Romania

Romania is an East European country. It suffered cruel history and much injustice. The 22 million people that now live in Romania have Aryan origins but when Romans invaded the country they named the inhabitants Romans. In the sixth century Slavic tribes arrived and in the twelfth century gipsies flooded Romania from India. Turks invaded Romania during middle ages and ruled them until Romania gained independence in 1881. Transylvania united with Romania in 1918.
During the WWII the big powers cut up Romania among themselves mercilessly.
Soviet occupation in 1947 led to the abdication of the king and the draconian dictatorship of Nicole Ceausescu who was overthrown and executed in 1989. By 1996 the communists lost power and the country is on the way of recovery economically and socially.
Romania is a Christian country with the main Romanian orthodox religion.

Anton Kovac

My most vivid childhood memory is of kids at school calling me Gipsy. I don't know why this made me so ashamed and angry and upset. I had many fights because of it and I was always in trouble because of fighting. You could say that I escaped from Romania because kids called me Gipsy. Parents scared their children by saying that gipsies will take them if they are not neat and honest and hardworking. I grew up terrified of Gipsies.

I heard people say that my father used to be a Gipsy. I couldn't say when my father stopped being a Gipsy or if secretly he was still a gipsy. We used to go to church like ordinary people and we never went begging from house to house like gipsies do.

I was born in 1941 as one of five children. My parents produced food on their little farm on the border of Hungary and Romania.

Everybody was poor at the end of the war. Our house was burnt and we lost our animals. We were forever hungry and waiting for my mother to bring home food. She worked on the fields for other peasants and when she returned, tired in the evening, the kids jumped to untie her apron. We thought only of our hunger and blamed mum if she didn't bring enough or if she came late. Later I realised that as the oldest, I should have helped her.

Dad worked in the vineyard and often came home drunk, singing through the forest. He chased mum through the house and sometimes he caught her in an embrace to dance with him to his song. Mum often ran out of the house to feed pigs or chooks, so he chased us kids. He hugged us and bounced us on his lap and we were delighted. That was the only nice thing that happened to us. Dad sang silly songs and the tears rolled down his eyes and we asked for more.

Mum was always busy, she nagged us to help her but dad told her that kids should have fun. People said that mum deserved better. I loved dad more than I loved mum.

Everything changed when I went to school. At school I first heard that dad was a gipsy. It seemed that nobody liked my dad and that everybody felt sorry for my mother. Mum inherited a vineyard and a paddock from her parents but dad came with nothing. I became ashamed of dad and I began to hate mum for marrying him.

I heard the whispers that my father was drinking with a woman in the vineyard's storage room. Kids teased me about that but I was strong and I hit them to shut them up.

One day I went to the vineyard to get some grapes for mum. I heard the laughter from the storage room above the vineyard. I saw a fancy basket full of grapes and red peaches covered with silky flowery scarf. I realised that the

basket belonged to a woman who laughed with dad inside. I grabbed the basket and ran home. I don't know why I did that but I was very angry.

Mum ran to the vineyard and abused the woman who was drinking with dad. The other woman was younger, she had a flowery dress and she laughed at mum. Mum yelled at dad and the other woman. The other winegrowers came out to listen. I was hiding behind the bushes and felt ashamed.

Mum kept the woman's basket and scarf and whenever I saw either of them I remembered and was sorry for bringing them home.

In 1956 I moved to Bucharest where I met Alenka. We both worked in a textile factory. I had nowhere to live. In the summer I slept on the railway bench. In the cold late autumn the police chased me away. It wouldn't do to have me freeze in the night. Alenka and I decided to get married and move in with Alenka's family on the outskirts of the city. That's where problems started. Alenka's family told her that she could do better.

After our son Martin was born I felt trapped. I wanted to be somebody, live in my own house, and make my son proud.
I escaped to Austria from where they transported migrants to other countries. I promised Alenka to send for her as soon as I settled down.

In 1960 I arrived to Australia by Qantas. I met migrants of many nationalities coming on the same plane. I landed in Sydney and on my long bus journey from Sydney to a migrant camp in Bonegilla; I sat next to Nicola. This Croatian migrant told me that his cousin Stipe will pick him up and take him opal mining in Lightning Ridge. Stipe later told us that there was money, lots of money in opal if you were lucky. Black opal from Lightning Ridge was the most precious and beautiful gem in the world.
I joined the two men. The road to Lightning Ridge seemed endless but I was happy because the monotonous scenery took me away from everything I wanted to forget. The trees ahead promised to turn into forests but they were really just scattered clumps of shade for the thousands of sheep. The countryside had no landmarks that I could remember but I welcomed the newness, the distance and the aloneness.

The mirages on the flat country encircled everything within into a pretend ocean. The trees in the distance seemed to grow out of the glistening water. The water turned into dry parched, cracked dirt as we came near. Everything seemed unreal.

The dirt road brought us to a small dusty settlement with a ghost like mullock heaps of opal dirt around the camps.

Miner's dwellings were much like Gipsy villages at home.

The old miners told me that in Lightning Ridge everyone had an equal chance and fortunes were made overnight.

I was determined to make a go of it.

There was a story about Steve, a poor Hungarian Gipsy, who built a camp in the bush. As he dug a hole for the toilet he bottomed on opal and became rich. Miners came to seek Steve's advice. Steve became an expert in everything. Overnight he became well known and respected. The dreams were made of true stories like that.

I never told anyone that they called me Gipsy. I never talked to Steve because he was a Gipsy.

Among strangers I learned to speak English fast. The mining vocabulary does not require too many words and all are related to opal.

Tourists often inquired about the meanings of the local expressions. I felt clever as I explained to them about angel stones, china hats, gouging, fossicking, puddling, specking, propping, about the biscuit bend and tailings and bottoming.

Stipe introduced me to pig chasing. The floodwaters brought hundreds of pigs from the farms up North. The pigs became feral and, hiding in the huge wheat paddocks most of the time, they were hard to spot except when they ventured along the bore drain to get a drink. Farmers welcomed hunters who got rid of the menace as long as they kept the gates shut and didn't disturb other stock.

Stipe drove his old Ute into the bush over the logs and drains. The boys tried to hold on at the back with the pig dogs. Stipe didn't want the sows because they were always pregnant so he directed the dogs towards the chosen boars. When we mustered the pig, the dog jumped out and caught it by the ear and we followed. One pulled the pig's tail and kicked his hind legs in to make it fall on its back before we put it in a cage. We brought home eight wild boars that first evening. At home Stipe grabbed the tail of the one at the cage door and pulled it out and onto his back. Grab the back legs, he yelled. They pushed the boar, head first, into the steel frame, so it couldn't move. Stipe quickly cut into the flesh and castrated the pig. Catch, he yelled. Nicola wanted to have a go next, he wielded a knife towards the other men asking them if he could perhaps practice first on either of them since they had no use for their balls here in the bush.
You would have a go if it was whisky we drowned you in afterwards, laughed Stipe pouring the antiseptic over the pig's wound. Now comes the bath, he said as he poured kerosene over the bleeding boar to kill the lice before he released it into the sty. In a couple of days they'll want to eat again and then I'll clean their guts out with de-wormer. Once on grain they'll grow fat in no time.
I grabbed the tail of the boar while Stipe spread its legs to let Nicola get the balls. I made a mistake and patted the boar's ear. Like a flash of Lightning the boar twisted its head and slashed my hand with its protruding task. I let go and the pig bolted with half his pig hood intact. Get him, yelled Nicola and Stipe joined him chasing the pig into the scrub.

I poured antiseptic over my gaping wound and wrapped the hand into my shirt. That's the last of cutting balls for me, I said to myself.

Two months will see them fat. In the middle of winter we'll kill them, said Stipe.

In July most Yugoslavs in Lightning Ridge came to Stipe's place. They brought cartons of beer and bottles of whisky to recreate their memories. Nationalities forgotten they all spoke Serbo-Croatian as directed by their Yugoslav government at home. They needed the unity, a dozen or so men lost in the bush among strangers. I understood much of what they said since we were neighbours in the old country.

Aboriginal girls came to drink with the men. Once we killed eight fat boars and selected pieces for smoking. The rest we minced for sausages, arguing all the time about the recipes used at homes. Girls were generous with their help but they followed men's instructions for the cuisine they were unaccustomed to. Yugoslavs preferred pork to lamb and mutton, they even preferred rabbits but most rabbits were poisoned now. The farmers spread the poison because the rabbits dug into the ground and spread the obnoxious weeds into the waterways and so into the outback. Like the wild rabbit, domestic animals introduced to Australia also adopted to warm conditions quickly. Without natural predators they easily competed with the native fauna for natural resources. There were no fences in the early days and many pigs, horses and buffaloes escaped into the bush where they bred uncontrollably. The graziers were afraid that feral animals would bring foot and mouth disease to the continent.

The floods brought many domestic pigs from Queensland and they roamed wild in the bushes around Lightning Ridge. The farmers who cleared and ploughed miles of land were afraid that pigs would destroy their crops. The golden grain paddocks swayed in the wind as far as the eye could see during the wet season but during the drought the land was bare and the feral animals dug for roots into the scorched ground. As the wind came it lifted the precious soil and made enormous dust bowls out of the country. The thin layer of the soil was becoming thinner.

Flies bothered miners in the bush. We cooked on the campfire and millions of flies descended on any spot touched by food. The newly introduced cattle, sheep and pigs produced tons of manure for flies to breed on in the hot summers. Flies had no natural enemy in Australia until they brought the African beetle to digest the piles of manure scattered in the bush. But the flies persisted and Australians invented hats with fly screens and corks bobbing down around their faces. Gradually they sprayed the flies dead. Now flies only appear in spring and autumn unable to resist the warmth and the dung smell. There are no flies in the heat of summer or in the cold of winter.

On my arrival I wandered around opal fields and spotted an unusual concrete structure. I stopped at the sign Bush Observatory, visitors welcome. I was amazed seeing the rooms dedicated to philosophers, astronomers and

scientists. In the concrete was written a story about Alex who was wrongfully accused of murder. He spent four years in jail before he was pardoned but he never wanted to join the rat race again. The observatory was his monument, his dream. He mined for opal but mining was just a hobby, something to do when he wasn't building. Money wasn't important to Alex; he lived cheaply and spent most of his money on the steel and the cement for the astrological and astronomical structures in the middle of the bush.

I met Bill who lives in his old shack close to Alex. We liked each other from the start. I decided to work with Bill on percentage because he had his own equipment.

There is a story behind every man in the bush, said Bill with a twinkle in his eye.

The camps of Bushmen stretched into the virgin bushland. The men accepted each other's anonymity and shared of themselves only what they wanted to share. The anxieties and fears of the past were replaced with dreams for the future. Everybody was equal. Other men's languages were as strange to me as mine was to them. We marvelled at each others customs and traditions. I became one of the boys. My story was safely tucked away. The events from the past could be recalled at will but I could pretend to be who I wanted to be.

During the working day Bill spoke in rare monosyllabic words. In the evening we sat around the campfire and Bill and Alex talked about Greek philosophers and famous astronomers. We looked at the sky sprinkled with most brilliant stars.
On dry hot summer nights most miners slept outside on makeshift beds to catch the breeze but during wet periods voracious hordes of mosquitoes forced us inside. We were reluctant to go outside even to cook.
Bill downed a woollen balaclava on his head as he rushed to his small campfire to get the billy-can to make tea.

I stopped with Bill in his camp until I built my own nearby. I worked hard because I planned to go home and bring Alenka and Martin with me. She sent me a photo of Martin who started to say daddy.

While I tried to save money to bring my family over I met Edna, exciting, willing and beautiful Aboriginal girl. I told Edna about Alenka and my son and she seemed pleased about them.

Most of other migrants slept with Aboriginal girls. You have to have somebody. I realised that for every hundred of miners there were about twenty females. Most of the migrant women were married. White Australian girls rarely picked a non-English speaking migrant man. Thank God for Aboriginal women who felt quite happy to sleep with migrant men.

I grew fond of Edna and after awhile I invited her to my camp.

I always remembered Bill's words: It is easier to find opal than a partner. As long as you are not after the same thing you can trust your friend or your brother, but on opal we are all greedy for the same thing. Many friendships are broken on account of opal. People start off trusting each other, they couldn't be bothered with contracts, they work happily until they find money, but then most look again at their vague verbal agreement and try to get more for themselves out of the partnership.

Bill liked to sit in the Diggers Rest hotel telling stories about the gems he found and saw. When others argued about the power of politics and religion Bill insisted that the power of man's greed wins hands down every time. When the talk came around the reasons for us being here Bill said:
When you join the system you put yourself in line for promotion and then you wait for promotion and pay rise all your life. You are constantly afraid that you will fail because you may not be good enough. When there is no more chance for promotion, you slip away and die.

Men are less scared in Lightning Ridge. In the system a man is driven towards a pay rise and promotion. If you don't get ahead you become afraid that maybe you are not even good enough to be where you are. That maybe tomorrow you will be left behind.

Bill and I found a huge nobby of opal weighing almost half a kilo. Bill showed it in the pub and it passed from hand to hand and from lips to lips as his mates licked it to examine it for any traces of colour. A bluish-green and pink lines were noticed on the grey background but there was no commercial value in the colour. It was an interesting specimen and Bill's fellow drinker, offered a hundred pounds for it. That was a lot of money in the sixties for a colourless stone. Miners talked in pounds for years after the currency changed to dollars. It took a long time before dollars were granted the status of real money. Bill's friend wanted the nobby specimen as a birthday present for his friend, a local shopkeeper, who used it as a paperweight on the counter of his shop.

An opal buyer spotted the nobby some months later and paid two hundred pounds for it. He took it to Japan to serve as the background piece for his opal exhibition. The large ugly looking blob of grey potch fascinated his Japanese business partner. He wanted to buy the piece to contrast with his colourful opal collection.

The opal buyer passed the nobby into his hands but it fell on the marble floor of the exhibition hall and it chipped at the end. The opal buyer picked it up and his face changed as he slowly kneeled onto the floor to cover the stone. The heart of the paperweight nobby was a pure red on black gem. Scooping the broken stone he excused himself and went into his room where he looked into the mass of red fire, where purple, violet and green flames moved like flamenco dancers inside the fiery hell of the stone.

This is, this is, he stuttered as he searched for the name that would portray some of the beauty of the stone. This is a bleeding broken heart, he named the stone. He booked the first plane to take him back to Lightning Ridge.

Joseph, the local cutter quietly locked the workshop after he glanced at the nobby. He took out a bottle of whisky and they sipped slowly as the nobby passed again and again from hand to hand. They held it to the eye, under the table, far away, under the light and magnifying glass and finally they left it on the table to look at them.
What are we going to do with it, asked the cutter as the daylight faded.

We'll decide tomorrow, said the buyer exhausted from the admiration.

The next day they decided on one large heart shaped stone to keep and enough little ones to make the man a millionaire. The cutter got a generous commission and both men agreed to keep the story of the stone a secret. But no story of this proportion could be kept secret for long. You can't hide a fire; there will be smoke and the heat. Rumours began. Nobody knew how the story emerged, it probably just boiled over. People simply had to share the knowing. Over the years I heard little details of the story over and over and it became the greatest story of my life.
It became one of the great stories of Lightning Ridge.
At first I felt let down by Bill.
You should have known. You had been in the Ridge for ages, you know everything about opal, I accused Bill.

Sometimes you have to break the heart to see what's in it, said Bill almost unconcerned.

Go and see the buyer, said Edna. He might give you a share.

I was too sick at heart for the beauty I had and lost. You can't be that lucky twice. I left Bill to start on my own.

Old Bill became sick and died soon after.

Edna became my mining partner. Just as well I bought my own compressor and jack-pick. Edna filled the wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow and tipped the dirt into the bucket to be lifted out by the hoist. When the truck was full we took the clay dirt to the puddler to wash. As we waited, Edna and I sat in the dirt, drank beer and smoked in expectation. Going through the tailings was always exciting as the colourful silica shone in the clay mud. But we found nothing worthwhile as we drove for over thirty metres into the dirt.

That's it, I said and switched off the compressor.

We sat leaning on the pillar and Edna scratched into the pillar with a screwdriver. The glassy sound told her that she drilled into the opal even before she saw the rainbow-coloured chips.

We cried. We just hugged and cried.

There is more, must be more, Edna whispered. But there wasn't. We cut a few tiny red stones from the chips on the ground and feverishly followed the direction of the trace for another twenty metres. The red stone, only centimetres from the surface was the only stone. The story of it spread like stories do in Lightning Ridge.

It could have been a twenty-carat of red on black, miners said. You could ask any money for a stone like that. And there were lots of little ones.

Twice unlucky, I expected the third chance but it never came.

Edna and I had seven children in ten years. As my family grew I relied on odd jobs to provide for them and only mined to pursue my dream. I found insignificant green and blue stones but never again anything that would warm my heart.

Our oldest son Kevin often came with me on the field and played there with his dogs. He picked lumps of dirt and threw them for the dogs to fetch. Once a dog returned a fair sized lump of dirt and, wet from the dog's saliva, it exposed a speck of red colour through the dusty surface.

Kevin showed it to me and we went to the cutter to see what was inside. To our amazement the stone sold for two thousand dollars. I banked the money for Kevin. Since then all my children became keen on specking. A few days later I went to the pub and heard about a boy who found a ten thousand-dollar stone just like that on top. Kevin's story spread and became bigger and better with every telling. I didn't mind becoming a celebrity.

One day in the pub a miner was telling a story to some tourists: This little black bastard found a fifty thousand dollar stone on top of the mine and threw it to a dog to lick. People laughed in amazement. Neither the storyteller nor his audience associated me with the little black bastard. I ignored them, I knew that they said things about my kids behind my back.

Most European miners had kids with Aboriginal girls. There were few girls around of any sort except Aboriginal. Australian girls were stuck up farmers' daughters or office workers or nurses and teachers.

The opal became scarce so I had to look for work on the nearby farms. There was no unemployment benefit in Lightning Ridge until the eighties; you couldn't say that you were looking for work if you lived in Lightning Ridge because there was no work other than mining. You were here on your own with your luck.

I took a gang of Aborigines into the bush fencing, shearing and grid making. We camped, cooked on the open fire, boiled the billy, baked the damper, and barbecued the meat farmers provided. We used bore water for everything. I had to fill my hat with water and put it under the tree to cool before I could drink it. At least water was available since they drilled the artesian bore. I heard that they looked for oil and found water. Trenches were made on the

nearby farms to use the water for stock. Hot water from almost thousand metres deep Artesian Basin provided for the bore bath where people of Lightning Ridge met after work to soak their tired bodies.

These days many European migrants come because they believe that the water has a healing power.

Often all the family joined me as I went cotton chipping and stick picking at Wee Waa. I was used to chipping from home.

I hated to work with animals though. When I first went mulesing, I held the sheep while Edna's cousin cut the skin off the sheep's bum, spread the mulesing powder on the bleeding wound and let go. I almost passed out. Have to be cruel to be kind, said the grazier. We cut the skin off their bum so the wool won't grow and the shit won't stick to it and flies won't lay maggots.

I hated dehorning. Young calves cried as I cut their horns and I felt a pain in my stomach.

They get caught in the fences if the horns are left growing, they fight and damage their skin, the flies attack the wounds, explained the grazier. It had to be done. I didn't mind shearing, crutching, drenching. I talked to sheep as I shaved their faces and feet so the burrs didn't stick in the wool.

I hated inflicting pain on dumb animals but I had to cut their tails and balls. They showed me how to put the sheep down with its front legs opened wide around my neck while I held the open purse with two fingers and pulled the balls out with my teeth and spat them out. To do a calf you needed two blokes, one to hold the head and the other to throw it on the ground from the back.

I heard people say that people on the land had it easy in Australia, that they just let the sheep loose in the paddock and let the wool and meat grow. Our people know nothing of the backbreaking jobs with animals.

I heard a grazier say to his city friend: The wool grows while I sleep and it grows on something that we eat.

It made sense to him. There was a lot of cheap labour around. Aborigines and itinerant migrants did most of the backbreaking work.

I caught myself talking Romanian sometimes as I walked alone in the bush. I started by humming familiar tunes of love songs dad used to sing at home. Later I checked that nobody was within an earshot and then I sang out at the top of my voice. Talking out came gradually. First I felt weird saying things out loud to sheep and kangaroos and stupid galahs but lately I said things to fences and bushes. The half-forgotten language brings back memories from childhood. There was no need for embarrassment since no one knew or cared that I even existed within the vastness of the outback. There was no need to

tell anyone about this either since no-body would be interested. People accept others as they come in Lightning Ridge.

I was fascinated by the name Lightning Ridge . My Australian partner Bill liked to explain about the town's history.

At the turn of the century a shepherd grazed his sheep on the spot where the town stands now. Lightning once struck the Ridge which was the highest spot for hundreds of miles. It killed a shepherd, his dog and six hundred sheep. The place became known as Lightning Ridge .

Shepherds found colourful silica flushed out by erosion and washed by floods. Fascinated by the shiny stones the shepherds sunk the first shafts in 1901. The first miners came to Lightning Ridge soon after. They were obstructed and persecuted by landowners who wanted to stop these vagabonds trespassing on their land. When the graziers could not break the miners' spirit they fenced off the water and then poisoned the water with an excuse that they wanted to exterminate the rabbits. Without the water and with their horses impounded, the miners paid heavy tolls on food supplies.

Those men really had a lot more grit than we have today, remembered Bill.

A serious mining only started when I arrived in the sixties. Every miner became an inventor of the tools he used. New machinery was invented from old bits of steel often found at the tip.

Lightning Ridge was a good town in the sixties. Nobody locked their camps, there was no stealing or thieving, miners could leave their opal and equipment on the field and it would not be touched.

Books were written about Lightning Ridge opal and each writer coloured his story by an individual experience to weave a rainbow of truth and fiction, secrets and myths. Touched by the miracle of the stone, writers were moved to tell their story and the theories about the way to find opal. They called opal a sun kissed beauty, a wondrous rainbow, the joy to the spirit, the peace to the mind. The splendour in the palette of opal colours caused the grown men to cry, tremble and shout.

Miners chose and surveyed their fifty by fifty metres claim, drew a map and paid a small fee to register it in their name.

The experts agreed that there was no way to tell where opal deposits were hiding, yet some miners tried to divine opal by holding two wires in front of them. They marched into the bush and the wires sometimes crossed in front of them. The diviners assured the newcomers that opal was underneath. The old miners laughed at them because the diviners never found opal for themselves.

Others looked for the signs above ground, they tried to guess the spot by the vegetation or the stars above them.

Miners always liked to peg their claims next to those who found opal; most seemed to be right next to the big guy who found millions. It was like they were standing in line for lady luck to smile on them, right next in line to be touched by providence.

They dug shafts by pick and shovel at the beginning, later they used jack hammers, and in the eighties everybody hired the drilling rig to drill the holes for them. In the nineties they sunk little mechanised diggers and loaders into the shaft to do the manual work.

There was never a dull moment in Lightning Ridge for the miners in the Diggers Rest hotel. There was always music and a happy story going around keeping the hopes alive.
Sometimes miners bottomed on the opal dirt but often it was a false level and all the work was in vain. Even if the level was good, more often than not, it did not carry opal. You don't really know what you've got until you cut it, warned Bill. And you don't know what it is worth until you sell it.

People held their breath while their opal was cut. Sometimes the surprise under the dirt was excitingly pleasant but more often a flaw killed the stone. Sand was often in the middle of the brightly coloured stone and it reduced the value of it drastically. One theory said that opal was formed where there was a fault in the earth formation and the water pierced the ground and continually sipped through the sand stone.

Camps scattered in the bush around the tiny township were made from old tin and Hessian; lime and iron stone made stronger homes; log huts were pretty. Later in the eighties many brought their caravans and built shacks around them.

The rain water tanks often ran out in hot summers and only few miners could afford to run a generator for electricity. Most had dirt floors and candle lights, many brought water in large containers and used it sparingly.

The dust didn't worry us as much as the floods that turned the black soil into a greasy mess impossible to drive through. We had to abandon mining and go specking. We looked over the field if the rain that washed the dirt away had uncovered a spec of colour. The stories were told of the tourists who found a fortune specking after the rain, everybody knew someone lucky and the stories became the myths.

Thousands of hopeful tourists descended on Lightning Ridge every school holiday or long weekend and many returned regularly or stayed until they ran out of money.

I realised that farmers around Lightning Ridge were also gamblers. They were taking a gamble on the weather. They hoped that the right amount of rain would fall at least once in every four years but nothing was certain on the land. Dry spells sometimes lasted for years and the land cracked and not a

blade of grass could be found. The farmer once said that it was a season of shear and shoot. They sheared the sheep and shot it afterwards. Sometimes a wet followed and the water covered the farms for months. The animals became weak and drowned or got bogged in the dirt.

I was out in the scrub near Corcoran Lake mending the fence one hot afternoon when I saw a lamb stuck. The head of the half-born lamb was hanging behind the ewe, which was restlessly baaing for relief. I often watched the lambs being born, the head between the lamb's legs, coming out in a gentle glorious swoosh.

I wanted to end this ewe's agony with a hard hit on the head, but I couldn't. The eyes of the ewe followed me with a dumb tearless sadness and I just couldn't walk away. The memory would haunt me. I reasoned that they were not my sheep and not my problem. But there was just a suffering ewe and the dying lamb and I and I had to do it. I chased the baaing ewe begging her gently to stop and let me help her. The flies were all over the sticky bloody mess protruding from the sheep's bum and I was covered in burrs as I chased the poor creature into a fence and grabbed her for the wool with all his strength.

I should be in the pub with my mates, I told the future mother; it's forty-five bloody degrees hell here. I talked to the ewe to remain sane and think of something to do. I remembered that lambs are born with front feet first, so I closed my eyes as I pushed the bloody head into the ewe and began searching inside for its legs. As I started pulling out the legs the ewe gave a tired pelvic push and the lamb came sliding out. Staggering on the ground, tripping over itself, it slowly found its way to the mother's head and they became acquainted and sniffed over.
Exhausted from the birth, I wiped the blood off my hands but the flies followed me as I stumbled home. The tears washed the blood and sweat off my face as I looked back to see the lamb finding its mother's milk. Suddenly I felt so alone and so close to God that I cried openly and loudly for the first time since I was a little boy. I was there when I was needed and I felt proud and happy. I felt that time stood still in the bush.

The seasons here are barely noticeable by the slight change of temperature. People in Lightning Ridge remember the times of droughts and the times of floods. Things happened either before or after that dry or that wet.

I looked at the dry parched land. The crops were dead; the farmers were sad watching the stock die and the land crack. They stopped scrub cutting. There was only so much scrub and more sheep. The sheep and cattle held onto the meagre growth along the road, the trees were grey with dust. The Willie Willie rose and, unsure of its path, it darted this way and that. Rollie pollies, blown by the dry hot air, wrapped themselves on trees. In the remote aloneness of the bush I cried for my family and myself.

As soon as I learned enough English to make the deals, the farmers called on me and I gave quotes for miles of fencing, or water tank building or whatever

needed doing. I brought out workers, collected the pay, and checked the job. Most of the workers were Edna's cousins. Aborigines complained about the hard work, they threatened to leave as soon as they got paid but on a payday I brought a Ute full of drinks and smokes and food to the bush. Aborigines spent their money and had no option but to stay. If they had any money left they lost it at night as they played cards around the fire.

They established the Aboriginal Protection Board; they rounded up the dispersed groups of unrelated Aborigines and brought them into the settlements called Aboriginal reserves. They wanted to teach them about the mercy of God and the justice of British judicial system. They also taught Aborigines to live and work like whites. The law prohibited whites to bring alcohol to Aborigines. Whites weren't allowed on the Mission, except for people like me who lived with them. I often took my family to Wilcannia, Brewarrina and Walgett Missions because Edna had relations there.

Farmers took Aboriginal boys to teach them how to work on the land and look after the animals, girls were taught to cook and keep the house.
Edna is very proud because she learned the housekeeping in the big farmer's house.

Many Aborigines lived with whites in small country towns or on the fringes of towns. Lightning Ridge in the sixties was just such a place, a place of bush camps with a mixture of adventurers from all over the world. We built camps in the bush, Aborigines and Europeans, doctors and illiterates, policemen and criminals. We brought our picks and shovels, rope ladders, and candles and looked for opals from five to twenty metres deep in the clay beneath the sandstone of Lightning Ridge .

In the making for millions of years this rainbow stone only made its debut in the early sixties, when I came to look for it. The world recognised its unique beauty and paid for it. The shells impregnated with specks of colour were proof that there was an ocean here long ago. The skeletons of dinosaurs dug with the opal dirt also told about the timeless history of the life in Lightning Ridge .
Only a small percentage of miners made a fortune in opals, most had to supplement their income with casual work on the nearby properties. Many went to work in the city, saved money and returned. The lure of opal was too strong for them.

Hilda, a Swiss psychiatric nurse commented in the pub that Lightning Ridge was much like the mental hospital she used to work in. The only difference is that people here are free to go home and do their own cooking.

You really think that we are all mad? I asked.

It helps, said Hilda with a twinkle in her eye. She knew that she was mad to stay with these illiterate beer guzzlers and talk about opal.

I heard that patients from the Bloomfield mental hospital in Orange were taken on an excursion. They stayed here, because the road ended in Lightning Ridge, laughed Hilda.

Nobody has any idea what opal miners should look like or how they should properly behave. Maybe we really are all mad. Like opals we remain unique. People of all races have the same dream in Lightning Ridge, the same working methods, and the same thirst.

We used to meet in the pub to compare our finds. When anyone found a better stone, he invited everybody to a BBQ. The stone was passed around for inspection. We licked it to make it shine better in its unpolished state. The miners predicted the weight of the polished stone and the price per carat.

People counted on each other and in an emergency they were all willing to look after their mates.

Sometimes I watched the sunsets and realised that only the glorious colourful sunsets of Lightning Ridge could ever compete with the beauty of its opal. In the peaceful end of the day I remembered the home I ran away from and I remembered my wife and my son, my mother and father and brothers and sisters and the people who laughed at me when I was a boy. Alenka re-married of course but in my dreams she was where I left her with tears in her eyes and more beautiful every year. I couldn't go home, my children always needed shoes and books and clothes.

The Labour government was keen to help Aborigines since 1975. They spent a lot of money on housing, education and health for Aborigines. The government built houses in town for Aborigines; they gave a message to the rest of us that the way we chose to live wasn't good enough. Edna and the kids left and they live in town now but I stayed in my camp. I could have moved into a town house with my family but the mateship and equality with other miners were more important to me than a new house.

Whites are complaining that Aborigines get everything while white kids have to live in hot camps. Somehow people are never equal. Most white miners call Aborigines bludgers and crooks.

A group of singers came from Romania about twenty years ago. They toured Australia and they wanted to see the bush. I was happy to show them underground, I took them all over dirt roads on the opal field. I told them about the big nobby Bill and I found and lost. The story fascinated the young Romanians. The busy amateur film maker heard the part about the stone worth millions of dollars. He narrated the story into the camera about a man who became a multi-millionaire overnight. I never saw the film but it was shown on television at home. A few months later I received letters from people who claimed to be my distant relatives. Neighbours and friends wrote and wished me well. They all wanted to hear from me. I began to plan my trip home. My son Martin also wrote the first letter to me. He told me that he loved

me and that he was hoping for a motor bike. I wanted to go home and surprise Alenka and Martin with a new motor bike.

A few weeks later my mother wrote that everybody was saying how selfish I was for not sending money to my family. They all saw me on television and knew about my millions.

I never wrote a single letter home since. I never again worried about being poor. I decided that the only people worth knowing were those who stopped with me while I had nothing. People like Edna. Maybe the poor stay with the poor because the rich do not want them.

In 1991 the roof collapsed in my mine and damaged my back. In 1995 I qualified for a disability pension and last year I got my old age pension. I am thinking about going home. That's something to look forward to anyway.

Maybe I will sell my camp and my mining gear and go for good. I will never let anybody know if I am rich or poor.

I want the bastards, who called me Gipsy, to think that I am a millionaire.