

## THE ROAD TRIP

You know the expression ‘know-it-all’? Parents or teachers can throw it at you like nunchakus, like it’s an insult? Well, I take it as a compliment because to tell you the truth, there’s not too much I don’t know. Unfortunately, the little bit of what I *don’t* know happens to be the most important stuff. What I *do* know is a whole lot of crap. I absorb inane things from Google like other people soak up their hot chips in vinegar. This is great for trivia nights at Barker Street High, but it’s not so great for anything else in particular, except annoying people.

Another cliché that gets thrown at me a lot is, ‘life wasn’t meant to be easy’. What I’ve learned about this is that when it’s said to me it’s not a generic phrase or an accepted fact of life, it’s directly concerning me. *My* life wasn’t meant to be easy. If God exists, he’s got it in for

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me and if karma's the thing, then I was Adolf Hitler in a past life. My name is Hunter Samuel James. I'm 16. And I think I am in hell.

# 1770

I didn't like the sunshine. It was blinding, blistering and made me sweat profusely. It could actually kill a person, so I was pretty justified in hating it.

I didn't like the sand. It was hot. It felt awful between my toes. The dry sand sounded like lobsters dying when I walked over it and the wet sand felt like I was walking in cold cow dung.

I didn't like the ocean. It was always too cold, even in summer. It fizzed up my nose like a soluble aspirin and it dumped me like a sumo-wrestling girlfriend, leaving me choking and broken. It could also kill a person. Actually, sand was also capable of killing a person if you poured enough of it down their throats or buried them in it and waited for the tide to come in. But I guess it could be more of a weapon because you also needed a perpetrator.

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Life was not meant to be easy. It was meant to be a treacherous obstacle course, a cruel gauntlet, and right then I was in the thick of it. The reason I was there and not asleep on a desk at a school in suburban Brisbane, with my headphones surreptitiously wedged into my ears, was because my mother went mad. She used to be normal – not tuckshop normal, but normal enough.

‘What are you writing?’ she called across to me.

‘An SOS note,’ I said back at her. ‘Got a bottle? I need to be rescued.’

My step-dad looked over and gave a pathetic laugh. Step, as I called him, was so lame.

‘Who will rescue you, Hunny?’ my sister, Pippa, asked. ‘A mermaid? Ariel?’

My sister was one of those girls who would never be hip cool. She still had a stash of Barbie dolls tucked up the back of her cupboard, which is kind of embarrassing when you’re ten. But Pippa wasn’t like your average ten-year-old. Pip was a special ten-year-old. Her milestones weren’t necessarily on the same timeline as other kids her age.

Six weeks with these people was going to do my head in. And then there was the baby. The baby! I wasn’t even going to get started on that!

School was bad enough. But homeschooling was worse when your mother and step-father were your teachers and you had to live with them twenty-four-seven in a

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cramped two-room tent. I was just moving into the second half of year ten when Mum came up with this completely insane idea. She'd always been a bit alternative – not tie-dye and dreadlocks alternative – just experimentally colourful and tortured by the idea that she was missing out on some spiritual secret, some philosophical lucky dip bag that no one had offered her. *It'll be fun. A real adventure. You guys will learn so much more from the real world than you could ever learn in a book!*

Mum was a writer. She wrote bits and pieces for newspapers and magazines. But she was writing a novel this year, and apparently the day-to-day stress of crafting words left her blocked, literarily constipated, and mentally burned out. So she decided to take a sabbatical, she called it her '40 days in the desert'. But what we all knew, but weren't saying out loud, was that Mum went nuts. She had a nervous breakdown or whatever you call it. It was actually pretty serious. She overdosed on pills and we nearly lost her.

It really made me sick whenever I thought about that day; when I found her with foam in her mouth and her face all blue. I really thought she was dead. In that moment everything rushed at me like a tsunami. She would have a funeral and be gone. Forever. Just like that. But then she'd groaned and the ambulance made it just in time.

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I didn't like this beach adventure she'd dragged us on, but I liked it a whole lot more than not having her around. When I thought about that near-disaster, the hinges on the sides of my jaws began to ache. I didn't ever want to let Mum get that desperate and hopeless again. I would try to make this stupid sabbatical work for her. But geez, really, I found it pretty hard to get juiced up about the whole thing.

There was nothing especially nice about the sautéing sun on the white, dusty beach with the world's most annoying family, so hopefully the 'mini-break' would be just what she needed and we could all go back to Brisbane soon. I felt like she was trying to conquer some demon – battle some invisible secret curse that she was wearing around her shoulders like a leaden shawl.

We didn't even have a destination – had no idea where we were headed. Mum just kept saying she'd know when we got there. Talk about vague. We were only with her because we were all afraid to let her go alone. I suspected that none of us really *wanted* to be on the road, except perhaps Pippa, who was always happy to tag along behind anyone who bought her the occasional ice-cream.

Mum even bought everyone a travel journal and a new Parker pen, to document this 'adventure'. So I was going blind in the sun, scribbling stuff about scribbling stuff in this book. Pippa would no doubt use hers to craft pages

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and pages of barely distinguishable mermaid blobs. I tried to talk Mum into letting me bring my own laptop so I could record the trip in a blog. That way I could spend most of my time on Facebook and maintain my connection with the rest of the world. But Mum wasn't having a bar of that. She was going all hippy trippy and wanted us to live like primitive people.

There was one computer and that was hers, which was completely unfair. I was banned from social media for the duration of the trip and that was probably the hardest thing to deal with. It took me about two days to realise I had a serious Facebook addiction. I was actually feeling physical withdrawal symptoms. When I thought about what I was missing in terms of updates, notifications and personal messages, I broke out in a cold sweat.

By the time we'd get back I'd probably have four million notifications. I had even been lying awake at night plotting how I could get away from the family – head to a shopping centre, or something, so I could use a public computer and let my friends know I was still alive. Maybe I could suggest a trip to the library. Like that wouldn't be suss.

My pale skin was melting into the sand and a rash of itchy red lumps had burst across my chest like mutant measles. I was totally allergic to camping. I seriously had not worn shorts or taken off my shirt in public since I was a toddler. I owned 17 black t-shirts and four pairs

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of black skinnys, three pairs of Connies and a stack of boxer shorts. If my mates could have seen me in a pair of board shorts, I would never have lived it down. 'Heavy Metal meets Malibu Ken!' I could hear Jesse taunting me now.

It was hot.

It was dry.

It was powdery.

The sand made my skin crawl.

I clawed at the angry puss-filled welts over my chest before hopping all the way to the water's edge, trying to avoid blistering my feet. Sand. It was freaking horrible stuff.

'Do we all remember why this place is called 1770?' Mum called from behind me.

'Because Captain Cook landed here in 1770,' yelled Step.

He really was like another big kid. I was sure the question wasn't directed at him but he wanted to show us all how clever he was. How sad and yet amusing. I waded into the water and bounced over tiny ripples of waves, to escape more inane questions that were meant to expand our general knowledge.

1770 was a stupid name for a town. It was a year. Just a bunch of numbers. I guessed Cook thought he was being clever too. Like my parents thought they were being clever when they named me Hunter.

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Really? *Hunter*? I felt like I should have been born with a khaki hard hat and a shotgun. I was one of many kids of my generation with first names that sounded like surnames. In my form class alone there was Madison, Carter, Mackenzie, Harrison, Riley, Jackson and Nelson. And just to add insult to that injury, my surname was James, which is clearly a first name. No wonder I was messed up and back-to-front!

At school the kids mucked around with my name and sometimes they went too far, but generally speaking I had become known as 'Fox'. This was mainly on account of my red hair (I like to think), although there was a running joke that if there was any kind of hunt going on, I'd be the fox and not the hunter. I was not what you call ... herculean. I wore my red hair kind of shoulder length with a long fringe. It was not just a fashion statement, it hid my wingnut ears. All those early school photos had me looking like that kid on the front of the *Mad* magazine. But now I was kind of hidden, kind of shadowy.

Mum called us all Goths. Man, she was way off. If I wore black nail polish and skull rings, I'd be a Goth. My people, my crew, we were just into dark clothes and long hair because it was simple and comfortable not to be 'cool'. Not to be anything at all. And for the record, the word 'cool' wasn't even cool. 'Cool' was actually a buzz word for 'lame'.

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It would be nice to think that I was nicknamed Fox as in 'the king hornbag of the school' but that honour was reserved for Mack Bentley. He was the guy who made my life a misery. The guy had some kind of radar with my name on it and he knew just which buttons to press. He would always be the first to notice a headlight zit on my chin or a new schoolbag, and he would go out of his way to make me feel like a total loser. He was actually another reason I agreed to come on this ridiculous road trip north. Sure, it was nice to get out of a few weeks of school, but mostly I needed a break from Mack Bentley's relentless bullshit. Mack Bentley would love the beach. He was all tanned and cut and could probably even surf. I couldn't believe Katie Ford fell for that. I was counting on the fact that my absence would make her realise how much she missed me and she would notice what a tosser Mack was. Or maybe she wouldn't even notice that I was gone.

When it came to creating stupid names for people, I had recently managed to do a bit of that myself. Most of my mates who had a step-dad called them by their first names. Jesse had Steve and Katie called her step-father, Tommo. Step would like me to call him Dad, but it was for that very reason I resisted. There were other reasons as well, of course, as to why I called him Step, short for step-father. He hated it. His real name was Brad and I was never going to call him Brad. Brad was just ... it was

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just so much of a 'cool-lame', jock name and my step-father was anything but a jock.

Even though the water was too cold for my liking, I couldn't lose face by turning back. I ploughed through the froth, letting the sting of salt season my goose-bumped legs. That first splash against the sack had me gasping. *Whooo!* Antarctica in underpants-land. I felt my balls retreat like little pill-bugs.

Pippa was squealing from the shallows like someone was skinning her. That kid could punch notes sopranos would kill to be able to hit. It wasn't just Pippa. It was a girl thing. Even the chicks in my year ten class could strip three layers of skin off the back of your neck every time they saw a picture of the latest sexy vampire dude from Hollywood. I was pale and weedy. I hated direct sunlight and I was definitely no vegetarian, but I was not pulling chicks like those *Twilight* guys. Weedy and geeky might look good on the big screen but it didn't translate well in school.

My skin was actually whiter than the sand and I could barely see for the explosive light. We were only a few hours north of Brisbane but already I felt like we'd moved closer to the sun. It was hotter, brighter and more unnerving than the comfortable dull greys of the city. I still needed a doona at night in Brissie, but on the beach I felt like I was a raw prawn sizzling on a barbeque. I had a slop of baked beans and stale toast in my belly,

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popping gas bubbles. Baked beans was pov food. It was up there with packet macaroni. Gross. But as our campsites offered little more than communal hotplates, we were stuck with non-perishable things, such as baked beans and cans of tuna.

I was jumping up and down on my toes as each wave crept higher, freezing a further portion of my body, distracted by the discomfort on my startled skin. I did not belong there. Everything was foreign. Kind of surreal.

I was dwelling on how much of a fish out of water I was when I saw an actual fish jump about a metre in front of me. I got such a surprise that I lost my balance and the water karate-kicked me off my feet. I was buffeted about like a sock in a washing machine, the outer edges of my body tingled and fizzed. I finally found my feet and pulled myself up out of the turbulent surf and looked back toward the beach, rivulets of salty water cascading into the corners of my mouth, my hair covering my eyes like a slick veil. Pippa was laughing maniacally.

‘Get dumped, eh buddy?’ Step called.

I ignored him. It sounded like a rhetorical question anyway.

Mum sat on the beach, fussing over the baby’s hat. She was a complete nazi about sunscreen and the poor little guy was lathered in it, like a fish fillet drowning in

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batter. He flailed his fat arms and legs in the air while Mum tried to fasten the blue bonnet to his head.

I didn't get babies. Sure, I knew I was one once. Mum never ceased to remind me of the fact. I understood the biological framework. Babies grew into toddlers, who grew into snotty-nosed kids, who grew into me, who grew into – I looked over at Step, pretending he was still a teenager and failing – who grew into adults or at least larger people who seemed hell-bent on controlling the world and everything in it while trying rather pointlessly to act 'cool'.

What I mostly didn't get was people's ridiculous obsession with babies. The *gooing* and *gahing* made me gag. *Isn't he gorgeous? What a cute little burp. His farts are adorable.* Puppies were cute. Kittens were cute. Baby meerkats were cute. But human babies had incredibly ill-proportioned heads compared to their bodies, like aliens. They were nearly always rolled in blubber and were bald, and they dribbled and cried endlessly. It was a stage, a phase, and an unpleasant phase at that. I couldn't wait for that little doughy windbag to grow up and stop doing all those things that grown-ups thought were cute.

Half the time I thought the poor kid was bellowing because of his name. Who would call a baby Ranger? Mum and Step swore they just loved the name but it was clear the baby was named after Step's 1986 red

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Range Rover. And that was sad. Naming your kid after a dead relative, a favourite celebrity, a saint – that made a certain amount of sense. That was acceptable. Naming it after your car was bordering on child abuse. I loved my ‘Plan B’ skateboard but I was not going to name my son after it! I was a bit obsessed with names. It was just one of those things that interested me. My favourite name, a name I would change my name to, if ever I felt the need, was Balthazar. Yes, Balthazar.

Pippa and Step were collecting shells along the shore to decorate the sandcastle they had begun. I walked up the curve of wet sand towards the rocky outcrop at the far north of the little bay. Mum had insisted we come to this out-of-the-way beach, far from the crowds at Agnes Waters. We’d climbed down from a walkway, over big boulders and tufts of wiry plant-life to the pale yellow expanse of sand that wrapped itself around the self-contained ring of rocks. Up above I had seen tourists at the lookout pointing down to us wondering how we’d managed to get to the beach. I’d figured that there was no path down because the council clearly didn’t want people spoiling the spot.

‘If they didn’t want us here, they’d put up a sign,’ Mum had reasoned.

Little rock pools speckled the ground and after a quick bodysurf, I poked about there for a bit, looking for something out of the ordinary. I found some sticky

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anemones and peeled them off the rocks. The little suckers made a squelchy noise, *pwop*, as they snapped away from the slimy wall. In a shallow puddle I found a starfish and couldn't help but get a shiver of excitement. I didn't think I'd ever seen a live one. Maybe at the aquarium, but not in the wild. I couldn't remember if they were dangerous or not, but I decided to risk it and picked it up. The thing was leathery. Cold. Raised tangerine nodules dotted the arms, like the creature had suffered an allergic reaction to something. Shellfish?

The bumps ran from the tip of the arms to the centre like mini mountain ranges. I turned it upside down and was surprised to see that the arms were bisected by long gashes that looked like the stitches I'd got on my calf muscle after a rather gnarly skateboarding incident that had me flying into a barbed wire fence. The crisscross patterns looked so symmetrical they might have been unnatural. Nature was pretty clever. In the centre there appeared to be a kind of mouth that was puckering and twitching like it was warming up for a kiss. I looked closely. *Phew*. Fish-breath.

I looked across to Pippa and Step. I thought my little sister would go psycho over a starfish. She was obsessed with mermaids and would probably have thought a starfish had magical properties or powers. Their sandcastle was growing into something half decent. It looked like a gritty wedding cake. The starfish could have been its crowning glory.

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‘More shells. Get me more shells,’ Step called as he clapped his hands and sat back on his heels.

Pippa jumped up and skipped back along the frothy shallows, searching. It got under my skin how close she and Step had become. I found their cheery, happy, joyful relationship to reek of betrayal. She seemed to have forgotten Dad and had replaced him just as easily as a battery in her DS – slipping off one dad and into another like a t-shirt. I supposed she thought that one was just as good as another. That really bugged me. I had to constantly remind myself that she was younger, and all that, and she didn’t understand the concept of divorce as well as I did. But Dad had loved her so much, she’d been his little princess and her lack of loyalty to him just seemed so cold.

There was a lot that annoyed me about Pippa, not that I could ever express it without being branded ‘the bad brother’, but that one Dad-thing annoyed me more than the rest. The squealing, I could handle. The tantrums were becoming less frequent. And then there was the way everyone fussed over her so much and ... I could go on. All this was bearable – but when she changed the subject whenever I talked about Dad, that hurt.

She stopped visiting him in those early days – just cut him out. Even before ... before ...

Watching them together in that moment caused tears to sag in the back of my throat and I wasn’t sure if I

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was in pain or just angry. I threw the starfish into the sea, skimming it like I might a flat rock or a frisbee. I laughed as it bounced twice before disappearing. Stuff Pippa. She could find her own starfish.