



Ten Pound Poms

By the late 1960s I'd been in Madrid for three years and was ready for a change. My roommate, Juanín, felt the same way so we decided we'd move somewhere else, maybe drive a Jeep to South Africa then take a ship to Australia. We discussed it with a friend at the Australian Embassy, and he had a much better idea. He explained that the Australian government's Assisted Migration Programme—part of its "Populate or Perish" policy—flew people from London to Sydney all the time, for the paltry sum of ten pounds sterling in administrative fees. Since most of those migrants were from the UK, and Australians call the Brits "Pommies," the fee inspired the nickname "Ten Pound Poms." Applicants committed to staying for two years or refunding the cost of the airfare if they left sooner. It was the cheapest ride anywhere, much too good to resist. So we did some paperwork at the Embassy in Madrid then went to London to board a flight that took us halfway around the world.

We landed down under as "assisted migrants" and, as such, were taken to a sort of clearing house, a large Quonset hut with dozens of cots arranged in rows, military style. We were told we could stay there for a week at no charge, and they would help us find work. Posters advertising blue collar jobs of all kinds festooned the walls, making me feel distinctly out of place. When asked to specify my trade I said I was an advertising account executive and was given a sceptical look. The hut was way off the beaten track, in a remote area beyond the city limits on the south side of town. We had no car. There was nothing to do and nothing to see in any direction, just open land. The place was clean and well organized, and the system was efficiently run. But, to me, after three years of hedonistic urban living in Madrid, it felt like a prison camp. Partly because I hadn't

slept for well over twenty-four hours, I found it all deeply depressing. I wasn't sure quite what I'd expected, but it certainly wasn't anything like this.

I was just starting to think about refunding the fare and flying back to Spain when the manager informed us that a Miss Miranda had called to say she was sorry to have missed us at the airport and would soon be arriving to collect us. Miranda? I looked at Juanín and he said he'd met her while she was traveling in Europe a few months earlier. They'd exchanged a couple of postcards and, in his last one, he said he'd be arriving in Sydney soon and mentioned the date. He never imagined she'd come to meet him.

Miranda arrived in a turquoise Mustang convertible with the top down, her blonde hair billowing in the breeze. A lovely, vivacious young woman, she swept into the forecourt and ran to meet us with open arms. There were squeals, giggles, hugs, huge sighs of relief, and then we were off. Through downtown Sydney and over the harbour bridge to Neutral Bay, where we stayed at her place on Kurraba Road until we found our feet. When one takes a leap into the unknown—as we had just done with (it must be said) very little real planning or forethought—precisely *where* one lands can set the tone for the rest of one's stay. I was immensely fortunate because that charming neighbourhood, not to mention the social scene at Miranda's house, were my introduction to Sydney.

In time I found a place to live and a job as an account executive at an advertising agency where I could have stayed forever. There was much to commend my life in Oz, but I was restless at that age and five years later I was off again on another adventure. I never went back but have very fond memories of my days as a Ten Pound Pom.