

IN THE
BELLY
OF
OZ

TARZAN KAY



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Published by Iguana Books
720 Bathurst Street, Suite 303
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M5V 2R4

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Publisher: Greg Ioannou
Front cover image and design: Anne-Marie Brouillette
Book layout design: Meghan Behse

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Kay, Tarzan, author
 In the belly of Oz / Tarzan Kay.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-77180-048-8 (pbk.).--ISBN 978-1-77180-049-5 (epub).--
ISBN 978-1-77180-050-1 (kindle).--ISBN 978-1-77180-051-8 (pdf)

1. Kay, Tarzan--Travel--Australia. 2. Australia--Description
and travel. I. Title.

DU105.2.K39 2014

919.404'72

C2014-901903-3

C2014-901904-1

This is a first print edition of *In the Belly of Oz*.

PART ONE

HERVEY BAY, QUEENSLAND

The Beginning

(and the end, of course, but mostly the beginning)

The neighbours are drunk again. They're lying on the fire escape in yesterday's clothes, the same neighbours who sell drugs to the youth of Verdun, who traipse up and down our shared staircase at all hours of the night, who broke into my apartment six months ago. I don't even care about the stuff they stole, their dogs who bark at 4:00 a.m., their drunk friends – none of it.

Squinting down at my cell phone in the blazing sun, I've been perched on the fire escape for hours, surveying the back alleys of skid row and waiting for something to happen. After exchanging a series of banal text messages with César, who can't get out of work and won't be stopping by for any final farewells as promised, I climb back into the kitchen and pull down the shades. The bright August sunlight is mocking me. All this time I've been secretly hoping that in some desperate act of chivalry he would finally offer to drive me to the airport. I've been so hung up on the idea that I refused offers from three people, still clinging to the idea of a big romantic send-off at the departures gate.

Retreating to the bedroom, I plummet to the floor, surrounded by neatly folded piles of clothing, carefully stacked packages of chewy candies, the skateboard I built last summer, and a few other non-essential nostalgia items, and commence unpacking and repacking my suitcases for the eighteenth time in as many days. It was my hope that I would be at this very moment returning the room to its former state of disarray, César and I crying out with

pleasure while the gifts and candies and clothes were kicked about the room in the heat of passion. Afterward he would profess his love for me, tell me he would wait for me, and perhaps even beg me not to go, our naked bodies desperately clinging to one another, Pale-Skinned Lady and Latino Ken Doll, in a scene worthy of a Harlequin romance novel.

Of course I would leave anyway. I have to go. Not even this invented passion can stop me. It's a trip I've been putting off for ten years — a temporary retreat from my flailing academic career in exchange for a semester of sand, surf, and sister. Besides, I don't actually want to stay; I just want someone to want me to stay, which is not at all the same thing.

~

A doctor once told me we carry our emotions in our livers. I feel it now. This liver of mine is so inflated I can practically feel the weight of it in my hands as it heaves and gags, sifting through various pre-departure anxieties, the old feeling that the entire adventure will be such a lot of work, I might as well stay home where it's cozy and comfortable, where no one expects me to have the time of my life or learn any of life's great lessons.

When the brain detects change, it immediately begins battling against it, sending off a distress signal to the frontal lobe, our creative mother-station, and ordering it to shut down. It's one of the human body's many strange quirks, a proverbial chink in its armour. It's also the reason I bought this plane ticket about five minutes after mounting the whole Australia scheme, certain that if I left my brain even a moment to digest such an extraordinarily imprudent plan of action, it would almost certainly hit the override button.

The thing is I've already given over the last three years to what anyone else would consider "reasonable decision-making." If there's any payoff for such sagacity, I haven't seen it yet. People who sacrifice their lives for their careers are supposed to have cars and

money, professionally tinted hair and manicured pets. I have none of those things, which is why I am sitting alone in a roomful of worthless chattels, wondering how in the hell I am going to drag it all to the airport by myself.

I'm impeded by my ego from calling any friends for assistance, since it would mean admitting how grossly I've overestimated the progression of my relations with César, the Latino Ken Doll. How shameful that I'd assumed we had progressed to the drive-each-other-to-the-airport phase and now here he is texting me saying, *Toodaloo Muchacha! See ya when I see ya*. It's humiliating.

I tell myself that real women take the bus. It's a small consolation, and I am careful not to put such declarations under any careful scrutiny. All the same, there's something symbolic about taking yourself to the airport. (Had I known I was embarking on a journey of self-discovery the likes of which would change my life forever, I might even have considered it an honour to escort myself on such an esteemed mission.) No amount of symbolism, however, can keep me from bitching and bellyaching as I drop a spare set of keys in the mailbox and drag three bulging suitcases down four flights of stairs.

From the metro car to the bus station to Trudeau Airport, I continue in the trifling exchange of text messages with César, each as barren as its predecessor. Even at the luggage counter I am still waiting for something to happen, though it's impossible to pinpoint exactly what. I get the feeling of being desperate to eat something delicious, yet no particular snack is especially tempting because I'm not actually hungry. Not for food, anyway. The longing in my heart goes much deeper than any place a minor character like César is likely to reach. The breadth of its bleeding contusions is much greater than anything he is likely to bandage up with a few mundane text messages. But that doesn't stop me from hoping.

It seems unfair that air travel gets more and more expensive while we the passengers have to do more and more of the work. Everything is automated now; you have to print your own boarding passes, weigh and tag your own suitcases, even throw them on the conveyor belt. It wouldn't be such a hardship but for the fact that I've been texting round the clock for days and I really just need someone to look me in the eye and talk to me, even if it's only to determine whether or not I'm travelling with any syringes or flammable liquids.

So I stand in the old-fashioned line with all the old ladies and wait my turn, even declining instruction from the battalion of customer service agents attempting to rush things along. I've been suffering fits of anxiety all afternoon. When I couldn't think of an excuse to unpack and repack my suitcases yet again, I left the house four hours early. With time to spare, I consider "accidentally" scattering a sheath of loose papers all over the floor and making a big deal about picking them up, just to attract that extra bit of attention I am craving so badly. I content myself with spending ten minutes saran-wrapping my skateboard onto my bag, hoping someone might mistake me for an actual skater and simultaneously dreading that someone else will call my bluff (I can't actually skate).

It's no surprise that my carry-on is five kilos over the limit; between the collected works of Henry James and the caloric equivalent of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, I'm not even sure how I got it up on the counter. Cheered on by a chorus of groaning from the thirty-odd people lined up behind me, I begin redistributing among my suitcases, not altogether averse to the attention. In a vanishing act worthy of Houdini himself, I manage to force a laptop, a trilogy of teen fiction, and a kilo of Twizzlers into my already overstuffed purse, thus reducing the weight of the offending luggage to a cool nine point nine kilos. The agent graciously does not weigh my conspicuously bulging handbag, if you can still call it that.

Even with all the dawdling and attention grabbing, I make it through the gate with two and a half hours left to kill. Against my better judgement, I drift into the airport bookstore and purchase yet another copy of *Mr. Good Enough*, a book that I cannot seem to shake even after having returned it on two separate occasions. At first I found it disturbing and even a little grotesque to think that we women should call off the search for Prince Charming and settle for someone who's kind and has a job, but after a string of X-rated and ill-fated love affairs that went nowhere, I'm starting to think there might be something to it. I settle into the grey expanse of airport benches and, in between more texting with the Latino Ken, wonder if my Harlequin playmate might actually be "Mr. Good Enough," or if he is simply "Mr. Good Enough for Now." The two are easily confused.

Departure is half an hour behind schedule, shortening what is already a criminally brief layover before the long haul to Sydney. By the time I've boarded the plane, sent a few final pea-brained texts and shut off my phone, the last of my energy is sapped. Mercifully, the budget-minded airline is at least clear on where the everyman's values lie: a very welcome TV screen hums in front of me, broadcasting everything from big budget Hollywood glamour to the sort of arty French films that make you sound smart at dinner parties. It's a long trip and I'm tired of sounding smart, I want to be common for a change, so I select one of the former. As soon as I get the chance, I knock back a few glasses of wine and melt into my chair for the next six hours.

The plane touches down about ten minutes before my connecting flight is scheduled to hit the runway. All of the Australia-bound passengers are loaded onto golf carts and zoomed across the airport to the international terminal; the reckless speeding through the blue corridors of the Vancouver airport makes me feel just a little VIP.

The aircraft is remarkably humane. I have two seats to myself, which thrills me. Technically the second is not exactly mine, but as it appears unoccupied I snatch the extra pillow and blanket and sprawl

across both seats with exaggerated fatigue. It's late, I'm excited, and my heart is sore in a way that can only be soothed by a few hours in the foetal position. Not even scrunched up knees, recycled air, or knobby airplane seats can keep me from sleep.

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I couldn't calculate how long I slept even if I tried. By now I must have crossed at least three time zones. For posterity, I assure myself it must have been five or six hours and then drop the subject; if I start making calculations it will be more like forty-five minutes. I scoot out of my seat to do a lap around the cabin, pausing near the emergency exit to do a series of exercises in front of an old man and his disapproving wife. What's a girl to do? You've got to keep the blood flowing.

Somewhere over Guam or Honolulu, I start thinking again of the lover I left behind and I am swept up in a moment of panic, "*Wait! I'm in love, I'm in love, turn the plane around!*" Rather than create mass hysteria in an enclosed space 30,000 feet above ground, I resolve to write him a love letter on a scrunched-up bit of boarding pass, which is the only paper I have handy. The letter comes out as messy and convoluted as the paper on which I am writing, a not-at-all-sexy mish-mash of tangled emotions.

In the end, I decide that I am delusional and prematurely jet-lagged since it's much more convenient than falling in love with someone between whom I am about to put four months and seven thousand miles of distance. I scratch out the scary stuff, crumple up the note and jam it into a damp coffee cup, which gets crammed into the bottom of the makeshift aerial garbage pile that I've already been working on for a few hundred kilometres. If the cabin attendant cares enough about the affairs of my reckless and dishevelled heart to fish a soiled love letter from a sticky coffee cup under a heap of rubbish, I applaud her entrepreneurial spirit. I'm dog-tired, and not in the mood for any ritual burning.

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I've conveniently forgotten or ignored all the travel tips I so painstakingly sought out before getting on the plane. All except one, that is, and it proves to be more useful than I could have imagined: brush your teeth non-stop. Over the course of the next twenty hours, I become convinced this is the secret of long distance travel. I brush my teeth after every nap, in every airport, after every meal. When I get too groggy or cranky I brush my teeth. If I feel too hungry or too full I brush again. Inevitably, after fifteen hours of stagnant air, over-salted and pre-packaged space food, cramped-up legs and too many Katherine Heigl movies, there are air traffic complications and we have to fly around in a holding pattern for an extra 45 minutes. I'm too excited to care; I'm about to land on the other side of the world and reunite with my long-lost sister, who I've not seen in over two years. Nothing can touch me now.

Minutes before the plane touches down in Sydney, we fly by the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. I spin around and jab my neighbour just a little bit too hard, "*THE OPERA HOUSE, THE OPERA HOUSE*," I yell at full, inappropriate-for-air-travel volume. I hardly even care that I've just exposed myself to thirty rows of passengers as a lame imitation of a world traveller. My neighbour throws me a bone, smiling obligingly and looking out the window.

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By the time I deplane, pass through customs and wait thirty minutes for my luggage at the wrong end of the airport, I'm late checking in for my connecting flight to Brisbane, though it doesn't stop me from recklessly chucking all my belongings onto a cart and bolting across the terminal. It's good to have an excuse to run. I miss the flight. Since it is a popular route, they put me on the next flight; I don't mind having an hour to putter around the airport, brush my teeth and browse the bookstore, absentmindedly wondering if I might return *Mr. Good Enough* a third time, making it a retail hat trick.

Feeling myself begin to lose touch with my former identity, I plod around the airport trying to breathe in the full effect of what I've done. Four months ago I was riding a double-decker bus down the 401, drunk on the height, the speed, and the view from the front seat. I'd been sipping on a large double-double, which at the time would have qualified as dinner. In a moment of clarity the likes of which can only be attributed to the winning combination of open road, empty stomach, and caffeine high, I thought maybe I'll chuck it all in and spend a few months on the beaches of Australia. Despite a thunderous clanging of bells in my head, calling me sick and weak and not capable of such things, I called my sister. Rather than demanding to hear the logistics or chastising me for waking her at four in the morning, she simply said, "When are you coming?"

Shuttling back and forth between terminals I have to pass through security again, which is shockingly lax by North American standards. The security guard asks where I am from. "Canada," I tell him.

"Our favourite," he says, and I laugh.

"You say that to all the pretty girls, don't you?" But I secretly believe him.

On the connecting flight to Brisbane they are playing the news since it must be something like noon. They are announcing the latest in sports. Some burly Australian men are running across a wide field with something that looks similar to football. What could this mysterious sport be? Lacrosse? I am about to tap my neighbour on the shoulder and ask her to enlighten me on this new and innovative game when I suddenly realise...*rugby*! I cross my legs in quiet mortification and thank the gods of travel for having spared me such an embarrassing cultural blunder.

No sooner do I have a chance to knock back a third cup of coffee, when the pilot asks the attendants to prepare the cabin for landing. Before you know it I am frantically pushing my way through the crowd, weaving around the suitcase trolleys and crying babies, tears already clouding up my eyes because there she is just across the way, watching me navigate this one final obstacle course; my flesh and

bone, living, breathing, one-and-only sister — Juliana.

Birds Fly over the Rainbow

My sister has specifically requested that I bring her a sizable quantity of Nibs. After three years away, her homesick heart has built them up to something of a delicacy. Immediately upon hitting the road, we crack open a giant packet of these delectable and now rare treats and proceed to eat ourselves sick. We don't know it yet, but this will be a vital part of our interactions for weeks to come.

I keep reminding Juli to stay on the left side of the road. We coast along the main highway with the windows down, hair flapping in the wind, the early morning sun already beating down, hinting at the coming spring. The highway runs along the coast and is just two lanes wide with an occasional passing lane opening up every few kilometres.

I am no more accustomed to Australian driving conventions than I am to being a passenger on the left side. For hours I am convinced we're facing a head-on collision at any moment. It doesn't help that I'm hyper-stimulated and hopped up from all the candies (which I must learn to call "lollies," if I'm to fit in here). Nobody bothers to signal, honk their horn, or even yell and curse and possibly give the finger like any reasonable person would do back home. Australian drivers are much more casual about suddenly revving the engine and pulling up in front of you at the last possible second as though it's the most natural thing in the world to do. My sister's giddy and spasmodic barefoot driving doesn't help either. By the time we pull up to my sister's house in Hervey Bay —four hours up the coast from Brisbane — I've composed and rewritten my last will and testament about eight times.

It's very common in Australia to rise with the sun and return to bed shortly after its descent. It's been suggested that Australians go to bed earlier and sleep longer than any other nation. In my sister's house, bedtime is as early as 8:30 p.m., which suits my jet lag just fine. For an entire week I wake up around 3:00 a.m. and roll around in bed for hours listening to the song of the birds and savouring the smell of cold, salty air and the freshly laundered sheets that hang on the line in the yard. Without an alarm clock in the guest bedroom, I learn to tell time by the birdsong outside my window — at 3:30 a.m. a few meagre tweet tweets, around 4:00 a.m. an atonal melody so eerily human that for days I worry some vagrant is whistling just outside my window, and finally at 4:30 a.m. a choir of noisy lorikeets chirping in the grapefruit tree in front of the house. By the time the bird symphony dies out, it's 6:00 a.m., I'm already onto my second cup of coffee and my sister is peeling herself out of bed to greet the day with a song of her own.

We eat Nibs for breakfast until our stock is exhausted. My sister laughs all the time, even when she is crying and suffering the harshest of disappointments. She has not had an easy marriage. With her husband off at sea, trawling for prawns in far north Queensland, she is alone in an empty house many thousands of miles from everyone she knows for as many as seven months a year. Juli and her husband are free to communicate by satellite phone, but at \$3/minute, their conversations do not last long. When the trawler is nearer to the coast they can video chat online, which sounds good in theory but is maddening as all hell in reality. With the service coming in and out, their conversation inevitably goes something like this: *“Hey ba...is that...in range now...can you star...togeth...whe...I got the same... this is so frus...ok, that's beh...can you hear me no...”*

With the two of us shackled up together, this year's tiger prawn season is infinitely more bearable. We laugh and laugh until we're clutching our stomachs and gasping for air. We're like teenagers

whose parents are out of town and have decided to throw an all-girl sleepover. We bought ourselves a case of wine and an unlimited supply of lollies. Every mundane activity is in some way hilarious because we do it together. I have the feeling we're breaking the rules; that we're getting away with something bad.

~

My sister and I grew up in a house of many rules; rules about what to wear, rules about which music to listen to, rules about which movies to watch, rules about which books to read. The bulk of these regulations were put in place by our father in a fit of hysteria, the source of which was usually something entirely unrelated. Many of them go back so far that for the most part I was too young or too unaware to connect the dots between cause and effect.

I remember very clearly the morning he suddenly declared that Juli and I were to start wearing dresses every single day; it was unchristian for us girls to be running around in pants all the time. The Closed Plymouth Brethren, with whom our family was in fellowship, were opposed to such worldliness. It was equally frowned upon for women to cut their hair and wear jewelry or make-up. Showing skin was considered especially sinful, though it's unclear where pants came into the picture. Yet we never threw stones where our patriarch was concerned; no one in our family pointed out that it was the nineties or that girls weren't wearing dresses anymore, to church or otherwise.

My parents weren't the sorts of people reading Betty Friedan in the sixties. My father had already begun his missionary work by then while my mother would be shipping off to Bible College before the decade was out. The great mysteries of womanhood were mostly limited to how white she could get her whites or how she made the Corning glassware sparkle like diamonds. For all their worldly expertise, the *Feminine Mystique* might as well have been a Tide campaign.

In retaliation for what she recognised as a directive that defied all

logic, our mother demanded a handsome sum for the purchase of new fabrics. She made the most of it by sewing us a closetful of calf-length summer dresses. A born negotiator, she also managed to whittle the dress rule down to every other day. My father liked to say that the only person who can buy from a Gentile, sell to a Jew, and still make a profit is a Mennonite, which my mother was. She negotiated her husband expertly. Eventually she would negotiate us the hell out of there.

Like a good Mennonite wife, she sewed our entire wardrobe from scratch. Many a Friday evening, the eight of us would load into our Dodge Ram van and drive across the border to Joanne Fabrics, where we would spend hours selecting patterns, fabrics, zippers, and buttons. On the way home, we would stop at a roadside dive called Jet Port, where we drank pitchers of Squirt and consumed mountains of chicken wings.

The van was called the *Grey Goose*, for the image our mother had painted on the tire cover in a demonstration of artistic prowess that went almost entirely unexploited for the whole of her married life. The *Grey Goose* could fit my parents, four brothers, my sister and I quite comfortably, probably even two or three more had my mother not insisted on having her tubes tied after I was born. My father, who was opposed to birth control for religious reasons, did not object and, in fact, seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

For all the concern he expressed for our worldly indulgences, he took very little notice of our daily routine, therefore it was not long before the dress requirement faded into oblivion. Yet he remained an active participant in the moral upholding of the household. By then I was old enough to be privy to some of the internal goings-on of our house and so when my father came up with the idea to screen every cassette tape in the house, I understood the house-politics motivating his actions.

In any case, he made no effort to conceal the source of his rage. How he had come across my mother's copy of Jean Auel's *Clan of the Cave Bear* was anyone's guess. She'd been very careful about

keeping it hidden, reading it almost exclusively in the bathroom with the door locked. Even more miraculous is that he opened it to the single page that could possibly have been considered morally questionable – a sex scene.

From upstairs I could hear him raging wildly in the kitchen, “*Gimme all your tapes,*” he cried to my sister and I. “*Gimme all your tapes,*” he repeated. Ever the dutiful youngest daughter, I laid my precious collection of cassettes out on my desk and left the room while he bounded up the stairs and proceeded to confiscate the lot of them. Meanwhile, my sister was busy burying her *Rancid* and *Green Day* cassettes in a cupboard full of jeans and turtlenecks while I stood watching, paralyzed by the fear of discovery.

Our mother allowed him to rage but did not reciprocate. She packed us a suitcase and drove us to her mother’s apartment, where we spent the night. We returned the next morning with my mother offering apologies for her defiance. She knew she’d been within her rights to leave, but she valued the harmony of the household more highly than her own vindication. Though none of us women received anything like an apology from the mouth of our patriarch, we found our cassette tapes had been returned overnight.

It wasn’t the only time our father convinced himself of the necessity of such censorship. There was never a movie watched in our house without one ear open to the sound of creaking stairs. Our father was prone to tiptoe downstairs to the family room and sit in for a few minutes on whatever it was we were watching. Such surveillance would usually end in a long sermon delivered with elaborate gestures and wild eyes, confiscation of the film and perhaps even further punishment given the severity of the infraction. Major incidents resulted in the confiscation of films such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *Ghostbusters*, *Labyrinth*, and, inexplicably, *The Next Karate Kid*.

For this reason, we owned a number of pre-approved films, which I always preferred since it was only then that we could relax and

enjoy the show. Some had biblical themes: *The Ten Commandments*, *The King and I*, and *Ben-Hur*. We were also permitted such classics as *Spartacus* and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

For some reason my father enjoyed *The Simpsons* and even after having watched it on several occasions never managed to find anything objectionable. Sometimes he would even retell the jokes and compare himself to Homer Simpson, which of course we all found sort of ironic.

~

It's only natural that when a wild animal is caged it will fight like hell to escape, which is what we were and is also what we did. One by one, my siblings flew the coop. My brothers left in quick succession before reaching the age of majority. My sister was the youngest to leave, dropping out of school and fleeing across the country when she was barely fifteen. I was thirteen when she left, which makes fourteen years since we have spent any significant time together.

Now that we *are* together, we don't take it for granted that we can play loud music in the living room and speak freely about anything we like without fear of reprimand. That's what makes it so thrilling to drink wine in the afternoon, bitch and swear and traipse around in our bikinis. Deep down we're still just a couple of Mennonite girls trying to pull the wool over our old Dad's eyes.

~

Eventually I give up; I give in to the rhythm of the rolling tides and rise at 6:00 a.m. with the rest of the world. Australian spring is hardly in evidence at this hour and the house isn't heated. We wrap ourselves in blankets, sweaters and scarves to ward off the cold, peeling them away one at a time as the sunlight meanders into the living room window and the damp air blows out through back door.

Breakfast in our house is a historic event. In fact, we eat breakfast twice daily. Given our small size and number of hours we spend

lounging in the backyard, one might think we would skip lunch or dinner, an incorrect assumption. Skipping a meal would be like bailing on an all-expenses-paid trip to Disneyland; each is a momentous occasion.

We start with our homemade cereal blend: mixed seeds and grains with cocoa nibs and goji berries drowned in a pool of rice milk and maple syrup. Later on we cook up a hearty portion of lentils, drenched with coconut oil and topped with eggs, fried onions, garlic, and whatever green vegetables we have handy. It is a hideous brown and green mash that no one not directly born into our family would conceivably agree to eat. But we Knapp women are so busy extolling the extraordinary palatability of our lentil mash we have hardly enough air left to swallow our food, so utterly delectable and seasoned with the company of sisters. So much pleasure, so much joy, I am genuinely gasping for breath.

Over breakfast we plan lunch and dinner and in the afternoons we drive around collecting provisions for our culinary pursuits, snacking all the way. In the evenings we walk my sister's unruly dogs, though it is plainly clear to any passer-by that it is in fact the dogs who are walking us — something the locals are repeatedly compelled to point out to us. We are something of a spectacle; two women the combined weight of a storm cloud, being dragged along the esplanade, our upper bodies inclined backward at least thirty-five degrees, wielding all of our weight against the strength of these wild beasts, Zeddy and Jade.

It was only a matter of time before I figured out that, in Australia, Australian wine is dirt-cheap. At the discount liquor store (of which there are many), you can buy a perfectly drinkable bottle of *Wolf Blass* for \$5. I'm not exactly Bill Gates; I came here with \$750, I've got no job and no prospects. With that in mind, I only buy two bottles and wait until I've sent at least three official sounding letters each day before kicking up my feet with a glass of cold merlot, which is how they drink it over here.

There are days when Happy Hour starts as early as 10:30 a.m.

After we've polished off the *Wolf Blass* we switch to blend of Cab-Merlot called *Bowler's Run*, which you can get for just \$3 a bottle, or \$2.50 if you buy it by the case, so of course we do. With the early starts, I've already eaten second breakfast and painted the town curriculum vitae grey by 10:00 a.m. Juli is tanning in her bikini in the backyard, ready to pop out for some more lollies.

I like to wait until late afternoon when the sun comes flooding through the living room window and I can twist open a fresh bottle while rehashing the day's "work" with my sister. But every so often I figure what the heck, it's almost noon and I'm all the way on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, who's gonna know?

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