



# PARAMEDICO

AROUND THE WORLD  
BY AMBULANCE

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# OUTBACK AMBO

## *Australia*

For two weeks I have sat here in this fibro shack along the Newell Highway listening to the ceaseless drone of air-conditioning, waiting for the sick and injured to call me. Coursework for my paramedic degree is done and all my novels are read. Now I wait, occasionally wishing, with guilt, for some drama to occur, some crisis, no matter how small, anything to break the monotony of my posting.

From time-to-time my mother sends me a letter or her ginger cake wrapped in brown paper. So, for the second time today, I drive to the post office in my ambulance.

Some in Peak Hill might consider their town the whole world. But to me, a nineteen year-old city boy with a penchant for surfing and nightclubs, I am cast away, marooned, washed up in the stinking hot Australian outback.

‘Sorry, champ,’ says the post officer. ‘Nothing today.’

And so I drive my ambulance around the handful of quiet streets where nothing ever changes, where I rarely see a soul. Shutters are

down, curtains drawn, doors shut. Where are they all, I wonder, these people who apparently know my every move?

I turn down towards the wheat silo and park up for a while, imaging how I would treat someone who had fallen from the top of it. After that I go to meet a flock of sheep with whom I've learnt to communicate. Much of it is non-verbal. We just stand there, the flock and I, face-to-face, staring quietly, contemplating what the other's life must be like. Now and then we exchange simple sounds by way of call-and-response. Whenever I think I've gone mad I remind myself that most people talk freely to their pets without a second thought.

Earlier in the year, the Ambulance Service of NSW sent my whole class to remote corners of the state. I understood, of course, that in our vast country, with its sparsely populated interior, everyone is equally entitled to pre-hospital care. Only problem is that few applications to the service are received from people living in the bush. Instead, young, degree-qualified recruits from the Eastern seaboard end up in one-horse towns like fish out of water.

Entering the Club House Hotel in Caswell Street on my first night, twelve faces textured like the Harvey Ranges turned my way, looked me up and down taking in my stovepipe jeans, my combed hair and patterned shirt. As if my appearance was not out-of-place enough I foolishly ordered a middy of Victoria Bitter and the room erupted in thigh-slapping laughter. Before I ran out, a walnut of a man nearest me leant over to offer some local advice.

'Out here mate, it's a schooner of Tooheys New, got it?'

But I never went back to the pub, at least not socially. When called there in the ambulance for drunks fallen over, I was always greeted with the same row of men in the same position at the bar, like they had never gone home. It didn't take me long to realise I'd need to find entertainment elsewhere.

In less than a month Kristy Wright, an actor playing the role of Chloe Richards on the evening soap *Home & Away* has become the object of my affection. As the elderly will attest, a routine of the ordinary brings security of sorts, a familiar comfort, and *Home & Away* is just this for a lonely paramedic with too much time on his hands and not enough human company. Kristy is not particularly glamorous, nor is she Oscar material. Perhaps it's her likeness to my first proper girlfriend, a ballerina who ran off to Queensland, married a concreter, and broke my heart. Whatever the reason, I'm deeply smitten and make sure to never miss an episode. Out here it's hard to miss anything really.

For a small fee I have taken accommodation in the nurses' quarters on the grounds of Peak Hill's tiny brick hospital with its single emergency bed. Adjacent to the hospital lies the ambulance station consisting of a small office, a portable shed with air-conditioning and a garage containing an F100 and a Toyota 4x4 ambulance for difficult terrain. My new home next door is a freestanding weatherboard cottage, a little rundown but quaint nonetheless. Lodging at these nurses' quarters initially sounded quite appealing to a young, single man, but the place never came with any nurses in it.

At 8 pm I ladle some lentil soup out of a giant vat I prepared earlier in the week, heating it up on the electric stove. After dinner, at 9 pm, I run the bath, making sure my blue fire-resistant jumpsuit is hanging by the door and my boots are standing to attention below, ready for the next job – if I ever live to see it, that is. Two slow weeks and I'm beginning to think they should close the ambulance station down before their assets rust away. The population plummeted a few years ago when Peak Hill's gold mine hit the water table and ceased operations. Locals left behind would disagree, but maybe ambulance stations ought to come and go with the mines.

When the call finally comes it catches me off guard, just as I knew it would, cleaving me from an abyss of 4 am slumber.

‘Huh?’ I grunt into the phone. The dispatcher in the Dubbo control room 80 kilometres away sounds just as vague.

‘Okay, what we got here, let me see, ah, semi rollover on the Newell Highway six kilometres south of Peak Hill...well, that’s about all I got mate...good luck with it.’

I hang up, roll out of bed in my jocks, splash my face at the bathroom sink, head to the door.

Keys, keys, ambulance keys. I teeter on the remains of sleep, trying to think of where I put the keys. When I throw my legs into the jumpsuit I’m relieved to hear them jingling in a pocket. My boots are on and I’m out.

The engine of the Ford springs to life, the V8 gives a mighty roar, a call to action. Adrenalin, like petrol charging through the lines, ignites me for the fight. I flick the red flashing lights on the roof, the grill lights on the front, and then, as I skid onto the highway, I let the siren rip through the stillness. There’s not a car in sight, no one at all to warn of my approach, but this run is for the hell of it. I’m doing it because I can, because for two weeks I’ve been bored out of my brain and I’ll be damned if I won’t make the most of a genuine casualty call. The Ford is a missile; eight cylinders of muscle thundering down the highway. In no time I cover the 6 kilometres, wishing the crash was further away for a longer drive. Last month it took me sixty minutes on the whistle travelling at speeds of 150 kilometres per hour to reach a child off a horse at a remote property.

Up ahead I see a pair of stationary headlights in the middle of the road, shining directly at me. They appear, at first, to be sitting higher than normal, but when I get closer I realise the semi-trailer to which they belong has flipped upside down. It’s a most peculiar sight.

No one has motioned me to stop. In fact, there is no one about at all, not even Doug the policeman. I wonder for a moment who

called the job in. Further down the road I spy another truck pulled up with its hazard lights on and assume this driver must have rung us.

The motor of the upturned semi is still idling. It's a rather eerie sound in the absence of any other. I decide that, for the purpose of making the scene safe and preventing an explosion, I ought to switch it off.

From what seems to have been the passenger side of the truck a steady stream of blood runs slowly to the shoulder of the road. The entire cabin of the semi is crushed and when I call out 'Hello there!' I don't even get a grunt of acknowledgement.

This is my job I remind myself. It falls on no one else. It is precisely my duty, without further delay, to climb underneath the overturned truck, attempt to turn off the ignition and ascertain the number and condition of its occupants.

With a small torch in hand, I get down on my chest and crawl into a narrow passage about a foot high with twisted metal and shattered glass all around, my head is turned on the side, oil and bitumen brushing my cheek until I reach an opening in front of me. Here I'm able to lift my head up and take a look around. When I do this my heart jumps like a stung animal as I find myself face-to-face with the driver, his head pummeled into a mushy, shapeless mess, his mouth gaping wide and a single avulsed eye glaring at me. For the first time ever I am simply too startled to shriek or utter any sound whatsoever. Confined like this makes a rapid retreat difficult. Instead, I am frozen in horror, just as the driver's face may have been in the moment before it was destroyed by his dashboard. After a number of seconds, when I regain a little composure, I reach up to the keys dangling in the ignition and turn off the engine. At the same time I see a photo of a woman and child, beaming at the camera, some birthday party. Perhaps it was the last image the man saw before exhaling his final breath.

Almost as slowly as I entered the cabin I extract myself and return to the ambulance, shaking ever so slightly, to give Dubbo control a report from the scene.

It takes Peak Hill's SES Rescue Squad five hours to remove the driver's body. Most of this is spent waiting for a crane to arrive from Parkes. I stand in the shadows clutching a white folded body bag, reluctant to join the rescue volunteers, all ex-miners and rough farmhands cursing and spitting and slapping each other on the back. When the driver is finally laid out he is gruesome to behold. Some of the rescue guys have their photo taken with the corpse, arms slung over one another, smiling.

Back at the hospital, the nurse on duty has called in Peak Hill's only doctor, a short Indian fellow, to sign the certificate. When I unzip the body bag and pull it back, all colour drains from the doctor's face, his eyes roll into his head and he grips the wall to stop himself from passing out.

'Doc may need to lie down for a while,' I say to the nurse as she leaps forward to prevent him falling.

By the time I finish at the morgue the sun is high over the Harvey's and I reverse the ambulance into the station, putting it to bed for another two weeks.

Much of Peak Hill's indigenous population lives in what is still known as 'the mission', a handful of streets on the south side of town once reserved by missionaries to control indigenous life. In comparison to many Aboriginal missions in the Australian outback, the houses are fairly tidy and the occupants give us little trouble. Except for Eddy Lugar, and his extended family, that is. When things are becoming monotonous in Peak Hill one can always rely on Eddy to get pissed, flog his missus or end up unconscious in someone else's front yard. Empty port flagons line the hallway of his house, a house without a door and with every window smashed in. Half the floorboards have been torn up for firewood in the winter.

Jobs often come in spurts and on the day after the semi rollover I scoop Eddy onto the stretcher and cart him to the hospital for his weekly sobering-up. In straightforward cases like this I work

alone, making sure to angle the rear-vision mirror onto the patient for visual observation. Occasionally, to be certain the victim doesn't pass away unnoticed, I attach a cardiac monitor for its regular audible blipping. This way I can keep my eyes on the road ahead.

Longer journeys are a little trickier. For these I must evaluate a patient's blood pressure every ten minutes or so by pulling over and climbing into the back. It is hardly ideal, but sometimes necessary when I'm unable to find a suitable or sober candidate to drive the ambulance for me. A strategy the service conceived many years ago was to recruit volunteer drivers from the community, people familiar with the names and location of distant cattle stations and remote dirt tracks.

Charlie, a hulk of a man with handlebar moustache and hearty belly laugh is the best on offer. Unfortunately his job as a long-haul coach driver means he's rarely in town when I need him. Perhaps one day he will join the service full-time.

As for Lionel Walker, Peak Hill's only other volunteer officer, he is simply too crass a character for taking anywhere at all, let alone critical situations demanding professionals. Unshaven, slouchy and barely able to complete the shortest string of words without adding expletives, Lionel is rarely called upon to assist. Nonetheless, his job as the hospital caretaker means he never fails to appear at the ambulance station regaling me with racist, redneck tales and invitations to bi-monthly Klu Klux Klan gatherings held at secret locations in the Harvey Ranges. His open dislike of 'boongs' – a derogatory term for Aboriginals – is another reason I can never take him on jobs in the mission. Compassion for the weak, preservation of life and respect for the dead seem unfamiliar concepts to the man. After all, Lionel's beloved pastime known as 'road kill popping' involves intentionally driving over bloated animals with his Ford Falcon in order to hear them 'pop' under the chassis. Worse still, less than a month after my arrival in Peak Hill, he snatched a snow-white cooing dove from the eaves of the ambulance station and ripped its

head off, remarking about the ‘pests’ inhabiting the hospital rafters. This callous act brought me to the brink of tears and I slammed the door in his face.

When my family drives up from Sydney to pay me a visit I take them to the Bogan River, just out of town. It’s a sorry little waterway but there are several picnic spots to choose from. In the shade of a snow gum we lay down a tartan blanket. My mum unwraps her tuna sandwiches and pours out the apple juice while my dad reflects on the subject of solitude, meditation, Jesus in the desert. My sister and brothers are not normally so quiet and I sense everyone feels a bit sorry for me, as if I have some kind of incurable disease, all because I’m stuck here in Peak Hill.

Later that night, as no volunteer drivers are available, my dad offers to join me on a call to the main street. He’s still tying the laces of his Dunlop Volleys in the front seat when I pull up at the address. Above the newsagent, in a room devoid of any furniture, an eighteen-year-old male is hyperventilating and gripping his chest. His name is Gary and I’ve met him before. The teenager is morbidly obese for his age, thanks to antidepressants and a diet of potato chips and energy drinks. What Gary is still doing in this town, estranged from his parents, roaming about jobless and alone, is beyond me.

‘My heart,’ he moans.

As I take a history and connect the cardiac monitor, I relish this rare moment. Doesn’t every son secretly dream of impressing his father with knowledge and skill? Our patient hardly requires expert emergency attention, but Dad observes my every move and his face is beaming.

Suspecting Gary has once again consumed too many Red Bulls, I offer him a trip to hospital and he nods. If I were him I too would rather spend my evening with the night-nurse than sit here alone. Once loaded up, I throw Dad the ambulance keys and give him a wink.

‘Someone’s got to keep Gary company. Just don’t crash it okay or I’ll have some explaining to do.’

For a second or two Dad stands there looking like a kid on Christmas morning.

No one visits me after that for the rest of my time in Peak Hill, but six months in I’m less concerned about isolation. Routines I’ve constructed help the time pass. I’ve also begun to feel the subtle tension that simmers below the surface of every country town, the whispering voices from unseen faces and the contradiction of personal privacy coupled with the compulsive curiosity to know the business of others. A lady in the grocery store last week was able to recite to me my every movement for three consecutive days; what time I left the station in the ambulance, where I drove to and what I did there. Sheep are dumb animals, she told me. My efforts to communicate with them at Jim Bolan’s property were futile and stupid. I was speechless. Never on any visit to my fleecy friends had I seen another human being. Unless the sheep themselves were dobbing me in. Even on the verandah of the nurses quarters drinking my Tooheys New in the evenings with nothing but sparse scrubland laid out to the horizon, I cannot escape the distinct sense of being observed. Back in Sydney, where people live side by side and on top of one another, a person can saunter about naked in the backyard and no one pays the least bit of notice. Those who imagine they will find some kind of seclusion in a country retreat should think again.

It’s August and my cases last month entailed an old man dead in his outhouse for at least a fortnight, a diabetic hypo to which I administered Glucagon by subcutaneous injection and a motorcyclist with a broken femur on the road to Tullamore. Lionel Walker, drunk and bad-mouthed, was in there somewhere too, collapsed in the scrub as usual.

After browsing the internal vacancies around New South Wales, I decide to apply for Hamilton in Newcastle. One of the controllers

in Dubbo is a keen surfer like me and whenever he calls for a job we joke about starting a Western Division surfing team. I regret telling him about the Newcastle position because he immediately says he will go for it too, his length of service giving him a clear advantage.

As steady as I may be going in Peak Hill, the month ends with an accident that changes everything, an accident forcing me to leave town for my own safety.

No matter how many truck drivers Doug the policeman books for speeding through the main street, few semi-trailers slow down much. They have a tight schedule and Peak Hill is just another blink-and-you-miss-it town clinging to the highway.

At 10 pm on a Friday night I am already in my bed, lying awake in a silence one never hears in Sydney, imaging the wild time my friends are having there, bar-hopping around Darlinghurst and Surry Hills, seeing bands and DJs, laughing and hooting and flirting with girls.

When the phone rings, I jump back into the cold, dark room, sit bolt upright, snatching the receiver.

‘Peak Hill Station.’

‘Yeah mate, let’s see...some kid hit by a semi on the main street, says its near the service station. I’ll sort you out some back-up from Dubbo. They’re just finishing a transfer so it might be an hour or so, may be forty-five – if they fang it. Booked 10.01, on it 10.02. Good luck.’

As it turns out, the fourteen-year-old Aboriginal boy lying in the gutter has only been ‘clipped’ by the semi-trailer, a hit-and-run, although I suspect the driver wouldn’t have noticed. A crowd from the mission has quickly formed and they urge me to hurry as I retrieve my gear.

‘C’mon brudda, ya gotta help tha poor fella, he ain’t in a good way mister medic.’

Relieved to find the boy conscious, I put him in a neck brace and begin a quick head-to-toe examination to ascertain any other injuries.

As I'm doing this I feel a hand squeeze my buttocks, more than one hand, in fact, until a good many are occupied with my bottom cheeks. I look around but the crowd encircling me is too dense to identify anyone in particular. I wonder where Doug the policeman is, he always seems to arrive well after a drama is over.

The crowd shuffles back half a foot when I ask them to, but push in again when I take a blood pressure. A second time I feel the hands, this time squeezing and caressing my buttocks with renewed enthusiasm, one of them even giving me an affectionate little slap. Such a thing is most distracting in emergency situations. Moreover, it's shameless sexual harassment. I grab my portable radio, calling for urgent police assistance. That should wake Doug up, I think to myself. Again I demand the onlookers move away, but my request is ignored.

'Listen brudda,' says an elder among the group, 'We don't trust you whitefellas, we gotta watch you, make sure you do us a good job, you know wad I mean?'

Finally Doug the policeman turns up, huffing and puffing and waving at the crowd to move on. Reluctantly they do, now giving me space to load the patient. Doug offers to drive the ambulance to the hospital and I call off my back-up from Dubbo as the boy seems to have suffered little more than minor abrasions.

Early the next morning I am woken by the sound of car with holes in the muffler going up and down the dirt road beside the nurse's quarters. Crouching low, I crawl in my underwear to the kitchen where I'm able to peek out from the between the lace curtains over the window above the sink. Idling on the grass outside my place is a beaten-up, cream-coloured Datsun packed with Aboriginal girls.

'Shit,' I curse to myself, instinctively grabbing for a butter knife. From my position at the window I can make out their conversation as they speculate on my whereabouts.

'He ain't come out from that house all morning, I reckon he in there, he in there, I'm telling ya.'

‘Maybe he gone walkabout.’

‘He ain’t gone walkabout! Ambo guys don’t go walkabout, they gotta be ready, you know, READY!’

‘Yeah, and we seen two ambulance in that big shed, means he in there, he in there for sure!’

Not wanting to get caught undressed, I crab-crawl my way back to the bedroom and throw on my uniform, complete with all its formal trimmings. Maybe if I wear the tie and jacket with gold buttons down the front and speak with a firm tone I can scare off my stalkers. By the time I psych myself up to step out and challenge the girls – butter knife in my pocket for reassurance – the Datsun does a doughnut, whipping up a cloud of dirt and farts off toward the highway. The girls catcall before the car shudders over the cattle grate at the end of the track and disappears.

I phone Doug the policeman and explain the situation.

‘Yeah, I heard,’ he says.

‘Heard what?’

‘The blackfellas are a bit upset with you.’

‘Me? Why? I did fine with that kid last night.’

‘Sure you did but you also got yourself a big problem in the meantime, mate. Those Koori chicks are trouble and you’re the talk of the mission today. Heard they even got a special name for you, what is it again? Ah, Romeo! That’s it!’

‘Romeo?’

‘Romeo, as in Romeo and Juliet, you know, that movie that’s just come out, seen the ads for it on TV?’

Baz Luhrman’s sexy contemporary interpretation of the Shakespearean classic had recently done good business at the Australian box office. Even Aboriginal kids in Peak Hill, miles from any cinema screen, knew about it. Unfortunately I didn’t look vaguely like Leonardo De Caprio. How could the girls have come to such a comparison based on the quality of my arse alone?

‘Take it from me mate, whatever you do, don’t be going down

the mission on a job, understand? Either you'll be gang-raped by the women or a jealous bloke will glass your throat.'

Until now I hadn't considered the extent of the matter. But Peak Hill had been home to Doug the policeman for a decade and as dozy as he was, he knew the town and its people better than anyone.

'Listen, you got to get out of here,' he adds. 'Those girls won't let up until they pin you down. Literally.'

'But Doug, you're a cop for crying-out-loud!'

'Come on. Cops can't touch no blackfella these days, let alone a female of the species. You know that. Sorry to tell you this, mate, you're on your own.'

Never have I covered the 20-metre distance between the nurses' quarters and the ambulance station in less time. Whatever door I pass through, I make certain it's bolted behind me. Despite Doug the policeman's fear-mongering, if a call comes in for the mission I have every intention of making an official request for his assistance. This way he cannot, by law, refuse to help me. The idea of driving anywhere near the southern part of town has put me on a knife's edge. What's to say a bitter indigenous bloke down there doesn't ring triple-0, fake some illness and jump up to strangle me with my own stethoscope?

My hopes of being nothing more than a passing interest are dashed the following day with the approach of the Datsun again at 10 am. It circles the ambulance station five or six times, coughing and back-firing, making no effort whatsoever to appear inconspicuous. Hearing the air-conditioner blasting in the demountable, the car eventually skids to a stop and one of the girls gets out and peers through the window to see if I'm inside. Lying motionless behind the lounge, hiding for a good ten minutes, I wonder what my job has become. There is no question in my mind how different a situation like this would be if I were a female paramedic and my stalkers were male.

The *Bogan Times* comes out on Monday and 'Peak Hill's Romeo' is front-page news. 'Local Ambo Talk of the Town!'

Management in Dubbo are concerned. My wellbeing is under threat and the service has a responsibility for my safety next time there's a call to the Peak Hill mission.

Within a week I get surprising news. Out of all the applications for Hamilton Station, mine has been selected and I'm offered the position. With little hesitation I accept. Although I'm told the merit of my application won me the position, I'm unconvinced. My transfer takes effect immediately, which rarely happens. It seems obvious to me that the Newcastle job offer and my report of sexual harassment are no coincidence at all.

On the afternoon I get the transfer letter the Koori girls arrive again for their daily patrol. This time I lounge on the verandah in my underwear and give them a wave. Having eluded them for a fortnight, the girls scream in delight. A moment later the Datsun stalls and skids into a ditch. As the girl driving curses and tries starting it again, her accomplices lean out of the windows, yelling at the top of their voices.

'Hey, white boy!'

'Love your arse, white boy!'

'How about it, white boy!'

None of them actually leave the car, and I sense for the first time they are too shy to come any closer.

'Love you, white boy!'

'Come and see us, white boy!'

Finally the engine splutters back to life. Before they pull onto the track again I make sure to blow them a kiss.

'Thank you girls! Thank you!' I call after them.

The Datsun tumbles down and away in a flurry of hooting horns, wolf-whistles and flailing arms. When the dust settles and the road is quiet again, I'm overcome with shame for my unfounded anxieties. How harmless these girls were in truth, making the most

of their life in this drab, nowhere town. A little innocent fun is all they ever wanted. Having finally lured the white boy medic from his house, I know in my heart they won't be back.

But neither will I.