

Travellers

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The Travellers

There are times in our history when great men are forced to travel long distances to reach a goal. Bass and Flinders, Burke and Wills, Hume and Hovel, Charles Sturt, Thomas Mitchell and other great travellers of our history paved the way for modern man to embark on their own travels. While it's true that these great men of our past trudged long distances and discovered much of this country, their records were sketchy at best. While acknowledging the achievements of our early explorers, one wonders what the history was BEFORE they came along.

The south eastern corner of Australia is arguably the source of the deepest mysteries of our ancient past. Mysteries to most, but hear me out as I attempt to explain how I became witness to the truth of the origins of our richest and most colourful landmarks.

I had, at one time, a penchant for overproof rum. Life is full of contradictions, so, of course, at the same time as I developed a craving for rum, I also discovered the joy of water-divining. Working hard all week at my chosen profession of car theft, I looked forward to weekends filled with drunken discoveries of water pipes, underground streams and other bodies of water that would have remained hidden if not for my interference. Armed only with a forked stick and a bottle of Bundy, I would wander for hours with my stick held firmly in outstretched hands until it jumped and twisted as if it were alive. At every discovery, I'd reward myself with another swig of sweet, sweet rum, before heading off in another direction.

I'd travel for many miles until I was either exhausted or unconscious. Many's the night I'd sleep under the stars with the stick (I never could call it a "divining rod") vibrating in my hands as I slept off another stupor.

By the time I was forced to give up drinking rum for my health's sake (not to mention car theft – what was I thinking?), divining had lost its appeal. Little did I know, however, that the combination of divining and a rum-induced coma opened the door to a part of my brain that, for most people, was permanently closed.

They say we only use a small proportion of our brain power. The most brilliant minds in the world have managed to tap in to only a tiny percentage more than the average person, giving them almost super-human intelligence. While it's true that I may have missed the "intelligence" part, the earth beneath me gave up its secrets through the stick, to be stored in that part of my brain laid bare by the intoxicating effects of overproof rum. The result was an untapped well of historical data that would, for the rest of my life, find its way from the earth beneath my feet to the part of my brain that is limitless in its capacity to store this vital information.

So it was that I travelled with GT along the path that intersected our most revered historical icons; the Hume Highway. I had planted the suggestion in GT's mind that he would enjoy the trip to Sydney to pick up a car that I had "bought." His legendary driving skills, access to heavy vehicles and friendships with owners of car trailers combined well with my whining to bring about the events that are portrayed here in these pages.



Figure 1 - The Hume Highway and its secrets have been transferred by way of divining while unconscious.

Canberra to Sydney

It was a bright and sunny Saturday morning. I heard the rumble of GTs V8 Falcon and the rattle of the emergency chains of the car trailer before I saw him swing around the bend in front of my house.

“Hey, GT! Great to see ya!” I cried, as I ran out onto the road in front of him. I knew he wouldn’t hit me; his reflexes were as keen as they ever were. The look on his face as he set all four wheels of the car shuddering in an anti-lock brake system seizure was precious!

After circling back around the Cul de Sac, he pulled up across my driveway. I was all ready to go, so I jumped in to the passenger’s seat.

“Mornin’ Choc. Got ya wallet?” said GT.

I jumped out of the car, ran inside and picked up my wallet, phone and sunglasses that I left on the kitchen bench, said goodbye to Vicki again, and raced back out to GTs car.

“Got it,” I said, brandishing my empty wallet, and we were off.

GT was shaking his head and mumbling under his breath. “Fuckin’ moron, should’na’ stopped, I should be in fuckin’ bed.”

“What’s that, mate?” I asked.

“I said, ‘*Fuckin’ moron, should’na’ stopped, I should be in fuckin’ bed.*’”

“Pardon?” I said.

“Ah, what’s the use,” GT replied in resignation.

“No worries mate!” I said cheerfully, as I donned my sunnies, changed radio stations and turned the volume up.

We headed out of Queanbeyan via Sutton Road, and were soon on the Federal Highway. GT was quiet, enjoying the thrum of the wheels on the road and the gentle warmth of the sun as it shone through the windscreen. It was early autumn, and the temperature was perfect; too warm for the heater, too cool for the air con. The car pulled the car trailer as if it wasn’t there, such was the quality of the trailer’s construction. It belonged to

our friend Danny Fort, who owned Resort Trailers.

“Trailer tows OK,” commented GT, as if reading my thoughts. This was my cue to engage GT in conversation.

“Yes. I guess. I’ll take your word for it, but as the FUCKING PASSENGER I wouldn’t have a FUCKING CLUE!”

“Well, no need to snap,” he replied.

“Sorry, mate. Where are we?”

“Coming up to Collector,” said GT.

A cold chill settled in my nut sack as historical data cascaded from that secret place in my brain. This is how it usually happened, an audible trigger as simple as the mention of a historic town that harboured a deep, but unpublished, history.

“Do you know how Collector got its name?” I asked GT.

He looked at me and frowned, as if the person who spoke those words was a stranger. “Well, yeah, I think Terrance Murray gave it the name in the early 19th Century. He owned most of the land around this area at the time. He used the Aboriginal name for this place, *Colegdar*.”

“...and?” I prompted.

“What do you mean?”

“Why is the Aboriginal name for the place so like the *actual* name?”

“I dunno. ‘*Colegdar*’. ‘*Collector*’. Sounds the same. Who cares?”

I shook my head slowly, deliberately. I adjusted my sunnies so that they sat more comfortably on my nose. The seat belt was starting to drag in to my neck, so I pulled it away from me and let it snap back across my shoulder before I spoke. “I see our historians have managed to pull the wool over your eyes, too GT.”

“Well, I lived in this area most of my life. I think I know most of the history around here.”

“GT. Mate. Forget it. Unlearn what you have been taught. It’s a load of bullshit, a story concocted to hide the truth.”

“Well, OK, smart arse, how DID Collector get its name?” asked GT.

How Collector got its Name

Millions of years ago, the country which would one day be known as Australia was starting to separate from the African mainland as the Earth’s crust shifted and heaved. Eventually, it drifted south and became the biggest island continent in the world. Before the movement completely separated the two continents, a herd of Wildebeests wandered across the divide in search of cooler climates. For miles they wandered, the herd diminishing and growing with the passing years until they settled in the area that, one day far, far into the future would be traversed by the Federal Highway.

Long before mankind trod the Earth, Wildebeests flourished. But the ones that travelled to *Terra Australis* evolved to suit the different terrain and climate. To access the food that was necessary to sustain them, they learned to stand up on their hind legs to reach even the lowest branches of the bottle brush trees. Now the bottle brush flower was once poisonous to all animals, and the leaves were just as toxic. But the Wildebeest adapted, consuming bottle brush flowers as fast as they could grow. Fortunately, the bottlebrush grew in abundance across the entire land, so there was no shortage of food.

The effects of the bottle brush toxin on the Wildebeests would make for interesting scientific study. Its effects can be compared to that of LSD, and within the space of several millennia, the Wildebeest changed. They learnt to stand upright for hours at a time while they fed. By way of natural selection, Wildebeests with strong hind legs and straight backs evolved into a mysterious, minotaur-like creature our recent history would describe as the Yowie. Of course, this is NOT the Yowie of relatively recent times, but its close resemblance will suffice for the explanation.

The Yowie of this era was constantly off its tits. As the Bottlebrush was consumed, it grew back with an even stronger toxin, which attracted the Yowie-like creatures to the most evolved bottle brush trees. Throughout this era, Yowie shit dropped like rain upon the ground, saturating it until some areas were feet deep in Yowie shit. This went on for tens of thousands of years, until a great catastrophe¹ wiped the Yowie-like creatures from the face of the Earth.

The bottle brush toxin, without any wildlife to consume it, gradually lost its potency. It is now completely toxin-free, of course, but it has been that way for millions of years since the last of the evolved Wildebeests disappeared after the great catastrophe that I mentioned earlier.

Following the great catastrophe were millions of years of droughts and flooding rains. The Yowie shit sunk beneath the ground, but could not decompose due to the toxic nature of the digested bottle brush flowers and leaves. Instead, the Yowie shit turned into pearls of petrified stone, and

although they were thick on the ground where the bottle brush trees grew, they were gradually dispersed by wildlife, climatic denudation and geological deposition over the entire country.

Millennia succeeded millennia, and mankind evolved without the strange creatures that once roamed the Eastern parts of *Terra Australis*. Their fossils have never been found, and nor would they, as the noxious toxins dissolved every trace of the creatures forever. Not a single molecule remained after the creatures died and decomposed.

But their shit would last forever.

It happened by chance that a Dutch ship, passing by the east coast, lost one of its crew members over the side. Hundreds of years before Captain Cook ever set eyes on this country, a Dutch sailor, Corneleus Gruthead, dragged his weary body ashore on the beaches of the south coast of what would become New South Wales. Nursed back to health by the local aborigines, he began exploring the area, moving further and further inland. On one of his extended excursions, he lost his way, and wandered aimlessly for weeks without food or water. What sustained him were the strange, small pebbles that he kicked up from the ground. It is still an old bushman's trick that, when stranded without food or water, sucking on small pebbles activates the saliva glands, giving the feeling of having consumed something. The petrified, ancient Yowie shit was almost identical to the other small pebbles that lay scattered across the ground, except for the strangely translucent rings that characterised them. By sucking on them, Cornelius gained an almost instant increase in energy, and feelings of well-being came to him despite the fact that his body was wracked with dehydration,

¹ There have been many Great Catastrophes over the years. This was one of them.

exposure and malnutrition. If he sucked on one of the pebbles, he felt GREAT!

At last, he stumbled upon a settlement and, once again, was nursed back to health. He kept to himself the secret of his survival, and when he was fully recovered, he back tracked his footsteps to the last place that he remembered seeing the strange looking (but magic) pebbles. Noticing that they were most abundant near outcroppings of bottle brush trees, he established camps around the most promising locations. Digging further beneath the surface than his fingers could reach when he was almost dead with exposure revealed an abundance of the pebbles.

He soon realised he would have to tell the locals what he was up to. He didn't want people to think he was some kind of addict, so he convinced the locals that he just thought the pebbles were pretty, and he wanted all of them gathered into piles. The locals had no interest in putting filthy petrified shit into their mouths, like they often saw the Dutch man do when he didn't think they were looking, but they humoured him and helped him dig them up.

With so much material to work with, he experimented with them. He'd pop one, two, then three of the pebbles into his mouth to gauge their effect. It was spectacular! He felt invincible, and would have been, if he didn't pop FOUR of the fucking things into his mouth! Imagining that he had transformed into a giant kookaburra, he leapt from the highest gum tree to fly high into the sky! Of course, he plummeted to his death on the ground far below.

The locals told their children of the story of the Pebble Collector, and his

resting place marks the spot of the country town that carries his name.

Collector to Goulburn

GT didn't say anything for a while. This happens quite a lot when I reveal the truth to people who once had a false view of the history they were most comfortable with. So his response wasn't a surprise to me.

"You fucking wanker!" he cried. "Give me back that 30 minutes of my fucking life, or get out of the car, you gibbering fool!"

We were travelling at 110 Km/Hr, so it was unlikely that I was going to do that. I reached behind me and fished a cold beer from the esky. I opened the lid with a "hiss" and sipped the icy cold nectar with a flourish.

"Now you're gonna drink that beer in front of me? What are ya?" whined GT.

"Well, you can have one, if you like," I offered.

"I'm fucking DRIVING, you dickhead!" he yelled.

Well, I thought, thanks for that, Captain Obvious. I figured I should keep GT occupied so he didn't think about the nice cold beer I was drinking. Well, I thought, he can't have a beer because, well, who cares, it's not my fucking car, I'm not driving so I may as well have a few beers so I don't get bored.

"That's a fuckin' big sheep, isn't it?" I said, by way of a segue as we passed the Big Merino at Goulburn. GT seemed to be calming down.

"Yeah. The Big Merino. It's supposed to represent the sheep and wool industry here, but it's a thing of the past now. The Merino studs of the 20th Century were never really Goulburn's

claim to fame. The Peppin studs of Yass and Wagga are where the prize Merinos come from.”

I couldn’t blame GT for his ignorance. He didn’t have the kind of insight that I had been gifted with, so who am I to judge? Nevertheless, I scoffed at him.

“You poor, deluded shithead,” I said. “The Big Merino has nothing to do with sheep, or wool, or any of that crap.”

GT sighed loudly and made an attempt to turn the radio up from the controls on his steering wheel. I turned the volume down using the more traditional method as I told GT the history and the origins of the Big Merino.

“You know that this area was once a vast inland sea?”

“No, I didn’t. It’s on the edges of the Murray flood plain, isn’t it?”

“GT, stop talking and listen.”

The Sheep of Goulburn

This whole area was once the centre of what is now known as Lake George. Everything you see around you was once under thousands of feet of clear, fresh water. Larger than any lake, it was a vast, inland sea, with tides and waves, but not salty. Millions of years ago, the inland sea was teeming with marine life, the likes of which were unique to the rest of the world’s water born creatures. Where the great oceans of the world spawned whales, giant squid and fish of every variety, this vast inland sea, with its fresh water and warmer temperatures, gave birth to hybrids that are now only spoken of in legends and myths.

Of the many creatures that lived beneath the waters of Lake George (for want of a better name), the most fearsome was the Elephant. Not to be

confused with the Elephant of modern times, the Lake George Elephant had only one thing in common with its future counterpart in name; its size!

The Lake George (LG) Elephant was an air-breathing giant that could spend days at a time beneath the water, storing oxygen that it trapped in its thick coat of fine, white hair that grew thickly around its body. The oxygen sustained the LG Elephant by slowly leaching through the skin and into its blood stream. When the oxygen was all but used up, the beast would travel back to the surface, drag itself up on to the beach and rest for days at a time while it replenished its fur coat. At this time, the dense, fine hair would soak up huge amounts of oxygen. As it did so, the coat thickened and grew until the LG Elephant was completely rested. During the summer months, it would slip straight back into the water, but during the winter, it made forays further and further inland, seeking food and shelter that it would never find anywhere else but beneath the water of the inland sea.

Many of the great beasts would venture too far from the inland sea to find their way back in time to obtain the nourishment that they needed to survive. On their death, the oxygen stored in their thick fleece ensured their swift decomposition, which is why there are no traces of these creatures to be found today.

Except for one.

The actions of these beasts, to wander further away from their food-source, was purely instinctive. They knew, at some level deep within their genetic structure, that they must evolve to walk on the land, as the inland sea would be gone at some point in the distant future. This is why, millions of years before mankind walked the land where

once an inland sea hosted these unique creatures, a lone LG Elephant found itself stranded halfway between its natural habitat and the slate plateaus that stretched for miles in any one direction.

Hopelessly lost and disoriented, it wandered further and further from the inland sea, stumbling over the vast plains of slate and rocks until it fell into a huge pit that time, wind and sand had eroded. Down, down, down it plunged, until it landed in a bed of fine powdery sand. Completely buried in the sand, it eventually suffocated, its life-giving oxygen cut off from the skin beneath its thick coat of fine hair by the powdery sand that was granular enough to soak into it. The moisture that came down from the hole created by the LG Elephant as it stumbled into the pit reacted with the sand, and quickly solidified into an unbreakable coating, preserving the beast for eternity.

During the next millennia, the inland sea dried up as the Earth shifted on its axis. It happened too quickly for the creatures of the inland sea to evolve and survive, and all traces of the LG Elephant were lost. Some of the smaller creatures survived by moving with the water and hibernating beneath the mud, coming to the surface only when the last portion of the lake would fill with sufficient water to sustain them as they fed. These are the creatures who form the basis of the myths and legends of modern day Lake George, but that's another story.

The ground heaved on one side to form the Great Dividing Range, and on the other to level the inland sea bed, keeping the vast plains almost as they were. The extremes of weather, the intense summer heat and bitter winter cold, cracked and eroded the mineral rich surface, forming natural pits and

channels that would one day supply mankind with the raw materials for survival.

Recent history does not record the discovery of the Lake George Elephant, perfectly preserved inside the pit that was eventually dug out as mankind quarried the area for its cement and plaster compounds. Instead, the miners erected the monolith as a sort of land mark that exists to this day. The fact that the Lake George Elephant looks exactly like a giant Marino sheep is purely coincidental.

Exeter/Bundanoon/Berri ma

"What a crock of shit!" said GT as I finished the tale of the origins of the Big Marino. Clearly, modern history has been skewed, told and re-told to the point where the truth lays hidden somewhere beneath the lies.

I tried not to offend GT's sense of ownership of the alternative answers to things like the Big Marino, but knowing the truth the way that I did made it difficult for me to sound anything else but smug. "GT," I said, "I came into this knowledge by way of the Earth itself."

"Shut up."

"I have the historical facts recorded in a part of my brain that were stored there by natural phenomenon. Highly improbable, admittedly, but it happened nonetheless."

"*Shut up!*"

"Do you want another beer?" I offered.

"I haven't had ANY beer! How can you offer me ANOTHER beer, when I haven't had ANY beer!" By this time, GT was sounding rather whiney, like a child that has missed its afternoon nap.

"I was just being polite, GT. I was making the offer out of kindness, even though I knew you would decline, due to your pompous, loathsome, self-righteous, law-abiding nature".

I allowed GT time to stew as he drove, some time to mull over the things I had described to him. People need time to overcome their views that have been locked in by a society that packages everything in neat, tidy, believable boxes of knowledge. But first things first.

"I need a piss," I said.

"Stiff shit, stop drinking beer," came GT's terse retort.

I pondered this for several minutes, unable to arrive at any sort of compromise. It was, in my opinion, hypocritical of GT to say this, as he was just as fond of beer as I was.

"If you don't stop, I'll piss my pants and ruin your upholstery."

Sighing deeply, GT slowed as we approached a sign indicating a roadside rest-stop. He pulled the car off the Hume Highway and stopped in front of the toilets. We both got out and relieved ourselves. Me of the beer, GT of his tension. When I had finished, I walked out of the toilet and saw GT sitting on one of the picnic tables, sipping on a bottle of my beer. He was staring off into the distance, towards Sydney. Not far up the highway we could see a sign, indicating that we were approaching the historical town of Berrimah.

"I suppose," said GT, taking another swig of my beer, "that you are going to tell me some bullshit story about how Berrimah got its name."

Berrima: How Sally's Corner Road got its name

I smiled quietly to myself. The way GT was reacting, it was unlikely that he'd be responsive to the truth as to how Berrimah got its name. I thought, at the time, this would be a bit too much for him to absorb, such was the nature of the history of this ancient town.

"GT, I don't think you're ready for that one."

This seemed to please GT. I reached into the ute and pulled out a beer for myself. I cracked the top and sent it spinning into the forest of gum trees behind the toilet block.

"You see the street sign there, on the other side of the 'Historical Berrimah' sign?"

GT squinted. "Yeah. What's it say? 'Sally...' something."

"Sally's Corner Road," I said. "Not actually a part of Berrimah, but of Exeter."

"I was really enjoying this beer," mumbled GT.

I laughed quietly at my friend's humour before continuing. "The road itself exists to this day," I said, "but its name has been obscured in an attempt to erase the bitter memory that is attached to the name 'Corner.'"

"I'm not listening," GT said, automatically. He did a quick double-take as he realised what I had said. "Wait a minute. Whaddaya mean, 'CORNER?'"

I smiled to myself as I explained. "Yes, most people assume that the road is named after someone called 'Sally,' but that's only half-true. If you look at the phone book for the area, you'll see quite a number of *Corners* listed. Most of them are descendents of Ian and

Mabel Corner, a young English couple who arrived in Australia with the first fleet.”

“How do you do that?” asked GT.

“Do what?”

“Make this shit up.”

“Anyway,” I continued, ignoring the insult, “Ian and Mabel Corner settled on a farm not far from Berrimah, which was one of the first established Colonial NSW towns after Sydney was settled. But things started going bad for the Corners as it became obvious that the town of Berrima would never be anything bigger than a country village. The Corners put everything they had into their farm with a view to supplying produce to a growing population. Sadly, they only managed enough business to keep them solvent for a few years.

“They gradually sold off everything; their land, tools, machinery and their children.”

“Children?” said GT, who, by now, was eager to get moving. We hopped back into the ute, and drove out of the rest area, heading back down the Hume Highway towards Sydney. We passed the road sign.

“Yes. Mabel Corner gave birth to a boy, and promptly sold it to an acquaintance, Sally McQueen, for a sum of money that allowed the Corners to survive quite comfortably for a year or so without going bankrupt. When that ran out, they simply had another baby, and sold it to Sally.”

“I hate to ask,” said GT, “but what did this Sally mole do with the babies?”

“I’m glad you asked,” I replied.

“Why?” asked GT.

“Well, it means that you are obviously interested and ready to hear about the truth, ugly as it may be.”

“No, I am just trying to see what it will take for you to come to a brick wall in your story. You’re making it up as you go along, so if I take you off on a tangent, you’ll get stuck and I can legally shoot you.”

“Sally McQueen raised the children as her own,” I continued, unperturbed. “She lived in Berrima, and saw the Corners quite often when they travelled into town to sell their produce. They raised chickens, mostly, some sheep and cattle, so a lot of their income was dairy products, of average quality. Sally, on the other hand, held prospecting rights to much of the land in the area, and made her fortune in royalties from the coal mining boom of the mid-1800s.

“In the end, Sally raised four of the Corner children, who she christened with her name, McQueen. The first, Stephen, grew up to be a successful doctor, with surgeries in Sydney and Melbourne. Then there was Madeline, James and, finally, Lucretia. All but Lucretia grew up to be successful and wealthy. Sally suspected that either Ian or Mabel had stolen this last baby. By all appearances, they were, by then, incapable of having any more children. It didn’t seem to concern Sally at the time, as she firmly believed that “her” children would grow up to be successful as a result of their upbringing, not their birthright.

“That was, as I said, until Lucretia. There was a gap of about six years between James and Lucretia, whereas the rest of Sally’s brood were about a year apart. When Lucretia was four years old, Sally knew there was something wrong, so one day she left the child in the care of a nanny and

headed for Exeter, which was the town that grew on the land that the Corner's once owned. By then, their house was a run down, rat-infested hovel. Ian, in an attempt to blot out the guilt and shame, turned to drink after fathering their second child and handing it over the next day in exchange for cash. Mabel seemed unconcerned, and used the money to act out the life of a kept woman, attending parties, church socials and town activities as if she were the social heart and soul of the community.

"When Sally arrived at the Corner's house, Ian was well on the way to a gin-induced coma. He was coherent enough, however, to convince Sally that Ian could not have been capable of fathering Lucretia. Nor was it likely that he had been involved in the previous two babies, although their likeness to their biological mother was enough evidence to assure Sally that, at the very least, they had 50% of the Corners' genetic material, but the other 50% was probably sourced elsewhere.

"Ian directed Sally to the orphanage, which happened to be close by. It was, by anyone's standards, a well run, hygienic and professional institution, with many happy faces on both staff and inmates. The Matron was only too happy to answer the questions posed by such an erudite member of Berrima royalty, and the disappearance of an abandoned, inbred infant four years previously was enough evidence to close the case on the origins of Lucretia's parentage. So, too, was the uncanny likeness of the Exeter pub's publican to the second and third of the Corner's children purchased by Sally.

"Mabel Corner had no answer to Sally's accusations, and, rather than face any ultimatum enforced on her by Sally, she signed over all that was left of the Corner estate and took herself

and her vegetative husband back to England, where they led a brief, miserable existence until their mercifully swift death at an opium den.

"Sally bequeathed the remainder of the Corner's properties to the Exeter, Bundanoon and Berrima councils. With the assistance of Sally's royalties, the road between Exeter and Berrima was completed and named "Corner Road." The locals, rightly or wrongly, called it "Sally's Corner Road," and, as a historical reminder of the events that transpired in the not too distant past of this backwoods community, it was officially renamed a year after Sally's death."

Berrima - Sydney

For quite a while, GT sat silently, holding the steering wheel lightly but firmly in his hands. The air outside the car had warmed considerably, so I wound down my window. The breeze was pleasant; not too cold, and not overly gusty as it would have been in an older, less aerodynamically designed car. Nevertheless, the silence from the driver's seat was almost palpable.

"You want to pull over and have another beer?" I asked.

I noticed GT's eyes flicker towards me; apart from that, he made no other movement. That brief flicker, however, reassured me that GT was still thinking, trying desperately to overcome his own historical inertia. Or so I thought, until he unleashed a string of epithets and curses too dark and hurtful to repeat here. However, I took it all in my stride, as GT was only expressing his outrage at having been deceived for so long. Being exposed to the truth can be an unsettling experience to those of us who have trusted our societies most revered

elders for so long; teachers, librarians, and grandparents alike had betrayed that trust.

“Choc,” said GT, calmly, after about an hour’s silence. “Don’t tell me any more stories. You are just gibbering shit, and you’re driving me mad. If you open your fucking mouth again, I’ll shove a bottle up your arse.”

I thought about that for a while. By now, we were approaching the turn-off for Mittagong, and a rush of historical memory was coming through me. A few kilometres later, we pulled into the Pheasant’s Nest servo for fuel, and to allow me to extricate the beer bottle from its new resting place, the result of my impulse to regale GT with the truth of how Mittagong got its name.

How Mittagong got its name

The name “Mittagong” is said to be derived from the Aboriginal language, and means “little mountain.” There is some truth to this, but only in that the “little mountain” was, in fact, a volcano that almost destroyed the entire Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

Tens of thousands of years ago, the inhabitants of the land around the area that would eventually become known as Mittagong was under attack. Interstellar travellers from another galaxy had earmarked this place for annihilation. Their plan was to make the area habitable for them, and because they breathed pure CO₂, all plant life had to be eliminated and huge quantities of CO₂ released into the atmosphere. The easiest way to do this was to bore a hole deep beneath the earth’s crust and tap into the molten core that lay hundreds of miles below the surface.

It so happened that this area was populated by a tribe of natives that had

evolved far more rapidly than modern man would ever envisage. Long before the indigenous people of the country came to this part of *Terra Australis*, there lived a humanoid clan of indistinct origin that called themselves the Pheasant’s Nest clan. Beyond that, my recall is sketchy, without any detail as to the physical appearance of these people, but I have a feeling that they were similar to modern man in their biological make-up. Their development was, however, far in advance of our own, even by 21st Century standards.

The technology of today would not have developed as swiftly as it did without some help, and the artefacts that were discovered here and secretly stored in a Government bunker deep beneath the Pine Gap installation provided that help. It wasn’t until the early 1970s that humankind managed to unscramble some of the mysteries that they had found here. Needless to say, only a handful of highly respected scientists knew of these discoveries, and were only just developing an appreciation of the intelligence and knowledge of the people who lived here thousands of years before the first homo sapiens arrived.

When the interstellar attack came, a meeting of the heads of the Pheasant’s Nest clan was held in the community hall. The leader of the clan, Jimmy Jamtin, addressed the assembly from his podium.

“I’d like to thank you all for coming, and to assure you that, for the moment, we are safe. But we need to take action if we are to survive.”

Sitting in the first row of seats were the elders of the clan. You would think that they were made Elders because of their wisdom, their life’s experiences and their advanced intelligence, but that was not the case. Sadly, although

these people had already invented the microchip, laser technology, teleportation and super-conductivity, their custom of elevating their oldest members of the community to “Elders” was, to say the least, a set-back. The tradition, in times like these, was for the people to discuss and develop plans of action and have them ratified by the Elders. In other words, all decisions were made by a majority vote of a bunch of senile, diseased, brain-dead geriatrics. Genetically, the people of this era suffered a rapid decline in brain activity from about the age of 70, which, coincidentally and unfortunately, was the age that they were made Elders. Most of them did not live past the ripe old age of 80, but once they were nominated an Elder, they became part of the decision making process regardless of their role or status before this milestone in their lives. To offset this obvious disparity in judgement, the leader of the clan was chosen purely by birthright. The smart ones gave up their seats to their heirs well before they turned 70, whereby they would be relegated to the ranks of the Elders. Usually, though, the heir assassinated the leader at the first hint of mental instability, and while cold-blooded murder was frowned upon, the tradition was silently condoned as a common-sense solution to a complex problem.

Some individuals in the population had devised ways of manipulating the Elders so that they voted on things that were obviously for the greater good. For example, not long before the attack came, Jimmy Jamtin, then only in his early thirties and guaranteed a long reign, called a meeting to discuss what to do about an invention created by one of their more upbeat scientists, Beer Keg. Beer Keg had created a drink that, when brewed correctly, tasted delicious and induced a state of

euphoria never before experienced by anyone. He named the drink after himself, but, like all major decisions, the time had come to decide what to do about this amazing discovery, Beer.

Several samples were handed out, and most of the people gathered in the community hall were keen to have Beer made readily available to everyone. The Elders took their time sampling the Beer, and, one by one, they passed out, until only a handful of the less fragile Elders were left. Many people stood up and spoke highly of Beer; some praised its taste, others regaled the Elders of its social impacts. Soon, unfortunately, the talk ran out and tradition dictated that the time had come for the Elders to decide.

“What say you, Elders?” spluttered Jimmy Jamtin, as he rose unsteadily to his feet grasping a mug of Beer in his hand. “The decision is yours: Beer to be made available to all, or banished forever?”

A few of the more resilient Elders realised that they should be responding in some way, but, in the embarrassing silence, could only blink their red-rimmed eyes. Jimmy feared that one of them would blurt out some mindless statement that would forever deprive them of delicious, wholesome beer, and he held his breath in dreaded anticipation.

“May I speak to the Elders, Jimmy?” came a request from the crowd. Jimmy let the air out of his lungs in relief.

Speaking from the floor was allowed if the clan leader deemed it relevant which, in this case, he did. Jimmy recognised the person as one of the smarter members of the community who had a knack for swaying the Elder’s judgement.

“The chair recognises Harry Koonts,” responded Jimmy.

“Thank you, Sir.” Harry turned to the Elders. “I wish to address you on the forthcoming decision you are about to make. I come with the warning that allowing Beer to be made available to us all brings with it a cost.”

Oh, fuck no, thought Jimmy, along with most of the congregation. *What’s this idiot trying to do? Shut up, shut up, SHUT UP!*

“If you decide to allow this,” continued Harry, “the production of RED JELLY will escalate, to the point where there will be a lot of free red jelly.”

Upon hearing the words “red jelly,” the still conscious Elders pricked up their ears. Even a few of the unconscious ones appeared to rally somewhat. Elders simply LOVED red jelly!

Jimmy Jamtin smiled inwardly, thinking to himself, *Fucking brilliant!*

“What say you, Elders?” prompted Jimmy once again. “Shall we all have Beer?”

The Elders still capable of doing so raised their hands, all of them grinning and mumbling “red jelly, mmm, yes.”

“Then let Beer be made available to all from this day forward!”

A great cheer erupted from the crowd, and life was good.

But now, as reality reared its ugly head, the fate of the people rested, once again, on the decisions about to be made by the Elders. Discussion was rife, with many of the best scientists posing a number of solutions to the problem. Outside, the inter-stellar travellers had activated a boring laser that was tunnelling down through the Earth’s crust as they spoke.

“The chair recognises Professor Farnsworth,” said Jimmy Jamtin.

“There is little time left to act,” said Farnsworth. “The laser you can see outside is boring a hole deep beneath the Earth’s crust. Soon it shall gush molten lava that will cover the land as far as the eye can see. From what we have gathered by studying the extra-terrestrials as they kill us, they are CO2 breathers that are clearing this area so they can inhabit it themselves.”

“What can we do?” said someone.

“My suggestion is to upload a computer virus into their system, rendering their ship useless. By my calculations, the first thing to happen will be the cessation of all laser boring, then the alien spacecraft will plunge to the Earth nearby. Our atmosphere will quickly kill off the aliens, and we will have free access to the spacecraft which will make our advances in technology even swifter than it already is.”

“Professor,” interrupted one of the spectators.

“The chair recognises Harry Koonts,” said Jimmy Jamtin.

“Do the aliens have any red jelly?”

The Elders looked up wistfully at the mention of red jelly.

“Why, yes, now that you mention it,” said Farnsworth, thinking *Fucking brilliant!* “The aliens have large deposits of red jelly in their spacecraft, enough to last us for thousands of years.”

“What say you, Elders,” said Jimmy Jamtin, loathe to let an opportunity like this go by and also thinking *Fucking brilliant!*

All the Elders raised their hands, signifying that they voted to upload a

virus into the alien spacecraft, but thinking *Red Jelly! Fucking brilliant!*

The scientists went straight to work, and soon they were stepping over dead aliens to plunder the inter-stellar craft for all its technological riches. The hole that the aliens had started boring left a huge crater, which filled with a relatively small amount of lava. The lava solidified and capped the crater, creating a small mountain.

Unfortunately, the Pheasant Nest clan, a race of people that lived here well before homo-sapiens arrived, were extinct within a few decades. They wiped each other out in a spate of drunken brawls as Beer flowed freely in the community. All traces of these people were eliminated by time; tens of thousands of years of time. The aboriginals that came later called the place *Mittagong*, meaning *Little Mountain*, which is all that is left of this ancient world. Some artefacts survived, but were secreted away by modern man to examine and re-

discover the secrets that gave us the technology we know today. Some secrets are yet to be revealed, but that's another story.

Sydney to Canberra

We arrived in Tarren Point on time, and picked up the car. It took a couple of hours to sort out the paperwork, gather the bits and pieces that came with the car and manhandle it on to the trailer.

Soon enough, though, we were on our way out of the suburbs and headed back home. We had already decided to stay overnight so we could have a few beers, play the pokies and enjoy a nice steak at the bistro.

GT, however, became sullen and withdrawn.

"Is anything wrong, mate?" I asked, as GT made easy time through the sparse weekend traffic.

"Yeah, you're pissing me off with your



Figure 2 - GT tells me to shut the fuck up

stupid stories. Do you ever shut up? Can we talk about something other than how a place got its name?"

"Sure," I said. "Don't worry about it. I'll shut up, OK? It's just that..." I couldn't say it. By now, I was a bit fearful of GT's reactions to being told the truth about the history of these places.

"Yeah? What?"

"Well, GT, you appear to be very narrow minded in your outlook. I mean no disrespect, but you can be a real arsehole sometimes."

GT thought about this for a while. Was it my imagination, or did his features soften, just a little? GT sighed, and slumped a bit into his seat.

"Well, yeah, I guess I have been a little uptight. Challenging my long-held knowledge of an area that I grew up in is going to have that effect. What I understand about many of these places is still supported by our education system, yet you seem to take some sort of perverse joy in destroying those long-held truths."

Well, that was probably the deepest conversation I have ever had with my friend of many years. I was somewhat surprised to actually hear that he cared. I would never have guessed that GT would have any kind of interest in, let alone fondness for, the naming of country New South Wales towns.

"Wow. Where did that come from?" I asked.

By this time, we were on the Princes Highway, heading for Heathcote Road which would take us back to the Hume Highway via the Great Western Highway. We were staying at a footy club where the highways met, a place that GT said was ideal for us. GT drove in silence for another half an hour, by which time he was pulling in

to the club's car park. With the car trailer on, we took up two parking spots, but there was plenty of room. GT set the handbrake, and turned off the engine. I knew he had something to say, and in the sudden silence, the atmosphere in the car was expectant, and somewhat surreal.

"I've never told anyone this before," he said, quietly, "but the Hume Highway holds memories for me, some of which I have tried to forget."

GT turned and gazed out the windscreen, and he focused on some distant image as he came to grips with whatever it was that held him in such thrall. Tears glistened in the corners of his eyes, then made slow, wet tracks down the sides of his cheeks. It took some time, but, as he struggled for composure, he told me his story.

GTs Story

"I was a truckie, once," he began.

I listened to GT's story, which unfolded slowly and methodically, which is his way of dealing with things. To say I was enthralled would be a lie, GT being a somewhat mediocre storyteller. To do his story justice, I have taken the liberty of setting it in rhyme.

The Legend of Graeme Thomas

On those cold, crisp nights 'round Gunning

When the dingos calls are clear,
You can hear the truckies yarning
Over campfires, drinking beer.

The stories told are many,
The story tellers few;
Though listening may be agony,
The yarns they spin are true.

One night a truckies convoy
Set camp up for a steak
Off the freeway out of Woy Woy
To have a well earned break.

Graeme led the trucks in line
To their favourite parking station;
He'd led these rigs a thousand times
Across this mighty nation.

In singlets blue like truckies suits
They laughed and joked around
While rubbing hands and stomping
boots
On the cold and frosty ground.
They'd barely started sizzling
The bangers, steaks and chops
When some of them started Grizzling
About "Those fuckin' cops!"

Before the other truckies there
Yelled "Shut ya fuckin' mouth!"
A sound broke through the still night
air
Coming from the South.
The sound was like no other rig
These men had heard before,
The grinding gears like a screaming
pig,
The exhaust like a dying whore!

Two headlights pierced the gloomy
night
As the truck rolled up right there
It slowed to a crawl then pulled to the
right
As the brakes rent the still night air.
The big diesel clattered, it jumped and
shook
As it idled down to a halt.
Then with a belch of thick, black soot
The engine stopped with a jolt.

The old Mack leaked water, grease and
oil
Its paint was chipped and scratched,
The chrome was peeled from too much
toil,
Its tyres were bald and patched.
In silence stood the phantom Mack
As mist rolled round its rims;
No sound came from the darkened cab,
No movement from within.

A truckie raised a shaking hand
To point at the driver within,
His ashen face was pale and bland

His voice was cracked and thin.
"Of all the rigs from sea to sea,
From the cities to the outback;
There's none that strikes more fear in
me
Than the Devil's big black Mack!"

The truckies glanced at one another
Some soiled their short black dacks;
One whimpered softly for his Mother
While most stop dead in their tracks.
For all who drive to earn a buck
Know when their time is due,
When Old Nick winds up in his truck
He's come to transport you!

Now Graeme was a legend
Within the truckies clan;
They say one night he flattened
Two-Bob Cobb and broke his hand.
But Graeme's knees were trembling
At the sight of the big black Mack,
His mind was fast remembering
When he went to Hell and back.....

He'd stripped a lousy retreat
One night on Highway One;
It's the thing long distance truckies
dread
But soon the job was done.
Then as he packed his gear away
He heard a familiar sound,
A big old Mack diesel's bray
Made him turn around.

A big black truck was bearing down
Slowing as if to stop.
The sight of it made Graeme frown
And caused his heart to flop.
The legend of the phantom rig
Came to his mind once more...
"The gears sound like a screaming pig,
The exhaust like a dying whore!"

The black paint sucked the feeble light
That came from the moon and stars;
The colder air, the darker night,
No buses, trucks or cars.
Then from within the darkened cab
There came an evil voice;
"Come on in, me truckin' lad,
Ye' haven't got a choice!"

Graeme knew the stories well,
And of the Devil's calling;
But Graeme wasn't going to hell,
He found the thought appalling!
"Get thee hence!" he cried aloud,
"You phantom highway drifter!
If you don't go then how'd
You like a piece of ten inch shifter?!"

Graeme lunged at the ghostly cab
Like a vengeful fighting machine.
"Piss off, you driving demon scab!"
And smashed the Mack's windscreen!
He knew the truckies legends well
And that the driver's prison
Was there within his small black cell
From where the Devil had risen.

A blinding flash, an eerie sound
Was all that Graeme recalled;
He barely remembered feeling the
ground
When back to his truck he crawled.
But he knew this night would someday
come
'Twas the Devil who set the dates;
But not when his chops were almost
done,
And not in front of his mates!

So there in the parking station
Off the freeway late that night,
We saw the confrontation
'Twixt the Darkness and the Light.
We were all too scared to run or yell,
And then, from all reports,
Graeme walked up to the truck from
Hell
And pulled his shifter from his shorts!

From deep within the Devil's lair
There came a rumbling sound,
A filthy stench filled the cold night air
As he wound the window down.
A pustulant, gnarly, wrinkled fist
Emerg'd from the truck from Hades,
Attached to an arm of rotting grist
With the middle finger raised.

Then the engine from the truck of
death
Roared loudly in the night,

In fear the truckies held their breath
And clenched their butt cheeks tight!
"I'll get you yet, you son of a bitch!"
Cried the Devil, "On one of your
voyages!"
"Ahhh! Go and bite your arse, ya
prick!"
Replied Graeme as he pricked his
sausages.

The big truck shuddered and almost
stalled
But then picked up its pace,
The truckies cheered, they were all
enthralled
As they watched it leave this place.
They stuffed themselves with chops
and beer,
There'd be no truckin' tonight!
For this was a night of grace and cheer
It was Graeme's night, alright!

So now you truckies on Highway One
Can travel both safer and swifter,
Be courteous, kind and never be glum,
And carry a ten inch shifter!
The Devil's gone with his Hellish rig,
We'll hear that sound no more,
Of the gears that sound like a
screaming pig
And the exhaust like a dying whore!

R and R

We left the car and sauntered in silence
to the reception desk. In a few minutes,
we had checked in, dumped our swags
and were nursing beers at the bar on
the first floor. My head was still
swimming with the images conjured
from GT's story, but, underneath it all, I
finally understood. GT had been in
denial, not because I had challenged
his historical perceptions, but because I
had picked a metaphorical scab that
had been festering in GT's head for
many, many years.

"You're shout, dickhead," came a
voice. I looked up, surprised that it was
still GT, and with an effort of will, I

shook the past from my head and dumped myself into the present.

I got the beers, and we drank. We cracked jokes and laughed at each other, told a few yarns and had a few more beers. We slipped away to the VIP room, and wasted \$20 each on the pokies. We ordered big rib-eye steaks, bone in, with vegetables and mushroom gravy. We had more beer and watched the local toothless bogans pour cans of cheap bourbon and coke down their throats. When one of them snapped a pool cue in half and thrust the short end at his girlfriend, we got up and left, almost getting bowled over by the in-rush of huge Islanders sporting "Security" on their tightly fitting polo shirts.

We both had full schooners, so we sat on our beds in the hotel room and talked about what I would do with the car on the trailer when we got it home. By the time we were both washing down the last of the chilli-chips, we decided it was time to turn in.

"No need to get up early tomorrow, we'll take off when we are good and ready," said GT.

"Sounds good to me," I said, "I'm in no hurry."

The next morning we got up, showered (separately) and dressed in the fresh clothes we had brought in our swags.

"You want breakfast first, or shall we get moving straight away?" asked GT.

"Let's hit the road, shall we?" I replied, eager to get going. We picked up our stuff and headed for the car park. We chucked our gear into the boot of GT's car and were soon weaving in and out of the early morning traffic.

"Hungry?" asked GT.

"Yeah, but let's get outa this traffic first," I said.

"Great. It's a short drive to the Hume, then we'll stop for breakfast at the roadside diner near the Moss Vale turn-off."

I froze. "Moss Vale?" I said, in almost a whisper.

"Ah, fuck!" cried GT as he smacked the steering wheel with his open palm.

Careful, I thought, don't wanna accidentally deploy the air-bags!

How Moss Vale got its name

Before the town of Moss Vale existed, a small settlement was built, either deliberately or mistakenly, on a swamp. Well before the "discovery" of the Goulburn Plains that would happen in another 80 or so years, a large population of mixed European and aboriginal heritage, recognised the wealth in the land and attempted settlement in some of the most rugged and inaccessible areas of the Southern Highlands. Some settlements were never heard from again, while others thrived and grew. On this particular settlement, enterprising ex-convicts, ex-hostages and estranged aboriginals of unknown origin agreed to dig out the slate and limestone that was evident, with a view to capitalising on the growing building trade of the southern settlements. A dusty, rutted track, later to be known as the Old Argyle Road, led to the larger established settlements that, even now, were being given names like Wingello and Old Marulan.

It became obvious that they couldn't have picked a more miserable site to establish a quarry. As soon as they started digging, they struck unpredictable water tables and shallow artesian lakes. It was nothing but a huge, thinly-covered swamp, but at its

edges they discovered rich tin and copper veins that required little effort to mine. Believing that they could build their fortunes in tin and copper ore by only having to suffer the discomfort of massive mosquito bites and their associated diseases, they persisted.

To say that the Southern Highlands, before the discoveries of Meehan and Hamilton at the turn of the 19th Century, was a slow growth area was putting it mildly, but as the townships grew, so too did some of these outlying settlements. But on this specific settlement, mosquito-borne diseases and the puckered, ruined flesh of the people who couldn't help but scratch away at the mosquito bites, created a generation of extremely ugly, angry, sick individuals. The only thing that kept people working at the settlement were the rich, profitable, tin and copper mines.

Sadly, however, even the prospect of turning over good money wasn't enough to attract people. In the end, it was abandoned.

Almost.

One person stayed behind. A second generation son of one of the first settlers, Maurice Valentino continued mining his family's copper mine, bringing high quality copper ore to the smelting towns to the south on a regular basis. His gnarled, pustulent flesh was pock-marked with weeping craters of savage mozzie bites that constantly turned septic in the filthy, damp mine. To prevent irritation of the sores by the constant rubbing of clothing, Maurice usually went around naked, save for a loincloth of wool and cotton salvaged from the abandoned hovels of past settlers, his public appearance was, to say the least, hideous, and he was shunned by all.

Over the years, he accumulated massive wealth, but this fact was only common knowledge to himself, his bank manager and the mining broker.

At the turn of the 19th Century, business was booming. The Old Argyle Road became the Great South Road, quarries were established at Wingello and Bungonia, and smelters at Old Marulan serviced the outlying mines. Maurice continued shipping his ore to the smelters, and some people began to notice that he was changing. Maybe they were simply getting used to seeing his foul, hideous body and its accumulation of raw, angry wounds, because, it seemed, they were becoming less hideous. The truth was, they were disappearing!

Eventually, he started wearing clothes again, and a good cut they were, too! Finally, people started engaging with him, and found him to be an erudite, witty and charming person, if not slightly pudgy with clean but blotchy skin.

But these people were a funny lot, and there were many, if not most, who could not help but see him as nothing less than the "creature from the swamps" that had somehow cleaned up his skin condition.

One person, however, looked at Maurice with a kinder eye than most. To do so required a good, kind, and loving personality, someone who saw beauty within the ugliness. Such a person was Elizabeth Manager, the Bank Manager's daughter. On the occasion of her coming of age on her 17th birthday, she accompanied her Father to the bank for the Bank Holiday Family Day, and it was on this day that she first laid eyes upon Maurice. At this time, he had started wearing pants, but his condition was far from being acceptable in public.

In his haste to expose Elizabeth to potential bank foreman material, the Bank Manager had led her to the rear entrance, which was where Maurice would deposit his ore certificates in a specially constructed drop-box in the wall. This was the arrangement that the Bank Manager had insisted Maurice follow to keep him out of the public area of the bank. Bank Holidays were on a Tuesday, so there was no reason to think that Maurice would be doing any business today. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on which way you saw it), Maurice's arrangement had the advantage that it paid scant regard to the day of the week, nor, indeed, the time of day, to do his banking.

As the Bank Manager rounded the corner at the rear of the bank, he almost collided with Maurice, who had just deposited his week's ore certificates.

"Good Day, Manager!" quipped the bare-chested Maurice, whose torso was awash with boils and festering sores that squirted tiny jets of puss if he moved too violently.

"Oh, er, Mr Valentino, I, er..." stammered the Bank Manager, attempting to steer his beautiful young daughter behind him to spare her of the image of such a frightful visage as Maurice, not to mention the over-spray.

"Morning, Miss," said Maurice to Elizabeth, politely.

"Good Morning, Sir," said Elizabeth, her eyes wide with shock and innocent disbelief. At that point, their eyes met, and although Maurice's eyes were squinted and puffy from the swollen flesh that mottled his face, Elizabeth saw nothing but the inner person, which filled her heart with an emotion she had never before felt.

"Well, mustn't keep you, Good Day to you, Sir," said the Bank Manager, as he hurried his Daughter through the door that he had managed to open in record time.

"Who was that man?" enquired Elizabeth, once they were safely inside the bank with the back door firmly closed.

"Never mind, Dear," said her Father, "just a customer with a slight, er, 'condition.'"

"Oh, Dear," sighed Elizabeth, "The poor, poor man!"

"Oh, he's not poor, I assure you!" said the Bank Manager. "Come along now, people are waiting," and they headed for the conference rooms where tea and scones were being served for the bank's staff.

From that day on, Elizabeth, accompanied by her Father, waited at the back door of the bank each and every Bank Holiday, hoping to catch a glimpse of Maurice. But each time, her Father hustled her inside the bank before she could engage in conversation with the hideous mining magnate. Occasionally she would spot him out of the corner of her eye, and she felt herself blush with pleasure when their eyes met. She was sure that Maurice had timed his visits to coincide with hers, but her Father had no intention of exposing her to such a person.

On her 18th birthday, Elizabeth resolved to meet formerly with Maurice Valentino. By this time, his condition had cleared remarkably, but the ignorance and prejudice blinded the Bank Manager, as it did for everyone else in the Marulan township.

"No, Elizabeth, I forbid you to meet with Mt Valentino!" said the Bank Manager. He was horrified at the

thought of his daughter being anywhere near the creature from the swamp, but Elizabeth was a determined young woman!

On the next Bank Holiday, she wrote a note and, on the pretext of removing a stone from her shoe, she placed it secretly under the lid of the drop-box on the back wall of the bank. Later, as Maurice deposited another of his weekly certificates, he saw the letter and opened it with eager fingers.

“Dear Mr Valentino,” it read. “Allow me to formerly introduce myself. My name is Elizabeth Manager, and I am the daughter of the Bank Manager. If it please you, I would like you to join me for elevenses on the morning of the 11th, at the garden lounge of the Post Office Hotel.

“Please forgive my forwardidity, but I am left with no other option, as I will explain, should you choose to meet with me.

“Yours, Elizabeth Manager.”

The morning of the 11th was a Sunday, and the Post Office Hotel was closed. The gardens, however, were not, but unless patrons could get access to beer, the gardens were always going to be deserted.

Elizabeth had packed a picnic lunch, which included a thermos of tea, a new invention of which she made good use. Promptly at 11, Maurice appeared, dressed in the finest clothes that money could buy. It didn’t help him much, as he was quite ugly by anyone’s standards, with or without the sores that, as she guessed, were almost gone.

“My name,” said Maurice, by way of reciprocating Elizabeth’s formal introduction, “is Maurice Valentino, and I am at your service, Miss.”

“Oh, do sit down,” urged Elizabeth, “and call me Beth. Tea?”

“Lovely!” said Maurice, cheerfully, and together they sat, drinking tea and eating cucumber sandwiches and pikelets with jam and cream like they were old friends.

They talked about the weather, the copper business and astronomy, which was Elizabeth’s scholarly pursuit. They talked about politics and religion without hitting each other. They talked about cars, of which they had a mutual fascination and an equally large font of knowledge.

“Tell me about you home,” asked Elizabeth, out of the blue.

“Oh, my home is a settlement some miles from here. It sits atop a drained swamp, with sweeping views of the distant blue mountains, beautiful rolling hills and valleys as far as the eye can see.”

“But I have been told that you live in deplorable conditions, with only the mosquitoes for company,” said Elizabeth in wide-eyes disbelief.

“Ah,” said Maurice, with a twinkle in his eye. “It’s amazing what a shitload of money and a brilliant invention will do for the building trade and one’s skin condition,”

“What’s a ‘shitload’ of money?” said Elizabeth, innocently.

“Forgive me, my dear, for my crudeness. I am not often in the company of such educated and polite people, especially people as wonderfully beautiful as you. I’m afraid my manners and social graces are somewhat lacking. Nevertheless, a shitload of money is enough to make me the richest man in Australia, if not the world.”

Elizabeth pondered what she had just been told.

“Golly,” said Elizabeth, as they lay naked across the garden table, the mid-afternoon sun warming their sweaty, pink skin. *I think my cunt’s melting!* she thought, as she smiled pleasantly to herself. “That’s a lot of money. What was your invention?”

“A veil to keep mosquitoes away,” explained Maurice, as he propped his head on to one elbow so he could smile down on Elizabeth’s pretty face. “You simply drape the veil over yourself when working in mosquito-riddled mines, and when the money rolls in, drain the swamp and, PRESTO, no more mozzies!”

“Oh, I see. A MOZZIE VEIL!”

And they lived happily ever after.

The Road Through the Goulburn Plains

As the story of how Moss Vale got its name came to a close, we were pulling in to the roadside diner, just off the Hume Highway about five miles past Berrima.

“Choc, tell me what I have to do to stop you from regurgitating the verbal vomit that you are forcing me to put up with.”

I wasn’t offended by GTs terse request and brusque tone. I knew now that it was his self defence mechanism protecting his long-held beliefs and ingrained country culture. “We’ll be OK here, I don’t sense any divinings in the area. Maybe further up the track, but let’s get some brekky into us first, eh?”

Inside the diner, truck drivers sat at large tables covered with clean tablecloths. There were no crowds like you get at the fast food outlets that dominated the Hume Highway. These kinds of diners were almost extinct, but

the ones that still existed were true to their origins. Old photographs hung on the walls depicting the shop’s façade as it existed almost a century ago. Horses and buggies, Model T Fords, old, gnarly farmers with long beards and pitchforks were explained away by the captions at the bottom of each carefully framed photo.

“It’s worth coming off the highway to stop for breakfast. I can’t stand that Maccas crap,” said GT.

I had to agree. I continued reading the captions and looking at the old photos. They were obviously copies, but there was one particular image that was brown and wrinkled with sepia tones that couldn’t have been anything else but a genuine photo.

“Come on,” urged GT, “Let’s sit down and order something. I’m having the Big Breakfast. How about you? Same? Choc?”

I couldn’t focus on what GT was telling me. There was something about this photo that went beyond the usual divination of the earthen secrets that were stored in my brain. No, this one went deeper than any of the other stories I had so far regaled. It was as if the secrets surrounding this piece of history had tried to bury themselves deliberately.

“CHOC!” yelled GT, and he pulled me away from the photo, jarring me back to reality.

“Eh? Oh, yeah, Big Breakfast for me, too. Coffee?”

GT, looking slightly worried but, at the same time, relieved, nodded in the direction of the counter, where the old lady with the colourful apron stood ready at the urn. No barista here, just percolated coffee or a pot of Amgoree tea. I ordered two mugs of coffee, and the old lady served it in a couple of

extra large porcelain cups, tinkling on matching saucers. I had to spoon the sugar in, one for me, one for GT.

“There ya go, love,” said the old lady, smiling. She would be 90 at least, I thought, as I smiled back.

I took the coffees and sat at the table. A white, lace-lined table-cloth covered a small, square table topped with green chequered formica and standing on chromed legs.

Classic 50s décor. Boutique cafes in Sydney pay a fortune to have reproductions of this stuff, I thought.

“I am guessing that you are about to burst into another of your stories, going by the look on your face when you were staring at that photo,” observed GT.

“Well, yeah, except this one is a little too ‘deep’ to bring out. I might not ever get to it, actually.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Well, I told you what happened to me, a long time ago?”

“What, with the water divining and the bundy binge-ing? Yeah.”

“It’s difficult to explain, but the divining rod became a conduit between my brain and the ground. Somehow, the very earth we stand on has recorded everything, every detail, for millennia after millennia, and now some of that detail is stored up here.” I tapped an index finger on my temple.

“Well, on those occasions when I was left unconscious, with the stick still clutched in my hands, data continued to flow and flow, unchecked, storing history away in my head. But I think there were some things that, by necessity, were buried deep inside a

metaphorical vault in my head. That picture jarred one of those secrets out from the vault, and connected with a whole pile of historical facts.”

“So what’s the secret?”

At that point, another elderly lady shuffled over with GTs breakfast. She placed it in front of him, then went back for mine. We tucked in to our bacon, eggs, sausage and mushrooms with gusto. All the while, I kept think of the answer to GTs question.

As we were putting butter and vegemite on our toast to accompany another cup of coffee, I said “I think something quite extraordinary happened around this area. More than that, I think what happened was out of the normal plane of existence.”

“What, like extra-terrestrials or something? Come on, Choc, you gotta be a little bit more.....”

“WAIT!” I said, the realisation hitting me all at once! I looked around, seeing the old ladies in their aprons, shuffling around the diner, wiping tables, arranging doilies, all so innocently. I stood up, looking around.

“What’s wrong?” asked GT.

“Spoons!” I said. “Where are the spoons?”

“Right here, on the table,” said GT, pointing to the teaspoons.

“No, no, the fancy ones. The ones people collect.”

GT looked past me, and pointed out past the diner’s counter to a door. “I think you can buy souvenirs out there, in the shop,” he said.

I turned and walked past the photos, stopping once again at the old photograph on the wall.



Figure 3 - The cottage that should never have been photographed, as it exposes the secrets of an alien civilisation.

The caption was hard to read, but it said “Visitor’s cottage, destroyed by fire #~#~#~” and the rest was obscured.

I walked out the door into the shop next to the diner and, sure enough, there was a display of souvenir teaspoons behind the glass counter. Another ancient old crone hovered nearby, as I expected, wearing the same apron, shuffling along like the rest of them.

“Yes, Dearie?” she smiled.

“Nice spoons,” I said.

“Would you like to see them?” she offered.

“No, not them. How about showing me... THE GOLDEN ONES!”

The old lady gasped, and her hand came up to her throat in a sort of protective reflex.

“How... how did you know?” she whispered.

I smiled to myself. “Be calm, old one,” I said, under my breath, to ensure no-one could hear me. “Your secret is safe with me.”

A look of resignation crossed her features. At that precise moment, GT made his appearance, curious as to my actions.

“What’s going on, Choc?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing, mate. Nothing at all. Let’s get moving.”

Once we were in the car and moving towards home, I relaxed a little and began sifting through the details that were going through my head. Could I dare reveal the truth to GT? To the world? What good would it serve were I to do so? For sure, a group of unique people (for want of a better word) would be exposed, and, no doubt, pursued for their story. I reflected a moment on that and decided that exposing them would kill them, otherwise they would have sought notoriety of their own volition long before I came along.

For now, I decided, their secret would remain a secret, until such time as events forced me to reveal them.

How Towrang Got its Name

Twenty thousand years ago, as the Earth was recovering from a global ice age, a lone inter-stellar spacecraft searched the globe for a suitable landing spot. They found one, in a location that would one day become a small country town along the Hume Highway. When it did, however, it would look nothing like it was now. In fact, the landscape would be unrecognisable and almost uninhabitable, but the spacecraft landed anyway.

On board were the crew and passengers from a planet in a distant galaxy. Their technology was so advanced that the distances involved, millions of light years, were of no consequence to these people. The spacecraft itself was powered by a single atom of carbon, and the basis of travel was to continuously occupy a portion of space in front of the craft (or behind, to the side, or whatever direction the travellers wished to go) non-simultaneously sequential to the craft's current position. A simple

concept that provided safe, secure, faster-than-light travel.

The reason for their visit was to establish a colony on a habitable planet to act as a sort of jump-station for future travellers. A sort of Stop, Revive, Survive establishment on the Great Galactic Highway. So far, they had established at least one jump-station in every galaxy between this one and theirs. In some galaxies, they had two, three, up to six jump-stations, in the case of very large galaxies.

Although extremely cold, the travellers established the station and left behind twenty of their passengers, whose job was to live there for a while to observe and report various findings and research on the spacecraft's return. The data would then go to their home planet's headquarters to be made available to whoever required the use of the jump-station.

Sadly, their home planet exploded not long after they were dropped off. They tried in vain to contact the old world, but, after a hundred or so years, they had to assume they were stuck here until someone wanted to use the jump-station. Despite their planet exploding, there were many travellers in space at the time; in fact, there could be thousands of their spacecraft deployed exploring galaxies at any one time. The fact that their home planet exploded was tragic, but the spacecraft deployed at the time included a number of highly placed political leaders, who would eventually decide on another planet to use as their headquarters. It had happened before, it would happen again. Maybe even one of the planets that sponsored a jump-station, would do, but for now, they were a disparate group of disengaged space explorers until they could get organised.

The communication technology issued to exploration teams, though well advanced, was limited in range to the next closest jump-station. This was standard procedure, but, what with their planet exploding and all, visiting the second-furthest jump-station from their ex-HQ was going to be low on the list of priorities for the surviving spacecraft Captains. Accepting this fact, and in anticipation of a long wait, the visitors built a chamber deep beneath the ice sheet, where they established a hyper-hibernation facility. Here they locked themselves into stasis, only to be awakened when the first settlers discovered the land in the late 1700s.

As the visitors awoke, they looked out upon a landscape that had changed quite dramatically over the millennia. The ice age was well and truly over, and they were greeted with sunny days, warm winds and lush, green vegetation growing on a fertile land just brimming with possibilities. The Communications Officer attempted communication with the old world, but the carbon atom issued to them at the start of their deployment had almost run out and they had no way of splitting one until nuclear technology, on this planet, came of age. So they left their communication device on passive, transmitting only occasionally but mostly listening in the hope that the old world would ring them eventually to let them know they were on the way.

The visitors, stunned at the length of time that had passed since they went into hyper-hibernation, knew that the likelihood of rescue was diminishing with each passing millennia. Without admitting it to each other, they accepted that they were stuck here for a long time, and, rather than spend it lying on a cold slab hyper-hibernating,

they may as well mingle with the primitive inhabitants. This they did willingly, and although they often spoke to each other of the old world that they left behind, as time passed, they saw less and less of it in their future.

The settlement that was established by the local colonials was close to the hyper-hibernation facility, which provided a perfect opportunity for the visitors to inter-mingle with the locals. Being humanoid in appearance, they passed off as fellow colonials, and soon they were as much a part of earthen society as the free convicts and explorers that were our early settlers. Despite their high intelligence and technological acumen, the visitors had been trained to live off the land and to blend in with local inhabitants where possible. In other words, they adapted.

Years passed, and their old world ways were all but forgotten. Only the Communications Officer cared enough to occasionally drop in to the hyper-hibernation facility to check the communication device. One day, the elders of the settlement, including several of the original space explorers, met to form a Council, which was done in short order. The next obvious step to facilitate the transition from a colonial settlement to an actual township was to agree on a name. They were embroiled in discussions as to what name would be most appropriate. The Communications Officer had chosen that very morning to do his periodic inter-galactic communications check. This involved simply listening to some inter-stellar white noise for a few minutes, and transmitting a brief message that wouldn't tax the carbon atom too much.

Halfway through the council meeting, he came running in at top speed to

announce, breathlessly, that “The Old World Rang!”

Several of the councillors looked at each other, frowning. “The name’s a bit too long, but maybe if we use an acronym.”

“T.O.W. Rang?”

“Sounds good to me,” said someone else.

How Tarcutta Got its Name

If you look closely along many of the side roads along the Hume Highway, you’ll see large gum trees growing on the side of the road. When the trees are left to grow unchecked over many years, they can form a sort of roof over the road, blocking the sun and putting the road in a permanent shadow. This creates a perfect feeding situation for the gum trees, which are not actually trees at all, but sentient beings from a parallel universe.

It happened many millions of years ago, before life as we know it came to these lands. Giant monsters, enormous birds and strange wild-life lived in abundance, and would have lived and evolved for eons if not for the events that transpired during this period.

A rift in the somewhat unpredictable curtain between our world and another, appeared briefly. Although there were none around to record it, the very Earth beneath our feet absorbed the details in a sort of Terra Firma memory cell, to be locked away forever, or until released in a one-in-a-million event. I happened to have been in the area when I felt a thirst for OP rum. I had already decided to do some divining, and had selected a very nicely shaped stick for the task. So, armed with my diving beverage of choice, I set out on

a walk along a side road off the Hume Highway.

I don’t know how long I was unconscious, but it was a big bottle and I still had a firm grasp on the divining rod when I awoke the next day. What I had seen was a strange and beautiful event that I suspected would have occurred only once in a thousand years.

The rift exposed a landscape of rolling hills covered in huge ghost gum trees. In the clear, purple sky above the towering trees were three bright orbs of light, only one of which emitted heat and light, but was of such intensity that it almost blinded me. From out of the rift came a slight breeze, and, before it closed, the breeze blew some leaves and other debris into this world. From this brief event, a ghost gum seedling from another world sprouted in ours, and eventually grew to release more seeds and populate the land with ghost gums.

Unfortunately, the trees would only grow to a fraction of the size that they would have grown in their natural habitat. The ones I saw on that eerie world were of an inestimable height; the comparison was akin to a bonsai ghost gum. The reason for this was that the nutrition required for normal, gigantic growth was absent in this world. The closest material that contained some of the trees’ natural nutrients was bitumen. It wasn’t until the arrival of modern man that these trees were exposed to the compounds that would enhance their growth.

As they laid down their roads to facilitate travel across this new land, the settlers combined the thick, black bitumen that was a by-product of the surrounding quarries, with the aggregate particles of the quarries to harden the road surfaces. Immediately,

the roots of the ghost gums grew upwards towards the nutrients contained in the road mix, eventually leading to the trees growing larger and the road surface cracking and crumbling at the edges as the nutrients were extracted. The locals saw the problems, and gangs of workers were dispatched to trim back the road surface where the tree roots were destroying the roads. In later years, tar was substituted in place of the more expensive bitumen to be the glue that held the aggregate, and the road gangs became known as Tar Cutters.

Holbrook: The Submarine Conspiracy

The town of Holbrook is a peaceful and quiet one. The people who live and work here are a laid-back kind of people, almost lazy, in the eyes of most visitors. I asked GT to stop here for a while, so we could recharge our batteries after so much time on the road. He wasn't fooled for a minute, such was the bond that had grown between GT and I as we journeyed the Hume Highway.

Coincidentally (or not?), GT pulled up at a café directly across the road from the main attraction in the centre of the town. The hull of the HMAS Otway, an old Oberon class submarine, was mounted here in the mid-1990s. The fairy-tale concocted by the alien conspirators who work the Hume Highway was that the town itself was renamed in honour of Lt Norman Holbrook, a submarine Captain during WW2, and a VC winner. While the existence of such a person may be true enough, the facts have been skewed in order to protect the identities of "The Others."

"I'd say 'a penny for your thoughts,' Choco, but I'm afraid of your answer,"

said GT, as we sat at our outdoor table sipping mugachino coffee and nibbling on chocolate doughnuts.

I shifted my gaze from across the road to GT, realising, with some embarrassment, that I had been 'off with the fairies' for so long that my coffee was tepid. I gulped down a few quick mouthfuls and took a big bite out of my doughnut.

"I made a promise to the old lady at the truck stop at Marulan that I wouldn't tell this story," I said.

"Well, shut the fuck up, then!" GT responded, somewhat bluntly.

I pretended that I hadn't heard his brusque dismissal. "Seeing this spectacle," I continued, waving my hand in the direction of the submarine, "reminds me that the truth may never be told unless I tell it. It's quite a burden, GT."

"Look, Choc, you've got me here for a reason. You usually prefer to stay on the road, to keep moving, but we filled up at Tarcutta. We could have kept going all the way through Albury, but you wanted to stop here. So let's get it over with, shall we? How did Holbrook get its name?"

"It's NOT fucking HOLBROOK!" I yelled, slamming my fist down on the table. We got some odd looks from the few people in earshot, including an elderly couple sitting on a park bench behind us. I took a deep, calming breath, and said, with a bit more control, "This whole town, like many others up and down the Hume, is a haven for aliens."

"Yeah, I know," said GT. "Fuckin' South Australians, they're everywhere!"

In spite of myself, I smiled. Trust GT to know which buttons to push.

Old Ladies, Roadside Diners and the Big Pavlova: The Truth

Millions of years ago, when the Earth was a bubbling cauldron of molten lava, a spacecraft from a distant galaxy hovered over the boiling seas of magma. It would not be the last time that visitors from outer space came to this world, but these were the first. On board were the crew, and they had a very specific mission; to find a potentially inhabitable planet as close as possible to a specific set of coordinates. While the Earth was, at the time, uninhabitable, it had potential. What's more, it was almost in the right spot most of the time, but during its journey around the sun, it would pass through the exact coordinates they needed for their task. There were several landing spots, but they chose one on the southern hemisphere that would, one day in the future, become the town of Holbrook.

The aliens established their post, in what would have been extreme conditions. But they came prepared. Into the atmosphere of the planet, they shot several missiles containing chemicals that would transform the composition of the air. The heat of the molten lava created a severe greenhouse effect, but not until the aliens changed the composition of the upper atmosphere did it turn to steam, condense and form water. For centuries it rained, cooled the Earth's crust, and rained again, eventually making the land sustainable enough for the aliens.

They left behind a construction especially fabricated to blend and grow

with the land, concealing it from discovery by whatever creatures would evolve over the years by way of a clever series of holograms and light-benders. This was one point in several, spread across the universe, which enabled the aliens to teleport between galaxies. The constructions were stations that connected each other with an invisible beam. Alien spacecraft simply activated a homing signal whenever they crossed a beam, and were instantaneously transported to the nearest station. In effect, the constructions were teleportation stations for spacecraft, and they stretched for millions of light years across millions of galaxies. They could also teleport individuals directly to and from the stations, but this was not their primary role. Only maintenance personnel used this feature from time to time.

The Milky Way galaxy, being the smallest galaxy by a factor of thousands, was rarely, if ever, used. As it happened, it would be during a normal maintenance procedure that things would go terribly wrong for the Earth-bound station.

At the turn of the 18th Century, a maintenance crew was dispatched to Earth to carry out periodic checks necessary to ensure the station's effectiveness. Few spaceships had used the Earth station; in fact, most interstellar travellers opted to bypass Earth in preference to way-stations in larger galaxies. In effect, the Earth station was redundant.

Which is why a demolition crew was despatched not long after the maintenance crew.



Figure 4 - Alien Key or Souvenir Spoon?

With no knowledge of their presence, the demolition crew withdrew the keys that were an essential part of the equipment in the way-station. A “key” was a component made of a material that was similar in molecular structure to gold. A key had a handle, or shaft, about three inches long, with a bulbous contact at one end. At the other end, a geometrically shaped tab, stamped with its own unique design, identified its purpose within the machinery.

There were hundreds of these keys, each of which were required to energise the equipment which generated the power required to teleport a spacecraft between way-stations. The technology was so advanced, it would not be theoretically conceived by the human mind until the 70th Century.

When the maintenance crew gathered at the way-station to return to their own galaxy and planet, which was three way-station hops away, they were horrified to discover that it had been “hibernated” by a demolition crew. All the keys, they saw, were missing. Without them, the teleportation system was useless. In addition, more primitive humans were being observed in the area, and they were putting down roots close to the way-station. It was only a matter of time before they stumbled across it, and, humans being what they are, who knows what would happen then?

The crew of aliens were all basically humanoid in structure, but were genetically different to homo-sapiens in so many different ways. Nevertheless, their priority was to protect the way-station and re-create the keys so that they could eventually

return home. This would take some time, hundreds of years, in fact, but these aliens experienced time in a vastly different way to humans. The keys were all unique in their construction because they each had a unique purpose. One batch of keys operated the communication system, one batch powered the locating beam, while the majority of the remaining keys formed the teleportation power source. Some individual keys operated miscellaneous services, such as the cloaking devices and hologram generator, and these keys were left in place by the demolition team as they were of little or no use to them.

On the outside, the aliens looked, to humans, like elderly females. Taking advantage of this, they established themselves at the way-station by masquerading as scone-cooking tea-ladies, Great-Grandmas and retired widows. The way-station itself proved to be a problem just waiting to be solved. It was of a circular construction, unusual to almost all architectural standards of the evolving civilisations, but the aliens operated it as their headquarters for centuries, under different guises. This required the activation of the key that could render the building an industrial glasshouse, town hall, sheep auction pen, the Big Pavlova, and other such nondescript constructions that the general populace, over the centuries, would come to accept.

The construction of the teleportation keys began in the 1920s. The aliens had the knowledge required to construct them, but the materials were difficult to come by. The primary substance was gold, which they had to melt down and mould into shape. The tab that identified each unique key had to be manually sculptured, a painstaking process in the absence of

the specialised machinery and expertise that the originals enjoyed.

To operate within the societies that the aliens were forced to live in, they created the souvenir spoon industry. As they carefully crafted their golden keys in secrecy, so too did they mass produce hundreds more worthless tin, copper and steel keys, which humans bought by the thousands, legitimising the alien's presence. They distributed their best sculptors, who established themselves along the road that would eventually become the Hume Highway. Behind every roadhouse, truck-stop and Golden Fleece service station were ageless alien beings secretly manufacturing golden keys. The aliens that located themselves at the way station would make periodic trips up and down the highway collecting the golden keys that looked like souvenir spoons.

Unfortunately, the likelihood of discovery was forever on the minds of the aliens. From time to time, action had to be taken, often violent, to protect the way station and the construction of the keys. Innocent citizens were vaporised after stumbling across the alien equipment that had been exposed when the cloaking devices unexpectedly switched modes. Petty thieves that stole unfinished golden keys from out the back of diners were hunted down and eliminated. Entire buildings would be relocated if curious passers-by became, well, *too* curious. Questions about elderly ladies that seemed to be around 100 years old for twenty, thirty or forty years resulted in many an untimely death or mysterious disappearance from society. Inevitably, as civilisation evolved, and the logistics along with it, keeping the alien secrets hidden from view became increasingly difficult,

notwithstanding the unusual powers that the aliens had.

It has taken hundreds of years, but soon the aliens will have crafted the keys required to activate their teleportation system. Intergalactic travel will once again be possible, but maintaining the way-station will become a liability. Cloaking the way-station from modern Earthly civilisation will only be successful when the right equipment and specialist teams are dispatched. The maintenance aliens, currently struggling to correct the mistake made by a bungling intergalactic bureaucrat who inadvertently sent in the wrong team, were doing an outstanding job, under the circumstances. But they can't keep it up for much longer, so the manufacture of the keys is of the utmost importance.

By exposing the truth, am I helping the aliens or condemning us to an early demise?