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Life's drastic detour

“Looks like the man from Mars” was all I could weakly scrawl on the piece of paper handed to me by my mother, as I sank back into the hospital bed I would inhabit for the next half year or so. The comment referred to my face; I had just seen it for the first time since the calamity a week or so before. The hand still holding the small hand mirror was my mother’s. “Plastic surgeons can do wonderful things these days”, she said, biting her trembling lower lip and fighting back the tears as she spoke. That grotesque image I had just seen in the frame—it was supposed to be me, but I couldn’t recognize ‘me’. Even after closing my eyes I could still see it; one half of that misshapen countenance facing me, the other half staring off askew in another direction altogether. The glazed, sunken eye belonging to that disconnected half was located, bizarrely, at a different height to the other eye. Instead of a nose, this alien face had a narrow, flat sliver of skin, with one tiny ‘nostril’ opening at its base.

Nearly all the facial contours that make us each recognizably unique—cheekbones and the like—had been smashed and distorted by massive impact. My nose had been largely torn off. Sure, I was medically trained, but I wasn’t exactly in the

mood for dispassionate analysis of my injuries. A numb horror fought for dominance with the infused narcotic medication clouding my consciousness. I had written my ‘Mars’ comment for the simple reason that I couldn’t speak, what with the tracheotomy tube entering my throat through a cut in the front of my neck, helping my lungs to inflate via mechanical ventilation.

The painkilling drugs were not the only thing making me mercifully hazy—I had not long emerged from several days of unconsciousness in intensive care. I was only gradually beginning to piece together, from what my family was telling me, what had happened to put me here.

I had been a family doctor in southern Australia for some 13 years. Now, at the age of 36, I had suddenly become an avid consumer of medical care, instead of its provider. All the result of a split-second highway impact, in which my four-wheel-drive SUV had collided with a fully-laden fuel tanker at a combined impact speed of 180 km/h (110 mph).

My wife had a serious medical condition at the time, which seemed to be partially relieved in steamy tropical weather. To help alleviate this distressingly painful syndrome, even if only a little, we had decided to move to Cairns, in Australia’s tropical far northeast, to ‘start over’. Our house, and my practice in South Australia’s capital, Adelaide, had sold readily. We had already bought a house in Cairns and sent our furniture on ahead. Little did we

know that it would take over six months before we would catch up with our possessions again.

Our plan was to take our two cars up to Cairns via the remote central Australian outback (see map, Fig. 1, p. 14, which for the sake of non-Australian readers also shows a size comparison with the continental US). For the first leg, about 1500 km (950 miles), we would travel on the famous Ghan train, which took motor vehicles as well, to Alice Springs. We really looked forward to driving the remaining 2400 km (1500 miles), especially the first part in the remote Northern Territory. We knew and loved the lonely outback highways—the vast desert flatness stretching to the horizon, hour after hour with seldom a vehicle, and the brilliant reddish-purple desert dawns silhouetting scraggly excuses for trees, with the occasional eagle interrupted from its feast of roadkill kangaroo as one sped by.

Calamity in the outback

It was a sunny day in May 1986 when we unloaded our two cars from the train in ‘Alice’, as Australians call our famous town in the country’s Red Center (so-called because of the abundance of reddish iron oxides in the ubiquitous sandstone and sandy dust derived from it).

After lunch, we set off, feeling really upbeat and with a general thankfulness to God—for being alive, and for such a beautiful day. I led the way in our 4WD diesel-powered Holden Jackaroo (a rebadged Isuzu Trooper) with our 11-year-old daughter Lisa



Fig. 1(a): Map of Australia, showing all capital cities, also Cairns and Alice Springs, which is some 1500 km (950 miles) by road from Adelaide. Most of Australia's vast inland, colloquially known as the 'outback', consists of flat, arid, desert country.

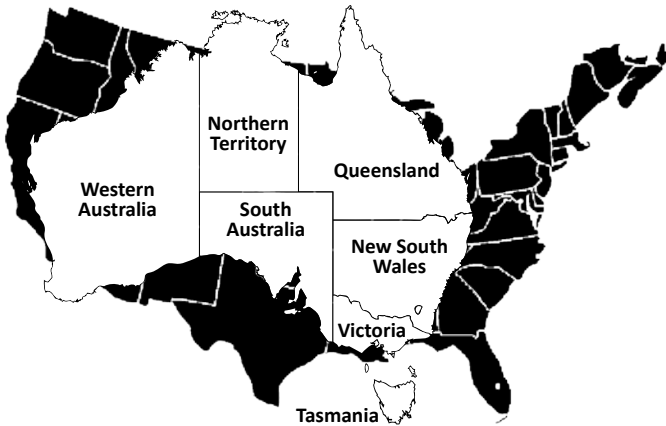


Fig. 1(b): Australia in a rough size comparison with the continental United States.

in the front. My wife followed in our small sedan, accompanied by our other child, our 14-year-old daughter Lara.

At that time, the Northern Territory, the closest thing to an unspoilt 'frontier' state in this wonderful country, had no highway speed limits. Normally I would have wanted to cruise that long, straight traffic-sparse stretch of road as fast as the Jackaroo would want to go. But I thought that this time, being in convoy, I would use the vehicle's hand throttle to keep its speed constant at a relatively staid 110 km/hour (70 mph).

The first hour or so rolled by, mile after mile of highway with nothing but flat sandy desert on either side, as far as the eye could see. With such little contrast in the scenery, the speed sensation was so low that it sometimes felt as if it would be faster to get out and walk. It was the early afternoon, and my neck was aching a little from an old whiplash injury. Lisa was whiling away the time with some toys on her lap. I asked her to put a pillow behind my neck, and half-jokingly told her to wake me up if I started to seem drowsy.

The rest of my family, in the car behind me, saw the whole horror. A large fuel tanker was coming the other way, in contrast to this road's normal loneliness, at 70 km/h (45 mph). They saw the Jackaroo drift directly into its path. The police later told them that I must have momentarily fallen asleep. Had I nodded off a split second before or after, there would have been nothing to collide with.