

EIGHTEEN

IT'S TRUE, THEY DO WEAR CORK HATS

Erica was 20 years old and was a trainee nurse from Perth in Western Australia. When we met she was on a 3 week break from doing her training in the gold mining town of Kalgoorlie about 500 miles east of Perth and it was here that I had to make my way if I was to see her again.

August came and it was bloody cold in Sydney, but it meant the end of my 4 month trip and going home time. The company were very accommodating when it came to flying their personnel home, if you wanted to stay and have a holiday that was fine, and they would fly you back to UK from anywhere as long as it didn't cost more than the flight from your home port.

I wasn't too sure how to get to Perth from Sydney and I spent the day after signing off the ship checking out the travel shops for the best (in my case, the cheapest) way.

I had a few options,

- 1) flying – too expensive,*
- 2) train – even more expensive,*
- 3) hire a car – couldn't drive,*
- 4) bus – maybe,*
- 5) hitchhike – didn't have a year to spare or*
- 6) walk – didn't have two years to spare.*

So I settled on the bus.

It was a Tuesday evening, and I looked at the timetable and called Erica. “Erica it's me, Graham” “Hey Graham, when are you coming over?” “I'm catching the bus so I'll be in

Kalgoorlie on Friday morning about 2:30am” “The bus? Are you mad, it takes forever” “I know but I thought I’d just as well see some of the country while I’m here” “OK, I’ll be waiting, see you Friday”.

The bus was painful, comfortable enough but fucking boring. The driver would stop every four hours for a break and on the near side front wheel he had marked all the seat numbers. At the start of each leg of the journey all the passengers would put a dollar in a box and when the bus stopped for a toilet break the seat number that was closest to the ground won the money, hoorah!

Most of the passengers on the bus found it highly amusing and were too excited to sleep in case the bus stopped and somebody claimed their prize while they snoozed. I was the only fool on the bus travelling almost the entire width of Australia and on the second day I didn’t bother putting my money in the box. “FOR GODS SAKE JUST GET GOING, I COULD HAVE BEEN THERE YESTERDAY IF IT WASN’T FOR THIS STUPID BLOODY GAME” I thought, but I had to be patient and wait just another 16 hours before I arrived.

We stopped at a place called Eucla on the South Australia / Western Australia border where I had my first wash in nearly two days. I’ve just called Eucla a ‘place’ but I didn’t see anything there at all to warrant this description, except a small building that had a toilet and a salt water shower and woman there to give you a bar of soap specially made to make a lather in sea water. I have no idea where she could have lived and by the look of her she could have done with spending a whole day in the saline washroom herself.

The next stop was Kalgoorlie and I had to freshen myself up somehow, so decided to chance the shower. I don’t know who made that soap and I hope he had another job because no-one

in their right mind would have bought it. I could have been there a week and not made a lather, it was fucking awful and stank to high heaven, I came out smelling worse than when I went in. And the water, it was so salty that when it dried it felt as though somebody had wrapped me in Clingfilm. I was pissed off with getting no sleep for two days, I was pissed off with the bus, I was pissed off with the drivers playing hubcap bingo every four hours and smiling as though everyone thought it was great fun, and now I could hardly bend my arms because somebody had the brilliant idea to have a wash with glue! JUST GET THIS FUCKING BUS MOVING AND WIPE THAT STUPID SMILE OFF YOUR FACE” was what I really wanted to say, but held back and politely asked “What time will we be in Kalgoorlie driver?” “For the tenth time, the bus is on schedule and we’ll be there in eight hours” Now it was his turn to be pissed off with me – good, now he knows how it feels.

But as sure as eggs are eggs we pulled in at the bus stop right on time.

The driver found my bag and threw it out on the pavement (obviously an ex airport baggage handler), jumped back on the bus and pulled away, which drew me to the conclusion that everybody else on the bus was pissed off with hubcap bingo and the money box was empty.

Anyway, I was here now and it wasn’t long before Erica did a handbrake turn round the corner and stopped just inches from my legs. She jumped out of the car and threw her arms around me, and in almost the same move pushed me away and turned her nose up, “Christ, you stink Graham, what’ve you been doing?” I explained about the shower episode and she pushed me in the car and started the 10 minute drive to her place.

“Now, there are a few rules about staying here” she stated, “these are nurses quarters and it is absolutely forbidden for

any men to stay here". I started to speak. "Let me finish" she said. "You can sleep here, but you have to be out before nine in the morning and you can't come back until after nine at night. If Matron catches you then I'll be sent back to Perth and have to do this part of the training all over again, I'm 2 months away from finishing and I never want to come back here again, it's a shithole. Do you understand?" "Absolutely" I replied. Well well well, this should be interesting, I thought. We parked in the hospital car park and quietly walked the 50 yards to the front door of her quarters. "Go around the side" she whispered "and I'll let you in through the window" It was a single story building so at least I didn't have to climb up a drainpipe, but within a minute I was clambering through the open window and into Erica's room. "Now go and get a shower, you really smell bad". I had never been spoken to like this before, and to be honest I found it rather exciting.

"OK, I give in, where's the shower" I said sarcastically. "Just down the corridor second on your right" "But what about the Matron?" I asked. "Don't worry, her room is near the entrance, she'll never hear anything from here" So I took my washing gear and a change of clothes and went for a desperately needed douche.

When I came back, Erica's room was full of other nurses in nothing but their nighties, thirteen in total and sparkling wine was been passed around. I was given a chair to sit in and the girls surrounding me started throwing a barrage of questions, "What do you think of Kalgoorlie?" "Don't know, I've only been here two minutes and it's dark" "What's England like?" "Cold, wet and horrible" "What do you think of Oz then?" "Fantastic, and if the people are all like you then I might end up staying" This answer drew a round of rapid applause. "So how long have you all been here then?" It was my turn now.

“Well, we’re all from Perth and have to do 5 months training in this godforsaken place before we can sit our exams, we’ve got just a few weeks to go before we leave and none of us can wait, can we girls?” answered one particularly chatty girl, and with perfect timing they all replied “Noooo”.

They were all barmy, the lot of them. “So what is there to do around here” I asked. “ Absolutely fuck all” one of them said “unless you want to go and shag a gold miner and they’ve all got a dose which is the last thing we want to take back to our fellas, innit girls?” and they all started giggling.

Thinking it may have been an asylum, I asked what sort of hospital it was and found out that it was just an ordinary hospital that served the local community and the aboriginal villages scattered about the bush.

Question time over, Erica threw them all out, shut the door behind them and proceeded to rip my clothes off and throw me on the bed.

I didn’t know what to make of it all, it really was a madhouse, especially at eight thirty in the morning when Erica was screaming at me to jump out the window with instructions to meet her in the pub at lunchtime. So off I trotted, to find somewhere to get some breakfast.

It was a strange place, but only strange I suppose if you’ve never seen this sort of thing before. The buildings were no more than two stories high and nearly every street had a covered boardwalk. And it was dusty, Christ it was dusty, and the flies drove you mad. I supposed that in summertime the heat killed off the flies but now, in middle of winter the bastards were everywhere.

I walked around until I found somewhere that sold food and sat down and called for the waitress. Godzilla walked over to me. “Yeh” she said in what was probably her polite voice. “Yes,

could I have some breakfast please, just some eggs and bacon will do, Oh and some toast, if it's not too much trouble" I asked, feigning my best of British accent. "Strooth, where the bloody 'ell are you from?" she asked in her obviously unfeigned and natural Antipodean tongue. "England" I said. "Jesus. Evie, Evie, we've got a bloody Pom in 'ere" "What?" came the shout from the kitchen, "we've got a bloody Pom in 'ere asking for some breakfast". And with that Evie came running out of the kitchen wiping her hands on the already filthy apron she was wearing. "I've never met anyone from England before" she said with a toothy grin. "What can I get you?" "I know what he bloody wants just get out there and do him a special" Godzilla snapped at Evie.

What was served at my table could have fed the entire ship for a week, it was huge! The women had been pleasant enough in their own way so I tried my hardest to plough through this BrontoBreakfast but it beat me before I was even half way through. "I'm sorry girls" I said "but it was just too much, how much do I owe you?" "Don't be daft" Godzilla replied "you're the first Pom we've eva 'ad in 'ere, so take yer money and go an' spend it in the pub, they're gonna luv ya in there"

I walked around for a bit both to kill time and walk off the bulge in my stomach. The nurses were right, there was absolutely fuck all to do here, no wonder they were all mad.

I found the pub about half twelve and walked in to get myself a cold beer, even though it was winter it was still pretty warm outside. I opened the door and was met by the biggest, hardest, roughest, toughest, ugliest looking bunch of blokes that I have ever seen in my life, and to top it all off, they all wore cork hats. I had a sudden vision of the offspring that would be produced if the prostitutes from the Texas bar in Lisbon ever mated with these monsters, and it made me shiver.

“Who the fuckin’ ‘ell are you?” said one of the gentlemen sitting by the pool table. “Graham” I said “just here for couple of days seeing a friend of mine” “I’m surprised you’ve got any friends with a fuckin’ poncey accent like that” said another, and they all laughed. Oh God, I thought. I’m going to get splattered, and thrown out in the street for the flies to drink my blood then vomit all over me, but at least I’ve got a flock of nurses to tend my wounds and plaster up the broken bones. With that, Erica burst through the door and dragged me outside. “What the hell were you doing in there?” she yelled “You said to meet me in the pub” I replied. “Not that one, the one in Hay Street” “But you said that that one was full of prostitutes” I argued. “At night yes, but during the day it’s fine, we all go there to escape blokes like that, now come on” and she dragged me off like a naughty boy to her car.

“I’m sorry about all this sneaking around” she said “but I can’t afford to get thrown out right now, I’ve got some good news though” Tell me it’s dream, tell me it’s dream, I thought. “The Matron has gone back to Perth for the weekend, so we’ll have the place to ourselves. No more climbing through windows” “ Thank fuck for that” I said “ I couldn’t stand another day wandering around this place, can we go back to your room now” and she obediently started the car and took me back where I slept the rest of the afternoon. A meal that night was followed by a barbeque way out in the bush the next day and a trip to the local Emu farm – very interesting!

Sunday came, and there was a sense of excitement in the air. “What’s the plan today then” I asked Erica. “It’s the Sunday Sesh” she replied. “What’s that then?” I asked curiously. “Well the pubs only open from 4 ‘till 7 on Sunday and down at the town hall there’s a band playing and drinks are all 2 for 1”

The town hall wasn't too far from the hospital so the thirteen loony nurses, Erica and myself all got dressed up in Sunday best and walked the half mile down to where the action was.

The place was heaving with people, mostly miners and farmers and a few of the townsfolk, Godzilla and Evie were there and waved at me from across the hall.

We found a table to fit all of us around and 2 of the girls went to the bar and came back a couple minutes later with a tray full of rum and cokes. Within 5 minutes another 2 of the loonies were back at the bar ordering again, these girls sure could drink. After the fourth round (which was eight rum and cokes each!) the laughter and general volume of chatter in the place was increasing and then the band came on. Jesus, this was what the earlier excitement was all about, they were a six piece combo who called themselves, wait for it, 'The Mucky Duck Bush Band', and they were absolute crap. But the whole place was whooping and hollering as though it was the Rolling Stones up there twanging their out of tune guitars. The girls were going mad, and the booze they were knocking back was making them a bit frisky. With Erica sat on my left, the girl opposite had her foot shoved in my groin giving me teasing rub and another on my right was fighting the other girls foot with her left hand to lay claim to my crotch for a few minutes. I didn't know what to do. Erica was happily clapping and singing along with the music while her two mates were fighting over my bits. Soon it was Erica's turn to buy the drinks and I begged to let me come and help her, "It's OK, you stay here we don't want you getting in trouble with the blokes here, they'll rip your head off" My begging eyes went unnoticed by Erica and her friend who were already half way to the bar. Now I was left to the mercy of these rampant lunatic girls who hadn't had any sex in weeks. Their hands were everywhere, all of them fighting over the only real human male in the entire town.

They whispered suggestions in my ear and those who were not that close just shouted across the table that I could shag them at any time.

It was hilarious, terrifying and intimidating all at the same time and I wondered what lay in store for me when I got back to the hospital.

Fortunately, by the time we got back around nine o'clock, the girls were so completely legless drunk they just went to their rooms and crashed out until the next day.

Monday was when Matron came back and although she was a stunning girl, I decided to leave Erica and her certifiable friends for a more civilised couple of days in Perth before catching my flight back to the UK.