

The illustrated
On the Run
in Dreamtime

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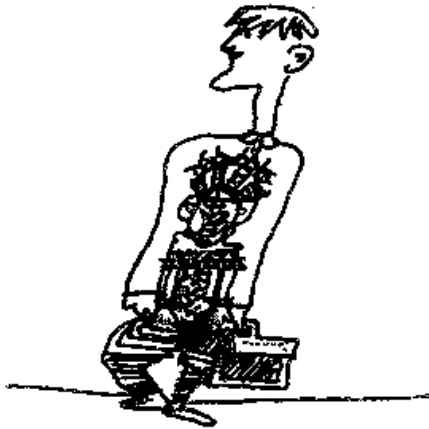
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Dedicated to kind strangers, everywhere.

1. *ON THE RUN IN DREAMTIME*



I had always thought gravity was a cultural concept conditioned by evolution into our DNA to prevent us from falling. Here, on the edge of the Nullarbor, Western Australia, I was walking on blue. Blue reflected in the impossible whiteness of this salt-glazed desert, so alone in this arid radiance, the daemons of my thoughts all I had for company.

I was wrong, for I was not the sole possessor of this vastness. I shared it with another, at first a smidgeon on the merging of sky and plain; then, as the blip grew into shape and form, I recognised an ancient Holden, a model of car as peculiar as any marsupial.

Responding to the magnet I keep concealed in my thumb, this relic of fifties Oz, an amalgam of various wrecks, ground to a halt a bare few feet away, spraying gravel on my unprotected knees.

With the vagueness of delirium I resolved, as I stumbled forwards, to change out of my kilt at the first opportunity ... Such an impractical garment for this desert terrain.

Window glass, smeared and grimed behind its Pickwickian Christmas card coating of white dust; the driver leaning over to unsnib the lock, stuffing something bulky underneath the passenger seat; before the door groaned open, revealing a white face, bloodshot wide-angled eyes, a crooked, broken-toothed grin. No introduction necessary: anywhere, any place, the Furry Freak Brother ... And myself, yea, just another Scotsman on walkabout.

Tucking my tartan about my knees, grateful for the sag of the torn leather seat, I slumped back, blissfully closing my eyes as the car took to the road ... a wounded camel escaping a rodeo of circus sadists ... a motor launch surging against a choppy sea, the tang of salt ... burning rubber ... oil ... and ...

Sitting bolt upright, I asked him then, 'You wouldn't happen to have a smoke on you? Something real? Right now I think I'd offer up my soul in exchange for one little joint.'

Scratching his light beard, the nail long and yellowing, Furry Freak Brother seemed to be weighing me up for a nark; then, after stretching the elastic moment to breaking point, he chuckled, a covert smile escaping his sparse thatch, and drawled, 'Reach under ewah seat, cobber, and ewe'll find a baag 'rapt in an owld bit of sack. Paypers and maytches inside. Carefwul ewe down't spill it. Beyst goddamn weed in Awz-traylia ... Jest dreven one thouswand K's tew geyt eet from a Chinah-man.'

So, Nirvana was a Chinaman's creation. I guess I'll believe in about anything, just so long as it gets me there. Crawling voices, from the speaker beside my ear, a familiar rhythm. Nipping Heids, a Glasgow band I knew well from the auld country. Though for the life of me, I couldn't recall having heard the track before.

*I wuznae here, I wuz there!
I wuznae there, I wuz here!
In a desert this was clear.
Oan a road in a car that
Wuznae really here nor there.
Wuz I com' in', wuz I goain',
Wuz this the end? Or
Wuz it the beginnin'?
Did I care, or did I no?
I didnae really ken ...*

Furry Freak Brother eyed me a screwball gaze. 'Lesten, myte,' he said, 'we-ell 'ow did ewe come tew be hitchin' owt 'ere, in all this fuckin' desert? A Scotchman een a kilt ...' Slowly, he shook his head, 'I mean, part of me brayn still thinks I'm fuckin' 'alluwcinatin' ewe.'

Sighing, I looked out of the window: blue of the salt now tinged with red dirt, road signs, what was left of them, triangulated jumping kangaroos peppered with gunshot. Passing Furry Freak Brother the joint I asked him then, 'Are you sure you really want to know? It's a long story, and once I get started ...' I let the sentence hang.

A grinning Bugs Bunny gone to seed, Furry Freak Brother exhaled thick smoke between gaps of nicotine-stained teeth. His voicesqueezed-outlikepressedgarlic. 'Why not, cobber, passes the time dun'it? We ain't gowin' nowhere fast, an' besides thies owld bweuty's engine loikes to overheat, sow, we got tow tyke it re-al slo'uw.'

Automatically, reaching into the bag once more, I asked him, 'You don't mind if I roll another one do you, mate? A big one, this time?'

'Suwah', he drawled, 'It grows, it grows.'

I noticed then my hands were shaking. The story was welling up inside me and I had to spit it out ...

*Wuz it a lost pearl,
Under the mattress, that done it,
Or a splinter o' glass?
Wuz that lassie still my duchess,
Or my trouble and strife?
Wuz it me, or wuz it her,
That done it?
I didnae really ken.*

*Wuz that hoose I built her,
A butt n' ben, oan a midden
Or a castle oan a hill?
Wuz my wife, that whoore
Who shagged a' my friends?
I didnae really ken.*

*And wuz that road,
Paved wi' good intentions,
My highway tae hell?
Wuz it my wie oot
Or leadin' me doon?
I didnae really ken.*

*And wuz this end,
Or wuz it the beginnin'?
Did I care, wuz it fair?
I didnae really ken.*



2. BALL AND CHAIN



I created a small stir somewhere over Papua New Guinea. I had just changed into my kilt, sporran, and all. I was not seeking to attract attention, merely fulfilling an oath sworn on the road and observing fealty to my ancient clan.

There was another reason. I couldn't decide whether to declare my case of bikinis — all I had by way of collateral, bar a few dollars — at the next set of customs. If I did I would have to pay a punitive tax. But who'd hoped, the image of a kilted playboy, I held up a piece of paper, 'Here's a list of the contents of this bag,' I gabbled, 'And a

receipt showing you how much I paid for the contents – three hundred bikinis.’ I observed that I’d made a slip, said ‘contents’ twice, but I thought, that will screw up his head, shrugged and continued.

‘I have to admit that I plan to sell half of the contents, but the rest of the other half of the contents are intended as gifts. You know, and I recommend this method, it works every time.’ I reached into the bag and pulled out a loose bikini, dangling it before his eyes by a silken strap. ‘The trick is to insist they try them on.’ I brayed like a camel, winking at him.

The dead-pan customs officer neither blinked nor lifted his gaze from mine. From the way he shifted his feet I guessed he had a bad case of haemorrhoids. Pointing over my shoulder he said in a gravelly voice, ‘My mate over there wants to know, what does a Scotsman wear under his kilt?’

I leaned closer until his face went out of focus and I was an inch from his pockmarked nose, then rasped in a whisky-drinking voice, ‘Baaallzzzz.’ Though long, my one-syllable response was measured. I could have said, ‘A ball and chain, just like any other man,’ but the magic of the kilt, Hogmanay and all things Scottish was just the job.

The customs man drew himself up to his full height of about 5 foot 2 inches, jerked his thumb towards the ribbed rubber doors, looming like great condoms to the Aussie outside. ‘I don’t want to know about your fucking bikinis, just carry on mate.’

First jet-slag stop: a hostel, garret no. 23. Opening the door I was confronted by a large TV screen, a video playing of Nipping Heids, one of the bands I’d put up, so long ago it seemed, when I staved off bankruptcy and doomed my marriage in the process, turning the Castle into a rock and roll hotel, and my wife into a groupie. Obviously they’d made it large, because their song ‘*Three rubber sheets to the wind*,’ from the album *OZtralia Dreaming* was number 1 here too. A ridiculous title, considering at the time of recording, they’d never even been out of the Auld Country.

And yes, I'd heard this song before. I'd even penned some of the lyrics, and even suspected the rubber sheets mentioned were my second anniversary present to the hot aristocratic number I had married, though I doubted I'd get a credit for either contribution.



*We were tradin' places, getting' low down,
Hot n' dirty 'tween steaming Rubbah sheets
But I nevah expected No sex change ...*

*And then I saw my face
On youah pillow. Looking back
I was Icaptured Babe,
in a blink of my blue eyes,
Wond'rin' how I could evah trust me, again ...*

Yea, my words issuing their mouths. I prayed they were not prophetic, considering how fuck-ed off I had become since my wife turned groupie. Yea, pop stars, who needs them ... Whatever had I seen in the weegie heid-nippers?

I threw the door wide. Loud, posh English accents, four tall young men, fresh out of boarding school, each clutching a tube of Foster's lager like it was the last can in the world, an argument raging. The subject: cricket.

I stopped in my tracks, saying weakly, 'Sorry chaps, I've got the wrong room.' I slammed the door behind me. Fuck this shit.

I descended the stairs, bruised my knuckles raising dust from the cluttered reception desk.

The silhouette behind the frosted glass office door turned out to be a profusely sweating pus-ball. It leaned around the door, 'Wha'd'y want?' Gusts of stale garlic assailed me.

I demanded, 'Have you got any lockers? I want to leave my luggage in a secure place.'

The pus-ball foamed, 'Wha'd'y expect for five dollars and ninety-five cents?' it boomed, 'Fort Fucking Knox? This is a genuine dive mate. You get one sagging bed, two sheets, and a lot of company. What's the problem? Room not to your liking? Shite everyone else comes in with a ruck-sack, not one of those executive briefcases on wheels. Now what can I do to help you?' He leaned over the reception desk, trying to smile.

I left. I couldn't stand to argue with this mountain of bile. Probably just another average Australian. Millions of them out there, in the fucking hostel or out in the street, what's the difference? I headed for the railway station and the left luggage office. As I looked at the Turkish-Cypriot baggage handler who handed over my receipt, he began to turn into a Doberman Pinscher, a slavering one, too. *No, it was not my demented imagination.*

What was it those Dutch discoverers first called this continent? Van Daemons Land. I supposed I'd have to be careful of what lurked around every next corner. Yea, truly I had descended, my long fall broken at last. Landed on my feet, I had, in the terrestrial hell. Nothing could have prepared me for this jangling ugliness, this crude crowd bustle. I didn't even feel this was really Australia. It seemed so much like England and the States all jumbled up. Over there a round mailbox, beside it an old Morris Minor sandwiched between two big fast cars. Beside them a hamburger joint.

I needed to see something that was genuinely of this land. I needed to feel a connection. And so I set off in search of beauty.

New South Wales Art Gallery: I am searching for their permanent aboriginal Exhibit through a hotch-potch of western art - Matisse, Cézanne, Jackson Blowjob, Desperate Dan *a la* Lichtenstein, nineteenth century visions of Highland cows transported along with stags, castles, kilted Scotsmen, Landseer *et al*, to Tasmania. Yes, there was a painting of this Tasmanical vision in some ghastly room of this gallery. There were also nymphs, satyrs, bounding kangaroos and centaurs frolicking amid Grecian temples. Corridors and corridors of the bloody stuff till I want to retch and scream.

I took a few wrong turnings in the labyrinth, but finally I discovered the sub-sub-basement. In a room adjacent to an exhibition of art college student photographs, I found the displays of Aboriginal art.

Jesus, I thought. Poor black bastard nigger coons, relegated to the base of this Antipodean shit-pile, over-lorded by the white establishment of European and American artists.



ART I CHOKED
WITH THE PLAY
OF WORDS

This is the Professor talking: 'In the past few years, evidence has been unearthed proving that Aborigines have been in Australia for at least 40,000 years, and possibly much longer. Despite being conclusive these discoveries are still being howled down by the establishment of Australian Universities. Many eminent academics still hold to *the woman, the log and the dog*, theory. Allow me to provide you with a brief summary.

'A pregnant woman, Big Black Bess, was swept off to sea while holding a female dog, also pregnant, by the scruff of the neck. Somehow the pair, slithered onto a log which drifted many thousand miles to Australia. The woman and her male child founded the rase of Abos. The dog and her brood also founded the species of dingo.

'Both the dogs and the humans degenerated through inbreeding. What other explanation could there possibly be for the Aborigines' presence in this land so far from elsewhere? And after all, didn't the white Australian settlers need one hell of a good excuse to salve their consciences as they hunted the Aborigines, shooting them down like wild pigs in Tasmania, until there were none left on the island?

A new theory has emerged to counter the legend of the woman, the dog and the log theory. Cranium consultants have discovered that the skull of the Aborigine appears to be a mix between that of ancient Peking Man and Java Man. This suggest that the Aborigine of today is bears resemblance to our ancestors of Neolithic times, perhaps the most valuable genetic storehouse walking the planet today, the living atavistic record of our uncoded past. Could it be if we learned to understand the aborigine mind, discover the meaning of *dreamtime*, we might find the key to understanding ourselves.

3. CIRCLE OF GOLD ...#1



I should have known, even sensed it, but I had no premonition ... A letter was waiting at Sydney Main Post Office, a malevolent hand reaching out from twelve thousand miles away. Two enclosures – both from my da-h-arling wife.

Haggard Castle, Stansburgh, Leven, Scotland.

Frankie,

The castle has not sold, the deal fell through, and don't ever think of coming back. Our joint accounts have been closed. I enclose the Circle of Gold chain letter, your best hope for the future.

Wishing you well, Conniiff.

P.S. Don't EVER write, or call.

In a daze, I ripped open the envelope entitled 'Circle of Gold'. My eyes scanned the false print quick as a ferret. A chain letter – you know the kind. You pass it on to two people, sending money up the line. And then