

Excerpt from the book:

TILL YOUR FATHER GETS HOME

— a memoir

"The deepest search in life it seemed to me, the thing that in one way or another was central to all living, was man's search to find a father, not merely the father of his flesh, not merely the lost father of his youth, but the image of a strength and wisdom external to his need and superior to his hunger, to which the belief and power of his own life could be united."

— Thomas Wolfe

Chapter 34: Lightning Strikes

I stuff three loaves of bread and ten cans of sardines into my backpack. I tie my sleeping bag to its frame. I then take a bus to the outskirts of Sydney. There I start hitchhiking. The first day I cover three hundred miles into the parched Australian Outback. That night, sweating inside my down bag, I sleep beneath the stars. At dawn I wake up to the loud squawking of cockatoos. After breakfasting on bread and sardines, I hit the hot road again. By the time I cover the last two hundred miles, the temperature has soared into the hundreds.

Finally, not having passed another car on the road for over an hour, my ride arrives in Lightning Ridge. I get out and find myself in the middle of nowhere. Mounds of white

slag, like bleached anthills, dot the baked landscape. These are the opal mines. Nearby, without plumbing or electricity, recluse miners live in shacks fashioned from kerosene tins they've hammered flat. Building codes are the least of the laws that go unenforced in Lightning Ridge. I feel as if I've traveled back in time to the Old American West. It's not yet noon, but everyone's in the pub. So I head there too.

Coming out of the bright sunlight, I stand like a blind man in the doorway of the darkened bar. I can smell beer though, and the dim saloon chills the sweat on the back my neck. As I wait for my eyes to adjust to the cave-like dimness, hardly a head turns in my direction. Making my way over to the bar, I ask for Werner. "A German miner," I explain, not knowing most of these miners are German. Before the bartender replies, I spot Werner sitting on a stool at the end of the bar.

"Werner!" I say with a smile, going up to him. "Hey! I made it."

He stares at me with dead eyes, and looks away.

"Tom. From the Opal Centre in Sydney. Remember?"

He doesn't look at me.

"You told me to come out and see Lightning Ridge," I explain. "I just got here."

Staring straight ahead, Werner drinks his pint. It clearly isn't his first. All the good will that gushed out of him while selling opals to Matthew is gone. I start sweating again.

"Well," I say, swallowing, "you said to look you up when I got to Lightning Ridge. Remember?"

Still staring forward, the squat miner shakes his big head. He sets his glass on the bar. The conversation seems over. Standing at his elbow, I don't know what to do. I've just hitchhiked 500 miles into the Outback, and my only contact is pretending he doesn't know me.

"Do you know a place where I can stay?"

Werner shakes his head. Out of the corner of my eye I notice two grungy miners staring at me. Then Werner turns and fixes his dead eyes on me.

"You stand someplace else," he commands.

I turn and walk away. In the shadowy pub I feel as if I'm in a dream. I have no bearings. I float over to a table, set my gear beneath it and sit down. Nobody is looking at me. Maybe I've ceased to exist.

"G'day, mate."

A bulky youth about my age has walked up to my table.

"I'm Dieter," he says, sticking out his hand.

I shake it. "Tom," I say, noticing his German accent. I glance over at Werner, still hunched over the bar.

"You know him?" asks Dieter, pulling out a chair and sitting down.

I tell him my story.

"Not a good time. No luck. And very hot. Forget about him," says Dieter, waving his arm. "Very bad news."

"Are you mining opals?" I ask.

Dieter nods his head and tells me his story. He's on his own – and has had no luck.

"This is every day," he says, nodding at the drinking miners. "Telling stories of almost finding black opal, of maybe finding black opal." He waves his hand dismissively. "Not many young people here. Nice to see you," he says. "You want beer?"

"No thanks. Do you know where I can find a place to stay?"

He shakes his head. "No places to stay."

For someone so young, Dieter's a prophet of doom.

"Where do you stay?" I ask.

"I live here. I have nice old wreck of car I sleep in."

"You sleep in a wrecked car?"

"It is like my home. I have other car too, that works. But this wreck is my house."

"I saw a lot of wrecks in town," I say, nodding.

"And not just the autos," grins Dieter. We both laugh. "Hey," he says, resting his elbows on the table. "When I drive to my house car to sleep, you can have a sleep in my working car. Is okay?"

"Sounds good," I say.

"I show you."

As we leave, I glance over my shoulder at Werner. He never looks up.

Outside Digger's Rest Pub, the blistering sun sings us. Inside Dieter's car, it's even hotter. He drives me around to see some of the mines. Each anthill of bleached slag is heaped up against a tower of wooden crossbeams, crowned by a hand pulley for excavating more slag. Each mine is worked by a solitary miner. A loner mentality prevails in Lightning Ridge.

Dieter is very friendly. He likes having someone his age for company. So we spend the day together. He shows me the wrecked car with no tires where he sleeps. But it's too hot for much sightseeing. We soon retreat to the pub's shaded coolness. Digger's Rest is the town's epicenter, and I now understand why. It will be evening before it's cool enough to go back outside.

As Dieter and I walk to his car, an orange sunset splashes across the horizon, firing the clouds with a numinous glow. We stop and stare in awe.

"How does He do it?" I say, half aloud.

"Who?"

"How does God do it?"

"Ahk! I don't like that talk," scowls Dieter, waving one arm dismissively.

"What talk?" I ask, surprised by his violent reaction.

"Gott! I don't want to hear about Gott!" He walks away.

I linger a few moments longer, staring at the sunset, before following Dieter to his car. That night when he retires to his wreck of a home, I stand looking up at the stars. I search out the Pleiades, which can also be seen in the Northern Hemisphere, close my eyes and focus on Andrew in Boston. Then I roll out my sleeping bag on the back seat of Dieter's working car. I've borrowed this National Guardsman-issued down bag from my brother-in-law, but it's designed for cold weather. Alternately sweating inside the bag and lying on top of it as prey for mosquitoes, I spend a sweaty, sleepless night on Dieter's back seat.

But that night's misery is nothing compared to the next day's anguish.

I spend a large part of that second day alone, wandering around town. As I witness the way of life in Lightning Ridge, I begin to lose hope – both in my quest and in humanity. Base desires motivate so many here. If most people aren't willing to strive for higher consciousness, how can universal redemption ever be possible? I wander despondently. I sense the dying quality of the town permeating my being. I'm feeling heavy as lead when I come upon a café that serves coffee and tea instead of booze. I enter and sit at a table. A friendly woman serves me. I take out my journal and begin to write. I soon find my center. Hardly a soul enters the café all day. It becomes my private sanctuary.

The next night is Christmas Eve, and Diggers Rest is rocking. A two-bit performer entertains the miners. Into a fuzzy microphone he sings pop standards interspersed with stale jokes. I remain outside under the stars. I've only just spotted the Pleiades when I hear the amateur singer breaking into Frank Sinatra's "My Way." His affected lisp is what draws my attention.

*"Yesth, there were times, I'm sure you knew
When I bit off more than I could chew."*

The crowd's raucous laughter clues me in. The hack performer is doing a gay cover of the song:

*"But through it all, when there was doubt,
I ate it up and th-spit it out.
I faced it all and I th-stood tall;
And did it my way."*

As the bar roars with laughter, I find myself walking farther away from town. On this lunar landscape, I feel as if I am walking off the end of the earth. But I don't care. I keep walking. It's the anniversary of Christ's birth, and I feel so far from that spirit. Tears fill my eyes. I'm thinking of Christmas Eves of midnight Mass and Christmas mornings of family togetherness. I keep walking – away. I must get away from this squalor. I must get back to Boston. I need a spiritual support group. I think of Roger and his Somerville house of Buddhist meditators. If I'm not to lose all hope, if I'm to foster any faith, I need a nexus.

Suddenly through the pub's fuzzy microphone come the lyrics of Elton John's "Candle in the Wind." The poignant words about Marilyn Monroe pry open my heart. I'm moved to remember we're all just as fragile – and lonely and lost. My faith is a candle in the wind, and I must shield it. I turn around – with a plan – and head back to town.

The next morning, Christmas day, I sit sipping tea in my café sanctuary. Three noisy teenagers soon enter, abusing the quiet. As they sprawl in chairs at the table next to mine, they boisterously order breakfast. From their

conversation I piece together that they've come to Lightning Ridge on holiday and, having drunk themselves silly, are now headed home. I overhear something about "Newcastle" and "one hour". I know Newcastle is in the general direction of Sydney, so I make a quick decision. I ask them if I can catch a lift. They glance at each other and shrug. I hurry to Dieter's car wreck of a home to fetch my backpack. My German host is nowhere in sight, but time is short. I hurry back to the café, throw my gear in the teens' car and leave without bidding farewell to Dieter.

We haven't driven far on the desolate road out of Lightning Ridge, when one of the Aussie youths shouts, "Galah!" Instantly the driver brakes. All three boys then tumble out of the car. They don't strike me as bird-watcher types, and they're not. They fetch rifles out of the trunk and take aim at the cockatoos – or galahs. I'm just glad that they miss. Cursing, they toss their rifles back into the "boot," and we take off again. But it isn't long before the same scenario is replayed: the shout, the abrupt stop, the scramble, and potshots at pink and gray cockatoos. I can't believe I've bummed a ride with rowdy riflemen. Then again, I've truly been in the Wild, Wild West these past few days. In different circumstances I would have abandoned this ride and thumbed another. But I don't have that option

in the Outback. We've been on the road an hour, and not a single car has passed us in either direction. Resigning myself to sitting quietly in back, I take deep breaths and cancel my negative thoughts. All will work out. This ride is a means to getting home.

We're back on our way only briefly though, when I hear a siren. I haven't seen a cop since Sydney, so I assume it's an ambulance. Turning to look out the rear window, I spot a police car bearing down on us. Where did *that* come from? Accelerating up to our back bumper, the cop car forces us to pull over. The teen driver brakes in a cloud of dust.

"Fuckin' shit!" says the kid who's riding shotgun. "The heroin's still in the boot!"

I don't believe what I'm hearing. The cop orders us out of the car. I open my door, get out, and stand fatalistically on the side of the road. My spirits have sunk so low these last few days, it almost seems fitting I get busted for heroin possession. When the cop orders the driver to open the "boot," I don't even walk to the back of the car. I don't want to witness the bust. I'm trying to take deep breaths when I hear a rustling sound and the click of metal. I turn to see the cop, hand on the butt of his holstered gun, demanding permits for the rifles. The three teens fish them out of their wallets. While the cop

looks over the permits, he fails to search the trunk further. He thrusts the papers back at the boys and waves us on our way.

Back in the car, the overexcited teens talk all at once, while I whisper prayerful thanks. I hold my breath for the next half hour. We don't shoot at any more cockatoos. When we pull into a one-street town, I breathe more easily. While the driver fills the car with petrol, and the other two boys head for the restroom, I gather up my gear. Without a word I quietly open the rear door, step out of the car, and walk away. Heading down a wooden sidewalk, I have no idea where I'm going, but I don't look back.

"Tom!"

I've barely walked a block when I hear my name. I turn around.

"Where you bound, mate?"

"Evan?"

It's the Opal Centre's in-house expert, staring at me over his half-moon eyeglasses! I can't believe it: Evan is staying at his brother-in-law's place, only a few miles from here. He invites me to come stay with them. He'll be driving back to Sydney in three days, he explains, so I can catch a lift then. I can't believe my good fortune.

"Is Jill with you?" I ask.

"No. She's in Sydney, writing her book." Evan rolls his eyes. "*Ballet Be Damned.*"

We drive out to an isolated, run-down cabin surrounded by parched fields, rusted machinery and bleached cattle skulls. There's no well, so water is scarce. Everyone takes turns sharing the same inch-deep bath water (as guest, I thankfully get to bathe first). After the last bather, the murky water is scooped up to irrigate the garden. The third day there I snap a photo of myself sitting in a rusted rowboat in the sun-baked backyard. The image sums up my beached metaphysical quest.

When I arrive back in Sydney, my plan is still intact: I'll return to Boston to my spiritual support group. But, thanks to my godmother, I have airplane tickets to five other Australian cities. So I decide I'll touch down in each town for a day or two. I'll still be going home – just in a roundabout way. Meanwhile, I'll work one more week at the Opal Centre to earn some travel money.

But the week doesn't go as smoothly as I planned. The signs of my descent into Lightning Ridge begin to show. I can't pray or meditate. Dashing my week-old New Year's resolution, I go back to drinking. Indulging the skewed logic that the darker regions must be traversed before light can break, I start reading Henry Miller's *Tropic of*

Cancer – a far cry from Sri Aurobindo's *the Adventure of Consciousness*. I've been knocked to the ground, and before picking myself up, I intend to wallow in the mud awhile. A week of cloudy unmindfulness ensues. I earn the eighty bucks to finance my trip home, but I begin to question if I have the strength to renew the arduous work of awakening. But I'm buoyant. I have a sense of humor about my plight. In Seaforth I take another photo of myself, leaning against the sign for "Hope Street." But the sign underneath warns: "Not A Through Road."

When Saturday, the 11th of January, arrives, I'm giddy with anticipation. I head for the bus that will take me to the Sydney airport. Wearing my straw-hat, with my knapsack flung over my shoulder, I have a bounce in my step. As I sing the theme from *Midnight Cowboy* ("I'm going where the sun keeps shining/ Through the pouring rain"), I see my smiling face reflected in a shop window.

My first stop will be Canberra – "meeting place" in the Aborigine tongue. It's Australia's capital territory, like Washington D.C. in the States. The highest peak on the continent lies outside Canberra. My plan is to hitchhike to Mt. Kosciusko and climb it. There I will meditate and pray and attempt to regain the clarity I lost in Lightning Ridge.

After my flight lands in Canberra, I claim my backpack from the baggage carousel and stand glancing around. I'm wondering which direction to head in, when a big, bearded aborigine walks up to me.

"You need a lift," he says.

It isn't a question. It's a statement, and it's prescient. I stare into the piercing eyes of the bushy-bearded, black-skinned man. It takes me a moment to recall that "a lift" means "a ride" in Australia.

"Yeah, okay," I say, quickly recovering.

"Wait here a second," he says.

I watch the aborigine walk away and approach another luggage carousel. There he greets two middle-aged men in suits. They look Eastern, as if they might be from India. He picks up both their suitcases and gestures with his beard for me to follow. As the three men cut diagonally across the concourse, one of the Easterners looks over at me and asks the aborigine something. I don't hear the question, but I hear the answer.

"No," says the bearded stranger. "He's not a Bahá'í."