

Metamorphosis

A composite image illustrating the concept of metamorphosis. The upper portion shows a monkey's face with a human-like expression, looking down. The lower portion shows a human's muscular torso and hands clasped together. The background is a gradient of blue and green light.

Ferggus

Leo

Prologue

The black BMW M3 does a slide turn and then comes screaming down the street. At the same moment, spotlighted under the only working street lamp, a red e911 noses cautiously out from the car yard. Here The Salesman - head turned in the direction of the noise, arm frozen in a wave and a look of terror on his face - stands irresolute. The M3 has almost reached the Porsche when it swings out and accelerates away at the rate of a jet taking off. It leaves the BMW for dead. A blacked out window rolls down and the thin muzzle of a precision rifle appears briefly. There is no sound, but at almost the same moment The Salesman crumples to the ground, his expression fixed. A neat hole has appeared in the middle of his forehead. One might have taken it for a bindi (the man was a Hindu) except that on the freshly painted white wall behind where he'd been standing the back of his head is now sprayed over it.

No more than five minutes earlier (the time is important) the driver of the e911 had been talking casually to The Salesman, "Mate, life is cheap these days. This time tomorrow there'll be a hot chicky sitting in that seat going down on me while I've got my foot to the fucking floor." Leo's eyes light up and he laughs mirthlessly at the image conjured up in his mind. He turns to The Salesman, who's just handed him the keys, "Mate, how fast did you say this cunt could go?"

The Salesman is untypical of the usual brash, desperate Inner West car yard types who's job it is to offload vehicles only there because NO ONE wants them. But Leo is barely listening as he runs through the impressive performance statistics of the latest e911. He runs his hands caressingly over the smooth leather and walnut finish, with more affection than he's paid to any women he's ever been with. In fact Leo has no difficulty hearing him above the gentle hum of the e911's electric engine but again he's distracted, this time by the vintage style dashboard, full of gauges and flickering red needles, that resembles a plane cockpit. He thrusts a hand out of the open window of the sports car, "Mate, thanks for fast tracking the deal. Yeah, you could say that - a very big hurry. Gotta get out of town for a few weeks. Nah, on a plane; yeah, got a private jet waiting for me at Bankstown. Sun, Sea and non stop Fucking..." Leo is still waving to The Salesman as he cautiously, a little warily even, looks both ways and then noses out slowly onto the deserted side street filled with empty car lots. All the vehicles that normally clutter the place are now safely locked away from temptation for the teenage kids of the nearby high rise block, for whom the future offers only the bleakest hope.

The Sales Boys are long gone, mostly down to the bars that line the main street where they'll be bragging to any girl that will listen to them bullshit about the deals they've scored, "Course I'm proudest of the ones that screwed them the most. Why? Who wouldn't fucking be? It's a test mate – them against me. Anyways, more commission for me to spend on you Baby, right? Fucking plods. Suckers. Mate they EXPECT to be done over, the game's just by how fucking much." If the girls only knew: the ones bragging the loudest are always the ones with something to prove – haven't made their quota; on a last warning. Or the words of the last girlfriend are still ringing loud in his ear – the ones that made him feel so infinitesimally small. It makes them feel better. Even if they're the only one believing the bullshit – which they need to do if they're going to be able to get out of bed the next morning and do it all over again.

Back at the car yard it's just at this moment that the BMW appears. Immediately Leo knows who it is. He knew it had been a risk to buy the car, but what choice did he have? Everything is a risk now anyway, and without wheels he'd be a sitting duck. That said, he had expected a little more time. But the gang he paid allegiance to specialises in high tech crime. *Fuck it, for them to have got on my tail in five minutes the boss must have been alerted to the sale straight off.*

Flying down the narrow side road Leo glances in the rear view mirror and his heart leaps into his mouth – the M3 is close enough for him to recognise the driver and his offside, who's got a machine pistol pointed straight at him. It's like time stands still and he's looking straight down the barrel; he feels himself being sucked into the Black Hole of the muzzle. There's a flash: Leo ducks instinctively as the rear window shatters. And then smiles ruefully. So much for the fucking bullet proof glass. Which at considerable expense was supposed to have been fitted. *And was the only reason I'd had to fucking wait around and pick the cunt of a car up so late. 'Rush job,' 'Valued customer.' What a crock of shit!* Still smiling to himself he reflects, *Yeah, have to give it to the cunt – it was a convincing act, no hesitation. Anyway what did fucking bullet proof glass look like? And what was the likelihood of its credentials being tested that soon? Well, the fella had paid for his little scam and paid good, no question of that.*

Back on the rundown street, cars parked either side, the racers are pushing 140.. 160.... On a straight, approaching 200, with only millimetres either side of them. Sounds rush by like someone threw a tin of noise at him. Up on the right music blaring from a house all lit up. Outside fairy lights over the stunted trees; people hanging round the front door. Someone pressed over the upstairs front balcony. Ha, ha! Bent over the guy has her pinned against it, going at her from

behind whether she wants it or not.... A woman's scream for help. Not from her – he'd seen the complacent expression on her face, and the Dog Look on his. Scream interrupted. Desperate afraid of something.... Oh shit! Straight in front, no time to react, a kid runs across the road, followed by a knife wielding gang. *Was it me screaming? Sounding like a girl.* Face caught in the spotlight. Terrified. Blond curls; full pink lips: *Fuck, Boy or Girl....? who'd ever fucking know.* Glinting metal blades blind him; closes his eyes... Somehow (*How the fuck did I manage it?*) he misses the kid.

"Fuck!" Leo shouts out loud, suddenly getting a flash of how it's going to end – the pair of them upside down, a crumple of metal, balls of flames high into the sky. *Need to get onto a main drag, or that's sure as fuck how it's gonna end. Freeway, no. The M3 looks like it's been supercharged and it'll eat me. Leo's good with the electric for acceleration; need corners to slow the cunts down and put some space between us. Yeah, the Parramatta Road be perfect, and just up ahead now. Yep, there's the turning.* The e911, barely slowing, takes the corner with tyres squealing strangled cats but grips the road like it was glued on. Leo laughs as there's a crunching sound behind and when he glances back sees the M3 still snaking as the RWD struggles to regain control. *Fuck, it's like driving a fucking go cart, only when in them it feels like you're doing 250 - in this cunt, you're fucking doing it!*

Settling down into the bucket seat of the 911, with a long stretch of straight road ahead, Leo puts his foot down and the car leaps forward, flashing past the cars on the inside then weaving neatly round those coming the other way. With all the honking and flashing lights Leo wonders if the cops might take an interest, then laughs out loud again, *What the fuck am I thinking! This is Parramatta! This is fucking driving Sunday arvo at a fucking Grannies' Reunion. Nah, they'll only show interest if the cunts behind hits a passer by with the shooter.*

Leo settles into a rhythm and is a little more relaxed now – the road's got enough turn in it, and enough traffic, that the M3 is making no headway. He starts thinking ahead, *Where the fuck am I going? The jet's at fucking Bankstown, in the opposite direction. But either way, I wouldn't have enough time if they're still on my tail. Need to shake them off first. Down town Parramatta! Yeah gotta be there: that ghetto for the foot soldiers of the gangs that have taken over Sydney after the rest of Australia went mad and bought into the Nordic fucking Model.*

Nodding to himself, *Yeah, lose them in the rat hole and half an hour later I can be on the plane. Fuck knows to where, but Leo can worry about that once he's in the air.* He feels a sudden tightening of his balls, *What the fuck was I thinking? What the fucking, fuck, fuck!* But he can't help smiling, *You fucking know exactly*

what you were thinking, cunt: a container load of state of the art surveillance gear the gang had somehow got hold of. First of a kind, and the very first batch out of a laboratory in China. Every cunt of a Dictator is going to want it: taps into the mind and can record the thoughts of anyone that appears on the camera. Sell that and I'd make enough to disappear forever, to wherever. Leo had got the money he asked for the surveillance equipment, but he's starting to wonder if it's going to be enough. Heart jumps into his mouth again, thinking of all the possibilities: *Fuck, would anything be enough to make a clean break from these cunts?*

He pushes the thought down, concentrating on the road ahead, and the thumping eases a little. Looking for a turning he shouts, "OK cunts, this is it: if this doesn't work, fuck it, I'm all yours." Almost past the turning Leo yanks hard on the wheel. For a second the wheel feels light to the touch and he's sure the 911 is going to flip, but then the back end frees itself and slides out; immediately Leo spins the wheel the other way and the Porsche makes a long slide across four lanes before straightening. A few hundred metres ahead the road narrows down to a dual lane bridge over a black emptiness. While this side of the river it's all dark and empty streets, the other side is a different world, the streets everywhere lit up with garish neon lights. And it's closing time for the clubs and pubs, so wall to wall it's people spilling out onto the sidewalks. To Leo it reminds him of the old time funfairs of his youth. *Still the fucking same. Still run down to fucking nothing! Still the end of the fucking world!*

Seeing how lit up it is, as soon as Leo crosses the river he does a sharp left - the M3 still close on his tail, having caught up some on the straight stretch - and follows the riverside road. Down below to his left in the empty blackness Leo knows exactly what he'd find there. Hadn't he spent his first year in Sydney there? *A tent fucking city - if you were lucky! If not, it was out in the open in the clothes you stood up in, and whatever you'd been able to wrestle off some other cunt. And looking up at the stars. Those fucking stars! Winking at me. Taking the piss.* After six months of nothing going his way, he came to hate them. "Stop laughing at me!" One night so pissed he'd started shouting, "What the fuck do you know what it's like down here? Stop fucking at me cunts!" Someone had knocked him out and he'd come to in the water - lucky it was winter, the freezing cold water had brought him to almost instantly and he was just able to swim to the river bank and someone else had dragged him out.

Leo shakes his head, trying to rid himself of the thought: the feeling that always comes over him when he thinks of those times. *Allright, another K, Leo will shake the cunts off then. They won't expect me to do that, no fucking way.* Glances in the mirror - *What the fuck, they're almost up me!* He puts his foot down. The

engine only purrs a little louder as he's slammed back into the bucket seat. The e911 pulls away from the M3 like it's standing. *Allright, here!* Another right, but this is no tarmac road, and the 911 is slewing from side to side and Leo's struggling to control it. It snakes along the dirt road across the old park, where the rest of the wrecks of humanity find what safety they can amongst the trees. Leo had heard of one clown, used to be a mate of his, had even built himself a shelter up in of the big old Eucalyptus trees. They found him, neck broken, at the bottom of it one morning. After that someone else, a pair of fellas – there was always one of them up there – took it over. Had they pushed him out? Cuckoos taking over the nest? Or was his mate just pissed and fell out and they took the opportunity? Of course it never paid to ask those kind of questions. And the cops had no interest – one less trouble to worry about, that's how they'd see it.

Though he's struggling to keep control Leo laughs out loud: *Yeah, not bad, she can take off road not bad. The BM - fucking mess. Whoa! There the cunt goes!* In a haze of dust the M3 spins out. And keeps spinning. *Go on cunt! Pirouetting like a fucking ballerina!* Suddenly something catches at the corner of Leo's eye. Too late to do anything about it, straight ahead is a bundle of blankets right in the middle of the track. A thump as he goes over it. What, where, who the fuck was that! In the mirror he sees the bundle hasn't moved, and then the M3 goes straight over it. *Fuck it, if the cunt was still alive, he'd be fucking dead alright now.*

Looking ahead Leo thinks to himself, *Fuck it, nearly across the park. Where next?* Glances back: the M3 has dropped back, going more slowly now, but even so is still struggling to keep a line. *Maybe! Just fucking maybe, I'm far enough ahead. Three roads and all dark: they won't know which one Leo's taken.* Fixing the opening in the railings in his mind Leo kills the lights. It's like he's suddenly blindfolded. Still doing close to 100K, a solid steel railing ahead with only the narrowest gap in it, Leo holds his breath, expecting any moment to slam into it. Second later there's a loud scraping noise and the 911 shudders, but he keeps his arms locked rigid, the wheel straight. And he's through the gap. *Fucking made it! Whoa, fuck it - which one? Straight on Holmes! They'll never think of that mate – too fucking obvious.*

Night vision has started to kick in and the outline of the rundown industrial buildings, silhouetted by the hazy glow of the city, gives him enough direction to pick up the road. *No street lights, nice! Empty street, nice!* Foot down, the e911 leaps forward. Leo knows these streets, knows them well: he's got a few hundred metres before he hits the brick wall of a warehouse at the end. *After that it'll be lit up, but by then hopefully we'll have lost the cunts. And if Leo hasn't shaken them off, well... Well, he'll have to think of something fucking else, won't he! Then*

again, if it's not here, Parramatta, this shithole of humanity that became Leo's home and back yard after he escaped from home, then where the fuck is there? Ahead the street is starting to light up, and as soon as he turns the corner, a sharp right, backtracking towards the centre of town, Leo turns the headlights back on. Fuck, it's fucking carnage! The streets are spilled over with drunks stumbling out the pubs. Busy as a Saturday arvo, for fuck's sake! Then again, this is fucking midday for most of these cunts, right! He stares into some of the moons of faces. Familiar looking, but all complete strangers. Don't we all fucking look like this? Helpless. Hopeless. Lost fucking souls who thought our Utopia, our fucking Shangri La was here in this cesspit Sydney. When everyone else was saying The Model was the only way. Fuck them! What did they know? People want different things, and Leo sure as fuck doesn't want what they're telling us is Utopia.

Someone staggers blindly onto the road, just about to go under the wheels when someone pulls him back onto the sidewalk. As the car hurtles up the street it starts, just a few spots at first, but then, like a tap turned on, it's a full on downpour. The place looks better for it. *Yeah, not hard. Road ahead glistening like a Black Snake. Hehe, yeah, the red underbelly on this place sure turns up regular. The lights changed - star sparkle instead of the dull, glaring, back stare. Yeah, like every woman I ever fucking knew. Hehe, the chicks caught out in the rain: clothes bedraggled, makeup running. Or was that just another fight with the Old Fella?*

Leo slows as he approaches the end of the street. Cornering, the 911 takes it like it was bone dry. Speeds up while an eye in the rear view mirror. *Nice, no M3... Orgh! Fuck it, how did she just slid round the corner and tanking up the street after Leo?*

Two kids have been playing for the last half hour outside The Red Fox: ever since their mother went inside to do the last of her shows. "Mum coming soon, Dale?" the little girl asks her older brother. Without letting on Dale's been checking the big wall clock inside the pub the whole time. "Yeah, sis, she won't be long now." Just then a woman stumbles out of a side door, unable to see for the sudden change from galey lights around the stage to the semi darkness outside. Still wearing a skimpy, pale pink bikini that glitters dazzlingly even in the faint light, the woman starts pulling on a demur, plain white dress. The boy pretends to be blinded by the sequins, and on seeing him the woman's sullen face immediately lights up. She has a certain natural beauty, which even the thick, heavy makeup can't mask. She starts up a steady patter, and the little girl looks lovingly up at her. The woman has the dress over her head, so she doesn't see it when the silent

e911 flashes past. The boy gives a yelp of surprise, then screams. The woman pulls frantically at the dress, which had caught on something.

Having seen the 911 hang a left the driver of the M3 slams his foot hard down. When he reaches the end of the narrow street, on the still slippery surface the M3 does a long slide turn onto the much wider road. Closing distance rapidly on the 911, the M3 pulls over onto the other side of the road and comes up alongside the other vehicle. The squat barrel of a machine gun slides out – the gunman is invisible inside the car – and starts spraying the 911 with bullets. But the M3 has run out of road. As they hit the end, where The Red Fox makes the corner, Leo yanks on the steering wheel. The 911, as it pulls onto the narrower road, is like a train on a track, taking the corner straight down the middle. But, with the gunman still blazing away, the M3 makes a hash of it and spins out of control, slamming into the front wall of The Red Fox. The machine gun sprays death into the frozen crowd outside the bar.

A few seconds earlier a drunk had thought it funny to throw into the road the pink ball the little girl had been playing with. Dale, momentarily distracted by his mother, doesn't see his sister run into the road to get her ball, straight into the path of the M3. The impact separates head from body, and ball and head bounce across the road, coming to rest on the footpath opposite. The M3, sliding out, smears the boy and his mother against the outside of The Red Fox.

The front end of the M3 is a right off; the front axle bent so the wheels are at right angles to where they should be. Still the driver tries to reverse, but the M3 is caught under the rear end of an expensive white SUV. The squealing metal, the roar of the engine, the sight of them trying to get away, at this the frozen crowd comes to life and in an instant a mob has formed around the M3. A round of machine gun fire sets the women off screaming and everyone ducking for cover. But as soon as it stops they surge forward again and drag out the occupants of the car. They don't give a fuck about the mother or her kids - for the drunken mob it's just a bit of fun to finish the night up with.

Afraid to enter these streets at night unless in squad numbers, it's another five hours before the police arrive to survey the carnage. Of the killers little remains except four pulped, faceless torsos with limbs randomly hacked off so they resemble a pile of discarded mannequins. It's another hour before one of the cops notices the little girl's head on the opposite sidewalk, an expression of joy fixed on her face. The M3, a symbol of wealth, of jealous envy for those who strained their lives for such material gains, is a burned out shell. It stands as a fitting symbolism of the failure of their lives, and all those wrecks of lives who see Sydney, and all it

represents, as the only Path to Glory. Even those who've 'made it'. For, what have they made except a pile of paper? And through this erroneous pursuit been blinded to the source of true happiness.

Leo, though he'd caught a glimpse of the crash, keeps his foot down until he's passed the City Limits. Here, beyond the thin fingers of the widely spaced street lights, the road is pitch black. This is the transition zone between Sydney and the Model. A hundred and fifty kilometres physically separates the two systems of governance. Within this zone isolated developments have sprung up. The wealthier inhabitants of the city have sought to escape the mess they themselves have created by buying a mansion in one of the extravagantly portioned private estates. They boast round the clock security behind high walls topped with electrified razor wire.

It's always the same – Leo has seen it repeatedly on the journey out of town. Against these walls homeless derelicts of humanity congregate, parasites that live off the scraps the Rich throw at them to salve infrequent moments of guilt. For some home is in one of the abandoned industrial buildings the land development contractors hadn't bothered to demolish, which leaves a slowly decaying, ugly wasteland beyond the white walls of the estate. These in fact are the aristocracy of the homeless. Those less fortunate find shelter at the wall, with a tattered tent if they're lucky, a strip of discarded cardboard if less so. Or nothing at all if they've taken up the very bottom rung of the ladder of material gain.

As Leo approaches the foot of the Blue Mountains he's become accustomed to these depressing sights, to this extreme of disparity. But one of the private estates, an exception of extravagance, catches his eye. Of marble columns. Of glitter, and more glitter. In the houses within the estate, or the line of the filthy expensive cars in a continuous stream entering or leaving. Or the occasional glimpse in an Open Top, of Woman as Trophy, in shimmering metallic dress, daubed in jewelry; the interior of the vehicle a jet plane battery of buttons and lights, and spread of the finest white calf leather. Or it might have been the sight of the Derelict scuffling with A Pair at the royally appointed entrance to this Monster of Inequality. They obviously inhabitants of The Serene Lakes Private Estate, stand beside an enormous saloon styled in the fashion of a Rolls Royce of an early 20th Century vintage. Their way is blocked by The Derelict, who's so drunk that every time he tries to stand he slowly topples over. Up to this point The Pair have been no more than verbally flailing him, but the woman has lost patience. In a rather masculine fashion she hitches up the Golden Fleece gown

and stalks up to The Derelict, at the same time pulling out from her bag a gold plated revolver.

The entrance to Serene Lake, even for someone of sober temperament, might to some degree resemble the Gates to Heaven. A high white wall that stretches in either direction along the road until it disappears into the dark. At the entrance, in a sweeping curve the walls end at a pair of brightly lit white marble columns standing at least ten storeys high, through which anyone wanting to enter or leave (why would they want to do that?) must pass between. 'The thighs of a goddess' had been the developer's instruction to the designer. Allowed to enter only of course once they've proved the substantiality of their credentials to one of the phalanx of guards dripping in so much gold braid they could be taken for an unbenevolent Dictator of any one of a dozen impoverished African nations.

In the space in front of the high walls are several hectares of grass so immaculately cut and of such a vivid green one would have to assume it had been sprayed on. Beyond the security gates there are tantalizing glimpses of The Good Life – vast estates, roads wide enough to fit a soccer pitch, a lake dazzling in the moonlight.... And so on. Seeing all this, to The Derelict there is no doubt in his mind that he does stand at the Gates to Heaven. And he has been trying to explain this to The Pair. However the chasm between thought and comprehensible articulation is too wide for such metaphysical reflections to be understood.

Woman, hands on hips (she really is suspiciously masculine), gun dangling from a finger, stands over The Derelict, who smiles gap toothed up at her. Ignoring this proffered olive branch, Woman begins ardently kicking the defenceless baby of a drunk. At one point she stabs a stiletto in his groin and can be heard shouting to The Breadwinner, "Well, that's one less of the cunts that will spawn their amoeba." (Shouldn't that be amoebae?)

Not unreasonably The Derelict has by now concluded The Pair are determined to prevent his entry into Heaven. He finds himself the need to convince them of the error, which proves to be the fillip he's been needing for nigh on a decade since his life fell apart (lost job, lost wife, lost kids.... yada, yada yada). With surprising agility The Derelict jumps to his feet. Woman, alarmed by this unexpected display of vim, cowers involuntarily (the bully is surprisingly easily turned) and starts yelping for Rescue by Man. The Derelict staggers towards her yelling in what sounds like a hotchpotch of several different languages. In fact, he is attempting to explain, "After all I've been through, surely if anyone deserves to go to Heaven, don't I? Look at you, what do you want for? And you get to go in there. Why would you stop me?" he wails, uncomprehending, and uncomprehendingly.

Man calls to Wife, his intention being to Swallow Pride and bolt. But with surprising speed The Derelict runs over and grabs him by the (very expensive) coat sleeve. Reeking breath envelops Man as The Derelict pleads, "What do I have to do to get into this place mate? I can't take any more of this life – mate, I gotta get in there! And I sure as Hell don't wanna go there." He waves vaguely into the dark. Having achieved a greater coherence by painstakingly slow enunciation, Man comprehends enough to get the gist of The Derelict's thrust. Shielded now behind the car door, which garners him faint courage, Man sneers, "Like fucking everything you filthy cunt. Moneeey! If you ain't got it, you'll never get in here. And you sure as fuck ain't never gonna have it. So get the fuck out of my way and let us out!" Lip curls and he looks The Derelict up and down, "This place isn't for the likes of you: it's for people that have Made It. All I see in you cunt, is Failure."

Derelict looks shocked; holds a surprisingly tight grip on Man's sleeve, "You mean all along Jesus was lying? Heaven is only for the rich?" Man, all confusion cleared, is starting to enjoy himself. "If this is Heaven, boy – which you can take from me is the closest fucking thing to it. If it is, mate you'll never see inside them Pearly Gates." Winks at Woman and laughs, "You shouldn't believe that shit, boy. That was just to keep you lot quiet while we emptied your pockets."

Woman adds, her face a puckered, ugly sneer, "Yeah, say it, babe. And stripped you all fucking naked once we'd done that." Gaining confidence in their superior number, and Derelict's obvious demoralized confusion, The Pair grab him and hurl him onto the grass. While sauntering back to the limo they talk in low voices, occasionally looking back at The Derelict and laughing coldly. The Derelict, his brief flurry of energy expended, is unable or unwilling (the effort is rather less than half hearted) to rise from the soft bed of grass on which he lies. He looks up at the two imposing marble towers and shakes his head disconsolately. From this distorting angle, the towers split in two and then, in a drunken multiplicity, start to dance before his eyes. The world itself starts to swirl, and almost immediately The Derelict heaves up the meagre contents of his stomach over himself.

At this point a few of his friends, who had waited until The Pair had definitively departed, come to his belated aid. Convinced they too are trying to prevent his reaching Paradise, he throws off these helping hands, "Get the fuck away from me cunts! No one's gonna stop me! Not when I'm this close." Plaintive wail, "Not after all I've been through." Looking disdainfully at the other homeless he lashes out with a foot, "I'm warning you, get the fuck away. I don't need any of your help." Nose tilts up and sneers, the bitter expression similar to the one on Woman's face, "I was one of them once."

Perhaps, however, he realises the futility of his attitude, because a few minutes later he stumbles off in the direction of the wall. To the place where the less than handful of people in the world that know him congregate, and where he keeps his few worthless belongings. Here a few small fires provide a baleful glow of light over the area. Abandoned by his friends, mumbling to himself, The Derelict doesn't notice the group of kids before it's too late. This is their familiar playground. Picking on one of the homeless derelicts, they find relatively innocent amusement tormenting these, so easily, tormentable. But tonight is different. It might have been nothing more than the influence of The Full Moon. None of them were ever able to give a coherent explanation for why they did what they did. "Something came over us. I wasn't me...." was the best any of them could come up with.

At least it's over mercifully quickly. The Derelict would have felt nothing once one of them had expertly coshed him. He falls, pole axed, to the ground. A smile - which none of them notice - begins to spread over his face as they strip him naked and throw his clothes and possessions on the nearest fire. Once it blazes up they throw him on it too. As the body hisses and fizzes the flames climb high, almost to the full height of the wall, lighting up the whole of the dismal area. A sudden burst, as his long mane of hair catches fire. The kids dance around like they're at a party or, as one explained, "Red Indians on the War Path mate.... We were once Warriors. Yeah!" Laughing, drinking, they throw empty vodka bottles on the fire. With the body now unrecognisable as human, and as the flames die down, the children drift away to their homes.

Leo reaches the foot of The Blue Mountains just as they threw The Derelict onto the fire. Though exhausted, terrified that another car has been put on his tail, he continues to push the e911 to its limits as it snakes up the steep road. The flickering lights of the city, as the car climbs into the mountains, remain visible through the shattered rear window. It comforts Leo to see the dimly lit redundancy of the industrial zones surrounding the brightly lit fairy tales of private estates. In the further distance, now only just visible, is the Sydney CBD - a garish monolith of high rises that at this distance merge into a continuum of orange light. The only movement is the blinking red lights of helicopters swarming around the buildings like insects. Most probably even in broad daylight he wouldn't appreciate the contrast of nature's quiet, timeless beauty he's driving through against the coarse ugliness of humanity's footprint he only recently departed.

Driving.... driving.... Barely conscious of where he's going, as dawn breaks Leo finds himself back in his home town. The Model from which he'd traded everything and everyone to escape.

The sun is coming up as Leo drives along The High Street in Arcadia. He's immediately distracted by the jumble of recollections triggered by what he passes. Just as engrossed as Leo, lost in each other, a young couple step off the sidewalk almost straight in front of Leo's car. Slamming on the brakes, at the same time smashing his fist on the two tone horn, the noise sets off a flight of cockatoos who've adopted the nearby tree for their morning gathering. Raucous screeching; a flurry of white, the cockatoos swoop low over the car, with the deliberate purpose of making their irritation at the disturbance felt. The couple laugh and mouth apologies as Leo flaps his arms wildly to shoo the birds away. They take no notice and continue swooping and screeching as the car makes its way down the street, drawing the attention of locals, none of whom appear to be in a hurry. Cursing the couple Leo keeps glancing at them in the rear view mirror. Looking happy and carefree, when they get to the other side of the road they're joined by a young boy: they look too young for him to be their child.

Turning off the main street Leo passes by rows of the quarter acre blocks that make up most of the town. Whilst the lawns are universally trim, and each has splashes of color from shrubs and flower beds, there's something different, personal, about each front yard. Leo, recollecting the immaculate perfection of Serene Lakes and the other private estates, sees only something unkempt and shoddy: he gives the pleasant, lived in atmosphere of the street a dismissive sneer. After that he finds unfavorable comparison in everything he sees in Arcadia. It makes him feel better, and a troubling thought which had begun to weigh on him - enough he'd felt the need to confront it - now begins to lighten.

At the far end of the leafy suburban street, wide enough for half a dozen cars to drive abreast, he comes across a sight typical in The Model towns. It was not THE reason he left, but it could be said to have been the straw that triggered his departure. Swarming over the roof of a four bedroom brick house, a group of men, women and their children are carefully replacing the dozens of tiles which a recent hailstorm had broken. Everyone is helping everyone - passing up and round materials and tools, and assisting in any way they can with the repairs - their manner always relaxed, easy going. Time does not seem important; the work itself even, seems secondary - merely an excuse for them to join together. Enjoying shared laughter; gently teasing each other. There's one man perched on the apex of the roof, who's only job it seems is to entertain the others. As Leo looks at them his anger rises so rapidly it quickly becomes uncontrolled and he

starts screaming and cursing at them for their complacency. But most of all, it is the lack of discord – which for Leo it is the only signal of something worthwhile being attempted. That it's only through one person dominating another, bending them to their will, that anything meaningful can happen. The greater the force needed, the greater the ultimate prize. These people represent the antithesis of this: placid harmony reigns. He drives quickly on, the jarring image of their industrious achievement an irritant.

Determining to get out of town as quickly as possible, he barely takes in the old man sitting on his front deck. Under an awning, in a semi circle around him, sit perhaps a dozen teenage boys and girls. They're listening intently to what he has to say – their eyes shine with excitement at the knowledge the wise and loving old man is imparting. Too, his eyes shine at the recollection of an adventurous, travelled past, and in seeing the enthusiasm in the children's faces.

Leo overtakes a line of slow moving, brightly painted transport pods filled with people. The side of each one depict historical scenes – knights jousting; pilgrims climbing a precipitous path to a church perched on top of a mountain; an Indiaman sailing ship struggling through monstrous seas. Rolling down the window, Leo laughs nastily and shouts, "Watch out mate, you're taking your fu.... You're taking your life in your hands travelling in them mate." A few people smile, but blankly, mechanically, indulging his outburst like a tolerant parent might. One of them stares intently at Leo for some moments and then gives an enthusiastic wave of recognition. Leo, distracted by this, doesn't see the car in front brake suddenly. The 911 bumps into the back of it with a faint crunch of broken glass. Immediately Leo leaps out of the car and starts shouting at the other driver, blaming them for the accident. The man looks surprised and somewhat bemused by Leo's attitude. The pods having stopped, a crowd forms around the two vehicles. Everyone tells Leo not to worry, "Everything can be fixed in no time, and we've got the best Car Detailers on the mountain. It'll look like new by the time they've finished."

Leo snaps back, "What do you mean, it's a brand new car! I've only had it for five hours and he's smashed it up!" Leo's temper rises in the face of everyone's calm reasonableness. He senses the situation slipping away from him and he grabs the other driver, a middle aged, stockily built man, by the collar. The man, without the slightest effort, disengages himself from Leo, at the same time staring incredulously. Just then the person who'd recognised Leo comes up and throws a friendly arm over his shoulder and pulls him away from the crowd. Out of earshot Phil tells Leo, "Mate, you can tell you've been in The Big Smoke for too long. Come on mate – a couple of broken lights and some paint scuffs, the boys at the

detailers will be able to fix that up while we're having breakfast." Phil smiles at recollections from their youth, "Remember mate, the old café down by the river? It's still there." Laughs, "And it won't have changed much I doubt."

With Phil smiling warmly, Leo – a moment before tense, combative - relaxes a little. But then another memory comes back to him, and he angrily throws off his friend's arm. "Yeah, I remember the fucking place. Remember Shirley? Yeah, one of the reasons I left this fucking shithole town. And I'm sure it won't have changed, just the same as you haven't. This fucking town hasn't and it never, EVER fucking will." Leo abruptly turns his back on Phil and starts making his way back to the Porsche. With the crowd now dispersed, he turns around and shouts, "I never meant to come back here. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing here now!" He glances round at the few remaining faces; their looks of sympathy rile him to anger again, "Do you know why I left this fucking place? Too many people fucking helping each other. Too much fucking NICE. Get's you fucking down!"

Just then - and they all hear it, heads swiveling in unison - tyres squealing, a black BMW M3, identical to the one written off earlier, does a fast slide turn round the corner, and then gradually slows down, cruising to a standstill at an angle across the front of the 911. Without thinking where he's going Leo pushes through the crowd and starts running. Moments later he hears them behind him. They seem to be taking their time, no more than jogging, like they're not in a hurry to finish it. Staring wildly around, Leo realises he's making for the café down by the river. Coming to the top of the long, gently declining bank, Leo puts on an extra spurt. Running down the steep slope, on the edge of out of control, half way down he loses his footing and stumbles, almost falls, but manages to recover. At the same moment he'd heard the loud phut! of a silenced gun shot, and just ahead sees the bullet smack into a tree. Ducking, weaving, like he'd seen it done in the movies, Leo has almost made it to the bottom of the bank, the café a hundred metres or so downstream, when it feels as if someone has picked him up and thrown him. Flung down into the water the pain suddenly hits him and he gasps, gulping in a mouthful of water. Turning over, choking, he looks up into the blank face of one of the killers. He's someone Leo knows. Only a little – they might have exchanged a few words or been in the same room at times. But it's as if Leo is a total stranger – in his eyes there's no shadow of recognition, or any emotion for that matter. All his attention is focused on what he's doing: the man closes one eye and, holding the gun at arm's length, takes careful aim at Leo's chest and squeezes the trigger.

Leo is dying. Though he can't feel anything he knows he's dying. Or is it because he can't feel anything? Looking up into the sky he sees the flock of Cockatoos. Alarmed by the gunfire they've risen above the treetops and are wheeling in a long sweep centred over his head. Their raucous screeching drowns out all other sound. It reminds Leo of another time, of his youth. The same flock of screeching cockatoos; the noise mingling with the laughter of his friends down in the river, in the deep pool under the waterfall. A few of them at the top making exaggerated preparations to dive. One of them leaps off the overhanging rock and hangs a long swallow dive. Phil shouts to Leo to join them, but he's torn: wanting to join his friends so he can show off his dives – show that he can do better than Warren – but at the same time wanting to stay with Shirley. It's the first time they've officially been together as boyfriend / girlfriend. He wants to show her off, but a part of him just wants to be with her: hear the sound of her voice spoken just for him – her lilting, musical voice, and the bell chimes of her laughter.

Leo feels the squeeze of her hand on his and he looks up into her smiling, hazel eyes: "Go on, you know you want to. I'm happy here just watching, but I might come in later." Something in what she says, or how she says it, sends a bolt of jealousy through Leo. Lips thin, his smile forced, he shakes his head. Leo pulls Shirley to him, "I can have that any time I want, but for how long will I have you?"

She grimaces, "What do you mean? I'm not a dog to own. I want to be with you Leo, you're smart; interesting; different. The smartest in the class by a country mile. I never understood why you stayed here after you won the scholarship to the best senior school in the State." Leo's smile becomes fixed, "And leave my mates behind? Not knowing anyone. Having to board somewhere far away from my family. Not likely." He'd never told anyone that Shirley was one of the reasons he'd knocked back an opportunity that no doubt would have changed the whole direction of his life. He'd got the offer a few days after they'd started dating and it had been on an impulse; one that he sometimes now regretted. Part of his decision was because he genuinely loved Shirley or, at least, he genuinely believed he loved Shirley. He still wasn't really sure what love was. But he knew one thing – he wasn't going to leave Arcadia and let Warren have a clear field to step in and take Shirley.

It's about as typical a scenario as they come: two teenage boys fighting over a girl, and her loving the attention. Leo is standing less than an arm's length away from Warren, red in the face, stabbing a finger to emphasise his points. He shouts

at him, "You ask her out again and I'm fucking warning you.... That's all I'll say – you've been fucking warned. So stay away from my fucking girlfriend!"

Warren laughs, sneering an imitation of Leo, "My girlfriend. My girlfriend.... Since when was Shirley your fucking girlfriend mate? And if she is, what the fuck was she doing behind the footy stadium and me with my hands down her pants?" Warren turns to Shirley, "Isn't that right mate?" Shirley looks down and her cheeks turn pink, but she can't help giving a little smile. Warren chides her, "Come on mate, you weren't so shy last night, were you?" Leo looks from Warren to Shirley; she gives a slight shrug of the shoulders and grimaces. But then she straightens up and squares her shoulders, "Leo, mate, no one owns me. Least of all you!" Leo makes a movement towards Shirley and by the look on his face he might be wanting to hit her. But then he stops and looks from one to the other. Both of them are smiling at him. Carelessly, as if what happened the previous night was nothing. Warren opens his mouth to say something. Something smart - he can always be relied on for that – that will make Leo feel even smaller than he already does. But the nonchalant smirk changes to one of fear when Leo pulls out a knife and flicks it open. It glints under the bright overhead lights. "No mate, there's no need for that," Warren pleads. He steps back but is immediately against the wall, and trapped between two desks. The whining tone still in his voice he tries to make light of it, "Mate we were only fooling around; it didn't mean anything. Everyone knows Shirley's your girl."

For a second Leo looks placated and his knife arm drops. Shirley, enraged, shouts, "No I'm not! I'm no one's girl and I never will be. I'm not a fucking pet. No one owns me, least of all you, Leo." Leo gives a roar and launches himself at Warren. He tries to dodge the attack but he's too slow, and Leo buries the knife blade in his belly, right up to the hilt. Warren goes down, clutching the knife, and writhes on the floor.

For a moment the only sound is of Warren moaning loudly but then, all together, the whole class bursts into laughter and everyone's clapping. Warren, still on his back on the floor, holds up the plastic retractable knife like it was a trophy. The teacher, who'd been sat at the back of the class, calls out, "Very good all of you – only Warren, I think you overdid the death scene again mate."

"Ah teeecher!" The large, gangling youth laughs – a smile is never far away; nor are the jokes which can be guaranteed to crack the class up. Jokes that from anyone else wouldn't be half as funny. He has the born comedian's timing, and the voice and facial expressions that make it impossible not to laugh. He says, mock serious, "You know teacher, one of these days Leo's gonna do it for real. I thought he was gonna do me THIS time in fact. Weren't you mate?" Leo looks sheepish

and reddens, but then someone says, “Mate, don’t knock it; him and Shirley could go on the stage with that act. True, he did look like he was gonna. But it’s called acting mate – something you wouldn’t understand.” The class starts whooping, and the teacher has to shout to be heard, “Alright everyone, calm down! You seem to have forgotten this is a psychology exam.” Groans all round, “OK, everything is set up. Teams of three in each of the booths in the gym hall; an examiner is there waiting for you. You know what to do – replay the scene using what you’ve learned in class. Marks for diffusion, empathy, diversion, analysis. And of course solutions. If I see any knives out, that’s an automatic fail!”

As the students file out of the classroom, Shirley slips into step with Leo. She takes his hand and whispers, “God love, sometimes it’s hard to tell whether you’re acting or not. Sends a shiver down my spine when I see the look on your face.” Leo looks drawn, a little pale, and wears a fixed expression. “You alright love?” she asks, a little worried. Leo tries to brush off Shirley’s concern, “Mate, like Phil said, it’s just acting. Teacher said we’d get extra marks if we made it more realistic.” He stares at her, a challenge in his eyes. Shirley looks upset, unsure if Leo is telling her the truth. He turns away and mumbles, “Don’t worry, it just takes time to come down from it, you know.” Looks at her straight then, “Get into the part, right!” He smiles more naturally now and squeezes her hand, “See you at break?” Still, after Leo walks off, Shirley stares after him, shaking her head slightly, looking doubtful.

Five years later. Leo and Phil are down at the river, outside the café, when they hear about it. Phil, perplexed and distraught, asks Leo, “Why do you think they did it?” Leo, suddenly angry, though not really knowing why, responds, “How the fuck should I know. I haven’t spoken to the slut since she went off to college.” Phil, silent for a minute, says, “Someone said she lived too much through Warren. It was his dream to go up the mountain, not hers.” Leo knows this isn’t true, but after all these years Shirley and Warren are still a sore topic for him. “Babong! Change of topic mate. I don’t wanna talk about this any more. N the fuck I.” Phil, still shocked, stares at the cascading waterfall, and says nothing. Leo doesn’t seem to notice his friend’s upset, “Mate, did I tell you I’m finally heading off for The Big Smoke? Next week.”

Phil turns and stares at Leo, his face blank. “Yeah mate you can congratulate me whenever you want.” Though no one’s within cooeee, Leo glances round and drops his voice, “But hey, you’re the first person I’ve told mate, so don’t go blabbing it. My folks don’t even know.” Phil shakes his head; he looks as though he might start crying, “That’s not fair not telling them.”

Leo shouts angrily, "Who gives a fuck about not fair. Mate I'm fucking bored shitless. I'll kill myself if something doesn't happen. Or kill someone! How the fuck can you stay here? Think of spending the rest of your life here - beats me mate."

It's an hour later; the two friends are still at the café. Phil has recovered from the news that's set the whole town buzzing. Convinced it will be a terrible mistake if Leo goes to Sydney, he's trying to persuade him to stay in Arcadia. "Mate it's just as exciting here. Different yes, but still. Think about it. The challenge of keeping our community a success. Sustainably. Who's ever done that in history? Not just slash and burn and make a fast buck. Look at Sydney – new buildings going up all the time. It's like a race, nothing to do with what people need – half of them are empty the whole time. How is that sustainable? Mate, what we've got here, that takes real wisdom, to take on board what every one wants and synthesize that into something we can all feel a part of. The factories; all the other businesses; development of the town. Like the new college. We're all responsible and have a say in how things are run and are gonna change. Where else will you find that? It's a real challenge, for everyone. A load on, sure. But a good one."

Leo responds dismissively, "Yeah? And what's the fucking reward for all this wisdom and effort mate? Mate, I wanna make as much money as I can and retire at thirty. I wanna be someone. So people recognise me on the street." Phil stares at Leo for a few moments before replying. Some of the energy goes out of him, but then he rouses himself, "Mate the reward is living in a community where people are proud and feel a part of it. Kids that, even though we live in a remote town, they know a lot about the world, and look forward to getting out there and experiencing it. But when someone is facing a challenge, facing adversity - it's our adversity too. We pull together, we overcome it. Together."

But Leo isn't interested. He seems in no doubt about his plans, and has a ready knock down for all the arguments Phil puts forward to try to persuade him to stay. "Who gives a shit about sustainable. Bottom line, you can't make it here. I mean make it really big. Make big money fast. That's why I'm going to The Smoke. I'm gonna have everything I ever wanted. And couldn't have here because there's six others ahead of me with their hands out."

Phil shakes his head and smiles sadly, knowingly, which irritates Leo, "Mate, how many people do you know that made it on their own? Yeah, yeah, I know Leo. It's gonna be you. A handful make it big, but there's a queue round the block that think they will but never do." Exasperated by what he sees as Leo's blinkered naivety Phil goes on, "Then again, nothing to be ashamed of if you do fail mate. Look at Harry. He was the biggest concern in the town when the shit hit the fan for him. He couldn't have recovered on his own. Not after all the bad luck he had."

Mother of all storms that was.” For the first time Leo laughs with genuine humor, “Hehe, yeah literally mate.”

Harry Wittaker had started out with one simple ambition: to be the biggest transport concern in The Blue Mountains. He started out conventionally enough. First with a few dump trucks to serve the steady demand for construction transport. And then, with logistics in place, he invested in a small fleet of sixteen seater buses that plied a trade up and down the mountain. Harry’s business was fortunate to be born at just the right time – when the transport industry was being transformed by automated driving and electric vehicles. Seeing the writing on the wall ahead of everyone else, Harry offloaded the trucks and buses and invested in driverless electric transport pods like the ones Leo had mocked in Arcadia, with the historic scenes painted on the sides. Once established his business became an important service – you could say it was one of the backbones of the Blue Mountains communities – eight person driverless pods that followed set routes within each town. Or which were coupled into a road train of four pods, to shuttle people between the towns and down the mountain.

Everything went well and the business prospered – at that time he was probably the largest business in The Blue Mountains. But then a series of disasters struck which almost overnight destroyed everything he’d built up over ten years. It started with a particularly strong electrical storm which swept over the whole of New South Wales. Direct lightening strikes on radio towers across the mountain immobilised the communication systems in the pods which led to several of them being involved in fatal accidents. The first was the worst – a pod full of kids on their way to school went through a red light. They were wiped out by one of the dump trucks Harry had offloaded onto his competitors. An old woman was run down by another and died of a heart attack. A pregnant woman was stranded on her way to hospital to have her baby. Fortunately a doctor was passing by; the baby was born on the sidewalk, and both he and his mother survived. Plus dozens of other near misses, most of which went unreported.

It couldn’t have come at a worse time for Harry because he’d just gone through a big expansion and was relying on the increased income to pay creditors. On top of that he was grappling with the theft of the savings he’d put away for just such rainy days. An employee had wiped out his bank account and gone on a gambling spree which only ended when she’d lost it all, and then threw herself under a train. The government wanted to halt operations until a full investigation had been completed. Harry would have been long gone by the time that was finished.

But everyone knew it was a problem with the communication system – not enough fail safes, and no ground based emergency stop system in the event of a blackout. But what difference would any of that make if no one would travel on Harry's bright orange pods? Which was the beat up story being put out by the media. Maybe if it had been another operator the community might have let Harry go to the wall, and that would have been the end of the story. But Harry was different to the businessmen that Leo so admired - and aspired to be himself as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Harry was born and brought up in The Mountains. He could count on his fingers how many times he'd been off it. He loved the mountain community, and he was part of it to his core. Though he'd had an outright monopoly of the public transport, he'd passed on the economies this brought him onto the community by charging such low fares that even The State Transport Company gave up trying to compete with him. He never exploited his advantage for himself – he and his family lived modestly, no different to the workers he employed. In fact everyone in the company earned near enough the same hourly rate, Harry included.

And so, when there was talk of closing the business down, the community was quick to respond. First they went on strike – an across the mountain, blanket refusal to work or engage in any commerce. Chastened, the government started to look seriously at how could the safety concerns could be resolved. Funded by the community, the communication system was redesigned, approved and up and running within a month. Back in operation Harry was able to make all his payments in full to his creditors on their due date. They'd all been rubbing their hands with glee, expecting to have what they knew to be a solid business fall into their laps. They went away disappointed, but could hardly complain as Harry never missed a payment, and in fact paid out in half the agreed term. That's what comes of a businessman that runs his operation not to exploit but for the good of the community. That's the story of Harry Wittaker.

“... Here we've got every kind of industry mate. Money is queuing up to build their factories here. You know that. It's cooler up here so cheaper to run the Lights Out operations. But we're not in a rush. Aren't half of them producing shit no one needs? What's the fucking rush? We'll build a new factory when what it produces is really needed. For that you need to be flexible and we are. No one expects to be in the same job in ten or even five years. But who's worried? We're not driven by fear to survive.” Looking as if pulling the rabbit out of the hat, the definitive argument, he slaps his hand on the table, “Do they have any safety net in The Smoke? Right. Here The State is an ally of the vulnerable – not its adversary. It

comes down to taxes to make it work. Everyone paying their fair share: books have to be balanced, hey. Every business here pays its share with a tax on....” Leo snorts, “Fuck taxes. Make as much money as you can and pay as little as you can without getting caught.” Phil ignores Leo, “Or Welfare, when we're not working and training for new jobs? What about your father, brother and sister that lost their jobs?” Leo gives a look of distaste, “Should work harder and longer hours – in The Smoke no one’s guaranteed a holiday; you have to earn it. That’s how it should be.”

Phil shakes his head, “Yeah, I heard it’s the same at school: kids have to earn the right to sit at their desk. Until they do they have to stand. I don’t believe it but that’s what you hear. But jobs mate, you’re fighting against a rising tide: with automation jobs are only gonna get scarcer.” For a moment Leo looks uncertain, but then shakes his head violently and waves his hand dismissively. Unexpectedly, Phil starts laughing, “Mate, who cares? It’s not a bad thing. In fact it’s all good - let the machine do the shit jobs. Yeah, yeah they can do any job pretty much, but if it's an interesting and rewarding job then why give that to a robot? It’s not always about efficiency mate. Let the doctor or engineer or gardener enjoy doing it. And for the rest of us we were taught at school how to plan for our free time. Prepare ourselves for it. Make the most of it.”

Leo sneers, “Yeah and look what good it did Warren and Shirley.” Phil shakes his head, “Mate, some people you can't help. Education can only go so far. If you’re wrong in the head you’ll fuck up unless you let someone help you.” Phil pauses, reflecting on some of his memories of Warren and Shirley together. “Yeah, they're the proof of that I guess. But for the rest of us – look how our lives have been transformed by education. Learning how to be at peace with ourselves. Really understanding our psychology so we know why we’re feeling and reacting the way we do. So we can control it.” He giggles and glances at Leo, “Well, most of us mate anyway. Yeah, Learning to Be. Released from drudge work, with lots of free time, it’s Utopia - not something to be terrified by. Hey, is it really true what I was saying, that at schools in Sydney the kids all start in class but have to earn the right to a chair? And if they misbehave their mouths are taped over and have to earn the right to come back into class.” Leo tosses his head, “What the fuck do I know? What the fuck do I care?”

This raises an eyebrow from Phil and he shrugs, “And learning to live with each other. Start with the psychology of it. Yeah, again we learned all that at school. That was a good time. And look at the outcome, how at peace we are with each other here in Arcadia. And, Sydney excepted, it’s the same anywhere you go. People say our generation knows more about the world than any other. Well that

stands to reason – how you gonna get on with other people, other cultures, if you don't understand them and their history? And I've had the opportunity to be amongst it, travelled half the world mate. Stuck in Sydney, more than you ever will I'm guessing mate." Phil muses, "You know mate, I did feel ready for life when I left school – this life of when the majority are free from drudgery. The first time in history. It's fucking amazing to be alive in these times mate." Phil can rant, and it seems like he's on a train for one. But he suddenly stops and stares at Leo, "And yet you want to leave all this," He sweeps his hands over the river, the café, the waterfall, then takes in the whole town. "For that? Where no one's trying to understand each other – it's all dog eat dog. How can I screw them to get the most out of them." Leo mouths a 'Suits me mate' but Phil ignores him, "Nah, business should be about serving the community – not fucking people over. Really mate, I don't understand why you'd wanna live there, and I never will. Good luck to you though. And if it doesn't work out don't stay out of pride." Phil suddenly looks serious and tears start to well up. "You're loved here, you know that don't you mate? There will always be a warm home for you here mate."

Leo's response is scathing, "Why would I ever want to come back here? Mate once I'm gone I'm never coming back. You won't see me for dust." But then, despite himself, moved by Phil's concern, Leo tries to be conciliatory, "Sure there's no poverty here. But there's also no chance to make it big here. That gives me a fucking hard on mate. While here: fucking d – e – a – d mate." Suddenly angry again (Phil's calm complacency always has this effect on him), Leo flicks the finger at him, "Mate, you can stick your fucking fishing rod up your arse - I'm outta here." Leo stands up to leave and Phil gets up too. Punching his friend lightly on the shoulder, Leo smirks, "Shirley and Warren – who would have believed it. Maybe I should get some flying lessons."

It's something they've been planning for years. With studies finished they're taking a helicopter to the top of Mont Blanc, where they'll set up blankets and make love.

"It's exactly as I'd pictured it" Shirley whispers in Warren's ear as they stand waving off the helicopter. "Though I've never seen video of up here, it's exactly the same. The mountains all in place; the snow covering in the same places. The rocks giving us shelter from a strong wind; the snow being blown off. And down there, the route we're skiing back. Warren, love, I can't believe it's exactly as I saw it in my dreams." She looks up into his face, "Scary, isn't it?" Warren takes her hand. Though the smile is still there, there's a seriousness about him now, something only the people he cares deeply about ever see. He takes her arms and

pulls her to him so she's pressed against his chest. For a time they stand in the early morning sunlight, two crisp silhouettes on the iconic mountain top. Puffs of clouds skid across the blue sky. With the wind now dropped silence - absolute silence - reigns.

Eventually they separate, seemingly reluctant for it to end, and begin unpacking from the containers a heavy waterproof tarp and thick blankets. In silence they lay everything out. The atmosphere has a spiritual feel - a sense of ritual has come over them; a tradition of which they are a part, its origins lost in a distant past. They move slowly, mechanically, in a unison of flow. Eventually, with the tent securely pegged down (inside it the food and a cooker have been set up for a later feast), Warren and Shirley smile shyly at one another. It reminds them both of the first time they made love. They've been together for five years now: a few months after the Psych exam Shirley had abruptly left Leo for Warren. He'd completely lost it when she told him. Terrified her with the explosion of fury and threats he'd made against them both. She couldn't help it, even though he'd really done nothing - but she'd seen the same look in his eyes as when they'd been playacting; he'd even used some of the same words. She couldn't stop herself thinking he was going to hurt her. Yes, knife her! How foolish, she knew that, but she couldn't help it. As he was shouting at her, it was all she could think about. He'd talked about honesty and integrity; about not being dependent on someone else for happiness. And then, "Think about the rest of our group, the disharmony! People taking sides." Yes, everything they'd been taught, about themselves, about getting on with each other, living together. But she didn't hear a word of it.

Before coming Shirley and Warren had both voiced concern (laughed about it sometimes) that it would prove to be too cold and the dream they shared of making love up there would turn out a fizzle. Warren had joked, "What if it's so frigging cold you can't find it. Gone into hibernation?" She'd laughed, "Don't you worry young man. We have secret ways to coax them out." In fact it was warm under the thick rugs, and they couldn't wait to get their heavy winter clothes off. Naked, she lies in the crook of his arm, just their heads poked out from under the blankets - both of them are lost in the view, over the whole world it seemed to them at that moment. A few hundred metres below the movement of a circling bird catches Warren's eye. He points it out to Shirley. She smiles and kisses his lips as he's still talking. About how he'd like them both to be eagles, making love on the wing. She grips him, "We are, love, we are eagles. Flying over the top of the world. Come into me love."

More than once they make love, and it's as perfect as they'd imagined it: alone, they the only two humans on this beautiful, redeemed planet. They would

continue its perfection wherever they went. And wherever it was, they'd be there together.

In the early afternoon the wind picks up and snow flurries swirl around them. They'd been content to lie, she in his arms, looking out over the breathtaking scene, he telling her what he planned to do with his life and she, unable to dream her own dreams, seeing herself a part of his. She would follow, willingly. Wherever he chose to lead them. From time to time directing him away from reefs and towards greater harmony. But content to follow; be the navigator of his dreams.

With the clouds starting to coalesce and descend it's time for them to be packing up and leaving. Not yet dropped to them, but it could only be an hour or so before the mountain peak would be lost in the clouds. Dressing quickly they repair to the tent, and on seeing the feast suddenly realise how hungry they are. Where they started with half the tent filled with piles of food containers, it's not long before they've demolished everything and, contented, heads poked out of the tent, they once again stare out over the mountains.

Unexpectedly a look of sadness passes over Warren's face and his voice catches when he says, "Better pack up and leave soon if we want to stay below the cloud cover." She looks wistfully into his eyes as she responds, "I don't want this day to ever end, love." He suddenly grips her fiercely, and again his voice catches, "Don't worry babe, it never will. Together for ever; it's what we agreed wasn't it?" Her heart skips a beat at the picture conjured up by his words. Excited to leave now she scrambles out of the tent and shouts to him, "OK then! Let's get going. You think I can beat you to the bottom?"

Warren smiles but still looks serious, "Let's not rush it – we've got a good few hours to get down if we take our time." Shirley drags him out of the tent, "Allright! Allright! But let's get going; I can't wait to start." She points down the mountain, "Look at it, love – it's like someone painted it." It certainly would make a grand theme - the wide expanse of crisp, inviting snow; the occasional outcrop of hard, grey rock and further down the spreading green canopy of trees. It has a static, timeless quality – making it hard to picture anything moving within it. The eagles perhaps the only thing that might look in place. Humans could only ever appear intruders.

As Shirley hurries to pack the large containers the helicopter will collect the next day, Warren seems to dawdle over everything, dragging it out. Shirley teases him, "What is it love? Did I suck all the energy out of you." She laughs but he remains distracted. She goes up to him and puts an arm around his waist. "It's allright love. If we can make it happen here, we can do it again. Some other place; some other adventure. Maybe better still!" She smiles up at him encouragingly,

willing him to take some of the boundless energy she feels. He shakes himself, seems to try to rouse himself, but is still unable to shift whatever's weighing him down. She takes his hand and kisses it, "Come on, you'll feel better once we get going. You won't be able to think of anything then, except trying to get down in one piece." A few minutes later: she takes his arm and shakes him, "Hey, come on, we're done here love. Let's go!"

Shirley snaps on her skis and starts limbering up her body. Transferring her weight from side to side on the skis, getting used to the feeling of being on them after so long. Memories start to flood back. Of hurtling downhill, at this speed able to control direction by just the slightest shift in body weight. Of having to push herself, beyond herself, to keep up with Warren, who's the best skier she's ever seen. Glancing over at him she sees him still dragging it out, as if reluctant to leave the mountain top. Taking forever to adjust his skis, but eventually he's ready. Helmet and goggles make it impossible to see his expression, but just from the way he stands – slouching, staring into the distance – it's clear his mood hasn't lifted. Losing patience, Shirley pushes off, at the same time shouting over her shoulder to him to follow her. In seconds she's flying down the steep slope, sometimes airborne as the ground drops away beneath her.

It's only a few minutes, but longer than Shirley had expected, when Warren swoops past her, skis hissing over the hard crust. He waves and shouts something as he passes. She doesn't catch what he says, but she doesn't need to. She knows – it's on. The race is on! The exhilaration of speed, the thrill of danger, the perfection of the scenery, removes all doubts and fears. Images of their love making and the rush of feelings break in on her thoughts from time to time. But it's momentary, as another obstacle, another life threatener, rears up in front of her. It takes all her skill to stay on her feet, to make it through the steep, narrow half pipes carved through the rock. And not be thrown over the cliff's edge, only metres away, and to oblivion.

After half an hour of knife edge skiing, pushing them both to the limits of their abilities, Warren slows a little. Just enough to allow Shirley to enjoy the breathtaking scenery, instead of seeing it being just a passing blur. It's no less exhilarating than the thrill of throwing themselves down the mountain, challenging it to take them in its hold and crush life, all energy, out of them. Another hour and the treacherous narrows have been replaced by wide sweeps of crisp white, still virgin plains of snow. Still a thousand metres above the highest village, they have another hour at least of skiing before they reach it. In another half an hour they might start to come across the first of the other skiers.

Shirley shouts to Warren to stop. She wants to savor for a few minutes the memories of their solitude, the primal experience of being the only humans in the world. He seems to hear her, almost immediately leaning into a tight turn, in preparation to pull up. But just as he's about to stop he suddenly jams the ski sticks in the snow, twists in mid air and pushes off again. She hears him give a loud shout; she laughs, putting on a burst of speed herself to catch him up. Ahead is the first of the thick clumps of fir trees, through which narrow tracks have been cut for the skiers to pass through – so narrow one could reach out and touch each side with the ski poles. And with the branches joining overhead, a darkened tunnel is formed. The change in light, the sudden silence, and closed in, it's an eerie feeling after the vastness of the mountain range. Warren arrows down towards the needle wide gap in the trees, but before reaching it he veers off on a wide sweep that carves twin tracks through the snow a hundred metres in front of the line of trees. He continues to follow this path, which takes him towards the cliff face, which at this point drops vertically to the shelf on which the highest village is perched. Never slowing, when he reaches the edge he launches far out over the precipice where, for a moment, he seems to hang. Releasing his skis, as he plummets earthward he arches into a swallow dive.

Shirley, without thinking, had followed the long, smooth curve formed by Warren's skis. When still some distance from the cliff edge she'd screamed a warning to Warren. It had only seemed to spur him to go faster, dropping his shoulders and bending lower into his skis. She might have hesitated at this moment, but if she did it was imperceptible; no one watching would have been certain she had. And then she too drops into a fast racing stance and follows her lover over the cliff.

Angus

The following pages are taken from a diary written by a man called Angus – his last name is never mentioned, but it has no bearing on the story. These fragments of a life were found in the small bundle of possessions left behind by Leo Gartner in his cell at The Asylum. They came into my hands because Leo was my best friend there and we shared a cell....

Allright, allright. Yeah, I stole them! I was intrigued by this man who Leo talked about incessantly – sometimes filled with a viperous hatred, and at others as if he were some kind of Prophet. What happened to the rest of the diary I've no idea, but in fact what remains is sufficient to illustrate the story of this man's life. It is characterised by a transformation: one which might be regarded as a model which others, equally bemused by modern life, might profitably imitate. Reading the early entries, of a so conventional man, it's astonishing what he later became. Then again, perhaps we think of ourselves, each other, in too narrow terms? I think so. Bind ourselves to a past that has no bearing on the possibilities of who we can be.

Ah, the Country Life!

My life is like so many of the privileged middle class living in Sydney during the final years of the twentieth century. Employed in interesting, well paid work. My own business. Owner of a home the envy of my friends and one in which I could happily end my days. It's a beautiful acreage property nestled in The Bush, yet less than an hour from the city. Such has been my life for five years, after a struggle of similar duration to reach this pinnacle, following our emigration from Europe. It is, to my mind at least, an idyllic life. My fears are trivial; the obstacles to its continuity are little more than speed bumps. OK, it's mostly at the weekends that we have any free time to ourselves, but that's life these days, isn't it? And it's certainly a tonne less stressful than if we'd stayed in England. We've got a lot more to show for it, no question. You know, it's exciting having your own business – creating something worthwhile. It gives real meaning and purpose to your life. And what chance would I have had to be my own man in staid old England where people STILL call each other 'Mr This; Mr That....' You have to screw everyone to get anywhere. Given a chance, why would anyone want to live that drudgery life. The weather; everyone living on top of each other; stultifying tradition? Compare that to here in Oz: well, by any measure this my friend is Paradise. And you were a genius to think of coming here! Hehe. Great job, a happy family, fantastic home. And holidays whenever we want them, to exotic places most people only dream of visiting – all right on our doorstep!

Soooo....

I confess it's taken me the week to recover enough to be able to put pen to paper....

Last weekend I decided to do my impression of being self sufficient: Farm Boy. God knows why. Me: City Boy. I think it was a full moon and the head was gone. Yes, I'll put it down to that, because I don't want to be making a habit of this kind of behavior. I can't afford to, even on my salary! It all starts innocuously enough with me deciding to cart my own water. We're not the mains water, and it hasn't rained for a month so the tank, the size of a Barbie tea cup, has run out. On Friday evening. Again!! So without water even to flush the toilet I'm heading to the dried up dam on our property to get a bucket of whatever I can find. What could go wrong? Of course. OF COURSE! Yeah, I slip in. Two seconds flat I'm up to my neck in thick, reeking goo. My curses are still ringing out, and eerily echoing back at me, after I've managed to extricate myself from the black, shit stinking mud that seems determined to suck me back in. Creature of The Black Lagoon style, yeah. The monks across the valley must have been blushing pink!

I think we can all agree, it's a bad start to the weekend. However I have learned from this experience – so many lessons have I learned from attempting the Country Life! Lesson One: never approach a steep slope with a mud bath at the bottom of it dressed in your underwear. When I stagger back to the house it feels like I have the whole dam inside my undies. The older of the kids takes one look at me, rolls her eyes and says I look like Dylan (the younger of the two) with a nappy full of poo. I'd have given her a clout, but at the best of times she's nimble and hard to catch. So anyway, yeah, naked is good. Every time. It doesn't matter who's watching, because in a couple of seconds you're going to be wearing a mud suit anyway. Two: friends are like rats up drainpipes - when you're covered in something that looks and smells worse than shit, and you want to come round to their place to clean off in their pristine, suburban shower.

Now, in our neck of the woods, there's a kind of Fairy Godmother: the water carter, Red. Haha, picture him in a tutu! A character. A true one off. Big hulk of a man with a face prune wrinkled by the sun. Clothes always clean but full of holes and falling off him. Looks rough as, but a soft heart – you can see it in his eyes. Already well into his sixties when I first met him, he's still sprightly and as strong as an ox. And always up for a laugh. Usually at my expense. Like when he thought it was funny telling me, bang in the middle of Dry Season, that he's heading off for a holiday, for three weeks. Three weeks! The whole village would be condemned as a walking compost heap! And then he says, dead pan, “Yeah, Vanuatoo mate. Always wanted to give the original bungy jumping thing a go mate.”

Scream, “Red, Red! Mate you could get hurt. What are we gonna do if you break your neck?” He just smiles and says the insurance will cover it. Insurance? “What good would that be to us with you parked up in hospital?” Fuck, we could end up starting The Plague! You know, I actually fainted. When I come to, no sign of Red. I dunno what comes over me but next minute I'm running down the street screaming the end of the world is coming. Allright, I should have realised it was a wind up. But I panicked! And with some justification I think.

But, to my shame, this is by no means the first time he's got me. Wasn't there the time I turned the tap on and it came out looking like blood? I thought someone had been murdered and dumped in our water tank! Yeah, yeah – running down the road screaming like a girl. Again. Became quite the butt of jokes with the lads down The Club: Red leading the piss take of course. Anyway, as I'm running I see Red's truck and I flag him down. He's gassing himself when I tell him what's happened. “Mate, didn't the wife tell ya? Advertising mate. Only a bit of red dye. Red water: get it mate?” He eyes me like I'm a complete dumbass. I just want to strangle him, but of course I can't. That would be like doing a Peking Duck on The Golden Goose, hey? In fact he only stopped tormenting me after newbies buy the house next door. After that it's him running down the street screaming like a girl

every other week. Just another victim of Red's pranks we all assume. Until the last time when he's found dead in the middle of the road with an axe embedded in his head. The wife got arrested – apparently she'd been threatening to do it for a while. Hey, whoever said nothing happens in the country!

Anyway, yeah Red can afford to play the fool without any comeback because he's got us all by the balls. During a dry spell the fella has over a grand in his wallet. Trouble is, once his wallet's full he's gone - offski. No chance of water being delivered. Even if The Wife puts on her most alluring voice, and makes promises that even give me a hard on. Take my word for it, we tried it. And the problem isn't finding him – guaranteed he'll be down The Club. The problem is getting him out of there. Because once he's glued himself to his (yeah, he's got his own) bar stool, you won't prise him off it for at least three days once he's a Bender. And then we're all walking around with clothes pegs on our noses and waving at friends at a distance as far as is socially decent.

That said, Red will rarely let you down. That is a relative term though. Its like this. Red won't start a job if there's the slightest chance he'll miss opening time at The Club. He hasn't missed one since the time he had one can too many and left the handbrake off the truck. Apparently there was quite a crowd gathered – watching in incredulous silence - as the truck slowly rolled down the boat ramp into the river. At first it floated - the water tank was almost empty. With everyone else finally coming too and trying to rescue it, Red glances at his watch, takes one look at the truck, shrugs his shoulders and thumbs the first lift heading into the village. But his luck was off that day and they got a puncture, and he had to run the last two kilometres. It's said he was just a blur; broke a dozen Olympic records. But he still missed the opening by a minute. Red was outraged. Threatened to sue: insisted they should have waited til he got there! “Nah, maaaate, Bender Time doesn't count,” insists Red. If you accept that then yeah, I guess it's true.

Well, don't I have to say that? Otherwise, hey you never know, he might get a hold of this diary and then, well, we could kiss goodbye to getting another load of water out of Red. Might as well move. Then again, maybe there's a blacklist for water carters across the world and we'd be doomed to collecting our own water for ever. Argh! Or live the nightmare of a suburban existence. Argh! Now, to someone who's never enjoyed the bliss of rural living that probably sounds no big deal. But once you're hooked on this country life, anything else is like living in the Black Hole of Calcutta. Yeah, I think all my mates have admitted to at least once waking up in a cold sweat, screaming, “No, not back there, pleeeeeeze!”

Fortunately we're on Red's priority list, since Jules has Red pretty much wrapped round her finger. She can flutter her eyes with the best of them and, as Red admitted to me, “Mate, any time I comes round here she's guaranteed me beer and a bonza meal. What more could a fella ask for?” I'll never say no to having a

few with him - always good crack and Red knows everything about everyone. And unlike doctors and lawyers The Water Carter's Code of Ethics does NOT prevent them from coughing up the juiciest dirt imaginable. Around here, news travels just as fast as Red's aging truck.

I've been umming and aching about doing this for quite a while. So after the threat of Red being off for a three week holiday bender I decide to bite the bullet and invest in my own water cart. I'd already tracked down the setup I was after. Now, it's certainly not the deluxe model that some of my neighbors have shelled out on. Mine consists of a rusted old trailer and a thousand litre plastic container reinforced with mesh. Currently owned by a fella that wants to sell out and head back into Suburb Land. I'm guessing he got on the wrong side of Red - what other reason could there be for giving up this? For that? Now I realise, for anyone on mains water, my gear may not sound like much, and I'll grant you, it's certainly not a pretty sight. But to anyone with an empty water tank, hanging out for Red when he's still got two days to go on The Bender, seeing my gear would be like the whole damn cavalry coming over the hill. No joke, I've had more appreciative comments about my water tank than anything else I've ever owned!

So by midday I've got a few loads of water, which starts to fill the tank up nicely. True, I've also started a small river after driving off and leaving the stand pipe running for half an hour. Well, I thought the old fella behind me was queuing up for water. Turns out he was only waiting to follow me cos he had a bet on with his mate that the trailer wouldn't make it home. Later heard some Wise Crack quip that he "needed to go off to the village - so I'd better get the fucking canoe out, hadn't I mate?" Cheeky bastard! Anyway, a half dozen loads later and the water tank is full and I'm feeling chuffed with myself. Like I've earned something big. But then of course it starts raining. And doesn't stop the rest of the day: more than enough to refill the tank ten times over. To be sure - a lesson in the fickle mystery of nature, for which we are not to judge. Something that Mr and Mrs Suburban rarely experience, except maybe at the Easter Show, when standing behind a prize cow with diarrhea.

The next morning, seeing as it's stopped raining, bright and early I go over to the shed. Now, I've been planning this for a while. Feeling like John Wayne. The Big One. Grab the trusty chainsaw and give it a spin on the trigger finger. Feck it, right then I'd have put it in a fecking holster if I'd had one. Then check to make absolutely sure it's blunt enough that it won't chop my leg off - which seems to be its main goal in life. And then I survey my distant paddocks - narrowing my eyes and whistling through my teeth when I spot the trees that are gonna get it. Actually these days you can't see too far. Used to be there was quite an expanse out the back, and a nice vista over the valley. Now you can barely see a hundred metres, since the EPA put a blanket ban on cutting The Bush back. Look, I'm all for

preservation - Christ haven't I shot over the head of someone that started through pristine bush with a bulldozer? All because they wanted a tennis court "in a natural setting". But it's got so the Bush is up to the back deck. Put it this way, the local wallaby troupe have taken some convincing that our house does not constitute part of their habitat. And all because the EPA has gone so tree huggy that the lesser spotted green eyed toadstool takes priority over us humans. Just So.

I digress. Anyway, I've spotted a couple of trees well and truly toes up. With barely contained excitement, I fire up trusty chainsaw. Reminded of the Wife's dire threats, I start with the smaller one. Which - in my Know it All attitude that I was dick swinging in those days (how numbered they were!) - is the extent of me Being Cautious. I'm like those Light Sabre fellas in Star Wars - in a blur me and trusty chainsaw have slashed a wide swathe through the trees on one side of the driveway that cuts through down to the house. Scanning the handiwork I'm reminded of the time my older brother got hold of the electric dog clippers and shaved the hair off one side of my head.

Now, intoxicated on the throb and buzz of trusty chainsaw, and the smell of fresh cut timber, in my careless enthusiasm I've had no thought about Dog. A wire haired Dachshund X Terrier, Dog has the uncanny knack of appearing at the moment of my greatest fuck ups and then, with a bark like a fecking wolfhound, lets everyone know. I'm almost through the last of the trees - a mouse's fart would have blown it over - when I look up and notice Dog blissfully asleep, sunning his balls - and dead in line with the flight path of my by no means aerodynamic future firewood. With image of splattered Dog, accusations and tears all round, I run over, grab Dog - who gives a yelp and not unreasonably tries to take a chunk out of me - and throw him in the kids' play house. Yeah, you've guessed it. The tree takes on a mind of it's own and it's crushed playhouse. Timber flying everywhere; petrified dog yowling and shoots out through the window. Dog OK - physically at least. But I think everyone in the family knows what post traumatic stress disorder looks like now. Not surprisingly since then when he sees me he gives a wide berth. And won't go near a tree. Which makes going for a leak difficult, except when I'm not looking and I get a warm feeling down my leg. It's the only time he comes near me. People ask me why he does this.... It would take too long to explain.

Well that didn't go so well. Instead of saving a couple of hundred bucks in firewood I'm now up with the RSPCA for dog abuse and will have to pay some overcharging, butt cracked tradie to rebuild the cubby house the kids never go in.

But that's not the end of it. If only I'd stopped there....

This last one is a true monster. A whole new ballgame alongside the one I nearly flattened Dog with. I'm looking at the girth of the trunk, then at the blade on trusty chainsaw. It looks like a Bob the Builder plastic toy up against this mother. What was I thinking? Even before I started the thing has a lean on it putting the

house in its flight path. But I've got a head of steam up and convince myself I can do it. Feck if I pull this off, I'll be in firewood for the next ten years. And around these parts there's a lot of kudos to be had for being able to say that. John Wayne swagger defo not out of place!

Again taking what I consider the cautious, sensible approach, before I start at it with trusty chainsaw I enlist the aid of the tractor. There's stories associated with that psychopath of a machine – ask Dog, he was witness to all my near death experiences. Raise up the front loader and jam it up against the tree as high as I can. Yes, I know. With hindsight all that did was raise the pivot point a smidgen higher. To be honest the only reason I'd thought to use it was so I could with a clear conscience tell my wife that I'd taken every POSSIBLE precaution. Hmm, it's true, yeah, I was somewhat taken aback by the long list of things she was able to rattle off in a single breath that I should have done to avoid “the inevitable disaster you've made of our life.”

As I take the first cut, in my head I hear her voice (with its familiar condescending tone) warning me, just before she'd set off to catch up with one of her screwball friends: “If a fucking leaf of that tree comes within ten metres of the house I'm divorcing you. After all you've put me through I'd have the whole village on my side.” I couldn't disagree with that. So it's with some trepidation that I begin cutting a cake slice out of the side of the trunk furthest from the house. The logic being that I would then be able to push the tree away from the house. But as I was finishing the cut the blade of the saw jams up and the tree starts tilting further towards the house. Heart jumping out of my chest, I yank at the trusty chainsaw and by some miracle I manage to prise it loose. Quickly begin a cut the other side. But it's like using a butter knife - against butter that's been in the frigging freezer for a month. Hardly make a dent in the trunk: yeah smart arses, sharpening the chain would have been a good idea. I KNOW. Desperately, leaving the chainsaw embedded in the trunk, like an Axe Murderer that'd lost interest half way through, I run over to the tractor and back it up, with the intention of taking a bit of a run up and giving the tree a good push in the direction away from the house. But the frigging thing only starts following me! Fortunately it stops its lean when it's closed the gap on the cake slice I'd nicked out of it. Throwing the throttle wide open, like a jousting Knight on his Charger (eff off, I can dream can't I!) the front loader blade slams into the trunk. Despite nearly rattling the teeth out of my head, the tree just laughs and a few hefty branches slam into the dirt around me. Lucky I wasn't impaled by one of the bastards – though (look on the bright side) at least then I might have died a martyr?

With the lean on the tree, and the direction it's going to fall – ie, square on the house - terror grips my heart. But at least for the moment it's holding. So, with sweat pouring off me I tear at the trunk with the trusty chainsaw and, an agonising

half hour later, I finally manage to extend the cake slice out of the opposite side of the trunk. So now there's barely five centimetres left in the middle holding up this huge tree three times the height of the house, and with a girth it would take two people to reach around. The faintest breeze starts it swaying precariously. Actually this proves a brief respite, as I'm able to time a few more thumps with the tractor when it's being blown the other way. For a while there it actually looks like the trunk has almost straightened up. I've even (stupidly, I KNOW) started telling myself this is all going to end alright. Might even be able to look forward to a career as the local Bob the Tree Fella. But then the inevitable - the effing thing started to topple back over my head. As if proving a mathematical theorem, it perfectly bisects the house. There's a moment as it's falling when I'm mesmerised by the gigantic grace of the thing. But then there's the noise. The screeching and wailing. Like something human. No one should have to hear shit like that. Shocks me rigid - hell, it's like I'd killed someone. I still can't talk when Jules comes home an hour later. Though it wouldn't have mattered anyway - even now I still can't think of anything that could remotely defend what I'd done.

The upshot of this sorry tale is that I now live as a recluse at the bottom of the paddock, in a cave. With trusty chainsaw as my only companion. Dog guards the house like it's his own. Which is a bit rich. Before playing guard dog was very much an optional thing, when he had nothing better to do. Even then he'd pike out if someone so much as booed at him. Now he's taken to wearing a leather collar with studs and answers only to the name "Killer". Rupert was such a nice name, it seemed to suit him so much better.

The children occasionally bring me food but they pretty much left it that if I thought I was going to be self sufficient I could start by feeding myself. Which had the definite ring of The Wife about it. The older of the two I think even manages to inject some of Jules' condescending tone into her normally pleasant, piping clear voice that carries effortlessly across the valley. Or am I just being sensitive? On the upside, the wallaby troupe are very accepting of my presence. I've considerably warmed to the fellas. Well, they ARE the only living thing on the property that will have anything to do with me. Though when they bound past the front of the cave - always just as I'm getting up - it's like stepping out of your bedroom onto a freeway. Conversation might be brief and unintelligible, but at least in their soft gaze there's none of the dagger looks - which I'm getting from everyone in the entire village since The Wife put it about that I'd been trying to kill her. That the dog had just been a trial run. Yeah I can see how someone armed with all the facts might see it that way.

Jules occasionally relents and lets me come into the house for the principal social gathering. For the kids' sakes I'm guessing. Pretty sure she'd be happy if I never set foot in the house again. I'm looking forward to Christmas - though I did

have to promise to leave trusty chainsaw at the cave. Of course I had to fork out for the exorbitant cost of The Real Tree Fella to come and remove the tree trunk that had embedded itself in the house like an axe cleaving a head in two. And taken a second job in order to pay the house repair costs. We've all had to tighten our belts since we got the new, astronomically expensive, insurance premiums – which, probably not unreasonably, includes a specific clause relating to willful damage caused by Trusty Chainsaw. I can only say it was all done with the best intentions. But there's no one listening. And the wallabies still don't understand me.

The Birthday Party

We're playing at happy families. It's not hard to see things are fraying round the edges. Time has eased some of the bitterness caused by my "willful, dumbass destruction of the family home." But it's not the same carefree amble through life, and I sense things will never be as they were. Big up though: I've been allowed back in the house. I have a suspicion Jules has only let me back in the fold to provide a convenient punchbag for when things go wrong in her life. As is frequently the case. Since - how did it take so long to realise? - my wife is a complete Nut Job. Even the kids are saying she's a broken record, and most of the accusations and blame are unfair. "Not all of them though, dad." Hehe, the little bastards will never let you wholly off the hook, will they?

It's Zenny's (our oldest) birthday today. Four or five? Not sure. No, must be fifth, because she's started school and made friends with some boys. Or at least no longer treats them with the utter, undisguised contempt I secretly feel we've earned. This morning I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself. Hehe, you starting to see the pattern here? Over confidence, closely followed by humiliating failure. Yeah, the tree lopping episode was just a One Of. By now Dear Diary you will have read of my several other disasters that followed it. Fortunately they were somewhat less headline grabbing. But let's be objective here: fair to say, up until the Tree Episode I'd been a picture of caution and shown a healthy respect for nature. Had readily accepted I was Apprentice in this art of country living. But then got above myself. I guess a year is a lifetime for a City Boy. In the Bush it's a blink of the eye. Yeah, that was a lesson in itself.

Anyway, back to the birthday party. Which City Slickers wouldn't know is THE highlight of the social calendar in Rural Living Land. For the adults! You know, this one for Zenny I feel I really have, finally, put together a birthday party to be proud of. One which isn't going to leave me regretting at the end of it that we'd ever had the little bastards.... Hehe, I mean the Little Angels.... Of course. Now, we could have larded it and done a Maccas, as some - traumatized by their last effort - pike to. But that means for the next year facing the down the nose looks from the Mother Mafia. And Jules would never allow that - herself being well sucked into the social spiral. So, like the rest, we kill ourselves trying to come up with ever more inventive and elaborate entertainments for the little bastards.... Err, Little Angels. No, frig it, I DO mean Little Bastards.

As I said, this time around I'm convinced we're on a winner - easy as to set up, and a First in the village. On the recommendation of a friend (who swore it was the easiest party he'd ever had), we've hired a Dinosaur Jumping Castle. Little did we know at the time that ours would also be the last. Following the events I'm about to

describe they've been banned across the State of New South Wales. Yeah, probably NOT something to be proud of, but fuck it, I am, hehe. Now, setting aside the suppressed jealousy at not having one when I was a kid – which I went some way to assuaging by ensuring I was the first to try it out, “Stand back everyone! I need to check it's safe before letting the kids on.” - it was definitely the best hundred and fifty bucks I've ever spent. Well, that lasted more than ten flushed and panting minutes.

So, a ute rocks up with a trailer on the back, just as the the first of the brats are starting to arrive. Well, that's apart from the kid who appeared at the window as we were having breakfast. Not unexpectedly - his mum is well known to be so spaced out she can't tell day from night. Of course I'd panicked, thinking the dino fellas weren't going to show. Let's just say I'd started pulling out the jumping race sacks, screamed at The Wife to boil twenty eggs, and kicked the kids down into the cellar looking for the old Pin the Tail on the Donkey board. On the glossy brochure they promise at the end of the day to smoothly pack away Mr Dinosaur and disappear into a dipping sunset. I suppose to be fair to them it very nearly does happen that way. Who's fault it didn't pan out is open to conjecture and anyone's opinion is just as valid. Well, in fact, legal argument will determine who's right, since the court case comes up in a few weeks. Though I'm not holding my breath – since when did Little Guy get a fair go?

First off, let's make it clear - and there can be NO argument about this - the guy who brought it was not Einstein. More like, brain's of Al's pet hamster. It kicks off with me and Paul having an existential debate about where the jumping castle is to be located. I assume he's got it and so, with images of kids with split face grins bouncing joyously in, on and down the blow up, I leave to buy more provisions - after learning twenty more kids are coming that the kids had invited without telling us. On return, needle slides across record - sorry kids, you'll have to ask grandpa to explain that metaphor. No jumping castle! And there's Paul sitting disconsolately in his 4WD, head in hands. When I ask him what's going on, exclaims, “Sorry Boss, but you said you wanted it here.”

Me: “?”

Pulling hair out, “But don't you see? There's a branch in the way. What do you want me to do, Boss?” Now, our front paddock covers three hectares of flat, pristine green lawn. Let's just say, he had options. Am I being too harsh? Too suburban? Fortunately, from somewhere I find a few ounces of patience: “Paul mate, it's OK if you move it a metre that way. The kids won't mind. We've a bit of space to play with mate, yeah? What do you think?” Relief floods his face. Decision made, in a jiffy the thing is set up (even with Paul doing it) and he offskis. Looking at this big green Dinosaur shaped castle with slides and all sorts, the chest swells out and I'm thinking, yep, this is gonna be memorable. Yell to the

kids: “Mate, we’re ready as we’ll ever be. So let’s get it onnnn!” Cheers all round from them. Wife does an eye roll. But what could go wrong? Plenty of food, refreshments on tap, spare hats, tubs of sun screen to dip the kids in as they arrive. Huge Dinosaur Jumping Castle to rev them up. Sprinkler to cool them down. Mate, I got it all worked out.

Hehe, Country Life – you sometimes don’t realise how wrong, wrong, wrong you can be. On my friend’s advice (“Mate, they won’t be interested, you won’t be able to get them off the fucking Boing, Boing”) we’d decided on no games. Well I did pike and have Pass the Parcel ready. Just In Case. Yep, I kicked the Pin the Tail on the Donkey back down into the cellar. “Oops, sorry Zenny love, didn’t know you were still down there. Ralph found it ten minutes ago.” At least that means there’ll be no fun for the Smart Arse with the innocent face. For whom though I do have a sneaking admiration. Why didn’t I think of it? At the last party, whenever Dog wasn’t looking he’d stick the pin into his butt. AM surprised by the extent of Dog’s memory: at sight of kid immediately runs yelping down into the Bush; doesn’t reappear til after dark. And there’ll be no prize for Little Fat Bastard that manages to peek from under the scarf - however hard you tie the fecking thing on. At least I won’t have to explain to Cameron’s concerned mother and pediatrician father the indentation on little darling’s head. Though it’s always seemed pretty obvious to me when you look at it in the mirror: *Design by Carla Zampatti* is clearly visible.

No three legged race. I was tempted, I admit it. It’s a hard one to leave out. Not least since it would be a chance to recoup some of the exorbitant cost of these bloody parties - running a book with the dad’s on which would be the first kid to take a fall down one of my strategically dug *rabbit holes*. In addition – and it’s a near thing which is better - I’d get to see the look on Perfect Child’s face when he catches one and realises that for the first time in life he won’t be cutting through the winner’s ribbon. And running into open arms of Blonde Babe mummy - his one man Cheer Squad. Having said that the little buggers are generally pretty adept at getting round them. “Eyes like fucking hawks. Like I said, giving kids veggies is never a good move. Look at me, a Meat Only diet never did me any harm,” my mate had complained. Yeah I think it was about that time he had to go into hospital and have a stomach implant or something. Anyway, we wised up and put camouflage over the holes. But then I had some fast talking to explain how (and why) a rabbit would place over its warren a camouflaged framework of used Magnum sticks. I told The Mothers (frigging hell, they’re scary when they get in numbers greater than three) I would check it out on the Net, but I’m running out of time, so if any one has any bright ideas let me know!

So as the first kids arrive while a part of me is cocky as another (the part unable to erase memories of my long history of social catastrophes) is shuffling feet

nervously and fixing cheesy grin on. My mate wasn't wrong though - I fully needn't have worried. Every one of the little buggers, as soon as they clock it, make a beeline for the jumping castle. And start that screaming they get when they're really into something – like a jet engine at full revs. Sets your teeth on edge, and sounds like it's never going to stop. But today I don't care. I won't deny it, within five minutes I'm swaggering like a King – the kids are all yelling it's the best party ever, and I can see a few of the dad's surreptitiously writing down the phone number of the bouncy castle fella. Yeah, put that in your pipes and smoke it, you Snotty Mother's Club mob! I'd even opened a beer and set the hammock up. *Mate, I was telling myself, this is going to be a breeze. Let those mothers down in the village sneer all they want – from now on it'll be water off a duck's back.*

Yeah, I think my butt had just touched the hammock, lips already round a cold one, when all hell breaks loose. It starts with jumping castle gracefully folding forwards, knocking one kid clean out when Dino head butts him. Screams from three others trapped underneath the collapsing edifice. Mothers wailing and pleading to God (yeah, this is heavy duty Bible Belt country) to save their Beloveds. Shit though, do they know how to curse. Even I had to look up some of what they were yelling at me. How does it go? You can take the Slut out of the Whorehouse, but you can't take the Whore out of the Slut. Something like that, hehe. True enough, first up I'm bricking it that some little bastard is going to die on me. But they all seemed to get pulled out pretty quick and none the worse for it. Good on them, I'm thinking. Especially given that they're usually snivelling at the slightest threat to them not getting exactly what they want. Mothers not so understanding. Visions of Social Outcast: how unfair!

Anyway, we line them up for a headcount and they're all there – maybe a little red faced, a little shivering with the shock, but otherwise not too worse the wear for the ordeal. Of course I'm expecting it, and it doesn't take long – they NEVER disappoint. We'd barely got the last kid out when one of the Mothers lays into me with, "Hey mister!" Obviously the social niceties are no longer a requisite, "Hey mister! What the fuck were you thinking? I knew straight away something would go wrong as soon as I saw who put it up. Don't you check the reviews? Their gear's always doing this." She looks at me like I'm the most irresponsible parent on the entire planet. Reviews? WTF is she on about? This shit is all news to me.

Now, I can be quick on my feet - gosh, I've had enough training with The Wife, haven't I? And I'm well over the looks and snide remarks of Mommy Mafia, so I tell her straight, "Well if you think it's so easy to come up with a winner party, why don't you run the bloody thing?" I guess the nonchalant shrug of the shoulders wasn't the smartest move. She says nothing, but the eyes narrow, and you can see she's saving it up to throw back at me later, when it can do some real damage in front of a bigger crowd.

Still wondering what the bloody hell has happened, I go round the back of the castle, only to see a huge vent with air pissing out of it. Not a hole mind, this is a vent, like it's supposed to be there. After tying it up as best I can, Dino starts to fill out again and I'm thinking we're all good when the electric motor packs up. Worst nightmare! I still wake up reliving that moment – cold sweat; pins and needles down the arms. Immediately the jumping castle shrivels up. Yeah darlings, not unlike my willy after a cold swim. Immediately the kids give the '*OK mister; so how are you going to entertain us for the next two hours*' look. I try everything to get it going but I know I'm pissing in the wind. Defeated, I ring the hotline. Indignant jumping castle hirer: "This has never happened in eighteen years of operation." Like it's my frigging fault!

"Yeah, like I really want a horde of demanding six year olds at my feet, the Mommy Mafia lined up behind them egging the little bastards on?" I notice some already pulling out the mobile phones to record the evidence. I hear the desperation in my voice, "Yeah, right mate, come down here and see how long you'd last before you're on your knees with your wallet out trying to bribe them with a free meal at Maccas." For the record (Jules thoughtfully timed me) I lasted two minutes. None of which I can deny - though initially I tried - until Jules showed me the videos the cows had posted online. Man, Wyatt frigging Earp wouldn't have stood a chance against the speed they draw at. I'd already resigned myself, with a what the fuck shrug, to embarrassment on a village scale; something by now I'm fairly well used to. But gosh, I've had kids in Melbourne pointing a finger and screaming, "There's Dino Man!" Feck it, I doubt I'd get any peace even in a yurt in Outer Mongolia these days!

I'm not ashamed to say I begged the fella. Tears were shed. Good on him, Paul's boss actually rolls up pretty quick and fixes things up with a new electric motor pump. I later found out it had gone pear shape because Paul hadn't tied up the vent – and by the time I noticed the motor was already half burned out. Paul explained - god I still want to ring that bastard's neck whenever I think of him! - "I'd forgotten the knot the boss showed me, you know, so I figured, what was the point yeah. You know what I mean?" Remember Al's hamster – forget it! This guy has the brains of a retarded goldfish. Maybe Tesla's pigeon? They're pretty dumb right?

Of course we've had to divert the kids while the jumping castle is down. All we have to hand then is the grub so we pile it down their necks. This seems to do the trick, until the sugar hit kicks in. Mainlined on the shit - red cordial and Coke. Man do they fly. Once the jumping castle is back on, the damn thing near takes off. The sprinkler can't keep up and I have to fire up the water pump to hose them down. Feck, they're steaming! True, I probably did overdo it with the coke. Sure, it was the cola version - but I swear you'd have thought they'd been on the other stuff.

Still, I'm starting to think that we might have squeaked out of this one. Things looking to be going well again. But then I find I'd overdone the waterworks a tad. Around the sprinkler it's a mud bath, knee deep. Sucked down, every few seconds one of the kids comes up looking like Creature from the Black Lagoon. Quips Zenny, "Deja Vu of you dad!" Which of course sets off Mommy Mafia. They're just fucking waiting! Feck. Vultures! Eyes rolling, forked tongues wagging. Overhear one of them hissing, "I wouldn't be surprised if they all get cholera." Hehe, it WAS a little difficult to tell the kids apart from a warthog.

If that isn't bad enough, just then Zenny's besties, Laura and Maisy, start up their ongoing feud. Man are they going at each other. Two normally demure little girls – "Yes, Angus.... No Angus...." Had to see it to believe it. And then something was said. I never did find out what, but it sets off Maisy screaming. That kid could get a job as a fire siren. Jules gives me a look like I need to sort them out, but I just stare back and shrug – I mean, what can you do with a phenomenon like that except give it a wide berth until it runs itself out of batteries? And then we're both distracted by Zenny going off too. Man, the language that kid has picked up from school is something else. Yeah, no doubt once again the monks across the valley are blushing red. I find it's only that some of her friends have rifled through her drawers and borrowed some of her clothes. "Without asking!!" Then again, I've witnessed Cold Wars start for less than that amongst her mob! Telling Jules to sort them out, I leave: mate, how can any bloke be expected to cope with all these female hormones? Started wishing I'd given them Ecstasy instead of the Coke. A little more love at that point would have gone a looong way.

Now, another innovation this time round, I'd decided to give them their Show Bags at the start of the party instead of at the end. I dunno, call me petty, but it bugs the hell out of me that there's always one kid that ends up with everyone else's best stuff in their bag. Isn't it always like that? It's like he's got a magnet in there or something. But at the tail end of a party, with everything going off, what chance have you got to square things up for the other kids – like with your hands full trying to negotiate cessation of Cold War hostilities and so on. Anyway, the plan actually worked – the culprit this time round has been identified and I've kept an eye on the little fat bastard so he can't snag from the other kids. But then shit hits the fan again and there's another pile up between Maisy and Laura. Apparently this time it's over the Show Bag lollies - which are identical, I'm talking sheep clones mate! It seems obvious those two just plain hate each other – they'd be at each other over a grain of sand. Then again, tomorrow they'll probably be best buddies. Who knows mate, I gave up a long time ago trying to keep up with the ever shifting allegiances of Zenny and her mates. Reminds me of the fucking Borgias. You know what though; I reckon even they'd be spinning.

Of course by now we're running well late, so we have to rush things along. Don't we still have the cake and candles to do yet? I tell you I'm a tad nervous. These kids are so high that the chocolate is defo going to send them over. And, oh baby, take my word for it, it does. Mass hysteria. Kids running headless chooks around the garden. Johnny starts jumping on the tables and then dived into the (one foot deep) fishpond, coming up looking like a sea monster with seaweed and mud dripping off him. All Zenny's girls scream on queue. No question, they'll be in cheap horror movies when they get older. And of course there's the ongoing mass hysteria of them all imagining themselves drowning in a jumping castle. Yeah, Lesson Three: the line between Glory and Ignominy is gossamer thin.

At this point, when I can clearly picture the village gossip headlines, to my surprise things start looking up. Peter buries his head in the cake and when he comes up for breath looks like his face is made of chocolate: I have to pull off Dog from taking a chunk out of him. From my perspective completely understandable, but I know the Mommy Mafia don't see it that way. A week later Zenny tells me the little fella is still enjoying lunch break finding bits of cake prised out of an orifice. Outside on the back deck I give them a bucket of water they can all share to clean themselves up. Oh God does that set off one of the Mafia. I think it was typhoid they were certain to catch this time. Dengue Fever? Who fucking knows. Cares! Man I have a lot of respect for teachers who have to put up with these kooks every day. Of course in all the chaos Little Fat Bastard with the bulging Show Bag makes a clean getaway. But don't worry, I've got a photo of him holding the loot bag up, looking smug as a pig in shit.

Overall though, all things considered, I'm claiming the party a success. Hey, don't (most of, hehe) the kids say they've had an awesome time. Little Pete (still high on the choco cake) brags he could keep going to midnight – and by the look of him I wouldn't doubt it. Mate I thought his eyes were going to pop out of his head. A few of the parents arrive to pick up their little darlings. Admittedly most of them had stayed / refused to leave: no doubt concerned that if they'd left they might never see the little Lights of their Lives again.

Yeah, yeah, of course after this our standing in the neighborhood is rock bottom. Actually I thought we'd already hit it, but there's layers of ostracism I'd never dreamed of. But who cares – Zenny had a top party! That said I'm not immune to a few shivers over what might have gone wrong. And that night I have The Nightmare for the first time. Top story on 60 Minutes. An expose - The Worst Parent in the World. Richard Carlton interrogating me about The Party Tragedy. Ninety seven kids trapped under collapsed Green Dino. Only two survived; and seven bodies located a week later at the next birthday party as Paul unraveled the tarpaulin. Him, looking bemused, admitting "Yeah, I did wonder what those lumps

were; I was having a job getting everything onto the trailer.” Retarded goldfish – forget it! That guy has the brains of a tree stump. That died a century ago.

Post script

I later find out Paul is a Med Student about to complete his Finals. This was just a part time job. Oh dear! Oh, dear!

Counseling

Well, I suppose the party had to end at some point. Most people's lives are shit so why should ours be the exception? In it's nuclear form our family has disintegrated. At times it feels like it only started yesterday, it's happened so quickly. I guess being so busy with work it can feel like that. At other times, it's a painfully slow unraveling; an untwining. The worst part of it is how it affects the kids, especially Zenny. Ralph, I'm not sure he picks up too much.

Sudden wealth, following the sale of my business and the death of my mother, has given us opportunities we'd never anticipated and therefore never discussed. Very quickly it becomes brutally apparent that our goals, our most fundamental desires that shape how we want to spend the rest of our lives, are not only divergent, but diametrically opposed. My wife wants to convert our cozy 3 bedroom sandstone home into a palace: Dream Home. No doubt it would have more than paid for itself by the property value increase. But it would also destroy what makes it so, to my mind, perfect. If it was just a standard Red Brick, I'd have been indifferent. But this place is something unique. The, in places foot thick, sandstone was hewn by hand from outcrops on the land, and it resembles one of those pretty French stone farmhouses that look like they've been there forever. It squats snugly on a ridge with the lawns out front. And looks across a Bush valley of eight hectares out back. To me it's a paradise and rather than desecrate it I'd leave and let someone own it that appreciates it for what it is. I like it, no love it – and I never feel like this about places. It suits me and, you could say it represents what I'm looking for in life now. I hanker after a simpler life. An opportunity to spend more time with the kids, to work fewer hours, and not be doing the work I'm currently doing. I've always felt like I was running to keep ahead of the Wolf. I want to be doing something that doesn't feel like work at all. I want to be debt free; make myself free. But that doesn't fit in with Jules' picture. She wants to spend all the cash to fancy up the house, and continue living the middle class life. Arguments, stand up face to face slanging matches, eventually end with one of us withdrawing - the desire to fight for our dream for the moment expunged. But it never ENDS. Because neither of us want to (or should for that matter) give up on our dreams. But we're so poles apart there's no way we can accommodate both of them. Every afternoon my heart and feet become heavy when it comes time to go home. And at its end, each day becomes another I'd like to forget.

And so we do it. Like two little bambis, we embark on a journey of betrayal which will change us irrevocably. I'm writing this diary entry a few weeks after things kicked off (and the cynic has defo kicked in!). When we start I stupidly assume we're looking out for each other, as much as for ourselves. Not one of us

willing, in a heartbeat, to screw the other over to get what they want. I see us as strangers now, because I don't know the person Jules has become. Or perhaps has for the first time revealed herself to be. Perhaps she feels the same about me. But I think she always knew I wasn't being myself when I was a Suit. I think the surprise was that I'd had the balls to break out. Looking back I think she knew me better than I knew myself at that time. There used to be a time when I saw life – the purpose of life if you will – as Party. Squeeze every goddam drop of juice out of it. Or put it another way – what else is there? If you're going to deny the Life's a Party philosophy, there has to be something else, right? Well mate, blank wall as far as I was concerned. Though, yeah, out of this experience if I've learned anything it's this: in life all things come to an end. This party is definitely OVER.

The counseling shebang is more akin to the Witch Hunts of the Middle Ages than modern medicine. Then again, what can you expect when all Shrinks are barking fecking mad. You know, a couple of months in, I've come to the conclusion we'd have been better off sitting down and telling Dog our troubles than listening to Shrink's despairingly misguided advice. At least the little fella has got all his marbles, and a sense of humor few humans can match.

Let's see if I can't shed some light. It's going to sound a little mundane to start with but trust me, pretty quick it's gonna get better. Where to start? Well, I suppose it started with Jenny on the Shrink Couch, knickers off, legs spread and me pumping semen into her ass. And her begging for more. Hehe, need to go back a little further? OK. Session three I think. Out of nowhere: "You need to initiate sex more." This from Jenny the counselor. I come back with some appropriate banter. Of course Jules isn't there. I hope that was obvious. Hey, come on, give me a break! I know some people (a lot of people in fact) see me as a self centred bastard, and if I'm being honest I can't deny it. But I will defend myself to the hilt against the accusation of being "the most selfish, inconsiderate cunt I've ever had the misfortune to share body fluid with." Hehe, however many times she says it. It's like this, Jules, frightened by what she was finding out about herself during our joint therapy sessions, had stopped going after only a few weeks. She denied that, and said it was because she couldn't stand hearing the things I was saying. But, hey, I was only doing what we'd been told by Jenny, "Open up.... Your REAL feelings.... Blah, blah, blah...." While Jules was shtum as a clam, or would give out saccharin versions of everything, like we were at a goddamned dinner party!

Anyway, it's my third session alone with Jenny and, for some reason, while I'm in my usual spot on the long couch, Jenny has perched herself on the arm of the easy chair straight opposite me. Which means I'm pretty much at vagina height. And she's wearing this fetching skirt thing made of strips of material so that, when she sits leg over knee, I get an eyeful of plump, very edible thigh. Maybe even a snatch of pink undies? Hard to be sure since it's only peripheral vision I'm getting

– mate, I could hardly stare now could I? What with her a metre away, and still talking about sex. Generally at first, but then, fluttering baby blue eyes, gets quite specific, “Would you like to have sex with me?” Naturally the jaw does drop a bit. I recover pretty quick, though not quick enough for her to notice and gives me an enigmatic, come on smile. Dunno what she’s playing at but it can’t be straight up, right. I’m not stupid – must be some Shrink technique, right? But then doubt rears its head – not the only thing, hehe – when straight after she slowly uncrosses her legs and (peripheral vision or not) I get another eyeful, this time of the pink lace underwear. And she takes long enough that I can say with some certainty that she’s not a natural blond, if you get my drift.

Now, I’ve been reading up on this therapy stuff, so I know it’s quite common for Patient to fall in love with Shrink. And I’m sure with Jenny it happens all the time. Tousled, mousy blond hair, looking like she just got out of bed. And eyes that say she wants to get back there soon as. And a fit body, just how I like it: not skinny, but not too much either, so like you know in ten year she’ll still look good and not sagging down to her knees. It’s about now I notice for the first time she’s wearing Wank Me red nail polish, with red lips to match. Mate, there SHOULD be a color called that, shouldn’t there? Now I can’t be sure, but I don’t remember Jenny wearing this color ever before. Anyway, in the spirit of honesty and openness I fire straight back without a blush, “Yeah, of course.” Which would have been fine but then, Dick Brain only engaged, I follow up with, “You up for it too then?” Things move pretty quick after that (Clothes off.... Couch Just enough foreplay.... Fireworks on the anal). Post coitus discussion moves away (far, far away, hehe) from fixing my marriage, to when we’re next gonna get it on. It’s not hard to arrange. In fact, some advice fellas, I’d say if you’re going to have an affair, off the top of the head I can’t think of anyone easier to have one with than a Shrink. That night I only have to say to Jules, “Look, this is really working for me, so I’m going to up the sessions to three a week for a bit, alright? Yeah, straight from work; don’t worry about grub, I’ll get something on the way home.” Hehe, you can stop it with The Bastard!! I already admitted that, didn’t I? And is it really worse than that?

Look, let’s be adult about this. Humans aren’t designed to be monogamous. In fact there’s very few species (any?) that are. So, cut the crap, it’s a social law impossible to keep – goes against the natural order of things. Women? Give me a break! They do it just the same - only they’re better at hiding it. Why couldn’t I be honest with Jules? Mate, you don’t think I tried? I love her; love the kids. I tried my goddam arse off. But she’s not having a bar of it. We have the talk on a Sunday, the kids gone for the day with mates. We’re still in bed – a safe place, that’s how I see it. “Jules, with all this navel gazing, it seems to me that men and women aren’t meant to be with one partner only. Marriage is bound to fail if you measure it by

fidelity.” This is before the solo counseling starts, so I’m able to look Jules square in the eye as I say it. And so I get a good look at the effect it has on her. She doesn’t show much emotion usually so unconsciously I’m always on the look out for the little signs she gives. So the grimace of pain and the welled up tears are a shock. I grab her and try to reassure her, “It was the fella we met the other night that got me really thinking about it. Yeah, the plumber fella. Bemused by what he was feeling and thinking. And by the wife’s over the top reaction. Should have expected that though - Catholic – need I say more? And a Big Mouth – she tells anyone that will listen what he wants to do. Probably grabs kids at high school pick up I wouldn’t wonder. Gives them the Dire Warning about Men. Oh come on, Jules, I’m only joking!”

She’s still looking distraught, legs pulled up and arms wrapped tight round them. Looking out the window, away from me. She gives a wan smile but says nothing, “But the fella, I’m guessing he hasn’t ever had a thought like this before in his life. How he sees it, all he wants is to be able to have sex with a few other women. Just for six months or so, til he gets it out of the system. Doesn’t want to cheat, wants to be up front about it. He loves her! Keeps insisting that.” I take her hand, “I know how he feels, though I’ve never done anything about it of course.” She flinches and pulls away. I wonder if she knows about the others? But it doesn’t count, when it’s just a release. Does it? I come home after with a clear conscience, loving Jules more than I did when I left home that morning. Anyway, beside the point. THE point is, Jules is having none of it, “But it’s what we both agreed to, wasn’t it? And I don’t want to change the deal. I’d just end it if that’s how you’d want it.” Yeah. Door closed on that one.

Exasperated, I tell her, “But it is working; I just feel we should both be able to have, discretely of course, one or two other sexual partners from time to time. That way a marriage is sustainable; removes the need to cheat. Honesty is more important isn’t it?”

She shakes her head vehemently, “Loyalty. I’ve invested everything in this. How can someone else come in and nothing change?”

“Jules, you’d always be Number One. I know it....”

Shouting now, “Shut up! No! I won’t do it. If you want to have other women we’re over. You think I haven’t been attracted to other men? Not had the opportunity?” That’s hardly a surprise. With her looks, there’s been parties where I’ve literally been pushed aside. And there was the one time when a guy kissed her right in front of me. Full on the lips: she turned her big brown eyes and stared at me as he did it. Like he was doing it to someone else. Anyway, the upshot of our discussion is that I have to spend an hour placating her, and she brings it up over the next few days, so I know it’s playing on her mind. So, yeah, defo no deal with rewriting the contract. So, what was I to do with Jenny? Do what everyone else

does of course – go behind Jules back, pile on the lies and shag Jenny so much my dick’s sore all the time and have to think up ever more imaginative excuses for not wanting to do it with my wife.

Anyway back to the couch, hehe. I’m still having a counseling session, which is pretty weird. I try to keep the topic off Us, and in fact this leads to an interesting conversation about the meaning of life. The options open to us. You know, despite all the shit that’s happened, I’ll always be grateful to Jenny for opening my eyes and ears. Made me realise there’s a much bigger and more fascinating world out there than the little bit I’d been spinning around in. You could say she was the catalyst for my transformation; without her it might never have happened.

The affair follows the usual pattern. We mostly go to out of the way hotels – sometimes well out of town when I can get the arvo off. Easy when you’re in Sales – fake meetings never wear thin, hehe. She’s married too, but it’s easy for her too since it’s like she works for herself at the clinic. Yeah, things are pretty good for a while, like two teenagers without a care in the world. We even start talking about arranging a weekend away. Why couldn’t we have been happy with those lazy afternoons spent down at Elvira Bay, swimming in the nuddie when it was getting dark. Making love on the sand bar at low tide? Why couldn’t she have been happy with that?

I’ve been seeing Jenny for about two months when out of the blue I come home and Jules tells me, very matter of fact, “Look, I can’t see a way out of this – you should move out.” I try to persuade her but with Jules, once she’s made her mind up, you’re talking to a brick wall. She goes on in the same tone, “We need to sell the house. Once we do that, everyone can have what they want.” Looking back, you could say she was right, but at the time I wasn’t ready to end it. Gosh, I was having the time of my life – Cake + Eat it, hehe. Who wouldn’t want that to go on for ever? I was even coming round to the idea of continuing to work full time. Jenny had persuaded me it was just a mid life crisis. Surely if I was going to be an artist I’d have done it years ago. Anyway what had I done about it now? It was easy to drop the acting classes. Only just started them, it’s not what I want to get into, it was just the easiest thing to sign up for. The quickest way to get the ball rolling with exploring Another Life. Man, Jenny’s quite the sharp shooter with the Ack Ack gun – trained on the little plane I’m flying, trying to launch new dreams and new directions.

Sell the house. That’s a reality that’s hit hard. I’d had dreams of ending my days there. I’m looking at a mirror shattering. Consequences follow in quick succession: moving out, and into a shitty suburban house in the village which the kids come and stay at a few nights and on alternate weekends. This all takes time so I’m seeing less of Jenny, which she’s not at all happy about. The only upside is that she’s hungrier for it so I’m getting all the sex I want. Yes, even with Jules from

time to time. Of course it's tough on the kids but we keep things as same as possible so that, apart from a few hiccups during the first few weeks, things tick along pretty much as before. Only I'm now free, which is really all I was ever after. Jules has a fella, a neighbor that's been sniffing around her ever since we moved into the area. Yeah, another complication – he's married too. But unlike Jenny, this fella's only a few hundred metres down the road from our place and, poor sod, he's like a dog with two dicks. Subtlety isn't his middle name and Jules doesn't seem to care who knows about them, so it's soon common knowledge in the village.

Peculiarly people start to give me the cold shoulder. Down The Club I overhear a friend of the fella's wife talking about The Domino Effect. Yeah in this tight arse community, I can picture it – one falls, and they all start to tumble. Then again, with this mob, Born Again Christians, barely been outside the village, this is no game. This is their life torn up, and no hope of anything to replace it with. For me life is good: the party goes on. If they want to see Half Empty, that's up to them. Now, where was I, oh yes, Jules, Jenny and Me: a pretty threesome. As I was saying....

[PAGES MISSING FROM DIARY]

The Real Estate Agent

Now, it's not my intention to drag anyone through the entrails of my failing marriage, but one phase sticks in my mind that I want to get down on paper. The distance between me and Jules. By that I mean our perspective about life, the world. Two ships. One continues on the main route, sticking with the fleet, while the other sets a lonely course running itself into the eye of the storm. Hehe, poetic huh? Anyway this diverging can only lead to one outcome, having to sell the house.

Well, let me tell you, I used to think that the Parramatta Road used car salesmen were the snakes of the Sales industry. My experience selling the house has changed all that. I learned very quickly that if a Real Estate Agent starts talking about being ethical, run for the hills. And if they talk of being followers of the REI (Real Estate Industry) Code of Conduct, well, hehe, you're in the deepest possible shit, because you'll have already been well shafted. In real estate, ethics are in the gutter. But that's hardly surprising given that in Australia it's got to be the easiest way (by a country mile) to make big, quick, easy bucks. And unlike your Mining Magnate (the other way to become dizzyingly rich in Oz) it requires zero capital, zero qualifications, and zero ability except to be willing to bullshit the leg off a donkey. In fact you're better off with an agent who's openly shonky. The one I ended with never once mentioned ethics. And promised to screw every last cent out of the buyer, even if it was an old granny on a pension. I think he said, ESPECIALLY if it was. Hehe, what old biddy had done him over one time? I didn't like to ask. And, unlike the first ones, he didn't spend 90% of our conversations primping himself and running down the other agents. Absolutely convincing what the house was worth and somehow made it sound like a steal. Hell, the bastard got me so pepped up I was ready to put an offer on our place myself!

The other Agents standard tactic is to promise ridiculous prices that they'll get for your property. But as soon as you've signed on the line they spend the remainder of the painful association beating down your expectations so that by the end of it you're just bloody grateful if anyone makes an offer.

Seller: "Another no? Not even when we threw in the dog? And a shag with the missus? What about the guy that came this morning? He seemed really interested."

Agent: "Sorry that was the electricity meter reader... But we gave him a go anyway."

And did I mention Ego? The size of a small African republic? Our very first agent just couldn't understand why we wanted to switch to another one, despite him having failed to garner a single viewer in three months. Let's call him Agent A. Hehe, sounds weird that but, hey, who wants to get sued? He also has the

disconcerting habit of out of the blue slipping into this Italian Godfather persona: “OK, we do it just like I says, and no one gets hurt, capiche?” Pictures of waking up with Dog’s head in my bed. No thank you! Sarcasm, I was also quick to discover, goes sky high over their heads. Not the brightest bunnies, this mob.

Me: “Is it possible you could have marketed the place a bit more aggressively? The fact we are selling our house is not a secret with national security implications. I agreed to pay your exorbitant fee and you promised to cover the cost of advertising. I thought it would involve a bit more than a note in the window at the Chemist’s shop.” Blank look. “Mate, what do you think we’re going to do when the agency agreement comes up for renewal.”

Scratches his head for a bit and then, like he’d just had the most original idea in history, says: “You should drop the price, mate.”

Me: “Mate, I can’t drop the price any further! For god’s sake, the rabbits in the paddock will be putting in an offer if we go any frigging lower!”

How do I put Agent B – no, fuck it, we’ll call him Phil, since that’s his name – into a proper perspective? How about this, is this clear? The bloody clown couldn’t have offloaded Buckingham Palace for five goddam quid! Actually, looking back, I think all Phil was really interested in was the luridly colored company bomber jacket and the car. Once I got to know the fella I started to feel sorry for him. Burned out salesman: one of those poor bastards afraid of even the mildest rejection, but still got all the highlife expenses. I mean, I only said I didn’t like the color of the company tie (which looked like a cat had vomited on it) and he bursts into tears, locks himself in the toilet and refuses to come out until I reassure him it’s the best I’ve ever seen. Jesus H Christ! Poor old Phil, the proverbial horse with a broken leg. Nothing you can do but take them out back and shoot them. Hehe, subconsciously I must have been thinking that because whenever he came round, without thinking I’d find my hand wandering over to the gun rack. I’ll give him one thing though, he was a whizz at getting people around to look at the house. But it was pathetic, as soon as someone even mentioned the word “offer” he was grovelling around their ankles. Come running, literally running, to tell us. Feck, what was there to get excited about at that price? Unless you’re maybe trying to sell a pigsty.... in Kazakhstan! He hasn’t quite mastered the cool, offhand manner I was looking for: “Yeah, come back to us with an offer once you’ve scraped together every cent you and all your relatives can borrow... and then double it!” Looking at the faces of the people Phil got offers from, you could see they’d only done it out of pity. Or thrown out a number just to get him off whining and pleading like a whipped dog. Poor old Phil.

Anyway, thank god for Stewie! The boy did a great job. Well not really, just did what you’d expect any self respecting Salesman to do. But I’m splitting hairs – I’d

recommend him to anyone. Sure he bullshitted some, but at the end of the day he knew the market, and when he found some buyers he really worked them to get up the price for us. In a month the place was sold, for a couple of hundred thousand more than we'd expected. Another month and Jules has bought her dream home. Me? I'm happy renting.

Internet Dating

Jules tells me the other day she's started exploring internet dating. A beautiful and articulate woman, with a sharp tongue and a smutty wit, it's inevitable she'd be inundated with desperate and distant offers. Me, I've always been scathing of this technology, but her results have been even better than I expected. One Dutch fella, oldish but overloaded with energy, is the standout. I'm not sure what designs he has on Jules though – I sometimes get the feeling he's more interested in getting his hands on her house than on her. Funny thing, I seem to get on better with Dieter than she does. He keeps asking me about Buddhism, after I mentioned I'd visited a monastery on my last trip to Nepal.

Down at The Union in Newtown. Oh yeah, I've moved to The Smoke. Single + The Country Life don't go. Anyway, over a game of snooker and a few schooners - with a few plates of fries and chicken wings on the side to soak it up – I start telling my mates about this. But when I mention Nepal, Jimmy interrupts me, "Hold on a second Angus, young man. We can revisit that later, but yesterday you were regaling us with your planned cycling odyssey to India. Again. And what about making the award winning documentary about street children in Nepal. Gonna make you in Hollywood. Internet stars lining up to suck your cock. Tell me, good buddy, will any of this actually come to pass?" Yeah, Jimmy loves his play with words. Funny as.... when he's doing it to someone else.

Eventually the conversation comes back round to dating, in general, and internet dating in particular. I tell them, "As I was saying, Jules results with internet dating have impressed me enough that I decided to give it a go. Let me start by saying, Internet Dating is a dangerous drug - should have a Class A rating. Once you get on the computer it's like one of those old strategy computer games that used to keep me up all night. Hehe, yeah trying to take over the world. Yeah, around the time I'd just started the business. My excuse to Jules was that it all was good training for turning us into the next Microsoft. She'd just roll her eyes and give me the finger as I crawled, bleary eyed, into bed after having had my head buried in the game half the night. When it was dawn coming up before I'd stop playing I realised I had to do something. The burial service for the DVDs was a very moving experience let me tell you. It still brings tears to the eyes." With a few, but not too many, schooners inside me, I have plenty to say, on just about everything. The two boys playing snooker are more interested in their game than listening to my pearls of wisdom, but Jimmy seems content to hear me out. "You know mate, when I think back, it was Jules pushed me into checking internet dating out. And I think the real motive was not as she said, making light of it, *I just want you to find true lurve*. Fluttering eyes as she says it. No mate, the real motive is to get shot of me. I know what she'd like – a clean slate." Which reminds

me of something she said the other day, *You know, I never loved you. Ever.* I don't know if she'd meant to shock or hurt me, but I'd realised that years ago....

Jimmy interrupts my thoughts, "You were instructing us on your experience with internet dating, my friend. Impart you wisdom, good knight." The game is forgotten for the minute; Gavin and Jackson can see Jimmy getting on a roll. We take the piss out of each other all the time; it's a laugh, no malice intended. "Well, I kinda wish she hadn't put me on to it. With her success, though I kept telling myself not to expect the same, I couldn't help picturing being flooded with emails. Start feeling like a frigging teenager again. It's all I can think about – excited, sweaty, masturbating all the time (hehe, those were the days!). But after the first flurry, the old creek dries up quick. Bloody hell, the only email I've had this week is confirmation of registration for another dating service. Which I never applied to." Laughs all round: most of what I'm saying, one or other of them agrees. "Which actually was a fuck up, because I thought I'd joined ALL of them. Yeah Gavin, even the one whose ONLY purpose seems to be for fellas to upload pictures of their dicks. I'm sure you're on all of them, mate. They should be called *Finda Flasher....*"

Gavin laughs, "Joking aside mate, haven't any of you ever thought of offering these poor mutts a service." His real job is an Investment Wanker, which seems to give him a lot of free time. "Don't all these dating sites look to be just CRAWLING with desperate and gullible people? And, crucially, well heeled and willing to splash it. How could it fail? You've seen the Tech Dyslexics." For a second he starts gassing himself, unable to get his words out. "Example – ha ha - the old geezer, must be in in his late 50's, who's registered himself in the female section. The piss takes are priceless: fucking Goldmine. And in his comments you can see he's getting more and more frustrated. Must be wanking himself senseless by now. There's a wad to make in being The Professional Shoulder. Mate, the chicks are fucking BRUTAL. I can tell you from personal experience. Who wouldn't have their self esteem shot?" Jackson gives his big booming laugh, "You serious man? All that whining self pity?" He takes one of the chicken wings and snaps it between two fingers, "Five minutes and I'd want to throw them out the window."

A Fuck that! explodes from Gavin. It's so out the blue we all stare at him. I notice Jimmy smirking then, and Gavin goes a shade of pink. Got a feeling this is what Jimmy's been building up for the whole time. "What? Mate, it's just the same as real life. The best remedy for a chick that fucks with you is to give it straight back. Never told any of you the story of crazy bitch Yvette, did I? You'll get what I mean."

Yvette

Yeah we met through one of those online dating services you have to pay to join: Blue fucking something or other. Figured if the cunt could afford the fee I'm gonna be getting more class, you know. I pick out this one, Yvette Ma, an Asian chick. In her mid thirties but looks hot enough in the photos and nice figure, even though it said she had a kid. After going through the rigmarole, we get to talking and agree to meet at a café down on The Parramatta River. Her suggestion, since I never been to the place since it's out of the city and I never normally go further than I can still see my apartment. Yeah mate, one down from the penthouse, one back from Circular Quay. Not bad for a geezer that finished High School with next to fuck all, hey. Hehe, I've got my eye on the penthouse: if I can crack a million this year, maybe I'll go for it.

Anyway, the place is nice enough: quiet restaurant over the water; quack, quack shit going on in the background. The usual except a ton of grass everywhere. You know: green shit. And across the other side of the river, full on Bush. Nice enough meal, though the champagne was shit. Gave them an earful about that and told them I'd pay double for a Bollie, but they weren't biting. Normally I'd have told them where they could stick it but, first date, you're on best behavior, right? To be honest, though she was hot, I'm beginning to lose interest: square as, you know. I mean, I only called the waiter a fat Greek cunt that probably liked to suck off little boys. You know what she turns round and says, voice all prim like a fucking teacher, "Gavin, please don't use that language, I find it offensive. He would...."

Mate, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I thought she had to be joking so I give her an excerpt from my Fuck Definitions, "Now, now Yvette, I dunno who you're talking about, but words are only sounds. It's their meaning, and that all depends. Take FUCK for instance. A noun: 'What the fuck?' An expression of surprise. Nothing wrong with that. 'A fucking fast motor' : adverb defined as 'very'. Also an adjective conveying same meaning. 'The fuck I will' : a useful expression to convey the negative...." Mate, I was on fire, right? I'm laughing like a pig but when I give her a gander I see she's not getting it at all. Getting bored and thinking of wrapping things up, but then I get a brainwave and when she goes for a piss I slip something in her drink. Always a gas to see the straight lace ones off their trolleys. Of course I drop a tab as well, and it doesn't take long before we're both loosed up and I can already see her legs spread on the bonnet of the 911.

[After starting to write up Gavin's story, in his own words, I reread these first few paragraphs. They make for unpleasant reading. And if I'd carried on in the

same vein the story would have become incredibly boring, since the way he told it it's just a one sided chronology of a series of bloody depressing encounters that he makes sound like sport. Knowing him, I know he's capable of better than that. Fortunately there was a long weekend a few weeks after that, which degenerated into a Class A Fest. Although by the end of it I wanted to die, I'd taken the opportunity to get Gavin talking about Yvette. These are my recollections: inevitably unreliable but I think a more accurate characterization, since from the outset their relationship was colored by drugs. And a whole lot more interesting, and just a lot more.... fun. Unfortunately Gavin is a much nicer and more interesting person – you can hear the poet come out - when he's escaped his normal self.]

When she's walking back to the table it's like she's on a movie set, in Technicolor: the colors more vivid, unreal. Makes her look like one of those Old School stars. Me so fucked up I get it into my head she's that real life actress - the Australian one that used to be a model. And when she smiles at me I wanna go straight out and rent every movie she ever made. And it doesn't stop. Leave the restaurant. Walking in slow motion. Seems as if the summer's undressing her: she's got a skirt on, a long one but OK, it's a tight fit and she's pushing out of a flimsy top with a red bra underneath. Moving heaven. The warm light breeze strokes her skin like a tender lover's hand. Half way across the room the Acid must get to her because she gives a shudder, and after that her body's loose; eyes half closed when she smiles. Yeah, she's finally got that poker out of her arse. Hopefully we can have a better time of it now it's kicked in. She sits down on the grass with a bit of a wobble; I put out an arm to steady her, and you can feel the heat in her. The Summer Heat has got to her – got the blood going so you can't find ease any where you look.

I point out someone swimming and for a minute she stares at them. When he starts floundering she starts pissing herself. I ask her, "As a Buddhist, what merit are you gonna do for them if they get in trouble?" She looks at the fella again, for a longer minute. You can see a struggle going on, like she should care, but then she gives a slack shrug of the shoulders and we both start gassing ourselves. Tears streaming down her face. Yeah, everything is different when you're on the good stuff. And this IS a good batch, from a regular supplier. Yeah, I can just imagine it: we'd be checking the guy out as he was drowning, but only curious about how he's gonna go, not a care to help him out. Before long I'm in tears too.

After that we're just sitting and watching the world go by. But our world, ultra vivid, is different to everyone else's. They're all still looking movie stars, even the fat as fuck waiter that should have been strangled at birth for looking so dog ugly. Some of her movies start coming back to me. It reminds me of my girlfriends and it seems a good opening: I want to find out what she likes so I start telling her

about them, "Yeah, there was Melody, she liked it up the arse." Start laughing, "Well, really, up anything. But yeah, compared to other girls, she did like it up the shitter. And being whipped. You ever tried that? No? Why not? Yeah, Melody liked being whipped until her ass was burning red and then, out with the lard and whoopsie, what am I doing in here? Nice ass too, like yours actually. Yeah, I guess some girls don't like it, but geezers love it. I don't suppose I have to tell you that though." She doesn't say anything at this, but she lets her hand slip casually onto my lap and gives it a gentle squeeze. We're down on the river bank now, away from the crowd. We can't go full on, but there's a lot of bases we can cover. I roll on top of her and slip my hand under her skirt. Pushing her panties aside, which are already dripping, I start fingering her, very lightly. I get a picture, of a Buddha perched cross legged, floating, held up just on the tip of my finger. Her clitoris is throbbing; inside her pussy is a furnace and her honey is dripping over my fingers, down my hand. She hisses in my ear, "Find the point where every sensation comes together and you'll see me disappear in a white light. You and me are in a continuation of a Dream that's being going on for ten years. In this dream there's no Innocence. No Guilt. Only for us to give ourselves up to selfish pleasure, and the desire to please. Everything I want." She squeezes her legs together, crushing my fingers, but I only push them further inside her. "And anything you want." When my hands start ranging over her, by the tremors in her body I discover where she wants to be touched. The White Light points. "Come to me," she whispers, and unzips my pants. Then starts rolling my dick between her fingers like I've never had done to me before. Her mouth opens and her tongue flicks over blushed, tender lips. Inviting kiss, or entry. Her legs part slightly, "You can do ANYTHING you want to me."