

ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE WITH A GUY NAMED TONY

• FITZ CAHALL

I really didn't have much say in the matter. Call it karma or fate. There he was, 200 meters out of town, waiting for a lift into the middle of nowhere. I realized right away that I would stop, clear a spot on the front seat and offer him a lift to Perth.

Five days earlier, after months of subsistence hitchhiking, I had cashed in the chips and decided to see Australia in cutting-edge style. I would watch the horizon unfold from the behind the wheel of an automobile. Oh yes, I would be one cool customer.

The used-car salesman dished out a dirty grin when I told him my price range. I swear there must be some ancient fraternity of these guys, like the Shriners or the Masons. That damn smile is their secret handshake. He only had one car in that range. For an extra \$1,000, there would be several more possibilities. I shook my head.

"Well, you are going to love the color," he said, "and I'll throw in the shag seats for free."

Like I said, I'd be seeing the world in cutting-edge style. 1977 Mitsubishi Sigma style. My "new" car is older than I am.

The owner's manual lists the car's color as "impact orange." It may be bright enough to cause collisions. I can envision oncoming drivers shielding their eyes from what they have mistaken for a renegade sun god. Blinded, they swerve off the road, plow through a farmer's fence, flip three times and settle upside down in a lingering cloud of dust.

Such is the raw power of my new wheels.

A car of this caliber deserves a name. Helga the Horrible.

One smashed wind screen later, I was rolling out of the civilized world into an incomprehensibly vast and flat continent. In miles, it equates to driving from El Paso to the Atlantic, but without the Texans. Nothing but plains, shrubs and hordes of kangaroos pondering the perfect moment to commit hari kari in your high beams.

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At the age of 16, we good-naturedly stumble into trouble. The shit hits the fan and we turn around with a surprised grin and say something insightful like “gee” or “golly.” By 23, we know when we are on the commuter lane to trouble, but can’t change lanes quick enough to avoid collision. You watch a predictable and cliched movie to the bitter end just to tell yourself “I told you so.”

I left Port Augusta, the last significant sign of civilization for 2,708 kilometers, on a cloudy Monday morning. The first hours crept by with dread visions of hissing radiators, abandoned gear and smashed dreams of the Indian Ocean. The oil light blinked incessantly. Reverse no longer worked. In the back seat, my monument of a back pack — Boss Hog — now empty, seemed to gloat that once again we would soon be attached by the hip. At least I will have something to tell the kids.

So that’s my state of mind when Tony appeared on the horizon. Staring down the barrel of a grizzly fate in the Australian Outback, I needed a companion. I pulled over, threw cassettes and loose papers on the back seat, and swung the door wide open.

“How far you going?” he asked.

“As far as I can,” I answered with a devious smile. The poor soul didn’t know what he was in for.

Tony stared blankly. He pondered the “impact orange” finish.

“We are going till the wheels fall off,” I said.

More blank staring. My attempts at humor have pushed Tony to reconsider his travel plans, although I got the feeling a good portion of his life was spent staring blankly.

“Well, umm, I was going to Perth. Are you going that far?” he warily questioned.

Probably not.

“What I was trying to say is that my car is having issues and may not make the whole trip, but I am going to Perth. Get in. It’s faster than walking.”

Tony was sold, so away we went. It’s 2,500 kilometers to Perth.

I am probably too young to be a keen observer of human nature, but I am

going to venture out on a limb and suggest that Tony wasn't the quickest of cheetahs. Within two hours of chatting, it became apparent that Tony was incapable of listening. He could hear perfectly fine, but there must have been a serious plumbing glitch between his inner ear and brain. Thirty hours of driving and far few hours of conversation later, Tony would have to be reminded that my name wasn't Pete, but Fitz.

Tony also considered himself an expert on a wide array of topics, including economics and American history. Did you know that the French helped the confederates invade New York City during the War of 1812? Or that Democrats and Republicans believe in the same things, but have different ways of implementing those beliefs? "Nullarbor" is aboriginal for treeless plain? Looks suspiciously like Latin for "without trees" to me, but I could be wrong.

It wasn't that Tony continually didn't know what he was talking about, but it was the confidence with which he was so blatantly wrong that left me marveling. The next couple of days consisted of mostly one-sided conversation. But it was interesting listening to Holden Caulfield monologue, not really sure if you are getting a shred of truth, but not really caring.

About 300 kilometers before Ceduna, a South Australian officer of peace pulled us over. Tony decided not to wear his seat belt. The officer gives us a once over, hears my Yankee accent and directs his full attention to Tony, whose license had expired some two-odd years ago.

"Oh yeah, I meant to get that fixed," he tells the 20-something officer. If the cop is impressed by the lameness of that excuse, he doesn't bat an eye. We pull away. Tony is \$200 poorer.

Tony launches into a running monologue on the cops. Apparently, he has some experience. At the age of 20 and proud owner of a hot red Mazda, Tony pulled to a halt at a red light. The four square-looking businessmen to his right looked like they could loosen their ties a bit. A quick drag race against four stiffs. Tony looked at them. Smiled. They knew the business. By the time the two cars hit 120 kmph, the squares were holding tough. Tony looked over to see who he's tangled with and what they're driving. The 30-

something driver smiled, dropped a hand to his breast pocket and produced a well-polished badge. It gleamed on a brilliant Perth morning.

Tony and I pushed forward, struggling to find conversation, and instead listened to the subtle variations in clinks, whines and moans of Helga's 24-year-old motor. We went through the tiny towns of Mundrabilla and Eucla, perched on the edge of a great continent. Towns — drenched in light unhindered by smog, awash in brilliant blue sky and bordered by an unchanging horizon — that exist for no other reason than to supply petrol and greasy over-priced burgers to truckers.

Tony is hopelessly broke and living off nicotine and fruity granola bars. His credit card has been maxed out for two weeks, but at every stop he gives it a whirl just in case. He racks up air time on a plush cell phone with long, hideously mushy baby-talk conversations to a girlfriend on the Gold Coast.

His best mate in Perth, a cellular salesman, talked him into buying it. Tony laughs and tells me the story of how his mate thought it was a sure-fire job to better things. Head of sales for the west coast. The company folded and left Tony's mate unemployed and Tony with a cell phone that costs an arm and a leg.

An Australian generation lost — 1990's sensibilities stuck in a 1950's lifestyle. No education, lacking the credentials to pay serious bills, but craving the amenities of the States. Dreaming the cosmopolitan life that so many young Australians flaunt. A world where people dressed in trendy black clothes make phone calls from hip bars. The bills seem to have caught up with Tony, and now he is headed for the opal mines and a world of rugged work, beer and prostitutes. Maybe a career in trucking. It is a life he will watch from behind glass, like a child staring at the Serengeti scene at the zoo.

"At least I know what I am," Tony says. He quits talking and spends the next 200 kilometers watching shadows work across the continent's interior emptiness.

My four tapes incessantly jammed into an ailing boom box have become unbearable. We sit in silence. After 20 hours of driving, a little over half way, we have no energy to commit an act of needless conversation. We plug away

at unfathomable distances at very fathomable speeds. Seventy kilometers slip by in silence, both lost in our own thoughts and not interested in each other's. We crash out at 1 a.m. on a dirt car park 20 meters from the road.

For five minutes in creeping dawn light, I bask in a life without Tony, who's still wrapped in a thin sleeping bag glistening with frost. Still snoring. I revel in the cold morning air, walking from one end of the car park to the other, kicking pebbles across the hard, red soil licked by frost. Tony farts so loud he wakes himself up. Ten minutes later, we are crawling toward Perth.

When you stop at roadhouses or checkpoints after dark, kind souls don't hesitate to warn silly, ignorant Americans. "Watch the kangaroos. They're everywhere. They're no joke."

It sounds suspiciously like the start of a B-rated horror flick.

But it's the truth. Kangaroos are no joke. A big male is the size of a big buck deer. You most definitely wouldn't want to tangle with one in a dark alley. They are fast — exceptionally fast — extremely indecisive and blessed with the intuition of dead, broke gambler.

A roo's evolutionary brilliance is its downfall in a modern world of semis and camper vans. Originally carnivorous, the roo must have been terrifying — a cute, cuddly furry animal with big claws and the temperament of a velociraptor. No longer flesh-eating, the roo evades by performing a 90 degree turn while in mid-spring by whipping its muscular tail against the ground. Great if it breaks right. Not so great for the roo or a radiator if it picks left. In 200 kilometers, I count 83 dead kangaroos, the handiwork of the massive semis making all-night amphetamine-driven pilgrimages across the continent.

Part of me is screaming to stop, to pull over, to tell Tony to chill out. He has been ringing all his mates in Perth with an ETA that is hours before we'll get there. While I was asleep, he must have found Helga's sixth gear — the fabled warp speed. Maybe he can't do the math. I want to tell him to bugger off, but I don't. I just keep driving and driving.

Past the God-forsaken gold-mining town of Kalgoolie, where the entire southern hemisphere of Hell's Angels have set up shop, and, according to Tony, the only town where prostitution is a licensed business. We keep driving while the voice in my head tells me to stop.

In Northam, 100 kilometers east of Perth, we stop for gas and more oil. Tony tries his credit card. I am out of cash and sweet talk a 17-year-old girl into two cups of coffee. The rolling New England-style lumps before Perth are Helga's final test. It doesn't help matters that I accidentally forget to replace the oil cap. The motor sputters, churns and heaves like a belly overwhelmed by coffee. I have just found God and am in full prayer mode. I think I would come undone if I had to spend one more night with the Tonemeister. I push the motor on the downhill sections and coast through the inclines. The car chokes.

"Doesn't sound so good," Tony notes.

Ten minutes earlier, he had digressed into a monologue about how I could double my money on the car if I put a little work into her. He had pronounced the motor "mint" despite the fact that it drinks oil faster than petrol.

But now the motor didn't sound so good. No shit, Tony. Where have you been for the past 30 hours?

Amen was all I could say when we crossed the city limit. In 20 minutes, I would be in the silent company of Helga and Boss Hog. A quick detour into the suburbs to drop Tony at his mate's. Then freedom.

Twenty minutes later, we are hopelessly lost in a grid of side streets. We are in Perth, but the whereabouts of this mythical mate remain obscure. I can't remember the last time my anger brimmed and spilled like a carelessly held coffee mug. "Lost?" I wanted to scream. "Lost in the town you couriered in for six years? That you drag-raced cops in? Who gets lost in their hometown on the way to their best mate's?"

According to Tony, the town had changed a bit in three years.

Three gas stations, a quart of oil and a call to his friend later, we find ourselves on the opposite side of the river. Tony scratches his head. The next hour passes in a haze of traffic circles and driving on the wrong side of the

road. I have never been so spent. After 22 solid hours in the car, I want to cry.

Tony eventually makes it to his friend's after I coax control of the road atlas. He offers me a spot on his friend's floor and a night on the town. I decline. I have a date with the Indian Ocean. So I drive another four hours, feed the car more oil and realize that the past 100 kilometers' oil had been gurgling onto the underside of the hood. Twenty six hours of solid driving. All in a day's work.

In the morning, after chasing delirium away with four cups of coffee, I find Tony's brimmed hat and cheesy crime novel under the seat. The trash can looms five feet away. Part of me wants to erase all memory of the past two days — to heave it out with the rubbish. The hat looks like something a sock-and-sandal-wearing father would use to embarrass his teenage daughter during a day at the beach. It's sharp with sweat. Tony is on page 214 of this "joy ride of a thriller marked with intrigue and suspense."

I tuck them away in a corner of the trunk ... just in case.