

# **Overflow**

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## Synopsis

*Overflow* is a novel formed from a collection of five stories, each focussing on a different character and exploring the themes of loss, escape and dependency. Newcastle and the fictional Queen Victoria pub form environments in which the characters experience tragedy, death, love and infatuation. The novel also explores the interlocking relationships and the characters' dependence on the pub and alcohol. The linked narratives highlight the coincidental connections that occur within the city of Newcastle and are part of my exploration to understand the environment of the Australian pub.

The exegesis, *Overflowing*, discusses the influence that place has on the individual and the connection between place and portrayals of self. The first part of the essay focuses on the idea of place and its significance, examining how place shapes the development of characters and how characters in turn influence the sense of place. The second part of the essay looks more specifically at the place of the pub, the representation of self, portrayals of masculinity, and the role that violence and vulgarity has on representations within the pub. The essay explores sociological ideas of place and identity, and applies these theories to fictional works set in Newcastle, with close examination of Patrick Cullen's *What Came Between* in particular, and the genre of "pub fiction", with particular focus on David Ireland's *The Glass Canoe*.

## Overflow

**For Mum and Dad**

The first drop of rain opens a crack in the windscreen.  
It splits the night ahead; the streetlights are bright down one side of the street,  
dark on the other.



## **Malcolm**

March 2007

“Get up, you mutt. Carn, get up.” Malcolm cracks the imaginary whip against his thigh to encourage the greyhound along. The jackets blur together; it is hard to tell the dogs apart as they come down the final straight. He holds his breath. Malcolm strains to hear the commentator’s staccato words. The dogs cross the line and he moans. In the near-empty TAB, no one hears him.

His large hands scrunch up the betting ticket before launching it across the room. It falls just short of the bin, bounces across the grey carpet, and becomes part of a collection of scrapped tickets on the floor. Nobody counts how many in the collection are their own failed bets.

One more bet, then. He is only a hundred dollars or so behind this week; a decent win and he will be even. He refers to his guide and fills out another form. It is a longshot, but rumour has it the dog is a sure thing. One win and he can pretend he was never even behind. Considering what Centrelink gives him for unemployment, he really needs the money. The machine snatches the ticket from his hand when he threads it into the slot.

“Not your day?” The cashier, hunched on his stool, offers a smile, revealing a line of crooked yellow teeth. His pale blue shirt creases as he leans over to read the computer screen. “That’ll be twenty, mate.”

Malcolm rummages through his wallet. “Can you change that bet to a tenner?” He fishes out a ten-dollar note before taking the betting ticket. “Here’s hoping.”

The TAB attendant nods and returns to reading his paper.

Malcolm counts the seconds to the start of the race. The days seem so slow now. When he worked at the BHP as a metallurgist, the days passed quickly while he studied tables and graphs on the computer screen. He had an important job of ensuring the quality of the steel and the satisfaction of the customers. There was no “mate” from his colleagues or clients; he was respected. He wore a shirt and tie to work; he was always clean-shaven and he walked with purpose. He is so far away from that man now, with his mess of a beard, wrinkled shirt and ripped shorts. He slumps on the bench in the centre of the room and kicks his thongs off. He would never admit it out loud, but he misses the order and cleanliness of his office. His table was always neat, pens in their container, papers neatly in their files. The only thing out of place in his office was a drawing in the corner of the whiteboard that his son Geoff had doodled when he was about nine. The smiley face, with its large tongue and bushy eyebrows, watched over Malcolm as he worked each day. And then there was the family photo on the desk, the one he looked at whenever he was overwhelmed by the workload, when a deadline got to him. He

knows where that photo is now: it is buried at the bottom of a drawer of a desk that is covered in junk. The desk is in a room Malcolm seldom enters. There is little use for the study these days, so it is currently used to store boxes of rarely used stuff.

Malcolm runs his fingers through his scruffy beard. He browses the training course book Centrelink suggested he read. The only option was to retrain and then find more work in a different field, maybe something in accounts. He is determined to do something before enrolments close.

The last blast of the afternoon sun barely reaches into the den of the TAB. Outside the window there is a parade of shorts, skirts, singlets and revealing tops. A pair of smooth, tanned legs stroll pass the entrance; Malcolm's eyes glide over them.

He gazes up at the bank of televisions. Their green glow combines with the fluorescent lights overhead. He bites his lip. He needs this win. The dogs enter their starting pens, pressing their noses out of the grill. A colourful number above the trapdoors announces each dog's lane. The gates snap open. The dogs jostle while they charge. The rabbit uncaringly whirs along the rail. Dirt sprays from beneath the dogs' paws. Malcolm spots the pink jacket of his dog; it breaks through the pack and nudges in front. The announcer's voice is a whirr as he screams the dogs' names. The dogs come down the final straight in a pack. Malcolm clenches his fists and bites his tongue, bouncing on the bench. A group of dogs cross the finish line together in a cloud of dust. He jumps to his feet. Surely his dog is first or second.

A car alarm screams outside but Malcolm ignores it. He watches the television screen, waiting for the race results. He glances at his watch momentarily while he rocks from side to side, bare feet rooted to the carpet. It is close. Too close. He checks his ticket. He only needs a place. The dog had long odds. If it places, he will double his money.

The results show up on the screen: his dog is third. A moment later the paying dividends flick up on the screen next to the name of each dog. Rains-A-Comin', in third place, comes up with "NPD" beside its name. There aren't enough dogs in the race to pay third place.

"Fucking mutt," Malcolm mutters. He turns away and kicks the air. In his imagination, his foot goes thudding into the underside of the dog with a crack. He snatches the training book from the bench, slips his feet back in his thongs, and strides toward the door while punching the air.

People hurry between the shops doing last-minute shopping. Malcolm pauses in front of the hairdresser. In case he does get lucky enough to get an interview, he should probably get a haircut. He looks into the salon; a young boy sits, legs swaying wildly back and forth, as the clippers streak across his head. The boy grins as the rotund, bald hairdresser towers over him. The boy looks so much like Geoff at that age. The hairdresser squints through the glass and feebly lifts an aging hand to acknowledge his regular. Malcolm returns the gesture.

The late-afternoon sun is still bright as he continues his trek home. He grimaces and hobbles when a stone lodges between the sole of his foot and his thong. He hesitates outside the pub on the corner. The low murmur of workers having their after-work drinks comes from inside. He imagines the cold beer sliding between his lips, the frothy head sticking to his upper lip, and the hops biting his tongue. He lingers at the door a moment longer before crossing the road and continuing along the footpath.

A cool breeze rolls down the hill over Lambton Park. On the concrete stairs of the rotunda a couple sit, throwing a tennis ball high into the air for their German Shepherd. The sun is sinking behind the Moreton Bay figs, shining through the branches and casting long shadows onto the grass.

Malcolm ventures off the footpath to walk on the grass. He stops for a breather. His hand skims along the top of the hedge that borders the park; his fingers slip between the leaves and bounce off twigs. A shout rings out from the cricket nets behind the rotunda as some boys practise hitting the leather around. Beyond the nets, children still play on the playground equipment, ducking in and out of the plastic and sliding down slippery-dips, while their parents watch.

The light spills over the field. It was around this time of day that, after fighting the traffic at knock-off time at the BHP, Malcolm would often retreat to the park with his son. They would take turns batting and bowling in the nets until it was too dark to see the scuffed leather ball. Malcolm smiles when he peers over at the nets: a young boy with pads too large for his legs swings his bat wildly. His head flails about following the arc of the bat, his eyes not focused on the ball. He misses and the ball crashing into the mesh behind the stumps can be heard across the park. The young boy slumps his shoulders while gathering the ball to return to an older boy at the opposite end of the pitch; the older boy calls something to him and then shows him how to play the shot with an imaginary bat. The young boy readjusts his pads on his legs and takes face once more.

Malcolm purses his lips and nods, recalling how Geoff's first pieces of cricket gear had been a birthday present from Malcolm's own father, who had once bought Malcolm his first gear. Excited to try it, Geoff had dragged his father straight to the park upon receiving it. Geoff's helmet had flopped about, covering his eyes, blinding him to Malcolm's slow spinning deliveries. Malcolm, expecting this, had brought some foam to the park and padded the helmet until it sat steady on Geoff's head. The boy tested it by attempting to lightly tap the heavy bat against it; he dropped the willow atop the helmet and complained for ten minutes that he couldn't hear anything. Still, he grinned a gap-toothed smile every time he connected with a ball thrown to him by his father. Malcolm thought he was a natural and it wasn't long before the woody thud of leather on willow was more frequent.

The young boy over in the nets connects with a delivery and it collides into the side mesh of the nets. He jumps up and down excitedly. Malcolm can see his grin from where he stands. The older boy claps from the other end of the pitch. The pride is similar to when Malcolm stood on the sidelines, screaming and cheering as the ball sailed from the willow after Geoff hit a boundary to win the under-fifteen's grand final. The team sprayed Malcolm with their drink bottles, as it seemed fitting to drench their coach after the victory. He smiles; so much pride from hitting a ball around the ground.

Malcolm finds a gap in the hedge. He wanders toward a concrete path and examines the long tufts of grass spilling over the edge. Goosebumps spread over his arms when he follows the path into the shade of the giant fig trees. About thirty metres from the road he pauses, circling his foot around a gouge in the concrete lip of the path. Geoff's bicycle caused the groove on the edge of the path years ago when it had slipped sideways. He was about eight years old. Malcolm had carried Geoff in his arms the short distance up the hill home. The bicycle was left by the path, scratched, its front wheel bent. It was missing by time they returned from the hospital, Geoff's leg in a plaster cast.

Malcolm's eyes follow the concrete path weaving toward the play equipment. The last time he ventured into the park with his son, Geoff had just had his seventeenth birthday. He had run away from home in the middle of the night. A thick fog had settled across the playing fields; the rotunda was shrouded in a blanket of grey, as though concealing the ghosts of brass bands unseen for decades. Malcolm's feet crunched across the bark of the play area while he searched in the darkness for his son. The argument had started over the computer printer not working, of all things, with Geoff's final high school assignment for the year being due in the morning.

"How can you not know how to use a fucking printer?" Geoff's voice had steadily grown in volume.

Malcolm followed Geoff through the house while he ranted.

"I thought you used computers at work, or can't they afford them, either?"

"Grow up, Geoff, and cut out that language. Be thankful I have a job and we can afford a damn computer."

"I'll fucking swear if I want. You broke the fucking printer, you dumb prick. If I can't get this printed, I fail my fucking assignment."

"You ungrateful sod. Perhaps you should just get out of my damn house." Malcolm flinched when the door slammed

He eventually found Geoff inside a small plastic cottage, caught in the light of a nearby streetlight, hugging his knees beneath the brilliant red plastic roof.

Leaving the park, Malcolm looks over in the direction of the play area: the plastic roof of the cottage has faded to pale pink.

Malcolm groans at the sight of the incline ahead, his hands running over his beer gut. The cars pass by, some with their headlights turned on, barely slowing for the curve in the road. Overhead, leaves and branches rustle in the breeze to fill the brief moments of quiet before another car rushes by. His thongs drag against the concrete path as he runs across the busy road; he struggles, cursing that he isn't as fit compared to even ten years earlier. Age was winning that race.

Grass takes hold in the cracks in the footpath on the corner of his street. Most of the houses have peeling paint on their weatherboards but tidy lawns. His is freshly painted, though the lawns need mowing. Under the streetlight opposite his house, a paper bag rests in the gutter. Malcolm leans against his knee when he bends to pick it up; an empty long-neck of VB beer is nestled in the paper. He mutters under his breath about the lack of respect people have and carries the bottle with him toward his house.

Sweat is dripping down from his hairline and running over his cheeks. It works its way down under his shirt until it drops from his gut, which hangs over his shorts. On the horizon, dark clouds are gathering. He pushes through the gate in the brick fence and climbs the two steps to the entrance. The timber door swings open and shudders as it slams into its plastic catch.

It is hot inside and Malcolm sucks in warm air with deep breaths. In the shafts of sunlight through the bathroom window, dust motes float before vanishing into the shadows. Malcolm drops his wallet and the WEA Hunter Adult Education and Training book on the table in the kitchen. The empty long-neck bottle, now naked with the paper bag in the bin beside it, is positioned on the corner bench to be taken to the recycle bin later. He opens the fridge and twists the lid off a two-litre bottle of Coke. He swigs deep from the bottle before screwing the lid back on. He collapses on the seat beside the kitchen table, air hissing through the stitches in the vinyl.

Outside, cockatoos squabble as they rip apart the trees that line the street; a neighbour's dog barks madly at the commotion. Inside, there is only Malcolm's laboured breathing and the ticking of the wall clock beside the fridge. Malcolm cranes his neck upward; in the skylight, black spots mark the final resting place of a collection of trapped insects.

The caller ID on the phone beside him blinks. It could be his lucky day. Perhaps it was a job offer. Be nicer still if it was someone ringing to tell him has won the lottery. Not much chance of either, he decides, but hits dial on the phone anyway. The call is answered quickly and the girl on the other end of the line announces it is a local firm at which Malcolm had enquired about work. Malcolm's heart skips a beat.

“Afternoon, Carol. My name is Malcolm Cross. Sorry, I've been out running some errands and missed your call.” His fingers work their way through the loops of the cord between the base of the phone and the handset.

“Oh, yes. I was just ringing to let you know that, unfortunately, we don't have anything available right now. But we will keep the résumé that you gave us in case something comes up.”

“Oh, okay.” Malcolm winces at the thought of another résumé drop next week. “Thanks for your time, Carol.”

Malcolm flicks through the pages of courses on offer. The words seem to blend together. Diplomas in business management, human resources and aged care fill the first few pages before the book outlines various courses in hobbies such as photography and guitar. He circles a few options. The weekend's newspaper still sits on the table; the available job positions have been crossed out, one by one.

“Who would've thought finding work would be so hard at fifty-five,” he mutters to himself. He pulls at his shirt. It seems tight around his neck. “Not too old yet, dammit,” he assures himself. “There's something out there for you.”

He scratches his head on the plaster behind the chair before pushing himself up with a grunt. The timber frame sticks to its runner and grates when he opens the window behind the kitchen sink. A small pot on the window sill holds a dead plant. It died soon after Veronica left.

Malcolm leans heavily on the bench over the sink; it creaks under his weight. The dishes are stacked deep inside the basin. Veronica used to complain about how he would wash the dishes each night—a few dishes at a time during the advertisement breaks of various television shows—but now the dishes stack up for days at a time. Sure, he had his flaws, but doesn't everyone? She still didn't have to leave. When he had finally been let go from the BHP, years after the mill had closed, they had argued more as money had become increasingly tight. Work was hard to come by with everyone looking for it. He had become more frustrated as the weeks went by; he drank and smoked more, spent more time at the pub and TAB. He may have put on some more weight, too. But he also took the time to paint the house. Veronica was the one who wanted that done. She left the day after he had finished.

Six months. It has been six long months since she left. He has changed. He still gambles, but he can't be expected to stop everything. He hasn't found the bottom of a bottle for thirty-four days, now, and doesn't smoke anymore. On the corner of the kitchen bench lies his old ashtray, cracked clean in two, a reminder of the habit defeated. Of his bad habits, smoking had to be the worst.

Six months, though. She has been part of his life for so long, but now she can only pass messages on through Geoff. At least Geoff is still here. It's not complete, but it still feels like a home with him here.

The chair strains as he collapses into it. He reaches for the telephone and dials Veronica's mobile. The phone rings twice.

"Hi, you've reached Veronica. I'm not available to answer your call right now. Leave a name and message and I'll get back to you."

Malcolm pauses, breathing slow. He begins to mutter a hello. Down the hall, he hears a key turning in the lock. He drops the phone back into the cradle. Footsteps are coming down the hall toward the kitchen. He pushes the further education book inside the weekend's newspaper and stashes the bundle into the saucepan drawer beside the table. "First week of uni complete? How's it going?" Malcolm asks, his eyes wide and locked onto his son. Not that he ever told him, he is proud of his son for chasing his dreams at university.

"Going to be a bloody hard semester, I think. Not happy with the subjects I'm doing, but they may get better." The thud of Geoff's bag echoes through the house as it drops to the floor. Geoff leans against the wall beside the fridge. "What you get up to today?"

Malcolm wraps his fingers around the cord of the phone. "Uh, not much. Bit of gardening down the backyard earlier, made a few phone calls." His voice softens. "Popped down the street for halfa." He pauses when a knot forms in the phone cord and traps his fingers. "How's your mother?"

"Mum's fine. She's settled into her new place now. Do you want a coffee or something?" Geoff moves over to the cupboards where the glasses are kept. He spies the bottle in the kitchen bench. Malcolm can hear his son swallow from across the room. "But you've been doing so well..."

"What?" Malcolm turns and sees what has caught Geoff's attention. "Oh, no."

"Tell me you haven't, Dad." Geoff moves over to his father and leans down, trying to smell his father's breath.

Malcolm pushes his son back, out of his space. "Bugger off, Geoff. I haven't, I swear. I found it outside in the gutter. Some lousy bum left it there." The swirl in the linoleum on the floor becomes Malcolm's focus. "I admit I'd kill for a beer, but that's not mine."

Geoff's bare feet interfere with Malcolm's view of the floor. He feels his son's hand on his shoulder. "How about that coffee?"

Malcolm stands and gathers two mugs from the cupboard; he drops one, but it bounces, unscathed, off the bench top.

"How'd the job search go?"

"Not much around, but I'm trying, Geoff."

"Anywhere offering?"

Malcolm grunts.

"Has to be somewhere that wants to hire you."

Malcolm grows impatient. "Seems nobody wants me, Geoff. But it doesn't really concern you, does it?"

"Not at all. So, when did you want my next pay packet from Big W?"

"Don't be a smart-arse." Malcolm slams the pantry door closed after retrieving the jar of instant coffee. "I can't do everything at once, okay? It's not easy."

"It's as easy as you make it," Geoff mumbles.

"Geoff, just rack off. If you're going to harp, just piss off and leave me alone."

"Wow. Good chat." Geoff gathers his school bag. "Don't worry about a coffee for me. I'll be in my room studying."

As the sun sinks below the horizon, the occasional screech from a fruit bat replaces the squabble of cockatoos. Malcolm stands to turn the light on in the kitchen. His shoulders drop with the sound of a door slamming; he retreats to the lounge and turns on the television. The local news reveals plans for a new high-rise building on the waterfront in town. Malcolm isn't paying any attention to it. His eyes shift to the framed photograph of a sunrise at Newcastle Baths, the sky a rich blue with orange piercing the horizon, his family huddled together for the portrait. The frame is slightly too small. It was placed there a little under six months ago to cover the hole in the plaster.

It was raining that night. Maybe not. In truth, he can't remember much of it. It had been a big night celebrating the end of painting the house. He had left the pub toilets, the stink of piss and vomit, possibly his own, clinging to his clothes, and stumbled up the hill.

Veronica was sitting on the flat of the low brick fence when he arrived home. Or was that the front step? All he remembers is her not saying a word until after she had followed him inside and shut the wooden door.

"Try harder to get a job," she complained. "You need to put more effort into your appearance," she continued. "You look like a damn bum. No one's going to hire you."

Malcolm had tried to retreat to the bathroom. The criticisms continued to bounce off the tiled walls in the small room as he stripped off the rancid clothes and showered.

"I'm sick of you sitting on that fat arse of yours and drinking all day." The volume of her voice lifted and fell as she walked around the house. "You keep gambling away all our damn money."

"I do not sit on my arse," Malcolm bit back. "Who just painted the house, yeah? Wasn't you, was it?"

"Oh, sure. You did a great job you did painting the house. There's a big run right next to the front door."

He left the confines of the bathroom, wrapped in his towel, and found her leaning against the wall in the lounge room.



She glared at him before levelling one final insult. “You’re fucking pathetic.”

It was the pathetic that got to him. She should never have called him pathetic. His fist broke through the plasterboard next to her narrow face; her eyes went wide; her lower lip quivered. His knuckles came from the wall bloody, specks of white stuck to his open wounds, and his clenched jaw went slack. Water still dripped from his hair. He got dressed and then sat silently on the couch and watched as his wife of twenty-four years packed a bag. He tried apologising, but she left anyway.

Malcolm had still been sitting on the lounge, sobbing, when he'd heard his son return from a mate's place the following morning. He had tried to wipe the mess from his face and explain, but Geoff had just walked straight back out when he saw the hole in the wall.

A few hours later, Malcolm and Geoff sit side by side in the car. The streetlights pour light in through the windscreen. Covered in the moving shadows of the rain running down the outside of the car, the two men stare straight ahead. Malcolm shifts his large frame in the driver's seat, his woollen jumper pulling tight across his chest.

“I have no idea where we’re going. You sure you know where it is?” Geoff asks, his right leg jiggling on the rubber floor mat, his long fingers walking up and down the neck of the bottle in the drink-holder.

There was nothing worth watching on Friday night television, so he had volunteered to drive his son in town. It was better than his son driving and being tempted to drive home. “Yes, I know where the place is,” Malcolm smiles. “You forget your old man used to go to pubs when he was younger, huh?”

“You were younger once?” Geoff grins.

“So my creaking bones would lead me to believe,” Malcolm cranes his neck while listening to the radio. “Oh, c’mon, don’t be so bloody stupid,” Malcolm spits as he protests against the talkback radio. He leans forward to wipe the inside of the windscreen with his sleeve. It is raining heavily. The perfect sunny autumn day could only last so long.

Geoff opens his mouth to question him, but stops. They drive through a red light.

The rain pelts the car roof, almost drowning out the radio. They pass the familiar shape of The General Roberts Hotel in Lambton. The cement-rendered walls of the pub are a thin veneer of makeup applied to an ageing building. Slowing to a halt at the traffic lights, Malcolm peers inside the pub to his left. Large glass panels reveal the new renovations—dark slate surrounding the bar, new timber chairs, the walls a soft beige. The last time Malcolm ventured inside this pub was for his and Veronica’s anniversary the week before she left. With Veronica being the only wage-earner and money being tight, Malcolm had cut his drinking to save some

money so they could afford to go somewhere special. She insisted they settle for chicken schnitzel washed down with the house wine.

Malcolm blindly reaches for the demister controls, fumbling about, while squinting to peer through the window. Geoff's hand pushes Malcolm's out of the way before turning the dials. The cool air washes over the windscreen and splashes onto their faces. The ashtray juts open from the dash below Geoff's hand; loose coins sit against the Matchbox car jammed inside. Geoff had been six when he had parked his toy car amongst the cigarette butts, bored while Malcolm was in the shop buying bait for their fishing trip. Geoff had spent most of the morning sitting in the driver's seat, pretending to drive the car. It had been more fun to rip the steering wheel left and right than fishing. It wasn't until the promise of ice-cream that Geoff had finally joined Malcolm on the shore, listening intently to the lesson on how to bait a hook and cast a line. His son almost dropped the rod when he hooked his first fish. The light ahead turns green and the field of view becomes clear once again.

Malcolm's son's blond hair is a tangled mop atop his round face. It frizzes wildly about in a mess, quite different to the shaved head Geoff had insisted on through his childhood. Malcolm sighs, running a hand through his thinning hair. He checks the side mirror and sees the Golden Arches sail away behind them. His stomach rumbles and turns at the thought of the greasy food. He can't handle it anymore. His heart probably won't take it, either.

Another drop of rain sends the beads collected on top of the windscreen cascading down. Malcolm looks over at his son who takes a swig from his roadie, watching the bright moon-like orbs of light from the football stadium. He turns his eyes back to the road while Geoff turns the dial on the stereo. The voice of a talkback caller fades away.

"I didn't realise there was anything on at Marathon tonight?" Geoff jerks his head in the direction of the stadium.

"I don't think there is. Probably just doing work on the ground or something." Malcolm glances over at the bright lights of the stadium; the two of them used to frequent the games, rain or shine. They would sit on the hill among the Knights' fans, cheering and jeering in the midst of cigarette smoke and the spilt beer from plastic cups. He remembers the time his Knights took on the hated Sea Eagles. They came home smelling of stale beer after sitting shoulder to shoulder with beer-guzzling supporters in a sell-out crowd. He also remembers when Geoff told him he didn't want to go with him anymore, that he still wanted to watch the away games on television with him, but that it was embarrassing he could not sit with his mates at the game.

"You think the Knights will..." Geoff begins, but Malcolm's knuckles whiten on the wheel when the car slips in the wet.

"Think the Knights will make the top eight this year?" Geoff continues.

“Nah, probably not.” Malcolm is sure his son doesn't give a crap; it's just his way of saying thanks for the lift into town. “Reckon they'll struggle to win the wooden spoon. You have any early predictions for the premiership?”

Geoff is playing with his mobile phone. “Pretty sure it'll be between the Storm and the Broncos. But the Knights may make top eight.” The buttons click under his thumbs as he speaks. The light of the phone fills the car with a sickly glow.

Malcolm grits his teeth. It's obvious that Geoff doesn't care about the conversation. Malcolm's wrinkled hand reaches across and turns up the volume again. They drive up over the overpass and, out the corner of his eye, he sees the light of a train on the railway that snakes through the city. Malcolm turns back to the road.

On the radio, a caller complains through the crackle of poor AM reception about the high price of petrol and the low price of oil—a tired argument aired countless times before. His gleeful tone leaks through the speakers. “How can they raise the price of petrol so much on the same day oil goes up, but it takes so long for petrol to drop in price when oil gets cheaper? You know what I mean? It makes no sense. The price of oil mustn't be at all related to the cost of petrol.”

“Of course it is, you twit,” Malcolm hisses. “It's all relative! You think they just raise the petrol prices for the hell of it?” He slaps the steering wheel and grins to himself. He continues listening, shaking his head in disagreement with each caller. “It's as if these morons think they've come up with an original thought. Probably think that milk comes from the shops, too.”

The empty bottle rattles when Geoff drops it back into the drink holder. They pass car yard after car yard, each with a row of vehicles facing the road, some on pedestals. Hidden away behind the yards are small semi-brick rentals owned by landlords who got rich before the city's industries closed. Their tenants often struggle to pay the rent; Malcolm was lucky enough to own his house outright before he got laid off. The car turns right at an intersection. They are on the final stretch.

They rush past a high school situated on their left. The school's black fence is lined with intimidating spikes. Only a few years earlier, Malcolm would drop Geoff off at the gates on the way to work for the first term. On the drive in they would chat about sports and the news and school. Back then, there was no need for high fences.

“Seems your school has locked itself up tight. What's going wrong in this world?”

They both peer down a side street, which runs past the school's main entrance. Malcolm only drove Geoff to school for the first term of year eleven. Geoff earned his Learner's permit in the first lot of school holidays. His mother had then insisted on teaching him to drive in the newer family car instead of Malcolm's old Holden Camira. Malcolm had taught Geoff almost

everything—how to walk and his ABCs, how to ride a bicycle and kick a soccer ball, even how to shave—but he had to forgo the final lessons. He could have taught him to drive before work each day, their lesson finishing at the school gates, but Veronica became the teacher.

They pull up at a set of traffic lights. “Just through the railway gates.” Malcolm points to the level crossing where a train is heading off to Sydney.

Geoff chuckles and jokes that it is hard to tell which side of this town is on the wrong side of the tracks.

“Both sides are,” Malcolm groans, scratching the rough stubble on his face.

Geoff laughs assent. He pulls at a newspaper crammed down beside his seat. “I was looking for this earlier.” He holds up the paper for his father to see what he is talking about.

“Sorry, I never knew.” Malcolm shifts gears and continues driving. Every day the last few weeks, the local newspaper is filled with pages claiming that the city is suffering an ‘inner-city pub violence epidemic.’ Malcolm is sure it's the same as it ever was; the publicans are just under more scrutiny. “Don't worry, there's nothing very exciting in it.”

Geoff checks the time on the clock. “Mind if we drive past the beach or something? I doubt anyone else will be there and I don't want to sit ‘round by myself.”

Malcolm examines the petrol gauge but doesn't reply. They won't be driving anywhere unnecessarily. The light turns green; they move into a narrow street, slotted between fenced-off vacant lots. He ignores Geoff when he hears him sigh. The car bounces over the railway lines before veering right to drive parallel to the tracks. A few hundred meters up the road, under giant gums whose branches reach toward the railway, they find a small pub at the end of the street.

In the dark, among the auto-wrecker yards, warehouses and factories, the pub stands alone, stoically wearing its age. A hatchment proudly announces The Queen Victoria. Its old-fashioned coat-of-arms, an upright lion on one side of the shield and a unicorn rearing on the other, is cracked and peeling from the sun. Malcolm muses that this place hasn't changed since he last visited twenty-odd years ago. An ancient sign advertising Kent Old Brown backs a chalkboard promoting the kitchen's specials and, for regulars, the lucky number draw. The boards are relics from the 70s and 80s.

Malcolm swerves towards the gutter and Geoff lurches forward, his hand on the cracked dash steadying him.

Malcolm turns the radio down. “What time you plan on ringing for a lift? Happy to come get you.”

“Ah, I'm not sure, yet. I was thinking I might crash at a friend's place tonight.”

“I'm happy to get you in the morning, then. Who's place?”

“Don't know yet. Doesn't really matter.”

“Like hell it doesn’t matter. I like knowing where you are, still. Knowing you’re alive.”

“It’s okay, Dad. I’m not a boy anymore. I’ll stay with a mate or something in this way. It’s too far for you to come back out.”

“Geoff, look,” Malcolm steadies his voice, trying to calm himself and appeal to reason. “I know you’re still pissed at me for what’s happened with your mother and I, I know you think I’m not doing squat. But I’m trying, okay? I am.”

“Yeah, you gave up booze. And that’s awesome. But, you don’t seem to be trying beyond that. No job, yet. The yard is a mess. When’d you do the dishes last? Or do you want me to do that, too?”

The seatbelt strains as Malcolm’s chest heaves a sigh. “It’s not easy, you know? But I’m trying. I will convince your mum to come back home.”

“I’ve actually been thinking I might go stay with her for a bit. For a week or so, perhaps. Maybe longer. I’m not sure.” The car is silent. “She needs some support, too, you know?” Geoff leans down and plays with his shoe. “And it’ll give you some space for you to continue ‘trying.’”

Malcolm turns away from Geoff and glares straight ahead.

“Guess I’ll be by tomorrow to pack some things.” Geoff opens the door and steps into the curtain of rain trickling down the doorframe onto the curb.

“Geoff, wait–” Malcolm starts. The passenger door slams shut and he watches Geoff run towards the entrance.

Malcolm revs the car hard before releasing the handbrake. The spinning wheels kick up a dirty spray on the dull duco. He turns the radio off. The rain continues to drum on the roof of the car. He could accept it if Geoff wanted to move in with friends. But he is leaving him to go live with the woman who walked out on them. She could have stayed, sorted it out.

A bit over a year ago, he had a job, a family, a home. First, the job went. Then the wife. Now the son. He can’t even pick a winner with the dogs.

The trip home seems to pass quicker. His car slides to a stop beside the General Roberts. He has not had a drink for a few weeks, but what is stopping him now? He peers through the rain-soaked window toward the lights of the bottle-shop. Inside the car, the air has become stuffy. The Matchbox car stuck in the ashtray catches his eye. He thumps the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. The car splutters and moves onto the street. The thrum of rain on the roof echoes inside his head.

The car swings into the drive. The camellia trees down the drive scratch against the side-mirror. The tyres stop sharply under the carport. He slams the door shut.

In the kitchen, he hears the rain overflowing from his neighbour’s gutter onto his driveway. He turns the light on to discover the kitchen window still open, rain sprinkling

through the flyscreen across the dirty dishes in the sink. The timber frame of the window creaks and groans when he pulls it down. He leans heavily on the bench, again, over the sink. He looks at the pools of water on the glossy paint of the sill. He touches one of the dead leaves of the once-colourful African Violet. It falls from the pot and floats on the surface of the water on the windowsill.

The tap slowly drips into the sink. Malcolm scowls, crouches down and searches the cupboard. His arm snakes behind the U-bend in the pipes and the detergent bottles and finds the bourbon. The last booze in the house.

“For a rainy day, huh?” Malcolm mutters to himself.

He unscrews the cap and waves the bottle under his nose. The smell burns his nostrils. Examining the bottle, he sighs. He carries it to the lounge, leaving the light off, sits in his chair, and places the bottle on the table in front of him, open, with a glass beside it. The stream of light from the kitchen falls on the family portrait, hanging on the wall, covering a hole.

Malcolm stares at the bottle.

## Trace

May 2007

His long, dark hair is oily from the rain, forming a twisted mat down his back. He enters the pub—not so much walking in as letting the slick of carpet pull him into its den—and immediately feels at home.

Bright lights from the warehouses across the street peer through The Queen Vic's tinted windows. The front bar is filled with a young crowd waiting for music and cheap booze; he heads to the back of the drinking hole to be with a bunch of regulars—clientele from the days when topless waitresses served the bar—and a few dubious strangers. Some come to drink, some to linger at the bar and ogle; for others it is a home for those who do not want to go home.

Taking off his heavy dripping jacket, he passes a small table with five people huddled close. They give off a thick smell of cheap perfume and tacky aftershave. He takes in their lives in one swift breath. Trying to smell of sex—in a bar, who doesn't? Smelling of desperation more like it. He clears his throat. They seem so young to him, although they are probably the same age as he is.

He walks into the back room and passes a few familiar faces who are friends only for a round of drinks. They are good to bum a smoke from for the trip around the corner to the kebab shop after a big night of drinking, though. Suddenly aware of the smell of last night's falafel lamb clinging to his damp, creased shirt, he feels the steam and body heat rise through him.

"Trace," the middle-aged barman greets him with a grunt, his normal dash of dry humour absent. The barman, Jimmy, is a little below average height, skinny, with a sprinkling of grey through his otherwise jet black hair; some light wrinkles have started to form through his face, cutting through the light birthmark below his right eye. He stands on his toes and reaches up to put a glass away before retrieving another. Trace often wonders how someone so small and timid in nature can manage a bar, but then remembers watching Jimmy throw men much larger than him out the door singlehandedly.

Trace holds up his jacket. The barman puts the glass down and sticks out his upturned hand. The jacket is passed over the counter. Jimmy disappears out the back, leaving Trace to survey the room. Trace's rough hand drops down on the faded bar towel while he scans the faces in the dim light. There are a couple of regulars missing that he expected to see. The elders, Jack and Graham, normally occupy their tables well before Trace arrives, but Trace is sure they will appear at some point. They always do.

This back room is known by the regulars fondly as "The Hold." Jack, the oldest drinker still patronising the place, the one who has been coming here longer than anyone else, once explained that it was called that because once you visited, it took hold of you and you never left.

Most believe someone drunkenly vandalised the sign behind the bar and changed it from “The Hole.” Conspiracy theorists thought that vandal was Jack back in his younger years.

A loud groan escapes Trace's lips when he arcs back. Despite not having worked for a few weeks, his back still gives him hell from crawling under too many houses in tight, confined spaces. He finishes stretching and opens his eyes to see Jimmy standing there, an eyebrow raised, holding a schooner glass.

“Yeah, gimme a black? Cheers.” Trace hooks a foot around a barstool and pulls it under as he sits. The beer lands in front of him and he passes a twenty over the bar. “Keep it, ‘ey, for the next few beers. Saves you sorting change out.” It’s what he says every night.

Jimmy slips the twenty in the till and continues to polish the glasses. Tonight he sports a five o'clock shadow and dark lines under his eyes.

“Everything okay, Jimmy?” Trace runs his finger up the side of the glass, collecting the spilt head, before quickly spooning it into his mouth. “I'm not used to seeing you anything but clean-shaven.”

Jimmy chuckles. “Yeah, mate. Just had a late one cleaning last night, thanks to the classy people who vomited in the bathrooms, and I didn't get home to sleep until dawn. Woke up about twenty minutes before I was due here.” He uses the back of his hand to rub his right eye.

Trace sips at his beer. “Who needs sleep, anyway?”

“Might be a quiet one,” Jimmy shifts the subject. “Only the dedicated few will venture out in this weather.”

Outside, there is a gentle rain falling, as it has been for days.

“They say on the news we’re going to get a lot of rain this year. Going to be interesting when the East Coast Low hits. How’s your place holding up?”

“I left a bucket in the middle of the kitchen pool. Roof’s leakin’ again. But it does that when a pigeon takes a piss while flying overhead.” He tests his beer, approves, and takes an inch off the top. “The other half will tell me off when she discovers it.” His eyes roll around with exaggeration. “What can I do, ‘ey Jimmy?”

Jimmy laughs. It is a husky laugh and, like his voice, seems to scratch as it escapes his lips. He places a glass in the rack and picks up another. The glasses sparkle, but there is nothing else to do. “What can you do? Anything to make her happy. You're a plumber. Surely you could fix the leak?”

“Don't you start, too.” Trace eyes the bartender.

Jimmy smiles. “Sorry, mate. How’s things going with her, anyway?”

Trace scans the bar again. Everyone knows his story, but he still puts up a front for some. His shoulders slump and he stoops over his beer on the bar. “Not sure, hey? It used to be



so good.” Trace flicks the side of his beer with his fingernail. “I think the sooner I can get ‘way from the bitch, the better. But, ‘ey, she’s payin’ for these while I’m not workin’.” He raises the beer and grins. There are large gaps between his stained teeth.

Jimmy laughs and goes to check on the front bar. Trace carries his beer over to the glass doors that lead outside to the smokers’ garden and the night. There is no one outside. A lone tree casts a shadow across the yard.

“Didn’t think you’d be back tonight, Trace,” Jimmy calls across the room. “Don’t know how you do it.”

Trace’s head is still swollen with the residuals of the previous night, but he returns, always. Where else can he go? His reflection returns a gaze from eyes almost as dark as the world beyond the glass doors. He does it because he doesn't have much better to do. He manages a smirk before turning back to the counter.

He taps the top of his nearly empty glass; Jimmy takes the cue.

“It’s this, gettin’ told I need to get more work, or watching television.” Trace upends the glass and swallows the dregs. “And television is boring as hell. Romance crap and superhero garbage. If it’s not that, seein’ some wanker get arrested in yet another cop show ain’t my thing.”

“Well, must be something on? It’s so quiet in this room. I expected the rain to hold a few back, but not everyone.” Jimmy hands over a fresh beer and adds another sale to the cash register. He smiles while he pokes at the buttons. “I hope I’m not stuck here all night with you.”

“Well, that’d be crap, wouldn’t it?” Trace laughs. He’s wasted many a night talking with Jimmy; sometimes they’ve even met up away from the pub. Just last month, Trace went to Jimmy’s surprise fiftieth birthday barbeque that his niece, Esther, who regularly serves the front bar, had organised. Trace and Esther had a history that Jimmy could never discover; Trace doubted the barman would want his niece to ever be involved with him. “Isn’t there a crowd building in the other room? Sounds like there is.”

“Yeah, there’s a girl playing her first solo gig tonight.” Jimmy pauses to read the time on his watch. “She’s due on soon, so she better hurry up and get here. She’s dragged along a lot of moral support and all. Plus a couple of other acts that bring a bit of a crowd. Obviously they come for ‘em, rain or shine. This rain really has come from nowhere, though. We had such beautiful sunny weather last week, but we’ll be able to go swimming in your kitchen if this rain keeps up, I’m sure.”

Trace peeks through the glass panel in the door to the front bar. The crowd is slowly growing in size and gathers in small groups. Every now and then, someone will make their way to the bar, dodging between the groups. Trace’s breath stains the glass and his nose squishes out of shape against it. He jerks his head in acknowledgement when Jack catches him spying on the

room. Jack's white hair is sticking to his forehead, wet from the rain outside. He is perched on a stool beside the door. Trace thinks it is unusual for him to be in the front bar when the football is not on the screen out there.

Unlike the talk in The Hold, loud and fearless, the much younger crowd in the front bar seem to bunch closely together to talk in whispers, often shifting their eyes to the floor. Trace places his palm flat against the door and turns his ear against the glass, listening to the unintelligible murmur from the next room. When he turns his gaze back through the glass, a head rises from the bottom of the panel, deliberate and slow. A grinning face, partly shrouded by a hat, fills the tiny window to the next room. Trace jumps back from the glass and Bruce breaks into laughter and tips his hat. Bruce, a local singer-songwriter, is almost as much of a regular, sometimes performing multiple times a week to the patrons as they drink. The tall, lanky man returns to a conversation with someone next to the front bar counter.

"Bruce on sometime tonight?" Trace calls over to Jimmy, who nods. "That explains a bit." Trace rubs the base of his palm through the fog on the glass and looks back into the room.

A girl enters through the front doors, guitar case in hand, her blond hair spilling from dark roots. Her wide eyes search the room for someone, pausing briefly to smile at a group of people. Her foot taps and she stands straight, clearly tense. Bruce takes her guitar from her and guides her to the stage. "Damn," Trace utters and steps back from the door, mouth slightly agape.

Jimmy starts to laugh again. "Seen something you like?"

"Fuck oath." Trace stumbles on the way back to the bar. "Why can't the one at home look half as good as that?" His voice falls soft. "God, I gotta get away from her."

Jimmy stifles his laugh, pours some whisky into a tumbler, and places it in front of Trace. "On the house. Consider it some Dutch courage."

"Handing out free drinks now, James?" A tall figure stands behind Trace. His deep voice, resonating, comes from one of the few people to call Jimmy by his given name. His hand slaps down on Trace's shoulder. "Let me guess? The blonde? With you, it's always the blonde."

"I have a type: short blondes who like to make my life a fuckin' hell. How you doin', Boss? 'Bout time someone else I like turned up."

Boss takes his wet jacket off and throws it over the back of chair at the table closest to the bar. The older man always reminded Trace of his uncle, a man who once gave Trace a flogging when he caught him smoking at fourteen and turned up the next day with a six pack of beer to share while they talked things through. Boss is the kind of man who says little, but means what he says, and Trace makes a point not to argue with him. He towers high above Trace, his bright blue eyes behind glasses that draw level with the sparkling champagne flutes

that Jimmy has just finished polishing. "All is well, my friend. April is just out the front ordering some food. She'll be in shortly."

"Ah, nice. What you having?" Trace stares at his beer while he speaks.

"Steak. Medium rare. Food of champions." Boss removes his glasses and rubs each lens with a fold of his shirt. The cotton snags on the crack in the left lens.

"So, salad again," Jimmy jests, causing the two men in front of him to laugh. "Carlton for you, house white for April?" He starts pouring after Boss agrees.

"What you been up to, Boss?" Trace runs his finger up and down through the condensation on his glass.

"Not a great deal, really. Too wet to be in the garden the last few days, so just been poking around in my shed." Boss rubs his fingers together, examining the dark stains of soot and rust. He had worked at the BHP, as his father had before him, on the mill floor until they closed it down; after a few drinks, he would always complain about how they closed before he could get his forty year service badge. Boss and his wife had been lucky, though, as he was only a couple of years short of retirement. Large portions of the city were not so lucky and were left rambling around looking for work with thousands of others. "Can't believe I've been retired for eight years next week."

Trace nods in respect. "I'll have to get you to bring me in some three ounce sinkers. Planning on doing some fishing next weekend."

"Yeah, I can do that. What you trying to catch?"

"Snapper." Trace pauses before laughing. "Or anything that bites."

Boss smiles. "Yeah, I'll bring them in Monday for you. Been a while since I've made some. Trying to find some new projects beyond the veggie garden. Speaking of which, I'll have some fresh lemons for you next week, James." Boss rocks from side to side waiting for his drinks.

The first shaky notes of a song spill through from the next room. There is a small cheer of support before the young woman begins to sing.

*I can't stop thinking about that day,  
You were here, front of me: hello...*

Jimmy leans back and peers through the door behind the bar. The crowd falls silent, eyes all on the stage.

"Never say no to lemons." A wry smile cuts across Jimmy's face when he places the drinks on the counter. "So, only a couple tonight?"

Boss screws up his face, his nose a mess of wrinkles. He'd announced recently that his doctor ordered he drink no more than two beers a day. "Ah, the quack doesn't know what he's

on about. I'm healthier than he is. Beer doesn't hurt anyone." He takes a sip of his drink. "But, yeah, just two," Boss's voice trails off.

"Well, that's one," Jimmy jests.

"And a thousand and one more than you've had in your life, James." He reaches into his pocket and then sifts through the loose change in his hand. "How much?"

"Eight-forty all up. Yet another price hike."

Boss hands over eight dollars in change, before reaching up to the picture rail running above the bar and feeling along it until he finds the forty cents to go with it. Placing silver coins above the bar to save for later in case anyone needs a little extra for a round is a longstanding custom in The Hold.

The song continues to flow through from the other room.

*That awkward nod, a distant look,*

*You were here, front of me: hello?*

The patrons in the front room are still quiet, except for those ordering at the bar, while the slow paced song floats through the crowd.

At the other end of the back bar, two young men wait for service. Each holds a Corona bottle in one hand, money in the other. They are waiting to pay for their bets.

"G'day lads. Those from home?" he says, pointing at the Coronas. They both nod, straightening up. He takes their money and processes the bets. "That's okay, as long as you're buying the next one here. Just don't bring your own in future, thanks." He hands over the bet slips. The two move to an empty table, one stumbling over a chair, and gaze up at the screen where the dogs line up to race.

Trace looks up over his beer, a smirk across his face. "Those damn young'ns, testing their boundaries and pushing the limits."

Jimmy snorts. "Trace, you're only what, thirty-two? You're young enough to be their brother." He pauses, scratching his rounded cheek. "Didn't you tell me you tried to BYO grog the first time you came here?"

"Back then, I came for the metal, the titties, and the hope the bouncer wouldn't see I was only 16. If we had our own beer, we at least wouldn't be carded by the bar staff."

"And how long did you last?" Boss enquired, his yellowed crooked teeth showing.

"About twenty minutes. I guess I wasn't too subtle when ogling some bountiful delights and I got carded."

Jimmy laughs and nudges the untouched whisky towards Trace. "Now, are you going to do what it takes tonight?"

"Nah, probably not. Trust me, I want her, but--"

“You can want all you like, but you’re not five years old, and she’s not a toy truck. If you want to play with her, excuse the crude expression, you’re going to have to hit her up.” He gives him a reassuring nod and pats the bar mat next to the whisky tumbler again. “Now down that before April comes in and tells me off for encouraging you to drink.”

Trace throws back the whisky and slams the glass down on the counter, gathers his beer, and strides with purpose towards the door to the front room.

When the door swings open, the final notes of the song flow in.

*There's no time we had to leave,  
No closing time, no final call.  
But there's that look, that smile.  
You were here, front of me: goodbye.*

“He’s been out there a while. I hope he tries now that she’s finished performing.” Jimmy has one hand in his pocket and both eyes on Trace. Jimmy taps the glass panel in the door, pleased by the swirling sea of people, many headed towards the bar. One of the girls tending the front bar turns, indicates that that everything is fine, and returns to serving customers. “I’m not sure we’re going to see a happy Trace tonight, Boss. He’s standing out there like a deer in headlights. Pretty sure he’s going to fail with the blonde.”

Boss snorts in response. His wife whacks his shoulder. She is a heavy-set woman, wearing a pale sky-blue dress and little make-up. She carries the two used plates from their table, cutlery precariously perched, while in the other she cradles an empty wine glass. When her husband stands alongside her, the top of her head barely matches the height of his armpits. Tight ringlets fall to her shoulders, although the grey hairs have started to be more dominant than the blond.

“Oh, leave the boy alone. He’s trying, at least. He can’t be much more miserable after being rejected than what he is anyway.” She places the plates on the bar and readjusts her glasses. “I’m sure we’ve only heard his side of the story, but he’s definitely not happy in any case. Can I get another wine, darl? And another beer.”

“I know Trace is just trying to make things, well,” Jimmy pauses, “better, life more enjoyable. But he’s going about it the wrong way. And, even you have to admit: it’s sometimes amusing watching him crash and burn.”

Boss laughs. “Remember the time with the blonde in the red dress?”

Jimmy smiles and April stifles a laugh.

“Oh, sure. Bring that up.” April blushes. “Fine, the boy is a disaster with women. And he should be banned from ever table dancing again. He almost squashed her when the table gave out!”

In the other room, Trace clutches the remainder of another beer. The music has just stopped, the girl having finished a short set. He doesn't normally listen to the sparse, stripped back acoustic folk music that he just heard, but he finds himself humming a tune.

He rests against the bar, ignoring one of the regulars' small talk. He has been attempting to start conversation with Trace for the past fifteen minutes. His name was Benny, but he was known around the bar as "Stones." Some say his nickname came from the way he never backed down from a fight; the elders, like Jack, always frightened the youngsters of regulars by saying it came from the time he killed a man with a stone in each hand. Trace thought it was probably more due to the fact that Benny had little more intelligence than a handful of rocks. Trace always tries to avoid him.

"I dunno, I think these smoking bans are going to suck the lives out the pubs." Stones twirls an unlit cigarette in one hand like a small baton. The square box of a pack is outlined on his breast pocket. "It's bad enough we have to go the pokies area or outside here. It's going to be horrid to go outside to have a smoke in the middle of winter. I mean, really, I've smoked all my life and I'm still fine. Know when these laws come in?"

"Huh?" Trace looks over his shoulder and points to the sign on the bar next to them. "Next month, mate." Trace is watching the stage where the singer is unplugging her guitar. She wears a low-cut black top with a white shirt over the top and a long black skirt. Trace tilts his head to one side as he watches the clothes crease over the curves of her body. The stage lights catch her eyes when she smiles to a group of friends.

"Oh," the man laughs and runs his hand over his stomach. It is the size of a beach ball and protrudes over his belt; it bounces as he laughs. "So, how 'bout the cans on that last singer, huh?"

Trace grunts and turns back to the bar. Esther faces the other direction, pouring beers. She wears a relatively short skirt, showing off her long legs; Trace remembers those legs from what seems long ago. Her hair falls half-way down her back where it ends in bright red tips. Esther spots Trace and points to the beer taps; he shakes his head. She flicks her hand to tell him to get away from the bar and gives him a wink. His eyes drop to the counter and he smiles.

"Yeah, so I'll be back, mate. I'm going to get a toy truck." Trace kicks the base of the bar and turns towards the stage.

"Uh, so hi." He had heard the singer mumble her name between songs. Trace swirls the last half an inch of beer around the bottom of his glass. "May, is it?"

The girl looks up from her opened guitar case. She smiles, her ocean-blue eyes studying him, and giggles. "No. No, it's Nay."

"Nay?" Trace scratches his head with the rim of his glass. A strand of hair falls and floats on the surface of the beer.

“Yeah. As in Renee.” She lowers the neck of her guitar down into the case, then sticks her hand up. “Nice to meet you?”

“Trace. As in Tracey. My, uh, parents were fans of Dick Tracey.” He slurs slightly and his hand meets hers. Her palm is warm and clammy like his.

She giggles again. “Nice to meet you, Dick Tracey. And thanks for listening tonight. Always nice to have new people listen.”

“Yeah, no problems, hey? I enjoyed it. I really like your voice. That, um, third song you played, the one about the dogs, was really cool. And your cover of “Zombie” was great. Who doesn’t love The Cranberries?” He grins goofily, showing his crooked yellow teeth. He shifts his weight, feeling the sole of his right shoe peel away from something sticky—presumably a spilt drink—and takes a sip of beer.

Nay looks around, flicking her hair free from her round face. Her hands coil a cord in a tight loop before she slips it under her guitar. “Ha, Cranberries are an old favourite from high school. Well, I’m really glad you liked my music. That third song was one of mine.” She smiles and her cheeks turn pink.

“So, you, like, do this for a livin’?” Trace shuffles again and scratches his free hand against his hip.

“Mm?” She pauses, as though she didn’t hear the question. She cranes her neck to look in the direction of her friends. “Oh, no. Music is just for fun. I play with some friends occasionally doing covers. Cover shows are where the good money is, but we only do it once a month or so for some drinking money. I’ve only just started doing this solo thing, just for me; nobody wants to hear originals, so I only played a few.”

Trace nods in appreciation. He can see her cleavage down her top; she looks up and his eyes lock onto hers. “I wouldn’t mind hearin’ a few more of your originals. Must be frustrating getting a better response for covers than originals.”

She stands to stretch her legs, leaving her guitar case open, and checks the floor of the stage to see if she has missed anything. “Nah, not really. It’s part of the business. I just love music, so it’s all fun. Normally, I work in advertising. Write copy and stuff. What do you do?” She smiles and looks straight at him as she asks.

Trace takes half a step back, a little shocked. He runs a finger across his nose, unsure if she is asking out of interest or politeness. He coughs, feeling a tickle in his throat after having swallowed his hair that fell into his drink. “Uh, you know, not much. Nothing as smart as advertising or anything. Doesn’t matter.”

She laughs. “Oh, c’mon. You’re interested in what I do and it can’t be all about me. So, what do you do?” She reaches over and grabs a piece of paper that has her set list on it.

Trace feels his face flush and runs his hand over the stubble on his cheek. "Well, at present, work's been a bit hard to find. But I'm a plumber by trade. All this rain we're meant to get this year will help bring in some work, I imagine."

"See, good trade to have." She laughs again and pats her pockets looking for a pen.

"Yeah, it goes all right." Trace smiles back. "Good job for a dumb cunt."

Nay stops laughing, forces a smile, and inspects the ground. She kneels back down to her guitar case. The locks snap shut. "Well, it's been nice to meet you. Might see you around."

"I hope so. Let me help you with that." Trace bends to pick up her guitar case just as Nay, case in hand, stands up straight. His creased forehead collides with the top of her head with a soft, dull clunk. He drops his beer and the glass smashes on the floor.

Trace falters back. "Oh, God, I am so sorry." His voice is shaky, his words slurring more now. "Can I do anyfin? Seriously, so sorry."

Nay rubs her head and straightens herself. She steps to the side of the broken glass. "No, it's okay. Bye, Trace. Have a good night."

Trace bites his cheek and shakes his head while she walks off towards her friends who are all preparing to leave. A large piece of glass rests against his foot; he pushes it and some other shards around with his foot to form a pile. He feels a hand on his shoulder. Esther is by his side; she looks at him, brush and pan in hand.

"Didn't go so well, hon?"

"Could say that. I'll clean that up."

"Nah, don't worry about it. You okay?" Her hand reaches out and takes hold of his, carefully guiding him away from the mess on the ground. Her hands are cold and wet from pouring drinks.

"Mhm." He nods his head solemnly while staring at Esther's hand on his own. The first time he had felt Esther's hands, they were much warmer. It was in a pub in the next suburb. Trace had gone to see an old schoolmate's band. He had spent most part of the night ignoring the music and the woeful singing of his friend, drinking, and chatting up some young thing at the bar. They were days where he often woke not remembering much from the night before, never mind names. But Esther stuck with him. Trace was in his late twenties, Esther eighteen. They grew hoarse yelling over the music, standing at the bar, both doing shots of cheap bourbon. Esther had grabbed his hand and dragged him away from the bar. Trace had pressed her up against the cubicle wall in the ladies' toilets, hands clawing at clothing and raking bare skin, the summer heat filling the tile bathroom with a sticky humidity.

"Earth to Trace?" Esther gives Trace a playful smack on the shoulder.

"Ha, yeah, I'll be 'kay. Gotta stop living in the past, make a few changes. Get myself a new girl in my life. Sounds like a plan, huh?"



She playfully elbows him in the ribs. “Bugger off and grab yourself another beer. I’m sure Uncle Jimmy would love to hear about what just happened.”

“Yeah. They’re probably laughing already. Thanks, Esther.” Trace steps back and turns towards the door to the other room. He looks back over his shoulder. Esther is squatting, cleaning up the glass. He recalls how it was months before they spoke once she started working at The Queen Vic, how he could not look Jimmy in the eye. He will not make that mistake again.

Trace pauses at the door. He takes a breath and carefully opens the door. The door swings wide. He straightens up and steps through.

Boss, April and Jimmy are all staring at him, smiling. Jimmy begins clapping his hands together before shaking his head and reaching for a bottle of spirits on a shelf at the back of the bar to complete an order.

Trace’s face is burning red. He glances round the room, searching for a distraction. There are more people now: a few he recognises, most are new to him. He passes one small table; a flock of glasses are stacked around two chip packets, ripped down the seams, splayed on the top. A group of twenty-somethings debate something vehemently, only stopping to reach for their beer or wine or a stray potato chip on the foil. A haze of smoke seeps from the pokies room. Inside, people mull around, listening to the shudders of digital reels clicking into place and hoping for free game features.

In one corner there is a small television with a live feed of the races. Watching them are two young men. One of them is wearing a dark woollen jumper and tattered jeans. He has one cigarette tucked behind his ear, another, unlit, hanging from the corner of his mouth. He begins to chant, gradually getting more enthusiastic. The dogs speed through the finish line and he slams his fist down on the table, narrowly missing his glass and making the glasses jump. His friend, who wears a red flannel shirt, reaches for his beer, his attention from the screen unbroken.

Trace reaches the bar. “We may have trouble soon?” He jerks his head in the direction of the table.

Jimmy raises an eyebrow, pouring the final order for another patron waiting at the bar. “Well, we’ve already had one concussion. We don’t want another.” He grins at Trace and puts the final glass in the tray. He takes the money from a young customer. Trace leans against the bar and looks at the man. He is only in his early twenties and nervously takes a small step away from Trace. Jimmy leans over the bar with a hand full of change; the man takes the money and shuffles off hurriedly to his table of friends.

Boss slaps Trace on the back. “Well, I have to give it to you. You’ve a way with the ladies.”

April slips between Boss and Trace, placing a reassuring hand on Trace's shoulder. "Don't listen to them, love. You tried your best. The next drink is on me. The Boss doesn't need another one, anyway."

Trace grins and finds Boss is staring at his wife, a scowl across his face.

Jimmy laughs and starts pouring. "Hey, he may have failed with the blonde, but it seems he's won one lady over tonight."

"I was just thinking of having a water," Trace starts, trailing off towards the end.

Boss flicks Trace on the leg with the back of his hand. "Not a chance, son. If I can't drink it, you're drinking it for me. Besides, don't you know that it's a bad idea to mix your drinks?"

At the other end of the bar, the young men are waiting to put more bets on. Trace watches a playful shove, complete with smiles and a laugh, rapidly escalate. The one in the woollen jumper takes a quick jab with his elbow into his mate's ribs. A grimace spreads across the recipient's face, wrinkles forming through a tanned forehead covered by sun-bleached hair. His arms flex tight beneath the flannel and he pushes his mate away, who bumps into the wall next to the door to the pokies room.

Trace nudges Boss. "Here we go. The inmates are going to go at it."

April takes her cue and moves out into the main room to see which regulars are about.

Jimmy saunters slowly up the end of the bar. "Everything okay here, gents?"

The two stop and straighten up. "Wha? Fuck yeah. Just playin' mate. Give us another beer. And the bet, ta." The screen on the TAB machine reads that there is no win and the current bet will cost twenty dollars.

"I think you've had enough to drink, don't you?" Jimmy ignores the TAB machine and stares at them.

"Don't fuckin' tell me when I've had enough." The red flannel blends with his flushed cheeks and he bares his teeth. "Give us both a beer and process me damn bet!"

"I don't think so, friend. Time for you to leave." Jimmy's right foot slides back, knowing what is coming.

"Yeah, c'mon, BJ. Let's just go." The guy in the woollen jumper tugs gently at the guy in the flannel shirt.

BJ shakes free his friend's hand, raises his hand and throws the empty beer glass in his hand at Jimmy. Jimmy ducks and puts a hand up on the bar counter for balance. A shard of glass ricochets off the counter and catches his bare arm, a small bead of blood forming instantly. He stands back up straight. "Get the hell out of my bar and don't come back."

A hand reaches out and grabs Jimmy's wrist. Jimmy pulls back, but BJ slams his wrist back down to the bar, breaking the catch on Jimmy's watch. The guy in the woollen jumper stiffens and backs into the corner.

"Or what?" BJ spits and glares, his eyes wide and wild taking in Jimmy's small stature.

"Or, you deal with me." Trace grabs BJ's wrist and squeezes until he releases Jimmy's hand. BJ swings around with his other hand, his fist catching Trace's jaw.

"Oh, fuck off! You did not just hit me!" Trace instinctively throws a heavy blow into his attacker's stomach; BJ coughs and bends double. When BJ begins to straighten, Trace's right arm swings back, fist clenched. His arm is caught from behind; Boss's large hand stops the punch from continuing.

"Mate," Trace pauses while he stretches his mouth. He relaxes his right arm, before shaking free from Boss's grip. "I'm havin' a shit of a night. If you wanna do this, I'm happy to go outside and fuck you up. But it won't end well for you. Or your friend." Trace breathes slowly and watches calmly as BJ straightens, catches his breath, and sums up his opponent. Trace squeezes BJ's wrist firmly in his left hand.

Trace's eyes never leave BJ's face; the mirth is gone, replaced by a cold and piercing look. BJ starts to look around wildly at the faces in front. Boss stands behind Trace, and Bruce and Stones have both come into The Hold and stand next to a table to the side.

"So, we got a problem? Or you leavin' and not coming back?" Trace flicks his fringe out of his eyes, then releases BJ's wrist, and squares his shoulders.

"Fine. See if I give a fuck. It's a shithouse pub anyway. Let's go, Tones." BJ steps back and heads for the door, his friend half a step behind, mouthing apologies.

Esther comes through from the front bar. "You right, Uncle Jimmy? Let me get a bandage for that cut."

"No, don't worry about it, love. It's just a knick." He moves over to the back of the bar, his watch falling to the floor. He picks it up, inspects it briefly, and places it on the counter. He turns to the sink to splash some water over the smear of blood on his arm. "See, it's nothing. Just a broken watch and a tiny bit of blood."

Esther looks at Jimmy before she scurries out to the office. She returns with a Band-Aid and tells her uncle to shut up while her shaky hands apply it. She hugs him without saying a word, washes her hands and returns to the front bar where Stones has returned, awaiting another beer.

Bruce is at the door to make sure the troublemakers are gone. Boss puts his arm around April's waist. Trace is grinning like a madman, his left hand cupping his jaw.

"You were really ready to throw down, Trace?" Jimmy rubs his wrist. He looks at the watch on the counter again; the regulars had all chipped in and presented it to him for his fiftieth

earlier in the year. There is an inscription on the back: "It's not closing time, so how about another?" He would take it to be repaired in the morning.

"Yeah, probably. Boss probably stopped me from doing something stupid." He flicks his fringe out of his eyes again.

"Well, cheers for stepping in, anyway. April, that round's on me. Oi, Bruce? You want a beer? On me."

Bruce leaves his post at the door, collects his hat from a nearby table, and dons it. "Sounds great, yeah."

"What'll you have?"

"Just a light, thanks." Bruce reaches for his wallet out of habit before returning his hand to the bar. "I have to go on stage soon, anyway." He sighs. "Crowd is hungry for the same old 70s and 80s covers."

April playfully swats Boss's hand away from her waist. "So, Bruce, how are the girls?"

"Yeah, girls are good. Hope they've fed the cat, because I didn't do it before I left. She has nine lives, anyway." He pulls out his wallet to show off the latest photo of his daughters. The creased photo shows two teenage girls, dressed in their school uniform, sitting straight-backed and smiling for the camera. The younger girl has her hair pulled into pigtails; the older shows her braces as she smiles.

April clicks her tongue in approval. "Well, you'll have something exciting to tell them tomorrow."

"Probably best I don't," Bruce laughs. "I don't think the wife would like them knowing too much. Nothing was really going to happen." He lifts his right foot to rub against his left leg. "Pretty sure our man here had them both covered, anyway." He pats Trace on the shoulder.

Trace smiles. His right hand is still below the counter, clenched tight into a fist.

A couple of hours later, Trace is leaving the bathroom after his fourth visit. He straightens his shirt, wipes his hands again on his jeans and checks that his fly is up. His head bops to the music of the jukebox; Bruce has packed up and gone home having playing covers until after eleven. Trace's cheeks are flushed and he sways.

"You know, Jimmy, I miss the ice." Trace passes over another twenty-dollar note and points to the beer taps. "Can we get the ice back?"

Jimmy raises an eyebrow and shakes his head. He grabs a glass and starts to pour. The keg out back has just been replaced and the glass fills with foam. He pours the slop down into the tray and tries again, this time getting a half-beer, half-head combination. He puts the beer down and slips from behind the bar into the room. Reaching up, he switches off the power

button on each of the monitors before picking up a few empty glasses on his way back to the bar. He shares a quick word with April and Boss who are talking quietly at their table.

“What? You know it’s a good idea!” Trace notices someone just outside the double glass doors leading to the outside area of the pub. Stones hugs the wall under the shallow eaves, taking shelter. A cigarette juts out perpendicular to his square jaw, the end aglow. Trace considers joining him, but decides to stay dry.

“Tell me, Trace, how is it a good idea?” Jimmy returns to pouring the beer, humouring his patron.

“Dunno. The urinal cakes are just no fun. Melting the ice used to be a challenge.” Trace spins back towards the bar on his stool. Elbows against the bar, he supports his head in his hands. “A fun challenge. Too many things are a challenge with no fun these days.”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“I don’t know. Just sick of how my life is at the moment. Starting to get sick of bumming off someone else. I’m with someone who treats me like shit. I tell you she came home last week, late, with all the buttons ripped off her blouse and her hair a mess? Claims she got it caught on the car door. I mean, fuck, I may be a dick of a boyfriend, but I’ve always been faithful.” Trace rubs the bruise on his chin. “Sick of getting knocked back for work, too. You know life is fucked when you can’t even play with sewage to pay your bills. I don’t know. This responsibility thing. Overrated. Fuck it off.”

Jimmy nods knowingly. “Called old age, mate. You’re not sneaking into the pub anymore with beers in your coat to check out the barmaids. Those days are gone. Thank God—wouldn’t want to catch any of my regulars leering over Esther out there.” He places the beer in front of Trace, the glass thumping down louder in Trace’s mind than in reality. “You just have to get a job, cut your losses, go for what makes you happy. And, if it’s a girl, try not to give her a concussion in the process.”

Trace attempts a smile, his lips struggling to turn upwards through the alcohol and unspoken embarrassment. “Yeah, maybe. I dunno.”

“Oh, leave him alone!” April leans over and kisses Trace on the cheek. “We’re off for the night. Do you want a lift home, love?”

“Nah. Got me this beer left and Jimmy to keep me company for a little longer. Thanks, though.”

Boss stands behind them, arms folded. His head is turned toward the table of twenty-somethings whose empty chip packets still remain on the table. At different points throughout the night, the girls at the table have ventured out to the main bar to dance while the guys continued their discussions. The topic often turned sordid in the girls’ absence. Now, they all laugh as one of the regular barflies balances a half-full schooner on the top of his head. He

sings, out of tune, to the jukebox music filtering through from the main room. "Don't worry, be happy," he sings, before whistling along as he bobs and twirls.

Boss turns back to Jimmy. "Must be a full moon behind those clouds. Let's go. Coming, Trace?"

Trace shakes his head.

Boss shrugs and leaves.

April leans over and kisses Trace on the cheek. "Good night, boys. Don't drown in this rain."

On the silent screens of the TAB monitors, ghostly figures drift across the reflected lights. A few stragglers still linger in the pokies room, the constant click of digital reels ticking over. The sweet smell of spilt drinks rises from the carpet to combine with the slightly humid air in the room.

"Oy, Jimmy?" The side of Trace's face distorts as he leans against his hand. He was onto his second beer since Boss and April left. "You ever wonder if you've, ya know, wasted your life?"

"Of course not," Jimmy replies with a wry smile. "How can it be a waste while talking to you?"

Trace's head slips from his hand and bobs while he readjusts his position. "I don't know, man. I just, like, yeah. I thought I'd have my own business, own my own house. My brother's successful. He went to uni, wears a suit. Was always Mum's favourite, was always the one to go far. He doesn't speak to me now. Unemployed bum that I am. My own brother, not even wanting to know me." Trace sighs and looks at the dregs of his beer, raises the glass to his lips and upends it.

"You know, Chelsea, at home, I should be thankful for her. I know I bitch about her, but she puts up with me. Even if she hates me, she is still there." Trace stares at the empty glass in front of him. "How anyone likes me I don't know. How do you put up with me?"

Jimmy rests against the counter. "Trace, you're a good guy at heart. You're good value and loyal. And you are a little drunk. Home time for you, I think."

Trace nods and pinches his forehead, a fold of skin lifting between his thumb and index finger. It is almost midnight, though it takes him a while to figure that out. "Yeah, I guess I should bugger off, get home before *she* does." His words slur. "Gimme me jacket, yeah, Jimmy? Might make a run for it now, hope the rain slackens off."

Jimmy leans through the door at the rear of the bar and grabs the coat. He passes it over the bar runner.

“You’re not walking home in this, mate. It’s pissing down out there. I rang for a taxi when you were getting close to the end of that last beer, should be out front waiting for you. And good luck with the hangover tomorrow morning, mate.”

“Ha! ‘Ave to get through tonight, yet. It was that last beer. It’s always the last one that kills you.” Trace checks his wallet for cab money. “Looks like I’m walking anyway. She bare, mate.”

Jimmy reaches into the till and pulls out a note. “Not walking. Here’s a fiver. It’ll get you to yours from here, I’d think. Can’t have you getting sick; I’ll lose my best customer. Pretty sure I owe you five, anyway.”

Trace’s cheeks turn pink through the tanned skin in a rare moment of embarrassment. “I’ll fix ya up tomorrow.” Before Jimmy can respond, Trace slips through the door.

Jimmy sighs and looks over the nearly empty room. Only one table of patrons and a few in the pokies room are left. He flicks the switch on the wall to turn the lights on and off a few times. “Closing time, folks.” He sweeps his arms dramatically toward the door. “If you’d not mind finishing up, I’d like to get home before dawn.” While waiting for the remaining few to finish their drinks, he picks up a wine glass and starts polishing it to a shine.

Trace dives through the back door of the taxi in an attempt to dodge the rain and struggles to right himself. The taxi driver looks back at him; Trace fights with the seatbelt and smiles to the driver.

“Hey mate,” Trace says to the driver. “Don’t worry, feel fine. Won’t be throwing up in your car. Just a tad uneasy on the feet.”

The taxi driver nods. “Where you going?” His voice has an Irish lilt to it.

“Home,” Trace replies, reaching into his pocket and pulls the five-dollar note out. “Going as far as this can take me. Live in Mathieson Street in Carro, mate. It’s a few blocks over.”

The taxi driver smiles, taking the money from Trace. “Weather like this? I’ll get you all the way home. It’s not far.” He watches in the rear-view mirror and reaches over to turn off his meter. With the sound of the click of Trace’s seatbelt, the car moves off in a rush.

Trace falls back into the vinyl of the seat. He struggles to keep his eyes open while lights zip past on his side of the car. Smash repairers and warehouses share the street with office buildings for banks and insurance companies wanting waterfront views of the harbour. At one stage, the smell of the Fish Co-Op floats through the barely open window. He feels the car slow.

“Hey.” The driver’s voice wakes him from his daze. “Which street is it, sorry? I don’t know this area too well.”

The taxi travels slowly along a wide, dark street. The homes appear small in comparison to the factories opposite them. Few cars travel this road. Trace climbs up from his slumped position in the backseat, eyes drawing level with the window. "Yeah, this next street up here on your right. Just let me out at the end, cheers. It's a bitch of a street, real narrow. I'm only a few houses up, so I'll run."

The car pulls to a halt on the wrong side of the road, crossing the narrow street that Trace indicates. "I can take you down, lad. It's not a problem."

"Nah, she's sweet." Trace reaches over, pats the driver on the shoulder. "Really, mate, thanks for this." Trace jumps out the car on the right-hand side. His shoes slip slightly as he turns and shuts the door, waving off the taxi.

He starts down his street. The puddles on the pavement and road reflect splinters of light from the streetlight at the corner of the intersection. He zigzags along the centre of the road. He steps into ankle-deep water. His shoulders drop, feeling the water fill his shoes, and he shuffles through. His narrow home is one of several uniform terraces. He approaches his narrow balcony, which is lit by a dull porch light. He pulls himself onto the boards by grabbing the short timber railing jutting out from the wall.

He opens the screen and rests his forehead against the door. Pulling out his bunch of keys, he fumbles for a while before finding the right one, and has to steady his hand to fit the key into the lock. His flailing hand catches the side of the door before he stumbles down the hall. He throws his keys and wallet toward the double bed. Both miss the crumpled sheets; the keys disappear under the bed. He supports himself on the wall near the bedroom door and lets his body sink to the floor.

The beige wallpaper is peeling along the joins, ripping into strips. Trace pokes at one with his finger and thinks how it looks like the removable tickets on a cheap, photocopied flier. He pulls off his shoes and socks and he stumbles down the hall. Along the way, he removes his coat, shirt and pants, leaving them as they fall. He drops his boxers and steps through the door into the bathroom.

A lime-green shower basin awaits him. The curtain sticks to his skin once the water starts flowing. Trace rests his head against the wall of the shower, his hands clasped around the tap. He closes his eyes to try to stop his head from spinning. The exhaust fan clicks as it whirs and sucks the hot steam from the room. He lets his head fall back and feels the torrent rush over his face. He opens his mouth to swallow. The hot water hits the back of his throat with force; he coughs, heaves, then swallows hard. He gags again, then vomits.

"Why the fuck do I keep doing this?" he says out loud. He drops his head and groans. The metallic taste of blood lingers in his throat. He turns the water off.



He pulls back the curtain and steps out unsteadily. He grabs a towel from the hook on the wall. The rustle of material against his head seems louder than the rain coming down on the tin roof. He dries himself and wraps the towel around his waist.

In the kitchen, the dishes are stacked upon each other, separated only by the grime and leftover food stuck to their surfaces. A list of numbers is on a pad next to the phonebook, the majority of which have lines through them; Trace groans at the thought of ringing the rest tomorrow, while hung over, in search of work. He won't bother. He uses the table to prop himself, rubs his face, and then runs his fingers through the hair on his chest. Stumbling towards the fridge, he feels something against his leg. He kicks out against it and sends the drip-collecting bucket sprawling across the floor.

"You've gotta be shittin' me." The slick drains into a deep cut in the linoleum near a corner of the room. A drop of water lands on his shoulder. He closes his eyes, grabbing a glass from the bench beside him. He spins, eyes still closed, and hurls it across the room. The glass shatters against the doorframe to the bathroom. He loses his balance and falls to the ground, groans, feeling his towel unravel.

Trace stirs, feeling the water pool at his feet. His shoulder aches and his head is already throbbing. A cough causes him to force his eyes open; he squints. The blurred figure of Chelsea stands in the hall. Her hair catches the light from the lamp in the hall and he recognises the sage-green shirt as part of the Woolworths' uniform.

"You know, Trace, I can't handle this shit anymore. You're a fucking joke." Chelsea's words fall on him like the drops from the ceiling. "You're nothing but an unemployed, lazy-arsed alcoholic bum. About time you got your fucking life together. Act like a man, damn it."

These words he soaks up. They have been together almost two years, but the past three months have been torture. After every argument, he would wind up sleeping on the couch. The only time they spoke was through insults. Considering they met after she reversed into his car, he is not surprised that it has ended up a disaster.

He grunts and turns on his side. "You know what? I don't really give a fuck." He strains to read the time on the microwave. "It's 4am. Your shift finished two hours ago. So you can go back to whoever you were just bonin'."

When she starts to cry and turns back down the hall, he rolls over to face the cupboards. The cold linoleum is hard against his shoulder. He mutters to himself as he drifts back to sleep, swearing he can hear her yell out something about the other guy being better in bed.

The crash of the front door abruptly causes him to wake and sit up. The light coming through the windows of the kitchen assaults him. At least it is still raining and the light is not as bright as it could be. The water on the floor has spread to nearly every corner of the room.

The ripped curtains do little to reduce the light streaming into the room. Trace treads lightly over the floor towards the bathroom before he yelps. A piece of broken glass slices into his right foot. The blood blends with the water, fanning out in all directions through the kitchen. He hops backwards and jumps up onto the bench. Pulling the shard from his heel, he grimaces, muttering under his breath. He contemplates which pain is worse, the one in his head or the one in his foot.

“My head,” he mutters to himself. “Definitely my head.” With no shoes in sight, broken glass between him and the toilet, and a desperate need to take a leak, he relieves himself in the sink.

He hops through to the front door, careful not to slip in the water in the kitchen, and slips his left foot into an errant work boot. He looks in the main bedroom. The wardrobe is open and empty and the dresser is bare. In the lounge, the DVD collection is halved; Chelsea has taken hers.

There is a new note next to the list of phone numbers. He ignores it. He knows what it says. He hops into the bathroom, hearing the crunch of broken glass under his boot, and opens the medicine cabinet for a bandage. The bandage sits alongside the painkillers. He pops the cap off, fishes out three Panadol, and swallows them without water. Bandage now in hand, he lifts his foot and examines the wound. Breathing in through his teeth as he pokes at the cut, he decides it is not deep.

He rinses the blood down the basin and starts wrapping the bandage tightly around it. He sighs. This is going to be a long day.

Later, Trace shifts uncomfortably in his car at the parking lot at Waratah Village. On the back seat are a bag from the chemist with a new bandage and some Betadine, and a bag from Coles with some pasta, canned sauce and biscuits. Next to them is the purpose of his trip: a case of Toohey’s Old throwdowns.

He turns the key and the engine groans to life. It always struggles in wet weather. “Wish this rain would piss off,” he mutters. A click of a lever and the wipers begin.

The mobile phone in the centre console flashes with a new text message: *Pub tonight? It’s pissing down rain, but the beers won’t drink themselves.*

He groans and tosses the phone onto the passenger seat. It bounces awkwardly and down onto the floor. His head is still hurting, the throbs mixing with the pounding of rain on the car roof.

He runs the palm of his hand down over his cheek. The water drips from his hair, running down his back and over his face. Reaching over into the back of the car, he grabs a dirty shirt and uses it to dry himself.

Flicking the wipers on full, he pulls out of the park and heads towards Adamstown. He wants to see his mother before going home. Trace decides not to mention Chelsea leaving this morning; his mother has been telling him for over a year that she is a catch. At times, Trace felt as though introducing Chelsea to the family was his greatest accomplishment in his mother's eyes. It was always his father who had supported him.

People still speed, despite all the water on the road. Trace envies them, but his car seems to struggle to reach the speed limit before having to slow for the traffic lights or stop signs along the way. He pulls off the main road and cuts through the back streets of Lambton and New Lambton, where a mixture of old miner's cottages sit on large blocks next to newly renovated houses that have been extended to take up most of the yard. Trace realises he may be over the blood alcohol limit.

The road narrows between two parks. A dog wanders out onto the road ahead. Trace jumps on the brakes. The car swerves onto the wrong side of the road before finding itself back on the right side. The water sprays high up into the air, over the top of the car. There is a crunch followed by the car bouncing up over the gutter before it comes to rest. The car sinks into the mud on the side of the park. The dog looks at the car, barks once, and walks away.

"Fuck!" Trace expels a scream and hits the steering wheel hard. He turns the ignition, but it makes no effort at all to kick over. "Oh, this is a joke of a week!"

He doesn't even bother trying further. He picks up his phone, but discovers it is turned off. He presses the power button, but it refuses to turn on; he has not charged it for days. His rough hands snatch the keys from the ignition and he steps out of the car. He stares at the beer on the backseat through the window. "Screw you. You caused this!" He turns and starts walking along the road in the direction of Adamstown. He hopes he can bum a lift along the way and crash on his mother's couch.

The further he walks, the heavier the rain becomes. The gutters are overflowing, forcing him to walk down the centre of the road. It is only just after 4pm, but it is already getting dark.

The road bridge ahead that crosses the drain is covered in water. The torrents rip through the channel with speed, causing waves to crash into the bridge and spill over onto the road.

He starts over the bridge; he is headed toward the higher ground of Hobart Road, but stops. Squinting in the dark and rain, he notices the grass is churned up between the drain and the road that is running parallel to it. A hatchback is tipped, nose first, on a forty-five degree angle into the drain; its headlights highlight the bottom of the drain while its rear hazard lights blink. Trace can only see the rear windows; the front half of the car is submerged under the torrents. Then he sees it again: movement inside.

Trace runs towards sunken two-door hatchback. Both doors are under water. Small fists pound against the glass of the back hatch between screams. Trace grabs hold of the handle to the hatch, ripping the handle up, but the hatch doesn't budge. Inside, a face looks at him, tears running through smudged mascara, bottom lip quivering. The car is filling with water and it shakes as the storm water moves through the drain.

“Hey!” Trace yells. “Is it just you in the car?”

The woman nods, her red hair stuck to her face, her blue shirt clinging tightly to her body. Trace looks around; there is a car further up the street. It disappears around the corner.

“Are you hurt? Can you move or are you stuck?”

The woman yells in between the sobs. “It's so cold! The doors are jammed! Help me, please!”

“Okay, okay. I'll get you out.” He looks at the rear windows. “I'll be back in a minute, okay?”

He runs over to a nearby house and belts on the doorframe. He thumps it again and sees the silhouette of a person through the glass. The door opens. “Ring 000! Someone's crashed into the drain.” Not waiting for a reply, he picks up a large rock from a garden bed and runs back to the car.

He checks through the rear window; she is shivering, her fists still feebly hitting the glass of the rear windscreen. Trace is not sure how the car is still balancing on its nose. “Just hold on. Cover your face.” The car slips and bounces as the water hits it. The undercarriage grinds along the concrete. In some vain attempt to stop the car from slipping, he presses his shoulder into the side of the car. Again and again he beats the window with the rock; it cuts into the palms of his hands. The pain shoots from the cut in his foot and he grows numb with cold. The rain still falls, relentlessly, over the car, the gutter, his body. His clothes feel so heavy. With another thud against the glass with the rock, a crack appears. And then another.

He pulls back to hit the window again and, in the wet, he loses his grip on the rock. It falls down, bouncing off the ground into the torrents of water in the drain. His shoulders drop. The streetlights alongside the drain highlight the streaks of rain that sting his face as he looks up. A scream from inside the car focuses his attention. With his hip still pressing into the side of the car, he thrusts his elbow toward the window. The jacket he wears is shredded by glass and he feels the nicks on his elbow while he continues to clear the glass from the window. There are no large shards sticking from the edges; it'll have to do.

The undercarriage grinds and bounces along the concrete again. The hole created by the broken window is small. Trace sticks his head through it. “This is going to hurt, but grab hold.”

Her arms feel thin, cold and wet when he grabs them and guides them out the window first. She eases her head and shoulders through the broken window, before, with a grunt, Trace

drags her through the gap. A bare leg catches a small piece of glass on the window and a piercing scream cuts through the rain as her skin is ripped open. The car grinds against the concrete and moves again. Trace pushes the girl up the hill, before losing his footing, falling onto his back, his leg dangling into the drain. The storm water rushes through the drain and pulls at his leg. The lights blur and rain slams down. The car edges closer to where he lies. Tufts of grass rip from the ground as he claws it, pulling himself up through the mud, away from the edge of the water, away from the car. He collapses next to where the woman cries, clutching her leg.

With a groan, the car flips and splashes down into the drain. The water rushes over the roof of the car.

“Well, that was something, huh?” Trace says between heavy pants. He lets his head fall into the mud. People from the houses across the street rush over to help them up and guide them back to shelter. Trace limps heavily on his foot. He can feel the blood oozing into his boot. He slumps down on the edge of a front patio.

The woman, in her thirties, is silent. Her high cheekbones are pale against her bright red hair, which is now a twisted mess. A light smattering of freckles covers her small nose. Someone presses a towel against her lower leg where the cut from the broken window bleeds. She is shaking, wrapped in a blanket, and keeps looking back to the car, which can barely be seen under the waves of water in the drain. The headlights of the car cause the water to glow before, finally, they blink twice and the drain becomes dark.

Trace catches her eye and smiles. “Not every day you can park your car in the storm drain.”

She blinks, still in shock. “Th-thanks,” she stutters with cold.

The street is dark; the streetlights are dead. In the distance, an ambulance approaches. One of the neighbourhood children rush out into the rain and waves wildly. Flashes of red bounce off of the walls around him when the truck pulls into the drive. Trace buries his face in his hands, exhausted, the pain in his foot excruciating.

He steps out of the car and slams the door shut. He bends down and gives a little wave of thanks, before leaning against the telegraph pole a few houses up from his childhood home.

His boots are still heavy with water; his right foot stings where the ambulance officers redressed the cut. With every step, he winces. He wonders if he perhaps should have gone to hospital to have it checked out. A light breeze works its way up the street as he listens to the cars passing by on Brunker Road. He continues toward the near-derelict house on the corner. He cannot remember it ever having been painted. Outside, the weatherboards are almost bare; the hardwood has cracked and splintered and tiny flecks of paint barely remain around the window

frames. Inside, the wallpaper is remnants of the 1960s, with floral designs and a swirl of bold patterns. It isn't much, but it was enough for him and his family as they grew up. He still remembers, though, the embarrassment of bringing home a friend from primary school for his first sleepover, and a cockroach rushing across the kitchen table during dinner. Cracks between the floorboards and gaps under the screen doors meant many creepy-crawlies could enter and escape the house.

Trace walks slowly. He stops and steadies himself against a fence. The streetlight above flicks on and off. His stomach rumbles with hunger. Outside his mother's house is her car; he hasn't noticed before how bad its condition is. The car always brings back memories. It was only a few days old, its bright red shimmer something he looked forward to seeing, the day he returned from school and saw an ambulance in their driveway. The red lights flashing gave the walls of the house the first colour it had seen in years. His uncle's car pulled into the curb a little further down the hill to where Trace and his brother stood, his uncle jumping out the car and rushing toward them. Trace dropped his schoolbag and started to run down the hill. His uncle caught Trace's arm. When the ambulance rushed around the corner, sirens blaring, a young Trace fought against his uncle's grip; his younger brother stood motionless further up the hill, a small figure with drooping shoulders. His mother looked up the hill, mouth open, tears rolling down her face, to see her two sons and brother-in-law. She shook her head. Trace's uncle nodded. She rushed to the car to follow the ambulance. The red shimmer of the car caught the sun as it sped around the corner. There was a pungent smell of burning rubber left on the street outside their house for hours.

He limps past the neighbour's small timber house. Someone is playing a guitar. The bare notes saunter out into the street. It is a woman, sitting on the balcony, under a low-hanging light bulb. Her small hands move across the strings of a guitar that looks far too big in her lap.

Trace steps over the low fence into the yard. He readjusts the blanket over his shoulders. He coughs politely. "Nay? G'day."

The music stops. Lifting her head, her eyes widen seeing Trace. Her hair falls free, framing her round face, and she leans forward.

"So, this is a little weird," he laughs. "I grew up next door. Mum still lives there. Was just going to see her and saw you."

Nay relaxes, leans back against the wall, and chuckles. "Well, hello there. You're right: it is a little weird. Small world, huh?"

"Yeah. So, like, I really am sorry about last night. I hope my thick head didn't, you know, do any damage. Really didn't mean to head butt you. Or offend you. I had had a bit to drink; something that is gonna change. Today is a new day."

“It’s okay. Who doesn’t swear every now and again? So, if today is a new day, how about we start again?” Her left hand moves along the neck of the guitar. Lone notes drift from the guitar as she flicks her right hand down over the strings to give the conversation an abstract soundtrack.

“Yeah. That’d be nice. I really am—”

“Nuh uh. We’re starting again.”

“Oh. All right.” A drop of water falls from the gutter of the house onto his head and Trace catches it on the tip of his nose with a pinch of forefinger and thumb. He tries to think of something witty to say, before looking at her. “So, hi. My name’s Trace.”

“As in Tracey. Like Dick Tracey?” She beams a smile. “My name is Renee. But call me Nay. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Trace sits on the edge of the balcony. The streetlight on the footpath continues to flicker.

“What did you do today, Dick Tracey?” Nay asks.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he claims.

“Give me a minute, then try me,” she replies and sticks out her tongue. She excuses herself and walks inside. Nay returns with a towel and throws it over Trace’s head.

“So, today is a new day?” She smiles again and her fingers brush over the strings.

Trace turns to the street when he hears a car door open. The shadow of his mother sinks into the driver's seat and the rusty red car from his childhood begins to move. In the back window of the car, Trace spots a “For Sale” sign.

“Yeah. It's time for new things in my life. If nothing else, I need a new car.” Trace examines the rips in the elbow of his jacket. “My car died when it got a bit wet.”

Nay tilts her head and strums the guitar again.

“What *did* you do today? Drive your car into a drain?”

Trace throws his head back and laughs. “Something like that. Any chance I can use your phone to order a pizza and you let me tell you over dinner?”

## **Bruce**

June 2007

Outside, the rain and wind batter the garage studio. Trees wave against dark clouds in the night sky. Inside, with the protection of soundproofing, all is a still and quiet.

It is past midnight. Bruce leans back and knocks a beat with his fingertips against the right arm of the chair. Calluses bump and scrape against the leather when his fingers linger on the beat. He runs his left hand over his balding head before reaching for the light beer on the desk; the condensation stains the grain of the timber. His first few years as a performer often saw him coming home from gigs so drunk he could barely find his bed. There had even been a couple of gigs that had resulted in him being banned from country hotels after not finding the bathroom. A few things have changed since then. Now, he has a few light beers during the performance to combat nerves and takes simple pleasure in one final light beer after returning home; his body just does not agree with big nights anymore. The final beer at home has become a ritual.

On the wall above his desk, his calendar highlights the upcoming gigs. Scrawled in blue ink is a booking at the university for the following day, at lunch. Above the marked dates, an image of a trickling creek in a rainforest attempts to project a calm influence on the busy schedule; through the centre of the image, the trunk of a tree lazing on its side, moss-covered, on the edge of a stream. The chair creaks when he spins and looks around the room. The studio is built into the back part of the garage; separated by plaster and soundproofing, the other half of the garage stores the two family cars, lawn equipment and the usual treasures such as fishing gear and bicycles. Bruce hears the pop of a petrol can in the other part of the garage and wishes the soundproofing was better. On one wall, a collection of guitars hangs with pride, neatly spaced; opposite them, microphones and recording equipment sit on benches in a mess.

In front of him lie a few sheets of paper stapled together in the top corner. They carry the NSW Police insignia. Bruce flicks through the pages, reading the statement he gave the desk sergeant after he finished performing earlier. A collection of messy signatures are scribbled across the bottom. Part of being a pub performer involves dealing with people in the pub who drink too much; it was fairly uncommon to be threatened in the carpark before a gig. He had refused to hand over his wallet and phone and had bolted for the door of the pub with guitar in hand. If performing songs that are not his own does not kill him, Bruce is sure a drunk will. He gathers the papers and stashes them in the bottom drawer. The last thing he wants is his wife, Jen, to find out about the events of the evening. Nothing serious had actually happened; the publican never would have reported it, and Bruce was willing to let it go, but some do-gooder



with a mobile rung it in after witnessing it. When the police turned up, Bruce had little choice but to go through with it.

The chair creaks when it tilts back. His naked toes slip over the grain in the timber floorboards underfoot as he swings in the chair. He opens his browser and logs into YouTube. His videos have had no new comments; the videos of him performing covers in his garage studio have received a little traffic, but nothing substantial. He refers to the notes beside his keyboard and researches the most popular songs. Retrieving his guitar, he listens to the song for a moment before strumming along to the music. The process of learning Top 40 songs is a common ritual for him. The crowds at the pub demand the songs they know, so he has to learn them. If he liked what he heard, he listened through the song a few more times before writing down the lyrics.

The shelves in the corner of the room hold a collection of compact discs containing his original songs. For the most part, they are unplayed. On rare occasions, he plays one to the family, but they mostly never leave this room. The spine of a cassette tape mocks him, his name scrawled in black biro on the glossy cardboard. It was the handwriting of a seventeen-year-old who thought his songs would hit the radio. By the time he hit nineteen, he had collected a drawer full of rejection letters and lost any hope of doing his own material. Twenty years later, he still remembers that first song. He shifts his hands on the neck of the guitar, the notes to his song drifting from the strings, and hums along to the melody.

*I've been dancing now for far too long  
this broken foxtrot; my feet are sore.  
But let's pick it up:  
one, two, three-step, four.  
Now slow it down, come closer, here,  
It's in my arms you belong.*

Bruce grins. It may not have hit the radio, or even been a great lyric, but it earned a smile from Jen. He carries the guitar to a stand by the door, finishes the last mouthful of beer, and leaves his sanctuary.

He runs across the path, his bare feet striking the concrete, quickly unlocks the back screen door, and sneaks inside. A soft meow from the cat greets him from the lounge. A small hall light allows him to move quickly through the house to the bedroom. The door is open wide, his wife's body hidden under the mound of sheets and blankets. He lightly steps across the carpet. The belt buckle clinks as he takes off his jeans. He decides to skip the shower and climbs into bed in his t-shirt and briefs. His wife rolls over and faces him.

"Good gig?" She sounds tired.

Bruce lightly brushes her long hair from her face; he can smell her conditioner as he plays with her hair. “Much the same as they ever are. The girls?” He leans over and kisses her on the forehead.

“Much the same as they ever are,” she replies, before rolling back over. “You smell, by the way.”

“Love you, too, Jen.” He slides over close, wraps his arm around her, kisses her neck, and waits for the ringing in his ears to fade with sleep.

The first day they met was in summer nineteen years earlier. He was playing some of his songs in the courtyard of a coffee shop in town. She came in with a few friends and was sitting on a table near where he was set up. The sun was warm, filtering down between the leaves of the trees, and he still remembers the yellow dress she was wearing. Her skin was pale and her hair dark as it fell free over her shoulders; he lost his place every time he looked in her direction and found her pale blue eyes looking at him. He plucked up the courage and sang a new song of his while his eyes never left hers. It seemed to work.

“In my arms you belong,” Bruce whispers quietly, kissing his wife's bare shoulder.

In the morning, Bruce wakes to hear the rain hitting the window above the bed. The clock reads a little past eight. Tossing the blankets to the side, he sits up and pulls on some pants.

“Morning, sweetie,” Jen stands against the kitchen counter, coffee in hand. “Or is that still sweaty?”

Bruce raises his arm and has a smell. “Phew! Yeah, sorry about that. I'll shower shortly. Big night. Just wanted to crawl into bed in the end.” He rubs the sleep from his eyes. “Did I miss the girls?”

“Yeah, they left for school ‘bout ten minutes ago.” Jen's short, stumpy fingers lightly tap against the navy blue coffee mug. Her fingernails are painted bright red—Sally, their youngest daughter, undoubtedly had a part in this—and they occasionally click on the ceramic. She places her coffee on the counter before adjusting her ponytail. Her work shirt is tucked into a black skirt that hugs the curves of her hips. “Tess is staying at her friend's place for the long weekend so they can study or work on a drama project or something, so I guess we won't see her til Monday.”

Bruce rolls his eyes. “Or Sunday when she's hung over from the party she goes to tomorrow night, thinks she is dying, and calls us to be saved.”

Jen laughs. “Have a little faith in her, Bruce. Not every teenager is like you were. Want a cuppa?”

“Chamomile, thanks, yeah.” He stretches his jaw. “I've another gig at lunch. Hope you're not going to want to talk to me next week. After last night, two gigs today, and shows

Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. Well, I hate long weekends for a reason. Everyone gets a break except me.”

Jen places the kettle on the table, with a mug and tea bag. The toaster spits the bread up, one slice tumbling out of the metal box and falling to the plate strategically placed in front of it; Jen slips more slices in and pushes down the lever. Bruce drops into the seat at the kitchen table; he crosses his forearms on the tabletop and rests his head on them.

“Sweetie, no sleeping at the dinner table.” Jen smiles at her husband.

“Not even a little?” He forces his eyes open.

Jen ferries the toast with the honey and butter from the bench. “No, not even a little.” She sits at the table. Bruce reaches over toward the plate of toast. She bats his hand away. “There’s bread down in the toaster for you. You can get it yourself, though. I’ve got to go to work soon.”

Bruce stands and hovers over the toaster, warming his hands over it. He cranes his neck to look out the window. The clouds are dark and the rain is still heavy. “Over this weather. What’s this, the second week of rain in a row?”

Jen agrees with a mouth full of toast.

“Long weekend. Of course it was going to rain.” The toast jumps from the toaster, one slice bouncing off the plate and onto the floor. Bruce picks it up, blows on it, and tosses it on the plate. “Oh well, not like we would be going away, anyway. Everybody wants their living juke box.”

“Aw, sweetie. That’s not true.” She pauses to take a sip of her coffee. “Some people don’t like music.”

Bruce turns to see his wife smiling at him. He scratches the side of his nose with his middle finger, the others curled into his palm; she feigns hurt and smiles again.

“I only said some people. I couldn’t resist your singing in the shower, remember? It is how we wound up with Sally.” She smiles softly, her lips tinted pale pink. “I’ll pick her up after school. I’m only working until two.”

Bruce nods, coating his toast in a thick layer of honey. “Jen,” he starts, his voice soft and serious. “Nah, never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

Jen stands from the table, carrying her empty plate to the sink. She stalls, finishing her coffee, before the mug joins the other breakfast dishes. “What’s up, sweetie?”

Bruce turns in his chair, his arm rest on the back causing the skin of his biceps to roll over the timber. “I want to try my original music, again. I just feel I have something more to give than singing *The Gambler* all my life.”

Jen nods. Bruce complains to her all too often about doing nothing but covers.

“I can't just make the choice myself. It might require spending, and maybe losing, a fair bit of money.” Outside the kitchen window, Bruce spies a leaf from the tree in the backyard slowly drift downward. It suddenly stops, suspended in midair, amongst water drops caught in a spider web between the house and the fence. “But, there's a shed full of songs out there. They can't sit there forever.”

Jen walks over to her husband, wraps her arms around him from behind, and leans to kiss his cheek. “Bruce, if you want to do it, I'll support you.” Her voice is soft. “But it comes with one condition.”

“Mm?” Bruce lifts his hands and holds his wife's arms as they drape across his chest.

“You have a shower. You still smell.”

“And I still love you, Jen.” He turns and kisses her.

Jen releases her husband and grabs her handbag. “Have to go to work, but we will come up with a plan later on, okay?”

Bruce slides a large chunk of toast into his mouth. He nods as his wife darts out the door. In the sink there is a pile of dishes needing to be done. Plenty of time before his gig at the university.

A car door slams outside. “I can smell you out here!” The playful insult comes through the rear screen door before the car starts and pulls out the drive. Bruce pops the last piece of toast into his mouth and makes for the shower.

The pre-lunch crowd is quiet. There is a small group having a beer to celebrate the end of their exams, as Bruce has discovered when speaking to them between songs, and a few people read quietly at tables or on couches. It is approaching midday, so more people should arrive soon. Bruce hopes so, anyway, considering his first set was performed to less than ten people. He wonders if people struggle to eat and drink in this room with the vulgar colours of the walls and carpet; the brown and blue backgrounds have red and yellow lines swirling through them, and there are grey tables scattered through the room.

Bruce looks up at the large flat-screen television to the side of his stage. It is tuned to MusicMax, the volume muted, and currently airs clips to the classic songs of the 1980s. Bruce sees a clip he recognises and plays a few bars.

“Well, folks, if you'd not mind, I'm going to grab a drink. I'll be back shortly.” He lays his guitar flat on the stage and heads toward the bar.

The man behind the bar is young. His hair is cut short and gelled to spikes. A dark shirt features the University of Newcastle Union logo, the collar lifted upright in order to make a fashion statement. His face is smooth; it looks like the boy has never shaved in his life. Bruce wonders if he's old enough to be in a bar, never mind serving him drinks.

“G'day mate, can I grab a can of lemonade and some plain chips?” Bruce looks around the room while the bartender pours his drink. He spots the bushy hair of Geoff lounging on a couch placed perpendicular to the far wall of the bar. Bruce has met him at a few gigs and enjoys a chat with him.

The couch sags as Bruce collapses into it. “Hey Geoff, how you doing, mate?” Bruce places his lemonade down and tears at the packet of chips.

Geoff looks up from his book. “Oh, hi Bruce! Did I miss the first set? I only just got here.”

“Yeah, was just doing some covers first set.” Bruce decides to test the waters. “Think I might try out a few originals next, if you're interested in hearing?”

“Definitely, definitely.” Geoff runs his hand through his long hair. They had first met at a gig earlier in the year at The Queen Vic. Geoff had been a little drunk and Bruce had listened to him while he offloaded about his parents' broken marriage. Since then, Geoff turned up regularly to where Bruce played. “That said, might be a bit distracted. Kind of waiting for someone.”

Outside, in the wind, the trees seem caught in a frenzied dance. The branches, leaves and twigs break free and fly through the air to land on the balcony. The rain comes in bursts, slapping onto the windows on the side wall and drumming against the roof.

“Someone, huh? Someone of the female variety?”

“Perhaps,” Geoff goes quiet. His fingers fidget with the book in his hand. “We met online a while ago, through friends on Facebook. Met up a few times, wound up taking a class together, too. I'm not sure where it is going, though.”

Bruce smiles. “Well, who knows?” He spots a girl come in from outside, hair wet, and beam a smile when she spots his couch mate. “But, it's raining outside, so make sure you give her your umbrella.”

“How do you know she doesn't already have one?” Geoff looks confused. He dog-ears the page in his book and slides the book into his bag.

“Still ruining your books, huh?” The soft voice surprises Geoff, but the corners of his mouth turn upward.

Bruce watches the girl kneel on the couch behind Geoff. She hugs him from behind.

“Bad habit, yeah. How'd the exam go?” Geoff's eyes follow the path of the maze of intersecting lines on the carpet until they find the girl as she sits next to him. He smiles at her.

“Yeah, okay I guess. I think I stuffed up my second essay, but it's done. I've already passed the course.” She shifts dramatically in the couch to get comfortable and drops her bag on the floor with a thud. “I'm a bit hungry, now, though.”

Bruce holds out the bag of chips in her direction; she reaches into the bag and steals a chip.

“Oh, yeah,” Geoff blushes. “Uh, Bruce, this is Nill. Nill, this is a guy I’ve been ignoring since you got here, Bruce.”

Bruce grins, his eyes creasing at the sides. “Pleasure to meet you, Nill.”

Nill smiles back at Bruce and shakes his hand when it is offered. Her hands are small and soft; in comparison to Bruce’s six-foot-five height, she is tiny. Geoff’s eyes are still locked onto her. She turns to him and smiles.

“Do you want a drink, Geoff? You driving?”

“Yeah. Can I get a Coke, please?”

She stands and heads toward the bar.

Bruce feels a cold breeze sneak through the door to the side of the bar when someone walks through it. He pulls tight the light-coloured hoodie around his shoulders. Last thing he needs is to get sick.

The room is starting to fill up. One student is writing furiously, ignoring her vibrating phone. A mature-age student has the newspaper spread out over the table, his schooner of beer untouched. To the side of the pool tables, two friends play Giant Jenga; the tower of lengths of wood grows closer to the height of the players, and wobbles with every stick removed and added to the top.

“She seems nice, Geoff.”

“Yeah, yeah she is. Bad feeling I’ve slipped into the Friend Zone, though.” Geoff sighs.

“Ah, I don’t know. Jen is my closest friend. And I married her.” He thinks back to that day in the coffee shop again. He remembers approaching her nervously, asking her to meet him at the same place, same time, the next day. They did that three days a week for a month before she agreed to dinner. “You guys remind me a bit of how we were when we first started out.”

Geoff shakes his head. “I don’t know. Pretty sure she’s not into me. But it would be nice to have a win for a change.”

Bruce laughs. “You’re not in it for a win. This is an endurance race and it never ends.” He digs into the chip packet and stuffs one in his mouth before pulling out his phone. “Never.”

Nill returns. “So, did you get all your work done?” Nill sits back on the couch, balancing the drinks as she does, before placing the glasses on the table. She fishes into her bag and pulls out an apple. There is a loud crunch as her teeth sink into it. “Oh, did you get that essay on physics, or whatever it was, finished?” She speaks through the apple in her mouth, her words coming out slightly muffled.

Geoff laughs. “Metaphysics, not physics. That was a pretty fun paper. I was looking at the existence of reality and the possibility that everything I think I'm experiencing is something I'm imagining in the eight to twelve minutes of brain activity after I've died.”

Bruce looks up from his phone, listening to Geoff explain his essay. He slides a finger up under the inside of his hat and scratches his head. His large hands straighten the hat and pushes back down. He goes back to poking at his phone, pushing each button one at a time with his index finger.

Nill stares blankly at him, blinking. “That made no sense to me, but okay.” Her sensuous red lips wrap around the apple again. A dribble of juice spills from her lips and sits in the crease between her lip and her chin.

“Nill? You've something,” he says and gestures toward her mouth before hesitating.

She licks at her lips before wiping her mouth with her sleeve and then picks up her glass. Behind them, someone moans before a loud crash sounds through the room as the six-foot tall tower of Jenga sticks falls to the ground. Nill jumps, her drink spilling on her lap and on the couch. A squeal escapes her lips while the cold lemonade soaks through her jeans.

Geoff laughs a little at first. “A bit jumpy, Nill?” He pokes his tongue out before offering a handkerchief.

She frowns before laughing herself. “You know how it is. I'm just going to duck to the bathroom to clean up.”

Bruce watches on for a while as Geoff dabs at the spill on the couch with his handkerchief. Outside, the trees appear to struggle to stay upright. Bruce checks his watch. He fishes the last chip out of the bag and washes it down with the last mouthful of lemonade. “So, how's everything going with your parents?”

Geoff stops cleaning and looks at Bruce. “They're not talking. Dad, I think, is trying, not that I ever give him a chance.” His face turns pink. “I'm living with Mum at the moment.”

“Mm, must be hard,” Bruce nods. “Just, you know, hang in there, mate.” He watches Geoff suddenly smile. He turns and sees Nill walking back into the bar, poking her tongue out in his direction. Bruce laughs. “Endurance race, man. Take your time.”

Nill falls back onto the couch. “Cleaning up after me? My room needs tidying if you'd like?” She laughs and turns to Bruce. “Sorry, Bruce. I think we've been ignoring you. So, what do you do?”

“Heh, it's fine. You guys have a lot to talk about, I'm sure.” Bruce stands and tips his hat. “Anyway, I'm actually here to work. Enjoy your chat.” He walks over to the stage and picks up his guitar.

There are now only a few empty tables in the room. The chatter becomes louder as patrons compete to be heard over each other and the wind howling outside. Fat drops of water come in waves, sheets of rain splattering the windows on the adjacent wall.

He steps on a pedal beneath the microphone and his fingers walk the neck of the guitar. A simple, slow blues melody escapes the speakers. "If you don't mind, folks, I'm going to play a few of my own songs." He continues to strum the guitar as he speaks. "I figured I'd start with a slow blues number, something I've been working on the last week. I hope you enjoy."

*Footsteps drift away;  
Candied perfume slowly fades.  
A low sigh. Hmm, float.*

*But your name's been in my phone for weeks,  
I can't bring myself to delete it  
Though I have no use for it now.*

*66.6 kay from my bed to your doors,  
'Nother 66 steps from there to yours.  
It's a long walk I'd make again,  
Just won't find you sleeping there no more.*

Bruce looks over the crowd in front of him. Most keep talking, unaware of the performer on stage. A few look up, nod along with the song. A few seem to be listening. He switches the tempo of the song, the slow blues turning into a rapid anthem.

*Scream it out above the noise,  
Let 'em hear it, let 'em hear it loud.  
Scream it out above the noise,  
Pointless if you don't silence the crowd.  
She's yours. He's yours. Your mine. I'm yours.*

Bruce closes his eyes, smiles, and starts dancing around the stage as he strums the guitar in double time. A siren starts screaming in the background, sounding like bagpipes coming to accompany his song.

Over at the bar, the boyish bartender is on the phone, one hand to his free ear, blocking out the noise of the siren. He gives a signal to Bruce to stop playing. The siren cuts through the newfound silence. The bartender walks over to Bruce and speaks to him quietly.

"Well, folks. This is me done, apparently. My songs have caused the university to be evacuated. I've been asked to tell you to all leave quickly and promptly and head toward the



main entrance of the building down the end of that hall Take care out there in the weather. The security guards are down there to get you to your cars safely.”

Geoff and Nill both wave to Bruce while he packs up his guitar. He winds up the cords, retrieves his microphone, and slips them in his case. He quickly shoves his pedals into the backpack on the stage.

Bruce's car bounces into the driveway with a thud and waits for the automatic door of the garage to open. The rain tattoos a steady beat on the rusty bonnet. He eases the car into the garage. He gets out of the car, pulling the guitar from the backseat and taking it into the studio through a door inside the garage. Returning to the main door, he watches the water spill over the gutter and up the Pebblecrete driveway. He turns his eyes upwards and can see part of the eucalyptus tree in the backyard. Its branches wave in the wind. Drops of water fall after spring-boarding off the tips of leaves.

He presses the button to close the garage door and darts along the broken concrete path that winds to the backdoor. His shoes struggle to gain traction on the path and he slips. There are pools of water growing in depth all over the backyard. The rain strikes his face, settles into the creases in his forehead and crow's feet around his sunken blue eyes. Two gigs complete with four to go. And he already feels exhausted. He reaches the rear screen door, pulls at it and is thankful to find it unlocked.

Inside, the house is cool and stale. It has been shut up tight the last few days with all the rain. Bruce kicks his shoes off next to the door, drops his keys and wallet onto the kitchen table, and walks over to the window. It creaks as he pushes it up an inch to allow in some air; he ignores the spits of rain on the windowsill. He grabs the tea towel from the handle on the front of the oven and wipes his face; the growth already sprouting after the morning shave catches against the material. The pile of dishes in the sink still remains. He throws the tea towel next to them. A job for later.

“Hey, sweetie. You're home early? It's only three.”

Bruce turns to see his wife pressed against the doorframe to the hall. He slides over, skating over the tiles in his socks, and pushes back her hair from her face. He gives her a peck on the cheek. “Yeah, I tried out one of my originals. They evacuated the uni.” He smiles. “You're back early, too? And Sally is home?”

“Yeah, school got evacuated, too. High winds, flooding, end of the world. All that stuff.” Jen strolls over to the sink, picks up the tea towel, and places it back over the handle. Her bones jut out through the taut skin on her hands and her veins show. The only jewellery she wears is a small engagement ring and her wedding band. Bruce watches her brow form a scowl. She scratches at her nose that hawks to a sharp point with long, slow strokes with the tip of her

nail. "Since you came through the back, you probably didn't notice how deep the water's becoming out front, though. So, where's the gig tonight? Is it still on?"

"Ah, Queen Vic again. I assume they'll still be open. I'll have to give the manager a ring. Then I have McCann's Bar up in Maitland tomorrow." He rubs his eyes and then drops his head when Chloe, the family Persian, brushes against his leg, leaving white fur on his black jeans. "I should go check that water out front. And spend some time with Sally." He collapses onto a chair.

"She's in the lounge playing games. I'm sure she'd love for you to join her." Jen smiles and pulls out a seat at the kitchen table beside Bruce. "How about a coffee, first?"

"Oh, God yes." Bruce buries his head into his arms folded on the table.

"No sleeping at the table, Bruce."

"Not even a little bit?"

"No, not even a little bit." She smiles as she turns on the kettle.

A squeal of delight ricochets off the walls and through the house. Bruce twists the controller wildly trying to steer the animated ape through the track.

"Oh, not fair! That close to the finish?" Bruce growls playfully in the direction of his daughter who is beaming a smile, having just won her third straight race of *Mario Kart* on Nintendo 64.

"It's not my fault you can't play, Daddy." She pokes her tongue out at him. Her brown hair is tied up into pigtails, her tiny button nose scrunched up as she celebrates her victory. "If you use the weapons and things it makes it easier. Again?" She hits the *Race Again* button on the screen before he has a chance to answer.

Bruce chuckles and gives her a playful shove while standing up. "Sure, but just pause it. I'll be back in a minute." He walks to the kitchen, feet plodding along the timber floorboards.

"Sounds like you're getting beat again?" Jen is bent over the electric frypan, inspecting one of the schnitzels.

"Girl's got driving skills. Thankfully there's another five years before she gets behind the wheel of a real car, though." He edges up close behind Jen, places his hands on her hips and looks over her shoulder. "How long until dinner?"

"Another ten or so. Go get beat again." Jen's eyes move up to the water cascading down from the neighbours' roof. "Maybe check out the front again?"

Bruce kisses his wife on the shoulder and leaves the kitchen. The world seems abnormally dark outside. He continues down the hall and unlocks the wooden door.

"Oh," Bruce exclaims while pawing blindly at the handle on the screen. He steps onto the front balcony and feels his socks grow damp. "Oh, this can't be good."

“Hey, Jen?” he calls down the hall through the open door. Her shape appears at the kitchen door. “You know how we always wanted a pool?” He looks back out to the intersection.

The water laps over the top of the front steps. Further up the road, water gushes from the drains. Bruce's eyes widen when he sees manholes get lifted from the ground and water gush over the footpath, all adding to the pond in front of his house.

A beam of light grabs his attention. It illuminates the tiny waves across the water in front of his house. The intersection grows brighter and the engine becomes louder. Bruce steps back when a white Land Cruiser bursts into view; the water reaches the door handles of the car. The 4WD jerks wildly before powering through the intersection. The waves left in its wake grow as they approach the front door.

“Girls, grab whatever you need. We’ve got to leave.” He closes the screen door, locks it, and slams shut the wooden door. His footsteps grow heavy as he runs down the hall. “Sally, move the photo albums up from the bottom shelf in the lounge. Quickly. And grab anything you want to take with you. C'mon, move.” Bruce's voice booms down the hall. The urgency in his voice causes his wife to stand at the end of the hall in the kitchen, mouth agape.

“Dinner's almost cooked, Bruce. We can't just go out.”

“Turn dinner off.” Bruce turns into the study and picks up the computer tower off the floor. He rips at the cords at the back, unplugging things as quickly as possible. He throws the tower up on top of a nearby cupboard. The lights flicker and the house is left in darkness. He continues through to Tess's room and places her laptop up high.

An ear-piercing scream rips through the darkness. “Daddy!” He feels his way through the dark to the voice and finds Sally standing on her bed.

“What? What's wrong, Sal?”

“The floor is leaking!”

He looks down and sees the water creeping between the floorboards. It gradually forms a thin layer of water across the floor.

“C'mon.” He grabs his daughter's hand. “You're just going to have to walk through it, love. I won't let go, I promise.” He pulls at her, and his daughter jumps from the bed, a stuffed Teddy in hand. They pass the dining room and the blur of Chloe, the cat, rushes past them. He sees the cat dart toward the living room table.

Jen returns to the kitchen and calmly unplugs the frying pan and turns off the oven.

“What you doin', Jen? We're kind of flooding here?”

“If the power comes back on, I don't want the house burning down, Bruce.” She steps carefully on the increasingly slippery floor as the water continues to spread through the house. It creeps over the toes of her shoes.

Bruce looks at his wife, who is somehow calm during this.

“Put your shoes on, sweetie.” She looks at his sock-clad feet. “Who knows where we’ll be walking. I’ll grab some things while you do.”

Bruce hoists his daughter up onto the kitchen table.

She hugs her bear close. “What’s happening, Daddy? Where’s Chloe gone?”

“The cat will be fine. Everything’ll be fine, okay?” He pulls his shoes on and ties the laces. He reaches over to the bench and grabs his wallet, phone and keys. “Everything okay, Jen?”

She returns to the room with Tess’s school bag on her back. “Her things are up high in her wardrobe. Filled her bag with some clothes, some medications and Sally’s spare asthma puffer.” Her face is calm. “What else do we need? What about Tess?”

Bruce grabs Sally’s hand and pushes Jen toward the back door. “Don’t worry, we’ll ring her later. She’ll be fine.”

They stop at the back door where the water is rising and almost reaching their knees. Bruce crouches and waits for his daughter to wrap her arms around his neck. He lifts with a grunt; his daughter is much heavier than the last time he carried her.

They start wading through the backyard. Bruce looks at the garage. Water covers the pot plants lining the side of the shed, slowly rising. He can see water seeping under the back door to his studio. “Hold on tight, Sally.”

He rushes towards the garage and fumbles for his keys. The studio remains dark after the click of a light switch. He can make out the shapes of guitars on the wall. They are up high, they will remain dry.

His performing guitar leans against the wall inside. Sally shifts when he moves to pick it up. “Sally, do you think you can walk?”

Her head shakes violently and she whimpers. He sighs and his eyes well slightly.

“Hurry up, Bruce!” Jen’s voice is stifled by the rain on the roof of the garage.

He balances Sally carefully before reaching and picking up his guitar. It is thrown roughly onto the pile of papers of the desk, nearly knocking off his computer. “Ready to go, Sally?” Out of the corner of his eye, he spots the cassette tape with his first recording. It is slipped into his pocket and they head back out into the rain.

“Bruce, I don’t know if the car will go through the water out there?” Jenn stands under the edge of carport, looking at the deep water flowing over the gutter onto the footpath.

“C’mon, let’s go.” Bruce looks up the street. “We’re walking.” In the distance, he hears a jet ski come to life as he and Jen wade through the rising water.

Bruce enters the lounge room of his sister’s second-floor apartment. He screws up his nose at the vibrant green paint on the wall.

“Tess said she will—” Bruce begins. Jen holds her fingers to her lips and scowls at him. He shuffles over. Sally is asleep curled up on the couch with a blanket over her. “Sorry, love,” he whispers. He escapes to the kitchen of the apartment. Jen follows.

“Sorry, only just got her settled. Poor thing was hysterical.” Jen stretches, her arms contorting behind her back at odd angles. “You were saying?”

“Oh, just that Tess is fine. Said to say she loves you. We've got to pick her up tomorrow morning before we go home. She's not sure what the fuss is about, but she'll find out.” He wraps his arms tight around his wife. “Turns out The Queen Vic is open tonight, still, but the manager obviously understood why I wouldn't be showing up.”

“Nice of Jacqueline to let us crash here while she works. Hate to be out there working in it, tonight.”

Bruce groans in response. He does not envy the work his sister does; being a paramedic is brutal work.

With his hands still on wife's hips, Bruce walks her across the room. He leans against the counter and pulls her closer. His chin rests atop her head. “Rain, rain, go away. Come again another day.” He shifts his position, uncomfortable in the too-small tracksuit pants that Jen grabbed before they escaped. At least they are dry.

“Bed, perhaps?” His wife pulls back from Bruce and breaks free from his hold. “I think tomorrow's going to be a big day. Jacqueline said to make the guest room ours.” Jen yawns and leaves the room.

Bruce looks around the kitchen. Unlike theirs, the room is a small and rectangular in shape, with a window above the sink and a pantry opposite the working bench. There is no room for a table. He looks out the window. The wind howls and presses hard against it. He jumps in his seat when the window cracks under the pressure and a line snakes up from the bottom of the frame. Jen rushes back into the room to investigate the noise, only half dressed.

“I'm not sure now's the time, Jen,” Bruce smiles. “Don't worry, just a crack in the window. I'll have a look and see if I can find where Jacqueline hides the tape. Go to bed, I'll be there shortly.”

Bruce pries his heavy eyelids open and is confronted with the deep purple paint on the feature wall opposite the bed. He groans and rolls over to discover his wife is already up. Carefully, he lifts the blanket to uncover Sally curled tight into a ball. He gets up and sneaks quietly out the room.

The news is on the television in the lounge room. Jen has hands are wrapped tight around a cup of tea. “Is it really six in the morning? Feels like I barely slept.” He yawns,

stretching backwards. "When'd she get into bed with us, anyway?" he asks, stepping into the kitchen.

The jar of coffee on the bench is nearing empty. He upends it into his mug to save digging about with a spoon. He adds a teaspoon of sugar, a teaspoon of milk, and pours hot water over the mix. The taped window shakes with the breeze while he stirs the coffee. At least the rain has stopped.

"She was up early this morning crying," Jen replies when he returns to the room. "The wind had her scared after what happened at home. Thought it was going to happen again. She calmed down and went back to sleep about 3am."

Bruce sits next to Jen on the couch. "Mm, sorry. I didn't hear a thing."

Jacqueline appears behind them. "Hi, Brother. How'd you sleep? Jen was telling me about the window in the kitchen." She drops into a recliner opposite them and pulls the footrest up.

"Yeah, damn thing broke. But, it should be weather-proofed until we can get someone out to replace the glass." Bruce put his coffee down on the table. "Want a coffee? If you tell me where there's another jar, I can make you one if you'd like."

"I'm good, thanks. I'll get some sleep soon. But if you want more, it's just in the pantry, second shelf from the top on the right." She stretches out and watches the news footage of the beached Pasha Bulker ship in at Nobby's. Her uniform pulls tight across her, her heavy frame sinking into the chair. "What a crap night. Twelve hour shift. Wasn't a good shift at all. There was a nasty car accident in the rain. The poor woman didn't make it."

Jen's mouth drops open. "You okay?"

Jacqueline rubs at her eyes and studies her hands. "Ah, I will be. Part of the job, I guess. As much as I love the job, you see a lot you wish you didn't. Poor woman lost control of her car, crashed into a tree. We think she was there for a while before anyone noticed, because that part of the street had been evacuated." She stretches back in the chair. "I don't envy the police who have to inform the family. That's the part I could not handle. When the family is there as it is unfolding, it's still tough, but everyone knows what's going on. But dropping a bombshell like that? Yeah, pass."

"Not sure how you keep doing it, Jac," Bruce says. "The car accidents, the drug overdoses, the pain and injuries. Seeing families during their hardest moments."

"Yeah, but there's a lot of good moments, too. You just have to focus on them." Jacqueline has a double chin when she speaks, her round face with flabby cheeks a contrast to Bruce's narrow, bony face. "We speak to people regularly, but you just have to try to not let it get on top of you."

Bruce nods. He feels Jen's hand move over his, her fingers snaking through his. "I guess we should wake Sally, pick up Tess, and go look at the house," Bruce decides. His eyes draw narrow and he flexes his jaw.

Jacqueline stretches before she sits up straight. "Let Sally sleep. I'd prefer to not sleep just yet, anyway. I'll have a nap after lunch, if you can be back by then, it'll be fine. Oh, just take my car, keys are by the door."

Bruce nods and leaves without another word. Jacqueline watches him leave and rolls her eyes at Jen.

Jen smiles. "Thanks, Jacqueline. It's greatly appreciated. He's just a bit worried about what will be left."

"Nah, it's fine. He's always been the same. Stuck in a mind trap; can't break in or his world will collapse."

Jen laughs. "Here's hoping it's nothing that bad."

Bruce pulls Jacqueline's Barina over and parks across his driveway. He catches a glimpse of side fence on the corner block when he looks down at the automatic transmission to ensure it is in park. There is a tidemark a couple of feet up; leaves and grass and mud are stuck to the timber palings.

Jen's hand finds his leg and squeezes hard. Bruce looks over at Jen, seeing her mouth agape, and then beyond through the side window.

"Oh, shit." He leans down to get a better view. "Well, probably a good thing we didn't bring the girls."

He opens the car, twists from under the steering wheel in the small car and stands upright, before moving around to the footpath. Through the gap in the fence, he can see the tall eucalypt that once towered high in the backyard is missing from the skyline. It now lounges across his backyard and has ploughed into his house. The back wall has crumpled under the branches' weight. From where they stand, they can see the crushed kitchen table and, through a gaping hole, the lounge room is on display to the neighbourhood. Bruce pulls his wife closer to him; she sobs.

"I," Bruce starts, his voice cracking. "I should go have a closer look." His wife nods, pulling away. She leans against the side of the car, shaking her head, with her hand over her mouth.

The water is still deep in the gutters. He walks through the gate, his feet sinking into the lawn, mud squirting underfoot.

He stops in the centre of the yard.

It is a mess. The fence on the opposite side of the yard is crushed, its mouth agape and its pulled teeth showing rot along the gums. Beside where Bruce stands, the rose bush is bent double and has its branches wrapping themselves around the roots. Leaves are strewn across the yard toward the toothless grin of the fence.

His eyes clamped shut, he spins toward the garage. At the back, another tree from next door has smashed into his studio. He can see that the wall where his guitars hung is crumpled. The roof is peeled back, the side wall cracked down to the top of the door.

He sits down on the concrete, crossing his legs, feeling the wet creep through his pants. In the distance, a siren blares out, while birds chirp in the nearby trees that remain standing. He pulls out the cassette tape from his pocket and stares at his name scrawled on the side of it.

In the corner of the yard, hidden under debris, Chloe the cat lies motionless. Her body is cold; her wet fur is muddy and a patch of red stains her side.



## Jack

August 2007

The antique Volvo coughs, puttering along at thirty kilometres per hour, skating along the wet tarmac. It is cold beyond the shell of the car and the windows fog up. Jack's breathing is laboured; his throat is thick with a cold and his nose is blocked. He rubs his sleeve over the window beside him so he can see the side mirror.

The rain doesn't stop people honking their horns, demanding he drive faster. There is a time Jack remembers when people weren't so impatient. When a large Ford speeds past him, spraying the side of the Volvo with water, Jack leans on the horn. He repeats this process as each car zips past him until he turns onto Royal Street and pulls up close to the curb just around the corner. The rain eases to light showers. The left-side tyres touch the side wall of the gutter; the stream of rainwater skirts around the rubber on its path to the drain.

The side-gate opens to a small, single-storey weatherboard home. The fresh paint on the side of the house has blistered from poor preparation. He catches his breath, coughing hard as he stands in the yard. The grass inches past Jack's ankles. A collection of plastic toys lies drowned in the yard. Jack hurries out of the rain and lets himself in through the glass door and calls out. Tiny feet patter on the scuffed floorboards.

Ethan, his five-year-old great-grandson, appears and charges toward Jack. His short blond hair curls above his forehead. His baby teeth leave gaps in a happy smile that cuts into his flabby cheeks. He has garnered a layer of puppy fat, but the short boy is due for another growth spurt soon.

"Guess what, Poppa?" His words tumble as he rushes through the sentence in his high-pitched voice. "A cat came up out of the gutter on the road and it looked so wet and the water was getting bigger and bigger on the footpath and the wind went *wooooo* and there was a crack and part of the tree fell and it went *splash* into the water and Mummy said I couldn't go outside but I want to jump in the puddles can I, Poppa, can I?"

Jack chuckles, having watched his great-grandson's emotions change from excited, to mad, back to excited in quick succession. "I don't think it's a good idea for you to go outside, Ethan." A brief scowl spreads across Ethan's face. It reminds Jack of how Ethan's mother, Lou, used to react when she was told no. All he needs is the scream while storming off to his bedroom and he would have his mother's performance perfected. "Don't you think it's a nice day to watch a film?"

"A what?"

"A movie. Uhm, a DVD. Do you have a nice DVD you can watch? Or a book? What about that book I gave you?"

Ethan scowls again, and then grins contentedly when Jack ruffles his dry hair. He runs to his room to watch the rain through his window. Jack gathers a towel and places it where the rain pools on the windowsill next to the door.

Lou comes out of the bedroom. Her hair is a mess. The straws of blond hair are roughly pulled back into a ponytail. Her skin is drained of colour. Her shirt has a stain just below her left collarbone.

“What are you doing out in this weather, Poppa?” She leans over and kisses him on the cheek. “Wasn’t planning on going out or having visitors, so I’ve clearly not showered or anything. It’s a lazy day.” Baby Bridget gargles in the nook of her mother’s arm.

“Sorry, darl,” Jack says, shifting his eyes around the room. He clears his throat. “I was just out doing some errands, had to go to the chemist and all. You know? This and that. Ethan seems to be enjoying the wet weather. Must be the one of the few.”

Lou sets Bridget down on her bouncer. The baby giggles in reply, hands reaching for a wisp of light brown hair on her head. Jack slowly crouches in front of her. His white hair sticks wet to his wrinkled forehead. He draws a finger across it. Bridget’s eyes focuses on his movement before revealing a gummy smile.

“Oh, how Marjorie would have loved you,” he whispers to the baby. His wife refused to hand over Lou when she was a baby. Marjorie’s smile always grew larger when her children and grandchildren were present. Some days, he still calls out to her to see if she wants to go visit the little ones.

“What was that, Poppa?” Lou asks.

“Oh, nothing. How is everything over here? Everything okay?”

“Everything is fine, Poppa. You didn’t need to check up on me. I’m a big girl now. Coffee?”

Jack nods. “Yes, well, with Kane skipping out on you again, I didn’t think it would hurt.”

“He didn’t skip anything. He’s working. You know that.” Lou puts the kettle on.

“Yes, yes. Sorry for the poor choice of words. Is there anything I can do?” Jack clasps his hands and fidgets; his soft skin rolls between his fingers. From his perch at the breakfast bar he can see through to the mess of toys in the corner of the living room. Next to the couch, faint remnants of Ethan’s last artwork stain the wall.

Lou stirs the coffee into the cold milk while the kettle starts to bubble. Jack looks on approvingly. He has taught her that putting boiling water straight onto the instant would burn it.

“Well, I need to fix a bottle for Bridge.” She adds hot water to the coffee-coloured milk and stalls while she thinks of something for him to do. She pushes the mug towards Jack. “I guess while I do that, could you ring the SES or fire brigade for me? The storm water drain a

few doors up is blocked or something. You may not have seen it, but it's spilling water over the road. Think someone should keep an eye on it.”

“Sure, love. I’ll do it as soon as I’m finished this,” he says, raising his mug. “Now, bottle for Bridge? Doesn’t that get expensive?”

“Yes, Poppa, it gets expensive, but don’t worry. We can afford it. It’s just easier, okay? Mum’s already lectured me on this. Don’t need it from you, too. And I don’t need an ‘In my day . . .’ story, either.”

“Okay, okay.” Jack forces a laugh and takes a sheepish sip of his coffee. “But, you know, it doesn’t seem that long ago when you were born. But, then, I can remember when your father was born. I am getting on, huh?” His laugh turns into a cough, the guttural sounds coming from his chest.

“You okay, Poppa? That doesn't sound too healthy.”

“Yes, yes, I'm fine.” He clears his throat. “Just a cough, nothing I can't handle. Now, where’s your phone book?”

By mid-afternoon, there are few cars on the road. Driving with his lights on, Jack continues well below the speed limit. He's in no rush. The rain is particularly heavy now; his wipers swish back and forth with speed, flicking water into the path of the cars that speed by him. He slows to a stop at a red light and turns the stereo on. The crackling speakers slowly come to life, sounding like they are warming up. It is halfway through the news report. The weatherman announces that the rain will get worse before it clears up.

“Worse? Bloody impossible,” he muttered.

He pulls into his suburb. Some high-school students from his street are running through the rain from the bus stop. Their raincoats cover only their backpacks. Their shirts and trousers are drenched. Every few metres, they gleefully jump into a puddle in an attempt to splash at their friends.

“Could’ve taken Ethan on an outing. Fools are going to catch their death, though.” Jack taps his horn a few times and yells through the glass barrier of the window, “Get out the rain, you bloody idiots!”

One block from his house, the driver’s window performs its trick of slipping down an inch. Jack grimaces when the rain hits his face. He tries to push the window up, taking his eyes off the road. He does not see the water in the spoon drain sluicing across the road.

As the car hits the drain, vertical cascades spray up on each side. Jack hits the brake and the car slides in the river of water as it slows. Then the engine stops.

He turns the key and the engine coughs. He tries again, but the car's lungs are full. He sits there, a sitting duck, across the middle of the road. The world blurs while rain slides down his windows. He tries the car again, knowing it is not going to do any good.

He sits in the old vinyl bucket seat. Squinting through the side windows, he can see the lights of his local, The Queen Vic, at the end of the street. It is closer than his house, at least. The rugby league is on tonight, too. And he does need to eat dinner.

His hands still on the wheel, he turns abruptly at a tap at the window. The high-school kids peer through the driver's side window.

"You right, mister? Need a push?"

Jack nods in defeat and points to the side of the road ahead where there's a gap to park. He slips the car into neutral and steers the car as the schoolboys push the car forward.

The odd drop of rain works its way along the edges of The Queen Vic's coat of arms that is etched into the glass of the front windows; the water eases downward toward the timber sill. Jack leans against a chest-high table by the door in the front room of the pub. His car sits under a streetlight in front of a warehouse across the road from the pub. He gnashes his teeth, thinking of how much it may cost him to get repaired.

His concentration is broken when Esther rests her hand on his shoulder.

"You finished with your plate, Jack?" Her hand hovers just next to his plate, a smile across her pale lips. Tonight, she wears a tight top; Jack can't help notice how thin she looks.

"Why? You feeling a bit peckish?" He smiles and pushes the plate toward her. "You should try eating sometime, girl. It's good for you."

"Oh, shh, you sound like Uncle Jimmy," she laughs. Picking up the plate, she looks out the window. "Is this rain going to end anytime soon?"

"Probably not," Jack replies, matter-of-factly. "Perhaps, though, we can have a dance later?" He drops from his stool and dances a few tap steps, his glass of rum and coke balancing delicately and not spilling a drop.

"Perhaps," Esther laughs.

Jack puts his newspaper on the table now that it is empty. A small television is mounted in the corner of the room, footballers running across its screen. An occasional crackle of snow flickers across the ancient set. The commentators continue their half-time debriefing before the cameras cut to the players running out onto the field. Around the dimly lit room, many faces are staring at the game. It has been a close game so far, but he was confident that his Dragons could get up and win against the Broncos.

Jack is surprised by the odd collection of outfits in this pub. When he is out the back in The Hold, they often pass through, but the regulars are normally left alone. In this front room,

where the live music is normally performed, all sorts of strange clothes come out. At the pool table, a young lad is wearing a tab-collared shirt with a pair of jeans which are ripped, exposing hairy legs beneath. At the bar, a short skirt begins its hike up a girl's stockings. A cluster of girls sit at a table nearby in frilly frocks, presumably pumped up by petticoats under the silky dresses. One man stands by the bar in a denim jacket, brandishing more metal piercings in his face than most girls would own. Damp jackets are strewn over the backs of chairs while, in a bucket by the front door, a collection of umbrellas reside, some dark, some brightly coloured. Jack shakes his head with a smirk when two young drunks enter, showing more than most want to see; they wear bright white nurse's outfits with plunging necklines showing a tangle of chest hair. The short dresses barely cover the boys' briefs. They bow to the cheers before quickly exiting the pub. In his youth, Jack never would have thought of entering a pub dressed like half of these people. The girls, not that they were ever in the pub, would have been dressed more appropriately. Jack sighs. Times have changed.

Jack waves his hand at Esther, holds up his glass and mouths his request for another. She smiles and nods. There are some perks to being the elder of the pub. His eyes return to the football and he frowns. Every time he stops paying attention to the game, the Dragons score another try. At least they are winning.

A full rum and coke is placed on the table next to his near-empty glass. He squints in the dark to make out the familiar face.

"G'day Jack," the man greets him, sticking out his hand. "How you doin', ol' mate?"

Jack instantly recognises the voice, the gravelly tones that peak into a squawk at the end of each sentence. "Trace, young man. You look so different with your hair short. When did this happen?" He slowly reaches out and lightly shakes the man's hand; his hand is almost crushed by the grip of the tradesman.

Trace laughs. "New girl decided the long hair was no good." He looks up at the television screen. "Dragons are going all right. Reckon the Knights have any chance?"

Jack's eyes have returned to the window, looking out at his car. "With that Brian Smith in charge, I'd say they have as much chance as that of my car going again." He groans. Quickly, he retrieves a handkerchief from his pocket and coughs into it. His throat is thick and feels as though it is closing. "Give you a tip, Trace? If you get sick, drink rum. Cures all. First time I've had a cold as long as I can remember. I blame the fact I stopped drinking rum for a couple of months." He coughs brashly. "Back to them now, though."

Trace laughs. "Hanging around for the music, tonight?"

"No bloody way," he says, turning to the stage where a long-haired boy plays with a drum set. "They better not start until after my football has finished."

“They won't. They know the rules around here.” Trace pats Jack on the back, before pulling up a seat. “How you been, anyway? I've not been coming in as much.”

Jack continues to tap his feet on the bar of his stool. He runs his tongue along the back of his teeth, feeling where the dentures slot in between his few remaining teeth. “Life goes on, son. Life goes on.” He frowns again, squinting at the drowned car out on the street. “What you been doing with your life, Trace?”

Trace's eyes are fixed to the television, his hand wrapped around a beer. “Got a new job, recently. Doin' the plumbing for one of the major property developers in the area. Is nice to have regular work again.”

Jack tilts his head, looking up to the television and then back to Trace. “Son, that's what you do to get your drinking money. Not what you do with your life.”

Trace shrugs. “Well, it's about all I do.”

Jack chuckles. “My son was like you. Thought there was nothing to life but his job. He thinks different, now, but I guess kids will do that.”

Trace stares back blankly.

“Ha,” Jack proclaims with a laugh. “Don't worry, Trace. Not suggesting you rush out and have children. I'm not sure Jimmy could handle The Queen Vic being overrun with mini-Traces. Just don't forget about the important things, son.” Jack pats his chest to loosen the congestion in his lungs. “I've been around a while and, not saying I know everything, but I do know there are some things more important than money.”

Trace nods, solemnly. Jack is sure he is just listening to him to humour him.

“You know, son, when my Marjorie was taken, I felt lost.” Jack falls silent for a moment. Trace takes a sip from his beer, his eyes not leaving Jack's face. “It wasn't a good time, you know. I didn't know what to do.”

The room seems to quieten down, as if everyone is listening in to the old man. A crack sounds across the room when a new game is started on the pool tables.

Jack looks at his tablemate. Trace is looking straight at him and swallows hard. Jack shifts his gaze down to his own hands and rubs the wrinkles on them. He twists at his wedding band, then tries to clear his throat. “But, you're lucky. You've youth on your side. You've not had to go through that kind of loss, I hope. Just don't forget there are more important things than work and beer.”

Trace's jaw shifts from side to side as his teeth grind. He purses his lips together. “Yeah, Jack. There certainly are.” He stands, pats Jack on the shoulder. “Cheers for the chat, mate. I'm heading out the back to The Hold.”

Jack nods. The rain has started to get heavy again. He looks back at the dying minutes of the football. The Dragons have won convincingly.

“Whatcha leave the fuckin' table for?”

Jack turns toward the rough voice that complains. He doesn't recognise the man. He's not a regular.

“Told ya I was just taking a piss. Now we've a bunch of hippies sittin' there. Where we gonna sit?” The man stands with a hand on his waist, flecks of plaster splattered across his shorts and shirt, surveying the room. Near his front white pocket, a thick white smear slips across the cotton shirt. He lifts his beer to his mouth, the glass slipping under his thin moustache. His mate, also in dirty work clothes, gulps his beer. He wears a dark navy-blue cap over his head and his hair sprouts out at the sides.

Jack nods to the two.

“What you want, old man?” His sun-ravaged skin wrinkles beneath his cap when he speaks.

Jack smiles politely. “If you lose the hat, the attitude, and use that phone of yours to call me a cab, you're welcome to have my table. Thinking I might call it a night.”

The hat is ceremoniously removed and placed atop the table where Jack sits. The last drops sliding down his beer glass like the rain slides down the window beside him.

Jack sits his eighty-plus years on his front veranda. His chest feels heavy as he breathes in the night air. The taste of his last beer still lingers. The timber patio furniture creaks as he rocks. He watches the rain. Winter has drowned the city and turned its gardens into mud. The weatherman has promised this will be the last week of heavy rains for some time, but Jack is not so sure. The unrelenting barrage makes intersecting, concentric ripples in the puddles that spread across his front lawn. He remembers these patterns from long ago, when he fished every Sunday, regardless of the weather. At least spring is nearing. Perhaps he should dust off a fishing pole.

The moon rarely peeks through from behind the heavy clouds drifting swiftly overhead. The street is dark with something more than night. Jack studies his watch; the hands edge north. The neighbours to the left burn candles on their front patio and enjoy a nightcap.

Cars occasionally approach and pass slowly. Strips of the world are forced into and out of brightness and colour in their headlights. Jack listens to a siren in the distance, the clatter of a train moving through the suburb a hundred yards away, the muffled beats from the music in The Queen Vic around the corner. His feet dance on the timber boards and he starts the countdown to dawn.

Jack wakes suddenly after dozing on his veranda. The wind howls for attention and rain falls across his face. He tries to stand in a hurry, but falls back into the chair. For his second attempt,

he takes the arm of his chair, holding it until he reaches an upright position, and quickly retreats from the veranda.

Inside, he looks at his watch, tarnished by the years, and notes it is past one in the morning. He moves over to the couch and reclines. A small lamp sits on the table in the centre of the room. The light falls on the glass of a framed photograph of his late wife. "Could be a long night, Marjorie." His wife looks back from behind the glass, smile across her face, a 75<sup>th</sup> birthday balloon in hand.

In his mind, he can still hear the music she used to play. Her long fingers danced across the keys with such ease, the chords of classical music erupting from the dark piano. He remembers sitting on the stool beside her when they were much younger, her hands on his as she tried to teach him how to play. He always grew frustrated quickly and escaped to the opposite side of the room to watch her play instead. From where he sits now, he has seen his wife change through the years. In the early years, she was a beautiful, buxom young lady, with a thick mess of brown curls. As the years passed, her hair lost its curl and faded to grey, and her glasses grew thicker. In the final year, he watched as she struggled to play the most basic of tunes, her furrowed brow twisting her thinning face. Her fingers grew weak, bony, and eventually her frail body gave out. But he can still hear her music whenever he looks at the piano.

He stretches. A large branch falls in the backyard the same time his knee cracks. He leans over and turns off the lamp. The room turns the colour of sleep.

A thin thread of light cuts between the Venetian blinds and slowly works its way across the room. It stalks across the carpet unnoticed until it lands on Jack's nose. He awakes and squints in the light. It is the first sunlight he has seen in days.

He examines the room, inspecting for signs of water damage. The roof on the house appears to be more rust than iron these days. Jack is surprised the rain has stayed outside all winter and his living room is dry. He stumbles to his feet and heads to the bathroom.

He washes his hands and then splashes cold water to his face. In the mirror, he discovers white bristle covering his face. Globules of water hang from the growth. He begins to cough loudly and has to brace himself against the basin. He turns on the tap, ignoring the flecks of red in what swirls down the drain.

A cylinder spurts foam into his shaky hands and he gently puts the blade against his skin. When he finishes, he pats at his face with a towel. The towel catches on a small patch of hairs missed under his chin.

He dresses and puts on a new pair of joggers. He pulls tight the laces and contemplates a memorial for the car. Time for breakfast.



In the kitchen, the hum of the refrigerator breaks the quiet. Jack observes the fallen branch in his backyard from his seat at the kitchen table. He shovels another mouthful of his breakfast in his open mouth.

“Mm, what I’d do for some warm porridge.” He pushes the half-eaten bowl of cereal away and places the juice back in the fridge. On a pad next to the fridge, he jots down the need for porridge on his shopping list.

He picks up the old phone on the corner of the kitchen bench. He listens carefully to the tone. His finger slides around the dial; upon release, the dial springs back into place before ending with a click. In the receiver, Jack listens to the muted tones as it rings. There is no reply. He looks at a list of numbers hanging on the side of the fridge and dials Lou’s mobile.

“Morning, Poppa. How are you? Everything okay?”

“Yes, yes. Everything is fine. Though, I fear my car may not have survived the night. It got flooded on my way home yesterday. Made for a wet trip to the pub, that’s for sure.”

“That’s no good about your car. Should you have been going out? You’ve not been well.” There is a commotion in the background at Lou’s place. “Sorry, I can’t talk long, Poppa. The kids didn’t have a good night.”

“It’s okay, love. Just ringing to see how everyone is? I tried the house phone.”

“Yeah, everyone’s okay. A tree came down up the street, hit some powerlines, so we don’t have any power. And our cordless phones don’t work without power.”

Jack hears Ethan crying in the background. “Sure everything’s okay?”

“Everything is fine, Poppa. You don’t need to worry, I’ve got everything under control. But I have to go.”

Jack rubs his head, his fingernail combing his white hair, and hums in thought. “I’ll drop by later. I have to go see if my car is okay. It got flooded yesterday on the way home.”

“Yes, Poppa, you said that already. Must go. Love you.”

“Take care, darl.” The bells release a single ting when he fumbles the receiver back into the cradle.

Jack locks up the front door and carefully walks along the concrete path to his front fence. The water still pools in his yard, but has receded from the path. The front gate squeaks when he pushes it open. The council never put in the footpath that Jack was promised thirty-odd years earlier, so he makes his way gingerly to the road across the grass. The water squelches underfoot; he frowns when he sees the mud pushing up over the side of his new white shoes.

He walks by the local football ground. A giant gum lies across the field. Jack sighs when he sees the roots fan out into the air. He had proposed to Marjorie under that tree.

Near the swing set on which he had pushed his children and his grandchildren in years past, a group of boys skid across the shallows on bodyboards. They cheer each other on as they speed into the mud.

“Oi,” Jack yells to gain their attention. He scowls, anxious to prevent the football ground from being ripped up. A young boy looks up and grins in Jack's direction. He offers an enthusiastic and friendly wave.

Jack grunts and half-heartedly returns the wave. The boy is one of the youngsters who helped push his car.

The park had always been the centre of his life. His own parents' home had been just two blocks from here. Then, just before he and Marjorie married, he bought a house on this street and they lived by the park all their lives. The day he proposed, they had picnicked under the stand of gums, not that the trees offered much protection from the sun. He smiles, thinking back to how she looked that day. A long, soft-pink dress caught the sun and billowed out at the bottom to hide her legs. Her shoulders were covered by a frill of material, her slender arms tanning in the summer sun. Her brown hair was up in a collection of tight curls and her lips were a deep, rich red. Ants leisurely invaded their picnic rug and stole crumbs from their salad sandwiches. For fear of choosing the wrong ring, Jack twisted a ring out of daisies. On one knee, he slipped it on her finger, promising to buy her the ring she chose if she said yes to spending the rest of her life with him. A neighbouring family of picnic-goers cheered after watching her throw her arms around him.

The sounds of cheers at this park were not uncommon for him. There was many hours spent watching the football every weekend through the winter months. He played at the park himself, scoring a try in his final game. They said he had promise, that he could go far if he applied himself, and could maybe even play for Australia. But his Marjorie was pregnant and the excitement and pressure of becoming a father consumed him. The life of a boiler maker could pay the bills and support his family. Not for one minute did he regret taking a job at the BHP. Those days are long gone, his hands weak, wrinkled and shaky. Later, he brought his son to play football with him, then, as the boy grew up, he watched him play competitively. He hopes to watch Ethan play one day.

The screams and cheers of the boys fade as he turns the corner toward where his car sits. The 1972 Volvo 144 Sedan, the first car he ever bought new, no longer has the midnight blue shine it had when he drove it into his driveway for the first time. Marjorie came outside that afternoon, apron hanging from her neck, her face marked with flour from baking cupcakes for a birthday celebration the next day. She had cooed on cue when Jack had shown off the car, but Jack always knew she could not care less about the car. These days, the rear passenger door

featured a dint, the chrome bumpers had tarnished and rust had crept into the side panel. The car was a ghost of its former self.

He peers left, down the street toward The Queen Vic. The pub is closed up tight, its normally inviting double doors closed and its windows dark. A train sounds its horn in the distance and he sees it whip past through a gap next to his local.

Jack carefully steps down from the gutter before looking to the right. He leans on the boot of a nearby car to steady himself. His shoulders drop and he inhales sharply. The left wheels of his Volvo hide in the gutter with water midway up the rims; the right front wheel is missing, the front end balancing on a pile of bricks. The top of the car is littered with leaves. An empty garbage bin presses against the front bumper. The driver's window has been smashed in by some thug, the door left ajar.

Jack feels his heart race. Images of family holidays, drive-in movies, holding Marjorie's hand speed by, a lifetime of memories. He turns away and leans against the boot of the car behind him. Beads of water soak into his shirt and press against the small of his back.

He clears his throat and spits into the gutter. He stares at the swirl of red. His hand reaches across his chest, feeling it tighten, before looking back to his damaged car. The empty garbage bin rolls back before the wind catches it and slams it back against the car. The pain in his chest sharpens. He coughs again, violently, falls to his knees, and gasps for air. The wet asphalt soaks through his pants and the wind cuts through Jack's sweater. Tremors run through his hands. He lifts his left hand and looks at his wedding band; he twists the scuffed gold ring with his thumb.

"Well," Jack whispers to himself between gasps. "Perhaps we can have that last drive together, yet, Marjorie."

**Geoff**

*December 2007*

The city is bathed in gold as the sun sinks; clouds gather to the east, a summer storm rolling over the crashing waves. Blowflies zip around seeking a sliver of skin with a bead of sweat. The sticky heat of summer sneaks through the doors into the confines of the pub. The warmth roams free around the room, reaching around the bare shoulders of girls and through the sweat-stained pits of men, across the beer-soaked mats of the bar.

Geoff stares at the glasses in front of him, his hand wrapped tight around one as if protecting the last inch of beer it holds. It sits on a beer-stained coaster with The Queen Vic's coat of arms printed upon it. He stares at the spider-web pattern down the inside of the schooner. He blinks, deliberately slowly, the sweat trailing down from the base of his mop of tangled blond hair along his spine. According to the clock on his phone, he has been sitting at the table a little over two hours; according to the empties scattered across the table, he has been sitting there for three complete beers. He adds a fourth glass to the count.

Through the window to his side, long shadows stretch along the still-hot asphalt. The streetlights flicker to life. The city waits for the southerly to hit and for the summer storms to roll through. Over the June long weekend six months earlier, the winds and rains had wrought havoc on the city. The winds whipped up waves that helped beach a massive coal ship near the city's harbour mouth, pushing it deep into the sands to become the object of much ado. The rains flooded most of the city, washing fences away, causing cars to float off, and leaving homes and businesses awash with filth. Yet, now, rain would be a welcome relief from this heat.

Geoff abandons his table and pushes through the growing crowd. He avoids contact with the men in the room, but always brushes up close to the girls. Two bargirls playfully shove and bump into each other within the confines of the horseshoe-shaped bar. Geoff slouches and leans on the bar, his foot on the rail at the base. He can hear his mother's voice in his head: "You'll wind up the Hunchback of Newcastle." He shakes his head; she rarely criticised him, but now it is only her criticisms he can remember.

A short girl turns and smiles at Geoff. Her lips are coated in a rich red. Her hair is dyed light purple and there is a small stud in the left nostril. She wears a white blouse pulled tight around her ample bust.

She looks Geoff up and down. "Mind if I see some ID?"

Geoff stares back at her. He pulls it out of his wallet. "Pretty sure I'm old enough."

Her hands take the ID. Her round pale cheeks glow pink. "Twenty-four this week? Really? Take it as a compliment, please!" She takes another quick glance at the card. "So,

Geoff, what can I get you?" She passes the card back over the bar; Geoff notices the chipped polish on her nails.

Geoff smiles, tells her he is not offended, and gives her his order of a Tooheys New. He drums his hands on the bar runner, feeling the wet of spilled beers under his fingertips.

"So, your birthday next week, yes?"

Geoff nods.

"Don't worry about paying for this one, then. It's on me. I'll have no problems remembering you're of age when you come back to the bar as I just love your curls."

Geoff smirks, his lip upturned at one end, and pushes his hair out of his eyes. "Thanks, uh..."

"Naomi. My name is Naomi." She smiles shyly, dimples deep in her cheeks, and adjusts a collection of colourful beads that spill down from her neck across the top of her white blouse. She turns and sees someone waiting on the other side of the bar. "I'll talk to you later, perhaps?"

Geoff nods and watches her spin around behind the bar with a flick of purple hair. Still holding the five dollar note he was going to pay for the beer with, he turns to the pokies, pushing through a door beside the bar.

The room is almost empty; the tables scattered through the room are unoccupied, but two men sit by the bar. One is a tall, older man, with thinning grey hair and glasses perched on the tip of his nose and the other is much younger, of average height, with dark, short hair. Geoff recalls his musician friend, Bruce, once told him that this back room, The Hold, was where the older regulars went to embalm themselves. Seeing the two at the bar, nursing their beers silently, Geoff wonders what stage they are in. Outside, through the double glass doors opposite the bar, people stand around on the newly built deck. They sip their drinks, a few smoking, and breathe the humid air.

Geoff slips through into a small pokies room. Inside, there are only six machines. A couple huddles over the buttons of their shared machine in silence. The woman is homely, wearing a gaudy, free-flowing dress, while her partner runs his hands over his rotund stomach. On the machine next to Geoff's pick—*King of the Nile*—a guy leans back in his stool, balancing his drink on his lap, feet resting on the low bench on which the machines are all lined up. His large hands appear rough and hit the buttons. Geoff feeds his five-dollar note into his machine.

The "Indian Dreaming" machine next to him sings as the coins flick up over the screen; alarm bells ring to signify a free game feature. Geoff peers over discretely. The sprawled form next to him sits upright. "Yeah, 'bout time I had a win. Been playing for hours." His face is drawn, eyes wide with dark rings under them, a thick of stubble on his face. "Man, I'm stuffed."

Geoff nods and feigns interest. "Big night?" He hits the spin button and watches another twenty cents turn up nothing.

“Ha, something like that. Name's Mark.”

Mark is in his thirties. A light scar runs along the base of his jaw. His shirt is partly unbuttoned, revealing a white singlet underneath.

“Geoff.” He turns his head and nods, but does not extend a hand. Mark's hand looks dirty as though stained by grease or dirt. When he reaches for the button to start the feature, his shirt creeps up his arm and reveals a dark tattoo of barbed wire wrapping around his forearm; pale blue veins travel perpendicular to the wire.

“Yeah, I'm a shift worker. Came off a six-day week, yeah, went out last night and still haven't got home.” He picks up a tumbler of drink; Geoff assumes it is bourbon and Coke.

“What do you do?” Geoff, too, slouches back in his chair and puts his foot up next to the gaming machine. He takes a mouthful of beer.

“Fuck around with machines, yeah. Over at One Steel. You know, like, fixing them when they break and making sure everything runs smoothly. Pays pretty well with overtime.”

“Well, money is always nice. Can't say stacking shelves at Big W pays that well.” Geoff's hand reaches down between his legs and adjusts the crotch of his jeans. He takes another gulp. “Damn, beer's hitting the spot.”

“Ha, yeah, I've moved past the beer. Something stronger is always good. Don't get me wrong, got nothing to drink about. Just enjoy losing myself for the hell of it.” Mark stretches his arms out and leans back.

“Yeah, losing yourself is good.” Geoff's voice falls soft. “I'm just drinking to forget.”

“Fuck, man, took something last night. Such good shit. So wired.”

“Really? I've never really tried anything like that. Can't sleep as it is.” Geoff hits the spin button again. The machine breaks into song, but pays a mere dollar.

“Oh, you should. I just do it for the buzz. Not to stay awake. I was with some chick last night. She gave me something and we went at it. All night. Like rabbits.”

Geoff tries to ignore Mark when he continues. The homely woman and her partner at the machine at the end of the line scoops up their coins and leave.

“Can't say she was a particularly good sort, but damn she was dirty,” he sneers. “I don't fuck fat chicks; they fuck me.” He laughs at his own revelation. “Besides, it doesn't count if my mates don't know.” He downs the rest of his drink, swirls the glass around and watches the ice spin around the base. He upends the glass again and proceeds to crunch on the ice. Mark's machine is singing again: another fifteen free games are added to the tally and the money sails past two hundred dollars.

Geoff feels a hand on his shoulder and a wisp of purple hair flicks past his face. The sweet perfume sends a thrill through his body. Naomi reaches between the machines and picks up a couple of empty glasses. She looks back and smiles. “Having any luck, Geoff?”

Geoff shakes his head, lifts his glass and downs the rest of his beer. His right hand wraps around Naomi's, which holds the top of the stack of glasses, before his left hand adds his glass to the top of the pile. Her hand is cold and her fingers feel wet from beer. He looks into her pale blue eyes before releasing his grip on her top hand. She smiles again.

He spins in his chair and watches her move through the room collecting glasses. A free-flowing black skirt contrasts against the white blouse she wears. She is short and would barely reach Geoff's shoulders. She turns back to where he sits. He reaches behind his head and scratches, unsure of what to say. She leans past Mark and collects his empty glass.

Mark spins in his chair and faces Naomi. "So, babe, why you working tonight?"

Naomi laughs. "Working to keep you and everyone else here happy."

"How about you let me work to make you happy," he offers with a cheesy grin. "I'm sure I could do a few things that you would enjoy." He flicks his eyebrows up suggestively.

Naomi laughs again. "How very nice for you. But somebody has to pour your drinks." She turns to leave the room. She calls back over her shoulder. "Bye, Geoff."

"Things I'd do to her. Is it still paying for sex if you're just paying to replace the clothes you ripped off?" Mark laughs at his own joke.

Geoff scowls. He paws at the button on his machine.

"But, well, looks like I can't compete." Mark strains and digs into his pocket in his tight jeans for his wallet. "How you know her?"

With only two cents left in the machine, a free game feature finally spins up for Geoff. He swears under his breath that it always happens like that. "Huh? Oh, I don't. Just the bargirl that served me earlier. And, with that," he points to the feature, "I'm going to call it quits before I lose more money."

Mark laughs and pulls a fifty-dollar note from his wallet. "Mate, I can't be fucked getting up. Plus, I don't want to leave this machine while it's in the middle of the feature." He reaches up and rubs his eyes. "Do me a favour, yeah, and go get us a drink? Double bourbon and coke. And get yourself one. As I said, something stronger is always good. Then you can bugger off back to the front bar and get that purple-haired minx." He grins and thrusts the note into Geoff's hand. Easy work for a free drink.

The back bar is unattended. Geoff stands at the register, next to the two men. The younger of the two men looks at Geoff, his parted lips revealing a line of gapped teeth; his front upper tooth features a large chip. He nods solemnly and turns back to the bar.

"Know the last thing she said to me, Trace?" The taller man breaks the silence of the pair. Geoff looks over and notices his eyes are wet behind his glasses.

"Tell me again, Boss," Trace replies quietly.

“She looked at this deep red rose in the front garden, told me that the day before it was such a deep red it was almost black. Said, 'Amazing how beautiful things come from something so dark.’”

The pair return to silence. Geoff politely nods to Trace. He walks through to the front bar to order the drinks.

Geoff stretches out in his chair and places his right heel on top of the toe of his left shoe. Beside him is an oversized cigarette-vending machine; now that smoking is banned indoors, the machine looks out of place. The timber table rocks when he bumps it, his drink twirling in the glass. He closes his eyes, concentrating on his breathing, and contemplates how shallow his lungs feel when he inhales. Each breath becomes laboured. He hears a rumble of thunder outside and grits his teeth. A soft hiss escapes as he exhales through his clenched jaw. He opens his eyes, focuses on the stage, and pushes the memories of other rain-soaked nights to the back of his mind.

The crouched performer is still struggling with the cables when he spots Geoff from the stage. A large grin and sparkling eyes emerge from under his bowler hat. Geoff raises his glass to Bruce and nods hello. Bruce head-butts the microphone as he gets up. The stand collapses, doubled over at a loose hinge. Ducking low, he checks his balance before straightening up. He lifts the microphone up, only to have the stand double over again. He shrugs and leaves the stage.

Bruce thrusts one hand towards Geoff and pulls out a chair with the other. Calloused from their daily travels across the frets and strings, his fingers scratch against Geoff's soft hand.

“Geoff, how you doing, mate?” His grin creases the corners of his eyes.

“Well, I'm planning a big night. What time you start tonight?”

“Music won't start until a bit after nine. Tradition.” Bruce looks at his watch.

“Tradition? How so?”

“An old-timer, Jack, came here since he was a kid. He was the elder of the mob in this pub. The staff loved him, the regulars respected him. Funny old guy, always good for a yarn. But he always demanded music not start until after the football. Don't know why, since you couldn't hear the call anyway. But he had been coming here longer than anyone else, so he got his way.” Bruce pulls his hat down over his eyes. “Jack isn't with us anymore. But we stick to the rule, all year ‘round. Tradition, I figure.” He straightens his hat, pushes his chair back. “Back in a sec. You good?”

Geoff looks at his bourbon, which is still mostly full. He does not really need another. Bruce goes to the bar.



People keep filing in through the front doors. The younger ones stick in the main bar with the stage. Geoff is amused by the segregation of ages in the pub; it seems anyone over fifty is banished to the back room. His finger rounds the rim of his glass. He tilts back until his chair leans against the wall behind. The timber creaks. Dull lighting hides the stains on the floor and the faces of many of the patrons. Silhouettes lean close in the dark and strain to hear each other.

Geoff's phone starts to vibrate. He opens a text to read that Nill is running late. She and her new boyfriend will be there shortly. "Great, you had to be bringing him. Just don't tell me why you're running late." A man at the table next to him raises an eyebrow. Geoff glares back and the man shifts his gaze away. Geoff frowns and takes a gulp of his bourbon and coke. His free hand spins the phone on its back where it sits on the table. Bruce returns, his large, toothy grin still present. Geoff pushes a chair out with his foot from under the table; Bruce sits in it and places two beers on the table.

"Two drinks are better than one!" Bruce's eyes crease and the two of them laugh. "So, how you been, mate? You took this semester off uni, didn't you?"

Geoff pushes his now-finished bourbon around on the table, staring at the wet trails it leaves on the table. He lifts his eyes to Bruce. The musician has seen Geoff a few times in the past few months, mostly when drunk and emotional. "Yeah. I couldn't handle doing class. Hell, I still can't handle shit." Geoff clenches his jaw. "Starting again next year, maybe." He scratches his leg under the table. "I did finally get my full licence, though."

"Yeah? Congrats, mate! Can finally have a beer or two and drive home, huh?"

Geoff forces a laugh. "Yeah, it's made a life a lot easier. Not that I can drive often when I go out drinking."

"I'll give you advice?"

Geoff nods, reluctantly.

"Don't go driving with your arse."

Geoff tilts his head to the side and squints, thoroughly confused.

Bruce laughs and throws his head back. His laugh seems to bellow above the noise of the room. A few people turn and look. He takes a mouthful of beer and stands.

"Back when I was younger, out on the farm, some mates and me were being idiots. I tried driving through the back paddock with them in the backseat, after a few drinks, steering the car with my arse. Literally. It was all going well til I went to shift gears." He grimaces at the thought.

Geoff looks at him. "Yeah, I drive an auto. Care to elaborate?"

Bruce turns around and bends to present his rear to the table. "Had a bit of speed. Went to put it in first." He re-enacts trying to change gears with his right hand. "Found reverse

instead. Slaughtered my gear box.” He laughs again. “So, my tip for you: Don’t drive with your arse!”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” Geoff peers over to the bar and sees Naomi pouring beers. He smiles to himself.

Bruce kicks Geoff under the table. “So, Naomi’s nice, huh?”

“Oh, shut up.” Geoff blushes. He looks over to where Naomi is. He scrunches up his face before rubbing his eyes.

Bruce rests on the table, seeing the trouble in his friend’s eyes. “So, any other news, mate? Are you okay?”

Geoff looks back, picks up his beer with one hand while the other sinks below the table. “Not really. Old man is pissing me off. Nothing new there, though. He’s always on my fucking back, blaming me.” Geoff pauses. “It’s been six months, you know? I still can’t accept she’s gone.”

Bruce nods and his eyes are fixed on Geoff. “I know, mate. Losing a parent is tough, but it will get better.”

Geoff frowns before he bites his lip. “Um, I got asked to move out with a girl I know.”

“Oh really?” Bruce decides to follow the abrupt topic change. “Is she cute?”

“Yeah, dead-set gorgeous. Would love a chance with her.” Geoff’s voice trails off as he looks back over in the direction of the bar where Naomi is working.

Bruce laughs. “Okay, so, second and final piece of advice for the night.”

Geoff meets Bruce’s eyes, where he sees the dark reflection of his silhouette.

“Get a flatmate, or get a girl. Or get both. But don’t get one girl to fill both needs. It never ends well. I gotta go get ready.” Bruce pauses and sighs. “Friday night. Another night of covers.”

Geoff smiles and says farewell, shaking the singer’s hand once again. People retreat outside or leave for other pubs or home. Through the windows, the dark clouds are gathering overhead; they light up with a flash of lightning before thunder rumbles through the air.

On stage, Bruce strums his guitar and mumbles random words into the microphone. He announces to the crowd he will be performing until after midnight sometime. A few faux-moans, and a quiet cheer from up the back somewhere, and Bruce jumps straight into his first song. He stamps his foot down on a pedal at the same time he starts beating on his guitar’s face. He hits the pedal again, grinning as the room is filled with a looped beat, then starts to strum the chords to his first song.

“I know a few of you know this next song by the Pogues. So sing the chorus with me, yeah?” It's a song he performs regularly for the crowd here, changing up the lyrics from the original. A few louder cheers erupt from the regulars.

*I met my love in Hunter Street Mall,  
Dreamed a dream beyond the Steelworks' wall,  
I kissed my girl to the coal ship's call,  
Dirty old town.  
Dirty old town.*

All the regulars chime in to the chorus, chanting “dirty ol' town” in time with Bruce. Geoff taps his foot in time with the song, tapping a beat with his thumb and little finger against his knee. Someone slips past his table and a shirt laden with the stench of smoke spoils the memory of Naomi's perfume. With his spare hand, he pushes the shredded remains of a coaster about on the table.

A couple of girls, younger than Geoff, move out into an empty space just in front of the stage; they twirl around, twist and spin each other. Their male counterparts lean against their table, shaking their heads at their girlfriends' requests to join them. The boys laugh when an older woman moves to join their girlfriends on the dance floor.

The woman steps slowly into an empty space. Her loose-fitting blue dress is gathered at the waist with a red cloth belt. Each tight gathering of material at her waist ends in a billowed curl at her ankles, the material barely covering the fact her bare feet are lightly slipping over the carpet. As Bruce hits a belting note to start the guitar solo, she lifts her arms perpendicular to her body. Her dance partner appears. His face is covered in a grey beard that reaches down to where the top button of his navy blue overalls is undone. His eyes are wide open as he takes the woman's hand and spins her quickly before they break into a quickstep trot. With a flurry of spins and twirls, side-steps and weaves, the couple leave most open-mouthed in entertainment. The girls on the dance floor cheer. Bruce finishes the song to loud applause.

“Yeah, if only that was for me! How about these dancers, everyone?” Bruce releases the guitar and claps the dancers. Another rumble of thunder sounds and the rain begins to fall outside. “Some lovely weather we're in for, huh?”

“Oi, Bruce, if it storms all night, and we get stuck here, you know you're playing all night?” Someone shouts from one side of the stage.

Bruce steps back from the microphone and laughs, his teeth catching the stage lights. “That's okay. I'll play for you guys all night. Though, keep in mind, once I run out of songs you'd like, I'll be dipping into my Wiggles repertoire.” He starts strumming a few notes of *Hot Potato*.

Then there is trouble at the bar. A fist flies, glancing the cheek of its target, and the crowd clears the space around. Two men, whose eyes are locked, sneer at each other. They are of the same height, but the man on Geoff's left has a more solid build. Each man has one hand gripping the other's shirt and one hand wrapped around a beer. The crowd falls quiet. Bruce continues strumming along to the Wiggles' song, watching the two fighters and providing an abstract soundtrack.

With a nod, an unspoken agreement is reached: each man leans over and puts his beer on the edge of the bar. The moment both glasses touch the bar, another fist flies. The first punch misses before another finds its target in the soft flab of a stomach. They wrestle close in a flurry of movement. A few men pull apart the brawlers. One gets escorted to the back bar, but not before grabbing his beer from the bar, while the other remains, rubbing his chin.

"I heard this joke the other day," Bruce grins. "So, Paddy walks up to the vet and says 'What can I do? My fish has epilepsy.' The vet looks at the fish and replies: 'It looks calm enough to me.' Paddy stands with his arms folded, unimpressed. 'Hang on. I've not taken it out the bloody bowl yet!'" There are groans as Bruce's laugh echoes through the speakers. The tension in the room seems to lift and a wave of cool air spills through the doors as somebody enters the pub. Someone up the back yells out a request for some Skyhooks. Bruce complies and starts strumming the tune of *All My Friends Are Getting Married*. Geoff rolls his eyes as every guy over thirty starts singing along to the main chorus, waving their beers in accompaniment.

The crowd grows. In the darkness, people bump into each other and try not to spill their drinks. One man squeezes through the crowd with four beers above his head. His large hands weave fingers between the glasses and push them together. With each step he takes, drops of beer spill onto his head. Despite it having cooled down outside with the southerly breeze and rain, the pub holds the heat. The room fills with the sweet smell of sweat.

Geoff checks the time on his phone; Nill has still not arrived. He reaches high above his shoulder, stretching, and becomes aware of his own body odour. He quickly drops his arm and scratches his knee instead. The black denim of his jeans is well-worn and soft against his fingers.

He spies on the couples around the room. One girl about Geoff's age pulls her boyfriend's arms tightly around her. Another couple is sitting opposite each other at a table, drink quietly, feet occasionally reaching out to touch the other's feet. A man pats his hand against his partner's buttocks in time with the beat of Bruce's song.

On stage, Bruce stands well back from the microphone and has a breather between songs. He holds a half-empty, tepid beer in his hand. He nods and smiles at someone when they enter through the doors.

A middle-aged man calls out. "Play us some Bob, Bruce!"

Bruce steps back to the microphone, adjusts it with his free hand, and takes another sip of beer before answering. "Some Bob? Bob Marley? Bobby McFerrin? Bob Dylan?" His voice, lifting at the end of each name, now features a slight husk to it after belting out the big notes. He grins. "Maybe some Bob the Builder?" He bends down, places his beer on the stage, and strums the chords to Marley's *Three Little Birds*.

Geoff reaches down and slides his index finger beneath his sock; he grabs hold of the material and tries to pull the sock up. He listens to the lyrics of the song, one he used to listen to often as a child, and pulls at the sock with frustration.

*Don't worry about a thing,  
'Cause ev'ry little thing's gonna be all right!  
Rise up this mornin',  
Smiled with the risin' sun,  
Three little birds  
Pity by my doorstep  
Singin' sweet songs  
Of melodies pure and true . . .*

Geoff closes his eyes, squeezing them tight together. His furrowed brow is a pinch between his dark eyebrows. His curls of hair fall over his forehead. As the music continues, he can hear his mother singing along in his mind, her voice creating a perfect melody.

"Everything is going to be all right? If only . . ." Geoff examines his hands. The wet from the beer coats his fingertips like the icing sugar once did when he helped his mother bake cakes for the school fair. She sang along to songs as they came on the radio and often danced around the kitchen with her young son. He must have been six or seven, but he cannot remember exactly. He wishes he could have one last dance.

He feels soft lips kiss his cheek. He turns on his seat and sees Nill standing there, smiling. A drop of rain sprints from her fringe of brown hair, runs down her cheekbone and toward her pointed chin. She wipes it off.

"A bit jumpy, Geoff?" She wraps her arms around him and gives him a proper hug. Geoff's hand reaches around her waist onto the small of her back.

"You know how it is. How are you, Nill?" He slurs slightly. Geoff sees a guy standing behind her. He is Asian, shorter than Geoff; he seems to be marvelling at Bruce's loop pedal trick. He has looped a beat into the background of *Three Little Birds* and a growing harmony builds over the top of the guitar.

"I'm okay, you? Been worried about you. I have not seen you much lately, since, you know . . ." Nill's normally soft voice strains above the music and trails off. She wipes her finger over her eyes.

"Look at you," Geoff tries to laugh. "I'm doing okay. Of course I'm doing okay." He holds up his almost finished beer.

Nill attempts a smile, then wraps her arms around him again in a tighter hug. It is slightly awkward, Geoff still seated on the stool, Nill's warm breath against his neck, and the guy who came with her now standing behind Nill and frowning. The guy coughs.

Nill breaks the embrace and steps back. "So, uh, Geoff, this is Sam."

Geoff shakes Sam's hand. "Glad you could make it, Sam."

"Yeah, me too. This guy is awesome."

Out of the corner of his eye, Geoff notices Nill watching him. Her feet twist on the floor with anticipation. She waits to see if Geoff approves. He forces a smile. "So, you're the guy that's got Nill so happy, huh?" He shouldn't have said that. His stomach churns at the thought of them being a happy couple.

Sam turns back toward Geoff, smiles and rubs his chin. His front teeth are crooked. "I guess so, if that's what she's been saying. Nill says you know this guy?" He jerks his head in the direction of the stage.

"Yeah, met at a gig a few years back. Top guy."

"That loop thing he's doing is awesome, man. I play a bit of guitar, too. Do you play?"

Geoff shakes his head.

Nill pulls her wallet out of her bag and throws the bag in Geoff's lap. "You boys seem to be getting on just fine, so I'm going to the bar."

"No, no." Sam steps around behind Nill, pulling his wallet out. "I'll get the drinks. What would you like? Wine?"

Nill rolls her right shoulder; Geoff catches a glimpse of the red bra beneath the loose black cotton of her singlet top. She screws her nose up at the mention of wine. "Oh, hell no. Just a beer will do me."

Sam nods and leans in to kiss her. She shies away slightly. He turns to Geoff. "What would you like, man? Another of those?"

"No, no. I'll get my own drinks."

"Nah, man. I work my arse off through the week, I can buy a few drinks. What will you have?" Sam makes a point of pulling out a fifty-dollar note from his wallet with his stubby fingers.

Geoff blushes slightly. He has only twenty dollars left in his own wallet. "Just a beer. Anything but VB." He takes another gulp from his beer when Sam moves away.

“You okay, Geoff?” She squeezes past him to take the stool against the wall. She slides up onto the seat and leans back against the chipped plaster.

“Yeah, think so.” Geoff hands her handbag back to her after she gets adjusted. He notices her feet dangle shy of the footrest. Her skirt has crept a few inches above her knee; his eyes move up to find Nill looking at him.

“I’ve missed you.” Her pale blue eyes continue peering straight through him.

He runs his hand across his face, feeling a few days' growth rough under his fingers, and looks through the window to the side of the table instead of into those blue eyes. In the lights surrounding the pub, it appears the rain is still stomping against the path. “I’ve just been busy. Been working a bit.”

Nill hums. “Well, keeping busy would be good for you, I guess.”

Geoff nods. “Oh, hey. It’s time for me to think about New Years, I guess. What are you doing this year? I’d love to be with you at midnight.” Geoff looks around the room. “Hell, I’d love to be with you at midnight every night.”

Nill smiles. “I’ve no idea, Geoff. But I’d guess I’ll be doing something with Sam. You can join us if you like?”

Geoff shakes his head and has another drink.

“How is your dad doing? Can’t be an easy time for him right now?”

Geoff ignores the question and wonders where his beer is. “What about you? What have you been doing?” His voice cracks slightly when he hesitates, unsure if he really wants to know what she has been doing.

“Just finished uni exams. Thankfully, they’re over. Not sure how I went, but I’m on semester break now.” She plays with the small, black handbag in her lap. She unzips it, checks her phone for messages or calls, then zips it back up. She begins to twirl a twist of brown hair beside her left ear. “It’s almost Christmas already.” She pauses. “Want some company if you visit the grave before Christmas?”

“Nill, not tonight.” Geoff swirls the schooner in his hand before emptying it. “I don’t want to think about it tonight, okay?”

Her hand pats his arm. Geoff takes hold of it, looking down at her fingers. He bites his bottom lip. He does not recall much from the days surrounding the funeral; it all happened so fast. But he remembers Nill being there each night, her fingers woven between his while they sat on the couch. He was lost then. He still is.

Three beers collide with the surface of the table. “The light is mine and I got you two Coopers Pales. Hope that’s okay.”

Nill reaches across Geoff to take her drink. He notices that she is not wearing any perfume tonight. He takes the remaining glass and takes a sip: the fruity flavours come with a crisp bite on his tongue. He nods a thank you to Sam; Sam grins in return.

Sam slides past some people in front of the table and stands against the wall next to Nill. In one hand he holds his beer, while his other hand reaches out to touch Nill's shoulder. He turns and leans over toward her.

Geoff tunes out while they chat. Bruce has begun to sing an original song, but the lyric from earlier continues to haunt him. *'Cause ev'ry little thing's gonna be all right.* His cheeks tinge red, remembering the embarrassment of when his mother would sing along to songs when they were out in public. He then smiles, remembering that time last year when, after a few drinks over dinner, he chimed in on the drive home from the restaurant. He can almost hear his mother's voice joining in. *Don't worry about a thing, oh no! 'Cause ev'ry little thing's gonna be all right!*

He hears his name mentioned and returns to reality. His mop of hair flies about as he shakes his head. "Huh? Sorry, was out of it."

Sam laughs, an almost-cackle erupts from between his lips. "It's all good, man. Was just saying that Nill says you're into art and stuff. What do you draw?"

Geoff looks at his fingertips, thinking back to when he last drew something. "I haven't really done anything for a while. But normally just sketches. I used to draw a comic, too. But haven't done it for a while."

Nill excuses herself to the bathroom and proceeds to squeeze past Geoff. She rests her hands on his sides and presses between him and the wall.

"That's a shame, man." Sam twists his lips as he nods, understanding.

"I guess. Didn't like what I was drawing, it was too dark, so I decided to have a break." Geoff scrunches up half his face, his right cheek lifting and causing his eye to close partly. "So, what you do?"

"Oh, a lot of high-tech stuff with regards to networking and network security. Not stuff you want to hear about." Sam leans his head in either direction, waiting for the crack. "Pays well, though. You get out to live gigs often?"

Geoff grunts. He coughs to clear his throat. "Not really. I normally work nights." He picks up his glass. The cold condensation slips between the creases of his hand. His foot slips off the stool and he lurches forward before correcting himself.

"Had a bit already, huh?" Sam pulls around a stool so he can see the stage while sitting at the table.

"Not really your concern, is it?" Geoff drops the glass onto the table with a slight thud.



“Whoa, man. Just small talk. Drink as much as you like.” Sam forces a laugh. He wears a black button-through shirt over a t-shirt with a surf brand logo splattered across the front. His head twists in different directions; he turns to the floor, the ceiling, then from person to person in the room. “Man, always loved this place. Used to come here with mates when we first got out of high school. We don’t go out as much these days: town’s too expensive.”

Geoff feigns interest. “I don’t like town. Too many people.” He straightens his leg before reaching for the ground. “Oi, I’m going to drain the main vein, yeah? Tell Nill I’ll be back.”

The stool tips backwards and precariously balances before tipping upright again. Geoff heads to the toilets. On his way past, he glances at two girls playing pool. One bends over to play her shot and her short shorts rise up. Geoff admires the view before slipping through the door into the gents’.

The heady stink of piss and disinfectant burns his nose while he moves past the urinals and makes his way inside one of the two cubicles. He turns and carefully locks the door, lifts the seat with his foot, then unzips. The door to the gents’ opens as someone else enters and moves to a urinal and starts whistling *Three Little Birds*.

“Oh, fuck off.” Geoff mutters. “Every little thing is not going to be all right.”

His first attempt overshoots the mark and hits the tiled floor, mixing with the water that pools from a leak in the roof above. He sways and attempts to correct his aim. Finally, he hears the splash in the bowl.

The phone in his pocket rings, the vibration tight against his leg, and causes him to stall midstream. He pulls the phone out of his pocket, but continues emptying his bladder. The screen announces his father. He fumbles with the phone until he manages to hit the button on the side that flips it open. The ring tone stops mid-chorus.

“Yeah, what you want?”

“And hello to you, too. How you gettin’ home? I’ve, ah . . .” Malcolm’s voice softens.

“You’ve been on the piss. Congratulations. Must be a day that ends in ‘Y’, huh?” Geoff uses his free hand to shake, adjust, then do up his zipper.

“Like you can talk.”

“How often do I go get pissed? It’s a daily fuckin’ occurrence with you! I just wanted one night out to blow off some steam.”

“Don’t you bloody start. You’ve got no idea what it’s like.”

“I’ve no idea what it’s like? I loved her, too, you know . . .”

“Then why weren’t you with her? Whenever she went off, you always calmed her down. You always went with her when she—”

“It wasn’t my fault, you know? I wasn’t the one who drove her out the house, so fuck you.”

“Piss off you ungrateful so—” Geoff cuts him off by smashing the phone into the side cubicle wall. He hears the phone handset crack and feels it bend backwards. He grits his teeth and hears an awkward cough and the shuffling of feet from outside. He looks at the phone in his hand—the screen and surrounding plastic cracked, the lights off—and leans back against the cubicle wall. He hears the bathroom door open and close.

Geoff sighs. He lifts his foot and places his shoe on the rim of the toilet. His hand feels warm; he notices a small cut. The rain drums down on the tin roof. The gents’ feels like an outhouse in the middle of a paddock. The song lyric keeps working through the haze in his head. *Don’t worry about a thing, oh no*. He tilts his head forward before pushing it back, hard, in an attempt to dislodge the song. The chatter outside in the pub drowns in the sound of the rain.

Geoff staggers out of the cubicle and works his way to the basins. He stuffs the broken remains of his phone into his pocket. His feet slip on the wet tile floor, but he steadies himself.

The tap sticks before the water gushes from the faucet. The icy cold water rushes over his hands. The soap dispenser to the side has a pool of pink liquid underneath it; he presses the button, but there is none left in the machine. His right hand reaches up to steady himself and presses against the mirror. Widening his stance, he rubs his hands under the water once again. The reflection in the mirror shows a small, smear of blood through his unkempt hair. A drop of blood hangs from the bottom of his hand before vanishing with the running water down the sink.

Bruce’s muffled voice comes from the stage speakers into the bathroom. “I’m going to break for ten. Hope you’re all having a great night.”

The stage is brightly lit with red, blue, and green spotlights. The rest of the room is dim. An emergency exit hangs from the ceiling in the corner of the room furthest from the stage; a green glow flickers as the white running man shimmers in and out of view.

Geoff’s eyes hurt. His cheeks are flush and a drip of sweat runs down his cheek.

“I’ll be back, yeah? It’s hot and we need more drinks. What we want? I’ll get ‘em.” Geoff stands off his stool and chews his lip while awaiting an answer.

Sam looks at him. “Nah, man, I’ll get the drinks. Your money’s no good here. Besides, don’t think you’ll get served, and we can’t go without drinks, can we?”

Geoff clenches his jaw. He glances over at Nill, who offers a smile and a quick nod, and he shrugs. “Yeah, whatever. Stretching my legs, though.” He leaves the table and makes his way to the back of the room.

The back wall of the pub is covered in posters for upcoming performers in the pub. A fan mounted in the corner blows cool air over Geoff. He rubs his face. A wedge of light from the bathroom spills into the main room along with a pungent smell; the door creeps shut. In the darkness, Geoff cringes when he notices an older woman slip her hand down towards her partner's pants before whispering something in his ear and giggling. The woman, easily in her forties with wrinkling leather skin and straight dyed brown hair, kisses the man on his clean-shaven cheek and runs her other hand through his thinning hair. They quickly check if anyone is watching and retreat towards the bathroom.

He looks over the abandoned pool table toward the bar and catches Naomi's eye as she pours a beer. Straightening up and trying his hardest not to waver, he raises his hand and waves. She smiles at him, her cheeks tinged pink. The clang of the metallic slops tray being tapped with the glass rings out while she tries to get the head of the beer to settle. Geoff pushes his way through the thick crowd back to his table.

Sam is frowning. His lips part, but Geoff ignores the words. Geoff watches Sam's two exposed front teeth reflect the colours of the stage lights.

He grabs the glass of beer and hurriedly lifts it to his lips. When it is slapped back onto the table, the beer splashes over the side of the glass. Geoff picks up the glass and licks it. Nill twists the rings on her fingers, trying to watch the stage whilst watching Geoff out the corner of her eye. Sam leans to whisper something to Nill and leaves the table.

The noise in the room washes over him. The conversations blur into a drone. The doors open and the rain hitting the footpath adds a drumbeat. Bruce's songs are mere elevator music for Geoff now. A schooner is dropped behind the bar and explodes into hundreds of fragments of glass. The sudden noise snaps Geoff's focus back to the stage.

"Well folks, this is going to be my last song. Travel home safe in the rain." Bruce runs the back of his hand across his forehead and wipes the sweat onto his pants. Someone yells a request for a Matchbox 20 song.

"Is that you again, Ray? Bugger off home!" Bruce grins in the direction of the voice. "Fine, fine. It's been quite a while since I've played it. Be prepared to be underwhelmed. But I guess it's better to be somehow whelmed than not at all."

He tweaks the tuning on the guitar and launches into the song. He pretends to forget the words to the first verse, making them up as he goes.

*It's pourin' down outside, hand me my raincoat.*

*I'm a tad concerned about watching my car float.*

*The world's gonna end, yep, it's just that wet.*

*Oh, I wanna sleep when it's raining;*

*But I'm playin' a gig  
So I can't be complainin'.*

The crowd cheers at the made-up lyrics. Geoff tenses up listening to the words. His hand reaches out involuntarily and lands in Nill's lap. The palm of his hand is cold, clammy, against the warmth of her bare thigh, her dress having risen slightly above the knee while sitting. His hand starts to venture a little higher and he squeezes her leg a little firmer.

Nill grabs his hand and removes it, scowling in his direction. She continues to hold his hand in hers. "You sure you're okay, Geoff?"

"Yeah, yeah. You sound like my mother sometimes."

"Think it's time we left, don't you, babe?" Sam stands tall next to the table.

"Sam, I—"

"No, we're leaving. Before I say something I don't want to."

Geoff twists in his seat to find Sam glaring at him, his teeth bared. "What? What the fuck you think you can say that's going to offend me? Got something to say, just say it." Geoff stands and edges closer to Sam. He can feel Sam's warm breath on his face.

Sam pushes Geoff back, then grabs his shoulders and forces him back onto his seat. "Just back off, man. I don't want to beat the crap out of a drunk, but I will. Keep your hands to yourself next time. It's pathetic." He turns and walks off.

Nill reaches for her bag. She moves around the table as Sam walks to the door. She takes Geoff's hand, looks at him in the eye. "I best go, okay. I'll ring you tomorrow? In the afternoon." She tries to smile.

Geoff shakes off her hand. He grabs the glass of beer and downs a large gulp. He swallows hard, slams his glass back on the table, and looks at her. "Just go. I don't care. Go fuck him and just leave me like they all do."

"Geoff, that's not fair. And you know it."

"Just go, okay? He's waiting. Just fuck off." He stands, belches, snatches his beer from the table, and heads for the back room.

The two men are still perched like vultures by the bar. Their feet tucked up under their stools, one fidgets with his empty glass while the other is hunched over his cupped hands. He flicks a match against the side of the box in his left hand. He gazes into the flame and lets the match burn down to his fingertips. He blows gently, puts the match with a collection of other burnt stubs in an empty glass on the bar, and draws another from the box.

Geoff ignores the faint smell of burnt matches that filters through the room. He pushes through the double glass doors that open out onto the smokers' area. The timber boards of the deck are slightly below the top of the step; he stumbles as he misjudges the gap.

The rain has eased and the air has a crisp clean smell. The puddles of water on the grass just beyond the deck are creating a faint stench of mud that sneaks up into Geoff's nose. The people before him, meanwhile, with their hovering cloud of smoke, have filled the area with a bittersweet aroma. Geoff takes another gulp from the beer.

He stumbles forward and asks a few people for a smoke. One finally obliges, laughing, and lights it for him. Geoff sticks the cigarette in his mouth and draws back deep. He coughs hard, almost retching. He balances on the edge of the top step and glares at the rain coming down.

"Piss off you fucking rain!" He screams up at the clouds. The crowd of smokers and drinkers behind him fall silent. "Just piss off!" He swings his arm back sharply, glass in hand, and accidentally bumps someone.

"Hey, man, watch it," the voice from behind him shouts. Geoff turns, carefully checking his footing, until he is facing him. He sways while he looks at the guy.

The man—tall, spindly, and with cropped brown curls—is wiping beer from his shirt with a free hand. A woman next to him tugs gently at it. "Just leave it, Matt."

"What the fuck you gonna do about it, huh? I barely touched you." Geoff's scowls at him, his teeth bared, and staggers towards him until their faces are inches apart.

Matt pushes him back. "Just back off, man. Okay? I don't want no trouble."

"Yeah, well, that's too bad. 'Cause I do. Fuck, I just wanna feel somethin'." Geoff takes a slow, round swing, glass still in his other hand, and misses the man by a few inches. He bends double trying to find his balance.

The man responds in kind and throws a sucker punch into Geoff's stomach with his right hand. Geoff grunts.

The light catches a ring on the man's hand as it moves quickly again. A closed fist connects with Geoff's cheek. There is a horrible crack.

The punch sends Geoff spinning. He falls down the two steps onto the wet grass with a thud. He rolls over, covered in mud, and feels the blood oozing from the gash on his cheek.

"Feel that, bitch." The man stands on the edge of the deck and takes a victory sip from his beer.

Geoff laughs and stands up. He sees his now-empty schooner glass and picks it up. He walks toward the back of the yard, the rain starting again. He collapses against a dumpster. Breathing deep, he runs his hand over his cheek, feeling the warmth seep between his fingertips. He pulls his hand back, seeing the blood, and drops the schooner. The tinkle of glass rolling against the concrete reverberates and his head becomes light.

Beyond the fence, a train creeps along the tracks. The grind of the steel wheels against the wet tracks harmonises with the hum of the engine. The crackles of raindrops on the electric

wires overhead match the beat of the wheels on the tracks. The driver sounds the horn, a loud, throaty call into the night, as the train approaches Newcastle Station.

People stand on the deck of the smokers' area, talking softly. A few point in Geoff's direction; they sip at their drinks, suck on their smokes, and laugh like nothing could be wrong.

Geoff opens his eyes. His cheek throbs, the gash burning despite the alcohol in his system. He moans as the pungent stench hits him. Water drips from the corner of the rusted dumpster onto his already wet face.

"Why'd you have to let it fuckin' rain this weekend?" His head falls to the side and he looks at the timber palings of the fence. He turns and looks over at the crowd.

A newly arrived group stands to one side of the deck, in a small circle, under the tin roof awning. They pass a cigar around and chat.

Geoff closes his eyes again. He opens his mouth to breathe deep and the rain strikes the back of his throat. Coughing and spluttering, he forces himself to sit up. A wet leaf falls from above and lands on his leg. His fingers tremble as he picks it off his pants and tosses it to the side. A figure steps down from the deck. Geoff closes his eyes in the hope that the man will go away.

"Hey mate, big night, huh?"

Geoff opens his eyes and looks up.

Bruce's large brown eyes look down at him. "Saw that your friends left. And Naomi, the bar girl, just mentioned you, said she didn't see you leave, thought I'd come look to see if you were around, offer you a ride home. Looks like you got yourself in a bit of trouble, though."

Geoff grunts. "Could say that."

Bruce stands with his hands on his hips, laughing and looking back over to where everyone watches. "C'mon, mate. Let's get you home."

Geoff's head is thick with booze. He rubs his forehead, pushes back his long fringe from his eyes, and attempts to stand. The world spins. His cheek throbs. He gives up and sits back down. "I'll just wait here a bit and just get a cab home."

"Nah, mate." Bruce bends down and helps Geoff to his feet. "It's not too far out my way and it's the least I can do."

"Uh, I can't."

"Don't even think about it, you've got a ride with me. That said, I think we'll go through the side gate over there, don't think we'll go through the main bar. " He pauses and winks at him. "Naomi's a bit sweet on you. You'll have to come back when you clean yourself up."

Geoff pats his pockets, feeling for his wallet and keys. The denim of his jeans clings to his legs as he stumbles across the wet grass towards the gate, guided by Bruce.

The Sydney train trundles past, its mournful hum echoing in its wake. The carriages follow their path along the steel tracks, this time heading in the direction of Sydney. The passengers' faces appear small in the yellow light through the windows. A small cheer comes from a few revellers when the gate creaks open and Geoff leaves the world of The Queen Vic.

The passenger-side door of the car creaks when Bruce pushes it shut. It closes with a thud, shaking the car, and Geoff's ears pop. The world is blurry. He groans and his head rolls around.

The driver's side door opens. The car rocks when Bruce jumps in and pulls his door closed. He reaches over to Geoff and hands him a bottle of water. "Drink this, mate. Might help, come tomorrow." He reaches into his pocket to retrieve his car keys. The engine splutters before revving hard.

Geoff rests his head against the window, holds the bottle of cold water against his swelling cheek, and closes his eyes. "Your dad's place, mate?" The gears grind. "Sorry, new car; still finding out her sweet spots. This is my second car in a year. Last one was screwed by the floods."

"Yeah. In Lambton." Geoff moans and runs his fingers over the centre dash, looking for the heater controls. "Hope you don't mind. Freezing." He unscrews the cap and sculls half the bottle of water.

"She's right, mate." The car lurches forward, swinging in a wide arc on the road, and then heads in the direction of Lambton.

The car rattles over the railway tracks. Geoff closes his eyes. It was raining that night in June, too. The past always comes back in his dreams.

The car shook when it moved across the railway lines at the Adamstown gates. Geoff's mobile rattled and jumped in the cup holder. The car bounced over the last bump and rode down onto the road, spraying water from under its wheels as he drove through a puddle. The headlights sliced the darkness, but the rain made seeing anything difficult.

The car slid up to the side of the road. The water in the gutter sprayed the footpath. The car came to a stop. Geoff reached for his phone to ring his mother again. The symbol for a new text message sat in the top corner of the screen.

He opened the new message, reading it as a whisper to himself. "I'm okay. Going to sit out the rain. Go home and look after yourself. Love, Mum."

Out of habit, he deleted the message before exiting back to the main screen.

Geoff smiled and put the phone back in the drink holder. He indicated, checked his mirrors, and pulled back out onto the road in the rain. It was approaching dinner time.

Approaching Bridges Road, he came to a stop again. The traffic lights were not working. Geoff noticed the fallen fence of a nearby house. He checked both ways and slowly edged through the intersection once it was clear.

The houses either side of the road were dark. Ahead, Geoff saw the flash of red and blue lights. If the weather had not been so bad, he might have paused to investigate, but he focused on the road ahead. Paramedics rushed from the back of their ambulance, kits in hand. The fire truck blocked the view of a car that had crashed into a tree. The water from the stormwater drain had breached its banks and spilled out over the road. The car was assaulted by the torrents of water. Geoff followed the directions of the emergency crew and continued driving past slowly. His face, bathed in red and blue when he passed the emergency vehicles, was fixed on the centre line.

Bruce rests his head against his hand, his elbow against the windowsill. The traffic lights change from a red blur to a crisp green circle with the swish of the windscreen wipers. He presses his foot down on the pedal a little too quickly and the tires struggle to gain traction. The car jumps and then moves smoothly through the intersection.

“Where are we?” Geoff looks through the windows.

“Just at Darby Street, mate. Prefer this way; can do seventy through here.” His left hand shifts gears as the car gains speed. “I ‘spose I could’ve got you a kebab, but I don’t think it’d stay down long.”

Geoff moans. “Fuck food. I need a hot shower.”

“Don’t have one of those in here, sorry.” He indicates and moves the car into the left-hand lane.

Geoff tries to laugh, but instead grimaces. His cheek continues to throb. He opens the bottle of water in his lap and finishes it. He drops it onto the floor of the car. He sighs loudly. “I still don’t know why it happened.” He pushes his left shoe off with his right foot and then repeats the process with his right shoe and his left foot.

“Hm?” Bruce shifts gears again. He turns to Geoff and sees he has dozed off again.

Geoff kicked his shoes off on the balcony and opened the door. He walked down the hall. There was a slight tear in the wallpaper where he stopped. He looked through the door into the lounge and saw his father seated in his recliner. The television was on; people standing on a sunny beach offer low bank fees during an advertisement for the Greater Building Society.

Malcolm turned in his chair. “They were just saying on the news the ship on Nobby’s Beach will be here for a while.” He turned back to the television.

Geoff grated his teeth. “Mum’s out in the rain somewhere. I got a text from her.”



Malcolm grunted. He scratched at his stomach, pushed the front of the recliner in, and then walked to the kitchen. Geoff followed.

A hiss escaped when he sat on a kitchen chair. The yellow vinyl pulled apart at the seams.

Malcolm looked at him in the chair, his face blank. "Want soup for dinner? I'm going to have soup for dinner." He never was one for cooking.

"Dad? When you going to stop this?"

"I'll assume I'm eating soup alone." He opened the pantry and looked through the cans.

"Not even trying?"

"Leave it. It's none of your business, Geoff."

"Sorry, but it is." He pushed back his long, neat fringe of hair, and continued to run his hand down over a clean-shaven face. "I know things are stressful with you not getting work—"

"That's not what it's about, okay? Seriously, shut up. Nothing to do with you." Malcolm's voice remained soft.

"No, Dad. It's always me who has to chase after her and calm her down. It's always me cleaning the mess." Geoff moves in the chair. The vinyl squeaks underneath him.

Malcolm turned and glared at his son. His hand held a can of tomato soup. The paper label crinkled and shifted as his grip tightened. "Everything is fine. No bloody mess to clean up."

Geoff shook his head. "If you say so, Dad." He stood and walked to his bedroom at the back of the house. Falling back onto his bed, he heard the beeps of the microwave as Malcolm set it to heat his soup. He pulled out his wallet and phone from his pants, placed them onto his bedside table, and stretched. The doorbell chimed through the house. He ignored it, leaving it for his father to answer, sat up, and foraged through uni work spread out on his floor.

He picked up a textbook, looked at the cover, and threw it on his desk. The semester was over: he would not need it anymore.

Malcolm called out to Geoff. His voice bounced through the house.

"You want me, Dad, you know where I am." Geoff squeezed his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

Malcolm called again. This time, the voice was louder and strained. Almost broken. Geoff raised an eyebrow. The smell of tomato soup had started to waft through the house.

Geoff trudged to the front of the house. When he passed through the kitchen, he found smoke rising from the toaster. The sickly sweet smell of burnt toast was overbearing. He hit the eject button. Two black squares popped up.

He heard voices and a noise he could not discern. He stepped into the hallway, looked in the direction of the front door and saw his father on his knees. In the light of the front porch, two policemen stood, holding the door open, their hats in their hands.

“Geoff.”

Geoff stirs slightly, waking up from his nightmare. The glass of the car window is cold against the side of his head.

“Oi, Geoff, mate.”

“Almost home?” He reaches up and lightly feels his cheek. It is sore to touch.

“Yeah, mate. We’ve just gone past Turton Road where Marathon is. I know you’re in Lambton, but where to from here?”

Geoff mumbles some directions. He cannot think of street names, so relates the directions using local pubs as landmarks. Bruce nods, understanding, and twists his hands on the steering wheel, producing a rubbery squeak.

Bruce coughs. “So, you spend a bit of time in the locals? There’s certainly plenty in the area.”

Geoff nods. “Fuck oath. Can walk in any direction and get me a beer.” The lights of houses and businesses dance amongst the raindrops on the window.

“Was a time that’d sound great to me. I’m not so young anymore.” The car slows and he pulls on the steering wheel at the first pub. He starts the descent down the hill toward the next pub. “Wonder why there’s so many pubs here.”

The car slows at the stop sign; Geoff peers out the rain-covered window across Lambton Park. The lights are on in the Rotunda, creating an aura around the local landmark; the spire atop the octagon roof is dark against the rain clouds. “Something to do with the old mine. Used to be a lot more pubs here. Rumour has it there’s a tunnel connecting a few of the pubs, too.”

Bruce hums his appreciation for the local history. He continues up the hill, turning right at the crest. He shifts down and turns into the driveway of the first house. The streetlight next to his car spills through the window.

Geoff begins to snore again. His cheek is already bruised and swollen, the blood dried on his cheek. The stench of alcohol fills the car.

Bruce reaches over and shakes Geoff by the shoulder. “Here you go, Geoff. Need a hand inside?”

Geoff murmurs something before opening his eyes. “Oh, nah. Thanks, uh, for your help and all.” Geoff squints and sees his father sitting on the front step. Malcolm lifts his head up and then hides his face in his hands. Geoff looks over at Bruce. “Guess I better go see him.”

Bruce shifts the car into neutral. “Geoff, mate.” He pauses and looks over at Geoff. “I might be out of place here, tell me if I am.”

Geoff opens his eyes and looks to Bruce.

“I know you lost your mother earlier in the year. It’s not easy. I’ve been there, mate.” Bruce looks through the side window and rubs his sleeve over the glass. “It’s a shit thing, yeah. Last thing I said to my old man wasn’t so nice.”

Geoff nods and struggles to keep his eyes open.

“All I’m saying, mate, is give things a chance. It hurts, but it will get better. You and your dad? You have to work on that. You don’t know what might happen, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Geoff’s voice trails off. “Thanks for the lift. You didn’t have to do give me a ride home and all.”

“Don’t be stupid, mate. Any time, yeah?” Bruce reaches across Geoff and opens the car door.

Geoff reaches down to gather his shoes, opens the door, and gets out without a word. He closes the door and walks over the uneven concrete of the driveway. To one side, the fishbone ferns have taken over and strangle the camellia trees, which now wilt and drop yellow and brown leaves into the garden bed.

Standing under the front edge of the carport, he runs his tongue over his teeth. He watches Bruce’s car back out of the driveway and turn down the street.

Geoff climbs the tiled steps, squeezing past his father without word, and opens the front door. Inside, the house is dark and quiet. Hesitating, he releases the door. He places his shoes on the ground and sits down on the step next to his father.

### **Song Lyric Reproductions**

Lyric excerpts on Pages 24, 25, 26, 46, and 53 are by Peter Bower.

Lyric excerpt on Page 80 written by Peter Bower, based on:

“Dirty Old Town.” The Pogues. *Rum, Sodomy & the Lash*. MCA/Stiff/WEA International, 1985.

Lyric excerpt on Page 82:

“Three Little Birds.” Bob Marley & The Wailers. *Exodus*. Island, 1977.

Lyrics excerpt on Page 88 written by Peter Bower, based on:

“3 a.m.” Matchbox 20. *Yourself Or Someone Like You*. Atlantic, 1996.

## **Exegesis: Overflowing**

## Pre-Drinks

My teenage years were dull and uneventful. I could admit to sneaking into nightclubs, getting drunk with friends and experimenting with drugs; but then I would be lying. Instead, I can tell you that my first full beer was consumed on my eighteenth birthday while watching a movie and that I fell off the bed after drinking it. While I occasionally ventured into the inner city to nightclubs once I had turned eighteen, my friends and I had little inclination to go to these places, which we perceived as noisy, smoke-filled, and lecherous. Our free time, instead, was spent watching movies, playing Playstation 2, and driving through town making animal noises out the windows at people lined up for the very nightclubs we avoided. What can I say: we were a bit different.

Then came the year 2006, which was one of discovery for me. I was almost 22 years of age, an odd age to be discovering life per the standard. Having written little else other than poetry since high school, I was attempting to write a prose piece based on my philosophical theories on the existence of reality and identity for my Honours degree. I had just begun a seminar on Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* as part of my Honours coursework component. I had also acquired a collection of new friends who liked to drink. It had become a weekly event to go to the university bar after class on Fridays or other pubs on the weekend.

My photography, my other passion, somehow managed to result in my working with a local duo, Grayson, as they completed the circuit of pubs performing cover shows. With a collection of original songs, like most local acts in pubs, they planned to make it big (and, indeed, one of the duo has had modest success as a recording artist in Europe since). I found myself in different pubs more and more, watching this duo and many others, quenching one thirst for live music and developing one for beer. It was one night at Bar 121, after three or four shared jugs, that something dawned upon me. I was squatting on sticky carpet taking photos of Grayson with an inadequate point-and-shoot camera, receiving the odd push or bump from someone standing over me, while people slurred along with the songs or made crude comments about the girl in the short skirt to my right. It was this specific moment that I remember thinking to myself what a rich environment the pub was, how full of character and characters it seemed, and how I needed another beer.

So, while at the bar, the cogs clicked slowly over, grinding through the haze of alcohol in my head, and I built the idea for my seminar paper for the Walter Benjamin course based around the idea of capturing images of the pub. For me, *Passagenwerk* is a fascinating piece of writing; Benjamin's intentions for the work will never be known, or even whether the fragments were intended to be published as "a work", since he died before completing it. What we are left with is a piecemeal assembly by scholars of Benjamin's methodical and detailed field and

research notes that he wrote about the Parisian Arcades. Benjamin has been quoted as saying that his research on the Arcades was detailing “The primal history of the nineteenth century; the thesis of the ever-same; of the newest as the most ancient” (quoted in Steiner, 2010). For me, it is a stripped back examination of human behaviour in one of its most natural environments in the modern world—the shopping arcades; it helps develop an understanding of behaviour that, while it has adapted to more modern times, can still be reduced to the most basic of natural instincts. While it may not have been Benjamin’s intention to present his work in the fragmented and broken mosaic that we now find, I wished to recreate the fractured style in forming a similar critical analysis of Newcastle pub culture. The means by which each portion could be read independently but still in relation to the other sections of the work allowed for a more multi-faceted analysis of the interchange of social and cultural values. In the resulting paper, I studied a selection of Lambton pubs, relating particular premises to past events and local historical background. I aimed to offer strong discrete images within a larger story or picture. To create these images, I blended historical accounts, old photographs, my own photographs, popular song lyrics, and my own poetry; connecting these fragments was a narrative voice that attempted to fit in with these drinking cultures as the unnamed narrator discovered some of these places for the first time.

Initially, I began *Overflow* for my Master of Philosophy degree as a development of ideas and techniques from the Honours paper but it became a substantially different project. I set out to recreate and build upon this Benjaminian exploration of local establishments throughout Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. *Passagenwerk*’s structure in particular was an influence on how my original Master’s project was to be formed. I intended to explore the framework of pastiche and montage, all the while examining pub and club culture in depth by looking at the communal values and the dysfunctionality that thrive within these establishments, observing behaviour and events while capturing these ‘modern day arcades’ and social hubs. Benjamin was quoted as saying “Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say, only to show.” (Buck-Morss, 1989; 73, quoted in McRobbie, 1994). I planned to write my project in similar fashion, not commenting on such behaviours but allowing the reader to interpret and judge the events described. Primarily, though, I wished to create a fragmented set of observations through different mediums which could collectively be held together via a narrative thread. With a collection of new contacts of bouncers, bartenders, singers and patrons, I thought I had a rich source of inspiration and information to create a strong collection of poems, stories, interviews, non-fiction essays and photographs.

Benjamin’s “First Sketches” (rather than his more refined “Convolutés”) of the Paris Arcades, found in a translated collection of his writings called *The Arcades Project*, had an

influence on how I first took notes for my project. Described as handwritten “early sketches” (complete with passages that were crossed out) from his bound notebook, these sketches helped form the way my text would fall upon the page. Partly, these sketches are notes for Benjamin to go back and work on later and even instructions to himself. (In one such statement, Benjamin writes “To be developed: motif of boredom amid half-finished material” (858), which is amusing considering the very unfinished nature of his *Passengwerk*.) For the most part, they are single sentences, but interspersed with paragraphs detailing various customs and behaviours from within the arcades.

“The solemn, reflective, tranquil character of the Parisian mealtime is measured less by the particular dishes served than by the stillness that surrounds you in the restaurant, whether it be before uncovered tables and plain white walls or in a carpeted and richly furnished dining room.” (829)

Benjamin uses rich, vibrant descriptions which help place the reader in the place, capturing the historical and social aspects of the Arcades in an engaging and factual manner. He continues to explore the way in which such a simple act as dining can ascertain and define class within Parisian society, and how, often, these classes within the Arcades all intersect. Later in the notes, a simple, beautiful phrase reflects back on this discussion of class: “Panels of glass in which not the chandeliers but only the candles are reflected” (852). This simple and eloquent description means little unless read in conjunction with the rest of his sketches; it then becomes a subtle view of how even the upper class with their extravagant chandeliers require something as basic as candles. The most important part of all this was his authentic capturing of the Parisian Arcades, in which he detailed every aspect of life, both throughout his “First Sketches” and his “Convolutés.”

The first year of my Masters started well in terms of experiencing authentic pub life. At a birthday party at an inner-city establishment, my brother and I were involved in breaking up a fight. I was covered in someone else’s blood (despite not having thrown a punch) as, in the adrenaline fueled confusion, we pulled apart two strangers fighting over a girl. The bouncers claimed I had been the one fighting (the manager stepping in and correcting this), and, regardless, we were called as witnesses at a court case between the two actual fighters. Thankfully, all my future pub experiences to date have been less violent in direct relation to myself.

Indeed, 2007 was a rich time to be documenting and capturing local establishments and social mores. As my first year of my Masters evaporated, the local pub and club scene was changing dramatically in Newcastle, Australia. ‘No Smoking’ laws were being implemented, progressively forcing smokers outside. At the same time there was a shift in the drinking culture within local establishments. In 2007, Newcastle had New South Wales’ second highest rate of



alcohol-related incidents per head of population, with leaked figures in December 2007 showing Newcastle hotels breached their licence conditions 196 times in the first 9 months of the year, while 79 per cent of all assaults committed on licensed premises in Newcastle occurred in just six inner-city pubs (McCarthy 4). The media latched onto this anti-social behaviour within and surrounding licensed establishments and, with the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research reporting that pub-related violence had skyrocketed in the past decade (Campbell 7), politicians were forced to implement strict new counter-measures. Drastic changes saw the banning of alcoholic shots, restricting certain alcoholic drinks after 10pm, last drinks half an hour before close, and a 1am lockout period followed by a 3am closure of all inner city pubs and clubs. While pub-related violence will be examined more closely later in this exegesis, these restrictions had an immediate effect on the local industry. Alcohol and trading-hour restrictions saw the closure of at least one pub: the Lucky Country, famous for its \$2 shots and original alternative music until dawn, gave up the fight and rescinded control to a development company wanting to turn the site into a boutique wine bar. Local bands were finding it increasingly difficult to play original gigs, and the industry generally suffered (though it has since made a strong recovery thanks to the new trend of pub restaurants emerging). Here I was, a solitary writer amongst the throngs of people at the bar, overhearing every complaint, witness to many scuffles and drinks being downed, and watching as the police presence increased.

This media scrutiny, new governmental legislation and the negative outlook towards establishments by large portions of the public ultimately led to the demise of my original plans. After obtaining clearance from the university, I had difficulties obtaining permission from the pubs to do my research and observations and, more importantly, use their establishments in the non-fiction aspects of my project. It was too much of a risk, both legally and to their reputation, and I could not blame them for declining. While I could discover the stories and interview various participants, I felt the concrete settings of real establishments added an authenticity and historical value to the creative work; deprived of their real locations, the representations of the events and people within the pub lost their authentic presence. My work had an aesthetic dimension that capitalised on tensions between the real (something authentic and genuine) and the actual (something that exists and isn't merely possible). Without these real places, the project drifted into a void where the work lost meaning. I found myself, nearly eighteen months into my degree, with no project.

Thursday, June 5, 2008: I was sitting alone in a pub, watching Bob Corbett perform originals to a crowd of roughly twenty. A small group swarmed the pool table, celebrating the last nights of bachelorhood of one of the men. Not one to normally give up, here I was fretting, miserable, my mind racing, a writer without something to write. If I could afford to, I would have taken to

drinking heavily. Instead, I nursed a \$3.50 can of Coke and watched as the condensation dripped down the aluminium. Outside, it was raining heavily, as it would continue to do for days over the June Long Weekend. Twelve months earlier we had been flooded. It wasn't until the end of a song where Bob, as he tends to do, started talking to patrons while tuning his guitar that things seemed to come together. To paraphrase the conversation:

Bob: "This rain is ridiculous. Anyone else think it's going to flood again?"

Patron: "If it does, you're playing all night!"

Bob: "I'll have to dip into the Wiggles repertoire. Makes you think back to where we all were this time last year, though, doesn't it?"

It was because of this seemingly trivial small talk that *Overflow* came to be (and, subsequently, why Bob had a character modelled loosely after him). If I couldn't write a partly non-fictional account of the local pubs and clubs, I'd write a fictional representation of my perceptions of them. I had the characters and stories already—people I had met or heard of, events I had witnessed or been told about, absorbing the vibe of many establishments—so I set about creating a fictional pub, The Queen Victoria, and went about tying all these characters together with the June 2007 floods and a night twelve months on when everyone thought it might happen again.

Compared to the original project, which was fragmented and presenting shards of people, the creation of a novel allowed me to explore characters in greater depth. It also allowed me to create a sense of narrative development. As the prose underwent countless drafts and several complete restructures, the novel changed from an examination of two characters over two nights two years apart into an exploration of five characters at different points throughout the one year, allowing me to shift away from a naturally linear construction to, once again, a somewhat more fragmented construction. The result was a collection of five interlinked short stories which, I feel, begins to explore and encapsulate one of Australia's most loved places: the pub. But in doing so, it shows society's dependence on the pub, particularly in times of misfortune. The short stories achieve at least some of the aims of the original project, allowing the reader to read each story independently but still in relation to the body of work as a whole, exploring the themes of masculinity, social dependence on the pub, the sense of community and dysfunctionality, and the very people within the pub.

Two things were crucial for me in the creation of these stories. One was capturing the pub; the other was capturing the place and major event (Newcastle and the floods). As the prose evolved through rewrites, the flood took less of an important role and the characters became the focus, but the exploration of the characters and the place of the pub was still the central, binding force. Consequently, this exegesis will be broken into two main components. The first will

focus on the idea of place and its significance, how place shapes characters' development, and how characters in turn influence the sense of place. I will look at Marion Halligan's *Lover's Knots: A Hundred-Year Novel* and Jamie Lewis's short story "A Rainforest in Medowie" to examine how place and sense of place can influence the characters, especially in relation to the Australian coastal town of Newcastle. I will then closely examine Patrick Cullen's *What Came Between*, a novel which uses the 1989 Newcastle Earthquake as a catalyst in exploring three couples' lives, in relation to the representation of place and the influence of place. I will also look at how place is identified and the use of place names as signifiers by comparing my short stories to Rachel Hennessey's *The Quakers*, which uses real events, people and places, but fictionalises all and leaves Newcastle identifiable but unnamed. The second part of the essay will build from the ideas surrounding place established in the first part of the exegesis and look more specifically at the place of the pub, the genre of "pub fiction", and the representation of self, masculinity and the role of violence within representations of the pub. The greatest influence on *Overflow*, David Ireland's *The Glass Canoe*, will be central to this part of the exegesis as the pinnacle of the genre. While *The Glass Canoe* will be the predominant text discussed due to its strong representations of the pub, I will look at Sam de Brito's *The Lost Boys*, Peter Ho Davies' *The Welsh Girl*, D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, and Raymond Carver's short story "Where I'm Calling From" to highlight the portrayals of masculinity in relation to the place of the pub and drinking. Together, with Ireland's novel, they show how fiction can be used as a tool for social comment, in particular, as an examination of masculinity, and how the place of the pub is an iconic and formative environment for the people within.

## **Entering The Bar**

### *An Exploration of Place*

Place is not only important to the story, but indeed to every facet of life. It helps shape who we are, the way we act and how others act toward us. This is something I wanted to explore through my stories: the idea of place, notably the place of Newcastle—a heavily industrial city with a high proportion of blue-collar workers—and the place of the pub where displays of masculinity are often crucial for social status. Through my novel, and in comparison to other novels from similar places (either situated in pubs or within Newcastle, Australia), I want to examine the relationship between characters and place. Specifically I want to look at how place changes personalities and behaviour, and how those personalities and this behaviour can in turn change the sense of place experienced by an individual or character.

Place is not simply the location where the body physically resides, nor is it simply a title that can be assigned to such a locale. The notion of ‘place’, rather, “is generally conceived as being ‘space’ imbued with meaning” (Vanclay 3). In other words, it is not merely the physicality of the location but rather the meaning assigned to or assigned by that location. ‘Places’ are considered locations “with psychological, social and cultural significance” (Dreyfus & Jones 340) and are “lived, perceived and associated” (Pickford 26) with particular kinds of human experience. Natural or constructed landmarks can represent such locations and as such can become significant for people who frequent or reside in such locations; they aid a person’s connection to a location and assist in building meaning and memory to create a place. Significant life events, such as first kisses, marriage proposals, deaths, graduations or holidays, all assign meaning to locations due to these experiences and the memories created, be they positive or negative. Indeed, “locations where people gather to play or meet and share stories, such as [...] pubs, can also become special because of their social meaning” (Vanclay 3). As such, ‘place’ is location possessing the significant meaning that an individual brings. Further to this definition, it should be noted that ‘place’ and ‘sense of place’ are somewhat different. Vanclay notes the following:

If ‘place’ is difficult to define, ‘sense of place’ is even more so, and there is a degree of confusion or misuse surrounding the term. ‘Sense of place’ refers to the individual, not to the place. While characteristics of a location may affect how people feel, and changing the physical characteristics can beneficially affect or negatively impact upon the individual sense of place, the concept properly refers to an individual’s connection with the place (location, building, landscape, city, and so on) and to their experience of place. (7)

In other words, while ‘place’ is the location, a location that has significance to the individual, it is ‘sense of place’ that is *perceived* by the individual and the experience they have while at or within such a place. Also, it is ‘sense of place’ that relates to how the place affects and is affected by those within or around it. For the purposes of this paper, ‘place’ will be considered as a location to which people assign meaning, while ‘sense of place’ will refer to how that connection and meaning affects people and, in fact, how it in turn affects the place. Further, I will examine the relationship between place and sense of place in relation to the fictional characters within literary works and my novel.

A key part in the creation of my novel was the creation of setting. Setting is, at its base, a space in which significance is built upon to create a place. It is the space where the characters are given their life. It is the vessel where the story occurs and becomes an influence on the story. In most cases, it moves beyond a mere space and becomes a “place”, a location imbued with significance and meaning. Place, itself, can become a character of sorts and have a heavy influence within a work, possessing positive or negative forms for both the characters and the reader. Be it through a generalised description of a land never visited by the author or the detailed particulars of the author’s home town, regardless of whether the location is fictional or real, a novel requires a sense of place to show and shape how the characters live. The author will inevitably “illuminate various aspects of the mutual interaction between man and environment”, an interaction that can sometimes have “formative and restorative qualities” (Pocock 337).

The place of Newcastle, Australia, is one of significance to me; it is, in every sense, home. Having lived here all my life, I feel I know this place so well, yet it is one that still surprises, with new streets, new locations, new people, and new experiences discovered so often when I explore this city. With my original project being largely non-fiction, Newcastle and the Hunter Valley were the obvious focus; when the project became fiction, I had the chance to create a fictional setting. But Newcastle was still the obvious choice of setting for me, as it was one that was familiar, yet still had room for me to discover new meaning. Beyond this, Newcastle has an uncanny nature where the likelihood of people being connected through one way or another seems significantly higher than most other cities; there is no six-degrees of separation here, but barely two. This was something I felt was crucial for helping create interconnected characters that were, still, separate from each other. My characters were to find Newcastle not just a place in which they lived but, rather, home. It was a place with which I knew I could create intimate connections for my characters, a city where every corner, every park, could be laden with experience and meaning.

The familiar place of home is often used by authors to develop settings and narratives since it allows them to build upon something with which they already have a strong connection.

Marion Halligan fondly describes both the cities of Newcastle and Canberra in her novel *Lovers' Knot*, two cities she knows well, having grown up and attended university in Newcastle before moving to Canberra as an adult. The novel is tasked with chronicling the stories of a family throughout a large part of the twentieth century, spanning a hundred years from 1911, "but its narrative denies the conventional chronology evoked and shatters into the fragments caught by photographs" (Frost). Throughout the novel, however, it is a strong sense of place, the significance of both Newcastle and Canberra, that influences the characters most. This bond to the home place is even acknowledged within *Lovers' Knot*, with the narrator stating: "To grow up in a town is to learn it. While you're at work getting educated in and out of school, details that only lovers know become part of your mind" (55).

Halligan's intimate knowledge of both cities adds a concrete reality to the created locations. D. C. D. Pocock describes home place as "a point of return" and "a point of stability during changes and chances" (339). While some of the characters move to Canberra, they often return to Newcastle, with the narrative bouncing between the two cities, and upon their return find a familiarity and sense of security. It is a point of return and a safety net for them but, upon leaving and discovering a new home place in another city, these characters somewhat lose their sense of identity with the city of Newcastle. The descriptions of Newcastle are postcard-like, often picturesque, featuring only the highlights of the city. The sense of home in this instance is strained; one character, Veronica, describes herself as "a tourist, a person who visited not lived [in Newcastle], not a native as always she'd felt" (55).

For other characters, the place of Newcastle is one which contains much history and experience. Each has key events tied directly to the city, with it becoming more than a geographical space but a home place for them, "a symbol of assurance and reassurance" (340). The home place even has such a strong influence on two characters, Ada and Albert, that having parted ways, both die "alone, ill, in different unhomely cities" (366-7). Characters establish and build relationships during walks along Merewether Beach or play in rock pools on Bar Beach, or explore career options as a photographer in the city mall, each affirming their place in the world and the place of Newcastle. But it is the BHP Steelworks, such a key part of the identity of Newcastle and its residents, which is referred to time and again in an attempt to position the characters at home. The BHP is a place of employment as much as it is part of the landscape. One character was fortunate enough to have "the BHP [pay] for his education through a traineeship" (57) and feels secure that "his future was assured" (57), while others merely ponder over the view "straight across the river to the steelworks" (335). The heavily-relied upon industrial icon amazes with its "spectacular view, even beautiful, with its lights and fires and clouds of smoke that with sunrise and sunset, all the angles of sun and moon, the darkness of night or day, the movement of wind and storm, change colour and pattern and shape and are a

source of endless contemplation” (335). For a large portion of the novel, the BHP remains a constant for the characters, with “the performance of the steelworks [going] on, sun and clouds and light and smoke” (337), and the home place of Newcastle acting as a constant, reassuring place of belonging.

Interestingly, Pocock notes that “the role or influence of home place [...] is not unidimensional; it has within it an ambiguity and tension which underlie human experience in general” (340). He also notes that the home place, or a place of great significance, is somewhere that an individual can find a sense of belonging and stability but, in turn, can also find stagnation or resentment and the potential for boredom and entrapment. While a place can be considered home, and can be of great significance, that is not to say that it is always a desired place.

A key part of the home place is, naturally, family. The initial home place where one grows up is built upon the foundation of the family and the role that it takes in the formation of our being. If the relationship with family becomes stagnant, the place itself becomes less desirable. In the short story by Jamie Lewie, “A Rainforest in Medowie,” the relationship with family is part of the reason why the family home has become such an unbearable place. Upon a return visit to his parent's house in Medowie, a small rural town to the north of Newcastle but which is identified as being part of the greater Newcastle area, to drop off his son for babysitting, the narrator notes that it is “the same home [he] grew up in which was the hottest, stuffiest house in Medowie” (157). It is interesting that he still refers to it as home, even though he blatantly states that he “purposely avoided visiting [his] folks” (157) and how his “two brothers had escaped at their earliest convenience” (157); regardless of the role or influence a place has, it can still possess the qualities that make it home.

The narrator and his father have a strained relationship, the dialogue terse and snarky between them, and Sam, the narrator's son, is reluctantly left with his grandparents only to be picked up promptly. This home, still in the narrator's mind as a hot, stuffy reminder of his upbringing and the relationship with his father, is not the place he believes it to be. Upon return, Sam, naked and giggling with glee, drags him toward the backyard, talking about the rainforest he had mentioned earlier when his father had dropped him off. The narrator hesitates, but upon hearing his father's booming voice, which “even after all these years [still stopped him]” (159), and discovering both his mother and father naked, he is led to the backyard with trepidation. The yard, a “wilting forest thing” (159), becomes alive when the sprinklers come to life and water drips all around them, cooling the harsh summer heat. This magical place, where they could drink water from the sky and escape the heat, allowed relationships to be reconfirmed, with the narrator even noting the “affection [he had] never noticed before” (160) when his parents kissed in the rain. Gradually, the environment and the people present encourage the

narrator to join in, and indeed enjoy, the activity. It is not through habit but rather the innate compulsion to fit in within a place that he first takes off his tie, not “even aware of doing it” (160), then his shirt, eventually his pants, until he, like his parents and son, is also nude. Both the enthusiasm of his son, Sam, and the sense of place have an influence on him, causing particular actions and, at the same time, having a restorative effect on him, beyond escaping the heat. The place becomes a positive home place, with the narrator saying that he “didn't want to leave [his] Mum and Dad's” (160) and even aiding to restore a strained relationship with his father, leading to the narrator asking his father to help him build his own rainforest back in the city of Newcastle. Pocock notes that the associative quality of locations, “by which they come to represent particular persons, actions or events,” can be a powerful influence on behaviour, so much so that the place can trigger memories or even encourage one to partake in certain activities or actions involuntarily (342).

Sense of place is an important factor that shapes how people behave in the real world. Portrayals of this behaviour in fiction help the reader interpret characters' connection to a given place. Various locations become significant to people, influencing their memories and their behaviour as time goes on. Patrick Cullen shows the relationship between place and his characters in his novel *What Came Between* (2009). The place of Newcastle, Australia, is a central force in the self-identification of each of the six main characters. The six characters within the novel make up three couples, each of whom resides in adjoining terraces on the historic Laman Street in Newcastle with the real world location allowing to explore the significance of place with his characters.

Assigning a name to a physical location helps build upon the significance of place; Cresswell notes that naming a geographic location invokes particular images and meaning, that names themselves are “rich with meaning” (2). In Cullen's novel, Newcastle is continually named. Broadly, the place of Newcastle has major significance to all of Cullen's characters. While there is “the lovingly depicted city of Newcastle, which functions as a character” (Ball 2), its actual name is bandied around often to ensure we do not forget that we are located in Newcastle, a very real place. Historically, it is a crucial part of the story—with the story occurring between the 1989 earthquake and the 1999 closing of the BHP Steelworks. These are events and experiences that give significance to the place of Newcastle: these events and experiences shape Cullen's characters and change their lives. Gieryn explored the theory that place becomes complete only when there is a past attached to it:

A spot in the universe, with a gathering of physical stuff there, becomes a place only when it ensconces history or utopia, danger or security, identity or memory. (Gieryn 465)



According to Gieryn, it is not so much the name that creates this sense of place, as the fact that the city has a unique spot in the universe, a physicality, and is invested with history, meaning and value. Newcastle, in *What Came Between*, becomes a place of significance because of its history, its sense of danger (associated with the earthquake) and security (or lack thereof for those working at the BHP steelworks), and the events that occur to its characters in the time after the earthquake. It is laden with memory, with experience, and with identity for Cullen's characters.

In another book that relies on the 1989 Newcastle earthquake as a significant force in shaping the lives of its characters, Rachel Hennessy's *The Quakers* is a blend of fact and fiction that creates a disturbing account of friendship and love turned obsession and murder. Based on the true-life events involving Newcastle-born Joe Cinque's murder by his girlfriend Anu Singh, and Rachel Hennessy's real life friendship with both individuals, the novel provides a disturbing insight into the characters. Unlike Cullen, however, Hennessy blends real events with fiction, making subtle changes to names of buildings and locations, leaving the city of Newcastle unnamed, yet instantly recognisable and familiar to those from the city. Hennessy uses a series of fake names to distance the reader from the truth: the Bogie Hole becomes the Beauty Hole, The Newcastle Worker's Club becomes, simply, "The Club", and Bolton Street becomes Bolder Street. Though Newcastle is never referred to directly, it feels familiar in its descriptions and we feel the connection when it is described as "our hometown" (133) further north from Sydney. In the early parts of the novel, "our hometown" is described with an affectionate regard, with the first person narrator, Lucy, paying heed to the security and safety it offers.

We un-shoulder our bags onto the pock-holed shelves above the Beauty Hole, named by us because Paddy had cried 'What a beauty!' when Daniel first brought us here. Off to the right the sea breaks onto the rocks but we have enough distance to feel safe from the waves. The pool comes down from the ocean like a keyhole and we duck-swim in the protected circle...

(44)

As Lucy's life falls apart, her idea of home, her safe place, becomes tainted and constricting. A place is seldom positive or negative forever, and, as I will delve into further in Part II, as much as place can influence human behaviour or attitude, human behaviour or attitude can influence and change place.

I am stuck in this land of suburbs. One Saturday I find myself lost in Garden City, a city of shops but with no evidence of a garden beyond the neon bird-of-paradise at its entrance and the plastic replicas stuck slovenly in tubs outside David Jones. (110)

Of particular note is that this is the only instance where a real Newcastle location is used and named without change or alteration. With a concrete sense of reality to the reader (for those who know Newcastle, anyway), the city moves beyond a familiar place to *the place* that they know. And, abruptly, the place they know is under attack, with Lucy's hometown as a whole acting as a negative influence on her in the middle section of the novel; the "land of suburbs" suffocates her and increases her anxiety.

I find the various means of creating a sense of place of Newcastle in these two novels interesting. Cullen's beautifully rendered images of local landmarks create a strong sense of familiarity and security; I do wonder, though, if it isolates readers who are not familiar or have no connection with Newcastle, as it seems to draw upon knowledge of the city and its occupants. Hennessy, on the other hand, creates a place that *is* Newcastle, simply without the name to cement the location to a fixed spot; the place is no less real without a name and, while it loses a small amount of connection for Newcastle readers, it opens the novel up to a wider audience, who will undoubtedly find parts within Hennessy's portrayal relatable to their own cities or places of significance. In the creation of my novel, partly due to my problems with Ethics and legal issues, and through the influence of these two portrayals of the place of Newcastle, I decided to find a blend between reality and fiction. Newcastle is never named directly, but landmarks, suburbs and streets are named as they are in real life. In part, I was exploring my own sense of place; the place of Newcastle is, to me, identified not so much by its name as by familiar and significant places. Further, something I wanted to explore in my own novel was the creation of an unnamed place that draws upon my readers' own experience. I wanted to create the nameless, yet familiar, pub, a place that capitalises on the readers' own experience and sense of place, rather than knowledge of a specific location.

In *What Came Between*, Cullen builds on the reader's experience and sense of place in focalising and localising place from the city to a more specific location of importance. The youngest couple, Lucas and Cate, while not the sole focus of the novel, appear to me to have the most influence on plot development. Their relationship is explored with a tenderness not found with the other couples' narratives; Cate's pregnancy also acts as both a climax and resolution to the novel. While the other two couples are also important to the exploration of relationships and the place of home, it is Lucas and Cate who resonate most with me. This is in part due to my ability to relate to their younger sensibilities, but I also found these two characters to be most fleshed out by Cullen, with the young couple providing the forward momentum for the story.

Within the chapter, "The Comet", we are privy to the moment when Lucas and Cate first get to know each other. Through this scene, we are introduced to the idea of the street as place; while only part of the city, but no less significant than the city as a whole, the street acts

as a conduit to the creation of their developing relationship, and a place of significance to their own personal lives. The street in itself is significant to Newcastle in general—its large, overhanging figs were iconic<sup>1</sup>, the city library and art gallery are prominent, and other landmarks, such as Civic Park, back onto the street—so the street already “contributes to sense of place by providing an icon to which symbolic meaning can be ascribed” (Vanclay 3). As Lucas’ foot is buried in the leaves in the gutter, a relationship is born from discussion of Halley’s Comet and *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*. Cate is camping outside the gallery, awaiting the opening of an exhibit to see a study used for a painting by John Coburn called *The Comet*, which has personal importance due to various events surrounding her father, Halley’s Comet and the original painting. Lucas, recently moved into his grandmother’s terrace on the street—already possessing a sense of place for Lucas with childhood memories of his relationship with his grandmother—winds up helping Cate hold her place in the line for the opening. Their relationship is born on the street: they share a meal while sitting in the gutter, Lucas sleeps on the footpath to hold Cate’s spot in the line, and they share their lives as they sit and pass the time.

“But you’re here now?”

“Yep, I’m right here,” Cate said, slapping her palm on the bitumen.

Her book fell shut. She brushed her hands together to shed the fine gravel from her palm[...] (65)

Through the chapter, Cate finds her place. The reader is witness to a sense of place, a place of significance and importance, being born. After obtaining the study of *The Comet*, they admire the image in Lucas’ lounge room; despite not eating, Cate’s lack of appetite and reasoning shows her comfort. ““It isn’t that I’m *not* hungry. I just don’t feel like I need anything right now”” (76). As Cate falls asleep on the lounge, we realise that the place of the street, where Lucas and Cate have spent their first days together, has become important. Through fond experiences created on the street, and through their home forming on the very street the relationship was first formed, it can be said that the street has developed “a special quality because of the type of experiences” the couple have had there (Vanclay 3).

As my project evolved, there was a need to explore other places with qualities of significance external to the pub. The pub, which was my initial sole focus in *Overflow*, may act as a catalyst for particular life events, but it became apparent that my novel had to explore life beyond the walls of the pub. Jack, for example, who was a passing figure in the bar in early

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<sup>1</sup> Mid-2010, the Newcastle City Council ruled that the Laman Street figs were deemed unsafe for public thoroughfare and closed the street. Through the rest of 2010 and 2011, the council performed a series of tests on the trees and decided to remove them and replace them. The public objected, fighting for months, protesting constantly, with the local newspaper and even the Lord Mayor fighting to save the trees. Eventually, after a long and expensive series of court battles, the trees were cut down in early 2012. This, in itself, shows how people can relate to an iconic feature that crystallizes for them the sense of place.

drafts, continued to grow with each draft as I explored the places beyond the pub to which he was attached. His character was one of the main reasons I extended my spheres of place as I continued to develop him. Based loosely on a number of older gentlemen who have been part of my life, he took shape as a slightly conflicted character. On the one hand, he is a doting, perhaps over-caring grandfather; meanwhile, he is also a crotchety, bitter old man still trying to come to grips with the loss of his wife and find his new place in the world. Places have an “associative quality, by which they come to represent particular persons, actions or events” (Pocock 342); Jack associates the place in which he lives predominantly with his late wife. Without his wife, the house does not *feel* complete: he sleeps on the lounge instead of their bed, her chair at the kitchen table sits pushed back, he talks to ghosts and frowns when there are no answers. Pocock notes that anyone “who has had to spend time in his empty family house will readily appreciate the dimensional difference between house and home” (342). With his house no longer a ‘complete’ place, Jack tries to find solace at the local park.

The park had always been the centre of his life. His own parents’ home had been just two blocks from here. Then, just before he and Marjorie married, he bought a house on this street and they lived by the park all their lives. The day he proposed, they had picnicked under the stand of gums, not that the trees offered much protection from the sun. He smiles, thinking back to how she looked that day. A long, soft-pink dress caught the sun and billowed out at the bottom to hide her legs. (71)

Here we have Jack’s place. It fulfils all of Gieryn’s ground rules: it is a geographic location, it has material form, and it is invested with meaning, experience and value. With that said, mirroring Jack’s life, which has suffered the loss of his wife, Marjorie, the park has suffered a loss with a “giant gum [lying] across the field” (70). While his home is similarly built on memories and experiences of family, this is a place that does not have the strong associative quality of people, despite his memories being linked directly to certain people. The park reminds him of times spent with particular people, of games of football and special moments, but the place does not represent a location where a particular person should be found. The place of home, with the passing of his wife, has lost its sense of home, its sense of completion; without the tree, the park is still somewhat complete and still holds meaning. Whereas Cate and Lucas were forming an emotional bond with each other and the place they share, Jack has his place formed from his years already lived and experienced.

So far, the idea of place has been a fixed location imbued with meaning through experience. Be it a city or a street, place can take form in any location where one finds meaning. One idea that fascinates me is that of the car possessing a sense of place. While true to two of

Gieryn's rules—it has material form and can be invested with meaning and value—it is interesting to consider it with regards to geographic location.

A place is a unique spot in the universe. Place is the distinction between here and there, and is what allows people to appreciate near and far. (464)

Gieryn lists places from armchairs to continents, but each of these has a concrete location, a set space which the place occupies. The car, in fact, breaks his third rule, as it has no set specific geographic location: while in use, it is seldom stationary; while occupied the world outside is continually changing. It has neither a fixed set of coordinates nor a common environment. The car, instead, creates a new set of boundaries within its confines, and the world beyond the metallic shell is no longer entirely relevant; it is the events, the experiences, and the people within the boundaries of the car that create a sense of place for its occupants. The car, while a material object and a possession of the individual, still has the qualities of place; it is merely a place that has transitional and moveable geographic location.

In *What Came Between*, Cullen uses the car in “The Long Drive Home” as a tool for a significant changeover in the novel. Elsie, the fascinating focus of the previous chapter, has her grandson, Lucas, staying with her. (This is the first time we are introduced to Lucas, with Cate not introduced until the later chapter, which I discussed previously.) Lucas requires a trip to the family home to collect some belongings required for his final transition to life in Newcastle, and his grandmother tags along for the drive. Lucas ushers, “with an exaggerated sweep of his arm” (35), Elsie into the car, as though she were stepping into a royal carriage; while it could be showing a fondness for his grandmother, I believe this shows Lucas feels the car is a great deal more important than some random, beat up EH Holden. He explains the car's own personality, informing Elsie “it doesn't like the rain” (36). It is with this car that Lucas finds a place in his youth that is his own, but one that opens up the opportunity to discover new places; perhaps the lack of fixed physicality is symbolic of the transitional sense of place that accompanies youth. With Lucas, “personal mobility is a high priority in [his] youth, [where the possession of his car has] greater meaning as a place to be and a means to make a personal statement” (Holloway 158). The car allows opportunity, but also provides much more.

You step up and you enter through a door, like a building. Inside, its height, structure and the eruptions of seats mean pretty much all you can do is sit, shelter, eat, sleep, have awkward sex and hold small meetings, of a criminal nature or not, as the case may be. A car can be used as a home out of necessity, and many people have the same deep feelings about their car as about where and how they live. (Holloway 155)

It is interesting, as Holloway notes, that “the vehicle is a place and a means of experiencing place” (162) at the same time; Lucas has begun to form his own memories and experiences

within the confines of the car, turning it into a significant place of his own, but the drive home is also an experience of place. Within the car, however, Lucas finds moments of joy, a chance to form a connection with his grandmother. As they drive to the family home, their windows wound down, inviting the country inside, their hands outside the windows cutting through the air, they share laughs with each other and build a bond. It is most interesting, though, when Lucas invites Elsie to take control of the car and drive home, despite having only driven once or twice and being unlicensed. After the drive home, fraught with breakdowns and breath tests, she pulls the car into “the empty space in front of the terrace” (51). Elsie informs Lucas he can keep her terrace and she would be moving back home with his parents; Lucas stands and looks at his car, now “settled in the gutter” (52). The car has found its place, and enabled him the opportunity to create a new place in the terrace.

In my novel, the car trip into town was always built in my mind as a scene of significance; the scene was always an exploration of the relationship of Geoff and his father, something that did not change as the rest of the novel evolved. Originally focused on Geoff, the story changed to be focused on his father, Malcolm, and his life. The journey into town takes place in the old family car. The family is breaking apart and the relationship between father and son is explored during this trip. As they travel, the trip sparks memories of going to the football with his son and going to school. But, more intimately to the occupants and the car, there are memories and experiences held within the confines of the car.

The ashtray juts open from the dash below Geoff’s hand; loose coins sit against the Matchbox car jammed inside. Geoff had been six when he had parked his toy car amongst the cigarette butts, bored while Malcolm was in the shop buying bait for their fishing trip. Geoff had spent most of the morning sitting in the driver’s seat, pretending to drive the car. It had been more fun to rip the steering wheel left and right than fishing. (15)

The family car is important to Malcolm; it contains memories and material objects that symbolise better times. It is interesting that, when things fall apart and he begins his descent to darker times, it is the car where he finds the most strength to fight the urge to drink. Even in the darkest times, this car is still a place where Malcolm feels a strong connection. Similarly, in “Jack”, the car is a place of memory and great meaning to Jack. Moving beyond a mere material possession, the car has history, as Jack does within it.

The 1972 Volvo 144 Sedan, the first car he ever bought new, no longer has the midnight blue shine it had when he drove it into his driveway for the first time. Marjorie came outside that afternoon, apron hanging from her neck, her face marked with flour from baking cupcakes for a birthday celebration the next day. She had cooed on cue when Jack had shown off the car, but

Jack always knew she could not care less about the car. These days, the rear passenger door featured a dint, the chrome bumpers had tarnished and rust had crept into the side panel. The car was a ghost of its former self. (71-2)

When he discovers his car is destroyed by the flooding rains and winds we witness a connection beyond mere ownership with the car.

Jack carefully steps down from the gutter before looking to the right. He leans on the boot of a nearby car to steady himself. His shoulders drop and he inhales sharply. The left wheels of his Volvo hide in the gutter with water midway up the rims; the right front wheel is missing, the front end balancing on a pile of bricks. The top of the car is littered with leaves. An empty garbage bin presses against the front bumper. The driver's window has been smashed in by some thug, the door left ajar.

Jack feels his heart race. Images of family holidays, drive-in movies, holding Marjorie's hand speed by, a lifetime of memories. (72)

We later discover that Jack, already mourning the loss of his wife, does not survive. In my mind, it is this final loss that brings about his death.

The car is somewhat of an anomaly in the exploration of place; it has no fixed geographical location, and, like all possessions, it can be discarded and replaced at will, seldom carrying over past history or significance to the new owners. But for some, it possesses significance far beyond most other places, except, perhaps, the home. A house imbued with meaning becomes a home, a place of great significance to its tenants, and is a place more intimate than a city or street. It can hold meaning and history beyond those who are within the walls at any given time while also holding and creating memories for the current occupants. Half way through Cullen's *What Came Between*, at the beginning of the chapter "Where Things Belong", we find Lucas poking around in the attic of their terrace trying to find the source of nightly disturbances in the ceiling. Cate stands at the base of the ladder, standing guard while Lucas discovers a nest of barn owls. They decide to leave them there and, instead, discuss the option of moving to the back bedroom to escape the nightly noises from within the walls; the drunken revellers from the local club do not disturb them as it is exterior to the house, but the birds have encroached on the confines of the home place and are cause for them to vacate the bedroom. Lucas and Cate show respect to the birds' own space by contemplating relocation instead of disturbing the birds. Eventually they decide to stay in their own room and coexist with the owls and their noise.

The bond to a place is something often hard to refuse and break and the history of a place can have a lasting impact on those connected to it. Historical events in a given place, even before the current occupants became linked to this place, continue to influence the behaviour

associated with the place. Often, historical relics and remnants are left behind with intention and these artefacts, while sometimes discarded upon discovery, can remain and change the significance and meaning that place holds for those linked to it. Having determined the source of the noise, Lucas moves to exit the ceiling cavity before sighting a child's shoe sitting on a beam within the dusty attic. The shoe is a remnant of the past and Lucas removes it from the ceiling without knowing why it is there. The characters, like the readers, are confused by the presence of the shoe and wonder about its significance. "Creases and folds — traces of motion — were hardened into the dark leather" (119), showing that this shoe is more than a found object but rather a relic. While Lucas' instinct is to throw it away, Cate feels there is a reason for the shoe being up there. Upon discussion with the neighbours, Lucas discovers that last century people "put shoes in the four corners of the ceiling to ward off evil spirits" (123). Lucas and Cate's home gains further significance from the finding of the shoe. The shoe, while a mere material object, creates much more of a connection for the characters to the location in which they reside. The shoe is invested with meaning and value, a historical and cultural significance, which, in turn adds to the meaning and value of the terrace house. The young couple find Cate is unexpectedly pregnant and that they are soon to start a family, much like the owls in the ceiling cavity; Lucas, superstitious and seeking an element of security, considers the shoe as Cate attempts to sleep listening to the nest of chicks.

Just before dawn she finally slept, and she was still asleep hours later when Lucas went back across to Ray and Pam's to re-borrow the ladder. He positioned the ladder beneath the manhole and took the shoe up into the ceiling, returning it to the corner above the spare room, to the place where it belonged. (127)

While the shoe is not connected to his individual history, Lucas feels a connection to the history, and symbolic representation, of the shoe, and thus incorporates it into his own meaning of place, his personal meanings becoming "embedded in people's memories and community stories" (Vanclay 3). Lucas changes to fit the place, but the place also changes to fit Lucas and Cate. It is Cullen's ability to include "tiny details that invite the reader literally into the characters' homes and lives" that creates a sense of place, a familiarity, with the reader (Condon 1).

Within my own novel, I wanted to examine spheres of place of various size and locations, with them sometimes spilling into each other, each with its own significance, each possessing its own meaning for particular characters, and each allowing the reader to connect with a sense of familiarity. While the place of the pub will be discussed later, in Part II, the significance of home and, indeed, a sole room can have for an individual is something I wanted to touch upon. In "Bruce", the titular character spends a large portion of his day, when not



working, in the back of his shed in his self-built studio where he practises his music and dreams of days that should have been.

The shelves in the corner of the room hold a collection of compact discs containing his original songs. For the most part, they are unplayed. On rare occasions, he plays one to the family, but they mostly never leave this room. The spine of a cassette tape mocks him, his name scrawled in black biro on the glossy cardboard. It was the handwriting of a seventeen-year-old who thought his songs would hit the radio. (46)

The place of his studio is a constant reminder to him of his past; its possessions are significant in relation to both his past and his future, with regards to his career and dreams. It is here that he writes, practises, works, thinks, finds solace; it is where he feels “‘at home’, where things ‘fall into place’, beyond which [he feels] ‘out of place’, [an intruder] in someone else’s domain” (Pocock 337). The cassette tape shows Bruce assigning meaning and attachment to the place through the safekeeping of treasured items and memories, and thus his sense of identity. When the storm causes the tree in the backyard to crash through the shed and family home, it is not the destruction of the home that affects Bruce the most. Rather, it is the destruction of the place of the studio, and moreover the sense of identity attached to this place, that leaves Bruce blank; even the death of the family cat goes unnoticed with the ruin of place and self. While not every reader will have a studio, we all have a place where we feel at ease and can recollect, a place more private than the home in general, a place where memories are created or perhaps merely explored. We also know how these places can be tainted.

The place of the pub is not overly different to that of the home for some people. It is a place that many frequent daily, where they eat, drink, socialise and, with the exception of sleeping and (for most) working, spend most of their day. I wanted to create a place, a pub, in my novel that was like home to my characters. I set about building a fictionalised combination of a number of pubs in the hopes of creating a “universal pub.” I feel that in creating a fictional pub that is familiar, yet nondescript, it allows readers to bring their own sense of place and apply it to the location, thus being able to create an attachment and assign their own meaning. While many have particular locals, their drinking homes away from home, a number of elements of the pub are similar. My goal was to create the ability to connect with the fictional pub through this sense of familiarity and through my exploration of the place of the pub, with notable focus on social interaction, portrayals of masculinity and identity.

## **The Shout**

### *Exploring Masculinity and Identity in the Place of the Pub*

The pub is a unique place. It can contain function rooms, accommodation, gaming rooms, restaurants or outdoor entertainment areas, but it always has a bar. The bar is a space often no bigger than a room. It is a shared, community space, where experience and meaning are instilled by individuals and groups of people to form a place of cultural and personal significance. Within, people experience the latest music, hear the local vernacular, discover a new lexicon, see the accepted fashion sense, and, perhaps most notably, learn what is socially accepted and expected of them in these environments. They form friendships, relationships and partnerships; within the place of the pub, people celebrate and commiserate; within the walls of each establishment, people come together or isolate themselves.

While each individual pub has a fixed geographical locale and a specific experience associated with it by individuals, I believe the idea of the collective ‘pub’ simultaneously has communal meaning and identity. In other words, while an individual may associate Pub A with a birthday celebration and Pub B with meeting a girl, both pubs have the similar association of drunkenness, frivolity and fondness. While an individual pub may be the subject of one particular memory, pubs in general all have similar experiences. Personally, when I walk into any pub, I feel at home and on edge at the same time; the past experiences in that particular establishment, combined with enjoyable moments and witnessed violent altercations within the place of the collective ‘pub,’ influence my mood. Despite my negative feelings, I find the positive feelings—memories of special events, my enjoyment of live music, and connections with good people—too strong to ignore. It is the meaning we assign that makes the pub significant to us. Through the sense of place, too, I find I act in a particular manner in the pub; societal expectation encourages me to attempt to dance to Cotton Eyed Joe or to sing loudly along to Khe Sahn, to be loud and merry, to talk to strangers at the urinal, to be, on occasion, inappropriate, and to smoke cigars during moments of celebration. It is the sense of place that even encourages me to drink alcohol; I never feel more unease than when I am in a pub without a beer in my hand. It is the sense of place and the idea of the pub that causes an individual to feel these particular emotions and behave in such a way. Consequently, in this section I will be looking at particular behaviours (notably drinking, violence, swearing) within the place of the pub, and examining how the place influences or encourages a particular form of masculine behaviour.

When writing my novel, I wanted to capture aspects of the various people I’ve encountered in local pubs and, moreover, how they behave in this unique place. The pub

appears to be a place rich with vibrant individuals, perhaps largely due to the inhibition-suppressing effects of alcohol-consumption, and I wanted to understand and explore these individuals through my representations. Within Newcastle and the Hunter, with a significant blue-collar workforce, with mining and the BHP steelworks historically being major employers in the area, the pub has been a large part of the local culture for working men. In fact, *The Newcastle Herald* reported that in 1827 Newcastle, which only had a population of roughly 1200 people, had “about 27 liquor outlets, including inns and grog shanties,” equating to approximately “one hotel for every 44 people” (Scanlon 11). According to staff at the local Historical Society, there were more establishments that were not licensed, thus unrecorded, during the times the Lambton colliery was open. These places were filled with men, still dirty and sweaty after working, and heavy drinking was always on the agenda. Accordingly, I focused my reading and my research on portrayals of men in similar environments. I discovered that I was specifically looking at a pub-based, alcohol-fuelled masculinity in literary fiction that was specifically set or linked to the pub.

The pub's role in alcohol-fuelled displays of masculinity is clearly not confined to the Australian context. In D. H. Lawrence's third novel, *Sons and Lovers*, the pub setting, while only featured sparingly, is somewhat similar to that of Newcastle. Set in a small mining town, the pub is a place the workers are drawn into and where these people are slowly changed. We are introduced to Walter and Gertrude Morel early in their married life. As the narrative progresses, we discover that Walter is not the same man that Gertrude married, that the marriage is strained and hatred toward each other is forming; the only thing holding the couple together is their children. In stages, we find that Walter was a polite young man who did “not take any drink” (19) when they first married, but had changed during their time living in The Bottoms. Working in the mines and in the cramped, close proximity to other miners, there was a societal expectation for Walter to drink at the pub and spend less time with his family. The place and the expectation of a certain behaviour in the place turn Walter into a drinker, one who returns home drunk, shown by the fact “His cheeks were very red and shiny above his black moustache” (11); it was expected that after work, in this town, they all “stop to have their pint at Ellen's” (19). He feels guilty for acting in this manner, for performing what is socially expected of him in this place, and “his guilt has made him irritable” (x); he lashes out, kicking and destroying the gate that holds him within the place of home, before fighting with his wife. The pub, as much as the mining town, influences Walter, shapes him and changes him. His home place becomes a constant reminder of the life he leads and the expectation of certain behaviour from him; it is a prison, one where he kicks at gates to try to break free. His marriage becomes strained, largely due to his drinking and the influences of the pub, and this becomes key to shaping all the characters' lives within the novel.

The influence on not only those within but those close to people who frequent the establishment was something I wanted to explore as I continued to read and plot. The idea for my novel was initially to show these influencing powers of the pub and the consumption of alcohol as they happened. As the novel developed, I learned that I had to show the consequence as much as the cause, but the idea was still to show my characters in the environment that helped shape them. One criticism of early versions of “Overflow” was the overt masculine presence and the absence of a strong female character, but it was a deliberate choice. Certainly, while women have a presence in the pub today, the local pub is traditionally a male dominated environment, and many establishments still have a strong patriarchal social structure. Until the mid-1970s, the public bar, or in some cases the entire pub, was seen as a male domain, where women held few freedoms that the men possessed (Coombs 206). With the exception of the high-profile members of the Sydney Push (a predominantly left-wing intellectual sub-culture in Sydney with politically motivated individuals such as Germaine Greer, Margaret Fink, and Eva Cox) throughout the 1950s and 1960s, women in Australia were predominately relegated to work behind the bar, drinking more expensive drinks in Lounge Bars, or expelled to the car park with drinks bought by their male companion. This in itself makes for a fascinating sense of place within the pub, where male behaviour was displayed in the main bar without filter for so many years. With the excuse for publicans refusing service to women being the lack of female toilets, the gender segregation continued until the 1970s. In 1973, the “invasion of previously undisputed male terrain” of the public bar began with a group of seventeen women requesting drinks from the front bar in a Manly pub, ultimately resulting in their eviction by the local police (Homan 86). It was these events that spurred media focus and social protest that continued until the laws were changed to allow women access to all areas of the pub (Homan 86). Despite these changes to the laws, some smaller establishments still have an overwhelming male presence and women are, while legally allowed, often made to feel unwelcome by the older regulars.

It should be noted that this segregation or degradation of women in the place of the pub was not limited to Australia. In Peter Ho Davies's novel, *The Welsh Girl*, we are given glimpses into the Welsh pub, “The Quarryman’s Arms”, as Davies “works a trio of characters out of the fixities imposed by their time and condition” (Eder 1). One such character is Esther Evans, the titular Welsh girl, who works as a barmaid in the local Welsh pub during World War II. Davies slips between each of the three main characters, each passing through the others’ lives and in the process comments on the war. But it is Esther that is the main focus of the story. When the British soldiers arrive in her town, it is Esther, being one of the few who speak English, who is sent to find their purpose; it is Esther who is considered the “peacemaker between the pub’s Welsh-speaking regulars and the detested British soldiers” (Eder 2); and it is Esther—restricted

in her life's ambitions, raped, and overcoming this to find something more in life—who discovers the most about her life and world. With that said, in the scenes within the pub, Esther is cast aside in comparison to the pub's male regulars. She pours beer after beer, “until her arms ache” (25), and is barked orders to “warm [the radio] up” while in the middle of serving (23). The men, particularly the British soldiers who now frequent the pub, dominate the environment, as they “whisper about the girls” (29) and “loung[e] around, legs splayed, collars open, like so many conquerors” (29). For them, it is a place for them to be men, where they are not judged and can feel unworried about their behaviour. It is their sense of place within the pub that allows and encourages them to act in such a high-prehistoric manner that oozes masculine dominance.

Today, in Australia, while certainly there is a female presence in local establishments, particularly those newly renovated, in many instances, the prominent force in smaller pubs is still male, and the displays of masculine behaviour are not much different to those of the “conquerors” in *The Welsh Girl*. Many smaller local pubs I frequent are heavily patronised by men, with few (if any) women, and the more notorious events—fighting, heavy drinking, sexist and inappropriate conversation, excessive gambling and other vulgarities—mostly involve men. Indeed, from personal experience in a few small masculine-heavy establishments, the few women I have met have portrayed themselves in such a manner that plays to the heavy-drinking, curse-word using masculine stereotype expected within these places. Even the less ‘brutal’ male establishments, such as those known for live original music rather than purely for heavy drinking, suffer from influences that lead to audiences dominated by a particular type of male. This is an aspect I wanted to capture in my novel. Sam De Brito noted recently in the *Sun Herald*, “guys go where the girls go and [...] most gals who wash regularly wouldn’t set foot in our smaller live music venues. If they did, one look at the wine list and dunnies would ensure they’d never return” (1). These venues still draw a crowd, but one that is small, dedicated, and often perceived as rough, drunk and violent.

The dilapidation of many small local establishments tends to deter female presence, yet it is the very thing that draws a certain type of male patron; this type of male uses the pub to escape from societal bounds and uses the place to be ‘men’ without fear of repercussion. The sense of place that they come to associate with the pub creates an environment that, in turn, encourages others to act in a similar manner. The attraction of this crowd in turn deters female presence, which leads to a greater crowd of a similar type of male, and the cycle continues. The result is small crowds, but a very stereotypical one. Drinking beer is seen as a masculine activity and the more traditional Australian regional pub presents an aesthetic—dark, well-worn environments filled with televisions airing sports and races, sweating bar taps, and no requirement for dress standards or decorum—that is comfortable to a certain type of male. They invite men to be “men”, to indulge in a certain comfortable sensibility: to drink beer, bond

without feeling effeminate, bet, smoke, and be within a space where one is free to talk about sexual relationships and perceived dominance.

This is what I set out to create in my novel: a small, local pub where masculine identities are dominant, but not so much that they overpower the establishment. The Queen Victoria is not sexist, though it may have sexist characters within it; it does not discriminate, but still remains predominantly occupied by men, even in the front bar where live music is played, not unlike many local establishments in Newcastle. It is not a place where everybody knows your name, but rather a place where everybody is free to do and be as they wish; they come to escape their realities and home lives, to drink and forget, to meet friends or strangers, or to simply spend time with a loved one. Women are present and important in my pub, but I wanted to focus on the masculine subjects in the male domain.

According to James R. Mahalik, Gordon Walker and Micól Levi-Minzi, “Men may anticipate their world from their experiences of being male in society (e.g., being told to be tough, self-reliant) and may take—or not take—certain actions based on their understanding of the world (e.g., ignore pain, refuse help)” (240). Their article, “Masculinity and Health Behaviors in Australian Men”, discusses the idea of archetypes of stereotypical Australians and how Australian men tend to aspire to fit into these roles. This is particularly pertinent in the traditional Australian pub; it is a “blokey” realm where the company one keeps shapes one’s behaviour, where the patrons become a product of the environment which they patronise. Mahalik, Walker and Levi-Minzi identify five key masculine images, four of which many of my characters can be linked to:

Other masculine images [beside the athlete] distinctive to Australia include the bushman, the mate, the larrikin, and the ocker (Lucas,1997). [ . . . ] The bushman reflects values of physical toughness and stoicism, the mate values egalitarianism and concern for the welfare of others, the larrikin can challenge mindless social convention, and the ocker reflects working-class sensibilities eschewing high culture and refined manners. However, these masculine images have negative implications for health behaviours. The athlete may be admired for ignoring injury and self-care when hurt; the bushman takes dangerous risks; the mate can reflect misogyny and fear of femininity; the larrikin is often characterized by drunkenness, brawling and visiting brothels; and the ocker is gets [sic] frequently portrayed as sitting around the pub drinking his beer. (242)

While the character Geoff seldom challenges the rules of social convention, he is seen to question authority when he is repulsed by the idea of taking advice from his elders and in his disrespect for his father. His drunkenness and willingness to fight, both verbally and physically,

as well as his sexual forwardness with Nill, show his character embracing this role of the larrikin and the negative impact this archetype has on him. In a similar manner, Trace fits the “image of [the ocker,] a working man who is ‘rough around the edges’ (Australian National Dictionary Centre, 2007)” (Mahalik, Walker and Levi-Minzi 242). He swears, his hair is long, and his clothes are disheveled; he frequents the pub almost daily to sit and drink, talking to anyone nearby, or nobody at all. Opposite each of these characters are their counterparts, Bruce and Jimmy, who help balance and ground each character. Both these characters attempt to guide their drunken friends, showing genuine concern and providing support in the process. Simultaneously, Jimmy becomes dependent on Trace (for patronage and protection), while Bruce becomes dependent on Geoff (for support, bringing friends to listen to his music, and providing company before his set). These are characteristics of the mate in Australian culture and, as outlined by Mahalik, Walker and Levi-Minzi, both Bruce and Jimmy fulfill this archetype. Boss, on the other hand, conforms, in part, to the Bushman: his emotions, while displayed, are limited, his stature and past employment portray physical toughness, and he takes the dangerous risk of stepping up to be involved in a fight, despite his age. Jack and Malcolm both play characters that fall into multiple categories.

A novel that builds on these archetypes and shows how the place of the pub can shape an individual is David Ireland’s 1976 *The Glass Canoe*. Most of Ireland’s novel is set solely within the one local establishment. While set in a different time and narrated in the first person, in contrast to my novel, which is narrated in the third person and set in very recent times, Ireland’s capturing of characters, broken storylines and exploration of pub-based masculinity have strongly influenced my work. In the Miles Franklin Award winning novel, we are introduced to the world of The Southern Cross, an old pub in the era where the pub was almost solely man’s domain. Through often brief, often poetic chapters, Ireland explores the masculinity of patrons through the eyes of the main narrator, Meat Man, who views The Southern Cross and its clientele with unnerving honesty and brutality. Meat Man introduces and follows a number of the regulars, such as Sibley, Alky Jack, Serge, The Great Lover, Mick and Aussie Bob, and shares stories about their lives at the local and beyond.

Ireland’s novel is made up of short vignettes that create a mosaic of tones, moods and milieus. Throughout we are shown the dark, seedy, and disturbing side of these characters as they fight, drink, and sleep their way to combat their misery and exemplify their masculinity stereotypes. Through the stories shared within the pub, and the actions taken while within the confines of the pub or with other regulars from the pub, we see Ireland’s characters continually prove themselves to be men in almost barbaric fashion.

Portraying masculine identities within the pub is often performed through actions and attitudes relating to violence, drinking and sex. While alcohol and violence are topics I shall

return to in more depth, Ireland performs a startling exploration of masculinity when he returns continually to relate disturbing accounts of sexual encounters. We learn of the male pensioners who resort to sexual relations with other male pensioners, purely for sexual gratification, the narrator likening them to prison inmates in that they “get to like it” but would “mostly go straight back to women” given the chance (9). Footballer Danny has his sexual pleasures with one particular loose woman interrupted when larrikin Mick reaches through the window and “dates” Danny just prior to climax (13). Other characters are named for their sexual attributes (such as Meat Man himself) or their prowess, such as The Great Lover, who slept with “anything with a hole in the right place and brush round it” (73). Time and again, Ireland investigates the masculinity of the characters within the pub through their responses and actions with regards to drinking, violence and sex. These characters act in ways far from the norm and are portrayed performing acts that are almost surreal. Ireland’s characterisation of the masculine pub is something I wanted to explore, but in contemporary pubs, and in a more normatively realistic style<sup>2</sup>. Ireland clearly identified the pub as a place that has dramatic and influential effects on people and explored this through his characters. While my characters may not go to such extremes, Ireland had a significant influence on my own understanding of the place of the pub and the portrayal of my characters.

What I find interesting about Ireland's novel is the way he deliberately examines each of his characters with regards to masculine stereotypes, but simultaneously warns of the risks associated with such categorisation. While his characters may fulfil the requirements of one or many of the archetypes set out by Mahalik, Walker and Levi-Minzi—Alky Jack fits in as the older gentleman “mate”, many fit as the larrikins with their challenging of social convention, drunkenness, sexual escapades and brawling, and most fit at one point or another as the rough blue collar, beer drinking ocker—the character of Sibley teaches us very graphically the dangers of relying too heavily on identifying these individuals with generic labels. Sibley, an over-confident, somewhat pompous PhD candidate performing his studies on the drinkers of the Southern Cross, labels the drinkers at the pub with terms such as “easily led”, “anal passive” and “effeminate”. In a moment when, plied with liquor, he has the floor, he informs the drinkers that they are required to “integrate and assimilate into the mainstream of Australian culture” (108) and that they will be “changed for the better, changed irrevocably” (109). He makes himself a target as it becomes evident that “the ordinary man in the pub refuses to be made to conform to external standards of right and wrong” (Green 43). In a novel obsessed with “urine, faeces, semen, blood, corpses and human remains” (Kirkby 8), when Sibley goes missing after

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<sup>2</sup> While, certainly, I have met individuals like the characters in both Ireland and de Brito’s novels, who carry two beers at a time, swear incessantly, who speak vulgarly, with sexist, racist, or homophobic undertones, or who are aggressive and violent, the larger experience in pubs for me has been somewhat more tame. I felt that, while those extremes do certainly exist, the more normative experience was more interesting to explore.



his patronising speech, the return of a once-empty stolen keg with the top welded back on signals his grisly demise. The displays of masculine behaviour continue to mount as the keg expands, before it finally erupts, spewing black sludge and a stench throughout the pub, a sign of Sibley's end. The way the keg expands before filling the place with the stench and filth of the sludge is symbolic of the worrisome masculine constructs, continually becoming more crude and violent, filtering through the pub. In time, the keg is taken away by two regulars, cleaned, and returned with bones that "*had* to be bigger than cats' bones" (180). Ever after, the keg with bones is used as a test of strength, hoisted above patrons' heads and beaten like a drum.

Violence is continually used as a means of displaying and proving masculinity by the characters in Ireland's novel. The three most dominant men in the pub are Serge, The King and Mick; they are considered "the elders" of the pub (Daniel 97), each of whom had "his own circle" (Daniel 97) of followers. These elders "laid down the laws and dispensed wisdom from the shoulder" (25) and, while proving their status as the leaders of the pub, lead by example with their fists. It is the character of Serge that I find most interesting, exemplifying the type of male who has a compulsive need to demonstrate his strength. While one of the leaders of the pub, it was purely because of his physical dominance.

He was a pub fighter. Not like some that went round wherever there was a man with a reputation and waited to take him on. Serge was a pub fighter at the Southern Cross, and only there. He wasn't even king of the pub.

Simply that he fought often, and usually with strangers. (23)

Serge would often begin a fight to stamp his authority. His "monster would take over and Serge would swing" (23), and the locals knew to be careful about him. His behaviour implies that it is the place of the pub, notably the place of the Southern Cross pub, which causes him to act in this particular manner. The sense of place helps create particular feelings and associations. This is the case for many of the locals at the Southern Cross pub, each trying to portray a tough persona through walking tall, drinking heavily, and feats of strength coupled with violence. The testosterone-fuelled behaviour reaches a peak when some twenty "strangers" enter the pub; the final scene is a portrayal of masculinity at its most violent when a brawl occurs between all in the pub except the older barflies like Alky Jack. Every man agrees, in advance, to fight fair without weapons. The sense of place invokes a sense of pride and honour, and the men all fight to prove their prowess. It is nothing the pub hasn't seen before; the bartender "Sharon read the paper, the demand for beer had fallen off sharply" (224). The fight turns nasty and weapons become involved, and it is not long before the locals literally break through the wall of the pub, exposing the brutality to the outside world. The novel closes with Meat Man getting a "fleet of glass canoes" for his fellow tribesmen and a cyclical image of "the Cross kids [...] shooting

butterflies” down the back (235). Despite the destruction, the broken bones and bloodied skin, the same behaviour will continue.

Feats of strength and violence, coupled with drinking, sex, and swearing, are constant reminders that the subjects we are dealing with can be brutal, vulgar and risk-takers. Ireland's characters participate in crudeness with strippers and loose women, swear constantly, and beat on each other, pensioners having sex, and anyone who stands close enough to throw a punch. It is through violence, however, that Ireland truly demonstrates the full extent of these types of masculine identities. In the environment of the pub, asserting one's masculinity is a matter of honour; one has to be seen as manly, as dominant, as in control, to fit in and to be accepted and, most importantly, to have honour in being a man. Violence is often used to defend this honour or, even, to attain it. Sibley's death is not the only example where violence is used in retaliation to the questioning of masculinity. These are honour-driven, brutish characters and violence is seen as the means to enforce one's dominance over others. When Serge's ruling on a game of billiards is challenged by a stranger, Serge attempts to use violence as a means to correct the lack of respect and questioning of his own honour. With the demand of “Outside” and jerking his thumb toward the door, Serge's dominance is doubted further when the stranger wins the fight after attacking from behind (172). Regardless, the reader is informed not to be concerned about Serge, that “Whatever cuts and gashes he got healed up without scars” (173). In other words, despite losing the fight, his honour remains intact because he fought for it and did not back down. Ireland suggests that this need for respect and honour is stirred further through the consumption of alcohol. The narrator says that “The golden drops stirred something inside that wasn't human” (11), before further clarifying that “Maybe it was all too human. Maybe it was the hunter and destroyer of life inside them [ . . . ]” (11). This behaviour, violent and aggressive, is something instinctive to Serge while under the influence of alcohol and in the environment of the pub.

When exploring my characters, violent behaviour seemed to be an inevitable development; I never deliberately set out to create violent characters, but within the environments I placed them it seemed natural that they would have aggressive tendencies. With that said, the instances of violence in my stories are far from brutal when compared to Ireland's. Characters in *The Glass Canoe* are almost comically grotesque, with one character, Ernie, even hammering a stake through his unconscious girlfriend's temple into the wooden floorboards beneath the kitchen linoleum. I wanted to portray my characters lashing out through frustration and anger, rather than blind rage and murderous intent; I wanted to highlight the everyday instead of the absurd. Malcolm puts his fist through a wall, scaring his wife during an argument; Trace intervenes and freely throws a punch when a patron gets aggressive with the bartender; Geoff picks a fight with a random man at the pub out of grief and in a drunken belief that it

might help him “feel somethin’” (88). In each of these instances, violence is used by the characters in an attempt to cement their masculinity, to gain control in a situation and over their emotions. It is Bruce’s nonchalant reaction to violence that comments most tellingly on violence, particularly violence surrounding the pub. For Bruce, violent behaviour is part of his life; when he is threatened, he shrugs it off and carries on with his job. When a brawl breaks out in the pub, it does not seem to faze Bruce.

Each man has one hand gripping the other's shirt and one hand wrapped around a beer. The crowd falls quiet. Bruce continues strumming along to the Wiggles' song, watching the two fighters and providing an abstract soundtrack. (80-1)

The fight takes place in the front bar, mostly filled with young patrons there for the music, but the idea of a fight is something to be revered and observed: they make room for the fighters and watch on. For Bruce—and even the fighters, who take the time to put their beers down before fighting—violence in the pub is commonplace and does not really require any special attention.

Violence is an ever-present reality in the place of the pub, especially in recent times through the Newcastle and Hunter Valley area. An increase in alcohol- and drug-related crimes in establishments in the Newcastle area was reflected, or amplified, in the media publicity surrounding a government crackdown on antisocial behaviour associated with drinking establishments since early 2007. Several years later, at the time of writing, there are still meetings of police and Newcastle city residents, patrons and hoteliers seeking a solution to the level of late-night violence and antisocial behaviour. Curfews, lockouts, drinking restrictions and refusal of liquor licence transfers have all been used in an attempt to lower the violence, and the sphere of restrictions expands as establishments in outer suburbs are subjected to the same new laws.<sup>3</sup>

Here lies a local culture

Most nights were good, some were bad

“Star Hotel” (Cold Chisel, 1980)

Newcastle has been dogged by a violent pub history. Most notably in recent times, the beloved Star Hotel, in a state of disrepair, had a final farewell gig, which was partly a peaceful protest

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<sup>3</sup> The introduction of strict new laws in 2008 which reduced trading hours, required hoteliers to employ stricter security measures, and restricted (or reduced the quantity of) the sale of certain alcoholic beverages after a certain hour was something that was first met with apprehension and protest by many of the drinking public. Four years later, however, the consensus from those I have spoken to is that it was a necessary action, especially after seeing the sharp decline in violent acts both in and around drinking establishments. In fact, Newcastle Licensing Unit won an award in November 2008 after seeing “night time street offences were halved” and “a 25 per cent reduction in night time assault related presentations in emergency departments” (Bushby 1).

against its closing, with free beer and live music in September 1979. Over 2000 people (with some estimations as high as 4000 people) rebelled when police enforced the closure of the pub and began ejecting people in the middle of the band's last song. The result was overturned cars, two burnt out police vehicles, assaults against police and the general destruction of property (Homan). There has been concern for some time by many Newcastle residents that the enforced curfews would see history repeat itself, but to-date such extreme reactions have not occurred. But as described by the Cold Chisel song, "Star Hotel" (1980), a song that reflects the current problems as strongly as it did those at the time it was written, pub- and club-goers rely heavily on these drinking establishments and the local cultures within as a crutch in an uncertain world.

Between school and a shifting future  
It was the most we had  
Those in charge are getting crazier  
Job queues grow through the land  
"Star Hotel" (Cold Chisel, 1980)

The pub is a place to escape economic downturns and employment concerns, where class is ignored if you have a beer in your hand. It is little wonder that so many people would attend to farewell a place and protest against its closure; many people form strong emotional connections to places of significance such as pubs, and such an adverse reaction to the interruption of this farewell of their local drinking hole does not seem unwarranted. Local pubs feature the latest fashion trends, the "in" music (be it original or covers), the lexicon of the youth and, above all else, an environment where people can go to drink, socialise, or forget. Part of this culture, however, is violence, often as part of an attempt to show male dominance.

After initially observing people in the pub and beginning writing, I found myself wanting to understand their actions more, particularly their propensity for violence and aggression. More generally, I wanted to understand how the sense of place within the pub influenced the people within it and how the behaviour it influenced in turn influenced the place of the pub. In sociologist Steven Tomsen's paper "Boozers and Bouncers: masculine conflict, disengagement and the contemporary governance of drinking related violence and disorder" (2005), a number of male interviewees are questioned about drinking and whether it has an effect on aggression within pubs. Tomsen shows through snippets of interviews that it is not so much alcohol that fuels violence within pubs as the predisposition to violence of those involved in the fight. In fact, in another paper of Tomsen's, "A Top Night: Social Protest, Masculinity and the Culture of Drinking Violence", he explicitly states that on some occasions there can be "very high rates of drinking and little aggression or violence" (93-4). But "Boozers and Bouncers" records his interview participants' opinions with regards to how people often are

“looking for fights” and suggests that “particular clubs with a rough image” and “venues with adverse reputations” were where most of the violence occurred (287).

The most intriguing part of Tomsen’s research regards masculine honour and pride. While acknowledging the research was limited in including only young males and discounting older males or aggressive females, Tomsen examines a particular problem with the place of the pub, where “disputes [are] seen as a natural result of young men socialising and drinking” (289). He finds it is both the predisposition to seek out fights and the idea that one’s honour must be upheld in public that are the cause of many fights. Tomsen and his interview subjects outline a number of scenarios, including using violence to overcome inadequacies (like the “macho dude” picking a fight with the talented dancer attracting all the girls) or to stamp authority (such as taking a smaller guy’s drink knowing that he can’t do anything about it), and discuss how they relate to masculine behaviour. Not surprisingly, aggressive disagreements are rarely solved amicably within the place of the pub, and there is more honour in fighting for a resolution than backing down from an altercation. Alcohol certainly fuels the violence by lowering of inhibitions, but societal pressure also dictates that getting involved in a fight is an “initiation into manhood” and this also encourages the fighters. (“A Top Night” 94). The sense of place within the pub, in particular, seems to dictate that such brutish behaviour is required. One individual notes how it is necessary to respond with violence because even the slightest hesitation will result in your honour being questioned:

“I suppose someone could be seen as a wimp if they back away from a fight even though this guy has done a really bad thing to you. You don’t want to fight because you don’t want to get into trouble or something like that. And you back away and maybe lose some respect from your friends. I don’t know anyone who would do that.” (290)

Violence, in essence, like the consumption of alcohol, is a staple in the realm of the pub. Violence is seen as something that, if in the pub and challenged, you must partake in or else you are ‘not a man’. Tomsen states that the involvement in violence in pubs is for the “protection of male honour in drinking contexts” (94). From what I have observed, this comes down to the sense of place of the pub; such behaviour is encouraged through the historic and cultural significance applied to the place of the pub, and one changes one’s behaviour while in the pub. Tomsen concludes that “there is no direct and obvious tie between violence and the use of alcohol” but, rather, that there “is a complex but powerful link between many incidents of public violence and the social process of collective drinking” (100). In other words, while alcohol may act as a lubricant, it is the environment of the pub, the pub’s provision of witnesses and the potential dishonour to an individual that is the cause of such violence. With this all said, violence is often frowned upon, certainly by staff and security at any given establishment, and it

seems to occur most often between small groups of young males looking to ascertain and affirm social status within their own group.

Certainly, the sense of place of the pub is tainted for many by such negative behaviour and is not simply the place of celebration and good times that one might like to think. Alcohol intake can vary from a quiet drink with mates to the heavy drinking and vomitus mess of an “all-night bender”. Violence can extend from a scuffle between two to all-in brawls and protests like that of the Star Hotel. With shared community stories passed down from the old regulars to the younger patrons, and with the natural instincts of young men coming into play, the place of the pub encourages such behaviour to continue. Not only this, frequenting the pub is often seen as an essential part of one’s behaviour in Australia; “it is an institution and a faithful expression of the Australian ethic” to visit the pub and to do so is “to be patriotic, to be a “fair dinkum Aussie” (Britton 2).

Both the place of the pub and national identity feed into the expectation to partake in the consumption of alcohol. (Likewise, the consumption of alcohol is an influence on national identity and the place of the pub, which forms a feedback loop I will examine later.) Drinking is almost a requirement while within the confines of the pub. There is expectation that particular personality types will be found within the pub, beer in hand, slurring their words and passing their days. As noted in Ireland’s *The Glass Canoe*, drinking in the pub is seen as something that is required for a boy to be “initiated, and [become] a man” (1), where men begin drinking only to “erase the ache and the tiredness (11) and, as they grow older, “drink to erase everything” (11).

The abuse of and reliance on alcohol is something that is essential in the portrayal of this particular form of pub-oriented masculinity. In my own novel, I decided to explore this issue with each of my characters in different ways. In Trace’s story, we see a man drinking for something to do and being proud of the fact his girlfriend (whom he despises) is paying for his beer; in Geoff’s story, we see a young man drinking to forget; in Bruce’s story, alcohol is used as a lubricant to help perform; Jack is an older gentleman who only drinks rum, in the misguided belief it will help with health. But it is in the first story that alcohol is mostly abused; despite Trace and Geoff both becoming extremely drunk, it is Malcolm who appears to struggle most with alcohol dependency.

He hesitates outside the pub on the corner. The low murmur of workers having their after-work drinks comes from inside. He imagines the cold beer sliding between his lips, the frothy head sticking to his upper lip, and the hops biting his tongue. He lingers at the door a moment longer before crossing the road and continuing along the footpath. (8)

We only see Malcolm drunk during flashbacks, but learn of his struggle, see his cravings for alcohol, and are with him when he gives up, after only a couple of weeks sober, and begins to drink again. Wilson notes that drinking alcohol “is a key practice in the expression of identity,” adding that the role of drinking “in terms of culture and identity, [is] not ‘simply’ (as if such things are simple) aspects of everyday life” (3). For my characters, and undoubtedly Ireland’s, drinking is similarly part of who they are and part of how they identify themselves. Drinking has become an integral part of the expression of their identity, both self-identification and how others identify them, and it is through this identity that the characters come to struggle with who they are, causing them to act out aggressively or, in most cases, drink more alcohol.

My inclusion of Malcolm's narrative in my novel is one that was essential for me, even though, unlike the narratives that follow, Malcolm's story has little to do with The Queen Victoria (other than dropping his son off there) or, indeed, any pub. While we see how the environment of the pub has an alluring and powerful effect on him when he hesitates outside a local establishment, and while we do hear of how he turns to the pub for a self-congratulatory celebration after finishing the painting of the house, we do not see him in the pub. This was a deliberate choice. His is an almost cautionary tale, showing the end result for a man who has had the pub-mentality of drinking and violence spill over into 'the outside world.' He drinks to celebrate and he drinks to forget pain; whilst drunk, he lashes out with his fists at his wife when he has his masculinity and honour questioned. For me, Malcolm's story is about his reliance on alcohol and its role in the expression of his masculinity. As well, it shows his self-identification with the struggle against alcohol, showing that alcohol-fuelled behaviour can be found outside the pub, but raising the question of whether this behaviour is fostered, in part, within the pub. It shows the struggle of determining the difference between social drinking within the pub and a dependence on alcohol that becomes an all-consuming part of who someone is.

Alcohol and identity often interweave through Raymond Carver's work with his characters regularly struggling to establish their own identity apart from their vice. It was not until the late 1970s that Carver quit drinking and his most respected writing came to light, such as the collection *Cathedral*. A reliance on alcohol was always a heavy influence on his work.

I'm a recovered alcoholic. I'll always be an alcoholic, but I'm no longer a practicing alcoholic.

(Raymond Carver interviewed by Mona Simpson and Lewis Buzbee, 1983.)

Carver's dependence on alcohol became a large part of his self-identity—even in his sobriety, he is an alcoholic—and his writing “[depicts] what appears to have been very much his own world and his own experience” (Scofield 253). Clark notes that Carver's characters “are almost all working class” (241), while Scofield states that these characters are “preoccupied with the

simplest elements of life—food, drink, work, relationships—[and their] culture consists mainly of television and drinking” (244).

In “Where I’m Calling From,” Carver effectively explores “alcohol addiction, recovery, and possible redemption” with regards to a series of characters who have checked into the rehabilitation centre (Magee 19). Similar to Malcolm in his story, these characters battle the internal struggle with the need to drink. Where characters in my novel mainly drink to forget, however, Carver’s remain sober and try to remember stories of when they were drunk.

Tiny edged in at the head of the table and began telling about something that had happened on one of his drinking bouts. People at the table laughed and shook their heads as they shoveled up their eggs. Tiny would say something, grin, then look around the table for a sign of recognition. We’d all done things just as bad and crazy, so, sure, that’s why we laughed. (Carver 128)

There is a similar sense of ‘one-up-manship’, common with storytelling and behaviour within pubs, with attempts to tell the craziest story or be the drunkest. These stories were how these characters self-identified; Tiny checks for “a sign of recognition” (128) and shows that he is uncertain of who he is and is looking for confirmation that these acts he tells of are ways he can be recognised. The place of the rehabilitation centre is not so unlike the pub: it is a male-dominated environment and each is trying to assert his manliness through his stories and making light of his struggles.

In perhaps the most telling display of masculinity, the unnamed narrator focuses on those around him to find escape and avoid dealing with his own problems of alcohol abuse. He describes a fellow patient as “first and foremost a drunk”, delving into shared stories and only allowing snippets of his problems through in moments of solitude and weakness. The narrator uses his time in the rehabilitation centre purely to ‘dry out’ rather than to address the source of the issue, admitting “Part of [him] wanted help. But there was another part” (138). Even after weeks spent in the centre, the narrator still struggles with the urge for “something to drink” (144). Social pressures, like that which occur within the pub, see the consumption of alcohol as an essential part of being both an adult and masculine; removing this element from the narrator’s life is to undermine all that he has learned of what it is to be an adult male. He relates stories of risky behaviour and defiant moments, such as his driving to the rehabilitation centre while drinking heavily with his girlfriend, to try and reinforce his belief about what it is to be male. The narrator comes to accept his alcohol problem and how it influences his choices. He gradually realises the severity of the situation and admits, but only to himself, that “There’s no way to make a joke out of this” (146). The “hardship is never romanticized because [Carver’s characters] are still too close to ground zero; romanticizing takes hindsight” (Gibaldi 673); the reader experiences the brutality of the struggle and the realisation along with the character. At



the conclusion, perhaps in an attempt to reassert his masculinity to himself and to the reader, the narrator makes a point of ringing both his wife and his girlfriend, with his alcohol problems somewhat ignored.

In both locations, that of the rehabilitation centre and the pub, honour is established among other men through tales of drunken behaviour and through feats that society dictates is expected of men. The bar tenders in the pub encourage people to drink, while the rehabilitation centre staff frowns upon it; but in both locations, the men want to drink. There is an alcohol-fuelled masculinity present, regardless of whether the consumption of alcohol has taken place, that shapes behaviour and expectations while in the company of others. In the pub, one is expected to be brutish and boisterous; in the rehabilitation centre, one is expected to have grand stories of outlandish behaviour while drunk. This form of masculinity is produced largely by the consumption of alcohol while, simultaneously, the alcohol consumed is fuelled by masculine construct, each continually feeding off the other.

There is always a feedback loop created between the masculinity presented within the pub and the pub environment, or at the very least between masculinity and the consumption of alcohol. This dynamic relationship creates a loop—more specifically, a reflexive feedback loop—in which the behaviour of those within the pub deliver the stimulus for the environment, which, in turn, returns the stimulus to the patrons. This stimulus within this space is reflected back and forth, continually, always promoting a certain kind of behaviour. The culture that has helped create a pub is full of brutish, masculine identities with heavy drinking, swearing and violent individuals swelling the bar; but, at the same time, those individuals have also created the pub culture. It is a self-perpetuated loop that continues to feed behaviour of those within the pub.

The pub is synonymous with acts related to drunken behaviour, but none more so than the use of normally socially-unacceptable language. Partly encouraged by the place of the pub, partly by those within, language is used in an attempt to prove one's manliness and, at times, as an act of aggression to try and show one's dominance in the environment. The consumption of alcohol, as it does with most behaviour in the pub, tends to increase the frequency of this language (although some individuals are more prone to the use of a crude vernacular, regardless of consumption). Within the pub, there is an acceptance of the “abandonment of daylight behavioural protocols,” such as polite language and manners, most notably when alcohol consumption is involved (Winlow and Hall 106). In fact, Tomsen notes that “rowdy acts of misbehaviour, like pushing, arguing, swearing, loudness and obscenity, are all valued for being part of a continuum of social rule-breaking which heightens the pleasurable experience of drinking” (“A Top Night” 96-7). Sexist remarks, racial slurs, and aggressive and foul language are common within the pub, and, indeed, in some sub-cultures within the pub, socially expected.

Swearing and socially unacceptable comments are particularly common among a type of masculine identity that frequents the small, brutish local pub. Sam de Brito's novel *The Lost Boys* focuses on such a group of men who use foul language with strong effect. Written in the first person, de Brito's narrator is crude and profane in his behaviour and his language. Ned is a no hoper with "no talent, no discipline and no hope of achieving" (1), who, when he is not surfing, spends his days drinking, smoking, using drugs, and being the social deviant stereotypically associated with the roughest of drinking establishments. Within the opening pages of the book, the narrator talks about masturbating to lingerie catalogues and drug and alcohol use, and swears continually; the confronting behaviour is something that is common to some individuals, particularly after a few drinks and surrounded by peers within the pub. de Brito's characters use every swear word imaginable, littering normal conversation and arguments alike with language that would be frowned upon by many. While surfing out the back of Bondi, they call each other "fuckin' grot" and "Fuckin' Leb cunt," swearing which is present in a lot of the dialogue in the novel (22). The use of this language is something that is required to fit in and be part of the "crew" (23). In the pub, a place considered sacred for this group of young men, foul language continues to be the norm. It is used particularly in moments where emotions are high and the bond between them is put into doubt.

I ring him, I don't know why.

– Where'd you go? I got you a beer.

– I told you I was sweet.

– What are you doing?

– I'm just cruising with a friend.

– A friend? Your friends are back here, mate, not some dirty fuckin' coke slut.

– Neddy.

– Mate, if you're gonna let chicks fuck you for coke, at least go the hot ones.

– Mate, I gotta go.

– You're a fuckin' joke, you know that

I stand at the table letting the boys' conversation wash over me, trying to work out why Scorps' disappearance bothers me so much. I want to believe it's because he's my mate and I wanna see him going forward [...] (15)

In a moment where the narrator, Ned, is particularly hurt, it is interesting to note his language become more volatile when he realises he has been abandoned by his mate while at the pub.

Loyalty is questioned and Ned's swearing is indicative of the betrayal felt. He finishes his beer and leaves the pub without saying another word.

Later in the novel, while in another pub, we see the effect of the place of the pub on the use of language by those within it. Ned and Scorps are watching the rugby union with a collection of Scorps' investment banker friends, all of whom are professionals, dressed smartly, and watching the Waratahs. With a combination of alcohol and the influence of the sense of place of the pub, the conversation that follows is not frowned upon or even questioned.

- When did we start getting turned on by younger chicks? I ask Scorps.
- Always.
- No. When we were twenty-two we didn't look at twelve year olds and go 'Fuck, I'd like to jam it in here.'
- Speak for yourself.
- I'm serious.
- I dunno, mate, he says then stands quickly.
- GO, YOU BLACK CUNT!!! He screams at the TV as one of the Waratahs' wingers chips over the top and chases. (180-1)

With a beer in hand, watching the football on the television in the pub, this conversation is not seen as taboo, inappropriate, morally wrong or politically incorrect amongst their peers. Like most of dialogue from de Brito's characters, it leaves the reader feeling uncomfortable, perhaps even concerned about the Australian male that the novel describes, but this language—containing swearing, and socially inappropriate, sexist, and racist remarks—is considered fine. The environment of the pub, and particularly the consumption of alcohol, alters the tolerance of what is accepted and “‘frees’ them from normative behavioural codes and enables them to engage in or witness forbidden activities” (107 Winlow and Hall).

The characters within de Brito's novel are overtly boorish and vulgar with regards to issues of race, addressing people of different ethnicities in a crass and racist manner. Within *Overflow*, I wanted to address the issue of race, as I often observed it, in a more subtle and non-confrontational manner. I wanted to reflect upon race through the relationship between Geoff and Sam. Sam poses a threat to Geoff in the sense that he is Nill's new boyfriend. Geoff does not like Sam, but this dislike derives, at least in part and on the surface, from an insecurity based on a perception that Sam is a superior man due to his being flush with cash and, in the end, his dominance over Geoff. While it may appear that racial intolerance underlies the perceived threat to Geoff's masculinity by a 'foreigner', racism and issues with ethnicity were points I wanted to portray in an indeterminate manner, not as if they were the sole cause of this indifference or even a cause at all. Geoff was always the portrayal of a decent guy who was in the process of

going through hard times. The death of his mother did not change his values, but the alcohol he found himself dependent on may have caused him to release some violent tendencies and swear more through frustration.

The use of crude language is something that, again, is part of a feedback loop within pubs; the sense of place encourages such language, but such language also influences the sense of place. It can be the cause of a rapid change in the mood of a room or tone of a conversation, cause a fight between friends or strangers, or be the cause of a rejection or the acceptance of a mate. Swearing is something that a large majority of people do, to varying extents and in varying contexts, and is something that I wanted to explore through my characters. Two characters worth looking at closely in regards to swearing in my novel are Trace and Bruce. Trace is portrayed as a somewhat stereotypical tradesman, based on several I know, who swears incessantly without any real cause. He sidles up to the bar with a “Fuck it” before placing his order, he replies to questions with a “Fuck oath,” and complains that life is “fucked.” While, admittedly, like most, he swears when in pain or in circumstances which are frustrating, he seems to swear more while in the place of the pub. The company he is in does not curb his use of profanities, either, as this is his local and he is accustomed to speaking how he wishes. When asked by Nay what he does, he answers that he is a tradesman and explains that it's a “good job for a dumb cunt.” With the mix of booze and feeling at home in the place of the pub, Trace sees nothing wrong with this statement, and is taken aback when Nay's reaction is not positive.

In contrast to Trace is the character Bruce. We witness Bruce swear only once, while in the presence of his wife no less, upon seeing the destruction of his home. This is a moment that is extremely upsetting to him, and it is emotion that causes his swearing more than influence of others. While in the pub, however, Bruce is immune to the need to swear (or drink heavily, smoke, fight, or any other of the behaviours mentioned previously) to fit in and be part of the “crew,” like Ned and those in *The Lost Boys*. I would suggest that this is predominantly because, for Bruce, he is at the pub for different reasons; the place of the pub is not a social outlet or escape for Bruce, but a place of work, a place of economic benefit. As patrons, we visit the pub to become part of something, to be influenced and changed by those around us and to fit in with friends and strangers alike; for Esther and Jimmy and Bruce, on the other hand, the pub is a workplace. It is the same place, but the meaning applied to it by the workers changes the influence it has on them.

The pub is a place that is both crucial to and for the Australian identity. The experiences one can have within help to develop a sense of identity. It is almost tradition that, upon turning eighteen, young people visit the pub to be initiated into adulthood with legal alcohol, gambling, smoking and music. While, admittedly, I have overlooked the positive outcomes of frequenting the pub—increased sociability, courtship, and bonding as a few examples—this environment

does encourage violence, gambling, foul language and discriminatory views, drinking, drugs and casual attitudes to sex. Yet, perhaps disturbingly, it is this place that helps form individuals in their adulthood. For the Australian male in particular the place of the pub will always hold importance in these formative years, where, even though women are part of the pub environment these days, men are shown what is (somewhat stereotypically) expected of them to be a man and where male bonding can take place. The place of the pub will continue to nurture this pub-oriented, alcohol-fuelled masculine identity, which, often, is only exhibited in these environments. The experience gained from the pub influences the person and, in turn, the person influences the pub; the behaviour witnessed within these establishments will always intrigue and perplex me.

## **Last Call**

This project, as outlined in my introduction, has never been a smooth process. I equate it to the first time drinking spirits. At first, it was rough and hard to swallow; but, as the years passed, as tastes (or my direction and writing) have been refined and I have grown accustomed to exactly what I was doing, I feel that I have grown into my work and my work has grown with me.

My novel primarily explores the relationship between place and people. Initially, there is the place of Newcastle, a place that is as much a part of my identity as the house I have lived in my whole life. The smell of the molten steel from childhood tours with my father of the BHP Steelworks, now long-since closed, still linger with me; the feel of sand between my toes at Nobby's Beach is familiar and warming when crossing it, yet somehow different to the sand of other beaches; the sounds of the Westpac Rescue Helicopter flying over my bedroom roof in the early hours rarely disturbs my sleep; the craving for fish and chips from my local take-away, and its superiority to other take-aways, often results in an unhealthy feed; the sight of a large, phallic tower in the middle of our city still makes me giggle like a school boy. This city is laden with experience, with memories, with familiarity and comfort, yet, for me at this point in time at least, does not grow tiresome or boring. This place is where I feel 'at home' and, somewhat like Newcastle's odd way of connecting everyone to everybody else from here, reassures me of who I am and from where I came. Though likely no different from the home town of most people, this connection and bond to my home place is something I found interesting, that I discovered lying within others when they told me of their favourite moments in life.

But, from the onset of my project, more important to me was the exploration of the place of the pub, a place that is of much importance to many people in today's society, especially within Australia. I wanted to examine this place and the effects that this place can have on people. The novel tries to capture the place of the pub, the influence it can have, and some of the masculine behaviour that I have witnessed within. These are things I have seen, people I have met, and, often, conversation I have heard. It is not to say that the absurd that takes place in Ireland's *Glass Canoe* or de Brito's *Lost Boys* never takes place in pubs around Australia, merely that I wanted to convey what I see and experience on a 'normal' night out in the pub.

Indeed, the pub is a formative environment for a large number of people, as it has been for a long time. Even without the consumption of alcohol, the place of the pub can help stir people into conversation, increase sociability and result in courtship. People in the pub often have intelligent conversation where new things or opinions can be discovered; people can meet lifelong friends and lovers; people can be exposed to wonderful music; and, despite the negative

aspects of violence and the like, young males can discover aspects of what it is to be an adult or a man in today's society. It is up to the individual what one takes from the environment of the pub.

The pub is a place that has been influential on my young adulthood. The people I have met within are both inspiring and, honestly, at times scary. Through the people I have met and the very place of the pub, I have gradually changed; through the initiation of pub-life, I have become, to some extent, the typical Australian male. I drink beer to excess, and spirits when flush with cash from the pokies; I smoke cigars on moments of celebration; I curse; I tolerate inappropriate conversation; I have never backed down from a fight (though, never thrown a punch); I have sung out-of-tune to pub bands and been rejected at the bar, by bar tenders and women alike. These are actions that are normally reserved for the pub; the place draws these personality traits from me, escaping my normal reality.

Am I like any of the characters in my novel? Perhaps. But I think that most of us are to some extent when we step through the doors of our local. The next beer, I believe, is my shout.

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