

POSTCARD FROM THE MINES

To get to the mines, you will need a plane, a car, a love of kidney-crushing corrugations (thirteen hours of corrugations), plenty of water, and fear, a lot of fear—fear of the colossal, fear of cacophony, fear of vastness, and fear of yourself. The enigmatic Australian outback has a way of diminishing you, daring you to gaze into your soul. So be ready for your insignificance. Be prepared for the abyss.

Mine one, known as Bundanyabba, or Bundy for short, is a small village about six hours from Oodnadatta, or fifteen hours and five or six minutes from the nearest McDonalds, depending on traffic, wash-outs, kangaroos and corrugations. Paris, the other mine, is further out, four hours to the right. In the time it takes to get to the mines, you could be in Paris, France, almost.

Calling Bundy a ‘village’ according to Reg Taylor, chief engineer, and notional self-appointed Mayor of Bundy (aka ‘Bluey’ so known for his blazing red hair), might be to do an injustice to an actual village. It’s a fifty-metre stretch of bitumen that runs between two rows of dongas (single room demountable tin huts affectionately known as suicide cells), five on each side. Four of them on the northern side are rammed together to make a canteen at the end of the street (or boulevard as the locals prefer), lovingly called the ‘Chops Elysees’—chops being their favourite meat, and Elysees a direct send-up of their sister mine, Paris.

Back in Oodnadatta (pop. 204 at last count), which by comparison to the ‘villages’ of the mines is a thriving metropolis, a hundred or so demountable houses line its two

hundred and seventy-two-metre bitumen main street. The residents, being very proud of every centimetre of bitumen, claim you'd have to go to Alice Springs to find the next bit of bitumen. But then you'd be in Alice Springs and not Oodnadatta. In Oodnadatta, known by the locals as the 'riviera of the outback', there's a way of telling locals (born and bred) from blow-ins (lived their life in the town but born elsewhere). The locals have a sofa on their front porch facing the main street in case anything happens (not that anything does, but they thrive on the anticipation), and the blow-ins have a sofa on the back porch facing the vast endless views of scrub stretching to the mountain range on the distant horizon. The locals have seen the view out the back. The view out the back never changes. They're interested in who comes to town, and who disappears.

You stop at the Pink Roadhouse in Oodnadatta before heading on to the mines, not just because it's your last known human contact, but you're coming to the company's mines to reconcile their accounts and are expected to pick up 'emergency stores' for both mines as you pass through. The pre-ordered stores, consisting of tinned food, meat, and beer (a lot of beer) are loaded into your rental car while you sip on a half decent latte. You can get a latte out here, out in the middle of nowhere, served by an English backpacker whose soft full-mouthed accent seems so out of place. But then everything is out of place. Only the red dust, mulga trees, deadly snakes, tarantulas, and flies belong. You are just tolerated—by the huge, by the din, by the vast, by the red. If you weren't so insignificant, the outback would crush you with indifference, and the scream of cicadas would mask your pathetic cries. Red dust penetrates every surface and infiltrates every orifice. The English backpacker smiles at you, or for you, you aren't sure which, but by the end of the trip, you suspect you will know. She acts as though she doesn't expect to see you again, even though you are back every month.

Competition between the two mines is intense, but by and large, good-natured. So far, the eight-burner barbecue has been stolen seventeen times. It mysteriously emerged in Bundy, then just as mysteriously disappeared only to reappear, again mysteriously, back in Paris. No one expects it to stay in Paris long, especially the ‘Parisians’. A barbecue is considered a civilising item at both mines. Why they wouldn’t buy a second one and have one each, misses the point.

The second most contested resource at the mines is water. Mayor Reg, with tongue firmly planted in cheek, says everyone up there in Paris is particularly proud of their so-called ‘spring’, which is yet to flow. In response, the citizens of Paris reckon Bundy’s ‘spring’ is a trickle of brackish water out next to the village dump—not even the ‘roos drink it, and it only holds water once every eighty years or so after there’s enough rain for the sewage to back up. Still, when it’s all you have, you make the most of it. Reg says, ‘at least we’ve got a spring, Paris has got seven-eighths of four-fifths of sweet f*ck all, if you don’t count the mine or the eight-burner barbecue—when they’ve got it.’

The two mines produce a monthly newsletter, turn and turnabout. The newsletters are ‘widely circulated’ between each mine. The sole and only point of the newsletters are to outdo and send each other up. Last month Mine one (Bundy) lead with a story about their racing carnival, a grand day by any measure. *The Bundy Outback Newsletter* highlighted one of the races, which fielded two camels. One of the camels, the favourite, was facing the wrong way, and no amount of coaxing could encourage it to turn around, so when the starter pistol fired, it ran in the direction it was facing, throwing its jockey, and has not been seen since—the camel, not the jockey. The jockey was eventually found covered in dust with a beer in hand. The other camel came second to the joy of the only on-course bookie. *The Bundy Outback Newsletter* described their carnival as the ‘Biggest and Best’. They had an unexplained surplus of ‘B’s’ in the printing department that month.

They went right off with ‘Beaut’ and ‘Bonza’, and a laboured ‘Bociferous’, which no one is sure is even a word, but it qualifies because it starts with a B. The highlights of the ‘Biggest and Best’ annual race meeting pushed the huge item of the week to the second page—the story about Dinger, one of the miners from Paris. Dinger, according to *The Bundy Outback Newsletter’s* intrepid reporter, had a large wart on his nose that glowed at night, thus enabling Dinger to save on torch batteries and electricity—had there been any electricity, and assuming there was anything that needed looking at in Paris at night. Dinger, with his glowing wart, was pretty handy down the Paris mine whenever the generator failed or ran out of diesel, which was often, according to *The Bundy Outback Newsletter’s* esteemed editorial. This was Dinger’s story as told by the feature writer—the facts of which were entirely made up, consistent with all the made-up facts as reported in both newsletters. It was a fact that if things weren’t made up, there would be nothing to write about.

Anyway, the story goes thus: Dinger, resident miner in Paris, claimed his dingo Dietrich, had mastered the first chorus of ‘Advance Australia Fair’, although much to Dinger’s regret, Dietrich refused to howl a single note of the anthem in public. Nonetheless, it was impressive, given that most Australians struggle with remembering the words and must acquit themselves by moving their mouth in a vague mime, pretty much as Dinger’s dog did with a lot of howling. Dietrich covered off on the word ‘girt’ with some distinction while not knowing what the hell it meant and unable to use it in a sentence. He was a dog and struggled to use any word in a sentence unless it started with a W. The word ‘girt’ left him ‘stonkered’ to use a colloquialism.

Not to be outdone, this month, the Paris mine produced its newsletter *The Paris Review Weekly*—so called by this posh name even though it came out monthly. But not every month. It depended if there was any news or not. Let’s face it, it isn’t every week

you get an eye-popper of a story like Dinger's dog Dietrich the songmeister, as gleefully reported in Bundy's newsletter. This month *The Paris Review Weekly* could not pass up the opportunity of re-reporting the Bundy race carnival, calling it a salutary affair featuring camels racing one another in the feature race of the day, the Outback Cup. The track, as described by *The Paris Review Weekly*, was so dusty that no one could see the camels or riders. Among the confusion and dust, no one noticed the riders had somehow swapped camels before they crossed the finish line, which tended to negate the result. 'The result is negated!' exclaimed the bookie. *The Paris Review Weekly* editorial team claimed with verve that they were sticklers for accurate reporting, wherever possible, and in particular, where the facts aligned with their mission to denigrate Bundy and its residents at every opportunity. They were themselves intending to lead with words containing several B's, but there was an inexplicable absence of B' at the printing press, which had disappeared days before the Bundy newsletter came out last month. The residents of Paris, which comprised a population totalling a thousand lives—including 981 wild goats, but not the billion or so ever-present flies, did not know for sure what had happened to the B's, but the reprobates who populated *The Bundy Outback's* newsroom were held in much suspicion by all who loved and revered *The Paris Review Weekly*.

The suspicion that the Bundy mine population was responsible for rifling *The Paris Review's* stock of B's came about because two years before, Bundy's two erasers went missing, and all the crossings-out and spelling errors had to be left in, making *The Bundy Newsletter* double its normal size to four pages that month. When *The Paris Review Weekly* reported on the missing erasers, it wasn't without a certain degree of snideness and celebration, and its next issue contained no crossings-out or errors. Soon after, Paris' eight-burner barbecue went missing, again.

This month *The Paris Review Weekly* suffered from the absence of Muggers, their usual headline writer. Muggers was out chasing one of his goats on his day off from detonation and blowing-up work. Doug, the goat, had swallowed Muggers' cigarette lighter (goats eat anything), and so Muggers had to follow the business end of Doug around for days waiting for his cigarette lighter to pop out, as it were. It's a dirty business, smoking. Anyway, this meant Doris, one of the cooks in the canteen, who had a light heart and an enigmatic beauty mark on her left cheek (which everyone confused with a fly), had to write *The Paris Review Weekly's* headline. Doris was better at writing her daily, weekly, or whenever, Page 3 column called 'Tips for the Light-hearted' where she would discuss such enlightened things as how to live a full and robust life in the outback without a peg or a pasta maker. She had a talent for teasing out the nuances of outback life.

The other story to run this month, also pushed to the second page, was the announcement that the Paris village committee had decided to name the village's only corner after the last tourist to have visited the dusty, main, and only street of Paris village. The committee took two years to reach the decision, by which time no one could remember several things. Chief among the several things no one could remember was who was on the committee. Finally, a committee was gathered in the front bar of the canteen, or enough committee that could be considered representational of the town's population, so the matter at hand could be dealt with, except now no one could remember the tourist's name, or even if there had ever been a tourist. So they decided to call the corner Doug, after Muggers' goat. To be honest, it wasn't much of a corner anyway; it turned off the main street and stopped, but even so, it needed a name, as everyone was sick of calling it 'the turn, off the main street that stops'. You can see how tedious that would be. The problem was, how would anyone know if you were talking about Doug the goat or Doug the corner? No one had an immediate answer, and the matter was referred

to a sub-committee, which consisted of Dennis, the donga cleaner. Dennis had a suggestion.

Dennis, who cleaned all the dongas in Paris and Bundy, had been to Adelaide to have an impacted wisdom tooth removed from his ankle. The wisdom tooth had belonged to the dog Dietrich from Paris that had wandered down the track to visit Bundy on a day when Dennis happened to be cleaning the Bundy dongas. In a moment of confusion, Dietrich the dog, mistook Dennis's ankle with the dingo bone he was gnawing on—Dietrich was gnawing on, not Dennis. Dennis, who was the only member of either mine to have visited Adelaide, saw many amazing things in Adelaide, such as a roundabout, and pegs. Upon his return, he offered that the corner should be called Doug 1.0, which he overheard while in the surgery having the wisdom tooth retrieved. It seems that city folk distinguish things by adding a 1.0 or 2.0, or 2.1, to things. No joke. Anyway, Doug 1.0 it was, or just Doug for short. Everyone seemed happy with that. No one thought Doug the goat would last too long anyway. He had that lighter fluid in his system producing a prodigious amount of methane farts, enough to fill a blimp, so sooner or later, the methane farts would come into contact with a lighted flame from the lighter working its way through Doug's system and boom, no more Doug—Doug the goat that is, not Doug the corner.

It should be noted that both *The Bundy Outback Newsletter* and *The Paris Review Weekly* have been internationally recognised for their journalistic excellence, wherein both cases, the breaking out of secrets has kept both of these august newsletters at the forefront of investigative journalism for as long as... well since Muggers first noticed Doug the goat's penchant for cigarette lighters.

(...an excerpt from the novel *What Will Happen To You?* by Gary N. Lines)