

PRAISE FOR *FAT CHICK GOES AWOL*

"Most people dream about chucking it all and taking off on wild adventures. Few actually do it. Anna shows us exactly how it's done. In Fat Chick Goes AWOL, Anna drags us along through all the highs and lows of making your life your own, and will inspire you to grab life by the horns and steer it toward a life uncommon." – **Nancy Sathre-Vogel, Family on Bikes, author of Changing Gears, Twenty Miles Per Cookie, What Were We Thinking?, and Roadschooling**

"An exquisite travel memoir in a fresh and authentic writing voice. Hugely entertaining – laugh out loud in many places, too numerous to mention, well written and loaded with distinctive and hilarious characters. A brilliant book." – **Christine Elliott, author of Unmasked**

"I once worked briefly for the BBC. I was given scripts and told 'Make this funny'. So I know funny. And THIS is FUNNY." – **Tahnee Woolf, author and co-creator of The Ten Terrains of Consciousness**

"This book is not the sort of thing I normally read, but I was pleasantly surprised. Having just finished Cheryl Strayed's book Wild I couldn't help but compare the two and I must say I enjoyed this one more. I was hooked from the first sentence. Fat Chick Goes AWOL is very funny, down to earth and inspiring." – **Anna-Lee Fox, Melbourne, Australia**

"The story held me so well it was a relief when I got to the end of an adventure so I could finally take a break to get up and go to the toilet or eat." – **Julie McLaren, Melbourne, Australia**

"I hope you've got as much arse to spare as Fat Chick – because you're going to laugh it off reading this book. And with her no-nonsense wisdom and handy tips, you'll also be motivated to get up off it and take action on your own dreams." – **Kate Kornacki, Melbourne, Australia**

FAT CHICK GOES
AWOL

A TRAVEL MEMOIR
by
ANNA MITCHELL

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For Billy Bob

Turns out you were right.

For Christophe

Turns out you were r-r-r...r-r-r...rrrrrrrr-rr-rrrrr...whatever.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The stories in this book are true, to the best of my recollection.

Except for the one where I blackmail Santa to get my recumbent trike.

The real Santa is the real Santa, Mrs Claus is a lovely, respectable woman, Bogan Boy was a faithful boyfriend (who did have a gig as a shopping centre Santa), and I paid for my trike out of my own pocket, same as everyone else. Honest.

However, many of the names of the people involved have been changed, either to protect the guilty or simply because I have C.R.A.F.T* Disease. The exception to protecting the guilty is Christophe the Crucifier. In his case I've used his real name, because you must be able to identify Evil when you meet it. Before it gets its claws into you.

*Can't Remember a Freewheelin' Thing

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PROLOGUE IN THE BEGINNING, THERE WAS A FAT CHICK

Once upon a time in the far, far west of the land that Time forgot, in a little apartment in the inner city, there lived a Fat Chick and her two fluffy cats.

Fat Chick spent all of her spare time lazing about in an armchair. It was a comfortable armchair, and she loved to laze about in it. It was just as well she loved that armchair, because the three-seater sofa was taken up by the two cats, and they showed no signs of ever giving it back.

One day as she lazed about, munching on her favourite junk foods and reading yet another adventure travel book, Fat Chick decided she too was going to have adventures. She was going to cycle, hike and paddle around the entire world.

Then she remembered The Rules.

THE RULES FOR FAT CHICKS:

FAT CHICKS DON'T CYCLE.

FAT CHICKS DON'T HIKE.

FAT CHICKS DON'T PADDLE.

She thought about The Rules. She thought about The Rules some more.

She drank a litre of Coke, and thought about The Rules some more.

She ate a tub of ice cream, and thought about The Rules even more.

She slowly worked her way through all the junk food in the apartment, all the while thinking lo-o-o-ong and ha-a-ard about a-a-a-all those Rules.

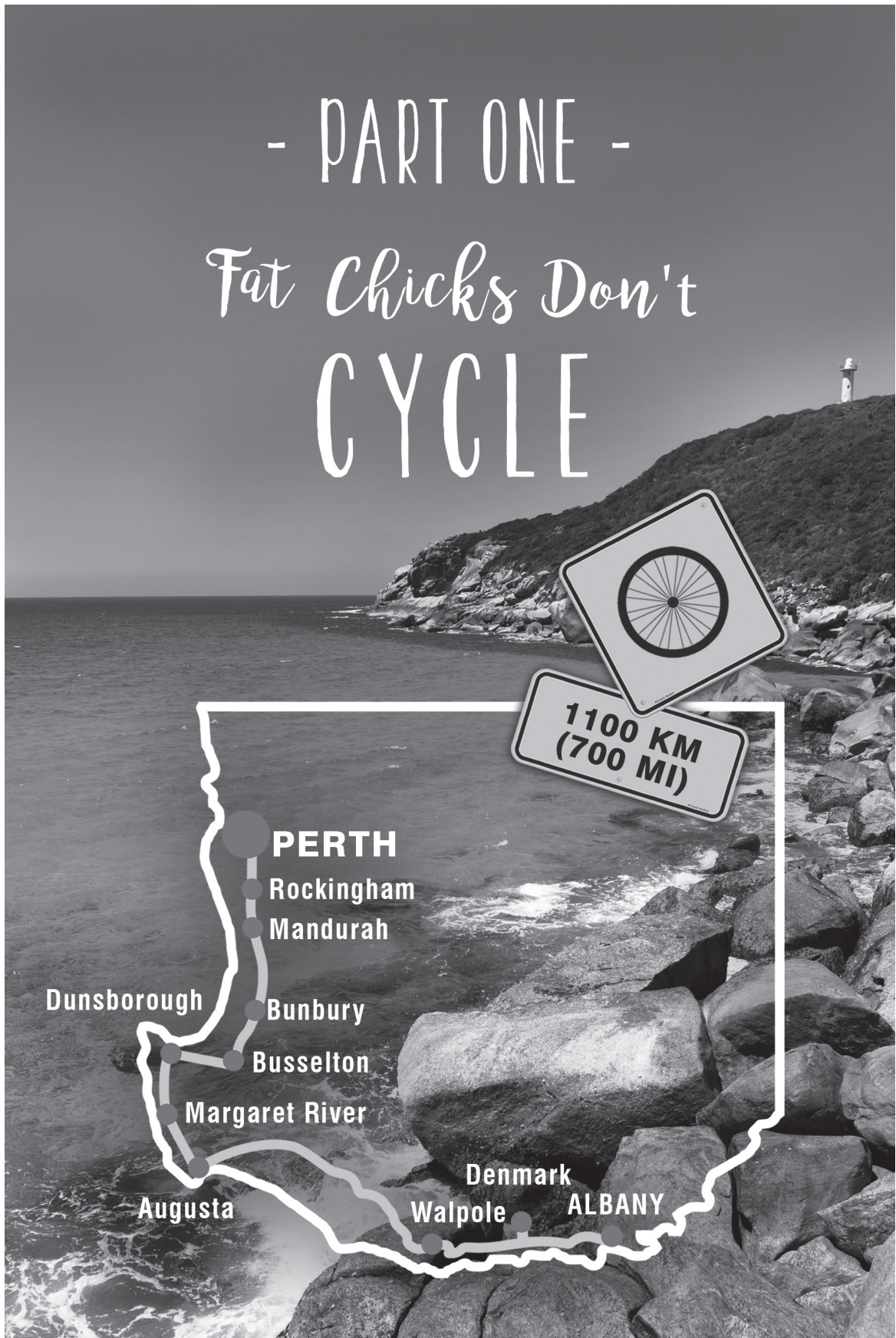
Finally she tossed the empty bucket of fried chicken into the bin and said to the walls:

“Fuck it, I’m gonna do it anyway.”

The two cats breathed a sigh of relief. They were the only things left in the house to eat.

- PART ONE -

Fat Chicks Don't CYCLE



C H A P T E R O N E

DEAR SANTA, GIMME A TRIKE OR I'M GOING TO THE TABLOIDS

Now, you all wouldn't know this, but I used to go out with Santa Claus.

No I'm not takin' the piss.¹ Everyone has a past, and before the marketing geniuses at the Coca Cola Company got their hands on this Fat Boy, and styled him into that wholesome favourite-Grandpa type you all adore, it was a whole other story.

When this story begins, Santa is a 19-year-old Aussie Bogan.² He drinks bourbon, smokes dope and hoons³ around town in a Ford Cortina station wagon painted Kermit the Frog green. I know, right? But this is long before he hits the big time and buys that fancy sleigh, back when he's a dirt-poor pizza delivery boy and can't afford to be picky about his wheels. At least it's a Cortina, one of the few models your self-respecting Aussie Bogan Boy would be seen dead in.

When this story begins, I'm a 23-year-old Aussie girl with letters after my name,⁴ a degree-qualified accountant. Since Australia is wallowing in Prime Minister Paul Keating's 'recession we had to have', that bachelor's degree isn't worth the paper it's printed on, so a year after graduating I'm still officially unemployed. To pay the rent on my cheap dog-box apartment in the inner suburbs of Perth, the

¹ Taking the piss = Aussie slang for joking/bullshitting.

² Bogan = Aussie slang for 'poor white trash'. Usually seen sporting flannel shirts, ugg boots, Metallica t-shirts, mullet haircuts, and a can of beer or Jim Beam in their hands. Often have children with more than one partner, none of whom they've married.

³ Hoon = drive like a maniac.

⁴ Letters after a person's name signifies that they have a university or college education.

capital city of Western Australia, I'm working as many shifts as I can get delivering pizzas, which is the casual job I had while studying.

The world of pizza is where Bogan Boy's path crosses mine. He's one of the drivers who deliver twelve orders in twelve minutes and are forever on the brink of losing their licence. His mad driving skills will come in handy later on when he has to cover the planet in a single night, but right now they're not doing his licence – or his wallet – any favours. I'm the driver who delivers two orders in twenty minutes and never once comes to the attention of the boys in blue. The guys make fun of me for being the granny driver of the crew – but only while they have demerit points to spare and aren't confined to kitchen hand duties.

A year into my Pizza Chick career, the two-site pizza business explodes into a chain; half a dozen shops open almost overnight. My boss sets up a central phone room to take the orders for all of them. I become the mistress of the phones. Literally.

"Hey, come 'n' 'ave a listen to this chick. She sounds like a double-oh, double-five number," the punters tell their mates. It's true. My voice on a switchboard is professional voice-over quality, with a strong hint of phone sex.

Unfortunately I don't *look* like a phone sex girl. Hot Chick is not how the males of Australia refer to me. I'm the Fat Chick. Even my 180cm (6') tall, heavy-boned, Amazon woman frame can't hide the fact I have enough body fat to make it into the 'obese' category. I passed the 100kg (220lb) mark when I was still a teenager. My adult weight has settled at 130kgs (287lbs) – not much less than my all-time high of 142kgs (313lbs). My calves are the size of tree trunks. They're bigger than Arnold Schwarzenegger's. I'm not kidding – I looked it up. His measured 50cms (20") around. Mine are 52.5cm (21").

If my calves are the size of tree trunks, then my thighs are the size of California redwoods. My size 22 (US size 18, European size 50) jeans have trouble holding them in, and the inner seams wear out quickly.

My 22DD-cup (US size 44DDD, European size 100F) breasts *could* be associated with a 0055 chick, but like they say, tits on a fat chick are like abs on a skinny guy – they don't count. Besides, when I look down, my stomach sticks out further than my boobs do. I can't even *see* my California redwood thighs.

My butt? Not a chance. Long story short, I am not a *Debbie Does Dallas* piece of arse. I am a *Debbie Does Donuts* piece of arse.

You are what you eat. I grew up the poster child for junk food and couch potatoes. Throughout my childhood, my mother worked for a biscuit manufacturer. The man she married when I was thirteen worked at a Coca Cola bottling plant, and soon she was working there as well. I was screwed from the start. By the time I got to uni, I was better at the junk food and sofa thing than the two of them put together – and they were good. If I did sex like I do food, I'd be an award-winning porn star. But I'm not a porn star. Because 23 years of junk food and sofa dwelling do not sculpt you into a *Debbie Does Dallas* piece of arse.

On the phone though, I am a sex goddess. Even the sober men wonder if they've rung the wrong number. One day a brothel owner called to place an order. He ended up offering me a job as the brothel's switchboard operator. I laughed my big fat hairy white wobbly arse off, and politely declined.

I don't *try* to sound like a 0055 operator. That's just what my voice does when I'm on a switchboard. Away from a switchboard, most of the time I sound like an Aussie truck driver.

The phone room is located at the chain's North Perth shop, which is an old inner city neighbourhood shop front with a crappy old weatherboard house attached to the back of it, that my boss lives in. The 'central phone room' is ten touch-dial phones and one desktop computer in the crappy old sleep-out at the back of the house.

Bogan Boy is working here tonight instead of at his usual shop, as the North Perth shop is short of drivers. He's on his way to the

toilet, which is just beyond the sleep-out. I'm dealing with the bane of the pizza shop phone operator's life – the people who don't know what they want, what change they need, or even where they are. I wait until they've hung up, slam down the phone, and go off in Strayan.⁵

“Fucken bloody useless piece a –”

The phone rings again. I pick it up reflexively and finish the sentence in my sophisticated, honey-toned, sexy-time phone voice. “Tippy's Dial-a-Pizza, may I help you?”

When I finish taking the order I look up to see a Fat Boy with gorgeous cornflower-blue eyes lounging in the doorway, grinning at me. On our next night off, he's taking me to a movie.

After the movie we go back to my dog-box flat. I put on a video, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Bogan Boy, hoping for his own excellent adventure, proceeds to get us both stupid drunk on bourbon and Coke.

I don't like bourbon and Coke – as far as I'm concerned it's a waste of good Coke. I don't like alcohol at all in fact. I can handle the occasional beer, but that's about it. But I've never been out with a Bogan before and I like this one, and I want him to think I'm cool, so I suck it up and suck it down. At least it's mostly Coke, which is about the only thing I drink.

It only takes about a glass and a half to work. Bogan Boy finds this – pretty much the only lightweight thing about me – amusing. So amusing that he nicknames me ‘the Cadbury kid’. After the famous commercial for the chocolate company that wanted to make sure we knew their chocolate contained ‘a glass and a half of full cream milk’. In case anyone was under the impression that chocolate is not a health food.

Curled up together on the torture-rack sofa that came with my cheap dog-box flat, this cheap date progresses to periodic games of

⁵ Strayan = Australian spoken in a rough manner, usually with lots of swearing.

tonsil-hockey. Bogan Boy's hands begin to wander, and this 19-year-old horn bag is convinced he's onto a sure thing. At three a.m., much to his dismay, I send him home. He might be a Bogan, and I might be a cheap date, but I'm a Good Girl. As they say, opposites attract. At this point I have no idea of the irony – that he'll go on to become Respectable Santa, and I'll go on to break all of the important rules in life.

The excellent adventure was followed by *Looney Tunes* cartoons. At three a.m., as we're tripping over one another all the way along the corridor, down a flight of stairs, and out into the car park, we're whispering "Shhhh. Be vewy, vewy quiet. I'm hunting wabbits."

It's the noisiest wabbit hunt in the history of the free world, and on a school night an' all. A neighbour in the complex next door, whose bedroom is right above Bogan Boy's parked Cortina, lets us know he is slightly irritated by our drunken carry-on.

"SHUT THE FUCK UP, SOME OF US HAVE GOTTA GO TO WORK IN THE MORNING."

It scares the shit out of us. Bogan Boy bursts out laughing again.

"Shhh," I tell him, filling his mouth with my palm. I can't help but add, in a whisper, "Be vewy, vewy, quiet."

Bogan Boy gets in the frog and attempts to drive himself home. Instead he writes the frog off, wrapping it around a tree. I find out about it the next day when he calls.

Oops. I didn't think he was *that* drunk. *I* was that drunk, but that was just a warm-up for him. Those pizza boys drink as hard as they drive.

Lucky for me Bogan Boy forgives me for sending him home without getting laid, and we date some more. Pretty soon he's staying the night, and the two of us are going straight to Hell.

So there we are. I'm his Bitch, he's my Toy Boy, and we have all the pizza we could ever want.

In addition to his pizza job, Bogan Boy has an annual gig as Santa. Each year when the silly season arrives, he puts down the

bong and the bottle of bourbon, slaps on the red satin suit, and goes off to spread joy and happiness at the local shopping centre. This year I go with him.

“Ho, ho, ho,” he booms as he settles into his throne outside the supermarket.

I turn and fix him with my steely gaze.

“Listen up, Toy Boy. You call me a Ho one more time, and I will squash you like a bug.”

“Bitch, get over here and sit on Santa’s lap, let the nice man take a photo.”

Yeah, that’ll happen.

And it does.

I can’t believe I’ve done something so clichéd as be swept off my feet by a man in uniform.

Anyway, the kids turn up, and I’m standing at the back of the crowd with my bottle of Coke, watching this whole thing go down. All these cute, innocent little kids are looking at him in wonder. He’s looking at them all sweet and kind and benevolent. And I’m laughing my arse off. Because if any of those parents had the faintest idea of what sweet ol’ Santa got up to at my place last night, Christmas would be cancelled immediately.

A couple of years later I’m no longer going out with Santa Claus. I find this out in a most un-excellent way. Turns out this Fat Boy has an addiction to the whole Santa thing, and a once-a-year gig imitating the big man in Perth’s suburban shopping centres ain’t gonna cut it. He’s got his sights set on the top of the Christmas tree – the star position, Santa Claus Esq., CEO of North Pole Enterprises. And since he’s not ‘wholesome’ enough to pass the background checks and get the job legitimately, he’s adopted the tried-and-true alternative method – sleeping his way to the top. I turn up at his place one day to find him having sex with someone

who isn't me. Someone who looks suspiciously like the wife of the CEO of North Pole Enterprises. And between the moans and the slapping of flesh, I hear her tell him he's got the job, just as soon as they get rid of the real Santa Claus.

I've come to Bogan Boy's place after a solo photography excursion along Perth's picturesque Swan River, so I happen to have my SLR camera with me. I lower my backpack onto the floor of his lounge room, and pull out my camera bag. Five minutes later I have photographic evidence of Mrs Claus' handbag, the hot mess of her and Bogan Boy's discarded clothes leading to the bedroom – including her distinctive monogrammed red satin panties – and the two of them well and truly making it onto the Naughty List for this year were I to show these photos to The Man at North Pole Enterprises.

The final photo is of their faces gawping at the camera. A perfectly framed and focused shot if I do say so myself – and since it's mid-afternoon, there's no lack of lighting. The judges of the monthly competition at the amateur photography club I'm in would be proud of me.

Bogan Boy springs off the bed with surprising speed for a Fat Boy, tugging on his other pair of black denim jeans, which are thankfully within arm's reach. The red satin whore yanks the bed sheet across her naughty bits.

I lounge against the bedroom doorway, SLR in hand. Saying nothing. Grinning. Santa yelps as he catches his pecker in the zipper of his jeans. I crack up laughing behind my grin.

"What are *you* doing here? How did you get *in* here?"

"Door was open. You really should be more careful, y'know. You don't know *who* might walk in. What am I doing here? Oh, just earning a bit of Christmas cash. If you get my drift ... "

Bogan Boy looks at Mrs Claus.

He doesn't have the money to buy my silence, and she knows it.

She also knows North Pole Enterprises can't afford a scandal like this.

The red satin whore gets her fat arse off the bed, locates her handbag, and pulls out a cheque book. Five minutes later I'm walking out of Santa's life with an even bigger grin on my face. This Grotty Boy-Person has just learned you *can* mess with this Fat Chick, but it'll cost you.

A few months later I see him in the media releases from the North Pole, wearing a far more expensive red satin suit, with somebody else's wife hanging off his arm. The stylists have done an excellent job of making him look like the real Santa, but I know it's him.

I don't call the newspapers though, or the TV stations. I don't even tell my friends. I can keep a secret. Especially for eight grand, the current price of a primo round-the-world plane ticket. I've been hanging out to travel around the world ever since I spent a year on a working holiday in Europe at age nineteen. He can have his red satin whore and his Santa dream. I'm going travelling.

As if anyone would believe me anyway. I mean, really, a Ford Cortina station wagon painted Kermit the Frog green? No self-respecting Aussie Bogan Boy would be seen dead in a station wagon, especially one painted Kermit the Frog green. Even if it was a Cortina. They do have *some* standards, y'know.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TRIKE MAKER AND THE CHARIOT OF FIRE

Bogan Boy is replaced by Huggy Bear before I get to go on my round-the-world trip. He's a Fat Boy too, but that's where any similarity to Santa Claus ends. This Grotty Boy-Person is a brainiac who loves a good intellectual discourse, and whose humour of choice is puns. He doesn't smoke or do drugs, and drinks wine instead of bourbon. He has a day job as a computer programmer for IBM, and a mortgage on a new three-bedroom unit in an inner city suburb. He separates his recyclables, and drives a Hyundai Excel hatchback in an orderly fashion – when he's not riding his bicycle. He's also a hugger – and a really good one, hence the nickname Huggy Bear. We end up moving in together.

I'm glad Bogan Boy didn't become Santa Claus the legitimate way, and take me with him. I was never big on toys as a kid, happy enough with a few dolls, some LEGO and a colouring book. As an adult, I'm still not into toys. In high school I once asked my friends what they would buy if they won a million dollars. The standard response was along the lines of a big house, flash car, jewellery and lots of gadgets. My answer was a backpack, a pair of hiking boots and a round-the-world plane ticket.

Ten years on from high school, nothing's changed in that regard. I'm still a travel nut, but not the least bit interested in ritzy hotels or luxury cruises. I like independent travel – backpack, boots, and I'll tell you where I'm going when I know, which will be when I get there. That year in Europe got me hooked. I loved it all. The freedom. The adventure. Walking along streets drenched in history,

even if I was too lazy to find out what that history was. Seeing how other cultures lived. Eating their food, learning their languages. The different currencies. Even stupid little things like domino-sized brown cardboard bus tickets that the drivers would punch little holes in on the date and time boxes. I couldn't get enough of travelling. When the year was up and I had to go back to Australia and finish my accounting degree, I made my way onto the plane like a dead man walking.

I'm still determined to go around the world. The only difference is these days I'm leaning towards human-powered travel instead of planes, trains and automobiles. For that strain of madness I blame Anne Mustoe and Bill Bryson.

Anne Mustoe was a 50-something headmistress of a posh English girls' boarding school, who one day packed in her job, sold her London flat, and set off to cycle around the world alone – despite the fact she had never gone cycle touring before and had no idea how to do even basic repairs like fix a flat tyre. Bill Bryson is a writer who hiked a serious chunk of the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail in the USA, despite being middle-aged, married, overweight and not having a clue what he was doing. These two people have messed me up for life with their travel memoirs. Bryson nearly put me in the damn poorhouse buying all *his* books at 35 bucks a pop on a pizza driver's wages.

Since then I'm pretty sure I've read every human-powered travel memoir in print, from *Full Tilt*, Dervla Murphy's solo cycling adventure through Europe and the Middle East in the 1960s, to Jesse Brampton's *Promises to Keep*, a solo long-distance hike of the Appalachian Trail in the USA, to Ben Kozel's *Three Men in a Raft*, a paddle down the length of the Amazon River. I'm thinking of spending the rest of my life cycling around the world, thru-hiking

long-distance trails along the way, and throwing in a few long-distance paddling trips as well.

No sooner do I get this idea into my head, than the Universe sends me a cyclist for a boyfriend. Huggy Bear may be a Fat Boy, but he's a Fat Boy who loves to ride his bicycle. He rides it to work every day. He rides it to the supermarket to buy groceries. He rides it dozens of kilometres to friends' houses. He rides it on social rides with the local cycling club, and he's ridden it hundreds of kilometres on proper cycle tours, including in places like New Zealand.

He may be a Fat Boy, but he's a Fat Boy with legs and lungs of steel. This guy can power his 118kgs (260lbs) up a steep hill as fast as those Real Cyclists who are so skinny you'd lose 'em if they turned sideways. *And* he can belt out a tune while he's doing it. I'm in awe.

I also hate him. I do *not* love to ride my bicycle. In fact, I hate it. I hate the seat, which gets more and more uncomfortable the longer I ride, until it bruises my tailbone. I hate the padded cycling knicks, or 'nappy pants' as I call them, I have to wear to combat this – they look hideous on me, and their protection doesn't last long enough. I hate the pressure of the handlebars on my hands – the padded cycling gloves don't help for long enough either. I hate the pressure on my shoulders and neck from having to lean on the handlebars when my butt gets too sore, and from craning my head upwards to see the scenery. I hate having to stand up on the pedals to get enough power to get up hills, and having to maintain a minimum speed or else you'll fall off.

In short, I hate cycling. Which is a bit of a problem when you want to travel the world by bicycle.

Huggy Bear talks me into going on the 'On Your Bike Tour', a seven-day cycle tour in rural Western Australia. I'm not keen on the idea of spending seven whole days in a row on a bicycle, but on this cycle tour trucks carry your luggage for you to each night's

campground. There's also a 'sag wagon', a mini-bus that will take you and your bike to camp if you just can't make it under your own steam.

I'm glad I let him talk me into it, because it's on this tour that the Universe gives me the answer to my predicament. There are about a hundred and twenty people on this tour, and on the third or fourth day I notice that two of these folks are not like the other ones. One afternoon they glide past me on low, three-wheeled, tadpole-shaped bicycles that look to me like mobile deckchairs. These two people look *awfully* comfortable ... Unfortunately I'm puffing too much to talk to them, and I don't run into them again.

My relationship with Huggy Bear dies a horrible death the following year, after we spend three months backpacking through North America. It was in trouble before that trip – it had been slowly deteriorating during the year or so we lived together – but travelling together was the death knell. I should have known back when we were planning the trip there'd be fireworks. Huggy Bear wanted a detailed itinerary of every day of the three-month trip, with all accommodation and transport booked in advance. I wanted to just pack my backpack and get on a plane. Sure enough, after a couple of months on the road, there were fireworks. I move out not long after we return to Perth, but it's an amicable split and we remain firm friends. However, from now on I'm sticking to solo travel. I realise I like it better. While it was nice to have someone familiar there all the time, I found we became a bit of a self-contained unit, and interacted with people far less than I did when I was on my own in Europe. And having my boyfriend there all the time just made me lazy; he was willing to do all the hard stuff, and I just let him. Plus, since his salary far outweighed mine, he paid for nearly everything, and I felt like a freeloader.

While the cycle tourist boyfriend didn't work out, the idea of travelling the world by bicycle, and those funny-looking three-wheeled

bikes, sticks. But I don't know what the funny-looking three-wheeled bikes are called, and even if I did, there's no time to do anything about it anyway. After breaking up with Santa and leaving the world of pizza, a couple of years after I graduated from university, I landed a job in Planet Office. It wasn't much of a job, only data entry and filing, but it led to a career as an office temp, and once the temp agencies realised I was reliable and I knew what I was doing, they wouldn't leave me alone.

In addition to that, the recession has done a one-eighty into a mining boom led by Western Australia, and there are jobs galore. I'm now 29, and over the past few years I've worked my way up to a degree-qualified accountant level job via every low-level shit kicker admin job known to woman. With that broad experience plus my accounting degree, I have a unique perspective of the accounting and admin function, and am in demand for the results I can get which other accountants can't. Graduating in the middle of a recession turned out to be a good thing after all. Go figure.

The Internet is a mainstream thing now. One day it occurs to me to see if I can find out what that funny-looking three-wheeled bike is called.

The Internet tells me it's a recumbent trike.

The Internet also tells me the world's premier manufacturer of recumbent trikes is Greenspeed, which happens to be in Australia. I go to their web page and in pretty short order I'm drooling over their touring model. Unfortunately it costs nearly eight thousand dollars. And they're located in Melbourne, on the other side of the country.

I have the money. I'm on contract to a large manufacturing company, and they were so impressed with my work that when I started talking about going travelling, they threw a \$7,000 bonus and a rate rise at me to get me to stay there another year. It's not as if I need to blackmail Santa or anything. Honest. Trust me, I'm an accountant.

The problem is I'd be handing over eight grand for a piece of gear sight unseen, to a business I've never dealt with before. I haven't spent eight thousand bucks on a *car* before, let alone a bicycle. I haven't spent eight *hundred* bucks on a bicycle.

I don't even know if I'll like riding a recumbent trike. What if I'm only in love with the idea of it, and when I get it I find it's not that great and I've wasted eight grand? I want to try one first, but as far as I know there aren't any in Perth.

I get on the phone to the North Pole. Santa is not pleased to hear from me.

"I'm not giving you any more money, so don't even ask."

"I don't want money. I want a name."

"What do you mean, you want a name?"

"I need a recumbent trike maker in Perth, if there is one."

"A what maker?"

"Recumbent trike."

"What the hell is that?"

"You're commander-in-chief of the global toy business and you don't know what a recumbent trike is? How'd you get that job, by sleeping with the boss?"

I email Santa a picture of a bicycle that has two wheels at the front, one at the back, a big mesh deckchair style seat, and no discernible handlebars. When he opens it, he bursts out laughing.

"That is nuts," he says.

I don't think it's nuts at all. Instead of balancing on your bum and your fanny on a tiny wedge of leather that cuts off circulation to both and leaves you feeling like someone's beaten them with a baseball bat, you get a nice comfy deckchair to cruise around in. Instead of leaning on a metal bar that cuts off circulation to your hands, you wrap your hands lightly around two upright handlebars at hip level. Instead of craning your neck upwards to avoid staring at

the road surface all day long, you lean back slightly, and the world unfolds before you like a movie on a cinema screen.

Recumbent trikes have been nicknamed ‘armchairs on wheels’. Since I’m a professional couch potato with wacko dreams of cycling around the world, I like the idea of an armchair on wheels.

“You wanna go around the planet on *that*?” says Santa. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Oh, you mean as opposed to a sleigh, a bunch of reindeer and magic dust.”

Santa shuts up and searches his database.

Turns out there *is* a trike maker in Perth – King Martoon. He’s the new kid on the block of recumbent trike manufacturers, and his reputation is good. Santa gives me his contact details, then tells me never to call him again.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Go check on your wife; see if her red satin panties are still on her.”

“Listen—”

A screeching voice interrupts him. “Claus, who are you talking to?”

Santa slams the phone down on me. Karma grins at me from the corner. I dial the number for King Martoon.

King Martoon is a 50-something-year-old Yorkshire man who can talk the hind leg off a donkey. I like him instantly, and not because he’s the maker of the one toy I can get excited about.

King Martoon works from home, in the shed, where all the best things in Australia are accomplished. He has a demo trike for me to try.

As soon as I sit on it, I know I’ve found my chariot.

It’s so comfortable. There’s no pressure on my butt, or my wrists, or my neck.

It’s so easy to steer. I can turn on a dime, and it corners like it’s on rails.

The brakes are so good. I nearly get whiplash when I apply them suddenly.

And no more craning my head up to avoid looking down at the road.
My neck is so happy it could kiss me.

I am reclining, but only at an angle of 45 degrees. There is another angle for recumbent seats that is much more laid back, 30 degrees, but that's for racing. People think recumbent bikes are bikes you lie down on. I don't feel like I'm lying down at all. I feel like I'm sitting in an armchair.

As King Martoon and I ride through his neighbourhood, I can't stop raving about the trike. I didn't expect to like it *this* much. I'm not complaining. I'm relieved I wouldn't have wasted my eight grand.

Turns out it's not going to cost me anywhere near eight grand either. King Martoon's trikes are half the price of a Greenspeed, but every bit their equal in quality. Even my untrained eye can tell King Martoon is a master welder, who takes pride in his craftsmanship.

"How soon can I get mine?" I ask him, sounding like a druggie in need of a fix.

King Martoon needs some details before he can answer this question. These are not mass-produced bicycles. Each one is built by hand, and customised to the buyer.

He starts talking Boy Language at me – 20-something moly chromey tubey internal Sachs tripply hubby geary thingy thing things. I stop him before he has somebody's eye out and tell him I want three things:

One: Build me a tank.

I'm hard on my gear. I tend to neglect it. I don't want to know how it works. I want it to be high quality, and just work. I want something that can take a lot of abuse and not take revenge at the worst possible moment, out in the middle of nowhere. I want a tank.

Two: The lowest gears on the planet, bar none.

I suck at riding up hills. I've sucked at hills since the day I first got on a bicycle. I still suck at hills a decade later, and I don't think I'm ever going to stop sucking at hills.

Three: Yellow seat. Red frame. Fire engine red.

The rest he can do however he wants.

King Martoon builds me the toughest and coolest human-powered vehicle in town. It's got disc brakes, like a car. A huge luggage rack that's a welded part of the frame rather than a separate rack that bolts onto the frame. Yellow mesh deckchair-style seat and cute little matching yellow pedals about the size of a deck of cards that my cleated cycling shoes clip onto. Orange safety flag on a thin bendy pole, to attract the attention of the Car People. Bike computer. And an air horn, to scare the crap out of the Foot People who hog the dual-use cycle paths and ignore the cyclist's bell.

It also has the lowest gears on the planet: a Schlumpf Mountain Drive. A Schlumpf Mountain Drive is gearing so low it's absurd. We're talking gears low enough, as King Martoon puts it, "to pedal up Mount Everest."

Coo-o-o-o-ool.

King Martoon has also made it with a 'Big Bum seat', as he calls it, so the Fat Chick may travel in even more comfort.

Awes-o-o-o-o-me.

It's even got a handbrake, so it doesn't roll off down the road when you stop halfway up a hill because you have to go pee. Or stop halfway up a hill because you suck at hills and could never make it to the top in one hit.

This is my chariot. This is even worth drinking that bourbon shit for.

King Martoon delivers him the day after Christmas. My friends from down the road, Maeve and Stephen, who I call Mauve and Stooph, have come up the road to check it out. As they watch, King Martoon unloads my trike and his, and we take off for a test run. Stooph later describes the scene, from the rear view, "as if two alien creatures, each with a long orange antenna, had just landed on the planet and were off to reconnoitre the territory".

Unfortunately, when I placed the order, I forgot men are colour blind. 'Fire Engine Red' comes out of the kiln a manky burnt orange.

"It's bloody red," insists the King.

"It's bloody burnt orange," insists the Fat Chick.

"It's bloody red."

I turn and fix him with my steely gaze.

"*Show me* a fire engine that colour."

"Well ... it's fire red."

"*Fire* red is not fire *engine* red. If *fire* red was the same as fire *engine* red, you wouldn't be able to see the fire *engines* for the *fire*. And where would *that* get us, huh?"

"Kid's gonna be a lawyer," my granny used to say. "Got the arguin' gene, that one."

Don't get me wrong, I still love my chariot, but for cryin' out loud. I'm a *Girl*. Okay, so I'm not *much* of a Girl. I don't wear makeup or buy shoes. I don't giggle and flirt and act all stupid and helpless when there are Boys around. I'm not even fussed when men leave the toilet seat up. I *do*, however, understand, as all Girls do, how important the colour of your chariot is.

The Grotty Boy-Person continues to insist this colour is red.

"And you lot rule the world."

It's still a beautiful thing, my chariot of fire, so I forgive him his colour blindness and give him his money.

When King Martoon and Mauve and Stooph have gone, I sit on a milk crate in the garage and stare at my chariot.

What will I call him? He has to have a name.

I remember a passage from a book I once read, a travel memoir by a West Australian author named Jesse Brampton, called *Promises to Keep*. Jesse was a farmer who was lying on his bed one day with a shotgun in his hand, about to blow his brains out. At the last minute he decided to go thru-hike the 2,200 mile Appalachian Trail instead.

As you do. Anyway, in Atlanta on a bus shelter was a piece of poetry called *Soft Chains*. It stayed with him, and it's stayed with me too.

Soft Chains

*soft chains are most
difficult to break.
affection, ease.
the spirit, wide-eyed,
limp-muscled; nestles
on its side,
and waits.*

Soft Chains are the things that keep us shackled to the Comfort Zone, never sailing out beyond the safety of the harbour, never living our dreams, never knowing what might have been. A steady job, a regular pay packet, a comfortable house, a familiar routine. Electricity, running water, reverse-cycle air conditioning. Family, friends, churches and groups. Career advancement, social acceptance, the protection of the herd. A familiar city. Favourite TV programs. The Stuff we've spent a lifetime accumulating.

During the past few years I've become acutely aware of the Soft Chains and how they bind. How powerful they are with their siren song of comfort and ease. How difficult they are to break. How many times I've dreamed of travelling the world, then sat in front of the TV all evening doing nothing about it. How I can blink and it's five years later, and I don't even know what happened to that time.

I sit on a crate in my garage in suburbia, and stare at my *Chainbreaker*.

CHAPTER THREE

NOT MY DREAM

As soon as Christmas break is over, I ride my trike to work. My co-workers all know it's coming; I've had a countdown on the aisle window of my office for a month now, marking off the days one by one. It's not the done thing for an accountant, but I don't care. I'm excited. My dream is coming closer.

It was never my dream to be an accountant. It was my parents' dream. The dream of all peasant farmers who migrated from southern Europe to Australia in the 1960s: a nice big house, a car or two, and kids who go to university and have a profession. It's a reasonable dream. That they should have a better life in Australia than they'd ever have back in the old country. That their kids should wear a suit to work, use their minds, make good money, and be somebody important, instead of wearing cheap cotton and being enslaved to a life of meaningless manual labour and poverty. It's a lovely dream. It's just not *my* dream. Does any kid ever grow up dreaming to be an accountant? I don't know of any. Most of the accountants I've ever worked with have only been in it for the money and the status. Most of them have been miserable sods too.

I'm lucky. I managed to avoid becoming one of the miserable sods. I managed to make being an accountant tolerable, even enjoyable, by working my way into systems accounting, which is what I'm learning in this job. Systems accounting isn't really about accounting. I know just enough accounting to make people think I'm an accountant, but I stay away from the accounting part as much as possible. Systems accounting is more like detective work – figuring out why the accounting system is producing the wrong figures, fixing the problem at source, and implementing a process

that will stop it from happening again. I like problem solving. I hate accounting. If I'd had to do accounting like a normal accountant, do the CPA course and live in a world of endless journal entries, cash flow statements, budgets, balance sheets and tax returns, I'd have gone postal by now. But figuring out systems, making them work better, and making the lives of my co-workers easier with a solution they never had before, or a quicker way to do things, now that's an accounting career I can handle, even enjoy. This, I could stand until I retire.

As long as the jobs are temporary, and there's a helluva lotta travelling in between. Because when all is said and done, in the big picture, it's still a life of meaningless labour. I just get to sit down to do it. I get more money than my dad did as a brickie's labourer and my mum did as a factory worker. And people think I'm doing something important with my life. I'm not; I'm just making my parents proud. I've made the final part of their immigrants' dream come true. I finished high school, graduated from university, and I have a profession. I'm a Good Girl.

A Good Girl who dreams of throwing away all of her parents' hard work, and cycling, hiking and kayaking around the world instead.

A Good Girl who's not prepared to wait 35 years for retirement to do it.

A Good Girl with a new recumbent trike.

For four years the accounting recruitment agencies who have been placing me in contracts have been asking me if I'll consider a permanent job instead of temporary work. For four years I've been saying no. They probably think I'm weird. The other temps I've encountered, who are only temping until they get a permanent job, definitely think I'm weird. Who doesn't want a stable, permanent job? Especially if you're an accountant. Accountants are stable, permanent people.

The reason I won't do it, apart from the risk of dying of boredom, is there's not enough leave.

If I were to do accounting the normal way, with a permanent job, in Australia I would get four weeks' annual leave per year. For a traveller, that's not even close to enough time to do any decent travelling. Especially when you live in Perth, the most isolated capital city in the world, and it takes a couple of hours of flying to even get out of the state. In Europe you could jump on a train in London and, after travelling on that train for 24 hours, you would have crossed the borders of half a dozen countries. From Perth, you travel on a train for 24 hours and you don't even cross the state border. From London you could fly to Moscow, a capital city on a whole other continent, in three hours. From Perth you can fly for three hours and not even reach the capital of the same country.

There's long service leave, but I'll be damned if I'm going to work ten years in the same job to get three months of long service leave, then wait another ten years for another three months. Besides, even three months isn't long enough for the kind of travelling I have in mind. Slow travel. Very slow travel.

Turns out as a contractor, it's even worse. There's no official leave at all. You get paid a higher hourly rate instead. I haven't had any time off, apart from weekends and public holidays, since I started temping four years ago. That's what you get for being good at your job – finishing one contract on a Friday and starting the next one on the following Monday. It's nice to be wanted by Planet Office, but it's just not my dream to be an accountant for 48-52 weeks of every year of the best years of my life.

It seems I have two choices. One, wait until I retire to hit the road. Two, space my world trip out over forty years, travelling the world in bite-sized pieces, a month at a time.

I don't want to wait until I retire. There's no guarantee I'll live that long, especially with all of the crap I've eaten since I was a young child. Even if I do live that long, there's no guarantee I'll be physically able to cycle the world when I'm 65. Fat Chicks tend not to age well, and joint problems and lifestyle diseases such as diabetes are common. Besides, by the time I get to 65 and am eligible for a pension, the retirement age might be 75. Worse, there may not even be a pension.

I don't want to travel the world in a stop-start way, having to pack up and go home just as I'm getting into the rhythm of the road. I don't want my travels tainted by the spectre of having to return to work. I don't want to have to deal with several hundred emails in my inbox every year when I return.

Since neither alternative is acceptable, I'm just going to have to do this whole thing *without* leave. AWOL. Absent Without Official Leave. I'll stick to contract accounting, go travelling for up to a year at a time on my own dime, then come back to the Real World and get another contract until I've saved up enough to bugger off again. A series of guaranteed 'mini-retirements' throughout my working career, instead of gambling on one big retirement at the end of it. That'll work.

Absent Without Official Leave. In an armchair on wheels. I like the sound of that. And now I have the armchair.

Well, I *had* the armchair. Until I got to work. Now a bunch of my co-workers are arguing over who gets to have a turn on the armchair next. Nobody's ever seen a recumbent trike before. Everybody, from the top of the Finance Department to the bottom of the warehouse, wants to ride it. Especially my boss, Schleffo the Magnificent.

Schleffo is Schleffo because Aussies love to shorten names by chopping off the last half and replacing it with 'o'; e.g. David

becomes Davo, Jonathon becomes Johnno, and Daniel becomes Danno – which is what they’ve done with his hard-to-pronounce Belgian surname. Another much-loved shortener is ‘zza’; e.g. Terry becomes Tezza, Barry becomes Bazza, Warren becomes Wozza.

Schleffo is the Magnificent because Schleffo is the best, most precise, fussiest systems accountant in the history of the free world, and what he can’t do with an AS400 server or an Excel spreadsheet isn’t worth doing. When Schleffo as a teenager in the 1960s undertook the aptitude tests for a job at IBM, he did the math questions without a calculator, as was required in those days. The tester’s only comment after marking the test was, “You didn’t need to answer the questions to seven decimal places – two decimal places are sufficient”. Schleffo the Magnificent in his spare time is building his own *aeroplane*. There is no way in hell you would get me into a homemade aeroplane – unless this grey-haired fusspot built it. Schleffo the Magnificent, also known in the Finance Department as ‘2DP’ (Two Decimal Places), is not a person who is easily impressed.

Schleffo is wildly impressed with my chariot. He does bog laps around the car park like a 19-year-old Aussie Bogan hoons around town in a Ford Cortina. He won’t get off.

“Get off my trike you Grotty Boy-Person, or I will squash you like a bug,” I yell as he races past, missing me by inches.

Schleffo screeches to a halt and gets off my trike.

Satisfied I’ve trashed the dullness of Planet Job today, I change back into my street clothes and pedal home.

The Car People, impatient in the peak hour traffic, don’t even try to squeeze past me in the roundabouts. They don’t know what the hell I am, so they slow down and hang back, to get a good look. It’s awesome. This would never happen if I was riding a wedgie bike.⁶ An

⁶ Wedgie Bike = the recumbent rider’s ever-so-slightly derogatory term for a normal bike.

evil laugh erupts from me. “The power, the power,” I bellow as I pass through roundabouts unmolested.

Along with the power comes fame. Everybody is staring at me. And I mean *everybody*. Pointing at me, staring open-mouthed as I go past, and talking about me. Even waving to me.

I’m going to get that a lot.

The attention is a bit embarrassing. But the power to hold back peak hour traffic, to be able to go through roundabouts without being smooshed up against the kerb by a tonne or two of steel, is *awesome*.

As I ride past a bottle shop, a little kid in a station wagon in the drive-thru leans out of the window and calls out to me, “What’s wrong with you?”

I later work out he must’ve thought it was a disabled bike.

I’m going to get that a lot too. The big orange flag on a bendy pole, a standard on hand crank bikes and motorised wheelchairs, doesn’t help. Even though people can see I’m using my legs, it seems in their minds orange safety flag equals paraplegic.

Funny how the world wants us to exist in pre-defined boxes. Only disabled people have orange safety flags. You must have a permanent job, and aspire only to Marriage, Mortgage and Mini-Mes while doing time on Normal Drive. You only get to pursue your dreams after 40-50 years of this, when you retire. And Fat Chicks don’t go cycling, hiking and paddling around the world. At any age.

Fuck it, I’m gonna do it anyway. Normal is boring. And, if you ask me, a little insane.

Schleffo and I discussed the whole Normal thing once. He didn’t have a high opinion of it either. While he’s happily married with adult kids, a steady job and a mortgage, he’s rebelling against Normal by building a plane in his backyard. That’s what he lives for, not his job. He’s not game enough to break out of Planet Office – mostly

because he's close to retirement and figures since he's done this much time on Normal Drive, he might as well serve out his last few years.

But he sees through it, as I do. Schleffo calls us corporate whores. I realise this is worse than being a regular whore. Instead of merely selling our bodies for money, we are selling our entire *lives* for it.

Want 20% Off The Book? go to <http://www.fatchickgoesawol.com/book-discount>