

# Bad Medicine

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## Extract

My birth served as fair warning that I'd be nothing but a troublesome little brat. I arrived into this world in December 1983, weighing seven pounds and who-gives-a-shit-how-many ounces. Poor old Mumsy needed a blood transfusion to replace the precious fluids I'd siphoned during her natal nightmare. But with Australia's strict fourth trimester anti-abortion laws, my folks didn't have a choice but to put up with me from that point onwards.

Growing up as an inquisitive, mischievous and highly imaginative Coober Pedy kid, I had what I can only describe as the perfect childhood. Coober Pedy is a unique town to say the least; there's nowhere else in the world like it. Situated in the middle of the bum-fuck nowhere South Australian desert, the opal-mining community boasts a surreal other-worldly terrain that features in movies such as *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* and *Pitch Black*. The sunrise there is unbelievable – fading night melts into an electric blue in the brief moments before the fluorescent orange sun peeks over the sawtooth silhouette of abandoned mineshafts on the horizon.

With a blend of Croatian, country-ass white Australian and transient Aboriginal cultures all mixed in together, the place has this quaint, eccentric, oddball character about it. Floaters, drifters and tourists who only intended to pass through the town find themselves addicted to the opal game – every gambling addict's dream job – and end up staying for forty years. Back in the day, it was also a notorious hide-out for Melbourne underworld hitmen while the heat from their latest job died down. As local rumour holds, the Victorian Police preferred the hitmen to hide out in Coober Pedy if there wasn't enough evidence to put them away; it was easier to investigate dirty deeds done in the desert than maniacal murders in Melbourne's metropolis.

My opal-miner father, Willie, was of average height and build, and always sported dusty, tattered denim jeans with the obligatory flannelette shirt and terry-towelling hat when he'd come home each night after an arduous day's work underground. He had an impossibly straight side-part in his thick, dark hair, which was immaculately combed and permanently glued in place with half a tub of Brylcreem. He also suffered from a condition known as the Ledgard Bum Chin: a genetic disorder whereby an arse-shaped feature dominated the lower region of his face. This condition is hereditary and makes the simple act of shaving a real bitch and a half; you've got to spread the cheeks with one hand and rotate the razor on its side to get into the deep arse-crack on your face.

Dad was incredibly quiet and shy around new people, but was a MacGyver-esque genius if you put him within a five-mile radius of a broken car with just a paperclip and a ball of lint in his hands. He also dealt with the family's disciplinary duties, which would often see him chasing me around the front yard screaming like a madman with a belt waving wildly above his head.

My schoolteacher mother, Heather, had a thick Jheri-curl afro that ruled the upper regions of her scone with an iron fist, while a pair of gigantic glasses dominated her face below. Her glasses were so thick that she was considered a bushfire risk when the blistering Coober Pedy sun refracted through the lenses, causing dry grass and leaf litter to smoulder. Mum was one of those old-school hard-ass teachers who loved working with kids but wouldn't hesitate to smite unruly behaviour with a shower of fire and brimstone if the situation called for it. She was an unbelievably generous and selfless person, though. She would tend to us children all night whenever we were sick, and donated all her spare time to local charities and community fundraisers.

I love my mum and dad but I'm not really sure how they met. If I'm honest, I don't want to know. I can't afford the therapy bills.

My brother, Bazz, was three years my elder and had one of those blonde rat's tail hairdos – you know: all business in the front, bogan at the back. He was absolutely giddy for all things computers and spent hours on end frantically jerking away on the joystick of his beloved Commodore 64, tongue sticking out at weird angles to make sure the on-screen computer character moved in just the right way. Bazz also suffered from severe childhood epilepsy, which has got to be the biggest cosmic 'fuck you' to an avid gamer. I lost count how many times the flickering computer screen triggered one of his nasty epileptic fits during our formative years.

My family, like so many others in Coober Pedy, lived in an underground dwelling known as a dugout, which gave us some respite from the heat in summer. I felt like a comic-book hero every time I burst through the front door of the Bat Cave, ready to thwart the evil clutches of boredom and get up to some childhood mischief. Big Bro and I relished every opportunity to explore the sprawling expanse of abandoned mineshafts that dotted the sun-scorched alien landscape beyond the front porch. Fond memories abound of catching angry reptiles, scrambling up steep sandstone escarpments and defying dehydration in stifling fifty-degree heat. My childhood overflowed with fun and adventure.

But the dugout was also fertile ground for childhood nightmares to leap from my overactive imagination. My biggest fear was running the gauntlet to our detached outside dunny at night. So often in the wee hours of the morning, I'd stand there under the dim glow of the porch light in my tiny Thomas the Tank Engine PJs, staring into the endless darkness of night, where all manner of goblins, ghouls and golems silently stalked, itching for their chance to get me. Prompted by the growing urgency of my imminent number-onesie, I'd fight the fear and plan my move. Then, when my daring reached Roger Ramjet proportions (or pee was spreading across the front of my PJs – whichever came first), I'd be off, moving like a banshee from hell, skidding to a halt at the safety of the dunny door, before rocking the world's quickest piss and sprinting back inside. My tiny little feet pitter-pattered across the ground as I ran. I'd never look back.