

# SPINIFEX & SUNFLOWERS

AVAN JUDD STALLARD



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## **AUTHOR NOTE**

The events and characters within this novel are entirely the work of fiction, and any resemblance to real events or people, living or dead, is coincidental.

*To the men who saw beyond the blue shirt.*



## INCUBUS

It's early and I'm driving through the bush-covered hills of the Darling Range east of Perth. A hangover is coming on hard and fast, and I know exactly what it needs.

I pull into the car park of the Mundaring bakery. I kill the engine, swing a leg over my bike and begin what very nearly counts as a skip toward the bakery door, such is my lust for a pie. I stop when I hear a crashing sound.

I look around, but there are no cars backing into poles, only my motorbike on the ground. It doesn't make sense. There's nothing near it. I go back and pick the bastard up. It's a heavy machine—a tourer—not the sort of thing you want to be lifting in my state. Once I have it up, I lean it back over. It drops to the ground again.

That's when I realise the kickstand's not out. So I pick up the bike, which seems even harder the second time, and extend the kickstand, whereupon it leans gently to the side. I don't check for new dents or scratches.

I totter into the bakery. The lady at the counter says, "Are you ok?"

And I say, "I'll have a steak and kidney pie, please."

I get a carton of flavoured milk from the fridge—the green one catches my eye and I don't think twice. I sit down and eat and drink in a vacant stupor. Once finished, I lean back and take a breath and presume myself cured. But then, partially revived, a thought comes.

Normally mine is a good motorbike, the sort that does as told. So why would it do that—fall down—on such a morning as this when I'm clearly in no state to be picking up great pieces of unyielding steel?

The caffeine or sugar or God knows what else that's hidden in green milk suddenly kicks in and a wave of clarity sweeps my mind. The whole sorry bike-dropping affair becomes eminently explicable. Which is to say, I forgot to extend the kickstand because I'm still drunk. Drunk as a boiled owl.

Before anything worse can happen, I buy a custard tart for morning tea and drive the last forty-five minutes to the Northam Racecourse, park my bike with the use of the kickstand and head inside. A few people say hello. A few people mention that I don't look too good and ask if I'm sick. I say yeah, I might be a bit sick.

I could just as well mention that I'm drunk. None of this lot would care. I'm already assured of the job—in fact, I'm already on the payroll—so my presence at the training course, however shabby, will suffice.

## RACECOURSE

It's at a racecourse — of all places, we're being taught how to be refugee-prison guards at a racecourse. I don't know why, and nor do they. That also happens to be the first lesson of training: nobody in this system knows the answer to any "why" question. Shit just is.

The second lesson is that I am the only one who calls refugee prison "refugee prison". And that's a big lesson. That lesson is retaught every day. Words matter. Not words like wanker, slut, poofter, whore: to be used at will and without discretion. No, we're talking the far more important words of bureaucrats. So a refugee prison is actually an "immigration detention centre", and the refugees are actually "clients".

I head around the back of the "training centre", looking for Alfred. I don't want to drive here drunk again. There are too many kangaroos on the roads between Northam and Perth. If I can be so drunk as to not know how to park my motorbike, I might not be up to dodging Skippy — who is, despite every TV series, documentary and tourism advertisement ever shown, a wilful idiot and inveterate cunt. And, while I appreciate this is verboten to say in Australia, I say it anyway because I know it for a plain and obvious truth.

Until a person has lived with roos they have no standing to speak on the topic. We took in a total of four joeys throughout my childhood in Manjimup, each orphaned after a car hit the mother. It's common for the young ones to survive — the roo

pouch is like a protective airbag. Mum couldn't bring herself to drive past a fresh carcass and not check, digging her hand into the pouch to see if there was a scared sack of bone and fur hiding inside. She would put the young and unviable ones out of their misery, but if they were far enough along she brought them home.

Clem hated it. He'd rant and rave, but Mum was the boss when it came to those sorts of things. Shitter—so named for her habit of shitting all across the verandah every day of her life when there was a big yard and plenty of bush to crap in—was the best of them, and even she was a moody ingrate. She'd let you give her a quick scratch under the cheek or behind the ear, then she'd suddenly decide she'd had enough and lean back on her tail and take a swing. It wouldn't be a mischievous swing, either, like a playful kitten. It was the sort of swing that said, "When I'm big enough I will rip your guts out with my massive mono-claw, human scum, but until then I will shit on your verandah and eat your cat food as I please." Still, I was upset when a dog got her. Even Clem was, the unsentimental prick.

The point being, there are thousands of unreasonable roos to dodge on the roads. Of course, I could just resolve to not get drunk to the point where I'm still drunk in the morning. But it wouldn't be worth a damn. Sober and rational promises are wonderful while sober and rational; they're worth nothing in the heat of the moment. Like when your cock is hard, or you're having a brew and that pesky incubus says screw it, Nick, have another, have another ten. I know he'll get me, sooner or later—the incubus, Skippy, one of them.

I find Alfred out the back on the steeples, smoking a cigarette, looking at the only green grass for miles. He's one of the few people who drives to Northam with an empty car. I arrange for him to give me a lift from Perth each day and I agree to give him some money for petrol.

I get a cup of tea and head inside just as training begins. I

can barely follow what's happening, even though it's pitched at the lowest possible level of comprehension. After a few minutes I stop trying. It's not like it matters. Skippy could take my place at training and I doubt I'd miss much.

The fact is, every one of us at the racecourse knows that being a refugee-prison guard is a crappy job demanding little more than our showing up. It has to be, or we wouldn't be employed. Collectively, we have no relevant qualifications, no relevant experience and no passion for the task at hand. That said, we're all glad to have the job, and what we lack in passion is more than made up for by the greatest motivator humanity has ever known.

## DEBT

Meg is twenty-two, a local in Northam, which is sometimes known as the gateway to the wheatbelt, but these days it's becoming better known as the gateway to epic salt pans that consume wheat farms almost as fast as wheat farms once consumed the mallee bushland. It's also the hatchery for colossal dust storms that blot sun from sky, and dirty the hanging washing of a better class of folk living in the distant Perth hills.

Nevertheless, Meg invested in a piece of Northam real estate with help from Mummy, and now she has to pay for it. Which might turn out ok after all, because they're in the process of building a refugee prison right here in Northam. With the promise of all those jobs, you'd think that the Northam residents would love that, but no, they hate it. They think the refugees are going to escape and then rape, pillage and salt the earth. At least the salting won't make much difference.

Roy is my new mate. He's fifty-nine and has been fired from every job he's ever had. Once you have his confidence, Roy is an unguarded sharer of his raw, bleeding, pained soul. Roy tells me about a woman he used to go with when a younger man. His very own lover, companion, friend. Of course, this woman is no longer with him and it is the worst thing to happen in his life and if it hadn't happened, everything would be different today. Today, Roy has nobody and nothing. He

wants somebody and something.

“Ya ever been to Thailand, mate? Oh, treated like a king. These women don’t care if you’re old. They respect ya, you’re wise ’n that in their culture. I met a pretty little bird there. She doesn’t speak English, but doesn’t matter. Fuck’n beautiful, mate. She’s waiting for me to come back.”

It sounds like she might be a whore, but I don’t see any need to mention that. Anyway, Roy’s booked a ticket back to Thailand for next April. On a credit card. Because he’s broke. Roy really needs this job.

Then there’s Danny. Danny looks like the dumbest fuck here because he’s got a big black goatee, beer gut and a poorly rendered neck tattoo of dragon claws or dark flames or it might be a bag of pointy black dingo cocks for all I know. He drives a barely roadworthy Valiant over two hours just to get to training. Danny used to work security at nightclubs, but the pay is poor and once you get a kid, which he just did, that’s pretty much it if you are in any way decent or aspiring to not be white trash scum. You need to pay for that kid. So you go out and get the highest paying job you can based on who you are, who you know and what you can do—which, for Danny and all the rest of us, amounts to nobody, nothing and fuck-all.

It doesn’t mean we’re all stupid though. Danny is the image of white trash, yet he talks with me about Ray Bradbury and Karl Popper. There’s another guy who used to be a permaculturist, which I’ve learned involves a good bit more than planting runner beans and smoking bong. And there’s an older woman here who knows four languages, at least one of them well (a shame it’s not English, as she seems interesting).

Then there’s me. I studied medicine at the state’s best university. I didn’t finish, but that had nothing to do with ability and everything to do with loathing—of the instructors, of the medical profession’s way of looking at the world, of the middle-class prigs with whom I studied, excepting my mate Keely and one or two others.

So I can categorically tell you that we're not dumb fucks—or, at least, not any more than your average sample of Australians. And yet here we are, because we all made bad life decisions—like the decision not to drive a massive truck in and out of a mine all night, then fly home for five days to see a wife and kids who don't know you and don't particularly like you because you're a prick. Why a prick? Because you spend three weeks working, drinking and fighting with a group of neckless miners, then get home and just want to fuck.

Which is to say, I don't have a wife and kids, I didn't end up driving a truck and I didn't finish my medicine degree, but I am going to finish this training course. Like everyone here, I'm going to be a guard at refugee prison for the only reason that matters. Debt.

## EXPERIMENT

Our principal trainer is named Warren. He's a big guy. Thick forearms. Fat head.

He keeps breaking down the "complicated" bureaucrat rules about what us guards can do at refugee prison into simpler terms that are borderline retard-speak.

"Don't steal stuff."

"Don't have sex with clients."

I think Warren was really good at his former job, and is not so good at this job. He used to be a prison guard. A real one who got to call himself that because it was at an actual prison with murderers and rapists and expectorators. Warren keeps hinting about all the violence he saw, and the violence he dished out. Warren angry. Warren smash. Warren has never actually worked in a detention centre.

The training manual is a massive binder full of procedures, policies and rules. Warren explains that it has been adapted from the parent company's prison guard training manual. Where it said "prison" it now says "detention centre". Where it said "prisoner" or "inmate" it now says "client". Where it said "guard" or "correctional officer" it now says "client service officer". Of course, there are dozens of slippages where the manual talks about prison and guards and prisoners. Oops.

Warren trains us to do headcounts; there will be at least three per shift. He encourages us to recognise detainees by a number, not their name, because that's just how it's done in the

centres. He teaches us radio protocols and the international system of code alerts: green for an escape attempt, black for officer needs assistance, red for fire, blue for medical emergencies.

We're given advice about not trusting our clients and all the horrible things we can expect. Warren shows instructional videos. There's one that shows a refugee casually escaping from a detention centre on Christmas Island by climbing over a fence while the guards look on. Scott is freaked out by this. He asks if the client is still roaming free, presumably living a Robinson Crusoe-like existence as the Christmas Island Yowie. No, he is not still roaming free, you fucking idiot.

We visit a medium security prison to receive first aid training. Our trainer for the day is a first aid-qualified prison guard. She gives lots of examples of things we might see and have to deal with, all of them drawn from her experience at the prison. She tells us that prisoners are generally unpleasant and sometimes deranged. It makes sense. I figure I might be deranged and unpleasant if I was locked up here. The complex is utterly devoid of signs of normal life. It's a massive square, enclosed by razor wire, surrounded by a barren security perimeter. Which is to say: looks like a prison, feels like a prison.

Throughout all this, my thoughts turn again and again to the research project of a goateed Stanford psychologist with the groovy name of Dr Zimbardo, which always reminds me of *Dr Zhivago*, a very fine film, two thumbs up. It came to be known as the Stanford Prison Experiment and, if it showed anything, it is that even the strongest characters will tend to act out the roles they are asked to perform, no matter how that clashes with their sensibilities and beliefs.

Four decades later, here we are, a bunch of average Australians about to be given a uniform and thrust into an institution bordered by fences and razor wire, saddled with a swag of rules and procedures that must be enforced and told that we are the enforcers. Oh, but fellers, ladies: you're not

guards and it's not a prison. It's a detention centre filled with clients and you are client service officers.

Who do they think they're kidding? Well, Scott for one, the short fat bloke missing a front tooth who's still wondering about that escapee on Christmas Island. I think Scott might be a bit dumb.

## ROY

We're sitting around going through the big folder of rules when Roy suddenly gets up and says, "Nah, can't do it, fuck it, I'm out, nah, not for me."

Old Cynthia, who is very sweet, goes to Roy and keeps asking what is wrong till Roy tells her he can't read so well. He's good with signs and labels, but sentences are difficult, though not impossible, unless they have big words, then they are impossible. A fair few of the sentences written by the white shirts do have big words.

Cynthia is nice and encouraging, and everyone else, too, because five minutes with Roy and you know he needs it. Fifty-nine, a bit thick, suffers from verbal diarrhoea, drives a 1987 Mitsubishi Triton, lives in a share house in a town in the dust-belt, been fired from more jobs than he's had, and speaks like John Jarratt in *Wolf Creek*. Where the hell is Roy going to go?

We plead with him to stay and he does; he says he'll stick the rest of the day out, see how it goes. After lunch, Roy seems a lot happier because Warren puts the folders away. He begins explaining "control techniques", then we pair up for some drills. Roy is a strong old bastard and mad as a cut snake. He completely ignores everything Warren says and just lays into the body pads with the sort of vigour Warren can't help but respect.

"Take that, you bastard!" Roy says after every blow. If you see and feel that sort of punch, as I do being Roy's partner,

there are certain questions you've gotta ask.

"Roy, you get into many fights when you were younger?"

"Too right. I was a scrapper. Come from England when I was a little feller. Any bastard said something, *bam!* That fixed 'em."

The violence of punching and kicking pads is good for Roy. It's healing. It helps assuage his feelings of inadequacy after the episode this morning where Warren asked him to read out loud. Only problem is that Roy is starting to feel too comfortable. I can see why he's been fired from so many jobs. Now that we're up and about, a constant stream of shit flows from his mouth in a mixture of mumble and exclamation. "Fuck" and "shit" and "mate" are his punctuation.

Turns out Roy is an especially eager proponent of jokes involving rape, or violence, or rape and violence. Anytime another bloke is bent over, Roy is into him with a rape joke, or a spot of simulated fucking. I think it's funny. The sort of funny where someone is so irreverent and so clueless that you've just got to appreciate the utter absence of guile. He's like a twelve-year-old boy: spastic movements matched by boundless energy, thinks he knows everything, thinks he's hilarious, no conception of mental states that are not his own.

Roy wears on the other trainee guards. They wish he'd shut up. They wish Warren would ask him to read again. I wish he'd shut up. But I also hope he doesn't. Roy is an original. He isn't in the least average. He is so stupendously below average, he's precious. So, yeah, Roy and I are friends.

The next day's training is shifted from the racecourse without any racehorses to an office in the big city. I spent three years in Perth, so I know my way around. To Roy, though, Perth is a concrete labyrinth. He manages to find his way to the office, where he makes a farce of the computer-based training, then when it's quits he has to find his way to a mate's joint in Claremont. Roy asks Nige if he drove; give us a lift, will ya mate? Apparently he didn't drive. Roy asks Tom if he drove—just need a lift to Claremont. Oh, wrong direction. Roy

asks Cynthia if she drove, but Cynthia is going in the wrong direction, too. The group is beginning to disperse and so Roy just starts asking the group as a whole, calling out, pleading with somebody, anybody, to give him a lift.

They walk off. To the last man and woman, they walk off. Because I'm a bona fide saint of a man, I bother to hang around long enough to see if Roy is going to get a lift. I can't give him a lift myself because I drive a motorbike and I've only got one helmet. With everyone else gone, Roy thinks he's stranded. I tell him not to worry. He can easily get a direct bus to where he's going if he just walks up the road; the bus stop he needs to wait at will say bus #102.

Roy is nervous as shit, so I accompany him up the street, find the stop, wait with him, then deposit him on the bus. Roy is effusive. He's floored that I bothered to stick around because, I realise, Roy isn't like that twelve-year-old kid. Roy knows he is annoying and a bit fucked in the head and he doesn't expect any help from anyone, ever, because that's what he's learned to expect in life. So I give him five minutes of my time and now we're mates forever. Seriously, Roy thinks I'm great.

I dunno what the point to that story is, but there is a point.

## TITS

Chantal is small and cute. Cherubic face, nice tits. She's only eighteen, or maybe nineteen, but, whatever her age, she looks young and talks young and acts young. She's the best-looking female at training, so I try to flirt with her, but she is just so clueless that I literally cannot find anything to say to her that allows the spark of real conversation.

Chantal is very earnest about one topic: being raped. Marilyn the Polish emigrant is forty years older than Chantal and she doesn't want to get raped, either. I guess none of us want to get raped, but the rest of us are pretty blasé; it only really animates Chantal and Marilyn. They talk about it a lot. So Chantal asks Warren about getting raped in refugee prison.

Warren does nothing to allay her fears. Even though we are in Western Australia and have no prospect of being sent to New South Wales, Warren tells us about an infamous client he heard about in a little suburb of Sydney called Villawood.

This client is a bad man. An angry man. A very, very big man who doesn't speak great English, just enough to threaten to rape any female client service officer he comes into contact with. Sometimes he threatens to rape the male officers, too. Warren tells us that the man has in fact tried before and will try again if given half a chance.

So this is what Chantal takes away from today's training: a big, deranged, angry Middle Eastern man with a dirty boner wants to rape you. I think this might colour Chantal's impression of

her “clients”, and she hasn’t even met one yet. I wonder if the refugees are having the same conversations about us.

I still haven’t given up on flirting with Chantal, so the next day I sit at the same table as her for our lunch break. We’re talking about nothing, because that is all Chantal can talk about. I guess I’m just happy enough to be at the table, sneaking furtive glances at her tits. Chantal tells us she’s lived in Northam all her life. She says that she doesn’t know much about “things” or “places”. She’s saying that she’s not very worldly, which is actually the sort of self-aware comment that makes me think there may be more to her. Then she tells us that she’s never met an Arab. Then she says, “I’m probably a bit racist.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You know, just calling them ragheads and camel fuckers, that sort of thing.”

She giggles a bit. I bite down on my sandwich and go back to sneaking glances at her tits.

The next day, I don’t bother sitting at Chantal’s table for lunch. Talking to her is too hard. But I haven’t given up on tits, so I sit at Meg’s table, which is what we call her even though she introduced herself as Meghan, the version of Meghan with the stupid pronunciation that sounds like leggin’, like when you’re leggin’ it after eggin’ someone’s Corolla.

Meg’s by no means unattractive, but her face isn’t as pretty as Chantal’s. Still, she has nice eyes, and nice lips. Not a bad arse, too, ample and amply round—likewise her tits. Plus, she’s talkative, the sort of talkative that drives itself without any outside stimulus, so it’s easy to be in her presence and look at her tits without overly taxing one’s brain. And I know that sounds terrible, like I’m a dirty lech, but it’s not as though I’m doing anything evil. I’m being affable while I look at tits. And either Meg doesn’t notice or she does notice and she doesn’t mind, because she starts to seek me out during breaks and we become friends. Which, by default, means I become friendly with her buddy, Scott, the gap-toothed dwarf with a pot gut.

## ROLES

The last day of training is underwhelming. We sign a bunch of forms and get our uniform. It's a blue polo shirt. I was expecting something more. Something prison-guardesque.

I have a chat with Roy. He's excited to finally get to bash some blokes and taser some blokes and rape some blokes. Thankfully, we aren't issued tasers.

Meg and Scott and pretty much all of us are excited about the money. It will be nice, there's no denying it. Something like two grand a week, maybe more with all the penalties and allowances. I don't think a single one of us here has ever seen that sort of moolah.

But there's also apprehension. None of us has ever met a refugee. We still don't know what to expect—anything from normal blokes to deranged fuckwits. Of everyone, I'm among the most sanguine. I've read a lot, travelled a lot, watched plenty of documentaries, so I know that, for the most part, refugees are just average people with middle-class aspirations who happen to come from another country. I have sympathy for what they've gone through and wish they had better lives, but at the same time I've seen how letting an unending tide of refugees into a country can lead to horrible societal rifts like in France or Britain. Compassion is great—I'm all for compassion—but not at any cost.

So, while I can't speak for my colleagues, I have a fairly strong sense of how the next few months are going to play out for me.

Basically, I'm going to go to my refugee prison in the middle of nowhere and try to be a nice guy because, even though I don't want to encourage an influx of asylum seekers, I know the refugees who have made it here don't want to be locked up and will probably be decent people. I don't want to add to their misery. If I can do something nice for them, I'll do something nice for them. But I'm not going to shed a tear, and I'm not seeking to change the world. I'm not Mother Conscience—I'm just trying to pay off an outstanding credit card balance from a trip to South America. Yeah, it's not even anything exciting like a drug debt or newborn bastard.

The fact is, I will become a guard. Regardless of what they call me, no matter how clever I am or how immune I think I am to societal rules and expectations, the moment I walk behind those fences I am a refugee-prison guard and I will become a refugee-prison guard. Even Dr Zimbardo got lost in the power trip and his performance as superintendent in the fake prison at Stanford. If I learned anything from reading his memoir, it's that we act out the roles we fill whether we intend to or not—and I've just graduated from trainee to guard. Simple as that.

## WELCOME

We get off a tiny steel lozenge on a street known as Derby Airport. A moist fist punches me in the face before I realise it's actually a vicious flailing with a steamed lettuce before I realise it's just the wind. A hot, sticky, suffocating wind that has the ineffable quality of weighing on you from all sides.

It somehow manages to make my hangover worse and I silently curse Keely for forcing the last of his bottle of Johnnie Walker Black down my throat by telling me to not drink his fucking Johnnie Walker Black—and then promptly passing out. I take a swig of water from my bottle and breathe, deep as I can, as I gaze out upon a strange land.

I was born and raised in a farm and forestry town in the south-west. I haven't been back in five years, but it remains the lens through which I view the world. So when I see trees, I'm looking for the karri and jarrah giants of eucalypt forest. When I take in the sweep of an entire horizon of land, I'm comparing it to the hills and valleys of dairy farm and vineyard. And when I taste the air, I'm searching for the pollens and oils I know should be there.

Here, all I taste is dust. All I see is dust—that, and low-lying scrub, the colours monotonous silver or khaki. But the real gut punch is the land itself. The flatness. It's like old parchment laid over an earth-sized sphere. That may be great for attempts to break the land-speed record in jet engine dragsters; otherwise, it's just alien and hostile.

I climb down from the plane and collect my bag. A van is waiting to whisk us to the centre, which isn't in town—it's fifty kilometres south-east, even further into the dry, desolate interior.

The drive feels long. There is nothing to punctuate the view. I certainly don't see the picturesque white sands and cerulean waters that people visualise when thinking about this part of the world. That would be Broome, the Australia of postcards and promises, two hours to the south-west. But we're not in Broome. We're in the shire of Derby, which, I've decided, is a shithole.

Of course, these days, now that we've learned to cast off outmoded colonial ways of looking at the Australian strangeness and quit seeking reproductions of Europe, even places like Derby are meant to be unique and precious and hold their own special type of beauty.

Right—and while the shiteaters in the tourism bureaus keep telling gullible Japanese and German tourists that, the fact is, I've landed in a unique, special type of shithole. It's little wonder the white shirts decided to put a refugee prison out here. You get off that plane or bus and you don't even think you're in Australia. You think you're in Africa, and I don't mean the good bits.

We pull onto a side road and cross a fence-line, pass some checkpoints that remind us the detention centre is situated on air force land, pass another fence, then pull into a parking lot. There's a big sign that says "Welcome to Curtin".

I guess time is money, so, almost immediately, our induction begins. We're introduced to chief swinging-dick Benedict. He's one of the senior managers who spends time in the headquarters and around the grounds. He's a big bloke, broad and thickset, obviously a formidable man back in his prime. He's carrying a good few years on his face, and a slight stoop affects his posture when he's standing, but he looks like he could still do some damage.

I notice his hands. They're like the hands you see on farmers who've done a lifetime of hard work under the sun—gnarled, leathery and heavy. He reminds me a bit of John Wayne, if John Wayne had been playing an old Australian drover.

The words that spill from his mouth are sharp and clipped, his accent distinctly northern but not bogan in the way I was expecting. He doesn't pause to take questions. He tells you something and you listen. Assuming we agree with everything he says, do exactly as he says and receive any admonishment without quibble, I'm sure we'll get along fine with Benedict.

He explains the basics. Tells us that we will need to be on guard at all times. How the clients are always stealing stuff. Are pointlessly obsessed with items they are not meant to hoard, as if at any moment the centre will run out of clean and hole-free undies.

He explains that the average client is a not a bad man—not evil or anything—but almost certainly is a shifty bugger, just biding his time. That means the most innocent, pleasant conversation may actually be their working an angle to screw you over, to find an advantage. So, the number one rule is that you can be friendly with clients, but you don't become their friend. You can have empathy for them, but not sympathy, because sympathy is a vulnerability that makes you a target.

“What you need to remember,” says Benedict, “is that even with the nice ones, and there are some nice lads in here, you be friendly with them, but you never trust them. They'll turn on you in a second, mark my words.”

Benedict hoists his enormous frame upright. “All right, follow me. I'll give you lot a walk-through of the grounds.”

We pass through a series of fences and gates into the compounds where the detainees are housed. We're told there are just under one thousand clients in Curtin, all men, yet walking around we see no more than fifty. Those we do see look pretty chilled out. They don't look like rapists or psychopaths or devious masterminds. Just some darker-skinned dudes

in thongs, track-pants and t-shirts strolling along, smoking cigarettes. It could be a drought-stricken town in Bali.

The occupational health and safety manager shows us a thermometer, destroyed after it topped out in the high fifties. Up here it's hot like you are on the surface of Venus. Hot and humid. The buildings, almost all transportables like those in mining camps, are disjointed and ugly. The gardens, where there are gardens, aren't going to win any prizes. The outside communal areas tend to comprise concrete slab, tin roof and a few wooden benches. Taken together, it's little wonder most detainees sleep the day away to emerge at night, or simply hide in the air-conditioned interiors.

That said, the place is not particularly fearsome or intimidating, not authoritarian or controlling in the dystopian way some would like to believe. There are lots of tall fences topped with razor wire, but apart from that it's just a really shitty bush camp. Not pleasant, but hardly a gulag.