



# Dingoes & diesel

Since he was a boy, **Richard Asher** has wanted to drive a big, bad truck through the Australian outback. Then his dream came true...

ILLUSTRATIONS NICOLENE LOUW

“**M**ake your way in, mate, and I’ll send you to Karratha.”

This was it. My first call! I was about to live the dream – one first dreamt in the back of Mr Seymour’s standard three maths class, where pictures of road trains caught my eye as I flicked through a copy of *National Geographic*. Now, 23 years later, I was about to become an Aussie truck driver.

Okay, I wasn’t going to be driving a 53-metre, four-trailer road train. Such licences do not come easily. But the eight-tonne rigid would do me just fine for now. It would still give me the travel experience I wanted: exploring the vast hinterland and one-dingo towns of Terra Australis with someone else’s diesel. And getting paid for it.

My job was to cart six tonnes of concrete bits and pieces from Perth to the Pilbara, Western Australia’s iron-ore mining country. I knew little about Karratha except that it was 13 hours up the coast. This was a bread-and-butter run for my company,

which specialised in charging panicked mining conglomerates ridiculous money to drop everything and head their way with some piece of vital machinery.

The downside for us drivers was that we were permanently on standby for a call from the boss, whose fondness for profanity in my “interview” I’d found quite refreshing after a lifetime in more formal employment. Ditto his long-winded attempts to scare me out of my chair with Northern Territory crocodile talk.

He’d also warned me that I’d eat terribly and barely sleep, but I didn’t care – I was elated to get that first call. I was about to hit the road with the grizzled veterans of the truckie world. Soon I would also sport plentiful facial hair and an inflated boep. Yebo!

**That first trip wasn’t easy.** Loading up was problematic and not just because of my incompetence with ratchet straps. We had everything nicely arranged on the tray when somebody noticed we’d forgotten a 1 000 kg pipe. The volley of cussing from the yardie nearly brought the warehouse down.

It was dark when we finally got going. As was customary, we kept the truck rolling while we took turns to drive. My co-driver Steve wasn’t about to let the rookie take first stint so he drove the rig to Geraldton – four hours north of Perth.

At 11 pm on a dark and windy night, after a “free driver coffee” at the 440 Roadhouse, it was my turn. I edged out onto the North West Coastal Highway. It was inky dark and I didn’t know the road. It was also my first time driving a loaded truck and my first time behind the wheel without an instructor or examiner alongside me. It was past my bedtime and I was pining for daylight, but there was no turning back.

I toddled along, barely touching 90 km/h as I got used to the feel of all the weight, while negotiating what turned out to be the hilliest, bumpiest stretch of road in the state. Road trains charged up behind me, heedless of my plight as they roared past. But the ones coming towards me were far scarier. Australia has the world’s biggest trucks but they drive on some of world’s narrowest highways. A decent shoulder is a rare luxury and I’d flinch every time one of these colossal brutes thundered past my right ear.

**Then came the loud bang.** It happened on our return two days later, somewhere on the desolate plain north of Overlander Roadhouse. I’d just heaved another sigh of relief after passing a road train when I heard a deafening crash and the sound of breaking glass.

*This is it,* I thought to myself. I’ve hit something and now I’m dead. But ever so slowly it dawned on me that I was still breathing, although there was no denying that the driver’s side window was in my lap. I’d been unlucky – a victim of a freak stone thrown up by the road train. Nothing a dustpan and brush couldn’t remedy.

**With more runs around** Western Australia, and a couple of epic five-dayers to Queensland, I built up confidence. I ignored my co-drivers’ advice to “flatten the dumb animals” and tried my best not to kill kangaroos at night, ending with only four murders to my name. I learnt to keep my eyes peeled for stray cattle (an impact at 120 km/h is not recommended) and I learnt how to run the fuel tank down just enough so we could fill up with the 200 litres of diesel we needed for a free meal at Cue Roadhouse. And I finally mastered ratchet straps.

I didn’t crash once. At times I was tempted to, though, because my co-drivers really tried my patience. My vision of truck driving had been of me, alone in the cab on the open road, my favourite music playing and a lot of pie eating. The reality was different. Not only are Australian pies horrendous, but driving “two-up” meant being thrust into a small space with another guy for a lengthy period of time.

Here, at last, I discovered the arrogant, homophobic, racist Australian, recently declared extinct in Melbourne and Sydney. Topics of conversation were limited to fishing, hunting, engines and agricultural techniques – whether I liked it or not.

“You into guns?” Tony asked me, barely five minutes out of the depot, and proceeded to launch into a story about finding a .353 by the roadside on the outskirts of Perth.

Tony wasn’t the only one who wanted to talk barrels and ammo. Steve, too, had found some sort of rifle in one of the many abandoned vehicles you pass in the outback. Steve held a senior position in his local gun club and I was treated to all the latest news.

I was face-to-face with The Working Man and I’m not sure we gelled. He loved the sound of his own voice and had all the answers. But despite the fire and brimstone, he had a childish aspect that harked back to my days at school. For example, anybody who endeavoured to do their job properly was labelled a teacher’s pet although the preferred industry jargon rhymed with “grass picker”.

The prevailing attitude was best exemplified by a Kiwi called John, who was perhaps the most negative human being I have ever encountered. Nothing was right in his world, least of all the company that employed him. He could moan non-stop for 3 000 km, all the way to the Pilbara and back.

“They’re a pack of pricks,” he would say. “There’s no duty of care and they never give me any solo runs, hey? I’ve had my gutsful of this place.”

I usually had my earphones in, but his whining drowned out even the loudest ABBA song I could find.

Perth wasn’t to his liking either – he had a peculiar dissatisfaction with the shape of the city: “160 km long and 40 km wide, Perth is. What a s\*\*\*hole. I should just go back to Nuh Zelland, hey?”

I wished he would.

More to my liking was Ed, also a Kiwi but a Maori man of few words. He’d been a prison warden back in his home country and he was certainly built for the job. His handshake told you that he was a man you shouldn’t argue with. Anyway, I couldn’t: his accent was impenetrable and I don’t think he understood Saffer. Our trip to Queensland and back was blissfully quiet.

**It wasn’t just my co-drivers** with whom I had trouble communicating. The two-way radio took some getting used to. My friendly introduction to the medium, on that first run out of Geraldton, went like this: “You’ve got your brights on, ya prick!”

It was strange to have a whole bunch of people talking without knowing who was addressing whom. That’s if I could understand them at all. Combine static with a deep Australian accent and you begin to doubt your credentials as a speaker of the English language. More than once I had to ask my co-driver to translate.

By the end of my three months, despite a dishevelled appearance I was rather proud of, my cover was blown. “You’re too educated to be a truck driver,” Tony said one day between fishing stories.

He was probably right. But still, I’m not going to rule out driving a proper road train one day. Solo.

