



Sir are you ok??

Yeah...I am...I am just so happy."

The words flowed just as freely as my tears and THAT is how I will look back on 2014; tearful, tired but very happy and fulfilled.

Though my outburst occurred in Philadelphia International Airport during the first few day of 2015 the origin of that emotion happened in 2014. Actually, it started way before that.

The Hugs and High5s Tour was my self proclaimed bike tour between Sydney and Melbourne where I hugged and high5'ed people along the way. Unlike my other tours where I was trying to raise money for a scholarship fund or other causes, this tour was a stripped down version where I did what I believe I do best: ride, interact and inspire.

Now biking Australia has been a notion of mine since I first biked the US in '02 but the idea for any kind of official tour started back in 2012. Lance Armstrong had just started his plummet from grace and though I had no clue about Oprah and the true murkiness of his story,

I felt that there was more in store and saw an opportunity. I flew down to Livestrong's Austin, Texas offices and pitched them the idea of my leading a small group of cancer survivors on a charitable service tour from Perth to Sydney. I had done solo tours like this in the past and knew the positive impact that this could have.

My thoughts were that a tour of cancer survivors biking and reaching out to people getting cancer treatment would not only do something good but also give the public a good story to follow rather than Lance's demise. It would be almost

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like rubbernecking on the highway expecting to see an accident but seeing a cool piece of art instead.

I really believed that the tour would have worked but was told that I was cocky, bordering on arrogant for pitching it. That was not the first time I've heard that in my life. Oh well, I tried. Upon my

return from Texas, a Fortune 200 company contacted me about doing something to increase their brand awareness throughout Australia.

I began tinkering with my Livestrong idea and reworked the tour's title, mission, budget, press contacts, timetable and other key points. I even began to assemble a team of possible riders, one of whom broke down in tears when I asked her to be a part of the endeavor.

I was excited about what I putting together and presented something very fair to the company. Negotiations began smoothly enough and as time went on I really believed that this trip was really going to happen and began making regular 'get ready' calls/texts to my team. But, to make long story very short, the company passed because Australia was less than 1% of their global revenue.

I understand why the company passed but it was still hard to take because I believed that this tour was going to happen and had begun passing that belief on. I felt foolish and each individual call to my team members was difficult to get through. Though no one blamed me, I still felt like I failed. One of my team told me to calm down though and assured me that I would find a way to bike Australia because I "always find a way" and went on to suggest that I fund the tour myself since I have all the details in place.



Initially, I didn't think too much of the possibility of funding my own tour until I went a site and discovered just how easy it can be to underwrite one's own dreams. Gofundme was the site that I decided upon and one of the cool things about the site is that you can set up your own prize system - you pledge this; then I will do that - kind of stuff.


So I reworked the budget for just one person and no support vehicle, started contacting Australian charities, named it The Hugs and High5's Tour and started working on the prizes.

I put my creative cap on and thought of basic things - 6 bucks for an Australian postcard - creative things - 83 bucks for a wake up call from Australia- goofy things - 6969 I will star in your home porn film awkward bike tan lines and all- and all things in between. Within the first hour of my launch, I raised 1000 bucks and as the days went by, more money came in to further cement my vision. Later, when Specialized Bicycles contacted me about giving me a bike: it all felt real.

I was going to have my own bike tour!

My plan was to do the tour in December and as my departure date approached, time seemed to move faster and faster. In planning out the details, I decided that in addition to volunteering at a variety of charities that I was going to

also going to try and hug, high5 and interact with at least 1000 people on my tour. To achieve this, i figured an on the road by 7AM and being off the road by 3PM schedule that would allow more than enough time and energy to go out and mingle with people. It was a lot but like they say: go big or go home.



**“NO,
THE WORLD
IS YOURS,”
I SAID**

With Specialized giving me a bicycle, packing was easy: toiletries, cycling shoes, convertible quick drying pants, quick drying shirts, khaki shorts, socks, laptop and camera. That’s pretty much all I took. Wait, I also took books. In fact, I took more copies of my books with me than actual bike gear.

I left right after Thanksgiving and to get to Australia, I flew from Philadelphia to Dallas, had a ten hour layover and then flew 17 hours onto Sydney.

Now let me pause and say that: Qantas Air is awesome and is the only way to get Down Under - more about airlines later.

During my descent into Sydney airspace I read about a restaurant in the city’s Bondi Beach section called Bills. Something within the write-up caught my attention, probably its proximity to the beach, and before the plane’s wheels touched down, I decided to go there for my first meal in the country.

After going through passport control and getting a very reluctant smile and high5 from the customs agent, I made my way to my hotel and briefly reconnected with my longtime friend Brigette. Brigette was a former client of mine in Philadelphia but now lives in Australia and works at University of Technology Sydney. But while it was great to see a pretty and familiar face, after such a long flight, it was awesome to grab a long hot shower and finally make my way towards some food.

Bondi Beach is a trendy beachfront area that is bustling with surfers, tourists and the city’s wealthy in equal measure. Its energy and beauty immediately infused me to the point that I decided to get a quick dip before eating and, since there’s never a bad time to swim in the ocean as far as I am concerned, my Indian Ocean immersion was just what I needed. I smiled the whole block or so walk to Bills and as I sat at an outside table pondering what to eat, the waitress started a conversation with me that quickly morphed from where i had been in the world to our high5’ing and hugging. She introduced me to her coworkers and one staffer’s energy was so intense that it almost bowled me over, literally. Coming up from behind, they almost tackled me with their embrace and when they found



out that I was planning to do some work with Beyond Blue, an organization that does a lot of work for teens suffering from depression, they really opened up.

While making my way through Bills awesome Full Aussie breakfast, this person tearfully told me of their suicide attempt and how Beyond Blue helped them “piece it all back together.”

“Without them, I..wouldn’t be here,” they said and then gave me their phone number in case I needed any help in Australia. Though my repast had quickly gotten serious, the genuine nature of this interaction made me smile and know that I did the right thing by being in Australia. Before leaving me alone for the rest of my meal, the staffer brought me some more food and said, “Here you go...You got a lot of good to do and I want to keep you energized!”

With my bike not shipped up from Specialized’s Melbourne headquarters yet, I had some time to get acclimated to the time difference but while still a bit jet lagged I got the opportunity to address a group of 50 Aboriginal high school students.

Brigette arranged for me to speak to the students, many of whom took a 16 hour train ride to Sydney, as a part of a summer youth program at University Technology Sydney. Now introducing kids to the world through my talk is always cool for me but this was especially so because of one student that really attached themselves to the high5.

A big personable teen with an equally big smile, approached me after my talk while on a tourist bus of Sydney and said that he felt my boldness to ask random strangers for high5 was "amazing."

"But," he almost whispered, "what if they say no?"

"To what?"

"The High5's"

"Then they're missing out."

"On what??"

"The magic,"

Looking at me as if he were balancing out whether I was crazy or cool, the teen seemed fascinated. As we stood on a busy street later on in the tour, he came up and asked how many people I could high5 in a ten minute span. I told him to start counting began asking passersby, "Who wants a high5?"

With every smack he would shout the number, "One, two..." getting more and more excited with each one. "Ten, eleven, twelve..." his voice grew louder. At this point that I reached 17 he said, "Oh my god, he's going to get 20" with a fervor.

Just then, the 18th person declined.

He was crestfallen and so was I to a certain extent-I really like high5's. As the person casually walked away, the teen shouted, "Why would you walk away from a high5? Why would you walk away from this man? He came all the way from the states to bike here...he wrote a book. I haven't read it yet but I know it's good."

As is with teenagers, each of his sentences were more excited than the previous and I told him to relax said, "like I said dude; They are missing out"

But, as is also with teenagers, he quickly changed gears from the man walking away to looking at me and raising his hand to heartily high5 me and yelled "18... you can still make 20!"

I tried coaxing him into high5'ing the 20th person with me but he shook his head, extended his arms and said, "Noooo, that's you... that's your world"

"No, the world is yours," I said.

As if being introduced to a new concept, the kid repeated the sentence a few times; the world is yours.

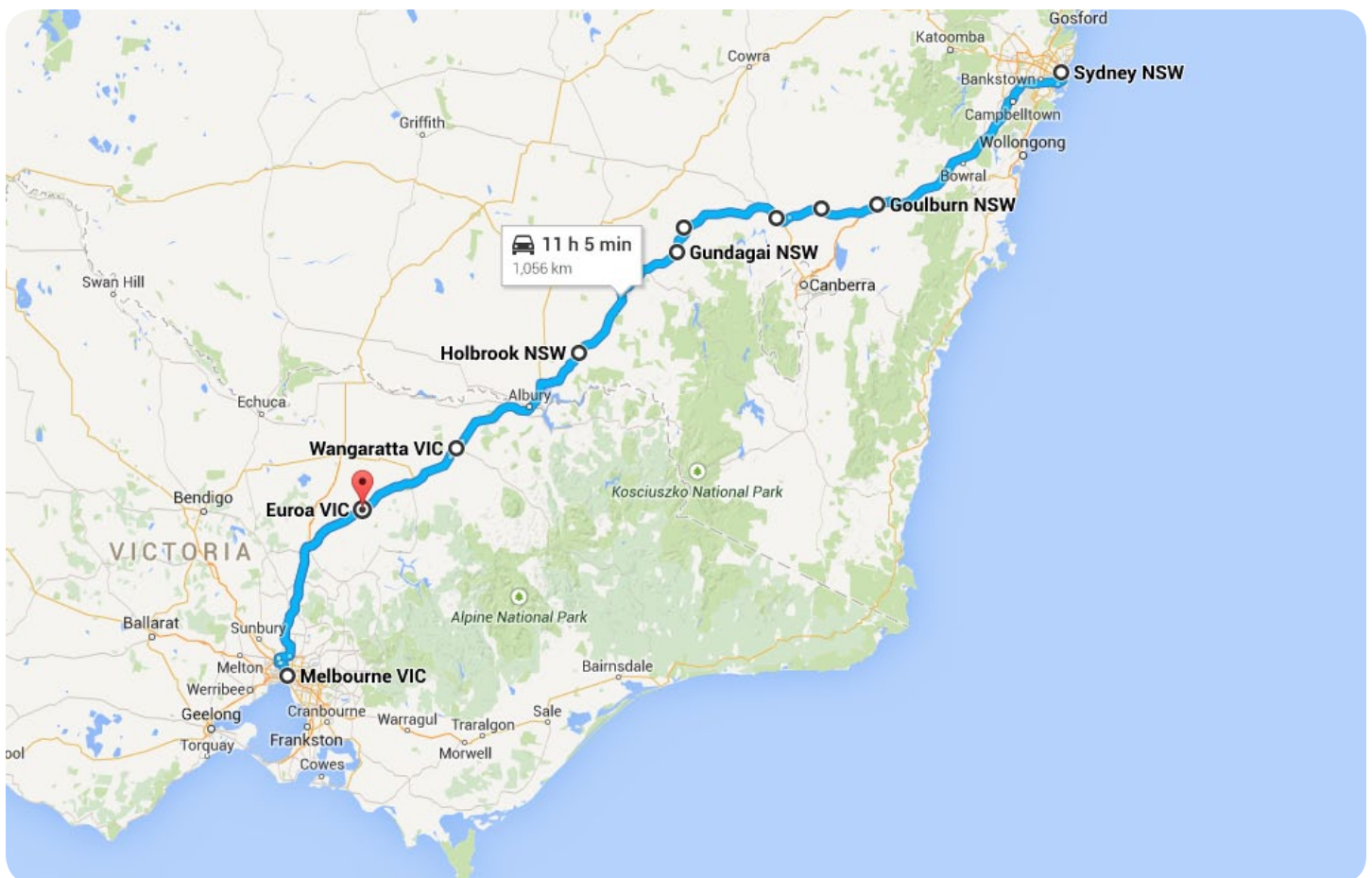
He kept repeating it over and again until I stopped him and said, "No, you don't say it that way; you say the world is mine."

Again, he repeated the sentence over and again but this time there was more emotion, depth and excitement in each statement: The world is mine.

The world is mine.

The world is mine.

As he repeated 'the world in mine' over and again, his smile grew more and I became more aware that the concept that I freely embrace was possibly taking a hold in him. He eventually started high5ing people with me and then went on his do it on his own and I do believe that one day we will read about his Hugs and High5 Tour.



Within days of presenting to the Aboriginal students, my bike had arrived and it was now time to do what I came to do. It was also time for the weather to totally change from cloudless sunny skies to heavy rains and headwinds. The conditions made the first days kind of cold and clammy but it all could have been avoided if I took a trucker up on his offer just a few miles out of Sydney.

While having lunch at a Greek gyro place, a trucker asked where I was going on my bike which opened the door to my whole story and further questions about what has kept me going throughout it all. I guess that he liked my answers because between chews, he pointed to a truck in a nearby lot and said, "I'm heading to Melbourne right after this food; throw your stuff in and I will take you."

He explained that Beyond Blue helped one of his good friends through a serious crisis at one point and because of that wanted to get me to Melbourne to do more good work faster. I refused his offer but did start thinking about it when he said, "there's nothing but snakes, spiders and shit hotels the whole way down there"

He said that he figured that I would turn him down and then scribbled his phone number down on a napkin telling me that he knew truckers all over the country if I needed help.

Besides the headwinds, hard rain and a lot of hills that all seemed to be named after someone — which did not endear me to these people at all — nothing much happened on my first few days. I biked on the Hume Highway, a major trucking conduit between Sydney and Melbourne, and while I enjoyed the constant scenery of vast rolling plains with light green to brownish grass and a few trees on either side of the roadway, the locals hated it. Every time I spoke with someone about what I thought was picturesque they remarked that the grass was dry, should be greener and was nothing but a tinder box of possible bush fires. I guess everything comes down to perspective.

Oh wait, something did happen, for the first time in my life I was getting some slight sciatica pain that was beginning to make biking a bit more of a labor than a joy.

On my way into the town of Goulburn, I got my first glimpse of my first kangaroo. I say glimpse because he hopped right with me to my left almost right out of view. I tried slowing up to get a better look but he kept pace and stayed right in line with me. I tried to stop quickly and get a picture but he hopped away only to return a little while later, still saying to my left, still just out of full eye sight.

Just getting this glimpse stoked my excitement for Goldburn because I thought that I may see more kangaroos on the way but I should have tempered myself. There was nothing in Goldburn. I stayed in a hotel where my room looked like it was a set for a bad snuff film — actually, is there a good snuff film? Anyway, the hotel was connected to restaurant that provided me with a unique dining companion.

A huge dead fly lay right in the middle of an empty place-setting right across from me. You couldn't help but notice it and I assumed that the host noticed it too but if he did, he never flinched. I held the menu in my hand but looked past it -staring intently at the fly. I thought about moving it but then wanted to see just how long the fly would stay there. I guess my waiter felt the same way because there it stayed for the whole meal. After eating, I said good night to my 'date' and went to get some sleep.

But Gouldbun had more in store for me. My room was right next a couple's room that got into an intense argument about someone locked up in a prison that was just minutes away from the hotel. But the couple later patched things up and had loud make-up sex. Good thing that was only minutes away too.

But the night wasn't over.

Afterward, she went outside, he stayed in the room and they both got on cell phones to loudly talk about each other to their friends.

Wait, did I mention that they smoked cigarettes the whole time??

The whole time: pre,during and post sex.

Talk about, On top of Old Smokey!

When the morning came I couldn't wait to leave Goldburn but had to stop when I saw a big- no, HUGE - statue of a sheep aptly called the Big Merino. I guess there are some cool things about Goldburn.

Gunning is a speck of town that I passed through that was apparently much bigger before the government diverted the Hume Highway a few miles west years ago. Now, the town's old architecture and remaining store storefronts are a standing testament to 'What Was.' But through Gunning's age and disrepair, stands a town with a very strong pulse that was evident in the smiles, waves and random "hi's" that immediately made me feel welcome.

Since I was on the old Hume Highway, I very scientifically decided to grab a bite at the Old Hume Cafe and am glad that I did because besides hugs and

high5's something happened to me that has never occurred to me before.

After hearing my story, an older patron got up and moved her seat closer to mine and expressed that she was thinking about buying bikes for her grandchildren and said that she wanted "to support the company that supports you."

Now prior to Specialized involvement with me, I have had to purchase and sometimes even borrow- the bicycles that I have used on my trips. Because of this, I never felt any allegiance or need to promote any bike company or product. But this was different, this was the first time that I was asked this question and honestly had something to say.

Filled with pride, I eagerly said Specialized's name over and over again as I detailed everything that I liked about their AWOL series of bicycles and even wrote their name and web address down on a napkin. I imagine that the woman only wanted a company name but this was an awesome moment for me and I wanted to say everything I could. In any case, I pedaled away from Gunning aglow with pride and would like to be present when those kids get their Specialized bikes for Christmas.



Happy riding kids.

For a while, my next destination city of Yass, was the town that I seemed destined to never reach. Sure, there were signs that said I was "this close" but all I had to do was bike to the next sign that contradictorily stated that I was "that far."

My ride to the 'dangling carrot' of a town wasn't so hard but it was all uphill and beginning to wear on me a bit. I stopped to snack at a roadside rest stop where I met two road workers who has broken down and were waiting for a tow. One of them informed me that my cycling "day was about to quickly change" as he tinkered underneath the truck's hood and refused to say anything more other than, "you'll see." His words sounded ominous but the fact that

they were both kind of smiling made me think that whatever they were talking about wouldn't be so bad.

It didn't take long for me to discover what they were talking about because just a few hundred yards from our conversation was a sign denoting sharp descent into Yass Valley. Downhills are the payoff for grinding it out and I was enjoying my reward so much that I didn't care anything about the signs that I was passing. I was just enjoying the ride and once I reached Yass, one motel name stuck out: The Thunderbird Motel.



Thunderbird, the name brings forth images of the 70's era. Though the motel had been recently renovated and modernized, it clearly showed its old school roots in things like its overall style and a bottle opener in the door frame - remember those. The Thunderbird reminded me a lot of the places where my family stayed in on my childhood vacations and brought back such memories that I sat outside of my room to daydream of my childhood for a little while.

Once out of my daydreaming haze, I strolled Yass' main drag to find a place to eat but happened upon a cool gym first and couldn't resist and working out. What can I say, I am a weight room junkie. Besides the great workout, the gym owner gave me a restaurant recommendation and I soon as I opened the door, the lip licking aroma of grilled meat hit me and made me smile. Before the bartender could even ask what I wanted, I ordered a steak and as he keyed my order into the register I stared in the bar's mirror and noticed man sipping beer.

No, that's not right, what caught my eye was the man's smile AFTER he sipped the beer.

I wanted that smile too and even though I am not a beer drinker, I ordered what he was drinking.

And I have to tell you, that beer and steak was awesome and made me smile too.

It also helped that there were no flies on my plate.

That night, my dinner companions were the Cochran's, an older couple that really hit it off me. We talked for hours about where I had been-where they had been - what we learned in the world and they liked me so much that they appointed themselves my guardian angels. The next morning, they drove along my route out of town to provide me with company as well as keep me safe. I left too early and we never actually saw each other but I aware of their actions because they called and emailed me midmorning to see where I was on the road. even though, I didn't need the, it was good to know that they were out there and ready to assist.

My sciatic nerve pain worsened and left me unable to lay on my sides, uncomfortable on my back and too fidgety to sleep on my stomach. I spent my night tossing and turning and believing that there was someone out there with a Big Dave voodoo doll and a hell of a lot of needles. The next day was horrendous; every 3 to 5 miles - no matter the terrain or if was even pedaling- I had to stop and let the sciatic nerve calm down.

And to give you an idea of my pain just know that it overtook my intense fear of spiders.

From my very first utterance of wanting to go to on this trip, people started talking to me about just how many spiders are there are in Australia. Big ones, small ones, giant ones, poisonous ones - you name the spider and it is some where in Australia. The very word "spider" made me cringe and that fear began to rule over me to the point that I briefly entertained the idea of not going on my trip. Obviously, I decided to go but I did employ some crazy therapy to get over my fear like forcing myself to stare a pictures of spiders each morning until I calmed down a bit. It never really worked. But what did work though was this intense needling pain coursing through my left butt cheek.

Sciatica was new to me and the stress of it all along with sleep deprivation was amplifying the nerve pain with each pedal stroke. Wondering if I was going to be strong enough to gut out the day, I was quickly turning into a despondent physical wreck. My biking was now reduced to keeping my right eye on the highway while my left eye examined the roadside - Australia's traffic patterns are the opposite of the US - looking for a spider-free zone.

I should note: I had no clue what a 'spider free zone would look like but that didn't stop me from looking.

When the pain became excruciating, I braked hard but gingerly got off my bike to kneel beside it and get in the only position that eased my pain. From my

posture, kneeling and leaning on my bike, I must have looked like I was in prayer to the cars whizzing by on the highway and to some extent I was. But I laughed when the pain eroded a bit and I took stock of the very high grass that I was kneeling in and a bug, not a spider, crawling on my leg. I guess I'm over my fear of spiders, I thought.

Still in pain, the idea of triumphing over my own fear made me smile a bit. But even after taking a few minutes to bask in my own glory, I struggled to stand up. With nothing but open road ahead of me, I decided to walk my bike toward the next town of Gundagai and even entertained the idea of walking the whole 10-15 kilometers there. But I saw that there was the town of Coolac about 2KM away.

By the time that I reached what looked like Coolac's only habitable building, I had switched from walking in my cycling shoes to a much more comfortable sandal and was feeling a tad better. The building that I entered was a general store that was right out the 1950's. As I opened the loudly creaking screen door, I wondered if the place was even open. The sunny day made it hard for my eyes to adjust to the store's relative darkness but once they did I could clearly see a few people milling around and a big lit cooler filled with drinks, I knew that I was in the right place to get a drink and a bit of a rest.



I grabbed a Bundaberg Ginger Beer and a small pack of Tim Tams- an awesome Australian chocolate cookie - and sat down to ease my nerve and enjoy the store's cool air. I leaned my chair back and began talking with one of the store's clerks and noticed that I was leaning my back on a very nice bookcase. The modern case made of polished wood and filled with books from Nelson Mandela, Tom Clancy, Dale Carnegie, Deepak Chopra and other volumes with topics spanning faith to fiction stood in stark contrast to the utilitarian design of every thing else in the store. When I inquired about the case, the clerk told me that a town resident had recently published a book and bought the case for the store to encourage the community to read more. "In fact", he said, "her book's about an American baseballer"

Thinking aloud more than anything, I said that I would like to speak with the author since I recently published a book.

"Really?" he asked and before I could even say, 'you can give her my email' he was on the phone speaking to what I assumed was her husband.

This is about the gist of the what I heard, "Hey, yeah.. theres a big American here that want to talk to your wife.....yeahhe wrote a book too...he just wants to talk...yeah..yeah, he riding a bike across Australia..well, to Melbourne.....some one died or something... he just wants to talk.....sure....yeah...sure.. look.. look, I will just send him down. ok....ok..yeah right now..ok bye." In between his clipped sentences and half descriptions, I was reaching for the phone while he steadily leaned back and shushed me. I am sure that we provided much amusement for the other staff but after the conversation he looked at me with a self satisfied expression and said, "Ok, its taken care of. They live right down the road about half a kilometer on the right, next to an old train shed....Now, finish up, he's expecting you."

The house was pretty much right where the clerk said that it would be but what he neglected to say was that it was maybe 50 yards off the road and behind a gate with a "Do Not Enter" sign on it. I looked past the sign and up the packed dirt path that ended at what I imagined was a 3 bedroom ranch house and thought, 'This is crazy... this is how someone gets gruesomely killed in EVERY horror movie I have seen.'

Most people wouldn't have gone down that path.....

....so I unlatched the gate and started taking one adventurous step after another thinking, '..sure hope that my dumb ass doesn't get killed.'

A funny thing about being scared, you notice everything. As I walked,



my ears seemed to be more attuned to every sound especially to the 5 or 6 barking dogs that came ripping and roaring from both sides of the house when I was just a few yards away. The dogs seemed to come at me from all directions; one or two from a barn to the left of the house, two from the right side of the house and at one from the left of the house right in front of me. Quickly surrounded by almost every side and angle, I stopped immediately and once I did the dogs slowed their pace except for one that looked really old.

That dog seemed to quickly lose interest in the whole commotion and stopped moving all together to lay down. Seeing this made me feel that the dogs were more noisemakers than aggressors but I still didn't take a full step and just shuffled my feet forward and yelled "Hey, anyone home... its the American writer from the store up the street"

Just then, a very thin woman wearing jeans, a t-shirt, a cowboy hat and a very perturbed look walked around from the back of the house and snapped, "This is so random!"

Expecting a man based the conversation I overheard but assuming it was the author that the clerk wanted me to meet, I smiled and said, 'It may be random

but that doesn't mean that it can't be good."

Rochelle Llewelyn Nicholls was her name and she was the author that I was told about. Her husband, Andrew, came out of the house shortly after she did and our collective smiles soon eased each other's apprehension to the point that the three of us were soon entering their home to talk book/publishing/promotion.

And what of the dogs....the seemingly menacing curs that had me standing in fear minutes prior were now scurrying between my legs almost tripping me in order to get into the comfort of an air conditioned house and lay down on various dog beds.

Rochelle's book, *Joe Quinn Among the Rowdies*, is about an Australian that ventured to the states in the early 1900's and ended up having a pretty good baseball career. With her book only being out for two weeks, she was eager to hear about what I had learned in my two years of promoting my book. Before I knew it, over an hour had past and we had eaten tea and cookies and had discussed everything from her college years in Alabama, to my travels around the world, to her husband being a fire fighter and more. But, it was time to push on. As she wished me well, she suggested that I grab a bite at the Niagara Diner.

"They will love you," she said.

I made it to Gundagai but before making my way to the Niagara Diner I registered at a motel with a little, old, white haired lady. She asked where my car was which started a conversation about my bike, mission and destination and further questions about where my entourage was. When I told that I was by myself she asked where my support vehicle was. Again, I stated that I was by myself but she just looked at me in disbelief and extended her arms and started furiously moving her thumbs as if she were texting as to ask where my "social media" people were.

"I Am Alone," I said.

With that, she waved me off and mumbled something as she marched from behind the desk and right past me out the door. Getting right to the edge of the main road, and after looking left and staring right to see no one, the woman turned around and came back to stand in the door's threshold and said, "No shit."

Walking past me but keeping her unblinking eyes directly on mine, she reached in the cash drawer and grab the money that I just gave her to pay for my room. She counted it out in her hands but held onto a 20 and placed the remainder on the counter. "Hey, I have to charge you something," she plainly said.

Around this time, I received a random text stating that I had a care package for my sciatica pain waiting for me at the local drugstore. With no number attached to the text initially, I had no idea who this care package was from but needed all the help that I could get so I headed toward the pharmacy to get whatever was waiting for me. By the time I biked to the pharmacy - a whopping 500 yards away from the hotel - I figured out that the text/care package was from Cherrie, a new friend who lives in Melbourne and that had been keeping tabs on me. The care package was a ton of much needed anti-inflammatories, heat packs and other necessary pain meds but I needed food to take with it so I made my way to the Niagara Diner.

Walking into the diner was a treat because from the art deco font spelling out "Niagara Diner" in big aluminum letters, to the decor, the booths and all the way down to a picture of the Niagara Falls on each plate - everything was just like being in the states. The diner was run by a sister and brother who inherited it from their parents who emigrated to Australia from Greece and from what I could tell one of the only places to eat in town.

Tony was the brother's name and once he saw that I was a weight lifter and discovered that I was a personal trainer, he lit up like a little kid and asked me if I wanted to see his gym. Then, once down in his basement gym that ran the length of the cafe, it was my time to light up like a little kid. His man-cave gym was a no-nonsense place that was completely and outfitted with every kind of weight, bar, dumbbell and lifting rack that you could ask for. Pain or no-pain, the place immediately inspired me and only thing I could do was ask, "Can I do a few reps of something, please?"

Those few reps brought Tony and I closer and he began introducing me to every cafe patron as his "good friend." But, nightfall was approaching and though I didn't want to; I had to leave to get some rest. When I biked back to the hotel, I noticed that my room light was now on but calmed down as soon as I took one step in the room because I saw a pot of tea and some milk waiting for me. Next to the tea was a note that simply said: Keep going.

Damn that lady was cool.

With a belly full of good diner food, a lot of anti-inflammatories coursing through my body, and some tea prepared by a kindly old lady, I slept like a baby and woke up pain free. But even though I felt good, I still wanted to take it easy and decided



to start later than normal which apparently jibed with Tony's plans. As soon as I entered his diner, he greeted me with, "Please don't go."



Tony and I immediately picked up where we left off the night before and between the laughs and jokes, a much heartier than normal breakfast was placed before me. After eating the bacon, sausage, steak, eggs, fried potatoes, buttered toast and coffee I knew that I wasn't going anywhere for a while. Still digesting the food, I began chatting with Tony's son and two daughters who were very interested in comparing my American lifestyle with theirs as well as hearing me repeat every word that that they felt I pronounced "funny" with my American accent. Just like the night prior, the good times made time fly and I found myself having lunch with the family but afterward had to leave- this time though, Tony AND his children were begging me to stay. But, I had to on schedule and began saying my goodbyes.



One by one, I hugged and high5'd Tony's family except for his mother who, just like the night before, was always in the cafe but on the perimeter constantly cleaning things and only really speaking in Greek to her family. Thinking that she didn't like me or that my presence was an unwelcome distraction from cafe work, I just kept my distance and waved goodbye but with one hand still wiping the counter she waved me over to her. Standing before her with my head about at my chest, I bent over to give her a hug. When I did, she grasped my neck tightly and whispered something in a foreign language into my ear.



Still embracing, I asked her what she said and very clearly she said that it was a prayer for my safety in Greek. I told her that I thought that she didn't like me because she didn't say anything to me throughout the day and she said, "Just because I don't say anything to you doesn't mean I don't see you. You are doing good work in the world..Now go do it!" and with a

with a kindly push in the back, i was off.

Equally as small as Gundagai but without nearly as much personality, Holbrook was my next town. Holbrook was interesting because it had a submarine in it. That's right, this landlocked city in the middle of nowhere has a real submarine in the town square. I had dinner at a local pub and because everyone had a lot to drink no one could provide/agree on too many details other than a famous naval commander was born in Holbrook and did something in some war and to honor his legacy, the government put a submarine there.

That's all i got. The only other thing that I discovered is that the area near Holbrook has the worst flies that I've encountered in the world.

The world, David???

Yes...the world.

I was riding along outside of Holbrook with small crew of flies in tow; two were pacing around on my left forearm, one was chilling out on my shoulder, one was relaxing on my right cycling glove while others buzzed around my face occasionally landing to get a rest. By this time, I had encountered so many flies that I was kind of immune to their annoyances but the flies on my face changed the game dramatically. It was unnerving and at the point where a fly went on the underside of my eyeglass lens, I lost it.

No, I had a roadside tantrum.

I have had tantrums before but this was bad, real bad. In one grand frenetic movement, I braked, smacked my arms, took off my gasses, wiped my face and rubbed my nose.

What I didn't know though was that my nose was harboring a fly and I don't know what was worse:

1. Feeling the crunch of the fly.
2. Hearing the crunch of the fly.
3. Envisioning it all.

Whatever your answer, blowing your nose and seeing mucus mixed with dead fly bits makes it worse and the only thing that could top it was a having fly go right in my ear at that time.

I didn't kill that one, thank God, but it still felt like a fly was in my ear even after it was gone. I tried to sprint through this region to outrun the winged pests and just as I began to feel a calm about me, I pedaled right in fly's path and swallowed one. Shit, what a gross day.

Australia, is truly one of 'flyest' place in the world.

I am never one keep track of how fast I am biking. My rule of life is 'the party doesn't start until I get there' so I basically ride and get there when I get there. But, the closer I got to another Australian State, I couldn't help but notice that there was more an urgency about my biking.

My eagerness was coming from the fact that the "You Are Now Entering/Leaving" signs excite me. No matter the trip, city, state, country or continent those signs signify progress for me and with there not being too many Australian states- Western Australia, Northern Territory, Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia - crossing one off the list was a big deal.

So with this 'sign seeing' zeal driving me, I was just zipping along and came down one big hill saw something about 30 yards ahead just off to the left side of road. From its shape and color it was obvious that it was a living thing and, at first glance, it looked like a wild boar. Now, I have never encountered a boar on my travels but I know that I don't ever want to.

Closing in fast on the 'unnamed creature,' I hoped that it would run off but it didn't. The boar-esque thing stood its ground and I didn't know what to do.

Torn between using my momentum to speed past the creature or braking hard to stop well ahead of the animal in order to coax it along, I unknowingly did both. Counterproductively foolish, I know, but it is what I did until I realized what I was doing and stopped pedaling. Once standing still just a few yards away, I could see that the animal was on its side and probably dead but, with my head filled with the many "All the things that can kill you in Australia" facts, I wasn't assuming anything. Keeping my bike between myself and the creature, I walked past it and then could clearly see a blood trail from the creature leading to the highway and that it was just a dead wombat.

But while I'm writing about wildlife, let me tell of another encounter I had. I was riding down a hill - what is it with me and hills- and saw something in the middle of the road shoulder right in front of me. Unlike the wombat story, I immediately knew that whatever this was in front of me was dead and very much decaying and really wanted to avoid it. At this very same time, a huge 18-wheeled truck

came right up beside me. So, with a semi-truck on the right, a guard rail on my left, a rotting carcass in front of me and a split second to make a decision my choice was made for me.

There was nothing for me to do but pedal hard, purse my lips, squint my eyes and hope for the best. I did all of those things and in a nanosecond I looked like I was a bit character in a Tarantino film. It was gross.



But, all of the dead animals aside, I did make through the to, Albury, the last city that I would see in the New South Wales State to get a 'You Are Now Leaving' picture and then biked a few meters over the Murray River to Wangaratta, the first city I would see in the Victoria State, to get my 'You Are Now Entering' sign. it was awesome!

Euroa was my next town and I was looking forward to riding into it because I was going to finally meet Choodie Weis. Choodie was a new friend that was introduced to me via email from a friend in Philly and had been checking in on me ever since i touched down in Oz. A grad student working on her dissertation in architectural studies, she and i had talked a great deal about the writing process and it was going to be good to finally put a face with her voice. She and her friend, Aphrodite, drove up from Melbourne to meet me and immediately expressed their concern for my welfare because bushfires were raging in the area.

Now, up to this point, I had been seeing a lot of public service announcements on TV and biked past a lot of foreboding signs about bushfires like "Evacuate and Live" but I am a city boy and clueless as to just how lethal and fast bush fires can be. I should have been concerned as the three of us ate and the other cafe goers chirped about the fires and the path that it could possibly take but, like the saying goes, 'ignorance is bliss' I just let it all go in one ear and out the other.

Still oblivious, I went to check into my hotel and as the clerk was giving me my key she asked about my "evacuation plan". Always the smart-ass, I said, "You don't understand how this works: I pay you money and then I stay here for the night."

But everybody is a smart ass and she retorted, "No...YOU don't understand how this works; we are in a bushfire area and we may have to evacuate."

Quickly changing my tune, I meekly said, "But I only have my bicycle."

"Hmmm...You better figure something out then."

'Oh shit,' I thought.

As I walked away from the motel, I couldn't help but look up and stare and the nearby ridge that was on fire and filling the sky with smoke. Suddenly things seemed a lot more ominous than before.

By the time i walked over to my room, Choodie and Aphrodite were now chatting with another motel guest about a news report that the authorities were thinking of closing the Hume Highway, and were concerned. I didn't know what i was going to do but wanted them back on the road to Melbourne and assured them that I would be ok. As I hugged them goodbye, it wasn't much, but came up with the plan to introduce myself to every motel guest as someone in need of a ride if we needed to evacuate. Like i said, it wasn't much.

Afterward, I felt that I should tell someone back home about what was going on and called my friend Mary. She and I go back almost 20 years and we had already worked out a system where I was messaging her daily and she was then relaying that information back to my family. Mary was immediately concerned and got on an Australian government run firefighting site that gave up to the minute details. Much more of a worrier and planner than I, Mary went on about possible evacuation routes and other details but I was preoccupied with a distinct burning odor that filled my nostrils and kind of made me hungry because it smelled a lot like a bbq.

After speaking with Mary and making sure to fully charge my phone and laptop, I went looking for food which was a lost cause because Euroa is a such a small town and everything closes up around 6PM. This seemed crazy to me but one woman on the street directed to me to a place that stays open late.

She was right.

The Chinese food restaurant did stay open late....But not on Tuesdays...and today was....That's right, you guessed it: It was Tuesday.

So, after going to bed hungry and waking up up even hungrier, I got a call from Mary first thing in the morning saying that that she hadn't slept a wink because she was up monitoring the fire's path, which did come dangerously close to me. She asked how I slept through all of the commotion.

"Like a baby," I said, "...but I really could go for some bbq."

"You're an ass Dave" Mary said.

"Yeah I know."

With only one motel and one or two cafes, Broadford was the last town and last small town i hit before Melbourne. While eating lunch I met two members of Broadford's City Council who were very excited to meet me and introduced me to other city officials. Sometimes when I am standing in bike tights and meeting people in suits, I feel out of place but all it takes is one person to say, "I was having real shitty down day until you came in" to make me feel like I fit in.

That night I grabbed dinner at a local pub and like most nights, when not talking to random strangers I would go over my trip notes and pictures. As I was going over them it occurred to me that my lofty goal of hugging and high5'ing 1000 people was well within my sights. 'All I need is just a few big days,' I thought. In thinking about where I could find a few hundred people to hug and high5 in the next few days, I watched a steady stream of people walk through the bar into a back party area. Just then, a light bulb went off above my head; Today is the day I am looking for.

I asked the bartender what was happening and he said that it was a private bbq for a local Australian rules football team. When he said the word 'private,' I heard 'opportunity' and when he said 'bbq,' I heard free meal. That is how my mind works.

I stood up and started walking toward the party room and the bartender again stated again that it was a private party and I replied that I heard him the first

time. He started walking around from the bar to accompany me and asked, "How big are your balls mate?" Australians really do say, "mate" a lot.

"Huge," I said.

The enclosed party area could hold a few hundred people and I could clearly see that the stage set for me, literally.

As the football team and supporters milled around with beers and burgers in their hands, I could clearly see that no one was on a bandstand that was in one corner of the room. The bartender, who was now standing right behind me, asked if I was really going to try and get some high5's from these "drunk guys."

"Hell yeah."

Making my way through the crowd, I caught the eye of some people that I met in the cafe with the city council members and smiled as I stepped up on the stage. Once on stage I asked for everyone's attention and started talking. Someone yelled 'who are you?' and as I yelled back, "If you keep quiet you will see," I could clearly see the bartender wince a bit.

Long story very short, I was able to win them all over and ended up getting 70+ drunken hugs and high5's...along with free food - what a great night.

I woke up the next morning feeling excited because with much less than 100 kilometers to go, my trip was almost over. A tour's last day is a graduation day of sorts where you know that you've essentially made it and pedal toward your destination with a sense of confidence and self-assuredness that you can't ever recreate. Early in the day I got flats in both the front and rear at the same time - How often does that happen? - but was unfazed.

With my head filled with reminiscent thoughts almost to the point of distraction, I was practically giddy while repairing them and tried to slow my pace to enjoy the ride but the kilometer countdown on the Melbourne signs were drawing me in like a tractor beam.

For the most part, the day was sunny and beautiful but by the afternoon, there was a huge storm brewing on the horizon to my right. With the temperatures dipping and the wind picking up, the darkening skies changed my whole style from cycling carefree to pedaling with abandon and keeping one eye on this storm. In all actuality, I was keeping both eyes on the storm because I almost missed the "Welcome to Melbourne" sign.

Right before the sign, the winds calmed a bit and the road broke into a bit of a

downhill giving me some momentum that I tried to maintain. Focused so much on the horizon and peddling hard, I blew right past the Welcome to Melbourne sign on my left and had to walk my bike back a few yards to it. The sky brightened up just a bit but after snapping my last picture, it got dark again as if Mother Nature was saying, "You got your precious picture, now be on your way."

**“YEAH,
IT DOES SUCK”
I THOUGHT.**

She could have been a tad more cooperative though because a vicious crosswind swept through and almost blew me over and into traffic right afterward. Now, with loose dirt and dust swirling around making it hard to see and breathe, biking was out of the question. I needed to find a place to take refuge.

I sought cover underneath a highway overpass and because it was not only getting cooler but also starting raining heavily, I stood shivering for about 15-20 minutes wondering how long I was going to have to hunker down.

Soon, a pickup truck approached and stopped maybe 25-30 yards from the cover of the overpass. Assuming that it was stopping for me, I walked my bike through the wind and rain to the driver's side window. It turned out that the driver had only stopped for a phone call and was totally engrossed in it when I knocked on the window. With a face full of surprise and panic, he rolled his window down a tiny bit and yelled, 'what do you want?'

"I thought you stopped for me."

He yelled, "No" and then, after peering out of his side view mirrors, asked how it was "out there on a bike."

Trying to put on my best 'hey, help a brother out' facial expression, I was surprised by the shiver now in my voice as I said, "N-n-n-not safe." But my expression and shivering stammer didn't work because, after a brief pause he simply said, "That sucks."

"Yeah, it does suck," I thought.

But his stopping wasn't a total loss because he did give me some directions to nearby hotel before he jammed on the accelerator and spun his wheels to merge back on to the highway. Though, as the dirt kicked up on me, I imagined how the whole scene must have looked and just had to laugh-thank god I have a perverse sense of humor.

With the weather worsening, I changed my plans from biking all the way into Melbourne's Central Business District to stopping at the nearest hotel to get

a hot shower and carrying on the next day.

As important as it was for me to get a picture at the 'Welcome to Melbourne' sign, it was even more paramount to bike to Specialized's offices to properly thank for my bike. After purchasing a few of their bikes and even riding one across Africa, I believe in the quality of their brand and finally meeting the company executives was a big deal for me.

Their offices were cool. Actually, with windows on almost every wall to allow in plenty of natural light to reflect off of the plexiglass cases that housed their most modern bike technology right next to their classic styles, Specialized's offices were actually cooler than I anticipated. As I was introduced to all of the staff who were very pleasant it was evident that another thing that was contributing to everyone's happiness: It was the Friday before Christmas and the office was scheduled for a half day of work.

Patty Young, my main contact at Specialized seemed just as excited to meet as I was, took me out to lunch to talk about my Australia and other global travels. We grabbed lunch at Rocco and Company, a fresh squeezed juice and coffee bar that is housed in a corner space of the Globe Skateboarding building along with a hipster barbershop. I know that it sounds like a very odd mixture of places but, trust me, it works.

Maybe I was so happy to be at Specialized in Melbourne on my last tour day or maybe the environment was just that cool or maybe it was a combination of things but in either case I didn't want the moment to end. Before leaving to go back to Specialized, I asked the cafe owner if I could return on Christmas Eve and hug and high5 their customers all day. They were open to my offer but did ask "why" and all I could say was "because."

I was nervous on the way back to Specialized, because I was finally going to get my opportunity to say thank you.

Wait, no, that isn't right.

I wasn't nervous because I was going to simply say, 'thank you.' No, there was more going on in my head. The memories of all the letters I wrote to all of the bike companies and all the times I heard "no" made me anxious. The flashback of a bike company exec telling me that, "We sponsor real athletes not people like you" made me angry. Recalling how I had to borrow a rental bike from a local shop for one of my trips because while I could afford the energy, I couldn't afford a bike made me anxious. Remembering all that I had been through in the

14 years since my first trip and trying to find a succinct way to properly express those emotions; that is what made me nervous.

From Specialized's perspective, they were just giving me a very nice bicycle but from my vantage point I was receiving a token of validation that meant so much. I don't know if I conveyed all that I wanted to but if anyone from Specialized is reading this: Thank You So Very, Very Much.

My solo Christmas Eve Hugging and High5'ing Extravaganza was a blast and whether the people thought that I was crazy or cool; I became more excited with each embrace. The next morning was Christmas and I spent the beautiful sunny morning walking along the beach and grabbing breakfast and a cocktail at a jammed packed restaurant. It was a great way to spend the morning and a far departure from my Christmas holidays in Philly.

All of my friends back home along with everyone I met in Australia was concerned that I would be spending the holiday evening alone but my friend Cherie ensured that I wouldn't and invited me to share dinner with her and her family at friend Connie's place. Connie's suburban home was very relaxed and, with a pool, was the first place that I had been to on Christmas where I felt inclined to grab a swim. She had invited all of her divorced friends and American expats to dinner and the running joke was her table was that this was the 'dinner for misfit toys.'

The mood was as festive as any I've had back home but because I didn't really know anyone I got the opportunity to really kick back and watch other people celebrate the holiday. Some time after dinner, one of Connie's friends showed up in a Santa suit and started passing out small gifts that were laid out underneath the tree. I just knew that I my name wasn't going to be called so while "Santa" called out people's names through with a fake beard that kept slipping down and muffled his speech, I just watched it all unfold and was totally surprised to hear "Ho-Ho-Ho! Where's David?"

Not really believing that he was speaking to me, I looked around and only stood up when he said "of course I 'm talking to you."

After thanking Santa I sat and unwrapped my gift to see a box of chocolate bars. Now because I have biked around the world, many have often called me Forrest Gump. Each time, I have fought that assertion because I biked while he ran, he was fictional and I am real and lastly he wasn't that bright and I like think that I am pretty smart. Though I like the movie a lot I never saw or really wanted to see a connection the two of us but everyone else does.

'That damn Gump again' I thought.

"Life's a box of chocolates, Dave," someone yelled.

Initially, I bristled as I heard this but started eating the candy and thinking about why I was fighting this characterization anyway. With no one around to stop my train of thought, I just kept eating and thinking my similarities with Forrest rather than our differences. With each bite of the Cadbury pieces, I looked beyond Gump's simple nature and saw that, dim or not, he did have a strong sense of self and a huge heart that made him fearless as he traveled the world. These factors combined to have him live a spectacular and enviable life which is exactly how some people feel about me. By the end box, I felt better about the reference, touched by the gift and ready for a big glass of milk.

I spent the rest of my days hugging and high5'ing my way around Melbourne and out of the many cool encounters I had, this was by far the coolest. I was out with Cherie and our waitress was a Texas woman who told me her story of partying the last few years of her life away in Australia but had gotten her life 'back on track' and was recently accepted to an art history graduate program in the states. She had sold all of her possessions, gotten rid of her car and tonight was not only her last night of waiting tables but we were her very last patrons. Her story was highly unexpected and energizing and prompted me to offer her a copy of my book. She asked what my book was about and when I told her my story and said the title she said yelled, "Holy shit!! YOU'RE the reason my best friend and her mother just biked across the United States last summer."



“What tha f---???”

The waitress then told me that her best friend’s mom went to see a ‘big black guy’ lecture in California 2 years ago and was so inspired by his story, energy and hugs that she biked from San Diego to Florida the next year with her daughter driving the support car. The randomness of it all was unfathomable and as the waitress walked away to get our guacamole, I told Cherie that I was so glad that she was with me because “no one is going to believe this.” That night was truly one of the gems of my trip.

But as nice as that night was, it was time for me to leave Melbourne and get back to Sydney because that is where I was flying out of. I believed that it was going to be an easy train or bus ride where I could take my bike on board and maybe get off to see some more of the countryside but I really underestimated the number of people heading into Sydney for the New Year’s celebration.

Flights, buses and trains were all filled and if I were to travel; I needed to have my bike boxed up. This stipulation changed things because my plan was to bike around Sydney for a day but I certainly couldn’t do that if my bike was in box. So I changed my plans but it all worked out because I ended up meeting some very cool people.

Getting a bike boxed up isn’t all that hard but it isn’t all that easy either. For starters, you have to get bike box and then you need tools to take the pedals and handlebars off - neither of which I had so I had to go to bike shop.

I went to the BikeNOW Shop <http://www.bikenow.com.au> expecting to just drop my bike off and then pick up later but ended up spending the part of the afternoon with shop owner and the rest of the day with one of Australia’s biggest coffee distributors.

While speaking with one of the shop mechanics, I met shop owner Warren Cay as he and his daughter were just returning from a ride. All it took was for the mechanic to say, ‘ya gotta hear this guy’s story’ and the three of us were talking up a storm. Warren, a successful businessman, was very interested in how much my trips have changed me over the years while his a daughter, a shy 14 year old with a mouthful of braces and a beautiful smile, was more interested in the places where I have been. As the ‘places versus wisdom’ conversation went on, I grew hungry and asked Warren if he wanted to grab lunch. “Are you in for treat,” he said, “ the best cafe and coffee in the world is right around the corner at the St Ali Cafe.”

Warren had some things to do at the shop so I went ahead to the cafe that, from the outside, looked more like a huge warehouse in the middle of an alley than anything world famous. But, from how packed this place was I can tell you that it was warehousing satisfied customers more than anything. The hostess told that there was a 30 minute wait and I was cool with that but then a short man wearing a t-shirt, loud sport jacket, big sunglasses and a small straw fedora loudly exclaimed, "You are somebody! I can feel it"

Though it sounded cool, really cool actually, I know that I am not famous and told him that I was no one but me. Wagging his finger and shaking his head he said with a smooth Melbourne accent "N-n-n-o you are someone. I don't know who but you are definitely a man of presence."

Now 'presence' is a word that I used to describe my father and more that sounding cool that really felt cool. I was about to start in with my story but this man, named Salvatore and who turned out to be the owner, told the hostess, "Get him a table now."

Weaving through the cafe's many tables and trying to speak above the din, I didn't think that I was really able to convey anything about myself but once seated, Salvatore said to a passing waiter, 'Get the big man from Philly whatever he wants.'

Though unwarranted, the attention was cool but it was good to see Warren and his daughter come in so I could share with them what was going on. Just as I was about to start talking Salvatore walks up and pats Warren on the back and says, "Hey you know the big man too' All Warren could say was that he just met me but that I seemed 'pretty cool.'

The next hour or so before Warren and his daughter left was a blur coffees, conversations, culinary delights and cultural comparisons all while watching Salvatore buzz around the cafe like a caffeinated bee. I wasn't sure of how it all happened but was intrigued by serendipitous nature of it all and decided to ask Salvatore if he wouldn't mind my hugging and high5'ing people at his cafe the next day. All he said was, "That'd be fantastic.. When can you start?"

The next morning, I arrived at the cafe around 7:15AM and was hugging people constantly until I left around 4. Unlike other cafes that I have been to, St Ali's didn't seem to have any discernible rhythm as to the ebb and flow of customers; it just stayed packed! My hugs were well received and between my interactions with the cafe guests, Salvatore and I finally got a chance to talk. Just like Warren the day

before, Salvatore's life story was fascinating because of his growth through the years and when he showed me a bottle of his recently launched vodka I couldn't help but get motivated thinking about my own brand expanding possibilities. But as time went on, I had to break away and leave because if I didn't secure a seat on some sort of vehicle I would be reduced to hitching a ride to Sydney.

But I did get a seat, the last seat, on the last train to Sydney, on New Year's Eve. Sitting on the train, there was an electrifying current of chatter about everyone's plans for when the clock struck midnight running throughout the train car but I was immune to their exuberance. After making it a point to interact with as many people as possible, I don't know what I wanted to do but I know that I didn't want to be a part of any large crowds.

Upon reaching Sydney, I decided to go back to the site of my first Australian meal and went to Bills to grab some lunch and am very glad that I did. Before even entering the building, one of the hosts was standing outside and gleefully greeted with a huge, "Heyyyy it's the big man, welcome back!!"

The food was as delicious as it was a month prior but maybe just a bit better because the staff was even more welcoming. In my book I wrote; the difference between eating and dining lies solely in the conversation and the company who shares your food. That said, it was great to dine at Bills. The staff's genuine warmth made me feel even better than I already did and I and was so taken with it all I decided to do one more all day hug/high5-fest.

The manager was so excited about my offer that she introduced me to the actual Bill himself. Bill Granger, world renowned celebrity chef with restaurants in Sydney, Seoul, London, Tokyo and Honolulu was in town and when I told him of my plans for the next morning, I half way expected him to say 'no.' He didn't though, Bill just looked me in the eye and said, "..Of course you are...I have heard all about you."

That night, from around 10PM to 2015, I serpentine my way in and out of small bands of new year's revelers on Bondi Beach. It was a peaceful way to bring in the year and while looking out over the ocean night sky I thought, 'why haven't I spent every new year this way?'

The next morning, I stuck to my annual tradition of going down to the beach at sunrise to write my wishes for the upcoming year along with the names of my friends and people that got me through the past year in the sand. Etching wishes and friend's names in the sand is always cathartic for me but now half a world away, my ritual meant even more to me and apparently it meant something to others as well.

A news photographer that had been taking pictures on the beach approached me and said that he had been watching me for about twenty minutes and was wondering what I was writing. When I told him about my tradition, he looked down at the many scrawled names that he was now standing amid and said, "This is so fucking cool" and then snapped my picture.

Bills patrons and staff loved my hug/high5 fest and I even ran into a couple that I hugged at St Ali's in Melbourne. "This is really not an act... this is just who you are," they said.

By 5PM I was exhausted but the fact that I had easily doubled my previous record and probably cruised right by my goal of hugging- high5ing 1000 people in a month made me smile from ear to ear. But there was no time to celebrate, it was time to pack and go home back to Philadelphia.

After packing up the next day, I had lunch with my good friend Zoe. We met in 2006 when she was backpacking around Europe and I was in Berlin for a film festival. At the time, I was a bit paranoid that no one would attend my film screening and, upon hearing her accent, begged her to see my film. I didn't think that she was going to attend but she did and we have pretty much been friends ever since.

Zoe had just moved to Sydney from NYC and was in the process of rebooting her life. She's always been one of those special comforting souls that I could always connect with no matter how much time had elapsed between talks but this time there was something different about her. She was very much the old Zoe but there was also a refreshingly bright vibrance about her now that I found very emboldening. Somewhere within our talk, Zoe said that she has always been able to count on me for motivation and that her only regret now was not bringing her bike to Australia.

"Take mine," I said.

Zoe couldn't believe my offer and neither could I quite frankly. Don't get me wrong, I didn't regret my offer - it's just that for every other trip I was adamant about returning home with my bike. I needed the trophy, a keepsake, something to strip down to the frame and mount on my wall. But as Zoe spoke about her plan to restart her life in another continent I thought of the tangible connections that we have in our lives.

Who knows, maybe I was still in a chocolate high from Christmas and thinking about Forrest Gump. Or, maybe I was just tired but in any case it occurred to me that the power within my story wasn't about my bike - as one writer said,

'you don't look like a biker ...you look like the guy that ate the biker that did what you did.'

My story's power surrounds what I have done beyond the bike.

Right there, I decided that I didn't need tokens anymore. Zoe kept asking if I was sure and just said, "I already made my story on the bike, go make yours." And with that, my awesome Specialized AWOL is now Zoe's

Happy riding Zoe:)



With no more bike, my baggage was cut down to one huge duffel and it was time to fly back home. The flight home from Sydney to Honolulu to Dallas to Philadelphia was largely uneventful except for a LOT of delays and if you are ever forced to fly with Jetstar Airlines: Don't! They packed us in so tight they should call themselves Amistad Air.

By the time I landed back in Philly, I was cranky, tired, tired of flying, tired being cramped and tired of being tired. Frazzled to the gristle, I didn't even stir when everyone disembarked, I just blankly stared into space until the flight attendant stopped to see if I was alright as she was about to deplane.

When I did groggily step off the plane though I couldn't help but notice that my arrival gate was very close to my departure gate a month prior which was a stark wake up call that my journey was about to end.

As I trudged toward baggage claim my phone, which had been in airplane mode for a month, annoyingly pinged like a winning Las Vegas slot machine. Without even looking, I knew that each sound was just one more task on a growing "now that I am back in town" to-do list. As the beep count mounted higher and higher. I angrily shoved it deep into my pocket to not hear it anymore but the vibrations agitated me more than the beeps because the annoyances were now physically touching me.

I snatched my phone from my pocket and called Mary to tell her that I landed but she didn't pick up. As her voicemail message droned on, I began thinking of everything that happened on the trip and continued reminiscing after I heard the 'beep' and began leaving a message.

I was calling a friend to say that I was home but just like my talk with Specialized; I was saying one thing but feeling so much more.

In recalling my trip I was feeling security of the Greek lady's prayer for my safety mixed within the warmth of old lady's tea in my room. I was feeling the honor of finally being sponsored by a bike company.

I was feeling a trucker's words of "throw your bike on my truck and i will take you."

I was feeling the tension ease because I didn't have to worry about what hotel/city I was going to bike to/sleep in or if I was going to run out of money. I was feeling the fast friendships I made with Cherie, Choodie, Warren, Salvatore, Bills staff and others that enabled to be by myself for a month but never feel like I was alone. During a rambling chat to Mary's voicemail I felt so much and then of all the signs that i saw on my trip, here was the one sign that I didn't want to see: Airport Exit Only - No Reentry.

After designing a trip, raising the capital, being away for a month and 39+ hours travel back home in just one more step and my first solo international bike trip would be... over.

And that my friend's is when I lost it. I said, "Thank you for being my friend" to Mary's voicemail - I know that its cheesy but that is exactly how it went down. Then, in full exhaustion I started crying.

That's when I heard the TSA officer say, "Sir, are you ok"

“Yeah... I am.. I am just so happy.”

Like I said to open this piece, my words flowed just as freely as the tears and THAT is how I will look back Australia and 2014; a year and experience that left me tearful and tired but very happy and highly fulfilled.

The TSA agent just looked at me in a confused way as if to say, “Dude, I am prepared for terrorists and crazies but they never trained me for husky brothers with a crazy tan lines that are crying all over the place.... That is NOT my expertise.’

I went on to dry my tears and pull myself together to joyfully reunite with my friends and family but I have to tell you, if you see some random dude offering high5s: take them up on it.

Otherwise, you will miss out on the magic- and trust me there is a whole lot of magic.

To my supporters, you make me strive to be a better man every day.

Thank you.

