

Memories
People
Places

Terry Waite

solitude



‘Wonderfully perceptive
and engaging’

Ranulph Fiennes

Terry Waite has had a varied career and is best known as a hostage negotiator. He was also taken hostage himself in Beirut where he was kept in strict solitary confinement for almost five years. He has written about this experience in *Taken on Trust* (Hodder, 1993). He is also the author of *Footfalls in Memory* (Hodder, 1995) and two humorous books, *Travels with a Primate* (Hodder, 2000; Silvertail Books, 2014) and a comic novel, *The Voyage of the Golden Handshake* (Silvertail Books, 2015). His most recent book, *Out of the Silence: Memories, poems, reflections*, was published by SPCK in 2016. A co-founder of Hostage UK and Y Care International, he is also president of Emmaus UK.

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SPCK

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Terry Waite
Suffolk 2017

Acknowledgements

A major part of the joy of serious travelling is in the preparation. The endless poring over maps and brochures, or researching on the internet, stimulates the desire to leave behind the day-to-day responsibilities and launch out into new experiences. I remember the excitement I felt as a child when my grandmother told me that she was going to take me on a day trip to the seaside. Having been brought up in post-war Britain, travel beyond the boundaries of the small Cheshire village where I lived was an exception. An exception that I welcomed with the same enthusiasm with which a prisoner might greet his impending release.

As soon as I gained a measure of independence, I began to travel beyond the shores of the British Isles. First to France, Germany and Austria in the days when it was safe and easy to hitch-hike across Europe. Later my work took me to Uganda, in East Africa, which eventually became my home for several years and also the birthplace of our youngest child. After Africa, the world opened to me. North and South America; the Middle and Far East; Australia and New Zealand. Sometimes I travelled in the company of others. More often than not I was alone.

Then, suddenly, my journeys came to an abrupt end. While seeking the release of hostages in Beirut I was taken captive and spent one thousand seven hundred and sixty-three days in captivity, almost four years of which were spent in solitary confinement. I have attempted to describe that experience elsewhere; suffice it to say here, it was during those years that I began to travel in my head. Using my imagination I crossed continents, sailed the oceans, and retreated into the inner recesses of my mind in order to try and understand myself more completely. On release, some five years later, I stayed put for a while in Trinity Hall, Cambridge writing my account of the experience. When the book was completed, I resumed so-called normal life once more. Having spent so much time in solitary confinement it was the solitary aspect of life that interested me.

Prelude

In my book *Taken on Trust* I tell the story of my captivity and survival. The first edition of that book concluded as I stepped off the RAF plane in Lyneham, Wiltshire, and gave a press statement to the hundreds of journalists present on that wet and windy day. In a later edition I added another chapter, which briefly brought that book up to date.

This book picks up the story and recounts some of the journeys I made to solitary places and also records some of the people who spoke with me. They are indeed a diverse group, ranging from the wife of a cattle rancher living in the middle of the Australian outback to a former double agent settled in a government apartment in Moscow. They all spoke with me about solitude and how they viewed and lived it, and I have attempted to faithfully reproduce what they said to me.

In the final chapter I have added some further reflections taken from my own experience and, throughout, have included personal insights. There is no interview with any individual who has chosen a solitary life for religious reasons, and the exclusion is partly because there are so many writings about this experience that I did not feel the need to include more here.

Some years ago I read Anthony Storr's book *Solitude*, which is almost certainly the classic work on the subject. In it he quotes De Quincey, who said: 'No man will ever unfold the capacities of his own intellect who does not at least checker his life with solitude.'

Increasingly in today's frantic world we need space for ourselves. Recently a friend told me a poignant story which illustrated this point perfectly. He was leading a trek across a barren part of South Africa. For miles around, there was nothing but sand, sky and the wide open space. He noticed one man walking alone and, as he approached him, he saw that tears were streaming down his face. Anxiously he asked him if all was well.

'I've never experienced anything like this before,' he replied. 'My life is just full of the pressures of work and family. For as long as I can remember I have never experienced such beauty and peace in solitude.'

Perhaps this small volume may encourage someone to move fully into that space and explore more completely the richness of solitude.

Part 1

PLACES OF SOLITUDE

I feel a slight bump and open my eyes. We are passing through a patch of turbulence. The seat-belt sign illuminates and, automatically, I check that mine is secure. A steward passes through the cabin, sees I am awake, and asks if I need anything. I ask for a glass of sparkling water. Within a moment it is delivered complete with ice and lemon. 'Would you like a blanket, Mr Waite?'

I thank him and refuse his offer. He disappears through the curtain as my neighbour turns fitfully in his semi-conscious sleep. I sip my drink and leaf through the airline magazine. Maps fascinate me. I remember the time when my guard brought me an encyclopaedia – the letter M. I turned to the map of Maine and spent hours wandering, in my imagination, along the rugged and broken coastline. Now I examine the global map and in particular the map of Australia. According to Qantas, all roads lead eventually to Sydney. On the world map I look for Lebanon, my involuntary home for almost five years. There it is! A chunk of coastal land carved from the flank of Syria. It was there on the shores of the Mediterranean that I began to see the many faces of solitude.

A voice booms in the distance. I can't make out what is being said as there is a constant steady roaring in my ears. Lights begin to flicker and suddenly they explode before my eyes.

'Ladies and gentlemen. Shortly we will be landing in Bangkok. Please make sure that your safety-belt is securely fastened and your seat is in the upright position.'

As I awake from dozing I recognize the ritual formula repeated thousands of times daily the world over.

'Will you get out here for a while?' my neighbour questions me. He is ready to leave.

'I might stretch my legs. It's many years since I was in Bangkok.'

Like all proud citizens the world over he tells me how the city has changed. How the airport has developed. 'We have our problems, of course, but we are working on them.'

Places of solitude

The doors are unlocked and there is the usual confusion as overhead lockers are emptied and the crew members endeavour to work out which exits will be used.

‘Goodbye, sir; thank you. Goodbye, sir; thank you.’

The cabin staff dispense the final benediction before assembling their bags with telescopic handles and marching to their two-day sojourn in a downtown hotel room.

Before leaving the plane I attempt to remember the terminal building as I last knew it. It was quite small and there were no more than half a dozen shops. One sold inexpensive silk ties and scarves, another elephant leather wallets and luggage, and a third the ubiquitous duty-free spirits and perfume. Unsurprisingly a work of transformation has taken place. Now the corridor stretches endlessly to my left and right. The items on sale have multiplied a thousandfold. I take a bored, cursory glance at the emporia and set out to find the toilets, which, for some inexplicable reason, are hidden behind a maze of passageways. In the final departure lounge some five hundred travellers wait to board their plane.

‘You are Mr Waite, aren’t you?’ A slightly built man with a pencil moustache stands by my side. ‘I have read your book. How do you feel now? It must be strange to be with so many people.’

He asks the same question that thousands of people ask and I tell him that I am well. I don’t tell him that I have changed. I don’t tell him that while I don’t find it difficult or object to being with large groups of people, I prefer the quiet of solitude. I don’t tell him that this very day I am setting out on a pilgrimage to explore that very subject. I want to meet people whose experience is deeper and richer than my own. I want to know how they embraced solitude and if the embrace crushed them or if it brought a little joy, a little life to a fading mortal existence. I want to hear the different songs of solitude. I want to blend my voice with that great solitary cry of humanity that echoes and reverberates throughout the universe. To say all this would be impossibly pompous and tedious.

‘I’m pleased you are well,’ he continues. ‘Many of us thought about you.’

I thank him again and he disappears into the crowd. Although there are times when I don’t particularly welcome an intrusion, I confess to being moved by the genuine concern of so many. It’s as though they are saying: how would I have coped? Would I have gone mad or would I have been able to find a life-bearing embrace from the experience? They ask some of the questions I continue to ask myself. How did I survive? What

Mount Isa

meaning can be found from solitude? Do I have a distinctive solitary song and at what point does that song merge into a great chorus?

The flight is called and we begin the slow shuffle past the desk clerk, the long march to the aircraft and the final squeeze into our seats. I am already into my pilgrimage. I am beginning to hear the first bars of a haunting melody.

*

Maps can be very economical with the truth. Admittedly, they do convey vital information for the navigator and professional traveller, but they can be misleading. I look at a name on a map – Mount Isa, for example – and immediately my imagination runs away with me.

We have been trekking all month across the parched earth of northern Australia. Our supplies are low. Suddenly in the distance we see a mountain peak. 'Isa!' we cry. Mount Isa. There are a few simple cabins, one general store, clean cool water . . . And so on.

Maps hold that sort of promise. The reality is often sadly different!

Isa is situated some four hundred miles east of Townsville and directly south of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Clustered around it, like supporting patrons at a charity ball, are such romantically named places as Duchess, Quamby, Ardmore, Georgina Downs and . . . Gunpowder. If the latter didn't set off warning bells, then Phosphate Hill ought to have done!

I had spent a restful weekend with friends in Sydney, sipping cool drinks on their sun deck overlooking the harbour. At Sunday lunch, when it was considered that my wits might have caught up with me from London, I was briefed. I was to travel by a commercial flight to Isa; there I would be met by a private plane from the Stanbroke Pastoral Company and after a brief stop at a cattle station in Cloncurry would head out across the Tanami Desert to visit the most remote roadhouse in Australia.

The first warning sign that my cartographical imaginings were about to be shattered became evident as we circled Isa in preparation for our final approach. For two or three hours we had flown through clear skies over the red barren scrubland that makes up so much of Queensland and the Northern Territory. I peered through the cabin window anxious for a first sight of the delights of this remote mountain hideaway. I saw a chimney. It was a very big chimney. It was belching forth smoke. Black smoke. Lots of it. There was a second chimney. Not quite so large, but equally productive.

Places of solitude

We circled the town. A huge scar ran through the centre, suggesting that some serious extractive work had taken place and the operators had forgotten to suture the wound. I felt a surge of disappointment.

The plane touched down a mile or so from the chimneys. As I walked across to the terminal building, a notice proclaimed that the adjacent hangar was home to the Flying Doctor Service, or at least to some of their aeroplanes. Graeme and Neil from the Stanbroke Company were waiting for me in the terminal building. Graeme wore blue jeans, a bush shirt and a battered Stetson. He was a lean six-footer with an appealing grin, behind which lay a thoughtful and at times worried expression. Neil was shorter, stocky and hatless. They had the Beechcraft waiting on the tarmac but suggested that we take a quick trip into town to get some lunch and see the sights. Most prudent travellers had phoned ahead to reserve cabs, so we were left for a while until a spare vehicle came by. Eventually a car drew up and the driver gave us a broad smile. He had a distinctly Irish look about him, but his beer belly indicated that he was in fact a true Aussie. Graeme and Neil urged me to sit in the front and from the back told the driver that we wanted a tour of the town, after which he was to drop us at a place where we might get lunch. That was the only cue he needed. For the next hour he gave us a non-stop commentary.

‘This is the greatest little town in Australia,’ he said, as though he knew instinctively that he had to try and reassure me. We drove past the clutter and mess that distinguishes mining towns the world over. He pointed out the chimney.

‘I took a greenie round some time ago. “Aren’t you worried about the smoke?” he asked. “I’m bloody worried, mate,” I said, “when there ain’t no smoke. No smoke – no work.”’

We remained silent, partly because we were pondering the remark and partly because we couldn’t get a word in edgeways. When he paused for breath I seized the opportunity and expressed surprise that there was so much work for cabs in town.

‘Look, mate, this car is worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. One quarter of a bloody million. That tells you something, eh?’

As he talked it became clear why he was so attached to Isa. Isa had given him a good living. He had worked hard in the mines for years, saved his money, bought a couple of houses and a cab, and never looked back. Graeme and Neil, both accustomed to living on remote cattle stations where there wasn’t even a cab on a tractor, sat silently while our guide gave us his view on politics and politicians, and at the same time

Mount Isa

pointed out the sights. We drove past an ordinary-looking house where, according to our guide, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh had once stayed. Then we went to look at some flats. It all reminded me of tours conducted in East Germany in the sixties.

'I'll take you to the lookout,' he said. 'You'll get a fine view from up there.'

We drove up a modest hill and climbed out of the car to stare at one of those signposts that indicate the distance to Rome, New York, London and other exotic locations. Exotic, that is, unless you happen to live in them. There seemed to be nowhere posted that wasn't thousands of miles away. When we returned, our driver immediately started to talk again.

'Did you notice anything up there?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied, taking the opportunity to pull his leg over his amazing ability to talk non-stop for well over an hour. 'It was much quieter.'

He gave a good-natured belly laugh and told us that he hoped we would have seen how green Mount Isa was becoming. There were patches of green where lawns had been carefully tended and I supposed that if you could forget about the mine and the smoke, and if Isa had been good to you and given you an opportunity in life, then it would be quite possible to think fondly of it. Neil, conscious that we had to fly that afternoon before the rains came, suggested that it might be time for lunch. Our driver recommended the Irish or the Buffalo club. Neither Graeme nor Neil were great club-men, although Graeme admitted that he might have been thrown out of the Irish club some years ago. We decided to play for safety and headed for the Buffalo. Here, somewhat reluctantly, we said farewell to our guide.

'It's a great little town,' he said, as he eased himself back into the cab. 'It's the greatest little town in Australia.'

One week later the following item appeared in the Isa-Spy column of the local newspaper, *The North West Star*:

With rumors (*sic*) still rampant that low-profile author Salman Rushdie is hiding out in Mount Isa, the spy can now report that the city has played host to another international identity.

Terry Waite, the American (*sic*) who was held hostage for two years (*sic*) in the Middle East by anti-US fanatics, made a flying visit to Isa earlier this week.

He with two other blokes, flew in, took a cab ride around town and flew out again. Purpose of the visit is unknown. Maybe he was looking for Salman?

2 Constantine

Rain clouds were gathering as we clambered into the company plane. We had lunched on steak, chops and chips, and felt suitably contented. Graeme looked happy.

‘Take a flip round the station, Neil. Let’s look at a few of the waterholes.’

As Neil started the engine and exchanged unintelligible phrases with the control tower, Graeme explained that there had been a bad drought for the past several years. This year the rains were late, but it seemed as though now there would be some water at last. As Mount Isa receded into memory, Graeme plied me with facts. Hundreds of miles of fencing; thousands of head of cattle; millions of acres of red scrubland. Every quantity was enormous except when it came to human beings. A handful of people ran the ranch at Constantine where we were to spend the night.

‘We’re now over the property,’ shouted Neil. ‘Look, that creek’s full.’

At the sight of water, Graeme’s grin developed into a broad, excited smile. ‘Bloody great,’ he shouted. ‘We need that, and more.’

Neil flew over the flat, red land.

‘If the rains keep up, within a couple of weeks we could have grass waist high.’

It was hard to believe that the parched yellow scrub would ever flourish again. We flew onwards for mile after mile. Occasionally we would spot a few head of cattle, a borehole, a dusty track winding its way into the unknown distance.

‘We’ll put down in Cloncurry,’ said Neil as he began to climb again. ‘From there it’s only half an hour by truck to the ranch. It’s the last town you’ll see for a long time.’

Cloncurry was a pleasing frontier town of five thousand inhabitants. Wide streets, a few shops, a couple of schools and a hospital with no doctor.

‘They won’t stay,’ said Neil. ‘They have to take care of the hospital, run a practice and be on call every bloody hour of the day and night. They come out here but soon pack up and go elsewhere.’

Constantine

Cloncurry lazed in the afternoon sun. It reminded me of the sets especially built by movie-makers. At any moment I expected to see a posse of desperadoes hurtling down the main street, followed by half a dozen Graeme look-alikes. We drove around in the pickup, collected a few supplies and headed out of town. Soon the bitumen gave out and we bumped on to a dirt road. The red earth and parched scrub reminded me so much of Africa. Thirty years previously I had driven through such countryside in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi. In Africa, for the first time in my life, I felt that I was in touch with the earth. The dust got into my hair and between my toes. Being in touch with elemental forces both excited and disturbed me.

Now, on the other side of the world, the same emotions stirred. This was a land still possessed by the spirits. By sheer determination European man had attempted to tame and contain. At intervals the spirits struck back with a fearsome hide-cracking drought or a super-abundance of rain that swept all before it. The survivors had entered into a respectful truce. Their faces, as burned and scored as the land that gave them their life, told the age-old story of suffering and survival. Aboriginal man, who once walked hand in hand with the spirits, now trod with uneasy, defiant step. In the city the spirits were entombed, buried beneath layers of concrete, their voices silenced. In the bush, like European man, only the strongest Aboriginal could survive. Only those who could remain totally in communion with the earth would be able to resist the debilitating forces that would reduce them into nothing more than shambling, dispossessed shadows. This was a hard, beautiful land.

*

‘In all my years in Australia, I’ve never had a better time or warmer welcome. Thank you, Phylis and Bill, for your kindness to me and my party.’

So wrote the American ambassador to Australia on 24 June 1980. I was leafing through the visitors’ book strategically placed in the guest room at Constantine. A visitor from the British High Commission had left his name without any message. He disappointed me, although I was impressed by his neat handwriting. The last entry was some two months ago: ‘Here for the challenge,’ wrote the guest.

I couldn’t resist capping this by inscribing my name and including, ‘Here for the beer.’

‘You’ll start a trend,’ said Graeme’s wife Sue, as we chatted in the kitchen. ‘We do get visitors from time to time. Foreigners think this is

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a remote place, but it's not at all. It's so near to the town that the Flying Doctor Service don't come out, although they will give advice over the phone.'

Sue was a large, jolly woman in her middle thirties. She ran her domain with efficient good humour. Her story was not an unfamiliar one. She had been a governess. That quaint Victorian designation is still given to those who are engaged to educate station children. She met and eventually married Graeme and they settled on the Constantine station. As a senior inspector for the company, Graeme had to travel to many different stations, but he admitted that he preferred to live in a more remote location.

'I don't know why that is,' he said. 'I just like it out in the bush. This is the nearest I've lived to a town for years.'

Sue laid out supper in the front room. As we ate, the rain began to fall. Again, sitting in a bungalow with the rain bouncing off the iron roof, I was reminded of Africa, especially when the mains electricity failed. Graeme didn't even move, as a standby generator automatically swung into action. I told them how thieves in Uganda, protected by the noise of the downpour, would attack during a storm. Thieves were not a problem for Graeme and Sue. They had known the odd animal to be butchered, but there was nothing serious.

The rain continued while the frogs barked joyously throughout the compound. We were sleepy. Soon after nine we called it a day. I paddled my way, under cover of the eaves, to the guest room and unfolded my map. The following day I would leave with Neil for a journey into one of the most remote locations in Australia, Rabbit Flat, some several hundred miles away on the far side of the Tanami Desert. Before getting into bed I read a warning note on the map:

CAUTION

It is possible for conventional vehicles to travel the Tanami Track but it is only recommended for experienced travellers. High clearance vehicles are recommended. Much of the track is impassable in wet weather, supply of fuel cannot be guaranteed and heat can be extreme. Organise periodic contact with a friend who is aware of your travel arrangements. The Rabbit Flat road house is one of the most remote in Australia. It was pioneered by Bruce Farrands and his French wife Jacqueline in 1969 . . .

I was soon asleep. The sound of falling rain can be very soothing.

I sat next to Neil in the co-pilot's seat of the Beechcraft. He handed me a map and pointed out that we were to fly directly west. As he conducted the final departure check he told me that he had not flown this particular route before.

'There are rain clouds about. Once we are under way I'll climb to about eight thousand feet to get above them. With a bit of luck we should be there in about three hours.'

While we taxied along the runway, Neil asked me to hold the door open to keep the cabin cool. When he had lined up for take-off I slammed it shut and we were off. Within a matter of moments Cloncurry was behind us, and before us lay the wild open space that constitutes so much of the Northern Territory. Neil set the satellite navigation system.

'These things are bloody marvellous until a satellite goes down. Then it's back to the old map and compass. When they work they can get us to within a few feet of our destination.'

We were flying over an area so remote that it wasn't even named.

'What happens if there is an emergency and we have to put down here?' I asked somewhat nervously.

'Search and Rescue would find us . . . eventually.'

The radio crackled into life, but Neil told me that we were too far away to make contact with ground control.

'We may be able to get a message through via another plane. If not I'll phone them when we arrive. If I don't do that it'll be panic stations within a few hours.'

We climbed above the cloud cover.

'I did a bloody silly thing once,' said Neil, after he had locked on to the automatic pilot. 'I was coming in to land at Isa when suddenly there was the most god-awful racket. Then I knew – too bloody late. I had forgotten to lower the undercarriage. I've never lived it down, but we all make mistakes.'

That admission of human error endeared Neil to me. Many people would have kept such an event well under

Places of solitude

wraps, but Neil, in his direct, honest manner, was quite prepared to talk about it. I told him that I had a small favour to ask of him. When I was in captivity our youngest daughter, who was a student at the time, had gone with some friends to Australia. They got hold of a car and drove up the Stuart Highway to Darwin. Later that day we were due to pass over that very road and I wanted to see it. An hour or so later Neil brought the plane down below the cloud cover. The terrain had not changed since we left Cloncurry. Red earth, scrub, a few spindly trees. Suddenly we saw a dark, straight strip in the distance.

‘That’s it,’ shouted Neil.

We came down low. Winding its way through this most remote of landscapes was the highway – totally deserted. I don’t quite know why I felt so moved. Perhaps it was the thought that while I was laying in my prison cell attempting to plot my way through the inner pathways of solitude, my daughter was travelling through this wilderness. The road stretched endlessly below us, resolute in its purpose to reach Darwin on the Gulf of Carpentaria. Within moments it was behind us and we were over untamed land again.

It was early afternoon when Neil shouted across to me that, according to the satellite system, we should be over Rabbit Flat in a few moments. To the north-west I could see a small range of hills. There was no sign of habitation.

‘See that track?’ asked Neil. Beneath us there was a winding mark in the earth as though a child had dragged a stick through the sand. ‘That’s the Tanami Track. And if I’m not mistaken we should be over the house in two minutes.’

He was not mistaken. We could now see the property. There were just a couple of buildings with a pickup truck parked alongside. A few hundred yards away someone had sweated to clear and level the desert and forge an airstrip. A threadbare windsock flapped in the half-breeze. We circled the compound looking for signs of life.

‘Perhaps they’ve gone to the supermarket,’ quipped Neil. ‘If so, they should be back in a fortnight.’ He turned to me. ‘You know,’ he said, ‘only a bloody crazy Englishman would come all this way for a cup of tea and a sandwich.’

*

It had taken me several days to reach the first true solitary situation of my journey, but that was somehow appropriate. It was in Beirut that I

Rabbit Flat

first met solitude face to face. Before that experience I had often been alone, but there were always other people around and, as and when I wished, I could seek their company. In captivity it was very different. For almost four years I was alone. The first encounter with my guards was intimidating and occasionally brutal. I was questioned and sometimes beaten. I had to learn how to control my imagination in order to prevent myself from becoming paralysed with fear. Eventually the questioning ceased and I was left alone. On odd occasions my guards would exchange a few words with me, but they were under strict orders not to talk to me. Each day, each month, each year, I was left alone with my thoughts. I discovered then that solitude needs to be approached gradually and experienced calmly. It is not just a matter of being quiet for an hour or so. Like a journey to a remote region, it takes a long time to reach the location and even longer to begin to appreciate the positive benefits of the experience.

As I stepped out of the plane at Rabbit Flat, I recognized that this wild, untamed territory represented in part an aspect of my own identity. Within me there were the remnants of an ancient aboriginal spirit. I recognized that spirit in captivity, when primitive emotions threatened to destroy me with their force and power, and also when those same emotions came to my aid to enable me to survive. It was impossible to bury them under the concrete of status or social respectability, because both had been stripped from me. Like the Aborigines of old who trod this very soil on which I was standing, and like the pioneers of yesterday whom I was about to meet, I had to be in touch with my instincts and learn how to trust them.

*

Now that the engine had been shut down, it was perfectly quiet. As Neil completed his paperwork, I climbed out and stood on the packed-earth airstrip. The nearest town to us was Alice Springs, some six hundred kilometres down the track. If we took the track, roughly fifty kilometres would see us at the Granites Mine, after which we would have an open run until we came to the Yuendumu Aboriginal Community at about the halfway point. Then there was not much else until the Tilmouth Roadhouse and, finally, Alice Springs, which is still considered to be somewhat remote.

Neil jumped down and joined me at the end of the airstrip. Nearby there was a solid iron girder to which was attached a length of chain.

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‘That’s how they keep this strip in such good condition,’ he said. ‘They hitch the girder behind a truck and tow it up and down. It’s very much cheaper than a grader and pretty effective. This is a very good strip.’

Suddenly the silence was broken and we heard the sound of a truck approaching. A battered jeep rattled into view and pulled up beside us. Behind the wheel sat a man with a full black beard and wearing an ancient Stetson. His eyes were just visible beneath the broad stained brim of his battered hat. They shone with good humour. He leaned out of the window.

‘How are yer, Terry? I’d know yer face anywhere.’

That rather took me aback. I had become accustomed to being recognized in different parts of the world but I hardly expected it at Rabbit Flat.

‘We followed yer troubles, mate. Bloody hell, what bastards there are in the world. My name’s Bruce. Bruce Farrands.’

He leapt nimbly out of the cab and helped us put the luggage in the truck. The three of us then clambered into the front seat and bumped off down the track towards the house.

‘My wife Jacqui’s at home. Glynn is also here at the moment. He’s my son. A twin. The other one is away in the military.’

We drove past two petrol pumps, vintage 1960. Attached to one of them was a notice: ‘Please check price before filling up.’ Good advice, I thought, although if you were low on fuel there were no other options. Bruce stopped in front of the house and let us out.

‘I’ll put the truck around the back. You go in.’

We entered into what appeared to be a communal dining room. In a corner was a serving hatch protected by a strong wire grille. Behind it were stocks of biscuits, chocolate and tinned goods. A young man appeared from behind the dry goods and gave us a rather surprised look, followed by a shy smile.

‘Hold on, I’ll let you in.’

We heard a key turn in the lock and the side door opened. We followed him down a small passageway into what was the family room. Outside I could hear the familiar hum of a diesel generator. All the windows were covered with curtains or blinds, and an air-conditioner groaned in the corner.

There was a TV, radio, books; in fact it seemed that virtually everything the family possessed was in this one room. Years ago when we lived in Rome, someone told me that at heart the Romans were in fact