

Solitary Man
By Karen Goa

Fred. Fred's got a face like Tuesday's potato mash served up on Wednesday and hands that could bowl prize-winning pumpkins. He's been sharpening tools in his van, in the Coolalinga Shopping Centre car park just outside Darwin, for "four or five months." Chisels \$2-4. Tin snips \$8. Hand guillotine \$25. He's whetted metal right round Australia four or five times. His son's in the same trade, he has his own tool sharpening van. Sometimes they meet up on the road.

I ask him how long he'll be camped out in the Coolalinga car park. He looks thoughtful. "Til I move."

I tell him we don't have mobile tool sharpeners in New Zealand, not that I've seen, anyway. He's genuinely astonished. "Why not? How do you keep your tools sharpened?" I mumble something clever like, "I guess they all stay dull," and take my heat-befuddled brain away before he can ask any more hard questions.

The road from Coolalinga to Katherine spins out straight and true as a spider's lead line. Along the roadside kangaroo grass blazes, Dante-esque, in the season's burnoff. Birds wheel and dive on small desperate creatures driven out by fire. Ghostly gums stand sentinel amid smoke shrouding the distant hills. It's so hot my lip gloss melts in my pocket.

Young Bill. Raised on cattle stations, Young Bill's only had four years' schooling, starting at age nine when Australia's School of the Air came along, decades ago. Suddenly he had friends – "children from other stations I didn't know were there" who he could talk to by radio.

In the telling, it seems like a miracle.

Young Bill's always dreamt of owning a cattle station but his wife didn't like the thought of all that empty space and time. They started a backpacker's hotel in Katherine the same year the Katherine River rose 24 metres and flooded stinking river mud up to the ceilings. Now he's the handyman for a local kayaking outfit when he's not out on his own, fishing for barra.

Jostling over make-believe roads near the river Young Bill brakes his four-wheel-drive to a stop amidst a clutch of termite mounds. The mounds are terracotta wonders, a couple of metres high and nearly as wide. One looks like a *pieta*. Another is a trooping trio of trolls. A local entrepreneur started trucking empty termite mounds down south to sell as sculptures to gullible city folk. "He sold a fair few, too," says Young Bill, "til the authorities put a stop to it."

Young Bill lifts the brim of his beaten-up, turned down Akubra, mops the valleys of his face with a hankie, folds himself into the driver's seat. We jounce along to Katherine, tasting termite dust.

Ronald. The motorcycle in the Katherine Shopping Centre car park looks like someone's ridden it headlong into a sandstorm. The metal holds a faint memory of paint. Bags and swags swaddle its sides.

Ronald is the Riding Dutchman. He bought the bike, an Enfield Bullet, in India. For nearly five years he's put the dirt of many nations beneath its wheels - Pakistan, Burma,

Malaysia, Cambodia, Yemen, Oman, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Australia. New Zealand is next.

He sleeps rough, away from campsites full of other people. He's figured out a way to sleep lying on top of the bike's frame and seat. It's a delicate balancing act.

When he runs out of money he picks up work. Doing what I ask, thinking fruit picking, mechanic, cattle hand. "Designing websites."

He's way more fresh-faced than anyone deserves to be after years of riding a motorbike alone around the world. I take a photo of Ronald and the bike to show my husband, who has his own Bullet. I give him our phone number in case he gets to New Zealand and ever feels like meeting people.

He tucks away the paper and rides off munching an apple. Inside the shopping centre I buy water for the hot drive back to Darwin.

Martin. A man in a Swannndri is pushing a supermarket trolley along the Stuart Highway. It's a half hour's drive from Katherine and at least as far to any major, or even minor, town in the other direction. It must be 35C in the shade, but there's not much shade. "Hardly anyone stops for me," remarks Martin. "I could die here. A kind lady stopped once, and journalists. You're not journalists are you?" he asks my journalist friend and me.

Busted. We confess, but state our case for being kind ladies, too. We're concerned that he's out walking the wilderness on such a hot day. His legs are like broiled logs of luncheon meat, ready to split

Martin has obsessive-compulsive disorder. In the trolley he's got a Huggies carton for a suitcase and a Pizza Hut box for a hat. He's sharp-witted and serious when he's not wavering into his own reality. "I have to ask you a question, don't think badly of me, but has anyone else been here in the last few minutes?" We assure him that it's just been us three. "Did you touch anything in my trolley?" No, we didn't.

To prevent theft he's tied himself to the trolley with a shoelace. He's worried that when he gets to Darwin he'll be tagged as a terrorist by authorities mistaking the shoelace for a bomb fuse.

Martin is pushing his trolley from Katherine to Darwin "because no-one else has." He wanted to be a park ranger, but his illness killed that dream. Shyly he admits to composing poems as he walks along. Would we like to hear them? For the next ten minutes he recites soaring stanzas and clever couplets, odes to the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the outback. I'm speechless, and sad. Martin's a natural, a poetic genius, an outback bard.

We give him bread and cheese, water and sunscreen, and wish him good luck. It's a scorcher of a walk to Darwin.