

MUSWELLBROOK

The Introduction

My most pressing concern, upon my arrival in Australia, was that I had to pay back the money I had borrowed from my brother in order to get there. (I knew he was as nice a person as a person could possibly be and wouldn't even mention repayment and, for that very reason, I needed to repay his kindness asap.)

Flight tickets were horrendously expensive before this wonderful global village was invented and, back then, there were well-founded reports of people – well brought up people from good homes, mind you – selling their kidneys or even their children's kidneys in order to afford the fare to Australia.

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And, to compound my dismal situation even further, the only place I could get money quick enough was on some big building project out in the country ... far away from big city rents, average wages, a constant social life and the accompanying distractions that was going to be my blissful lot in Sydney.

After extensive investigations, I heard there was a huge power station (the largest in the Southern Hemisphere) being built not far from a town called Muswellbrook, only a few hundred miles inland from Sydney.

This information initiated a powerful persuasion campaign from me directed at my long-suffering travelling buddy, Bren, that we should give it a try.

Within a few weeks of my brilliant harassment, his previous impregnable defences crumbled (almost pathetic really, thought I was careful not to say this at the time) and he gave up the fight only when there was absolutely no excuse (flimsy or otherwise) left for him to counter why we definitely shouldn't go.

The Journey

As we left the coastal area and moved into the burnt countryside, it was astonishing to witness how different this place was to anywhere I'd been or seen before.

There was nothing to remind anyone of where they had left. It was an alien world – just like Mars (if the scientists in the nineteenth century had been right).

The shock and awe of the alien night sky was already familiar to me. Not one star or constellation was where it should be, but were replaced by strange new constellations. Nothing was the same. The night sky was a completely different panorama of strange flickering lights in strange formations.

(That just couldn't be the same moon up there ... nothing else was the same up there.)

And I presumed the grass and soil that covers the entire Earth would remain the same. Grass and soil are pretty standard wherever you go, or so I naively thought. How wrong that presumption was.

Endless, empty, rolling hills with brown grass growing on red (ochre) soil. It was obvious that God was doing so serious drugs the day he created this place.

However, it must be said, Australia had just gone through a few years of drought and was, therefore, a lot more burnt looking than usual.

But there was something fundamentally sad about it all to my North European eyes.

North European sheep and cattle were never meant to be standing in fields of dust beside dried-up water holes and staring forlornly at the death that surely awaited them and also staring forlornly at the road for some relief from the guilty passing humans who put them in this awful position.

The brown grass was inedible and a few stunted gum trees, no bigger than oversized bushes, provided hardly any shade from the relentless sun. In my naiveté, I presumed this was the outback but I later discovered that ... this was good Australian farmland.

The Arrival

Eventually, we reached our destination. The little train station of Muswellbrook.

Stepping into the main street, we were instantly accosted by the blazing blitzkrieg of the inland Australian midday sunshine. It was like opening the door on your oven and putting your head into it after it was switched on for hours.

This sun assault was much stronger than in Sydney because the influence of the sea breeze, however weak, was now definitely gone.

Armed with rudimentary directions to our target hotel, and without a taxi in sight, we began to meander along the main street labouring under the inconvenience of our heavy bags and the oppressive heat.

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Suddenly, a lone girl approached me ... clearly agitated.

Presuming she was in need of some directions or whatever, I got ready my hurried response that I had just arrived in town and could be of no assistance to her. Her frenzied question was not what I expected at all.

'Have you got a girlfriend.'

Thinking I misheard and allowing myself time to formulate an appropriate reply if I didn't hear her correctly, I pretended I didn't hear her correctly.

'Have you got a girlfriend.'

Tragically, I didn't mishear what she said, although her accent was – how can I describe it – maybe severe is the right word here. Well, more severe than Sydney, although I realise many visitors to Sydney would consider that to be an impossibility.

But, realising I was a tourist here and keen not to offend, I was obliged to say something ... and say something as delicate as any Foreign Affairs diplomat can be.

'Well ... Ah ... '
(interrupting) 'Can I be your girlfriend.'

The most surprising thing about this encounter was that it was in total contrast with everything else that I had encountered since my arrival in Australia.

Because of my 'original' ('unique') physical looks (thank you God) I was a fucking Wog, a fucking Daego. No doubt about it. And they (especially the girls) let you know it at every conceivable opportunity. There was no way any sheila, who thought of herself as in any way desirable, would go anywhere near someone as – inferior – as me.

So, this Outback girl's behaviour was off-the-Richter-scale shocking.

Immediately, thoughts of the American Wild West in the Gold-Rush days and the ladies who were eager to relieve lonely men of their money came to mind.

This young lady of the night (or blazing, midday sunshine as the case was) was going to be mighty disappointed if she succeeded in relieving me of my cash reserves – she should have thought this thing through. She should have waited till I was leaving town, Hello?

She was clearly a beginner, though what she was beginning I wasn't sure. Either way, I realised I was out of my depth.

I stealthily scanned the surrounding area for a pimp or any evidence of a trick, but there was none. There was just this girl in the middle of the day desperately asking me to be her boyfriend and I was less than five minutes in town.

OK. Let's try and work this thing out. I mean, I know I'm not Mel Gibson but I'm not the Elephant Man either. It is within the realms of human possibility that a woman could suddenly lose all sense of decorum and just hurl herself at me, obviously before another lucky young woman does. (OK. Maybe not within the realms of human possibility but, I like to think, maybe close.)

The tragedy for me was that this young woman in no way whatsoever even remotely resembled Nicole Kidman.

It became terribly apparent that this simian frontiers-woman, had chosen me to be her partner – but that simple discomfort brought with it a whole range of concerns.

Maybe what I was experiencing was a venerable and time-honoured custom in these here frontier parts. Maybe the good folk in this locality have been engaged in this, their most sacred of all mating rituals, from time immemorial (which they took with them from some remote area of Lincolnshire, or Whatevershire in the mother country, two hundred years ago).

Maybe her friends (or more eerily still, her family) had politely suggested to her that she was now old enough to get a boyfriend and so the forlorn girl stalked the train station by day and night for any gorgeous babe (like me :-)) that was brain dead enough to disembark (D'oh!).

To put it very mildly, I was as careful upon the thin ice, that I was clearly walking on, as I could possibly be (cold, cold ice ... Hmmm, lovely). But I bravely continued.

'I'm sorry. Ahh ... that's very nice of you, but ... first I need to find a place to stay ... and then ...'

(interrupting) **'You can meet me tonight.'**

She was persistent, God bless her. But she was more than persistent.

She was somehow – desperate. It was as if she had been given one day to find a man, to prove she wasn't a lesbian or a witch or in league with the devil or something ... or she would be burned at the stake (*and burning anything would have been so easy out there, you could get burnt to death just standing in a 'field'. No need for a fire*).

I also began to notice something strange (well, I mean, stranger).

She didn't even smile or make herself sexually alluring or approachable in any way whatsoever, which one would be forgiven for thinking should be part of the course she had clearly embarked on.

But, then again, this could also explain why she was without a boyfriend in the first place.

Only a few days later did all this make sense to me (I think).

I realised that almost everyone in the area had the same surname – Goodman. And they had roughly the same facial characteristics – a flat Easter Island type face covered in matted dirty-blond hair, a small nose, a hooked chin and wide spaced, squinting eyes.

And, boy, was it rough looking. And Frightening.

Without a doubt, it would have inspired Stephen King to write his greatest best seller.

Obviously, the original 'squatter' families had come from the same area in England and were all related to each other. And, when they arrived, they had only themselves to breed with ... because many long and tortuous miles separated one farmstead from the other, especially in the early days of bullock-drawn carts or, at best, horseback travel.

And these lovely people could have been marrying their cousins for hundreds of years back in Merry Old England long before moving to Australia. Which was probably the reason they were forced to leave in the first place.

On hindsight, that girl was definitely a Goodman and the wise old God of Nature had somehow informed her that it was imperative she try (at least try, Goddamit) to increase the gene pool of her progeny, else – God love us all – they would be even more inbred than she was.

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After making some lame excuse and without waiting to witness her reaction, I headed off down the main street (the only street) as briskly as any deer could be brisk. It was amazing how our bags, that hitherto had weighed so heavily in the midday heat, had become so light and manageable.

Bren (who was always a total babe magnet) ... was impressed. But he was barely able to walk because of the throes of subdued laughter he was currently consumed by.

'You still got it, boy. You still got it.'

Although we laughed and nervously laughed, we were scared. We were very, very scared indeed.

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(And, for the remainder of my horrific stay in Muswellbrook, every time I ventured up the street near the scene of that meeting – just to satisfy the shock of my unusual surroundings ... I was always sure I would see her standing there.

This apparition of that girl never ended while I stayed in Muswellbrook.

And, surrounding her, would be six huge brothers – all of them with wide spaced eyes, very rough flat faces covered in dirty-blond hair and holding hammers and clubs in each hand.

And they'd be absolutely bloody furious that someone as bloody abnormal looking as me would have the bloody cheek to refuse their bloody gorgeous sister.)

The 'Hotel'

Having crossed the bridge over a small dried-up stream that flowed through the town (hence the 'brook' part of the name) we reached the end of the dusty main street, much quicker than we expected.

(My first impressions were that it was a surprisingly tatty and rugged town and it wasn't until a year later, when I ventured into the real outback in Queensland and lived there for six months, that I realised Muswellbrook was really quite a sophisticated and elegant place.)

Feeling deflated by our dismal surroundings, we reached our destination hotel, which was the last building in town ... and sought refuge there.

Some clarification may be required here for the uninitiated ...

Pubs are called Hotels in Australia. Even really, really rough pubs are called hotels in Australia. My deluded concept of what I hitherto thought was a hotel was now well and truly over. A misty dream, like something your mother could easily have told you in a bedtime story, was now completely evaporated. In Australia, the term hotel is loosely applied – very loosely applied – and should be taken to mean anywhere that allows a person to have a beer or to sleep for the night. Therefore, almost anything that fulfils that requirement, except maybe a park bench, is qualified to bear the title Hotel.

Hotels are – how should I say it – basic, but they were not intended to be anything else nor are they advertised as anything else. For example, if the communal toilet (dunny) works, you're doing very well indeed and the bed linen – well, if it's there at all it's a damned bloody luxury and you don't bloody deserve it, you bloody pommy poofta.

And it appears that every town, even the smallest town, has at least two 'hotels' – the Grand Hotel and the Royal Hotel. That's it. Absolutely no variety in the names and, I wager, woe betide the abnormal bastard who decides to call his hotel something other than the Grand or the Royal. Methinks that abnormal bastard would be found the next morning hanging from the tallest gum tree in the territory – which means his feet would be just a few inches off the ground.

Anyway, we asked for accommodation from the incredibly rough looking barman whose face was more potholed than the moons (both the Northern or the Southern Hemisphere moons). And, to paraphrase what the almost indecipherable gentleman said, he told us that the demand for rooms was very intense but two blokes had just vacated a room before we arrived and we had no idea just how bloody lucky we bloody are etc.

When we got the room it was even smaller and more dilapidated than either of us could have possibly imagined. But we thanked our lucky stars (both the Northern and the Southern Hemisphere lucky stars). It was situated at the back of the house and we shared a little balcony with the room next door.

Out on the balcony, a well-built man about sixty years old, was standing and looking out over the bleak countryside doing breathing exercises. We introduced ourselves and then introduced our shock at what we already witnessed and he patiently acquainted us with our new alien environment.

He told us, with great friendliness and warmth, that he was originally from Yugoslavia (and I knew then that he was a Serb) and he had been in Muswellbrook for a few years.

Beneath his affable manner, it was obvious he was a very unhappy man who, for whatever reason, had exiled himself here. *(He told us that this area sometimes reminded him of his home and I couldn't help wondering when those times could possibly be.)*

'So, I hope you boys find work on the power station?' Maybe you will.'

'Where is it anyway?'

'About ten miles away.'

'Are they taking on men?'

'I don't know. They used to be taking on a lot. There's about five hundred men working there now and half of them will be in the bar downstairs tonight.'

'Where do they all stay.'

'Most of them are living ... if you can call it living ... in a huge camp not far from the job.'

'I guess we'll just ask in the bar tonight.'

(feeling sorry for us) **'Yeah. Good luck.'**

'Are you coming down?'

'No. It's a bit hectic for me. I don't drink.'

When we re-entered our room, we were genuinely in awe of him.

(He was one of these people that everyone bumps into in their lives (it's rare, but we all know this feeling). People who seem to have been born, and remain living, on another parallel to the rest of us. They are like us (if you cut them they bleed etc.) but they are very unlike us. They are people who always know things that the rest of us chase after all our life but never quite get to. And he, like so many of his kind, appeared as if he either didn't know he had that knowledge or that knowledge didn't make him any happier – maybe that knowledge made him even unhappier.)

'He doesn't drink. Jesus Christ ... that's not easy.'

'How does he keep his sanity in a place like this?'

We could find no earthly reason why such an intelligent and interesting man could be stuck here and not among the like-minded souls that Sydney would provide. But maybe the reason wasn't earthly. It was probably something that troubled him, something he had to work out for himself that only the isolation of this place could remedy.

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And I reflected on the Irish monks of old who (because of their close bond with God) had willingly isolated themselves in beehive huts for their entire lives, denying themselves all the basic human comforts and even the companionship of their fellows.

But surely theirs was a strengthening, a quest, a pilgrimage. It was for a greater glory.

The more I got to know my Serb neighbour while I was there, the more it was apparent that he didn't have any of these aspirations.

He had nothing in his life and nothing seemed to motivate his soul.

Yet he maintained this wonderful serenity and refinement in a place where those qualities clearly had no worth.

The Baa (Bar)

That evening, with great trepidation, Bren and I tentatively ventured downstairs and entered the incredibly noisy, smelly, smokey bar that was below our 'bedroom' and savoured the apparition that presented itself to us with as little shock registering on our appalled faces as the best Oscar actors could have achieved, I wager.

Coming from Ireland, we had both seen crowded, noisy, smelly, smokey bars before but even our most wretched nightmares couldn't have prepare us for anything like this.

Through the intense cigarette smoke, we could see the huge volume of men that infested the place. Hundreds of men were in a space clearly not designed for anything like this amount and every one of them was wearing a very smelly T shirt, shorts and heavy working boots.

And they all had belts around their waists that were resplendent with hammers, chisels, screwdrivers etc. This was either the tools of their trade that they carried all the time ... even in bed or in the shower or having sex with a woman ... or they were in readiness for the night's fighting.

The stink of their sweat can only be described as ... forever memorable ... and, tragically, this is so and this stink remains with me forever. And always will, I fear.

(Needless to say, there was not one woman in sight, nor any member of the human species who could possibly resemble a woman. There was only these guys, horribly alike each other in every sordid detail. Such homogeneity was rare to behold on planet Earth. On reflection, we must have looked and smelled like raving homosexuals to these guys.)

Eventually, we made our way to the bar and ordered three beers each, knowing that the chance of getting in another order would be very slim indeed. We drank two beers on the spot, before pushing back from the bar with the third in hand.

There was method in our consumption madness, however, as the alcohol would be necessary to provide the moral support required for our mission. We were about to attempt to communicate with the patrons of this establishment and God knows what strange roads that was going to take us down.

Desperate Dan

Soon, we overheard a few Irishmen talking and politely burst into their conversation.

They were friendly and we introduced ourselves and our job-seeking mission. One of them (there's always one in a group, isn't there?), who was a dead ringer for Desperate Dan, proudly outlined the hopelessness of our situation.

'So, you're lookin' for a job, are ya.'

('A job? No. Whatever gave you that impression? We were told a lot of the guys who come together here can decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics that is presumed to refer to the society that, in a later time, wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls.' I really wanted to say this but prudently resisted.)

'Yes.'

'What's yer trade?'

(Jesus. I should have come prepared. I knew nothing about this. We should have had a story ready.)

'Labouring.'

'Ya come at a bad time lookin' for labourin'. It's all taken

... ya might as well go back to Sydney. Der's nothin' ab... '

You'd think that bad news like this should not be delivered with a broad triumphalist laugh and a smile, but you'd be wrong. (I mean, here we were hundreds of miles from Sydney only to discover there was no jobs and and he was smiling.)

And while he was relishing this new found power he had acquired from the conveyance of bad news, I was getting seriously pissed off with his attitude and interrupted his reverie.

**'So what are they looking for?'
'What do ya mean ... lookin' for?'
'What do they need out there?'
'Far as I know, it's only steelfixers dey need.'
'Steelfixers?'**

I said 'steelfixers' with authority, as if I were very wise in the ways of the steelfixer.

Of course, I hadn't a bloody clue what a steelfixer was. I kinda did know what a carpenter or a plumber or a bricklayer was – but a steelfixer? What the hell's that? He fixes steel? Surely, by it's very nature, steel doesn't have to be fixed. It's the toughest thing on God's Earth that man has ever produced. Maybe he fixes broken steel?

Whatever it was, I had no idea. But there was no way in God's Earth I was going to let Desperate Dan know.

'Yeah. A couple of dem's leavin' today ... so I'm only guessin', mind.'

I couldn't help thinking that it could have been their room we got earlier and, maybe now, we could get their jobs as well.

'Who do I ask about it?'

While Bren was trying to whisper to me something to the effect that maybe knowing absolutely nothing about steelfixing might just preclude us from taking the job, Desperate Dan dramatically stretched out his big fat arm with a similarly rotund finger at the end of it ... pointing to a man sitting in the corner.

**'Der he is. Dat's the fella. Billy Black. He's got da steelfixin' contract.
He's da man. He runs da show out der.'**

Then, turning to his buddies, he continued with blood-curdling hate and malice.

'Blackie's in tonight.'

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Blackie

Through a gap in the throng of putrid bodies, I saw a man ... though I use the term 'man' loosely.

Billy Black was the most ugly, disgusting, evil looking person I had ever seen before or since in my life.

In fact, I use Blackie as a barometer with which to judge every bollox I've ever subsequently met and, on the Blackie scale, no one has ever scored a perfect 10 like Blackie did.

A total slob. Surely the inspiration for Jabba the Hutt in Star Wars, there was absolutely no sign of human expression or emotion on that face.

He was sitting on just one chair, which strangely seemed to support him, and surrounded by a bunch of nasty looking snarling and sniggering cronies who I brilliantly deduced were his minders.

But Blackie just sat there with beady, black, shark's eyes ... chewing. Just chewing.

Straight away, I was sure there was no gum in there (which I later discovered to be the truth). He just rolled his mouth in a chewing motion like buffaloes do before they charge.

The harsh realisation dawned on me that I had no option but to put my bias aside and approach him.

I mean, appearances can be deceptive, you know. Inside that – that loathsome thing – there was probably a decent, good person who would respond in a respectful way to a similarly decent, good person.

So, when I had talked myself into a fevered pitch of positivity and finished-up my beer, I began to move in his direction. Desperate Dan blocked my path.

'Where ya goin'?'

'I'm going to ask Blackie for a job.'

One of Desperate Dan's buddies, positioned perilously close to me, exploded. Beer sprayed from his mouth and nostrils before he regained his composure enough to join all the others in a burst of delirious laughter.

Desperate Dan recovered first and quickly reverted to his previous superior persona.

'You don't understand.'

'What?'

'Blackie hates Irishmen.'

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Stunned silence.

My previous positivity, so difficult to acquire, was now under serious threat again.

Desperate Dan's men went on to explain that every Irishman on the job was waiting for the day they were leaving so that they could get Blackie. They had no choice but to take all the anti-Irish shit he dished out ... till then.

I was beginning to realise that this wasn't going to be my lucky day, after all.

As Bren and I began resigning ourselves to defeat, I realised I wasn't going back to Sydney without at least trying. I had come too goddam far to do that.

I walked away from Desperate Dan and his buddies, so as not to involve them in any ugliness that might ensue ... and approached Blackie's corner.

His cronies were taken aback as I moved unconcerned past them and addressed Blackie to his face – if 'face' is the correct term here.

'Hello. Are you Billy Black?'

Shakespeare himself would be hard pressed to describe the sheer emptiness of those eyes as they slowly rotated and finally rested on me.

His squinting eyes came from the usual flat Easter Island type face covered in matted dirty-blond hair, a small nose and hooked chin.

As I instantly suspected, there was absolutely no neuron activity at all happening in that cranium. And humanity – well, let's forget it, shall we?

There wasn't even a flicker of recognition that he heard or understood what I said or that there was even another human in his presence.

He just kept on chewing while his cronies quickly glanced around to measure the extent of the possible threat. They quickly realised ... it was just poofy little me.

'Me and my buddy are looking for a job.'

Again nothing. Not even a glimmer. Maybe his world moves far slower than everyone else, like an elephant's world. *(An elephant lives to about 100 years and a mouse lives to about 1 year. But the mouse heart beat is 100 times faster than an elephant. So, they have exactly the same life time. And this is true for all creatures on Earth.)*

Maybe he's just taking his time to answer and doesn't realise that other people would have moved on to the fourth or even fifth sentence by this time.

'Have you got anything on.'

Still nothing. Maybe he's just drunk. Yes, that's it. I mean, we're in a bar. Give him time. But I quickly realised time wasn't the problem. I was just going to have to retreat the hell out of there.

Then, dam, I just realised. I have come so far and maybe he thinks I'm being funny.

Maybe he thinks I was asking has he got any clothes on or something. I had to stay and continue.

' ... At the power station'

He stopped chewing. Christ! Something was going to happen.

My life flashed before me and I thought about all my loved ones back at home ... but then, thankfully, I realised I didn't have any loved ones at home.

'What diya do?'

He spoke with a hint of malice. I still had a few more seconds of life remaining.

'Steelfixer.'

'Where.'

Jesus. That was fast. What does he mean? Where?

Where does the steel go on a building site?

Where are you from?

Where is the location of the Holy Grail? What?

'Sorry, what do you mean?'

'Where ya bin workin?'

'Sydney.'

He started to chew again. I didn't know if chewing was good or bad. I didn't know if even mentioning Sydney was good or bad. I continued to suspend all human sensitivities and show no fear, though every bone in my body must have turned to putty at this point.

He slowly turned away from me, picked up his beer and swallowed it in one Neanderthal gulp.

'OK. Start tomorrow ... seven o'clock.'

'Thanks. We'll be there.'

(I discovered much later that he didn't recognise my accent as being Irish otherwise Blackie would have been the last man I spoke to on this Earth.)

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The Two Steelfixers

To put it mildly, all the Irish guys were very impressed when I got back in one piece and told them of my success but, in keeping with his growing stature as a harbinger of calamity, Desperate Dan was impressed for only a fleeting moment before he re-established his usual self.

'Probably only wants ya out there to drop a ton a steel on yer head.'

Then one of his buddies pointed in the direction of two dirty, weather-beaten men (sun-beaten men) sitting in a corner with their beers on a small round table.

'Dem's da two fellas dat's leavin. Dem's da steelfixers.'

Without hesitation I approached them. I mean, after Blackie, this has got to be a doddle. In fact, after Blackie, Beelzebub himself (should I meet him) and all the legions of Hell (should I go there) will be a doddle.

I explained my situation to the two men as best I could and they understood.

'Have ya gotta pair a nips?'

(What the hell were nips? But if I didn't know what nips were the chances were I didn't have a pair of them.)

'No.'

'Have ya ever used a pair a nips.'

'No.'

They savoured my unbelievably honesty as best they could and, when they had finished laughing, the hopelessness of my situation had the opposite effect. It actually presented a challenge to them.

At least, that's the only explanation I can muster for what happened next.

'Go to the baa and get some straws.'

'Straws?'

'Yeah. Regular drinking straws.'

Without hesitation, I did what I was told and was shocked to discover that this bar actually did have drinking straws. *(At this baa, no guy would have wanted a straw, lest he be beaten to death as a poofa. And no sheila would go anywhere near that baa.)*

Straws in hand, Bren and I joined the two steelfixers and the lesson began.

They took an implement from their tool belt, which I deduced straight away was a pair of nips. They stood up, put their stools on the table and put the legs of the stools against each other.

They put straws round the stool legs, caught both straw ends with their nips, twisted, tightened and cut. The legs of the stools were now tied together with the straws.

The speed with which they did it was remarkable. Like everybody, they were drinking a lot of beer but their dexterity shocked the bejaesus out of me.

They slowly repeated the process a few times, explaining each step and then let us practice as best we could.

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And so, for the next few hours, we practised and drank and talked about the job ... and drank and practised some more ... and then drank ... and then drank some more.

It was amazing how confident and skilful I became as the night progressed.

(But, even that night, in the throes of my newly-acquired skill and in the throes of my growing confidence, I was aware of that ...

alcohol is a great leveller of imperfection and inexperience and is full of empty promise.)

Getting To The Job

Following a turbulent night, we rose at 5:30am. And what a bad rising that was.

Because of the 'excitement' of the previous evening, we forgot to buy food or arrange to have anything to eat for the morning and the following day. And, to compound our misery, we had truly cracking hangovers maybe due, in no small measure, to the sheer quantity of unfamiliar beer and lack of food the previous day.

And, although it was still dark, we set off to hitch a lift to the job.

The road was deserted for the first half-hour and, because of our inland position, it was so much colder than Sydney in the morning.

Eventually, the cars, bound for the power station, began to come by with headlights blazing. But they were all full of men and there was no room for us even if they wanted to stop.

Seven o'clock was fast approaching and our sense of hopelessness was intense.

Sam

Suddenly a car, with just two men in the front, screeched to a halt.

We got into the back seat with the briefest of introductions and a multitude of thanks.

The driver, Sam, was furiously chewing as if his life ... and the life of all that he held dear ... depended on it. And, strangely enough, unlike Blackie, he was actually chewing gum. Real gum.

I discovered later that he inserted a new stick of gum every few hours and never removed any of the old gum until the day and the hard drinking night was over and he went to bed (though, as I got to know him, I would be surprised if he actually removed any of it, even then.)

'Where you bastards from?'

'Ireland.'

'Ireland? Is that part of England?'

'Well ... it depends on who you ask.'

'I'm askin' you.'

'No. It's definitely not. And neither is Japan, France or Estonia.'

(I, wisely, didn't include Australia in my list.)

Sam suddenly turned his furiously chewing head right round a full 180 degrees and looked straight into my eyes - horribly reminiscent of Linda Blair in the Exorcist. It was a flat Easter Island type face covered in matted dirty-blond hair, a small nose, a hooked chin and wide spaced, squinting eyes.

But, unlike Linda, there was no discernible violence or threat in that primitive face.

(I later discovered this habit of staring into the face of the person he is talking to while he is driving was one of his endearing attributes. He would totally ignore the road and probably even forget that he was driving as he scrutinized the face of the person he was talking to. This endearing attribute definitely explained why (unlike all the other cars) there was only one frightened guy in the in front seat and none in the back when he stopped for us on that fateful morning.)

'That's right. You blokes are fightin' over there, aren't ya?'

I thought I detected admiration or, at least, respect – but I could have been mistaken.

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On that car journey, as I looked out at the red soil and brown grass covered in frost, I realised that these people are a blend of English background with American-type lifestyle (dollars with the Queen of England's head on it) and, as yet, I couldn't figure out which predominated.

I guess it depended on who you asked.

The First Day on The Job

What seemed like far too short a time, we arrived at the huge building site that was destined to be the largest electric power station in the Southern Hemisphere.

There wasn't enough time to look at the place as we were running a few minutes late and we had yet to meet Blackie. Before I realised he was in the vicinity, he was suddenly standing there in front of me, having emerged from a hut (Hutt?).

Just in case he had no recollection of who I was, I decided to give a hasty introduction, but it was cut short.

'Hello. I'm that guy that ... '

'Where's yer tools?'

Now, in hindsight, I realise it seemed like a fair question to ask a man coming to work on a building site but, for some reason, I was wholly unprepared for it. It felt like such an intrusion.

I was doing so well with the drinking straws the night before. It was nothing short of genius how fast I learned. And, to compound this intrusion, I didn't even know what kind of tools, besides nips, he had in mind.

'I ... I ... '

(angry) **'Have ya gotta pair a nips?'**

'No.'

I said it good and hard. No ... is what I said (without any emotion).

There was no point in giving him a bullshit story. It would only make matters worse.

He shrugged like a caged beast for a while and with all the calamities of this world etched on his hideous face, he turned away without a word.

He re-entered from his Hutt and re-emerged with two pairs of nips.

I would like to say he gave the nips to us. But he didn't. Nor did he toss them to us or throw them playfully to us.

He definitely threw them at us. And he threw them hard at us. Not at our heads – but at our bodies. But, nevertheless, hard.

'Use these.'

Before I had time to voice my gratitude, he turned away.

Immediately, his foreman Steve (his most seriously deranged crony from the previous night) put myself and Bren working with two different gangs. (*Mustn't have two buddies together, you're not meant to like anything about your job*).

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I was put with a gang of about ten guys and we went into a trench to tie steel bars to big uprights. They seemed a sullen bunch of guys and it really did feel like I had just volunteered to join a prison chain gang in the American Deep South.

As I was about to make polite conversation with the two nearest guys, to my horror, I saw Blackie standing on the bank looking down at me. It was obvious he wanted to witness my performance.

I managed to get myself positioned very close to the two guys and, although knowing they were local (and probably terrified of Blackie since they were children) and that my request might fall on the most inappropriate ears, I had to take the chance.

'I never did this before, guys. Can you cover for me?'

They glanced at me with violent expressions. But it was only momentarily and, without a word or a smile and, in fairness to their sun-burnt Australian hearts, they moved closer to me to obscure my initial fumbblings.

Because fumbblings they definitely were, no doubt about it. My hands were shaking from the huge alcohol intake the night before and Jabba examining my every move.

I had lost the confidence of the previous night and the terrible truth dawned on me that I would have to remain permanently drunk to perform this skill.

Blackie watched, his evil eyes burning into me as each minute ground onward.

But I must have performed all right because, the next time I looked, he had disappeared and I knew I had passed.

I spent the rest of that terrible day keeping an extremely low profile and doing what the other guys were doing, as best I could.

Very tentatively, I discovered that steelfixing was the erection of the steel support for the concrete pour and all I really had to do was tie the steel rods together. The more experienced men would do the more complicated stuff like measuring and cutting.

But the day dragged relentlessly on. It wasn't the heat and dust blowing everywhere, it was the boredom. Inactivity was killing me. If only there was more work to do.

And, with each passing minute, I became more and more convinced I couldn't face another day. My steelfixing career would be my shortest career to date. Tomorrow morning I would pack my bags and leave this miserable place.

And the only positive thing about my situation was ... I hadn't unpacked yet.

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Bruce and Liz

To compound my misery, there was an hour's delay in the evening and I missed Sam's return lift. I was forced to hitch a ride back to town.

After some time on the deserted, culture-less, hill-billy country road, a totally dilapidated car being driven very fast came to a screeching halt.

And that's when I met Bruce and his wife Liz.

Bruce had wild eyes that did nothing to hide the genuinely malevolent and dysfunctional personality that skulked behind them. He had a grotesque smile permanently etched on his face, like Jack Nicholson as The Joker.

'Ha ya goin' mate?'

'Good, thanks.'

'Comin' from the power station?'

'Yeah.'

'I moved here six months ago and still can't get on that job.'

'Why not?'

'Because I've found Jesus. That's why, mate.'

Not many people gonna like you if you like Jesus.'

He dived into such an intense monologue with barely disguised rage that I decided it was prudent to just let him speak. He was a volcano that could erupt at any time and it was wise to give him his platform and allow some of that awful, vengeful, protestant energy to be released.

Although he was driving very fast, before we had covered five miles he had told me everything about his incredibly misspent youth. Things that were sufficient to put him away in a high security prison for the rest of his life.

The threads running through all his escapades included large amounts of alcohol, stabbings, extreme violence, arrests etc. And for the remaining five miles he told me stuff that, if my better nature prevailed, I would have jumped from the car without hesitation. But I was tired and, after this terrible day, I was beyond the point of caring.

Liz took up his story as she was undoubtedly practised to do, while he constantly indicated to me his thorough agreement with everything she said.

To synthesise, she reverently explained how fortunate he was that Jesus entered his life and how His amazing grace had saved a troubled man like Bruce (*strangely, she didn't say 'wretch' – I guess she was trying to attain some degree of originality from the same old story*).

'And ... ah ... are you OK now Bruce?'

'Yeah. Bonza, mate.'

'No more drink?'

'No way, mate. That life's over ... and thank God Almighty. Praise the Lord.'

I got confirmation of this from Liz. She had a receding personality, courteous and civil, as the wives of men like Bruce tend to be.

'Did you know him ... before?'

'I sure did.'

'Big improvement?'

'Yes. Although he goes a bit funny sometimes.'

She said it with such genuine disappointment and sadness as she looked out her window and I realised she would not have been given the opportunity to say this when they were alone.

'Funny?'

'It's just ... when he eats red meat.'

'Red meat?'

Bruce again confirmed the sad tidings she imparted and he looked at me with as much contrite regret as he could muster.

'Red meat, mate.'

She bravely continued and it was obviously something that consumed her and filled her with great sorrow.

'Yes. It makes him ... a bit ... violent.'

'Crikey! Well ... maybe you shouldn't give it to him.'

'I don't. He eats it when he's out ... sometimes.'

Though still limited in the ways of the world and all therein, and the complexities of inter-human relationships, as I was at that time of my life ... I instantly suspected that red meat had nothing to do with his 'occasional' violence.

Some ancient survival instinct forced me to keep talking as much as I could and as fast as I could – without saying anything at all. I expressed my opinion that we all really have no idea what we are eating in this modern world and it was amazing the effects that some food had on some people and it's terrible the things they put into food nowadays etc. etc.

When we reached town, I had the door open before the car stopped.

'Thanks Bruce'.

'Don't thank me, mate ... thank the Lord.'

Bruce was ecstatic that he had fulfilled God's wishes and done his good deed for the day and it was so much better that his long-suffering wife was there to witness it and bask in his reflected glory.

As I walked up the stairs to my room, I realised this must surely be recorded as the longest day of my life – and the night's hard drinking had yet to begin. The 'Farewell to Muswellbrook' hard drinking jamboree that would celebrate the end of my steelfixing career.

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However, my rock solid plans to leave Muswellbrook were thwarted that evening by Bren who was stunned that I wanted to throw in the towel.

'You'll get used to it.'

'Get used to it? If you chopped off my hands and feet, I'd eventually get used to it too. That's not a very strong argument.'

'But this is what you came for.'

'I know ... but I just can't face another day ... I just can't'

'But that's mad. The hard part's over.'

It went on and on like this and, after he had helped me consume about twenty-three gallons of beer, he somehow resigned me to staying – just like I had resigned him to coming here in the first place.

A Break With Routine

I spent the next ten incredibly long weeks in that God-forsaken, culture-less wilderness, working a nine-hour day and a seven-day week.

Every day was a work day (*well, there was one day off during that time, for the Queen's Birthday because it was obligatory in this British colony*).

Each day, for a handsome fee, Sam would drive me and Bren to and from the job, grinding away at the never ending task he had sentenced himself to i.e. chewing up as much of the world's supply of gum as he could get into his mouth every day.

Only once did I encounter him in a situation that was not as my job chauffeur. I had been drinking elsewhere and returned later to the pub (sorry, hotel) we were staying in.

(It must be understood at this point that alcohol was a necessity. It was medicinal. It was a soul preserving necessity. Otherwise there was no way a person acquainted with the rudiments of civilisation would have wanted to remain alive.)

Anyway, there was Sam, spread-eagled on a chair, absolutely pissed. His head was rolled back, his eyes were shut, he was not breathing and he was still chewing – an absolutely remarkable achievement.

Unfortunately, he regained consciousness before I had time to exit and he called me over. Through a saliva and gum filled mouth and the inevitable stuttering caused by forty-three gallons of beer, he tried to explain how his mates had deserted him and he wanted someone to accompany him to a caravan park outside town.

'What for?'

'Sheilas. That's what for.'

'Sheilas?'

'Yeah. Ya know ... women.'

'I know what sheilas are, Sam.'

'Good. Then let's go.'

Women! Now that was indeed novel for this area.

In fact, so severe was the dearth of women that I was beginning to look back with nostalgia on the simian frontiers-woman that presented herself to me on first entering Muswellbrook.

(Actually, I was told by many 'authorities' that prostitutes were sometimes flown into the camp by plane for weekends. But just like emotionally-starved sailors who see mermaids, I figured it was a delusion and I never witnessed it or had it adequately proven by a non-sexually frustrated person.)

'Seriously, do ya know any sheilas, Sam?'

'Know any ... course I bloody do. What kinda bastard d'ya think I am?'

'Yeah but ... '

'Listen mate ... I know them, OK. So, come on.'

Sam gave me that universal wink that all men seem to bestow on other men as a demonstration of their prowess with women. A shudder practically jerked the disks of my backbone out of place.

I mean, any woman that Sam knows (and I presume he meant in the Biblical sense) has got to make my simian frontiers-woman appear the most seductive of all women. Still, it would haunt me forever if I declined his offer.

'OK. Let's go.'

'Wait'll I get on me feet an get some bee (beer).'

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Sam gallantly managed to get on his feet and traverse the short distance to the bar and we got some (a lot of) beer. Then he somehow struggled out the door – hanging on to my T shirt lest I escape like his 'mates' already did.

To my eternal shock, his car was parked (parked?) outside and he was furiously ripping the pockets off his trousers trying to find his keys.

'Are we driving?'

'Bloody oath. How d'ya think we're gonna get there, ya bloody idiot ... walk?'

'Yeah.'

'Walk. I'm too bloody pissed to walk. Can't ya tell? 'Struth ... you must be as pissed as me. Anyway, it's about five miles away'

I feared he was probably right about the degree of my sobriety as I stood there and witnessed the most gruesome attempt I have ever seen in my life of a very drunk man trying to, firstly, unlock the car door and then get the key into the ignition as he continued to keep me enthusiastic about our mission and the multitude of sexy women waiting for us there.

He began this truly valiant attempt by leaning his left arm on the car to steady himself while his right arm tried prodding the key in the general vicinity of the target area – the keyhole. This was clearly not working, even to Sam, so he embarked on another tactic.

He stood away from the car, stretched out his arm, closed one eye and aimed the key at the keyhole. He then moved both himself and the outstretched key slowly towards the target figuring that, if he doesn't fall, the key just had to slide in.

Tragically, this was even worse. The key would land on the handle, glass or more frequently on the paint-work which thankfully was already very scratched.

He struggled heroically, his warrior eyes remaining fixed on his adversary – the keyhole – and refusing to let it better him. But it was obvious that he was seeing many different keyholes (even with one eye shut) and, thus far, none was the right one.

It simply wasn't polite to suggest that I maybe should give it a try. Men like Sam don't want that kind of help. And it was becoming very apparent that, even if his story was true and he did score at the caravan park, Sam was going to be no good to any woman this night.

Finally, he stumbled on the inspiration that if he formed a circle with the forefinger and thumb of one hand and held it over the target area, it would give his key-bearing hand a greater chance of finding the keyhole.

Shockingly, the strategy worked. Sam swung the door open and fell down on the street with the exertion.

Manfully, he crawled in the driver's seat and managed to get sitting in an upright position.

Getting the key into the ignition wasn't quite so bad as he was sitting now and didn't have to devote the majority of his consciousness to remaining on his feet.

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Eventually, the engine roared into life and off we went into the dark country road. The chances of hitting anyone was remote in this sparsely populated area.

And I knew that even if we drove off the road there was no real problem either. There were no ditches or fences, the fields were as hard as any road surface and trees were as scarce as people.

Although I knew all this, it did nothing to alleviate my anxiety. Even with my hand frequently correcting the steering wheel, we went off the road once or twice but not by much and, anyway, where the edge of the road was and where the field began could be said to be not as defined as in other parts of the world.

Sam kept on chewing and talking incessantly, frequently turning his head around by ninety degrees to face me when making a point.

After what appeared to be a journey half way across Australia, we reached the caravan park. I got out of the car and tried nonchalantly to regain my breath.

'Remind me to get a new chauffeur in the morning.'

It fell on deaf ears. Dam. Either he didn't get the joke, or was only thinking about women or, worse still, he thought I was a smart bastard and already decided I would have to walk home – which wasn't such a horrific scenario really, as the memory of the recent journey was still vivid.

But, even in my drunken state, I realised I didn't want to loose my daily lift to work.

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Under the incredible sound of the cicada beetles in all the surrounding trees, Sam stumbled towards the target caravan and I followed, both of us struggling with our beer cans.

And even though it was seen in the moonlight, the sight that greeted us (well, me anyway) was truly apocalyptic.

The caravan was rocking dangerously and the door was swinging open with at least two hairy men's backs jammed in the entrance. Somehow, we got in and I was stunned at the sheer volume of people that was contained within. (For people, read men.)

Great big sweating beer-filled barrels in smelly T shirts, shorts and boots. It was as if the whole fucking building site, all five hundred square feet with its five hundred workers, was all squashed into one tiny parody of itself.

How the floor supported this strain, I forced myself not to think about.

Instead, I broke open a can and stuck it to my face, totally raging with myself at having been stupid enough to get talked into this useless expedition.

What the hell was I thinking about? I mean, it was Sam that brought me there. Sam, for Christ's sake. Women, my arse.

Suddenly, although there was definitely not enough room for men to have anything that could even be loosely classified as a fight, something resembling a scuffle broke out and a group of men pushed another man towards the door.

'Git the fuck outa he', ya drongo.'

The object of this request was shoved up against me and his reply was, without doubt, the most convoluted and evil curse I had ever witnessed.

(In fact, if all the worst curses I had hitherto heard were somehow stripped of their non-essential words and the remaining swear words amalgamated into one vile bellow, it would not have competed in any way with what I heard.)

How one man's mind conjured it up on the spur of the moment, especially a mind that was obviously very drunk, was truly outstanding.

The curse involved a consortium of unrelated things, that obviously made sense to him at that very drunk moment ... namely donkey's genitalia, overt forms of homosexual behaviour, the man's incompetence in his working and social life and the car he drives.

As he pushed me aside to get out the door, we exchanged glances.

Jesus Christ! It was Bruce.

I was dumbstruck with embarrassment for him. But, of course he wouldn't remember me. I mean, he was driving and I was sitting in the back seat and now he's really pissed and really upset. It would be impossible for him to recognise me.

But ... he recognised me.

The scowl on his face suddenly transformed into a demonic smirk. Maybe he was too drunk to be at The Joker stage yet but it was indeed a semblance of a smile. Either he was even drunker than I imagined or the former curse had taken all the breath from his body, because he had great difficulty in speaking.

'How's it goin' ... me owl Oirish mate?'

'Couldn't be better. How about you?'

'O'right, I geese. But ... Oi've seen betta.'

At this point I presumed he meant he had obviously fallen off the wagon (drink-wise) and wanted to talk about it but, before I could open my mouth, he continued aggressively for the other men to hear.

'Yeah, mate. Some roight fuckin' cunts in 'ere tonight.'

I was about to reassure him that there was absolutely no sign of any cunts, either of the fucking or non-fucking variety, in here tonight – but I let it go.

'Is it not normally this bad?'

'Fuck, no. It's generally o'right.'

The men that ejected him began to look menacing again to the extent that even Mad Bruce realised it was time to depart. He gripped my shoulder very tight, in what I presumed was some kind of reassuring gesture.

'Gotta go, mate. Look after yaself.'

(I was tempted to say 'Praise the Lord' but I just couldn't.)

'Good night Bruce. See ya.'

As he stumbled to his car, got in and screeched off, my heart genuinely felt heavy for Liz that night and how her sad, dignified face looked away from me and out to the burnt grass when she told me about his occasional violence.

She was a good, well brought up woman and surely she suspected, deep down, that his alcoholic abstinence story was untrue.

But she seriously needed to believe the red meat story. Otherwise, her life was a sham.

It's amazing what delusion is and how we all need some of it to make our lives more bearable – maybe not to Liz's extent, but we all use a little red meat story to get by.

What a tragic tale, I'm sure, that woman could tell and the real tragedy undoubtedly was that she had nobody to tell it to.

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Still, life must go on. People tend to create their own tragedies in life and, this night, I had definitely created mine. I mean, here I was in a place more packed with maleness than Mike Tyson's jockstrap and I was looking for a woman.

With great urgency, I strained my muddled head to see could I identify anything that even resembled a woman.

(It wouldn't have to be a close resemblance, mind you, I wasn't going to be unrealistic. Just anything your average gynaecologist (and not necessarily some Harley Street specialist) could confirm on examination that it was probably not a man.)

And, sure enough, there she was ... A WOMAN.

I was genuinely surprised. It was indeed a woman. One solitary woman. One very brave woman or a woman who desperately needed male attention – a lot of attention.

Maybe attention of the psychiatric kind was what she really required to be in a place like this. So it was professional help she needed. Not attention or advice. She needed help.

She was defensively positioned in the corner with her back firmly against the wall, which, given her drooling audience who only stared at her body as she spoke, was an admirable and praise-worthy position for her to adopt.

It was then that I figured out why all the men were facing the same way.

To say my situation was hopeless was to seriously misunderstand it. A snowball being discovered in Hell's ashes after God nuked it would have been a much more realistic proposition than me getting anything that might resemble a woman that night.

Sam had magically squeezed (poured?) himself between the nearest men's backs and disappeared into the throng. I didn't have to worry about him falling and hurting himself because falling was impossible.

So, for about half an hour I tried to drown myself in a few more cans, feeling more and more miserable as I realised that I was at the mercy of Sam's return lift and had to be ready for work in about four hours.

Suddenly, THE WOMAN moved to a more favourable position not a million miles away from me and something inside me snapped. Why not give her a try. Every other guy was.

It's still not clear to me how I got near to her and I guess it never will be, but I did, God love me.

'So, how are you?'

'Fine, mate.'

I knew she was old enough to be my mother and she was one to whom the expressions 'She saw better days' and 'She was never the belle of the ball, even in her prime' could easily be applied. But she was very attractive to me that night.

She even smiled at me in a flirty way, although, in hindsight, my fevered mind could have exaggerated the extent of her ardour.

'Big crowd here tonight.'
'Haven't seen you 'ere befo'.'
'I'm Sam's secret weapon.'
'You're Sam's mate?'
'No. Well, not really I'm ... Yeah, I'm Sam's mate.'

(In Australia, you have to be a mate to everyone you just casually know.)

We had one of those ridiculous conversations where I could be talking about the UFOs that had been sighted in the north of NSW state (and probably was) and she could be talking about the price of lamb chops (and probably was) and we were in perfect synchronicity.

In other words, she was pissed and so was I.

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And, tragically, just as I was getting into my stride, she had to go. 'Was that the time' and 'It was high time she was in bed' and, with a flick of her skirt and a definite lusty smile, that I did NOT imagine, she squeezed her way out of the caravan.

Genuinely believing she gave me a strong cue to follow her, I did.

I burst out of the caravan and into the dark, starry night and the eerie, omnipresent symphony of the cicada beetles. But the unique and wonderful experience that is the sounds of the Australian night was very far from my mind that night.

I saw her. She was not leaning seductively against the side of her caravan, holding the door open and looking at me with her red lips parted like she should have been ... like she would have been if this was a movie. No, she wasn't. Instead, she was hurrying (definitely hurrying) around the corner of a nearby caravan.

I ardently followed her around the corner, but she had disappeared.

She obviously went inside, so I knocked on the door, still convinced I was doing the right thing and she just had to be waiting seductively inside.

After knocking some more, the door swung open and an old guy about fifty shadowed by a younger guy about twenty were standing there.

They were both absolutely adapted to their environment – big, blonde, flat faced and with very little cranial activity evident in their wide spaced eyes.

'Wattaya wan?'

'Ah ... I was lookin' for a woman.'

'There's none 'ere.'

'Ah ... Sorry about that.'

Later, it became obvious that my encounter was with the woman's son and husband but, because I had become so divorced from any 'normal' family setting, it was not immediately apparent to me at the time.

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A similar instance of this had happened once in a pub in Muswellbrook as Bren and I were sitting at a table with our ubiquitous beers.

A man and a girl came in, sat down close to us and were more openly affectionate to each. Not only was the sight of a women rare indeed but a couple being affectionate was even rarer.

To our horror, and to the horror of the all-male clientele, we realised that she was no more than seventeen years old and he was in his late forties. We were stunned.

'That's going a bit far, isn't it?'

'He obviously doesn't give a damn about what other people think.'

'Dirty old bastard.'

For some time, we traded a few observations like these in hushed tones. I mean, we were all a long way from home and pined for women etc. but there were limits to what is considered acceptable behaviour, even to the wild beasts we had become.

Obviously feeling uncomfortable by the tension they had caused, the couple decided to leave.

And it was only when he held her hand as they were leaving did we realise that what we were witnessing was a protective, loving father and his daughter who clearly loved him very much.

We were embarrassed. But, I guess, all men will lose a sense of family when they are forced to live as we were.

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Anyway, similarly embarrassed and accompanied by the eerie, omnipresent cacophony of the cicada beetles (which now sounded like laughter), I arrived back to base caravan.

Sam was unconscious again and, as the crowd had thinned somewhat, I saw another of his 'mates' also very oblivious to the world.

(Vince was only 20 years of age and already a hopeless alcoholic. His doctor had him on a big regime of tablets every day and strict instructions to stay away from alcohol otherwise he wouldn't see his 21st birthday. His party piece in the pub every night was to swallow down his tablets with beer.)

I successfully shook Sam back to a rudimentary form of consciousness, persuaded him it was time we returned to town and off we went.

Don't ask me how we actually got back, I must have deliberately erased it forever from my conscious mind.

Maybe, in future years, psychiatrists using advanced regression techniques to unearth what afflicts me will discover what really happened on that return trip. All I do know is that I never again ventured out in search of female companionship in Muswellbrook.

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Drunk Driving

Drunk driving only has meaning in context. In our part of the world it refers to anything over a pint or a half pint or whatever because there are lots of other (non-drunk) motorists and pedestrians using the road. In other words, you just didn't drink any alcohol – and that's it.

But in the Australian countryside, at that time, it required a whole new understanding.

To be unable to stand or formulate two consecutive words did not preclude a man from being a driver. In fact, it seemed de rigueur. Probably being flat on his back, unconscious, not breathing and with no discernible heartbeat may have risen some doubts about his prowess as a driver – but I wouldn't bet any money on that.

For example, it was a regular occurrence, on the way to work in the morning, to see a car driven into the drain at the side off the road with the driver still sitting at the wheel ... fast asleep.

(The road to the camp had a big drain on one side and motorists, who were used to meandering off the roads when driving, got caught in this trap very frequently.)

Only a few hours before, the driver would have left town en route to camp but got overcome – God love him.

His passengers, unable to revive him or get the car out of the drain, would have stopped another car which was guaranteed to be bound for the camp. They would have deserted him, knowing he was fine and would just be an hour or two late for work.

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One morning, as we merrily made our way to work as depressed and hungover as men could possibly be, we passed one such car almost completely rolled over in the road-side drain. We slowed down to see was there a problem or was he just pissed.

The driver was Desperate Dan, unconscious and would probably be a bit late for work.

As we drove off, I tried to describe Irish law regarding these drunk driving matters to a very shocked Sam.

'Yer jokin, mate.'

'I'm not jokin'.'

'Yer fuckin' me 'roun?'

'Fair dinkum Sam, fair bloody dinkum.' *(I had picked up some of the slang)*

'Ya mean ... you're drivin' down the bloody road ... mindin' yer own bloody business ... and the cops pull ya over n breath test ya?'

'Yeah.'

'An' ya havenn drunk one beer?'

'Yeah.'

'An' ya havenn had an accident?'

'No accident, Sam.'

'Bloody oath. Are ya serious?'

'Yes. I'm serious.'

'Struth. What kinda fucked up place is that?'

The rudiments of random breath testing were way too much for Sam – worse than any horror Bram Stoker could have imagined, even when Bram was seriously drunk.

Sam suggested, in his quaint way, that the local cops have more sense than to attempt anything stupid like that. And he was probably right.

What could the two or three local policemen do, anyway? They'd need a fifty-strong, heavily armed force in full riot gear on the roads every night. And, even then, they'd be hard pressed. I'm sure they wisely decided that it was better to leave well alone.

Half (and that's being radically conservative) of the working population on the power station would have been in prison, work would have ground to a halt and a lot of rich power-brokers would have been very upset. The police, not surprisingly, let it all go.

(Muswellbrook was a microcosm of the entire world. Crime prevention only works when the majority of the population really want to prevent crime and are brave enough to take on the power-brokers who control the police.)

The 'Inmates' on The Job

Generally speaking, the work was easy but it was, by far, the worst job I have ever had to endure in my hitherto miserable life.

Everyone worked nine hours a day and seven days a week. It was wretched drudgery, miserable work day after miserable work day.

It was very reminiscent of a Soviet Gulag forced labour camp – not that I ever spent much time in a Gulag, I confess, but the descriptions and photographs were eerily similar, except that the inmates had to work hard in a Gulag and we didn't.

The huge perimeter fence surrounding the site (probably electrified – nobody had the courage to find out) was definitely designed to keep us workers in for the day rather than keep any adventurous kangaroos out during the night.

Myself and hundreds of other unfortunate souls were down in holes and trenches, working on the foundations of the biggest power station in the Southern Hemisphere with the constant dust (at ground level) blowing into our eyes, mouth and nose.

The worst part was, by far, the idle time – nothing to do but to somehow trying to stay looking busy. I was always trying to find more work to do, so the day might hopefully pass quicker.

(Blackie was scamming the government, claiming he needed more men than he did. And that added terribly to our misery – too many men and too little work.)

And nature itself added a bitter twist to the unbearably sombre environment.

There is a bird native to Australia (I can't remember its name now) that makes a sound just like a baby crying. (Is there anything more tragic than being unable to comfort a crying baby?). And that forlorn bird would slowly fly cross the empty sky a few times every day and lament the dismal, unnatural sight it saw on the earth below and the suffering that must surely accompany it.

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So, the most difficult part was the mind-numbing boredom of spending every day with little to do in the company of men with whom I shared absolutely nothing in common.

Although we spoke the same language and drank the same beer, their world was a million miles from mine and it was impossible to bridge that divide by either trying to empathise with theirs or introducing them to a millimetre of mine.

And their contribution to the meeting of these disparate worlds was even less enthusiastic than mine. Their meagre interest was like a wolf sniffing at a carcass before the relish of sinking his teeth into it and ripping it apart.

There was no way anything outside their immediate locality, or at the very best Australia, was of any interest to them. They would belittle it and compare it unfavourably with the delights they knew ... in other words, footy (Aussie Rules football), league (Rugby League) and, of course, cricket.

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Strangely enough, Desperate Dan was a familiar figure on the job. He was not the kinda guy I would want to meet normally – but out in that relentless Australian environment, he was something I knew. Something I could identify with him. He was somehow ... normal. He was part of the normal world.

Whenever he marched past (about as regularly as the bird that cried like a baby would pass overhead) with his chest dramatically extended and his trademark loud footsteps, he would always say the same words to me with a knowing smile ...

'Yi'll niver go back now.'

And he never expected a response as he continued his onward march. He would never even break his military stride. After many weeks, I think I figured out what he meant.

What he was saying was, and I paraphrase ... how could I possibly go back to that awful country – Ireland – after experiencing these Australian delights.

Jesus! Was I going severely insane? Or was Desperate Dan severely abused as a child.

Eventually, I established some kinda normal rapport with foreigners, men who had very little English. It's funny how language means so little in comparison to culture, the arts and, I suppose, a general awareness of life on this otherwise lovely Earth.

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Bruno

I was discussing this with Bruno, a guy from Chile – a very unhappy and lonely guy from Chile. He recalled when he was forced to run for his life after Pinochet (Maggie Thatcher's mate) seized power in his country and the internment, torture and murder of thousands of innocent people, who were perceived as opposition, began.

He was targeted for no reason. It was nothing he did, it was just his left-wing political beliefs. And, as the harassment increased, he had no option but to get out as fast as he could – like tens of thousands of his fellow Chileans had to do.

The trauma of having to leave his country, friends and family, probably never to return, was bad – but the reception he got when he arrived in Australia was far from the encouragement he was in such need of.

'Chile? Were's Chile, mate?'

'Sounds pretty cold, eh ... Chilly?'

'Do you blokes have cars there?'

'And do ya have televisions ... ya know ... stuff like that?'

'Bet yer glad to be in a bonza place like 'Stralia, eh?'

When he realised these comments were actually meant to be friendly, his isolation was total.

Although he spoke good English, he stopped using it. What's the point in speaking? Language is a ridiculous burden if you have nobody to talk to.

He was the one who helped me decipher the local lingo. I couldn't ask the Aussies because, in all probability, they couldn't translate it for me.

For example, every time my work-mates were speaking they would say 'Bloody Earth' Almost in every sentence. 'Bloody Earth', that's all I heard all day long. But what did it mean?

At first I thought they were referring to Australia's red earth ... it's ochre soil ... its bloody earth. I mean, this red earth was blowing into our eyes, nose and mouth every day so it kinda made sense. But my elation at this philosophical turn of phrase was short lived. My work-mates were simply not the philosophical kinda guys.

Bruno explained it to me. They were not saying 'Bloody Earth'. They were saying 'Bloody Oath'. This explanation just muddled the water for me, momentarily. What did Bloody Oath mean?

Then I remembered that back in Merry Old England they used to say, as a demonstration that they were telling the truth ... 'My Oath'. That meant what they were saying was the truth and they were pledging their oath upon it. And, with the Aussie accent, Oath became Earth to my ears. Mystery solved.

As an English speaker, Bruno knew I was in trouble here so he helped me find my feet.

(The Australian vernacular is full of rich and colourful slang words too numerous to mention here but my favourite is ... chunda (chunder) which means vomit. It came from the convict days when prisoners were being transported on sailing ships. These land-lubbers were invariably seasick and when they had to man-the-riggings the rolling of the ship was a lot more intense the higher they went and they were a lot more likely to vomit. The rule was they had to shout 'Watch Out Under' before vomiting, so the men on deck could jump clear. But, as everyone who has ever vomited knows, this was a big ask – especially the projectile vomiting the riggings of a sail ship would bring on. So 'Watch Out Under' became mercifully shortened to 'Chunder')

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Grealy

Although we were all similarly miserable and depressed and probably looked terrible, there was a great variety of men working there (although my work-mates were all local). Besides a few 'foreigners', Kiwis and Poms there were the ubiquitous Irishmen (however, to most locals, the Irish were Poms as well).

One Irishman, named Grealy, used to wear a smile like a mask. His smiling face could be seen walking around every day, but there was no joy in that smile. *(He was only human after all and one wouldn't have expected to see joy in that place but one wouldn't have expected to see a smile either.)*

Like so many 'different' types, he always seemed to be alone, whether working or having lunch.

One day I approached him for a chat and, although he was friendly, he had a strange habit of not looking at the person he was addressing (a man more unlike Sam you couldn't possibly meet).

With his head rigidly turned away, he would squint from an impossible angle – with his benign smile always solidly in place.

'How long are you here?'

'A year.'

'A year? Twelve months?'

'Yeah. Just over a year now.'

It was very difficult for me to imagine. Twelve months in this place and he was still smiling and coherent and apparently sane.

'Do you take any time off?'

'The odd day ... but what's the point ... there's nowhere to go.'

'How long more are you going to stay?'

'Another year.'

To the average person in a normal job, a year is not a long time. But a month in this place is not something a person would willingly undertake unless his only child was going to be shot. (*Come to think of it, the entire community he belonged to would have to be under a death sentence as well.*)

'And what then? What's your plans?'

'Go back to Ireland and buy a pub.'

I could have guessed. What is it about Irishmen and saving enough money to buy a pub? Never a greengrocery or a newsagent shop. Always a pub.

And why not, I suppose. The happiest times of our Irish lives was spent in friendly, social pubs – out of the rain. It was only natural that to own one and be in it all the time would be nothing short of Nirvana.

The non-English speaking romantics had similar dreams except that it involved the purchase of things like a greengrocery or a newsagent shop.

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Prods V Taigs

That working environment created some interesting bedfellows but the most interesting to me was four Irish labourers ... two Belfast Catholic Republicans and two Donegal Protestant Unionists. (*For non-Irish readers, Belfast is the home of Unionism and Donegal is in the Irish Republic – hence the madness of this situation.*)

And all four of them always seemed to be working together in the same trench.

Seriously. Where else would you find it except Australia? (*The trenches of the First World War, I hear you say. OK. OK. The Belgian trenches in 1916 – but where else?*)

Surely the bleakness of the situation they found themselves in would create a bond between them – but it didn't.

They were thirteen thousand miles from the realities of the north of Ireland, shoulder to shoulder digging a trench in the middle of nowhere for nine hours a day and seven days a week ... but they were a lot more than thirteen thousand miles distant from each other.

Of course the Belfast Boys had no idea of the religious or political persuasions of the Donegal Boys, because they never bothered to find out. Being aware of the volatile situation, I tried to bridge the two seriously-separate worlds, sharing my donegalness with one and my anti-imperialism with the other but it was inevitable that trouble was going to break out.

Although I didn't witness 'The Trouble', I was involved in the delicate patching up process afterwards. But as everyone from the north of Ireland knows – this running sore is never mended or even patched up properly. It's just a little Band Aid – a plaster - when amputation is required.

One night in a pub, the Donegal Boys, very untypical of them it must be said (they were not trouble-makers), fervently praised Maggie Thatcher's handling of the H Block hunger strike and her refusal to make deals with 'terrorists'.

'No U-Turn. Fair play to her.'

Now, if they had chosen any other Unionist platform then, fair enough, I have no doubt there would have been a heated disagreement and it would have been resolved. But that one was just too much.

It was difficult to blame the Belfast Boys for physically attacking them because of the insensitivity of what they said and the enormous devastation this policy had brought to their community.

On the other side of the coin, it was obviously very difficult for the Donegal Boys to listen every day to support for an armed struggle they genuinely hated.

It was a good example of the Border Mentality.

This is a world-wide thing but Ireland is a very good example of it.

Many people from both sides of the border perceive it as a frontier where everything is different on the other side. They forget that it was just a convenient line drawn through homogeneous countryside.

The complexities of the Ulster people in Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan are just the same as the Ulster people on the other side of the border except that the people on the other side of the border have a greater unionist population, that's all.

The Belfast Boys came from the consciousness, as do the vast majority of their unionist neighbours, that everyone in the Republic is a republican (of sorts) which is just as ridiculous as saying everyone from the Republic is a publican.

They probably wondered why these guys from Donegal were not agreeing with everything they said. They probably thought they were just quiet and kept themselves to themselves.

They probably thought everything, except the reality of the situation – they were dealing with Northern Protestant Unionists.

Anyway, everyone who knew them tried to fix the situation as best we could, before it got out of hand. For example, the vast majority of men on the job were local, derived from naught but English settler stock and thoroughly Royalist, as I discovered many times to my great dismay.

The Donegal Boys could easily have mustered up support (Blackie and his buddies wouldn't have needed much persuasion) but, to their credit, they didn't.

All four guys continued to work there but were kept apart as much as possible.

Although they never really talked to the Donegal Boys again, to their credit, the Belfast Boys never again mentioned 'The Troubles' in their presence either.

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Argentina V Chile

A similar situation existed between a man from Argentina (Carlos) and the Chilean guy Bruno.

Although they were the only Spanish speakers in this vast wilderness and couldn't speak to the locals and they were both very nice men ... they absolutely refused to speak to each other.

It was such a tragedy for them. They both needed to stay on this job they hated, for about two years, to make enough money to return to Argentina in one case and, for the other, to re-establish the business, that was taken from him in Chile, anywhere in the non-fascist world.

Men's behaviour can make no sense sometimes. Women cope so much better in situations like this.

Surely they could have agreed not to mention their countries' disputes and identify with the huge commonality they shared. And, if not friends, be a support for each other if only for the time they were to be on the job.

But ... No. And we could do nothing for them. None of us had enough Spanish to make them shake hands.

The Falklands war was in full swing at the time and the Argentinian would seek out myself or Bren to talk about it because he knew we were on his side and, unlike the locals, we actually knew there was a war on.

(Seriously. The local Australians I worked with didn't even know the country that governs them – Britain – was in a war. All they ever talked about was footy and beer. When I mentioned the Falklands war to them one day, they squinted at this strange alien creature that I surely was, their congenital faces trying to fathom what the hell I was talking about.)

With hardly any English and emotion bursting all over his face and his hands waving wildly, Carlos would babble incoherently about the blitt-ie navv-ie (British navy) being kaput (destroyed) in the Malvinas (Falklands).

Of course, in response to our questions about how this was going to be achieved, we had no idea what he was saying but we learned to nod our heads in agreement.

If only he could talk about it to another Spanish speaker.

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Tony

There was another guy, a New Zealander called Tony, who seemed to develop an affinity with us because we weren't Australian.

I saw him very rarely on the job, but when away from the job he was forever walking alone up and down the main street (the only street) of Muswellbrook.

He had a ready smile, friendly, easy to talk to and I always imagined him to be the product of good, respectable people brought up in a nice, gently farming area.

Although we were available for a more in-depth conversation, he always kept it short.

'How are you boys doin'?'

'All right. How 'bout you?'

'Not bad. Not bad.'

That would be the extent of it and he'd walk off before any other banter could develop.

He always had the look of a man who was intent on going somewhere ... but everyone knew there was nowhere to go, except the Grand or the Royal.

He was a small man who always wore a tartan, lumberjack shirt (maybe it was the same shirt he always wore, it wasn't polite to ask). His red face and sandy hair reflected his Scottish ancestry – as about 70% of white New Zealand has Scottish ancestry.

He always held his head erect and had the small man's habit of walking with a heavy foot and pulling his trousers up – made even more comical as he, like the rest of us, was wearing flip-flops and a pair of shorts.

The trouble with Tony was that he was always getting into fights in bars – but, I wager, he would have been different under different, more benign circumstances.

One night, as we were entering the bar, he stumbled out of it and right into our path with his hand across his mouth and blood oozing through his fingers. We were embarrassed for him but he was unconcerned, took his hand from his mouth and smiled through the blood.

'How are you boys doin?'
'All right. How are you?'
'Not bad. Not bad.'
'Are you all right?'
'Yeah. Sure. Why?'
'Oh, nothing. What's it like in there?'
'Not bad.'

Tony was surprised that his usual conversation with us was a bit elongated this time. The fact that blood was gushing from his mouth and nose made no difference to him.

'Right boys. I must be off.'
'Good night.'
'Good night.'

The fight that did not go his way was obviously not going to undermine his natural civility. He walked off proudly with his back straight and head in the air.

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The Bushmen

But the single most disquieting type of men on the job couldn't be more dissimilar to Tony, or any other hominid on this Earth. They could only be described as bushmen.

It's hard to paint an accurate portrait of these guys because, coming from our part of the world, there is nothing that resembles them.

They could be identified straight away, very distinct from the local men and, especially, distinct from the rest of us.

They were a type of men who were once very much a part of the Australian environment but who are now (I think) rapidly becoming an endangered species. They travelled from work camp to work camp, from one big country job to another, taking a few months, or years, off between jobs until their money ran out.

A lot of them would not (or could not) return to urban life or any form of settled family life. But don't go getting the lofty notion that they were some form of heroic troubadours or lovers of nature or that they shunned the corrupt city or were discovering themselves or any other romantic nonsense like that.

These guys could no more discover themselves than they could discover a bath, or discover a kind word to say to someone or discover a book to read, or even discover how to read (*I'm not joking, illiteracy there was shocking. Many people would leave school still not able to read or write*).

To say the general appearance of the Bushmen was scruffy, their hygiene non-existent and their hair untidy is accurate but it fails terribly to convey what they actually looked like. Being run over by a thousand-strong herd of stampeding wildebeest could not have rendered these men more dishevelled.

Even the bone structures of their heads and bodies seemed distorted. Maybe they weren't born that way, I don't know, so it appears that is how they evolved – defying all known scientific logic. The most any of us non-bushmen types could get out of these guys was a horrible monotone drawl ... as he didn't look at you with half closed eyes.

'Has a goin', may?'

I learned not to ask them a question – any question. Anything like 'where do you come from', 'when did you come here', 'do you like it here' would be met by a silent squint and that was all. No response.

They could ask you whatever they felt like asking but don't dare reciprocate.

Maybe if I asked something like 'Do you think they'll ever discover an antibiotic for a virus?' I would have received an answer like 'Why not. Antibiotics for bacteria were derived from basic moulds. It's only a matter of time before a similar, simple solution will be found for viruses.'

Maybe ... but I don't think so. The roughest men I have ever encountered in my life were on that job, many of them wasted by drugs or drink and definitely on the run.

What they were on the run from was anybody's guess – maybe women, maybe settled society or maybe, in all probability ... the law.

(In those days, if you were wanted by the police, moving to a country area of another State rendered you invisible. Later, when I was travelling for six months in the outback, despite my natural inclinations – I always picked up hitch-hikers in Ireland – there was a terrible reluctance to pick up hitch-hikers there. There were just too many seriously dangerous guys out there.)

Maybe the Bushmen enjoyed their life and wouldn't trade it for the world. But if they knew or even suspected just how wretched they looked and behaved, then surely theirs was the most miserable of all lives.

The Grind

Each Muswellbrook day would grind along at a phenomenally slow pace from sun-up to sundown. Never in all my life, even at boarding school, did I look at my watch so much - at least three or four times every hour.

And it was not just a case of counting down each day. That was too slow. I had the daylight hours of each day broken into segments of four so that the count down would come quicker.

Of course, even in my deranged state, I did realise that the number to be counted down had to be, therefore, multiplied by four. I'm no fool.

But delusion comes in many forms. For example, I became increasingly convinced that something would happen to me, that I would injure myself or be killed – or worse – and the rest of my life would never be the same.

I knew it was irrational but it had its own momentum and it bothered me.

But, surprisingly, nothing significant happened while I was there.

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Well, once I did manage to poison to my hand with a tiny stab from a rusty spike. Amazing how easy these things can happen. As the days passed, it got really sore and my hand began to swell to the extent that I couldn't carry anything with it.

But, luckily, the things to be carried were not heavy and I could pretend it was fine by taking all the weight on my good hand and just hold the other in place.

However, as it got bigger and I didn't want it to be noticed, I had to bandage it (which made it look huge). So, I told the guys it was a small flesh wound and I didn't want it to get infected.

Running the risk of being considered a bloody poofter was better than getting laid off. And after about two weeks, the swelling receded.

Then there was the time I knocked myself out with an iron bar.

It was an incredibly silly thing to do and ordinarily I would never admit, even under torture, that I was capable of doing such a thing.

But I did. I was there. I saw it – well, up to the point of contact anyway.

The problem was that I hated wearing a hard hat and took it off as often as I could. My foreman, Steve, (Blackie's principal minder) would regularly sneak up on me.

'Wer's yer fuckin' hard hat?'

I'd make some half-hearted apology, pick up the hat and put it on. He'd never expect a proper excuse and I'd never give one.

One day, I had to break some bars by hand that were already almost cut through. The bars were standing upright and, after a few tugs back and forth, they would break easily.

One proved more stubborn than the others and I was forced to pull on it with all my strength. When it broke, it snapped quickly. I succeeded in pulling the bar down on my own head. Charlie Chaplain would have been in stitches if he saw it.

The next thing I remember, the men working close to me had lifted me off the ground and were somehow able to contain their laughter.

'Are ya all right?'

'Yeah. I'm fine. Shaken ... but not stirred'

There was very little blood and the wound was small. I was gallantly finding my feet and recovering my senses when I became aware of Steve's soothing voice blasting into my throbbing ears.

'Wer's yer fuckin' hard hat?'

Steve was standing on the bank, looking triumphant. He made no attempt to look concerned – his face could never be reconstructed in that way. If ever that emotion was part of his repertoire, he had lost it and was pleased with that. I pointed to my hard hat, lying nearby.

'There it is.'
'It shoulda bin on yer fuckin' head.'
'It was knocked off my head.'
'I don't believe ya.'
'Bloody oath. Damn lucky I was wearin' it?
I'd be in a sorry state now if I wasn't.'

Steve, not wanting a confrontation, just retreated into the humourless belly laugh that endeared him so much to all of us poor minions suffering under his wrath.

'Take 'im to the first aid cabin.'
'No, It's all right. Seriously Steve. I'm fine.'
'Take 'im to the first aid cabin.'

I didn't even know there was a first aid cabin on the huge site until one of the guys took me there. Inside, was a nurse. A WOMAN.

The experience of talking to a female – suddenly, without warning or sufficient trumpet fanfare – was truly wonderful. I spent a half-hour there getting tablets and dressings and lots of information on concussion.

Although ordinarily I would have cut this boring conversation short, I managed to fabricate all kinds of complications just to prolong the wonderful chat.

But, I didn't want to run the risk of being declared unfit for work (*maybe not to the extent of Primo Levi not wanting to be declared unfit for work in Auschwitz, but close*).

And so, unlike Primo Levi in Auschwitz, I returned to the drudgery that was my self-inflicted sentence.

The Leaving

And the incredibly boring days just dragged on and on.

Looking back, I don't know why I didn't take a day off and go for long walk along the dried-up river or find a book to read (it must have been possible to find some book) ... or something. Anything – just for a break and some much needed mental therapy.

But, on the plus side, the money was good and it was impossible to spend much of it (*there's only so much one man can drink, no matter how prolific a drinker he is*).

Then, after ten gruelling weeks of counting every day and every dollar, I had saved enough money to pay back my brother and even keep a bit for myself.

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One day, although I was convinced I would not live to see that glorious day, my career as a steelfixer finally came to an end.

Bren and I said our farewells to the few people we had come to know and departed from the others as quickly as we could.

As we left the hotel and headed up the dusty street to the train station carrying our bags again in the midday sunshine, I knew my Muswellbrook experience would remain with me till the end of my days.

And it was going to profoundly affect how I felt about things like living in remote countrysides with locals, chasing after big money, pushing the limits of endurance in the short term instead of steady progress (*what's the point of a few months of pain and pressure if it takes years off your life*).

But, in hindsight, it taught me nothing. It was going to take more than Muswellbrook to do that.

I was hoping my simian frontiers-woman would be there to meet me on my departure as on my arrival but ... she was nowhere to be seen. Obviously, she had met a man in the meantime. And, although I'm not clairvoyant, I'll wager all the money I made in Muswellbrook his name was Goodman and he had a flat face, matted dirty-blond hair, a hooked chin and wide spaced, squinting eyes.

At the train station, we unexpectedly bumped into Tony, the New Zealander.

He was the only one there on that lonely platform, sitting on a bench with his elbows resting on his knees looking forlornly at the tracks.

Although the scene appeared ominous, I approached positively.

'Hi Tony.'

Taken by surprise, he turned quickly. And seeing we were carrying our bags, his face became even more sombre.

'Are you boys leavin'?'

'Yeah. Sydney, here we come. Are you leavin' as well?'

'No. I'm stayin' ... a few more months.'

The obvious question was why was he sitting on the platform looking at the tracks in the middle of the day (and remember every day was a work day).

And there followed that awkward moment when I dare not ask what was obvious.

Obviously, he had taken the day off and this is where he came on his days off. But even with his sad face, he managed a gentle smile.

'Have fun in Sydney.'

'It's going to be hard to beat this place, but we'll try.'

Keeping the conversation as brief as he always did, he jumped to a manly standing position and with a wave of his hand he walked off quickly with his proud head erect.

In what seemed like an eternity (we were there an hour before the scheduled arrival, in case we missed it) the train slowly appeared and entered the station.

We jumped aboard as if this was the last train to Sydney - forever - and slammed the door behind us. With an overpowering sense of achievement we settled down, in complete silence.

As we headed out of town, I thought about all the other guys (especially Tony) who would dearly love to be travelling with us.

And I wondered about what effects the incarceration in Muswellbrook would have on them ... and the winners and losers that would result from it.

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Would Grealy keep his sanity long enough to buy his pub in Ireland?

Would my simian frontiers-woman find true love?

Would Blackie eventually get beaten up?

Would Liz find the courage to leave Bruce?

Would my Serbian neighbour realise who he really is and start a new religion?

Would chewing gum production keep up with Sam's demand?

.....

Upon reaching our destination, the beautiful sight that was the harbour city of Sydney stunned me even more than before and I knew that this love affair, unlike so many others before and since, would remain forever.

I was overcome to the extent that, risking years of serious illness or even immediate death, I was prompted to fall on my knees and kiss the platform in Central Station.

The next thing I did was to get as fast as I could to Bronte beach and get into the water.

And swim away.

And swim away from that land and away from the beach and the surf, swimming under the incoming breakers and feeling the rush of the huge waves as they passed overhead ... till I was out far enough to just bob up and down on the growing waves and look back at the breakers, the surf and the squeamish land-logged people trying to stay standing in it.

And I just remained there as I used to do, suspended in the power of that lovely blue sea and knowing that all around me was everything that was designed over millions of years of evolution to kill me. Perfectly designed killers. Natural born killers.

But the sharks, jelly fish, Portuguese men a war, blue-bottles, rip currents and a whole host of other stuff was nothing compared to Blackie and his buddies, the searing heat, the constant dust and the mind-numbing boredom that was the Australian countryside.

(A few weeks later, I got caught in a 'rip current' – thermal currents that come from the deep and go out again, taking everything out with them – and I would have surely died then had a solitary guy not come along on his surfboard ... and I was rescued.

And there were many other times, throughout my distraught life, when I was less than an inch from death. Not least on that list was being, by incredible bad luck, under a collapsing sea cliff during the 1999 earthquake in Oaxaca, Mexico - the worst earthquake the area ever experienced.

But nothing on my long near-death list had any real impact on me.)

Epilogue

I'm watching The News on television in the house I'm presently living in.

They are taking about a terrible disaster at a power station in Australia.

It seems the entire structure has collapsed with blackouts for half of the state, devastating loss of life etc.

And the fault was located in the steel reinforcements for the concrete ... that were tied wrong.

'AAAGGGHHHHHH!!!'

I jump up to a sitting position ... in my bed.

With eyes straining, I adjust to my bedroom surroundings, put on the light and try to steady my rampant breathing and pounding heartbeat.

Maybe, with time – and deep therapy – these nightmares will become less frequent.

