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*Excerpt from Chapter Four of Thumbs Up Australia:  
'A Short Australian Desert Adventure'*

WE WALK TO A SPOT MORE THAN 5KM OUT OF TOWN BY HALF PAST SEVEN. The self-induced heat of exercise evaporates, it's still chilly. Alice Springs can have crisp nights. Dew drops splatter down the side of lancewood plants. The kangaroos that thrive out here must be shivering as they complete their nocturnal grazing. My shorts are inappropriate, very Englishman abroad. I do star-jumps in anticipation of a benevolent sunrise.

Opposite us is a roadside rest stop where a trucker has parked. There is no sign of him in the cab, so I guess he's taking a 'smoko'.

This is an advantageous hitching spot. Our vantage point is at the summit of a slow incline sloping up from the town fringes, affording us plenty of time to analyse oncoming vehicles. Another beneficial factor is the Stuart Highway's unerring straightness. Three cars come past - all full. I would mark this place down as perfect if I were composing a hitchhiking textbook.

It's foolish to wish for something: the opposite will invariably happen.

Katia says, "I'd like to go in a Jaguar." This is one of my favorite mispronunciations of hers. Like many words - squirrel, for example - Jaguar is one I will never correct.

There are a substantial collection of suitable contenders who look at us as they would at lions in a safari park. Each time a vehicle approaches, Katia has time to assess it.

"Zis one is a shitty one," she says of a Volkswagen Kombi van trundling slowly up the rise. "I'm not going in zat bloody sing."

Inevitably, this same rattling camper wheezing uphill at a marathon runner's pace stops. I have a few seconds to peek at the elderly man and woman occupying the front seats. They are quite the oddest-looking pair I have seen in a camper van since my first visit to Glastonbury Festival in 1990, when all the New Age travellers still got in.

The man behind the wheel wears a pair of over-sized, black-rimmed spectacles. The dominant feature of his face is a substantial, bristly beard, which he tweaks with a forefinger as he looks dead ahead at the road, oblivious to us. He has a substantial gut, cleverly hidden by a lounge carpet-patterned cardigan and baggy brown corduroys.

Straining to see, I notice his female co-pilot has thick tresses of uncombed grey hair. She wears a silver fake fur coat. Her mouth is childishly daubed with pink lipstick. The old lady then steps out of the passenger door and walks right past us, not saying a word. Underneath her coat is a long, flowery summer dress. Her legs are covered by black tights. Over these are thick walking socks, and white Adidas trainers.

"You kids can get in," the driver shouts to us without opening the window. "She's just going for a piss behind a bush."

Katia is hesitant, but shrugs in the way she has learned to as a newly enthused hitchhiker. But when I slide open the rear door, her slight opprobrium turns to disgust. An overwhelming stench of body odor and unwashed animals almost bowls us over. Katia follows me in diffidently with her nose buried in the folds of her poncho.

No sooner have I found a place for my rucksack, than two scrawny dogs pounce on us, straining at leads buried under a mound of dirty clothing on the back seat. With the driver's attention still elsewhere, I endeavour to manhandle them into the boot. I manage to push a window ajar too. In doing so I notice there is a third human occupant, a small Aboriginal boy

cowering beneath a pile of blankets.

At first just his shaven head sticks over the top of his den. But furtively, two brown eyes emerge. His pupils bulge with trepidation. Katia says hello and attempts a few questions. As she does so the little boy retreats. From beneath the duvet shroud, we hear mutterings in an Aboriginal language, with odd English words thrown in. I open my mouth to ask the driver about this little boy, but I am too slow. He starts talking, in an authoritative yet completely manic manner.

This is a no-small-talk kind of ride, picking up on an imaginary dinner party conversation. No polite pauses or familiarising questions. The driver's words are a formless diatribe, a stream of consciousness ramble without a target. He needs an audience – us.

“She needs to take a leak quite often, you know,” he says. “Ah yeah, we only stopped at the fast-food restaurant in the Alice, but she needs to go again. The doc in Adelaide said she's got a bladder problem, but I don't reckon she's crook. That's Mrs Christopher by the way, and I'm Alan.”

It has to be one of the craziest opening gambits I've ever heard from someone who's just invited me into their car. Even in no hang-ups Australia, most people wait awhile before discussing their partner's urinary problems. Added to that is Alan Christopher's strange self-important manner, enunciating every word with the gravitas of a university lecturer. His accent is distinctly Australian, but bears all the hallmarks of someone who has never completely shrugged off the Old Country. From time to time it drifts back to its roots, maybe somewhere between South Yorkshire and the Midlands.

As the monologue on the lack of feasible toilet stops for an infirm wife reaches a natural pause, I jump in with a stock question: “So where do you hail from originally, Alan?”

“I'm from Derby,” he replies, manufacturing a passable imitation of his undiluted boyhood accent. “I left there with

my family when I was still a kid. One of my first memories is of the big, Wild West steam trains out by the dock as I peered through the quarantine building in Fremantle. That was a hell of a sight for a little boy of my exceptional imagination, I can tell you."

"I still follow Derby County," Alan continues. "Hopefully they'll manage to avoid relegation this year. It depends on Coventry and Manchester City as far as I can tell. My interest in football only came about as a way of connecting with my father. He was a normal, working class bloke and I was a kid with an IQ of 140 who wanted to be different. That's how I started watching soccer, you see. I remember seeing Derby playing a team wearing red and white stripes at the Baseball Ground. Now that could be..."

There is another off-putting ingredient in this unending soliloquy that makes this feel like a day out with a psychiatric ward – the interjections of Mrs Christopher. Every few seconds, as I'm trying to decipher her husband's latest tangent, she mumbles something utterly indistinct. She provides unscripted, off-stage asides to his patter. But he ignores her completely, doesn't seem even mildly rattled.

Frequently, in the midst of one of her strange slurs, Mrs Christopher just falls asleep, perhaps from narcolepsy. Her chin sags down towards her skinny chest and saliva dribbles out of her mouth like a baby. Without warning, her head shoots up abruptly and she picks up where she left off.

Alan's descriptions move into another subject area entirely – washing machines.

"The beauty of that particular machine we had when we were living in Gawler, South Australia, was that the man-u-fact-ur-ers keep every part for every model they produced," he informs us. "Now I reckon there's definitely something to be said for that in these days of disposable white goods."

When he says a polysyllabic word he's particularly proud

of, he pronounces every syllable separately. The phonetic lecturing manner grates.

Katia gives up listening, and is engaged in a tussle of peek-a-boo with the little boy, who is named Virgil. His top front teeth are missing.

My role is to say yes whenever Mrs Christopher falls asleep. Alan requires no other encouragement. So preoccupied is he with his one-man dialogue, that the vehicle trundles along agonisingly slowly. The speedometer drops below 60km per hour.

“This is a bonzer vehicle in desert conditions so long as I don’t push it too hard,” Alan says apropos of nothing I’ve asked. “In many ways it is an ideal vehicle for travel through the Australian bush.”

I’m grateful when the impulsive demands of Mrs Christopher’s bladder prompt a pause at Ti Tree, a tiny settlement composed of little more than a roadhouse, a pub and a series of heavily irrigated melon farms that border the highway. The original Tea Tree Station grew up on the back of the Overland Telegraph Line, after a profound well of sweet water was discovered in the area.

One by one, we totter from the van. Only now can we see that Virgil has been kitted out in far superior clothing to most Aboriginal children. He wears new trainers.

When we stumble inside the roadhouse, he becomes an excited little boy. Katia accompanies him to the gambling machines. He just stares without putting in a cent, mesmerised by the flashing lights.

Alan collars a man behind the cash register and starts talking about comings and goings in Ti Tree. I hear him say, “You might remember me.” But there is no reply. He talks on regardless.

Two stockmen gobbling down steak sandwiches at a wobbly plastic table watch us with confused stares. I ask Alan if we can

buy him something to eat. The roadhouse owner looks grateful for the interruption.

“Have we got the little fella?” Alan asks, as if he’s just remembered him.

Virgil chooses a plate of chips, chocolate milk and a packet of bubble gum. As each item arrives at the table, he stares in wonderment. Katia has to open the drink for him. Neither Alan nor his wife does anything. Virgil looks lost. No sooner has he put the drink carton to his mouth, than he spills the chocolate milk down the front of his T-shirt. The chips prove an even more trying. He patiently saws each chip into smaller morsels, like an expert carpenter.

Belatedly, this seems like a good time to ask, “By the way, Alan, where are you travelling to with Virgil?”

“Virgil’s from a place by the name of Ali Curang, a few hundred kilometers short of Tennant Creek itself,” he tells me.

The explanation for their journey is complex. Nine-year-old Virgil is the latest in a long line of Ali Curang children to return to his ancestral homeland after sampling an education in Adelaide. Alan, a retired teacher, is a zealous vigilante who runs his own entirely unofficial scholarship scheme for Aboriginal children. Having previously worked at Aboriginal schools in Arnhem Land and Tennant Creek, he devotes himself to escorting promising youngsters down to Adelaide for a year’s trial in one of the city’s best schools, acting as guardian during their time there.

“I worked in Tennant Creek area for years,” he explains. “I know a tree-mend-ous number of people in this vic-in-it-y. I was also a major figure in the, ah, ed-u-cay-shon of a lot of the more remote communities in Arnhem Land. This was after the Northern Territory education board asked me to stop teaching 13 years ago.”

Shortly after Ti Tree we pass a mountain discovered by Stuart on

the right hand side of the highway. Central Mount Stuart is the approximate geographical centre of Australia. When Stuart and his companion Kekwick ascended the highpoint, they named it Mount Sturt after his original mentor. But like so many other places along the Track, it's Stuart influence which endures. In his log, Stuart wrote, "Today I find from my observation of the 0 LL 111 degree 00' 30" that I am now camped in the centre of Australia." He never was one for gushing about his own achievements.

Stuart and Kekwick wrote a message on paper, placed it in a bottle and buried it within a cone of stones at the summit. To this day, the people of Ti Tree have struggled to find the cairn.

A plaque at the side of the Stuart Highway commemorates the first European sighting of the mountain. It reads: "John McDouall Stuart and William Kekwick ascended and named Mount Sturt on 23 April 1860. Later the name Mount Sturt was changed to Central Mount Stuart in honor of the explorer."

We turn down the corrugated dirt road to Ali Curang, which has no signpost. The back of the vehicle clatters against the bumps. Alan, regardless, maintains his highway speed. Before it was plodding, now it's spine-shattering. Virgil's face is elated for the first time. He gabbers and points to what must be significant landmarks. Perhaps for him the bloodwood tree dipping into a dried-up creek on our left has the poignancy of Big Ben for a Londoner. A sign declares that Ali Curang is a grog-free reserve. Normally, we would need a state Government permit to enter.

Talking over the vibrations, Alan rhapsodises about the Walpiri friends he knew in Tennant Creek. I hear only snippets.

"They're all dog dreaming," he says. "Dog dreaming starts around here and goes right up into Arnhem Land. That reminds me of when I was cut off up there during the Wet. That's when I really learned about what is called the Dreamtime..."

“So she said, ‘I don’t know whether we should go out at all.’ And I told her, ‘Well...’”

“...now the cleverest blackfella I knew was a bloke by the name of Cheera. He would play the whitefellas at their own game when they wanted a piece of land of no value to the Walpiri. He would concoct a story about a patch of bush that the tribe didn’t care about, and made the government agencies pay heaps for it. Fair go, I reckon. One of the old girls told me how they got visited by an an-throp-ol-o-gist. They invented bullshit tales. Blackfellas don’t tell us the really private stuff. But to keep the tucker coming, there’s got to be stories.”

What I presume is a thick grey heat haze smudges the horizon in front of us. The sun fizzes out. I realise we’ve properly arrived when Alan executes a screeching handbrake stop. A cloud of red sand drifts across the land to announce our presence. And just in case the residents didn’t hear us enter, Alan sounds the horn.

“Your boy’s done good down there,” Alan tells Virgil’s dad.

Virgil’s father bows his head sheepishly towards the litter-strewn earth. He looks uncomfortable with the whole village listening in. He wears a red baseball cap perched awkwardly on an afro of frizzy shoulder length hair. He is barefoot, with a shredded black singlet barely covering his beer barrel chest.

The boy’s mother ambles languidly from a decrepit iron-sheet shack – presumably her home since her semi-nomadic family was forcibly relocated by missionaries to government reserves many years ago. Her legs are matchstick-thin, covered in the symptomatic blotches of malnutrition and anemia. Alan goes on regardless.

“Now this is a letter from the headmistress,” he continues. “She says, ‘Virgil is doing extremely well in the special needs department. He has been a model pupil and is well-liked by both pupils and staff. We would like him to continue his

education here in Adelaide, with your permission.' So what do you fellas reckon? You should be proud."

There is no answer from Virgil's parents. They have not seen their son for over a year. Apart from offering him a brief show of affection on our arrival there was no visible emotion. They only revealed fleeting joy when Virgil handed over a McDonalds Happy Meal, which he secreted under his blanket throughout the long drive from Alice Springs.

Ever since white pioneers first traversed the sand-hills of the Tanami Desert on Afghan camels, 'welfare patrols' have escorted Virgil's descendents, the Walpiri, out of their clan territory. They were herded into missionary camps before the creation, in 1954, of Ali Curang, named after a billabong associated with dreamtime dingoes. Dependent on white man's food, weakened by alcohol and imported diseases like tuberculosis, the Walpiri were marooned, unhappily co-habiting with the Alyawarra, an entirely separate nation with its own language upon whose traditional land the reserve is situated. The Walpiri's own sacred sites are days away.

Today the community is held up as a perfect example of self-sufficient land ownership. It is officially alcohol-free. A local Aboriginal council administers its affairs. On paper, with a youth centre, domestic violence unit and independent night patrol, all is harmonious in Ali Curang. But the reality is starkly different.

At the entrance is a futile park which contains a bench with no seat. Clods of turf dry out, unplanted. The community is circular, arranged around a square of bone-dry scrub with a set of twisted goalposts at either end. Settees lie rotting under shriveled trees. We can hear the bass thump of hip-hop music emanating from a wooden building across the community.

Still unable to elicit a response, Alan starts filling bin bags with rusty cans and discarded food packaging chucked on the ground outside the pre-fabricated homes. There are bins,

but they appear unused. People lounge in the shade of their creaking verandas. Some rise slowly and lurch like daylight zombies towards us.

The gathering consists mainly of barefoot women in badly fitting flower print dresses. Katia tries to engage some of them in conversation. They put their hands over their mouths and mumble like nervous children. I ask a man in a black Adidas tracksuit top with a station hand's mullet haircut where the other men are.

"Most of our mob is out hunting during the day," he replies casually, eyes fixed to the ground.

"I suppose they'll be looking for kangaroos?" I respond, thinking of it like a recreational outing, like fox hunting in Britain.

"No, mate," he replies with a hoarse whisper, "it's goannas they're after. They've gone out with spears on the back of a ute. That's why they're burning the spinifex: it makes the little bastards come out of the bush."

So the caustic, foggy pall that surrounds us is not due to the scorching heat, but to Walpiri people torching the tinder-dry bush.

Virgil runs off, clutching his blanket. He looks thrilled. Meanwhile Alan and his wife talk animatedly with the locals whilst distributing gifts of junk food. There is a lot of affectionate touching of arms. They lived here for nearly ten years.

"Ah yeah, well you blokes can make up your minds while I'm in Tennant," Alan instructs Virgil's parents, evidently not dismayed by their apathy. Bent double, he resignedly reiterates, "Virgil could do good for your mob. He could stay at the whitefellas' school."

But without answering, Virgil's mum and dad just amble back to their home to eat the Happy Meal.

Ali Curang has its own primary school, where Virgil's friends are. From there, a minority go on to the blacks-only

Yirrara College in Alice Springs. The syllabus includes courses on 'learning to live in a house' and 'learning the European'.

I ask the tracksuit man if he thinks Virgil will go back to Adelaide. "I don't reckon, mate," he says.

He tells me some families have left Ali Curang to establish a remote camp further into the bush, into Australia's dead heart. After two generations of involuntary white civilisation, some Walpiri are retreating. Virgil's father intends to join them, he says, probably before his son's ritual initiation corroboree.

Before we leave, Alan enquires after one of his former protégés. This woman, Esme, spent ten years working for the civil service in Adelaide following the successful completion of a university degree under Alan's supervision; before inexplicably going walkabout.

"Do any of you blokes know where I might find old Esme when I get to Tennant?" he asks.

The man in the tracksuit top again acts as spokesman: "Most mornings you can find her in front of the VB bottle shop or in the gutter nearby."

Half an hour later, we're skidding around the perimeter track, behind the white man's house with its picket fence and flowerbeds. Alan points out the primary school.

The journey grinds even more agonisingly afterwards. Alan's scattergun stories crash into one another at a frenzied tempo. There is another toilet stop at Wycliffe Well roadhouse, which boasts the most UFO sightings in the southern hemisphere. Sci-fi buffs stay in the adjoining campground. The bar is decked out in luminous prints of aliens.

Soon after, the Devil's Marbles roll by in a blur on the right-hand side of the road. These are giant, spherical red granite boulders perched one on top of the other, jettisoned in a solitary valley. According to geologists, these formations were once part of the same rock 1,700 million years ago. They were split into pieces by wind and water erosion. The Aboriginal explanation is that the dreamtime rainbow serpent deposited them.

We are sidetracked by another Aboriginal settlement off the highway: McLaren Vale. Here, Alan stops a teenage lad and, inexplicably, puts on a phony Aboriginal voice.

“You remember me?” he asks. The kid shakes his head. “Who’s your mob? This is a nice community you got here, very good. You got whitefella here, eh. No bumma.”

Bumma, he explains, is an Aboriginal slang expression for alcohol.

Fumes of smoldering stubble still pervade the sky when we reach the outer limits of Tennant Creek, smudging the sunset through an auburn filter.

“Would you be able to drop us at the caravan park?” I ask Alan. I think he hears me, but he’s talking about Goole, Humberside, for a reason I can’t remember. “Now that has to be one of the dullest places in the UK, I guess. Do you know what I had to eat in Goole? Well...”

He lets us out, and when we turn to wave, after picking our bags off the floor, he is already hurtling off in search of Esme and a new kid to replace Virgil for the return journey to Adelaide.