

Of Wolves and Cast Iron

The flight from Sydney to Adelaide and the taxi ride from the airport to the hotel was uneventful. I had chosen to stay the night in Adelaide so I could have a full day's driving in the morning. The only flight the office would stump up for was an evening one, and even though it was a short trip, the tidy room and over starched hotel bed was welcome.

I really had no idea what to expect on this trip. The company I worked for was one of the smaller "New Media" online news outlets and relied heavily on freelance journalists and members of the public for their articles. It was probably the only successful modern internet news company that didn't rely on rubbishing the rest of the media industry to gain readers. I was lucky to have a full time job with them, even though the pay was average at best. But it was fun work, for the most part.

Assignments like this were fun in an adventurous sort of way. My editor (and owner of the company) Barry had leaned over the partition separating my work space from the kitchenette in our tiny office space, and handed me a printed out e-mail. "You remember that Filtiarn project thingo from a few years back? Some bird recons she knows something. Go check it out."

So here I am temporarily in the boring City of Churches. The "some bird" was named Janice Wellman, and was the ex-geneticist for a pharmaceutical company in Canada, and was now located in the South Australian city of Woomera.

Woomera alone holds a lot of connotations, being one of the test sites for the British nuclear experiments after world war two. The history of the place was horrendous; servicemen being exposed to radiation both by accident and on purpose; Aboriginal land owners either forced off their land or simply ignored and counted amongst the dead wildlife in the post-testing census. It didn't have a nice modern history.

I did a quick bit of research and learned that today the town itself boasts a population of about four hundred, mostly employed by the Defence department. Why a geneticist would be living there was on my list of questions.

I was up early and got ready to leave. I collected the rental car (some sort of manual transmission Toyota sedan) breakfast was a burger from a corner store in Paralowie, a piss, fuel and lunch (meat pie with chips) from a road house just before Port Augusta. I stocked up on bottles of water and bought a small fuel can as well. I had never been any further west than Dubbo, so the vast South Australian desert was a scary thought for me.

From Port Augusta, the scenery changed from farmland to desert; the rich red soil stark under the increasingly sparse vegetation the further north I went. It took a bit over two hours to reach the meeting point at the Pimba roadhouse, about half an hour from the town of Woomera. I turned off the Stuart highway and onto Roxby Downs road, and pulled into the roadhouse. Even at this time of year the weather was scorching. I fished my wide brimmed hat from my bag on the back seat of the car.

I never wore it anywhere except when working in the yard as it looked like a ridiculous article of clothing in the city, but out here in the desert it was a survival tool and anyone without one was considered a fool. I kept the car running to keep the air conditioning going, and watched the roadhouse. There was a road train parked in the open area, and three country utility vehicles parked out the front – two crusty old Holdens and a Toyota Land Cruiser with a rail company tradesman's box on the back. As much as I wanted to go inside and have something cold to drink, I didn't want to miss the meeting point.

I was only waiting about ten minutes when a white late model Land Cruiser station wagon pulled in and parked beside me. It looked like a fleet car, as it had the basic steel wheels and nothing stylish about it at all. A thin well tanned woman in work boots, a blue check shirt and khaki shorts jumped out. She had her shoulder length straw coloured hair tied back in a pony tail and looked about fifty, but the leathery skin may be misleading. I stepped out of my own car to greet her.

"You Martin?" she asked, her Canadian accent still quite thick.

"Yep" I reply. "Janice? Nice to meet you." Her handshake is firm.

"Grab your stuff. We have about four hours of daylight and it'll take two to get there. I'd like to avoid coming back through the scrub in the dark." And with that she climbed back into the four wheel drive. The window wound down and she leaned out.

"Did you bring a camera?"

I nod "Of course"

"Well, lock it in the trunk. You can't bring it."

I came all this way to gather information, and I'm not happy with this idea. "I have to take pictures –"

"You can't take it with us. Them's the rules. Take some of the road house when you get back."

I reluctantly lock my camera bag in the boot of the rental car, and fling my bag of clothes and water into the back of the four wheel drive. I notice there is a jerry can of fuel, a spare tyre and a short length of three inch PVC tubing with a u-bend on it lying in the back. I jump into the front passenger seat.

Even before I have my seat belt on, she has it in reverse and swings the large vehicle around. I'm surprised to see she heads back out onto the Stuart highway, away from Woomera and away from Port Augusta.

"So why is a geneticist living in Woomera?"

"Well, I'm on assignment for my university in Canada studying genetic shift in wildlife in areas affected by radiation."

"Sounds interesting" I lied, conversationally.

She looks over without smiling "It's all bullshit of course. Yes, I am doing that research, but the main reason is the same one why you're here. What do you know of the Filtharn project?"

I have to run my hands through my hair to help jog my memory "Umm, lessee. Thirty odd years ago someone in Colorado decides what we really need is a second highly intelligent species to share the world with, and starts researching how to

increase the intelligence of dogs. But domestic dog's genes are too diluted for that level of genetic manipulation, so they move onto wolves and made them grow bigger brains. They create a couple that seem to be able to learn to say a few words and count by stomping their feet or something, and then start cloning."

I look over to see if I got it right so far and notice she looks annoyed.

"Right, and wrong. Yes, they moved onto wolves because of the genetic deficiencies in modern canines. They didn't clone any of them though. They wheeled out the two originals for the media, but their progeny went back into the research program. They discovered how to extend their lifespan by thirty percent and increase learning ability by a similar amount. It has nothing to do with brain size and everything to do with the rate at which the brain develops and is able to take in and store new information."

"So where do you fit into this?" I ask.

She looks over at me as she leans over the steering wheel to shift more comfortably in the driver's seat. "I was part of the neural team. It's also why I'm going to ask you not to print my name. It'll become pretty obvious to those in the know but I'd rather not find myself in the media if it's all the same to you."

I nod as she turns off the highway onto a dirt track. "Yeah, no worries. So last I heard there was about fifty so called smart-wolves that were healthy, but they ended up out of the research program and were taken home as pets, which is when the trouble started."

Janice chuckled and looked over at me "There were fifty in Colorado. We shared the program with contributing universities. France created four, there ended up being about seventy in the US, and five in Canada. Another twenty were bred here in Australia. Someone found out that they were going to euthanize thirty of the Colorado wolves and smuggled them out of the facility to be adopted out amongst the researchers and their friends and families."

I had only heard about the thirty in the US, but I can't help but make light of it all "Yeah, and they started arguing with the postman instead of biting him or something. Why breed so many? Surely it's asking for trouble."

"It wasn't just that. We needed a reasonable number for genetic diversity. As they grew the authorities realised just how much genetic engineering had gone on. We were accused of splicing human DNA into animals and all sorts of things. As they grew their fingers grew and they were able to stand on their hind legs, even if their posture was compromised. But each generation showed to be a little better than the last with selective breeding. It was truly a triumph of cumulation of knowledge in our fields. We thought we would have our research published in every science journal around the world. We didn't expect to be in front of tribunals and inquiries."

The red dirt road deteriorated rapidly into a pair of wheel ruts, and Janice navigated around potholes and patches of thick dusty sand.

“I remember reading about it. Didn’t one of them kill somebody? There was all sorts of TV ethics debates and animal liberationists and so on all calling for blood at the time, but it was too late for the animals. Didn’t they kill them on the same night?”

“Yes” she nodded “One of them had a brain-snap and attacked a visitor to the house. They weren’t killed but it was enough for the media at the time to latch onto, and the government was in an election year so jumped on the band-wagon and that was that. They rounded them all up and put them all down like dumb animals the minute they had them out of their houses. For those of us that worked with them and knew they were intelligent, and for the most part feeling and caring individuals it was heart-breaking.”

She carefully steered the big Toyota down a dry creek bed and I hung onto the seat and comfort handle as we descended.

“I can appreciate that, but what does it have to do with this place? Why are you really here?”

“Well” she said after a deep breath “They killed all thirty that had exposure to the broader community. They didn’t go to the universities first because they knew those ones were contained, and thought they could pick them up any time. It was a mad night of frantic phone calls and running red lights, let me tell you. But we stole the remaining ones and took them into Canada. The Canadian government held a secure ethics committee with some key parliamentary people and the department of defence. They decided that they could ethically destroy them, but accepted our reasoning that there was a huge amount to be learned from an intelligent species of our creation. But they were being pressured by the American government pretty heavily.”

She gunned the engine and it climbed out of the creek bed back onto the track.

I decide to ask the obvious, even though she hasn’t answered my last question yet

“So, what happened to them?”

“They sent receipts of their capture and disposal back to the USA. Some of the team got arrested and spent a bit of time in jail. I was lucky and avoided most of it all” she said, keeping the four wheel drive ticking along the trail in third gear.

“They killed them for the Americans?”

“No” she replied, shaking her head “They sent disposal receipts stating they had been destroyed. They got flown over here and placed with the Australian teams. It was a lot easier to do being in the Commonwealth.”

“Wow. They sure kept that quiet. I thought they had destroyed all of them.”

“The French destroyed their ones, but the Canadian and remainder of the Colorado wolves all ended up here. The Australian government didn’t want any media involvement or any more pressure from the USA either. Remember at the time it was an election year here as well, and there were already political problems about something or other.”

“Yeah, the nuclear carrier they parked in Sydney harbour, despite our anti-nuclear agreement.” I wrote a series of articles about it and remember it well, but the Filtrium project was as far as I knew an American issue, and the problems with it far removed from my concerns at the time.

“I thought our universities were contributing to the Filtiarn project with academic research, not breeding animals.”

“Initially, they were. We could see how nervous the funding bodies and administration were getting and we decided we needed to make sure at the very least the genetic material was in more than one location outside of the USA. The universities here decided they wanted to go ahead with the full program. It wasn't widely announced because the cubs that were sent over were only a few weeks old and they wouldn't show any significant signs of advanced intellect until at least two years. Then they thankfully kept it quiet other than a few crack-pot news articles in supermarket tabloids. I suspect it was more luck than good management.”

“So, what's it got to do with out here?” I had planned on taking notes, but the way the four wheel drive bounced around it would be impossible to write. Her avoiding the question was beginning to annoy me.

“I'm getting to that. When we phoned the local teams here about what was happening back home, they agreed to take our ones as well. But the day we got here with them, the Australian government stepped in with police, RSPCA and customs quarantine. The local wolf cubs were about two and a half years old and their parents about twelve. It was as heart-wrenching as much for the police as for us when they were confronted with these animals that were trying to stand up and ask not to be taken.”

I was having a lot of trouble believing that. My memory of what little I had taken note of about the project was that they were wolves that could remember a greater than usual number of commands, and had a vocabulary better than the occasional famous “talking” huskies that could howl out a close approximation of “want food” or “I love you”. There was almost nothing I could find on the internet or newspaper archives before I left. I decide to take this ride to wherever it ended up.

“So the Australian government took them too?”

The track approached a high fence with department of defence trespass warning signs on it.

Janice nodded “Yeah. They took the lot. It was weeks before they would tell us anything. The Filtiarn need a reasonable amount of care, especially the young cubs. Extending the life span means slowing the growth rate, and when they are very young they are helpless for a lot longer than normal. We had assumed the worst and that they had killed them, but when their health had started to degrade the defence people let some of the team members in to see them. It turns out they didn't want to destroy them, but didn't want to leave them in public hands either. So they took them to a defence facility until they had decided what to do with them.”

An idea occurred to me “Did they want to turn them into super-soldiers or something?” Everything else seemed a bit too surreal; it was a logical mental step to my mind. The track ran parallel to the fence and up a shallow rise in the landscape.

“No, I don't think so” said Janice “There was talk of it from the US team in the early days and I know we were being watched, but I think the program moved too slowly

for that to become a reality. Maybe if it had of been able to run its course they might have. But the Australian teams took it a lot further. A lot of the team treated them like they were a part of their families, and the Filtiarn lived with them and travelled to and from the university with them. They got a lot more social learning than our ones did. They learned in a much more organic way and the teams here were a lot further along in socialising them.”

“So that scared the hell out of the government I guess” I said, nodding. The last thing the government would have wanted was the media finding out cute fluffy talking doggies were going to get the sleepy needle for no good reason.

“You betcha.”

“Right, so what are we doing out in the desert.”

Janice grinned at me “We’re here to meet someone.”

The four wheel drive crested a small hill beside the fence, and Janice slowed it to a stop and pulled the hand brake on before killing the engine.

“They brought all of them out here to be housed in the immigration detention centre at Woomera. But then they had a rush of illegal immigrants and wanted to open that facility again. So they set up some temporary accommodation here at the Defence site, figuring the fence and environment would keep them contained. It’s monitored pretty closely too, which is why we had to come in this way. If we try and cross the fence they’ll turn up rather quickly and won’t be asking any questions.”

Janice flicked on the CB radio mounted to the console and turned it to channel fourteen, and waited. Looking out the window I could see the rise and fall of the shallow red desert landscape, broken up by gullies and natural trenches in the red sandy soil. The only plants were short Spinifex bushes and shrubs. There was another track on the other side of the fence that ran a couple of hundred meters from where we were. I could see a puff of red dust in the distance, but whatever was making it was hidden by the landscape.

Janice leaned over to speak “If it’s not our guy, then it’ll be a patrol. If it is, then you’re a tourist I’m showing around, okay? Do not mention you work for a newspaper or you’ll be here for a lot longer than you’d like. That’s why you can’t bring a camera out here; if you get caught with even a mobile phone camera you’re screwed.”

“And if it’s our guy? How’s he going to get through the fence?”

“Well” she said slowly “If it’s our guy he can’t cross the fence anyway, or they’ll just shoot him.”

This was a shock to me. “Serious?”

“Yes, sir. Deadly serious.”

The CB radio crackled and a rough voice came through “Rana?”

She picked up the microphone “That you, Val?” She lowered it down again “His name is Valiant, but he hates it so call him Val.”

“Valiant? Like the cartoon?” I used to read Prince Valiant when I was a kid.

Janice laughed “No, Valiant like the car. He was born in one on the way into the university, and his house-father was a gear-head.”

“House-father?” I ask.

“Yes. They know they have parents and that the humans they live with are not them, but to keep a close family bond we call ourselves house-parents.”

The voice comes through again, becoming clearer as Val presumably got closer. He sounded excited “Hi Rana! Hi! Hi!”

“Hi Val, how are you, matey?” Janice laughed as she spoke before turning to me again “He gets excited like any dog. It’s really cute. It really pisses me off that I can’t go to see him.”

I’m stunned at the clarity of the voice coming through the CB radio.

Val’s voice came through excitedly “Hi Rana! I hae lots news for you!”

I can’t help but smile “Rana?”

“They all have trouble with some sounds, especially anything that uses the upper palette. He can do better but he’s been saying it since he was little.” She spoke back into the microphone “Val, I have a friend with me. His name is Martin. He’s from Sydney.”

“Yeah yeah, Hi Mar-in! Is he we tall abouh?” Val’s voice asks. I squint out through the window and can see something black moving along the track.

“Yes, Val” said Janice “He’s going to tell everyone about you all being stuck here. Come on Val, I know you can speak better.”

Val’s voice comes back a little less excitedly “Okay. I can.”

Janice spoke into the microphone again “How have you been Val?”

“Good! I’m good. Spike and me got ar bus going. It works good!”

She grins at me “Wait’ll you see this contraption. There’s binoculars in the glove compartment. He should be visible soon” she said before holding the microphone back up again.

“Was it just you and Spike that built it, Val?”

“No, Rana” Val’s voice announces “Me and Spike and Mis-er Brad and Mis-er Andrew.”

“Val, is Mister Andrew and Mister Brad from the base?” Janice asks.

“Yes, Rana.”

I open the glove box and take out the binoculars there. “Army guys live with them?”

Janice shook her head. “No, but they come into the encampment pretty often, according to Val. I think they get sent in to keep an eye on them. I can only usually ask him one thing at a time or he’ll just answer the last question. If he doesn’t know something he won’t answer at all, usually.” She talked into the CB again

“How is Jessie?”

“Good, Rana. She is happy now. The smallest one is gone and she was very sad but she is happy now. Our others all look strong” said Val.

“Others?” I ask.

“He’s onto his second litter of pups. Something that is easy to forget when interacting with them is they are not dogs or pets or children. They grow up to be adults, and are as protective and stubborn or as proud as the rest of us. The best way to piss them off is to be overly patronising.”

“Rana”

“I’m here Val.”

Val’s voice sounded flat “Rana, we argue with the army men. They don’t want us to learn things.”

“What do you mean Val?”

“Rana, they find our book and take them. They take our computer too. I wanna know who win but they take it.”

This begins to smell really fishy to me. It’s a hell of an elaborate hoax. “You’re telling me they read and can use a computer?”

“You’ll see, Martin. We managed to get a laptop to them. Mostly for Val. We have to dumb down the software a fair bit, but he can read and work his way through a surprising amount of new things.”

This is way too much “Bullshit.”

“I’m serious. Have a look for yourself! If you can get them motivated, they’ll learn on their own. For Val it was sports. They all love watching running type sports but Val will lose his shit over a game of Rugby. He says he likes seeing them crash into each other.”

“Val, why do you think the army men don’t want you to learn things?” Janice asked, and was met with silence. “He doesn’t know” she said before speaking into the CB again.

“Val, how is the group?”

Val’s voice has a hint of whine to it “Rana, they are bored and hot. It is too hot. We shouldn’t be here but we can’t go. Too much tinfish too.”

“Tinfish?”

“Tinned tuna. Tinned food is all they get to them here. I’m guessing if they sent a hundred pallets of dog food someone would figure it out.”

Val’s voice comes over the CB again as I look out the window with the binoculars. The small cloud of dust is preceded by what looks like a truck chassis with a garden shed on it.

“Rana, we swap with the Banggarla. We give them tinfish and coffee and they give us kangaroo and emu. We all like kangaroo and emu but it is too hot here. Banggarla show us how to go through fence and find food and find water. Banggarla easier to learn than English too.”

Janice is watching me as Val speaks “Are you getting it yet, Martin?”

I’m not sure what she means “No. What’s a Banggarla?”

“The Banggarla are the local aboriginal tribe. The wolves are trading with them over the fence.”

I look through the binoculars again. It's definitely a truck chassis of some sort, with oversized wheels made from metal. 'V' shaped lumps have been welded to the outside for traction, like an old fashioned tractor. Some of the dust seems to be white, and I realise it is steam.

"Is that a freaken steam engine?"

"Val, Martin wants to ask you about your bus" says Janice before handing me the microphone.

I'm a bit unsure on what to say "Uhh, hi Val. It's Martin here."

"Hi Mar-in! Hi!"

"Uhh, hi. Is that a steam engine?"

"Hi Mar-in! Yeah. We got fire and wood and we got water. We dun have pe-rol or burning oil. So we make a wa-er-engine."

I think I can see Val in the shade of the corrugated iron box fitted on the truck chassis. A sort of dog's head shaped outline against the background of metal pipes and a big cylinder I guess is a boiler.

"Bullshit" I lower the binoculars and realise Janice is leaning through the centre console retrieving the length of PVC pipe. She unscrews the end and installs a snug fitting smaller cylinder. "What's that for?"

"We can't cross the fence. We can't even pass things through it. So we lob them over with this."

I shake my head "I'm not getting it."

"You'll see."

"Val, it's Martin again. Did you make the steam engine yourself?"

"Mar-in. Nuh. Mis-er Brad made it but I helped! Lots helped. I read to Mis-er Brad and he made it for me. Army men dun know or Mis-er Brad get into trubble. They want it but we say no."

Janice grabbed the microphone off me "Val, did you fight with the army men?"

"Rana, no, they tell me I noh have my bus buh I say no, then Spike say no and Jessie say no and everyone say no so they leh me have my bus."

"Okay, Val. Be careful okay? Don't give them a reason to cause you harm."

"I know Rana. Are you ready? I am ready."

The contraption lurched to a halt on the dusty track a few hundred meters from us. Janice climbed into the back of the Toyota and wound down the back passenger window half way. She rested the PVC tube against the window so only an inch or so jutted out, and put her foot on the base of it, wedging it against the floor tunnel. She unscrewed a small cap, shook a can of no-name hair spray and jetted a quick blast into the hole. The cap went back on and I noticed it had a small hole drilled through it.

She flicked a lighter over the hole and the capsule was ejected with an impressive "thoom!" sound, and sailed through the air in a graceful arc before sending up a short spray of red sand where it landed a few hundred meters away.

I raised the binoculars again and see Val lower himself from the contraption. I'm absolutely stunned. Val was a grey wolf that I guessed would stand at about five feet

tall on his hind legs, and on his hind legs he was. He was barrel-chested like a dog, but his feet were disproportionately large, and he leaned forward as he jogged. Val wore a pair of khaki shorts, but nothing else. What stunned me more than anything was his hands. Actual hands!

Val reached the canister, pounced on it with one hand on the ground and the other on the canister, spun and jogged back to the machine with it cradled in one arm. He swung back up onto the vehicle and into the shade of the corrugated iron shelter.

“Holy crap! That wasn’t a dog. They were supposed to look like dogs!”
Janice laughed at my shock “Yeah, now you see why we need you to actually see him. He’s a person. They all are. They aren’t talking dogs.”

All I could see in my mind was Val’s hands; fingers splayed out on the sand as he dived onto the canister. The vision of him grabbing the PVC cylinder and running with it like it was a football was vivid. “You gave them human DNA? Seriously? No wonder the ethics people were all over your arse!”

“No! Not a single cell. There is no human genome information in them at all. Everything we did was a manipulation of their own genetic information. That’s why it was such a breakthrough! That’s why we want them to live and be recognised! They are their own species now!”

She disassembled the PVC tube again and climbed back into the front as Val’s voice came through the radio.

“Rana! Bulldogs won!”

“Yes Val. As well as the rugby results there’s the information you wanted and there’s chewy treats in there too. I’m sure you found them already, but save some for Jessie, okay? Promise me you’ll save some treats for Jessie.”

“Okay, I promise Rana. Rana, army man ask us who to talk to. He says he wants to know who to talk to when he wants to talk to the group. They all say it is me.”

Janice gives me the serious look again “Here’s a new situation” she said before addressing Val again.

“Val, does the group say you’re their leader?”

“Rana, not everyone but they talk and decide I am. Army man will talk to me tomorrow.”

“Is he a general or a major?”

“Rana, both. Mister Collins”

“Shit” Janice looks nervous. “Major General Collins of the Royal Australian Army. He’s the one that put them there in the first place.”

Something clicked in my brain “Wait. They can read, and use a computer. They are trading with the local aborigines and even learning their language. Now they just voted for a leader?”

“Yes. See the problem? Not only are they people, they are about to become ‘A’ People. My concern is as soon as that happens, and if nobody outside knows about them, they will get themselves wiped out and swept under the carpet.”

I look through the binoculars again to see Val standing on the metal brackets that support the steering shaft and looking out over the roof of the shelter. There was a much larger dust cloud in the distance from the same direction Val had come. He quickly climbed back inside and his voice came over the CB excitedly “Rana, I have to go. You have to go too.”

Val’s steam powered collection of scrounged metal lurched forward and moved to slightly faster than walking pace with jerky motions.

“Okay Val, stay safe, okay? Be careful.” Janice looked pained.

“Okay. Love you House-Mum.” Val sounded surprisingly tender.

“Love you too, fur-kid. I’ll try to be back same time as always.”

Janice flicked the CB off and started the Toyota up, slamming it into gear. She put her seat belt on one-handed as she guided the four wheel drive around the Spinifex bushes with the other, and gunned it down the track.

The Toyota bounced and thumped its way along the rutted track as Janice fought the steering.

“What’s going on?” I shout over the clatter.

“They probably spotted us. Had to happen sooner or later. We need to get out of the area and get you back to somewhere you can make a safe phone call. Go straight to Port Augusta. I’ll Drop you off at Pimba to get your car and you need to piss off down the highway until you see the first highway sign. There’s a track on the left hand side. You’ll see a green Ford Falcon under some corrugated iron. The keys are under a juice tin in front of it. Leave your car there and take the Ford to Port Augusta and make your report from there.”

“But it’s a rental car, I can’t just...”

“Fuck your rental car. I don’t know if they’d kill anyone over this but better not to risk it. Tell ‘em it got stolen at Pimba. Believe me, they’d believe it.”

This is suddenly becoming a bit too real “How am I going to out-run the army on a two-hour stretch of road?”

“Hopefully they’ll be chasing me. With a bit of luck, they’ll find me before they find you.”

We were back on the highway when a small matte green helicopter flew overhead, circled, then flew over again at a much lower altitude, then disappeared back the way it came.

“Yep” Janice said “We’ve been spotted.” She sat on a disturbing speed down the highway to Pimba, and slowed down just enough to let me hit the ground running at the roadhouse. I was left standing in the big empty dirt car-park at dusk watching the white four wheel drive roar up the road toward Woomera, when my black bag was flung out of the driver’s window.

I jogged up to it, retrieved it (and my keys), and jogged back to the rental car. I was barely back on the highway when I spotted another low flying helicopter heading towards Woomera, and then followed by two more. It put the fear of God

into me and I kept my foot flat to the floor until I found the dirt track she mentioned, and the green Falcon.

The last remaining shreds of daylight were retreating as I reversed it from its hiding place under a loose pile of rusty roofing iron from some old stock shed, then parked my rental car in its place and covered it in the sheets of tin. I knew I'd never see the car again, but I still winced at the sound of the metal scraping the paint of the roof. The Ford was full of empty beer cans and stank of cigarettes, but it had enough fuel to get me to Port Augusta.

I drove casually along the dark highway when suddenly the back window and the road around me lit up like daylight as it flicked a searchlight onto me, then it was turned off just as quick. The helicopter flew straight over, but it didn't slow down or change direction. I watched its blinking lights disappear ahead of me as it followed the highway. It had scared the absolute crap out of me.

I stopped at a McDonalds restaurant just outside of Port Augusta and used the free wireless internet to quickly write an article for Barry. I emailed it off, and made a forward-dated blog post in case it didn't reach him and I got detained before I could get home.

I checked into a hotel and paid cash. My hands were shaking, and I really wondered what to do now. I have to decide if I should risk the return flight, or try and drive all the way home. It would take about two days safely, driving on my own. Janice said the canister contained rugby results, some "Shmackos" dog treats and a wad of information on politics.

I'm sitting here on the hotel bed with my mind churning wondering what will happen next. The biggest surprise of all to me is that I'm looking forward to whatever it is.

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