

Chapter 34

INTO NOTHINGNESS

MONDAY, 12 NOVEMBER 2001

The Eyre Highway, one of Australia's prime road journeys, is named after the explorer Edward John Eyre, who survived thirst, hunger, and treachery in 1841 by the skin of his teeth to make the first east-west crossing of this enormous continent. I'll understand his pain by the time I arrive in Perth.

I'm halfway through the long journey. It has taken two days to reach Adelaide on a McCafferty's coach.

Two days down, two more to go.

It's an eight-hour stopover in Adelaide before the journey resumes this evening. I spend the day playing table tennis for six hours straight with the other backpackers inside the hostel we stopped at, then hacky-sack keepy-uppies with two Japanese lads in the corridor. Both activities are low-impact cardiovascular exercises that get my circulation going, compensating for two days of lazy dormancy.

The services in Port Augusta, 330 kilometres northeast of Adelaide, break the monotony of the asphalt. It's eleven o'clock at night, and I'm Hank Marvin, but the only hot food available inside the service station is a single pie, lit beneath a heated lamp like a C-list celebrity. It's chicken and

sweetcorn, a delightful combination, so I start counting out my change, seeing if I have enough or need to break a note, but when I look up, the pie is gone.

‘Four dollars,’ says the lady behind the counter.

A man I recognise from our coach pays for the pie. ‘Good on ya.’

Hungry and annoyed, I thunder back to the coach, settle back into my seat at the front, and stare out of the window, trying not to think about my grumbling stomach. I watch as we drive out of this tiny town, back into the black void of night, as though heading out into space. There are no houses, no streetlights, no people, and no cars. More to the point, no chicken and sweetcorn pies. But that’s about to change. Someone starts barfing, waking everyone on the coach, forcing them to pinch their noses, man, the stench, it’ll outlive religion, and now it’s ghosting towards the front of the coach, engulfing me, and I can’t help inhaling a noseful. I recognise this surging and waning sickly sweet smell with its poultry aroma and crisp notes of corn mixed together with gastric secretions. I turn to scowl at the shameless culprit who stole my pie and is now literally rubbing my face in it. There aren’t many people on the coach, so singling him out is easy, but he looks unwell, sweaty, pale, gagging into the sick bag, more coming out. Hmmm, perhaps he has saved me from another horrendous travelling experience.

Drive wakes everyone at the crack of dawn, his voice booming through his microphone and surround speakers. ‘We’re now driving through the Nullabor Plains. Nullabor means no trees in Latin, and as you can see, there are no trees, heh heh.’

I force my eyes open, instantly aware of my hunger. My body has rigor mortis. Human bodies aren’t designed to sleep in chairs, and sitting idly can take more out of you than working long hours. Outside my window, the scenery is incredible. As far as the eye can see, there’s a great, flat, wide, empty nothing. Oh, and one dead tree stretching its fingers at the sky in a desperate plea for water. I look ahead through the coach window at the straight road leading to the horizon as the sun rises behind us.

The Eyre Highway only crosses a fraction of the treeless plain. The Nullabor Plains stretch across 80,000 square miles. We occasionally pass random roadhouses offering fuel and cheap accommodation in the area, known as the Southern Bight of Australia. The owners of these isolated

places spend their lives filling petrol tanks for people who zoom out of their lives as quickly as they zoom in. Now and again, we glimpse the Great Southern Ocean, met by a plunging wall of sheer cliffs. It's hard to believe Antarctica is just a short hop across the water.

The coach driver refuels at Border Village, where the highway belongs to Western Australia. We freshen up here and have a bite to eat. I stare at a road sign pointing towards Australian cities and several countries around the world next to the distance in kilometres: England. Chile. The South Pole. Sydney. My heart deflates when I learn that Perth is still hundreds of kilometres away. I have a newfound respect for Edward John Eyre, who survived his thirst, hunger, and treachery without a coach, but then *he* didn't have to contend with pie thieves and the redolent, liquified aftermath.

I have five days in Perth. I need one day just to get over the coach trip.

People ask me why I took the bus instead of flying. My reply: *I wanted to see what nothing looks like.* Followed by, *but I'll never do it again.*

Perth is a mediocre city, hot, quiet, unexciting, and even the renowned Cottesloe Beach has nothing on those back in Sydney. But neighbouring Freemantle is only forty minutes away by train and has the prison. Built by British convicts in 1850, the prison incarcerated local criminals, military prisoners, enemy aliens, and prisoners of war for nearly 150 years. The tour guide takes us through the gloomy corridors, and this heightened sense of dread comes with each turn of a key. Spooked and sobered by the guide's commentary, the tour group follows him through the cell blocks where suicide prevention nets stretch from balcony to balcony above our heads. You can almost smell the aromas from the kitchen, hear the emptying of the toilet buckets, and echoes from the inmates answering roll call, let alone spending time in the hole with other prisoners spending time in yours.

The last person to be hanged inside Fremantle Prison was Eric Edgar Cooke in 1964. The gallows provide an eerie insight into prison life and, more poignantly, prison death, and then the enormity of the institute as an effective instrument of corporal and capital punishment strikes home.

Curled up on a leather sofa in Perth Airport, I try to get some shuteye but struggle. Flights have stopped for the night. Although the airport remains open, the cleaners are running vacuum cleaners, preparing the terminal for

business the next day. I'm one of two passengers in the lounge waiting for an early morning flight out. I decided to sleep at the airport as it saves me forking out for accommodation and the hassle of getting a taxi here at four o'clock in the morning.

Australia has touched my heart. I feel a sense of belonging here. Few countries are as well-endowed as Australia, and there is a general feeling of contentment and humility among its people, a zest for celebrating life. Work is seen as a means of sustaining the quality and enjoyment of life, not domination of it, unlike us poor poms. And with places on its map like *Booby Island*, *Soily Bottom Point*, and *Dead Woman's Hole*, who wouldn't want to live here? I will miss Australia as soon as I board the plane.

It's 21 November, 2001, and I leave this remarkable land down under, unsure if I will ever be back.