

# Van Daniken's Dreamtime vs Doris Duncastle (by Robert Bee)

The high roofed Mercedes pulled gracefully into a parking spot outside the Yulara Mall. Its passengers reluctantly emerged from the car's air conditioned comfort into the dry mid-day heat.

"Dad, look. There she is again," Angus whispered urgently to his father who was still unwinding his two metre frame from the driver's seat.

"Who? Where?" Stewart McFarlane said, knowing the answer but compelled to ask.

"That strange lady. The one at Kakadu," Angus said.

"...and at Katherine Gorge" Deidre sighed.

"...and the Devil's Marbles," Bonnie whimpered. "Dad, she's following us."

Stewart stared across the car park at the tourist coach which had disgorged its gaggle of wide eyed pensioners. Standing head and shoulders above them all was a tall...large... white haired woman of regal appearance. Regal, that is, except for the roll-your-own hanging limply from her gloss red lips. "Oh no...her!" Stewart's eyes pleaded with his wife. "Deidre, our holiday's ruined before it's half over."

"Don't be silly darling," Deidre said. "This is a big place. We'll probably never see her again."

"That's what you said at Kakadu," Angus said.

"...and Katherine Gorge," Stewart sighed.

"...and the Devil's Marbles," Bonnie whimpered.

They watched as the tourist party moved into the shopping mall, with the tall woman leading the way carrying a folded toucan headed umbrella at shoulder height like a shepherd's crook. The McFarlanes stood rooted to the spot by mutually disagreeable memories of their previous encounters with 'She Who Must Be Avoided'.

The holiday had started out with bright hopes. They shipped the Mercedes on the Ghan with them to Darwin, then started the leisurely exploration of the North End. The wide open spaces. The gorgeous scenery. It was to be the epitome of relaxing holidays.

But they hadn't anticipated Doris Duncastle.

It had been a typical Kakadu day...hot and humid. Despite their adolescent scepticism, the children had been 'blown away' by the boat tour on the South Alligator River. A typical twelve year old girl, Bonnie had screamed when a crocodile surfaced a metre from where her hand had briefly tested the water temperature.

"Do that again," Angus had coaxed.

"No way," Bonnie said, sitting on her hands. "It was so...ugly."

"That's where it got its name, my dear," a lady sitting in the row behind the McFarlanes volunteered.

"I beg your pardon?" Deidre and Stewart turned in their seats to see who had spoken. They saw a very tall lady, almost as tall as Stewart who, at two metres, was very tall. She had short, wavy, white hair and must have been well into her seventies.

"I was telling the young girl how the crocodile got its name. The aborigines noted that its face was ugly because its nose and mouth were crooked. They called it a 'crooked dial' and this became corrupted to 'crocodile'. It's well known how languages change over the years." The white haired lady smiled knowingly. "I have a grandson doing research at university."

Stewart stared at the lady. For once, he had no immediate reply. His methodical mind chewed at the explanation's logic, knowing it contained a fatal flaw, but for some reason, he couldn't unravel it. It was quite unnerving.

"Dad," Angus broke into his thoughts. "When are we going to see the Jim Jim Falls?"

"You see, there's another perfect example," the lady exclaimed triumphantly, prodding Stewart's shoulder with the umbrella's toucan head for emphasis. She turned to her companions. "The Jim Jim Falls were discovered by a local aborigine called James Jun Gill. His friends called him Jun Gill Jim. James was canoeing down the river when his friends in the canoe behind called out and pointed ahead, 'Jim, Jim...Falls.' And they were right. He did. They named it in his memory."

Stewart and Deidre exchanged head shakes, then resumed marvelling at the extravagant wildlife on the river.

"Of course, Twin Falls is a different story." The penetrating voice persisted. "They were discovered by twin British explorers Majors Wayne and Waxworth Waters. They reported to the Surveyor General in Darwin that its water flow varied at regular intervals. He dictated to his secretary that they be called the Rise and Fall Falls. She took this down as the Wax and Wane Falls, and the cartographer who knew the explorers shortened it to Twin Falls."

Stewart couldn't contain himself. He drew up to full height, turned and smiled widely and wisely to the lady. "I believe, madam, that Twin Falls is so called because it's divided into two cascades by a rocky outcrop. Hence - twins."

"Don't be silly, young man," the white haired woman said, pinning Stewart with a pitying look. She turned to her companions. "I have a grandson at University, you know."

Stewart turned and checked his watch. Only three hours to go.

The following day, the McFarlane family left early for Nourlangie Rock, intent upon seeing the famous aboriginal rock paintings.

The previous day's encounter with the woman 'with a grandson at university' was beginning to dim from their memory. After all, every holiday has one bad moment.

They arrived at the Rock. It was virtually deserted. Stewart fortified himself with a cappuccino from a thermos flask, while Deidre sorted out the information brochures on the various eras of rock art. Then they headed towards the caves.

"What do you think so far, Deidre?" Stewart asked after an intriguing hour of hunters and emus, X-ray barramundi and magpie geese. He slipped his arm affectionately around Deidre's waist.

"Fascinating. This tree here, struck by lightning. I wonder what pigment the artist used to capture it," Deidre said.

"Burnt lumber, an old aboriginal pigment," an all too familiar voice said behind them.

Stewart and Deidre both started like teenagers caught necking on the porch. "Jumping jumbucks, where did you spring from?" Stewart gasped.

"Not out of a willibong, I assure you," the ubiquitous white haired lady said. "Our coach arrived ten minutes ago and I sprinted ahead."

"Did you have to?" Stewart asked dryly, and received a sharp jab from Deidre's elbow.

"Yes," the lady said straight faced. "Some of those biddies can be frustrating. So ignorant."

"I know the feeling...ouch!" Stewart glared at Deidre.

"Dad, look at this fish over here," Angus called from further along the cave wall. "It's a bream, I think. An orange bream."

"Yes, raw serena, another native pigment. They use it to give the animals and fish a serene appearance."

"Time for the next cave." Stewart grabbed Deidre's arm and guided her and the kids out of the cave.

The x-ray art cave was crowded with tourists. Cameras flashed causing the eerie figures on the wall to seem three dimensional. Bonnie stared at a row of apparently human figures. "Why do their heads look like fans, dad?" she asked.

Stewart blessed the opportunity to give his daughter a lesson in native art. "Well, Bonnie..."

"That's their space helmets" the voice declared.

"Their space helmets? Wow!" Angus whispered.

"Don't humour her Angus. Excuse me, Mrs..?"

"Duncastle, Doris..."

"Mrs Duncastle," Stewart said, "I'd appreciate it if you would not fill my impressionable daughter's head with your Von Daniken nonsense."

"Dunnycan!"

"Hang on" Stewart's cowlick sprang up like a cocks comb. "There's no call to be..."

"Dan Dunnycan. He's a distant relative of mine, on the Dunny side. He wrote that book 'Lariats of the Wogs'" Mrs Duncastle took some makings from her handbag and began to roll a cigarette. "While researching cowboys in South America, he came across evidence that Australian Aborigines are direct descendants of alien visitors stranded here over forty thousand years ago." She lit up her cigarette.

"Aliens from South America?" Stewart furiously fanned smoke away from his sensitive aquiline nose. "Cowboys?"

"Don't be silly young man. From outer space. Up there." Doris dramatically pointed at the cave's ceiling.

Stewart stared at Doris, trying to judge her sincerity. Was this woman, thirty years his senior, trying to take the Micky out of him?

The cave began to fill up with elderly tourists, eager to hear more revelations about aboriginal heritage. Stewart and Deidre squeezed past them. "Come on, kids," Stewart called. "We're leaving before the giant serpent strikes us down with his laser beam."

"Oh, dad, can't we stay and listen." Angus hung back, as did Bonnie.

"It was the bone which was their laser. That's why they're always pointing them," Doris said smugly. "The giant serpent, young man, is a retained memory of their mother spaceship."

"Spaceship?" a male tourist ventured. "Why didn't they just fly off again?"

"Because it crashed. It's buried under Goose Bluff Crater, near Tennant Creek," Doris said.

"Aha," Stewart pounced. "Then why haven't they dug it up?"

"Don't be silly young man," Doris said. "It's a sacred site. For obvious reasons." She turned to her companions. "Some people just don't understand these things. No feeling for the environment."

The McFarlanes stood in the sun at Yulara, staring at the mall's entrance as if they expected the Loch Ness monster to make an appearance any second.

"Remember Katherine Gorge?" Deidre said.

"Would Galileo remember the Inquisition?" Stewart shivered despite the heat. "I'll never be able to look a platypus in the bill again."

They had made certain that 'she with a grandson doing research at university' wasn't on their cruise launch before handing in their tickets. The trip up the first Katherine Gorge was as beautiful as hoped. The sixty metre high cliffs towered on either side. The launch was only half full, so the McFarlanes enjoyed the luxury of stretching out on their seats and enjoying the peace and tranquillity.

The pleasure was short lived.

"Sorry folks," the guide and driver announced as they approached the rocks at the end of the gorge. "I'll have to ask you to sit up straight. We're taking on passengers. The Blue Broлга's got engine problems."

All those on board strained forward and saw another launch alongside the shoal, its driver's head immersed in the engine housing.

Suddenly, Stewart started choking on his thermos cappuccino. "Beethoven's deaf ears! It's her."

Doris Duncastle stood atop a rock, like a queen surveying her realm, her gaudy toucan headed umbrella flashing in the sun.

Stewart snapped an order. "Quick, down the back of the boat." He led the way aft, and all four McFarlanes hunkered down on the last row, trying to be invisible.

They need not have worried. Doris and friends boarded the launch amid a mixture of laughter and grumbling. Doris sat amidships, her umbrella still aloft, and didn't look back. "Chocks away driver," she said.

The launch slipped from the shoal and chugged back down the gorge. The McFarlanes hardly dared breath for fear of being discovered by Doris. What they were afraid of, they didn't know. She was only an old lady. She wasn't dangerous. But their previous encounters with her had left a decidedly bad taste. And they didn't want third helpings.

"There's a platypus," one of the tourists called out, while pointing off the port bow.

"That's a barramundi...or barratuesday...ha ha," the tour guide said, to scattered laughter. "There are no platypuses in Katherine Gorge."

"Why is that?" the original platypus spotter asked.

"Because the local aborigines, the Katherine Tribe, ate them all." This from Doris Duncastle.

"Ugh. How do you eat a platypus," the lady on her left asked.

"The bush tucker method," said Doris, who previously had never been further west than Penrith, "is to broil two or three in a tortoise shell, then wrap in a damper. It's called a platy-pie."

A fit of hysterical laughter from the stern made Doris look around. She saw Stewart, red faced, gasping for breath and holding his sides, while simultaneously roaring with laughter.

"Oh..." Doris said. "It's you."

Stewart finally caught his breath and wiped his tears from his cheeks. "Sorry to interrupt your discourse," he smiled at Doris. "You were telling these good people how the Robinson Crusoe aliens ate Australian indigenous wildlife. Please continue, I'm fascinated."

Doris smiled back, then returned her attention to her companions. "It's a little known fact, but my grandson..."

"... doing research at university," Stewart muttered audibly.

Doris cast a superior smile a Stewart "...assures me that the kangaroo, the koala and the platypus are not natives of Australia." She

nodded back to the ocean of raised eyebrows. "In fact, they came to Australia on the alien's spaceship. They are not of Earth."

The revelation was met by a deathly silence. The boat's guide, who after thirty years in the Red Centre thought he'd heard everything, simply stored this conversation away in his memory to use in the travel book he was writing. Diplomatically, he remained silent.

"Are you saying that the aliens brought these three animals, all the way from... goodness knows where?" Stewart asked.

"Well, in fact, they brought four. But when they were beaming..."

"Beaming?"

"...beaming two of them down, a duck billed web footed bird and a furred mammal, the transporter beam malfunctioned and the two got mixed up into one. A platypus resulted."

"Hey there, Big Mac." A cheeky call broke the spell holding the McFarlane's gaze on the mall.

"Dad, there he is," said Angus. He turned and ran towards the gangly man who had hailed them.

"Well, blow me down a brass bassoon," Stewart said. "How'd he get here from Alice Springs before us? I had my foot to the floor."

"Goodness knows," Deidre said. "Maybe he hitched a lift in a spaceship."

The trip south from Wauchope and the Devil's Marbles had been under a dark threatening sky. Thunderclouds had rolled in from the north east, chasing the McFarlane's Mercedes down the Stuart Highway like a lugger before a tsunami. If those clouds burst, there might be a chance the devils will be playing marbles underwater. Stewart grimaced, realising he'd been indulging in Duncastle-speak.

"Stewart, look out!"

He spun the wheel on impulse at Deidre's cry, narrowly avoiding a dark figure hidden against the dark brooding sky. He braked to a halt and sat, gripping the wheel and whistling a snatch of Beethoven's Fifth to restore his tattered nerves.

"Hullo, are you alright brother?" A dark face peered through the driver's window, further tattering Stewart's almost restored nerves.

"Please...don't do that," Stewart managed to say. "And what were you doing walking along the road like that...and in black clothes too. I could have killed you."

The face split into a white toothed smile. "Well, brother, firstly the road happens to be following my walkabout path. Secondly, I can't do much about my skin - I'm no Michael Jackson - and it'll take more than your two tonne Merc to kill me." He slapped the car's roof. "Nice wheels, though."

Stewart stared at the man, black skinned, wearing only stubbie shorts, a black akubra and carrying a black sports bag with a green and red 'Rabitoth' insignia. Then he burst out laughing. "Right, brother," he said. "It might be safer for my car if you were inside it. Can I offer you a lift?"

"Thanks, mate, thought you'd never ask." The black man opened the rear passenger door. "G'day kids, care for a witchetty grub?" He settled into the leather seat, shut the door and regarded their horrified stares. "Okay, how about some lollygobble bliss bombs?" He offered a packet, apparently taken out of midair, and shook some confectionaries into their surprised hands.

Stewart started the car and headed down the road. Deidre turned to face their hitch-hiking guest. "We're the McFarlanes," and she introduced the family. "I'm glad we didn't hit you."

"Not half as glad as I am, missus," the stranger smiled at her. He did a lot of smiling. "I'm Charlie, Charlie Lightfoot."

"Hi, Charlie," Deidre said warmly. "What brings you out here?"

"Art, mostly, missus," he said.

"Oh. You do painting at Hermannsburg Mission, do you?" Deidre said.

"No, missus. I teach Anthropology at Melbourne University."

Charlie soon had Bonnie and Angus eating out of his hand. And not just bliss bombs. They regaled him with questions about the Red Centre, Dreamtime legends, his anthropology lectures and his family. Charlie answered freely with an infectious enthusiasm for his great land and culture. Inevitably, the conversation led to Doris Duncastle.

"Zinc cream?" Charlie burst out laughing. Again.

"Yes. It seems that your stranded ancestors were sensitive to the sun's rays, so slapped on the zinc when they were outdoors."

Stewart managed to keep a straight face, though his cheek muscles were aching. "Your corroboree paint is a symbolic reminder of these early pre-adaptive days."

"Don't forget the boomerang, dad," Angus prompted.

"I shudder to guess," Charlie said.

"Don't even try," Deidre jumped in, earning a pout from Stewart. "The boomerang was a toy the aliens' children played with. It was a replica of the escape pods they used when evacuating the crashing mother ship."

"And I thought it was a stick that got bent from holding up the sky." Charlie sighed. He was silent a moment, then erupted into laughter. Again. "She's precious. My Elders would love her. Where'd you find her?"

"Everywhere," Stewart bemoaned. "But with luck, no more. We left her coach behind at the Devil's Marbles. She was explaining to all who didn't escape quickly enough how the rock formation was the petrified remains of ballast dumped from the stricken spaceship."

"Bloated bunyips! And my grand-dad told me they were the rainbow serpent's eggs." His eyes sparkled. "I must meet her."

"With enough bad luck, you probably will," Stewart said. "The coach is bound to stop at Alice Springs. But we're going straight through to Yulara, then Uluru."

"I've got business at Alice," Charlie said. "But I might see you at Uluru. I'd be glad to show you around. Sorry I can only tell you the Dreamtime version of its history. I don't have a Star Trek log book."

"Somehow, that will be a relief," Stewart smiled, as he steered down the highway.

"I met her."

"And...?" Stewart prompted, sipping his frothing cappuccino.

"...and apart from espousing some very radical, but quaint, anthropological theories on aboriginal heritage..." Charlie said.

"...quaint?"

"...I think she's a lovely old bird. I think she liked me," Charlie concluded, taking another slurp of his double chocolate malted milkshake.

"Irrelevant," Stewart ruled. "Nobody could help liking you, Charlie. You're so damned ...likeable. You flash that Colgate smile and a banker's heart would melt."

Charlie and Stewart were relaxing in 'The Waltzing Wallaby', a small coffee bar in the Yulara Mall. After the coach and its

occupants had departed, the McFarlanes had felt safe to enter the Mall and explore its delights. Stewart still hadn't figured out how Charlie had beaten them to Yulara, and was afraid to ask.

"Don't her ideas bother you? People are actually listening to her." Stewart bit into his last piece of raisin toast.

"So what? People listen to politicians and they don't believe them." Charlie demolished a strawberry iced doughnut in one mouthful. "It's all good publicity for us Kooris...who, by the way, as I advised Doris, originated from a planet in the constellation Koorus."

Stewart looked Charlie in the nose. "Koorus? There's no such constellation."

Charlie winked. "There is now."

Stewart exploded into raucous laughter, drawing disapproving glares from patrons at other tables. He pointed a long finger at Charlie who, for all his coal black skin, still managed to blush a bright pink.

"Yes, yes," Charlie dangled a chocolate doughnut on Stewart's accusing finger, "she does get up my nose a bit. Maybe a small lesson wouldn't go astray. But how? Logic would be like water off an emu's back."

"Let me think." Stewart nibbled the doughnut, forgetting his resolution to work on his waistline. He hummed his way through the first sixteen bars of Mahler's second symphony, conducting the imaginary orchestra with his hands while resting his elbows on the table. Charlie sat quietly, watching the performance, making mental notes for his next anthropological lecture, 'Eccentricities of Genius across Cultures'.

"Got it!" Stewart stopped the orchestra, mid-cadenza. He explained his idea to Charlie who, at the end, grinned so widely that Stewart's cheeks ached. "Would your Elders approve?" Stewart asked.

"Probably not. But who's going to tell them?" Charlie said. "What do we do first?"

Stewart stood and stretched his two metre frame. "First, another cappuccino. Then, find the nearest art supply store. I need to some buy some Burnt Lumber and Raw Serena."

Two days later, Stewart dropped Deidre and the kids at Uluru and continued on towards the Olgas. Deidre was disappointed to be left out, but they had agreed it would be best, for character development reasons, that Angus and Bonnie should not see their father at his skulduggerous best - or worst.

Charlie had gone ahead in a ute borrowed from a second cousin's aunt's son-in-law, with second cousin and a friend aboard. By the time Stewart arrived at the Olgas, all should be ready. They had checked the tour coach's itinerary and it was due an hour later. It was a beautiful Red Centre day and the pale full daylight moon hung in the azure sky, a silent smiling spectator.

Stewart stopped the Merc in the tourist car park, with the huge three hundred metre high rock face of Malakarta looming overhead. Despite his size, Stewart felt like an ant beside a giant's boot. Following a marked tourist map, he wended his way along a well worn track towards the Valley of the Winds. The reds and ochres of the rock swamped his senses until, up ahead, he saw two black figures sitting, sipping bottles of Coca Cola.

"There you are, brother," Charlie said as he saw Stewart approach. "This is my second cousin, Ben."

Stewart and Ben shook hands.

"And the quite one sleeping in the shade over there," Charlie pointed, "is Ben's friend, Blanche."

Stewart cast a quick glance at the sleeping form, then asked Charlie. "Well, are we ready? Will it come off?"

"Ready, brother, and no problems. Eh, Ben?"

Ben smiled even wider than Charlie, then went over beside Blanche in the shade to wait.

For the next hour, Stewart and Charlie chatted and laughed, sharing experiences and jokes. It turned out that Charlie played a mean first trombone in the university orchestra, while he couldn't blow on a didgeridoo to save his life. Stewart thought this was hilarious until he had to admit his musical powers were limited to a kazoo, which his children forbid him to play, and hand clapping.

Their banter was interrupted by the sound of voices coming up the path. Charlie gave Ben's foot a nudge, threw a thumbs-up, then he and Stewart walked down the path ready for an accidental meeting with the tourists.

Through the excited chatter of the group, Stewart and Charlie could hear Doris's penetrating voice in lecture mode. "...so that when the spaceship's sonic bloom hit Olga Rock, which was identical to Ayers Rock, Olga broke to pieces like we see it now. So they renamed it the Olgas."

The suffering tour guide raised his eyes at Charlie in the universal 'save me' code.

Charlie winked at him and waved the group past. "It's beautiful up at the Valley of the Winds, folks. Go and enjoy."

The tourists thanked Charlie, snapping or videoing him and Stewart as they went past.

"Oh, Mrs Duncastle," Charlie said as she walked by, toucan headed umbrella held high.

"Hullo, Mr Footlight," Doris said sweetly. She threw a frosty glance at Stewart. "Oh, hullo."

Stewart smiled and tipped his broad hat, but said nothing - which was probably a first for Stewart.

Charlie led her gently by the arm, out of the cluster of tourists.

"This may not interest a person with your deep knowledge, Mrs Duncastle," he said softly, "but I've just come across a staggering discovery." He looked about conspiratorially.

"All discoveries interest me, Mr Goodflight, staggered or otherwise," Doris said eagerly. She nodded towards Stewart. "Is it safe to...you know?"

"Oh yes," Charlie reassured her. "He has top government clearance...just like me."

"Hm, I'm surprised. But please...tell me."

Charlie shook his head. "I can't. Rocks have ears. I'll have to show you. Follow me." He led the way off the tourist trail, along a rock ledge covered with mulga and spinifex, then down a dry creek bed. Doris Duncastle dogged his heels, occasionally pausing to peer at rock outcrops. Stewart presumed this was to check if they had ears. It was all he could do to stop from giggling at the absurdity of the situation. If nothing else was achieved from this point, he would still be satisfied.

They found it in an obscure little rift in the main rock face. It was amazing that no previous explorers or tourists had come across it before now. But then, that only deepened its mystery.

Doris stopped next to Charlie who had turned and, quite unnecessarily, pointed at the classic aboriginal art adorning the rock face.

"It's beautiful," said Doris. "And so well preserved. It's as if it were only painted yesterday."

Stewart was suddenly seized with a violent fit of choking, which by some strange means was caught by Charlie. Doris watched helplessly as both men bear hugged, back slapping each other to ease their coughing. The sound of their struggles to breath carried up the rifts all the way to the Valley of the Winds.

The seizures eased and, wiping their teary eyes, they turned to Doris. "Sorry," they said in unison.

Doris smiled graciously and returned her attention to the painting. "Look at all those figures. And the birds...and snakes...a white

kangaroo. And is that the moon? Such exquisite use of figments..."

Stewart fought back another choking fit.

"...so lumberous and serene. But what is that figure in the middle?" She pointed at a skeletal human figure, clearly female, taller than all the others, and with a dazzling white shock of hair. "You know, that figure looks very familiar. Is that an umbrella she's holding? And what's all that pattern along the bottom?"

Stewart made a show of examining the scrawl beneath the feet of the group of figures. This had been his personal contribution to the art session the previous day. "I can't imagine," he announced, "but it could be writing. Charlie, are you saying this is a new discovery?"

"Totally new," Charlie nodded. "If the local Elders saw this, they'd be flabbergasted." Especially about the 'writing', he thought. That would be a first.

"Can you translate it, Mr Goodfright? Somehow, I think it's trying to tell me something." Doris adopted a semi-trance like pose, as if expecting a message from the wet, water based, soon to be washed off parody of aboriginal art.

Stewart and Charlie exchanged victory smiles while, simultaneously, for the moment, suppressing growing feelings of guilt for the prank they were pulling. Guilt comes later. First, the fun.

Charlie stepped forward, hummed in his best didgeridoo voice a few bars from 'Jake the Peg', and pointing to the scrawl symbol by symbol, intoned a translation.

"Be it known, when Mother White Hair of the Dunny Can Clan reads this sacred message, under a pale moon and blazing sun..." Charlie paused and meaningfully looked up at the moon overhead. "...a white kangaroo shall be the sign of the Home Going."

"Home Going?" Doris whispered in a quavering voice.

"Then the Mother ship shall rise once more from its grave and take all its children back to Koorus, led by the White Haired One, pointing the way through the stars with her bird headed sunshade. So be it known..." Charlie's voice droned majestically with further detail, but Doris wasn't listening. She was staring goggle eyed at the white wallaby that had hopped into the clearing and stood preening itself, only three metres away.

A sound, not dissimilar to an unoiled gate hinge, came from Doris's dry throat. She cast her umbrella into the air, raised her face to the moon and shouted at the top of her lungs. "I'm too old to be a Koorist. I can't go." She turned to the wallaby. "Please forgive me. I'm going home. To Sydney!"

Without a backward glance, Doris retreated along the route they had come by, making extraordinary speed for a lady her age.

Stewart and Charlie's high five echoed over the Olgas, raising a smile from the tour guide returning the group from the Valley of the Winds. The triumphant pair made their way back to their original meeting place, to collect the water and brushes to erase the bio-degradable art work.

"Ben's timing with Blanche was perfect," Stewart said, still chuckling. "A very well trained, if rare, white wallaby."

They turned the corner and skidded to a halt. There, sleeping peacefully in the shade where they had left them, were Ben and Blanche. They had not moved.

Stewart and Charlie froze. Their neck hairs rose and Stewart's erect cowlick cast a ridiculous shadow on the rocks. Suddenly, a distant rumble, like a rocket's sonic boom, made them both jump.

"Um...Charlie," Stewart whispered.

"Don't even think it, brother," Charlie whispered back, while staring into the sky for a view of the Mother ship.

Then they heard the sound, carried across the Olgas, that would trigger their schoolboy guilt complex for days to come.

"Come on, you lot. Back on the bus. It's Uluru or Bust, or my name's not Doris Dunnycan Duncastle."