

BEWARE THE DANGERS OF TRAVELLING ALONE...


'Utterly  
addictive and  
deliciously  
dark.'

**SALLY  
HEPWORTH**

'Dazzling  
and head-  
spinningly  
twisty.'

**CANDICE  
FOX**

# RED RIVER ROAD



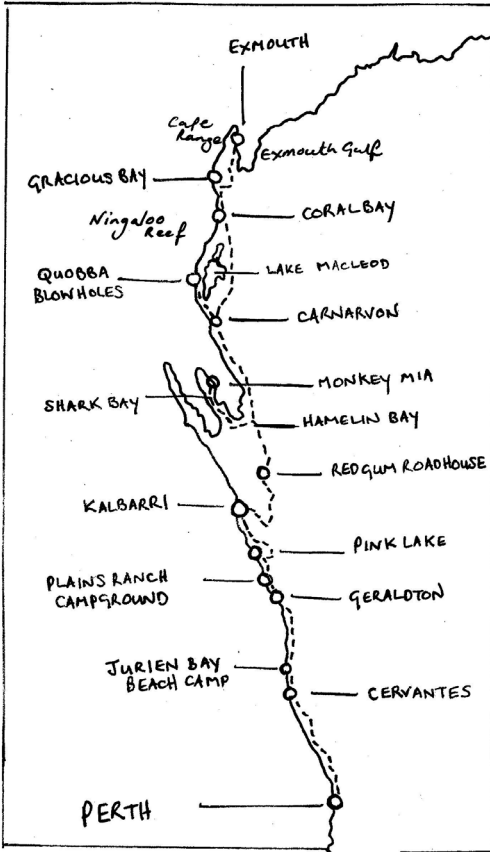
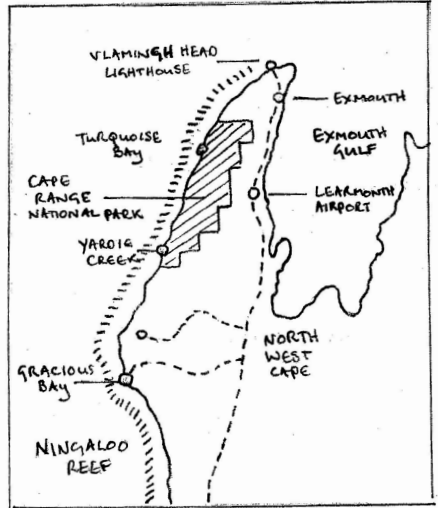
**ANNA  
DOWNES**

*'Take care of yourself!' screamed the White Queen, seizing  
Alice's hair with both her hands. 'Something's going to happen!'  
And then (as Alice afterwards described it) all sorts of things  
happened in a moment.*

Lewis Carroll,  
*Through the Looking-Glass*

# NINGALOO

## PHOEBE'S ROUTE



Liked by **goodnightpetergraham** and **others**

**pheebsinwonderland** Hi everyone! I'm Phoebe and I'm a travel addict and vanlifer about to take me, myself and I off on an adventure of a lifetime: THE BIG LAP OF AUSTRALIA! Only two more sleeps to go. And before you ask: no, I'm not scared. The first thing people say when I tell them I'm travelling alone is 'BE CAREFUL' – and don't even get me started on my parents' response. But the world is full of magic, and solo travel offers way more rewards than risks – it's just that the bad stories get told more often than the good. (Sidenote: according to my astrology chart, planetary alignment this year will bring significant transformations and challenges but also *opportunities* and *growth* – how's that for a good sign?!) So I want to explore this beautiful country and share my experiences with you so that hopefully you, and others, won't be afraid to do the same. Please join me as I travel an entire loop of Australia, starting and ending in Perth. Check out my photos, keep up with my posts and hit me with your own travel tips! There's no advice I trust more than word of mouth. See you on the road! Love and light, Pheebx x

PS: If you're still worried, see my list of TOP TWENTY SAFETY TIPS as compiled from various travel blogs and websites. I hereby swear I will plaster this list on the wall of my van and follow its advice every day so help me god. Happy now, Mum? 😊

(Image descriptions: 1. a long-haired girl wearing denim shorts and a bikini top stands on a dusty red road facing a beautiful sunset. A white van is parked to one side, fairy lights twinkling through the open side door. The road twists and winds like a river over the sprawling desert landscape toward the horizon. 2. a handwritten list of safety travel tips written on an A4 piece of lined notebook paper entitled *The Solo Travel Safety Gospel According to Phoebe.*)

#solofemaletravel #thosewhowander #vanlife #biglap #australia #lifegoals #chooseyourownadventure #vijasolo #travelgirls #wanderlust

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**mountainlady333** Love this so much, so inspiring 😊♥

**itmekezybee** Welcome to #LapLife honey, we're one big happy family!

**saltyhair\_sandytoess:** Hi Pheebs! If you don't have a 4WD, there are some great beaches you can access with only a 2WD if you're interested in off grid? Absolute beachfront camping, and totally free. I'll DM you the details.

**lonewanderer66** Take care of yourself, Phoebe. It's more dangerous out there than you think.

14 May

# KATY

I've made a mistake.

I know it as soon as I catch my head lolling, my eyelids drifting shut. With a sharp inhale, I sit up straight and tighten my grip on the wheel. I blink and the road swims back into focus. Dusty asphalt passes beneath me like fast-running water, the broken white line shining in the twin beams of my headlights. On both sides, red dirt fades to black.

My heart starts to race. *Did I just fall asleep?* I check the speedometer: I'm almost twenty over the limit. *Goddamn.* Swiping a hand across my clammy brow, my foot finds the brake and the van slows down.

The evening is quiet, no other vehicles but mine, but it feels like a close call. I could easily have veered off the road and hit a tree, or collided with a passing kangaroo; I could've smashed into an actual person. I can just imagine what Phoebe would say if she were here. *Are you insane, babe? Tap into your wisdom and pull over. Don't you know anything about how to keep yourself safe?* Oh, the irony.

The horizon to the west is striped with gold. Night has fallen so fast. Surely the sky was still bright just minutes ago?

I keep going. It might not be safe to drive after dark, but stopping overnight on the side of the road isn't an option either. And I can't turn back. I had a good reason for leaving in a hurry ... didn't I?

I think back. Why did I leave again? I'd been at a campsite. There'd

been a guy. I hadn't felt comfortable. And when you're uncomfortable, you leave. Travel 101. But what specifically had made me feel that way? I can't quite remember, the details are blurry – which isn't unusual for me, I can't always pinpoint the reasons behind my feelings. But then I steer sharply around a sudden pothole and something rolls into my foot, cracking me on the ankle. Reaching down, I pull an almost-empty wine bottle from the footwell. *Oh*. The dregs slosh against the cap and my stomach churns with it. *Oh, no*. I run my tongue around my mouth and taste blackberries and tannin. The realisation hits me like a sandbag: I'm not just tired. I'm drunk.

Skin crawling with shame, I wedge the bottle between my seat and the door, its glass neck poking out like a little person with something to say. *No*. I glare at it. *You pipe down*. I don't want to hear from any of its full friends in the back either, though I can already hear them calling. Look at me, can't even get through my first full day on the road without a booze-fuelled drama of my own making.

I can only guess what *really* happened back there – a friendly camper had tried to make conversation and I freaked out, overreacted and got behind the wheel despite having had too much to drink. Wouldn't be the first time.

Reaching for a bottle of water wedged in the cup holder, I twist off the top and scull half in one go, gulping down the lukewarm liquid as if it will wash all the bad feeling away.

I keep going and going. The sky grows darker; the stripe of gold turns pink then purple. I check the GPS. My next stop is just under two hours away, by which time it'll be fully dark. I have a booking but not until tomorrow. Maybe if I call ahead, they'll let me check in early? I reach for my phone, but freeze as a light winks in the wing mirror. Headlights. A car, catching up on the road behind me.

Slowly, I return my hand to the wheel. *One elephant, two elephant, three elephant, four*. I check the mirror again. The light disappears as I round a bend, then reappears as the car does the same. *Relax. It's a road. Other vehicles are normal*. Still, I continue to keep watch.

I turn on the radio. A local station is playing some sleazy saxophone number, very early 90s. The song fades out and is replaced by a news jingle. 'And now for today's headlines,' says the reporter. 'The family of missing solo traveller Vivi Green put pressure on police to extend their search to the Cape Range National Park after a—'

I turn it off again. The air around me suddenly feels hot and sticky. I switch on the air con and the soft whirr of the fan joins the engine's white noise. I shift in my seat. The twin pinpricks behind me look like eyes, getting closer and closer. They're also, I realise, moving. Zigzagging from side to side. I squint into the rear-view mirror, watching through the dark tunnel of the van's interior as the car crosses into the oncoming lane then slides back in line with me.

Something's not right. I put my foot down and speed up as much as I dare, but when I check my mirrors again the car has kept pace. A glance back at the speedometer tells me I can't go any faster, I'm back over the limit, so I change tactic, slowing down to let the driver overtake. But the vehicle slows with me and hovers right on my tail, swerving and swinging, swerving and swinging.

Spotting an upcoming side road, I signal left and brake, giving the driver plenty of opportunity to pass. But the car accelerates, growing ever larger in the mirror, and it's not signalling, it's not overtaking, it's coming straight at me, and it's going to hit me—

At the very last minute I wrench the wheel, sending my van into the gravel well before the turning. My wheels kick up a cloud of dust and the car shoots past in a streak of light and sound. I crane my neck as it passes, trying to get eyes on the driver, the registration plate, but all I see is darkened windows and the boxy outline of a military-style camper.

Coming to a complete stop, I sit in the dark with the engine idling, hardly daring to breathe, half-expecting the headlights to circle back, wondering what I'll do if that happens. But the tail-lights disappear and the road is empty once more. I kick myself for not stopping much earlier, for setting off so late in the first place, for failing to 'tap into' my 'wisdom'.

Trembling, I urge the van forward, turning onto the side road and rolling along a short distance before killing the engine. I take my hands off the wheel, lean back against the headrest and cover my face with my hands. I'm so jacked I can feel my heartbeat in my eyeballs.

At the same time, collapse is creeping in like a tide. The long drive, the hypervigilance, the alcohol, the car that ran me off the road – the combination hits me like a narcotic cocktail and fatigue takes over. My eyes start to close.

It's so quiet. I have to rest. I need to sleep. I start to drift ...

~

I wake to the muffled sound of rustling grass and snapping twigs.

My eyes fly open and I stare out through the windscreen, studying the shadows beyond. On the surface, nothing has changed. I'm still in the van, still parked on the side road, it's still dark outside. But in my bones I know that something is different.

I click on the interior lights then hit the switch for the LEDs in the back. Their dim glow spills from the windows and illuminates the patch of dirt around the van but not much more.

Then I catch movement to my right. The wave of a branch in the wind? A prowling animal? I press my face against the window, cup my hands to the glass. Maybe I imagined it. But no, there it is again, a kind of disturbance, a wrinkle on the surface of the night. Somewhere out there, something is moving.

I know I should stay put, that it's much safer inside the van than out, but I can't help myself, I'm already pushing the door open and stepping out onto the cold ground. From what I can see, the road is narrower than I first thought, little more than a mud track through a tangle of scrub, probably leading to a farm or rural estate. I have no interest in following it though; the last thing I need right now is some creepy old house. I turn instead to face the highway but I can't even see it anymore. It's like I've travelled miles into the wilderness instead of just a few yards.

Gradually I become aware of soft sounds hovering in the air like dragonflies. Bugs, leaves, breeze, frogs. Human sounds too. *Breath huff, sole slap, stone skitter.*

‘Hello?’

Drawing my phone from my pocket, I activate the torch. The beam is too weak to penetrate much more than the shadows at my feet, but up ahead I swear I can see someone. My heart sputters. *Yes.* Up ahead, standing on the track. A woman. Wearing yellow.

‘Phoebe?’

I inhale and a sweet, familiar scent fills my nose.

‘Pheeb? Is that you?’

It defies all rationality and logic but I’m convinced it’s her. She’s here. Sticking to the trail and holding my phone out in front, I take a step forward, then another and another. I pick up my pace and leave the van behind. Trees tower above me like tall humans, their trunks smooth and rumpled like folds of skin. Somewhere nearby, water is trickling. The horizon is swollen with hills, coal-black against a vast star-speckled sky.

Finally, I stop. I can’t see her anymore, can’t hear her. ‘Phoebe?’

The track is empty. Red dirt has become sand, the trees replaced by sea grass. The ocean is close.

‘Please,’ I whisper, shivering. ‘Please come back.’ But there’s no one here but me, no other voices or beating hearts. I was wrong. She isn’t here. I am alone.

Suddenly I can’t breathe. I can’t remember her face – her *real* face, not the one in photos and videos but the real flesh and bone of her. Eyelashes, freckles, hair, scars. The crinkle of her forehead, the lines at the corners of her mouth. They’re all slipping away like sand through my fingers. I’m starting to forget.

Bending forward with my hands on my knees – *Brace! Brace!* – I make a list.

*She liked to eat apples in the car, and always left the shrivelled brown cores in the cupholder.*

*Her pet peeve was noisy eaters.*

*For no reason at all, she never drank the last few centimetres of any drink.  
She preferred bobby pins to hair ties and liked to customise them with  
colourful nail polish. When it was sunny they glittered in her hair like jewels.  
People often told her she could 'light up a room', and it was true.*

Slowly, slowly, my breath returns to normal. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. I'm being such a baby. But I'm here, aren't I? I made it. And I have a job to do.

Following the track back the way I came, I return to the van, climb in and tuck myself behind the wheel. Hello again, square one.

In the end I decide that pushing on is the lesser evil. Wherever I am, either something is off or I'm seeing things, and neither problem will be solved by darkness and solitude. I'm much better off finding the next campsite and the company of other people. At least I've had a power nap.

Starting the engine, I turn the van around and follow the track back to the highway.

At first, it's just a feeling. An inexplicable pressure shift, like a descent into deep water. I can't put my finger on it, but as soon as the tyres hit the tarmac I can tell that something is wrong.

Frowning, I study my mirrors, searching for headlights, but there are no speeding cars this time. I check the wings again, my eyes jumping from the road ahead to the road behind and back again. Nothing. But then my attention snags.

I adjust the rear view so I can see the van's interior, angling it down toward the floor of the van, then up and around the sides – and then I see it: a ripple, like the sheets are breathing, like the van itself is alive.

Next, I hear a soft *hab-huh, hab-huh*, an echo of my own breath. I inhale and hear it again. I exhale to a second whoosh of expelled air. My stomach flips: that feeling when the roller-coaster starts to drop.

The bedsheets *are* breathing. The blanket is a weird shape, all bunched to one side. The mattress is lumpy.

It hits me like an electric shock.

I'm not alone.

# BETH

Of all the decisions Beth Randall has made in her life, sneaking into a stranger's van and hiding in their bed is surely one of the worst.

As she listens to the sounds of the driver – a woman? – opening the door and taking her place behind the wheel, Beth presses herself into the mattress as if she might somehow be able to disappear inside it. As the engine turns over, she starts to sweat. And as the van begins to move, all her thoughts curdle into a single clear certainty: *This is how I'm going to die.*

Obviously it's her own fault. What had she been thinking, trapping herself like this? Had she learned nothing from the last year? But she'd had no other choice! She'd been running for so long her feet were bleeding, her legs were cement, and every breath was a bellyful of fire. *Keep going*, she'd told herself over and over. *Weak fucking bitch, don't you dare stop now.* Every step was sending shockwaves from the soles of her feet to the top of her skull, reigniting the pain of each fresh injury.

At first the camper had appeared as just a warm glow in the dark. A lantern? A campfire? No – a van, tucked away on a side road with all its lights on; a HiAce, she realised on closer inspection, the kind of immaculate conversion you saw everywhere now.

'Hello?' she called as she approached – or tried to call, but her voice was little more than a rasp. 'Anyone home?' She didn't want to startle

the driver, knew full well how people can react when they're scared. No answer.

The van's white exterior was covered with red dirt and mud splashes. A peek through the windows revealed a cute but chaotic space: fairy lights and cushions, cupboards and drawers, a sink and a fridge; a neat little seat and a bed with the sheets turned back as if someone had just recently climbed out. Towels draped over the counter, discarded clothes, a snow drift of snack wrappers and crumpled paper banked up in one corner. No driver, though.

And then a noise cut through the quiet: the faint rumble of an engine on the highway. She spun around to see headlights in the distance. *Shit*. Without thinking, she pulled hard on the side door of the van, almost passing out with relief when she found it unlocked. Sliding it open, she slithered through the gap and dragged it shut again before flattening herself on the floor.

Breathless, she waited with her cheek pressed against the fibres of a striped mat, one half of her brain focused on the immediate threat, the other wondering about keys. What were the chances the driver had left them behind? Could it possibly be as easy as that? But the car outside was getting louder, the headlights closer. *Fuck*. She glanced around her, up at the windows, the shining fairy lights. The van was like a beacon, and all anyone had to do was peek through the windows just as she'd done and that would be it: game over. Where was the switch?

Then she stiffened. Footsteps. Someone was coming. Pulse racing, she clambered onto the bed, tugged the blankets over her body and curled up into a tight ball. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but maybe it would've been better to keep running? Hindsight is such a bitch.

As Beth feels the HiAce swing back onto the highway, she lies as still as she can, her body bruised like rotting fruit, her throat burning. There's a lump on her head, high up on the left side, and all her muscles are screaming. Frantically, she runs through all possible ways to handle the situation – because however it happens, she will be discovered, and then what?

It's actually a relief when the answer comes quick. After just a few minutes, the driver spots Beth in the mirror and quite rightly loses her shit. Piercing noise fills the van, half-words yelled at full volume, *wha the get ow who ah how the fuh*, and Beth gives herself up, throwing back the sheets and raising her hands in surrender, *no please it's okay don't be scared*, but the driver is already peaking.

The van veers in all directions, swinging from one lane to the other before hurtling off the bitumen completely. Every panel and bolt rattles as the wheels bounce over cracked, uneven ground; Beth is tossed sideways and loses her grip on the mattress, eventually sliding right off the end and landing on the floor with a thump. The driver screams and the van swerves again, so violently this time that Beth is thrown against the kitchen counter, where she cracks her head on a cupboard door – and down she goes again as the van skids, teetering briefly on two wheels before somehow righting itself and coming to a juddery stop.

Wasting not even a second, the driver yanks the handbrake, tears the keys from the ignition and throws herself out into the night, leaving Beth alone in the back. 'Mother *fuck*,' she mutters, and hauls herself up to sitting. Her left eye is pulsating like it might explode and there's something very wrong with her shoulder. 'Ow.' She presses her fingers to her eyebrow and they come away slick with blood. 'Oh, great. Fucking perfect.'

She peers out the window. The van has stopped at a dangerous angle, its hood sticking out into the northbound lane, the rear nestled into a shrub. The driver hasn't gone far; Beth can still hear her yelling hysterically somewhere in the dark. It's all *get out, get the hell out of my van, go away, leave me alone*, over and over and over. She needs to shut up or she'll attract attention.

Pulling herself up on the counter, Beth gets to her feet. Blood slides from her temple to her chin and she wipes it away, smoothing back her hair, her mind shifting so seamlessly into self-preservation mode that she's barely aware it's happening. Her body is used to making necessary adjustments; her mind has mastered the pivot.

Straightening up, she slides open the door and steps out.

On the road some distance away, the driver – rake thin, short hair, baggy t-shirt – is shifting nervously from one foot to the other and brandishing something in the air. ‘Stay where you are,’ she shrieks. ‘I have a gun.’

*Liar*, Beth thinks, but chooses not to call the woman’s bluff. Instead, she plays along, reaching for the sky while searching for the right words. *Not the truth. Anything but the truth.*

‘I’m sorry,’ she calls out – or tries to. Her neck and throat hurt so much, it’s hard to keep her voice steady. She swallows and it burns like acid. ‘Please, I need help.’

The woman does not back down. Every muscle is poised for attack. She’s not a fighter, though, Beth can see that. She’s shaking. And the thing in her hand is way too small to be a gun. It’s a key. Beth eyes it hungrily.

‘I’m not dangerous,’ she continues. ‘I promise. I was trying to get away, I needed help, and I saw your van. I didn’t mean to scare you, it was an accident. Please believe me.’

The driver looks around, clearly hoping to see another car or a truck, a passing stranger on whom she can offload this unthinkable situation – and who can blame her? Beth could be anyone: a drug addict, an escaped convict, a psych patient on the run. She watches as the woman pivots on the spot, both hands pressed to her cheeks. Whoever she is, she’s obviously not great in a crisis, just wants all this to go away – but she’s conflicted too. Torn. Some part of her wants to help.

Acting fast, Beth drops to the ground as if all her bones have dissolved. She thinks of home and the tears come quick. The driver shuffles forward, and Beth cries harder. *That’s it*, she thinks. *Come on, just a little further.* The woman edges closer still, the key glinting in her hand. It wouldn’t take much, just a firm push, a swift snatch-and-grab, and she could be gone in seconds ...

But then the driver stops just out of reach. She folds her arms and crouches down. ‘Hey,’ she croons, lowering herself into Beth’s eyeline.

‘Don’t cry.’ Her tone is suddenly gentle, the hysteria replaced by something more controlled. ‘What’s your name?’

Beth looks up, wary of this change. Her name ... she goes by so many these days, it’s hard to keep track. ‘Lily,’ she replies, plucking one from her head like a rabbit from a hat.

‘Lily,’ the woman repeats, meeting her gaze with what appears to be deep sadness. ‘Okay. It’s alright. I believe you. I can help.’ Standing up again, she puts the key in her pocket and holds out a hand. ‘Let’s get you inside. I’ll drive you to a hospital.’

Beth’s stomach lurches. That’s the very last place she should go. ‘Oh. No. That’s kind of you, but I’m fine.’

‘To the police, then.’

‘Really, I’m fine.’

‘But you said you needed help.’

Beth doesn’t know what to say. What excuse can she possibly give?

The driver frowns. ‘Well, I have to take you somewhere. You can’t stay here.’

Beth stares out into the darkness. It’s true, she can’t. And stealing the van would only help in the short term. *Okay, change of plan.*

‘Can I ... come with you?’ she asks. ‘Just wherever you’re going? I won’t be any trouble, I promise. I just need to clean myself up, get my head together.’

The driver tilts her head, regarding Beth with a mix of suspicion and pity – and something else, something unreadable.

‘Please. Just for the night. I can’t think straight. I just need to rest.’

The woman considers this. ‘Alright,’ she says finally. ‘Just for the night. We’ll decide what to do in the morning.’

Beth wipes her eyes with the back of one hand. ‘Thank you.’

‘Come on. We can talk on the way.’

Beth allows herself to be hoisted to her feet and guided into the van. Safely installed in the passenger seat, she clicks the seatbelt into place and braces herself for a deluge of questions, all variants on *what*

*happened to you?* Once again, she contemplates answering with the truth. But she couldn't even if she wanted to. Because the real question is not *what* but *who*.