The Triumphant Approach:
Chasing the Unwritable Book

Novel and Critical Exegesis

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Signature: .............................. Date: .............................
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Abstract

Newly single and working the graveyard-shift at his local railway station, Peter Lawson is a complete failure. Yet, inexplicably, he has never felt better in his life. This confidence swells when a newsreader on morning television and an astrologer at the city’s loudest tabloid both agree: Peter is The One...

What follows next tests the limits of his mind, and his faith, as he lurches from crisis to catastrophe – being helped along in his journey by a psychiatrist, a priest, and a class full of autistic boys – before meeting Maya, the one who guides him home.

Set between Sydney, London, and the foothills of the Himalayas, The Triumphant Approach is a tale about love, lunacy and the attraction of belief: a meditation on identity, and the redemptive power of losing one’s mind, in modern day Australia.

Following the novel is a critical exegesis that charts the genesis and development of The Triumphant Approach by examining its various thematic elements with a focus on madness and writing, giving particular attention to the mental illness and spirituality shared by the protagonist and the author. The exegesis examines how identity is changed by mental illness and explores the inherent challenges for the writer intent on expressing that through fiction, as well as looking at the relationship between mental illness and belief – with a view to understanding the symbiotic relationship between the two.
The Triumphant Approach

By Patrick Bryson
God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.

EMPEDOCLES
Lying in my bed, I hear the clock tick
and think of you.
Caught up in circles, confusion
is nothing new...

CYNDI LAUPER

_Time After Time_
Part I – Slouching Towards Petersham
You’re deciding whether or not to jump on the tracks.

You’ve already had an opportunity to go, but you were worried about the other people standing nearby. So you can’t be in too much trouble. You’re not that desperate.

Still, you’re considering it. For your eyes remain focused on what you believe to be a gold coin – a gold coin that would sit snugly in your near-empty hip pocket. You have even made some calculations and come up with a hypothetical plan for how to spend your windfall.

You will buy a can of Diet Coke. You will try and forget that this is what it has come to.

Nine months after your move to Sydney, a dingy mould-ridden flat in the far inner-west later, and nothing but an Arts degree under your belt, you are now on the train to Petersham. At Petersham you will sit for a test that determines whether you get an interview with CityRail.

You have scraped together a CV, plugged a couple of gaps and told a few outright lies. Along with your old school tie, you are wearing the closest thing to a business shirt that you own. The black pants that you have on, survivors from your days as a check-out operator at Woolworths, are now shiny at the knees and arse and will no doubt only last one or two more washes.

You need this job – you have worried yourself sleepless about getting it – and you’re expecting fierce competition for the vacancies. But upon your arrival in the foyer of the Australian Rail Training School, you discover that your concern was misplaced. You’re the best dressed candidate there, and have at least some experience in wearing a tie.
The same cannot be said for ‘The Loud Guy’, who is wearing a tracksuit, a baseball cap and a mobile phone. The Samsung is not distracting him from filling out his application form in the slightest, and the murmur of disapproval from some of the other applicants only makes him speak louder. This is to make sure that his listener – Rashid – can hear the conversation clearly, in far off Yagoona.

‘I fucken hate questions, Rashid. Fuck that, mate. Just give me the job Godfuckyya.’

The Loud Guy sees you chuckling and smiles at you. For the next couple of minutes, it’s as if he plays up specifically to make you laugh. When you go to hand in your form a short while later, you don’t expect that you will see him again. You wonder why he bothered coming at all.

You surrender your paperwork to a Human Resources Executive called Brad, who has unleashed the giant within. His shirt breathes, whereas yours clings to you like melted cheese, and his leather shoes are much smarter than your own vinyl pair. The bright sheen of his bleached white teeth almost forces you to squint.

He looks you over for a few seconds, with some deliberation. When it comes down to it, you’re all in a line and people like Brad decide who moves to the left and who moves to the right.

When he guides you to the left – and to the possibility of work – your hopes are dashed. Secretly, you wanted him to turn you down. Now you are sitting at a computer to do your literacy, numeracy and memory test.

You get a surprise when The Loud Guy walks in and sits himself next to you. He introduces himself as ‘Ali’.

‘I’m Peter,’ you say.
‘Listen, Pete, we’ll help each other out on the hard ones, okay?’

He winks at you. You nod at him and chuckle again, thinking that he should get into comedy. Then you understand why you find Ali so funny; he is dead serious.

You both pass through the test at a similar speed, until you get to the memory segment. It is here that Ali starts to falter. The test requires you to look at three pictures on the screen, in a horizontal row. Then the computer gives you six variations of that sequence and you have to select the initial one that you were shown.

Ali is swearing under his breath and starting to hit the keys harder than necessary. You look around and see that Brad’s underlings are distracted. Leaning across, you point to the screen and whisper.

‘Just remember the first two and the last one will always be right.’

‘What do you mean?’

You point to pictures one and two.

‘Remember one and two. Good, now click “Next”. Okay, where is one and two?’

Ali finds the right combination, selects it and moves on.

‘There is supposed to be no talking during this test,’ says Kelly, a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, short-skirt-wearing minion.

She is looking towards you. You see that she doesn’t care what you do, as long as you pretend to follow the rules.

‘Sorry,’ you say.

You fantasize about her choice of underwear as you answer that the dog runs and that seven times eight equals fifty-six.
Then it’s done. Kelly walks to your terminal and leans over you to look at your results. You breathe in her perfume, while examining her breasts on the sly.

‘Excellent, Peter, you should hear later today about an interview.’

‘Great.’

You pick up your folder and nod at Ali. He nods back and gives you another wink. When you’re outside the school and walking away, you hear someone jogging up behind you.

‘Pete, thanks Brother. I’ve failed that fucken test three times already. I could never get the order until today, mate.’

‘No worries.’

‘Mate, we’re gonna be cruisin’ the CityRail boulevard together.’

This exchange still has you smiling a little while later, as you pass through the Concourse of Ashfield Station, on your way home.

That’s when you are presented a vision of the future. There is the unmistakable sound of drunken shouting as you turn and see a young man punching the window of the ticket booth, screaming:

‘Fucken CityRail cunts.’
All is quiet as you turn into the street described as having the ‘nice leafy outlook’.

What the real-estate agent neglected to mention when you first viewed the unit included the lack of sunlight for three-quarters of the day, the subsequent damp in the bedroom, and the heroin addicts in the flat next door – who at least showed some restraint in only asking for money on the second time that they met you.

Once inside, you change into your more comfortable, burnt-out, hole-filled jeans. The holes exist because you haven’t worn much else for three years. You pick up the guitar that’s leaning against the wall and sit in your St Vincent de Paul chair. The guitar is missing a string, the chair a sizeable part of its covering.

With the help of some CityRail cash you’re almost certain that these things will soon be remedied, so the recent depression that has been dogging you doesn’t settle on your frame along with the flat’s accumulated dust. It just lurks somewhere near your spine.

Feeling the need to distract yourself, you switch on the radio and lift up yesterday’s paper.

You have been sitting like that for about forty-five minutes, when the phone rings. It’s odd that it rings at all, so it startles you. Indeed, as the prospect of talking to someone unannounced usually causes you anxiety, your first reaction is not to answer it.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi, Peter. This is Kelly from Advice Recruitment. We’re conducting the interviews for CityRail.’
‘G’day.’

‘We’d like you to attend an interview.’

‘Great.’

She asks you to come in to a Surry Hills address, on Monday.

After hanging up, you hear a key in the door – though you don’t rush to open it. You resume your seat in the corner and prepare yourself for the retelling of the day, as seen by your girlfriend. You don’t love her anymore and you suspect that she has figured this out already, but is hoping for a miracle.

She enters, puts down her bags, and rushes over to kiss you. The way she smiles and tries to cheer you up makes you feel like a monster.

‘You wouldn’t believe what happened today,’ she says.

‘Wouldn’t I?’

And so she goes on. Undressing in the next room, she continues with the prattle – never stopping for more than a few seconds.

‘Do you want to get something to eat?’ you interrupt.

She comes out into the lounge room.

‘Okay,’ she says.

While walking with her towards Parramatta Rd you inform her about the developments of your day. Seeing that you are not keen on the job – or the life of a low ranking public servant – she attempts to comfort you.

As she is speaking you daydream about pushing her in front of the oncoming traffic and wonder if the accompanying prison term would be any worse than working for CityRail. But you chase the thought away. Your days of being nasty to her are at an end.
Accepting that you’re not happy, taking this demoralising job, and telling her that you want to live by yourself will be your first steps towards becoming an adult.

‘Everything is going to be fine,’ you say.

It’s true but at the same time you are peddling deceit. What you mean is that even when you break-up, her life will go on and be successful and happy – just without any assistance from you.

This doesn’t take up your thinking for too long, though. At the time that you did get into university, by applying for special consideration, your love life had been of massive importance to the rest of humanity. But since you’ve graduated, you know that where you sleep, and who with, is a small matter.

It’s fair to say that your de-facto, Maxine, won’t see it in the same way.

Apart from her weight going up and down, switching from Mild to Super Mild cigarettes, and the seasonal swap in her ‘favourite’ TV show, she hasn’t changed since you first met her at the end of high school. She still loves sex, values it over all other things in your life together, and has little time for your dreams.

She just tells you what you want to hear sometimes, while hoping that you never thrive. And you both know why that is; if you’d had any success, you would’ve been out the door in a second.
You’re back.

But this time you are wearing the navy-blue trousers and the light blue shirt of the State Rail Authority.

As you’re scanning the notice board to see what group you’re in, you hear him.

‘Brother Pete. Over here, my friend.’

Ali has a huge grin. He’s made it, after two years of trying to get a job on the network. He is also the only member of your class to be wearing street clothes.

‘Guys, this is the bloke I told youse about. Without him, I would have failed that fucken test a fourth time.’

‘I won’t have you blokes sitting together then,’ says the man with the most impressive beer gut you’ve ever seen.

This is your new teacher – the coordinator of the course, no less.

‘I’m just jokin’ mate,’ says Ali.

Everyone laughs.

‘Don’t worry,’ says Beer Gut. ‘You’ll both suit CityRail just fine.’

Beer Gut then keeps his promise. You are put at one end of the classroom, Ali at the other. Beer Gut writes his name on the whiteboard: Steve Adams. He explains the rules. He tells you what you’ll be doing and how to cope.

‘Remember, when they yell at ya, they’re yelling at the uniform. Don’t take it personal, or you’ll go mad.’
He then recounts stories about his own career highlights, and emphasizes how he always did the right thing. He praises himself by inflating his own role in each anecdote, like the time he apprehended the ‘SRA Guy’.

‘I have a rule that youse should live by. If there’s an incident, write it down. Make a report. Take a photo. That’s how we got this bloke.’

Beer Gut tells the story. It’s not riveting, just a tale about catching a graffiti artist who worked for CityRail. His tag was SRA.

But hearing Beer Gut hold court, you would swear that he’d directed the hunt for the Backpacker Murderer and – through the use of his rare psychic abilities – discovered the crucial piece of evidence, solving the case on his own.

He stops talking about himself when his boss walks in, a few minutes early.

‘Out of all the Government Departments, we’ve got the worst record in front of the ICAC. You know what that is?’

‘It’s that corruption thingy.’

Kylie is seventeen and already Beer Gut’s favourite.

‘That’s right, Kylie. The Independent Commission Against Corruption. Don’t take bribes and don’t steal. You’ll get caught.’

He reads the information straight off the page, of which you all have a copy. He has to rush, he says, because you only have three weeks of training before you are left alone on the platforms.

‘Now this is my Boss. He’s gonna have a chat to youse all.’

Beer Gut takes a seat at the back of the room and lets Carl, the Head of Personnel, take over.
‘I pride myself on being able to read people straight away,’ says Carl. ‘So I’m gonna ask you all to stand up and introduce yourselves to the class and give a brief account of how you came to be employed on the network.’

As your classmates talk, you speculate as to how the Head of Personnel managed to get four haircuts onto the one head. You can’t work out if he dyes his wiry locks, wears a rug, or has embarked on some weird combination of the two.

He sees you smirking and asks you to stand up.

‘Okay,’ you say, ‘I’m Peter Lawson. I finished high school in the mid-nineties and then worked in a variety of low-paying, crappy jobs. For the last couple of years I went to Uni.’

Your deadpan delivery goes over well. You are about to sit down when the badly barbered Head of Personnel asks what you did at university.

‘Arts,’ you say.

‘Arts,’ he says.

He doesn’t hide his contempt for you or your degree. And from the way he looks at you when you sit down, he’s betting you won’t be around for too long.

You wouldn’t mind if he fired you right now.
On your second afternoon at the school you are each sent to your home station. For you this means Ashfield. When you arrive, you walk up to the youth on the gate and ask after the station manager.

‘That’s his office there, mate. Are you new here?’
‘Yeah, I started at the training school yesterday.’
‘Fucken boring, ay?’
‘A bit.’

The young bloke puts out his hand.

‘Tub,’ he says.
‘Peter,’ you say.

‘The real station manager has gone home. His second-in-command is in there now. His name is Slick. Watch out, mate. He’s a back-stabber.’

Tub starts checking tickets as you make your way to the station manager’s office. Slick is leaning back in a leather swivel-chair, entertaining a civilian. You introduce yourself and explain why you are there.

He finishes off the roll that he’s been eating and says, ‘Follow me.’

You follow.

He leads you out to the Concourse and walks you up to the staff room, where he allocates you a locker. The place is new, smells of disinfectant and has no character – all cement and glass.
After you put away your bag, Slick takes you back to the Garrison. In the Garrison he introduces you to Tub and Zorba. Zorba objects when Slick refers to him as ‘Zorba’ and instead claims that his name is ‘George’.

Tub finds this very entertaining, Slick a little less so, and you are not sure of what your reaction should be. Slick explains.

‘Whenever a passenger asks us for our name we say, “George”. That way if they ever make a complaint about you, you’re safe – because we’re all called George.’

‘They don’t teach you that at the training school, ay?’ says Tub.

‘I’m leaving Peter with you guys,’ says Slick.

‘No worries, Slick,’ says Tub.

‘Okay, George,’ says Zorba.

As soon as Slick re-enters his office, Tub is up and out the door.

‘Peter, here at Ashfield we look out for each other. Cover me.’

He hurries away and doesn’t glance back. Within a minute Zorba has done the same. He heads off in the other direction, saying that he has to go to the toilet. But he walks nowhere near the toilet.

You have been left alone, without knowing how to change the boards and unable to answer any questions from the passengers.

Two trains come in at the same time, one going to Campbelltown, the other to the City. You don’t announce them. You just try and read the timetable and adjust the boards. As you’re doing that, another train – going to Bankstown – comes in. While panicking about this, you have to let Angry Woman Number One into the toilet and give Angry Woman Number Two a timetable.
You carry out the first request but you have to refuse the second; there are no timetables to give. Angry Woman Number Two starts with the aggro.

‘This is just typical. I bet you do have timetables in there but being a typical bloody State Rail worker you won’t get off your backside and get one for me.’

You raise your voice a little.

‘I’m sorry, madam, but we don’t have any timetables.’

‘I’m going to make a complaint about this.’

‘Go ahead,’ you say. ‘My name is George.’

Slick opens the door, lets out his companion, and walks over to where you are standing with Angry Woman Number Two. Number One, her bladder now empty, passes by you and smiles.

‘Is there a problem?’ asks Slick.

‘I want a timetable,’ says the Number Two.

The authority of his black and white uniform, and the stripes on Slick’s shoulders, placate her a little. She folds her arms as Slick peers into the Garrison and sees that there are, in fact, no timetables.

‘I’m afraid we don’t have any at the moment. You can try getting one at Central, or wherever it is that you travel to, in the morning.’

‘I want to make a complaint,’ she says.

‘Alright,’ says Slick, ‘call 131500. Say that you talked to George, at Ashfield.’

He writes down the number and gives it to her. She can’t do anything else so she walks off, swearing to herself.

‘Where are Tub and Zorba?’ asks Slick.

‘Tub is on the platforms and Zorba went to the toilet.’
As you finish saying this, Tub rushes around the corner and speed walks to where you and Slick are standing.

‘Thanks for covering me, Pete. I’m fucken starving, mate.’

He takes his seat and opens up his bag of McDonalds. Slick smiles at you. Zorba then enters the room, from the opposite direction of the toilet, and Slick asks him where he has been.

‘Down in the car. I’ve got a fridge in there.’

Tub laughs and Slick pats you on the back.

‘You’re going well,’ he says.

Then he walks off. You look at Zorba and ask him to change the boards for you.

‘Ah, okay, George,’ he says.

For the next few minutes, while you sit in the corner, Zorba talks of his itchy balls, his three girlfriends and how he has to masturbate at least twice a day. He also tries to palm off some pornography on you.

‘It’s free, Boy.’

He’s not lying. Later, when Tub takes you on a tour of the station, you see that there are drawers, both upstairs and down, filled with the stuff.

‘We get it all off the Newsagent at the end of the month,’ he says. ‘We look after him and he looks after us.’

The ICAC, it seems, don’t know the half of it. You meet Elias, the Newsagent.

‘What is your good name?’ he asks.

‘Peter.’

He looks you up and down.

‘Peter,’ he says, smiling, ‘I shall call you “The Long One”.’
You and Tub make your way back to the Garrison and everyone is introduced to your new nickname.

‘Boys,’ says Tub, ‘this is “The Long One”.’

Slick nods his approval and then resumes the conversation he was having with the friend he’d been entertaining in the office, who has now returned from the Mall.

‘So this move is the most effective,’ says Slick.

He demonstrates a self-defence technique that requires the practitioner to utilise their elbow as a weapon. It is only then that you start to understand the style of your station’s second-in-command.

When you first heard his nickname, you got an image in your mind of someone tall with hair a little like yours – short, black and swept back with a bit of product.

But Slick has a Mullet originating from somewhere near nineteen eighty-six. He could slip into a host of bands from that period as the geeky keyboard-axe player, or, even better, he could star as one of the bad guy’s henchman in a B-grade kung fu flick: a henchman who chased down the hero by walking very fast in pursuit of him – while the hero ran away at full pace – at last being foiled in his quest by a woman with a pram getting in the way.

‘You can sign off now, Peter,’ he says.
You are on the train, having left the school at Petersham for another day. Apart from the excellent bacon and egg rolls, you have so far received nothing of substance there. You have taken tests, watched videos and read through Big Blue Folders, but none of it has had an application in the afternoons during your work on the platforms at Ashfield.

It’s when you reach the top of the stairs that you see him. Navy blue tracksuit pants, a grey USA hooded sweater and a black NY baseball cap – the uniform of Richard II. For that is how he introduces himself to you.

‘Absolutely, Brother,’ he says. ‘I’m your Richard II.’

You are a wary of him. He seems a little too keen to become your friend – like he is about to hit you up for a loan. You want him to leave, so you can talk to Tub in private, but you can’t get a word in. They are reminiscing about the Sydney nightlife of old.

‘Bro, I was one of the first brothers who came over here from NZ in the eighties, bro. Straight up. All the rich girls loved us, man. We were their black trophy, toy boys.’

Tub is more interested in talking to him about the nightclubs they had in common. Not being from Sydney, you can’t contribute at all.

It was the last day in the training school for you, and you want to discuss your home situation with Tub. He has become a real friend in the last three weeks. You’ve told him that you want to leave Maxine.

‘Hey, bro, what’s wrong?’

It’s Richard and he’s looking at you.
'He wants to leave his missus,’ says Tub.

‘That’s bad, bro.’

‘Yeah, I’ve gotta find a new place. It’ll be fucked, man. Almost like a divorce.’

‘Do you know where you want to move?’

‘Maybe Petersham or Lewisham or something – somewhere inner-west.’

Brother Richard grows excited.

‘Bro, one of my best mates has a place right next to him in Petersham. Studio apartment, Brother. It would suit you right down to the ground.’

‘What’s the address?’

He pauses and tries to conjure up the name of the street, but it doesn’t come.

‘Bro, I’ve forgotten but my mate will come around tonight or tomorrow and I’ll get the details. No probs.’

‘You’ll be set,’ says Tub.

They continue their chat for a time and then Brother Richard heads off.

‘Man, you’re gonna have a stressful few weeks,’ says Tub.

‘I know.’

‘Don’t worry, my friend. When you’re in your bachelor-pad, drinking Crownies and going out with stunners, it will have all been worth it.’

So it’s official; as soon as you find suitable digs, you’re telling Maxine that it’s over.
From the moment you walk through the door, you know that you will move in. It is meant for you: one big room, with a kitchen in the corner, and an adjoining toilet and bathroom.

There are at least fifty different spots on the carpet where the previous tenant has nodded-out with a cigarette in their hand. The butts have burnt holes right through to the cement. You’ll have to buy a few rugs to cover the worst of the marks. After you’ve had a final glance, the real estate agent takes you out the back and shows you the share laundry.

‘You’ve got a job, so if you make an application you’ll get it,’ he says.

He’s not doing the hard-sell. He doesn’t care if you take it or not. You accept his offer of a lift back to Ashfield Station. As you zip along Parramatta Rd, you tell him that you’ll take the room. You spend the rest of the short journey thinking of all the things that you need to buy for the place.

‘Here’s my card and an application. Fax it through ASAP,’ he says.

‘When can I move in?’

‘As soon as you like. You can pick up the keys and the lease tomorrow.’

In the next eight hours, from two in the afternoon until ten at night, you go through all the emotions: excitement, fear and worry. The relief, you’re sure, will come later.

You tell Tub about the development as soon as you get the chance. And he, in turn, starts letting everyone else know what a ‘mad bastard’ you are and how you have arranged your new pad without even breaking it off with Maxine.
‘You’re a bad cunt, you are,’ says Mel, as she faxes off your application for you.

She works part-time and comes from Redfern.

‘I just don’t want to live with her for weeks on end while we both look for different places. This way I’ll be able to get out without much fuss,’ you say.

‘As long as it’s alright for you, ay?’ she says.

But as far as you are concerned, it is a necessary act. Maxine doesn’t care how your life is turning out. And if you don’t tell her about already having the studio, she won’t know the difference.

For the last half-hour of the shift, Slick and Tub give you advice. Slick, focusing on your financial situation, says you should buy an apartment as soon as possible. Tub is more interested in the pain.

‘Fuck, man. How are you gonna tell her?’

‘I dunno,’ you say. ‘I’ll just have to say it straight up.’

‘You can leave early if you like. We can cover for you here,’ says Slick, passing you the attendance book.

You don’t want to go home.

‘Nah, I’ll finish the shift.’

‘You’re fucken scared of her,’ says Tub.

He gives you a playful push. You stand, pick up a pen, and sign the book.

‘Righto,’ you say.

You walk to the Lunch Room, retrieve your bag from your locker, and then stroll past and give the boys a wave.

‘Good luck,’ says Slick.

Tub just nods his head in disbelief.
You didn’t tell them that you intend to drop in and fortify yourself at Brother Richard’s place first. You’ve become a regular.

‘Richard II,’ you say, as he opens the door.

‘Brother Pete,’ he says.

Over a bong and a cup of coffee, you tell him how you will be receiving the keys to your new address in the morning.

‘It’s all set-up, man,’ you say.

Like Tub, he shakes his head at you. But he is smiling in admiration.

‘You out of it motherfucker.’

He can’t believe what you’ve done, and he seems to feel a bit guilty about the fact that he found the place for you. He exchanges looks of amused shock with his missus, Jen.

She tells you that you are doing the right thing.

‘There’s no need for her to know, Pete. A clean break is best for everyone.’

‘Do you mean that?’

‘The missus is right, dude. You might feel bad, and your ex will have a cry, but it’s better for her to find out tonight and for you to move out on the weekend. Straight up.’

‘That way she can hurry and find a spot of her own and you won’t be in each other’s way,’ says Jen.

‘Fuck,’ you say. ‘Can I have another bong, dude?’

‘Don’t be shy, bro,’ he says. ‘Go hard.’
Your new right hand man tells you to smoke the bowl through with him. So you do. By the time you amble up the stairs to your flat in Church St, you are as stoned as you have been in a long time.

She clocks you right away.

‘Have you been smoking?’

‘Yep.’

‘Well, you know what I think about that, don’t you?’

‘What do you think about that?’

‘I think your personality is not meant for taking drugs.’

You put on the kettle. She curses you under her breath and then clears her throat.

‘You need some mood stabilizers, if you ask me.’

It’s not the first time that she has suggested it. One of her best friends had bipolar disorder, before overdosing and drowning in her own vomit, and Maxine thinks that it is unhealthy for you to be so depressed all the time. But you don’t get angry about it. Telling her that she is the source of all your grief is not an option anymore. It happened once, during the now infamous Valentine’s Day fight, and you have no desire to go back there.

When you turn around and face her, your expression has changed. You ask her to sit down.

‘We need to have a talk,’ you say.

It’s as if she has been waiting for it. She nods her head and sits down. Tears well up in her eyes as she speaks:

‘Have you just, like, completely fallen out of love with me or something?’
That stops you. You’d been under the illusion that she would get angry, and want to argue it out. Instead she disintegrates before your eyes and you get drawn into it too, crying like a child yourself.

You tell her that you want to move out. She nods her consent and says ‘okay’ – like all she ever wanted to do was make you happy, and even in letting you go she is fulfilling this duty.

There are things that you omit from your story, as per the plan. You don’t tell her about the studio that you are taking over on the weekend, about how you saved your wages and spoke at length to your friends about it first, building up the hype for this very moment. You don’t mention that you had made the decision to break up with her months ago, and that you’ve just been treading water, keeping up appearances, until you had made it easy enough for yourself to get out unharmed, with enough money to start a new life.

All you can say is that she hasn’t done anything wrong and that you are the one who has changed for the worse. You try to make it sound as if you are doing her a favour by leaving.

She cries and cries.

‘I’m gonna go for a walk and get something to eat,’ you say.

When you return from your Quarter Pounder Meal, after having tried your best to block everything from your mind, she is on the phone to her friends. Plans of her escape are being made.

You are thankful.
You’re waiting for the delivery guys to bring your new furniture.

You’ve opened the front door for the dual purpose of seeing them arrive and for keeping watch on your beautiful neighbour, Isha. Her door is open too. You’ve met her and her partner, Edward, just once. Brother Richard hosted you all for dinner, but on that night you only got to talk to Edward – who is one of Richard’s old mates.

Isha sat in another room with her children and Jen, while you spoke with the men on the balcony.

You’re hoping that she will want to catch up and have a cup of tea. You’ve never lived by yourself, so it will be necessary to foster good relations with the people next door. You’ll need the company.

The furniture arrives first: a bed, two lounges, one coffee table, and two stools for the kitchen counter. The men who carry it in are clumsy and unhelpful. They secure your signature and get out.

You sigh, only then realising that you have to assemble everything yourself.

As you get up and start emptying the first box, she hurries out, hair wet and dripping on her top – highlighting the fact that she is braless – with a full basket of dirty laundry under her right arm.

‘Isha.’

‘Hey, Mr P. How ya doin?’

‘Not bad. I’m just unpacking.’

‘You’ve got a bit of work to do,’ she says, looking over the mess.

‘How have you been?’
‘Good. I’ve just got to pop this damn washing on.’

‘Sweet.’

She races around the corner. When you turn to the right you see her two kids are standing at the security door of their place.

‘Good morning,’ you say.

The girl smiles at you and the little boy hides behind her.

You sit down on one of the communal chairs at the front of your unit, in the little courtyard that you share with Edward and Isha. You attempt to get the children to speak to you, while Isha is still around the back, but they’re too shy.

When she returns, Isha catches you trying to make them laugh.

‘Have they been good?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Augusten, Annabelle, you remember Uncle Peter?’

They still don’t speak but little Annabelle smiles at you again. Augusten hides behind his mother’s leg.

‘I’ll see you later,’ you say.

‘Okay, Mr P,’ says Isha.

You decide not to assemble the bed. Instead you push the mattress over into the corner, and go to sleep.
Your station manager, one Mustafa Graham, introduced himself and told you to sit down. Your paths had not crossed until the end of your training.

‘I like to run a tight ship here at Ashfield,’ he said. ‘I’m loyal to my staff and they’re loyal to me.’

It was utter bullshit. You already knew from your few weeks experience that the whole station was divided into two separate camps: the ones who needed him to further their careers, and the ones who didn’t. This latter group despised him.

You won him over by massaging his ego, and calling him ‘Sir’. As a result, when you left his office, he smiled at you and suggested that you were ‘Officer Material’.

It was a bizarre start to your CityRail life, post training. You turned up for work at six in the morning and left at two in the afternoon, only to return again for the backshift at ten pm on the same night.

‘You’re doing the double back,’ said Tub. ‘Two shifts in twenty-four hours.’

He was right. When you left to go home, you signed off and said goodbye to Slick, who was signing on for the afternoon. Eight hours later, as you arrived for the night shift, you greeted him again as he finished. You learn that this is not uncommon. But being single, young, and prone to keeping your own company, you volunteer to do the backshift and often work twelve to thirteen nights out of every fourteen day roster.

There aren’t any people around after a certain time, so the nights are a cruisy gig, and you’ve fallen into an easy routine.
At eight-thirty pm you have your shower, then get changed into your uniform and sit down to eat a meal of two minute noodles. Leaving at nine-twenty, you walk directly up Parramatta Rd, towards Ashfield.

As you turn into Liverpool Rd you have to pick up the pace, so you can make it in time for 2200hrs – the appropriate way to refer to ten pm in the twenty-four hour roster that is adopted by the State Rail Authority. The official spin is that CityRail is an Organization of Rank, and one that prides itself on Discipline and Efficiency and all those other mottos people serving in the forces break with monotonous regularity.

You have to play along with it to get ahead.

The first two hours of the backshift are similar to the afternoon shift, with people going home from work and the pub. Then it all tapers off at midnight, and you get to close the station for four and a half hours. This is time that you get to yourself.

You start by hosing and mopping out the toilets, a grisly task. Then you sweep all the platforms and empty the bins. To finish, you tidy up the Concourse using the motorised cleaner with the spinning brushes.

It is mindless work. But for those four and a half hours, you own the station as you prepare it for another day.

A favourite pastime is to sit in Mustafa’s chair and play with the CCTV security cameras. You’ve become a master at manipulating the remote control so that you can follow someone from one side of the station to the other, using all the different camera angles available, without their knowledge.

You pay particular attention to the women, and you never miss an opportunity to discuss them in an inappropriate fashion with any colleagues or friends present.

Brother Richard, for one, derives great pleasure from sitting in Mustafa’s chair.
‘Pete, I can’t believe this, dude. My brothers back home in NZ would call me a liar if I told them what you let me do. Brother Pete, the Main Guard at Ashfield, letting me sit in the big boss’s chair and watch the security cameras.’

‘It’s nothing, man,’ you say.

And to you, it isn’t. You don’t care that on the backshift you are responsible for a brand new ten million dollar station.

It’s just a job.
The phone mounted on the wall in front of you rings. It’s the direct line from the Signal Box. You answer it.

‘That 29-R on the Down Sub is six late, champ,’ says the signaller.

‘No worries,’ you say.

You don’t know exactly what he means. You still have to stop and think about the details of the job sometimes, as you’re only a few months in. Down means that the train moves away from the City, and Up means it moves towards it. The Sub is short for Suburban. Platforms 1 and 2 are for the Suburban trains, 3 and 4 are for the Locals and 5 takes care of both.

You call Mel.

‘Control Room,’ she says.

‘The next Liverpool train on Platform 2 is six minutes late.’

‘Thanks. Can you announce the trains while I quickly go to the dunny?’

‘Sure.’

Seconds later she hands you the ‘On-Time Running’ sheet, as she makes her way to the toilet. You announce the trains and mark them off as they come. This one is on-time, tick. That one is five minutes late; you write five minutes late.

You’re almost there. You’ve got less than half an hour of the shift to go. You can already taste the chocolate milk and the sausage roll that you’ll get for breakfast.

An older woman knocks on your door. She is not pleased.

‘That man in the ticket office is very rude,’ she says.

‘Is that right?’
‘Yes, he didn’t get off the phone while he served me and he was very rude.’

‘I’m sorry about that,’ you say. ‘I’ll be sure to tell the station manager.’

She believes you and walks away, satisfied that she has been heard. Then Mel slumps back in.

‘I’m not feeling well,’ she says. ‘I’ve been sick all morning.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘I think I have the flu.’

She puts her hand on her forehead, sighs and then tells you that she will be alright. She leaves with her cup of water and her On-Time Running sheet.

Now a kid in a suit comes up and asks for a timetable. You give him one. He has his pimples and his suit.

‘Why didn’t that train stop?’

‘Which train?’

‘The train that just went by on Platform 1.’

‘It wasn’t meant to,’ you say.

He looks at you with disgust.

‘The Railways are a joke,’ he spits.

Then he puts his timetable in his briefcase and takes to the stairs. Through the window of the Garrison you look down and watch him on the platform as he lights a cigarette and stands tall. He doesn’t even fit his clothes, the poor little smartarse. You’re still observing him as the phone rings again.

‘Garrison.’

‘Peter, can you come in here a minute please?’ says Mustafa.

‘Absolutely.’
You stride into the station manager’s office. Mustafa is leaning back in his big black leather chair. Mel is signing off.

There goes your sausage roll.

‘Mel is going home sick,’ says Mustafa.

‘That’s no good,’ you say.

‘How about four hours overtime? You can look after everything, ay?’

‘Certainly.’

He hands you the On-Time Running sheet and you hurry back out to the Garrison.

You start to get anxious. You’ve grown too accustomed to working the peaceful nights on the backshift, alone. Clocking up extra hours in the morning means that you will have to deal with the peak-hour traffic. Before, you thought that term just referred to the roads. Now you know better. And Zorba has phoned in saying he’ll be late.

Bastard.

Until he arrives you’ll have Mel’s cleaning, his cleaning, plus all the trains and all the passengers.

You scan the timetable and keep close to the Garrison. Mel says good-bye as she shuffles past with her bags and her coat.

‘See ya,’ you say.

A little after seven a group of boys rush in the door. They all speak together. One of their mates is trapped in the elevator. You walk over to the lift and look through the glass panel; there’s the brat stuck inside. He’s about half-way between the Concourse and the platform. All the students from the other schools are heckling him. You press the button and the lift doesn’t budge. So you go and ring Mustafa and ask
him to deal with it. He calls you back soon after and says to tell the kid that the ‘Lift Guy’ will be there in fifteen-minutes.

There is a dumb show between you and the child. You give him the thumbs-up and tell him ten minutes, using your fingers to get the point across. He seems calm and sits down. You go back to the Garrison. When you check on him again he’s gone and the Lift Guy is in the roof stuffing around with the assorted wires.

You take a deep breath and look at the boards, then at the timetable. The next round of trains is still to come. You have about four minutes to yourself now. So you start reading the sports section of the Telegraph.

You’re just sitting there enjoying the back page, oblivious to the train that has stopped in front of Platform 1.

And then come the screams of the lady in the blue dress.

She’s all arms and legs as she skips the last couple of steps and runs towards your window.

‘A MAN HAS JUST JUMPED IN FRONT OF THAT TRAIN.’

You look down and see the train. Oh fuck, you think. You pick up the handset for the internal line and dial Mustafa’s office. He answers and you don’t let him talk.

‘Mustafa – a bloke just jumped in front of the train on the Up Suburban.’

You hang up and turn to see your boss stumbling out the door while putting on his orange safety-vest. He hands you a two-way radio and tells you to call the Signal Box.

‘I’m going down,’ he says.

You call the Signal Box.

‘We’ve got a fatality on the Up Sub,’ you say.
‘Oh shit,’ says the signaller.

‘Can you call Operations?’

‘Yeah, no worries, mate. Fuck.’

You hear him talking to someone else in the background. Then he comes back to you.

‘We’ll have to close the Suburban lines and redirect everything else to the Local, chief.’

‘Fine,’ you say.

Mustafa is on the two-way.

‘Peter, you’ll have to call Operations,’ he says.

‘It’s done, Sir.’

‘Okay, look out for the Emergency Services and escort them in.’

‘Copy that.’

There are more trains coming and going on the other platforms and several passengers waving their arms and telling you that someone has jumped, just in case it had escaped you. One woman demands to be let into the toilet. You stall her, as you direct an ambo to the right platform, and then she starts yelling.

‘I need to go to the fucken toilet now. Let me in now.’

You buzz her in and then you’re called back to the two-way.

‘Peter, we’re gonna have to let all the passengers off this train and then get them onto Platform 3,’ says Mustafa.

‘No problem,’ you say.

‘You’ll have to start making the announcements in a second.’
The phone rings. It’s The Union. The bloke on the phone wants to know if it was a worker that was hit.

‘No,’ you tell him.

‘Is it correct that there was a fatality?’

You remember one of the rules from the Big Blue Folders.

‘I’m not supposed to confirm that. You have to wait for the Coroner.’

He asks again if there was a fatality.

‘Well, he’s not gonna get up,’ you say.

You slam down the phone.

‘When will the next train to the City be here?’

It’s a woman in her thirties. She’s dressed in black and grey. She has glasses on.

‘We’re not sure at the moment,’ you say. ‘We’re waiting for directions from the Signal Box.’

‘So you don’t know when the next City train will be?’

‘It will arrive on Platform 3 shortly.’

‘Will that be an Express?’

‘I don’t know that yet,’ you say. ‘The trains will be out of order for a while.’

Mustafa, again, on the radio.

‘Are you there, Peter?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Alright, the passengers are moving back through the carriages now, mate.’

You’ll have to start making those announcements.’

‘Copy that.’

The Signal Box rings.
‘Your next train will be that 31-A on the Local there, tiger.’

‘How long?’

‘It’ll be about five.’

‘Cheers.’

The woman is still looking at you.

‘There will be a City train on Platform 3 in five minutes,’ you say.

‘Is that an Express?’

‘No.’

‘When will the next Express be?’

You’d like to punch her.

‘*We don’t know.* Just catch the All Stations train. It will be the first one to arrive at Central.’

She’s not happy with your tone.

‘Look, I know it’s difficult for you because of the accident but I still have to get to work.’

You control yourself.

‘Just tell them a man died,’ you say.

She walks off.

You pick up the microphone and start talking.

‘Attention Passengers. Everyone on board the train on Platform 1 please make your way over to Platform 3. All trains to the City will now be leaving from Platform 3. I Repeat: Everyone on Platform 1 please make your way to Platform 3. The next train to the City will be leaving from Platform 3 in five minutes.’
You go and adjust the boards that you can and then you walk over to the edge of the Concourse. Through the glass you can see the train right beneath you. There are a few different coloured uniforms moving around: some from the police, some from the ambulance service and a couple of suits from Head Office. Mustafa is there, in his orange vest, consoling the driver. Behind them, you notice the stretcher.

You look away when you see the red.
After hearing news of the suicide on the radio, Brother Richard runs straight down. You describe the incident for him.

‗Motherfucker,’ he says.

He looks far more upset about it than you do.

‗Are you alright, Pete-dawg?’

‗Fine, bro.’

You smile at him, and then answer the phone. Another customer approaches and asks if a bloke died. Richard engages him in a conversation that you ignore. A section of your brain has shut down. Right now you have no imagination, no memory and no feeling. You are an automaton, changing the boards, handing out timetables and letting people into the toilet like it is the most normal thing in the world.

With the mess now cleaned up, you wouldn’t know anything of importance had happened. Lunchtime is approaching, you’re hungry and all the trains are running to schedule.

You become aware that Richard is speaking to you.

‗Bro?’

‗Yeah,’ you say.

‗Drop by when you finish, alright?’

‗Okay.’

‗Brother, I’ve dealt with this shit before. Don’t think about it, dude. We’ll have some of the good buzz and everything will be fine.’
So you sign off at 1000hrs, after receiving commendations from Mustafa and the gathered suits for your calm leadership during the crisis, and walk straight up Alt St.

Brother Richard opens the door.

‘Come in, bro. You want a coffee?’

‘Cheers, man. That’d be sweet.’

‘Sit down, Petey. Sit down. Don’t be shy.’

He always eases any tension you’re feeling, and he wisely doesn’t ask anything about the morning you’ve just had. He just turns up the music and makes the coffee.

With that finished, he packs himself the first cone, smokes it, and then arranges one for you. You spark up the lighter, and inhale deeply from the proffered vessel.

That is the bong that does it.
It is Friday night.

Edward is in the courtyard, on the sofa-chair closest to your front door, and has changed into his going-out clothes, which consist of a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt. The t-shirt is worn with a short-sleeved button-up shirt, unbuttoned, on top of it.

He concentrates as he cuts up white powder – on a CD case – with his driver’s license.

‘You want a line, bro?’

‘Nah thanks, man. I’ve got work tonight.’

‘That’s even better, son. It’ll give you a pep-up, get you through the night.’

You smile and shake your head.

Edward doesn’t care what you do. He is going to go out and get in a fight. He will walk into any club, without paying, and sit next to the hardest man there. Richard has told you the stories. You were neither impressed nor interested. You just wish that he was a better husband and father. He’s capable of it; in the afternoons he is gentle, if a little old fashioned, with his wife and children.

He wipes his nose, puts the CD case aside, and a moment later he’s gone.

You take the opportunity to get changed into your uniform early, so with your few spare minutes you can sit next to Isha while she has a cigarette.

Although she has given you the odd hint that Edward has pushed her around before, she has never come out and said it straight up. She’s still under his spell and doesn’t want you to think ill of him, or Islanders.

You open your door and touch her hair.
‘Do you want a cup of tea?’

She turns around and you take a step back. It is not Isha.

‘Shit, man, I’m sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ says the girl, who is a little younger than you – maybe nineteen or twenty – ‘I’m Aaliyah, Edward’s niece.’

Isha opens her door and comes out.

‘Found them,’ she says.

She produces a box of matches and hands them to Aaliyah, who then lights a cigarette.

‘He thought I was you,’ says Aaliyah, blowing smoke in your face.

You’re still embarrassed, but you stay and listen to them talk.

‘So you think it would be alright if I crashed here for a while?’

‘Yeah,’ Isha nods. ‘You can help me out with the kids when I go to TAFE.’

‘Well, I’m glad I don’t have to live with those African dudes again.’

They both chuckle at this private joke. Isha helps you out.

‘She’s been living with these guys she met in the Cross. They were letting her sleep there if she cooked and cleaned.’

‘This morning one of them wanted a bit more, so I packed my bag and got a taxi,’ says Aaliyah.

‘Do you want a cuppa?’

‘Yeah thanks, Mr P,’ says Isha.

‘Aaliyah?’

‘That’d be cool.’
She looks a bit bemused though – like she isn’t used to kindness in men. You go inside to make the tea, wondering if she has a boyfriend or not.
You take a lunch break at two a.m., every morning. Leaving the station unattended for ten minutes, you walk up to Liverpool Rd and then on to the 24hour Mobil. That’s where you buy your Chicken Hero and Diet Coke.

You understand that most of the population would not consider this a gourmet meal, but they don’t get to eat their Chicken Hero while a fresh-from-the-warehouse Tangarra slips beneath them on the rails below, the sparks from the wires floating up in the cool breeze.

Tonight, as the train disappears under the building, you look down on the tracks and search them for meaning. Then your focus shifts to the walls and floors around you. For the first time you notice the colour and the glow of the station, your home. Straining, your eyes try to pull in the fluorescent light on offer as if it will somehow give perspective and clarity to the thoughts that are lurking in the shadows of your mind – reluctant to be discovered.

There is this feeling of optimism that you can’t explain, even as you go about the boring midnight clean up. It has been building over the previous days to the point where you feel excited all the time, without having any idea why. But this doesn’t bother you. You’re happy for the first time in many months and you have no desire to question how it came to pass.

Standing at the end of Platform 5, you get a view of the station as a whole. And then something shifts. You can see the gate that leads down to the tunnel underneath the station, where the old Concourse used to be, before they rebuilt the place.
Following the aged subway in your mind, you see that it goes under the station while the latest Concourse runs over it, and that, if you were inclined, a man leaving one way could come back in the same direction by a different route, completing a circle in the process, like Columbus.

As you empty the bins and sweep the platforms you keep thinking of the circular dimensions of the building, made so by the combination of the old and the new, and your eyes start picking out all the circles in the immediate vicinity: the red train signals in the distance, the yellow mounds on the tarmac that stop passengers from slipping, the pupils in the drunkard’s eyes as he first tries to threaten but then is frightened off by you, and the face of the clock as you stare through it and start to smile.

It is time for you to make a plan.
You’re in bed one afternoon, when it comes.

The theory forms as the sun sneaks through some of the cracks in the black paper that you’ve stuck on the windows, to help you sleep during the day. But fooling your mind is not straightforward; the useless thin cardboard never does the job. So instead of resting, you are reading over some material sent by the training school to prepare you to be a part of the CityRail Olympic Workforce.

As you read, the Olympic rings keep glaring out at you from the page. And it is this emblem that caresses your thoughts into their final shape. The mist rises under the heat of your gaze and the peak of the mountain is revealed: the idea.

Looking over your Olympic manual, you believe that you now have the key. Without any more thought, you put pen to paper. The sooner people can read it and spread it, the better.

You start thus:

28th of August 2000AD

Sydney, AUSTRALIA

Dear Colleagues,

This is the first official book of Circle Theory, released to you by the Sydney Branch of The Brethren of Lawson.

Everyone is part of The Circle, whether they know it or not.
We are pleased to provide you with this booklet and we ask you to 'Know Your Circle Theory'.

Throughout the book you will be encouraged to insert your own insights into the text. Anyone can add to The Circle, but even if they choose not to they are still participating.

You will find that members will make contributions in various ways:

- Some will accept The Circle, Circle Theory, and The Official Circle Way of Life as endorsed by the Elders of the Brethren of Lawson. These members will be happy to share their knowledge and The Circle will smile upon them.

- Others will view The Circle with suspicion and envy, not understanding that they are already members of the Brethren and that we don't want to harm but to harmonise. The Circle shines on them too.

- Various unfortunates will recognise The Circle whenever they see it. But, not realising they already have full membership of The Brethren, it will be a cause of much anxiety and suffering. The Circle takes special care of these lost sheep.

- The persecutors, unknowingly the most loved of all, will live in complete opposition to the reality of The Circle and its faithful servants, the Brethren of Lawson. When mention of The Circle is made they will pile scorn on it, saying that it is the work of the money-lenders, The Devil, and The Government. They believe the main task of The Elders is to hide information, control member's minds and use the organisation for purposes of fornication. It is alright if you are numbered among these few. The Elders predicted your behaviour a long, long time ago. In your own way, you are also giving to the Circle, and the Brethren are happy to include you.

1. There is only one rule that we ask you to adhere to (at all times) as a member of the Brethren of Lawson, and a budding exponent of The Circle Theorem. Never, and The Elders cannot emphasise this point enough, presume that what you know about The Circle is more
valid than what another thinks about it. And never believe that you are one of the important members in the Brethren. The Circle existed before you and it will outlive you and all beings inside it. Why? Because the Circle is truly infinite. Remember too that the Brethren didn’t create the Circle but the Circle gave the Brethren the power to Create. And with the power to Create came the power to name, and so it happened that an Elder sat at his desk one day and named the circle ‘The Circle’.

A) The Elders are pleased to provide you with this training manual and, again, we encourage you to know your Circle Theory. The book comes with a quick quiz to test your learning and some other interesting archival pictures of our gorgeous Circular City. The map has been prepared as a resource to carry with you.

B) The Brethren of Lawson has now prepared over eight thousand people for the coming Revolution and The Elders would like to extend their congratulations for the efforts of our Brethren. We wish you an enjoyable experience as you encounter the full force of The Circle for the first time, and our thoughts are with you during this exciting time in our history.

SIGNED

- The Circle
- The Elders
- 000

28/08/00

You read and reread the words you’ve written, for a long time. Then you just stare at the wall, nodding and smiling to yourself, not hearing the television, the phone, or Aaliyah, as she gently knocks at the door.

She lets herself in, taps you on the shoulder and asks if you want a coffee.
Later, when you are sitting out the front, she describes the look you had on your face.

‘I’ve never seen someone so peaceful, man. You looked so happy. Your face was glowing.’

‘What were you thinkin’ about?’ says Isha.

But you don’t answer.
You’re going straight to the people.

Before leaving for work you print out some copies of your new idea. The best policy, it seems to you, is to get it out to the masses without delay. Once you’ve handed over a few pages of your circle theory, you’re sure that the news will spread virally.

Parramatta Rd is quiet. There are not many pedestrians about. You only see a couple of souls. When offering them a copy of your pamphlet, you smile and say ‘hi’. While surprised, only one person knocks you back. Everyone else accepts. And as far as you are concerned, the job is done.

You believe that this is the start of something great.

Rushing back to your flat to get prepared for the backshift, you don’t have time for the usual shit, shower and shave. And you don’t bother about wearing a tie – it’s just a CityRail bomber jacket, the pants, the light blue shirt and an extra spray of Lynx. Then you’re out the door.

Aaliyah doesn’t even look in your direction, as you leave. She has the headphones on and is chatting live to someone on Yahoo.

You scan the streets ahead, and then check your watch after every five or six paces. To make it on time you’ll have to jog the last third of your journey.

This doesn’t cause you the usual worry, because you keep noticing the abundance of circles.

For a start there is the bright, full moon, beaming down upon you as you smile. Then you note its cousins: the wheels of the different vehicles driving past: the repeated use of the letter O in signs: the circular shape of the traffic lights: the button you press at the pedestrian crossing: the coins jangling in your pocket.
The subsequent expectation has made you feverish. When you arrive to take control of the station, Slick is a little perplexed.

‘What have you been up to?’ he asks.

‘Nothing,’ you say.

He looks you up and down.

‘You’re not your usual well-groomed self.’

‘I’m starting to settle in.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’m one of the boys now. I don’t give a fuck.’

‘Well, be careful.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Mustafa notices that sort of stuff.’

‘ Seriously?’

‘Sure, I did. If you don’t take care of your appearance, what else are you letting slide? He’ll start checking into how much you do in the night.’

‘I do plenty,’

He shrugs his shoulders.

‘I’m just letting you know.’

‘Righto,’ you say, as you walk him to the stairs.

Back inside, you realise that you haven’t eaten yet. You decide to order a pizza. After calling through the details you sit back and wait. It takes twenty minutes, which you spend sitting in Mustafa’s chair while playing around with the CCTV cameras.

The pizza guy arrives at the same time as Brother Richard.

‘Pepperoni, Diet Coke and garlic bread?’
‘Yeah, mate.’

‘Just sign here.’

You scribble your initials and the pizza guy leaves.

Richard sits down and you listen to him as you eat the pizza and watch the CCTV. It is showing the same picture the whole time – the main Concourse – but it is still a television screen, so it commands the attention of anyone in the room, even when nothing is happening.

Richard looks through the passengers coming off the latest train from the City, to see if Jen is among them. She’s not. He stays with you until the next train arrives.

‘Bro, I hope you work here for the next ten years.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Brother, I don’t want you to leave. This is all good.’

You smile and zoom in on the incoming Liverpool train, which is stopping on Platform 2.

Jen often catches that one, so you get ready to focus in on her. When she disembarks you go in for the close up.

‘That’s enough of that, bro.’

‘You better go and shield her from the lens, mate.’

He waves at the cameras they pass as he takes Jen by the hand and leads her down to the Catholic Club side of the Station, where they live.

You never worry about seeing him. He comes and goes as he pleases – just another character in the play, the main stage being the train station proper.

It’s a metaphor that has seemed very real for you in the previous days. In your own mind, your life has taken on the shape of a drama with you as the lead actor: the
film itself being screened in another world. You can’t tell anyone, though, because to
describe it would be to diminish it, with the results leaving you open to ridicule.

They just wouldn’t understand. They wouldn’t have any way of knowing the
truth, and no concept of your new mental powers.

For instance, now that you are alone, you can prophesy using the Daily
Telegraph. If one knows how to do it in the correct manner – and you’re not just talking
about using the Astrology section – one can receive messages from a higher authority, when speed-reading the paper.

The trick is to flick through the pages at random, and to start making
associations between the thoughts in your head and the pictures and the headlines that
you see on the page. Your mind receives the question and, as you read, the newspaper
gives you the answer.

You can also do it with the TV. You’re delivered a problem, and the changing
images and symbols on the screen give you a solution. Isha and Aaliyah have the power
too and through the television you are connected to them, though this is never
recognised formally in speech.

It gets you excited just thinking about it, and you get up and start pacing the
office as you finish your last slice of pizza. You can afford to eat it all, health-wise, as
you’ve been walking the few kilometres between Petersham and Ashfield every day,
with the result that you’ve lost a fair bit of weight.

After the last train leaves the station, you emerge from the office and dump all
the evidence of your late night feed into the garbage. Then you close the gates and get to
the cleaning. First you sweep, then you empty the bins, and then you wash the
Concourse. It’s all done on auto-pilot, until you take your break at two-thirty in the morning.

You’re still so full from the pizza that you forego your normal trip to the Mobil. Instead you make a cup of coffee and take a walk on the platforms. It being late August, you can stroll around without a jacket and not feel uncomfortable. There is a gentle breeze and a hint of jasmine in the air, the first signs of spring.

You cross the tracks at the City end of Platform 3, before making your way over to Platform 1. You get a little nervous as you walk towards the spot where the guy threw himself in front of the North Sydney train, back when you were a rookie.

As you reach the exact place where he jumped, you bend down and glance over the side. You place your hand on your heart and reach out to him in thought. After a few moments you stand up. Shaking your head, you recognise that in that instant you thought yourself capable of communicating with the dead.

You think that maybe it’s time to lay off the bongs for a while.

Tub gets in at five-fifteen, a full forty-five minutes early, because he lost his license and now his mum drops him off on her way to work.

He is there to answer the phone at five-thirty. It’s Zorba. Zorba is calling in sick.

Tub starts laughing as he hangs up.

‘Suck shit. You’re gonna have to do overtime.’

‘Like fuck I am,’ you say.

‘Mate, Mustafa will walk through that door and you’ll be ‘Okay, Sir, no problems, Sir. Leave it to me, Sir.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Fucken classic, mate.’
You try and think of something plausible to get you off, some reason to give the boss for not staying when he does ask you to do the overtime, but you come up with nothing.

‘Gentleman,’ says Mustafa.

‘Mr Graham,’ you both say.

‘What’s happening?’

‘Nothing to report,’ you say.

‘Except that Zorba rang in sick,’ says Tub.

‘No problem,’ says Mustafa. ‘Mr Lawson, do you want some overtime?’

Tub, unable to control his mirth, moves outside.

‘Yeah, no worries, mate.’

‘Good man. I’ll leave youse to it.’

Mustafa walks off to his office as Tub comes back in laughing. He slaps you on the back and you try not to smile, but you can’t help it. In your present mood, even this set of circumstances can’t get you down.

You start competing with Tub to see who knows the morning routine best. After each train comes, you take turns at changing the boards without looking up the timetable and checking the stops – chastising each other when one of you makes a mistake.

This gets boring after an hour and you decide that you’ll take a break. You buzz Mustafa on the internal line and get a clearance to go and get some breakfast. You head towards the Catholic Club, stopping only to purchase your morning sausage roll and chocolate milk, before you make your way up to Brother Richard’s house.

He is surprised to see you.
You tell him that you are still on duty. He commands you to take a seat. The Brother knows what you’re after. He packs the bong as you finish off your sausage roll.

You leave yourself a mouthful of chocolate milk for the walk back to the station.

‘You out of it motherfucker,’ he says.

‘Cheers, bro,’ you say.

You accept the bong and inhale. He takes it back, smokes a quick one for himself, and then packs another one for you. You start to get nervous about the time and look at your watch.

‘No wuz, bro. Smoke that and then you can head off.’

You smoke it, but realise at once that you’ve made a huge mistake. Two quick cones in a row, after you’ve been up all night, was not a good idea when you still have a few hours of overtime left.

But you don’t get the chance to think about it. You’re walking down the steps of the Brother’s place and finishing off the last of your milk. The activity and the pace at which you are moving are slowing down the drugs, but you know that the effects are in the post.

This is just like the moment before you’d hit the water, when you used to jump into the pool, as a kid. You’ve left the ground, and you’re not in the drink yet, but you can’t go back. And then you’re soaked.

Tub can tell straightaway.

‘Orh fuck, man. Take the keys and go to my locker.’

‘What?’

‘Use the Clear Eyes, ya dumb cunt. Quick, before Mustafa comes out. I’ll cover ya.’
‘Cheers, man.’

You do as you’re told. On retrieving the Clear Eyes and finding your way into the shower, you see what he means. The colour has drained from your face and you look ready to pass out. The only life you can see is the red in the whites of your eyes. The eye drops clean everything up, but you are left with a very glassy expression. If Mustafa walks out, you’ll have some explaining to do.

‘Thanks, man,’ you say to Tub.

He remains pissed off and doesn’t say anything. But he lets you sit there and doze while he changes the boards. It’s often him doing this sort of stuff, so you assume that he’s jealous.

Mustafa comes out with your timesheets.

‘I need some autographs, boys,’ he says.

‘No wuz,’ says Tub, signing.

He gives you the pen and you try and complete the task without making eye contact with Mustafa.

‘You look tired,’ Mustafa says.

You shake your head.

‘Bloody Richard,’ you say. ‘He gave me a feed and now I’m as full as a public hospital. I feel like having a nap.’

‘Don’t go up there again, in future, alright? You’re technically not supposed to leave the station.’

‘Yeah, no worries,’ you say.

He goes back to his office.

‘Ya handled that well,’ says Tub.
‘He didn’t buy it.’

‘Nah, but he’s turnin’ a blind-eye. Just don’t be so fucken silly again. What were you thinking?’

‘I didn’t know that it would hit me that hard.’

‘Mate, you’ve been up all night. Ya dickhead.’

He chuckles and then answers the internal line, while your movements and those of the clock slow down in unison. You ignore the people at the door to the Garrison, on the old railway premise that there is someone else closer who can answer their questions. The only task you have is to press the button that lets people into the toilet.

This continues until Mustafa rings Tub on the internal line again, at around nine o’clock, and calls him into the office. It just keeps getting worse.

‘Good luck, Stoner,’ says Tub.

You try and lash out at him by pushing yourself forward on the wheels of your chair and lifting your fist as if to strike, but he is around the corner in a flash. He turns his head back to look at you, laughing all the way to Mustafa’s door.

At least the peak hour traffic is finished, you think. All you need to do now is change the boards every fifteen minutes and pray that no one comes up to ask you questions.

You know that the CCTV camera is always positioned to focus on the Garrison when Mustafa is in the house, so you sit yourself in the hiding spot that you have located – just to the right of the phones. You can’t be seen through the window and the wall blocks out everything else.

After about ten minutes you pick up a generic bottle of cleaning fluid and a piece of newspaper. You’re going to make out as if you are polishing the Garrison’s
glass windows. That is all that is needed to keep the chimera of actual work going – a very crafty bit of movement in the background on the television screen – for Mustafa’s eye. You don’t even spray the cleaner on. You just hold it in your hand while moving the newspaper over the window for a few seconds.

Fresh from changing the boards, you sit back down and rest your head on the table, cushioning it with your arm. You are awakened by Richard, moments later.

‘Bro, fucking pull yourself together.’

‘What?’

‘Have a fucking coffee or something. You look pale, bro. Out Of It.’

He says this through clenched teeth and then heads off for a train.

Taking the Brother’s advice, you make your way into the Lunch Room for a coffee. While in there you splash some water on your face, slap it, and shake your head around. You find that this substance abuser’s cliché does not give the desired effect. Rather than waking you up, you feel as if you have had a small stroke.

Carrying the coffee back out to the Garrison, you come to the conclusion that you need some serious time off.
That morning – slouching along Parramatta Rd – you have to hold your bag in front of your crotch for most of the journey home, so as to cover up your sizable hard-on. It is one of those things that happen after you’ve had a toke and you’re feeling lethargic; you get frisky. Stopping to think of all the women you are hanging around, and the sex that you are not getting from them, only makes it worse.

On the one hand you would like to hop into bed with either Isha or Aaliyah, or – in your more extravagant fantasies – both at the same time. But on the flipside of that you would also like to have nothing to do with either of them: Isha because she is in a relationship with Edward and Aaliyah because she trusts you.

As you’re thinking this over, you pass Isha and Aaliyah on the lounge chairs at the entrance of your flat. You slip inside, undress, and lie down.

Drawing yourself into the foetal position, you get the feeling that you won’t be able to sleep. Half an hour passes by, then forty-five minutes. When it reaches the hour and you’re wide awake, you consider getting up.

It just doesn’t make sense. After the night you’ve had, followed by the extra hours of work, the breakfast cones and the long walk home, you still cannot get any respite.

You feel so hot that you claw back the covers and start trying new ways to rest your head, contorting your body this way and that. You’ve got no ventilation, you realise; that must be the problem: no A/C and no ventilation. The black cardboard on the windows, while keeping out the sun, is only attracting the heat and you, in turn, are beginning to roast.
You are glad when there is a knock at the door. You know that it is either Isha or Aaliyah, so you don’t bother putting any clothes on to answer it. Your boxer shorts are enough.

It’s Aaliyah. Shielding your eyes because of the sun, you pretend that you have been sleepy.

‘What’s up?’

She gives you a long look, up and down, and smiles.

‘Can I use the Internet?’

‘Sure.’

You open the door and turn on the light. She thought that you were too tired to notice, but you clocked that look; she wouldn’t mind a bit of the old Peter.

You walk into the bathroom and have a shower.

When you emerge a short while later, it’s as if you are not in the room. In this way you are almost like a proper family, with everyone taking everyone else for granted.

On opening the little white cupboard just above the fridge, you are disappointed to note that there are only two small cones left. This, along with your morning smoke at Richard’s, will be just enough to keep you sleepy all day, without knocking you out.

You push the drugs aside and instead choose to get something to eat. After putting some jeans on over your boxers, you slide into a basketball singlet as you stroll out the door.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘Isha.’

‘Who else, boy? Where are you going with no shoes on?”
‘Just heading down to get some lunch. Want anything?’

‘Cigarettes?’

‘Uncle Pete.’

Annabelle is jumping up and trying to open the door.

‘Hello, miss.’

‘Annabelle, get back inside and look after your brother,’ says Isha.

‘Ciggies, no problem,’ you say.

‘Thank you, my dear.’

Once again, you’re going for chips and gravy. You have maintained it as your favourite meal since you were young. Now single, in your twenties, and employed, you can indulge in this magnificence whenever you please.

The Chinese woman at the Food Mart always treats you well. She knows your routine.

‘Just the chips and the drink today?’

‘And one of these,’ you say, picking up a Rolling Stone magazine. ‘Plus I need some smokes.’

‘Cigarettes? I didn’t know you smoked.’

‘They’re for Isha. You know my next door neighbour?’

‘The Kiwi girl, long black hair, two kids – she’s your wife?’

You laugh it off, but that she made this leap excites you.

‘No, she lives next door to me.’

‘Yeah, she smokes this one.’

The woman hands you the bungers. You give her a fifty buck note and wait for the change.
‘Have a nice day,’ she says.

‘You too.’

You speed walk back to your bolt-hole on Fort St. When you reach, Isha tries to give you some money, but you don’t let her.

She is reading one of the books from off your shelf. You eat your lunch and then make a move to go inside.

‘Hey, give us one of those ciggins.’

‘What for?’

She knows exactly what for.

‘To spin my smoko.’

You’re going to try and make those last few cones last.

Sitting at the kitchen bench, you add half a cigarette to the existing mix of mull. It leaves the once green contents of bowl looking rather brown. You think of scraping the bong and the hose for some residue, but you chase that thought away.

You’ll smoke what remains and be done with it.

While packing the first cone you take a glance at the cover story of the magazine. It’s an exposé on celebrities who have been busted for drugs. Among those listed are some actors and singers that you admire. You’re beginning to see the connection.

You’re next.

You smoke as fast as you can, while you keep scanning through the article. Some of the people listed were arrested over very small sums of drugs. One or two were even charged for having drug paraphernalia.

You’re next, you’re next, you’re next.
It’s not so much a voice but a thought that is being repeated, and one that is now making you clear out your little white drugs cupboard. Aaliyah is facing the computer screen, not paying you the slightest bit of attention. That is good. You don’t want to make a fuss.

You put everything associated with Mary-Jane in a plastic bag. The glass bowl, bong, lighters, scissors, foil, and the box you stored these things in, are now garbage. You place some other paper and refuse on top of the bag to disguise the contents, for good measure.

Now you’re ready to dump the package. You sneak out the door, to the right of your own complex, and walk three or four house numbers down the street. There are two bins sitting in a driveway and you drop your old gear into the second one.

The bastards will have to work harder to catch you.

The effects of the last few cones have not even started to hit you yet. So you go back inside and sit down on the bed. Again, you look through your new edition of Rolling Stone. As it has already warned of a possible police raid, you study it with care. Attempting to decode further messages, you flip through from page to page – receiving questions in your mind and looking at the articles and the pictures for your results – only stopping when you get a hit.

But you can’t keep it up for long. You soon fall into a dark sleep.
You wake up in the early hours of the morning to the sound of Aaliyah tapping the keyboard of your computer.

‘What time is it?’

‘Two-fifteen,’ she says.

You wash your face and get ready to roll. To secure some time-off, you will need to act now.

While pulling your boots on, you tell Aaliyah that you are going to the station to request some leave. Even though it is quarter past two in the morning, she doesn’t find this unusual.

Shunning the idea of a taxi, you walk along Parramatta Rd – just like you do every other night.

You make good time until you are half-way to Ashfield, right near the Marco Polo Motel. Here you are stopped by one of the largest bats that you’ve ever laid eyes on. It doesn’t dive-bomb you either; it circles you.

‘Don’t even think about it.’

Further ahead you see a girl turn on her heels and run back towards Ashfield. You recognise the girl as one of the sex workers who run that strip. They all come through the station, and you’ve seen this one a number of times. She couldn’t be more than seventeen.

You catch a glimpse of her when you walk past a hedge, a few hundred metres on. She is hiding behind it and kneeling on the ground. You feel like explaining
*Stranger Danger* to her – how even if she can’t see you, you may well be able to see her – but you don’t stop.

You’re mentally composing the letter that you’ll type for Mustafa and leave for him to find in the morning.

No one is around when you arrive at the station. You check the office but it’s dark and nobody is sleeping on the floor or in the chair, so you flick on the light switch and scan the roster that is taped to the wall.

Zorba is the absentee. If the urban myths are true, you know that he’ll be in either one of two places: the Catholic Club, or his girlfriend’s house.

A chronic womaniser, drinker and gambler, he has also hinted at homosexual experiences.

‘Men know how to suck it better, Boy,’ he told you once.

‘Fuck off, man,’ you said.

After you passed that comment on to the rest of the crew, Slick tried to diffuse the situation and say that Zorba was simply trying to shock you. But Tub believed it.

‘He pulls himself off in the toilets here, mate – the dirty cunt. He always says he needs to blow his load three times a day.’

On remembering this you try the Lunch Room first, to see if the beast is in there. Striking out, you go and call on his main mistress: the booze. When Zorba had bragged about having a fridge inside his car, he wasn’t lying. He famously bought a five hundred dollar special and pimped it out. The boot has a fully operational bar fridge, which he installed himself, and it’s there for the specific purpose of allowing him to drink on the job. He showed this to you with great pride.

‘It’s the fucking stress, Boy. I can’t take it,’ he said.
Now you know that he is nearby, because you are walking straight past his pub on wheels. He’s not in it, so he must be somewhere within the club.

He doesn’t see you approaching. You watch him tap the poker machine as if it is part of his breathing. Tap, stare, compute and breathe. Tap, stare, compute, and breathe. As you walk towards him, you can see the flashing screen reflected in his glasses.

‘Zorba.’

‘Fuck, Boy. What’s wrong?’

‘I got a call that there was no one at the station and that I better get in here. You’re gone, mate.’

‘Shit, I’ve only been here for twenty minutes. It’s my break.’

‘Yeah, but you’re not supposed to leave the station, are ya?’

‘Who phoned you?’

As he says this he is collecting coins from out of the tray.

‘Nobody, ya dumb bastard. I’m just having you on.’

‘Oh fuck, I’m glad. You had me worried. That’s happened before, you know.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, I went to my girlfriend’s place one night and they found out. Fuck, Boy, what are you doing?’

‘Come back to the station. I want to write Mustafa a letter.’

‘What for?’

‘Some leave.’

‘When do you want it?’

‘From tomorrow.’
You are walking back together now, passing his car and approaching the steps that lead up to the Concourse. Things are moving too fast for Zorba. He is calculating how long you’ve been working on the network and the probability that Mustafa will grant you leave, without notice.

‘He’ll do it,’ you say.

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s a family matter. He won’t argue with that.’

‘What’s wrong with your family?’

‘My sister has run away from home.’

‘Really?’

‘No, I’m just using her as an excuse to get four weeks off.’

‘Why do you want to do that? You could earn money in that time. It’s a waste.’

‘I’m getting out. If everything goes to plan, I won’t need to come back.’

Zorba stays silent after this. As you sit in Mustafa’s seat and turn on his computer, Zorba sits opposite you and looks on.

‘Have you been eating okay, Boy? You look thin.’

‘I’m fine, mate.’

‘But you should be sleeping now. Leave this, maybe, for another day. Have a think about it.’

You feel sorry for him, because he’s worried about you, but there is no way for you to express the joy that is inside you right now. The prospect of leaving your new mates behind and changing scenes again doesn’t even bother you.

‘I think my work here is done,’ you say.

‘You’ve only just started.’
But he doesn’t stop you. You type out your letter, requesting leave for emergency family reasons. This is the copy that will go to HR and to the pay office. You also handwrite a little note to Mustafa, explaining the specifics to him. When you are done you fold them and place both sheets into one of the white A4 envelopes from Mustafa’s bottom drawer.

You write his name on the front and leave it under his phone.

‘Tell Mustafa I came in and dropped this off, alright?’

‘Yeah, no worries.’

‘Cheer up, mate. I’ll probably be back in a month telling you how I blew all my cash.’

‘Yeah.’

You turn to leave and Zorba reaches out and touches your arm.

‘Hey, Boy, you take my mobile number. Anything happens, you might need me, just call.’

He’s not joking. His concern is genuine. You’re not sure why.

‘Thanks, Zorba,’ you say, taking the scrap of paper he’s scribbled the number on.

‘Okay,’ he nods.

‘Don’t spend too much time in the club.’

‘I’ve been doing it for fifteen years, no problem,’ he says.

You don’t say anything else. You just smile and walk away, knowing that it might be your last time there.

You head up to Brother Richard’s, to see if he’s awake.
Standing underneath his balcony windows, you hear music playing and then catch the unmistakable whiff of pot. This tells you what you wanted to know. You whistle.

The volume of the music goes down and you see his profile, in shadow. He whistles back. You take that as your cue and enter the front door of the block and climb his stairs. He is waiting for you at the top.

‘Quick, bro,’ he says.

He looks from left to right to see if anyone saw you coming in. You walk through his bedroom, past the sleeping Jen, and take a seat on the lounge.

‘Bro, how did you know I was up?’

‘I heard music and I could smell the smoko.’

‘Bullshit, I’ve had a brother stand down there and see if he could tell when I lit up.’

‘Well, I smelled it tonight, man.’

‘Fuck. You’re good, son. Here you go.’

He hands you the bong and eyes you off with suspicion.

‘Where have you been, brother?’

You explain your night – catching out Zorba, leaving your job, the sense of triumph that you have – and he says nothing. He just nods.

‘Quick, bro. Go hard.’

This is a first. He’s packing another bong and giving it straight to you, without having one himself.

‘Hurry up, bro. Smoke that one and get home. You need some sleep, dude.’

‘Come on, man. I’ll sleep on the lounge or something,’ you say.
He gets up and starts pacing up and down the bedroom.

‘Bro, this is completely out of fucking character, man. You’re freaking me out.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t give me “What?” My missus is sleeping. Go home and get some rest in your own bed.’

You smoke the bong and then give it back to him.

‘Cheers, bro,’ you say.

He takes it from you and gets up, guiding you to the front door.

‘Take care, Pete-dawg.’

The last thing you needed in your condition was another bong, you know, but you are thankful for it anyway, as you float home. It helps the walk when you don’t have to think the whole time. The weed of wisdom slows down your mind.

You are alert to the presence of bats as you amble along, but you think that they’ll leave you alone now. That’s when you get swooped, and circled, again: once: twice: thrice.

You start jogging back. Then you run. The idea has now become real. It has been made flesh.

The game is over.
Upon arriving home you sit out the front with Aaliyah. She is smoking a cigarette, and talks of leaving.

‘I think I’m gonna bounce, man.’

‘Yeah?’

‘My grandmother said she would give me money for the flight home to NZ.’

‘Right.’

‘Do you think I should go?’

You look her over. She seems a bit lost, like she wants you to tell her to stay.

‘I have to give her an answer soon,’ she says.

‘Whatever you think is best.’

Neither of you speak after that. She goes inside and resumes her spot at the computer. When you feel like she is not coming back out, you go in. There hasn’t been an obvious chemistry between you, but there hasn’t been dislike either. It’s more of a mutual, stubborn, hard-to-get attitude that has not paid off.

You’ll miss her.

As you get into bed, she doesn’t take her eyes off the computer. And when you wake up several hours later, she is not there. The computer is turned off.

While making your coffee, you switch on the TV. The morning news is on. You are just starting to get interested when your mobile phone rings. You check to see who is calling and then almost decide not to answer it. It’s Tub.

‘Hello.’

‘Pete, what the fuck is going on, mate?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘This fucken time-off, mate. Zorba told me all about it. He’s worried sick, man.’
‘I just need it.’
‘Is that shit true about your sister?’
‘Not really, but I need the time off anyway. I may not be coming back. What did Mustafa say?’
‘He said it’s done, faxed through.’
‘So I’m right then. I’ve gotta go, man. I’ll call you later.’
‘Wait a sec.’
‘See ya.’

Then you turn off the phone. He dials the number for your home line but you hang it up and then take it off the hook.

You stare into the television.

The blonde newsreader is looking back at you. It’s as if she is speaking for your benefit only. At first it seems coincidental, but throughout the next few hours you see that all the programs share a common thread; they have the same being controlling them, and that intelligence is talking to you.

You don’t believe that it is God, or the forces of darkness or anything as intimidating as the supernatural of your upbringing, but rather, you feel as if you have found the other half that you’ve been longing for. You have awakened from a deep sleep and your love, the one who has been lost to you for centuries, has tracked you down. And you have recognised and remembered her.

There is a real celebration that is starting as a result of this. You get up from your position near the TV and walk out the front. You sit on the lounge chair, with your
shirt off, and then decide to lie on your stomach. Stretching out on the ground, you prop yourself up with your arms. It reminds you of when you would sun-bake at the pool, in Maitland, as a boy.

‘You look like the Sphinx,’ says Edward.

He is standing in his doorway, looking down on you with a smile.

‘It’s good to be home isn’t it?’ he says.

‘Absolutely, brother.’

You turn your head and look back out into the street. There is no visible activity. You suspect it’s because the word has gotten out that the king has returned, that the war is over, and that no one has to worry anymore.

The intensity of the expectation in your belly just gets better with each passing minute. You go back inside and sit down, because you understand that you have to wait for one more day. The wedding will be tomorrow and tradition must be followed; you can’t lay eyes on the bride until then.

But you can communicate with her all day long. She is flirting with you through the television. You put the phone back on the hook, and it rings.

It’s Will. He’s an old university pal from Newcastle.

‘Is everything okay, man?’ he asks.

‘Sure, Bud. Why wouldn’t it be?’

‘We were supposed to meet yesterday, remember? I turned up and the flat was open, but you were gone. Your neighbours didn’t know where you were.’

‘Shit, man. Sorry.’

‘I was just worried, you know? You didn’t answer your phone and you’ve got all that writing and stuff on the walls. It was like “Fuck, Pete has lost it.”’
He’s referring to your work on the Circle Theory that you’ve displayed around the apartment, with annotations in pencil scribbled over the paint work, for the whole world to see.

‘Well, don’t worry, brother,’ you say. ‘I’ve worked it out.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, it took me a fortnight but I got it.’

‘What have you worked out?’

‘Everything, man. It’s all good from here on in.’

He is laughing now. Your tone of voice has put him at ease. If he had been worried, you’ve placated him.

‘What are you up to today?’ he says.

‘Just having a day off, man.’

You talk for a little while longer. When you put down the phone and walk back out the front, Isha is sitting there.

‘Can I use the phone, Mr P?’

‘Sure.’

She moves inside and speaks in hushed tones. When she returns, she is all smiles.

‘I’m so excited.’

You don’t ask why, because you heard her. She’s been organising tickets for a trip, and must be working towards the same goal as you.

You leave her in the courtyard and go back to the television, where you watch the moving pictures on the screen and begin a dialogue with your returned love. You don’t have to speak, as the thoughts are being transferred to her brain from yours via the
airwaves, and vice versa. Half the time, while watching the TV, you feel like you are falling in love. The other half is spent laughing.

It’s happening. You had always known it – within the core of you – but you’d never been able to articulate it before. Now you have unlocked the final truth.

This pushes you outdoors again, to start walking off the nervous energy. You don’t even register the time or the state of the weather as you head for the Brother’s house, only to find that he is not in. You can sense his presence, but you can’t see him. Jen says that he has just gone down the road.

You go back towards the station. When you get there you find Mustafa, talking to Slick. They are in the middle of doing the hand-over. While they converse, you walk behind Mustafa’s desk and use the CCTV to zoom in on the Garrison. All that appears on the screen is an orange vest, so you can’t make out the person’s features.

You ask Mustafa who that employee is.

‘You don’t know, do you?’

He is trying to answer you, but is flustered. Slick is stifling laughter.

‘I’m security,’ you say, ‘and this bloke could be anyone.’

Now they both laugh and you tell them that you’ll be out of their hair soon. It gets back to formalities.

‘Good luck with your time off, Mr Lawson,’ says Mustafa.

‘Thank you, Mr Graham.’

You both know that this is it. Tub would have told him that you’re not planning to come back.

They don’t realise it yet but you’ll be leaving for Newcastle in a few hours, to catch the boat that will take you and your new wife away. You received the notice
telepathically, and it was confirmed through the TV, so you know that she will be on the cruise. In your mind’s eye, you can see her in her white dress.

She is running on the same internal clock as you, and no one else knows it.

You venture up to Ashfield proper in a last ditch attempt to locate Richard. But you can’t find him anywhere, so you head for the pub. Sitting down at the bar, you strike up a conversation with the first bloke you see.

‘It’s pretty warm outside,’ he says.

‘Sure is,’ you say.

‘Sydney’s a funny place to be this time of year.’

He’s giving you a conspiratorial smile. The Barmaid asks if you want a drink. You have no money but you say yes.

‘Schooner of black, thanks.’

She pours it. You look at your new mate and say ‘George, will pay for it’.

The Barmaid doesn’t get it, and the bloke next to you says ‘Who’s George?’

You put down the beer and walk out.

You’re getting the irritating feeling that you’re being thwarted at every attempt, and that the journey is not quite over.

You double-back to the station again and make your way to the Lunch Room.

Getting into the shower, you are surprised to find that you can sense her presence even there. It’s as though you can feel her and speak to her through the water.

It’s plausible. You’ll soon be on water with her, in the ship, so you might as well communicate through the water now, using it as a conduit for your thoughts.

You get out, towel off, and change. Then you take up a position on the floor, near the lockers, with your feet pressing against the door.
Tub barges in and wants to know what you are up to.

‘If you’re that tired that you need to sleep on the floor, you should get home to your own bed, ya goose.’

‘I’m leaving tonight,’ you say.

‘Where to?’

‘Home.’

‘Petersham?’

‘No. Newcastle.’

He looks at you and smiles.

‘Just go and have a sleep, man.’

‘Alright, bro.’

You get up and walk back to Fort St for the last time.
It’s just after four o’clock in the afternoon. You can’t wait any longer.

You’re back on Parramatta Rd, heading for Ashfield, and there are cars everywhere.

You take a detour at the start of Fort St High, only a few hundred metres from your flat, because you see red. All your eyes can pick up now is red and blue.

Blue is the international sign of safety. Red means danger. These voodoo tones are therefore serving as your navigation tools; you follow any sign of blue and avoid all examples of red. It leads you away from the main road, and the most direct route to your destination, but you are confident that this system will get you there unharmed.

Approaching an Australia Post Box, you are forced to cross the street. Australia Post is the premier carrier for the enemy, the red they use on their boxes and vans being proof enough of this fact.

Looking up from the ground, you’re pleased to see a blue car on the left hand side of the road. So it is confirmed; left is the way to go. You continue like this for half an hour, being drawn to blue and repelled by red, until the colour leads you back to Parramatta Rd.

Apart from the red and blue, the only other noteworthy sign is the large scattering of Jacaranda trees that litter the path you follow.

This purple is the signal that royalty has arrived. You have arrived.

But you thought that it would be a bit easier. You assumed that someone would come and drive you to your destination. You’re so tired.
Then it dawns on you. You can’t drive, as you’ve never learned how. So of course you have been deserted. It is the ultimate in buck’s night pranks. Right now, as you wear out the soles of your naked feet, your friends and colleagues must all be grouped around some large screen watching what is befalling you.

The Main Man is being made to walk.

You smile to yourself. You can afford to take a joke because you are by far the most powerful being amongst all the traffic, even though you are on foot; you can read the lights faster than anyone else and you can also influence the speed at which they change – through your mind – safe in the knowledge that you are in control of everything.

Having watched you in your quest to solve the problem, the people in the cars are now saluting your victory. The end has come, brought to the world by Peter Joseph Lawson.

When you stop at the intersection that joins up to Liverpool Rd, you have two choices. You can start walking left or you can continue on straight ahead and then cut through Ashfield Park.

You see two blue cars drive past and decide on taking the park.

Once there, you note all the council workers standing and joking with each other as you make your way across the oval. You give them a smile and a nod, as it seems as if they are all there to pay their respects to you.

The people emerging from their homes do nothing to alter this image that you have in your mind. You are the Emperor inspecting, and approving of, your loyal subjects as you complete the final journey towards your new love.
When you arrive at Ashfield Station, there doesn’t seem to be any staff around. You don’t recognise many of the passengers either, but everyone looks ready for the night’s festivities.

You make your mind up, on the spur of the moment, to head towards the library. The library will give you a clue on how to find her. You’re running on straight intuition now.

‘We close in ten minutes,’ says the girl at the front desk.

‘No worries.’

You rush to the nearest shelf and select a few books to flick through. These volumes of prophecy tell you to follow the girl behind the counter. You return them and go outside, standing near McDonald’s – so you can wait for her near the exit.

The girl comes out of the library about five minutes later. She leads you right back to the station. Obeying your instinct again, you board a train to Strathfield.

From Strathfield you must get a train to Newcastle; in Newcastle you will be reunited with your betrothed. There is no point in fighting it any longer. It has all been decided in advance and you are powerless to stop the march forward.

You feel bad about not being able to say goodbye to your friends, but something tells you that you’ll see them all again soon. They will be there for the new day.

It’s going well until you find that you’ve forgotten to get off the train at Strathfield, because you were lost in your thoughts. Then you suspect that you haven’t moved from Ashfield at all, and that you are, in fact, sitting inside one of those 3D rides with a movie screen on the windows to simulate a regular journey.
You inch your way over to the exit, so you will be able to see what is going on when the doors open at the next stop. You feel the train slowing down. The doors part and you disembark.

Assessing your situation, you see that it is night and that you’re now in Warwick Farm. It wasn’t a 3D ride. You just took your eye off the ball.

Trying to rectify the situation before you get distracted again, you walk outside the station and attempt to find your way to the main road. You need to get back to the City.

The bastards want you to walk, so you’ll walk.
It has been ages since you left Warwick Farm Station.

You are walking along what you think is Liverpool Rd. By your calculations, if you keep moving towards the City until dawn, you’ll make it to water.

The destination can change by the minute; it’s clear that things are not working out according to your original plan. Newcastle is out of the question. You search your memory, looking for a clue, trying to make sense of it all. Then you start laughing and shaking your head.

It was in front of you the whole time: Circular Quay.

You, the author of the Circle Theory, should have known that. It’s the link that completes the chain. You feel like an idiot for not having seen it sooner.

This new discovery gives you a surge of energy and a renewed purpose. You pick up the pace in response, almost running.

Every so often, you believe that you see one of the lads – and for a while you even feel that Brother Richard and Tub are tagging along behind you – but they aren’t in their usual form, instead looking and sounding like teenagers. They don’t come up to speak to you.

Your eyes look to the footpath as you pass a Caltex Service Station and several signs that you don’t read. By the time that you look up, and try to get a true bearing of how far it is before you hit the City and the Harbour, you find that you are at The Crossroads.
You have been walking in the opposite direction to the CBD ever since you left Warwick Farm, a few hours ago. Your sense of direction has well and truly left you.

You adjust your eyes to the setting and your gaze falls on the hotel.

This, you now understand, is it. This is the place where they are all hiding.

You cannot see your bride until tomorrow but at least you can have a drink with the boys tonight. Making your way around to the back of the building, you peer into the side windows. You think you can see Zorba, playing the pokies. He’s a long way from home, you think. It’s his spirit, but he is not in his usual form. That has been the strangest development in your story so far – the way people can now change bodies.

You can sense everyone in the hotel now, laughing at you, but there isn’t anything that can be done about it. Tonight you have to be Peter Lawson, one last time. When the dawn breaks, finally, you can just be.

You walk back to the front door and are stopped by the bouncer. He won’t let you in.

‘Why not?’

‘Because you’ve got no shoes on, mate.’

You laugh.

‘It’s alright,’ you say. ‘It’s me.’

He won’t budge. He looks like white trash, but surely he is one of the Samoan boys that Brother Richard introduced you to. He’s simply disguising himself in another body. These things seem commonplace to you now. You know the bouncer because you met him when he was another person. You don’t even stop to think about it. Many nights you went out clubbing together with him and his boys in Kings Cross, Brother Richard as your chaperone.
‘Stala,’ you say. ‘It’s me, man, Brother Pete.’

‘I told ya ta go and get some fucken shoes on, mate. Now fuck off.’

You admire him and the rest of your friends for their tenacity. It seems that they are driving you to make a bigger fool of yourself. If you can’t get into your buck’s night party without shoes, you think, you’ll take your top off as well.

‘Here I am,’ you say. ‘What if I take my shirt off? Can I come in now?’

The bouncer almost smiles and then pushes you further away, throwing your bag after you.

You walk out onto the lawn, underneath the towering street light, and decide to strip down to your underwear. At the bottle shop you see a young woman. You approach her and do some wild dancing in front of her, highlighted by several of your most impressive pelvic thrusts. She seems like she wouldn’t be averse to giving it a try, but she looks embarrassed.

This is not the way it is supposed to be. You are the groom; strippers are supposed to be dancing for you.

And now the police arrive.

‘Oh yeah,’ you yell, your eyes dazzled by the blue lights. ‘We’re gonna make a blue film.’

They each take an arm and lift you into the back of the paddy wagon.

You start singing Live Forever at the top of your voice. When the cops speed off, you are thrown into the grill and you oblige by yelling through it.

‘Come on, you cunts. Floor it.’

They don’t hesitate to start taking the corners fast, and you get thrown around a bit. When they stop, some minutes later, you are escorted from the vehicle and on
through the station. They guide you into a cell of only a few metres in length. The doors and walls of your new box are see-through. Sitting down on the bench, having pulled your pants on, you find that you can’t even stretch out your legs or lie down.

You smile at the female copper there, wink at her, and then laugh with all the male ones because, as you can see, it is not a group of policeman at all.

Rather, the cluster of men standing before you is made up of all your mates. You recognize the presences of Tub and Richard. There’s Slick and Mustafa – looking similar but different – and you call each one by name.

They pretend like they’ve never seen you before.

A few of them crowd around a computer. They’re interested in your mobile phone. After a couple of minutes they make some calls. It’s apparent to you that they are worried about people finding out your whereabouts. Up until now you’d forgotten about the danger that you must be in.

They’re protecting you from the mob.

You chide them for being so foolish. Can’t they see that even though you are locked in the cell, you’re still in complete control?

They laugh and shake their heads at your antics, soon enough getting sick of you and leaving the room. When they come in again, you do some cramped martial arts moves to impress them. They laugh some more and you just sit there. It is not a big cell.

Then your father arrives. He is in a blue shirt, just like the other boys, and he takes your bag and puts his hand on your back.

‘Thanks, fellas,’ he says.

It’s evident that you’ve passed another test. Your father does not look any different. He has not changed forms. You are very glad to see him.
The cell made you feel claustrophobic, and the joke was becoming cruel. But you beat them. That was never in doubt.

‘Are we going back to The Lodge, Dad?’

You’ve named the family home after the prime minister’s residence.

‘No, mate. We’ve gotta go to the hospital for a while.’
You are woken up at the same time every morning.

Today, still half asleep, you pull on a shirt and then make your way down the hall. It’s time to have your breakfast and medication. That’s the drill: food first, pills second. While you are swallowing your tablets, the nurse speaks to you.

‘Your shirt is on inside-out, Peter.’

‘No dramas. I’ll change it now.’

You lift up the bottom of your shirt, ready to slip it over your head, but then you stop. The nurse is watching you.

‘That wouldn’t be Appropriate Behaviour, would it?’ you say.

‘No it wouldn’t, Peter. Change it in your room. And you’ve got a visitor today, so smarten up.’

Later on, while you’re cruising along the hall – having just showered and changed – you hear a familiar voice behind you.

‘Pete.’

It’s Will.

You give him the tour. There is not that much to it: a TV room, a pool table, one drink machine, a corridor that leads to a dozen segregated dormitory-style bedrooms and a shower block with no hot water.

‘They don’t want us to burn ourselves,’ you say.

He takes you outside of the hospital for a walk. You do one lap of the park and then go back up to the mental health unit. Will reaches into his backpack and pulls out a Bob Dylan Commemorative Rolling Stone Magazine. He’s also brought along a pad
and a pen for you, being the true ally that he is. After thanking him for these gifts, you tell him that they should let you out when the magistrate visits again.

‘They say I’ve had a manic episode, man.’

‘You’ll be right, mate. Just take it easy for a while.’

He gives you a hug and leaves. The hospital is a hospital and you’re just another mental patient. But you want to make a couple of calls, to validate your position.

First up, it’s Richard II.

‘Hey, Bud,’ he says.

You tell him that you’re in hospital.

‘I’ve got bipolar disorder, man. I went psycho.’

He says to give him a call when you get out, and then ends the talk. The next conversation, with Tub, confirms it.

‘Don’t worry, man. We’ll be having a drink and laughing about it in no time,’ he says.

But you don’t feel like laughing about it; you feel like the greatest idiot who has ever lived.

You decide to confess your error to the doctors. You ask to see one, and it ends up being the guy that you thought was Brother Richard, in another form, when you were admitted by your father a few nights ago.

The doctor, you are told, is called Doctor Southey.

‘I’ve had a manic episode,’ you say, as he sits down. ‘I admit it. I just want to know what I should do now to get out. This place is torture.’

‘Peter, the last time I saw you, you were washing your belt in the sink.’

‘That was because of the boot polish on it.’
You look down at the ground and don’t bother to explain any further; it was an old CityRail belt, and you had covered the blue and gold insignia in black boot polish so that you could wear it without the uniform. But you know how it must have looked.

‘I’ll come back and see you in a couple of days,’ he says.

When you get back to your room, you sit on your bed and try to do some reading – though, as your attention span is quite erratic, it’s very difficult to concentrate.

You go out to the TV room but find that the people there are all crazy and no one wants to talk to you. There were times when you thought that you’d been alone, in the past.

Now that looks like nothing.
The Brother said to keep in touch, so you are keeping in touch. His phone starts to ring. In your anxiety you almost hang up, but then he answers.

‘Yeah?’ he says.

‘Brother Richard?’

‘Yeah.’

‘It’s Tall Pete.’

‘Motherfucker.’

‘I was gonna come over and visit.’

‘Sure, Pete. Today?’

‘If that’s alright, bro?’

‘No probs.’

‘I’ll be there around lunch.’

‘Okay, Bud.’

You hang up. Your dad screws up his face and says, ‘Tall Pete?’ You tell him that there were a few blokes called Peter and that is how the Brother distinguished you in particular. Your dad shakes his head but he drives you into Liverpool Station, where you then catch the train to Ashfield.

You make the familiar walk up to the Brother’s place, ignoring the station as you move through it, only to see Isha’s car out the front.

When Richard opens the door you find out that Edward stayed at home. It’s just Isha and the kids, with Jen and her new child. Brother Richard is now a father.

‘That makes you an Uncle again, bro,’ he says.
He excuses himself, to go down to the Dry Cleaners, and you are left with the women and children. Annabelle and Augusten climb all over you, in their excitement, and you are filled with emotion. You were just getting over the loss of not seeing them all the time.

Isha has a smile on her face as she pats you on the stomach.

It’s the bloody anti-psychotic medication that you’re on. The stuff has wreaked havoc with your metabolism and you’ve gained at least twenty kilos.

‘Don’t put on too much, Mr P,’ she says.

The Brother gets home and you go out and sit on the porch with him. There is a bowl of weed sitting there. He has himself a cone and then gets up to walk back into the lounge room.

‘Can I have one, bro?’

‘Sure, Bud,’ he says, glad to see you’ve still got some fight left in you. ‘Go hard.’

You suck down two of them and it doesn’t send you into an episode, as your psychiatrist said it might. There is no mind fuck. You wanted to prove that to yourself.

You can’t admit that it’s your fault for smoking the pot in the first place.

Walking back into the kitchen, you see that Isha has taken the kids and left without saying goodbye. You wonder what that is about and then you are being led out the door. Jen has sent you and Richard to go and get some KFC for lunch.

‘We might be going back to NZ soon.’

‘Yeah?’

‘It will be better for Jen and the little one.’

‘Why did Isha leave like that? Was it ‘cos we starting smoking?’
‘Don’t be silly, Pete-dawg. Just pay for the chicken.’

You take the food home and have your meal with Jen and Micah, your new little nephew. After you’re finished, Richard walks you to the station.

It’s time for you to go home.

You make sure that you aren’t seen, by keeping your head down as you move past the Garrison. The Brother, sensing your shame, hugs you.

‘We’ve been thinking of you, dude. We’ve had discussions and everything, talking about what that mad motherfucker Peter Lawson had done. Take care of yourself, bro. I wish you luck in whatever you do.’

But this seems like it belongs to another guy. The memories you have from before hospital are all filled with radiance: bright fluorescent light, almost able to be touched by hand. Now you feel like a blind man.

That would seem corny, like the rest of your tiny story, if it wasn’t true.

As the Brother walks away, the sun shines on your old CityRail boots – the only part of your uniform that you’ve kept – while you focus your gaze on the circular gleam near the rails.

It could be a dollar coin, or a cap from a beer bottle; you still can’t quite make it out.

You’re deciding whether or not to jump on the tracks.
Part II – I Tell You the Truth
I’ve now been to hospital twice. I kept smoking pot after the initial incarceration and ended up in the same courtyard, with some of the same patients, three years later.

I thought one of them was my best friend.

‘Will,’ I said, ‘how do I get out of here?’

‘Peter,’ said the ice addict, ‘you have to focus your mind, brother.’

Next thing I know they were quizzing me on all things religious, because they thought that I had a Messiah complex.

They were right.

‘What’s the third book in the Bible?’

‘Leviticus,’ I answered.

‘That’s good,’ said the OT. He made a note on his clip board.

There was only one nurse I trusted. During the afternoon tea breaks we ate Sara Lee chocolate cake and drank instant coffee together.

When I got there the second time he was the only person I recognised, apart from my parents.

‘I fucked up, Robert,’ I said.

He remained silent but he reminded me of the encounter a few days later, when the medicine had started to slow me down.

‘You’ve got some great insight into your situation, Peter,’ he said. ‘A lot of people aren’t so lucky.’

I’d grown tired of being told how lucky I was.

He continued, ‘Have you thought about writing your story up?’
‘Nah,’ I said. ‘I’m gonna be a rock star.’

He laughed at me and I went and volunteered at the BBQ; that’s one of the obvious ways to get discharged.

If you sit by yourself and refuse to participate then you are being antisocial and harming your chances of a release. All sorts of kangaroo courts and heavy duty medications can be enlisted to keep you there, if required.

The best thing to do is to get in and burn some sausages, and be positive about any of the childish activities they set up for you – like batting balloons about in the garden.

It’s not dignified, but you don’t care about that when you’re insane. In fact, I’ve often thought that they treated us like shit until we got offended, on purpose; because that was the only way they knew that we were getting any better.

And if you never take offense? Then they give up on you.
Between my two stays in the psych-ward, I made a pilgrimage back to the place where I was born – the old Royal Newcastle Hospital – and ate sausage sandwiches in the cafe downstairs.

Walking along the beach and then climbing up the hill to stare at the statue of James Fletcher, one of Newcastle’s great men, I remembered the time from my undergraduate days when I had drunk a concoction of magic mushrooms, mixed with orange juice, and then journeyed to stand in front of the very same statue.

My flatmate’s brother, Pushkin, had been for a drive with my flatmate’s boyfriend. Pushkin was an expert in finding mushrooms. On that day he had driven to Dungog and had spotted a patch of them in a paddock while speeding along, doing seventy.

Not having had the jungle juice before, I doubted that toad stools boiled in water and mixed with OJ would have any effect on me. But I drank it anyway.

We then went on a long stroll past the ocean, stopping right out the front of the James Fletcher Mental Hospital.

So as I stood there next to the statue, a few years later, I remembered that night. I’d given a long diatribe about the crazies and the statue of Fletcher and his eponymous asylum. Then the Postman gave me some bad news, after we’d disturbed a whole lot of bats feasting in some fruit trees near the fountains.

The Postman was one of my other flatmates. At that time there was myself, The Postman, Jessica and Keysta. Keysta had made up his own name and changed it by deed poll.
Keysta.

No one knew how to spell it and he had to go through the story of its creation, and the reasons why he created it, every time he introduced himself or filled out an official document.

He’d receive letters from Centrelink that were addressed to Mr Keysta Keysta. The computer programs from larger organisations would not recognise people with only one name, like Sting, or Bono. This was a great source of irritation to Keysta, who was adopted and had ongoing, fucked-up, abandonment issues. That’s why he changed his identity. His parents still called him Stephen, which wasn’t his real name either. His original first name, before his birth mother had given him away, was Matthew. At different stages I’ve heard him use all three.

When we drank the juice of magic mushrooms together, Keysta was in my year at university and wanted to make films – because he was crazy.

Keysta was serious, and had an ‘ideas’ box. He was also fluent in sixty different actor’s languages and demanded to know how many I knew.

‘I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,’ I said.

That’s when the bats hit us. We all ran for a few hundred metres, long after the creatures of the night had ceased to swoop. The Postman, always too kool for skool, had been walking throughout. When he caught up to us he fell in beside me.

‘Oh, Peter, I forgot to tell you. Your parents called up.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, apparently your sister has run away from home and they want to know if you’ve seen her.’
I took the news with gravity. The drugs had only just kicked in and I kept saying, ‘This is really bad.’

Keysta told me not to worry.

‘What do you think of my idea?’ he said.

He planned to make a large, special-effects dependent, sci-fi film and he had no money, knew no actors, possessed no equipment and had a three hundred page script tied together with a shoelace.

‘It sucks,’ I said.

I saw him again two or three years ago. Under his arm he had some designs for children’s toys that he intended to manufacture and distribute. He was also sending money to an Eastern European woman he had met online. She wrote that she had two children and no job. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that the woman was probably a man, named Boris, working for the Russian Mafia.

So we walked back to our terrace house on Stevenson Place and I tried to phone my family, to find out about my sister. After about twenty minutes of not getting through, Jessica patted me on the shoulder and told me to leave it until the morning.

‘They’ll be asleep now, Pete,’ she said.

‘Yeah, Pete, have a bong instead, man,’ said Pushkin.

I took their advice. A bong followed by a bottle of the murkiest, cheapest home brew going around – made and bottled by The Postman and myself – did the job. That’s when I felt nauseous and made a trip to our bathroom, which overflowed with square boxes of toilet paper that we’d stolen from the council dunny across the road.
I washed my face, took in some water from the tap, and then leaned on the sink with both hands. I looked deep inside the mirror, right into my own eyes, and saw a woman – clearly a succubus – who’d come to take my soul. She was stunning.

Someone knocked on the door – Keysta.

‘I am The Man in Black,’ I said.

‘Nah, you’re *fucked*, man.’

He then went and told everyone that I thought I was Johnny Cash. Pushkin, coming out of his sister’s room, sensed that something was very wrong.

‘Did you look in the mirror, Pete?’

‘Long and hard, compadre.’

‘Come and sit on Jess’s veranda.’

He took me out and opened one of the windows, letting the sea breeze come in off the harbour. Across the port, I could see the lights of Stockton and I heard a horn blast from one of the tug boats. It hurt my brain.

Jessica brought me a glass of water, with some pain killers. I had a crush on her too. Feeling sorry for myself, I fell asleep on her floor.

This was before I ever went crazy, when I was one of the sanest members of our circle.
After that first pilgrimage back to my birthplace, I decided that I needed to live there again full-time. I went back to Newcastle to regroup – in Merewether – right near the beach. I lived on Ridge St, next to the bakery.

I started, and quit, a Diploma of Education, then sat back, smoked bongs, and played guitar for six months, before enrolling in a music course. I saw a therapist but I didn’t tell her that I’d gone back to being a drug fiend until it was too late. By that time, I’d already nodded off at the wheel.

In my mind I’d convinced myself that it was Good Friday, though the calendar on the wall displayed the month of July.

No one was around as I walked the streets. I thought this was because people were indoors, mourning the death of Christ, my brother. The colours started jumping out at me again – the red and the blue – but this time there was no need to worry about red, the colour of danger, because my father now drove a red truck for Coca Cola, and thus, to my way of seeing the world, had neutralised the threat. I was therefore untouchable.

When I turned up at Mussolini’s house in the afternoon, he made me a coffee.

From his place we went to Ralph and Potsy’s. I made a timeline of these events, after my recovery, just to settle what happened that night.

I could do it by looking at the evidence.

For instance, when my brother picked me up from Newcastle Police Station, I had shoulder length black hair. But when I was at Ralph and Potsy’s again, later on, my head was shaved.
I’d found my way to the hill behind my house on Ridge St. From our back window you could see a fluorescent crucifix, sitting on top of the Baptist church, and I decided that I must see it close up. But being psychotic, I got lost – inexplicably – in my own neighbourhood. I found myself on someone’s front porch, having forgotten all about the church and the glowing cross. I don’t know who lived in the house, but I decided then that it was owned by Will’s father.

My best friend has never lived in Merewether, and neither have his parents, but being psychotic takes away the need for logic; Will’s parents were living there on that hill because I thought it.

When they didn’t answer the door, or my calls for them to come out, I hopped down off the porch and started to walk across the lawn. That was when I got stopped by several torches shining in my face. Rather than panic, I started doing Tai Chi.

‘Hey, watch out boys. He’s doin’ the Tai Chi on us.’

The pigs got a laugh out of that, as they grabbed me by the arms and assisted me into the back of the truck.

It didn’t seem like an inappropriate place to be. With affection, I again yelled through the grill and told them to go hard.

In between cracking jokes, back inside yet another see-through cell, I gave them my parents’ phone number. Within half an hour my brother was there to take me home.

After collecting me from the cop shop, Zac had the unenviable job of babysitting me until the morning. When he fell asleep in front of the TV, I took the opportunity to cut my locks, scrape my dome clean, and escape back to Hamilton to see the boys. On my return a few hours later, with Zac still on the lounge, I placed all the household
knives and forks in the toilet bowl and sent several other items flying out the door and into the backyard.

I can no longer remember the supernatural reasons behind these actions.

Zac stayed with me until my parents drove up from Sydney. I hung out all night on the back porch, listening to music and reading from a blue book of poems.

Instead of recognising any of the warning signs, or acknowledging that I’d started rethinking the thoughts that got me into the mental health unit the first time, I believed during my second episode of delusional grandeur that it was all happening for real.

I rationalised it to myself by thinking that I’d not been ready for the power to be given to me before, and that I’d failed at the final hurdle. They needed me to be a few years older and wiser before they could prepare me for the inevitable transition. Just who ‘they’ were was a minor detail that didn’t bother me in my psychotic state. I was so glad that my betrothed had returned, and had not forgotten about me.

I can’t explain what it was like to sense another person in the room with me that I could not see with my eyes, except to say that it felt real – as real as my wife’s brown toes do now, while she nudges me, looking for a foot massage.

Maya, was it you who sent me those messages?
I met him for the first time out the front of the old Polish Hall, in Maitland, where I had spent so many nights learning Tae Kwon Do. It was mid-afternoon, and I had just been up to the St Vincent de Paul shop to buy a battered copy of Shakespeare’s complete works. The book was all I had with me. I used my last twenty bucks to buy it.

‗Hey.‘

I turned and saw a man. He was as tall as me, but old, tanned, wrinkled and soaked. His pants were covered in soil and he stunk of grog and sweat.

‗The name is Rex,‘ he said. ‘I’m trying, I’m trying to get…the bus…fare. The bus f-fare to-gether to go and see Kerry Packer.‘

He looked at me.

‗Now, can you give me twenty cents?‘

I had no change, but I kept listening to him. He didn’t wait for an answer. He just kept right on with his pitch.

Rex was a professional.

‗I’m going to see Kerry Packer in Scone and he’s gonna be my partner. I’ve got a b-b-business plan. I’m gonna see Kerry Packer and I’ll tell him that you backed me. We’re in it together.‘

Then he started crying.

I was fascinated. I’d never seen anyone in such a mess. He seemed to be wearing everything that he owned. His long coat and assorted bags were all clinging to his body, like a pack-horse that has just negotiated a river.
Rex then started defaming a local, and national, treasure. He’d forgotten all about Kerry Packer and had instead summoned up the ghost of Les Darcy – Maitland’s very own World Champion Boxer – who had been dead for some seventy-odd years.

‘Les Darcy…that mongrel. I’m gonna kill that bastard.’

I watched as he swayed in the breeze. His eyes closed and then he woke with a start.

‘Come on, you dog.’

I thought he meant me, but I was mistaken. Rex wanted Les, because it turned out that Les Darcy was a murderer.

‘He killed my brother. Chopped his head off with an axe, the cunt did. I’ll get him, though.’

I excused myself, after shaking his hand, and left him to sway.

A few weeks later Rex got me and my friends drunk, and we didn’t even have to sit with him. We gave him a lift, from outside the offices of The Maitland Mercury, down to the train station. He handed over about ten bucks, in two dollar coins, and we drove away and bought a cask of wine. In homage to our new friend, the town drunk, we drank it out of plastic cups – while sitting in a gutter.

When I was living in Merewether all those years later, my next door neighbour asked me to tell him a story.

‘I’ll tell ya about the time the cops picked me up.’

Gerry laughed at the description of my half-naked dancing and singing from the night they locked me inside the see-through cell in Liverpool, the first time. I didn’t know, as I told Gerry the story, that I would give a repeat performance within weeks of this and be caught trying out my new Tai Chi moves.
'They put you in the fish tank when they think you’re crazy,’ he said.

‘I am.’

We both smiled. He then told some of his own tales. He’d been in and out of Maitland Gaol countless times. I asked him if he knew Rex.

‘Big tall fella?’

‘That’s him.’

‘He tried to root me. I had to share a cell with the prick.’

I went back inside and left Gerry sitting alone, shaking his head.
I’d never heard of bipolar disorder, or manic depression, until I met Ted Faraway. His dad was wild. We were in our Year 9 Computer Studies class when he told me.

‘I think I’m supposed to cry or something,’ said Ted, half smiling.

‘What are you talking about?’ I said.

‘Dad is in mental hospital.’

‘Bullshit.’

He laughed and nodded his head.

‘Seriously. That’s why I wasn’t here yesterday. We took him to James Fletcher.’

‘What happened?’

‘He took all our guns down to the police station and handed them in. He said to the Sergeant that he couldn’t keep them anymore because he’s suicidal. So we had to drive him to James Fletcher in the middle of the night.’

‘Fucken hell.’

‘I didn’t know, but Mum reckons he’s manic depressive and he won’t take the tablets.’

It was the first time that Ted had mentioned his parents.

About a month later I stayed over at his place for the weekend and got to meet his bipolar dad, Mr Barry Faraway.

Ted’s mother explained to me that her husband suffered severe highs and lows. She said it was a struggle to get him to take his pills.

‘He likes being high, Peter. He says he can get more done.’
‘He’s a freak is more like it,’ said Ted.

I could see that Ted was a little bit embarrassed about his old man.

On that first visit, Mr Faraway was just out of hospital and had driven into Maitland with Ted to pick me up and get some supplies. That’s what he said we were doing, ‘getting the supplies.’

‘I hope you realise you’re coming to stay on a farm, me boy,’ he said. ‘Ted here has got some jobs to do and you’ll have to earn your keep as well. There’ll be no buggerising around. We’re getting the supplies and then we’re gonna go do some work.’

He had his glasses hanging around his neck, held in place by a white piece of elastic. On closer inspection I noted where the elastic had come from. As we walked around the supermarket, he had to keep pulling up his shorts.

‘Dad, pull up your bloody pants.’

Ted laughed but he was looking sideways to see who was watching.

We reached their property about an hour later. That’s when Mr Faraway saw something in the distance, and hit the brakes.

‘Ted, pass me those binoculars.’

We watched on as he scanned the perimeter of his land.

‘Those thieving bastards.’

He put the car into reverse and sped towards the road.

‘Like fucken rats, they are.’

A few seconds later we pulled up in front of a truck parked by the Faraway’s fence. A woman sat in the passenger seat while a man stood fumbling with a piece of corrugated iron. He obviously intended to take it home with him.

‘You two boys stay here,’ said Mr Faraway.
He got out and walked towards the man.

‘This is private property,’ he said.

The thief didn’t move or say anything. He just stood there.

‘You can’t walk onto someone’s land and take things. It’s fucken stealing. You see that? That’s the boundary line. You crossed it and now you’re holding a piece of my property in your hands.’

The man still didn’t speak, but he put the corrugated iron down. The woman in the ute had cast her gaze to the floor.

‘You tell people,’ said Mr Faraway. ‘I’m a crazy man. You can’t come in here.’

‘Fucken hell,’ said Ted.

Ted was watching everything in the rear-view mirror, and had started to giggle. I looked around and saw why, just in time. Crazy Barry Faraway had climbed onto the bonnet of the thief’s pride and joy.

‘I’m a loony,’ he kept saying. ‘Beware.’

He was jumping up and down on their vehicle. Then he got off and walked back to us.

‘You’ve gotta teach these bastards,’ he said, speeding back up the driveway.

‘People have to learn not to trespass on this farm and take our shit.’

We couldn’t stop laughing. But when Ted’s mother asked us what had gone on, she didn’t find it funny.

Not long after that she took Ted and moved out.
With my father, and my youngest sister, I stood at the front desk of Emergency and waited for the triage nurse.

It was about a week after my oldest sister’s wedding. She was in Thailand and I was in Austral, South West Sydney. My parents were not sure what to do with me. I’d been asking to get out of the house because I wanted to visit Will and his new wife, Samantha. I phoned him and he said that it would be fine.

Mum and Dad thought otherwise.

‘I want to visit Will,’ I said.

‘And I’m telling you that you’re not ready for that yet, Pete,’ said my father.

‘This is bullshit.’

I knew my rights. If you’ve been locked up in a mental institution for any length of time, you become obsessed with the law and how it applies to you. I’d completed my second three week sentence and I wanted to go and see some people.

‘So you’re saying that I can’t go out of the house?’

‘Not until you’ve demonstrated to me that you can handle it, Son,’ said Dad.

‘Your friends don’t realise how sick you are, Pete,’ added Mum.

I slammed a few things about and stormed outside, confirming everything they were saying about me with my actions. But that wasn’t the point. The point was that I knew I could go anywhere I wanted to – legally – because I was a twenty-six year old man who’d been allowed to walk away from mental hospital with the full blessing of the doctor. No court order had been issued stating that I had to be under house arrest.

My parents were illegally detaining me.
The few friends I rang up laughed at me when I complained of this. Will told me that I should rest until my parents said I had the all clear to leave the property.

‘Well, I don’t have any choice, do I?’

Although I did have choices: I chose not to go to sleep. I didn’t feel like it. If I wanted to stay up and watch television all night then that was my prerogative.

But after a day and a half of this, things got tense. My father confronted me and there were harsh words spoken. In front of my mother, he claimed that I’d attempted to head-butt him. It was an exaggeration. I had tried to avoid him taking me back to hospital.

Then after a brief period of contemplation, lasting about five seconds, I decided that I’d be better off in the mental health unit.

‘Please,’ I said, ‘take me to the fucken hospital.’

‘Fine,’ said my father, ‘we’ll go to the hospital.’

People often have a short fuse with those who are unstable; my father proved to be more or less normal in this regard.

In the car I sat on the back seat and castigated him all the way in to Liverpool. At that late time of night it is a quick trip from Austral, taking about twenty minutes.

‘Well, I hope you’re satisfied. I spend all my time trying to get out and now you’re happy to take me back in.’

‘You asked to go back, Peter,’ said my father.

‘Because I was driven to it,’ I said. ‘I’ll have more freedom there.’

Freedom – The Law – only a madman can go on about them so much with such self-righteousness.
Dad got our usual parking spot and then we walked in. I knew the system well by that stage. While standing in front of the television screen in the waiting area, I confronted him.

‘You don’t give a shit about what happens to me at all do you?’

I burned at the thought that I’d be going back inside because we couldn’t make things work at home.

‘I do care, Pete. More than you’ll ever know.’

He looked me right in the eyes as he said it.

I understood then. I saw his pain, his quiet, resigned pain, and I backed off. Sometimes when you get that angry your eyes and ears are closed to what is going on around you. Seeing my father in that moment made me feel ashamed for all I’d done. My parents had already survived so much, and now I was putting them through this.

They summoned a doctor from the psych-ward and I went and sat with him and Dad. The doctor requested some time alone with me. We talked about the usual shit. What they do is ask a series of everyday questions and gauge how insane you are by your answers.

‘What do you do, Peter?’

‘I’m a bum.’

‘Your father told me that you have a degree.’

‘Yeah.’

‘And you play music?’

‘I just got a Fender Strat.’

I left out that it was made in Mexico.

‘Why did you come here?’
‘Because I’m a prisoner at home.’

This went on for ages. It only became interesting when I brought up the topic of Sin, and my half-arsed belief in God.

‘Well,’ said the doctor, ‘you’ll have to see a priest about that. But for now, you’re free to go.’

He sent us on our way, and we didn’t talk during the drive home.
I rose early the next Sunday.

It took half an hour to walk to the local village. The small Catholic Church stood towards the far end of it. I kept up a fast pace, taking in everything with my eyes on the way through. I noted the colours and symbols encountered – the bird with blue wings flying in front of me: the message written in red chalk on the pavement – just as I’d done before my confinement. It’s a difficult habit to break.

Although, when it came to looking for meaning in these things, I did have some reservations. Clearly, in my delusions of grandeur, I had lost the plot and seen things that were not there. I’d imagined relationships with people who never existed.

So I sat through the Mass, keen to be absolved of my sins. I stood in line and received Holy Communion.

Afterwards, I made myself known to the man they called ‘Father Brian’. He was the guy in charge. I had to make my request through one of the younger priests assisting him.

‘I’ve just been to hospital and the doctor told me I should make my confession.’

The young novice looked a little concerned. With my hair shaved off at the scalp and my six-foot-six frame weighing just over eighty kilos, he must have thought that I was suffering from cancer.

He sought out his superior fast.

Father Brian, tall himself, with greying hair and glasses, made his way towards me. He knew that I didn’t have cancer, or any other physical disease; he’d seen the look in my eyes.
‘Come in here,’ he said.

He ushered me into the crèche, where we were separated from the rest of the congregation by glass. They would not hear my confession, but would doubtless be looking at me and wondering what the hell was going on.

‘Now what are you after?’

‘I need to have my confession heard.’

He nodded. I confessed.

‘Say one ―Glory Be‖ as your penance.’

‘What about the Rosary?’

‘Just start with a Glory Be.’

He turned to leave.

‘What are the Mass times throughout the week?’

‘They are printed on that board there.’

I heard some impatience in his voice, as he pointed to the large sign I’d just walked past.

I decided to come back for the midweek services. On the Wednesday I fronted up at the scheduled time in the morning. Then I arrived on Thursday afternoon for the Rosary session.

I soon became one of the regulars. It was hard to hide it; on any given weekday there would only be four or five of us.

One afternoon I took along a copy of some notes that I’d assembled when psychotic. I’d found the pages as I unpacked some of the boxes that my father had helped me to move when I left Merewether. I wanted to see what the old priest made of it.
‘The Circle Theory,’ Father Brian said, a brief smile touching his lips.

‘Is that significant?’

‘Well, it confirms what I thought about your state of mind when we first met.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah,’ he said.

He was still reading.

‘In what way?’

‘Come and have a cuppa,’ he said. ‘And I’ll tell you what I think has happened.’

We walked to the Rectory, which was next door to the church. He sat me down in the lounge room and busied himself in the kitchen. He came back a few minutes later with a tray on which he’d arranged two cups, a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits. He was used to hosting guests.

‘Have you been finding Church helpful?’

‘It has been difficult. I don’t know anyone here,’ I said.

‘Yeah, they can be a bit frosty with new people. I’ve tried to change that over the years, but it’s hard. How long have you been away?’

I gave him my history in the Church: Baptised at birth, given a thorough Catholic education, installed as leader of our branch of the Catholic Youth Group, Antioch – although I toned down the depiction of how the adult leader of the group had publicly called me Lucifer, after it was disclosed that I had been having a premarital sexual relationship with the musical director, her daughter – and then the fall into a lapsed believer, drug abuser and CityRail employee.

‘I’ve seen and heard worse,’ he said. ‘How did this come about?’

He motioned to the copy of the Circle Theory that I’d brought along.
I told him about everything: the sleepless nights, the railway, the pot smoking, my big ideas and considerable ego. He nodded and put the paper down.

‘I’ll choose my words carefully here, because you may not be out of the woods just yet. But I think that there has been an intense battle for your soul.’

I sat there, pretty happy with myself. The concept excited me, for all the wrong reasons.

‘You’ve been under the influence of the teaching spirits,’ he said.

‘The teaching spirits?’

‘Agents of Satan.’

‘Shit,’ I muttered.

‘Quite,’ he said. There was a pause. Then he spoke again.

‘You have to pray, ask for forgiveness and study the Gospels.’

‘So you believe it was real?’

‘I believe that you were being lead astray, ultimately to secure your death. You almost gave up your place in the Kingdom. Now drink your tea.’

He searched his shelf for some books. I drank the tea.

‘I could also be wrong,’ he said. ‘You should still listen to your doctor and take your pills, but don’t discount the fact that Satan and Evil are very real. As a believer you should always be on guard. You dropped the ball and turned your face from God. Don’t make the same mistake again.’

‘Thank you, Father.’

‘Come and see me when you’ve read those, and we’ll have another chat.’

He gave me the books and I made my way outside. Standing on the street I attempted to assess how I felt, after the news that I’d had a close call with the Eternal
Fire. On first hearing that I’d been the cause of a conflict between Heaven and Hell, I thought myself to be very important. But I’ll never repeat that stupidity.

Father Brian told me something that afternoon that has stuck with me ever since:

It is when we most feel like God that we are closest to Satan.
I sat on the frayed green carpet in the school hall, excited and afraid.

God had been on my mind all throughout nineteen eighty-eight. I knew that towards the end of that year our class would receive the sacrament of Confirmation – becoming full adult members of the Church – but I didn’t know what this would mean for me.

Arriving at my first Catholic school, St John’s, in ‘eighty-six, I had been twelve months too late to receive my first Holy Communion with the rest of my classmates. I therefore found myself in a tricky situation: a baptised Catholic, but one who couldn’t receive the Eucharist. This made me feel isolated every time we went for Mass.

So my teacher, Mr Garibaldi, worked out a deal with Bishop Leo. He announced it to the whole class on the afternoon that he told us the date for the Confirmation Service.

‘Mr Lawson, here,’ he said, ‘will be having a very special night.’

Everyone looked towards me.

‘He is going to have his First Holy Communion and his Confirmation at the same time.’

I thought about this as we sat in the hall and practised our hymns. Beside me, to the left, one of my friends was ripping out long pieces of thread from the carpet. Along with everyone else in the hall, he remained oblivious to my elevated spiritual condition.

The song being rehearsed seemed to speak to me, and it was the subject matter – the words – that made me so anxious. The chorus of the hymn, in particular, kept repeating in my head for the rest of the day.
‘Here I am Lord. Is it I Lord? I have heard You calling in the night. I will go Lord, if You lead me. I will hold Your people in my heart.’

I felt like I was personally being called by Jesus. That’s why I got scared. In my ten year old mind the only way that I could be of any use to Him, and His Church, was to become a priest.

This posed problems. I already knew that I wanted to get married, and that I loved beautiful women, but how could I ignore God? In the end, ruling out the prospect of discussing it with anyone else, I told myself that I was too young to decide anything.

Without knowing it, I had sensed the Holy Spirit for the first time; either that or it was the first sign of bipolar disorder. Who can be sure? Maybe I believe only when I’m high, disbelieve when I’m depressed, and am in a state of confusion, unable to choose one way or the other, when I’m normal.

But then, what is everyone else’s excuse?

There have been similar occasions since. I catalogued the so-called spiritual ones with Father Brian. My first Reconciliation, the Confirmation Mass, and my opening weekend with Antioch, all shared that same quality. Brian said that these were experiences to be treasured, and to be used for future reference.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Compare your memories of being sick to these times in which you did feel the Holy Spirit, and you’ll see what I’m driving at.’

It was disappointing; I had been happier ill.

We’d been progressing further in my studies of the Bible, and some basic theology. He asked me to stop by once a week, after the Thursday afternoon Rosary Service. His main concern was that in my illness I had listened to voices, and taken
direction from them, thinking that they were from God. He tried to educate me so that I would be more discerning in the future.

‘You never want to fall into that error again,’ he said. ‘And you can be sure that the Devil will try you. It will get harder, the more faithful you become. Your belief will fill him with rage and he’ll try to deceive you. Remember what St Paul said, “Even Satan can disguise himself to look like an Angel of Light.”’

I nodded, but felt sceptical.

The main problem was that I couldn’t talk to anyone else about it. The last thing you can say, after getting out of the mental health unit, is that you have been under the influence of the Evil One. My doctor, my family, and my friends – they wanted to hear that I had lost my way after taking substances: end of story.

I feared that it was more complicated, but Father Brian said there was nothing to worry about. As I left the Rectory that Thursday, he held out a small card for me.

‘Here you go,’ he said. ‘Keep this close to you.’

I examined the picture on the card; at first I thought it was the Virgin Mary.

‘That’s St Dymphna,’ said Brian. ‘She is the Patron Saint of the Insane.’

‘Thanks,’ I said.

She looked fetching, but I tried not to think about it as I read the prayer.

“Pray for me, dear St. Dymphna, that my nervous and emotional turmoil may cease, and that I may again know serenity and personal peace. Amen.”

I wished that rhyming in prayer would be banned by the Vatican. Then I put the card in my Bible, and walked away – wondering what the punishment was for fantasizing about a Saint.
The second time I went to hospital, I engineered an escape.

We’d been sitting in the main lounge area, where the autistic man, Matthew, insisted that Channel Seven be on the television at all times, otherwise he would start slapping himself about the head.

Still supposedly under the influence of the Evil Spirits, and trying to get some quick answers, I glanced between the television and the astrology page of the Telegraph.

Meanwhile, this schizophrenic Asian girl who had a crush on me got up from her chair and walked over to a neglected sign on the wall that read ‘OFFICIAL VISITORS’.

At the time we were both stark-raving ‘I am The Walrus’ insane; I know this because she offered herself to me on a platter, going so far as to pull off her underpants and lie down with her legs spread – while I turned my back and told her to cover herself up.

Do you see what insanity does to a person?

You let chances like that go by, with sham piety. Just as any self-respecting woman in her right mind would never give herself away like that to a bloke she’d just met, any shrewd single man – and also, let’s face it, quite a few of the married ones – would have gotten down on the ground and drilled that schizo Asian nymph, You Porn style.

Anyway, she read aloud the OFFICIAL VISITORS sign.
‘Official Visitors are to report to the Office before entering and leaving,’ she said.

As she finished reading it out, she got called away for activities. This was the phase of the moon where one of the young female nurses would blow up surgical gloves and hit them around with us in the courtyard.

By that stage the patronising tone and day-care like rituals of the staff was just too much for a crazy man to stomach, so I did what any sane man would do and lied. I advanced towards the counter of the office and spoke to one of the trainees. I didn’t know her so I hoped that she didn’t recognise me.

‘I’m an Official Visitor and I’m informing you that I’m leaving the premises.’

‘What?’

I wondered if the anti-psychotic medication hadn’t slowed down my speech, so I sped it up a little and increased the volume.

‘I’m an Official Visitor and I’m letting you know that I’m leaving the building, okay?’

‘Okay,’ she said, not caring.

I skipped down the stairs before she had a chance to change her mind, thinking what a masterstroke it was to disguise myself as an Official Visitor.

I made my way towards the train station, where I discovered that I had no money, no bag and no shoes. But – being in Liverpool – this didn’t pose too many problems; if anything, I blended in well with the scenery.

My father responded to the reverse-charges call that I gave him, and promptly drove me back to the hospital. Once there I was disappointed to find out that the door was always open. By law they couldn’t lock us up anymore.
As I sat down in the courtyard, I saw that one of the young men had a black eye.

Upon inquiry, he said that I’d given it to him.

I vaguely remembered punches being thrown and a contest for my leather jacket.

On the night that I was admitted, it seems that I suggested a fight to see who would be able to stay inside the circular pattern on the floor of the psych-ward. Whoever defeated me, by forcing me outside the boundary, was to receive my jacket as their trophy.

The following day, I had extensive bruising and no coat.

The matron in charge on that night could not tell Mum where it had disappeared to. A junior male nurse – and I know which one, the motherfucker – set it up so that this bastard could smuggle the jacket out.

The other patients steered clear of me for a while, after that; I’d become the violent crazy guy people warned each other about.
There is a woman on Frederick St, Ashfield, who collects leaves.

I saw her again recently, in Coles. I’ve returned to the inner-west and now live less than ten minutes drive from where I first lost my mind.

The woman who gathers leaves is demented. Back in the day, she used to drift out of the house in her nightgown. And on one gruesome occasion she even picked up her twigs and branches while wearing nothing at all.

She was not an attractive demented woman, so at that time I let her go about her business unhindered.

There was also a man who felt he could complete any of his ablutions in public, no matter how many spectators surrounded him. I ran into him again, too.

‘Are you right there, mate?’ I said.

‘Fug of,’ he said. ‘Fug off.’

On the wall where he’d been lifting his leg, right near the entrance to the town hall and library, there is a sign.

It reads, ‘Ashfield Council Welcomes Refugees!’

They should also add that it welcomes madmen, nudists, drug addicts, thieves, those on the brink of suicide, and CityRail employees.

Of course, sometimes they are all the same people.
When I first met Father Brian my head had been shaved, rather crudely.

I said that I’d forgotten the symbolic reasons behind the things I’d done during my second psychosis, but that would be a blatant lie if I repeated it now.

My brother had driven me home from Newcastle Police Station. He helped to search my room for anti-psychotic tablets, but we came up with nothing; it turned out that I’d given them all away to my drug-taking mates, who used them as tranquilizers.

So we sat down in the lounge room and I waited for Isaac to get sleepy. High as a kite on mania, I hadn’t put my head to a pillow in three days.

I had dreams of handing down everything I owned to Zac, who would become the new leader, while I retired to the heavens in peace. Sitting across from him, I decided that he would be the one I gave my power to.

‘Here ya go, man,’ I said. ‘These are yours.’

I gave him my guitars; other than my books, they were the only items of value I owned.

‘You’re The One now,’ I said.

He laughed it off and leaned back in his chair. When his eyes started to close some moments later, I tried to make my exit. He caught me on the road and brought me back inside.

‘You’ve got to stay here, Pete.’

I smiled at him because of the way he was trying to engage me with his eyes. People always do that when they think you’re insane, as if by looking you straight in the pupil they will somehow convey their message to you without words. It’s
quite condescending, and rarely works. Indeed, it often just makes the madman angry, because he is being treated as if he’s mad.

Waiting for Zac to sleep, I sat on the back lounge and listened to music. After sharing a bedroom with him for thirteen years, I knew that once he’d fully immersed himself in slumber it would take a car alarm next to his ear for him to move.

Then, feeling the need to piss, I got up and walked into the bathroom.

At this time of my life I was, without rival, the vainest member of my immediate peer group. I stood there in front of the mirror and studied myself.

My hair was dyed black and conditioned, my nails were painted and I sometimes wore foundation. I’m not sure how I got away with any of this, as most of my friends smelled their clothes before putting them on. But looking at myself in the mirror that night, I knew the time had come. One last hurdle had to be jumped.

I had to defeat the Sin of Vanity. The pride I had in my appearance and the pleasure I took from being looked at had to be obliterated.

Sighing, I located some scissors in the bathroom cupboard and bunched up my hair into a pony tail. This proved easy, as my mane had already started thinning. A few choice cuts and the bulk of it had disappeared. I finished off the job with a disposable Bic, inside ten minutes. There were cuts all over my head, so I had to have a shower to clean up and stop the bleeding.

When I finished I went into the lounge room to see that my brother had descended into a coma-like state. He didn’t move from his position as I opened the door.

On reaching Hamilton, I paced up and down Beaumont Street, sometimes stopping to sit on the footpath while staring at the passers-by. They stared back,
perplexed at what they were seeing: a skin head in bare feet, looking up at the stars, with a knowing smirk on his lips.

Getting up off the ground, I decided to go back to Ralph and Potsy’s. Mussolini was there and together they all laughed at the words spilling from my mouth.

I commented on The Simpsons Marathon playing on the TV and I complained of having a cold head. And I remember sitting on both sides of the room, at one point simultaneously, I’m sure. There was also a young woman underneath a blanket, who I’d never seen before. She may not exist.

The last action I performed there, before running back home to my brother, was to take the white ball from Potsy’s pool table and sit next to his black cat, in the backyard. While patting the feline I looked into the night sky and saw the bright full moon.

The circle had taken hold of me once more. I reached for the white ball and held it up in profile next to the white disk in the black sky. In hindsight, when I relayed these events to Father Brian, this deed seemed absurd.

‘It just illustrates that you were moon-maddened and a full child of the night,’ he said, ‘taking your misguided orders from Beelzebub himself.’

‘Do you really think so?’

‘Well, I guess that sounds a bit dramatic.’

‘Yeah.’

That’s when I made up my mind to forget mass, again.
The second incarceration: three days and nights awake, enough medication to knock over a rhino, and a very pissed off couple of nurses.

This is the setting in which I chose to reveal my true identity.

The lights were off. They still had me in the observation area with the other loonies and ice addicts. Until I slept, and gave some straight answers, I wouldn’t be moving into the general psych-ward. They made this clear. So I started singing, to pass the time. Then I bothered some of the patients who were already asleep by approaching the ones that I thought I recognised. I didn’t know yet that I’d been hallucinating.

One aboriginal lady on a respirator tolerated me for a while. I got it into my head that she had the task of being my spiritual mother. I’ve no idea why.

When the old female nurse on duty saw what I’d been up to, she called her male colleague to come and help her. He stood at the same height as me, had a bald head, a biker’s beard and no emotion. My animal instincts took over when I sensed them coming in for the kill.

They wanted to shove another needle in my arse.

I’d made a solemn vow that this would not happen to me again; I would rather have been beaten unconscious. The indignity of being held on a bed, having your pants removed and being pinned in the buttocks – when you’ve already been deprived of your liberty – cannot be put into words. When it happened to me the first time I was in hospital, I didn’t calm down because they had given me the drugs; I surrendered because I’d been shown who was boss. A part of you just gives up when that happens.
But I didn’t let it occur a second time. There were only two nurses and, thank the Lord, not a security guard in sight. The female stood no taller than my mother and could be evaded with ease. The evil bald dude, complete with spooky apron and gloves, looked a little tastier. As they advanced I told them to ask me what my name was.

‘Don’t be silly, Peter. Now come here,’ said the lady.

‘No,’ I said, raising my hands. ‘Ask me my name.’

‘Okay, Peter,’ she sighed. ‘What is your name?’

‘I am,’ I said. ‘Do you hear me? I am.’

They weren’t impressed. I raised my palms as I focused in on the lady, trying to see if she understood me. That’s when the male nurse leapt forward and obtained a liquid-nails grip on my right wrist. The tiny one pounced herself then, and tried to help push me into the nearest room. They needed something to bend me over.

I summoned all my strength, and swung my arms free – busting myself from their grasp without hitting them: a critical move. If I’d connected with my swinging arms they’d not only have pinned me in retaliation, but they probably would have thrown me into isolation, or restrained me. Instead I could stand back, speak to them, and plead my case.

‘You’re not going to give me another bloody needle,’ I said.

He wanted to continue. She, seeing the fear in my eyes, decided to use it as a bargaining tool.

‘If you don’t want a needle then you have to try and get to sleep, Peter,’ she said.
I told them that I’d try. I didn’t succeed but I kept quiet and watched television until the morning, when they sedated me in liquid form with the first daily dose of medication.

‘I am,’ I kept muttering. ‘I am.’

No one had any idea of what I was talking about.
My old South Indian doctor, a native of Kerala, used to ask me three things every time I visited him. He kept his treatment of Bipolar Affective Disorder very simple.

‘Have you been taking your medication, Peter?’
‘Every day.’
‘Have you been getting your sleep?’
‘Absolutely.’
‘You haven’t been taking mind altering substances or anything? No drinking?’

I always had to stop myself from smiling when he asked me that. I mean, I hadn’t been taking mind altering substances but just sitting in his office was enough to do anyone’s head in; on the seat in his waiting room he had attached a toy frog that would croak when you sat down.

Seriously: people who had been tormented by aural hallucinations would slump onto the lounge chair and be greeted by a croaking frog.

‘No,’ I said.

I underestimated him at the start, a clinical man who didn’t get excited about much. He stopped short of telling me to pray but he once informed me that the sacred syllable Om, when said en masse, was the most powerful sound in the universe.

My Indian wife, Maya – who’s a Christian – said ‘What bullshit’, when I told her.
In 2003 I returned to Austral to live with my parents, after my second stay in hospital. I had some time to recuperate and grow back my hair. That’s when the fury I’d been suppressing for a few years came spewing out. My mother had to listen to it all.

I still had a lot of anger about not being able to go outside the boundary of our property, and I didn’t filter my thoughts as I should have. As soon as I felt something, I said it.

On this particular morning Mum had opened some mail addressed to my father, which is quite a common occurrence in most marriages: you open each other’s mail. But for some reason that day, it irritated me.

‘It’s for Dad,’ said my youngest sister, Sophie.

‘I’ll open it,’ said Mum, taking the envelope.

‘He’s gonna love that,’ I said.

‘Oh shut up, Pete,’ she said.

The next few minutes went by in a blur. We talked over each other at an increasing volume, until we were both yelling. Then I brought up one of those incidents in a family’s history that are best forgotten.

‘I should not have had to see that,’ I was saying.

‘What’s he talking about?’ said Sophie.

Mum stopped fighting after I mentioned it.

A few days later I didn’t even remember having the clash with her. She reminded me of it weeks afterwards, when I had calmed down enough to listen.
The first time I’d been psychotic I had seen my grandfather, who’d been dead for years, in the court yard of the hospital. On the second time that I spun out of control, it seems that I obsessed about this other family experience I referred to.

My mother patted me on the shoulder.

‘You’re right,’ she said. ‘You shouldn’t have had to see it. None of you should.’

The night before the Three Unit English Paper, my final exam in the HSC, I went up to my bedroom early. I had gone out earlier in the evening, chasing after a girl I worked with at Woolworths, blowing my last chance to do any serious study.

There had been tension brewing between my parents that I knew would end in a fight of some kind, so I skipped television with the family and instead made my way up the ladder and into my bedroom, in the canary yellow flood tower.

I looked over my pathetic notes, put aside my text books, and decided that what I knew then would have to be enough for whatever awaited me in the examination room the following day. I would try to sleep well and then turn up for the paper fresh, giving myself the best opportunity of bullshitting my way to a respectable score.

I’d just dozed off when I woke up to the sounds of thumping and screaming. I leapt out of bed and almost missed the ladder on my way downstairs. As I turned the corner into the lounge room, I was scared of what I would see.

Mum and the kids were screaming. Dad was the one doing the thumping, though he hadn’t touched anyone but himself.

As I ran towards him I could see both of his feet leave the ground as he jumped and head-butted the wall in front of him, with all his force. He had been yelling that he didn’t know what to do, and that he didn’t have the answers.
Mum and the little kids were trying, without success, to drag him off. I grabbed him around the waist and pulled him down. Once I got a decent grip he just crumbled, not because of my strength, but because he was broken – properly, desperately, broken.

I don’t know what happened or what was said before I entered, but there you have it. He was on the carpet and the kids were crying. Mum told them all to go to bed.

Dad lay there, sobbing, with a distant look on his face. Mum patted him on the head and said, ‘I pushed him too far.’

I don’t know whether she thought this an admission of guilt, but she was not happy in having to say it. She had a disgusted, angry look on her face – like someone who has forfeited a match because of a foul.

Dad was on his side one minute, and then out the door the next.

‘Let him go,’ said Mum.

She knew he would be back, but the rest of us were not so sure. Dad had found his way right out onto the edge.

That was the first night I cried myself to sleep, since I’d been a child.
I made the decision to leave home soon after that, and I can still feel the pain. It was the first time that I’d been hung over. On regaining consciousness, I already had a splitting headache. The voice of the station manager only made it worse. ‘Faaaaarrrrkkkkk, mate. You’re gonna have to clean that up. I’m not doing it. Bloody hell, that reeks. Wait there.’

I sat up and tried to gain my bearings. I was at Maitland Station, lying next to the vending machines. Evidently I had decided to stop and get a snack on my way home from the pub, but I couldn’t remember how I got there or what I’d eaten.

When placing my hands on the ground, readying myself to rise, I got wet. Then I noticed the stink. It sobered me up fast.

I took one look at the mess I’d been lying next to and then stumbled towards the exit. I was running by the time the station manager saw me and yelled. ‘You filthy fucken animal. I’ll remember you, cunt.’

I didn’t stop until I got a few blocks away. In the panic, I’d run in the opposite direction of our house. Then, on impulse, I headed towards the Hunter Mall.

I needed to make a phone call. To my alarm, I became aware that my jeans were rubbing up against bare skin. I felt my pants and confirmed that I had no underwear on.

The smell from the train station still clung to me and I didn’t want to think about how that smell was made, or the possibility that I’d made it, or the strange disappearance of my undies.

After fumbling in my wallet for forty cents, I fed the phone some coins and dialled the number for Woolworths, Green Hills.
‘Hullo, Woolworths Green Hills?’

It was the baker. I didn’t know his name.

‘This is Peter Lawson. I’m sick and I won’t be able to come to work today.’

It was four-thirty in the morning.

Standing in the bake-house at Green Hills, Dave the baker, smiling, scribbled on a notepad. *Peter Lawson called in sick. 4.30 a.m. Sounded highly inebriated.*

The store manager told me so on the Monday morning.

I hung up the phone and felt a bit better, knowing that I wouldn’t need to turn up for work at eight. I congratulated myself on my foresight.

I stood and looked up and down the mall. Then I walked along High St, in the direction of the Post Office. After passing my old school, I turned right and wound my way through the back roads, towards the highway.

There was a bridge somewhere in the distance that would take me over the railway lines, across Les Darcy Drive, and then home.

I didn’t want to find it.
After admitting that you’ve been psychotic, you are liberated. All sorts of things become much easier. It is understood that the normal rules no longer apply to you. Any contribution you make to society, after a stint in the mental health unit, is going to be seen as a bonus. But at least you are allowed to go on living. Sometimes miracles occur and people get better.

The same allowances are not made for dogs.

My favourite pet, Ranger, one of our beloved Great Danes, had a special bond with me from a young age. We took him on our various travels around Australia. When we stayed on the Gold Coast, I walked him to Broadbeach every morning. We had our picture taken together for the local newspaper in Cairns. And he pulled me from the ocean in Adelaide, after I’d fallen over in the surf.

I was not there for him, though, in his hour of need.

We were in the outback miner’s town of Broken Hill. My parents and I were inside the main shopping centre, while Ranger rested on the back seat of our mini bus. We left all the windows open, parked in the shade, and made sure he had plenty of water.

What he didn’t have was protection from the local boys.

A group of them had assembled in the shopping centre car park, as teenagers are want to do, and they had seen Ranger in the back of the bus. He barked at them.

When a Great Dane snaps at you, you back off. These boys did that, until they realised that Ranger couldn’t get out. The windows only opened a few inches.
So about half a dozen of these fuckers, all wearing baseball caps, started running around and slapping the windows – taunting him. Ranger ran from one end of the vehicle to the next, and defended our space, but they continued to circle him.

Only a young dog at the time, he would have been confused and frightened. And the exertion of barking, and running the length of the Coaster in the midday sun, rooted him.

Dad came to the rescue. He had walked out to check Ranger still had shade and water.

‘Piss off, ya little scum bags.’

They all ran away, but by then the damage was done.

Over time, Ranger started to lose his mind. At first he would just freak out in the heat. Then he would explode whenever he saw a youth in a cap, which soon developed into him going for any male that he didn’t know.

Towards the end he started growling at my sisters, and at this stage – with him greying at the whiskers – even my mother grew a little wary of cleaning out his enclosure.

Only my father and I had his complete trust.

I remember the last time I saw him. Even though I stood at almost two metres, I could pat my chest and Ranger would stand on his hind legs and put a paw on either side of my head. He’d look straight into my eyes.

On that day, before he saw me coming, I witnessed what everyone else had been talking about. The way he barked, and ran up and down the kennel in a panic, looked dangerous. He was being tormented by something that we couldn’t see.
I had my doubts about entering to greet him, but once he recognised me at the gate I saw the relief on his face.

I walked inside and he jumped up onto my shoulders. I knew exactly what he was saying. I’ve never seen a dog, or a person, so glad to see another being as he was then. I held him close, embracing him as a father would a son, and told him that it would be alright.

‘It’s okay, mate,’ I said – over and over – ‘you’ll be okay.’

But he was very fucken far from okay. He had a siege mentality and considered everyone a threat. The confusion was painful to watch. There were to be no miracles for Ranger.

Years later, sitting inside a cell waiting for my father, and then again for my brother, I understood what Ranger had been through when they each arrived to get me.

It must have been a relief for him to feel the veterinarian’s needle.
There is an Obelisk on the hill, not far from where I was born.

If you haven’t been to Newcastle, it stands at the top of Wolfe St and used to serve as a guidepost for ships approaching the harbour. Every night, in the months before entering hospital for the second time, I’d walk to that tall white column. I used to stand there and look down at the ocean. Then I’d turn and cast my gaze over the surrounding suburbs, before taking a seat to watch the sea again.

It was the beginning of a strange time. I imagined myself to be going through a second trial, an ordeal that would save the world, although – towards the end – I lost sight of this grand vision. I just kept on going in the hope that I’d get rest. What I wanted above all else was a break from thinking.

‘Resolve’ was the word that brought me peace.

On the Friday morning I spoke of earlier, the morning in July that I thought was Good Friday, I ventured up towards the Obelisk trusting that this would give me an answer.

Upon arriving at the top of the hill, I heard them – my guards of honour preparing a path for my entrance. The whipper-snippers they were using to trim the grass doubled as weapons for my protection. I knew they’d cut down my enemies if I needed them to.

That’s what I thought at the time. But they were just ordinary council workers taking care of council property.
I ignored them and walked up the path. As I drew nearer I saw that there was one word sprayed in blue paint all over the monument. This graffiti had been repeated on every side. It said, ‘Resolve’.

The word sent a chill through my system. I’d been talking to Will in the days prior, about Jazz. His main rant had been on the subject of setting a musical problem and then resolving it.

‘You set the problem, create some tension – until the listener doesn’t know what the fuck will happen – and then you resolve the situation, man.’

So I stood there, smiling and hugging the Obelisk in my psychotic state, with one word on my lips.

Resolve.

As far as I was concerned, I had won; the answer had been given to me and it was now my duty to share it with all creation. With that complete, with the tension resolved, I could retire, and get some sleep.

I haven’t been back to that spot since. I had some pieces of burnt brick that fell off the tower when it was hit by lightning in nineteen-ninety-four – I kept them with me for years – but I threw them out some time ago.

That has happened with many beliefs, dreams and people. If someone has reminded me of my nightmare, I’ve dumped them.

I don’t regret it now.
Part III – Symmetry and Repetition
You’re waiting for Tom.

There are several other children at the entrance being helped from their vans. All of the vans are fitted with ramps and most of the kids have wheelchairs, either motorized or manual. Tom is one of the lucky few who can get out and walk, albeit with the aid of callipers. The only other boy on foot has to wear a helmet underneath his cap, for when he throws himself onto the ground in a fit.

The bell rings and everyone moves inside for roll-call. Tom arrives after a couple of minutes, agitated and quite angry with his driver – a thin Italian man named Tony.

‘Tom, he’s worried about getting here on time. I tell him it’s the traffic, not my fault.’

Tony looks stressed.

‘I knew we were running late from the moment Antonio picked me up,’ Tom says. ‘We have to hurry, Peter, or I’ll get into trouble.’

‘Thanks, mate,’ you say, as Tony hands you Tom’s bag.

‘The vice principal said that there were very severe punishments for those who come to school late,’ Tom says.

Tom has a posh accent, and gets driven to school each day from an exclusive address on the North Shore. He also has autism.

‘You’re not going to get into trouble, Tom. You were late for a good reason.’

‘But I’m sure that the vice principal said we were not to be late. He said that there would be very severe punishments.’
You want him to say *very severe* again, but you stop yourself from asking him.

As you walk down the ramp you tell him that roll-call is still on, so he doesn’t have to worry about being late. He ignores you, speeds up and apologises as he enters the door.

‘I’m sorry-’

‘-Good morning, Tom,’ says Liz.

‘Good morning, TOM.’ says Milton.

‘I’m sorry I’m late but the traffic was very bad, you know. I told my driver-’

‘Tom, sit down and get out your diary. Okay?’

Liz, your supervisor, is not in the mood.

‘B-b-but I just want to explain one thing,’ says Tom.

‘Tom, I know you’re late because of traffic. It’s okay. Open your diary and show me what classes you have today.’

‘Yeah, Tom, open your DIARY,’ says Milton.

‘Milton, shut up,’ says Liz.

The other boys laugh.

‘That’s not very nice, LIZ,’ says Milton.

Liz gets annoyed with Milton, because of his squeaky, high-pitched voice.

‘Peter, could you please just explain to Liz why I’m late?’ says Tom.

‘I’M BORED,’ says Thorn.

‘Everybody, shut up,’ yells Liz.

Liz slams the table of Home Room, Special Needs, and glares at the five boys sitting around it: Tom sits bolt upright: Thorn rocks back on his chair, looking at the
floor: Milton smiles, staring at the roof: Brendan shakes his head in disdain and Leon puts up his hand.

‘Yes, Leon?’ says Liz.

‘LIZ, DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY JAMES BOND FILMS WERE MADE WITH A FEMALE BAD GUY?’

‘Leon, this is *not* the time for questions about James Bond films.’

‘This guy, mate,’ says Brendan, ‘He’s always talkin’ about James Bond, mate. He’s got problems.’

Brendan rotates his finger at the side of his ear to illustrate the point. Brendan possesses inside knowledge on the topic of problems; he downloaded the bomb-maker’s manual from the web and threatened to use it on his last school principal.

At this point you want to go outside, the urge to laugh is so great.
When the bell rings again, the able-bodied boys snatch their bags and run out the door. You’re left behind with Tom. It is your duty to escort him to his first two classes. The special needs boys are all integrated with the rest of the school.

Together you look at the daily timetable of classes pinned on the wall, next to the door.

‘I wish it wasn’t Monday,’ says Tom.

‘Why’s that, mate?’

‘Because I can’t think of a more horrible way to start the morning than by having Science and Music, side by side.’

You know what he means. Tom is in the bottom class, 7F, for students marked as underachievers. It follows that his classmates are aggressive, loud and uninterested in doing anything, while Tom is gentle, well-spoken and very big on compliance; he likes to do all his homework, every night. If he were able-bodied he would be in trouble with the bullies, but as it is he has you to protect him, along with his wheel chair. His posh voice is also off-putting to the local inner-west kids; they’re not used to dealing with someone who sounds so refined.

‘Okay, Year 7, sit down please.’

You are helping Tom into his seat. Mr. Walsh, the gay science teacher, is holding his hands on his hips and looking at 7F in his best stern manner.

‘Year 7, sit down and take out your books.’

You unzip Tom’s bag and help him get settled. You hand him his book, pencil case and glasses. With that done, you can sit back and watch Mr. Walsh lose the plot.
Only a few of the children are sitting down. These are the ones who are too dumb to disobey him. The other three-quarters of the class are still standing, talking to each other, and eating.

You watch Mr. Walsh. He is wearing his Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts. On the wall behind him are posters warning against the evils of homophobia, like Being Gay is Okay.

‘Year 7, what is wrong with you today?’ he says. ‘You’re not normally like this.’

Yes they are, you’re thinking. 7F have unimaginatively been dubbed ‘Seven Fucked’ by more than one of the teachers.

‘Peter,’ says Tom, ‘I feel like telling them all to be quiet.’

‘That’s not your job, Tom. You just worry about yourself.’

‘Well, can you tell them to be quiet?’

‘That is the teacher’s job, Tom. I’m just here to help you.’

‘Year 7,’ yells Mr. Walsh.

He is getting red in the face now.

‘Settle down, Sir.’ says Gene.

Gene is one of the local Aboriginal boys, streetwise, funny and the teacher’s nightmare.

‘That’s it, Gene. Bring your bag and sit here.’

Mr. Walsh points to a chair right in front of him. The resulting argument between him and Gene lasts for another ten minutes. By the time he has the class settled and ready to work, twenty-five minutes have passed: almost half the period.
You stay sitting next to Tom. You make sure he draws a margin on his page and you answer all of his questions. You tell him when to concentrate and what is appropriate and inappropriate. That’s your job. You’re the teacher’s aide.
In the afternoon you get a lift home with Jason.

You became friends when you roomed with him on the Year 7 camp. He was there because he’s a first year teacher – straight out of college – and drew the short straw. Being the new teacher’s aide, you also got shafted and had to catch the bus to Port Macquarie.

On the first night of the camp you found Jason reading ‘What’s So Amazing About Grace?’

‘Phillip Yancey?’ you said.

‘Yeah, my girlfriend gave it to me.’

‘I’ve read one of his books.’

‘Everyone at my church likes him.’

‘Where’s your church?’

And so you were able to bond. In quick time Jason spilled all his relationship problems. He’s much younger than you.

‘I spoke to my ex-girlfriend last night,’ he says, as he changes lanes.

‘How did it go?’

‘It went well, you know. And that’s got me thinking.’

‘Thinking what?’

‘Well, what if she was the one?’

You laugh.

‘Then you’re gonna have to drop the pastor’s daughter.’
The pastor’s daughter doesn’t know that Jason is talking to his ex-girlfriend. The ex-girlfriend has gone back to China, where Jason’s family comes from. His new squeeze is also Chinese and worships with Jason at the same Mandarin speaking church, where her father is the senior minister.

You know how this love triangle will play out, in advance. If it would help Jason, you’d tell him the truth: that he needs to grow up and stick by the choice that he’s made, or change his mind now and inform his current girlfriend about her competition. You could also warn him, from experience, that he has already ruined any chance of having a healthy, trusting relationship with either of the girls, and probably the next one too. He should cut his losses, find a new church, and stop sitting on the fence.

Instead, you give him the standard all-purpose Christian response.

‘Put it into prayer,’ you say.

He drops you off at your door. Your broken down car, the old Toyota station wagon, watches on from the driveway.
It is lunchtime and Leon is interrogating you.

His only way of communicating is to ask questions. He gives you time to respond, but he doesn’t listen to your replies; so it is not a conversation, as such, but an interview. He suffers from Asperger’s Syndrome, and his awareness of how to communicate with tone is therefore pretty sketchy. Speaking softly to him, shouting or using a sing-song voice makes no discernible difference to his reaction.

It follows that he delivers all of his lines in a deep monotone, with almost the same inflection each time. Today he has two things on his mind.

‘ARHM, PETER, IT SAYS HERE THAT ANTHONY CALLEA CLAIMS THAT HE IS GAY.’

Leon is holding up the classroom copy of that day’s Telegraph. You can see the picture of Anthony Callea, one time runner-up of Australian Idol, with the accompanying story below it.

‘Yes, Leon.’

‘WELL, IT SAYS HERE THAT ANTHONY CALLEA CLAIMS THAT HE IS GAY.’

The other students, a misfit bunch who sit in the special needs room during lunch, have quietened down and are waiting for your response. It is hard to keep from smiling.

Leon is not making it easy. He is shouting from two metres away, with a group of girls sitting between you and him on the floor.

‘So what?’ you say.
‘ARHM, WELL, HE CLAIMS THAT HE IS GAY.’

You remember the poster from Mr Walsh’s room: Being Gay is Okay.

‘And what’s wrong with that, Leon?’

He thinks about his response.

‘WELL, IT’S JUST THAT MOST PEOPLE WOULD DENY THAT THEY’RE GAY, BUT ANTHONY CALLEA CLAIMS THAT HE IS GAY.’

Everyone bursts into laughter.

But what is interesting to you is how Leon emphasized both DENY and CLAIMS; he’s learnt something about tone.

Now you just have to get him to lower the decibel level. Whether he is speaking to the class as a whole or just to you one on one, his amplifier is always switched to eleven.

‘PETER–’

‘–Leon, come over here, mate.’

You motion for him to stand next to your table. He starts shouting before he has reached.

‘PETER, ON THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CHANNEL –’

‘–Leon, be quiet for a second, please.’

He stands there staring at you, his eyes looking just above yours, as if he is reading an autocue.

‘Leon, when you talk in a small room, like this, you have to speak softly.’

‘OK. ARHM, PETER, IS IT TRUE–’

‘–Leon, speak quietly.’

‘Peter, is it true that there are people who can come back from the dead?’
They are never easy questions. Whenever he throws a curly one like this you make a point of asking him why he is interested. It’s so you can establish the context; often he will have read up on a topic, or seen something concerning it on TV.

‘Why do you ask, mate?’

‘WELL, I WAS WATCHING THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC CHANNEL LAST NIGHT AND IT SHOWED BLACK PEOPLE WHO PRACTISE VOODOO AND IT TALKED ABOUT HOW THEY CAN COME BACK FROM THE DEAD, LIKE ZOMBIES.’

Again, you have to stop yourself from laughing. Stopping him from yelling is the impossible task.

‘Well, I know that voodoo is practised in some places. But I’m not sure if they raise people from the dead or not.’

‘SO DOES THAT MEAN THAT AFRICAN AMERICANS LIKE P DIDDY AND FIDDY CENT WILL BE ABLE TO COME BACK FROM THE DEAD?’

You start to lose it. What makes it even funnier is that Leon stands in front of you, looking at your forehead, waiting for your answer.

‘SO IS IT TRUE?’

‘I don’t think so, mate. No.’

‘WHY?’

‘Because, as far as I know, Puff Daddy and Fifty Cent do not practise voodoo.’

He doesn’t react to your reply.

Seeing that the classroom computer is free, he walks across and sits down in front of it. He Googles ‘James Bond’, and doesn’t look up from the screen until the bell goes.
At the end of the day you help Tom walk up to the car park, where Tony is waiting for him. The boy rushes ahead of you, using his arms to position the callipers on the ground in front of him after every few steps. This allows him to gain some purchase, so he can then drag his legs and torso along. But, in practise, it gives him the unflattering appearance of an ape. You hate yourself for recognising it.

Establishing a personal connection with him is difficult. When he climbs into the back seat it is as if he has forgotten that you have been sitting with him in class for the last hour. He doesn’t even turn to say goodbye. Things like that make autism hard to deal with.

You reach in through the open window of the van and pat him on the shoulder.

‘Hey, Mister. See you tomorrow.’

He waives his fist at you in mock anger.

‘You. I told you not to call me Mister.’

‘Ok, Mister. Bye.’

You turn, not giving him a chance to react, and speed-walk back to the special needs room. You don’t want to miss the first bus home.

When you get to your desk, all your hopes of an early exit disappear. Sonia, the casual teacher who takes over from Liz two days a week, is filling out an incident form. She has been in a science class with Milton.

Most of your work so far has been centred on the Year 7 boys. They need you the most. The kids in the senior classes already have a routine and are used to the high school setting. But Tom and Milton need to be monitored, as they have just come from primary schools where they were with the one small group of children for seven years.
Now they are moving rooms every hour, in a sea of other kids, and it is hard for them to get into a rhythm.

Milton also has the added disadvantage of puberty, which is wreaking havoc on his hormones and his dealings with the opposite sex. This, you soon find out, is the very cause of the incident report that Sonia is writing.

You’ve only worked with her once or twice. She has never looked after high school children before and she was not prepared for Milton.

‘What happened?’

‘Well,’ she says, pushing her glasses up on her nose. ‘He was just writing. And I was looking towards the teacher and then I turned to check on him and he had his thing out.’

You think that you must have misheard her.

‘Pardon?’

She looks uncomfortable and tries to find the courage to explain further.

‘He had a pen and he was exploring the eye of his penis with it.’

‘No,’ you say, wincing. ‘What did you say to him?’

‘Well I said “Milton put it away” and then he put it away. Thank God no one else saw it, or he’d really be in trouble.’

So the next hour is spent writing incident reports, making photocopies of them and then spreading the news around the staff room. You very much enjoy telling all your male colleagues. They have the same reaction as you.

Only Sonia – the sight of Milton’s dick with a blue biro sticking out of it still fresh in her mind – takes it seriously. As you board your bus back to Croydon Park, you think of what a wonderful story it will make for your mates.
You wake up to the sound of a siren. It is so close, and piercing, that it seems to be emanating from your pillow, or at least the mattress of your bed. You try to ignore it for as long as possible, but it doesn’t stop.

‘Shut up,’ you murmur.

It’s dawn. Through the bedroom windows, thin columns of light are breaking in. You pull one of the curtains across so you can see what is going on in the street outside.

Maya moans and lifts up the quilt, to cover her eyes.

‘Sorry, darl,’ you say.

The noise is not losing its intensity. You’ve never heard one like it. Still not fully awake, you walk into the lounge room and make sure that the alarm is not being made from an appliance in your house. You know that it couldn’t be. But you still check.

‘Baby.’

Maya has noted your absence from the bedroom and is calling you back. You return and sit on the side of the bed, ninety-five percent certain that the high-pitched whirring could not be coming from your toaster.

‘Maybe someone’s car or house has been broken into,’ you say.

If that is the case, you should do the right thing and investigate. You go to the window again, but can’t see anything.

‘I’m just going to check out the front.’

‘Wait for me,’ says Maya.

She reaches for her nightgown.

‘Okay,’ you say, smiling at her.
You open the screen door and walk into the middle of the driveway. She stands next to you with her arm linked in yours.

The sound is louder now and seems to be coming from one of the houses opposite your own. Looking up and down the street, you see that a few of the other residents have also made their way outside.

‘Arre, yaar. Maybe it’s the end of the world,’ you say.

‘Ho-oid,’ she says, not really hearing you.

‘Let’s go back in.’

You both resume your places in bed, her arm still linked with yours. You fall asleep like that, with the maimed spaceship, or whatever it is, continuing to make its hysterical whine.

In the morning you both struggle to remember it.
You are sitting across from your latest psychiatrist, Dr Shiloh, and she is listening to your story. You have to tell it again because they rotate the psychiatric registrar at the medical centre every six months. So it follows that twice a year you have to restate your history to a new doctor.

This is a loathsome task. You are sane enough to find talking about yourself for an hour to be a chore, and you do not relish the job. Yet you still have to come across as happy, and restrain any strong emotions. It is important to display stability.

‘So you are doing your PhD now?’
‘Yes, I started last year,’ you say.
‘And you work full-time as well?’
‘Yeah.’
‘And how much do you drink?’
‘I don’t drink.’
‘You don’t drink alcohol at all?
‘Not for a few years.’
She doesn’t believe you.
‘What about drugs?’
‘No.’
‘That’s not so common, Peter. But it’s very good. You must be very strong. Do you still take medication?’

She knows that you do; your previous doctor had all this information printed on a card for her.
‘Doesn’t it say so in my file?’

She smiles at you.

‘You take Valproate every day?’

‘Morning and night.’

She looks you over.

‘So, Peter, tell me some more about the times you have been in hospital.’

If it were a different setting, you would say that she is flirting with you. She looks into your eyes and smiles throughout your monologue. You give her the greatest hits version. It takes about five minutes.

‘I got quite angry there for a while,’ you say.

‘I can see that. You still carry that with you, I know.’

She glances at her watch, your file and then at you.

‘Well, Peter, I’m sorry but we’ll have to finish up. Is there anything you would like to ask me?’

‘There is. My previous doctor reduced the medication last year and said that after some time we could cease it altogether. What’s your opinion?’

She glances at her notes again.

‘Well, we’ll wait and see in the next few sessions. It will have to be very gradual.’

She stands up and gives you her card, with your next appointment written on it. Every six weeks they’ve got you jumping through this hoop. She escorts you to the waiting area and says goodbye. Walking home, you realise that the only thing visiting the doctor does for you these days is to remind you that you are still bipolar; the rest of your life tells you to forget it.
Standing in the queue, waiting for the bus back to Burwood, you feel a tap on the shoulder.

‘Hi, Peter.’

It’s Simone – a regular in the special needs room at lunch. She smiles at you.

‘Hey, Simone.’

You’re not keen to continue the conversation, as there are plenty of other students from your school boarding the bus. Male staff talking to cute female students outside of college grounds is not a good look.

She gets from your tone that she shouldn’t continue and she moves towards the back of the bus. You take a seat near the front and spend the journey looking out the window.

When you get down in Burwood, Simone does the same and ends up boarding your Croydon Park bus. You hope that she gets off before you do, because you don’t want a student knowing where you live.

As the bus approaches your stop, she rises and walks towards the door. When the bus pulls up, and you walk to the door yourself, she seems surprised.

‘This is getting too weird,’ she says.

‘I know,’ you say.

But you’re less worried now; there are no other students around. You walk across the road together and then she branches off. You continue on and don’t look back to see what house she goes into, even though you are curious.
You make a mental note to tell Liz about it, in the morning. If she heard it from one of the other kids, or Simone herself, it might sound like you are trying to hide something.

You also decide to tell Maya, for the same reason. If you both ran into Simone on one of your evening walks together, and the girl said hello to you, it might be awkward.

But just when you think that you have avoided all the pain, you reach the letterbox. There is a phone bill waiting for you. Your broken down car, the old Toyota station wagon, laughs at you from the driveway.
‘I have kids from this school living on my block,’ you say.

‘Were there some on your bus?’ says Liz.

‘Yeah, Simone and a few others.’

‘Well, I’ll give you the speech. Don’t talk to them outside of the school grounds. But if they have a fight or are being rude to the public, then you have to step in.’

‘No worries.’

‘And be careful of the girls. We’ve had issues with that before.’

‘Yeah?’

‘One of the teacher’s aides before you had a crush on a Year 9 student.’

Your jaw drops.

‘Seriously?’

‘Oh, there was nothing in it.’

‘Who was the student?’

‘Young Dianne. She talked to him all the time on the bus. One day he came up to me and said “God, I wish she was eighteen.”’

‘I don’t want to hear anymore,’ you say, covering your ears. You were just worried about saying hello.

Now Simone walks in with two of her friends.

‘I saw you at the bus stop this morning,’ she says.

‘Did you?’

‘We drove past and saw you waiting. Didn’t you see me waving?’
‘Peter is not allowed to TALK to you. And you’re not allowed to TALK to him,’
says Milton.

He has been listening in on the conversation.

‘Yeah, ‘cos you’re all sluts,’ says Thorn.

‘Thorn, Milton, come over here,’ says Liz.

‘What?’ says Thorn.

‘Yes, LIZ,’ says Milton.

‘ARHM, DID HE JUST SAY SLUT?’ says Leon.

‘Yeah, he did, mate. He called ‘em all sluts. That’s Thorn, mate. He doesn’t give
a fuck.’

‘BRENDAN,’ yells Liz.

‘I’m going up to pick up Tom,’ you say.

In the distance, you can still hear Liz yelling – even as you reach the car park.
That afternoon, as you turn into your street, you’re confronted with a strange sight.

On the steps of the church, which is small, and Romanian, you see an old man kneeling down on a handkerchief. He is prostrating himself, and deep in prayer. This little man, in front of his tiny church, in a nondescript neighbourhood, performing an act of significant courage, shames you – because he is not doing it for the sake of being seen, or his family, or for his conscience. He is kneeling down before God in awe, as an act of profound thanks and love.

And you, a man who oscillates between being a lapsed Catholic and a lapsed Atheist, you envy him and feel sorry for him at the same time.
You are standing at the entrance to the Garrison, at Ashfield. The place has not changed since you were last here, seven years ago. You don’t know what you thought it would be like. Maya uses the station all the time, on her way into the city, but you have never come up onto the Concourse to pick her up. You couldn’t bring yourself to do it.

There is a woman asking for a timetable. Zorba gives her one without looking up from his *Zoo* Magazine. When you worked here, a day never went by without someone complaining about him.

Now you are standing face to face.

‘Hullo, George.’

‘What?’ says Zorba, looking confused.

‘I said “Hullo, George.”’

There is a glimmer in Zorba’s blue eyes as he tries to place you.

‘Did you used to work here?’

‘It’s Peter, ya goose.’

He looks uncertain until you mention Tub, Melinda and Mustafa.

‘Where’s Mustafa now?’

‘We got rid of him. Pissed him off to Town Hall.’

You can see that he is embarrassed. He can’t remember you. You are bald, and heavy – nothing like the boy that he used to joke around with.

‘What are you doing with yourself now?’ he says.

‘I’m married. I live here at Croydon Park.’

‘Are you happy?’
‘Absolutely.’

‘You deserve it, Boy.’

A young bloke sidles up beside you and asks Zorba for the next train to the city.

‘Check the board,’ he says, turning to let someone into the toilet.

It makes you smile, but you leave without another word.
You go down to the Catholic Club side of the station, and make your way up Alt St. You used to walk home this way, back when you first lived in Ashfield. It’s the street that Brother Richard lived on.

You go as far as his old place and then stop. Looking up at the front veranda, you half expect him to come out. It appears the same as it always did: a redbrick block of nineteen-fifties' flats.

But even if he wasn’t in New Zealand, if he stood in front of you now he still wouldn’t remember you. Zorba, a guy you worked with for over a year, had trouble, so a stoner like Richard would have no chance.

Peter Lawson, the main guard from Ashfield, is dead.

You already knew that, so why put yourself through it? Why refresh the memories? The answer is, because you want to destroy them. If you’re not remembered as the main guard, the main man, or even just Peter, then you can’t have been as important as your sick mind made out that you were.

There is no ship coming, no party set aside for you, no secret code in the paper that you have to crack. The station and the suburb remain ordinary. You remain ordinary.

Turning back, you walk the long way around the station and then up to Liverpool Rd, so you can wait for the bus. Maya will meet you at home and you will tell her that you love her.

You will be telling her the truth.
Your parents are here for a BBQ. This is the first time that they’ve seen your house, since you’ve been married. You show them around. They see the study and your main bedroom.

‘What’s in that room?’ says your dad.
He’s pointing to the second bedroom.
‘We don’t know.’
‘You don’t know?’

Your mum has turned to look at you both. Your dad looks incredulous.
‘It’s locked and has the landlord’s stuff in it. We don’t have access.’
‘I couldn’t cope with that,’ says your mum. ‘I would have to know what was in there.’

Your father is shaking his head. Part of the selling point for the place was that it was furnished, thus saving you some set-up costs. But the landlord left you everything she had – including knives and forks – the whole lot itemised in a ten page document, which outlined the room each object should be kept in. She also locked the second bedroom and said that it was off limits.

You change the subject and direct your parents towards the kitchen, where Maya is preparing for dinner.

She hands you a tray of meat, and you go out into the backyard with your father.

‘I’ve got an idea for you,’ he says, as he turns on the gas and lights up the burners.

‘Yeah?’
'It’s for a movie that you can write.'

‘Let’s hear it.’

It will be worth the laugh.

‘You know “In The Air Tonight” by Phil Collins?’

‘Yes,’ you say, beginning to get the giggles.

Your father loves Phil Collins and plays air drums to his music whenever possible.

‘Well, it’s a movie based on the story of that song,’ he says. ‘You start with a close-up of the father’s face—’

‘—You want to make a movie out of a Phil Collins song?’

You suggested saner things than that when you were psychotic.

‘You think your old man’s an idiot, don’t ya?’

‘No, I don’t think you’re an idiot.’

‘I’m telling ya,’ he says. ‘It would make a great movie.’

‘What would?’ says your mother, as she closes the back door.

‘Dad wants to make a film out of a Phil Collins song.’

She spits out what she is drinking and puts her hand over her mouth, covering her laughter.

When she regains her composure, she hits you with her own suggestion.

‘That reminds me,’ she says. ‘I’ve got a great title for a novel.’

‘Yeah?’

You’re not expecting her proposal to be any better than your father’s.

‘Before Your Memories and Beyond Your Dreams.’

You turn towards her.
‘What was that?’

‘Before Your Memories and Beyond Your Dreams,’ she repeats.

‘That’s pretty good,’ you say. ‘You should write it.’

She started a book once.

Maya comes out with the salad and you start teasing your father again, by bringing up his Phil Collins film.

He doesn’t mind.
‘I’ll go and check on Milton and Thorn,’ you say.

‘Okay,’ says Sonia.

You have both been reading the paper.

Tom is in the class adjacent to the special needs room and you’ve taken this opportunity to let him experience a history lesson without having you by his side. He has to learn to be independent.

Leon and Brendan don’t require you to be in the room with them at all. You get weekly reports from their teachers. Thorn, in theory, should be the same – except he is friends with all the bad kids. He gets in trouble often, from trying to be cool. In this respect he is almost normal. You walk past his maths room and have a look to see what is going on.

The teacher has seated Thorn in front of her desk, which means he was playing up. He doesn’t see you but one of his friends pats him on the shoulder to alert him to your presence. He is very self-conscious about any help from the special needs room and would sooner not have it. In reality, he’d be no worse off if you weren’t around. He fits in quite well with the group of underachievers he is friends with.

You don’t check on Milton either, because he has Physical Education. Every time you visit the class his big Russian teacher tells you that you are not required.

‘Milton is good boy,’ he says. ‘No problem.’

You have since stopped bothering to monitor Milton when he has PE. Instead you use the time to take a wander around the campus, which sits right on Sydney Harbour.
You’ve identified a number of places where you can hide for five or ten minutes. If another staff member walks past, you pretend you are looking for one of your boys. It is the privilege you give yourself for having to sit through Science, Maths and Japanese classes, all of which were boring the first time you went to high school.

You get back to the room in time for lunch. Sonia is still reading the paper, except now she has a sandwich in her hand. You take out the meal Maya packed for you – last night’s left over chicken biryani – from the room’s small bar fridge.

‘Thorn has been moved to the front of the class again,’ you say. ‘And Milton’s teacher said “Milton is good boy. No problem.”’

Sonia smiles at your impersonation of Milton’s teacher, whose name neither of you can remember.

Milton rushes in and drops his bag in front of you.

‘Why weren’t you in class with me?’

Not now, Milton, you think; please don’t do this to me now. You pause for a second.

‘I was in class with you,’ you say, trying to make eye contact with him.

But Milton has autism. He doesn’t look you in the eyes, and your tone of voice means nothing to him. He can’t tell that you’re trying to bullshit your way out of trouble.

He wants to know why you weren’t in class with him.

‘When were you there?’

Sonia has turned around now, because Milton is upset. And she has just heard how you spoke to Milton’s teacher and how he said everything was okay.

‘I dropped in and spoke to your teacher, remember? He said you were okay.’
‘You mean Mr Kozlov?’

‘Yes,’ you say, fearing what is coming next.

‘He’s not here today. There’s a casual.’

‘Who is it Milton?’ says Sonia, who is not looking in your direction.

‘Some SLUT who told me to shut up,’ says Milton.

You both chastise him at the same time. It allows you to get over the awkward moment where Sonia recognises that you’ve been lying to her.

She goes back to her paper while you try to figure out a way to get out of the mess you’ve just made. The only solution is to accept that you’ve screwed yourself and to say sorry to her. Any other option calls for more lies.

You busy yourself with reading until lunch finishes.

‘I better go with Milton,’ you say, as the bell rings.

‘Yeah, that would be good,’ says Sonia, still not looking at you.

You go and sit with Milton for the rest of the afternoon. When the bell rings at the end of the day, you retrieve your bag while Sonia is walking Tom to his transport – so you can leave without having to apologise to her.
It is grey outside, and raining hard. You ring the medical centre and cancel your appointment. You’re not going to get wet just so you can tell Dr Shiloh that you’ve been sleeping, and so she can ask if you’re still sober.

You could accomplish that much on the phone. As you take up your seat in the lounge room, your mobile starts ringing.

‘Hello?’

‘Peter, this is Dr Shiloh.’

‘Hi, Doctor.’

‘I’m sorry you could not come in today. I’m afraid that I don’t have any more appointments free during this rotation.’

‘Really?’ you say. ‘Are you sure? I can come in any time next week?’

‘No, I’m booked up until I leave at the end of the month. You’ll have someone different the next time you come in.’

‘Right,’ you say.

‘Will I still make an appointment for you?’

‘Actually, we are moving house soon.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know that. Where to?’

‘Lavender Bay. I’ll have to find a clinic over there.’

‘Alright then, here is what I’ll do. I’ll send you a letter of introduction for your new doctor that has your history in it. Then you can pick up where you left off.’

‘Excellent.’

‘Okay, Peter. Well, thank you for letting me treat you. It has been enjoyable.’
‘Thank you, Doctor.’

‘Everything else is fine?’

‘No change. Everything is stable.’

‘Well, just in case something goes wrong, you know you can call here anytime.’

‘Yes, Doctor. Thank you.’

‘Good bye, Peter.’

‘Good bye, Doctor.’
You stand out the front of the Burwood Westfield. You’re waiting for Will, who is about to take his lunch break. He teaches at the local Catholic Boys’ high school.

‘Mr Lawson,’ he says, greeting you at the door.

‘Will.’

You walk to the coffee shop. Both married now, these meetings are getting rarer by the year. Will has just become a father.

A group of schoolgirls run past you. Their skirts are way too high, even for old reprobates like you.

Will shakes his head.

‘I don’t know how you do it,’ he says.

‘What’s that?’

‘Work in a co-ed high school.’

‘Ah yes,’ you say. ‘It’s not easy.’

You tell him about the group of girls that sit in the special needs room.

‘And do you satisfy their special needs, Peter?’

You smile to yourself, but ignore the question.

‘Shit, I have to be careful what I say,’ he says, looking around. ‘My students and their parents are everywhere.’

The hour is over before you get a chance to talk about anything serious, like your wives or your futures. You don’t even reminisce about old times. You just eat and talk shit.
Walking him back to the school gates, you let him know that you don’t have to take medication for your brain anymore.

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah, they’ve scaled it back to nothing.’

‘So you’re not insane?’

‘I’m not insane.’

‘Congratulations,’ he says. ‘Fuck, I’m late.’

‘I’ll call ya soon,’ you say, shaking his hand.

‘No worries.’

He watches you turn and walk away, then goes back to his office.
‘Good morning, Peter,’ says Simone.

‘Morning, Simone.’

‘Hey, Peter. How come you’re not on the bus anymore?’

‘Cos I’ve got a new car.’

Her eyes light up.

‘So you could, like, give me a lift home every afternoon?’

‘You know I’m not allowed to.’

Sonia is in the room, listening to the conversation. She always notices the girls flirting with you.

‘They’re going to be sad to see you go,’ she says.

You’re leaving in a few weeks.

‘Yeah,’ you say.

She is busying herself with paperwork. You are reading the paper.

‘Peter,’ says Tom, ‘tell me again. Why are you leaving?’

‘You know Peter has a new job, Tom,’ says Sonia.

‘I’m aware of that fact, but I still wish that he didn’t have to go.’

He rocks back and forth, clapping his hands in front of his face as he does so.

You don’t ask him to stop. You just look at him and raise your eyebrows.

‘I’m sorry,’ says Tom. ‘It’s a little habit I have.’

‘That’s okay, mate.’

He sits up straight in his chair.

‘Hello, Sir,’ says Amiko.
‘Hi, Amiko.’

Amiko is one of the exchange students who sit with Simone’s group. For the last few weeks, she has made a point of saying hello to you every morning. It has caused you some disquiet, as she wears her uniform in a manner you’ve seen depicted before.

Being Japanese – with long socks, and a very short skirt – she looks just like one of the ladies that were featured in the adult magazines that Will brought home from his time as an English Teacher in Tokyo, way back when you had first graduated from University.

He said that in Japan porn was quite commonplace. The magazines that he’d kept as mementos of his gap year had come straight off the train, where kind souls would leave them behind in the seats for the next passenger, as people often do in the West with their newspapers.

He offered it as a gift, so in the name of cultural research – of course – and because it would have been rude to do otherwise, you’d taken one of them off his hands. It had remained in your library for a few years, while you were a bachelor. Although the magazine is long gone, the memory of certain images has not left with it.

You are still in your chair, and Amiko, who can’t be much older than fifteen, has taken her bag off her shoulders and is sitting down, by sliding her back along the wall. As a naughty boy of some renown, you know, from the position you’re in, that if you were to look downwards in a few seconds, you will cop an eyeful of underwear. And glossy, colour snapshots of the snow-white panties of the enjo-kōsai keep flashing in your head, from a long association with the aforementioned literature on the topic.

You simply can’t concentrate on the sentence of the column you’re reading. If asked what the article in the Herald was about, you would be unable to answer. It
happens when you lift up your eyes to turn the page. In the split-second when you bring the sheets together, you glance towards the floor – where she is sitting.

Just how will you ever escape from going to hell, or being reincarnated as a monkey, or whatever it is that awaits your foolish end?
You’re sitting in a circle, with the members of your home group. It is either called home group, bible study, or, most optimistically, ‘growth group’, depending on who is talking. Of course, there is an ongoing dispute in the congregation about this question.

At the moment you are working through John’s Gospel, on your suggestion. It was the writing that had drawn you in, ‘In the beginning was the Word.’

 Fucking brilliant.

You had not wanted to attach yourselves to a group; both you and Maya had avoided it for as long as possible, until asked point blank by your pastor one Sunday morning after the service. With no good excuses on hand at the time, you both reluctantly agreed.

Tonight the group is flat: two spinsters: one trainee pastor: two pastor’s wives – who are both baby making machines – and the obligatory young couple: that is, you and Maya. It is Thursday and they would all rather be home alone, watching TV. So would you. Maya is sitting next to you, and she can barely contain her boredom. She doesn’t ask any questions. She just watches on as Wayne, your bible study leader, goes through the motions.

‘So what do we think about that?’

Everyone has a different opinion, and in this egalitarian environment they are all valid – which of course means that they are all invalid. You only get excited from a literary point of view, if at all. The reason Maya doesn’t like it is because she is used to
Sunday school in India, where the teacher was respected, took a stance and had an opinion that they actually taught.

But in this crowd, polls are taken to establish a group consensus. The prayers, later on, are not much better.

‘So God, we just pray that you’ll be with your church, and nourish us and help us through this time.’

Everyone is always asking to be helped through something, and they each have a shopping list of demands.

‘And please help me get all my work done so I can prepare a good talk for Sunday.’

‘Help Sharon’s brother through his drug addiction.’

‘Help Mason to have more time with his children.’

‘Help Jill to make up with her mother.’

‘Help me to stay interested.’

Etcetera.

In the car, on the way home, you both come to the decision to ‘take a break’ from the bible study, or growth group, or whatever the fuck it is, and to let Wayne know as soon as possible.

Immediately, you both feel one hundred percent better.
The phone for the security door rings.

‘Peter Lawson?’

‘Yeah, mate. I’m comin’ down.’

They are not happy to see you. Delivery guys hate the lower North Shore, because most of the places are blocks of apartments without elevators.

‘Mate, I’ve never seen a place harder to get to.’

He must be exaggerating, you think, or trying to make you laugh. But they don’t laugh. They are pissed off already from being in an affluent suburb.

One is older, with a goatee beard and gold earrings. His tattoos are covered by thick hair, all across his arms and legs. The younger one is wearing a baseball cap and a wife-beater; he has discarded the fluorescent shirt that is supposed to be his uniform. His hand is in a partial plaster cast – the likely work of an assault, you think.

‘Which floor are you on?’ he says.

‘The top one.’

‘Orh, fucken hell.’

The older one shakes his head. You take a small box of stuff and wander off to open the door for them. When you get up to the flat you tell Maya not to offer them a drink. They want to act like arseholes, so you’ll oblige them.

They bring up the first lot of lounges, and slam them down. On the second load, you hear the young one hit the side of the rail, hard, with your bed frame.

You want to tell him to take it easy, but you don’t bother. It will only make him worse.
‘What’s wrong with your fucken back?’ he says.

He expects you to help them. If they were delivering your stuff as a courtesy, for free, you might. But as they charged you an extra hundred and fifty bucks for the delivery, on top of the few thousand you and Maya already spent at the place, you feel comfortable letting them do the work. It’s their job.

‘I’ve got a slipped disk,’ you say.

He is unconvinced. He goes back down and the older one brings up the last item, a bedside table. You had no furniture of your own, so now there are boxes everywhere. The older one gives you a fake smile and goes off to move the truck. The young bloke is scowling and wants you to sign the invoice.

‘Where do I sign?’

‘There.’

You know what he is thinking as he points to the folder. You rich fuck. He thinks that you think you are better than him, because you’re living on the North Shore. You don’t. You want to tell him that he has got the wrong guy and that this is not you; you’re really from Louth Park, Maitland, and you only know what he is thinking because you had guys like him living on your street. You used to work in the same sort of jobs, for a long time.

But as he snatches the folder off you, you realise that it would only make him angrier. There is nothing like the loathing directed at those who have climbed out of the ditch, by those who remain behind. He doesn’t want to be friendly with you. He hates you, on principle.

Your father said something interesting, a few weeks later, when you told him about the delivery dudes.
‘I mean, he was looking at me like I’m some *North Shore* type,’ you said.

‘Well, you are now, mate,’ said your dad.

It had snuck up on you. Apparently you’re the only one who didn’t know. Your brain was still running on the old software.

One day, you are living on the disability support pension, sucking down bongs and being sent off to the psych-ward. The next thing you know, your father is telling you that you belong on the North Shore – with your stylish, well-educated wife – and you’ll have to get used to delivery drivers being pissed off with you.

They used to call that selling out, in the old days. Indeed, *you* used to call it selling out. Didn’t you?
After being redirected, the letter from Dr Shiloh arrives. You read over it with interest.

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for seeing Mr Lawson for ongoing monitoring of his Bipolar Affective Disorder. His mood disorder has been in complete remission during his contact with the Inner West Mental Health Centre from August 2006 until December 2007, when he moved to Lavender Bay. His maintenance mood stabilizer (Valproate Sodium) has been ceased since September 2007 after gradual weaning with no signs of relapse.

In summary, he is a twenty-nine year old PhD student living with his wife. As mentioned he has been in complete remission of his mood disorder for three years. His complete abstinence from substance abuse, combined with a stable marital and social situation, has been instrumental in preventing any relapse of the mood disorder.

He has been keenly engaged in relapse-prevention psycho-education and demonstrates a good understanding of the relapsing nature of his mood disorder and the early warning signs of relapse.

He was diagnosed with Bipolar Affective Disorder (Type II) in 2000. He has had two psychiatric admissions in 2000 and 2003 for mania with psychosis in context of stressors and substance abuse. He has no history of suicidal or violent behaviour, but a family history that includes Depression (his mother and maternal aunt) and Schizophrenia (his cousin).
I have encouraged him to further discuss with his wife and family all the warning signs of relapse, including lack of sleep, increased irritability and intensified goal-directed activities. Early contact with mental health professionals is important in the event of any of these indicators.

Mr Lawson is advised to monitor for the relapse of Bipolar Disorder through regular follow-ups with a primary care physician.

I am happy to provide any further information in this regard.

Sincerely,

Dr A. Shiloh
Registrar in Psychiatry
Inner West Mental Health Service

So you should get plenty of sleep, avoid being irritable and never mention more than one career goal at a time.

Or, in other words, be lazy, agreeable and lose the ambition.
It’s dark and Maya is asleep beside you.

You’re starting to get anxious, because you don’t feel tired. You’ve tried a few different positions and nothing is working. The problem is that your mind has overheated. You were tired at ten-thirty, but you kept on reading. That was a mistake. Now your brain has got its second wind and you don’t know what to do.

You could wake up Maya, but you don’t want to ruin her night. In between worrying about losing your mind, you let it wander wherever your thoughts take you – hoping that one of them will turn into a dream and that you’ll nod off. Checking the clock, you see that it is nearly two a.m. It’s getting ridiculous. You concentrate on your breathing, at the same time eliminating all words and images from your brain. You’ve had success with this method before. The trick is to think only of breathing.

You see that there are snakes on the floor.

There must be at least two adults and three or four smaller ones with them. You are standing in a dirt yard and there are snakes. Maya is with you. She takes the initiative and picks them up, one by one, using a towel to cover her hand.

You’re frozen with fear while she does this, not knowing how she can be so calm about it. When she has finished, she walks over to where you are standing.

‘Are you alright?’

‘I think one of them bit me.’

‘Where?’

You look down at her hands and feet.

‘It hardly got me,’ she says. ‘It was one of the small ones.’
Standing beside the check-out at Woolworths, you bend down and empty your trolley onto the conveyor belt. You always ask Maya to let you do it, so you can reminisce about your own time as a check-out operator.

‘G’day, mate,’ you say, to the young Indian bloke on the register.

‘Hello, Sir.’

You wonder if he has noticed how you are giving him all the cold things together, and whether or not he gets the shits with people who bring their own bags. It used to annoy the hell out of you, because it slowed down the whole process.

But he isn’t interested in your bags. He is looking between you and Maya and wondering, ‘How did she get the Saheb?’ You guess that he hasn’t been in Sydney for long, because he keeps staring – long after it is polite to do so. It would blow his mind to find out that you are the lucky bastard who married up, and that your wife is the one slumming it.

Maya shakes her head at the way you rearrange the things that are not to your satisfaction.

‘That guy is a real gaandu,’ you say. ‘He put the washing powder in with our chicken.’

You are both walking towards the elevator. Maya is smiling at you, but thinking of something else; if she’d heard you, she would have slapped you for swearing.

She helps you load the bags into the boot of the car. You have to be careful when you drive out, as the place is quite narrow.

You pull up to the booth and lower your window.
The attendant is there. It’s always the same guy. He has a favourite line that he likes to deliver. He uses it every day, for every customer. You play the straight man and give him the perfect set-up for it.

‘G’day, mate. How ya goin?’

‘Oh,’ he says, ‘just another fun-filled day of excitement and adventure.’

The first time he said this, it brought a smile to your face. But within weeks it made you want to shop elsewhere; it was too depressing. Now it has gone on for so long that it has become funny again.

‘He said it,’ you say. ‘Did you hear the sala?’

‘What?’

‘I say “G’day, mate. How ya goin?” and he says “Oh, just another fun-filled day of excitement and adventure.”’

Maya starts giggling.

‘He thinks that he is killing with it. He says it every time. He must have got a laugh once, and now he can’t stop.’

‘Bapli, mo. It’s sad,’ she says.

‘You would think that he’d come up with something else. He’s down there for eight hours a day. Surely he could change it up a bit.’

The journey home is a quick two-minute drive, so you are still raving on about the bloke when you pull up. You repeat the line to yourself a few times, ‘Another fun-filled day of excitement and adventure.’

It’s only ever going to be funny because you know that the dude in the car park is living a shit life. The joke works by pointing out how dull his day-to-day existence is; and every laugh he gets just confirms it.
‘The poor bugger,’ you say. ‘Somebody should immortalize him.’

But Maya hasn’t heard you. She is a few steps ahead, holding open the front door.
Part IV – St Dymphna’s Song
Since I can remember, I’ve always had the feeling that I’m running late. It is no different today. I still behave like the new kid, not knowing who to talk to, lacking the confidence to cross the room. The others then take me as being aloof, proud, and arrogant. Both portrayals are correct. Nothing has changed; sometimes it seems like I’m fleeing from an unknown oppressor, and other times like I’m just going for a leisurely jog. As I look back, to see what has been chasing me, I find that I’m alone, in the middle of the road, and that I’m not sure if I’m first or last, or even if there is a race at all – except in my own mind. Disillusioned, I then make my way from the middle of the road down into the ditch. The existence of other people has never really helped me in this problem, one way or the other.

Just yesterday I had to talk my way out of trouble, with Maya. I admitted that I, Peter Lawson, did not absolutely believe that the Bible was the word of God. She pressed me for what I meant.

‘I don’t think Jonah lived inside the whale.’

She remained silent, though I don’t know why. She could have said that I was contradicting myself. How can you believe a man was raised from the dead, in the New Testament, and then doubt the stories in the Old Testament – I’m sorry, I meant the fucking Torah – like the Jonah and the whale, Noah and his Ark, or any one of a hundred tall tales? It’s a question I’ve asked myself, both when I believe and when I don’t. I’ve already told you that I fly back and forth between the two. It’s exhausting.

You’re not supposed to pick and choose with this stuff; it’s better to believe all or none. Right at that moment I was leaning towards none. Five times out of ten, I will.
The other five times, the times when I lean towards belief, I’ve discovered something uncomfortable.

I cannot not believe. Even when I pick up a book by an atheist, and follow the argument from their side, I have a lingering doubt that I will one day believe again, despite all the evidence I’m presented to the contrary.

Maya said I’d be better off not reading such tracts, and she’s right.
When we first met I took her to Gloria Jean’s and I had a hot chocolate. We met through a mutual friend who’d studied with me at university and with Maya at high school.

I was at home, checking my emails and emerging from the major depressive episode that followed my second, and last, hospitalisation – but I can forget madness now; as soon as Maya appeared, it vanished.

So there was the message from Maya, in my inbox. I’d been told that she might look me up during her time in Sydney. She planned to study photography, at UTS, for eighteen months. The note said she was here, and that we should meet up. Instantly I started thinking like a fool. Of course, my first thought was ‘What will she look like?’

This quickly became my favourite topic for reflection, and conversation. You must understand that I’d been watching television, eating baked-bean sandwiches and reading fiction for six months. Nothing else had been happening. The only time I went out of the house was to see my doctor.

On the night before our first meeting, I took refuge at Will’s house. Over coffee and TV, we went over all the possibilities. Samantha listened in from the kitchen.

‘So if she is ugly, how long do I have to stay for?’

It was ungallant to ask, I know, but I was with my best friend; it was the same as posing the question to myself.

‘Two hours,’ said Will. ‘Any less is rude. Anymore and she’ll get the wrong idea.’

‘Sweet.’
‘So she’s Indian, right?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Fantastic. She’ll know all those Karma Sutra moves.’

‘You think so?’

‘Absolutely. These Indians are schooled in that shit from a young age.’

I turned up at the appointed time and immediately regretted not having had a shave or wearing nicer clothes. Maya looked bright and sunny. Straightaway I knew I was in trouble. As we walked towards Broadway, I glanced sideways to confirm my initial picture of her. Yes, she was beautiful – and fit. Fifteen minutes later, instead of discussing the Karma Sutra, we were chatting about The Passion of The Christ. I had not seen the movie, but had read the book.

‘I just saw it with a friend from my course,’ said Maya, ‘and, my goodness, we were both crying.’

I firmed up plans, in my mind, to see the Hollywood version as soon as possible. Half the work, initially, is finding something to talk about. Already, we were onto religion; I had an in.

And that’s how it played out. I saw the film, called her the next day and said ‘So I saw The Passion,’ then, after an appropriate amount of small talk, I asked her if she was busy on the weekend. A month later I was sitting inside her new church.

This seemed astonishing to me, as I’d only recently given up going again. What is more, the house of worship she had me inside was Anglican.

Now I’ve always been quite ecumenical, even with religion, but sitting inside a Church of England building had never been in my plans. In fact, I had often openly mocked them as I walked past their cathedral in Maitland Park.
‘Just how can they take themselves seriously?’ I would say, to Will.

I meant it. Now the joke was clearly on me. Maya put an offering plate in my hands and I had to walk between the pews and collect money for an organisation that I had derided since Christ knows when. God was laughing at me, quite hard, and I knew it.

After the service, we were greeted by some of the flock. A woman named Sally introduced herself and asked us where we were from, and if it was our first time at St Paul’s. Maya did the honours.

‘I’m from India,’ she said, ‘and I’ve been a few times. I study here at UTS.’

‘I’m from Sydney.’ I said. ‘This is my first time.’

I was looking towards the door, but Sally wanted to know our church histories.

‘I was brought up in the Presbyterian church in India,’ said Maya.

This drew an approving smile from Sally.

‘And I’m Catholic,’ I said.

Sally looked embarrassed for me. It is a look I know well, from similar situations. In Non-Catholic churches, people have apologised to me for my Roman upbringing.

As we made our way to the door I could see that the minister had positioned himself next to the exit, so we had to walk past him to get out. They all do that trick. As Maya introduced me, I shook his hand. He looked me up and down. He knew I was there because of Maya, and it didn’t bother me.

Within another few months I had proposed to her.
There was more paperwork involved than is normal, with our wedding. The first hurdle I had to jump was the letter of introduction. I needed one from a Minister of Religion – to be handed over to Maya’s family when we arrived in India. It had to say that I was a good man, a practising Christian, and not previously married. I met at least one of those criteria. Enclosed with the letter, they demanded a copy of my Baptism Certificate.

So over a coffee, I showed the minister, Bruce, my Catholic Baptism certificate. He was touched by the request.

‘Well, Peter, I’ll have to call your mother to verify your background. And then I’ll get this back to you with the letter on Sunday.’

On Sunday the Bishop gave a sermon. As Bruce led the service, he made jokes about his senior colleague.

Maya remarked on it as we met him at the door.

‘My Gosh, Bruce, you were so irreverent.’

‘Well, that’s the Australian way,’ he said. ‘We like to drag down our figures of authority.’

‘The Bishop seems alright,’ I said.

‘John? He’s not a bad bloke, for a Bishop.’

Maya talked about the lack of pretence and how it surprised her.

‘I mean, where I come from, the Bishop would be given the place of honour and the best food and we’d hang on his every word – even if he was boring.’

Bruce told her that it had always been that way, ever since the convict settlement had been established. The humour was the only way to survive.
‘I’m from good Convict stock,’ I said.

‘I could tell that about you when I first met you, Peter,’ he replied.

He handed me the letter.

‘Now I’ve put you two down on our marriage preparation list,’ he said. ‘We start next week.’

Maya thanked him as I put the letter in my pocket. Not for the first time, I wondered what I had gotten myself into. I had consented to a marriage in a developing country, to a life lived between two worlds, to sobriety – Maya said she was out the door if I ever indulged again – and to a six week marriage preparation course in a church where I didn’t believe in the titular head, who is the Queen of England.

Bruce had not mentioned anything about that. We prayed for the Queen every week, and I found myself skipping over that section of the liturgy. It’s a habit ingrained from my childhood.

I have been around long enough to remember saluting the flag at the weekly school assembly. Standing to attention in front of it, the seventeen of us at Iona Public would say, ‘I honour my God, I serve my Queen and I salute the Flag.’

As we intoned, ‘I salute the Flag’ we would salute the flag.

The first time that this happened to me I went home and performed the routine for my mother. She’s a proud descendant of the convict John Nicholls, who sailed out with the First Fleet onboard the Scarborough.

She was not pleased.

‘I would say I honour my God and that I salute the flag but I would not, under any circumstances, say that I serve the Queen. We’re Australians, Pete, not frigging Poms.’
Of course, from then on, I never said that I served the Queen. And I’ve been good to my word, though it took me a further twenty-five years before I exacted revenge for the injustice to my family.
I also needed a letter from my parents. Maya explained that in her culture, it wasn’t just us who were getting married; it was a union between the two families. Traditionally the first time they met would have been the engagement, when the promise was made. I took it upon myself to write the letter, so that Mum and Dad just had to sign it.

My mother was still telling herself that they would come over for the wedding. I knew it wouldn’t happen, and so did Dad. I saw him falter before he put down his autograph; he felt guilty signing it when he knew they had no chance of being there. Mum scribbled her name without a care in the world. She listened as I told her about getting a plane, and how all would be taken care of once they were on the ground. Dad stayed silent.

‘I don’t think Mum and Dad will be coming,’ I said to Maya, later on.

‘I’ve thought that myself.’

‘They’re just not up to it, baby.’

‘Ym lei lei, sweetie. Come here. It’s OK.’

She understood. I don’t like to whine about it, but the fact that they have missed most of the big moments in my life hurts. Or it used to, anyway.

Of course, at the time, I defended them.

‘They were there when I was in hospital,’ I said. ‘They were there when it mattered.’

And that is true.
Before we left, I had all manner of people telling me how difficult the trip was going to be, how I would end up with dysentery, and how I would be lucky to return alive. They were only half-joking. Friends who don’t know the first thing about India, or even Asia as a whole, will tell you not to drink the water, not to eat street food, and ‘How on earth, Peter, will you cope with the poverty?’

My answers always disappointed them. Maya’s parents are both doctors; they live in a modern two storey house with electricity, clean water, cable television and an SUV parked in the garage.

That only changed the questioners’ course of action. Then it was all, ‘Do they have servants? What caste are they? Will you have a five day wedding? Can you speak any Indian? How do they cope with the poverty?’

It turned me off bringing up the topic.

After the Khasi wedding, which lasted for one day and was held in a Presbyterian Church, I got to give a bit back. All we were getting on BBC World was coverage of the Cronulla race riots, in Sydney. The Lebanese and the white supremacists had taken it to the streets, after starting it on the beach. It was quite a dust up. Not long after, the church we’d done our marriage preparation in burned to the ground.

Will told me all about it.

‘You don’t want to come back here, mate. The country has gone to the dogs. Your church has gone up in smoke and you’re safer where you are. Being in a mixed marriage in Sydney is not a good idea at the moment.’
Samantha’s parents are Vietnamese – so Will is in a mixed-marriage himself – but despite the joke, I took his point. We would not be returning to paradise, any more than we were leaving it.

I’d had the phone brought to my bedside and I was lying on my back as I spoke. About three weeks after we got married, I slipped a disc. No: it’s not the reason you think, but it got a laugh out of everyone just the same. Maya got tested on the sickness part of our vows pretty early. I had been told to lie flat on my back and only to go to the toilet for number twos. The number ones had to be taken care of by Maya, who acquired a plastic bottle for me to piss in.

After speaking to Will, I decided to call home. At that time my parents lived in Bankstown, near my sister, and I wanted to hear what they had to say about the riots. My brother-in-law is Lebanese and I figured they’d tell me what was bullshit and what wasn’t. My maternal grandmother answered. As I had not called her number, and she lived a couple of hundred kilometres away from my parents, I knew something was up.

‘You better talk to your mother, darl.’

She handed the phone to Mum.

‘Hi, sweetie, how are you going?’

Mum was sick, that much was certain. Before we had left for the wedding she’d had some problems with her sodium levels, and with getting older. Now it was more to do with depression.

She tried to put my mind at ease by saying that she was alright, that the doctor had seen her and that Nan was helping out. It was a brave attempt; she was obviously quite down. Nothing I could say would change it, but she needed someone to listen to
her. For that purpose, it helped that I was half a world away; I hadn’t been around her at home to get exasperated like everyone else, and judge her.

When I got off the phone I remembered that I had not asked about our church, which had burned to the ground, or about the riots.

It didn’t matter.
So if you want a fish out of water story about my time in India, you’ve come to the wrong bloke. I didn’t backpack around the country and follow the hippie trail, hopping from one Guru to the next.

We stayed in Maya’s family home in Shillong, a hill-station at the foot of the Himalayas. There were no wild animals, I didn’t get robbed, and I caught no weird diseases.

Whenever I left the compound, it was with a family escort. My Khasi language skills were still rudimentary, so I could swear, tell Maya that I loved her, ask and answer basic questions, use an Indian-English accent and make my in-laws laugh, but not much else. In between visiting family, I watched a lot of cable TV – in particular a lot of cricket, MTV and CNN – and my hosts made me as many western dishes as possible. They were particularly good at making French fries, from scratch. On the weekends we would go out into the country side, taking a picnic lunch with us.

All in all, it wasn’t too different from my life in Sydney.

There was only one time when I stopped to think of the past, on the afternoon of the engagement. I had been driven to a house owned by a friend of the family, so Maya and I could both get ready separately. When the time came to leave, Ma Samuel – the man who would be my uncle for the night, and represent me at the engagement ceremony – knocked on the door and asked if I was ok.

‘Biang, biang,’ I said. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Ok, then. Let’s get going.’
We all piled into his Sumo and drove off into the rain. As we approached Laitumkhrah, his phone rang. He passed it to his son. One of Maya’s cousins had called ahead, to see where we were.

‘Don Bosco,’ said Bah Hep.

We could hear them squeal at the other end:

‘Quick, quick. Don Bosco. They’re at Don Bosco.’

As Bah Hep hung up, and we started down Hopkinson Rd, my mind went back to Fort St and I remembered the morning before I went to hospital for the first time. Was it possible, I thought, that five years before I met her, Maya had visited me in my waking vision? I closed my eyes for a brief second, and could see the blue as it led me towards Ashfield.

‘Ok,’ said Ma Samuel. ‘You can’t get out of it now.’

We laughed while he turned off the ignition. And as we prepared to brace for the rain, with the wind smashing me when Bah Hep opened the car door, I chased this thought away: let me not be mad. Please God – anything but mad.
The church site had not even been cleared when we returned to Australia. Upon visiting the block, we were greeted by a small number of the new chairs that had been installed, in place of the original pews, one month before the building became ash. Apparently, the new chairs burned very well and could not have been better chosen for that purpose.

The process of getting the chairs approved had taken almost a year, and had involved a bitter dispute between the faction who thought that the pews were uncomfortable and detrimental to worship, because they invited you to wish for faster proceedings, and the faction who answered by saying that comfortable chairs would only invite more sleep – already a problem during the long sermons – and that anyone who didn’t want to put up with a little bit of discomfort was evidently not pious, i.e. not Anglican, enough.

Of course, the church council had to get involved and be seen to be listening to all parties, before they went ahead and decided to buy the new chairs anyway, after first getting recommendations from the congregation on the colour, size and style of the said chairs.

It was a fiasco. The idea that God had been pissed off by the whole undertaking, and had incinerated the ugly building dedicated to the adoration of Him in retaliation, had been thought but wisely left unsaid.

Bruce, our senior rector, was also keen to point out that he had not set a match to the old barn, even though he did loathe it, and its rats.
But he had bigger vermin to extinguish. A few weeks after our return, he made an emotional call to arms at our yearly ‘Vision’ service. He wanted St Paul’s to become a big inner-city congregation, numbering a thousand, by 2012. Our motto was, ‘Each one should bring one.’

‘People may ask why? Why should we try and get a thousand people in here, especially when we don’t even have a building? Well, for one thing, people can’t ignore a church that size. A big church with a vibrant congregation gets noticed by the community.’

People were shouting ‘Amen’ at different intervals, throughout this.

‘There are thousands of people in the surrounding suburbs who have never heard of God and, let’s be frank, are basically the walking dead.’

There were solemn nods.

‘When they read that we were going to rebuild the church and make it bigger, they mocked us. Why would the Anglicans need a church that holds seven hundred people? Are they expecting a big influx of Christians to the inner-city? Well I can tell you today that, Yes, we are. We are praying for a revival and praying for the City of Sydney.’

Then we sang.

I had never been a member of an evangelical church before, and I have to say that I don’t recommend the experience. The idea turns everyone into used car salesmen. Come along to our film night: No Obligations: Bring a friend: We drink beer too: This is what Jesus thinks of Global Warming.

A church that has to meet in the pub, or a Thai restaurant on King St, just to ensure an audience, doesn’t have much to teach society. Things should be so bad in the
pub that we each feel compelled, individually, to seek the solace of the church – not the
other way around.

‘I agree with you,’ said Will.

He couldn’t believe that I was at a happy clappy church, because the real truth –
as he saw it – was back with the Romans.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, I had a suspicion that I’d been right the first
time, accidentally, as a schoolboy.
At the age of sixteen I announced to my mother, and to several schoolmates, that I was an atheist.

I came home from school after a Catholic Perspectives class one afternoon and said, ‘It’s all a bunch of bullshit.’

Mum smiled and nodded.

‘I mean, we were reading about some of the miracles today and then he was trying to link the text to the Old Testament and really, please. What sort of dickheads do they think we are? I can’t believe people have been getting away with it for so long.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Mum, ‘But you’ll think differently about it when you are older.’

I doubted that. I couldn’t see how. Of course my new position didn’t come through reason, or from a thorough investigation of the facts. It was a gut reaction – as irrational and impulsive as when I decided six months later that I wasn’t an atheist.

I was soon silenced by a devout believer at school, whose parents were members of Opus Dei. He wrote me a long three-page epistle, and quoted Thomas Aquinas. He said that he could see from a poem I’d written in our English class that I still believed in God.

There was something in this, I admit, that spoke to my ego. He then introduced me to a well endowed girl who went to his Youth Group, Antioch, and I was sold.

That I became a Christian through happenstance, loneliness and from a yearning for praise is evident. Plaudits came my way when I prayed in front of others and gave spiritual talks. I thought this meant I was pious. All it meant, in reality, was that I had
the gift of the gab, and could be entertaining. It also meant I got laid; there is the
uncomfortable fact that if there had not been hot chicks, I wouldn’t have lasted more
than one meeting.

   Seriously.
Turning our inner-city congregation into a Super-Church seemed like wishful thinking from the very outset; for one thing, I don’t think a lot of the flock wanted anyone else to come along. They seemed happy enough with their club as it was.

The situation didn’t get any better when the senior minister’s wife walked out on him. It isn’t uncommon these days. Churches everywhere have to put up with pastors leaving their families to be with their seventeen-year-old girlfriends, wives leaving their pastor-husbands to get a life, pastors coming out and announcing that they are gay, and the like. The interesting reaction to keep track of, when the shit hits the fan, is that of the congregations.

After Bruce told us that he had failed to love his wife enough, that she had walked out, and that he would take some time off to pray and win her back, there was silence in the house of judgement. Some of the women cried. The men sat, ashen faced, with arms around their wives – all of them thinking that if Bruce could get dumped then any of them could.

During tea and coffee, we spoke of other things. But soon it became apparent that – like the battle between the pew and the chair factions – there were those who supported Bruce and those who were sharpening the knives, his personal disaster providing them with an opportunity.

Bruce said as much when he came to our house. He’d come to try and get us to stay with the congregation.

‘G’day,’ he said. ‘I can’t stay for long.’

‘Why’s that?’
‘I have a meeting with Nina straight after this.’

Nina was his wife. He seemed to be the only one who thought that she might come back. Everyone else had moved on.

‘Take a seat, mate. Can I get you a tea or coffee?’

‘A glass of water, thanks.’

He looked thinner. I suspected that he was dieting, as part of a larger plan to get his wife to come home. It was sad.

I poured a coffee for myself and sat across from him. Maya sat beside me. We had talked about how we would tackle this, about what we would and would not say, but Bruce saw through our approach. He told us our answers were superficial.

There was an awkward silence. I didn’t want to go first, because Maya often rebukes me for giving away too much.

‘So you’re leaving because you’re not happy with the services, the preaching, what?’

‘It’s just, we weren’t happy with the way they dealt with your situation,’ said Maya.

‘Morale has been low and no one knows who to talk to. The different factions have taken over.’

‘Would you say that has been since Nina left?’ he asked.

We carried on this way – talking around the fact that we were unhappy there, and had been for a while. The ‘it’s not church, it’s us’ line got trotted out, a couple of times.

While he spoke to Maya, I let my thoughts wander. He was telling her that he saw us as the future of the church.
I thought to myself, this bloke gave me a letter of recommendation. He said that I was of good character. Obviously, any rhetorician worth his salt could now refute this. The opinion of a divorced pastor should be worthless when it comes to putting forward a character reference for a marriage proposal: at least that would be the viewpoint of the puritans who we were leaving behind. The bad judgement and behaviour that led to the divorce could be backdated to include and discredit his entire ministry; you can’t be both right and wrong at the same time.

‘You can always come back,’ he said, on his way out the door.

I rolled my eyes at Maya, as she bolted the lock.
So we started attending a more fanatical church than the one we left, because it was closer to home. It was a full-on, charismatic, hold up your hands, let’s sing love songs to God, type of experience. After the first service we went to, I ran into an old mate from our previous church. He is one of those guys who gets heavily involved with the organisation of a place, makes himself useful, then – after about twelve months – leaves in a storm of accusations and counter-accusations because of his borderline personality problems.

Over some instant coffee, of the awesomely bad church variety that your body refuses to imbibe and turns into urine while it’s still in your mouth, he made it plain why he thought Bruce’s old lady had kicked him to the kerb. It was the same reason that he thought the church had been burnt down and why the whole congregation was going to hell in a Hummer.

‘They don’t know how to worship God, Peter. That’s the truth, brother. God put a word on my heart, six months ago, and told me to get out of there. He said “Styx, leave this place. They don’t know how to worship.”’

I nodded and smiled. With guys like Styx, who believe that they can cast out demons, that God is vengeful and punishes those who disobey him, and that they know the truth – and being pious is being like they are – it’s best to nod and listen. For one thing, it’s fucken funny. And you’ll never get them to change their minds. Question Styx or his theories, and he’ll call you a sinner worthy of the most painful punishment.

‘I was at Uni the other day, brother, and I was talking to one of my workmates. He’s this Indian fella, right. I’ve been having a battle with him.’
Styx has spiritual battles with the Adversary all the time, in between the bucket bongs.

‘He came up to me and said, “Styx, man, will you pray with me?” And I said “Sure, dude.” And then I prayed over him, Peter, right there in the Quad. I prayed that God would forgive him for worshipping false idols and that he would come to Christ, you know? Then he stood back and his eyes popped open like this, and he said. “Styx, man. I feel like the spirit is starting to manifest.” He said he could feel and see this monkey like creature coming out of him.’

‘Straight up?’

‘That’s the awesome power of Jesus, Peter. Man, He just uses me.’

There is nothing anyone can say to that. He either can cast out demons or he can’t – depending, of course, on whether they exist. I’ve got friends who I love and trust that say they do, and that they’ve seen such things with their own eyes. One even told me about someone coming back from the dead, in a family known to him.

All I know is that anyone could tell you – from just one conversation with him – that Styx has got serious fucked-up psychological problems. And I’m sure that asking him to pray is one of the favourite pastimes of his university acquaintances. They must get a lot of free entertainment from him.
I used to buy the myth that my body was a temple. But now I see it for what it is: a cheap factory-made vessel, with a small hole in the base.

Just as one fills up a bottle that has a tiny leak, I can sometimes appear to be full – of truth, lies, or both – but it soon changes. The appearance of fullness is fleeting, and after a short time the level starts to dwindle down, until the vessel is once again empty. And that is the way ideas seep from my brain.

My brother, Isaac, has seen this with me many times. Just last weekend we had another discussion about Christ. The last time that we talked about Him, I had spoken about being a believer. Now Zac was surprised to find that I also related to his unbelief. It came about easily enough.

We were talking about Christians who said that the world was six thousand years old, about Noah, Dinosaurs and Darwin. With the Presidential Election going on at the time, right wing creationists had been dominating the news.

‘So, like, what’s your take on evolution?’ he said.

‘I believe in the science of it, absolutely.’

I could see he was glad I said that.

‘How can people believe that we walked with the dinosaurs and all that shit?’

‘I dunno, man. I can’t talk for them.’

‘There’s this bloke at work,’ said Isaac, ‘who is always starting fights on site, because he tells blokes that they’re gonna go to hell.’

‘Seriously?’
‘Yeah, he can’t help himself. Everyone lets him go, because his wife has left him and he’s not the full quid, but sooner or later they’ll stop talking to him for a while and then he comes and asks me why.

‘Why won’t they listen to me, Zac? he says. I say, “Steve, you can’t go and tell people they’re wrong, that they’re all gonna go to hell and not expect them to get pissed off at ya. You’ve gotta drop it, mate. People don’t want to talk about that shit at work.” But I’m right, he says. I know I’m right. They are gonna go to hell.’

We both laughed.

‘Where do you start with that,’ I said.

‘I feel sorry for him,’ said Zac, ‘because he honestly has no idea. So I listen to him for a while, and answer his questions. He’ll say, “I don’t want you to go to hell too, mate. You’re a good guy, for a bad guy. You’re a good bad guy,” he says.’
One night, while I was watching the TV with Maya, the phone rang.

‘Hey, big brother. How are ya?’

It was Chantelle, the oldest of my younger sisters.

‘Not bad, sweetie. How are you?’

‘What’s wrong?’

Chantelle has a heightened emotional barometer and can pick up the slightest changes in tone of voice.

‘Nothing much.’

The truth was that I had been unhappy, legitimately, for a few days.

‘Spill,’ said Chantelle.

‘Well, it was what we were talking about at Karen’s the other day.’

Karen is the next line, in age, after Chantelle, and then there is Sophie. Zac is between the first two girls.

One stylist, one builder, two mothers: All of them have made it, despite many setbacks, and they’re good, beautiful, people – devoted to each other, their children, and to my parents.

‘I’ve been thinking about it too. Harry asked me what was going on, when I came home from Kazza’s in a mood.’

Harry is Chantelle’s husband.

Karen had been having a BBQ, and we had all been sitting outside eating together, waiting for our parents – who are always late – to arrive. It started out of a
throwaway comment from Kaz, which normally we would ignore. But she said it in front of her fiancée.

‘Yes he did, Dad used to belt me, Pete. He swung me from my heels.’

‘Steady on,’ I said.

And we were off.

Karen survived being a teenager the hard way, by quitting school and running away from home. She still feels like she has to justify it to us by bringing up any wrong she can think of, or invent, from our shared history. Mostly, we let her get away with it and try and bring her back to the present, where she is a good sister, daughter and mother.

‘He fucken did, Pete. I’m tellin, ya.’

Maya changed the subject, and Karen went and checked on the food. Her other half – Matt – followed her in.

‘She’s talking about when she used to spar with Dad and punch him on the arm,’ I said.

‘I know. It’s a total joke. But Matt hears that and thinks she was abused,’ said Chantelle.

My parents arrived soon after, and we ate. Then Karen and Mum had a fight, of the kind where Kazza’s drunken fiancée got involved, and the night ended early. It was just like the good old days.

‘Look,’ said Chantelle, ‘we had a mother with serious undiagnosed mental problems. Let’s be real about it.’

Sometimes her frankness astounds me.
We were laughing – not out of spite, or indifference, but out of relief. 

Sometimes the past does have an explanation, and the truth – finally revealed – will provoke laughter.

What else can you do?
I ate my first bowl of fruit yesterday, at the over ripe age of thirty-one. Since before I could talk, I have spurned it. Now, without notice, I’ve changed my mind. Maya, who had prayed for this miracle, tried to keep from being too enthusiastic. She didn’t want me to back down out of rebelliousness. She knows I’m still a simple, irrational man – who will sometimes do the opposite of what she desires, out of pride.

We started with a pear, followed by a red delicious apple and then some watermelon. I have left the bananas until last. The banana is a foe I’ve not gone up against since I was about four years old. My Oma, that is my father’s mother, tried to feed me one in her housing commission flat in Riverwood – back when she could walk. I remember a long battle, with her putting it to my mouth, me rejecting it and then going through the process again a few minutes later. But I would not bite. She is a stubborn woman, and kept at it until I cried.

‘We would have killed for a banana, in the war.’

The banana was warm, slightly mushy, and had a coating of fur. This was what really did me in. For years after that, I just couldn’t do fruit.

She doesn’t remember now. All she talks about is losing a child, her horrible first husband, eating cats during the war–‘rather like rabbit’, tulip bulbs – ‘quite tasty’, and the fact that she was moved into an old age home; she did not move herself. In her failing mind, it is an important distinction.

I visit her regularly. She looked after me on and off for years. But she is not above cruelty, snobbishness, or random acts of favouritism. It is hard to imagine a woman more unchanged by the events of her life, in terms of the wisdom she has not
gained. Before, she was capable of being interested in other peoples’ lives. Now, she just congregates with the dead – while making long complaints about the living. She is also a bit prejudiced.

Maya and I found this out the hard way.

‘Of course, one day, your aunt was sitting there and she said, ‘So is Maya black?’ And I said, ‘No, she is coffee coloured.’

We laughed nervously, out of shock, dreading where she would take this. It did not get any better.

She continued, “Well,” so I said to her, “What can she do – put white powder on her face?” I mean you can’t change what you are born with, can you? It is not her fault that her skin is that colour.’

Prior to this, she had been discussing her life in WWII. The story is one I’ve heard many times. Some Germans stormed their house, in Amsterdam, and found her brother hiding in the attic. She walked in and one of the Germans had a gun pointed at her brother.

“What are you doing?” I said. “I’m going to shoot him,” he said. “No, you’re not,” I said. And then his friend said, “No, we’re not.” Then they turned around and left. Looking back, I don’t know why I was not afraid.’

Five minutes later, she was discussing my wife’s skin colour in increasingly gut churning tones. It’s not her first transgression. In a previous home, she made complaints about her Nigerian nurse. She admitted in her grievance to me that part of the problem was that the nurse was black.

After Maya and I recovered, I sent the old girl a letter outlining my rage. It was a waste of everyone’s time – as letters generally are.
When Bruce, our former pastor, was being pushed out of his position following the end of his marriage, I obliged with a note in his support describing his fellow leaders’ actions as hypocritical, unchristian and theologically dodgy. I’d been urged to write it by one of Bruce’s supporters. They were few on the ground.

It didn’t take long for the phone to ring, and for the puritans to hit back.

‘Hello, Peter. Simon Gall, here.’

I knew Simon only by sight; we had never had a proper discussion. He was on the Parish Council.

‘How are you, Simon?’

‘I’m not happy, Peter. I’m not happy at all. Your email is slanderous, incorrect and causing trouble where we don’t need it.’

His supercilious tone got my heart rate going. My information had come from one of his colleagues on the Parish Council, so I knew he was bullshitting me. The object of the call was to find the leak.

‘I mean, who is giving you this stuff? I cannot tell you how angry I am.’

‘You just did, Simon. You’ve made your position quite clear.’

And then I hung up. Immediately, I knew we would have to find another church; we had chosen our side, and it was the wrong one.

Later on, I found out why they went after Bruce so hard.

‘He doesn’t lead them, Peter. He’s very charming on a Sunday to you and me, but no one he has ever actually worked with has come away from the process without feeling dissatisfied.’
This was Councillor Gall again, calling me back after he had ‘lowered his blood pressure.’

Once he knew he couldn’t get a name out of me, he tried a different approach and attempted to get me to see how evil our newly-single Pastor was, and how his departure would be best for everyone. In their version, Bruce’s departed wife was being painted as a saint for having endured his egotism for so long. And she was not to be questioned. As the Pastor and the husband – the spiritual director of his family – Bruce was derelict in his duties; otherwise, Nina would never have left.

‘If Bruce doesn’t leave he will tear this Church apart.’

I listened and listened, knowing that I had done my dash and that we would go down with the ship. But it was funny, in a way. Simon Gall is a true believer; in condemning his Pastor, he felt like he was doing God’s work. The idea that Bruce was human, that his wife was too, and that they were never really compatible, just wasn’t going to fly.

We only went back once more, and were frozen out. In the sermon, one of the younger pastors gave a warning about how dangerous it was to label people hypocrites. Then no one spoke to us.

As soon as the service ended, we got out of there.
The only regret we had, in leaving, was that we would stop seeing Len every Sunday morning.

Len is an old pensioner. We drove him to church every week. He was not your average St Paul’s member; the bulk of them are students, attached to the theological college, or working professionals. Len was one of the few, poor, inner-city fringe-dwellers, which is what attracted me to him. He is a real person.

When I told him that we were not going to St Paul’s anymore, I could sense that he thought he would never see me again. He put on a good face.

‘Well, to be honest, I think I’m gonna give it a rest for a while too.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘They don’t really want me there anyway.’

We both paused.

‘I know what you mean,’ I said.

It was disheartening, but true. He’d get a few people saying hello to him, and even the odd one who asked him how he was, but the unvoiced insinuation was always that the person was a great Christian for spending some time with him; it improved their sense of self-worth.

‘We can still be mates,’ I said.

‘Yeah, no reason why we can’t.’

He still thought that he was playing along, and that he would never see me again.

‘I’m gonna drop in every couple of weeks, to have a chat and a cup of tea.’
‘Ok,’ he said, shaking my hand. ‘In a couple of weeks.’

I went back the next Wednesday, and surprised him.

“Peter.’

‘Len, how are ya?’

I tried to make it seem like no big deal, and sat down; I wanted him to expect me to come, in future.

‘I’m no good, mate,’ he said. ‘No good.’

‘Why is that?’

‘This bloody manic depression, mate.’

He tapped his head.

‘Yeah?’

He doesn’t know that I’m bipolar too, and that I’ve been in hospital with blokes like him.

‘Yeah, mate. It knocks me around,’ he said.

Len is an anxious man, with no family at all. After his mother died he’d lived in a boarding house for fifteen years, where he’d been surviving on one meal a day – and not much contact with anyone. He has crippling paranoia.

‘I saw Dianne,’ he said.

Dianne is from St Paul’s.

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah, she said that they won’t rebuild the church for years. Maybe four or five.’

He paused and looked at me.

‘I don’t know if I’ll even make it that far,’ he said.

We laughed.
Sitting in the car park, after I left his room, I reflected on the fact that he had no one, and that the home itself was full of people in the same boat – people who had proper battles with their minds. Len is permanently afraid and gets anxiety headaches: he’s also becoming forgetful, slurs his words, thanks to his medication, and sometimes doesn’t even get out of bed, because he’s so depressed.

Driving away, I felt fortunate. If I’d been born fifty years earlier – when they locked you up long term for having a bad day, and zapped the bejesus out of you – it could have been me.
I had to see him again soon after, because Maya and I were going overseas for a few weeks. In the days before we left, I made sure that I saw my parents, my grandmothers and Len.

We tried not to make a fuss, but it was hard because we were going to Oxford – not to study, as I kept pointing out, but to attend a conference. Still, the name mesmerised people.

‘It’s just where they are hosting the event,’ I said.

‘But, Peter. It’s Oxford,’ said Mum.

When I visited her a few days later, my Nan kept it low-key and chose to give me a bit of advice about England.

‘You want to be careful there, Peter.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Well,’ she said, pausing, ‘that’s where all those horrible Convicts came from.’

I’d heard that one before, but laughed anyway. She had a gleam in her eye, because the convict blood was from my grandfather’s side of the clan – not hers.

Len got the most joy out of the news.

‘So where will ya go? Will ya see London?’

‘We’ll stop at London, and then go on to Oxford.’

‘You’ll see Big Ben?’

‘Yep.’

‘And Buckingham Palace?’

‘Yep.’
'The Tower of London?'
'I think so.'

He was on a roll.

'What about the Thames?'
'We’ll see it.'

'Now, Peter,’ he said, taking in a deep breath. ‘Can I ask you a question?’
'Yes, mate.'

'You don’t mind?’
'Nah, go ahead.'

'When you’re in London, could you send me a card?’

He was so earnest, leaning forward, so much like a child in the way he asked, that I almost hugged him.

'Of course, mate. Maya already has your address written down.’

'That’ll be lovely,’ he said. ‘I’ll put it up on the shelf there.’

We both looked up at the shelf, bare but for a few old birthday cards, and then I got up to shake his hand. He walked me to the staircase, as he does every time I visit, to make sure that I didn’t get lost on my way out.

'Give my regards to your beautiful wife,’ he said.

'No worries, mate.’

'Now to get out, you just go down there.’

He pointed down the stairs – the same ones I’ve been using for over a year now.

'It’s alright, mate,’ I said. ‘I know where I’m goin.’
We were tense when we got off the plane at Heathrow, because we had heard a couple of horror stories before we went over. It was the same treatment we got when we told people we were going to India, with a few of the details changed.

Don’t drink the coffee: everything will be too expensive: the sun won’t come out and you’ll get knifed in the street after being held up in customs for five hours – stuff like that.

When friends tell you that sort of shit, you dismiss it out of hand. But it’s the first thing that comes to mind when you hit the ground, until your experience proves otherwise.

So, of course, we were through customs in five minutes.

‘Where are you off to?’

‘We’ll be here in London for a few days, and then Oxford.’

‘Yeah, and what are you doing there?’

‘I’m attending a conference and my wife will be sightseeing.’

The young customs officer gave us our passports.

‘What’s the conference on?’

She was pretending to be chatty, but as soon as she spoke she looked to my eyes to see if I faltered in my answer.

I looked at her directly and said, ‘Madness’.

She laughed and nodded us through.
Oxford was a hole. We got there by train, and then asked a taxi driver to take us to Queen’s College.

‘Queen’s. Right.’

He opened the boot and let me put our bags in. He didn’t speak the whole time, and broadcast a loud don’t-ask-questions vibe.

When we got there we had to fumble for the fare, as he didn’t have change. We still couldn’t make out each coin by its size, so Maya took some time to look through her purse.

‘You haven’t got the money?’ he said, to Maya.

‘Sorry, I’m just checking. We’re not sure which coin is which. Maybe you can just take the money from here?’

She offered him the fistful of coins.

‘Hasn’t your friend got any money?’

He meant me. I’d had enough, and wanted to belt him; I did not like his tone at all.

‘We’ve got the frigging money, mate,’ I said. ‘You haven’t got any bloody change.’

I’d offered him a twenty pound note, and he was scowling at us.

We got out of the cab and I retrieved our bags. He then walked around to us and pulled out his wallet; the fucker had the change all along, and was just being a cock.

He drove off and left us standing there.

‘You sound so Australian when you get angry,’ said Maya.
‘Shisha?’

‘Ho-oid, shibun bha.’

‘Well, he deserved it – the maderchod.’

‘What did you say?’

She smacked me on the arm. The former convent school girl still won’t tolerate my swearing – in any language.

There were no signs that said, ‘The Queen’s College’. It took us another quarter of an hour to find the Porter, get our keys, and make our way to the room in Queen’s Lane Quad. We walked past the gate we were supposed to use. If we’d known what we were doing it would have taken us about four minutes, but we’re colonials.

When we came back outside it was raining, and I wanted to go home.

‘Nga iet iaphi,’ I said, clinging to my wife’s arm.

‘I love you too,’ said Maya. ‘You naughty boy.’

She pinched me on the cheek.
It was typical me. For years, I’d read about London, about musicians, writers and cricket players that I admired. I’d imagined myself there countless times.

But as we crossed the Tower Bridge, I looked down to the water and recalled John Nicholls, my great, great, great, great, great grandfather – who had been working for some hair merchants in 1784. He’d stolen a whole bunch of razors, powder puffs, hair and a few boxes of soap from them; maybe pride and vainglory really is a family trait. Anyway, he took a lot more than just a loaf of bread.

They sentenced him to seven years transportation. For the first three, before he sailed for Botany Bay, he had been inside a hulk, the Censor, floating on the Thames. That’s three years chained up in shackles, sitting in the shit, with rats – the sick and dying not separated from the healthy – and having to drink badly strained water from the river, which your crap, vomit and urine had just been emptied into that morning. There was a thirty percent death rate, once you entered a hulk.

It was still on my mind when we picked up our tickets and waited in line to enter Buckingham Palace, a few hours later. Each year they open the doors for two months to let the tourists in, while the Queen is off riding horses in Scotland. My promise to not serve her was on shaky ground; there I was, filling the Royal coffers with my hard earned convict coin.

I was pleased to find that the inside was not that different to Harrods, in that the place seemed to be falling apart. It was impressive, but not overwhelming; like every hard-up titled family, they had to open the gardens to the punters – so as to get enough of the filthy lucre to get by and keep the estate running.
As we walked around, Maya kept making jokes about stealing back the Koh-I-Noor Diamond – in between mocking several of the other obnoxious tourists behind their backs. But we both shut up when we saw the artworks; it was more than our eyes could take in.

Then we came to the Queen’s ‘secret’ entrance.

‘It’s not too bloody secret now,’ I said.

Whenever someone has an underground entrance, false-wall or hidden safe, they invariably can’t wait to show it to you – not realising that you’d be the very one to steal whatever it is they’re hiding.

Maya rubbed her stomach.

‘Nga lah thngn,’ she said.

‘Nga ruh, yaar. There’s a cafeteria outside.’

We made our way towards the tea-van but got sidetracked at the gift shop. I sat out the front, next to an American with a broken leg.

‘I’m gonna wait here,’ he said, to his wife.

I’ve never seen someone look so over it; he pulled down his baseball cap and leaned forward, observing the cast on his foot.

After a few minutes I got bored myself and found Maya, who was looking over postcards, pencils and erasers emblazoned with the Royal Emblem; they’re fucking shameless, these Windsors, I tell you.

As always happens in shops – like when I’m looking for a book – I immediately felt the urge to go to the bathroom. Maya finds this quite amusing.

‘Nga sam eit,’ I said.

‘Really?’
'Ho-oid. I think it’s an emergency.'

‘Ani wow, u heh eit. Who’s my heh eit? There are toilets back there.’

She was smiling, but didn’t look up.

The lavatory she was talking about was in a demountable shed, not too dissimilar to the ones you’d find at a music festival. There was an attendant inside, an old guy, who had the task of keeping the place clean. He had on the standard royal uniform, but the mop he pushed did not match it. He was taking care of a large puddle on the floor.

Jet-lag had thrown my body clock out, so I hadn’t yet taken care of my morning ablutions. We had been to Brick Lane the night before, and really gone to town with the all you can eat buffet – in particular the beef vindaloo.

My pants had barely hit the floor when the rumble started. An explosion followed it, of the kind where the whole bowl was splattered – Pollock style – with mission brown arse-piss.

It felt good, painting the royal crapper with an Indian curry that had travelled via the guts of an Aussie – a gala performance. I sat there for a while and soaked up the atmosphere.

I’ve always taken a perverse pride in my shit, but this one was particularly agreeable; this syrupy turd was for John Nicholls. When he’d sailed for Botany Bay, after his three years on the Censor, it was meant to be for good. The elite didn’t want him, or any of his descendants, to return to England – ever.

Seen in that light, my shit was triumphant.

After using half a roll of paper, I made for the exit. The ancient attendant had some work to do in my cubicle. I smiled at him on the way out.
Maya was waiting for me outside.

‘What are you grinning about?’

‘Revenge is mine,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘There is a stink in there that will be waiting for Her Highness when she gets back from Scotland.’

Maya took my arm in hers, both of us laughing, and we left.
Will called, soon after we got back, to give me some news. They were leaving Sydney.

‘I got the job,’ he said.

He had gone for a position in Newcastle, where we’d grown up.

‘Are you serious? That’s awesome, man. Congratulations.’

We talked about how I would be the only one left in Sydney. Of all our mates who made the journey down after Uni, I was the survivor.

‘Well, that’s easy-fixed. Get a job at the Uni then come and live the dream.’

‘Nah, mate. Maya is a Sydney girl, man.’

We ignored that I had grown to love the city life as well.

‘You could work on her,’ he said.

‘I tried to for a while, but then we got yelled at on Hunter St by that frigging dickhead.’

‘Oh yeah, that’s right, I forgot about that.’

We were in Newcastle to see family, and I had taken it upon myself to lead Maya around and give a running commentary about the true birthplace of gods and heroes.

Crossing the road, near Civic station, we were about two metres from the kerb. A car slowed down beside us and a young bloke leaned out of the window.

‘You fucking BOUGHT her,’ he yelled.
It couldn’t have happened at a worse time. Maya had already felt foreign; every memory of mine, enthusiastically declaimed by me as we strolled along, had made her feel distanced from my past.

This yobbo in his bomb, screaming that I had bought my Asian wife, told her that she was not welcome in the present. Of course, we knew that he didn’t represent the town. And everyone we told disowned him and his sentiments, but the damage was done.

‘Has Samantha got a job yet?’

‘Nah. She’s been to a heap of interviews, though. We’re waiting on hearing from a couple of schools.’

‘She should be fine.’

‘Yeah, I dunno. I hope so. Whenever we go out she is the only Asian, ya know?’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘This Principal from her last interview is a bloke, so I’m hoping she’s a shoe in.’

‘Because she’s hot?’

‘Mate, don’t laugh. We’ll take a full time job for her any way we can get it.’

I watered this down for Maya, as we drove to the supermarket. Instead of the racial concerns, regarding moving to a regional city, I relayed Samantha’s worries about uprooting the family, and finding new friends – everything but what Will and I had discussed.

‘Well, good on them,’ she said.

‘Yeah, it’s the right decision for those guys.’

But not for us; I’d already established that from Maya’s tone.
As we took a trolley and entered Woolworths, we started to talk about Sunday morning. Neither of us looked forward to it. She didn’t like the preacher and I didn’t like what he preached. We were in a bind.

‘Well, we are not tied to the place. We can always find another Church,’ she said.

‘If it comes to finding another congregation now I’d rather not go at all.’

‘Don’t say that. That’s my greatest worry. Not wanting to go is terrible.’

‘Look, I enjoy going to church with you, but I don’t want to go to a new building and meet new people and go through all that shit again. The change in routine will stress me out.’

I didn’t have the guts to say that I would rather sit at home and read the paper.

‘We can go to a Catholic church if you like?’

This tugged at my heart. It was a big concession for her.

‘Don’t be silly. Of course, if you want to go somewhere else, I’ll follow you.

Nga ieit iaphi, mo?’

‘I love you too, but this stuff worries me.’

We stopped in front of the fruit and vegetable section. Normally I would leave Maya there and walk on to the Deli – to order the bacon, and so on. But now I stop with her and pick out a supply of apples to get me through the week.

In the days after this first happened, Maya actually questioned my sanity.

‘I can’t believe it. It’s still so shocking.’

‘People underestimate me,’ I said. ‘They always have. But I can do anything, yaar. No problem.’
She looked at me strangely. Her toilet reading at that time was a book on bipolar disorder. In the course of reading it she had marked the stories regarding changes in character, new enthusiasms, and all the regular manic-depressive stuff. Thus, instead of it being a cause for celebration, abruptly changing my diet to include fruit after thirty-one years was now seen as a red flag.

I considered joking with her, by saying that a snake had told me to eat the apple.

Instead I noted her concern, told her to monitor me and my sleep for a few days, and didn’t make any sudden movements. You almost have to be boring, when accused of madness.

Anyway, it blew over after a little while and then she played up the fact that I started eating apples on her watch.

‘Don’t get that one. It’s bruised,’ she said.

We got into our usual rhythm. I pushed and she selected the items. When we came to the check-out it was the regular gaandu who didn’t know how to pack our bags.

‘G’day, mate.’

‘Hi, Sir, how are you.’

‘Good, good, good. Yourself?’

‘Not bad.’

I had to admit, the bags did not need rearranging. He was learning, and seemed more relaxed.

‘I feel bad for those guys,’ said Maya.

We’d noticed that nearly all the employees were Indian, Bangladeshi or Nepalese.
‘Don’t feel bad, man. They’ve got a foothold. You and I both worked shit jobs too, for a while.’

‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

We got down to the Camry and packed the boot. By then used to the narrow spaces, I zipped through the car park.

Our old friend was on the ticket window.

‘Arre, here is your pal,’ said Maya.

‘Shit, yaar. I’m gonna try and get him to say something else.’

‘Ho-oid, ask him how he is.’

I wound down the window. But old-mate got in first.

‘You two having another fun-filled day of excitement and adventure?’

I paused and tried not to smile.

‘Yeah, what about yourself?’

‘Just chipper,’ he said.

‘Cheers,’ I said, and we drove out.

‘My goodness, he can’t help himself,’ said Maya, ‘but at least he said something different.’

‘The whole thing was different,’ I said, a little stunned.

For months I’d been telling everyone the story of how the car park guy said the same thing every time. ‘Just another fun-filled day of excitement and adventure’ had been the answer for how his day had been going, whenever I’d asked him. Now I felt slightly stupid, and like I’d been getting him wrong the whole time.

‘What did he say that was different?’ asked Maya.

‘He said “You two having another fun-filled day of excitement and adventure?”’
‘And we’ve just been shopping.’

‘Exactly. I think he’s actually saying that our life is shit.’

We started laughing.

‘What else did he say?’

‘I asked him how he was and he said “just chipper”.’

‘That sounds rehearsed too.’

‘Fully, I know. But here I am feeling sorry for him and the bastard has been making fun of us the whole time.’

Maya reached out and put her hand on my leg, as I drove into our street.

Shopping has always been a good indicator of where we are at. If things are bad, we’ll do it quickly and not talk. After trips like that she’ll walk ahead of me when we get home, open the door, and not wait for me to catch up.

I’m worse – and am usually to blame. But when things are sweet, as they are today, we draw the process out and savour every moment of being together – just us against the world.

‘Nga iei tiaphi,’ I said, as I took out the junk mail. I love you. They were the first words she taught me to say in her language, and they’re still my favourite.

But Maya didn’t hear me. She was a few steps ahead, holding open the front door.
The Unwritable Book: Critical Exegesis

Fiction was good therapy for Woolf because it too deals with subject-object transactions that make a whole, a meaning that ratifies the integrity of both self and text. It involves all of us, authors and readers alike, in the difficult task of creating and yet discovering a meaningful reading, of reconciling our experience of the text with the objective text itself, avoiding the twin errors of under-reading (passively receiving information without projecting meaning, failing to realize that the text cannot create our subjective experience of it) and over-reading (mistaking our own projections and perspectives for the text's). In reading and writing, we must alternate repeatedly between reception and projection, between impression and explanation, using each to reinforce and correct the other. Fiction is intrinsically good ground for exploring manic-depressive illness: in both, making interpretations is the crux of the problem. (Caramagno 17)
Introduction: The Crux of the Problem

The Triumphant Approach began the moment I first left the mental health unit of Liverpool Hospital, South-Western Sydney, in late December of the year 2000. Before the business of writing the novel took over, some six years later, I had to go through the strange process of reconstructing my identity and remembering who ‘I’ actually was. For your identity is what you misplace when you are taken over by a full-blown psychotic episode; in losing your mind, you give up your character and your history. To put it in literary terms, the world views you as an unreliable narrator of your own story.

This realisation hit me one night as I watched The West Wing. In that episode the character of Sam Seaborn, played by Rob Lowe, was debating with a colleague about the reliability of a witness. He said that the witness was ‘a clinically diagnosed manic-depressive with a history of... institutionalization. This was the chief witness for the prosecution...’ (Yu, Series 2, Ep. 16) The implication was clear; as the witness had been diagnosed as a manic-depressive, nothing he said in a court of law could be deemed admissible or truthful. His testimony was of no value, because at one time or another he had lost the ability to reason.

So in writing the novel and the exegesis, I have been aware that nothing I say about my episode can take away from the fact that I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder; or, to paraphrase Sam Seaborn, I am a chronic manic-depressive with a history of institutionalisation. Surprisingly, acceptance of this fact – and recognition of it in the novel and exegesis – led to the realisation that as the theme of my mental illness, or my madness, increased, the possibility of actual madness decreased, something that I explore in chapter three of this exegesis, with reference to Felman.

But before I could get to this point I first had to find a narrative framework that would suit the episodic nature of my protagonist’s mental and spiritual life. The question of voice also became very important, as the narration of the novel progressed, because the main character, Peter Lawson, had a subjectivity that was split between the past and the present. In the process of discovering this I drew on the work of Kocan, McInerney and Bukowski, and the first chapter of this exegesis deals with their influence on The Triumphant Approach, with particular reference to the twin modes of first and second person narration. A key theme that I explore is identity, how it can be
changed using these two modes of discourse, and what these voices imply about the narrator.

These three writers also influenced The Triumphant Approach because the protagonist of each of their cited novels is an example of the young male literary aspirant. As the chapter shows, each differed from the others in a significant way. Chief among the differences was whether or not the writers chose to write a Künstlerroman – an ‘artist novel’ – or a Bildungsroman, the classic ‘novel of formation’ (Abrams 132-33): and a large part of the exegesis details how The Triumphant Approach morphed from one into the other.

The second chapter deals with autobiography and memoir, outlining the chief reasons why I felt that The Triumphant Approach should be presented as fiction. Rather than focus on what a novel ‘is’ to come to my conclusion on whether to label The Triumphant Approach ‘fiction’ I focus on what a memoir is not.

Chapter three looks at the theme of madness, and how The Triumphant Approach, as I first envisioned it, was unreadable and unwritable. Here I engage with the work of Felman, and Foucault, before looking at the prose of Gerard de Nerval and in particular the mode of narration that he used in Aurélia, which has significance for the finished version of The Triumphant Approach and its overall narrative structure.

I conclude with a study on the theme of belief in The Triumphant Approach and the spirituality of the protagonist – with reference to the religious imagery used throughout the book, and its relationship to the character’s mental illness. The episodic nature of mental illness and spirituality are also examined in terms of what belief can do to amplify the effects of mental illness – in the specific case of my protagonist – and how this process becomes inverted when the character questions his religious beliefs because of his mental illness. Crucially, the same process that takes place with the theme of madness can be seen to be taking place with the theme of holiness, and the chapter argues that as the theme of holiness increases, actual holiness decreases.

The exegesis is an examination of the creative process and also an accomplice after the fact, as practice led research heavily influenced the rewriting of the novel. Aside from documenting this process, the exegesis also aims to reveal the paths not taken in the creative journey, and scrutinizes the reasons behind these decisions, before situating the novel in terms of existing literary canons.
Embarking on the novel, I had been under the impression that my episodes of mental illness could be left behind. That is, I thought that they would suit being represented as periods of my life – and of the protagonist’s – that had been experienced but were soon forgotten, as the character developed. So the first drafts were written with a fixed view of what madness is and is not, and this lack of fluidity led to an imbalance in the text.

Ultimately, I had to come around to the fact – in the novel and in life – that while I may not define myself by the title of ‘bipolar’, it still defines my actions to this day. Just as an alcoholic who has not touched a bottle in years still identifies as being alcoholic – to avoid hubris and to reinforce the ongoing hard work of sobriety – even a person who has experienced psychosis briefly will always carry a question mark of insanity with them. The way that I may argue the point in a heated argument, or seem to go into my shell after a disappointment, will always be interpreted by those around me with the diagnosis of bipolar disorder in mind; in either case, I could be losing it (again), or going into a depression and becoming suicidal. If not, just the fact that I’m bringing it up at all, or writing about it, can be used to indicate paranoia, and so on.

My lack of reason in the past continues to mock my attempts to acquire it in the present. The exegesis sets out to explain these complexities, and the way in which I’ve tried to portray them through the novel.
Chapter 1 – I’m Bukowski: You’re Kocan

Models for the Narrative Voices of Peter Lawson

This chapter deals with the two narrative styles of The Triumphant Approach, the attitude behind both, and the models used for each voice, with particular regard to their tone.

There were three separate models I used for the narrative style and structure of The Triumphant Approach, and two important reasons for using them. One: I felt that I needed to adopt at least two different narrative voices to accurately document the mental illness experienced by the protagonist and to effectively denote his change in character. Two: I wanted to veer away from writing what Abrams referred to as the traditional Künstlerroman, or ‘artist-novel’ (133), and instead concentrate on the day to day existence of the character – with a focus on his mental and spiritual life. This required shaping The Triumphant Approach into what Abrams described as the Bildungsroman, or ‘novel of formation’ (132). It follows that all three models I used for reference points drew directly and indirectly from these two subclasses of the novel.

There are two distinct narrative styles used in The Triumphant Approach: the heterodiegetic second person (singular) narration, used in part one, followed by the homodiegetic first person narration adopted in part two. This pattern is then repeated in parts three and four.

The Second Person

Wood, writing in How Fiction Works, has pointed out how rare the second person device is:

I can tell a story in the third person or in the first person, and perhaps in the second person singular or in the first person plural, though successful examples of these latter two are rare indeed… (5)

And Smith, in The Writing Experiment, described the second person technique in this way:
...the second person form ‘you’ creates a particularly intimate (sometimes even intimidating) relationship between narrator and narratee... (it) can also be employed in narration to set up ambiguities about who is being addressed, and is used most often in experimental fictions. By means of the pronoun ‘you’, the narrator can speak partly to someone else in the narrative, and partly to the audience, thereby implicating the narrator in what is happening...And the second person can be used very effectively...to imply a split subjectivity, so that one part of the self seems to be looking to see what the other half is doing, so that the self is both acting and acted upon. (92)

There were two different models for the creation of this second person voice in The Triumphant Approach. One was The Treatment and The Cure, by Peter Kocan, and the other was Bright Lights, Big City, by Jay McInerney. The Treatment and The Cure resonated because of its main topics – institutional existence and mental illness – and its Australian setting, while Bright Lights, Big City influenced The Triumphant Approach because it covered the areas of substance abuse, city life and the drudgery of the wage earners’ existence. Both autobiographical first novels about would-be ‘writers’ – fitting into the category of Künstlerroman – these texts proved invaluable for the creation of Peter Lawson as his journey in some way touched all of these locales, and was based heavily on my own life story.

There is one major difference between the narrative technique Kocan adopts in The Treatment and The Cure and the one used in The Triumphant Approach and in Bright Lights, Big City. While The Triumphant Approach sticks resolutely to the second person singular (in parts one and three), as does McInerney, on occasion Kocan disconcertingly drifts into a first person plural voice, which seems to approximate the mental life of his protagonist – the nineteen year old psychiatric patient Len Tarbutt. This gives the impression of more than one subject being involved in the narrative at a time, when readers are expecting only one. It’s a recurring technique used throughout The Treatment and The Cure. To give a few examples:
You’d rather stay in the cool shadows and watch the moon, but it seems spoiled. At ten o’clock we are herded upstairs. You enter a huge dormitory that looks like a flophouse… (93)

And:

He goes to the office to tell them he can’t pay the bill for his appendix. Electric Ned is there with Arthur. Through the glass partition we see Dave waving his hands and talking. We feel the joke’s gone too far. Electric Ned and Arthur are looking our way. They know someone’s been having fun with Dave. You drift into the background, away from Ray Hoad. (31)

If you drift into the background, where am I? It’s the use of the plural ‘We’ that is the most remarkable. A second person narrative, when it works, seems to function as a default first person voice and is handy when the subject in question has little or no real self-knowledge, and almost needs to be told how he or she feels – as is the case with Kocan’s Tarbutt – or because they are severely traumatised, like McInerney’s protagonist.

With a second person narrative, the first person exists as a narrator, but without recognition, and talks only about the second person – the ‘you’ always being mentioned; we don’t know or care who the real first person, the actual narrator, is. The effect of this is that generally the reader will identify the ‘you’ as being the narrator, talking to himself - implying a split subjectivity, as noted previously by Smith – but this is never made clear for us as readers; it is something we assume to be the case. It gives the added benefit, however, of leaving room for the reader – or, in the language of narratology, the narratee – to insert themselves into the text as a participant, something that otherwise can only happen with the first person plural voice.

A good example of this is the protagonist from Jay McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City, a portion of which is useful to compare with The Treatment and The Cure so as to highlight the similar yet quite different styles:
‘I’m going to be working for most of the night,’ you say. Actually, you are about to give up, but a night of Allagash is not the remedy for your blues. You’re thinking of bed. You are so tired you could stretch out right here on the linoleum and slip into a long coma. (32)

You see here that the narrator is doing his best to stay out of the way. It is all about ‘You’; ‘I’ or ‘We’ are not mentioned. In that way, the second person narration McInerney uses implies that the narrator is heterodiegetic – outside of the story. Compare that to the following extract from The Treatment and The Cure:

You are thinking though – you’re thinking how this is the first time that you’ve held hands with a girl in the pictures. At twenty-five you are getting a taste of life! Afterwards we stand in the shadows outside your ward. (157)

In the first example from Bright Lights, Big City the first person, implicitly present as the one who says ‘You’ repeatedly, is kept out of the story. Whereas in this second example, from The Treatment and The Cure, the first person seems to be present, periodically, and reminds us of this by referring to himself as a member of the group ‘we’.

But he is not just reminding us, the readers; he also seems to be reminding himself – the ‘you’ always being referred to in the narrative. To clarify the point: ‘you’ cannot refer to yourself as ‘you’; only ‘I’ can refer to ‘you’ as ‘you’. So in Bright Lights, Big City the ‘I’ behind the narrative, because he stays silent, is very much like the common third person omniscient author who exists in space, is heterodiegetic, and knows everything about a story without giving us a clue as to where the information has come from or the true character of the narrator. The focus is on the subject and the story, at all times, and not on the narrator.

The Treatment and The Cure’s second person narration works like that same third person omniscient author; but, because of the narrator’s periodic appearances, it operates more like the narrator who occasionally winks at the reader and shares a joke with them, momentarily letting you know that he/she is there – except Kocan has subverted this clichéd convention. Instead of the narrator winking at the reader and
sharing a moment with them, Kocan’s narrator appears to share secret moments with his protagonist ‘Len Tarbutt’, as if the narrator is present with the protagonist at the time of the event described. But the end effect is that the ‘you’ employed by the narrator means that we as readers are actually the ones who share the moment with the narrator – because, the moment we read ‘you’, we also, momentarily, become the protagonist.

Once Kocan’s narrator says ‘we’ – using the first person plural voice – he appears to be announcing himself as a participant in the story, as there is a split subjectivity in the text. Rather than pretending that he is not there as a narrator, Kocan thus implies through this narrative structure that he is present and reliving the story with his younger self, and with us. So it could be argued that the ‘you’ being spoken to throughout the text is Tarbutt, the protagonist, and that the use of the second person to identify him is so the reader imagines themselves to be the protagonist, and the ‘I’ who announces himself in the form of the plural ‘we’ could be seen as Kocan, the author. If we accept this reading, the narrator therefore slips between a heterodiegetic and a homodiegetic discourse; he is both inside and outside of the story, at the same time.

Identity
The diagnosis of the Tarbutt/Kocan figure in the Treatment and The Cure – ‘schizoid’ (140) – is very different from the one applied to Peter Lawson, who has bipolar affective disorder. Freudenberg, writing in volume thirteen of the Australian Dictionary of Biography, also noted that Kocan was first presented to court, after his assassination attempt on Arthur Calwell in 1966, as a ‘borderline schizophrenic’ (341-45). The difference in these diagnoses meant that in the portrayal of Peter Lawson – a character who experiences extreme highs and lows interspersed with long periods of being ‘balanced’ – one voice, or one split subjectivity, could not be made to represent the different stages of the character’s journey, as it was with Kocan’s protagonist. I would argue that upon entering a psychotic episode a person takes on a new self and that to represent it properly – in contrast to the normal self – more than one style of narration would be needed.

The problem with the autobiographical narrative of a mentally unwell person – from my point of view – has never been one of memory, but rather one of identity. The trauma and the glory of bipolar episodes leave an indelible imprint on the hard drive of
the brain; the question is how to filter those memories through the clarity of the present, without diluting their authenticity. Another dilemma when representing the present is that these memories, and what they imply, also dramatically affect the current self.

Switching time-frames in the presentation of a character such as Peter Lawson – as happens in *The Triumphant Approach* – requires taking into account these changes in identity and challenges the writer to find a solution for the problem. Milden, writing in the *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, has documented the identity crisis an affective patient – such as Peter Lawson – goes through:

I contend that because of the nature of this illness affective patients emerge with particular problems in organizing a sense of self that are specific to this illness…When a patient has a major affective episode, his or her normal self disappears. The patient becomes someone foreign, another self. By definition, this self has a different affective organization than the normal self. There are different thoughts, behaviours and personality traits. Who, then, is the real self for someone who has been up and down and in between? Is the real self, who one is when one is euthymic (normal)? Is it possible or even necessary to construct a whole self out of an amalgam of the ‘self-in-episode’ and ‘self-out-of-episode’? Can this integration ever achieve the same coherence of self-structure that the patient previously took for granted?” (346-7)

It would seem that constructing a whole self out of the in-episode and out-of-episode personality is what Kocan is trying to achieve in writing *The Treatment and The Cure*, with a second person singular voice that has first person plural links. Meanwhile McInerney, in *Bright Lights, Big City*, uses the second person singular to portray an emotional detachment in his unnamed protagonist. The character, loosely based on McInerney himself, is a young would-be writer employed as a fact checker at a magazine that closely resembles *The New Yorker*. During the course of the novel we learn that his mother has passed away less than a year before the start of the narrative, and that his young catwalk-model wife has recently deserted him.
Choosing the second person singular to tell the story of this character works on a number of levels. It allows for the detachment of the character because the constant reference to the ‘you’ gives the illusion that the trial the protagonist endures is occurring to someone else and not the narrator. And in the absence of these things happening to the narrator – because of his insistence on the use of ‘you’ – the door is then open for the reader to insert themselves into the story. ‘You’ becomes a way for the reader to experience the narrative in a way not possible with the third person or first person narration. A first person narrator talks to you, the reader, as him/herself. When you read ‘I’ it signals that you are reading someone else’s account of an event (unless you wrote it yourself – but even then, the point is debatable) and there is always the knowledge, even if engrossed in the story, that someone else must have written that ‘I’. Similarly, a third person approach is arguably not inviting you to experience the story, but rather to listen to (or read) it. Both first person and third person narrations can then be seen to make the reader a witness to events – not a participant. The reader could imagine themselves to be the narrator or the protagonist in these two narrative styles, but that is a decision of the reader; it isn’t necessarily suggested by the text.

The second person narration seems different in that the use of the ‘you’ does suggest that the reader is involved, because they are being directly addressed by a voice that is speaking to them individually – by calling them ‘you’ – and not referencing itself; if the narrator did reference him/herself with an ‘I’, for example, it would become a first person singular account. The point about the ‘you’, though, is that it implies that there is a narrator – because someone must exist to write or say ‘you’ – and it implies that there must be a reader, that is ‘you’. The nature of the relationship between narrator and narratee can be suggested with this one word.

The first person plural also falls into the same category as the second person singular, as Kocan displayed. The ‘we’ he uses works in the same way for the reader as the ‘you’ does, in that even when the first person announces himself he is still leaving room for the reader to be a participant in the story. Reading ‘we’, directly after reading ‘you’, means that the narratee still appears to be addressed. Temporarily, the narratee becomes a member of the group ‘we’ along with the narrator – so there is room for everyone.
As mentioned previously, in *The Treatment and The Cure* Kocan seems to have worked in this way to produce a narrative style that would represent both the self-in-episode (the person with the mental illness) and the self-out-of-episode (the euthymic person). The point to make is that these episodes – for Kocan’s Len Tarbutt – are not clearly demarcated as such. Kocan hinted at this in the following passage of *The Treatment and The Cure*, which further explains the duality of the you/we persona he employs for his protagonist:

Half your mind is terribly clear and you are like a bystander watching yourself with this girl, as though you need a witness to tell you it’s truly happening; the other half is like a gibbering idiot who wants to kiss and fuck her and cry on her shoulder all at the same time….We are kissing in the shadows outside your ward. (157-9)

The ups and downs of Kocan’s protagonist are portrayed as being much more fluid than is the case for Peter Lawson, who can look back and cite certain timeframes when he was, certifiably, psychotic and can then compare those times to more current ones when he has been – again, certifiably – in complete remission from his mood disorder. But the second person narrative technique was not used, or chosen, to describe only the periods of psychosis, as part two of *The Triumphant Approach* – with its first person narration of psychotic episodes – implies.

In *The Triumphant Approach* the second person is used to describe the unaware version of the self – the self who has little insight, and seems to be operating on auto-pilot – and this meant that parts one and three, those in the second person, are linear in their narration of events, whereas the first person narrative, in parts two and four, is more reflective and can jump backwards or forwards in time, because its version of the protagonist is aware, and has insight into the present and past circumstances. As Hartley, in *The Go-Between*, wrote ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’. (1) With this in mind, the second person sections of *The Triumphant Approach* can be treated as a foreign country, and the first person parts can be seen as the accounts of a protagonist who has been abroad, returned, and can now evaluate the
experience. Thus, in The Triumphant Approach, the result is that ‘I’ have a memory of the events, but ‘you’ went through them.

As well as being a vehicle to examine the past, the second person narration in The Triumphant Approach also serves the same purpose as that of McInerney’s in Bright Lights, Big City where it was previously mentioned that the character has mentally withdrawn because of severe trauma – in this instance because of the death of his mother and the desertion of his wife – and then taken up quite regular substance abuse. This applies equally to the character of Peter Lawson, who at the start of The Triumphant Approach is unemployed, in an unhappy relationship and prone to depression – only to become employed in a dead-end job that exposes him to violence, verbal confrontation, long hours and high levels of stress. The second person narration helps to portray this section of the character’s journey in that the protagonist seems to adopt the mindset that the process is one that has to be endured and is very much out of the control of the character. Things are happening to the protagonist rather than the protagonist influencing events in any significant way – as a result, the ‘I’ has left it up to ‘you’ to deal with the situation, and will only return after the rough patch has been negotiated. This seems to be an act of self-preservation, but in effect only heightens the fall for the character of Peter Lawson who, like McInerney’s protagonist, also tries to deal with his problems by turning to drugs.

Worker or Writer?

The narrative technique used by McInerney also served another purpose. Sam Tanenhaus, in his recent New York Times review of McInerney’s How It Ended, wrote about how well the second person narration of Bright Lights, Big City suited the deeply narcissistic character of the young male literary aspirant:

...It was McInerney who succeeded — through the inspiration of the present-tense, second-person voice, the vehicle of false insinuating intimacy twinned with coolly ironic deflation...What seems a coming-of-age story becomes instead a case study of acute narcissism, the universal condition of young male literary aspirants. The second-person narration flowed so easily because McInerney was lampooning all those other self-
conscious, self-absorbed young novelists whose every “he” was really an “I.” (2)

This is a significant point to consider when looking at the three protagonists discussed so far. Both Tarbutt, Kocan’s protagonist in The Treatment and The Cure, and the unnamed protagonist from McInerney’s Bright Lights, Big City can be placed in this category of ‘literary aspirant’, and it could be argued that both novels are classic examples of the Künstlerroman. The Triumphant Approach, when read as the story of my alter-ego, could also be argued to be in this category. But that interpretation could only be considered when taking into account my biographical history; it is not implied or referenced in the final presentation of the novel – where the character of Lawson is presented as a worker, academic, son, brother and husband, but not as a writer. Only McInerney and Kocan portray their protagonist as being a practising writer or overtly ‘literary’ in any way, although it’s worth pointing out that their prose is not primarily concerned with the desire, or their struggle, to write – only their desire to survive. Their artistic concerns and dreams are secondary, and only mentioned occasionally. But when they do get mentioned it is significant; McInerney’s narrator says, ‘you have always wanted to be a writer. Getting your job at the magazine was only the first step toward literary celebrity’ (40). While the novel only mentions his writing in its absence – in his depression he has writer’s block – it contributes significantly to his idea of self-worth. He sees himself as witty, urbane and destined for bigger things – which is indicative of what the second person voice brings: self delusion and denial, the inability to see the situation for what it is:

You see yourself as the kind of guy who wakes up early on Sunday morning and who steps out to cop the Times and croissants. Who might take a cue from the Arts and Leisure section and decide to check out an exhibition... (4)

The irony, for McInerney’s protagonist, is that he is not the kind of guy to get up early and get the paper; he has come home late from a night on the drugs and in reality fits a very different kind of user-profile.
Kocan also mentions writing and his interest in poetry in *The Treatment and The Cure*. He writes of ‘making notes for a poem…They both tell you…that it’s the best poem they’ve ever read’ (183), and at the end of the novel he wins the ‘National Poetry Prize’ (200) for the same poem. Again this also indicates how he sees himself. On the same page Kocan goes on to say of Tarbutt, writing is ‘the only power you have’ (200). His existence as a writer sets him apart from the other patients, who are referred to summarily as ‘Retards’, ‘Dills’, ‘Mongols,’ ‘Monkeys,’ ‘Purple-Faced Epileptics’ and ‘Drug Addicts’ (87). Again, there is a denial there; Tarbutt pretends that he is special, whereas his circumstances – in the psychiatric hospital – should tell him otherwise; he is excluded.

Charles Bukowski, whose book *Post Office* served as another model for *The Triumphant Approach*, also created a version of the literary aspirant alter-ego in the form of the postal clerk ‘Henry Chinaski’. Bukowski fashioned in Chinaski a character that he used throughout the rest of his career in his autobiographical novels and poetry. Even though the character Bukowski presented was interested in music and literature, he spoke and wrote in the language of the street – often provocatively crude and sexist in his tone – and deliberately kept his work free of the literary, going so far in *Post Office* as to not even mention that he was a writer until the final page. As noted by Brewer, *Post Office* is:

...unique in that it barely mentions the craft of writing. All of art is relegated to a derogatory backdrop…Although Bukowski was writing and publishing poems throughout the period recounted in *Post Office*, this information is oddly omitted. (14)

As Bigna affirmed in his thesis on Bukowski, this is because *Post Office* presents Chinaski as a worker, ‘not a writer’ (63). In that way, rather than being a Künstlerroman – which Abrams defined as representing ‘the growth of a novelist or other artist into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of the protagonist’s destiny and mastery of an artistic craft’ (133) – *Post Office* can be seen as an archetypal Bildungsroman, which Abrams defined as a ‘novel of education’ where the subject of the novel is more related to ‘the development of the protagonist’s mind and
character...through varied experience...often through a spiritual crisis...into maturity and recognition of his or her identity and role in the world’ (132). This is also the case for Peter Lawson in *The Triumphant Approach* who is portrayed both as a worker and as a person with bipolar disorder – who endures a lengthy spiritual and psychological crisis – but not as a writer.

There are several hints of Lawson’s desire for a life outside of his work – whether it’s to escape the railway or being a teacher’s aide – and his education is mentioned in passing, but the details of his actual artistic life are not referenced directly, as is the case with Bukowski’s *Post Office*. This is not presented as being important to how he sees himself, but rather how he sees the world; in hindsight it explains his eye for detail. Lawson and Chinaski, in this context, can thus both be seen as examples of what Wood referred to as the literary version of Baudelaire’s flâneur – ‘the hero who is both a writer and not a writer’ (61). Also, with its preference for short numbered chapters, colloquial language, the emphasis on substance abuse and a sometimes juvenile attitude towards women and sex, stylistically *The Triumphant Approach* perhaps owes more to *Post Office* than either *The Treatment and The Cure* or *Bright Lights, Big City*.

**The First Person: Avoiding the Fake**

The choice of Bukowski’s working class language and dialogue was classified as having three distinct purposes, according to Bigna:

...in Bukowski's writing there is a particular emphasis on dialogue which is often profane and sexually explicit. Bukowski's choice of confrontational language serves a threefold purpose: It sharpens one’s focus on unpleasant experiences in Chinaski’s life. Secondly, it suggests a refusal to emulate the aesthetic richness of his romantic, modernist and post-modernist contemporaries and predecessors. Thirdly, in the interests of gaining his readers’ trust, Bukowski employs the language of the street - the commonplace, colloquial speech of the working poor. (26)

This preference for the language of the working class is also what separates *The Triumphant Approach* from McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City*, which can’t help but
show the education of the protagonist – who is unhappy in his job as a fact checker at a major establishment magazine and yearns to move into fiction. Also, his choice of drug – cocaine, or ‘Bolivian Marching Powder’ (1) as McInerney calls it – is a decidedly middle/upper class drug, whereas everything about Lawson is working class, from his choice of substance – marijuana – to his family background, place of birth, language and employment record.

Post Office is also significant as an influence on The Triumphant Approach because of its first person, homodiegetic, narration. The voice Bukowski uses to create the character of Henry Chinaski is clear, unadorned with literary flourishes or attempts at philosophy, and is focused on plain speaking and an avoidance of the fake. Gluckstern, writing online in The Quarterly Conversation, describes it in this way:

From the opening line: “It began as a mistake,” Bukowski, as alter-ego Henry Chinaski, writes straight from the hip in unambiguous, accessible prose. A congenital loser trapped in a dead-end profession from which he can derive no personal satisfaction, yet possessed of enough self-awareness to recognize the absurdity of his situation, Chinaski is an Everyman of the underclass.

The reference to the first line from Bukowski’s Post Office is a good place to start in terms of comparisons with The Triumphant Approach. Bukowski’s use of ‘It began as a mistake’ (7), as an opening to his first novel was deliberate in that he strove, as acknowledged by Bigna, to write in ‘a simplified manner so that his work could be appreciated by the casual reader...This is because he believed that aesthetic complexity created a wedge between art and reality’ (160).

It also introduces a note of urgency into the story, as if the narrator does not have much time and can only give the specifics, and it is also defiant in its refusal to try and impress or be anything other than what it is – the voice of the underclass. In an interview with Silvia Bizio, for High Times, in 1982, Bukowski related this tendency for plain speaking to his childhood and in particular the abuse he received at the hands of his father:
...when they beat you long enough and hard enough you have the tendency to say what you really mean; in other words, they take all the pretenses out of you. If you can get out of it, whatever is still there is usually something genuine...So you see, my father was a great literary teacher: He taught me the meaning of pain – pain without reason. (98)

The opening line of The Triumphant Approach – ‘You’re deciding whether or not to jump on the tracks’ – and the first sentence of part two – ‘I’ve now been to hospital twice’ – are both in this same tradition. The tendency for plain speaking in The Triumphant Approach is more obvious in the first person sections of parts two and four, where the narrator speaks from the time after he has been diagnosed as mentally unwell. The disabled tag the character wears, and the treatment that goes with it, has brought some humility to the protagonist. The second person sections – particularly in the opening part of the novel – sometimes drift into a more narcissistic tone because of the effects of Lawson’s mental illness, with its bipolar symptoms of grandiosity and introspection.

**Structure**

The structure of The Triumphant Approach, then, follows on in the tradition of Nerval’s Aurélia, which Felman, in her Madness and Literature, said was based ‘…upon an unresolvable tension between these two discursive tendencies in the narrative: the mode of hallucinatory inflation and the mode of critical deflation’ (67).

Two examples from the text will highlight this. Firstly, in part one, this quote from chapter thirteen depicts a time when Lawson is about to enter his first psychotic high, and is excited by the potency of his new ‘idea’ to save mankind:

As you read, the Olympic rings keep glaring out at you from the page. And it is this emblem that caresses your thoughts into their final shape. The mist rises under the heat of your gaze and the peak of the mountain is revealed: the idea...Without any more thought, you put pen to paper. The sooner people can read it and spread it, the better.
The second person allows for the grandiosity of this passage – because it is understood that the character doesn’t know what is going on – while still evoking some sympathy from the reader. In other words, the second person signals here that the protagonist is acting in ignorance, and should be judged without harshness.

The same allowance would not be made for the character in the first person. Accordingly, the narrator acknowledges this and treats the same topic with dismissal in the following example, from chapter three of part two:

On my return a few hours later, with Zac still on the lounge, I placed all the household knives and forks in the toilet bowl and sent several other items flying out the door and into the backyard…I can no longer remember the supernatural reasons behind these actions.

The narrator, here, through dismissing the ‘reasons’ behind his strange behaviour, signals to the reader that the reasons themselves hold no importance. The dismissal of these reasons also shows the reader that the character has lost his self-importance. In dismissing the ‘supernatural’ he is dismissing the idea that he is chosen – or the idea that you should be listening to him. In The Triumphant Approach the second person narrator often has to explain the actions of Lawson – because the protagonist (of the past) doesn’t understand them. Conversely, the first person version of Lawson doesn’t have to explain his actions in the same way, because he has some self-knowledge and has renounced his insanity.

The Shy Ego
Some authors have chosen explicitly not to use a first person narration because of an inability to talk about themselves. These are the previously mentioned writers that Tanenhaus said that McInerney was ‘lampooning’ because they were ‘self-conscious’ novelists. Roger MacDonald, quoted in Robert’s Writers on Writing, explains his own avoidance of the first person in the following way:

I felt very self conscious of the letter ‘I’ all the time. It just seemed too egotistical. I was brought up as the son of the Presbyterian minister. You
don’t matter – it’s other people who matter more than you do – so that’s why I avoided that. (159)

Compared to the previous quote from Bukowski, where he said that his father ‘beat’ the pretences out of him, this statement from MacDonald implies that the decision not to choose the first person is about avoiding attempts to assert the self – out of a Protestant impulse to serve others. Bukowski’s view is that others have served him nothing but pain, so he is going to assert himself and say whatever he likes.

The reason McInerney made fun of the ‘self-conscious’ novelists was because they were not being truthful. Making the protagonist a ‘he’ or a ‘she’ when the novel is based on your own experience is patently false – and makes Macdonald’s claim seem like fake piety; it is *not wanting to be seen* as talking about oneself, rather than really not wanting to talk about oneself.

The decision to write *The Triumphant Approach* in only these two styles, first and second person, was not made at the start of the writing process but after the first few drafts had been completed. There were two other sections that were in the third person and in a first person plural voice, respectively, but they were cut from the manuscript. This meant that the novel, originally conceived as being postmodern, and unapologetically about a ‘writer’, was not always the ‘coming of age story’ or Bildungsroman that it now appears to be.
Chapter 2 – Character Names & Genres

Memoir, Autobiography & The Lost Sections

Of The Triumphant Approach

Nevertheless, despite differing aesthetic aims, the Beats do provide some context for Bukowski’s ruggedly self-expressive art. In particular, it is the single-minded devotion to the transformation of life experiences into fiction above all other considerations, that distinguishes Henry Miller, the Beats and Charles Bukowski from other twentieth century American writers. (Bigna 28)

In this chapter I deal with the questions that arose out of using autobiographical details extensively in The Triumphant Approach, and the eventual decisions on genre that resulted from this process – as well as documenting why specific sections of the text were discarded along the way. I also clarify my own position on the differences between autobiographical fiction and memoir with particular reference to The Triumphant Approach. In particular, I focus on what a memoir ‘isn’t’ – or can’t be – to reach a conclusion about the protagonist’s name, and the decision to present the work as fiction.

Naming Names

My original inspiration for the project came at a time when Brian Castro had just released Shanghai Dancing, his ‘fictional autobiography’. Essentially I saw it as a more literary, sophisticated way, of taking the same stance that Bukowski had in his portrayal of himself as Henry Chinaski, in Post Office. To me, both writers seemed to be truthfully attempting to tell their story, but telegraphing to the reader at the same time they would not be bound by this allegiance to the ‘truth’. They left themselves room to choose the more entertaining options and storylines as they wrote, and did not have to comply with an idea of historical authenticity – or the supposed journalistic integrity – to which a memoirist, or historian, has traditionally been held accountable.
Bukowski, as has been noted, chose to represent himself with an alter-ego that he gave a different name – while Castro decided to name his alter-ego eponymously. There are two performance styles being used here – both of them filled with artifice. Bukowski, in using the name Chinaski for his narrator/alter-ego, is speaking in the first person about his own situation – for instance, working in the post office, drinking heavily and having sexual experiences with different women – but prefacing his comments with ‘this happened to a friend of mine’. This is a standard operating tool of Bukowski and his contemporaries, namely the Beats – as noted by Duval in his recent study, *Bukowski and the Beats*:

All the Beat writers are autobiographical by nature. And it is clear that Bukowski’s prose texts and poems, even when he presents Henry Chinaski do not escape this rule. It's the same whether the narrators call themselves Dulouz (Kerouac) Chinaski (Bukowski) or Mr. Miller (Henry Miller in *Sexus*). The events and the gestures of the characters/narrators are the same as the authors’. (Duval 95)

Looking through the previous names, Dulouz for Kerouac, Chinaksi for Bukowski and Lawson for Bryson it’s easy to see the convention at work; the names have been chosen to indicate that the character is based on the author and subsequently they sound related, many of them using initials, or rhymes, that are deliberately meant to conjure up the original – as in the following example from James:

The nagging question was made more so by the sudden prosperity of a friend, Bruce Beresford. In previous volumes I called him Dave Dalziel, for the usual reason: I was attributing to him inappropriate behaviour. (James *North Face* 153)

Which brings us to Castro, who used his family name in *Shanghai Dancing*, and more recently, Helen Garner, who in her novel *The Spare Room* called the narrator, a writer, ‘Helen’. This angered some critics of the work, notably Robert Dessaix, who in his review of *The Spare Room* in *The Monthly* went so far as to say the book wasn’t a
novel, while at the same time noting that Peter Carey, quoted in a blurb of the same book, described it as ‘the perfect novel’.

The main problem for Dessaix was that Garner doesn’t seem to be playing the game. Not only does she write *The Spare Room* from obvious lived experience, and use her own name for the narrator in the book, she also makes reference to the fact that she lives next door to her daughter and granddaughter, as she does in real life. She has, in fact, made no attempt to invent a set of circumstances; she is, it seems, simply recording them.

The only problem is, if *The Spare Room* isn’t a novel neither is Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, Kerouac’s *On The Road*, Bukowski’s *Post Office* or Kocan’s *The Treatment and The Cure*. Under the criteria that Dessaix provides in *The Monthly* these works can only be considered ‘innovative explorations of literary approaches to non-fiction...’

But Garner’s case seems the most problematic. Castro, while using his family name, and some obvious detail – in terms of the family origins and association with Asia – made it clear that he had invented or exaggerated a lot of the work, notably the historical parts he himself had not lived. And Bukowski, like Kerouac and Kocan, used his own life story extensively but hid behind the name of an alter-ego – again signalling the artifice in the process. But Garner is doing both of these things – using her own story – looking after a dying friend – and her own name, yet still calling the work a novel.

**Writing’s Oxymorons**

Most first novels are disguised autobiographies. This autobiography is a disguised novel. On the periphery, names and attributes of real people have been changed and shuffled so as to render identification impossible. Nearer the centre, important characters have been run through the scrambler or else left out completely. So really the whole affair is a figment got up to sound like truth. (James *Unreliable* 1)
A La Recherche turns out to be not only based entirely on his (Proust’s) experiences: it is intended to be the symbolic story of his life, and occupies a place unique among great novels in that it is not, properly speaking, a fiction, but a creative autobiography. Proust believed, justifiably, that his life had the shape and meaning of a great work of art: it was his task to select, telescope and transmute the facts so that their universal significance should be revealed. (Painter xvii)

These two quotations suggest that both James and Proust used the same technique to achieve two completely different goals. In a sense I would argue that is entirely possible. It would seem that the ultimate choice a writer makes in terms of the form and genre of their story, especially when it deals with autobiographical material, is regarding the name of the character(s) and the decision at the time of approaching the publisher to label their book either ‘novel’ or ‘memoir’. Everything else seems to be down to style. As Kundera has pointed out, citing Sartre, it would be better if we just spoke of ‘prose writers’ and books, not novelists and novels:

I reread Sartre’s short essay ‘What is Writing?’ Not once does he use the words ‘novel’ or ‘novelist’. He only speaks of the ‘prose writer’. A proper distinction. The writer has original ideas and an inimitable voice. He may use any form (including the novel), and whatever he writes – being marked by his thought, borne by his voice – is part of his work...The novelist makes no great issue of ideas. He is an explorer feeling his way in an effort to reveal some unknown aspect of existence. He is fascinated not by his voice but by a form he is seeking, and only those forms that meet the demands of his dream become part of his work. (143-44)

As Smith has written, all writing is a ‘fiction’ – so claims of truth and of new genres like creative nonfiction would themselves seem tainted from the start:
To write is always to construct something, to create a fiction. There is a considerable difference between ‘real life’ and ‘text life’ though the two may be interconnected. Even when personal experience is used it is always mediated by language and sometimes transformed out of all recognition. Furthermore, it is arguable that success as a creative writer depends more on the ability to explore ideas and feeling through language than on personal characteristics or experience. (xi)

This would appear to be the stance of Castro and Garner. As Castro himself argues online in the Australian Humanities Review, ‘Writing, of course, makes oxymorons of these. I knew all autobiographies were highly inventive acts of dissimulation...I knew the public reaction to autobiography was one of overlooking its fabrication.’

As I cannot, for reasons of space, and objectivity, go through and pick out each example of actual lived-experience portrayed in The Triumphant Approach and compare it to the fictional inventions inside the text to justify how believable the depiction of ‘my life’ has been, I have taken two things for granted in the presentation of it here: one, that Peter Lawson is a different character from myself – so as much as I use the details of my life for reference, I feel justified in deviating from them at will in pursuit of the best novel – and two, that some degree of authorial intentionality had to be accepted by me as an author to undertake the process of writing both the novel and the exegesis.

The Triumphant Approach as failed ‘Historiographic Metafiction’

Choosing to present The Triumphant Approach as fiction led me on a convoluted, ironically circular, journey. Initially all the trouble came from wanting to write a postmodern novel that was based on fact (in the past tense) but interrogated by the fiction (in the present). I wanted The Triumphant Approach to be true to my own experiences but also to build upon them, to interrogate my memories, and, in some way, to validate them – by going even further in the literary portrayal of madness, using the form of the novel to recreate the experience of psychosis.
The novel thus developed, originally, as what Hutcheon calls, ‘historiographic metafiction’. Conceiving the novel as a postmodern text, I decided to have two distinct narrators and protagonists; one was ‘Peter Lawson’ (who survived to live in the final version of the novel), while the other narrative voice was given to the character of ‘Patrick Bryson’ – who was sometimes referred to as the narrator – and bore no real resemblance to the author in any way, other than sharing the same name. Patrick Bryson, the metafictional character, thus became the interrogator of Peter Lawson, the ‘historical’ figure. This lived out on the page, what Smith described as ‘f(r)ictional history’:

They tend to rub together fact and fiction: their object is not only to research the past, and then imaginatively reinvent it, but also to question the notion of historical truth. Such fictions often suggest that historical events can be viewed in very different ways from the official versions of them. They penetrate the vested interests at the origin of the historical accounts, and show how they were designed to suit those who were in political power at the time. They create friction between the history we have been told, and the history which might have been. (144)

At first I wanted to use my own life story in a very limited way – referencing some early incidents from my childhood and then the years spent working on the railway. For the rest I wanted play on the idea that the name Patrick Bryson itself meant nothing (a quick Google search tells us it is shared by hundreds of people) and that Peter Lawson – the fictional character who would embody ‘me’ – would be the man who represented truth while ‘Patrick Bryson’, the character named after myself, would be the man of lies.

Thus there were entire sections devoted to the concept of the ‘Narrator’ – a fictional version of Patrick Bryson – and these sections were originally set in North America, and then Australia. The line between Lawson and ‘The Narrator’ was obvious in some places, and almost negligible in others, and it became clear after completing the first few drafts that the concept was not going to hold together. The novel was attempting to be fanciful, realist, postmodern and utterly truthful at the same time – so it
went from homodiegetic first person, to second person, to heterodiegetic third person, and seemed to jump from magic-realism to realism in a heartbeat.

**Cut: The Third Person & the First Person Plural**

To make the interrogation of Peter Lawson complete, I felt I needed two extra sections that were not included in the final manuscript. In the first draft of the novel there was one section – titled, ‘Trash and Treasure’ – that dealt exclusively with the early years of the character of Peter Lawson. It started with his first day of school and ended up at the point just prior to him leaving home.

As with the other autobiographical sections, there were jumps in time, composite characters, and exaggerated stories, but on the whole the section represented – from my own admittedly biased view – what I believed to be my early life. I started out writing it in the third person with what Wood calls a ‘free indirect style’ (8) that tried to balance itself between the voice of the narrator and the mind of the child. The end result of such an action is that, according to Wood:

...we see things through the characters eyes and language but also through the author’s eyes and language, too. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge – which is free indirect style itself – between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. This is merely another definition of dramatic irony: to see through a character’s eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see... (11)

Here is an excerpt from the discarded childhood section of that first draft:

Peter hated pre-school and his mother told him that he didn’t have to go again. At one of them they had tried to make him sleep in the middle of the day. But who slept in the middle of the day? The other one encouraged him to eat fruit. Every day he had to take something from the greengrocer to give up for the group meal. A fruit meal.
The main problem with writing this section was that it was the only part of the novel written in the third person, and as such – even with the free indirect style – it remained difficult to inhabit the mind of the child, with the language of the adult narrator Bryson/Lawson – whose language and worldview, whether Bryson or Lawson, was quite jaded. Despite this, I eventually got this section of the text to sound as if it were in the voice of the character as he was at whatever age he appeared in the text – between four and eighteen years of age.

Along with a linear narration of the events, the end result of this section read more like Young Adult fiction, and as such seemed at odds with the rest of the text. Biographically, the events that occurred in this section did seem important but it became evident that the few chapters that were needed – for instance the section on ‘Crazy Barry Faraway’ (Part II, Chapter 5) – could be incorporated into the first person voice of Lawson, who had the freedom to skip back and forth in time during his narration of events. The other chapters in this discarded section, while important as a part of the writing process for fleshing out times and confrontations of some significance for the character, were in the end not needed.

This section did have a strong relationship to the other discarded section, written in the first person plural, in that as the vulnerable voice of the child, the young Peter Lawson – not old enough to speak for himself – has been excluded, and written out of the narrative. The first person plural voice was written as the voice of madness. So the Patrick Bryson/Peter Lawson figure from this section (there are drafts where each name has been used) has, along with the voice of the child, been expelled from the text.

**Post Modest**

The second major section that was excluded from *The Triumphant Approach* was the ‘Patrick Bryson’ section. As I conceived it, this section – which was titled ‘Post Modest’ – was set to challenge the notion of the author’s identity, through the use of his name, and the history attached to that name, as well as through the prism of mental illness. The difference in this section was that, instead of writing the section with the self-knowledge of the balanced looking back on his periods of madness, it was meant to show the psychotic high as experienced by the character, and not in any way to question it.
To display the psychotic high at its height I felt that I had to find a device to explore the grandiosity of the person who thinks that he is the king, and believes it. The doubt that runs throughout the rest of The Triumphant Approach could not be present. To achieve this, and to also show something of the complexity of the bipolar personality, I conceived of the character as being triune, like the Christian conception of God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit (in unity) as one. To give an indication of this in action, here is the first paragraph from that deleted section:

We are Patrick Bryson. We’ve worked as journalists, served with the Australian Army, sold cars and taught Evolutionary Enlightenment. We have never been to hospital, for anything to do with our own health, ever. We’ve been to Bali but we’re not insane. Not yet. We are the Brethren of Bryson. And we’re on the run.

The plot of this section revolved around the character being simultaneously obsessed by his name, and pursued by it – in the form of other characters also called ‘Patrick Bryson’. Briefly, after Googling ‘Patrick Bryson’ and coming up with thousands of hits (not linked to ‘me’), I followed the course of several of these threads and incorporated the details of these other ‘historic’ Patrick Brysons into the text. These different people named ‘Patrick Bryson’ included a teacher of Evolutionary Enlightenment from the UK, a car salesman from the north-west of the USA, a volunteer with the Peace Corps who served time in Haiti, a right-wing journalist and blogger from the deep south, a ‘Patrick Bryson’, from Washington County, born in 1755, and Patrick Bryson, the Mayor of Adams, situated in Umatilla County, Oregon.

Together they formed the Brethren of Bryson, and the narrator of the piece – the ‘we’, while being the ‘I’ of the one individual narrator – also spoke on behalf of all these other Patrick Brysons. The section was linked to the rest of the piece, in that Patrick Bryson – as The Narrator – appeared in other parts of the novel, to confront Peter Lawson.

This following section is one of the original chapters – since cut – from part two, as shown by the direct address of the first person narrator. Lawson, the narrator, makes it clear that (Patrick) ‘Bryson’ is a separate character, a writer and a ‘liar’. There was a
double process of repetition occurring here: Peter Lawson, an invented character name, was given my life experience, while my title – Patrick Bryson – was given an untrue and impossible ‘history’:

I am Peter Lawson...I’m not a writer, as much as that bastard implied I was in the first two parts of this bullshit... After I have set this saboteur straight I will retire from swearing altogether...He just got it all wrong.

For a long time I didn’t know where to start – there were so many flaws: parts invented, parts left out, parts added to other parts and sliced up, made smaller. “It’s easier for the reader to understand,” he said. Well I was the only reader, at that point; I never knew who he was talking about. This babble regarding ‘The Reader’ and how we had to treat him. “The Reader will get what he is given,” I said – numerous times...This is what Bryson has ruined for us all. He didn’t put that in. If he just stuck to the narrative, the very specific instructions he’d been served, I wouldn’t have had to do this. So I apologise for speaking in the first person, but I have to tell my own story. He can’t be entrusted with it. He is a writer, and believe me – I know; all writers are liars.

This device helped to link the ‘Post Modest’ section with the rest of the text. So the ‘Post Modest’ section served three purposes: to give a historical – though false – perspective to the separate character of the narrator: to portray madness as it is experienced, without the filter of a narrator that has regained his balance: and it was meant to discredit the Narrator, myself, as a liar, and someone not to be believed – in the hope that the reader would see and feel the truth of Peter Lawson’s situation.

Essentially, in believing I could accomplish this, I was simultaneously being self-confident and cowardly; I was trying to exploit my biography – with its wealth of available material, the opportunity to mythologise myself and the kudos earned when the novel is based on a true story – while at the same time attempting to protect myself from the criticism that follows such a move (it’s expected of first time novelists: it signals a lack of imagination, and the possibility of a limited range etc).
But upon completion of the first draft it was apparent that the character of the Narrator, and the idea of having a fictional ‘Patrick Bryson’ in the text, was taking away from the tale of Peter Lawson to the point of distraction. Instead of reinforcing Lawson as a reliable narrator it did the opposite and undermined whatever truth there was in his story. So I removed all references to the ‘Narrator’, cut out the section featuring the fictional Patrick Bryson, and concentrated on the adult story of Peter Lawson – my alter-ego.

**Memoir or Novel?**

I subsequently decided that if *The Triumphant Approach* was to be based entirely on my own story then the protagonist should be called Patrick Bryson too. I found myself wanting to emulate Castro and Garner and do away with the pretence that I was writing about someone other than myself. Once that decision was made it should have been relatively simple: if the entire book was based on my own personal circumstances (and the character shared my name) then perhaps what I had on my hands would be a memoir.

However, while almost everything that is referenced in *The Triumphant Approach* happened to me, and the biographical details of Peter Lawson and myself are close to identical, key events have sometimes been exaggerated, or left out, as have the characters surrounding Peter Lawson. Some of these characters are entirely fictional and others are composites of three or more characters.

The character of Father Brian, for example, resembles a former parish priest of mine (quite vaguely, in appearance only). Other than the initial meeting I initiated with that priest upon my release from hospital – during which we barely spoke – I never bothered with trying to establish a further dialogue. The words and actions attributed to the priest are themselves made up, as is his name and age, but their contents are well in line with the teachings of the church, in terms of the references to the teaching spirits, agents of Satan, being on guard against temptation and the need for prayer, repentance and a close relationship with God etc.

The girlfriend of Peter Lawson, Maxine, has also been changed into a composite character. Her name, characteristics and personal history are not recognisable to the real
people that they were drawn from and the ‘best friend’ character of ‘Will’ is again a composite of four separate close friends of mine.

This is nothing a quick disclaimer couldn’t take care of, it’s true. The memoirist is often justified in condensing and rearranging information. As James noted in Unreliable Memoirs, ‘The friend who helps you dig tunnels in the backyard is rarely the same friend who ruins your summer...but a book with everyone...would last as long as life’ (149). But there were further ethical considerations, especially regarding my family, that made me want to avoid memoir.

**Avoiding the Hoax**

It’s instructive to again look at the example of James Frey – and in particular his book A Million Little Pieces, which was originally distributed as a memoir. At the time of writing the book, Frey had intended to sell it as a novel and he exaggerated his ‘story’ accordingly, as he had to admit in this ‘A Note to the Reader’ section of later editions of the book:

I made other alterations in my portrayal of myself, most of which portrayed me in ways that made me tougher and more daring and more aggressive than in reality I was, or I am...My mistake...is writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience.

The mistake he admits to would not have been a problem if he had succeeded initially and sold the book to his publisher as a novel. One thing hindered that from happening: the writing. As a novelist, Frey had not won over any publishers with his prose style, getting rejected several times. The implication then is that the reason it has had such success as a memoir was because people actually believed that Frey had lived through the experiences he describes – which would have been extraordinary. This cannot be ignored. Publishers will give writers a free-pass in terms of the style of their prose if the book is based on personal tragedy, survival and redemption: in other words, if it’s nonfiction grief-work. For an inspiring personal story, things like art, grammar, punctuation and poor vocabulary can be overlooked. Also, when comparing the ratio of
fiction to nonfiction published, as noted by Annie Dillard in Gutkind’s *In Fact: The Best of Nonfiction*, the chances of getting a nonfiction book into the market are far greater than those for fiction; ‘only one out of nine books published will be fiction’, nonfiction accounting for the other eighty-eight percent (xvii).

So Frey presented the same book that had followed the conventions of autobiographical fiction – with its changed names, exaggerated anecdotes, apocryphal detail, condensed time-frames and composite characters – and instead proclaimed it to be a true story, knowing full well that his style would be overlooked in the publishers quest for an inspiring true story to feed a market hungry for narrative nonfiction. Harper Lee found this situation ‘hilarious’, as noted by Cheung in her online review of Lee’s latest book, and claimed that it drew her out of hiding to write her own memoir. Furthermore:

Lee notes that Frey's book follows what is, essentially, an old literary tradition of turning aspects of real life into fiction, conjecture, and speculation. Lee herself evoked her own childhood in *To Kill a Mockingbird*; the only difference is that she called the book "semi-autobiographical" to allow for artistic license.

I felt personally that I could not take the step of presenting this work as nonfiction, for the reason that Lee outlines in the quote above; I had clearly, in several places, used artistic license for dramatic effect and could not reconcile this with presenting the work as memoir – as did Frey (though it is true I have not been offered the same financial incentives).

Still, after redrafting that initial attempt of *The Triumphant Approach* I changed the name from Peter Lawson to Patrick Bryson – briefly – and toyed with the idea of calling it a fictional biography, or even just plain old ‘novel’. As Garner, Proust and Castro have proved – naming a narrator eponymously doesn’t preclude a book from being called a work of fiction. But calling the narrator by a different name will preclude the book from being called a memoir – as in the cases of Kocan, Kerouac, Bukowski et al – and this is what I wanted to achieve in using the character of Lawson, for the simple reason that I had also depicted my family, and my partner, in the book.
The process of writing these family sections was highly selective. In a family of seven, such as my own, there is a constant struggle by all parties to assert their individual memories as a part of the family folklore. Many of the anecdotes I’ve used would be hotly disputed within the family itself and there would be no chance of coming up with a version that suited or placated everyone – without obviously fictionalising it and making the book ‘based on’, rather than an actual ‘true story’. Also, when citing behaviour that would be embarrassing, or traumatic, for some family members, I felt uncomfortable about portraying my version as ‘true’, and I also felt protective of them. So by providing the character and his family with a different name, ‘Lawson’, and giving the novel a ‘semi-autobiographical’ tag, any anecdote regarding this family history – which I understand many might still claim as ‘true’ anyway – can easily be denied, and described, as fictional by those believed to be the real-life models for the characters.
Chapter 3 – The Unwritable Book

Madness & The Triumphant Approach

The chain was broken and the hours were marked as minutes. It would have been the Dream of Scipio, the Vision of Tasso, the *Divine Comedy* if I had succeeded in concentrating my memories in a masterpiece. Resigning henceforth the renown of the inspired, the illumined, and the prophetic, I have to offer you only what you so justly call impossible theories, *an unwritable book*. (Nerval 15)

The Best Laid Plans

Originally *The Triumphant Approach* was devised as being a very different type of book. Part of the difference is attributable to the normal changes that take place in writing a novel, and in life generally; things do not turn out as you plan them. But there was something that I had not factored into the equation. Throughout the writing process I had been under the impression that words would be able to convey the experience of psychosis. I therefore thought that I would be able to write a novel that both explained the experience from the outsider’s viewpoint and demonstrated it from the perspective of the protagonist. To do so, it was clear that I would have to slow down the thinking processes involved, and use a language that readers would be familiar with – the language of psychiatry, and psychoanalysis, as well as the language of metaphor and the novel – but I felt confident in my ability as a translator to do that. I also felt that the results of such an enterprise – if written well – would be entertaining, and highly readable. This meant that I believed, and intended, that the results would be accepted as text, and admitted as valid into the world of prose.

What had led me down this path was the fact that, fundamentally, I believed that my incarceration(s) – while admittedly for my own safety – had come about through a lack of communication between myself, and the observers of my behaviour, those that declared me ‘mad’. But I must qualify that statement: in entering the world of symbol and image, I left behind the everyday world of language, the only words in which I
could be understood or in which I could understand. For in failing to talk, and describe
my feelings with words, I was also failing to listen – primarily to the message, ‘We
don’t understand you. You are not making any sense. You sound insane.’ I could no
longer put myself in the position of the ‘other’, and in retreating into the physical
experience of psychosis I had made sure that no one could understand what it was like
to be ‘me’. Thus I had fulfilled all the criteria for not being able to function in society,
as outlined by Rosenberg:

Human communication and cooperation depend on taking the role of the
other, on seeing matter’s from the other’s point of view. No person
deprived of communication can function adequately in society. If other
people cannot comprehend what is going on in the actor’s mind, they
cannot communicate with him or her. (299)

In making this assumption that my experience was translatable into language, I
had also made another – equally erroneous – hypothesis. I had been looking on my
experience of psychosis itself, which encompassed two periods of mania followed by
major depression, as being valid – in literary terms. In this regard my psychosis had
thrown up a whole world of fictional ideas and possibilities. For instance, to name a few
cited in the text: my mind had presented me with the idea that I had a lost love, who had
been with ‘me’ at different times throughout history: I was operating on a higher
spiritual level than mere mortals and that I could ‘read’ signs and symbols that no one
else could: that I had solved the riddle and beaten the ‘game’ and that the ‘end’ was
coming.

I concluded that if these ideas were in reality not true and declared ‘invalid’ then
the experience would at least be able to be used and included in a fictional – that is, a
make-believe – world. In this regard I was wrong. If the treatment of my condition has
taught me anything, it is that my experience of psychosis is not proper ‘lived’,
‘historical’, experience but a phantom of real existence – a trick of the mind. And I
wanted to portray the experiences, in one part of the novel, as being the normal, valid
thoughts of a young man who had never felt better in his life. Of all the things Lawson
feels during the psychosis, it is not insane. But to display psychosis as being valid – and
legitimate – at all, or to write about the experiences in terms that do not recognise that I lacked ‘insight’ while having them, would be to invite exclusion a third time (the first two being when I ended up in hospital).

Even so, I went ahead and tried to write the book in this way. I could, and have, accepted the diagnosis of bipolar disorder and the implication that goes with it – that I had been deceived by my mind. I knew that before starting the project, but what I wanted to show to readers was how it could be possible to believe the things that I believed and yet still not come to the conclusion that I was insane. That is, the observer of the madman can never understand why he does the things he does (the term madman, as I use it, is not intended as gender specific) – because the madman is incapable of explaining it in terms that can be understood. Also, I’d argue that the observer does not have the language to ask.

The reason that I believed that I could bridge this gap, and illustrate something of the method – and the logic – behind psychosis, is because I can clearly remember the episodes of psychosis, and the reasons behind my actions, thoughts and conclusions. Having survived the experience with my memories of it intact, and having officially regained my status as a ‘sane’ person, I felt that I had the necessary qualifications to explain myself, and make the episode comprehensible. And in making my episode comprehensible, I would be able to regain my personhood – the fact that I was ‘human’ throughout my ordeal – and the reader of such a text would be able to put themselves in the shoes of the protagonist and see that they could also have the experience, and that the experience of psychosis is not too far from the reality of everyday existence. The inability to recognise this only brings the opposite, incomprehension, and the ‘actor’ becomes a non-human, someone to be excluded, as Rosenberg, again, has shown:

The inability of others to take the role of the actor is totally destructive of meaningful human interaction, which requires a person to anticipate the other’s response to his or her words or actions. But if we have no comprehension of what is going on in the other’s mind – why he stares into space, what his disconnected words mean, why he refuses to sit in a chair because it is yellow – then the human bond is snapped.... (299)
Unfortunately, as this chapter will show, the goal of getting the reader to understand the position of Lawson in the way that he understands himself during the times when he would be judged by observers to be psychotic – particularly in the deleted section ‘Post Modest’ – proved impossible. Both the section and the psychotic portrayed in it were unreadable. I’ll explain this in greater detail, with reference to the work of Felman, after first discussing the mental health of Lawson as it is portrayed in the existing ‘readable’ parts of The Triumphant Approach.

**You Shall See Me As I Am: Madness & the Promise of Things to Come**

...In order to communicate with the spirits, Nerval renounces the world of men. To reach for the star, he takes leave of his friend. Though its goal is to rejoin the ‘other’, his delirium in fact only widens the gap that separates him from others. Nerval’s tragedy is precisely this loss of the other: this vicious circle of the imaginary – a narcissistic entrapment – is what constitutes the core of his madness. (Felman 73)

**Longing for the ‘Other’**

I broadly agree that the tragedy for Gerard de Nerval’s protagonist in Aurélia – as it is for Lawson, in The Triumphant Approach – is the loss of the ‘other’ and the recognition that something is missing. But the beauty of the missing ‘other’ – for Lawson, as well as for Nerval’s protagonist – is that in the high phase of the psychosis, she – the missing other – is the one who gives hope, peace, comfort, and, at least for Lawson in The Triumphant Approach, a temporary feeling of wholeness. The way Nerval depicts the missing other, as the archetypal ‘woman’ – birth mother (protector), Mother of God (spiritual mother) and lover – compares directly to the way Lawson envisions the other. Consider the following from Nerval:

I am the same as Mary, the same as your mother, the same being also whom you have always loved under every form. At each of your ordeals I have dropped one of the masks with which I hide my features and you shall see me as I really am. (162)
We also see this unmasking of the other, and the feeling of expectation that her ‘imminent’ arrival creates, in the following section from part one of The Triumphant Approach, in which Lawson has just recognised the television as being the instrument through which he can communicate with his ‘other half’:

You...feel as if you have found the other half that you’ve been longing for. You have awakened from a deep sleep and your love, the one who has been lost to you for centuries, has tracked you down. And you have recognised and remembered her...The wedding will be tomorrow and tradition must be followed; you can’t see the bride until then. But you can communicate with her all day long. She is flirting with you through the television. (Part I, Chapter 17)

Madness, as experienced by Lawson – particularly in part one, during the lead up and the height of his first psychosis – is the promise of things to come: the promise of the other. Reason, and Lawson’s recovery, depends on him accepting that there ‘is’ nothing, and no one, to come, and that nothing ever will – in the way that he had imagined. But the striking thing about this imagined other, and the correlation between the way the experience of the other occurs for both Nerval’s protagonist and for Lawson, is how the characters both claim to always have known that this ‘other’ was missing, as if it was something that they had remembered. In chapter seventeen of part one of The Triumphant Approach, Lawson says: ‘...It’s happening. You had always known it – within the core of you – but you’d never been able to articulate it before. Now you have unlocked the final truth.’

This is a similar tone to the one Nerval presented in the earlier quote, where he mentioned the lover who ‘you have loved under every form’. The expectation is one of wholeness regained. What the missing other implies – particularly if she is ‘remembered’ – is that at one time, in a prior life, she was joined together with the protagonist, in union and whole. Thus the implication for Lawson is that in the sections of the novel dealing with his psychotic high, he is – or feels – incomplete. His madness,
his psychosis, is about the anticipation of being reunited with his spiritual lover; the tragedy is his inability to ‘see’ her:

I was so glad that my betrothed had returned, and had not forgotten about me. I can’t explain what it was like to sense another person in the room with me that I could not see with my eyes, except to say that it felt real.

(Part II, Chapter 3)

**Madness as Incomprehension: it takes two to make a psychotic**

The most general conclusion to be drawn is that insanity is both a psychological disorder and an interpersonal phenomenon...it takes two to make a psychotic – an observer and an actor. A person whose role other people are unable to take is judged to be insane, except when the observer attributes such failure to him or herself. (Rosenberg 300)

The madness of Lawson can be seen in two contexts: the incomprehension of his actions by the people surrounding him, and his incomprehension of their incomprehension – the fact that he doesn’t, and cannot, note the concern of the people around him. The text portrays this in numerous instances. Lawson’s behaviour at the time of entering his first psychosis is recognised by those close to him as being abnormal, and out of ‘character’. To cite just a few examples:

You turn to leave and Zorba reaches out and touches your arm.
‘Hey, Boy, you take my mobile number. Anything happens, you might need me, just call.’
He’s not joking. His concern is genuine. You’re not sure why. (Part I, Chapter 16)

‘Hurry up, bro. Smoke that one and get home. You need some sleep, dude.’
‘Come on, man. I’ll sleep on the lounge or something,’ you say.
He gets up and starts pacing up and down the bedroom.
‘Bro, this is completely out of fucking character, man. You’re freaking me out.’ (Part I, Chapter 17)

Here the text suggests that Lawson is starting to act out his thoughts, and, confronted with them, those around him become alarmed. He has been depicted in the text, prior to this, as having thoughts that are not normal or ‘accepted’ – like his fixation with circles, his subsequent theory, and the fact that he feels special and can somehow receive messages from a higher power through the media – but up until this point he has not shared these thoughts and he has not let them influence his actions. He has not given anyone an opportunity to confront his madness. But now, turning up to his friend’s house in the middle of the night, and being seen to not care about his appearance at work, or about his attendance there, he has become incomprehensible to the people around him. They do not understand why he is behaving in the way he is, and – more importantly, in this equation – he doesn’t feel the need to explain his actions.

It is only in hospital that his madness and his difference are made known to him. So the incomprehension, as it is portrayed, is actually felt by both the protagonist – or the actor – Lawson, and the observers, his friends, family and doctors. They cannot comprehend his actions, and he cannot comprehend their incomprehension. It follows that a large part of Lawson’s treatment involves the staff at the hospital helping him to understand that they don’t understand him. More importantly, he is made aware that they are not meant to, and can’t – by virtue of being sane – understand his position. The onus is not on them to comprehend his language; he has to relearn theirs. Rosenberg noted that ‘it thus anchors this defining feature of insanity in the process of social interaction’ (300). The madness can only be made known to Lawson through the fact that other people recognise it, and there has to be interaction with others for him to know this.

Further, Rosenberg also defines this as the reason behind the therapeutic measures taken by the medical profession, and what they are designed to accomplish: ‘...namely, to eliminate that behaviour that other people cannot understand, i.e., take the role of the other, and to replace it with behaviour that other people can understand’ (300).
In other words, the reset button is hit on the patient and they are rebooted. This is true for Lawson, who is portrayed as having to consciously stop and think about his behaviour in terms of what is appropriate and inappropriate – something which he would have taken for granted, and known unconsciously, before the advent of his illness. For example, in this exchange with a nurse in his ward, he is seen to be regaining his sense of self-consciousness in terms of his modesty. On being told his shirt is on back to front, he moves to change it in front of the crowded room:

‘Your shirt is on inside-out, Peter.’
‘No dramas. I’ ll change it now.’
You lift up the bottom of your shirt, ready to slip it over your head, but then you stop. The nurse is watching you.
‘That wouldn’t be Appropriate Behaviour, would it?’ you say.
‘No it wouldn’t, Peter. Change it in your room. And you’ve got a visitor today, so smarten up.’ (Part I, Chapter 20)

The Psychoanalytical and Metaphysical: is Lawson Mad or Bad?

...For or against Wilson, affirming or denying the ‘objectivity’ or the reality of the ghosts (in The Turn of The Screw), the critical interpretations have fallen into two camps: the ‘psychoanalytical’ camp, which sees the governess as a clinical neurotic deceived by her own fantasies and destructive of her charges; and the ‘metaphysical’, religious, or moral camp, which sees the governess as a sane, noble saviour engaged in a heroic moral struggle for the salvation of a world threatened by supernatural Evil. (Felman 145)

Peter Lawson’s madness can be viewed in two ways: as a failure by the protagonist to recognise that he is ill, or as a failure by others to recognise him as he sees himself. That is, there is a clash between the scientific, psychoanalytical, clinical approach of observing him as opposed to the metaphysical, religious, and moral approach – a clash between belief and doubt. It follows that as a character he is
portrayed as being knowledgeable about both schools of thought and they seem to co-exist side by side. It is also the main source of confusion for him, when it comes to assessing his own identity. The character, in the form of the first person narrator, outlines this early in part two of The Triumphant Approach:

Without knowing it, I had sensed the Holy Spirit for the first time; either that or it was the first sign of bipolar disorder. Who can be sure? Maybe I believe only when I’m high, disbelieve when I’m depressed, and am in a state of confusion, unable to choose one way or the other, when I’m normal. (Part II, Chapter 8)

I’ll now look at both these personas, the believer and the doubter, as they appear throughout the novel, that is, as the hero and the narrator.

The Hero and the Narrator

The Triumphant Approach, as noted in chapter one of this exegesis, is structured – from the point of view of the protagonist – along the same lines as Gerard de Nerval’s Aurélia. The narrator, Peter Lawson, is looking back on the hero – that is, Peter Lawson the ‘madman’ – and this introduces what Felman described, in Writing and Madness, as the unresolvable ‘tensions of the narrative’ (66) – the tensions between the previously cited modes of ‘hallucinatory inflation and the mode of critical deflation’ (67). Felman described in greater detail what this involved, and the following can be seen to be in concurrence with the portrayal of Lawson – as both hero and narrator – throughout The Triumphant Approach:

The hero is a ‘madman’; the narrator, a man who has recovered his ‘reason’. The hero is given over to sleep and its apparitions; the narrator is wide awake and alert. The hero lives madness in the present; the narrator reports it after the fact; he is out of synchronicity with the hero. The hero often describes himself as having a supernatural power, a super-strength...The narrator’s mode of being is defined, on the contrary, as impotence...The hero believes he has absolute knowledge...The
narrator professes ignorance and doubt...The hero introduces a visionary, dream-like mode of discourse which constantly moves towards hyperbole or overstatement...By contrast, the narrator initiates a critical mode of discourse which constantly tends towards litotes, understatement, reduction, and reserve...(67)

But as Peter Lawson, the narrator, discusses Peter Lawson, the hero, it can be noted that Lawson, the hero – the madman – has numerous disguises. At first he is portrayed as the outsider, not suited to his job or his relationship – in a place where his madness can be seen as difference. He is not the same as the people around him, and it is willed by him that this is so. He leaves his partner and in choosing to live by himself, and to work alone at night, he is – as noted by Felman – like the protagonist of Flaubert’s *Memoirs of a Madman*, seeking ‘uncivilised solitude’ and ‘eccentricity’ (79). He is deliberately setting himself apart from the crowd: madness as a choice. Further, this is recognised by those around him as a willingness to push the boundaries and do things that others will not. And he is subsequently called a ‘mad bastard’ (in Part I, Chapter 6) by Tub for his deceitful way of breaking up with his partner, and Brother Richard refers to him as that ‘mad motherfucker’, Peter Lawson (Part I, Chapter 21). The narrator’s own way of portraying the hero thus is to mention the history of his copious drug use and his inability to see himself as a member of his family – or of any partnership.

For instance, Lawson, as a young man, gets dangerously drunk and doesn’t want to find his way home; he feels that he is different to his family and doesn’t belong. Also, when given the option of staying home with his relatives or going to hospital, in part two, he chooses hospital: this is madness as youth, and defiance. This youthful defiance goes hand in hand with his political incorrectness, and objectification of women. Lawson wants to do the wrong thing and wants to be seen as doing the wrong thing. The narrator notes his subsequent drug abuse with an ironic tone of holiness, ‘You spark up the lighter, and inhale deeply from the proffered vessel. That is the bong that does it’ (Part I, Chapter 10).

And:
The last thing you needed in your condition was another bong, you know, but you are thankful for it anyway, as you float home. It helps the walk when you don’t have to think the whole time. The weed of wisdom slows down your mind. (Part I, Chapter 17)

Invoking the ‘weed of wisdom’, and the youthful defiance of the character, introduces another, more ironic, reading of the madman. This is a part of the hero that embraces his madness, after it is recognised, because of what it implies about his relationship to others. When the character of Gerry, in part two of The Triumphant Approach, says ‘They put you in the fish tank when they think you’re crazy,’ Lawson—the hero—replies, ‘I am’. Madness in this guise, as noted by Felman, is a role to be played: ‘...Beneath the mask of the accusation, the accused becomes the accuser, pointing his finger at the...fools: madness designates as its opposite not sanity, but stupidity’ (82). Lawson is happy to accept his difference, his madness, compared to the stupidity of his neighbour, Gerry – a jailbird – and his own family. When Lawson’s father suggests making a film out of a Phil Collins song, the narrator notes, ‘You suggested saner things than that when you were psychotic’ (Part III, Chapter 13).

So the madness of defiance and, in turn, the madness that would assert itself, ironically, to be in opposition to stupidity – madness as superiority to others – now enters the final phase of madness, which is portrayed as insanity in its highest form in The Triumphant Approach: the madness of belief.

It is the madness of superiority, and the madness of defiance – where Lawson sees himself as an outsider, incomprehensible to others – which actually facilitates the character’s belief in himself as king. Thus madness can be seen to be begetting madness: his desire to be a man apart – which in the context of the novel could also be seen as the character compensating for his loneliness and the fact that he is not successful – and to be a man outside the boundaries, gives way to pride, and self-interest. As noted by Felman in her discussion of Flaubert, ‘the principle governing the “category of fools,” is ...the same principle of narcissistic egoism that constitutes the “category of madmen” as well....’ And Lawson, the hero, in this context, fails to recognise that ‘in the order of narcissism, “fools” and “madmen” are the same’ (90).
This manifests in Lawson – the believer – when he first starts communicating with supernatural forces through the medium of the television and print media, and is also suggested in the many references to him being powerful. He is also referred to as ‘the Main Guard’ (in Part I, Chapter 8) before it is revealed that he thinks that he is the major character in a play: ‘In your own mind, your life has taken on the shape of a drama with you as the lead actor’ (Part I, Chapter 14). Finally Lawson acknowledges that he thinks he is king, literally: ‘This purple is the signal that royalty has arrived. You have arrived...The Main Man is being made to walk’ (Part I, Chapter 18).

The line about Lawson believing that he is a character in a drama has a correlation to the way that Nerval saw the madman: as a storyteller who identified so much with the hero of his imagination that he became that hero. In the preface to Les Filles du feu, Nerval described it like this:

There are, as you know, certain storytellers who cannot make up a story without identifying themselves with the characters of their imagination...Well now, can you believe that a story could sweep one so entirely away that one becomes incarnate, as it were, in the hero of one’s imagination...! What could only have been a game for you, maître, had become for me an obsession, an intoxication. (14-15)

And the intoxication, as it is experienced by Lawson, is noted by Aaliyah, when she describes his demeanour and the look on his face at the time of his breakthrough – or breakaway, depending on the reading – with the ‘Circle Theory’: ‘Later...she describes the look you had on your face. “I’ve never seen someone so peaceful, man. You looked so happy. Your face was glowing”’ (Part I, Chapter 13).

For Lawson, the believer, this can almost be seen as an affirmation of his divinity: a look of peace, and glowing, evokes images of saintliness. The opposite reading of the same situation – the doubter’s reading – would see him as a crazy zealot, such as the type that Christopher Hitchens outlines in God Is Not Great:

In the city of Jerusalem, there is a special ward in the hospital for those who...are sufferers of the ‘Jerusalem Syndrome’. Police and security
officers are trained to recognize them, though their mania is often concealed by a mask of deceptively beatific calm. They have come to the holy city in order to announce themselves as the Messiah or redeemer, or to proclaim the end of days. The connection between religious faith and mental disorder is...both very obvious and highly unmentionable. (52-53)

The Triumphant Approach reflects the two stated positions – those of doubt and belief – as they meet each other in reality: in a situation in which neither can deliver the knockout blow and prove the other wrong, but where each doubts the other. What the text also displays is the surprising respect that each position takes in relation to the other, from the point of view of the professionals involved. For example, when Lawson, being interviewed in the emergency department of Liverpool hospital by the resident-psych, brings up the topic of sin, the doctor replies, ‘Well...you’ll have to see a priest about that...’

Conversely, when Lawson takes the doctor’s advice and goes to see the priest in the following chapter of the book, he is told – even though the priest believes Lawson is at fault spiritually and points out to him that sin and evil are very real – to follow the medical advice: ‘I could also be wrong...You should still listen to your doctor and take your pills...’

While the religious reading of The Triumphant Approach, and the spiritual journey of Lawson, point to him having to learn to live with contradiction in terms of his belief, the psychoanalytical reading leads toward the same conclusion.

It is entirely possible that Lawson is experiencing God, and, being confronted by what words cannot describe, he lacks the tools to comprehend the vision; because God, as s/he is described in the various scriptures, is incomprehensible. That Lawson feels elation, terror, and even triumph, is not only understandable, but – in a world that consents to the idea of God – is to be expected. The psychotic high, the delusional grandeur, then – as experienced by Lawson – could be seen as the same delusion experienced by the mythological donkey that carried Christ: the donkey that, hearing the cheers of the crowd, and seeing the palms placed on the ground in front of it, thought that it was the Messiah, and not the man who rode on its back.
The madness of Lawson at this stage is that he is asking a doctor about sin, when the language of sin is not recognised by the doctor. And, in fact, the only way for the doctor to make Lawson well – especially when he is psychotic, and thinking that he is special – is for the doctor to take away his belief. The best he can do, as demonstrated in the text when he encourages Lawson to see a priest, is to turn a blind-eye and ignore his beliefs, and where they might actually lead him.

It is not that Lawson believes in God that is the problem, or even that he feels that he can communicate with him – millions pray, and ‘talk’ to God every day and believe that they receive responses to their prayer – but that he feels he can bring up the topic of his belief with a person who does not have the language to respond. He has lost the notion of time and place, and cannot comprehend the incomprehensibility of his position.

The doctor, in this situation, is left with what Kocan has referred to in his critical work as ‘Dysart’s dilemma’. In his most recent autobiographical novel, The Fable of All Our Lives, Kocan describes it in greater detail:

He brooded on Equus. It seemed to him that it had made a profound point about the disenchantment of the world, and about how the harm of that comes to each person in their own way. One way was shown in Alan Strang, the isolated youth driven to invent his own dangerous delirium of the sacred. Another was shown in the rational psychiatrist Dysart, stripped of the sacred by modern intellectualism. The shrink is bound by his job to render Alan Strang as bereft as he is himself, and he can see the cruel dilemma. For his own good the youth has to be “cured,” has to be made puerile, has to be turned into that empty modern thing, a stakeholder in wellness. Aware that he must carry out a kind of maiming, the doctor asks in anguish: “Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?” (192)

Where does this leave the reading of The Triumphant Approach that starts from the position of doubt, and rejects – or is at least sceptical of – belief? Not surprisingly, it seems to lead the argument towards contradiction. The psychoanalytical approach
gives us a language to undertake a reading of the text – or any text – without having to resort to the language of the metaphysical, but a language that also forces us to recognise the contradictions inherent in the psychoanalytical approach, as noted by Felman:

Does psychoanalysis, then, aspire to meaning or to truth? . . . This now unavoidable question of the meaning of psychoanalysis . . . is in fact a contradiction in terms, since "meaning" is forever but a fiction and since it is psychoanalysis itself which has taught us that. But contradiction, as we know, is the mode of functioning par excellence of the unconscious, and consequently, also of the logic of psychoanalysis. To reckon with psychoanalysis is to reckon with contradiction, including its disequilibrium, without reducing it to the specular illusion of symmetry or of a dialectical synthesis. (120)

Post Modest: the madness recedes

Madness as it appears in The Triumphant Approach now is the madness that is acceptable to the outsider; it is wrong, misguided and ‘lacking in insight’, and – described as such by the narrator – it is therefore acceptable. It is portrayed as coming in a wave, and then receding – twice, before making itself scarce in the second half of the novel with the appearance of Maya.

The line from Felman, ‘As madness increases, the theme of madness recedes, and is lost’ (98), is then applicable to The Triumphant Approach in a number of ways. To start with, it could be seen as applying to the truth – or believability – behind what the narrator is depicting in the text; he is comfortable with depicting Peter Lawson, the hero, in the past-tense as mad, because he – Peter Lawson the narrator of the present – is not mad himself. The narrator then uses the theme of madness to emphasise the ‘truth’ behind his words. And even though the theme of madness seems to recede in the latter half of the novel – in chapter two of part four Lawson says ‘but I can forget madness now; as soon as Maya appeared, it vanished’ – it is ever present and lurking in the shadows. Doubt is cast over the character’s sanity by Maya when he randomly takes up eating fruit after thirty years of not doing so: Lawson casts doubt over himself when he
suggests that Maya was the one who visited him five years earlier in his ‘waking vision’ (Part IV, Chapter 6) and he pleads: ‘let me not be mad. Please God – anything but mad’. Lawson’s sanity is also examined through his friendship with the old-aged pensioner ‘Len’, who is shown to have an ongoing battle with his bipolar disorder. The presence of the theme of madness, and the periodic questioning of Lawson by both Maya and himself, throughout this section, can therefore be interpreted as proof of the protagonist’s well-being – because madness does not question itself.

In contrast the madness of the lost section, ‘Post Modest’, does not exist as a ‘theme’. It is madness as experienced from the inside – madness not understood or thought of as madness, but as truth: acted upon with certainty, and with no need of explanation. It never occurred to the narrator of that lost section – the triune Patrick, the ‘we’ – to reference madness as a theme, and his interactions with the characters around him only reinforced his ‘sanity’. There were things that occurred to him as a character that seemed unexplainable, but he never doubted himself. The triune ‘we’ was not to blame.

What this meant, for the reader of the section, was that the narrator of the rest of the novel – who had almost apologised for his madness, and announced it when it was there – was absent, and not able to guide the reader. The question of whether or not the narrator of this section, the triune ‘we’, could then be trusted also influenced the rest of the text, to its detriment. This is representative of what the section was trying to portray – the otherness of being psychotic, the being a different person. But it then left the reader feeling alienated, because the possibility presented itself that the real voice of the character could be the triune ‘we’. The madman’s actual identity could be the unapologetic insane persona, and the Peter Lawson character merely a guise to gain the trust of the reader.

Rather than looking on it as a failure, I feel that the triune Bryson figure losing his identity in this section – and then being rejected by the readers of the work (as was the case across the board) – confirms not only his madness, but the madness of the text and, therefore, its success. It was not recognised, not understood, banished, placed outside the boundaries and made non-text – just like the actual experience that the section portrayed. In this sense it was an unqualified victory, and to be included, accepted and understood would have been failure: comprehension and sanity.
The Unreadable: blindness, silence and the language of madness

How can we read the unreadable? This question...subverts its own terms: to actually read the unreadable, to impose a meaning on it, is precisely not to read the unreadable as unreadable, but to reduce it to the readable, to interpret it as if it were of the same order as the readable. . . How does the unreadable mean? (Felman 187)

The magic alphabet, the mysterious hieroglyphs have only come down to us incomplete and falsified, either by time or by men who have an interest in remaining ignorant. Let us rediscover the lost letter, the effaced sign, let us recompose the dissonant scale, and we shall gain power in the world of the spirits. (Nerval 148-49)

Until now the question of why language cannot adequately express the experience of psychosis has not been examined. To understand why we cannot understand, it is necessary to borrow from the world of the novel, the fantastical land of metaphor, because – as will become apparent – madness, so often spoken of as being only in the mind, is actually a physical experience more than anything.

To speak from the point of view of someone who has experienced bipolar disorder, the psychotic high fills the system with a desire not to sleep, and a feeling of immense lightness. Whereas a major depression leaves one feeling like a heavy weight has been tied around the waist, and the centre of one’s gravity is drawn to the ground, the place of graves.

Thus, quite literally, these are described as the highs and the lows: where you are either pulled up towards the heavens or down towards Hades. In my experience I have felt both – and, having tried to write an unwritable book about it, I can say that nothing can describe how madness actually feels. To feel it, you have to make yourself mad (that is, clinically psychotic) – through drugs or sleep-deprivation or through trauma – and then you would not need it explained; it would be felt by you – and language would be useless. The state can, however, be conjured, using the following analogy:
Imagine that you have been born into a world of blindness – that is, out of the one hundred people living in your village, everyone is blind. They cannot see colour, they cannot tell the difference between night and day, they cannot read or write, they do not see beauty or ugliness and they cannot see you. These people have no knowledge of, and no possibility of understanding, ‘sight’.

Now imagine that – miraculously – you have been born with vision. Out of the one hundred in your village, only you can see. How will you describe to those around you what is happening? For one, you have only their language to try and make sense of it – a language of blindness which may have no words for sight – and no words to describe any of the things that you can see: no language to describe the opposite of their non-sight.

Assuming that you have tried to explain it with the vocabulary available to you, imagine the loneliness of being the way you are – yet the beauty of the experience, after all, you can see – and the sadness you must feel at having to close your eyes. For, surely, that is the only way you will be able to survive. This will not be too hard, though; if you do not close your eyes, or at least stop trying to tell everyone how great they look – thereby making them anxious, confused, and thinking that you have taken leave of your senses – they will close your eyes for you. Your eyes, like Gloucester’s, will be put out. There may have been one like you in the village before, and there may be others in neighbouring villages now, but being one in a hundred they will have shared the same fate as you; they will have been blinded. Suppose another miracle occurs and you find someone like yourself, someone into whose eyes you can look and say ‘I always knew I’d find you’, what then? Being the only two around, you might understand each other, but you’ll probably also be separated. To leave you together would only perpetuate the sad myth you have invented, that you – the special two – can see, when everyone else is blind – as God almighty intended them to be. Your desire – your compensatory delirium – is actually a result of your unbridled ambition and pride; you want to be different from us, and see.

Really, is it worth it? No, best to shut your eyes, use their language and experience the world as a soundtrack; forget the images that are there before your unopened eyes. What use are they to you if only you can see them? You could try and
talk it through, explain it in the most beautiful terms, but how will they ever understand?

‘The memories you have from before hospital are all filled with radiance: bright fluorescent light, almost able to be touched by hand. Now you feel like a blind man.’ (Part I, Chapter 21)

And so it goes. The madman experiences the language of madness through sight and sound, symbols, images. Those around the madman, blind to his vision, can hear only snippets of the soundtrack that he shares, or repeats, to them; unsighted, they cannot see or feel the story of the film, and only hear echoes of what the madman hears. Explaining madness to them would be like describing each scene of a movie – in real time – to one of these persons blind from birth, someone to whom the colour blue means nothing, and is the same as red, or purple.

The madman can experience blindness, but the blind cannot experience sight, only its inadequate description with language. Not experiencing the sight of the mad, the sane – blind – person says that sight does not exist. The implication for the mad man or woman – who has experienced both madness and sanity – is that they are whole, and that those who have not experienced madness, because of their blindness, are incomplete. Thus discovering this of themselves, or suspecting it, the incomplete name wholeness ‘madness’, and, inadequacy ‘sanity’; the madman is made blind, because the incomplete cannot see.
Chapter 4 – I Believe: I Can’t Believe

Contradiction and Spirituality in The Triumphant Approach

Late nights in the Psychiatric Emergency Room, it’s not unusual to meet someone who claims to be Jesus. (Montross 1)

I myself know the feeling of being ‘The One’, and of feeling chosen...Walking to the pie shop seemed like a creative experience...and a spiritual one. (Bryson 60)

Shadowing the theme of madness and bipolar disorder throughout The Triumphant Approach is Peter Lawson’s struggle with his religious faith. It made an already difficult topic – mental illness – much more complex to deal with in prose; not only did the character have to navigate regaining his mind, but at the same time he had to save his soul – or work out if he believed in the ‘soul’ at all – and reconcile this with his identity as a madman.

I tried to hint at this dual theme with the actual title of the novel – an allusion to ‘The Triumphant Entry to Jerusalem’ (NIV Matt 21) – which in an earlier version of the manuscript had been ‘The Triumphant Approach to Lawson’. The shortening of that title allowed for interpretations other than Peter Lawson finding his identity – or coming of age, in the classic Bildungsroman fashion. The title is now also meant to suggest something of the madness that overtakes Lawson – made manifest in his blasphemous idea that he himself is God – and to further imply that the protagonist is a mythological hero.

I further chose the headings for each part of the novel with this dual theme of madness and spirituality in mind. Looking over the four titles, ‘Slouching Towards Petersham’, ‘I Tell You The Truth’, ‘Symmetry and Repetition’ and ‘St Dymphna’s Song’, it’s possible to draw direct religious connotations to three of them, and the fourth – or the least obvious – ‘Symmetry and Repetition’, can also be considered in this context, with some explanation.
‘Esoteric Yeatsism’ and Lawson’s Circle

The first of these titles, ‘Slouching Towards Petersham,’ is a reference to the last line of Yeats’ oft-quoted poem ‘The Second Coming’: ‘And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,/ Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?’ (124).

The two ideas in The Triumphant Approach that borrowed most from the ethos that Ellmann called ‘Esoteric Yeatsism’ (223), both evident in ‘The Second Coming’, are related directly to the madness and the spirituality of the protagonist. I represented these ideas in the novel by using the images of the circle, and the Sphinx.

Yeats outlined his system in The Vision and he applied it to the individual as well as the collective. Briefly, as documented by Ellmann, Yeats classified human personality into ‘twenty-eight types, or...twenty-eight phases of the moon, each phase being pictured as one of the spokes of a Great Wheel.’ He further developed this idea with the aid of a figure that consisted of two cones – which he refers to in his work as a ‘gyres’ – that were placed together and were ‘interpenetrating, whirling around inside one another, one subjective, the other objective’ (Ellmann 231).

Yeats saw history as the dance of these two gyres, the subjective and objective – also described as ‘beauty and truth, value and fact, particular and universal...Man and Daemon, the living and the dead and all other images of our first parents’ (231) – and he envisioned the cycles as being eternal.

I had known about the concept of the gyres and The Vision prior to being mentally ill, and I could recite ‘The Second Coming’ from a young age. So in a way the themes from Yeats found their way into the novel without design, as I had internalised them. But they also found their way into the text because the poem and the ideas discussed in it were much on my mind at the time I became ill; that is, I obsessed over the poem and its themes while I experienced my first psychosis. At one point I actually recited the poem – in full – while in hospital, with great emphasis on the previously cited last line.

The problem I found in trying to put some of this material into the novel is that – while several of his poems are quite famous – the spiritual mysticism that Yeats practised and outlined in The Vision is usually dismissed as quackery and is not widely known. So it was important to make sure that any use of such imagery did not depend on the reader having any prior knowledge of the spiritual themes referenced. A good
example of this is when Lawson is referred to – just at the point at which he enters his first episode of psychosis – as the ‘Sphinx’ (by the Edward, in Chapter 17).

The Sphinx, in Yeats poem, is portrayed as the actual beast of the apocalypse, a ‘shape with lion body and the head of a man, a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun’ who, as noted earlier, ‘...Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born’ (124). In the original Babylonian and Egyptian tradition, the sphinx, as noted by Kjos in ‘Symbols and Their Meaning’, was depicted as a ‘guardian of sacred places’. Waite, however, in A New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry, described it in the following way – which concurs with Yeats’ reading of the Sphinx – as an imitation of the salvation story of Christ:

... (The sphinx) is the guardian of the Mysteries and is the Mysteries summarized in a symbol. Their secret is the answer to her question. The initiate must know it or lose the life of the Mysteries. If he can and does answer, the Sphinx dies for him, because in his respect the Mysteries have given up their meaning.

To apply this reading to the text sees Lawson – in his delusions of grandeur – as being recognised and labelled by his neighbour, Edward, as the antichrist. But while the imagery of ‘The Second Coming’ and the esoteric symbolism of Yeats was important to the creation of the work – as is the imagery and reference to the Christian Bible – I was careful to make sure nothing about the symbolism, the occult, eastern philosophy or Christian theology need be known by the reader for them to comprehend what is going on in the novel. As Ellmann noted, an awareness of Yeats system was more useful for the writer, Yeats, than it was for the actual reader – who need not know anything of Yeats philosophy when reading ‘The Second Coming’. Yeats himself also made sure ‘not to require knowledge... from the reader of his verse, and...made it possible that the gyre is merely the falcon’s flight’ (237). In the same way, the spiritual imagery in The Triumphant Approach is not important to the understanding of the plot, or the final outcome for the protagonist. Lawson does not have to be taken as the beast of the apocalypse by the reader when Edward refers to him as the ‘Sphinx’; the text makes it clear that the reference to the Sphinx is to do with the physical position that Lawson has adopted while lying in the sun. As is the case in Yeats’ ‘The Second Coming’, ‘The
symbol has more connotative power if its esoteric meaning is understood, but the extra connotation can be ignored’ (237).

**Caught Up in Circles**

The most autobiographical element of the novel involved the creation of ‘The Circle Theory. The letter that Lawson writes in part one, which introduced his ‘Circle Theory’ to the world, was first written by me in the days prior to my first episode (actually, on the date cited in the novel). As such it is the earliest existing piece of the novel, and perhaps the most authentic; I wrote it during a mini-psychosis.

This does not make it the most original part of the text. There are so many examples of the use of the circle, or the wheel, in traditional spiritual texts that a study of them would be endless; for example, the wheel and the image of circles is used in the Buddhist, and Judeo-Christian canons – there are the twin examples of the Dharma Wheel, and Ezekiel’s Wheel – but it can also be found in Plato (as a description for the beginning of the universe, in Timaeus) as well as in the work of Empedocles, as cited at the start of *The Triumphant Approach*. In contemporary American fiction, Ignatius J Reilly, the protagonist of John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces*, also references the circle: ‘The Universe, of course, is based upon the principle of the circle within the circle. At the moment, I am in an inner circle (81). And the theme is represented by the symbol of the Ouroboros: a snake chasing after, and biting, its own tale – who resumes the chase as soon as the pain of having bitten it recedes – ad infinitum.

The circle, or wheel, can be used to analyse Peter Lawson’s journey and one that is anticipated by the following passage of *The Triumphant Approach*:

You can see the gate that leads down to the tunnel underneath the station, where the old Concourse used to be, before they rebuilt the place. Following the aged subway in your mind, you see that it goes under the station while the latest Concourse runs over it, and that, if you were inclined, a man leaving one way could come back in the same direction by a different route, completing a circle in the process, like Columbus. As you empty the bins and sweep the platforms you keep thinking of the
circular dimensions of the building, made so by the combination of the old and the new, and your eyes start picking out all the circles in the immediate vicinity: the red train signals in the distance, the yellow mounds on the tarmac that stop passengers from slipping, the pupils in the drunkard’s eyes as he first tries to threaten but then is frightened off by you, and the face of the clock as you stare through it and start to smile. (Part I, Chapter 12)

It is important to point out that this fixation on the circle was not recognised by me at the time as having significance from an historical point of view. It developed from my own inability to reconcile my various spiritual beliefs. From the Catholicism of my youth, to my flirtation with Atheism, and all the positions in between, I felt the need to somehow find unity from this array of possibilities. The Circle Theory was thus created out of a naive quest to resolve my own position, and the only way to do it was to have a theory that allowed for anything, for all paths and no paths: the image of the circle thus chosen because it is so useful when confronted by contradiction. The logic of the Lawson’s Circle Theory demands that those who believe, those who disbelieve, those who recognise different beliefs, those who are dogmatic, those who are sceptical and those who don’t care at all, are all one and the same: accepted by, and part of, the circle – whether they know it, want it, or not.

The use of the wheel, or the circle, while important for the personal story of Lawson, also has implications for the structure of The Triumphant Approach as a whole. Looking at Lawson’s illness and comparing the cycles that he goes through in the novel to those of Esoteric Yeatsism, it is possible to see in the movement of his moods the left and right movement of Yeats’ gyres.

As Ellmann mapped out, Yeats thought that he had,

...discovered in this figure of interpenetrating gyres the archetypal pattern which is mirrored and remirrored by all life, by all movements of civilisation or mind or nature. Man or movement is conceived of as moving from left to right and then from right to left; no sooner is the fullest expansion of the objective cone reached than the counter-
movement towards the fullest expansion of the subjective cone begins. (233)

This could also describe the expansion of Lawson’s ego as he approaches hypomania and then the counter movement into major depression. From high to low and back again, twice, bipolar affective disorder – the ‘cyclic’ mental illness – leads Lawson on a circular path, until he is released from his suffering at the end of the novel by the character of Maya.

The title of part three, ‘Symmetry and Repetition’, does not have an obvious spiritual element to it, and is in fact taken from the Lewis Namier essay of the same name. But situated where it is, as the title of part three, it is signalling the second half of Lawson’s journey – and is intended to be linked to the circle. One rotation of the wheel has taken place – denoting the first-half of Lawson’s journey – and there must be a counter-movement to complete the process. In this context it is a nod to the circular, Ouroboros-like, mission Lawson is on with his spirituality, and his sanity, and the link is thus understood to be seen in the same context as the Esoteric Yeatsian content of the previous chapters.

There is also a nod to the structure of the novel: after parts one and two, with the respective second and first person narration, there is an identical round to follow in parts three and four, whose second and first person narration provide the symmetry and repetition in the form of the narrative voices employed.

**Lawson’s Logic**

Rather than seeing his mental illness as being linked to, or caused by, his belief, I see Lawson’s struggle with the supernatural as separate to the experience of psychosis. In other words, his experience of psychosis is informed by his belief, but it is not caused by it. I also felt that the see-sawing nature of belief sat well with the cyclic nature of Lawson’s mental illness – in that for Lawson both his madness and his experience of the spiritual are episodic. He speaks of this see-sawing process, in part four, as oscillating between being a ‘lapsed Catholic’ and ‘lapsed Atheist’.

Lawson’s madness is not presented as being brought about by his spiritual nature, religious upbringing or even by his logic – which, in his letter to introduce ‘The
Circle Theory’ – seems, in its use of language and its internal layout, to be more than reasonable. Indeed, in his use of logic Lawson is not alone. Foucault, in *Madness and Civilisation*, had this to say about the logic of the mad and how it seems to ridicule the reason of the world:

The marvellous logic of the mad which seems to mock that of the logicians because it resembles it so exactly, or rather because it is exactly the same, and because at the secret heart of madness, at the core of so many errors, so many absurdities, so many words and gestures without consequence, we discover, finally, the hidden perfection of language. (94)

The logic itself, the grammar and vocabulary Lawson uses – even his quest for an inclusive language to bring the people together – is not of itself mad. Instead, the letter introducing Circle Theory indicates that, rather than being a fault in his use of language, it is Lawson’s fixation on the one image of the ‘Circle’ – and using this symbol to build his own religion that confirms his insanity. The main problem for Lawson could thus be seen as the historical one of the mad, as cited by Foucault in *Psychiatric Power*, the ‘taking oneself for king’ (27).

It is taking himself to be king in *The Triumphant Approach* that allows Lawson to be able to invest the symbol of the circle with the power to heal the world and bring peace to humanity; it is not the logic of his language, which is secondary. In fact, as pointed out in the previous chapter, it could be argued that Lawson’s madness has started some time before he sits down to write the letter.

The difficulty in writing this section was that the expression of madness does not announce itself in a dramatic way in real life. It would be easier to portray madness in a Jekyll-and-Hyde fashion, rather than attempt to document the subtle way that madness overtakes a person, because bipolar disorder has the aforementioned episodic quality to it. But I did not wake up one day and think ‘I am King’, so the novel reflects that. The madness sneaks up on the character of Lawson in a series of small attacks that he does not question or dismiss in the way that he normally would. Although when the subtleties have accumulated to a significant degree, the height of his madness is portrayed, both
times, using spiritual imagery – first with the circle and then again when he makes a pilgrimage to the obelisk to find an answer to his ‘problem’.

In making the point that Lawson’s spirituality does not cause his mental illness, it should also be noted that it does not prevent the illness, and actually, it makes it harder for him to get a diagnosis. Lawson is allowed to go on for longer in his delirium because he does not question himself. His religious background has helped him to accept ideas that society would otherwise shun.

For instance, I was able to believe in a world other than the physical one we inhabit because I had grown up being taught about just such a world; culturally the idea that someone might have supernatural powers, or could perhaps communicate with God, was not unknown to me. So the reference points for the protagonist in The Triumphant Approach are spiritual ones because that is the only way he can make sense of his experience of the mental illness; if he didn’t believe in the spiritual ideas he is obsessing over, he would have to accept that he is insane.

In his insistence on the importance of the image of the circle, and making the external world fit into this ‘Circle Theory’, Lawson embraces his madness. It is not the language, his use of logic, or even the circle itself; it is because he thinks he is king and that his revelation will have an actual real-world application, because he believes it. Foucault discussed this insistence on the ‘prestige’ of one image – which can be seen to directly apply to Lawson and his ‘Circle Theory’ – in Madness and Civilisation:

The ultimate language of madness is that of reason, but the language of reason enveloped in the prestige of the image, limited to the locus of appearance which the image defines. It forms, outside the totality of the images and the universality of discourse, an abusive, singular organisation whose insistent quality constitutes madness. Madness, then, is not altogether in the image, which of itself is neither true nor false, neither reasonable nor mad; nor is it, further, in the reasoning which is mere form, revealing nothing but the indubitable figures of logic. And yet madness is in one and in the other; in a special version or figure of their relationship. (94)
In writing the sections of *The Triumphant Approach* that dealt with madness, notably this section on the Circle Theory, it was interesting to note how, during the psychosis, my creative powers had been corrupted by my mental illness. In other words, as I parodied the bureaucratic language of the railway on the Circle Theory letter, I was using my creative faculties.

I thought it important then, that in writing the novel and exegesis, I have been able to steal back the material made by the corrupted creative mind and have used it for the opposite of its intended purpose. Originally the Circle Theory had been created – as Lawson believes in the novel – as a reality: something that will change the world. Whereas now the theory and its use have been stolen back by the fictional – make-believe – world of the novel; instead of dogma, it is entertainment. Thus the results of the creative actions of the mind are finally being used in their right context.

**Lawson as Dictator**

It is instructive that Lawson chooses to reveal his glory – and establish his kingdom – by means of the written word, the classic form of the dictator. In this way the creative urge – which Lawson suppresses in his attempt to fit in on the railway – could be seen as corrupted by the urge to rule, or the urge to be king. In handing out copies of his Circle Theory on Parramatta Road, it could be argued that Peter Lawson is not far away from becoming Jim Jones, talking into a PA long into the night and forcing his followers to hear only the sound of his own voice, even while they sleep. In an online interview with *Slate*, Junot Diaz articulated how this desire for one voice – which unchecked can become the voice of dictatorship – is inside us all:

> We all dream dreams of unity, of purity; we all dream that there’s an authoritative voice out there that will explain things, including ourselves. If it wasn’t for our longing for these things, I doubt the novel or the short story would exist in its current form...Just remember: In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters.
In this context, Lawson’s pursuit of a Theory – and something that will do away with religion – could actually be seen as the exercising of a fascistic impulse to be in control. And, furthermore, it could be seen as the impulse towards atheism; there can be no god but the dictator/narrator, Lawson. His lack of knowledge about anything important, particularly at the time of creating his theory, seems to be further evidence of this, as noted by James in Cultural Amnesia:

The occult and the mystically profound are perennial short cuts to a supervening vision: a world view without the world. Extreme Authoritarianism is only a step away...The mass murderer is ever fond of theories that explain everything, and all the fonder if they can be acquired without study. (61)

Lawson’s identity& the state of ‘I AM’
I chose the title of part two, ‘I Tell You The Truth’, because it is a statement repeated by Jesus throughout the New Testament (for example, in John 6:32; John 8:51, John 10:1 and Luke 21:3 of the NIV) and seemed like the best way to start the first person introduction of Peter Lawson. There are two reasons for this, the first being that Lawson identifies himself in this section with the same words Jesus used in talking to his disciples – ‘I AM’ (John 8:58) – and is thus discovered to have a ‘messiah complex’. The second is because it suits the first person tone of the narrative that follows it – which is addressing the reader directly, almost as if it were a confessional. The first person, as noted by Richard Ford in Robert’s Writers on Writing, is ‘so personal. Its address to the reader is: Listen to me, believe me, what I’m telling you is true’ (189).

There is another reason for using this title for the opening of the first person address. Jesus not only professed to speak the truth, but actually claimed to be the truth – as its divine embodiment – when he said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (NIV John 14:6). Lawson then, as the first person narrator, could also be seen – in the context of the novel – as trying to ‘be’ the truth.

Early in part two, Lawson mentions how he felt during one of the psychotic highs that he had experienced; in particular he cites the idea that he was ‘powerful’, and
somehow close to God – in his own mind. Lawson, the narrator, then moves on to say that ‘When we most feel like God, we are actually closest to Satan.’

Up until this point, the idea that feeling or believing oneself to be Jesus was dire, and a sign of mental illness, has only been considered from the scientific or psychiatric point of view – which sees it as an indicator that the patient does not have perspective and has lost all insight. But when looked at from the Judeo-Christian perspective of Lawson’s upbringing, equating oneself with God/Yahweh/Jesus is blasphemous, and throughout history has had a traditional penalty of death attached to it.

Peter Lawson not only equates himself with Jesus, but he uses his words, and the words of Yahweh, to declare it: Jesus said, in John 8:58 (NIV), ‘I tell you the truth...before Abraham was born, I am!’

I made sure that Lawson uses the same phrase a number of times throughout The Triumphant Approach to suggest this fixation: in chapter nineteen of part one he says ‘Here I am,’ before trying to get entry into the Crossroads hotel, identifying himself and implying that he should be ‘known’: he declares, in chapter two of part two, ‘I am The Man in Black’ (thus comparing himself – and possibly identifying – with Satan) when he hallucinates and believes he has been visited by a succubus: in chapter four of part two Lawson then answers ‘I am’ when Gerry informs him that, ‘They put you in the fish tank when they think you’re crazy’, and confirms his identity as a madman: before finally revealing himself, in chapter twelve of part two, as an answer to who he is, with the words ‘I am’.

This last instance is the one worthy of the most attention, and the one in which I can add some biographical detail. Early in the chapter, Lawson – the narrator – says, ‘The second incarceration: three days and nights awake...and a very pissed off couple of nurses. This is the setting in which I chose to reveal my true identity.’

Again, as a writer – mentioning the three days and nights awake – I was painting Lawson as the Jesus figure, who rose from the dead after three days. But the most important point, in this instance, is the fact that the narrator is saying that this is his ‘true identity’. Remembering that this section of the novel, part two, is the direct address of the first person – the narrator who is telling the truth – this admission seems startling. Because throughout the narrative Lawson the narrator, though he talks about Lawson the madman in affectionate terms, does distance himself from the idea that what
happened to him was real. Lawson the narrator is happy to use the language of his doctors, and dismiss his episodes of psychosis as not being valid. That is until we get to this statement of his ‘true identity’.

Applying the Judeo-Christian reading to this chapter – and to the notion that Lawson’s true identity is the ‘I am’ state – then blasphemy is the only conclusion that can be drawn. Insanity can be – and is – also implied, but the first reaction of the fundamentalist reader would not be far removed from that of the crowd that surrounded Jesus when he declared ‘before Abraham was born, I am.’ The text notes that ‘at this, they picked up stones to stone him’ (NIV John 8:59). But the Judeo-Christian reading of this is not the only one that exists; an Eastern approach to this state of ‘I am’ sees the experience as being positive. Deepak Chopra, in his book *How To Know God*, described the ‘I am’ as the natural – sacred – response of someone who had reached, ‘Stage Seven: God Of Pure Being’ (153):

A person who reaches stage seven is so free of attachment that if you ask, ‘Who are you?’ the only answer is: ‘I am.’...The state of ‘I am’ foregoes pain and pleasure. Because all desire is centred on pain and pleasure, it comes as a surprise to find out that all that I wanted all along was just to be. (158-61)

When Lawson declares ‘I am,’ during his second stay in hospital, I was again drawing on my own lived experience. In between my first and second psychosis I had reread the New Testament and had also worked my way through the previously cited book by Chopra. So I was keenly aware that the ‘I am’ state, as outlined by Chopra, was theoretically the highest that could be attained. This, personally, is quite embarrassing because it means that during my time in hospital I provoked the nurses and made them ‘ask me my name’ just so I that could reply ‘I am’ – as if I were one of these spiritual masters that Chopra had written about. On the contrary, uttering the words ‘I am’ only confirmed my spiritual naivety – you cannot ‘desire’ your way to becoming a saint – and my madness; I could not see myself from the point of view of the nurses, but still expected them to understand me.
The final point to note about the ‘I am’ state, and the words themselves, is that the phrase ‘I am’, as noted by Schneider, can be seen to be linked – through Sanskrit – to the sacred symbol of the circle:

The Sanskrit word ‘aham’, which means ‘I am’, is made up of the first, middle and last letters of the alphabet. These letters also represent the three parts of the circle: the centre, the radius and the circumference. (10)

So Lawson, in saying the words ‘I am’, could be understood as bringing the theory he had espoused to its fruition. When he declares the words, ‘I am’ he ‘is’ – or, rather, becomes – the circle. In this way the first two sections of the novel can be seen to be linked through these two incidents. In the first part, he creates – or remembers – the ‘Circle Theory’, and in declaring ‘I am’ in the second part of the novel, he is the circle.

Again, this is not intended to be read as such by the reader and no knowledge of the religious connotations are required to understand that Lawson is psychotic, or obsessed by Christ, at this point; both of these things are insinuated elsewhere. But it was important and interesting for me in the writing process to explore the ‘I am’ state, and the theme surrounding it, for the same reason that I used the ‘Circle Theory’. As much as recalling both of these incidents embarrassed me, I could see their importance and the possibilities of using them in their literary sense, their right context.

The Redemption of Lawson: Maya and the Inversion of Genesis

Originally The Triumphant Approach was without a redeeming female figure for the protagonist, Lawson, and in early drafts I had not included any sections that mentioned a partner or wife-figure for him. It was at the stage when I was writing a more consciously postmodern version of the text, and I incorporated certain problems that I encountered in the writing process into the manuscript. For instance, in an early draft of part two, these lines appeared: ‘We share a small cottage, my wife and I. I can’t mention her again. I’ve taken an oath not to. The story that needs retelling is one without her.’

I’d taken this line partly because I wanted to focus on the earlier life of the character, and partly because I did not want to offend my partner. The result was that the novel seemed unbalanced; it showed the episodic nature of mental illness, and how
the protagonist – in the present – seemed to be ‘well’, but by not showing the secure relationship that the protagonist was involved in, or it’s dynamic, it kept hidden the main change in Lawson’s life. This change – as noted by the letter from the psychiatrist in part three – is a direct result of Lawson taking the doctor’s advice, eliminating drugs and alcohol from his life, and having a stable home situation.

The relationship is also significant because Lawson’s wife, Maya, is portrayed as being a devout Christian; and at their first meeting they discuss the film The Passion of the Christ. It follows that Lawson is drawn back into the spiritual life by Maya, and she reintroduces him to church. In this way I attempted to make it clear that Maya is the one who sets Lawson straight in his religious uncertainty.

Early in part four, ‘St Dymphna’s Song’, I inserted a number of things to help establish this. The first thing that implies it is the title of the section. St Dymphna, as noted in part three through the character of Father Brian, is the Patron Saint of the Insane. Thus her ‘Song’ could be seen as the answer to Lawson’s prayer – a celebration of his sanity – as delivered to him by the Saint, through the flesh and blood character of Maya. A further hint in this regard, is that Lawson, as the narrator, notes that he ‘married up’ – climbing the spiritual and social ladder – and that Maya is ‘slumming it’, when he discusses the confusion on the face of the Indian check-out operator at Woolworths (in Part IV, Chapter 22).

Once the section then gets underway, Peter Lawson, in the form of the first person narrator, starts out by recognizing and explaining to the reader that he has never known certainty for any length of time. Again, this is straight autobiographical detail taken from my own history. It is a plain, honest statement of my spiritual and mental life – delivered by Lawson. The narrator states that even if he finds a position satisfying one day, he will more than likely find it repellent the next, and vice versa. He assumes at this point in the text that no one can help him with the problem. Then he cites a conversation on the Old Testament (or Torah) that he’d had with Maya – his convent educated wife – in which she told him that he would be better off not reading books that contradicted his Catholic upbringing. The breakthrough for Lawson comes from admitting that Maya is right, and the implication for him is that he should not waste time worrying about it. True to character, it takes him a while to understand this, and he still flirts with notions of belief and unbelief throughout the rest of the novel, but the
scales – to borrow a biblical metaphor – are starting to fall from his eyes. He is beginning to see, through Maya’s help, that the contradictions are a fact of life. The choice of Maya’s name was important for me, in this regard, because it confirms to the understanding of Swami Vivekananda, cited below, and his reading of what ‘Maya’ really is:

...the Maya of the Vedanta, in its last developed form, is neither idealism nor Realism, nor is it a theory. It is a simple statement of facts – what we are and what we see around us...We find that Maya is not a theory for the explanation of the world; it is simply a statement of facts as they exist, that the very basis of our being is contradiction...

Along with recognising these contradictions, I felt that the text had to show some ambivalence about the character’s belief. As I noted previously, he swings from between being a ‘lapsed Catholic’ and ‘lapsed Atheist’, and this confirms with my own experience of the episodic nature of the spiritual. There is an inversion that takes place in the character at this point. Instead of believing the erroneous ideas that were suggested to him by his mental illness – because they reminded him of his religious ideas – he is now questioning his religious beliefs because of his mental illness. So while his belief reinforced and amplified his psychosis, the legacy of his psychosis is that it reinforces and amplifies his doubt; he veers away from certainty of any kind, and can thus be seen – even in the Christian sense – to be adopting a more ‘mature’ approach to his idea of belief and God.

This is in accord with what McGlashan had to say, in *Religious Studies*, about the never ending journey that faith is:

...Mature faith therefore is open to doubt and questioning, and is ready to entertain paradox and apparent contradiction. It is more inclined to an inclusive both/and attitude than to black and white, either/or exclusiveness....So this kind of faith is essentially a faith that is forever in pilgrimage, regarding it as greater gain to be seeking than to have found. Perhaps in the last resort, because it requires the surrender of
omnipotent control of self and others, it is only this kind of faith that allows God to be God. (520)

Lawson then, in the second half of The Triumphant Approach, can be seen to looking on spiritual matters from a far more realistic perspective; long gone is the Circle Theory and any notion of Lawson himself having any control or influence on the balance of the ‘world’. In its place is a more worldly approach to the idea of religion. Here I was able to focus on the nuts and bolts of church life, as I have experienced it, and the actual business of the church – which revolves around getting people through the door. I was also able to leave behind the idea of ‘sin’ and the remnants of Lawson’s former life that still existed in part three – the focus on sexual torment at being ‘excited’ by the school uniforms of students at his school: his obvious discomfort in and around Ashfield Station, the place that hosted his first episode – and instead focus on the other characters around the protagonist and his old-fashioned notion of serving them.

Along with this new approach to living, and his focus on others, comes an acceptance by Lawson of the real reasons as to why he had been interested in church, and the Christian Bible, in the first place. This is a realisation that came about through writing the exegesis, and then informed a later draft of the novel: my interest in the Gospels – which became Lawson’s interest, in the book – is primarily a literary one. Upon confirming this, I then inserted it into the novel in chapter eighteen of part three. The narrator notes: ‘It was the writing that had drawn you in, ‘In the beginning was the Word.’” Along with this acknowledgement, the narrator states, in chapter eight of part four, that he became a Christian ‘through happenstance, loneliness and from a yearning for praise...’ And he further implies that if he had not been attracted to the girls in his youth group, he never would have kept up his attendance.

The same process that takes place with the theme of madness can be seen to be taking place with the theme of religion, or belief. In the last chapter, I spoke of the theme of madness being present as the indicator that the protagonist was not mad. Interestingly, when the theme of God, church or religion is introduced – for instance, when Lawson recounts to the priest his church history, is excited by the image of St Dymphna, or refers to his demon-fighting friend as having ‘fucked-up psychological
problems’ (Part IV, Chapter 10) – it can be noted that holiness, or real spiritual insight, is absent from the text. As the theme of holiness increases, actual holiness decreases.

So really, Lawson, at every stage of his spiritual journey – until he meets Maya – is portrayed as pursuing God for all the wrong reasons: sex, praise, entertainment and ego. And his starting point for making the journey has been ignorance. Knowledge only comes as he is guided away from focusing on himself, and from changing the way he operates, by Maya.

This final section of the narrative was framed by a conception of Maya as Eve, and it is in this way that the story of Genesis is inverted. Maya leads Lawson – the Adam figure – towards knowledge, as she does in the Genesis version, but this time it is to redeem him, not to bring about his fall. There are two passages that take place in part four, in particular, that are deliberately referencing this Old Testament story – as well as the symbol of the Ouroboros, the circular serpent – and they are both related to the dream Lawson had (in part three) in which Maya is seen to be his protector and shields him from the bite of the snake, the traditional representation of Satan. This dream, rather than being an example of orientalism, is actually subverting the normal cliché of the Australian male from the ‘outback’ who handles reptiles – à la The Crocodile Hunter – and it uses the snake to represent the image of Satan in the same way that Henry Lawson did with ‘The Drover’s Wife’, with Maya taking the same protective role as the female protagonist of that short story.

The conventional reading of Genesis sees the woman deceived by Satan – the snake – before she talks Adam into partaking of the forbidden fruit with her. After discovering this disobedience, the Lord God, walking like man in the Garden of Eden, confronts the snake and says:

You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. (NIV Gen 3:14-15)

With this in mind, two readings of Maya’s influence on Lawson and his spiritual journey become possible. In the first, Maya is portrayed as Eve the Mother, and Lawson
as an offspring of Eve – is the child who is in enmity with Satan. Maya therefore takes on the role of protector, as mother, and Lawson – as the child – is shielded from further confrontation with Satan, as Maya deals with the snake and takes the bite for Lawson, in a familial act of martyrdom.

I tried to portray Maya as a mother figure to Lawson in a number of ways: Lawson is reprimanded for swearing in front of her: she ‘makes his lunch’, when he goes off to be a teacher’s aide at school: he has to talk his way ‘out of trouble’ when admitting to doubts about the validity of the Bible: she gets him – the archetypal prodigal son – to return to the church: she exacts a promise – under the threat of disowning him – that he will not take substances again: she ‘often rebukes’ him for being too candid in public: she has to help him go to the toilet, when he slips a disk: worried about his diet, she prays for him to start eating fruit: and she pinches him on the cheek and refers to him variously as ‘sweetie’, ‘baby’, and ‘you naughty boy.’

Also significant to this reading is the fact that Lawson’s birth mother, in the text, is portrayed as being a damaged figure – and it is implied that her side of the family has a predisposition towards mental illness. So Maya, in her role as a life-partner to Lawson, is taking over that mother-role from her mother-in-law. The damaged mother has been replaced by a more balanced version, which is alluded to in the following line from chapter two of part four – where Lawson indicates that he does not need to worry about madness anymore, because ‘as soon as Maya appeared, it vanished.’ This indicates that Maya, Lawson’s wife, actually embodies sanity and can make insanity disappear at her will – whereas I portrayed Lawson’s mother as being slightly unstable herself, fighting her own battle with mental illness, and therefore unable to banish it from her son’s life.

While the evidence for Maya as Eve, the wife, restoring the balance that was ruined in Genesis – making Lawson the Adam of the story, and inverting the parable’s original meaning – also exists. Consider the following quote:

I ate my first bowl of fruit yesterday, at the over ripe age of thirty-one. Since before I could talk, I have spurned it. Now, without notice, I’ve changed my mind. Maya, who had prayed for this miracle, tried to keep
from being too enthusiastic. She didn’t want me to back down out of rebelliousness. (Part IV, Chapter 13)

Here Lawson, as a child of Eve, can be seen to be growing up into the man, and taking on the ‘Adam’ persona – leaving behind childish things. This chapter, which includes the story of Lawson’s life-long aversion to fruit, is important to understanding the reading of him both as the archetypal child of Eve, and shedding the persona as he grows into the adult Adam-figure.

At the start of The Triumphant Approach – the genesis of the novel – Lawson is shown to be in an unhappy relationship with his de-facto partner, Maxine. What is betrayed there is a mistrust, and a dislike, of women. The two matriarchal figures that he subsequently refers to in depth, his mother and Oma (grandmother), are both portrayed in an unfavourable light. The mother is depicted as the source of family grief, in chapter fourteen of part two, when she pushes the father-figure to breaking point. And Lawson notes, ‘That was the first night I cried myself to sleep, since I’d been a child.’

And the grandmother-figure – as ‘Oma’ – is noted, in the previously quoted chapter on Lawson’s long period without fruit, to bring him to tears, again, as a result of trying to force him to eat a banana – while she was in loco parentis.

My Oma, that is my father’s mother, tried to feed me one in her housing commission flat in Riverwood...I remember a long battle, with her putting it to my mouth...But I would not bite. She is a stubborn woman, and kept at it until I cried. (Part IV, Chapter 13)

Also, the character of Oma at one point grossly offends the sensibilities of Lawson and Maya when she is exposed as being racist. So the two designated mother-figures in Lawson’s life, before Maya, have each left a mark on his psyche sufficient enough for him to remember it; and significantly, in both instances, he was brought to tears. It is true that Lawson’s other grandmother is mentioned in positive terms, but the difference with her is that she is not presented as being a mother-figure for him, but for his mother. Lawson’s mother, as indicated before, is thus still seen as the vulnerable
child and in need of care from a mother-figure herself, and Nan, the grandmother-figure, is therefore still active in her own role as mother.

In The Triumphant Approach Maya is thus presented as a redeeming female figure for Lawson. She reintroduces him to fruit, and breaks the cycle of pain in the process, forcing him to leave behind the bad memories and experiences of his youth. Metaphorically, she stops Lawson from biting his own tail – as he had been doing in the endless fashion of the Ouroboros. At the end of his journey, he notes that he will stop with her and ‘pick out a supply of apples’ while they shop, implying that his whole routine and way of life has transformed. It’s important to note that this was also another instance of art imitating life, and that I myself had not eaten fruit since I’d been a child – so in that way, from a creative perspective, I can’t take credit for the imagery of the apple. But it is an example, whether the Genesis connotation is picked up or not, of Maya being a calming, healthy, sane influence on Lawson. Maya – as the inverted figure of Eve – has taken him, the rebellious, angry, boy, and made him into a man: in his union with Maya, he is seen to be reconciled with himself, his mind, his family, and, ultimately, the idea of God.
Conclusion – The Writer Recedes

In private conversation with people I’ve just met, I generally don’t bring up the fact that I have bipolar disorder. The main reason is that the hero of *The Triumphant Approach*, the madman – Peter Lawson – now seems to have very little in common with me. I avoid him in the same way I avoid many old acquaintances; when we sobered up, and stopped smoking, there was nothing to talk about. With every day of accumulated sanity, I feel less in touch with that ‘hero’ who went insane. In all, I spent something like six weeks in hospital – over two visits – and the six years since in remission. So my early attempts at writing this novel, with their focus on Patrick Bryson as the ‘writer’, were a product of the fact that I relate more to the ‘narrator’ than the ‘hero’. The reluctance to write about the axe-wielding madman came about through not wanting to sensationalise his short career – and to recognise, with the artifice, that my existence as a writer had been far more substantial than my existence as a psychotic.

The change came when I realised that the focus of the novel, in the opening section, had always been on Peter Lawson the worker. I was not interested in the writer; during my stint on the railway I studied for an MA in creative writing two nights a week for two years, yet in all the drafts of the book I had resisted writing about that process – because it didn’t seem important. And in rereading my initial drafts, I noted that as the theme of writing receded, the better the writing became. So it followed that implementing that strategy throughout the rest of novel meant that I could focus on what was important – my protagonist’s mental, spiritual and social life – and the psychomachia that he endures because of it.

And while I may not identify with being bipolar now, I would certainly still be identified by the world as having bipolar disorder – particularly if I were ever linked to, or accused of, a crime: representations of mental illness in the mainstream media indicate that society still fears the madman. Therefore, I step forward to take my place in the assembly of the moon-maddened and accept the label gladly. The part of me that sees madness as defiance, and in superiority to others, takes pride in the title. But with this pride comes the sadness that in writing the novel I had to condemn my younger-self, and in a way turn my back on him. I was confronted by what Kocan called
‘Dysart’s Dilemma’. To tell the story of the mad Peter Lawson, the young hero, I also had to maim him by taking away his belief. This was accurate to the way my treatment was administered, it’s true. Part of making the madman ‘well’ involves shaming him and forcing him to acknowledge the idiocy of his actions. So portraying the foolishness of Lawson’s psychosis for the reader is appropriate, but it is my view that the reader should also consider that something else could be taking place – the possibility that there are other worlds than ours.

The monotonous regularity with which the people labelled insane claim to be having a spiritual experience is used against belief to prove its irrelevance. Unspoken by the madman, or by his supporters, is the possibility that this same monotonous regularity could be an indicator that something else is going on, something that no one can understand or explain – least of all the madman, who does not have the language to convey the message.

Although, if the madman himself can’t clarify it, no one else – not even the novelist – will ever be able to get close. And that is what I have had to come to terms with in this project, the fact that the book I wanted to write is unwritable. The manuscript that I’m left with, The Triumphant Approach, is the result of accepting these contradictions, in life and art, and then carrying on anyway; the exegesis is the record of the discovery.
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