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A SNIPPET

Have you heard about the 'Grey Nomad' phenomenon? Recent retirees are swarming through the country like a canetoad epidemic. Staying in caravan parks as is my fortnightly wont, I see heaps of them. I love the oldies as much as the next person, but I'm disturbed by the sheer volume out here. At Bucasia I was verbally by a nomad for using my laptop in the communal area (the only power-point as it happened). "We're real," she gesticulated loudly, "that's not real." pointing to the computer. "You're drunk lady." Rabble.

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Chunky Biscuits

Blocks of time is one of the ways we order our lives. This chunk of time for this, this chunk for that, an hour allotted for this, a year spent doing that. Without giving it much forethought my life is presently defined by the humble fortnight. There are further subdivisions of course, but none so prominent as the 14 day period between newsletters, and none besides that I dwell upon. Every second Monday is a beacon, a stopper, a chance to pause and take stock. Usually it means a day of rest is in the offing as I recharge batteries, buy supplies and write the newsletter. A lot can be achieved in two weeks. In my kayaking terms, it should mean about 400-500kms. It should mean at least a dozen new campsites, maybe a hun-

dred photos, a couple of new scrapes, a handful of good conversations, countless hours of contemplation, unexpected bursts of laughter, a few new ideas and maybe even a little insight. I like the fortnight.

But just as time is one way of marking progress, so is place. From here to the top I'll discard the fortnight and adopt place as my anchor. Two are important and Cooktown is the first. From here at Lucinda to Cooktown is a chunk. From there I will send the penultimate newsletter and prepare for the next and final chunk. Thursday Island is therefore the second and final marker for the journey. Time will still be part of it because time is always part of it, but in my mind I'm thinking of place

now. The east coast of Australia has finally shrunk down to a manageable size. Here to Cooktown. Cooktown to Thursday Island.

To the fortnight just past. It's been a whopper. As expected the southeasterly wind has not failed to blow, sometimes it slants to the east-southeast or the south-southeast. It would be splitting hairs to complain. Daytime temperatures hover around the mid twenties and very early it's often below ten degrees. Mosquitoes and sandflies are mostly friendly. Bindis and goats head burrs are less friendly but tolerable. I've finally tired of muesli bars and pack chocolate ripple biscuits and vita-weats for snacking through the day. Sometimes gingernuts.

Day to Day

141. Cape Palmerston to Salonika Beach, 39km
142. Salonika Beach to Bucasia (Mackay), 37km
143. Bucasia R&R
144. Bucasia to Goldsmith Island, 41km
145. Goldsmith Island to Dent Island, 49km
146. Dent Island to Saddleback Island, 51km
147. Saddleback Island to Abbot Point, 48km
148. Abbot Point to Cape Upstart, 47km
149. Cape Upstart to Cape Bowling Green, 52km
150. Cape Bowling Green to Cape Cleveland, 42km
151. Cape Cleveland to Magnetic Island, 42km
152. Magnetic Island to Acheron Island, 25km
153. Acheron Island to Orpheus Island, 44km
154. Orpheus Island to Lucinda, 19km

Magnetic Island By Touch

The tour group sat on the sand beside their brightly painted bus. A man walking his dog stopped and looked westward. The yacht dropped anchor and settled snugly into the wind. The big red ball on the horizon didn't swing like the mesmeriser's watch, but it did the same job. The light turned dirty orange before ceasing to be light at all. The glow would last a while longer. The paddle dipped quietly into the water, falling through each successive stroke with less effort each time. I was slowing down, it happens when I get distracted. Shouldn't be on the water at sunset. It gets dark.

Louie had wandered up as I landed at Nelly Bay earlier in the day. "What design is that?" After pleading ignorance and inquiring after the bakery he invited me to his mate's place for a drink. Chris lived just over the road amongst a menagerie of musical instruments and naked, wobbly, foam-seated chairs. The conversation became bogged down in the mechanics of nuclear power stations as I sipped my tea. Like a giant steam engine? Half-life of a coconut shaped lump of enriched uranium? None of us knew what we were talking about but I enjoyed it anyway. Time ticked away. Louie showed me to the hardware store and then to

the supermarket. We stopped at the café for another drink. If they weren't shirtless backpackers then they stopped to say a quick hello to Louie. He was well connected on the island. Gary's wife had given birth. They used the chopper, they say they won't but they always do. Marlin was doing deliveries for his dad who owns the pub. He spoke fast for someone who lives on an island. Time ticked away. The tide had gone way out and the kayak was stranded inside the reef. We carried it towards the marina until Chris' breathing told me it was time to drag it. I drag it everywhere anyway, I explained. It was after four o'clock when I washed the mud from between my toes and headed to the empty side of the island, the dark side.

The moon'll be up soon, all big and bloated with reflected light. Actually no, had I bothered to check I would have known that moonrise was not until 9pm. By 7pm it was genuine darkness. The faint glow on the western horizon only made the near shoreline more indecipherable. My stroke was cautiously reinvigorated, not so much that I might plough into an exposed rock but enough to know I was going forward against the steady easterly. Rebound

waves reached up like hands from the ocean, a gentle tap here, an unsuspecting bull slap there. 'Success lies in your hips tadpole-san, keep them loose like a flooded river,' came the accented voice in my head. The bow sloshed down spraying phosphorescence in it's wake. The blades kicked the little light bulbs into my lap where they slipped over the spray-deck. I grabbed at the light and was surprised to feel the jelly between my fingers. I squeezed and the light smeared down my finger like a snail trail. Unexpected.

The water beyond the headland smoothed as I continued to be distracted by the odd little jelly-lights. Smooth water = possible sandy shore. Inching in closer I could hear the rustle of coarse sand being sorted and resorted by pulses of water. Plunging the paddle lengthwise into the water I failed to hit bottom. Deep shelving sandy beach? Closer, seemingly only meters away, still no bottom. Two more strokes and the boat slid onto the beach. That's good. I hopped out as a wave tipped the boat over. The next wave slammed it into my shins. Never stand shoreward of a kayak. Paddle in the dark sometime though.

"Sometimes I sits and thinks, and sometimes I just sits."

**Satchel Paige
(1906 - 1982)**

Eyewear Mystery Deepens

An all ports alert was issued last week when two Sunglassii went missing in the Whitsunday region. The rare Sunglassii orangus (polaroid var.) was last seen on Goldsmith Island and the more common Sunglassii blackus escaped at Cape Upstart. Sunglassii caretaker, Mr Hughes, denied responsibility but failed to adequately explain the dual disappearance. Further checking has revealed that Mr Hughes has been involved in similar incidents from as far south as Tasmania. An anonymous informant has suggested that it may be part of a much wider racket involving Hattus spp. and Spongus spp. also.

"Maybe it was a dingo, they're sneaky enough." Not

on Goldsmith Island Mr Hughes. "How many butterflies would it take to lift them d'ya reckon?" Stretching now. "Well okay, but at Cape Upstart Wayne and Lloyd gave me a XXXX, and when I think about it there was no good reason to do that... other than to distract me. They had opportunity." But no motivation Mr Hughes, they were collecting oysters when you interrupted them nosing about for leftovers.

We may never know the truth dear reader but we can take solace in the knowledge that Mr Hughes reaped his own bitter harvest and went Sunglassii-less for two and a half days. You're a goose Mr Hughes, a watery, red-eyed, squinty faced goose.

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SCIENCE WEEK COMPETITION

AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS IN GRADES 3-10

Utas Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology have come to the National Science Week party and are putting a stunning new book by Gustaaf Hallegraeff on the line. All you have to do is answer the following question and email it to me before I reach Cooktown (or roundabouts) to be in the running*.

"In a fight to the death between two crocodiles, one made of rock and the other made of water, who will win? Explain your choice."

Spanish Mackerel and a Long Spit

Flomp forwards into the shallow water where the crushed coral met the shallow reef. Cold water floods under lifejacket and over kidneys, liver, intestines... Almost. Skin stops it, but I can imagine. Water warms, body cools. Throw the clean hat ashore, get rid of the cumbersome spraydeck, paddling shorts too. Even cooler now. Roll over but not for long, it's too bright and I like to look. Coral forks and bumps and sticks and trees wobble beneath. Eyes sting and it's cold now anyway. A boat drives into to the beach, a fishing line is reluctantly wound in. Ali says Harry has caught only one mackerel all day. Better than none. Need help stringing up the boat cover? Their shelter for tonight. No, I'll see you later then. It's a very small island.

Thankyou Harry, mackerel cutlets in chilli sauce would be welcome. And salad too! That's a treat, you really wouldn't believe how good that tastes. I used to sell mackerel cutlets but I never ate them, they were frozen and the chicken was hot. Back to Cape Town on Sunday. Tell me about Cape Town and I'll tell you about Tasmania. The sharks are the only danger are they? I've heard you get some big ones down there. Oh, not those ones, the ones in suits are the problem. Ha! It's a good camouflage, who knows where they lurk. Good night Harry and Ali, you know I don't usually like to share my islands. This is an exception.

A twenty kilometer sand spit, a skinny one too. Hooking into the Coral Sea with a crooked finger pointing eerily north-east. That's my way. Why so long and so low? Why haven't the cyclones swept it away? You stick a finger out like that and liable to be lopped off, or in this case, not. A respected finger of sand.

To camp right on the tip is my hope. Connected to the mainland but so far from the reality of it. The lumps and bumps, so often confusing, are way back there. The flatness, the simplicity are all around. There is a mystery about this place. I think things happen out here that no-one knows about and no-one really cares about. There is logic in it too, always is, it's halfway between Cape Upstart and Cape Cleveland. I fall five kilometers short. Mystery or not, ideals are pushed aside when my shoulders sing their evening song. The water looks solid with the amount sand and mud sweeping northward along it. Of course the secret of this place lies somewhere else. Up in the headwaters of the Burdekin River, down it's muddy banks and out into a twilight zone between river and ocean. Through the shallows I paddle and onto the beach. Drag and puff into the dunes. It's full moon tonight and the tide will urge the ocean to nibble at the base of the dunes. I'll get up later to watch for a while.