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Destination: Down Under

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Edu works as an engineer in a multinational company recently established in Barcelona. The monotony of his routine does not bother him; at work from Monday to Friday, going out Friday and Saturday night with a group of unmarried thirty-five-year old friends, and Sunday lunch at his parents', overcoming his hangover. In the past, he used to be a non-stop traveller, and had been to everywhere in Europe, most of Asia, and a handful of countries in Africa and South America. His apartment is adorned with furniture, carpets, pictures and masks from the most exotic corners of the Earth, and he loves regaling his guests with the stories of their origin. Studying abroad in Australia encouraged him to travel from place to place, as a free spirit... Down Under he realized the world was out there, waiting for him.

His nine-to-five job doesn't allow him much time to think about past trips, but a voicemail from a friend brought back many memories: "Hi there, this is Sara. I was wondering what you're doing tomorrow evening, 'cause I'm flying Down Under next week and you are the only person I know who has been there, and uhm... I'm planning my trip right now, but I've no clue about how many days I should spend in each of the one thousand spots I'd like to visit... so could you give me a call sometime soon? Take care". Standing by the answering machine, a thousand scattered thoughts came back to Edu's mind. Australia had been a turning point in his youth; a reference to personal growth, and a place where he could settle down.

Shit man, Sara is going to Australia. I wish I could have had someone to give me the low-down before I went. I had no idea where I was going until I saw: "Welcome to Melbourne International Airport". Reading Bill Bryson's book on the plane was definitely NOT a good idea. That book scared the hell out of me when it talked about all the venomous snakes and scorpions running around the country, oh boy... I'd better tell Sara to try kangaroo sausage, Vegemite, Carlton Draught, VB, wine from the South and Cadbury chocolates! I bet she will love the Great Barrier Reef, the Blue Mountains and the Twelve Apostles, and who wouldn't, right? ...mmm, those days... and where might Nico be now? And Pam? And that bunch of vegan hippies working for Amnesty International? I haven't got one of those group emails from them for a while... will Sara be up for coffee tomorrow?

They met at the *Cafè de les Delícies*, in Rambla del Raval. To summarize Australia's touristy spots was not an easy task for Edu. His year in Melbourne had been a life-changing experience, not even close to Sara's vision of a holiday destination. Barcelonians in general do not go to Australia because the ticket is too expensive and there isn't much publicity about the country. The interest of Sara and Edu was unusual, and perhaps this common denominator was the major force binding their friendship. Going to Australia never crossed Edu's mind until he was desperately looking for a program to study abroad. He was not assigned to a college in France, Italy, or alternative Erasmus destinations, but to La Trobe University in Melbourne. He started writing a diary before leaving Spain, and against all expectations, he writes an entry every now and then.

I am not sure how much I will write because I am such a lazy ass when it comes to writing. I have almost done the packing, and I still cannot believe that all the bureaucratic hassle has actually ended. I am "ready to go" to the other side of the world. If I had known that picking an Australian university amongst all the other study abroad options involved such a long paper trail I would have rather gone somewhere else, even to Portugal. Two months of filling in papers, and sending money to the embassy and

university, and don't you dare miss any of these papers if you don't want to get stuck in some airport shit hole somewhere between Europe and Asia. Once you have jumped through all these hoops, you still have to pay over a thousand euros for an endless flight. Mum and dad are nervous because they think I can't do it. They plan to call me every two days, and I can only hope that something will eventually stop them. It's already midnight; I hope you don't mind being checked in at the airport.

The flight from Barcelona to Melbourne was certainly long. The first impression he got was that Australia represented a meeting point between England and Asia, organized in a North American urban landscape; the majority of the population had distinctive multicultural features, but the spread of the roads and the boroughs of the city reminded him of the United States and Canada, where he had previously been on vacation. Ethnically, and in contrast to Spain, Australia was homogeneously heterogeneous. Throughout the first month, Edu heard the names of a dozen little countries between Asia and Oceania for the first time, and on many occasions he thought of a conversation he had had a long time ago with a friend of his, who told him that every time you meet somebody from a different country it feels like travelling to that country.

Australia is evidence of the utopia of multiculturalism. It feels like being in the future, and I like it. For some reason I had thought that Australians were just like tanned Brits, who were laid back and loved drinking beer. But this is not the case, indeed, anyone could be Australian. I don't feel like a foreigner at all (this is not France!), only when I screw up with the English grammar, which is more often than I expected... I blame it on the clumsiness of my friends with foreign languages, which makes my English stand out for no reason. So far, I have managed to express myself, but I am not sure about my future presentations and papers for class... at least I know there are many other international students who (I hope) will be as concerned with their English as me, and this is a comforting feeling, somehow.

The university campus was bright and sunny, and Edu was living in a room facing a pond, next to a French guy named Nicolas. During the first two weeks, he built a multicultural group of college friends with whom he could share his doubts about youth, mainly drugs and sex. Coming from multiple cultural backgrounds, the voice of the experienced did not always provide the most useful piece of advice... and it did not take more than two months until Edu started to feel something for his next door neighbour. It is common knowledge that the first homosexual love is always hard to manage, and Edu was one of those shy types that relied on alcohol to make a move. As they spent more time together, it was increasingly hard for Edu to deal with the fact that Nico liked him just as a friend.



Damn, I like him. I know that Dad shivers anytime somebody jokes about my homosexuality but I love Nico. I would hold him right now if I could... Pam told me that he gives good hugs and I bet he does, with those shoulders... are you kidding me? I never thought I could develop a feeling for a French guy from a ridiculous cold town known for being the place of origin of mustard. I can only talk about my feelings with

Pam; she is the only person who is aware of how much I enjoy being close to Nicolas. I thought women were complicated, but shit man, guys can be just as full of twists and turns! This coming weekend is Lotzi's birthday, and Nico insisted that everyone get him a group present. I told him I would go to buy it with him... so I can get the chance to spend the whole afternoon together downtown, I can't wait!

Nico never found out about Edu's feelings. Nicolas was too blind to realize such things, and Edu was too shy to deal with them. The situation was too much for Edu, so he started looking for a place off campus to avoid seeing Nico and feeling miserable. His difficulties encouraged him to start smoking again. He was looking for an alternative place where Nico would not show up all the time, either cooking or getting out of the shower, and not persistently remind him of his bad management of personal issues. Eventually, he found a room in the area of Northcote, a residential suburb increasingly popular among college students, halfway between the university campus of Bundoora and the city centre. He moved into a shared house with an Australian biologist called Mike, and a Hindu computer scientist that everyone called Sunny and he never bothered to ask why. They had a yard with a promising barbeque grill with which to enjoy the beginning of the summer.

I am moving out, I have to. This will be the best way to stop seeing and thinking about him ALL the time. These guys living in Northcote look alright. I mean, whatever, they look chill, so we will get along... but what really bothers me about Nico is that he has absolutely no clue about how much I dream about him, travelling around Australia, showing each other our mutual desire to be together, we would be a cute couple, wouldn't we? And then I talk to Pam and she crushes me with the fact that not a single thing will ever happen between us, basically because he likes women and I have neither tits nor a juicy ass, and that is apparently what all twenty-three year-old guys are looking for. Pathetic. I will be better off getting out of this place; at least I won't have to commute as much to get pot and listen to decent live jazz music in Brunswick. I guess I have to think positive...

Living with roommates was a lot different than what Edu had initially thought. His housemates had their own friends, not like his ex-roommates on campus, so they didn't care about hanging out with him. He felt lonely because coming from Barcelona, a whole weekend at home without even going out to watch a movie is the most significant characteristic of losers. His roommates were not bad guys at all, but Edu was just not used to the independence (and ignorance) of certain shared apartments. He was not used to eating, cooking and buying food on his own, or to asking for permission when he wanted to throw parties and have people over. It took him a while to become friends with his housemates.

These guys ignore me until I bring people over and they want us to shut up. Sometimes they even pretend to have a headache. Assholes! They don't tell me to party with them at all. If they ever talk to me about their parties it is the day after and always to show off about their supposed skills at picking up girls and getting free drinks downtown. Aside from these two, it has been mentally healthy to get away from Nico, I was going crazy; his haircut, his smile, and his subtle French accent were too much for me. In front of him I couldn't pretend to be the stereotypical 'Spanish macho' that could perhaps ignite something between us. Well, who knows, right? Someone said that time is the best healer, so I am taking my time to get over him. My feelings for him are still there, though, I wish I could vomit them away right now.

After exams Edu and his friend Pam decided to explore the country up north, by the Great Barrier Reef. Pam had been his best friend since arriving in Australia, a nice girl from Queens, NY, who shared his sense of humour and made Edu laugh non-stop. They flew to Cairns and did their best to enjoy two weeks of holidays. For both of them, holidays were a synonym for doing absolutely nothing all day long. Sleep, lie under the sun, eat, take a nap, and check email. That was their job for two weeks. The nature of Northern Australia was so astonishing that they both thought about becoming biologists and spending their lives in that corner of the planet. Walking around the rainforest,

they understood why it was in this part of the world that the fieldwork of Charles Darwin turned into a cohesive theory about the evolution of species. They hugged koalas, took pictures of crocodiles, kangaroos, bats, snakes, and the most colourful, huge birds walking around town! Since then, they have been most unimpressed by the pictures in travel magazines.



Paradise exists in Cairns. The landscape here does not compare to anywhere else I have ever been to. The nature is absolutely amazing, like being in a different planet full of unique animals and plants, and where pollution and industry have not yet destroyed the flora and the fauna. But the greatest treasure of locals is under the sea: The Great Barrier Reef. Pam and I bought a camera to take pictures under water; and we almost used the whole film today. Everyone here is very friendly with us, well, with the exception of a crazy Cuban from Miami that kept hitting on Pam the other day while we were playing beach volleyball. I guess some people just don't realize how inappropriate they are sometimes... at least I don't think about Nico as much. Distance helps.

The Great Barrier Reef became an increasingly blurred memory when they got back to Melbourne. Edu started to hang out more with his housemates,

and to work for Amnesty International. The trip had reconciled him with Australia in general. Through his job, he got in contact with grassroots associations in East Brunswick, most of them concerned about the environmental threats of global warming and in two months he was moving into a new place with a vegan community. His new housemates were Eric and Sheena, who had a six month-old baby called Sky, and Simon, Eric's brother. They were peaceful people, sometimes taking things too easily, but Edu was okay with it. At some point, he decided to quit pot because he was having sex with Simon every time they smoked together, and Edu didn't really like his housemate that much.

Since I moved into this new place I haven't had a problem, I actually find the baby entertaining. School has shifted down the list of priorities. I am not doing much these days... and the funniest thing is that even while thinking about it I don't feel bad for procrastinating. I love my life now, it's nice. I get good vibrations from this place; we share food, drinks, drugs... and I don't even miss meat that much. I also got into photography as a hobby, so I am taking a lot of random pictures searching for a source of inspiration. Cutlery, windows, yards... it's obvious I am not there yet. I also take pictures of me, mainly naked and making more evident the lack of inspiration. I like to think that the problem is that photography is not aesthetic enough, because a camera only captures existing realities, it copies them and reports their existence, but there is no feedback between the artist and his work. Smooth like a shot. Take it or leave it. Perhaps I should get some clay tomorrow, or painting oils, or both. I'll see.

The end of the summer was unpleasant, but at least he got a little more done for school. He dropped the job at Amnesty International because the door-to-door campaign was exhausting, more psychologically than physically. One day on his way to school, he decided to get off the tram and take a bus to the Twelve Apostles. Sitting next to a woman in her fifties, fat, with dark blonde hair and brownish eyes, looking nowhere, Edu could not stop looking at her chubby fingers and facial hair. After talking for about ten minutes and telling

her about his impulsive decision to get out of the tram on his way to school she told him he was not original, and that she was meeting young guys that pretended to be special, exactly like him, on a daily basis. He didn't remember the last time he had been shut-down like that, and tried to hide his resentment. They remained silent the rest of the journey.



I went to the Twelve Apostles with my notebook and camera but I could only look at the water. There is endless water... until the horizon where nothing remains but the sea and the sky. I felt so small talking to the old lady on the bus, exactly like a piece of nothing. I am going to school tomorrow; I have missed too many classes this semester. And I am taking a plane home in less than three months, shit. Melbourne, Bundoora, Nico, Pam, Lotzi, Mike, Chiranjiv, Eric, Myra, Sky, Simon, the Great Barrier Reef, the Twelve Apostles, Northcote... will all be gone forever in a plane ride? Technology is like science fiction. Perhaps I will be an engineer one day, and I will be close to understanding all this, but I still don't know what I should have said to that fat woman with facial hair and chubby fingers who told me I was the archetype of the guy that thinks of himself as someone unique, when actually most average.

The waiter comes over to the table where Sara and Edu have been sitting for the last half hour. Sara asks for an espresso while Edu's thoughts about his year in Australia are still spinning around his head. He couldn't care less about the touristy spots of Australia that concerned Sara. For him, Down Under had been the backdrop for life-changing experiences, condensed into a year that had taught him more about himself than about anything else. In five minutes the conversation was over. Edu paid for the bill and wished Sara a good trip. He started walking toward his apartment wondering in which random drawer he could have kept Pam's phone number. He felt like talking to her that same evening. It had been many years since they had met in Australia... so she would probably be happily married and taking care of several children.

He got home and smoked a cigarette while drinking a cool beer in his three square-meter balcony. His encounter with Sara had taken him to Australia, but he ended up not calling Pam because once he found her number he thought it would be an inappropriate time to call. The next day, the beep of the alarm clock brought him back to his routine as an engineer in a recently established multinational company in Barcelona. This week, Edu is working from Monday to Friday, going out Friday and Saturday night with a group of unmarried thirty-five year-old friends, and will be having lunch at his parents' on Sunday.

The pictures included in this text were taken by Anna Zamora between July and October 2003.

1. Chilsholm College, House 4, 2nd floor. Campus of La Trobe University at Bundoora, Victoria.
2. Melbourne Zoo, Victoria.
3. Flinders' Station, downtown Melbourne.