

Adelaide and Return

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Really, this particular story starts while I was working on the station south of Darwin. The time on the station is actually a story in itself, in that the best (some), and the worst (most), of station life was portrayed in staffing, management, and work practices. Like, for instance, the fact that the race horses being trained there, (seemingly a more important activity than actually raising cattle.....), had a comprehensive first-aid service, whereas there was no such facility for employees, not even a box on the wall or in a vehicle. You watched your step, or provided your own. Toughness was all, and commonsense as to work conditions did not always prevail. Management fostered the expedient ethic that only whiners whined.

There were those vehicles, ie. the cut-down diesel-powered Toyotas, they would run/idle all day because the batteries were dead, only serving to prevent the alternators burning out; start them with a push in the morning, and keep them going all day. With a spread of some 600 square miles, too bad if you stalled beyond reasonable walking distance from home base. This was said to be more "economical" than buying new batteries. Or was it fear of theft? As for radios in case of trouble, or to assist with location in times of need, they were for whiners too. Then, there was the alcoholic leading hand, with his mixed-blood wife and kids isolated with him on the station, given a large loan for a vehicle that would bind him, with all his old injuries and broken dreams, to the station owners as his addiction would ensure gratitude for irregular and deferred payments being overlooked until he had passed his use-by date.

The manager was a tough character, and very capable, if tied in his own turn to the owners' interests; at least he never asked anyone to do anything he could not do himself, and had so far escaped the worst consequences of such an attitude to work practices. But it was his cynical and frustrated wife, with her petty-bourgeois background and frustrated delusions of landed-gentry grandeur who was the dominant malignancy that loomed over all. Her creed was to give the staff as little as possible (because "they" would always abuse their "privileges" anyway, and presumably that included usable vehicle batteries, with the result that there was a high turnover of staff that could not, or would not, be bound, or usually were not worth the trouble of cultivating loyalty for any station owner.

Of course, a pub a few miles away on the main road did not help, either, so the manager's wife was "right" about the staff loyalty and "abuse of privileges". But, she never could kill the story of her and the helicopter pilot and their little spin, even though it was to pay back her old man for some similar grievance in their shared past! Those who would set themselves up as judges of others should beware that they themselves may be judged in their turn.....and the story gave rise to much derision from generations of "ungrateful" staff. However, I do unnecessarily and tastelessly digress, but it is worth noting that as yardman at the station, I restored order to all of the shared grounds, including the cookhouse of the "ungrateful" station-hands and 'traditional' alcoholic station cook, except for the garden of that Big House where the Landed Pretender resided, and then gave my notice. A small act of subversion, but nevertheless a satisfying one!

But the hinterland was wild and beautiful, and I was reminded that so often in remote areas, in Australia and other places, of the contrast between the beauty and scenery and the often sordid and unpleasant human relations of those made interdependent by the circumstances and conditions of their everyday life and employment. There is nothing romantic about that sort of occupational lottery; all too seldom could one enjoy concurrently both the company and the environs. Only natural disasters in these settings seemed to really "bring out the best", after which normal back-biting services are resumed....no different to small urban communities after all. Perhaps only true isolation, for those who actually experience this, really defines the worth and utility of human interaction when it occurs. Hermits do have their point, now I think about it...

Anyway, while on the station I saw an old postal van owned by one of the hands which appealed to my sense of the romantic, and prompted visions of touring around set up like a motor caravan. So we did a swap, my station wagon plus a less-than-optimum amount of dollars to make up the difference, and I advanced my plans to leave that flawed paradise, to hit the road and live and work from this van wherever it would take me. This act of purchase was then the beginning of the next curious chapter in my travels. The van was the reason I met Ritchie, and then made that particular Darwin-Adelaide and return journey.

So, after leaving the cattle station, I returned to Darwin, to fit out the van for my prospective travels, see a few friends, and to do such things as glut myself with back copies of newspapers at the city library, there being a paucity of such luxuries at the station I had just left. One day, while inspecting travel-related equipment at a suburban second-hand emporium, I got talking with a friendly and exceedingly stout assistant, Ritchie, who, by his own estimation, had his finger on the local commercial pulse, and gave lots of advice about what I could buy, and where. Certainly, by his own account, he owed no loyalty to his erstwhile employer.

Apart from his big-mouthing, Ritchie was an amusing character, and had supposedly travelled extensively as a truckie, his geographical knowledge at least bore this out. I was prepared to tolerate what I perceived as inconsistencies and over-statements in Ritchie's curriculum vitae, as I had learnt that if one is tolerant of idiosyncrasies, and let blurred details slip past unremarked, often the company one kept in end-of-the-line places like Darwin could be most interesting. Asking too many of the wrong questions in such places was not the way to get on, in fact.

Ritchie made light of his girth, (and happily browsed on local takeaways), which was one of several unusual physical characteristics that he had, like no beard, quite small hands and feet for someone of his size; and, though short, he weighed over 100 kilos. Certainly, his weight did not seem to be a hindrance to him. He was something of a riddle in fact; perhaps this is one of the reasons I accepted more and more of his company, subconsciously following my own curiosity. He lived in a caravan (owned by his employer) at a park on the outskirts of town, claimed to have been married, (with photos to prove this), and had been raised at an orphanage in South Australia, (as part of the "hard-luck" section of his c.v.)

All these details were not so unusual, given his life-style and present circumstances. Ritchie was ever-optimistic, a fast-talker, did not seem to let the past bother him, and apparently intended me no harm. Perhaps I was an audience of sorts to whom he could happily recount his exploits. Apart from all that, I could never figure out if he was on the run from the police, or was a great mate of theirs, and actually a truly model citizen. Tolerance was, after all, part of the lifestyle of those "on the road", which we both were

at the time, while having age and at least one occupation in common.

It was Ritchie who suggested that because we both had trucking backgrounds, we should go to Adelaide to work for an old boss of his, who apparently would have him back anytime, etc. I had intended to do the rounds of other NT stations in the old van in a casual capacity as driver, fencer, gardener, or whatever, but was open to suggestion re Adelaide, as I had friends down there, and although I would miss the outback way of life, I would be getting a better and more regular pay-packet that would finance more travels in the future, perhaps even again overseas.

Ritchie arranged a service for the van, as of course, he "knew" someone. He was quite happy to leave his job and van without notice, as he said relations with his employer were not good as he was owed back-pay, etc. I finished the few purchases that would make the van comfortable, like a mattress to enable proper resting after driver swaps, one spare tent for stops, in case we were under rain rather than stars at the time, and a few groceries and utensils for when we brewed up. The trip was to last about a week at the speed the old postie van would go, and we intended to rest up during the day at creeks and rivers, and drive in the cool of the night, depending how things went. The usual sorts of plans some 10% of (itinerant) Australians have on any given day of the year, especially those with older vehicles...! Urban-dominated the Australian society may be, but many are still very mobile for all that.

So, it worked out that I helped Ritchie do a late afternoon flit, and in this way, we left Darwin astern at a speed of about 45 mph, heading for this new job in Adelaide, sun low on the driver's side as we headed due south. For the first part of the trip, anyway, things were relatively uneventful, settling into the routine of a long drive, stopping for gas, paying by turns, (in Ritchie's case with some money I had leant him because of his 'differences' with his last employer), changing drivers, or getting off the road to cook up or wash in any waterhole or river that was handy. We did visit the station where I had worked on a social pretext, (staff-related, note), but really it was for one last glimpse for me of the scenery I had enjoyed while I worked there. Perhaps it would be some time before I came north to these parts again..?

The real action in the story happened south of the NT border, after we left behind the tourist turn-offs and the post-monsoon tourist traffic, which in the main headed to Cununurra or Mt. Isa, or on the train, with car and all transhipped. The road was left to the truckies, and the well-equipped or the optimistic and/or the less-than-optimally equipped such as we were, because this was still in the days of the unsealed stretches of the Sturt Highway. Bulldust, in sheets as well as windrows, or the bare rock of the roadbed, was what we would encounter. The occasional stretches of gravel were a luxury under these conditions, but none were really what the old postal van needed at that stage of its life.

Those who have travelled on the old road would know what the conditions were like, as well as seeing the wrecked, derelict, or burnt out cars that lined the road in their scores. Never leave a vehicle unattended was the rule in those parts, for any so left were seen as marked for salvage on a first-come, first-served basis. Those who did not accept this judgement were free, or at least had the option, to put a match to what remained of their transport and effects, and many of them did just that. Prevention of looting or other grades of default possession by pre-emptive destruction was the next best thing, perhaps.

This then, was the character of that stretch of highway the old van was to travel over for the next 24 hours, still unsealed from the South Australian Border to Coober Pedy, with just a short stretch of seal around Marla Bore. We came to the northern end of the dust at dusk, just as the big trucks we would meet later that evening were beginning to roll, though at this stage we had the road to ourselves. The first 100 yards told us what we were in for, at least as far as I was concerned on my first time there, although my companion, of course, claimed he had been over the road before in trucks.

Years before, I had been from Alice to Ayres' on unsealed roads, but the NT sections were always well kept because of the tourist traffic. But this was a new experience south of the border, with unrelenting vibration, dust, swaying, and bumping, that would keep our speed down to about 25 mph tops. The steering bucked and twisted, and the column change needed to be held in gear. At times, the vibration would cause a sort of resonating effect in the old vehicle that could only be dampened by heavy braking or actually coming to a halt. As a reminder of the possibility of breakdown, the wrecks beside the road loomed in the periphery of the headlights. The story was that South Australia actually plotted to keep tourists from leaving the State by the northern route, and so spend more money while being confined to only one main highway. Who knows whether this is true or not; rather like saying Melbourne signposting keeps travellers going round and around until their money runs out...

Anyway, as bad as the Sturt was at this part, it did not stop others periodically wanting to pass, flashing their lights, and in some cases actually speeding by, as we pulled well over. Apparently, they subscribed to the school of thought that it was better to skip across the high spots where possible. The big trucks with their powerful lights plied their trade in either direction, and, although not speeding, they churned up great plumes of dust that caused us to halt our progress till we could see the road ahead. Every hour or so, we stopped the van off the road if possible to stop the endless rattle and vibration just for a while, and to 'stretch our legs'. I decided to drive the whole way on this stretch, given the conditions and my ownership of the van, with Ritchie telling me about how much improved the road was since last time, etc....

As the evening progressed, the traffic did diminish, though, and driving was made easier from then on for the next few hours, not forgetting that a tropical night is as good as 12 hours long. One particular car went past at a great speed, on a rocky and relatively less dusty stretch of the road, suspension bucking and lifting so much that we could actually see under the vehicle as it fish-tailed past, gravel spurting from under the back wheels, and striking the front of the van, though fortunately not damaging the windscreen, and I also had one hand pressed against the glass to dampen possible shocks from larger stones. Not surprisingly, after half an hour or so, we came across the same car much dented, and on its side off the road, after skidding and rolling on a slight bend, easy enough to do on such a rudimentary road, with excessive speed plus lack of banking on the corners.

There was no sign of the driver, but there had been a couple of vehicles passing us recently which would have stopped. Ritchie, of course, wanted to investigate the still-warm mechanical corpse, and attempted to remove the odd souvenir in a fever of clumsy

pilfering. But the battery was already gone, and the rest was a fairly battered, so he did not have much luck. Why the driver was in so much hurry is anybody's guess; perhaps the vehicle was stolen, and the thief was trying to put in some distance south as soon as possible. Fortunately, the accident happened far from us. Certainly, at 25 mph we were in no danger of skidding of the road, that sort of excitement we could do without. By this time I was feeling tired, so we pulled off the road at an old borrow-pit, killed the engine, and enjoyed the silence and the stars, preferring to sleep away from the van after such a ride.

When the sun came up, we boiled the billy, loaded up again, checked the van over, and we set off again. Before long, we came to a new stretch of sealed road which in turn led to the roadhouse of Marla Bore, where the van was fuelled up and tyres checked before the next stage of the journey. We also heard that there had been a bad accident south of the roadhouse the previous evening, involving a truck and a car, resulting in two deaths. Probably it was someone who had also passed us the previous evening. Sure enough, south of the roadhouse, there were gouges and bloodstains to be seen on the new seal, although other wreckage had been removed. No good augury for the future of the highway at that point, the new stretch had only been open a couple of days at that point!

On such a new wide road, the reason for the accident could be either tiredness or inattention or both, even glare from undipped lights playing on a dirty windscreen was possible. Still, a quick clean-up had ensured that the tourist traffic was spared the spectacle. However, I was not spared Ritchie's subsequent accident anecdotes, and stories of his personal experiences and injuries, which I reckoned to be false, as I knew there were no noticeable serious scars on what was visible of his pink vastness, so coyly displayed at the last creek that contained enough water to immerse himself in at some distance from me.

After a few miles, the seal ended, and we were back to our average of 25 mph. For the rest of the day our progress was painstaking, and painful, except for comfort stops, and the old van lurched bravely on. Late that evening, we again pulled off the road and made a camp, stiff and sore from the day, ears still ringing in the quiet of the night. Still the traffic passed, thin but constant. Only a couple of hundred miles to go tomorrow, and we too would strike the seal again at Coober Pedy, and if the van still held together, there would be a good road to Adelaide.

Again, as dawn broke the following day, we broke camp, checked the van, and I climbed in and pressed the solenoid button. Nothing happened. No direct cause for alarm, just another check needed. This actually revealed that the battery, which should still have been in situ beneath the passenger seat, had hammered its way through the rusty cradle, and disappeared into dust and darkness of last night, leaving, by a fluke, the terminals hanging safely apart. Well, we did have a laugh at the time, because the old van fortunately had a generator rather than an alternator, and so had continued to generate raw power. The resulting roughness of the motor had been masked by the condition of the unsealed road, and so we had continued for an unknown number of miles with no battery, a gaping hole in the floor of the van (albeit with a cover in place), and the terminals flapping free.....!

A passing 4-wheel drive was soon flagged down, the driver also amused at our story, and happy to give us a tow, and soon we were on our way to Coober Pedy, but with those terminals carefully taped to prevent further complications. At Coober Pedy, as a captive market, I dug deep to buy another battery, the most expensive for its size I ever purchased, before or since, as well as the usual petrol. We set off a few once more, and a few hours later, the familiar shape of the Flinders Ranges came in sight. However, with the better road, driving became a more pleasurable occupation, and we started our "shifts" again, on the long haul to Whyalla, where a stop was made for petrol and a snack.

A decision was then made to turn off and go via Clare Valley for a bit of scenery, rather than the busy and uninspiring coast road. Finally, after a pleasant afternoon on good roads, we settled for a night at Melrose caravan park, below the mountain. A rented van with real bunks, hot showers, laundry, and a meal at the local pub were the semi-ritualistic end to the hard driving of the previous days, but an inspection of the van assured me that there would be no going back that way, as the trip had definitely aged the old vehicle noticeably. The steering was looser, the engine movement had damaged a mount, and the bodywork was that bit noisier. What else had been similarly affected I did not want to know.

At this particular point, Ritchie seemed a lot quieter, and complained of a headache, apparently a legacy of one of his "accidents". He had plenty of hair, enough to cover any scars on that particular part of his body, so there was no reason to disbelieve this particular story. As the evening went on, Ritchie carried on as if he was in real pain, could not bear to see the light in the van, and began to sound very alarmed, talking about the "doctors" at the time of his "accident" saying that he would have some sort of trouble in the future. In the end, I ran him to the local cottage hospital at Murray Town on the grounds that there could be some medical emergency in the offing, and left him telling his story to the duty sister, who seemed bemused as well as concerned. I headed back to Melrose after I made arrangements to call back at the hospital in the morning. I promised myself a lie-in and a long walk before leaving Melrose. If Ritchie was in hospital, then I was in no hurry to get to Adelaide; obviously, the promised job could now be a non-starter. But I would worry about that later.

The following day, I returned to the hospital, more or less hoping that Ritchie only had a bad headache, and was surprised to here that he had been sent to Adelaide that morning, as they were not sure what to do with him, and had no medical records to hand. A message was left for me to follow on, and see him in Adelaide. This I did, realising that I would have to drop in on friends for a day or two till all this was straightened out. But the rest of the day was pleasant enough, driving on my own down through the Clare valley, and I had one more night on the road, parked down a quiet lane, well away from the traffic, near Gawler.

Eventually, Adelaide hove into sight, and once more my mind made the adjustment to increasing urban traffic, signals and intersections, in contrast to the previous days on the road. Before I called at the hospital, I rang a friend at work, and arranged to have a place to sleep for a few days. Then I addressed myself to the problem of what had become of Ritchie, and went to the Flinders Medical Centre where he was supposed to be to find out exactly what was going on. I even purchased the traditional offering of fruit for the patient, as well as taking with me an old b/w portable TV I found amongst Ritchie's cardboard boxes and plastic garbages stowed in the van.

Really, at first I was quite impressed when I eventually found Ritchie, up near the top floor, in the Neurological Ward. He had a room all to himself, suitably dimmed for someone with acute photophobia, and he greeted me weakly when my visit was announced, asking me solicitously how the rest of my trip had gone, where I was staying, and saying how sorry he was that his old trouble had returned, and so interfered with our joint work plans because, of course, without him, there would be no job for me. Somehow, I began to sense that he was overdoing things, but was more resigned than anything at this stage, and merely curious as to why all this was happening. After all, even though I had lent him some money because of his hard times, I still had the balance of his gear in the van. His martyr act went as far as saying that he did not really need the TV, even just to listen to, though he was so grateful to me for thinking of him, etc.

Finally, when the rest of the conversation dried up, mostly about his condition anyway, I took my leave, determined to talk to a member of the staff to find out what was going on. I managed a short conversation with the duty doctor, who actually asked me if I had known Ritchie for long, as they had found it difficult to get a clear picture of his condition, and also to track down his files from previous claimed hospitalisations. There was not much I could tell him, except that I felt that Ritchie told one story too many, if that was any help. I was not even sure about his second name, to be honest.

Anyway, I said I would return the next day, and talk to the doctor again in case there was some other question he wanted to ask me. Meanwhile, I would go and visit my friends, and make adjustments to the changed circumstances as best as I could. Whatever happened, the van was not going to leave South Australia after that last trip, it deserved, and needed, a quiet retirement on sealed roads. Work was another priority that would have to be looked into before long, as well. Oh well, such was life on the road, and that was the life I had chosen to live at the time. That evening, after a meal and talk of old times with my friends, we all enjoyed a bit of a laugh over the Ritchie incident; certainly, the events were quite unusual, and the even the financial loss made more bearable by the storytelling.

The following afternoon, I went back to the hospital to see Ritchie, and was asked to wait and see the same doctor again. I was not surprised to hear that Ritchie had made up the whole story, and this was not the first time that he had done this, either; there were other times and places under other names, but the same old story, which, in the age of computers, so good at searching data banks and matching findings, finally gave him away. Munchausen's Syndrome, with Himself as the Proxy, apparently?

Also, he suffered from a genetic hormonal abnormality that also seemed to cause pathological dishonesty, and a compulsion to seek attention with ever more fantastic stories. The most pathetic part of the story was that marriage and children that he had claimed in his past were out of the question for him. We then went to confront Ritchie with all this information, and got a strange response of aggression and counterclaim, reassertion of his story, and complaints of mistreatment. By this time, I finally had enough of all the crap. I was feeling a bit subjective myself by this time, and not all that inclined to be sympathetic to his problem, and left with the doctor while Ritchie was restrained and 'counselled' by other staff members.

He was to be discharged that afternoon, anyway; the staff had been waiting to warn me of what was up, and to cross-check a couple of facts first to ensure that there really was nothing wrong with him, as they were obliged to do. I asked why some more permanent sort of solution could not be found, like institutionalisation as obviously, criminal charges were out of the question. There was nothing that could be done, human rights and all that, so Ritchie would spin his silly tales again to someone else well-meaning, especially those to whom tolerance was more of an ethic than a token social behaviour. In my case, I was a 60's child after all, still studiously easygoing and over-tolerant as we had been in those times, so I was easy meat for his machinations, including provision of funds. Ironically, as a sometime overseas traveller, one is similarly cautioned to be aware, and even "at home", the old customs of hospitality should, sadly, be observed with similar trepidation.

After thinking over Ritchie and his plots and plans, (he had, after all, got himself a free trip to Adelaide by some quite patient and clever planning), I came to the conclusion that, also, because he was what he was, and without any possibility of relief, he actually hated "normal" people. Thus, many of his plots and stories were in the category of compensatory behaviour, partly to impress people about how super-normal he was, as well as a means of seeking revenge on them, and then feeling superior to them when they fell for his line.

Certainly, among the less-than adequate "normals" I had come across who seemed to be compulsive liars, these factors were usually very apparent, and Ritchie seemed to run true to this form.

Because of his condition, Ritchie had managed to accumulate some hospital "experience", added to by claiming other phantom illnesses, and achieving hospitalisation for those as well. Thus, for a time at least, among people who express sympathy before censure, his "act" could be quite successful, making him an even greater liability as a result, and a regrettable burden on hospitals and staff he chose to exploit. The saddest irony was that he always had, and always would have, sympathy for his misfortune, for such it was, and no blame to him. But apparently this was never to be enough for Ritchie.

However, I decided, in my then somewhat subjective judgemental frame of mind, that, syndrome or not, Ritchie could still learn a basic lesson or two, and a few days later, the opportunity arose for this when he rang me, using the number I gave him on my first visit to the hospital. He said that yes, he had deceived me, but that was too bad, and now he wanted his gear, especially his truck log, being a 'lawful' document, and that should I oblige, or else. Or Else? Well, I decided that "or else" was about as convincing as the rest of his stories, and told him this had gone on long enough, and that I would not personally hand over his possessions under any circumstances.

I had no intention of keeping his gear, of course, but had given it instead to some people whose address I had found among his 'papers', what there were of them. By this time, as far as I was concerned, he had abrogated any rights to privacy after exploiting my good-will. I was determined to find any other contacts that could be of use to really identify Ritchie; after all, every occupation has its hazards, including that of habitual liar. The result of telling Ritchie this latest news was to cause a stream of abuse, and

then slamming down of phone by Stout Party ensued. That was the last I heard of Ritchie. On reflection, I would rather be able to sleep well at night than pursue the sort of lifestyle that Ritchie did, regardless of how successful it was, although in his case this was patently and pathetically not the case.

Actually, the people to whom I eventually gave his possessions had fared far worse than did I, as they had lost thousands of dollars on a dud trucking venture in which they had been partners with Ritchie at his very persuasive and personable best. I had tracked them down to a small house in the Hills, to which they had been reduced because of consequent money problems, and it was there that I realised from whence Ritchie had obtained his "family" photos; they were of the wife and children of that unfortunate household. But, I was hospitably received, and there was some wry humour derived from the fact that Ritchie would have to approach them to get his gear back, that too was some small satisfaction to me, as well as the family. Even the small TV left for Ritchie at the hospital actually belonged to them!

Well, after these events were concluded, I decided to make the most of my of my unexpected "holiday" in Adelaide, so I saw a few sights, looked up an old flame and had a dose of big city living. Eventually I decided, after another week or so, that I would head back to Darwin again after all, and look for something in the prospecting line, perhaps. Adelaide, though a very pleasant city, was still a city, and not really my style; the Territory still beckoned, and the Dry season had only recently begun. The van I left with my friend, who was about to build a house in the Hills. I suggested that he get some use out of it for that purpose, as it was not really fit for much else, and I had in truth written it off in my own mind. We agreed that he should sell the van eventually when the house was finished, and very decently he later sent me a percentage of the proceeds.

To make the trip back to Darwin, I had too much gear for a bus trip, so decided to hitch a ride, but through the newspaper. I duly placed an ad, and had but one reply, but this was enough to secure me a lift in a more modern car, with my tools and bags strapped to another trailer behind, pick me up the following afternoon, no worries. And so, my next adventure was to begin on that northern highway, so I might as well tell you what happened, anyway.

Two young men in their 20's turned the following afternoon, with a late model Holden, towing a motorbike trailer, carrying, in space reserved for three motorbikes, one trail bike with some of their equipment strapped around it. My bags and boxes were then added to this collection, and off we went on the highway north toward Whyalla on a hot, dry SA afternoon, with the sun getting low on the passenger side. The usual pleasantries were exchanged as the drive continued, the two young men were about to have their first experience of life in the Territory, and being in 'import/export', with very definite ideas about applied capitalism principles and self-motivation, they were apparently going north to seek their inevitable fortunes, and really light a commercial fire under those Northerners. I acknowledged my great interest in this information, while privately thinking that it was more likely that the Territory would leave a mark on them than the other way around, as other overconfident types had found out before now, to their cost. How true was this to be, as it so turned out.

By about Port Germein, the trailer developed tyre problems, and a replacement was required to continue the journey. As I thought that my gear probably contributed to this problem, (on reflection it was probably due to the usual neglect that trailer tyres suffer due to weather and lack of regular pressure checks), I rashly decided to help pay for the tyre, although at the outset, it had been decided that my share was to be petrol only, and by turns. This new offer must have made me appear an easy mark, based on those capitalist principles already mentioned, because, as the journey progressed, and the road became more and more remote, my "turn" seemed to come around more and more often. Also, despite the original agreement of camping out under the stars when a long break was wanted, we checked into a new roadhouse, and I found myself shelling out for my share of this, too, on a take it or leave it basis.

As the journey progressed, I did point out politely the scope of my concerns vis-a-vis our original agreement, but was told in so many words to like or lump it, and to look out of the window at the particular unsealed stretch of the Sturt that we were then traversing, the obvious implication being that I would be left there, with or without my possessions, to take my chances. I sighed inwardly, and kept my concerns to myself, thinking that this was the second abuse of the laws of hospitality that I had felt in a couple of weeks, and how the more things change, the more they remain the same..?

The fact that I was not put out to fend for myself was therefore not so much due to their tolerance of my perceived ingratitude, but the fact that my "turn" would come about a few more times yet. In my turn, I decided that better the devil(s) I knew, and of course, what was on the trailer belonging to me, was, after all, my entire stock of possessions and tools with which to make another start in Darwin. Apart from that, in spite of their more obvious faults, they were both careful drivers, if fairly fast, and I was not privileged to share the driving, so in that respect, had a fairly easy time of it. The cost would probably end up the same as the corresponding bus fare anyway, so, what the hell?

Thus, we uneasily co-existed for the rest of the journey; at least until we got to Darwin, and I had served my purpose; myself and possessions were then off-loaded onto the footpath outside a central city boarding house, which fortuitously had a vacancy, and meant I did not have to search further. Even our goodbyes were polite. Oh well, I had arrived in one peace, at considerably more than the bus price in the end, perhaps, but had travelled in some comfort, and not non-stop, had arrived reasonably rested, and now I had to make some sort of effort to pick up again where I had left off in the Territory. Prospecting jobs took time and patience to find, so I lost no time in beginning the rounds for occupations like dish-washing to re-establish some sort of new capital of my own base.

In this search, I was soon successful, and up to my elbows in suds at a local restaurant. The boarding-house where I was so fortunate to finish up at was OK for a week or two, but I had to share, being only too conscious of the vulnerability of my gear stacked under and around my bed. Within a week, I had found another single room vacant, in yet another of Darwin's selection of places to stay that cater to the budget end of the market, and took the opportunity to be (more) on my own. I paid my dues at both addresses, past and prospective, and made several pedestrian portages early in the morning to escape the worst of the heat, and

settled myself in time to go to work that afternoon.

Occasionally, in the next couple of weeks, I did exchange greetings in the town with my erstwhile motoring hosts, albeit with carefully-fixed expressions of phony good will on both sides; at least they deigned to recognise me. I gathered they had found themselves suitable accommodation in one of the plusher suburbs of Darwin; they even ate one night at the restaurant where I was working, although I only caught a glimpse of them, and they not of me. But the business of getting on in Darwin, and making some money as well as toiling up the usual ladder of improving accommodation and vehicle prospects, with the prospecting job somewhere in the future, soon put recent niggling events out of my mind.

Actually, the rooming house that I had just moved into was a rather unusual place and not that comfortable because the row of rooms to let faced west, and had no through-flow of air due to the subdivision of the house which had enabled the rooms to be made available in the first place. Such was the psyche of the owner, though this was actually not so unusual in Darwin, it was that sort of place, even after the cyclone. As a matter of fact, I had lived in Darwin before that time, actually missing that particular event by a few weeks as I passed through on the final leg of over-landing from Europe. Not a very dramatic cyclone story, really, come to think of it. Mind you, I will not be looking for more direct cyclone experience in the future. The lure of a young Canadian lass travelling south at the time had been the real reason why I missed the cyclone, and we had made it as far south as Tasmania together, (on the old Gahn, not the highway, note!), but that too is another story, but I do have much to thank her for, in retrospect, as well as pleasant memories!

Anyway, the new end room was big enough to store my gear, was lockable and comfortable enough as long as I stayed out during the heat of the afternoon. The landlord in his rather malignant eccentricity would use his own key to check out the rooms without the occupants consent, but there was a pool to swim in, a high fence, burglar alarms, and a curfew. Sometimes after a few beers, the godfather side of the landlord would manifest itself, and a big slap-up meal would ensue, in common kitchen located in the basement, and whoever was in the house would be invited. The landlord, as it transpired, hardly ever used the kitchen in the other part of the house; like most residences in the north, the lower level of a raised house was the coolest place to be, anyway.

Presumably the family also suffered discomfort from the results of the economically originated renovations, legal or otherwise. In fact, the landlord, originally of an excitable and opinionated cultural origin, had a rather expedient view of life, with the result that he had ongoing problems with the police, and a special escape hatch fitted to his bedroom that exited into the yard, because of this and other more shady considerations, though due to his garrulity this was an open secret anyway. This included the time when a visiting officer copped 240 volts from the work-shop door-knob, which was meant for an entirely different nocturnal problem, and had been left on during the that particular early morning quite by mistake.

As to profession, the landlord was a (self-taught?) refrigeration technician of the "reconditioning" persuasion, and had maintained a good living selling his handiwork to remote areas, and to people usually unable to comprehend, let alone enforce warranties, of doubtful and arguable value as they were. These and other factors were probably behind the landlord's feelings of bonhomie and generosity towards his roomers; he needed every friend he could have living at his fortified casa to help maintain security.

Dogs had come and gone, mostly because they ran away, or were poisoned, so keeping the tenants on side was the next best thing. His wife seemed to accept the status quo either with equanimity, or with resignation, I did not know which. But there was a young family to care for, so she had a full-time occupation anyway, without bothering with other worries. Eventually, though, things got too hot even for these hardy survivors, and they made plans a few months later to leave town, although at the last minute, wife and kids were caught shoplifting, and the paterfamilias was arrested when he ran out of options concerning a pending case of aggravated assault. Certainly, a good friend, or a bad enemy, an ex-peasant member of one of those tribes of old Europe since washed up on the shores of the Territory. I got on alright with him, though, and was happy to participate in security, but, then again, we had no business relationships, or other conflicts of interest when i come to think of it.

So, after a shaky start, my life settled down to a sort of routine, the restaurant was bearable, and kept my feed bill down, along with my domestic landlord's largesse. As I only liked a drink before the evening meal, and seldom after I have eaten, I also landed the job on my evening shift of taking my restaurant employer home in his own car, as the 'demands' of his profession usually rendered him incapable of safely driving himself, and friends and family declined to help in this instance. This, at times, gave me access to the car if I ever really needed to use it before I returned it. An old bicycle was also useful to attend a local swimming pool on free mornings, or the beaches that dotted the coast near the city. (Swimmable in the Dry Season, jellyfish reigned in the Wet.) I even managed a social life of sorts, although another vehicle of my own and the quest for a prospecting job were still top priority. But the first month was always the worst in any new start, and that was behind me by now.

My immediate neighbour at the rooming house was an amiable alcoholic who was long estranged from his family, but was quite happy with his lot, working as an odd-job man at a well- renowned local hotel that surrounded its imbibing environs with a lockable wire mesh cage, such was the occasional enthusiasm of the patrons on long hot nights. This was not a place for the fainthearted at the best of times; I had the odd glass or two there in times gone by, but that was always during the day. At night, the action really got going, so there was a chain-mesh enclosure around the beer garden, and bouncers for those going out, as well as in. But my neighbour was a past master at avoiding trouble, while enjoying his perks, and saw the pub's milieu merely as a cynical spectator.

Because our hours sometimes coincided due to the shift requirements of our respective positions as functionaries in the food and beverage industry, this neighbour and I would sometimes meet and talk outside our rooms about the events of the day or night that had just passed. On one particular early morning, as the sunrise was beginning to streak the sky, he actually knocked on my door to tell me about an accident that he had not long ago witnessed outside his place of work. He was quite coherent, despite his tipping of that previous evening. As a practising alcoholic of the old school, he drank to actually enjoy his alcohol, as well as because he needed to, so seldom ever passed out or anything so undignified. Thus, the story turned out quite coherent, even chilling as he told it, because there was a fair dollop of relish in his manner of relating it.

It transpired that a trail bike with two passengers, and a long wheelbase Toyota equipped, as most bush vehicles were, with a real bullbar, (no Toorak Tourer this particular 4-wheel drive), had met at right angles, and at a good speed when almost outside the pub. My neighbour had seen the accident almost as it happened. I will skip the details re the motorcyclist and passenger, except to say the incident for them was fatal, if not immediately so, and the trail bike was actually cut in half by the impact. The 4-wheel drive, accustomed, no doubt, to collisions with ant-hills and real bulls, suffered no real damage from an impact with a mere trail bike. Apparently at a late hour, the two bike riders had exited the pub car-park after enjoying the hospitality of the caged area of the hotel, and were unwise enough to ride into the path of the speeding long wheel base Toyota fresh from the bush.

Something about the story made me pay attention; I did know of the existence of a trail bike of similar model, and two keen riders who liked to feel the wind in their hair, and who had a taste for local watering holes, but...? After delivering his story, my neighbour wandered off to make himself a cup of tea, as his occupationally-induced thirst actually needed quenching with something more akin to water by this time. I did not join him, in spite of his offer, as I was tired from my own night's work, and wanted to sleep during the cool part of the day, so I went back to my bed.

In spite of the dramatic story, and the possible connotations, I did sleep. As a sometime professional driver, I, along with others, had adopted the rather bleak irony of saying, when on hearing accident stories of a particularly violent kind, that when they were banging into each other, they were not banging into me. This thought was enough to help me, along with my tiredness, to get back to sleep again, and soundly, until the heat of the early afternoon woke me once more, and it was time to return the restaurateur's car to the restaurant, and engage with the suds and dishes once more.

Just before I set off for work that afternoon, my neighbour came into the basement kitchen where I was making myself a cup of coffee. He was very interested to show me a photo, now displayed on the front page of the NT News, of the accident he witnessed in the early hours of the morning. There it was alright, just as he had described it, one half of a trail bike, with the usual chalk on the road, the other end nearby, and a story describe the scene and the details, as well as could be reconstructed, of what had transpired. Although I had not thought about the accident that day, I certainly did take notice then, anyway, as the trail bike, or what was left of it, seemed to be the same model as the small cc bike that made the long trip from Adelaide with sundry baggage tied around and over it. At the end of the article, it was stated that the two youths killed as a result of the accident were from Adelaide, and their names were being withheld until next of kin were notified. That bit certainly did make me think.

Well, no names were ever published after that relating to the accident; suffice to say that subsequently, I never again met my two erstwhile and ever-hospitable travel companions in and around Darwin, although this had happened on a regular basis before. Some time after that, a single ad appeared in the News, with a '3-mtrbike trail. 4sale, g. cond.' etc, plus a phone number. If this was who I thought it was, ie, relatives 'losing the case', then that '3- mtrbike trail.' was also fated to remain in the NT. Presumably, the nice Holden then made the long journey back with (a) different driver(s). After seeing this ad, I decided to share my suspicions with my neighbour, and this time it was his turn to be thoughtful for a while. Certainly, I wasn't gloating at what was behind these various bulletins of news; for whatever happened to me, my pride, and my finances, on that return trip, such a penalty seemed rather too much for such petty venality and breach of manners.

Whatever other recompense was being paid was anyone's guess. For myself, I am always wary of the penalties of hubris, being a one-time student of history; although gloating is a just minor form, at least. What did seem somewhat weird was the fact of my immediate neighbour of the time, who enjoyed conveying such tidings anyway, being the one who actually bought them to me. I was wary of ladders and cats for weeks after. The wheels turn slowly, but they do turn, etc. After all, it was, at that time of setting off from Adelaide, a matter of pure chance as to whether my two companions and I would make a happy acquaintanceship that may have extended socially beyond our arrival in Darwin. If this was to be their fate in the North, irrespective of the means, perhaps I was fortunate in not becoming friends with them after all? Well, I claim not to be determinist, paying more respect to the Law of Averages, but you never know....?

Also, that really signified the end of my tale of Darwin to Adelaide (AND return) at that particular time. As a matter of fact, I went from dishwashing to gardening and maintenance by degrees, when I finally bought a ute. The prospecting job did turn up in the end, just at the beginning of the Wet, but that, as they say, is another story. Oh yes, I did go and see Ritchie's ex-employer, the one at the second-hand shop. Of course, Ritchie's stories were all the usual lies and hyperbole, it was, of course, the fact that he who actually owed for the caravan rental, as well as having made off with some of the shop's stock for his own purposes. He was "wanted for questioning" over that, needless to say. Well, I belatedly apologised for my part in the afternoon flit-plot, and said that I had been conned in my turn. However, my contribution Ritchie's discomfort was appreciated by the dealer, and he said that contacts of his in the south would keep an eye out for this malefactor; in more ways than one, it seemed, Ritchie was doomed to run out of holes to hide in, and one did not have to be a determinist to figure that out.....