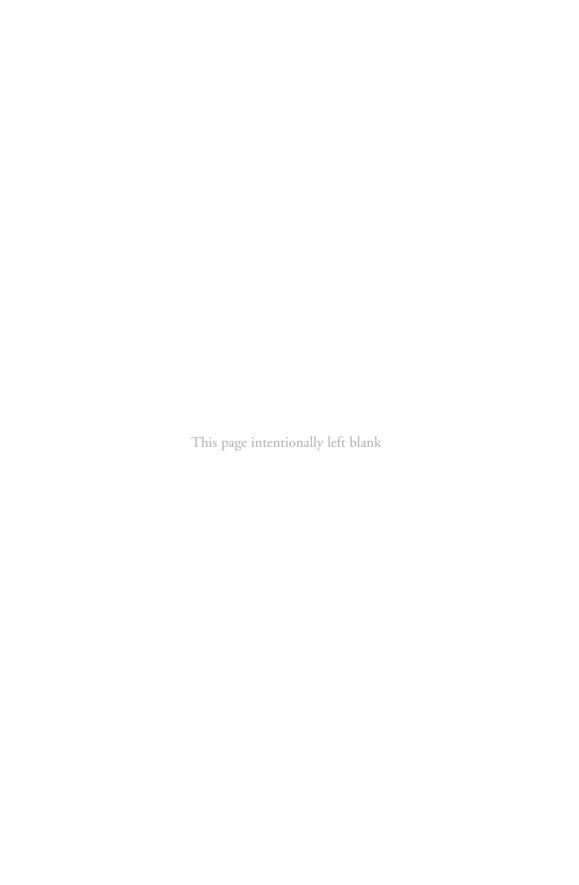
LOVE?
SOTHER
TURNS





ARENA ALLEN&UNWIN

Certain names, dates and locations have been altered or merged to protect people's privacy and to maintain narrative flow.

First published in 2010

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Arena, an imprint of Allen & Unwin 83 Alexander Street Crows Nest NSW 2065 Australia

Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100 Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218

Email: info@allenandunwin.com Web: www.allenandunwin.com

Cataloguing-in-Publication details are available from the National Library of Australia

www.librariesaustralia.nla.gov.au

ISBN 978 1 74237 341 6

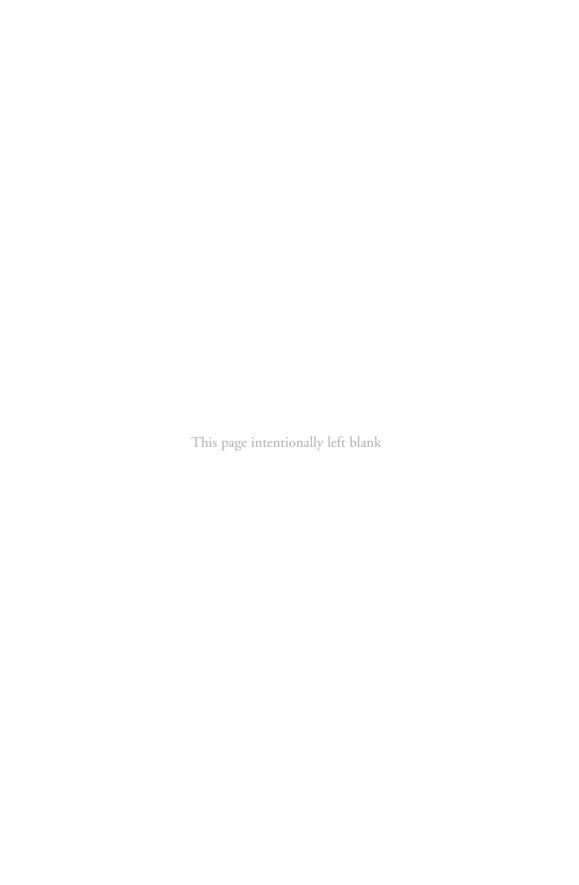
Set in 12.5/17.4 pt Granjon by Bookhouse, Sydney Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

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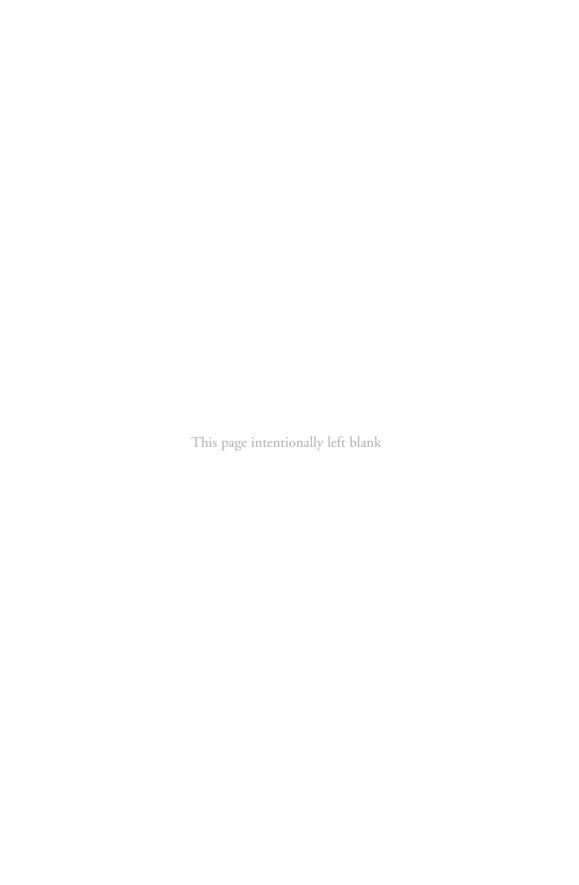
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'A day without laughter is a day wasted.'

Charlie Chaplin



This is the story of how fate came and called me one day with a love so unexpected, so bizarrely clad, so inappropriate, so wrong but so ridiculously right, that I threw everything away and moved into a Mazda 323 with the man who drove it.

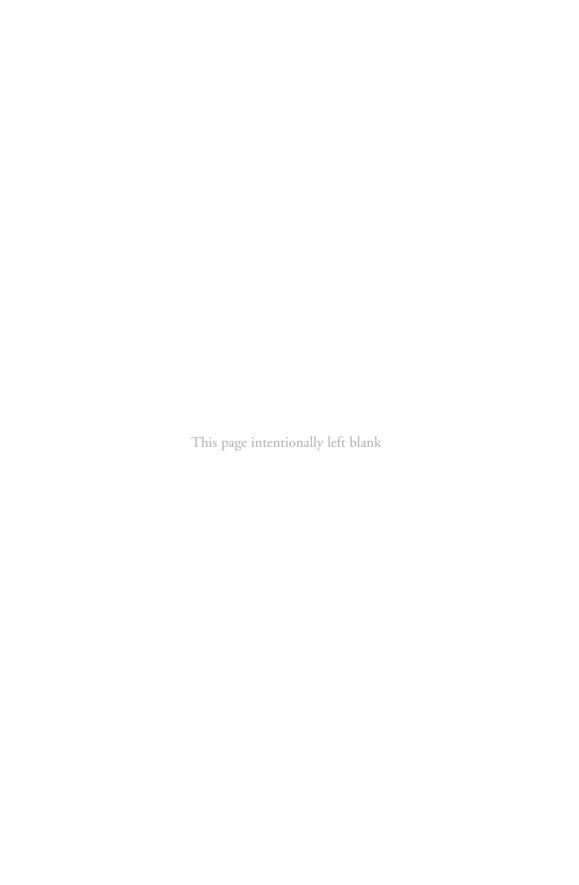
The next year had me crossing state borders like they were tram stops, juggling internet coverage and showers in roadhouses, oil-soaked food from the bain-marie in petrol stations along the Nullarbor and sleeping by the side of busy highways, all across the country. I'd never been happier, crazier, laughed so much and learned so much, nor spent as much time looking for appropriate washing facilities.

Although my longing for Melbourne coffee never wavered, the experience of seeing beauty and love in places so rough and raw completely unravelled all I ever thought was real, imaginable, impossible and probable. I questioned everything anyone had ever told me about love, danger, safety and fun, and, most importantly, what was 'essential' in life.

Mostly, I learned that love, happiness, and even success, come walloping down at the speed of light when you let go of all your preconceptions.

Mystic Medusa, the astrologer who started all of this, put it down to the transit of Uranus on my ninth house sun.

I blame it on falling in love.



Prologue

Many returns

'Happy birthday my twin-fish . . .'

I never quite pictured myself living this way on my thirtieth birthday. I'm lying on a mattress on the floor of my brother's spare bedroom, wearing his clothes. The well-worn cotton of his Triumph motorcycle t-shirt is thankfully soft, so it doesn't scratch my bites. My meagre bag of clothes — actually, everything I possess made of fabric, which includes my backpack — has spent the night doing hot soapy laps of his washing machine. I even tripled the recommended dose of Omo per load, just to be sure.

I've just woken from the first night of thick, unbroken sleep I've had in an actual bed, in weeks. The smell of an easy Saturday morning drifts under my door, and I'm brought back with a thud to here, now. The plane has landed. I'm in Melbourne. Familiarity, yet it feels like a familiarity from lifetimes ago, not a mere twelve months.

Bacon frying, toast browning, my brother going about his ritual, blissfully unaware that the safety of his familiar vibe is like

an old lullaby come back from the past to comfort me. His routine feels like a faded dream, like it was always here, like perhaps I imagined the whole Big Dipper ride I just got off.

No weird strangers walking outside my door, accidentally pushing it open . . . No cars pulling up, about to throw gravel on my face, make me stand up, brush myself off, get back in that car again. I'm in a house, with doors that close.

Phew

Red dust, still on my shoes, is the only visual proof that I've been walking on a different-coloured ground.

'Huckleberry Superstar! Aww he likes the fatty bit doesn't he? Eh? Eh?'

On his way out for the day, Dec knocks on my door and pushes it open. 'Hey can you wash those sheets as soon as you get up? Just in case . . .' He shakes his head, in a what-has-your-life come-to kind of way.

The night before, he'd retrieved me from the corner of Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, where I'd made a plaintive call from the footpath outside the sweaty pub where I'd spent the last two nights. After landing back in Melbourne from my outback odyssey, I'd booked into the same pub Jim and I stayed in before we left. Okay, maybe it was for sentimental reasons, but I'd been drooling over the idea of my own room for what felt like aeons. And, frankly, it was cheap.

I did wonder why the mozzies this year were particularly small, particularly itchy, and particularly silent and invisible. It wasn't until I bumped into Georgie, in the kitchen, to ask if she had any repellent for mosquitoes, showing her the trail-paths down my neck, across my stomach, in bracelet circles on my arms, and little necklace-like curlicues across my chest, that her exclamation

PROLOGUE: MANY RETURNS

of, 'FUCK! I thought we got rid of 'em last time!' alerted me to the fact that the stained carpet and broken windows weren't the only reason the weekly rental was less than I'd paid anywhere, ever. By a margin.

'FUCKIN' BEDBUGS! I BETCHA IT WERE THOSE FILTHY GIRLS FROM CAIRNS WHAT BROUGHT 'EM IN!'

There were bugs smaller than cells biting me – and probably living on and in all of my clothes – sucking my blood. Hitchhiking their way across my skin, and under it. It made me feel distinctly claustrophobic, like I was on a packed Greyhound bus and nobody was ever going to get off until I had. So much for that room on my own.

After that, I moved swiftly, packing up my belongings and rushing down the stairs. As I scratched my way to the front bar like someone with OCD, the manager of the pub didn't even blink when I asked for a refund.

'Is that what these are, too?' He exposed his arms to me.

Ugh. That kind of work would have taken months.

'Um, yeah, I'm pretty sure it is . . . you should wash everything. And maybe sleep somewhere else? If you can . . .'

I slithered out, feeling guilty that I had the option of calling family and friends who lived nearby, unlike these wayward drifters.

'Uh Dec, do you think I could stay at your place for a couple of nights?' I explained the bedbug situation.

'Geez Lou, you poor thing. Those slobs mustn't have cleaned ANYTHING.'

As peak-hour traffic whizzed past me, drivers craned their necks to get a good look at me sitting on my suitcase, as if they needed to memorise the scenario for a future *Crime Stoppers* episode. Clad in my jeans and a red singlet purchased twenty moons ago,

I mused, for the thousandth time in a few months, how little you can tell about someone from their outward appearance.

At last Dec's car pulled up as I scratched pathetically at my arms, his terrier, leaning out the window, panted happily in recognition.

Dec greeted my ridiculous situation with his usual daunting, military-style practicality. 'Here, put this on,' he said, throwing me a blue tarpaulin. 'And sit on this,' he covered the passenger seat of his car with a towel. His golden terrier, perched like a lion on the console, leaned in for a chin tickle.

'Don't touch him till you've had a shower,' barked Dec.

'It's okay Dec, I don't think they like dogs.'

It's morning now, and I just keep having flashes of realisation that I have nothing to worry about anymore. I know where I am. I know where things are. I'm safe.

'Don't forget to lock the back door when you go out,' Dec says, leaving.

'I won't.'

'Oh! And is it really your birthday today?'

Oh yeah, I'd almost forgotten. So this is what thirty years old looks like, hey?

I gaze down at the bites, and my pathetic little pile of belongings sitting next to the mattress. I'm so used to everything being new, frightening, challenging, confronting, exciting, that this old world, one I know by heart, is like a worn-out outfit. Familiar, but disarmingly easy.

Then I remember how much work I have to do, magazine articles and interviews to write, work I love, which has taken off over the past year, since I threw everything away and went on this wild, crazy, frightening, harrowing adventure. Work which I tried

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and dreamed of getting when I was living a much more suitable lifestyle for a fashion and lifestyle writer, but somehow couldn't. Until I let it go.

And I feel a little like a madwoman, because if anyone walked in and viewed the physical aspects of my life, they would probably think I was a down-and-out hobo yet, inside, I'm filled with peace, little bubbles of abundant realisation recurring around my heart, feeling I have everything that I ever wanted.

If a little scratchy.

Staying at my brother's house is like staying at The Hilton after where I've come from. I'm used to listening with shallow breath, sussing out the sounds of shared spaces with haunted, hard and tattooed men, waiting for a silent patch when I can slip into the kitchen to fix my morning habit on a working stove, performing the whole caffeine-injection ritual as quickly and quietly as possible, for fear any host of strange souls will spring into the kitchen and catch me in my vulnerable, pre-caffeinated state.

I open up the mocha-scented coffee grounds which have travelled safely from the bottom of my bag, around Australia, to this new day. In a way, it feels like I've just walked out of a Hollywood action movie. I have to remind myself that the ride is over, no more bombs are about to go off, there are no more surprises for the protagonist. I'm home.

After pouring myself a cup of steaming liquid I wander outside to the garden, breathing in the startlingly loud sounds of the inner city, still such a shock, after months in the desert.

Dec's dog pads out, looking up at me with his big loyal eyes. He shadows my movements like he can smell my DNA even though my body and soul have been through a complete washing cycle of life. He looks up at me and grins, puffing hot steams of just-eaten

PAL on my ankle. Then he lets out a little bark and licks me. Recognition. I'm still the same girl.

Just a little dirtier.

Despite being technically homeless, bug-bitten and with less than twenty dollars in the bank for a few days, I don't feel poor. I have a prop which has acted as the channel from thoughts to words to dollars no matter where or how I've been living over the past year. And I'm in the city now, where it's a hundred times easier.

My laptop sits proudly next to my pile of clothes with my mobile phone. Along with a quiet space in which to use them, these are the only necessary tools which connect me to the capacity to better my situation. And since I'm still writing a number of weekly columns for the paper, I know things are going to get better really quickly.

I revel in the space and silence of having a kitchen table to myself, a strong cup of coffee, a radio which plays jazz, and no crazy men banging on the door to groan, talk or ask for a cigarette. The paradox still floors me. That the columns I write are so far from the life I've been living for the past twelve months, even my editors have no idea I've not been living in the city to do them. I also know that without this one talisman, there's no way I could have written about silk scarves and diamond-encrusted eye shadows whilst dining on toasted sandwiches made for me by bikie gangs or showering next to a urinal while a skimpy served beers downstairs in Kalgoorlie. And no matter how many times I've cried tears of awe at Australia's landscape, felt inner peace lying next to ancient stones or melted in the presence of spaces so untouched by material needs that they sang to the most private, non-verbal parts of my soul, I also know none of it would have been possible had I not had a job which relied on these surface concerns.

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Without my columns, which are all about selling the idea of the opposite, there's no way I could have earned regular money while travelling around Australia, unpinned to any specific place for certain periods. Packing like vagabonds in the middle of the night and fleeing, just because we got the urge. Following a three-thousand-kilometre tangent for a comedy gig, experiencing dawn and dusk from gulp-worthy beaches, spending twenty-four hours a day in the presence of the very embodiment of adventure in a human, and yes, having traumatic highs and lows which have seen me return, like the prodigal daughter, penniless and perhaps less sure of anything than when I left.

The beep of my phone pops my reverie. It's a birthday text message from a homeless clown from a park in Newman, Western Australia, telling me how the sprinkler system woke him up.

Happy Birthday my twin-soul. Welcome to the best years of your life so far! The western sky says hello . . . Love you forever . . . xx

Jim.

My heart slips through space in a kind of free-fall, and the gulp of longing comes back, that feeling parents must get when they've missed their newborn's latest adventure.

I still love him. Madly, deeply.

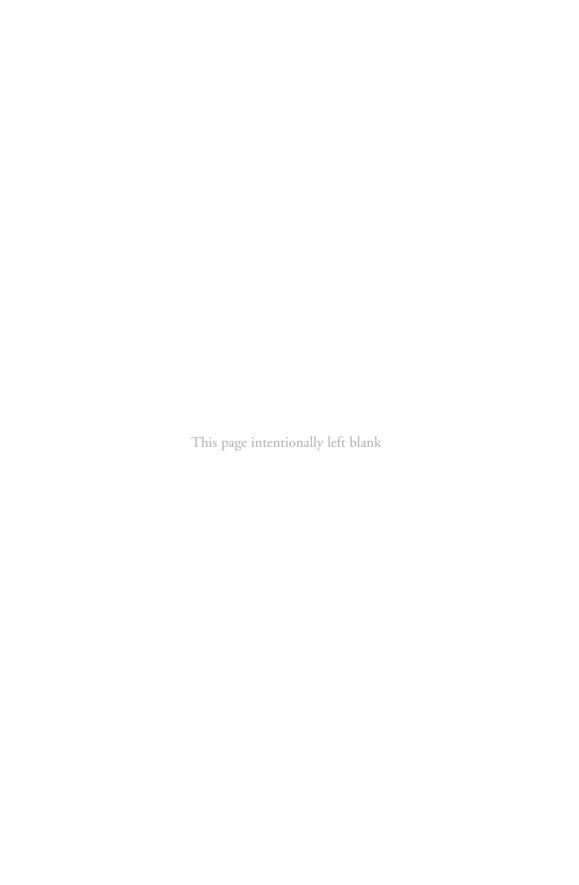
Even though the relationship saw me trade car, home, friends, family, and everything I previously knew and loved, for crass jokes, roadhouse snacks and way too much time spent in the passenger seat of an overloaded Mazda, I feel the same way about him that I did within hours of meeting him. That the universe had given me an offering, in the most challenging guise it could think of. And if I could bring myself to loosen the grip on life, and on myself – what I allowed myself to do, who I allowed myself to become – loving him and seeing the world from his car seat for a while would change everything. And once you've seen life, people, experiences, places,

for what they truly are – little balls of beauty and ugliness and miracles and horror simultaneously existing in seemingly opposing places – there's no going back.

For a split second, I contemplate what would have happened if I'd said 'no' to this strangely presented man, offering me the opportunity of a lifetime, with the gift of constant laughter, but only if I squinted and looked beyond the obvious. I shudder, then look back at my bite marks anew, as if they are Olympic trophies. Some kinds of adventures are always worth the risk.

I wipe the red dust from my laptop and start typing.

PART 1 ONCE UPON A TIME



1

The accidental waitress

'What are you going to write about if you don't . . . live?'

The Year I turned twenty-nine, I stopped being able to lie. Not little lies — I've always been good at ignoring phone calls, screening appointments, saying I'm going to the bathroom when I'm really leaving without saying goodbye, that sort of thing. But the big stuff — like, who I am — I'd never really been sure of before. I don't know when it happened, exactly, but I just seemed to cross some threshold into a new version of the me who didn't lie about it. I wasn't clucky, didn't want to settle down, and didn't see the point of a mortgage or a miserable job if it made you take up drugs or any other series of addictions just to handle it. And I was increasingly running out of the ability for chitchat with people who did do all these things. This excluded me from what felt like ninety-nine per cent of the population my age. I was leaving parties like the one just a night ago, left, right and centre.

My best friend had talked me into going to the party because it was my birthday. In the eight years we'd known each other, we hadn't gone longer than a week or so without doing something together. But something was changing in me. I'd been hiding away, cocooning. Sally saw it as an unhealthy level of antisocialness.

'Come on Lou . . . what are you going to write about if you don't . . . live?' She spoke directly to my deepest fear. Guilt got the better of me, mixed with a very superficial urge to just get dressed up for something. So I went.

The party was a friend of Sally's workmate. Neither of us knew anyone, which has always been my favourite kind of party. It was in a warehouse in Fitzroy. Thumping techno music greeted me at the door as I made my way in. Sally had been there for a while, by the looks of things, and was already stumbling.

'Lou! Meet Hayden!' she squealed as soon as she saw me, and I shook the clammy hand of her new friend. Hayden wore a slick top, flashed his teeth in a canine-like grin which implied either cocaine or ecstasy, and spent way too long staring at me without blinking. Still, Sally seemed to really like him, and was smiling more than I'd seen her smile in a long time. So I left them to it. As I walked away I could hear him angrily talking about his work and his boss, while she nodded, entranced.

I found a plastic glass and poured myself a drink, glancing at the throbbing party which, by all measures, was 'going off'. Glossy girls in knee-high boots poured through the door kissing the air and disappearing to the toilets, re-emerging rubbing their noses, giggling and laughing their way through a dance floor of flashing lights with suddenly wide eyes.

The men reminded me of prowling wolves. Glowing teeth from the neon lights flashed whenever they caught a glimpse of exposed female flesh. I stood and watched, made eyes and small-talk

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with some, who clutched their designer beers and looked over my shoulder. I got bored, and checked myself for the temptation to race to the bathroom and rack up myself, just so I'd have something in common with everyone.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. 'I saw you walk in. Wanna dance?'

He was tall, dark and, I guess you'd say, good-looking. His t-shirt had some logo on it but I tried not to hold that against him.

'Okay.'

We started shuffling in time on the packed dance floor, a giant disco ball glittering wickedly above. More people kept arriving, and before I knew it, I could feel my dance partner's body through his t-shirt, our personal space small, hot, growing in intensity. All of a sudden I felt an elbow in my rib, and when I looked up, my dance partner had his eyes rolled back in his head on some trip with his arms around me. He hadn't noticed, but I was having trouble breathing.

'Um - sorry, I have to go.'

'What? What?'

He followed me off the dance floor, and I found a space against a wall to catch my breath. I was still clutching my stomach, which by now was aching like a stitch.

'What happened?' He's twitchy now. Aggro. I should have kept quiet.

'Oh, I'm just going to go to the toilet . . .'

I walked past Sally, still happily ensconced with Hayden, left her to it and grabbed my jacket, pulling my shoes off on the way out to walk faster.

It was autumn and the palm trees in Canning Street stood strong and gracious. I suddenly felt a wave of gratitude, that I'd made such a swift exit from all these people I had no interest in being

with. Same age, same city, same upbringing. What happened? To think of myself with a man like any of those wolves on offer filled me with a peculiar mixture of sadness and apathy. I kept walking, relieved to be alone.

When I rounded the corner to St Georges Road, I saw the Italian brothers from Danny's Hamburgers. Once, when I'd been followed home, two of them walked me to my flat and stood guard in the cold for an hour until the police came. Gus, my favourite, was having a cigarette on the corner as I walked past.

'Hey Louie! How are ya!' Covered in bacon grease and chip fat, he leant in to give me a hug. Out of relief, or maybe shock, a couple of tears fell out of my eyes.

'Uh, sorry.'

'Nah! No worries Louie! Oi've got seven sisters and a woif, sometimes goils just need to croi. I know it doesn't mean nuthin'.' He slapped me on the back in a 'chin up' kind of way.

I said thanks, wished him goodnight and kept walking. I slept soundly, knowing Gus was there frying patties through the night, keeping an eye out.

I wanted to write more than anything, but somehow, despite five years at university, pounding the floors of restaurants on the top end of Bourke Street had become my accidental career. Cliché? You betcha. And being a walking, talking cliché becomes boring. I grew to hate it when customers asked what else I did with my life. ('What else do you do dah-ling? You do have a brain don't you?' one woman asked me. I reeled in horror, only to have someone else ask exactly the same thing the following night.) Not that I judged anyone who was a professional hospitality worker, I just had this painful, niggling voice which always interrupted any semblance of

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contentment to ask, 'When are you going to try to make a living doing what you want? When are you going to take a risk?'

It's easy to drown these doubts out with alcohol, and I did that often enough, but when there is something that genuinely gives you joy, like writing did for me, it's really quite hard not to do it. Anyway, hospitality wasn't all bad. In a way, I felt privileged that I had a 'trade' I could ply, a 'back-up option', to keep me stocked with clothes and magazines, friends who always knew about the hippest new places, days and nights so busy and filled with people and life you can very easily lose years like that.

I enjoyed the physicality, the fast-forward friendships, the clatter and movement, and the earthy simplicity of meeting the basic human needs for hunger, thirst and conversing with others, which brought well-dressed people into restaurants night after night, spending ten times the cost of certain foods just for the fanfare of being served.

I loved how the pace of a busy restaurant at peak hour knocked every other thought out of my mind in an all-consuming orchestra of orders, meals and table numbers. Besides, it was immensely satisfying, on an instinctual, human level. This restaurant was their treat, and I was like an actor, ready and waiting to sweep them off their feet with a flawless performance.

I did try to find alternatives to waitressing. I once found a job in a traditional office environment, but the confinement, inertia and constriction of being monitored for eight hours every day in a room full of white-noise felt like torture. At least waitressing kept me on my toes. I had days full of unexpected events, parties, pop-star bookings and celebrations, ridiculous amounts of cash being dropped, and a certain intensity of human interaction you just don't get in a silent, computerised cubicle. Besides, I saved a fortune on gym fees.

In a way it was like I was putting off 'growing up and getting a real job' for as long as I could. I could sleep all day and stay up all night, starring night after night in a dazzling opera of serving Melbourne's high-flyers, and all it asked of me was that I turn up to work with a starched shirt and a willing smile.

Graduating from regular waitressing to fine dining, I was also afforded an entrée into a world that perhaps I never would have had the opportunity to glimpse without the ability to decant wine or memorise sixteen specials per night. The *Bold and the Beautiful-*style couples thought nothing of charging their two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar Tuesday dinner to Amex. Melbourne Mafiosos tipped me fifty dollars for remembering their favourite cigar brand, and I met famous tennis players, pop singers and actors. I was also able to put off the only alternative I could see most of my friends in 'real' jobs settling for: heading to Bunnings on a Saturday. Catching peak-hour trains home to *CSI Miami* and monotony. A life spent in front of the TV.

But the dizzying arrays of compliments and complaints from the personal to the ludicrous never failed to surprise me. Like the English investment banker who would come in every night for a risotto he could have easily cooked himself for next to nothing. All it took was a 'How are you, Steven?' and his entire face would light up. He prided himself on knowing every single staff member's name and noticed whenever we changed our hair. The easiest customer to serve, his nightly twenty-dollar tip broke my heart. But just as he used the restaurant to fill his own gaps, there were others, too, who performed strange complaining rituals which said so much more about their inner battles than it did about the temperature of the food. Like the unsmiling woman who would come in every Thursday with her endlessly placating husband, order something she would invariably never eat, complaining loudly that it was too

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hot, cold, salty or sweet, and he would always pay, thanking us in hushed tones.

I was well-versed in this world of opposites and paradoxes of the human condition. Criminals who'd tasted the inside of a jail cell ordering \$478 bottles of wine on a Wednesday, tables away from a couple whose family had saved all year to shout them a meal here for their twentieth wedding anniversary. And me, dancing around the restaurant, wearing my poker face for each nightly routine.

I knew the food was only part of the reason the customers were willing to fork out ludicrous amounts of money for a simple pasta dish. People revert to a certain childlike, raw state when it comes to being fed, revealing their innermost wounds over forgotten details such as sauces and wines. They didn't come for the food, as much as the idea of being served. At least, this was how I saw it. It was about having someone smile at you and make you feel that you were worthy of being looked after, pandered to like a prince, every little detail of the matter of your meal effortlessly covered. All you have to do is sit, eat, let it take you over.

And I had Marco. Marco was just one of the many reasons I was able to stay in a job which only used a droplet of the rivers of dreams I tried hard to ignore. I loved Marco in a way people talk of falling in love with a foreign country. Its differences are its delights – but at the same time you know, one day, you will have to return home.

Marco was my saviour. He turned a boring job into a beautiful movie and we were the stars. Each night at work I searched for his bobbing head passing the doorway as I set tables upstairs, exchanged secret gifts of cheese slices and handmade chocolates from the dessert tray, and felt a rush of pride when I noticed he now always hung around for a Stella Artois at the bar. He never drank 'knock-offs' until I started working there.

We didn't really have anything to talk about except our every-day experiences at the restaurant, but this was enough. His poor command of English meant I sometimes got a headache trying to explain anything more detailed than a simple statement, so in nine months together we never spoke of anything more complicated than the basics: food, sex, work, sleep. The past was best left alone. We were attracted to each other physically, we would care if the other one tripped over, and we enjoyed spending our one night off per week together. That's love, right?

Time passes quickly when you're moving in such a frenzy, and after twelve months of sixty-hour weeks at the restaurant, my dreams most nights were about coffee cups I'd forgotten to restock, or a risotto I'd forgotten to put on the bill.

'It's like you work on an oil rig,' said my sister Ayala, when I popped over for a visit one day. I was exhausted, and spoke of nothing but sore muscles, the nuances of the people I worked with, the money I was relieved to be making yet too busy to enjoy.

Her living room, scattered with notebooks, novels and periodicals, from Sue Grafton to Tolstoy, reminded me of a girl I once knew. In another lifetime – was it only three years ago? – I'd shared this very house with her and her husband as I plugged away at a writing degree. Some nights, when I got home, I'd find little notes on my pillow. 'Here's a pen I saw in the city on my lunch break, it made me think of you.' Her encouragements made me want to succeed, just to say thanks.

Another time, they took me out for pizza to celebrate my first paid published poem. I pinned the cheque, for one hundred dollars, to the board above my desk, and kept it there for weeks, a visual reminder that the line between dream and reality was only ever an idea away, only ever just trying away. Eventually, though,

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I pulled it down. You can only live on one hundred dollars and dreams for so long.

Meanwhile, I had mastered the art of hiding my dissatisfaction. I avoided socialising with anyone not from the restaurant, I was too busy to go to any other functions anyway, as they were usually at night, and I didn't know anyone who did what they really loved for a living. I melded my life dreams to suit my current situation. If what comes easily is what you go by, then I was doing what I was *meant* to do, I rationalised.

The only time my dreams ever came back was when I had more than two days off in a row, and I would start to fantasise about how I would make a living as a writer instead of carrying plates. And perhaps I'd still be dreaming if it weren't for an old croissant, a bout of conjunctivitis and a cracked rib.

2

More than a croissant

'Louisa, anything is possible. You've just got to be willing to step off the cliff . . .'

'Going 2 Borders in half an hour. Want 2 come?'

Eyes thick with weepy conjunctivitis, I woke early on Sunday morning to my sister's text after my first Saturday night off work in six months.

'My eyes are-sick!'

I told Marco the night before, to make him understand why he couldn't catch a cab over when his shift finished.

'I no understand,' he replied. 'You need glasses?'

I pulled out my Italian-English dictionary, the only way I could get through these sorts of conversations. 'Altamente contagioso.' Highly contagious.

'Oh, okayyy. Goodnayt.'

After four hours spent drinking coffee, browsing Borders, and reading all the latest issues of *US Vogue*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire* with

my sister, it's still only the middle of the afternoon. Wow. When you get up early, you really get stuff done.

'You should go home and pitch some of those stories, Lou,' says my sister, and as I sail my bicycle down Canning Street, which is drizzling with rain, I'm so hyped up on caffeine and ideas that I don't notice the pole until I slam into it and fall, with a thud, onto the pavement.

'I've had a fall off my bike, the doctor says I have a cracked rib - ah - I can bring in a certificate . . . ?'

I can hear Chef barking orders in the background as I pathetically plead for two days off work in a row. I feel like a whinger and a complainer. But part of me is annoyed. Employed as a casual, it's not like they have to foot the bill for my forty-eight hours on Nurofen-Plus.

'Well can you come in tomorrow? We have forty booked in the private room for the Australian Medical Association Christmas dinner.'

The irony of what Angela, the manager, is asking me to do isn't lost on me. And the thought of another Christmas party season spent watching other people celebrate, while I have accomplished nothing but a cracked rib this year, makes me suddenly angry.

Still, I answer robotically, 'Yeah, that'll be okay.'

One good thing to come of my two days off work, sans the distraction of Marco, is that I do, in fact, send some story pitches to magazines. Fuelled with sisterly motivation on the Sunday, despite the bicycle-crash interruption, I sent seven pitches to different women's magazines. 'How to live to 100', 'Famous firees', and 'Recent research into circadian rhythms' were just some of my genius-seeming ideas, met with a resoundingly silent email inbox.

Why hadn't anyone replied? If I was bad at pitching, I wanted to know why. So on Tuesday morning, met with a blank day of

nothing, I picked up the telephone and called the number inside one magazine.

'Ah – Louisa, yes I did get that pitch from you. Look we're not really commissioning at the moment. Where are you based?'

'Melbourne.'

'Oh okay, look, I'll keep your details on file in case anything comes up.'

Yeah, right. What could possibly 'come up'? I try to forget about it and knock back another two Nurofens. The pain in my rib is like a knife being sliced into my back, every time I breathe.

When I get to work that night, nothing can prepare me for the chaos that is there to greet me.

'Jimmy's quit, Marco's not answering his mobile to come in, and I need you to set table sixteen, twenty and twenty-one up for the AMA function. They'll be here in twenty minutes!'

No 'How are you feeling Louisa?' No 'Is your rib okay? Glad you're alive!' Nope, just lift every single tabletop on your own, carry twenty chairs up three flights of stairs, oh and set for three courses in twenty minutes. With a cracked rib.

I manage as best I can, grunting and gritting my teeth in pain, because Jeremy, the only other waiter in the restaurant, is madly setting up the entire main, one-hundred-seat dining room, on his own.

'You okay, Lulu?' he yells from across the floor, when Angela sidles up behind him.

'No time to talk Jeremy, let's just get this room set up.'

I'm wondering why exactly Jimmy quit, why Angela is being so rude, and how much longer I can stay in a job which doesn't even pay for a sick day when I've cracked my rib, when I notice something in the corner behind one of the tables. By now laying down forks and knives with Olympic speed, I weigh up the time and pain

involved with investigating what it is, and decide against it, just as one of the first AMA partygoers walks through the door.

'Lulu, take a first drink order, I'll finish the tables,' says Angela, appearing beside me. And I wonder, not for the first time, why she always acts like she's doing me a favour when she's bossing me around. It's remarkably unsatisfying having to leave an unset table when you're three wine glasses off from finishing it. I just want some sense of completion, dammit!

'Hello, sir, can I get you a drink?' Out of the corner of my eye I send vicious bolts of rib-located pain to Angela, as she smoothes the linen and surveys the settings smugly, like she's done the whole thing herself.

In the small bar, off to the side of the restaurant, Chef comes out, as he always does, just before we are meant to have our briefing, to discuss the night's specials, check the bookings, and tell us how we are going to space out the orders. Night after night he conducts the symphony of five hundred exquisitely prepared meals with impeccable detail, barking orders, monitoring the time on each docket, overseeing every single meal which comes out. I have nothing but admiration for him, doing it in a boiling hot kitchen and only occasionally getting the pleasure of people's faces when they receive his perfectly arranged meals.

Just as he appears, recognising in one swift glance that thirty customers are already here, there are only three waiting staff in the entire restaurant, and there'll be no time for briefings, Angela stomps into the bar, clutching a stale, cobweb-covered croissant from centuries-past.

'WHAT IS THIS!' she spits at me, as I try unsuccessfully to balance two scotch and cokes, three James Boags and a glass of champagne on a tray.

It's not like we have time to discuss a croissant. It's not like I didn't JUST SET UP AN ENTIRE ROOM including four tabletops and carrying thirty chairs upstairs WITH A CRACKED RIB all for twelve dollars an hour, oh and NO DINNER. Angela, just so you know, ALWAYS gets dinner. I feel like I've been hungry all year. I've lost ten kilograms working in this place. NO WONDER!

I look at the customers, happily congregating in an eager hubbub, oblivious to this murderous exchange just a metre away, thanks to the strains of Pavarotti which have just started up.

'Louisa, I FOUND A CROISSANT! When I tell you to clean the restaurant, I mean to find things like this!'

It was beyond thought, really, what I did next. It was pure instinct, probably like how men feel when they belt someone at a bar who has crossed the line. Except when I get angry it has more of a distant quality – i.e. I need to get as far away as possible from the cause.

I place the tray on the bar, shaking with fear and rage. Then I walk past Angela, down the stairs to the staff locker room, past the kitchen staff, calling out to me from half-smoked cigarettes in the back alleyway as I exit down the lane.

It isn't until I've walked all the way home from the city to Fitzroy that I realise I forgot to take off my apron.

My phone is ringing. It's only nine o'clock in the morning. Nobody calls me this early, unless it's Angela calling to apologise. Or abuse me.

I look at my phone. It's an 02 number. Sydney.

'Louisa?'

'Yes?'

'It's Jessica. From Ok! Magazine. How are you? You sent me a pitch when I was at New Woman . . .'

Oh yeah, that was three whole days ago.

'Oh hello! How are you?' Sure, it's the most normal thing in the world to be receiving a call from a magazine editor. Ohmygodohmygodohmygod.

'Listen, are you available to do an interview in Mount Waverley in the morning? I'll email you the details. It's Jenny McCormack, she's just fetched Gold at the Commonwealth Games. She couldn't catch the Sydney flight and she's only back in Australia for a few days. We go to print on Monday . . .'

I sit bolt upright in my bed, not even flinching when my rib does its knife-slice. 'Of course. Great.'

'Fantastic. Oh, and you've done interviews before, haven't you?'

When I was just out of university, and still naively plucky, I'd miraculously landed a job at Melbourne's daily newspaper, *The Herald Sun*. I'd driven the photographers to stories, answered the phones, compiled the news lists for the chief of staff, and even had a few health stories published, even though I wasn't technically employed as a journalist. If you could call asking a medical specialist for a few quotes over the telephone an interview, well technically, I'd done it.

The next morning, I see a side of the day I haven't seen for at least a year. The birds are singing and the sky has that pure look. Like everything is starting again. I sail smoothly up the freeway against the traffic, until I arrive at a strangely impersonal building, the head office of a sports association. I check my lipstick in the mirror for the nineteenth time before parking the car and getting out, trying to curb my rising panic before it turns into a full-on anxiety attack.

Who am I kidding? I'm not a journalist! What the hell am I going to say to this girl? What if they can tell, from my clothes,

that I'm not the real deal? I wonder what a real journalist would have worn. I'm in a blue jumper and my black pants from work and some ballet flats. Do I look too casual? Thank God I have a dictaphone. My prop. Proof. Yes, proof, I am *really* a journalist.

I gulp, air catching dryly in my throat. One foot in front of the other. Every step towards the building feels like another step away from waitressing. I keep walking.

By midday, our allotted hour is up and my dictaphone clicks to stop. The tape is full. 'Have you got enough for your interview?' says her manager.

'Yeah . . . that should be . . . fine.' Is this what you say? 'Thanks very much for your time . . . ah, it's going in the February issue.' I promise the swimmer, hoping this actually is true, and that what I write will be good enough to print.

I drive home, then stay up all night transcribing the excruciatingly awkward tape and somehow, despite monosyllabic answers to my hour-long interview, I get enough material to string out nine hundred words. With a good subbing job, and the magazine's uberprofessional photo shoot done in Sydney, the interview actually ends up looking okay.

Miraculous.

My email inbox announces a new message, a few days later. "Thanks Louisa, all good. Invoice away."

The fee would have taken two weeks of restaurant pounding to match.

I use sixty dollars of my cheque to order a box of business cards from the internet. And pray no-one discovers I have no real credentials.

Although I'd like to say it was as easy as that to transition from carrying tables (with a cracked rib) to writing freelance for a living,

it did take a bit longer. A lot longer. And a lot more not knowing how I was going to get through certain assignments.

Instead of travelling with Marco to Europe as I'd planned before quitting the restaurant, we separated as soon as we no longer had our work in common. I didn't mind, really. It was a remarkably smooth break-up, like we both saw our romance as a summer holiday, not something you'd keep forever. Especially since he was still keen to stay on the ship that was sixty-hour hospitality work weeks and I wanted to start seeing mornings again.

I decided instead to use the money to live off for six months while I pitched and wrote and pitched some more, until eventually, the payments started to come and I no longer cringed, feeling like a fraud, every time I typed the words 'As a brief introduction, I'm a freelance journalist . . .'

I lived like a hermit for the next year, writing articles on anything which interested me. I waited at best a month for invoices to be paid and at worst, six months. For the most part, except for some brief interludes of euphoria (usually just after a cheque had arrived), I wondered why I was so arrogant as to think I could do something which made time pass so enjoyably.

It wasn't just the idea of working without being monitored that I enjoyed about freelancing. It was the panoramic scope it gave me of the world, a world so much bigger than that restaurant dining room or any of the other workspaces I had ever found myself in. I pitched and wrote columns for newspapers, interviewing couples, writing features on cultural topics, lifestyle trends, health reports and psychology research. Anything that interested me – that popped into my mind – I pitched to a publication I thought it would fit for. I loved how my entire perception of a subject, problem or place could be cracked open by my tracking down an expert, picking up the phone to ask some questions, reading certain

textbooks and studies, or just speaking to anyone who knew more than me about it.

Through taping all the interviews I did, and painstakingly transcribing ten typed pages a pop until my wrists ached, playing back moments in the interviews so excruciating I physically flinched when I heard myself speak, I also learned so much about my own conversational patterns and faults, like I was shining a blowtorch on my innermost psyche. Who needs therapy? Just tape yourself giving interviews and you'll see your communication strengths and weaknesses fanned out in a mosaic!

I interrupted, I blurted things out which were obvious, I asked the same questions more than once, when they'd already replied. How on earth had I got through life? Still, it was a steep learning curve, and I kept going. Part of what frightened me about interviews was why I wanted to do them so much. To have conversations about so much more than the weather or what dresses were on sale at Myer. Sometimes, I wondered if I knew more about these people I was interviewing than I did of my best friends.

Because interviews fascinated me, I pitched to a small-budget careers magazine one day, offering to write profiles of successful Australians. The magazine was targeted to high school and uni students, and supposed to be 'motivational', so high-achieving 'success stories' became my niche for a little while. Through the magazine, I interviewed more Olympians, actors, singers, sportspeople and comedians than I'd ever dreamed I'd talk to in such a short space of time. Usually I got the interview through merely googling them, emailing their manager and pitching the magazine. Voila! Suddenly I was sitting across from someone in a café, dictaphone in hand, whom I had only ever read about or watched on TV.

MORE THAN A CROISSANT

What astounded me, over and over, was how easy it was to get people to talk by asking the right questions. Gradually I improved, through planning, navigating the interview towards the most important aspects, always wondering — what would the reader want to know? What is the most unusual aspect of this story? And I never had that feeling I had with that first interview, that I'd been dropped into an abyss without an oar. I was growing. The feeling of terror had metamorphosised into exhilaration. It felt good.

From charity workers to successful business owners, sportspeople, actors and comedians, one part of their success always fascinated me. A common thread prevailed, regardless of career choice or which arena they specialised in. It was this invisible crossing of a certain threshold, this odd sense of stepping out into an island where you create a new set of rules for your life – but it demands that you get so far out of your comfort zone you can't see straight.

One guy, who had gone from overweight, inexperienced and unemployed to one of the most sought-after presenters on TV within a year, spoke to me one day.

'Louisa, anything is possible. You've just got to be willing to step off the cliff and take the risk. The pay-off is always worth the pain.'

Despite moderate success – I had a monthly column, and some regular features for health magazines, as well as the occasional job subbing other people's stories – I had no idea what I was doing, really.

I'd got a book from the library on how to invoice and set up an ABN, but I had no idea what was acceptable behaviour from a magazine editor, how often I should follow up, how long it should take to be paid or what an acceptable word rate was. It wasn't until an editor asked me to rewrite one of my pitches five times with

quotes, then published it under her own name, that I felt desperate enough to email a stranger I thought might possibly provide some advice. Why the hell not? I didn't know anyone else to ask for help. What's the worst she could do? Not reply?

Thursday: 11.12 pm

Dear Mystic,

Umm, I know you used to be a freelance journalist so I was just wondering, is it normal for an editor to reduce your word fee AFTER you've written three cover stories for the magazine? And not pay a kill fee for something they've asked you to rewrite? (See below.)

I hope you don't mind me emailing. I love your astrology columns, I'm based in Melbourne, and I don't know anyone else to ask.

Oh, and I'm a Pisces.

Warmly,

Louisa

Thursday: 11.22 pm

Louisa,

Is she drunk? No, hang on, is she on CRACK? That is not acceptable behaviour, from any editor . . . Write me a short piece for the blog and I will do your chart and whiz you over a copy of my new book . . . and have you ever pitched to $- \ldots$? They need freelancers urgently . . .

Bestest,

Mystic

I blinked at the message, appearing so quickly in my inbox. Just like that, another gift, sitting on a plate from the universe, one little risk, holding the keys to a miracle. Four months of to-ing and fro-ing with an insanely difficult magazine editor who had reduced

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me to tears (and eating stale lentils) for the last time had led me, out of pure lack of anyone else to ask, to make a new friend.

A new friend who doubled as a career mentor and a psychic pen-pal, one of those fairy godmothers who turns up just as you're about to give up the quest.

3

Venus meets Pluto

'Relationships started under these stars are . . . almost like a kidnapping – from one life to another.'

LIFE HAS CHANGED SO MUCH, since I left Marco and the Italian soap opera in the city, burrowing away like a hermit in my flat. I was surprised how happy I was to be single and to focus on my rediscovered ambitions. I'd heard through the grapevine that he was going out with another waitress from the restaurant where I used to work. *Good on him*, I thought. Every waitress needs a Marco to make the job more bearable.

I'd realised, when I left, that although having his complimentary eyes and broken English words of romance made the job endurable, now that I was doing something which was leading me in such fascinating directions, I just didn't feel the need for any distraction.

And tonight, I feel excited. Mystic Medusa has flown down from Sydney to host a night of astro-fun as part of the Melbourne

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Writer's Festival. Although we've been emailing about everything from career advice to planetary transits for over six months, we've still never met face to face. Although slightly nervous at meeting someone who knows so much about my most private, only-expressed-in-the-false-anonymity-of-emailing-someone-from-interstate-who-lives-under-a-moniker thoughts, I'm curious, too. Her life seemed so eccentric and quirky, I knew she'd be slightly left-of-centre. And so would her fans.

Just my kind of night.

If St Kilda were a planet, it would be Pluto, God of the Underworld. Dark, dangerous and sexy, prostitutes and pimps share street corners and shaded doorways with actors and eccentrics, sunburnt backpackers lugging their dog-eared Lonely Planets down Fitzroy Street oblivious to the junkies shooting up in the darkness. But despite the seediness, St Kilda has an old glamour, too. Turn the corner of Fitzroy Street and you're greeted by a multitudinous sea stretching out past the iconic pier, white sea baths once home to Melbourne's gentry on holiday, its carved stone seats and sweeping art deco apartments overlooking the glorious stretch of shimmering water.

Although certainly no longer relegated to gentrified rich folk on summer holidays, St Kilda is still all about parties. Celebration. Holidays. An escape from the norm. Any night of the week, wine, drum-beats and the screams of drunk strangers pour from its copious bars, the sinister laughing mouth of Luna Park's entrance reminding you to unbutton your shirt and let loose. Aside from the hangover, you can usually be sure what happens in St Kilda stays in St Kilda. Each morning the street sweepers clean last night's decadence from the footpath as leftover souls from the night before stagger home.

St Kilda is almost a subterranean world within Melbourne, a haunting expanse of wind-whipped beach dampened by our interminably grey skies, darkly illuminating cast-off beer cans and stray syringes laying carelessly on the top-skin of sand. Policemen and emergency workers keep the night pulsing with a steady, seedy melody: screams, sirens, flashing lights, kebab wrappers cast aside to wipe hands of the night. Done for now.

St Kilda has always pulled me out of my comfort zone, a place of intense and unexpected encounters. But tonight I'm willing and ready to close the metaphorical drawbridge of Punt Road and head across the river. Melburnians see the Yarra River as the great divide. Tonight, I'm ready to cross over.

Before leaving the house, I cast one last look at Mystic's blog, partly to see what today's pearls of wisdom are, partly to say goodbye to the safe anonymity of not knowing who is behind the words. Today's post is on the oracle of relationships.

'Pay attention to the surroundings, the environment, the setting, the first time you meet someone. What's the history of the place? The vibe? Analysing the symbolic nature of your first meeting is a reliable oracle for the major plots and themes of the relationship. Nothing is by accident.'

'The whole world's mad with cherries and crazy on top!' a hobo cackles in my ear as I alight from my car, parked just below the big dipper ride of Luna Park. His face is lined with a lifetime of close escapes, and I feel like I've been expecting him. St Kilda's not a place you live if you want to lead a safe life. You go there if you're ready to face your demons, or even just feel like sharing a drink with them once in a while.

'Real love is the best kind of blindness,' wails another homeless man as I weave my way past the strangers milling in the doorway

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of Theatreworks, what was once the parish hall of the original church of St Kilda, now home to any number of intimate theatrical performances – and tonight, an astrology cabaret.

The homeless man is shaking his head amongst an eclectic crowd of smokers and people drinking wine from plastic cups, milling outside the entranceway. He mutters something about the 'Abos getting it right, living off the land'. I notice a young, friendly looking guy in a grey t-shirt and denim jeans, stopping to smile at him, body front on, giving him his full attention.

'Yeah yeah, crucial,' he drawls in an ocker accent, looking like he's talking to an old friend at a party, adding a cheerful, 'Catch ya round' before he moves on. I wait for him to look around and roll his eyes, like most city people do when they've 'escaped' from an interaction with a hobo. He just keeps walking, peacefully. Happily. His way reminds me of The Fool of the tarot's major arcana. All he's missing is the swag over the shoulder.

Inside the auditorium, my heart is pounding out of my chest, like it's me who's about to go on stage. I can't breathe, can't talk. I need to concentrate. I feel like something important is about to happen, and I need to shut my eyes in order to see it. I need silence so I can hear it. Why do I feel as though I'm in a car about to do a U-turn from everything I've known so far?

A pretty blonde woman clad in kitten heels and blue jeans takes the stage, and I know it's her. She's nervous, talking at lightning speed, ordering everyone to break up into their star-sign groups. As she takes huge gulps of red wine I feel the nausea of her nerves, my heart pounding in empathy for her obvious jitters, yet excited, fascinated, as well.

After breathing a sigh of relief that the Pisces in the group get to sit up the back, I notice the guy who'd talked to the homeless man in the chair I want to sit in. 'What are you?' I ask.

'Um, Poisces,' he drawls in a lazy Aussie twang so strong it's like he's just crawled in from the bush. I take the seat beside him, amused by the fact that this rogue country drifter is sitting on his own at an astrology night.

The night is like an Oprah-style astro confessional, and Mystic goes through all the stars in a sort of Q and A, revealing quirky characteristics from an online poll of forty thousand readers. Aside from having trouble hearing her, I'm glad I'm up the back, where I can survey the sorts of people who would come to such a wacky night.

'Virgos email me a lot about their stick collections,' she says, and three different Virgos start up about their penchant for sticks. One has obsessively sharpened pencils. The other – branches from a tree. All, sticks. Odd.

Pisces guy lazily turns to acknowledge me when I've settled in, and his blue-eyed face is so boltingly familiar that I accidentally stare too long, then hope he doesn't think I'm sitting here to pick him up.

Piscean men are strange, anyway. I don't care what he thinks of me. I'm going to say whatever I want just so he knows for SURE I'm not trying to pick him up. Hey, he's at an astrology night, too! He must be weird.

One thing plays on my mind, while I listen to Mystic quiz the Scorpios on their propensity to both stalk ex-lovers and be stalked themselves, and work in professions which involve death or sex. How do I know him?

'My name's Jim. I'm a friend of Mystic's.' Hobo-spunk interrupts my thoughts, like he heard me asking. He shakes my hand, which is odd, as his knee has been resting on mine since I sat down. I don't think he's noticed.

Jim. James. Actor?

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'What star sign is most likely to leave parties without saying goodbye?' Mystic asks, and I suddenly remember to be as unappealing and weird as possible, so Mr Good-looking Pisces doesn't think I'm trying to attract him. Even though maybe I am. But I can't. So I won't.

'God, I always do that!' I say, remembering how much it peeves all my friends. He cocks his ear to hear me better, nodding.

'Yeah, me too,' he says quietly, then yells, so Mystic can hear, 'It just cuts out all that unnecessary chitchat! "Stayyyy, have another drink," he mimics, 'Bo-ring!'

Then she asks, 'What star sign was voted worst in a crisis situation?'

Someone yells, 'Pisces!'

Jim looks at me and chuckles, shaking his head, like *they just* don't understand us.

'That's because it's never a crisis,' he says under his breath, so only I can hear.

I look at him, 'I know,' I say, 'drama queens are so annoying!', and he begins to tell me about a friend who announced he's getting a divorce.

'I mean, they weren't happy so I figure he should celebrate the divorce. I'm not going to say poor thing. I mean, that's not really a crisis, is it? Most people see the tiniest things as a crisis.'

Suddenly I remember why I know his face.

Months ago, on Mystic's blog, she'd written about a resolutely single 'Piscean Comedian' who drifted around Australia living out of his car doing rude comedy in out-of-the-way bars. She'd used him as an example of how unpredictable and contrary Pisceans can be. A well-educated Sydneysider, from some kind of aristocratic heritage with a degree in commerce, 'he now pretends he's the son of an itinerant shearer if anyone asks him about his background,' she'd

written. 'He also travels across Australia with all he owns in his car, refusing to settle down for anyone or anything, abstaining from all conventional notions of a relationship or material success.'

I'd clicked on his link on her blog, which had led me to his website, the front page bearing a photo of him being kissed by an Aboriginal man in the Northern Territory, a huge grin on his round face, red dust smeared across his tanned arms. He even had a notes page, and I saw how many random girls and rough, outback guys had posted fawning messages. She was right. This multiple conjunct Pisces was one *weird* fish.

I will not be attracted to you, I think determinedly, coming back to the auditorium from my reverie. Classic commitment-phobe. But hang on – I'm not in any hurry for commitment, either! Plus, he's a Pisces. Even though I'm one, too. Plus, he leaves parties without saying goodbye! But I do, too.

But damn he smells nice.

Like earth, sweat and happiness.

Like wide open spaces.

Like freedom.

After we've gone through all the star signs, Mystic invites us to join her for a drink at the Dog's Bar, a wine bar just a few steps down the road. I rush away from Pisces spunk to put money in the car meter, and as I walk back to meet everyone, my stomach does the same flip-flop it would do if I was about to give a speech. When I get to the entrance of the bar, I take a deep breath, and look down at my feet. I'm standing on a stone carving of a lightning-bolt. The night is warm, so everyone is sitting outside, and as I slip to the side of Mystic, introducing myself quickly, I notice Pisces guy in the corner, sipping quietly from a bottle of water. The astrological

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talk is growing wilder and louder, people trading planetary transit stories as some would trade gardening tips.

'When I had Pluto transiting my sun I lost my job, my house burned down and the laundromat accidentally burned all my clothes. That's when I started to write about astrology. The first sentence I wrote in my new notebook was, "Keep an eye on F'ing Pluto!"

I remember what she'd said about the astrological climate tonight. Venus and Pluto were at opposite ends of the sky.

Mystic turns and looks at me, and says, eerily, 'Relationships started under the stars tonight are very Venus Pluto. It's almost like a kidnapping from one life to another.'

Jim moves a chair so I can sit closer to him, looking at me with a soft half-smile like he's just woken up from sleep. There's something about how comfortable he is, with no need for alcohol, that makes me feel immediately at ease. Like he doesn't want or even need anything from me, or from anyone, but he'll be happy to experience the encounter, whatever it holds. I have a tendency to feel easily trapped and smothered, so his way of half-ignoring me puts me immediately at ease. Plus, he's the first Piscean I've met who doesn't drink.

I'm impressed by a man who needs no artificial aids to be able to relax with the intense astro crowd, even if they are well dressed and he's in his old sneakers and a scruffy old shirt. He's comfortable. And because he's comfortable, I feel comfortable. There's something – naked, about him. Or just, unnaturally open. Like you couldn't jolt him, like he's not scared by much. *Because it's never a crisis*, I think, hearing his words over and over in my head. I sit there in peace, close to his scruffy jeans, wondering how much he's seen, how many laps of Australia he's done. How many crazy people he's made laugh.

Just then, a couple pull up on Acland Street, leaping out of their car in triumphant jubilation, hugging, screaming and kissing each other.

'Always good to get a car park,' says Jim quietly, looking at me with a smile, like he makes up jokes as much for his own amusement as anyone else's.

'I loved your poem about the city and the country,' says Mystic, interrupting our moment, thanking me for coming, remembering something I'd forgotten I even sent her.

'What were you saying about the city and the country?' asks Jim. Placed on the spot, I can't explain things very succinctly.

'Err, it was just about the different people you can be . . . in two different places . . . kind of.'

Jim nods in understanding, leaning towards me like there's no-one else in the packed bar. 'I get that as well. That's why I love travelling around Australia so much. It's like you get to explore all the different aspects of yourself, depending on where you are.'

It's an uncanny feeling, like we've been together before, and our meeting again tonight is the relief of return. We are like silent, war-weary comrades from lost lifetimes together. Even when we drift apart as the night unfolds from place to place, I feel him with me.

His phone beeps, and I remember I left my mobile in my car. 'Oh, I left my mobile on the dashboard of my car,' I stand up, ready to dash off.

'Yep, Lou. Just a sec, I'm coming . . .' he says. Our togetherness is a given.

Part of the reason I had stopped going out so much, over the past year, was because the superficial pick-up-dance with ego, arrogance and personal baggage took centre stage every Friday or Saturday at any number of glossy bars in the city. And frankly, I was in no hurry to settle down. Clucky? Nope. Traditional? Nope. My idea of romance is someone curious about my dreams and excited about how they're going to pursue theirs. Not telling me how much money they earn or what sort of outer look encapsulates their 'ideal woman'. But at bars and restaurants all over the city, it seemed the pendulum swung to the extreme, and I'd begun to feel like the odd one out for noticing. People in my age group seemed more obsessed with the way they and their partner dressed, smelled and wore their hair than whether they were actually happy and healthy. Screaming fights after too many drinks were considered normal, gaping wounds of loneliness mopped up with shopping, and relationships deemed 'successful' just because neither had cheated on the other, were all part of the package called 'dating in western civilisation, millennium style'. I wanted more.

I wanted honesty, health, someone who saw me and acknowledged me for who I was, beneath the clothes and the make-up. Someone I could trust to love me more for being true to myself than wearing the right shoes. And I was willing to do the same for them. I interviewed a relationship counsellor once, who told me the main reason couples came to see her was because they claimed the other one 'never listened'. But how can we listen to each other when we don't even hear our own inner voice?

The number of conversations I'd had with men who loathed their jobs but valued the money above their own health or sanity had begun to blur. And because I don't follow football, I didn't have much else to discuss either. If I didn't take the drugs that were offered to jazz up the night or get roaring drunk, then forget about any kind of encounter with the opposite sex. Marco had come from a decidedly chivalrous Italian background, and deep down I doubted I'd ever meet an Australian man who knew the meaning

of chivalry, or romance. I'd almost given up hoping I'd ever meet someone who shared my weird views of the world.

My choices had placed me in a sort of no-man's land. The fact that I wasn't interested in sitting around talking about how hard it was to make a living from my 'art' for hours on end disconnected me from the real bohemians. But living from story to story and unable to save for a mortgage or pre-book a holiday excluded me from the rest.

It wasn't like I hadn't tried to be normal. The job I'd been so lucky to get, at the newspaper, could have led to a journalism cadetship, if I'd really wanted it. But the moral agonies of news journalism turned my stomach in knots. I'd see hungry cadets be promoted over a 'scoop' on the latest fraud, murder or child-rape case. Each day as I dutifully typed up the headline summary from *A Current Affair, Today Tonight* and the *Rumour File* on 3AW, I'd overhear the chief police reporter behind me, on the phone, picking the details like a hungry crow. 'And – just off the record – where was the body found? Did he decapitate her?'

The crunch came when the Bali bombings happened and I found myself fielding phone calls to the news desk from anxious families waiting for us to update the dead list. The chief of staff would clap his hands every time a new round of photos came in, fresh with blood from the AAP wires.

'We've got a ripper cover for tomorrow,' I heard him on the phone to the editor-in-chief. It was a close-up of wounded revellers running for their lives. The fear of death in their eyes, blood stains on their dresses. One of them appeared on the dead list the next day.

Jim breaks my memory, his blue eyes looking into the distance but his head leaning close with his ear near my lips. He is listening, intently.

'Do you still write poetry, Lou?'

I think of that poem I wrote, so long ago, about the city and the country. Before I discovered the right brain of freelance journalism – a necessary compromise between wanting to make money from my 'art' and giving it up completely.

'Um – well – not for a while. This is how I know Mystic – she's been helping me with my writing over the past six months. We kind of do similar work . . . I needed some support, you know, being freelance is a pretty weird job . . .'

'That's cool. I think we do the same thing, Lou. It's a constant balance between following your inspiration and keeping yourself fed.'

We talk about the wacky situations we've found ourselves in, and I tell him how chasing invoices is as much a part of the job as actually writing.

'Yeah, I get that too,' says Jim. 'After I've performed, sometimes the publican says he didn't make enough money over the bar to pay me. It's like, "I wouldn't mind covering my sundry costs — like some food!"'

I laugh at how he says 'sundry', and notice that I'm unravelling in his presence. It's not just because I'm not filtering my words for attractiveness, but because, finally, I've been able to go beyond explaining what I do and just relax with someone who understands.

As we walk back to the bar, I find myself telling him about the newspaper, about how I had nightmares for months after I left, how nobody understood why I was passing up the 'career opportunity of a lifetime', how I felt ashamed even when I went back to waitressing, like I couldn't understand it. I'd lost any chance of a 'career', I felt, but I just saw that job as finding the most fear-provoking, negative and awful stories going on in the city, interviewing the people who've suffered, expanding people's darkest

terrors and using my writing skills to sell newspapers which just expanded the fear. I remember people shaking their heads at me when I quit, like I was a lost cause, and my decisions made no sense.

He stops and takes my hand, looking a bit nervous, but rubbing my palm with his thumb. 'That's the most beautiful story I've ever heard.'

Two different bars, many drinks and umpteen conversations with strangers later, I decide to call it a night. It's 3 am, so I migrate out the front door to the footpath, wondering where the taxi rank is. Jim appears at my side.

'Do you need a lift somewhere, Lou?'

He says it in a way that tells me he doesn't expect anything from me. That I don't owe him anything, just because we've spoken. He's just wondering if I need a lift.

'Um, well, I live on the other side of the city. It's a bit of a drive. I'll get a taxi, it's okay!'

'No worries Lou, but I'm staying in North Fitzroy if you do need a lift . . .' He gives me his friend's address, which is about fifty metres from my flat.

'Okay . . .' We smile, like kids about to go on an adventure.

'Hop in!' he says excitedly, clearing the passenger seat for me and opening the door.

In his silver Mazda, red dust covers the dashboard and every square inch of the back seat is filled with his belongings. He clears a space for me in the passenger seat, turns the heater on and, whilst cruising along Punt Road, fishes around in the back for something he wants to show me.

'I wrote a book!' he says, proudly passing me a bound copy of *Jimbo's Great Aussie Adventure*, flicking through to find a particular

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page as his other hand stays on the steering wheel. I feel like I'm at a slumber party, in his house, and his car is our cosy room.

'Are you warm enough?' he asks, putting on a Hall and Oates CD. The speedometer says over 300 000 kilometres.

'How much do you drive?'

'Oh, I average about seventy thousand k's a year. Some people sit at an office desk all day. At least I get a nice view!'

When he pulls up at my flat, he leans in for a kiss, which is kind of jarring, considering how much fun we've been having and how relaxed I feel with him. Usually there's that weird anticipation . . . Halfway through the movement, my right brain barks 'STOP'.

Get out of the car, Lou. He's a Pisces, for God's sake. And you saw the t-shirts piled high on his back seat. They are emblazoned with the words: I FUCKED A GOAT.

I slam the passenger door, making it up the steps to my flat in a tipsy blur, distracted with my brain argument. I know, I know. But I really like him. 4

Interstate stalking

'It's not stalking if we both do it.'

I WAKE EARLY, FEELING AS though I've missed a vital clue in a mystery. My head is fuzzy, like I'm coming down with the flu or something, obsessively spinning the events of the previous night through my head in a constant rotation. What have I lost?

The rain pours down outside, while I make coffee and try to remember what I am supposed to be doing today. Everything in my flat is as it was when I left to go out last night – but I can't seem to find myself here again. I feel like I'm meant to be somewhere – else. Or missing part of myself, which lies beyond the four walls of this flat.

Unfinished articles lie in printed-out piles on my desk. A review copy of the latest dating book by a relationship expert, advocating the use of 'sales tactics' to score the man of your dreams, lies unopened, next to the publication I'm to review it for. I wonder

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what the dating expert would have to say about what I'm about to do? Ha!

I search Mystic's blog archives, finding Jim's website, which, naively, lists his phone number, for all the world to call him. So I do. It goes straight to voicemail, so I send him a text message, inviting him to pop over before he drives back to Sydney. The only reason I know he's going back so soon is because he's giving Mystic a lift.

I've got to hurry. Something urgent has come over me. I was so quick to jump out of his car last night. But now, I'm reconsidering my haste. When was the last time you met someone uncompromisingly following their passion, Lou? Never.

Fifteen minutes later, Jim appears at my door, dripping wet, handing me a block of Toblerone and some lemonade, nonchalantly heading towards the shower. I never told him Toblerone was my favourite chocolate. And lemonade was always a treat for feeling under the weather. I toss him a towel, like we already live together.

Afterwards, he sits on my couch, showing me some of the comedy work he's compiled into a DVD, and we talk for four hours. We watch Pink being interviewed by Denton, and he rests his head on my belly like I always imagined old couples do when they've been together for years. Despite lifestyles at opposite ends of the spectrum, we share a synchronistically parallel value system on ideas of society, fear, money, freedom and creativity.

When he leaves, just after midnight, to catch up with a comedian friend who has just come off stage, I feel something huge has occurred.

I think I've met my soul mate.

Who tells crude jokes for a living.

Jim had been single for over seven years. With an unpredictable lifestyle and a bawdy stage persona very different to his introverted private side, a salary which hadn't exceeded \$18 000 for a few years and no particular desire to settle down and live in a house, he wasn't exactly 'perfect catch' material in the traditional sense of the word.

'Besides,' he'd said to me the night before, 'if you have a wife or a girlfriend you've usually got to have a house to put them in.'

I, too, found it hard to even consider a 'conventional' relationship, but for different reasons. With a strange hankering for freedom myself, I railed against the idea that just because I was nearing thirty, I was supposed to put procreation deadlines and mortgages before true love and adventure.

I wasn't that shocked when Mystic emailed me to say that Jim had spontaneously declared he was 'in a relationship' with me, the day after we'd met, in the car drive back to Sydney. But I was delighted. I couldn't stop grinning, and I smacked into the wall of my bedroom after doing a little dance of happiness.

'He is from a very good background,' she wrote, concerned that I wouldn't look beyond the veneer of the crude jokes and sparse belongings. Little did she know I'd fallen so madly for him that I couldn't have cared less if he'd finished high school.

'You both have Uranus conjunct your sun. The relationship will be characterised by freedom . . .'

A week later, he turned up in Melbourne, vaguely referring to a gig he had booked, which I later found out didn't exist. He stayed over for two nights, and I asked him question after question about Australia, like it was a country I'd never visited.

'When we go to Broome . . .' he murmured in bed the second morning, and it didn't even sound that strange to hear a man I'd known a week mentioning our visiting a place three thousand

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kilometres away like it was going to happen. Stranger still, I believed him.

'I'd better go home now Lou,' he said at about ten in the morning, referring to Sydney like it was just up the road. He had a gig that night in Windsor, just north of Sydney.

'Well, drive safe,' I said, as I watched the Mazda pull out of Barkly Street.

All day as I numbly checked my emails and zoned on and off planet earth, I checked the time and tried to calculate where he was on the Hume Highway.

Sometimes you don't even need to think rationally, to know someone has it figured out. After too long adrift in a sea of money-seeking city slickers, I've fallen in love with a man whose sole purpose is to make people laugh, and roam the country. No contracts, no trappings, no fears. A life based simply – and authentically – on freedom.

Here was someone whose company gave me more pleasure, insight and comfort than anyone I'd met my entire life. So the outer details of his life didn't really matter, like the goat jokes, and the fact that he owned nothing but a car. That all came second to this central, deep desire to spend as much time as possible in his company.

After a restless night pacing the streets of Fitzroy, I pause on the corner of my street, and notice a piece of graffiti I never saw before: 'Do you really think you're in control?'

I walk up the stairs to my flat, deliberating on whether the feelings I have are reciprocal. An old episode of *Water Rats* comes on the screen, with a familiar-looking figure juggling balls on a beach. The credits roll: Jimbo the Clown.

For a Pisces like me, signs like that are dangerous.

So since the next day was fine and sunny, I owned a car, and I'd just completed the last of five stories due for three weeks,

I decided to drive to Sydney to see him. And that's probably when I started to come undone.

It's strange, how easy it is to drive to another state of Australia in just one day. People usually refer to borders and state lines like they are significant things, forgetting that once upon a time, they didn't exist. Someone constructed that delineation out of nothing. It's all just space, and we make up the lines.

I turn right at the end of my street to the sign on Sydney Road. I don't even need to look at the map. I know this will take me straight there.

SYDNEY 888 KM.

I'd just texted him about an hour ago, from a café, where I couldn't concentrate on anything. 'What if I drive to Sydney – today?!'

And, the freedom-loving soul that he is, honouring instinct and whimsy over planning and forethought, he calls me straight back, inviting me to tour the coast with him, saying we'll have a place to stay in Sydney, when I get there.

Phew. I race back to the flat to pack. I'm glad it's not just me.

I feel I've been given a get-out-of-jail-free card by virtue of having a car. The Eagles croon to me from the car stereo, making me feel like a gypsy cowgirl, and I relish the crispness of the air as I alight from the car at Seymour in the darkening night, to grab a takeaway coffee.

The air tastes like freedom, and the eucalypts shiver in the night, whispering change, whispering mystery by the side of the seemingly endless Hume. As I drive through unknown towns I feel I am heading towards something big, unknown and crazy, far

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from everything I've ever experienced before. But what's perhaps strangest is that I don't feel scared. It all feels inevitable.

I ponder the story I know so far, rehashing our two encounters to date. Our conversations have been epic – like biographies written in fast-forward. It was like we were both in a hurry to fill the other in on the details so we could just get on with it.

He couldn't care less about the difference between lino or tiles when you're renovating, but he does know the name of every small town in Western Australia and has a personal best of driving from Perth to Adelaide on less than three hundred dollars. His set of street directories, for every city in Australia, takes pride of place in a sacred box in the back of his car – his 'office'. He's probably driven down more roads and crossed more state lines than most Australians would in their lifetime. He's given me an impression of country Australia so far from the Wolf Creek perception that is all we ever really hear, in the city.

'The ones with no teeth, Lou, they're usually the gentle ones...'

He's so philosophical at the idea of danger it's funny – drug addicts, hobos, jailbirds don't scare him – in a way only someone who is at peace with their dark and light sides can be. He's been performing for over fifteen years, and only went bush when he had reached the limit of freedom he felt he could achieve, in fickle, media-slick Sydney. After a stint at a clown course in Japan to becoming Sydney's most popular children's party clown, he decided to give stand-up a go at age thirty, winning a new talent award and getting a few prime TV spots in the early days which set him on track.

He is just as restless as me, with lack of growth, even when he does reach certain goals. 'I got bored, Lou. The jokes had to be a certain level of tame to keep the agents happy. And I started to do improvisation, which used my clown skills. I always loved

that more.' So he set up his own night, building up a crowd at the Albion Hotel in Parramatta which was, according to the bouncer, 'The only night we never had any fights.'

We share something else – big – in common. Our major decisions are made from a more instinctual, feeling level than logic. It's something I've never been able to explain to anyone else, when I quit a job at a moment's notice or I've taken a risk – like this drive to Sydney. Sometimes you just know things. Words – and explanations – get in the way of the truth.

Bringing in at least a couple of hundred punters with his rogue mix of stand-up, improvisation and a crude send-up of *Perfect Match*, he'd reached what he then thought was his peak, until he pushed it too far one night and the politics of the venue booker saw him given a warning to 'tone it down or leave'.

'But the punters didn't want me to tone it down, Lou. This is the west of Sydney, they aren't going to laugh at the musings on supermarket packets that might work in the corporate market. I was giving them what they wanted. But it's like the agents – or the venue bookers – are ashamed of what makes real Australians laugh.' So he left. The clown ran away from town.

And that's what really pulled me under, so that now I am free-falling under a sort of spell, feeling like I've been hit up with cocaine and he's my supply store. That I've met someone so purely devoted to one single thing in life that they wouldn't compromise it for anyone. Like he can't help but put the amusement of people – and himself! – before the financial rewards of staying in the city or the ambitious trajectory of impressing an agent, or seceding to worldly values. His certainty of purpose, and his own philosophies – regardless of how great, or small, that purpose is, in the world's eyes – is almost pure and holy. And to me, it's a relief. He's not wasting

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time searching. He knows what he needs to do. And whether or not it will ever pay off doesn't influence his decision to do it.

Some would probably see it as stupid. I think it's beautiful.

Never having been further than the east coast, he decided to put his things in storage and set off on a three-month tour of inland New South Wales and approach publicans for one-off gigs as he drove through town.

'When I got back to Sydney I felt alive again. I had all these stories. But everyone was just the same. Nobody wanted to hear any of it. They just wanted to show me their renovations.' So he gave away all his possessions, bought a car reliable enough to tour in, and gave notice on his flat.

'They never censor me in the outback pubs, Lou. I can just do what I love. In essence I was pushed out there but in it I've found this freedom, I've made all these friends, all over the country, blokes who have taken me in and I've stayed in so many houses with these people. I found the real Australia and it's pretty damn beautiful.'

I turn up the Eagles, challenging myself not to look at the odometer until a new song begins. The dark road doesn't scare me, even though I'm on my own and nobody – except a guy who I know by first name only – knows where I am.

I don't know why fortune smiles at some And lets the rest go free . . .

I accelerate towards the future, and the road passes in a blur. All that's gone before – fading – oh so fast.

After nine hours of driving, and the same Eagles CD on replay number ten, I cross the threshold from country to city, suddenly finding myself at Sydney's bright, shining entrance. The lights come on, despite it nearing midnight.

'WELCOME TO SYDNEY' claps me awake from country roads and daydreams. It's not the type of town you can cruise into in sleepy mode. With its confusing spaghetti-strap roads, bridges, tunnels and tolls galore, I'm not in the streets of the Melbourne I know. I snap to attention. *No more daydreaming, Lou*, even if I have been in the same position for hours and hours and hours.

I spilt my coffee all over my legs three hundred kilometres back. In such a hurry to keep driving forward, I couldn't even stay still to drink it. By now, it's dry, with a java-scented patch the only physical proof that I've covered ground since this morning. Proof that this is really happening.

Since I haven't eaten anything since the morning's toast, my hands are shaking and my bloodshot eyes are wide. JIM flashes from my phone and I jump in my seat.

'Get into the right lane after the second tunnel. I'll meet you at the taxi rank along the Harbour at the end of George Street! See you soon!'

I want to giggle and scream, it all seems too ludicrous. Have I gone crazy? Who drives nine hundred kilometres to see someone they've known for a week, except a stalker? And where the hell are we going to sleep tonight? He doesn't have a home!

Finally, I pull over near the water on Circular Quay, its surface shimmering under the moon like glittering diamonds under a globe of stars. His smiling silhouette is standing on the street next to his car.

'Oh, Lou.'

It doesn't take long, for someone to know your name, for someone to say it like it matters.

He looks at me like he can't believe how lucky he is. I pretend not to notice. The intensity of all of this is overwhelming.

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'It's not stalking if we both do it,' he says with a laugh, and I pat him down, as if to check he is real. Satisfied I'm not dreaming, we kiss.

Home.

I hop into his car and we take a spin around Sydney, walking down King's Cross streets and chatting at sparkling ferry coves in the night until two in the morning. Finally, he leads me in my car back to his parents' house, the house he grew up in, where we'll be staying for the next two nights. It's like we've fast-tracked a year's worth of dating landmarks into a week.

Those next forty-eight hours, Sydney had never looked so beautiful, and I have never been so enamoured by its swooning views and sparkling waters, shimmering like gold in the amber autumn light. The miner birds are singing their seductive tune when I wake, thinking it's spring, and frangipani leaves litter the footpath in Lane Cove, like a bridal scattering. It's as though the place was waiting for me – eager to reward me with beauty, joy and sun, for taking this risk, starting this love story.

We walk around the harbour, visit the Museum of Contemporary Art and randomly decide to order oysters at Circular Quay, our arms in a permanent coil around each other's hips, laughing like kids every time we 'wake up' to how preposterously fantastic this whole love thing feels.

As he pulls out his wallet to tip a busker playing the didgeridoo, I hear his phone beeping with messages. It's been running hot since I met him – I gather he has a lot of friends.

'It's my sister, Lou. I haven't brought a girl home in seven years. They just want to check you haven't got two heads.'

We catch the ferry to Manly to meet his sister and her husband, walking up the stairs to their apartment overlooking the

water. His sister greets me with warmth and curiosity, pulling down a huge map of Australia, marked with pins.

'I rode my bike from there to there.' She points to a huge stretch of the coastline from Adelaide to Queensland.

'Did you do much training?' I ask, assuming she had signed up to do a program with a group.

'No, I just rode the bike around the block a few times before I left.'

She talks later of how people would just turn up at certain moments in her ride with parcels of food left at her tent or encouraging notes.

Her eyes sparkle with excitement when she points to dots on the map.

'Wow.' Adventure must run in the family.

When her husband gets home he looks exhausted, until he sees Jim. 'So did you two meet at one of Jim's gigs?'

'No – Lou hasn't seen Jim perform yet,' his sister replies.

His eyes grow wide and his head swings from me to Jim to her and back to me. He shakes his head. 'Might have to get the country NSW bus timetable for you, Lou. Just in case.'

Since heading back from a twelve-month trip to Western Australia and the Northern Territory to emcee his sister's wedding, Jim has a littering of gigs for the next fortnight up the coast of New South Wales to Gympie in Queensland. Jim grew up in Sydney, which is why his phone is running hot with friends wanting to catch up and reconnect. When I'd arrived the night before, he'd been to two comedy rooms to drop in on friends and sat on one beer at a pub in Paddington while catching up with a particularly unhappy old school friend for two hours. The friend had then suggested they head to a strip club to continue the conversation.

'Did you go to the strip show?'

'I have to compete with the nude jelly wrestlers every week at my Windsor gig. And people take their clothes off at my gigs all the time. It's kind of like the fire-juggling at my children's clown shows. It's just the currency we play with as adults. But to me it's just entertainment, keeping it all naughty or taboo so that people will be interested and call it a great night out . . . and like with my friend from school, it just helps him keep that vision of women as one of three archetypes, either mother, virgin or whore . . .'

He's on a roll now, ranting philosophically. I gently bring him back to the point.

'Did you go to the strip show?'

'No, Lou. I've done about a thousand gigs in those kinds of places. It's kind of like work, to me-I see how hard those girls are working, distracting men from their lives. I'd rather have a conversation like this, sitting on the ferry dock, looking up at the stars.'

Tonight, he's arranged to catch up with another private school friend. He hasn't seen him for a couple of years since he 'went feral', in their words. But I get the impression he's fiercely loyal, and it would take a lot for him to cut someone out of his life. Actually, I don't think he's ever done it.

'I told him about you! You're coming, aren't you Lou? I want to show you off!'

We've already done the rounds of three houses in Leichhardt, Lane Cove and Milson's Point. I've been drinking cups of tea and visiting other people's bathrooms all day, meeting friends from primary school and his clowning days, talking about everything from nature to relationships to Buddhism and creativity with these wonderful people, openly accepting me into their homes. Jim's been circulating me around like he's picked up the last four-leaf clover on earth.

'They all know me as being single. So I'm as shocked as them!'
This time, we head to a pub in Potts Point to meet his friend.
I feel privileged to be taking a walk through his history album, which he has so openly laid bare. Live sport blares from a huge TV as we walk in, and I immediately want a drink, if nothing else, to block out the noise. I'm not much of a sport watcher. Jim gets rugby blindness straight away, and I stand sort of lost for a while, until a tall, slick-looking guy walks confidently over and pats him on the shoulder.

'MAAATE!' He introduces himself to me with a handshake, like he's at a networking function, his eyes darting over my shoulder.

We make chitchat. Some sort of architect-cum-property-developer, he tells me he has three houses – two in Sydney, one in Melbourne. He talks angrily about money the entire time – stocks, property, how much his divorce cost – drinking schooners of beer and impatiently prodding Jim when he doesn't get up to shout another round, because he hasn't even finished the last two. It's just as Jim's trying to distract him from the money talk by telling him a funny story about a gig he did in Norseman, Western Australia, when the guy's eyes glaze over until he spies a woman in a red dress walking past. He follows her bottom to the bar, winking back at Jim.

'So when are you getting a spot on Rove, mate?' he says to Jim. Clearly, he's not listened to anything Jim has said about his love of doing uncensored comedy.

I find this man quite curious. He's intelligent, good-looking, educated and politically aware. Occasionally he pipes in with something about the state of the world which makes me think he reads the papers and has a conscience. But it's the patronising way he looks at Jim – and me, for being with Jim – because he's not striving to earn loads of money and get the shackles this man is so

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painfully griping about that astounds me. Lack of self-awareness is a funny thing. Jim is sitting there patiently, doing his best to cheer the guy up, find some common ground, bring his attention to the paradoxical irony of how the pursuit of money seems to be a common thread in the guy's stresses and strains. After telling us his ex-wife was only after his money, he announces proudly how much his assets are worth. He seems completely unaware of how little this matters to either of us.

I head to the toilet, leaving them to the huge sports match. When I get back, slick guy is madly texting someone underneath the table, thinking Jim and I can't see. He makes an excuse and rushes off, after kissing me in a really strange way too close to my lips for comfort.

We walk home in silence, across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in the beautiful, balmy night. We're both quiet. I don't want to insult Jim, who is opening up and showing me everyone he's ever known, so early in the relationship. But he shakes his head, a mixture of bemused and appalled, by what was really quite a typical catch-up with an old friend.

'When you went to the toilet he asked me who else I've been sleeping with.'

'No wonder you split Sydney.'

5

Love dust

'I can take you anywhere . . .'

I hadn't thought further than getting to Sydney to check whether or not I'd dreamt Jim up. So when he invited me to join him on his ten-day road trip up the coast of New South Wales, to Queensland, my heart spoke before my head had a chance to calculate whether or not I even had any deadlines or meetings or appointments back in Melbourne. Or that perhaps you should pack properly before you go on a long road trip, and ask a few questions about where you might be staying.

'I'd love to!'

It always amazes me how quickly you can forget the past when you're travelling. We spend months and sometimes years before a trip, stewing in our analytical thoughts, deliberating and planning, but when you actually hit the road, you realise nothing much matters but what you do right now, in this moment in time.

In the past, I've only ever done long road trips where meals and rest stops were planned, kilometres logged, all accommodation fully booked in advance. The most memorable trips, though, always involve some sort of mistake, wrong turn or accidental loss of vitally important information.

On the way to a camp years ago, with two friends, we got so lost with no mobile phones or maps we ended up pulling into a random town at midnight that was so small it didn't even have a shop. So we saw a light on and knocked on a stranger's door. A young woman in a nightie answered and let us in, quite grateful for the company and not particularly curious about who we were. When we asked to borrow her phone to call the camp she put on the kettle and gave us plates of biscuits. After she spent an hour exchanging relationship woes and the trials of small-town living with her visitors, we were almost sorry to be collected by one of the other leaders who'd arrived to ferry us to camp. Engaged, living with her fiancé, who had gone out and not come home when he said he would, she seemed grateful to unload on strangers who had no investment in her life, and no judgement, right or wrong, for how she felt about it all.

It was one of those moments that cemented my decision to choose friends based on whether or not I'd like to get lost with them or not.

'I like getting lost with you, Lou,' she'd said, and I thought it was one of the most flattering things anyone could have said. 'I can take you anywhere and people just – talk to you.'

When Jim told me the first night I met him that he actually preferred wrong turns to following an itinerary, I knew we would be okay wherever we went. Full of adventures, the kind of person who'd be met with cups of tea in the middle of the night

by a stranger in a nightie, he wouldn't chafe at the waste of time, or the change in plan.

Although he manages to keep enough money in the bank for food, petrol and water, his main aim isn't linear accomplishment, but accidental experience. The here, now moment. Exchanges with strangers.

Unexpected magic.

Two days after my arrival in Sydney, I leave my shiny new car outside his parents' house and get into his beaten-up Mazda, covered in stickers from towns I've never heard of. So smacked out with love dust, I forget, momentarily, that he will be selling stubby holders after each gig with the slogan, 'I Fucked a Goat'. His method is simple. He rolls into town on his way past, pulls out a few posters, introduces himself to the publican, and explains his comedy show.

'If I get a gig under these conditions, just by my own rules, I feel like I've really earned it.'

When I do remember the t-shirts and the stubby holders, somewhere up the Pacific Highway as we lose more and more Sydney traffic to a shining, glorious sky of blue, I ask what it means. At first glance a crass, brash statement, it turns out he's put a lot of thought and philosophy into it.

'It means I don't care what you think about me. I mean, by saying to the world "I Fucked a Goat" – what can they say back to you? What could be worse than that?!'

I ask him how many t-shirts he's sold, at twenty dollars a pop.

'Um, think I'm up to about two thousand . . .'

I burst into laughter, wishing I'd left my overpriced boots at home. They don't fit with this new life I've stepped into.

I wasn't setting out with a map or itinerary, I had never heard of the towns where Jim had booked gigs. In fact, I didn't even ask him where we were going. My shoulders unravelled as I met each day not with goals, aims and plans but a blank slate and an open heart. I became dizzy with adventure, roads, beauty, strangers, truck-stop rainbows and new sights, and consequently shifted my perspective from deadlines and accomplishments to the importance of instinct and a lack of judgement.

We slept in dingy single beds that sank in the middle and on acquaintances' couches. If the sun was shining and there was thick enough bushland, we slept by the side of the road.

Sometimes we didn't sleep, we just kept driving. I drank coffee akin to lighter fluid from petrol stops and we checked our emails from two-dollar coin-in-the slot kiosks with dirty keys, Jim updating the gig guide on his website from shops where the confectionary hadn't been rotated for years.

If it was cold, we pulled over and just closed our eyes in the car and kept the heater running. We were high on life and adventure and love so the fact that he had to perform most nights and I was in an unknown situation every hour, every day, wasn't frightening, but it all took on a mystical, transcendent tone. They say the early days of love have the same effect on the brain as a high from cocaine. We were junkies, all right. We talked, sang and laughed so much we both lost our voices.

Australia's roads had never looked so beautiful and strangers had never been so welcoming. In just over two weeks, logging about four hundred kilometres a day, I saw more towns and states of Australia than I'd taken twenty-nine years to see. With a growing perception of the idea of beauty which lay at the opposite spectrum to what I'd been taught my entire life, my suitcase of

colour-coordinated clothes and bulging make-up bag lay unused in the boot of his car.

I learned, over the next two weeks, that being kind, trusting and open is a much more transferable skill than knowing how to adorn yourself outwardly. And that if you're sleeping in a ghost-ridden room or by the side of the road, love and trust are much more useful than designer trimmings.

In the scheme of one-on-one time, we probably spent more time together in those two weeks than I would have spent in six months getting to know anyone in my life to date.

Where I'd thought I'd been in love before, never had I experienced the drugged-up feeling like this. Though I was often sleepless, hungry and constantly out of my comfort zone – nothing could hurt me.

I was fascinated, entranced, obsessed, consumed with Jim, the addictive part of my brain stimulated to the point where I couldn't remember what I ever liked or wanted before meeting him. After spending days and days in the car, listening to him talk, breathing his energy and feeling his company beside me, I think I even forgot that he was a separate being.

Like smack addicts who see angels in bedsores, we wanted to share our high with everyone we touched.

In a café on our way through a small town on the coast of New South Wales, we stopped for a sandwich, his arms around my waist, and he'd just made a balloon animal for a random kid walking past. When the lady behind the counter asked us why we were so happy, Jim blurted out, 'We're in crazy love!' Our eyes shone back at her like she was part of our insane fantasy.

'Oh gee, kids, wow . . . be careful with that . . .' she said, looking at us like we were a breed of bird she'd thought extinct.

Our drug was the type of intense love some would classify as insanity, and we did all we could to prolong its effect. All the details of life that once mattered didn't bother me anymore. If I went for three days without showering or four without checking my email, I didn't care – but where was Jim? That's all that mattered. I felt like Jim's presence was the fairytale kiss that woke me from a deep slumber – and I'd been spending my whole life, until now, in that slumber. At night, lying beside him, wherever we were, I didn't want to shut my eyes.

If we parted for more than a few minutes, to go to an ATM or make a phone call or even just – the toilet – we'd message each other, only half-joking: 'Miss you!! xx'.

The way he looked at me, I knew I wasn't the only crazy one. Perhaps we weren't seeing each other, we were seeing some higher, fantastical vision of who we wanted the other person to be. Who cared? It felt good. Dangerously, sickeningly, good.

When he drove, I kept my hand permanently on his leg, and when we got out of the car and walked, we'd keep touching, in an attempt to stay endlessly connected in a line of energy that couldn't be broken.

'That was the lost week,' Jim said one day, referring to the week when he'd come back to Sydney before I drove up in a love-sick frenzy, to follow him. That time apart had been more than enough to make us overcompensate by not wanting to spend even a minute apart now. We talked and touched all day and all night, frustrated when our bodies beckoned for sleep, like it was an unnecessary separation.

We both lost weight in the course of those ten days, and Jim used a balloon as a belt to tighten his jeans. Eating, sleeping and showering were such crude interruptions, almost like a waste of

time. We had more important things at the forefront of our brains. Like catching up on lifetimes apart.

Where just weeks ago I'd been so work-obsessed that I'd log ten hours a day on the computer, feeling lazy if I wasn't simultaneously pitching, researching and filing stories, I was now so lost in something which had nothing to do with accomplishment and all to do with instantaneous reaction that it was like my previous self had been kidnapped. She'd gone. Left the building that was my body. And now this vague, open-hearted girl was replacing her. *Me*.

Leaving Melbourne, I'd packed quickly, but like the old me. I'd flung my hair straightener, a huge bag of toiletries, make-up and going out dresses, including heels, into the boot of my car. What a mistake.

For two weeks I changed clothes twice, washed my hair once with some leftover Palmolive in someone's home shower, and the rest of the time gave myself Clayton's washes in everything from pub toilets during Jim's gigs, to road shack outhouses and taps by the side of the road. Sometimes, I brushed my teeth out the window as he drove, rinsing my mouth with our bottles of water. I didn't want to appear high maintenance with this free-wheeling swagman. Besides, the way he looked at me, even the unwashed version, I figured it didn't matter.

Although at first glance Jim's life could be viewed as a couch-surfing slacker, I soon learned he more than paid his way in accommodation by listening, entertaining and performing impromptu clown shows for any children who were loitering about.

And I learned to go with the flow, too, falling into these myriad lives in houses, dotted across the map. I'd wake in the middle of the night on a sofa bed, or a mattress on someone's spare-room

floor, seeing Jim beside me and mentally constructing the time and place by a process of deduction. Where had we parked the car? Which friend was this from which house and which school or gig? Was a shower out of the question and what time did we need to get up to fit in with their schedule? And did any of it really matter as long as I was happy, here, in love?

More and more unnecessary history fell from my soul with every mile we logged, and so by the time I returned to Melbourne, I was virtually unrecognisable from the girl who had left two weeks earlier. But it didn't feel like I'd accumulated anything. Rather, the real me had just – emerged.

And all it had asked of me was that I leave home and drive up the road.

Take a risk.

Let Go.

In Coffs Harbour, Jim stops for a match of tennis with another old friend. My bare feet poke from the floor, and my knees, stiff with sitting, beg for a run.

The sun drips upon us like nectar from the gods, and I notice happily that there's a tennis club shower I can use after my run. I pull out my towel and a summer dress and place them on the passenger seat for later.

I begin to jog away from the court, smiling like a drunk with lack of sleep, the honeymoon phase of love, and a blissful appreciation of all the miles I've already travelled. Tearing myself away from Jim to go for a run had been an interception by my logical brain to get my body back. But it's hard to stay focused.

I don't take my phone, and I have no idea what time it is. I just run, that's all I can remember to do. I go up a hill, then down a side street. I'm not looking where I'm going, just enjoying the

feeling of being in motion again, moving my legs. Free, *freedom*, the word, the feeling, exhilarates my veins, I don't even consider the fact that I might get lost. Life is all too easy and blissful today, what could possibly go wrong?

After a few left turns, and then a few rights – or was it three lefts and one right? – I am utterly lost, and the sun is beating down on me brighter and hotter than before. I realise, with both fright and humour, as I find myself on the edge of a freeway, I don't even know Jim's phone number.

I swing wildly between Zen cool, thinking Jim and I have such a connection he will surely channel my locale, and at worst in a parched and dizzy panic. I am dripping with sweat, carrying nothing except the sweaty singlet and shorts I wear, have no idea how long I've been jogging for, and, to perfectly top off the situation, it's the first day of my period so I'm not too sure how long I have before a certain something will start to – err – leak.

After a long diversion when someone directs me to the wrong tennis court, I find myself at a graveyard. I feel like a walking joke, but I have to ask this elderly couple, visiting a grave, where to go. I'm desperate. Parched.

'Excuse me?' I pant. 'I'm a bit lost. Sorry to interrupt. Do you know where the tennis court is?'

'Where are you from?'

'Melbourne.'

They chuckle, murmuring that the tennis court is somewhere nearby but they can't recall where.

'Who are you trying to find?'

'My . . . boyfriend . . .' I let it hang in the air for the nothing word that it is. How can I use the same name for this man that I've used for every other relationship I've been in?

'Well can't you ring him?'

You don't understand, I wanted to tell them. I just used that word because I can't say soul mate to a couple of strangers in a cemetery or I'll sound cuckoo. And by the way, I don't know his surname.

'It's cool, I think I know where I'm going!' I don't want to worry them, so I jog away, only to move towards the familiar sound of tennis balls being lobbed. Like a panting dog, I sniff out their origin, two streets behind the graveyard.

Grateful but dripping with sweat, I flop next to Jim on the chairs next to the tennis court. He gives me a hug, even though my sweat is now mixing with his, all over his t-shirt.

'You've been gone for an hour and a half!' he says eventually, as I guzzle the entire litre of water he'd left courtside for some post-tennis hydration.

'Jim . . .' I gulp, looking up at his face, every line and freckle imprinted on my memory. 'What's your surname?'

By sunset, we are in Macksville, a coastal country town about a hundred kilometres south of Coffs Harbour, where he has a gig in a couple of hours. After setting up his speakers and saying hello to the publican, a beer-bellied fellow with cheeks in a permanent state of rosacea, Jim jingles the keys to our bedroom for the night, upstairs. It couldn't be more romantic. The ancient bed sinks almost to the floor and a stray dog howls outside the window. The window, covered by a grey, dusty curtain, looks out to the back verandah.

Sometimes when he does a gig they give him dinner on the house, as well as a room. Here, we get both. When the waitress comes out to the verandah overlooking the river to take our order, we both order the calamari and a glass of white wine.

'Jinx.'

I've often wondered how I would have felt about Jim had his rough comedy been the first thing I saw. If I still would have driven nine hundred kilometres to kiss him had I witnessed his game of 'Perfect Snatch' before speaking to him. I'll never know.

He slips me his mum's phone number in case I have a 'change of heart' when I hear him perform, and says, with gravity: 'Lou, whatever you decide, tonight, I've really enjoyed this crazy love adventure.'

Then he runs downstairs to start the show.

I lie alone in room number 12 at the Macksville pub, until I can hear enough voices down below that I think I can slip in to the main bar without him noticing me. Up on a makeshift stage in the front bar of the hotel, the tinkle of pokies plays in the background while he yells to a crowd of strangers with a different, commanding voice to the one I've been listening to in the car.

'How are you cunts going? Had a few bongs have you?'

They laugh. He's one of us. Just as rough . . . unafraid of a few boundaries being crossed. He's making it clear he's not some city tourist. He holds up one of his t-shirts and the small crowd laughs, but I'm sensing some weird energy nearby, and do my best not to look around and make eye contact with anyone except the bartender.

You're never anonymous for long in a country pub, and after ingesting Dutch courage by way of about ten bourbons, three girls appear in front of me, demanding to know who I'm 'with'. I point to Jim, at that point encouraging people to join in his Talent Quest, with two girls kissing on stage to the shouts of the rest of the pub, the sure winners, unless the guy who claims he can play the guitar with his toes tries to beat them.

The girls next to me look slightly confused.

'Lucky - or we'd have to fight ya.'

Suddenly one smiles, offers me a sip of her bourbon because I don't have a drink, asks me where I'm from, inviting me 'and the funny fella' to a party at 'Mick's place' after the gig. I decline the offer of bourbon, but am careful to look neutral. No judgements. No preconceptions.

I smile and look around, rest my eyes on Jim as refuge, hoping he hasn't noticed that I'm there yet. He tells me, later, how he saw everything that happened when I walked in to the room, and I realise the detailed concentration he must have, to keep on top of the crowd, leading them instead of being led by them, commanding attention, staying in control.

The girls are now talking about which pubs have more 'Abos', and I automatically fade out at the word which rattles me, coming back into focus while one of them is talking about 'a fight at the other pub which was cool'.

'How come?' I ask, curious.

'It's a bit of something different, you know?'

When she says this it dawns on me how much comedy is needed in these places, how the means – crassness, crudeness and swearing – justify the ends. Jim's language is so coarse I cringe, but at the same time I can't help but marvel at the miracle of creating laughter in places where fights are the only way to get rid of the frustration of living. I love that flicker of realisation when they do laugh, like they've seen themselves for the first time, and how special they feel when he calls them up on stage to vie to win one of his t-shirts.

Laughter is as base a human need as food, sex, crying, sleep. And it has a unifying power like nothing else on this earth. Although getting two girls on stage to kiss for the purpose of winning an 'I Fucked a Goat' t-shirt – whether it's consensual or not – goes

against my principles of what 'should' be funny, I can see that in places like this, it's the only thing that will work.

This is the antithesis of everything I consider pretty, intelligent or beautiful. But Jim's not degrading anyone, he's sending up society, at the same time he brings them together by freeing them from the constraints of all the things they can't say unless they're drunk or deranged. Perhaps he's deranged himself? Who knows.

But I do know that smug, city-slick humour just isn't going to cut the mustard in a town which still uses the word 'Abo'.

The room is on a high, in a unified frenzy of laughter and cheer, as Jim crowns the winner of the contest. A man in shorts and thongs with a dripping plastic bag ambles in, takes a seat with a beer, and Jim asks if he's just got back from a fishing trip. Immediately he's smiling at being 'included' in this odd but happy show.

In ancient times the court jester was often brought in to make people laugh before they prayed, because it was thought to open them to broader ways of thinking, to open them up to new spiritual possibilities. Like the proverbial court jester brought in to free the town from its preconceptions, Jim's blown in like a mystery and will blow out, just as fast. And all the town will remember is that for this night, they felt better.

'I only swear in drinking environments,' he'd told me in the car on the way. 'If there's no alcohol, I don't need to swear. It's uptight enough for me to say something gentle and they laugh. But I need to use my full arsenal in these places, because the ante is upped for loosening their boundaries.'

Is it my imagination or are they standing taller? He continues into the night, sticking to the common thread of sex, drugs and alcohol. These people want a commercial break from worrying about

the state of their world, the state of themselves. Like the orders for more drinks, which keep coming, they are seeking relief.

When he finishes, he meets me upstairs, jolting the room with the fiery energy of someone who's been on stage for two hours. His mannerisms are overlapping, and it takes him a while to lose the extreme stage persona, debriefing after the gig and asking anxiously if I still want to continue 'on tour' with him.

'Of course!' I say, pulling him into the bed to let him know I'm still desperately in love with him.

How weird can it get? A couple of boundaries and perceptions made their way out of my head and got swept up in the ash of the night's antics downstairs. I'm curious to know just what I'll lose next.

'You can always go back, you know, Lou,' he says, drawing me closer.

I fall asleep dreaming of all the strange roads we've just travelled, are travelling, will travel.

In the morning when I wake there's dust on my tongue and the memory of words in a dream:

No. Going. Back.

6

Road-tested

'I don't see much difference between that alcoholic behind the bar and a glossy pub in Sydney. It's just addictions – in different clothes.'

Breakfast is eggs on toast at the Macksville café, messy fried piles of slush served on white toast while the plastic door covering flaps and whips in the wind. My fine-dining taste buds have officially left the building. Gulping back a faint flicker of guilt at not being at home in rainy Melbourne on my computer, I relish my meal in the lighter, warmer landscape. Jim is reading our horoscope out loud from the local paper when a woman comes in with her daughter and orders an ice-cream. The girl tiptoes over to Jim and stares, waiting.

'Hello,' she says expectantly, looking up at him.

'Aww, g'day,' he nods and smiles respectfully, like he knows this little thing. Almost absentmindedly, he starts blowing up balloons he just happens to carry in his back pocket, making her a pink poodle after asking her how old she's going to be when she's seven. With a storybook little-girl grin, she pads proudly back to her mother, to show her what the clown just made.

Jim tucks back into his eggs, now onto the sports section. The mother does a quick to and fro from the girl to the only other people in the café – us – holding her daughter's hand and looking at the pink poodle with early morning confusion.

As I settle back into the passenger seat of what seems like an alien-ship which is transporting me to other dimensions, the landscape gets more and more unfamiliar as we wind further and further away from Melbourne, mirroring my internal shifts.

The valium-like heat of the Australian sky makes me sleepy, and Jim folds his tennis towel on the console, patting it for me to lay down my head. He drives on, and I fall asleep thinking of pink poodles and a river I'd never seen before today.

I wake to find we are in Grafton, a town that feels like it was once grand, but is now an empty shell of its former self. Jim takes me on a small tour, too late for his usual trip to the golf club for a run. The sun has almost set, and he has a gig due to start in less than an hour. We drive up a street that seems to die a little more the further we go, until finally, we are at a dark and crusty-looking pub at the end of a dead-end road that is overgrown with weeds. Hotel Creepsville.

I see his poster flapping in the window, feeling my heart sink. Yes, these are our digs for the night.

The place smells of old dreams and sadness long since drowned in ghosts of alcohol. The air is hostile, thick. It's hard to even walk forward, like my body can tell I'm not wanted in there.

A cork hits me on the face, and the stooping, frail-looking crone who threw it glares at me from behind the bar and starts muttering swear words.

'She's only joking Lou, she's just upset that I have a girlfriend,' Jim says, of the woman nearing eighty and drunk, who has immediately forgotten what she just did, goldfish style.

'Glassofplonk?' she slurs, proffering me a trickle of cask red coated in a thick layer of dust, which has risen from the bottom of the glass. After a few minutes she forgets who I am and asks, again, where I've come from, why I'm here.

Jim has keys to the room, so we slip away, saying goodbye, and the moment is gone from her brain, I'm sure. We learn later that she's usually in bed by now -6 pm.

Someone once told me living alone makes you more sensitive to other people's energy, but I think even the least intuitive would feel the ghosts in this place. The energy of the spirits is so tangible, it's as if I can hear the howls of their pain and suffering. The air in this place – empty as it is – feels so busy.

We walk up a dark hallway, where the light bulbs are all blown. I hold Jim's hand tighter. An old sink lies on the floor, and we step over a trail of other unclaimed, abandoned objects: a workman's singlet, a hairbrush, a broken comb. The smell is of stale cigarettes, dust, sadness and rising damp. I need to go to the toilet, and Jim escorts me to the murder-scene bathroom. Is that a bloodstain below a coating of dust on the sink?

'I don't think I'll have a shower here,' I announce. I'm too scared to even close the cubicle door. Jim respectfully looks at the floor while I go.

Opening the door to our room, I'm relieved to see a clean, freshly made bed. Oddly, the bin is still full of rubbish: dirty tissues, crunched up empty Jack Daniels cans and cigarette butts. A door leads outside onto the top balcony, which is jammed with old couches, cobwebs and abandoned wardrobes.

'This is like the Hotel California,' I say to Jim. But he's gone into his pre-gig oblivion. As I've started to notice, he gets into a certain 'zone' before he does a gig where it's very hard to penetrate his head with anything vaguely right brain, such as conversation. He becomes erratic, silly, as if his creative alter ego makes him blind to the here and now. I tell him I'm scared three times until he finally snaps out of his fog and hears me.

'Oh no! Babe!' He does a playful blessing of the room, chatting to the old men whose ghosts we feel are still lurking, asking them to 'be nice to Lou'.

His gig starts in twenty minutes, so I follow him downstairs to the bar. There's no way I'm staying in the room on my own.

Later, I ask Jim how he does this, night after night. Sleeping in different towns, rooms full of cigarette butts and ghosts of hobos, alcoholic publicans and never knowing what will happen next.

'I don't see much difference between that alcoholic behind the bar and the guy drinking ten beers at a pub in Sydney. It's just addictions – in different clothes.' He's right. Addictions flow everywhere – country or city.

'Besides, there's something which makes you feel really alive, not knowing where you'll be next!' I know what he means. I feel like I've been woken from living on auto-pilot, and I've only been on the road for a couple of days.

Downstairs, the hotel bar is filling slowly with younger people than I would have expected. Unlike the slightly aggressive vibe at Macksville, Grafton is more relaxed. Jim starts early, chatting with everyone at the bar, coming into his own like a preacher holding fort.

He's not a big guy, but when he puts on his stage persona, he pulls people's attention. It's fascinating to watch someone so quiet and philosophical transform into this rowdy, quick-lipped being

in a crowd beset by hecklers. And confirms for me, yet again, that appearances are more than deceiving. Feeling is the truth.

The room is filling with more Anglo-Saxon-looking white Australians, a mullet here and an oversprayed ponytail there, nervously ordering drinks and remaining quiet, until they've downed at least three apiece.

Jim's friend Roger, from the tennis match in Coffs Harbour, has driven up to catch the gig. He arrives late, sits beside me and asks me a few questions about how I met Jim and where I live in Melbourne. He seems anxious that I might change my mind about Jim. Just as Jim pulls out a particularly raw punch-line involving the 'c' word, Roger leans in towards me and says, earnestly, 'You know he went to university, don't you?'

Although he's only thirty-six, Jim already has over a decade of experience in the comedy industry in Australia, which is probably why performing to drunks isn't so scary. 'Doing thousands of kids' parties was good preparation,' he said in yet another of our marathon getting-to-know-you conversations. 'Sugar and alcohol have the same effect!'

We talk about this conundrum, of playing to drunks when he's not really a drinker, of playing the rude ocker guy when he's conscientious to a fault. When we'd eaten oysters at Circular Quay just a few days before, he'd stopped me from throwing one of the shells over the harbour into the water.

I always liked the way they sounded, clacking against things. His face had grown anxious.

'Oh Lou, let's just leave them on the plate. The waitress might get upset . . .'

So what's with all the filthy humour, and throwing the 'c' word around like it's going out of style?

'I wanted the belly laughs. Not the chuckles,' he explains. 'To get them, though, you've got to go in hard, and shock people a bit. I love it when people laugh before they've had a chance to think about what they're laughing at.'

Before the Sydney Comedy Store became one of many venues that banned him, he was pulled aside and told by its manager, "The people who are laughing at you are so loud they're drowning out the people who aren't laughing."

'That's when things got weird,' he says later, as we lie in the creepy room at the Grafton hotel. 'I thought: if I tone it down any more I'd rather go work in a bank. The whole thing is you're up there working for that belly laugh, that scorcher, if I can't go in for that I might as well not do it!'

'I never imagined comedy would have this censorship,' he says now, four years after he gave away his belongings and started touring out of his beat-up Mazda. 'The whole point of a comedian in society is to make fun of the rules, to say the things no-one's allowed to say. And people laugh at the same things city or country – we eat, we root, we work. But the city has been hijacked by this corporate market where it's like the humour has to be aspirational, little funny titbits about what you've done with so-and-so and who you're going there with. And it's not the punters that want that, because I've seen them breaking their necks laughing at the other stuff. So, in essence, the art of comedy suffers.'

He keeps talking, like a hosepipe has been let loose on his passionate rant. I'm just so happy to be with someone who loves what they do.

'Comedians say they either "kill" or "die" on stage, Lou. But if someone tells me before I go on up there what to say or to tone it down, I feel like they've taken my arsenal away. It's like sending someone into battle but not letting them take their full kit of

weapons. In the outback, the publicans never do this to me. They let me swear, do my Talent Quest, make balloon animals, whatever. As long as the punters are laughing and they don't have any fights, they're happy.'

For someone like me, who doesn't like swearing, the purity of the feeling in the room outweighs the means by which he's getting there. It feels strange not to be scared to be surrounded by forty-odd people yelling about sex, but they are ridiculously happy, relaxed, and laughing at themselves in a way which leaves me in no doubt that they have moved to a point beyond their daily troubles. And isn't this the purpose of art, in all its forms — to elevate us beyond the mundane?

'The problem is, there's this perception that rude means not intelligent,' says Jim, later on, in our creepy room, as we debrief over the night.

Whether or not I think rude humour is unintelligent, if it makes people laugh, in a way I see it as akin to a national service. What else has the ability to simultaneously relieve pain, make us forget all the troubles of the day, and lighten the atmosphere? And for some of those people in the room, who have been through things in this life I can barely fathom, what healthier way is there to forget about it all than to laugh?

Jim has places to stay in every little town from the Western Australian wheat belt to the north coast of New South Wales, copies of his self-made DVD are burned in Norseman and handed around at parties, and truckies across the Top End have started to CB each other when they know he's coming into town. What drives him is a feeling that there are worse things in the world than making people laugh – even if it does involve a lot of attention on our sexual organs.

'I've had that in the mining towns, you know Lou. Nobody's going to laugh if you get up there and try to explain all the complicated difficulties there are in the world. They've just done twelve hours underground, they've got no female company except the skimpy behind the bar, they want a cold beer and they want to laugh.'

Inevitably after each gig he has a bevy of new friends ready to offer him a couch, a conversation or an invite to the party after the pub closes.

'I'm just always surprised by the amount of time people have for you in the country. In Sydney, everyone always seems to be looking over your shoulder, scanning the crowd, looking to see who else is there. But I'd rather be out here doing what I want than hanging out in Sydney getting bitter and complaining. Life's good!'

The long roads are often a relief, a place where he can mentally process the last gig, prepare his next set of gags, and gear up for the alter ego he portrays when he's on stage. And then there's the fact that when he does perform, it often doesn't finish until well into the night, after he's listened to the stories of another cluster of strangers, happy to have an unattached outsider to provide a fresh ear and a different perspective.

'I mean, I keep my wits about me but Australia is very safe. I don't really drink, I don't smoke and I've nothing to steal except my car so it's probably good that I sleep in it most nights,' he says with a happy chuckle.

During the Grafton gig, he's pulling out his t-shirts and people are competing to win the coveted prize. After one girl takes her shoes off a guy decides to one-up her by pulling his pants down.

'We have a winner!' cheers Jim, presenting him with the t-shirt.

It's juvenile and base, but everyone's laughing and by virtue of the stage interaction, many have even felt like a celebrity themselves for a few moments. Their smiles and demeanours have changed – the laughter has given them momentary relief from the dramas of everyday life.

When he comes off stage – which is really just moving from his spot in front of everyone at the bar, winding up the night and slowing down the energy from frenzy to closure – he walks over to me and Roger.

The similarities between these gigs and his clown parties astound me. Like a babysitter hired to bring everyone together for fun and laughter, in these pubs the only difference is that his jokes involve sex instead of burning his bottom with a firestick. But it's all the same – taboos which, by virtue of his jester role – he is the only one in the room allowed to voice.

We lie in the creepy room, with the backdrop of an old man coughing and wheezing down the hall, as we talk in the night. As dizzy as I still am in love-smack-land, my old self is starting to reappear, in this environment so far out of my comfort zone I want to cry. I feel almost superficial, for focusing on dust, dirt and rubbish in the bin. I miss my bed, I miss my – things. I miss having an anchor, a place to return to. And even though I have my notebooks and pens, I miss going off on my own to write. Here, I feel like I'm wasting valuable time I could be spending with Jim. Something about this feels like it's on a time limit. Like it's going to end – too soon.

'There's a saying, Lou. You've gotta stay healthy or where will you live?'

I look at him admiringly, a fit, trim thirty-six-year-old, with no addictions or complaints, living life on his own terms. This will be my new anchor.

ROAD-TESTED

His life is so far from the materialistic culture I am used to that I feel as though my brain has been kidnapped, but like someone with the Stockholm Syndrome I'm starting to love my captor, to empathise with his values and ways. My brain dips and spins in the night, trying to reconcile my life and my city values — of nice coffee, nice wine, bubble baths, intellectual stimulation, libraries, classical radio . . . and this — life on the road.

I toss and turn, unable to shake the feeling that we aren't alone in the room. Jim pulls me closer and eventually, I drift off. In the morning, after we tiptoe downstairs, I ask the guy behind the bar if the old man who was hacking and coughing in the night is okay.

'What old man? You guys were the only ones sleeping up there.'

7

Sprinklerville

'People always try to give me stuff. But if you're happy and healthy, you don't really need to buy crap, hey?'

The sun in the morning, ever brighter as we inch further north, deletes the ghosts of the night before and we're planted in a new day, in another new place. My morning hunt for coffee is rivalled only by Jim's need for the paper from whatever town we're in.

We pull up at a café somewhere on the coast with plastic chairs, plastic tables and little vases filled with fake flowers. I order raisin toast and a cappuccino just to get into the holiday feel, and it arrives on a floral plate, garnished with pineapple.

As part of his touring routine, Jim always gets the paper to read before the day's drive, forming gags and punchlines around the news of the day. We collect the *Daily Telegraph*, from a petrol station, and I pull open *body* + *soul* to find an article I wrote a few months ago. Jim reads my article, about the link between debt, clutter and obesity.

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'Lou, this is great. But my problem is the opposite. I find it hard to keep my belongings down. People always try to give me stuff. Shopping is such an emotional thing anyway. If you're happy and healthy, you don't really need to buy crap, hey?'

I don't even need to ask if he has a credit card.

'The only debt I have is my car – three hundred bucks a month. And I kind of need that.'

He's so healthy, so fresh, so – innocent. I love the way he moves through the world greeting everyone he meets with an openness only someone with so little material ambition could.

I've long believed most problems and jealousies in relationships arise from projections – what we don't have, what we wish we had, what we don't see we can have, or can become. Similarly, all that we admire in others is something we secretly desire to have in ourselves. I love the light way Jim treads on this earth. I suddenly have a flash, of throwing out all my belongings and being as light on my feet as him.

My first thought is of the shelves and shelves of papers and books I own. Residue built up over twenty-nine years on earth. But I want to be free! I think, looking at Jim, innocently chewing on his toast. No debts. Not more than a few bags of belongings in his back seat. How will I keep . . . my business afloat? I force my two brains – outlandish and practical – to reach a truce for a while. *I'll deal with you when I get back to Melbourne*.

Although it's only been a few days, this is the longest holiday I've had in years. Freelancing requires a constant eye on the bank account, future and past planning, a momentum of ideas and work relentlessly garnered which I hadn't allowed myself to ease up on — even for a few days, until now. Suddenly, I've pressed pause on my momentum.

We drive in silence, and I ask Jim, 'Have you ever run out of money and gone hungry?'

'Babe, this is Australia. Have you ever heard of anyone dying of starvation here?'

Still, I hope we get to a town with an internet kiosk soon. I want to be able to chip in for calamari hoops and petrol for a long time coming.

'Um, babe, I think I need to go.' We've been back in the car for a few hours. I'm not sure where we're headed, today. I don't want to be annoying, and ask for details. But I do need to go to the toilet.

'Okay, I'll just find you a nice tree.'

After a slow lap of a withdrawn section of bushland, he pulls over. 'That one there, I think that's the nicest tree for you. Nice wide canopy!'

It starts to rain, and I smell leaves, timber dust and fresh pine. He ducks out of the car to buy some oranges sitting atop a 'trust' box near somebody's driveway, and tears one open with his mouth as he does a leg stretch overlooking a hill. I get back into the car, clean and refreshed, inspired by the exquisite economy of nature. And how much care he put into finding me a 'good tree'.

Driving from Lismore to Mullumbimby, the leaves get greener and the landscape becomes more lush. Winding down the window, the air smells like lemon and pine, almost medicinal. In the main street we stretch our legs, me less interested in the shops than the people and how they change, as we dip and weave up the coast. Here, they seem more at ease, like a version of Sydney which has relaxed its shoulders and isn't in an endless panic about where they're going next.

Tonight, we are to spend the night with the couple who gave Jim his first clown party gig over a decade ago. Or maybe it was a stand-up gig . . . I forget.

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Adjusting to the long drives has been hard on my body; the endless movement making solid stillness feel strange. When we pull in to the tiny, silent town flanked by fields and hills, I find myself praising the wife on her choice of chairs.

'They're so soft.' And unmoving. It's a delight to go to the toilet and not need back-up. Here, there are lights and soap, no sinks in the hallway, no decade-old dust, and no coughing men. But after the wacky places I've just been adjusting to in fast-forward mutability, it feels like the real world is on valum.

The husband doesn't really acknowledge me. It's assumed I'll gravitate towards his wife for chitchat. More stupid boundaries. He tells Jim about his bricklaying business, which hasn't paid him, and how much the tiles cost that he really wants for the back patio.

There's tension over the food preparation. The baby boy screams, it's somebody else's 'turn' to feed it. Jim stops giving me his lovesick looks and instead looks guilty. These two are so far from lovesick it's like a warning ad about what happens when you get a mortgage.

'So, how did you two meet?' the unhappy wife holding the baby asks, and I toy with whether or not I should mention the word astrology.

'Ah – through a friend, in Melbourne . . .' I sense it would be easier to ask about their renovations.

After listening politely to their story about a new sprinkler system, and sensing that the woman is tired, I signal to Jim that I'm ready to hit the hay. Clean towels folded neatly on their spare king-sized bed break my heart with their domestic kindness. Jim stays on, talking with his friend, and I pull out my journal and attempt to write.

Drowning out any adventure talk with sprinklers and paving information, the night was like a blind date gone wrong with a completely inappropriate combination of people.

The delight of being in love and in utter bliss no matter the place, time or situation mixes strangely with the 'me' that starts to appear now that I'm alone in the bed. Why am I in this place? Why did I just waste three hours of my life listening to someone talk about renovations and timber when I could care less and I probably will never see them again? I miss my girlfriends. I want to check my email. I want to do some work. Work is my personal sprinkler system — it's what makes me feel I'm getting somewhere. Like I'm progressing.

When Jim appears an hour later, I've been lost in my solitary discussion for so long I almost don't notice the look on his face.

'I haven't seen the guy for three years \dots and he talks about the sprinkler system \dots '

During the stream of life complaints peppered with slight peaks when they talked of their renovations, the couple also seemed to have kept a physical distance from each other which involved no touch, no eye contact, and only the snidest of remarks about who was going to clear the table or put their child to sleep.

I see, for the first time, how much I tame down my own feelings and passions when I hang out with my own 'sprinkler' friends. And then, because I have nothing to offer in that 'scene', at the end of the night I am left wondering – why don't I have a house, a mortgage and some renovations?

But as much as hearing about the sprinkler system bored both of us, I can't help but realise their penchant for home furnishing has given me the cosiest bed I've slept in since Melbourne. But if I thought Jim was ready to sleep, I'm mistaken. He's all aflame,

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passionately ranting in hushed tones about why the sprinklers are the reason he left Sydney.

'It was like everyone turned thirty and decided to get new carpets. I can't get any sense out of anyone anymore. It's all mortgages and babies and divorces and depression, so they drink and smoke and gamble and go to strip joints snorting coke while they complain that their wives or girlfriends don't understand them . . . then they look at me and tell me I'm the crazy one!'

He pulls out one of his DVDs, and puts it into his laptop. 'Here, Lou. Can I show you something? I know you're tired but just watch – a little bit . . .'

His DVD is like a seven-up documentary about what happens when you put someone sensitive and wildly creative into the fray of the media game.

It starts with clips of him in beer commercials ('they always thought I looked like the typical beer-drinker'), then a current affairs show following him on a day of kids' parties (on an average Saturday, during his clowning 'peak', he did about ten), to a funny short film which won an award (he plays an ocker guy who gets a Greek girl pregnant and has to marry her). In the early clips he looks clean-cut, speaks with a slightly arrogant drawl which reeks of private school privilege, and wins an award doing cute gags on talk-show TV. But then there's a visible shift.

The authentic Jim starts to emerge when he starts his own comedy night in 'rough' west comedy rooms, improvising with the untamed crowd, laughing in an unrehearsed bellow like he really means it, looking like he's doing this for the fun of it, for nothing but the pure joy of creating other people's laughter from his own thoughts and ideas. Then the DVD takes on an even bigger leap. He's suddenly in the outback, chatting to a man outside a pub in Broken Hill, panning the camera across the wide, dusty earth. There

are clips from towns I've never heard of, pubs which look like they were in *Crocodile Dundee*, clown shows in Aboriginal communities where the happy smiles of their teeth glimmer in the light, joyful children crawling all over the 'funny man'. And in most of the clips from the last two years since he hit the road, he's wearing one or two outfits.

Dirty. Alive. Living intensely.

'Lou, I made myself two promises when I left Sydney. To see the real Australia. And to make as many people laugh as I could.'

Discovery. Adventure. I view what his trade-off for possessing things has been – he's had experiences and seen more of Australia than most people would do in five lifetimes.

The DVD is still playing, and I'm struggling to keep my eyes open. But he begs me to stay awake for just a bit longer.

'Just watch this bit, Lou. This is when I went to Coober Pedy.'

He films himself walking into an underground house with an old man drifter he befriended at a gig. 'Got no bills, Jimbo. Live under the earth, just pay a hundred bucks in rates a year. Long as I've got that covered I can eat prawns every night if I want to!' he cackles with laughter.

'Do you miss Sydney?' Jim asks.

The man chuckles and shakes his head, stirs something on his stove and rolls a cigarette. 'Send me a postcard of a traffic jam!'

The silence in the man's cave echoes graciously in the background.

Watching Jim morph from the footage of just four years ago, when he'd been a slick urbanite, into a soulful wanderer who wears the same t-shirt for three years, makes Aboriginal elders laugh and gives most of what he has away on a regular basis, I'm hit with a

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wave of sadness, because I know why I've met Jim. He's going to show me how to say goodbye to it all, too.

It all, suddenly, seems inevitable. I've always wanted to feel alive, to love madly, to see what really matters and not get caught up in useless trappings.

This sprinkler night has crystallised how similar our values really are. His look of horror and shock when he emerged from the living room reminded me of something I was taught once, in an acting class, years ago. Define the biggest fear of your character. Therein lies their motivation.

'What's your biggest fear, Jim?'

'Not doing – or being – what I love.'

I fall asleep in his arms, the outback footage merging with my dreams and when I wake, I think I've got no belongings either, except my body, lying here in this space.

Jim hasn't got another gig for a few days, and we need a break from the social interactions inherent in sleeping in other people's spaces, so we just drive. The trees and landscape ask nothing of us, but reflect our sense of peace and freedom, a sense that something is growing and changing, silently, from deep within.

As we drive further and further inland, the flat fields become lush hills and valleys, until we don't know where we are anymore. We stop in Nimbin for a tofu burger and wander through the museum, fielding offers of hash cookies.

A sign catches my eye:

'What will matter when you die?

How many you loved

How willingly you braved

How much you let go . . .'

Tears fall down my face, and Jim draws me tight, knowingly. It grows dark, so we pull into a place called Woodenbong, at the foot of a lush rainforest. The air is sweet, crisp and moist with ions. We book a room in the hotel which looks like an old hall from the outside, and there's a horse grazing softly in a paddock at the back door. I take him an apple, happy to share a private conversation with this being who asks nothing of me.

We've forgotten about meals again for the day, and at only nine o'clock, everything is closed, so I buy some broccoli and dip at the service station and bring it back to our motel room, where we eat our 'supper' in bed.

'This is good, Lou.' Jim eats the raw broccoli enthusiastically, like I've cooked him a Sunday roast.

Exhausted and sniffly with the hint of a cold, he takes a handful of vitamins from his glove box first-aid kit and disappears into a thick sleep. I lie there next to his peaceful form in the room unsleeping, and when morning breaks through the window and I can see the outline of the horse coming clearer into view, I slip out to explore the town.

When I pass the primary school with a banner about a visitor from Brisbane, I remember how privileged I am to be here, on a whim, from further away than many people have come in their lives. The lady who checked us in last night had said, while pencilling in our original destination to the hotel guest book, 'Been to Sydney once, never been to Melbourne.' She's almost twice my age.

I walk up a hill in the mellow sunlight, waving off offers of a lift from friendly truck drivers, passing noble-looking horses grazing a paddock, cows littered across the lush green of dairy farms in autumn. I stop to look around, when I get to the top, and almost slip on a large, rusty horseshoe, right side up on the road.

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I pick it up and jog it back to the car, placing it in the glove box for driving luck.

When you're in love, everything's a sign.

Like a hunger that's just been stirred, the more towns in Australia I visit, the more I want to see. It's not that I want to do anything in particular, I just want to observe, look and feel and know, have my feet tread their paths, witness these worlds within worlds, in our grand, luscious country. To have Jim by my side while I do it is the icing on the wedding cake. This is why I'm here, I think. Experience.

I feel the first inklings of understanding the flipside of the anxieties of freelancing, like a puzzle piece that has just fallen into place. This is why I don't work in an office, for a boss, in a conventional way. Free-dom.

Jim sleeps till late during the day, going for a jog around the golf club, showering, then climbing back into bed, where we talk past dusk. Something has flicked a switch in me. I'm bored here. I want to go. We both look up at each other at the same time, thinking it.

'But we paid for two nights . . . ?' I offer, voicing one half of my brain.

And then – we bolt, like horses, leaving the keys in the door.

We drive for four hours through the black night up to Brisbane, crossing another border, stopping to eat pizza at a twenty-four-hour diner on the main drag, continuing to the Gold Coast and arriving at around three in the morning. After the fast-forward healing of a room and a shower for the night, we're back telling stories again, losing our voices, pulling over by the side of the road for one-hour naps in the car. I catch a vision of myself in the rear-view mirror,

oily pizza stuck to my face and the same singlet I've worn for three days now.

Yep, I've officially gone insane. Why did I just leave a perfectly good bed in Woodenbong? We're as addicted to the road as we are to each other.

My phone rings in the morning, waking me from a stiff sleep in the passenger seat of the car. It's Mum. She knows I'm not at home. She's been leaving messages on my home answering machine for days.

'Lou, where are you?'

'Um. Queensland? I think.'

'Who with? What are you doing?'

'A guy I met at Mystic Medusa's astrology night . . .' Out loud, the notion even sounds ludicrous to me.

Mum goes understandably silent. The poor thing is probably worried I've been brainwashed by a madman.

'When are you coming home?'

'Um, Thursday?' I pulled that out of my head.

I thought it best to make it sound like I know what I'm doing.

As we walk along the beach on the Gold Coast, eating fruit and talking about our families, Jim's phone beeps with a message from a fan. He bursts into laughter and replays the message, a yelling diatribe of profanities and profundities.

'Mate, just watched your DVD for the twentieth time. Hope you don't mind but I burned it from a copper friend who leant it to me. Just wanna say, man, you FUCKING INSPIRE ME! INSPIRATIONAL! Any time you need a place to stay, I'm here man, living with my goddess in the Hinterland. You stay as long as you want. FUCKING INSPIRATIONAL!'

'Want to go visit him?'

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I think for a minute. I know, from listening to his message, this isn't the kind of guy I'd meet living in my Melbourne apartment, sipping lattes with the girls. Which is one of the many reasons I'm here.

'Sure!'

It's only a few hundred kilometres back-tracking into the Hinterland, and we don't have to be anywhere, so we hop back into the car. I brush off the vague anxious feeling that I've promised to email someone, and gaze down at my mobile phone, to see that it's out of range.

I love talking to Jim. It's as if I finally found someone who sees the absolute weirdness of life, the upside-downness of rules, and the magic and wonder of the most seemingly horrific things. Nothing scares him, nothing revolts him. In his pure, open state I find absolute freedom, and it's like nothing I've ever felt before.

When he listens to my life stories, he doesn't cringe and sigh and get protective over the scary bits and angry over anybody doing me wrong or the lessons it took me so long to learn. He's just curious. The way it should be. Nothing is bad or good. It just – is. His view is almost Buddhist, except that he isn't religious. He wants my opinions and feedback on his life, and asks me questions about mine without ever interjecting with a judgement. I realise, somewhere on the road between Sydney and Brisbane, why it's so easy to open up to him.

He has no ego.

We weave in our life stories, like a confessional, with our views of spirituality – that the only true religion is love, and that should be the measuring point from which all the decrees spring forth. If I'd brought this kind of thing up with any of my exes we wouldn't have got further than an ego-based intellectual argument.

But Jim just nods, and encapsulates my exact view in his own words. We match.

I never knew I felt this way, because I never really talked about it before. Most of my friends and past boyfriends seem to have just 'inherited' their religion, like a surname you don't consciously choose. Marco was like that about his Catholicism, carrying a token crucifix his mother had given him to 'protect' him, no matter what he did. To question it would have been to insult his upbringing. The emails I shared with Mystic Medusa were probably as spiritual as it got, offering sage interpretations of symbols and signs, and a vision of the universe which encapsulated a much wider viewpoint than a traditional creed or format.

I've always felt life is magical. Sure, there are some horrendous moments, but occasionally I'll be lying in bed or sitting at my computer or walking down the street and just get this absolutely insane wave of wonder which overcomes me. Until Jim I never saw a match for that glimmer in my eye of someone else who feels it too. That no matter where you are or what you're going through, we're bloody lucky to be here, and there's a magical, mysterious reason for all of it.

In Jim, I've found someone who shares my uncommonly gleaned perception of the meaning of life, religion, true purpose. To him, all roads lead to the same place: love and acceptance. In that place, nothing I — or anyone else — has ever done, is wrong. In the accepting space of the interior of his Mazda, all my preconceptions of previous relationships, love and life come undone.

If religion can be defined as a series of values with one binding cord, or a leader who epitomises them – then Jim was my guru, and love the religion. And the world, with its freedoms and experiences waiting in every unlived day, was the church where I could express my devotion. From a balloon animal for a stranger

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to an understanding joke for someone having a rough day, Jim was my new measurement of whether or not I was living up to my potential for kindness.

And my new spiritual purpose was to feel this stunned, amazed, awe-inspired and loving every day.

A few hours later, up a hill from a tiny, herbal-looking town outside Mullumbimby, we pull up at a fibro house at the end of a dead-end gravel road. I brace myself, as usual, having no idea what is going to happen next.

After knocking on the fly-wire door a few times, a skinny, hardened, fifty-something man in stubby shorts and thongs comes to let us in, almost falling over when he sees us at the door.

'Jimbo! Fuck! It's really you! FUCKIN' 'ELL! And ya've got ya MISSUS too!'

It's funny travelling with a public figure, but one only known to obscure men in back towns. Johnny, the guy, immediately runs to get his camera and starts filming both of us standing on his porch.

'Wait, I've gotta get the car in it, mate. The famous car! Jimbo's Mazda is parked outside my place!' he yells into his video.

As chequered as his past, the guy is a tattooed gentleman. After showing us around his hydroponics shed like a little kid at show and tell, gifting Jim with a hefty hunk of hash ('Mate, I want to give you something! For visitin'!'), he invites us to share some beers with him and chat, pulling out the video camera for impromptu footage of us sitting in his shed.

'Like a laugh, eh?' he smiles, wiping his hands self-consciously before shaking mine and looking at me like I'm an extension of Jimbo's stardom. 'You two make a lovely-looking couple,' he says, panning the camera across us both, wearing five-day-old outfits, sitting at his kitchen table.

I soon hear his complete life story. The problems of sprinkler couple pale in comparison to this man's history. An ex-heroin addict who had somehow lived through ten years in jail for armed robbery, drug dealing and murder, he has undergone a complete turn-around since getting out, and off the drugs. A bit of homegrown hydroponics is nothing compared to what his system has seen.

'I'm bloody blessed, Jimbo,' he says. 'Lucky to be alive.'

He raves about the book *Conversations with God* and flings his only copy on Jim, urging him to borrow it. 'Fucking changed my life, mate. Only thing that matters is the moment.'

He has the edge of someone who has seen hard days, but it's his gratitude for the kind of freedom most people take for granted, to live on their own cheap property growing their own food (and hydroponics), reading books about spirituality and putting together a comedy routine, that really touches me.

'I'm just starting to get into comedy, using my stuff from the inside.' He puts on an amateur shot video, of his first show in Brisbane, and asks Jim for some 'professional feedback'. 'And mate, if I credit you, do you mind if I use one of your gags in my next spot? You're my inspiration!'

Assumptions are funny things. You'd think someone who has associated with some of Long Bay's finest would be intimidating to be around. But I feel relaxed here. This man has faced his demons, and come out the other side.

He refers to his girlfriend, who is at work, as 'my Goddess', and when she arrives home he runs to greet her, all but falling at her feet. 'Honey come in here, look who I've been chatting with!'

By eight o'clock I'm starting to get a bit hungry, but nobody has mentioned any food. I'm also getting more and more anxious that I've forgotten something major to do with work. Being stuck,

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not knowing what day it is, in the middle of Mullumbimby's hills with a lovely ex-con and his psychologist girlfriend, whom he's just showered with a bong to welcome home from work, I'm not too sure what the polite thing would be to do or say. So I just sit, quietly, and wait.

Jim, sensing something's up, and suddenly appearing to remember something, too, starts to say goodbye. Johnny looks like we've just stolen Christmas.

'Mate, I'd love you to stay if you can. Come back any time. Stay for the week! You need a place to sleep? Always welcome here!'

After an extended, excruciating goodbye, we make it back into the car. As we round the corner they are still waving, Johnny shaking his head like he's just been visited by Elvis.

The love-smack is wearing off, just a tiny bit, and I'm not feeling very good. All this broken sleep, different houses, random strangers and undefined mealtimes has thrown my body off. My period, the way in which I measure the tune of my body's rhythms, has fallen way out of whack. Usually, it's like clockwork, falling on a rhythmical 28-day cycle. Some months, I even time it to the hour.

My friend Sally had always found this funny. 'It's like your body is more female than mine,' she'd said once, after lamenting her year-long amenorrhea when she started stressful full-time work. My problem had always been the opposite — a bleeding reminder of my gender any time I try to push the limits through overwork, weight loss or lack of sleep. I'm one of those girls who bleeds twice a month when I'm stressed. Once, when I did a month of sixty-hour weeks at the Italian restaurant, I got three periods. Ignore your interior rhythms at your own peril, my body seems to cry.

Just like then, now, my body is struggling to adjust to the massive changes taking over my whole being. I start to bleed, and

then it stops for a day, only to start again a few hours later. Is it normal to visit this many pubs, houses and strangers? How does Jim do it, and stay so sane and stable? Maybe the female body just wasn't cut out for this?

I calculate when our last full sleep was. I think it was Wednesday – two days ago, back in Woodenbong. I don't know how many more stories I can listen to before I sleep. Like a marathon runner, I've hit the wall. Although I'm beyond exhausted, I won't allow myself to complain. What if he won't think me roadready, and sends me back to my 'comfortable' life in Melbourne? This could be my only chance to prove I'm up to the adventure. It makes me think this is the real reason most girls don't hit the road.

But this touches on something deeper. The Australian outback isn't the kind of place girls like me usually go. Maybe there's a reason Jim can live like a swagman and I can't. As superficial as it is, most people judge by appearances, and the brutish-looking men in Jim's DVD clips don't talk or look that pretty. After meeting Johnny, and hearing Jim talk of all the other beautiful souls he's met on his travels, I'm beginning to think I might have more to learn from them than I once thought. And maybe by not judging them, and taking the risk of going out there and seeing what's further than my Melbourne tribe, I'll encourage them to look beyond assumptions too.

Visiting so many strangers in their own homes in such a short space of time has me getting particularly sensitive about the details. As soon as we park the car I start weighing up signs and searching for clues about the inhabitants. Here, somewhere just outside Nimbin, I see a rambling cottage garden with lamplight spilling through the balcony window. Jim catches me checking my face in his rearview mirror and tells me not to worry. What can I do? They've

already opened the front door. This singlet, coffee-stained pants and Birkenstock sandals will have to do.

Inner beauty, I chant. I'm wrecked. How do I drum it up under these conditions? I pretend I'm a performer. *One more show for the night.* Let's see what these souls need . . .

We walk in to an idyllic dinner scene of a bohemian couple cooking Moroccan chicken. It's a house which reeks of comfort and thoughtfulness, a life spent devoted to art. The girlfriend, a professional singer, is in the middle of telling her boyfriend about an opera that had made her cry.

Jim's old friend, the guy, is a carpenter, who has never been addicted to heroin or gone to jail, but he seems much less content than Johnny, who I just met. He looks sad and exhausted when Jim introduces me, explaining that his sister has cancer and they don't know how long she has . . . His partner is a gentle creature, my age, who teaches music. For the first time since we left Sydney, I don't feel it would be wrong to tell her what I do for a living.

She is yin to all the yang I have been witnessing in the pubs, in Jim's jokes, in this crazy road life. She dishes up bowls of steaming chicken, pouring us both a glass of wine as we sit on the couch. As we have no wine, or gift, Jim pulls out a wad of the hash Johnny gave him, asking the carpenter if he'd like a spliff before bed. He rolls a joint as soon as he's finished the chicken, smoking it on his own for the next hour, so distracted by his sister's news that he forgets to offer it to anyone else in the room.

Alas, I have hit the wall for chitchat and gentle speak.

My mind goes blank and mute. I'm exhausted. I open my mouth and then close it again. Show's over. Jim is still listening intently to his friend, offering a nod and a monosyllable or a sage piece of philosophical wisdom, at the appropriate moments. I am amazed by his fortitude.

Dizzy with houses, souls and juxtapositions, I drift in and out of consciousness while remaining upright in the guest chair. Generous and poetic ex-cons flanked by sad, stoned carpenters with beautiful, musical girlfriends and bowls of steaming chicken.

The girlfriend grows tired, and leads me to the spare room, showing us the single mattress in the study that is our bed. I ache to close the door, but I must wait for Jim.

When he pads in, we talk of sleep like a sporting race. 'Okay, no talk tonight. As soon as I turn off the light we just – go – okay?'

When we eventually open our eyes and look at the clock, it's midday. We slept for thirteen hours.

In the morning we leave the last chunk of weed for them to smoke at their leisure. It's our attempt at an apology for overstaying our welcome. I hop back in the Mazda, applying a few drops of perfume and deodorant from the car in my Clayton's wash. The house had been empty when we left, moments after waking. We didn't want to push it by taking showers.

My work brain replenished from sleep, I remember what had been hanging over my head the night before. The day I got to Sydney, I'd arranged to interview a Sydney couple for my monthly column. Without a recording device on my mobile, and none of my notes, I panic. We drive straight to Byron Bay, where Jim drops me off at an internet café. I check my inbox to find three emails from the PR woman demanding to know when I can email her some preparatory questions. Uh oh. I don't like the sound of this. A control freak, these are often the toughest nuts to crack, interview-wise. How can I turn this around? The answer presents itself, as I look out and realise we aren't that far from Sydney.

I type up some questions excruciatingly slowly, racking my brain for the habits I took so long to learn. How did you meet?

SPRINKLERVILLE

What attracted you to each other? What challenges have you overcome together and how? What have you learned from each other?

I save them in a Word document and email them across to the lady, feeling fraudulent and cheeky, emailing work after no shower, from an internet café in Byron Bay. Thankfully, she can't see me. The PR lady emails me straight back with a time and an address in Sydney for the following week. I wonder idly where else I'll have been, by then? And hope against hope that I'll have at least had a shower.

To say I've forgotten who I am would be an understatement. Reading my own emails, sent just a few weeks earlier, is like reading someone else's diary. I find an email from an editor, who is checking a small fact on a story I had written months ago. It takes me ten whole minutes to construct a two-sentence reply. I've forgotten how to write.

People talk of love being like a spell, but never have I felt it like this. Each day I'm doing things I never dreamed I would, meeting people in situations so far out of my comfort zone that it's as if it's not even me anymore. But all the while, I'm with this man who drives me wild. But it's not lust. It's not even deep friendship. It's pure, blinding, all-encompassing, sickening, I-will-do-anything-for-you — including drive around Australia in the same outfit for two weeks — love. Why? I keep asking myself. I feel like he's the best part of myself, or a constant reminder of who I am, when I don't worry about what other people think, or what other people say. He's me, without the ego.

After I've been on the computer for half an hour, he comes in to check on me. It's the longest we've been physically apart since the tennis match.

One of the first freelance columns I was given was interviewing couples each Sunday for a newspaper liftout. It was called, 'For

Better, For Worse'. I filed one interview a month, for two years, and time and again, probing my way through an hour of what felt like psychotherapy, I'd discover that when they met, he couldn't hug her for the first six months, as she was recovering from a car accident. Or that just after an intense two-week courting, the man had to go and live in Poland for two years, before they ever saw each other again. It could be anything — one ate meat, the other was a strict vegan. They meditated for three hours each day together because one was recovering from cancer. They both wanted a huge family, but she was infertile so they adopted.

Every few weeks I would travel to a different house and meet with these people in their own personal space, taping every word and asking questions which, later on, when I was replaying the tape to transcribe it in my little flat, sometimes made me cringe with the intimacy. But what surprised me most of all was that the couples were never what you would expect. The attraction that really lasted didn't seem to follow any of the expected rules – i.e. look like this or go to the right parties – and someone will love you. When I did probe to find a 'reason' for why they withstood the challenges, why they thought it was 'worth it', they could only ever come up with 'We just had to'. As if, when you know you are meant to take a particular journey with someone, it's harder not to go. Even if, by going, it throws life – as you know it – apart.

But one of the strangest things about life is that everything always seems to be a preparation for the next step. With Jim, I felt that what used to be important to me now came second to that feeling that I had to hurry up and become who I was meant to be, and he was the key. And like the numerous love stories I'd been writing for two years, I had no choice. I just had to go along for the ride.

SPRINKLERVILLE

As we drive on, the scent of space and gums is merging with Jim, so that I will forever associate him with the Australian landscape. We nap in his swag by the side of the road in the sunlight, to the sounds of native birds, our bodies crunching on leaves, bull-ants bypassing our peaceful heads resting on the ground. Cocooned by ancient gums in a self-sufficient, natural world of insects and animals, the silence breathes new life into our tired veins. The sun warms our skin and sends us into a drugged sleep. I feel like an explorer, seeing my own country for the first time. Drifting in and out of consciousness, I think of the people I know back in Melbourne, trapped in offices, listening to man-made sounds. I feel so blessed.

Each time we wake, we check to see if the love bubble has popped when we look at each other. 'Yep, still there,' Jim says, as I burrow into his whiskers in the middle of a field, thinking his eyes see the world like the best part of me does. He smells like Home.

Work concerns begin to drift in and out of my thoughts, as I lie on his swag on a patch of ground somewhere up the coast. On the surface, we lead completely different lives, with a completely different objective. His entire act is centred on being the consummate single ocker Australian bloke, and my articles are all targeted to preoccupied urban women in the capital cities. Do we really have to choose between love and work?

In Casino, a beef grazing town two hundred kilometres south of Brisbane, Jim veers towards a pub to ask for a gig. I think I'd better leave him to it, so I go for a walk, looking in dusty shop windows and exploring yet another town not listed in your average Australian travel magazine. I call Sally, back in Melbourne, and tell her where I am. I call my sister, I message my other girlfriends. It's hard to remember that I have another aspect of my life.

'You're going to run away with him, aren't you Lou?' says Sally, catching me by surprise.

'Um, no, I'll be back in Melbourne next week!' I say, nervously. I feel her stiffen, on the other end of the line. Why does going in one direction have to mean leaving the other?

A little boy with a miniature mullet appears as I'm turning the corner to return to Jim crossing the road. He's on a bike, doing wheelies, aged around six or seven. He follows Jim like he's the pied piper, on the phone to a friend, making funny faces to the boy as he talks, snapping his phone shut. Jim can't see me yet. He has his back to me to face the little kid.

'What are you doing?' the kid says, like a teenager hanging out with the cool gang on the street.

'My name's Jimbo. What's yours?'

'Josh.' He's pulling his bike up to show off, still acting tough.

'How old are you Josh?'

'Six!'

'How old are you gunna be when you grow up, Josh?'

Josh's face is perplexed, then he lets out a tough little laugh, crossing his little muscly arms across his chest as he inches further towards Jim.

'Here, I'll show you a trick, Josh.' Jim asks him for his bike, and places it on one wheel, on his chin. A woman strolls by, shopping bags in hand, not even casting a sideways look.

Josh is entranced.

'Where do you live?' says Josh.

'In my car!' Jim replies.

'My house is up the street, wanna see?'

Jim turns around to see me, laughing. 'Do you wanna go to Josh's house, Lou?!' he's joking.

SPRINKLERVILLE

It's a silent town, and Josh has never even been as far as Brisbane. This must be as exciting as it gets.

'Nah, Josh, we're looking for the golf club. We want to go for a run.'

'I'll show ya! Follow me!'

We hop back in the Mazda, following Josh on his yellow BMX, going at about one kilometre an hour. Every few moments he turns to check we are still there. Like a police escort, he takes his role seriously, except that we have to go slower than his tiny BMX, to let him take the lead. I pray no cars pass us and ask us why we are following a little boy on a bike. Eventually, the slow drive comes to an end at the golf club.

He hops off his bike. 'Did you see my house? I took youse the long way so you could see my house.'

Jim makes him a bike out of purple balloons, and says we have to go.

'Have ya got a plastic bag I can put it in?' says Josh, like he gets purple balloon bikes all the time. I find one in the car and he carefully puts it over his front handlebars.

'See ya!'

8

Sugarcane moon

'Jim, did Sammy mention graves under the floor?' 'They're just resting.'

I TELL JIM ABOUT MY interview.

'No worries, Lou, just got a gig in Gympie then we can drive to your interview!'

Gympie, a town almost two hundred kilometres north of Brisbane, is at least two thousand kilometres from my interview destination. It doesn't seem to bother Jim, so I won't let it bother me. Besides, we're in Queensland, in May! My mum will be pulling on a second pair of socks right about now, and I'm passing giant pineapples and sugarcane fields, swaying in the angelic Queensland light.

Adjusting to my wacky news on the phone the day before, Mum had helpfully suggested I buy some tropical fruit since I was up north. We stop by a roadside barn in her honour and stock up

on peaches, mangoes and bananas. Jim buys two of everything, and insists on peeling my banana for me.

Romance.

There are certain parts of Australia where it's dangerous to have a particular view on racial issues, and I have a feeling this is one of them. Gympie was Queensland's first gold-rush town credited with 'saving' the state from bankruptcy. Although the word Gympie is from a stinging tree Aboriginal people found in the area, the locals have eradicated all other ties to its original inhabitants. Later, when Jim and I pop into an RSL to share the roast of the day with fifty other white-haired locals, a friendly clerk on the front desk mentions something about 'Abos' while talking with us. If I show my horror at the choice of words, I will cut down most exchanges before they've even started. I'm learning to just listen and learn.

We pull up outside the pub I assume Jim is due to gig in, and I stare in gratitude at the gold-tinged Queensland sky, so white and far from the Gothic grey of Melbourne, fast becoming like a dream of a place I once visited. After speaking with the publicans, Jim takes his speakers upstairs and I follow him through the smoky pub, weaving between overweight pensioners in print-dresses with one hand on the pokie slot button and the other on a stale beer.

I wonder what tonight's digs will be like? Not having to navigate the interpersonal complications of visiting strangers in their homes simplifies things. Even if it is – err – another Hotel California.

I follow Jim up steep creaky back steps covered thickly with pigeon poo, almost arriving on the roof of the steep Queenslander. The publican had muttered something about not seeing it for a while – 'Staff just use it for parties love, that okay?' – so I brace myself,

expecting the worst, clinging to Jim for safety as the strange smell of stale cigarette smoke leaks out of the dark door.

'Hello . . . ?'

He motions to me to stay back while he assesses the scene, finding a light, waving me into the room. It's pitch black but for a dusty shaft of light from a crack in the open door, where it looks like it's been kicked. A bathroom which appears to have not been used in half a century lies to the side of a huge living room covered in filthy carpet, a couple of worn chairs and some old copies of *Ralph*, beside that eternal Australian pub room decorating trademark: empty cans of Woodstock bourbon and cola.

It smells like a farmyard but that's probably just the hundreds of pigeons congregating outside on the balcony that have been performing their ablutions here for a couple of centuries. The windows are boarded up so when the door slams behind us we can't find the light switch, and I pathetically yelp and cling to Jim while he feels his way around in the dark. When the light comes on we hunt for a bed, or even a mattress of some sort. Nope. Looks like we'll be sleeping on the (filthy) floor. An overflowing ashtray sits on a sink and a wardrobe filled with odds and ends is in the bathroom. Yes. The bathroom.

Jim never goes anywhere without his swag, and luckily, I think that a night spent on the floor is good for your back. It's also a balmy night, so we don't need to worry about blankets. Nevertheless, I cross my fingers that cockroaches and rats haven't made any homes nearby and try not to breathe in the dirt too deeply through my nasal passages. Hey, at least we have the place to ourselves, right?

With the feeling that it's only been used as a party zone by young folks, my ghost-radar isn't picking up on any spirits. Still, I'm not staying here on my own. We pull off a couple of cushions from the couch and lie on the floor. We need some sleep. I shut

my eyes and visualise my bed back in Melbourne. I've left my cosy apartment to sleep on the floor of a filthy pub room in Gympie.

'It's all part of the adventure!' Jim says, reading my thoughts.

I love the anonymity of entering a new town, like an invisible observer, so safe and free to absorb the vibe but not be a part of it. Gympie feels, like Grafton did, that it's a shadow of a once-gloried place, and to learn that it was the home of a gold rush explains the feeling.

I withdraw some money from an ATM on the main street, randomly requesting a statement of my last transactions:

3 May 2.04 pm	Withdrawal Liberty Petrol Newcastle	\$27.85
4 May 9.19 pm	Withdrawal BP Service Woodenbong	\$7.60
5 May 1.15 am	Eftpos Transaction New York Pizzas, Brisbane	\$9.90

It occurs to me that I look like a criminal on the run.

After Jim has done the necessary preliminary work at the pub, we head across the road to the RSL for a buffet roast. After signing in and talking to the racist but friendly man at the counter, we dine next to a sea of semi-rinses and well-cultivated beer bellies, white socks pulled up to the knees, eating peas soaked in gravy with mashed potato. Jim eats quickly, in gulps, and starts his process of preparing for the gig ahead. I'm still not used to how spaced out he gets, asking me the same question three times and looking distracted, then forgetting where his things are.

'You're holding your keys, babe.'

'Right.'

I race back inside the RSL after he leaves his wallet on the table.

Back at the pub, I sit out on the verandah while Jim sets his speakers up and starts talking to – nobody. There is not a single customer in the room, except me, and the bartender who had gone out the back to finish a cigarette. But Jim has promised to do a two-hour show, so on he goes. He is literally performing to an empty chair.

'How you going? Tired of being pushed around and sat on?' he says to the chair.

I sit at the bar drinking diet coke, enjoying the breeze coming in from the balcony and wondering how Jim can be so cheery and relaxed when there are only two people listening. A few more people start to slowly filter in. For the next hour or so, he does the full show to a room of about six, and just when his voice starts to croak and I think he's losing his spark, about fifty people walk in off the street.

It's like watching the sun come up. Jim springs to life, jumping into the crowd and bantering with the newcomers, figuring out who is who. Within a few minutes the taken-aback crowd is roaring with laughter, furrowing their brows in confusion and wondering who is this strange man standing in the middle of the room being so crude but doing it so playfully.

I finally understand why he is always chasing gigs in every backwater town and pub across the country. These people, who would otherwise have spent the night drinking away their wages, are guffawing and crying, acting silly and generally behaving like kids let out of school. As rough as they appear on the surface, there is a real purity and innocence to their wanting to be included in the jokes. When he says something ludicrously coarse, they roar some more before shaking their heads, when their minds have caught up.

By the end of the night they are behaving like a room full of his friends. Ocker men with shaved heads pass him beers and ask if he needs somewhere to sleep for the night. I sit back, trying to remain anonymous, afraid that I'll give away the act, place something between him and them.

One man, who I half assume is a sexist redneck, is drinking Bundy, heckling Jim, and laughing particularly loudly at the vulgar jokes. He walks to my chair at the bar and starts chatting to me as he waits for his drinks, happy to be out on a Saturday night, eager to make the most of it.

I learn he works in the sugar fields.

'It'd be good for you, love. I don't know if you work in an office or what but the women, they need a bit of sun – you know, to regulate their cycles. You sleep better, too.'

He then starts telling me how the sun and being outdoors is good for mood regulation during the time of the full moon, 'especially for sheilas. Dunno why, but it's better for them.'

I'm in a pub in Queensland filled with drunken men, and one of them has chosen to talk to me about the effect of the sun and the moon on our circadian rhythms.

'What do you do with yourself, anyways?' he asks me, sweetly.

'I . . . ah . . . write?' I offer.

'You do what you love, that's the important thing,' he says, wisely.

Another man sidles up to me, using pub-room telepathy to gauge the relationship context. He stifles a beer-scented burp on my shoulder, then says quietly, 'You and the funny man need a place to stay, I got a big house up the road. Plenty of room. Number 24. Just knock. Any time.'

Like Macksville, I'm not anonymous here. The dynamic is quickly assessed in a pub – who is single, who is with whom, who has blown in from out of town, who to trust. It's so simple, this

life – I now begin to see how Jim has truly couch-surfed around the country. Australians are just so damn laid-back and generous.

We fall asleep later, giggling on the floor in the farmyard room. I burrow closer to Jim to block out the smell of dust and dirt, dreaming again of pineapples and sun reflecting off bitumen.

In the morning we hit the road at pace, flapping the newspaper in the passenger seat, delirious with distances. On we drive in the Queensland sun to the daggy tunes of Hall and Oates, Eagles, Fleetwood Mac and eighties pop classics. No melancholy love ballads here. Just life. Sun. Freedom.

It's beginning to feel normal to me, not knowing where I'm sleeping each night. I've fallen into Jim's rhythm, and he mine. Our days don't follow any pattern. We don't even eat according to mealtimes. The car is our home, our refuge, where we debrief from the space we've just left, sharing encounters the other may not have noticed, and prepare for the town we're about to enter. I don't want the adventure to ever end.

The light in Brisbane is different, with glossy streets flanking the river and giving the sense of new starts, new money, the pristine sheen of a town without the drive and tension of Sydney and Melbourne, not to mention better weather. Jim starts telling me about Tina and Scott, old friends from Sydney we are going to visit. 'It's okay Lou, I worked with Tina just before I quit the advertising agency. She quit too. She's just as random as us!'

No intellectual or aspirational pretensions of worthiness here. Brisbane seems to value the glitzy show of a clean, shiny place to live. So what if Melbourne considers it showing off, and Sydney only values you if you roll with the high-flyers?

After a quick stop for some wine we pull up at a timber Queenslander set back from the street. Tina waves to me from the balcony as I stretch my legs and Jim parks the car. She's smiling like she can't wait to meet me.

Tina and Scott are Jim's friends from his previous life, the incarnation after he'd gone to uni, lived in a share-house in Coogee and worked at an advertising office, knocking his head against a desk to stay sane. Tina, who was the receptionist for a little while, let him intermittently bang it against hers. They are warm, busy, friendly and funny. Pictures line the kitchen wall of the couple riding camels at sunset, swimming with dolphins, surrounded by butterflies in the Amazon. I ask how long they travelled together, before buying this house it appears they are renovating.

'About fifteen years,' replies Tina.

Despite both coming from Sydney, they decided to move to Brisbane because it's cheaper and sunnier. I get the feeling they don't struggle to make friends, or make new starts. It's so relaxing being around people who don't fear the unexpected, embracing it wholeheartedly, instead.

'Do you miss your family?' I ask.

'Yeah but we can drive or fly back – it's not far. And it's heaps sunnier here,' she says, matter-of-fact. And it is.

Tina and Jim catch up on old times hilariously, sharing stories of share-houses gone wrong and Jim's running away to clown camp. Scott, outside lugging timber and building a wall for the bathroom, pops his head in every once in a while to pipe in with some news.

Their home feels like a grown-up version of a tree house, and unlike many of the people we've been visiting, they don't seem to have any ruts. When I ask to go to the bathroom I step outside on a precarious plank of wood, walking the high beam until I get to a toilet with a door but no roof, gazing up at the sky.

'Yeah, Lou, just watch the floor for nails,' Scott yells over to me. I look down at the rickety wood I'm perched on. Below is a steep drop to the earth. But man the view is exciting.

Scott comes in at dusk as the crickets start to sing outside and fixes us dinner in a flash like a cheerful army general on speed. So cutely in love, he gives Tina a peck on the cheek every time he passes her, even if it is just to get a condiment from the pantry. Tina, still so distracted by catch-ups that she's forgotten to prepare anything. She all but looks forlornly at her glass for a second before he tops it up.

We eat on the couch in the living room. Tina sits on the floor because the chair is on the front balcony or something (furniture is so trivial), and we end up playing Scrabble and Trivial Pursuit in between reminiscent tales of their Coogee share-house.

Tina screams with excitement any time a song comes on the radio that she likes and when we finish our meals, Scott scoops up the plates but she's still eating so he leaves hers. 'DARLS!' she shouts at him, metres away in the kitchen doorway, 'Comin' at you!' and rolls her plate across the wooden floor to the kitchen because she's cosy where she is. He washes the dishes and cleans the kitchen at lightning speed, and comes in to top up our wine, pecking Tina's cheek, for the hundredth time.

At about midnight, Jim asks Scott what time he has to be up for work.

'Oh, about five.'

'Really? Do you ever get sick? You know, renovating, working, not sleeping much.'

'Never. If I get a niggle I just set the inside army to work. So I don't. Anyway, I like doing stuff.' And that's that. He doesn't get sick. We drink and talk and laugh into the night, sleeping under a mosquito net in a double bed in the spare room in absolute luxury.

Late the next morning, with Scott long gone to work, Tina pushes the door open. 'I bought bacon and eggs so we can have a fry-up breakfast!' she says cheerfully, like there's no such thing as a normal weekday, plopping on the bed.

A travelling sales rep with no bookings that day, she cooks in her tracksuit like we're all on a camp together and we brush our teeth in the kitchen sink, because there's no bathroom. The instant ease I feel with Tina is so refreshing it gives me energy. We are as far from mortgage hell as you can get. This couple is like a case for spirited selfishness – doing what they love, being who they are, without compromise or boredom-induced jealousies – inspires me to think that Jim and I can make it. That we have more than valium-bland Sprinklerville to look forward to.

Outside I stretch in the sun up high in the trees, overlooking someone else's backyard with kids bouncing on a trampoline. Tina and Scott remind me that life is just a game and we make up the rules, ruts don't really exist except in our heads, and new friends are just a drive away.

Later in the car, Jim tells me why he loves them so much, 'They treat me like a new friend, every time I see them.'

I think about it. It's what anyone wants, in any relationship. To be treated like a new, unpredictable, limitless human being every time you interact with someone, unshackled by the past. To be acknowledged, for the possibilities that you are. It's how Jim treats everyone, but it's so rarely reciprocated to him.

We drive off, eggs in our belly, ready for a new layer of sunscreen to protect against the Queensland sun, as Tina waves goodbye. Ready to pack our fifteen years of adventure into the relationship. And maybe, one day, have a dinner party of our own.

'Will you let me roll my dirty plate across the floor?' 'Only if you yell "Comin' at you darls!"'

It's amazing how other people's positive energy can restore your equilibrium. Travelling in the hardcore manner we're doing heightens the effects of every place we visit. We're never there for long, so we sponge it up, spit it out, leaving as if we've spent a day in someone else's outfit – misery, happiness, ruts and all.

I haven't worn make-up, shaved my armpits or even washed my hair for days. But staring back at me from the mirror in the car is a happy, if a little ruddy, face. My oily hair is pulled back in a ponytail, and I'm wearing a blue singlet I put on five hundred encounters back in Woodenbong, after what I think was my last shower. My eyes are slightly bloodshot, and parts of me are sore from sitting, sleeping and travelling on unfamiliar grounds. The slight feeling of flu permeates my body, but it's hard to know if it's because we don't sleep or eat regularly, are having too much fun, talking too much or are just too damn in love.

Jim catches me checking out my reflection in the mirror, and sniffing my armpits, before I hunt for some deodorant in the car.

'You look great Lou, don't worry. Promise me you won't put any make-up on until we get back to Sydney!'

The sky softens from a purity of white sun to a cooler blue as we drop further south, car wheels carrying us back over the same highways which look oh so different from this side of the road, and this stage of the journey.

Reversing over roads we crossed ten days ago I remember the exact conversation we were having at certain landmarks. Because of our surplus in the sleep bank thanks to the glorious double bed at Tina and Scott's, we drive for ten hours straight, only stopping to refuel or stretch our legs and relieve ourselves against gum trees, the cleaner option in fresh, open air to stained murder-scene askfor-the-key toilets offered by petrol stations.

Our phones cut in and out of range, and when we go for a few hours with no coverage, Jim, as usual, has about five messages when he turns it back on. One is from Sammy, an ex-girlfriend who is a country-and-western singer. She sounds like a gypsy soul too. 'Not a sprinkler, Lou. Promise.'

Sammy's in love with a fellow road-hungry musician, and I know I'm going to like her. Jim tells me it was Sammy who once suggested, as they were driving past a prison in Derby, Western Australia, that they stop and do a 'gig'. He made some jokes and she sang some songs with her guitar. The prisoners said it was the best day of their lives. When he tells me this story my ears prick up, longing to see Derby, wishing I at least knew what the sky looked like up there. People who have seen that part of Western Australia, up close to the Territory, get a look in their eyes when they describe it. It's my country, too. So what if I'm a girl?

Sammy's at her parents' farm in Taree for the night, and has invited us to drop by. Looking on the map, Taree is a fair way away, and after telling her we probably won't get there until 11 pm, I'm all booked in to meet yet another soul, another reminder that there is more than one way to travel through this earth.

'Sammy lives in Newcastle, but she regularly tours the Northern Territory . . . and she's studying teaching . . .' and now she's in Taree. Another person joyfully taking advantage of cutprice domestic fares, she regularly touches down across all states of Australia, rendezvousing with her muso man in Newcastle when they aren't both gigging around. Just the kind of teacher I'd want. Wild, fulfilled and free.

By Taree, we have lost all the heat of the Brisbane sun, and the chill in the air is cutting. Jim pulls into McDonald's and we chomp down oily fillets of fish, scruffing in the back seat for our jumpers, unworn for days. We make it to Sammy's farm just before midnight, a dirt road off a dirt road with the air getting blacker as we move. So cold by now that a thick fog envelops the car, we pull to a stop next to an abandoned farmhouse under a pitch-black sky with nothing but the faint sound of cows as a sign of life. When we get out of the car the air is so cold it's like we've dived into a pool. We gulp. After ten spooky minutes standing on a house porch in the middle of a paddock, the darkness is playing tricks with my mind. I feel like I'm walking in on someone else's stories. Someone else's long-held business.

Eventually Sammy appears out of the darkness. She has a sprightly, no-nonsense, can-do energy, like someone who has grown up close to the earth. She shakes my hand eagerly, despite the hour and despite the fact that, as we discover, we've woken her from sleep. I like her immediately. Unpretentious, full of life and stories, and curious about ours, she laughs easily and her eyes sparkle when she speaks.

'Mum's cookin' you both a fry-up brekkie in the morning. Better be up by seven!'

Alas – we have to be back in Sydney by 8 am. My interview is booked for three hundred kilometres away – which means we have to get up at – three!

'Better be a bloody good interview!' she says good-naturedly, considering we are essentially crashing on her floor for a few hours then leaving.

'Who's it for?' she asks. When I explain, she offers herself and her partner as potential candidates. 'We've just put out a CD. Could be good publicity?'

I give her my business card so she can email me when she gets back to Newcastle. It feels particularly strange to take a professional action when I'm unshowered and sleeping on her floor.

I'd better get used to it, I think, planning how to wash and clean up my appearance so that I'm at least acceptable enough to walk into a well-to-do Sydney couple's Bronte home. Jim may love me looking like this, but most other people, especially those who work in media, have certain . . . standards. I find soap in the ice-cold shower, and settle for a Clayton's wash, my skin hurting from the freezing water. I get as far as a splash on my chest and decide to skip it.

The century-old farmhouse, with faded photos of relatives from the 1800s, has a permanent whistling under the doors. There is a bedroom but neither of us feels right about sleeping in there. We sort of mutually decide on a doorway, where we roll out the swag. It's about three degrees, and I didn't pack thermals. We roll into each other and Jim says, 'Don't forget, Lou, you add your light energy to the dark.'

I always got mocked for my 'vibes' until Jim. He doesn't even need me to verbalise them, noticing immediately and giving me hopeful little sermons about light and love, while the wind is howling and it feels as though there's a whole family going through the motions in the darkness around us.

'Jim, did Sammy mention graves under the floor?'

'Lou, they're just resting.'

I once read that doing scary things is the quickest way to reprogram your brain to see how many self-imposed boundaries can really be melded with a bit of daring. This first road trip with Jim has become my own Anthony Robbins course – but with ice-cold showers instead of hot-coal walks. And sermons about light in haunted houses rather than NLP. It's a lot cheaper.

My mind dips and weaves with thoughts of ghouls and ghosts as Jim tries to blow warm air on my nose, the only part of my body not covered by the swag. I breathe shallowly, trying to listen for

anything unexpected. The house creaks, howls and sighs. It's hard to know if I'm dreaming or imagining, and at one point Jim says he is seeing a woman leaning over us in a white dress, just as I'm picturing the same thing too.

The year before, I'd interviewed a paranormal expert who'd documented the most 'haunted' areas of Melbourne. He'd told me ghosts stick to their old homes, and in particular, cold air is often a sign of a haunting. *Tick to both, here*.

It's almost a relief when Jim's phone alarm goes off at 3 am, even though we are deathly tired. I turn on every light I can find and Jim writes Sammy a note before we bolt to our refuge, the car. I catch Jim doing a little bow at the door, saying thank you to the space, the spirits. I'd just done the same thing silently in my head, before walking out the door.

After spending two weeks doing things and meeting people in ways and paths I've never walked before, defying all conventional wisdom for how a road trip should be done, what's an interview added to the mix? No sleep, no shower, no preparation at my home study, I'm just glad Jim has years of experience searching for back-to-back kids' parties on Saturdays. He doesn't even ask for the address until we get to Bronte.

After logging a thousand kilometres the day before and with another three hundred to do that morning, the endless road has lost some of its romance. But every time I feel myself drifting back into comfort mode – wanting my bed, my coffee, my flat – I think of how great it is to be somewhere new. Like I've been set free.

'What are you going to do while I'm there?' I ask, visualising him sleeping in the car on the corner of the street. He thinks for a minute then remembers that one of his oldest friends lives nearby.

'I'll have breakfast with Patty!' Like turning up at morning toast time is the most normal thing in the world.

Jim must be really tired, because he asks me to drive for the first time, out of Taree. I gaze in wonder, and more than a bit of fear, as I hear him snore just minutes after swapping sides with me. I love that he's so portable, though. He can just put his feet on the dashboard in a yoga pose and he's out.

We drive for three hours through the night before the sky, like hope, cracks through with light at the same time we have made it back into Sydney radio and phone range. When you've been driving for hours in the middle of the night, when the sun starts rising it's almost a miracle. Everything's so much easier in the light.

Exhausted, we pull over for a few minutes' rest at a shop in Raymond Terrace. Jim rolls out his ever-present swag and we snatch a moment of sleep together with the freeway traffic spinning past us. I lie there, listening to the morning traffic zooming past on the Pacific Highway, stunned that the rhythm of driving has been temporarily stopped, aware that we have pushed it all beyond luck, and even stupidity. I beg the universe, Mercury and Hermes, all to get us safely to Sydney. I look to the sky and promise to be Jim's extra set of eyes — to help the gods deliver us from the fate of Transport Accident Commission commercials.

Jim wakes fifteen minutes later, packs up the swag and buys the strange breakfast selection of fresh prawn rolls from the shop, just metres away. At one dollar a pop, and the freshest prawns in Australia, they're so cheap! As he hands over the money I laugh to myself that they don't know we used their tree as a bed. Still, I guess it's everyone's tree.

I walk outside and stretch, dashing back in to get a takeaway coffee for the remainder of the trip so that I can at least string a sentence together. I check my crumpled notes, apply make-up in the passenger seat, and try to mentally rehearse for being around 'normal' people again. But what surprises me is that I'm not nervous. The couples I interview for this column, especially the ones suggested to me by my editors, always come from a certain demographic. My socio-economic 'tribe', I guess you'd say. After being around every tribe but my own over the past couple of weeks, this will be a walk in the park.

We pull up at a little cottage, and a casual couple in jeans greet me at the door. 'Would you like a coffee?' asks the man, and I try to hide my drool. Yes, please.

During the interview, the girl, offhand, makes a quip about how she'd often come over to find nude girls reading in the living room of the bohemian share-house where he once lived. I know this is something that will strike the average newspaper reader as odd.

'Did you get jealous?' I ask.

She shakes her head, no. 'Besides,' her partner adds, 'if someone is jealous there's usually some sort of manipulation going on.'

It's these little pearls and off-hand remarks during interviews that I live for, usually cast as an afterthought or deviation from the main story. I finish my coffee and the tape clicks that it's been an hour, texting Jim that I'm ready to be collected. Soon, his Mazda pulls up outside their little cottage.

When I transcribe the interview tape back in Melbourne, I sound like I'm drunk. Although outwardly awake, the picture of a bed is now swimming and spinning in front of my eyes with more and more intensity. Jim and I have only hoarse croaks now, instead of voices.

'We'll go to my parents',' he whispers, and I secretly hope they aren't home so we can just disappear into a deep sleep without having to speak.

When we get there, his mum invites me to a market, knowing I'm only in Sydney for one more day. I should be on my best behaviour considering this is my new love's mother, but the proximity of a bed has slowed me down like an Energizer battery on its last legs.

'I. Don't. Think. I. Can.' I say, gazing longingly at her clean hair, freshly made-up face and energy of a person who has slept a whole night through in a cosy bed.

A few hours later, when I wake, I wander outside to find all my clothes hanging out on the line, including my underwear, carefully laundered and pegged. I have to borrow Jim's shorts and t-shirt to leave the bedroom. I don't know if it's because I've just woken up, disorientated and relieved to find I'm in a safe, warm house and we don't have to rush off anywhere, or because we've just travelled three thousand kilometres together and there's a shower at the end of the tunnel, or because an hour later my dry clothes are folded neatly on the end of a spare bed with a frangipani garnish, but I burst into tears.

'Oh! Poor Lou!' says his mum, when Jim shows both his parents on the map all the places we've been in so many days. She then dishes us up the most delicious plate of osso bucco I've ever eaten in my life.

It's all a prelude to the theme of our relationship: pushing the limits of everything, shocking people at the same time that we bring out their best and worst sides, unfulfilled dreams, longings past, surprising love. And me, ignoring the clues in my body that I'm going too far for fear that I'll miss out on the adventure. Or – worse – pass up the most wondrous feeling of love I've ever been given. We suck out the days and spit the pips back into each other's mouths – the marrow, the bone, all of it – swallowed whole.

I've never met someone else so eager to make the most of their one, miraculous crack at life, don't wait, don't hurry, but do it. Be it. Now. Take the risks, beg for everything, all at once, but never stop being grateful. Don't give up, just be. Love. Now.

It's quite incredible how quickly you can recover from things, when at the height of your exhaustion you feel like your body is about to shut down for good. A bit of domestic softness soothes the ragged edges of our road-weary bodies and soon we are as freshly laundered as our clothes after our sleeping binge. I've slept, I've eaten, and I've showered. Someone has even washed the coffee stain from my pants, which now smell pleasantly like eucalyptus laundry liquid. Bellies full of home-cooked dinner complete the picture. We're back.

Jim has one more gig tonight, and because I drive back to Melbourne tomorrow, I want to go with him. We hop back into the car for the one-hour drive to Windsor, a place I've never heard of, but is apparently quite rough, for him to compere a two-hour Big Night Out show after an hour of jelly wrestling.

'You can stay here, Lou,' says his mum, after I get dressed and ready.

'Thank you.' But I have to go, I think. Once you've seen how far you can push your body, comfort just seems . . . lazy.

'It can get a bit rough in there, Lou,' Jim tells me. 'You might want to just read in the car, if it gets a bit much.'

We've pulled up at the gravel parking lot out the back of the barn-like Jolly Frog. I'm planning on slipping out and going for a walk around the town. I'd hoped there might be a library, my favourite refuge in cities when I'm waiting for something or just passing time. But being past seven on a Thursday night, I'll be lucky to find anything that's not selling alcohol, video rentals or takeaway

food. This isn't, technically, a city. It's more a cross between an outer suburb and a country town.

Out of curiosity, I stroll into the pub a little while after Jim. Since it's payday, there's a bustle of guys rocking in after loudly parking their hotted-up utes. Still, if the last two weeks have taught me anything, it's that you should leave your preconceptions at the door. Two men nursing beers gaze up at me as I walk in and, instead of being aggressive, actually look quite shy. Embarrassed, even. They take big gulps of their beer as I pass to sit down on a stool in the corner, ordering a diet coke. Nobody wants to harm me, in fact, they're all quite happy – they have someone to laugh at, jelly wrestlers to look at, beer to drink and it's payday. Two young-looking guys pull up stools next to me and introduce themselves, laughing at Jim's current gag about dating and then one of them launching into a monologue about the difficulty of 'finding any decent girls . . .'

'I try the internet you know, but they all lie. How do you know how old they really are?'

His friend looks at me, as if to find an answer, too. 'You look like a nice girl . . .'

I want to be an objective listener, and I've always envied the way a man can go into a pub and have a quiet beer and conversation with another man without any sexual dynamics coming into it. But I can't help but think – if a man watches nothing but jelly wrestlers and scouts internet chat sites, what sort of woman is he going to find? I tell him I'm with Jim, so that at least he won't take it personally that I'm not responding to him sexually, but I find myself annoyed that I have to do this. There's no way I could nomad around alone, like Jim has been. In a way, my gender keeps me from real Australian freedom, because so much of the outback, waiting to be explored, is a frontier of masculine, macho energy.

The guy, inching closer to me, with his arms up across his chest, is talking from a place of ego now, comparing himself to Jim, in some tribal communication style reminiscent of the Dark Ages. 'I did a bit of stand-up comedy once . . . hey, you got any girlfriends?'

I slip away to go for a walk to find a café, somewhere to read the paper in peace, get away from the neediness and hunger in this church of the twenty-first century for lonely men. I stroll up and down the main road, and shift my gaze to the window of Gloria Jeans coffee, where all the 'decent females' missing from the Jolly Frog are flocking and drooling over mud cake and cinnamon-spiced hot chocolates. *Sigh*. If only Mr Chat Site could tear himself away from the jelly wrestlers and the pub, he might find someone nice to change his mind.

Back at the Jolly Frog, Jim has finished but a cluster of drunken die-hard fans want to keep him talking after the gig. We squeeze a guy and his stubby of VB into the back of the Mazda to give him a lift home, which he says is just up the road. After we drop him at the end of a twenty-kilometre dirt road past paddocks, he tells Jim that he usually walks it 'to sober up'. What does it matter to us? We treat kilometres like kisses - the more we log the richer we feel. Our love of the road is surreal, delirious. I start to fantasise about how many roads my body will have crossed before I die – I hope it's a lot. In and out of sleep, while Jim drives through the black night, I worry about all those people who live, and die, without travelling long distances. I see the road – and the car, and Jim driving it – as a glorious teacher, come to open my mind and open my eyes and show me things about myself and the world no book could ever teach, no photo could ever evoke. This feeling about the road is, perhaps, why

despite only just rocking back into Sydney that morning, we go and collect my car, Jim following me nine hundred kilometres back to Melbourne down the Hume in the dead of night before collapsing into my own bed. 9

Outworn objects

'Babe? These clothes are still wet?!'
'I know. I was missing you.'

Arriving back at My Fitzroy apartment, with Jim in tow — is like walking in on someone else's movie set. There's evidence that I live here: seventeen messages on my answering machine, mail in the letterbox addressed to me. Books on my table, photos of my family. But the only palpable proof of the change two weeks can have on anything is the fruit I forgot to clean from my juicer. Dried pulp from apples I minced a fortnight ago has gone brown and is emitting a smell like earth mulch on an otherwise unmoving bench.

I've always loved taking the rubbish out. Like new beginnings or clean slates, it's just a strange thing that gives me joy. I clean out the manky pulp from the top of my juice machine and carry a plastic bag filled with other remnants of a time before a time and feel I am cleaning out someone else's kitchen. Who am I? I feel like all we've discovered and all the epiphanies I've had in the

OUTWORN OBJECTS

last fortnight have made everything I ever owned redundant. Too comfortable. Too much. Too easy.

Half-sleepwalking, we lug Jim's sparse belongings up the stairs, take a shower, then collapse into bed. And that's that. He's moved in. Just a few weeks after we met.

Reconnecting with friends and family means I have to put a name on this – situation.

'Uh, I've got Jim here. Boyfriend? . . . Yeah. I mean, I guess . . .'

He's beside me, always. We sleep, eat, walk, write, everything within an inch of each other. He comes home from doing our laundry with a pile of wet clothes.

'Babe? These clothes are still wet?!'

'I know . . .' he chuckles nervously, embarrassed. 'I was missing you.'

To the outside world, it looks like I've moved in with a boy-friend. And I guess I have. It's just not what we're about. I feel uncomfortable even calling him that. The name implies something you 'get', someone who has to 'do' certain things. A material object. He's more my soul mate – come to teach me lessons, crack open my perception of love and stretch my boundaries. I'm not expecting this to be easy, and I don't want it to be, as it hasn't so far.

'I'm having a dinner party – you and Jim are invited.' I feel uneasy, asking him along to parties and dinner invites. 'You don't have to come . . . but you'll like Karina and Tom,' I tell him. I'm scared it will send him packing. But deep down, perhaps it's because that sort of stuff sends me insane with boredom.

I reach a compromise, inviting friends to his Melbourne gigs, Sally and some other friends, shocked and curious that I am so

seriously involved with someone so soon, but understanding completely the moment they meet him.

'He's just as weird as you, Lou,' says Sally one night, in a nice way, after we've driven to watch the tennis at her place and I've found them in a deep discussion about the ethics of in-vitro fertilisation, in the kitchen.

'It's funny that he swears so much on stage,' says Paige, another friend. 'You're the most anti-swearing girl I know!'

Just as I did in Sydney, he gets a fast-forward tour of my entire social and family network. He listens to everyone, nods at the right times and, to my astonishment, has absolutely no critics amongst everyone I know. Except Sally.

'He's going to take you away from us. I know it.'

He already has.

Still, I feel like I'm caging a wild animal. Seeing how lightly he travels has made me look at all my trappings as excessive, indulgent. He's done numerous laps of our country in its entirety and what have I been doing? I have a stack of books and clothes. Although he goes on the prowl in the Melbourne comedy rooms on the hunt for gigs most nights, his reputation precedes him. He gets one here and there, but every Thursday he drives back to Windsor in New South Wales for his Jolly Frog show, and I miss him the entire time. His phone beeps constantly, with messages from publicans littered across the outback map.

'JIMBO! MAAAAATE! WHEN ARE YA COMIN' BACK?'

'Uh . . .' he laughs, looks at me, beside him in the bed. 'I've met someone! I'm with her – Lou – in Melbourne!'

'Fuckin' WHAT?'

It's my fault they're missing out on laughter. The missus has trapped 'im.

Meanwhile, I'm getting a lot of work. Just before I met Jim, I'd sent out a stack of thick Manila envelopes to every magazine and supplement I wanted to write for. I typed up story pitches, column ideas, colour-copied my updated folio, and wrote each editor a personal cover letter. It cost a fortune, but now my investment seems to be paying delayed dividends.

In the next month I write three e-newsletters for a health magazine, three magazine feature articles and four columns. And the best bit is, in between it all I'm free to head up the Hume whenever Jim gets a gig. In six weeks we do the Sydney round trip seven times and Canberra twice. But through it all, I have this dilemma. The only time he gets a really free look in his eye is when he's talking to his random mates from the outback. And when he talks about gigs he's done in Western Australia, his eyes shine. I think: Why have I been melded with a free spirit if I'm not supposed to travel, too?

One night, he gets a small emcee spot at a comedy room in the city. We've been walking in there every Tuesday. It's such an old-fashioned game. If you want a gig you need two already established comedians to vouch for you. After wearing down the two comedians who seemed to hold fort at this room and promising to 'keep it tame', he lands the spot.

I watch him from the bar, looking slightly cagey, casting edgy glances at the manager, who is standing in the shadows making hand movements, signalling to tone it down.

The headliner, a neurotic veteran with that bitter edge of someone still living on borrowed money and a broken thread of hope twenty years later, aggressively sculls three glasses of neat scotch beside me, not knowing I'm with Jim. I've seen his act before. His style is like a nutty professor on heroin, and I know for a fact the latter part is true in his real life too. Before going on stage, he pesters the manager for an 'advance', and shuffles out the back for

a few minutes, before coming back to the bar rubbing his nose and teeth and downing his fourth pre-set scotch.

Despite the constraints, Jim had managed to suss out the vibe of the crowd, a bunch of English backpackers who wouldn't have got any cross-cultural references except those made to *Neighbours* or Vegemite vs Promite spread. They had no idea who the headliner was, and they didn't care. They just wanted to laugh.

He decides to pull out a gag about the comedy industry. 'I said to my agent, I'm not like your average comedian I don't smoke or drink, I don't do drugs, I don't have a gambling addiction. But if you get me some gigs so I can afford to have these problems, I'll sign now . . .'

The crowd laughs. Headliner, beside me, swears loudly. 'Oh for fuck's sake why do I have to get HIM before ME!'

The manager is tapping his watch indicating time's up, so Jim skates along to introducing the headliner. Timing is everything in the comedy rooms. Go over by five minutes and you'll have no friends.

'Ladies and gents get ready to be taken to Planet Ramble – this next comedian is a madman with method!'

Headliner swears again and shakes his head at the manager, like, I loathe this guy, give him another spot and I'm not coming back, only to nod in friendly acknowledgement to Jim as he walks off stage. My stomach lurches. I've never seen Jim treat anybody like that.

We stay for the headline act and as we walk home, I weigh up whether or not to tell Jim what went down. He already knows.

'Lou, this is why I stopped doing comedy in Melbourne years ago. You just can't do what you want. If you go too hard as an emcee you piss off the headliner. It's all about egos. That's why I like going off on my own.'

When we get home we lie in bed, talking intermittently until daybreak.

'This is the longest I've stayed in one spot in a long time,' he says after we've been lying silently, looking out the window to the stars, for an hour. 'I'm scared I'll lose my edge.'

He's referring to the pages of road stories gathered over years of touring. Stories and anecdotes he uses to punctuate his sets on stage. Part of who he is. The free-spirited Aussie swagman. You don't put a swagman in a North Fitzroy flat and make him go to dinner parties.

I wake with a headache, like I'm putting off a decision. My phone rings. It's an editor from yet another magazine, signifying a breakthrough. She wants one of my feature proposals.

'Yes, Louisa, I want you to interview a man called Shanaka. He doesn't own anything and he runs a very successful business. It's called Lentil as Anything.'

I walk to Lentil as Anything one rainy autumn day. I left Jim snoozing in our bed, loading up on sleep for his weekly 1800-kilometre round trip to his Windsor gig tomorrow. I'd decided on style over comfort, layering two cotton blue tops over each other with some thin pants and my high-heeled boots. Funny how you slip into old patterns. I still feel the need to impress that I'm a journalist who has it together. To straighten my hair. To look good, lest I be found out.

I arrive at the café to meet Shanaka, who is in his mid-forties but looks like he's in his late twenties. Intelligent, sensitive and kind, he intermittently jumps up during our interview to help serve coffees when the restaurant gets busy. The café—restaurant is a migrant-assistance program, serving healthy vegan food with live African music most nights. There are no set prices — you 'pay as you feel'.

'You don't wear enough clothes, Louisa,' is the first thing he says, shaking my hand as I sniffle and shiver after my rainy hike.

I look at him and realise that he would always know if it's about to rain. He pays attention to his surroundings.

'So . . . I wanted to know about you living in a tent . . . ?'

He knows why I'm here. This is part of the luxury of journalism. You can ask about anything. You may not always be answered, but generally, if someone has agreed to be interviewed, they are willing to give you some answers.

'Yes, it's not for everybody. I used to have a house, and worked in the conventional legal system. I just felt very . . . separate from society. In the house, in the car, in this job. And I had some ideas for a program which would help migrants.'

So he moved out of his house, gave away his car, planted a tent in a camping ground along the coast and decided to switch to cycling, for his health and for the environment.

'It's funny, Louisa. The day I decided I wanted to ride a bike I found one on the beach.'

I ask the questions I know people will want to know the answers to.

'So . . . what if you get cold? I mean, you live in Melbourne?'

'I wear thermals. And you get used to it. Walking to the showers, warming up with exercise. That's when I started running ten kilometres a day. It warms me up.'

I look at this fresh-faced man, musing that he is probably healthier than many of the men and women I know who live in houses, drive cars and 'pay' to exercise at gyms.

'We need a lot less than we think we do, Louisa. It's just a matter of taking care of yourself.'

He slips back behind the counter, his friends from other countries making jokes, singing, moving in a rhythm of grateful

productivity. I walk back along the creek, vowing to put warmth before looks from now on.

At home, I transcribe the tape, and Jim listens, as he washes the dishes. Shanaka only eats once or twice a day, 'But I make it really good food.' He stays at friends' houses instead of the tent when they need a house-sitter. And he seems to look after himself physically and mentally better than anyone else I know. 'There is so much waste in modern society, Louisa. I mean, my friends are going to pay someone to look after their animals while they are gone. As well as pay their mortgage. As well as pay for accommodation where they are going for a "holiday". So in effect, they are paying for their own accommodation three times. And that's how I used to live, too.'

Jim, who had an outside office as well as his Sydney flat before he threw it all away, remembers the pressure of lots of bills. 'There comes a point where your possessions own you,' Jim says. I pause the tape. I think, for a moment, of all the places I would explore without what I perceive as 'ties', binding me to Melbourne. Like the rent on this flat.

Something about Shanaka really struck me. Rather than the clichéd hippy who owns nothing because he can't be bothered getting a job or working for the 'suits', he is the antithesis of laziness, and has managed to reach a middle ground between using his education and intelligence and eschewing cultural mores that he doesn't agree with. His modus operandi is economy. Use less. Think for yourself. He hadn't even wanted to tell me he only eats once a day. 'Everyone has to do what feels right for them,' he'd said.

Jim finishes the dishes and sits beside me. He has no gigs to book, nowhere to drive, nothing to hunt or gather. So he turns on the TV and settles in for a night of sport. I cook us curry for

dinner and he wolfs it down without looking at the bowl, cheering at the TV when the Swans score a goal.

One morning, Jim takes a 4 am call about a death in his family. In the past week we've been to a country town outside Canberra and driven to Sydney and back twice. My body is feeling as rocked as it did when I was in the middle of Mullumbimby, and my cycle has gone out of whack again. Plus, I have a story to finish up over the next day, so I kiss Jim goodbye as he leaves for the funeral at daybreak, feeling like a weakling for not going with him.

'See you on Friday,' I say, 'give your family my love.'

I go back to bed, revelling in the chocolate starfish action and set to work on my article when I wake. My phone rings, later that day.

'Oh Lou.' He always says it like he's glad he's caught me, like it's a surprise I even picked up the phone.

'Jim.'

He's just been selected for jury duty in Sydney. Of all things – a manslaughter trial for a drunken brawl at a Sydney pub.

'How long are you there for?'

'It looks like it's going to be at least a month.'

I wander through the flat looking for physical reminders of his presence, eventually finding a leftover can of Rexona Black and a t-shirt, which I pathetically sniff like a dog who misses its owner.

'This is what people with jobs must feel like,' Jim says on the phone the next morning, walking across the Sydney Harbour Bridge during peak-hour to make it to the County Court in the city. Paid a wage, fed and forced to sit in a room with no pens, paper or entertainment except the grisly details of a murder trial swimming in his brain, his job is to decide whether a man is guilty of manslaughter or not. All while being monitored.

Not a fan of conflict, and the only one on a jury of twelve who believes the man is innocent, the psychic dilemma of deciding a man's fate makes him sick. He gets diarrhoea, can't sleep, and calls me to debrief every night on the strange group dynamics of the people in the jury, the video of the brawl they are forced to watch umpteen times, the strange case of one decision to take a swing at someone which missed and landed on someone else, killing them.

I wake in fright in the middle of the night after another long debrief before I'd slipped into a dream, thinking I've killed someone and I can't remember who it was. I toy with the idea of driving to Sydney to be with him, but since he is sequestered in the court for nine hours each day, and I have more stories which need finishing, and no mobile internet on my laptop, I decide against it. Also, I feel I need to make a decision. Something has been niggling, and it's not just the sense that Jim's paid jury duty came just in the nick of time for him financially. We aren't meant to live this way, together. He's been trying to hide the fact that his comedy just doesn't have much of a market in Melbourne, unless he turns the crass gags into philosophical double entendres, which just isn't his style anymore.

You can tell a lot about a city by the things they laugh at. Melbourne is less in-your-face than Sydney, and we like our comedians a bit more introverted. The only night I see him really raise the roof is at Young and Jackson's, and that's because most of the crowd are from overseas, and he plays his send-up of the typical Aussie.

I head out with a bunch of girlfriends one night when he's away. We eat Spanish paella and drink nice wine. The whole night is enjoyable, comfortable, friendly. They talk about their jobs, we drink and eat more than we should, and in the morning we go out for coffee, eggs and the papers. I look around at all our nice clothes

and our comfort and contentment. I think of what I've achieved and that I'm finally earning a steady income from what I love, that the whole reason I chose this profession was for the freedom to come and go and be who and as I please. But am I really challenging myself anymore?

I come home and drink far too much red wine in front of the TV. No. I'm plateauing. It's all too easy.

That night, I dream children in Western Australia touch Jim's clown suit to receive spontaneous healing. I dance beside him, planting seeds which sprout overnight into flowers dripping with words. People eat them, and feel nourished.

When I wake I am petrified, with my heart-beat quickening and a strange sense of urgency, like I've got to run, now. Like I must jump off a cliff without first checking that I even have a parachute.

And then I set about throwing away my belongings.

In three weeks, I shed a one-bedroom flat full of furniture, whitegoods, clothes, shoes, books, appliances, crockery and manchester. A mint collection of *US Elle* magazines hit the racks of the local op shop, and a bookshelf worth of modern classics travels from my flat to the local library shelves.

I start small, going through my filing cabinet of papers and references, paring it down to a folder of vital tax and banking information and article resources, lugging rubbish bag after rubbish bag of my life's history down the stairs and filling up the recycle bin. Every item gets assessed for deep significance and sentimental value, until gradually I am asking even the most lovely of my belongings to prove their worth. The odd connection between my vision of myself and my belongings means that the shedding is like a deep, intense, week-long version of psychotherapy over a relationship which has served its purpose. Are you replaceable? Are you

holding me back? Does holding on to you stop me from exploring better things, growing, learning? Who am I without you?

Monks shave their heads as a symbol of their commitment to a new spiritual beginning. So it feels with my clean-out. I begin to understand why people sometimes report relief after a fire has burned down their home, with all of their possessions. Like a fast cleansing, they are free to see themselves without any objects to hide behind.

I place my furniture online, snapping photographs of my double bed, bedside tables, couch, desk, bookshelves, fridge and microwave, working on into the night with this process of shedding. My girlfriends argue over the ten pairs of heels I shuck, each retrieving CDs, make-up, bags and dresses as the shedding becomes more and more extreme.

My sister, angry that I'm going away, has been silent for two weeks. Finally she calls, and I take the juicer over as a peace offering. 'I need one of those,' she says.

The fridge is lugged away one night by an army captain furnishing his new house on the beach. The couch, by a second-hand re-seller. A bookshelf, to my brother. My father's books, to my mum. My diaries plus photos, in boxes, to live atop my brother's house in the attic. In a way, I feel like I would as if I was witnessing my own death. The clean-up. The distribution of the spoils. What I've left behind.

After I give written notice to the real estate agent on the apartment I've rented for three years, I take a deep breath and call Jim.

'Want to hit the road again?'

He sighs. 'I think I've been waiting for you to say that.'

A remarkable thing happens, as I start to discard belongings, a side-effect I hadn't been expecting, and only when I've got over the

shock of actually following through on one of the craziest ideas of my life: my confidence grows. But it's not in the way you feel when you put on a new dress, or get presented with an award, or could ever feel from any outward accolade at your worth.

Stripped of everything, I'm forced to look at what my real assets are, in non-physical terms. My brain. The way I tell my own story. The current moment – my only power. It sounds new-agey, corny, clichéd. But it's how I feel, after the initial shock. That I'd been resting on society's version of what makes you a valid person for too long. And now, after making the leap of trying to see what life is like beyond things, I've finally met the truth.

At first it's like a nightmare. I look around at the sparse flat, like a half-empty shell of my life. All that's familiar is gone. What have I done?! But then, as if I'm camping and need to remember a new routine, each day is simplified. I start – and finish – with purpose. Liberated. Anew.

Having less physically, makes me more focused on my intentions and my actions. Without cushions, advice, safety, warnings, how far can one leap? More importantly, what do I want to be and do each day? Get published, keep up my relationships, stay healthy. Surprisingly, I don't need as much for that as I thought. It's more reliant on how I think, feel and behave than what I have.

One of the hardest parts of the cleansing was letting go of a filing cabinet full of article references, ideas, papers and sources. I had to trust, when I let them go, that I finally have the skills to find the information that I need for each article as it comes. Instead of a three-drawer filing cabinet of twenty kilograms worth of papers, it's all on my laptop, which sits perched on an empty box in my living room. But I have one more big thing to do before I'm truly free.

I throw out the internet modem, and go into the city to look for something Jim had showed me – a little matchbox-sized plug-in

modem which means I can connect my laptop to the internet from anywhere. It turns out that freedom isn't as popular – or as easy to find, in 2006– as I'd hoped.

When I go to the computer shop it takes four conversations before I can track down what it's called. It strikes me that what I'm doing is not unlike how I feel when I'm researching an article on a topic nobody has heard of yet. It takes so many questions, going beyond the 'nos' and the 'I don't knows' until I find the person at the end of the tunnel who has one vital clue which will carry the thread of the whole story. Finally, an IT whiz appears, who has 'heard of' these 'minimax thingies' you can plug into your laptop. It takes two hours, and they mistakenly call me 'Doctor' on my necessary contract, but I get it connected.

I walk home from the city with my laptop, stopping at a park bench to connect. I look up at the trees, smiling. *I'm free*.

I go from owning thirty pairs of shoes to my runners, my leather sandals, one pair of heels and one pair of boots. Working through my wardrobe is like sifting through the albums of past lives, and from a drawer full of waitressing aprons to tops worn once to events long over, each trip to The Brotherhood bin makes me feel lighter, freer, more mobile. And weirdly, more myself. Why did I ever buy all this stuff?

The wasted money I've spent on once-worn tops here, unread books there and CDs which make me cringe fills me with shame. As I sift through the material documentation of my life, loves and history, I remember, piece by piece, how many times I have bought something to make myself feel better. And has it worked? Perhaps like a drug or a sugar fix, the effects last a few hours. At best, a day. But then you're left with no actual action that you've taken, to carry yourself forward to who you want to be. Except this Neptunian idea

which came to you on the lips of an advertisement which promised consumption had the power to transform you.

Not true! My soul cries in realisation. The television goes, quickly, and I don't even miss it. Generic ideas, advice, manufactured fears and conflict-induced dramas leave my flat and I am quickly at peace, living intentionally, awake to just how many hours there are in the day when you're not listening to endless chatter and other people's dramas.

As I take bag after bag after bag of clothes to op shops, books to the library and possessions to friends' houses, I drive home feeling as if I've lost weight. I step lighter up the stairs to my flat, and my energy has already shifted from a constant rewind to the past back to the here and now. My body standing in an empty flat. Pure potential, like supergirl waiting for take-off.

Another remarkable thing starts to happen. I become more confident with strangers. I've always been chatty, friendly to those I don't know, but this is a different friendliness. I've lost the fear that comes with needing to protect your space. I have no delineations anymore, no definition via address or things, so in effect, I have nothing to lose. And, now that I don't have stuff to return to, I feel I've been given more hours in the day, as well.

The neighbour downstairs, mentally ill, living in the only commission flat in the block, asks to borrow my vacuum cleaner one day. The next day, I hear a knock at the door. It's her again, twitching and muttering, holding the vacuum cleaner, and something else. 'I heard you cough last night. Thought you might like this.' It's chicken and corn soup. She runs away, nervously.

With nothing to steal, and no distraction of objects to replace interaction, I feel a sort of openness to the world I'd only ever felt when I was travelling before.

As I'm sitting on a box in my almost empty flat, typing an email to an editor over a story on Chinese medicine, a young woman appears, squinting to look through my window.

'Oh, I'm sorry!' she says, when she sees that I'm home, explaining that she saw the flat advertised for lease and she wanted to see it before the group inspection.

'You can come in if you like!' Why not? I don't have to be anywhere.

I show her around, and she says she's on her way to uni.

'I'm studying Chinese medicine.'

We trade emails, and she refers me to two experts, invites me to her house and loans me an excellent book which I use for the article.

It's quite amazing how quickly things move once you make a decision. It's only been three weeks since Jim left but the flat is almost empty now. And I'm no longer waking half in shock, looking at the changes in my environment. I open my eyes, fully conscious. With no physical clues to who I was, can and should be, from now on I can do whatever I want. Simplifying my environment has shucked an enormous amount of useless clutter from my heart.

The effect has been physical, too. In three weeks I've lost three kilograms. The flat isn't that cosy to hang around, so I go down to the creek, the park or the beach when I need a visual fix of natural beauty. I no longer focus on what I can buy or accumulate, now I look for what's already there. What I won't need to carry.

'What are you sitting on, in your flat?' Dec asks, feeding his dog absentmindedly from the couch.

'Boxes. I like it. Simplicity.'

He pats the dog then looks out the window.

'I didn't have a bed for a year when I lived in Queensland. Just slept on the floor. You need less than you think you do . . .'

My main aim, through all of this, is to be as portable, economical and self-sufficient as I can. I look at the fine print of the phone bills I have been unquestionably paying for years, and realise I have been spending at least five hundred dollars a month on phone calls. Jim, who is on the phone constantly, spends less than a third of that. I switch plans, after doing a couple of hours of research. What else have I been blindly accepting?

After disconnecting my home phone and land internet, transferring to cheaper plans, closing off my contracts, and ensuring my work life is as portable as possible, I have cut my living costs by over a half. Now, the only thing left to get rid of is the car.

Because Jim and I will be travelling together, it makes sense that an extra car is not only wasteful, but unnecessary. Still, it takes a big dose of braveness to let go of the car, something that represented my own freedom and independence. Definitely no turning back now. Gulp.

After the one hour walk home, I am struck by the peace of the blank space. Like a piece of paper I can now write upon, clearing my possessions has been the quickest way to get perspective on my life. I wonder about all the adventures I'm about to go on with Jim, a state away, deciding a man's fate in the jury box, as I submit my last two features from my laptop in the empty flat.

When I've finished, I light a candle for the bathroom, sinking into the hot water as the city whirrs around me. My ears file the familiar sounds through the bathroom window of a street I've known for years, and I give thanks for the peace at the end of a day when I farewelled the only possession which was really, really hard to let go. And with it, I've said goodbye to a bucket of fears and doubts, shedding a city skin I'd grown too comfortable and

familiar with, ending a chapter of my life which I can never, ever return to.

Having nothing exposes your soul's real currency in this life. I vow not to let anything material define my true worth as a human, again. From now on, my daily thoughts, choices, decisions and words are going to provide the compass from which I steer my direction.

Like a perfectly timed scene in a play, Jim's trial comes to a close the night before I hand back the keys to my flat.

'Red-bulling my way to you, babyyyyyy!' he texts, as I'm carrying the vacuum cleaner down to the kind neighbour who brought me the chicken soup. She looks like it's Christmas.

'Where are you going?' she says, inviting me in to her cluttered flat to meet her pet parrots.

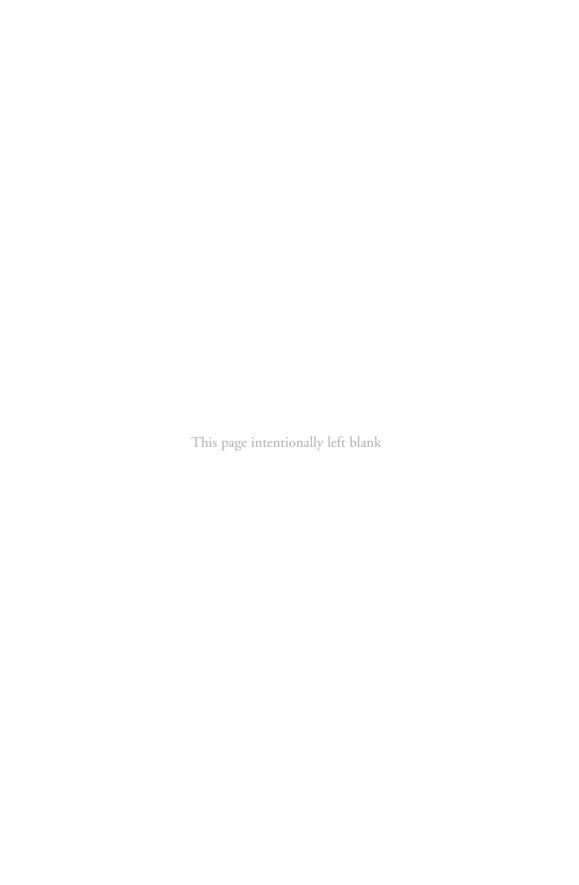
'Well, I've always wanted to cross the Nullarbor. After that, not sure . . .'

She looks like she's about to have a fit, convulsing and hearing voices I can't even imagine. As I back out of her flat and say goodbye, she emerges from her inner world for a second, and yells after me, 'The red dirt in Western Australia is what I loved best.'

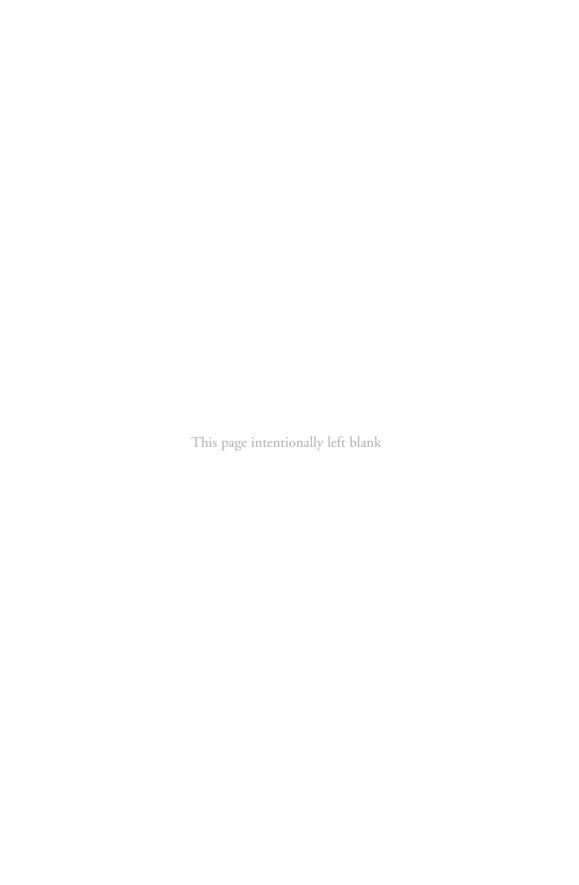
Even she's been there. Everyone has a story.

Jim arrives at 2 am to find me scrubbing the blinds with a bucket of soapy water. My two bags are packed by the door, with a pillow perched on top.

'So, I guess you're serious about hitting the road, then?'



PART 2 THE ROAD



10

Outsiders

'Why can't we just fall across a warm empty space to sleep in while someone's at work?'

'Oh, we're not that evolved yet, Lou.'

After Meeting me in my empty flat, Jim and I do one last lap to Sydney. He lands an audition for an ice-cream commercial before three clown gigs in a row so I meet Mystic Medusa for fish and chips on Clovelly Beach, talking about astrology and the coming eclipse season, while kids flip and fly around us in the water. Rounding the cliffs near Coogee, Jim jumps up in front of us in his clown gear, covered in shaving foam and toilet paper from the kids' party.

'Jimbo! You look ridiculous!' says Mystic, so he throws himself into the waves to wash it off, forgetting a huge chunk of foam which remains in his ear, as he dries nonchalantly in the driver's seat, cruising back to Lane Cove to collect our things before we do our last trip south on the Hume.

We've been doing laps of Melbourne's rain-slicked streets for hours now. Neither of us has slept since Sydney, and wasn't that the day before yesterday . . . ? Not leaving Lane Cove until late that evening, we'd decided on a detour to Yass to drop in on one of Jim's comedy friends doing a gig. So now I'm not sure what day it is, and when we last slept.

Rolling back into Melbourne's wind-whipped roads is like meeting someone I've always known under an entirely new set of circumstances. I no longer have an apartment in which to escape the long drives, soak in the bath, collapse into my bed. There are new rules to the relationship. I feel like an outsider.

We drive down Glenlyon Road, in Brunswick, and I suspect that half the street is at work. I think of the sheer waste of all those spaces – doors you can close, taps with running water, roofs against the rain. That's all we need. I don't even care if there's a proper bed or not. 'Look at that house, I bet it's empty. We'd be out by the time they got home . . . you could just leave some balloon animals for the kids . . . why can't we just fall across a warm empty space to sleep in, while someone's at work?'

'Oh, we're not that evolved yet, Lou.'

Jim nods contentedly, gazing softly at the road ahead like everything will happen at just the right time, then he passes me the packet of Allen's snakes with a cute smile. 'Here, Lou, I saved you all the red ones.' He puts his hand on my leg, and gives me that look.

I remember where my new home is.

Here, now.

We could call my sister, or even some of my friends, who have spare beds and rooms in various suburbs of Melbourne, but finding a place to rent together marks the beginning of the journey. My promise is to follow Jim where the gigs are and try everything I can to see life from places I never would have tried. This week, he has two comedy gigs in Melbourne. After that, we're heading west.

Cruising through rainy Fitzroy, just blocks from the apartment I packed up and left, just a few weeks ago, we spy a piece of paper, flapping in the window of a pub on the corner of Alexander Parade:

'Short and long term accommodation available. Enquire within.'

'Bingo!' says Jim, like he was expecting it. We pull over, and I step on a twenty-dollar note in the gutter, just as I get out of the car.

'It's a sign!'

We spent last night at a comedy show in Yass, and because we arrived so late, there were no rooms in any hotels. On a high from cheek-sore laughter and black coffee sweetened with sugar to drown out the taste, courtesy of the Yass Red Rooster, at midnight I said, 'Yeah, let's just keep driving, hey?' and like madcats we used up the high for about a hundred kilometres of Hume.

An hour or so later, we tried for some shut eye in Jim's swag in a freezing park in Jugiong, just outside of Canberra, but instead of sleeping we just shivered and clung to each other on what felt like a grassy cliff, eyes wide open, chuckling to allay our fears.

An hour later I looked up to see his blue eyes blinking back at me in the night. 'Wanna go?'

He breathed steam puffs into my mouth. 'Sure do babe, it feels like we're intruding on something, here.'

And we hit the road like thieves. By the time it was light and the shadows had long gone, we found a nice patch of gravel near a paddock outside Albury.

Half an hour passed, until the sound of cars pulling over metres away from the swag triggered our silent agreement – time to leave – dissolving the embrace in one swift movement, Jim rolling up the swag in one fell swoop, seconds until the space where we'd just slept is a cloud of dust kicked up by the Mazda.

It's a strange feeling, this anonymous use of space where and when we can find it. Criminals stealing sleep in wide open spaces. *Lovers on the run*.

I love how portable the intimacy is, the fact that as soon as we are lying down, arms around each other, wherever we are becomes our bed, infused with this feeling we can only re-create when we are together. Our vibe. And through spreading 'us' around in this way, all the spaces we cover become part of our story, too.

Love left in piles, wherever we've lain.

Exhausted by 9 am, eight hundred kilometres later, our third attempt at sleep, we've grown careless, throwing down the swag under a weeping willow off a dirt road outside Seymour. My eyes are shut and I'm almost there, almost gone, when I can feel Jim's energy shift and quicken. A nanosecond later he is pulling on his trousers, face lit up like he's on stage reacting to a heckler.

'Hi! Uh we've just driven from Queensland . . .'

I see an elderly lady's knobbly legs just centimetres from my head. The woman, casting her eye from our half-naked bodies lying in a field to our overloaded, zanily parked car, backs away, speechless.

'Why did you say Queensland?' I ask Jim, laughing hysterically, pulling my clothes on as he careens onto the freeway in a skidding U-turn.

'I thought it's a bit further so it makes sense that we're tired?!'

OUTSIDERS

We speed off like hoons, and I keep laughing, the only antidote to the terror that's been gripping me ever since we left Sydney, the line between wildness and pure insanity completely blurred now.

At The Royal Derby, we pay the deposit without even bothering to look at the room, lugging our refugee hessian sack of clothes up the rusty cast iron fire escape. It's 4 pm now, and Jim is due on stage by eight.

As soon as we have the keys we close the door and hop in, top-and-tail style, to the single bed. I barely register the smell of must, old bodies, hurried lives. Jim distracts me from wondering who last slept on this bed by saying, 'On your marks, ready, set go!' like we're in the middle of a sporting match. To counter the sport speak he rubs my shoulder affectionately with his dirty foot and puts his hand on my ankle near his head.

A few minutes later, we're out.

11

Unfamiliar terrain

'I like to make things nice. Like that jasmine in the bathroom – I put that there . . .'

THE ROYAL DERBY IS AN old, red-brick pub perched on the corner of Brunswick Street and Alexander Parade, just a ten-minute walk from the apartment where I've luxuriated for the past three years, but oh so many miles away in difference. It heaves and pulses electrically, swimming with stories on their way in and out.

Slapped on the corner of a busy freeway and a major tram route, we can feel the city throbbing in the walls and between the ancient, filthy floorboards. Our room is maybe 4 by 4 metres, technically a 'single', and, for the grand sum of sixty dollars each for the week, we get a single bed that sinks in the middle below a cracked window with just one curtain that falls off every time we accidentally touch it. I sleep beside a hessian bag full of our dirty laundry and a jar of Worcestershire sauce.

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It's only been a few months since we met, but by now we share a key, a towel, a swag, a car, and most of the ideas that pass through our brains. We're laughing at the filthy room, at how places like this always feel safe when you're with someone you love, and how fun it is to rent a room in an old pub in the city you've lived in forever.

'Lou, do you think I should pull out my Japanese flag gag in Richmond?'

'No way! You're not in Grafton tonight. Melbourne girls are . . . different.'

'Yeah, you're dead right. I'm not used to having a female perspective on my comedy. What makes Melbourne girls laugh?'

'Just go in a bit gentler. Do more of your quirky clown stuff. You don't need to swear.'

There seems to be toast crusts in one of the bathroom toilets at the end of the hall so I wind up using the pink one which says, in handwritten black pen, delightfully misspelled, 'LADYS ONLY'.

Someone has filled a beer glass with wilted jasmine next to the tap, in an odd display of home decoration. I turn on the water and nearly have a heart attack. The shower is stone cold. I lurch out into the hallway, gasping for dear life, goosebumps under my pink towel.

'You okay hon?' a voice calls out. I'm steaming ice and shivers, a sorry sight.

Georgie, a 'long termer', who sings and plays guitar in the room directly across from us, shows me how to warm the water up by walking down the two flights of stairs outside and switching the dial on the old hot water system.

I'm grateful for Georgie, and not just because she saves me from hypothermia. Her energy is light, and you can hear her

singing and practising her set-list for a weekly gig she does at the restaurant downstairs in the hallway at dusk. She has a husky voice and a sinewy body, somewhere between man and woman, adult and child. You don't know where she's come from or what kind of background she's had, but something tells me she's seen a lot of life. Yet she's managed to do that rare thing — establish boundaries, and keep her lightness, despite it all.

I step outside the room on the third morning to go for a jog, and she spies me lacing up my runners. 'Ah, exercise. Good for the body, good for the soul,' and invites me into her room as I pass. Inside, with a window out to the howling traffic, her room smells of incense and on the wall above her mattress are little tacked up passport photos of her and someone else pulling faces at the camera.

'Just because you're staying in a pub, doesn't mean you have to feel povo,' she says, offering me one of many morsels of wisdom from someone who has spent far longer on the road – and perhaps not by choice – than me.

'I like to make things nice. Like that jasmine in the bathroom, I put that there. And this scarf.' She points to a dusty black-and-white football scarf she's hung on her wall like a trophy. 'I found it on the footpath.'

Her room is clean, sparse, but filled with other people's castoffs. 'I pulled up the carpet, and I found that rug,' she points to a little stained rug she's placed carefully next to her bed. Proud.

From our bedroom across the hall I hear the well-dressed and giggling gay man I've seen, knock on her door in the night, asking if she wants to 'go for a coffee'. By that he means: to walk to the kitchen. They pad past our room, unexpectedly cheerful despite the dank space, perching their steaming hot beer glasses filled with coffee beside cigarettes ready for lighting, an unlikely duo sharing this moment in time.

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When they finish their cigarettes they walk up to his room, number 8, where he has a TV. I hear a few bars of the intro music for *Seinfeld*. Georgie's hoarse voice crackles down the hall, in between their laughter.

It only takes two safe people to soften what would otherwise be a scary place to stay. Not everyone is as chatty and friendly as Georgie, and we quickly learn who to avoid.

Strangers, like animals, pick up the scent that we are a self-contained cocoon, and they leave us alone. Jim, too, is free from being taken into the fold of wayward men, because of my presence. Both of us, outsiders, together.

In a place with so many transients, monitoring boundaries, moods and different people's 'vibes' is a full-time job. A secret code seems to permeate all our interactions with everyone – a code of respect for the sense of personal space so necessary when you are sharing such a strange living situation.

This is the problem with short-term accommodation – people rocking up with nothing to lose and jagged with their current space and story. Defensive from travelling, or just broke, lonely or looking to 'party' every second of the day.

A young English couple across the hall wave hello to us, gauging whether or not we'd be up for a drink. Normally friendly, chatty, making eye contact with everyone, it's here that I start to keep a little bubble around myself. I'm in this for the long haul, I need to be careful. Shield myself against that hedonistic travellers' mindset of meeting strangers, bonding over twenty beers, losing the day, ready to go somewhere else.

As much as I'm here to travel and experience things and meet interesting people, writing comes first. If I can't stay afloat, what good am I to anyone? Since we met, Jim and I have inspired this

single-minded focus in each other's creative pursuits. Night after night we debrief over ideas and creativity, and what it means to be a sole operator.

'Our jobs are synchronistic, Lou. It's as if we both need the down time more than the actual time on stage, or you landing your writing gigs. It's what we do with the down time that determines whether we'll get on stage or not.'

My work life has been stripped back to its absolute essentials now. No glamorous home-office to rely upon, my moveable workspace is a powered-up laptop, ideas injected from the people and places I encounter and the non-linear hunt for information to fill the gaps in commissioned stories. An added bonus? A door that shuts, and a room – any room – will do.

On Friday night, Jim flies to Darwin for a whirlwind gig. Like me, he finds it hard to say no to a gig, even if, after expenses, he doesn't technically come out that far ahead. For him, like me, it's as much about the people he meets and the experiences he has as the pay packet at the end.

I spend the first few hours writing my columns for the Sunday newspaper. Nag Champa burns away the drift and din of stale beer, wafting in from the balcony, and Bach's concertos from my laptop block out the intermittent drumbeat, thudding through the floorboards from the bar below.

After focusing for so long I forgot where I was, I look up from my computer, returning to the room. I send an invoice and shut down my computer, trotting outside to Brunswick Street, and realise I just did my 'job' in a cracked room on a stinky mattress. And it didn't make a scrap of difference.

I head up the road to Sally's house for dinner, wine and goodbyes. We talk about travels and adventures, her new job, which

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states of Australia I'm about to tick off the list, play music and laugh about where I'm staying.

'Do you want to stay here? I have a bathroom you don't have to share with creepy drunk strangers and a spare mattress for you to sleep on . . .'

As tempting as it is, the pub experience is a personal challenge to me, especially this one night without Jim. 'No, it's okay!'

At Nicholson Street on my way home, I have to stop myself from automatically walking to my old flat. I gaze forlornly ahead and face the reality that that door, that room, is no longer mine. I'm anywhere I'm booked for the night, now. That single fact has more effect of pulling me into the here and now than anything else.

Back in room 15, I toss and turn to the sounds of screams and throbbing bodies, wishing I'd taken up Sally's offer. The band played until 4 am.

By morning it's quiet as I pad to the kitchen and pour myself a water in the only receptacle available: a beer glass. I have a huge feature to write, and I'm nervous and scared. It's on the latest leukaemia research for a medical journal, and I've never heard of half the terms referred to in the interviews I transcribed, partly in the car, on the way back from Sydney.

I head to Princes Park for some fresh air before I tackle it, and the effect of being in such a wide, lush, open space after the dusty pub is physically palpable. I run and sweat, filling my lungs with power and my muscles with energy. When I reach the end I feel like I've started the whole day over, like I'm brand new and alive.

Exercise always has this effect; a dusting down and wringing out, like a shower for the spirit. A toughening and a smoothing at once, the most natural way in the world to polish your ragged edges.

Blink. Move. Breathe.

After that short dose of *I can*, I'm ready to tackle the feature. I head back to my dirty little room and spread my library books and laptop across the bed.

After three hours, and a draft, I fix myself a sandwich using a pair of scissors as there are no knives in the kitchen, then chomp it down on my bed. Then I start again, and when it's finished, I celebrate by driving to my sister's for dinner.

It's so nice to be around family. And to sit on an actual chair while I eat.

Mum comes to visit my new 'digs', and I glance at her face as she enters the room, spying the bottle of Worcestershire sauce and all my belongings in the three hessian sacks. She seems both curious and philosophical, after getting over her initial horror at what I'd chosen to do.

I truly don't think Mum has ever visited anyone staying at an inner-city pub. Neither have my girlfriends — so I invite them all over for a look, too. Their mutual fascination inspires me to think that it would make a good feature for the daily newspaper, so I quickly send a pitch in the morning to the only editor whose details are listed on the inside of that section. After clicking 'send', a reply pops up almost immediately, a 'thanks but no thanks', and a promise to keep my details on file.

I go downstairs to help Jim to repack the car, as we only have two more sleeps until we leave. On my way down the stairs my phone rings, and the caller announces she's an editor from the newspaper I just pitched to.

I barely catch what she is asking because it seems so ludicrous that I just say 'Yes', jot notes on a scrap of paper I scramble to find, promise to file the first three columns by Monday . . . yes, yes . . . and – she's gone. She wants me to write three columns a

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week for two weeks, maybe longer. The person who I'd pitched the pub story to had moved sections and somehow passed on my details as a fashion writer.

'Oh and Louisa, you've been writing fashion for a while haven't you? You'll have plenty of contacts for photos, too?'

I've never written about fashion before in my life.

I jumble out the news to Jim, race back inside to our room, googling fashion public relations companies, jotting ideas for 'looks', racing to the shop to buy a new copy of *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar*, researching designers to feature and madly emailing friends who might have contacts and suggestions for people who may have photos of their work.

I don't even have time to ponder the thought that these columns will be read by half a million people and that I'm filling in for a writer who has more than ten years of fashion experience and a staunch following of fans. To ponder the challenges would waste valuable time – I need to start sending emails now, because I'm not going to be in mobile phone or internet range for much longer, and I need the first series of columns ready and written in four days.

So I start this amazing new coup as a fashion columnist for the daily newspaper in a room above a pub in Fitzroy when all the clothes I own in the world fit in one plastic sack, and my writing files are squeezed into the same box as a jar of Worcestershire sauce and an iceberg lettuce that Jim has just bought for lunch.

After working steadily for a couple of hours, I head to the library for more research, transcribing words from a fashion dictionary to keep close, implanting visual memories to refer to when I need to intersperse the columns with a reference which makes it appear like I've been doing this longer than a day.

Afterwards, Mum is waiting for me at a café with a batch of forwarded mail and I'm excited to tell her the news. The waiter

sees the yellow mail forwarding stickers and asks me where I've moved to.

'Um, a car?'

It's a warm spring day, one of those Melbourne days when you could cry with the opening of life again after the seemingly never-ending deathly dark of winter. Everybody seems to be out on the street, sunning their freshly revealed skin from Fitzroy's al-fresco tables. My best girlfriends join me for coffee after Mum leaves, and just like magic, others appear, friends we didn't know were in the area, an impromptu celebration on a Thursday night.

A balmy breeze curls up the street and reminds me I'm free, my life is changing, rapidly, rapidly now. What lies ahead are new roads, new stories, a future so bright it's blinding, a love with whom I've already shared a million adventures and we're about to embark on more – and career coups like this magical fashion column.

I have that bittersweet feeling of appreciation for a moment I know will be over before I know it, but keep chanting to myself, over and over, *just enjoy, now*.

The sun eventually sets and Jim calls me from the kitchen at the Royal Derby. 'Lou, I'm using that Worcestershire sauce for a pasta dish, invite your friends!'

I dread to think what the hell pasta with Worcestershire sauce will taste like but the gesture of him cooking in that dingy kitchen, which only has one saucepan and a filthy electric stove, is so beautiful that I can't hold back from inviting them. We stop to buy wine and Parmesan cheese, and sit outside on the rooftop balcony filled with rusty ashtrays with the background city song of the sound of the engines of passing cars.

Jim is visible through the kitchen window, flipping things across the frying pan, eager to serve my friends.

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He dishes up plates of steaming pasta for everyone and brings them outside, when it promptly starts to rain. '*No worries*' is our new reaction to everything, and we turn our bedroom floor into a table, spreading out newspaper like a cloth while Georgie serenades us with her acoustics up and down the hall.

After dinner, Jim plays his self-created comedy DVD on his laptop and we laugh into the night. Having my friends in this space, when we've only ever had dinner parties in houses and apartments, makes it all the more like a crazy movie we've just written or something. It just feels so unreal.

When they leave we brush our teeth together like kids on camp in the shared bathroom, and the rain falls quietly outside. I fall asleep smiling, gratefully, thinking how mysterious life is and how little you really need to be happy.

It's our last night in Melbourne, and we spend it at my sister's. I sit in the lounge room, attempting the first two fashion columns on my laptop as she clicks her knitting needles while their new kitten plays with a ball of string by my feet. The rain splashes the windows first gently, then harder and harder.

It takes me two hours to write the first column, and most of that effort is the fight to silence the taunts that I'm not capable, that I'm silly for thinking that I can, that I don't know what I'm doing. When I've finally finished writing, I'm sure it will be sent back. I'm sure they'll figure out I'm just bluffing. Still, I gulp after re-reading it for the twentieth time, and press 'send'.

'So that's pretty great about the columns,' says Ayala with a proud twinkle in her eye, clicking her needles. Everything about her is cosy.

Did I ever notice so much as now, that I'm leaving?

'Someone at work saw your byline in *Sunday Life* last week. I said you were my sister. She wants to be a freelance writer, too.'

She gives me a look, like it's not going to happen.

'Why do you look like that?'

'She said she didn't hand in the last review because her neighbours played some music too loud or something.'

'Couldn't she have taken her computer to another room in the house? Worn headphones?'

'Exactly.'

'Yeah, well, next time she uses that excuse tell her I wrote that piece in the Albury Red Rooster. They were cleaning up to Britney Spears, and it was turned up really loud.'

The news reports: Steve Irwin has died of a stingray attack. Jim comes in, after a ten-minute set at a comedy room in the city.

'There's already stingray gags making the rounds, Lou.' Life moves forward, so quickly it bites.

Ayala adds enough oats to her morning porridge for both of us and wakes us up to eat with the kids at the back table. I'm wearing an old tracksuit because it's so cold and Jim just pulls on his one pair of jeans and the one woollen jumper he owns. Ayala, in her pyjamas, would usually be embarrassed by someone seeing her like this. As I'm helping her with the bowls, she says to me, 'It's easy to relax around someone like Jim. He doesn't care about things like clothes, does he?' The kids pull faces as jokes and even though his eyes are still barely open, Jim blows up a snake from his ever-ready supply of balloons in his pocket. He hands it over and lets go of the end before Finn gets it.

'Oh, OH! There you go. Now it's a dead snake.'

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Finn laughs. Jim quickly makes Phoebe a pink poodle so they both have an animal, and Ayala scoops them off to pre-school. She tells me later that as soon as she handed Phoebe over to her teacher, she proclaimed loudly, 'We had a real live clown in our house last night!' and showed her the poodle to prove it.

Mum takes us to the corner café for one final latte before we leave. She gives us a road map of Australia, not realising it will become our mutual diary.

Goodbye, Melbourne. Goodbye roads I know and corners and history and cafés and safety and knowing that there will always be someone I know somewhere at some hour and all the pieces that make up a tribe, a place, a life that is home.

Goodbye to all the interiors I've inhabited and all the jobs and floors I've tramped carrying plates, glasses and plans, houses I've lived in, streets I've walked in the dead of night never worrying where I am because I know the place, I know the space, I'm in it as much as it's in me.

I feel scared, casting aside a place which has given me my education, my family, my dearest friends and even led me to Jim, and now, a column in the daily newspaper. But it's time to go, that's all I know. I don't so much know it as feel it. If I don't go now, when I have a laughing knight in a shining Mazda to lead me, when will I go?

Goodbye security. I'm leaping, now, not even looking at the roads I'm leaving, just flicking madly through the map Mum has given us. Some people show houses where they've lived, restaurant locales of their first dates. We get maps to form our sacred history. Crinkled by the sun on the dashboard, open to number 33, waiting for dots to mark our stops on this sunburnt country.

On we drive leaving the past behind like a bucket of ashes, scooped up, gathered together, placed in the dust bin marked 'then'.

And here I am - now.

I pray out loud to Hermes, the God of travel, to keep us safe on the long road ahead. Jim chimes in, smiling at me and yelling out the window, 'Bring it on!' then he sees my lips moving and my eyes shut in prayer.

'What did you ask for?'

I was adding a clause for decent coffee in the outback roadhouses.

12

Living history

'It's good to look them in the eye, Lou. They're just searching for a connection.'

It's ALMOST NIGHT – DID we really only leave Melbourne this morning? – and I don't know how much longer until we stop. Or even where we're going, exactly.

I feel like I'm in exile. But I chose this. I wanted this. I remind myself I have nothing to fear. I'm still me – just in a different place. Where am I going? Why, again?

Jim's gentle spirit, guiding the car forward like a ship, brings me back, as I catch his now familiar look of peace.

'Just wait'll you see the Nullarbor, Lou . . . all these hours of "nothing" will be worth it.'

Oh, yeah. That's why.

Numerous layers of sunscreen, kilometres in the hundreds and snacks eaten in a moving car disconnect me from the earthly centre of my body. No six-o'clock meals at the table for me, or even a bath to book-end the day. You're on your own now kiddo. It's real.

Waves of sadness at what I've left behind compete with a soft sort of anticipation of a future I'll not know until I experience it. The mystery is beautiful, but fear hovers just below the surface of my consciousness.

We stop in Horsham, where the winds blow wild and instead of walking around the lake to stretch my legs I just want to cower in the car. A few more hours of roads again and we're in Nhill, or 'the abode of spirits', according to the sign. We walk in opposite directions around the lake, rejoining to prepare sandwiches with our crockery box unloaded on a picnic bench like the vagabonds we are.

Excitement has faded to mellow apathy, the kind you can only get when you have been driving for hours and you know there are countless more until you get to your destination. You give in to it, like rocking in a boat travelling across the world. Wheels turning over bitumen, carrying us somewhere I've never seen. Surrender, the rocking motion whispers.

The murky sky we left in Melbourne has transformed into the wind-whipped warmth of the Western District, and by nightfall I can already feel the oily layers of sunscreen that I'll need to remove at the next shower. And I have no idea where or when that will be.

Because our phones lost coverage somewhere outside Ararat and radio options have lessened to zilch, a self-imposed silence rules supreme.

At a petrol station in Horsham, Jim emerges and hands me a huge pair of sunglasses. 'Nothing's too fine for my little lady,' he says, jokingly, and I pull off the price tag: \$4.99. He chuckles softly, saying I look like a giant ant.

The rest of my travelling outfit is a ten-dollar green singlet and a pair of tracksuit pants. Jim, too, wears a cotton pair of tracksuit pants and an old orange t-shirt. We put them on after our showers in Melbourne, having no idea these decidedly inelegant outfits would see us across the desert.

Runners, socks and sandals sit on the floor of the car for random exercise when we stop. Jim drives barefoot. Clothes are such an afterthought for him.

We drive relentlessly, silently, trying to place some distance between then and now, not really talking, strangely tense. It's just 'us' now, a travelling entity bonded together, all our belongings mixed up in boxes, stacked atop each other, moving across the map of Australia with no particular to-do list or purpose, except adventure and a different perspective of this country I've always lived in but never really seen.

By eight o'clock I'm tired and I miss my mum. I just want to call her and let her know we are – *well, where are we?* I'd better not call her.

I snap out of it and flick into organisational mode, remembering that if we want to eat anything other than a bag of chips or cold tuna from our box in the boot, we'll have to stop driving soon. Things like meals and accommodation aren't really Jim's forte.

'Babe, do you think there's a town coming up?'

My dreams of a hot meal and something else to look at other than a moving road are fading fast. Ahead, behind and around us is blank darkness and a line in the middle of the road, illuminated by our headlights.

'Um . . . are you hungry?'

Well no, not really, since all I've done today is sit. But I want to stop before it gets to the desperate stage. The gaps between towns are getting wider and wider.

Logic has a funny way of ruining things. Knowing how late it is, how we *should* eat or plan a bed or stop driving, I prod Jim until he responds by slowing down, and drives around the two streets of the next town we happen across until we find the local motel.

'Shall we keep going?' says Jim intuitively, when I come back from the investigation process.

'Babe, it's late. How are we going to find anything else and still get dinner?' I say, feeling a little like a whingeing wife. We've been driving for eleven hours.

Part of me wants to keep driving. But the other part knows how deranged we both become without a proper night's sleep. And we've got a long drive tomorrow.

Begrudgingly paying eighty dollars for a double room with no heating and a musty bed that sinks in the middle with a lime green coverlet, we dump our bags, wander into the dining room, share the wilted and oily salad buffet with strangers, then go to our room to shower and sleep.

Jim seems grumpy. Perhaps because the last time he crossed the Nullarbor he slept in his car. He probably thinks I'm high maintenance.

I regret that I made us stop at this expensive, soulless motel, feeling guilty that I've somehow added a champagne lifestyle to his carry-on luggage. Was it that strange of me to want a bed?

Our room looks like something furnished in the 1950s for a family on a beachside holiday. There is no bath, no TV, and the radios seem to just be for decoration – they don't work. More eerie

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silence. It feels like we are two aliens from outer space landed in the most inappropriate facilities to recover from our journey.

It's freezing and there is only one blanket. But, there are six towels. *That's handy*.

I head into the shower, with a little exclamation at the nice soaps in the bathroom, trying to find something positive. 'Well that's worth the eighty dollars then.'

I'm not imagining it, am I? I know he loves me, but my mind starts playing obsessive tricks in the shower. He's going to drop me off at the next petrol station. He's wishing he never invited me to move into his car.

When I come out, he has that furrowed look, still, and he's on his own computer. I don't interrupt. I'm tense. He's tense. Being together 24/7 is exhausting. Again, the thought: Oh God, what have I done?

I'm too tired to bring my big bag in from the car, but after my shower I need something clean to wear. Jim's t-shirts, which he has curiously lugged in, are lying in a pile next to the bed. 'Just wear one of those, Lou,' he says, not looking up from the email he's writing.

I gulp, but I need an extra layer so I put one on over my singlet and climb into bed, pulling the blanket over me so I can't even see what I'm wearing. Underneath the blanket, the t-shirt reads: I FUCKED A GOAT.

I pull open my own laptop, eager to replace the dull tension from driving with some sort of intellectual stimulation. The internet delivers. I find emails from editors, some fact checking for a story, my horoscopes, and a response to my first fashion column, inviting me to a cupcake and champagne party in South Yarra to launch a new label.

'I have to be at another function . . . thanks for thinking of me . . .' I write in response. I don't mention that I'm in a town called Keith and I'll probably be eating bain-marie specials on the Nullarbor the night they toast the designer. Jim and I both eventually pack up our computers at the same time, and switch off the light. We lie, unmoving, in the strange motel.

In the morning, after jogs and sunscreen, corn thins and apples in the main street, we buy water from the supermarket and hop back in. Jim's brown legs look so happy behind the wheel, and as he drives, he keeps a big bottle of water between them, for sips.

Eventually, like a slow sunrise, Jim's mood picks up a little, as he eases back into his spot behind the wheel. He always does the majority of the driving. Since this car has been his home for longer than I've known him, it's only natural that I get the visitor's chair. Besides, I find the Mazda pretty hard work to drive. Even though he bought it near-new when he fled Sydney three years ago, the heavy load of carrying his life in the back and high-speed country driving has taken the grunt from the engine. It's a full-on thigh workout trying to accelerate with any speed. No wonder he does Tibetan yoga stretches every time we stop for petrol.

Moving in with someone has a way of shining a torch on your oft-ignored habits and how they reflect your values. Jim doesn't value material possessions, to put it mildly. Eyes always half-misty with the bigger picture (a gag in his head, a philosophy about the world), the simple matter of even packing the car with any sense of structure or detail eludes him. And it's even worse when he's about to go on stage, or running late for a gig, which is pretty often.

His clown shoes get thrown on top of a whipper-snipper on top of his jeans and socks. Historical non-fiction novels flap in the

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back window alongside his tax return box. If I hadn't insisted on a complete re-pack I'm sure the Worcestershire sauce would have been thrown in the same bag as my towels.

It's for this very reason that I love him. Here, in my two-day-old tracksuit, stinky singlet and five-dollar sunglasses, he still gives me that *look*. Misty-eyed, kind and caring, hand out to open my door, like he can't believe I've chosen him. Yes, I have. *And you get this stinky tracksuit too*.

He doesn't know I went through my bags with a fine-toothed comb and left behind anything that I would have been heartbroken to see ripped, stained, covered in dust or fallen in the gravel when he was going through one of his pre-gig frenzies, searching for lost keys, phone, wallet or props. Constantly wondering if he's going to accidentally drop, smash or break any of my possessions is like a daily reminder not to get too attached to 'stuff'. It's a good way to be. Yet an art I still haven't quite mastered.

Although it doesn't sound very romantic, I feel as I think a prisoner would feel. Stripped of all the accourrements of my outer 'personality', dressed in a generic uniform, planted in a landscape so wide, gaping and unenthusiastic, I'm forced inward, to question who I am and what makes me who I am, if it's not possessions or place.

I question twenty-nine years worth of habits and values. The fact that up until now, I've always needed daily stimulation – coffee and words, reading, talking, action, writing. Newspapers, radio, television, connection to the wider universe. It's a city thing, but also because I hate to switch off. I might miss – something. Here, I have no such input – just a flat, barren landscape, reflecting the unchanging nature of time. Confronting me with its yawning revelation that nothing material I could ever say or do will change the nature of life.

By absorbing the landscape I understand Jim so much more, and even, perhaps, become like him. Out here you know survival, or even the cycle of life, has nothing to do with superficial wants or needs. It's a series of rhythms, and we follow, as much as we like to delude ourselves that we lead. *Life, death, growth, change*. Designer boots would give me no advantage out here. Neither would a man who valued such things.

I wonder why I've always done this kind of thing – pulled the rug out from under my feet so I have absolutely no back-up option. Like throwing away all my belongings and moving into a man's car. Yes, I trust him, but what? What if something happens – worse or more dramatically than it did last night? What if he snaps or I snap and we both end up in the middle of nowhere with no way out?

I put my hand on his warm leg, flopped like it always is, relaxed on my side of the car. He puts his left hand on top of mine, in a movement so natural and comfortable it's like it's my own hand. Immediately, my doubts dissolve like a small pool of water does in the scorching sun.

As we cross the border to South Australia, we come back into range and my phone beeps with messages. It's a designer, calling about photos for one of the fashion stories.

'Hi Louisa, I just got your message! I'd love to be featured in *The Age*!' she breathes excitedly.

Jim turns down the radio and I act like I'm in an office, hoping she can't hear the sounds of a car honking nearby. I chant off the specifications by rote: my email address, how many pixels I need the photos to be, the size of the file, when it will be published . . . 'Yes, by tomorrow will be just fine.'

By tomorrow I might be out of internet range but hopefully I can forward files from a service station on the Nullarbor.

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I call back other contacts, organising the next week's columns and information as we drive through the streets of Adelaide, searching for the exit. I point through the map for Jim as he searches for the street which leads back onto the highway. The car is packed to the brim, and when he brakes suddenly, a book of Henry Lawson poems hits me on the head.

'Owww!' Now it's my turn to be grumpy.

I have my folder of notes in my backpack like a schoolkid. I never would have thought it was possible to conduct an entire business from a moving car until I saw Jim in action. His weathered Collins diary holds the details of his gigs, his Tibetan breathing exercises ('when I started balancing chairs on my chin the doctor said I needed to do daily stretches to protect my back'), his contacts across Australia – and the world – with a few plastic inserts filled with weathered set-lists. Once, after a gig in Queensland, he'd nonchalantly stuffed his three-hundred-dollar cash fee in a sock in his glove box. Then he pencilled in the payment and added it to his list of venues at the back of his diary.

His version of MYOB. I like it.

I love learning, with Jim by my side spurring me on, that I need so much less than I've been told I do. Not just that, but with someone who cares more about the way I treat people – and life – as I go about what I do, rather than the end result, I focus more on getting the process right. 'It's not about to-do lists, Lou. It's about intention,' is what he believes. The products don't matter – my only reliable tool, he teaches me, is my head and my heart and soul. Passion, excitement and the drive to make it work are so much more important than the right pen, the right office, the right pair of shoes. These are all you need to be literally earning a living from what you love as you skate across the road map of Australia.

This feeling of seeing the same view for days on end is blurring the lines between us. We impose new boundaries and little escapes, little spots of breathing space.

In Adelaide we buy some groceries from Coles and set up a picnic in the park, splitting up afterwards to go for long walks alone and meet up back at the car. Space apart, in these long days of driving, is crucial.

But always, inevitably, by the end of the walk I'm missing him, like a limb I've left back at the car. This partnership stuff is such a paradox.

We are in constant motion, in transit. Neither here nor there. Without much else to rest on, achievement-wise, we begin to push each other to cover greater and greater expanses. The day's accomplishments are ticking off dots. Three hundred and ninety-eight kilometres between two dots, one day, and we treat it like stops on a bus. This is a road trip to rival all our previous road trips. It's addictive.

'Lou, how many kilometres until Iron Knob?' Jim prods, and I kiss goodbye to the vague thought of stopping at every little town between Adelaide and Ceduna. Jim never did like to travel like a tourist.

'Ummm, 597 . . .'

'Cool . . .' he drawls. I love the peace of looking out the window while he drives. It's so damn relaxing. We never make boring chitchat to fill in the gaps. It's either love-talk, creative-talk, travel-talk or nothing.

We pass through towns famous for the biggest this and the smallest that or only known because someone was murdered there. A coffee and a splash of water at one place will make me love it, and if the sun has been stinging me for hours and I have a headache from driving, I hate it. It has nothing to do with the town.

Travel narratives written by people who've lived in Melbourne and Sydney often complain about the lack of amenities in the outback, the stupidity or slowness of the locals, comparing everything to the 'better' big city equivalent. But the one question they don't seem to answer is: What drives the people to disappear out here? Is it humility or hopelessness? And why does so much of the media produced in Australia ignore the ninety per cent of landmass, west of Sydney and Melbourne? Why does loving one idea mean you have to reject its opposite?

It's easy to put down what you don't understand, but I want to make up my own mind, to see if it really is hard for a girl to be out here, not just a girl, placing us all in that one lump of cliché, but me. Can I do it?

I'm determined not to judge anything by previous standards, on this trip, not to classify anything as intelligent or non-intelligent, ugly or beautiful. I want to watch it all like an observer watching a film, even my own actions, in these places. The landscape is merely me, reflected. A blank page for me to understand the nuances and motivation of my character, my culture and Australia. An Australia I've previously only seen from the telescope of people in my socioeconomic group, in a city whose streets and dialects I knew.

Adelaide marks the end of a certain kind of civilisation, and not just because we're losing mass-market shopping, footpaths and kit homes. It's more the sense that we are going into exile now. Passing through the gate into a long period of blankness. The people we see from here on in are their own tribes, following the rules of a different Australia, not the intellectual arty Australia I know, nor the bland uniformity of suburbia.

This feels more wild and undefined, characters seemingly passing time to get through another day, uncaring whether they leave any mark on this world, grateful just to be left alone. Noise and ego doesn't apply out here. No-one's going to save you if you're silly enough to run out of sanity on a long and lonely road because you're wearing the right clothes or you've been on TV. Pretensions got left at the edge of 'civilisation'. Out here we're all the same, flattened by the landscape.

We all need water, petrol, food, everyone is 'mate' and you can make friends or enemies in a split second depending on whether you embrace this or not.

We pull in to Port Augusta late, hungry and tired, heading to the supermarket to refill on water and fruit for the next day's food. Jim stops, momentarily, before he opens the door.

'You might get a shock, Lou. There's a lot of Aboriginals here.' He gives me a look, like he's happy that he could be the one to bring me here.

'Okay.' I don't realise how the bland landscape has seeped into my skin until I find myself visually entranced by rows and rows of colourfully packaged groceries in the Safeway. We reconnect at the check-out, water, celery, chocolate, tuna, chips, in hand.

In approximately two minutes at the Port Augusta Safeway, I see more Aboriginal people, of vastly different tribes and colours, than I have ever come across before in my life. I feel like I'm in another country. And I'm the odd one out, being white.

Across the road are two hotels, and Jim explains that one is for the 'whitefellas', one for 'blackfellas', and the line is rarely crossed. Signs are scattered around with 'No Humbugging', and Jim clarifies what it means. 'Begging for money,' he says, and he politely says no to a few people gently asking for money. Their body language is downtrodden, passive. But it's the resolution to the white and

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black power dynamic, that this is the way it is, which really jars me. I feel fat, privileged, disgusting. 'No mate, sorry mate,' I find myself saying also. I look at them and feel the tug of history and all that my 'people' have done.

There's so much I want to know and tell them, but instead I just send a silent *thank you* and *I'm sorry*, as I pass, looking them in the eye, facing my own shame and acknowledging theirs.

Jim takes my hand as we walk back to the car. 'It's good to look at them, Lou. They're just like us. They're just searching for a connection.' Then he looks at me with a cheeky grin. 'It's kinda cool being the one with the different-coloured skin. Shows you how they must feel!'

God I love him. He gets it.

13

Bundy, bikies and bearded dragons

'Youse need a room for the night?'

STILL DIGESTING MY ENCOUNTER FROM the Port Augusta Safeway, we drive down a dirt road to a pub.

At least, that's what Jim claims it is, but it just looks like an abandoned tin shack, with a black Rottweiler standing guard at the door. It looks a bit like you might picture the head office of the Klu Klux Klan, but I keep this to myself.

A warm, dry heat touches my skin and my stomach rumbles in the dark. Jim is beginning to doubt anyone's home. I wonder briefly if I can go into a hotel – however tin-shacky – in my tracksuit.

'You might be the best-dressed girl in Iron Knob,' says Jim, pointing to my painted red toe-nails peeping out from my sandals. 'Beef'll offer us a room if he's in,' he says, referring to a guy who gave him a gig once. That's all I know. I don't like to ask Jim too

many questions. If you narrow stuff down by overanalysing things, you narrow the possibilities, is our motto.

'You heard of the Rebels bikie gang, Lou?'

'No . . . oh . . . maybe . . . ?'

"... doesn't matter."

We walk up the dark path to the shack and I bump a plastic chair, causing the dog to bark, as we open the door to the shed.

'FUCK ME DEAD IT'S JIMBO!' A stocky man is perched behind the counter with long mutton chops. He's clad in a wife beater, slams a beer on the bar, takes a look at me and firmly plants down a Bundy 'for the lady'.

'Youse need a room for the night?'

Soon, his wife trots out, nodding her approval. I get the feeling she's the real one we need to impress in this relationship. Like a lost soul joining the Rebels as a dysfunctional replacement for the safe haven of a family, Beef secedes to the matriarchal Monique.

Gypsy, the Rottweiler, runs in and sniffs my leg while Jim 'catches up' with Beef. They reminisce over the gig Jim did and why the cops came (shots were fired), how happy Jim was not to be shot at (very), and how Beef reckoned it was the best night ever but the f'ing cops should have f'ed off or he wouldn't have had to use his crossbow.

For the next few hours, Beef and Monique keep up a steady stream of stories about battles with the cops, how they keep out the rival bikie gang with their crossbow, and which guy had heckled Jim and who buried someone down a hole in some other town after a bad 'blue'. Jim laughs and looks at me, 'It was a tough gig that night, Lou.'

I'll say.

'Beef must like you,' Jim whispers, nodding to the third Bundy and coke I've been given since we got there, and Monique

even makes me a ham and cheese sandwich when I ask Jim for the keys to the car to get some tuna. I hate Bundy and coke, but it would be like scorning someone's prize offering to turn it away, so I flinch and pour it down my gullet.

'Eight bucks them usually cost,' says Beef, unexpectedly, and I remember to keep hiding the fact that it sort of hurts to drink them.

Their warmth for Jim spreads to me, in a *she's Jimbo's missus,* so she must be okay way. And also, because they're laughing. I get the feeling they don't laugh much. Jim's visitation is like a medicine which will carry them through another chapter of their lives. You just can't discount how important it is to laugh.

After a while, I go to the 'ladies' toilet, a big cold empty row of cubicles with a window out to the flat, red earth of Iron Knob, an old mining town. There's a TV on behind me and, aside from the bar stools, the tables and chairs are all plastic, like you'd find at a cheap garden furniture shop. An old man sits on the corner bar stool, drinking his beer out of a stubby holder with a naked woman on it. He only moves his head once, to laugh at Jim, indicating that he can hear everything.

Unusually for me, I'm not scared. I never am, with Jim, no matter how jagged the men, how scarred their histories. He seems to have a Fool's touch, coming in with no judgements, just an ear for the humour in even the most tragic story, a way to make anyone smile, and no ego at all so there is no threat or sense that he is doing it for any selfish reason of his own. Every place we visit the men practically beg him to stay and listen to their stories. It's as if he's become the modern version of the nomadic medicine man, but he heals psychic pain more than the physical version, simply by listening and joking and providing an unopinionated presence.

Through snatches of stories about brawls and bar-fights – relating to who has been excluded from the Rebels and why he'd 'kill' for 'em – I gather Beef came from a broken home. He doesn't realise it, but he talks about his dog and it sounds like he's describing himself. 'That's why I called her Gypsy, love,' Beef tells me, referring to the dog who stands guard at the door wearing a little silver-studded collar. 'Had no home, nobody owned her. Bloody beaten up good when I found her.'

Monique is kind to me, but in a forceful, *don't mess with me or any of my kind* way. Her hair is red, straight, sleek, and she has thick eyeliner which serves to shrink her already piercing green eyes. Her nails are blood red and she wears black, like she's a widow.

Beef speaks of his daughter, from another marriage, the custody battle, all the complicated madness that makes up a messy life. I wonder how Monique found him, and what draws people in to these unconventional tribes which you only usually hear about on the news, when there has been a bloody brawl.

I guess the same things that draw people into the conventional ones. A need to belong. A need for someone to fix. A need to set yourself — with someone else — against the world. Against whatever represents the 'authority' that has slighted you. In this case, the 'pigs'. Thankfully, neither Jim nor I are representative of anything that has slighted either of them. My generic tracksuit has come in handy.

Beef holds fort behind the bar like a preacher with all of us banked up as he gives his sermon, the bar his pulpit, his place, his power. He tells story after story, and I tune in again to hear about some 'city poofter' who was lost, coming in and asking for a glass of champagne for his 'missus'.

'Told him to fuck off,' says Beef.

I've never been in a dynamic like this before – the bikies, the wife, a closed bar. If I think about it on an intellectual level I get freaked out. So I gulp down more Bundy and go with the flow.

Jim is asking Beef more questions about his convictions, which sets off another rambling story. Monique gets excited and nods emphatically at the right spots. She's on his side. He's hers, now. Somehow, a mention of an Aboriginal makes it into one of the stories, and I hear *that* word again, fired like a shot from Monique's lips. The way I now let this word coast past my ears without defence shows me how much I've already changed. I'm not even shocked to hear it anymore.

Jim has been locked in conversation with Beef for some time, but sensing the conversation with Monique is heading into dark territory, he snaps off his bar stool and announces that he wants to update his website with some pictures of them.

'What? You want to take pictures of us?' Beef looks humbled all of a sudden. Monique stares at him, quiet, too. She even looks nervous and shy.

'We've not got any pictures of the two of us.' They've been together for seven years.

Jim just laughs and gets the camera out of the car, while the two disappear and put on their 'colours' – their decorated leather jackets. They re-emerge on a roaring Harley into the bar. Monique is freshly made up, with gothically black lipstick.

Jim takes about twenty photos of the two of them revving the engine, cracking jokes like a professional, getting them to ham it up. They hug, kiss and laugh like lovesick teenagers, and for the first time all night Beef isn't talking about a custody battle or the cops. He's patting Monique's hair and they kiss, thinking I'm not looking. She nervously re-touches her lipstick in between shots.

When Jim reappears from the car he has two of his goat t-shirts, one for both Beef and one for Monique. I snap the camera at Beef's radiant smile as Jim presents him with his new work wear.

'I'm makin' you an Honorary Rebel!' yells Beef, through teary eyes.

Before they take the Harley away, Jim snaps a quick picture of me in my green singlet and tracksuit pants, riding it.

Beef laughs behind me. 'Love, hold this.'

He hands me a crossbow, and Jim takes another picture.

'You'll email them pics to us, won't you?' says Monique, blushing, before Beef shows us to a room for the night.

I can barely keep my eyes open as Beef talks away in the room. It's a shack right at the bottom of the mine with fibro walls and a mosquito net. There's even a sink next to the bed.

'Don't disturb the dragon . . .' Beef says on his way out, but it melds into my dream and I'm not sure if I imagined it. We pass out, holding hands like schoolchildren. The mosquito net flaps against our faces and the dry heat catches in my throat.

In the morning I wake to see a giant lizard wandering across the floor. I find a kettle, next to the sink, and get some instant coffee out of the car. There's a toilet, but no shower, so I brush my teeth in the sink. The lizard saunters back across the floor and I realise Beef wasn't joking. It even has gills, which must be the 'bearded' element of the dragon. I open the door and let it out.

Not knowing how much car time will be on the agenda today, I pull my tracksuit back on and go out for a look at the town.

Iron Knob is an arid town once home to a BHP iron mine long since closed, about fifty kilometres from Port Augusta. Everything about the place is dishevelled, abandoned, rough. Cactus plants litter

the footpath which is dusty with red ochre. I pad past tin shacks with Rottweilers standing guard and don't see one female.

Everything looks like it was knocked up quickly, cheaply, to serve a purpose. The whole feel is coarse, tough, parched and masculine.

At the top of an unpaved road, which is the main street, I look down on the town. A place for human cactuses, I think. In need of harshness to thrive. I feel sort of intrusive, or arrogant, for thinking I could just slot into these worlds, across Australia.

Jim's lack of opinion or preference had at first struck me as weak, but now I see that it's the only way he can see the whole of Australia. Imagine if I'd come to a place like this with any of my exes, such as Marco? His aftershave would have warned them a mile away, and we would have been chased out, like the couple Beef mentioned, asking for champagne.

Opinions. Preferences. Personalities. They can rub people the wrong way. Better to be neutral. Safer. I'm becoming more and more like Jim. A blank slate in each new place. An unwritten page, ready and waiting for a new story in every town.

I return to the room and make some toast in a toaster I find under the sink. Beef and Monique turn up soon after and we sit with them in the dry, parched heat as Beef cracks open his first tinny for the day. The bearded dragon wanders sinisterly over to his thongs, and Beef pats it absentmindedly.

We mention where we stayed the night before this.

'Been to Keith once. Best mates were bluin'. Made up now but,' says Beef, looking up at the sky. I ask if one of them ended up in a hole.

Beef chuckles, the scent of dust and Bundy coming out of him as he looks at me, shaking his head.

BUNDY, BIKIES AND BEARDED DRAGONS

'Never take a woman to that place, Jimbo.' Monique nods grimly in agreement.

We drive off, a little later, and when we start to debrief after the turn-off we can't help but laugh hysterically. Jim looks at me, and says, 'How many people have said that about Iron Knob?'

14

Nullarbor dreaming

'Love, by the time it comes here, is old news. So we don't get the papers.'

CEDUNA IS WINDY AND RAGGED. But as it's the last town before we really are deep in the heart of Nullarbor country, Jim wants to see if there's the chance of a gig. Inside the Foreshore Hotel at Ceduna, perfectly healthy human beings smoke and drink the day away to the sinister song of pokies. Outside the sun shines blue and bright.

'G'day mate,' Jim cracks a joke to an anxious-looking Aboriginal man, smoking in the corner. A smile spreads across his face, white teeth grinning widely, shining in the light. The rest glance hopelessly from their ticket stubs to the races on the TV while the chime of the pokies competes with the cash register, slamming open and shut.

The bar is filled with thin, chocolate-skinned Aboriginal people. They look hunted, haunted, hungry. And perhaps worst of all, like they've given up. Behind the bar the two owners are white,

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plump, brisk efficiency, tinkling dollars into the register, seemingly oblivious to how horrific this scene seems, to me.

I feel ashamed of my skin. *Again*. Jim gives me a nod. Knows I'm adjusting. *You're okay, babe*, his eyes say. *Just take it all in*.

After a chat to the owners about the oyster festival, we go back outside through the pokies room. 'Hey Nelly, how's things?' says Jim to an elderly Aboriginal woman. She looks up, and her eyes change.

'Jimbo! Funny man!' She's grinning from ear to ear, remembering something from the last time he was here. The others nearby raise their heads from slumped shoulders and cheap, printed dresses, sipping glasses of beer perched on the pokies slots. Their eyes wide like children, a couple catch his words and smile, too. For a second, the energy is changed, even in this den of smoky sadness.

I feel, again, like I am travelling with a priest who heals through laughter.

On we go, up the road, deep into the heart of Nullarbor country now. Greater and greater expanses between cars and people, life and earth, a blank, barren landscape of what was apparently a sea bed a couple of million years ago.

'Null – Arbor.' No trees. Nothing but the howling wind and the sounds of a few thousand centuries of earth to keep you warm at night.

If you hold still long enough, or even – don't talk – it speaks to you, whispering through the reeves, cracked open to the sky.

The stark contrast between the silent, almost soothingly barren landscape and the petrol stations we must, by necessity, stop at further highlight the strange confusion of what I'm perceiving and what's real, what has gone before us and what lies ahead.

Racism is an arbitrary term out here. There are no newspapers, no intellectual commentary or egos vying for the perfect words with which to describe something that has happened.

As we drive I romanticise that I will finally be able to learn, in each town, through its museums and statues, about the original inhabitants of our land. But nothing prepares me for the uncomfortable gap in information about Aboriginal history, replaced by bronze statues paying homage to European explorers who 'found' something which was already found. So much wisdom, so much knowledge, lies hidden in their Indigenous wandering souls, both about the land, their own history, and how to live in a way connected with a sense of spirit. But I learn that partially because of their own cultural attitude towards recording information and the shameful, violent history of white colonisation, not much of it will be laid out and ready for us to pick up and touch, in a museum or library. The things I learn won't come from books, they'll come from one-on-one experiences, entirely subjective, but all the more beautiful because it's living history. All the more incredible, because it's been here all along, waiting for me.

A still, silent separation starts to sink into my skin and I feel myself becoming like the voluntary lone wolves out here. Drifters, wanderers, loners. This isn't the sort of space which attracts those who need constant attention. Or even – acknowledgement.

Signs start to appear signalling turn-offs to Aboriginal camps, and I wonder how far you have to walk before you are deep in a place where white culture has never gone before.

Later, in Perth, I read of a nomadic Aboriginal tribe which has managed to stay so removed from what we call 'society' they have never even seen a car. The reporter, a white man sent to deliver money for a painting by one of the elders of the tribe, drove deep into the heart of the country to find them, after the uber cool 'art'

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world got 'word' of this artist. They ran for cover when his car arrived. Still speaking in dialect, through a translator, they thought the car was a monster sent as punishment for something they'd done to the land. He offered them money for the painting and the woman who headed the tribe went and buried it.

What use is money, really, when you know how to live abundantly without it?

The further we drive the more of this country seeps into my skin. The wind picks up as we go further west, the stacked Mazda chopped and buffeted with no protection from the gusts blowing in from the ocean, nature's constant reminder that we are but a fleck in the landscape, surrounded by flat, ancient plains, dropping down into thousands of miles of sea. Frightening carved cliff-edges with no sign or warning drop into the same ocean, far from gentrified explanations, civilisation.

Your sense of time and place has nothing on this, it whispers to me.

The jaw-dropping landscape of the southern byte scooping suddenly down into the southern ocean is such a dramatic vista, with deep, echoing silence, that I'm awed like someone who has met their guru when they least expected it.

Jim and I have stopped talking, silenced from this strange, flat plain, rocking us forward like a dream, processing our thoughts and revelling in the peace after our night sleeping with Dragons and Rebels, absorbing other people's demons. Jim has crossed the Nullarbor a few times, now, and just accepts the silence that it breeds.

Something peculiar has also been taking me over, but it's been there since I met him. Now that we share every second and millimetre of car space, dreams and every waking thought, it is growing more imperceptible. I feel like I'm becoming Jim, merging into his body when it's all I look at, forgetting what I was or thought before I knew him. We share everything – habits and hours, water bottles and dreamscapes, music, jokes, brainstorming, silent time, the car, sleep, laughter. I should be alarmed, but I'm not. Friends, family, even observers who knew us separately, don't exist in this place we have planted ourselves, so we are free to merge completely. He picks up my mannerisms as I do his.

Though our speed picks up as the landscape gets flatter and more desolate, kangaroo signs warn of driving at night. Jim, from experience, knows dusk is the most dangerous time for roo run-ins. After saving on lodgings and food the night before, we embrace the idea of paying for a night's anonymity, nothing but sleep, no-one to impress, no-one to explain ourselves to.

'Here?' Jim nods, pulls over at the Nullarbor Roadhouse. When he turns to me I see his eyes are bloodshot, wide open like peeled onions, eight hours of driving making him batty.

I hand over eighty dollars for a 'donga', to yet another stranger in yet another place I've never dreamed of, getting that familiar feeling of romance at unlocking the door to a paper-thin shack which promises us a night of rest, if we can stay warm enough in the whisper-thin walls.

'Dongas' are an accommodation option favoured by truckers. A step up from a campsite, but only just, they offer walls, but no heating. An ancient creaky bed, sparsely furnished and occasionally, electricity. This one has no lights, and Jim sets about with his phone, feeling his way in the dark.

'I'll search for that torch Mum gave us,' I say. Bless Mum and her torches and maps.

Inside, we peel back the flimsy pink cotton spread and lie down for a little while, listening to the howling wind coming in

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off the plains, and a distant dog from a caravan, barking. Within moments his breath is husky in a dream beside me, his heart rate slowed, asleep. Lying and listening, and a little bit lonely in my waking state, I'm also curious about this strange, neither-here-northere place, so I think I'll go and explore. The bed is more than a bit sunken in the middle, so I can't slip out easily. It has to be a heave.

I trek to the showers under the stars, which are coin-in-the-slot, one dollar for ten minutes. A sign on the door asks me not to take too long: 'Water comes by truck. Not by mother nature!' It smells like a urinal, even though it's definitely for females. I weigh the pros and cons of going in for a wash. In Keith, it was a toss-up between the jog and the shower. The jog won. In Iron Knob, there was no shower. I don't think I've ever layered so much sunscreen and sweat in my life.

I know it's only a dollar, but this shower is really filthy. And kind of – creepy. Jim is asleep in our murder-mystery shack on the edge of the dongas. I take my towel back to the car. This place would be a great setting for an episode of *Medium*.

Searching for a connection to what day it is, or what's happening in the rest of the universe, I ask in the shop for a newspaper.

'Love, by the time it comes here, is old news. So we don't get the papers. Last chance was Ceduna. Next probably Norseman.' I look at our map. That's a one-thousand-kilometre gap.

The shop owner talks slowly, but not with any ill-will. It's just a different pace out here. The TV blares in the background, and I see her point.

'Do you miss the paper?' I ask her vaguely, still absorbing this strange fact.

'Nope. Never read it.'

I order the least unhealthy of the meal options from the bainmarie: a hamburger.

'Seventeen dollars, thanks love.'

The patty is so dry when I bite into it the entire thing falls apart.

So I walk outside, sit on the gravel road, and listen to the silence again, before heading back to our room. I fall asleep with my arms around Jim, my one and only anchor. He stirs, still sleeping, and hugs me back.

I wake from a cold sleep, thinking of cliffs. By now, Jim can read my breathing patterns even when I think he's still asleep.

'Don't go for a run, babe. You just don't know.'

'Okay. I'll just stretch my legs in the field.'

Outside our room, a lizard waddles lazily across my toes like it couldn't care less, and I gaze out to the distance, far from signs and traffic and police and all those city safety-nets which are placed to protect us from our own stupidity. Here, you could walk and walk and get lost in a thousand kilometres of space, freeze to death in a night's winds, or worse, fall off the byte if you walk too fast. The earth demands reverence and respect, and I feel my spirit finally understand just a fraction of the sacred awe which kept Aboriginal people living in harmony with this frightening, mystical land for centuries.

Mystery and gaping anonymity hit you here, too. There's a quiet apathy to the things that make up an identity, in a space like this. If you wanted to disappear, this would be the place to do it.

But be careful where you step. The twenty-seven hundred kilometres of cliff dropping down into three hundred feet of granite which make up the Great Australian Byte looks out to Antarctica, dropping stiff and sharp, like God has sawn it off in a violent

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decision, dropping into the deep blue sea. There are no fences out here, nobody else to protect you from the elements. Whether you live or die is all up to you.

Jim comes up behind me to gaze at it too. 'You like the Nullarbor, don't you?' He looks proud, like someone who is showing me their backyard. Like? This is more than like – it's intense fascination. All this time I've lived in Melbourne, and I never came to see this. I like Jim's way of acting like Australia is his to show me, just as it's all of ours, but not that many people want to see it.

We stand in silence for a little while, just appreciating. Like a polar opposite to my waitressing self, I am still. Content. I don't want to be anywhere else with anyone else in this universe. This, is what's out there. No more wondering.

Jim breaks the silence eventually. 'Let's go, Lou. We might be able to see the whales,' he whispers.

Once a year, whales from Antarctica return to the Australian Byte to give birth to their babies in the place they were born. It's only a very narrow window of days when they do this, their instinctual watery bodies gravitating towards the memory of the waters where they emerged from the womb.

Without any research into the phenomenon, or even knowing what dates they appear at the edge, Jim had been filling the car with petrol when he heard from someone at the roadhouse that today is probably the last chance to see them. After swiftly packing our meagre belongings – the torch, our water, our wallets – we get back into the car, bidding adieu to yet another space which has carried our spirits through another night, following a turn-off to the national park.

The view from the edge is an unfathomable expanse of sea, crashing below the kilometre-long cliff face, ancient stone which

has seen thousands of years of changes. Massive blobs of black slap up and out of the water, breaching their magnificent forms in the daunting sea. We watch in awe, mesmerised by the power of this other world within our own world, mothers moving with their own water, shifting space, listening to some internal guide we will never ever understand.

'Pretty unreal, hey?' Jim looks at me. Yet another never-beforeseen-marvel we've shared. These moments make me feel like our life together is one endless honeymoon.

Afterwards, Jim calls me into a cave, and I tiptoe down into a cavern sliced into the side of the cliff face, gulping back vertigo to stare at the expanse of sea ahead. 'I love the fact that there's no signs about anything,' says Jim. So do I. Find it all yourself. Find yourself.

This land, in all its harshness and beauty, demands that you mature, fast, learning the language of your earth as a matter of survival. Every sound and drop in temperature, in changes to the landscape, reading the earth for your own life. Far from the spoonfed culture of television and takeaway food, out here is where you learn truly to fall in love with the source of all things. And to listen, with every breath.

The vastness of the land, and the jarringly extreme sense of life and death dancing in the same air, brings my whole being alive with lucidity and focus. I'm in awe everywhere I look, gasping and silenced. Like a trip to a monastery, the effect of the silence and space is overwhelming clarity.

I reassess my need for the newspaper, and wonder if to read that trivia out here would be to miss the point. It's a relief there is still a place in Australia so blank and untainted that you have no choice but to switch off your connection to the superficial.

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Spirits whisper in the eaves. In a place with no distractions, you hear them so clearly. They tell me that all that matters is love, letting go and following your dreams.

We are as vast and expansive and frightening and beautiful and untameable as the land we walk on.

Nothing else matters.

15

Another country

'What time is it?'
'It depends where you stand!'

We're deep into the plain. Each hour we spend driving makes me feel we're deep-sea diving and I'm further and further away from the surface. The signs for the ninety-mile straight were hours ago, and we've long since stopped looking at road signs in the triple digits for the next place to stop. The horizon spreads out like an ocean, the same vista any way you turn your neck. It's dizzying.

The austere sameness of the landscape plays tricks with your mind, and by now Jim and I have entered what feels like a different state of consciousness, leaving each other to daydream as time and space melt into our senses. I put my hand on his leg, silently thanking him for bringing me here. He winks back at me in acknowledgement, and keeps driving, silently.

I'm not even sure what time it is. It could be just getting dark, or it could be the sun is just coming up on the horizon, ready to sear

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the sand. All I can see is space ahead, and the dust we've kicked up by the wheels of the car in the rear-vision mirror.

What day is it? I'm tired and cramped from being in the same position in the passenger seat while all we own fills every spare piece of space in the back. Jim can't see out the back because the swag is up against the window, and our two-dollar hessian 'refugee' bags with all we own fill every available bit of space and nudge up against me, encroaching on the front seat.

I close my eyes for a minute and drift off into a regretful memory about the new mattress I gave away when I got rid of my bed and all the rest of my furniture . . . I'm woken from my listless fantasy by a gut churn from a sudden slam on the brakes.

'Lou! Look!' It's the loudest Jim's been all day.

A camel has walked in front of the car.

Yes, a camel. We pull over by the side of the road and manage to catch a glimpse of it trotting into the distance, its gold and mocha humps eventually blending in with the horizon.

It's then that I realise we've made it to Western Australia. The driving has been so long, so flat, so severe, disorienting my perception so that I'd almost given up hoping. Camels, red dust and searing heat are the first taste I get of this new country. But it's not just any summer heat, the kind you get for two weeks in January every year in Melbourne. No, this kind of heat would disintegrate an animal carcass in a day, char your skin in an hour and leave you dry and delirious, slow and stunned, easily forgetting your past, present and future.

Jim pulls over, and I find a tree to squat behind, cleaner than any truck stop we've been in, with a few bull-ants for company, too. 'Are we really in Western Australia?'

'Sure are, baby!' He's smiling and aflame with passion, like he's just brought me home to our renovated love nest. 'Check out the colour of the ground!' I stand up and look down at the red earth, almost tripping over a bull carcass. A smile spreads across my face. *I'm really here*.

After we hop back in, Jim starts telling me stories about where we're going, who he knows, gigs he's done. He's waking up. Already, his energy is shifting. The same way I noticed how much he relaxed when we drove out of Sydney or Melbourne, he is in an entirely different zone, over here. Like it's the land of his birth, even though he was born and raised in Sydney.

A question appears, faintly, walking in front of my sun-seared eyes. *How will you change, from here on in?*

At Border Village, like we've crossed the finish line in a wacky race, three giant clocks with three time zones at the fork in the road symbolise the crossing of a threshold.

'What time is it, Jim?'

'It depends where you stand!'

Technically, you're supposed to change your watch back two hours when you cross the border, but really, how can a few metres dictate the time? This is one of my favourite parts of travelling. That realisation that time is but a construct, *just like the rest of your life*.

I fix a coffee from brown powder in polystyrene at the truck stop while Jim helps the quarantine inspectors go through our car. They retrieve markers of our relationship, cleaning out the boot, forcing the unpacking again, this time, to be repacked with a cake of red dust. Our territorial marker, our glorious achievement that dust. This time, my clothes will have it too. No more red dust jealousy, like I had in Melbourne when he'd unpack yet another item caked in his passport stamp from a foreign part of my own country.

Out go the nuts we bought back in Queensland, honey from Adelaide, some rice snacks from Sydney, and all the fresh fruit we'd hoped would last until Perth. Although we're on the border

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we're also in no-man's land. No paper, no phone connection . . . and now, no fruit.

Jim munches on two apples at once and chats to the men as they search.

'When did you guys leave Melbourne?' I hear one drawl, as he removes another bag, this one with the Worcestershire sauce from Fitzroy.

'Ah . . . day before yesterday,' Jim slows to their pace, talking the same way, instantly making them comfortable.

The old guy looks up. 'What? You did that – in two days?' Jim, standing with two empty apple cores, has on a green t-shirt which says, 'Pike – Just do Nothing'. And he looks like the most simple, ruddy fool in the world.

'Did you say you've got a missus?' the old man asks. Jim waves over, signalling to the man where I'm standing, and he laughs, shaking his head.

The pace of shopkeepers, even the quarantine agents – is all a slow saunter. I gaze up at the shop TV, its unknown newsreader reporting on unknown people and places reminding me that I might as well be in a new country. The clock we adjust our watches to says four o'clock, and we've miles to go before we sleep. Six hundred kilometres, to be precise, from Border Village to Kalgoorlie.

In Norseman, closer, closer to the finish line which just keeps moving, I buy a can of dolmades, three more bottles of water and a packet of snakes, to cheer Jim on with the driving. Walking out of the little supermarket, I notice a sign in the window, advertising a metal detector. Below the photo is a hand-scrawled encouragement: 'There's gold in them there hills!'

I look up at the sky, a different, wider-seeming sky than the one I'm used to, with a heat that tastes like liquid gold, drying on my tongue in a crust coloured amber, like honey. I can see why

people head west for new beginnings, a new life, or just to forget the old one. It's easy to start over again when the sky drips liquid gold all over your tongue in a heat so strong you can't remember where you've come from.

And any step you take could be on a gold mine.

16

A touch of Paris in the goldfields

Tve always wanted to go to Paris, Jim.'

JIM'S SHINING FACE, WET WITH NEW jokes for a brand-new day, wakes me from a dreamless sleep. He has his hands behind his head, looking up at the whirring fan.

'Lou, do you think there's a skimpy in Paris called Boulder?'

'Umph?' I'm groggy with the relief that only a bed can give after thirteen hours on the road.

We rolled in to Boulder, Kalgoorlie's twin town, late last night, lost in two time zones after eleven hundred kilometres of road.

I couldn't talk. So beyond hungry, angry, lonely and tired – otherwise known as the HALT principle – it was all I could do not to give voice to the feelings of blame that he had made me this way, when yes, I had agreed that we keep driving, mercilessly,

from Border Village. To Grand Final Weekend in Kalgoorlie. And nowhere to sleep.

Like a *Survivor* challenge we'd given ourselves, we really had left ourselves in the most ludicrous situation. But, like everything about how we go about meeting our basic needs together, impulse always seems to take precedence over foresight and planning. Or even logic. Sometimes that was great. Sometimes it was – not.

I just had to trust that Jim's good karmic vibe would see us in a bed by the time the clock struck midnight. If nothing else, I needed to check my email, and shower about a kilo of dirt, fatigue and random thoughts of fear from my skin and hair.

One sweaty pub after another in Kalgoorlie turned us away. Men spilling out the doors sporting mullets and wife-beater singlets cast eager eyes up and down at me, spitting on the street, downing pints of beer. Jim and I took it in turns to ask. I didn't want to show him I was a bit scared.

'Hi, my boyfriend and I were wondering if you had any accommodation upstairs?'

The owner shakes his head. Nope. 'Won't have much luck on Grand Final Weekend I'm afraid, love.'

My emotions have always had an element of the Big Dipper about them, swinging from ecstatic highs to miserable lows – and that's just before I've had a coffee in the morning. Fronting up to the main bars of packed pubs on Hannan Street after a day spent in the car, ignoring the werewolf-type glances of sweaty cashed-up drunks, I felt a little angry. And bereft. With a side dish of hopelessness.

'We'll try Boulder, Lou. Come on.'

In Boulder, just five kilometres up the road from Kalgoorlie, there is still a little noise in the few open corner pubs, but nowhere near the element of desperate aggression we just escaped. The sandwich board out the front of the Golden Eagle Hotel announces, 'Skimpy of the Week: Paris'.

'I've always wanted to go to Paris, Jim.'

When we walk in together, numb, exhausted, bug-eyed, the middle-aged couple behind the bar just smile at us sweetly, then hand over the key to a room before we've even registered how great it is that we will have a bed tonight. And a shower.

Homeless and unwashed at 11 pm on a Friday night, still in my exquisite sunscreen-and-sweat-soaked singlet and navy tracksuit pants, bloodshot and mincing words, with the scent of our just-eaten dinner from McDonald's emanating from our pores, I worked really hard to smile at the lady as she talked us through the facilities. Finally, she left, and we lugged our bags up the stairs. After a few moments, footsteps again, and a tap at the door.

It's the lady, in heels, I notice, teamed with her own tracksuit pants, standing proudly as if posing for a brochure, bearing three fresh towels for us. There were also three on the bed when we got there. 'Youse need any more towels you just let me know.'

We must have looked dirty, I guess.

But when I pad up the hall to scrub away three states and two days worth of dirt, I'm standing next to a urinal, and there's no lock on the door. I shut my eyes and watch the water run down the plug-hole, washing off yet another insane journey.

It always startles me how a full night's rest wipes your aura clean and you're ready to do it all again. Just when you think this is it, I can't go on like this anymore, one big dose of unconscious oblivion and you're ready to do it all over again.

'Youse wanna come down for a sausage when the game starts?'

As much as I hate football, I do love that it is such a unifying force this woman is already inviting us to a barbecue. The husband adds, almost as an aside, as I pay for another night, realising we've

slept past check-out time, 'Youse might wanna move ya car, seen it got a bit of a swipe last night.' I walk out the back and look at the Mazda, parked haywire – almost on its side – like Jim had been a second away from falling asleep at the wheel. The entire back left light has been smashed, and there's a huge dent in the rear chassis.

Jim, back in the room, is eager to try out a new joke, but I interrupt him. 'Babe, um the car is a bit damaged.'

'Oh. Right-o.' He doesn't seem too fussed. He rubs his eyes, pulls on his shorts, and pads down the fire escape to have a look.

His face is contemplative. 'I can just tape it up I reckon.'

It hasn't affected his mood at all. He fishes out some masking tape from the glove box and gets to work.

'Did she say something about sausages?' He winks at me, dusting off his knees.

'I love you.'

Jim, despite his strange material circumstances, is easy to love. He doesn't blame, get angry, snap or criticise me, even when he hasn't slept for days or has had his only possession smashed. When cornered, he burrows into his own private oasis, which can be just as hard to penetrate. But unlike some of my less-appealing traits, he never erupts or has a 'mood' depending on circumstance. A quiet acceptance that he has created every cause and effect in his life frees me from bearing the brunt of less evolved projections. It's liberating, and forces me to step up to the plate and lift my game, lose any remnant of projections from relationships past. We don't play games. Jealousy is a non-issue.

'If I wasn't into you, why would you even want to be with me?' he said once, on the subject. I feel the same way. And I know that if I talk to other men or establish relationships with anyone – man or woman – Jim will just want to hear about it out of curiosity about me, not some lower ego jealousy wanting to know if the other person poses a threat. There is no threat. We love each other, and we both expect each other to love the world. It happened straight away and the connection is so invisible and so deep that to worry about it being severed just doesn't cross either of our minds. When we talk about other relationships we've been in, it's a curious conversation, not an anxious one.

But at the same time, we see that these issues are pretty much prevalent in every gender exchange we have with others. When we get home, or back into the car, after each exchange, it's like a huge sigh of relief. Life is so much simpler when you don't get jealous.

After we spend some time in Kalgoorlie, I realise that I would have been in real trouble had I come here without him. Kalgoorlie is a peculiar place, dramatic in its exposure of the worst of white Australian male behaviour.

By midday the sun is beating down on the tin roof of the pub and sweat pours down my décolletage after just a few moments standing on the balcony outside our room, surveying this new landscape. Downstairs, the pub is filling up fast. Sweaty white men with shaved heads clad in Bulldogs colours line the bar, shouting and jeering.

I take the chance for another leisurely shower while Jim settles in with a lemonade and his mobile phone to 'watch' the game with his best mate back in a different space and time (it's three o'clock there), in Sydney.

The mirror and sink is just a step away from the urinal, but Paris, the skimpy, has left some make-up and hairspray on the counter. Jim says she was touching up her lipstick when he walked in.

'It was a little awkward Lou,' he said with a chuckle, when he returned to the room. Although she nodded that he could go right ahead, he used the cubicle out of respect, emerging when she had got to the eyeliner part of her make-up routine. I giggle, picturing the exchange.

After my shower I put on my favourite cotton red dress, in celebration of being able to cast off my Nullarbor tracksuit, and also because it's the only thing in my bag fitting for such heat. I walk down to the bar to join Jim and watch the scene.

The couple are serving beers and Paris is chopping up lemons, her flesh exposed to the preparation of food and a sharp knife, beer taps and open saloon doors. She's clad in a black see-through negligee, a g-string and chunky heels, and I admire her ability to do physical work in such a get-up. But it also just looks so peculiar.

There's something almost clinical about having someone's flesh so exposed while you are drinking, eating and sitting around. She makes no attempt to hold in her stomach or stand in a flattering way. The bar is too busy. She's puffing and panting, working just as hard as the other – clothed – bar-staff. But her vulnerability shows, no clothes to make up a story, this is her body. On show.

Soon, she comes to do a 'round' with her pot glass. She stops awkwardly in front of Jim. 'Would you like to see my breasts?'

'Ahh, oh thanks but I'm okay. Thanks though!' Jim is awkward. Polite. *Didn't we just meet in the urinal?* he doesn't say. She's just doing her job.

I look away when the drunk guy next to me says yes to her offer, out of respect for his private 'show', but I see him put a fiver in her glass. Afterwards, he turns proudly to me, as if he's done a community service. She moves on quickly with that peculiar half-smile, and I see the young guy who is in the room directly across from us turn her down, despite his obvious inebriation. Shaking his head decisively, like she's offered him a ticket for the meat raffle.

'Nah love. Not today. Waiting for me pay . . .' He looks back up at the television.

'They make a packet, those girls,' one says to Jim, letting it dangle in the air for me to absorb too.

"... Do two weeks in one place, get their meals and accommodation, only do an eight-hour shift max . . . pretty good life."

As a miner, he's used to thirteen hours underground at a time. But still – I know that the skimpies only get thirty dollars an hour. When I was working as a waitress in some of Melbourne's better restaurants, I'd make that, with tips. And I didn't need to slice lemons with a bare chest or pull beers in stilettos. But I guess it's the same thing. Doing a job – for the money.

'Gotta be careful, but. Some of 'em show their nipples to get more tips, but we tell 'em not to when the cops are making the rounds,' says one of the guys sitting near Jim.

The nipple law strikes me as hilarious. It's technically illegal for them to expose their nipples, and so the ones who don't wear negligees usually cover them with 'stickers'. Little stars, coy little hearts. At worst, a piece of tape.

Looking around the miner's pub, which smells like beer and sweat and sounds like groaning and feels like hard work and dirt, it's no wonder this strange job description – a skimpy – exists, as a way to 'slot in' some femininity in an extreme way. If 'femininity' is what you'd call it. In a way, it's a brutal femininity.

Paris, slicing lemons, sweating as she pours beers. Clomping around the bar, pulling down her top in one jerky movement.

Oddly, I miss women's clothes. A flash of a colourful scarf here, a creative pairing of boots and dress there. Something hidden. Mystery, subtlety. Style. Beauty for the sake of beauty, not flesh for the sake of flesh. But things are sort of – sped up – here. The men only have a certain number of hours to get their 'fix' of women. Give me a naked one. *Now*. I imagine their hunter-gatherer brains ticking over.

Jim holds my hand under the bar where no-one can see it, rubbing his thumb against the palm of my hand. Back in our room we discuss the whole thing like we're doing a Masters in Aussie outback culture.

Paris leaves the door to her room ajar, shares the showers with patrons, and comes and goes like the 'temp' that she is. The couple who run the pub work alongside her g-stringed form, and it's all just the way it is. It's all about the money. Something you do, in between worlds.

The only time I remember that skimpies are 'unheard' of in the east of Australia is when I email my friends. 'What's a skimpy?' most of them ask.

Paris – or whoever the *skimpy of the week* is – provides some visual relief from a day spent underground, and brings in the patrons, thirsty for beer no matter what time they've clocked off their shift. In return she gets a bed, a room and her pay. And when she's done, she leaves *TV Soap* magazine and a jar of instant coffee for the next girl.

She has red hair and a face so caked with make-up it's hard to tell where she is on the time-line between eighteen and thirty. Her eyes are turquoise blue, a colour so unnatural it must be contacts, I decide. I would too, if I felt all those men looking hungrily into my soul as I poured them beers, I think.

Paris has a strange half-smile which she uses on the patrons, not betraying a ripple of a clue about her character or personality. I realise I'm the only other girl in the pub in her age demographic, wearing make-up. She looks at me, slightly confused at my being here, but still with that unquestioning acceptance. She sleeps in the room beside us, with the window overlooking the balcony where I write in the dry heat. Through it I spy the anonymous clues to

her life: an unkempt bed, a jar of vitamins, an *NW* magazine open to a story on Tom Cruise and Katie Holmes, curled in the heat. Beside the bed is a James Patterson thriller half read, the wrapper of a chocolate bar and the TV left switched on to a soap opera. *Just like a summer holiday*.

After she's finished her shift that afternoon, a man pulls into the car park, honks his horn until she jumps in, looking straight ahead. She gets in wearing a denim miniskirt and stripy singlet, then leans over to kiss him. He pulls out swiftly, kicking up a cloud of dust on the gravel road.

Boulder and Kalgoorlie are the twin cities of Western Australia's Goldfield region; an area home to over fifty operating mines hacked deep into the rich red earth. Faded newspaper articles from the gold rush herald stories of a man's fortune changed in an instant, woken that day with the clothes on his back, digging away at the dream of a nugget the size of a cherry, enough to change his family's fortune for the rest of his life.

The first yell of 'Gold!' in 1893 inspired a mass exodus to the area, from areas as far as the eastern states. All these men, dreaming of a better life, trekking through the waterless desert on a dream.

We visit Coolgardie – forty kilometres from Kalgoorlie – on Sunday. A ghost town now, only one of its twenty pubs still open for public consumption, historic signs dotting the empty main street which speak of its height, when it had a bigger boom than Kalgoorlie. Sad tales of men walking in 1892, the 110-mile waterless journey from Southern Cross on foot, only stopping at the rare stations, to get a life-saving cup of tea in the heat.

With no running water for washing, drinking or disinfecting, disease, dysentery and death spread fast. But still they kept coming, all those men, hungry for gold.

All the pubs seem to have a nugget story here, a reminder of the richness which hides under the crust of earth, and perhaps more sinisterly, to remind all the miners of why they've given up any semblance of having a balanced, 'normal' life. What is normal anyway? You so quickly lose the old versions you used to have, especially if the need is strong enough — and they all come here with the same desire: a stint in 'Kal' to *set themselves up* for the future. Climb down into a mineshaft and don't go back to the city until you've earnt enough to keep you going for life. But when is it ever enough?

Downstairs in the main bar at the Golden Eagle is the framed newspaper story from the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, proclaiming the particular nugget on which this pub was founded. This one was found right near the surface in 1930, a seventeen-year-old the lucky striker, hitting six thousand pounds with his humble pick and shovel. Since every pub has a story of a nugget found under its floors, as recently as the 1940s, you have the sense that there is still gold hovering under the floorboards of the cheaply constructed houses which litter the streets of Boulder and Kalgoorlie. But where the beauty of gold would seem to suggest that the place should be rich and regal, the money and wealth is spent on men's tools: utes, bullbearings, tyres.

Mum's roses would never bloom here. Just wildflowers, with lots and lots of prickles and weeds.

That feeling – of men who've come here for one thing, and one thing only, to change their fortunes through the sweat of their brow and nothing else – permeates every part of Kalgoorlie. It's a hunger, an aggression, a paradoxical mixture of greed and integrity, to 'make good for the family', or just scrape themselves back from nothing. Mostly, though, it's young men I see, pouring their mining wages into hotted-up utes, into the tills at the plethora of pubs, or keeping the goldfields' sex industry afloat.

The gold lying below the surface in Western Australia will probably always hold this appeal to white men. After the longest drought in history in the eastern states, we learn that the same things still drive men, a hundred years later, to leave ailing farms and businesses to try to make good in the West.

After Coolgardie, we head to the Superpit, a massive mine just up the top of the city, so big it's like a city of its own. It would take a truck an hour to drive through its daunting roads of chiselled granite, hundreds of years of layers and digging, and still there's more. The daily blasts are a visual reminder of the violence of twenty-first-century mining, like hand grenades thrown in a war. Except there's no war, it's supposed to be our own country.

Late that night we are lying in our bed when the earth shudders dramatically and the walls rattle. I assume it's an earthquake.

'Babe?' I tug Jim's shoulder.

'It's just the pit, Lou.'

The Superpit, mined twenty-four hours a day, every day of the year, is the largest open-cut mine in the world. Part of The Golden Mile which sparked the biggest Gold Rush in Australian history, it has been drilled and blasted for gold for so long that its gaping, carved wound is visible from space.

In the morning I jog past utes and red dust to the lookout perch on the side. From this vantage point, goliath-sized trucks, endlessly carting material up and down its roads, look as small as Tonka toys.

A hundred years of digging in particularly mineral-rich areas has left gaping holes littered around Western Australia, long abandoned when the bounty has been drilled out. It seems so greedy – to just take and take, in ever more extreme ways.

I remember reading of Aboriginal 'grazing' methods, back in Melbourne where you can talk about these things much more

philosophically because it's not in-your-face. The nomadic tribes, who hunted and picked their own food from bountiful areas, had a silent understanding that you never take more than a third of the crop from a certain area, no matter how hungry you are. 'You must leave enough for it to regenerate.' It's this concept of thinking about no less than six generations ahead and the innate regenerative capacity of the land, before their own stomachs, that is in grave contrast to the violent greed of mining with equipment which sends earthquake-like shudders to houses kilometres away.

There are no TV cameras here, nobody worried about being politically correct or environmentally sound or impressing voters. It's almost primal, like rape; violent, forced digging into the earth's crust, now aided by gigantic electrical equipment.

And the strange assumption that it will go on forever. Or when this part is fully mined, you'll start again somewhere else.

After visiting Coolgardie, I become curious as to how the first water pipes were laid down. A sift through the book rack at the Coolgardie museum reveals it was an Irish engineer, Charles Yelverton O'Connor, who was responsible for the most ambitious water-supply scheme in Australian history. But oddly, his luck seemed to have done a sharp U-turn halfway through the trajectory of the project. A year before the long-drawn-out Mundaring Weir scheme was completed, he shot himself unexpectedly, leaving behind his wife and seven children. There's a suspicious lack of information on why such a brilliant and ambitious man would have worked so hard and given it all up one sad morning. Jim purchases one of his biographies at the museum, and we read it together, lying in bed, that night.

'You notice something missing from this story?'

'You mean, the Aboriginals?'

'Yeah.'

Nowhere in the chronological treatise on O'Connor and this area of Australia, which was still largely inhabited by Aboriginal people back then, does it even explore the topic of Aboriginal tribal history in the sites chosen for the Weir.

'That's the thing about Western Australia, Lou. Whole other ball game when it comes to land rights and Aboriginal history.'

I can't help but think that by disrespecting a space considered sacred to the oldest living culture on the planet, you might call upon you some bad 'vibes'. Or, just to get really superstitious, a curse.

Watching a documentary on sacred Aboriginal sites, months later, I learn that O'Connor used one of their most sacred watering holes for the Mundaring Weir project. After one of the original tribes attempted to convince him to relocate the project, and he refused, a curse was put on his life. It's not surprising that the curse never made it into the museums. But it haunts me to think how hard it is to find out about what is violated. Where I am walking, the spirits I could be disturbing. And that sighing, sad resolution that what my skin represents is two hundred years of brutality to a race which would never dream of using a drill to hack into the earth and sell the proceeds to each other, for nothing but a profit turned so quick.

The day has cooled to a slow simmer by the time the game is over, and like a dog cooped up all day in a hot house, I'm eager to go for a walk. I forget where I am, temporarily, slipping on my shoes and ready to explore this new town. But time has stopped in a certain era here. It's that time when men's public spaces were bars, restaurants, billiard rooms and brothels. And the women were either prostitutes or hiding out in the parlour. Jim has been here before, though.

'I'm coming with you, Lou.' He says he needs to get his body back after days of driving but I notice concern on his face, at my naively strolling outside in this extremely aggressive space.

Shops which sell bullbearings, alcohol, cars, tyres, pipes, wheels, tools, hardware and truck parts glisten in the amber sunset, along with hotels on every corner and a precinct entirely devoted to bordellos. We walk in peaceful silence through the balmy night, holding hands as 'We Are the Champions' echoes out the doors of hotels along with the sound of drunk men singing, fights brewing, stumbling and swearing on every corner. And further down, we pass Aboriginal men on the street, swigging from bottles, rolling their eyes back in their heads in delirium, not noticing us as we pass.

The flipside of the emphasis on money-making in the goldfields is the nonchalant acceptance of a stranger appearing to start over again. They don't ask where you've been or where you're from. They ask if you're looking for work. It's assumed you are here to earn money in an industry linked to miners or sex, and there is no shame in putting material gain above all other concerns for a time in your life. Back in Melbourne, university students would be living on two-minute noodles whilst studying for a degree in politics. It's almost like a different race.

Since we're out, and Jim is his own agent, we wander into a few pubs, Jim spruiking his wares, telling managers about his show and offering to leave a poster. One reeks so strongly of last night's vomit, sweat and stale beer that I have to hold my nose to stand there, while the manager blows a plume of smoke at Jim's face.

'Mate, I've gotta ask. Do ya swear?'

'Yeah, a bit,' Jim says, chuckling nervously at the understatement and pulling out one of his t-shirts to prove the point.

The manager, a burly guy with a huge beer belly and a tattoo of a speared heart on the crown of his head, grins approvingly, exposing a missing front tooth. 'Oh good. Otherwise they'd think you were a poofter.'

We walk back to Boulder, passing thin-walled houses with the doors left open, television lights flickering and abandoned strollers in the front yard. Broken objects betray the apathy of desert heat. In more than a few, I make out the shadows of overweight women in the doorway, and they eye us as we walk past, without saying hello.

Jim waits outside, stretching on the street while I buy a tub of yoghurt from the small supermarket near the Golden Eagle. When I go to pay the woman has her hand out, scowling at me, eyeing me up and down with suspicion. Is it my dress? The fact that I'm not obese, like most of the white women in this town? So far Paris is the only girl who's smiled at me, not looked at me with suspicion and made me feel guilty for wearing a dress, like I'm a traitor.

Just before we arrive back at the Golden Eagle, Jim comes out of The Rock Inn beaming, walking quickly despite the fact that we've just done eight kilometres in the hot night. 'It's game on, Lou.'

He must have struck it lucky. He only ever uses sporting terminology when he's had good news. 'Two gigs. Next week. Aww yeah!'

The manager had taken an instant liking to him, asking him to compere a wet t-shirt competition and do a Big Night Out show. 'I'm gunna let loose in Boulder, Kalgoorlie!' he says, looking like a kid who's just been given a pile of pocket money and doesn't know what he's going to spend it on. 'I reckon I can even do my Japanese flag gag here!' he punches the sky like he's just won a tennis match. 'It looks like we're moving to The Rock Inn on Monday!'

I wonder if the shower is next to a urinal at The Rock Inn. If it's not, things are definitely looking up for me.

17

Australian style

'We don't often get ladies here . . .'

IN KALGOORLIE, BY MIDDAY THE sun is a searing ball of fire, and it's easy to understand how soft-drinks and air-conditioned cars have taken their toll on so many bodies here, male and female, all disproportionately bigger than anywhere else in the country. I'm determined not to follow suit, which means I need to go running before it's skin-cancer scorching.

On the Sunday morning I slip quietly out of the bed leaving Jim breathing huskily, the way he does in the midst of a deep sleep. It's only 6 am, and already I am sweating. I pull on my shorts and take my phone, leaving our one key to the room on the table beside him, in case he needs to go to the bathroom while I'm gone. I walk up the main street and start jogging, and very soon hit dusty roads on the periphery of town. I keep a vague mental map of where I came from, and just enjoy the vast, open roads with silent houses sleeping off their grand-final day hangovers. Beer cartons are tossed

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carelessly aside broken fences, rubbish lying on dirt, tin roofs shining in the hot sun.

Except for a random dog, not a soul seems to have woken yet. My skin sizzles in the heat and I am panting, dazedly, drugged with the sweat and effort of keeping one foot in front of the other, swatting flies, wiping the moisture from my brow before it drips into my eyes. The roar of a car coming up behind me breaks my reverie, and my stomach lurches when I hear it slow down. I look up to see a white man in a blue singlet peering out of the front window of a ute, eyeing me up and down.

'Out for a run?'

Something is off, I can feel it.

'Yep.' I meet his gaze, briefly, lightly.

Keep it light, Lou.

'I can think of a better way to get some exercise . . .' The look in his eyes, the realisation that I'm on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere, means the next nanosecond could decide my fate. *Just be light. Non-flirtatious. Don't show fear. Appeal to his good side.*

'Ha ha, yeah!' I wave him off with a smile and speed off in the other direction, like I know where I'm going. I don't look back until the sound of my heartbeat has stopped thumping through the side of my chest.

I must have been running for ten minutes straight, and I find the main road to Boulder again. Now, I understand. I understand why the women who aren't skimpies or prostitutes, and even many of the ones that are, are all overweight. Hiding their female form under layers of protection. Trying not to get eaten alive.

Relieved to be back at the Golden Eagle, I trot the steps two by two up to the back door to the upstairs rooms. It's usually ajar. Except it's not. It's locked. I pull out my phone and call Jim's mobile.

'The mobile you have tried calling is switched off, or not in a mobile service area. Please try again later.' His message bank isn't working either. Is this some kind of joke?

I walk around the front, looking forlornly at the upstairs window at the back of the balcony, behind which I know he's fast asleep.

'JIM! JIM!' I try throwing a stone at the window, but it flicks Paris's window instead. She doesn't stir, and neither does he.

I know Jim. One of the things he does best of all is sleep. It's one of his deep loves and something he has as much talent for as comedy. Without a wake-up call he will easily be in the abyss until midday – or even longer. I could be stuck in these sweaty shorts, parched, for a very long and boring time. I fish out the car keys from my pocket and decide to muse in there, instead. I scrounge \$4.80 in loose change from the console, and decide to drive to a café and read the papers.

But after I take a drive up the road, doing a complete lap of Hannan Street, it dawns on me that cafés haven't yet hit the goldfields. Not even one lousy café – hey, I'd settle for a franchise! – has opened, yet. McDonald's will never go out of business. There's just something about the reliable, bright and (bless!) air-conditioned fast-food giant that soothes a dark ache in the desperate soul seeking cool, predictable respite from a desert.

I send Jim a text message from the parking lot: 'At McDonald's, PLEASE call me as soon you get this!'

Inside, I order a coffee and some toast, sit by the window, witnessing the parade of utes and overweight families going through the drive-through. I stretch it out for as long as humanly possible, as I have no idea when Jim will wake up. I am amazed by how annoyed I am at my lack of productivity, even though really, I have

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no choice. I satisfy myself with an in-depth analysis of the *West Australian*, with its strange buried leads halfway through the stories, odd editorial angle, and politics and players I've never heard of, followed by three copies of *New Idea*, a *Woman's Day* and complete the big crossword puzzle in the *Sunday Times* before my phone, finally, rings. It's 10.30. I've been here for three hours.

'Lou? Did you feel like a hash brown? Do you want me to come and pick you up?'

It's hard to be annoyed with someone who offers to pick you up from what they think is a fast-food binge when they've just woken up.

Jim drives to Norseman for a clown show at the primary school he lined up two days ago over the phone. I'm reluctant to get back in the car, so soon after our stiflingly long Nullarbor run, so I spend the day shacked up in our room at the Golden Eagle.

With nothing but utes for visual inspiration, I'm going to need to get into a trance-like state to write about fashion with any sort of authenticity. I close the door and log on to the internet, press play on my Rachmaninov music to drown out the Willie Nelson on the jukebox downstairs, a steaming hot cup of Nescafe Blend 43 beside me.

I haven't written anything since we crossed the border, and after waiting for my computer to start up, I immerse myself in a few fashion websites, pumping myself up and quite curious to know if really, it makes any difference where I am when I write this column.

Twin-sets have recently been seen slipping through the elevator doorways of Melbourne, now a smooth part of the office-wear lexicon, not seen in such prim simplicity since Doris Day's pink numbers in Pillow Talk...

Sure, I do this all the time. In fact, I'm wearing a twin-set now! Ha ha ha . . .

A publicist had emailed me a picture of a designer's latest 'Look Book', and it's with photos of the kind of attire never seen to grace the streets of Kalgoorlie pasted across my computer screen that I channel back into that other land. Immediately afterwards, I commence one on the Hamburg hat, as seen in Karen Walker's Autumn/Winter 2006 collection. Conjuring words to illustrate the point, I forget where I am and it doesn't matter, anyway. It's amazing that I am the same person, with the same ability to write, whether I do it from a stylish office in Melbourne or a bed that sinks in the middle and rumbles with a superpit blast from one of the most sexist redneck cities in Australia.

It's a revelation. Almost frightening.

After double-checking some facts and the spelling, attaching the catwalk shots and emailing my editor, I swing my legs off the bed and decide to celebrate by sampling the Golden Eagle's lunch fare. I eat among miners drinking beer and nodding at the footy, the only female in the front bar who is wearing clothes. I'm getting used to feeling like the different one.

When Jim gets back he walks through the bar all alive-looking, like he always does after a gig. He orders a lemonade and drinks it quickly, grinning, knocking out the end of leftover jokes he's just told.

Upstairs, I kiss his cheek and see it's covered in a light layer of red dust like cinnamon, just tangible in the soft glow of our bedroom. We calculate that he's earned \$200 today minus petrol and me \$180, from the column. We head into town and splash out on Thai in a restaurant where we feel like the happiest couple in the room. We drive home in the balmy night, pleased, full, born anew.

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Jim, in the driver's seat, looks over at me, happy with his belly full of lemongrass and chilli, the tastiest dinner he's eaten in a week. 'How good is life! I mean, SERIOUSLY Lou! HOW BLOODY GOOD IS LIFE!'

Jim lies beside me in the bed concocting outrageous quotes as I compile a press release on the upcoming wet t-shirt competition he is booked to compere. 'You've always got some boiler down the front wanting to punch anyone who says her jugs aren't big enough,' he says, asking me to add an end line about it being the perfect family day out.

At sunset, we'd walked up to the main road and I snapped some pictures of him to send to the local papers for some editorial. After editing it I press send, like I've just done a made-up article about the most ridiculous man who treads this earth. In what town would a story about a wet t-shirt competition make the papers?

To both our amazement, after I send the release it is reprinted almost word-for-word, along with the picture I took of him standing on the main road. Jim's a bit concerned, though, which strikes me as odd, and immediately gets on the phone, asking the t-shirt supplier in Sydney how long it will take for a shipment to make it to the Golden Eagle Hotel.

'But, you've got three bags' worth in the car, haven't you?'

Why isn't he happier about the publicity I've just got him for the gig?

'Lou, I've only got about five left in extra large. Have you seen the size of the guys around here?'

Jim is getting the deranged look he always gets before a gig which he knows is going to be big. He loses his car keys whilst holding them, leaves his wallet on the top of the car before driving it up the street and looks right through me when I ask him what time it starts, answering me with a completely unrelated punchline.

The band is warming up the crowd, playing covers in stubbies while the barbecue sizzles sausages and hulk-sized sunburnt men drink beer like it's water. He gives me the key to our room, where I can hide if the pub gets too much.

'Just ignore everything that comes out of my mouth for the next couple of hours, Lou.'

I smile. An hour ago, despite my protestations, he'd followed me in the car while I went for a run because he worried about my having another ute experience. Now, he's about to channel Rodney Rude. Looking out the top window to the crowd below, souls clad in beefy bodies weave in and out, shaved and mulletted heads bobbing up and down gripping steadfastly to their drinks, a crowd of hungry tigers waiting to be fed.

Whenever we are given the keys to a new room at a different pub I brace myself and try not to expect anything, anything at all. From sleeping on a filthy floor in Gympie to ghosts in Grafton and showering next to a urinal at the Golden Eagle, I now try not to even expect a door that can lock. Which is lucky, because this one doesn't. In fact, there are no locks on any of the doors at The Rock Inn. The exit at the end of the hallway goes down a flight of stairs to the car park behind the pub, and anyone could come in at any time of the day or night. But there's so much trust in these places. Even Crystal – this week's skimpy – parks her battered Ford Laser downstairs and comes out of her room in her nightie in the morning to see if anyone has any DVDs to watch.

The bed in our room is covered in a rumpled doona and the sheets hold the imprint of a previous body. *Oh boy*. It's like entering the lives of others, you have to have a little chat to the space and introduce yourself.

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There's an abandoned couch, a kettle on a bookshelf, a jar of Saxa salt and a full ashtray. Skimpies leave their holiday reading on the bookshelf: five issues of *NW* magazine, a selection of airport thrillers, and some *Sex and the City* DVDs. Not for the first time, I consider the life of a skimpy, how I wish I could just drop in from the sky, work in pubs drinking UDLs when I finish and worry about nothing but what's in this week's gossip rag about the stars. I want to know what it's like to live without missions for a while. Without the anxiety of deadlines and words and worrying about how everything I say and write is perceived by other people. To be blissfully ignorant of anything, moving through the heat. I want to be able to read John Grisham novels before a shift in a bar for easy money and not feel guilty about wasting my life.

I catch myself, and stand up straight. Whoa, Lou! I overheard a man at the bar at the Golden Eagle saying to another, 'Kal numbs the senses.' Am I really jealous of the skimpies?

I head back down the stairs to the car to lug up another bag after realising I forgot my towel. The heat is so stifling it's like walking through fire. The tiny bathroom is filled with half-used shampoo and conditioner bottles of tenants past, and a smattering of broken make-up. The washing machine seems to be in the hall, plugged into a trough, which holds two dirty beer glasses. Going to the toilet, down the end of the hall and filled with a century worth of cobwebs, involves passing numerous rooms with doors half open. When I lie on the bed for a sleep I shut my eyes and pretend I'm staying at the Sheraton. But outside, all I hear are men yelling metaphors for breasts.

Early in the gig, Jim playfully warms up, toying with the crowd of tattooed men, lining up the willing applicants for the wet t-shirt competition and commiserating with one woman on her back problems.

'You must really need to do your shoulder stretches, hey?' The noise of the crowd rises through the air.

It's supposed to be forty-plus degrees today, just perfect for a function which relies on spraying women with water and selling lots of beer. I watch Jim from the window, marvelling at his magic. In a literal sense, what he's doing isn't so special – compering a wet t-shirt competition. It values women on their anatomy, but they are all willing participants, encouraged by their five minutes on stage. None of them look like models, on the contrary, they are anything but, which is kind of where the magic is.

Jim is using his skills to keep the crowd light and amused in the same way he does a children's party gig. Giving each woman a chance to be the star, picking something unique to ask her, like a beauty pageant, but always pulling out a punchline to remind them that he's the clown and they can do whatever they want around him and the joke will always, ultimately, be on life, with all its paradoxes. When he's deep into the votes on whose chest merits the coveted \$500 prize, I wander downstairs, hoping the crowd is distracted, to get a drink.

A strange sense of honour pervades in these tribal situations. My body language, clothes and demeanour clearly show I'm not part of the competition, and nobody tries to touch me, although it's standing-room only at the bar. I squeeze past a barrage of men twice my size, and order a gin and tonic to take back to our room.

'SHAY'S TITS ARE THE FUCKING BEST!' A man screams so hard his voice cracks. The bar is packed, and there are two skimpies working alongside the two managers. They are all laughing.

A man nudges me from behind, in the throng of the main bar. 'Oi!' A man pokes nudging man over me as I collect my drink, closely followed by a 'You okay love?' My knight in shining singlet.

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I smile, 'Yeah, thanks,' not wanting an awkward conversation, but not wanting to appear rude either.

He looks at me, shakes his head and has a grand swig of his beer. 'We don't often get ladies here,' he says, as the crowd roars at someone else's chest.

The competition is fierce, and Jim crowns the winner based on the level of yelling in the crowd. The winner is the local medical receptionist, Simone, who says she's going to put the money towards a holiday on a cruise ship with her boyfriend. Sadly, Shay's chest didn't make the grade despite her screamingly passionate fan.

'She's with the comedian,' says a mulleted-man as I pass, and I marvel at the speed at which relationship dynamics spread in outback pubs.

Jim doesn't notice me slip back upstairs as I weave between sweaty bodies. He's too busy defending his choice of footwear to a bunch of men. Mindlessly pulling on some Crocs that his sister had given him as a Christmas present apparently caused huge doubt that he was 'fair dinkum deserving' of compering a competition based on the attraction of women's breasts. Crocs are too 'poofta-like' for Kal. He should have worn his sneakers.

After the show winds up, Jim texts me from his spot on the stage, looking up at our window. 'Gunna stay here a bit longer. T-shirt sales are going off!'

I lie on the bed drinking in the dry heat and working my way through the selection of gossip magazines. Jim eventually reappears, wild-eyed and happy, emptying his pockets of dozens of scrunched-up twenty-dollar bills from his t-shirt sales. 'It's my shout for calamari hoops tonight, Lou. There's gunna be a few of those goat t-shirts making the rounds of Australia's goldfields. Aww yeah!'

18

The Aussie work ethic

'You'll be right, Lady.'

Our Room at The Rock Inn has swiftly become Bloke Comedy Central. Padding up the hall from the shower, I hear the sound of male voices in our bedroom, lonely guys who've rolled in from the Nullarbor, looking for a job on the mines, happy to find a comedian to distract them from the interminable hard work ahead of them.

'Guys, this is Lou,' Jim says. They nod shyly, shuffle a bit, relieved to rest their gaze back on Jim, who breaks the tension with yet another gag, sitting on our bed, like a preacher to the masses. Kids, playing with the clown.

The lack of privacy is messing with my head, though. The door that won't shut. The blur between who Jim is, and what he does. The merged lines, all crossed now, between what had been our regenerative space together and not knowing when we will have it to ourselves. I remember telling a girlfriend back in Melbourne that

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this was my fear. That the blokey energy would get too much, that I'd crave some quiet time on my own.

'Well you'll just go and find a room of your own. Or go for a walk. Regather.'

Here, it is impossible. The temperature hasn't dropped below forty degrees for the past ten days, and I've nowhere to go in Boulder except the car. There are no cafés here. Libraries? You've got to be kidding.

I can't focus. Jim's 'other' persona is taking over our bedroom. I've always loved the way he tries jokes out every day but I can't handle these rough, crass gags on constant rotation with sweaty, grunting energy, 24–7. I feel like an alien trying to write in a foreign language as I attempt to focus on what women want to read about in glossy magazines. I shut my eyes, and all I smell is beer and sweat.

It's a funny thing, the way this baffling land of maleness and lack of security and the feminine touch affects my attitude to work. Once upon a time, I had all the personal space and amenities in the world, and no excuse, really, for missing the mark when it came to pitching to women's magazines or newspapers based, and read by educated people, in the capital cities. The only way I can come to explain my lack of productivity when I had every comfort at my fingertip, compared to the present, when I need to hunt everything down from newspapers to phone coverage to internet connection, is that now, I'm constantly aware of what I value. Like a starving person who can think of nothing but food, my obsession with the spread of knowledge and the power of the media is invigorated anew by the complete lack of these 'luxuries' in the places we've been staying. Book shops. Good radio. Conversation about things other than mining shifts and sports. Even – internet connection,

because my mobile internet device hasn't worked since we left the Golden Eagle.

Tim, one of the guys who has been coming in for Jim's impromptu shows in our bedroom, tells us that he's just come over because of the drought on his family property in Victoria and the lure of riches from the Boom. 'But what they don't tell you is that it costs around three thousand dollars to get all your licences to even work on a mine these days . . . I come here with a credit card, thankfully, but you see about fifty guys a week just turning up to the mines getting sent away.'

His story inspires me to compile an article pitch from the bedroom in between visitors, fired up that I finally have a story people in the eastern states would actually need to know. I drive to the only internet café in Kalgoorlie, researching statistics on the dinosaur-slow connection in the stuffy shop, cutting and pasting the word files to editors, only to drive back a few hours later to check if there's a reply. It's a slow and expensive process, and driving to Kalgoorlie from Boulder is like basting in an oven for twenty minutes. With sunscreen, a litre of water, and the fan going full in the car, I still arrive home dripping with sweat, sunburnt, parched, ready to pass out.

After three rejections, it gets accepted. I have to provide plenty of statistics and interview some key people interstate for the story. I can't afford to have a party going on in my 'office' every day. Jim, sensing my tension, jumps up from the bed when a young guy wanders in one morning, his day off from work, drinking a can of bourbon and looking for some company. He shuffles him out and follows him into his room, cracking jokes and listening to his story for a few hours while I work on the computer.

When it comes time to eat a meal, because there is no kitchen, Jim has taken to dishing up cans of tuna from the bench next to our

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bed. Apples, corn crackers and hummus dip are the only other meal options we can come up with that don't require a fridge or stovetop. This 'free' accommodation is really starting to get me down.

'I need to do a phone interview on Monday, without interruptions. What if someone walks into the room?'

Jim looks up at me, a little concerned. 'Might be tricky with the mining boom and everything. But we'll have a look, hey?'

In all our travels I'm always amazed by how after every loud place we seem to fall across a quiet place, how everything hard has its soft counterpart, just a car drive, an experience, a view away. How just when I feel I've reached the end of my tether, we come to a place of peace in which to recoup and regather, ready for the next battle. And how evenly the experiences are always distributed.

Because of the interminable forty-plus heat, we've taken to doing the majority of our exercise at night. When the sun has gone down, we walk the edges of Boulder, past ghost-empty pubs, clusters of Aboriginal people rocking in the dry heat, houses flickering with TV lights and the sound of fans. Pausing at the edge of town, we come across what looks like a cross between a motel and a school camp facility. Out the front, a silver sign lists 'accommodation enquiries' – followed by a phone number. Miracle of miracles, with the mining boom and accommodation at an all-time low, they have one double room left, at the grand sum of \$240 for the week. Run by a sprightly looking guy for miners usually arriving in clusters, he asks us a few questions and decides to make an exception to the general rule, that the place be for serious workers sponsored by their employers on The Golden Mile.

'We're all workers here. The men who stay here say they like it because it's like a home. Quiet at night. Respect in the kitchen. That sort of thing.'

What he's not saying is that you can't get drunk and make a lot of noise at night, parties aren't on and simple respect for other people's space is valued. I could kiss him.

We pay cash and collect a key. A street away from The Rock Inn we not only have a door which we can lock, but a fridge, television, air conditioner and clean sheets on the bed.

It's at this place, affectionately known as 'the resting place', where I see a softer side to Australian male culture, men who cook each other Sunday roasts, trade Robert Ludlum novels for their days off, and eternally discuss exactly how many beers they can drink to still blow 'zero' on their alcohol test. 'And Marijuana? Forget it. Stays in your system for three months!'

Because of the long shifts they work, whispering in the halls is *de rigueur*. At 5.20 am we hear vans pull up outside our front window and the sound of morning taps on bedroom doors. 'Scotty, you coming mate? Where's Scotty?'

It's an Australian camaraderie, which evens the harsh land-scape of Kalgoorlie. And even though I'm female, and not a miner, they let me into their lives, ask me about mine, and seem genuinely interested. Unlike the cliché of bloke culture at The Rock Inn, I eat lunch in the air-conditioned kitchen with a geologist who studies astronomy, get health advice from an ex-SAS soldier from the UK saving for a house for his wife and two kids, and swap copies of *The Australian* with the only other man who gets up at six on his days off to go and get the paper.

The openness of these men will always touch me. And remind me that whenever you see life is one way, all you need to do is enter a building a block away, and think again.

On our first day, we decide to celebrate Jim's wet t-shirt windfall by being tourists. But Kalgoorlie isn't your typical tourist destination.

I google 'Tourism attractions – Kalgoorlie'. A brothel tour and an underground mine come up. That's it.

'Well, they're kinda similar, aren't they?' says Jim, when I mention it. Sure are. In, out. Just a patch in time. Over soon. You'll be grateful when you see your bank account. Ignore your claustrophobia. *Just do it*.

At Langtrees 181, an unappealing sixty-something lady with a voice like sandpaper leads our group through the most un-erotic rooms I've ever visited. Aside from claustrophobically low ceilings, each room is 'themed', one with a boxing ring (for those with a penchant for sport), and the worst one – plastic stalactite-like walls, and picks and shovels, for miners!

The décor is pure tack, and our tour guide, in a sweat-stained white shirt with one of the buttons popped, peppers her dialogue with glimpses into the reality of the goings-on in each of the rooms. Aside from taking these tours, she was also the receptionist for ten years, so she's happy to answer questions from the uninitiated.

'Yeah, if he gets his rocks off within a few minutes he still has to pay full price if he wants a second go!' She laughs like a pack-a-day smoker, and there's a run in her stockings.

Inside the tiny rooms, the smell of the sweaty crowd fights with the aroma of bleach they use for the showers, yet another unlikely mix of the natural with the manufactured. Still, from a historic perspective, it's fascinating to hear of the Chinese prostitutes, shipped over on a boat, the reason the ceilings are so low. And the beginnings of what became this busy brothel.

'It started with a tent. The miners had needs, ya know! Ancient as the Gods!' she cackles.

After the brothel tour, we head down a mine shaft with a stooped old character called Wombat, bearing a cap which advocates gun licences. He calls me 'lady' like I'm a strange species of reptile that he is both fascinated by and scared of, as the tiny trolley-lift lowers us creakily into the cave. It's the same size as the dumb waiter I once used to send meals downstairs from the kitchen at the Italian restaurant. It's held and lowered by the same, thin cords of string.

Jim holds my hand and I start to cry quietly. It's so small, so dark on this ancient wooden pulley, creaking down into the black tomb with very dubious sounds. I feel like I'm being lowered into a coffin. 'You'll be right, lady,' says Wombat, who keeps nodding at the space in front of him, instructing Jim to give me some water when we get to the bottom of the shaft. I ask him if I'm normal, to distract myself from my embarrassment.

'Once got stuck with two claustrophobic ladies in the lift, but they fainted pretty much straight away, which was good.'

Down in the mine, our tour guide is an experienced elderly man with a limp. He talks sentimentally about the days before things went 'mechanical', and they were paid according to how many holes they made in a wall, chipping away silently.

'You'd get your five hundred a day easy if you blasted three metres or so of rock and twelve dollars per hole on top of that.'

Wow. But in exchange, they couldn't even go to the toilet while they were down there. For seven hours. I picture them, living in each other's pockets, day in, day out. Spending more time with other men than they would with their families, crawling out of bed and away from their loved ones to go down a hole and earn enough money to pay for food on the table, a roof over their heads, to 'set themselves up for life', as the romantic notion goes.

'You wouldn't want to get stuck with a man you didn't like. Close quarters down here. Your life in their hands,' he says, as we all stare at the moist, dark walls of the cavern.

We crouch along the torch-lit tour, imagining their lives, played out in the dark to the sound of hammers, seven hours a day,

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five days a week. But there's a certain dignity in denying your need for freedom to put a roof over your family's head. The Australian work ethic. Hard, physical labour. All action, no thought. Kind of like those women up at Langtrees, I muse. Just doing it for the money. Hoping to escape with full pockets and not too many scars.

It's cool, down in the mine, but so dark and eerily damp. Halfway through the tour, a boy has a very quiet panic attack and has to be taken up. I'm relieved I'm not the only one who thinks this is too dark a place to spend your days.

I continue my daily rally to the internet café, as I still have no coverage on my mobile internet device. The concentrated effort in the searing heat rewards me with two more stories commissioned – a column and a feature, as well as the fashion columns I keep getting asked to do, 'for one more week'.

'I'll cook dinner for the next week,' Jim says, supportively. 'I don't want you to worry about anything. Just focus on your writing.'

He's steaming vegetables in the kitchen when I catch myself kissing him on the cheek and he bristles. In our room, I ask him if everything's okay.

'They haven't had any female contact for a while, Lou. You're the only one here aside from the cleaner. I don't want to shove it in their faces.'

In the mornings, I'm the first in the kitchen. When the men who have their days off come in, they seem startled to see me. One dashes off to return with a photo of his wife, kids and dog. Another says hello and starts talking immediately of his sister. On Sunday nights, the youngest likes to cook for five of the other guys from his particular mine. They helped him get his Marksman licence, and

cooking and eating together means their extreme lifestyle becomes slightly more family-like.

I'm in the kitchen, refilling my water bottle, he smiles at me straight away, eager to engage me in conversation.

'Hey mate, what would you add to mash potato, to make it good?'

I ask him if he has any garlic, and he passes me the bowl while he turns down the oven for the fish. Holding his bowl, next to the oven, he lets out his entire life story like he's back home on his farm in Victoria, talking to one of his sister's friends. I wonder if this is what guys in Vietnam were like, so desperate for female company that they spilled everything to the first one who appeared? It can be so overwhelming, being around so many lonely men. I start to physically ache every time they walk into the kitchen and see me. It's exhausting, being an archetype.

As I'm wiping the sweat from my face, delirious from a short trip to the internet café, I see the man who has been leaving me *The Australian*, after he's had his breakfast. He looks up at me, pierces me with his gaze.

I feel guilty, all of a sudden, for wearing my red dress. Making it obvious that I'm from somewhere else. Just for being -me. Female.

He says, like a warning, 'You better be careful here, love. A girl like you from the eastern states . . .' He lets it hang, looks out the back door to the sky.

'Much better off going somewhere down south. Kal wasn't made for the sensitive.' He grabs a long neck from the fridge and pads off up the hall, leaving me to wonder what he means.

Out for my nightly walk that night, Jim calls, to see where I am.

'Lou, are you okay?'

'Yeah, of course. How come?'

'The guy in the kitchen had me worried about you. He said I shouldn't let you go out walking on your own! It was one of those moments when I felt like a real bastard for bringing you here.'

'Oh God babe, don't worry! I'm fine! Really!'

'Wait there, I'm coming to collect you.'

'Babe, I'll be back soon. Truly. I like walking on my own. Please. I need the exercise.'

We have this understanding – that I want to see it all, and he is the perfect person to show me. But when others, like that man in the kitchen, witness what we're doing, we doubt ourselves, and get all mixed up in the roles of boy and girlfriend, and what you *should* do when you're in a relationship.

As I pass another pub, its open doors spilling forth the night's dramas into the flat, dusty air, I stop for a second, not quite believing my eyes. A man is sinking his steel-capped boot into another man's skull. The jukebox goes silent and the rest of the bar waits, arms folded over their chests, to pick up where they left off. I tear my eyes away and keep walking, feeling as though I've just watched a made-up movie of a place that is too harsh to really exist.

When I get back, Jim is watching the tennis in our room, texting jokes to some friends in Sydney. I slump beside him on the bed.

'Are you okay?'

'I guess I was naive. But I always wondered why most girls don't come to places like this.'

It's beginning to feel like he's my tour guide through a carnival of dark and light Australia.

'Yeah, I know. But it's the same if you think about it. There's just as much violence in the cities, like Sydney and Melbourne.

They're just dressed better.' I didn't even tell him what I saw. He just knew.

The next morning, we sit out the back with our breakfast next to two of the guys on their rostered day off. We're getting ready to head further towards Perth, as Jim has the promise of a weekly gig in Fremantle.

'All the cars got done last night, Abos getting money for booze,' one of the guys says to me, as he cracks open the first tinny of the day.

'What do you mean?'

Some Aboriginals who live in the park had smashed windows and stolen tools from each of the cars that were parked out the front. Jim's Mazda was in between all eight which got robbed, his life spilling out of every spare centimetre. He stands up, to go and check out if it's okay.

'Oh, you'll be fine, mate. Your car's gold. They won't touch it. It's why your missus is always fine when she's out walking in 'er red dress, too. Very superstitious, the Abos around here. Don't touch anything red or gold.'

We walk over to Jim's car, still overflowing with our life and worldly possessions. Four cars either side in the parking lot have been completely looted. And I've been wearing this red dress pretty much ever since we got to Kalgoorlie.

19

Fertile soil

'Congratulations mate, you've pulled yourself away from The Simpsons to see what's going on outside your door!'

The caked, baked drought of Kalgoorlie had seeped under my skin and made me feel similarly barren and decidedly unfeminine. But as the Mazda rolled up the highway from the red dirt of Kalgoorlie to the distinctly greener plains outside Perth, and the landscape grew visually richer by the hour, I felt something wake within me. Endless travel shows you just how many new beginnings you really have in you. Right now, it feels limitless.

'I'm excited, babe.'

'Me too.' He takes my hand and kisses the top of it.

Yet again, despite our dirt-encrusted hessian sacks and his clown shoes sticking up all over the back seat, I feel I'm being swept away on the wildest honeymoon ever with a man who never tires of new beginnings and fresh adventures.

'What town shall we stop in for lunch?'

He looks at me and nods, like, *you just leave it to me*. I don't know if that means he's taking me to visit another bikie pub or a schizophrenic genius who's going to bake us a cake and make us tea.

'Cool . . .' I drawl, beginning to sound as laid-back as him.

In Brookton, a little dairy-farming town just outside the wheat belt, Jim pulls over, I assume to collect the paper and some bottles of water. I scout out the window to see if there's anywhere I can buy something fresh, such as an apple. In Kalgoorlie, the only vegetables or fruit we could get was from Safeway, with their inherent taste of plastic and pre-packaged shipping, microwaved on high in the boiling-hot car in the fifteen-minute journey to Boulder. Both our bodies are feeling distinctly parched and undernourished, like the wrinkled apples we ate.

'Get ready for the best salad roll you've ever tasted in your life, Lou. Aww yeah!'

I follow him in to a grocer's deli. It smells like lemons, juices, fresh air and moist earth. Colourful bunches of herbs and freshly picked flowers are arranged in bouquets propped in wooden boxes along the wall. I'm in visual heaven. Suddenly, a flash of shining silver behind the counter catches my eye. Nooooo – is it –?

'Is that . . . er . . . is that . . . a . . . coffee machine?'

Shining behind the counter is a polished silver machine of delights, just waiting to inject some artificial stimulation into my too long numb body. Prepare to be properly caffeinated for the first time since Melbourne, Lou. Oh, yes...

I do a double-take as a gentle forty-something man behind the counter asks if I'd like some sprouts in my sandwich, and how strong I'd like my coffee. After the brutal masculinity of Kalgoorlie, this nurturing man is like the mirage of an angelic being. 'My little addict,' Jim says, after I blow and bless my cup of liquid gold. He's addicted too, injecting news into his brain to update his gag list with current affairs.

We both sit, contentedly, in the car, blissfully ingesting our first fresh greenery for weeks. Jim tries to start the car still reading the paper.

'Babe, do you mind if I just move that from the dashboard?'

I end up reading him the newspaper, thinking how much more enjoyable things are when you've missed them for a while. And how contrasts make life so much richer and more beautiful.

A couple of hours of undulating hills, lush valleys and turn-offs to roadside Devonshire teahouses later and we are in the outskirts of Perth passing a Bunnings warehouse and the usual cluster of multinational takeaway conglomerates. The freeway is moving at a steady pace, and we are one of only a handful of cars snaking our way into town on a Tuesday afternoon. But after weeks in the desert, it feels like we've landed in a thriving metropolis.

Pulling into Fremantle, it becomes apparent Jim has never been to this bar, as he's texting, driving and trying to reach over the back seat to fish the Perth street directory out of his boxed set for Australia, all at the same time.

'Can I help you?' I don't mean to seem niggly, but it makes me a little anxious to have someone talking, texting and lunging around in the back seat whilst transporting me in a moving vehicle.

'Oh nah, it's okay Lou, that's the guy there.'

'Why's he called Roo?' I ask as we pull up next to a red bar on the Stirling Highway.

'Dunno.'

Fifty-something Roo, clad in a purple band t-shirt and jeans, is pacing the floor scratching his head and looking like a faded rock

star when we pull in straight off the nine-hundred-kilometre road from Kalgoorlie to say hello. He doesn't seem at all surprised that Jim's hair is matted and wild, his t-shirt on inside-out, and the car is covered with a thick coating of red dust. If I'm honest, he barely acknowledges me, but I like the peace of being ignored, after the men in Kalgoorlie.

I quickly understand why Jim didn't mind driving across the Nullarbor after numerous calls from this crazy Roo, who is giving him free reign to run his own show, in any which way he chooses. 'Mate, if you just get up on that stage and do what you do, I'll be happy. Get some new punters in, keep it moving . . . I'm hoping it takes off.'

Money-wise, things don't sound too enticing, but according to Jim's scrawled budgets on scrap paper in the car, we should be okay for a few weeks until the show 'takes off' and he can start charging a cover charge. Roo mutters something about a one-hundred-dollar fee, but seems much more interested in talking about running the bar, and everything else on his mind.

I sit, drinking a diet coke he's given me on the house, happy to be in a place where the breeze blows soft, the sky is warm but the Swan flows gently under the bridge. And the bar even has 'girl' drinks, like diet coke. Finally, after assuring him we'll be back in a couple of hours to set up for the gig, we escape.

'Now, we just need to find somewhere to live.'

I'm beginning to really like the smell of old pubs. This one has a particular blend of mustiness and carelessly rinsed ashtrays mixed with a touch of Johnson's baby powder which tells me that someone is washing . . . or at the very least, regularly vacuuming, around here.

The Rose, a three-storey weatherboard pub on the Stirling Highway, is perfectly perched in between the Swan River and the Indian Ocean.

We hadn't intended to stay in Fremantle, but after falling into town, liking the look of the place and looking for a place to stay nearby without any particular attachment, the universe must have liked our lack of desperation. As usual, not caring too much seems to get you exactly what you need. We land a room as if by magic, after only one rejection at The Swan up the road. We don't discover until later, but the chances of our finding accommodation like this at a moment's notice were impossible.

A tall lady in the TAB, Leigh, greets us with the lack of questions so indicative of how many strangers appear daily in Western Australia. Jim asks for a room and she finishes serving a customer before grabbing a bunch of keys.

'We don't have any double beds but this room has two single beds you can move together. If you take this one I'll let you have it for \$130, because of the bed situation.'

'Awesome Leigh, let's do it!' says Jim, casually friends with anyone just as soon as they've met, smiling at me like, *See? Everything always works out*.

We pay cash and she gives us two keys. No bond, no security deposit, she hadn't even wanted to know our full names.

'Oh, and you'll need a key for the lady's bathroom. Since you're the only female staying here at the moment . . .'

Did she say only female? I scamper down the hall to check the 'facilities', half expecting a misspelled sign and perhaps a jar of wilted jasmine, a-la the Royal Derby. But no, we've landed at The Ritz. The bathroom has a huge spa bath, separate shower and sink. In fact, it's almost as big as our bedroom. Sweet Baby Jesus it even

has a stack of white towels and the faint smell of bleach. And no toast crumbs or *anything*!

Fremantle, a harbourside fishing village, lies on the mouth of the Swan River, just twenty kilometres out of Perth. With a population of roughly twenty-six thousand, it's a cross between a country town and a city, with a relaxed, creative and earth-friendly vibe.

Our room is spacious, up three flights of stairs and next to the communal kitchen and living room. We nod 'g'day' to a few old men drinking beer silently on the balcony outside, passing every time we bring a fresh load of belongings up from the car. There's no other way in or out except these steep stairs, so I get used to nodding to the men. On the third trip I hear the same man say the same thing he's said to me the last two times I went past. 'Good exercise!' and nod into his beer.

They seem old and harmless. Having them see me with Jim makes me feel secure. Like they know I'm 'accounted for', or something. We slip into our room, number 6, giggling at what the hell we're doing.

The room is huge, furnished with the two twin beds, a dressing table, chest of drawers, large wardrobe, little fridge and a TV perched on a table. The west-facing window looks across to the Indian Ocean, which is only a ten-minute walk across the train tracks and the highway from the pub.

Delighted that we have a kitchen to cook in and a fridge to keep our food in, I set out to go food shopping next door. Jim is on the phone lining up gigs and chatting with comedian friends in Perth when I leave, so I nod and leave him to it. Downstairs, I can't believe my luck when I find an organic grocer just next door. Like the Brookton deli it smells like flowers and fresh earth. They make

juice with ginger and have a display of fresh salads. Mangoes and avocados are just one dollar, and I can't control my excitement.

'It's so good to get fresh fruit again!' I say to the young guy behind the counter.

'Where have you come from?' he asks, curious. It's been a while since I've spoken to someone young and untroubled, so I tell him about our trip across the Nullarbor, that we're staying at The Rose, that I'm a writer and that Jim is doing a gig tonight, just down the road.

'I can't come tonight but maybe next week. If you guys are free on the weekend we're having a party on Saturday. My housemates are really nice.'

Did he just . . . invite us to a party?

'Tell your man he's welcome too!'

I walk away, full with the parcel of fresh fruit and friendship and walk around the river for a little while, stretching my legs, breathing it all in. When I get back to The Rose I find Jim has bought exactly the same selection of fresh fruit and vegetables that I did: two avocadoes, two mangoes, two peaches.

'Did he invite you to his party, too?'

'Yeah, but I just ran down and gave him a copy of my DVD cause he asked what sort of comedy I do. So he might not want us to come now!'

When it's time to go to the gig we hear the old men out on the balcony reach a crescendo in their drunken, muttered banter. I've showered, unpacked, sent five long emails and even written a column from our bed. When I came to check my emails after my walk, I'd found a slew of names I'd never seen before: editors, PR companies, even some distant relatives I hadn't heard from in years. They must have bought *The Age* last Saturday.

Since my first few fashion and beauty columns had been published, it seems my stock has risen in freelance land.

How the hell did I get away with that? was my first thought, upon seeing the printed copy Mum sent me, the week after it was printed. My fashion columns – and the photos I booked on the road – filled the entire page. One beauty company wants to know where to send a package of caviar-encrusted moisturiser for me to try, and another designer asks for an address to send a thank-you gift.

'Um, Jim, how do you get your mail? You know, when you're travelling.'

'Any post office in Australia will hold your mail for you. I just go and collect it.'

I reply to them both, saying my address is - temporarily - c/o the North Fremantle Post Office.

'Wonderful Louisa, expect a parcel in the next few days. Enjoy your holiday. Which hotel are you staying at?' comes the reply.

Er. My hotel doesn't exactly have any stars.

Meanwhile, a sub-editor has lost the fashion copy that I pains-takingly sent from the dinosaur-slow internet café in Kalgoorlie, and I need to resend it. The email is timed from early last night, and I have gone almost twenty-four hours without replying. I quickly locate the file, press send and apologise for being away from my 'desk'. Ten minutes later, I receive another email from the editor, asking if I can continue to write all three weekly columns indefinitely, because my 'very Melbourne writing style' has apparently hit the right note.

I'm sitting on the single bed next to Jim in my nightie, under a picture of a dirt-bike racer while the Stirling Highway traffic speeds past and the men on the balcony are scraping chairs and falling over on their way to the toilet. Jim, in his shorts next to me, is emailing Beef and Monique the 'glamour shots' he took in Iron Knob.

Why, I wonder, has the best career coup of my life come now that I have thrown away my office, my clothes and possessions, and shacked up in an old-man pub in North Fremantle? Why is it all flowing so well? The fashion emails weren't the only ones I found in my inbox. Editors I'd pitched to six months ago seemed to have woken from silent slumber and were now commissioning features left, right and centre. After scrawling down my new fashion columns and deadlines, I pencil in my feature deadlines, as well as my other regular columns, and realise I have about ten articles due in the next fortnight.

I make five calls to various contacts for sources from my new office on the bed at The Rose, happy that the accelerator pedal has been put on my work again, that we have a place to stay for longer than a few nights, and that my usual niggling anxiety about money can be temporarily quietened. Jim is pacing the floor, getting anxious about his set-list, but also, excited, like someone gearing up for a race. He starts pulling gags on me, playing around, rougher than usual. He always gets like this when he hasn't been on stage in a while.

'This is gunna be a big one, Lou, I can feel it.'

It's impossible not to get excited when he's like this. I pull on some jeans and my one nice top which made it through the severe culling of a month ago. We shut our bedroom door and walk through the passageway to the balcony, the only way to the stairs.

'HEYYYYY!'

There are about six of them, congregating around a full ashtray and six empty longneck bottles. One man even has a plaster cast on his leg. Another is yelling unintelligibly, and appears to have no teeth. Jim, geared up for crowds just like this, is ready and waiting to play.

'Hey!' he says back, squatting in a half pounce, frightening them a little with his zeal.

One man, who I'd seen drinking earlier that day, has particularly matted hair, and no teeth.

'Wow, you look like a cave man or something!' Jim says to the matted furry man, and the group laughs. Cave Man grunts, laughs despite himself. It sounds like an insult but Jim says it cutely, with a cheeky smile. And he knows — Cave Man is a smart dude under that beard. He knows that he looks like a cave man.

I make for the stairs, wanting to make it obvious I'm not the performer in this relationship and I have nothing to do with what comes out of Jim's mouth. He's due on stage in five minutes, but just as he starts backing down the stairs with me the youngest guy, a sort of lost-looking red-head who doesn't seem as fragile as the rest of them, begs him to come back.

'Please! I've been with these old guys for hours . . . can you just tell us . . . one joke?'

Without missing a beat, Jim eagerly pounces back towards them and pulls out one of his favourites, something crass and crude and slightly misogynistic yet also making fun of the misogyny itself. They laugh, and the young guy looks like he's found a guru to worship. Jim pulls out a t-shirt and hands it to Cave Man, for being a good sport. They cheer as he leaves, awake again, yelling banter, like they've been visited by a madman in a drunken dream.

At the bar, Jim's crowd isn't much bigger than the one at The Rose. The night goes slowly, and as I've heard most of his set-list jokes so many times by now, I zone in and out from his words to the audience.

But the reason I keep coming to his shows, the reason why I love what he does so much, is that he's the master of improvisation. When he deviates from his set-list and just 'plays' with

whoever comes into the room, it's like a return to the days before television.

It's almost like – magic, a reminder to me of the strange gifts we're given on this earth. His is an intuitive ability to bring even the most introverted people outside of themselves, for a moment, to a point where they can laugh. You just don't get that from watching sit-coms, or even a stand-up comic who doesn't deviate from his set-list. He also has an uncanny ability to read a crowd, almost like a psychic clown.

A tall, wiry looking fellow with pock-marked skin, twitching and looking nervy, walks in halfway through the show. Without even glancing at the door, Jim breaks from the joke he was telling, looks him straight in the eye and says, 'How much speed have you had tonight, mate?'

The man, to my surprise, smiles, orders a beer and sits down. As Jim says to me, when I ask him over and over how he gets away with saying these things to people, 'Lou, most of them are just happy to be included in the joke. And they know what they look like too. Sometimes they're surprised, but they know deep down.'

He follows this up by telling them he lives out of his car and he travels from town to town as a comic. He looks so scruffy you know it's not about ego. There's a purity and an innocence which protects Jim, and means that the speed junkies, criminals and cave men of this world immediately respond to him like he's a brother or best friend.

'You know, this is a pretty fancy gig for me. You guys are really well behaved. Usually I'm competing against some naked jelly wrestlers over there, a juke box blaring in the corner, and a drunk man comes up to me and vomits at my feet.'

The crowd nods and chuckles, all he's said so far is pretty much true.

'That's when I think, well at least I'm getting a feed tonight.'

Watching the atmosphere change from build-up to punchline to the sated exhaustion after laughing still makes me feel I am with a magician who has the gift of conjuring emotions through words. He gets a few good laughs and a lot of confused head-shaking chuckles. It's early days yet. As Roo said, he can make this night what he will. It's a Tuesday, he's lucky to even have four drinkers, let alone the eight who have now come in after hearing the noise on the street.

'Everyone clap for the bloke who just walked in – he's giving real life a crack, yeah! Congratulations mate, you've pulled yourself away from *The Simpsons* to see what's going on outside your door!'

The crowd laughs and claps, the new man, with his little taste of the spotlight, does too. He really did just crawl away from *The Simpsons*. He lives next door and heard the noise.

A few young guys come in, eager and smiling, perching in the background at the bar, close to me. When Jim has a break he comes over and introduces them. Budding comedians, they'd come to welcome Jim to Perth. I'm blown away by the sweet camaraderie, compared to how it was back in Melbourne and Sydney. When Jim goes back on stage Kieran, one of the comedians, tells me he's been following Jim's career for a few years now.

'I really admire him. I hope I can be like him one day.'

At that moment, Jim is telling a joke about sleeping in his car being the best type of car alarm. Kieran laughs, sips his beer, like he understands.

'And you – you just travel with him, now?' Kieran says.

'Yeah, yeah I do.' He's happy with that. Doesn't question me on my job or want to know any more information. It's enough that we both admire the same man, for the same reasons. I like Kieran. And I really like being the side act in this relationship. Working for myself, I'd come home exhausted from dinner parties where I was the 'interesting' one brought in to liven up the party of corporates with tales of my 'weird' life as a freelance journalist. Now I'm with someone who will always be weirder than me. It's a relief.

I sit on three drinks for the two-and-a-half-hour show, marvelling at how Jim can do almost three hours on stage after driving nine hundred kilometres from Kalgoorlie earlier that day. This is pure passion, this is why we do what we do. Because it's not exhausting, when it's something you love. Like the writing I just did on the fly, my heart skipped a beat in excitement and anticipation at being asked to do it. Jim, too, had been almost tapping his toes in anticipation of this gig, all afternoon. It would have taken more than a 'measly' little nine-hundred-kilometre drive to take away his fire. Long drive, sleep or not, telling jokes to a crowd also has a regenerative effect on him. Like it reminds him why he's here. I feel so blessed to be with someone who knows – and does – what they are obviously meant to be doing. It just saves so much wasted time searching.

By midnight most people have left, and Jim finally winds up his epic show. Roo wants him to stick around afterwards, have a proper 'yarn', and I figure it's best to leave them to it. Jim whispers that he won't be long, 'I'm just going to collect my pay and come straight back for a cuddle . . .'

I walk the two minutes back to The Rose and up the three flights of stairs to bed. The empty balcony holds a litter of empty beer bottles in the balmy night air. I've just switched on the TV when there's a knock at the door. Assuming it's Jim, forgotten his key, I open it, to find a plaster-cast old man limping and muttering.

'Steve . . . Steve?'

I shake my head. Not Steve.

'Oh \dots guy that was in this room \dots before \dots ya haven't got a cigarette have ya love?'

'No, I don't smoke. Sorry.'

By 2 am the lights are off, and I'm trying to sleep. Jim's scattered clothes on the bed comfort me as I lie in this funny space, halfway across the country from my family and friends. I kiss the sleep idea goodbye as soon as I feel Jim and his post-gig hyper energy bound into the room, switching on the lights. He wants to debrief, ask how certain jokes went down. I give him as much feedback as I can think of, but it's late, I'm tired. I can hear his heart pumping quickly, and ask a question.

'Did Roo pay you?'

He goes silent for a bit. 'No, not yet, I have to go in tomorrow and get a cheque.'

'So . . . you listened to his problems, watched him drink and helped him pack down the bar for two hours and . . . nothing?'

'I know, Lou.' He sighs. I understand how hard it is to be your own boss, sometimes the people you work for become friends, and it's hard to separate their own money troubles from asking for what is rightly owed you. But still . . .

I know this kind of stuff doesn't really matter to Jim, in the scheme of things. He's more interested in whether or not he treated people well that day than whether or not he got paid for the privilege. I lie there surprised and slightly ashamed at my frustration. His patience floors me with admiration, yet makes me feel a bit queasy with anxiety, too. He does what he does for reasons which have nothing to do with money. But still, I wonder if this lack of self-assertion is a sign of things to come?

20

Honeymoon at The Rose

'I've never lived with artists before . . .'

'Wanna go to a gig at the Lazy Susan tonight Lou? I've got an emcee spot.'

'Sure!' It's our first night out together in ages. I celebrate by straightening my hair in the bathroom to the tunes of the old men snoring, punctuated by the springs in creaking mattresses.

When we get to the gig, the comedians greet Jim like old friends, waiting for his return. 'Mate, heard a lot about you! Great to meet you!'

They shake my hand and smile and invite me to sit at their table in between sets. Kieran, from the previous night, comes over with a smile, and they can't wait to see each other on stage. It's how they are – excited about this thing called comedy.

Doing it for the fun.

On stage, Jim mines his bounty of West Australia anecdotes, including a song which mentions every small town from Perth to

Broome, and the easy, relaxed crowd cheers him on. He slips into an old gag about not having time to call people back, one that worked so well in Sydney and Melbourne, and it falls flat. He chides himself in the car, shaking his head. 'People have time to return phone calls over here. I should have remembered.'

After the harsh contrasts of Kalgoorlie, in Fremantle we feel immediately at home. Its slow, gentle vibe, honey-coloured sunsets and kooky characters uninterested in fame or fortune but just to know us give us immediate peace. Jim's fellow comedians welcome us into the fold, chatting with me during gigs and inviting us sight-seeing or to the markets. If I stay back at The Rose to work, while Jim goes to have a 'look' at the comedy rooms, they ask after me.

But I'm getting more work commissioned than ever before, so I start to follow a fairly disciplined schedule from my office in room 6. I wake early, aware that the two-hour time difference means that I could have queries from editors at 7 am Perth time. Outside our room, we hear a brief bustle at five as most of the men head to their factory jobs, but by seven the halls have gone quiet. Jim jokes that their jobs are keeping them alive, 'It stops them cracking their first tinny until three,' and I can't help but agree. It's a strange life they've chosen, our housemates at The Rose, but in a way the deep respect for manual labour means their bodies are still ticking along despite the ingestion of masses of alcohol when they come home each night. And at least they have company.

When it's all of them, it's like a party of lions, roaring over the top of each other, preventing any real conversation from taking place. By five or six most nights, they've reached a peak on the balcony. Grant, a fifty-something Kiwi who likes to listen to Elvis and Abba in his room and tries not to drink as much as the rest, is my personal favourite. He always apologises if someone swears when I walk past. He's also the only one who actually cooks any food in

the kitchen. On payday which doubles as skimpy night (Thursday), he dons a clean pair of slacks and combs his hair, to pop down for a 'light beer' with Cave Man, who usually gets thrown out for yelling then stumbles up the stairs to pass out in bed, or his doorway, if he doesn't make it.

Most nights I hear Grant in the kitchen, cooking a slab of pork he gets from the meatworks factory where he works. 'I try to give some to Mole but he never eats it,' he sighs quietly, speaking of one-toothed alcoholic Cave Man. Sometimes Mole taps on our door, to check if we are 'okay', on his way to his room.

'Ever get any trouble, come see old uncle Mole,' he says, stumbling down to his tiny room at the end of the hall. I guess it's his way of saying he likes us, and we can trust him.

At around 7 am I take the coffee pot I've lugged from Melbourne into the old kitchen which looks out to sea, along with my own spoon and cup because there is barely any crockery in the kitchen. The day starts with a hiss and a spittle, and by the time my cup of adrenaline is ready and steaming beside me, I'm awake enough to marvel, once again, that I get to live my dream and travel with my soul mate, without compromising one or the other.

I've never been able to write beside anyone else, before Jim. If I ever tried, it felt like I was cheating with another lover, or being selfish and indulgent. I always had to scuttle to another room and close the door, or usually, just wait until they left my space (usually the entire building), before I could get into the 'zone'. But perhaps because he's a writer too, able to switch off and burrow into his own world when he's composing gags, in the mornings with my pen dancing across the page, I don't even stop if I hear him stir. They say creative passions, or running any business of your own, is like having a child to look after, and in this new world we are

creating I feel it more than ever. We both act as parents to the other one's passion. Me, concerned at the lack of boundaries and assertion with the Roos who govern his pay cheque, and Jim, always assuring me to 'tap away' on my laptop with the lights on, while he sleeps, oblivious to the light and noise.

Occasionally Jim wakes and immediately starts making phone calls to hustle gigs or return calls from the many men across the country who like to unload their life's issues on his ears. It strikes me as funny – him on his mobile phone and me on my laptop, surrounded by papers, in bed. We look a bit like a workaholic couple you'd see on some Hollywood film about lawyers on honeymoon. Except that we are at The Rose, and during our 'lunch hour' we walk down to the Fremantle Markets and look for a tofu burger.

We go to see a naturopath together and embark on a detox diet complete with herbs, supplements and three litres of pH-balanced water every day. I run along the beach at sunrise and Jim goes for three-hour walks while I'm writing in the afternoon. I lose all track of time while he is away, and he jolts me from an obsessive amount of re-reading and research.

'Lou, you've gotta come down here, this is amazing!'

'Okay!' I reluctantly close my laptop and slip down the stairs before the old men can trap me with a conversation. Jim is watching the sun set over the most glorious ocean I've ever seen, or walking around the roundhouse in Fremantle, or hitting tennis balls against the wall at the tennis court overlooking the Swan River.

When we walk together we debrief on each other's work, or he'll try a new gag on me, or just stay silent, appreciating all that we have while the sun falls like honey around us. It's peaceful, almost *too* peaceful. I've never had such companionship in the daily aspects of life before. We still don't go more than an hour or so alone, without communicating. And we still – get – everything

about each other. We could talk in code and still understand the exact meaning we've intended.

Our feet crunch the leaves underfoot as black swans lap below us on a little secluded inlet of the Swan.

'My sister called today. She couldn't believe I took you to Iron Knob. Said she was amazed you didn't turn back.'

I think to myself: not even his family knows how much I love this man. And it's lucky they can't see the folks we're living with at The Rose.

Being a stranger in town, with no interruptions – no-one to have coffee with, no-one to 'catch up' with, able to do all my interviews via telephone and email, so much time wasted in transit, mindless eating of junk to keep the endless social engagements flowing is just – eradicated. There is a beautiful simplicity to not knowing anybody, having no history in this place. I feel my life has been swept clean of the extraneous and now is solely, purely intentional. By making my key decisions based on my two true loves – Jim and writing – anything inauthentic just falls away.

I realise it wasn't just the clothes and belongings I cast aside back in Melbourne, I was also letting go of alliances and relationships – not just to people, but to values and ideas of myself – which had long since had their day. Jim asks, interested, what I'm writing about one day.

'A rare cancer gene.'

'Good one,' he says, curious. He knows it's a challenge and I never studied medicine, or even journalism. Yet he never ever doubts that I'm up to the task. But it's easy here. We've started anew. Like someone on the witness protection program given a new name and a new identity, except this is one that I chose, with the man I love,

and I get to do exactly what pleases me most of all in a town which has felt like our own private island since we got here.

For a time, we get the balance right. Like the cusp of a grand wave, the equilibrium feels extraordinary.

I wake with someone to laugh with. I am earning money from my passion and sharing a life with someone similarly devoted to a strange, specific skill.

I finally understand the meaning of true romance.

Fremantle is a quiet place, like a city in the eastern states might have been twenty years ago. Sunday trading hasn't reached it yet, recycling bins aren't even *de rigueur*, and I'm still having trouble finding copies of *The Australian*. I end up reading as much as I can online, even though Jim brings in the *West Australian* each morning.

Since I haven't seen *The Age* for almost a month, writing my columns has been like writing 'blind'. I find one of my features reprinted in the *Sunday Times*, and notice, for the first time, how little care I'd paid to finding suppliers, interviewees and references which would apply to this part of Australia, a massive chunk of the demographic. Ignored editorially, living in Western Australia opens my eyes to just how huge is the eastern state stranglehold on media.

I find a newsagent in the middle of Fremantle which orders me copies of *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and I start to collect them each week, four days after their print date, for double the cost. *Just like another country*.

Jim starts doing the shopping and cooking during the day, filling the halls of The Rose with scents of tofu, rice and vegetarian delights prescribed by the naturopath. He has yet to discover spices and seasoning but I don't want to discourage him, so I gulp down

rather bland piles of couscous and rice, grateful for his generosity, if not his seasoning skills. We take sunset dips in the Indian Ocean, watching the sky drop like molasses, performing for us only, feeling like we've discovered the secret, and like things can't get much better.

When I print my invoices in the Fremantle net café, I discover I've earned more this month, living out of a bag, than ever before. Jim is cooking tempeh stir-fry in the kitchen, and rings me, from a room away, to tell me dinner is ready.

'Babe, I just got another feature commissioned!'

He yells cheerfully through the wall, 'Get used to it!'

Like my most positive, encouraging side, having his voice endlessly around me and nobody else has all but deleted the Doubting Susan who once played a much louder track on high rotation.

So with all this beautiful, significant stuff going on, it's easy to brush aside 'superficial' worries such as what it looks like to the rest of the world that we are living in a decrepit pub with old men. For a while, we even become like the self-contained sprinkler couples we'd railed against, who tried to trap us with their dinner parties all those moons ago, talking of their new cutlery and furnishings. But it's in an old pub, and we cook for a cast of escaped jailbirds with no teeth. And my prized furnishing is the table from under the TV Jim has moved, and decorated with a balloon tulip, for me to use as a desk. And the crockery we buy is from Saint Vinnies, because the share kitchen has no forks.

It's a Tuesday night, half an hour before Jim's gig, and Jack and Darren, across the room from us, have reached their screaming peak early. Most of the men here have a past, children or wives they've lost or left, maintenance payments in other states, charges they're fleeing with addictions to help soothe the pain, but

Jack and Darren, unlike the self-contained Mole or the shy Grant, put all their dirty laundry on the line for everyone else to see. And the other men, still valiantly self-protective despite personal dramas, won't get involved.

The two of them break all the rules. In an extremely homophobic working-class culture of miners and blue-collar workers, they share the same room to save on rent. They also break the Aussie code of simply getting on with life and not complaining. Although Jack does have a broken leg, if he was a true blue Aussie we wouldn't hear about it every few minutes. Grant, in contrast, had surgery a few weeks ago and had to take two days off his job at the meat factory, and wouldn't even let Jim help him up the stairs the day he came out of hospital. But perhaps the most cardinal sin of all in this institution built solidly on a tight sleep/work/drink cycle is that for the past week, Jack and Darren have both been getting drunk and fighting well into the night, keeping the other housemates awake with the haunting sound of drunken Freudian dramas coming from their room.

In the last ten minutes, they've become noticeably more heated. I'm simultaneously trying to file a column on organic cotton bathing suits, locate my interview with a couple so that I can check a quote, and answer my phone, which I can see is my mum ringing, when the door almost bashes down.

'HE-LP! HELP!'

Jim is closest to the door, so he opens it, quickly.

'I've LOST JACK!'

'What do you mean?'

Jim is thinking what I'm thinking. How far can a man on crutches go when the only exit is a massive flight of stairs?

'I yelled at him to fuck off and he did! Hey Jimbo can I borrow your phone?' he squeaks. 'I don't have any credit left on mine!'

I give up on filing my column with this soap opera unfolding, and pack up my laptop. Darren, standing in the doorway, peering in to see where I am, makes me uneasy. Just as Jim is handing over the phone to Darren, Jack reappears, crawling in from outside, on his hands and knees.

'I'm in pain! I'm in pain! You know, it'd be safe to say this is WORSE THAN CHILDBIRTH!'

He's in a heap at our doorway now. Both of them are looking at us like we're their long lost parents, come to rescue them. Jim starts nervously checking the time on his phone, now that Darren has handed it back. He is due on stage in ten minutes.

'MATE! YA GOTTA GET ME TO A HOSPITAL! THIS IS FUCKING SERIOUS!'

I have no idea what is wrong with Jack, but Jim flicks into gear and says yes, sure, he can take him to a hospital. But how are we going to get Jack down three flights of steep stairs when he can't walk?

Jim and Darren carry him, while he moans the entire way, heaving him into the back seat of the car. We drop them both off at the Fremantle Hospital, Darren in tow to push his wheelchair.

We pull up at the gig and Jim runs into the bar like a rock star, laughing. But I'm peeved. Sure, it was okay this time. But Jim's lack of boundaries and limits with people is starting to worry me.

The next day is cleaning day, when pastel-topped Jenny, in her early fifties, arrives in bright efficiency, sweetness and light. Her presence brings a significant lift in the energy of the smoke-stained walls. She folds us clean white towels in triangles and lays them at the end of our bed, the pillows plumped and the faint hint of her talc-scented perfume lingering in the rooms like air-freshener.

In the kitchen making tea with some herbs Mole has left her, she lowers her voice and tells me that she won't be coming to do the cleaning for a few weeks, because she has just found out her breast cancer has returned.

'But I'm feeling positive,' she says. She talks of the way she's changed her diet, started meditating, ingesting herbal concoctions and avoiding smoky, loud or stressful environments. It's just then that I smell someone's cigarette smoke, looking up to see that Jack, who is no longer in the hospital we took him to, is blowing thick rings of smoke towards Jenny.

Jenny stops talking, a little embarrassed, and he blows a thick plume her way before a swig of his first long-neck for the day.

'Yeah, ya can do EVERY BLOODY THING IN THE WORLD AND YA STILL GET SICK!'

We walk to the Fremantle beach one night for me to take promotional shots to send to the local newspapers. Jim's regular Tuesday gig has had a small crowd, but hoping to bring in more people, I work on a press release with the caption 'Banned Comedian Hits Fremantle', and send it to the media. The local radio picks it up, booking him in for a spot on their afternoon show.

Mole is knocking on my door to see if I want to sit with him and Grant on the balcony while they watch the sunset. I'm listening to Jim on the little radio I bought just the day before. I hustle Mole into the room quickly, my finger in a 'shoosh' signal on my lips, not wanting to miss any of the show. Mole is tentative, not wanting to cross the threshold of our private space, but also very curious, and respectful.

He finally tiptoes in, clenching his Emu Bitter, crouching down with me on the floor, stroking his beard ponderously and listening. He looks around and I notice intrigue through his cloaked face.

'It's – nice – in here,' he says, looking around at our space decorated with quotes and pictures from our travels. 'But he needs to be a bit tougher, that man of yours,' says Mole, out of nowhere. 'Didn't know how to take him at first. Now I reckon . . . more people like him in the world . . . less wars!'

'Yeah, he's pretty peace-loving,' I say.

'But you know, he needs to be a bit more like a . . . man. You can't do all of that . . . stuff. It's not fair.'

He's caught me unawares. I wonder what else he's noticed about our relationship, from under his wiry beard. 'I know. But I love him.'

When the show is finished, Mole gets up, swaying, looking over at our open notebooks as he leaves the room.

'I've never lived with artists before,' he mutters curiously, on his way out.

Jack and Darren are screaming again. This time, it's really bad. Jim has just bought a ticket online to fly to Melbourne the next day for a gig he does every year for a friend. Yet again, with pay, he will barely break even from the cost of the flight. It's a matter of loyalty to the friend who has booked him, I realise. But still, it worries me, his extraordinary nonchalance about money. It feels like others notice it too, and try to take advantage of him. Will he ever get ahead?

His eyes, peeping back at me in the night, glow with concern as the screams grow louder, followed by the blood-curdling thuds of slapping flesh. It's hard, though, because sometimes they are followed by laughter, sometimes screams.

The next day, they are even worse, fighting in the hall and knocking on our door every five minutes to ask to borrow a phone or a few dollars. I'm trying to work – this time, irony of ironies, on

yet another fashion column about a designer whose dresses would cost about as much as a year's rent at The Rose. Every time I get a flow of thoughts to type, there's another knock at the door or more screaming and then – what sounds like beating. To make it more confusing, this is sometimes followed by laughter, sometimes by groaning. I've had enough.

Darren knocks at the door and I lurch forward, intercepting Jim.

'Look, you're a grown man, you need to look after yourself!' Jim looks startled, like I've yelled at him.

'Oh NO! I've upset the missus!' Darren starts to sob, and I run down the stairs to get out of this madhouse.

I don't know who I'm more annoyed with – Jim, for being so bloody nice all the time, or Darren, for constantly pestering us while we're trying to work in our room. I also know that people with such mixed-up psyches need a bit of common sense, you can't just keep enabling their insanity. Also – I'm tired, stressed, and running my own strange business in such a hairy way doesn't leave much room for mistakes. Or days (and nights) left sleepless from people who are torturing us all. Still, I feel sick in my stomach after confronting him, and ashamed of myself. Jim would never snap at anybody. He's the measure by which I now treat people.

My heart pumps in palpitations as I walk quickly down to the beach, and cry it off at the waves. Jim calls, ten minutes later.

'Lou, I've found somewhere else for you to stay tonight.'

Oh boy. Now he's looking after me, too. This makes me even more upset. Now I feel like I've become the weak victim I so abhor. I think, breathe, logically. I'm a grown girl. I can look after myself. This is why I just snapped at Darren, right?

I march back to the pub to talk to Leigh.

'I don't feel comfortable staying there with those guys up there. They fight in the night and it's just horrible. Plus they keep knocking on our door.'

'Okay, that's it, yours is the third complaint, they'll be gone tomorrow. They haven't paid their rent for a fortnight anyway.'

Jim makes Leigh chuckle with a joke as we leave and holds my hand as we go upstairs to get our stuff. When Darren walks past he grips me tighter. I bury the thought, that he's more worried about upsetting Darren than upsetting me. I pack up my laptop and a day's worth of belongings, feeling guilty and angry and relieved all at once, but determined to put my dinner party face on.

Rhyll and Justin live in a little house, just across the road and down the corner from The Rose. I've always wondered how different people's lives can be, from one house to another. From their front garden I can see our bedroom window at The Rose, and I'm so grateful not to be sleeping there tonight.

We pull into their driveway in the balmy night. Inside, Leonard Cohen croons softly while they talk contentedly, stirring salsa on the stove. We've just left a psychological drama, and here we are in a romantic comedy.

We walk in and Jim takes the lead, making jokes and banter, while they serve us up homemade nachos with slow-cooked salsa. It's such a relief to eat from a table with matching cutlery, a place that doesn't feel like it's encrusted with ghosts — and living demons — of jagged men. And when they pour the wine it's not with the ferocity of someone filling up at a petrol bowser in a hurry.

'I actually just finished my photography studies . . .' Rhyll is saying as I zone back into the conversation after a brief pang of guilt at Darren and Jack. Why am I causing trouble for those poor lost men who have no choice but to live in places like The Rose? The

events of the night have fragmented the fine equilibrium I was so enjoying. I've lost my bearings, and it's made me weak.

'Here's some of my work . . .'

Rhyll is showing me her folio. Beautiful nude black-and-white portraits and profile shots, lovingly arranged, the beginnings of her career. 'I'm still trying to get a proper folio of published work together, though.'

Something occurs to me. Since landing in Western Australia, I hadn't interviewed any couples from Perth for one of my magazine columns. My editor had said that though they'd be 'willing' to publish a story on a couple from the West, they didn't have any photographers this side of Australia, so I'd have to supply images as well.

'Do you know of any nudist organisations around here? I heard some part of Cottesloe Beach is nudist, occasionally . . .'

Rhyll nods. 'Yeah, I think they're called Sunseekers or something. Why?'

'I do a column on . . . interesting couples. I thought I could interview some nudists. Would you be interested in taking the photos?'

'Oh my god Lou, I'd love to. Wow!'

We trade email addresses and phone numbers, which seems awfully formal as I'm sleeping on her sofa bed tonight.

At eleven o'clock I drive Jim to the eucalypt-lined airport and drop him off. We're back laughing together again, he at the perfection of Rhyll helping me with my columns, 'See, Lou, Jack and Darren were really helping you with your work . . .' I let it slide, still uneasy at the memory of their discord.

'Say hello to Melbourne for me! And babe, can you bring me a copy of *The Age*?'

He kisses me goodbye and walks off briskly, his bag across his back heading towards the open doors of Perth airport.

When I get back to Justin and Rhyll's, they are snuggled on the couch watching a Jarmusch movie. Justin's guitar is propped in front of him for impromptu moments of creativity. *See*, I think. Couplesville doesn't have to involve a sprinkler. These two manage to balance creativity with a safe place to live.

'That's pretty rock-star of Jim, flying down to Melbourne for a gig then back the next day. You guys are living the dream!' says Justin.

Yeah, but sometimes it's not that dreamy.

I fall asleep listening to the same traffic go past on the same road, but in a different direction. And I dream Darren is bashing down the door to eat my bowl of nachos.

In the morning I wake, momentarily forgetting where I am. Then I remember Rhyll will probably pad around in her nightie. Romance and flowers and the female form aren't cause for fear and frustration. I don't need to feel guilty. Relax.

It's the strangest thing, this tension that has built up in my body since sleeping in spaces inhabited by lonely old men. It's like I have to constantly monitor myself. I catch myself staring enviously at Rhyll's kitchen, a shiny steel coffeepot sitting on the stove, a bowl of fruit casting rainbow rays through the kitchen window. I wonder when I'll be able to cook dinner in such an idyllic setting, without the smell of Grant's pork simmering in the scratched frypan.

It's a shiny day and I drive up to Cottesloe Beach for a barefoot walk along the sand before I settle in with my laptop at the café on the water. I spend the day as the old me, eating breakfast out, working on my laptop from the café upstairs, visiting the Cottesloe library, browsing in shops and collecting my mail from the North

Fremantle post office. There's a letter from Sally, post-marked from five days ago. She knows how much I appreciate hand-written mail over emails. The time it took to get here accentuates how far I feel from everything over here.

Dear Lou

Things are pretty boring here. Work is the same – although I'm coming up to holidays soon and going to use the cut in interest rates to get the floors repolished. Umm . . . what else? Miss you! . . . I dreamt last night you were back in my kitchen, telling me stories and drinking coffee. Melbourne's just not the same without you.

How is Jim? I think it's awfully romantic what you're both doing together, even though it's also pretty crazy.

Maybe you can't have one without the other?

Love,

Sally

Reading her familiar handwriting in the front seat of the Mazda under the scorching western sun, the tears are spilling thick and fast. It's days like these I really miss her.

At four in the afternoon, it's time to head to the airport to collect Jim, and my throat does a see-saw at the thought of returning to The Rose. When we pull in, Jack and Darren are sitting on the balcony with their belongings, waiting for a taxi to collect them. Jim says goodbye to them both, shakes Jack's hand, and wishes him luck in the court case with his daughter and the other assault charge.

'I didn't know about that?!' I say, once we are safely back inside our room.

'Yeah, I thought it best not to tell you while all that other stuff was going on.'

An hour later, Mole taps on our door. 'Party time kids, the monsters've gone. We'll all be able to sleep tonight!'

As crazy as it is in this nut-house, at least there's a sense of camaraderie.

'Knock on old Uncle Mole's door if you want to have a beer to celebrate!'

Jim goes straight to bed since he caught the red-eye to Melbourne and back, and I go downstairs with Mole and Grant to sit in the bar. After realising it's skimpy night, feeling a bit uncomfortable as the only clothed girl at the bar, I head back upstairs, and lie, unsleeping, under the whirring fan.

One night, when the place is peacefully quiet except for the distant hum of the television in a far-off room, the electricity goes out while Jim is cooking. I pop out to Mole and Grant midway through their Emu Bitter shift on the balcony and ask if either of them know how to locate the fuse box. Mole hops straight into action, still gripping his beer as he flexes his handyman muscles and flicks the fuse, locating the source of the problem — an overused power board.

I carry my glass of white wine out onto the balcony to say thank you, and Grant tries to give me his chair. 'Stay with us, love.'

Mole, with pride, punches him playfully, telling him to be quiet. I ask Jim to bring dinner out to the balcony, when he's finished cooking. He gets an excited look in his eye.

After the sun has set and Mole is quietly stroking his beard, Jim comes out with four steaming plates of tofu and vegetables. After the obligatory protestations, Mole takes a bite out of politeness, and we both look away, not wanting to seem too eager to make him eat.

'Not bad, this tucker, not bad,' he says, gobbling up the entire plate of tofu and leaving the vegetables. Grant eats everything on

his plate too, smiling at us and offering Jim a slab of pork from the factory if he likes.

Talking in bed later, we both agree that baked silken tofu is the perfect dinner for a man with only one tooth.

Jim leaves for another gig in Kalgoorlie, and I decide to stay in Fremantle for the weekend, catching up with Justin and Rhyll and working on some stories. I wake on Saturday to hear something at the bedroom door, and when I get up, I find a box of biscuits sitting in the doorway.

When Jim arrives home on Sunday night after the gig, I'm cooking us dinner in the kitchen, and Mole pokes his head in to listen, his usual Emu Bitter clenched in his fist.

'Ah, I knew you'd gone away!' He's looking at Jim. 'Don't worry, I was keeping an eye on her for ya!'

Grant comes in under the pretence of offering Mole pork again, but really, I think, just to talk to us, his motley-community.

'That couple from room twelve have gone back to jail. Not sure about the kid . . . poor bugger.' They'd been dealing something, from their rooms. A guy got upset, something went wrong, Leigh found out and gave them the boot.

'Jacko's going back to jail, tomorrow too,' Grant murmurs, like he's reporting the weather, referring to a heavy-footed early riser who I'd only seen once, coming up the stairs.

Mole, standing stroking his beard in the background, pretending not to listen, looks up at me. 'You two lovebirds make this place . . . better.'

Mole knocks on our door, half an hour later, with a package of ham and jasmine tea, nervously muttering under his breath, not meeting my eyes. 'Just . . . ask, if you need anything . . . knock on old Mole's door. Anyone tries to hurt you two . . . I'll kill 'em. 'Kay?'

In the morning we wake to find a note shoved under our door. It says that because of rising land costs and the mining boom, The Rose is going to be bulldozed in a fortnight. 'All tenants need to find alternative accommodation.'

Honeymoon at The Rose is over.

21

Wheatbelt sushi

'Anyway Lou, wasn't it nice to chat to someone with teeth?'

We've only been at The Rose for a month, but the room feels like our own house by now. I can't believe how much stuff I've accumulated — boxes of published articles and newspaper liftouts, products sent care of the North Fremantle post office, books I needed for various articles, a medical dictionary, and even a printer. But we have to cram everything back into the Mazda, so it's time for another declutter. I never realised how much hard work goes into staying lean of possessions.

I'm hesitant to throw it all away – I've just started writing for a medical journal, and I need the printer to cross-reference quotes, information and sources. I also need it for invoicing, but if I'm going to put travelling light first on my agenda, I'll have to turf it.

I walk down to the post office, to collect the last of my mail before we head to the wheat belt, to stay with some of Jim's friends and chase a couple of his gigs. And then – who knows where else

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we'll go? Back to printing at internet cafés and scrounging for net coverage. Sigh.

But again, that thought of seeing a new place on the map. *Yes*. The thrill of movement will make up for the exhaustion I feel at all this packing up. I ask Jim if we can stay a couple more days at The Rose, just so I can enjoy relaxing in a room with books again.

'But Lou, Pluto's so happy we're visiting, he's killing a pig.'

At the post office, I find a parcel. It's a four-hundred-dollar pair of designer sunglasses: Just a little thank you from the girls at Paul Maloney fashion agency . . . Your article last Saturday did wonders for Karen's line . . .

Mum has also sent a postcard from an art exhibition on global warming. It's such a foreign concept over here, where the mines are in your face and nobody's concerned with staying trendy – sunglasses or global-warming wise. My stomach lurches. Balancing freedom and stability is a full-time job.

When we pack the car in the morning, Mole is sitting at the TAB with a long-neck of Emu Bitter, feistily watching the races.

'You two lovebirds getting out of here are ya?'

We tell him we're heading to Merredin for a gig, then not sure where to next.

'Well you know you can call on me any time you run into trouble. Any time.'

Jim asks him for his phone number but he has no idea what it is. Instead, Jim punches his own number into Mole's phone.

'See ya Mole.'

We thank Leigh for having us and load a few more boxes into the car. Mole, standing on the balcony to wave us off, mutters to me quietly as I head down the steps. 'Bloody beautiful bloke your fella.

But you take care of yourself will ya? I think he sometimes forgets about the – uh – details. He needs to learn to listen to you more.'

He wanders back inside, waving in a fly-swatting movement with his back to me because he doesn't like goodbyes.

Before we left Melbourne, when I was cleaning out the car, I'd found a filthy brush and pan in the inside console of the passenger door.

'What's this for?' I'd asked Jim from the Brunswick BP.

'Oh that's for cleaning locusts off the car. When it gets really hot and dusty in the wheat belt sometimes there's . . . locusts.'

Flash forward to six months later, and sure enough, driving through the wheat belt, on a thirty-degree-plus day with the air rippling in waves in front of us, and no other cars on the back road to Merredin, what looks like a swarm of orange mosquitoes starts to pellet the windscreen.

'Oh, that's the locusts,' says Jim casually, and the scent of burning insects starts to fill the interior of the car. When we pull into a petrol station, there are thousands caught and stuck on the front grill.

'We'd better brush them off so they don't overheat the engine.'

Lucky I didn't turf that filthy brush and pan, even though I've been gazing at it every time I sat in the passenger seat, wishing something more glamorous was in the console.

For ten minutes we brush the front grill, washing them off the side of the car with buckets of water. People stop to ask if they can borrow our brush and pan, and we oblige. No wonder the English, Irish and Scottish settlers were once so afraid of the Australian bush. We have so many bizarre insects, such as random locust plagues.

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I buy a diet coke to fill my stomach until lunch, as Jim wants to show me Southern Cross, a town where all the streets are named after stars. It's so hot and dry by the time we get there I want nothing but a chilled sandwich, a cool magazine to flick through, perhaps the sound of running water. Instead I get a dead town with nothing open except a strangely decorated pub. Definitely no glossy magazines here.

He takes me for a quick lap of the humble town, where street names such as Sirius, Mimosa and Acrux contrast starkly with the baked earth landscape and flimsy brown facades of swiftly erected houses.

He pulls in next to a hotel where he once did a gig, and I'm so ravenous I decide to settle for a packet of Twisties if that's all they have. The dark, dingy pub is, thankfully, air-conditioned. A weathered old crone appears, looking suspicious, her face transforming when she figures out it's Jim.

'Look who's here!' her face is alight with smiles, she instantly appears younger.

'Mel...' Jim drawls, like he's back with his favourite aunty. Numerous locks of hair bagged in plastic 'decorate' the doorways. Whose hair is it?

'Oh, that's what we ask them backpacker girls to leave when they go.' Go? 'Back home, silly!' Mel must think it is a nice decoration. I think it's creepy.

A chubby English girl stomps loudly downstairs in her pyjamas, grabbing two packets of chips and heading back upstairs with a stack of DVDs. Jim tells me working in these outback WA bars is plugged as the 'ultimate Aussie experience' to English backpackers. 'Apparently they love it. Many of them come over with their girlfriends, and they share the bar shifts. So if you get a Hotel California, it's not as bad.'

'How are you enjoying yourself?' Jim asks the English girl who's just dished us up toasted sandwiches.

'Oh, like nothing else.'

Both girls want to extend their stays. It's like the ultimate summer holiday. They're sunburnt, they're working, and meeting real ocker Australian men.

'They usually end up pregnant to one of the locals. It's just what happens.'

'Really?' I can't believe these girls could find the hard-drinking, mute men of outback Australia that appealing.

'It's exotic, Lou. Like Crocodile Dundee.'

Just then a man walks in wearing an Akubra, smirking at the English girl. She blushes, and pours him a beer.

Onwards we drive through more locusts, until we get to Merredin just as the sun is setting orange in the sky. Sunsets in Western Australia are almost a religious experience, and perhaps one of the main reasons why, despite the less-than-ideal working conditions, I just keep going.

No man-made structure has ever impressed me like the sky on this side of Australia. The scope and magnitude seem to whisper that this life is so much more than you or I could ever dream. Think big. Don't limit yourself. You are as huge as this world you stand in, bathed in honey-tinged light.

There's so much more earth, space, time and hope than you could ever imagine. Don't worry about any of it. Even if you run out of money, you'll spend your evenings watching – this. How can you think yourself disadvantaged, poor? How can you worry that there's not enough of anything in this world? Look. It's right there.

The amber gold, dripping down the horizon, is the richest hue I've ever seen.

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Merredin was the original rail link between Kalgoorlie and Perth, and still carries echoes of the town that it was. A Target sits on the main street, flanked by Video Ezy and a bakery, which we discover in the morning sells sushi. Sushi in the wheat belt. Miraculous. But the question is, do they make lattes?

I spy Jim bringing his things in from the car and he introduces me to Joe, the gay publican at the pub where he's due to perform tonight. Symbolising how generic the outback Aussie 'type' is, Joe is known throughout the wheat belt only as 'gay Joe'. I guess there's only one gay man.

'Hi honey,' he says to me, offering me a drink.

'My God, that's a great coffee machine!' I say, spying the shiny San Marino espresso machine glittering enticingly from behind the bar. It's so out of place here it's marvellous. And probably why it looks like it's never been used.

'Nobody ever orders anything 'cept cappuccinos, but,' Joe says grumpily.

After catching up with Jim, and planning the night's gig, he throws us the keys to our room upstairs, saying to come down for dinner later, on the house.

Up the back stairs we go to our lodgings for the night, finding a double bed in a hot room with a little lamp and a table. Someone's abandoned green thongs poke out from under the bed.

'I need some thongs,' says Jim, happily.

We lie down for a little while until the sun has dipped so low on the horizon that a walk won't scorch our skin, then Jim takes me for a tour of the town. The streets are surprisingly busy, and because there has been a race today, the pub across the road from the showgrounds is overflowing onto the street. When we get back to the pub, we order twin meals like we did that long-ago night in Macksville. Matching plates of fish arrive and Jim even shares a

white wine with me. Soon after, firecrackers start to go off in the sky as part of the race day celebration, and the children start jumping up and down, excitedly. We stand up, hugging in the warm night, sipping our wine.

'This is what I love about the road, Lou. One minute you're on code red, cleaning off locusts from the car grill, the next you're eating fresh fish on the house, watching firecrackers on a balmy night in a new town. And I've got a gig!'

He pulls out a balloon from his back pocket and blows me a tulip, pulling me to his chest as we watch the firecrackers in the night sky. We wander upstairs with food and wine in our bellies, and I lie on our bed looking at the stars in the night, while Jim prepares his set-list, testing the occasional gag on me.

Ah, life.

Joe knocks off work early and sits near me down the back of Jim's show, laughing like he's at home watching his favourite TV show. He is so relaxed, I can tell he's been looking forward to this. He as much booked Jim for his own light relief as to bring some new punters into the pub.

Seeing that the crowd is mainly families with young children, Jim tones down his Big Night Out show to a cross between a G-rated clown party littered with double entendres to get the adults laughing too.

At around 10 pm the crowd starts thinning and the kids go home. The lone bartender is only serving a drink every ten minutes or so, packing down the shelves, restocking and cleaning and getting ready to go home. Suddenly, about twenty young people push through the door at once, coming into the stage room and joining in on the fun. Jim comes alive, as he always does when there's a willing crowd, and they lap it up, texting others and calling friends.

The crowd continues to grow, a mob pushing through the door in only a matter of minutes.

It all happens very quickly, but the girl behind the bar is overwhelmed, with people queuing for drinks. Joe has run to the front door to lock it and keep everyone else out. The pub across from the races had just closed, and its two hundred-odd thirsty patrons are looking to pick up the drinking where they've been brought to a halt.

The bartender looks at me frantically from behind the bar, and without even thinking that I don't know how to use the till, I jump into action, pulling out UDL's from the fridge, serving beers, and pressing numbers into the till. I make up prices when I don't know them, 'Five dollars?' and they give it to me. I keep pressing 'no sale' on the till because it's all about speed.

'Over here, love, over here!'

Joe doesn't seem to notice where I am, and I can hear Jim still performing in the next room to the sound of laughter and heckling.

Two hours later, Joe declares the bar closed. Like a clock winding down, they drift off, leaving rows of empty cans and glasses in their wake. Joe pours us all knock-off drinks, and we sit, sipping icy cold spirits in the hot night. It's the first physical work I've done in a long time, and it felt good.

When we go to bed Jim says cheerfully, 'Anyway Lou, wasn't it nice to chat to someone with teeth?'

I laugh then ask why Joe was so panicky about the packed bar, when surely that's what every publican wants?

'He's gay, Lou. Do you know what must have happened to him in these towns? No wonder he gets nervy about guys boozedup on alcohol.'

He is the first publican I've seen pay Jim straight away, without the usual exhausting and repetitive discussion about how much he's made over the bar, or inane conversation about court orders and AVOs. Joe is a reminder that where some people's troubles make them bitter, some become better; kinder and more empathetic, generous to the other tattooed souls around them. The unpredictable effect of roads and lives, written under the skin.

I rise early, purchasing a weak, burnt coffee infused with the taste of polystyrene. I'm so far off my detox it's not funny, but I figure when you're living like this, you need some pleasures. Even if they do come in the form of a brown drink that bears no relationship to the creamy concoctions of my dreams.

Also, I need to fuel a run. Our detour into the wheat belt has extended for another day, to visit some old friends up the road, and although I only have a few days' worth of clothes sitting on the top layer of all our belongings in the car, I at least left out my runners. Running in the wheat belt is as much an arm workout as a leg one. The flies are huge – not little flitty insects, but big, slow, buzzing monsters. I stretch my legs and spend the next half hour swatting them and keeping up a slow canter, ignoring curious looks from locals as I gallop down a repetitive lap of the town. I need this. Without knowing what I'm going to do for the rest of the day – sit in a car for eight hours, or eat deep-fried food, or drink beer – at least knowing I've done One Good Thing clears me out and reconnects me to free will. Out here on the road in my sneakers, I'm in control. And no matter where I've slept the night before or which part of the blokey culture has got me down, I always feel free, always feel myself, again.

Although the sun scorches my skin and melts my sunscreen as soon as I've applied it, the psychic relief of exercise means the

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payoff is worth it. Still, I'm concerned. I've started to notice a sun spot come up on my forehead, just where the sunscreen always drips off, and I wonder how much longer I can spend exploring this great southern land which also has the harshest ultraviolet rays in the world.

My fair skin burns easily, and I know that a day in the front seat of a car in the Australian sun is like sitting in front of a fire. No amount of sunscreen can cancel out prolonged exposure. Here I am giving advice on beauty treatments and caviar-infused ointments and I'm burning up a storm, ageing quicker than you can say ozone layer. With every leathery-skinned woman that I see out here, I flash forward to myself, in ten years, or will it be five?

I pull on my new sunglasses, worth a one-way ticket out of here, and quiet my doubts. *Keep going, Lou*.

Jim is waiting with the car running out the front of the pub when I get back. 'Just got a clown gig at the primary school in half an hour. Let's go!'

Guess I'll shower . . . later?

22

Dog day afternoon

'Maybe we shouldn't have gone there.'

The bush telegraph of the small town is going strong, and Jim is like Corrigin's favourite son. When he is heading back into town for a gig, word spreads fast. His phone beeps with messages of invites to stay over, catch up, 'Maaaate! When are ya coming?' I brace myself for the social whirlwind again, glad I at least ran today.

Corrigin is only an hour's drive up the highway from Merredin, but with our phones flashing 'out of range' almost as soon as we hit the road, I feel we are heading into a black hole. I filed the columns I had due before we left Fremantle, and was up to date on my medical articles and a couple of other columns, too. But what if an editor wants to check a fact? What if a vital piece of information comes through and I miss it?

As the car kicks up dust I scrounge for a scrap of paper to make a list of the things I need to do when we get back within civilisation, to ease my mind. Then focus on my next objective:

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getting rid of this sweaty stench from the run. Sometimes survival is a full-time job.

We pull in at the Corrigin service station where I head inside for a Clayton's shower. I can't find a clean towel so I use scratchy toilet paper as a face washer and dryer, the liquid dispenser as my soap, cleaning off the dust gathered on the unpaved road we just drove into town.

Jim calls, from outside. 'Lou, are you in there?'

'Yeah, I'm just washing my face!'

The door creaks open slowly and I am face-to-face with a huge, black python, wrapped around a little boy's neck. 'Surprise!'

I shriek so loudly the little boy runs back outside with the snake, where Jim introduces me to 'Sonny' and his pet python. Soon, his mother appears with a 'G'day Jimbo', then she proceeds to chastise her son, who still has the black python wrapped around his neck.

'Take him back to your room, Sonny! I didn't say you could use him to scare people!'

Corrigin has a peculiar love of dogs. With a dog cemetery filled with graves for 'Rusty', 'Scamp' and 'my beloved mate', dog statues and signs rise cheerfully from streets all over the town. Once a year, for the Annual Dog in a Ute competition, utes line the road out of town up past the cemetery. Jim tells a story of pulling into the service station to witness the spectacle of barking kelpies banked up in over two hundred utes. A man came out of the shop, thinking it was a funeral. 'It must have been a popular dog.'

We pull up at the primary school and Jim is greeted by a swarm of kids. He clicks into clown mode, leaving the car running by accident and forgetting half his tools. I chase after him with the toilet paper and shaving cream, keeping track of both his key and mine.

I watch half the gig, but wanting something else to fill my brain other than the jokes I am beginning to know by rote, I walk to the centre of town, looking for a shop which sells a newspaper or a magazine. I find a takeaway food shop called Top of The Town, settling in to read the endlessly disappointing *West Australian* and have another weak, burnt cappuccino.

Oh for a *New Yorker*, right now. A cool breeze and a bit of pretentious Fitzroy conversation would really hit the spot. I search the magazine rack, hoping for something . . . interesting. *Truth* and *People* magazines stare back at me, cruelly.

After finishing my brown drink, I search for an internet café, but all they have to offer here is the 'telecommunications centre'. After waiting at the counter for ten minutes, an elderly lady shows me to an archaic-looking computer in the corner, where I unsuccessfully try to connect to the internet for fifteen minutes. No go.

The woman, not particularly fussed, tells me that Telstra broadband hasn't hit Corrigin yet, so they're lucky to connect at all some days. She gives me my dollar back, and I leave, feeling like I've missed out on a meal I was drooling over.

When Jim's gig is finished, I collect him in the car with toilet paper and shaving cream stuck to his face, smelling like laughter and cheekiness. Again, my growling dissatisfaction is abated with a mere look at his face. The kids chase our car from their spot in the playground, not wanting the fun to end. 'Come back, JIMBO!'

Giggles and laughter fade as we drive down the hill.

'It was a great gig Lou, they even paid me straight away!'

'Great!' I say. But I'm just wondering if I can check my emails somewhere.

Corrigin, to some locals, is known as 'Niggerock', 'because that's what it spells backwards,' someone once told Jim. The local Aboriginal

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tribes are all afraid of the rock, so they avoid the place, believing it cursed. Of course, the overruling attitude amongst locals is relief. Racism is so common amongst otherwise cheerful and 'good' folk of outback Australia. This is the paradox of the bush: talking to racist people is the only way to learn about the Aboriginal curses and superstitions. I wouldn't have even known about the curse if someone hadn't made that 'Niggerock' reference to Jim.

Jim takes me up to see the rock, a curved piece of dotted marble spanning a couple of square kilometres at the top of the town. If I'd really been sensitive, I wouldn't have stepped on it, but my senses were off. I was tired, grumpy, and foolishly ignoring the voice which audibly said, in my head, 'Don't go there'. We walk in silence, overlooking the town, and an eerie feeling starts to send shivers up my spine. By the time we get off the rock, a black cloud has descended upon my mood, possibly because of two bad coffees, too much sun, or maybe because of something more. Jim doesn't look too happy either. He's kind of disappearing into himself, which is his version of a bad mood.

'Maybe we shouldn't have gone there.'

Pluto and Tara ran a pub in another town, the first place Jim pulled in off the Nullarbor, deranged as a wild dog and with thirty dollars to his name, on his first trip across to Western Australia. Pluto took an instant liking to Jim, tossing him the keys to a room upstairs, inviting him to stay 'indefinitely' and instantly referring to him as his 'best mate'.

When he'd travel away for other gigs the two would leave endless messages on his phone, checking whether or not he was okay, asking when he was coming back. Accepting him unquestioningly for who he is, they opened up their hearts and their lives to him, and even conceived their first child on the night of his gig, joking they'd name it after him, before moving to Gin-Gin, twenty kilometres away.

I assume I will like them – the fact that they love someone I love gives us something in common. Also, to admire a free spirit like Jim means they must surely have a bit of the adventurer in them, too, or at least, no interest in 'entrapment' as we see it. But just as you can't predict the outcome of any interaction of atoms, my meeting Pluto and Tara, warm and friendly as they are, only confirms to me that I desperately, achingly, miss Melbourne. And this is not my tribe, or my place.

We arrive at their house, a farmlet located next to acres of dry land, and despite being twenty kilometres out of the nearest town, I'm just happy to be able to be indoors and away from the harsh sun. Inside, everyone is drinking, even though it's only midday, and I feel bad that we've arrived empty-handed to what appears to be a party.

Pluto gives Jim an almighty smack on the shoulder to welcome him, plonking a beer in front of him, despite Jim's protests. Three women, including Tara, sit on the other side of the room, with the boys all milling about talking feistily about crotching sheep and other farming topics. The girls are welcoming enough, offering me a drink and smiling, but I guess I'm just not in the mood for socialising.

As I tune in and out of the conversation, telling myself to keep an open mind and look for some common ground, one of the Bacardi-gripping girls announces to the others, 'I don't understand those people who spend hours on the internet, writing emails and whatnot. It's so boring, to sit at a computer.'

All I can think about right now is how much I want to check my email.

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'Trudy's pregnant,' whispers Jim, coming up behind me and giving me an uncommon public display of affection, which is nice.

'What? The backpacker from the pub who's sitting over there quietly? She's only been here a month!'

'Remember that competition I told you about?'

When we'd dropped in to the pub in Southern Cross, Jim had told me about the local men in these small towns having a bet on who could bed the new bartender first.

'And it's to him –' He points at the guy whose wife just left in a huff with their two kids.

'Can we go, soon?'

Jim stiffens and turns our hug into a sort of pat, like a mate, and laughs nervously. 'I've had a few drinks, Lou. I think Pluto wants us to stay.'

The clock ticks. Nothing changes on my exterior, but for the anger rising like an impending volcano in my stomach. Tara must sense something's up, because she brings over her newborn baby girl, and asks if I want a cuddle. Her beautiful little girl blinks sweetly up at me, softening my dark mood somewhat and distracting me in only the way a sweet little new being can. When it's time to hand her back, my foul mood returns, and I desperately want to be alone. Somewhere cool, dark and peaceful.

Far from here.

I want a bath, I want a book, an interesting movie, or at the very least – a poem. I want to listen to something that isn't harsh, drunk or base in humour. I'm sick of pubs, and hot, bitter surroundings. And all these men, who Jim seems to love so much, but I'm finding so hard to bear.

I recite poetry in my head like a prisoner in a chain gang, seeing Jim's silhouette and deludedly imagining him suddenly all apologetic, with a flash of recognition, scooping me up in his arms

and whisking me to safety, like he once did at the Hotel California, all those moons ago

Cooling your brow as with the mystic dew

Dropping from twilight trees . . .

'Have you read any good books lately?' I ask Trudy, the backpacker, attempting to engage. To my surprise she asks me if I'm into astrology, so we have an interesting discussion about how Cancerians are so motherly and keen to have children, because they're ruled by the moon.

In the kitchen, Tara is peeling potatoes with her baby under her arm. I step in to help her, trying to still the growing growl at Jim for bringing me here, trapping me here, when I really want to go. I argue with myself, trying to be grateful for their hospitality and wondering if anyone would notice if I went and lay down in the car, when I can hear Pluto talking about their dog, saying it hasn't been exercised in a couple of days.

'Um, can I take him for a walk?' Pluto throws me a leash, shaking his head like I'm mad, and I set off with the beautiful, wild, crazy animal which tries to throw itself in front of every car that appears.

We walk up roads past paddocks glistening with yellow straw in the sun, and I assess my life over the past few months. I don't know if it's the lack of alone time, the beer, the sun, the dirt, or how far I am from everything that I've ever known, but I start to cry. I wail to the sky, and the dog starts to howl alongside me, looking up with the whites of his eyes loyally, innocently, joining in my pain.

By the time we get back, I feel slightly better. I go and pat the horses, and Pluto comes up beside me to tell me about their differing personalities. He is up to about beer number fifteen now, but seems barely even tipsy. Eventually, the sun sets, and I can tell Jim is in no state to drive. Pluto has forced six beers into him by now, and he's all open and gentle, gentler even than he usually is. I look at him and instead of seeing beauty in his way of going with the flow, it just looks weak.

It might sound strange, but this is the first time, in all our travels, that I see Jim as a separate being, with different needs, goals and perceptions to me. It comes with a jarring sensation, like I've never seen him before.

Oh, nice one dickhead! How the hell did you get around Australia not knowing how to fix a carburettor!

They're shaking their heads like he's the most stupid man in the world, and he just – lets them. Jim would never arc up at someone picking on him. He likes this role of the clown. As long as they're laughing, he's okay. But God, I wish he would snap right now. Their insults make me angry. I just wish he would assert himself!

For so long I've been in a lovesick daze seeing us as one and whole, together. Until now, I just trusted that we would always grow tired of places at the same time. It's happened up until now. But he's not going anywhere – he's perfectly happy standing there, playing town clown so the guys can beef themselves up in his presence. If I want to leave I'm going to have to figure out how to do it on my own.

I'm questioning the entire reason I threw everything away to come out here, in this middle-of-nowhere place, after months of macho company which has taught me – what? That way too many Australian men think binge drinking is a perfectly fine hobby? That as laid-back and friendly as outback Australians are, they can behave like primitive beasts? When I set out on this journey, I was determined to prove my misconceptions of this Australia wrong. But this afternoon has only managed to magnify our differences.

It wrenches me in two. I don't want this to be true. I don't want to be the only one who wants to reconcile roughness with a bit of elegance, swearing with gentility, the beauty of the landscape with a similar open-mindedness about life. I thought Jim understood that. But I think he has a much stronger fortitude for the ugliness and paradoxes than me.

I feel stuck, bored, frustrated, and to make matters worse, I can't even call Sally or my sister for some desperately needed perspective, because there's no phone coverage in this damned place.

Back at the house, the party is in full swing by now, and despite their friendliness and generosity, I just want to leave. But I can't, Jim is drunk, it's late now and there will be kangaroos on the road. I storm outside and accidentally touch an electric fence, which jolts me so hard I can't breathe for a few minutes.

'AAAAAAEEEEE!'

Jim, a little shocked at my noise, starts to laugh, which is all the encouragement I need to cry. He comes over to me, but he's still laughing, patting me and looking back to the blokes. Am I imagining this, or is he treating me like a fella? I feel sick. This is as far from the romantic reason I'm with him as it gets.

'I have to go back to Fremantle,' I say angrily.

'But -'

'I'LL DRIVE, I'll dodge kangaROOS, I don't care, but I HAVE to get out of here.'

He laughs nervously, looking over my shoulder at the men who are probably saying, *Jimbo's missus is spittin' the dummy out there!* or something just as tacky. Something which puts me in a box and labels me 'missus' and what I'm feeling as 'spitting the dummy' when it's so much more. I'm so much more. Just like they are!

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At least at his gigs there is something to look at, listen to, a variety of people to talk to. But here – in this farmlet in the middle of nowhere, a drive to even get into the tiny town with nothing to buy, do, see or read except a barren landscape, disconnected from everything – I am totally trapped. Get me out of here!

'You can't leave!' the men say indignantly. 'The girls are cooking a roast!' Another beer hits Jim's shoulder, and guilt at ruining his reputation as easy-going pulls at my damn Piscean heart-strings and we stay.

'This was my biggest fear, Jim, when I got rid of my car to move into yours. Don't you remember that?' I say to him as soon as we're alone.

'I know Lou, but we're here now. Nothing bad has actually happened. Getting angry isn't going to change anything. It will just make you feel worse in the morning.'

We sleep in the spare room and, as always happens after I've become so fed up I can't breathe, my period comes, gushing. I have no idea where my supplies have gone in my frenzied packing from The Rose. They're probably below his clown shoes somewhere, covered in dirt. Jim, redeeming himself a little with concern, rushes to search the car and I do what I can with his towel to prevent leaving murderous stains on their bed sheets. I feel like an absolute derelict. By the morning, I'm utterly humiliated, exhausted and anxious, and I just want to leave.

'Babe, I'm okay to drive,' says Jim, heading to the driver's seat. 'NO,' I insist. I need to feel – at least some semblance of

control again.

Everything about the driver's seat is him. My legs don't reach the pedals, I have to adjust the rear-vision mirror. When I use all the energy I can muster to reverse I feel a sudden crunch hit the side.

Just to top off the perfect twenty-four hours, I've just backed into Pluto and Tara's car.

Oh, shit.

I pull out my wallet in the dark, fishing for a hundred-dollar note, all I have in there. I run back inside and pin it under the sugar bowl on the kitchen bench.

I'm so sorry. Ring me when you get a quote.

It isn't until we get to a paved road that I exhale.

23

Wicked winds and missing Kremes

'Don't waste the day in anger, Lou. Check it out. That sky – just look at that sky.'

WE DRIVE IN SILENCE, JIM letting me take the helm even after my misguided reversal. I play a Beth Orton CD three times in a row before I can talk.

'Where do we have to go next?'

The words I choose are telling. You put me here. I'm powerless. I have no say in any of this. You are ruining my life.

'Well, I've got that gig in Esperance tomorrow night.'

I refuse to stay with any more 'friends', since the last deviation, so I say, 'I know we're bordering on broke, but there's a reason not everyone stays at other people's houses around the country. Sometimes you just need a break!'

For the long haul from Corrigin down south to Esperance, my heart isn't the blank slate it should be for such scenery. Instead of paying attention to the experience, my anxieties over phone and internet coverage, as well as the louder and louder questions in my head about where I should be based, start clouding every encounter I have with strangers. I don't even notice the landscape anymore. I just see my worries.

'Don't waste the day in anger, Lou. Check it out. That sky – just look at that sky.'

He's right, I know. Life is too short. For beating myself up over a bent fender. For beating him up over having a few drinks with some ocker men. For beating them up for being the way they are. For losing the day to this foul mood.

My mood lifts by an eighth of a microgram when I spot a service station along the gravel road out of town. Survival flicks back into gear. Coffee, bank balance, phone recharge card.

The petrol station attendant takes so long to make my coffee I want to tip the rack which should be holding newspapers on her head. 'Thanks,' I say curtly, flinging my coins across the counter. I stomp back to the car and burn my tongue on the first sip.

'You'll love Esperance, Lou. Guy who runs the pub is really friendly. Loved my act and had me stay for two weeks last time. They'll let us stay when we get there, for sure. The pub's right on the beach, too.'

I nod. Friends have told me about Esperance. Some of the most incredible coastline in West Australia. City of sea-lions. And a biosphere of fertility tagged *The Sweet Spot* by Aboriginal people, which is on the way. But because of what's pulling and tugging at Jim's and my heart, we don't even notice the difference in the air through the biosphere, and when we pull over to get some food

from the supermarket I find myself whingeing about the shopkeeper in the car.

'Did you see how slow she was? How could one person move so slowly?'

'Lou, she was just talking to the guy in front of you. Who cares?'

A cow walks in front of the road and we slow to a crawl, and I find myself so enraged at the hold-up that I'm shaking my head.

Jim's trying to turn it around, laughing, as usual. 'Lou, you're angry at a cow?'

When we stop in Hopetoun, Jim says he'll go for a half-hour walk while I check my emails from the takeaway shop. I feel envious, that he gets to put exercise first. But I've left everything too late. I still have no phone coverage, and even a few hours could mean I've missed a gig. Everything traps me in this mood.

Jim has nothing but one gig booked in Perth, in five days, and with his usual blasé approach to covering expanses of hundreds of kilometres in a day, decides we might as well see the rest of the south of the state while we're here. I'm waiting to hear back on various pitches I had the sense to send in Fremantle. It's getting down to the line.

Sure enough, my sense of urgency hadn't been unfounded. There's an email waiting, from my editor at the newspaper:

Louisa, I've left you three messages. Can you call me when you have a moment? I need to talk to you about some more columns . . .

My heart beats, quickening. Money. Work. My saviours. I run to the car, drive it to Jim, honking.

'JIM! Can we go now? And do you know if there's Vodafone reception in ESPERANCE?'

When we get to Esperance, the air is strangely silent, except for the wind, blowing gales that would have sent Dorothy to Oz. We find out later that dead birds have been falling from the sky.

It's not a good sign.

Five minutes before we get to Esperance, my phone beeps with coverage. Sure enough, there's three messages from Cindy, the editor, along with another one from a sub-editor for another magazine left the day before, checking some facts.

'There's the pub ther -'

'Babe, can you just pull over? I need a coffee and I need to make a phone call.'

No longer interested in making nice with the publican, I suggest Jim goes to say hello while I head to a little plastic café on the edge of the street.

'Hi - Cindy - It's Louisa here."

'Ah Louisa! Is this a good time?'

A gale-force wind has kicked up outside and I scuttle to cower in the least flappy edge of the café. A table blows over, dropping plastic flowers on the linoleum. The shop assistant looks angrily at me, like I'm responsible.

'Yes! Yes it's great!' I say, too eagerly.

'Ah, well I was just calling to see if you were interested in doing some more columns for us, as well as the fashion ones. These ones pay a little better but the emphasis is on checking facts and getting good promotional shots. Does that sound like something you'd be interested in?'

The columns are to be about Melbourne events – dance, art, culture, theatre. Just the sorts of activities I adore. Or – I would – if I was there.

'Yes that sounds great.'

WICKED WINDS AND MISSING KREMES

'Oh good. I'll forward you some suggestions, but do you think you could turn around the first by, say, tomorrow? And we need an extra fashion column this week too.'

My answer is 'yes' to everything, especially after the morning's costly bingle.

'Thanks Cindy. Thanks for thinking of me.' I'm hanging on by a thread, and she just keeps giving me lifelines.

Jim comes and slumps beside me in the café. 'They didn't remember who I was. Not looking good, Lou.'

'What do you mean?'

'The guy who booked me doesn't work there anymore. We just drove six hundred kilometres for nothing. Might just stay the one night, hey?'

Back we hop into the Mazda, which by this time was feeling more like a cage to me than a vehicle. I just want to get out, bunker down in a room with my pen and paper and get my columns sorted. But the wind is getting choppier and choppier, buffeting the car. We drive past the sea, foamy waves smashing about and ancient-looking pines leaning with the force of the gale. The only backpacking lodge that has rooms is giant and overlooking the sea. We get a room and unload the car, and Jim disappears for another walk.

Safely in a room with a door I can close, I find more emails from my editor, one sent just twenty minutes ago. 'Louisa I need you to file 150 words on a look from the fashion festival. Can you get it to me by 5 o'clock?' That's twenty minutes away. I press reply, and start madly typing in designer names and googling photos from the fashion festival. I file the story, too hurried to even play music on my laptop, tapping away in the silent room. Satisfied that particular bomb has not exploded, I relax into the next job a bit more.

For two hours in our freezing-cold room I channel Prada's Autumn 2007 collection and interweave the Little Red Riding Hood

story. When I'm really immersed in the writing, I forget where I am and scramble beside me, looking for a reference book. *Oh.* I remember. That went months ago. I miss my dictionary.

When at last I'm happy with the column I send it to my editor, who has also asked me to cover three dance extravaganzas on in Melbourne next week. I call the publicists to arrange photos and they offer me free tickets. Gulp. 'Oh, thank you, but I won't be able to make it.' Why is my freedom beginning to feel like entrapment?

Jim arrives back grinning like a happy fool, inspired from his walk, where he's seen sea-lions and walked all the way to a whistling cave. 'Do you have to eat in the bed?' He's slurping away under the doona, cold baked beans straight from the can. For some reason this really depresses me.

I pull on some clothes and head up the road for a look for myself, but the day has grown dark while I have been typing. The sea-lions have all gone, now there's just a violent sea and a dark, ominous sky which looks like it's sinking. I walk further up the hill to the supermarket, and settle on a can of baked beans for my own dinner. After righteously warming them up and eating them in a huge, silent hall, I pad to the outside bathroom to brush my teeth and whack my arm so hard on the hand dryer I bleed. I stumble back to the dark room and close my eyes, falling into a nightmarish sleep.

I dream that I am in jail by the side of the sea, and Jim is my captor. Then he is sinking into one of my bubble baths, which becomes quicksand, and he can't breathe.

At 6 am, my phone is ringing. Loudly.

'HELLO IS THAT LOUISA? LOUISA DEASEY?'

WICKED WINDS AND MISSING KREMES

'Um . . . yes - OWW!' I bash my head on the headboard of the bed as I try to sit up.

'Yeah look it's Stuart from Toll Couriers – we've got a delivery of Krispy Kreme donuts but no-one's home . . . is there going to be someone home later?'

Is this some kind of a sick joke?

'I don't live in North Fitzroy anymore . . .'

'Shall I redirect them somewhere? There's no return address . . .'

Jim, who has heard the whole thing because 'Stuart' is yelling like a fiend, rolls over. 'Ask them if they can deliver them to the Esperance backpackers.'

'Um, Stewart? Have them on me.'

It takes a few emails to get to the bottom of the Krispy Kreme mystery, but I discover it was a Valentine's Day promotion, something to do with a column I did on romance ideas. They even had cherries on top.

After the days we've just had, a few Krispy Kremes would have gone down a treat.

When Jim wakes again, he hits his head so hard on the head of the bed he has a bump the size of a tennis ball. Nightmares, lost gigs, missing donuts, nasty winds, bruised heads and dead birds are an obvious enough oracle.

It's time to move on.

'Babe? I don't think we should stay here much longer.' He's revving the accelerator on the car before I've even had a shower.

I find myself on the phone to my brother, whingeing.

'I feel like I spend every day just – packing and unpacking. I dream I do my laundry in one place and have to catch a three-hour train to a place to dry it.'

'Lou, that's just the reality of travelling. It's hard work sometimes . . .'

Everything we have is dirty, even though we've only been on the move since Saturday. At least I'm up to date with my columns, phone calls, emails. But for how long? What if I get another commission with a lead time of twenty minutes? And more importantly, how much longer will I be able to bear missing out on Krispy Kremes?

'Lou, I don't have any gigs lined up for a few days so where would you like to go? You've never seen the south coast of Western Australia. Let's just have a look, hey?'

Sounds good to me. Just as long as we get out of this wind.

Onwards we go in our travelling home, like snails carrying all our lives in our dusty shell. The Eagles and Fleetwood Mac are back on replay, and my moods dip and dive for better and for worse depending on the landscape. After a couple of hours we get to Albany, but all I see are kit homes and Red Rooster. Not here. Please, not here.

'Let's just . . . keep going . . . until the landscape is . . . better.'

24

The peace of cucumbers

'People with a connection to nature . . . just seem to be happier.'

There's a funny pattern in my life, and in this trip. Every time I find myself standing on the edge of hopelessness, just about to give up, a place or an event will startle me so suddenly with its beauty that I do a complete about-face, ready to start again.

After another half hour, Jim slows down as we round into a logging town called Denmark, crossing a little river at the foot of the main street. We look at each other and nod. Yes.

Denmark is a town so picture-book pretty, so lushly green and fertile, I wonder if I dreamed it up. Even the snippets of conversation we catch all centre around crops and growing, fruit and ripening, abundance and gratitude. After glimpsing the word 'accommodation' up on a hill we find ourselves at the Denmark Backpackers, but should really be called the Denmark Four Seasons.

Inside, it contains everything that we need, to restore body, mind and spirit.

As we pull up, we meet Cheryl, the receptionist, a thin wiry version of Georgie from the Royal Derby so long ago, a drifter who looks like she's been expecting us. She even smells like sandalwood incense, just like Georgie did.

'You guys need a room, hey?' She's drinking coffee on the steps outside, smiling. She shows us the rooms, double ensuite bedrooms set up by the owner who had backpacked around the world and decided to build a place to stay with the one thing they were all missing: bathrooms in an annex of the dorm. I peer in to the double room she's offering us, furnished with art, picture-book shutter windows looking out to the hills, and fragrant with the smell of bergamot. 'And coffee is complimentary . . .' she says. *God can we please stay here forever?*

The crushed peanuts and red dust on my passenger seat have been making clean clothes before driving a futile exercise. So when Cheryl shows us that the laundromat is just a few metres downstairs, I sing a little song of joy in my head. I – gulp – miss Sprinklerville. For so long I've underestimated the strain of constantly connecting with tough, white, Australian men. To be left alone to do something as simple as laundry is like being given room to breathe.

I can't believe our luck, finding Denmark. By morning the steam of frost rises on the mountains, with cool air blowing from the south. We walk a few streets from the hostel to find lush, rolling hills topped with chalets, breathing air so dewy you could drink it.

Our bedroom looks out to a story-book vista of green, rolling hills, a river, and the song of native birds flanked by the occasional logging truck. Cheryl doesn't seem to sleep, but hums and sings her way to the kettle in the kitchen twelve times a day. She drinks

THE PEACE OF CUCUMBERS

coffee like a fish, constantly tidies, chatters to everyone, the ageless sister or grandmother anyone would want.

We wake early, going for walks up hills and along the river and see horses, kookaburras, alpacas, huge pelicans and all sorts of birds in the treetops. Gumnuts litter the ground, like Snugglepot and Cuddlepie were invented here. We drive to the Valley of the Giants in Walpole, getting sick with dizziness in ancient gums and walking along the shaky path up the top.

On Sunday, market day, I walk up the road to see old gypsylooking men singing Chris Isaak songs and playing the guitar. A fragrant café on the corner sells wattle-seed cake and emu paste and witchetty grubs, as well as environmental shops and signs up in the street inviting people down to certain trees to do yoga, wish for things or just 'come and make friends'.

Jim is in our room, laying out his mine maps and getting organised, pitching gigs, now that we are back in phone and internet range. Cheryl lives here, in her own 'quarters', which is like a walk-in apartment, just across from reception. I start to think of her like my sister, as she always greets me with a smile, tells me where I can find waitressing work if I'd like it, and one night, after cleaning out her closet, brings me a bag full of clothes.

'We're about the same size. Take a look. If there's anything you don't want just put it back in the bag and I'll take it to the op shop in the morning.' She treats me like I've come to Denmark for good. Like she wants both of us to stay. It amazes me how many places we could just . . . settle down in Australia. How easy it is to make friends.

I fix the printer at the reception desk one morning and they give us our night's accommodation on the house.

The scent of sandalwood incense drifts up from the shop downstairs, and we buy our breakfast fruit at the store from the

most shiny, happy soul I've ever encountered. He radiates health, and when he touches my fruit it's like he's pulsing with light, infusing it with healing powers. Back at the kitchen, where Cheryl is fixing coffee number twelve for the day, she asks how long we're staying. I look out over the horizon for a moment, at the giant gums up the winding path to Albany.

'I don't know, but we really like it here. Why do you think people are so happy here, Cheryl?' I ask, referring to every stranger I've come across since we got here – they have all been smiling.

'There's a strong connection to the earth in this town. People with a connection to nature just seem . . . happier.'

A cheerful English couple appear covered in bloodied bandages on our second night, clutching some squashed goats cheese and a bottle of wine, yet smiling and looking like they've just had the adventure of their lives. On their campervan tour of Australia, they'd been heading up the hills to a winery and rolled it on a particularly windy part, during the misty rain. The campervan was written off, everything smashed except, remarkably, this bottle of wine and their bodies.

They show us the photos in the kitchen while we are preparing dinner, a cross between proud and still in shock, wanting to debrief. The pictures are like printouts from a horror Transport Accident Commission commercial.

The wife had had to be dragged out by her feet, so bad was the state of the van. But the chirpy husband sustained one small scratch to his knee. The police chatted to them for an hour and they had a cheese and wine picnic afterwards with the scent of eucalypts behind them.

They've rolled up the police printouts of the campervan carcass like certificates and leave them on the kitchen bench in case

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anyone else wants to see them. Even car crashes seem to have a happy ending here.

In less than a week, despite only one small story commission, I'm regaining my equilibrium. I'm feeling stronger, and more connected. Like I'm almost ready to make a decision about where to go next. But still, so many questions.

After an email from one of my regular editors saying she has resigned from the magazine, and the Krispy Kreme incident, my urges to go back to Melbourne and closer to new sources of writing work have been getting stronger and stronger. I still have to rise three hours early for the time difference with liaising over the fashion columns. And I can't seem to get any stories commissioned on any of the experiences I'm having that are decidedly un-tourist-like, or unappealing to an advertising-obsessed market of the eastern side of Australia. So I do what anyone would do.

I pick cucumbers.

The organic farm is an eight-kilometre drive up a rolling hill from our accommodation. I buy a two-dollar shirt to wear at the op shop the day before after seeing a sign for 'help wanted' in the kitchen of the hostel, and Jim drops me off at daybreak, when the picking shift begins.

I don't want to think anymore. No more analysing, words, interior work. I even need a break from pitching articles, which, for the past week, have been met with an awfully silent inbox. Nobody wants to know about Western Australia, about Aussie outback culture. They want fashion. Dance. Beauty. Stylish, happy people who appear to have their lives together. Money, success, endless possibilities and vistas for what you can accomplish here on earth. And somewhere deep inside me, I guess that's what I want, too.

At the organic farm, I meet my two workmates, a girl and a guy who both have steady, grounded energy emanating from their pores, and who are both blissfully removed and unrelated to any of my troubles.

The smell of dirt, the abundance of the earth and the repetitive, physical labour help me escape my dilemmas for a while. The sky is shining, and I wonder why I've never had an outdoors job before. It's physically gruelling, but satisfying in a way which brings you back to all that is nature-like in your own body. Growth. Strength. Natural beauty. *Seasons, light and dark*...

When we break for lunch, Jenny gives me half her sandwich under a tree while we sit, cross-legged, on our jumpers. My nails are black, I'm scratched and sweaty, and my god I feel physically alive. We spend eight hours crouching over the cucumber plants a few metres away from each other in happy silence, breaking the peace to check which cucumbers make the A grade.

It's Valentine's Day, so Jenny, who is twenty-three, takes a moment to stop picking and describes her plans with her boyfriend.

'A few cold beers on the balcony, and a nice meal of spaghetti bolognaise.'

Jim and I will unfortunately be apart on our first Valentine's Day together – he'd driven back to Perth just this morning for a gig at The Brass Monkey which got arranged yesterday. I don't even know where to begin when she asks me if I have a boyfriend.

I keep the questions up, to divert her from asking me anything. 'How long have you been with him?'

'A couple of years. But no way am I having kids. I don't want to become another country town statistic.'

I smile at her choice of words.

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Then I frown: Am I going to become a weather-beaten statistic if I stay in the Mazda?

When we finish for the day, I hike down the hill, waving off their offers of a lift. It's almost six kilometres, but I want to be so exhausted that I fall into bed. I want to scratch the dirt out from under my layers of skin until I'm numb to the empty shock of sleeping without Jim for the first time in months – on Valentine's Day, of all days.

After walking down the hill for two hours as the sun sets slowly above me, my legs are quivering with fatigue. I make it up the steps to our room, hop in our blissfully private ensuite shower and the water doesn't run clear for a good ten minutes.

Afterwards, I crawl into bed, and find a note Jim had slipped under my pillow: 'Don't worry about it all so much, Lou. I'll love you whatever you decide, and wherever you are. I just want you to do what makes you happy.'

That night, I watch a bit of TV then listen to the trees blowing just down the hill overlooking the river. I call Sally and hear all about her new floors, the familiar tune of Melbourne life reassuring me that as much as I've changed, it will be there waiting when I want to return. And how long would I stay happy there, really? Would it really provide enough of a challenge? When Sally asks me where we are and what we've seen this past week I don't know where to start. I give her just a morsel, the hills of Denmark, the cucumber farm. I know to tell her more would overwhelm her. And besides, she probably wouldn't understand why I keep going.

I fall asleep quickly, and when I wake I remember my dream. I was flying above Australia, looking down on every state. Like all flying dreams, it depended on me getting the balance just right – half focus, half let go – and you can make it to the sky. In the dream I was the news reporter, the only one with the bird's eye

view in all of Australia. I was the only one who could see things clearly, because I was far enough away.

I wake, intent on my decision. Keep going.

But first, I go to the retreat on the hill for a massage, to gear me up for the next stage of this journey. The woman kneads away in a scented room overlooking the water while flute music plays and she asks what sort of mattress I've been sleeping on for my spine to be so knotted. I don't mention the Mazda.

But when I leave I feel there's new petrol in my tank, ready for another long haul.

I remember an interview I did, before we left Sydney, with a couple who had moved here from England. The wife had relocated twice, for the husband's work. She'd said, 'You have to find your own purpose for being somewhere, other than just the relationship. Otherwise, you become a mess.'

I write one word – scope – on a piece of paper and stuff it in my wallet. It came to me from the dream, and it's the reason I'm doing this. Yes, the frustrations keep coming and the way we travel is hard, but it's giving me a better scope on life than any other thing I've ever done so far. And no matter how tired and frustrated one place will make me, the endless cycle of regeneration in a new town is addictive. Without the Kalgoorlies and the Corrigins, I would never ever appreciate the Denmarks so dearly.

When Jim comes back, we stay up late talking in the night.

'The highs and lows of the road are much more extreme than in everyday life, Lou. But that's what's so special about being on tour.'

Coping with the lows does tend to make these places like Denmark so much more special. And it's another reason I want to keep travelling, at least for a little longer. I want to see all of my

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life as a tour, as a road. I want the sense of urgency, of alertness, of excitement, of being alive, that all of this has woken in me.

'I'm ready to go again Jim.'

'You sure?'

'Yeah. But can we base ourselves in Fremantle again for a bit? I liked it there.'

It's funny that I was thinking of that. Because Roo has just invited him back for a weekly gig. And offered to pay him double.

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The Fremantle doctor

'Welcome back to Fremantle, baby!'

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN ROADS HAVE become a constant companion, like a silent friend. We drive through the thick of night, from Denmark to Perth, stopping once for a nap in the car along a dirt road flanked by eucalypts. Jim happily puts his feet on the dashboard like a yogi and passes out. I gratefully drag my road-worn pillow from the back seat and place it over the gears. Kangaroos dance around us in the night, bounding forms of energy blinking their shining eyes under the full moon.

A few hours later, I wake to see the sun rising over surf in Fremantle, and quickly forget my dreams. Jim has been driving in silence for hours.

'Welcome back to Fremantle, baby!' He announces a new vista like others would announce a garden they've cultivated.

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Jim lands another gig at The Brass Monkey that night, emceeing at the comedy room which peppers more seasoned headliners with amateurs up for their first five-minute set. A nervous, well-dressed guy sits next to me up the back until the first break, when Jim comes over to check on me. Well-dressed man is clearing his throat. Sidling up to Jim, who was on stage a moment ago, like he's a superstar.

'I - uh - I'd love to do a set - uh - if possible?'

Jim quickly gets his name and a few details, introducing him after the break. The guy is fantastic – it's his first ever time on stage, and he's doing it because he just got the sack from his accounting job and wondered what it would be like to perform. 'Also – my self-esteem is in tatters so I figured if you guys don't laugh I'm pretty much right to go the razor option. Just needed to check first, but.'

The crowd laughs. He did it.

It's interesting watching live comedy endlessly, week after week with Jim. Since public speaking is feared more than death, I feel as though I'm watching people jump off cliffs with every punt on stage. It's exhilarating when they get the laughs, but my breath catches in my throat when I see the ones whose timing is off. There's a reason comics use the terminology 'I died on stage'. It's like watching their parachute not open.

After the gig, the comics chat and drink and laugh together, moving on to grab hamburgers and chips to wind down at a little place which operates around an open fire. We don't have anywhere to sleep tonight and I'd been assuming it was going to be another night parked at the beach, resting my head on the pillowed gears.

At the campfire, Alex, one of the nicest comedians out of an awfully nice bunch, invites us to sleep in his spare room in Northbridge. 'There's no proper mattress, but I've got blankets if

you get cold.' After the night before, a floor in a house is positively luxurious.

When we get there he puts the espresso pot on and turns on the TV to watch *Media Watch* and *Four Corners*, which he taped earlier in the night. We talk about journalism, writing and media, and it's the most intellectual discussion I've had this side of the Nullarbor. It's also incredibly stimulating to talk to someone who has different input to Jim. Since we've been sharing everything for so long now, from books, gigs and dream recounts, it's hard to know if it's just the coffee which has fired-up my brain synapses again.

'I never read the *West Australian*,' says Alex. I'm surprised. Hasn't he lived here all his life?

'It's just terrible writing. The print media over east is so much better. It's great that you get to write for them instead.'

It's not just a relief to talk about my work, rather than the comedy industry for a change, but I feel like Alex is one of my lost tribe.

The next day, after showers at Alex's, I submerge myself in the necessary details of sourcing my columns. Jim drops me at the library in Subiaco while he goes to post some goat t-shirts and return about eight phone calls to the wayward men of Australia who love him.

I compile some pitches based on press releases I've been sent on email. Since swift rejection by any of the major glossies on ideas pertaining to the West, I've restricted myself to pitching on ideas pertaining to the thirty-something woman who has never left Sydney or Melbourne. These get snapped up.

I work swiftly, emailing questions in relation to the fashion columns and making phone calls from outside the library. There's no time for doubt, I can't even remember that girl who was once afraid to say, 'I'm a freelance journalist.' The words fall quickly off

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my tongue. This is who I am. This is how I earn my money. I've passed the tipping point, through sheer volume. Since the shucking of my flat months ago I've written approximately two hundred and thirty-seven articles. But who's counting?

There's another reason for my quickened pace. The stakes are higher than before, because not only do I now have an unforeseen car bill to be taken care of, but also I'm not sure where we'll be sleeping at any given day of the week. So when I have a desk, a door, or a place to put the laptop, I sprint.

I tap away in the library, constantly checking my watch to see when Jim will be back, how long I have before I have to get into that car again. Like a poker-prod in the heart of all I'm missing, I interview dancers, actors, artists and coordinators of festivals and galleries for the events listings. Complimentary invitations to exhibitions and performances lie unused in the inbox of my email, and it takes all the willpower I can muster to eschew self-pity in favour of gratitude for the regular work. I fight resentful feelings towards Jim's peaceful acceptance of living conditions I am growing to hate. Why can't he have the same standards as me? Wishes? Opinions? Oh yeah, because he's a different person. The idea comes as a shock, and my head almost flicks back, with the realisation. All the reasons of adventure and discovery, which led me here, are still there. I love him just as much as ever, but the lifestyle factors which don't bother him have begun to grate on me, and well, frankly, I've changed. A lot.

I email Mystic, who had sent a request a few days ago for some information on a publication and how to pitch to it.

Hi Mystic

Try Selena, not Jessica. They only pay 60 cents a word though. And she doesn't like eccentric vernacular, so keep it formal.

PS: Sorry it took until today to get back to you. Was on a spare floor last night and slept in car the night before. Haven't had proper home since the pub in Fremantle. Domestic situation is as secure as boat in choppy waters. Is this the eclipse?

She replies, immediately.

Louisa, HOW are you staying so productive?

Sure the road is romantic but don't underestimate the stress of what you're doing. And there are many many whacky men in those towns. I personally don't go bush because of them. I'm sure Jimbo would understand if you needed some sense of stability?

The freedom of not having anywhere to hang my hat has become a shackle. Little things, like needing a library card to borrow necessary books for the article I have due for a medical journal, are nigh impossible when you don't have an address.

Jim appears at three, at the library.

'Let's look for a place to live,' I say.

'Yeah, righto,' he answers, a little frightened, like I've just suggested we go sky-diving together.

Mystic's email reminds me of how much I'm missing female company. It's exhausting always being the only girl in a place, carrying the weight of archaic projections of archetypes. But still, two loose canons like us, with no furniture and no idea where we'll be in a month let alone a year – who will take us? Our options are limited. For the first time since I left Melbourne, I ask Hermes for an answer.

He delivers us a sign, hand written on the walls of The Juicy Beetroot café.

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Fremantle calls us with familiarity, and we find the Mazda cruising along the Stirling Highway before we even make a decision about where to house-hunt. We stop at our favourite café for a bowl of salad, choosing our colourful concoction from the bowls of freshness on display, with an oracle deck by the till.

I pull: The answer is close by.

Searching out the bathroom, I pass a back wall with notices for share-houses, lifts up the coast and workers needed on vegie farms. Another piece of paper, with purple ink, flaps past my arm:

'Cute furnished room to suit travellers/couples. Short-term or long-term. East Fremantle, \$120 a week, includes internet.'

Jim, whose laptop has stopped working since he dropped it in a pre-gig frenzy from our worktable at The Rose, is particularly excited about the internet option.

'Cool,' he drawls. I call the number. A relaxed woman answers the phone.

'I've got a four-year-old girl, is that okay with you guys?'

Is she kidding? Sharing a house with a little girl reading fairytales is just what I need to get rid of the cobwebs of the last few days.

We drive to the house, at the top of Hubble Street, which leads down to the river. Children's toys are scattered on the balcony, alongside a white couch covered in pink silk, flanked by two empty champagne flutes and some fashion magazines.

I am so happy to see female objects that I nearly cry there and then.

'Hi, I'm Jane.'

A tall, tanned blonde woman in her mid-thirties greets us in a rainbow-print dress. She's relaxed, easy-going. The house is clean, she doesn't smoke, and there's even a box of organic groceries by the door.

We do the slightly awkward dance of meet-and-greet, explaining our weird jobs and travel arrangements and why we don't really want to live somewhere long-term, but an address, at least for the next month or so, would be nice. And because our own life situation is so strange and weird to explain, discovering that Jane is a stripper doesn't sway the good vibe we are both getting. Her four-year-old daughter runs out, to tell us she counted seven fairies in the garden before we arrived.

She shows us the room, a tiny spot down the back of the house, overlooking the back garden, next to the kitchen, furnished with a double bed, a wobbly clothes rack and a chest of drawers. Hanging over the bed is a huge green painting of two semi-naked women playing pool in a dark bar.

'That's one of mine. It's part of my strip-club collection.'

At sixty dollars a week each, this funny little room, strip art and all, suits us fine. We hop back in the car even though we have nowhere to go, and she calls a few minutes later.

'Did you want to move in - tonight?'

Having a safe, female-friendly home has a physical effect on me, immediately. I start pitching stories again, after a good night's rest, a walk along the Swan, and a food shop. So quickly, we recover. In the mornings, Jane's little daughter chases spiders and talks to the fairies in her bowl of cereal, before she goes to school. I don't feel guilty or indulgent for liking showers, make-up, cups of tea and sandwiches with alfalfa in them. And Jim and I are getting healthy again, now that we have a base with a kitchen, in which to store fresh food.

The universe rewards me, with a magazine commission: 'I need three hundred words on tourist attractions in and around Perth.'

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It's the first time I've actually had any green-light on writing about where I am on the map of Australia. But because it's a tourist piece, I realise that I've done nothing since I got to Western Australia that you'd put in a typical holiday magazine. I set about rectifying the situation, and for forty-eight hours Jim and I tick every Perth tourist experience off the map.

We do a historic tour of the harbour, the jail, the port, the museum, the galleries, eat fish and chips on Cottesloe Beach, and visit the fortune-tellers and trinket-sellers at the old markets.

The history of Fremantle fascinates me, and touring the jail is the strangest of all. It's quirky and captivating because we learn that the chapel staff took it upon themselves to change one of the Ten Commandments from Do Not Kill to Do Not Murder – as the jail was still practising the death penalty.

And intensely creepy, because even in the middle of the day, in the solitary confinement death-row cells, the heavy feeling of spirit and sadness is audible, and even the brisk tour guide admits that objects move from one day to the next in the now unused jail.

It's a bright, sunshiny Perth day, but the sadness as we move closer to the death-row section becomes palpable. In one cell, I burst into tears.

'That's where they went the night before they're hanged,' says Jim, later.

As I'm walking home from the swimming pool the next day, I take a diversion to an open field, behind a school. Physically exhausted as I've been swimming, running and walking to get back my body again, I flop on the grass, lying back, stretching and looking up at the sky. A few minutes later I feel as though I've been washed with a barrel of holy water. My entire being is invigorated, and I jog back to the house. Jane is home, cooking rice on the stove.

'I just had this amazing experience. I was wrecked and I went and lay down in this field and not long after, I felt like someone had performed a healing on me.'

'Oh, was that behind the school?' she says, not turning from the rice.

'Yes! How did you know!'

'That's one of the most sacred Aboriginal healing sites in Fremantle. The medicine men worked there or something . . .'

I try to find out more, googling madly, to put it in my story, but I can't find any experts to back up Jane's claim.

The editor removes it. 'Just stick to tourist attractions. Can you replace this with a really great street for shopping?'

I have to remember not to ask Jim for anything on Tuesdays. He starts preparing for his gigs as soon as he wakes up. I let him do our weekly shop on gig day one week and he loses the keys to the car, buys ten of one thing and none of anything else, then puts the milk in the cupboard and the cans in the fridge when he gets home. I remind myself to treat him like someone who's sleepwalking. But just on Tuesdays. I kiss his clown face and we spend the day apart, with text-message reminders of vital things like where he's left his keys.

It's balmy, as always, and Rhyll is behind the bar smiling.

'Justin dedicated a song to you two last night,' she says, fixing me a 'girl' drink of vodka and fresh lime. Our friend from the vegie shop has been coming along each week and the locals treat us like we've lived here forever. Jonathan, an English man who sits up the front and brings clients from his business as a trader, introduces me to his wife as 'Lou' and we talk about travelling and relocation. Yep, I could definitely become a Sprinkler in this town. Everyone is so darned laid-back and sweet.

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As Jim moves the couch to the front of the stage, a skittish guy walks in, and heads to the back room where there's a space invaders-type computer game with a fake gun attached. The room is filling rapidly, a far cry from that first night six weeks ago. Suddenly, a scream breaks the happy hubbub, with 'I'm going to shoot you all!'

Skittish guy is pointing the fake gun at the room and making sounds like gunfire.

Jim, quick as a flash, calls him over to the stage. 'Mate, what have you been taking? Come up here . . .' He is soothing. Gentle. His body language doesn't change from how he approaches anyone.

Like a mesmerised child, skittish guy immediately follows Jim to the stage, sitting close to him on the couch and smiling at him despite an obvious speech impediment. His energy is off, and he swears intermittently like he has tourettes or has taken speed. Then flops, looking discouraged. Then starts again, suddenly.

This, this is why I love this man, I think to myself. Give him the lost, the broken, the scary to everyone in the room and Jim will just see a child who needs some attention, a joke which needs telling, an atmosphere which needs lightening.

The crowd is quiet, nervous, like the group breath is held in. It's okay, I think. It's okay as long as he's up there with Jim. He can tame lions. *Leave him with Jim, he'll be okay*.

Skittish guy is patting Jim on the knee now, smiling. He's possibly drunk, or on drugs, or has something mentally wrong. Who knows? But like a horse whisperer Jim has lulled him into a calm state. Suddenly Roo appears, aggressively confronting him, at the foot of the stage. 'Mate, time to go!' he lurches forward, grabs his hand.

'NOOO!' He's scared and angry again, and jumps into the crowd, thrashing and throwing chairs at the wall. People duck,

weave and bolt into the beer garden. Jim, still calm, stays on the couch watching thoughtfully as the man's removed.

The police arrive, twenty minutes later.

'Yeah paranoid schizo mate, escaped from Graylands mental hospital ten k's away. Hadn't taken his medication.'

He'd ridden here on a stolen bicycle, which is now lying abandoned outside. I can't stop thinking of how happy he seemed for a few moments, sitting next to Jim on the couch.

Jane, like everyone I've ever met, is a fascinating paradox of habits and philosophies. The small weatherboard house doubles as a gallery for her erotic paintings of the strip club, yet when it comes to food, she eats only vegan organic produce, feeding her four-year-old perfectly presented servings of mung bean sprouts mixed with lentils on rye crackers, giving her mini-lectures on looking after the organs in her body. Worried that everything she ingests be pure. Then, her phone rings, and it's her boss from the agency, booking her for everything from stripping to escort work.

'Tell him I won't do sex. That costs extra and frankly I don't need the money at the moment, y'know? I'll wear my see-through nightie though, if he likes.'

Tallaya stands in the doorway, watching Jane, soaking it all up like a sponge.

When Jane applies fake tan to her legs in her underwear in the kitchen, Jim politely looks away, and takes Tallaya to play games on the verandah. At night she arrives home from the Video Ezy with an armful of horror films, ready to watch after she's read Tallaya her story. She makes us leave the lights on all night, because she's scared of the dark. But she never locks the door. The flywire flaps open in the wind, night after night.

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She only works one or two nights a week, and spends the rest of the time reading gossip magazines, babysitting for the rest of the community of strippers, going to the beach and watching DVDs. I watch and observe, happy to have a safe place to work, for now, glad that I trust Jim so inherently that Jane wandering through the living room in her underwear doesn't worry me. But it does make me miss my sister and my girlfriends back in Melbourne, who would never do something like that. Still, it's the price you pay for living in a place with a clean kitchen again.

I'm getting more and more work every day, and I don't have time to be caught up in chitchat, as much as I envy her beach-going lifestyle.

Jane surprises me with sweetness, knocking on the door one morning to give me a 'present', a packet of organic vegan biscuits to eat while I write. She invites me to kickboxing classes and the beach, but I always decline. I'm on a race against the clock, catching up on work which is streaming in with more regularity than ever.

Relieved to finally have a 'base', I go wild sending pitches to magazines one day, and come home from a walk to find I've been given ten commissions. Holey moley! I walk to the Fremantle library, clipping research from online journals and starting my work day at six, meeting up with Jim in the afternoon to walk down across the Swan and journey with him to gigs, or cook our dinner in Jane's kitchen, happily full of forks and free of roast pork.

Jim, meanwhile, is taking longer and longer on the toilet, developing an unhealthy obsession with making it through Jane's foot-long stack of *NW* and *Who* magazines. She holds a subscription to both, eagerly standing guard by the letterbox for their arrival each Monday.

We hear that Barry Humphries is in town, and buy tickets to his show in Subiaco, walking hand-in-hand, the closest we have become to a Sprinkler couple yet. He regales the crowd with spluttering Sir Les and Soft Sandy Stone and even pulls up members of the audience, as Edna, in a game remarkably similar to Jim's Perfect Snatch.

After my biggest cultural feast in aeons, I type up a proposal to my editor from one of the Sunday newspapers, late in the night. Knowing that Humphries is touring Sydney and Melbourne in a few weeks, I am aware that the story both has appeal to the eastern states and can be timely with his show.

In the morning, I check my internet again, and find, to my shock, thrill and horror, that the story has been commissioned. 'How soon can you file?' writes the editor. *Oh hell, how do I track down Barry Humphries?*

I start with Google, hunting down his publicist under news and internet archives, finally finding a name and contact after a small news piece where she'd made a statement after he got snappy at a reporter. After looking up her contact details, making the call and explaining the scenario, she asks me to put it in writing. I copy my editor.

An hour later, she has arranged a phone interview with him in his hotel in Perth, the next day.

The morning I am to interview him, Jane is in the kitchen with two of her stripper friends complaining about the fake tan they've just bought.

"The FUCKIN' STREAKS! Is yours ORANGE too?!"

I close the door to the bedroom and make the call, committing every word to memory, hoping this man will deign to talk to me.

'Are you any relation to Denison Deasey?' is the first thing he asks after the operator puts me through to his room.

'Y-yes. That was my dad,' I say.

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'He was the first person to interview me about Dame Edna. He took me to a very elegant tennis court in South Yarra, I remember.'

Oh, my. If he could see me now, fifty years later, interviewing Sir Humphries from a bed in a shack below a picture of a girl in a g-string playing pool.

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Nuts on the road

'Lou! I am locked out in my underwear and you are asleep and I can't wake you up! Call me! xx'

When we get home the next night, Jim's phone rings. He takes it in the room while I'm cooking, marching out to the kitchen to entertain Jane's daughter by balancing a chair on his chin in celebration.

'Why so happy, babe?'

'Got a good gig Lou. You'll be into this one.'

'What do you mean?'

'My mate Dave is running it. He always organises accommodation, pays me straight away, has a cracking audience. He's professional, you know. It's in Geraldton tomorrow night. Wanna come?'

Random travel, a few hundred kilometres up a coast I haven't yet seen — with an address to return to. Bring it on! I pack my pyjamas and toothbrush, leave the rest of my belongings at Jane's,

and hop in the car. On the way, we need to collect another comedian who'll be doing a ten-minute set at the gig. We pick him up from his nice-looking house in Subiaco, glancing anew at the dusty, packed car.

'Lou, I'm a bit embarrassed about our CD collection,' says Jim. We're not used to having visitors in the car. The comedian barely stifles his reaction to the vehicle which has been our mutual home, and asks Jim, incredulously, where he sleeps when he sleeps in the car.

'Ah, in the front seat! I put it down a bit.'

The comedian is appalled, and I don't feel so high maintenance anymore for begging Jim for a bed.

I've been sticking well to my detox diet since moving in with Jane and the delights of a kitchen, so at the first petrol station, I decline Jim's offer of Allen's snakes, and rustle about to find some nuts in the glove box instead. They do look a bit mangy, and after a quick sniff I ask Jim for his thoughts on my proposed snack.

'Oh Lou - No.'

'Why not?'

'I bought them in Victoria. I'm still not sure how they got past the quarantine inspectors in Bordertown.'

'Oh, okay then,' I throw the entire box of nuts out the window, and the comedian in the back seat yelps.

'Ah there's a car right behind us, Lou,' Jim says, and I wonder if they thought my turfed cashews were bullets hitting their windscreen.

Eventually, they overtake us without throwing anything back at us, but Jim is so embarrassed he can't look sideways at them when they pass.

The random information Jim gets given on his gigs often makes merely finding the locale a treasure hunt, and this one is no different. We know it's at a pub somewhere near Geraldton, and Jim has the head comedian's phone number, but we don't have much phone coverage on the way, so until we get to Geraldton we won't know where we're sleeping or where, exactly, we need to go. When we pull over in a town where Jim asks the publican for a gig, his phone beeps with a message which sounds like it's from a David Lynch film:

'Go to the backpackers after the first roundabout in Geraldton. That's where you will be sleeping. Ask for a girl called Rachel, she will show you the way.'

It's about four in the afternoon, and Jim is due on stage at seven. These treasure hunts don't leave much room for error.

When we get to the backpackers, we walk the silent halls looking for the elusive 'Rachel'. The booker's phone is switched off.

'G'day mate, I'm here to do a comedy show . . . Dave booked me.'

'Oh sure.' The guy at the desk throws Jim some keys. 'You're in room 7. Rachel will be out in a minute.'

After a while a decidedly relaxed Irish girl pads out of the shower, asking if we're her lift for the night.

'Hi Rachel, I'm Jim. How are you?' He gives her a nanosecond to answer, then shouts, 'Let's go!'

It's six thirty.

Rachel has only been in Australia for a week. Upon arrival in Perth, she'd been offered bar work from an agency with the glorious option of 'accommodation included'. Soon after getting to Geraldton, she discovered they meant a cold unfurnished barn at the back of a pub, forty kilometres out of town. The poor thing is forced to sit on the other comedian's lap in the back seat, so overloaded is the car. But she takes it all in her stride, taking her job of navigating

us to this mysterious barn seriously. The young comedian had been hoping to go over his set-list one more time before getting to his first ever country gig, but travelling with Jim is a serious lesson in the art of going with the flow.

We take a few wrong turns until Rachel recognises a particular line of trees, and it isn't until she spots the roof of the pub that she can confirm we're at the right place. When we eventually arrive, the pub — a giant timber hotel, smack in the middle of a field — is packed, with Geraldton locals coming in on buses, happily paying their forty-dollar cover charge. The hall is full. I know, immediately, this isn't going to be like one of Jim's haphazard gigs competing with the jukebox and the skimpy at the bar. He's getting his excited look, like he's about to run a race, and I blend into the background, happy to be left alone to mingle and watch the scene.

Men and women of all ages pack the hall, and Jim takes the stage, warming up the crowd with a few jokes about Western Australia, goats and sex, instantly raising the energy of the room, this eager floor, wanting to laugh. His timing is perfect, with the laughter rising and falling as rhythmically as his punchlines.

Sadly, the other comedian from Perth doesn't go down so well. It would be kind to say he merely crashes and burns. It's his first gig out of Perth, and as tight as his twenty-minute set is, his logo t-shirt, techno music and gags about nightclubs just don't run with the Geraldton crowd. They're audibly relieved when the headliner Dave takes command of the stage. Really, he's who they've come to see, a seasoned pro who knows his crowd and plays to them like a piper.

After forty minutes of non-stop laughter, the crowd is the best kind of exhausted, cheek-sore from laughter and even tears.

The comedian who bombed commiserates with a pretty blonde in the rowdy bar afterwards, and we drop them at a nightclub on the way back to the backpacker.

'I'll be fine!' he shouts, only to text Jim the next morning to say that he'll find his way back to Perth, probably to avoid more car-time with Ma and Pa Nut-throwing Kettle. At one in the morning after a long day's drive, gigs and adventures, I hop up to the top bunk in our stuffy room, and fall asleep immediately. Jim, post-gig wired, and stripped down to his underwear to sleep in the stuffy room, lies awake, then gets an urgent need to go to the toilet. For some weird reason he takes his phone to check his messages on the way, absentmindedly leaving our one key in the room.

He comes back and lightly taps on the door. Nothing. Knowing how loud my ring-tone is set, he calls my mobile. I sleep on, with a ringing phone making its way into my dream world.

He calls seven times.

People in the nearby rooms are sighing, and when someone grunts a loud 'Fucking shut up!' he gets too scared to do it anymore, looking for alternative sleeping arrangements. Jim wanders to the common room, still in his underpants, where an English guy is watching the soccer. He gives him a sheet which is sitting on one of the vacant couches. It was about half an hour after this that I woke and noticed the message on my phone:

'Lou! I am locked out in my underwear and you are asleep and I can't wake you up! Call me! xx'

It's the kisses at the end of the desperation that make me laugh. I let him in and he's understandably upset.

'The soccer guy gave me a pretty suspicious look when he handed me the sheet. He sort of threw it at me!'

In the morning, we walk along the beach and buy fresh fruit at the Geraldton market. Jim snaps his phone shut looking excited after a phone call.

NUTS ON THE ROAD

'Mate wants me to emcee at his wedding in Katherine. He also wants me to be best man. Reckons there's a heap of truckers up north who've been burning my DVD and want gigs. Might be time for a move, Lou.'

Ooh, the Territory. I've never been that far. Once again, the lure of the road calls me louder than my pangs for home.

27

Dust on my tongue

'Wouldn't you rather risk a croc than miss out on this?'

During the drive back to Fremantle, we take a wrong turn and end up deviating by about two hundred kilometres east of Perth. As it's about to get dark we pull into New Norcia, a little town once run by Benedictine monks. We call Jane, tell her not to wait up, try to gauge her mood and whether or not we should give notice tonight.

When we do eventually pull in, after midnight, she's applying fake tan and cheerfully watching *Friday the 13th* whilst instant messaging someone on a dating website.

'Oh, no worries,' she says, distractedly. That's it. We're free again.

The next day, I beg a break from the car, and Jim agrees to drive up to Broome and meet me there, so I book a ticket online and spend the next week finishing off my writing assignments. It feels

DUST ON MY TONGUE

so indulgent, waiting to catch a plane all those miles of road Jim is patiently logging.

He phones from Monkey Mia, where he's made a friend in the Mr Whippy ice-cream man, and landed an impromptu gig emceeing the guy's fiftieth birthday. He's been feeding dolphins and washing in the sea, and sounds psyched like never before.

'Should I have come?' I ask guiltily, secretly enjoying trips into Perth city to have coffee and buy myself a new suitcase so my things are no longer in that hessian sack. I count down how many more sleeps I have in the bed at Jane's, mentally preparing for the car again.

'Nah Lou, there's been a whole lotta nothing until now. You would have just complained.'

I pile everything into my new suitcase, and when Jane drops me off at the airport it feels as though we're just going on a short trip to Geraldton again. I don't even say goodbye to Justin and Rhyll.

'There're so many goodbyes, with travelling,' I say to Jim on the phone from the airport.

'Yeah but it's never forever. You just don't know what road you'll be on tomorrow.'

When the plane lands at Broome airport, Jim is waiting for me wearing some shorts I've never seen before with his hair totally matted and wild.

'I stopped showering this week,' he tells me proudly, 'and I found these shorts on the beach. Tell ya what, Lou, you could furnish your whole life with other people's rubbish.' The zip doesn't do up.

We drive to a motel which he's booked for the night in an uncommon display of organisation. 'Thought I'd ease you back

into the road, Lou. Tonight's luxury. But from tomorrow onwards – things might get a bit hairy.'

We walk around Broome, another world of remoteness from Perth, and Jim looks fiery and excited, like he always does when he's got gigs on the way and a tour planned. I feel uncommonly nervous, about getting back in the Mazda again. I've read the road from Broome to Darwin can get a bit rough, perhaps too rough, and when I'd told Jane where we were driving next she'd shaken her head and said, 'Good luck!'

We eat Thai takeaway back in our motel room and I remind myself to savour every second of a bed, a shower, a door. I don't have any articles due so I wake before Jim and walk to the beach.

It's the most magnificent shining stretch of sand I've ever seen, dripping with sky, unlimited in turquoise space. Jim appears after I've been stretching and splashing for about an hour and pulls me into the water.

'Seriously, there's something different in the water up here.'

I feel even better than I did in that patch of space in Fremantle where medicine men lived.

Jim has a gig tonight at a little bar a way out of town. He's organised it differently to usual and given me a job to do. I'm to collect a cover charge from the punters and sell his goat stock.

We eat barramundi burgers on Cable Beach while the sun sets and twinkling camels parade before us, masquerading as tourists. Jim starts gearing up for his gig and I wander off to put my feet in the rock pools at dusk under the balsamic moon.

After the gig, a Big Night Out show in an old room attached to a hotel, we try to sleep in the car. I'd sold just two stubby holders and one t-shirt, and a girl who had noticed me just drinking diet coke kept coming and offering me sips of her Wild Turkey, concerned that I wasn't drinking.

DUST ON MY TONGUE

Accommodation in Broome is expensive, and we're forfeiting motels in order to travel for longer and dine on barra burgers each night. Jim is nervous, though, thinking someone from the gig might knock on the car window if we sleep here, so we drive thirty kilometres out of town. He pulls up at the back of a Roebuck Plains Roadhouse, where trucks are parked eerily in blank dust in the silent night. All I can see are shadows of reeds shivering to a whispering wind, even though Jim tells me we are close to a caravan park. Jim, a little cold, pulls something over his head after we lay down the swag on the dirt road and climb in. My eyes are shut and I'm trying not to see Ivan Milat and his creepy mullet every time I close my lids. Something tickles my chin.

'EEEEEAAAAAAAA!'

Jim is wearing a wig in the shape of a mullet.

If it was daylight I'd be able to laugh at the fact that it's purple, but for now, all I see is Ivan Milat's double.

'SSHH! Lou! My head is cold!' he's laughing now, and so am I, but it mixes with a sick feeling like I'm going to vomit. We lie there for a few hours until the sun comes up and we drive back to Cable Beach, where I fall asleep on the sand and use the sink in the café toilets to brush my teeth.

It's hot, in Broome. Not the Swan-soft warm of Fremantle, or the gritty male heat of Kalgoorlie, but more a dusty, dusky baked heat I realise, for the first time, is what I'd been expecting all along.

Camels trot past on the road and we decide to tour a crocodile farm while we're here, napping in the car for two more hours until our tour starts. I cuddle a baby crocodile with its jaw kept shut with a hair-tie and Jim takes a photo. Fear mixed with fascination is becoming a theme of this leg of the tour. We spend the rest of the day on the beach, walking and swimming and taking more

photos. No proper sleep has my head shot to pieces and I make up for it by chain-drinking diet coke.

As I'm standing in the water looking across the Indian Ocean, Jim wave-surfs then reminds me that crocodiles are often seen down here. 'Wouldn't you rather risk a croc than miss out on this?'

Hmm. I'm not sure. Especially after what we just saw at the Malcolm Douglas crocodile park. Those beasts are living dinosaurs, with enough teeth to mince me quicker than Jaws. *But this water* . . .

I plunge in.

It's seven thirty on a Saturday night, thirty kilometres north of Broome, Western Australia. Roebuck Plains Roadhouse is a place truckies often stop and refuel, or grab a paper-thin 'donga' for the night, before a fry-up breakfast that will see them through the seven hundred or so kilometres up the Great Northern Highway to Kununurra, or down south to Carnarvon. The bar is full to overflowing, with a balmy mix of beer, dust, steak and fresh cologne rising with the anticipation of a cashed-up crowd ready to suck the life out of this Saturday night. Ready to laugh. No pretences allowed.

The crowd come freshly showered from the communal toilets at the caravan park, from long, lonely drives on the road to and from Kununurra, and from a town which rarely plays host to the original Aussie swagman come to liven up one evening of their lives. They have no idea he slept on the dirt out the back last night. They sport their best flannel shirts, gulping in Saturday-night gumption, from teenage couples on a date to grey-haired nomads who've pulled into the attached caravan park for the night. Lone truckers flank the bar, arriving solo but soon are laughing in unison while the beer flows from tap to glasses rising in between gags.

'Seen this bloke before?' I overhear one guy.

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'Yeah mate, up in Katherine . . . bloody ripper . . . unbelievable.'

I walk the crowd, nervously collecting the ten-dollar covercharge from everyone in the room except the staff. They're all about to spend at least seven times that on drinks over the bar, so they open their wallets easily, too happy to send some money back into the pockets of a 'top' bloke who sings for his supper.

On the tingling door to the cashier, an A3 poster flaps in the wind:

JIMBO SATURDAY NIGHT 7.30 \$10 COMEDY - ROAD STORIES - MAYHEM.

The poster is his cheeky smile under a mop of uncombed hair, a photo I'd taken three thousand miles ago under a forty-degree Kalgoorlie full-moon. Spot on seven thirty Jimbo marches up to the stage and launches his attack, after mock-serious confirmation that the crowd knows his comedy is 'R-rated'.

'You cunts know what you're in for?' He's commanding up there, sensing a rough crowd, no city gentility here, he needs to let them know he's in charge from the get-go or they'll eat him alive.

'Hey, are you two rooting?' he asks a young couple who've just finished their steak and chips.

'Don't pick on her, she's going out with my son!' yells a middleaged woman sitting at a table drinking with some friends. A truck driver pokes his head inside the bar after refuelling on the long road to Derby, decides to stick around, handing a crumpled ten-dollar bill to me. Less than a minute later, after the asinine punchline, he's clinking a beer with a fellow truckie, grinning like a toothless angel, part of the rising energy of a room full of Aussie strangers

drinking, yelling and laughing. The jokes get quicker, and the crowd goes wild, the electrified energy continues for over two hours well into the hot night. Jim banters with the crowd over sex, his travels around the country, and basically a ruder version of the same topics that worked in Sydney.

To drive past the roadhouse, all you'd see is a room full of happy, howling, eighty-odd people bonded by the spectacle they're both witnessing and taking part in. Laughter is the common denominator and Jim will pull anything out of his arsenal to get it.

Being at the gig is like taking a wild rollercoaster ride with a wayward angel. He dips and weaves like a mastermind, shocking the crowd with ludicrous punchlines too crass to be believable, and achieving his ultimate goal: creating head-shaking guffaws before the intellect can butt in and interfere. It's magical to watch, everyone shaking their heads with silly grins on their faces. I rise and fall with the crowd. After he's scaled the peak of rancid humour, he announces that he's available for children's clown parties at the end.

'Is he fuckin' for real?' a trucker guy asks me, knowing we travel together.

I nod. 'He's really good with kids.'

After a hot, fitful night's sleep in the donga, I shower in the communal block, where a grey-haired lady with a bun is applying her make-up at the sink.

'Did you go to the comedy last night?'

'Yeah, I did,' I say to her.

She's shaking her head, still smiling. 'It was a bit – you know. Rude. But I couldn't stop laughing.'

When I get back to the room, Jim is chatting to a couple next to his car, who beg to have their photo taken with him. We walk into the shop to a crowd of cheers and the truckers from the

DUST ON MY TONGUE

night before are enjoying bacon and eggs before they head to their next destination.

'JIMBO!'

'Guys!'

His new friends. He trades banter and more gags, gets road tips for the next leg of the drive, and tells them where he's heading for the next gig. The shopkeeper cooks us both a plate of eggs and plonks them on the plastic table, 'on the house', and the truckers nod to me, one of the group, because I'm with him. It's like his country, his tribe. We hop back into the car, kick up a kilo of dust, and start driving further north.

'Next gig's in Turkey Creek. Bring it on!'

28

Kimberley sky

'You a traveller . . .'

We drive through miles of dust, making the six hundred kilometres to Hall's Creek in just under six hours. In Derby we stop quickly to stretch on the pier, witnessing the vast windy peak between two ports. Boab trees and an eerily vast landscape announce the Territory to my eyes. This is rogue country. Wild and untamed, impossible to understand immediately. By now, the sun is beating down and I can feel my face frying, sunscreen pointless, dripping down my cheeks in sweaty rivers as soon as I apply it. The air conditioner is fanning us with recirculated dust and guzzling more petrol than we are already churning through.

The next leg of our journey is a few clown shows in Aboriginal communities. In Hall's Creek, Turkey Creek and Fitzroy Crossing, Jim performs to the primary school kids, high school kids and anyone else who happens to be walking past or standing around. I skip his first clown show, deciding to catch the second one after

I've spent some much-needed time in the interior of a cool shop. The heat is unbearable, and I'm desperately thirsty, even though we have been steadily drinking water all morning. I walk into a little tourist shop, while overweight adolescent Aboriginal women yell at their children in prams on the street. There are a lot of young children roaming the streets of this town. It reeks of sadness, sickness, desolation.

Inside, I queue at the counter to order something. Fried food at the bain-marie is overpriced beyond belief. Soft drinks are four dollars. Two Aboriginal women stuff cans of coke in their sweater pockets as I pull out some water. The white woman behind the counter snarls at me when I order a cappuccino. 'That'll be four dollars.'

Her hand is out before I've even opened my wallet.

After a wander around the town which is young mother central, I head to the high school, to catch the end of the show. Grumpy kids are pushing each other as Jim tries futilely to get their attention with some playful fun. The teachers are screaming over the top of him at the students, until he distracts them with some chair-balancing on his chin.

As we drive up the road out of town later, a pregnant girl smoking and pushing a pram looks through our window, suspiciously. I feel guilty that we get to leave, and she doesn't.

Up on the edge of the Northern Territory, the remoteness of where we are makes familiar faces all the more sweet. After I interviewed them over the phone in Newcastle a couple of months ago, Sammy and Doug are good friends of mine now, too. So when Jim tells me that they're doing some teaching work outside Fitzroy Crossing, I can't wait to see them. They've got their tour bus going and we're meeting them at the 'white' hotel for dinner.

Sure enough, we pass wandering Aboriginal people, physically so different to the tribes we'd seen in Hall's Creek, but when we go into the pub to meet our friends, only white-skinned faces peer up from their beer. As we sit outside sharing laughter and stories, a young Aboriginal man gets refused entry for wearing thongs. I look at Jim's feet: he's wearing thongs.

After a buffet meal and road stories, we go back to their bus, parked in the silent camping ground nearby for more music and drinks. They have kitted it out so fantastically it even has a kitchen, a bed 'room' down the back, a booth to eat in, and a record player. These guys do the road in style.

Jim lays down the swag next to the bus and we fall asleep as soon as our bodies hit the ground. I dream of stars and space, a time which has no measure and a journey that never ends.

In the morning, I tag along to Jim's clown show at Fitzroy Crossing Primary School in an extremely good mood thanks to Sammy's delightful coffee-making skills.

'You know how we say you should come to school every day because sometimes very fun things happen?' The principal is announcing at assembly, while Jim sets up his leaf blower and other props on the other side of the yard. 'Well today we have a real clown come to visit!'

The kids aged from five to sixteen squeal and giggle excitedly, falling into line two by two to move to where the 'clown' visitor is waiting. I walk with them, two little Aboriginal kids chasing me and asking me questions.

'Where you from?' says a little boy.

'Um – Melbourne.'

'Hey – she from Melbourne!' he proudly announces to the others. 'Corrine's sister been there!'

KIMBERLEY SKY

Jim told me once, Aboriginal culture values where you're from more than what you do. The little five-year-old looks up at me, like he approves. 'You a traveller.'

He slips his hand into mine and innocently accepts me as a new friend, giggling loudly during Jim's show and beaming up at me, like I'm part of his family.

Sleeping in the open in this part of Australia is the only way to savour it, and I'm suddenly more thankful than ever that Jim would always choose roughing it over luxury. Galaxies of stars made their beds in the sky and a symphony of animals starts up in the black night. We sleep perched on the edge of a gorge after a campfire dinner with Sammy and Doug, drifting in and out of dreams to the cooling sound of running water, metres away down the cliff.

When we wake, animal tracks litter the path around our swag. We pack quickly, leaving Sammy and Doug as the sun is just cracking open in the cooling sky, and hit the road at pace. Jim rolls up the swag, and I vaguely comprehend what looks like crocodile tracks, right beside where we slept.

If I needed a reminder that Jim is living his rightful purpose, it has come in the past week. His glory comes in unexpected places: crowds of disparate souls laughing in ramshackled houses and schools, his peculiar mix of disconnection from society and a well-garnered swag of jokes and anecdotes to appeal to every age and background.

I start to get an eerie feeling as if I'm watching a documentary, and the ending won't have me in it. How could it? I can't live like this forever, as beautiful as the Australian landscape, lands within lands, tribes and vistas within vistas, I'm different to Jim. The more time I spend with other tribes the more confirmation I

have of where I'm from, like the little boy who'd asked me just this morning. My first home says a lot about me.

But when anyone asks Jim where he's from, he says, now, 'I'm homeless,' sounding proud. He'd stopped saying Sydney a year ago. The road defines him, more than any one place ever could. But me? I'm yearning for Melbourne, like a house I need to return to.

After a gig at an Aboriginal settlement run by missionaries, we drive for a hundred kilometres so we can both check our messages. We stop at Argyle diamond mine and I attempt to connect my internet in the car. Outside my window a massive orange snake slithers past like a moving coil, set to its own private agenda. The internet doesn't work, but my phone does.

'Ah – Cindy – it's me. Louisa. Look my internet is down at home and I just thought I'd check you hadn't sent anything.'

'Oh, it's funny you should call. Actually I need you to get me a quick interview with a designer. Do you have anyone in mind that you could call?'

Standing next to a diamond mine, staring at ochre mounds of ant hills and earth, wearing a pair of shorts and another old singlet, I rack my brain for what the fashionistas will be thinking about this week.

'Jim? We need to find a petrol station that has a computer.

Pronto'

After interminable hours travelling, we end up at Wyndham, the northernmost tip of Western Australia just before the border to the Northern Territory. Jim knows the couple who run the local motel, and remembers an internet café down the road in a kit home.

I type one word in Google and wait three minutes for the search to finish, unless it has disconnected before it finds what I'm looking for. I make a few phone calls, amid strange looks from the

KIMBERLEY SKY

woman behind the counter and the guy on the next computer, using my city voice and begging someone from an up-and-coming fashion label to send me photos of her work. Eventually, the column is filed, and the photos emailed as well. It only took an hour. I walk back to the motel and Jim is laughing at the bar, eating a barra burger.

'Done?'

'Done.' But for how long?

Jim has gone into the milk bar while I sit outside in the starry night awaiting a chocolate delivery, when I push through the tinkling door to change my request from a Crunchie to a packet of Smarties. There's no-one at the counter, but the sound of singing and laughter coming from out the back. Jim's in the back room looking at photos of the owner who once toured with Elvis. The eccentric old man who works behind the counter is so caught up in his story, he intermittently breaks into song.

Jim is nodding, listening, nodding. He doesn't appear at all bored. He stays, laughing and trading jokes for songs with the old guy. I throw some coins in his hand, slip back to our motel room, with the vision of the milk-bar owner laughing like a ten-year-old in my head.

Jim doesn't get back to our motel room for two hours.

29

The wedding from hell

Do we have to get back in that truck?'

'JIMBOOOOO!'

I've woken to the sound of a drunk man on the other end of the phone line. If he's awake, Jim always answers the phone, a far cry from my screening procedure.

It's Ned, urging him to 'Hurry the fuck up and get to Katherine! We've got a wedding to piss up!'

'When's the wedding?'

'Day after tomorrow.'

I've never met this couple, but like so many of Jim's 'road' friends it all seems to have started with a gig somewhere, an offer of accommodation, which soon turned into a new relationship. Ned has proposed to the 'love of his life', Sophie, and because Jimbo performed at the gig where they first met, just a year ago, he's going to be best man. He gets a look in his eye like it's a true honour, and I think, quietly, Jim has no idea how much of a breath of fresh air

THE WEDDING FROM HELL

he must be to these small-town men. No wonder they consider him a friend for life. He makes them laugh, gives them companionship and listens to all their troubles, giving them none of his own. Who wouldn't want him to be their best man?

We pull into Katherine late at night to the tune of cane toads singing, their rotting carcasses splayed across the bitumen in hundreds of hit and runs across the road. We pay for a night at a youth hostel, and Jim leaves early in the morning to find a suit-hire shop.

'Jim, do I pay for another night, or do I pack up?' I call, at check-out time. I haven't heard from him since he left.

'Ah – can't talk, Lou, I'm trying on a suit.' I can hear Ned's bellowing voice behind him. He sounds like he's drunk. At 10 am.

I pay for two more nights, then change my mind, and say, 'Actually, just one.'

All I know is that the wedding is tomorrow. I don't know how long we are supposed to be here or when we are leaving or where the wedding is. With nothing nice to wear to a wedding in this heat, I search for a clothes shop, and settle on a boutique in the main drag next to a Subway shop. The heat is so dry I guzzle my two-litre water bottle on the way back to our room.

I decide to entertain myself by checking my email at a coinin-the-slot internet café. My computer doesn't connect to the internet from the hostel. There's only one request, this time from an editor I've never heard of at the same paper. She wants me to write two hundred words on a 'look' for the season. I'd browsed through some magazines in the supermarket buying water bottles, so I have an idea.

Layer skirts have made their official revival after a decade spent lurking in the closets of late-eighties Kylie fans . . .

It's become second-nature now, writing on the fly. I tap away on keys gluey with spilt coke and potato-chip crumbs, save

my document, give it a quick skim, then press send. It's still only two in the afternoon, and I have no idea what Jim is doing. So I jog back to our room, pack a backpack, and go for a hike to the Nitmiluk National Park.

The park is aswim with lizards, birds and dinosauric-looking reptiles. I'm not talking a few stray lazy geckos, I mean big, scaly beasts akin to the bearded dragon we'd seen all those miles ago in Iron Knob. God I love Australia. *Terror Australis*.

Not for the faint-hearted. You share this space with a thousand poisonous, venomous, scary creatures. And that's the beauty.

I hike to the steep peak of a look-out point, crunching through straw-like leaves and ancient gums. Drawing out to a sudden plateau, the steep drop gives me vertigo like I got when I stood on the cliff edge of the Nullarbor. Down below me is a two-kilometre river dropped in between a carved gorge. Crocodiles lazily bob down the river, sunning themselves on rocks in the direction of the water. Nothing short of an ancient earthquake could have carved such a dramatic cut in the earth.

Nothing but violence could make something so natural so jaw-droppingly beautiful.

Back at the car park, I call Jim. The sun is about to set, and I'm hoping he can pick me up. 'Babe, I'll be there in twenty!'

He pulls up driving Ned's truck. Ned, a tall, stocky man clasping a beer, burps into his forearm before extending it to shake my hand. I'm covered in sweat and melted sunscreen, in dirty clothes.

'We're going to a barbecue at Ned and Soph's!' says Jim, excited.

'Um, babe? Do you think I could go back to the hostel and shower first?'

Ned pipes in, 'Nah! Don't worry Lou, just come like that.'

THE WEDDING FROM HELL

Jim takes a left turn at the main road, in the opposite direction to the youth hostel. I bite my tongue. I don't really want to meet a whole new bunch of strangers – like this.

I've run out of water, and the faint whisper of a headache moves to the front of my forehead as we take a dirt road to a house set back on a hundred acres. Sickly looking horses reel up at the truck as we arrive, and I spy Jim's Mazda caked in dirt next to half a dozen utes. Ned is in the middle of warning him not to try any funny business tonight on him, the night before his wedding.

'We tarred and feathered a bloke once, geez it was a pisser.'

My headache is growing worse. *Tarred and feathered?* Why would you cover a man with road tar and chicken feathers?

'What happened to him? How did he get the tar off?' I ask. Ned says it took 'kero and a scrubbing brush' to get the tar off.

'Yeah poor bugger died of cancer. They reckoned it was the kero, too!' Sure, I can take the Aussie larrikin spirit with the rest of 'em, the whole 'harden up' idea, but accidentally killing someone for a bucks' night joke makes me want to be sick.

We get out of the car to meet the rest of the wedding party. Sophie, the bride-to-be, is wearing a thin polyester dress teamed with thongs, holding her newborn baby while sucking on a Vodka Cruiser

'Did youse bring booze?' she says to me and Jim, as a greeting.

'Um . . . no . . .'

She takes my hand and pulls me into the kitchen to meet the other girls.

'Hi Lou!' says her mum sweetly, instantly warm. I can't fault their kindness. But there are about three little babies bobbing around while everyone is drinking, and I can't help but worry about the visuals they are unconsciously absorbing.

I've never really been clucky, except for a few passing urges to hold newborn babies while they are still quiet. But when I see some kitchen bowls and an egg-beater, I get a sudden domestic urge which can probably only be compared to what other girls call clucky. I want to (gulp) *nest*. I want an apron, dinner at six, the smell of vanilla and nutmeg in the oven. Oh sweet lord, I just want some security, some routine to anchor me in this rapidly startling world of tar-and-feather men, harsh sun and truck kidnappings without a shower. Something mild, to lessen the bleak landscape.

'Um, where's the bathroom?' Sophie points up the hall, and I hide in there for ten silent minutes, massaging my temples and trying to meditate away the headache with my eyes closed. Fortified by a few moments alone, I slip out of the kitchen and wander back to Jim, who is entertaining the bunch of mullets out the back, drinking beer.

'I'm going to drive back to the hostel and have a shower. And pick up some wine. It feels rude . . .'

'Nah Lou don't fuckin' go!' says Ned, piping in. 'Soph'll give you somethin' to wear. SOPHIE!' he bellows, before I can make a run for it.

He and Sophie are rocking together, clenching their drinks proudly, looking me up and down but not really seeing me. Ned points his beer at me, sloshing me a bit in the process, and says, 'Lou wants to have a shower. You can lend her some clothes carntcha? And while you're at it, give her a drink.'

Jim looks over in an 'It's out of my hands' look. What he doesn't say is, See? This is how they express their generosity. Take it Lou, go along with it. Drift, like me. See the real Australia. You wanted to, didn't you?

THE WEDDING FROM HELL

I don't want to drift anymore. I want a kitchen. An address. A cupboard where I can fold my clothes and know I will come back home and they will be there, clean, not covered in dirt and dust, begging to be washed, packed or unpacked for the thousandth time. Secure. A bunch of coloured flowers on the window sill, my toothbrush in a jar, a movie on a Saturday night. *No more sunburn*.

'Yeah, righto,' says Sophie. And that's that. I'm trapped here, in someone else's life. Soon, I'll even be wearing her clothes.

The night falls slowly outside, while I sit here in my own version of Dante's inferno. I placed myself here though. Really, who do I have to blame? The only way to bear it is to drink and after three Vodka Cruisers my stomach is a sweet bloated mess, but still, oddly, hungry.

It's late by now, and the men and women have separated and the women are making the salads. The barbecue doesn't start up until almost midnight and I'm exhausted, emotional, and trying to hide everything in an effort to be nice to these people who are being nice to me in the way they know how, but only serves to remind me that my tribe is far, far away from here.

Dolly Parton music fills the air and they talk of people I've never heard of, who slept with who, and sing along drunkenly. I nod and laugh, trying to get the idea of the tarred guy's cancer out of my head and simply relax in the environment, but it's no use. My Big Dipper emotions are at a low point, and it's going to take some serious work to dig me out. After we eat charred steaks at midnight, Jim reappears by my side and says we can go back to the hostel now. I feel like I've been given a leave pass from jail for a few hours.

He's doing a mate a favour with this wedding, so I want to cut him some slack. After spending a fortune on their rental suits, he has a number of jobs to do in the morning before the actual wedding, so I figure I can hang in there for one more day. Then we're getting out of here. Together.

It takes me ages to fall asleep after red meat at midnight, and I suddenly panic that I was supposed to pay for another night here. Jim has already drifted off. When I do finally make it to sleep, I dream I'm being tarred and other people's stories are sticking to my skin. I have to peel my skin off to free myself of their stories, and it hurts like burning. I wake, sweating, sitting up in the bed. I look beside me, at Jim, fast asleep, and flinch, momentarily.

He looks like a stranger.

In the morning, Ned knocks on the door early, picking Jim up in his truck and disappearing to do wedding preparation things. The ceremony is at midday, all I know is that I'm to drive back to the farm and meet the family for a lift to the venue. I pack everything quickly, check out of the hostel after trying to pay for another night but they're full, and drive in my cheap Katherine dress up to the farmlet. Where will we sleep tonight? Already I feel like crying, and the day hasn't even begun.

I've been to a few weddings in my life. Lavish receptions and smaller, less formal affairs which were nevertheless filled with love where what was missing in expensive décor was more than made up for with family generosity. The chitchat is always slightly reverential about the relationship, no matter the denomination. And the celebratory aspect is the best part. And food? It goes without saying that most celebrations involve food of some description. So I was kind of expecting — I dunno, maybe, a cracker?

Arriving at the house, I'm hoping we'll potter about helping the bride do her hair and make-up, have some breakfast, prepare for the day ahead . . . but I'm in for no such luck. I barely know these people – who am I to question their pre-nuptial choices?

The Vodka Cruisers are already flowing and there's no sign of food. Sure, I'm a ring-a-long to this wedding, but I'm bloody starving. And since we're on a farm sixty kilometres from the nearest petrol station, I can't exactly stroll down to the shops to pick something up.

Suddenly, a loud siren wails up the hill to the property, in part 'one' of what will forever be known to me as The Wedding From Hell. It's a truck with a fake police siren, and from the smell of it, one which was once used to transport manure. Sure enough, I discover the couple share an odd quirky love of sirens, so it has sentimental value.

In we pile, eskies full of alco-pops aplenty and the wedding guests clad in their best flannels. Ned and Jim are waiting, flanked by three other beefy men and a couple of kids, for good measure. The girls pile on in their wedding day best teamed with thongs, thirstily downing their Cruisers.

'Jim,' I whisper. 'How long are we on this truck for?' My head is pounding, begging for a coffee, and someone's little boy has just discovered how to turn the siren on and off above my head.

'DING!' I cover my ears in pain.

'Um . . . dunno.'

Then, it starts to rain. The dress I'd bought just the day before is a thin viscose fabric. Splashed with water? It becomes see-through. Jim pulls me closer and I vow to make it through this day, alive. After an hour of this torture, twelve empty bottles rattle around the muddy floor of the truck, signifying full bladders.

'STE-EVE! CAN WE STOP FOR A PISS!' says someone called Kel.

'YEAH RIGHTO!' Steve yells back from the driver's seat.

The truck driver pulls up at an abandoned warehouse and we run, in the rain, me in high heels, over slabs of broken concrete

and mud, to the decrepit toilet. I look in the mirror. My dress, purchased the day before, has now popped two buttons. In the bathroom mirror, my hair is straggly and drenched, drowned-rat style, my nose is pink, and my throat is hollow and sore, like I'm coming down with the flu. My life feels as tacky and valueless as this sweat-shop dress I'm wearing. It's Saturday, I think, staring at the back of the toilet cubicle door.

If I was in Melbourne, I think, I'd be able to get the paper. Have a coffee. See my friends and family, head to a movie, have a run. Never have I felt so sure of where I wanted to be.

As if I've been kidnapped, I wonder, quite seriously, if I'll ever get to see that place again.

Back on the truck, we endure another hour of going round and round in circles in the rain until, mercifully, we stop at a patch of bush near a swamp for the reception. Aside from the shivering, hungry, cold, tired, coffee-craving aspect, the ceremony is quite nice. They profess their love for one another in front of a crowd and then a song plays. I've always loved that part of weddings.

I gaze at Jim, standing handsomely in his suit, looking decidedly out of place in an outfit so 'structured'. Looking at him from my place on the damp muddy ground, I'm hit with a sudden flash: he will never change. Do I want him to? No, because then he wouldn't be the man I fell in love with. But I don't think I can continue scrounging for a bed each night and sitting in trucks, filing fashion columns from the road.

Oh God. Is this really how it's going to end? At a wedding? Jim has given me his camcorder to record the ceremony as a gift to Ned and Sophie, but because the batteries haven't been recharged in so long, the flashing red light marks the end of the taping just before they say 'I do'. *Perfect timing*.

THE WEDDING FROM HELL

Shania Twain's lyrics mark the end of the ceremony, and I stand around shivering with people I don't know, will probably never see again, and can't remember the names of, while Jim witnesses the wedding register and poses for photos.

'Do we have to get back in that truck?' I ask another girl. I'd noticed she was the only other one who refused the Vodka Cruisers, and we bond over our mutual dislike of alco-pops before midday.

'Only for a short trip. We're going to a winery now!' she says, chirpily. I picture tables set with flowers and candles, a three-course meal, maybe our troubles are over, the pay-off for the pain is about to commence?

The truck rounds a corner to a - brewery. Or - better described - a hut in the middle of a paddock.

The wedding party doesn't care – beer starts being poured and I bandy with my new comrade, hunting down snacks to line our stomachs before the orgy of alcohol commences. To top it all off, the function 'room' is outside, unheated – and it's still pouring!

'What about some snacks? Potato chips?' I'm begging the bartender. It's 2 pm now. I haven't eaten anything all day.

'Kitchen doesn't open until six. We can make youse some pizzas then if youse want.'

I relent. Order two glasses of wine, one for me and one for alco-pop-less girl. Then I sit myself in a corner and pray for this to be over, just as Jim appears from doing some 'best man' job and sits next to me. 'You okay Lou?' Mosquitoes are now relentlessly biting me. My two red wine glasses are drained. I forgot to give the other one away.

'No, I'm not okay. I'm hungry. I'm tired. I'm dirty, I'm cold! My dress has popped two buttons, and my boyfriend keeps disappearing to do favours for someone who thinks giving a man cancer is funny!'

Jim gets the spacey look on his face. He's disappearing. 'You'll be right Lou. I'll get you some chips.'

The crowd of thirty gets drunk quickly, which isn't a surprise, so when it comes time to do the speeches they don't even look up from their drinks at Jim, who has painstakingly prepared a whole series of romantic-sounding gags about Ned and Sophie. Some strangers from another function at the other end of the room are the only ones who pay any attention, heckling and laughing. Then one of the groom's friends tries to start a fight.

'What do you expect?' I say to Jim, when he comes off stage. 'Who doesn't serve food at a wedding, with a smorgasbord of alcohol? It's just asking for trouble.' The friend is removed by the police, after making his girlfriend cry and vomiting in the paddock.

I don't remember eating. I don't remember dancing on a table, or slurring bitterly about the *West Australian* newspaper to a man's face, or falling over on my way to the toilet, but Jim tells me later. I do remember noticing that all five buttons from my dress had fallen off and all you can see is my slip. When I 'come to', we're in the Mazda. It's night, and we're on a dark road. Jim is gripping the steering wheel. Looking panicked.

'LET ME OUT OF THE CAR!'

He grips the steering wheel, 'NO! I'm not letting you out in the middle of nowhere!' then grabs my wrist hard as I try to open the passenger door.

'STAY IN THE CAR LOU!' His voice breaks.

We've been driving around Katherine for hours. It's not raining, but it's mighty cold. I'm still in my popped-button dress. I have a vague memory of stopping at a caravan park and lying down on a floor in an empty room, in what must have been the office. When I opened my eyes, I couldn't see Jim. And that was when this fight began.

THE WEDDING FROM HELL

'I had my eye on you, Lou! I was watching you the whole time! Nothing could have happened!'

'No you weren't! I was alone, on a floor, in wet clothes, in tar-and-feather land!'

I'm shrieking and hyperventilating now with the memory of it. He's still gripping my wrist.

'Let me out of this car!'

I don't remember the crack, or even the feeling of resistance from the windscreen, but a few moments later the car has stopped moving and Jim is looking at me, incredulously, shaking his head. It's the first time I've seen him slightly angry. Like I've crossed the line and he's had enough.

'Do you see what you just did?'

The heel of my stiletto had sent a splinter-like crack through the entire windscreen.

Now when I look at the road ahead it's covered in nothing but lines.

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Eclipse

'The eclipse of the moon . . . can represent a dramatic ending.'

When the sun comes up I feel worse. The only time I can remember feeling so terrible in such a physical, blow-to-the-soul way is when my dad died. I often envied other kids when I was growing up. They still thought they had the power to change things, but when you experience death at such an early age you learn quickly that some things are irreversible, and all you can do is accept it.

It's a death, pure and simple, and that's why the grief hits me with waves even though Jim is still living and breathing beside me. To this relationship, to the free-wheeling love we've enjoyed for so long, and to my delusions that I could live like this for an unlimited amount of time.

We spent the night sobbing and gripping each other in agony, painfully aware that we'd reached the end of our journey together.

'You're the love of my life,' Jim said, before a little sob escaped his lips and he stared at the crack in the windscreen.

'But we can't do this anymore, can we?' I love him. Painfully. But I'm *not* him.

In the morning he leaves to check on Ned, and I go for a walk to the gorge. Alone in the national park in Katherine, grieving for something gone too soon like Dad, I remember Mum's comforting behaviour, the gracious simplicity of life going on which always, faithfully, carries you through to the other side.

Mum was the reminder that life, and taking care of yourself, are the only actions to take to carry you out of the pit of despair. Fresh, healthy and dressed, coordinating our lives. Handing me a buttered piece of toast. Fixing dinner, planning our futures. *Taking care of our basic needs*. Planting flowers, painting a new house.

In the cafeteria toilets, I assess my body: exhausted and shaky, with puffy, swollen pig-eyes from crying, a husky voice from screaming, and a body wracked with guilt at the windscreen. I vow to be as self-sufficient and productive as my mum was, making choices and decisions which create a better future. Focusing on what remains. Planting flowers, to replace the ones that have just died.

It would seem obvious that it's time for our story to end, but I'm not ready to let Jim go. It's impossible for my brain to reconcile that this man I love is someone I need to leave. So I sit at the cafeteria with my biro and my notebook, and write a list of all the things I love about travelling with Jim, and all that I miss in Melbourne. The Melbourne column fills the entire page. Jim gets simply: Love, adventure and laughter. Under 'cons', I write: No freedom.

How funny, that the reason I set about on this trip, was to feel free. But now, his Mazda has become like a jail cell and I no longer have the keys to get out.

It's time to go home.

I've always had an ability to get joy from the little things, no matter how sad I am. A good cup of coffee. The smell of cooking. A stranger's kindness. A dog appearing from the middle of nowhere, asking for a pat. The sun just before it sets, casting brush strokes in the sky.

I walk up a bush track and chant lists of little things that I'm going to enjoy, back in Melbourne, to strengthen me for telling Jim the news. Reading in bed while the rain falls outside. A poem in the bath. The smell of Dench bakery. Dinner with Sally. Fresh flowers. A window ledge where I can rest a book, not needing to pack it up the next day. A good night's sleep.

Simplicity.

I get a vision in my head of well-stocked shelves in a pantry, my clothes hanging in a wardrobe, not crumpled and ruined, and a desk in a room where nobody can interrupt me working.

Holding my vision carries me back to the car, and I pick up the phone and call Jim.

'Jim, I think I'm going to book a flight back to Melbourne.'

He sighs. 'I understand babe. I've never had the pleasure of freedom – with this kind of love – before.'

If I needed any confirmation that the universe was waiting for me to make a decision, it comes in the form of an email, ready and waiting, when I log in after my walk.

'Louisa, a friend of mine needs an editor for a health magazine. It pays well, and you can do it from home. Only thing is, he needs you to start in the next few days, if you're keen.'

I call the number, lining up an interview with the publisher the next day. I then check my horoscope, seeking an explanation for the horrific weekend. 'The eclipse of the moon on your sun... can represent a dramatic ending. But don't forget, every exit is an entry somewhere else, according to Tom Stoppard...'

Then I book my flight back to Melbourne, and exhale, for the first time in ages.

For the drive back to Darwin we are talking again, like little kids excited about our lives anew, eager with plans, finally free to love each other without needing to compromise our values in life. It's a peculiar thing, this insane story we've shared. It's as if we've scaled the highest peaks and the lowest troughs possible, and now, we can just move on to other things.

We stop at a water-hole and I jump in, in my clothes. A sign at the entrance says crocodiles are 'often' spotted, but not 'recently'. I let the pure water baptise me, a new beginning and an end all at once. When I look up Jim's bobbing head is growing smaller as he swims a mile deeper, risking more, further from the edge.

'Why'd you go so far in, babe? Didn't you see the sign about crocodiles?'

He's panting, almost shining with radiant glory. 'The risk makes it all the more exhilarating!'

Knowing we only have a few more hours together makes us bury the pain of the previous night's drama to relish the last moments in time. We wander through Darwin at dusk, our clothes dried now from the sun, arm in arm, looking for a restaurant to have a final meal together before I fly back to Melbourne on the Red Eye. After I get changed into a dress in the dirty car, we arrive at a candlelit place on the Marina, where the bow-tie-clad waiter guides us flawlessly to a table overlooking the Timor Sea.

Our Riedel wine glasses sing when we touch them, and our meals arrive, perfectly arranged like works of art. Not only do we not have to clear our own space at a roadside café table, but they bring the food to our table for us.

Jim looks up at me as if he's just remembered something.

'Did you know this is the first time we've ever eaten in a proper restaurant together?'

We've been together a year.

Would I trade seeing six states, four seas, countless road gigs, sleeping by the side of the road, and The Wedding From Hell – for a year of restaurants and behaving normally?

Not on your life.

As I go to walk up the gangplank at the airport, with tears dripping down my red, blotchy face, Jim hands me a little smooth orange pebble he's had since one of his walks along the river in Denmark. A visible touchstone of the connecting cord which runs from one half of our continent to another, it reminds me there is no separation between what I love and who I am.

I hold the pebble in my hand as the plane takes off, its smooth strength in my knuckles a reminder of how quickly things can change, how we make it all up as we go along, how important it is to let go.

I strap on my seat belt as the wheels rise on the plane, gathering speed. The runway begins to blur and we lift off from the ground.

Darwin airport, shrinking from my window, becomes a fainter sparkling dot in the night, as I disappear into clouds, letting go of all attempts at understanding this miracle of flight. Once upon a time, I muse, nobody saw how humans could fly. Somebody must

have had to be the crazy one, being laughed out of town when they presented the first model of a plane.

What a funny thing freedom is.

It never comes in a package that's graspable, unless you let go of your preconceptions.

I've travelled across the desert and a thousand kilometres and two time zones in a day, worn the same underpants for a week and slept in a shack with a pet lizard, seen snakes, pythons, camels and whales, sunsets like gold and toothless angels like Mole . . . and all of it came when I let go of ideas of what my life should look like, what love should look like, when I left what I had to find who I was, fled all I knew and hopped into a car with a man I fell in love with the night I met him.

My stomach lurches with a gulping pang for his familiar energy as I touch down at Tullamarine, realising he won't be there to meet me. And I quickly replace the vision with the creamy, dreamy latte I'm going to have just as soon as I get to Fitzroy.

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Full circle

'So, you can think on your feet then?'

Melbourne has never looked so beautiful, so unique, and like such a – lady. Like the vision of a place from my dreams, I'm amazed by how clean, healthy and well-dressed everyone looks. Despite being on the far edge of the Australian summer, Melbourne has a familiar chill, and I'm suddenly glad that during my mass cull six months back, I'd chosen to store a sparse few more elegant remnants of my previous existence at my mum's house.

Mum collects me from the airport, hands over my fitted black coat, and helps me with my one big suitcase, all I've travelled back with, the sum total of my experiences in my head, my heart, my skin and my soul.

I stay with Sally for the first two nights, a newfound appreciation for the level of comfort and security in her life that I was so quick

to shed. We stay up late, talking in the night, and she barely believes half the stories I have to share.

'I kept telling myself you were in outback Australia, Lou, then I'd see a column about a dress that you'd written in the paper!' she says, shaking her head.

'Do you think Jim will follow you back?' I shake my head, *no*. Then I try to change the subject, finding it impossible to describe how the journey's over, but the love will always remain.

In the morning, the tram makes its familiar sailing song down Nicholson Street and I pinch myself that I'm safe, in a bed, and free, again. No more sunburn. Libraries aplenty and phone connection. Family, friends and cats roaming the Carlton streets. My town. My tribe. Home.

Despite missing Jim like a gulp every time I do – anything – I know that I'm not the same person who left this town. I'm determined to keep the feeling of life being a tour, even though I'm safe and sound, back in Melbourne. When you travel, everything unknown is an exciting adventure just waiting to be conquered. So I approach my lack of belongings and accommodation as just that.

I've come utterly full circle.

Jim calls, with another reminder to replay in my mind when the painful pangs grip me with longing.

'I slept at Pig's place last night, Lou. We talked road stories and we stayed up until dawn.' I remember Pig. He drank Bundy and burped a lot. Jim knows just what to say to help me appreciate where I am right now.

I run to the milk bar on my first Saturday back, and savour the taste of purchasing *The Age* for just two dollars.

Hot-off-the-press.

I meet the publisher two streets away for a quick interview and get the brief on what he wants for the health magazine.

'Where were you when we spoke, yesterday?'

'Katherine.'

'So, you can think on your feet then?'

I can finally say 'yes' to the invites to theatre shows, dance, performance and the perks of the arts columns, now that I'm home, too. Sally likes dance, so she comes along with me to a New York contemporary ballet performance on the second night. I dust off my one nice top, after pulling it from the bottom of my suitcase. We sip Bollinger in the foyer as regal-looking women doused in perfume swan around us. As the dancers take us away on a visual journey my mind intermittently drifts back to Jim, my missing limb. But this beauty, all that I missed, brings me back. Sally smiles, tears in her eyes from the show, and gives me a hug. 'I'm glad you're back, Lou.'

I'm introduced to one of the benefactors of the dance school and she air-kisses my cheeks and looks up at her eyelids while she bellows to me.

'Oh yes, you do look familiar because I saw that photo beside one of your pieces in the newspaper. Who styled your hair for the shoot?'

I think back. It was Denmark, just after the Krispy Kremes horror. Someone had demanded a photo be emailed that day and I asked Jim to pull over near a public park so I could plug my hair straightener into the power point. I didn't even wash my face before he took that photo.

But he did make me laugh just before he snapped the shutter.

I feel like I've emerged from the most extreme form of *Survivor – romance style*, so the issue of setting myself up in an apartment again is the least of my worries. Free to spend every day working in hotel lobbies, libraries and quiet cafés dotted across the city, I marvel at how much you can get done when you make your own rules.

The Wedding From Hell, still on replay in my mind, was stressful simply because I had no control over anything, from meal-times to sleeping arrangements. Now I've got my freedom back, nobody is going to take away the joy of my power to choose how I live my life.

Sitting on a tram one day, I overhear a girl and her mother, talking anxiously in the seat behind me. The mother is imploring her daughter to pick her first university preferences. The daughter is holding out for a dance scholarship, but the mum really wants her to study law.

Be what you love, I silently whisper to her. Don't live to please anyone else.

Be what you love.

At the Westin Hotel foyer, I sit in luxury at a glass-topped table while women in heels step around me, the rain falling softly outside. I commission articles for the magazine, conduct phone interviews, scrawl story-lists and juggle commissions from my editors, all while plugged into a nearby power point. The waitress brings me water even though I haven't ordered anything to eat.

When the internet disconnects without warning, I look up to see another businessman at his laptop, looking perturbed.

'Ma'am,' he says, in an American accent, 'are you connected?' I shake my head, no.

Suddenly, an elegant man sweeps in front of both of us, asking us to follow him upstairs. Wondering if I'll be found out, I follow

anyway, and he leads us both to the 'business' room furnished with mahogany tables, lounge chairs, a printer, fax and phone, and of course, free wi-fi. After thanking him we both get back to work.

I make calls to fashion designers and ask for photos for the paper, speaking of publication dates and juggling calls. A steaming coffee appears next to my laptop as I wind up a phone conversation and when I get out my wallet to pay, the hotel representative smilingly shoos my hand away.

'It's on the house.'

I marvel at the outfits we all wear – jobs, houses, suburbs and behaviours. We really are all the same. But place someone in a certain locale, and you assume . . . all sorts of things. The staff here have no idea the hotel where I sleep is a little less clean. And it certainly doesn't have any stars.

Mum brings me fresh daffodils, to brighten the room at the Royal Derby. We laugh that I'm editing a national magazine from the bed of a room in a pub. Besides, what I like about staying here while I work on such big projects is that it reminds me of how nobody – myself most of all – should be taken at face value. Don't judge a person by their temporary situation. Their home. Their clothes. Their position. Anything can change in the blink of an eye.

And it always does.

By the following Saturday, I'm letting myself into a beautiful apartment, on the ground floor of a block, just streets away from where I used to live.

I sleep on the floor for the first few days, revelling in the pure white simplicity of an unfurnished flat. I'm not worried about it being empty, for now. I know, from experience, how easy the accumulation is. It's the letting go that's the tricky part. In the buzzing auditorium by the shimmering docklands, the bustle of excitement before a year's worth of struggling to create a parade of fantasy is about to commence. A waiter stops, smiles, offers me a tray of smoked salmon canapés, another pushes a Kir Royale into my hand.

'Thank you.' The room is sparkling and alight with the popping of camera shutters. Reflections of the water catch on chandelier light in a kaleidoscope of possibility.

The publicist for the fashion awards spots me, rushing over in her couture finest to introduce me to two actors who have been flown in from LA to glamour up the Melbourne Fashion Festival. I introduce myself, smile warmly, drink up the music and settle into my seat for the first show. When the usher appears, I hand across the gold-papered ticket with my name on it.

People behind me crane their necks to see who is important enough to get a seat in the front row.

Exactly a year ago, I was sitting in a pub in Kalgoorlie with a skimpy called Paris serving me soup. And I felt just as lucky as I do now, getting to see such things. Lives. Landscapes. Experiences. Worlds that aren't mine, but which still allow me a front-row seat.

The music starts and the show begins. A petulant-looking model stops and poses in front of me in a see-through dress just like the negligee Paris wore. I study the cut, the stitching, the fabric. I even catch the seam of some sticky tape, stopping her nipples from showing through the viscose.

No, the dress isn't very different at all. And neither is the girl. She's just standing in a different landscape.

My hand instinctively falls to Jim's pebble, ever-present in my pocket, and I wonder where he is on the road map of Australia tonight. I realise, suddenly, that I don't miss him with the ache that had at first frightened me with its intensity. I feel him in the

contented smile which spreads across my face. I'm doing what I love, and so is he. This is all we ever wanted from each other, and from the relationship.

That night, I sleep deeply, and dream Jim has given me the keys to his Mazda, because he doesn't need it anymore. This time it's me who waves farewell and hops into the driver's seat, ready for a new adventure.

When I start the car, I see that he's left me a first-aid kit in the centre console, under a plastic balloon rose. I open it up and see that all it contains is a small scrap of paper. Written in my own handwriting are just two words:

Let Go.

Acknowledgements

Writing and publishing this book has been as wild a ride as travelling with Jim, and many people have played unwitting roles in an incredible journey. So here is a short thank you for blessings and encouragements, large and small, which showed me I was on the right track.

Firstly, to Ayala, who has always believed in me and delights in my successes. And for cycling over Soothers and Lemsip when I'd written so much I made myself sick! I'm so incredibly blessed to have a sister like you. And to my brother Dec, who eats tigers for breakfast and has always scoffed at the word 'impossible'; you inspire me to do the same.

To Jim's family, particularly Robyn and Camille, for osso bucco, kindness and unconditional love. To Jacqui Tonks, *ma souer adventureuse* on this wild ride called life. To Kate Forster, for dream interpretations and a life-saving book of Rumi poetry. To Magda Hoszko, for snail mail in Kalgoorlie, Marios in Melbourne, and a

perspective that takes away my headaches. To Christina Martini, for ten pages of enthusiasm from Seattle. To Sarah Darmody, who knows a thing or two about plants, life, and the power of words. To Margaret Ambrose, for sharing your knowledge about the book writing process. To Claire Isaac, for that first perfectly timed feature commission. To Mystic Medusa, for ridiculously fated connections and emails! To Louise Thurtell, for a phone message which wiped out a lifetime of doubts, and to Jude Mc Gee, whose first friendly email encouraged a whole book out of me.

And to everyone Jim and I met on the road; I'll never be the same, and I'm glad about that.

This book would be so different had I not bumped into my kindred writing spirit David Crynes, who so generously analysed my original manuscript, and taught me to take it seriously. I couldn't have done this without you, Dave.