

## The Australian Wager

“Hey Jay. What’s the capital of Australia?” Rob fired this off as a thinly veiled barb.

“*What?*” I asked out loud, but thought to myself incredulously, *Doesn’t everybody know that?* An easy question to answer, unless, of course, you were not well-traveled, and the questioner wasn’t. Or unless you weren’t college-educated, and this same speaker, a seventeen-year-old, wasn’t. This person was Rob, someone who had a penchant for petty theft and a lack of respect for other people’s private property. As for me, a world traveler and Ivy Leaguer to boot, I should probably know the answer. But I hid my eyes behind tinted sunglasses, more intent on a female customer walking in to buy cigarettes than on Rob’s “Down-er Under.”

*But what IS the capital of Australia? A-ha, eureka, I got it!* Just like the lucky soul who breathed what would become California’s state motto upon finding gold, I plucked out the answer after panning through my memory. I had traveled to Australia once for a job interview, and the answer also came from my study of the Graduate Record Exam, in an attempt to crack it. The two sources corroborated each other.

“So Harvard Man, what is it?” Rob sneered, trampling over my educational pedigree, as he viciously sucker-punched me—*Ow!*—on the arm.

“See? He doesn’t know, ha-ha,” he cackled with uncompromising disrespect, turning toward and seeking recognition from the senior henchmen seated with us at court: Edmund, a heavysset “Jolly Good Fellow” who baked pizzas, and Ahmad, a slim bookie who talked in jive.

Then there were the two owners of the cigar bar who were observing us: Amo, a tall, thin bloke with a constant dour frown who manned the till so that nobody got to it, short of killing him, and Jack, a buff, former construction worker who was always hustling, always trying to sell you something.

At the time, I, as a Harvard-educated slacker, was stuck post-graduation with a bipolar type one diagnosis, unable to account for it. My brain, once a finely tuned Aston Martin, was now a backfiring Yugo, and it was all I could do not to lose my composure and cry, feeling like a complete loser, given to frittering the rest of my years in a cigar shop and frivolously spending my money on cigars. And that was where the other cigar aficionados and I were, at “Up ’n Smoke” in the San Fernando Valley.

Now Rob’s insulting gesture had just lit a fire under me. I normally didn’t mind clowns caught up in their own monkeyshines, but when they stained my wanderlust credentials and desecrated my alma mater I would go to all lengths to put them in their place. What I had to do to earn the title of “knight-errant” and the privilege of “Bachelor of Arts” from Harvard was beyond Rob’s comprehension, and now I was piping mad.

“Wait! Do *you* know?” I taunted back at Rob, as I began feeling hot-headed. Then something clacked inside my troubled brain. *OK, I’ll show you!*

“Rob, I’ll bet money I know and you don’t!” I threw down the gauntlet as I sensed an opening, a way of dusting things up, of making an example of this little peacock.

We cigar fanatics were assembled around a circular wood and faux-marble table upon which a round cigar ashtray was in constant use. Rob and I lounged on opposite ends of an oversized, pitch black, faux-leather, sagging three-seater. Meanwhile, Edmund and Ahmad reclined in puffy, jet-black office chairs, replete with oversized armrests and huge headrests. Each of their chairs had a chrome base that connected the seat to black plastic wheels. It was odd seeing the two seated as such, since the chairs seemed to have been plucked from a futuristic sci-fi movie set.

Edmund and Ahmad trained their ears in on the conversation, as Rob picked up the gauntlet.

“Oh, yeah, you wanna go?” Rob demanded. Boy, I just wanted to grab that clown’s ugly mug and defile his smirk, once and for all.

“Sydney?” intoned Rob, moving his lips tentatively. He said it like “Shid-neigh.”

“Yeah, it’s sh-t knee, isn’t it?” Edmund joked, mocking the entire process. His chair stood opposite my seat on the sofa, and he was now blowing a chimney-full of smoke out from the near-butt of his double corona, holding it gingerly in thumb and index finger. He then managed to crack up at his own insipid joke. He even looked at me to pick up on his intentional mispronunciation. But I glared at him instead, for nearly sidetracking the wager.

Miffed by my gravitas, Edmund dispensed his cigar butt in the table ashtray and rose from his chair to enter the walk-in humidior. This time he chose a baseball-bat-shaped presidente. After Amo rang up the sale, I paused to watch the delicacy and nimbleness of Edmund’s plump, thick fingers, each as wide around as a sausage link, as the pizza man lit that Nicaraguan bad boy up with a torch lighter.

Edmund returned to stand at the side of his puffy seat, waiting to see what would happen next. Ahmad shifted in his own chair, taking it all in, then started to lean forward.

“Yo, bro, it’s Sydney, ai-right?” Ahmad muttered loudly.

I raised a clenched fist at him for possibly jeopardizing the bet. He himself elevated both arms as if to say, “What did I do?” His curiosity already having been piqued, he went back to his dark, maduro-colored stub of a robusto and continued watching Rob and me. He rolled the cigar around and around in his mouth with his thumb and index fingers while chomping on the head

every now and then with his teeth, finally letting out a steam-engine's worth of smoke into the air.

I felt a mischievous glint emanate from my eyes. "So all right, everybody! No one touches their phones and no one helps Rob! Yeah yeah yeah!" My voice was at a shrill drill sergeant's fever pitch, and my facial features contorted into a Stephen Hawking's grimace as I bounded upwards from the couch to stand all the way up on tiptoe, like one of Michael Jackson's signature dance poses. Heads swiveled. Eyes widened. Mouths opened. Silence descended upon the party. Rob dropped his cigar by accident. Momentarily startled, everyone stopped what they were doing. Even Jack, who had just come out of the bathroom, exited in stutter-step, as if he were juking out Michael Jordan himself. But that wet washrag in his hand was no basketball.

"There's a madman among us!" another customer, who had just come inside to buy a cigarette carton, half-joked. He skedaddled out the door as soon as he made his buy.

As my labile mood temporarily subsided and since I now had the attention of everyone I deemed important, I collapsed back down on the couch. A few wandering customers had returned, albeit reluctantly, back to what they were doing.

The focus of Edmund's and Ahmad's attentiveness, I went back to Rob. "OK, Sydney, that's one answer! You get two more! If any one of your answers is right and mine is wrong, you win. If we're both right or both wrong, it's a tie. But if I'm right and all three of your answers are wrong, I WIN!"

With that, I pulled out my leather wallet from a back pocket and took from it a folded piece of paper. I unfolded it and displayed it carefully, left to right and back the other way, to Ahmad and Rob who were sitting around the circular table, as well as to Edmund who still stood nearby.

They all leaned in, peering at the document.

I grinned. “There you go, guys. That’s my most recent paycheck of six hundred dollars! I’ll bet this money that I know the capital of Australia and he”—I turned my gaze to Rob and jabbed a thumb at him—“doesn’t!” I tilted over at Rob and leered straight into his face.

With my thumb and index finger I tossed the check over to the circular center table, where it fluttered in mid-air before coming to rest on the round tabletop, next to the ashtray. Ahmad excitedly bent over to pick it up, stared at the watermark, became convinced it was legitimate—which it was— and remarked, “Aw-yeah! My main man Jay just threw down six Benjamins to start the deal!” A hoarse laugh sprang out from Ahmad and then a smoker’s cough overcame him.

Edmund shouted at Ahmad, “Hey wait! Who the hell do you think you are, Don King or what?”

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While Amo continued to man the till silently, Jack yelled out, “OK, I’ll check the answer.” He nearly fell over himself to enter the humidor. He had been observing the whole thing carefully after coming out of the bathroom, and he got sucked into it. He was up for anything that sped up sales in his establishment. He would be the “Judge and Jury” of this.

Rob pulled out from his nylon and Velcro wallet six crisp hundred-dollar bills and dropped the wad carelessly on the table, as if he already knew he was going to win it back. Rob seemed so sure he had this one in the bag! Multiple chances to score and maybe I was bluffing?

“Perth!” Rob yelled out, an exuberant grin on his face. Edmund, now back in his chair, and Ahmad, leaning toward Edmund, began softly whispering to each other, between whooshes of cigar smoke and the sharing of knowing smiles. Now the two men were fully onboard.

At this last guess, as with the first, I didn't even say "wrong." I just screamed, "Woooo-hooo" at the top of my lungs, in complete and utter disregard for the challenger.

I momentarily collected myself and announced, "OK, that was answer two. Try one more time! And, uh... hurry up, will you, OK? I don't got all day," psychologically battering my foe. This time I squared myself up, took aim and sucker-punched Rob on his unsuspecting bicep. His turn to hurt.

"That's for bustin' my chops, Rob!" I menaced him with a lion's roar.

Rob's grin stayed plastered on his face, and he looked straight ahead, but I began to see just a hint of disbelief in his eyes, as if maybe I knew this one and he didn't. He was at a dead loss for any other Australian city to come to his untutored imagination, you could tell.

"Holy moly, I really don't think you're going to win this one, Rob," Edmund squinted at the kid. A falsetto laugh emerged from his moist lips in a gesture of contempt for the petty thief.

"Oh my God, there's twelve hundred dollars in the damned pot!" Ahmad hurrahed as he inspected the six hundreds and my check.

By now, Rob had his face all scrunched up, as he jogged his memory furiously, fervently reaching for some place, any place in Australia, that might work.

The seconds and minutes ticked off. I had stopped counting time with this kid. I figured that he could take until the shop's closing, and he still wouldn't come up with a good third answer.

"It's been ten minutes, Rob. Let's go," Edmund nudged Rob.

"*Diez minutos*, on my clock too, man," Ahmad also counted the time to Rob.

"See, he doesn't know!" I gloated to Edmund and Ahmad, stealing Rob's own repartee.

Rob broke away from his mental workout, and, goaded by our bullying, screamed with clumsy might, “Alright, alright, it’s Melbourne!”

Instead of laughing like a hyena, this time I sat down, silent and inscrutable behind my tinted shades. A hush descended over the room. Ahmad and Edmund did nothing, except suck on stogies and focus their eyes on me.

I motioned to “Judge and Jury Jack,” who was still pacing inside the humidior. You would have thought he had put on a black robe before leaving the humidior, the way he waltzed back in like a judge entering the courtroom to the bailiff’s “All rise!” Instead, he had his phone in hand, with the answer to our agonizing question.

“So Jack, do you know the capital of Australia?” I prompted.

“Yeah, I do,” he said matter-of-factly, folding his arms, as if he were the authority on Australian toponymy.

“Alright. So Rob”—I jabbed my thumb at the kid scornfully—“chose Sydney, Perth and Melbourne. Right, Rob?” Rob nodded. “Are any of those right, Jack?”

Jack paused to swallow some air, shook his head and then announced: “Nada.” Jack’s eyes looked up to the ceiling, his arms fell to their sides and he put his phone away.

Edmund and Ahmad beheld Jack, both men’s eyes bulging. Smoke streamed out of their handheld cigars. A thick film of sweat on Rob’s brow was now visible. I began to giggle like an evil genius. Edmund and Ahmad looked at me, then back at each other, then back to me.

“Are you fooling around with us, Jay?” Edmund queried.

“What’s up yo’ sleeve, man?” Ahmad demanded.

“OK, everyone,” I said. “So do you want to hear the right answer?”

A cacophony of indignant voices shouted out to be heard, in essence saying, “Tell us!”

“Alright, settle down,” I crowed above the din. “Shhh! Shut up! Be quiet!” I screamed, before everybody became silent. “So my answer is...” Ahmad and Edmund slanted in over the round table as if over a campfire, with me as Boy Scout storyteller. Rob seemed frozen, staring without another word at nothing. I spoke slowly, and deliberately, as if I were enunciating at a Spelling Bee: “Canberra. C-A-N-B-E-R-R-A. Canberra.”

Everybody turned to Judge Jack. Finding himself to be the focal point, he paled ever so slightly, shifting from one leg to the other. Stage fright. But realizing that he had accepted the privilege to mete justice, he went forward and stated ever so solemnly, “Jay is right. It’s Canberra.” He shrugged his shoulders at Rob: “Sorry, man, you lost.”

You could have heard a cigar label drop on that shag-carpeted floor of Up ’n Smoke. Edmund and Ahmad gawked at me, unbelieving, as if to say: “How’d you do that?” Their eyes nearly popped out of their heads. Then a mad rush to pick up their phones ensued, and the two tapped on their keyboards to confirm Jack’s answer. Satisfied, they stood up to celebrate.

“Holy moly!” Edmund paraded around the shop, doing an Ali shuffle, cigar in hand, his heavy frame and protruding belly at odds with the gracefulness of his lightweight footwork. He settled back down in his chair, now more comfortably intent on his cigar.

“A kickass show!” Ahmad chortled to himself, dusting off his suit jacket and settling his svelte frame back into his “executive’s chair,” as if he had masterminded the whole gig himself from his puffy, oversized throne. He did look like Don King somewhat, with the greying coif and gold spectacles.

I tipped forward over the circular table to retrieve my check and pick up my half-a-dozen “Benjamins.” Then sitting upright on the edge of the couch, I glanced over at Rob. He was in full PTSD mode, with a clown’s frown on his face, his ordinarily tanned features now completely



blanched. But, in fairness to his youth and inexperience, I remembered what somebody once said to me: *“Hey Jay, go easy on the kid. This cat’s got a lot to learn.”*

“So Rob.”

“What?” he asked weakly, turning to me, utter defeat in his childish voice.

“Did you learn your lesson? That winners don’t gamble?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Now, do you want a cigar?”

“What?”

“I said a cigar. I’m buying.”

“Heh, yeah, sure, Jay.”

I glanced at Edmund and Ahmad. Now that they had settled down, I wanted to thank them for serving as audience to the whole caper. I stood up as they watched me, the Harvard Hustler, with newfound esteem.

“Jack, let me buy a cigar for each one of us.”

“Alright Jay. Hey everyone! Jay’s buying you all a cigar.” Jack rubbed his chin, wondering at my largesse.

I handed Jack a hundred. Everybody marched into the walk-in humidor, with Jack keeping a watchful eye on Rob. After selection, Edmund, Ahmad and Rob, in that order, went to the counter to help themselves to the cigar cutter and torch lighter. I myself soon bounced over to the counter to get my change from Amo. Rob still stood nearby.

“Rob, no hard feelings, eh?” We exchanged fist-bumps by the register. There was no need to rub it in.

Amo returned the change to me. He had manned the till stoically the whole time, except for a measured shaking of his head and a pursing of his lips. He didn't think much of any of us.

And so the evening ended not too badly, with some "mild" entertainment, my honor intact, free stogies for everyone, and a winning house, as always, with the new purchases.

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Before the wager, I had felt as dull and dumb as a doorknob. It was all I could do simply to sit in my seat and suck on a stogie. I wished my brain would fire in a well-timed sequence of carefully managed explosions, as it had before, so that I could blast off out of that cigar store. Not even close. Yet once Rob cast doubt on my travel record and college pedigree, there was a chain reaction, as if the: (1) neurons fired, (2) neurotransmitters flowed, and (3) axons and dendrites connected. He had basically lit a match underneath my own Saturn V rocket. Ignition sequence began, with seven-and-a-half million pounds of thrust, (1) burning kerosene, hydrogen and oxygen, (2) lifting a fifty-ton Apollo spacecraft and lunar lander, and (3) slicing through the heavy lower Earth's atmosphere, to "fly me to the moon." And on the other side, Rob, who had played with fire, got burnt.

However, after the initial brilliance of launch from Earth, the victory over Rob rang hollow. The Saturn V could throttle up only to fifty percent. That was the bipolar manifesting itself: fifty-percent power, fifty-percent efficiency, fifty-percent stress. I was operating with one hand tied behind my back. The issue of my mental health seemed to present itself as an impossible conundrum.

However, due to the encounter, I became relentlessly committed to overcoming my limitations. Reducing the rocket's 50-ton "payload" could lower the stress (i.e. by doing such things as taking breaks). Streamlining the rocket's aerodynamics would enhance its efficiency

(i.e. by using good sleep hygiene to help my brain, etc.). And additional strap-on booster rockets could augment the main engine's power (i.e. by working with my treatment team, family and community so I did not "go it alone"). Using my limitations as opportunities meant that I could handle myself as well as someone without the illness.

With growing alarm over my squandered past, and with a strong urgency to attain a bright future yet-to-be, I decided to apply for Ph.D. programs in business management. Unlike professional degrees or a Master's, you had to do a separate research study—the dissertation—to graduate. So I thought of what institutions to apply to that would provide an intellectual experience. The usual suspects were out there: Stanford, UCLA, Harvard, Penn, NYU, Columbia, and the University of Pittsburgh.

The application process was long, tedious and lasted a year. Filling out applications felt boring but required attention to detail. Prepping for the GRE again was drudgery, but I had to unriddle it. Getting college transcripts required arcane rules, but I had to do it. Personal essays were lessons in frustration, but I got the hang of them. Assembling the packets was a logistical nightmare, but everything settled down. And I stayed away from cigars despite the tremendous temptation to seek old haunts, hang with old friends, and pick up old habits. The packets went out in January, when schools opened after winter recess.

I waited.

February froze my marrow and March thawed it.

And I waited.

April Fools' brought May's I.Q. test results.

And I waited.

June's Start of Summer ended with July's Four Bangs.

And I waited.

Then, in July, at the height of summer... do you know what happened?

I got in!

Pitt was it.

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