

# Sidney - 2000

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Tales from Olympia - Unpublished

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It seemed so distant in both time and space, but suddenly the fanfare was calling, the world was gathering, and it was time once again to venture to a faraway land. “Can’t you hear the Thunder?” It was time to go to the “land down under”, so far away, it seemed just a cliché....

Until you get there. And then you realize that Oz is real. That it is a stunning corner of the planet, with a colorful history and a truly unique mix of people. Far from perfect, but with a trace of utopia, it provided a perfect setting for man’s most idealistic institution.

Until now, the collective consciousness of Australia consisted primarily of kangaroos, the outback, Crocodile Dundee, and a few other cartoonish icons. Until now, it was just a last strange stop before the South Pole. Yes, people came from there. Famous people. But not many people actually went “down” there. It was just too far . . . down there.

It was 9:30 on Monday evening, the 18<sup>th</sup> of September of the year 2000, and we were in the 14<sup>th</sup> hour of a flight from Los Angeles. The darkness of the vast Pacific was now giving way to a distant sparkling metropolis. Our 747 banked to the left, and I caught a glimpse of the rings within the bow of the Harbour Bridge.

“It is beautiful”, said Monique, the girl to my right, as she stretched to see her harbour. She was, I could only assume, just another blessing of the Olympic Gods. Yes, despite the fact that I was standing by on a once crowded flight to the Olympics, I had been presented with a business class seat, next to a blond “Ozzie Gull”, whose beauty matched that of her city. And she had matched me drink for drink, and then some, over the course of the evening. As I would later find out, only an Ozzie Gull would begin a conversation with “Oh look, its beer-o’clock”.

Though our relationship only spanned the Pacific, I knew she loved her city in a way that few of us are able to love our own. This is a simple extrapolation of the well synchronized conversation we had; one which lasted, literally, from yesterday until tomorrow and ended with an invite to her home in Balmain, the once working class section of Sydney that lets her jet ski from her front door.

The massive jet touched down, and with a giant inhale, it came to a stop. Australia.

Australia!!

Mike, my fellow Olympic pilgrim, was waiting for me outside customs, having arrived on an earlier flight. We rented ourselves some cell phones, jumped into a cab and headed towards the skyline.

## **Paddington**

Kate and Roger had been my neighbors through the mid 90's before departing Atlanta for Australia. They are fine British folks that work a bit too hard but know how to have fun when they need to. And they were great neighbors, always ready for a pint, a laugh and a long and winding conversation. I missed them, and I knew I wasn't catching them at the best time. Their city was all in a tizzy, and Kate works for Coca Cola – an Olympic cornerstone that tends to place all hands on deck during the two weeks of every four years. And she's pregnant. And they were moving soon. Mike and I knew we were going to be pretty much on our own, which was fine, but I still missed them.

So we had our “flat” in Paddington, a most British of neighborhoods in the heart of Sydney. Twisting narrow streets of town homes surrounded by ornate grillwork and gates; it's the only part of Sydney that felt anything like Europe. This surprised me, especially since the cars go the wrong way in Sydney too. As Mike described it, Sydney otherwise looks very American. “A 14 hour flight and you end up in St. Louis”, he said. But we took this as a superficial observation, and the harbour is no Mississippi.

I was up and awake early on the first morning. Early enough to take a run through the warming streets. I found a loop of treelined stone sidewalks through the village. Ducking under the eucalyptus and other foliage I had never seen before.

Each morning thereafter, Mike and I would walk down to the Gusto café as the Australian sun just started to come over the rooftops. We'd order a breakfast sandwich, take our usual table on the street, thumb through the Sydney Herald, and finish up just in time to catch our bus – nearly right from our table - into the center of town. It was such an easy, comfortable course of morning events that by the third day, it was as if we'd been following this routine for years. We were snugly ensconced in Paddington, in a fine British home with fine British hosts, who gave us a few maps and a key – one of those old keys that open up treasure chests – and sent us on our way.

## **The Opera House**

Most of the structures that humans create manage to demonstrate the greatest expression of human limitations. Imagination and engineering rarely merge, but once in a long while, a building manages to convey an energy. This tends to be a “reaching” toward the sky, like the Eiffel tower, or the Empire State Building. Still, in all of these examples, the buildings remain on the ground, reaching upward, but powerful in their girth and stability, as if stability were still in question. But have you ever seen a building fly?

The Sydney Opera House flies. Billowing outward and upward, its “sails” seem to lift the entire city. There is no building like it; none that defy their innate

“buildingness” in a manner that draws your eyes to it as if it is a spectacle in itself. It’s a structure that doesn’t seem to make sense as a building, both architecturally – seemingly defying gravity, and kinetically, because as you circle it, it seems to be moving with you. Greater than the sum of the energy that built it, the Opera House is magical. And that’s only from the outside!

It was our first stop. We just had to see it up close to make sure it wasn’t moving. And then, just to make doubly sure, we had to touch it too. We never got tired of looking at it, and nor – I’m sure – did the world.

### **Darling Harbour**

Our walk took us from Circular Quay (pronounced “key”) to a once polluted cove that had become a teeming public commons of restaurants, shops, attractions and, for these few weeks, pin trading. Darling Harbour was the social hub of the games, and understandably, the locale that Coca-Cola had elected to set up camp. We had already been interviewed once by a local Sydney station and quizzed on the spot about Aussie lingo. Here was Coke with their worldwide PR media center right at the mouth of the harbour. I’m certain that these media centers can be folded up and taken anywhere. And there, as expected was Susan McDermott, who I had last seen drumming up a buzz in Nagano. All in the name of soda.

A break in the action allowed her a just enough time to say hi before we were once again faced with microphones by another TV station. It wasn’t as if we were media whores – we were just some of the few Americans who had managed to make it down under. Then again, there were a lot of Americans traipsing around the harbour looking for the big pin deal, so maybe we *were* just media whores.

### **To the Park**

It was time to head West. The Sydney trains hold twice as many people as the average subway. Double-decker, new and fast, we shot out of downtown and into the hinterland toward Homebush and the Olympic Park.

Homebush was once a toxic waste dump, but it has now been reclaimed in the most sports-minded of ways. The Olympic Park is a village of spectacular venues, arranged with all of the hindsight of Atlanta and the foresight of Sydney. And the train system! As we would later see, the trains gracefully achieved the miracle of moving a quarter million people in and out of the park in a matter of an hour. A friendly volunteer waited at every bend, guiding the people to the next train, which would seem to leave almost immediately after you boarded. This is because there were trains leaving from many tracks every few moments, so that even with the waves and waves of many thousands of people, you were always moving toward your destination.

Mike and I followed the stream of fans out of the shiny new terminal and into the hot Australian sun towards the ticket booth. And suddenly we were in the flickering shadows of the flame, high above Stadium Australia.

Women's Table Tennis today, Gymnastics tonight, and Weightlifting tomorrow. Not bad for a start.

## **Ping-Pong?**

We had what one might consider "50 yard line seats" at the Table Tennis venue. The funniest thing was watching them "volley". These warm ups are like fast-forwarding a home movie. The reflexes of these women were so fast that you begin to realize why some Olympic athletes go on to become circus attractions. In this case, they are just not "of us".

Needless to say, this was one of the best Ping-Pong matches I had ever seen. I even learned some new grips, thanks to the helpful public address announcers who I am certain are strongly encouraged to inspire budding Ping Pongers on to Olympic glory. My suggestion that they should have ball boys was met with concern by the guy sitting next to me - a table tennis purest, I assume. I was simply pledging my indirect support for the International Ball Boys Union (IBBU), who deserve the opportunity to employ their "craft"

If by now it appears to you that I had some difficulty taking this particular event seriously, I commend you, for you have snatched the subtle meanings of my prose from the mysterious darkness.

## **Svetlana**

Not all Russians have escaped the cold heart of the cold war. Some still feel the pressure of the largest country upon them. They must deliver with superior precision, or they are not considered by many to be Russian. So it was through the fifties, sixties and seventies, when the Russians always seemed to deliver. Even with a gold medal around their neck, the smile of the Russian was a cold smile, an iron curtain smile, with a hint of relief that was probably just the tip of the communist iceberg. We'll never know everything that happened to these people. They were the human equivalent of a May Day procession; athletic machinery molded by the demands of tyranny.

The clouds have not completely broken, for Svetlana is the epitome of the tortured Russian Athlete. The success of her team was on her shoulders, but she has succumbed to distractions and the need to be famous. For whatever reason, she missed the higher of the uneven bars and landed flat on her face; a face, I later learned, that was destined for Playboy (among other body parts). Not only did it represent the beginning of the end for a Russian gold medal, but it put Svetlana in an "oh so huffy" mood.

Watching her, set off from her teammates, you could begin to fill in some of the blanks. Russian gymnast, on the road to stardom, a starlet already, above and beyond her universally diminutive teammates. She is, after all, 5'11" – a “giant” of her sport. She’s also 21 years old – ancient by Gymnastics standards, a woman playing with girls.

For the rest of the competition, she pouted, dodged cameras, and sleepwalked through her uninspired routines. Like many competitors who build a history of winning easily, she could not win when the pressure was there. She did not compete, and the Romanians went on to a surprise victory.

But I am happy to say that Svetlana already has a good agent who undoubtedly gave her some profitable advice. The later competitions brought us a new Svetlana, with a haircut, some smiles, hugs for her teammates, and even a gold medal in a solo event. She had re-invented herself in the nick of time – something, it is absolutely safe to say, that no gymnast has ever done during the course of one Olympics. We may therefore look forward to the inevitable selling of the long legged blond for our capitalist appetites. Perhaps the only difference between the communist and capitalist gymnasts is the packaging. Ahh, but we can be sure that there is only one Svetlana. And if we forget, our newly shared media culture will remind us.

## **The Rocks**

At the base of the Sydney Harbour Bridge lies a cluster of very old but well scrubbed dwellings known as The Rocks. This is where the first Europeans set up shop in Sydney back in 1788. Of course, they had to build a prison first, since that’s what they were there for in the first place. Many of the British were shipped off to Australia for minor crimes, but I am certain that, had they seen the beauty of the harbour and the countryside ahead of time, the crime rate would have skyrocketed. In fact, Sydney is a city because those taken there against their will decided they weren’t coming back. Sunshine, beautiful beaches, lush forests, and a chance to make it on there own. And in The Rocks, some great beer.

Mike and I decided to split up that night: I wanted to cavort with the locals while he wanted to catch another event at Olympic Park, which he did: badminton (don’t get me started).

First I took a stroll past the Museum of Contemporary Art along the Circular Quay. The Opera House was lit up under the nearly full moon and the giant Olympic Rings overhead on the bridge.

A private party was being held in the Museum. It appeared to be an exclusive do, with velvet ropes at the doors and a well-dressed doorman/guard/bouncer. Only members were allowed in. Strict rules.

As they say, membership has its privileges. This gathering was being sponsored by American Express, and . . . oh, look there in my wallet . . . I’m a

member! I flashed that pretentious piece of plastic, and the rope came down for me. In I went to sample the red wine, and then the white. And as parties should be, my money was no good in this place! They would only take American Express.

Time to get back to the masses. Onward I ventured and dropped in at the oldest bar in Australia for some working class “Toohey’s New”. They actually gave me a punch card – if I drank six, I’d get the seventh one free. The stuff tasted great, but I didn’t want to fall into the harbour.

Swimming was on – lots of it. I met a few people and tried to decipher the local chant. Yes, they had invented something that sounded like “Aussie Aussie Aussie! – Hoy Hoy Hoy!”. I asked one of the guys what this meant. “Nothing, its just a chant”, he said. But it caught on everywhere. Silly as it was, it gave the Aussies a calling card for their athletes. It certainly sounded nicer than the American chant. As one writer correctly pointed out, “U! S! A!” has the sound of dictatorial oppression and superiority. This “Hoy” thing had an energy to it, an aspiring, supportive, “come, on you can do it” feel to it.

Mike later noted that, with a few minor changes, this could also be a great chant for the Israeli team (“Oy Oy Oy!”)

It was late. I left the Rocks and wandered down one of the many pedestrian streets. An actual street for people: once common in our country, but now unthinkable in the previous Olympic city of steel-caged souls. There was a band playing, and hundreds of people of all races and ages gathered to hear them. Those in the front sat on the street so others could see – so everybody could see - and the glow of the stage lit up their faces. All of the faces of the world, all around me, in a state of harmonious joy. In the center of the city, in the center of mankind’s universe.

## **The Snatch**

What adolescent nonsense do weightlifting terms inspire? The Clean and Jerk? The Snatch? Well, we couldn’t help it because we were having too much fun.

Weightlifting took place on the banks of Darling Harbour in a large auditorium. It is the type of sport that you can’t help but root for everyone, and I believe this is because you can actually feel the hernia coming on as you watch. The venue is appropriate, as it is a theatrical sport, with each athlete entering the stage to an introduction. The crowd begins to hush as he bends down to tighten his grip on the bar. And then, for a second, as the arms and legs become taut, no one breathes. It is the most silent that thousands of people can ever be, because no one is breathing.

In the snatch, the athlete swings the bar over his head, and the weight of it pushes him downward further into his crouch. And then, if he’s balanced correctly, and he’s picked the right weight, his legs slowly straighten, often with a

wobble or a sway. And then he is standing, and with that great moment of triumph, everybody breathes at the same time, the thunderous applause breaks out, the music plays, the bar slams to the floor, and all is right with the world.

Turan Mirzayev of Azerbaijan would have probably won a gold in the hairiest athlete competition, just barely ahead of Giuseppe Ficco of Italy. A stout hearted little mono-brow, Turin had a certain charisma that made us wonder what the Azerbaijan chant was. (“Azer Azer Azer . . . Baaaa Jaaaan!). He managed to snatch, clean and jerk his way into the medal round to great fanfare. Regrettably, he didn’t end up winning, but he put on a great show while we were there. And we wish him well.

### **No Woise**

Anyone who has gone to a foreign country and been there for even a few days, deep within the din of the native language or dialect, understands how the ears begin to “tune” to the language. This must be what babies go through in infancy, unconsciously tuning to their parents voices and inflections; refining their reactions, and understanding what’s happening with ever increasing efficiency.

In the case of the Aussies, we began by missing entire sentences, to which we nodded with stupid politeness. A day or so later, we might miss a few words here and there, but by the next day we were pretty much up to speed. With something like this, you know you’re there when the thoughts that run through your mind begin to take on a strange Aussie dialect. You have now been tuned.

We learned that Aussies rarely worry about things, and they will remind you of that to put you at ease immediately. “No Worries” is what they say at every turn, but they say it so fast that it sounds like “No Woise”. It is a very representative expression, which probably explains why they’re there in the first place. One might assume that if you’re ancestors were arrested in Old Victorian England and placed on a boat to who knows where, your first site of this beautiful country would have elicited a very simple, cathartic “No Worries”.

Of course, they were still in prison, with nobody outside of prison to come visit them. This led to some very devoted friendships among the inmates, and a loyalty that tended to prevent any breaking of trust among them. If they were to be punished for some indiscretion, they would be punished equally rather than provide information to their wardens that might lessen their individual suffering.

And so, when they got out of prison, it was inevitable that the inmates then became “mates”. It is another expression of the culture, this one clearly reflecting the value that the Aussies have for friendship. The term, “Mates” has literally been passed down from the ancestral confines, and now it was being bestowed on us. We were all mates. And we had no woise.

## **To the Beach!**

There are two main beaches in the Sydney area. Bondi Beach is the one everyone heard about since it hosted the beach volleyball competition. We ended up going to the other one: Manly Beach – but we liked it too.

The nice part about the trip to Manly is that its by boat. The ferry from the Circular Quay is a big beautiful green and yellow ship that holds a few thousand people. On this beautiful day, we managed to encounter the sailing competition in both directions. It was actually our second trip out into the harbour – the first being in a water taxi, a small checkered yellow motor boat that might as well have been driven by a New York cabbie.

On days like these – gorgeous sunny blue days – the harbour is a complete free-for-all. We had to yell at our cabbie to avoid a giant catamaran. The ferry also had to proceed slowly; there's no apparent rules or right of way. It is a harbour that is too well loved.

In the distance were a hundred or so white sails of the Olympic competitors, each emblazoned with their flag and three letters of their country. They all looked as confused as the rest of the boats in the harbour, and I'm certain that many of the "civilian"

vessels passed well within the pylons on occasion, perhaps in hopes of picking up a medal.

The ferry eased into the port, and we began our walk through the festive streets of town toward the beach. It is a Mediterranean type town, with shops and plazas, and on this day, a jazz festival. A few minutes later, our stroll ended at the Pacific in the center of a long arcing beach that could very well have been in the South of France. Nice cafes in each direction, and people of all types enjoying the sights and sounds of the beach, the smell and taste of the food and the feel of the sand and the ocean.

After a giant seafood platter – consisting of a very wide range of fresh saltwater creatures – we made our way back. The harbour traffic had gone up a few notches, and this time there were Olympic sailboats all around us. Some stuck, others being towed, others just going off in different directions. I managed to safely conclude that Olympic Sailing is not a spectator sport, unless of course you're one of the Olympic Sailors.

Meanwhile, the ferry was stuck in traffic – a long line of boats trailed off in the distance toward the Opera House. The sun was beginning to settle, and the mist coming up from the flotilla made the whole thing a beautiful site. No rush, and No worries.

I settled into a conversation with some "Westies". In Sydney, the further west you live, the more provincial you will be considered. Human nature perhaps, for they were simply the Australian equivalent of the American redneck. With teeth to match.

It was a spirited conversation that seemed to waft between joyful exuberance and drunken belligerence as quickly as the sway of the boat. Fortunately, I stayed on the joyful side. One of the woman had asked me about the shirt I was wearing. It was the shirt I wore when I carried the Olympic torch on the way to the Atlanta Olympic Cauldron – a shirt that served as a model for the Sydney torch relay uniform. This she found so exciting that she asked if she could kiss me. With no worries from her husband, I said sure.

She had all of her teeth.

## **The Bridge**

The Sydney Harbour Bridge had become the other icon for the games - a sweeping steel arc that stretches from The Rocks on the Circular Quay to North Sydney.

Finished in 1932 after nine years of work, the Bridge was to be opened with tremendous fanfare and the requisite ribbon cutting by the Governor. But things didn't go exactly as planned.

Out of the crowd of dignitaries rode a uniformed "Captain" by the name of Francis de Groot on horseback. As a member of the radical right, this guy was apparently miffed by the ruling labor party's policies. He put on his old military uniform, found himself a horse, and slipped into the festivities. Just as they were about to pull out the big 'ol scissors, he swept in and sliced the ribbon with his sword. They wrestled the guy to the ground, tied the ribbon back together, and got on with the ceremony. No worries.

So here I was at the base of this mammoth span of steel and stone. It was time to climb the thing.

The Bridge Climb is an attraction that one must qualify for. Although its a bit easier than the Olympics, it did require a breathalyzer, some climbing lessons, a jumpsuit, a harness, removal of all loose objects, and of course a waiver that said something along the lines of : "I promise not to sue anybody if I fall off this bridge". After a few hours, off we went, first under the approach ramps, then up through the base, and finally on to the Arch. Just across the way, Chelsea Clinton happened to be on her way down. Would a secret service agent have dived in after her if she had fallen off?

It's a very chummy experience, as you are literally bound by cables to a group of ten people and an extremely chatty escort. You're also all dressed alike, so there is a sense of "mateship", as if you've all just arrived on the same spaceship. It's pretty easy to get to know everyone. On the way up, you wear a headphone so you can hear the narration, though no matter how well tuned my ears were at this point, I was clueless about what was being said. There were trains, cars, boats, planes and wind all over the place. But no worries. I knew we were climbing a bridge.

At the top they take all your pictures for you, since you've been required to leave the cameras behind. Then you walk under the immense Australian Flags and make a wish. The view is something like flying over the city on the back of a giant turtle. There's the Opera House, flying below, there's the skyscrapers, and of course, the harbour, stretching off toward the Olympic Park in one direction, and the Tasman Sea in the other. What a place to be.

### **Baseball in Australia**

On my last night in Sydney, I met Roger at the Olympic Park for some baseball between the USA and Italy. As had become my custom, I found myself rooting against the Americans. I think it was that USA chant. Besides, the memories that the Italians would have if they beat the Americans would last a lifetime longer than their opponents.

Baseball in Australia is a funny thing. I could see early on that the Aussies had made some calculated predictions: A successful baseball competition would mean their audience stayed awake. They had no doubt ascertained that it was a dull sport, at least to the majority of the world, consisting of those who are understandably unable to appreciate the subtleties.

No worries. They would turn it into a carnival extravaganza of unsubtleties. Every possible fan-stimulating gimmick was rolled out. First there were the foul ball sound effects – the shattering window, the downward piano scale, etc. Foul balls in themselves were exciting. For many, it was inconceivable that the actual ball could come flying at them. So strange was this phenomenon that signs were posted all through the ballpark advising the patrons to “Beware of baseballs flying into the seats”. Peals of excitement would erupt whenever a ball found its way there.

“There sure is a lot of standing around”, said the Ozzie Gulls next to me (no relation to Ozzie Guillen).

But Fly balls also managed to trigger their own excitement as well. Two Cuban girls sat a few rows in front of us, and each time a ball went into the air, it was like a miracle when someone caught it. They couldn't believe that little ball could shoot way up into the sky and come down, as if randomly, into someone's hands!

Then there were the grounds keepers. In “real” baseball, six or seven guys come out on around the fifth inning and “drag” the field. This is a coordinated effort in which they tow a heavy sheet of material across the entire infield to smooth out the dirt surface. Over time, some ground crews have introduced a mild bit of showmanship based on a sense of exaggerated importance. They salute the crowd upon completion of their task, as if the game would be immediately

terminated without their timely arrival. And so we all breath a sigh of relief, and the contest is allowed to continue.

In Australia, as it turns out, the crew entered the game three times over the course of nine innings. Little dances, hearty salutes, and beloved cheers from the crowd only encouraged them. Any more attention and they would have been dragging the damn field after every out.

And what barrage of baseball gimmickry would be complete without the infamous “wave”? For those who have not been to a stadium since the 70’s, the wave is the moron’s equivalent of synchronized swimming, requiring only that the participants know how to do “synchronized standing”. Each person stands up and sits down in progressive unison with everyone else in the stadium. Those who have practiced the wave also put their hands in the air and simultaneously yell something completely meaningless.

To the uninitiated international baseball fan, this was an outright spectacle, and another priceless example of American ingenuity that is certain to result in the eventual destruction of Wembley Stadium. The wave was such a thrill to many of these fans, that they deemed it necessary to start a new one every inning. Unlike the typical American wave, which now seems to gradually dissipate until one idiot in the upper deck remains with his hands in the air, the International Wave degenerated into chaotic “eddies” throughout the stadium, with small groups of people sitting and standing, convinced that this was all that was necessary to bring everyone to their feet.

By the top of the seventh, I had elected to teach my untutored seatmates the words to “Take Me Out to The Ballgame”. Needless to say, this was a necessity in preparation for the coming performance. Nobody had ever heard of the song, “crackerjacks” meant nothing to them, and “rooting” in Australia apparently refers to vigorous copulation. So not only did the girls around me have a serious problem with this song, it was impossible for them to believe that everyone was actually going to sing it. When I sang it to them, they must have thought I had lost my mind.

When then the middle of the seventh rolled around, a deep Aussie voice announced over the PA. “Everybody Stand up and join us in the traditional song of baseball”. The girls reluctantly stood up, as did everyone else, unaware of what was really happening. The words appeared on the screen, people began to mouth them, and then sing them. And suddenly we were all singing. We made it through with smiles and claps - a great performance of the world’s singers honoring America’s national pastime. We had done it!

And then they played it again. So we all sang it again, and this time people knew a few more of the words and it was a little more raucous, because people like it when they know the words, and then finally, after much singing, we were done, and we began to sit down. Another great performance.

And then they played it again! They played the stupid song again, and put the words up again and we kept rooting and rooting until we had rooted more than pigs in heat and we were freaking sick of the goddamn stupid baseball song.

Italy lost the game when the pitcher threw an easy grounder into right field, allowing the tying and winning run to score. Arrivederci Italia.

## **The Great Reconciliation**

There are dramatic parallels between Australia and the United States, which provide lessons for both. The U.S. became the haven for millions from everywhere over the last two centuries, at great expense to those who lived here for centuries before us. By virtue of this arrival of the masses and the ensuing massacres, blame and shame were decentralized and minimized. It's hard to tell exactly why this is, but finger pointing has been an American quality ever since the second immigrant arrived. Our ancestors also didn't leave a whole lot of witnesses as they made their way across the continent.

But what if they had? Imagine if our country encompassed a great swath of uninhabitable land in its center that we simply decided was not worth settling. Even after we massacred and displaced a good number of them from our fertile coastlines, the result would certainly be the preservation of many thousands of native lives, followed later by their millions of descendants. With the memories alive through the generations, and the cultures intact, how would we feel then?

The mirror would undoubtedly be in our face.

But we killed the witnesses, if not physically, then most definitely spiritually. And for those courageous small pockets of still spiritual natives, the blame is hard to find in our melted pot.

It is not in Australia. There seems to be a collective responsibility, which, ironically, makes it easier to confront. The simple acknowledgment that damage has been done and the country should be shared is a tremendous step for this unusual place. For the ethical majority who wish to move forward, acknowledgment by itself is far more meaningful than financial reparations, which are more of a litigious revenue stream in our country than a path to progress. Acknowledgment brings catharsis, which then leads to reconciliation. And then great things can happen.

And on September 26, of 2000, a great thing did happen for Australia.

Cathy Freeman is a great runner. An Aborigine, an Australian, an attractive, articulate human synthesis of her continent. As she stepped to the starting line in the quarter mile, it was as if the two great peoples of Australia melted into one behind her. If she could win this race, it would provide a shared moment of joy

that had never before been experienced. While the more than 110 thousand people rose to their feet in Stadium Australia, the streets of Sydney filled in front of the giant screens scattered throughout the metropolis. This was a moment - a new moment - for this country.

The race is only one lap.

She wore a body suit in green and yellow, the unofficial colors of her country. The staggered start had her out well. The screams followed her down the backstretch and towards the far turn.

The quarter mile is a unique race. Because the entire lap is run within lanes, the stagger accounts for the longer distance around the outside lane. This adds a good amount of suspense, since nobody really knows who's winning until the runners come into the home stretch.

Now it was clear to everyone. As Cathy rounded the last turn, the screaming got louder, the flame shot higher, and the entire country pushed their hero further and further ahead of her competition. Her giant strides were as symbolic as they were physically impressive.

And as she won, the country became one.

### ***The Dreaming\****

For the Aborigine, the basis of everything is the concept of the Dreaming, in which the past, present and future were regarded as a continuing and uninterrupted stream. Spirit children were intermediaries who brought life from out of the Dreaming, conferring this precious substance upon aboriginal people as on all natural species. The Dreaming was the source of all life, and anything that touched it was, virtually by definition, sacred. Sacredness was, therefore, a condition of living. The intermediate period between the emergence of physical life and its disappearance on death was permeated by a concern for retaining or enhancing sacredness. All initiation was a re-introduction to the sacred, and death merely another form of initiation – creating or recreating life out of physical death. Aboriginal religion was oriented around two basic issues. One was physical survival, the other spiritual survival. The key to both was believed to rest in the Dreaming. Together they pervaded all aspects of human living

\*From *The World of the First Australians; aboriginal traditional life, past and present* by Ronald and Catherine Berndt (Aboriginal Studies Press, 1992)

## **A Night with our Hosts**

We did get Kate and Roger out one night. Our first venue was at a place called the Slip'in, a stylish multi-level indoor/outdoor bar restaurant. In other words, something for everyone. Roger, Mike and I sat outside until Kate escaped from work. And then another call rung through. It was Travis, a fellow pilgrim who had just arrived in the country, and soon tracked us down at our table.

We were riding the crest of great beer, long lost time with good friends, and powerful American dollars. VB beer, which stands for Victoria something, is the brew of choice. Only naïve Americans drink Fosters in Australia. Either way, everything was cheap. And the surroundings could have been any happy hour watering hole in a US metropolis.

It was only when we went to dinner at a nearby Chinese Restaurant that the differences were obvious. Only when you realize that the concept of "service" is not always to be expected do you realize how much we take it for granted. We had an otherwise wonderful meal despite our propensity to trouble the surly waiters for an occasional . . . fork. A request for a glass of water generated a look of absolute disgust from one of the waiters. We had really pissed him off with that one. And thus, I was given strict orders by Kate not to tip. I couldn't have imagined that it would have ever mattered to these guys.

We wanted to continue, to cavort, but it was just as easy to succumb to the cotton sheets of our wondrous Paddington beds, and after a bit of debate, all of us except Travis bid adieu to the Sydney nightlife and grabbed a cab for home.

## **Ozzie Gulls and the Parallel Universe**

Mike and I dropped in on one pub and immediately started a conversation with three wayward blond housewives in various stages of current or ex-wifery. They had at least six marriages among the three of them. They seemed weatherbeaten, but quite happy. Trish, Gail and Sue, the first now single, the second now married and the third dating someone half her age. They were an earthy trio, past the pretensions, but not the tensions of their relationships. We bought them a round, because by nature of the American dollar, we were suddenly rich, and thus it was our patriotic duty to redistribute our wealth.

We showed them Olympic pins. I should say that Mike showed them Olympic pins as I have long been cured of the fixation. They seemed unimpressed.

We talked about the lawnmowers in the opening ceremonies, which are Sydney's version of Atlanta's pick-ups I suppose. Funny how much influence we had.

We asked them what Australian women looked for in a man, and not surprisingly, it's the same thing that American women look for in a man (except perhaps for the pin thing).

We asked them what they thought about all these people coming to their country. They thought it “quite a lot of fun”.

We talked about thongs, which are “flip-flops” in Australia, and something else in America.

We explained to them why we were convinced that Shooting was the fastest Olympic sport and then scolded them when they were unable to tell us that Archery was the second fastest Olympic sport.

And we probably talked about a lot of other stuff, but it was the encounter itself that was enriching, giving us a peek into contemporary Australian day to day culture, and discovering it’s pretty much the same as ours. We are in a parallel universe.

### **Goodbye Matilda**

I was on my own on the way home. I had a cab seconds after my short stroll down to Gustos. My cab driver was from Eastern Europe, which I now believe provides cab drivers for the entire planet. He was an aviation aficionado, with many questions and comments about aircraft. He knew everything, so I know he enjoyed every opportunity he could get to drive someone out to the airport. I tipped him well, but not in a patronizing way. It was more like prize money for exhausting the Jeopardy category “Airplanes and Aircraft”.

I was early, and a bit anxious, being a standby passenger so far away from home. The Qantas flight to Los Angeles had been full – I would need one more blessing from the Olympic Gods.

I had a few hours to kill, and began reading a book I had picked up about Sydney. I knew I had only scratched the surface of this land, and this was a meager attempt to make up for it as much as I could. The book, simply called *Sydney* by Geoffrey Moorhouse, begins with an arrival by boat. The reader is met at the entrance to the harbour and slowly piloted in towards the Circular Quay. Moorhouse elegantly describes the surroundings in detail; each landmass, edifice and promontory, in a slow methodical manner, just as it appeared as our ferry returned from Manly Beach. It is a wonderful way to begin the acquaintance with the city.

Suddenly they were calling names. With just 20 minutes to departure, it looked like I’d gotten on the packed 747. Seat 55A. A coach seat – 12 hours next to a window over the Pacific. I couldn’t complain.

But then there was a problem with my boarding pass. Maybe it was a mistake – I hadn’t been cleared. Maybe this boarding pass was someone else’s. They asked me to sit off to the side for a moment.

And then they handed me a business class seat . I had been upgraded.

So it was time to go.

Similar to its opening, Moorhouse's final chapter beautifully describes the end of your visit. Your ship pulls out of port and makes a leisurely pass under the Harbour Bridge. Then it skirts Bennelong Point where the Opera House waves farewell (because, I swear, the building is moving), then on through the channel, slowly, as the stunning sunlit land slides by. And then finally, you watch the Hornby lighthouse move past you, and you are through the narrow gap of the North and South points.

Your ship heads for the Tasman Sea and the open ocean.