

NO WORRIES MATE !!!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victor Moubarak was born at an early age as a baby a long time ago in a far away northern land where men were strong and big and tough and women told them what to do.

He soon realized he was born into poverty when his mother carried him around in a supermarket plastic bag instead of a pram.

Like many children Victor learnt a lot from his parents. They taught him at an early age the love for adventure. He used to come home from school and find that they had moved house. Undeterred Victor never knew the meaning of failure; he always had to look it up in the dictionary.

As a young man he determined to do well in life and decided to get on the stage ... the first one out of town. He joined a traveling theater and performed many times as the front end of a pantomime horse; but he decided to quit whilst he was ahead.

In his life Victor has faced many ups and downs, especially when working as an elevator attendant in a Department Store. He was quick to learn however the usefulness of books and always carried with him a large volume from the local library. It was particularly useful for standing on and reaching the top button in the elevator.

His hobbies include sitting down, writing and painting. He has written a few books to be found on his website and he is currently busy painting an old chair and the garden gate and fence.

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Also by Victor S E Moubarak



“VISIONS” (ISBN 978 1 60477 032 2).

“VISIONS” is a fictional story of three children who see an apparition of the Lord Jesus on their way to church. They tell their priest, Father Ignatius, about it; and pretty soon news spreads throughout town.

People react to the news in different ways. Some readily believe; others mock and scoff in disbelief, whilst some react violently towards the children and their families.

Parishioners seek guidance from Father Ignatius whereas the Church seeks to hush the whole story in the hope that it goes away; whilst Jesus appears again and again.

“VISIONS” challenges readers to ask what they would do in a similar situation – as Christians, as parents or just as onlookers.

A vibrant tale of supernatural events, with a fast-paced storyline and strong believable characters, “VISIONS” is a challenging must-read Christian book for everyone ready for a reality check on what they actually believe.

“VISIONS” is available from all good bookstores and on the Internet. It is also available in Kindle, Nook and other electronic versions.

I pray that God blesses each one of you dear readers, old and new, and may He be with you and your families always.

Victor S E Moubarak

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NO WORRIES MATE !!!

INTRODUCTION

From my experience, all Australians I have met have been nice people.

I have an Aunt in Australia who is also nice ... up to a point. Shall we say she is an acquired taste and tends to grate on you somewhat.

The first thing that my Australian Aunt Gertrude said to me as she stepped off her plane at the airport was "G'day cobber! You don't look as good as your photo. A Picasso with a bad stomach more like!"

The second thing she said was "Are you gonna carry my luggage mate? Or do I have to call a porter and have to tip him for the pleasure?"

As I carried her luggage to the car, there started my long ordeal of having my Aunt Gertrude as a guest whilst she holidays with us.

Make no mistake about it; she is a kind old lady with a heart of gold which she hides well in case anyone thinks nicely of her. She lives in a world of her own totally oblivious of the effect her distinctive Australian accent, her loud voice, and her unbelievable antics have on the rest of humanity. Or to be more precise ... have on me in particular.

I hope you enjoy these short stories recording the various frolics of my Aunt Gertrude and my long suffering existence whilst she stays with us.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude

For days on end the house was full of excitement because "Aunt Gertrude is coming! Aunt Gertrude is coming!"

I can't understand all the fuss myself; since no one has met Aunt Gertrude and the last time I saw her was millions of years ago in the Jurassic era I believe.

Sure, the old fossil does keep in touch, once a year, when she sends a re-cycled Christmas card which someone else has sent her. Yes, I mean it ... a re-cycled Christmas card! She sticks a piece of paper on the card where previous well-wishers have written and then she writes her Yuletide Greetings. We often peel off the paper carefully and guess who originally sent her the card!

She has always been very tight-fisted as I remember. So miserly that she looks at you from on top of her spectacles so as not to wear out the lenses!

Anyway ... this distant relative, (she lives in Australia), whom no one has ever met except me has decided to visit us. Apparently her husband, a successful business man, had planned a business trip to the UK before he died suddenly, and she did not want to waste the airline ticket!

As soon as he was underground she was over ground and flying.

And I was tasked to go and meet her at the airport. I took the day off work and left early to get there on time. I waited endlessly in the reception area and eventually my eyes set upon the much awaited relative from down under.

She walked very slowly and carried a small case in her hand. I offered to carry it for her and she refused holding it tightly to her chest. We waited for the rest of her luggage which I loaded onto a trolley and then into my car.

No sooner had we left the airport that she started complaining. "Why do you drive so slow?" she asked, "where I come from we walk faster than that!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I smiled politely, looked at her from the rear view mirror and said:
"There's a speed restriction area up front. Road works I believe!"

"Why do they have to fix the roads at inconvenient times and near a busy airport? Why can't they fix them elsewhere?"

I must admit I had no good answer to this one. Why indeed do they fix the roads near the airport and not the ones in a desert somewhere, in the middle of a jungle or up a mountain? How inconsiderate of these road mending people!

"Do you live far?" was her next question.

"It's about an hour away, I'm afraid!" I replied hesitantly.

"You should consider moving nearer the airport." she retorted quickly, "it would be more considerate when you have visitors from abroad."

Once again, she was right of course. We should all leave our place of employment locally, and where the schools are close to hand, and move near the busy airport on the off-chance that our distant relative, (not distant enough right now), might one day in a lifetime get hold of a spare airline ticket and choose to use it rather than attempt to get a reduced refund.

I remained silent and then started to panic as I saw the traffic build up right ahead. There had been an accident and we soon came to a stop on the highway.

"Are we there yet?" she asked.

"No!"

"Why have we stopped then?"

"There's been an accident. The police is re-directing us another way."

"Not many accidents in Australia." she claimed, "My husband drove for fifty years and never had an accident. Except once! When he reversed on Aristotle, the cat! Didn't like him anyway ... the cat. Didn't like my husband much either ..."

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I said nothing and left the highway slowly as directed by the police.

A few minutes later my cell-phone rang. I stopped the car to answer it.

"Where are you? Why have you not picked up Aunt Gertrude from the airport?"

It took a few seconds for my slow brain to realize what I had done. I'd picked the wrong aunt from the airport!

How was I to know? She wore spectacles. She walked slowly. She looked old ... she WAS old! She looked Australian, she spoke in an Australian accent and came off an Australian plane!

Was I to check her identity in her passport double-locked in her hand bag held tightly against her chest?

Why is it always my fault when everything goes wrong?

That evening I opened my Bible and read: "Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name; you are mine."
Isaiah 43: 1-5.

I bet He knows the right Aunt Gertrude better than me!

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Aunt Gertrude's Bloomers

My Australian Aunt Gertrude who has been staying with us for a while is a really peculiar person; and it has nothing to do with her age or the fact that some elderly people can be eccentric or odd.

Ever since I have known her she has been that way, apparently. I remember as a child hearing my parents saying that she is very tight-fisted when it comes to spending money; and if she were ever mugged she'd convince the mugger to give her his wallet.

This attitude, as well as others, have manifested themselves since we've renewed her acquaintance after so many years of living apart since she emigrated to Australia all those years ago.

For example, not that we're expecting any gifts from her, you understand, but her choice of welcoming gifts has been "economically eccentric" not to put too fine a point.

She brought the children bags of Australian boiled sweets ... and one packet was open because she needed something for a dry throat whilst on the plane.

When I met her at the airport she came towards me holding a can of Foster's amber nectar; one of the best things to come out of Australia. I was delighted at the prospect of such a generous gift ... turned out it was her lunch.

What she actually gave me was a book on how to make your own boomerang. Well, I exaggerate; it's not a book but in fact a ten-page pamphlet.

Every time I threw the book away it came back.

The first time I left it semi-deliberately on the sofa so that the dog would pick it up to play and destroy it. It was retrieved and put on my bedside table for safety.

The second time I left it outside in the garden in the hope that it would just fly away. Again it found its way to the bedside table.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I finally put it in the waste paper basket and was told this is insensitive and that I should keep it in case some day, when I'm old and retired, I might want to make a boomerang for the grand-children. What an unlikely prospect!

Another example of her meanness was portrayed in church last Sunday. During collection she put in £1 and took out some change from the collection plate. She complained afterwards that she only managed to retrieve 85 pence whereas she wanted to collect 90.

Anyway, Aunt Gertrude's peculiarities are not confined to the not spending-money variety.

Our house faces a beautiful park leading to pleasant country walks amongst the valleys and hills beyond. When Aunt Gertrude arrived we gave her a front facing bedroom so she could see the beautiful views from her window.

I got home the other day to find the largest pair of white bloomers hanging out to dry from a makeshift rope out of her window. The underwear was so big that it would have been used by Captain Cook as a sail for his ship on its way to Australia. Next to her pants was the largest bra I could ever imagine.

I was speechless ... I mean ... is this what they do in Australia? Hang their under-washings out of the window for the whole world to see?

What would the neighbours think or say? It is bad enough the way they look at me when I'm wearing my red tartan shirt, green trousers and cowboy hat with a feather in it. Now they have the huge white under-garments as an additional subject of conversation.

Fortunately, as I am not renowned for my diplomacy, I was forbidden to mention the objectionable items, and a quiet word in her ears quickly removed the clothing to the washing line in our back garden.

"Will the birds poo all over it in the back garden?" enquired Auntie Gertrude.

"No ... they only poo at the front," I replied ... diplomatically of course.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

When pork met Gertrude

Everyone had gone out and I was alone in peace at home. I went to my office to get on with some work which was urgently needed for a management meeting that week. I hadn't been working for more than ten minutes when I heard the front door open and my peace was interrupted by Aunt Gertrude's mind-numbing grating Australian accent seeking attention.

"G'day cobber ..." she screeched like a constipated owl, "do you have any of them pork scratchings left?"

For those of you who don't know, pork scratchings are small pieces of pork rind or skin which have been cooked and flavoured so they become dry and crispy. They are a favourite alternative to salted peanuts or potato chips or crisps in pubs and a good accompaniment to a pint or three of beer.

Personally, I prefer my Foster's amber nectar or Guinness minus any food in order not to interrupt the flavor, if you see what I mean. But I understand people snacking on scratchings, nuts or crisps with their beer.

I'm not sure whether pork scratchings are available in Aunt Gertrude's native Australia. She says she first tasted them a few days ago when we took her to the pub and since then she has acquired a taste for pork scratchings.

"Did ye hear me mate?" she screeched again, "any scratchings left?"

I got up from my desk and offered to make her something more substantial like some sandwiches and tea, or a light meal such as an omelette or scrambled eggs on toast.

"Are you fair dinkum?" she said with a wry smile.

I didn't understand what she said but for the sake of good Anglo Australian relations I went to the pantry and got her a large bag of pork scratchings. Luckily we had stocked up on the product since that trip to the pub where pork met Gertrude.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

She sat in front of the TV watching Australian soaps whilst I went back to my desk to finish my report in peace.

Thank Heavens for pork scratchings!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Gone with the wind

It was a lovely summer's afternoon that Sunday when we sat as a family and enjoyed a sumptuous Sunday lunch. We had roast beef as well as fried chicken which had been marinated in all sorts of flavorsome spices and herbs; accompanied by an assortment of vegetables including of course the dreaded Brussels sprouts.

I have never understood why God created this particular vegetable; but create it He did. No doubts He has His reasons and one day we'll discover how beneficial it is for us and how silly and uneducated we have been to dislike it so. However, for now at least, most people I know don't seem to like it.

I don't count myself amongst them, of course. I'm neutral in this respect. I would eat Brussels sprouts if offered to me but I would not go out of my way to ask for them in a gourmet restaurant.

But that Sunday, Brussels sprouts were on the menu. I believe they were mixed with walnut pieces and fried onions, if memory serves me right.

We have had Auntie Gertrude from Australia staying with us for a few days so we also invited Father Frederic to Sunday lunch. The two had never met each other so we sat them next to each other around the large dinner table.

It was a lovely meal with pleasant conversation on no particular subject and all subjects that came to mind.

After lunch, we all moved to the living room to enjoy a nice cup of coffee and continue our discussion.

Father Frederic sat on the sofa leaving a little room for someone else to sit beside him and a few minutes later, as well all made ourselves comfortable, Auntie Gertrude came in and sat beside the priest.

Sadly, and embarrassingly for her, as she lowered herself in the well upholstered settee she accidentally broke wind with a thunderous loud noise.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I should mention at this stage that Father Frederic is somewhat hard of hearing; and he therefore did not notice nor pay attention to what had just happened.

I immediately tried to cover Auntie's embarrassment by asking him loudly some Ecumenical question that came to mind.

As I leaned towards him speaking a little louder than usual I noticed his face going a little pale as the tell-tale strong smell reached my olfactory senses.

He looked at me accusingly as Auntie got out of the room saying "By dingo cobber! I forgot the biscuits in the kitchen ... they're special I brought from Adelaide ... I'll go and get them!"

As she got out of the room, followed by the rest of the family, she added somewhat undiplomatically "they are not as bland as those English biscuits!"

I was left alone with the kind old heavenly priest and the smell from hell.

Suddenly, the Ecumenical question became totally irrelevant as my mind went blank and my hurt pride and wounded honor urged me to shout at the top of my voice "It was not me!!! It was her!!! She did it and went out leaving me sharing her stench."

But being the stupid gentleman which I am, I said nothing. I kept quiet and protected a lady's pride and honor by my silence.

"Would you like a biscuit?" I asked Father picking up the large serving dish which was there all the time.

"That's a lovely piano ..." replied Father Frederic getting up from his seat and moving towards the open window. "Our church organ needs mending ... it doesn't pump so much wind in the pipes as it used to."

Somehow, the uneasy conversation which followed and the fresh air from the open window, diluted the heavy atmosphere in the room as eventually the rest of the family rejoined us accompanied by an innocent looking Auntie Gertrude. Since that day, Father Frederic keeps his distance from me whenever we meet.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

When Gertrude met Herbert

Whilst Aunt Gertrude from Australia is staying with us for a while we thought it a good idea to invite Uncle Herbert from Dundee in Scotland to come and visit for a few days and meet her for the first time. She of course having emigrated to Australia all those years ago; or was she deported from Britain? I don't know. Anyway ... the two have never met.

Now most people tend to think before speaking. Not Auntie Gertrude. She has been fitted with a delay mechanism which makes her speak first and then a few moments later think about what she has just said.

Of course, when this occasionally happens to most people; they realize what they said and apologise, or quickly change the subject. Not Auntie Gertrude. When the delay mechanism makes her realize she said something wrong she continues talking without thinking and makes a bad situation worse.

Uncle Herbert on the other hand is a kind old soul who is always welcome with open arms whenever he visits us. This is because he is always carrying a bottle of the best single malt whisky, which I appreciate very much, as well as various well-chosen presents for the rest of the family. Generosity must have been his middle name when he was christened!

Unlike Auntie Gertrude whose presents from Australia were a few bags of boiled sweets from Adelaide as well as a half-drunk can of Foster's amber nectar which she had opened on her flight to soothe a dry throat. Or so she said.

Don't misunderstand me; she is a kind old lady really. But not from this planet somehow. She seems to live in a world of her own totally unaware of life around her.

No sooner had we welcomed Uncle Herbert and thanked him for all his presents than Auntie Gertrude's delay mechanism came into effect.

We were all sitting in the large living room when Auntie opened her mouth and her stomach gurgled; as we say in our family when someone speaks without thinking.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Uncle Herbert, I should point out here, wears a hair-piece because he is somewhat self-conscious about his bald patch. It is not well-fitting but hey ... he's always worn it and no one has ever said anything about it.

Not Auntie Gertrude.

She started the conversation by asking "Was your wig expensive cobber?"

Uncle stuttered and said "Ehm ... well ... I ... I ... I paid quite a sum for it, ye ken!"

One of the children innocently compounded the difficult situation by asking "What is a wig?" Fortunately the situation was defused by taking the children out to help prepare the dinner table for lunch.

I remained in the room with Uncle and Auntie. She was the first to speak and interrupt the awkward silence.

"The reason I ask," she said, "is because in Adelaide they make them made to measure. They fit very well and you can't tell it's a wig!"

"I ... I ... I see. Aye ...!" stuttered Uncle embarrassingly.

"If you want, I'll order one for you and send it when I get back home!" she continued in her screeching Australian accent which has given me nightmares ever since she arrived, "all I need is your hat size cobber!"

I changed the subject by talking about the weather. Something which we often do in Britain when we have nothing else to say. It's a neutral subject and more often than not leads people to agree on the matter.

"Oh it's been pissing cats and dogs ever since I set foot here!" screeched Aunt Gertrude, "not like back home. It can be quite dry for months it can."

Uncle and I mumbled and I was silently thankful that the conversation had moved on.

"What's the weather like in Dundee?" she asked Uncle, "is it often windy? 'Cos you'll need a hat to stop your wig from flying off!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

What was I to do? I felt like screaming "For pity's sake SHUT UP!!!" But you can't be disrespectful to your old Auntie can you?

I changed the subject once again by asking if they wanted an aperitif before our meal which should be ready presently.

Well ... as you've guessed, the refined relative from Australia asked for a can of Foster's amber nectar; whereas Uncle and I enjoyed a drop of 12 years old single malt.

Thankfully, lunch proceeded peacefully and every one kept their hair on. But I'm sure it's early times yet and Auntie will find other opportunities to embarrass herself, and us!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude goes shopping

Last Saturday I was volunteered to go to the supermarket with Aunt Gertrude from Australia who is staying with us for a while. The rest of the family wanted some respite from her grating Australian accent and slang.

I must admit, since she's been with us I've started to acquire a slight Australian lilt in my speech as well as a few of her words. The other day, unintentionally of course, I said to the postman "G'day to you cobber!"

He replied, "I didn't know you were Canadian!"

I did not dignify his comment with a response so as not to promote his ignorance to total ignorance.

Anyway, off we went to the supermarket accompanied by Uncle Herbert who has come to see us from Dundee in Scotland, and to meet Auntie Gertrude.

That Saturday, Auntie had decided, on the strength of half-an-hour of sunshine that day, that we should have a barbecue in the back garden. She started choosing bits of meat when Uncle Herbert suggested a few packets of the best Scottish smoked salmon would go down a treat.

"Ye can't have stinking fish on a barbie," she screeched loud enough for the whole supermarket to hear, "you'll fumigate the neighbourhood!"

"Och aye ..." he responded calmly, "ma wee bairn grand-daughter had a Barbie!"

"Did she get burnt badly on the barbie?" enquired a distraught Auntie.

"It wasnae burnt ... it was a braw wee doll ye ken!" he replied.

"Your grand-daughter is called Ken? That's a strange name for a girl!" responded a more confused Auntie.

And so it was that, once again, this time in the middle of a supermarket, I became international interpreter between Scotland and Australia, both

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

countries purporting to speak in English and here we have two nationals who can't understand each other.

At least at the liquor counter they both agreed - no wine.

She chose a dozen cans of Foster's amber nectar, whilst he chose Tennent's lager and Irn Bru.

"It's made in Scotland from girders, ye ken!" he said proudly.

"Why does he keep saying Ken?" she asked me in a loud voice for the whole shop to hear.

"G'day cobber, fair dinkum, mate!" I replied as I moved the shopping trolley towards the checkout.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude strikes again

I tell you ... as much as one has to like one's relatives, Aunt Gertrude makes it very difficult indeed. For years I have loved her as I love the sun ... from afar! Us living in Britain and she in Australia has been the ideal relationship and for a very long time the love between us has really blossomed.

She sent us one of her re-cycled Christmas cards once a year and that was enough love to last us a whole 12 months, until the next card.

By re-cycled, I mean that for years she sent us cards other people sent to her with the original message crossed off and her love and best wishes scribbled in. But it's the thought that counts. They weren't always Christmas cards. Sometimes it was birthday cards her friends sent her and she scribbled "Merry Christmas" and sent them to us to "save destroying trees" in the rainforest somewhere or other. On one occasion years ago she sent us a sympathy card she received after her husband passed away six months previously. She scribbled over the card "Best Wishes for Christmas" and that made it cheerful in an instant.

Her eagerness to save money whenever she can has been a source of family amusement for years.

Personally, I can live with that as long as it does not affect me directly. It's her life and she can live it as she wants. But since she came to stay with us for a holiday her antics have directly affected me ... especially this morning.

The family was out and for my sins I had to stay at home to finish a report I was writing and listen to the interminable nattering of my Aunt's Australian accent. Perhaps this is a penance for "time-off" Purgatory; I don't know.

I tried to ignore her as I typed away furiously trying to beat the time-deadline when I have to up-load the report to my boss.

I hadn't had any breakfast and had been working since 7:30am. She got out of her room at about nine and suggested she makes me something to eat. How kind of her. I smiled and thanked her.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

A bit later she came in with a nice cup of coffee and toast with grilled cheese and a meaty paste on top. The cheese was hot and melting, just as I like it, and the extra layer of meaty paste on top, bubbling because of the heat, made it divine. I devoured it thankfully and suggested that she makes some more.

"We have no more meat, cobber!" she screeched as she does normally, "it was a small tin and it's finished!"

"It was lovely," I said appreciatively, "what's it called so we can buy it again?"

"It had no label, mate!" she screeched back showing me a small tin she had bought cheaply from the supermarket. It was cheap because it specifically had lost its label and had a small dent in it - that's why!

I looked at the tin suspiciously and went to the pantry. It looked like tins we'd bought before. In fact it had the same serial number ink-jetted at the top like tins we'd bought before. Identical in fact to our cat's tinned food.

She had just fed me cat food on toast !!!!!!!

What mental type of relative have I got?

What possessed her to buy a tin with no label just because it was a few pence cheaper?

What was she expecting to find inside? Peas? Caviar? Grilled kangaroo liver marinated in Australian lager?

She is definitely totally mad.

And I note that she did not have any of the appetizing grilled breakfast toast. Perhaps not that mad after all !

When I told her what she had just done she laughed and said "It'll grow hair on your chest, cobber. Or should I say fur?"

I really wish I could love her from afar once again.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Accents

Having Aunt Gertrude from Australia visiting us for a few days, and Uncle Herbert from Scotland coming to meet her, made me wonder about accents.

My neighbour is from Glasgow and his accent is totally different from the more "delicate" tones one hears in say, Edinburgh's Morningside.

Now these are two cities not very far apart. Why should their inhabitants have such different accents?

The British Isles aren't that big compared to other countries like America or Australia. Yet despite their small geographical areas they have many different accents. The people from Liverpool sound differently from those in Cornwall, Norfolk or even different parts of London? Why is that?

What does create an accent anyway? Is it the food, the water, the weather or what?

And when did accents first start? In the Middle Ages?

Did the Knights of the Round Table speak with different accents depending on where they came from? They all seem to speak perfect English in the films and on TV.

Do animals have different accents depending on where they come from, I wonder?

Does a French poodle or a German shepherd dog bark with a French or German accent? We wouldn't tell the difference of course; but do they notice a distinction when dogs from different countries bark at each other? Does a dingo, like my Auntie Gertrude, bark "Woof woof cobber"?

Does a Manx cat sound any different from a Siamese?

How about birds? Especially migrating birds like swallows, ducks, geese and so on? When they arrive on the Continent do local birds say, "Aha, here come the Brits to spend the winter here again"?

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I've spent sleepless hours at times wondering about this. And one thing I noticed; when I'm travelling on business and spending overnights in various hotels up and down the country ... whilst I'm counting sheep to help me go to sleep ... yes ... they do "Baaaah !!!!" in different accents depending on where I happen to be.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Auntie's Phone Antics

I was at the computer working. Aunt Gertrude picked up the phone and rasped in Australian "Mornin' to ye. What can I do for ye t'day?

... ..

"He's busy right now ... can't it wait cobber?

... ..

"Important? I tell you mate! The Good Lord Himself took six days to make the whole universe and what's in it; He then put His feet up and had a rest on the seventh day. What could be more important than that?

... ..

"You fellas are always rushing around in a hurry like a wallaby with diarrhea. I always told my second husband not to rush, but would he listen? Then one day in his rush he fell down the stairs, broke his neck and died, and I was left to raise the kids alone. Now is that worth rushing for, I ask ye?

... ..

"As I said, he is busy. He will phone ye back when ready ma darlin'. He's such a fusspot you know, and ever so slow. He'll never be the first fly on a dog's poo ... not him!

... ..

"Fair dinkum mate. I'll get him to phone ye!"

I asked her who was on the phone as she finished talking.

"Some fella called Robbie MacNamara ... Told 'im you'll ring back when you're less busy!" she replied.

"Robbie MacNamara?" I cried, "that's my boss. He is the Director of Finance. You don't talk to him like that!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"I thought he was a telephone marketing person selling you something or other," she replied nonchalantly, "seemed a nice fella, must have Australian ancestry I shouldn't wonder!"

I rang my boss immediately to apologise for my aunt's outrageous behaviour. He said that she was charming and amusing.

I bet he only said that to annoy me!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude's Mischief

This time Aunt Gertrude has gone too far. Her mad antics are beyond redemption and forgiveness.

It happened on Saturday. I was looking forward to a peaceful day alone as the whole family, including our visiting Aunt Gertrude from Australia, planned to go to London sightseeing and no doubt shopping.

On the day in question, for some unknown reason, Auntie decided to stay at home. She made a joke about "baby-sitting" me and said no more about it. After the family left she retired to her room to write some letters to her friends back in Adelaide.

I sat in front of the TV to watch a business programme. I must have been very tired because I soon fell asleep on the sofa.

About an hour later I was awakened by the door bell. I answered the door and it was the postman seeking my signature for an important letter he'd just delivered. As he gave me the letter he smiled and said "G'day!" in a mock Australian accent.

I smiled and said nothing. I made myself a coffee and then decided to walk to the newsagent down the road and get some papers.

On the way there I met Mrs Groggins who lives a few doors away. She was in her front garden pruning her roses. We spoke for a minute or two and as I left she said "G'day!" I thought it somewhat odd of her and went on my way.

At the newsagent I picked my newspapers and decided to treat myself with my favorite chocolates. I also, against my better nature, bought a small box of best chocolates for Auntie Gertrude.

As I paid for the items the cashier smiled at me and said "G'day!" as she handed me the change and receipt.

On my way back home I was somewhat puzzled at this sudden Australian epidemic in our town. Perhaps they'd all met Auntie Gertrude and they were emulating her accent and sayings. After all, she's very noticeable is Auntie; especially with her loud voice and distinctive accent. Coming up

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

the street were a young couple. As they approached me they looked at each other and smiled.

Auntie Gertrude was still in her room. I read my papers and had two large cups of coffee and not a few chocolates.

A bit later I went to the bathroom.

As I looked in the mirror, there on my forehead, written in bright red lipstick was the word "G'DAY"

I nearly burst a valve as my blood pressure reached new heights.

Auntie Gertrude laughed and said "I didn't know you'd go out looking stupid, cobber!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Waltzing Matilda

I'll admit that I have never liked dancing. Not the slow dancing when you hold a lady tightly, or the faster dances like the samba, cha cha cha, or the modern dances where people stand in front of each other and shake like demented chickens.

The reason I don't like dancing is because I am not good at it. I'm all uncoordinated and my feet are too big. Dancing partners always trip over them or get trodden by me. And should I ever stand on tip toe like a ballerina my head hits the ceiling and dislodges some tiles.

You can imagine therefore my dread and fear when Aunt Gertrude read in the newspaper that there was a dance meeting at the local town hall featuring music from Glenn Miller, Benny Goodman and other big bands from years gone by.

"Och aye ... that would be great fun!" encouraged Uncle Herbert who is also visiting us from Dundee to meet Auntie from Adelaide.

"We should all go coppers!" she enthused looking at me for support.

"Yes ... I agree." I said, "we should all go except me because someone should stay at home just in case the phone rings and needs answering ..."

My reasoned argument was dismissed and we all went to the dreaded dance.

As soon as the band played "In the Mood" and I definitely wasn't; Aunt Gertrude insisted that I take to the floor with her. She pulled me by the arm so hard that I heard it break off my armpit joint. There was no stopping her. In her loud Australian accent she insisted that I "lighten up" and "stop getting my underpants in a twist".

To humour her, and just because I'm such a gentleman, I agreed to dance with her. But I didn't know what to do. How do you dance to "In the Mood"?

I stepped accidentally on her feet twice. She grimaced the first time and said I danced like a pregnant kangaroo the second time.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

The tune went on for ages, followed by Chattanooga Choo Choo, Pennsylvania 6-5000 and then Moonlight Serenade.

I don't know where she gets all her energy from. I was soon out of breath and yet she was as light on her feet as someone half her age. Thankfully, after the first tune Uncle Herbert came to the dance floor and took over from me.

"Och ... these young 'uns are not so sprightly as we are!" he joked.

"Fair dinkum, mate!" she agreed as they both danced together admirably.

It was a long night. They enjoyed the dancing. I enjoyed the beer. And I was right ... when we got home the phone had rung twice and the answering machine had to do what I would have done had I been there!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude's Toilet Roll Holder

Having an Australian Aunt staying with us has proved quite a challenge in the entertainment stakes. We've tried as best we can to think of English things to do and experience - things which she would not have back home.

We took her to a village tea-shop and sampled scones with clotted cream and jam, we visited garden centers and flower shows (I hate them, but needs must), and we've gone for walks in the woods and enjoyed picnics by the river.

"This is not like the bush" she said in her distinctive loud accent which can be heard for miles around, "back home our picnics consist of a bonfire by the billabong with a good chunk of meat roasting; not triangular cucumber sandwiches and tea. I should have brought the amber nectar!" Other picnickers looked in our direction and smiled coyly.

Whilst I agree with her last sentiment, I hasten to explain that we are trying to re-create English type things to do ... not an Australian barbie in the outback.

A friend of ours is a member of an operatic society and they put on their version of *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan at the local village hall. So we decide to go and support her, and also as a night out for Aunt Gertrude.

When we arrived at the venue Auntie said "It isn't the Sydney Opera House, is it cobber?"

"No it isn't Auntie," I replied through gritted teeth, "it is a small village hall with a maximum capacity of 100 people; and a production by a small amateur troupe!"

Surprisingly, she enjoyed the amateur production.

The next day we took her to a car boot sale. This is a British tradition whereby people fill the boot of their cars with unwanted knickknacks and go to an open field where they sell their goods to other people. A bit like a yard sale or a garage sale but in cars.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I stayed in my car listening to the radio whilst they went out bargain hunting. After an hour they returned and Auntie was excited having bought a genuine "Shakespeare toilet roll holder". It was made of brass, looked old and cost her £5.

"Look at this dunny roll paper holder ..." she said with glee, "belonged to the great bard himself too, sport!"

I explained as politely as possible that the modern commercial toilet paper with perforations originated in the 19th century, with a patent for roll-based dispensers being made in 1883. So it's unlikely it belonged to Shakespeare.

"But it has his initials on it, cobber!" she insisted.

The letters WS were rather scratched and damaged and looked more like WC rather than the poet's initials. I said nothing so as not to deflate her bubble. She said she'll put it proudly in her toilet back home.

That evening, to celebrate, she suggested we go out to somewhere expensive. Never mind the cost; she will pay. So we went to the local garage and filled the car tank with fuel.

I then took the family to a Greek restaurant; which we all enjoyed.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude's Obsessions

Aunt Gertrude from Australia's stay with us for a while is certainly causing me strain. It's not just her accent of course ... although Lord knows I'm fed up of hearing her say "Fair Dinkum, mate?" whatever that means.

It's not her throwaway facts about Australia every now and then either. "Did you know a koala bear is actually not a bear." She would say. "It is actually a gray furry marsupial which resembles a bear and feeds almost exclusively on eucalyptus leaves."

"Interesting ..." I would reply hiding my total lack of interest.

"And the kangaroo cannot actually pass wind ..." she would go on. Not that I cared to know that fact in the first place. Apparently, its gut does not have the necessary bacteria to create the gaseous emission which we all suffer from occasionally. And that's probably why it keeps hopping around instead of walking or running like everyone else.

No ... what really gets to me about Aunt Gertrude is her total and absolute obsession in saving money. She definitely is the ultimate housekeeper. She was widowed three times and every time she kept the house.

Whenever we go out shopping she insists on haggling and trying to get the price down. In the weekend market near us the price of fruits and vegetables is clearly displayed on each market stall; yet she insists on asking the stall-holder "Are you sure mate?" in her Australian accent. When they confirm the price she replies "You're kidding me? Right! In Adelaide it's at least half that price!"

Last Sunday we took her to a nice tea shop we often frequent in a small village near us and enjoyed tea with scones and potted cream and jam.

You know those little packets of butter they normally have on the table? And the small plastic containers with various jams, and the small sachets of sugar? Well, she insisted on putting all the unused ones in her bag as we left.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"We've paid for them cobber!" she said with a smile as I protested, "I can have them for breakfast!"

I don't know whether to be embarrassed or insulted. After all, we have plenty of butter, sugar and jam at home.

The other day the phone rang once and then stopped. A minute later it rang once again and stopped.

"That's for me," she said, "may I use your phone?"

She picked up the phone and dialed out and spoke for about half-an-hour.

Apparently she had worked out that it is cheaper to phone from our home to Australia rather than the other way round. She had worked it out to the nearest penny including working out the daily exchange rate between the two currencies.

So she agreed with her friend back home that her friend would phone twice and put the receiver down as a signal for Auntie to ring Australia.

I don't mind the ruse, but not once did she actually offer to pay me for the calls; so she effectively phoned for free.

The other day I caught her bending down in the garden and saying to the bush "Give it to me ... give it to me ..."

I thought her Australian mind had gone walkabout in the outback.

She was actually talking to the cat who had just caught a pigeon. Eventually she retrieved the pigeon and brought it to the kitchen and prepared it to bake in a pie. Apparently back home she often makes pies with all sorts of road-kills to save money.

No one would eat the pie when it was finally baked and we convinced her to share our turkey roast instead and give the pie to the cat.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

The lost Aunt Gertrude

We were all out "shopping" at the mall. Actually, "shopping" is a euphemism for walking around from shop to shop looking at their windows, going inside and buying nothing at all, or on a rare occasion buying something totally unnecessary just because it makes one feel better.

Personally, I've never understood the female's need for window shopping. We males tend to be more direct. We know what we want; we go to the shop and buy it. What could be simpler than that?

But on this occasion we had Aunt Gertrude with us. She's been staying with us for a (long) while whilst holidaying from Australia, and it was decided to show her the new shopping center which opened not so long ago in a nearby city.

As usual, I decided to sit on one of the benches specifically placed in the mall for bored husbands who'd rather read a newspaper in peace. They all went from shop to shop and agreed to return in about an hour or so. Can you imagine that? A whole hour of peace without Aunt Gertrude's grating Australian accent hurting my ears!

When they returned proudly showing all the nonsense they had bought ... I mean, who needs yet another cardigan ... Aunt Gertrude asked us to wait for about fifteen minutes as she wanted to visit the "dunny" just down the corridor.

We waited ... and waited ... and waited ... We sent out a search party to the ladies to see if she was there. She wasn't. We split up and went in different directions searching different shops. She wasn't in any of them either. We widened the search and agreed to keep in contact by cell-phones. She was no where to be found.

As my heart started to gladden at the thought that perhaps she had gone back to Australia I heard her screeching accent from the doorway of my favorite fast-food outlet.

She was standing there with a vagrant in dirty torn clothing and she was arguing with the fast-food store manager. As I approached them she shouted loud enough to be heard back in Adelaide. "Look here cobber ... if

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

this place is bad enough for them beatniks to eat in, it is bad enough for him also!"

I asked her what was going on. She replied "This reptile cum manager does not want to let us in!"

The manager recognized me as one of his regulars and let me deal with the matter. Apparently, the poor beggar had asked Auntie for a few pence for a cup of tea, and she decided to treat him to a full meal instead. But the manager would not allow him in dressed like this.

I explained to the manager that she was an eccentric family member visiting from Australia and I did not see why I should be the only one to suffer her unusual antics. He agreed to let us in on this occasion. So I phoned the rest of the family and we enjoyed a great meal.

Guess who paid? Me!!!

Why is Auntie's generosity always costing me dear? To be fair, she did buy me a stupid cardigan.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

The armchair

I may have mentioned that Uncle Herbert from Dundee is very generous and always brings us many gifts when he visits.

He was with us recently to meet Aunt Gertrude from Australia who is staying with us for a (long) while.

After he left to his native Scotland he proved once again that his generosity knows no bounds. I wish it did really ...

Being generous is one thing but then it can also go too far and it takes over someone else's life. I don't mean to be critical ... Yes I do actually; otherwise I wouldn't be telling you this.

Let me explain.

The other day a large van drew outside our house and they delivered a large box.

"Struth cobber ..." said Auntie Gertrude, "what in a nest of kookaburras is that?"

We weren't expecting anything apart from a book which I had ordered from the Internet. But this box was far too big for a book ...

We got the box into the house, Auntie and I, and we opened it to discover that it contained a huge armchair.

Not a normal type of armchair mind you ... no, this was an inflatable armchair. And not the kind you inflate with air ... it would take ages and strong lungs to inflate something this size. No, this armchair had to be filled with water. It's like a water bed but armchair shaped. And it's in the most hideous blue plastic colour.

With the gift was a short note from Uncle Herbert saying "I saw this in the shop and thought of you."

WHY?

Why would an oversized fluorescent blue inflatable armchair lead a kind,

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

albeit somewhat demented old man, to think of me? Do I look fat and wobbly maybe? I never even wear blue, so what led him to buy it for us?

Anyway ... one has to be kind I suppose, and as Uncle Herbert is visiting again next week, (he seems to like Aunt Gertrude - don't know why), we decided to inflate the armchair with gallons and gallons of water.

"No worries cobber!" laughed Auntie Gertrude, "I'll fix the hose from the garden to the water and we'll soon have this thing floating like a surf board on an Australian wave!"

It must have emptied three local lakes to fill it.

It was placed in front of the TV where our dear Uncle often sits. It wobbles and moves as you sit in it and it makes you sea-sick, especially when the blue plastic reflects the light from the TV set.

Aunt Gertrude tried it a few times and she liked it. She's thinking of buying one for herself to take back to Adelaide.

So there was I yesterday sitting uncomfortably in this huge blue lagoon moving from side to side when I eventually fell asleep. There was nothing good on TV except the dust accumulated by the static.

As I lay there sleeping, dreaming of being on a Pirate's Ship with Captain Blue Beard no doubt, suddenly my dream turned into Titanic.

Apparently the other day Auntie Gertrude was knitting on the inflatable armchair and had inadvertently lost one of the knitting needles. As I sat on the chair I somehow pushed the needle into the plastic fabric which burst with a slow but steady discharge of water everywhere.

There were gallons of water flooding the living room as I slowly sank down to the ground trapped in the infernal armchair as it folded itself with me in it ...

... and then I shot up violently like a rocket as the water made contact with an electric appliance in the living room.

Auntie Gertrude who was in the room at the time and witnessed the whole

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

event laughed loudly as she said "I always knew your big bottom was too heavy for that chair, cobber!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Events my friends, events!

There are times in life when a series of events follow each other and somehow combine to make one's life more difficult than it is. These are times to have Faith, patience, perseverance, and most of all the absence of one's Aunt Gertrude.

A few days back we heard that our Uncle Herbert from Dundee was not well. So we decided to drive up to Scotland as a family, with Aunt Gertrude from Australia, and stay with him for a few days until he is better. The old man lives alone, and for some unknown reason he got to like Aunt Gertrude. So we decided a visit would do him the world of good.

Unfortunately, the day before we were due to set off I fell off a ladder whilst cutting a tree in the garden. Not much damage done but I twisted my ankle badly and could not drive.

So it was decided that I'd stay home and the family with Auntie would travel by train. But she refused. She said the journey was too long for her and she'd rather not go.

This is a woman who came a thousand plus miles from Australia and yet is refusing to travel a few hundred miles to Scotland.

I tried to encourage her to no avail. I would have gladly paid for a one-way ticket to anywhere in the world to avoid being in the house alone with her but I could not shift her. The last time I was alone with her she fed me cat food!

On the day in question they all left and I was alone with Aunt Gertrude who decided to make me better. She prepared chicken soup which apparently is good for invalids.

I told her it was mid-summer and that I hated chicken soup, and besides a twisted ankle does not make one an invalid. She said it contained pearl barley which is good for you!

After I was fed the soup she suggested we pray together for me to get better.

What? I had no intention of praying with her. But she insisted.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

She started with the Rosary and then a number of readings from the Bible followed by other prayers and pleadings to the Lord for my health and that of the whole family, including their safe travel there and back, and not forgetting Uncle Herbert.

To be fair, not once during the prayers did she say "cobber" or "fair dinkum" or "no worries" or any of her other Australian sayings; which no doubt pleased the Good Lord no end.

Then, to make conversation, she said she'd been to that posh department store in London on her last visit and bought something unusual to send back to a friend of hers in Adelaide.

"Oh yes ..." I said feigning some interest.

"It's a Santa Claus costume" she said, "I bought it for a friend who has been asked to be Santa at the local church fete!"

"But ... it's the middle of summer!" I mumbled with a smile.

"I know, cobber ... I'll be posting it to him on Monday ... I'd like you to try it first to check the size is right. My friend is about the same size as you and well rotund round the waist too ..."

She has a nice way of flattering people, I thought. Before I could say anything she'd been to her room and returned with the red costume. I tried the heavy coat on, and put on the white beard too, to humour her. As I stood up so she could check the costume for length I accidentally stood on a stupid plastic toy which had been left on the floor.

I heard it crack underneath me and felt the pain of my twisted ankle shoot up my leg. I let out a cry as I collapsed back on the sofa.

"Dear Lord ... are you OK cobber!" she cried in a panic, "don't move fella ..." she continued as I nodded that I was OK.

She went out of the room and left me alone to recover slowly from the shooting pains. About ten or so minutes later I heard voices from the front door. Two ambulance men entered the room ...

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Apparently, when she heard the loud crack under my foot she thought I'd broken a bone and phoned for an ambulance.

The two paramedics checked me out and said I was OK. I tried to explain why I was wearing a Santa costume and one of them said: "Don't worry sir. We've been to a number of call-out situations and have seen many sights. We've learnt to be discreet and never ask questions!"

What exactly did he mean by that?

I am so angry at the mad woman that I am still fuming days afterwards. The rest of the family think it is all very funny.

Auntie Gertrude said "Lighten up cobber ... if you'd lost some weight round your waist you would have seen the toy on the ground!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Real men don't cry

For years the debate has continued about the difference between men and women. Women can be gentle, kind, tender, emotional and so on and so on ... whilst men are naturally tough, they don't show their emotions, and any sign of kindness or tenderness is a sign of weakness.

Whilst not wishing to either start or enter this debate right here I must admit that I have been brought up to hide my emotions and to always appear strong, in control and not show any hesitation in my decisions or the accuracy of my judgment. The stiff upper lip syndrome has long been a revered trait to be adhered to whenever possible.

The new fashionable trend that it is nice for men to show their feminine side and it is OK for men to cry would not until recently have found favor with me.

I really cannot remember the last time I ever cried until a few days ago.

In recent days I have had reason to cry twice, with real tears. Not manly, I know; but it actually happened.

The first time it happened involved my dear Aunt Gertrude who is holidaying with us from Australia. I have written a lot about her and how she has tested my patience to extremes since she arrived at our house. But deep inside she is a kind old lady who has suffered a lot in life and overcame all odds with a smile and a determination of a Saint. But what she did a few days ago really brought tears to my eyes.

We were at the supermarket car-park having loaded all our shopping in the car and about to leave. Being a gentleman, I opened the door for her and waited until she entered the car and sat behind the driver's seat. She looked at me with a gentle smile and moist eyes and said "look at that beautiful sunset ... it reminds me of many sweet sunsets with my late husband in Adelaide! He really loved bright red sunsets ... I miss him so ... he was a handsome big man ... you would have liked him. Pity the two of you never met!"

I looked at the sun setting in the distance over the hills and for once I felt really sorry for this little old lady with so much hidden love in her

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

heart. For a fleeting moment, I really regretted ever wishing she'd go back to Australia.

Then, for some unexplained reason, she shut the car door on my hand ... accidentally of course.

OH the pain ... it brought real tears to my eyes. "Real men don't cry!" I heard my brain say; but my eyes were in no mood to listen.

Auntie got out of the car and apologized profusely ... everyone panicked!

"Dad are you crying?" I heard in the distance of my confused mind. Where's the stiff upper lip when you most need it?

I could not see because of the tears ... I was driven to hospital A&E Department where they took an X ray of my hand.

Mercifully, apart from some serious bruising there were no broken bones or torn tendons. But I really cried that day ... real tears like it rarely happened before. Talk of showing my feminine side !!!

Amongst the pain and confusion I asked the doctor whether I'd be able to play the piano. He said yes. Which I found most odd since I could not play the piano before the accident! Perhaps I should have asked him about the guitar too! I always wanted to play it well.

Anyway ... a few days passed and all was forgotten. However, Auntie Gertrude was once again the source of more tears in this hitherto stiff upper lip type of a man.

She read in the papers that the local cinema was showing a romantic sad film involving a love story and a tragic ending. A real tear-jerker from all accounts! Apparently she'd seen the film in Adelaide and cried throughout and she believed we'd all enjoy shedding a tear at this sad story too.

"What a load of nonsense!" I thought. Why is it that women love to see sad films and cry throughout? Well, I certainly had no intention of going to see this silly sad story. If I needed to cry some more I'd gladly shut the car door on my hand myself.

But I was out-numbered as often happens in this household. They all decided to go to the cinema.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Now, it is a very long time since I have been to the cinema. In my days going to the cinema was not necessarily to see a film. Much better to sit in the back with your date and ...

Anyway, we all went to the cinema as a family with Auntie Gertrude; and once again the occasion brought real tears to my eyes. Tears which I just could not control.

It wasn't so much the story which made me weep like a child ...

Have you seen how much cinema tickets cost these days? A true fortune I tell you!

And no reductions for a whole family or old people - which Auntie certainly is!

And can you imagine the price of popcorn, drinks, sweets, chocolates and all the other things which apparently are now essentials whilst watching a film.

In my days, sitting at the back row one was too busy ... watching the film ... to need popcorn and drinks.

My wallet joined me in shedding genuine tears as we had to fork out so much for so little.

As the film started I had so many tears in my eyes thinking of the cost that I could not see anything.

Anyway, the cinema was so crowded that if the lady in front of me did not have pierced ears I would not have been able to see the screen!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

The sayings of Aunt Gertrude

My Australian Aunt Gertrude is a no-nonsense lady who says it as it is and it doesn't matter who she upsets in the process.

Make no mistake; she is a sweet and gentle old lady with a heart of gold which she hides very well in case you would think kindly of her. Having faced hard-times in Australia and survived many difficulties and heart-aches she has built a granite-like façade which perhaps is often misunderstood by those who don't know her well.

Since she's been holidaying with us I can truly say that I have aged at least a hundred years; especially when having to put up with her grating Australian accent which sounds like a duck-billed platypus being run over by a lawn mower. Not to mention her various meaningless catch phrases uttered to all and sundry with no rhyme or reason ... or even sense.

My favorite is "When you're in the bush with no dunny the trees are further apart!" I'm not sure what it means but I think it's when things are bad they seem worse than they are.

If ever the world runs out of wisdom I'm sure we can all turn to Aunt Gertrude to replenish our waning stocks once again.

Whilst watching the news the other day about a seemingly irresolvable world problem Auntie suggested that the best way forward is to "put them political fellas in a room with a large dose of laxative and don't let them out until they solve it!"

Yep ... that should do it according to Gertrude.

If only all problems could be solved with a dose of laxative.

On another occasion whilst watching a politician on TV she said "I wouldn't vote for him. He has a face that even his mother would disown any credit for!"

We laughed of course but said that the man isn't really that bad looking. She replied "The difference between a kangaroo and a wallaby is in the eyes of the beholder!"

On another occasion, whilst watching a singer on TV, Auntie said "She sings like a kookaburra with its tail on fire!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

But her worst insult was delivered to the cashier at the supermarket who, whilst pricing our goods, picked up some loose courgettes, put them on the scales, and asked "Are these cucumbers!"

Without batting an eyelid, Auntie replied "Do you need a University Degree in Ignorance for this job?"

I don't know what was funnier, her reply or the grating Australian accent it was delivered in. Anyway ... the cashier didn't understand because he replied that they need no qualifications for a cashier's job; and she could pick up an Application Form from Customer Services Desk.

Perhaps he understood her all right!!!

Good old Auntie Gertrude. She spreads chaos and mayhem wherever she goes; but we like her. Just about!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

The answer is blowing in the wind

I went to the library with Auntie Gertrude, a relative from Australia who is staying with us for a (long) while.

I sat at a table with a couple of volumes which I needed for my research work and started making notes quietly. Auntie Gertrude sat next to me reading a magazine. A few minutes later a small man came at the table and sat beside her with a few books which he started reading and making cross-references in his notebook.

A few minutes later he turned to Aunt Gertrude and said "Do you realize that all the time I've been sitting here 500 square miles of rain forest have been destroyed?"

Without batting an eyelid Auntie replied "Then I suggest you don't sit here cobber!"

"Are you interested in the environment?" he asked her.

"I'm interested in a quiet environment in which to read my magazine in peace" she replied somewhat harshly.

"Do you want to save Mother Earth?" he continued enthusiastically not having taken her point to heart. Before she could reply the man continued, "Take births and deaths for instance ..." he said. "Births and deaths ... it's a question of balancing the two ... Do you realize that every time I breathe in and out someone in the world dies?"

"You should try a different mouth-wash mate!" replied Auntie as quick as a flash. I smiled inwardly and said nothing. She is well able to fight her own battles and for once her attention was not directed at me.

He ignored her and proceeded with another fact "Every 30 seconds or so a woman gives birth to a new baby!"

"Someone should stop her before she gets too exhausted," Auntie Gertrude retorted in her Australian accent, "now if you don't mind I'd like to continue reading."

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

On our way home in the car Aunt Gertrude commented that she was reading an article about the environment and saving the planet whilst we were in the library. She told me of plans to build a wind power facility somewhere and the inhabitants were protesting against wind turbines being erected in their locality.

"Why do you think they'd do that cobber?" she asked.

I explained that wind turbines tend to spoil the view, especially in the countryside; to which she promptly replied without thinking, "Why don't they bring them out at night when there's no one there and take them away in the morning?"

I was struggling for a diplomatic polite answer when she continued, "Either that or disguise them as windmills. Everyone likes windmills; they are so romantic."

I smiled and said nothing.

"We should also harness solar power," she continued, "that and wave power, in fact any movement can be harnessed to make electricity."

I nodded as I drove on.

"Can you imagine," she said "if everyone wore a hat with a solar panel on top we'd be gathering electricity everywhere we go. We could also fit people with a movement contraption and whenever they walked they'd produce electricity."

"That's good," I smiled thinking of windmills, "and how about getting some wind power from people?"

"Oh, you produce enough of that all by yourself cobber!" she retorted with a laugh.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Global Warming Gertrude

My Aunt Gertrude from Australia switched off the radio and said, "Well that's a load of old nonsense, cobber; if ever I heard some!"

I bit into my toast with ginger marmalade and asked, semi-expecting her unusual take on another world problem, "What's that Auntie?"

"Those fellas on the radio," she said, "they were talking about global warming. The planet is getting warmer, they said, and it will melt the polar ice cap and we'll all drown as the sea level rises!"

"Oh ..." I exclaimed "better start taking swimming lesson then!"

"If the polar cap melts," she asked, "will it be the North Pole or the South one?"

"I dunno. Both I suppose." I replied putting down my cup of coffee.

"Well, I'll go back to Adelaide and I'll be all right then!" she said nonchalantly.

I must admit I never thought I'd be grateful for global warming and ice caps melting if it meant her going back to Australia. But, after a moment's pause I asked her to explain.

"Well cobber," she said, "if the North polar cap melts then all the water will flood you lot in Europe and the North and I'll be in Australia safe and sound!"

I nodded and said nothing.

"And if the South Pole melts, the water will not rise up the globe towards Australia will it? It will drip down into space just like when you get your head out of the water tub. The water drips down not rise up!"

I'll admit to having learnt something new about the whole issue of the environment and changing weather patterns. Before I could say anything Aunt Gertrude continued.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"Besides ..." she said, "assuming that this global warming thing is actually man-made, and not just a freak of nature ... a bit like you ... then we should do something about it, cobber!"

I ignored the badly-veiled insult, and asked her what we should do.

"We should stop lighting candles for a start," she declared, "candles create a lot of heat for no reason. Can you imagine how many candles are lit in the world at any one time? Candles in romantic settings in restaurants, at the dinner table at home, in the bath ... struth ... what is the purpose of candles in a bath tub? Candles in churches ... candles on birthday cakes ... wherever you turn people are lighting candles. Now that's a lot of unnecessary heat I tell you!"

This was proving to be quite a scientific lesson from my Aunt. Who would have thought that the world's problems could be down to one simple solution? I ventured an opinion and suggested we stop using barbecues too.

"Watch it cobber!" she retorted back, "when we Australians have barbies it is for a purpose; and that is to enjoy the great outdoors with a nice bit of steak and a can of amber nectar. Not a triangular cucumber sandwich and a cup of tea like you do."

I waved a mental white flag and retreated. You can never win an argument with Aunt Gertrude.

"And another thing," she declared triumphantly, "it mentioned on the radio that another reason for global warming is cows breaking wind. Apparently they break a lot of wind and this upsets the ozone layer or something like that; and it heats up the planet."

"Unlike the kangaroo" she continued, "the kangaroo cannot actually pass wind. Its guts do not have the necessary bacteria to create the gassy emissions which make up a fart! So you cannot blame us Australians for global warming."

I bit my lip and poured myself another cup of coffee.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"So scientists should establish how to treat cows so that they behave just like kangaroos" explained Auntie Gertrude with authority, "and they can start by experimenting on you!" she smiled as she left the room.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Gertrude and Caruso

My Aunt Gertrude from Australia certainly does not miss an opportunity to embarrass me.

We were having tea and coffee in the Parish Center after Mass and got into a discussion about singing and music with other parishioners. One admitted that he was totally ignorant about music to which Auntie quickly retorted "if ignorance is bliss, how come there aren't more happy people in the world?"

I gulped my coffee and said nothing.

Later on she suggested to the choir master "You need some new talent in the choir mate!"

The choir master, a man whom I have secretly christened Caruso because of his posture and loud voice when he stands up front and sings, replied politely that indeed he needed new volunteers for the choir.

"Don't look at me cobber!" she exclaimed, "I'm from Adelaide you know and I'd be going back soon!"

"Not soon enough" I thought rather unkindly.

Before my mind could enjoy the thought of Auntie going back to her billabong in Australia she burst my moment of happiness by adding, "If you want someone for your choir why not have my nephew here. It'll make a change from hearing him sing in the bath. His voice is a bit croaky mind. But he's so loud that the neighbours have often invited the police to enjoy the fruits of his vocal chords!"

Before I could say anything the choir master agreed and Auntie promised that we'd be at their next rehearsals.

We all met at the Parish Centre and were welcomed by Caruso.

He started by taking down our names and asking us about our singing voice - some said tenor, others said contralto, some said soprano and so on.

He asked me about my voice range. I did not know what to say. Whenever I sing in church on Sunday, God reaches out for the headache tablets and Jesus puts cotton wool in His ears.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Before I uttered a word Aunt Gertrude suggested "his voice is more like a strangled cat ... but I'm sure you can make him improve!"

Caruso smiled and said nothing. He scribbled in his notebook and then asked me to do something embarrassing in front of all those people.

He said "sing FIGAAAARO, Figaro Figaro Figaro Figaaaarooooo!"

I told him I did not know that particular hymn. I thought I'd be part of the choir and we'd all sing "Amazing Grace" or whatever hymns are scheduled for that Sunday.

He insisted he wanted to test my voice range.

So rather than sing I said a few times weakly "Figaro!"

He said "Yes ... quite!" and walked away.

I felt somewhat patronized by his "Yes ... quite" and I was ready to leave when Auntie interjected, "I told you he'd be a good laugh cobber! But beggars can't be choosers can they?"

Caruso got us together and we practiced a few hymns to help him gauge how good we were and how much work he had on his hands to improve the bad lot he had as volunteers.

After an hour or so we had a short break and Caruso suggested I stand at the back of the choir and sing softly, almost miming, as if I was singing a lullaby for baby Jesus to go to sleep.

I took that to mean he didn't think much of my voice range and power. I nodded and made a mental note not to go to any more rehearsals.

On the way home in the car Auntie Gertrude remarked "well at least we've solved one mystery tonight cobber!"

I raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

"You're as talent less when singing in the bath as when hiding amongst a choir. A frog with laryngitis would do a better job! There are plenty in our billabong back home who can testify to that."

For a moment I wished and prayed that she was in that far away billabong.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Cops Encounter of the Gertrude Kind

I really wish that my Australian Aunt Gertrude would learn to keep her mouth shut. Since she's been holidaying with us her loud Australian accent and innate shatter has got me in trouble more than once.

Last evening she decided to stay late in church after the Prayer Meeting to have a cup of tea and a chat. Nothing wrong with that, except that at about ten o'clock I was made to volunteer to go and pick her up. I had just got home after a long day at work, I had not eaten since I don't know when, I was a little tired and yet ... when you are volunteered ... well, I'm sure you understand!

On our way back from church my stomach rumbled once or twice.

"Swallowed a frog have you cobber?" said Auntie with a laugh.

I apologized and let the incident pass. But a few moments later, there it was again, a louder rumble.

"I heard better noise from the depth of my billabong!" she exclaimed, "Trapped wind is it? Well don't let it out in the car mate!"

I ignored her and prayed that we'd get home soon. But my prayers may have been mislaid in a pending tray somewhere in Heaven because a few yards later we were stopped by a police vehicle parked up ahead.

"Good evening sir, mam," said the policeman, "We're conducting a routine vehicle check. It won't take a moment!"

Before I could say anything Auntie Gertrude, sitting in the passenger seat beside me, said "I can assure you he hasn't been drinking officer!"

I froze in my seat and did not know what to say. My stomach spoke for me with a loud rumble.

"At least I did not see him drink," continued Auntie, "I've been in church you see. He picked me up so I doubt he would have drunk and driven at the same time, cobber!"

The policeman looked at me and asked. "Have you been drinking sir?"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"No, of course not ..." I replied in a dry throat, fearing where all this would lead to.

"Would you to get out of the car please?" he said sternly.

I got out and so did she. The policeman went to his car and spoke with his colleague. I asked Auntie to get back in the car but she wouldn't.

"Don't worry mate! I'll get you out of any trouble. I get stopped by the police all the time in Adelaide!"

The two policemen came back to our vehicle and explained the procedure involved in taking a breathalyzer test.

I blew in the bag and it was negative, as indeed I expected and hoped for.

"Is this your vehicle, sir?" asked one of the policemen.

"Yes ..." I nodded.

"No it isn't, cobber!" retorted Auntie, "you told me it was a company vehicle!"

I explained as calmly as I could that it was the firm's vehicle registered in my name.

"Has he done something wrong?" asked Auntie, "because I can vouch for him. He is not the brightest penny in the universe; but he gets along poor soul."

"Please mam," said one of the men, "would you return to the car whilst we talk to your husband!"

"She is not my wife!" I protested.

It's bad enough having her for an Aunt, an elderly one at that, than to have her mistaken as my wife.

"She's a visiting relative from Australia" I explained.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"Are you going to do the good cop bad cop bit?" interjected Auntie again making a bad situation worse, "I doubt he'd know which is which; the poor wallaby!"

One of the policemen stayed with her by the car whilst the other one took me aside towards his vehicle. He checked my identity and paperwork and explained that it was a routine check and all was in order. He explained that he had to breathalize me following Auntie's comments, and sympathized somewhat with my predicament. "Some elderly folk like to be seen to help!" he remarked.

As we drove away Auntie commented with a gleeful smile, "They had to let you go, cobber! I told the policeman who stayed with me that in the dictionary the word wimp has a picture of you next to it!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Missing without a trace

I've been missing for three days. Without a trace. No one knew I was missing ... except me of course. I suspect none of you noticed my absence.

On Tuesday the family decided to take Aunt Gertrude down South to visit friends, leaving me at home alone with the dog, the cat and the goldfish.

Oh bliss ... a whole three days without Auntie's Australian accent grating on my nerves. Without a family demanding this and that and volunteering me for all sorts of things.

As long as I can keep the pets well fed I'll have a peaceful break all to myself. Although at times the goldfish can be quite noisy when they chatter and laugh at me from their fish tank.

Let me explain that we live in a very old Victorian house which has a cellar spanning the whole floor area of the property. You enter the cellar from a door just under the staircase.

We don't use this basement often, it's mostly a storage area nowadays where we keep half a dozen bottles of wine lying lazily on a shelf which I built myself ... slightly leaning to one side mind you ... but still OK if you wedge a book at the end and it stops the bottles from rolling off.

We also keep some foodstuff down there, mostly tins of soup, various tins of vegetables and fruits and other household goods like detergents, washing liquids and so on. And books. Plenty of books. I built a few more shelves in one corner which I call the library and we've put a number of books which we refer to every now and then. You get the idea ... it's just a storage area for things we use now and then.

The basement used to be a small apartment for a servant or butler in years gone by. It has a small kitchenette and bathroom still fully plumbed in and in working order, and a tiny living/sleeping area. Originally I wanted to send our guest from Australia, Aunt Gertrude, down there; but I was over-ruled, as often happens in our household, much to the amusement of the goldfish.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Now where was I? In the basement ... or about to enter the basement to be precise. I needed a book about Australian parasites so off I went downstairs as one would in such circumstances.

As I got to the corner where the books are, there was an almighty crash in the house as the dog started chasing the cat who followed me down in the basement.

The dog ... huge as he is ... did not quite fit in under the staircase where the basement door is situated, but his immense stature slammed the door shut. That's when I heard a clunk ... clunk ... clunk ... sound all the way down the stairs and at my feet.

Perhaps I should have mentioned that the door handle has always been a little loose. I've always planned to fix it ... Lord knows I've been told often enough ... but with that and the leaning shelves it was all a question of priorities. Which one to fix first ... and neither was done!

I picked up the door handle and tried to open the door. No use ... it would not work. And that's how I went missing without a trace in my own house.

No one knew I was there. No use shouting for help. No one would hear me. No point in phoning for help. I didn't have the cell-phone with me.

Try as I might to open the door but it was all in vain. An hour or so later I heard the phone ring in the house and the loudspeaker on the answering machine said "Hello ... we've arrived safely ... Oh ... you must be out. See you Thursday evening. Bye!"

Great ... what a prospect. Trapped in my own house for three whole days.

Now it is said that in such circumstances of extreme trauma one should sit down calmly, take deep breaths and concentrate. No need to panic.

Calm down and concentrate.

And nothing aids concentration more than a drop or two of wine.

Fortunately we have plenty of that here. Or beer if one prefers ... which is also easily to hand.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

After an hour or so of concentration I still had no idea on how to get out of my prison.

My mind was getting a little hazy ... perhaps it's the lack of air down here. There's a small window at the far end of the basement leading to the back garden of the house. It's at ground level when you're out in the garden ... if you see what I mean. It's too small to get out of; and it is barred anyway. I did tell you wine aids concentration didn't I?

Now then ... if I could get the cat out of the window he could go for help! (Hic ... pardon me ... hiccup!)

I could tie a message to his collar! No that won't do ... he doesn't wear a collar. Too dangerous you see, he could get caught on a tree branch and injure himself. So we've never put a collar on him. Perhaps I could go out and buy him a collar. Oops ... I can't get out ... hic!

Perhaps I could tattoo a distress message on his body ... a bit extreme I must say! It'll stay with him for life. "HELP ... I'm trapped in the basement!"

The problem is I have no tattooing equipment whatsoever down here, and I've never tattooed anyone in my life let alone a cat.

What if I cut a message in his fur with scissors? Like some people do with their hairstyle when they cut their hair in different patterns? Would the cat stay still long enough until I finish cutting his fur I wonder?

I think I need another drink ... hic!

Ah ... I got it. This is certain to work. I could empty all these tins of peas ... well some of them anyway ... no one likes peas. I could tie them to one another with a long string and tie that to the cat's tail.

He'd make such a noise running all over town that someone is sure to find him and read my message which will be written on one of the tins.

I emptied about a dozen tins. Peas taste awful when eaten cold you know ... even washed down with beer.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I tied the tins together. Wrote a message on several tins to make sure it is read.

I called the cat sleeping happily in the corner. I tripped on the Australian book lying on the floor. The cat suddenly got up and shot out through the window.

Typical of that cat ... un-cooperative to the last. He just would not help me in my hour of need.

I was found fast asleep on Thursday evening.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude's Wild Life

It is said that in millions of years from now man will become extinct. This is because there is something wrong with the male chromosome which means that for a while humans will only produce female offspring; and then human beings will no longer be able to reproduce.

Well, I don't know about you. But if the world had no more men who would take the spiders out of the bath tub?

The reason I mention this is because I am a hero in my own household.

The other day there was a big spider in the toilet and the whole family panicked. I was sent in to capture it and take it out in the garden.

I basked in my new found glory until Auntie Gertrude came home from her walk in the park and was told of my intrepid exploits.

"Is that all cobber?" she said deflating my ego like a burst balloon, "once when I was in the bush I found a snake in the dunny."

"Really? What did you do?" she was asked as all the family's attention deserted me and turned to her.

"Only one thing to do mate" she exclaimed, "I stood on its head and killed it. I wasn't going to give him a front row seat in the audience whilst I sat on the dunny!"

As the family oohed and aaahed in amazement Auntie went on "On another occasion whilst I was having a shower at home I saw a small lizard looking at me and counting my wrinkles. Fortunately I only have one wrinkle, the one I sit on!"

The family laughed as Auntie Gertrude continued to entertain her audience and dimming the limelight which hitherto shone on me. I mean ... tackling a spider is quite a feat you know.

"In Australia we have all sorts of wildlife" she declared, "I once found a baby koala in the kitchen. The door was open and the poor mite came in. He was weak and starving the little fella!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"What did you do Auntie?" they all asked.

"Oh I phoned the animal rescue people and they took him away," she went on to the delight of her attentive audience.

"A neighbour of ours has a lizard for a pet" Auntie explained, "the creature is always perched on his shoulder as he walks around the house."

"Did his parrot die?" I asked sarcastically.

"No, he has a parrot as well," she replied having missed my comment completely, "and a dog, two cats and a white rabbit."

"Tell us about them ..." they all cried in unison.

At which point I left the room and let her enjoy her moment of fame. At least whilst she is entertaining the family she is not getting at me.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunts Gertrude and Philomena

If there's anything more testing than having Australian Aunt Gertrude staying with us for a (long) time it is having Aunt Philomena join us as well.

Let me explain.

Aunt Gertrude is from Australia and has not met her cousin Aunt Philomena, who lives somewhere in Wales with a long and unpronounceable name, for a long time. (That's the place which has a long unpronounceable name, not Aunt Philomena - her surname is rather short: Tet).

Anyway, as I was saying before interrupting myself; the two Aunts have not met for many years. Gertrude went to Australia in her early twenties and Philomena married a Welshman and lived in Wales since she was a similar age. If I remember well, the two ladies are six months older than each other, but don't ask me who is older than the other since ladies never reveal their age.

Have you noticed, by the way, that old people, men and women, never reveal their age directly. They say: I'll be 79 next September, rather than I'm 78.

Anyway, I seem to have interrupted myself once again. Must stop doing that. It confuses my train of thought.

Have you also noticed how trains seem to run less frequently than in the past? They announced at the railway station over the loudspeakers that trains were cancelled due to shortage of staff. Why can't they employ taller people?

As I was saying, or meant to say, the two Aunts are in their mid to late sixties and haven't met for many years.

As soon as Aunt Philomena arrived Aunt Gertrude greeted her and then in her pronounced Australian accent declared "You don't half speak funny clobber! Do you all speak like that in wheels?"

Yes, she pronounced Wales as wheels.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

After a short period of greetings and reminiscing about the past, which lasted about half a day, the two ladies started to exert their authority like two animals marking their territory. Never mind my family and I living here in the first place. We became unwilling bystanders whilst the two Aunties sorted out who was boss.

Aunt Gertrude made the first move by declaring that she was the appointed nurse to look after the household's "invalid". That's exactly what she called me. It was her way of saying to Aunt Philomena, "Keep out. He is in my care!"

Aunt Philomena hissed sotto voce in a broad Welsh dialect "No wonder he's not getting any better!"

The rest of the family exchanged knowing glances and smiles and said nothing. Better not to interfere when two giants take centre stage on life's comedic drama.

I must say though, the two Aunts, working independently, proved a great help to our family as they took on various household tasks. It allowed life to go on as normal even though I was often left at home alone with the two of them. I dreaded what they would say to each other, or do, to try to help me get better!

"You're not giving him soup again?" said Philomena on one occasion, "you'll have him run to the toilet every few minutes!"

"Better than the stew you prepared yesterday, cobber!" went the quick Australian response, "it looked like road-kill!"

"It was not road kill. It was the best cut of lamb!" was Philomena's hurt response.

"I bet the lamb was quite happy to have it cut!" retorted Gertrude resulting in a game, set and match win to her.

On another occasion, a light bulb in our lounge reached its end of life. I suggested we leave it until the younger members of the family arrived and then it would be changed. The two Aunts would not hear any of it. They had to prove they were perfectly capable of changing a light bulb.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

They fetched the step ladder - well, Gertrude went for the ladder first followed by Philomena with a replacement bulb.

They simultaneously placed the step ladder under the light fittings on the ceiling. I suggested they let things be, but neither heard my pleas. They were determined to get the bulb changed and each wanted to claim the credit for it.

Gertrude tried to climb the ladder first.

"No ... let me" said Philomena still holding the replacement bulb, "I am fitter than you!"

This was like a declaration of war to Aunt Gertrude who replied "What do you mean cobber? You're fitter than me? You probably meant fatter but I could not understand your wheelsh accent! I'm surprised your thin legs can carry all that weight!"

For a few seconds there was silence. I cowered in my seat and prayed for peace.

Gertrude climbed up the ladder shakily whilst Philomena held her legs to steady her as she went up.

"Let go my legs cobber!" said Gertrude "I'm perfectly capable of climbing by myself!"

"I'm only helping" replied Philomena as the ladder shook from side to side.

The inevitable happened. Gertrude lost her balance and as she leaned to one side Philomena attempted to help her by grasping at her hips. Gertrude fell pulling Philomena with her and both crashed onto the nearby couch which broke their fall.

They landed onto the couch with legs flying in the air. It was a sight not for the faint-hearted.

Luckily I was sitting on the easy chair opposite providing me with a vantage viewpoint from a safe distance. Had I been on the couch I would have been crushed by a surplus of Aunties!

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I waited a few seconds to see if either of them had died or broken any bones or limbs.

To my surprise, they both got up and burst into fits of laughter.

I knew that all was well and my prayers had been answered. Peace had returned once again. From that day both Aunts became the best of friends. I dread their new found collaboration into nursing me back to good health.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Gertrude's Christmas

I may have mentioned previously that Aunt Gertrude, eccentric as she is, is not really as tight-fisted and mean as she leads one to believe.

Before she came to visit us in the UK and stay for a (long) time, she lived in Australia where she moved many years ago, and we had not seen her since. Our only communications with this distant aunt was by yearly Christmas cards. And that's how she gained the reputation, in our minds at least, of being rather mean.

She used to re-cycle old Christmas cards, and not for any environmental reasons or to save the planet ... no, she re-cycled them because it was cheaper than buying new ones every year. She used to save old cards sent to her by relatives and friends and then glue a piece of paper over their best wishes, and write her own seasonal message instead.

The first time we received such a card we were astounded and amused, but yearly, we learned to peel off the paper she glued on the card to discover the original sender. We played a guessing game of "friend or relative" before peeling off Auntie's message to discover whether we'd guessed the originator of the card correctly. One year she had re-cycled one of our own old cards we had sent her!

Anyway, once she arrived at our home any suspicions of an avaricious old lady quickly faded away. She is a kindly person, most generous, almost to a fault, albeit with quite a few eccentricities which make her somewhat tolerable despite her grating pronounced Australian accent.

It's traditional in our family to open the Christmas presents, which Santa left under the tree, when we return from midnight Mass. This year was no different.

As we sipped our cups of hot chocolate and enjoyed the mince pies we eagerly opened our presents and thanked each other with hugs and kisses.

To everyone's surprise, and initial confusion, we discovered that Aunt Gertrude had bought each of us a very large chocolate egg.

Chocolate eggs for Christmas? Surely not.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

As we jokingly enjoyed the surprise she explained that she had bought them a few days after Easter because the shops had reduced the price. And, reasoned Aunt Gertrude, "chocolate is chocolate cobber, no matter what shape it is."

To be fair, this was not an act of meanness per se, because the eggs looked expensive, albeit the shop may have reduced them a little. But her logic was that "you never pay the shopkeeper what they ask for, but what you're willing to pay!

"If the price is not right cobber, you just don't buy it. You can always go without!"

Impeccable logic one might say. And perhaps a sign of her careful management of money. Something which today's younger generation may have forgotten.

But then she spoilt it all when we came to open her second presents left under the tree. Each one of us received a very expensive sweater. And I mean very expensive. The kind of jersey you see advertised on TV in very up-market shops.

"What is the point" I wondered "of saving a few pennies by buying Easter eggs cheaply after Easter, and then spend a fortune on these magnificent jumpers?"

But then, that's our Aunt Gertrude.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Aunt Gertrude's New Year

New Year's Eve in our household was a pretty low key affair. A few friends came round and everyone was gathered in the front room chatting, listening to music and enjoying lovely mince pies, fruit cakes and a selection of drinks.

A few minutes before midnight I went to the kitchen to get something and there was Aunt Gertrude, our Australian Aunt who has been staying with us for a (long) time.

"Are you doing first footing, cobber?" she asked.

Let me explain. It is a Scottish tradition that after midnight on New Year's Eve the first person to enter a house would bring good fortune for the coming year. The "first footer" is often a stranger (neighbor or friend) who would bring with him some gifts like a coin which represents financial stability, some bread for food throughout the year, salt to represent flavor, a piece coal for warmth and a drink, usually whisky, for good cheer.

Sometimes a member of the household, usually a male, would leave the house just before midnight, and then knock at the door and enter after midnight bearing the said gifts.

"No ... I'm not doing first footing," I replied, "It's snowing. It's too cold and I live here. I'm not a stranger!"

"Of course you are," she replied "you're very strange. I've never known someone more strange than you! Positively weird, I'd say!"

As I was adamant not to go out in the freezing cold Aunt Gertrude decided to go out instead. She gathered the said gifts in a bag and went out in the front garden.

At about midnight the phone rang which I answered. It was some Australian relatives phoning to wish us a Happy New Year. I got on talking with them and forgot about Aunt Gertrude outside in the cold snow.

At midnight everyone in the front room cheered and started singing Auld Lang Syne and other songs. Someone started playing the bagpipes.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I heard the front door ring but I ignored it and continued my phone conversation, believing that someone else would answer it.

The singing and cheering went on for about half-an-hour when our guests decided to leave.

As the household quietened down a little we all realized that Aunt Gertrude was missing. Where could she possibly be? Gone back to Australia? Hopefully!

I then remembered that the last time I'd seen her was when she went out before midnight to prepare to first-foot the New Year.

"Did you not answer the bell when she rang?" I asked.

"No ... why didn't you? You were here by the phone!"

This was no time for recrimination. It was time to find a missing Aunt Gertrude. Possibly turned into a snowman in the front garden with all this freezing snow which just would not stop.

We went out to look for her. She was nowhere to be seen. Not in the front or back garden or in the street either. And she definitely was not in the house.

What do we do? Phone the police and say we lost an Aunt?

"No officer, not an ant ... an aunt ... our auntie ... She's Australian ... Her name is Gertrude ... no ... we do not have an Australian pet insect called Gertrude ... She's an aunt ... not ant ... She's a female Uncle Gertrude ... Does she have any distinguishing features? ... She has a very pronounced Australian accent which can be quite grating and annoying in her own way. When did she go missing? well ... we haven't seen her since last year ... which was only about an hour ago ... An hour is not enough to declare someone missing? Believe me ... I wish she'd been missing for longer ... she came here to visit some time ago and I've aged a lot since ... wait a minute officer ..."

Just then, the front door bell rang. It was Aunt Gertrude. Apparently she got tired waiting outside in the cold so she went first-footing at our neighbor's house. They welcomed her in and she'd been enjoying their hospitality for the last hour.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

"They have better whisky than you, cobber!" she said as she went up to her room.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Intrepid Gertrude

We went as a family to a town not so far away for a short holiday break. It was also an opportunity to take our Australian Auntie Gertrude out sightseeing.

One evening, whilst the rest of the family decided to stay in the hotel, Auntie and I took the bus to town to visit the museum. Afterwards we decided to go for a short walk in a nearby park and perhaps enjoy a meal in a restaurant before going back to the hotel.

Despite her outspoken personality Auntie Gertrude can be quite nice at times and good company. Especially when reminiscing on times past when as a young woman she went to Australia to start a new life.

It was early dusk as we walked through the park when suddenly, out of the bushes, a young man stepped out towards us brandishing a small knife.

"Quick ... give me your wallet mister!" He said menacingly waving his hand left and right.

I froze and felt my knees starting to tremble a little.

"Call that a knife, cobber?" said Auntie, for ever not knowing when to keep quiet, "ye're pathetic mate, and ought to be ashamed of yourself! In Australia we use such a small blade to pick food from our teeth!"

The young man kept eyeing us both and moving his hand left and right ready to thrust the knife forward.

"Hurry up. Give me your wallet!" he threatened moving his hand slightly forward towards me.

I was really frightened by the whole experience and must have cried a little because I felt tears trickling down my leg.

"You too old woman ..." he said, "give me your handbag!"

"No worries mate," replied Auntie, "you can have it!"

And with that she swung the handbag in the air and hit him right in the face.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

I don't know what she carries in that bag; six cans of amber nectar for all I know. But as soon as it hit him the man fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

"You've killed him!" I exclaimed.

The man attempted to get up and reach out for the knife which he had dropped.

Auntie quickly stepped on his hand with her foot. For some reason she always wears slightly raised shoes with a heavy heel the size of a small brick.

The man screamed in agony.

"Quick cobber!" she cried out, "grab the knife!"

As I picked up the knife she quickly walked away towards the exit of the park. I followed her as fast as I could and eventually threw the knife in one of the bushes.

By the time I reached her she'd already stopped a taxi.

I said nothing throughout the journey. And to be fair she did not mention the incident at all. Not even to the rest of the family when we got to the hotel.

"Come on cobber," she said, "let's call the family and gather in the restaurant. I'm so hungry I could eat a kangaroo!"

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

No one said it would be easy, cobber!

We were watching a Christian program on TV and I made an off the cuff comment that sometimes it is very difficult being a Christian considering all the world's temptations and how many non-believers seem to have it so good.

My Australian Aunt Gertrude who is staying with us for a (long) while, stopped knitting and said "No one said it would be easy, cobber! Jesus never said "you'll all get into Heaven no worries mate!" "

I smiled and she continued.

"If the Good Lord meant us all to return to Him in Heaven He would have created a load of senseless boomerangs! We'd live our life here with smiles all round and then boomerang back to paradise. Well, it ain't like that I tell ye ... just take it from me!"

I smiled again at her interpretation of Scripture and before I could say anything she went on.

"But the Good Lord is wise and kind you see. He gave us the choice to choose between going to Him in Heaven or spending eternity in a hell hole hotter than the outback! We must make that choice, it just ain't automatic fair dinkum and all that!"

I must say I never realized she had such opinions. She is Christian all right but she never talks religion ... until now.

"It is not compulsory to go to Heaven!" she announced as if she'd discovered a newly found secret, "we have a choice to make between Heaven or roasting our backsides for ever in the outback!"

"And for us to make the choice between good and evil, God had to allow evil in the world.

"If evil didn't exist then we'd have no choice to make; and with no choice we'd all do good and we'd boomerang back to Heaven.

"What I'm sayin fella ... is that we'd be like robots with no brains to make a choice with. But as I said, if you were listening, God being kind and all

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

that, gave us the freedom to choose ... that's a great gift which we often take for granted mate!"

I stifled a laugh at her colourful explanation of Free Will and imagined her as a preacher in her native Australia.

"So as I was saying before you interrupt me fella ..." she continued, "God allowed evil to happen in the shape of the devil. He allowed him to exist and gave him the freedom to tempt us into his evil ways.

"His temptations come in many shapes and sizes ... from the tiny piece of chocolate to a cigarette, a bottle of drink or spending a lifetime bonking someone we're not married to!"

At this I had to let out a laugh. She frowned like an old school teacher chastising a little naughty child.

"I'm sorry Auntie," I said, "I am not laughing at you, I'm laughing at your way of expressing yourself."

"That's OK fella ..." she smiled, "it's just that I feel there are so many Christians in name only. But they aren't fooling God ye know ... They may think they are holy and do-gooders but the Lord isn't easily fooled by their false piety and hideous sins.

"I know it isn't easy being a Christian. What, with life being as difficult as it is and we're all rushing around like our derriere is on fire. But Christianity is a way of life my friend. It's not a badge one wears on one's lapel. And when life gets difficult the Good Lord and His Mother Mary will help if we ask them."

"Are there any Australian Saints?" I asked for no apparent reason.

"I don't know cobber," she replied, "but if there are they'd be quietly spoken, shy and demure; like most Australians are!" she smiled.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

The late departed Auntie Gertrude

Aunt Gertrude came over from Australia to stay with us for what was supposed to be a short holiday. However, she stayed on and on for what must be over one dog-year, and probably about two cat years and I don't know how many mice years. The thing is that a few months with Aunt Gertrude and her grating Australian accent is a very long time in any creature's years. I know I've aged enormously since she's been here.

Don't misunderstand me. It's not that we don't like Aunt Gertrude. It's just that she has so many quirks and habits which, quaint as they may be, they lose their charm and appeal after a long period.

For a start she likes to sit in front of the TV and watch all the Australian soaps for hours on end and then tell us what has happened next. Because she has already seen them in her native land when originally broadcast she knows the plot of every series and episode and wants to make sure that we don't miss a minute of the endless exciting storylines. The fact that we never watch such programs any way has not diminished her enthusiasm for inflicting them on us. I mean ... do we really want to know who is being friendly with whom in "the street" and who is cheating on whom? It's no different to any other soap in any other country. Personally I'd prefer a simple plot like Tom and Jerry. I could watch them for ages; if I could get anywhere near the TV.

She also has this infuriating habit of saying every so often, "Help ... I'm trapped within my own skin!"

What she means of course is that she wishes she was a teenager once again and able to do all the things she did when young; like chasing after kangaroos, or koalas or whatever she did when in Australia.

The first time she said it, it was somewhat amusing. But after umpteen times the novelty wears off somewhat.

These little quirks aside she's a kind old lady I suppose and we enjoyed having her for the last eternity; and showing her around our part of the world; and enduring her criticisms how it is not as nice, or as big, or as beautiful as in Australia.

The day of her departure back to Australia soon came and unfortunately it coincided with us having to be away from home for most of the morning.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

We prepared her breakfast, said our fond goodbyes, and asked her to pull the front door behind her as she left. The door would self-lock automatically.

We arranged for a taxi to call on her at the appropriate time to take her to the airport; and we agreed that she'd phone from there to leave a message on our answering machine that all is well.

Later that afternoon we got home and the place was as quiet as a morgue. The TV was off and no more the Australian accent of endless soaps was to be heard. We sat in silence enjoying a nice cup of tea and ginger biscuits. My favorites!

Then I heard from a distance "Help ..."

I scratched my ear with my little finger and re-tuned my hearing to listen carefully. Could it be that the echoes of "Help ... I'm trapped within my own skin" are still reverberating within the deep recesses of my Australian accustomed mind?

"Did you hear anything?" I asked, but I was assured that I was imagining things.

"Help ..." repeated the voice from afar, but once again, not followed by "I'm trapped within my own skin".

This time others heard it too. It came from above ... (Play dramatic music!)

No, not Heaven ... but from the floor above!

Up we went to the spare bedroom and there we found Aunt Gertrude under the bed. All we could see was her legs protruding from under the bed and her feeble voice asking us to get her out.

We tried to pull her gently but she was well and truly stuck. Her clothes had somehow got caught in the springs or whatever it is under beds that makes people become stuck. Maybe her rotund figure was too much for the space available under there!

I lifted the bed with all the strength I could muster whilst the rest of the family gently reversed her back from under it until she was free.

NO WORRIES MATE !!!

Apparently her spectacles had somehow fallen under the bed on the far side by the wall. As there was no room for her to retrieve them from the side by the wall, she got down flat on the other side of the bed and crawled under it and became stuck for the last hour or so.

Obviously she had missed her flight back home.

We retrieved the glasses and gave her a cup of tea and a piece of cake. We made several phone calls to various airlines and managed to find her another flight home in ten days' time which in dog years is ...

Oh I can't be bothered to work it out.