Upside Down

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Extract

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Prologue

Why…?

I really had no idea what I was embarking on. But a strange sensation deep down somewhere told me I needed to go... I needed to see with my own eyes.

Why had I put it off for so long? Well you know...job, mortgage, boyfriend, moving house, life...FEAR!! (more like!)

The thought of heading off on my own left trails of sleepless nights and sweaty palms. But the desire and want to go was bigger than all of these obstacles put together. It was now or never, and my biggest fear was that fear itself would govern my life.

The gauntlet was set; I would rise to the challenge. But I was scared!! Bloody scared!!

And so came about a trip that would change my life forever...

I invite you to join me on my journey to the other side of the world. I assure you any dream powerful enough will not let you down.

'Bravery has genius, power and magic in it.' Johann Wolfgan Von Goethe.

CHAPTER 1

London Heathrow Departure Gates

It's done, I've booked my ticket to Australia at last! Phew, now that's sorted at least I *know* I'm going…Better ring my mum to tell her the good news.

'Mum?'

'Darling?'

'It's all booked; I'm leaving on the 26th February at 18.30 hrs. Isn't that fantastic? Mark (the guy from Bridge the World) was sooo friendly, and we chatted away for ages about Australia and how nice it is over there.'

'That's lovely dear, I am so pleased for you. Which airport are you flying from?'

'Pardon?'

'Which airport?'

'Ummmm?'

'Georgina, please tell me you haven't just paid for the ticket and not found out where you are flying from?'

'Ahh?'

'What if you are flying from Edinburgh?'

'Errrrr, I'll ring you back in a tick.'

Damn, I knew I'd forgotten something. No matter, I'll just swallow my pride…

'Er hi Mark, yes, I spoke to you about five minutes ago, yes the one who's flying to Sydney, yes can't wait! Umm one small detail, I don't suppose you could tell me which airport I am flying out from? Heathrow? Fantastic, thought as much…great to speak to you.'

'Mum, hi. Yes it's Heathrow, no problem, it's all sorted. Knew it would be…'

I think my mum's response was something along the lines of did I really think it was wise to travel to Australia on my own, when booking my travel ticket was posing difficulties?

Hmmmmmmmmm? I think a point was in there somewhere, which I decided to ignore…

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Making decisions such as I'm going to Australia for a year really sound so simple, and quite frankly they should be. After all it was supposed to be 'fun'. However the build up to my departure was anything but. I owned an apartment, and sold it just two days before my departure, I tied up my work at the Art College, and said my goodbyes there, and to the City of Plymouth where I had lived for the past five years. I went home to Reading where my parents lived to say farewell to more family and friends, a sometimes traumatic experience. In fact I had so many different leaving do's with various different people, that by the time it came to depart on my adventure, I didn't know whether I was on foot or horseback. I then proceeded to drink too much

the night before my flight, and woke up with a throbbing head and a feeling of ‘what on earth am I doing?’

I didn’t know any one in Australia, and had just about managed to book two nights in a B&B in a place called Glebe in Sydney. Really that was as much as I knew. So maybe it is becoming clear already that I’m not a planner? Big decisions I can make, it’s the finer details that often pass me by.

So my mum cried, and my dad was strangely silent and said very little, and I cried and said repeatedly I would be fine. (Although it came out in an odd robotic fashion, as I am not sure whether I really believed it.) And then my sister, Victoria, took me to the airport, where I checked in my bags.

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Have you ever experienced an emotion where you feel cold from the inside out? Where your stomach lurches uncontrollably, and your skin tingles in apprehension and fear? Well that was me after the flight attendant had sent my rucksack off to a dark corner of the plane, and I stood silently looking at my sister in the hubbub of Heathrow Airport.

‘Do you have to leave just yet?’

‘No, no, let’s go and get a coffee.’

We chatted and laughed and read HELLO magazine, and talked about the celebrities, and then I looked up and said:

‘I’m not going to see you for a year? I’m not going to see anyone I’ve just said goodbye to for a year?’

That’s when it hit me. I was on my own, this was it; I was going to the other side of the world to a continent where I knew no one. My sister looked at me and said:

‘I know.’

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At this point I want to STOP and take a step back. Using the luxury of hindsight, I know masses of people have done what I was about to do, and Australia is a developed English speaking country, and I could always come home if I didn’t like it. I knew all of this, and I was sure a thousand others made a lesser deal of it than me. But I had never done anything like this before, never travelled alone, and the unknown nature of this trip resulted in me feeling scared! Coupled with the fact that I had given up all of my worldly possessions, flat, job and life in the UK to pursue this dream, in my mind there WAS no turning back. Somehow I had to navigate my legs onto that plane so I couldn’t change my mind. Therefore this account is of what my feelings actually were, rather than an illusion of what would be more preferable to relay, and probably a lot less embarrassing.

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So it was time to say goodbye to Vic. As people all around us moved forward in their lives, we stood in what seemed to be our own vacuum at the gates and embraced each other. I rarely saw her cry; she was my tough older sister, but when she gave me a hug for what seemed like an eternity and I let go and looked at her blotchy red, tear stung face, I lost it too. It was hard not to; my chin quivered, and the tears rolled down my face. She told me I would have a great time, and just to get through the first week, then I would have real fun! (That word again?)

‘This isn’t fun!’ was my response.

Another hug, and then the hardest walk through the departure gates with a brief look back to wave goodbye to Vic.

There, I had done it…

No turning back…

It was just me, myself and I.

Swollen ankles – Fat Germans

I was told that when the plane lifted off the runway and I was on my way, I would feel a great sense of relief. Didn't happen.

I also had visions of sitting next to a nice old lady or some family who would want to immediately adopt me and comfort me in my sad departure. Didn't happen either.

Instead two fat German men rocked up and sat down, looked at me, said something I didn't understand, then began sniggering. As luck would have it they stank of alcohol, and then proceeded to drink more and more once the bar was open. Coupled with the fact I didn't really feel relief when the plane flew into the air, just slightly nauseous.

So it is safe to say I will never forget my flight over to Australia. Personally what made it even more tedious, aside from the fact everyone in the aircraft now thought I was associated with the fat Germans asleep and snoring beside me, were my poor swollen ankles. They just wouldn't stop growing; by the end of the flight I had trouble putting my trainers back on. The stewardess kindly suggested I should just keep walking around, which I attempted to do, but it was a hard achievement in a Boeing 747. As my ankles swelled steadily, so did my internal dialogue with an encyclopaedia of fearful thoughts. However, as we drew closer to our destination and after 23 hours in the air, I grew tired and bored of my mind's chatter, and chose instead to tell it to just shut up!

So the inevitable happened and the plane landed in Sydney, Australia. Time to step onto foreign soil. 'Let's go!' and I lifted my swollen trunk-like ankles off the plane.

Stepping off the cliff – My first day in Australia

I see my first and last day as being significant, and I want to share that with you…

I felt welcomed when I was going through customs, it was nice, I felt wanted. First there was a sniffer dog pacing excitedly up and down while I was hauling my bag onto the trolley. Thankfully it looked disinterested in its contents, a good sign at least. Then I was asked to step aside by a customs officer as I made my way through to the exit; my rucksack containing my current entire life was unpacked and some more questions asked. Then, as I made my way finally towards the exit door, I was stopped again by another guy who wanted to see my passport and asked me my intentions in the country. At this point I had never realised I looked so suspicious, while remaining so innocent; it was something I made a mental note to work on during my stay.

It felt weird. What can I say? I had lost a Thursday somewhere down the track, and leaving a climate which required jumpers and lots of them, suddenly replaced by hot, hot weather was not something I experienced every day. Physically my senses were a little confused, but now I had arrived I felt a bit happier about the whole thing, and I jumped in a taxi and made my way to Glebe, and my B&B.

I was hot, tired and swollen, and all I wanted to do was take off my warm clothes fit for February English climates, have a shower and get some sleep. It was 7.30am and as I knocked on the B&B door, no one answered. So I stood alone on the doorstep of this terraced house, and watched as my taxi disappeared around a corner, leaving the street completely empty. It was a beautiful day, the skies were clear, and I thought I really could just stand here all day. I continued to wait patiently and eventually an old lady came out to welcome me in.

So at last I got my shower, soaked my fat ankles, and promptly fell asleep. Later that day, I did some sightseeing. Armed with my Sydney map I made my way down to Darling Harbour (naturally making a few wrong turns on the way) and proceeded to go on a cruise of the harbour. What I remember of that experience, only having been on Australian ground for around eight hours, was that everything seemed so completely surreal. I gaped at the Sydney Opera House and looked up at the Harbour Bridge while passing underneath, and it all felt so unnatural. I was finally seeing these famous Australian icons that I had admired in books and on TV a thousand times, and here I was cruising right past them, feeling totally and utterly out of it. My mind, body and soul could not get over the fact I was on the other side of the world…alone.

I made my way back to the B&B and cried my eyes out. I had wanted to come to Australia for as long as I could remember, and here I was, finally making that big step, committing to the experience, and yet I was feeling flat and particularly lonely. I couldn't turn and say 'hey look at that, look at this', because there was no one to tell. I couldn't comment on 'isn't it scary, exciting, exhilarating?' as there was no one to listen. I was completely and utterly on my jack jones. It took a good while to come to terms with that fact, and it was one of the most useful, essential, important life changing lessons that I've learnt.

Disheartened as I was, looking back I wouldn't alter that first day for the world, even though it resembled standing on the edge of a cliff, with my eyes shut, and taking one giant leap off the edge and into the unknown. I didn't know what would happen in Australia or where I would end up.

I realised later on in my trip that I could fly…

CHAPTER 2

Hostels

The sound of a cockroach scurrying across wooden floorboards is pretty depressing. The sound of the first cockroach you've ever heard scurrying across wooden floorboards is in fact revolting. My bedroom had bars on the window, a dirty big fireplace with a plastic rat hanging from it, three bunk beds and grotty wooden floorboards...all the better for hearing the lovelies running on.

The last time I slept in a bunk bed was when I was six years old. The last time I slept in a room full of bunk beds and people was…let me think…er…NEVER!

Four days into my new life in Australia and I had the flu or some such thing that I had been fortunate enough to pick up from a fellow passenger (probably the Germans) on the flight over. I felt rotten; I had a temperature, was sneezing every few minutes and was shivering from head to toe. I was lying in my bunk (my new cheaper abode, after the B&B) wondering how I had come to be in this situation when I heard this clickity click sound of a living animal scurrying across the floorboards. I looked over and saw this humungous roach running across the room and under one of the bunk beds. Even now after my trip has finished I can categorically say I'm not the fondest of snakes, I can live with spiders if I really have to, but roaches or 'cockies', as my sister used to call them, have to be one of the most revolting creatures ever to walk this planet.

I was a virgin traveller, had not done this hostel sharing lark before, and was feeling under the weather and euuwwh that noise was so awful. So I jumped up and ran out to the living area where all the other backpackers were sitting.

'There's a cockroach in my room!! ***PLEASE*** can someone come and kill it?!?!'

The damsel in distress routine has yet to fail me when there are guys around ready to prove their manhood. I was lucky this was no exception. A circus performer called Conrad who was known to juggle fire in his room (directly above mine) came to my rescue and killed the roach.

Later on in my trip I worked for a week pretty much in isolation on a farm in Western Australia, with a guy who was into Buddhism. I read a lot of his books and became very interested in the idea of karma. The idea of respecting all living creatures appeals to me. However this approach ceases when it comes to cockroaches – the execution of which has to be a given!

So after my rather embarrassing geaky girlie outbreak, I expressed my sincere gratitude to the smiling Conrad, who stood proudly dangling the cockie in front of me, and fell back into bed in a fit of sneezes.

That night was awful. Apart from feeling like my head was going to explode, every noise and every sound made my skin crawl and flinch uncontrollably. It was like a bad nightmare gone horribly wrong, and it was a really bad introduction to: 'learning to live with Australian cockroaches.'

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I awoke the next day and went and bought a box full of roach traps, and was laughed at by everyone...but I had to ***do*** something. Even if they didn't work (and they didn't) psychologically they made me feel better. Ironically they are one of the least dangerous creatures to be found in

Australia, and yet they posed the biggest threat to my sanity! I did however become accustomed to them and their ever presence in the majority of homes that I resided in.

To fill you in on the accommodation available to backpackers, on the cheap end of the scale there are hostels, which come in all wonderful shapes and sizes, are staffed, usually by other travellers, have receptions, kitchen facilities, communal areas and are generally cleaned daily – although this is a debatable subject. On the even cheaper end of the scale there are houses for backpackers, where a landlord comes round each week to collect rent, and you are left to your own devices, cleaning and all! These houses are similar to squats and were my first main abodes while staying in Sydney. It was not uncommon for me to live with about 20 others in these huge run down houses, all sharing bedrooms. The landlords were keen to fit in as many bunk beds as possible in each of the rooms; it doesn't take a genius to work out why. In my mind they were dirty roach ridden hovels, but strangely with that in mind I had some of the best times in them, and met some fantastic people. (Along with some completely insane as well!) From living entirely on my own in my (now sold) gorgeous flat in England to waking up with a multitude of people each morning, I did scratch my head on a few occasions, but as with everything, plunged in feet first, and embraced the experience for what it was.

In one of these houses I stayed in for about a month or so there was a massive and I mean massive cockroach which we were not allowed to kill as it was named after our landlord 'Bob'. Hmmmmmmm. At another 'luxury' home I stayed in for about three months one crawled across my head while I was sleeping and I jumped from my top bunk in the middle of the night onto the floor in fright. My room mate John who slept on the bottom bunk was accustomed to getting up before me to head off to his job, so when he heard this almighty thud, which was usually the sound I made when getting off the top bunk, he jumped up as well, thinking he was late for work. He was not impressed when he found out it was 3am and I was having a heart attack because of a cockroach! I didn't get any damsel in distress sympathy either! Hey, some it works on, others it doesn't...

I don't think the word I am looking for is 'proud', but near the end of my stay in Sydney I remember lying in my bunk bed dozing, when one crawled across my face (again!) and I casually flicked it off. I mean you have to admit that from where I came from that is pretty impressive…?

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I decided after my arrival in Sydney to get a job for the first few months of my trip and then to travel around. I thought that would give me a chance to earn some dollars and then blow it on seeing the rest of the country. One day, about two weeks into my time in Glebe, a friend that I had made said there was an office job going at a shipping yard he was labouring at. He gave me his boss's number, and I gave him a call then and there. I made an appointment to meet within the hour, and rushed back home to put on some smart clothes I had bought in preparation. Little did I know that this was going to be the beginning of a crazy relationship with the 'Levine' family.

CHAPTER 3

Levine Marine Shipping

The high heels that I had bought, and the skirt which was bordering on the tightish side was probably the worst outfit to arrive at a shipping yard in, but with age comes experience, and so I am imparting to you this knowledge. DO NOT wear tight short skirts and high heels when you have to walk through a shipping yard...period! Especially an Australian one, and oh it was also muddy, so by the time I had tottered around trying to find this blessed portakabin, with plenty of labourers stopping to gawk a look, my shoes and the back of my legs were splattered as well...getting the picture?

I finally found the Levine yard, and the owner Bruce Levine, and clambered as gracefully as possible up the iron staircase which led to his office, careful not to let my heels slip through the holes which you find in those outdoor stairs.

I wish everyone had the experience of meeting Bruce Levine and his family, because it would be one that they would never forget...believe me. But since the chances are that you never will, let me proceed in telling you about this bizarre and particularly crazy family. Bruce Levine owned Levine Marine Shipping, a business which dealt with tugs, barges, cranes, boats, and landing barges. You could smell the whiff of testosterone a mile off, and I think Bruce had enough in his body to compensate for half the men in Sydney…or was that Australia?

He eyed me up, and strode around the portakabin with an air of importance, asking me a few questions, meanwhile keeping an eye on the boys in the yard who were labouring for him, occasionally stepping outside onto the deck to shout down at them. I was to discover Bruce was very good at shouting down at people. His wife was called Celia Levine and was tucked away at the back of the office out of sight. She was a tiny but beautiful woman, South African by birth, and a force to be reckoned with as I was to learn. They seemed to like me, and I was hired then and there, set to start work on Monday morning. So I put my reservations about my first encounter aside and tottered out of the yard.

Locked in the toilet

I don’t know what it is about me and toilets. In a previous job I once opened a door of one to find my boss sitting comfortably passing ewhh God knows what. The look of horror on my face can only be described as a mix between mortified, disgusted, horrified, revolted! A mental image I could have done without in my life.

So anyway it was my first week at the Levines’ and the toilet was located in the main office. As I mentioned before it was a portakabin on stilts and everything was included in this one room. So there was a shower and a toilet incorporated, situated pretty much right next to Bruce’s desk. Lovely. So I had arrived in the morning and gone straight to the toilet. Everything was as it should be until I came to unlock the wretched door. Well this was when it became jammed and I

couldn't get out. GREAT!! This was all I needed, two days into the job and I was trapped in the dun! The phone started ringing in the office, but as I tried and tried to set myself free, the door would not budge. So I just sat there and waited. It must have been about 15 minutes before Bruce came storming in.

'Where are you Georgie, why aren't you answering the phone?' he screamed.

'Err Bruce I'm in here, the toilet door is jammed and I can't get out.'

'Well open it!' he bellowed.

'Bruce that's what I have been trying to do for the past 15 minutes.'

'For Chhhrissst sake! Chrrrrisssss!!'

Bruce shouted at the top of his voice to one of the lads in the yard who was working for him as a chippie. Ohhh great I thought. Then I heard the front office door bang.

'Chris, open this bloody door and get her out, she's gone and locked herself in the dunny!'

Great thanks Bruce, just add to the humiliation why don't you? As Chris broke open the door, you should have seen the look of amusement on his face, one which said: just you wait until the rest of the lads hear about this. Mine was one of total humiliation and mortification that I had actually done something so utterly embarrassing. Needless to say after I was back at work Bruce thought this was hilarious, and kept making endless jokes, which he thought were terribly amusing. Hmmmmmm again...

Bruce was loud, brash, crazy, impertinent, a bully, extremely difficult, robust, rude and above all shouted like no man I had ever met before. But I am thankful to him really, since after having him as a boss, there has been no tyrant possible of coming close to even making me feel in the slightest bit intimidated.

The Jaguar's brakes

Another thing that I am thankful to Bruce Levine for was the Jaguar that he owned and let me drive. Oh yes, my first ever opportunity to drive the Jag was cruising over the Sydney Harbour bridge, it was good alright. I was sent on errands all over the place, to get smokes for Bruce, sandwiches for Celia and to collect the money from Balmain each Friday for the crew's wages, which I was also responsible for calculating. (Didn't want to get any mistakes with those guys I can tell you!) I was always keen to get out of the yard and into the Jag; no trip was too small for me to volunteer. I drove all round Sydney in that car, it was bliss to drive, and I loved it! It was an automatic and purred like a kitten, but one day I got slightly confused with my footwork on the brake and accelerator and happened to press them both down at the same time. It made this unnerving weird lurching stopping movement and I panicked, but luckily didn't crash. Unfortunately the brakes didn't appear to work quite the same after that, which was a minor problem. Well actually rather a major problem, but I kept quiet, I mean after all it was an old Jag, and I'm sure the manoeuvre isn't that bad for a car? So Bruce found out the brakes were up the creek, (but had no idea that it might have been due to a misunderstanding on my part), and ordered in another Jaguar – identical maroon, but a slightly newer model. I went with him to collect it and was instructed to: 'take it home Georgie.' Which I proceeded to do. HOWEVER it wasn't or didn't appear to be working properly, and it kept cutting out on me as I went through Sydney's central district. Cars were hooting and beeping me left right and centre, swearing at this blonde in a jag who obviously couldn't drive. But honest it was the car's fault not mine! I got it started again, not sure whether to call for help or continue, but my style is to keep going, so I took it up

across Anzac Bridge which was close to our offices. The blessed thing cut again, completely dead, my foot was pressed down on the gas and nothing…Cars were whizzing past me as I started to slow down. There was absolutely nowhere to pull in; the bridge only had two lanes each way. I prayed and started it while still moving, and whacked my foot on the accelerator again. This is a technical technique, self-taught in the two seconds I had to avert disaster and to avoid the engine stopping. It worked and I held my breath all the way back to the office.

So I was the first to drive the new Jaguar and probably knackered it up again, BUT I didn't care. As I arrived back shaking, my face white, Celia ordered me to sit down and take a strong coffee to calm my nerves. She phoned Bruce and shouted at him as to why he had let me drive a car that obviously wasn't roadworthy. I assured both of them I wouldn't get back in until they had taken it back to the garage for some fine-tuning. Bruce being Bruce laughed and thought the whole episode amusing.

CHAPTER 4

Blue Mountains – Cold Waterfalls

As I was leaving work one Friday afternoon, an Irish guy called Brian who laboured for Bruce at the shipping yard, (and who Bruce liked to call Irish – very original) said that he and some friends were driving up to the Blue Mountains that evening – and would I like to come? This was my first opportunity since arriving in Sydney to get out of the city and I jumped at the chance. I rushed home to pack my bag, then went next door to his house, and met the others. There was Rick who was half Dutch/Australian and Tony who was from New Zealand and a horse whisperer – or so I liked to believe. Brian had previously bought a mustard-coloured Volvo from another worker at the yard for $100, and I have to admit it kinda showed! BUT minus the smoke and noise and a fair amount of oil which we kept feeding her, it did do the job of getting us up to the mountains, roughly a two hour drive from Sydney.

Tony had previously worked out there on a cattle ranch, looking after horses, and knew of a quiet spot near a river to pitch the tents and make our camp. We arrived at around 1am, and this being my first ever experience of the Australian bush I let myself be led by the boys. They all seemed quite at home, and Tony a complete bush baby started a campfire while I helped (or attempted to help) the others set up the tents. We then cooked sausages on the campfire, and Rick started to play his guitar. I became increasingly cold as the night wore on and Tony lent me his waterproof poncho. Warm as toast underneath it I laid down and looked up at the night sky.

The stars, oh the stars. What have we been missing in England? No one told me that a night sky could look like that! And the noises too in the bush, every living creature seemed to be wide-awake. Tony took out and started to play the harmonica, while Rick sang. I couldn't believe how perfect it all was, and if only I could tell you the taste of an open-fire crunchy cooked sausage after you have had to wait 50 minutes for it to cook. Mmmmmmmmmm, it was worth waiting for. I crawled into my tent at round 4am, and left the others smoking, singing and drinking.

I was the first up in the morning, and as I stepped out into the glorious sunshine my eyes fell upon the exotic birds that surrounded our campsite – their home; I stood quietly for a while listening to their songs, until I decided to walk down with the cups from the previous night to the stream that I could hear close by. I washed them in the water, and let the sun soak into my skin. Then I felt a sharp pain in my right ankle, ouch, a gigantic (later I found out) bull ant had attached itself to the back of my foot and was biting me! I flicked it off, and swiftly walked back to the campsite, learning my first lesson of the bush, to keep your shoes on and to never become complacent, as you never know what you can step on. Nature in Australia is in general 10 times as big as anything you'll find in the UK, and 100 times as dangerous. The deadly animals defy belief, but they're all there just waiting for pink plump English girls to come along bare footed. Let's just say I heeded the warning.

The others woke up and since Brian was hankering after a swim, Tony took us to a place that he used to frequent when living out there. When we arrived at a barbed-wire fence with a big sign saying WARNING: KEEP OUT. I looked around for the watering hole! Tony casually asked me:

‘Georgina, have you ever climbed a barbed wire fence before?’

Come to think of it...no, I hadn’t. So he proceeded to show me bare-foot! (Tony was a virtual Aborigine and going bare foot was as natural to him as night follows day.) I made it over and looked around for the landowners with shotguns.

We continued along and came upon a beautiful pool with a small waterfall. Brian jumped straight in, while I sat with my feet dangling in the cold clear water, lapping up the surroundings, sun and sounds. It was so utterly relaxing for me; I was beyond chilled, completely beyond it. We sat and enjoyed the serenity of the mountains for a couple of hours then made our way up and over the barbed wire fence (piece of cake) and back up to our camp.

Tony then suggested we drive up to a great lookout point and watch the sun set. So we all bundled into the oil-guzzling Volvo and headed for this hotel on top of the mountains. On arrival he informed us it was a five-star joint, but with a great bar where we could have a drink and admire the view. We all looked, however, anything but five star! I had shorts and a T-shirt on and my legs were covered in dirt from the camp. I was also becoming cold, so Brian had lent me his massive old worn-out denim jacket, which swamped me and came down well over my shorts, an attractive look! The other three didn’t look much better and, as we wandered into the hotel, heads turned to look at this colourful motley crew.

We stood out on the terrace, quietly overlooking the mountains, each with a beer in hand and watched the sunset turn the sky into a glorious cascade of oranges and reds. It was magic, stunning and probably the most open space I have ever witnessed in all of my life. Standing there I felt a strange solidarity amongst me and the boys who were practical strangers only a day ago – we were witnessing something very beautiful together and nothing else in that moment really mattered.

As the sky turned purple, we drank up and returned to camp for another fire, delicious food and entertaining music and as I crawled for a second night into my tent, I felt as if the Australian bush was a magical place that I could seriously get used to living in – albeit with a little help from my new friends.

Marmalade's stomach

After my idyllic trip to the Blue Mountains it was business as usual back at the yard. Part of the Levine ‘family and other animals’ included Spot, the yard cat, who gave birth to four kittens which all had varying life spans. One got crushed by one of the logs being delivered to the yard, Hotton’s dogs killed one, the other disappeared, assumed dead, so we were left with Marmalade. Brown and ginger-coloured and named by me…original I know. He survived into his adult life, and we used to let him in the portakabin in the warm, during the winter months. Bruce became quite soft with him, and used to sit him on top of his desk on an old jumper. We started giving him milk to drink, or should I say Bruce started to give Marmalade milk to drink, as I kinda thought it was a bad move.

As myself, Bruce and Celia were working in the office one day, Celia questioned me:

‘Georgina, what does it mean if a cat starts scratching its claws on the floor?’

Completely innocently I said:

‘Well Celia, I think it probably means that Marmalade is just stretching his claws, as he is growing from a kitten into a cat.’

‘Oh ok, that’s alright then.’

‘Why do you ask Celia?’

‘Well, because Marmalade is scratching down this end of the room, and oh ehhhhwehhh, Marmalade what you are doing!!!’

I ran down to the other end of the office, and poor Marmalade was arching his back and diarrhoeaing all over the carpet. Oh the smell was terrible! We chucked him out onto the deck, and then Celia squealed to Bruce to get him to do something about the mess…

Meanwhile, Tony, who I had travelled to the Blue Mountains with, was having a rough time working in the yard. Bruce was unrelenting in his shouting, demanding orders and work conditions, and Tony was a free spirit, just plain fed up with it. Just about the time Marmalade decided to crap all over the office floor, Tony walked into the office and asked for a word with Bruce.

‘Bruce, it’s not working out for me here. I would like to finish up working for you today.’

Now usually Bruce could turn two ways here, get really nasty and demand that he worked out the week, but he had another idea.

‘Ok Tony, that’s fine, you can finish up today, but first you have to clean something up at the other end of the office.’

So dear God, poor Tony was free to go, but with one last task (which he did!) and thanks to him, Marmalade’s mishap was resolved, but I have to say I felt terribly sorry for him, Tony that is, not Marmalade.

The cat was banned from having any more milk, and generally after that he wasn’t allowed to sit on Bruce’s old jumpers on his desk either.