

Dispatch No 4 – Wednesday, January 9 (evening)

A ‘cleavage’ of utes

It’s one of the largest coal deposits in the world, and over the ten-minute journey to the campsite we pass farmland, other accommodation villages and gates that lead to mining sites, and I’m reminded that by far the most ubiquitous landscape feature out here is nothing. In every direction, all the way to the horizon, apart from the odd something which, no matter its size, always looks inconsequential and tiny, because of all the nothing.

Untouched scrub and desert nothing, cleared and dusty expanses of nothing, idle machinery and structures where nothing’s happening, all in the dull, drab and dirty nothing colours of grey, white, orange, green and yellow.

Early in the morning, as well as between 5 and 6 pm, huge bits of mining machinery, trucks, mining-spec utes and buses crowd the roads, and there is plenty of open-cut and

underground coal mining occurring all around, but it is nothing compared to all the nothing.

Last year, when I first arrived, everything I knew about mining I'd gleaned from television, movies, and that theme-park roller-coaster ride where you race around in a mining cart. I've never seen anything like that out here and, even if those carts ever were part of the Australian mining industry, I'm sure they've been long decommissioned, as there's no way they'd satisfy safety standards that prohibit boots without steel caps, brisk walking and pointy hats. Extremely disappointing, as those carts would be a far more fun way to get to work than the bus.

I've since realised that the reason that nobody in the media ever reports on the nothing is that there's nothing exciting about it. At least at the beginning of this swing, I'm not eagerly looking out of the bus window for huge machinery rushing around, frequent explosions, or dwarves and dragons, as they've always been in every movie I've seen that features mining.

Instead, I look out to the horizon and, once off the bus at the campsite, I notice that the sun is setting, and the few wisps of cloud in the sky are on fire. Away in the distance are black clouds smudged to the ground, meaning rain might hit tonight, tomorrow, or miss us completely.

I walk past the neat rows of utes. There are at least forty here, and I wonder what the collective noun for them might be. A tribal-tattoo of utes? A Jägerbomb of utes? A cleavage, footy, Bali holiday, bong, spoiler, personalised numberplate, regiment or porn of utes? Maybe just a jerky of utes?

'Donga' is one of several words I've learnt since becoming a FIFO, and one of the few that isn't swearing. It's the official name for mining site accommodation, and walking towards mine down the identical rows, I'm reminded of the overwhelming jail vibe of this whole place, and I realise I've forgotten the number. So I search for my key as it's written on the tag, but already know I've left it at home. Meaning there is something more pathetic than an adult with no keys, and that's a grown man who only needs one key, but couldn't even remember that.

Luckily, the campsite manager is in. He hands me the spare and reminds me to return it during my next swing, and that we're supposed to drop off the keys before leaving anyway. I notice there's another spare for my donga still on the wall, meaning there are three copies of every key, and wonder if anyone has ever misplaced all of them, or if I did it, I'd be the first. Maybe I should just start leaving my door unlocked as so many of the other guys do.

Inside, my donga is as lifeless as I left it. Each one at this campsite is about the size of a small caravan or average bathroom, and contains a single bed, flatscreen television, wardrobe, bar fridge, and a separate shower and toilet. In inner-city Sydney, I believe they're rented out for hundreds of dollars a week and called 'luxury townhouses'.

The dongas are nothing special, but they're certainly better than backpacker accommodation, in which I've spent way too many nights as an over-thirty. A bed of nails, in my opinion, is also superior to backpacker accommodation, as a bed of nails has never given me scabies or bedbugs, or had noisy,

bed-rattling sex with an American tourist on the bunk above me, then vomited all over my rucksack. Which was open.

I've always felt weird about the flatscreen TV though, which is designed to be watched from bed. Each time I've met a person with a television in their bedroom I've judged them, as bedrooms are meant for far superior activities. There was a TV in Verity's bedroom, and it's the only thing in that room that was never turned on. Sly wink.

Although the light is fading it's still oppressively hot – 41°C according to my phone – so I change out of my jeans and shirt into shorts, a singlet and thongs, then head for the dining room.

It's just after 7 pm, and there's hardly anyone smoking and drinking at the end of the rows, while before the break there were plenty, and I wonder if that's because of numerous New Year's resolutions, or if most of the others aren't back yet, although the number out and about was always a fraction of the total staying here. Similar to the rowdy passengers on public transport, it's those you notice that are the most memorable, and not the silent majority keeping to themselves.

The two small groups that have formed are carrying on the same as always, taking turns to brag about their obsessions: women, drinking, petrol-driven things, gambling and more drinking. Over the Xmas break I heard what I've since learnt is a popular term for them – 'CUBS'. It stands for 'cashed-up bogans'; however, a quick internet search reveals that outside Australia 'cubs' refers to a young 'bear', and a 'bear' is a man who's large, hairy and homosexual. It then occurs to me that

in this heat, we'd all be more comfortable if we were naked, and I instantly feel weird for having those two thoughts so close together.

Right now, in my thongs, shirt and shorts, the only thing separating me from the cubs is my lack of a wedding ring and lower wages.

Night edges in slowly here if you watch for it, but look away and concentrate on something else for a moment and it'll suddenly become dark, which happens tonight over the short walk from my donga to the dining room.

After lining up with a plate and poised to start piling on food from the row of steaming bain-maries, a large woman behind that counter barks at me, 'No! Not you.'

'Pardon?'

'No singlets,' she tells me.

I glance at the men in singlets already eating, as well as those in high-vis, which is also banned at dinnertime, and say nothing else. She's likely been waiting all evening to act the enforcer, watching for someone she suspected wouldn't argue back, and we both know she's chosen wisely.

Across from my donga, two guys are chatting while sipping mid-strength beers, and notice me enter mine wearing a singlet, then leave wearing a shirt.

'Get kicked out of the dining room, did ya, mate?' asks one.

'By that big lesbian looking bird?' asks the other.

'That's right,' I reply.

'I bet you she wants to screw you,' says the other.

'A sweet looking kid like you. Be careful, she might tear it off,' adds one.

They both laugh, and I smile back. I'm guessing that I'm older than both of them, but with their deep crow's-feet and flab, they look at least five years older than me.

I head back to the dining room. I've picked a shirt with a frayed collar hoping that she'll have a go at me about it, but she doesn't even glance up while I fill my plate with meat. Verity's a vegan, so apart from dinners with my parents, I've had hardly any over the last couple of weeks, and I pile my plate high with it. I've managed to drop 10 kilos over the holidays, and will continue with the healthy eating tomorrow.

Although I get through two and a half plates of it, the meat is tough and stringy, which I mention to the two guys who don't seem to have moved from their position across from my donga.

'All the decent chefs got the arse,' one tells me.

'There's only that lesbian and a kid now,' says the other.

'This whole place is almost empty. They're moving everyone out. I think they're going to close it down,' one continues.

The other one explains that this is one of the smaller campsites, and it was only ever meant to be temporary accommodation for the construction workers as they worked on the larger campsites designed to last decades, not months.

A third guy has joined them, who I remember from my previous swings. Every night he'd be on his laptop until midnight, online gambling and drinking from an Esky, while continually offering free beers to any passers-by, who were then dragged into his monologue. Tonight he's got the Esky at his side, but no laptop, and is talking about how he's

given up the horses and is committed to winning his family back.

After getting my laptop, I head back to the dining area, and set myself up in the adjoining covered and mostly empty outdoor area. Where I angle a chair and table for a view of my small tree, just as I did almost every evening last year. It doesn't seem to have changed at all over the break and, if I had to guess, I'd say it even had the same number of leaves. Then I resume working through the pile of admin around my upcoming comedy and fringe festival appearances, and although this is my first night back, I feel like I could've been sitting here for a minute or months, so little has changed.

At 10 pm I'm hopefully tired enough for sleep, so I depart for my donga, where I turn up the air conditioning, and not just because it's still oppressively hot. All that meat for dinner has done some awful things to my stomach, and whatever I eat out here usually has a similarly gassy effect. Sometimes I fantasise about how good it'd be to have a girl sharing my donga, but I'd probably explode or rupture something internally from holding in all that gas whenever she's around.

So even though it isn't great for the environment I keep the air conditioner pumping, as I fart like a champion out here so am terrified of accidentally gassing myself to death, and leaving the window open isn't an option due to the constant noise from the diesel generator and mining activity.

Mourner one: 'Such a tragedy. Poor Xavier, he had so much potential, and he was so close to paying off those debts.'

Mourner two: 'No, he wasn't actually.'

Mourner one: 'Oh. Still, he was trying. So do you know how he went? Was it suicide?'

Mourner two: ‘You haven’t heard? He actually farted himself to death.’

Both mourners stare at each other, trying badly to suppress giggles, which turns to laughter and catches on until everyone at the service including the celebrant is laughing loudly.

Mourner two: ‘So you know what did him in? Three steaks, a full bowl of spaghetti bolognese, four sausages and three hamburgers.’

Mourner one: ‘That’s so gross! Eating like that, he was never going to last.’

Which is exactly what I’d just had for dinner, and I realise that if the power goes out, there’s still a chance I might expire, so I also open the window a crack. Just before I find sleep, I remember that tomorrow I’ll probably find out whether I’m going to get that time off or lose my job, and lay awake for over an hour, stressing about all sorts of things I can do nothing about.