

**“Riding the edge of oblivion”: dopamine, addiction,  
creativity—what the human reward system teaches us  
about the work of the artist and the road to recovery**

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Arts

Department: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney

Mark Payne

Date of submission: 24<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Mark Payne

## Abstract

Addiction tears through every level of human society, and despite the many approaches to dealing with it, no solution has been found. This problem inspired *Use Me Up*, an autofictional novel set in early-2000s Sydney that contends with addiction, self-destruction, and recovery. Drawing from my own familiarity with addiction, and the experience of writing a novel, this exegesis addresses addiction's social causes, as well as the potential pathways to recovery. I embark upon a close analysis of the human reward system: the group of neural structures activated through the anticipation of pleasure. At its core is dopamine, a neurotransmitter widely recognized as intrinsic to addictive patterning. By examining dopamine as the "molecule of more," (Lieberman, Long, 2018) I explore how the protagonist of *Use Me Up* exhibits destructive desires which both reflect a biological vulnerability to addiction and reveal our heightened exposure to addictive cues in twenty-first-century "limbic capitalism." (Courtwright, 2019)

While dopamine is key to addiction, I also consider the neurotransmitter's vital connection with creativity, an association which is well known but rarely studied in depth. Drawing on dopamine research by J. D. Berke (2018), L. J. Gotlib (2021), and others, I provide further insight into how dopamine uncovers the biological connection between creativity and addiction. Bridging research in the humanities and sciences, I consider the therapeutic qualities of creative work, and how the experience of creativity may reveal practical insights for recovering addicts, insights that do not ignore the instincts of our biology. The nature of this exegesis lends flexibility to my discussion, as it, like creativity and addiction, exceeds boundaries and rules when exploring its subject. I analyse the links between dopamine, addiction, and creativity from the perspective of the artist at work, and how this can shine new light on human creativity and our human reward system.

## **Table of Contents**

**Exegesis: “Riding the edge of oblivion”: dopamine, addiction, creativity...**

**Introduction**

**Chapter 1: Dopamine**

**Chapter 2: Addiction**

**Chapter 3: Creativity**

**Conclusion**

**Bibliography**

**Novel: *Use Me Up***

“The real problem of humanity is the following: We have Palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions and godlike technology. And it is terrifically dangerous, and it is now approaching a point of crisis overall.”

**Edward O. Wilson** (1978)

## Introduction

*Use Me Up* is a novel about self-destruction, self-delusion and addiction. Set in Sydney in 2010, it follows protagonist Jack Gallagher, an alcoholic and drug addict, as he falls into the depths of dependence, before rebuilding himself in the company of other broken souls. From its inception, the novel was always intended to be a story about addiction and recovery and, like many works of fiction, draws from painful first-hand experience. For this reason, one may describe the novel as a work of autofiction. There are numerous definitions a critic might draw from (Dix, 2019; Worthington, 2018; Effe, Schmitt, 2022), although Alison James offers a particularly valuable insight into the ways this genre allows for a “range of figurations” of the fact-fiction relationship: indeed, “due to the very ambiguity and hybridity of autofictional texts, they can serve as a useful testing ground for theories of fiction.” (James, 2022, p. 42) Blending difficult lived experience with fictional invention, my novel also thrives in this intermediary space, exploring how personal struggles with substance abuse can be creatively reconfigured, without losing their central autobiographical anchor. Throughout this literary exegesis, I provide further critical reflection into the relationship between creativity and recovery, major themes which are reinforced through the dramatic components of *Use Me Up* as it takes the reader close to the repetition and desperation of Jack’s journey from chronic substance abuse to the early stages of recovery.

A key pillar of this essay concerns the vital connections between creativity, addiction, and the chemical impact of the neurotransmitter dopamine. Throughout the novel, Jack’s body is “flooded with a hormonal cocktail of cortisol, epinephrine, norepinephrine and others.” (p. 17) Drawing on scientific research by J.D. Berke (2018), L.J. Gotlib (2021), and others, I explore how primal dopaminergic experiences, mediated by the brain’s built-in reward system function as an underexplored point of connection between self and the world, and so offer valuable insights into addiction and creativity. Indeed, much attention has been given to how

mega companies like Meta have mastered the art of delivering dopamine-driven rewards to not only cultivate but even direct the thinking of tens of millions of addicted people (Tereshenko, 2023). The process of writing *Use Me Up*, and additionally my work as a recovery coach, have shaped my understanding of the theoretical and practical aspects of addiction and creativity. *Use Me Up* is a first person novel, and so by harnessing the capacity of the slippery “I” – a central tension, as Gérard Genette (1993, 77) argues, in the work of autofiction – I present qualitative data, foregrounding the personal, to explore the social impact of dopaminergic experiences. In the final chapter, I offer some tentative insights into how this knowledge might be used practically to improve an individual’s management of addiction issues through creativity. In addition to exploring the subject of addiction, and the reasons behind its existence, it is my hope that this exegesis can help to lessen its prevalence, while making valuable suggestions for better management of recovery, breaking through the loneliness and desolation of the addict’s life.

### **The problem**

For the American biologist Edward O. Wilson, human society is trapped in the conflict between “Palaeolithic emotions,” “medieval institutions,” and “godlike technology.” (Wilson, 1978) Writing 50 years, long before I created Jack Gallagher and *Use Me Up*, Wilson’s formulation feels remarkably prescient in today’s world of dopamine addiction. It often seems like humankind’s ancient biology has evolved for radically different purposes to those required to function in the twenty-first century. As Stephen Jay Gould famously states: “There’s been no biological change in humans in 40,000 or 50,000 years. Everything we call culture and civilization we’ve built with the same body and brain.” (Gould, 2000 cited in Cochran, Harpending, 2009, p. 125) However, the complexity of contemporary life in much larger communities than existed when we reached our latest stage of physical evolution, presents

certain problems. More recent scholarship than Gould's, finds evidence that use of digital devices and extended periods spent online are now causing structural changes in the brains of children (Nivins, 2024), so arguably, today, even our ancient biology may actually be changing. Furthermore, the cutting edge of artificial intelligence technologies provides a particularly ominous terrain for the habituation of addictive behaviours with researchers already exploring the overlap between the age of AI and the possibilities and challenges they pose for personal behaviour (Suva, Bhatia, 2024).

Daniel Z. Lieberman and Michael E. Long suggest in *The Molecule of More* (2018) that the most urgent societal problems—addiction, obesity, wealth inequality—can be explained by the tension between biological makeup and the modern ways of life, with dopamine a fundamental element to understanding this conflict between societal demands and our inherent desire for pleasure and satisfaction. The “reward system” was first articulated in 1954 by James Olds and Peter Milner who discovered that electrical stimulation in certain brain regions in rats produced a rewarding experience, leading to continuous self-sustaining behaviour. Later, research would link the neurotransmitter dopamine to the functioning of the reward system, assisting the brain and body regarding how to expend energy (Berke, 2018; Gotlib, 2021). While dopamine is often understood simply as a driver of pleasure, Chapter 1 presents a more nuanced account, emphasizing its role in the anticipation of satisfaction.

Modern society is awash in stimulation, and it is not always clear which activities will be beneficial and which will be harmful. However, the need to make these choices is inescapable and, I argue, requires a level of creativity to be successful. The alternative can lead to repetitive cycles and self-destructive behaviour which is a topic that I dramatize throughout *Use Me Up*, where rampant stimulation and the inability to see beyond immediate desires keep Jack locked in self-defeating cycles of addiction. I will argue that, rather than dopamine being the central neurochemical driver of this conflict, it is better understood as a point of

vulnerability that reveals the conflict between individual biological desire and societal expectations, and so requires greater understanding.

Addiction is as old as human civilisation. J.A. Engel and Elisabet Jerlhag argue that “addictive drugs, such as alcohol, have since ancient times been used by mankind to achieve euphoria and a state of well-being”—adding that only recently have “the neuronal systems mediating these feelings [...] progressively been identified.” (Engel & Jerlhag, 2014, p. 202) In this fashion, I explore the neurochemistry of addiction, and ask how it can help us achieve a clearer view of the path to recovery. Addiction is present in every social demographic, race, gender, and culture, occupying a universal presence in the species despite a wide variety of cultural differences. This is not to deny that addiction might have unique cultural causes. Instead, it is the case that the addictions most prevalent in a culture will reflect the addictive stimuli available in the environment.

Alcohol remains a major source of addiction in Australia, with more than one in four adults exceeding the Australia Adult Alcohol Guideline in 2022 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). One might also consider the presence of gambling addiction in Las Vegas: in 2022 the state of Nevada noted a spike in the level of problem gambling following the pandemic (Kean, 2022). Likewise, the remarkable number of heroin addicts and prevalence of Narcotics Anonymous in Iran point to the unique cultural circumstances through which addiction is experienced. In 2012, there were 18,195 weekly NA meetings in Iran, second in number only to the United States (Afder, 2019). Likewise, the seemingly immeasurable impact of internet gambling and social media addiction remain pressing issues for the twenty-first century.

If addiction is a universal across the human species, then so is creativity. Many scholars agree that, while culture-bound, there is a universal creativity to the human species which is innate within us and manifests at the biological, social, and linguistic level (Morriss-Kay,

2010). Even within a single language, new words and phrases are created to reflect changes in culture from generation to generation; consider the Oxford English Dictionary's adoption of the word "tweet" as a noun in 2013, despite its contemporary usage only dating since 2006 (Kite, 2013). Similarly, the prevalence of being "terminally online" or "the red pill" convey the malleable qualities of languages. In an autofictional novel like *Use Me Up*, the narrative becomes a self-conscious exploration of storytelling, where the drive toward coherence and recovery is continually disrupted by the protagonist's cynicism and disbelief, ultimately confronting the bare reality of "Oblivion." In some respects, Jack exhibits the Freudian tendency towards disorder manifest in the "death drive"—the innate urge to return to an inert "mineral" state. (Freud, 1920/2003). Jack sees the fictions others tell about themselves as inadequate, yet he cannot construct a stable version of his own identity strong enough to pull him out of his struggles with addiction.

Creativity is a capacious topic and one that is impossible to exhaust within the scope of this exegesis. Indeed, it is the inexhaustible quality that is interesting. By referencing the creativity studies of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2005), Mark A. Runco (2006), and others, I unpack some of the salient themes of creativity research while drawing concrete links to my own fundamental interests in addiction and dopamine. Like addiction, creativity results in the firing of the brain's dopamine receptors (Zaidel, 2014) and so presents a novel avenue for considering alternative pathways for substance abuse treatment. The author has personally experienced both self-destruction in the form of addiction, as well as the immense joy of creativity by writing *Use Me Up*, and other projects such as my personal interest in recovery coaching and use of creative exercises as key components of recovery programs. My experience suggests that when the creative aspect of our nature is too successfully repressed, self-destructive behaviour emerges, with addiction being one obvious and common manifestation.

Having successfully completed a full-length creative project, and reflected upon its themes, I passionately argue that people may greatly benefit from a creative outlet as a major part of recovery, in keeping with contemporary research on creative practice and art therapy as sources of personal development (Magsamen and Ross, 2023). Failure to consider approaches to creativity within recovery programs may result in highly negative and destructive life outcomes and the exacerbation of addiction and its negative impact over individual and collective health. As such, I explore the significance of creativity as a meaningful response to addiction precisely because of their connection at a deep biological level—not separate elements so much as diverging branches of the same human tree.

This is a key concern for my exegesis and will be negotiated throughout the three main chapters. While it is not the case that increased dopamine, or first-hand experience of addiction, improves creative output, I will claim, through reference to *Use Me Up*, that dopamine and addiction are both indications of the presence of creativity which has manifested in different ways. The past few years have witnessed an acute upsurge in popular studies, as well as critical warnings regarding the endocrinological underpinning of society under “limbic capitalism,” (Courtwright, 2019) with dopamine a key culprit for any number of social ills. Somewhat ironically, some of the traits which can be helpful for the creative process can also be damaging to someone who uses alcohol or drugs in an abusive manner. For example, the compulsion to seek “novelty” (Simonton, 2012) in a creative process is fundamental to the generation of ideas but may exacerbate the damaging behaviours of the addict who is overcome with society’s manifold distractions. In *Use Me Up*, Jack is driven to extreme lengths to maintain his addictions, whether through self-deception or damaging relationships. Later in the exegesis, I touch on the novel’s incorporation of musical cues and creativity more broadly as a positive stimulus in harnessing our dopaminergic urges. Ultimately, creativity is an essential human faculty that, while universal, must be allowed to prosper. If it is not utilised correctly there are

unfortunate side effects. Just as unused body parts atrophy, if creativity is stifled then a person risks falling into destructive behaviours.

### **A note on methodology**

At every writer's conference that Stephen King attends, inevitably at some point he is asked what type of pencil he uses to make notes. Presumably, the asker of this question is hoping to find some great alchemy in whether King uses a Staedtler or a Stabilo; and whether, if they use the same equipment, they might enjoy comparable success. In a similar spirit, my exegesis on *Use Me Up*, considers the meaning of its composition. As noted by Richard D. Nelson (2004), Welby Ings (2014) and others, the exegesis is a practice-led paper that interfaces with a creative work, therefore existing on a plane between scholarly argumentation and creative expression, without necessarily restricting itself to either form. In other words, it is a useful method to pick at the gaps between disciplines. Many academics and practitioners espouse the benefits of creativity, including Eric Maisel and Susan Raeburn (2008) without always looking at the underlying reasons for this or specifying in detail the ways in which it should be approached. Through reference to the dopamine studies of Berke (2018), Gotlib (2021), and C. Marsden (2006), the creativity analyses of Runco (2004, 2006), Csikszentmihalyi (2005), D.K. Simonton (2012), and Louise Katz (2013), among others, my exegesis engages these often-isolated topics. The exegesis will sometimes resemble a literature review and at other times a more discursive and exploratory paper. In each chapter, my engagement with secondary scholarship will then be applied to the subject of *Use Me Up*, resulting in a critical and creative dialogue that offers insight into the mutually reinforcing subjects of dopamine, addiction, and creativity. It is not my intention to supersede academic work from other disciplines, merely to provide a new lens through which to view these topics. As such, the structure and analytical decisions of this exegetical paper will aim to make use of the instinctive choices of a creative

work, using qualitative data, as well as expressive language and metaphor to expand upon my three central themes: dopamine, addiction, and creativity.

Creativity and fictionality, as Alison James notes, are essentially ambiguous subjects (James, 2022, p. 48). One of the primary skills I developed over the course of this doctorate has been how to write a novel, a process that was neither clear nor precise. For many years, the idea for this story and the characters within it rattled around my brain looking for a way to form itself. From time to time, I would sit down and write a page or two, sometimes just a few paragraphs. My initial work on this project involved collecting scraps and excerpts and attempting to piece them into some kind of coherent order. Often, they did not fit together; just as often I would find two pieces of writing on the same idea, written months apart, with only superficial differences in the prose. I used these fragments and attempted to map out a narrative which retained the spirit I was searching for. Then I attempted to fill in the gaps, writing prose that would link the fragments together. For James, “I” is itself an “enunciative gap” (James, 2022, p. 49) that opens the work to broader considerations of fictionality within the attempt to locate narrative cohesion. While enjoyable, the process was messy. I tried to imagine where one situation might be placed and what might need to happen to Jack in the meantime. Many of the earlier pieces did not survive the drafting process. When going through these fragments there was at times some frustration. I would locate bits of writing that were suitable for the project, only to find something else describing the same events written at a different time. From this process, I drew the conclusion that there was something which was crying out to be articulated, something that needed to be said, that came from a level below conscious thought, and that these elements were the most creative parts of the project.

The big change came when I had both time to write and a minimal level of distraction. For this, I have Covid-19 to thank, which afforded me free time and basic financial support: two things that I did not have beforehand. There have been recent studies into the overlap

between forced seclusion during the pandemic and creativity, with some sections of the population experiencing heightened creative output in 2020 (Görlich, 2023). Nevertheless, with physical stability in place, I fell into a rhythm of writing for two to three hours every morning, reviewing the previous day's work, then continuing from that point forward. In six weeks, I had completed the manuscript. This was more progress than I had made in the previous 24 months. This is not to say that writing in the mornings was the special ingredient (no more than King's choice of pencil), but rather that there was a habitual rhythm to my days and that this rhythm was a creative one. In reference to the dopaminergic aspect of this process, I do not have the equipment or skills to measure the levels of my neurochemistry, but I can wholeheartedly state that I both looked forward to the writing and enjoyed the process too. I did not privilege any kind of results (although delusions of grandeur may have crossed my mind from time to time). Instead, it was the draw of writing something truly creative that excited me, the ability to use words as I wished, to find situations and turns of phrase that both held interest and amused me was what I found most compelling. In brief, I enjoyed the process rather than the result. My dopamine, my anticipation of pleasure at a bodily level, was fired by the act of creation. From a certain angle, it almost seemed erotic.

Building on my lived experiences, and research into the overlapping subjects of dopamine, addiction, and creativity, I will consider the benefits of the creative process over strategies for recovery, with each chapter focused on one of my core themes. Underlying this study is my core faith that the neurochemistry of desire, grounded by the dopamine system, can be positively "hijacked" (Wise and Rompre, 1989) as a bridge towards creativity, rather than an inevitable tendency towards addiction and despair. To return to Edward O. Wilson, it is futile to repress ancient biology. One must live with the conflict between the ancient body and the stimulation of modern society. Phrased another way, we have to live with dopamine. Humankind cannot do without it; in many ways, it controls the basic function of all life. It is

up to us to be proactive, to accept this conflict and, through understanding and imagination, improve approaches towards treatment for addiction.

## Chapter 1: Dopamine

Who doesn't want to be happy? Who isn't driven forward in their lives by the promise of joy and satisfaction? It could be a smile from a child, the acceptance of a new job, or tidying up a messy kitchen. People are always looking for things that make them feel better. Without this essential drive, a person would be a motionless, stagnant packet of DNA. But is happiness our fundamental motivator? Can it be attained, and if so, maintained? The problem of enduring happiness is a central concern of my creative project, *Use Me Up*. In the case of protagonist Jack Gallagher, happiness is intimately linked to profound despair, the intense pleasures of highly addictive substances treated as a means of escape from his "default emotion" of "low-level agony"; as Jack declares: "This is why I drank beer, skulled shots, snorted lines, gobbled burgers, chased women..." (p. 203) Throughout the novel, the repetitive sequence of addictive behaviours is portrayed as a perilous cycle that is profoundly difficult to break. Jack's despair stems from his inability to comprehend the chaos and vulnerability of his drives, which make him susceptible to addiction. In this chapter, I demonstrate how my creative investigation into addictive pleasure reflects a lively body of scholarship concerning the stark biological foundation of human desire which is driven by the neurotransmitter dopamine. As such, this chapter will provide a brief survey of the field of research on dopamine, and its function as a prime motivator of the human species. As L.J. Gotlib notes in his entry to *The Gale Encyclopedia of Science* (2021), dopamine is now widely accepted by the scientific community to be intrinsic to the way the species is motivated, providing insight into the complexities of human action at a neurochemical level. Generative of pleasure, satisfaction, and motivation, the firing of dopamine receptors in the brain plays a crucial role in many important bodily functions, connecting the individual to the wider world. Far from being driven by happiness, per se, the hardwired biological drive for pleasure is easy to exploit and is readily turned into

a bogeyman for any number of societal ills: a *New York Times* headline from a few years ago—“We Have a Dopamine Problem” (Smith, 2023)—warns readers of the prevalence of addictive behaviour patterns. By engaging my creative project with the neuroscience of dopamine research, I hope to achieve a more lucid perspective on how the drive towards enduring satisfaction reveals the disparity between individual bodies and the demands of modern society. Throughout the novel, Jack’s personal struggle with addiction is portrayed in primal terms, highlighting the human reward system as a point of vulnerability hardwired into biological evolution. In addition, I have drawn conclusions about how the link between dopamine and pleasure can be viewed by artists and addicts (to be further explored in the following chapters), and how this view overlaps with my personal experience producing a substantial creative project.

### **Motivation and desire**

C. Marsden (2006) attributes a “celebrity status” to dopamine, with prominent figures in neuropharmacology, neurology, and psychiatry playing a role in raising public awareness of its influence on various human functions. However, this status risks overlooking the longer history of research, which has evolved from focusing on motivation to more broad-based concepts of human desire.

The discovery of dopamine in 1957 by Swedish pharmacologist Arvid Carlsson (for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2000) was a revelatory moment in the study of neurochemistry. Carlsson’s discovery that dopamine was a neurotransmitter in the brain, and not a precursor to norepinephrine, was counter to the prevailing view at the time, with the highest concentration of dopamine existing in the basal ganglia (Yeragani et al., 2010). Since then, the scientific consensus has significantly evolved, with the nature of dopamine going from a relatively minor intermediary in the formation of noradrenaline, to a major

neurotransmitter in the brain involved in the control of movement, Parkinson's disease, the neurobiology of schizophrenia, and attention-hyperactivity disorder. For J.D. Berke, "the idea that dopamine is critically involved in ongoing motivation has never gone away—on the contrary, it is widely taken for granted by behavioural neuroscientists." (Berke, 2018, p. 787)

Above all, dopamine is generally associated with the drive towards desire. Most notably, famous studies into the function of dopamine, such as Bruce K. Alexander's "Rat Park" experiments of the late 1970s, demonstrate the impact of isolation over the impact of motivation and desire (there have also been examples of studies conducted on monkeys in the 1980s) (Gage, Sunnall, 2019). These experiments follow a similar formula: the animal is presented with a stimulus, either food or a potential mate; dopamine fires, and the animal is motivated to act; the conclusion of these experiments shows that dopamine invigorates the animal's behaviour and that motivation is heavily impacted by social milieu. More recent experiments suggest the crossover between dopamine and the regulation of mood and emotion, with the body conveying motivational value and promoting movement on sub-second timescales. Again, Berke is valuable here: he points out how researchers have learned that "increasing dopamine makes it more likely that an animal will decide that it is worth expending energy to move or, in certain cases, move faster." (Berke, 2018, p. 788) Not only does dopamine provide the motivation to perform an activity, but the more dopamine that is present, the more emphatic the decision will be.

### **Anticipation and weakness**

What is interesting and essential to bear in mind is that dopamine is linked with the *anticipation* of pleasure, rather than pleasure itself. Studies throughout the 1990s landed on new insights into the anticipatory role of dopamine as "a neural substrate of addiction and reward" (W. Schultz, et. al., 1997). In other words, dopamine sparks the desire for an object, and the

motivation to act, but not necessarily enjoyment of the spoils. For Marsden, the firing of dopamine offers “a dynamic estimate of whether it is worth expending a limited internal resource, such as energy, attention, or time.” (2006) While one may assume that biological drives bind us to the present, dopamine is in fact orientated towards the future. Serotonin and noradrenaline are concerned with events which are happening now, whereas dopamine is concerned with what *could* happen—interestingly, dopamine is antagonistic to serotonin, which is related to how people enjoy the things they have pursued (Huttunen, 1995). For Berke, “unexpected, reward-predictive cues” are linked to firing dopamine cells, with such cues invigorating behaviour and learning. “Motivation ‘looks forward’: it uses predictions of future reward to appropriately energize current behavior.” (Berke, 2018, p. 787)

Dopamine’s connection to the anticipation of pleasure reveals a more complex relationship with desire. When it has been blocked in the brain, subjects lose all motivation, with dopamine-lesioned rats often choosing not to exert effort to actively obtain rewards (Marsden, 2006). On the paucity of dopamine, Gotlib adds that “a lack of dopamine in some areas of the brain has also been implicated in depression.” (2021, p. 1274) In some ways, to self-administer narcotic substances to solve depressive issues can be an effective problem-solving tool, at least for a short period. Unfortunately, drug abuse, or the excessive reliance on drugs, can also lead to the disintegration of a person’s health, making the immediate antidepressant impact one of ever diminishing returns.

In other words, dopamine is the chemical of positive expectations; it fires for happy surprises, but only ones that promise positive outcomes. Understandably, this discovery has proved valuable for studies on the neurochemical underpinning of reward anticipation in gambling disorders, revealing that the dopamine system is particularly sensitive to behavioural stimulation related to monetary reward, particularly in the ventral striatum, a brain region involved in emotional and motivational processing (Koepp et. al., 1998). Dopamine does not

simplistically map onto notions of satisfaction but, once again, flags a point of weakness within human biology when faced with the myriad possible pleasures of contemporary society—pathways which point to areas of exposure or weakness that we are scrambling to overcome.

### **Environment**

Despite the fact that dopamine is something that humans generate internally, the reward system is at the mercy of environmental cues and the things they encounter, usually visually (Kaas and Balaram, 2014), as they navigate around the earth. The question then becomes: what motivates us and why? It is here that context becomes important. What someone's biologically determined reward system may assess as pleasurable, and worthy of effort, is not always within their control or best interests. The dopamine system encourages them to expend time and energy on things perceived as beneficial in the immediate environment. Anticipated pleasures, therefore, exist within a social context, inherently connecting the personal to the environmental (Berridge and Robinson, 1998). It may be tempting to frame dopamine in allegorical terms, similar to the biblical story of The Fall. Just as the snake tempts Eve to taste the apple—leading to the loss of innocence—the anticipation of pleasure promises a fragile symbiosis with the natural environment. We need these environmental impulses, but the stakes are potentially disastrous. Who is responsible for this? Eve? The snake? Or God for setting her up? Regardless, the snake and the apple will always be in the garden—ready to stimulate desire.

If to exist in the world inevitably involves a certain level of temptation, it still remains to be mindful of how dopamine can be strategically harnessed for profit. Twenty-first century capitalism plays a fundamental role in exploiting the human reward system as a highly lucrative method of turning individuals into lifelong “consumers” (Courtwright, 2019). This has intensified in the age of social media, creating a particularly corrosive environment where the ignition of our dopamine pathways draws individuals towards all sorts of unhelpful or wasteful

behaviours: scrolling through digital feeds, online gambling, and tapping away at visually stimulating images (impulsive behaviours that prove especially disastrous for a character like Jack Gallagher). In other words, the biologically inbuilt drive for “more” leaves us empty handed with the consequences of our actions—lost money, lost time, difficult conversations, a sense of demoralisation—before moving swiftly on to the next irresistible object.

### **I can't get no ... satisfaction**

There can be the temptation to make dopamine singularly responsible for these consequences. However, it is no more to blame than any other natural, biologically determined process. More accurately, I suggest that the dopamine pathways point to areas of individual exposure to environmental cues which can be profitably explored. While these impulses are physiological, the world is primed to stimulate them. While the notion of transcending or overcoming these temptations may set one up to fail, later chapters in this study offer insight into some of the tactics a person can employ to intellectually reframe their instinctive drives. And yet, as J.D. Berke and the wider survey of dopamine research shows, the body is programmed with the assumption that satisfaction may be attainable if we follow the right cues. The clear disconnect between human instinct and the professional, emotional, and social contexts of twenty-first century life is a fundamental problem that *Use Me Up* sets out to explore. Throughout the novel, Jack often feels as if he lacks control of his body, while fumbling towards the anticipation of ecstatic pleasure. When the reader meets Jack, he is at the mercy of his primal impulses: “I liked to ride the edge of oblivion. To taste the moment where maximum risk tottered between elation and despair. The risk of losing everything made life exciting, being close to desolation makes victory feel that much more glorious.” (p. 1) In many ways, Jack’s narrative highlights the disparity between the body and the demands of modern society.

At the same time, a brief glance at the species' evolutionary past is enough to demonstrate how dopamine and the biological drive towards satisfaction has proved extraordinarily useful. Daniel Z. Lieberman and Michael E. Long (2018) show that humans share the same physiology as their biologically "modern" ancestors 100,000 years ago, with the neurotransmitter dopamine a fundamental mark of this legacy. For much of the history of the species, the quest for clean drinking water, a stable food supply, safety, and a mate have been enough to keep us busy. To encounter anything which helped the species to achieve these goals would motivate the body to act. As Robert Kelly (2013) suggests, people also crave variety at a biological level; without physiological variation, they could be prone to annihilation from individual strains of bacteria; if human behaviour were uniform, they would be easy targets for a predator primed to exploit weaknesses in that routine. Moreover, the environment has never completely been able to sustain us. As hunter-gathering tribes, we tended to migrate by about 3km per year simply because we had exhausted all we could in the immediate vicinity. An ancient human walking along the savannah would similarly have their dopamine fire by the sight of a fruit tree, water source, or antelope. Since the advent of the Holocene, and the transition from hunter-gather tribes to advanced agricultural societies, humans have more of their essential needs met. They need expend only relatively small amounts of energy to take pleasure in the shots of dopamine that fire upon the promise of satisfaction. If this leads to greater levels of dissatisfaction in the longer term, the brain, nevertheless, is still programmed to seek out new stimuli. After all, to *desire* was the key to our survival.

While running water and food are not uniformly available across the planet, we now live in a world of relative prosperity where market forces are designed to take advantage of our in-built need for "more." Regardless of abundance, the persistence of unhappiness remains an unnerving reality of twenty-first century life for many affluent countries. Sales of antidepressants are at an all-time high, and more so in countries with developed infrastructure

(Burns, 2022). Meanwhile, the “loneliness epidemic” links advanced industrial societies to increased levels of unhappiness and atomisation. One of the social outcomes of this conjuncture is, of course, addiction. In my creative project, I connect behavioural attitudes to the wider market of commodities primed to elicit dopaminergic responses. “I feel like I flick through people in the way you might flick through the pages of a book or a magazine, looking for something interesting and then moving on quickly because nothing draws me in.” (p. 40) Jack’s compulsive actions reinforce the desire for novelty that neoliberal capitalism has proven remarkably adept at delivering. The most cursory glance at contemporary advertising finds buzzwords such as “new” and “improved” featuring heavily, with sophisticated marketing techniques across a multitude of media platforms calculated to exploit our Fear of Missing Out (or FOMO) and the overwhelming desire for the novel and never-before-seen. It works. Such words trigger the brain’s dopaminergic system, which is primed for new positive experiences. From first-hand experience, people can spend their entire lives in these cycles, be it pressing the buttons on a gambling machine, online shopping, abusing drugs, betting on sporting outcomes, scrolling for pornographic imagery, or losing themselves in bars. Before we know it, our entire lives have passed by.

### **Compulsion**

Such is the danger for Jack, in *Use Me Up*, who is a good example of somebody at the mercy of his dopaminergic impulses. In Chapter 13, Jack walks into a pub, “everywhere the sounds of consumption,” and begins grabbing animalistically at the food on somebody’s plate. He has not eaten for days. Fred H. Previc (1999) suggests that humans originally evolved dopamine in order to encourage them to gorge on fruit in the summer to gain the weight and nourishment necessary to survive the winter. The ensuing scene in *Use Me Up* is a parody of this impulsive behaviour: “There was bangers and mash on the table nearest to me, it glistened and the gloopy

gravy looked delicious in the way that few brown liquids can. My arm reached out and grabbed the sausage and took two long bites.” (p. 67) In Jack’s case, the combination of extreme hunger and available food leaves no room for inner willpower. The alliterative effect of “glistened” and “gloopy gravy” highlights Jack’s raw anticipation of animal pleasure. His arm extends, as if it were separate from his body, reinforcing that he is at the mercy of his most primal drives. This representation of Jack’s scenario, where dopaminergic impulses lead him to what he thinks he needs, what he believes will make him happy, results in the character’s extreme embarrassment. However, the kindness exhibited by the woman whose food he takes perhaps offers an alternative insight into practical solutions for Jack’s illness that will inform later chapters.

The main concern behind all restless activity is that there is a reward for making judgements and decisions that will likely lead to the satisfaction of desire. Berke highlights the importance of “Reward Prediction Errors” (RPEs), connecting dopamine to evolved patterns of learning, which “are used later, to help make choices that maximize reward.” (Berke, 2018, p. 787) This reward can come from two places: one external, the result of the activity; and one internal, the increased levels of dopamine produced. Berke adds: “Dopaminergic modulation of long-term learning mechanisms helps explain the persistent behavioral effects of addictive drugs, which share the property of enhancing striatal dopamine release.” (Berke, 2018, p. 788) Dopamine inspires a person to act, but problematically for short-term pay off. This also suggests that dopamine itself is the reward, at least in terms of neurochemistry. Throughout the novel, Jack persistently weighs the balance between possible rewards and the associated time and motivation required. “I was always guessing value, how much fun would this person be, how long would my money last, when did I last eat, how dangerous is this activity in the short, medium and long term?” (p. 57) At the same time, Jack is depicted as trapped in a kind of perpetual present moment; he is “an eternal Peter Pan,” (p. 16) his life governed by impulsive

behaviours, and the desire for pleasure at all costs. Recent scholarship by BJ Fung (2021) explores the neurobiological overlap between dopamine, motivation process, and time perception—captured in the colloquialism, “time flies when you’re having fun.” Only through positive habit-forming can Jack step beyond his pathological immaturity. Other studies have shown that “alcohol, nicotine, and a variety of other drugs including marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines, and heroin all appear to raise the level or the availability of dopamine in different parts of the brain.” (Gotlib, 2021, p. 1273) This could well explain why so many people with a tendency towards depression will initially try to self-medicate with drugs and alcohol. The propensity to fall into self-destructive behaviour may be exacerbated by any number of socio-political factors, including expansion of medical waiting lists, defunding of public services for mental health, and the prevailing distrust of medical authorities in various parts of the globe (Turner, 2018).

The socio-political components of addiction are explored in *Use Me Up*, and significantly inform the broader critical questions that shape my creative project. Jack Gallagher is brought to his knees by the sound of the chimes on the gambling machine, where he is trapped in cyclical, damaging behaviours. “Taking a break never seemed an option in such situations. If the numbers were going up, I needed to stay there and enjoy it. If the money was going down, I needed to stay and turn it around.” (p. 66) A few pages later, Jack suffers the consequences of his actions. “When you hit zero with gambling there is nothing—no physical sensation to take away the pain. You sit there with it, absorbing what you have done, alone with guilt and shame slicing through you.” (p. 68) This is a reasonable representation of how addiction can affect people when they become debilitatingly compulsive in ways which are damaging to them in the long term. As I explore in later chapters, dopamine and creativity also share significant points of biological crossover. While there are differences in operation, it is of fundamental importance to accept that they cannot be separated from one another. At

the level of brain chemistry, it can indeed be difficult to tell them apart: “scientists can be confused about the difference between a bipolar manic episode and cocaine use.” (Lieberman and Long, 2018, p. 104) Just as the effects of a stimulant can sometimes be indistinguishable from mental illness, dopamine and the human experience are equally inseparable.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that dopamine, as the scientific literature demonstrates, is not merely synonymous with satisfaction; rather, it describes the anticipation of pleasure. And so it points to a notable site of weakness between individual biological impulses and social expectations more broadly. It sets in motion subjective judgement into whether gratification is attainable from what is ready to hand. From the discovery of dopamine in the late fifties, to contemporary cutting-edge research, the function and meaning of dopamine has significantly changed, implicated in numerous areas of human life, with notable impact over motivation and learned response. Humanity is prone to activities which are likely to improve its emotional situation, motivated by behaviours that are anticipated will remove pain and lead towards prosperity. Some behaviours, unfortunately, are apt to provide short-term pleasure and long-term pain. As my creative project explores, there are key points of tension between the dopaminergic system and contemporary life that exploits this desire for quick shots of pleasure. Addiction is an obvious and extreme outcome of this, revealing the limitations of human biology and how individuals can fall prey to the dopaminergic system inherited from their hunter-gatherer ancestors. Jack’s animalistic impulses, depicted through key scenes in the novel, reinforce the uncomfortable tension between ancient bodies and our twenty-first century milieu.

Writing this paper as an exegesis within the humanities has allowed for greater freedom and flexibility of expression than a scientific methodology. My conclusions on dopamine in

relation to the central question have inevitably evolved throughout this process and can be summarized as follows: As human beings, we struggle to connect with the world—both physically and socially, whether online, in-person, or in imagined spaces. Dopamine plays a crucial role in this interaction, acting as a biological mediator at the intersection. However, this juncture is often fraught with challenges. Dopamine influences decision-making when faced with unfamiliar or overwhelming stimuli in the environment, yet the stimuli one encounters today is far more potent than anything the species has previously adapted to. As a result, dopamine cannot reliably guide us toward consistently beneficial choices. Being in a dopaminergic state is inherently pleasurable, and for dopamine, there is no concept of “enough.” If dopamine receptors are firing, it signals a perceived potential reward in the environment—prompting the body to invest time and energy in pursuit of that reward. Anything within sensory reach can tempt us, and dopamine urges us toward it. Yet the world is not designed for our physical well-being. The story of the Fall illustrates that even in the Garden of Eden danger existed—and today, it is ever more present through the ubiquity of social media firms. While we are part of this world, our attempts to achieve lasting satisfaction are often clumsy. Sometimes they can go wrong. The next chapter is an exploration of what happens when they do.

## Chapter 2: Addiction

“**20**Now Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. **21**But when he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and uncovered himself inside his tent. **22**And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father’s nakedness and took his two brothers outside....”

### “Noah’s Shame and Canaan’s Curse,” Genesis, 9:20-22

“You need to have a definitive low moment.”

[...]

“Without one of them, you probably won’t make it.”

I reflected again for a moment.

“Well,” I said, “I’m homeless, unemployed, and I’m talking to you.”

He looked at me for a second and nodded.

“That could be it,” he said.

“That could be it.”

### Mark Payne, *Use Me Up*, pp. 127-128

The abuse of alcohol and other addictive substances has been with humankind since its earliest stories. From Biblical allegories to glitzy Hollywood movies, addiction is depicted as one of the most devastating things to happen to a person and poses dire consequences for the individual and society. A groundbreaking recent report estimates the total cost of addiction in Australia to be \$80.3 billion for the year 2021 (Rethink Addiction, KPMG, 2022). The economic outlook is similarly distressing throughout the world. A report from the United States estimates the annual estimated medical cost in hospitals from substance abuse disorder to be as high as \$13.2 billion (Peterson, C et al., 2021). Additionally, illicit drug use is responsible for over 750,000 deaths per year, with approximately 71 million people experiencing a drug use disorder in 2017. (Ritchie et al., 2022) Put another way, this is roughly equal to the approximately 70 million people on the planet with red hair (Barnes, 2013). These figures rise further when we include the figures for alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and pornography addictions. The World Health Organisation estimates the number of alcoholics at 380 million worldwide which is almost 5% of the planet’s total population (WHO, 2022). Of course, many

cases go unrecorded in the official studies, meaning the real numbers are potentially much higher. As argued in the previous chapter, addiction reveals an important bridge between neurochemistry and the demands of modern civilisation which, in dire circumstances, can result in addiction. The link between dopamine and addiction is well established in the scholarly literature. Wise and Rompre note the capacity of “dependence producing drugs” to “hijack” the reward system by creating more powerful rewards than generally available in our everyday lives (1989, p. 195). While addiction is generally considered an exclusively medical issue, I am keen to explore the shortcomings behind treating addiction in these terms. I argue that the narrow medicalisation of addiction can limit our understanding of the more complex interlayering of biological, social and psychological factors involved. Throughout a series of vivid scenarios, *Use Me Up* aims to dramatize how damaging addiction can be, as well as the broader social circumstances that make it easy to become trapped in these cycles of behaviour. By focusing solely on the medical rehabilitation of the individual, rather than the conditions that lead to addictive behaviours, one risks doing an injustice to people who suffer from this disease, while ignoring the ways in which dopaminergic impulses might be positively reframed.

### **Harm reduction**

Like dopamine, addiction is a widely used, albeit loosely understood, concept. The American Psychiatric Association provides a commonly accepted definition of addiction in the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, describing it as any compulsive behaviour that is detrimental to the individual and involves a level of unmanageable compulsion (DSM, 2022, p. 544). This description captures the essence of addiction, emphasizing its negative impact on a person's well-being and the inability to control the urge, while drawing a concrete link with the human reward system:

“All drugs that are taken in excess have in common the ability to directly activate the brain reward systems, which are involved in the reinforcement of behaviours and establishment of memories. Instead of achieving reward system activation through adaptive behaviours, these substances produce such an intense activation of the reward system that normal activities may be neglected.” (DSM, 2022, p. 544)

In addition, the DSM highlights “gambling disorder[s], reflecting evidence that gambling behaviours activate reward systems similar to those activated by drugs of abuse and that produce some behavioural symptoms that appear comparable to those produced by the substance use disorders.” (DSM, 2022, p. 545) The manual goes on to identify further known behavioural addictions associated with gambling, sex, shopping, and addictions associated with internet use. One does not have to look far for nascent studies into smart phone addiction; some top CEOs even claim to limit the use of these technologies among their own children, although it is unknown how widespread or effective this practice has been (Akhtar and Ward, 2020). In situations where addiction is life-threatening, current best practice highlights what is known as “harm reduction,” referring to a set of practical strategies aimed at minimising negative physical, psychological, and social consequences of substance use, without necessarily requiring abstinence (Szalavitz, 2021, p. 15).

The term “harmful” is omnipresent in the literature on addiction and could be defined as anything which does significant damage to the brain, body, or both. In cases of “harm reduction,” specialists incorporate strategies to administer safer use, abstinence, and address conditions of usage. It is often difficult to draw the line at the point where healthy consumption stops and harmful addiction begins. This is amplified by the fact that many addicts self-diagnose (Khantzian, 1997). However, at its best, “harm reduction” is designed to serve people on the basis of individual and community needs, seeking strategies and practices in public

health policy to lessen the negative consequences associated with addictive behaviours. It seeks to implement strategies within public health that mitigate the negative impacts of addictive behaviours, fostering a balanced approach that recognizes both individual responsibility and societal factors. As the landscape of addiction continues to transform with digital and social media advancements, quantifications of “harm” must also adapt, integrating new strategies to help individuals regain control over their lives and behaviours.

### **Cultures of addiction**

The complexity of addiction extends beyond this clinical framework, encompassing various psychological, social, and biological factors that influence its development. However useful these factors may be in providing a shared framework for treating addiction, they do not address how addiction and its cycles of behaviour are negotiated from day to day outside of clinical settings; nor does it adequately capture the social impact of addiction as expressed through language and culture.

Gabor Maté’s highly acclaimed *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* (2008) provides an insight into the etymology of the word “addict,” explaining that the original meaning is “innocuous” and describes a “habitual activity or interest.” He points out that the cultural connotations around dysfunctional drug and alcohol use are a distinctly twentieth century phenomena (Maté, 2008, p. 192). The language of addiction has proliferated further still. In conversation, people often say they are *addicted* to avocados or exercise, for instance, as shorthand for any activity that they enjoy on a regular basis. This dovetails uncomfortably with the highly “moralized” discourse that still clings to the concept of addiction (Frank, 2017). The language of addiction is used in advertising to reinforce positive associations, and yet we also have to plaster our products with warnings about doing anything to excess, be that drinking or gambling. It is clear that some “addictions” are socially acceptable, and some are not. Equally

unsettling are the ways in which references to addiction are grafted onto puritanical work culture. The injunction to “Do What You Love” just as easily becomes a fig leaf for organisations to encourage exploitative forms of workaholism (Jaffe, 2021). Outstripping its original definition, addiction has appeared to arrive full circle, from being a concept which people are afraid of, back to one that is ubiquitous, inoffensive, almost banal.

In *Use Me Up*, the rationale for Jack’s serious dysfunctional behaviour often returns to the protagonist’s extreme discomfort with the habitual strictures of twenty-first century life: “the things normal people do.” (p. 166) And yet, as this exegesis asks, could it be that society is currently built upon addictive ideals?—preying on the biological programming for “more.” In *The Age of Addiction* (2019), historian David Courtwright marks the surprising shift from addiction’s extreme stigma in the 1980s to the celebration of vice and overconsumption that drives twenty-first century business culture. “Limbic capitalism,” he writes, “refers to a technologically advanced but socially regressive business system in which global industries, often with the help of complicit governments and criminal organizations, encourage excessive consumption and addiction.” (Courtwright, 2019, p. 6) In almost every respect, people are encouraged to consume beyond our basic needs by the market forces which drive the economy. In this context, a level of excess is inevitable, with the rise of new technologies creating avenues for addictive consumption. Nowadays, we are surrounded by pleasurable stimuli dressed up as marketable goods. While there are theories which suggest that addiction is purely chemical and biological—“a manifestation of the long-term pharmacological actions of these substances on the receptor mechanisms of the brain” (DSM, 2013, p. 481)—the mounting evidence around behavioural addictions suggests that the causes are polyvalent, and that environment is key for how addiction manifests. Maté writes that “all addictions [...] share the same brain circuits and brain chemicals.” (2008, p. 192) When it comes to the cause, he seems almost overwhelmed by possibilities, writing that “addiction has biological, chemical,

neurological, psychological, medical, emotional, social, political, economic, and spiritual underpinnings—and perhaps others.” (Maté, 2008, p. 193) With such a variety of potential factors, it is little wonder that it remains a fraught area of study, as well as an illness from which many suffer.

### **Visualising the journey**

I will now apply some of these insights to my creative project, *Use Me Up*, as a chronicle of addiction and behavioural disorder. The arc of addiction and the long journey towards healing significantly inform the composition of my novel while flagging the importance of creativity as a particularly fertile area for recovery strategies (see Chapter 3). The novel tracks the nuances and complexities of Jack’s journey and so necessarily reflects the cultural cues and environments that often lead to addiction. This is important, as the protagonist’s change of environment and their recovery significantly overlap. Crucially, Jack’s narrative corresponds to two key diagrams which display the various components and stages of an addict’s journey. Figure 1 outlines the stages of addiction as they are described in David J. Nutt’s and Liam J. Nestor’s *Addiction* (2013). They write that “addiction does not develop immediately. Rather, its development should be thought of as a process made up of several stages that are comprised of elements.” (2013, p. 24) Jack begins the story as a functional member of society. He is a teacher, although there are signs that his nascent alcoholism is starting to seriously impact his work. Shortly after we meet him, he is asked to take time away from his job. As the novel progresses, the reader witnesses his addiction become more severe. He is introduced to a detox centre and immediately leaves to get drunk. In accord with Figure 1, we meet Jack as he is in “Substance pre-occupation”—he is intoxicated at work where he is forced to “battle through the routine” (p. 3). The narrative then follows his journey through “Withdrawal” (Jack’s first experience of detox [p. 47] to “Loss of control” (Jack’s rampant drinking and gambling spree

[p. 68]) and “Negative consequences” (Jack eventually bottoms out and is forced to check in at Foundation House [p. 84]). For Nutt and Nestor, the social, financial, and personal consequences of chronic drug use are exacerbated by “a fear of having to cope with the perceived day-to-day stresses of life upon substance use cessation.” (Nutt, Nestor, 2013, p. 28) While the particularity of individual behaviours may vary across different social contexts, failure to cope with professional stresses are consistently flagged in personal testimonies by addicts who turn to chronic substance use. (Nutt, Nestor, 2013)

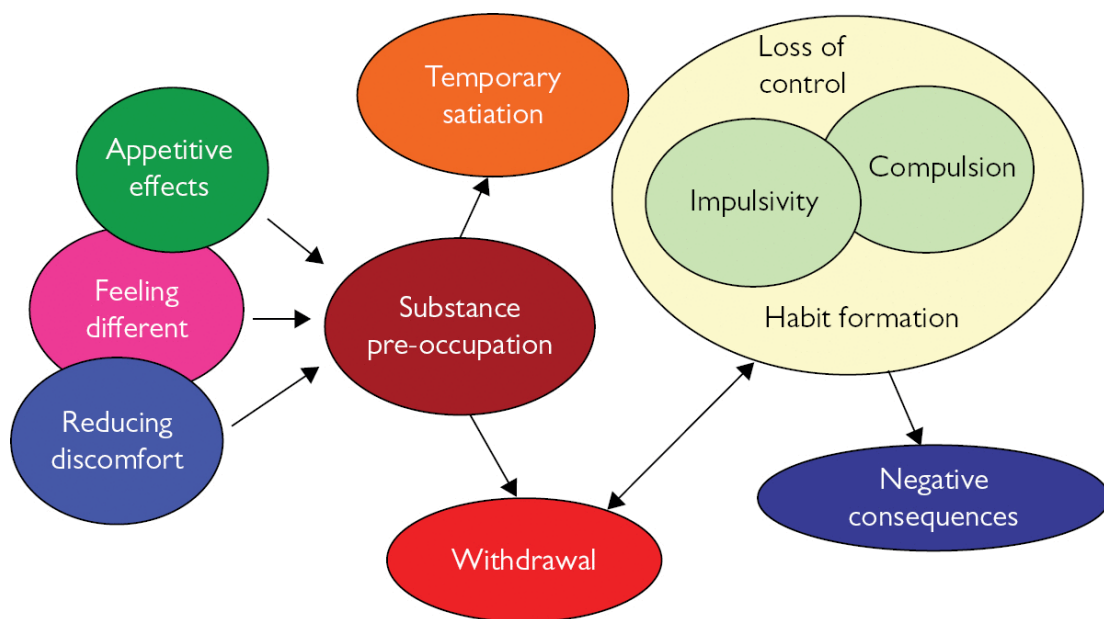


Figure 1: David J. Nutt, Liam J. Nestor. (2013). *Addiction*. Oxford: Oxford Psychiatry Library, p. 25

Secondly, my creative project incorporates the stages of a well-known visual resource for “Addiction and Recovery” known as the Jellinek Curve (Figure 2). The trajectory of this resource outlines a generalised path to recovery: from occasional consumption, through chronic cycles of substance abuse, concluding with group therapy and the possibility of achieving a proactive and “enlightened” perspective. We meet Jack at the end of the “crucial phase” as he passes through the “chronic phase” and into “rehabilitation.” By the second half of the book, Jack is destitute and institutionalised: “Emptiness, silence, only void.” (p. 68) While his alibis and internal resources are exhausted, the Jellinek Curve bridges the lowest point of an addict’s

disease with the “honest desire for help.” Significantly, the novel highlights the broader social milieu of Jack’s journey through addiction, and the need for a wider social net for his recovery to begin. Jack runs into many characters over the course of the novel, moving across various sites of temporary accommodation (most tragic is the transfer of Dean from the halfway house after he is caught soliciting prostitutes from his room while under the heavy influence of drugs and alcohol). The novel does not shy away from the fact that a great number of people who attempt this journey unfortunately fail, often with terminal consequences. Statistics on those who recover and those who do not are notoriously difficult to find as numbers are not collected with any kind of methodical rigour. A 2020 survey conducted by Narcotics Anonymous in the UK showed that 52.5% of 1,400 respondents claimed to have relapsed into drug use (NA, 2020). However, these figures do not include the number of people who relapse and subsequently stop attending meetings, or those who die thereafter. One can only assume that the relapse rate is considerably higher than the records show.

In the autofictional negotiation of Jack’s story and my own lived experience, I have drawn on the Jellinek Curve and Nutt’s and Nestor’s “stages of addiction” to underscore the authenticity of Jack’s story as a plausible representation of someone living with chronic substance abuse. Despite the debate about the causes of addiction and differing approaches to definition, one can see that the results of addiction *in extremis* are often similar: damaging behaviour for the individual and the group and, in extreme cases, destitution, institutionalisation, and death. *Use Me Up* tracks one such addict who runs into these extremes but is exposed to solutions and communities who “give a damn.” (p. 156) Jack begins to recover when the context of his living situation and his employment situation begin to change. It is not necessarily the loss of his job and home that compels him to recover; these changes are merely manifestations in the narrative of unignorable consequences. As a recovery coach professionally, I can attest to these being common outcomes for severe abusers of alcohol and

drugs. Furthermore, for recovery to occur, two essential elements must also be in place: opportunity and willingness. For Jack, fortunately, he is exposed to possible solutions to addiction and willing to listen to them. He teeters on the edge of “rock bottom,” listening to one of the volunteers at the rehabilitation facility speak of a “definitive low moment.” (p. 127) Referencing the Jellinek Curve, this pivotal moment corresponds to “complete defeat



Figure 2 The Jellinek Curve

admitted.” While the physical consequences of hitting the lowest ebb in an addict’s journey are stark, the sarcastic humour and warmth of their exchange reinforces the kindness and opportunity available to Jack who gradually suspects that he has something tangible to lose.

### Stimulating environments

But what does it mean to apply the social factors of the addict's journey to the subject of dopamine? I have already addressed how the question of social milieu is highly important for honestly considering the optimum approach to chronic substance abuse. My assertion that addiction is contextual is based on the following assumption: we must have a drug available in order to be able to take it; it would be difficult to become an alcoholic in a society without alcohol. For empirical evidence of this, we might look to the case of American soldiers in Vietnam; according to the Archives of General Psychiatry (1975), 20% of returning soldiers qualified as heroin addicts when leaving Vietnam, yet only 1% had been regular users before they left for service (Hall and Weier, 2016). After their return, the number dropped again to pre-war levels. This is not to say that the opportunity to take a substance or partake in illicit behaviour will inevitably lead someone into addiction. Rather, it means that the amount of repetitive use necessary for the behaviour to become harmful requires the presence of the substance in the first place. As an aside, it is important to note that taking away these substances does not always result in the total eradication of consumption or addiction issues. Again, the United States provides us with an excellent case study. During the prohibition era, between 1920 and 1933, alcohol was illegal, but alcohol use and indeed alcoholism did not go away. As the impulses and activity of our dopamine reward system suggest, the human animal is innately drawn towards satisfaction along pathways that are difficult to manage. As Jack mentions near the end of the book: "I don't see addiction as a selfish choice. It isn't a choice at all." (p. 205) This is a revealing quotation that connects with Jack's growing self-awareness and "enlightened" perspective. At the same time, he is aware that the impulse towards addiction is something that he is predisposed towards, embedded within the deep recesses of the human reward system.

As suggested in Chapter 1, human neurobiology is designed with the template and behavioural patterns of hunter-gatherers: when we encounter a fig tree, we are compelled to

eat, as we may not come across food again for some time. Dopamine is deeply implicated in this process as it is the chemical in our brains which spikes when one is headed towards anticipated pleasures. For much of the novel, Jack is a “hungry ghost” (Maté, 2008) at the mercy of his racing instinctual urges—“to get away from this violent mind that drove me, that was all I wanted.” (p. 79) Research into the function of dopamine points to a link between the need for addictive stimulation and the absence of meaningful social interaction. The widely referenced “Rat Park” experiment is a notable example, led by Bruce K. Alexander and colleagues at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, who conducted a series of experiments on the living conditions and morphine consumption of rats. The broad conclusion of this experiment was that rats who lived in a “rat utopia,” with wheels to run on, plenty of space to explore, and numerous mating opportunities, would voluntarily consume less morphine-infused water than rats living in confined environments (Sederer, 2019). One could argue that this experiment indirectly takes up the Marxist concept of the “opiate of the masses,” where religious consolation serves as an escape from the material drudgery of capitalist exploitation but where an enriched environment may lead to fewer examples of addiction.

We cannot ignore the economic underpinning of societies when considering the ready availability of addictive pleasures that are marketed to us. At the same time, it is important not to lose sight of biology and the species’ ingrained physical susceptibility to addiction. For the addict, “the state” and “capitalism” are large and amorphous concepts over which one has little or no control. However, I argue that the environment in which people live is under their control to an extent. If one accepts that addiction has a contextual element, it is possible that recovery does too. For Jack, this involves securing the time and space to develop positive habits. “In the past I had always needed a drink, or a smoke, or a line, or some attention from a woman, or a win, or fucking something—just to feel ‘okay’—whatever that was. As it turned out, I was at peace with three meals a day and a clear task.” (p. 109) As such, Jack moves closer towards an

“enlightened and interesting way of life,” echoing the final recovery stages of the Jellinek curve.

We already incorporate these considerations into our treatment plans. Clinicians do not allow access to drugs and alcohol in rehabilitation facilities, and of course a good treatment plan involves a safe environment for the recovering addict. Twelve-step literature talks about staying away from “slippery people, places and things.” (Schaberg, 2019, p. 51) And yet, in my view as a recovery coach, people will be motivated to live better lives and to continue recovery programs, if they focus their attentions on things they can control. The Jellinek Curve balances the need for social reinforcement, while acknowledging what can be controlled and what cannot. The brain of the addict, deprived of its drug of choice, will be hungry for dopaminergic stimulation wherever it can be found. Typically, people in early recovery are found to take solace in food, cigarettes, and sex. These compulsions are often less harmful than the primary addiction. In each case, the sooner an addict admits defeat the better. Once again, Jack’s exposure to “rock bottom” is clarifying as a fellow patient at the facility explains to him, “I poured out that first jug of rum and coke with ice. Drank a glass and felt...nothing. It didn’t work. It didn’t take the edge off like it used to.” (p. 117) However, a persistent delusion among addicts is that the substance or habit can be contained—an inability to do so is one of the DSM’s defining criteria. The longer the period in which somebody’s addiction is active, the more destructive and self-destructive their behaviours will be. Long-term addicts reach a point where they are succumbing to an urge beyond their control, the concept of abstinence becoming unsustainable and fantastical. Despite the logical knowledge that engaging in addiction is harmful, our biology will override the rational mind. This process only worsens over longer periods as the effect of repeated substance abuse becomes increasingly damaging to brain function.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggest that the persistent need to source a solid medical footing underlying the lived experiences of addiction can itself become something that obscures the reality of the problem. Addiction is fundamentally an environmental issue and closely connected to social factors which exploit the human reward system to exacerbate cases of dependency. These are all topics that I looked to embody through the composition of *Use Me Up* by mapping Jack's journey as an addict to available resources on addiction and recovery. In the novel, Jack begins to heal when he finds himself in the company of others on the same journey. When he alters his environment, recovery begins to seem possible. At a societal level, however, people face significant challenges. Addictive behaviours are highly profitable, and many products are designed with the sole purpose of fostering dependency. Cigarettes and vape devices serve little practical function. The societal utility of pain medication is minuscule compared to its widespread availability. Humans are natural consumers, but unchecked consumption leads only to suffering. The economic system exploits this biological vulnerability for profit, and there is little meaningful resistance. Capitalism dominates the global economy, and the most extreme capitalist societies also suffer from the most severe addiction crises—and the highest associated medical costs. There is an element of inevitability in this, but also something avoidable.

Once again, it is crucial to foreground the importance of dopamine. My novel explores how addiction can be seen as dopamine running unchecked, unable to process its surroundings. As the environment becomes increasingly saturated with addictive cues, more people are affected. We don't judge people for having hay fever, yet addiction carries behavioural symptoms—essentially maladaptive coping strategies—that invite stigma. At its core, addiction is a maladaptive strategy in the pursuit of satisfaction—the drive fuelled by dopamine. This desire is intrinsic to biology; one cannot simply outthink it. However, it is

possible to make better choices, but in the short term, addictive behaviours often produce powerful results. Unfortunately, the long-term consequences follow a predictable pattern of harm. It can be argued that addiction is the result of an unfortunate combination of drug availability, emotional trauma, cultural conditioning, and physical susceptibility, but this does not change the sense that we have a societal responsibility to reduce the availability of drugs and the cultural conditioning around addiction. It is important to at least tell the truth about it. As reflected in the process and eventual completion of my creative writing project, it is my contention that if people have an outlet for self-expression, they will be less inclined to choose the destructive path of addiction. The opportunity to be creative gives people a chance to live. The key to change lies in cultural adaptation, beginning with individuals and small communities. The next chapter offers one possible route forward.

### Chapter 3: Creativity

“We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to prove you had souls at all.”

**Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)**

Creativity is of fundamental importance to humanity, both on individual and societal scales. Without creativity, it is hard to believe that the human species would have established farming, the scientific method, the arts, or any of the innovations behind its persistence. And yet, a considerable thesis could be written simply about the lack of consensus for a stable definition of the concept. To take a small sample, Runco (2004, 2006), Simonton (2012), Katz (2013), and Csikszentmihalyi (2005), offer ranging and various approaches to the subject of creativity—that do not exclusively pertain to the domain of art—and what it means for the possibility of self-expression and human potential. This chapter dives into the current field of creativity research represented by the work of these scholars, while also considering what addiction and recovery might reveal about the broader need for creativity. In so doing, I raise the question: are addicts more prone to creativity, or is creativity—underpinned by its biological connection to dopamine—a powerful lens through which to examine both terms more closely?

Addiction is a recurrent topic in storytelling and media. Thomas de Quincy’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821) arguably sets the cultural template for the drug-addled artist, although more recent examples of addiction literature might include *Infinite Jest* (1996) by David Foster Wallace, *Portrait of an Addict as a Young Man* (2010) by Bill Clegg, and *The Outrun* (2016) by Amy Liptrot (now a popular film starring Saoirse Ronan). Music fans invoke the “27 club” who died prematurely as a direct result of their struggles with

intoxicating substances—Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, and Amy Winehouse. It is obvious that there is a mysterious, somewhat romantic, link between addiction and the arts, so much so that the term “tragic artist” has passed into cliché. There is no recognised connection between cancer and artistic output, or diabetes and the arts. So why is the link with addiction, almost passively, acknowledged and accepted? While no such anthropological study exists, one wonders whether a closer look at the lives of gardeners would reveal levels of addiction comparable to those found in the creative classes.

Building on my previous chapters, I look to bring creativity and addiction into closer dialogue. Without taking the cliché of the addicted artist at face value, I nonetheless suggest that this curious pairing invites useful conversation around the overlap between the reward system and creativity. While historical findings have been mixed, recent studies point to the connection between dopamine and creativity, examining dopaminergic pathways, and their response to the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, and a real-world creative achievement index (Zabelina, et. al., 2016). A 2010 study (de Manzano, et al.) found that individuals with higher dopamine D2 receptor density in the thalamus performed better on divergent thinking tasks. Furthermore, as a work of autofiction, *Use Me Up* necessarily reflects on the role of creativity within the lived experience of the author to question the paradox of “I and not I.” (James, 2022, p. 48). Later in this chapter, I examine how certain environments can support the positive activation of dopamine within the creative process. It is my contention that if people have an outlet for creativity, they will be less inclined to choose the destructive path of addiction, or at least, when creativity is constricted, self-defeating behaviours are more likely to emerge.

### **Defining creativity (or not)**

To clearly define a concept of any kind requires the imposition of boundaries and edges, places where something is, and places where something is not. It can often seem like creativity is the antithesis of this task; its job is to transgress boundaries, elude expectations. Art, in the Romantic sense as defined by John Keats, requires one to exist in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (Keats 1817 cited in Rejack and Theune, 2019, p. 13) According to Louise Katz, creativity retains this Romantic lineage through its “inherent ambivalence,” existing in tension with rationalist approaches which equate creativity with “invention” (Katz, 2013, p. 480).

While creativity remains problematic to conceptualise, there have also been notable discoveries. Despite acknowledging the many obstacles to a working definition, empirical psychologists like DK Simonton note the repetition of words such as “novel” and “useful” as key elements within discourses on creativity within a broader frame of everyday experience. Referencing the updated framework from the U.S. Patent Office, Simonton approaches a quantitative theory of creativity by adopting the terms of “novelty, utility, and surprise.” (Simonton, 2012, p. 97) Simonton is particularly effusive in his praise of the third criteria “surprise” or “non-obviousness” to define creativity, while voicing his frustration at the “lack of consensus” from academics writing on creativity who must first “define their terms.” (Simonton, 2012, p. 103) One can go down further rabbit holes interrogating the criteria for creativity. Is a reproduced cell “novel,” even if it is a direct replica of the one from which it spawned? Likewise, “surprise” is defined by an individual’s expectations. Are works of art based on well-known events of historical record creative under these criteria? Presumably there were people who were surprised by the ending of the movie *Titanic* (1997). Even if these conjectures trouble Simonton’s definition, in the case of James Cameron’s epic blockbuster there were undoubtedly countless creative decisions made along the way, shaping the way the historical story was represented.

And yet, part of the reason creativity is so hard to define is its universality. While critics often disagree on the details, there is a general agreement that some level of creativity is innate to the human species (Morriss-Kay, 2010). The subject of artistic creation is particularly fraught; as Csikszentmihalyi (2005) observes, artists have been historically unwilling to discuss the specificities of creative practice, gesturing to the air of superstition surrounding the intimate relationship with “the Muse.” While creativity retains mystical overtones, it is also entangled in the social context of the everyday. Csikszentmihalyi continues to suggest that “genius resides precisely in their [the artist’s] ability to distil commonplace human experiences into moving, memorable ones.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 148) In her book on the creative process, *Big Magic* (2015), Elizabeth Gilbert writes that projects seem to compel their own drive and consciousness, that the artist becomes a vessel for the work to enter reality, offering a gloss on the enduring connection between creativity and the unconscious mind. In this context, the artist almost seems to occupy the place of an instrument; could a trumpet explain how the music it makes is created? Would we describe a trumpet as creative if it were lying inanimate on a table? Rather, it is some fluid combination of the artist and the art, the process in motion, that manifests creativity. This aligns with Katz’s assertion “that there is no need to throw out the Romantic baby with the rational bathwater” by uncritically dismissing the Keatsian embrace of “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts” in efforts to meaningfully define creativity (Katz, 2013, p. 484).

While creativity stubbornly retains mystical overtones, it is also entangled in the social context of the everyday. Furthermore, it is important to maintain a clear distinction between the quasi-mystical properties of art and creativity as a wider area of activity that finds novelty within various areas of human experience. Only then, does it become possible to ask what this means for the addict. As Bruce K. Alexander’s “Rat Park” experiment illustrates, the removal of social opportunity produces lasting problems—a constriction of possibility that fosters

negative behaviours. In this broader context, Simonton's concept of creativity and novelty is useful. Following the previous chapter's considerations of addiction, and how impulsive cycles of destructive behaviour can be traced back to vulnerabilities within the human reward system, I argue that the drive towards "novelty" and utility in creativity mirrors Chapter 1's negotiation of dopamine as the anticipation of novel pleasures within a social context. In other words, novelty is a key point of intersection between dopamine and creativity, as both flourish through engagement with the new or unknown. If biological impulses can be hijacked by corporations for profit, why not consider the possibility of a practical solution to intentionally shape social environment to encourage creative responses instead?

### **Dissatisfaction**

At the same time, creativity often involves significant failure and dissatisfaction, revealing a more complex relationship with the biological impulses that inform human experiences of pleasure and desire. Mark A. Runco, in his book-length study *Creativity*, provides a compelling overview of its psychological foundations. He highlights a crucial distinction: while cultural revolutions transpire over many years, they still occur rapidly in comparison to biological evolution which unfolds over generations with benefits taking time to manifest. According to Runco, humankind cannot escape this reality, living as biological creatures navigating an increasingly sophisticated cultural environment, and it is within this space that significant neurochemical conflict arises. The brain is wired for survival, yet modern existence demands adaptation beyond basic survival instincts. Runco describes creativity as a "vital natural resource" that contributes to "physical and psychological health [...] and to optimal human functioning." He argues that it "plays an important role in technological advance, in the social and behavioural sciences, and in the humanities and arts" (Runco, 2006, p. 117). Most importantly, he asserts that "creativity is a useful and effective response to evolutionary

changes,” a “reactive” process that allows humans to address “problems or challenges” as they arise (Runco, 2006, p. 116). The drive to create, then, is deeply intertwined with the need to solve problems—both real and imagined. Embedded in this idea is an inherent dissatisfaction with the present moment; life is either insufficient or can at least be improved upon. Dissatisfaction, while sometimes self-inflicted, has also proven evolutionarily advantageous, driving behaviour that enhances survival and reproduction success.

While creativity may be seen as an engine of the “new,” it is also an immersive process marked by tension—at once an outlet for frustration and a catalyst for progress—mirroring the contrast between the artist who succumbs to self-defeating behaviours and the one who learns to balance them. Through embracing dissatisfaction, one is capable of renewing, perhaps even improving upon what has come before. It is no mistake that individuals still return to art, predicated on deep evolutionary impulses, as the only outlet through which to connect the self with new and speculative worlds. Creativity offers an outlet to think differently, balancing originality with appropriateness, and intuition with logic. Neither rationalist nor romantic frames appear wholly adequate to this process. As Katz (2013, p. 484) clarifies, “the idea of explaining creativity as a ‘science of innovation’ does not deal adequately with the possibilities that may become available to us when we seek to immerse ourselves in a creative pursuit.” Creativity, then, is not merely inspiration towards a defined goal but bridges instinctual impulses and cultural cues in an ongoing cognitive process of adaptation to an ever-changing world.

If this brings us closer to a workable understanding of creativity, it is also important to consider the *why* of creativity as well as the *what*. My own personal experience pursuing a long-term creative writing project has been a key source of insight into this process, as both a healing activity, and an instrument of sustained problem-solving. Storytelling is a big part of how Alcoholics Anonymous works and, indeed, more than half of the pages of their

foundational text are taken up with stories (Schaberg, 2019, p. 10). Beginning during the Covid-19 lockdown, the composition of *Use Me Up* became a vital opportunity to express myself and work out problems through creative writing. This is not the only way to be creative and there are many ways of channelling one's creative energy in other directions. Writing is hard; formal creativity is immensely difficult. For every successful pop star, actor, or writer, there is also the risk of broken dreams and unfulfilled promise. Repetition and mind-numbing routine are central themes I address in *Use Me Up*. Within the novel's structure, scenarios recur and sequences unfold where little progress seems to be made. The implication is that entirely constricting outlets for creativity can be fatal. For me, this creative process was profoundly physical. Several years ago, after an operation, I was bedridden for a week and learning to walk again was agonising. Had I left the muscles unused for any longer, it would surely have been more difficult. Creativity may be similar. We must be able to express ourselves regularly, and with freedom—despite the discomfort sometimes involved in doing so. In this regard the bodily experience of “the new” became utterly essential. When novelty arises, dopamine is released (Whittman et al., 2007), generating dynamic action and adaptive behaviours oriented toward positive outcomes. However, when stuck in repetitive, non-productive cycles, one is likely to wither at every level, with depression a key example of mental degradation. Similarly, if there is no variety in a person's diet, their body will miss the nutrients it needs to function optimally. Far from being an escape, creativity engages with the problems embedded in the stories a person tells (James, 2022), while offering a bodily channel for redirecting destructive impulses. This is central to understanding creativity as a life support system, while remaining conscious of practical solutions to addiction. However, it is important that we provide adequate contextual scaffolding to allow individuals to flourish through the positive benefits of creativity, otherwise our dopamine pathways will find other outlets.

## Novel creation

The protagonist of *Use Me Up* provides an immediate case study for an individual who does not have an outlet for creativity in his life. Jack is stuck in a job he finds dull and a routine that does not stimulate him. In some ways his nightly descent into addictive horrors provides him with relief from a non-expressive life. Using the tools at his disposal—bars, “pokie” machines and narcotics—his addiction escalates into criminality and increasingly reckless behaviour. When Jack’s situation begins to change, he faces the problem of replacing addictive cues with creative cues where possible. “My only issue was trying to figure out exactly what it was I liked to do other than getting fucked up?” (p. 139) While it seems simple on the face of it—to update the environment into one which can direct one to healthier habits—one must also acknowledge the many obstacles. In the twenty-first century, people are overwhelmed with opportunities to seek a cheap dopaminergic rush. Rather than looking inward for creative solutions to the problems Jack faces—be they practical, emotional, or otherwise—a distracting burst of sugar, caffeine, or some other stimulant, is handed to him. “Something was playing on television, something designed to help me buy things and judge others. I judged others and thought of buying things. Hints of flesh leapt out, wads of money. Streaks of dopamine ran through my brain at their sight.” (pp. 159-160) The sensory overload of Jack’s day-to-day inhibits his ability to redirect dopaminergic impulses away from addictive lures. This is reinforced through the language used; “hints of flesh, wads of money,” leap out at him from his television set, hijacking the impulses towards “novelty” and “surprise” that might otherwise be channelled towards creative outcomes.

Autofiction offers a useful way to think about recovery, since it blurs the line between lived experience and imaginative transformation. I approached my journey to recovery through the production of a novel which provided the opportunity to reflect and remake my experiences. For me this involved playing with words, making new connections, and enjoying language.

Many theorists of the novel highlight the medium as a primary means of playing with different voices, negotiating different perspectives (Patterson, 1985). This may also translate to the tangible benefits of creative action over both mind and body. Addiction is a poor imitation of this, flooding the dopamine system to such an extent that the possibility of satisfaction is either overwhelmed or lost. While the myth of the romantic artist is pervasive, I am living proof of someone whose addiction irreparably damaged their ability to escape the claustrophobic cycles that entrap characters like Jack—but who benefited when placed in a healthy environment conducive to habitual creativity. In the novel, this is reinforced through the progression of Jack’s mental well-being as he alters his environment and achieves more enduring social bonds. He picks up old hobbies, engages in productive interests: “Reading came back to me.” (p. 148) My suggestion is that people involved in recovery programs should seek to fundamentally remodel their environments where possible. In my case, two things needed to occur simultaneously for my recovery to happen. Firstly, the benefits of the addiction needed to lessen. This occurred because my ability to enjoy the addiction had worn itself out, a process known as “anhedonia.” Secondly, the consequences increased to an unacceptable level; I was no longer able to operate in a social context. Ultimately, the solution needed to present itself. The solution is three-fold: abstinence, society, and consistency. Jack’s embrace of “this day at a time stuff” (p. 189) is exemplary in this regard. These things fit together and are most successfully combined in twelve-step fellowships, although others have experienced positive results through profound religious experiences or by independently re-balancing their lives in accord with a recovery program. In recovery, the addict is left with a fertile brain, a propensity for “new interests” and “rebirth of ideals” as outlined in the Jellenik Curve mentioned in the previous chapter. With the disease removed, individuals retain the ability to try new things and make striking connections, enjoying intimate social relationships that allow them to enjoy creativity in a consistent manner.

## Process

Given the links I am drawing between addiction and creativity, I argue that further energy should be invested in creative acts as a way for people with addictive tendencies to live more manageable lives. I am not saying that addicts are more creative or have a tendency to be more creative. Rather, I believe that the profound connection between creativity and the reward system presses enough of the same biological buttons to be a close and far less harmful, alternative than addiction. Taking the genre of autofiction as paramount, the primary resource for this exegesis is my transformative experience in creating the novel, *Use Me Up*. In the course of writing this novel, the process itself provided a profound experience of immersive creativity and the encounter with the new, as outlined above. While writing I sometimes had the radio on in the background and as a song was playing, I included the music as a diegetic component within the scene I was working on. This happens at two separate points in the novel, where Jack's inner monologue takes him to a musically inspired state of mind. I use the songs to provide further context for his actions and emotional state. In a pivotal scene near the end of the novel, Booker T and the MGs play from the radio, providing the background music for Jack's steady recovery. "The Hammond organ bounced off the electric guitar and I could feel my shoulders moving along with it. Involuntary, what real music should do to me." (p. 208) Mirroring my own direct experience of the creative process, the sequence echoes Elizabeth Gilbert's theory of the creative act as galvanizing its own "drive" and "consciousness." It felt as though I was adding texture to these scenes whilst also giving intertextual weight to the proceedings. As a writer, it was a very enjoyable experience. Through the autofictional transformation of my life, I rearranged pre-existing fragments from my world, combining them in new ways to create something: novel," "useful," and "surprising." The spontaneity of this decision, the opportunities for textual play that it offered, were of a primary biological benefit, firing my dopamine receptors, lifting my mood.

## **Creative problems**

Humanity's solutions to problems, historically, have been creative. People made tools to hunt bigger animals and developed agricultural societies to deal with our lack of food in the winter. Some of us create art to confront the emotional discomfort of simply being human. Recalling Runco (2006), creative acts have been with humanity since our earliest incarnations, expressed through cave paintings, mosaics, or garlanded stone tools. Creativity has evolved with humans, much as addiction has. Both engage vulnerabilities present in biology and need constant supervision. As Jack mentions of the road to recovery: "An air of manageability was beginning to descend upon my affairs. I didn't let this fool me, the path back down would only take a few hours to travel. The path headed upwards was longer and needed constant attention" (p. 209). By the end of the novel, Jack is closer to achieving a degree of control over his instinctive life.

The dopamine system drives people to make urge-driven, emotional, and instinctive decisions all the time, which helps the species proliferate. While it may not always lead to stable happiness (see Chapter 1), I argue, that can creativity can be a balm, and partially resolve this dilemma. This is what humans have devised to cope with the weaknesses present in biology, allowing for adaptation over time. It is, indeed, why humankind is still here. People create solutions to problems all the time, both personal and societal. Some of the species have been more prone to create, more talented in this area, and they have been encouraged to pursue this for the good of the group. Likewise, whether a person is destined to become an artist, a blacksmith, or an athlete, is shaped by both circumstance and context. In any case, the association between creativity and problem solving is never entirely lost. Furthermore, through the practice of art therapy, the healing capacities of creativity are increasingly accepted as orthodoxy in forming lasting solutions (King, 2021).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that access to artistic expression can improve the lives of people in recovery at all stages, supporting their personal journeys and redirecting dopaminergic urges. Discovering what works best for each individual is a process that takes time and self-exploration. Addiction often manifests as a desperate search for dopaminergic stimulation and escape, a theme dramatized throughout *Use Me Up* and embedded in my broader approach to creative writing. If one accepts that creativity is a healing process, then a lack of creative expression may, conversely, be harmful. To be clear, writing a novel is not a cure-all, but the rigid suppression of creativity can have negative effects. Various therapeutic approaches already integrate the arts, such as music therapy, art therapy, and narrative therapy. Every human being must assert themselves both as an individual and as part of a social group (Runco, 2006). Since the earliest days of the species, survival has depended on tribal integration, while the ability to pass on DNA has been closely tied to how individuals distinguish themselves in an evolutionary competition. Biologically, these two forces exist in tension, requiring a continuous production of “the new” (Simonton, 2012). This may explain why successful creativity often maintains a connection to something pre-established. In storytelling, for example, audiences typically expect a sense of narrative order, where dramatic conflict leads to resolution. Without these elements, a narrative is difficult, if not impossible, to follow. Yet within this structure, there is ample room for originality, and the unexpected, allowing new novels to be written every year. The arts can be likened to a game of chess: the rules are fixed, but within a few moves, an infinite number of possibilities emerge. While the idea of “the muse” suggests inspiration from beyond the conscious mind, creativity ultimately arises from a combination of an artist’s skills and life experiences. Where, then, does inspiration come from if not our own biology?

Like addiction, creativity is another expression of dopamine in human behaviour that is fundamentally shaped by its environment. Both are linked to our biology, but while addiction can be destructive, creativity is inherently healing for the creator. This makes sense—the drive to create is rooted in the fundamental instinct to procreate at the genetic level. What some call instinct, others might describe in neurochemical terms. When the creative process aligns with dopamine’s frenetic energy, it can lead to a person’s most inspired work. However, this requires a positive and structured environment, as creativity flourishes freely but with the discipline and stability necessary to complete a project. Indeed, perhaps the lack of a stable environment accounts for the aforementioned examples of self-destructive behaviour among artists that continue to linger in the popular imagination. However, given stable conditions, the encouragement of creative expression can help individuals find deeper satisfaction and serenity in their lives. It not only allows us to thrive but also provides purpose and meaning. Without it, biology can rebel in self-destructive ways—addiction being one of them. Human existence is largely shaped by the search for universal solutions, a trait that is both a strength and a weakness. Just as bacteria defeated the aliens in *War of the Worlds*, if the species had a single solution for everything, it would never innovate or adapt. One of the greatest challenges we face is our relentless pursuit of happiness, which is inseparable from our endless craving for satisfaction. As discussed in previous chapters, satisfaction is always fleeting, forcing us to continually seek new and creative ways to attain it. This ongoing search, in many ways, defines life itself.

## Conclusion

“One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people.

He said, ‘My son, the battle is between two "wolves" inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.’

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: ‘Which wolf wins?’

The old Cherokee simply replied, ‘The one you feed.’”

### Ancient proverb

From the outset, this exegesis aimed to be much more than a diary documenting the process of writing the novel, *Use Me Up*. By reflecting on its core themes and aspects of its composition, the objective was to navigate the links between dopamine, creativity, and addiction, with the hope of isolating practical ways to improve outcomes for addicts in recovery. In Chapter 1, I considered the current scholarly literature on dopamine, and some of the ways the human reward system unsettles ideas around satisfaction and happiness. In particular, dopamine points to a key mark of exposure between the self and the world—and so, demands closer attention to its environmental factors. In Chapter 2, I addressed difficulties in defining addiction, and the importance of context and social milieu over the likelihood of chronic drug use. I explored the ways in which key resources for mapping an addict’s recovery journey provided useful as secondary sources but also raw material that is embedded into the structure of the novel itself. Finally, in Chapter 3, I approached a dopaminergic theory of creativity grounded in the “new” and “novelty,” bridging the gap between the problem-solving capacities of creativity and our hardwired biological drive for new experiences.

In the background of this exegesis, two fundamental questions have seldom been far from my mind: does a proclivity towards addictive behaviour, grounded in the human reward system, enhance or stifle creativity? Furthermore, is there a way that we may consider addiction and creativity as interlinked processes manifesting in slightly different directions? I argue that creativity can be an attempt to meet humanity's biological drives in a healthier way. Dopamine fires in the brain when we are stimulated or placed in situations where we anticipate satisfaction. Addictive substances provide artificial stimulation, as well as forms of escape—a means, as Jack states in the novel, of silencing the “raging and untameable nature of my drives.” (p. 97) And yet, the artificial stimuli that many seek through designer drugs, gambling, online pornography, and social media, are far more than the biological reward system was designed to cope with (Courtwright, 2019). This is a societal problem. Given the kaleidoscope of potential distractions, addiction is an unfortunate, and inevitable, by-product. But creativity may offer a positive path forward. The difference between stimulation from addiction and from creativity is that the latter allows you to genuinely open yourself to the possibility of learning something new; you are engaging in behaviour that is productive, producing a deeper sense of satisfaction than simply having your neural receptors locked into administered cycles of medication. In many ways, dopamine is both the solution to and the cause of problems in this area. After all, this is not a simple process. In much the same way that we now warn young people about the dangers of smoking, we might also warn of excessive exposure to potentially addictive consumer goods. For many, the seduction of dopamine will lead into addictive processes. But the obverse is also true. Attempts to find new beneficial outcomes, to achieve pleasure and happiness through creativity, may eventually help us evolve past the dangers present in modern life.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the subjects of dopamine, creativity, and addiction, are capacious areas about which there has been much scholarly attention. In

particular, there are many ways that creativity, as a universal human facet, might be negotiated. Often the method used in social sciences to define creativity requires the production of new lexical connections (Simonton, 2012). Each of my three core concepts has proven to be contested ground for their respective scholarly fields. However, I argue that both creativity and addiction share many of the same biological markers, namely a mutual connection through the human reward system, and can be understood as the same energy channelled either creatively or destructively. From a personal perspective, my embrace of creative activity has been profoundly beneficial in redirecting my attachments to addictive behaviours and their associated dopaminergic impulses. However, not everyone will follow the same path. For this reason, it may be worth separating creativity and art. There are many ways in which creativity can manifest. My key takeaway is that the suppression of creativity can be disastrous, preventing us from being able to express ourselves healthily. This can be particularly difficult when living in a society awash with distractions. While I do not think the act of creation is a direct counteragent or panacea for addiction, the biological similarities between the processes are certainly compelling. One of the key similarities is that when a person is in creative flow, or addictive compulsion, they are in thrall to the power of their biological drives. They are powerless over themselves. The rational mind becomes a tool for the expression of the body. In cases of addiction, this is expressed through the search for more of the substance or habitual behaviours that the addict has become reliant upon. In creativity, this is the inspired expression of our deepest selves.

There are inescapable limits to simply explicating these problems in academic prose, especially when definitions of creativity must account for the “ambiguous, energising force of the creative drive.” (Katz, 2013, p. 488). But there must be practical action that one can take. My novel began as story fragments and would perhaps have stayed this way had the correct context not arrived. For me, this was the enforced isolation and quiet of Covid-19. Suddenly, I

found myself with ample time to write and an environment which enabled it. This gave my days a regular rhythm, and through the focused nature of my routine I was able to channel something creative. Had my environment contained alcohol, potato chips, gambling websites, and other such stimuli, the results would have been predictable. One might say that *Use Me Up* is a product of the environment I chose to create. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this exegesis, some of the descriptive colour, particularly the weaving of musical cues into the narrative, was directly influenced by my experiences during the composition of the novel. In other words, the context in which I wrote infused the art and became an integral aspect of the final project. If I had played different music that day then those pages may have been very different, perhaps not even making it into the final manuscript at all. Nonetheless, re-reading my work, I have learned to appreciate the importance of focused, repetitive action in achieving a completed project. This is unquestionably the case in addiction recovery. Just as the repetition of creative actions will result in a finished project, the repetition of positive action will result in a healthy and stable life. Plants need heat and light to grow; likewise, for both creativity and recovery to flourish, the right conditions must be present. There is a lot to be said about removing what is harmful from the environment. For the addict, this will be addictive cues. However, what is harmful to the artist, is distraction. These two forms of negative stimuli often resemble each other and—alas—are completely ubiquitous in modern life.

One of the central observations of this study is that people have constructed a culture which exacerbates addiction and makes it an unfortunate inevitability. It is a highly profitable, and exploitable, weakness of human biology, in which we are exposed to a myriad of potential addictive cues which may spike the dopamine system. However, by acknowledging dopamine as a biological vulnerability we invite closer attention to the ways in which our reward system can be cynically hijacked and redirected. With the proliferation of available distractions, addiction seems built into the context of our world. In the same way that if you spend all day

in the sun, you risk skin cancer, the constant exposure to addictive stimuli is highly likely to result in addictive behaviours for individuals. There is much greater scope for legislators to act against these addictive cues, with an honest acceptance of the harms they can do. However, blaming “society” in general places us in a position of powerlessness about how to find meaningful and practical solutions to these issues. In this sense, my argument diverges slightly with David Courtwright’s otherwise valuable diagnosis of “limbic capitalism” which seeks to explain how free markets must necessarily exploit our biological vulnerabilities in order to function. On the contrary, I argue that the way to work against these social challenges is at the level of the individual and the group. It is important to start by honestly sharing the harms caused by alcohol, drugs, social media, pharmaceutical drugs, pornography, and gambling. One of the ways I have attempted to do this is through the novel, *Use Me Up*. Indeed, Jack moves closer to recovery through the tough, but positive intervention of the volunteers and staff at the rehabilitation facility and half-way house. But the world outside is rarely as forgiving. Not only can it exacerbate addiction, but also strangle creativity. So ingrained is creativity as an evolved way of dealing with unknown problems (Runco, 2006), that when suppressed it can cause a variety of mental health issues. Through a deeper understanding of the links between creativity and addiction, and their respective dopaminergic ties, we may establish a stronger path towards surer solutions.

### **Limits of study and areas for further research**

The essence of this exegesis is an informed personal reflection on creativity and addiction inspired by the process of writing *Use Me Up*. There will inevitably be benefits as well as drawbacks to this kind of critical approach. This study has not included a clinical trial. Instead, my conclusions are drawn in large part from my secondary research. As such, it is difficult to extrapolate my conclusions into hard data without making some concessions about the areas where further research is still required. Creativity remains a nebulous concept which is

notoriously difficult to define. Addiction is a vast topic which continues to evade either simple explanation or cure. Furthermore, as a possible solution to addictive behaviours, creativity is not a one-size fits all cure that will work in equal fashion for all individuals. Nevertheless, it is a positive process which pushes similar biological buttons and causes considerably less harm than addictive attachments to drugs, alcohol, or gambling. Just like writing a novel, this can be a hard and challenging process. Creativity must first become a repetitive process for respite and healing to occur. As Chapter 3 suggests, creativity is a prime mover in human society, stimulating “new” possibilities and ideas (Simonton, 2012). It is our innate system for problem solving (Runco, 2006). Being human is rife with problems; physically, emotionally, environmentally, our existence poses challenges that manifest both internally and externally. As this exegesis seeks to show, addiction is particularly ruinous, connecting with humanity’s deep biological drives. However, I argue that creativity provides a vital path to solve these problems, and also to reach for satisfaction. And yet, one must first accept that satisfaction will never be permanent. The reality of the human reward system is that dopamine pathways are highly manipulable. Life continues to change, and so must we.

Above all, my objective has been to improve outcomes for individuals and communities struggling with addiction. This requires practical and actionable solutions. My belief is that the more one ignores the connections between addiction and dopamine, the more society simply risks finding ways to manipulate biology into making consumer decisions which are not to the benefit of the individual or the collective. In order to reduce the damage done by addiction, it is vital to empower people with the knowledge they need to make informed choices about how to construct their lives. Any quantifiable reduction in the prevalence of addictive stimuli is progress. For this reason, I would be very interested to see statistics on people who work in artistic industries and find out how many of them have had or continue to have addictive issues. The answers are not likely to be found in a simple blood test. Nor are they necessarily there in

close statistical analysis. Positive artistic output and addictive tolerance is found in repetitive action. It is measured in days; how many days can you give to an artistic project? How much of this day will you give? Or will you succumb to distraction? Even if a certain level of distraction in society is inevitable, potentially addictive behaviours *can* be arrested. To use another metaphor, once an egg is broken, it cannot be unbroken—but it may still have its effective uses. Addiction, then, can be seen as part of the human journey, one that is harmful, but which could equally springboard into useful areas; addiction is, as mentioned earlier, an unfortunate inevitability given the combination of our ancient biology and aggressive twenty-first century market forces. Nonetheless, to constantly expose the entire population to addictive stimuli is irresponsible and self-defeating. We are potentially creating a world full of people with hyperactive dopaminergic pathways and not giving them healthy ways to utilise this energy. Creativity is a far healthier output and one which can provide deeper satisfaction for the individual. If the goal to “cure addiction” may be unattainable, the ambition to “reduce the causes” of unnecessary addiction is certainly possible. Addiction should not be seen as an endgame. For many, emerging from addiction can be like the first gasped breaths of a new life, full of the unknown, full of promise.

Moving forward, the goal should be to arrest and *prevent* addiction by studying the environments that make addictive cycles of behaviour possible. This will include, but is not limited to, pointing out the corporations whose demand for greater profits pushes addiction and blindly exacerbates the problem. It is crucial to educate people about the biological realities of using drugs and smart phones excessively. I would love to see greater access and educational opportunities for younger people to engage with these topics, whether through traditional research papers or other creative outlets. Instead, we are prescribing them Valium and Adderall (Lakhan and Kirchgessner, 2012). Furthermore, I would be very interested to run trials which limit smart phone usage in schools and see how this affects academic performance. It seems,

nowadays, that we all carry the gateway drug around with us in our pockets, and we are handing it out to adolescents. It would be extremely useful to place legislation on social media use for under 18s. Restricting social media use may offer significant cognitive, social, and academic benefits. Recent studies suggest that excessive social media engagement disrupts attention, reduces memory retention, and negatively impacts critical thinking skills (McAllister, Beatty, 2024). By limiting access, students are encouraged to focus on coursework, leading to improved academic performance. Reduced screen time fosters healthier interpersonal interactions, promoting deeper in-person communication and social development. Restrictions can also mitigate cyberbullying, online distractions, and mental health concerns such as anxiety and low self-esteem. Instead, people are marching irrevocably into a world where they blend more and more of themselves into their devices, and doing so willingly. The experience and stories of addicted people, particularly those who have recovered, provides us with important information on how to handle this societal transition. If we are only chasing cheap dopaminergic thrills, our creativity, and therefore our progress in the world, will be lost. Without creativity we lose something essential to ourselves as human beings. Creative expression might not be the meaning of life, but it can give your life meaning.

### **Conclusion**

To refer back to Kazuo Ishiguro: “we took away your art to prove you have souls.” To analyse this quote from an inverse point of view, we might understand people suffering from addiction as broken souls. Implementing these vital and creative ways of expressing ourselves is a way for our souls to heal, expressing pain and healing from the various physical and psychic damages of addiction. At the outset, this exegesis intended to locate answers that the scientific community was unable to provide, with the arts offering us something crucial that science simply cannot. My contention is that pharmacology is mostly unhelpful on the path to healing

addiction, that it is at least only a small part of the solution. After all, what happens when creativity is denied people? There is a tangible link between highly oppressive societies and heightened alcohol abuse; in 2010, Belarus reported the highest pure alcohol consumption per capita (Grigoriev and Bobrova, 2020); in Russia, alcoholism has been identified as a key factor of the post-Soviet transition and unprecedented mortality crisis of the 1990s (Gugushvili, 2023). Nevertheless, our addictive behaviours are highly dependent on context. Despite having low levels of overall alcohol consumption by EU levels, Nordic countries continue to wrestle with highly regionalised problems related to episodic drinking and dependency (Agardh, 2016). Being able to “hijack” (Wise and Rompre, 1989) the amygdala is the design flaw in human beings, what makes us vulnerable, driving us off in self-defeating directions. As I suggest in Chapter 3, this tension is most explicit in the figure of the “tragic artist” for whom creativity ultimately does not serve as a safeguard against addiction. But given stable conditions, our dopaminergic drive towards “more” can also produce positive outcomes. Throughout our evolutionary history, humans make decisions that lead to something new, meaning we proliferate in ways that maintain the randomness of our DNA, helping us out-evolve bacteria and diseases through variety, ensuring the survival of the species.

This formulation poses two questions: firstly, why would we put ourselves in the position where our behaviours and motivations might be hijacked? Secondly, why are our bodies designed in this way? While scientifically grounded answers may await future research, my analysis suggests these questions point to the same fundamental point of overlap and vulnerability concerning the human reward system. We are designed to react urgently to stimuli that helps us, at the level of our DNA, to consider our primary purpose: to replicate our genes for the next generation. This will be anything that keeps us fit, alive, and in good health—a good food source, a potential mate, security, or standing in the community. These are the things which drive us, and we have evolved to be physically rewarded when they are within our grasp.

However, it means that we are susceptible to being manipulated by stimuli which our brain stem instinctively registers as potentially satisfying, despite rational knowledge that it is harmful. Dopamine is naturally occurring in the body. We need it to be creative, to do anything. Through dopamine, and thereby through creation, we seek new ideas to deal with the world around us. Complete gratification is not a stable condition, nor a sustainable goal. However, the act of creation is fundamental. Dopamine fires when we are creative; however, it can be manipulated or distorted, which can result in addiction or other problematic dysfunctions. As biologically “modern” humans, the reward system we have in place to help us proliferate is also our design flaw.

Considered in these terms, dopamine almost seems like the artist in our DNA: flighty, indecisive, and unpredictable. It can drive you mad, but it can make you smile. If we might describe dopamine as the selfish friend of the monoamine group, it is also true that we cannot function without it. Without our reward system we wouldn't even seek food, meaning we are as much in thrall to it as we are to air, water, and sunlight. Given that complete mastery of our dopaminergic self is not a realistic objective, we must surrender to the reality of dopamine and make realistic healthy choices around how to construct our lives in ways that work. We are not going to out-think, control, or cure dopamine; we can, however, find the right conditions in which to thrive and advance. In the wrong conditions, one risks spiralling down into the hellish landscape explored in *Use Me Up*. Crucially, Jack, the protagonist, changes the direction of his life by altering the circumstances of his surroundings, forging positive routines, finding community and people who care. It is key to how the artist will thrive and the addict will recover too. An artist knows that he must make bad art before he makes good art; likewise, a recovering addict knows that relapse can be common in early recovery. In other words, it is vital that our circumstances are altered so our immediate impulses can be directed towards positive ends.

Sadly, once the switch is flicked on an addictive process, there is almost no turning back. To be in addiction is to plunge down a chute of despair, exhilarating, terrifying, and sometimes unstoppable. For millennia, humankind has struggled with this, but no solutions were found to be consistently effective before the beginning of twelve-step programs and Alcoholics Anonymous in the 1930s (Schaberg, 2019). The medical treatments we have today are only “medically” effective and do not address the complex social, psychological, or environmental factors involved in the process. This can only be accomplished through the process of creative and repetitive recovery, taking into account the environment of the addict.

My own creative project was borne of this. Covid stopped me doing anything else, leaving me alone with the “slow time” for “reflection, experimentation, speculation” (Katz, 2013, p. 488) that creativity often requires. I could have fallen down a well of chocolate, drinking, or television, but instead I fed this energy into a creative project. Where the temptations of modern life once primed me to succumb to addictive patterns, a change in environment allowed my instinctual drives to be channelled toward creative ends. Without the rush of unhelpful stimuli, my brain understood the opportunity to create that lay open before me, and I took that opportunity. This does not mean that we must wait for a pandemic every time we want to be creative, merely that these choices will be made for us every day, every minute. The question remains the same. Will I choose to do something new? Or will I choose to repeat the behaviours of old, the ones that have led nowhere. This is a question we must keep asking ourselves.

In my experience, both addicts and creatives have a fundamentally different relationship with their dopamine receptors than the rest of us. Dopamine courses through their bodies with greater intensity, constantly seeking new outlets for stimulation. Likewise, creativity thrives in pursuit of the new, regardless of success or failure. This is borne out through the process of writing *Use Me Up* which involved considerably more editing and

deleting than writing, persisting despite the numerous setbacks. Similarly, addiction reflects the human tendency to repeat behaviours even in the face of negative consequences. While the outcomes of addiction and creativity may differ vastly, both require the same relentless process of trial and error. Instead of medicating away addiction—and with it, the innate human drive for novelty and creation—we should engage with these forces directly and honestly. Reckoning with addiction means understanding its roots, channelling its energy into more constructive outlets, and reshaping our environment to support healthier expressions of this dopaminergic impulse. Only by doing so can we take meaningful steps forward, living in alignment with our biological potential and preparing ourselves for the uniquely modern challenges that lie ahead.

## Bibliography

- Agardh, EE. Danielsson, AK. Ramstedt, M. Ledgaard Holm A. (2016). Alcohol-attributed disease burden in four Nordic countries: a comparison using the Global Burden of Disease, Injuries and Risk Factors 2013 study. *Addiction*. 111(10):1806-13. doi: 10.1111/add.13430. Epub 2016 Jun 6. PMID: 27085097; PMCID: PMC5089612.
- Akhtar, Allana. Ward, Marguerite. (2020). Bill Gates and Steve Jobs raised their kids with limited tech—and it should have been a red flag about our own smartphone use. *Business Insider*. May 15, Available from: <https://www.businessinsider.com/screen-time-limits-bill-gates-steve-jobs-red-flag-2017-10?r=US&IR=T>
- Barnes, Hannah. (2013). How many redheads are there in the world? *BBC News*. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-24331615>
- Berridge, KC. Robinson, TE. (1998) What is the role of dopamine in reward: hedonic impact, reward learning, or incentive salience? *Brain Res*. Dec;28(3), pp. 309-69. doi: 10.1016/s0165-0173(98)00019-8. PMID: 9858756.
- Berridge, K. C., & Robinson, T. E. (2019). What does “Rat Park” say about addiction? *Psychological Science Agenda*. American Psychological Association. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2019-19427-011>
- Berke, Joshua D. (2018). What does dopamine mean? *Nature Neuroscience*. 21(6), pp.787-793.
- Burns, Corrinne. (2022). Antidepressant prescribing increased by 35% in six years. *The Pharmaceutical Journal*. July 8, Available from: <https://pharmaceutical-journal.com/article/news/antidepressant-prescribing-increases-by-35-in-six-years>
- Chong, Bryan. Jayabaskaran, Jaya. Kong, Gwyneth. (2023). Trends and predictions of malnutrition and obesity in 204 countries and territories: an analysis of the Global Burden of Disease Study. *The Lancet* [online]. 57, Article 101850. Available from:

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(23\)00027-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(23)00027-5/fulltext)

Cochran, Gregory. Harpending, Henry. (2009). *The 10,000 Year Explosion: How Civilization Accelerated Human Evolution*. New York: Basic Books.

Courtwright, David. (2019). *The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. (2004). Stalking a new world order. *New Literary History*. 35(2), pp.339-348.

(2005). The midnight disease: The drive to write, writer's block, and the creative brain (review). *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*. 48(1), pp.148-150.

de Manzano, Ö., Cervenka, S., Karabanov, A., Farde, L., & Ullén, F. (2010). Thinking outside a less intact box: Thalamic dopamine D2 receptor densities are negatively related to psychometric creativity in healthy individuals. *PLOS ONE*, 5(5), e10670.  
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0010670>

Everitt, Barry J. Robbins, Trevor W. (2005). Neural systems of reinforcement for drug addiction: from actions to habits to compulsion. *Natural Neuroscience* [online]. 8(11), Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16251991/>

Flaherty, Alice W. (2005). Frontotemporal and dopaminergic control of idea generation and creative drive. *The Journal of Comparative Neurology*. 493(1), pp.147-153.

Frank, LE. Nagel, SK. (2017). Addiction and moralization: the role of the underlying model of addiction. *Neuroethics*. 10(1), pp. 129-139. doi: 10.1007/s12152-017-9307-x. Epub 2017 Feb 19. PMID: 28725284; PMCID: PMC5486499.

Freud, Sigmund. (1920/2003). *Beyond the Pleasure Principle: And Other Writings*. London: Modern Classics.

- Fung, BJ. Sutlief, E. Hussain, MG. (2021). Dopamine and the interdependency of time perception and reward. *Neuroscience Review*. June 125, pp. 380-391. doi: 10.1016/j.neubiorev.2021.02.030. Epub 2021 Feb 27. PMID: 33652021; PMCID: PMC9062982.
- Genette, Gérard. (1993) *Fiction and Diction*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Gilbert, Elizabeth. (2015). *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. New York: Riverhead.
- Goodman, Aviel. (1990). Addiction, definition and implications. *British Journal of Addiction*. 85(11), pp.1403-1408.
- Görlich, Y. (2023). Creativity and productivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Scientific Reports*. 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-40493-y>.
- Gotlib, L.J. (2021). Dopamine. In: Lerner, K. Lee. Lerner, Brenda Wilmoth. eds. *The Gale Encyclopedia of Science: Volume 2*. Farmington Hills: Gale, pp. 1271-1274
- Grigoriev, Pavel. Bobrova, Anastacia. (2020). Alcohol control policies and mortality trends in Belarus. *Drug and Alcohol Review*. 39(7), pp. 805-817
- Gugushvili, A. Azarova, A. Irdam, D. (2014) Hazardous alcohol consumption in slow and fast privatized Russian industrial towns. *Sci Rep*. 14, 11737. doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-62077-0
- Hall, Wayne. Weier, Megan. (2017). Lee Robins' studies of heroin use among US Vietnam veterans (review). *Addiction*. 112(1), pp. 176-180
- Henden, E. Melberg, HO. Røgeberg, OJ. (2013). Addiction: choice or compulsion? *Front Psychiatry*. August 7; 4:77. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2013.00077. PMID: 23966955; PMCID: PMC3736117.

- Huttunen, M. (1995). The evolution of the serotonin-dopamine antagonist concept. *J Clin Psychopharmacol.* 15(1). doi: 10.1097/00004714-199502001-00002. PMID: 7730499.
- Jaffe, Sarah. (2021). *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone Hardcover*. New York: Bold Type Books
- James, Alison. (2022). The Fictional in Autofiction. *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, edited by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor. London: Palgrave, pp. 41–60.
- Kaas, JH. Balaram, P. (2014). Current research on the organization and function of the visual system in primates. *Eye Brain.* 6, pp. 1-4. doi: 10.2147/EB.S64016. PMID: 26388695; PMCID: PMC4574956.
- Kaliszewski, Michael. (2023). Alcohol and Drug Abuse Among Native Americans. *American Addiction Centres*. September 12, Available from: <https://americanaddictioncenters.org/addiction-statistics/native-americans>
- Katz, Louise. (2013). From Eros to Industry: Creativity Theory and Practice. *Conference of the International Journal of Arts & Sciences.* 6(1), pp.479-489.
- Kean, Tricia. (2022). Nevada sees spike in gambling; expert predicts problem gambling epidemic. *KTNV Las Vegas*, February 17, Available from: <https://www.ktnv.com/news/nevada-sees-spike-in-gambling-expert-predicts-problem-gambling-epidemic>
- Kelly, Robert L. (2013). *The Lifeways of Hunter-Gatherers: The Foraging Spectrum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khantzian, EJ. (1997). The self-medication hypothesis of substance use disorders: a reconsideration and recent applications. *Harvard Review Psychiatry.* Jan-Feb;4(5), pp. 231-44. doi: 10.3109/10673229709030550. PMID: 9385000.

- Kite, Lorien. (2013). The evolving role of the Oxford English Dictionary. *Financial Times*. November 15, Available from: <https://www.ft.com/content/dfdfba02-4c70-11e3-958f-00144feabdc0>
- Koepp, MJ. Gunn, RN. Lawrence, AD. Cunningham, VJ. Dagher, A. (1998). Evidence for striatal dopamine release during a video game. *Nature*. May 21;393(6682), pp. 266-8. doi: 10.1038/30498. PMID: 9607763.
- Lakhan, SE. Kirchgessner A. (2012). Prescription stimulants in individuals with and without attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: misuse, cognitive impact, and adverse effects. *Brain Behaviour*. September 2(5), pp. 661-77. doi: 10.1002/brb3.78. Epub 2012 Jul 23. PMID: 23139911; PMCID: PMC3489818.
- Lembke, Anna. (2021). *Dopamine Nation*. London: Penguin Random House.
- Levy, N. (2014). Addiction as a disorder of belief. *Biology & Philosophy*, 29(3), pp.337-355.
- (2017). Hijacking Addiction. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*. 24(2), pp.97-99.
- Lieberman, Daniel Z. Long, Michael E. (2018). *The Molecule of More*. Dallas: BenBella Books.
- Magsamen, Susan. Ross, Ivy. (2021). *Your Brain On Art: How the Arts Transform Us*. London: Penguin Random House
- Maisel, Eric. Raeburn, Susan. (2008). *Creative Recovery: A Complete Addiction Treatment Program That Uses Your Natural Creativity*. Durban: Trumpeter.
- Marsden, Charles A. (2006). Dopamine: the rewarding years. *Br J Pharmacol* [online]. 147(Jan), Available from: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16402097/#full-view-affiliation-1>
- Maté, Gabor. (2008). *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

- Matthews, Eric. (2010). Explaining Addiction. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*. 17(1), pp. 23-26.
- Meyers, J. (2016). Pursued by demons: creativity and suicide. *American Imago*. 73(1), pp.1-23.
- Mitchell, Allison. (2007). Confronting addiction across disciplines. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*. 12(3), pp.233-236.
- Morriss-Kay, G.M. (2010). The evolution of human artistic creativity. *Journal of Anatomy*. 216(2), pp. 158-176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7580.2009.01160.x>
- Nutt, David. Nestor, Liam J. (2013). *Addiction*. Oxford: Oxford Psychiatry Library.
- Patterson, D. (1985). Mikhail Bakhtin and the dialogical dimensions of the novel. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 44(2), pp. 131-139.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/430515>
- Peterson, C. (2021). Assessment of Annual Cost of Substance Use Disorder in US Hospitals. *JAMA Network Open* [online]. 4(3), Available from:  
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2777032>
- Previc, Fred H. (2009). *The Dopaminergic Mind in Human Evolution and History*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Rubin, Judith A. (2010). *Introduction to Art Therapy: Sources & Resources*. London: Routledge.
- Runco, Mark A. (2004). Everyone has creative potential. In: R. J. Sternberg. E. L. Grigorenko. J. L. Singer. eds. *Creativity: From Potential to Realization*. Worcester: American Psychological Association, pp. 21-30.

(2006). *Creativity: Theories and Themes: Research, Development, and Practice*. Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Salamone, John D. Correa, Merce. (2012). The mysterious motivational functions of mesolimbic dopamine. *Neuron*. 76(3), pp. 470-85. doi: 10.1016/j.neuron.2012.10.021.

Schaberg, William H. (2019). *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of A.A.* Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press

Schultz, W. Dayan, P. Montague, PR. (1997). A neural substrate of prediction and reward. *Science*. 275(5306), pp. 1593-9. doi: 10.1126/science.275.5306.1593. PMID: 9054347.

Sederer, Lloyd I. (2019) What Does “Rat Park” Teach Us About Addiction? *Psychiatric Times*. Available at: <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/what-does-rat-park-teach-us-about-addiction>

Seitler, Dana. (2018). Willing to die: addiction and other ambivalences of living. *Cultural Critique*. 98 (Winter), pp. 1-21.

Simonton, Dean Keath. (2012). Taking the U.S. patent office criteria seriously: A quantitative three-criterion creativity definition and its implications. *Creativity Research Journal*. 24(2-3), pp. 97-106.

Smith, Dana G. (2023). We have a dopamine problem. *The New York Times*. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/30/well/mind/dopamine-brain-behavior.html>

Summers, J.S. (2015). What is wrong with addiction. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*. 22(1), pp. 25-40.

Suva, M., & Bhatia, G. (2024). Artificial intelligence in addiction: Challenges and opportunities. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 46(5), pp. 465-472.

Szalavitz, Maia. (2021). *Undoing Drugs: The Untold Story of Harm Reduction and the Future of Addiction*. New York: Hachette

Tereshchenko, Sergey Yu. (2023). Neurobiological risk factors for problematic social media use as a specific form of Internet addiction: A narrative review. *World J Psychiatry*. May 19;13(5), pp.160-173. doi: 10.5498/wjp.v13.i5.160

Ulanov, Anne Belford. Rosen, David H. (2013). *Madness and Creativity*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press.

Wilson, E. O. (1978). *On Human Nature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Wise, R. A. Rompre, P. (1989). Brain dopamine and reward. *Annu Rev Psychol*. 40, pp. 191-225.

Yeragani, VK. Tancer, M. Chokka, P. Baker, GB. (2010). Arvid Carlsson, and the story of dopamine. *Indian J Psychiatry*. 52(1), pp. 87-8. doi: 10.4103/0019-5545.58907. PMID: 20174530; PMCID: PMC2824994

Zabelina, D. L, Colzato, L. Beeman. (2016). Dopamine and the creative mind: Individual differences in creativity are predicted by interactions between dopamine genes. *PLOS ONE*. 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0146768>

Use Me Up

by

Mark Payne

1.

Gold coins cracked onto the aluminium tray.

Darius had sweat pouring off his brow and a look of mad intensity in his eyes.

He kissed the bartender, an old Chinese man.

Tequila was the appropriate way to celebrate things and a large win on a courteous gambling machine gave us a perfect chance to rejoice.

Darius ordered shots for all. Rent would be paid, rounds would be bought and further good times would ensue. He began to collect the money from the tray in great handfuls and piled it onto the bar. From there he neatly arranged the coins into five-dollar mounds to exchange with the bartender for notes of currency. This was the big-time baby. He chuckled as he assembled these piles like a tyrant whose scheme was playing out as planned.

Darius felt he had earned that money. It had been four hours of sitting by that machine and pressing the buttons with red-faced enthusiasm. Personally, this was the wildest I had ever seen him. Normally, whenever the going got exciting, he would draw back and hold himself in check. Stop before things went too far or became dangerous and self-defeating. I was different in that way; I wouldn't draw back. I liked to taste the moment where maximum risk tottered between elation and despair. The risk of losing everything made life exciting, being close to desolation makes victory feel more glorious. I wanted the glory. To ride the edge of oblivion. The problem, of course, is that sometimes you lose; and what then? The abyss.

Darius slammed down his tequila and upended the shot glass onto the mat in front of him. He was ravenous, bloody veins pulsing in his eyes like tiny red snakes.

"Again!" The barman stepped back, polishing his wine glass, careful to avoid the moist lips of his sloppy clientele. Darius reached for the tequila.

Work was going to be interesting tomorrow.

\*

I was alive, against my wishes, my mind lumbering into the present. Instead of a smooth transition from sleep, it was like consciousness was being dragged out of me by a truck through a field of tree stumps. My left arm bowled over my body and smashed onto the small alarm that spat at my head. I lay with my eyes closed, a poor creature on its back, the sunlight from the window causing great damage. I would stay in bed forever if I could.

Overnight my brain and my skull had ceased to fit together neatly, one had shrunk or the other had grown, the friction between them was unbearable. Species of rodent had crawled

into my mouth during night and given birth to the most impressive bowel movements in history. It seemed my body had been thrown from a third story window and then roughly transported back up the stairs to the fourth floor. And yet, I found myself at work an hour later.

In my early days teaching at a secondary school, I remember enjoying the company of the students, feeling enriched by knowledge of their cultures and lives. It was enjoyable to spend time with young people, at the start of something, their lives unfurled ahead of them. Nowadays, this joy had been lost to its more comfortable opposite: condemnation. It wasn't my fault; the repetitiveness of experience *made* me judge people, and rather quickly, using shorthand like nationality, what they vaguely looked like. It was faster to do this than risk getting to know anyone, so it was economics at the end of the day. Categories like 'European' didn't need much further distinction. Judgement is just a natural part of the rational mind.

Trudging down the corridor and clutching a textbook in my hand, I approached the classroom. For this group I had trouble remembering who was sleeping with who – or *whom*, perhaps. For an English teacher, this kind of grammatical fussiness never dies. As is always the case with classrooms full of teens, romance reared its lovely head all over the curriculum. I once had a class of fifteen students that produced seven different couples. Steadily, over the course of the five weeks, the students would march off two by two and love would somehow bloom. Once upon a time, one of those couples may even have involved yours truly. Back in school, daydreaming of some girl, stunning and from out of town, who decides I am worth exploring and promptly goes about the business of seducing me. Perhaps wearing a short skirt that day, idly leaving her legs open, just to snatch my attention.

Entering the classroom, I was conscious my puffy features and film of sweat perhaps revealed my crimes as I battled through the routine. With a fogged-out brain, I began writing a sentence on the whiteboard. "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." A memorable opening, no doubt, but I asked the students to continue the story for themselves. Some of the students began chatting among themselves, while I took a seat at my desk. Who was this Samsa? What happened to turn this man into vermin? I had bought myself some time. For a second, I cradled my head in my hands and lamented the nature of existence and the futility of the universe.

When I looked up I saw Kevin, my immediate supervisor, peering through the window of the door with an expression of contemptuous disapproval. But before I could judge him for judging me I clapped my hands and, smiling, picked a good student to read their work for the class. Kevin was gone when I glanced back. *Was he ever there?*

I was checked out as the student read from a sheet of lined paper. This was far from the first time I had run through this tired routine. Periodically I would encounter somebody who could see right through me. This happened with an old colleague, Jakob. He came from the Czech Republic. He was one of the few guys I met who drank more and harder than me. He made no secret of it either. He came in every other day with the complexion of an old cabbage and explained how he had been drinking substantially the night before. We never gave each other a hard time, happy to accept each other as we were. He knew my game was similar and we both agreed not to tell on each other. He was smart after all, and probably had his pick of reprobates with whom he could piss away the time. And so, we sat in each other's company for over four months. Fighting through hangovers together, making it to a respectable-to-drink hour before greeting one another with dignity and honour, like men on the field of battle. How I missed Jakob when our paths eventually separated. The shadow of his baseball cap was comforting to me. We met again for a drink a few years later but it wasn't the same and neither of us could remember why we had bothered.

2.

Lunchtime came and I shuffled onto the balcony, my shaking hands lighting one cigarette, then another as I thirstily pulled the nicotine into my blood. After this essential triage, I approached the food counter where the vendor conspiratorially handed me a cheese sandwich and coffee. We had a long-standing agreement about my dietary needs and I paid him when I could. Now, all I needed was to find a quiet corner in which to eat and suffer in peace.

Across the room I saw Kevin approach. Ye gods! In times of yore, we had been brothers in arms: smoking together on breaks, propping each other up on the way to the bus stop in afternoons, talking through the issues of the planet in our evenings. But this was not *yore* anymore; Kevin's hair was shorter now and balding slightly at the crown. Ten months ago, he had leapt to the dizzying-heights of middle management and a change occurred. No longer did he socialise frequently with the rest of us. He often smoked his cigarettes at the opposite end of the café's balcony, quizzically peering into his phone. My sympathies lay with him at the beginning of this period. He was merely doing the bidding of an equation he was duty-bound to follow.  $X$  number of students =  $Y$  number of teachers and it was his job to find a balance. He could only control one of those variables and he usually did so in a reasonable way, just another servant to routine.

"Everything okay Jack?" he asked in a tone that suggested this was more than the usual Monday pleasantries.

"Not bad thanks man, same old same old," I said, one old sea dog to another.

Kevin looked at me and smiled as if he had been gently punched in the scrotum and he was trying not to show the agony.

"It's just," he paused, "you've got a black eye."

*Did I?*

What the fuck...

How could this have happened?

I began to try and form a picture of my actions the previous day.

I made an indiscriminate sound that acknowledged what he said – not an actual word in English, though still somehow constituting a unit of meaning.

*"Erghugh."*

I sounded casual enough.

"And you're wearing odd shoes today," he added helpfully.

This was going to be harder to explain than I thought. What the hell *had* happened?

From out of the haze, there emerged a wobbly outline of my Sunday night. There had been a rugby game at 8pm and I popped into the Albert to see how it was going. Darius had been involved. As if on cue, I saw him over Kevin's shoulder moving like a gazelle between rooms, avoiding consequences with elan. The beers the previous evening had all been agreeably priced, tasty and cold, so I had consumed a polite number of them. I must have decided to have a nightcap in the Triple Ace bar as I blearily recalled its array of screens and sounds and flashing. Then what? The flashing and the sounds were for me! I had won something. Money. Very useful. I exchanged it for tequilas all round. So far, so standard.

Nothing else was clear at that point. Vague memories of red cushions, needing a leak and seeing a pot plant. I think people were angry at me. A door was blocked, two people were holding me, and then an arm – I don't know who the arm belonged to, but it was smashing into my face. I pushed someone away and – *no* – that's it for now.

The owner of the arm would remain a mystery, even if the answer was in there somewhere I am sure. Rugby was obviously to blame.

"Let someone else handle these this afternoon Jack," he said, pointing vaguely to my class sheet and paper. When he spoke, it was with a sense of foreboding.

"Come with me."

We walked along the off-mustard carpet, past the glass-partitioned classrooms to his office. He closed the door and we sat down, separated by the mountain of papers and post-it notes on his desk. A heavy silence fell, during which his face and expression became a field of study for me.

Kevin took a seat across the desk, and he gave a look of exasperated concern.

"Mate, go home today. Me and some of the teachers, we've noticed things. How you've been looking more and more a state recently. At least one of the students has complained that you smell. It doesn't look good."

I tried to speak but words had dried up.

Shit. I couldn't lose another job. The idea of not being able to afford tobacco terrified me. And, after all, I was doing my best.

"It's been tough recently."

"Everybody has things to deal with Jack. Sort your shit out." He was being tough. This was the toughest I had ever seen him. I began to accept my fate.

"I'll call you at four today," he said, "and we'll figure out the rest of the week."

That seemed to be that.

I managed to summon a noncommittal, but plausibly apologetic expression. The image of a giant insect, recumbent in bed, flashed into my mind and I remembered how only a few

hours ago I had struggled against the shrill morning light. Inside, I could only think of one thing, how all my effort getting up had been wasted – how annoying.

3.

Walking home, the despair settled like a damp cloud around me. While my mind was sluggish, soon every molecule in my body had awoken to my grave error. My stomach was both volcanic and lethargic, my crooked limbs swinging lank, as my brain played worst-case scenarios on a continuous loop. Not only would the flow of income which allowed me to eat and live be drying up, but the source of my connection to other humans. Sure, many of those humans were youngsters, but what could I do? Without this job, my contact with people, other than bartenders and vendors in bottle shops, would be limited.

The idea I could still save my bacon stuck to the inside of my head like phlegm on a pavement. It glistened, it taunted, it asked me to look it over. It also made me kind of hungry. I had mostly skipped lunch. Food couldn't do any harm, so I decided to grab a late breakfast while I collected my thoughts and strategised. My mood elevated slightly. For a brief moment, I saw the headline of a future article reporting the moment; INSPIRATION ARRIVES OVER BACON. The cover of Time Magazine beckoned.

Sydney is a town with many highlights – among these is its breakfasts. The greasy spoon café of English lore has inspired a gastronomical arms race on these hills by the Pacific. Where once there was eggs and bacon, there is now avocado and quince, light salads, and fluffy cappuccinos. The immigration waves of generations past have improved the traditional cuisine by giving it Greek and Italian flourishes. These nestle in with an endless selection of Thai, Chinese, and Vietnamese restaurants that fill their tables every evening. The wise rulers of this land decided to reward this process by welcoming the next wave of immigrants with camps in the tropical north of the country where they were beaten, starved, and humiliated. Some people there even sewed their lips together they were so unhappy. How dare they dream of coming to Australia to start a business, to build a life.

Before reaching a café I knew and was fond of on Crown Street, I stopped in a general store to buy a packet of Marlboro lights. Twenty cigarettes cost \$12 and about ten of those dollars were collected by the federal government in tax. My smoking clocked in at nearly forty cigarettes a day, so I rarely bought packets in such a blasé manner. My usual penchant was to buy large pouches of tobacco for \$30 and roll. The drawback was these self-constructed smokes would tend to stain my fingers yellow, or brown if I hadn't showered, and those fingers would need to be scrubbed raw by pumice stone in the morning: meaning pain and sometimes blood. Nevertheless, the idea of running out of tobacco filled me with dread. Not being able to put

that drug in my system would have been catastrophic – so much so, I knew I would beg, borrow, steal, whatever it took to get a cigarette.

In general, there were two cigarettes in the day that were enjoyable. The first in the morning as the nicotine fast was broken, and the one after dinner. I often awoke in the night and would have cigarettes during those dream-like moments which also hit the spot. During such an occasion, the narcotic joy of the early cig would be reduced. Dinner was often a rushed affair nowadays, sometimes amounting to no more than a sausage roll in one of the pokie rooms. Still, those sausage rolls were bloody delicious.

Ah, the pokie room, those loving grottos at the back of pubs where people could gamble on one-armed bandits, with their flashing lights and prizes that sometimes reached the thousands of dollars. To be in with a chance of winning you needed to sit in front of a machine and press buttons for a long-established period. This was a task I could handle. There were enough variables to maintain the delusion that this was a game of skill. A great ruse that helped the designers make a lot of money – they certainly made a lot of mine.

Smoking had been deemed an offensive habit and was therefore banned in the majority of bars. People were left to drink and fight and sexually harass each other in a clean-air environment. The smokers were banished to the pokie rooms and some, like myself, found playing the machines passed the time agreeably while breathing in that rich smoke. Being able to drink and smoke in the same place was always much more civilised, like the old days. The bar owners seemed to like the people in the pokie rooms though, and often brought us trays of treats, like spring rolls which were almost as popular as the sausage rolls. I suppose you could say we were treated like kings.

Perhaps I would go to one of the pokie rooms after breakfast. It *would* aid the digestion. It may also help my process of reflection, I thought. How best to proceed? All I knew was the prospect of the pokie room felt comforting and appealing to me.

4.

It was a particularly sunny afternoon and I sat quite at peace with myself, pressing the buttons on one of the gambling machines as numbers doubled, then disappeared, then recovered again. All the while I was settling into a state of deep contentment.

I felt good. The sun danced through the blinds, the smoke from my cigarettes wafting in light like ghosts in a tunnel. My body had achieved a kind of buzz – physically I was humming – my mind temporarily freed from the worries and stresses of my wider catastrophe of a life. These were the good moments, the ones to cherish, but they were always fleeting.

At this point, I realised the company of a woman was the one thing that could improve, or perhaps shatter, this nirvana. The search for women is an endless curse in many ways, impossible to escape; even success brings misery and soreness. I envy the eunuchs, whoever they are, able to live without the rapacious drive that keeps the rest of us mad.

My winnings would not change my life but could possibly make the afternoon interesting at very least. The present moment was all that mattered; the future was another country, and would be dealt with somewhere down the line when it could no longer be ignored.

I pressed COLLECT on the machine and the screen froze before the throbbing light. “I am waiting for you to come back *ma cherie*,” it seemed to say. I floated towards the collection window.

The attendant carefully avoided eye contact with me and seemed relieved I was going. Usually, a lack of acknowledgement like this drives me mad but I was in such a glowing mood it didn’t matter.

With my pocket bulging and the wind in my hair, I left the Colombian on Oxford Street and started to wander down Crown with the intention of cutting through to Kings Cross. As I turned into William Street a powerful and unusual feeling came upon me. My limbs started shaking as I walked and great weights began to pull my eyelids together. After “careful” analysis, I realised that I was the drunkest man in history.

I could not go on.

Walking became difficult.

My only option was to sleep, and immediately. But to sleep on such a busy street would have been uncouth, I couldn’t possibly subject myself to such a humiliation. So I stumbled down a side street, finding a patch of concrete, and lay down. Its soft cushiony hardness provided the rest my creaking bones craved.

I closed my eyes and slept with my head resting on my hands in prayer position and my legs splayed out like a long jumper mid-leap.

\*

My slumber was interrupted by a young girl who jolted me awake, I don't know how much later.

"You can't sleep here," she said.

Clearly she was an angel, perhaps here to rescue me. She might even brew me some coffee and butter me some toast.

There was someone else with her and I couldn't quite make out their face.

"You must take care of yourself," she added helpfully.

I managed to push myself up to sitting position as she and her companion disappeared around the corner.

I rolled on to my side so I could use my arms to push up to standing position. My core strength needed a bit of work.

As soon as I stood my trousers fell down. Fortunately, I was wearing some form of undershort and that was only mildly twisted around. But my belt had gone.

In fact, so had my shoes. A dip into my pockets revealed my wallet and phone had also departed. I looked at the time. No watch.

Ah.

This afternoon had not gone as smoothly as I had envisaged.

I stumbled home, sadly, holding my trousers up the whole way. Then I got into my real bed, that filthy, grey pit of despair.

And lay there.

\*

The next morning, I woke without a care in the world. There was no aching in my body and although I felt lightheaded it was not in a totally unpleasant way. I was rested as if I had slept a thousand years. This would be a day I would melt into without much trouble. I grabbed the robe from my chair.

This dressing gown was quite a character. It had blue and black stripes and a large rip above the left pectoral from a previous encounter with an angry bannister. Oh, the stories this poor dressing gown could tell.

The morning was quiet.

I walked downstairs and lit a delicious cigarette with the lighter which was ever-present in the gown's pocket. Lighters come and go in other garments, but the dressing gown lighter was loyal, like a well fed stray. I knew I could rely on it to be there when I looked.

It was a grey morning in Sydney. The clouds had swept in from the Pacific overnight and were moodily poised overhead, ready to unleash their discontent. I love it when it rains in this city. There are no half-measures, it is a full torrent of fury that rinses the streets and sends everyone scampering for cover. Almost like God is shouting in your face. These quiet moments before the deluge, when the heat is rising, are also pleasant in their way. Like when you have made a connection with someone in a bar and you know you're going home with them, just an undetermined interval of time standing in the way of wild passion.

I stubbed out my cigarette and added it to the mountain of butts in the ashtray before turning and heading inside. As I did so, the first crack of thunder could be heard in the distance.

"Morning dick head."

\*

All three of my current housemates were sat on the couch. I smiled but my greeting was not returned. Two of them were staring at me as if I had some hideous and never-before-seen deformity dangling from my nostril. The third housemate couldn't even make eye contact and just sat there, a grenade of pent-up frustration.

"Good morning."

I had known these guys for many years. The tragedy of our situation was as follows: where they had matured and aged, I was an eternal Peter Pan, unshackled by the false promises of responsibility. Each night they would work late, or network, while I flew off to terrorise pirates and return at dawn from Neverland, my youthful good looks intact. It had occurred to me, since I moved back in, how they were probably somewhat jealous of my sociable ways. Cathy had been particularly unpleasant, leaving aggressive notes on my door: *TOILET PAPER* for example – she no longer even said "hello" in the mornings.

In my time, many grave pronouncements have come my way. You quickly learn that anybody who starts a sentence with the words "we need to talk" or "can we have a chat" is the bearer of bad tidings without question. I had a few of those under my belt though, and I was always able to handle them, to justify myself in a reasonable way.

However, nothing on earth can prepare a man for the most terrifying phrase in the English language.

“Do you know what you did last night?”

Naturally, the horror of hearing these words is multiplied infinitely with the slow-dawning realisation that you do not, indeed, remember what you did last night. This horror instantly gives birth to an extraordinarily inhuman anxiety, realising you are the plaything of those who recount the story, incapable even of presenting a defence. “That doesn’t sound like me” is simply not a convincing argument when all evidence points to the fact it was most certainly you.

Doom beckoned. There was no escape.

“Mate, you’ve gotta go.”

Ah yes, those words I was so well accustomed to.

It remained a mystery to me why others would not allow me the leeway I gave myself. There were some things I held to be self-evident, inalienably true. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of alcohol. That to secure these rights, I must be given endless second chances and that it was my right to cast off people who did not want to give me space. The atmosphere in the shared house suggested that my fate was sealed. Indeed, it was time to depart. Time, it seemed, was no illusion after all.

I looked around at the lounge and the pictures on the walls, one of us all smiling together, living in younger bodies, less stressful lives. Never again would I tip-toe through that living room, daintily step upstairs at night or take a poo in the back yard because the toilet was occupied. Oh, such happy memories I would leave behind, such distinctive marks.

A man named Walter Bradford Cannon landed on a theory that animals, when faced with a perceived threat to their survival, enter a state called *hyperarousal* – more commonly known as *fight or flight* mode – in which they would be flooded with a hormonal cocktail of testosterone, cortisol, epinephrine, norepinephrine, and more. This usually caused extreme emotional and behavioural responses.

I scratched the back of my head.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

No fight nor flight from me today then. Just lacklustre negotiation.

“Today,” they all said in unison.

Having been forced to move so often over the previous couple of years, my instincts were kind of lethargic. Screaming and shouting and threatening had all led to the same outcome. Being short of breath, out of energy, and not getting my way regardless.

The faces before me conveyed a mixture of things I’d seen before: disgust, determination, exhaustion.

“Okay,” I said.

Who cares? Their loss anyway.

It did of course raise an interesting problem. Where was I going to sleep tonight and what would I do with my stuff?

More importantly, how was I going to get all that organised by mid-afternoon so I could go and grab a couple of beers?

5.

Months passed. I moved house three more times. These moves all followed a similar pattern. First, I would catch up with a friend, for drinks – usually, meeting for the first time in a while. Then they would decide I should stay in their spare room. A few weeks later I would do something unforgivable while blackout drunk. And finally, after a couple of weeks of tensely avoiding each other, I would pack everything into boxes and go to the next place. Another friendship ruined forever. It was tiring and eventually I ran out of friends.

Fortunately, there was the internet. Upon entrance to this wonderful world of instant connection I landed on cheap, short-notice accommodation at the Captain Cook Hotel, a classic red-brick building on the scuffed heel of Paddington. They didn't seem to have much of a discerning selection process, or any kind of process at all, but that suited my particular predicament. They would take me on a week-by-week rolling basis and I would have a private room. *How bad could it be?*

In front of the final share house with my (now former) friends there was a stack truck, the kind used to transport washing machines or ovens from vehicle to household. It was bright red and had a sub-optimum number of functioning wheels. It would serve my purposes perfectly. I wanted to get away from this place as quickly as possible. Turns out my vomiting in the back yard had been the latest in a long list of last straws. As much as I was getting away from another failed attempt to live with normal people, I was desperate to escape from my own shame.

As I pushed my worldly belongings in their milk crates up the hill and over Moore Park, I reflected on the excellence of my problem-solving skills and delighted in the fact this move would be over much more quickly than the other ones. The milk crates were still unpacked from my arrival. In fact, they'd been that way for years. The moves themselves stick together in the memory, as if they were just another part of the daily routine and not a monstrous pain in the arse.

Relocating is dirty work. Bits of grime clung to my sweaty body and by the end of it I was head-to-toe in dust.

The shower in my new palatial home was located at the end of the first-floor corridor and was a shared facility with the eight other apartments, or bedrooms, on the same floor. It seemed we would all enjoy the same grey and itchy carpet on the way to our daily cleansing. The shower itself was twice the size of my room and contained six showerheads evenly distributed along the wall. The tiles were dark yellow and small and, to me, went perfectly well with the

crisp morning sunlight that Sydney throws up from its east. It was also the perfect colour to disguise all manner of sins. I urinated into the plughole while applying soap to my armpits and anus. My bladder was deeply thankful for the relief and I was grateful to my bladder for not relieving itself earlier. The times my body obeyed the commands I gave it were moments to cherish these days. Either awake or sleeping, I was too often overcome by an emission or an urge that I could not get the better of. A few years earlier, I had taken to brushing my teeth in the shower because it seemed more efficient, so I proceeded to enjoy a good scrub, spending more time on removing the thick yellow fluff that had collected on my tongue during the previous day than I did on the teeth themselves. Alas, brushing again in the evenings was a luxury I usually forgot to partake in, so I made the most of this morning indulgence.

Returning to the room, I found a shirt with an acceptably low number of creases, holding it up to the light to reveal its crimes. Nothing horrendous. I gave it a spray with some deodorant, and then sprayed myself, before dressing for the day. There were no exact pairs of socks anymore but I was always able to rustle up two clean ones. While fidgeting into my clothes, I reflected on the fact I didn't have a job to go to anymore. There was relief. There was fear. There was shame. But mostly there was relief.

It wouldn't last.

6.

This was the first time I had lived in a hotel above a pub and what an adventure it was. Our cast of characters was straight out of the Jungle Book, if Kipling's classic were set in Sydney in the liminal space between madness, institutions, and the local drinking and gambling emporiums. Menace hovered above us like a pregnant rain cloud.

Don shared his room with his mate Labbie and they wanted the quiet life. Don was as big as a bear though and had the air of a man who wouldn't hurt a fly. He introduced me to the wonders of Devon, a large slab of meaty sausage who had somehow achieved human form. Don's life involved making trips from the kitchen to make Devon sandwiches and returning to the TV room to watch the cricket while eating them. He rolled the occasional smoke too.

"It's better than jail mate," he would say to me. As I bit down into a sandwich he gifted me one afternoon, I wasn't so sure. He would smile at my antics, the way I came home at all hours, covered in scars and bloodstains.

"One day you'll find out," he chuckled.

Then there was James L and James K – the two Jameses, as they were known. James L was bigger, red-haired, angry and unstable. About once a week he would experience a sudden aggressive episode and the police would be called because he was threatening someone. I never saw him actually become violent but he would get in people's faces, shouting with spittle flying out of the sides of his mouth. Terror and fury pulsed in his yellow eyes, across their maps of red veins. How dare they say this about him.

The cops always looked pretty bored when they turned up. There was a crime behind every door in this hotel, and they kept being called when someone set him off.

"What's gonna happen today James?" they'd say.

Confronted with authority in the form of two well-fed constables, beef-stacked with tools on their belts, he would shrink into a kitten until they left. After all, he hadn't caused any real harm to anyone.

James K, his companion with whom he shared a room, was skinny, short, and red-haired. He would usually come around after James L's outbursts in damage-control mode and talk to people to assure them there was no drama, and how he was just having a hard time at the moment. He always looked around before he began a sentence and talked out of the side of his mouth.

Hard times were the norm in this universe. They were everywhere, not always super visible but, like dark matter, the implicit substance holding things together.

At some point I realised the Jameses were lovers and life partners. I suppose I just hadn't paid attention. When things kicked off outside, with the shouting and screaming and throwing of ashtrays, I would happily sit in my room and drink and smoke and think. What bother was it to me? I had a balcony and a room to myself – Virginia Woolf would have loved it. No need for others at all when I could view Moore Park before me in all its splendour.

Carol was a dancer from Queensland and she lived on the second floor. She tended to work nights but liked to be social in the afternoon before she went to work. She had a white ferret that she kept as a pet and walked around on a purple leash. The ferret was the delight of the community and we all enjoyed a cuddle when it came loping around the lounge room. They are bloody strange creatures, long and misshapen, yet oddly functional. I suppose we were all a bit like that.

Sharing another room on the third floor, there was a mother and son. He was a bright, friendly kid who should not have been anywhere near the rest of us. We talked about sci-fi a lot and I even gave him a couple of books from the small pile I kept around. A Bradbury novel and a copy of *Brave New World* I didn't need. He told me he needed to care for his mother who was ill. She was ill all right. Sick as a dog and in the last stages of some heavy drug dependence. Her arms were frail and thin, and I could see her bones, even through the thick wool of her jumper which she wore all through the summer. She always smiled sweetly with a face that elicited a mix of warmth and pathos.

"Nice to see you luv," she'd say to me. I wanted her to be okay, but something held me back from engaging. Suspicion? – call it what you like. I wanted to believe she really *was* ill and he really *was* caring for her. That, in fact, they were just kind people, being dragged into the abyss.

There was another kid who was like a duck to water, the young junkie in our midst. He would have been about 19 or 20 years old and had been shaving his head, it seemed, since birth – a pre-emptive act against the baldness he knew was coming. I knew he was a junkie because he told me, he even seemed pretty pleased about it.

Our communal kitchen was the place people interacted with each other, whether they liked it or not. We all shared a steel fridge and some cupboards which were painfully inadequate for the thirty plus people who resided on those three floors. There were periods when the kitchen was quiet but, in general, there was a queue outside, composed of resigned or restless people waiting to prepare some godforsaken meal for themselves or some other lost soul. My personal diet at the time consisted of two-minute noodles and cheese sandwiches. I was proud of this, it kept my food shop to less than 30 dollars per week. Sliced loaves of bread at the time were only 99 cents – my major expenses were cheese and margarine. If I had a

particularly bad week on the gamblers, I could do without them and just get the bread. It was beautifully efficient too. As long as I did a quick thirty buck shop on pay day, I knew I could eat for the week regardless of what happened with the beers and the gamblers and the darkness. It was good I had organised myself so brilliantly. Though it was a hairy hour or so between the pay hitting the bank account and getting the food home before the deluge could begin again. As soon as I knocked back one crispy, cold beer, all bets were off.

One Saturday morning, I was in the kitchen preparing my usual when the young bald fella was there downing stubbies, his head like an unfried dumpling gleaming under a lamp. He offered me a beer and I knew the trade-off was a bit of a chat in return. He showed me a bump in his vein and said he'd shot up this morning.

"Feel fucking great mate." It was party time evidently.

"You know," he said eyeing my bowl of noodles, "you can eat pretty much for free in this town. If you know where to go, there's always free food going. Monday night on Devonshire Street, Tuesday lunchtimes at Vicky Park, Wednesdays in Newtown."

He was referring to the charities who doled out food to the homeless at various junctures. I wasn't there yet, but I kept a mental note.

"How many beers have you got?" I innocently asked.

"Whole crate mate," he grinned.

Not for long, I thought.

It was largely because of this guy that I locked all my possessions into a canvas bag every morning and padlocked it to the underside of my bed before I left. At the very least it would be noisy and awkward to break into, not to mention disappointing. I wouldn't have put it past him though. I wouldn't put anything past anybody that desperate.

From time to time, a resident would scream bloody murder all day because someone had entered their room and stolen something or other. It was never much of a mystery, but there were enough potential perpetrators that finding the actual culprit would've been near impossible.

The doors stayed closed most of the time. Nobody wanted an outsider to see the interior of their room. If somebody stuck a head around a door it was done with great care and the craning of necks. There was a chef, a great hulk of a man who looked as if a tiny puppy could throw him into a rage. One tended to tip toe around him, making polite and non-offensive conversation if necessary. He would start one of these conversations by staring at you until you were scared into speaking. I would usually encounter him late at night and be met by soul crushing silence.

"Errr... how's it going?"

A moment passed, before he launched into his tirade.

“Fucking cunts at work. The kitchen’s closed at 9.30, that means it’s fucking shut.”

“Arseholes man.”

“More than fucking arseholes MATE! Someone should smash their fuckin heads in!”

“Beer?”

“I will. Fucking cunts.”

His girlfriend was “sick” too, certainly. He was extremely protective of her but I don’t think anybody was interested in moving in on his territory. The times I saw her she looked close to death. Whatever was wrong with her, it was not pleasant to behold.

In the midst of all this local flavour, there were usually a couple of backpackers from somewhere like Norwich or Shropshire who had come to be charmed by Australia’s beaches and sunshine. They rarely lasted more than two days before finding somewhere else to lodge.

The rest of us were hanging on as long as we could. God help us.

As a wise man said: “It is easier to resist at the beginning than at the end.”

7.

In the face of any crisis, it is useful to have someone to blame and, in such situations, parents tend to come in handy. The two hardworking and rarely appreciated middle Englanders that spawned me were weighed down by the burdens of the eternal class battle, the balancing of cheque books, demanding children, and the byzantine politics of the workplace. I can recall being put in the back of the car with my brother, strapped into a lifted baby seat and being left to amuse ourselves. Perhaps we were given colouring books to pass the time, in the vain hope we'd stop pleading for attention or love or food or emotional support; to give the poor unfortunates a moment to themselves, for once, in God knows how long.

Years, perhaps.

When the colouring books wore thin, we searched for other stimuli. This I did by staring out of the window and looking at the trees, wondering where the adults had gone. Why were they no longer *here* to entertain me and cater to my every need and whim? Before panic became overwhelming, my father would appear near the window, which was open slightly at the top so that I wouldn't cook to death. His breathy grin was a mixture of relief that we weren't killing each other and mild guilt that we had been left. With a big smile, he pushed a packet of crisps, salt and vinegar usually, sometimes cheese and onion, through the window gap and towards our grabby little hands. I would struggle to open them but manage after a while, my paws plunging into the salty goodness, plastering my face with crumbs.

"There you are son. Everything okay?" He would make some exaggerated facial expressions, a few jerky movements, and we would both giggle at this hilarious giant, moving like a tree in the wind for our amusement.

"We'll be back soon. Watch your brother." With a face covered in potato chips and focussed solely on the bag, I would murmur, "Uh hum."

My father was the first man to play pool with me in a pub when I was ten. How I loved that day. Everybody seemed happy and full of energy. Backs were slapped, there was whooping, there was the uncontrolled laughter and snorting that you see when people are deliriously cheerful. People joking around, glasses in hand. *How about it son? Time for a drink?* It felt like Christmas had come early. The adults were pleased to see me for a change and my actions were accepted and, in some cases, even celebrated. I remember potting a ball and being clapped – this was a formative moment for a ten-year-old, being applauded by adults.

"He's a natural! A natural talent!"

Those words stayed with me for many a year afterwards.

A couple of weeks later I wanted to relive the experience. I filled up my pockets with twenty pence pieces (it took two to operate the pool table) and cycled five miles to the same country pub after school on a Tuesday. There was nobody there that day and the bar was empty. The barmaid didn't bat an eyelash at a ten-year-old kid entering the pub on his own. She served me my glass of coke as if I had been the local supermarket manager. If I'd asked her to fill it with Drambuie, or Absinthe, or formaldehyde, she probably would have done so without question. Such were the wonders of the country pub in the late twentieth century.

I set up the balls, yellow and red on the green table. Playing against myself, I moved around with purpose like a cheetah stalking its prey, the cue gripped tight, clumsily chalking it before clattering the balls together as hard as I could. At one point I dropped the stick, it clattered on the floor and I looked around expecting to be scolded, embarrassed, as was the case most times I made a loud noise. Nothing happened. Nobody noticed, nobody cared. What joy! I returned to crashing the balls together and had another Coca-Cola. I can't remember who won, although I do recall being disappointed there was nobody to praise me for my good shots this time round.

After the balls were potted and the second coke was gone, I got back on my bike and went home. The barmaid didn't even say goodbye. It was a running theme that would continue for the following decades.

It wasn't until a couple of years later that I received another kick to the system. There was a repeat of a movie with Paul Newman on TV where he plays a young, skilful pool player. I think it was called *The Hustler*. I remember how the smoke drifted across the screen and the glasses sparkled under the stylish monochrome bar light. How he owned the table, grinning, the cue an organic extension of his body as he lined up the perfect shot. I remember how people clapped and cheered when he played.

"Money won is twice as sweet as money earned," he said.

Of course, nothing was mentioned about money lost.

From that point on I was set on making my living as a pool player. I felt if I could angle my body, time my shots correctly, assume that air of affectless cool, then things would work out. After all, pubs seemed to be places where people were happy and, if you could shoot stick, where cash could be made. Who wouldn't want that?

That's when I started drinking.

Being stuck in accusations about the past was not a game I played. Let's just say, as far as I was concerned, it was all Paul Newman's fault.

8.

By the end of the school day, and the ring of the bell, I could always tell my students were itching to leave. I couldn't blame them. School wasn't really for me either. You could say it was ironic. But it was the rules mostly, the boundaries. Places that were closed off or the activities which were prohibited. I had since watched Paul Newman in other films, like *Cool Hand Luke* or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. He didn't give a damn for rules either.

At school, I bristled at the endless demand for homework, together with the headache of warnings against smoking, for shirts to be tucked in, to listen carefully, to watch my tone, to sit down, to stand up, to get in line, to form a circle. Always being told what to do, never allowed to find things out. If something was forbidden then my mind was instantly drawn to it, like the nostrils of a predator filled with the aroma of blood. My body would be pulled forward, hijacked beyond its control. I had to find out what delights were out there, in the shadows, in the places that were off limits, where I was not supposed to be. Often it wouldn't be anything especially exciting, just the sight of a teacher smoking a cigarette – who would then shout at me of course. Still, I went towards these objects, needing to discover things for myself. Something deep within me knew the adults could not be trusted, that they were faking their way through the game as well.

I graded well when younger. But, on the whole, I found high school to be a massive drag. In between bouts of withering discipline, being a teenager turned into an exercise of becoming an enormous prick and learning how to be a prick to other pricks. I didn't understand why people could be shitty to each other for sport. I preferred to laugh at things which were funny, rather than the misfortune of others. It angered me when groups would turn on smaller or quieter kids, usually roused by some poor sap with an obvious weakness, like being fat or having a pug nose. Although sometimes the fat kids with the pug noses were the worst. The thing with people was you never really knew if they were okay until you interacted a bit.

I would tend to play football with the bullies and foul violently. It was my way of sharing justice in a world which I deemed to be unfair. This made me unpopular with the popular kids – and no more popular with the unpopulars – which, I suppose was the worst of both worlds. All the same, being perceived as mad, bad, and dangerous to know became a comfortable niche and way to keep clear from the desperate clamour of the popularity contest. During the break times I didn't spend playing ball, I would be reading somewhere or, more likely, off campus and up to no good. The nearby streets were a treasure trove of sweet shops, sex shops, bookmakers, pubs, and chippies. Everything a growing boy needs. From time to time, another kid might provoke something and, unfortunately, I had a habit of reacting. A few choice words

– or a flying foot – would usually repel the others, but the fates determined that every time I did something to another kid I would get caught by those strange and reluctant policemen, the teachers; it never seemed to happen the other way around.

“You boy. Again... Always you! Detention.”

Protest collapsed into resignation and, after a few years, turning up to school felt like a waste of time. Often, I didn’t bother. I felt targeted by the teachers and letters would be sent home, prompting long and pointless shouting matches. I couldn’t have cared less.

When I got a job in a school myself, it could have easily felt like an example of cosmic repayment, a great big joke. In fact, I mostly think of the way I joined the bullies on the pitch only to enact a subtle kind of revenge. Was a similar thing going on here? – or was it just a lousy decision on my part. Who knows.

If nothing else, I’ve learned that teachers in general get a hard time. If a kid does well, the kid gets the credit. If the kid crashes, the teacher gets the blame. Or the parents. Sometimes the parents and the teachers blame each other. Maybe the crash was coming. Maybe it was a good thing. I changed schools at sixteen and nobody cried about it.

In the new place, though, I was a novelty and not the predestined magnet of trouble. All of a sudden, I flourished, especially with the girls. Alas, by that point the routine of pouring my body weight in beer down my throat every Friday and Saturday was already established, skinny little thing that I was.

If any of you fancy building a time machine to go to England in the 1990s and drink underage, let me give you a couple of tips.

Firstly, be tall.

Secondly, go to snooker clubs. They will serve anyone and don’t give a damn. They also tend to be a magnet for some of the shadier parts of the night world. From the age of 14, I had already spent enough time in the nearest snooker club to claim a parking spot. Even if I couldn’t drive legally.

The years passed like this. I managed to find a way to navigate the school system during the day before getting into the serious business of going out in the evenings. My ruse was, if I did the bare necessary academically, and rolled in my own cash, then I could do what I wanted the rest of the time. Scraping by was enough and I became an arch scraper. I developed skills to stay ahead. Even after a few drinks, I could punch out work last minute in a haphazard and rushed process, word rubble formed into shaky sentences that half-way resembled sense. I became a master skim-reader (a skimmer and a scraper), understanding enough to hit the key headlines of the week’s homework. Sometimes, simply turning up, despite being in lousy shape

was all that counted, slumped there, absent from myself, an exhausted body in a seat. It wasn't always pretty, but it was sufficient. I didn't open my economics textbook until two weeks before the exam of a two-year course and miraculously graded respectably. Let the record state, that doing well in an economics exam does not necessarily improve your economic situation.

For money, I washed pots in a kitchen. The world of kitchens was, I rapidly detected, inextricably linked to the world of bars. The chefs I worked with were an angry, ball-scratching group of humans – red of face and scarred of forearm. They would hurl pans at the wall when displeased with a server and had mastered the art of insulting someone the moment they walked out through the swing door.

“Muppet!” was the usual refrain.

After a day at school, I would spend a few hours in the jaws of these choleric cooks before demobbing to the local late-server to dissect the evening. This inoculated me quickly against being a ‘muppet’ and kept me reasonably safe from their fury. My parents assumed I was learning important values by having a part-time job. What I was doing, in fact, was earning drinking money and making the connections I needed to stay wrecked.

The restaurant manager was called Sharon, a buxom lady with kind eyes. She liked to squeeze my hand and look into my face at the start of my shift. Whether this was to assess if I had been drinking or for some other purpose, I never learned. The chefs always closed the kitchen and she would be gone by that point. As soon as she departed, out came the cooking brandy which would be poured into coffee cups and distributed to the kitchen team.

Flash forward another couple of years. Constructing a life with the mismatched skills I acquired during my mid-teens was, it turned out, rather thirsty work. From the word go, the bed I slept on was nothing more than an afterthought. A place to lay my weary bones and nothing more. It varied wildly from night to night and was often the couch of an unknown. My days and evenings were spent marauding in the quest for money to fund the alcohol that at least took away my anguish for the night.

I often awoke in the most surprising of scenarios.

“Leave him alone, he's my friend,” I heard one night as I slumbered upon a sofa that was once turquoise but now aqua-cigarette, flecks of brown.

I could feel someone drawing on my forehead. There were lots of people around, smiling. I just wanted to sleep.

“Fucking stop that! Not in my flat!”

The voice belonged to Kara. Through bleary eyes, I made out her outline, lovely brown hair hanging below her shoulders. She was the woman who had given me a job waiting tables

in a restaurant. She was eight years older than me, but we managed to bond over a love of tequila and late nights.

There are angels in all of our pasts, people whose kindness and patience carries us through the darkest times. When things get particularly bleak, I sometimes forget them, but they bridged me across a river, threw a rope for me over a ravine. Kara's friendship sheltered me for many years, gave me a place to stay and a job to hold onto. Without it the current would have swept me away.

It was when my friendships ended that I observed everything else ending too. At these points, I found it very difficult to continue. My need for the community of my fellows, it turned out, was as strong as my need for oxygen.

When her stoner housemates thought it was hilarious to label my head, Kara stepped up, prepared to kick some ass. I woke up that next day and my forehead was clean and her housemate handed me an apologetic coffee. In retrospect, we were all crabs in the same bucket, stopping each other from getting out.

Kara should have been above all that crap. She had mountains of ability and the determination of a mighty cliff, but she *did* also like tequila. It made for a mixed level of progress. Keeping an eye on me was probably also a hindrance on her march towards the promised land of growing up, settling down – whatever it is that people strive for.

9.

Kara had been to Australia and she often spoke of how good it was, how “nice” people were, the brightness of it all. It was an effective sales pitch, even if she seemed trapped between the reality of her present and the apparent splendour of her past. She was on the road and far away, from England, from her family, from whatever rupture had torn her from the straight and narrow.

“You have to go,” she told me, repeatedly.

“There’s nuffin’ here,” she’d add and make a circle above her head with the rolled-up fiver we were using at the time.

“Nuffin.”

I kept my sights on the fiver and its destination, it was all I could focus on despite the long road ahead of me.

“I will, I will,” I said, clenching my teeth in that almost smile, then swigging back some more vodka and Red Bull from the pint glass and wondering if the ice would be ready yet. Looking at my watch, it was only five minutes since I had last checked it.

As she spoke, my brain flitted everywhere, from the warmth of our conversation to the taste of my drink, and back again. We were awesome; this conversation was awesome. Maybe I needed the toilet again. I loved the taste of this drink – how long is she going to be talking about this ... is it my turn to talk yet – has she got to take so fucking long over this, fuck that looks good, dammit we’re cool, if only those bastards knew. Damn this tastes good, I need a smoke. Maybe that girl is still up, I should call her. What if we run out of drinks? Fucking hurry up with that, yeah yeah yeah yeah, my turn ... shall I pour us some more? What time do I go tomorrow? Do I have clean socks? Where’s my lighter? Give me my lighter. How have I smoked this many fags? Only sixteen in those machines! My turn my turn my turn hurry up.

Then I was slumped in a chair, a crust around my chin. Almost like whole days had passed since Kara was talking about life out in Oz. The ashtray lay face down on the floor to my right, a small molehill of grey ash and yellow filters. The empty glass was still clasped in my left hand. I felt raw and sniffly. I made a sound, like someone had reached through the entrance of my nose to tickle my brain.

There, on the floor by the door was my bag. It didn’t have much in it, but it was what I was taking. A couple of books. A change of clothes. Kara was asleep on her bed. We never kissed, never did anything.

I went to the bathroom and threw some water on my face. My watch told me it was coming towards 1pm. Time to go.

She was asleep as I left and went to the bus stop.

By the time I arrived at the airport I was starting to feel better and I went to the bar.

10.

“Have you tried Gorman House?” said the lesbian with the Saint George Dragon tattoo.

We were sat in the worst café in Surry Hills (not an easy thing to find) and hiding from the sun under an awning. We rolled White Ox cigarettes and picked through the carcass of my most recent calamity.

We had never met before, although these were the kinds of connections I appreciated. Someone to talk to and fill the blocks of loneliness and desolation that otherwise formed the structure of an addict’s world. Perhaps this is why there was such camaraderie between us. Not just for the shared experience, but for the gasping relief one feels from the solitude of daily, ritualistic self-destruction.

She seemed to have a bit of rust on her wheels too, the kind of facial scars that are formed only by the blunt impact of a couple of hard fists wearing jewellery, and the slightly crooked smile people get after they have had a cheekbone broken at some point. I was taller than her but she was wider and I would Pepsi-challenge her to beat the shit out of young and old if it came down to it.

“Gorman what?”

“It’s a ‘hab, up Rozelle. Get cunts clean in there.”

My options were running thin and this could be an alternative that might give me a little runway.

“Do you have the number?” I asked.

“You getting the coffee?”

My nod was slow and definite and full of knowledgeable regret. Never ask a junkie for a favour. It is never free.

I feel like I flick through people the way you might flick through the pages of a book or a magazine, looking for something interesting and then moving on quickly because nothing draws me in. What the best books do for me, is change the way I see things, how I understand the people around me. Knowledge, experience, feeling. How could I expect as much from a hapless human being?

I could comprehend Shayla well enough. Despite being birthed through solid brick and smashing her way through everything, I could see she wanted to do *good*. In me she saw a fellow sufferer, she understood the desperate powerlessness of my quandary. The fact that I still had the shingles together to buy her a coffee didn’t hurt. And I needed that number. It was my next best idea. Nothing had worked. Changing jobs, losing jobs, new girlfriends, moving

apartments, moving again, going out, staying in, smoking weed before, smoking crack during, drinking water before I went to bed, counting to ten, standing on tippy-toes, spinning round and howling at the fucking moon – none of it had worked.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

“Not easy to get in. Are you in the construction game by any chance?”

“No. Destruction.”

“We know that. The major thing is you’re gonna need to be clean. Least a coupla days. They test you when you arrive.”

“Well how the fuck is that gonna happen?”

“My friend, you’re gonna have to do a detox.”

“Fuck.”

“Once you do, it’s a piece of cake. They let any cunt in there.”

And they did.

11.

*Ice Street*. The perfect location for a detox centre in a city with a crystal meth problem. Presumably *Pokie Machine Avenue* and *Heroin Heights* were not viable names for the council. *Boulevard of Broken Dreams* might have been too clichéd and the difficulty of pronouncing *Ice Street* probably amused someone somewhere. Those sibilant ‘s’ sounds crashing into each other, struggling to give enough space for independent syllables to be fully realised. No choice but to mesh into the cliff-edge sound of “treat”.

I called earlier in the day.

“Yeah, come on in, ‘bout six o’clock’ll be fine.”

Six was a dicey time of day. Getting through an afternoon without a drink was an ordeal. To placate myself, I spun the yarn that it was already sorted and I was off to a holiday camp. Placing a story in my head was always helpful to push me into action. I recall telling myself I had to study for school exams to prove the teachers wrong with all their negative predictions.

Into the bag I packed some spare socks, undies, and a couple of t-shirts I found when searching through the rubble of belongings on the floor for items clean enough to take. I placed this collection of rags on the rubber mattress and assessed if it was enough. The mattress had been freshly turned over that morning, as it was every morning, when I awoke to find it damp and an empty glass somewhere on the bed. Or sometimes I awoke to find it damp and no empty glass. I’d recently taken to snatching a few self-help books. *Quit Smoking the Easy Way*, *The Power of Now*, *Take Control of Your Life* – in the sack they went. In no time I would be a new man.

This was a momentous decision; it was something that needed to be announced, to be shared with someone. Kevin? No, he wouldn’t be impressed. Darius? No, I might need his help getting work later. Sarah? No, she would just have something sharp and pointy to contribute. Needless to say, I couldn’t tell anyone in the Cook who would just rob me while I was away. So, I simply closed the door behind me, making triple sure it was locked, and flung the sack over my shoulder.

I was holding my bag of treasure in a black bin liner as I triumphantly strode into the detox joint. Protruding from my chin, there was a large open sore where I had scratched incessantly, positive that an ingrown beard hair was the source of discomfort. My most recent self-administered haircut was a few weeks ago. My skin was a pale green-grey colour, my fingers stained yellow, and the gingivitis emanating from my mouth could have killed a rhino.

As I locked eyes with the two nurses at the door, I was certain they both had the hots for me. How to let them down gently? This was going to be tricky.

Alas, instead of more attractive women, I found many men, most of them old, as I was led inside. Checking in was, frankly, weird. Anything of value, a phone, a wallet, all went in the safe in an envelope. During an interview, I was quizzed by a creature in a conversation that was memorably peculiar.

“You’re Welsh!” I correctly identified from his accent.

He looked at me like I was a piece of shit, as if he had a higher purpose, and that to have to serve the likes of me was, frankly, a punishment.

“Be careful what information you give to people here,” he warned.

“I just gave you my wallet.”

He made no attempt to disguise the eye roll or the general disgust he felt for my presence.

“Tomorrow we take a car of people to the clinic at 11am if you have any medical issues you want looking at.”

“I guess my chin.”

He made a note.

“You’ll probably need some Valium and Antabuse.”

“Seriously?”

“Probably the only thing for someone in your state.”

“Nah, I’ll do it my way.”

He gave me that winning glare again.

Valium is basically alcohol in a pill. It can help people who are having a particularly bad, heart-straining detox, but I was 29 and not a major heart attack risk. He just wanted me incapacitated, and I could tell he knew I was thinking this. Antabuse makes you sick as a dog if you take it and drink. As if being fired from countless jobs, a series of evictions, break ups, and now the embarrassment of this conversation weren’t discouragement enough from the path of chaos.

“Here are the PJs,” he pointed at the shelf. I grabbed them and went to the dormitory.

12.

The first thing that struck me about the sleeping quarters was the smell. And when I use the word 'struck', I mean it in a literal sense. This was odour as a different entity, something solid, flat, weapon-like. It leapt at me like an airbag in a high-speed collision, pulling me in and pushing back at the same time. The cocktail of rotting feet, sneezes, farts, unwashed armpits, decade-old socks, open sores, fungi of every genus, urine-stained pants, shit-stained undies, and nicotine-clouded coughs was like a blanket, a tide, a supernova of aroma.

There were twelve of us packed in there. Immediately it became clear I was going to have to spend most of my time in the yard.

"Cups of tea, eh. That's what the empire was built on."

"Maybe. I didn't build it." I continued to dip my Lipton teabag into the cup. It was one of those squat types, the kind that can be stacked many high and are usually served with vats of coffee. The kind with a handle big enough for one finger.

There was no fruit tea, just a giant industrial tin of tea bags, dusty and brown around the edges; getting dustier and browner as the lid was pried open with spoons and knives to retrieve more of the precious bounty within. Milk, by the serve, mini-plastic, tear-off lid portions. I was not a sugar man, although it seemed the rest of the world thought otherwise. People are obsessed about putting sugar in tea and coffee, they add and stir it with a religious fervour. Tink tink tink tink tink.

We talked about religion, how it overlapped with people getting clean.

"I know a few blokes who found Jesus," said Scott, a likeable surfer type with arms like rail tracks.

"It's all the same god."

I tended to agree with him.

The goal of being in a detox was, I had thought, to detoxify the body and then achieve a clean, successful life thereafter.

How wrong I was.

For starters, everybody already knew each other, and I was the sole newcomer. A fresh fish flapping on the deck. This pungent den of iniquity was merely part of the circuit for the rest of the guys and gals. For me, my journey into addiction, my *career* if you like, had been a breezy sled ride down a mountain until the foretold cliff-edge inconveniently appeared. Now that I had reached bottom, surrounded by my own rubble, I found myself part of a thriving ecosystem. Snagged upon this murky reef, I found that I fit right in.

Dole cheques arrived on Thursday once every two weeks. Guaranteed, on Thursday, most people would miraculously find a second wind and be out of detox promptly and nimbly for that friendly shot up the Cross at Porkies, or whichever establishment provided their connections. The cheque might last a day or two, or perhaps there might be some part-time work involved. Scott, for example, was an electrician who still had one or two bridges left to burn. Then the rest of the fortnight would be running, grabbing, climbing, scamming, kneeling – doing whatever it took essentially to get a shot and then go again. Eventually, the body or the will would run a little thin and then detox would be there for a nice little drug holiday. Some sangers, clean PJs, and cups of tea. *A quick recharge before that grind began again.* From a state policy level, this took the edge off the crime statistics for a few days here and there and, for any self-respecting addict, they could play the game and talk to the counsellors for a day or two before getting back to business as usual. It was a win-win situation.

“What’s up with yer chin?”

I fingered the open blister delicately, it was on the left of my chin and the size of a thumb. The past few days that bloody hair and the scratching, trying to pull out the offending follicle, had of course made it worse. It still eluded me – and the itching, always the itching! So the scraping and the pulling and the itching had all continued, until I had forcibly extracted almost every piece of chin stubble in the region using my nicotine-stained, beer encrusted digits. Eventually the skin had rebelled and opened up a vast terrain of red and yellow, an oily and unpleasant canvas too sore for my fingers to bother any more. I could touch it lightly with the top of my forefinger, just to check if it still hurt, and that was it. No diminution of itching. And it still hurt.

“Ingrown hair,” I informed.

“Fucked. I had one of them. Don’t shave.”

Sage advice.

There were two wooden, pub-style garden tables wedged together in the backyard of the facility, it was originally a colonial house that had had some Lego-like renovation to make it into a couple of dormitories upstairs, with a canteen and an office downstairs. There was some crude wooden-plank fencing around the back yard, overhung with paperbark and eucalyptus trees, their branches reaching in to shade us. Months and years of dry, sludgy, dying leaves were arcing at the corners of the brick garden. There were ten of us out there and zero non-smokers in the house. Anybody enjoying the interior would have been either sleeping, eating, or negotiating with the staff for something or other. The rest of us were engaged in the full-time pursuits of rolling cigarettes and blowing smoke out of the side of our mouths. Birds

chirped in the background. As the sun sank in the Blue Mountains beyond Penrith, talk covered the full spectrum. Scams, how it all started, the good old days.

“There’s a payment, if you’re on the dole for six months you can get into your super, get five grand.”

“Cunt owes me fifty bucks.”

“That’s a nice round number.”

“Claudine, I’ll never forget her,” Scott reminisced.

“She was 25 and I was 17. She took me home from the pub that night and gave me that first shot. We spent the weekend in bed. I guess I been trying to live that weekend every time since.” He smiled at something out of sight.

“Sex was good. Next time I am coming back as a sex addict. That I think I could handle.” His grin grew wider, pushing out the corner of his mouth. He lit a smoke and coughed up some crackling. A piece of spittle flew from his throat and landed on the shoulder of the bloke next to him, who was on the nod, a stalactite of drool beginning to form at the corner of his lip. It appeared nobody else had seen this and I decided not to mention it.

My energy levels were diving. I had eaten about four sandwiches and three bowls of cereal since I arrived. It had been some time since my body had taken such an amount of food and it needed a little help with the processing. Tea and cigarettes are useful stimulants, but when exhaustion wants you, it takes you. Saying good night to the rest of the old sea dogs, I left them in the dying of the light. The door had a slow-weighted closing mechanism and the time it took to slowly shut and block the light from the corridor was the amount of time I had to find my bed and climb in. Relieved I had nothing of value on me, I collapsed in the dark and fusty dormitory and added my sounds and smells to the jungle.

\*

The room for the blokes had windows that didn’t let in any light. I knew it was morning when I woke up because of the slices of yellow in the air vent towards the top of the wall behind my bunk. That air vent had its work cut out clearing the pressure in there. Any notion of staying in bed and resting was vetoed by my nostrils which used their decisive vote to get me out of there.

The canteen was deserted and the clock on the wall told me it was 7.30 in the morning. I poured myself a high bowl of Weetabix and cornflakes and added some brown crumbs of instant coffee to a cup. The only sound was the spoon against my bowl and the munching and slurping I made as the food began the perilous journey into my bowel. I could see the doors to

both dorms from where I was sat. Suddenly, the door to the girls' dorm room, opened gingerly. Out stepped the Welsh case worker who had inducted me at the start; he looked furtively back and forth and returned to the office without realising I had seen him. A minute later the girl emerged and tip-toed over to the showers. I had forgotten her name as she had been quiet at the table the night before.

Putting my bowl on the tray next to the sink, I crept outside for the first and most agreeable cigarette of the day. A magpie joined me at the table. He seemed interested in the high-piled ashtrays around him and I was mildly shocked no one had left their tea cups out the night before. We were a band of messy junkies but, given some shelter for a few days, it seemed we were also eager to please – cleaning up after ourselves, saying “thank you”. I think I just wanted to hear the words, “you’re welcome, make yourself at *home*,” rather than the usual refrain, “you have to leave *now*,” which was what usually serenaded me when I arrived somewhere new.

“Morning,” the girl said as she walked down the steps.

“It is,” I replied. I reached out a hand, hoping to get one back. “Jack.”

“Clara, we met. Got a smoke?”

I handed her the crinkled pouch of tobacco that held my life together.

“How long you been here?” I asked.

She looked away, then up at me; she flashed a brief crooked smile as she handed back the tobacco. She rolled her cigarette thin and tight and quickly.

“A couple of days.” Clara took a long, deep draw as I lit it for her. “My money has come in so I’m leaving today.” She blew out the smoke and closed her eyes.

The rest of the herd gradually emerged from their slumber and joined us around the table for the wake-up smoko. I realised I hadn’t had a drink for 36 hours – I couldn’t remember the last time that had happened. Maybe a year ago? Perhaps when I had the flu that time. Some faraway period in the past, millions of years ago, when the continents were still forming.

The chirping of the early birds whistled into the garden.

“Morning dick head.”

“Morning.”

“I went to England once.”

“Yeah.”

“It was alright.”

“Yeah.”

Despite the need to continue with this ‘important’ conversation, there were enough people awake now so that I could return to the dorm without worry. It had been my concern

that the Welshman would realise I had seen him come out of the girls' room. But now I would be lost in the crowd. Safe and sound. All the while, I was still amazed by the fact that I'd stayed 36 hours sober – it was a goddam miracle! Perhaps it was okay to stay in this place another day or two.

I had brought some deodorant with me and I went to grab it from my bed. Upon the duvet, I saw the books and the black bin liner with my dirty clothes and the deodorant inside. Liberating the clothes and the deodorant, I went into the bathroom. It was at this point I realised I didn't have a towel, so I nominated one of my t-shirts for drying duty. The lack of hooks or other useful things in the sparse room meant I needed to hook the drying rag onto one of the pipes leading from the wall to the showerhead. I had a two-step distance to the dispenser under the sink which provided soap. Hot water was not an expectation so when it arrived I felt as if angels were dancing on my body.

Still wet as I left the shower, I crossed to the laundry, my pyjamas clinging to my skin. I was already a little chilly when the front door burst open and revealed a great creature in its frame. A man so enormous he blocked out almost all the light and air from the street, his great casing and rounded shoulders housing a fellow big enough for the basketball circuit and round enough for Friar Tuck's table. His beard and his hair were lush and curly, he could have stepped straight out of a Norse myth; if he were holding an axe and wearing a horned hat it would have been completely natural. For a second, he did not budge. Instead, he fell face forward in the doorway and started convulsing. The case worker and two of the other addicts moved towards him and pulled him into the hallway.

"Hello Paul." No response.

"Had a bit of a rough trot have we? I'll get you some Valium."

The junkies started twitching at the V-word. The case worker, Welshy, seemed to pick up on this.

"For him," he added helpfully.

Some nodding, some resigned shrugging.

I walked past and put my laundry in the machine, keeping my hoodie with me. It was not the warmest of mornings.

As promised, at 10am a couple of us went to the local clinic to be looked over. We were driven there in a white car to the bottom of Darlinghurst where the medical centre was located. This was an area I knew, but only at night. Now it was like visiting somewhere familiar, yet feeling slightly removed, unable to explain exactly why. As soon as my foot hit the ground, I could sense where the nearest three pubs were, the rough cost of their schooners and how long it

would take to get there. This peculiar ability of mine to map the terrain terrified me. Despite my current state of sobriety, I was back on familiar soil and ready to operate on autopilot. Which meant, relapse. I almost ran to the Nelson; it was just two blocks away and agreeably dark in the daytimes. At only 10, it was still too early though. Not forgetting the mild sting of my chin, I forced myself to go through with the medical thing instead.

“In there,” said the Vietnamese guy who had driven us down.

The clinic was in two colonial houses at the bottom of Bourke Street with the faded yellow paint and the green awnings you might find in country towns around the state. It felt like a watering hole in a nature documentary about the African plains, the entire jungle was congregated outside; pacing streetwalkers, jittering junkies, scowling trannies, blokes with beards flecked with spit, smudged make up, delirious giggling, stealthy glances, innocent handshakes, pleading eyes, the full buffet of desperation. I joined the queue. It moved quickly as most of the people just wanted to use the shower, it being the only one available to the homeless for a couple of blocks. Inside, there were cups on the counter with vitamin B tablets which everyone partook in. I showed the desk my Medicare Card and was ushered through to the nurse.

“What’s wrong with you today love?”

“My chin, it’s got an in-grower.”

“It’s got a bit more than that love – you’re gonna need to stop scratching that.”

She handed me a small bottle and told me to dab it on with cotton wool twice a day.

“You’re up in Gorman?”

“I am.”

“Probably need to get something else knocked out of you.” She laughed heartily and ushered me to the door.

I felt better when I got back to the detox centre. In some ways, I was the cleanest I had been for years. No hangover, my hands were not shaking, and I actually felt hungry. I tore into another bowl of cereal and followed it up with two pieces of vegemite toast – those single-serve vegemites, with the peel-off foil on top. I munched down on the crispy toast, spread lovingly in margarine which sent a salty zing across my palate. I asked where all the food came from.

“Mostly from the Knights of Malta,” said the new case worker. Welshy was gone, and besides, he had decided not to converse with me.

“Who are they?”

“Connected with the church.”

I reeled internally. No way was I gonna be brainwashed by those god bothering types. I waited for the pitch, the insistence of belief. But it turned out – that was it. There were no documents to sign, no lectures to listen to. The sole involvement of the religious was to help the needy. In this case, us. They collected the food from somewhere, brought it to us, and went off to help other people. As a lifelong Bill Hicks fan, I had always been smugly mocking of such folk, deriding their faith with my superior knowledge of Darwin’s theories. It struck me there were no atheists lending out their hands when others were reaching up. Let me tell you, I didn’t expect to have a spiritual awakening over a piece of vegemite toast, but you take these things where you can get them. I resolved then, no longer would I evangelise evolution if someone talked about their faith. They were welcome to their beliefs without judgement. After all, if I could spend a life convinced that sinking a few and snorting a bit was the only way to have a good time, who was I to judge?

The bloke next to me was shaking, tea dribbling out of his cup and onto the grey table. He had salty, windy hair and the baked skin of a person who has spent half their life in the sun and the other half in pubs. I knew those red fingers too well, those lobster claws; I had seen them on myself when I got ‘stuck in’ for days at a time. He grinned vulnerably at me.

“Lovely morning, eh?”

“A beauty.”

We exchanged names and a few good-humoured missives on masculinity and it seemed we had mutually decided the other was alright. He had a pack of cards he was nervously shuffling and despite his jittery digits he seemed quite nimble at this.

“Do the tricks Glen!” blurted the fella at the table next to us.

“Yeah do it,” said another.

A small crowd started to gather around our table and I watched as he shuffled and moved his palms around in a circular manner over the deck. Most of the cards were bent inwards at the middle. He offered the deck to Clara, who was slurping her final coffee before hitting the street again.

“Don’t tell me what the card is. Now lay it face down on the table.”

He continued shuffling the deck, with the card face down where everyone was watching.

Then he asked. “What card was it?”

“The jack of hearts.”

He offered the deck to me and told me to pick a card.

I took one from the edge, the least likely place he would have wanted me to take one, I thought.

“I’ll be damned. It’s the fucking jack of hearts.”

Laughter and bewilderment broke out around the table.

“I seen him do this so many times.”

“How the... ?”

Clara smiled, leaned in and gave Glen a big kiss on the cheek. He looked at her as an elderly lion might a gazelle.

At this point, I noticed a sign on the wall behind him. It had one of those motivational sayings you sometimes see in medical waiting rooms in quotation marks. “Gorman House gave me the chance to make the change I needed in life.” The quote was accompanied by a picture of a man who looked like a younger version of Glen.

“Is that you mate?” I pointed.

“It is indeed,” he grinned. “Got those made up when they moved here.”

“How many times you been in?”

“Seventy-two,” he replied, before picking up the deck of cards, dropping it as he went to put them back in his pocket.

Hours passed. Somebody jumped the fence to go and see a dealer. I watched some daytime TV – *Deal or No Deal* – where the contestants made the wrong decisions, which infuriated me. If I had been there, I could have won that money – idiots! The basic premise where you guess how much money is inside each suitcase appealed to me. I was always guessing value: how much fun would this person be, how long would my money last, how dangerous would this activity be in the short, medium, and long term? You know, the big questions. My brain was always running. There were some pretty fast noggins in this place too. Don’t be fooled by shabby surroundings; somebody is always trying to work an angle.

“What’s your star sign?”

“When’s your birthday?”

“Where do you live?”

“Nice street. What number?”

I always had false answers prepared for these questions. My paranoia taught me that rule number one of being a street fiend involved learning a few identify theft tricks. This may have been looney tunes thinking, but if someone was coming to get me, I was gonna be ready. People were alright in general, but if a wallet or a few bucks was lying around, who was gonna know? As the old saying goes, *a junkie will steal your wallet, but a drunk will help you look for it*. It took me years to fully comprehend the wisdom of that.

The table in the back yard was where I spent most of my days. This was where one could smoke with impunity. Having taken drugs, alcohol, gambling and sex away from myself, I was going to damn well smoke. I imagined the view from above the table, filling and emptying as others came, smoked, stubbed and left, the only constant the top of my head as the leaves came gently down. In these daydreams, everything seemed slightly sped up, as I suppose we all were – moving at 1.15x speed, propelled by the relative cold and the re-emergence of blood in our veins. The song in my head as I reflect on this scene is “For Once in My Life” by Stevie Wonder. The giddy joy of being in love, being the same as the relief of sobriety for a few hours. *For once I can touch what my heart used to dream of.*

Sing it Stevie! Bring on that harmonica. The table was full of splinters, the wood an earthy green, and you could pull them off with your fingers like hard bread. We all did it, passing away the time. On a trip to the bathroom, I saw Paul the Viking as the door for the dormitory swung open. He was lying on a bunk near the opening, shivering and shaking as if he were freezing cold. Now *that* was a detox. I realised some people’s hardcore was harder than others. But this man was the gold standard. *For once, I can say, this is mine, you can't take it. As long as I know I have love, I can make it.*

I felt like dancing. My shoulders jumping up and down and my head rhythmically bouncing back and forth. A grin appeared, the cigarette in the corner of my mouth holding steady as its ash cliff piled up.

“You’re feeling better,” Scott smirked.

The fella sat next to me had jumped out to see his dealer earlier in the day. He was nodding off on the table now, his forehead flat down. I put my arm around him and kept on my chair dancing with glee.

“Glad someone’s feeling happy,” chimed in another.

“I’m gonna get another cup of tea.”

*For once in my life, I won't let sorrow hurt me. Not like it's hurt me before. For once I have something, I know won't desert me. I'm not alone anymore.*

I let go of my companion and he slumped to his right banging his head on the bench. He didn’t complain about the pain and just made a kind of humming, satisfied sound. He was fine, everybody just shrugged. The counsellor came out, as they did once an hour, no doubt to get a box on a form ticked somewhere.

“Everything okay?”

Everybody beamed innocence, sweetness and light.

“Absolutely.”

“Lovely thanks.”

“He’s fine, just having a nap.”

“Good-o!” And off he popped back inside to hide out in his office. Satisfied that no one was dead and that we weren’t killing each other, the land of street detox within the borders of what they could explain away. My energy levels started to drop again, so I crept back into the dorm, ready for a nap to take me. The Viking was snoring and had stopped shaking. It felt like a luxury to share with just one person’s collections of sneezes, snores, and farts for a change.

These little patches of sleep started to restore me. Waking up without a headache or a sense of punishing guilt was something I had almost forgotten. To open my eyes without dread, without worry about what had been said or done or texted the night before – it was a gift. There were no fires to fight today, or no new ones at least. No injuries to decipher, no mystery transactions to ponder, no frantic search for keys, a phone, a toilet.

Paul was up and holding court in the garden. Despite the brutality of his appearance, the wilderness in his face, he spoke eloquently, like an old English gent.

“Really, it has been terrible. I should never have stayed with this friend of mine. All he does is drink. There was no way to stop it. That’s how I ended up here.”

I understood then that there was almost always somebody else to blame, or a circumstance, or a place. For me it was my boss or my girlfriend, the cross, university, English people in general, the neighbours. But mostly, it was capitalism; that was a very good and useful one. Everyone and everything was to blame. If *you* had to put up with what I had to put up with, you’d be fucked too. I sucked in the smoke from my rollie, my teeth clenched together and my lips wide in a faux smile.

As Paul carried on, I wondered who the hell this guy was? He was a smart fella for sure.

“What do you do my friend?”

“I taught history for a while but that stopped a few years back. I should never have stayed with this chap, he is the reason I was so bad when I arrived.”

“Old mate studied at Harvard.”

“Seriously?”

“I did. He drinks all this red wine, honestly you just can’t say no to him.”

Gravely, “I understand.”

“We don’t realise until it’s too late. It’s like invading Russia.”

“Russia?”

“Yes, we didn’t win the war so much as Hitler lost it. If he hadn’t invaded Russia, he probably would have prevailed.”

“So, your mate with the red wine is Russia?”

“In a sense, he is all of the Baltic states *and* Russia.”

I looked at Scott and started rolling another. Paul kept talking about 20<sup>th</sup> Century European history.

“Do you really think he went to Harvard?” I asked Scott.

Scott’s low growl was uncertain but steady. “I dunno, but he knows about Hitler.”

I could sense it was time for me to go.

13.

“Don’t worry, I’ll never do it again,” I said as I re-slung my bag over my shoulder. But why? Why sling? Why not place the bag gently over the shoulder? Whatever the future held, I was a slinger of bags and determined to start anew. I went out the door.

The brisk walk up to Oxford Street was full of optimism, the frangipani flowers were scattered on the ground and the light dust of autumn sunshine warmed my brain. As I surveyed the likely paths my new life might take, a thought occurred... A familiar kind of thought. A notion so compelling that it was futile to construct a counterargument, churlish even. There was a burning warmth, a tingle of excitement and anticipation tickling through it. I experienced an embrace of fresh resolve.

“Fuck it.”

And so began my crimewave.

The first person I decided to rob was, unimaginatively, myself. I had given my cashcard to Samirah, a strange girl who had chased me harder the more I ran away. My thinking had been sound at first: to entrust her with access to my finances was a strong deterrent against plundering them for my own addictive purposes. Any link up with her would involve the necessary commotion of shower sex in which we both sat cross-legged and she would grunt like an ox. She had an obsession for licking anus that revealed far more about her than anyone else. Brutalised and ashamed, I would slink away from her at regular intervals. Sad that I had needed her – sad that she wasn’t the love that I wanted, even though she seemed to want me so much. I didn’t have the strength to keep clear and end things, so our mutual dance of misery was prolonged. As I approached her door in Glebe, it was clear to me that giving away access to my treasure was not only foolish but just dragged her into my quagmire of soggy catastrophe.

I knocked on the door.

“Babe,” beaming.

“My love,” she surged forwards, grabbing me with both arms.

Ninety minutes later, I was heading to the ATM with the edges of my card burning my pocket and slathered in a new layer of shame. It had long been my conclusion that love and sex were completely without connection. Love was something that flattened me, that I wanted to master but couldn’t have – sex burst forth from me at unpredictable moments, like a frightened animal in a bag, always trying to escape and find an exit. They seemed to have as much to do with

each other as waves and bullets. “*Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Übermensch.*” That was Nietzsche's way of saying his personal life was a bit complicated.

I was getting jittery so I picked up the pace, striding ahead towards the Triple Ace Bar, zig-zagging back through Prince Alfred Park and across Elizabeth, shadowed by the great railway bridge that rendered this area of the street a fantastic monument to blandness. There were some sorry looking bushes planted by the curb that seemed to wheeze next to the rush of traffic. It was about 10am.

Spending five days in detox meant five days *not* spending money. Hence, for a change, I had a few shekels to rub together – and I was keenly rubbing them. A hundred bucks seemed a good place to start. The moment I arrived at the bar, I ordered a jug of Carlton and made my way to the outdoor smoking enclave. I sat in front of the machine and poured out my first schooner, marvelling at the pale liquid as I gently slid a fifty into the machine which lit up with affirmative R2D2 sounds of approval.

I had waited long enough and so I raised the glass of beer to my mouth, feeling the froth bubble underneath my nostrils. I poured it back with a long satisfying gulp. The instant sensation pulled all through my body, starting with my mouth and reaching the top of my head and running through into my back and shoulders chilling and firing me at the same time.

“Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh...” A thousand worries dissolved. My head leaned back and I looked up into the gap between the buildings with its cracked paint and air-conditioning unit, a pocket of urban undercarriage. I poured again to the top of the glass and started pressing buttons on the machine. No more thought patterns, no more negative feedback loops, no more conflict, just the melting feeling and the machine.

The numbers went up briefly. Three pyramids arrived and the coin graphics started to burst from the bottom of the screen. An extended tune started to play as if I were being inaugurated as president. The spins span and I watched enthralled, waiting for new combinations of random shapes to arrive and inform me I was a winner. Time passed, the duration of about six cigarettes, and the jug was getting near empty. The thought patterns were returning. I looked around and saw the barmaid, the place empty except for us; she was on the corner reading the paper and smoking a cigarette. I raised the jug and nodded as we made eye contact. She knew what to do and pushed herself off the bar top, a brown faux-quartz design with a black trim, some VB and Carlton cloths placed squarely on its top. My eyes moved from her to the machine, over and again, all the while the bottom of my existing beer was tapping on the re-spin button to keep those reels moving. If they came in again I was going to be there to see it, to *feeeel* it, I needed the beer but I couldn't leave the machine for long. The pyramids came in again – oh sweet glory of timing! I collected the jug and let the machine continue,

racking up my winnings in the process. The barmaid took my money with efficient coldness and returned to her newspaper and cigarette. I thought I saw a flash of anxious disapproval in her eyes. Who cared? I was winning dammit. Winning!

Taking a break never seemed an option in such situations. If the numbers were going up, I needed to stay there and enjoy it. If the money was going down, I needed to stay and turn it around. The problem was I had just drunk a whole jug of beer and the bathroom was far away. God places things in our paths at opportune times and, on this occasion, there was a handily placed pot plant of reasonable size next to the machine. I was alone and the barmaid was nowhere to be seen —‘who would know?’

Angling my body to the left so that only my back faced the bar, I whipped out the old chap, a golden arch of urine rising from me and landing in the pot plat – or at least in the vicinity. I continued to press the buttons, confident that I was performing the heist of the century. It took a long time. My funds had gone down by some fifteen percent, yet still my bladder continued to empty. At last, the surge died away and I was able to return to the business at hand without fear of another physical interruption. There was still money in the bank and beer in the jar as the clock struck twelve. People were entering the establishment, many screwing up their faces as they did so. I began to pick up a certain odour in the vicinity.

It was time to go.

Exiting through the back door and heading straight down a side alley, the rumble of consequences faded behind as I eagerly sought new pastures. My pocket bulged with one-dollar coins, hastily cashed out from the machine as I had sculled the final dregs of my beer. My jeans hung off me like a flag tied to a telephone pole; I was better fed than usual after my holiday on Ice Street but still many years distant from three square a day. Besides, the equivalent of six schooners on an empty stomach could make any man peckish.

Up the hill and the Forresters appeared before me. Its gentle chatter and polite demeanour beckoned me to partake of its charms over lunch.

I walked in and the smell of food had me immediately half-crazed. It was busy and queues of people snaked off in several directions; numbers on white cards wedged in metal stands, everywhere the sounds of consumption:

“Three Carltons mate.”

“Lemon, lime, bitters.”

“Chardonnay.”

“Chicken schnitz please luv.”

There were bangers and mash on the table nearest to me; the bangers glistened and the gloopy gravy looked delicious in the way few brown liquids can. My arm reached and grabbed the sausage and I took two long bites.

“Sorry,” I said, “sorry.”

The woman at the table looked at me, more worried than angry.

“It’s okay,” she said.

I rolled the end of the sausage through the mash and gobbled it down, almost hearing the ‘plink’ as it landed in the ocean of lager swilling around within.

“I’m sorry,” I repeated.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. This was human kindness of another order.

I slunk from that place. The woman’s gentle response jarred me, I had no idea how to deal with it.

\*

A block of empty. Blank space. No idea how much time had passed. I was in another room, another pokie room. There were shutters with light streaming through smoke, making it feel like a scene from a film noir. Perhaps I was Humphrey Bogart, fashionably cynical, interviewing some dangerous dame for a seemingly harmless case. I certainly had a cigarette in the side of my mouth. There was an overweight bloke in the corner opposite wearing a tight black t-shirt. He was asleep, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, as if he were judging me even in his dormancy. He was no beautiful dame. I was not in a film noir after all – a film perhaps, just nothing with Veronica Lake, or Bogart, or anyone beautiful. There was no room for beauty here. Realism begat realism in this world of bad-tempers and dirty chemicals. My numbers were low, about nine bucks, then a quick hike to fourteen. I kept pressing the buttons. Just small wins, nothing to get the juices flowing. A buck here and there – although there didn’t seem to be any more cash in my wallet. The reels kept spinning without giving me anything, the sound like a quick horse galloping and stopping suddenly as each rung landed. Gallop gallop gallop gallop stop – gallop gallop gallop gallop stop – gallop gallop gallop gallop stop.

Then zero.

Then suffering.

Then no Lauren Bacall.

Then downward spiral.

Then stop.

The whole world is a few drinks behind.

Perhaps Bogart was right after all.

Here's what I think: although a downer, alcohol can give you energy and often euphoria. With heroin you are buzzing and numb. With cocaine you are the king of the fucking galaxy. But when you hit zero with gambling there is nothing – no sensation to take away the pain. You sit there with it, absorbing what you have done, alone with the guilt and shame slicing through you. I understand completely why so many gamblers commit suicide. Facing the brute fact of loss. *What had just disappeared there, with that game?* Rent? Food for a couple of weeks? How many debts left to pay? How do I get out of *this*? Where are the next dollars going to come from?

I had to get fucked up but there were no more options. My credit cards were maxed out, the bank account was empty. I would need to go again tomorrow. What could I do?

There were still a few bucks of change in my pocket. I went to the bar. An unfamiliar establishment, deserted. I pushed my body up on the palms of my hands and leaned forwards over the bartop to see if I could find a friendly steward. A long glance in either direction revealed emptiness, silence, only void. A giant tumbleweed, the size of a truck, blew around behind me and vanished through the left exit of my imagination. The rail with the bottles of liquor sparkled before me in silent temptation. "Who's gonna know?" I reflected. My arm took on a life of its own as my body arched over the bar, legs flying out behind me, in a diving pose like an extremely thirsty Superman. My right arm latched onto the neck of a bottle and its bounty within. I slid back to my feet and beheld my prize: a bottle of Smirnoff vodka, nine tenths full, with a speed pourer inside. That'll do, I reasoned, and shoved the base of it unsafely in my back jeans pocket. I tucked the top under my t-shirt and walked rigidly to keep balance and not spill anything as I left.

\*

The line was sideways, turquoise blue on one side and green on the other. I couldn't figure out what it was. My right cheek was pushed hard against my jaw and a cable of drool had collected in the lip and cascaded down my chin, making the light glisten and dance upon the scab. There was something between the blue and the green, a strip of yellow with some black dots in it. My eyes adjusted, it was a building, and the line was the horizon. I pushed myself and sat up straight, looking at it. The movement disoriented me such that I nearly fell straight back down. I kept my left hand on the grass and breathed slowly into my chest, trying to get level again.

In my right hand, I clutched the bottle of Smirnoff with the grip of a manufacturing robot. There were still some dregs in the bottom, so I lifted the rim to my lips and tilted it back. The liquid stung my throat and I could feel some bile rise up from within me. I clenched my teeth together and sucked in some air and held it, defying the urge to vomit as a prisoner of war might resist torture. Now, where the hell was I? So often this question seemed to come up. Behind me there was a busy road and the yellow building in the distance looked familiar in some way; there was a small hill behind it with some trees on the side. The road criss-crossed in and around the sides of this park. Moore Park. The Pythagorean slice of grass that separated Surry Hills from Paddington and many dogs from their leads. From here I could re-enter the fray and get back to the action without much difficulty. I drained the vodka bottle of the last of its bounty and threw it in a bush. My legs led me across the road and back towards Bourke Street.

Dusk was headed our way. It was one of those long afternoons where the sun scorches into the land and the people move sedately between watering holes and shade and their business. I loved afternoons like this, with the sun on your neck and a glass in your hand – no burden, no worries.

Light breeze blew the leaves across the road; the stretch between Goulbourn and Oxford was always quiet. Every time I walked this part of the road, I tried to figure out where the old Labour Club was. It was here somewhere before it closed down. A place I had been so familiar with, that I had known intimately and taken for granted. Then one day it had vanished.

A year had passed, then two. All of a sudden, I could not remember what the doorway looked like, or where it was exactly. But I could recall how I felt when I was there. The rich sensation of belonging, that I was part of the group. It was a sense I had spent years trying to find again. The pressure of the road under your feet disappearing with the comfort of a well-upholstered seat and the sharp clang of pints ricocheting off each other. The shimmer of clanging guitars vibrating under breathless chatter, who's headed where and who's just got lucky and left out the back with a stranger. Dancing on tables until god knows what hour, unable to remember where my own bed would be when the bell came for final orders. Crawling out from under a pile of backpacks stuffed in a corner, like a snail slipped out its shell, unable strap back into my new life, when we call it a night and the doors close behind us.

As I approached Taylor Square, I saw ahead of me two girls chatting intently at the cash machine. They began to walk away and I approached the terminal, plunging my hand into my pocket to retrieve my battered card. I looked at the ATM, discovering that the girl had left her

card in the machine and it was requesting instructions. I looked up and saw the girls in the distance.

A moment passed.

What should I do?

The screen prompted me with a beep.

I could have waved to them, shouting. ‘Hey! Lady!’ I could have done that. Instead, I pressed the button for CASH WITHDRAWAL and was giddy when it sent me to the next screen. It was difficult to know what number to go for. I didn’t want her to suffer too much, but I needed a drink and I was broke. Forty bucks oughta cover it, I figured. The two twenties slid out and my hand welcomed and then folded them immediately. It gave me the card back too. Another predicament. The best thing I could think of was to leave it on the machine, maybe she would realise what had happened and come back. Then all would be well.

It had been a hard day’s work, so I decided to reward myself with the luxury of a beer. In front of the Courthouse Hotel, I beheld a sight I had not expected to see, but that seemed so perfectly timed as to be unquestionable. Here, not more than a quarter of a mile away from Ice Street, grinning and gurning, was Glen, my card-trick playing compadre from the detox. We embraced like old friends: men who had survived the same shipwreck and were forever bonded.

“What’s yer name again mate?”

“Jack,” I said.

“That’s right,” he croaked.

We had a drink and he opened up about the shadiness of, “Those cunts at Gorman.”

“That bloke is in the girls every night and no one does nothing. And that kid on the nod. What a joke. What’s he detoxing from? Pavements?”

“There *was* food,” I admitted.

He looked at me as if I had just passed wind in his mother’s face.

“Hardly fucking gourmet.”

I nodded.

“Food is useful,” he conceded, before shovelling a handful of peanuts in his gob and swigging them down with a glug of Tooheys New. I didn’t understand Tooheys drinkers; for me, it was Carlton all the way, VB in a pinch. Tooheys had that metallic tinge, a soulless beer, whereas Carlton refreshed without bitterness. It was as steady as a rock when times were hard. Times were fucking hard.

An hour later, Glen was urinating against a wall in the main bar and the server was calling the cops. He was still dressed in what I assumed was the leather jacket and the ripped

jeans of his youth. He still exuded the same cocksure swagger of a man raised as a road warrior, a man who answered to no one. His elderly stoop betrayed the defiance of ageless rebellion. As the cops arrived, he still had his cock out and was cackling deliriously when they entered. I slipped through the side door and went around the corner into Kinsellas.

Again, I woke up some time later, and again, it was cold. There was a hard metal cube in front of me – it appeared I was on the pavement. Darkness. My head full of pain. There were screwed up newspapers, an empty milk carton and cigarette butts on the ground. I ran a hand through my hair to make sure it was all in place, as if preparing for an important interview, perhaps to discuss my role in an upcoming Oscar-tipped production.

*“So Jack, thanks for joining us. You’re still in character I see.”*

*“I felt it was important to really commit to this role. I didn’t hold back.”*

*“Was it difficult at times? It seems like this character really damaged himself?”*

*“It came to me more naturally than anything else in the world. I just needed to tap into his motivation.”*

*“And what was that?”*

*“He didn’t want to feel anymore. Being in life as a straight person involved being exposed to the winds of emotion. He wanted to shut that off. He had to. Once you make that commitment, nothing else matters. Except having great hair.”*

*“Your hair does look good Jack.”*

*“I know.”*

*“You have really devoted yourself to the smell though. Maybe too much.”*

14.

Things continued like this.

As I reached home, battered and beaten, I felt relief to be re-entering through the alleyway by the bins, and that no one was there to see me. In the best tradition of pathetic fallacy, a light rain began to fall, gathering volume, rising to a torrent as I arrived indoors.

Upstairs, the kitchen was a desert of opportunity. I approached the giant metal fridge and saw before me six longnecks of beer inside. They belonged to the chef-grizzly-bear-hybrid who lived across the hall. Undoubtedly, if he saw someone eyeing up his beers, he would pound them into schnitzel and serve them with curly fries.

I took one and quietly locked my bedroom door behind me.

The deft silence with which I had committed this grand liquid larceny was only slightly spoiled by the way I immediately kicked over two of the empty beer bottles on the floor as I entered the room. They clinked, they rolled, they made the kind of racket that would have worried me more had I not made sure the door was firmly locked. I folded up one of the chairs and lodged it under the handle just in case. A little time passed and my eyes adjusted to the mixture of moonlight and streetlight that floodlit the harsh angles of the room. Its blue shade added romance to the squalor, the bottles on the floor glistening next to the dirty rags and bits of paper, the cigarette butts bunched up and poking out from the mounds of ash and dust. Perhaps there was the odd brave cockroach in the mix, but it seemed possible even they had declared amnesty over this room.

I glanced over at the park. It was perhaps 2am and nary a trannie was stirring. I could see the orange dot of a burning cigarette from somewhere outside. Two feet below it there was a head bobbing forwards and backwards with purpose. All was well with the world. The beer seemed to disappear in the blink of an eye. I pulled my weary bones over to the bed and passed out.

\*

The rain lasted for days. The roads glistened, a dark mirror reflecting shadow back to the world. Occasionally it slowed to a trickle and people would dash between locations, most dressed in preparation for the next downpour, some wearing the clothes of professional peacockery and risking their ruination. I watched them from my balcony, smoking down the last of my tobacco and sneaking out to that great fridge in the kitchen to take the food and beer of others at

moments of quiet. As Monday afternoon rolled into view, I checked my bank account and was delighted to see a sum of seventy-six buckaroos and nineteen cents. A veritable fortune.

My addict mathematics worked quickly on these numbers, crunching them into a period of time in which I could be wiped out, *and how to maximise this period*. I began to sniff around the room and look for clothes that would be acceptable for the outside. Pickings were slim. I found a canvas-coloured jacket which was covered in pockets. It had been bounty from a cupboard in a share house I had rented some six months ago. Once, this jacket had kept somebody warm. Now it merely cloaked my grubby self from daylight as I staggered between pillar, post, and piles of dog shit. There were large rips in the left sleeve. This was *de rigueur* and I figured I had the charisma to pull off such a bold fashion statement. My jeans were a little creased with a grey stain near the knee. Relative to how bad they could be, they were as pure as the driven snow. For visuals, that would be enough. Far more hazardous was the state of my body. I might look respectable, but I smelt worse than a pub urinal after a Christmas party. It simply wouldn't do, so I sprayed on some deodorant. Problem solved.

Let it be known that rain is bad for shoes.

My footwear brand of choice had been 'the cheap one' (not an official brand name), kind of a 'sub-sailing' shoe from a store at the bottom of George Street near Railway Square. They also sold t-shirts with amusing slogans, things like: I AM NOT AS THINK AS YOU DRUNK I AM, or I'M WITH STUPID accompanied by an arrow. There were nicer brands, but my fifteen-dollar slip-ons were stalwarts of my world. Alas, they had a habit of opening up around the big toe of the right foot. It was possible I had some Godzilla of a toenail on that side, or maybe it was just the way I walked. Either way, there was always a little hole with a bit of toe peeking out. I didn't mind and most people didn't seem to notice. But in times of rain, such as this moment, the jig was up and my feet got wet. No matter, soon I would be in the loving embrace of a pub.

I walked along Flinders Street towards Taylor Square but could get no further. The heavens opened in an angry and lengthy belch of rain. I took cover in a café on the corner which had a Cuban theme. There were other shivering, dripping creatures there and we stared out at the street waiting for a lull in the deluge. I took a seat at the back and began rolling cigarettes. The seat was an old leather couch that was torn and surely full of lost coins. I fell deeply into it, much more than I expected to, as if its cushions were but a mirage and, like Alice's rabbit hole, the bottom was indeed much deeper than it appeared. The rain continued. From this vantage point, I was forced to look up. I spied their spare bottles of liquor at the back of the bar: the shelf had a mere support crosspiece behind it. I idly fingered the gaps in the

chair for coins or perhaps a lucky note. Those bottles could slip out of there and nobody would notice. I brought my coffee to my lips and took a furtive sip.

My fellow customers were all staring out of the bay windows at the front. Some were taking videos of the monsoon as it raced along the street. The barista leaned forwards on the bar taking in the show as well. Nobody was paying me the slightest bit of attention as I reposed and continued plotting the crime of the century.

Without any pause or hesitation, I stood up, reached my tall frame forwards and teased a bottle of Smirnoff Blue backwards off the shelf. If it tinked off another bottle it didn't matter as no one would hear it under the noise of the rain. The skinny base of the bottle fit snugly into my right jeans pocket and I tucked its neck under my jacket. *Yes*, I was pleased to see you! Limping innocently, I walked out of the side door and into the storm.

Striding purposefully east along Oxford Street I turned quickly into South Dowling and my pace began to ease. The rain warmly kissed against my cheeks, dripping from my chin onto my chest. I was excited, ready to enjoy my bounty. It was high time to get back to the Captain Cook and shut the door. It wouldn't take me long.

\*

The world was dark when I came to. My mouth was dry and my head pained. So did my neck, jaw, chin, shoulders, spine, hips, kneecaps, all the way down to my feet which were cold, my ankles sore. I felt as if my body had been hit by a train and a desperate need to escape this all-encompassing pain. On the mattress beside me lay the vodka bottle – yes there it was, lying on its side with the top off. There was still *some* liquid in it, below where the neck would have let it dribble out. I grasped the bottle and guided it towards my face. A fire lit my throat as I poured the leftovers. I coughed and choked but held it down. My innards made some insubordinate sounds, but they were quelled by my determination. Perseverance and focus is key to achieving any goal. I held my jaws together and sucked down the bile that threatened to rise. The rebellion subsided and I swigged back another last pearl of the Smirnoff Blue 50%. I started to feel better, my hands would be able to function now, I thought. An empty longneck bottle was close to hand so I picked it up and urinated in it. It was still wet outside, so I tipped the contents onto the roof afterwards.

I looked the room up and down. The folded wiring of the bunk above me, tied into little squares supporting its mattress. My bags and clothes rested upon the top bunk and I never went up there. These things had sat in lethargy since the day I had crash landed. There was a balsa-wood cabinet, white plastic around it where I had piled papers, receipts, leaflets, old

rolling paper sleeves, flecks of tobacco, various detritus from a life. Anything of import was placed there for filing at a more opportune time. Not now, of course. I was busy trying to disappear, turning over to find the magic side of my body that would allow me to finally pass out, which I did after much tossing around.

When I opened my eyes, it felt as if the skin was being stretched beneath them. My head burst with the normal scramble of terrible thoughts; *what must they think of me? What had I become? How did I get here? How was I going to show those people?* I hadn't a clue who *those people* actually were. I could not say. But I'd show 'em, I'd show 'em good. I looked at my watch, it was 3.30am. Too early for anything. Too late to make any goddam difference. I got up and smoked a cigarette on the balcony as some cars drove past. I doubted anybody could see me in the shadow, which was fine as I did not want to be seen.

Some hours passed like this, where I would hover between the bed and the balcony, closing my eyes and opening them. My head was rushing around in circles of its own choosing, running from one paranoia to the next. It was a tornado of thought, a wild tempest destroying all in its wake. This was why I needed the shelter of being numb, the delirious relief that drugs and alcohol gave, the euphoria, the calm – I would do anything for it.

To get away from this violent mind which drove me; that was all I wanted.

Light appeared on the horizon, the gentle glow of a new day in hell. I was running low on tobacco and needed more. Hitting the street again, I made sure to stick to the alleyways. I did not want to encounter other humans and have to justify my existence to them.

We all put on our outfits, a big game of dress-up for the show of others. People label their activities by what they wear and the places they walk. This is me walking the dog; this shirt and power strut indicate I am going to work; my tracksuit pants and flustered look show I am buying something my wife told me to get; here I am hunting a rhino – you can tell by the hat. My costume was simple. It said, *stay away, I no longer participate.*

I could see another shadowed figure walking in my direction in the alleyway. He was taller than me and had his hood pulled up around his face. I kept my head down and made for the right-hand side of the path, leaving plenty of space to go round each other. As we came closer, he began to lean in on his left. His hand went into his right-hand pocket, searching for something that it seemed to cup around.

I looked at his face, snarling angry, blood around the right eye.

“Scott?”

There was a pause as he looked at me.

“Ah, maybe.”

“It’s Jack mate. How you going?”

He loosened the hand in his pocket, pulled it out and lifted his hood above the right eye.

“Some cunt smashed me mate, I think my eye-socket is fucked. It’s fucked.”

I saw his eye and the cuts on his knuckles. He was not in tip-top shape.

“Mate, have you got any smokes?”

I handed him a big pinch of tobacco and some rolling paper.

“Thanks mate.”

“My pleasure.”

He lit his smoke and kept walking. He knew where he was going and it wasn’t to the hospital. I knew for damn sure that fixing his eye was a problem he wasn’t interested in solving, not yet anyway. I watched as he disappeared, a slight limp on him but still a dominant stride, a way of holding his cigarette that kept his fist half-clenched, and his eyes constantly on the prowl for whatever treasure the street would reveal to him that morning. I never saw him again.

\*

“Foundation House.” The voice rose at the end of the greeting.

“I need to come in, Shayla gave me your number.”

“I know Shayla. How is she doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“What is your name?”

“My name is Jack Gallagher.”

“We haven’t got any beds right now Jack. Call back on Thursday.”

\*

“Foundation House.”

“I called the other day, my name is Jack Gallagher. I was wondering if any beds had come up.”

“That’s right Jack. I asked you to call back on Thursday.”

“What day is it?”

“It is Tuesday.”

“Okay, speak to you then.”

\*

“Foundation House.”

“Hi, I have been calling...”

“Jack Gallagher?”

“Yes.”

“We know you’ve been calling every day.”

“I know, I figured...”

“Look, it is only Wednesday, but a couple of blokes left last night unexpectedly. You can come in tomorrow morning at 9am. But you’ll have to pass a UT to get your bed.”

“A UT?”

“Urine test.”

“That is fantastic. Thank you.”

“9am.”

15.

There is an old fire station in Rozelle at the end of Wharf Road where it turns off Balmain Road and heads towards the water. It comes at the end of a section of green park and the tarmac at the top has a few holes in it and could do with a touch up but the council never seems to get around to it. Wharf Road moves steadily downwards.

I turned into the street and descended with my backpack slung over my shoulder. It was the same bag which I had arrived in the city with nine years before. The same backpack that I'd scooped up from Kara's floor and salvaged from the old Labour Club and that had survived with me through many adventures and close scrapes since then. It contained a few old rags for clothes and little else. All of it could feasibly have been thrown away but I clung to them anyway because they were the only things I had.

My skin was slightly toasted by the morning sun but the strong breeze coming off the bay kept me cool. The green cloth of the park and the gentle paper bark trees looked on as I made the steady march down. My instructions were to arrive by 9am for intake, although I was a little bit early. I didn't exactly have much else to do that day. On my right, I passed an abandoned building and, on the left, there were some hedges and a little path. I continued to the second left and turned in. At the end, I met the back garden of Foundation House. There was a little stairwell with a white railing leading up to the door. I knocked on it. No answer. I knocked again. Nothing.

Looking around the back garden, I could see out to where the grass finished and became a yard of concrete with a couple of old pub garden style tables. To the right, there was some brush before the bank in the water. Nobody was home. Had I come to the right place? Surely there'd be somebody waiting for me. Perhaps not a huge welcoming committee with baskets of fruit or gifts from the local artisans, but a receptionist or somebody like that.

But nope.

I decided to try my luck and walked inside. There was a sunroom to the left with some comfortable-looking chairs but no people. No signs. I arrived at a door with a little window at the top, revealing another door on the next side. I walked through the first one and knocked again. Quite loudly I thought. Still nothing.

At this point I was ready to walk out and go to the pub. How dare these people say they would admit me and then not have the decency to be here at the allotted time? Didn't they know who I was? I could just disappear and that would be it.

Except I knew that it wouldn't prove anything to anybody. This is often the case when petulance tries to teach a lesson.

Coming to this place was my last chance and I knew it. Every time I tried to get my life on track had ended in utter shambles. People who seemed to know what they were talking about said this was my last shot and in my gut I knew this was the case. In truth, I think I was scared. How the hell was I going to get through this? What would life be like on the other side of it?

But I had more pressing worries. There was a minimum five-day clean time to get in. I had been clean for about two days. Five days would have been a miracle for me at that point. I had only once managed a week and that was just by virtue of being utterly broke. It was Thursday morning and I had drunk up until Tuesday evening. My last drink had been a bottle of beer I had stolen from the communal fridge at the Captain Cook Hotel, probably belonging to the psycho chef. In fact, it had occurred to me that maybe this beer would be my last as I drank it. In private, I raised a toast to myself and downed the contents, though it didn't change the taste nor the outcome. I was mainly worried about the chef finding out it was me who kept robbing his beers.

Either way, 36 hours is a lot less than five days and I was afraid that somebody might figure that out.

At that point, people started to come out into the garden and light cigarettes. I walked in through the series of doors again and saw a small group queuing up at a window that faced into a back office.

I walked up to the back of the queue and said, "Hey, I'm checking in today."

"Yeah, just wait there mate we'll get to you."

Other people looked around at me. My feeling was they weren't too impressed.

16.

Dean smoked White Ox and that meant he had spent a bit of time in jail. Inhaling a puff of White Ox is an experience similar to swallowing an angry buzzsaw in the middle of buzzsaw mating season. He would roll them tight and thick and smoke them without a muscle on his face moving.

“G’day,” he snarled as I constructed my Champion tobacco cigarette. I was a touch embarrassed. The gaudy yellow and red of the pouch seemed crass and effeminate in comparison.

“G’day,” I replied, in my toughest jail voice.

Below his rounded shoulders, there was a lack of any angle to his dense body. Physically, he was a balled fist. I wondered if a baseball bat might snap if one were to be used as a weapon against him though, paradoxically, I could see that this was a broken man. His face betrayed a tiredness and a sadness. He had lost his battle, whatever that battle was.

“First time in?” I asked.

He exhaled slowly. “For a while,” he replied.

We were sitting outside where I had returned while I waited. Dean was the first out and it seemed we were going ahead with a brief get-to-know-you conversation. The kind which helps box someone into an understandable category that will help you judge them.

“Where are you from?”

“Mount Druitt mostly, but I been running all over the place the past few weeks. Cabramatta, the Cross. You?”

“Surry Hills,” I said. “What’s your poison?”

“Benzos lately. They’ve fucked me. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The others started coming over then, from wherever they were. And what a ragtag bunch. There were missing teeth, piercings where the sun didn’t shine, neck tattoos, nose tattoos, missing fingers, limbs, scars, scowls, jowls, porcelain white skin, grey skin, green, tattered clothes, holes in shoes, t-shirts from the Victorian era. And attached to every yellowed hand was a cigarette and a mild tremor. Truly, I was home.

Then, from amongst the brush of my new compadres emerged a man, not unlike Jim Robinson from *Neighbours* in the late 80s and early 90s, with clean teeth and the glow of the living beaming out from his healthy cheeks.

“You’re the new bloke,” he said to me not as a question, more as if it were a solid delivery from a bowler who spent eight hours a day in the nets and who knew how to send the ball true and straight.

“Yup,” I replied.

“Come with me.”

So I did.

He led me through the doors again and I noticed the floor this time, a brown and undistinguished carpet, those nondescript cubes of fabric you find in places where people don't care about the floor too much. Through the second door there was a large room with an enormous dining table fit for at least thirty people and an open space on the right.

“Wait here,” he commanded.

Returning with a small tub, he led me to the bathroom and invited me to urinate into it. This was a moment I had been dreading. Since arriving, all I could think of was that I had to have five days clean. But with just two days to my name, the idea of me making it to five without a drink or a smoke was simply looney tunes. If you had locked me in an iron coffin, sealed it with a weld, tied it shut with a diamond encrusted chain, and sailed out to the Mariana Trench, then thrown the coffin over the sides attached to heavy weights – even if you had done all that – by the time you arrived back to shore you would have found me at the bar knee deep in my second; such was the capacity of my thirst. Nothing would have stopped me from drinking a beer if I needed a beer. And I needed those goddam beers.

The only reason I had in fact managed to stay clean for as long as I had was down to sheer destitution. I had no money left and I was too sick to go and steal anything. My credit card was maxed out to the final percentile of its capacity. If there was money in any of my bank accounts it would have amounted to less than five cents in total.

The previous week I had stolen vodka on two occasions in a less than classy fashion. What else could I do with only sixteen bucks to my name? I guess I could buy a box of wine and that might get me some distance along the way I needed. Or I could play sensible and buy some tobacco, which would last almost four days.

After some sweaty, head-pulsing deliberation, I chose to buy the tobacco. But let me tell you, it was a fucking long day.

17.

“Drop your bag in there, you’ve got a big day ahead of you.”

We both looked at the liquid I had produced. What mysteries did that dark orange fluid contain? It felt like I were having my shoes stared at by a nightclub doorman, and my reaction was the same. I stayed cool, affected an air of not giving a shit and pretended I was bored by the process.

He ignored me with the expertise of a French waiter.

A moment passed.

“Yeah, you can come in with that,” he sighed. I couldn’t believe it and almost asked the guy to repeat himself. Despite only having roughly two days without alcohol, somehow the fates were smiling fondly on me. Call it a miracle. Call it human fucking error. Whatever it was, it was the green light I had waited for. From yellow to green, time to move through the gears.

I walked back towards the area with the table and awaited instruction. My fellow travellers were all there, milling around, jittering, grimacing, angry faces looking me up and down. I don’t mind saying I felt nervous. There was nothing to hand to numb my feelings, nothing to take the edge off. And boy were the feelings there. This was a nightmare – a pungent mix of being naked in the supermarket, the first day of school, and meeting your in-laws. It felt as if a layer of skin had been stripped clean off, leaving me raw and exposed.

“That’s my chair cunt.”

This was about the level of warm greeting I was expecting. The table was enormous and there were about ten people in the room with more than thirty chairs in all.

I stared at the bloke. He was bald and about five foot nine, his body a triangle from the peak of his scalp down; Jabba the Hutt with a gym membership. The corners of his lips pointed south-south-east and south-south-west. The elegant calligraphy of the tattoo on his neck read *Sonja*. He stood over me and I looked him in the eye, saying nothing. The rest of the room watched in silent anticipation, a teaspoon clinking the side of a mug as it stirred.

Rick, the Jim Robinson lookalike, came in and said:

“Right, time for group, come through.”

Jabba the bodybuilder smiled and exhaled sharply through his nostrils. His head rolled back a half-inch, a hint of a nod. We watched each other’s eyes as you might watch a car coming to stop as you crossed the road. Then we walked into the room with the others.

My last few days at the Cook had been kind of blurry. I had gone out to get tobacco and booze a few times but the rest of the time I was just turning over on the mattress. I had called the landlord and told him I was going. Every day at around 3pm someone banged on the door.

“Where’s the rent Jack?”

“We know you’re in there.”

I had kept quiet at those times and only tip-toed down to the showers at night or early in the morning. It was not an ideal scenario. Everything in that room I had put in bin bags from under the sink and chucked in the wheelie bins as I left that morning. To say ‘*I wouldn’t be welcome back there*’ would be an understatement; a bit like saying, the British made policy errors in Ireland, or Die Hard 4 was a bit of a letdown. If it weren’t the landlord banging down the door, that big old chef would have come circling to get his beers back. I blew out the match on another bridge burnt.

In other words, I had to make this new place work.

So Jabba the Chair was my new challenge. Just my luck. Why was I always interacting with the violent, abusive, and criminally insane? Why couldn’t I be in a minor stramash with a more agreeable member of the community? It was always problem-solving for psychos in my world and it seemed a touch unfair.

And another thing. What the hell was going on here?

The room was light. From the first metre up on two sides, it was almost all windows, and the grey walls were punctuated with a few basic posters. The usual stuff.

**This Poster is here to satisfy our health and safety requirements.**

Please read and ignore this information, so, if shit goes down, the management of this establishment will not be legally accountable for whatever shit actually does go down. In fact, you, as reader of this notice, are now legally required to take the burden of whatever shit goes down, as a result of reading this notice. Consider yourself warned and try to avoid doing whatever shit would cause damage.

There was also a grid of smiley faces (that is what we called them in the era prior to emojis, despite the fact not all of them were smiling), underneath which were labels such as, *Happy*, *Sad*, *Angry*. An instruction manual for human emotion. I couldn’t help but think this was thirty years too late.

I sat next to Dean, who looked tougher than the others physically, but in more pain than anyone I had seen in my life. There were six men and four women. In general, the men looked grey, green-tattooed, and dressed as if they had slept in clothes they found in the charity basket outside a downtown gym. The girls looked like spray painted and wilted flowers, rigid and in decline, dead underneath.

“Robbo’s grad today. That’s next.”

“On ya mate.”

“Nice one Rob.”

“Big fella!”

A shatter of light applause broke through the room. Jabba, who it seemed was called Robbo, grinned like a shark with some metal fillings in his mouth.

Most of my life I kept secrets. There were always things I didn’t want others to know. I feared their judgement and I carried guilt and shame around like two heavy shopping bags full of junk I shouldn’t have bought. What secrets would I keep here? What would be the point? That I was scared? That this was my last chance? That I wasn’t as prone to physical violence as the people around me? That I just wanted the bullshit to stop? I wanted the negative consequences to not stack up. I wanted to feel good like others seemed to feel good – you know, normal people. I wanted to appreciate life and try not to block it out. Instead, I had the white heat of agony in my centre. The tiny point at the centre of the universe before the big bang, infinitely dense and under significant pressure, was no comparison for the excruciating throb of self-loathing I held in my belly. It dragged my shoulders forward, stooped my neck. I would do anything to cease that anguish which had always been there. This was why I had wiped out two decades. This feeling I could not face.

Robbo kept smiling and nodding as praise wafted towards him from various parts of the room. I breathed in and let out a loud sigh.

“You okay Jack.”

The room looked at me, a crowded silence.

“A bit tired. What’s next?”

“Just stay awake and follow along for now. You have to do all the groups obligatory, there is no sleeping in the day.”

Rules. My favourite.

People started passing around a card and signing things in it. Dave brought out a t-shirt and handed it to Robbo. Everybody clapped. It seemed we were doing the Foundu version of an Oscars ceremony. I clapped and played along as best I could. My mind wasn’t really in the room though. I was looking at the chairs and trying to think of how I could use one as a weapon

if he came at me afterwards. Right hand on the back of the chair and left hand on the seat, then I could lift it and the legs would attack while the base acted as a shield. A chair is an effective weapon if used properly. It was true that my life of drinking lager and flirting with cocktail waitresses had not prepared me well for the nuances of hand-to-hand combat, but confidence was important. If shit were in fact to go down, then I would be ready.

Robbo was escorted by all of us into the car park, where a girlfriend was waiting for him. She looked like she had seen it all, a smile that hid a million recorded transgressions. The front of her body protruded and then descended flatly, formerly impressive breasts rested lazily on a belly not hidden by her dark green t-shirt. Her nipples poked through the cotton like Second World War gun turrets, long since abandoned from active duty. There was a tattoo on her left arm, some kind of crescent. Robbo leaned in for a hungry kiss and they slurped each other's faces before getting in her car and speeding off. The rest of us went back inside and sat down.

Twenty-eight more days of this shit.

\*

My first afternoon. I felt as if I were on a cattle train being shunted between rooms. One set of papers to sign and then another. My mind was not accustomed to a full day of being awake and lucid and filling in forms. It felt like school again. Like work again. *I wonder how those kids are getting on?* Some information came at me with great detail, and some just washed over.

"No sleeping in the day."

"Shave every morning."

"But I've got an ingrowing hair on my chin."

"Shave around it."

These little things were usually enough to make me walk out. But walking out was not an option anymore. This was the last house on the block. Every time we were shunted into a room I – like the others I guess – tried to respond in what I thought was the right way to get through. Usually there were questions, a check in for how we were. Sometimes there was a paper to write on. The breaks every 90 minutes were when I could finally smoke. We all smoked. This was when I could talk to people. In some ways this was how I had always related to others, on smoke breaks at work or between class. Waiting for something to happen. Giving someone a light, sharing a filter, bumming a paper. Talking about the various merits of tobacco brands and paraphernalia.

"I prefer the super-slims."

“Always bits of bark in a Drum pouch, I’m over it.”

These things were important. There were also different levels of cough of course. The quickfire, triple bark; the deep gurgled spleen-spitter; the wheezing, orgasmic, long-groaner. The coughing cacophony was at its most musical in the mornings, but our orchestra was always tuning, ready for a full burst.

\*

One day became two, which then slouched into a third. I had not had anything to drink for five days. When was the last time that had happened? A decade ago? When triceratops roamed the earth?

I would wake up early and suddenly be slapped in the face by life, the flooding back. Before I opened my eyes, I would still feel the panic and fear leftover from so many painful mornings. Having to face what had happened the night before, what damage would I need to heal? Who had I phoned, what had I said? What had I done? Who had I injured?

My heart was racing before an eyelid cracked open into the day. But it would just be me. Staring at the grey roof, the gentle glow of a Sydney morning creeping across the wall, coming to get me in my final retreat. A roommate snored on the other side of the room. Nothing new.

I would creep out and smoke alone on these mornings, before most of the others were up. It was honestly a new world. A big fella would be there when I went out for these smokes. Our G.I. Joe, a classically handsome guy in his forties, with straight edges on every part of his body. He had been a pro-footy player, but retirement in his thirties had been less exciting than having his name screamed by 30,000 people at a time.

“The pokies and the coke gave me that buzz, but...”

“Yep.” Yep indeed.

He was walking around doing stretches.

“Gotta keep in shape. This is the time to get it all on track.” I doubt he could have sat still if he was paid to.

I found walking from bed to the toilet, to the yard for a smoke, was progress enough for that first week.

“Fucking shouldn’t be doing this,” he would tell me as he lit a cigarette.

“I remember saying the same thing myself as I was chopping up lines of coke.”

We both chuckled.

“You definitely shouldn’t be doing *that*.”

Joe spoke in every group about getting back with his wife and seeing the kids.

“This second ‘hab is the trick.”

The AVO was a problem of course.

“I don’t even remember it.”

Aggravated Violence Order, like a restraining order. Most people had them, it was almost a qualifying certificate. My qualifiers were a bit different though.

Can’t get out of bed without drinking? Check.

Not really a bed, just a mattress? Check.

No money, no home, and basically unemployable? Check. Check. Check.

There is more than one path to the top. There are even more to the bottom.

What is the bottom anyway? The place where you are no longer socially acceptable? I don’t think I had ever quite been there. Perhaps it is the place where you run out of road. Certainly, I was out of ideas. The consequences of my actions had stopped my ability to keep the show rolling along, the money coming in, and the obstacles out of the way. I was on my knees, willing to do whatever it took, having tried to control the raging and untameable nature of my drives. Another question was ‘why?’ Why keep going? Everything was broken. My future and my past were shambolic. What did I have to live for?

For what reason I don’t know. Maybe a feeling that I wasn’t finished. That I still had things to do. I just knew that if I kept following the path I was going the best future I could hope for was sleeping in parks and running off with stolen vodka bottles. It didn’t appeal to the higher nature of my ambitions. My ego wanted more than that. So I needed ideas from the outside. This was the only place dishing them out. The last place.

18.

At night, I would see ghosts. My dreams were vivid conversations with people I hadn't seen for years.

"How are you doing?" she would say, flick her blonde hair back and look up at me. Her hooped silver earrings giving her that Spanish sassiness.

"I am dying." I replied.

"Not yet, you're at war but you fight."

"What's it like?"

"You don't need to know yet."

"Why did you go? Why you?"

"You don't need to know yet."

There was compassion in her eyes. We were back in the bar with the oak surfaces again. I was younger and there was still glow in my cheeks, my fingers not yet yellow.

I could see her laughing, a smile that warmed a room, that melted fear. I looked again and she was at the doorway of the room where I was sleeping, walking slowly away. I got out of bed, the grey walls quivering around me, and walked to the doorway, looked down the corridor to see her again. I turned and looked both ways but nothing. She was gone.

\*

Day six.

It was quiet when I opened my eyes for the day.

My body followed its desire for nicotine and led me along the hall and out the back door.

"Shit the bed again?" said Joe as I came out for my cigarette.

"Something like that."

As I was rolling, a lorikeet flew down and landed on the table in front of me. Nodding backward and forward as it stalked along the wood. It didn't seem to have a clear plan where it was going but it stalked forwards anyway, with its blue head, green neck, and fuzzy yellow-orange chest.

"Morning," I said.

It stalked towards me.

"What?" said Joe, as he tuned a hamstring, puzzled at my interaction with the creature.

The bird and I looked at each other, a black pupil on a red-outlined eye. We passed a message between us, something primal, something men and birds have said to each other since the dawn of time.

The bird didn't seem so interested in the cigarette butts on the table and nibbled at a leaf. It seemed a sensible choice.

"Don't feed them," said Joe. "They get used to bread and it makes them weaker."

"How do you know this?"

"I killed two in my back yard last year. They came back every day for the bread and honey. I thought I was helping them but it made them weak. Cat attacked them."

"So the cat killed them?"

"I shouldn't have given them the bread."

The bird flew off as quickly as it had arrived. Unworried by my murderous compadre and his misplaced intentions. I was slightly shocked he had a cat. A bit like Rambo having a pet budgerigar.

We went in for breakfast. I piled cereal on my plate and ate it quickly, five Weetbix and milk. I was glad to have the food and thankful for its source. On the first day, one of the forms I signed was for the dole. Mother of mercy I had worked and paid tax for the last decade and I qualified for it. The cost of the establishment was taken directly out of the cheque and the rest landed in my bank. This came to around 40 dollars a week, which was just about enough for a large pouch of tobacco, some filters, and some papers. Food I would need to figure out on the go.

"Today we're going into Strathfield. Any of you need to do shopping, you've got two hours this afternoon."

Eyes and smiles began stirring around the room. An opportunity to hit the real world was upon us. I was not enthused. I did not want to be seen. In general, if anybody I knew had seen me in the last couple of years, they had crossed the road. Those are the kinds of experiences one could do without. Even worse, what would I say if I saw someone who'd want to speak?

"How are things?"

"Pretty good thanks. Got married last June and we just bought another investment property. And you?"

"Awesome thanks. I lost my job and have been slipping into petty crime in order to keep on the bottle. I haven't had a solid shit in at least 18 months."

I might not be invited to the next barbecue with that story.

“Still single if you have any available girlfriends though.”

At this point I would flash my yellow-brick road of a smile and stick out the fluffy tobacco tongue, maybe give them a complimentary spluttering cough.

In all honesty, get-to-know-you and how-you-going chit-chat was something I regarded as an encumbrance. A shallow sales pitch of interests, or recent events, largely replaced in the modern world by the personal shopfront of social media. I can't remember how many times I socialised with people only for the conversation to turn to the tiling in their bathroom, or negative gearing, or miles to the gallon. When this was what kept the world spinning, turning to a life of abject destitution didn't seem so bad. Billions of years of evolution had given me senses with which to taste, smell, and understand the world as a concept. I also sensed the void the world came from. The thing in itself, I called it *Oblivion*. Most of my fellow men were too obsessed with their creature comforts to confront this bare reality, distracting themselves to get through life, forgetting Oblivion just around the corner. I chose not to look away. At least there was heft in the way I tested my body's endurance, courage in my determination to get up every day and throw chemicals at it. The idea of dedicating my days to a spreadsheet and fitting in with the neighbours just didn't appeal.

“We'll pair up for the shopping. Stay out of trouble.”

Dean nodded at me. I nodded back.

\*

In Greek legend Jason set sail on the *Argo* in his quest to retrieve the golden fleece. He was specially watched over by the goddess Hera. In *Jaws*, Chief Brody and Matt Hooper joined up with the old fisherman Quint on his ship 'the Orca' to hunt and kill the great shark that had destroyed their season. We had a white minibus with plastic grey upholstery and a bloke called Craig driving it. We called it '*The Bus*'.

I found myself sitting next to Amber and we talked. Amber could have been lifted straight from Irish folklore. Her hair was aflame, curled, and ungovernable, sprouting out in all directions and cocking a snook at gravity. She was short and young, I would guess no more than 24, and had a cherubic attractiveness to her which I imagined helped her get what she wanted when she wanted it. So far, I knew two things about her; she was homeless and she had three kids.

“You're a bit superficial,” she told me delicately.

“No I am not.”

“I think you just want to be left alone but you're here now and we can't.”

“I don’t *know* what I want,” I didn’t want to discuss myself. “Where are the kids?”

“They’re with their dads but they’re coming back to me. Soon as I’m done here.”

“What was it? Booze?”

“Wine. Pills. S’all fucked.”

We took Parramatta Road towards Strathfield. The great vein of Sydney’s west, thick and purple, scabbed and fraying at the edges. We passed dozens of flaky awnings and empty shop fronts, massage parlours, boarded up windows, and so on. Craig was playing Bob Dylan on the radio: *they’re selling postcards of the hanging, painting the passports brown*. We passed Leichardt and I remembered a gelato I had bought there many years earlier on Norton Street. *The beauty parlour’s full of sailors, the circus is in town*.

“What are you getting today?” I asked.

“Some make up, maybe other things.”

I had six bucks on me and was ready to dive into the luxury of a takeaway coffee.

As we pulled up in the car park, Craig informed us we had two hours and we had to stay with our buddy. Meet back here at four o’clock he said. We nodded and slipped off into the vending arena like a group of wolves ambling towards a paddock of sheep.

The shopping centre is a curious place for down time. The concept is to compare and buy. I had never been immersed in the process and none of us had any money. If we had been flush with cash we would not have been in the institution we were in. This was not a spa for the wealthy, this was a holding pen for harm minimisation, a place where we would do less damage than if we roamed free. Yet now we roamed.

We got our coffee, mine a flat white and Dean (surprisingly) a cappuccino, and were on the fire exit smoking. That was the budget gone. I didn’t see the point in looking round a bunch of shops at things I couldn’t buy and didn’t need. Maybe a pair of shoes, but it’d be another week or two before I could rub together fifteen bucks to buy some. Tobacco and coffee came first. Priorities man.

“Deal was ‘hab or jail,” Dean told me. “I don’t wanna go back to jail.”

“What’s it like?”

“Whole thing runs on reactions. Don’t react to anything. It’s like you don’t exist in there. It feels like you don’t exist.”

I stayed quiet. My nights in the drunk tank were not a valid comparison and, frankly, I didn’t remember them anyway.

“I seen officers beat blokes unconscious and just leave ‘em. No medical, no nothing. They don’t exist.”

It was one of those autumn days where a slate of grey hangs over the sky and drips humidity. Neither rain nor sunshine, just the embrace of heat without release. My jeans were creased and my black t-shirt had become dark grey over time, its image of the Blues Brothers now just random flecks of white as the cultural reference, the indicator of my humour and taste in movies, had been washed away by a thousand spin cycles and thousands more hours of sweat and hustle.

“Wanna look at some shoes?”

“Sure.”

We went inside and eyed up the goods. Pumped up kicks with stripes and bounce and soles you could bet on to last. One fifty, two hundred bucks a pop. That was my living budget for the next two weeks and it only just covered smokes. Those shoes were not coming with me. After a while, we just sat on the bench by the escalators and watched the people go by. Hassled mothers with young children, teenagers smiling and posturing, awkward, aggressive, afraid. Security guards walking around, giving us one long look and then another. I watched the time tick down; we had spent \$3.75 each on coffee and that was it. Our lives were neither changed, nor enriched. We had learned nothing, gained nothing. I now knew the cost of things that I would never buy. We headed back to the bus.

It was quiet on the journey back. Craig was a little aggressive with his corners and we were shunted into the walls and windows as we turned back onto Balmain Road and headed for the lodge. The bus skidded on the gravel as the brakes cracked on the driveway. We slowly emerged as dusk began to creep over the horizon, walking and stumbling along the path back into the facility. I had two bucks and twenty-five cents left on me and I headed for the coke machine, \$1.50 a can. I threw them in and my finger slipped as I pressed the button, hitting it twice by accident.

Behold!

Two cans were ejected. By some fluke I found a cheat in the system and doubled my luck. I lived for this shit – the good fortune of it all made my day and the cold perspiration of the cans on my forehead were my prize. I began to strut, from the vending machine to the fridge where I hid the other can for later under some tin foil that was lingering at the back.

But with every rose, a thorn.

As we returned, Amber had been dragged into the office. Craig had the kind of face that could melt mercury and everybody was avoiding eye contact.

“What’s going on?” I said to the short, flame-haired girl.

“It’s... a bad thing,” she revealed.

“A bad thing?”

“Taking what I shouldn’t.”

“Taking?”

“Clothes. Lots of them.”

“She robbed half the fucking mall,” Brett chimed in, our resident crane driver. “Craig spent 45 minutes asking security to let her come back with us.”

The things you miss when you’re having fun.

Dean chuckled, and it was the first time I think I had seen him smile. The left corner of his lip curled open revealing some teeth, it might even have gone up a millimetre or two.

“Yeah, she’s a klepto,” said the older fella. I hadn’t caught his name yet, just the fact he looked a bit like Bela Lugosi, but without the generous good humour of Dracula.

“I think she had two shirts and an extra jacket on under her stuff. Bunch of jewellery in her pocket too.”

“We weren’t there long.”

The whole affair seemed to be delaying our timetable. I stayed put and started to roll cigarettes. I had a cigarette case I had bought from Paddy’s Markets for five bucks. It had stripes of brown and black on it with a silver rim and could hold up to thirty rollies, though I almost never had time to roll thirty before I was smoking the stock down. My method was refined, I would stretch out the paper and add a big pinch of tobacco, then add a filter at the end. Squeezing each end between my thumb and index finger, I would gently spool the tobacco into a tight cylinder before lifting it to my mouth and licking the edge to seal it. I got through one, then two, three...

“Can you stop that please?”

Four.

“You, tall boy with the smokes.”

I looked up. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously. It is distracting me.”

I thought about this for a second and gazed at my accuser. She was in her mid-forties and had short hair. Healthier looking than the rest of us, not aggressive, just a potential incendiary device of nervous energy.

“Sure. No problem,” I said.

It was better to leave it. I felt it was a bit ridiculous, but if the boat was going to rock anyway, I didn’t need to be the one doing the rocking.

Another member of staff walked out. A guy named Rich, wild-eyed and intense. He ushered us into the room. Amber scurried in first and sat down, butter melting in her mouth.

“So,” Rick looked us all over and his glare was such that it could physically rock a man. I sat up straight, all of us did, as his head searched the room, looking for confession, weakness, or some kind of crack to exploit.

“Nice time shoppin’ I see.”

“S’alrite.”

“Nice enough.”

“Yeah not bad eh.”

He breathed in through his nose and his shoulders raised a little.

“Amber has something she’d like to say. Amber,” he looked at her. Then all of us did.

Amber was looking at the floor and shrugged her shoulders. Slowly, she raised her eyes to face the room.

“So, I tried to take some clothes and I got caught. I shouldn’t have done it, it was stupid.” Nobody budged a muscle, but the fact no one cared too deeply was obvious.

“I am sorry and it won’t happen again,” she added, for perhaps the millionth time of her life.

The sun was going down and it was the time of day when it was almost too dark inside to continue without hitting the lights. The room sat in silence, gradually becoming greyer by the second. I looked at the sign with the different emotions on it – let me see, I wasn’t angry, I couldn’t say I was happy exactly. In fact, I felt calm. In this realm of nefarious activity I felt like I fit right in. After a lifetime of being the sore thumb, the egregious problem, it seemed like I might be in an environment where I could sail under the radar for a bit. Also, I had an extra can of coke. I started to think about dinner with a leaping sensation in my heart. Truly this was the land of plenty.

19.

A man would come once a week and cook all the meals in large metal pans. We made our way through them one pan at a time, moving it all from the back fridge to front fridge. The selection was three-fold; one was a species of noodle dish with sliced peppers, another a shepherd's pie, and the third was mac and cheese. These rotated constantly, although breakfast was always the cereals we had on hand, Weetabix and cornflakes, which I would mix together. This was our three squares a day and, frankly, it was the healthiest I had eaten in years, maybe ever.

During my first week in the house, I could feel myself putting on weight. My hands started shaking less too – although the constant intake of powdered coffee kept the afterburners firing a little. The exceptions to this routine were Sundays, where friends and relatives visited; and Wednesdays, where former residents would come back and we, the current crop, were tasked with cooking a big old barbecue for all. The rest of the time we had check-in groups, which I was still to comprehend, and worked our way through a cleaning rota that was written on the wall. It seemed my job was always to clean the toilets. I filled and refilled a mop bucket with soapy water and threw it over the cubicles and urinals again and again, lathering up the entire room before mopping it down and sending the brown foamy water into the drain. Afterwards, I would spray the toilets, lifting the seats and wiping them down with paper from a long blue roll. Cleaning was not a natural talent of mine, but at least this was a job I could do on my own. I could make a mess and then clear it up again. There was a rhythm to it I appreciated, despite the lack of romance.

Over time, I found my anguish was dissipating. I could get through the groups and the days and the nights, and I didn't feel awful anymore. In the past, I had always needed a drink, or a smoke, or a line, or some attention from a woman, or a win, or fucking something just to feel okay. As it turned out, I was at peace with three meals a day and a clear task. The rest just fell away. I realised, however, that this was just a moment in time. At any second, something could come along and demolish the calm.

We had a resident called Pete whose dad was a cop and, diligently, he had dedicated his life to breaking every law he could think of. Teenage rebellion had kicked in at some point and he had run with it, all the way into his forties. Pot, robbery, heroin, fraud, he had sampled the full buffet, until...

“Alcohol fucked me. It's the hardest one. Everybody does it. How do you avoid that?”

It was a question which had more than crossed my mind.

In a world where Jesus was turning water into wine, the ancient Greeks were quaffing goblets, and every life event was celebrated by raising a glass, the idea of avoiding lager in Surry Hills was beyond my conception.

“I don’t know how she stayed with me,” he said of his fiancée. I didn’t know how she got with him in the first place. The recipe of ingredients that made a man attractive was a mystery to me. No offence to Pete, but I just don’t know how some blokes do it; his pot belly, crimson cheeks, yellow t-shirt and wild ginger stubble must have splooshed it for somebody. This, of course, was an opinion borne of my own insecurities. How could I be single when he wasn’t? Maybe not only my insecurities, but my shallowness too. There it was – judgement again, that old chestnut. It was the emotional shortcut I could always rely on to make me feel a tiny bit better. I’d known for a while this was what I was doing, but actually going the extra length to act differently was a whole other story. It was not a quality I liked so I decided to try my best to stop judging people unfairly from that point. Pete, frankly, was a nice bloke, and he had lent me tobacco a couple of times. Who was I to judge? Who are any of us? Besides, he was funny.

“The time I borrowed my dad’s gun to knock off a convenience store – that was probably the worst.”

We collectively barked with laughter.

“Dead set?”

“Straight up mate. Old man was furious, almost broke my fucking nose when I gave it back.”

“Did he know what you did with it?”

“Still doesn’t. I only got eighty bucks any way.”

These were good war stories.

We were hanging out in the back yard on a Sunday morning, dappled sunlight creeping through the trees onto the concrete patio. We, the creatures, had queued up by the window after the breakfast to collect medication, and now we were outside smoking and drinking coffee to self-administer the next round. Pete held court, a natural raconteur.

Cars began pulling up on the gravel. Doors lightly opened and closed as the visiting relatives stepped towards us, optimistically looking for their family member and allowing themselves to dream of finding a new person: Buddha perhaps, or George Clooney. They were united by a brow-beaten weariness, underscored by faint hope. People would pair up with their inmate and retire to different corners of the garden for conversation and tears, hugs and promises, the flickering of new dawns.

As the others peeled off, Dean and I were left alone. He gave me that look, those eyes that couldn't help but express brokenness. For a second, I was struck by an image of us both in the carpark, the vehicles moving into position around us. I imagined myself pressing a dry bread roll into the gap of a slightly cracked car window and there, on the other side, was Dean only smaller. I made eyes through the glass, and caught him watching me clumsily gesticulating as the roll broke apart, crumbling as I tried to press the food through the cold surface. The more I tried, the more I was left with slapstick little pieces. There are times when comedy is all that matters.

"I guess we'll be waiting a little longer," he chuckled sadly.

I smiled at him for a second, then let my face fall blank. I offered to refill our coffees. He accepted and I made my way through the doors to the kitchen. As the kettle boiled, I scooped two heaped teaspoons of instant coffee from the great tin and splashed some milk in the bottom of our cups. I had overfilled the kettle and it took a little while to boil, slowly reaching its wobbly denouement and flicking off. I poured the water into the cups and stirred the black islands of undissolved granules into the mix.

As I walked out of the kitchen holding both cups, I saw directly in front of me, sitting at the large table, a beautiful girl dressed in a black t-shirt with dark brown hair tied up high behind her head. She wore circular, black-rimmed glasses and, despite the fact she was sitting, I could see that she was tall and slender. I could also tell that I had met her before.

I stood there like an idiot, staring, my mind firing into gear and trying to figure out where on earth we had encountered one another. She looked up at me and smiled, a warmth flashed across her and she stood, now with arms outstretched. I grinned back and started to edge forward. At which point, Pete emerged from behind my shoulder and barged past me.

"Babe."

They embraced. This must have been his fiancée. As I walked around them to the door with the coffee cups, I saw her glance at me over her shoulder, the look on her face was one of disgust.

I sat down next to Dean and began rolling my fifteenth cigarette of the day.

"Mate," I said, "I think I know Pete's fiancée."

"Oh yeah. How?"

"I think she works in a bar I got drunk in a week or so ago."

"Ah shit," he added sagely.

"I'm not sure if it's the one where I pissed on the floor or the one where I asked the barmaid to marry me."

Dean stared into the distance.

“Tricky.”

“I think I confessed my undying love for her between the seventh and eighth beers.”

“That’s about when it happens.”

We sat in silence together for a while, breathing in our cigarettes and letting the breeze drag the smoke through the branches of the trees and into the sky.

“Think it might be a problem.” I played with the sentence out loud and it could have been a question or a statement. Some sentences are always like that. ‘*Cigarette(?)*’, ‘*My round(?)*’, ‘*You’re upset with me(?)*’ In truth, it was never really a question, the answer was self-evident.

“Which bar was it?”

“I think Triple Ace. That one down near Central.”

“Twenty-four hours? Bunch o’ pokies?”

“That one.”

“Nah, gets that shit all the time. Probably doesn’t even remember.”

I was momentarily reassured by the thought that I was part of a larger social problem, drunken idiots doing stupid shit, rather than being a specifically abhorrent buffoon.

What a relief!

My mind danced with a million worries, like deranged suitors at a ball. I would do the foxtrot with the *I have debts* worry, then spin away and do some salsa with the *what is happening to my career* concern. Crowded around me were other willing dance partners. *Robbo* calling me a ‘cunt’ and wanting a two-step, *Pete’s fiancée* giving me the face and ready to breakdance. At least my classic troupe of *what did I do last night* and *who did I call* had hung up their dancing shoes for now. I started to consider that most of my worries were of my own making, unnecessary, and themselves a way to avoid enjoying life.

That evening we were in the crazy bus headed to a meeting.

“Pete, I know your fiancée.”

“I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

A beat, two.

“We all fuck up mate. She felt sorry for you.”

The bus drove on, streetlights flickering through the window, and I could see the half-crescent moon in the sky. Pink Floyd began strumming through the radio. *Wish you were here* is a great song to get fucked up to. It just begs for a string of joints, a tab of LSD. Right then, I

wanted to crawl up and die. Anger I could cope with, pity I detested. When this bus stopped, I decided to just ditch the lot of them and head to a pub. *Fuck it*. My mind had spoken.

The bus turned off the Western Highway and headed up Crystal Street. At the corner, we passed the Oxford Tavern, neon lights in the shape of dancing girls, the text to the side informing: LIVE SHOWS, ATM, TAB, POKIE MACHINES.

“Craig, I need to get out mate.”

“What for?”

“Toilet.”

“We’ll be there in five minutes, you can fuckin’ wait.”

“It’s serious.”

“You shit in this bus, we’ll all fuckin’ kill ya’.”

This was tough logic to argue with. I was jittery, my teeth were clenching, and my lips were grimacing, but I did not really need to visit the commode. Fuck people feeling sorry for me. Fuck that shit.

We ended our journey in a car park outside a community centre in Bankstown. I did not know this area at all – to me it may as well have been an enclave of Mongolia. Had there been men riding horses, shooting bow and arrow, long moustaches flowing in the wind, I would not have been in the least bit surprised. Instead, it was a bunch of fairly normal looking people clutching their car keys and shuffling into the building. Late autumn was a time when people could still get away with shorts and t-shirts, while others moved on to jeans, maybe hoodies. I had been wearing the same pair of torn blue jeans since the discovery of fire. *Shame over public appearance* asked if it could have this dance.

The hall had a fairly standard set up: an urn of hot water on a table surrounded by teas and coffees and chocolate biscuits. People lined up and helped themselves. It seemed ridiculous to me that a couple of chocolatey snacks could be a salve for a lifetime of self-abuse, but it worked remarkably well as a short-term solution. I was all about short-term solutions. I filled my pockets with cookies, grabbed a tea and sat down on a stackable wooden chair. It was 7pm, drink o’clock for most of the world. I stared out the window and began shovelling the cookies into my mouth and wondered. The window was dark of course, so all I could see was the reflection of the yellowed and bright room where we were sat. Even circumstance was making it hard to be moody – sometimes everything is against you.

I examined my options. I had no idea where I was or how to get anywhere. There were less than twenty bucks in my bank and only some small change in my pocket, so getting a cab was out of the question. My best bet was to sit through all this shit, get the bus home, and then sneak out and go to a bar and get as fucked up as was humanly possible.

On twenty bucks?

That wouldn't even cover the warm up. I would have inhaled it before taking a seat. This was going to take much more of a plan – and remember, it's good to set a goal.

Some guy at the front was going on about the usual shit, how he lost his house and then found it again. I never understood all these people wasting their money on houses. That's good drinking money right there. You could have bought 200,000 schooners of beer for that. Idiots the lot of them.

I finished the cookies and looked at the clock. It was ten past seven. At half time, I would go out for a cigarette, so I began to roll. The room was having an effect on me. Or the process of sitting in one place and being quiet. Rolling gave me something to do with my hands, for I was forever fidgety, but the tension in my shoulders and my jaw and my neck was loosening. It seemed like the stiffness had been a permanent fixture before, it gave me that edge. It wasn't until the shoulders dropped that I realised they had been tight for so long, beginning probably in the womb. Half an hour ago, I had been willing to set my world on fire, again. Now it felt as though that were less essential. The experience of having a bad feeling passed and I did not remember that happening before. It seemed to wash over me like a wave, splashing out when it had run its course. The programme usually running was: Feel Bad > Do Something > Feel Different.

Instead, this time I had waited and it had passed. There was use in this as I didn't have any consequences to mop up.

"I was in a psychosis, I didn't know what I was doing." Bela Lugosi was talking. It turned out he was a former psychiatric nurse and he knew all the terminology. A smart bloke, but not smart enough to outrun Oblivion. A doctor he had worked with scheduled him to a mental hospital. That must be some come down.

"It isn't about the reward centres of the brain," he seemed to cry less when he focussed on the technical stuff.

"It is a pain disorder. I was covering up pain."

He was drinking jugs of rum and coke and taking Xanax. That made sense to me, but I didn't have a full-on career to piss into the rose bush on the balcony.

"I don't think my wife will speak to me again. I was in a psychosis." He was crying again, weeping like a shot deer.

He had had something to lose and then lost it. That hadn't stopped him.

By the time we got back to the facility, Bela had calmed down a little. I had dug out my secret second cola from the fridge and sat with him at the big table. He talked both to me and through me, staring at something in the past and the future just beyond my shoulders.

“I’d stopped really. Eight years.”

“Clean?”

“Squeaky. But I was bored. The doctor gave me some painkillers. I knew what I was doing. By the time I got home I’d taken three and I stopped at the bottle-o to buy some rum.”

“Fast.”

“Very.”

His hair was cut short and spiky, like an old military man clinging to the style of his youth. His broad shoulders and solid frame were visible despite the humility of his trackie pants and grey t-shirt. I could see the acorn shape of his penis in the fabric of the cotton.

“I poured out that first jug of rum and coke with ice. Drank a glass and felt... nothing. It didn’t work. It didn’t take the edge off like it used to.”

I looked at him and he was deadly serious as he made eye-contact with me.

“But WHOOSH,” he moved his hands forward. “All the anxiety, that worry, that self-doubt. It came straight back. It flowed into me again.”

The look on his face as he said WHOOSH would stay with me for a long time.

New people would arrive. Not every day, but a couple of times a week.

“Your bed come up because two blokes had a fight,” Pete told me. “Psycho fella named Steve and a big Islander called Dave. Steve fucked everyone off, always playing games, people off each other. One day Dave has enough and socks ‘im in the ‘ed. Let me tell you, you don’t wanna get punched by Dave. Big bloke. Both kicked out.”

There I’d been on the outside, holding on by the skin of my fingernails, and I had only got in because of an even slenderer bit of fortune. Violence and serendipity were not comfortable bedfellows, but I took it.

Pete and I were walking through the doors to the garden. There was a new bloke out there, smoking a cigarette theatrically and sitting on one of the garden chairs at the bottom of the little stairs. He looked around with wild, searching eyes. Fresh salmon in the realm of the bears.

“G’day.”

“Alright.”

He stuck out his hand but didn’t get up.

We both shook it. Separately, of course.

“Coming in today?”

“Waiting for the bloke.”

“Jack.”

“Pete. What’s your poison.”

“Ice mostly. Call me Gav.”

*Are all tattoos green?* I thought to myself. Or maybe the equation was:

*tattoo ink + human skin x time = green*

Each design faded into a dark algae colour.

Either way, it was a reasonable observation that Gav was partial to a tattoo and had been for some time. Faces and fangs, script and dots reached out from his arms and neck, everywhere. Despite the antagonistic nature of this personal presentation, he had the face of an insecure boy who wanted approval. Eyes pleading for a pat on the back and a ‘well done’.

“Too far mate, too far.”

“Takes about four weeks for you guys to land,” said Pete with a weary wisdom.

“I got six days mate, I’m fine. Longest in years.”

Six days off ice looked like a mosh pit. There was more movement in that man’s neck muscles and scurrying eyes than in a den full of rats. He was remarkably chirpy though.

“Sunshine’s fuckin’ great mate.”

The doors opened again and a staff member had emerged; “Gavin?”

He stubbed out his cigarette in the ash tray like he was deleting a long sentence, letter by letter, trying to get back to a clean document through repeated taps of the backspace key. They walked inside and Pete and I continued with our own smoking.

“Will either of those guys be back Wednesday?” I asked Pete.

“Nah. Neither of them finished, I doubt it. Robbo maybe though.”

Great.

\*

The science of making a burger patty is not sacrosanct; everyone has their own style. I belonged to the ‘use as many ingredients as you can’ school of thought. My task was to make enough for an estimated thirty people, perhaps fifty patties. I emptied the breadcrumbs out of the sliced bread packages that were on hand and threw in a bunch of salt and pepper. I added Worcestershire sauce, chopped onion, some rosemary I found in the cupboard, sneaking in some grated cheese, as was my wont. I mixed it all in a great bowl with mounds and mounds of mincemeat, pulling out burger-sized fistfuls and slapped their arses before placing them on a great tray for transport to the barbecue outside. In a division of duties that may have been voluntary, a comment on sexist societal expectations, or merely chance, the girls prepared the potato salads and the other blokes buttered bread and set up a stack of plates and cutlery next to the window that faced the kitchen. Dean stabbed sausages with methodical precision. Maybe they had wronged him while he was inside.

Cars started to pull up and three or four guys would get out of each vehicle, happy and smiling. Every third or fourth car would bring a few girls, although people stayed ‘school-disco’ distant. There was prickly and nervous energy in the room. We residents were part of the service end, so I didn’t have to interact with people too much. I plated up burgers and transported them to the barbecue, then I milled around at the back and smoked with Dean. He was a man who knew how to keep quiet and suss out a situation. Me, I was more a talker, but I followed his lead and kept the vocal to a minimum.

No sign of my mate Robbo, meanwhile. The guests lined up like animals at a trough, jostling, shoulder to shoulder, piling their plates high, upending mustard and ketchup and squeezing it heartily onto their food. When they were all served, we were able to swoop in and pick up the scraps.

After we had eaten, everybody retired into a big hall and one of the counsellors led another session. I had still to decipher the meaning of these things. People checked in with day counts which was a common thing, although I, unfortunately, had to lie every time. When I first arrived, I was supposed to have five days clean, but with only 36 hours to my name I had been playing with the maths ever since.

“Honesty,” some guy said. “We are *all* fucked without it.”

I looked around the room. You could hardly imagine a more motley group of liars, cheats, thieves, and crims, except perhaps in the legal profession. They did it for the fun of winning though. At this level, people did what they needed to do to survive, and survival was clearly on the line. A life of heroin use and malnutrition does strange things to the shape of a body. Cheekbones stick out, teeth emancipate themselves and leave jawlines sucked in, sallow. Legs can be sickeningly thin and arms become grey and scarred. Eye-sockets were cavernous, zipping pins emerging from dark openings. Without honesty we were fucked – with it, maybe more so. Nonetheless, I started to feel uncomfortable about lying everyday on this topic. I needed to let it out.

“I just went to the RSL after my Don died,” said the incongruous little old lady among us.

“Lonely then. The machines would make me feel good, I loved it when I got the spins.” Of course, I knew what she was saying. She had short, curly hair, almost the staple retirement haircut for women of a certain generation. She should have been baking cookies I thought, not sat in a room with Australia’s Most Wasted.

Darkness fell like an empire in its decadent age, slowly and before you realised it was happening. The visitors made their way out to the cars and drove off. Nobody stuck around for too long afterwards except to smoke and we were left at peace with the washing up. There was an industrial dishwasher in there and my spell doing the pot-wash as a young man had prepared me well for the task of scraping plates, loading the machine and taking the piping hot crockery and cutlery out afterwards. It didn’t take us long to get through all of it and by the time I took the final garbage bags out, the visitors were all gone.

\*

“GO MANLY!”

“This is the year of the Eel mate,” Dean retorted with a crisp deadpan, a flash in his eyes. It was footy season and Manly were playing. The fellas gathered around the little TV and settled in to watch. Rugby league was never my game growing up, but I appreciated it as a

spectacle. The muscle-driven bursts of energy and the stop-start nature of the plays. They got knocked down, got up again, then knocked back, rising up each time. It was how I saw myself, a man you couldn't keep down, despite what felt like the efforts of the whole world against me at times. Just before half-time, I got up to use the loo, the long day of instant coffee and cans of coke meant regular visits. The girls' dormitory was on the left and I saw in the corner of my eye the old lady coming out of their corridor. I turned to her with a friendly smile and saw a deadly serious look in her eyes. She didn't respond to my smile and was preoccupied by something else. That was when I saw the enormous carving knife she held in her right hand, pointing forwards and upwards like an alert dog's tail. If I was going to piss myself, it was going to be now.

"Everything okay love?" I asked as I gently stepped to the side.

Her dressing gown was tight around her body and her soft slippers shuffled on her feet. Surely a cup of tea would be more appropriate in her grasp, I reflected.

"Where is he? The smug one." She asked, still not looking at me.

"He was laughing while I talked about my Don. Where is he?"

As she said this the door from outside burst open and in walked the jittering Gav, fresh from cigarette number 52 of the day.

"You were laughing at me," she edged forwards with the knife, fire in her eyes.

"Whad da fuck?!"

The noise of Gav's exclamation was sufficiently loud to disturb the office. The office door opened and the evening staff member, Wayne, stepped out, immediately spotting the bloodthirsty old biddy, and froze.

"Mary," he said. She didn't acknowledge him.

"Mary. MARY!"

"Yes," her eyes remained fixed on the wiggling, wobbling Gav.

"He was laughing at me."

"I fuckin did nothing mate. Tell her."

"Mary, I need you to give me the knife okay."

"It's just not polite. Young people today. If my Don was here."

"Mary," this time she looked at Wayne whose face was soft and kind.

"I need to take the knife Mary."

"Yes," she said and the point of the blade started to point downwards, her anger drooping with it. Wayne edged towards her.

"I am going to come and take the knife now Mary."

She started to face the floor. "Yes."

Wayne moved in close to her and gently grabbed the knife from her right hand. Gav was splatted against the wall, like an egg in a pan. I tried not to move or startle her. Wayne took the knife and pulled it away from her, his other arm wrapped around her shoulders with care. I took the knife from him, behind her back, as he began shepherding her towards the table.

“Jack, could you sit with Mary for a bit while I do some things,” he asked.

“My pleasure,” I said. Mary and I sat at the table for five minutes while Wayne retired to the office. His face was in the window looking at us the whole time. Mary stared at the floor, not wanting to talk, her head jutting left and right intermittently, as if there were troubling thoughts still spiking through her mind.

An ambulance came and took her away, and afterwards I went to bed.

I don't remember who won the football game.

21.

That month the price of cigarettes went up nation-wide. It pretty much doubled. Before, you could grab a packet of darts for less than ten bucks and get through the day. In the after times, that shot up to eighteen or nineteen. The idea, presumably, was that people would smoke less, the health of the nation would improve, and the government would get more tax dollars, etcetera. The result, as far as I could see, was desperate people became angrier and even more desperate. Almost overnight the whole world seemed to shift to rolling. It was not great timing for our little community to say the least. Having already made the switch to rollies, and having the yellow fingers to show for it, I was hurt less than most. It was a stressful era though. You could feel the fury vibrating off people as you walked past them, the wrath pulsing from several yards away. People were searching for something to focus their rage on, which sometimes became a problem. My existence at this time was a process of trying to avoid becoming a target.

During this phase, I could walk towards small groups of people and they would remain silent, not acknowledging or saying hello to me, responding coldly if at all. It was not overt, but I could feel something brewing. I assumed the nicotine rage would calm down in the collective mind after a while. In the meantime, I began talking to the staff, out of isolation more than anything else.

“They pay you well for this?” I asked Wayne one evening.

“I volunteer,” he replied.

Considering that his job description included talking crazy people away from carving knives, I was reasonably surprised. What else did he volunteer for? Bomb disposal? Cleaning the teeth of great white sharks?

“What the fuck do you do that for?”

He smiled at me, chuckling as if I had asked him the stupidest question in the world.

“It’s good for me.”

I got the feeling he wasn’t making it up. No wonder this place was so cheap – they don’t pay the staff and the night porter is a potential lunatic.

“I can’t believe they don’t pay you guys.”

“The day people get a salary, they’re professionals. I volunteer to help out. Trying to get my quals now, then I’ll be one of them. But I’d do it anyway.”

“Why?” I was genuinely perplexed.

“Because it reminds me.”

“Of what?”

“Of what it was like. I was in your boat too one time. Back in the day. I don’t wanna go back.”

It made sense.

“So, you’re one of us?” I asked.

“You could say that. But it’s all the same thing. Being human is a pain in the arse.”

“No shit.”

“People do whatever to take the edge off after work; food, alcohol, porn, you name it.”

This is certainly the case. For many a year, I justified depravity with the logic, *everyone’s doing it*. That line of thought doesn’t impress me now. The guards at Auschwitz were thinking the same thing. I had to challenge myself on my thinking.

“For us, the pain is felt greater. It’s like we’ve got more sensitive nervous systems, we reach further into the cosmos, and the ability to stop isn’t there. If I could *can on* without consequences, I’d probably still do it.”

Amen to that.

“In the end, only when I was face down in my front yard, the wife and kid screaming at me, the cops showing up, only when that happened, did I accept that *it was over*, or *I was over*.”

I heard stories like this all the time. People with things to lose were more easily convinced. Since moving countries, I never had much to fall back on and would surf along the stormy edges of life. If I crashed out from time to time, that was the price to pay.

“You need to have a definitive low moment. I did. You seem to know too much. You got one?”

I thought about this for a moment and there were too many horrific things to contemplate. But I had always kept going.

Every.

Single.

Time.

“So many mate. So many low moments. I couldn’t pick one. I’ve been dragging over rocks for years and it hasn’t persuaded me.”

He looked at me, I couldn’t decipher his gaze. Was it pity again? That familiar look of disgust?

“Without one of them, you probably won’t make it.” He said this without emotion.

I reflected again for a moment.

“Well,” I said, “I’m homeless, unemployed, and I’m talking to you.”

He looked at me for a second and nodded.

“That could be it,” he said.

“That could be it.”

Our eyes flicked to each other, then away again, as we settled into silence, that funny thing everything comes from, including our own thoughts.

“Know what I think?” I asked him.

“What’s that mate?”

“I think we’ve got all these fucking crazy programmes running that are like a kind of defence against it.”

“Makes sense...”

“You know what *it* is though mate?”

“What’s that?”

“Oblivion mate. Fucking Oblivion.”

He was quiet, as if waiting for me to finish my thought.

“You do all these things to avoid it; get married, get a job, mow the lawn, buy a Ferrari. On and on. You acquire a bundle of all these toys. You can’t cope without doing things, having things, but it’s all just counterfeit, tricks to avoid the truth, ensure you keep missing yourself. We’re always on the edge between nothing and the world we’ve built to avoid it. And that’s fucking interesting... don’t you think?”

He looked quietly away as if to break the connection, as if to say politely: *stop*. The poor sod – he wasn’t expecting to have to deal with this when he agreed to a conversation. Something was causing me to lash out, to speak with poison-tipped words, and I could tell if I kept this up it would mean trouble. We weren’t that different, after all. We had each journeyed into the abyss, with the gossamer-like hope of escape from drudgery and the ordinary responsible life. But where had this left us? Locked in. Life reduced to four walls, a set of rules, and a class of fellow sufferers. If I caught his eyes again, perhaps there would be fear there, just as there was when I opened my mouth to break the silence.

“Sorry mate.”

22.

Time was running out for me. I had eight days left in this joint and nowhere to go afterwards. There was no cash to put a deposit on a rental and I couldn't think of anybody I knew who didn't have the ashes of a burnt bridge smouldering at their feet. Options were not in long supply. So I talked to the staff at the facility.

"Where do people go after here?"

"You on the list for Houso?"

"I am not, but I reckon I could join it."

"Average wait is 18 months."

This was a slight spanner in the works of my 'solve all life problems in a month' strategy. I would need to find another way.

"There's the halfways."

"The what?"

"There's a couple of halfway houses, but you gotta work a programme. It can't just be you going there for cheap rent."

"Of course mate," I exclaimed, even if I did then think *'oh, cheap rent, that's convenient.'*

"Coupla blokes will be here on Wednesday. Dean is looking at it too."

If Dean was in, I would feel a lot better. My willpower alone was not something I could rely upon. The number of times I had sworn blind in the morning I would never drink again, only to be rolled up in the foetal position by lunchtime, trapped in the excruciating emotional agony that only a drink could take away... It was too many to count. It was clear I would need a running buddy, a brother in arms. Not to mention, a halfway house could be another hostile environment. Having a jail-hardened mate in tow would do no harm whatsoever.

Over the previous weeks, I had been kept dry by a combination of destitution, desperation, and busyness. But in terms of the stringency of the timetable, it was as much as I could bear. Being told what to do all day, every day, wore on me. I was reaching my limits. These halfway houses seemed to have looser programmes, more sporadic check-ins. That would suit me just fine.

I was to find out why later.

\*

We were sat in the garden and I was treating it like a job interview. That meant one of my cleaner t-shirts and no smoking. I was proud of this effort. Perhaps some kind of tribute would be bestowed upon me for my achievement, a medal of honour or a knighthood seemed apt.

“I’ve just started at this but we are moving it in a tighter direction. You’ve gotta be willing to tow the line.”

The man was an oak, perhaps as broad as he was tall – impressive looking, but not at all showy. He exuded a calm and a strength that is rare in men. What struck me more than anything else was the softness of his voice and the care with which he chose his words. His sheer size, for surely he was a specimen, went almost unnoticed because of the quiet and soft authority of his voice. His name was Jeremy and he meant what he said. Sometimes the wild buzzing of my mind, its endless dodgem race of thoughts and ideas and regrets and plans would slow to concentrate on something. It did so with this guy.

“But there’s always the other place, we both got beds right now. You talk to him and let me know.”

We were heading into May and the days were getting shorter. Lights would start to flick on at around four in the afternoon and mosquitoes would come cruising earlier and earlier. I was beginning to feel at home in that facility, the sound of the leaves blowing through the garden. I did not feel safe from myself.

It turned out I had other things to be afraid of anyway.

The second guy came and we spoke for a shorter time. Some conversations were not meant to be. I could feel my legs being bitten and my bowel had begun to sound its alarm call with increasing urgency. My teeth began to grind and my face made that pained fake smile where I pulled the corners of my lips back to try to grin, but it probably didn’t come across that way. Darkness was falling.

“For the first 12 weeks you’re in everything. There are no empty afternoons and you’ve got something every evening.”

I knew I wouldn’t make it. “Sounds good,” I lied.

“Think you’re up for it?”

“I know I am.” Jesus God, if I couldn’t get into the first place my creek and paddle situation was going to be dire. Obedience was not an area in which I was highly skilled.

We shook hands and I scratched my freshly bitten ankles, sore from the opportunistic early evening mossies. He returned to the facility office to speak to the staff there and I rushed down the corridor to the bathroom. My body opened and angels sang. I felt at one with the

world, the animals and nature, as I washed my hands smiling and let the physical relief tingle through.

“Why are you such a cunt?”

Suddenly, I looked up in the mirror and saw the ice man lingereth.

“Yeah, you’re a cunt.”

I just looked at him, for what else was there to do? Grabbing a paper towel from the head-height roll, I turned around and dried my hands.

“Right back atcha baby.”

Icy tensed up but didn’t move towards me. I could see how much he hated me. I could not tell you why exactly, but he veritably detested my existence.

“Robbo says g’day mate.”

“Send him my love,” I fired back.

Gav was in hoc with my mortal enemy – the same Robbo who’d taken an immediate disliking to me from day one – and he’d clearly just been given the latest on me. Plus, icy Gav here, I calculated was only a couple of weeks clean. The potential for him being uncontrollably violent was reasonable. He was obviously in the same schooner as myself in having no options for accommodation. Fisticuffs would have meant the door. The brain on ice is exceptional at focusing on the task at hand, obsessive, be that a pipe, a rock, a vagina or getting close to one of those things. The only price was a complete jettisoning of the ability to rationally weigh consequences. Gav didn’t throw a punch and I didn’t lose eye contact with him. Considering these circumstances, we were both doing remarkably well.

The tap dripped brashly into the sink.

His fists continued to clench and pulse. My hands were crispy dry.

“See you around.”

He waddled off and I followed him back down the corridor into the common area. He knew I was right behind him, only six or seven yards away. As we arrived, Jeremy came out of the office, clutching his car keys and looking ready to go. He approached me.

“We have the bed in Bourke Street if you want it,” he said.

“I do.” There it was. A light at the end of the tunnel.

\*

That valedictory weekend was not packed with incident. Gav and I managed to avoid each other, and Dean and I walked through the markets at Glebe on our excursion afternoon, smoking quietly and drinking in the sunlight.

Glebe market is in a school playground at the weekends and provided welcome distraction from the endless grey of the facility's indoors and its cleaning rota. Here there was coffee, antiques, t-shirts with artistic design, Ecuadorian beads, hand-crafted jewellery, home-made soaps, leather purses, and all manner of things I had little to no use for. They were, however, nice to pick up and look at. I experienced the paraphernalia of the world with new interest, taking time to feel the weight and texture of these things. In the past, I was only really interested in stuff for how it would affect my heart rate, or if it would send my emotional wave in a euphoric direction. That was beginning to seem less important. The combination of a cigarette, a coffee and some sunlight on the face was balm to most of my needs, and these things were in plentiful supply.

"You done halfway before?" I asked Dean.

"One time."

"What was it like?"

"Didn't last long. I broke my parole and went back to jail." He looked regretful for a moment or two.

"You gotta play the game in these places. It's not as bad as jail. But some of the rules are the same."

"For example."

"Don't dob," he said.

That seemed easy enough. Not giving a shit about what other people do was an area in which I scored highly, a life skill for the ages. *I see on your CV here Jack, it says you can clean toilets, piss off ice addicts and keep your mouth shut. Welcome aboard.*

A full week without incident was too good to be true, though.

\*

The silences had been getting louder for days. Fewer people made eye contact with me and I would often see Gav milling in the corner with a couple of his cronies. On my final morning, I went outside for a cigarette the same as usual, the low sun shooting through the trees, my delicious smoke wafting translucent through the light. This was the morning of my graduation. Everybody seemed to get a happy send off, the wishing of well, a blessing for their future. I had not had those group experiences at school or anywhere else and I was looking forward to this. At last, a group to which I belonged.

"Fucking Pommie cunt!" The crunch of gravel arriving with this greeting.

"I've fucking kept quiet, you haven't got to me."

One of his mates turned and pushed back against him.

“He’s not worth it mate. Fucking leave him.”

“I’ve fucking kept quiet.”

One of his other goons stepped forward who looked eager for a bit of biff.

The first mate kept pushing back.

“He’s not fucking worth it. Leave the cunt.”

“You haven’t even registered on my radar mate.”

They all stomped off together to the end of the garden and around the corner. It had all taken less than thirty seconds. My heart was beating hard, about to fly out of my ribs and I looked left to right. Nobody had seen anything, nothing had happened. I flicked my cigarette in a bush and went inside for a shower.

23.

Last night, I found myself dreaming again.

The first thing I remember is my overlong limbs sticking out from under a cramped desk. I am looking at a large whiteboard and there is a sentence scrawled in blue ink: although the letters blur and shake a little when I try to focus. There is a slight rustle from either side, from others around who are just out of sight. I am stuffed in my chair, a body too big for a space that won't have me, knees almost tipping the desk over. I squirm in place and my eyes narrow to a squint as I try and focus on the board.

“Jack Gallagher, what is the problem?”

The teacher at the front of the room addresses me with a stern tone. As she holds her gaze, I note the eyes of others, other children staring in my direction, boys and girls grinning, even a few chuckles as I look at each of them in turn. I can't think of what to say. Unlike the others, I am a grown man. Probably older than the teacher. Haven't I gone through all this before? Throughout the classroom there is a cold anti-septic smell.

As the teacher goes back to conducting her lesson, I feel a slight tap on the back of my head, the collision of a scrunched up ball of paper. The projectile lands at my feet. Even though I am crammed into my tiny, schoolboy's chair, I can easily reach down – could press the flat of my palm to ground if I wanted – and bring the paper to my desk.

With clumsy fingers I flatten out the paper across the desk and find a short message in what looks like crayon. At this, my eyes focus and I find I can make out the words. *How about it son? Time for a drink?*

There is a sharp intake of breath, swallowing the sound from the classroom. The teacher has me in her crosshairs again.

“Excuse me, Jack, but do you wish to be giving this lesson?”

\*

We stepped out of the car in Darlinghurst and a large metal gate closed behind us.

As we went into the back of what was formerly a terraced house and walked upstairs to a waiting area, I saw two large filing cabinets before me. Jeremy opened one to reveal shelves of bedding and a few boxes with piles of papers in them.

“You'll need one of these,” he said as he handed me a doona. “A couple of these and one of these,” two pillows and a sheet followed. Green was the colour, green like the trim of

the skirting board, like the murk of a canal, like the dismal tattooed arms of the men I'd left at Foundation House.

He stared at his watch. "Now is as good a time as any. Is that all your stuff?" he asked, nodding in the direction of my backpack.

"Yes." I replied.

We stepped out onto Bourke Street and started walking up the hill in the midday sun. The leaves of the paperbark trees fluttered on the kerb beside us, as Dean and I carried our packs and worldly possessions, him with the determined stride of someone who had other things to do.

I could still feel the adrenaline coursing through my veins from the morning. Icy Gav, that little shit, had ambushed me and I hadn't seen it coming. A snarky comment, followed by another. The fact that he had waited until I was leaving made it worse. At least I was out now and heading for the next stop. I found it hard to let go of this stuff though, always have.

\*

As we arrived at the house, the first thing I remember seeing was that the door had a number lock on it, like we were about to enter some secret military facility. The possibility that I would be trained as a ninja or as a ufologist appealed to me. Hand-to-hand combat, basic weapons skills, alien warfare, perhaps an exotic language: Tagalog, Mandarin, Persian.

"I'll need to change the code now because the other bloke only left last night," he said.

Walking into the house we were greeted by four men, all of them sporting tattoos on the neck and piercings big enough for a pony's nostril. The three in the front room were involved in some kind of heated discussion. The older guy in the background had a cigarette in his mouth and he nonchalantly pushed a mop through what was presumably the kitchen. They all turned and smiled – big, friendly, toothy smiles – when we walked in. Everyone except the older guy.

"Lou," said the nearest guy extending his hand.

"Lou's my 2IC," said Jeremy, "you can call him if you have any dramas and I'm not around."

"Welcome," Lou grinned again, holding eye contact, trying to suss me out.

The palest guy, who had the high cheekbones of a superhero, or a supermodel, was introduced as Graham, and the shorter guy with the widest stance was Al.

"You're in our gang, are ya?" Al asked.

"Accidents happen," I replied.

“All the time,” smirked Graham, before looking at Lou and adding, “I’m gonna head off and do that now mate. Working it.” He left through the front door, brushing past me and leaving a sense of mystery around what ‘it’ could be.

“Your ugly stepsister is in the kitchen cleaning up,” Al helpfully informed.

It turned out my stepsister was not the world’s best at mopping floors. It also turned out she was a sixty-year-old man called Vince.

“Get fucked Al,” were the faceless words from the back of the house.

We were going to be one big happy family. I could feel it.

“We start a group in ten minutes. Jack, you’re upstairs on this side and Dean, upstairs on the other.”

As we walked into the kitchen, this strange geography made sense. The door we had walked through was in fact the gateway to two terraced houses that had been knocked together. There were two sides, two staircases, and two ways of life. One side was for the whole community, three houses in all, and everyone was welcome to come and go. So, essentially, Dean and I found ourselves at the ground level reception area for a community centre of ne’er-do-wells. Jeremy looked at two sets of keys in his hand as if he expected them to talk to him, then briskly handed one to me and another to Dean.

I walked upstairs and dropped my bag on the bed. Now I had a double bed and a room to call my own. It had been a while. The door had a lock on it, there was a chair, and a large window to the street. There were thick green, nylon curtains over the window which blocked out all light. In honesty, this was a big step up from Cook Hotel which was more like lodging on the sticky bit attached to the floor of rock bottom. The new wildlife downstairs were a different quantity though, who knew what could be rustling in the bushes?

In all, there were 12 of us that morning, plus Jeremy and Lou. Four blokes in each of the three houses. As Dean was in the same place as me, I had only two new personalities in my immediate environment to deal with, Graham and Vince. Al was in one of the other houses and would appear less often.

We introduced ourselves to the rest of the crew and were shuffled aside for paperwork, signing papers that would allow the dole to take out our rent in advance (infinitely wise) and behaviour clauses for our rights to lodge there. Not so much a sword of Damocles, as a big axe for those on their knees. We would have sporadic and random urine tests and there would be something on most mornings to keep us in check. This was still a great deal more freedom than we had enjoyed in Rozelle. The luxury of free time for oneself, to do with what one wished, was about to make a welcome return. My only issue was trying to figure out exactly *what* it

was I liked to do other than getting fucked up. A true conundrum. I could read forever, I could get into the movie industry, or perhaps own a pet. Each option still felt like Everest compared with the thing I knew how to achieve: getting well and truly wasted. This issue seemed to present itself in proportion to the amount of time I spent practising the new programme, something I had decided to name the Blaze of Doom mainly because I wanted to avoid anything new age or clichéd. We were encouraged to sit there, feeling our feelings, good or bad, without judgement. For at least 6 minutes, I had been facing, up close and personal, the worst emotions inside me which was a fair effort.

As the other residents filtered out of our common house, Dean and Vince and I were left alone in the kitchen. Vince looked at us as if we had just backed a truck over his dog before defecating on it and sodomising his mother on a stage.

“See you cunts later.” These words seemed to emerge from out his back as he strode past us and out of the door. It seemed his typical communication style was to say something aggressive while walking away.

Dean, classically unruffled, as happy as a clam, informed me. “I’m gonna go and do a few things mate. See you back here later.”

“Sure,” I said. And then he left too.

I found myself sitting there. In silence. The choice of what to do next was mine and mine alone. This chilled me to the marrow. The multiple choice I had programmed for myself during the previous thirty years looked something like this *a) smoke b) drink c) what else is available? d) repeat options a b & c*. Then it came to me, there were other things one could do with the finite existence on our planet. I could also sleep.

Two hours later I was hungry, so I went up the hill to the supermarket on Bourke Street near Taylor Square. Over the years I had seen an apartment building turn into a building site into a bigger apartment building and then this food emporium open up beneath it. Thousands of people had arrived and done their jobs in destroying and rebuilding that corner of the earth. They had moved in and out of the area, raised their children in the nearby nursery and bought their coffees on the corner. I had spent the majority of those years nursing a Carlton Draught at either the Courthouse Hotel or Kinsellas, which were just a hop, skip, and a jump away. The new sterile environment around them had an impressively minimal effect on these bars which remained monuments to a stickier era. I walked past them both on my way to the shop. They whispered as I did so, like sirens beckoning me towards the rocks. As I passed Kinsellas, I heard the urgent *rrrrriinnnnng* of a gambling machine starting a feature. Some lucky punter was

about to get some spins. I turned to go inside and have a look. To see if it was a good win. Just curious.

*Maybe this wasn't a good idea. But I hadn't had a drink for a month. Surely one wouldn't hurt. After all, I deserved it. I had been GOOOOOD. I had sat through the Blaze of Doom, locked into the minute fibres of my emotional life, and even lived to tell the tale. Now I needed a reward. And there was only one way I knew how. I deserved this. How bad could it be?*

*Then another line of thought: They would know. Of course they would. And then I would be out on the street. Back to square one. I couldn't go on this cycle forever. But then, what's the point? How do you EVEN have fun without drinking?*

I started to feel sick in my stomach. I crouched down on the corner and held my belly, leaning against the bit of brick wall next to the bar on the corner with Campbell Street. I could feel my face crease up. I took my pouch of tobacco out and started to roll a smoke. My fingers were shaking. As I sucked in the first drag of smoke, I was sure that living like this was impossible. In the real world, I would need to walk past pubs and drinkers, all day, every day. It was a fucking gauntlet. The magic words jumped into my head. *Fuck it.*

*Fuck.*

*It.*

I pulled air in through my nose, drawing in bravery, and turned to my left, heading for the door to the bar.

*Fuck it.*

24.

Placing my palm on the handle I could hear something else amongst the rings and the thunks from the pokie machines. Was it laughing? Shouting? More like grunting, wheezing, gasping.

“Jack. Mate. Jack!”

I turned and saw walking towards me, a figure lit up like Times Square, energy beaming from his eyes. Dean. His board shorts twisted left and his arms spread wide. This man was not a hugger, not by nature, but he was happy to see me nonetheless.

“Mate. What the fuck. You’re just like me. I just had this chick. Mate. Shoulda seen her. Knew what she was doin’ let me tell ya.”

I smiled at him, which at that moment seemed the right thing to do. He was talking and smiling, running over his words, swaying a little.

“Beer’s good mate but they’ll smell it straight away. I got vodka in ‘ere.”

He pulled around his grey backpack and gave it a little love tap. He leaned in close to me. I could feel his breath as he spoke.

“Go careful bro. Don’t fuckin say anything. I’m fine.”

“Don’t worry mate. I’ve got your back.”

He nodded, looking at me. I could see that he trusted me and took me at my word. Men know these things about each other.

“I got something I gotta do,” he murmured, and walked off around the corner onto Oxford Street.

I stood there as dread began to crawl up my leg. This guy was a big reason I chose to come here. To this place. It struck me that he might not be the most reliable ex-con I could have put my faith in. There was undoubtedly a good bloke in there somewhere, but he was off to the races now, running around the track after that false rabbit which would never be caught. To run seemed like a good idea. I felt as if there were a tiger at my back licking its lips, an anaconda slithering along the pavement, circling between my legs, the call of hunting gorillas in the background, a roar in the distance. It seemed I would not get far on foot.

So I went to the supermarket and bought the materials to construct some cheese sandwiches instead. And some ice cream goddamit.

After eating, I walked down to the water at Woolloomooloo and sat by one of the long wharves staring at the harbour. Sydney is a beautiful place when you’re not in a dingy room gambling with money you don’t have. I found tranquillity in this simple activity for a moment. The can

of worms wriggling in my head stopped pulsing for a minute and I just saw the lull of the harbour, breathing in and out, slapping the arse of the sea wall beneath me.

A bottle smashed in the background.

“Fuckin cunt!”

After a moment of reflection, I concluded this charming greeting was not intended for my soft ears. It was in the blocks of flats on the other side of the road and the usual refrain of the houso conflict. This call can be heard at any time of the day, through all seasons of the year. More prevalent in Sydney than eucalyptus, sunny days or meat pies, it can be relied upon to pierce quiet moments state-wide at the drop of a longneck.

The sun had pretty much set by this point, the light throwing dramatic silhouettes from everything. My shadow looked about twelve-foot tall, most of it between my feet and my knee, the rest of me oddly short in comparison. When I finally made to leave, it was almost as if I were strolling alongside my misshapen double, keeping my shadow company. Perhaps he'd been through the wars and needed a companion just to see him home? I looked on my shadow with amusement. I thought of a girl I knew in school with who had similar proportions.

After mooching all the way back down the lamp-yellow streets, I arrived home and opened the door to find Dean on the couch in front of me watching TV, the sound blaring through the room. His face was redder than a cherry and he held an imperious glass before him, its contents glistening.

“Bro, cunts, bro.” Each word separated by a breath.

I understood immediately what he meant. Joining him to imbibe the news, I sat on the opposite couch and received my update on the world.

Somebody had done something un-Australian and they were being shamed for it in the top stories. First the Chinese were to blame, then the backpackers – at some point there was mention of Al-Qaida. I can't remember what had been done, but it was clear those three groups were the main threat to the Australian way of life.

Dean broke the quiet.

“You're alright for a Pommie bloke,” he clearly wanted to make me feel at ease.

“Pretty much Aussie now mate.”

“Yeah.”

He grabbed his glass and waddled back to the kitchen, returning with it replenished. I could hear the glorious relief, the ‘haaaaaaaaa’, coming from his soul as he took that first sizable gulp.

“Want some?” he asked.

The light from the TV caused the glass to flicker on the yellow walls, while the brown, cream couch pulled me into its comforting embrace. I looked at his drink, weighing the offer of inclusion.

“I’m tired mate, might get some kip.”

“No worries bro, see you in the morning.”

I cleaned my teeth and went up the stairs. After locking the door, I threw my clothes on the floor and got into bed. Under the covers, I waited for sleep to take me and stared at the ceiling for a long, long time.

Waking at five, as was my habit, I began the day with a cigarette. Usually, I would rise briefly in the night, at about 3am, and have a quick blunt. My body would crave nicotine in the witching hours; it was greedy, it always wanted more. Smoking in the house was not a risk I wanted to take. I saw ash on the living room table and suspicious rings from old condensation there as well. Taking a cloth from the sink in the kitchen, I wiped it all down, no need for us both to be in the shit after our first full day there. Returning, I saw a soup spoon on the draining board, laid flat on its back and bent in such a way that it would not have spilt a drop of liquid had there been any in it. *That’s interesting* I thought. And put it in the rack.

Sitting on a plastic chair in the back yard, I observed my surrounds in detail. The yard was made up of bricks in a U shape, scattered mostly in uniform order but with some broken blocks here and there, a layer of mud and grime spread across like vegemite. Weeds emerged triumphantly all over the place and at its back was a tree some thirty-foot-tall and shrubs which reached as high as the back fence. My chair was on one side of the U and the wheelie bins were on the other. A rat emerged from the garden and stood in front of me. We made eye contact; game knows game. The Sydney rat, *Ratticus Straya*, is about twice the size of its overseas compatriots. I am not sure what they feed on, but it wouldn’t surprise me if poodles were on the menu. Baby goats did not seem out of the question. This fella looked at me, not so much as a meal but as a potential rival. His nose twitched arrogantly, so I gave the little fucker the finger and off he scampered. Bastard knew better than to fuck with me.

After a little while, I made myself an instant coffee and smoked another cigarette. It was still only 5.30am. We had some kind of group at nine and the rest of the residents would be turning up. Stubbing out smoke number two, I opened the fridge and prepared myself a bowl of cereal. It felt like a huge achievement to start eating before I had smoked three cigarettes, that being the usual custom. With milk on my chin and full of a sense of accomplishment, I climbed back into bed, listening to magpies caw until dawn passed.

The rough sound of blokes stirred me from my slumber a few hours later. You know the sound, the whooping, the coughing, some laughter, a smattering of belches. I re-dressed and came downstairs to be greeted by the radical sight of Dean – clean-shaven and wearing a reasonably uncrumpled t-shirt – standing at the edge of the crowd, nodding impassively. His eyes were wide and alert. Clearly this man was a professional.

Jeremy arrived and we filed into the mirror-front room which acted as base for all our meetings. The room had three budget couches backed against the walls and two chairs facing away from the window which looked onto the street. There were metal bars outside the window which was common enough in the neighbourhood, but it wasn't clear if this was to keep people out or in. The walls were that same pancake yellow, the colour of nicotine stains and pub-ceilings. The floor was a little sticky and made a damp sound as if it were hungry for my holey Raben shoes.

“Time for a mop in here boys,” Jeremy observed.

Jeremy and Lou were the shepherds to our flock of wolves. People sat around or leaned on the wall, doing their best version of ‘quietly respectful’. Dean and I were introduced and met with a series of barely perceptible micro-nods. Less enthusiasm than a couple of turd sandwiches.

Our timetable was laid out for us: a visit to the homeless shelter tomorrow, followed by food delivery, and tai chi later in the week. The rest of the time was to be occupied with cleaning and ‘healthy activities’.

I could tell Jeremy was edgy from some of the things he said.

“Fucking sort the cleaning or you're gone,” was one such clue.

“Sick of you lot being late in the morning,” was another.

He didn't exude the shiny smugness of the usual dictator. I got the impression he was just a decent bloke putting on a show for discipline. But the anger; that came from somewhere real. When people draw in breath loudly through their noses and grimace sideways, they are not fucking about. It also helped he was the size of two enthusiastically-fed oxen.

I joined the guys who hung around in the garden smoking and chatting afterwards. This was the reason I started smoking in the first place, for a sense of belonging, and to get breaks at work. The world I grew up in was one where smoking was the norm and asking for lighters, sharing cigs, and ducking round the corner to take five, were how we related. It was the foundation of camaraderie and where we were able to talk. Who was in. Who was out. What had happened. Why. I could find this information and more over a smoko.

I coughed gutturally, we all did. That world I grew up in wasn't there anymore, it was left in the distance as we were pulled into a reluctant future. You couldn't smoke in cafes, pubs, or beaches anymore. I am pretty sure the midwife was working her way through a woodbine when I was being delivered. Times had changed.

Dean disappeared with the crowd and a couple of the blokes stayed back.

"Fancy a schnitzel?"

"I like to eat."

"We're going up the Cross for dinner tonight. Come with."

For a recovering addict, going to Kings Cross in the evening seemed like a foolish activity. The Cross is solely populated by strip clubs, gambling dens, alleys full of needles, and dogshit. Pickpockets and herds of junkies roam the street in search of tourists to rob.

"Sure," I said, "schnitzel sounds good."

I felt like a Christian sprinkling salt and pepper on himself before entering the lion's den.

But it had been a while since my last schnitzel. What could possibly go wrong?

\*

Reading came back to me. We were not a scholarly community though, and it felt like something I would have to do in private. I did not want to become a target, a 'smart *cunt*'. I have seen many a North American shiver at the sound of this word, although in Darlinghurst it is almost punctuation. Positive uses are prominent, *good cunt* being the most obvious. There are some ambiguous ones also, like *funny cunt*. But a whole host of negative ones, *bunch of cunts*, *a cunt act*, *a cunt of a job*, *cunty*, *massive cunt* – and many others. For a lot of people, their entire understanding of the world is based around this terminology. So I kept my reading of Isaac Asimov and Malcom Gladwell to myself, mostly. Being an ex-teacher rather than an ex-con was disadvantage enough when in the wild, even if we did all use the same watering hole.

Looking through the pages of *Foundation and Empire*, I enjoyed reading about the idea that Hari Seldon was able to mathematically map out human history in science fiction. It seemed like such a bloody good idea, someone should really get on with it. Meanwhile, I couldn't predict the course of a single evening. I was nervous about hanging out with these guys. What would dinner entail? Would our journey to Kings Cross mean I would be drawn into some kind of gangster pact – *no such thing as a free schnitzel*. As soon as I tucked into those chips I would be in their debt for life, called on to do favours whenever needed. My other

option was to remain alone. This left me with perhaps a greater enemy. Mine was a head wired for self-destruction, no opportunity would be left unsmithereened.

*The New Yorker Diner*, as it eventuated, was a glorious hangout. The plates stacked with fat chips and a doorstep of schnitzel. They were giving it away too, less than ten buckaroos and a feed fit for a footy team. Why would you eat anywhere else if you were on a budget? It was tucked away near the back of Kellet Street between the rear entrance of a strip joint and a pokie door for one of the hotels. The façade had navy blue trim peeling at the sides and open-plan windows meaning that you could see everyone who was in there, including the chefs. People walked past and were always dropping by to say hello to each other. A community amongst the vice.

Our crew that evening included Anton, a man who looked like a butcher and ate like one too. Great mounds of food balanced on his fork en route to a chamber of a gut that folded over the edges of the table. Also in attendance were the cheerfully bearded Bruce; and Ian, a man whose calm demeanour betrayed a careful intelligence. They were a stand-up bunch. Although I'm not sure you could have left any of them with your sister.

Over our banquet, we spoke of glory.

"I'm gonna show 'em. It's different this time."

"Eat up mate, when you speak you can't put food in your mouth."

"Look, I put down the spoon and picked up the fork. I don't mind. Not flat on me back anymore."

"Your missus is."

A flash in the eyes, then a softening.

Bruce interceded.

"How about them chips? Whoppers today."

"Good chips. Shows they're good people. Only an asshole would serve up a bad chip."

"There's arseholes out there."

"You can tell, if they don't have a neck, probably an asshole."

"Not always. Look at Hitler, he had a neck."

There he was again. Hitler will echo through history as the man whose name can end any argument. Who else can claim to have had such an impact? Jesus? Shakespeare? Not even Jane Fonda. It seems like you must do great evil if you want to be remembered through the ages. That is how human history works.

I slurped from my can of coke and laughed along.

"How's it goin' in your house Jack?"

“I ain’t seen Hitler in there yet. Everyone has a neck so far. That’ll do.”

Walking home that evening, I felt protected by the pack around me, coated in the armour of our cigarette smoke. The songs of the sirens were blocked out by our camaraderie and tales of the time before. Together, it was as if we didn’t have a care in the world.

25.

In my dream it is lunchtime and the teacher asks me to stay after class for my disruptive behaviour. The bell rings and the children rush out of the classroom all energy and chirpy voices. Someone slaps me on the shoulder – whether affectionate or not, I don't know – as they pass on their way out.

It takes me a little while to extract myself from between the seat and desk. When I finally get to my feet, I skulk up to the teacher's desk. I am taller than her and she looks up at me with the same stern expression like she is talking to a little boy.

I am used to this feeling.

I have done nothing wrong.

When she asks to see the paper from before, I am momentarily taken aback. Since being told off the first time, I balled up the paper missile and stuffed it inside my pocket. But the teacher is waiting. I reach into my pocket and hand it over with a mild grunt.

The teacher takes the object from my large adult hand, turning from me so her face is slightly obscured behind the wrinkled white square as she reads. On her desk, I notice there is a plastic Tupperware, a thermos. A moment passes, and with a sigh she drops her arms and sends me a brief look before turning away.

“You know what to do with this.”

She hands me back the messy paper and gestures vaguely to the door, over to the bins. I offer a perfunctory nod, but the second I am out of sight – whatever impels me to do it – I stuff the thing back in my pocket.

On my way out, I glance at the whiteboard. I am close enough to see what has been written, to make out the words. I am surprised to find that it is not a sentence, but a list.

The days of the week. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday...

\*

When I got home things became interesting.

Dean was bubbling away on his side of the couch, watching the TV with an intermittent smile. He had a tall glass filled with transparent liquid in his hand. It seemed unlikely this was Perrier. A coffee cup was balanced on the shoulder of the couch with a crispy coating of ash around the rim.

“Mate.”

“Mate.”

“Good to see ya.”

I sat down and we watched TV. Ben Cousins, a good-looking bloke with a determination to fuck things up for himself, was getting his hair shaved. He had won the Brownlow medal but couldn't kick the ball like he used to. He wouldn't again.

I noticed Dean had a new jacket, a nice one. It looked pricey: zips, warmth, leather.

“That new mate?”

His grin was from ear to ear, brown teeth piercing through dirty brown-ginger stubble which spread across the rounded chin of a cage fighter.

“Bro, let me show you something.”

His eyes locked on to mine, then wandered off into the distance, then locked again.

“Come with me.”

He leaned on the armrest and knocked the coffee cup on the floor. It broke into almost two clean pieces, shards of china making up the difference. A mixture of ash, cigarette butts, and old coffee made a teardrop of syrup on the floor. He didn't notice, leaning his left arm on the doorway as he got up, and led the way through the kitchen into his part of the house and up to his room. I followed, watching him walk heavily from side to side and gradually forwards. His room was a shrine to cigarettes and empty glasses. *There might not be any more glassware in the kitchen*, I thought as I took in the scene. There were bowls and spoons and various flakes of humanity spread about. For just a couple of days' work, I couldn't help but admire his productivity. His bag lay on the floor, largely unpacked from the rehab, a couple of items of clothing spilling out like the guts of a recently killed animal.

He perched on the bed and lit a cigarette as I sat cross-legged on the floor.

“This girl mate, she had poppers. You had poppers?”

“I have.”

“Want some?”

“I'm good man. This was yesterday?”

“First day. I went for a root. Girl give 'em to me. Bit weird, but why not?”

“Sure.”

“They said anything to you? The programme? Ask any questions?”

“Nothin'. I just had dinner with the boys. Nobody's asked anything.”

“I like you bro. You're a good bloke.”

He looked around furtively and cupped out his right hand, beckoning me closer.

“Look at this.”

He reached over and opened the top draw of his wooden bedside table. It looked like old street-rescue furniture, perhaps fashioned by a sailor from *the Endeavour* on a morning with a brutal hangover. Reaching in, his hand came out holding a handgun. I hadn't seen one before.

He grinned, it seemed to make him feel good to hold it.

"Guess where I was last night?"

"Church?"

He laughed, coughed a little. Grinning again, he leaned towards me, cupping his non-gun hand.

"Up north mate, did a servo. Fuckin' easy bro. Miles away."

Okay.

"Let's go and get some girls bro. You're a good bloke."

"Thanks man."

I could feel he wanted something more from me, some kind of deeper bond to be forged. We had already been through a lot together, this was going to the next level.

"Bro," he paused, choosing his words carefully. "Do you like heroin?"

I stood at the turning point.

26.

“Where the fuck is he Jack?”

Jeremy and Lou were not in a good mood. My head was cloudy from the late night.

“You seem to be the person closest to him right now. If he’s gonna talk to anyone, it’s probably you.”

Dean hadn’t shown up to the morning group. He hadn’t shown up to anything for almost two days. No excuses had been provided. He was rumbled. It seemed there wasn’t much runway for mistakes here, and the staff were right onto it.

“I haven’t seen him.”

“Fuck’s sake.”

The house had filtered out after the group and left me with Lou and Jeremy. Everyone else was quiet. They knew something was up and that I was in the middle of it. It seemed my compadres were experienced at side-stepping a storm. Tip-toeing away without attracting any attention to themselves.

“You don’t look so good Jack.”

“I’m tired. It’s been a rough trot.”

They looked at each other. I just wanted them to go, so I could head back and sleep again. It had been an ordeal to lift myself from slumber.

“Come down the office with us Jack.”

“Ah, now?”

“Now.”

They marched me out the door and down Palmer Street to the clinic. It felt like I was being escorted from a workplace. I had been escorted from workplaces before. It is the kind of thing which tends to happen when you arrive late with a strong whiff of beer about you. You hope the senior management will at least have a sense of humour about it. They usually don’t. There is no pleasing some people.

I had a particular weakness for St. Patrick’s Day and the morning of March 17<sup>th</sup> always arrived too soon. The angels would whisper; “Jack, Jack my love – don’t you know what day it is? It’s Paddy’s Day... we’re going for a pint of Guinness.” The logic was flawless, the caper supreme. I would head to one of those round-the-clock beer holes and sup that dark medicine, a cracking meal that fired up my system. Always, always the first turned into a second, a third, and on and on. Eventually, the idea ‘I really ought to get to my place of business’ emerged from

the mist. What I mean to say is that, traditionally, March 17<sup>th</sup> was not a good day for my professional life. Neither was March 18<sup>th</sup>, quite frankly. Certainly not the mornings.

But there were no leprechauns around here. Merely a queue of homeless people, waiting in line for their shower and their vitamin B pills. We walked upstairs, Lou in front and Jeremy behind. Arriving in the office, Lou reached into a cupboard and produced a small cup.

“We’re gonna do a UT. Piss into this and bring it back. You know the drill.”

I took it and walked to the bathroom at the side. Jeremy stood behind me with the door open, gentlemanly enough not to watch as I performed the operation.

There was something about these two guys that I was struggling to place. I didn’t see either of them enjoying this part of their job. They were angry, sure – the number of fucks per sentence had been on the rise ever since Dean began dancing the light fandango; but their anger did not graduate to sadism. Nothing like the teachers who are scared of a class and dish out cruel punishments.

I sat in the chair while they looked at the pot and referred to their sheet. They looked again and nodded to each other.

“You haven’t used have you.”

“I haven’t used.”

“You haven’t drunk either.”

“I haven’t.”

“You’re not gonna tell us where he is, are you.”

“I don’t know where he is.”

This game of blank statements could go on forever.

Jeremy leaned back in his chair and blew out his breath. He looked at me again and shrugged.

“Head back to the house mate. The food delivery arrives...” he looked at his watch; “... sometime soon. You need to be home to get it. Fridge it up.”

I figured out what it was with these guys that I couldn’t place before. They actually gave a damn. They wanted us to get better. Their anger with Dean and me came from the idea that we had blown our chances. I still knew this was my last one. Dean, on the other hand, must have still had a few more hands to play. I didn’t see him at all that day. He probably got going early.

Graham of the cheekbones was sat at the kitchen table when I got back, calmly tapping his feet.

“Got any papers, mate? I know it’s a bit chintzy.”

I handed him a cigarette paper and he started to roll himself a toothpick slim smoko. His skin was pale, his lips smooth, and his eyes cavernous with pupils pointing out from their centre, like two lonely raisins floating in a bowl of milk.

“You seen your mate?”

“Nah, you?”

“I been doin’ my things. I don’t see much.”

Graham saw everything and a damn sight more if I had to guess. He had enormous shoulders and giant egg-like biceps. Yet his legs were oddly stringy, dangling in his grey exercise pants.

“What’s the plan for today?”

“I wanna see if any treasure turns up in the delivery.”

The situation was similar to the detox centre: a local charity collected food from restaurants and stores who couldn’t sell it, and then dished it out to homeless people or those in need. If you are too broke to buy food, Australia is not the worst place to be. There was a lot of stale bread which wasn’t a problem – you can toast that back to glory. In one shipment, we had a case of some soft drink with a truly evil flavour the world had been too smart to buy. Another time, bizarrely, we were given twenty quail wings which were two days out of date. Into the freezer they went. “That’ll do me for the week,” Graham noted, sagely. There were large fridges at either end of the kitchen. Graham put all the food he wanted in the one on his side of the house and instructed me to do the same.

“Drop the rest over there,” he nodded at the other fridge.

Around lunch, guys from the other houses milled in, friendly as can be.

“Mate.”

“Mate.”

“How you going?”

“Delivery arrived yet?”

Graham sat in front of his fridge in a plastic garden chair, his arms crossed and right foot slung over his left knee.

“It’s over there,” he nodded at the other fridge.

This routine had played out before. None of the friendly visitors felt the need to challenge Graham. He had his quail and would defend it with his life. The others foraged for what they could find and left without drama.

Coming back in the evening, I noticed the front door of the house next door was left wide open, light emanating from inside. Surely nobody would be foolish enough to leave their door unlocked and akimbo for an extended period in this neighbourhood. It would be like

leaving an open suitcase full of money and drugs on a bar stool in a Mexican border town. As a good Samaritan, I felt duty-bound to look in and see if they had any cash lying around for me to protect. Coming closer, I spotted a woman sat on a red upholstered easy chair in the front room. Everything around her was the colour of old strudel.

“Hello luv?”

She grinned at me, a gap where a tooth should be. She was old, her legs trunk-like with varicose veins, age, and cholesterol. There was an ashtray on her armrest, a fag burning comfortably in her right hand.

“Wrong door,” I back-pedalled.

“Okay love,” she shrugged.

Closing the door to our abode, I leaned against it for a second, making sure it was properly shut and that she was not coming for me.

The house was quiet. Was I alone? Solitude in a place like this was a rare pleasure. I cracked open one of the pineapple-tribute juices the world had rejected and sat on the couch. Something was playing on television, something designed to help me buy things and judge others. I judged others and thought of buying things. Hints of flesh leapt out, wads of money. Streaks of dopamine ran through my brain at their sight.

Graham came in around 9.30 with a suit jacket above his trackie pants and injustice in his eyes.

“Did one of those meetings. Jeremy riding me. Fucking waste of time.”

You had to hand it to Graham, he was better than TV.

“How d’you mean?”

“Been harder here since he arrived. Always pushing us. I been here for six months, I got another three, I earned ‘em.”

“How long’s he been here?”

“Him and Lou arrived maybe five weeks ago.”

“What’s changed?”

“People. He’s runnin’ us out. Meetings, do me a favour. I heard one bloke tonight say he’d used half a million bucks. ‘Mate, don’t insult me’. I was a nurse for a decade. Can’t hold a candle.”

“You’re a nurse?” He looked more like an undertaker. There, I caught myself judging again – the TV cast its spell.

“Fucks me off. People don’t know what they’re talking about. *Meetings*.” There was disgust in his face. I liked listening to him. The guy had heart, he meant what he said, whatever the hell it was.

“Fuck this shit,” he added passionately. “I earned them months,” and went to bed.

27.

I'm a grown man in the schoolyard at lunchtime when a young boy ropes me into playing. One of the bullies. He grins horribly and jabs his fingers at my face.

“Bang. You're dead.”

All around us, children are chasing one another, shrieking, sticks waving in their hands. His small face is creased with something I can't name, and though he's only little, I am surprised to find that I worry what will happen if I refuse.

I lie down on the tarmac, feet pounding around me. It's a sunny day. So bright I close my eyes, but the light passes through, turning the inside of my lids a purple orange.

I'm afraid this war will never end. If I stand up, maybe I could be a hero. But then I remember – I'm dead. Those kinds of thoughts belong to the living and the hero's quest is a fool's game, just dumb brutes wandering in circles.

So I lie there, waiting for the bell to ring. The paper still in my pocket.

\*

The mornings brought me relief. That moment before I opened my eyes, when consciousness had kicked in and I did not yet have visual confirmation of where I was, had always been one of dread. In that half-second I would tense up, brace myself, ready to deal with the damage of the night, most of which I would not remember. I pulled my body through hangovers that only increased in sadism as the years wore on. Shameful memories would blindside me as I wandered through the opening hours of a day. New injuries would necessitate improvisation, a mystery limp, a dislocated thumb; *where had that come from?* Grease would be required in the gullet, preferably in bacon-form. The worst mornings were when the smoking and the coffee caused me to retch. This always seemed against the rules of cricket, in my opinion.

But mornings of this nature were becoming a memory. I would open my eyes, tense and ready for the instant barrage, and I'd find... nothing. A clear head and food in the fridge. My days began with activities I found novel and quaint: the cleaning of teeth, the gentle splash of milk in the breakfast bowl. And cigarettes. Always cigarettes.

Vince, the old fella with the cigarette and the mop, had kept the lowest of low profiles. He occupied the room opposite mine but we never encountered each other. He joined me in the kitchen that morning; it seemed he had decided I might be worthy of his time.

“You come from the place in Rozelle?”

“Yep.”

“Supposed to be good.”

“Got its charms and its wildlife. You?”

“Out of Goulburn a year ago. Had a bad trot. Went to a place up the coast.”

I knew Goulburn had a jail. It also had a conservatorium and a theatre, but Vince didn't have the look of a man who played flute or did improv. Maybe it was the Rabbitohs jersey and the tattoos that gave it away.

“You gotta follow the programme in here now. Play the game. Your mate might be in strife.”

I let it hang. There was nothing I could add which would help. Tact had never been my strong suit, but I was learning.

“Noisy up there last night.”

“It's a loud neighbourhood.”

Vince smiled and nodded and went to the fridge. He took out two bits of quail and started frying them with some margarine. Delicious as this breakfast feast appeared, I decided to jump in the shower and leave him to it. As I put my bowl on the drainer, I saw the same flattened soup spoon on the edge of the sink. Suspecting the worst, I put it on the drainer too.

We had a group an hour later and everyone was there, except Dean. Graham arrived a couple of minutes late, paler than usual, a light fleck of green emanating from his edges. Jeremy was pissed again.

“How many times have I gotta talk about the cleaning?”

He breathed slowly and loudly, his great chest swelling and receding like waves on the edge of a storm front.

“This is the last chance for some of you.”

The place seemed pretty clean to me, but my standards, potentially, were not the benchmark for wider society. Before he left, I ostentatiously grabbed a chux cloth and opened a fridge door to begin wiping. The others left after a quick smoke and a joke. Tales were told of women wanting someone or other. My corner of the fridge began to sparkle. As the chattering dissipated, two figures turned toward each other were left in the kitchen.

Graham and Vince were facing off in front of the sink.

“That was my quail mate,” he leaned in closer to the older man, both of them stiff and calm.

“It's everybody's. Maybe you should buy some fucking food. What you spendin' your money on anyway?”

“I buy food all the time mate.”

As Vince was lining up another zinger of a comeback, I heard a sound coming from upstairs. Talking, muffled. Who would house break into here? It got louder and revealed itself to be giggling. After the clomping of steps, two girls came into the kitchen, topless and flicking at ancient cigarette lighters which struggled in their old age. One woman had zits all over her shoulders and face, the other was older, her tits stretched out and pointing south, rolls of fat on her belly. She clasped a small 500ml bottle of vodka and sipped from it.

Dean came down the stairs behind them, boxer shorts doing a bad job of hiding his boner. He had scars all over his chest and shoulder tattoos that looked like ancient military armour.

“FUCK YEAH!” he leaned into the older girl, kissed her, and she poured some vodka down his throat. The younger girl looked side to side. Nervous, jittery.

Vince was as happy as a clam.

“Ladies!” he beamed.

The older lady sneered at him. “Fuck off old cunt. None of youse are getting anything until your mate pays up.”

Dean started to laugh his head off. He looked at me and started grinding his hips back and forth, sticking his tongue out.

That’s when his face broke. It seemed to shatter and fall in an instant, his eyes dropping and his head falling with it.

“Ah, this is fucked!” He grabbed the vodka bottle again, drained it, and threw it out the door into the garden. It smashed without great theatrics and his shoulders slumped.

“FUCKED.”

“We should go. This isn’t good.” The younger girl was starting to get panicky. She was in her mid-twenties, arms like cheese graters, and seemed lost, young in the head.

“I’ve gotta go.” She went upstairs and her older companion mother-goosed after her.

“That *Cialis*. It works mate, let me tell ya.”

Graham approached me. “Can I borrow another paper mate? I know it’s chintzy.”

We rolled cigarettes together.

“Are you gonna tell em? Don’t fucking say anything!”

“What you want us to fuckin do mate?!” Graham turned round and was ready to shout. He held back, but anger pulsed from him nonetheless. “This is fuckin bad for all of us.”

The girls scampered downstairs, handbags, smudged lipstick, heels slipping to the side. This was no pony ride for them either. Vince followed as they rushed for the door.

“Come back any time ladies, I’ll be waiting.” His grin was warm and inviting.

Dean had his head in his hands. “This is fucked.”

He walked into the group room and lay on the couch. A minute later he was snoring.

Graham did not look happy. "Fuck's sake."

"I reckon they loved me," Vince said. "They'll be back for sure."

This did not help our cleaning situation. It did not help it at all.

Everyone knew the code of Omerta was sacrosanct. The situation could not be discussed. It was not, however, immediately clear how to deal with the snoring body on the couch. Cleaning the fridge was not going to cut it.

"So, what do we do now?" I asked foolishly.

Vince guffawed himself into a cough. "I wouldn't be doin' much if I were you. Think I might go out for the day." He grizzled his face into a piece of quail, eating whilst standing in front of the pan.

Graham looked at me with a pleading expression and rubbed his index finger and thumb together. I handed him a cigarette paper, all 0.03 cents worth of it, and he rolled himself another of those pin smokes. The sound of the snoring coming from the front room was interspersed with the odd mumble of the word 'fuck', that came out *'faaaaaark.'* Then another snore.

I considered going out too. Jeremy and Lou would swing by the house intermittently anyway. It seemed this situation could resolve itself. Many things do when left to play out their own little drama. I struggled to remember a scenario which had been improved by attempts to strangle it to my will.

"Good bloke Dean. He'll be right."

"Yeah. The best."

Making sure my door was locked, I thanked the heavens for clear weather, and went to face the day. It was warm and dry, despite the impenetrable grey spread of the cloud. A furious storm may break out later, but for now the air felt like tepid bath water, unthreatening, slightly grubby. I walked up to Surry Hills, away from the house, from the clinic, from the Cross, towards the streets of my younger years, when I had been full of potential and swagger. The people I knew from those days weren't in my life anymore. They had all married footy players and moved to Queensland, or worked in marketing, drove around as salesmen, did yoga in the evenings, went out of town at the weekends, drank award-winning wine, discussed tiling in the bathroom, the price of property in the East, the size of lots in Haberfield, what the politicians were doing wrong, why they knew better, what was inappropriate, why they didn't talk to that person anymore, which new diet was the best, who drove in a fucked up way, where the next CBD would be, why their industry was important, why they did what they did. The

things normal people do; the things that made me puke. My participation in the desperate scramble for position in the status hierarchy was over. By taking a place at the bottom, I removed any uncertainty. It also came with the feeling of total superiority for not taking part. I gloried in the ability to look down on the world from the gutter. These people searching for 'things' to make them happy. Fools. All. Happiness was like the common cold: you could catch it anywhere, from anyone, sometimes the dirtiest people you know. But after a little while your body figured it out and you returned to that normal state again. The longing, the dissatisfaction, perhaps returning to that place or person where you caught it before. Personally, I had found it drinking in pubs, in hoovering lines and slamming tequila, standing on tables hands raised high above my shoulders. But it wasn't there anymore. The antibodies had taken effect. That strain of happiness was gone and I needed to look for others. So I searched.

The money in my pocket was slender, the ideas in my head limited. I sat in a café on Crown Street and read the paper. The paper had a crossword which had long been a friend of mine. At precisely the right level of difficulty, sometimes I would complete it, sometimes I would not. It left me feeling smart enough, instead of frustrated. Bacon and eggs were served around me, avocado was smashed, sourdough was baked. The easy opulence of the Sydney café pulled me in.

"*Serendipity.*"

"Huh?"

"4 across. Finding valuable things not sought for. Ten letters."

"It does fit. I thought it might be *contraband.*"

She laughed. I didn't quite see what was funny.

"And 2 down, consequently, is 'ergo'."

"That's what people say to me at parties."

She laughed again. This time I understood.

It was my turn to talk again. I didn't know what to say, how to react. She was pretty and I was nervous. What was she doing talking to me? Did she have some kind of brain injury? I reached my hand up to my chin and the open wound was gone. It had been gone for a week or two. I might look like a normal human again. It had been a while. I began to feel self-conscious about my clothes, my battered shoes, so I crossed my ankles and pulled my feet under the chair.

"You do this crossword every day?" I blathered pathetically.

"No. I work here. Only when it's quiet and some asshole customer doesn't do it first. Today, you're the asshole." She smiled warmly.

If only she knew.

“We all have a role to play. Mine is to ruin people’s days. I guess I can kick back now.”

“You want another coffee?”

My brain strained on the idea of spending another three dollars which was a big dent in the budget.

“Only if it’s a good one.”

She walked off and I returned to 3 down, *annoyance (7)*.

I muddled through some initial calculations. Sitting in a café, I had been ‘noticed.’ This had been my intended roadmap to success for a long time. Finally, patience had paid off. No doubt this girl had taken one look at my debonair appearance, my skill with a biro, my expansive vocabulary, and she was ready to bet the rest of her life on me. I envisaged our lives together. A child after 18 months. Our second would arrive two years later and I would give the first-born son the middle name of ‘Danger’. Her father and I would shadow box playfully and our dogs would be called Trix and Treats. Maybe I would retrain as a dentist. I would grow herbs and we would roll our own pasta.

She placed a new coffee in front of me.

“The boss is out, this one is on the house.”

Yeah baby! I’m fucking back!

She walked to the far end of the room and sat on the couch. Beckoning me towards her. It was time to make my move. I stood and began to stride across the room, confident in the knowledge the right words would come as I approached. Ignoring my eye-contact skilfully, she leaned in towards the left of the couch, to the area obscured from view by the wall. As I turned the corner, I was met by the sight of a pile of muscles with a head on top. From the head protruded a kissy pout which was planted on the lips of the waitress.

I continued walking and entered the bathroom, the ideal surrounds for a moment of deep contemplation.

It seemed my projections for our first child might be a little optimistic.

Leaving the bathroom, I paid another staff member at the counter and continued roaming towards Cleveland Street, my heart broken and a little shaky from embarrassment and the double injection of coffee.

\*

“Jack!”

A slow-moving tree approached me from the brush at the side of the road. It had an accent.

“Jack.”

It was Darius, my old teaching colleague, a giant of good will and clumsiness.

“Amigo.”

“You look different Jack. Not healthy, just not, kind of ill.”

“I have a regimen of creams,” I assured him. For some reason, I was not ready to say the words ‘I have stopped drinking’ – I figured this might diminish my manhood in the eyes of others.

He laughed, slightly madly.

“Let’s catch up. Walk with me. I have *important business*.” He stressed these last two words as if it were a punchline to a joke he’d forgotten to set up.

It was heading towards mid-afternoon, a grey and dangerous part of the day. It did not have the momentum of morning, nor the anticipation and thrills of a night. Mid-afternoon was when energy changed, when my day could go towards mischief in one direction or sanity in the other. A light thunderclap sounded. We walked to Cleveland Street and he led me to Bar Cleveland, the sight of my inspirational ‘grab vodka and run’ escapade.

“I don’t wanna go in here mate.”

“Why not?”

“I am not drinking right now. I don’t want to go to pubs.” It was a half truth, but better than a complete lie.

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Are you SURE?”

“I am SURE.”

This could go on for some time.

“Oh,” I could see machinery turning in his head, a lot to compute. “Okay then. How about that place?”

“Sure.” We walked across the street into a small restaurant that never seemed to have any customers. The menu of Indian cuisine was not what he had had in mind. Darius ordered a bottle of beer and I had some water.

“I have exciting new things for us my friend,” Darius drank back his beer hungrily, the condensation dripping onto his fingers.

“For example?”

Darius paused before taking another sip of beer.

“Say Jack, why *did* you stop coming to work back at the old place? People liked you there.”

It hadn't felt like it. Going to an office everyday, having eyes rub themselves all over me, micro-judgements, macro-assumptions, grim faces, sighs, turned backs.

“You don't know?”

“I don't.” His voice was high-pitched, as if he were surprised he didn't know something.

We sat there in silence as I thought about the best way to phrase it. The reality. How I had decided to stop coming to work so I could stay in my boarding house and drink. How I ran out of money and have been dodging homelessness in a series of institutions. It didn't sound great.

“Ah, you know, sometimes it's time.”

“Fair enough. I have a new place for us. They pay more, you finish earlier. I am finished now,” he beamed. “I worked this morning.” His smile turned into a chuckle.

“This *IS* interesting,” I conceded. “Tell me more.”

And so the pitch began.

28.

The mid-afternoon light was fading and Daruis's third beer had been drained. Before parting, we hugged like family. I watched as he wandered off into the darkness, a man who could not be kept down, or fathomed, by any who encountered him.

Invigorated by the good news, temptation began to close in. I saw reason for celebration. And what better way to celebrate than by sinking a few...

My thigh began to vibrate – it was my phone, the third I had purchased that year. All of them had been bottom-of-the-line, 30 dollar Nokias. I picked up and heard Jeremy's voice.

"You need to come back to the clinic," he sounded as cheerful as a cancer diagnosis.

"I'll be about half an hour."

The foyer was deserted at 5pm, making for a stark contrast to the early morning when it teemed with the wildlife of the homeless district. I knocked on the door and was let in.

"We found Dean at the house this afternoon. He was fucked up. I guess you don't know anything about that."

The others weren't here and that began to worry me. I didn't answer.

"He is in detox now. He isn't coming back. But he asked if you could pack up his stuff and take it all to him."

"I guess I can do that," I said.

"He'll be sleeping it off today. Take the stuff up tomorrow. I'll come with you and pack it up now, make sure there's no paraphernalia there."

Things would be found for sure. I suppose it didn't matter now.

After arriving at the house, we both went up to Dean's den of debauchery.

"What's your caper Jack?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why are you here? Just a cheap place to live for a while?"

I didn't know how to answer this.

"Cos you can't work. Not the first three months. Not until you've finished the programme. You gotta do twelve sessions of everything."

"Twelve weeks."

"If you show up. You gotta show up, you miss anything and you have to repeat."

He took out his keys and opened the door to Dean's Guernica of a room. There were the gored remains of clothing on the floor, a couple of needles in the bin, a mountainous

ashtray, the nestled jelly of used condoms on the bed – one stuck artistically to the skirting board. Perhaps it shot off at the crucial moment. A stain of mystery liquid made a pattern on the window.

“Well, you can tell he’d been using,” deadpanned Jeremy.

He went downstairs to get a couple of black bin bags from under the sink and I opened the draw of the bedside table. That’s when I saw the gun. I didn’t know what to do. Without thinking too hard, I quickly wrapped it in a stained towel and shoved it in the middle of Dean’s pack. In the months to come, I would wake up at night worried about my fingerprints being on the thing. At the time, I was merely covering for a mate.

Mercifully, Jeremy came back upstairs with some rubber gloves as well as the bin bags. Between the two of us, it didn’t take long. We opened the windows, only at the back, and put his packed bag on the bed.

“I’ll leave the door unlocked, see you in the morning.”

Maybe not the perfect crime, but one which was tied off, nonetheless.

\*

Jeremy and Lou were breathing fire all morning. Formerly colossal men looked at their feet. There was no camaraderie that day. They stayed back to talk with Graham and the rest of us went about our business. Maybe Dean hadn’t got it so wrong, I thought. He’d had a little party, now he would be free to roam the savannah once more, a lion in search of some meat. Me, I’d had no fun. And I was beginning to think I deserved some.

Returning to the detox felt strange. I already knew there were people using in there. *Detox* is not the right name for such a clinic. *Clean up* might be better, *Sandwich Station* perhaps, or *Addict Spa* – these would be more accurate. Of course, where there are the vulnerable, there are also predators and sadists – that covers the staff hiring policy. For Dean, it would be another roof for a couple of days. I stopped at a store and bought him a small pouch of White Ox on the way up.

Approaching the door, I took a deep breath and knocked on it hard three times. It was like knocking on the door of any other house, albeit one with a bloody great hospital right behind it. The door swung open to reveal the Welsh case worker who had taken such a pertinent dislike to me during my stay. He looked at me as if I were displaying a picture of his dead grandmother.

“You’re not coming in.”

“You’ve got a resident here, these are his bags.” I held them up as if they were Frankincense and Myrrh.

The door slammed in my face.

At this point, I began to realise the chap didn’t want me to pop around there anymore. This meant, hypothetically, if I needed to use another detox in my future, I would probably have to find a different one. Some people are gifted in different areas; baking cakes, writing songs, taming wild horses – my gift was burning bridges. Here was another smouldering wreck that could have been useful. An artist is always practising their craft. I could see the dome of the Welsh bloke’s head through the window. No chance he would be making eye contact with me. Cowards using power arbitrarily never make eye contact. Fuck him.

Another counsellor came out after a minute. “What’s his name?”

“Dean,” I replied.

“Dean what?”

“I don’t know. How many Deans have you got today?”

She smiled unpleasantly and went back inside.

A few minutes later she came back again.

“He’s here, but he’s not in good shape. I can take the bag.”

“There’s some tobacco too.”

I handed them to her and the door closed in my face again, maybe an inch or two from my nose.

I was furious; did these people not know who I was? *I’m not some gobby street urchin! I am fucking somebody!* I never wanted their help anyway, arseholes. Detox doesn’t work; desperation works. Being broke works. Having no options works. Dealing with some anal administrator who wants to call himself a humanitarian and treat people like dogs, helps no one. I hope they still get their funding – Harm Minimisation my arse.

After some quiet reflection, I decided not to burn the place to the ground. Dean would get his tobacco at some point and the great wheel would keep turning.

Vince was grinning like a croc when I got home.

“Housing lottery mate.”

“Housing lottery?”

“I got my houso. I been up that office every week for six months. My place. You won’t believe.”

Vince had one mission in life – apart from getting laid of course – and that was to get a housing commission apartment. His ship had come in.

“Right in the city.”

“How does that work?”

“How *DOES* that work? God mate.”

“God?”

“I been working with the undercover nun. She wrote me a reference.”

“The undercover nun?”

“Old duck by the church. I help her bag up food and take it to the homeless. Been doing it for months. I go to the communion too. The chicks are supreme. You want answers, go to God mate.”

Food, lodging, and women. It seemed indeed these folks were enjoying the life of plenty. They also had Vince. What more could you want?

“Good for you mate. When does it start?”

“Two weeks. I mean, who else they gonna give it to? Somebody who works on the stock market? Do we need more of that? I bring colour to the neighbourhood.”

Of this, there was no doubt. I also saw his point. The city was saturated with corporate douches. The tipping point had been passed and things had deteriorated into a sanitised mess of Footlockers and Starbucks. The roads to hell are paved with chain stores.

“Where’s Graham?”

“Graham’s gone.”

“What the fuck”

“He’s been using the whole time he’s been here. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice. He was an expert dodger, but they had enough of him in the end.”

“What happened?”

“I guess they told him to shove off this morning. He’s probably down at the homeless shelter in Chippo now, or, more likely, on a mate’s couch shooting up. Important thing is I got my houso. Probably those ladies will be back later to make my day too.

He walked over the fridge and pulled out some more quail, threw them on the pan. I wondered if he might put Graham’s shoes on too if they’d been left behind.

The morning’s exertions had made me hungry.

“Might as well cook me up some of that quail too.”

“Cook it yourself.”

Life hung around Vince like a loose garment as he ambled through his last two weeks. The girls didn't come back, but he did eat most of the food in the fridge before the next delivery turned up. I also saw him taking time to talk to the other fellas in the programme. The two at the top gave him free rein; it was only the new people, or those breaking the codes, who got grief. Vince had earned his stripes and freedom followed. It was in watching Vince that I started to see a path out. I would never qualify for houso in time, so work would need to become part of the equation. But seeing Vince made this almost seem possible. Here at last was a man at peace. I had not seen one for a while. In the meantime, living on charity food and the dole was enough for me to steady the waters. The idea of finding my feet became more solid by the day. I started to mix with the blokes from the other houses, the ones from the dinner.

"You know a bloke called Robbo?" asked Anton one day over Kranskys, more bounty from the delivery.

"I do."

"They found him last Monday."

"Found?"

"Hungry Jacks on Oxford St. In the toilets. OD."

"No shit."

"Not the nicest spot for it. I'd have gone for those ones up at the rocks. With the electric doors. I like them ones. Warm."

The options were clear. Hungry Jacks or Houso, Kransky or a coffin. Do the necessary or do one.

The moon goes around the earth twelve times in a year. It takes twelve years for Jupiter to circle the sun. King Arthur had twelve knights. Hercules had twelve tasks. And I had to do twelve sessions of tai chi with a middle-aged man before I could get a job and clamber out of there. There is a certain genre of dude who teaches yoga and tai chi. Mid-fifties, charming, slight pot belly, comedy sex beard, and a determination to do good in the world. Our tai chi instructor Steven Segal-ed his way into the nearby community hall every Friday and busted his spiritual moves all over us. We obeyed and attended. The departure of Graham and others had taught us to toe the line to the best of our abilities, or face the loss of shelter and charity food. For some, the consequences of leaving would have meant the jangling of keys and the locking of a cage. Tai chi didn't seem so bad in comparison.

Until the hips started grinding.

The hall was on a side street off Hyde Park. Probably it was the back of a church, for it is always a church, or a school, possibly a hospital – advertising agencies and banks do not make their space available for the community after hours. It was underneath a much larger building, the skyscrapers of the city having grown up around it, like the apartment blocks of Willy Loman’s Brooklyn. An enclave of benevolence lost in time and blocked from sunlight. The floors were wooden and polished, the lighting imposing and sterile. The custard cream of the wall paint often gave the impression we were like flies – dressed in grubby black and grey clothes – crawling all over a dessert of lemon curd and biscuit.

Our bodies swayed left and right like tall grass in the breeze as Steven guided us through his routine. He had his eyes closed most of the time, beaming with aggressive serenity. We were not a nimble group, not athletically primed. Arms would fall, shoulders slouched, backs stooped. But the faces, they would smile and giggle above pot bellies and droopy tracksuit bottoms, bum cracks and scarred arms. The paragon of calm, poor old Steven would regularly lose his shit.

He was trying to do good – god bless him he was – to help us less fortunate members of society ascend to the higher plane. A state of mind he had mastered. He brought this gift, his ocean of calm to us, and we snickered like teenagers faced with a picture of a willy. In our defence, the man’s pants were tight enough to reveal his religion. About twenty-five minutes into each session, from across his calm waters would emerge an angry sea beast, blasting its ferocity across the room.

“FOR FUCKS SAKE!” he would spit.

“TAKE IT SERIOUSLY OR DON’T BOTHER.”

But we had to bother. Although the spiritual benefits of tai chi were accepted, this was not the crowd. This was a group better trained for naval gazing; or gazing in general. Men with experience of walking across a jail yard with an imposing strut, or taking beatings from sadistic guards, are bound to make light when faced with a guru. It is just too delicious an opportunity.

He becalmed himself once more.

“So...”

Breathing in deeply through the nose, the strength of his inhalation brought a stack of wooden chairs an inch closer towards him.

“We shall continue.”

People didn’t wake up in the morning with the intention of driving him mad, but it was part of the entertainment anyway. Life could be dull, after all. The only physical flexibility most of us had was around the bending of elbows or the plunging of thumbs. There was greater elasticity in a cream-cracker than in my hamstrings. To move our bodies more fluidly was, well,

funny. But this was his calling in life and old Stevy didn't appreciate the mockery. I am glad he gave back, but twelve compulsory tai chi sessions with a bunch of ex-cons is ripe ground for humour. You may as well have asked us to go to antenatal classes. It was an intermittently hilarious and painful part of the week.

“FOR THE LAST FUCKING TIME!”

For twelve fucking weeks.

30.

The bell rings, and we're instructed back into the classroom in single file. Just in time. The sunshine has vanished under gloomy clouds.

Having been so recently dead, it feels good to use my body again – to actually move – even with the drill-instructor teachers barking at us to get in line. Even so, my real identity as a dead man doesn't truly leave me as I march inside.

When I'm sure no one is looking, I slip a hand into my pocket and pull out the paper. I tease at its edges, unfold it just slightly. Curled and distorted, along the wrinkles of torn paper, the message has become strange, and it is like I am learning to read again: *Hw aout i sn? Tim fr a dri ...*

Back in the classroom, I force myself into the chair again – crammed in once more. I can feel the teacher's eyes on me. I don't like it. Worse is the feeling of eyes on the back of my head, the giggling faces of kids so recently at war.

The teacher opens her mouth and gives us our task: write about a perfect day.

I watch the others begin scribbling. I pick up my pencil which looks tiny in my hand.

\*

People came and went, disappearing in the middle of the day, many of them running out of time. They'd disappear and someone else would come, just as they left. Whatever it was they had spent a lifetime chasing had caught up with them, turned around and consumed them.

At times, I imagined the universe to be a bit like this. A parasite. You either do what is uncomfortable, knowing you might fail, live more damaged, or let go to the thing eating you. And if you do volunteer to let go and be used up, there comes titillation, pleasure. Chaos at feast in the world. Whatever road you take, you're nature's bitch. Sure, there may be alternative philosophies but even this might just be a way to avoid reality, a less honest way to numb and close your eyes. It's all pleasure: a way from A to C, by jumping B. Use me up.

Vince departed and was replaced by a younger fella with a baseball cap welded to his head. With inspired nomenclature we called him, *the Hat*. It was the same week the Hat arrived that the Scientist also came into my world and the torment began. I met them both on one of the afternoons at the homeless shelter. Once a week we would go there and get CBT coaching from a psychologist with a group of others who had to attend by court order, or, if someone happened to be in the shelter and just fancied it. More often than not, nobody fancied it, but

sometimes you'd get a proper street crazy, shouting and foaming at this mild-mannered homosexual psych. He would say things like:

“Thank you, I think we can all take some of that on board.”

The only bloke I knew that week was Danny, an albino Aboriginal who was doing the course as part of probation. He asked lots of questions, seemed interested. He was another man covered in bravado and I could see he was touched by the efforts of someone trying to do something nice. He never stopped being a tough guy, but he wanted to know how to control his addictions.

The Scientist and the Hat arrived and introduced themselves. The Scientist, so called because of his job and qualifications which he would never take long to tell you about, had the long body of a sausage dog and the pointed face of a squirrel. He had busy eyes and, from moment one, was telling the rest of us what to do.

“Yeah mate, I know all about deep breathing,” he began diplomatically. “When are you gonna tell me something useful.”

I bristled at his interjection. There was pizza at the end of these sessions and the man needed to stop talking; I wanted my barbecue chicken.

“Why don't you shut up and listen?” I offered helpfully.

And that was it, we were at war. Why the hell not? Unfortunately, that paved the way for the Scientist to enter and terrorise my life for the next few months.

As luck would have it, both of these bastards moved into the same house as me. We were about as friendly as a bucket of hungry rats. Three knife fighters constantly circling each other. Things started okay with the Hat and we initially bonded over talk about his marriage.

“Nah, mate. Nah. I won't do it again.” For a 23-year-old, this seemed an oddly determined statement. He was unmoved by counterargument though.

“What if you met someone who was cool later on?”

“Nah.”

But our friendly beginning did not last. Soon, I saw him leave the house with the Scientist and before long he refused to talk to me. Instantly cold and incommunicative. When I walked in the room, he looked away and didn't say a word.

If I said, “Hi,” it would be met by silence.

After this happened a few times, I stopped bothering. So, we went on in silence, conspicuously ignoring each other except for the occasional grunt of frustration or look of disgust. Those long accusing sighs. Part of the issue against me, it seemed, was the cleaning. There was this story going around that I didn't do my fair share. From my point of view, this was horseshit. I washed up everything after I ate and did my round of the household chores as

per the schedule. I understood the basic laws of thermodynamics just as well as the Scientist. How things tended to unravel, fell into disorder. You only needed to look at an addict's bedroom to know that was true.

So I kept on doing my thing. I didn't feel like I had breached any particular rule – but still, the problem remained. I had enemies and they were in the house. Being right or wrong doesn't mean much if there are two of them and one of you. And more to the point, there was nowhere else I could go. There was no money in the bank and I had no friends, family, or contacts to lean on. No job. It was this house or the street. I have only slept rough a few times, but it is enough to know I don't like it too much. Staying was my only option.

As ours was the main house for the whole project, everything marched through there. If we had a group or a class, it was there, so everybody came by at some point or another. Tuesdays meant food delivery and collecting the unwanted food was something of a prized job. Everything arrived in a stack and needed to be put in the fridge, before the boxes would be broken up and placed in recycling. If a house resident couldn't be there to collect the food, somebody else would and that person was trusted to clean up the trash afterwards.

One Tuesday the Scientist agreed to take the delivery. When I got home a few hours later, it looked like the house had suffered a break-in. There were boxes and bits of food strewn all about the ground floor beyond even the kitchen and into the sitting room. It was pushed to a point where it was designed to get a reaction.

This wasn't a great situation to be in, but my God I can be just as stubborn if needs be. The Hat moved out when a bigger room came up in another house and the Scientist and I continued for almost ten weeks without talking to each other. He had set out to break me. But in the end, it was him who broke.

My morning routine had become regular and predictable. I would usually stumble downstairs in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt and eat some Weetabix with a glass of vegetable juice. My theory was I hadn't eaten many vegetables, or much at all, during the previous decade and it was a good idea to stack the food in now. While I was doing this, I would usually encounter the Scientist, who would stare at me but not say 'hello'. He would always be cleaning something reproachfully.

During the ten weeks of our mutual internment, he would become ever more outlandish with his muteness and his scrubbing. Towards the end, I awoke one morning to find the drying rack for the sink on the floor outside my bedroom door. On it was my breakfast bowl and spoon from the previous morning. The temerity of me not putting them back in the cupboard after they had dried was too much for somebody. I wonder who?

I picked it up and walked downstairs. The birds were chirping on that crisp clear morning. Entering the kitchen, I was greeted by the sight of the Scientist, covered in sweat, the salt of hard labour drenching him and the look of grim determination on his face that of a man climbing a mountain. He had wheeled the street bin inside and had leant it against the counter so he could reach in and scour it clean with soap and bubbles and fresh chux cloths, presumably purchased for the task. He glared at me impassively.

Keeping a straight face, I placed the rack on the kitchen table and took my bowl and spoon from it. From there, I walked to the fridge and took the Weetabix box from the top and the milk from the door. I could feel his eyes following me as if I were a wasp, stuck on the wrong side of a pane of glass. I placed five wheat blocks in my bowl, added milk, and began munching nonchalantly. When finished, I quickly washed the bowl and spoon, replaced the rack on the sink and put them on top. Lifting up the cereal box and the milk carton, I could feel that they were both empty. I gave them a little shake and shrugged my shoulders.

I walked towards the Scientist who had stopped scouring the deep interior of the wheelie bin and was now just staring at me. I threw the box and the carton inside and saw some dusty bits of wheat and a trickle of milk fall out, forming a fresh crust of dirt upon his otherwise pristine plastic. We locked eyes for a second. Then I turned and walked back upstairs to my room. His quiet rage could have shattered windows a block away.

At some point in all this, I don't mind saying, I realised this conflict was taking a toll on me. I would whinge constantly about him and I didn't like to see myself as a whinger. All I wanted was the guy to say 'good morning'. Basic human decency I thought. He was having none of it. It was driving me mad and I got the impression he was taking some sadistic pleasure in it.

Every day something different to fret over, to complain about. Eventually, the repetitiveness itself became a torment. How much longer could I cope with this monotonous cycle, especially with dopes like the Scientist and the Hat for company?

I needed change, variety. Life. Wherever that would come from, I wanted to move towards it. Right now, I was at my wits' end. I had to act.

That's when I decided to go right ahead and kill the cunt.

It was only fair.

31.

I started to brainstorm ideas on the topic: rat poison might do the trick, but it would be difficult to administer. I considered putting it in the instant coffee he was constantly going through, but this lacked delicacy.

The idea of physical violence greatly appealed to me. I'd like to stick my knee on his neck and make him say please and thank you! However, I knew he was a former sailor, and he had mates who would likely pile in. So, murder would need to be most subtle.

Two days later, me and the Hat were in the kitchen and I proposed coffee.

He looked at the wall for a second, then at the floor. Despite the days of uncomfortable quiet and resentment, he was still easier to be around than the Scientist. Then the words "Why not?" fell out of his mouth.

We went around the corner to a hole-in-the-wall place with a hipster-ish vibe. Artful tattoos and hair tied up in 1950s style, the short sleeves of checked shirts rolled over and tucked in. We sat there together: me in jeans and a black t-shirt, him in exercise pants, a hoodie, and the obligatory hat.

"What can I get ya?" chirped the barista, keen, clammy, potentially surviving on a mix of smoothies and cocaine.

"Cap," said the Hat.

"Flat white in a takeaway cup," I asked.

"You sitting in?"

"We're sitting aren't we?"

"You can't sit in and have a takeaway cup."

"Why not?"

"We don't do that."

"What the fuck? It's coffee."

"Mate, we don't do it. That's the way it is."

"Fuck's sake. Fine, normal cup."

"That's four bucks each. Can you pay in advance?"

We went to another café and never returned to the crackhead hipster again. Unfortunately, he was around the corner from the house and I would need to change my route home. Doesn't matter, it was worth it to make a point.

"How are you man?"

"Okay. I been thinking about joining the navy. I'm not sure it's for me."

The Scientist had been in his head alright.

“Why the navy?”

“Old mate says it’s a good thing. He did it. I’m not sure.”

The Hat was young, but he had some runs on the board. He was away from family, away from where he came from. Out on his own. I could see the agony in this notion.

“It doesn’t look like this idea is making you happy.”

“It isn’t.”

I sipped my flat white, all three dollars fifty of it.

“I like this day at a time stuff.”

“Yeah.”

“What was your poison?”

“Bit of heroin. Bit of meth.”

“Injecting?”

“At the end, yeah.”

“I don’t know much about the navy mate. But I reckon they might be strict.”

“Got worse at the end of my marriage.”

“You got married, I remember.”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

It seemed like a good idea at the time: this phrase could echo through the ages as a precursor for all sorts of ill-judged actions. Bond villains when asked; ‘Why did you explain the plot at such length, giving him the chance to escape?’ People who voted for George W. Bush; criticising your boss’s work; asking your sister why she was shouting at her husband. All of these things and more had merit in the moment. The consequences could last an eternity.

“She isn’t waiting for you then?”

At this he laughed. His head rolled back and leaked cappuccino through his nostrils. The hat fell to the ground to reveal a thick and luscious head of hair.

“No mate,” fighting back tears. “She is not waiting.”

Gravely I understood. There was no one waiting for me either.

“You’re alright mate,” he exclaimed with genuine shock. “Old mate said you were a right cunt.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘look out for this bloke.’ Really spoke out of the side of his mouth while he said it.”

I fucking knew it! There was no doubt about it. He must perish.

That night we had a dinner for all of the houses down at the bottom of Bourke Street in the biggest house of the group. The rooms there were more like private apartments and the Hat had the one at the front, the *Taj*. We spent the afternoon down there on the balcony smoking cigarettes and talking what's what. He knew this terrain better than I did and I was grateful for the tuition.

"Lot o' blokes round here wanna help you get back on your feet. Might have a job for you. That type of thing. Stay away from 'em."

"How do you mean?"

"They'll get you to do the runs for 'em. Take something from here to there. They don't wanna get their hands dirty."

"No one's approached me. I guess I'm not the material they're looking for."

"You're pretty loose. But everyone wants cash some time. You'll be the same. Blokes end up dead or in jail. Don't do it."

"What's your plan?"

"They don't like me here. Giving me shit. I'm trying to get houso."

"You're young. What about a job?"

"Mate, I got a criminal record. That's years away."

The road back from the bottom of addiction and crime seemed impossible. This kid was gonna do it though – I could see it in him.

Time passed. I rolled cigarettes.

"What's for dinner?" I'd ask.

"Fuck knows. I'm staying out of it."

At 6pm, we went downstairs to the smell of sausages blistering on a pan. The two guys cooking were friendly with the Scientist and they greeted the Hat. To me, they gave the shortest of shrift, not even a nod. When Anton and the others arrived, I felt more at ease. People who said 'hello' and were friendly made a difference. They always do and rarely get credit for it.

One of the punks at the grill was checking his phone relentlessly. His mind was elsewhere and not focussed on food preparation. I consoled myself with the knowledge that: time + heat = edible sausage. The chances of me expiring from badly cooked meat were not high. Not this time.

Jeremy and Lou arrived and the sausages were handed out. We rolled them in sliced white bread, ketchup was squirted, burned onions were squidged in.

Jeremy was in a relaxed mood.

"What've we got here fellas? Quite the feast."

Having a dominant character in a good mood cut the tension. Instead of the Scientist and his Vandellas on one side of the room gurning, everybody started chipping in with a joke here and there. There is something levelling about a group of men standing and eating together. Pretences are dropped. The code is always the same: if you like someone you're horrible to them in the group but stand up for them behind their back. If you don't like someone, you are icy polite.

There was a lot of talk of jail.

"Using is outta control in there."

"I always wondered how they got the drugs in."

"Usually the girls bring it in their vaginas when they visit. Sometimes a screw."

"Screws are brutal."

"I seen blokes beaten half to death and just left there. Many a time."

The Scientist, his eyes wild, laughed along loudly with his mates' banter. Jeremy was also excitable and munched his hotdog, nodding along. It was like a night of drinking, although less repetitive and with fewer trips to the bathroom.

The man on the grill was cooking as if a clock was ticking. It was June now and the night fell early, the breeze cooling the room and all of us happy to finish eating and get somewhere warmer.

"That's yer lot," he boomed as the final bangers were plated and put on the table. The saucepan skidded into the sink and he began scrubbing it, looking out at the room, his eyeballs willing us out the door.

The men descended on those final sausages like seagulls, elbows flapping to the side and gentle pushes here and there. Spare tyres began to sprout on the once grey and gaunt figures about me.

Jeremy started to eyeball the pan cleaner. As he realised this, the washing became less frantic. He smiled the smile of innocence and came out to join the group, all affable and friendly.

Silence descended, pierced only by polite munching and stifled burps.

"Any announcements?" said Lou.

The room didn't stir. Lips turned down, shoulders shrugged. Jeremy looked directly at the Scientist, who did not return eye-contact, just glanced nervously from side to side. Then he stared at me for a moment. I looked over my shoulders, to see if there was somebody behind he might be checking for. But no, he was looking at me. His attention made me feel guilty.

"Then I'll see you all in the morning," Jeremy concluded.

The men shuffled out.

“Ta.”

“See ya later fellas.”

“Sausages again next week.”

I hung around with the Hat and smoked in the backyard for a bit, emboldened by having made a friend. Not much time passed before the pan cleaner walked out the back door on his phone.

“When are youse two fuckin off?” he enquired politely.

“Get fucked,” offered the Hat. “I fuckin’ live here.”

Pan man’s room was out back and separate from the rest of the house. He brushed past us and opened its door, galloping inside and the sounds of instant rearranging could be heard.

“How long?” I heard him say into the phone. “See you soon.”

He stuck his head out and shouted back up to us again.

“Fuck off cunts!”

Not while there is cola in my canny can can, I thought.

That’s when I started to hear the sound.

Clop, clop, clop, clop. Interspersed with some whispering, quiet enough that I couldn’t make out the words, but loud enough that I could make out it was two people. Clop, clop, clop, clop, clop.

Then a knock at the gate.

Pan man walked to the end of the backyard and opened it. I could see one of the street girls, make up attacking her face, hair reaching for the heavens, and agonisingly high heels. She handed the Pan man something and he shut the gate again. He came marching up the yard towards us, leaving the gate unlocked.

“Get in the fuckin kitchen,” he growled at us.

The Hat smiled. “Guess you got a few smokes for us?”

“Fuck’s sake.” He reached into his pocket and handed us a cigarette each.

“I’ll have two mate,” the Hat added.

And the second two came out.

As soon as we entered the kitchen, we could hear the clopping again as the girl walked through the yard with her kill.

“Shhhh.”

Not a bad little earner, I thought. Though, it was not the best hustle for clean freaks.

“How much you chargin’ her?” I asked.

“None o’ your fuckin business.”

It was the first two *real* cigarettes I'd had in I don't remember how long. Even spending so long in close quarters with the Scientist hadn't taken the shine off things. It was a good day.

32.

Everyone is writing their perfect day, the sound of pencils itching away, like rodents desperate for food, scuttling across the floor late at night.

I imagine all the sunny thoughts flushing through their heads – holidays by the pool, hugs from parents, pets you grow to love who love you back out of need and necessity. I've lived longer than these kids, and know too well what the deal is with those stray hopes and dreams.

A sheet of lined paper sits in front of me. The giggles and chatter have damped down. Even the teacher is seated now, pen in hand, appearing to write something at her desk.

I toy with the edges of the paper, scribble a few lines. A long time ago, I might have filled the margins with doodles, weaving in and out of the blue lines. But this is different. A nameless need compels me.

I take the wrinkled note from my pocket and place it over the lined sheet. From this distance, with my craftiness, the teacher can't see what I'm doing. I flip the paper, message-side down, onto the desk.

I take my pencil and begin to write.

\*

We are all a bit special and there is nothing like a few years of self-inflicted brain damage to wake up to this fact.

Take Phil for example. Here was a guy who had been around the houses and wore his insecurities on his sleeve like an ostentatious ketchup stain from lunch. His tattoos were the shonky, self-administered prison kind. Strangely unintimidating, not signifying any obvious allegiance. They looked like they had been done on an especially chaotic afternoon when there was nothing on the TV. Just green dots in no particular pattern, scattered across hands and forearms. They looked odd, although it had probably seemed a good idea at the time.

Phil liked girls – we all did. But Phil liked girls in a way where he could see them coming from several blocks away. His desire for a woman was the parched rasping of a man dying of thirst. He would sit in group in the mornings and put on this strange gruff voice and stare off to the side, speaking of things in a solemn tone. When he began to talk, people would exchange glances, roll their eyes. It couldn't have been easy for him, but he was magnificent in his determination to keep going with the act as he launched into his stories.

*"I remember one time when a bloke asked me for advice, and I said to him..."*

Or some such cobblers that was supposed to make him look good – even though nobody understood.

It didn't bother me much, but he drove several people insane.

The Hat, being our youngest and perhaps angriest member, wanted to dismember him. Despite being only twenty-three, he had already managed to move to the Philippines, get married, move back and accumulate at least twenty tattoos. Phil thought of the Hat as a protégé, someone to whom he could impart his worldly wisdom.

The Hat thought Phil was a tool.

“Mate, I remember when I was your age...” Phil would begin in that gruff voice.

“Don't talk to me cunt,” the Hat would spit back.

“Mate, calm it down,” Jeremy would say.

There ended the lesson.

Phil's discomfort with himself was like a high-pitched shriek in a quiet room. It would perturb anyone near him. Animals would scurry away, insects would dig underground, birds would squawk and fly off. When you looked straight at him – it became clear that eye-contact for Phil was clearly like staring into the sun – it felt like seeing into the eyes of the dying. He inspired mockery and pity in equal measure.

He needed a woman more than most. And women could sense this. Unconscious of the fact that he was approaching, they would cross the street from a block away in anticipation. There must be some evolved primal alert-system warning them of his kind.

One morning he walked in, glaring as a mouse might glare at a pack of coyotes, his lips turned downwards, his elbows arched out. He walked to the corner of the room without looking anyone directly in the eye. Standing there, Jeremy to his left, he stared at the wall above us and drew in a deep breath. His distress was palpable to everyone.

“Tell 'em,” said Jeremy.

Everybody perked up at that point. Something was afoot.

“Faaark.”

“Tell 'em mate. They have a right to know.”

“The ones in my house yeah,” Phil said.

Now all of our imaginations were whirring. Was he cooking up speed in the house? Harboured a stowaway? Opening a portal to another dimension?

Or, even worse, had he been caught out renting his room to one of the street girls like Pan Man? If that little scam got shut down, more than one bloke would be out of pocket. It ain't easy to make an honest living on the dole.

“Look,” he sighed.

We were like Hyenas on the Serengeti. Eyes darting left and right.

A rather sinister emotion came over me, a sense of relief. With another man in Jeremy’s sights, I knew the focus of trouble would not be me today. I had lived in constant expectation of reprimand. Since early childhood, my propensity to do the wrong thing in the eyes of authority figures was innate. The Mozart of disobedience if you will. From the classroom to these four walls, it sometimes felt like not much had changed.

For the next few minutes at least, I could turn off that alarm and relax.

“Go on,” pushed Jeremy.

“We’ve all seen some of the girls on the street.”

I could see some fists clenching and shoulders rounding.

Perhaps this is how normal people feel I thought to myself – even with Phil in the spotlights. At ease with the universe and awaiting the next event.

He continued in the manner of a man carrying several bullet wounds and crawling towards a bear trap.

“Well, I’ve been letting one of them...”

Eyes started to narrow.

“The blonde girl with the bob, ya know.”

We did.

“... come in and use my shower between jobs. Chatting to her and stuff.”

The eyes in the room started to relax. Nobody felt this was a massive crime.

“The reason I was letting her was in the hope I might get a root.” Of course it was.

A couple of people sniggered, more in recognition I thought. But for Phil it was hell.

“So last night...” His face had creased unusually – was he about to cry? “Last night, I went down to the kitchen while she was in my shower and when I came back... she’d robbed my wallet and phone and a few other things from my room.”

“Fucking stupid,” said Jeremy.

He drew breath again.

“So, I’m saying sorry for putting my housemates’ stuff in danger.”

It felt cruel of Jeremy to make him apologise publicly like that. Though in the long run, I understand why he did it. For me, it was no big deal. Phil will be angry about that morning up until the end of time. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he blames Jeremy for it too. The problem with Phil was he never twigged that his insecurity pushed people away. I didn’t really understand it when I was a kid either. I always ‘got’ Phil. I understood the overwhelming desire to be accepted, to fit in, to be wanted, that drove all of his actions. I understood what it was

like to see what the cool kids were doing and to copy it, to attempt to be one of them by painting my backpack in a similar way and being promptly mocked and ridiculed for it. School was not great to me. There are some lessons you have to learn over and over again and never quite sink in. It seemed he had learned and forgotten that one a million times. He couldn't be himself. Couldn't feel satisfied in his own skin. It is a horrible situation to be in, to want something so much that you can only push it away. There is a little of Phil in all of us I think.

33.

Two days later, the Hat called me as I was walking to the homeless shelter for a session with the gay psychiatrist. It was late afternoon, a warm breeze in the air.

“Mate, it happened.”

His voice was urgent, decisive.

Whatever ‘it’ was, had undoubtedly occurred.

“He was in at the clinic this morning. Puked on the floor. He’s a shot duck.”

These clipped sentences glossed a whole story, but I was missing ‘it’ – the key bit of information.

“Who?” I asked. I had no idea who the Hat was talking about. Phil post-humiliation? Anton post-Kransky? Dean returned?

“Your mate...” At this, I raised my eyebrows. I was still in the dark.

“You’re my mate.”

“NOOOOOO, your maaate.”

“Science man?”

“Science man.”

He had gone and relapsed. Frankly, it could have been either of us. A lesson in rigidity was being handed out here. Neither of us was willing to budge and, in the end, one of us broke. I also bore damage from this and enduring was slim satisfaction.

I continued on my way to the shelter, making my way through Chippendale, the cars flying past on Regent Street following the way up to Redfern. A bicycle shop sat there, quietly suffocated by the torrent of traffic belching its gas into the air as it headed west. Sydney kept moving, the commuters with places to be, hitting 110 km/h and be damned what was in front of them. Emails needed to be answered, texts responded to, steaks to be eaten, lager drunk.

I wouldn’t wish it on anyone – getting slaughtered in the morning and puking it all up in front of the whole clinic – not even the fucking Scientist. But maybe that was it; maybe he’d finally succeeded in boring a hole in the fabric of the normal world. Taking up shop in Oblivion. Just this once, I couldn’t help but admire him a little. Opting out at least has gumption.

Good luck Scientist, wherever next you shall roam.

\*

The psych was a fan of patterned jumpers. Not stripes exactly, more like a collection of horizontal shapes headed left to right across his chest: a squiggle, a line, something that looked like a heartbeat monitor on LSD.

“How are you today Jack?” he purred.

“I’m alright, how are you?” I politely enquired while taking off my shoes. “I can take off my shoes, right?”

“If that makes you feel comfortable.”

“It does.” I didn’t like the way my feet sweated after a walk and I figured, in a homeless shelter, that their smell would quickly be lost among the many lush fragrances.

“How are things going in the house?”

I was suspicious of such questions. Surely, he would feed back to those in charge, and I couldn’t let myself get involved in conflict when there was the threat of being kicked out.

“It has been tense.”

“Yeeeeeeas,” the pitch of his voice crept upwards, tempting out further information.

“But I reckon it’s over now.”

“Ooooooh?” a lilt in the tone, which said, tell me more.

I was reticent to talk openly with this guy. These meetings may have been designed to help, but I felt surveilled. Surrounded by spies. This man was a therapist, I was duty bound to see him for my accommodation. He made it feel like I was gossiping with a hairdresser though, and it helped drop my guard.

“My housemate has relapsed apparently. He is puking on the floor at the clinic right now.”

“Ooooh. I hadn’t heard that.”

I shrugged.

“Do you have any feelings about this?”

“I guess I feel relief. He was making my life hard.”

“He was making *your* life hard?” I detected an insinuation in there. That he felt it was my fault.

“He was fuckin’ rude. Never said hello. Slagged me behind my back.”

“Sometimes people are like this. So, if people are rude, it makes your life hard.”

“Yeah.”

“People can be rude. People can have bad days.”

“He had ten bad weeks.”

“Possibly longer. It might not have anything to do with you.”

This did not make me feel better. Strange how my goal was always to feel better. To sidestep my default emotion of low-level agony. This was why I drank beer, skulled shots, snorted lines, gobbled burgers, chased women, smoked cigarettes, caught planes, rolled dice, played cards. These things made me FEEEEEEEEEL, not anguished, not less-than, not entirely incomplete. Truth was people made me feel bad – their expressions, their words, their judgement.

Substances, illicit behaviours, and the thrill of anticipation – these lit my fire. But they were not on the menu right now.

“Well, he’s gone now.”

“Is this how you are always going to deal with your problems? To just hang in there until it goes away?”

“I don’t know.” And I didn’t. This whole ordeal had been painful.

“That’s a good answer. Not knowing is fine. You need to avoid going back to your old ways. Or you’ll be back here. Or worse.”

“I have learned that.”

He nodded gently. He put his pen down on his notebook and looked at me. When he did it was almost like he saw the accumulation of the same days, from detox, to recovery, to halfway, behind my face.

“You know why I work here?” He asked me in a manner that suggested pretences had been dropped.

“I don’t.” This sudden directness was refreshing.

“I used to drink, a bit like you. Kind of cocky.”

Unsubtle, but fair.

“I drove through an intersection in South Africa one night, on my way back from the pub. Two people died. Including my partner.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t really drive.”

“Are you listening Jack? You’ve got a chance here. There aren’t many. You’ve already seen what happens to people. If you drop your shit, you might make it.”

This was the first time I had seen him emerge from behind the cloak of professionalism. He seemed like a human for once. We both did.

I went to speak but found my words catch a bit.

“I am doing what I can.”

His breathing slowed and his fists clenched and unclenched on his knees. I had not noticed before but he was a big man. More than six foot, broad shoulders, wide chin. Put a hat

on him and he could have been a merchant seaman. A tinkly voice can mislead you at times. No wonder Mike Tyson had become such an animal.

“So what? You do your time here, get a job, and carry on? The same things will probably happen.”

“The same shit could happen. I could do all those things and they could fall apart. What then? Start from square one. Go through it all over again.”

“So what is going to be different this time?”

This was a very good question.

“I don’t think I can figure out past today, beyond lunch time.”

“It’s three in the afternoon.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I dooo,” that lilt in the voice was back. “But maybe that is enough. Just get today right.”

“I hope so...” I reflected on how each day had been the sum total of many little decisions. There were positive choices, then negative choices. But I didn’t see addiction as a selfish choice; it wasn’t a choice at all. There was hopelessness but there was also grace. “I have been lucky here. I know that. Luck isn’t always comfortable, but it is still luck. I can’t throw this away.”

“That’s right. You have been lucky. We both have.”

“I don’t know how I got to this point, but I am glad to be here.”

I looked around the office, out of the window. There was a young girl holding a baby out there in the yard of the shelter. She wore a maroon hoodie and grey trackie pants. She was bumming a cigarette from an old drunk with a beard the colour of river mud and hands yellow like the desert.

“I know what’s waiting for me if I don’t hold onto this.”

34.

The teacher is speaking at the front of the classroom. The school day is nearly over.

She calls on each student to read their writing – to share their perfect day. As the children shuffle to the front, I notice the downward glances, the trembling legs, the muttered rehearsals under breath. I hate pity, but I feel it for us all.

Quavering voices read from lined sheets. I've finished mine, scrawled in tiny script despite my clumsy fingers. Over the course of class, I've penned a miniature monster, a haiku to horrify, a poem that can't be taken back.

“Jack Gallagher.”

My turn. I walk to the front. Behind me, the days of the week are still scrawled across the whiteboard. A few puzzled glances, even snickers, when they see what I'm carrying – not the neat sheet we were given, but a ruined square of paper, the kind that looks like it could have been fished out after honking my nose.

At the front of the room, I am an insect pinned under a microscope. I look out to the class: there – cool kids at the back. There at the front, the one I fancied who never gave me the time.

What else is there to do but read? I bring the paper to my eyes, aware how on the other side there is the crayon message. Even when I open my mouth, I can tell the kids are trying to decipher what it says.

Out of the corner of my eye, the clock: only a few minutes to go. Maybe I won't even have time to start. Maybe I can slip free, go safely home – to the car, where a packet of crisps will be waiting.

\*

A week later, I was lighting my third cigarette before breakfast when Darius called.

“Jack my friend, we must talk,” he announced with accented pomposity.

The kettle boiled and I poured steaming water into the cafetière I had found for four bucks in *St. Vincent de Paul*. The house was mine alone right now and I exploited this by smoking in the kitchen.

“So talk.”

“This place I mentioned... there is work. Now is the moment to strike. How is your CV?”

“The greatest work of fiction ever told.”

“Glorious, I will text you David's email address. He is expecting your contact.”

“I owe you for this big fella.”

“Buy me a beer sometime.”

“No.”

He laughed. I did not.

“Okay,” he added. “Speak to you later.”

This was week eleven now. In a fortnight, I could return to work and start earning money again. Face society, become a functioning cog in that big wheel once more. What a load of shit. But it was better than other loads on offer. Sometimes one learns the hard way. I put on the radio and listened to Booker T and the MG’s. Having this place to myself and the music playing loud felt goood. The Hammond organ bounced off the electric guitar and I could feel my shoulders moving along with it – involuntary, what real music should do to me. These guys were from a different time, when talent was required to release a record. My previous decade had been spent in clubs and sports bars; it was rock music or house beats, crack cocaine for the ears, the snares and claps riding along with my high, the arrival of a win or a loss. My system for the pokie machines never worked, but the peak of a house track never missed. If I could combine that with the right level of drink or MDMA then *halle-fuckin-luyah*. But these MG’s were a smoother affair, a steady dance with a satisfying conclusion. More like a confident upwards movement than a high, a satisfying climb, ready to rest on the plateaux.

A knock at the door broke my peace. The clack of a finger entering the code followed immediately afterwards. In a swift movement, I crossed the kitchen and walked out the back door with my cigarette and coffee cup.

Lou walked in with two new fellas. I suppose fresh catches had been inevitable. You never had to wait long for people to go. They all left eventually, new people taking their place. I didn’t dislike other humans in general, but I certainly felt better when they weren’t around. I had been here for some time though, and I guess that made me some kind of elder for what it was worth.

I did the handshaking, the smiling. To look busy, I stubbed out my cigarette and grabbed the mop, as if to say, *I keep things clean around here, make sure you do too*. These new guys had the familiar air of broken goods – scarring, ink and scruffiness. The obligatory strut. Lou showed them upstairs and, while they were settling in, he came down to bear me glad tidings.

“Space come up in one of the other houses, a bigger room. You can take it.”

“Sweet. When?”

“Soon as you’ve cleaned up here. Come down and get the key from the office by four.”

I nodded as they busied themselves with other tasks. A big day beckoned.

While cleaning the room and packing my bag, I was able to take stock of what had changed since I arrived. My wardrobe was a little less threadbare. A couple of old socks and t-shirts were thrown away to be replaced by workable alternatives. I had a couple of new books now and needed another bag to carry them. Things were cleaner, clothes were folded. An air of manageability was beginning to descend upon my affairs. I didn't let this fool me. The path down would only take a few hours to travel, but the path headed upwards was longer and needed constant attention.

As I continued to place my clothes in bags, I cast my mind to the rest of the day. There would be time to kill. Perhaps I could walk down towards Stanley Street to invest in a coffee and a go on the pinball machine before I checked in with Lou. I would take a table facing the street in the last throws of the afternoon sunlight.

On the way for coffee, I imagined passing the dole office where I knew it was pay day. Other lives bustled all around. A cursory glance would tell them I wasn't worth robbing. The purposeful stride of the heroin addict as they headed towards Centrelink to get their dole cheque, or towards their dealer's house when they knew that product was available. They'd walk through walls to achieve their objective. Nothing would get in their way and I comprehended this with solemn understanding. Identification.

The room was almost finished. I took a seat on the edge of the stripped mattress and looked at my hands, finding they weren't shaking anymore and had returned to a colour resembling that of a normal person. I had shaved and there was colour on my cheeks too. Darius had come through with work and I had sailed through the rough seas. Was this a new era? Whatever it was I would be ready. What could go wrong?

As I took in the scene, I spotted something at my feet. Looking down, I found a balled-up piece of paper. I took it in my hands, turning over its peaks and valleys with my new fingers. It was high time I grabbed that coffee.

I stuffed the paper in my pocket and left.