while I'm down.”

“Really, Juanito,” Gerry stated without conviction, “I don't know enough about you to take a

stance.”

I breathed a sigh of relief, then he continued. “But if your own children are making these claims....”

“You're right, you *don't* know me, but,” I retorted, “you sure are willing to take other people's opinions for fact awfully quick....”

“As youse tour leader,” Gangles weighed in, “I think I ought to resolve this for once and all. Juanito, you are hereby accused by all present of liking Sesame Street. How do youse plead?”

“This tribunal is ridiculous.” I said with mock horror. “I will admit that I liked it, as did both Katarena and Enrique, who liked it even better. It was a great teaching tool, especially for them.”

“Sounds right to me, mate.” Gangles announced with the same humility, impartiality, and great knowledge as if he was the right honourable barrister Greg from Melbourne. (Whom I think could be an excellent appointment to the High Court when Chief Justice Gleeson retires in two years.) He looked at the others gathered around the fire and said, “Youse've done well by youse children. Innocent of all charges!”

There were more whoops and much laughter.

Now fully exonerated, it wouldn't be long before I was once again guilty of high crimes and misdemeanors due to my errant tongue.

“OK, mates, time for a few facts around our bush telly,” continued Gangles, “youse know we are in William Creek, smallest town in Australia, a year-round population of five, more or less, but home to the biggest cattle station in the world at around thirty-four thousand square kilometers [over eight *million* acres, many times the size of the Parker or King ranches in the USA!]. There's always been trade and travel across the deserts of Oz since people existed here. This was a water stop for aborigines, Afghan cameleers, and in eighteen seventy eight, it became a stop for the old Ghan Railroad from down South. The pub over there is original an' intensely historic. Or, if youse go on Wrightsair [www.wrightsair.com.au] for a view of the area from above, see Lake Eyre and Marree Man—largest geoglyph on earth—or maybe go a bit lower and slower on a short ride with Explore the Outback Camel Safari [www.austcamel.com.au]. However, I want youse to know that we still have a long way to go an' the more time spent here means less time elsewhere. It's youse choice, though.”

We looked at each other and agreed to Gangles' suggestion. During the ensuing banter, I heard Anya declare,

“It has been *so* cold! I can hardly sleep!”

What could the Boy Scout in me do except to offer the best medicine?

“I'll tuck in with you.” I gallantly responded. “Our mutual body heat will keep you plenty warm.”

“Noer, Juanito.” came her sharp reply. “You're married and I'm not looking!”

“*Mira*, Anya, you're practically a doctor. You know I speak the truth about warmth.” I indignantly replied with a hurt tone in my voice, “and, I am completely honorable. How could you think less of me?”

“Juanito,” she resignedly responded. “I think you don't remember. I *told* you that I'm not even close to being a doctor.”

Then, surprisingly—and possibly it was the beer talking—Desire spoke up. “*I* need is a good man to keep me warm.”

She didn't direct her comment specifically toward me, and neither did I take it as a suggestion, despite my being highly qualified. Quite the opposite. In the few days that we had been traveling together, I had come to think of her more as a daughter, though she clearly was not. Regardless, my response to her was wholly inappropriate,

“DESIRE! You don't mean that!....Do you?”

Talk about throwing a wet blanket onto the conviviality. Within a minute of my scolding, everyone turned into their swags, leaving me gazing at the fire, filled with remorse, more guilty than

ever. Deep in thought, I was scarcely aware of two motor vehicles passing William Creek, then backing up, pulling into the camping area, and parking off to a far side. The drivers turned off their headlights, and darkness, along with an even more biting chill because of the dying fire, enveloped me. Shivering, I climbed into my swag.

I did not sleep well that night, filled with guilt and remorse for my blatant remarks.

The Sun wasn't entirely up yet, but I was, heating up a pot of water on the grill and breaking my own personal camp. After pouring the hot water into my Smart Café cup, I pressed the grounds through it and ambled over to yesterday evening's new arrivals.

These two, sinewy blokes who had driven in several hours ago, could have been twins. They appeared to be about the same age (younger than me), with sun-burnt hair and leathery skin, the result of their long exposure in the outback. Matt was Australian by birth, and Taurus, originally from Austria, is now a naturalized Aussie. Each was driving a Toyota Prados, which appeared to be the same.

"Nigh, mate," Taurus said, "mine's newer, two thousand five."

Matt jumped in. "Don' let 'im blow you, mate. 'e bought 'is right after I got mine. Last two thousand four on th' lot, good price I 'ad. 'e paid five grand more for a month's difference."

"It doesn't really make any difference anyway," I said to them. "Toyota's just a good machine regardless. And I especially like how you keep them, just like my FourRunner back home. Only need to see out the windscreen and mirrors. The dirt keeps thieves away."

"Actually, Juanito," Matt said, "'ere, th' more dirt means its better for th' bush, somethin' thieves like."

Now Taurus jumped in. "Toyota is th' most widely used vehicle anywhere in Australia. That's why this, an' other tracks'll never be topped. Toyotas run forever. They're strong as a horse, smart as a tractor."

I became an instant authority.

"Mine's a ninety-three, with over two hundred thousand miles, I mean, *three* hundred thousand clicks on it. It does run forever, and I plan on getting a million mi-, uh, clicks on it. But you got to maintain it. Back home, I have a n incomparable mechanic, Robert Huston at McCrae Car Care, who groans whenever he sees me pull up. Last time was when steam started blowing from under the hood and the check engine light had come on. It died just as I pulled into his garage. 'Juanito,' he told me, don't *ever* run it like that when it needs fluids. Pull over and call a wrecker.' Three days later, he got me back on the road...after five hundred dollars and a new radiator. On the steering wheel I've painted "ALWAYS CHECK FLUIDS"—just in case I get in too much of a hurry."

Then Matt checked my authority.

"You've got a good machine, alright, but any respectable owner should know 'ow to make sure of all th' critical areas reg'larly."

Changing the topic, I admired a guitar leaning against a bumper. Taurus proudly picked it up and twanged out "Waltzing Matilda". Both mean scratched out a creaky rendition, and I joined in with the refrain. All smiles, Taurus told me, "First song I ever learned about Australia. Should be the national anthem, too. This guitar is made of Mulga Wood, strong stuff. Plectaur's made of the same stuff..."

"A what?" I interrupted.

"A plectaur. The pick. You've never heard of that before?" he asked.

"No, I never knew it was called anything but a 'pick'." I remarked.

"Hmmm." He mumbled something distinctly Germanic, shrugging his shoulders.

"Regardless, you need to be a bit careful around the Mulga Trees. It can cause septicemia if a thorn gets into the skin. That can cause septic shock and kill you. Aborigines use it as a spear tip to ensure death."

"Well, I sure do appreciate the information you've shared with me." I said earnestly. "I can see my group is starting to pack up. Do take care. Have a good day."

"Same to you, mate." they said in unison, shaking both my hands, one apiece. Our mutual affection and common denominator of recognizing Toyota as one of the greatest vehicles in the World

gave me the warm feeling that they could pull me apart, each taking a half to their Prado. It would have been a happy, if not bizarre, tale, spending more time in the glorious Outback, living a split life of luxury in the reliable Toyota. I'd probably earn my keep by eternally checking the fluids.

Back to reality.

“Like I said yesterday,” Gangles spoke to all of us, “it'll be close. I'm glad none of youse did those extra activities. But I didn't count the extra time because some of us needed to yabber with other blokes.”

I gave everybody, especially Gangles, the motoring shrug of indignation, along with “I was ready hours ago.”

“What we're drivin' now is the Oodnadatta Track, an original route into the Outback.” Gangles announced. “Youse'll often see the remnants of the old Ghan railroad an' telegraph line. Whenever youse see a clump of trees, that's where water's been brought up, either by a sprin' or by bore or bankside on an intermittent stream. They're spaced out to accommodate re-waterin' the steam locomotives used back then. Our first stop, though, will be at South Lake Eyre, then a fuel and lunch stop at Marree.”

Gangles pulled the Coaster into a parking area and announced: “This is the Southern extension of Lake Eyre National Park [www.parks.sa.gov.au/parks/sanpr/lakeeyre/index.html], sixth largest lake in the world and the lowest point in Australia at some twelve meters (39 feet) to fifteen meters (49 feet) below sea level. Sometimes, youse would be lookin' out on a body of water which will flow from the Northern part to the Southern or vice versa, dependin' upon the hydrological conditions. Because there is no outlet, the waters that drain into it from Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales, and South Australia end up evaporatin' an' makin' some of the most saline-concentrated solution on the planet. The fauna that tolerates such conditions is extremely unique, an' are only found here. Most interestin' is that whilst this surface is usually drier than a pebble in the Moon Plain, the subsurface has a phenomenal amount of water in what's called The Great Artesian Basin, a natural aquifer. It is, indeed, one of the largest in the world, with an estimated amount that could be double the area of the British Isles. Motorin' along this track, youse'll see a number of patches of green an' trees. These oasis are the result of where the water has broke through, come up to the surface in a spring. There are also places where it has been induced, with a bore. These form a strin' pattern, with Lake Eyre always to one side. If it seems like a path to youse, it is. People have used those places as water holes as natural restin' points when crossin' the desert. Whether Aborigines trekking through tens of thousands of years ago, Afghans guiding their camels, pastoralists waterin' their animals, or steam trains needin' to refill the water compartment, this track's been a long time outback path. Go ahead, have a good look around but don't wander out—the surface is actually a crust an' youse could break through. Our timin's back to good, but don't be away for more than a quarter-hour.”

I followed a rail toward the dry-lake bottom, carefully stepping on the firmest looking ground, and picked up a small stone, popping it into my mouth.

I won't say it was particularly salty to the taste, so I replaced it with another piece of rock, then another, followed by another. My scientific thought was to find evaporites that would confirm the former presence of water. Maybe I had ruined my mouth with too much pressed coffee, but I couldn't detect any hint of the moisture, though I had no reason to doubt Gangles words.

“Dad! You're going to fall in! Let's go!” I heard Katarena shouting behind me.

I was getting to be a regular feature of tardiness. At least I didn't break through the land.

Gangles drove back onto the track, saying, “Keep youse eyes open an' cameras ready— youse'll see some objects that constitute desert sculptures. Just yell out so we can talk about it. Our next stop is in Maree [www.henrythornton.com/article.asp?article_id=4887]. I need a servo for the Coaster, then we'll go to Drover's Rest for ourselves.”

We hadn't gone far through this one-tracked desert when a farmstead with a horse-like structure appeared in the distance. As we drew closer, I could see that it was actually a pair of water tanks that

had an old car welded to one end and an iron tail welded to the other. It was big, bigger than Texas-big. It was Australia-big.

“That's Big Dog,” Gangles told us. “Robin Cooke is a sculptor from my state of Victoria....”

“Mine too, Gangles!” shouted Anya.

“Yeah. Youse can tell it's old water tanks for the steam trains, an' an old Chrysler for the head.”

Almost hidden as we motored South, the next attraction warranted stopping in the road. We opened the windows for an unimpeded gaze at an actual trailer car from the Ghan Railroad.



The railway of travel between Maree and Alice before 1981.

“Such an bloody good way to remember it, but the official owner was the Commonwealth Railway, which quit runnin' in nineteen eighty when a new standard line replaced this narrow gauge line. This whole set up is part of the Alberrie Creek railway sidin',” Gangles commented, “an' if we had time, we'd be visitin' numerous sidin's because a maintenance crew was housed every fifteen clicks or so. That distance was chosen due to the men pumpin' a handcar seven or eight clicks an' bein' able to give a reasonable amount of labor for the day before returnin'. The 'Ghan' youse see is recognition given to the Afghanistan cameleers who were essential to the formation of an internal Australia. Even more interestin' is that they were experts with camels, an' came from anywhere in the Middle East, not just Afganistan.”

Stating as if it was a fact, he continued. “All of youse have heard of Stonehenge. See if youse can figure out what this next artwork is called.”

“PLANEHENGEL!” all of us said, mostly together, as we could see two planes standing on tales with wingtips touching.

“If anybody goes to Rolla, Missouri, in the 'states,” I helpfully offered, “there is a replica of Stonehenge on the School of Mines campus. I personally think it is better than the original because you aren't barricaded from getting close.”

“Do you not travel,” Desire said analytically, “to see the original? Didn't you say 'You can read about places all you want, but there is nothing better than actually going there'?”

“Well...” I said with embarrassment, and, caught in my hypocrisy, admitted. “Desire you recall my words accurately. I sit corrected.”

“This next sculpture youse see” Gangles continued, “is a 'dream catcher'. The iron tripod is the support with it hangin' down. Do youse know what it means if it's bangin' up against one of the supports?”

I couldn't hold my tongue, and blurted out, “It's a windstorm!”

“Bingo!” said Gangles. “Should've been self-evident.”

“It's the same idea as a weather rock,” I replied. “We use them all the time in Scouts. So many displays like this are huge; they're Australia-big, which actually makes Texas-big look small.”

“Youse know,” he replied, “that's because Australia takes a whole continent, about the same size as youse forty-eight states.”

As we entered the small town of Marree, he gave us a bit of area history.

“Here, youse’ll find the terminuses of the Oodnadatta Track—what we’ve been on since William Creek—an’ the Birdsville Track, which goes more than three hundred clicks Northeast on the Eastern edge of Lake Eyre an’ the Simpson Desert. Probably what Maree is most well known for is its history, startin’ with a natural outflow of fresh water, which makes for logical stoppin’ point in the desert for Aborigine traders. In the mid-eighteen fifties, when explorer John McDouall Stuart was makin’ the first transcontinental trip, an’ found springs of fresh water here. He named the Hergott Spring after a German Botanist in his expedition, but it was renamed Marree after the Great War because of anti-German feelings. It became a major stopover point for maintenance crews of the telegraph an’ grew in importance when it became a railhead. Marree is generally accepted as the headquarters for the Afhan cameleers, and even had a suburb named ‘Ghantown’ for them, being that they were Muslim an’ all. Sometimes it was called ‘Little Asia’ because of their origin. Youse can find their ruins all around Oz, as well as around town. An’ youse remember the railroad nickname earlier, The Ghan? It was their camels, though, which were an ideal animal for this desert, able to go the long periods of drought an’ still carry a heavy load, an’ was used up ‘till the mid-*nineteen* fifties. A little *too* ideal, I’d say, because they’re invasive, taking control here, endangerin’ indigenous animal populations. They did provide an essential link for takin’ goods an’ post to the Outback an’ North, then returnin’ with wool an’ post. This was true even after the railroad an’ roadway were completed, because those suffered weather stoppages. If youse stick around to next month, Maree is the rendezvous point for an annual gatherin’ an’ race called the Marree Camel Cup.”

“That would be interesting Gangles,” I said to him, “but in another month we’ll be in New Zealand!”

“Too bad, Juanito,” he replied, “youse’ll miss the B an’ S that always happens with it.”

Stopping alongside the fuel pumps of the Oasis Cafe and Supermarket, Gangles announced, “This servo stop’ll take a while, get off and stretch youse legs some.”

His suggestion was well-received. I naturally followed the crowd, being somewhat crippled and slow.

Inside, I found an eclectic assortment (apricots which were, naturally, dried!) of items in addition to the usual snack foods typical of any gas and grocery stop.

One item I seized upon was my favorite—a (free) map. Not just any map, but a specific-purpose, cartographic document for travel in South Australia. 4WD Tracks & Repeater Towers is an explorers delight—and lifesaver. It is possibly the finest indicator of routes upon which high-clearance, heavy-duty wheeled, multi-drive vehicles in existence. The only superior map might be generated by Geoscience Australia, but it has fatal flaws: no identification of repeater towers and range thereof, nor details about rugged travel. An absolutely essential tool to modern-day survival in the Outback is being able to notify help if one has serious troubles is a two-way UHF radio. There might be two exemptions to that: 1) the lead driver is a person a great experience; and 2) that person has a fully-charged mobile and is in regular contact with the outside.

I took great comfort as both those traits are characteristics of Gangles. At least twice daily, before setting off in the morning and after the Coaster was parked for the night, I would see him talking with headquarters personnel in Adelaide—practicing what he preaches, no driving and phone talking at the same time.

This exceptional stop got better, by satisfying our now-voracious appetite for Tim-Tams. Life couldn’t be better.

We explored Marree some while waiting for the Coaster to have a drink. Directly across the road was the ruin of an Afghan memorial. From the first moment they and their camels were brought to the continent in 1838 to help conquer the desert heart of Australia, their identity was made schizophrenic. Not white skinned like the European invaders, nor dark skinned like the Aborigines, they were valued only for the wealth they could bring to the entrepreneurial class. Mostly shunned by the former, they had greater acceptance among the latter, who themselves were the most outcast. With their now-reviled

Islamic religion and a nomadic lifestyle from desert life, these Muslims were essential ingredients to the success of Australian growth. Without their mastery of survival in arid regions, it is possible that Australia might still have an unknown red center.

We also visited the now-defunct train station. What makes it noteworthy is the break-of-gauge, where there are two distinct railroads. Standard gauge had been laid from Port Augusta further South; from this point, narrow gauge had been laid North to Alice, what the Ghan we saw earlier ran, with its last run in 1980. A new standard gauge construction had been completed by then, bypassing the Oodnadatta Track and all attendant services moved likewise.

Our lunch stop at Drover's Rest, strategically located at the historical junction of the Birdsville and Oodnadatta Tracks was restful—something any Drover wants after a several days cattle drive to the Maree railhead. Tourist type cattle drives are the rule now, with the last true drive in 1972, after which the motorized road trains dominated cattle transport.

“By jingoes, will youse look at that, Juanito!” Gangles exclaimed.

I jerked, blinking my eyes open in the bright Sun.

“Ooops, sorry, Mate.” Gangles apologized. “Didn't realize youse're pushing up zeds.”

“I wasn't asleep,” I replied indignantly. “I was merely keeping that Sunlight out of my eyes. Maybe I'll buy a pair of flip-ups that I can clip onto these clear lenses.”

Well, since youse're awake now, take a look at that!” and he pointed to a vehicle just ahead. Youse kids been yabbering to me about how much youse like cycling, just thought youse might like what's coming toward us. The one with the orange flag above it.”



I plan for this to be me in the future....!

Gangles had implied that there were multiple bikes, but there was only one, and what a beaut it is, too. I saw a Greenspeed Trike, which certainly is near and dear to me. Not the specific cycle, but the biketouring that the masked individual was engaged in.

“Wow!” I shouted. “Katarena or Enrique, get your camera going, get me a photo of that!”

I turned my attention back to Gangles, speaking “What a great machine! That is a recumbent trike by Greenspeed, and you can see how easy it is to keep upright. Back home, I have a Double Vision™ recumbent tandem built by Advanced Transportation Products out of Seattle Washington. Since it only has two wheels and is primarily built upon a large chromoly monotube, it is notoriously unstable—it doesn't take much to fall. I've gotten rather talented at that, but I've also gotten pretty good at catching myself—most of the time! The bike was rather expensive, but it does carry a life-time warranty. Unfortunately, that doesn't do me a whole heck of a lot of good because the company went out of business, likely due to the instability factor. I actually purchased it from the premier retail tandem store in the world, Tandems Limited, in Birmingham, Alabama. I was so excited about that exotic machine when I picked it up that I didn't listen to the shop co-owners, Susan and Jack. They warned me that the company was likely not going to last.”

Gangles acknowledged my words with twist of his mouth and lifting his head.

I continued to speak. “When I became the happy, albeit now wiser, proud owner many years ago, I had the intention about the three of us pedaling the West Coast, from Victoria to Tijuana. Enrique had not trouble pedaling himself, and I bought the tandem for Katarena to pedal with me. It was all fine and good until my wife went to the annual Texas Library Association meeting in Houston. While there, she had met up with one of her cousins, who strongly recommended that I *not* take them on such a cycle tour. Elena expressed that same concern to me quite late the first night she came home. Boy, when I heard that, I lit out of bed, totally angry that she would over-rule something I knew so well. Anyway, I compromised—we ended up driving to Western Canada and Alaska instead! I guess the silver lining to that cloud was that as a family we haven't done any bicycle touring, except short trips such as what we did down on Phillip Island, but we have traveled a huge amount, like right now. And, Gangles, the reality is that if you aren't absolutely committed to bicycling, taking a long tour like a fifteen hundred mile—twenty-four hundred clicks—is going to be quite miserable.”

Gangles nodded his head in agreement.

“Yes,” I continued, “if I was not sitting here, taking my children about the world, that is for sure something I'd be doing. He is totally self-supported, the exact same way I bike tour. See the enormous water buffalo hanging on the rack! Can't get too far anywhere, be it desert or oasis, without fresh clean drinking water. In fact, when I return in the future, that is *exactly* what I want to do, except for when my wife joins me. She won't participate in such strenuous exercise, though I think she'd like to tour by Coaster with Wayward Bus...”\

“No way, Dad!” I heard Katarena shout a few seat away. “She'd like some of it, but I don't think she'd like the 'roughing it' that we've been doing.”

“She used to,” I replied, “in fact, that was the only way we ever use to travel, camping most places at night.”

“Katarena's right.” Enrique joined the conversation. “Now that she makes more money than you, she mostly likes five star hotels and sleeping in. And there is absolutely no way we would have gone scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef with Magic Reef, or camped in Kakadu National Park with Kakadu Dreams. She would have especially hated paying the extra money for this tour in Alice.”

“But,” Katarena qualified the negatives, “she might have bicycled with us from Amaroo Park Hostel to the Koala Reserve on Phillip Island, and I think she would have really liked the hostels in Melbourne and Sydney. All in all, though, I have to agree with Enrique; we are constantly on the go, and she likes it slower.”

“You're both right.” I agreed with them, “There are times when I wish she was with us, then other times when I know she'd hate it. That would be bad.”

“I don't know youse wife, Juanito,” Gangles added gently, “but she sounds a bit like my former wife. Gettin' married changes 'em.”

“Now wait on there,” Anya chimed in. “I don't know her either, but I'll bet she's top notch. I mean, look at the evidence. You and her have produced two well-balanced children, even if you don't agree on everything, so don't go belittling her. I'll support her in her absence!”

“Anya, I wasn't belittling her.” I replied. “We've had a very good twenty plus years of marriage with no intentions of splitting up. It's just that she'd like some of this and dislike some of it. That's just her way.”

“I'll go along with youse on that, Juanito.” Gangles interjected. “An' I'll agree with Anya that youse have two children who have lots of smarts. I personally think youse takin' them around is just plain super.”

Desire, who had moved forward, spoke up: “It is a bit lonely traveling alone, but if I ever get married and have children, I'd want a husband who could help them like you, Juanito.”

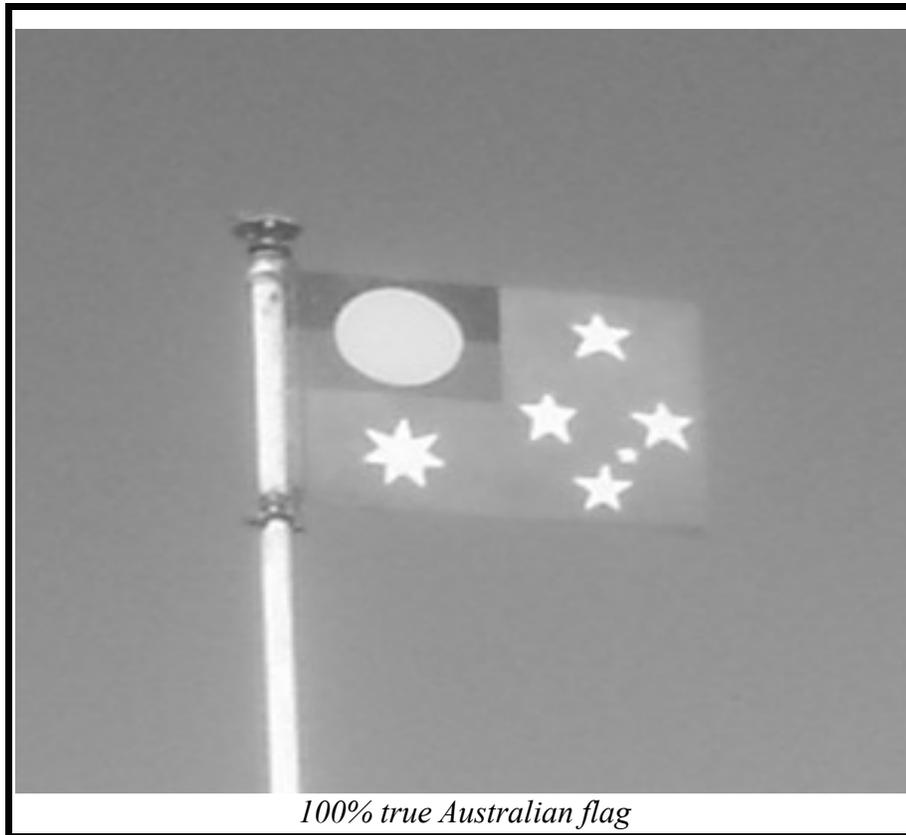
Flushing with pride, I spoke again: “Lots of people would disagree with what I did with my inheritance, and question why I might spend it traveling. But I can't think of a better use than this.”

All heads nodded up and down in concurrence.

The Coaster stopped in a rather desolate looking place and we stepped out of it. A short hike revealed a vast, multi-colored graben, the colors resulting from different grades of Ochre.

“This stoppin' point is the Lyndhurst Ochre pits, which has been significant to the Aborigines because of the colors, resultin' from the iron content. They use it for everythin', from paintin' rock, pottery, their own skin, and tradin'. Youse'll find that the ochre quarried here tens of thousands of years ago was transported all over an' exchanged for trade goods in return. It's not a traditional book, but this is just as good a record of history as anythin' written down.” said Gangles. “Let's go see if Talc Alf [www.southernaustralianhistory.com.au/talcalf.htm] is in.”

For the first time since leaving the Stuart Highway a few days ago, we drove upon asphalt. In the mid-day Sun a dozen minutes later, we were parked in front of an extraordinary couple of buildings, clearly constructed from available materials. I was impressed, this is my kind of recycling, and safe here, far from any building codes regulating construction. Upon closer inspection, I've no doubt about the stability of the structures, but the facade would doubtlessly violate any communities (except for Coober Pedy or rural USA) standards for appearance. Personally, I loved it, with a pole bearing Talc Alf's own interpretation of the Australian flag.



According to Talc Alf, who must've been the model for Headmaster Dumbledore in the Harry Potter movies, insisted that, "Harold Thomas, an aborigine, created this flag in nineteen seventy-one as a symbol for all of us. Instead of constantly remindin' us that we were once a colony for prisoners in the British Empire, replace the Union Jack with the Aborigine flag. Let ourselves and the world know who makes us. I originally came from the Netherlands, and I entirely know the horrors of not acknowledgin' certain groups of people."

"I am familiar with the Netherlands," I told the white-bearded man. "One of my brothers and I had pedaled the North Sea coast in nineteen eighty-one, then I had returned twenty-three years later with my family, half of which are now looking at your talc artistry."

"*Goede dag*, Cornelius." came Gangles' voice from behind me. "I see youse met the oldie from my tour. He an' his young'uns know Jeffo."

"Jeffo?" Talc Alf acted a bit surprised. "Really? How's he doin' these years?"

"Well, two years ago" I replied, "he was sober enough to lead a group of us on a bike tour of Amsterdam."

Both he and Gangles burst out with laughter, Talc responding with mirth, "Sounds like Jeffo is makin' a go there. On for the bloke!"

Katarena approached Talc Alf and asked, "How much do you want for this piece?"

"Since you apparently know Jeffo," he replied, still smiling and occasionally erupting with a chirrup, "ten dollars inclusive."

"Katarena," I questioned her, "you've acted as if your burdened carrying the digi around, and this

must be at least twenty times heavier. Are you sure...”

“I am not burdened!” she said indignantly, then thoughtfully said, “But you do have a point. I guess you're right. Maybe I won't add to my luggage But I will take a picture!”

“Good plan!” Enrique tossed into the discussion from across the outdoor room.

We continued to look over his contemporary carvings, and heard more from the idiosyncratic philosopher. He was particularly emphatic about his own version of the phonetic alphabet, describing the true meaning behind words based upon the physical shape of the letter. Talc Alf's common-sense approach to being an abecedarian-phren-ologist.

“They're starting to get into the Coaster.” Enrique reported. “Let's get gone.”

Gangles was able to drive considerably faster on the blacktop, and we arrived at the NRG (November-Rachel-Greg) look out point for Leigh Creek open cut coal mine [www.theage.com.au/news/South-Australia/Leigh-Creek/2005/02/17/1108500204360.html]. After parking, we were able to wander among some of the mammoth machines used in this operation. Inside a fenced pen, was a huge dump truck named “Titan”. One of its tires easily allowed Katarena to sit on the rim, fitting nicely inside the wheel of a huge Bridgestone tire. This particular tyre held a world record of traveling an astounding 289,215 km (180,000 miles) in a lifespan of 17,520 hours (two years) before putting it on show.

“Dad!” Katarena yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Just kicking the tire. I think it still has a useful life.” I replied thoughtfully.

A far larger walking dragline, which looked like a crane on steroids. It had a Titan-sized cab sitting on a larger crawler base with a 49 meter (160 feet) boom and 7 cubic metre (1,850 gallons, or about two backyard swim pools in suburbia) bucket to scoop up tonnes of ore. I was immediately familiar with this crane as it was a “Bucyrus Erie”— clear identifiers of the Great Lakes region now more commonly known as the “rust belt” and began working this strip mine in 1951. That was over *50 years* ago, so it is reasonable to assume that with the technological development since, the mining equipment today far exceeds anything then in every aspect of size, scale, or scoop.

I remembered back decades, when I and cousins would roam around new home construction, we'd find a front-end loader, and excitedly scamper into the driver's seat. It was strange not having a steering wheel, but no matter, we'd pull the different levers, ultimately discovering the one that would lower the bucket. What great fun! That is, until we realized that once the bucket was down, it could not move elsewhere. Regardless, we could still climb all over, inevitably, accurately, finding the well-greased hydraulics. Not only did that earn swats to discourage future exploration, which may have hurt but were not nearly as painful as the scolding and tears of “what if one of you were under it when the bucket came down?” As I learned later, children have been crushed in precisely that way, and now the buckets are either lowered or locked to prevent such an accident.

Opposite of this behemoth crane was the pit it had dug, something which could easily hold a small ocean. Thankfully, it, too, was fenced off—a tumble down could prove absolutely disastrous as well as fatal!



South end of Leigh Creek Mine(www.waywardbus.com.au)

Sufficiently impressed, we loaded back into the Coaster and continued motoring the smooth, straight, interstate quality roadway through a transition landscape of low brush, usually with a railroad track alongside. The increase in vegetation created an increase in the fauna. We saw numerous more emu, kangaroos, and camels, as well as Wedgetail Eagles, constantly on the prowl either from above or perched on a fencepost, stump, or in the rare tree, ready to pounce on smaller prey.

“The largest flyin' birds youse're seein' out there are Wedgetail Eagles,” said Gangles. “an' they ought to be the national bird, just like the Bald Eagle is for the USA. They are native to Oz an' is one of the largest in the World. Like all Eagles, is has excellent vision, viciously territorial, can soar forever, an' has actually adapted well to humans. That is, once the pastoralists learned they didn't kill off the sheep! Considerin' Wegdies were slaughtered to the point of bein' put on the endangered species list, but they've made a decent comeback. We're stoppin' here to pick up firewood. We ought to get plenty, it burns quick.”

He turned off the pavement and came to a halt alongside piles of railroad ties. Seeing my questioning expression, he answered, “Its OK. They're usin' cement sleepers an' leave these to be scavenged, in a one-machine operation where the wooden sleeper is replaced with a cement one and the tracks are welded into a continuous rail at the same time.”

“That's really not what I was thinking, Gangles.” I replied. “I figured we'd burn these, but my concern is about the preservatives in the wood. I know breathing them aren't good for our health.”

“Youse're forgettin' that youse're in the Southern Hemisphere.” he evasively answered. “It's not the same as in the states. Seems to me that not breathin' around the fire will stop the harm.”

I laughed, and said, “Just like when I tell my students that they can cure they hiccups by holding their breath for ten minutes!”

He shared my laughter, and after we secured the timbers on the trailer, we were got underway on the blacktop.

An oddity appeared close to the road. A barnyard gate was erected, which would not have been odd in this ranchland, but it was odd there was no fence on either side, nor did the gate stop traffic from passing through it on a non-existing track. It was a sign, an advert for the West End: “YALUMBA, Australia's oldest family owned winery” and “Paradise Hotel, Parachilna”, along with the suggestion of “**EAT SOME TODAY**” over three signs—one of a kangaroo, one of a camel, and one of an ostrich. I can certainly understand the latter two being on the menu as they are invasive, but the kangaroo? I remembered the 'roo we ate on our Kakadu Dreams tour in Kakadu National Park two weeks ago, and I wasn't impressed with it. Why weren't rabbit or sheep, another pair of animals that were imported with good intentions but only interfered with the indigenous fauna, on the menuboard too?

“We're turnin' off here onto Brachina Gorge Road, which youse can see is gravel. We'll get back to the bitumen tomorrow, at Wilpena Pound. Keep youse eyes open as we get into the evenin'. We may see more wildlife up close.”

The road was a dusty gravel, with subtle changes as we gained elevation into the Flinders Mountains [www.southeasternhistory.com.au]. Gangles came to a near stop as we approached a wet, near-hairpin turn across a wet, low-water crossing of Leigh Creek, passing at least twenty young people who were single file between two adult leaders.

“Where're you from?” Gangles hollered out the window.

“Geelong-it's our school outing!” came the mixed pitch reply of adolescents.

“Where're you goin'?” asked Gangles.

“Angorichina Tourist Village!” came the jubilant rejoinder.

“See you there!” he told them, then to us inside the Coaster. “They'll be at the group camp, not that close to us.”

Looking out the window, I felt the years of Scouting surface in me. I, with Troop 192, had just turned off U.S. 54 and were motoring to the Three Rivers campsite. Ascending those 13 miles, we had

left scrub for woods because more moisture was available at the higher altitude, very much like now, even if we were in the Southern Hemisphere.

Gangles slowed to a crawl as the terrain became steeper. We passed several signs warning of water on the road, only to find no water on the road. The last hinged sign was folded up, causing me to ask Gangles, “Is that a sure indicator that there will be water on the road?”

He gave a wry smile, and when we came to the water, replied, “Yeah.”

We arrived at a flat spot in the roadway and I could see the road diverging. One lane continued uphill, the other toward a fuel pump, phone booth, and wooden buildings [www.angorichinavillage.com.au]. Gangles stopped beside the fuel pump, and we clambered out, filing into the closest white painted structure.

Going inside the building, there was little room for all of us. It was a dry goods store, food mart, front office, gas station, outfitter, tourist bureau, emergency aid station, and anything else that a person, either passing on the roadway or camp resident, might want. I was not surprised that the public phone was outside! I bought several postcards and quickly went back outside, joining the group milling around the Coaster.

Gangles was there, refilling the Coaster, and issuing directions: “Youse're in good luck. I was able to negotiate both a cabin *an'* fresh 'roo for tonight's meal. That first cabin over there, the Charles Moore Chalet, is our overnight. It'll be different from Coober Pedy. Go on an' youse can start pullin' gear from the trailer into it. Don't mess with the firewood—it'll be needed for tomorrow night.”

Glad to be neither traveling in the coaster nor camping tonight, we opened up the trailer and eagerly retrieved our own packs, taking them a short distance to the cabin. When I saw Desire limping, I dropped my pack and ran over to her, giving my arm as a support before she fell over.

Wincing back the tears, she expressed her gratitude. “Thank you, Juanito. My foot is not good.”

Starting our slow walk to the cabin, I shouted out, “Gangles, Desire is in worse shape. I think you ought to have a look her foot soon.”

When we passed my pack, I scooped it up with my free arm and, upon arrival at the cabin door, I dropped it again to give Desire my full assistance. Once inside, she plopped down on the couch and carefully removed her shoe. I went back out to get my pack, and, as the Sun was setting, I was amazed to hear the schoolmates we had passed an hour ago tromping down the path to the group camp, merrily singing “Waltzing Matilda”. I was certain they must have waltzed into a secret elevator to get here as quickly as they did from where we had passed them.

I was overwhelmed by the magical moment. The Sunset was a blazing red-orange through the thin, low clouds; the sweet, fading voices of Aussie youth wholeheartedly singing a song emblematic of a fateful outback encounter and the low groan of a digiredoo; the semi-sour smell of Gum trees, diesel fuel, and kangaroo meat frying on skillets permeating the air; and the solid feel of the wooden door jamb upon my hand as I steadied myself, ready to swoon from the overload upon my senses. It was more than magical, it was a true, once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I knew it. If I absorbed any more of this intensity, I would surely burst. Instead, I did a slow motion, spastic pirouette and stepped back into the cabin.

I suspect that magical moment was longer and actually blinding because inside the cabin I found Gangles and Anya doctoring Desire's foot, Gerry roasting the kangaroo in the oven of the small kitchen, Enrique in a top bunk reading, Katarena experimenting with her digi on the bottom bunk. I only remember dumping Desire on the couch in dimness; how did all these other characters get by me and into this setting? It made no difference.

“Glad to see youse could join us, Jaunito.” Gangles said as he pierced a blister on Desire's heel, causing her to flinch and emit a yelp. As he applied a poultice to the lanced flesh, he continued, “I know we've been through the Never Never, but youse looked gone gone out there, starin' away at the horizon. All the beds have been claimed, all that's left in a pull out mattress.”

Now looking relieved and able to sit up, Desire added, “Gangles is correct. You were in, what

psychologist call, catatonic stupor. Oh, and thank you for helping me.”

“No worries, mate!” I replied to her in my best Australian. “And I prefer sleeping on the floor, though this one does seem to have a few waves in it!”

We had a good laugh, a good meal, good talk, and a good night's sleep.

I wasn't the only person who was up early.

“The Sunrise will provide excellent, if not unique, lighting for my photography.” Gerry quietly told me. “I'll be back later.”

Pressing coffee in the hot water in my Smart Café mug, I stepped outside into the brisk air.

“Shut the door, Dad!” Katarena said harshly, “You're letting in the cold air!”

Not just cold air, but it was thick with moisture. It had rained during the night.

Within a hour, the Sun was rising low in the Eastern sky, casting long, dwindling shadows; Gerry was back but in the loo, and we were all awake jabbering away. One conversation began to dominate.

“Katarena.” Gangles said.

“What?” she replied with irritation.

“Katarena.” he said again.

“What do you want?” she again replied, with increasing irritation.

“Katarena.” he repeated.

“Why do you keep doing that? Why are you picking on me?” Katarena asked with a high pitched squeal.

“Anya.” changing to whom he spoke.

“Yes, Gangles?” she said very pleasantly, but added, “If you'll pardon me, I need to use the phone.”

Then he said “Desire.”, to which she replied equally pleasantly “Gangles?”

Returning to “Katarena.”, she repeated a much more hostile, “Why do you keep doing that? Why are you picking on me? What did I do to you?”

It was obvious what he was doing, and it was a lesson well taught.

Katarena shrunk down in her bunk, and meekly said, “OK, OK, OK, I get it.” then followed that in an exceedingly agreeable tone of voice, “How may I help you, Gangles?”

“Actually, Katarena,” he replied, “youse've helped youself. See how much easier it is to get things the way youse want without being angry. Down Under, 'its easier with VB than with vinegar', if you understand that. ”

“I wasn't angry!” she shouted, then calmed down with “I do understand. You're right, anybody can improve relations with a better attitude and response.”

Anya returned quickly, “Someone's using it for now.”

“All of youse need to get some brekkie before we head out. We'll camp at Wilpena Pound tonight.” he said as he spooned a dollop of Vegemite onto toast.

Always ready to try a different food, I, too, spread a generous helping of Vegemite onto toast. Biting into it, my lips puckered and face twisted into a furrowed crabapple, but I choked it down, and spoke, “Once you get it down, it's kind of, well, it's, it's, it's...” As I struggled for something positive to say. “Here,” offering a bite to Katarena and Enrique, “try a piece before using a whole piece of bread.”

They, too, evoked extremely contorted facial expressions; Katarena ran to the door and spit it outside, while Enrique gamely swallowed it, followed by a glass of water to wash it through.

She came back in saying, “UGH! How can you stand that stuff? EWVHH!”

Lowering the empty glass, he said “I don't think I'll go out of my way to buy any.”

Everybody was laughing, especially Gangles, who said “I love it. Youse can live on it. The dark color results from the all the good ingredients that have been mashed in.”

In a display that either validates his claim, or perhaps he was showing off his ability to eat it and not regurgitate the tarry substance, he scooped out a large spoonful. He showed all of us that he had

indeed gouged another sizable amount out of the jar, then put the whole lot into his mouth. He slowly pulled a clean spoon from his mouth, then opened it to show the successful transfer. Picking up a water bottle, he rolled his head back, swallowed, and chased it with a long squirt.

“Ahh, finest snack available!” he said, smacking his lips.

Anya slipped outside again, returning just as quickly, speaking with some frustration, “She's still using it.”

Gerry stepped out of the WC, looking clean as a new penny, er, nickel, after an extended stay. Anya stepped in for a quick clean up, and followed in rapid succession by Desire, Katarena, Enrique, Gangles, and myself. We loaded our gear into the trailer and loaded ourselves into the Coaster by (09:00), ready to head to our last night together, camping at Wilpena Pound. Slowly motoring out of Angorichina Tourist Village, Anya angrily fumed

“She is *still* on the phone! And she's watching her kids play with the water spigot at the same time! How rude!”

“Anya,” Gangles said in a calming voice, “use my mobile. It's fully charged and I was able to get a signal through earlier. This is Vodafone, will that work for you?”

The surrounding trees and lush greenery soon gave way to scrub and finally short grassland, when Gangles stopped the Coaster and announced: “You see how much the landscape has altered from yesterday evening to now. What has happened is that we passed Goyder's Line of reliable rainfall twice. Since South Australia is considered the driest state on this great continent, a surveyor named George Goyder decided to determine a line, called an isohyet, dividin' arable from non-arable land. He did this almost a hundred and fifty years before, back in the *eighteen-sixties*. He calculated that the minimum amount of precipitation needed to sustain a farm was no less than ten inches, which is two hundred fifty four millimeters now. It took him a long time, but he mounted a horse an' rode all around, establishin' those points of rain. Even here, within the Flinders Ranges, there are pockets of great variation, dependin' upon location in reference to windward or leeward breeze, which in turn dictates the rain shadow. One of the easiest ways, if you can consider anythin' back then easy, was to differentiate between the growth. Eucalyptus trees required more water than the scrub grasslands, which needed more than sparse Spinifex or Mulgawood. If you look out, you can see the transition between all three zones. It's actually quite a mess. You remember seein' the metal and cement telegraph poles along the Oodnadatta? Wood poles were initially used, but that was just too much a valuable commodity in the Outback, an' a lot of the poles were burned. On top of that, the government had formerly *paid* farmers to deforest land, to show 'improvement' or loose privileges. It was a win-win situation; the farmer cleared land, an' was paid. Then he'd crop it, sell the results an' get paid again. Next, the government was winnin' because the population—the *white* population— was expandin' an' developin' more land, spreadin' *our* dominion over the Aborigines. The downside, an' it may be too late, was that we humans were *dramatically* alterin' the landscape, changin' the transpiration cycle which controlled the precipitation, thus changin' the line of reliable rainfall. There you have it: fresh, clean water rules.”

Cruising along on a decent dirt roadway, Gangles pointed out numerous kangaroos in the grasses. “They could be a bit difficult to see, bein' camouflaged by brown fur on the brown scrub. It's a bit easier if you can pick out their white leggin's.”

Craggy peaks began showing in the distance, piercing the blue sky, high enough to cause air at the tips to begin condensation in faint cloudcaps. Within another hour, Gangles drove the Coaster onto a worse dirt road up to a large cement marker that actually reminded me more of a half-buried mausoleum. After reading the bronze plaque, I had that eerie feeling of premonition. This excellent point of observation is named “Stokes Hill Lookout” and had been built in conjunction with the Adnyamathanha people, one of the Aboriginal groups that inhabit this area. Topping the cement and fieldstone rectangle was a precisely crafted 3-dimensional topographical bronze accurately depicting what we could easily see in the distance: Wilpena Pound.

“This bronze is a superb overview of where we are goin' to swag tonight, an' can give a bit more info about the Aboriginal Dreaming Trail, part of which we are drivin'.” said Gangles. “Youse can see how perfect the oval shape is, the best in the world, if not the world. These mountains that form a rin' around the basin is millions of years old. [www.ga.gov.au/news/mordor.jsp] The center erodes faster than that rin', leavin' a large depression, a bowl. 'Wilpena' means 'bent fingers' an' 'Pound' is an English term for 'animal enclosure', which some pastoralists certainly used it for. However, accordin' to the people who originally lived her, the Adnyamathanha, their dreamtime goes that two serpents, Akurra, came upon an initiation ceremony there. It was called a Malkada' an' held in the 'Ikara', which we call the Wilpena Pound. The Akurra ate as many people they could get ahold of, an' bein' well fed, they needed to rest, an' became the walls around the pound. I see a few clouds out, but hopefully they'll dissipate sufficiently enough for us to see the stars. Let's head on down!”

At noon, Gangles parked the Coaster at site Frog A7, Wilpena Pound, [www.australia.com/campaignsExperiencesescapes/factsheets/Flinders_Ranges.pdf Flinders Range National Park] Flinders Ranges. This is a lovely, grassy, tree-shaded area with a few campers scattered about. We rolled out our bags, and, after our quick lunch, most of us separated to explore the other buildings and trails. I gave Katarena and Enrique explicit instructions to use the buddy system before they walked off, cameras, map, and water bottle in hands.

“We saw the washing machine,” Katarena told me, “but don't wash any clothes. We'll do that tomorrow night in Adelaide at the hostel.”

“I'll do that,” Enrique volunteered, “I don't want my clothes to be any pinker.”

“No worries, I'll be happy to let you do them.” I replied. “See you later, be safe and take good pictures. I love you.” With a wave, they were gone. I thought it remarkable how quickly they disappeared amongst these trees.

I noticed Gangles muttering, and when he saw me, he verbalized, “Almost nobody here, but the bloody washer is in use an' there is a bloody line for it! Well, if youse're not tramping, would you help me clear the top of the trailer? We'll leave whatever we don't burn, this bein' our last night.”

Desire came over to lend a hand, saying “Gangles, what you did hurt but now it feels much better. I can walk more. Thank you.”

“No worries, Desire.” he replied. “As tour leader, takin' care of you is part of my job an' what youse paid for.”

Then Anya showed up, and was eager to help unload.

Gangles remarked, “That was bloody fast. Always makes a difference when there's participation. Ta to all of you.”

“Juanito,” said Anya, “I see you've been drinking a lot of coffee in that orange cup. How are you liking Australian coffee?”

“I like it fine, especially with it pressed this way.” I replied. “I've got a bigger press at home, but I never really understood exactly how to use it until I bought this in Cairns.”

“Would you like to learn a way to make it unbelievably good?” she asked.

How could I say no?

“Of course I would!” I agreed.

“OK, we need to go to the store and buy supplies.” she mysteriously said with a twinkle in her eye. “Then I will teach you, and anybody else who is interested, the secret tonight.”

I was intrigued. “Sounds most inviting. Desire, do you want to walk to the store with us?”

“I would be happy for that,” she murmured, “if it is not too far.”

“It's a general store,” Gangles said, “about a half-click alongside the creek. I think I know what youse're talking about, Anya. That will be a treat.”

The rustic building more than satisfied our needs: it had postcards, stamps, post box, and the 'secret' item: Tim-Tams. I enthusiastically bought several varieties, all in the pursuit of science: would a caramel taste different from double-chocolate from an original when dipped in coffee?

That evening, after the meal, a pot of coffee was brewing on the fire and I was breathlessly awaiting the next instructions from Anya.

“Noer, Juanito, don't rush me!” she said. “Ever since I told you about the unbelievably good coffee, you've been pestering me. I will admit you've made some good predictions, but maybe you bought too *many* Tim-Tams.”

“If this is as good as you've led me to believe, Anya,” I answered with a smile, “I may not have bought enough!”

“OK, everybody, lets go to the picnic table.” she said. “Someone bring the coffee pot; Juanito, you bring the Tim-Tams.”

We followed her instructions exactly, and gathered around her at the table as she spoke.

“First we prepare the Tim-Tam. Remove it from the package. You see it is rectangular. Bite off the opposing corners. Now you pour a cup of hot coffee. You have before you one Tim-Tam with the opposite corners bitten away, and a hot cup of coffee. The objective is to use the Tim-Tam as a straw through which you draw the coffee up and the instant it begins to melt in your fingers, you suck all of it into your mouth. Allow me to demonstrate.”

“WOWEE! That is intense!” she reported. “Each of you must now do it, but if you'll know it if you don't get it right. All you can do is experiment until you have it down.” Then, looking at her attentive students, she saw me.

“Juanito,” she rebuked me, “I wanted you to watch my demonstration before you jumped straight into it.”

“Anya,” I said muffled because my mouth was full of a Tim-Tam, “I haven't had any coffee yet. This is a raw biscuit! I did buy extra Tim-Tams for tonight. I saw what you did, now I'll do the same—as soon as I swallow what's in my mouth.”

“I thought that would be your treat, Anya.” complimented Gangles. “What a wonderful way to finish our last night. I'll have one, too. Good thing you bought extra, Juanito.”

Everybody had numerous servings of this particularly delightful desert. Several cups overflowed as the Tim-Tam melted before they could be popped into mouths. But we kept at it until we perfected the timing, bringing on an intense rush of sugar and caffeine. I was a bit slow, and needed extra practice time.

Indeed, it was a good thing I bought extra.

“Now that we're all wired, an' the skies are clear, we won't have any worries finding stars an' constellations.” said Gangles. “Come on over to this space, where no trees are hangin' over, an' look up.”

“Youse remember the Southern Cross? Find it, an' it forms the head of the Emu. This is where youse need to remember what the Emu looks like. If youse look at all the stars up there, look *between* them. That is the Runnin' Emu. I can see it very clearly. Anybody else?”

“Yes,” Gerry announced, “I can see it, rather distinctly.”

One by one, everybody was making a visual affirmation. Except me. Despite my great effort, I resigned myself to having some kind of a serious impediment, and sought solace in the Tim-Tam coffee desert. It was a *very* good thing I had bought so many earlier!

I made one last visit to the WC, reminding Katarena and Enrique to really brush their teeth tonight, then I myself sacked out. Despite the ingestion of the potentially energizing java mix earlier, I fell asleep quickly.

Both Gerry and I were up early; me by nature, Gerry in pursuit of the perfect photo. I was surprised to see Enrique up and about as well.

“I'm going with Gerry to help with the photos,” he told me, “and Katarena is still asleep. See you after Sunrise.”

“Mates,” Gangles announced after breakfast, “today we'll be visitin' some of the first towns in

South Australia, an' a local winery before we finish up in Adelaide. Desire, youse want to be dropped at Cannon Street Backpackers, and youse want at the Hilton, right, Anya? Hayburgs, youse are close to where I leave the Coaster. Gerry, that'll be the last stop unless you want somewhere else. From what I know, the only holdup will be traffic in Adelaide, everythin' else will go fine. We don't need to leave for another hour, so explore more if youse want."

Everybody scattered, eager to see something they had missed from yesterday, and I certainly wanted to check out the St. Mary Trail. I was pleased to see the Katarena had buddied up with Anya and Desire, Enrique was staying with Gerry. I followed the well-marked trail for possibly a half-mile when I felt a twinge in my left knee. After stretching, I continued on, then I felt another twinge. No mistaking this, I had been given two warnings to cease climbing, regardless of the easy trail. The third time might not be a warning, but a severe crippling. I slowly retraced my steps, staying quiet enough to spy upon Eastern Grey Kangaroos and Black Wallabies.

"Dad!" shouted Katarena, "Gangles said an hour! Where have you been? We've been waiting..."

"They say the last time is always the best," I interrupted her, "but I have a legitimate excuse this time. My knee was complaining, so I had to slow down. But I'm here, and really, not too late, either. On our way!" and I got on the Coaster.

The paved roads assured our fast transit behind Gangles' skilled driving.

Gangles announced towns as he drove South. "This is Hawker, gateway to the Flinders Ranges and home of the Hawker Cup." "This is Quorn, home of the steam train Pichi Richi." "This is Melrose, oldest town in the Flinders Ranges, established eighteen fifty-three. Look up that hill. That is the war memorial to the Great War diggers. If any of youse know much about Galipolli in Turkey, youse'll know how Australia suffered pointless death. Those gates to the Memorial Gardens are for World War Two diggers an' their in town because some veterans can't make the climb up there."

"Youse should know that the Kangaroo an' Emu are on Australian coat of arms because they can't go backward, only forward—just like Australia."

"Gangles, are you sure about that?" I asked him; "What, with John Howard aligning with the George Bush of the USA definitely seems to be going backward!"

"Yeah. Seems backwards, doesn't it?" he replied. Then he continued:

"On the electrical lines above us on the left, the Kookaburras are welcoming us to our lunch stop in Laura."

I thought they were probably the same three birds continually flying ahead and reforming as the Coaster rolled into Laura.. Here, Gangles stopped at the city park. "This is one of the widest main streets in small town Australia, an' it looks as though we have it all to ourselves, probably because it's cold."

"What's this? Take a squizz over there! First time I've ever seen it here! There are a couple of Euros, which are Wallaroos, which, as youse can guess, are halfway between Wallabies and Kangaroos. Must be drier than ever if they're down here, eatin' the Eucalyptus. They might be pets an' raised by humans around here. Still, keep youse distance."

Within an hour, we were passing through a larger city. "This is Gladstone, where the railyard has examples of all three gauges: Narrow, Standard, and Broad. It's a major transportation point for agricultural access into the Flinders."

"This is the town of Clare, an' home to the Seven Hills Winery. Before we stop, it was the first winery in the valley, founded by one of the first Jesuit Priests in Australia, the Right Reverend Aloysius Kranewitter. He an' his Jesuit followers from Silesia staked their religious claims here in the mid-eighteen hundreds. They called it 'Seven Hills' because it reminded them of the Seven hills of Rome, which they thought might become another such fabled city. Youse can't hardly be a priest an' not have a church, which is named after him. Saint Aloysius Church is adjacent to the winery, because you absolutely must have good wine in the services." said Gangles. Then he added, "Youse already know youse kids can't drink the wine, Juanito, but I'm sure you can go around the area an' in the

church, if it's open.”

“No worries, Gangles!” I replied. “We won't have any troubles with a walkabout.”

After Gangles parked in an obvious tourist bus zone, all of us disembarked. Katarena, Enrique, and I followed a clean sidewalk toward the church while the others made a quick amble to the tasting room. Passing alongside the crypt, I noted how neat and well-groomed the landscape and gardens were kept. In fact, the whole area was immaculate, even inspiring. In particular, the bare vines were pruned and supported by a near-invisible fence in exacting rows, the result of precision work by the Jesuit priests over the past 150 years. So this is the root cause of their fine (I assume) wines!

Much to our pleasure, the church was open and we quietly entered. The interior was stunning in the elementary design largely constructed of local materials, and was focused on the sole purpose of saving Catholic souls—and possibly a few converts. We walked out the magnificent structure, and ventured toward the tasting room.

Seeing people on rented bicycles, I was strongly tempted to inquire about where and how much, but knew we wouldn't have enough time to explore this fascinating area much. Instead, we peered into the cellar, downstairs from the tasting room. Several barrels were hooked up to a pump, which distributes the as of yet unfermented grape juice. A quick glance in the tasting room affirmed what anyone would expect: well-lit and exceptionally clean, no speck of dust anywhere. Going back toward the Coaster, we passed a work area, remarkable in that it looked slightly unorganized, but where many casks were stored while the liquid took on its biblical effects.

As if we had pre-arranged our timing, Desire, Anya, Gerry (bearing his own newly purchased bottle), Gangles, and we three converged upon the Coaster.

“We'll have one more stop before Adelaide.” Gangles said, “an' traffic will be heavy once we get there. Chances are good that what youse'll most likely be seein' from here will be the beautiful countryside, lots more cars, an' people.”

We hadn't gone long before Gangles stopped at a servo built of local bluestone, and he announced, “This is Auburn, historic entrance to the Clare Valley, where youse just sampled the fine wine produced here. The Coaster needs more than just a sample of diesel now. Youse can use the loo and get snacks—we're close, but traffics startin' to build, so it's goin' to take a while. An', lookin' at the skies, we may even get wet!”

Underway within fifteen minutes, Gangles was much less verbal, when he spoke, “I won't be sayin' much, I need to focus on these roads. If youse look quick there, see the yellow tripod? This is a speed trap. That was a bright portable camera, lettin' motorists know that to slow down or, if caught, there won't be leniency by the judge.”

He spoke again after merging onto a much larger divided highway, “This is the Gawler Bypass Road, named after the city it bypasses. The city is named after the second South Australian Governor, George Gawler. Why bother telling youse this? He named the Flinders Ranges, where we just spent time, after Matthew Flinders, first English explorer of the area.”

Stopping on Waymouth Street, he quickly told us some unique history: “A colonizing group in England had determined that their newest colony was not going to be the result of a prisoner settlement, which was the initial reason for coming to Australia. In eighteen thirty-six, a few hundred families arrived here to establish a tolerant community that respected the rights of everyone. Unfortunately, that applied only to white Europeans whilst the Aborigines were exterminated, mostly by diseases. Other than that, this area has flourished and is the capital of South Australia. An' that is the headquarters for Wayward Bus.”

Moving the Coaster a half-block he stopped in front of a three-story building bearing a large marquee advising us that we had reached our Adelaide hostel. All of us looked at each other with a momentary blank stare. The next words that came out of Gangles, despite being inevitable, came as a shock and disappointment that we were finally ending the eight-day, Face the Outback tour.

“Katarena, Enrique, an' Juanito, this is the YHA Central Adelaide youse were stayin'.”

Sensing the camaraderie we had built up over the past week, he gave us a way to ease the pain of separation. “Look, if all of youse want, we can meet at the Chinese restaurant two blocks off at the corner of Grote an' Bowen Streets in a half-hour. Timin's good now because it's before the rush, an' most all the tour guides eat there. After that, we can go to the pub at the end of Tatham Street in an hour, exceptin' that Katarena and Enrique can't go up to the rail, youse'd have to stay in the lounge. Does this sound OK to everyone?”

There was hesitation—I don't think anyone other than Gangles understood what was happening. Then a small, almost gasps of disbelief, came from within the Coaster.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“OK.”

“I'll bring my friend whom I am meeting for our exclusive INEXPENSIVE two-nighter at the Hilton Inn?” stated Anya in one of those questions that actually mean, “I don't know exactly what I'm going to do other than enjoy a luxurious setting after a rather spartan week.”

“Then it's settled. Katarena, Enrique, and Juanito, I'll see youse at the trailer so youse can get youse packs, youse check in, and we'll meet later.”

The rainclouds we had seen earlier, which Gangles had predicted would dump precipitation, burst open as we got out of the Coaster. It was a familiar rain to me—an El Paso style rain, in which we were more misted by several drops than drenched. With the trailer open, we retrieved our black backpacks, distinctive with tape (mine was ductape, of course) around the handles.

Standing beside the trailer on the sidewalk, Katarena spontaneously gave Gangles a hug. Even though it was damp out, I saw a tear slide down her cheek. I wasn't immune to the emotion of the moment, and gave Gangles a hug as well, but no tear. Enrique gave him a solid Australian-American handshake, both of their grips reflecting mutual appreciation and conclusion.

“Good onya, mates.” said Gangles. “See you soon.”

We stood there for another moment, waving at the departing Coaster, then went into the hostel.