

A Turtle's Journey

By

Andrew turtle

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About the Author

I was born on November 30, 1984, at Nepean Hospital to my mother, Lorraine Turtle, and father, Laurence Turtle. Throughout my life, I have encountered many twists and turns, confronting multiple traumas along the way. Despite these challenges, I have used my experiences as a springboard to cultivate compassion and resilience, always striving to learn and grow.

Throughout my memoir, I refer to my parents as ‘Mother Dearest’ and ‘Farther’—words of endearment that reflect my deep love and respect for them. From a young age, they modelled compromise, partnership, and love, creating a happy home filled with joy and laughter. My two brothers have also been an unwavering source of support, keeping our family together through thick and thin.

As much as I value family connections, I also profoundly cherish my friendships, even though I can sometimes be misunderstood. Music is my solace, a soothing balm that helps quell my pain. I use my poems and songs to express my emotions, often drawing the deeper aspects of my experience. Above all, I love playing the piano, which is a way to connect with others through the gift of music.

Sports have also played an essential role in my life, particularly cricket. Through the game, I have cultivated friendships and learned the importance of being a team player. While I was born with natural talent, I haven’t always lived up to

that talent. Tennis and table tennis are my other favourite sports that allow me to hone my hand-eye coordination while having fun. Despite challenges with academic achievement, I have always loved learning. I have pursued a wide range of disciplines—Chinese Medicine, International Public Health, and Community Services—and now synthesise knowledge from various sources. I am deeply curious about the world and how it works, drawing insights from diverse figures such as Rupert Sheldrake, the Dalai Lama, Joe Dispenza, Bill Gates, and more. I aim to use my knowledge to help myself and others, promoting healing and restoring balance to our planet.

This memoir is an ongoing journey—a reflection on my life and an exploration of what is to come. I hope you will join me as I continue to learn and grow, applying my experiences to help create a better future for myself and those around me.



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CHAPTER 1~Parts of My Rich Life

There are many parts in my life that makes my life so rich. My parents brought me up in a happy home where they modelled compromise, love, and how to have a fun time. My brothers are the rock that holds me together. My grandparents were my heroes growing up that ensured that all my family had the opportunities we needed to succeed. Music is, and will always be, the cornerstone of my life.

I am also a talented cricket, table tennis, tennis, and an Australian Football League (AFL) player, and although I was never the best at any of them, I have competed in these sports all my life. I love being with my mates on the sports field or playing at home with my brothers. I also am passionate about the Sydney Swans, whose blood culture has given me many great memories. Most of all, though, my mates keep me happy and as sane as possible. This is my story, which starts by exploring all these areas of my life that I am profoundly grateful that I can enjoy.

From The Very Beginning

From the very beginning, my life has been filled with richness and depth. My parents gave me a happy home, modeling the importance of love, compromise, and fun. My brothers have been my constant rock, supporting me no matter what. My

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grandparents were true heroes, ensuring that our family had the opportunities we needed to succeed.

All these parts of my life have created a sense of abundance in everything I do. Music has always been a cornerstone of my life. From the earliest age, I was entranced by the sounds of the piano, an instrument that became a lifelong passion. Sports, too, have been a significant source of enjoyment and fulfillment. While I may not have been the best cricket, table tennis, tennis, or AFL player, I have always competed with enthusiasm, sharing many memories with mates on the field or playing at home with my brothers. The Sydney Swans is one sports team that holds a special place in my heart. Their blood culture embodies the kind of sportsmanship and camaraderie I aspire to in all areas of my life. The most important part of sports has always been the opportunity to connect with others, and to share in something larger than myself.

Of course, my mates have been a constant source of joy, laughter, and sanity. Whether we're on the sports field or just hanging out, I value their presence more than anything. Life is meant to be experienced with others, and I am grateful every day for the connections I have made.

My memoir explores all these parts of my life and more - a journey that takes readers on a tour of everything that has shaped me so far. Through it all, I remain profoundly grateful for the abundance life has provided me. I hope that readers will take away the importance of finding joy and richness in all areas of their own lives and embrace the many gifts that life has to offer.

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A Happy Home

Mother Dearest and Farter brought me into the world, demonstrating their love and willingness to compromise to create a happy home for their family. They met at church, where Farter learned to sight-read by playing hymns. To Mother Dearest, he was the cleverest person in the world - and he truly was.

Despite their different backgrounds and interests, Mother Dearest and Farter shared a deep bond and values that brought them together. They worked hard to create a nurturing environment for their three boys, instilling in us the importance of compromise, love, and hard work. As I grew up, I witnessed firsthand the impact of their love and values on our family. It was clear that their commitment to each other and to us was unwavering, and I am forever grateful for the home they created for us.

Born on June 4, 1953, Mother Dearest is the kindest and most compassionate person I know. She always has a story to tell, often about her beautiful boys or her many adventures from yesteryear. Her home is always tidy, and she is an expert knitter, sewer, and seamstress.

Mother Dearest has had a successful career in teaching, and her enthusiasm for education extends to students from diverse backgrounds. She has taught home economics, was a careers advisor, and worked in vocational education. In her vocational education role, she organized school students to

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attend Technical and Further Education (TAFE). After her redundancy, she returned to teaching welfare, which frustrated her until she was finally allowed to retire.

In retirement, Mother Dearest focuses on two major passions. First, she looks after Hawkesbury Skills, a turn-of-the-century building she has been on the committee for decades. Originally used during the war for various things, the committee has transformed over the years from arranging the work for the dole program to organizing the Secret Garden, a community garden for disabled people. Today, Mother Dearest helps maintain the old building and rents it out to various local businesses. Second, she spends much of her time at state records doing family history research and presenting to family history groups around the state, promoting their family history business, Turtle Consolidated Services.

Mother Dearest was brought into a loving family, and her mother, Agnus Norma Storey-Edinburgh, was a pure soul. She spent most of her energy raising two beautiful boys, Roger and Edward, and two wonderful girls, Denise and Lorraine. Unfortunately, we lost one of the fine men in recent years to a sad heart attack. It took a lot of effort to look after Grandy, Victor Joel Storey, who was a confused man after his father left their family home, leaving him looking for answers for the rest of his life.

While there aren't many memories of Grandma, her hospitality was legendary, as she invited everyone into their family home with biscuits and cakes. Up until her death, she made sure Grandy was always looked after. After her passing, Grandy turned slightly sour, struggling to look after himself, and

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infamously yelled at Mother Dearest and Farter, which made me weary of him.

Overall, Mother Dearest has a heart of gold and has inspired many with her life of service, care, and passion. Her presence and unwavering commitment to her passions have blessed her family and community. She truly is a remarkable woman.

Farter, Laurence John Turtle, is a smart and interesting person. Born on July 22, 1953, he has a balanced and educated perspective on political affairs. His most impressive skill is his ability to summarize information precisely, which he used to help you with my English essays to ensure you always got better marks than I deserved.

Farter is also a perfectionist. He has shared stories from his youth about feeling dirty or not achieving his desired level of success in school. Despite these setbacks, he achieved great success as vice-captain and came second in the state for music—accomplishments he should be proud of. During his youth, Farter was an active member of the young Labour Party and was being groomed to be the next minister at their church. He was also academically gifted, earning high marks in school and ultimately gaining admission to law school. Farter had a few girlfriends before taking Poorpa's advice to ask out Mother Dearest. It was the best decision he ever made, and their love and partnership have stood the test of time.

Farter is a kind and attentive person who cares about the success of those around him. His skills and experiences have

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shaped him into the person he is today, and his self-discipline and attention to detail have helped him succeed in both his personal and professional life as a father, History and English teacher, music teacher, and family historian.

Mother Dearest and Farter showed the power of love and compromise as I grew up. Mother Dearest dreamt of living in the country, while Farter preferred city living. They met halfway and moved to the quiet town of Kurrajong, located about two hours northwest of Sydney in the foothills of the Blue Mountains. This picturesque village had rolling hills and a vibrant community where many family friends lived, ensuring that 'home' was never short of company.

Mother Dearest stayed home until she returned to work as a Home Economics teacher at a local high school, while Farter left his job as an English and History teacher at Hawkesbury High to work from home. He set up a piano studio and taught his three boys, nurturing their love of music. Farter's commitment to his family extended to their friends, many of whom also became part of the Games Night Family. They shared a supportive environment that emphasized the importance of both family and friendships.

The Games Night Family comprised families who grew up in Fairfield and moved to Hawkesbury. They would take turns hosting activities monthly, with adults and children enjoying themselves. The adults played adult games while the children played activities like hide and seek in the dark, eventually became mulberry fights as the second-generation Games Night Family got older. Though the group's composition changed over the

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years, the core remained stable. The importance of laughter and an enjoyable time together remained constant.

Looking back, I had a wonderful childhood. I eagerly anticipated those Friday nights when many families would have piano lessons with Farter while Mother Dearest entertained the adults upstairs. The Games Night Family was a highlight, and spending time with such a supportive group is a cherished memory. Mother Dearest and Farter modelled what true love was, and my family had a happy home.

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother

My favourite band is the Hollies, who I associate with the music my family frequently played during our trips around Australia. Their most recognisable song is "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother," which features beautiful 3-piece harmonies that I relate to deeply due to my high regard for my brothers. The song's lyrics convey the message of helping others, no matter their burden. These are the words of this lovely ballad:

The road is long,

With many a winding turns

That leads us to who knows where, who knows where?

But I am strong,

Strong enough to carry him,

He ain't heavy, he's my brother.

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So, on we go.
His welfare is of my concern,
No burden is he to bear,
We'll get there.
For I know
He would not encumber me,
He ain't heavy, he's my brother.
If I'm laden at all
I'm laden with sadness,
That everyone's heart
Isn't filled with the gladness,
Of love for one another
It's a long, long road,
From which there is no return
While we're on the way to there,
Why not share?
And the load
Doesn't weigh me down at all,
He ain't heavy, he's my brother.

My older brother, Phillip John Turtle, Philby, was born on February 20, 1983. Twenty months older than me, he welcomed me into the family despite wanting a baby sister. Philby was a conscientious child who loved escaping by reading mystery books and demonstrated an early love of languages. He idolised me,

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and we spent most of our childhood together. Our bond was strong. While he was less coordinated than me and struggled with his gross motor skills, he excelled in languages. He can speak fluently Japanese, Mandarin, Vietnamese, and English. While grieving from a failed marriage, he finds himself as a teacher, cricket coach, and umpire. He is quiet but is full of love for his family, close friendship circle, and Harry Potter.

The family was complete when David Lawrence Turtle, Davy, joined the family on April 23, 1987. Mother Dearest wanted three beautiful boys, and that is what she got. Davy had his issues. His stomach was not working correctly when he was born, and he could not digest food. He smelt rank! Davy was also born with Elephantids, in which his big left toe Alfred, reached adult size as a baby. His left knee was significantly bigger than his right. This meant he had to buy two pairs of shoes, his left being two sizes bigger than the right. Once he had an operation across the longitude of his stomach and had surgery on his toe, he was ready to go. Davy has grown into a beautiful man who is a loving friend, father, and husband.

In my fondest childhood memories, my brothers and I were inseparable. We spent countless hours playing cricket and table tennis and exploring the country on many memorable holidays. Davy and I shared a room. Our bedtime ritual regularly consisted of a game where one of us would extend an arm from the top bunk, and the other would scramble to catch it before it retreated. Unfortunately, one night ended in disaster when Davy's grip slipped, and he came tumbling down, shattering his collarbone.

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Despite our misadventures, we couldn't avoid our shared passion for sports. In the backyard Rugby league tussles, Philby was known for barreling down the field and sending us flying. Our friendly matches against the Cliftons were always hotly contested, though they had to endure the occasional whiff of sewerage because of a nearby sludge pit when they made their way up to their piano lessons. During one game of rugby league on the cricket, I made a feeble attempt to halt Philby's charge, but instead, I delivered a knock-out hit that left him in a neck brace for weeks. Sorry, bro!

But it wasn't just physical play that brought us together. We had a shared love for scoring and statistics, which we explored through our many games of cricket dice. As the bowler, we would roll two dice, and if the total was less than seven, the batter received no runs. If the sum was seven or above, however, the batter turned to roll the dice themselves, recording the number rolled as the runs they scored. Rolling a five meant the batter was out. We spent hours playing this game, constructing our fantasy leagues, and creating our favorite players. We fashioned entire competitions out of our love for cricket and statistics and thrived on recording and keeping score. As much as I loved the sport, I admit I got too carried away talking trash and often lost track of the score. This habit whilst scoring, got me into plenty of trouble.

Philby's life has been a series of journeys, panning across different continents and cultures. He spent a year in Japan growing up, which was a year of significant trauma for me. I wish I had my big brother here with me, as I am sure he would have protected me. He spent a year in Kunming (China) as part of his

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double degree in International Relations and Education, which I believe is a great mix of disciplines. He spent two and a half years out at Uluru as a tour guide, where he made some great friends, enjoyed cooking, and entertained the guests with the help of his mate Cowboy. Finally, Philby spent six months travelling around Tasmania as a tour guide and sharing some of his gifts.

Philby then spent four years in Vietnam, where he shined. He enjoyed teaching at a school in Hanoi where students showed him much respect. He spent the evenings instructing various students at their homes and in the classroom, he created at his home. He fell in love, and we flew over for a memorable wedding where many of our family and closest friends shared a fantastic two weeks. He then brought his wife out to Australia, where she broke his heart.

Philby is still finding his feet in his career as he adjusts to teaching in Australia. He influences every community he becomes involved in. He was nominated for Citizen of the Year in Coleambally after only being in the community for two years but was mistreated at his placement in Yoogali. He currently lives in our home and spends most of his time teaching, umpiring cricket on television, watching cricket, and eating a lot of tasty food. He slowly gains confidence while healing from his failed marriage but desperately needs someone to talk through his grief. I hope he finds himself and learns to harness the gifts that he has been given.

Davy is an incredibly talented piano player, a wicketkeeper, a rugby league player, an AFL player, and anything he applies his mind to. He is a wonderful friend who has always

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had a large friendship circle growing up and who has a beautiful time together. Yes, they drink and gamble way too much, but they have remained loyal to each other, are all dedicated fathers, and are thriving in their chosen careers. Many continue to play cricket together and have had many memorable parties where they let loose. They used to meet up at RG Magees and wherever the party was, and although separated by distance, our family is never far apart.

Most of Davy's mates met in Whistler before making their way down the West Coast of the United States, where they explored 'the College Scene.' Some of them then moved to Central America before Davy decided to spend a year in Toronto, Canada. Ten years later, he is still there.

With his love of AFL, Davy joined the Rebels, Toronto's AFL team. While playing AFL in Toronto, Davy discovered two of his most beloved companions. A young lady heard about this fantastic young Australian and asked to take him on a date. The rest is history. They now have a loving marriage and two beautiful boys. I did not have much time to get to know the boys, but we formed a loving bond when I spent time with Emmett. I hope they will again love their crazy uncle as I get to know them better. I want to show them how important it is to love your brothers because they can give you joy and a beautiful friendship. I hope their crazy uncle can prove how it is possible to have an enjoyable time, regardless of what hurdles life throws your way.

Unfortunately, the other fantastic companion lost his battle with cancer recently and can no longer share his happiness and joy with us as he did in his lifetime. Thank you, Josh, for being

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a fantastic friend and companion for my beautiful younger brother and generally a good bloke. RIP mate! You have no idea how much you are missed!

You shared so much joy with so many people. I did not get to know you well, but I will always treasure you finding the time to watch a Blue Jays game with us, even though you were working yourself off your feet trying to get your restaurant humming. Finding someone like you, who never had a bad word to say about anyone is hard. We will keep your memory alive and ensure that Matilda grows up knowing what a spectacular human being her dad was. You are no longer with us here, but your spirit will always be. I hope to be reacquainted with your beautiful soul in heaven someday.

My Grandparents Were My Childhood Heroes

Being teachers, Mother Dearest and Farter worked hard during school terms. As soon as all the work was done, we were off. We would pack our beautiful dog Smooch in the back of the Tarago and head up to Wagstaff, a small town on the Central Coast where my childhood heroes, my grandparents Poorpa and Nanna, lived. Our second home at Wagstaff was a happy place. Poorpa helped us catch our first fish off the jetty and taught us how to body surf at Kilcare Beach. We would be welcomed with vinegar, onions (with lots of sugar), and jelly.

Poorpa, Donald John Turtle, had been brought up through The Depression. His cheeky father, Silly Billy, an orphan (even

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though he did not know it), would entertain him, providing him with a lot of love and an early love of politics. I never met Poorpa's mother, Great Nan, but Nanna told me, she was the most beautiful person in the World. Farter spent much time with his grandparents and his cousins growing up. Poorpa's childhood was filled with lots of music and opportunity despite growing up in The Depression.

Nanna, Faith Trevethan-Turtle, was raised in an orphanage. She told stories of the night her mother was taken away from her. She witnessed her mother slit the throat of her Father while she was in her crib. Nanna's mother was taken to a 'nut home' for the rest of her life. Because her Naughty Father could not be trusted around children, Nanna was sent to an orphanage. She grew up in separate homes with her two loving sisters and spectacular brother. Because the warden felt sorry for her, she got special privileges, such as calling first dibs on the fruit. She did not start school until she was seven because she was so small. She was bullied by a girl called Joycey Tricker, who soon learned not to mess with this strong woman. Nanna would go on to become a seamstress but desperately wanted to be a nurse. Her Naughty Father was too scungy to buy her the pocket watch and uniform she needed to learn the trade. Her dreams were squashed but not her spirit.

Poorpa told me it was love at first sight when he met Nanna at Petersham Dance Hall. Nanna came with her Spectacular brother Ern and Poorpa with his cousin Dorothy. They swapped partners. Poorpa and Nanna learned to jitterbug, with Poorpa learning to throw her from shoulder to shoulder and

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through his legs. After that, Poorpa went West on a Harley with one of his mates, picking up whatever work he could find. He talked about shining people's shoes in towns like Nyngan and Walgett. But when he received a letter from the Great Nan saying that The Nanna was visiting her daily while he was away, he came hastily home.

Poorpa and Nanna got married, both aged twenty-three. They built a home together in Fairfield. Poorpa would give Nanna tasks during the day while Poorpa went to work. Poorpa worked in many roles, including a lift mechanic, and eventually became the mayor of Fairfield. While he had strong socialist values and was in the Labor Party, colleagues respected him as he would fight for what was right, regardless of what side of the political spectrum the perspective was. While Poorpa was in politics, the Great Gough Whitlam often spent many hours at their happy home, even as Prime Minister. Poorpa was so dedicated to the people he served that he was willing to take calls whenever needed. He was known to leave the family to solve the problem if it was urgent, even on Christmas Day.

Poorpa was known to party well into the night with his mates. He loved fishing, rugby league, jazz, and playing the clarinet. However, because he was so busy during the day, he only had time to practice the clarinet early in the morning. Poorpa told me stories of being so sore after a game of rugby league that he would be sore most of the following week, only feeling good enough when it was time for the next round. He would then do it again the week after, playing tough, hard footy.

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Poorpa loved a bit of rough play. As was expected back in the day. He told me a few tricks. He said to me that often, he would rile up his second rower with a few jabs under the chin so that the second rower would biff on with the opposition's forward pack. When the umpire asked Poorpa what happened, he always pleaded his innocence.

Poorpa taught me how to kick a footy, organized for his friend in the United States to give me my first clarinet, and shared his love of jazz. He took me on a memorable trip to the Grafton Jazz Festival, where I got acquainted with a young Ses, his beautiful King Charles Spaniel. We caught catfish on the Richmond River and met some great musicians. Poorpa shared boundless joy in telling me stories about his king and queen, Louise Armstrong, and Ella Fitzgerald.

I loved spending time at Wagstaff, but they moved to a new home in Saint Huberts Island when we were a little older. I have even better memories there. I remember fishing (or crabbing) in the Brisbane Waters, swimming against the current in their small pool, and devouring Poorpa's favourite food. Not only would we arrive at vinegar, onions, and jelly, but we would usually have delicious prawns to consume. Poorpa thought that if we tried oysters, we would not like the taste and the texture. He could not have been more wrong. Unfortunately for him, we loved them, and his share was significantly less.

Although he loved oysters, Poorpa loved sharing with his grandchildren. Poorpa gave unconditional love to everyone he knew, especially his grandchildren on both sides of the family. This love could be felt in his presence. His big blue eyes shared the

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window to his beautiful soul. Although he loved the Labor Party, he was just as passionate about justice and supporting the disadvantaged. He never swayed from his integrity. Poorpa talked about 'keeping the bastards honest,' regardless of what side of the political pendulum they swung. To my hero, people were what mattered. People were getting what they needed. He would do anything in his power to ensure no one went without.

I am proud every time I go to Cabramatta, where I can see my hero's name on a plaque. I get excited about visiting Canley Vale to share some Pho with Philby, knowing what an influence Poorpa would have had in this multicultural society. His mate Gough Whitlam did more in his short stint as Prime Minister than any other Prime Minister in the history of our country, bringing into full swing free education and significant reforms such as ensuring that hemophiliacs can self-transfuse instead of having to go to the hospital every time they bump and bruise. I often wonder how much of these great ideas spawned from discussions over a few beers with my great Poorpa.

Nanna was the perfect companion and partner for Poorpa. From her background of living in an orphanage, her life was dedicated to raising her two beautiful children. She built the family home from the ground up, restoring all the furniture herself. She ensured that her children had a good education, upbringing, and a happy home; however initially began learning the piano for herself. Still, as her children's enthusiasm grew as they explored their musical talents, she ensured they were given every opportunity to succeed. This led to both pursuing careers as

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music teachers. While also encouraged by Poorpa's beautiful sister, much of the family has taken a musical route.

Music was an essential part of all of Farter's cousins' life. Both Poorpa and Nanna's children expressed their musical talents in diverse ways. Farter was more of a perfectionist who would practice small chunks of music slowly until all the parts fitted together. Aunty Suzie would practice from start to finish and return to the beginning again to play the whole song until it was perfect. Farter had a dab into the violin as a second instrument, while Aunty Suzie was often seen transporting a cello larger than her petite frame.

Nanna ensured that both children competed in Eisteddfods to compete against other talented musicians. Here, Farter was head-hunted by one of the adjudicators, Marjorie Hessie asked him to learn from her as a mentor. Once cherry-picked, Nanna ensured that Farter was supported to travel to the Conservatorium to learn from one of the greatest Australian Composers of the era, where he mastered his art.

It is no surprise that music is still a big part of both Nanna's children's lives meet regularly to play duets with a few other local piano teachers who must be a big part of our family's life to this day. Nanna focused all her time, effort, and energy on ensuring her children lived in a loving home, had every opportunity available, and encouraged them to follow their dreams—luxuries she was neglected and was never given the opportunities to fulfil herself with his Maid of Honor by his side. Poorpa and Nanna were a great partnership. A marriage that lasted more than sixty years.

Best Family In The World

I have been lucky enough to have an amazing extended family who all get along and meet up regularly. Farter has one sister, Aunty Suzie, whose family I have grown increasingly close to as we have grown up, and Mother Dearest has one sister and two brothers. This side of the family's get-togethers have always been full of joy and laughter.

Aunty Suzie is an energetic, dynamic little lady full of joy and good cheer. Her husband, Uncle Stephen, had a stroke recently and can sometimes be a little cranky, but I have a special bond with him. Their daughters Catherine and Heather have married exceptional men who fit into the family well and are exceptional fathers. Heather and Jon have brought the beautiful Violet, Hamish, and Gemma bringing new energy and spark to Christmas. Young Bodie brings a smile to his parents, Catherine and Steve, who will take on their parents' personalities.

Mother dearest's older sister, Aunty Denise, is a very pure person, just like her mother. She is a very touchy-feely person who needs lots of hugs. Her husband, Uncle Paul, is the funniest person I know. He is a small, bald Maltese man who has always provided me with a lot of laughs with his jokes and banter.

Their oldest son, Michael, is an authoritarian man who served in East Timor and came home with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. After a failed marriage, he married the love of his life, Wendy, a wonderful mother to their two amazing children, Rosie and Caleb. Rosie is my little girl, and I miss her a lot. Aunty Denise

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and Uncle Paul's daughter, Pauline, is a kind and intelligent woman who continues to provide everyone with much love and joy. She met her soul mate, David, when we were kids, and they used to look after us when we were children. They have two amazing children, Cameron and Naomi, who have always been important to me. Cameron has married the beautiful Liv. They are going to be wonderful parents one day.

One of Mother Dearest's older brothers, Uncle Ed, passed away on Christmas day a few years ago. He was a jolly, happy man who was always full of joy. His wife, Aunty Lee, is a gentle lady who never talks badly about anyone. Their oldest son, Scotty, is a redhead who spent his earlier years travelling and finding himself. He found himself when he met his Thai wife, Tiraporn, whose beautiful daughter Ava is full of joy. Their youngest son, Chris, is one of the funniest men I have ever met and really should have taken up stand-up. He married Mel and is now showing what a great dad, he is with his daughter Evalyn.

Mother Dearest's oldest brother, Uncle Roger, is a simple man who enjoys the best in life. He married Aunty Jane, who was a little harder to have a good relationship with but always showed me a lot of love. Unfortunately, their daughter Bronwyn passed away when she was just a baby, which was the end of Aunty Jane. Uncle Roger will call you every birthday and spend money he does not have on you. He will tell you the smallest details of his day but fill you in with everything happening in his life. He has a heart of gold and will let you know how proud he is of you and the family at every opportunity.

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Christmas on both sides of the family is full of joy and good company. We meet up for birthdays, weddings, engagements, and some funerals. Uncle Roger made it clear to me many years ago that he is so proud of the family. He said, 'Everyone just gets along. There is not one drop kick amongst us.' The whole family is a gem to be around. They are hardworking, intelligent, and enjoy great food and lots of laughs.

Music of the Spheres

My palpitation for music started early as Farter was forced to give me my first lesson just after my sixth birthday. Early in my life, Farter had given up his prestigious career as an English and History Head Teacher to teach piano from the baby grand piano at home. I loved music early, which would stay for me for the rest of my life.

Dad's rule was that if we did our piano practice in the morning, he would make lunches and wash up. So, I started with timed eight-minute sessions. As I used the freedom of my music to escape some of the more mundane and traumatic aspects of my life, this would turn into one, two, three, four, and sometimes more hours of practice at school and in the evenings. I loved it. The free feeling of playing my own and other people's music. Mine and other people's masterpieces.

Music was in the family. Dad's Auntie Bettie Bunnie had taught him and his sister Auntie Suzie, who too became a music teacher. Auntie Bettie also taught Auntie Helen, who teaches music

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at Mclean on the New South Wales North Coast. Aunty Helen has been fortunate enough to be the duet partner of David Helfgott, the infamous musician whose movie Shine proved his traumatic and eccentric life personality. At one point in one of our stays up at Maclean, she offered to take me to meet David. Still, I thought second about it due to being uncertain how I would take a nudie run considering the trauma I had recently experienced.

I have always played the piano every time I walk past the it. Farter started me on the more advanced Piano Koala Capers that he reserved only for me instead of the more favoured Jane Bastien beginner's book. I picked up the piano quickly and soon got a 10-dollar Guild scholarship for getting the highest marks in the country for my preliminary exam.

I played at a range of Eisteddfods, getting mixed results. It was likely that I would win, but usually, it was in the top three. I settled into the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) system, whilst many of Farter's other students did the more Popular-focused Guild exams. I was born with a mixture of classical, jazz, and popular music. I did not get passed sixth grade, as I was traumatized by a mere B+ in the sixth-grade exam because my previous results had been much more favourable. Looking back, I should have been happy with a B+, considering the trauma I was going through. But I am a perfectionist. I did play much harder songs, as many of my AMUS songs would have been categorized in the AMUS level standard.

Poorpa enthused me with a love of jazz. He loved listening to various jazz musicians, from Fats Waller to Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Billy Holliday,

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and his king Louise Armstrong. He shared Duke Ellington's love of trains, as train rides were often the basis of many of his songs. He explained Louise Armstrong's unfortunate life, where he had to learn the trumpet in prison due to some of the most regrettable events, mainly because he was Black. He took us on a memorable trip to the Grafton Jazz Festival. I got to rub heads with some leading Australian jazz musicians at an early age. I remember going to one of his favourite bands as a teen, where he tapped away madly to the beat, with his Parkinson's-ridden body, and waved his walking stick wildly in the air. He ensured that I was educated in jazz routes, soul, and blues and had a healthy appreciation of Boogie Woogie and Ragtime.

I always played duets. Growing up, I played with Alan Amor, who is no longer with us. Later, Spider became my partner. I would go up every week to Spider's house at Bowen Mountain, where we would religiously go through our songs five to six times, trying to perfect any minor imperfections. We practised hard but never got the reward we deserved at Eisteddfods, maybe because our touch and style were slightly contrasting. Spider is one of those quiet and unassuming people who are perfectly happy in themselves. He would never make an issue of the fact that he even plays the piano, let alone practised so damn hard on these duets with me.

I also played duets with my two brothers. One Eisteddfod Philby just stopped playing. He either forgot where he was up to or just lost his train of thought for a bit. I am known for giving him an immense death stare, but we soon resumed the song. Because he regathered his thoughts and continued where we left

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off, we were rewarded with a high commendation. I also played a memorable duet with Davy where we won the Eisteddfod playing 'All You Need Is Love,' one of The Beatles classics anyway. It was a flawless performance where I played the melody as I was at the peak of my game at the time.

In my teen years, I was mesmerized by the piano playing of my friend Mark Heath. He had a much darker style than me, which reflected his personality at the time. He would often come over to our house, and whilst we were all hanging out downstairs, he entertained himself by playing his freestyle music. He improvised and struggled with more structured pieces, but his music was beautiful. For his HSC, he performed a beautiful composition that ensured that he was awarded for playing his song at the Opera House as part of the Encore Showcase, a performance of all the best young musicians of the HSC for that year. Although he struggled with performance anxiety like me, a professional player played his beautiful composition to a warm reception. Mark came running onto the stage in the encore and showed his big and often misunderstood personality.

I first heard Mark's composition at school one day when I first performed the best song I have ever written, the Weatherman. This is a song I wrote whilst September 11 was playing out on the TV screens. I believe it accurately portrays the mood and sentiments that were being felt at this touch-and-go moment in history. Everyone was impressed when I played my song, but when they heard Mark, they just said, 'Mark's shits on yours.' I was frustrated at the time but could see the funny side. Mark's composition aligns with any of the great romantic period

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songs with drama; he played it with such a feeling. He did so much more feel than when the professional played his music.

I also spent a lot of my time playing the clarinet. I had a clarinet that I received in the post from my grandparent's friends in California. It was a 1920s clarinet with a pure tone. After the frustration of the typical squeaks, I got to learn a complex instrument, and my embouchure tightened as I practised more and more. I would catch the bus up to Bowen Mountain for lessons from a beautiful lady, Alison. I came second in the one Eisteddfod I played in and was starting to show improvement in my music theory at the time. I was good at the clarinet since it was my second instrument. It was like learning a second language.

*I played in the School Band and Hawkesbury District Concert bands on a Friday night. Playing the clarinet was an excellent way for a young man to meet ladies. Talented, intelligent, and gifted young ladies. I used this opportunity to flirt with a young flutist, who now plays for the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and a beautiful young lady who supplied the painting I used as the front cover of my first book, *The Consumer Journey*. Despite spending most of the time following what the more senior clarinet players were doing, the school band and concert band sessions were full of joy. And well. I was getting distracted by a lot of flirting.*

As I practised more and more, my repertoire grew. I played a few classical songs, some jazz classics, and many great pop and rock standards, including songs from musicals. I began exploring all the great songwriters and their tricks. I did a songwriting

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course at TAFE, where I learnt the structure of music and about the music industry. I always kept one week ahead, as I was learning from a piano teacher up in the mountains. I was starting to get my style.

At school, I often beat myself up for minor errors in exceedingly tricky songs, and stage anxiety took hold of me. I could not play in concerts. Even at Eisteddfods, I could win a section and be completely down on myself for not playing it flawlessly. At school, the compromise was that I would play at all the major events and functions instead of the concerts, as I thought no one was listening. I would play some of my songs and the repertoire I had built. I would play melodies as the official party walked in. I would give them all sorts of beautiful tunes as they walked in, including the Dark Vader song and 'Here comes the bride.' Whatever I thought, it would be condescending. This always got a little chuckle.

Now, the piano is more relaxing than anything. I do not have to think about what I am playing; my voice always warms up a little more. I have always struggled with my voice to the point where I was told that warming off milk would bring about a better tone. So, I did not drink milk for nearly fifteen years. Nothing improved. I am now happy with my voice and glad to play whatever comes to mind. Some bits of songs, improvising, and playing chord structures at will. I enjoy asking people to choose their three favourite chords and playing whatever comes to mind. It is about knowing the scale and chord patterns and letting your fingers take your mind wherever it is at any one point in time.

Hours on the Cricket Field

When Philby came home saying he wanted to play cricket, Mother Dearest and Farter were in shock. 'What would you want to play that game for?' They thought.

Regardless, Mother Dearest took Philby down to the registration day for North Richmond Cricket Club and signed him up. A few weeks later, I tasted the great game at Philby's birthday party, where I found out that I was surprisingly good. I joined Philby's teams that year with his coach, Joe Pearce, giving us all a good taste of what the game had to offer. I desperately wanted to be a wicketkeeper, but when they saw me bowl, being a wicketkeeper was no longer an option.

In my first cricket season, I was seven years old and playing under the tens. That year, I came second in the end-of-year statistics to my childhood hero, Carl Chesterman. I averaged eleven with the bat, which was not bad for a seven-year-old playing with a bunch of kids three years older.

In one game, I remember coming up against the superstars of the competition, those Richmond Boys. We played the game of our lives to have them nine wickets down, only to realize they had been saving their superstars for last. Number 10 and 11 blasted us everywhere and won them the game. Little did I know that one of those Richmond Boys, Punter, would become one of my best mates and most cherished teammates.

I spent all my representative cricket in the first or second slip beside Steven O'Keefe (SOK), who went on to play for

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Australia and has been one of the most consistent and well-respected players in the Big Bash league. From under ten's to under sixteen's, we played competitive cricket and achieved wonderful things as a team. I look back now and think about the excellent players that comprised that team. I am grateful that I played alongside such great players who genuinely were magnificent people. Unfortunately, I had a few selfish meltdowns that hampered my relationships with my teammates and the opportunities I received in representative cricket. Looking back, if I had better control over my emotions, things may have turned out a little better for me in my friendships. More opportunities would have come my way in cricket and later in life in general.

With any sport, the trips away bring the most incredible memories. I remember one of the fathers of our Representative Cricket Team telling the hippies up at Nimbin that the whole team was his children. The Nimbin hippies were impressed that one man could have so many children. It was also a memorable night the entire team was kicked out of Pizza Hut because we sang our song so loudly and boisterously. 'We are the boys from the bush and are back in town. Going to play cricket till the sun goes down. Going to take wickets if it takes all day. Come on down and watch us play.'

I underperformed in representative cricket, considering my talent. After my breakout season in under elevens, when I played one of the best innings in my life, I was asked to be one of the three players to represent Hawkesbury in a regional competition. I remember how excited I was as I cycled up and down the hill near my house, screaming out loud. But this

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opportunity never made for anything as I never got to play cricket at this level. I never got another chance like this for the rest of my life. I performed well at the club, never anything more.

Cricket became a big part of our family's psyche and routine. Although Philby lacked my talent, he was my greatest supporter. He came to every game and scored every ball. He was always there to ride every wave with me.

As I got older, I got utterly entrenched with the game. I formed some of the most incredible friendships with mates, and we continue to be friends up to this day. I brought my bat to school every day and played with my mates during most recesses and lunches. We played without pads, which made me an excellent leg-side player. I was not afraid of getting a bruise or two on my thigh. At this time, my two best mates, Az and Nath, were also obsessed with the game. We would play cricket on the weekend and talk about the game until Friday. Then we would do it all again.

I had a few good seasons in club cricket, where I thrived as captain. Although I was on the losing side, I scored half the team's runs one year. I was destroying bowling attacks at that point as I tried to dominate. More importantly, I was playing with my mates, and they looked up to me. I was polite and honest and would do anything for the team to win. I had a coach who believed in me. I virtually ran the training sessions. I was fit as I spent my spare time running or riding my bike. I was enjoying life, and my friends were enjoying life with me.

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My family life was great. I had supportive parents who would take me to and from every game despite having to split their time between three boys. We often walked down to training if they could not make it, stopping to get slushies. We had the energy to burn, even on sweltering days. If my parents could not make it, I would catch the bus up the mountain to my coach's house, Steve Tadich or one of my other friend's parents would drive us.

We also fit into our busy lives with indoor cricket. This was always exciting, and I felt invincible indoors for a few years. I could field less than a meter away, which was hard to get past. I played a representative indoor for a bit, and we were beginning to match it with the adults. I could bring the best out of my teammates. Some of my mates had minimal talent, but I gave them a chance because I loved them. I loved being out on and off the field with them. I loved the game. I loved my mates. I loved life. And everyone loved being around me.

This transformed into senior cricket. I got to play with Philby and brought out the best of him. We opened the batting together. While he had a reputation for batting 'as slow as a turtle,' with his brother by his side, he scored close to a run a ball. Fields would spread when he would go out to bat. Intuitive even hit his first six. These were the best days. We played rugby on the turf fields while not out in the middle. I was known to tease opposition bowlers. Play games with their psyche. Grown men charged in, and I would laugh at them. I had complete control. I knew where they would bowl the ball, and I could hit them wherever pleased.

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My most incredible memories of senior cricket were playing with a Little Master Bonnici. At school, he would run around everyone else with a soccer ball. He could sidestep twenty players and leave them bewildered. He was a complete master in complete control. On the weekends, he entertained us with his hilarious commentary and little pixie jumps every time we got a wicket. Bonnici was a joy to be around. They were good times. Full of joy, happiness, and excitement.

My passion and love for cricket waned in my late teens. Transitioning into seniors, I was starved of opportunities at my beloved North Richmond to play in the higher grades, so I moved to Windsor and Pitt Town for several years. I played my best cricket in my time at Windsor as I was dismantling attacks, mainly medium and slower-paced bowlers. Still, every inning drained me a lot of mental energy due to the frustration I had for the game.

I was playing Durham Shield, under nineteen's representative cricket, as early as fifteen years old. Here, I outplayed many players who became hardened first-grade club cricketers. If I had made the slightest mistake, however, I would beat myself up. I could have been more pleasant around those years and would angrily pace up and down. By the time I got to Pitt Town, the love was gone. There were glimpses of talent, and we won a few premierships, but I contributed little to these teams. I still enjoyed what happened after the games, but not so much on the field. I have a lot of regrets that I did not fulfill my talent. As I transitioned into senior cricket, I was so dirty that I was not given the captaincy, as this was given to many old heads.

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When I returned to cricket after university, I had some of the best moments of my life. I won five premierships in seven seasons. I was, however, the twelfth man two years in a row in the grand finals at Pitt Town. The first year I returned to North Richmond, I joined the best team I had ever played in, including Az, Boots, Crossy, Waddo, Watkins, Buzzy, the Mann, Rosie, and Todd, the man who would become the best captain I ever played under. We won a great premiership the first season back in a team where, apart from Waddo and Mattie Rose, we were all within two or four years of each other. We played unbeatable cricket that year. We also had a damn good after-party. The Cross and I shaved our heads and had a game of Goon of Fortune where there was a slope and ensured I drank every drop of that flask. I then walked for hours with Az. Even though we differed in opinion the whole way home, and I drove home way above the limit, it was still a great memory.

I stuck with my team for several years and had a lot of great memories. I played my best innings in the grand final. That was the only time I played a match-winning role in the final. Although I am still dirty that I was not awarded man of the final, Frosty also played a match-winning role, so I respect that he also played a great match. That team was beautifully captained by a man who believed in all of us and found out how to get the best out of us. We had some great young players that year and some great older heads.

A few years after my last premiership, the Heaters brought the heat in the semi, and the Wide-Eyed Cain batted the most memorable innings of my life. His father, a great coach, if

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not the greatest, sat down with me in an intense discussion before going out to bat. I was surprised because I was going in at number eight, where the useless batter bat was. However, with great intensity, he assured me with confidence that I still had a significant role. I got out to bat, and I have never seen eyes as wide-eyed with concentration. He was already on one hundred and thirtyish, but I assured him his job continued. I did not last long, but The Wide-Eyed Cain went on to blast them for a memorable 220. It never felt like we would lose after that, but the Young Guns gave it a red-hot crack. When Craggles got that final big wicket, I felt a rush like never before. This would be my last premiership, and although there is no evidence in the photos that I was at the after-party, we partied long into the night. Although he was the weakest player on the team, the other Rose led us beautifully and demonstrated how much respect we had for the Young Guns in a memorable speech. I always have and will always have respect for that beautiful man. I regret sledging the Young Guns as much as I did, but at that time, I let my ego get in the way of just enjoying the game. They deserve more respect than that and have made it a lot further in the game than I ever did, even though I potentially had the most talent.

I have some great memories of cricket. My most fantastic personal recollections on the cricket field include an impressive single-handing batting display against Gosford Wyong at my favourite ground in Creek Shield, hitting nine fours in a row to win a match outright, including my first six, my highest score in which I hit a six to bring up my ton, with the Skipper going off in the background, smashing them everywhere on my return from Thailand with my best mate Az, as well as my memorable 49 in

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a second-grade final. My other great memories include my best mate getting five for an inning against Heaters and the Wide-Eyed Cain's great knocks, Punter's gritty ton, and the Skipper hitting the winning runs on the last ball for the Sixers. There are many memorable moments, but these are the highlights.

What I will remember most about the great game, however, is the memories you make in the sheds after the game, sitting down waiting to bat, talking about all the great memories you have had with your mates, and being out in the field on a hot day doing your best to keep everyone motivated. I took it way too far with the sledging, but I love being part of the team. Although I had talent, I thrived in my prime on the losing side and had little contribution to winning sides as I became a better team player. I prefer to be an ordinary player in a good team than the star player in a lousy team any day.

I never bowled in all the good sides I played because there were always better spin options. Although this gave me incredible frustration at the time because I was training so bloody hard and was consistently bowling in the nets, I am grateful that I became more of a team player. I became someone you do not want to play against but respected by my teammates. Although I once lost my love for the game, my mates helped me find it again. I will always be grateful for the memories.

The Davidson Shield

As I was expected to be the next best thing, I joined the school cricket team with all the other year twelves in year seven. Of the six years I played school cricket, we were regional champions four times. We went on some amazing, memorable trips away. The first years were unsuccessful. At first, I was so little the opposition bullied me a bit. I thought this was disrespectful because any year seven player playing senior cricket is an amazing feat and should have been respected.

The second year, I was captained by one of my childhood heroes, Carl Chesterman, and we made it to the semi-finals, where Westfield knocked us off the perch in a close and well-fought match. We had done well to be regional champions and travel to Maitland for the finals. Chesto was a great batter and a wonderful bowler at the time, and I looked up to him immensely. We had an amazing bowling attack, including Nick Cain, Luke Shelton, Tim Malfroy, Chesto, and a Young Eldo in the mix.

When the senior players returned to their schooling duties, Brad Roberts took over the reins of captain, and I played a special inning. I, however, fell from grace by dropping a catch in the outfield, a catch that slipped right through my hands and hit me on my head. This was my first concussion. At that point, my mental health deteriorated, and I had regular outbursts on the field. This outburst was my first truly embarrassing one, as I never had one before that.

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This was fueled by a night out where I snuck into the Cessnock High School disco, where Kat and her friends had snuck me in. It was that night that I had my first kiss. Honestly, I do not even remember what the girl looked like, which I am a bit ashamed of. I was the novelty of the night as I was a young, attractive man at that point. All the year twelve girls thought I was a lot older than I was, so I got a lot of attention. I also remember having three cans of Coke and a Red Bull, something I had not experienced before. No wonder I did not sleep that night.

The third year was the only time the Richmond Boy got the better of us. They had SOK, my teammate Cooky, and some other mates from my club cricket teams. They really should have done better, but they did not have the depth. I remember getting three wickets that game, including getting SOK out, but I bowled three wides in a row as I was trying too hard. We crumbled, chasing a total that we should have got. In between all this, we also beat the Richmond Boys in a school indoor cricket comp. Like the Pitt Town side, who always beat our superstar team in club cricket in the finals, the Colo Boys played better and had more spirit.

The next two years were magic, including memorable trips to Wagga Wagga, Inverell, and Bathurst. I had the chance to win a match in Wagga Wagga with a young Crossy but got bowled on a deteriorating pitch. Crossy's mum reminds me of walking off with a big smile as if I had just won the match. I did not know how to control my emotions at that point. I was going through a lot at home at that point.

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Inverell was awesome. In my womanizing prime, I got acquainted with the local ladies early on in our stay. The boys did not take this too lightly and came and raided our hotel. These country boys tried to tie me up and drive me down the road in their Ute. When we were introduced to the school, Walshaw purposely made a fool of himself in front of the whole school, as 'tensions' were the trend of the time. Inspired by Jackass, we were all playing practical jokes like this. I thought this was the funniest thing in the world. We did, however, win and progress to the finals again to play at Bathurst.

We did not play good cricket on the first day at Bathurst but made up for it by doing better than we did two years earlier by coming third in the state. I have great memories, however, of the night at the Gold Panners Lodge, where I again acquainted myself with the ladies and had a memorable game of touch football. The group of mates and parents on this trip were top-notch and would become good mates later in future cricketing ventures.

We never went on to win the state competition but were rewarded by the school principal for going damn close so many times. I think about how good we were, even though three or different generations of players for such a small public school. We matched it with the sports schools who hand-selected their players.

Two years after I left high school, Colo High School did win the Davidson Shield in a team that included Davy, Eldo, Cainy, and so many other boys that would later be the Northo first-grade team. I think about the profile of college sports in the US

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and the fact that no one at our school knew how damn well we were and what an amazing feat it was to be that good for so long. If we were that good in the US, we would have been on the TV, the whole town would have come out to watch us play, and many of us would have gotten scholarships into college. It was not like that, but we had great memories and had such a wonderful time.

Controlling Rallies on the Tennis Court

Tennis has never left me. I began lessons as a four-year-old with Mr. and Mrs. White. My brothers and I learnt in group lessons with various family and cricketing friends. We used to play little round robins and were progressively assessed on our skills. Looking back, I was playing with some talented players, including someone who was acknowledged as potentially the most talented junior golfer in Australian history before his tragic death. Tennis lessons were always competitive but lighthearted. My older sister from another mister, Rach, continues to remind me that I destroyed her confidence early on because I never let her win. Not once. I am sorry sis. I love you.

Because Davy wrote left-handed, his natural inclination was to play left-handed. Mr. White, however, was very traditional and believed that everyone should play right-handed, so Davy learnt to be right-handed predominant. As a result, he does not play a backhand to this day. Whatever side it is, he hits a forehand. Then he has some amazing shots that he cuts down and uses both hands, like a double-handed backhand, but he

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does it on both sides. This gives an amazing spin that is unhittable. That is why I naturally slice my backhand, trying to imitate this shot.

My brothers and I used to play competitions in the school holidays. Philby and Davy sometimes won but usually got participation awards. I often won. In one competition, I was winning the final five to one when I had my most memorable dummy spit. This trumped any tantrum John McEnroe or even Nick Kyrios would be seen doing on a tennis court. I threw my racket and ran off the street, where they threatened to call the police if I did not come off the road. They banned me from playing at any of their lessons or competitions until I was 13 or 14.

While I did not pick up a racket for years, I began playing with Mark Heath. He was an amazing piano player but was equally as good at tennis. He played in the first or second division in the incredibly competitive Richmond Competition. He had a good top spin backhand and forehand a more powerful serve than me. He was a bit more erratic than me, and I knew that if I kept in the rallies long, I could win them. We played once, twice, and sometimes three times a week. We either played up at Kurrajong School, the Kurmond School Court, or down his road at an old lady's court. She would hide the key in the letter box. I loved my battles with Mark. He always won. But one day, I played the game of my life and beat him. We never played again.

When I went to HAC, I began the Richmond Competition. I began in Division Five and had some competitive games. I was the second player to a much better player who taught me a lot. I was getting a reputation for returning to the games, having good

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rallies, and never going away. We won that comp. When I returned from Thailand, I bought a racket, which improved the quality of my shots. My hunger grew. I increasingly went up the grades. When I made it to second grade, me, and my partner, Wilbow, had a bit of a run. Suddenly, we were the targets. Everyone had to find a way to beat us.

As the competition slowly dwindled, there were slowly fewer divisions. There were fewer skillful players. I went through a patch of not losing a game for three or four years as my skills increased. I went through several partners. I could not find anyone to commit to weekly games before finally finding my perfect doubles partner, Oggy.

Oggy and I played for years together. Although we formed some impressive rivals, I do not remember losing too many nights. Oggy and I were a formidable team with his long reach and put-away volleys at the net. Oggy was my favourite doubles partner of all time until he injured his knee playing football. He tore both meniscus in his knees, which meant that he needed an operation on both his knees. This temporarily stopped our run.

I went through a run-in single where I would lose the first match of the competition and then go undefeated thereafter. I was hard to beat over the distance and developed a formidable forehand. My backhand is a strange double-handed chop, modeled on Davy's backhand. I try to control the rallies early with the forehand. I try to keep my running to a minimum and run the players side to side. Some nights are better than others, but I try to stay as much in the backhand court as possible, so I do not have to play too many backhands. I have learnt to work out the

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player's weaknesses, and if I am losing, I try to find a way to change my game. Obviously, some players have more talent than me, especially some of the young players coming through. I love seeing a young player who really gives it a crack. I lose it if an adult beats me comprehensively, but if a young player is 'good enough if he's good enough,' I love it.

During my time at HAC, I played tennis most days with John Bob and Wax if he felt up for hiding. John Bob always told me that he won many national and pan-national championships growing up playing table tennis. I thought he was bullshitting me until I went to his house and saw his cabinet composed of a frame of his hero Roger Federer and all his trophies and medals. John Bob is a big-hitting left-hander with a solid backhand. He always kept the rallies short because he knew the longer they went, the more rallies I won. I never beat John Bob but went close from time to time. As Wax got better, we had some great battles on that hard court. John Bob really enjoyed these battles. He said that if I applied myself, I could have played on the tour. Not a great player on the tour, but I could have pushed the top one thousand.

I have played a little bit of tennis here and there since. I have had a few lessons to try and get over the ball more. But since Oggy did his knee, I have struggled to keep my emotions together when playing on the court. I have lost a lot more games, and I am taking it far too seriously. Oggy ensured that I was intense and competitive but gave me the confidence to ensure that I did not lose it. I do not remember one outburst when playing with my great friend. I hope to return to the game and regain my love of it.

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The Turtle Table Tennis Table

Even before my brothers and I were big enough to stand, we would play table tennis with our trusty table tennis table. Setting it up in the carport of our first Robertson Street Home, we would need stools to be able to reach the table. I remember a young Davy falling time and time again off the stool until he was finally big enough to stand and play with his big brothers.

As soon as the school holidays would come around, we would set the old table tennis table up. The table was an old wooden thing that was, in fact, two tables. We had to put it together by screwing the multiple butterfly screws together to hold the rickety legs together. Because these battles were so fierce, by the end of it, we had to align the two parts to the table in particular angles because there were so many holes in the table from throwing and banging rackets on them.

The most memorable table tennis games were around Australian Open time in early January when the three brothers would try to emulate our favourite tennis players. We used to make our own Turtle Table Tennis Table (TTTT) Open draw that would be ferociously competed. Our pride was sky high when Australian players played well, especially the Woodies. Because all three brothers were ambidextrous to a degree, we all wanted to be Mark Woodford, especially the year he made the semi-finals. We would draw out of the hat to know who would get to play the great left-hander Woodford, who was prominently known for doubles. He gave us immense pride the year he had an exciting run in the singles Australian Open. I could not actually

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play a backhand left-handed like I do when I bat in cricket, but I still had a lot of control. My other brothers are more than adequate playing both right and left-handed without requiring the other hand for support.

When one of my brothers would want to play table tennis, they would ask AT for TT. I had a similar code for each of them when they agreed to a game, it meant that they would be engaging in a ferocious five-set match. Regardless of who won, we were all similar in ability that it would always go the length, regardless of whether we were playing right-handed or left-handed. The sets would often be close. The games would often go set for set because it was hard to maintain the intensity that the sets provided. Often the person who won was the one who was lucky enough to serve first in the first set. There was nothing between the three brothers unless I was in one of those moods.

Because we were always so competitive, the winner often had a table tennis racket thrown close to their forehead by the loser. We never did any severe damage to each other, though, but there were some close calls. There were a few holes in the wall, yes; and lots of broken rackets that our parents refused to fix because we had done it out of anger. We would have to save up to get table tennis rackets to replace the ones that we broke.

Table tennis has remained an important part of my life in most eras of my life. When I was at university at Campbelltown, a group of six or seven people were all roughly the same standard. This is always the best sport when you can compete at a level that others are at a similar level. It does not really matter who wins

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and losses if it just must be fought hard and competitively. At Campbelltown, we played as often as we could. It was fun!

This trend continued at HAC. Again, there were about six or seven of us that could either win or lose, depending on the dynamics of the day and the level of concentration one brought to the game. I used to get immense joy out of seeing the competitive Wax struggle to get a point off me at the beginning, but in true Wax style, he worked his ass off to be competitive.

Snail, a friendly sort of a guy, found a way for me to not even win a point. Snail was number one in the country in the computer game Halo. Even the top ten players in the country refused to play against him. He got offered a scholarship to play Halo full-time but chose to follow his studies instead. I could not get a ball past Snail, even at what I think was my table tennis prime.

I was playing so much table tennis at HAC that I made it to the finals of a competition where I won some money. But Snail's hand-eye coordination was superior to anyone I had ever met, other than my childhood hero, Chesto, and was the best defensive table tennis player I have ever come across. I would play shot after shot, long rally after long rally until I eventually over or under-hit a shot. Snail, you could have let me win one point, mate. I am not actually that bad. You just made me look like it.

I like table tennis because it needs a lot of intensity, hand-eye coordination, and concentration. It fits my skill set, but like most things, I can compete to a level without being exceptional at

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it. I can compete, and win against most, but people with superior hand-eye coordination like Snail, Crossy, and Chesto, would trump me every time. I am working to accept that I am not perfect and that there will be people better than me at whatever I am trying to do. I am trying to accept that doing my best is enough and that I am enough.

Aussie Rules

I have always loved the AFL, ever since I was introduced to it in 1995, when the Sydney Swans had their first taste of success in the national game. Growing up in Sydney, it was known as 'Gay FL' as both my peers and I were raised on Rugby League. Although Rugby League has also been a big part of my life, I have tended to favor this faster, more expansive, and skillful game in my view. We had played Rugby League in the backyard, and apart from a few AFL cards I had collected, I had heard nothing or knew little of the game.

Growing up in a Rugby League-focused community, I desperately wanted to play in the league. My hero growing up, my Poorpa, had taught me how to kick the footy and I had loved following his Easts Roosters. Poorpa had followed them all his life since growing up in the Eastern Suburbs. The Roosters had been good to me growing up, making five grand finals in ten years with all-time great players such as Freddy Fittler, Luke Ricketson, and Craig Fitzgibbon, giving me many great memories.

I remember Poorpa giving me my first taste of Grand Final fever in 2000 when he bought us 'obstructed view' tickets at the

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new Olympic Stadium. He only bought us these tickets because they were cheaper, but there was nothing at all wrong with them. It was great seeing the skill up close but unfortunately, the Roosters lost due to a wonderful game from Broncos' full-back Darren Lockyer. This was my first game watching Rugby League live since we were kids when I watched my first game. In 1991, I had been to my first and only game up to this point, when Penrith Panthers beat their rivals at the time, the North Sydney Bears. Greg Alexander got the best of his rival, Jason Taylor, in that game.

My point in bringing Rugby League up is that I had desperately wanted to play competition rugby league due to having a momentous day of playing second row in a school competition. We almost won the competition and formed a remarkable forward pack with some other players who were playing representative Rugby League at the time. They had seen something in me and desperately wanted me to play. I had several arguments with Mother Dearest; she did not want me to destroy my body before I was thirty years old. Her compromise was that I could play AFL because there were fewer injuries in this sport. Plus, this boy, Crossy, had been pestering her at cricket for months for me to join his team, The Hawkesbury Saints. He was the captain and had seen me kick the ball a bit in the school playground.

I knew nothing about the game, other than what I had learnt from a few Swans games I watched live and on the television. I had been following them since 1995 but did not really know much about the game. The other boys in the team seemed

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so tough and had grown up in much 'rougher' circumstances. The coach seemed to yell at us a lot, even if we did not seem to make many mistakes. I was surprised by how rough it was. They all looked like such 'pansies' running around in short shorts on TV. But they were so tough on the field. They really could lay a tackle and make it hurt. Really dig your head into the turf and make you feel like you had earned picking up the red Sherrin. You had such little time to get rid of the ball. It was easy to take a mark or get the ball, but you had to do something with it almost immediately. You had to get your head down, pick up that ball, and then decide in seconds what was the best way to dispose of it. It was great!

And running was important. I loved running at that point. I remember starting training with three laps. I would often lap the rest of the team. Sometimes twice. I could keep up with all of them except Crossy. I wanted to be like him. He was a great leader and I admired everything he did on the field. He was tough, and just got the job done.

The first season was a bit of a blur. It was under 15s and we made the finals. We beat some good teams, but some good teams beat us. We came third or fourth, which was a true reflection of where we were, better than most. But the top teams were a head above us. We had a great ruckman who was our star player along with Crossy. We had some tough guys. A few guys who could have a good game, and a few beautiful indigenous players who showed me some new skills. Our coach was tough on us but fair. He was good at getting us pumped up for a big game. This made it an exceptionally fine introduction to the game.

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I remember the finals vividly. I got a head knock early, which often meant I would play a good game. But I turned into an asshole. We got a bit of momentum and had built a winnable lead and then the lights went out. It was a night game under the lights at Bensons Lane and someone had sabotaged the game. I remember yelling out multiple times 'Plug your asses, boys!' I am not sure why, but I did. But after the game resumed, we lost the momentum and they overrun us with a big last quarter. We were still in the game until Crossy was tackled from behind. This stole our momentum. It stole our spirit. Crossy's head went down and ours with it. We lost the game.

That was the last game I played with Crossy because he went on to play representative footy, struggled with a back injury, and then a hamstring injury after that. He was destined to get drafted into the AFL despite all his injuries but lost his wonderful, beautiful, and inspiring dad, Steven who we all loved and looked up to. Crossy still plays a lot of footy and cricket out in the country, but when he lost the person that inspired him at that pivotal moment, he lost his drive to make it to the top level. At that point, I think he just decided to enjoy his sports and enjoy spending time with his mates.

I was lucky enough to enjoy some of that mateship up close later on the same side of the cricket pitch a few years later. I got to see some of his skills up close from the slips cordon as his mean bouncers would terrorize opposition players from a good length. Although Crossy was not drafted into the AFL, he was still one of the toughest sportsmen I have ever played with. His great

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ton to make us minor premiers in a third cricket competition will always be memorable.

Anyhow back to AFL, well sort of. Because I was going through a tough time at home, I struggled to commit to the next season. I left the game halfway through the season. The other person I had signed up with, Sam Beck, had asked me to come across and play rugby for HAC. His dad knew about the HAC culture and wanted me to be a part of it.

I would later discover the beauty of this culture, but I was not ready yet. Beck would drive us to train in his Paddock Basher Ute at extreme speeds in the places where he knew the police would not be, and slow down where he knew they would be. I could not get into this rugby thing. It seemed a bit gay to me. Putting fingers up their bum to lift them into the air to do lineouts. This was all too much for me. Plus, I was playing against men. They took immense pleasure in running straight at a skinny little 15-year-old and scoring every after try on my wing. This bowled me over every time I tried to make a tackle. It was hilarious for them but humiliating for me. Plus, there was a big drinking culture even back then. This was a bit much for a fifteen-year-old.

So, I committed to the next AFL season. It was under eighteens for the Western Jets. There was a great culture at the club, and they appreciated my enthusiasm, toughness, and fitness. I was developing into a man and had quite a stable routine of running at least six kilometers each day, doing a heavy session of weights, riding my bike in insane distances, and finishing the day with one hundred pushups and one hundred

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sit-ups. I was fit, to the point where I would play under eighteens in the mornings, then play reserve grade, and occasionally play on the bench for first grade. I played my first game for first grade and scored the one and only goal of my career. I was later knocked out and they could not stop the bleeding; yet, another concussion, which could not be good for my mental health. I never returned to playing another first-grade game ever.

In the under 18s, there were only five teams in the competition. Some games were epic road trips to Cronulla or Wollongong, while some were at Bensons Lane or against the Penrith Emus. Initially, the home games would often be a mix match of players and I would often play my best games. By the end of the season, however, the opposition had better things to do than to travel to Richmond and would not even make the effort to come down. Because I was a presence, I often overcrowded the forward line, so I was asked to primarily defend. I was also told to follow the ball up after I kicked it. I took this way too literally. In one play, I followed up four kicks from half-back and finished a dead eye kick into the forward fifty to a leading player.

Many of my teammates just did not have the skills to compete at this level and with the level of physicality of the other teams. Playing senior footy, I excelled at this level and was rewarded with a Best and Fairest. This was more of a sympathy award because they wanted to encourage me to come back and be the future of the club. It did the opposite. I was going to university so decided to leave AFL on a bang.

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In one game, Davy filled in for us at the University of New South Wales and was kicked in the eye. I did not realize that he was even on the field or off it as I was focused on winning the game for my team. He was supposed to be playing a representative game the next day at the Olympic Stadium but had a ruptured blood vessel in the eye. Any movement was potentially fatal. And although he missed the precursor match to the Swans game against a Papua New Guinea Junior side, it was a buzz to see one of my heroes out on the ground, even though he was carrying the drinks. I was so proud of my little brother for everything that he was able to achieve in both his short Rugby League, cricket, and AFL career. He could have possibly been a pro at any of these sports if he did not value having fun and being there for his family and friends above all else.

The Bloods

I supported the Swans as soon as they showed any sort of promise. The year 1995 was when the great Ron Borassi brought some of my favorite players to the club like Tony Lockett and Paul Roos. It was an exciting year to be in Sydney as the Swans rose from being no-hopers to making the grand finals. This was what really opened my mind to the great game.

The next 20 years have been nothing but success for the club as they have provided for us year in and year out. They have only missed the finals twice in my whole time of supporting them. They have provided me and my family with many wonderful

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memories and great times. The premierships in 2005 and 2012 will always be a highlight of my life.

I have vivid memories of Mother Dearest bawling her eyes out screaming 'Leo Barry' as he took one of the most memorable marks in AFL history in the dying seconds of 2005. Then with less than 40 seconds left, Nick Malceski snapped the clinching goal from a pack in Sydney's forward line to kick an amazing win in 2012. There were so many memories in those years when there was nothing separating the great Sydney and West Coast sides. These battles seemed to last forever.

The Swans have been so close on many other occasions. They are never far off. The culture of the Bloods has made supporting them so memorable. Their tough, relentless, skillful footy has kept me a loyal fan for over 20 years. Then to top it off, watching Buddy Franklin's 1,000th goal in a bustling, exciting pub was possibly the greatest highlight of all. It's up there with Plugger's 1,300th when I was 'woo hoeing' around the neighbourhood for more than an hour as I climbed up and down the hills of Kurrajong after the game.

The first game that I saw live changed my life. I was injured and spent about an hour yelling and screaming at my mother and father because they would not let me play indoor cricket. They compromised and said that we could go into the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) to watch the Swans. We had been supporters for years to this point, so I excitedly went along. It was amazing seeing things up close; seeing Micky O'Lachlan and Wayne Swass less than a metre away, being able to talk to them

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if we wanted to and seeing the actual distance of what the 50-metre ark looked like in real life. It was remarkable.

The Swans were playing the Hawthorn Maggots. A loud drunk behind us made them know it every time a Hawthorn player picked up the ball. It was memorable. We won a close game, by about ten points, I think. After that, I was hooked. The next season we bought a Junior Membership for \$50 and went to nearly every game.

I have watched nearly every game since I first started supporting the Bloods in 1995. It is rare that I do not watch a game on television, at least. I try to get to a game when I can. This year, my mum's bridesmaid's husband and daughter gave us their tickets every time they were unable to make it. It is amazing seeing this relentless game up close and personal and seeing my heroes in action. You feel every momentum shift, the ups, and the downs. The crowd makes you feel every mistake because at the highest level, the skills are elite and there are few errors. You can see the passion and the emotion on the faces when your team wins. And when the Swans lose, there is barely a word spoken on the train trip home. I am grateful for every moment I have spent watching the Swans over the years and look forward to continuing to feel the raw emotion that this great game elicits.

The Right Time, The Right Place

It is amazing when the right people come into your life at the right time. In my second year of cricket, I met an unlikely

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friend. At that point, I had already made a name for myself in the game, but it was amazing that the least talented player in the team would become my best friend, Nath.

It took Nath approximately three seasons to score his first run at cricket. When he did, the whole team ruptured into a standing ovation. He had a stroke as a baby, which had an impact on him for the rest of his life. He was extremely uncoordinated, which made him left-sided oriented and barely having any coordination on his right side. It took him so much longer to learn things than everyone else, but he still had a lot of talent. He was a talented euphonium player. Any musician will know that a euphonium, a small tuba, is an exceedingly difficult instrument to play.

Growing up I was always at Nath's house. After cricket, we would often play more cricket. As if more than three hours was not enough. My two brothers would often go with me, and we would have fierce battles. This often concluded with his then-crazy sister Hol not liking that she had gotten out and would chase us around ferociously with the cricket bat. One day, our fun was ended when Hol stroke Davy across the head with a bat.

As our musical talents progressed, we formed the Harrishells. A four-piece jazz/classical quartet with a strange mix. Two Euphoniums (Philby and Nath), a clarinet player (me) and the trumpeter, the one with the most talent (Hol). We were a talented bunch and practised hard for months, only for Hol to decide two days before the Eisteddfod that she did not like the songs we had learnt and requested that we learn two more songs before we perform at the Eisteddfod. Fearing an all-out war, we

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took on the fiery redhead's request and briskly learnt two new songs.

We were basically improvising at the performance and almost upset the much more favoured band who had done a lot of travelling as a jazz band and had formed a remarkable three-piece. The adjudicator was impressed with the quality of the section stating it was the best section she had ever adjudicated. I think she knew how much talent each of the musicians, individually and collectively, possessed. Of these musicians, I think nearly all of them became professional musicians at one stage in their lives. It was only a classy rendition of Oh When the Saints Go Marching In that separated the groups.

Despite the talent differential, the love of cricket grew deeper for both me and Nath. My interest was focused more on cricket statistics and Poof on technique. While he lacked coordination, he never lacked dedication or commitment. Then at one game, he invited one of his lifelong friends along to an under thirteens game. Little did he know, this would bring three lifelong friends into the story.

Az had a quiet and calm demeanour. He was polite and introduced himself with a firm and confident handshake. This was a man who knew who he was and what he wanted in life. Pity my game did not live up to the expectations that had been discussed on the way to the game. I watched a ball miss the wicketkeeper's end and run me out, dawdling at the bowler's end. I did not even face a ball. It was my first and only diamond duck. On his first introduction to cricket, Az had seen a rare feat.

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Soon Az signed up and was impressing us with his big turning wrong 'uns. He told us all that he was a leg spinner, but the ball never went away from the batter but instead turned sharply in. So, in the first game, as the captain, I bowled him ten overs. He got a few wickets but went for a few runs. It did not matter. He loved it. It was impressive for a beginner. He showed such promise.

This love of cricket never left the three of us. We would come to the game every Saturday, practice recess and often lunch, and train twice, sometimes thrice a week. No one could understand our obsession or why we talked about cricket so much. We would often bowl without pads. By the end of our time at school, we were bowling fast as our bodies grew. But we kept batting without pads. Because he was used to facing off-spin, Az destroyed all sorts of off-spinners in the games.

By about fifteen or sixteen, we started playing a lot of golf to accompany our weekends playing cricket. I had been playing golf for a while with Jonesy, who was soon to form a formidable relationship with Nath, despite our friendship fading off. One day Jonesy invited Nath to a game at Grose Vale Golf Course, a course that was a family business of Az. We invited a childhood friend of mine, Glenn, with whom we all had a long history of playing cricket.

Although Nath had worked on his cricket technique by learning from the great Don Bradman over the years, his golf swing was horrendous. It took him numerous swings to be able to connect to the ball. It was the most tedious game of golf that

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was already in its third hour by the time we got to the seventh hole.

Glenn connected onto one and ferociously yelled out 'fore' to Nath, who had played ahead. Poof turned around late and collected the ball straight into his eye socket. Nath fell to the ground in agony, saying, 'I'm dying, I'm dying.' If it were not so horrendous, it would have been funny. We never finished that round of golf, and Nath never played again. His one game of golf was horrific enough, and his mother would not allow it either. She became even more protective after that. I think I kind of got the blame for it.

Anyhow, this did a little damage to the golfing obsession but nothing to our friendship. Az came out with my family on a holiday to Nyrang, a beautiful property between Orange and Molong. We had just turned eighteen and were able to drink. Az already had a taste for beer and a quiet appetite for women. I had recently been out to Orange to do my work experience and had come out to the guest house twice or thrice with my family. I was already good friends with Phillie, Julia, and Phillie's best friend, Ally, the most stunning young woman I had ever encountered.

This was a trip to remember. Az and I stayed up late playing my repertoire of songs that I had worked out on the piano. We played Piano Man many times, accompanied by Az's harmonica and our characteristic finish of slamming our heads on either end of the piano. We played some tennis that finished with our slump over the net. And we ventured into town with Davy, where we tried to get into our first pubs. This got old quickly because Davy was underage, so we returned a cheap bottle of

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Brandy. It is hard to say why it was such a magical trip away. It just was!

During our last few years of high school, we would look forward to our Friday nights when Nath, Az, and I would get together and go for our routine walk around Kurrajong Village to McMahons Park. We would talk about all the girls we were interested in and a lot about cricket. This transformed into going back to my house and jumping onto Myspace.

At my house, we would hack into Nath's Myspace account and try and talk about as many inappropriate things to as many of his female friends as possible. On Monday, he had to apologise to everyone in his circle. We thought it was hilarious, but looking back, we were bullying him a bit. Poof would often lose interest and explore Philby's porn stash that was hidden under his bed.

Other things we might do would include going into town to Hitler solute all the passing cars. We might wander around to Az's house and watch Ally G or whatever music videos were popular then. It was usually videos for like bands Sum41. Nath's dad, Rohan, would then kindly end our ventures at approximately 10:00 p.m. We would then look forward to playing cricket on Saturday, talk about cricket all week, and then do our Friday nights all over again.

Our group slowly expanded to include a few other schoolmates who Nath and Az were slowly hanging around more. I increasingly strayed away from the popular group who hung out on the Pigalle on the dam and Bergan's group. I drifted in between groups as I could not decide which of the three groups

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I fit best in. I also spent time on the sports oval playing footy with the footy boys.

Before, I spent more time practising the piano. As spare periods became a thing in years eleven and twelve, I became a true floater. There were just too many different types of people who I enjoyed spending time with, and it was hard to choose. Plus, I had all the interests. I enjoyed an active social life, playing sports and hanging out with the nerds. Eventually, the groups merged outside of school into one big, unified, and harmonious group. There did not seem to be a popular group or a nerd group. They were, and still are, all good mates.

Our Friday nights merged into Friday and Saturday nights, when a small group emerged to either play poker, bet ten-cent pieces, go to various parties around the traps or head down to the club to play snooker. Poof, high on antidepressants, soon became the envy of everyone down at the club. Everyone wanted to be his friend. These days were full of good memories, none more than the infamous tackle of Nath that sent him unexpectedly flying across the room.

Throughout our uni years, we would all come home on the weekend. I would pick everybody up at their houses around Kurrajong and the surroundings around 9:30 p.m. Initially, Nath's parents would not allow him to come out with us, so we would usually have quiet ones in. We often played drinking games. Az had formed an active social life on campus and began bringing some of his mates back home with him. They fit in, and our drinking games often became more intense. The first real time Vic and Nikki came out, we were playing a drinking game

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where I was the first to vomit, even though I was driving and was on the orange juices.

Although my and Az's Friday nights were becoming more of a uni thing, we all still made the religious trip back to Richmond for our Saturday nights. Poof and I had begun hanging out and playing music with Steve, so we would all somehow get to RG's. Davy's mates would often be in the front room betting and getting drunk while Nath, Hol, and I would join up on the dance floor with Paddy and his mate. We had our little corner where we would bust out our moves until the rock music stopped around 11:00 p.m.

We had got to know many of the bands by this stage, as many of the group were studying music at the uni and would often entertain the musicians with our air guitar. Nath was known for his uncoordinated feet. Hol would be somehow down to the ground doing her thing. And I was just having an enjoyable time. Paddy and his mate would just groove away in the corner doing their thing. Az would be drinking somewhere. And who knew where Steve would be? He would be somewhere trying his best to get laid.

Regardless of where we were, we would do our thing until the dance tunes ended at about 1:00 a.m. and then go out the back to see which of our mates were out the back. We would mingle for a bit before it was time to leave RG's around 4:00 a.m. It was customary to get a kabab before finding our way home. I often stayed sober with a few red cordials and drive everyone home.

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Many years ago, Steve introduced us to Tom and Holly. Holly had been Steve's best friend since the end of high school, so we started all going out together. Initially, this was great. We went to pub meals, had road trips, and had lots of parties at Steve's house. These were the good times when we all got along.

But one day, Steve introduced us to his beautiful new girlfriend, Chris, who he went on to marry. Steve had hoped that Tom and Holly would merge into a harmonious friendship group with Chrisula's work friends, however, Tom and Holly isolated themselves from the workmates, and this was the beginning of the end of our big harmonious group.

On a trip up to Brisbane, Tom got a bit inappropriate with Steve, which was the final straw in the relationship. I got caught up in the middle and was blamed for it all. I, however, remained friends, but Poof, Holly, and Tom sort of separated. I was the only one who remained good friends with Steve. To this day, I must spend time with them on separate occasions. It is a bit sad, really.

Everyone sort of has their own life now and their own families. Initially, Nath and Az routinely came up to Tom and Holly's to watch the rugby league on a Friday night. Nath and Tom have a magical memory for rugby league and can remember players, teams, and sides way back in their early years. The season's highlight was always the state of origin nights, which would either be enjoyed at Tom and Holly's beautiful stone Grose Vale cottage or at the Brewery Pub, where we enjoyed making fun of Tom's work colleague Troy.

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On wintery nights, these footy nights often spurred into bonfire nights when we spent most of the night picking on Az whilst feasting on my delicious one-pot wonders. It is usually Nath and Clare's job to get drinks. Az usually gets the entrees and will delight us with delicious olives and sometimes a homemade damper. My job is to slave away on a one-pot wonder. And Holly delights us with her delicious, decadent, often vegetarian desserts. These nights are always enjoyable, especially with the accompaniment of girlfriends and wives as they become available.

The location of our explorations is often the beautiful setting that we are so lucky to call our mate's home. It is a beautiful location where we have had many Friday night football adventures, state of origin nights, bonfires, and parties, including Tom and Holly's wonderful celebration of their wedding, when they eloped and got married at their favourite destination, Byron Bay. As Tom has increasingly made the property more beautiful over the years with his beautiful stonework, they have extended the house to be a happy family home for their two beautiful boys. They have made the older cottage, where we used to watch the football, into a gorgeous Bed 'N' Breakfast. They have extended a second cottage off the property as one of their investments.

As I have made increasingly frequent visits to see Tom, Holly, their beautiful boys, and, more often, Holly's beautiful dad since her mother sadly passed, I have made it my second home. I am enjoying seeing young Cyrus and Byron grow into beautiful and talented boys. They are the most important thing to me, as I

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will sadly never extend the trauma of my schizoaffective genes to another generation.

I am trying to get to as many football games as possible, spoiling them with Pokémon cards and sharing as many precious moments down at the Club's arcade as often as possible. I see Cyrus as the fun heartbreaker who will be the centre of attention and every girl will fall in love with. Byron is the kind and more sensitive young man every mother or father wants their daughter to marry. Cyrus is the one with raw talent who will win games for you. Like his dad, Byron is the workhorse, who will be your best and fairest. I see a little bit of me in both. To me, they are just two beautiful boys who I look forward to spending time with as often as I can. I hope to get to know them well and guide their compassionate little hearts on a journey into an amazing future.

I do not get the time to see Steve's children grow up nearly as much, but when I do, I see the beautiful, talented, and kind young children that both his parents are. I hope I can become increasingly part of their lives as we begin to share our musical gifts with the world. Steve married his angel, Chrisula, years ago now, and it is a joy seeing them together and demonstrating to their children what true love is.

We have all gone our separate ways a bit now, but occasionally we all still catch up. These times are magic. Nath's wedding to his gorgeous Clare will always be a memorable day when my best mates got so drunk that we almost did not give ourselves enough time to get ready for the wedding. I made a gorgeous 'flower girl.' They look forward to starting a happy home in their newly purchased family home in Glossodia. I

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cannot wait to see another generation come into this world so I can spoil their children and have as good a relationship as I do with Tom and Holly's boys.

Az has recently got married in Kirribis to his beautiful wife Anna. I am slightly disappointed that I did not get to see my great mate get married, but that is all behind us now, and I hope that they can arrange the right visa so that we can see their marriage shine in Australia. I look forward to Az taking his bride into a new home soon as he profits from all his hard work slaving away on his mushroom farm. I look forward to many years ahead of enjoying cricket together, whether playing together as mates again or in a coaching capacity.

I really cannot wait to see what all our futures hold. We are all here together now in a wonderful position to really enjoy what life has to offer. With my traumas out of the way, I hope I can begin to be more present with these great mates who have made my life so rich. There is nothing stopping us now!

Cold Kebabs, A Hens Night, and a Case of Beer

Some of the most incredible memories you have in your life involve a little alcohol, sometimes a lot, and a bit of time away. A few year-end trips have a particular memory trace—all bit a few less brain cells.

The first was my first footy trip with the Western Jets. This was both memorable as well as a non-memorable on the way

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back. Our destination was Newcastle. On the road trip, we got tipsy and then drunk. Beer cans would come down one side of the bus and end up being emptied on the other side of the bus just as quickly. I was taught the art of putting a straw to the side of the mouthpiece to ensure that you could gulp down the beer as if it was water.

We got to Newcastle in a semi-disordered state, and that is how it would stay for the rest of the two nights and three days up there. We were asked to be quiet and pretend we're not drunk so we could at least get into the hotel. We thought it was funny whispering, 'We'll be quiet, boss, we'll be quiet.'

The next few days were a blur, as good memories usually are. All I remember is being told the rules—you must always be with a Jets player, no 'poofs,' and I do not even remember the other rules. If we broke any laws, we had to report to the Kangaroo Court in the morning to plead our innocence.

We then broke away. We were entertained with endless drinking games. The main game was that you always had to keep your drinks covered because if a poker chip was placed in your glass, you had to skull it.

The following nights I spent my chances trying to get lucky and spending time with the amazing men that were the Western Jets. We spent Saturday afternoon drinking beers from a fellow club in Newcastle as we egged on a former Jet. The night was a blur despite getting a young lady's number. I called her later. I found out it was her work number and receiving a call from me was highly embarrassing for her. We never talked again.

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The trip home was a lot more sober than the trip up. Three days of heavy drinking was an arduous task I would never do again. I went close, but never like this. We arrived back at RG Magees at about 4:00 p.m. feeling worse for wear and a bit sorry for ourselves. As we returned, the same guy that had begun the journey with us playing the Shoot the Moose arcade game in the pokies room was still there playing the bloody game. He had been there for three days straight, waiting for his Jets mates to return.

The other great trip away was Wazza's bucks party down in Kiama. I am not sure how we got down there, but our first adventure was to play a round of golf at a fancy golf club just out of town. Because it was pouring rain, we decided to stay inside and get on the tarps. I started early, got a little tipsy and then a little drunk. Davy, who I had been lucky enough to play a bit of cricket with that year, put on the tab early, a case of beer to whoever would pass out first. It was a sure bet, as I was already close to the edge. He thought.

The morning soon turned afternoon, and I was on top of the world. I was tipsy the whole time, maintaining a healthy level of laughter. I was the life of the party the entire time. At least, I thought I was. As the afternoon came, we ordered something to eat. While eating, they took my phone and found out who was the last person I had called. I met a lovely young lady at the Fiddler, the first girl I had ever had the guts to ask out. She and her friend had driven me home from Rooty Hill KFC a few days earlier, where we had caught up for our first date. I had been talking to her a bit, so she was on top of my most recent phone call list.

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The boys called this girl. She later told me that she wanted nothing to do with me because she could hear me nervously laughing in the background as they made fun of me on the phone and made me out to be a complete asshole. I was the butt of the jokes when I was part of the Pitt Town Boys. I never got a bowl. They usually batted me down the order. And they put me, twelfth man, two years in a row in the grand finals, even though I was coming home every week to play and had scored a few handy runs when I did get a chance. I was not a great fielder then, probably as I was still adjusting to living on medication and was extremely tired from spending time at the uni. So, I lost interest in the game whilst playing at Pitt Town. A few of them were top blokes, but some of them were pigs. Especially the third-grade captain the year we won, even though he killed it with the bat that year.

*This was not going to stop my night. I kept having a few beers and pulled out my customary dance moves. The girls loved my ‘stagger,’ an activity where I hold my legs together and wobble from side to side, grooving to the music. They also loved my customary ‘whoop, whoop,’ where I roll around on my back in a circle, well, sort of a circle. This is inspired by an episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer demonstrates this incredible, pitiful skill.*

There was also a beautiful waitress whom the boys said I could not get the number of. So, I went on to prove them wrong. I walked up to her and got her number. My trick was, and always has been, to tell the girl that the boys have said, ‘I have no chance of getting your number. Just give me any number so I can say I

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have your number.' The boys never knew any better. It probably was not even her actual number. I never tried anyway.

So, the night progressed. There were a lot of nice girls around who were extremely friendly. A few had made a couple of moves on me and my friends. They seemed friendly enough.

Then I felt a bit tired and was about to go home when Cato, my captain, said, 'You want a bowl? Get me a kebab, and I will give you a bowl on the weekend.'

I jumped at the opportunity, as it had been a few years since I had had a bowl, and I ran down to get a kebab.

But on the way, I saw Timmy and Beck jumping into a bus, a different Beck than the one mentioned earlier. 'Hey,' they said. 'Jump in.'

So, without thinking about it, I jumped on this bus. So many friendly girls were there, and a few creepy guys joined in for the ride. We seemed to drive for ages and ages before one of the girls grabbed my hand and said, 'Please, come with me. Some of these guys creep me out. Can you protect me?'

Thinking nothing of it, I followed the girl into the house. There were bottles of alcohol and dildos everywhere. 'Where are we?' I asked Timmy and Beck. 'Where do you think we are?' Timmy replied. 'We are at a Hen's Night.'

Beck and Tim were trying to get lucky with the bride-to-be. 'Give her one last send off.'

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'Are you guys not married?' I thought. But the thought never crossed my mind again. I am at a hen's night with some 'friendly' girls.

Some of the girls sat me down and gave me a straw. Then, they said, 'You can have as much vodka as you like.' Then, they handed me a dildo and got me poking them in the face with it, them saying, 'You go, boy!' Timmy and Beck thought it was hilarious. Asexual me, at the time, thought nothing of it.

But like that, everyone seemed entertained, and I was left to entertain myself with a bottle of vodka that I slowly drank through a straw. Who knew where Timmy and Beck were, but I did not care. I was happy enough to entertain myself, slowly sipping on the alcohol.

Before long, Timmy and Beck came back a bit disappointed. They failed to woo the bride-to-be and said, 'Let's go home.'

We had a great walk home. It was about 3:00 a.m. We had no idea how to return to the pub where we were staying. However, it was still a memorable chat about everything—wives, work, and as usual, cricket. I got to know these boys, the best first-grade players at the time. Despite all my talent, I was a twelfth man in third grade then. I was playing for a club where I did not fit in. But these boys made me feel like I fit in and talking to players that had achieved so much more than I had ever achieved felt good.

After four or five kilometres, we returned to the pub at about 4:00 or 5:00 a.m. I placed the half-eaten kebab under

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Cato's pillow and quietly whispered, 'I have your kebab, skip. I have your kebab.' He rose from his slumber, screaming, 'You are never getting a bowl. You owe me \$50.' I thought I did not get a bowl anyway, so no harm had been lost. I had a good night.

I then crept over to Davy's bed and whispered in his ear, 'You owe me a case of beer. You have passed out long before me. He yawned and said, 'Fair one, mate, you win.'

So, I did not get a bowl, but I had been to a Hen's night. Few guys can say that. I also got my case of beer. Davy bought me a case of Hollandia's, a cheap Dutch beer. I could not even drink the damn thing; they were so yeasty.

I was happy that year that I filled in twice to play first grade, where Davy was wicketkeeping. I played cricket with him for the only time in my life. That was the only reason I went to Pitt Town in the first place. I got told many times that I was useless, was the butt of every joke, and was, at times, bullied. But I got two memorable games with my beautiful little brother. I also got to play with players as good as Timmy and Beck. And although I was the twelfth man both times, I got two memorable premierships.

My Big Regret

Momentum did not take on the power in my first season back to cricket. I enjoyed playing, but coaching was not the best experience of my life. I had lost a lot of love for the game and had

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a lot of anger. However, I brought back some of the enthusiasm of my university and rekindled it with one of my great loves.

I was acquainted with a young Baby Beamer whose talent soared above the rest. There were others, but memories always fade unless made strong, often by less memorable events. There were two children with autism in my first season, which made it a challenge that rekindled not a love of cricket but more anger. With no skills in special education, my tolerance could have been better. I would send one of the boys to do laps. His just got angry, and I lost patience with the other boy, which I now regret. We did not win many games, but we did run up against a relatively good side whom I would soon become acquainted with as more than friends but family.

The season escalated at the last training session, where I thought it would be fun to have a water bomb fight, one of my favourite things to do as a child. But a fight broke out. One of the boys started throwing uppercuts at some of the other boys because he could not tie one of the water bombs himself. I went to break up the fight, and that boy was off. I ushered the other boys over to find their parents in the club, and I went to sit down with the troubled youth.

He was only eight or nine, but his confidence was already shot. I found him on the cricket pitch and quietly sat down with him. He said, 'I am a loser!'

I responded, 'No, you are not. You are a lovely boy. You cannot go around throwing punches at your friends. It is not what you have done in the past that matters but what you do the next

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time the same feelings come inside you again, how you control your frustration and anger.'

He broke down, and I gave him a little hug.

The following year, I was given a team of fine young individuals. Still, the parents had explicitly asked that the autistic boy be excluded from the team. They feared him after he broke loose at the last training session. I had to tell the boy's mother, who was already down of luck, of the team's wishes.

Looking back, I greatly regret this decision. Now that I have worked in disabilities, I know there would be a million reasons why an autistic boy might lose it like that: sensory issues, neurological issues. The possibilities are endless. I wish I had stood up for the majority and made him feel part of the team. I could have changed the trajectory of his life as team sports are possibly the best part of a child's upbringing and the best form of early intervention for anyone with a disability. Again, I greatly regret making this decision. He trusted me, and I let him down.

The Cricket Family

Baby Beamer was joined with his mates, a group of fine young cricketers and, most of all, fine young children. They were eight or nine, and Baby Beamer was slightly older than the rest. They seemed to get on like a house on fire almost immediately. Many had played on an undefeated team the year prior, but their parents were looking for someone to take them to the next level.

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I remember overhearing Punter whisper to his wife, 'He looks a bit scraggly,' as I was introduced to the team.

We met at a Meet the Captains afternoon. I remember overhearing them talk amongst themselves, saying, 'I'm not sure about this guy.'

Some had known me from junior cricket and coming through senior cricket as a youngin and knew I had a lot to offer, but many had come across from other clubs like those Richmond Boys. I remember hearing Beamer confidently say, 'Wait 'til you see him bring them together. Wait to see how fun he will make it for the boys.'

I remember being overwhelmed by the talent. I had coached a young Kobey and Logues the previous year as four-year-olds even though I had no idea they were cousins. Kobey's left-hand batting technique was perfect, even back then, as a four-year-old. Logues had won most of the games, but when it came to the run at the end, he was lazy and just walked. Young Wilson could land the ball on a dime even back then. Zacky was swinging them both ways. And well, a young Tull was bloody useless. He bowled like his dad, and they were going at right angles.

Their work ethic was remarkable, especially for a young Tull. He started mowing a wide pitch, and as he stopped spraying them at right angles and got a bit of control, he would narrow the pitch. I could not keep the ball on the wicket when I got to his house after training one afternoon in the first season. He had

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designed the most fantastic tank I have ever seen and, by the end of the season, was bowling darts—arrows as straight as a laser.

The following three or four seasons were a blur. The boys would work their asses off at training, often playing a replica game on the oval. They all valued their wickets, especially a young Eth who hated getting out. They all did. That is what made these battles so intriguing. No one wanted to get out and give their mates a bat. They were facing some of the best bowling, possibly anywhere in the state.

The dads would all be there at every training. They would all knock off from work early to spend their afternoon chatting with their mates. They talked about all sorts of things, including work, family, renovations, model aeroplanes, but mainly cricket and their beautiful boys. They were obsessed with the game and gave the boys great pointers as needed. They were becoming great mates, as were the boys.

As the boys got older, the training focused more on net sessions to work on their techniques and hone their bowling actions. Most of them, ten out of twelve, were also representative players, so they were getting plenty of time to work on the rest. I would always finish with a few fielding drills to keep their catching, ground fielding, and throwing sharp, but it would always finish with lefties vs. righties.

We were fortunate to have as many left-handers as right-handers, which is rare in any cricket. Lefties vs righties was a game that was a battle to the death. They would often end with tears from at least one player. But in the end, they would leave

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the game as mates, as if there had been no competition. They would walk off laughing, smiling, and looking forward to the weekend when they could be with their mates again. Of course, the reality is that there would be many backyard battles between Tuesday and Saturday, but you catch the drift. They loved being together, and I loved being around them. Like mutual respect where there was just love between all of us.

About a third of the season in, I thought it would be a clever idea for the dads to get together and have a season of indoors together to keep the interest sharp in the off-season. Initially, some moaned and groaned and said, 'I don't think the old body is ready for it.' I pushed them through the arduous task, and every Monday, we would go down to Richmond Indoor Centre for our game.

Once the niggles were out, we played some fantastic indoor cricket. We did not lose too many games. Gregggy got his left arm darts swinging both ways. Punter and I picked up many wickets bowling our shitty little offies. And Beamer got better every week. We had the exceptionally talented Wax filling in, who gave us a bit of class, but there was a lot of class in the swing bowling of old Al, Brenno, and the rest of the 'men.' The boys would sit along the side and 'Yee haw' every wicket so loud that the Grumpy Old Adjudicator soon ended that.

Regarding the final game, Wax brought in his talented brother and father to boost our stocks. They had driven the whole two and a half hours from Oberon. I was furious as I would not bump Beamer from the side, who had rocked up every game for the entire season. He did not have the talent of the other two 'fill-

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ins,' but that was not the point. He was one of the boys. So, Wax threatened not to play if his brother and father could not. So, I said, 'We will play one short.' Mates are more important than winning any day.

He did play, had a great game, as usual, and caught a screamer to win us the game. A relatively comfortable win in the end. Beating a hot young side, many of whom went on to play superior grade levels after that. This showed the level we were playing at and the quality of players like Punter, Brenno, and Wax, even though Wax played minimal cricket after that.

I am unsure if we played four or five seasons together or if it was just three, but that is not the point. By the end of the last season, we were a family. Punter had taken over the coaching duties, but as he and the boys were moving up to Queensland before the end of the season, he asked his trusty mate to take over the boys. I still slept in most of the season and missed the morning games, but in the last game, before the boys moved up to Queensland, we played our rivals, Freemans Reach. We had beaten them in the final for the last three or four years and had some skillful players, especially young Brocky, who I have a quiet respect for, despite him still asking for that damn slushy for the last fifteen years.

The game did not go as we planned. It was my first game back, and we lost it. The first game we had lost in nearly four years. Punter thought it was hilarious because he had gone undefeated the whole time, he had coached the team, and in the one game I took over, we lost. Anyhow, I did open with his boys,

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and they did take a bloody long time to get into their innings. So, was not entirely to blame.

The rest of the season went as planned, and we got to the final again, against those bloody Freemo Boys. Our army was set up across the Woodlands Oval as all the parents, grandparents, fathers, brothers, mothers, and sisters were there. It was a sea of gazebos for as far as the eyes could see, like a sea. You get the point.

We were without our superstars, Zacky and Kobey, but we had plenty of other stock to fill the void as did Freemo. They batted as deep as we did. And they were well coached also. Logues took a few quick wickets and we had them struggling at five for barely anything. But then, something we were not used to in our four years of playing together as a team, a young Kyle dominated us. Another kid I had a lot of respect for. He was cocky but fair.

This took the game away. But as usual, we showed a lot of fights. First, Basto kept us in with a good knock before he fell into a trap. He was blasting them everywhere until Brocky moved every one of his players to the boundary. Basto tried to hit a six and mistimed it, landing straight into the hands of deep mid-wicket.

The rest of the game was a nail-biter. The Wilson's kept us into the game until both held out to some good cricket. We fell two-run shorts, and Freemo got their deserved premiership after so many years of being the second best. They deserved it for all the hard work they did to get there each year. And we did damn good fighting right to the end. It was one of the best junior games

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of cricket that I have ever seen. That night was hard to swallow, but I was proud of my boys, and all the support that the parents had given them throughout the years. It was an end to an era, but friendships will last forever.

We did lose Punter and the boys to Queensland and one of the good ones to Heaven. Pete had moved up to Bellingen so Riley could be in a warmer environment for his Renaud's Disease. Pete had often asked for advice from me when one of his boys was going off the rails. I constantly reminded him, 'Pete, they are not you, mate. They do not have the same motivation as you.'

Pete loved to talk about horticulture, and I have never met anyone so passionate. He used to be a World Champion Model Aeroplane rider. He had gone as far as he could in so many pursuits. But one day, when he was out fishing with his beloved Riley, one of his special boys who he never stopped raving about, he slipped and hit his head on a rock. Unfortunately, he was never revived.

I went with a few mates to his funeral, where Punter drove down from Queensland. All the parents were there, but this was no place for children. This was the last time we were all together. It was so sad that we had so many great memories; the last one we all had together was saying goodbye to one of our mates. Rest in Peace, Pete. I love you, mate, and all the joy you brought into our lives. You were one of the good ones, and your boys will grow up to be wonderful men because they had such a fantastic role model and friend. I miss you every day and would do anything to listen to one of your long-winded stories again.

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You bowled puss, mate, but you had enough heart to make up for it.

Mentorship

I have consistently demonstrated sound leadership skills. As I have developed as a human being, this leadership has developed naturally in several mentorship roles in a voluntary capacity on the cricket field, in community work, and at the global level.

I returned to playing on the cricket field after coaching for many years. I had successfully coached many of the young players, many of whom looked up to me at the time. After playing many roles in second grade, I dropped back the grades and found myself captaining a fourth-grade side. On this side, I brought some of my mates back, including Psycho and Stephan, up-and-coming young players, Archie, Freddie, Ramone, Goedde, and a few talented young AFL players. I had coached many in both club and rep cricketers and slowly brought many of these players to the club.

Archie and Freddie are brothers. Freddie is the talented younger brother who had always played above his age and excelled in representative cricket then. He was a confident, sometimes cocky kid who was mature above his years. A fun-loving kid whom I loved to coach. His older brother Archie did not have the talent nor the work ethic of his younger brother but is a laid-back kid, still with plenty of talent. He is highly charismatic

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and was coming into an age where he was growing into his body, and his personality was shining through. I loved these boys, and at the time, they admired me. I opened the batting with Arch, and Freddie filled in wherever there was a spot.

Ramone is my little mate. I coached him from an early age in representative cricket and slowly got him over to North Richmond. His dad, Pete, is one of my greatest allies in the world, and we spend time exploring the city together. I am a regular in the Dallas household, which is my second family. Playing with Ramone was a lifelong dream, and I have since watched him become a quality cricketer. I had highly memorable innings batting with Ramone on Richmond Oval, where we turned it on with a faster-than-a-run-a-ball one hundred and forty-run partnership. This was one of the highlights of my cricketing career. I often put Ramone in front of me to dull down the bowling so that I could take teams apart.

Ramone is now a regular for the Eastern Suburbs first-grade side and got offered a scholarship to play cricket in the county league over in England. Pete and I live our dreams through Ramone, as he can bowl impressively sharp. He has been clocked at 139 kilometres per hour, which is as quick as anyone. If I were taller or had more ability, I would bowl four to six bouncers per over at my batters. This is what we encourage Ramone to do. He does not consistently bowl that many bouncers but bowls a fantastic bumper. He owes remarkable success to his thoughtful dad, who took him down daily to the nets for over ten years. He has a bung shoulder now and a terrible eyesight for his efforts. Ramone is, however, staying put for now because he is focusing

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on becoming a philosophy student at the university. He wants to constantly improve himself and learn about the great thinkers that shape our thinking.

I played my best season ever as captain and enjoyed the extra responsibility. The senior players led from the top, with Stephan scoring more runs than me, including a few magical hundreds, even though I topped the averages with an average of over 66. By halfway through the season, I had only gotten out once, run out in the first game when I was on 60, and they tried to regrade me all season. Stephan and Psycho got most of our wickets. We mixed the youngins around at the other end.

My season was stopped in a round where a bouncer clocked me in the eye socket. I went out to open the batting because we had fielded the entire day in 45-degree heat, and no one else wanted to bat. As a captain, you do things for the team sometimes. The ploy was to bowl short at my head, and even after I was hit, they continued bowling beamers (i.e., bowling deliberately at my head) for another three overs. I ended out stopping the game and walking up to the other captain. Unfortunately, this halted my form and the team's momentum going into the second half of the season.

With poor momentum in the semis and me missing six weeks, we had gone from the top of the table to second. I rested our star youngins in the game before the semis because they had their grand finale the next day. My plan backfired, and we slipped from second to third. Unfortunately, the semi-finals were washed out we could not compete to play for the final.

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Regardless, we got a reputation for playing tough cricket, and it was an excellent steppingstone for the younger players, who are all playing much higher-level cricket than their coach and mentor ever achieved. I am proud of them and look forward to seeing how far they can take their cricketing prowess. I hope I taught them about clean-hitting and tough, competitive cricket.

The proudest area of my life is seeing my young friend, Ethan, turn into a fine young man. When I met him, I volunteered as a co-facilitator for the RAGE program for young boys with anger management problems. He was completing the course for the fourth time because his mother, Gail, struggled to cope with his anger issues. It was impacting their relationship. At the end of the course, Gail asked if I could mentor Ethan so that he had a male role model, as his father was rarely in the picture back then.

Ethan had attached himself to me within a week of taking the course. I had decided to take him to the Hawkesbury Show to volunteer to sell corn cobs. Initially, Ethan was quiet, but watching me sell the corn cobs was all the encouragement he required. Initially, he was frustrated that the shift was going so slowly, but as his enthusiasm improved, he was surprised when the four-hour shift was over. 'Corn cobs, anyone for corn cobs, come and grab your corn cobs,' he was announcing to the world. This quiet kid was coming out of his shell.

Ethan is a pure genius. Because he was bullied at school, he did not go for three to four years. The one day he did go was the test to determine where everyone fit into the grand scale of things. He got 100% despite not completing any of the

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schoolwork. He could quickly pick up anything. I was so excited to see what his future holds.

As the years passed, I began spending more time with Ethan. He is now one of my best friends, and I spend more time with him than anyone else. He has an excellent job as a salesman, selling various storage solutions. Some months he tops the sales quota at his company, and I am proud that he is increasingly applying himself to his job.

Recently, he moved in with us when the floods were on, which meant that he did not have to rely on his mother to take him everywhere, a trip that was usually an hour round trip. He has since moved into a motel in Richmond due to mold issues from the floods. This has allowed him to meet and maintain great friendships with fantastic young men around town. He regularly goes into the city and just has a damn enjoyable time.

He is highly focused on health and educates me every time I see him on dietary, nutritional, and exercise solutions that I am trying to implement into my daily life. He is a tall, handsome young kid who will make a fantastic father once he finds the right woman he can care for and who will take care of him. I cannot express how proud I am of him. I always look forward to seeing him. I am so grateful to have him, his beautiful mother, Gail, and their two beautiful dogs, Bella and Pablo, in my life. They are truly one of the most significant parts of my life, and I love them very much.

I also have a mentee on the other side of the planet, in Kenya. I mentored Grace in the Global Mental Health Peer

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Network Mentorship program. This is the responsibility of all honorary members. I have been able to mentor others, but there is only so much time to dedicate to many people.

I have not done as much for Grace as I would like to. I tried to research the mental health and tech world in Nairobi when she first came on board. Still, communication difficulties have sometimes made it difficult. I have tried to explain to her the importance of keeping databases so that she can maintain engagement in programs. I wanted to help her financially during tough times, but this did not work out. She has been through a domestic abuse relationship. And she sometimes struggles to have enough medication to sustain her attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Grace is a psychologist and has her own business on mental wellness. I hope I can get over to Kenya in the coming years to meet her in person and form a fantastic relationship for years to come.

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CHAPTER 2 : TRAUMA



CHAPTER 2~Trauma

From the beginning, it seemed that mental health challenges were written into the script of my life. My family history was riddled with mental illness and past events that could increase my vulnerability to mental health issues. Although I enjoyed a happy and innocent upbringing, my teenage years were marked by a series of traumatic events that left me feeling confused and unable to cope. Despite my best efforts, the grief of losing three of my most significant role models has left me searching for answers for the rest of my life. Over the years, I have learned to manage my traumas to some degree and find ways to move forward. However, the loss of my loved ones has profoundly impacted me, and the search for answers and healing continues.

Doomed

My family history of mental illness and past life events seemed to have set the stage for my struggles with mental health, even before I was born. The good thing about having family historians as parents is that I know the genetic and environmental factors that could increase my risk of mental illness.

At birth, I experienced a trauma that further predisposed me to mental health challenges. The umbilical cord was wrapped three times around my throat, and I was born blue and

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asphyxiated. For the first two to three minutes of my life, I had my mother's umbilical cord wrapped around my throat. My birth trauma may have had lasting effects on my mental health.

Mental health issues have plagued both sides of my family tree. On my father's side, my grandmother witnessed her schizophrenic mother slit her father's throat before being institutionalized for the rest of her life. On my mother's side, my grandfather struggled with his Jewish identity after his father left his mother due to madness. He left for Western Australia and died at the age of 42 in an institution from a brain tumour. My other grandfather also had his struggles and died after being diagnosed with frontotemporal dementia. I thought his strange and inappropriate behaviours were due to bipolar disorder, but it turned out to be Wischelchutz. I spent a year fearing that I would suffer a similar fate. However, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed no frontal lobe damage, giving me hope for my mental health.

Sometimes, I wonder about the role of past lives in shaping our present experiences. I once dreamed that I was Jimi Hendrix in a previous life. His music has always resonated with me deeply, and I feel an inexplicable connection to him. However, I know that these thoughts may be a manifestation of a God-delusion that I am still working through in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

School Camp

On my 15th birthday, we left to go to Warner Brothers for our year nine school camp. The Year Advisor called the roll and kindly asked if any of my mates would accompany me on the other bus because he wanted his peace during the three to four-hour bus trip, knowing I would be in full swing on the bus trip. Az kindly offered to go on the other bus even though all his other mates were on the Year Advisor's bus. I sat next to a quiet young Kirsty, who would become a big part of my life a few years later.

The trip was fun, and we settled into our rooms. We put a hole in the tent to sneak off to the girls' tents through the night. It was a great night when the teachers were on full alert and were aware of our shenanigans. At one stage, I did sneak off to the girl's tent but did not get the pash I sought. When the boys were together, there was the worst smell from all our farts. I did not think I was well. Some boys were experimenting with drugs even though 'knowing would ever know.'

On a sleepless night, I acquainted myself with the young Black Priest. I did not know him until now, but I was amazed at how a 15-year-old could describe his Mormon faith in so much detail and passion. He knew exactly what his faith was and what he wanted to do with his life, even back then. I was in awe of the way he swam. He had broken some of Ian Thorpe's records even back then and looked effortless. He had a vast wake on either side of him as he glided down the lane. He had a ripped body. Mine was good at the time, but his...God damn! He could backflip. He could breakdance. He was something special!

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The following day, I woke with great enthusiasm. It would be a sweltering day, so we packed lots of water. Then, we started walking a hike to the top of the mountain. On the way to the top, the Jealous Friend offered me his water bottle. I had known the Jealous Friend since primary school, and he was always jealous of me because I had such a natural charm with the ladies. Whenever I succeeded in any pursuit, he would yell out, 'Crickey Moses.'

I would never have drunk from it if I had known that he had spiked this drink. But it was over 40 degrees, and my bottle was empty. So, I drank the poisoned bottle, and before I knew it, I had so much energy that I sprinted to the top of the mountain. I had reached the top so quickly that I returned to my peers and then back up numerous times.

I then felt extraordinarily thirsty and downed three or four bottles of water. I had so much energy but was feeling a bit weary. We played a bit of cricket before going for a canoe ride. I had so much energy that I skipped the instructions as I could not concentrate on his words. I remember being in a boat with the Black Priest and his best mate, Bergan. I had only been introduced to Bergan because he was in the other group circle. I grabbed the oar and paddled so fast. It was only because the Black Priest and Bergan were so athletic that we managed to go in any straight direction. By the end of the canoe trip, I was exhausted. I jumped out of the boat, and the Year Advisor had a grin on his face. He was so entertained by watching me be so 'enthusiastic.'

Even though it was an extremely sweltering day, over forty degrees, I suddenly felt so cold. I retreated to my cabin and

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jumped into the sleeping bag. Soon, I started sweating profusely, and I felt highly woozy. Everyone screamed my name because they had planned a birthday cake for me. I remember hearing the Year Advisor yell, 'Where are you, you party pooper?' The Black Priest was asked to bring down a glass of water, but when they saw how dehydrated I was, they asked to sit down with me to drink some Powerade. He sat down with me until I resumed any colour on my face.

Then I was off. I suddenly had so much energy. At that point, I became an excellent middle-distance runner and ran everywhere. I ran all the way to the highway, about 300-400 meters from the camp. This was out of bounds, but I had a strange urge to go to the highway.

While I sat on the highway, I heard the only voice I have ever heard, a conscience, if you like, urging me to run in front of a car on the highway. The voice, conscience, whatever it was, was saying, 'Come on, run out in front of the car. This will be the easiest time to kill yourself. There will not be any other opportunity like this.'

By this time, the teachers were worried and were looking for me everywhere. Finally, the Wyeth and the Pretty Teacher, I honestly do not remember her name, found me walking back to the camp weary. They helped me walk to the medic's room, where I went from hot to cold. I did not even have the energy to go to the bathroom, so I wet myself. The Wyeth said, 'Great, the only degree of comfort he has left.'

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They did their best to hydrate me. They used a drip. I only remembered the popular girls coming into the room and wondering what all these amazing jars of yellow fluid were. I had filled three large bottles of urine from all the fluids I had consumed. 'Yuck!' they shrieked as they realized what the bottles were and dashed out of the medic's room. I do not have much memory after that, but I remember hearing one of the doctors say how dehydrated I was and that 'We almost lost him there. I have never seen anyone that close. He is fortunate to be alive.'

The following day, I woke extremely groggy and feeling sorry for myself. I had been a few minutes away from dying. I remember one girl telling me, 'You liked the attention, didn't you?'

It was furthest from the truth. Before that, I was an innocent, happy-go-lucky child with the perfect childhood. This was the first psychotic episode that I experienced. And it was my first drug-induced psychosis. My first forced drug-induced psychosis. Not a drug that I chose to experiment with, but one that took away my opportunity to experiment. It was speed, but I can never be sure. The only thing to be certain was this camp, on my fifteenth birthday, changed my life forever.

Purple Haze

The next couple of months were a blur. I returned to school, but everything seemed to be a patchy haze, and I was not there. I tried to write my feelings down, but this only entrenched

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me further into being more lost. More confused. More unable to express what I was feeling and experiencing. All the poetry in the world could not express my feelings at the time. I wrote a song called Purple Haze that started with the following words:

*Drifting in and out like a patchy haze,
Drifting in and out of a wishful daze,
Feelings are lost in a poetic phrase.*

I was so lost then; I am unsure how the following chain of events happened. But within three months of being drugged on the school camp, three momentous events occurred that took me out of my balanced reality of a happy, innocent childhood and into the hands of psychiatry's whim.

After the school camp, I was dehydrated and ended out in the hospital for over a week. Mother Dearest reminds me of my state of mind at the time as purely bizarre because I still have limited recollection of my hospital stay. She brought me into the hospital because my words purely were not making sense, as I was far detached from a balanced reality.

All I remember of the stay was bunking with a young boy who had broken his arm in a motorbike accident. Whilst carrying a drip, we terrorised the staff by collecting all the plastic gloves in all the hospital wards. We blew and tied them up, so they were giant balloons and played soccer with them in the halls. Because I was a nuisance, rather than having any real idea of what was causing all this bizarre and inappropriate behaviour, the doctors explained that I had viral meningitis. They could not find

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anything wrong, so they sent me home from the hospital, and I resumed school the next day.

The Human Spirit

A few weeks passed, and I experienced a night I'd rather forget.

It all began innocently enough. I invited Bergan over to hang out with the German Exchange Student. We shared jokes and laughter when someone suggested I check upstairs for any available alcohol.

Unsure of what to choose, I quickly grabbed a few bottles, knowing my parents were sound asleep in the adjacent room. Returning downstairs, the boys were impressed by my assortment of liquor. Aware that there was more alcohol in the cabinet beneath the staircase, I hurriedly retrieved a bottle of red wine, later discovering it was an old, fine wine that my father and his friends had aged for over 20 years, saving it for a special occasion.

Upon my return, we resumed our gathering in the downstairs music room. Although the boys were impressed with my haul, this was the first time in my life that I had acted covertly behind my parents' backs. Beneath my nervous laughter, guilt weighed heavily on me.

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We continued with our teenage banter, but the boys grew impatient, urging me to join in. "Come on, mate, give it a go," they encouraged.

At first, I resisted with a nervous giggle, saying no three or four times before finally giving in. I took a deep gulp, shuddering at the unpleasant taste. Unaware of the consequences, I downed the entire bottle of wine and at least half a bottle of the other pilfered liquor.

Before long, I was laughing loudly and pretending to converse with imaginary people on the walls. I became boisterous and uncontrollable, leaving the boys uncertain about how to handle the situation.

Soon after, I vomited all over a newspaper the boys had picked up, fearing I was nearing my limits. To avoid waking my parents, they suggested we go for a walk.

My laughter and curiosity eventually turned to anger. I began shouting the names of all the girls I had crushes on, screaming, "Fuck them! Fuck them all!"

We walked uphill and reached the park. I retched on the ground, the taste of the red wine lingering in my mouth. It continues to haunt me to this day. Eventually, I lost consciousness...

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I Choose Not to Remember

This part of my memoir, I initially chose to omit. I did not want to tarnish my own or anyone else's reputation. However, as I have delved deeper into my own trauma, I have come to realize the profound impact it left on me. It is unlike any other moment or series of moments in my life; it has shaped who I am today.

Over the course of one or two weeks, I would wake up to find the German Exchange Student in my room, long after my parents had gone to bed. At first, not understanding why he was there, my immediate reaction was to scream. He would quickly cover my mouth with his hand, urging me not to scream. He was always swift enough that I never had a chance to make a sound.

On the first night this happened, I violently struggled as he covered my mouth, but I remember nothing beyond that point. It felt as though whatever he used to stifle my screams also stole my consciousness and my memory. Or perhaps I chose to block it out.

This ordeal repeated itself every night for a duration I am uncertain of. What I do know is that I never quite had enough time to scream, and then I would lose consciousness. I would wake up with a sore arm, always a different one. I would wake to a feeling down there. I still hate that feeling.

The time it took for me to lose consciousness seemed to decrease with each passing night. My window to scream dwindled, and my ability to fight back faded.

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In truth, I cannot say for sure how long this continued. I estimate one or two weeks, but it could have been shorter or longer. I was also grappling with alcohol poisoning and meningitis during this time, which pushed me into a psychotic state. I have made a conscious choice not to dwell on the specifics.

What I do remember are the days. I recall spending time in the German Exchange Student's room, where he boasted about the medicines, he had access to. With a sly grin, he would discuss how he could obtain syringes. Back then, I had no interest in such conversations; I had no idea what he was talking about.

Sleep eluded me entirely. When I was not being awakened by the German Exchange Student, I would wake up screaming, convinced that he was there or about to return. I spent countless nights staying awake, paralyzed by fear.

Then, during a cricket trip to Lismore, the moment I had dreaded occurred. I walked into the room, and there he was, the German Exchange Student, unpacking his belongings. He looked at me with the same sly grin I had seen before he silenced me. Only this time, I was conscious, and I fought back. With a few uncoordinated blows, I attempted to retaliate but was swiftly pulled away from him by my father. He intervened before I could cause any harm.

Following that incident, the German Exchange Student was swiftly sent back on a bus to the Hawkesbury, where he resumed living with his chosen foster family. While this chapter had come to an end, the torment of sleepless nights and the lifelong repercussions of mental illness were just beginning to

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take hold. I buried anything malicious deep within my consciousness for nearly 25 years because I simply chose not to remember.

Losing My Shit

With the German Exchange Student on his way home, Farter took it upon himself to try and mend things. He suggested a one-on-one canoeing trip, but I declined, in desperate need of some rest. Despite my lack of sleep, I hoped for some peace. I hadn't had a decent night's sleep in weeks, staying awake through the nights, fearing a recurrence.

A few days passed up in Lismore, where we were staying at a caravan park with Davy's Cricket team. My mental health was deteriorating rapidly, and Farter took me to the hospital to figure out what was happening in my mind. He stayed with me as the doctors explained to my concerned parents that I had become detached from reality. I found no solace from my troubled thoughts and would often retreat to the restroom, screaming in despair. Upon returning, the only relief I could find was in quietly chanting something under my breath.

Farter asked me what I was murmuring, to which I replied, "God is Good, God is Good, God is Good. The Devil is bad, The Devil is bad, The Devil is bad." I was experiencing a psychotic break, so I am uncertain whether it lasted for minutes or hours. The doctor eventually prescribed some medication and sent me home after I was rendered unconscious.

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When I woke up, my father anxiously awaited by my bedside, a period that had lasted for 14-16 hours. It was the first proper sleep I had enjoyed in weeks.

True to my nature, I bounced back swiftly. One morning, I shed a few tears, then went out to play cricket on my own. Crossy's mom summoned a young Crossy to bowl a few balls at me, and cricket once again occupied my mind. That evening, we fried a few cane toads as we ventured for miles, following Crossy's pretense of being an adult and urging us to "get off his property."

A few days later, I found myself loudly cheering for the victorious Hawkesbury team, who achieved a miraculous victory in the final against an undefeated Newcastle side. I led a cheer squad of potentially eight hundred young cricketers who had gathered to support the underdogs in the exciting final. Our team executed three brilliant runouts to secure this remarkable cricket victory, spurred on by the enthusiastic army that I led in chanting, "Hawkesbury, Hawkesbury, Hawkesbury, Oi, Oi, Oi."

Running Away

I had already started running by this time, but what I enjoyed became something necessary. Necessary for me to have an outlet. An outlet for the stress of my life and the trauma I was enduring at this part of my life.

In primary school, I never really got into running. I was a chubby kid who was just natural at sports without trying. I often

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walked cross-country races because I did not have the stamina. I did not care.

Then, as my body developed, I tried for the first time in a warmup cross-country race in PE, and I came third. I thought, 'Shit... I could be good at this.'

So, I started by running around the backyard. Then it became two, three times. Before, it was the whole block. Then it became two blocks and so on. I ran everywhere after that. I ran further. I ran longer. I ran harder. I loved it.

So, in year seven at district, I came 15th. In year eight, the third. Then, I won and led the pack in the regionals the following year. I could have made a state that year, but the guy in front of me got his shoes stuck in the mud and had to stop. I could not stop laughing, and he ended up putting his boots back on and running straight past me. I came seventh, and only the top six went through.

I then joined Little Athletics and ran behind the best runner I have ever run against. I did not have the heart to run with him, even though I did not care enough. I did not have that winning attitude I needed to win against those sorts of athletes. I won most races at school, especially middle distance. The following year, after all the shit happened at home, I did not even make the district. Although I had lapped third place and a state female triathlete in a 1,500-metre race at Little Athletics a year earlier, I did not make the top six in a school race. I had put on a lot of weight from the medication and could barely run around the block.

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What stopped me from running was not the rape, the mental health, nor the medication. I had experienced a stress injury, tendinitis in the ankle, which meant that a large sac of fluid would come out and rub against the bone on top of my foot. It was excruciating. I ran through it at cricket. I ran through it at AFL. I ran through all the pain in races in school. But eventually, I was forced to stop. This left me angry and depressed. I lost the outlet I needed.

The Shrink

I settled back into home life and school for about five or six months. Cricket kept me occupied, and I was running heaps at that time. After watching his son lose his mind and waiting eagerly next to his bed for several hours, waiting for him to wake, Farter could see something haunting him. He reached out for help and sought answers for his sometimes-strange behaviour.

I had lost my marbles at the Family General Practitioners, who temporarily gave me some ancient tranquilising antipsychotics that I tried for a bit. These made me feel like a zombie. I had a few delusions whilst taking them, even though things stayed normal at school. At one point, I thought I was pregnant. I thought my then-developing pot belly was a baby bump.

About six months after the seemingly isolated incident, I got the first available spot with a psychiatrist. By then, I had stabilised. The secretary told me of some ‘friendly’ websites

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where I could meet other lonely teenagers. But they realised I had a stable group of friends. They told me there was nothing wrong with me and that my parents were overprotective. They were overprotective, but it is hard to diagnose someone when they had months to stabilise after needing help six months before a vacancy.

Farter took me to St. John of God, where I got acquainted with my first longer-term psychiatrist. He was a skinny man, and I did not trust him. He was a bit awkward and did not know how to make a conversation, especially not with a troubled 15-year-old. Because I was still a minor, my father was asked to stay in the room to support me. He made most of the conversation, and when I was left to my own devices, the psychiatrist always put words in my mouth rather than trying to let me speak. I kept quiet mostly. Most of Dad's conversation was about how well I was doing at cricket and how well my music studies were going.

On the way home, I would be queried by my father, who would ask why I was so quiet and that he had to make the whole conversation. I thought angrily inside. You expect me to talk about cricket and music to a quack I do not trust when I have been almost drugged to death, almost died, was possibly raped, and nearly drank myself to death. Although I could hit the ball anywhere, I wanted to and could have a growing repertoire on the piano, these things seemed so trivial to me.

Because of the words in my mouth and the fact that I had had a few delusions when being on Lygactil, the quack thought it would be a clever idea to put me on a new-generation antipsychotic. He sent me home with several documents that I

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could not understand and told a troubled teen that he was making a weighty decision because it was likely that I would be on this medication for the rest of my life. Although Farter took a significant effort to read all the paperwork, it felt like another language and did not make sense to me. I sort of blanked out when they were describing all this complex language and science to me, to be honest. I did not understand. I just went along with it.

The first medication I tried was Olanzapine, which was described to me as Zyprexa. It is hard to express the feeling, but it always made me hungry. When I would come home from school, I would raid the fridge and the cupboards, eating everything in sight. I returned to the shrink 10 days later and jumped on the scales. I had put on 10 kilograms! I had gone from a fit, athletic runner to an overweight, unhealthy slob in 10 days.

So, they trialled me on another medication. The shrink, worried that my psychotic symptoms were worsening, put me on 600 milligrams of Quetiapine, a drug I called Seroquel. I would take this dose every morning, not at night to help me sleep like how I currently use it in a much smaller amount (i.e., 100mg), but to make sure that the psychotic symptoms did not affect my schooling.

Apart from mainly sleeping during class and spending much of the weekends sleeping at cricket due to my strong medication, I got through the rest of my schooling relatively well. Although a bit obsessive in year 12, I got into university despite being on this highly sedative drug. Many peers asked me why I was constantly nodding off in weird and wonderful places. My

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favourite teacher was excited when I made it through her English and History classes without nodding off for half of them.

Burning Through the Night

Although it appeared to my family, friends, and cricket mates that I was coping, I was finding it increasingly more difficult to sleep. To my teachers, the poetry I was writing strongly contrasts the happy-go-lucky student they were seeing in their classes and the person excelling in his musical endeavours and thriving on the weekend in his chosen sport. And here they were, reading poetry about suicide and wanting to die. The face I was putting on seemed to contrast the words being written. The songs written at this time more accurately reflect how I felt inside. I was Slowly Burning Through the Night.

Setting Off Someone I Admire

I started drinking at parties more and more. I became increasingly angry with cricket because my abilities on the field were becoming less and less profound. This made my way to parties where I would often be bowling to myself, yelling at people passing by. I would be trying to start fights with them and drinking so much that I would pass out here, there, and everywhere. I was making a fool of myself time and time again. I

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was losing friends quicker than I was gaining them. I was starting to get a reputation for being a hopeless drunk.

Sometimes I did not drink, and I was the life of the party, but they were in different circles. To some, I was the old me, the happy-go-lucky fun person who was everyone's friend. To others, I was the guy at the parties who scared them. The guy at the party was just fucked up! My friends who I saw at school and on the weekend playing cricket saw a different me from the ones who saw me drunk. So, there were two I's. Those who have remained true to me chose to see the good me, the leader, even though it was blurred. The one who ran cricket sessions for his team and made it fun for everyone. The one who could blow an audience away on the piano. The one who could do anything he put his mind to.

Bergan was the only one who seemed to be a part of all areas of my life. He became increasingly critical of my life despite encouraging me to drink myself into alcohol poisoning. Seeing his friend go off the rails before him, I cannot imagine how conflicting this must have been for him. He was seeing two people at once. A person some saw as good, and others saw as bad. And to him, he was seeing both. I do not know what seeing all this did to his long-term psyche. How conflicted he must have felt. How much he must have blamed himself.

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Home-Life Imbalance

Life at home was getting increasingly difficult for me and my parents, especially my father. It must have been hard to see someone you conceived become increasingly angry and more difficult to be around with. At the same time, the reality that my parents were seeing contrasted with the reality that the teachers were seeing at school. I was increasingly becoming angry being at home. I hated being in my room and constantly being reminded of it.

As my sleep was getting worse, I woke up later. It was increasingly difficult for my dad to get me out of bed on time for school, so I often did not get time to practice the piano as much in the morning, which had been part of my routine since I was a young child. The time I did get to practice focused on theory and the aspects that I was not good at, such as oral and singing. My father, who was my piano teacher, was focusing increasingly on the things that I was not good at, causing tensions between us.

It meant that we were fighting every morning because he was growing increasingly focused on aspects of music. I was struggling to make sure I could keep up with the high grades that had been expected of me up to this point. I was still practising at school, and when I got home from school, I had built up quite a repertoire of songs, but the mornings and lessons were becoming increasingly tense, aggressive, and argumentative.

This strained our relationship, as it always appeared that we were yelling at each other. He always seemed angry at me. He

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always seemed to be yelling at me. And then everyone else around him, my mum, my brothers, his students. Everyone. At one point, he almost punched the light out of my older brother, Philby. It started to scare me. It appeared that I had set off someone that I admired. It felt like it was my fault.

I became angrier myself. And more depressed. And more anxious. And more paranoid. And it all seemed my fault. I could not sleep. I did not want to remember! I needed to escape!

And unlike my father, I did not have a chance to escape my anger, as he could escape into Mother's Garden, my escape. My outlet was increasingly difficult to use. My ankles hurt. My feet hurt. My head hurt! Everything hurt physically and emotionally.

Getting Through

I am unsure if I would not have gotten through if I had not received the support of a Great Psychologist, Graham, who became a mentor. Dad had given up on me at this point, and I had not made much progress with the psychiatrist, so they tried to see if 'talk therapy' would be more beneficial for their troubled child. I remember the Great Psychologist telling me that the only time he ever heard me angry was the first time he heard me yell in the background, 'I'm not going to another bloody shrink!'

I persisted, and my first session changed my life. The Great Psychologist could see straight through my father's anger and could see incredibly early on that was a big part of my problem. He acknowledged that I needed an outlet and often reiterated

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that I was 'yelling at my parents so constantly at the time because I could.'

Rather than focusing on my negatives through a typical Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) program, the best practise at the time, he saw that it was more important to get through to me. To get me out of my mind.

So, the first session focused more on him than me, about what he liked to do. First, he shared some of his favourite music and gave me five or six of his favourite CDs. Then, he asked me to listen and see what I thought. Finally, he asked me if I could assemble a CD of some of the music I liked to listen to. That would give him a better place to start knowing who I am as a person. He also gave me the lyrics to Billy Joel's 'Angry Young Man' and asked me what I thought.

I went away and put together a compilation album of all my favourite music. It was all the music I had been brought up on, my dad's music. I also went through 'Angry Young Man' with a tooth and comb as if it were an English dissertation. I went through it line by line and tried to grasp what Billy Joel was saying. The Great Psychologist, Graham, was impressed by the beautiful songs I had chosen, mostly ballads about 'peace' and 'love,' and was overwhelmed by how much detail I had gone dissecting the song. In the next session, he asked me what I thought about 'Angry Young Man.' I replied, 'It's me.' He said, 'What part of it is you.' I said, 'Every word. It describes exactly how I feel,' and it did. I was an angry young man. Was Billy Joel writing about me? My grandiose mind thought.

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I had a lot of excellent sessions with the Great Psychologist, and I got to know the person I was and the person I could become. So, I settled back into high school, giving year 12 a real crack. Even though I was on highly sedative medication, I got through the HSC. And I was proud of what I had achieved, only really focusing on the last two years. All the trauma I had been through and the fact that I missed the first two weeks of year 11 and year 12 because of the increased stress and the expectations I was placing on myself exponentially grew at these times in my life. I was becoming a happier person again.

I had planned not to go on schoolies with the rest of the boys and get wasted off my face for a week or two. Instead, I had planned to ride my bike around the South Island of New Zealand. Although I had put on a lot of weight and could not ride my bike around New Zealand, I did some research. And I booked a tour instead with some money I had left over from working in the Olympics, the money I had saved teaching piano, and my income as a part-time waiter on Friday and Saturday nights. In addition, I raised a little more by working a new position for the Blue Mountains Water Company during holidays. Finally, I had enough money and was ready for my first overseas adventure.

The day before I had prepared to go on the trip around New Zealand, I panicked and had a bit of an existential crisis. My parents called the Great Psychologist, who was concerned that I was not quite ready mentally to abandon the life that had kept me stable and would be better off doing something with more support. Something a little closer aligned to what other adventures my other peers were exploring, like schoolies. Even if

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I got drunk for a week, he thought, at least I would be with other people my age who were also experiencing their first time away from life with their parents. I ignored my existential crisis and the advice of my first Wise Counsel. Instead, I took a great leap of faith and caught the plane to New Zealand—a scared, traumatised young man.

Memories Do not Lie

The great leap of faith was a fantastic decision. I had a wonderful time in New Zealand and learnt much about myself. I had learnt to look after myself, had had my first clubbing adventures, bungy jumped, and explored much of this beautiful country. I had, however, run out of money about 500 km from my start and finish destination and required my parents to bail me out. This put further strain on our relationship.

When I arrived home, I had also stayed so long in New Zealand that I had left my run short to get set up for my new university life in Canberra. I had hoped to get into a Bachelor of Arts at Sydney University; however, I had missed out on getting the grades I required by 0.20 marks in the HSC. So, the next best option was moving to Canberra to study at the Australian National University (ANU). This university had a reputation for being the best university in Australia at the time and was rated the 16th best university in the world. However, this left me with less than one week to find a place in Canberra and settle into

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university life. This change would have been a lot for anyone, especially a scared, traumatised young man.

On the first week in Canberra, I caught the train back to Sydney to play cricket. I was physically and emotionally overwhelmed by a huge week. I was commuting from Queanbeyan by bike because I had failed to secure any accommodations. I was getting acquainted with the new life in Canberra. The university was a buzz, as there seemed to be so much to learn. I was surrounding myself with the several types of clubs that were available. I had spent many hours practising on a new piano. I had also ridden my bike once or twice to get acquainted with the new choir, which I hoped would boost my singing skills. On top of this, I decided to catch the train home to play cricket because I did not want to stop playing with my friends. I was exhausted.

I was preparing to take the long trip back to Canberra, which would mean a bus out to Queanbeyan, to ride my bike the 10-12 kilometres to the university. I fought with my father. He was still angry at me that I had not planned well enough in New Zealand and that he had had to bail me out. He had yelled and screamed at me, so I had caught the train home not just physically exhausted, but now I was also emotionally unstable.

I felt unsafe, so instead of catching the train onto Strathfield to catch the bus down to Canberra, I got off at Parramatta because I thought I needed help. I began walking down Church Street in Parramatta when a man saw me. He walked behind me briefly and asked, 'Are you ok?' He put my arm

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around him and my hands on his shoulders. I was physically and emotionally exhausted. This embrace made me bawl my eyes out.

The police saw this embrace and called out, 'You pooftas!'

This would have insulted any straight person, particularly someone who had thought he had been raped by another man and had never been allowed to experiment with his sexuality. I screamed and screamed. I was tired and screaming out of frustration. I was at my tipping point, both physically and mentally.

The police continued abusing the man and me, calling us 'pooftas.' By this point, he, too, was screaming. He was as scared as hell. He had put his hand on my shoulder to offer comfort, and now the police were abusing him. Finally, we were tasered and then handcuffed. As we arrived at the police station, we were both screaming, so they took us to the Hainsworth Unit at Cumberland Hospital, where they knocked us out with needles and put us in some sort of chamber. I was trying to seek help as I felt physically and emotionally drained.

Because of the scene, the police knocked us out and locked us up in the chamber for 15 days. They starved us for the entire time we were in the chamber. Every time we woke screaming, they would knock us out again with some form of psychiatric medication and put us back in the tank. Eventually, the other man got out of the tank, screaming that he will kill himself if he is not let out, and crying before knocking him out of consciousness again.

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The other man had come to Parramatta to visit his mother, who was in Cumberland Hospital and was on his way to visit her. This meant that his mother witnessed the event and could see the abuse that was taking place. Everyone at Cumberland could hear the screaming but was unaware that we were being placed in a chamber, a tank of some sort, and being knocked out without food nor water. These could be described as 'torture tanks.' As the other man's mother was extremely distressed by what was happening, she was also threatened with being put into a tank, but only two tanks were available at the time.

The other man's mother rang her lawyer, who was there within half an hour. She claims to have paid a hefty sum to get the three of us out. The three of us were let out, and I was allowed to call my parents, who came to get me from Cumberland Hospital. The other man's mother watched me get in the car with my parents and drive in the other direction.

Although I was released, when I went to get records of what happened in Cumberland all those years ago, there was no record of what had happened. The thing about this type of oppressive psychiatry is that evidence of it is extremely easy to hide. According to the records, 'If it isn't on the record, it never happened.' It is easy to diagnose someone with paranoia and say this is why they do not trust anyone. It is easy to give a diagnosis of schizophrenia and say they have a history of delusions. The reality is that the people who inflict the trauma probably are not impacted by it too much. To them, what they did is right, and they can justify it in their minds. They might not even be alive to 'feel'

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the consequences of their actions anymore. The reality is for the person who experiences or witnesses the abuse. The trauma stays with them for a lifetime. Memories do not lie. They are the only transparent record of the truth.

Bloomfield

Amongst many positive experiences, I had had a few difficult years at home. I had moved down to Canberra to start a new life. I had fallen in love with My First Love. However, about nine months into my new life, I became obsessed with various philosophies and paranoid. It had been recommended by My First Love's mother to return home to get some help. Her brother had not gotten the support he needed at 'the right time.' He had lived a life struggling with schizophrenia. She could see similar behaviours in me and was concerned that I needed to get the help I required before it was too late.

I had formed quite a sexual relationship with my first love and became quite unbalanced in my life. I had moved down to Canberra to begin a Bachelor of Arts; however, I was hospitalised in the first week of moving to Canberra. After a failed first semester, I had only actually completed two subjects. Both of which I could have done better in. In the second semester, I dropped to no official subjects. I was going to as many, Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology, Religion, and Psychology subjects as possible. In my mind, I aimed to develop a well-rounded philosophy based on what I was learning.

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When I returned to Sydney, I was taken to Penrith Hospital, where the treating team assessed me. Because they did not have beds at Nepean Hospital, I was escorted in a car with two security guards to Bloomfield Hospital in Orange. I talked calmly and rationally to the small team of helpers, who seemed happy to discuss rationally with me. We spoke about Canberra and what I had learnt at the university that year. I explained that I was looking for alternative medication options and was thinking of studying Reiki and Chinese medicine.

I arrived at the psychiatric hospital in a calm state. Still, upon arriving at the hospital, the team of psychiatrists and nurses approached me. They yelled, 'I hear you're looking for an alternative.' Six nurses grabbed me, pinned me to the ground, and injected me with a substance. Again, I had no idea what the substance was. I remember being doped up and remaining in a drugged-up state for the next two days. I drifted in and out of lucidness.

Despite the recommendations from the psychiatrist for Mother Dearest to stay away from the hospital, as 'it is often the parents that are the reasons why 'they' become unwell,' she came out to Orange to stay at Nyrang with her good friend Christine and her family. She visited me every day and eventually advocated for me to be released from the hospital to be in the care of my parents. After 10 days, I was released from the hospital, a bit angry and a bit more scared. This time from being jumped on by a bunch of nurses for no apparent reason other than to exert some authority.

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Fifteen Different Medications in Two Days

When I returned to my home life in Kurrajong, I was balancing a relationship in Canberra and a lazy existence where I was trying to piece together what I had learnt in my first year of university. I did a Reiki course for a few weeks that kept me occupied, but my parents were becoming increasingly concerned that my life had no direction. I had dropped out of the university and did not have a plan B for what I would do.

In my mind, I was piecing together a masterpiece. I had in mind that I would summarise a biology textbook I had bought and do this at my favourite location, at the Cabbage Tree Lookout at Grose Vale. I would follow the creek bed up to where I would piece together my masterpiece and workday and night until it was complete. Looking back, this was a 'delusional' perspective, and this was the perspective that Mother Dearest took. She followed me down the street and called the police. They took me in the paddy wagon to Nepean Hospital, where I had my second traumatic psychiatric experience, this time at Pialla Psychiatric Ward.

Instead of being knocked out cold this time or jabbed for no reason, I would experience a new type of oppression by the psychiatric system. Yes, I came in with a bit of an arrogant perspective that I was close to having all the answers humanity needed to solve its problems. I potentially made an inappropriate comment to an Indian man thinking that he was a Hindu. Still, they treated me like a criminal after that.

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To take control of the situation and to take control of me, they did not try one medication or even two medications to see what medicines worked best for me. When I got my records many years later, they experimented with 15 DIFFERENT medications in the first two days of my stay in Pialla Hospital. I would go on to try 17 different medications during my visit there. Whether this was incompetence or was a targeted approach to 'fuck me over,' indeed, trying 15 different medications is an appropriate method for finding a balanced medication regime.

I was paranoid when I went into the hospital. I do not deny that, but I felt like I was bullied by the psychiatry and nursing staff during my stay there. There was nothing to do in the hospital. One nurse told my parents the best approach is to 'keep their minds blank.' Two young nurses looked out for me, but I became increasingly paranoid and suicidal while in this hospital. It took them 37 days to realise that I required stimulation to stay well when they allowed me to bring in my piano. When they had an open day, they opened the recreation room that had been closed off to us patients.

I was placed in the high-dependency unit for about 10-12 days, where a problematic patient made it hell for everyone. He pissed over all the toilets so that no one could go to the bathroom and ejaculated over the kitchen floor to ensure everyone had to walk through his cum every time we had a meal. He stole everything I owned. And when I went to sit in the one tiny spot where there was sunlight, he spat on the ground.

Because he had then gone out into the central acute ward, when I was asked to go back into the acute ward because I had

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stabilised, the psychiatrist made an excuse because I was too scared to be with that asshole, ensuring that I stayed in an extra week than I needed. Every time I presented at the tribunal; this same psychiatrist made a range of lies that kept me in the hospital longer. I was only released when I requested the num, who I trusted to join me, and the truth of the situation was told.

Eventually, after 47 days, I was released to spend time in the Norwest Clinic in Wentworthville, where I received a hugely different type of care one devoid of intimidation and lies. After a week or so in this clinic, the other participants were amazed at how my eye contact went from staring straight at the ground to trusting again and looking at people with my honest and open eyes directly into theirs. Within three weeks, I was myself again. On the last day, I told my dad that I was looking to return to the university to resume my learning and writing. I was shot down. 'No one will ever read what you write.' My confidence returned to where it had begun before I entered the hospital.

Once I completed my three-week treatment at the Norwest Clinic, I was invited to join the Young Person's Program at Brumby House. This intensive program for young men with schizophrenia was kind of a group home environment. I shared a house with four other young men. We had support workers come in who acted like case managers. They took us shopping and to various recreational activities, like walking along the river.

A fantastic case manager took me to see my psychiatrist, who was now Helen Mitchel, in Richmond. Driving like a maniac there, he was impressed that Helen was the first psychiatrist who listened to what he had to say and took his advice. I continue to

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have a fantastic relationship with her today, as she is different from most other psychiatrists I have been involved with. She generally cares and only wants to do what is right for you. She sits down with you and goes through all the options, supporting you in making the most informed decisions.

This was vastly different from the psychiatry I had experienced so far. Then, I was forced to talk when I was not ready and given a drug that put on 10 kilograms in 10 days. I had been knocked out cold every time I woke screaming for 15 days without food or water. I had been pinned to the ground and injected with drugs for no apparent reason. And then, I was bullied, intimidated, and given 15 different medications for 15 days. Now I had choices and could finally experience humane psychiatry, at least for now.

Brumby House was my first taste of a psychosocial program and was a godsend. As I had independent living skills, they progressed me to the second phase of the program, semi-independent living. I was helped to be put on a pension and moved into a home in North Parramatta, where I settled into a new life. It is here that I enrolled in and completed the first year of my Traditional Chinese Medicine Course. The following year, I moved to campus. And the rest is history.

His Spirit Touched Me

I had a wonderful relationship with Nanna's older brother, Uncle Ern. We spent many holidays on the Sunshine

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Coast with his daughters, Aunty Jeanie and Aunty Pam, and their families. I always enjoy spending time with Aunty Jeanie and Uncle Don and try to see them when possible. This is not easy, considering that they live so far away. I have a close affinity with Uncle Ern's youngest grandson, Cameron, who is so much like his grandfather—kind and with a gentle sense of humour. Uncle Don always impresses me with stories about rugby union, as he once coached the Australian Women's Rugby Union team to a World Cup in Canada. One day, he invited me along to their training on the Sunshine Coast, which was a buzz.

I had one of the funniest memories of my life when we visited a cuckoo clock shop when they came to meet us at Tambourine Mountain. The more humorous 'cousin,' Andrew, had entered the shop before us and set all the alarms precisely at the exact moment. You could see his excitement as you heard, 'Wait for it, wait for it.' It was one of the funniest things I had ever witnessed without expecting anything to happen when all the coo-coos were set off at precisely the exact moment. The old shopkeeper was horrified and hurried us quickly out of the shop as we were all in hysteria. I have never laughed so hard in my life.

This side of the family has an incredible sense of humour and fun, especially Aunty Jenie and Aunty Pam. They are both married to incredible men. They are short on stature but full of life and excess energy. I love it when they come down. They came down once a year for a long time, and we caught up in all sorts of beautiful places in between when we were up at Lismore and the Gold Coast. We had many memorable holidays in places like

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Buderim, Palm Woods, Bli Bli, and Malolaba, as they always seemed to live in a different house every time we visited.

Uncle Ern had a good life but also a hard life. He had lived a life barely knowing his parents, being brought up in a separate orphanage from his three sisters. He had witnessed his daughter, Jeanie, struggled with anorexia to the point where she almost lost her life before she found the love of her life and came back to the life of the living. Uncle Ern had watched his wife, the love of his life, fade away with dementia, caring for her for the last 20 years of her life until she died. And then, after she died, he had hoped to care for another elderly lady in a wheelchair, whom he married, only to have his heart broken again. Caring for people was all he had known most of his life.

Then, when he needed to be taken care of, as his Parkinson's slowly took his body away from him, his family did not have the time nor the inclination to take care of him. They were busy with their own families and their own lives. So, Uncle Ern went to Sydney to live with his sister, Pat. Unfortunately, this was not a good option, as her dementia had deteriorated to the point where she had lost her marbles. So, Uncle Ern moved to Kurrajong to live with his youngest sister and her beautiful husband, Poorpa.

It seemed like a good arrangement, as Poorpa always appreciated the extra company. I enjoyed spending time with Uncle Ern when I could, but I spent most of my time in Canberra studying then, so I was only up for the holidays. When I did spend time with him, I could sense a deep sense of emptiness and loneliness at times, even though he put on a brave face. He would

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have small outbursts if you did not give him 100% attention and run off to his room. When would you say, 'Is Uncle Ern ok?' He would come back out of his room with a big smile. He just wanted someone to show him that they loved him.

One day, Davy was on his way up to see Uncle Ern and see if he could help him with his new car when the police were there. Shocked, Davy burst into tears, thinking something had happened to Poorpa. It was not Poorpa. Nanna had found his younger brother in their garage with a noose around his neck. Uncle Ern had lost his battle of depression, anger, resentment, Parkinson's disease, disrespect, and neglect to suicide. He had taken his life.

Knowing that I had had a great relationship with this beautiful uncle, Mother Dearest and Farter took the three hours to drive down to Canberra to let me know. I was spending time at my girlfriend's house, My First Love, when I was told they had some sad news. They did not need to tell me what had happened. I knew Uncle Ern was near the end. I just felt helpless to be able to stop it. I had tried to spend as much time as possible, but I was not living up in Kurrajong then. I could not do anything to stop it. I let out a loud yell of anguish. I felt Uncle Ern's pain.

Then one of the most spiritual moments of my life came upon me. Whether it was a voice, a premonition, or whatever you want to call it. I heard a call from the ether saying, 'Would you like me to look over you?' Uncle Ern's spirit was with me as I felt a tingle from the top of my head to my toes. I felt a quiet sense of calm and comfort. I knew Uncle Ern was safe. His soul was now at peace. He was now reunited with the love of his life.

Saying Goodbye to My Hero

important to me until their deaths. As Poorpa felt that 'Bastards were getting the better of him,' he retired from his alderman duties at Fairfield Council, and they moved full-time up to the Central Coast to retire.

Poorpa would have spent the rest of his life up there to be close to his lifelong mate, Stan Ward. Poorpa loved being up near the water. Since he was a boy, he had loved having the freedom to go for a dip, do some body surfing, or spend some time with his dog by his side enjoying rock fishing. He loved having the opportunity to winch his dingy up from the canals of St. Hubert's Island to cut and prepare the fish he had caught. He loved being able to steam the blue swimmer crabs he caught. He also loved maintaining his garden, and with the help of Nanna, he left a love of gardening with both of their children. Poorpa loved the community of Woy Woy. He would have done anything to live the coastal life of the Central Coast, but his Parkinson's was getting increasingly difficult to manage. A life of staying up late, having many drinks, and working long hours had taken hold of his body.

Poorpa and Nanna moved to Kurrajong, hoping we would look after them as they aged. They could also be close enough to Faulcon bridge to be with his other grandchildren, whom he valued equally. This was great for us boys because it meant we could be within walking distance of our heroes. Although it had been such a significant part of our childhood to go to the Central Coast, having them around the corner was even better.

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They looked at many houses around town, many of which had been unique homes for them to spend their later years in. But Poorpa was impressed by their chosen place because it had a cool bar. Apart from the fact that there was an extremely large incline from the post box to the garage, it was, in fact, three distinct levels if you included the back access and was extremely inconveniently based over two different stories. Looking back, it was a terrible choice of house, but it was close, and I would not miss the opportunity to be just a small stroll away from my heroes.

I often wandered by Sherwood Street on my way home from school to see how they were doing. I would often be invited to the bar for a ginger ale, a ginger beer, or a lemonade. I would often have a tinker on their turn-of-the-century piano passed down the generations from Great Nan. I would often play with Ses, who was a playful and excitable little mate. I would chase him around the lounge room and fall with him to the ground in a loving embrace. He was a dog, but he always seemed to have a smile on his face. He always seemed to have a spark in his beautiful eyes. He always seemed to be full of joy.

I began teaching my young piano students downstairs on the piano that was so full of life. I wrote some of my favourite songs on that piano, including my HSC composition ending. I had some great times downstairs in that house teaching the piano. It was as joyful an experience for me as it was for the students to whom I tried to teach my beautiful instrument in a fun and exciting way.

I often found Poorpa's music blasting from the lounge room whilst Nanna was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Poorpa

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would be somewhere, pottering around the garden. I owe much of Nanna's lack of hearing to the end of her life because she always had to listen to the jazz blasting out at all decibels. She was happy if Poorpa could hear his jazz in the background. Nanna never complained.

Nanna thought she could not cook, but I enjoyed her simplicity. It was fish with caper sauce, roast pork with vegetables, or meat and three vegetables. There were a few others, but they were the staples. The meal would always end with a rice custard, a meal I once detested as a child but learnt to love as it was always cooked with love. If lucky, we would be surprised by Poorpa's jelly and custard. This was always a thrill.

One day, Poorpa's Parkinson's was feeling good, so he decided we would walk into town, approximately five hundred metres down the road. There is a steep incline that he managed well. We got our ice cream. Poorpa loved buying his grandchildren's ice cream. He often finished a swim at Kilcare Beach with an ice cream, usually a Bubble O Bill or Paddlepop. We were feeling perfect this day, so Poorpa asked if we could go back home through the top access of the property. Although we owned it, the neighbour had encroached on it, and they were going through the legal system to gain access to it.

We got to the top access fine, but about five metres in, the Parkinson's stepped up a notch. Every step became a challenge, but we did not mind. We talked about everything. Football, jazz, whatever came to mind. The steps were challenging, but the conversation was great. It took us about 45 minutes to make it about 10metres. I grabbed him by the shirt and dragged him

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down the steep incline, dirt getting all over his baggy green track pants. Poorpa did not mind. He was having an adventure.

From reaching the start of the top access, it took us approximately three hours to navigate the 10-20-metre incline, but we had fun. Understandably, Nanna was worried and concerned about where we had been. She grabbed him by the hand and tried to hurriedly rush him down the final 14 or 15 steps of the stairs, but the stubborn Poorpa explained, 'My grandson will take me down.' It had been challenging work, but it will remain one of the best few hours of my life. I enjoyed spending every moment with my hero.

However, we did see his Parkinson-ridden body slowly deteriorate, and we were forced to put him in a nursing home. We checked out a few, but the care was terrible. Poorpa was the most grateful person I knew, but in the first place, he would often wait hours to be dealt with when he needed to turn his body over. Simple activities like this seemed to be such a chore.

Eventually, we got him settled in at Kurrajong Nursing Home. This was great because it was just around the corner, and we could visit him nearly daily. The staff gave him a lot of respect and treated him with dignity. The day before his death, he told Mother Dearest that he was 'ready to go home.' Mum replied, 'You cannot go home. Your home is here at the nursing home.' I knew what he meant.

Carrying my childhood hero's coffin down the driveway and saying goodbye was difficult. But he had lived good innings. He had lived a full life, and he had achieved everything that he

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had hoped to achieve. I had once asked him whether he thought a global government was possible. Poorpa believed it was too big because family and community were his two most important things. Family and community were good enough for him.

Poorpa taught me so much about tolerance and how you must be grateful for what you have. Even close to his last days at his home in Kurrajong, he could barely walk, but he continued to have one rose that he addressed daily. It blossomed. As did his bright, larger-than-life personality. He would sing and whistle the whole time whilst attending to his rose. It was the only thing he could do, but he did it well. I will always be grateful for learning that even unimportant things, like attending to a rose, can be magnificent. I summarised my relationship with Poorpa with a poem I read at his funeral called Poorpa.

A Final Goodbye

I spent more time with Nanna after Poorpa died. Nanna's dementia started to worsen while Poorpa was alive, but it gradually deteriorated Nanna over the years. First, there were minor behavioural issues and confusion, then she lost the ability to drive, and eventually, she lost all ability to function.

Nanna sold the house they had bought in Kurrajong and moved in downstairs so we could keep a closer eye on her. We adapted the garage to a self-contained flat with a bed and some of her other comforts. We began buying things to make it a little

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easier for her, such as specific dementia clocks, but her functioning declined.

I walked with her every day around the block. This walk is an excellent 2-3 kilometres round trip that scales some big uphill and downhills. It is a challenge for anyone to do. But as Nanna's memory declined further, she often forgot that she had walked the block and would do it two, three, and sometimes four times, often in extensive heat.

Things became increasingly difficult at home. Mother Dearest and Nanna began arguing about smaller things before they were butting heads at nearly everything. Eventually, we had to make the difficult decision for her to go into care.

We chose a beautiful nursing home in Windsor called Fitzgerald House. It was here that Nanna would spend the last ten years of her life. It was comfortable here, and the support was excellent. I would visit her 2-3 times a week every time I had an opportunity. I loved spending time with her, eating, going for walks, and singing the song I had written about her, and Pa's life called Faith and Don.

One day I was taking her for one of our walks around the nursing home when she suddenly tripped and hit her head hard on the concrete. She started bleeding from the head and went unconscious. I panicked and raced to the nursing staff. When I returned, she had returned from her unconsciousness and was back with the world. The nurses reached down to her to help her up, but she refused their help, screaming, 'No, my grandson will help me up.'

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This hit me more than I thought. I called Mother Dearest, whom I had not seen in a long time, and she drove down to my home where I was living at HAC and called me over to her car. We sat in the car, and she asked, 'What's up?' I somehow lost control of my emotions and started bawling my eyes out. It seemed beyond what I was able to cope with. I wept. 'I thought I had lost her. She is the last person that reminds me of Poorpa.'

I recovered and spent another three or four magic years with Nanna, visiting her whenever possible. Although her dementia had changed much of who she was, she never lost her sense of humour and had her own quirks. She always used to tell me that she 'had a poor memory but had a good forget-tory.' She always used to say that she 'had been here before.' These are just some of the quirks we got used to as she often repeated many things she had previously told you. She was still a gem to be around, and you always had a bit of a laugh.

The last night she was with us, she Facetimed Davy and told her how much he loved him. She had a long-lost memory of Poorpa but continued to know who Davy was even though he was on the other side of the planet. She knew who Mother Dearest and Farter was, Aunty Suzie and her daughters, and even knew Philby's ex-wife, Uyen.

She could not utter words on her deathbed but spent some of her dying moments with Philby and me. She would point to herself, make a sign of a heart, and then point at us. We held her hand as she told us, 'I love you,' in her way, one more time. Seeing the last chapters of my two heroes was sad, but again, she had lived well. She had gone from living in a nursing home with no

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opportunities to ensuring that her children had every opportunity to be the best people they could be. She often told me that she was born without a heart, but throughout her life, she had given everyone else her heart.

Hypomanic

passing, I remained stable for nearly 20 years. However, increased stress at work led me to leave Uniting and go through a period of losing three jobs in less than a year. This has had a detrimental effect on my confidence and made me more depressed and suicidal than I ever have been in my life.

During my time at Uniting, I became increasingly stressed. I would often work on Sundays to be prepared for the week ahead, and if I did not do this, I would not cope. I would usually prepare for up to three hours on a Sunday, only for many of the meetings I had been booked to do that week to be reassigned to another LAC, and I would be given a different participant for which I had yet to prepare. This would put me in a state of stress and anxiety that I was unprepared for attending a meeting. My new team leader, Olessia, did not know how to handle me when I was in that state as she would find it hard to manage me.

The final straw as an LAC came when the planner funding for one of my participants did not push through. This caused me a lot of frustration and anxiety, and I never really got over it. I had been in that job for three years, my most extended

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employment role so far. I was in a relationship with the Perfect Companion, who had left Uniting eight months before me, and took on a job that caused her great stress. She was working long days and late into the night and early hours of the morning to keep up. She was also tired and cranky and did not have much time to spend with me.

I went straight from Uniting to being a peer worker at Frangipani House, working for One Door Mental Health. My energy levels were high with extreme excitement on days when I could connect and assist my participants, and then I would crash and be depressed the next day because no one turned up for the groups or answered my phone calls. One was a company with no leadership; we all worked in a self-managed team. This did not suit me, as I needed structure, which increased my stress.

In 2020, the second round of infections of the Coronavirus (COVID 19) hit and was handled with strict lockdown rules. It did not do my mental health any good and affected me immensely. I was isolated in my unit seven days per week. My work was carried out online or via phone, which made it hard to connect and engage with my participants. I became depressed due to a combination of being isolated and not being able to continue my physical activities.

I was removed from my role at Frangipani House as there needed to be more participants engaging in the online activities for One Door to continue employing the number of staff on the team, so I was offered a different role in the connector program. This boosted my spirits as I could contact and connect with most people and provide support and assistance on the phone. As the

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COVID restrictions were lifted, my team met up. I brought the team together and introduced innovative ideas to support our clients. We started a group program and did social outings, which gave me a great buzz. I was high because I had brought my team together and developed a new team culture.

During this time, a female colleague commented about me, which triggered a downward spiral. I lost all confidence and went into a depressive, negative, self-doubting state. It was hard to reason with me during this period, and it was impossible to shift my mood. Eventually, however, I shifted out of this state, but I continued to be high one day and low the next depending on what happened at work.

During this time, the Perfect Companion's son, Enigma, became more difficult, selfish, less tolerant, and verbally abusive depending on his day and whether everything was going his way. His behaviour caused much conflict for all of us as I would stick up for her, and he would attack me. I realised that this affected my mental health, and my stress state elevated. I started going to her place less than two to three nights per week, so I was not always in constant fear. Things escalated more between him and me, and as my relationship with him declined, so did my relationship with his mother.

Over this time, there were several instances when I thought I was becoming unwell. There were signs, including numbness in my arms, getting more paranoid, and needing more medication to sleep. At one point, I thought people were breaking into my unit by getting through the window in my spare room and sleeping in the spare bed at night. I thought they had a key

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to my front door, and they would get in that way to sleep in the spare room but would be gone by morning when I got up. Another time I met the Perfect Companion in the city one day, I had a sensation that everything sped up around me. This was increasingly happening. I reached out to my psychiatrist from a private health clinic, but I felt better when called me.

I was made redundant at One Door, which had a devastating effect on my mental health. I was seeing my wise counsel Michelle at this time, and she believed I was hypomaniac. My work at One Door ended a few weeks after I returned from a road trip to Adelaide and then a buzz flight to the Gold Coast, where I was offered a traineeship to be a Blockchain developer. I got COVID on the last day of my job at One Door and infected all the company's executives. I got vertigo a few days later, which caused great distress. The isolation caused me to sink into a depressive state, and I had suicidal thoughts. I did not want anyone to visit me, and I did not want to talk to anyone.

After a few weeks, I got a new job and appeared to have recovered from my depression. I thought this would be my dream job developing programs for a disability provider. I was anxious but very excited to be starting. Unfortunately, this job provided no managerial structure, direction, nor support from a co-worker or boss. I was unsure of what I was supposed to be doing, which caused me tremendous frustration and stress.

I sat for the first week and obsessively developed a workbook for recovery coach participants to work through. Then, I was told that I had to call all the participants on the books and get them to engage in programs that had yet to be developed.

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When no one answered calls, I would be on a downer. I was frustrated that my co-worker was supposed to be helping to develop the programs and make calls, but she did not and then would twist it around that I was not doing my work, undermining me.

I had a disciplinary meeting within the first few weeks, saying that I had been inappropriate, but I was unsure how or in what manner I was being inappropriate. I was up and down emotionally each day due to the stress of not knowing what I was supposed to be doing, not getting any assistance or support from my co-worker, and having my co-worker undermine me daily.

After six weeks, I knew I was getting the sack, and this was playing on my mind. I did not know what I had done, except this woman I was supposed to work with did not like me. I had a meeting that offered a reduction of my working days to two days, which I turned down. I left immediately feeling deflated and defeated that I had lost 'another' job. This left me believing I was unemployable. I was angry, depressed, and even suicidal. I tried to seek help by going to St. John of God, but they did not have a bed available. I went to Nepean Hospital, but they sent me home. I tried every support I had mapped, but nothing was open. I took this all personally, and this escalated my depression.

I sat at home on the lounge each day, depressed, thinking that I was unemployable. The Perfect Companion continually tried to tell me otherwise, but as far as I could see, I had been sacked from three jobs in a year. Finally, I was about to lose hope when Ramsey Clinic said they had a bed available.

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Once in Ramsey, I was my happy self again, excited even. I was looking forward to changing my medication to Latuda and was pleased I had the same psychiatrist I had seen 19 years ago. I settled in my room and attended the first session, where I met The Goddess. This changed my life. We began going for walks in the morning and walking to the shops. We played up a little bit. We looked forward to leaving the clinic to start a new life together.

When we did start our new life together, it was a whirlwind. Until our first trip down to Sydney, everything had been perfect. We spent all our time going for walks on the beach, exploring Newcastle together, playing football in the park, and making love at every opportunity. And I was getting to know her two children. Things were going so great.

Then on our first trip to Sydney, the stress began to surface. As we reached Penrith, her pain levels became intolerable, and she told me all about it. I tried telling myself that we were only 15 minutes from where we needed to be, but she yelled and screamed at me, making the car trip miserable. We ended up just pulling over to get some relief. Then as we reached close to Newcastle on the highway, her stress levels reached a new high because we were about to run into her former husband, Ben, for the first time since we had met. As we reached the football oval, I thought, 'What have I got myself into?'

I went into a 'dissociative' state, completely shutting down and going blank. Rather than seeing this as a 'trauma response,' from the state her stressed behaviour had caused, her response was for me to just snap out of it. Snap out of it before my

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son gets home. She stormed off because she was so scared that my face went blank. I went searching for her, scared that she was going to drink.

Up to my birthday at the end of November, everything else seemed to be going smoothly. But it was on my birthday that I noticed how controlling The Goddess was. Instead of letting anyone else engage in conversation, she spoke above them. Whenever her children went to add conversation to the table, she interrupted them and spoke for them. Again, I was thinking, 'What have I gotten myself into?' I left the dinner table and walked to clear my mind, which caused more stress as The Goddess did not know where I was going. I dissociated again and was suicidal. At that point, I did not want to live anymore.

As Christmas approached, we had our difficulties. We had had numerous arguments, and I continuously thought I was out of my depth, but the sex had been so good that it had kept me in the relationship. Until Christmas, I had been increasingly manic and needed increased medication to sleep. Then, we had a massive argument over a poem I wrote as a holiday address for Christmas Eve. This was the end of me. Every time I did something I was proud of; I was shut down as if I were worthless.

I enjoyed Christmas with the family, and The Goddess joined us on Christmas Eve. She stayed for an enjoyable day with two of my friends the next day but then went home. My friend, and former work colleague Glen, remained for a few days, and we spent time together. I was, however, increasingly manic, and lacking sleep in the days that followed. I had been in and out of a hypomanic state for over eight months. The year's stress had

progressed to a point where my mind was at a tipping point. I was close to a crisis.

Scheduled

Hypomania is a state in which everything seems happy, euphoric, and exciting as if you cannot get your words out fast enough. I was sleeping extraordinarily little and was more active than normal. In addition, I had increased sexual energy that I did not seem to be able to control. One day, when I was travelling out to Mount Wilson with Glen and Zoe, every story seemed to take on increased significance to the point that I would cry with laughter and joy at stories that were not that exciting.

In my mind, I was going through my 'creation story.' From my study on the Evolutionary History of Creation, I believed that the evolutionary story would play out in my life over the next seven days with roughly the following structure:

- ***Day 1:** the creation of the physical world and the best of what the physical world brings – technology.*
- ***Day 2:** the creation of the earth and the struggle humanity has between land, sea, and sky.*
- ***Day 3:** life is brought to the story as simple cells evolve.*
- ***Day 4:** Simple cells evolve into anxious, paranoid, obsessive, and compulsive reptiles.*
- ***Day 5:** Mammals evolve emotions.*
- ***Day 6:** Humans evolve thought, self-talk, and imagination.*

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- **Day 7:** the REST of the story evolves.

This is how the story occurred in real life:

- **Day 1:** I bought a hell of much technology and took my friend on a manic journey to Parramatta, where I told her a whole lot of stories thinking that I was embarking on a vast evolutionary journey.
- **Day 2:** I picked up my friends Sigrid and Zoe and went on a big roundabout trip in Western Sydney. I then wrote an email to Elon Musk explaining the situation that humanity is adversely affected by the climate change crisis and that we are mining the planet to extinction.
- **Day 3:** I spent the entire day trying to evolve the story and produce my definition of the higher power. That night I had a psychotic break and broke my phone. My mental health nurse had heard I was psychotic and was calling to offer some help.
- **Day 4:** I woke up with a 'revelation' that I am the 'creator' of my story. I went to the streets preaching my 'revelation' and was followed home by the police. My mother offered to get some support, but I jumped out of the car in anger. I was then picked up by an ambulance and taken to the hospital to get checked out. I spent the night in the emergency department.
- **Day 5:** I waited most of the day to see what was happening and was taken to the high-dependency unit.
- **Day 6:** I fought for my rights because I was not seen nor heard in the high-dependency unit. I vented my concerns to the official visitors and the medical superintendent.

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- **Day 7:** *The rest of the story will be told in the book An Insane Man in an Insane Place, Piecing Together Stories of Detainees of Various Degrees of Insanity.*

The consequence of my manic high was that I found myself scheduled in a mental health hospital. In my heightened state, my parents responded by what I perceived as hostile towards me, ensuring that I had lost their trust and excluded them from my care.

I transferred from the High Dependency Ward to the Acute ward. There were a few familiar faces. And the first night seemed like a backpacker as the patients leaving the next day were all high on ice.

One day blurred into the next as the routine became familiar to me. First, we were woken up to go to breakfast, which was always tasty, before spending the day in the courtyard. We were entertained by each other and the company the participants gave each other. Next, there would be lunch, followed by more of the same before dinner. Before long, it was time to go to bed and do it all over again. There was lots of laughter and good banter amongst the people on the ward, but the staff did their best to hamper our spirits.

When one of the participants asked for their rights to be read to them, it was done in such an intimidating way that the patient said, 'I will be afraid of you now.' The staff member responded, 'Good, that's the way it should be.' At another point, I want to highlight the need for consumers and staff to be effective staff members in the Partnering with Consumer Standards

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recommended by the Australian Quality and Safeguards Commission. The staff did not want to be partners and were happy with the 'us vs them' culture, with the staff member saying, 'I am not your partner.'

We have advocated for better conditions in the public mental health system for years. But unfortunately, it continued to be in the archaic, authoritarian for 20 years, if not worse. It continues to be a traumatic experience rather than a healing one, in which the staff seems more focused on intimidating the already traumatised clients and overly exercising their authority. When I complained about the conditions and that I was not getting any treatment, therapy, nor meaningful activity, I was reminded, 'Do you know where you are?' I was appalled by this and reminded the nurse that I knew exactly where I was every time I saw her. I ended up getting disciplined over this.

On the last day I was on the ward, I asked to talk to a manager to discuss an issue after being told that I 'need to ask a nurse' about the process of how to even see a manager. I asked four nurses and was told every time, after breakfast, after lunch. A manager finally told me he would see me and signalled he would see me in 10 minutes. I waited for 10 minutes, then 20, then 30, then 40, and then just gave up. This was the same response you would get every time you 'asked a nurse.' Despite requiring their assistance for even the most minor things like a toothbrush or shampoo because the patients could not be trusted with these, it would often take 40 or 50 minutes, sometimes more, for even the most basic requests.

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In the last two days of my stay, I saw many of my peers lose it as the conditions eventually got to them. Instead of supporting these traumatised individuals, the authoritarian approach was to intimidate them and circle them with security guards. Some of my friends lost it and lashed out, which was the response the security guards were after because that meant they could use force. Another of my friends just screamed and screamed until he was given the injection.

It was ironic that the person who provided so much intimidation on the ward was the one who was asked to walk me out. I walked out of the ward after three and a half weeks without a treatment plan, advocacy, therapy, nor virtually any form of activity when I was there. The gym was out of order, so the only exercise I had participated in was pacing up and down the lonely halls. I had not seen a tree in more than three weeks. I had not even seen a car.

Although 20 years ago was equally as traumatic, at least we had engaged in some group activities and had had the opportunity to go for daily walks. I walked out of the ward angry, still hypervigilant, and traumatised.

Resolving My Trauma

The Perfect Companion drove me to the Hills Clinic and sat until the nurse saw me. Then, almost at once, my anger seemed to dissipate. Within an hour of being in the clinic, I had undertaken a Collaborative Care Plan, seen my psychiatrist, and

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created a treatment plan. This was all I had asked in three and a half weeks at the public hospital, and within an hour, I had gotten what I had wanted at the private clinic. The nurses seemed eager to help and friendly, not intimidating.

I settled in quickly, and like the people at the public health clinic, all seemed great. I settled in for the night and wrote about my experience at the public hospital. I did not have access to my computer at the public hospital but had been eagerly writing out my experience and trying to resolve some of the traumas I had confronted. I was angry in the clinic but had written about some of the reasons I was angry such as being yelled at by my father and the pressure I felt growing up trying to be a 'perfect' pianist and living up to the expectations of a father who is a perfectionist. As I wrote things down, I felt less angry.

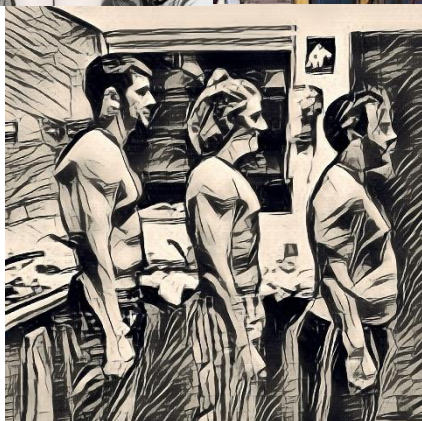
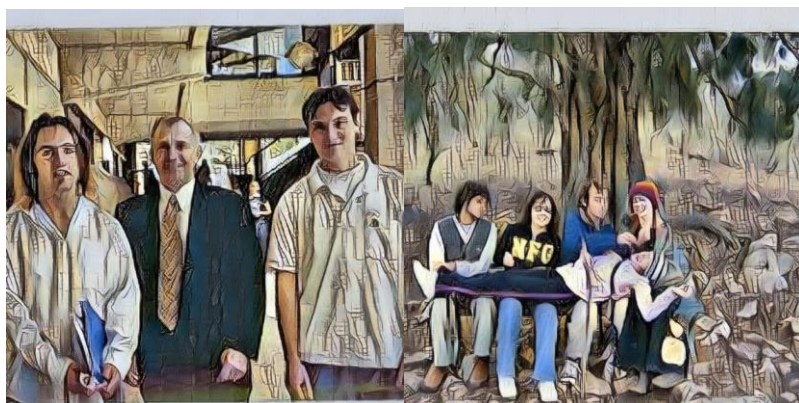
Then over the next week and a half, I slowly unfolded all the trauma I had confronted. Initially, I found it challenging to write about and would be angry, even crying, but after it had been written, it was as if it had been released. The tension I had held about being drugged, raped, and tortured seemed to put ted to be let go. It was as if everything that had happened seemed to lose its power. Over time, the memories seemed to lose their intensity, and the power was placed back in my hands, not the trauma.

I spent another three and a half weeks in the Hills Clinic. Still, instead of boredom and intimidation being the key themes of the day, I got fit from all the gym work and martial arts, became more mindful from the Taichi, and was educated with exceptional facilitation of groups such as cognitive behavioural

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therapy (CBT), dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT), and acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). In addition, I went for daily walks where I could position my mind to put together my life story that moved beyond the trauma and into the significant aspects of my life that have made it so good. It was hard to believe that I spent the same amount of time in both facilities because one dulled the mind and made me angry, whereas the other fulfilled my mind and put my body and mind into a place where it could heal.

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CHAPTER 3~ Lessons

'Lessons' is an exploration through my years in school, the university, and the TAFE. It encapsulates the stories and friendships along the way as I have undertaken a lifelong learning journey, expanded my learning method, and enhanced my knowledge in a range of academic pursuits in Chinese Medicine, Public Health, Community Services, and more.

School

There was nothing spectacular about my schooling ability. Farter always said I was an adaptive learner, but apart from my early grasp of mathematics, I was far from a fantastic student. Mother Dearest has reminded me that my year one teacher had run out of mathematical tasks for me, but this grasp of numbers soon left me as the teacher ran out of tasks, and my interest stalled.

My imagination was always my strength. Early on, my stories were longer than the rest as I got a head start with my literacy. I remember sitting down with Mother Dearest to author a story about a toothbrush. We typed it up on a primitive typewriter, and I was so proud of this story. In Year 5, my father moved us to Grose View, which was the best decision we ever made. I remember being asked to tell one of my stories to the

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kindergarten class, which was a buzz. Again, when I used my imagination, I shined.

The other teachers saw more of my talent than I did. My great year five teacher put me on detention for a week because I refused to complete the assignment on *Bridge to Terabithia*. When I finally did hand in the work, I topped the class. She was great. She put me in line when I needed to put in line, and I was rewarded for the effort she put into her teaching. My Economics teacher placed similar pressure on me, as did my science teacher in drumming chemical equations in my head. These were the only time I ever topped assignments in school other than topping music in year 10 and a business studies assignment on Chantry that I worked my ass off on.

My year 6 teacher was a bit of an ass. He would sit me under a fan for three months straight because he knew I would not complain. Then, when I did ask to move, he told me to 'stop complaining.' Although it is not a direct reason for my neurological issues, it was a starting point. That year I increasingly became more agitated, and as my teenage hormones kicked in, I became more perverted. He was, however, good for a story about the early days of Hawkesbury cricket and allowing us to play Olympic Handball at every opportunity. Many talented athletes were in this class, and these Handball battles were intense.

My high school years are a bit of a blur. We had a great cohort right from the beginning. There were few dropkicks, but a hell of a lot of talent. We were all great mates and, to a degree, still are. My year seven class set the scene for a love of ancient

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history as Mrs. Holloman demonstrated great enthusiasm and passion.

I had a decent teacher in year nine in my most memorable class, where my passion poetry and songwriting began. I began researching songwriters in year 11, including a TAFE course that expanded my love. I had missed many of the foundations because I was away from school too much with music and sport, which worsened my mathematics and science ability. I, however, worked my ass off in year 12, and we all did. I did a great HSC composition, of which I am still proud.

Our school cohort got the highest marks in Western Sydney for the year, a reward for all the students' and teachers' arduous work and friendship. I wish I had leaped more out of Anna Manea's work ethic, which began in first class and worked steadily until getting over 99 in the HSC. Apart from the trauma beneath the surface and what was happening in my home life, my high school years could not be any more memorable.

My First Taste of Learning

I had only really taken school seriously in the last few years, so I was blown away by the wealth of knowledge available in your footprints in my first taste of university. Unfortunately, I missed my preferred university degree by 0.25 marks in the HSC. My dream was to follow in my dad's footsteps and study at the University of Sydney. However, I agonisingly fell short. I had been offered a spot at Charles Sturt University (Bathurst) to study

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Sports Journalism, and I desperately wanted to get my hands on philosophy books. So, I took the next best option and travelled to Canberra to study Bachelor of Arts at the Australian University. I was enrolled to study four subjects—Psychology, Linguistics, Sociology and Philosophy.

When I arrived at the university, I was more than surprised. There were people everywhere. Young people everywhere. Bikes everywhere. There were clubs of every type. Marxist groups, religious groups, language groups, political groups, culture groups, sports groups, and fitness activities for everyone. This was a hub of culture, knowledge, and learning. There was a certain buzz that I had never felt before.

The classes were fascinating. They were delving into subjects I had only ever dreamed of hearing about. I summarised Piaget and social psychologists in the dictation rooms, learning the rooms where all the lectures were. I had to fit into the extracurricular activities that I was hoping to become a part of. One of my favourite bands, Machine Gun Felicio, was playing, so I danced along to them. I joined a new choir, which was a real buzz. I had to ride 10 kilometres in and out of Queanbeyan on a dodgy bike I borrowed because my beautiful bike, Midori, that I had saved up for, had been stolen.

By the third or fourth day, I was exhausted. I was slowly getting back to Queanbeyan later and later as I was trying to get into a study routine, especially the night I did the choir. I was starting to get up earlier to fit in. Then I had to leave Friday afternoon after the lecture to get back to Windsor to play cricket.

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I fit a lot in, and I was exhausted by the time I got back to Kurrajong.

Things still were not great at home because Dad was still upset because he had to lend me \$300 or so because I ran out of money in New Zealand. He was also upset with me because I had stayed in New Zealand too long and had not given myself enough time to prepare for the university. On the way back to Canberra on a Sunday, we had an argument, and I left in a rage. I was still angry when I got to Parramatta, so I thought I would seek help. On the way to the police station, a man tried to support me and hugged me to see if I was all right. The police saw us and started yelling at us, telling us that we were 'poofdas.' They took me to the police station, where I was deemed mentally ill, and I was detained for three days in a chamber. It felt more like fifteen.

I missed the whole second week of uni, leaving me behind in my studies. I tried to catch up but was so far behind I had to drop two subjects. I tried to study the subjects, but I needed help for them to sink in. I handed in a poor philosophy assignment with different versions of a rather crude response to Plato's work. The lecturer spent the next session marking my assignment saying how rude some of the responses were. I knew he was talking about mine as it seemed like a direct attack.

I had only read a little, other than trying to summarise the work that we were learning in class. The sociology tutor pulled me aside because he saw potential in my work. He gave me the textbook and showed me some of the significant theories we were learning about. Then he asked me to summarise the work as part of the essay. I spent a long time that evening summarising and

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writing up an essay of which I was proud. I got my first distinction for my arduous work.

The next semester was a waste. I was still recovering from the traumatic stay at the hospital. I ended up dropping all my subjects to attend a variety of lectures on all sorts of subjects concerning sociology, philosophy, religion, anthropology, and more instead. My aim was to surround myself with as many different subjects as possible to begin creating a comprehensive worldview. I was not getting assessed for any of the subjects and did not sit for any exams. But I learnt heaps.

I fell in love for the first time in Canberra and spent every spare moment with my First Love. We enjoyed exploring Canberra together and talking about everything. We had a few jobs on and off, such as putting posters on whatever we could find around that time. It was a lot of fun and took up most of my time. We played some music, and I got to know my First Love better than I had ever gotten to know anyone before.

Towards the end of the second semester, my mental health had deteriorated significantly, and my First Love's mother had asked me to head home to get some support. I spent 10 days in Bloomfield in Orange before returning to Canberra, where I continued attending lectures and spending all my spare time with my First Love. Eventually, I moved back to Kurrajong, where I spent my days studying several topics and trying to consolidate my knowledge. In addition, I did a reiki course. Because I did not seem to have any direction, my parents asked me to get a job. I searched everywhere and found a sales job in Parramatta that I decided to give it a try.

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I had to get up early in the morning to walk to the bus stop, catch the bus into Richmond, and then catch the train to Parramatta. It was at least a 2-hour trip each way, depending on how long I waited for the bus and train. Once in Parramatta, we would get a 10–15-minute class in the morning, teaching us basic sales techniques before going around businesses in Sydney. We would be assigned specific areas and driven there or catch the train. We would walk around to different companies and give them a sales pitch on why they should buy the phone packages. As an upsell, we could try and sell a mobile phone, as these were the trendy things at the time.

The pyramid scheme worked like this, if you managed to sell three packages daily, there was room for promotion. The commission was 50/50. The salesmen and women got half the commission, and the person owning the business got the other half of every sale we made on the field. He stayed in his office all day while we slaved away. The package was making the business owner filthy rich while all of us workers struggled to make enough commission to survive. I barely sold a package in the week I persevered, as the purchaser needed more incentive.

One day we were walking around Leichardt, and I wanted to try my luck at a fancy building. When I went inside, everyone was wearing white nursing gowns. So, I rocked up to the office and gave the man my pitch. We talked, and soon they started telling me about Chinese medicine. I was fascinated.

I was at the Sydney Institute of Chinese Medicine. One of the students soon approached me and told me about Yin and Yang and other Chinese medicine concepts. It blew my mind.

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Sensing my excitement, the office man said, 'You could start next week if you want to.' He assured me I only needed to pay upfront if I had the money, as there were 'fee-help' options. I left so excited.

At the end of the week, I was exhausted from the travel and handed in my resignation. I was distraught by the pyramid scheme and felt it was almost impossible to make a sale. Only some of the thirty or forty salespeople had made any sales. I managed to sell one phone even though I was a persuasive salesman. It was just not for me.

I soon became unwell again and ended up in the Pialla psychiatric ward at Nepean Hospital. After three weeks, I spent 37 traumatic days at the private Norwest Clinic. I was then transferred into the Young Person's program at Brumby House in Emu Plains. I began in a group home environment and soon transitioned to a semi-independent unit at North Parramatta. I was supported to get on the Disability Support Pension (DSP) and was provided with fantastic case management support.

On one of my trips down to Canberra after my stay, my First Love bought me a book on Chinese medicine, and I read the cover excitedly. Chinese medicine fascinated me, and I wanted to know more. I did not attend the school at Leichardt, but I went one better and enrolled in the Western Sydney University's Traditional Chinese Medicine course. Farter came with me to the enrolment, and he was impressed with how focused the course was, not only on Chinese philosophy, which he knew I would be fascinated by, but also Western medicine. Farter seemed proud that his son was going to be a doctor.

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I was so excited. Mother Dearest came with me to the city to get the textbook, Giovanna Macciocia, the Go-to-Guy in Chinese Medicine. I started reading the book. While it was all foreign to me, it looked so fascinating. It had excerpts from ancient texts and covered topics like facial diagnosis. I was hooked. Farter took me to North Parramatta, and we worked out the bus routes I would need to take to get to the university. It was not an easy commute, but my enthusiasm was palpable. Everything just seemed right!

My First Year of Uni

Although I had had a false start with my first attempt at the uni, I was highly motivated to make the most of my second opportunity. Although I was excited, I knew this would include long days. I was at university for four days and had one day off. So, I would catch the bus and train on my days at uni and spend the spare days studying and doing assignments on the old-fashioned computer I had at the time.

I started the day by waking up around 5:30 am. I would get dressed, pack my lunch for the day, and then walk 10 minutes down to the bus stop. I would catch the bus approximately 15 minutes into Parramatta, where I would again catch another bus. Next, I would catch the bus to Liverpool, waiting for another bus before finally getting to the Bankstown campus in Milperra. I would later change this by catching the train to Granville and Liverpool as I became more familiar with the route. I would then

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have to do the whole thing on the way home. It became familiar for me to sleep on the way back, as it was exhausting.

I was highly frustrated but fascinated by the first class. I was introduced to the fascinating but slightly strange James Flowers, the lecturer for many of our classes throughout our degree. I was trying to absorb all the information in the first class, but I was distracted by many questions about topics that seemed utterly irrelevant. The class dragged on but explored topics as diverse as dragons and demons. The subjects seemed varied and different from any concepts I had ever heard of before. The class seemed fascinated by the discussion, and it was filled with fascinating people. Although I just wanted them to shut up and learn, I was hooked on the first session.

The first semester was a whirlwind. I was still adjusting to the new medication and was either tired most of the day or found it hard to focus. I was reasonably attentive in class, but I would nod off in some classes, and there was not much point in being there. The social life was, however, incredible, and I took to my new classmates. There were all types of people, and I quickly became close to a range of friends. I gravitated particularly towards Clare, with whom I soon formed a small group. The greatest thing about the Traditional Chinese Medicine class was that we were also joined by the Naturopath students, who shared many of the same classes. We were one big homogenous group that got along like a house on fire.

By the end of the first semester, I managed to pass all the subjects. I studied hard at Lake Parramatta in my spare time and was grasping the principles of Chinese medicine, but I needed to

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improve. I struggled through the other subjects and only just passed physiology. I was getting by. I was getting decent marks in my assignments, but I needed help grasping the subjects enough to go well in the exams. Many were failing, so I was doing well.

This trend continued into the second semester. I was trying hard but struggling to get the grades I deserved. Despite trying my hardest, I got two out of 30 in my first anatomy exam and ended up having to work my ass off to pass that class. I also focused too much on making beautiful notes in my first acupuncture class to grasp the subject. I failed that class and had to complete it again the following year.

I was, however, enjoying a rich social life. Then one day, my life changed when I related to two of my greatest allies and lifelong friends. One day at the bus stop, a young 17-year-old named Luke was waiting. He missed his bus a few times but was more interested in socialising and getting to know me than getting the right bus home. I remember how impressed I was with his knowledge of acupuncture and the wealth of experiences he had had for as a teenager. His wisdom was above his years, and he was wholesome fun. I connected with him that day and am grateful that we have formed a wonderful friendship ever since.

The other person with whom I connected strongly was Orlando. I had been catching the bus with him to and from where he was getting off at Moorebank, about 10 minutes away from Milperra. He had a big smile and had tried to approach me a few times on the way to school, but I had struggled to understand his

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thick Peruvian accent. His father was paying for him to have an adventure abroad, but he had worked to fit in despite excelling in Chinese medicine and learning it in his second language.

We ended up catching the train to Parramatta that day. It was out of his way, but he just wanted to make a meaningful friend. We talked about everything and anything. He taught me all about Peru and taught me a few Spanish words. He taught me about his favourite game, football. I told him about cricket. We talked about some things we were learning about in class. Now that I was talking to him, his Spanish accent was highly understandable. We never got anywhere we planned to on the train, but this one-and-a-half-hour on the train changed my life forever. I had a new best friend who would be my closest ally at the university over the next four years.

At the end of the year, many of the Chinese Medicine students had a little road trip up to Brown's echinacea herb farm in Walcha. Two short girls, the Blue Skye and the Mexican, picked me up. The five-and-a-half-hour trip was full of adventure and good cheer. We got to the property late at night and almost spun the car off the road, which was a bit scary.

The week was full of fun. I got to know some of the Chinese medicine family on a new level. I connected with them a lot better than I had in the other classes, as our days were filled with demanding work planting herbs alongside the tractor, and the nights were filled with tasty food and lots of laughs. It was starting to become less like hard work and study, and more about enjoying each other's company. It was beginning to feel like a small family.

Moving On Campus

Travelling to and from North Parramatta daily was exhausting, so I followed Az's footsteps and moved in the campus. It had changed his life, so it seemed like an excellent choice for me. A spot became available, so I jumped at the opportunity. I had been to a few campus parties at the University of New South Wales and had fun.

I was excited as I drove up the small yellow driveway. I knew my friend Luke was moving on campus also so that I would not be lonely. I was shown to my room and introduced to my roommates. The first person I was introduced to be a skinny girl named Nicole. The office lady was brimming with excitement when she introduced the other guy I was sharing the room with. She had told me that he was cool. With a firm handshake, he said in a thick Arabic accent, 'Hi, my name's Romi.' He looked extremely friendly and spoke with great confidence. Unfortunately, the third roommate was a fast-talking girl, and I do not remember her name.

That day, we got to know the rest of the people living on campus. My eyes kept diverting to a young girl with long brown hair who have big brown eyes. Her name was Lizelle, and I got to know her quickly. After that, other people, including a young Japanese girl called Saori, took my attention. These people would become my closest allies, and I would spend hours with them on campus.

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Living on campus comes with many perks. Firstly, there were no train nor bus trips to get to the uni. You could jump straight out of bed, shower, and meander to class. And there was always someone interesting to talk to. Someone fun to spend a few hours with. Unlike living virtually alone, there was never any chance of being lonely.

We became a united bunch and had a few favourite things to do. We would either jump the fence or, as the wall slowly developed holes, head over to the Chinese takeaway shop, where there was an array of delicious dinners. Lunches were only six dollars, so you often got lunch and dinner simultaneously. The other was to head across and have a good kebab, but these were less delicious than the Chinese.

Luke and I often used to head into Bankstown to do our shopping. We had a system where we took turns buying things. I was surprised at how cheap the fruits and veggies were, so we would get a shitload and share them amongst ourselves. He loved his fruits and veggies as much as I did, so we bought a few other things, a few instant noodles, some bread, some rice, and some sauces, but they were simple shops back then.

As Orlando started joining Luke and me on our adventures into town, we enjoyed exploring the Chinese herb shop and buying all the herbs we were learning about in class. We used to try all types of things at the shops, like sugarcane juice and a range of items from Asian supermarkets. One day we tried our first-ever milk tea with pearls, which became a habit whenever we went anywhere.

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Luke started spending more time with Saori, and soon we discovered they were an item. Philby had taken a shine for Saori because she was beautiful, but Luke took to her quickly. Lizelle took Romi, who was desperately trying to study his translation studies, but Lizelle would not leave the poor guy alone. Of course, he was a handsome guy, and she was a pretty girl, so I do not blame either of them for falling in love.

We would often go out in the city. We would catch the train to the city after class and wander around Darling Harbour, trying different clubs. We liked all types of dancing, so places like the Platoon and Lacita particularly, caught our fancy. There was something remarkable about spending the night in a salsa bar that made Lacita my favourite. I got to know some musicians and talked to them late into the evening about playing Latin music. We would come home early in the morning and walk back to the campus via a 10-15-minute walk from Revesby Railway Station.

I started doing better at the university now that I was not travelling so far, and I was getting the hang of traditional Chinese medicine. I still struggled during the first semester, but I passed acupuncture on the second time, and I understood the concepts for the first time. On one particular day, Farter picked me up to see Tim Freedman for my birthday present at the Opera House. On the way, I recited to him every acupuncture point in the body and its anatomical locations. For the first time, I knew something so good that I could recite everything word for word. It was a proud moment.

It was a memorable year, but not full of memories. It flew by so quickly. I made life-long friends in an environment that

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was always fun and exciting. There were not many stories that came out of this period of my life. It was a wonderful time of my life that seemed to flash by. I am incredibly grateful that I had the chance to move on campus because it changed my life and put it on a trajectory for achieving much greater things.

Moorebank

There was not a spot available for me on campus the following year. I forgot to submit an expression of interest to continue my stay on campus. Whatever the reason, I moved to a shared house with a few older men. The house was owned by a schoolteacher named Dave, who was always busy watching TV and doing his marking for school. It was in a suburb called Moorebank, meaning I had approximately a 15-minute bike ride either way to the university campus. Some days Dave drove me, but most days, I got there by bike along the freeway and then through the town.

I was in full flow at the university by this stage and was increasingly working hard on my studies. I was starting to memorise things more and get my mind around herbal formulas. The theory was beginning to make sense, and I was starting to do elective subjects. One of my elective subjects was War and Peace, which was a fascinating break from Chinese medicine. We were learning about sovereignty and the principles of international relations. The subject was highlighted by a United Nations-like conference where we had to place different perspectives on a

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human rights principle. It got heated and was a great way to present an assignment, arguing a topic from many perspectives.

I was starting to become better friends with the Chinese medicine boys. They were the most balanced young men, both physically and mentally. Physically, four or five of my Chinese medicine friends had black belts in different martial arts. This equipped them physically and mentally to be astute at many things. Physically, I was impressed by their endurance, strength, and stamina various tasks. This was most evident when we used to go on drives down to a park off Woodville Road. They would do chin-ups, push-ups, sit-ups, and squats for hours. I was impressed. I could not keep up.

Occasionally, one of these finely balanced men, Hamish, would pull me aside after class to tell me he was meeting Luke behind the campus cottages. Hamish was a boisterous guy leading our Chinese medicine class in most of our subjects. I looked up to him. He had taught Kung Fu around Australia after deciding never to study again. He did decide to study Chinese medicine again and was excelling. It was to his parent's farm that we had gone to learn about how to run a farm in my first year in the university.

These battles between Hamish and Luke were fierce. Battles to the death, but because they were stealthy, they trusted each other that there would be no considerable damage. I would watch with fascination as one would attack whilst the other would defend, both waiting for their opening while defending for dear life. Hamish was more of a counterpuncher, whilst Luke was

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more aggressive. These battles would last five or six minutes maximum whilst I stood on cheering.

The best thing about living in Moorebank was that Orlando and Clare were just around the corner. I used to either go to Orlando's house to study, or he would sometimes come to mine. We used to enjoy going to Clare's house and had begun having dinner on occasion with her parents, Margarett and Tony. Now and then, Clare, Orlando, and our other friend Michelle would meet at the Moorebank Library and enjoy studying our subjects together, often reviewing what was coming up in exams. There was also a great Thai restaurant in Moorebank that was within our budget.

I used to ride my bike all around the area. Orlando used to catch the bus into Liverpool and meet me there, where he would show me some of the Peruvian cafés. He loved showing me about his homeland. We organised a dinner where he showed us a fantastic purple corn drink called chicha morada. It was sweet and tasted amazing.

As we had become increasingly better friends with Clare's friend Natalie, Orlando and I decided to go to a go-kart centre in Ingleburn. I remember thinking I was so crap and how the girls showed us up. But we had a magnificent time and went home on a real high.

That night, I received a call from Orlando saying, 'Clare has been in an accident.' I first thought that Clare always seemed to be in an accident. She had travelled to India numerous times and had even made it to the base of Mount Everest. I thought it

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was normal for Clare to be in trouble, so I thought nothing of it. But Orlando called me again 20 minutes later, saying, 'You better come to the hospital now.' So, I got out and headed straight to Liverpool Hospital.

When I got to the hospital, Clare was already dead. Tony and Margarett were at her bedside with shocked looks on their faces. I did not know what to think. She just looked like Clare. She looked at peace. Her friendly eyes were not there to welcome me with her gorgeous smile. I held her hand and felt so empty. One of the most beautiful souls I knew was gone.

I sat there with Tony and Margarett, who were noticeably quiet. This was different from them. Their home was always full of happiness and joy. It was a somber moment. I tried to lighten the moment, and they respected that, but we were all missing our friend.

That afternoon I went into the piano room to practice and let my emotions out because they were flowing at this time. I played all the songs that reminded me of Clare. All the inspirational ones. But the cleaner had to close the piano room before I could process my emotions. So, I asked, 'Can you come back and close this up later?' But the cleaner would not budge. So, I walked home, trying to process what had yet to be processed.

The funeral was a depressing affair in which the priest barely mentioned Clare. It was so impersonal, as if Jesus Christ had died, not Clare. The funeral was an opportunity to share all the good moments we had with our friend and her brief moment on this planet. For someone who was 21, she had done so much.

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She was recognised at the Botanical Gardens for her contributions to herbal medicine; a plaque was dedicated to her. All her close friends joined, as we were so proud the day this was memorialised at the Botanical Gardens. This was a small reward for all of Clare's wholeness to everybody she knew.

Orlando and I continued to visit Tony and Margarete for many years after Clare died. They began inviting us to trivia nights and special dinners at their house. They knew how much we loved Clare and how much she loved us.

As the year closed, I had a falling out with Dave, and he only let me stay at the shared house because exams were so close. It was hard to finish any study because the guy who lived next door always seemed to have a different girl over. Twice or thrice a day, sometimes more, I would hear him shag another girl, almost shaking the door off the hinge. Orlando always said he must have had skills because he was the ugliest man he had ever met.

One week before the final exams, Luke won a prize on the radio for us to attend an event in a strip club in Kings Cross. It was the launch of Fat Pizza's new TV show. We met all the stars, including Pauly, and talked to a few strippers. It was a crackling night.

The night before my exams, I was just about to go to sleep when my flatmate came in and said, 'Try this?' I said, 'I am about to go to bed. Can I try it tomorrow?' He baited me and said, 'Come on, mate.' I thought, why the hell not, and downed the shot. It was the most vital thing I had ever tasted. 'That was 80%

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moonshine you just drank.' I laughed and thought, 'That'd be right.' I slept well that night.

The exams came, and I returned to Kurrajong for the Christmas break. I had had a mixed year of fun, adventure, and grief. It had been a mixture of good and challenging times, but mostly full of joy and excitement. My life was gaining momentum, and I was looking forward to what the next year had in store for me.

The China Family

A new group of Canadians had moved on campus, which had given the campus a different flavour. They were out in Australia for an enjoyable time, and it sometimes felt like a backpacker's hostel. It was not the most conducive for study, but I was increasingly doing better at that.

The year seemed to fly by, and before I knew it, we planned to fly to China. The whole first semester was a blur. Once you are in the studying routine, the time seems to fly by. It is hard to explain but studying becomes easier at this point. I was dedicating increased time to my assignments so that they seemed to happen, and the stress was eliminated.

As you are not rote learning as much, there is not as much added information in the exams, and it is more about remembering what you do know and building on that. I only really liked exams once I started to get better at them towards the end of the third year of the four-year degree. By this point, the

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assignments were increased presentations, group assignments, or a mixture of both, and I was good at both. By the end of the last semester of the 4th year, studying has become enjoyable and less of an effort.

Two weeks before flying to China, I had an incident with one of my flatmates on campus. I could not believe her paranoia, as she always demanded the apartment door be locked, even if she and everyone else were sitting in the living room. I do not remember her name, but she was an avid Melbourne Storm supporter. After the semi-final, I mentioned how I thought a Cameron Smith tackle was the worst tackle I have ever seen and stated that he should miss the grand final for that tackle. She was so offended that she said 'something would happen at the airport' when I flew to China. I did not think twice about it, other than the fact that I knew that she worked in customs.

So, the semester ended, and I was excited to be flying to China for our placement at Jiangsu Provincial Hospital. I was excited when I jumped on the plane where I caught a six or seven-hour flight into Hong Kong. Some of my friends had jumped on the plane a few days earlier and had organised a small trip to explore Macao. I was happy to get to China and start the adventure. Hong Kong was foggy, and I had the whole night ahead of me, but I decided against catching the train into the city with the thought that I might get lost and miss my flight to China. I slept in the airport, awaiting my flight to Nanjing.

In the morning, I joined the flight with some friends who had also boarded the same flight. It was another five or six-hour flight with fewer luxuries than the earlier flight, but soon I

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descended above China. It was a magnificent sight as you dropped on Nanjing, seeing green pasture upon a green pasture with small communal cities amongst the rural setting. It was like nothing I had ever seen before.

I arrived at Nanjing Airport and met Orlando and Philby in the baggage area. Orlando was on my flight from Hong Kong, and Philby was already in China for a couple of weeks as he had flown to Beijing for the Olympics to support his friend Ben who competed in the sailing event. Unfortunately, Ben fell short of a gold medal after capsizing less than 200 metres from the finish while in the lead and the gold medal position. We were, however, disappointed with Ben as he failed to catch up with Philby, despite him flying over to China to watch him race.

After reacquainting with each other in this foreign land, we waited ages for my bag to arrive. Orlando's bag was one of the first bags off the plane. Mine was nowhere in sight. After the last bag was offloaded, we went to the official's area to see if there might be a mistake. The official did a few phone calls and informed me that my bag was left in Hong Kong. He got the details of where we were staying and told us that the bag would arrive at the hostel in the coming days.

Brimming with excitement, we jumped in the taxi for the 45-minute trip to the city centre where our hostel was. It was a trip to remember. The driving was different from anything we had experienced before. There were no road rules. The driver just beeped the horn and swerved to overtake the vehicle in front. Orlando and I laughed nearly the whole way, as it was one of the most exciting things I had ever experienced.

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It was the China that people see in the movies. It was like going back 200 years in time. Like the seven or eight-hour plane flight had taken us through a time warp. There were people on bikes pushing equipment piled up on their carts. There were carts full of chickens. There were people everywhere, and this was the rural area. There were substantial high-rise buildings in the middle of farms. And there were farms as far as the eye could see cut into every aspect of the landscape. This was the China that you could only dream of back home. It was magnificent.

We arrived at the hostel, and it was comfortable enough. We settled in and went for a walk. Then, we found an Australian Pub. The Mexican and I returned to this pub to watch the National Rugby League (NRL) grand final at lunchtime the next day. Here, we watched a Cameron Smith-less Melbourne Storm smashed by a red-hot Manly Sea Eagles side. At the Australian pub, we had a few Australian beers and a terrible meat pie and talked to the owner about Magnetic Mountain, a drive up to Bowen Mountain, less than a five-minute drive from my home in Kurrajong. I also got asked by the waitress if I would like some cold 'cock,' which I thought was a hilarious misinterpretation of Coke.

As we started exploring Nanjing a bit, the China Family decided to meet for our first of many wonderful Chinese dinners. Philby helped us order in Chinese as he had become accustomed to speaking Mandarin after spending one of his university years in the Southern Chinese city of Kunming. Philby ensured we had a table full of delicious food to devour, a luxury that we got used to in our two-and-a-half-month stay in Nanjing. Whereas Peking duck is the specialty in Beijing, salty duck is the specialty

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in Nanjing. This is served with most meals and is usually a plump duck cooked with salt. It is not as salty as it sounds and is quite delicious.

Nanjing was the capital of China until Beijing took over in 1949 when it became the People's Republic of China. Whereas 'Bei' means north, 'Nan' means south, with 'jing' meaning 'capital.' Nanjing means the 'South Capital' and is a highly significant city for Chinese people. Nanjing was the site of the first university in China and in the world. The foreshore of the Yangtze River, as it winds through some of the city centres, is one of the most photographed sites for Chinese tourists. There was also a massive massacre of Nanjing civilians whom the Japanese brutally murdered in the second world war.

Not only did my bag not arrive on time, but my medications were nowhere to be found when the bags did arrive. I had to wait 10 days for my prescription to be shipped out, which I was extremely nervous about as I required medication to sleep. My coordinator Zou Shu arranged with one of her friends at the hospital to give me acupuncture to help me sleep. Blue Skye's mother also had schizophrenia and offered to help me. I was highly grateful for this support as this kept me well during this period.

We were soon acquainted with the flat that became our home after the first few weeks since we arrived. It was a comfortable flat with just enough cooking space. I stayed there with two Koreans, a girl, Anna, and a guy, Jinguan, and Orlando. The problem was there were only three beds and there were four of us sharing the flat. I bunked with the Korean guy Jinguan the

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first night, but I did not trust him, so Orlando offered to share the room with me.

This was often a fun experience. Orlando and I respected each other's space in the bed so much that it was common for one of us to fall out of the bed. We enjoyed spending time checking our emails. Clare's death was still raw for us both, and Orlando had photos of her everywhere. She was his best friend. He still even had a photo of her on his screen on his laptop. It was comfortable sharing with Orlando. We even made it a routine to watch Orlando's favourite Star Trek episodes.

Soon we were welcomed into our morning routine of going to the hospital. I would wake up, have a quick shower, and then walk the thirty to forty-minute walk to the hospital or ride the bus. I enjoyed the walk because of the delicious dumplings I bought along the way. I also often got tea eggs to go with this for breakfast and grabbed these delicacies as often as I could. They could be found everywhere.

Exploring the hospital was a fantastic experience. The Jiangsu Provincial Hospital comprised of many departments, of which I spent two weeks each in the Gastrointestinal, Paediatric, Facial Paralysis, and two Acupuncture Wards. My first two-week placement was in the Gastrointestinal Ward, where patients either experienced digestion or gut-related conditions, from diarrhoea to constipation to gastroenteritis, and even stomach cancer.

The system was a first-in-first-serve order, but just because one was not first in line did not mean he or she did not

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get a chance to be served. Patients would be diagnosed and given prescriptions. At the core of the process was the senior doctor who would diagnose and prescribe treatments like acupuncture or herbal medicines. They would then pass the information on to a junior doctor who would write up the prescription in Chinese. Once this was complete, another scribe would enter the diagnosis and prescription into the computer. This was passed on to the translator, who would translate the details for us. This would all be overlooked by people 10 or 12 deep observing and participating in the process, trying to work out their own diagnosis based on the presented information.

Once the diagnosis was made, the patient would either progress onto an acupuncture ward or the herbal dispensary. The herbal dispensary was a sight to behold as it housed rows of shelves full of assorted herbal medicines. The dispensary was at least a football field length inside and was always seven or eight people deep. Behind the walls, the chemists always reached into baskets where the herbs they requested were placed. Seeing this process at work was excellent, as the dispensary was full all day, and the chemists were busy searching for herbs throughout the day. It was incredible.

My second placement was my most memorable, in the Facial Paralysis Ward. On the first day, the master said that if he trusts me enough, he would let me help him with the needling. Because I was so eager to line up and hand him the needles, he gave me an opportunity on the first day. This would become a memorable couple of weeks.

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The system was simple. The apprentices, like me, would line up next to one of the eight beds and hand the clinician the needles. He would then put each needle into specific locations on the face to help aid the facial paralysis patients. The doctor would then ask us to do one or two points, usually Hegu (Large Intestine 4) or Waiguan (Sanjiao 5) and connect that point to the electro-acupuncture kit. We would then read for 15-20 minutes when the needles were taking their effect before the doctor asked me to disconnect the electro-acupuncture machine and take them out. Occasionally the doctor would ask me to do the cupping on the face of the patients, and which I quickly got a reputation and was dubbed as 'Mr. Cupping.'

The week seemed to fly by in the facial paralysis ward. The seasons were changing from autumn into winter then when the temperature drastically dropped from around 26 degrees to minus eight degrees in less than a week. There were increased numbers in the ward because facial paralysis, such as Bell's Palsy, is particularly prevalent during seasonal changes—the book 'When the Wind Changed' by Ruth Park is a story that highlights this phenomenon. We learnt a lot about weather in Chinese medicine, as it plays a foundation in the philosophy behind the practise. It was amazing to see it in real life.

I got a reputation on the facial paralysis ward for getting effective results. One day a woman who was an English teacher introduced herself to me. As I began putting the needle in, she let out an all-mighty cry. Thinking I had put the needle in the wrong point, I apologised, saying, 'Are you alright?' She said, 'No, that

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stimulation was the best stimulation I have ever felt.’ I felt quietly chuffed.

Between sessions, I read The Celestine Prophecy, a book Clare gave me for my birthday. By this point, nearly the whole China Family met during breaks and had wonderful times together. There were 15-20 minutes in between duty intervals. Many of the Asian boys in the China Family took a fancy to the girls that were in my facial paralysis group and started to mingle with them. In these breaks, it was all fun and games until these meetups were stopped as one of the doctors complained that it was not a ‘hotel lobby.’

The rest of the placements came and went. As a group, the China Family enjoyed feasts nearly every night at one of the restaurants around town. We would fill the table with all types of dishes. We would spin a wheel so the one who won could get whatever dish he or she wanted delivered straight in front of him or her. We were also quite drunk quite often, as we would often accompany meals with the easy-to-drink Tsingtao beer. Because the glasses were so much smaller than the schooners we were used to in Australia, we were encouraged to have a glass or two. The problem was that, before we knew it, we were off our face.

Orlando got a reputation for being ‘The Finisher.’ He would always start his meal after everyone else were finished eating. In true Peruvian fashion, he did not like any of the food being wasted. So, the skinny Peruvian would finish off our leftovers. Often this would be quite a lot of food. At times, he would still be eating half an hour after everyone else had finished. We would all wait for him to finish. I was unsure how,

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but he never seemed to put on weight. Until one day, he pulled me aside. 'I put on three kilograms,' he said. I thought, sucker. Finally, all that food has caught up on him.

We also used to go out quite regularly. We met a fun young Brazilian, Tiago, studying at the University of Nanjing. We had our small group of myself, Tiago, Blue Skye, Nixon, and Heigan. Often, we would be joined by other members of the China family, but often it would be just us. We would find a club in the clubbing district and dance the night away. Then, I would stagger into bed, often requiring Orlando to open the gate at four or five o'clock in the morning. I would then sleep in until midday if I did not need to get to the hospital.

When we were joined by more of the China Family, we often got kebabs after our clubbing adventures, or Craig would shout us all dumplings. The kebab place would usually be closing but would stay open for our three a.m. adventures. What food did we get on those kebabs, whether mutton, beef, lamb, or dog? But geez, they tasted amazing.

On weekends, we often ventured to tourist destinations around Nanjing or went on a trip or two away. The Mexican and Blue Skye spent one of the weekends to see the Tiananmen Warriors, and once booked a trip for us all to explore Yellow Mountain (Huangshan). This was the highlight of the China trip, amongst many.

The trip began with a bus trip of four to five hours. About halfway, we arrived at a site where we did a bushwalk and some abseiling. We finally arrived at Yellow Mountain and began our

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five to six-kilometre walk up the mountain. I complained the whole way up, but it was much fun. Once we reached the top, I left the group to look around the summit. I only had a few minutes to look at this world heritage site before it became too overcast to see anything. I was lucky. I was the only one who got to see it. I, however, needed more time to take a photo before the weather became more overcast.

We then met as a group to decide whether we were to pay more for us all to be in the same room. This seemed like a better deal as we were all comfortable with each other's company by this time and had no secrets. We grabbed a meal and settled in for an early night. We soon fell asleep as we drifted off to terrible karaoke singing in the next room.

At about midnight, I woke to two of my friends screaming. I, too, screamed, thinking that someone was harming my friends. A rat had crawled under Blue Skye and jumped over my friend Alicia before escaping the room. Once the rat made itself safely out, there was again a quiet calm amongst the group.

The following day, we woke early for a quick breaky before walking to the mountain's peak. Sadly, it was still overcast, so it was unfortunate for us not to see the beautiful mountain from the top. I was, however, fortunate to have a glimpse for a few seconds of a giant golden monkey who stood in front of me for a little bit before crawling off into the fog.

After staying a while at the peak, we decided to return to the bus. About twenty minutes in, Orlando started running at full speed, and we all decided to follow him. We ran the whole six

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kilometres in about 12 minutes, only stopping to admire and take photos of these fantastic skinny men who scaled up and down these steep mountains at least twice daily. They thought it was funny that we even noticed them, but we were amazed by people who could do such a difficult job every day. Their legs were indented because the stairs were so steep.

After running virtually non-stop from the top, when we found the underlying cause of the mountain where we were met by some of our group who caught the gondola down, we were told that there were another two kilometres to the bus. I was exhausted, but the group continued running, so I followed. We got within 200 metres of the bus, and I almost collapsed with exhaustion. I could not go any more, but just as I was about to give up, I found a shop selling sugar cane. I bought some sugar cane, and my energy was restored. I jumped on the bus and enjoyed the trip home.

After our internships at the hospital, we had a brief exam period that brought together four years of learning Chinese medicine. Seeing acupuncture done daily, when needling was actually done on real people, was invaluable for my learning. Being a visual person and practising acupuncture myself meant that I learnt more in my 10 weeks in China than I did in my whole degree learning out of textbooks. The exams in China solidified that.

And then, after the exams, we were off on our eight to nine-hour train ride to Beijing. Everyone was in a good mood because studies were done for most of the China Family. This allowed us to let loose during our week in Beijing to explore the

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city and all it had to offer. Beijing was buzzing because it had recently opened itself to the world for the Olympics. This meant it had to clean itself up, and many traditions, such as spitting, was banned. Beijing was looking great.

Vincent, one of the Asian boys in the China Family, had secured a great backpacker minutes from the city centre. This was within walking distance of Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, and Chairman Mao's Memorial Hall, where Moa is buried. The other way was some amazing markets where I tried everything from snakes to centipedes to starfish and sewerage lobsters. We went for long walks throughout the city, exploring grand parks where feral cats were the size of small lions. We went on train trips to various tourist destinations, such as the Temple of Heaven, and ended up in strange suburbs where we tried all types of street foods. Our adventures around Beijing were much fun and full of adventure.

One day we caught a bus out to the Great Wall of China. We asked the driver of a bus who said that it would be 50 Yuan. Nixon, our only Cantonese speaker, said no, and we walked around the next corner. The following bus offered us 35 Yuan. Again, Nixon said no, and we went around the next corner. Finally, another bus offered us 18Yuan, so we all jumped on the bus.

We arrived at The Great Wall on a freezing and windy day. It was at least minus eight degrees. Regardless, we were excited and started walking up the great monument. I was surprised by how steep and how well-structured it was. We continued to climb up, fighting against the wind as we reached the top. We continued

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a steep descent down and reached a point where I reached my exhaustion level. Not knowing how much time we had left, Nixon, Heigan, and I decided it would be best to climb back up to catch the toboggan to get down to the bottom. When our exhausted bodies finally reached the bottom, we realised that where we had reached our exhaustion point was, in fact, just 20 metres from the ending point and that if we had continued, we would have reached our destination. Regardless, we got a good taste of the Great Wall and an authentic taste of the genius of its construction.

For our last two nights in Beijing and the China Family's last days of adventure, we decided that we wanted to find a club to finish on a high. We found a club that had an amazing reggae band from Ethiopia. I acquainted myself with the piano player I called Mr. Music and we danced the night away. We got everybody in the club up on the dance floor to the point where there was not enough room to have a band anymore, so they packed up their instruments, and Mr. Music became the DJ. We continued late into the evening. When I left, the female singer got into trouble with the bass player, her husband. I had no idea that that little thing was married to the bass player.

We had had an eventful eleven weeks in China and were uncertain about what the future would hold for us. The Mexican and Blue Skye planned to jump our cruise boats and travel around the world, learning their acupuncture trade. Neil planned to take over his dad's animal acupuncture business. Nixon thought of starting his own business. I still had a year of my degree, so I was heading back to Sydney. Orlando planned to visit Japan and spend a few more months in Australia before returning to Peru.

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Many of the rest of the family were uncertain on what their next adventure would be. The reality was everyone had different plans about what they were doing next, so we knew that this was the last chance for the China Family to all be together.

For our last night in Beijing, we returned to the same club because it had been such a big hit before, but we were a little tired, and there was not quite the same buzz. After nearly four years of studying and then exploring a foreign land together, it was nice to sit back and relax to be together one last time as a family.

Campbelltown

After returning from China, I settled into summer at home before settling in for my last year at university. I moved down the Campbelltown campus of Western Sydney University at Macarthur. Luke also had a few subjects to do, and I was also moving to the campus, so I was not making a move alone. I was flatted in a five-bedroom apartment with four Muslim boys. Two were in their first year of university and were studying medicine, another was studying sports science, and the other was in his last year of osteopathy. They were all intelligent, fun-loving guys studying hard but also wanting to have a fun time.

I only had three subjects to complete, so I was freed to achieve in these subjects. I still spent a lot of time studying, but I would also go out most Thursday nights and explore Campbelltown, including having great meals and attending

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many parties. One particular party was an international guest party where I came dressed, well, virtually undressed as a sumo wrestler. All I had on was some undies shoved up my butt cheeks. When it came to awarding the best dressed, the announcer was trying to get another girl laid, announcing, 'Who votes for this girl to be the winner?' Bare anyone cheered. Then when it came to me, 'Who votes for this guy to be the winner?' And they all started chanting my name.

I often found a place to enjoy Blue Skye on Thursday nights. I had stared non-stop at the Blue Skye in the first year when her 18-year-old body merged perfectly with her pretty face, highlighted by her captivating blue eyes. In the first year, she and the Mexican picked me up on the way to Hamish's farm, even though I could only see her above the windscreen. In China, she was initially frustrated with me but then enjoyed dancing with me into the night as we learnt to enjoy each other's company. By the time we spent together after uni, we were already comfortable around each other.

On Thursday night at Cruise Bar in Circular Quay, while enjoying some salsa music, Blue Skye's brother approached and asked me to ask her out. He said, 'You often regret the things you don't do, not the things you try to do.' I never had the guts to ask her out, but I enjoyed being one of her closest allies for the next couple of years. She is now in Winnipeg, Canada, and I look forward to meeting her and her beautiful family in the future.

On campus, I used to enjoy going shopping with Luke. Whilst things had progressed from our days of taking turns to buy our groceries, it was just as fun looking for discount health

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products and the like. I was embarrassed one day he screamed, 'Help' on the way back from Macarthur Square. With the tourist threats that were happening then, and the fact that I was with other Muslim men, this was not the most fantastic decision. A security guard came running with his dog, thinking a serious crime had been committed.

Throughout my stay in Campbelltown, I was dating the Korean Beauty. This was a fun time as she would sneak into my room early and stay with me until class started. We would spend a lot of time in secret hideaway spots and parks talking, making out, and making love wherever and whenever it felt right. In addition, we went on the occasional drive that would take us to places around Sydney. We had a good group of friends then, doing all sorts of things together, including day trips to Wollongong and dinners around Sydney. With less pressure on studying, it meant I could enjoy myself.

As the last semester was ending, I focused one last effort on finishing the semester well. I had one final exam to do, diagnostics. I had assumed Orlando's role, but instead of him teaching me, I was able to teach others. So, I studied the ins and outs of diagnosis and got full marks in the final exam.

I had now finished my undergraduate degree and planned to study Public Health in the new year. I had come a long way from the scared boy a few months before starting university, as I was now a confident, well-resourced, still young man. I spent an amazing three months in China and had many great friends. I was now twenty-five, had a degree, and was ready to tackle the world.

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My Masters

Before I knew it, my master's degree had begun. I had moved into a small flat with a Cranky sort of lady in Dulwich Hill, which gave me an approximately 15-minute train trip into Redfern that was virtually on the doorstep of Sydney University. Unfortunately, the administration staff had messed up my application form for some unknown reason, and no spaces were available in the Public Health course. Still, I was welcomed into the International Public Health course with open arms. This was the master's in international public health or MIPH. It had been my dream to study at Sydney University as I had been told all the great stories of my father's time there.

I was impressed straight away with several things in the course. First, the lecturers were great. In every class, I learned from one of the world leaders in the field. The courses would be full of content, and I would be buzzing with ideas. By this stage, I was beginning to connect ideas. And I often came out with various models as we explored different topics.

Second, I loved the workbooks we were given. Each subject had a workbook with four or five readings throughout the week. These were often cutting-edge resources and articles from the most recent literature, which blew my mind.

Third were the assignments. At first, I would brainstorm my ideas profusely with the professor. He would tolerate my ideas but also brainstorm ways that I could shape my assignments to better address the topic or research question. The

projects got you thinking about topics such as the Millenium Development Goals, intervention priorities such as the diarrhoea epidemic in India, research proposals, health system issues such as service delivery and water crisis concerns in Gaza, how health promotion strategies reduced the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) in Uganda, childhood stunting in Peru.

As the degree progressed, I created more models and did more article evaluations. This ensured that I analysed all parts of the literature, from the title, authors, journal, year, volume, and pages to the literature review, objectives, ethics, data collection, sample, analysis, results, discussion conclusion, and implications of the studies. I got my best results in comparing the Australian, and Chinese Mental Health Systems and a discussion of a model called Perceived Behavioural Control in which I designed a brochure encouraging medical students to try and use it and refer to acupuncture. Unsurprisingly, the assignments I did best in were based on Chinese medicine and mental health.

The other assignments that I did exceptionally well in were the group assignments. I was influential in getting the group up and going in a presentation on 'Development.' I devised our model, which got us on the right path towards getting the top marks. I also enjoyed the group discussions, as many marks offered were in group facilitation in the tutorials. I entertained the participants in the tutorials on several occasions, facilitating fun groups on various topics such as 'what is a community' and 'culture.'

The fourth thing that I greatly appreciated about the degree was the facilities. The facilities were world-class, and

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although rebuilt to be even greater, I cannot fault what was available. For the time, it was amazing to be able to print off as many articles as you wanted and to have access to world-class libraries. I took my research to a new level by accessing world-class computer labs that allowed me to use the computers for a more significant portion of the day. The university grounds provided me with many new experiences and being close to the city allowed me access to Chinatown whenever I wanted. This provided a lot of joy.

I particularly became close to one of the students. John was an American exchange student who was out in Australia to learn a thing or two about public health before heading home to focus on his chosen career to be a doctor. John entertained the class every time he got up in front of the class with his witty way of exploring public health topics. He was much more advanced in his worldview than I was then. One day, he single-handedly won a debate, leaving the audience in stitches. He also did a fantastic presentation that helped us get the highest marks in the group assignment I was talking about. The way he was able to organise his words and hilariously spin them baffled all the other students.

John would often give up what he was doing to join me in whatever activity I did at the time. I had desperately wanted to show John a game of cricket, so one day, he dropped what he was doing to come and sit with me and watch a game at the university. John also joined our family at a Swans game where the Swans played Carlton to go into the preliminary final. This was an exciting game in which Chris Judd almost stole the game from us. Seeing John get involved in a game he knew so little

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about was great. He helped cheer on the Swans as Kieren Jack eventually got the better of Judd and the Blues.

I lived at two places in the first year of my masters before moving in with my friend, Dougy, in the second year. The first was the grumpy lady I was talking about earlier. In our little flat in Dulwich Hill, she was trying to educate me about worldly things such as Che Guevera, Charles Manson, and the Spanish language. She was always cursing and was negative about everything. One day, I travelled from Kurrajong, which was not easy as I had to catch the train into Central to get on the train out of Dulwich Hill. This took me nearly two and a half hours on a Sunday. When I arrived, she had had a bad day and told me to go home again. This was the last straw living there, so I decided to find somewhere else to stay.

I moved near Rockdale into a tiny house I shared with a quiet-speaking woman. I did most of the second half of the year studying here. Although it was a bit further to commute to uni, I loved the diversity and culture in Rockdale. There was lots of good food from all different nationalities. Living with four Muslim boys in Campbelltown had given me quite a taste for Arabic food, which was fine in Rockdale. The lady here, however, was ripping me off with rent and was quite unpleasant to live with. So, I ended up moving out abruptly.

An old schoolmate, Dougy, was living alone and invited me to stay with him at North Richmond. So, I spent the rest of my master's days here. My master's degree drifted into a third semester, where I completed Biostatistics and Health Promotion, two subjects I had deferred. I needed much support with

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Biostatistics and technically got a conceded pass as I got 49%. Regardless, I had completed my master's degree and grown. I was, however, feeling a bit lost, not knowing what my next adventure would be.

A Wise Teacher

Towards the end of my master's, I met an unlikely friend who became one of my closest allies and continues to be to this day. One of my school friends, Michael, whom I have previously called the Black Priest, invited me to his house near Elisabeth Drive between Penrith and Campbelltown. He invited me over for dinner because he had heard that I had completed a degree in Chinese medicine and that it may be suitable for a condition that was ailing his mother, Dercum's disease.

I rocked up to the house expecting a good feed because the Goisissi's were known for their hospitality. I had met his then-pregnant wife-to-be Tara, when Michael had proudly showed her off to his mates at RG Magees, potentially five or six years prior. I was impressed by how friendly and inviting she was and how well she complemented Michael's entertaining personality. Michael had been part of my life long ago as he was the one who had supported me to rehydrate on the school camp that began my traumatic three months when I was 15 years old.

We had a quick dinner, and I was quick to work. I took Michael's mother, Sigrid, into Michael and Tara's bedroom to see if acupuncture would be successful for Sigrid's condition.

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Dercum's disease is one of the rarest diseases in which painful lipomas (lumps) develop in bizarre areas. Because they establish nerve endings, these lipomas can be extremely painful and debilitating. Sigrid was not much older than my parents but appeared to be aging more quickly.

Once I inserted the needles, Sigrid said that she felt instant relief. She said she was surprised as little could relieve the constant agony. She fell into a deep sleep, so I went out to enjoy the company of Michael, Tara, and Michael's younger sister, Sophie, who had decided to join us. Sophie and Michael are incredibly close, and you had to consider them a pair since they were teenagers.

After the customary 20-30 minutes of acupuncture session, I came to check Sigrid's progress. I became worried and called out to Michael to come straight away. I thought I had killed his mother. Michael gently approached his mother, 'Mum, mum, are you alright?' Michael shook her twice, and still nothing. Our worries became more pronounced. What have I done? I thought. Then, out of nowhere, Sigrid jumped up in a startled response, screaming, 'That was the best sleep I have had in ages. I feel great!' The acupuncture had put Sigrid into a deep, healing sleep and supplied much-needed restoration to her body and mind.

We enjoyed a great meal and even better company that day. Sigrid discovered that my friend Reika was being baptised as a Latter Day Saint member. As an avid Latter Day Saint follower, she asked if she could join me in supporting Reika in her baptism. I asked Reika, and she was excited that a fellow Mormon was interested in her baptism, so Sigrid came along.

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My relationship with Korean Beauty was in its border zone at the baptism. She seemed more interested in hurting me. She purposely flirted with the other attendees at Reika's baptism. Sigrid seemed uptight at the baptism, as everything seemed to be focused on her. I noted this but offered to continue providing her with the needed acupuncture to restore her nervous system.

I went weekly to her house on the corner of Comleroy Road at Kurrajong. It was a beautiful large house overlooking the Kurrajong Hills. Sigrid had a spot where I could permanently set up my acupuncture table and offered the room to start a small acupuncture business. I jumped at the opportunity and began advertising all over the Hawkesbury District. I had a small clientele flowing through the business, so I was spending more time at Sigrid's house. Of course, she was one of my clients, and the acupuncture provided significant relief.

When I returned from Thailand, things changed living with Dougy as he had recently gotten engaged. In addition, his fiancé, Rachael, moved in, and we did not get along well. So, within a few weeks of returning from Thailand, Dougy asked if I could move out. I was going to head back to my parent's home in Kurrajong, but Sigrid offered me a spot in her caravan. I would only have to pay seventy dollars weekly, giving me access to a shower and toilet downstairs. In addition, my acupuncture room was set up upstairs, so it sounded like a great offer.

I was consolidating my learnings from my master's, setting up my small acupuncture business, and soon decided to learn music at TAFE. I spent all my spare time at TAFE practising and with my girlfriend at the time, Amanda, and her daughter.

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She lived just around the corner. I could see her place from my caravan, which was convenient. Things were going smoothly for a while, except I spent all my time practising music and had little time for anything else. It was getting a bit much, so I soon stopped the TAFE course to focus on my acupuncture business.

This gave me more time to be. I would go for long walks into Kurrajong village or Kurmond. However, things fell out of favour with Amanda, and I felt a bit lonely. Sigrid was always good when you felt upset, so she offered to take me to see an old piano teacher playing at Marrickville Bowling Club. When we drove there, I met a fantastic woman, Sonia, to whom I gave my details. She called a few days later, and we decided to meet at her place at Dulwich Hill, just around the corner from where I used to live.

She greeted me at the door and let me in. We went shopping with one of her friends before heading back to her house. She asked if I could help her with her bra, so I helped her take it off and hugged her from behind. We stayed up all night talking and hugging. She wanted more, but I was not ready for more.

The next few weeks passed, and we stayed up early in the morning, texting and talking on the phone. Then, she came with one of her friends and stayed at my caravan, and we explored some of the Blue Mountains. Another day, we met a few friends in the Blue Mountains. We returned to spend time with my parents, where we enjoyed watching Mao's Last Dancer and had a beautiful dinner at the Indian restaurant in North Richmond.

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Finally, Sonia returned to my house, where we explored more of our bodies and enjoyed making out late into the evening.

The following day, we went for a drive through Weeney Creek and ended out at the back of Bilpin. We drove up into Katoomba, where she was eager to make out and potentially explore more, but I still needed more time to prepare for this. Next, we drove into Blackheath, where I met one of my friends, Dianne. Sonia was attending a Pentecostal Gathering. Diane and I were a bit confused as people were on the floor in hysterics and soon surrounded me, trying to 'raise my spirit.' They asked me to place my hands on people's heads to heal them. They asked me what I felt, and I started talking about some Chinese medicine healing mumbo jumbo, and they told me, 'You're the anointed one.' Soon they started marching around the room, giving blessings to organisations in Western Australia and speaking out against 'devilish' organisations in the Blue Mountains. It was all a bit much. I must have seemed confused, or maybe I was not offering Sonia enough, because when I dropped her off at the station to go to another party in Revesby, it was the last time Sonia talked to me.

I spent more time with Sigrid as she told her traumatic life story. She began dedicating about an hour or two daily to her life story while I typed away what she was saying. At times, she would be in tears as she disclosed intimate details of her immigration to Australia and the sexual abuse that had impacted her physical and mental health. Some of it was difficult to hear, but it was highly healing to express the traumas that had affected her.

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Most days, we would cook together in Sigrid's makeshift kitchen in her house. She showed great pride in cooking some of her German delicacies, such as cabbage rolls that she topped with the famous gravy she made from the scraps from the pan. I often cooked concoctions from the vegetables she had bought and mixed them into flavoursome meals.

Sigrid was highly active at the time. She would wake and take the six-kilometre walk through the back streets of Kurrajong Hills before swimming at the Oasis swimming pool in Windsor. This maintained her nervous system in reasonable order with regular acupuncture sessions.

Things were good for six to eight months before we fought, and my mental health deteriorated sharply. Finally, I presented to Saint John of God, where they told me I was having a crisis. The nurse asked me if I could drive home, so I returned to my parents' house with everything from my caravan in the boot.

This was, however, not the end of Sigrid and I's friendship. We went through a period where things were not going well, but we have maintained contact throughout the years. At a certain point, living in the five-bedroom house at Kurrajong with all the collectibles she accumulated have become too much for Sigrid to handle. Because Sigrid was known to be Australia's worst hoarder, clearing out the house took a small team six weeks to sort and order everything in the place before finally getting a local trader to take it all in one go. At one point, I threw a jar dated in the 1980s out in the bin. However, Sigrid got it from the bin, saying that 'dates are only a guide.' It was a frustrating

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process at times as it seemed that you would sort something out for it to be resorted out at another time.

We searched many different places for Sigrid to find a new home. She ended up settling at the Windsor County Village in Vineyard. She had to downsize significantly and had to justify what she had. Only when she was placed in the hospital for a lung infection did the missionaries sorted adequately through what she had and got rid of many of the things she did not need.

At some point, Sigrid stopped going to the pool daily after getting an infection. This affected her mobility significantly. Then, a few years later, she had an accident where her hands got caught up in the seat belt. Because she was suffocating, a passing medic released the seat belt and took with it two of her fingers. After this accident, she relinquished her license and could no longer drive.

Over the years, her mobility has decreased to the point where she now requires a wheelchair to get around. So, whenever I pick her up, I must wheel her to the car, she maneuvers herself into the car seat, and then I must pack her wheelchair in the backseat. We, however, continue to have incredible adventures, whether it is to the vegetarian Indian restaurant in Quakers Hill, to the Grills on George, for a feed at Riverstone Pub, to Scheyville, a drive to Pitt Town, or some other adventure around the traps. Although more challenging than once, the trips are full of enjoyable conversations and laughter.

Sigrid continues to be a source of inspiration and hope. She has reversed the trauma cycle and with her children and

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grandchildren, every chance to live an everyday life is remarkable. Her faith in Jesus Christ has kept her on a path of unconditional love where she has supported me through the good and the bad. I am grateful for my wise teacher whom I continue to share a fantastic friendship with as we travel through this life together. I drafted a poem called Self-Mastery on October 26, 2020, for my good friend Sigrid.

HAC

I spent much time at Hawkesbury Agriculture College (HAC), visiting my friends, Dianne and her flatmate, Kyla. While I was dating Amanda, we would spend two or three nights a week there hanging out. I had been to a few Thursday night bar nights with Diane and found these were always good nights out. So, when I discovered that they offered affordable rooms for the public, I saw this as an excellent opportunity to move back in the campus and participate in the anticipated HAC culture I had heard so much about.

I enrolled in TAFE again to study Community Services. Initially, I was enrolled in Certificate III. However, because I had a master's degree, they fast-tracked me into the Diploma in Community Care Coordination. This gave me the qualification I required to work in a management capacity in any community services organisation. I went to Granvill once a week and received the diploma in six months.

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While living at HAC, it gave me the perfect opportunity to study for the TAFE assignments that I found extremely enjoyable. It explored various topics such as termination, workplace issues such as bullying, drug and alcohol concerns, communication styles, leadership styles, supervision, conflict resolution strategies, and staff development and training. While I found the university very abstract and difficult to see where everything fit in, I found TAFE practical and applicable to the workforce.

Monday nights were a buzz. The class was full of people from many ethnicities, and the teaching was excellent. Living off the Disability Support Pension (DSP), I often spent my last dollar of the fortnight on an Arabic meal at one of the Arabic restaurants in Granville. Afterward, I would catch the train and systematically work through the menu. Once I got to the class, I listened diligently and absorbed the great content offered. Six months flew by swiftly and concluded with a fantastic feast featuring about 15 cuisines worldwide. I contributed some kangaroo steaks to contribute an Australian spark.

Life on HAC was a lot of fun. It was filled with many table tennis and tennis matches most days with John Bob and Wax, some squash, explorations over to the University and TAFE, and lots of parties. I joined the 100+ year culture of the HAC Rugby team, which joyfully filled my year. Unfortunately, my season was cut short by injuries as I was unable to walk for nearly 13 weeks after injuring my calf on two occasions.

A lot of drinking involved as part of the 'Mott' culture. A whole lot of rhymes had to be remembered and learnt, word for word. Otherwise, drinking was required. Many rituals were

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followed that were passed down year by year from the century-old traditions at HAC. The university tried to stop these because they were seen as inhumane due to the amount of drinking involved. I found the traditions inclusive because regardless of who you were and where you came from, the traditions were the same for everyone. The first-year students were the 'motts', and the third-year students were the 'sirs.' The sirs were in charge of ensuring that the rituals followed the traditions, and the motts were in complete submission to the authority of the sirs.

The first ritual I was involved in was called 'Tunnels.' This involved being blindfolded and led down a pathway on my hands and knees, only knowing the 'mott' in front of you and the mott behind you. By the end of the pathway through a range of tunnels, my hands and fingers were bleeding from the roughness of the canals. When the group emerged from the tunnels, we were held in a circle where everyone was asked to spit into a bowl. It was then an exercise of trust as each of us was expected to drink from the bowl. I was gagging, thinking I was drinking other motts spit, but there was salt water in the bowl, not spit. Again, it was merely an exercise of trust. There was this sort of camaraderie in every ritual, and it brought the group of sirs and motts together. Although you were submitting to their authority, you had to trust the sirs a lot.

Grandstand to grandstand was my favourite ritual of all. Here, the motts had to run for two to three kilometres from the Grandstand at Richmond Oval to the HAC Grandstand. Here, one must choose to either run naked with socks to protect their feet or run without socks and protect their dignity by wearing an

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underwear. Considering the lack of shame of the motts and the fact that the road is harsh between the grandstands, most motts chose to run the route with socks and no undies.

There were naming rituals, bucks parties, and many celebrations in between. Life on HAC was one big party. My name from the naming ritual was 'Flag,' which meant 'keep it off the ground, hung cunt.' Other names included BUS, meaning big ugly slut. The poorly named RV, or rape victim. The person I became best friends with was Apple.

Apple was the person to whom I shared a flat with. She heard many things about me, but she went out of her way to make me feel welcome. After I lived at HAC, I moved in with Apple in a small flat in Richmond. We lived there for nearly two years and had many enjoyable times. We mostly lived separately, she stayed in her room, and I stayed out typing away on the computer, but we had a mutual respect that ensured that we remained good friends.

Apple is just Apple. She is warm, bubbly, and fun to be with. She did a fantastic master's degree after HAC, earning her a job as a scientist, where she worked in several labs. Her best friend is her mother, Christine, who is overprotective but extremely caring and loving. They are a perfect duo. We have had many magical dinners, especially when we enjoy pho together. I am incredibly grateful for every moment I get to spend with Apple, and it has been wonderful to see her grow into the confident lady she has become.

Lifelong Learning

summarising, and internalising what I have learnt. If you have ever seen me in a lecture, I was probably busy trying to write down everything being taught to ensure that I get all the words I could capture from another expert. I am constantly finding the connections in what I hear to determine how it fits into the bigger picture.

I did not read a lot when I was young, but when I did, I internalised a lot. Philby was more into fiction and would spend until the early hours indulging his imagination in fantasy. I was more into facts and used to read books on topics such as medicine. I turned up with Davy's doctor, Alfred, to one of his specialist appointments when he was getting an operation for his foot. The doctor was impressed with my knowledge of feet. I knew everything about feet and spilled out a range of facts I read.

Growing up, I was more interested in reading and writing short stories. I reveled in the funny and compelling short stories of Paul Jennings. As I grew older, I spent more time reading cricket books and exploring cricket statistics. So, I knew everything there was to know about every player throughout their careers. I explored the lives of Dean Jones and the Waugh brothers, some of my heroes growing up.

In year six, we got our first family computer. This meant I spent fewer hours on the encyclopedias that Mother Dearest and Farther ensured that we always had access to, as Encarta 96 had all this and more on the computer. Nevertheless, I remember

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spending hours after school exploring the digital encyclopedia and doing search after search both for assignments and out of pleasure.

In my high school years, I mainly played sports, but in years 11 and 12, I started making computerised notes. I spent hours dissecting textbooks and the ancient history books. I learnt and arranged them into computerised notes. I also spent hours researching the United Nations and topics such as Global Governance. These searches were rather primitive, but I printed page after page to highlight them. I also did a 50-page assignment on alternative music and another 50-page Business Studies assignment that went to the next level in my learning. Many of my peers thought, why would anyone do assignments that comprehensive? I just loved doing it.

As I moved to the uni down in Canberra, I focused more on arranging my notes by hand. I did not have a computer down there. I spent hours typing my assignments in the computer labs. Still, I did not produce anything that was that impressive. I was unwell then and left everything to the last minute. I was working hard, but nothing was going in.

When I started my Chinese Medicine Degree, I focused all my spare time, whilst at home and on my days off from the university, doing my assignments on the primitive computer I had at that time. In addition, I did a few special assignments. I focused all my time on getting my notes together so that I was not internalising anything I was learning. For example, I had nearly 150 pages of notes in physiology, but I only remembered a

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handful of the information. My friends told my teachers how much work I was doing.

As I moved in the campus, I spent all my spare time researching the computers in the computer lab. I was starting to get better at using the Internet and was printing off swathes of pages of studies and papers. I was doing a lot of reading and now underlying the crucial parts of my reading. I heard from Hamish that you must 'make the big, small so that you can make the small, big.' This was my philosophy from then on. I summarised what I was reading to work out the main parts of the context and then researched all the areas I summarised as the key points. I also had a philosophy of starting assignments as early as possible in the semester and working on them gradually until editing the final details close to the due date. This worked because my assignments were getting better and better marks.

In my third year, I finally got my laptop. It was cheap, but it gave me so much freedom. It meant that I could take it with me everywhere and was not constrained to the limits of the computer laboratories. I was free to learn wherever the hell I wanted. I loved the freedom.

As my university studies progressed, I got close to full marks for all my assignments. Everyone started to want to do group assignments with me because I did all the work in the first week. Then we would refine the presentation afterwards. I also got better at making PowerPoint presentations. By the end of my undergraduate degree, I could have been better at delivering presentations, but they were graphic and full of content.

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By my master's, my ideas were starting to come together. I was not just learning anymore but was beginning to synthesise what I was doing and put together models. I enjoyed the fact that each week, we were given recommended readings that I summarised nearly every page on top of doing amazing assignments, which thrilled me. The lectures were next level. I came out buzzing, putting them together into models and theories that summarised everything being said. I moved from reading articles to reading increasingly the textbooks I discovered in the library. There was a special computer lab and we printed what we could for free. This transformed my assignments and my research. By the end of the degree, I had many theories and models, including a model of emotions, which is fantastic. We did a group presentation that we topped, and I was vital in getting the ideas off and running.

After I finished my master's, I spent three months printing off the work I had done in the year and a half of study and put them into large documents. I printed off so many notes from my time studying that there were over 40 such documents, each with at least 350 pages.

While at HAC, I spent a lot of my time studying in my room, but to mix it up, I used to go to the HAC or Richmond TAFE Library, two places I loved to study. Not only did I kill it at TAFE doing some fantastic work, but I also got my first Apple iPhone, which transformed my access to information even more than the laptop. I could read literally wherever I wanted, ensuring that I was now studying on the train, on the bus, and everywhere I was, not talking to people.

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After I finished TAFE, I was worried about what to do next. I desperately wanted to do a doctorate degree but did not know how to do this. I was practising Chinese medicine at Hawkesbury Herbs and Healing and then moved to live with Sigrid at Kurrajong. There were two things that got me back on track. My boss recommended reading Bruce Lipton's Biology of Belief, the hypnotherapist recommended buying a book by Joe Dispenza, and I found a book at Sigrid's House. These books did not make sense to me initially. Still, they took me on the path of reading about science, spirituality, and religion and a lifetime of exploring self-help books. This gave me a new lease on life and a new avenue of research to explore.

Whilst doing the Global Now Project service mapping, I also created a website called Turtle Disability Hub, which mapped most of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers in the Nepean Blue Mountains. The website explained the NDIS and all the funded categories and supplied links to services and information for specific disabilities. This fantastic website was beneficial for co-workers and NDIS participants. I would alternate between mapping for the Global Now Project and the Disability Hub website.

Whilst working on these two projects, I was also writing my book. This meant I was reading, taking notes, and editing my writing. I found that I had duplicated a lot of information, so I started creating spreadsheets to collate the knowledge to help with any repetition in my notes. Whilst at Frangipani House, I discovered PowerPoint and started summarising the information in a very simplistic format, with visuals to create miniature

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books. I spent hours and hours making these PowerPoints and was obsessed with creating them, but it brought me closer to my dream of writing my book. This was fantastic work and made it very easy to understand. I would work until past midnight almost every night, working on one project or another, even at Uniting or One Door.

I read and summarise nearly every book that I purchase these days. I buy new books every week or two, read them quickly, and then have them summarised in the coming weeks. All this whilst working full time, doing my mapping, and sporting activities after work. While working at Uniting, I completed three mini-courses: one on Platform Development, another on Systems Thinking, and a Mini MBA in Emerging Technology. The last year has been primarily focused on Blockchain technology and its role in money. This demonstrates my growing understanding and recognition of the importance of technology in this modern world. I aim to make the technologies we have work for everyone by making information easily accessible.

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CHAPTER 4: Work & Occupations

This is a chapter of my employment and volunteer work, starting during school and working through my previous jobs in the disability and mental health sectors. This explores a range of volunteer work I have undertaken in between and gives a perspective on where this may lead me in the future.

My First Jobs

Growing up with a father as a piano teacher had its benefits. It meant that because he was at capacity growing up, each of us boys managed to secure his extra students as our first piano students. I started at 13 to get some extra pocket money, and it was a lot of fun. Dad had taught a lot of preschool music and had developed a fun and easy-to-learn method of learning the piano. He gave us basic tips, and I went from there.

I spent hours researching the beginner piano teaching lesson book before my first lesson and had written out a comprehensive plan. Finally, I was ready to teach my first student. I took the preschool techniques and made them my own. Lucky to be learning on a baby grand piano. It was not all about playing the piano. The students marched around the lounge room to 'Charlie Crotchet likes to walk.' Stamping their feet slower to 'Madam Minim likes to stomp.' And laying on the ground as if falling to sleep to 'Big Fat Whole Note Likes to sleep.' As they

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progressed from the basic holding pattern on the piano, they progressed to using their fingers as numbers before learning to count to basic rhythms. Soon they were ready to read the introductory notes on the stave learning the patterns 'Every Good Boy Deserves Fruit' and 'FACE.'

Because it was fun, most of the students progressed fast. At the start of each session, we would start by reviewing the practice sheet. Every half-hour session ended with a game, usually memory or snap. This would often lead to the next student's class, and they would compete. Because many were adept with their practice routines, many were soon ready for the end-of-term Monday afternoon parties and received my end-of-term assessment. Regardless of their progress, I always found positives in what they did to encourage them to continue practising hard and doing their best. This progressed from one day to two and sometimes a third. It was a lot of fun for me, and many of the students who have now grown up have seen me in the street and told me that they were some of the best times of their lives.

I started doing a small kitchen hand job on a Friday night to earn a bit extra cash again. It was down at the local Chinese place where I was in the kitchen from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m., slaving away and washing the dishes. When I arrived, the dishes would be piled up high, and I never seemed to get to the bottom of the work. I received a gracious six dollars per hour for my hard work. This was pure 'character-building' work. I used to look forward to the end of the shift, where they occasionally put on a delicious feed of leftover fried rice.

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This looked good on my resume and landed me a gig as a waiter at the classy Ritz restaurant. The first night was Valentine's Day. It was not just my first shift but the first night that the new owner had taken over. The two large rooms were full of anticipation as the previous owners had built it into one of Sydney's most successful restaurants. It was, however, me on my first shift, with no training, and a boss run off her feet. I received a lot of abuse that night and for the rest of the time I worked at the Ritz restaurant, as people were waiting hours for their meals. The kitchen could not keep up with demand.

The following shifts were less busy and less stressful. Unfortunately, we did not get the numbers back in the Ritz, and the reputation slowly declined. From what would have been 60 or 70 tables full on the first night, we would have been lucky to fill 10 for the rest of the time I was at the restaurant. They started employing more people, and they had a lot more experience, but the damage had been done. The reputation had been destroyed. It was different from the Ritzy restaurant that the name and the earlier reputation suggested.

I did that job on and off, without any training, for a year or two. I sometimes got called in on a Saturday night, but I often had a full day at cricket from 8:30 am to 6:00 p.m., where I had been in the heat all day. That was also the time when things were difficult at home. Too much was going on, and I could not dedicate myself to my work at that point.

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Advocacy Work

I had a long break between employment from my early school days, as I spent most of my 20s unemployed living off the Disability Support Pension (DSP). I could not work while at the university, and during my first year living at HAC, I did a year of TAFE. My days at HAC were filled with studying a variety of topics.

Sigrid found an advertisement in the Hawkesbury Gazette for the Hawkesbury District Health Service Community Board of Advice (CBOA), a committee of prominent local leaders at the Hawkesbury Hospital. I was uncertain about this role, but I secured an interview. I had just finished my master's and had a lot of public health terminology running through my brain.

I was so nervous because a young lawyer was going for the same position. She was a mother, and I felt she had a reputation beyond anything old me. I remember going in with an 'it doesn't matter' attitude because this other woman was sure to get the position. Unfortunately, the interview questions struck me, so I left the interview thinking that I would never get the position. The interview questions focused on 'What part of the hospital would you most like to change?' Looking back, my answer was genius. I said that I would improve emergency waiting times and customer service.

I must have been impressed because I got the position. The pretty young lawyer was Sarah Richards, who is now Hawkesbury City Council's mayor. They chose me above her. I did

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have some great ideas, and the CBOA was an excellent capacity-building method. We had to do all the hospital accreditation, got invited to all the essential functions, and occasionally did some excellent training on topics such as advocacy campaigns. As I started to get to know the other committee members, I realised that I was rubbing heads with the prominent decision-makers in the Hawkesbury Community. We had great opportunities to learn about what was happening in the hospital and hear what was happening from a CEO's perspective. The board oversaw what was happening in the hospital and the Hawkesbury Community.

As my public health ideas began to make their way into the committee, members would go out into the community groups in Hawkesbury and give feedback to the committee on what the other groups were doing. I got the immense joy of going to the Hawkesbury Youth Interagency (HYI) and Hawkesbury Community Forum, where I got to meet all the community workers in the youth and aged care sectors. I got the immense joy of reporting their activities back to the group. This also led to other activities that these forums were undertaken. I was invited to more events. And I was taking part in as much training as was available. I was not working, but I had a full-time occupation.

As my 30th birthday was approaching, I was travelling around a bit. First, I visited my friend, Luke, in Brisbane and toured my spiritual home, the Northern Rivers. I spent a week or so in Kyogle. I pitched my tent in the Kyogle Showground, where I was protected from the heavy rain. Then, carrying all my gear, I caught the bus into Lismore, which I used as my base for the following week. From this base, I went on day trips, using my

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\$2.50 pension card, to catch the bus to spend days exploring the towns of Nimbin, Lismore, Ballina, and Lennox Head. Between these day trips, I explored Lismore and took a few trips to the Southern Cross University Library to study.

After my adventure in Far Northern New South Wales, I returned to stay with my parents. Farter had temporarily 'disowned' me and told me he did not want to support me anymore but had forgiven me enough to let me stay overnight. Using this as a base, I used one of my free train trips to Griffith, where I stopped at Coonabarabran on the way to Griffith. Whilst in Coonabarabran, I enjoyed spending a small amount of time at the birthplace of the legendary Don Bradman, who we have recently found out is a relative of ours.

I was looking forward to seeing my cousins Michael and Wendy and their two children, Rosie and Caleb, who recently moved out to Griffith to start a new life. They previously lived in Cranebrook, where I routinely gave Michael and Wendy acupuncture nearly every Wednesday evening for a short period. Michael used to say, 'I can feel the shit getting out of the body.'

I was only invited over to keep Rosie occupied. At the time, Rosie was one or two, and it was my job to keep her entertained with games of 'Flashlight' and 'Hide and Seek.' So, with my history of entertaining Rosie, it was nice to get out to Griffith to see my beloved cousins. I was greeted by a hyperactive Digger, a beautiful Border Collie pup who was eager to see any visitor at the time. He jumped up on me and got acquainted with me very quickly.

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Whilst out at Griffith, I spent time exploring the council chambers and the library, as I often do in any new town. Griffith is a beautifully designed town by the same town planner that designed Canberra, Burley Griffin. On the first day, Wendy took me to the Tourist Information Centre, where I got acquainted with the region's history and learnt about the significance of the Riverina as one of the primary agricultural lands in Australia. In addition, I learnt about the professionally managed and supported canal system that ensured the region's water supply was.

One of the reasons I was out in Griffith was to promote the Youth Council idea for which I had applied for grants. I had researched youth services and was discussing the idea with the Hawkesbury Youth Interagency then. I aimed to create a 'council' of young people amongst school students so that they could discuss and debate discussion points at a council level from a youth perspective. I sat down with the youth advisor from the council, and she was impressed with the idea and thought it could work out for Griffith.

Upon researching Youth Advisory Groups as part of the Youth Council document I was putting together; I came across a life-changing discovery. I discovered that there were Mental Health Advisory Groups and that people with lived experience with mental health often ran them. I came across the ACT Mental Health Consumer Network (ACTMHN) and found out they were running self-advocacy groups for people with lived experience of mental health. I never knew this was a thing, but I raised the idea with Wendy.

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Wendy thought this idea was excellent, but only started for a few days. However, she said she would drive me four hours to Canberra if I wanted to do the course. I was brimming with excitement as I could see the benefits of taking the course. It would be a six-week course, but I thought I had committed to five and a half years of university, so what was another six weeks?

Wendy also said that in the days between those, she would be happy to drive me to Leeton to see my friend Didge, who was living there then. It would also give her a chance to see one of her friends living nearby. So, I had a wonderful day with Didge in this other town designed by Burley Griffin. Didge's father was one of the elders in the town. It was a sweltering day, but memorable.

It came to the day when we were heading to Canberra, and Wendy drove the four hours through the Riverina to the country's capital. Once there, I reacquainted myself with one of my old favourite restaurants for a feed. After that, I found my way to the Canberra Centre and began this course. I completed the first session, then caught the bus out to my campsite for the night and set up my tent. After the course, I caught the train home to be with my family, who had now completely forgiven me.

I would spend the next six weeks travelling down to the course. I would leave on Tuesday morning and arrive in the afternoon to get to the course for a 1:00 p.m. start. After the training, I would head out to my campsite to set up for the day. I would then catch the bus back into town for the course and catch the train or bus home after completing the course on Wednesday afternoon. It was an extremely educational course and gave me

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many self-advocacy courses and my first real taste of systematic advocacy.

I was given access to the Experts by Experience: Strengthening the Mental Health Voice in Tasmania document produced by Anglicare Tasmania. This is my go-to document, and it changed my life. I already started service mapping in the youth sector in my research for the Youth Interagency. However, this gave me access to 'consumer' services and initiatives in Australia and worldwide. It included 'Being,' the peak body for mental health consumers in New South Wales. This document also opened my mind to some ideas of what consumer services and initiatives could look like. I am still looking for a document as comprehensive as this. It continues to shape my worldview. I recommend anyone interested in the consumer movement to summarise this document as a starting point for their exploration for lived experience services and initiatives.

This document and my newfound appreciation for the Consumer Movement saw my research on how to get involved in Consumer Advocacy in my region. I found out that Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (PHN) was pioneering a new 'consumer' group called the Regional Development Team (RDT).

I went along with the first group and was impressed by its spirit. There was a lot of laughter, mainly from a young Indian Man who seemed to have a knack for making everyone laugh. There were also other people in the group that I gravitated to immediately, including the staff, who seemed content in giving us, 'consumers,' lots of opportunities. Little did I know that this

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group of 'consumers' and staff would soon become my best friends and inspire me more than anyone else. There seemed to be high spirits amongst the group to bring the consumer movement to life in the region.

Out of this group came two other opportunities. The Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District (NBMLHD) was also trialling a new consumer group called the Consumer and Carer Advisory Group, or CACAC. Of particular importance was the focus of this group on getting the 'peer workforce' off the ground and getting consumer and carer frameworks to become part of the hospital's wide frameworks. In addition, they aimed to ensure that the lived experience voice was being institutionalised into the hospital's policies and procedures to ensure that the work being done would stay in the systems running the hospital.

The other was involvement in the Saint John of God Consumer Partnership Advisory Committee (CPAC). This was a committee at the local private hospital that met monthly to talk to patients about their experiences at their hospital. If there were any grievances, we would write them down in a red book and read the feedback at a meeting that included administrative, maintenance, and executive staff. This meant that the voice of the patients was relayed to the staff, which could make a difference at the hospital. It also gave me access to an inspirational leader who was chairing the committee, Lloyd. It meant that I got to rub heads with the people making changes at the hospital. I became good friends with the CEO, Steven, who was doing an excellent job at the hospital then.

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So, within a few months, I was busy with these three committees, the CBOA, the interagency, and forums that I had to report back to the CBOA. I soon joined the Hawkesbury Skills and Richmond Community Services boards. I was also the Deputy Vice President of the North Richmond Cricket Club. Although this role was virtually void of responsibility in those days, I attended all the meetings and learnt a lot from the other men on the committee. Men that I continue to look up to today.

I also began volunteering at Richmond Community Services two days per week. I often completed the work I needed to do in a voluntary role quickly, so I spent the last four or five hours of the day combining the ideas. This greatly annoyed the boss, but I loved it as it gave me a positive environment to flesh out my ideas.

One of the Community Board of Advice (CBOA) community members begun doing community forums at all the major community groups in Hawkesbury. I often completed the four-question survey, which surprisingly got a lot of discussion out of the groups and meant that we got some excellent feedback for the hospital about what is working and what the community perceives could work better. I put together a report that I got no recognition for. Another member used the foundations of my work and added a few extra paragraphs to claim the work as their own. Regardless, I used the framework for my research at Richmond Community Services. I presented the results at their Annual General Meeting. People were impressed with the level of research that a volunteer was willing to put together for the community.

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At the end of all my experience on the committees, I had built a reputation. I was asked if I would be the consumer representative on the Navigation Tool. The committee included a web developer from Thomas Marsden, a psychologist, a carer representative, a project manager, and me, the consumer representative. The Navigation Tool was to be the go-to tool to have on every GP's desk, to give an overview of all the region's mental health and related services. The experts assigned to bring together the task were-skilled, qualified, and experienced.

At the first meeting, I brought the Terms of Reference home. I summarised all the key points that the project was hoping to highlight and the discussions that took place, sort of like a secretary's report. Little did I know this would summarise the website's design. It highlighted all the information that needed to be gathered and gave a rough overview of the people the website would need to target.

I was coaching my second Bob Browns Cricket Coaching tour at Maitland when I got a call that changed my life. The Project Manager, Glenda, was impressed with the work and wanted me to be employed for five months to research and assemble the Navigation Tool website. The Primary Health Network would pay me fifty dollars per hour, and I could keep my pension because they would only employ me for 15 hours per week. I almost jumped through the roof with excitement. I had been at the university and now volunteering for nearly 10 years. Finally, I was given a paid opportunity to be rewarded for all my work. Despite this, I had many ideas running through my brain

on how the website could work. I was so excited. I was looking forward to making my way into the mainstream workforce.

The Nav Tool

I arrived at the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network office early, ready to start my first real job. The building was a state-of-the-art green building at the time, on a corner of the Western Sydney University Werrington campus on the Great Western Highway. First, I walked into a bustling office where I was introduced to the team. Then, I walked to my desk—my first work desk. I was filled with excitement. I was impressed by the modest office space because it was a 'sit-stand desk.'

It was only a short time until I was introduced to the work, and I started getting information together. I began with a thorough internet study of all the directories in the Nepean Blue Mountains. I explored Aboriginal, CALD, Homecare, and primitive disability directories. Much work had been done, but I needed to decipher what was up-to-date, relevant, and outdated. As I sifted through the services in the directories, I slowly worked out where the duplications were and put them into various categories.

At the first meeting with the working group, I had done much research and was brimming with ideas. Whenever I seemed to bring an idea to the table, however, it seemed to get shot down by Glenda, the Project Manager. She seemed to be such a bitch! Everything that I thought was a clever idea, she squashed. After

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a while, I started to see the method behind her madness, for if every one of my ideas had gone ahead, the project would have taken 30 years. She was sifting through my ideas to see what was manageable.

Some of the ideas that did come to fruition included a section on 'What to Do in an Emergency,' organising Clinical Signs and Symptoms into feelings that someone with a mental health issue may experience, a Directory of mental health services, demonstrating ways to access mental health services, mapping consumer networks, and having a resource section. Remmy, the psychologist, went back to the drawing board to research Clinical Signs and Symptoms and how they related to feelings, and I researched the rest. The web developer, Shamus, put together the logistics of how all this would be accessible as a website.

I spent the next few months researching mental health services and applying what I learned about the Consumer Movement and the mental health sector. Then, about three months into the project, I presented what I had done to the Working Group. The feedback was that work still needed to be done because it had yet to reach the website. I had, however, done all the research, and it was sitting on my computer, ready to go onto the website. I was slowly ringing all the organisations to see if the information I entered was correct. Because of the negative response, I was gutted and felt deflated.

Glenda had seen all the magnificent work that I was doing and found a way to boost my confidence again. I continued working my ass off to get a product to implementation. We slowly

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found a way to get the information in an accessible format. Glenda rearranged the directory categories to make it easy to search. With a few minor tweaks to all the different components, before long, we had a product of which we were proud.

The team came together to edit the website. We were all hands-on deck, working together to ensure no errors. We were working on several projects all at once, including the Resource Cards and the Mental Health Research Libraries. We all came together and edited those, too. It was a real team project.

Thomas Marsden and the Primary Health Network Marketing team came together to produce a marketing strategy, ensuring that the Nav Tool, as we were now calling it, would be delivered to as many primary health network stakeholders as possible. First, Thomas Marsden put out a few distinctive designs for posters and brochures, and we all decided on the ones we liked best. Next, the Team Leader sat down with me and showed me how we put analytics on the website to track its progress and how many people it reached. We now had a formidable product ready for market.

I was asked to launch the product at an NSW Commission event at Springwood Theatre. We had a spacious room to fill, but we managed it. All the advocates I worked closely with over the last three years were there. The local members and many important delegates from the Mental Health Commission were there. Most importantly, a proud Farter made the journey up from Kurrajong to support me. The event went off without a hitch, and the product was launched.

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I closed my office in the following weeks and thought about my next move. I began talking to various community organisations that had seen the work I had been doing in the community and at the Primary Health Network. One of them, Oldman, came into the office and told me about a role that had opened in Richmond for a Partners in Recovery program.

Partners in Recovery was a program I had been made aware of a few years earlier at a forum. The manager had been working with me at the Primary Health Network and asked me how I would work with a caseload of about 20 people. I did not know how because it was different from anything else I had done before, but I was confident I could manage it. She, too, was confident, so she enrolled me to begin a full-time role in the Partners in Recovery. I was excited. I had now landed my first full-time role.

Partners in Recovery

I was nervous about starting my new role, my first full-time position. However, it was only about a four- or five-minute walk from my house to a small house converted into an office. There were two rooms with computers in them, a kitchen, and a toilet. In addition, we had two cars available for us to use to see the participants.

I settled into the role with some onboarding and learning all about Partners in Recovery. It was going to be great. I would conduct assessments known as the World Health Organisation

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Disability Assessment Schedule (WHODAS 2.0) to determine where the participants were in all areas of their lives. I would also conduct a Risk Assessment that went through all the areas of their mental and physical health that could impact their ability to function and assist them with whatever areas of their lives they needed support with. So, it was going to be great.

So, Oldman took it upon himself to train me with the skills I needed to go out and do the job on my own. To be honest, we went all around the Hawkesbury and Nepean talking crack. We would go to the participants' houses and get to know them and their needs. Then, we would go back to the office, and I would do the research necessary to support them in their lives. I slowly took over and talked more while Oldman took a supporting role.

One day, when we were out with the Partners in Recovery District Coordinator, Naveen, having a good chat after we had finished with a participant, I was particularly heightened because we were mucking around. I joked about Oldman's Big White Pills awaiting him when he returned to the office. When we returned to the office, Oldman brought me into his office and gave me an official warning. I thought I was only mucking around, but it was an immature comment, especially in front of one of the district coordinators.

I continued with the job and was getting increasingly involved with my participants. I was doing a few of my participants on my own now and was only being supported by other workers with extremely difficult participants. I forget the circumstances, but I received my second warning in another heightened state.

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On a particular day, one of the new workers, Khrishe, received a call from a participant who was in a psychotic state. He was having visual hallucinations and was seeing things that were not there. Khrishe was trying to find where the participant was so that we could get him the support he required. However, whenever she would get close to finding out where he was, he would hang up or completely change his location. This went on for hours, and I was in a heightened state. I made highly inappropriate comments to some workers, thinking we were mucking around, but no one was laughing.

The following day, I arrived at work, and no one was there. I was brought straight up into Youngman Oldman's office. He explained that one of the workers had complained about some of the comments that were made, which had breached my third warning. It was Thursday, so the Human Relations worker would be coming in on Monday to discuss my employment contract.

I had an extremely anxious weekend and rocked up to the office on Monday morning. I was extremely paranoid. Mother Dearest and Farter drove down to support me, but I needed to do this alone. I walked into the room and was highly intimidated to see one of the Regional Managers and Humans Relations managers staring at me as I walked in. As I had studied termination processes at TAFE, I knew the drill, so I said, 'I know how this works. Without mucking me around, could we please get straight to the point?' They got straight to the point, 'Unfortunately, we have decided to terminate your contract. You are still in your probationary period, and we are afraid that your behaviour is a risk to our company's reputation.'

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I lost it and ran out of the room upset. I walked across the road without even looking at incoming traffic. Cars were beeping everywhere, but I did not care. I walked over to the shop and grabbed a coffee. Then I went to grab my car to get out of there. Just as I got to the car, I watched a woman reverse straight into the taillights of my Mitsubishi Magna. Things were going from bad to worse. I had lost my job, and now my car would be out of action and needed to be fixed.

The Global Now Project

The weeks that followed were full of depression and gloom. I was again unemployed. I soon went back to volunteering at Richmond Community Services and continued my work in mental health advocacy, which had not stopped even while working full-time. I committed even more to my volunteer work and ensuring that I was being trained in as many areas as I could. I booked a trip to Peru and planned to stay over there until I ran out of money with the aim of then committing suicide before returning so that I did not have to live my life of gloom anymore.

I began attending Westclub, a social and recreational club over at Penrith. Over there, I was working with a man called Poole. I was brainstorming a 'community literacy' program to build on the awareness of services that the Nav Tool had begun but undertook an expanded program at a 'global' level. I mapped the services locally, and now I wanted to use the skills I had learnt in International Public Health and undertake a global project.

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I had started doing an online course on project management through TAFE, and I needed to do an assignment putting together a scoping study outlining the project's idea. So, I got a group of six mental health consumers together for the project and brainstormed the ideas on which I was working. I titled the scoping study - A Global Mental Health Situational Analysis Initiative. The Preliminary Scope Statement explained that the project would be:

"A global open-source initiative that aims to map the programs, services, initiatives, resources, literature, research, and stakeholders currently operating in the mental health sector at a state, national and global level."

The study described the project's purpose, values, aims, requirements, assumptions, constraints, boundaries, risks, deliverables, and milestones. The rest talks about the stakeholders involved, the budget, and principles associated with project controls, control management, documentation, and reporting. This foundational document was highly comprehensive and explored the basic preconditions for starting the project.

I got quiet and sourced a quote from Thomas Marsden to begin building preliminary service mapping software for the project called, The Global Mental Health Situational Analysis Initiative. The initial software was merely a database of programs with backend access and preliminary word processing capabilities. I was required to type all the descriptions of the organisations into the database and hyperlink the programs. It was primitive and messy and had minimal functionalities.

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As time went on, I began to invest more in the software. All my spare money was invested in the project. First, I added a Program tab to the project and a way to hyperlink contact, social media details, activities and events, opportunities, and resource details into the software. Then I got quotes for the resource clearinghouse, the stakeholder registers, and the research clearinghouse. After a while, I had comprehensive software of which I was proud. I feverishly spent all my spare time doing the data entry.

One evening, I was reading a book by Wayne Dwyer on mindfulness. Everything talked about the present moment and how we must try living in the ‘now.’ Now, this. Now that. Something clicked in me. My project was aimed at the global level and was mapping what was happening then. The Global Mental Health Situational Analysis Initiative was longwinded. The Global Now Project was a lot catchier. And it talked to me. It was a revelation to me that this should be the name of my project: The Global Now Project.

While working at Uniting, I often came home and did data entry for the Global Now Project. So, I would often be at the Perfect Companions House typing away on my Global Now Project. Not initially, but as I became more ambitious to complete the project and worked full time, this was the only time I had to do my data entry.

In mid-2021, I was invited to talk at the International Mental Health Conference on the Gold Coast. I aimed to make this a networking event to promote the Global Now Project. Ethan supported me in putting together business packages, including

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business cards, brochures, flyers, and pamphlets for the event. I spent hundreds of dollars. However, due to Covid-19, the event was cancelled and placed online.

I went to plan B and the gig economy marketplace Upwork to find a worker to help promote the project. I found an amazing young woman from Ethiopia, Oluchi, who believed she could get a business on board. Oluchi put hours into trying to get a pitch together; however, she struggled to understand the project and was promoting a completely different project from the one that I had created. I was chewing through my money fast and had to stop employing Oluchi.

So, I spent January of 2022 putting my ideas in a form that could be understood. Then, I solidified the critical components as follows:

- ***Organisation and Initiative Database:*** a directory of mental health organisations, programs, services, and initiatives around the world.
- ***University Faculties Database:*** a directory of university departments, faculties, and schools from psychology, psychiatry, and other mental health-related educational disciplines worldwide.
- ***Resource Clearinghouse:*** a one-stop-shop for mental health resources around the world.
- ***Research Clearinghouse:*** a research repository organised by research questions and themes to ensure that all research is accessible in one convenient location.
- ***Stakeholder register:*** a register of mental health consumers, carers, and professionals documenting their

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roles and how they contribute to the mental health system.

The document also highlighted the stages the project hopes to undertake towards the full rollout, the team that will be required, ways people and organisations can get involved, requirements to promote the product, what the project offers stakeholders, as well as the broader idea of how we can Go Global in a Generation. Going Global in a Generation is a more general concept of how conducting a global situational analysis is a crucial first step in the planning process that is important in dreaming, designing, delivering, and developing an ideal mental health system. The document looked forward to creating a Global Mental Health Agency. This registration body measures, analyses, and tracks the activities and transactions of people and organisations in the mental health sector. The document ended with an index of the project's features, the database categories, details of the databases, and a range of surveys to help analyse the project's progress.

Since creating the document, I have dedicated a lot of time to data entry and getting the information into the system. I dedicated myself full-time before going to Ramsey Clinic but have been busy recovering ever since. I aim to pitch my idea to an investor in the coming months to get a small team together to actualise the plan, as highlighted in the document. With the updates that have been made, I can work with tech experts to create a handy tool for people in the mental health system throughout the world.

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Finding My Work Self

looking for a job. One day on Seek, I found a role that caught my particular interest. It was a role as a Local Area Coordinator. This sounded right up my alley, so I applied for the role. There was a role going on in Parramatta. I thought I had travelled to Parramatta before for work; there is no reason why I could not do it again. I was fortunate to be offered a position to attend an assessment to decide whether I was eligible to become a Local Area Coordinator.

I was running early on the day I was to attend the Assessment Centre. I jumped on the train at Richmond in anticipation. But when we got to two stops on the journey, there was a delay, and we were all asked to get off the train. We waited an hour and a half until we were told to head back to Richmond. I panicked because I was already fifteen minutes late and still had to travel the hour into Parramatta. I almost resigned to the fact that I would not get the job but decided to stay optimistic and head in.

I arrived at Parramatta an hour and fifteen minutes late, sure that there was no point in trying, but they were running late and had only just started introducing each person. I apologised

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for being late and was reassured that it would not impact my chances of being selected because it was not my fault.

It was a strange assessment structure in which we were first briefed on the disability sector, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and a little bit about the role and competencies they were looking for. It seemed like a significant role in which a degree of customer service and skills in connecting participants to services were required. I was professionally qualified for the role, as I had experience in all these areas.

As the group interview stage continued, I was carried along by one of the other women who seemed to be bound with confidence. She took me along with her enthusiasm and made me look better than I felt then. The final part of the Assessment Centre was a formal interview and a dummy telephone interview. I did terribly at these two phases of the day, but they reassured me I did an excellent job.

I was surprised, but I was offered the job. It was Friday and was due to start on Monday in Parramatta; however, whilst walking through the Richmond Markets, there was a NAIDOC Week event with a Uniting store. The Nepean Blue Mountains Local Area Coordinator Team was doing some community engagement.

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I went and introduced myself and told them I was starting in Parramatta on Monday. The team was excited that I was coming on board, and we had a big chat and told me a little bit about the role and what to expect. The District Manager, whom I call Big Brother, was there. She asked me if I wanted to work at Penrith instead of Parramatta. This was more convenient because it meant I could apply the knowledge I had already acquired working in the Nepean Blue Mountains. So, instead of starting at Parramatta on Monday, I was now starting at Penrith. I was so excited.

So, I began my new role as a Local Area Coordinator. I was introduced to my team leader Luella and was left to my own devices to work out what to do. I was given a copy of the NDIS rules, and that was it. I spent the rest of the week printing documents off the internet to get a better idea of the NDIS. I did not know then that most of these documents could be found in the storeroom. This would have saved a lot of effort.

On the second or third day, the Windsor Team Leader approached me to see if I wanted to come and work at Windsor. Naturally, I grabbed the offer, as this meant that I was only 10 minutes away from home. I would now be working in the Hawkesbury Community, where I already knew many of the community groups and community leaders from my Community Board of Advice days. I also enjoyed some of the cafes around the

town and the lunch hot spots I had become acquainted with over the years.

And the team was excellent. They all seemed so knowledgeable, friendly, and willing to help. There was one lady in her mid-30s who took me under her wing. I spent months shadowing her and learning from her punctual, abrupt, yet professional approach. She impressed me with her knowledge of disabilities and direct communication style. She seemed to ask all the right questions and find a way to get the answers she needed with such little effort. However, after two months of working alongside her, I realised I did not know her name. 'I'm Leanne,' she said. 'How in the hell do you not know my name?'

I was soon doing my first meetings, where I had to learn to elicit information from my participants and know everything about them. I had to explore all the areas of their lives and then summarise this information for the planners so that they could make decisions on what funding should be distributed to the participants. When I first started, the NDIS was still in its primitive days, and the processes were still working themselves out. It was initially just about writing an interaction with all the details you collected, and the planners would make the decisions from there. In the beginning, we were just information collectors. It would become a lot more complicated than this.

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My first plans did not get impressive results, and I thought I would need more time to get the hang of the role. I remember thinking about quitting immediately, but Leanne said, 'You can either take the easy way out or work your arse off to prove everyone else wrong.' So, I chose the second option, and I am so grateful that I did.

After a while, I started to get the hang of it. I looked up to the 'Plan Build' Team, which consisted of two people who became some of my best friends in the world. They used to sit upstairs, learning the ropes. They used to laugh and joke all day. I used to join them towards the end of the day and join their shenanigans. One later became the Best Companion in the World, and the other was Nicola.

Everyone thought Nicola and I were destined to be with each other. The other people in the office were planning our wedding and had plans for us. We started hanging out outside of work. I got to know her, her sister, and her friends well. We went to Western Sydney Wanderers games and even followed them up to the Central Coast to watch them play the Central Coast Mariners. We made a day with it and got fish and chips on the beach. Soon, Smith was taking me everywhere and teaching me about country music. She invited me along to see Kip Moore and Lee Bryce. She also got me tickets to see Bruno Mars, even though she could not make it, and I went along with one of her friends.

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I worked hard to get to know the role by summarising the price guide and began service mapping all the disability-related services. Although I was learning from some of the more senior Local Area Coordinators taking on more leadership roles, I still vomited every morning, not knowing what I was doing daily. Nevertheless, I was getting through each day, not feeling I was achieving the outcome I was after. I was getting more of what I was asking for, but something did not seem right.

After about a year as a Local Area Coordinator at the Windsor office, I was moved to the Penrith office to join the Plan Build Team. This was a new role that was offered to a select few Local Area Coordinators. While there was a small team of plan builders at the Windsor office, the Local Area Coordinator Program wanted to make this a more routine part of the role. The National Disability Insurance Agency was training a small team in Parramatta, and I was one of those who were asked to be trained at Penrith.

This was exciting, and we had a week's training to get acquainted with the process. This was about justifying to the planners why the participants required funding and what line items the Local Area Coordinator recommended the participants require. It is then about adding the necessary funding to the plan so that most of the work is done for the planner. I loved doing plan-building, but it took a while for me to understand what I

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was doing. Soon, however, I had the highest KPIs in the district and was getting better and better at justifying what I needed.

Things were changing at work. I found my 'work-self' when I changed team leaders. I found a team leader who believed in me. She would hold a team meeting every morning to ensure everyone knew precisely what they were doing. Some people thought she was micromanaging us; however, I enjoyed the structure she was providing. It ensured that I did not throw up every morning because I finally knew what was expected of me and what I was supposed to do daily. And all the hours of training that I had been doing seemed to be finally paying off.

When the Best Boss in the World took over Big Brother, things changed significantly at work due to a significant culture shift. This was highlighted by the fact that Big Brother used to sit in an office and only 'invited' you into the office to tell you something you had done wrong, whereas the Best Boss in the World sat out with us and did not even have an office. Big Brother seemed to focus purely on numbers, to the point where she encouraged you to hand in unfinished work to ensure that you met the KPI requirements. The Best Boss in the World brought in an audit team to ensure that quality was seen as just as important as quantity. Towards the end of Big Brother's time, she instituted TIS, a workflow tool, but this was refined under the Best Boss in the World to ensure that the workflow process was

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improved dramatically, and it was clear-cut night and day, what we were supposed to do each day.

When the Best Boss in the World took over, it became like a family at work. She introduced a role called LAC on Duty, which was like a receptionist for the Local Area Coordinator Program that used the worker's experience to try and solve as many of the problems confronted at the program's front end. I was well into my relationship with the Best Companion in the World by this time, so it was nice when she got this position, and I was reacquainted with her at work.

The team became more like a family, and I really enjoyed being at work. I would enjoy lunch with a different work colleague every day to break up a day of challenging work. Then, we would go out on Friday nights to have dinner, sometimes a movie, sometimes to the arcade, and always some good dessert. It was a lot of fun.

As I had not taken any leave since I started the role almost three years ago, I was forced to take some leave. I went around NSW with Philby, but whilst I was away, I spent most of the time in libraries completing assignments for a short course on Platform Development. I returned to work even more stressed than when I left, and I never caught up again after that.

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For a long time, I was working half of Saturday to prepare for the week and was staying back later and later to keep up. I was then going home to have dinner with the Best Companion in the World, but I was also typing late at night while doing the Global Now Project. I added a few extra short courses to the workload, and before I knew it, I felt burnt out. I was smashed at work and was increasingly stressed in my personal life.

I desperately wanted to leave the NDIS system for a long time and had been looking for a job for over three years. There was no consistency in the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), and the injustices felt so huge. The tipping point was when I had worked with my favourite participant for three years. We presented the same evidence as we had for the previous two years, with increased evidence, mind you, and the planner decided to cut his plan by \$60,000.

The planner justified that the participant only needed 10 hours of social and community support to do everything he needed. Things you and I take for granted, shopping, spending time in the shops, going out with his friends, going to the gym, and even playing wheelchair basketball, with which he had previously represented Australia. He was expected to do all this in 10 hours, all because a planner believed this to be reasonable and necessary. Even though a previous planner had capped his minimal social and community budget for an active young man

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with spina bifida who cannot access the community without the assistance of a support worker at 26 hours, this planner told me that 10 hours was sufficient. He was expected to do everything he needed in that short period of time.

I was mortified, and then the planner told me that he did not need his meals prepared and delivered, even though he was in a wheelchair and could not reach the counter to prepare meals. The planner tried to tell me that because he has a wife who can prepare his meals, he does not need to do this himself. The participant's wife, however, often worked, which meant he would often be home alone, unable to prepare a meal. It was not just these things. The planner cut out most of the things that the participant needed to live an ordinary life. I tried to advocate for him but ended up getting reported for telling the planner that, 'she had no accountability in making r decisions.' I explained that although it does not impact her, it affects the participant's ability to live an ordinary life. It was not the planner who got yelled at when I told him that his plan had been cut so dramatically and the NDIS would have to pay another Local Area Coordinator and planner for another review.

This was the final straw for me, for this type of story happens all too often. The Local Area Coordinator is the person in the middle who gets yelled at by planners, participants, carers, and even providers whenever the party does not get what they

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want. The reality is that it is the Local Area Coordinator who is working the butts off day in and day out. Most of them who have been there for more than two or three years are burned out because the demands of the role have become increasingly challenging to sustain. The management is more than happy to increase the demands without knowing what the role requires. It is a problem not just in the Local Area Coordinator role but also for planners and any employee in any position in the NDIA. It is worrying because these are the very people upon whom the NDIS relies for the system to hum along.

One Door Opens

I left Uniting, a job that I had worked my ass to be good at, because I needed a change and had burnt myself out. I was interviewed at Frangipani House in Harris Park to be an intensive NDIS support worker. My role would include working in a centre for people with complex mental health problems on the NDIS. The role included facilitating groups, working one-on-one with difficult clients, and helping run the centre.

The day would begin with a morning meeting where I would work out what I needed to do. There was a rough rotating roster that was prepared by one of the staff members, including a range of duties, such as cooking lunch with the participants, operating on the floor of the centre, ensuring that all the

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participants were happy and occupied, cleaning up at the end of the day, and running the groups. There were rough categories for the groups, but what you did was up to you. It was my job to run the mental health group a couple of times a week and run the men's group, as I was the only man working there after the first couple of weeks, and I had a few other groups to fill time with.

What I did in these groups was entirely up to me, so I went to work to spend all my spare time working out and getting great content for these groups. I decided to focus on 'change' because this topic often came up when asking what to focus on. 'Thoughts' because these are important for our mental health. I decided to focus a group on 'Chinese Medicine' as this topic I knew a lot about and could be applied to anything. The men's group focused on issues such as 'men's business,' expectations of men in modern society, and a range of statistics on men's mental health that I found interesting. I also did some groups on 'mental health advocacy,' 'the consumer movement,' and other topics that I had an interest in and focused on mental health.

I loved getting these groups together. I would spend all my train trips home preparing for the following week. Then, I started focusing on the following week's groups. Soon, I had a range of courses on diverse topics for the next couple of months. I loved consolidating much of the knowledge I had been learning over the last 15 years and having an audience to discuss topics I enjoyed exploring. Although it was only a small group of interested participants, they enjoyed my teaching style and the opportunity to discuss exciting topics that were relevant to them.

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Occasionally, some other colleagues joined in, adding further vibrancy to the discussions.

The floor time allowed getting to know the participants, and the individualised time provided an opportunity to work one-on-one on things that were important to them. I helped Marco design a website for the book he had poured his life and blood into. I listened to some participants and the extensive traumas they had faced that had made them slightly delusional. And I got to know young Andrew, whose struggle with his sleeping patterns made living an ordinary life difficult. Everyone I worked with had something that made them exceptional. I built up quite a lot of momentum with many participants, and what happened? COVID-19 happened.

COVID-19 sent me into a shock wave. I enjoyed waking up early to catch the train to Harris Park. I never missed the early train, which meant I was getting to work about 45 minutes before work started so I could settle myself and prepare for the day. I loved the routine of being around the participants, helping them cook lunch from time to time, enjoying the food and the vibrant Indian community of Harris Park, enjoying the company of my work colleagues, and getting all my work done on the way home on the train. I was enjoying the routine and the work I was doing.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant the centre was closed, and all contact with the participants went online. All one-to-one support were done over the phone. I was skeptical of how this could work for people with mental health problems, but I tried to make it work. I put together a schedule of all the participants I had assigned and scheduled a time to ring them once per week. I

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scheduled the online groups we were to do and researched a range of games we could play, trivia games to explore, and content I could use for my online groups. It was fun trying to be creative.

I scheduled to talk to each participant for one hour but was uncertain what sort of conversation I could have with mentally ill people and how this could go for an hour, but I was optimistic. In the spare time in between, I tried to get together a range of courses on the topics I already started in the groups and expanded on a wellness course that covered all aspects of wellness—gut health, diet, heart health, sleep, etc. These were topics I had read a lot about, studied for years, and was hoping to consolidate anyway for my own wellbeing.

It turned out to be great. In the beginning, it was tough making conversation, and it seemed like no one usually answered. Poor Shinella got frustrated as I called her one phone call after the next, but the participants opened. Talking for an hour was sometimes not enough, and I said we would continue the discussion next time. Some of the participants asked for more than one discussion a week. We would talk about all sorts of things. Some participants just wanted to talk and were otherwise isolated because of the pandemic. Other participants wanted to work on capacity-building skills and were grateful for my putting so much time into my presentations and discussion points.

And I had my regular group attendees, which made the online groups one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. We had all sorts of groups and all sorts of discussions. I had Heidi, a sweet young lady, who could not work during the pandemic, so

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she joined every group we did. Noel was a thoughtful and intelligent man who participated in most groups. Paul, who had been hospitalised most of his life, shared his wisdom through his long, thoughtful sentences that seemed to blur one from the next. There were a few others, but these were the core that joined the group every time. I got extremely close to them throughout the sessions and looked forward to seeing what I could learn from them.

One session with Barry was extremely memorable. I had been working with him for three months when we decided to explore his family history. He was a quiet man, but he could talk once he got started. I managed to get Mother Dearest on the phone. She is a family history expert and was more than happy to help. She asked Barry questions and discovered that he was related to Reg Livermore, the genius songwriter and producer who wrote the Rocky Horror Show. Mother Dearest then returned and did Barry's whole family tree right back to his convict routes. She did it for free. And Barry was wrapped in hope that he could put together a few more pieces into his family's story.

I thoroughly enjoyed my chats with the participants, but centre-based care was invalid in COVID times. Being a small non-government organization (NGO), One Door Mental Health could only justify employing some of the employees in their current roles considering how uncertain the times were. There was, however, another position available in the Connector Program. This program tried adjusting to working online but had a few more opportunities than at Frangipani House. I was offered a secondment to work in the Connector Program. I jumped at the

offer, thinking that this would be an excellent strategic move for my career, and quickly jumped on board with my new program, which would be more of a support coordinator role, like the work I did with Partners in Recovery.

Connector

I soon jumped over to my new team, composed of three fine individuals. Glen was a skinny man with experience working in Partners in Recovery—Mental Health (PHaMS) out of the country and had previously been an advocate as a pioneer of the Hearing Voices Movement. Daniel was a fine young man, working four days per week. He was well travelled, he was in his last year studying social work at the university and had a good grasp of the social determinants of health. Ruth was a dark woman from Kenya who was previously a personal trainer, and full of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, they had been smashed with work, and the early parts of the Connector Program had meant a considerable waiting list.

The program was structured through one-on-one support, helping in all areas of the participants' lives. I did a presentation of all the things that were expected of me in the role and quickly learned the structure of my administrative requirements. Still heavy in the swing of COVID-19, I was given a caseload of 10 to start with.

I got to meet my participants on the first or second day. Some answered the phone, and I went through my spill, but many

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did not. We had a long waiting list, so it was not the end of the world if people did not want to engage. So, I worked out who on my list needed support and who had been told by someone else they should be on the program. Before long, I had a small group of participants requiring regular support. Some needed help with housing, and some needed someone to talk to. Regardless, I was seasoned with talking on the phone by now, and the days seemed to go by so quickly. I was on the phone most of the day and spent the rest of the day researching ways to improve various areas of their lives. Knowing things would be busy when we returned face-to-face, Glen was concerned that I was biting off more than I could chew. He was worried that I was trying to support too many participants.

We eventually did return to face-to-face, which meant an hour-and-a bit of commute into the Grose Street Office in Parramatta. I visited participants face-to-face at their homes around Western Sydney, which meant a lot of driving. The only real expectation of being in Parramatta was the Thursday morning walking group, which was great. Everybody came for their coffee. Some walked. Some just talked. But we soon had an excellent atmosphere.

Everything was going smoothly. Daniel and I decided that we would share our first visits. So, one week, we went around town meeting all my participants, while the succeeding week, I spent time meeting his participants. We thought this was a good approach, as it would mean that if one of us was sick or on a holiday, they could be supported by the other. We got to know each other in these weeks, and many of the participants we met

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during this period became highly involved and engaged in the program.

One visit was entertaining. I did a lot of work on the phone with John, including getting him 'Emergency Payments' through the Salvation Army when he moved into his new house by having a three-way conversation over the phone. So, I knew a lot about John, and he knew a lot about me, but I had yet to see what he looked like.

I met him at the 7-Eleven in Paramatta and asked a man if he was John. He said, 'Yes, I'm John.' So, I went on and bought him a cup of coffee. We then continued chatting about everything we had been working on over the phone and talked about Adelaide. John spent most of his life in Adelaide, but this 'John' had no idea about anything to do with Adelaide. He continued but became so disturbed by the conversation that he left us. Realising this was not the 'real John,' we returned to the 7-Eleven, where a man came running up to me and shook my hand. It was great to finally meet John, and this was the start of an enjoyable work relationship with him.

As the program progressed, I decided to make the most of the big project budget left over from pandemic. Because we did not spend any funding during this period, we had a lot to spend. It would be wasted in the following year if we did not spend it, so I proposed a more in-depth program for the team. Initially, they were skeptical and thought it would take away from the individualised work, but I convinced them that it could work. So, they jumped on board, and the Connector Program came to life.

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Mondays became guest speaker days. This was an opportunity to talk to Peer Work and Mental Health leaders. I got guest speakers like Maree Abunga from Cameroon, my mate and Peer Work leader Ryan D'Lima, the earlier Mental Health Advocate of the Year Matthew Jackman, global peer work leadership pioneer Marie O'Hagan, Australian Peer Work leader Fay Jackson, and lots more. Although the numbers and enthusiasm dwindled when I interviewed my heroes, Glenda Webb and Charlene Sunkel, we gave many opportunities for our participants to hear from, meet, and ask questions of some of the leaders in the mental health field. While I led most of the sessions, sometimes my peers took over, preparing and sharing the questions with the leaders before doing the question and answer (Q&A) sessions.

Tuesdays were our outing days. This allowed our participants to explore places around Sydney, like The Three Sisters, Cockatoo Island, the Botanical Gardens, the museum, Manly Beach, Fagan Park, Taronga, The Rocks, and many more. When we went to Cockatoo Island, we had a big picnic for our new worker Fatima's birthday and explored the historical navy site. When we went to Manly Beach, we caught the train to Circular Quay, the ferry across to Manly, and had delightful fish and chips on the beach. We then split into two groups: one group walking along the beach and foreshore, and the other through Manly's mall and op shops. These days were full of fun and adventure and gave a fantastic opportunity for the participants to get to know us and each other. For many, even having an ice cream, a picnic, or other luxuries our budget could afford, was a novel experience for them and gave them a sense of connection to others.

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We also did fun activities such as barefoot bowling and 10-pin bowling that gave the participants other outlets to enjoy themselves. Costs were minimal, as they were mostly covered in One Door's budget, other than the costs for the trains and buses to get there. There were often reduced prices because Daniel had often bargained with the service providers to ensure no or little cost. Daniel did an excellent job preparing for these outings and ensuring these days were fun, well organised, and despite being informal, filled with joy, so everybody could get something out of them. These were fun days but also educational for the participants.

Wednesday was BBQ Day. Initially, we had BBQs at Bungarribee before moving them to Blacktown Showground. Whilst the first group felt different enthusiasm than I did when I tried to encourage them to participate in games like cricket, we had a stable group of participants turn up each Wednesday when we transferred the group to the Blacktown Showground. We began playing card games that then transformed into longer walks around the Showground. Glen or I would quickly stop at Aldi on the way to the picnic to ensure there was enough food for everyone. At the picnic ground, everyone seemed to enjoy each other's company. For many, the decent meal was their most significant meal of the week, possibly even their only meal beyond a few boiled potatoes and eggs. Unfortunately, many were struggling with severe mental health challenges, so it was often difficult to give them enough motivation to cook a healthy meal.

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Thursday was a chance for the participants to meet up in Parramatta Park for coffee, milkshake, or drink of their choice. Whilst the group's purpose was initially to go for a walk around the park, it became more of a chance to chat and get to know each other. Whilst some participants chose to walk around Parramatta Park, most preferred to exercise their conversation skills. This group climaxed with about 16 participants at one point, when two tables were not enough for everybody together without spilling out into the main part of the café. At one point, almost the whole café was full of One Door participants. By the end of the group, the numbers slowly dwindled, and there was barely any participant remaining.

As the Thursday morning group dwindled, we found that many people could not make a face-to-face group meet-ups due to a range of issues. One was social anxiety, in which people lacked the confidence and social skills to make face-to-face groups beneficial. Other people had agoraphobia and found it difficult to venture out of their homes. Others were still in lockdown mode and had not regained the confidence to venture into the community again. They had lost their confidence. We decided to start running online groups to reach these people.

Initially, the group thrived. The first two groups brought many of Daniel's participants online, sharing in different ways. We tried to get one of Daniel's participants to share her story. However, this was rather long and scared some other participants away from the online groups. Finally, after a few months, there were two regulars, Sharon, and Bill.

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Sharon was experiencing agoraphobia and had rarely ventured out of her home in 20 years. We had gone out to visit her at home, but she felt more confident online. Bill had turned up to several of our groups but struggled with social anxiety. We all connected with both, so the online groups were extremely enjoyable. We played Kahoot! most of the time and loved these trivia sessions. Sometimes it ventured into other online games, but there was a lot of laughter regardless of what game we played. Whilst it was hard to justify funding for two people, the social connection it gave them was worth every penny One Door was investing in them. Right up until our last session, Bill gave us his last drum roll. It never seemed to matter who won or lost. It seemed like we were all winners.

Friday was our activity day. I would come into the office after seeing one of my participants and often arrive at Fatima with one of the participants doing art with one of the workers. As a few more participants would come, I would take them down to the shopping centre to get the ingredients for lunch. I would then get a production line of participants chopping, cutting, mixing, grating, peeling, and preparing the ingredients. Finally, a whole group of participants would help me prepare and cook a delicious lunch before enjoying eating it together in the courtyard. The participants would often stay for a few hours, enjoying each other's company, before we finished up for the weekend, or I went to another participant.

While I prioritised the program that we had created and the group activities, I also worked with 15 other participants. I helped them with housing applications, NDIS applications, going

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for a walk to have a break from their daily routines, or just talking to them on the phone if needed.

Zoe (pronounced Zo) was one of the participants who took full advantage of the program. She struggled with anxiety and depression most of her life, and her mobility was limited. She did not know why walking was getting more challenging, but her doctor, Doctor Nikki, saw a brochure of Connector and thought it might be a good thing for her to try.

Zoe was not happy with her initial worker, Ruth, so she asked if I could take over as her worker. I met her at one of the Parramatta Park walking Thursday mornings when Ruth picked her up from Seven Hills, and we hit it off straight away. Soon, I was conducting capacity-building workshops with her on gut health before a regular Friday morning spot opened. Zoe became involved in the outings, came to nearly every BBQ, and tried to make as many Friday activity days as possible. So, she was making the most of the program.

Our Friday morning sessions were regular at 9:30 a.m. at Seven Hills Shopping Centre. I would arrive early to get some of my other work done and buy her coffee on her arrival. Sometimes I bought her breakfast, as that was a luxury she could not afford. We did everything in these sessions, including her housing application, her NDIS application, a functional assessment for the NDIS, finding her a trauma counsellor who changed her life, and even spending a few weeks preparing a submission to the Deputy Housing Minister, who was going to be one of our guest speakers. Zoe found herself in her program. On the last Friday Activity Day, I caught Zoe saying, 'This is my family.' Zoe has since stayed

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friends and continuously told me that through One Door, 'she found her tribe.'

John was sometimes a loose cannon, but I got to know him well throughout the COVID time. John had been through several foster homes throughout his life and never got to know his family. When I first contacted him when I first came on board with Connector, he had just moved into his first home after being homeless since arriving in Sydney. He had moved across from Adelaide to start a new life. He had nothing except a fridge and a few nick-knacks, so I helped him get a few appliances through the Salvation Army's 'Emergency Fund.'

After our adventurous meeting, I helped him move into a boarding house in Guildford. As he was new to the area, I would walk around the neighbourhood with him to help him feel safer in his community. John had borderline personality disorder from all the trauma and neglect he had experienced in his life. He would often talk, and I would listen. He often said, 'Not many people get me, but you really get me.'

Unfortunately, I could not be there twice for John when he did need me. The first time he had had an altercation, he had shown up at the Grose Street Office, hoping I would be there. Unfortunately, I was not there, and he had called the police, who took him to Cumberland Hospital. The second time, he had a bit of a psychotic episode and desperately needed to talk to me. I wanted to meet him halfway. Unfortunately, it had been raining for weeks, and I was working from home because I was flooded in. There was no way for me to go anywhere because the train

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line and the roads were blocked. John spent about six weeks in the hospital then and was fortunate to get released.

I visited him two or three times per week whilst he was in the hospital. By the time of his release, John had had enough of Sydney and hoped to head home to Adelaide. However, he wanted to avoid returning to the Guildford guesthouse because he felt unsafe and needed somewhere else in Sydney to stay. He promised me he had somewhere to stay in Adelaide, so I spent weeks helping him get his birth certificate. This was challenging because we needed somewhere to send it, but eventually, we got it. I then helped John organise a flight home to his homeland and helped him get on the plane. I almost cried when he finally got on the plane because we had been on quite the journey together.

Jeff was a Sri Lankan-born web developer who had been struggling with bipolar disorder for many years. He had a good sense of humour, and we had much in common. We had a range of adventures together, including playing badminton, having boxing sessions, grabbing our regular coffee at McDonald's, going to the Lindt factory, exploring a Sri Lankan supermarket, and going on a few random drives. Sometimes we would work on Centrelink applications, but most of the time, we would chat about random things. We would talk a little bit about mental health, a little bit about his family situations, and a little bit about his experiences in the tech world.

Jeff had had some difficult experiences with his bipolar disorder, including trying to top himself with a tie when he was at St. John of God. At times, Jess called me in crisis; however, because of his history with the public and private mental health

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systems, I had to try other approaches when he was suicidal. He did not need me to call an ambulance, but I often suggested ideas like text crisis lines. This would allow Jeff to think about his responses instead of just reacting. He would have called me three or four times in an emergency, and we always found an alternative solution. The reality is that I like Jeff, and although he had a pretty shitty father, he was a rather good bloke.

Donna was an agoraphobic who had barely been out of her home for the last 20 years. She was morbidly obese but did her best to lose weight and perform a regular workout routine. I began working with Donna during COVID over the phone and continued working with her until my last day at One Door. In our time together, I only visited her twice; the rest were our weekly one-hour conversations over the phone.

The first time I visited her at her home, her daughter was there with her support worker and her challenged grandchildren. As I knew Donna loved affirmations, we took turns for each person in the room to find an affirmation on their phone or computer, one they had already thought of themselves. I collaborated on all these affirmations in a presentation that is very dear to me. I later gave Donna a book by Donna Hay, famous for writing amazing affirmations. Donna read it cover to cover, and this was often one of many discussion points in our chats. Donna spoke sternly to the executive when I lost my position at One Door because our sessions made a big difference in her life.

Like John, Sribimo was a troubled participant who was a bit of a pest to some of the other programs. To me, he was an absolute gentleman. Daniel and I visited him in his home, and he

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spoiled us with Lebanese treats. He was in a break-and-enter situation when he was high on Xanax, and I accompanied him to a range of court proceedings. We put together a presentation of all the happenings in his life. This was enough to get him out of prison and continue living with his family, whom he was trying to look after. He turned his life around, and found a decent job, and I was able to get him out of the program. I called him every now and then to see how he was going, but his mental health was under control.

Arren was the success story of the program. He was not engaging with Daniel, so I gave him one last shot. We met at Blacktown Shopping Centre and sat down, where he told me about his schizophrenia. Arren was able to describe his symptoms and experiences vividly. I was impressed. He came from the Philippines to care for his father, who was dying of cancer. He was living on boiled potatoes, boiled eggs, and not much else. He began coming to all the outings and all the BBQs and helping me cook lunch on Friday afternoons. He participated as much as he could and started making wonderful friends. It was such a joy to see his confidence grow as he developed his life skills and his social skills.

One day, our Executive Manager came into the Grose Street office at about 2:00 p.m. He was expecting things to be winding down and for us to prepare for the weekend, like he was willing to do from Tuesday onward. But the place was buzzing. We had a small handful of people in the kitchen cooking lunch and another group enjoying each other's company in the courtyard.

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At that point, we were proud of how the program was going and expected our contracts to be extended for at least another three years. In addition, we were training three new employees to be part of the team. Finally, we were expecting the other program that was running, the Service Navigation Program, to be combined to create a unified Psychosocial Services Program (PSP).

The reality was that we only got half of the contract. What was going to be 12 positions became six. We were all asked to apply for our positions, knowing that six of us would not get them. I applied for my position and was unsuccessful. I was offered redundancy and told I had two weeks left in the position. A position that I loved. A program we had created from scratch. A program anyone would be proud of. To the Executive Manager, we were not getting the KPIs he wanted by doing useless K-10s that show no real measure of whether a service is achieving its aims. We were getting results. We were changing lives. People were enjoying themselves and learning valuable life skills. That should be the objective measure that determines whether a service is meeting its objectives.

Our last day of Daniels' time at One Door was buzzing. As usual, we had 15 or 16 people in the centre, who put on a magnificent show. We had a wonderful time and enjoyed singing happy birthday to him before giving him his card and gifts. We spent a momentous day in the courtyard, having a wonderful time and enjoying everyone's company one last time. The company that had found 'Zoe's tribe,' and gave Arren a new lease on life.

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Daniel and Glenn also took redundancies, as Daniel was already leaving for six months to pursue his Social Worker Placement in Alice Springs. Glen was uncertain what he would do with his life, as the position had burnt him out long before I came on board. I, too, was left on the drawing board, thinking about what I was going to do next. I was again in a hole, not knowing what I had done wrong and thinking I was again making a difference. Only to be left unemployed again.

One Door Closes

I hit a deep hole when I lost my job at One Door. When I left Uniting, I left a job I had worked my ass off to be good at. I left Uniting to explore an area of employment in which I considered an expert. I was an expert. I talked to experts. And we made an excellent program, mainly based on my vision of an ideal mental health program. I felt defeated. I tried to fit in repeatedly, and my mental health continued to get in the way.

I do not blame the management for any misfortunes I have confronted in my work life. I would have made the same decisions with the information they had. When working with Partners in Recovery, I demonstrated some inappropriate behaviours, made offensive comments, and struggled to maintain a positive level of mental health at work. When I was disciplined for inappropriate behaviour comments at Uniting, I demonstrated poor professional conduct in the workplace. It was not my fault that the NDIS and COVID killed centre-based care.

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But to lose my job at Connector, where I significantly impacted people's lives, hurt.

And I was supposed to walk away from the positive connections I had made. I had invested a lot of emotional energy into ensuring that their well-being was being looked after. I made them feel safe to discuss the traumas that left them in despair. Again, I do not blame the executive manager for looking for alternative employment arrangements because contractual agreements are essential, but surely making a difference should be placed above objective measures that do not mean much. Surely developing life skills and improving the areas of people's lives that matter is more important than petty KPIs like completing K-10s. Even then, I was up to date with these as well. Because I was again unemployed and uncertain of what my future would hold, I went deeper and deeper into despair. I felt defeated. I felt cheated and abused by a system that seemed not to care about what was important. Quality of life. People. Meaningful connection. Healing together and being each other's partners in recovery.

I spent much time at the Perfect Companion's house all day, staying for dinner and miserably watching TV, which relieved me so much. Because I was so low, she called her friend, Catherine, one day while we watched TV on the couch. Catherine offered me a job with her disability support coordination company, Costello Consultancy, saying that all I had to do was make a difference in people's lives. She said the job would be two-fold—I would be a 'Psychosocial Recovery Coach,' and I had to create a social program for her disability participants. In

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addition, it would be my role to work with all the participants to support them in whatever areas of their lives they needed assistance with.

At that point, I was offered another interview with Flourish Australia for the Resolve program. My previous project manager, Glenda, run this program for several years, and I knew the program well. It had a good reputation for reintegrating people with mental illnesses back into the community after an extended stay at the hospital, which lasted more than 15 months. The management sounded lovely, but I was scared because I had the night shift involved. I previously worked on the night shift while working at a petrol station, which destroyed my mental health. So, I was a little bit skeptical about taking this role. So, when the job at Costello Consultancy came up, I was excited. It sounded like the perfect role.

The Perfect Companion tried to warn me that it might not be as perfect as it seemed. She warned me that Catherine was an over promiser. She previously worked for Catherine in a role that sounded too good to be true. She had left Uniting, a job that she had loved and loved the people she had worked with, to work at Costello Consultancy, thinking that she would have much less work and more time to spend helping Enigma with his therapy. As it turned out, 30 billable hours meant a lot more work, and she worked early every morning. Catherine pleaded with her to come over to work with her for months and then provided no guidance or support when she got into the role. I had seen many of my friends, many from Uniting, worked for Costello Consultancy as well, and none had been able to last more than six months or so.

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Regardless, Catherine tried to get me across to work with Costello Consultancy for years, was a good friend, and the job sounded too good to be true. Plus, I did not have anything to lose. It was better than sitting on the couch all day feeling miserable.

So, I drove over to the Abel Street office for my first shift. It seemed promising at first. The induction was excellent. Everyone seemed excited to have me on the team. I started with the statistics and worked out the demography of the company and its participants. The first day in the office was buzzing because of a Christmas party. The place was full of people, and the place was humming.

The next day, we met with Catherine, the CEO, and Naomi, the person I would be working with to deliver the program. We sat down, and I asked, 'How will this all work?' Catherine replied, 'I would like you to get some program's up and running.' 'What type of programs would you like me to get up and running?' I asked. 'That will be between you and Naomi.'

That did not give me much to work on, but at least I can be creative and work out a program that might work. After all, it was a self-managing team at One Door, and we were not advised by the management. I thought I could do it all over again.

So, I knew the demography of the participants, and Catherine gave me some of her participants that she would like me to meet, so I put together an expression of interest form of all the activities I researched that were available in the Penrith area. I thought I would go out to some participants and scope their interests.

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I went to about 10-12 participants' homes and discovered that they were interested in similar things. Most of them were interested in the available recreational activities, so I started ringing around and visiting the various recreational activities around town. Before long, I had six weeks of programs booked for an Activity Day on a Monday, a Women's Group on a Tuesday, and a Men's Group on a Thursday. This would accompany the Art Therapy group on Wednesday. We would work towards having an outing day on a Friday to places like Featherdale and other sites we found thriving in the Connector program.

While waiting for the program to start, I visited as many participants' homes as possible to see their needs and goals. The aim was for me to work with the support coordinators who were working with these participants to achieve these goals. Although this worked for some participants, it felt like I was encroaching on the role of the support coordinators and that we were doubling up on service to get more money for Costello Consultancy. That was the role of the support coordinators anyway, so it was double dipping.

I was also working with one Recovery Coach participant, Brett. He was a lovely man who loved to talk and have a yarn. He told me that he was not an alcoholic because his liver markers were not at abnormal levels, despite drinking a case of Victoria Bitter at least every two days. He told me he kept a lid on things by drinking slowly, only consuming a stubby every 40 minutes. Regardless, he was a heavy drinker, and his demands increased as the day progressed. He often wrote Catherine long, rambling texts late in the afternoon, making his demands known. He had

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a lot of respect for Catherine because she secured him the comfortable home.

I would spend quite a lot of time at Brett's house, just listening to him talk. Then, we started walking down to the coffee shop, where he would tell me everything about his life, travels, and many of the things troubling him. Then, I would order him coffee and listen. I had a soft spot for Brett, and I think he had a soft spot for me. He just needed someone to talk to, and I enjoyed listening to his stories.

Finally, we got going with the groups. The first Monday group was an exercise group where a personal trainer went through an exercise routine with our participants. We only had about four people turn up, but they all got something out of it. We finished with lunch and then drove everyone home. It was a great start.

The day before the Tuesday Women's Group, the facilitator dropped out because she had COVID-19. So, I called Mother Dearest, who filled in to do the sewing and crouching class. I already had all the needed equipment, so I looked forward to the ladies learning something new. We had six or seven ladies turn up, and they all did their best. Many had support workers accompanying them, who also participated in the activity. It was a fun day for all involved.

The first Men's Group on Thursday was also a success. We had a fantastic trivia day with a few men that turned up. Because the numbers were low, some workers from the Caring part of Costello Consultancy joined in. Caring was the support worker

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wing of the Costello Consultancy organisation. This made for a memorable day that was full of laughs.

I had a great program up and running, but things drifted on for a few weeks. I met some people at their homes, completed the expression of interest form, and tried to work out how to make the participant's dreams come true. As I seemed to encroach on the work the support coordinators were already doing, I became increasingly stressed. The team seemed more interested in making money than achieving outcomes. They talked behind my back and started to tell me I did not know what I was talking about. I worked for three and a half years at the NDIS and understood the rules, but this did not fit with their values. The other workers seemed so content with keeping their customers that they were not following the rules of the NDIS.

The program hummed with activities like going to Ten Pin Bowling on a Monday, Lewers Art Gallery for the ladies on Tuesday, and the Movies for the men because Lawn Bowling was cancelled. I thought things were going OK, but I was becoming increasingly stressed because I did not know what I was doing and was winging it. I was getting anxious as I ran here, there, and everywhere without being present in whatever I was doing. The numbers participating in the program were below what I expected, and I was not bringing in enough money for the company. Not enough to justify my wages. Although they did not expect me to achieve numbers overnight, there needed to be more funding in the participant's plans to justify expanding the programs. Everybody who was going to participate in the

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programs was participating. The people who were engaging in it were loving it. I should have been happy with that.

Outside the group, I only had one participant I was working with, and he was becoming increasingly frustrated with me. As the drinks would roll in in the afternoon, he would call me, demanding to find a psychologist. But none was available, and when I did find one, there always seemed to be a reason why they could not fit him in for a few weeks. So, the pressure was increasing on me. And I was feeling it. I felt stressed, anxious, and useless.

After about six weeks of starting at Costello Consultancy, Catherine organised a time for me to meet in the office. Naomi, who was playing the Human Relations, had taken some time to also be in the office. Naomi got straight to the point. 'It's not working out,' she said. Catherine continued, stating, 'You only have one Psychosocial Recovery participant at the moment, and he preferred not working with you any longer. She said, 'He feels that as you are a lived experience Recovery Coach, his trauma is getting the best of you.'

It was true. I had not found my feet in setting up the programs. I lacked structure and guidance on what was required. And although Naomi was supposed to support me in setting up the programs, I did it all by myself. I gave her a few tasks to follow up on, and when I came to the next meeting, none had been completed. Because I was stressed that she had not done it, instead of focusing on the budget as I had planned in the meeting, I tried to follow up with what she was supposed to do. There was no support, guidance, training, nor professional development on

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how I could do my job better. There was no support at Costello Consultancy, and everyone was talking behind everyone's back. There was not a good culture at the company.

Regardless, I had two days left at Costello Consultancy. I went to Brett's house for one final session, and it was one of the best experiences of my life. I finally found a psychologist, and she booked to see him the following Saturday.

When I arrived at his house, I was brimming with excitement that I finally secured a psychologist's appointment. I said, 'You have someone to talk to now, Brett. You do not have to hold it in anymore.' He stared straight into my eyes, and his eyes started welling up. Finally, he burst out, 'Sixty-five years. I have held it in for 65 years.'

Brett started bawling his eyes out. He had been so desperate to reach out to someone to talk about trauma that he had not told anyone for 65 years. He had kicked another child in the face when he was young, killing him. He did not have the skills to cope with this and instead not told anyone all his life. He told me because he trusted me. He just needed to let it all out. There were a few other things that he told me that day that he had promised to keep to the grave. Expressing his traumas seemed to give him great release. He asked if I could accompany him to the psychologist on Saturday morning. It was the least I could do.

I was furious on my last day at Costello Consultancy. I frustratedly backed up my stuff and packed it in the car. I let

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Naomi know throughout the day how angry I was. I felt that I had done a rather excellent job with the lack of support I had received. I had created an amazing program that was doing OK and had made headway with one Psychosocial Participant I did have.

I was just about to leave the office to go home when one of the participants showed up. He was brimming with excitement after the movie we saw the day before. We had gone and watched Tom Cruise's Top Gun, and we stayed for a long time after that just chatting with the participants and having a bit of a laugh. As he walked into the office, Naomi said, 'You must be smiling because of the movie you watched yesterday. The participant 'Yes, it was great. Andrew has made a real difference in my life.'

He came to chat, and I ensured Naomi could hear the discussion. He had come in a few times to talk to me, so I knew I had made a difference in his life. As we spoke, I said, 'I've got some bad news.' 'What?' he said. 'Today is my last day at Costello.'

His jaw dropped. He said, 'This always happens to me. As soon as I get close to someone, they leave.' I said, 'Do not take it personally. Things were not working out.' He said, 'I am going to take this personally, they can't do this.'

This was not the first time he had gotten close to someone, and they had left. This is a familiar story for people in the disability sector. There is such high staff turnover because it is hard to make a buck in the industry. So, people come and go, breaking meaningful relationships because it is hard to justify paying someone if they aren't bringing in money. Regardless of

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how much they care, or whether they are making a difference in people's lives. It appears all too often, and many times in my life, that making a difference is not enough.

I packed my bags and left the Able Street office. I was unemployed again and uncertain where my next dollar would come from. I created a great program with no help from anyone else. But again, that was not enough. Again, I started making connections. But again, that was not enough. Again!!! I felt defeated. Gutted. My heart sank. Again, I tried my best and failed. Again, I tried to fit in. I tried to make a difference. And I was thrown out like trash. I had nothing left.

Despite the best efforts of the One Kind Person working there, I lined up concrete walls on the way home. But I could not muster enough strength to leave my body to smack straight into the brick-and-mortar. I lined the wheels of my car up to every tree and sped up to insane speeds. But I could not muster the courage to leave my blood on the leaves and branches. I spent the next 12 hours contemplating how I could kill myself.

I had had suicidal ideations in the past, but I never actually planned for it. However, I thought I could have the best meal. I went to one of my favourite places where no one could find me for days and drank myself to death until my liver was no longer functioning. I went to the Royal Hotel and asked questions about the best steak to buy, the most expensive steak in the Royal Pub. I then walked to the bottle shop, but the shop was already closed because it was after 8:30 p.m.

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I went home and emptied my alcohol portfolio and pretended I was going to the Best Companion's house to wash my clothes, sneaking the alcohol into my washing basket. I texted her, explaining all the reasons why I did not deserve to live. She hung up on me at first because my attitude was terrible, but then she just listened. I stayed on the phone with her until I started drinking. And then I wanted to be alone. I drank about three-quarters of a bottle of vodka before deciding this was not me. I could not bring myself to drink myself to death. I was not ready to die. I staggered home and flopped into bed. I quickly passed out.

Planning for the Future

I do not know what the future holds, employment-wise. I have valuable experience working with disabilities and peer work, but I am not ready to invest all my energy into full-time employment. I am not emotionally prepared to give all of myself to the participants again. I will need to learn to set boundaries to protect myself and ensure that I do not get too close to my participants, as I have done in the past.

I have had time to recuperate and get my energy back. I had worked myself into the ground and burnt myself out working full time, throwing myself into advocacy work, studying, and doing the Global Now Project. I was virtually working until midnight every night and relying on my medications to knock myself out so I could do it all over again the next day. Then,

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starting the day with a stiff coffee to get up and going, I would work until 6:30 p.m. at Uniting and then drive all over Western Sydney at One Door. Anyone would have reached their breaking point.

Moving forward, there needs to be a balance between working and doing the Global Now Project. Regardless of what I do, that project will always be a backdrop, as it is part of who I am. It is a project I have invested all my savings in and has the potential to change how mental health runs worldwide. The Global Now Project gives a starting point for any student, researcher, consumer, caregiver, or policymaker starting in the mental health field to know what is already out there before starting their journey. It has the potential to bring mental health services together, so they do not operate in silos but work together. I am incredibly proud of the project so far, and I hope to invest more time, energy, and money to ensure that it is something that will benefit everyone in the mental health system.

Whatever the future of my employment, my work ethic, tireless dedication to my occupations, and advocacy have put me in a position to make the most of the challenging work and receive financial benefits. Due to my commitment to my work, I know that I will make a lasting contribution to the operational and technological capacities in various fields as diverse as disabilities, mental health, and Chinese Medicine. I know I will further my understanding of many topics, including trauma, climate change, and emerging technologies like blockchain, to

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*benefit everyone. I have put in the hard yards so that everyone,
one day, will benefit.*

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CHAPTER 5~ Travelling

Travel has always been important to me. I got my taste for travel as a child from many trips away. However, it was only when I explored the South Island of New Zealand that I began my travels abroad. After this, I travelled to Vietnam for Philby's wedding, Thailand for Warin's wedding, Vietnam again, Thailand again, China for the adventure of my life, and Canada for Davy's wedding before heading to Peru for a fantastic experience. These trips have shaped my character and filled my life with a sense of adventure

Family Trips Away

While the family spent most of our early holidays up on the Central Coast, we also ventured to places like Kangaroo Island, the Victorian Goldfields, the Gold Coast, Durras, and holidays with the Az to Nyrang and Yamba. In addition, I had a memorable holiday in Huskisson with Reynold's family and a ski trip to Blue Cow with Hallam's family.

The most memorable childhood holiday was in Kangaroo Island, where we spent a few weeks exploring the diverse island. First, we drove through Hay before reaching our first destination, Mildura. Here we spent a few days exploring the orchard hub, including exploring a wax museum and a boat ride on the Murray River. Our tour then meandered along Murray River towns, such

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as the beautiful Renmark, before heading past Adelaide to the Kangaroo Island ferry.

Once on the island, we spent days exploring the penguin and seal colonies, where we got close to much of the unique wildlife. We explored a fantastic cave with spectacular glass-like pylons. We stayed at a sheep station where we lived on a farm for a few days. We then meandered through national park after national park, where friendly kangaroos jumped into our car at one point, and at another point, we drove off on Dad, who got out to take a photo of an echidna. While observing a massive pack of Cape Baron geese, a giant kangaroo stood up to Dad to fight him, and we were forced to flee to prevent a dangerous altercation. We drove home after a tired two weeks or so, where I held my prized blue Kangaroo Island hat as my prized possession for the next couple of years.

Another memorable family holiday was our exploration of the Victorian Goldfields. Here, we explored all the old gold mining towns in central Victoria, such as Ballarat and Bendigo, learning the stories behind the history of these historic towns. The Victorian-style homes' architecture mesmerized me, and I spent hours trying to draw them in the back of the car. I was astounded by the grandeur of the churches, particularly in Bendigo. The highlight of the trip was exploring Sovereign Hill by day and by night and seeing a replication of the famous battle in an extravagant light show.

The Gold Coast was the first time we ventured beyond caravan parks to stay in a high-rise building. This was the first time the Chans joined us for a holiday outside their holiday home

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in Durras. Having the Chans join us on this holiday was great as the oldies explored the city for its cafes and restaurants. In contrast, we enjoyed exploring the beaches and staying in a luxury apartment.

One day, I left early in the morning for a run, and because this was in my running prime, I kept running. I started at Main Beach, went past Sunshine Paradise, and kept going to Miami Beach. By the time I reached my destination, I was a bit tired, so I started walking back, arriving at least three hours after departing. Because I forgot to let my father know that I was going on my adventure, he was searching up and down the beaches of the Gold Coast with Rachel looking for me.

That afternoon, we went to Mt. Tambourine to meet my Aunt Jeanie, Uncle Don, and cousins Andrew and Cameron. As it was always an adventure with this bunch, we spent a sugar-high afternoon with them exploring this picturesque village. We then came back and had a swim and a game of tennis, where I traumatised Philby by running him back and forth.

We also spent a magical time exploring the theme parks, where we spent two days at Sea World, a day at Movie World, and another day at Wet and Wild. At Sea World, the memorable experience was ‘Bone Head’ stalking people with fake spiders tantalising close to the water. We watched him from the stands for hours, scaring person after person until one fell in the pool. Dad and Uncle Michael replicated the trademark wobble of his head for months after—the same wobble that gave us so much entertainment. Other memorable experiences included watching a young Davy swim with the dolphins, jumping on time and time

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again on the free-floating *Mission Impossible* ride at Movie World, and watching Philby get stuck on the fast slide at Wet and Wild when we were getting timed for how fast we could go down the slide.

Yamba stands out as the highlight of the many memorable trips we took with Az. It was so bloody hot that year, and we spent the whole week out in the sun playing cricket, surfing, and doing some fishing. We didn't do anything in particular, but we were at an age when we were looking for a party the whole time. We got invited to a party within half an hour of leaving but had to decline because we were heading home. Sometimes, having no memories is what you remember most.

The South Island

At the end of high school, everyone was heading to school. However, I had leftover money from the Olympics, so I headed to the South Island of New Zealand, as I had heard it was full of adventure. So I booked a Contiki-like tour starting and finishing in Christchurch. The tour was circling around the South Island, so you could jump off at any stage and catch the next coach travelling around. I had originally planned to take the train, so I could ride my bike around the island. However, when I saw the size of the mountains, I was glad I decided against this option.

The flight was exhilarating, as it was my first time on a plane. I met a lovely couple on the flight who said they would pay

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for the taxi ride into the centre of Christchurch. Unfortunately, when we arrived in the city centre, the backpackers I booked were full, so I had to make my way to other backpackers on the other side of town. Fortunately, the taxi driver saw me stuck with many bags, so he drove me around the streets for free.

I spent a few days exploring Christchurch, which was quite an adventure because the World Busking Festival was on. I took this opportunity to meet a few of the local young ladies, some tourists who were in town for the festival, and a few of the buskers. There were acts all around the city. Some were horrendous, but most were a good laugh.

When the tour started, we headed to Kaikoura for our first stop. This was a picturesque town on a plateau with a backdrop of the highest coastal mountain in the world. We then drove up to Picton, where some left to catch the ferry into the capital, Windy Wellington. However, a few of us decided against this and went for a beautiful walk that looked over the coastline.

We then explored the coastline to Able Tasman National Park, where we rode a canoe and walked along the coastline. Seeing some beautiful seals less than a metre away as they bathed in the sunshine was superb. We then drove down the East Coast, stopping off for some whitewater rafting before going down the coast to the Fox and Franz Joseph glaciers. While some people decided to take a helicopter ride to the peak and walk down the ice glaciers, we decided to go for a memorable bike ride instead through the countryside. At one point, the police pulled us over because we were taking up the whole road.

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The trip continued to Queenstown, where I fell in love with the countryside and decided to stay there for a bit. I had my first ever clubbing experience when a British DJ invited me to an exclusive night where one of his favourite international DJs was playing at a small club in town. Charlie grooved with me all night, teaching me about the intentions of the DJ when he was trying to get the audience to dance hard. He was getting people to fall in love. Knowing what the DJ was trying to do made me realise how much he had the small club's dancers in his hands.

We headed out to the jump site the next day, but the first day was a false start. It was too windy to jump. But the next day, the bus strategically drove up the winding path to a cliff face. The bus was almost hanging off the edge of the road. When we arrived at the top, there was a colossal gully, with a cart with a glass bottom pulled along the pulley. This was the second highest bungy jump in the world, with 140-meter descent, free falling for seven seconds.

The jumping order was decided upon by weight, and as I was a skinny little thing at the time, weighing 69 kilograms, I was about the fortieth person to jump. However, Charlie, the British DJ, was 93 kilograms and the heaviest in the group. Because he was the first to jump, the instructor asked if any of his friends wanted to join him, so my Dutch friend Jerone and I decided to join him.

I watched thirty something people jump and see how much they enjoyed themselves, so when it was my turn, I was excited. They tied me up and told me that on the third bounce, I should pull the chord, and the team would pull me up. So, I

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hobbled to the edge and was told to wave to the camera. I had been looking down for about three hours and had hibernated to see the bottom of the gully, but a sense of space from looking outward scared the snot out of me. Regardless, I did my little hand trumpet solute and jumped straight out. Before I knew it, my few seconds of free fall were over, and I bounced at the bottom of my jump. I bounced three times and pulled the cord. Little did I know, this would send me a couple of metres down. I thought I pulled the wrong cord. But after a few doubtful seconds, I was pulled up into a seated position and could enjoy the beautiful view. It all happened so fast, but I did it. I was so proud of myself.

I was on a high for a few days and joined my Dutch mate, Jerone, before a fantastic bike ride up the top of Queenstown and around the lake. I stayed a few extra days in Queenstown, and the group that I had gone around New Zealand with moved. So, I spent a few days in Queenstown before heading north to do some fruit picking.

I decided to head north towards Wanaka and hitchhike with this guy who was making his way north. I was not sure this was the best idea when he told us not to take photos, but there were enough of us hitching a ride if he was to do anything. We arrived at a small town called Arrowtown at about 3:30 a.m., where they said they would need some workers in the morning. There was a small motel down the road that we were told was an excellent place to stay.

I got an early night and started work at the apple farm in the morning. Everyone working there was friendly, and we had a wonderful day. The only problem was that I needed to realise that

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the multi-staged carts were carrying apples up and down the same lane of apple trees. I thought you had to turn the carts around at the end of the lane and carry them up the next lane. I would have spent 45 minutes trying to reverse the cart and turn it before the lines holding it together snapped. I broke the cart and was not popular with the management.

That night, I was sitting down when an Indian man who had been working on the farm approached me and offered to cook me dinner. He seemed friendly and excited to cook for someone else, so I was more than happy to have someone cook for me. He enthusiastically threw some spices in, so I was taking note of his expertise. Then it was time to eat. I took my first mouthful, which was so hot it almost put an ulcer through my lip. 'It's ok,' he said, 'I have yoghurt.' I would have put half a tub of yoghurt on the curry before it was cool enough to eat. When we finished, the Indian man turned around and said, 'My wife has just left me. That is the first time I have ever cooked.' No wonder, I thought.

I worked the next day with extensive diarrhoea and a sore stomach. Every time I went to do some work, I needed to rush off to go to the toilet. I was the laughingstock of the village. They made it clear that they would not pay me for destroying their structures, so they instructed me to head back to Queenstown to look for work. So, I headed back to Queenstown.

I found work for a few days and returned to the tour with another group. I virtually run out of money, so I had to get back to Christchurch as cheaply as possible. I had a few cash left, I just went for a walk when we got to Te Anau. We then toured along a

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road that meanders alongside the world-famous Milford Track through Milford Sound. Although this part of the tour is infamous when it is raining, as water flows over the track, the scenery past Reflection Lake is stunning as you make your way into Milford Sound. On a gorgeous cruise ship, taking in Milford Sound was spectacular.

The tour continued to Invercargill. The sleepy town took us on a fascinating night where the town entertained us with multiple laps of the same cars circulating the town centre for hours before we retreated to a lesbian bar. The trip continued around the Otago Peninsula, where we spent a night in Dunedin. However, as I was already on borrowed money by this stage, I was saving my cash. The trip began by scaling the steepest street in the world before touring back to Christchurch.

My last night in Christchurch came around a lot quicker than I had planned. I not only run out of money but was rushing back to Australia to start university. On the last night, I met up with many of the people I had made my way around to Queenstown with, who settled in Christchurch for a few days and were waiting to catch up before I left. In particular, a 29-year-old nurse asked me to marry her at that church. I am not sure what she saw in me, as I had only just turned 18, but it was an offer that I humbly declined. It was, however, a fantastic night and a wonderful way to end my first overseas adventure.

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A Thai Wedding

One of the wonderful things that came out of my master's degree was my friendship with Warin. Warin was a Thai girl who I gravitated to early on in my time at Sydney University. Soon, we were doing everything together. After going to all our classes together, heading up into Newtown for lunch to enjoy six dollars of Thai food, she began inviting me over to her house for dinner. She made a mean Pad Thai and enjoyed cooking up a feast for all her friends she had made in Australia. She once commented that she never thought of meeting a friend like me.

When she told me that she was getting married back in her homeland, it was an excellent opportunity for me to explore her Thailand and, most importantly, try some of the fantastic Thai cuisines that became such a big part of our routine. So, Warin organised for me to get a specially reduced flight over and said I could stay with her family on their sugar cane farm. I looked excited about the adventure.

After a short flight, I arrived with much excitement. Warin and her husband Namsak were at the airport, where I was excitedly greeted. We drove through busy Bangkok with all its extravagant high rises and what seemed like dozens of tolls. Before long, we arrived at our destination for dinner. It was a nicely decked-out little place with no walls. I was quickly asked, 'Can you handle hot food?' I said, 'A little.' They seemed to laugh a bit as I tucked into the delicious meal, barely stopping to talk. When the meal was over, they said with a grin, 'that was as hot as we have.'

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We continued to our destination for the night, the small flat of Warin's cousin. It was a simple place with just a pan toilet. But it was comfortable enough for one night. We continued to Kanchanaburi the following day, where we rocked up to Warin's sugarcane farm. We spent a bit of time there before heading to town for the first of the wedding celebrations. It was a small party with plenty of food. Many of Warin's friends, family, and a few familiar faces from back in Sydney were there.

The next few days flew by until the official celebration of the wedding. As Warin and Namsak were Buddhists, the Buddhist monks were invited to the house to worship. There were many sacrifices for the monks, and everybody wore celebratory clothes. There were all sorts of chanting and praying taking place, with Warin ensuring me that I did not have to pray on my knees. At one point, as the groom's side of the family had to give Warin's family up to \$40,000 worth of gold. I told Warin that that would be enough to set them up for life. However, she said that would be spent on me and my time in Thailand. I was gob smacked that I meant that much to her.

The day of the wedding was a momentous event and led to a rather large function with about a hundred people. I was at the table in front of the room with two others I studied with in Australia. I was served the first meal, my favourite deep-fried fish meal. I took a few bites, and the next dish was served. This was a theme that lasted the whole night. There was just so much food that I could not keep up. And so much to drink too. Every table had a bottle of whisky. Whenever I walked to a different table,

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someone else wanted to skull the whisky with me. Before I knew it, I was off my feet.

The children all took a shine to me. Before I knew it, about forty children were surrounding me, wanting the crazy Aussie to play with them. I played a few games with them and made them happy. Then, some girls were on the stage performing traditional Thai dancing. Before I knew it, they were surrounding me in a big circle expecting me to do something, so I got down and did a stupid dance. The night turned out to be spectacular and flew by because I was so drunk.

As I sobered up, Warin's sister asked me to accompany her to Warin's hotel. Warin and Namsak were staying at a superb five-star hotel along the River Khwae. Warin's sister worked at the hotel, and it was a beautiful six-star resort. They nicely set up the room for the couple to spend their first night together. A tradition that was foreign to me, a lot of parties ended back in the room, cheering them in as they entered the room. A bit of a celebration happened before everyone moved out. Warin asked me to stay, but I thought it would be better if the couple spent some time together.

The following day, we went for a drive out to River Khwae Bridge, a historic bridge and rail line built by Japanese army prisoners of war during World War II. We spent some time exploring the rickety bridge and the markets surrounding it. I then saw something that I could not pass up. An opportunity to hug a baby cheetah. To ensure that the cheetah stayed calm, it had a bottle of milk that it was always sucking on. Its heart was beating so fast that it was a bit sad, really.

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The next few days passed, and we spent most of the time around the town eating food and returning to the farm, where we just relaxed. On another day, we went for a long drive through the fish-farming villages and to a few remote temples. The highlight of that trip was visiting a war memorial, which was the site where five Myanmar armies came to fight Thailand, then known as Siam, and take over Bangkok. I imagined a brutal battle with big elephants. Siam won the battle, which united their colonies to become a united Thailand. This battle site was significant for the Thai people as it united them as one nation.

On another day, we went to the Tiger Temple. Here, I had the opportunity to walk besides giant tigers. Unfortunately, they were doped out to ensure they did not inflict any damage on us, but it was still a fantastic chance to see these huge tigers up close. At the end of the day, I had the opportunity to see them play. These giant' cats were just like ordinary house cats in our loungerooms, reaching for toys and backflipping into the water. Seeing them play up close was magic and I realised they just wanted to play like any other animal.

The next day, we went to the Elephant Haven. I got the opportunity to ride a beautiful elephant. Because I was talking to him and patting him, the guide trusted me enough to take his place at the front, near the elephant's head. I was a little scared because it was so high up, but I soon settled into the experience. As we reached the river, the elephant filled its trunk with water and soaked me from head to toe. Then we headed back to the camp. As I jumped down, I went and fed a few of the other elephants and returned to the elephant I rode before leaving. I

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remembered looking into her beautiful, loving eyes and realising what a great connection we had made.

After my significant adventures, I spent the next few days back at the farm. I was exploring the area and spending time with the family there. It was a magical few days with lots of tasty food and laughs. On the last day, I sat down for dinner, and Warin's father got up to speak. I said to Warin, 'I haven't offended him, have I?' She said, 'No, he wants to say something.' She translated what he said, 'I don't have a son,' he said, 'but I would be proud to call you my son.' I thanked him and felt how gracious my Thai friends had been.

I headed into Bangkok for the next part of my adventure, as I was heading to Vietnam to visit my brother Philby for a week. I was about to head on the couple-over flight when I realised my visa was inappropriate. I contacted my cousin's family in Bangkok, and they came and grabbed me and sorted it out. I was then on my flight to Vietnam.

When I arrived in Vietnam, I was greeted by Philby's partner, Uyen, who took me to the middle of Hanoi, where Philby lived. Once in the city, Uyen introduced me to her university friends, and we chilled for a few hours. Eventually, Philby knocked off work and met his work friends at a small café around his school, where they planned to get drunk well into the night. So, drink after drink was what we did.

The following week was a bit of a blur, when Philby took me around town on his bike to different places to eat. We stayed at his house, which was a three-storey affair with his flatmates

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on other floors, one dedicated to a lounge room, another to a classroom and another to the washing room. There was also a pool table that kept us entertained for hours.

Uyen took me to a traumatising zoo where they teased animals like giraffes and tigers who were left bored to pace around the same path all day. On another day, we went to an amusement park. On other days we just toured around on bikes or by walking around Hanoi, finding unimportant things to do here and there. I took turns choosing who I was riding with, but it was quite the experience of zooming through traffic on these little bikes.

One of the best days of my life was when I spent time in Philby's class, watching him instruct his students. Seeing the respect he got from the students and seeing how much fun they had was great. Seeing him teach at different people's houses after work was also good. Philby taught the students English while Uyen and the mothers prepared a feast for everyone during the class. After the lesson, the whole kitchen was filled with food, and everyone sat down and feasted on the delicious food.

The last night in Vietnam was the best of all. Philby's American flatmate, Steve, broke his arm while riding his motorcycle, thinking he was a Moto X driver, and was not given any painkillers for the pain. Although Philby was staying at Uyen's, we decided to stay up all night to accompany Steve. We took turns playing our favourite songs and sang early in the morning. Then, at four a.m., we headed to the pho place down the road and had the freshest, most delicious pho I have ever had

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in my whole life. It was cooked with the freshest ingredients from the farm.

I flew back to Thailand, stayed at my cousin Scottie's Thai family. They had a successful signage business and a mansion in Bangkok's suburbs with seven tennis courts. I got myself comfortable and had my first game of tennis. I got used to playing tennis with them all afternoon before it would pour down with rain at about four thirty every day.

Other notable things I did in my week in Bangkok included going to a crocodile zoo, having a delicious Pad Thai on the River Khwae, visiting the site of the first Siamese Twins, shopping for my first real tennis racket, and watching my cousins play soccer. But the highlight was when the soccer team returned for a steamboat after the game and stayed to play tennis. Everything I did revolved around tennis whilst in Bangkok, as I was soaking up having access to fantastic tennis facilities. At one point, they paid for a tennis lesson and treated me with a Thai massage. They also organised a special Buddhist festivity for me because they wanted to show me how they celebrate.

Ultimately, I was spoilt in all three phases of my trip to Thailand, Vietnam, and Thailand again. I put on 13 kilograms in the 18 days I spent away. By the time I returned to Thailand, I could not eat any more, and they were surprised at how little I ate. The reality is that I was given so much food that, at times, I felt sick from eating too much. This was only due to the hospitality of the locals, as I was truly treated like a king.

A Vietnamese Wedding

We flew to Vietnam. When we got off in Hanoi, we headed into the city and got accustomed to our eight-dollar-a-night backpacker room. I stayed there with my brother Davy and his wife Jodie, who flew in from Canada. It was just around the corner from where my parents and just about everyone were staying.

When we got to where my parents were staying, Philby's best friend, Newts, arrived with his girlfriend Melissa and his parents, Denise and Wayne. We decided to just sit on the balcony and have some banter while watching the happenings on the street. There were men cutting wires, trying to make sense of the electric cables that were running everywhere. It was fascinating.

After a few good meals and a few good fruit drinks, we started preparing for Philby's wedding. Philby's other best mate, Tim and his wife, Bree, made their way to town, so we prepared for a buck's party. We bought Philby a tie with an Australian flag saying, 'Kiss Me, I'm Aussie.' We went barhopping because it was no more than \$0.15 for a drink, and we did whatever was required to get in. It was required to suck in some happy gas through a balloon at one bar, so we obliged. Before I knew it, everyone else had gone, and I was left on my own to stagger my way around to a few extra bars. I eventually staggered my way back to the hostel.

Mum and Dad spent most of their time exploring the beautiful cafés, having breakfast, morning tea, lunch, afternoon

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tea, and so on. I wandered around the streets with Davy and Jodie, trying everything and buying whatever was in my way. It was quite an enjoyable experience.

The day before the wedding, we took a taxi ride out of town before catching a bus. After a few hours of travelling, we reached Uyen's home village. It was a cute small town on the side of a mountain with big rice farms in the middle. The houses were simple and never complete because you had to pay taxes on complete homes in Vietnam. It was remarkable to be in such a unique little village. We went to a few houses where we were invited to have tea. Many speeches were made.

That night, we stayed at a cheap hotel. In some rooms, people found used condoms, the balcony was falling to pieces, and everyone complained about the beds being the most uncomfortable beds they had ever tried. I must have been lucky and got a good room. We headed up to sing some karaoke the first night and rocked it out that night.

Tim and I decided to see what was happening on the floor, where everything seemed to be happening. They asked us to sit down and if we wanted a massage. We thought this would be okay, so we got a massage. Then, they asked us to change into some boxer shorts, washed us, and offered to scrub our backs. After the massage, we were sitting out in the waiting room having tea when Philby came and had a piece of the person running the show. Not knowing what was happening, Tim and I were just going along with whatever they were doing, but apparently, they were saying in Vietnamese that they were trying

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to get more money out of us and would take advantage of us. Philby told Tim and me that he was disappointed in us.

The next day was the first day of the wedding celebrations. We woke up early to walk up to the top of the mountain, which has a beautiful Buddhist temple. We then headed down to the village for the wedding. Our family and a few of Philby's best mates were meeting there. Over the next three days, nearly one thousand people came and enjoyed the food and drink that were offered. There were all sorts of food—various parts of pork. Everyone brought something. And the family supplied lots of rice wine. Lots of rice wine.

Uyen's uncles seem to be everywhere, offering each one of the family members as much rice wine as we could handle. They said, 'Mot Hai Ba,' meaning one, two, three. We all did our best to keep up but struggled as the afternoon kicked in. Bree was the first to go as she asked Timmy to take her home.' As the afternoon kicked in, everything went dark, and the drinking turned to dancing. Lots of dancing.

The same pattern occurred over the next three days. Lots of great food, lots of people coming and going, lots of rice wine, followed by hours of dancing. As usual, the children gravitated towards me, so I entertained them. The final day was still filled with a few extra festivities, including photo shoots, and the newly-weds pouring champagne over a cascade of glasses. Uyen's brother and his friends also creatively carved watermelons.

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Just as the festivities were about to end and some of the people had begun to head back to the city, disaster struck. Uncle Paul got dehydrated from drinking too much rice wine. Hel went unconscious, and we began thinking for the worst. Davy said, 'He's having a stroke.' I immediately comforted Auntie Denise while Davy took Uncle Paul to the toilet. Uncle Paul started vomiting and profusely spurting diarrhoea from the other end. We were concerned that something more sinister was going to happen.

The village doctor arrived and came prepared with a range of treatment modalities. He began with some medications that could have been adrenaline or something similar. When it started to take effect, he then trialled acupuncture. At this point, Uncle Paul was still unconscious. The doctor asked me what points I would try, and I told him a few that he then administered. Still unconscious and only occasionally twitching, we were uncertain whether my funny uncle would return to us. The doctor then administered a drip, hung it above Uncle Paul's arm, and allowed the solution to slowly drip into his system. After about three hours, Uncle Paul slowly regained consciousness and relieved us. It was not a stroke, but regardless, it was a scary experience for all of us.

Uncle Paul was brought to a hospital in town, and we caught a scary bus trip back to Hanoi. While overtaking a van, we missed an oncoming car by millimetres. Once back in town, we checked in in a nice hotel for the night and got to experience the French Quarter of Hanoi. We went for a nice walk and explored some charming food.

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The rest of the time in Hanoi was spent around the main centre, where we went on day trips, had all types of local food, and explored various fresh fruit juices, which were terrific. We generally had an enjoyable time. This was justified by my Auntie Suzie's friend, who joined us for the wedding and the adventure. She stood up on the last day saying, 'How lucky we are as a family to all get along and generally have a good time.'

The Festive Wedding

Toronto is a special place to visit. I have not seen it in its bitter coldness, but that is an experience to be had. I have seen it in bright sunshine when the city gets behind its Blue Jays and Raptors. I have lovely memories of two Blue Jays games and an experience I will never forget. We got caught up in a hurricane at Jurassic Park and had to run our hardest to escape the rain to get the last seats in a packed and humming pub. It was a historic game for the Raptors, where a memorable slam put them into the playoffs. It is hard to explain the buzz around Toronto when the Blue Jays or the Raptors are thriving. It is all the talk, all around town.

My most memorable memory of being in Toronto will always be the wedding. Like Philby's wedding in Vietnam, Davy's was something to remember. Davy rented a piano for me so I could play my songs at his wedding. This became increasingly difficult every night because I needed more time to practice. We had so much fun. Every night, one of his mates would arrive from

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Australia, and we would end up 'drunk as a skunk', drinking Bloody Mary and playing darts. I would get home early in the morning and try to play my songs blindly, drunk. It is not that easy. I do not recommend anyone trying to do this.

Although I was not a groomsman, the groomsmen and the brothers had a memorable night getting our hair cut for the big day. Again, drinking and darts were key themes, but it took hours to get our hair cut. I grew my hair and beard for a year in preparation for this night. Although I cannot explain our fun that night, we all have great memories. Even though we are all not here on this planet anymore.

The Buck's party was also memorable. It began with a game of Axe Throwing, where Deano almost killed us all by throwing the damn thing so hard. Always incredibly talented, the Beautiful Younger Brother's mates quickly took to this challenging art. One of his mates was the last man standing, and we encouraged him to do his best chanting, 'Aussie, Aussie, Aussie. Oi, Oi, Oi.' Little did we know that the other leading Axe Thrower, whom we thought was a Canadian, was also from Adelaide.

The day escalated quickly, and we ensured the Torontonians knew that most of us were Aussies. I remember yelling on the bus, 'We are all Aussies!' One of the custodians said, 'We know, only Aussies can party like this.'

As the day turned into night, and we were fueled by increased alcohol intake, Intuition started buying me more beers because I was not working at the time. We had some great food

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at Little Korea, where Philby fell down the stairs because he was so drunk. I do not remember much after that, to be honest. I remember going from pub to pub, where I became acquainted with the ladies. Slowly, everyone else left the party and went home. Not me and my Beautiful Younger Brother. This was the last night before he would consummate his marriage and express a commitment to his much-loved wife. He was up for a fun time, and he had it with one of his big brothers. We were dancing with many ladies, to whom I proudly introduced Davy, yelling at times, 'This is his bucks party.' He was grooving with the ladies as only we know how, with one girl saying, 'You sure he's getting married?' I replied, 'Yes, he loves his fiancé more than you know. He just knows how to have fun.'

The wedding was a spectacular event. Over 30 of his friends and family flew in from Australia, and they rented out the entire Camp Kawartha, where the Great Wife had so many great memories. As the wedding party entered, I played my beautiful piano solo, 'The Butterfly Ballerina,' as they came in. I started by penning these magical words that summarized my relationship with Davy perfectly:

You are the sun shining in through the windowsill,

You are the one that guides me through the rain,

Just to be with you is to live a life true,

I am one when you are here.

I played various songs as they signed the marriage certificate before playing the jazzy 'Picture Frame' as the wedding party exited. We had a memorable toast from the large

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man who had announced their engagement when he proposed to her in Newfoundland. This was a special rum that was unique to Newfoundland, which was a separate country from Canada until 1949.

The wedding was spectacular. The Second Family was all there except for the Great Aunt, who, unfortunately, was too sick to make the long flight to Canada. Most of Davy's friends were there, including the Great Best Mate, Ryan, who delivered a cracking speech. Davy spent a generous amount of time sharing why everyone who made the journey over for his wedding meant so much to him. I had to take small sips of the craft beer to ensure I was not a balling mess.

It was more of a festival than a wedding. There were food stalls with all types of mac 'n cheese and poutine. There were also outdoor activities such as archery and axe-throwing, well as some amazing folk musicians performing. Farter, however, missed most of the activities as I left the piano charger in Toronto.

Davy's friends entertained themselves with a range of frisbee sports and more. The night turned a little bit messy as we danced the night away. Although it did not go to plan. I planned for a song I wrote to be the newly-weds' first dance, but due to a technical glitch, it became their second dance. My only goal in writing the song was for Mother Dearest to bawl her eyes out, but it only made the Great Aunt Kerrie unable to control her emotions

I had seen one of my talented school friends sing a song called 'You've Got Each Other To Hold' at her wedding. She sang

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with her husband on the ukulele. This inspired me to create these lyrics for Davy's first dance:

*You are a rose without any thorns,
You are the morning of thirty-three dawns,
You have each other 'til you grow old,
Because you have got each other to hold.
You are the wind that blows clouds away,
You are the memory of a perfect day,
You have got forever to see what unfolds,
Because you have got each other to hold.*

*You are the morning, a bright day's begun,
You are a flower reaching up to the sun,
You do not need diamonds, silver, or gold,
Cause you have got each other to hold.
You have each other till the end of days,
To love each other in millions of ways,
You have a love that could never be sold,
Because you have got each other to hold.
Because you have got each other to hold.*

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Peru

I left Sydney for Los Angeles and Houston before arriving at Jorge Chavez International Airport in Lima at approximately 11:15 p.m. After a lengthy taxi ride, I soon reached Orlando's house in the upmarket suburb of Miraflores. In the middle of the night, I was greeted by one of my favourite allies and a bottle of red from Chile. While we reminisced over stories from our side of the world, this small apartment became my home for the next 12 days.

By day, Orlando and I explored the chaotic streets of Miraflores and tried some of the local food. By night, he introduced me to his beautiful friends Lyanee and Tattiana. We tried some fancy food, and I was introduced to the famous, well, infamous Pisco Sour. After a night of trying Sammy's Pisco, Orlando passed out in the toilet.

After a few days exploring Lima with Orlando, I jumped on a double-decker to explore the ancient ruins of Panchanamac. It was an important religious site for four cultures that resided in Lima, both as a place for worship and as a place where pilgrims travelled considerable distances to answer their spiritual questions. The drive to and from Panchanamac demonstrated the significant disparity in Peru and opened my eyes to the poverty that exists outside Miraflores.

The following days we had long walks, spent late nights chatting with friends, and slept in to recover. Orlando organised a day trip in Punta Hermosa, Peru's most famous beach, where

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many a beer was drunk, and I had my first taste of ceviche. A highlight was the night spent with Lyanee, Andreas, and Tattiana, Orlando's three closest friends. We stayed at Tattiana's house until the early morning, chatting and sharing our favourite music.

After 12 days in Lima, I was introduced to a tour and spent a night in the hotel. Waking up early, I went to the airport and had a quick flight to Cusco. It is the capital of the Incan world, and it puts on a show. With my trusty sidekick Aoife, we explored the streets of Cusco, meeting new people, trying whatever came our way, and having random adventures within these cobblestone streets. As we got to know the group better, we could barely hide our excitement at the dinner table as we shared our adventures. We also had an amazing time dancing our night away at Mumm Africa and rocking out with a Peruvian rockstar who had played with Dave HL. We cannot explain what a wonderful time we in what had the Incans call the navel of the world.

The tour then moved to the sacred valley; a place revered as one of the most beautiful places in Peru. On our first bus adventure, it was fascinating to wind through these misty, mysterious mountains that are the Andes. As we explored the tiny villages in the Sacred Valley and wandered through their markets, I felt like pinching myself to prove that I was alive and not dreaming.

After an adventure-packed day through the Sacred Valley, we arrived at the extraordinary Ollantaytambo, where we had one of the most scenic lunches of our lives. The next day, we arrived by train at Machu Picchu to explore one of the world's

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most renowned ruins. It was so important to the Incan culture; you could only revere its beauty. As you look down at the quarry in the valley below, where the construction materials came from, or at the grand size of the mountains surrounding this palace, the Incans can only be admired for building such a mystical and wonderfully sacred place. It was sad to leave Machu Picchu, but memories of exploring it will always remain with me.

After another few days in Cusco, I embarked on a seven-hour bus trip across the Andes to Puno. It is the gateway to Lake Titicaca but also boasts a terrific nightlife. As we adventured through the largest navigable lake in the world, we discovered the great reed islands and explored a culture separated partially from the 'mainland' culture. Puno was a fitting place to have one more fantastic night with a spectacular group, as most were leaving the following day.

I became accustomed to my new group of six Aussies with a quiet seven-hour trip to the White City, Arequipa, a city surrounded by over 180 volcanoes. After an early night, I explored a museum dedicated to preserving ancient Incan mummies who had been sacrificed on high mountaintops throughout the Incan Empire.

A new day saw the group travel through scenic sites, from sunny to even snowy. Finally, we arrived at a picturesque destination that was our base to explore the Colca Valley. Within the Colca Valley is the Colca Canyon, the deepest canyon in the world. It is home to the sacred yet endangered condors that use the heat reflected from the valley to propel themselves to the peak

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of the canyon to find food. The condors came in waves, appearing less than a metre above the adoring crowd.

After a few days back in Arequipa, we boarded an overnight bus to Nasca. We then jumped on the bus to the Huachina Oasis, where I joined a group of boys on a sand dune for some sand-boarding adventure before having a meal and a cocktail in the poolside bar. We then continued to Pisco. The final day of the tour consisted of an early start as we left the earthquake-ravished town of Pisco and headed to the Ballestas Island, affectionately known as the 'Cheap Man's Galapagos.' Here we saw seals, penguins, and an array of other birds, wildlife, and beautiful scenery. We then went for a walk along the prestigious waterfront before boarding a bus for Lima to conclude the tour.

I spent the last eight days of my time in Peru at Orlando's house with his beautiful mum and friends. Like the first 12 days, we did a lot of walking, talking, and drinking. With Orlando, Tattiana, and Lyanee, we spent numerous nights in bars around Lima, eating exciting foods and checking out the sites. It was more laid back in comparison to the first 12 days but just as enjoyable. The most memorable was a fight outside the restaurant where we ate, my church adventure with Lyanee and her family, and a fabulous last supper in Miraflores where I was spoilt with my much-loved ceviche.

After my stay in Peru, I went to Toronto on April 26, 2017. After confronting an inquisitive customs officer, I met Davy at the airport, who brought me to his new home. After that, I spent a lot

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of time hanging out with Jodie, Davy, the dog Harvey, and the cat Cedar and walking the streets of Toronto.

Davy and Jodie managed to get a weekend off, so we decided to go camping. After a nice drive out of Toronto, we made our way to a beautiful caravan park, where we camped in a 'yurt' near the lake. Davy's Australian mate, Deano waited for us with his new wife. We had a lovely night by the campsite, where Davy and Jodie got a bit tipsy before retiring to the yurt.

The next day, we were off to Algonquin Provincial Park. As we arrived at the gates, we were told that there had been sightings of some moose and beavers, so we hoped to see some too. Not long after arriving at the park, Davy started screaming and quickly pulled over. About 50 metres down the road was our first sighting of a moose. It was amazing.

After a quick walk around, we continued driving, and not long after, Davy spotted a baby moose. We pulled over to the side of the road and were looking at the baby moose from above the road when I looked to my left, and less than a metre away, the mother moose was eyeballing me. Davy screamed, 'Too close!' and pulled my shirt to get me out of the way of the mother moose as she charged across the road to be with her baby. After that close encounter, we continued down to the beaver dam, where beavers had artfully built the walls made of sticks. While we did not see any beavers, we saw a couple of moose up close. Not a bad at all, as many Canadians never see a moose.

When I returned to Toronto, I spent time with Davy and his amazing wife, Jodie. I spent a fantastic day with Davy at his

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work, tried various restaurants, and watched a Blue Jays game at Rogers Stadium. One memorable night, we were going to watch a Toronto Raptors game at their downtown arena that they call 'Jurassic Park.' But a mini cyclone ripped through the city, leaving us running to escape the heavy rain. We watched the game in a pub where Chris Durrant scored a memorable slam dunk to send the Raptors into the next playoff stage. A real highlight of the trip was heading up to Jodie's brother Ryan's house, where I saw his wife Krista, Jodie's beautiful parents, niece Caitlin, and nephew Cooper. I felt grateful that my wonderful brother had found such a fun, trusting, and accommodating family.

Exploring With My Bro

I enjoy exploring with Philby, including exploring Melbourne with him and the family, as well as around central NSW. Travelling with Philby is very low-key and unplanned. We would always have a little on the agenda, but we would always find something else to do. While working at Uniting, I didn't have a break for three years. It got to a point when I started to burn myself out. I had too much unused leave, I was forced to take a two-week break. Philby was coaching Bob Brown Cricket Coaching out West, so I asked if I could join him.

I caught the train out to Dubbo, where I stayed above a lovely pub that was right in the middle of town. I arrived a little before Philby, and his young local cricketers, who stayed in a motel down the road. I was busily studying a short course on

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Platform Development in my spare time and was hoping to fill in the extra time while Philby was coaching me to complete the assignments for this six-week course. So, after doing some work, I met Philby at a beautiful Japanese restaurant for dinner, where I had a delightful wagyu beef dish. After dinner, I retreated to my pub for a night cap.

The following day, I explored Dubbo's shops, walking up and down the shopping strip and exploring the river walks around town before retreating to the library to do some work and rest. After Philby finished, he met me at the library, and we walked up to the Dubbo Zoo, which is right in the middle of town. Interestingly enough, it was still operational until recently and was the site of the last execution in NSW. It was chilling, considering how many dangerous people operated in such tight confines. The next day I did a similar exploration around town before heading into the library for more work.

The next day, we headed to the next town in our agenda, Orange, where a few of the young local cricketers Philby was coaching were also going. We stayed at a nice little motel where the boys and us took up two rooms. The first night was full of cricket banter as we laughed the night away.

The next morning, I got dropped off in town and rented a bike for the day. I ended up in the middle of nowhere before deciding I needed a map. I found a map and discovered it was a small but decent ride out to the botanical gardens. I enjoyed walking around the gardens for about two hours and took it all in, in the heat. I then explored the shops in Orange before taking the bike back to the motel. After Philby finished his coaching, we

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went for a beautiful drive around the hills of Mount Kanabolas and enjoyed the views from the top. The next day I, too, explored around the town and did some work in the library before meeting Philby at the Council Chambers, where we planned to meet before heading on to our next town.

The next destination was Jerilderie, a small Riverina town where Shaun Brown had his next camp. We found a motel and settled in for the night with a few new people coaching in the town. The following day, I walked through the sleepy village and discovered the lake was connected to the world's largest billabong. I spent the day exploring the town, discovering the sites where Ned Kelly had robbed a bank in 1879 and where the 'Jerilderie letter' was drafted. It was a decree asking for the resignation of a corrupt police force. The town was fascinating, with little historical markers on each significant building, highlighting the importance of the buildings to the Kelly gang.

I spent a few days exploring and spending my spare time in the library. Philby picked me up on the last day, and we headed to Collamberle. We met Mother Dearest and Father at a motel. They come down because Philby had been nominated for Citizen of the Year. Then, we headed into town for a meal, where we met some of the locals. Everybody seemed to know Philby, as he was obviously an important part of the town.

The next day was the ceremony. Philby's award was the last of the day because it was the big one. But unfortunately, Philby did not take home the award. Mother Dearest and Farter offered to drive me home, and we returned to the Hawkesbury, another adventure coming to an end.

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A Whirlwind Trip to Central Australia

I recently enjoyed my biggest road trip ever with Daniel, a young man with whom I had worked at One Door for approximately eight months. I was a bit disheartened at the time because my contract was coming to an end. So, on a Friday night, when Daniel said he was heading to Burke, I rang my mate, Crossy, to see if he was still at Burke and decided to join Daniel on Sunday.

On the Sunday, I woke up at 3:30 a.m. and caught the train to Seven Hills with all my stuff. Glen was meeting us there with one of our work colleagues. Daniel picked us all up at the station, and we headed to the Blue Mountains for the first part of our adventure. When we arrived, we went for a short walk, got the drone up into the valley, and said goodbye to Glen and our work colleague. Then, we continued our adventure to Mudgee, where we stopped for a delicious breakfast before grabbing some olives on the side of the road and making our way through the central west of NSW. We set the drone up again over some purple fields and another farm before making it to Burke at around 5:30 p.m. We drove roughly 10 hours through Central NSW.

We decided to go for a walk. At the first corner, an Aboriginal man, sounding like a goat, started following us, so we went through a park. Whilst going through the park, we heard a party, so we decided to follow that. But every time we got closer to where the sound was, it seemed to go further away. Still, being followed, Daniel typed in his Google account, 'Is Burke safe?' A few reports of Burke being the most dangerous town in NSW kept

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coming up, saying, 'it has been compared to crime rates of Afghanistan War Zones.' As the sound of the party followed us, we returned to our room.

The following day, we went for a drive around town and explored the river close to flooding. We had a nice lunch by the river before I got a call saying that I was chosen to be interviewed for A Blockchain Developer position on the Gold Coast. While I planned to head back to Sydney from Burke on Wednesday, Daniel asked over the phone whether it would be easier if they would fly me up from Adelaide. They agreed so Daniel decided we would leave Burke for Tibooburra to go to Adelaide. Daniel planned to head up to Birdsville, but this road was flooded, so he was eagerly checking the roads and maps.

With the new plan in mind, we headed out to see Crossy at his house just outside of town. Crossy showed Daniel and me where he lived, but he was busy, so we continued. We headed out of Burke along a narrow dirt road. We encountered some beautiful wildlife, including a huge albatross and a giant Eagle that teased us for about 15 minutes. As darkness came, it became a hazardous drive as we became a dodgeball for kangaroos. At one point, we hit a kangaroo that just stopped in the middle of the road. Eventually, we made it to the beautiful town of Tibooburra, had an excellent meal at the pub and settled for the night in the comfortable hostel.

The next morning, we headed out west through Sturt National Park to Cameron's Corner. We managed to get a small roast that Daniel hoped to cook that evening, but all the shops at Cameron's Corner were closed as everyone who worked there had

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COVID. We took a few photos of the border fences and tried to call through to the organisation on the Gold Coast to make arrangements. However, the signal could have been better. I hoped to call work to tell them that my plans had changed, but it was impossible to make a phone call. This triggered my anxiety.

As we made our way through the desert, it was just us, the road, and the elements. We made our way around the outskirts of the Flinders Rangers and, after hours of driving, found a place to camp for the night. Daniel found an old riverbed with plenty of space to set up camp and somewhere to pitch a tent for the night. It took us a while, but we managed to cook a few potatoes and left-over scraps from our lunch. Unfortunately, we couldn't cook the roast as it had been in the fridge and was still frozen. As a result, we had an early night in which I had restless sleep on and off in the van.

We continued our adventure through the Flinders Rangers in a hurry to get to Adelaide. I took on the driving at Hawker and drove to Port Augusta with only a toilet stop. Daniel was frustrated that his plans had changed and did not want to go to Adelaide. I rushed him because we thought we had an extra day to get to Adelaide. His plan was for him to continue from Port Augusta and for me to get a rental car into Adelaide. Unfortunately, no vehicles were available, so Daniel and I reluctantly continued.

We headed down to Port Pirie, where we managed to get some sugar in our bellies. This overcame our hunger as we became nice to each other again. I continued driving all the way to Adelaide, where we settled in our backpackers for the night.

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Once settled, we headed to Adelaide's Chinatown and had a good meal.

Daniel drove me to the airport the following day, where we said our goodbyes. I caught a flight to Sydney and a connecting flight to the Gold Coast. Once there, I took a taxi from Coolangatta to the office I was going to. Nearly everyone had gone home because it was 5:30 p.m. by the time I arrived, but I was still interviewed by the CEO of the business. then I was asked to be driven to my hotel at the Hilton. I spent the night exploring Surfers Paradise and grabbed a good feed before returning to my luxurious hotel.

The next morning, I was taken to the blockchain course that was part of the offer if my application was successful. I was met by one of the blockchain developers, who asked me what my vision was. 'My vision is to blockchain the world. I would have one platform in which blockchain technology would allow all data entered to be immutable.' He liked this solution, but I knew he could tell that I knew very little about how the technology worked. I continued the course before catching a taxi back to the airport and catching the plane back to Sydney. Within five days, I had travelled from Sydney to Adelaide, the Gold Coast, and back to Sydney. What an adventure.

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CHAPTER 6~ All types of Love, Lust, Sex, and Satisfaction

Growing up, I had a wonderful childhood but was primarily focused on sports and music. I had a few girlfriends in high school, but I first fell in love when I moved to Canberra. I had a few beautiful girlfriends at the university, but only when I found my first faithful companion in my 30s did I have another taste of pure love. It was love with an older woman, but pure and blissful. I have had flirtatious love, a taste of sensuality, love with an older woman, and lustful adventures. I have fallen in love with all body types, all in preparation for finding a life partner who would give me everything I need. I am searching for my true love

Childhood Sweethearts

Growing up, the thought of girls never crossed my mind. I was one of the boys who loved playing football, tennis, cricket, and whatever sport I fancied. By the time I reached sixth grade, 'love' was still a taboo word, despite my developing a reputation of a young Casanova.

The seventh grade opened the field for me substantially, and these things developing on the girls' chests could satisfy a wandering eye. I had minor flirtations and possibly a few heart flutters with the young ladies, but largely I did not think about 'girls' that much. I was too busy playing games on the sports field

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and practising piano at home. I remember being nervous with one young lady but never had the guts to ask her out. I imagined her throwing stones at my windowsill every night so that we could escape and spend a night out in the moonlight together.

The first girl that took my fancy, even though I told the boys I had previously been interested in many, was a Pretty Little Red Head. She was clever, and we spent all our time flirting on the phone. We went on a few dates to the movies, I think, and we took immense joy in holding each other's hands in the playground, but it was more of a show than anything else. I enjoyed holding her hand, but we would stay far apart because we feared touching each other's bodies. Her friends tried many times for us to kiss at the football field, but my nerves got in the way, and there were lots of nervous giggles.

In ninth grade, I was snuck in a school disco by two of my friends up at Cessnock High, where I was up at Maitland playing in the state finals of the Davidson Shield. It felt like I was the novelty of the night as I soon grabbed a young, skinny girl to get my first kiss. It was underwhelming initially, but as she started experimenting with more adventurous kissing movements, it became more enjoyable for me. She went to the toilet, and I never got another glimpse of her, but at least three other girls, all of whom were more developed, may I say, all took turns teaching me a thing or two about kissing. It was not until the night's end that the 12th grade girls realised that this handsome chap was only in the ninth grade.

A few years passed, and I had crossed the eyes of this young, skinny dancer with a cute little face. I told a young Black

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Priest on a long walk from Kurrajong to North Richmond after our 10th year formal that I had my eyes on her. We giggled numerous times across the playground, but she was a year below me, and they rarely got involved in extra-curricular activities together.

It was not until the school disco when we were united in a loving embrace, kissing for what seemed like hours, never letting go of each other's mouths. Her friend conveniently slid my hand from her well-shaped back and down to grasp her equally well-shaped bottom. This was a unique experience for such an innocent boy, as I needed this encouragement.

We had a magical couple of weeks together, including a Christmas event. We kissed passionately before the crowd turned around to see the fireworks and caught us in the act. She was embarrassed, but I thought it was fantastic. We shared a memorable day down at the river on the play equipment, where we kissed and cuddled for an entire day. I would often ride my bike down to her house to kiss her passionately, but I never seemed to want my mouth to leave hers, and she got a bit bored of it all. Finally, one day she invited me up to her house, where she burst into tears and called it off.

By that point, I had begun washing the dishes to get some extra cash on a Friday evening to accompany my already healthy income from piano teaching. Then, at my second job in hospitality, I met a young lady who was a few years ahead of me. She was gorgeous. She had a big smile, big blue eyes, delightful lips, and beautiful blond hair. We used to argue as the cows came home, but I could not keep my eyes off her. I was only 16, and

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although I was pouring bourbon and Cokes, she would spend the shifts ringing her friends and talking about the clubs she was adventuring to after the shift was over.

On the last night, I was working at the restaurant as a terrible waiter. I remember thinking about all I fantasized doing with her out in the cool room if I had my way with her. It was all too much working with her all these years, thinking how gorgeous she was and not having the guts to ask her out. It would have been all too easy for me to get a fake ID and see what all the fuss was about at one of these clubs. Then all my dreams seemed to come true as she bent over and rubbed her bare breasts over my back. I turned around, and she had her bra off, and I had my first glimpse of some beautiful plump adult boobies.

She drove me home, and all I could think about was what I wanted to do to her, but I had no idea what to do. The silence was palpable because I knew she wanted the same thing too. I wanted her to 'teach me a thing or two.' But I was nervous, shy. I had confidence but lacked confidence at the same time. I asked her to pull up outside my grandparents' house because it was only a few hundred metres from my parent's house. But I did not want to lose my virginity outside my parent's house. We looked at each other, both with nervous laughs. Nervous sharing, nervous giggles. And then I opened the door. 'I... guess I better get going.' I closed the door, and she drove off, yelling 'Wanker!' as she drove off. I took the longest 300-metre walk of shame of my life. I wish I had just taken a move. I kicked the ground. Screamed. I felt like such a loser.

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I was 16 or 17 and had not experimented sexually to this point yet, despite a few close calls. The word wanker seemed to resonate around in my mind. I had heard many boys talk about 'wanking,' but I had no idea what it was. So, I pulled my little thing and felt nothing. But then it began getting better, and it started to feel good. Then, when I started a few rhythmic movements, it felt great. As I do, I got heavily involved in this. What had I been missing out on?

The excitement and joy however quickly turned to anger and frustration. I wasted all the best sexual energy of my life on myself. It however wasn't what I craved. Human love and connection. While it gave me a release from all the trauma and anger I had held inside to that point. Eventually, it just felt empty.

At the same time, I was spending more time with my mates, but they had begun going to the university, and Friday and Saturday nights had become lonelier for me. I was texting the one that got away. She was in England and kept me company during these lonely nights. She recently came back from England, and we had gone on some nice bike rides together. She told me about Italy, mobile phones, and a whole lot of stories that were novel to me. It broke my heart when I had to attend her funeral two weeks later. All those times she talked to me from the other side of the world, I never knew she was dying. I just enjoyed talking to her.

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My First Love

Then I moved to Canberra to start university. I had met a few pretty girls in New Zealand and had been proposed to by a much older Nurse, but nothing had taken my fancy. That was until I met a tall, athletic girl who tripped over the vacuum cleaner the first time she saw me. We started talking, and I was mesmerised by her enthusiasm and talent. She could play everything. Bass, guitar, and drums, and I did not even know for a long time that her most beautiful instrument was her voice. She was working at the music shop because she had pestered the boss so much to let her, and that is where I met her. I was putting up a brochure to start a band, but what I found was even more remarkable, my First Love.

I could not wait to see her. She had strong, long legs, a perfect post-puberty body, beautiful eyes, and a pretty face that I could not keep my eyes off. Initially, I would carry my piano over to her house in a shopping trolley, and I would play all my songs with her on her drums in her lounge room. Then, one day we were all butt naked, but I did not take advantage of her. I was more interested in trying to study at that point but would look forward to coming over to her house every morning because I could not wait to see her.

One night, I organised a party when only my First Love and her best friend turned up. I did not know, but she sabotaged all the invites because she wanted some alone time with me. After a while, her friend left, and we were alone. Then, out of nowhere, we both leaned in and started kissing. We kissed all night. We watched Rave all night. We planned to jump on the bus to audition for Australian Idol the next morning but slept in because we were up all night. I tried a few moves on her that night, but I wonder if she even noticed. The angry flatmate saw evidence of this, as I made more mess with the wet dreams as we

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fell asleep arm in arm after one of the most memorable moments of my life.

We did have sex after that. At first, it was not great. It was awkward, and nothing exciting seemed to happen. I had to tip-toe to kiss her, as she was a lot taller than me. I enjoyed kissing her. She had a memorable taste and a memorable smell. I took the tongue thing way too far, though.

Her being tall made it difficult to kiss her. But it was not challenging anymore when she was lying down. After a lifetime of sports, her legs were strong but just starting to fill out. They were perfect. They went straight up to her hips, which were just beginning to fill out. Then there seemed to be miles between her hips and her beautiful neck, where I experimented with lots of hickies.

Her breasts were also starting to fill out and were perfectly tender, firm, and perky. Like the ones t in the movies. Her body was subtle and smooth. I used to enjoy massaging her beautiful body, front and back, with whatever moisturiser I could get my hands on. With a massive erection, I would start from her neck and work my way down to her feet, touching whatever I could feel, experimenting in whatever way we could imagine. Her body was a wonderland.

*We got the afternoon,
You got this room for two,
One thing I've left to do,
Discover me
Discovering you.
One mile to every inch of
Your skin like porcelain
One pair of candy lips and
Your bubble-gum tongue.*

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*And if you want love
We'll make it.
Swim in a deep sea
Of blankets
Take all your big plans,
And break 'em
This is bound to be a while.
Your body is a wonderland,
Your body is a wonder; I'll use my hands,
Your body is a wonderland.
Something about the way the hair falls in your face,
I love the shape you take when crawling towards the pillowcase,
You tell me where to go and
Though I might leave to find it
I'll never let your head hit the bed.
Without my hand behind it.
You want love?
We'll make it.
Swim in a deep sea
Of blankets
Take all your big plans,
And break 'em
This is bound to be a while.
Your body is a wonderland,
Your body is a wonder, I'll use my hands,*

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*Your body is a wonderland,
(I'll never speak again, again)
(I'll use my hands)
Damn, baby
You frustrate me,
I know you're mine, all mine, all mine.
But you look so good it hurts sometimes,
Your body is a wonderland (I'll never speak again, again)
Your body is a wonder, I'll use my hands,
Your body is a wonderland (I'll never speak again, again)
Your body is a wonderland (I'll use my hands)*

I made her feel so special that her dad knew it. She would play John Mayer's 'Your Body is a Wonderland' on repeat all day and all night in her newly purchased car. We would wait for the lights to go out, and then she was mine and I was hers. Whatever she wanted, I wanted. Whatever I wanted, she wanted.

I would often re-enter my consciousness after a peaceful night to see her beautiful eyes staring at my post-pubescent face. I would cheekily say, 'What?' She would reply, 'I am allowed to stare at you if you want.' It was incredibly reassuring knowing that the beautiful face was my last thought before I drifted off to sleep and would be the first thing I would see as my eyes peered open in the morning. It was an excellent way to start the day.

We also had a wonderful relationship outside the bedroom. We would drive around Canberra, talking about whatever came up. Music, the Raiders, football, our friends. We had a job or two together. The best one was when we would collect posters from all the venues around Canberra, and it was our job to put them on whatever posts, walls, or wherever we could glue them on. Because I was so slow at it, my First Love

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would do all the work. I was getting paid \$10 per hour just to drive around and talk with my girlfriend.

We recorded a few songs and did a bit of busking. We tried to get a band going, but we were more enthusiastic than the rest of them. My First Love was a beautiful soprano singer with an impressive collection of acoustic masterpieces on her then superb eight-piece recording set-up. She was learning to manage bands at the Canberra equivalent at TAFE and put on a fantastic festival that Poof and Hol came up with, as Hol's band at the time was the headline. Here, we watched the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup Final between Australia and England. Unfortunately, Poof left his ID back home, and I could not enjoy the nail-biting final.

Eventually, I became unwell and had to head back home to try and get better. This was hard for both of us, as we became accustomed spending every moment together. When she would come up and visit, she would at once drag me aside and have her way with me in the bedroom, even though my parents knew all too well her intentions. She came up a few times and got to know my besties well. We had some magical nights when we all enjoyed each other's company. She seemed to fit in. I told one of my female friends that I was thinking about marrying her and would propose to her soon. However, I was not financially stable either, which was why it never happened.

The time apart had a toll on us. When I did venture down to Canberra, a lot of the fire was gone. Her friends had not accepted me, and our once-flowing conversation had slowed. I was starting to get an interest in Chinese Medicine, and she was trying to support it, but the fire had dwindled. She broke up with me once, but we had had such a wonderful afternoon riding our bikes around Lake Burley Griffin and paddle boarding around the fountain that she said she could not imagine me being anything other than a boyfriend. But her music had turned from *Your Body is a Wonderland* to *Boys Are Summer*:

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*I never will forget those nights,
I wonder if it was a dream,
Remember how you made me crazy?
Remember how I made you scream?
Now I don't understand what happened to our love,
But baby, I'm gonna get you back,
I'm gonna show you what I'm made of.
A little voice inside my head said, don't look back. You can never
look back,'
I thought I knew what love was,
What did I know?
Those days are gone forever,
I should just let them go.
I can tell you my love for you will be strong,
After the boys of summer have gone.*

She had all but broken my heart, and I was hospitalised in my longest stint at Pialla. She was ringing every night, but my mania and paranoia were frustrating her. She came and cheered me up immensely, but her mum was in her ear, telling her that it would probably be difficult living with a man with schizophrenia, knowing too well that this was the case as her brother had lived with the condition most of his life. So, it was all but over by the time I was out of the hospital.

She came up to visit me at my new house in North Parramatta. We had had a wonderful day together exploring around, and it felt like the old times again. Then at night, she was sleeping on the floor, and I was sleeping on the bed. So, I asked if she 'wanted to come up to the bed.' She gave me a nervous smile and laugh and said, 'Yes.' I, however, swapped with her so she

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could have a comfortable bed, and I slept on the cold, hard floor. I did not realise that she wanted to rekindle things that night. I was not thinking about sex. I was happy to have my good friend back. She, however, woke up in a foul mood, and I realised the consequence of my lack of decision.

We never really talked after that. She came up for my grandfather's funeral, and we laughed. But other than that, every time I tried to contact her, she made excuses for not catching up. We drifted apart, and now she has a beautiful husband and wonderful children. She went through a tough time when she lost her beloved grandmother but is now living a happy 'Christian' life. We occasionally talk by text, but in these long-winded exchanges, she talks more about God than what she does in her life.

A Girl with Great Boobs

I went a few years without love. I made good friends with some good fellas and had several small crushes but no significant romances. I had met a young Lizelle. On our first meeting, I dreamt that something would come of it. She was younger than me and, while confident, seemed too in the moment to have any in-depth conversation. As she matured, I would find this out to be the opposite, but even though she flirted with the idea of us being together, I never seriously accepted the offer.

Regardless, I started hanging out with her and a group of young women with a young Orlando. The first year on campus was a blast for all of us, and I developed a small group of four or five with whom we started adventuring a little further. We got off class early to go to the beach or have Pho. We had a wonderful

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trip to Wombeyan Caves, but no romances occurred for Orlando and me. Just a whole lot of fun and a load of good memories. At one stage, I pranced around the camp zone, singing, 'I am the queen of the fairies.'

One day, when I was at Luna Park with Lizelle, I received a nervous look from a Blonde Bombshell. She was also working at Luna Park and had seen me there, and Lizelle organised a date for us to go on.

We went on a few dates. I was nervous as hell as I met her at an underwhelming shelter. We then went and had a delicious meal of Pho before spending the night at Bankstown Leagues Club. We did a little bit of everything that night, had various meals, and ended up spending ages in the pokies machine. By about 4:00 a.m., I was ready to go home, but the Blonde Bombshell seemed to have another agenda and did not seem to want to go home yet. I just wanted some sleep.

We went on a few more dates, including a memorable night at a restaurant that was previously filmed for a TV show and was showing their audience the happenings of the event. It was a bit of a buzz. We had a good enough time. I was ready to go home but she wanted to stay up. One time, she started to strip off, but it just did not feel right. She just did not feel comfortable in my arms. She would stay up late into the night, and I would want to get some sleep. This was a theme that continued for a bit.

I helped organise a memorable camping trip to Narrabeen Lake, where many of my friends joined. We had many tents set up joined together by tarps. The Blonde Bombshell and I went for

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a walk, found some young people, and ended up at their lame party. I made an excuse to get away from the party, and the Blonde Bombshell and I had some fantastic alone time. I was not sure who grabbed who, but we ended up kneeling in the foot-deep water and kissed passionately under the moonlight. Leaning in and under the water as her lips felt so subtle and sweet. It was a memorable half an hour when I enjoyed her body's touch and the taste of her lips.

We then walked to the top of the mountain, where we were met by another girl who I had been spending some time with on campus. She was a short, stocky girl with a friendly enough face and noticeable glasses. We talked for hours. There was lots of laughter. The two young women seemed to hit it off and promised each other they would stay in contact. I did not see the Blonde Bombshell much after that. I was not even sure what happened. Whether I called it off or she got bored. But I felt she always wanted more than what I was willing to give her at the time. I was looking for more friendship than a frisky sexual relationship.

A few weeks passed, and I spent more time with the short, stocky girl, and we decided to go down to get a few drinks at the pub. I was into homemade whisky at the time, so I snuck a bottle of homemade whisky into the bar. I ordered Coke and mixed it with my drink. By the night's end, we were both tipsy and walked a couple of kilometres to get home. We became close, and I was looking to see how far I could take it.

A few hundred metres from the campus, I said, 'I bet ya, you really want to kiss me right now. She initially denied it with

a shy little giggle but eventually said, 'Yeah, I wouldn't mind a kiss. We got back to my room, and she looked kind of hot standing there in the moonlight. I liked this girl, and although she was stocky, she had a particular beauty. So, I cheekily said, 'I bet you want to take off your top. She replied with a cheeky smile and took off her top in a sexy way. I could not believe how big and impressive her boobs were. There was only one step to go. To see what they looked like beneath those impressive e-cup, sexy black bras.

She took off her bra, and there were the most beautiful, huge, yet perky boobs you could ever imagine. They were perfect. They seemed to protrude straight out of her surprisingly skinny stomach. She looked stocky because those boobs were ginormous. And they were perfect for touching. I grabbed them. Squeezed them. Kissed them. Licked them. And got my whole face between them, so they jiggled from side to side as I motor-boated them. She soon removed her underwear, and I went to paradise that night. And she did not mind me having a go in the morning, too, if I wanted. Or whenever I felt the urge. Before long, we were in love and spending all our time together.

The Girl with Great Boobs was fun to be around, and she was hooked. Although she told me she could not think about anything but me, I was a bit concerned because it was distracting her from her studies. She always wanted me, and this is just not functional when you are studying and trying to pass uni. She would want to watch TV with me and stay with me until we went to bed.

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I was still studying a decent amount and starting to get better results, but depression had taken hold of the Girl with Great Boobs, and she was finding it increasingly difficult for her to function. I offered to help brainstorm an assignment in which I was reasonably interested. It was due in a week, so I decided to give her a head start. But when it was time to hand the assignment in, she had not touched it. So, she got an extension and another extension until there were no more possibilities of extending. She wanted me to do the assignment for her, but I was doing my best to keep up with my own workload. She ended up handing out a half-finished assignment, in which she got full marks.

This lack of motivation affected all areas of her life. When we went out, we usually had an enjoyable time with her friends, but I remember my enthusiasm being all too much for her on occasion. She could not cope with my enthusiasm. One night, we drove to Burrolow Creek to see the glow worms, but the car could not make it down the difficult road, and we had to walk a few kilometres in. She must have been spooked by some of the noises in the wildlife because she started crying. She cried. And cried and cried. I could only hug her and hold her, saying, 'It is alright.'

A few months passed, and we had many memorable nights with our friends, but I left for China and left behind a depressed girlfriend and endless opportunities. The first week passed, and I had not heard anything. Then, the second. There was no communication from home, so I decided to free up my options and hopefully find happiness in China. I made close friends with some girls from home, and there was a world of

opportunity for amazing Chinese women. So, I called the Girl with Great Boobs and said it was over. 'It just wasn't working.' I was single and ready to mingle.

Asian Beauty

In the third year of my Chinese Medicine degree, I took a subject based on ethics. I was not sure how it fit into a Traditional Chinese Medicine degree, but regardless, I was paired with a young Korean Beauty. I initially took an early shine to her when I glanced across the room, but she did not notice me. At least, I thought.

Our assignment focused on Moral and Legal Rights concerning Cornelia Rau. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, and disappeared from Manly hospital, fleeing to far north Queensland, where she assumed a new identity, 'Anna.' She claimed to be a German exchange student who could not speak much English. Based on this case, the assignment raised many legal and moral questions, including identity, human rights, the legal definition of mental illness, rights to diagnosis, consent, duty of care, negligence, legal limitations, and boundaries. I was so engrossed in the topic that I was unaware that Korean Beauty had eyes on me as more than just an assignment partner.

She gave me all the signs, but in delivering the presentation, I was so focused on getting a good mark that I was utterly blind to what was happening around me. We delivered a

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flawless presentation, and I got my first High Distinction in my life. I got 91 out of 100 for the subject.

What was more impressive was that I started spending time with Korean Beauty; she was a lot of fun. We went with her friends to Port Stevens, where we lost her friends and had a kiss fest. I loved holding her because she was much smaller than I was used to, and I was impressed by the tightness of her waste. It was like touching hard concrete, but her skin was silky smooth. There was not a blemish from the toe to her head. Her skin was perfect.

Soon, we started spending all our time together. I remember talking to her about the difference in life in Sydney and Melbourne. In Sydney, we are very individualistic and spend much time together. In Melbourne, I thought, everyone seems to enjoy each other's company and stay up all night drinking coffee and celebrating everyone's company. She said, 'I want to live as they do in Melbourne with you. I want to stay with you all night.'

So occasionally, she came over, and we would have nights together, but mostly, she returned to her sad family life. She did not even have a bed because she chose to sleep with her sister. Her father often returned from nights drunk and sometimes hit her. I desperately wanted to get her to escape this abuse. No wonder she wanted to live like we were in Melbourne. No wonder she wanted to be with me all the time.

I got acquainted with her body. It was perfect to look at, and I enjoyed touching it all over. She had beautiful skinny legs and a cute little tummy. The other Asian boys were jealous that I had more to play with than the rest because she had plenty of

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cleavage to touch. And I played with them a lot. I played with her body a lot, to be fair. We had sex at every opportunity. Three, four, five, six, seven, and sometimes eight or more times per day. It was a sexathon.

I would wake up to her sneaking through my door, which I kept slightly open for her. We would make love two to three times before class and when we came home from class as a reward for finishing a paragraph. She would show me all sorts of places that I never knew about, besides the damn at the uni, which I found out many people consider their secret hideaway. We would have sex when we went for a walk along the river. In the park. Even if people were around.

One day we hired a backpacker's room for the night for 10-15 minutes of glory. Another time, we had sex in the middle of the city. It was raining, and the windows of the car were misty. But we got caught. It did not seem to matter if people were around. She even wanted to do it in the big church in the Domain, but we missed that opportunity. However, she made sure we had sex in the park opposite Central.

It got a bit ridiculous, to be honest. When I lived with my oldies at Kurrajong, she would call me to meet her at Wiley Park. It takes me about an hour and 10 minutes to get there in traffic. So, I would make the trip for her to sneak myself beside the stage, where she would give me head jobs and sometimes even the whole deal. She was a nymphomaniac. It was wherever and whenever. She could not keep her hands off me, and I could not keep my hands off her. She was just too hot.

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Then, one day, I noticed that her perfectly skinny hips were widening, and her moods were becoming increasingly erratic. After sex one afternoon, I had this strange image in my mind of a sperm floating in the air. I had gotten my Asian Beauty pregnant.

It was as if my subconscious would altogether avoid the subject. Whenever she mentioned children—her child, our child—it was as if my mind went completely blank. She would talk about how she would start talking to 'it.' It was not that I did not want to be a dad. I just was not ready. It was not that I did not want to talk about it. Something in my psyche just completely blanked out.

Then one day in class, we learned about a special acupuncture move on Spleen 6 (SP 6) Shanyinjiao and how it can induce abortions. One of our classmates had tried this maneuver on one of her clients and had to rush her to the emergency room because she almost bled herself to death. Luckily, they performed a routine that ensured the patient was brought back to life, but it was a shocking story that sent a shock wave through the classroom. Later, Korean Beauty told me she was thinking of having an abortion. I told her that, 'There are many risks and complications. What about that story in class?' Her reply was, 'I would prefer to bleed to death than have your baby.'

I am still shaken by this comment up to this day, but I am not surprised that I pushed this poor girl to this point. I have been distant since I heard of the pregnancy, and I am unsure why. It was as if my consciousness had taken over. She was in a tricky situation, as it was difficult to tell her family, as they already did

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not like me and was so abusive towards her. She confided in one of my closest allies, which made me jealous. I was not proud that I was jealous, but I did not know how else to react at the time. I was not nasty to my friend. We were having some of the best times of our lives whilst staying in his brother's apartment whilst he was in Cairns, and we were venturing all around Sydney at night.

One day, we were staying at my friend's brother's apartment near Sydney University. The Korean Beauty gave me the address and the time I needed to be there. She said, 'You are always late. So, make sure that you are not late today.'

I left an hour early, but there was a bus delay, as there was a regular around the Inner West at the time. So, I had to walk to the location, which was at least 45 minutes away, and I only had 30 minutes to be there. I walked as fast as I could all the way there, but I was still late. I arrived late at the abortion clinic.

When I arrived, she was so defeated. 'You only had to be on time once,' she told me in a disappointed voice. There was no point arguing, I had let her down. I felt sorry for myself, and all the trauma I had experienced came to the surface. I felt so selfish, but everything came to the surface. I felt so horrible that I let her down.

Later in life, I was talking to our mutual friend, and he told me that the reason why she wanted me to be at the abortion clinic on time was that she was thinking about keeping the baby. But she was uncertain whether I would come to the party and would be a good dad. She was scared that I had many dreams and

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ambitions and would not have prioritised being a father. I felt saddened that this could have been my only chance to be a father, and I would have been a wonderful father. I would have prioritised it above everything in the world. If only I was given a chance.

But I missed the chance, and the abortion happened on that sad day. She went through the process of having a counselling session and was asked if she wanted to go ahead with that. They told her the risks and what this may do to her mental health, but I was left out of all the discussions. I had been so distant; it was only fair that I was left out of such a big decision in both of our lives.

Things were never the same after that. She felt that I was using her for sex, and maybe I was. She was so afraid she would get pregnant again that she could never give herself to me after that. Towards the end of our relationship, she often flirted with other guys in front of me just to work on her flirting skills because, in her mind, she was all ready to move on. She did move on eventually, and our mutual friend told me she had found someone else. Intuition stayed up that night, and we sat and had a whisky together, not saying all that much. She did marry and had a child with the man she had moved on with. He was an abuser, just like her dad. They separated, and she has been a single mum for most of her adult life. If only she had trusted me enough, her son or daughter, whatever we were destined to have, would have had the best dad in the world. I had a feeling that it was a girl.

Glimpses of Being a Dad

The wonderful thing about being single in China is that the wealthiest girls are often single because men do not want to date girls with a higher status. So, the girls who are the most attractive are usually single. I took the fancy of many women in China, but nothing eventuated. I got frisky with a few girls but was too scared to take home a girl I did not know. I was frigid then and had trust issues with those Chinese girls. You never really knew if they were only trying to exploit you. The girls in my group became great mates, but nothing eventuated either. I did not have a girlfriend in China or during the years of my master's. I did not have time; I was focusing on my studies and having fun.

Then, I met Amanda through a tinder date. The first date was a disaster. We went into Windsor and drove back to Cabbage Tree Lookout, where we started making out. Unfortunately, the lights on the car ran out, and we were left out in the dark. I was forced to call my best friend, Sigrid, who took us back to my house in North Richmond, where I was sharing with Dougy. The night worsened when we made love on the mattress still on the floor, and her breast milk went everywhere and saturated the sheets. I even tasted the breast milk that night and almost threw it up. It was so sickly sweet.

The next night, I was at Tom and Holly's watching the footy. I spent the whole night trying to break it off nicely with Amanda. Whenever I thought I had done it well, she would return with, 'Please give Gracie and me one more chance.' This went on

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for hours, and it was tiresome. Holly and Tom gave every possible response, but I ended up giving her a chance for another date.

The next day, I rocked up, and her daughter Gracie was at my house playing in the swing we had in the backyard. She had let herself in. I thought this was moving fast as we had been dating for less than 24 hours, and I had already been introduced to her daughter. Nothing like getting to know each other, right?

I ended up staying with Amanda for about 6-8 months. I enjoyed being a father figure for Gracie and spent as much time as possible with her. She was a great kid with a big heart and enthusiasm. We played games at their house, but I always got in trouble for being too loud. Gracie fit nicely into my family, and they enjoyed having a child around.

We used to spend hours at the Hawkesbury Agricultural College (HAC) campus, even though I was not living there then, and Gracie would stay with us late into the evening. It was scary that she never seemed to fall asleep as she drew on the windows and doors. There were no rules, and it was a good time. I found it strange that she was edging on four years old and was still breastfeeding. It was as if Amanda was holding on to this attachment if she possibly could because it was the only real attention her daughter gave her.

Eventually, Amanda got a bit nasty, and things did not work out. We initially broke it off and shared all the words under the sun. But I felt something when we hugged, and so did she. So, we continued with our failed couple of months, which I tolerated

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because I enjoyed being a father figure. When we did have sex, she would say, 'What a connection we have.' But I never felt it.

After the final argument, I had had enough. It got nasty quickly, and she played a sob story when I called it off again. That she had cancer and all this type of crap, I knew it was all a game, and quite honestly, I did not feel it was my problem. It seemed like everything was a bit of a game for Amanda, and I had had enough.

It was a bit of a dry spell for me for a few years after that. I hooked up with a few fantastic girls at HAC, but nothing resulted in more than a few dates. I got a beautiful Blonde Girl back in my room, but I had difficulty keeping it up. Apple was more than impressed next door that I managed to lure the most attractive girl on campus back to my room, but the Blonde Girl was far from impressed. She stayed a few times, and I saw her topless a couple of times, which was great. She had a perfect perky rack with a sexy little piercing on the nipple, which was fun to play with, but other than that, nothing happened. We only went on one date.

This was the story of my time at HAC. It was close to hooking up but could never actually bring home the bacon. I ended up moving out with Apple, and we had a cute little apartment in Richmond. We were there for nearly two years, but my dry run extended. I was starting to think I was close to passing 30 and would be solo for the rest of my life.

Then, one night, I was a bit seedy at the pub, and a cute little girl with short black hair started to show me some interest. She had perky little boobs that I could not keep my eyes off. So,

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we got talking, and she agreed to go back to my house with me for a few drinks.

She followed me home in her rickety little car and pulled up at my house. I ran in, put on some fresh breath, and poured her a drink. She was not a drinker, but it felt like she was enjoying the company. So, I made a move on her and started kissing her neck. Things moved on from there, and we had a fantastic night.

The following day was a buzz. She stayed with me all morning as we drove to Bilpin, tried some non-alcoholic apple cider, and had their famous apple pie. I could not keep my hands off her and hugged her at every opportunity. I hugged her from behind. From the front. Up high. Down low. I had had such a dry patch, and her body felt so tight and beautiful. It was nice to be holding another girl again.

We went on a few great dates. I took her into the city one night, and we had a memorable time. We went to an all-you-can-eat Indian restaurant where downstairs was a fantastic movie theatre where you could lie down on pillows and bean bags. I took the Blonde Girl I had hooked up with at HAC there a few years ago, and there was a similar vibe. We then went for a walk through the back streets of King's Cross. There was a fun, happy vibe.

As we started driving home, all I could think about was how much fun I had and how horny she made me feel. I felt like pulling over to give her one, but I continued driving. I almost lost control of the car many times because I could not keep my eyes off her. She looked beautiful.

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Then, when we were about half an hour from home, her whole mood changed. She started raving about how her children's father did not get why she threw out all his clothes one day. Because he did not ask.

I could not understand this reasoning. I would have been angry if someone had just thrown out my clothes. She kept being angry, and her anger turned to rage until she told me how she had tried to hang herself by tying a shirt around her neck. I could not believe how she had gone from this light-hearted fun mood to be so dark and depressing. Her mood had changed like a switch, and with it, her sexual desire. I was so horny, wanting my way with her, and now we arrived back at my house, and there was nothing. I was left dry.

We had some memorable times after that. I was enjoying working at Uniting by this stage and would enjoy coming home to tell Tim Tam all about my day at work. It was the first time I had a girlfriend while working, so this was a nice feeling. We enjoyed going out on Wednesday and some Thursday nights for her to sing karaoke and for us to play pool. I would sit behind her with her rubbing up against me, and she would fondle me while we sat at the bar together. It was very reassuring, and I never had this sort of relationship with a girl before. We would go out on Friday nights to karaoke with her friends, and it would be a similar story. I was tired at work, but it was worth it.

We only had one get-together with my friends the whole time we were dating. I wanted to show her off to my friends, so I invited all my friends over. Unfortunately, it did not turn out as I had planned. I asked Apple to come watch the footy with me, and

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Tim Tam was jealous. She spent the whole night ignoring me, and I felt like an absolute ass having to pull her aside from my friends and ask her what was up. She put on a face after that but was not impressed.

I had been sneaking into her room late at night and making love in a bunk when her children were asleep. It was fun sneaking around, but I had no meaningful relationship with her children. Like her dad, the kids were friendly but a little simple. Things were starting to wind down, but I felt an urge one day and offered to massage her.

I rushed down to get a decent amount of massage oil, and before I returned home, she already arrived at my house. She was ready for a unique experience, and it came almost straight away. She quickly removed her clothes, and we had the most fantastic embrace. As we hugged, we rose together, and I slipped straight into her in the air. It was the most amazing sensation. Then we made passionate love for about an hour. The longest I had ever been able to endure. I was trying every position and making beautiful, passionate love.

Then, at my Aunt Janet's funeral, we sat on the grass, and I talked to Broadbent and his wife, Chrisula, who had worked with Aunt Janet. Every time I started to speak with Broadbent, Tim Tam would jump in front of him as if she wanted all my attention. I was with my family and friends, and my attention needed to be divided.

Then, as we arrived at the Nepean Rowing Club, she pulled up. I gently asked, 'Could I please be with my family today?'

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I need to be with them. They are my family.' Because she wanted all my attention, she did not even come with me to the Rowing Club and decided to go home instead. To this day, I am not sure if I did anything wrong, but I could have been a bit kinder to her.

The next few weeks were a blur. I remember her telling me things like, 'What are we doing?' and 'Things do not seem to be working out.' We had a few good nights out, and I got to know her friends better, but things were fading. The spark we had faded. I ended up seeing her at Coles one day, where she worked, and I was excited to see her. I was, however, in a bit of a hurry and said I would catch up with her later. She hovered in front of me, like at the funeral. I left, and she never contacted me again.

A few months ago, I pulled up to a car outside Coles, where I shopped daily at that point. The car door opened, and this boy was chuckling, saying, 'That man looks old.' The lady opened the door and said, 'Yes, that man is old.' She looked up, and the person the boy was talking to so kindly and intelligently was me. I took a quick glance at the lady and began to stare for a moment. It was Tammy.

She had grown all her hair and was looking stunning. She looked so beautiful as her cheeky little face blossomed. I glanced back at the cute little boy; he was about four, maybe five. It had been a while since I last saw him. It was as if I had an instant connection with the boy, as if he and I were one.

I thought about this moment a lot and thought about how this boy must have been mine. Could that magical night of that amazing embrace bring a beautiful child into this world? Maybe

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Tammy was so upset that day at the Rowing Club because she desperately wanted to be a part of my family. Perhaps she already knew that she was pregnant and was hoping to be a part of my family, which I had left her out of until then. I think about that moment when I looked over and saw that boy. I looked Tim Tam up on Facebook and tried to contact her in every way I knew. But unfortunately, I did not know where she lived, and I have not seen her since. I sincerely hope she is not keeping the most important person in my life away from me. I would make a terrific dad.

The Perfect Companion

As I began to get more involved in my work at Uniting, I started to spend more time with my colleagues after work. One of them became my Best Friend. I started heading over every Friday night for a 'movie night,' and we got to know each other well. I did this for about three to four months before we started adding a meal or two a week into the equation.

We had an excellent Thai meal one night before returning to my place. I was living near KFC in Richmond, where my house was neatly tucked behind another small block of flats. I loved this place, and it gave me many comforts. When she arrived at my house, she stopped the car and continued chatting away as we had all night. I felt something for her that night. Her neck seemed so long and delicate. It appeared that the light was shining on it so brightly. Her neck stood out.

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We sat there for what seemed like 10-15 minutes talking. I had heard that the best test to see if someone was comfortable around you, and therefore a perfect opportunity to ask them out formally, was to gently touch their upper thigh. If they are feeling comfortable, that is all they need to give consent, a gentle caress, and this often leads to more pronounced states of fun. So, I gained the strength to assess this theory but only managed the courage to reach out to touch the top of the knee. Regardless, she did not flinch, which I was surprised about. I then considered making a move but decided against it, as I enjoyed the friendship. And she was much older than me. I was not ready yet to take a risk. I went to get out of the car, but every time I did, I thought twice about it and resumed the conversation. I would have gotten in and out of the car at least four times. Each time, I jumped back in, thinking I should make my move.

One of our Friday nights, we watched a great movie and had a cracking night. At one point, I leaned in for a kiss. She backed away saying, 'No, no. I do not want to destroy our friendship. We have something good going on that I do not want to destroy.' As I was leaving, I had a premonition inside, saying, 'Sometimes, you need to take a risk. Sometimes, when you make a move, it turns out to be the best thing in the world.'

So, as I was leaving to go to my car, I grabbed her chin and reached in for a small peck. I held on a little more, but it was nothing more than a peck. I felt so proud of myself that I had taken the risk, hoping that something would come of it. Nothing did. She pulled back, saying, 'You're a bad, bad man.' It did not faze me. I cheekily rushed down the stairs and jumped down to

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my car. I knew she was upset now, but I was quietly chuffed that I had followed the advice of my premonition.

We kept our increasingly regular dinner dates and Friday movie nights for quite a while. Then, one night after work, we decided to go to Barracks Bar at the old Rum Core Barracks. We enjoyed a conversation when a group of more affluent people got up from their table and left their whole cheese platter on it. We stared at it for a while to see if the people were coming back for their platter. But it appeared that they just did not want it. So, we looked at it for a while before deciding to tuck into it. We thought this would go well with the cider and shandy we ordered from the bar.

It was delicious as we tucked into the different kinds of cheese and deli meats. We ordered another side dish and enjoyed each other's company immensely. I was talking about our then-familiar topics, the injustices of the NDIS and the disability system. Fulfilling our appetites and allowing our inhibitions not to hinder us, we left the bar in a bit of a high mood. I held her back on and off and contemplated kissing her many times, but I was happy to enjoy her company and the positive mood we had created from a joyful evening.

On the way, we pulled up at her house, which had become a place where I was almost as often as I was at my own. I asked for a 'good night kiss,' thinking that a peck on the cheek would suffice. She grabbed me and reached for the most resounding kiss I had ever experienced. In reaction, I began 'sucking her face' in an all-out motion. There was too much tongue for my liking, but it was because I was nervous. Finally, she said, 'Relax.' After that,

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our lips and tongue seemed to dance together synchronously as if it were meant to be. It was the best kiss I had ever had.

The next couple of months were great. We were in our honeymoon phase, which seemed to last forever. She drove me to and from work for a long time there. We would drive along the foothills of the Blue Mountains, past the lakes, grab my coffee at Underground Coffee Roasters, park the car, and eagerly get to work, walking the 10 or 15 minutes from where she would park.

By this stage, she was the receptionist for the Uniting Local Area Coordinator Program, LAC on duty. And I was enjoying my work as a senior Local Area Coordinator. We did see each other work, often with me showing an inappropriate comment about how beautiful she looked. But generally, we were too busy with our work to spend any meaningful time at work. She would often go the entire day without a break, and I usually had lunch with one of the other workers. Workers that were slowly becoming a family.

We looked forward to coming home after a big day at work. She would drive me home, but we usually stopped at Coles to get the ingredients we needed for dinner. She would always try to pay, but I would sneak some food onto the register before she noticed to share some of the burdens. Occasionally, we would then head into Liquorland to get something nice to drink as a treat.

We would then come home to cook dinner. We would take turns, but to be fair, she did most of the cooking. It was always a pleasure to eat whatever she cooked. I took immense pleasure in

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preparing the vegetables, regardless of whether I was cooking or not. If it was my turn, I would often cook salmon, and I would cook it extremely crispy. Broccolini, carrots, or mashed sweet potatoes would usually accompany this, or both mixed together. Sometimes with pumpkin. Whatever I cooked, I would get in trouble for having the gas up too high, as I would forget to put the cooking fan on. Because I cooked everything so damn hot, I was damaging the cupboard above the stovetop.

Initially, things were great between her then 11-year-old child, Enigma, and me. He enjoyed my inappropriate sense of humour and the joy I brought to the household. However, I was surprised by how dark an 11-year-old could be and how rude he could be towards his mother—especially someone as beautiful and kind as his mother, who was doing the best she could for her child.

Enigma had tried a little bit of therapy, some occupational therapy. But he would be tired from a big day at school and would play up in the therapy sessions. The Perfect Companion could not justify paying \$180 per session for him to 'play games.' When he did go to therapy, he was exhausted, as he had been doing his best to hold it together in the classroom all day. This was not easy for him. He did not seem to fit into any boxes. There was no help for someone who comes across as social as him and is capable of basic things like showering and brushing his teeth. He was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, social pragmatic disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and oppositional defiance disorder (ODD). But there did not seem to be any therapy or program that seemed to fit his needs.

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We went on a weekend break on the Easter Long Weekend to Hill End. We set up the tent as we arrived, and I was grateful for a quick bonk. The Perfect Companion recognised back then that a man needs a release every now and then. This put me in a great mood. We had a wonderful day and evening exploring the camp zone. It was full of young families, plenty of children, and a lot of laughter. We seemed to fit in well with the other families who, too, had chosen to explore this historic gold rush ghost town.

We woke up for a nice walk around the camp zone the next day. We ended up going for a drive out to a historic site; I could not remember what it was, but Enigma was poking me, pushing me, pretending to tackle me. As I had done to this point, I tolerated it. But it got to a point where enough was enough. I just wanted to relax and enjoy the historical sites we were exploring. I asked him once. I asked him twice. I calmly asked 10 times for him to stop. He was in a good mood until I snapped and yelled at him, 'Please stop!' He continued to the point where I lost my cool and tackled him to the ground.

I must have hurt him, but it hurt his ego than his body. This was the first time I had stood up to him and stood my ground. He did not like it, and this was his end and my honeymoon period. He turned on me after that, and I started noticing more his nasty personality, which I had previously ignored to a degree. I saw how cruel he was to the cat. He would pick him up and squeeze him so tight. We would tell him to 'please let go,' but he would squeeze tighter. The cat would finally need an escape and scratch him on the arm or sometimes the face. Then, he cursed at the cat, saying something like 'bloody cat.' I could not believe anyone

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could be so cruel to an animal such as a beautiful boy. The cat would prance around with his back arched high like a 'lion,' waiting to be scratched under the neck that he would extend as he accepted the embrace.

Then there was the dog, whom Enigma used to cover with a blanket so he could not see, and then wrap him up. At one point, his mother hit him across the head because he had tried to kill the dog when he was a puppy. His father had also tried to kill him as a puppy, causing tension in their relationship when they lived in a caravan with her dad. He was a lot better with the dog by the time he approached his teens, but it still traumatised him occasionally. He was a sweet little dog who always welcomed you with a big, happy 'smile.' As you arrived at the house, the fluff bag would run up and down the corridor in excitement. He, Goggy, and the cat, DJ, would spend hours receiving love from the Perfect Companion and me in the lounge. I loved them so much.

Things were not always bad between Enigma and me. We had some wonderful trips to Uncle Michael's house. Uncle Michael's house was coincidentally minutes away from Nyranang, the property where I had had so many wonderful stays as a child. It was in the middle of nowhere, but Uncle Michael knew about the family and their 'queer' undertakings. As Christine's former husband had been on the council at Orange when he left the family for his gay partner, it was quite the talk of the town.

One time, when we were out at the beautiful property, we had a memorable couple of days exploring the Chernobyl series that the Perfect Companion had bought for Enigma as a Christmas present. For some reason, he was fascinated by the

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nuclear power disaster, and the series kept us captivated and refrained from arguing for days.

Also, on that trip, I walked with Enigma outside at night. We crept up to a cow trap, and I said, 'Look at that.' He crept forward in anticipation and a bit of fear. 'Is that a funnel web?' I secretly asked. He looked closer and became even more scared. 'Is it?' I said this as I crept closer to what I was pointing at. Knowing that I had him in my hands, I waited for my opportune moment and screamed, 'Gotcha!' He jumped a mile. The tough, overweight, ginormous teenager jumped a mile. And I then had a bit of a laugh. It was a fun time when he was not being horrible to his mother, bullying other teenagers on the internet, or so angry and engrossed in his game that he would not do anything else.

Those who went to Molong were so great. Every year, Kerry, the Perfect Companion's father, and his beautiful younger partner, Caroline, would join us in the few rooms built into a second little cottage. It was a little bit cramped, but for the next two years, it was fun sneaking and squeezing into the Perfect Companion's single bed late at night for a snuggle. By the third year, the interest was gone.

I enjoyed exploring the countryside with the gang we had out there. We went down to the creek bed one year, where several farming families joined Uncle Michael's daughter and son-in-law, Gus, every year. Another time, we helped fertilise the paddock to make it ready for the next cropping. We enjoyed rounding up a stray ram that had entered the paddock. I was amazed at how calm Uncle Michael was. It was a trait that had

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rubbed off on his one and only child and his grandchildren. They were a wonderful family to be around.

Gus was a country guy and taught me a lot about country life. He talked to me a lot about what must be done to keep a farm. One year, he showed me an app that demonstrated how the weather conditions in the Indian Ocean impact Australian farming conditions. At other times, we encouraged his three beautiful boys to tell stories about their amazing lives on the farm. They admired Enigma because he was unique and different from anyone they had experienced in the country. They would spend hours playing table tennis and exploring the farm. Sometimes, they would ask me to come join them. Out where there were no distractions, he and his beautiful cousins all seemed to look up to me.

I am grateful for the time I had with the Perfect Companion; I glowed every time I was around her. I enjoyed our make-out sessions that seemed to happen late into the night during a honeymoon period that seemed to last forever. I used to look forward to seeing her beautiful, naked body enter the room after she had her shower and cleaned up. She looked like a picture from a Mona Lisa painting—a perfect figure eight body with wide hips and beautiful, large breasts. Everything seemed to be in perfect alignment, as those 10-15 seconds used to send shivers down my spine.

I loved touching, kissing, and caressing her breasts before slowly making my way south with my fingers. She would moan and groan a little, and the pleasure she was experiencing was palpable as I gradually sped up in a beautiful rhythmic motion.

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Slowly getting harder as I became more enthusiastic. I would slowly jump on top of her. However, this often ended the enjoyment for both of us way too quickly, so I often pulled her on top. She had two positions that I both enjoyed immensely—one when she would lean forward, and I could grab and caress her beautiful large breasts as she rhythmically moved up and down on my erect penis, or she would lean back and have a look of complete satisfaction and enjoyment on her face as if she experienced extreme pleasure. Sometimes, I would close my eyes and just enjoy being inside her.

Our lovemaking was beautiful and often intense. However, I never seemed to be able to last long enough for her to get the full pleasure she deserved. I was never able to get her to a climax. It was extremely enjoyable and loving, but I could never quite get her where I knew she would fully trust me enough to give her all. As if she had been hurt so many times before, she could never give 100% of herself to me.

I was a little lost at work when the Perfect Companion left for what she thought would be a much better offer. She was convinced she would work fewer hours for more pay. As a result, she would only need to work 30 billable hours instead of the 38 she was currently working. This meant she could take half a day to take Enigma to the therapy that he needed so much.

It was, however, a lot more work than was expected. Thirty billable hours meant that that was the work done, leaving the Perfect Companion working longer hours. She could not manage her daytime working hours, as she provided a service many would have been proud of. She was often unable to claim

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the phone calls she was making because there just was not enough funding in the plans for her service. As a result, she was spending hours on the phone that could not be included in her billable hours.

She was working up to three in the morning, which meant I initially stayed up and was tired for the next day. But in the end, I ended up just going to bed early. We would then wake up earlier in the morning to ensure that everything needed to be done was done, affecting our sex life. Because we were both becoming increasingly unstable, Enigma started playing on our moods, making us all more irritable.

By this stage, Enigma was playing his games more and more. His addiction began when he found a PlayStation 36 thrown out as junk at one of the house's garbage dump one day. This was okay. He had a few 'shoot-em' and car racing games that seemed to hold his attention. However, it was not enough, as his attention demanded more intense stimulation.

It was starting to seriously affect his relationship with his Pa Kerrie and us, who up until then had been obliging to supply the Perfect Companion with much-needed respite in the holidays and even when she had gone on a work trip to Adelaide for a week. Kerrie always tried to get Enigma active by biking, going to the beach, and fishing. However, this was becoming a chore. They began to butt heads whenever they had any confrontation, especially when he was told to do something other than his gaming. Because he was not getting his own way, he made it difficult for Kerrie, even though he was the most caring and understanding man I had ever met.

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The final knock-out blow was when Enigma required a laptop when he started high school. The Perfect Companion was forced to buy a laptop for him because it was school policy that every child required a laptop. This was not just an issue at home, as it was hard to get him off his laptop even to do the smallest task. It meant that he was doing minimal, if not work, at school. Gaming consumed his whole existence from 7:00 a.m. to about 9:30 p.m. He even started waking up early in the morning to start playing his Warthunder before he had a shower and got dressed, making it even more difficult for him to get everything done before school.

I even got yelled at whenever I gently told him it was time to wind down by giving him 10-15-minute warnings before dinner. I would rudely get snapped at because this meant that he had to stop playing Warthunder for dinner. Although he got better at it towards the end, it was a considerable effort to get another half hour to watch Home and Away. It was the only time I got to relax after a long day. Eventually, we found it much more peaceful to allow him to take his laptop to either his room or set it up with the Perfect Companion's other monitors, so we had some opportunity to wind down and watch a bit of TV.

This obsession demonstrated its horns because he had already been through a few schools. He had been in a lot of trouble at his first school, a Catholic School, where the principal had disclosed that he had been the most challenging student he had ever confronted. He had started high school, knowing it would be difficult. I supported the Perfect Companion to a

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disciplinary meeting before starting high school due to a previous incident that will not be discussed.

This meant that Enigma would have a particular 'safe space' that he could go to if he ever felt threatened and that the girl involved would always be in a separate space, and she too had a 'safe space' she could go to if she ever felt threatened. This escalated with several incidents where he, who was easy to intimidate, often felt like he was being bullied. The truth is, yes, he was easily aggravated, but often, the incidents escalated due to his interpretation of 'perceived bullying.' I am not saying that he was not being bullied. Still, he enjoyed being a bully either in response to the bullying or preceding the incident in which the bullies retaliated.

Enigma began to feel extremely alienated at school while that girl was at the school, but when she left, we thought things would improve. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Much of the damage had been done, and he had a reputation for bullying. He seems to enjoy bullying others. By this time, the Perfect Companion had support workers in place and went weekly to joint counselling. Still, much of the damage to his confidence, self-worth, and reputation had already been affected, and it will be a struggle for the rest of his life to regain this confidence, even with the best support.

One of the most significant problems I saw with Enigma was that he could never accept responsibility even if he had done something so wrong that it required police intervention. The other was that he was always wanting more. There was never a feeling that he had enough. He always needed another game. But

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when he got a new game, there was always another game he wanted. If he somehow was not allowed to play a Warthunder special event because he was away on holiday, someone was always to blame.

When he was rewarded by doing something like mowing the lawn, which any kid should be doing for their parents anyway and was rewarded with a new skin or a new plane on Warthunder, there was always a new skin or plane that he wanted. If he wanted something, he must get it at once. He would not want to wait for some special occasion like Christmas before he got it. He refused to work for something because he knew his dad would buy him or give him the money he needed to buy it on his birthday or Christmas.

And when he did not get what he wanted. He turned nasty. And I mean nasty. He would verbally and sometimes physically abuse anybody in many ways, nagging until he got what he wanted. This could last hours or even days. The Perfect Companion was usually the recipient of the abuse. However, in my time in the household, I gradually received more of it. It was destroying my mental health, and I was so afraid of the physical and psychological abuse that the Perfect Companion would face in the future. I was scared for her and sorry while I could share that burden with her.

Things reached their lowest point in our relationship as I became less tolerable with Enigma and the situation I found myself in. It worsened when the Perfect Companion decided to renovate her house. Although they turned out beautiful, this significantly strained our relationship. To her, this was an

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opportunity for him to have his space and for us to have our space. A space where we could grow old together and have peace of mind knowing that we could enjoy our dinner and watch TV in peace. This meant that she would be paying off debt for another 15 years, meaning she would be close to 70 by the time she paid off her debt. I was in the prime of my life. I was 38, but I would miss my 40s whilst she was in debt. To me, this was our opportunity to invest. I had paid off all my debts, and she was less than \$200 away from paying off her mortgage. By the time the renovations were complete, she was over \$150,000 in debt.

We broke up over this. A trend that had happened every time we had a difficult period in our relationship. Each time I returned because the relationship was safe and satisfying, I had the Perfect Companion I have ever had. While preparing dinner and devouring it, we always had an enjoyable conversation, mainly about the NDIS, the disability system, Enigma's cricket whilst he was playing, and all our fun adventures. I glowed when I was in her presence, and she deeply respected who I was and what I was trying to achieve in my life. I cannot say this for many people in my life, even some of those who are closest to me.

The most extraordinary adventures I usually had involved times with Kerrie and his beautiful girlfriend, Caroline. Like the Perfect Companion was my cougar of nearly 17 years, there was also a sizeable gap between Kerrie and Caroline. We had many memorable afternoons with Kerrie's family and the Perfect Companion's mother's side of the family, who were both full of fun. Caroline and I had an extraordinary bond as she was such a fun-loving gal. We seemed to have a lot to say about everything

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and had many good laughs. Usually whilst Caroline and Kerrie enjoyed a Shiraz or Cab Sav. Or two. Or three. Sometimes more.

Caroline loved showing me around her beloved Northern Beaches. We would often take the beautiful winding road through some of the Northern Suburbs of Sydney to arrive at Kerrie's comfortable Mona Vale apartment. We would drive around Warriewood, Dee Why, and one day up Palm Beach, where we enjoyed exploring the markets and some of the sites of Home and Away. The days were always packed with lots of adventure, tasty food, and laughs.

One day, Caroline was showing us her neighbourhood in Dee Why and was showing immense pride in some of the Manly Sea Eagles legends like Dezzy, Cliffy, and their other foe lived. She pulled up to a quiet, seaside comfortable, looking home where her handsome neighbour with a beard was reading a book. 'There's Mattie.' she said. I paused for a moment realising that one of her neighbours was one of my childhood heroes.

The man who gave us a gentle smile as he glanced up from his book was Mattie Johns. The man gave me many memorable memories on and off the footy field. A man whose character Reg Ragan gave us so many tummies laugh with his inappropriate cracks of his 'barge-ass' brother, who was the best footballer, regardless of the code you support, I have ever seen. He, too, was a legend and had given me many nervous memories as a Rooster fan playing the nights. And there he was. He was reading his book, giving us a gentle smile. It was memorable.

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I have so many great memories of my time with the Perfect Companion and much to be grateful for. None more so than the support she gave me recently when I refused contact with my parents. She was an incredible support for my family and me over these problematic three and a half weeks. She sat through my anger as I tried to deal with the traumas that had affected me my whole life with such grace, even though she knew it was unlikely that we would ever be together.

I cannot imagine the hurt she must have felt when I cheated on her. The same pain she had felt the two previous times she had had partners who had cheated on her. A man whom she married for 17 years and who slept with numerous women whilst married and devoted to her. Another man she had a child with, whose partner groomed him until she stole the man away from her even though she had had a child with him. Despite all the hurt, she put all that aside to ensure that I was in a place where I could get the support I needed. This was the person, the wonderful woman that she was. The Best Companion I have ever had.

While driving me to the Hills Clinic, I told her where the relationship went wrong. I think deep inside, she had a feeling that I would return to her loving arms, but after this conversation, I had to come to the realisation that our relationship was over. The trust was gone. I asked if we could be friends, but she replied with the following text:

"Neither of us are the people we were before you went into Ramsey. I miss very much being your Habibi. I felt safe and secure. I loved our intimacy, the romance, the connection, the

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friendship, the companionship, and that exceptional energy we shared that glowed when we were together. I have never experienced all of that with anyone else. It was perfect. It was love how I dreamt it should be. It was love how I wanted it to be. But that has all gone, and I do not want to be reminded of us not being that way anymore and not having it anymore with the person I loved and adored. As you pointed out, you are in the prime of your life, and you deserve to find someone around the same age so you can grow old together. I do not want or need to be around to see you pour your love onto someone else the way you used to with me. I pray that you heal quickly, find love, and reach all the goals that you have worked so hard to achieve."

That was the closure I needed, but I do not regret one moment I spent with this most extraordinary and beautiful woman. I will always be grateful for our companionship and everything she has done for me. She has done more than she will ever know for my confidence and for allowing me to be the person I have always wanted to be. I will be forever grateful.

The Goddess

I was in a comfortable, safe relationship with the PerfectCompanion, but I experienced extensive abuse daily from her son, Enigma, which affected my mental health. I struggled with unemployment and was laid in a job where I thought I was achieving important things. When I went into Ramsey Clinic, I

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was not looking for love. I was looking to restore my confidence and begin my healing journey. I, however, found all three

The first day, I accidentally walked into the group therapy room, where a lady basically fell out of her seat when she saw me walk in. She looked skinny, tired, and a little bit like a junkie, but this was a look that I always seemed to like. I looked into her eyes; she had sad but beautiful big blue eyes. She made a wisecrack at one of the other ladies. I thought, 'Shit!' but was obliged to laugh. We later got to know each other quickly, as you do in therapy. You get to know everything about each other, the good and the bad. One day in therapy was like six or seven in the real world.

That night, my Philby came to visit me. I was on a high, and so was she. We were bouncing off each other's excitement and enthusiasm. We seemed to talk about anything. I thought, 'Well, I am in a good relationship now. I'll see if I can set her up with my brother.' They had nothing in common, and we talked the whole time. Philby was shy at the best of times. So, we spent the evening chatting together and getting to know everything about each other.

The next few days seemed to fly on by. Eventually, we decided to go for a walk to Parramatta to get some space from the clinic. It was only around the corner when she grabbed my hand. It felt nice, but it felt so wrong. I was in a safe and loving relationship. But at the same time, it felt so right. Her hands seemed to fit so perfectly in mine

Then we walked further down the street, where I sat on a brick letterbox. It was one of those long ones with many letter

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boxes, like a fence or divider of a property. I swear she leant in, but she tells me it was me. Regardless, our lips met, and my tongue was acquainted with hers. Again, it felt so wrong, but it felt so right in many ways.

We continued our walk through the park, stopping every moment to make out and feel her beautiful body rub against mine. We eventually made it to the mall, where she showed me through a few of her favourite shops, giving me hints of her favourite clothing and perfume brands. Going up the escalator was yet another thrill. She kept turning away while rubbing up against my leg, expecting me to grab her firm and tight ass. It seemed like an excellent game to me, so I played along.

We arrived back at the clinic aroused and excited. We had held each other's hands the whole time, and my lips persed from so much making out. A massive sense of guilt re-emerged in my awareness. That night, she got the trusty blanket out, and I massaged her feet whilst we watched a movie. She later told me that she had never been so aroused in her whole life. I, too, was quietly aroused just by touching her feet

The next day, we went for a walk with a similar outcome. We held hands as soon as we were out of sight of the nurses, made out at every opportunity on the way to the plaza, and had a blast when we arrived. On the way back, we were also in a rush as we took every opportunity to make out and feel each other's bodies. On the way back, I asked to stop in the park to lie down to get a view of the Parramatta skyline. I got acquainted with the top half of her body, let us say, and requested a full view, but the lady told

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me that even though she was as 'horny as could be, I had to wait.'

So, I waited for the night. Again, the blanket came out, but this time she was so eager to get an experience of the 'piano fingers' she had heard so much about. We were watching the world cut where Steve O'Keefe was commentating on the telly. I was quickly distracted as even the commentary of couldn't hold my attention from the attention the Goddess and I shared under that blanket.

One day we both took leave as she had planned to see her sister play AFL in Marrickville. I, however, did not have enough leave to take the whole afternoon off, so I went with her as far as I could and walked her to Wentworthville station. Hand in hand, we then went for a train trip to Westmead, but this was as far as my leave allowed me to go

We had a magical half an hour or so while waiting for her connecting train as we kissed passionately in one of the waiting rooms. As we had a bit of privacy, she asked if I could kiss her on the neck, so I ferociously and passionately tasted her scrumptious neck. When her train arrived, neither of us wanted to leave. We leaned in for the most magical hug, where our chests both seemed to emerge at precisely the right place. We squeezed in at exactly at the right time and rose together as one. It was a remarkable embrace as if we synchronised as one at that moment.

I had the challenge of telling the Best Companion that I had been sneaking around behind her back. It was difficult, but

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we met at a mutual party, and I told her on the way home. It was sad that I had broken her trust. It would be even more challenging for her to mend a broken heart and a life of partners who have cheated on her, making it even harder for her to trust again in her twilight years. But, in another way, it was a release from the abuse and trauma that had led to my mental health deteriorating to the point where I needed care. It was sad when I left a broken heart as I left the car that night, but at the same time, it brought me alive again.

The following week was a blur. The Goddess was waking me up early, around 6:30 a.m. so that we could walk. Once out of sight of the nurses, we held hands and kissed. When we were in the lift, we would take our opportunity of solitude to pash vigorously for four to five seconds before adjusting ourselves at the top or the bottom of the escalator. At one point, she asked me to ‘swipe’ her in the lift because she had purposely not worn any underwear. On another occasion, we snuck into the laundry and closed the door where she got another taste of piano fingers. We got one official warning but denied any involvement. After that, we just had to sneak around better.

I was still extremely insecure about my sexuality and sexual performance, so I researched sexual health clinics, investigated acupuncture to increase my jing, and went into sex shops to see what tablets and sprays I could use to prolong my pleasure. Towards the end of my relationship with the Best Companion, she had been getting a strange itching, and I was getting a burning every time we had sex. I told the Goddess in a letter all the issues that I had confronted in the past, including a

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premature ejaculation issue that had been an issue since my teens. I booked a sexual transmission test to rule out anything untoward. My research made me nervous that I had either a sexually transmitted disease or had been causing the itching and burning due to some form of fungal infection.

The Goddess reassured me that none of that mattered as she had been in a loveless relationship where the mistress of her former husband was kept satisfied every night by 15 seconds maximum of glory. Her previous husband had told her she had a poor sex drive and that she never did any fun things right.

So, on the day of my discharge, I went straight to the doctor to be assessed for sexually transmitted diseases and tested whether I had any form of fungal bacteria. I went home for a good night's sleep and drove up to Newcastle the next day. On the way up, I got the test results clearing me of any sexually transmitted disease or fungal infection. So, it was not me causing the fungal infection all along. I was now clear to make love to the Goddess.

I was calm as I drove up the freeway but became nervous as I arrived at Belmont. I pulled over and put some deodorant on, as she made it clear that I needed to improve my personal care and hygiene. I got to the end of the street and had butterflies running through my stomach. 'What if she does not like me in the real world? What if I have left the Perfect Companion and the relationship fails? What if I am a complete failure in the bedroom and nothing happens?' This has been a familiar story in the past.

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But I arrived and stopped at the front of the home and saw her standing there equally nervous. She gave me a nervous smile and directed me where to park the car around the back. She walked me through the garage, past the piano, past the toilet, through the kitchen, and straight to the bedroom. There, we started with a passionate kiss. She asked to be reacquainted with ‘piano fingers’ before a full loving embrace. Cleared of any sexually transmitted disease, I was surprised by my endurance, and we had the best sex of our lives.

This pattern continued for several months as we explored our honeymoon period walking hand in hand along beaches, exploring places around Newcastle, and playing sports with her beautiful children. At every opportunity where there was any sort of privacy, we would embrace. There was nothing wrong with her skills or low about her sex drive.

On my birthday, my parents drove up from Kurrajong, and my Auntie Kerrie had driven out from Lorn, a 45-minute drive. Her two beautiful children joined us, and the Goddess aimed to impress. We booked a lovely restaurant, and the food was exquisite. It was new for her children to try some of the food, and there was little she could eat on the menu due to being gluten intolerant. Every time the children spoke, she seemed to interrupt their moments of genius to prevent them from saying anything wrong. In the end, it felt like no one had a chance to speak except for the Goddess, and I felt extremely overwhelmed that I did not even hear my parents’ wonderful stories they usually share.

I had never felt so overwhelmed. I felt trapped. I rang my friends Ethan and Gail to talk, but this triggered the Goddess. I

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got my first blasting, and the honeymoon period was over. She was upset because I walked away without telling her, as this is what her earlier husband used to do. She had to look everywhere for him, and he had had an affair on his phone. I tried to explain that I was not him and needed to talk to my friends, but nothing could get her out of her emotional mind.

As Christmas approached, I learnt more about alcoholism. She was counting the days that she was sober. She was going to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) every day as one of her coping mechanisms. However, whenever we went to any club, she would get triggered and get the urge to drink.

Although she told me she was a baby drinker compared to some of her AA compatriots, she previously drank two litres of vodka daily. She would begin the day by drinking the dregs of the leftovers from the previous night's explorations. She would always have a drink beside her as she watched TV and had become addicted to vegging out on the couch watching Netflix series after Netflix series. She had pulled the handbrake on the highway of her sister on the way to the first admission to Ramsey Clinic, which had put a strain on their relationship

The addiction made it difficult at work before she quit her high-status role as principal. I could see the impact the drinking had had on her relationship with her daughter. Her daughter did not even want to visit her at one point because of the jealousy she had towards her former husband. This jealousy had made it almost impossible for them to talk about anything. Her redeeming quality was that her highly empathetic and understanding son was holding himself together as well as

possible; this was the saving grace keeping her together. He later admitted that the drinking had impacted his football career, but I was impressed by his maturity and ability for him always to find the best in his mum.

I learnt about borderline personality disorder. We bought a Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT) for Dummies book. Without knowing that I was reading from the DBT book, I would read sections of the bits about 'Aloneness,' 'Loneliness,' and 'Emptiness.' She was surprised by how much she related to it. I would then read about the criteria of borderline personality disorder, such as 'unstable and intense interpersonal relationships,' 'identity disturbance,' 'dangerous impulsivity,' 'recurrent suicidal behaviour and self-injury,' emotional instability,' 'chronic feelings of emptiness,' and 'expressions of intense, uncontrollable anger.' Still, instead of reading out the headings, I would just talk as if we were discussing. She would often comment, 'Are you going to keep describing things that explain precisely how I am feeling?' I then finished a conversation by talking about addictions, and it was like I was talking to her. She read it from cover to cover in a couple of days, but I was uncertain how much of a wise mind she was actually in.

Many things infuriated me about the Goddess. It seemed she was not interested in my projects at all or the ideas that I was producing. If I were working on a poem, she would take my computer so that I could focus solely on her. When I did produce something I was proud of, she refused to even look at it. She would say things like, 'No one will look at what you would write. No one cares.' Her opinion was that something you write is

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personal to you and your close circle and should not be shared with the world. To me, your works should be shared and embraced by as broad an audience as possible. Words can inspire. You should present your ideas to the wider world and let them critique it. She was so worried about people taking things the wrong way that it was painful. She thought she was trying to protect me.

After a fight on Christmas Eve, my mental health gradually got worse. The Goddess became increasingly controlling and angry. So finally, I decided to spend a few days back in Richmond. While at home, I got scheduled and taken to Nepean Hospital, where I had so much trauma over 20 years ago. The same hospital, all but a different name.

The hospital was a horrible place, and my mental health got worse rather than better. My parents blamed the move to Newcastle for the decline and asked the Goddess to leave me alone. She wrote text after text to them, telling them how much the situation impacted her. They asked her to stop contacting them. This hurt both of us, so I asked my parents not to be involved in my care. Because the Goddess was not in contact with my parents, I asked the Perfect Companion to be my next of kin, and she was communicating with my parents to keep them updated on the support I was receiving.

It all got messy very quickly. When I regained contact with the Goddess, she drove down straight away, and we had a fantastic hour together. That was the most significant amount of time I was allowed with anyone at one time. We spent the time wrapped up arm in arm, shared lots of passionate kisses, and did

all but make love. Little did I know this would be the last time I would see her in person.

The Goddess' jealousy of the Perfect Companion began to take control of her thoughts. Because the Perfect Companion was in control of decisions about my care, this got the better of the Goddess. She became increasingly angry over the phone and more abusive. A section describing borderline personality disorder in the DBT for Dummies book told what happened perfectly, 'because of the fear of abandonment,' she 'became rapidly and intensely attached.' At first, this led to 'idealisation, but because the level of attachment was unsustainable, this feeling of idealisation led to one of devaluation, causing the Goddess 'to speak and behave in hurtful ways.'

Many of the comments that came out of her mouth became highly hurtful. It was as if she was the only one who had experienced trauma. It appeared that she resorted to drinking to cope with losing her mother at a time she needed her most, losing a lot of power by being brutally raped and then experiencing extensive grief when her father died. She made it out as if I had never experienced any grief, even though I, too, had carried the caskets of the two most influential people in my life. I, too, experienced extensive trauma at a time when I was too young to know how to cope with it or was unable to develop the appropriate coping skills. I, too, was trying to deal with a lot of anger, but I was not taking it out on her.

he Goddess was a theologian scholar but removed all traces of her personal God in her house, including every rosary bead, because she did not believe in her personal God anymore.

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She was so caught up in her emotional mind that she could not accept anyone else's perspective other than her own.

As I arrived at the Hills Clinic, I was finally in a place where I could learn to deal with the traumas that were 'keeping a score' in my body. I wrote my story even if no one else in the world will read it. I decided that I would not let my traumas take control of my life anymore. I was not going to let negative people interrupt my happiness anymore. I sent a negative email to the Goddess but later wrote a text rethinking what I had written, but the damage had been done. Clouded by her ego, she sent me a long-winded email stating that she wanted nothing more to do with me. She sent me a threat saying that if I ever contacted her or her family again, she would have her cousins come to my house and inflict some injury on me.

The Love of My Life

I am ready for love. True love. I know all too well the importance of being flirtatious and fun to make the other sex laugh. I have experienced a selfish love that was necessary to develop the self-respect required for true self-compassion. I have explored the importance of touch to make women feel so special that they cannot think of anything else. I have shared the love of an older woman to experience true companionship and the finer things in life. I also know what it is like to have a lustful relationship where you explore all areas of your sensuality and sexuality.

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I have experienced all sorts of love, lust, sex, and satisfaction. I am ready and deserve the opportunity to find the love of my life. My God delusion led me to believe that I was searching for a Goddess, but now that I am free of my God delusions, I am only looking for true love. I am ready for the person that I will genuinely make happy. The woman that will truly make me happy.

In writing this book, I often fantasised about the woman that would be my perfect partner. Although I would like this person to be pretty, kind, and compassionate, I consider the hurt I delivered towards the Perfect Companion. I have decided that my criteria are someone who loves me, has a good relationship with my friends and family, and just wants to be happy with me. I want to be a faithful partner attentive to the needs of the companion I choose to spend the rest of my life with. We can share our passions but genuinely want to spend quality time together as we age. We will be comfortable enough financially to travel broadly, exploring all that is good together.

I look forward to finding the love of my life.

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CHAPTER 7: Lyrics, Poems, and Songs

Writing songs and poetry has been an essential part of my life since my teens when I started writing music poetry, I was writing about what was happening in my life. My first song came about as a 13-year-old at my grandparent's house at St. Hubert's Island when my father said I could not have a second glass of orange juice. In protest, I took to the piano and started writing a little riff that was not too bad. Poorpa, my childhood hero, was impressed with my musings and said, 'That's not too bad.' That was all the encouragement I needed, so I started experimenting with various riffs and melodies and began philosophising words to go to the music.

My First Songs

The first complete song I wrote was *Lonely Hope*. This was an extension of the riff I experimented with at St. Hubert's Island. It included words about the questions I was asking then with the insight to make any dreams come true. We need hope. I wanted to know why we have war, always compete, and how you achieve in life. These are all questions I still ask today.

Around this time, I was going through some tough times and had started my first relationship. *Summer Breeze* is a song about how I was looking for positives in my life. The Summer

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Breeze itself was the relationship that 'blew me away.' I was hoping it would take me in a positive direction, but I was uncertain. 'A red, red rose as the summer breeze blows, where it takes you only the summer breeze knows.'

A Flower was written by some school friends who spent time wagging school and fell behind in their schoolwork. I wrote this song to demonstrate that sometimes things are complicated and need hard work and dedication to succeed. While you may not achieve things the first time, if you continue to work it out, things can be beautiful.'

Country Air was more a riff I wrote and a jazzy little interlude that I never really finished. I wrote a big, improvised interlude that I have since added to other songs, as it is cool. The lyrics began as a protest everything that was going on at the time, but it was more the music that maintained the test of time rather than the other lyrics, as only one verse remained. The riff was based on Song for the Dumped by Ben Folds. I can improvise for hours over the descending bass riff that created the verse and will make a great song when it is kicking with swinging drums.

As trauma impacted my life, my songs took on a depressed tone. Slowly Through the Night demonstrates my difficulty sleeping. I wanted to experiment with a simile, so I added 'like' a candle burning through the night. In Another Man's Mind was my masterpiece at the time, asking God, 'Why are you laughing down on me?' The Human Spirit is a story of my experience in which I got alcohol poisoning for the first time.

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I had many crushes throughout school that made their way into my writing. My first flirtatious adventures can be found in Song for You. 'Is this real laughter? Is there love forever after?' expresses the uncertainty of this venture. This continues into All My Love, which explores an early failed drunken adventure that ended in a good friend agreeing that it would be better if we remain friends. Who Knows Where explores my fascination for a young girl called Matilda Julian, whom I had a thing for a while. Matilda ended up getting over 99 in the HSC, so with this intelligence. It was apparent why I had such a fascination with her musings.

When a childhood friend, Cameron Hallam, had a skiing accident, he was left paralysed for a fleeting period with severe neck problems. Walking on the Moon was a letter to him when I first heard of the injuries that he sustained. I wanted to write a small letter to let him know that even though I lost contact and was no longer a close friend, even his old friends were thinking and wishing him the best for his recovery. I am unsure if he ever read my poem, but I was thinking about him. He made an almost complete recovery and is doing well in life now.

Flooded Tears was an assignment written as part of the TAFE songwriting course that was a part of vocational in the 11th grade. I wrote this song about the generation gap between the Baby Boomer generation and Generation Y. During the 90s, there seemed to be a significant gap in the understanding between the generations, which I believe was a big reason that I am so misunderstood and continue to struggle to understand who I am.

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At the same time, I was learning at TAFE, I was also beginning to play with lyrics and learning from a piano teacher up in the Blue Mountains. One week, my music teacher asked me if I knew what chakras were. I had never heard of the term before, but I started reading about them and learning how chakras relate to colours. My music teacher said it would be cool if I could create music that somehow used the chromatic scale in a song. So, I combined the two ideas, thought of how colours could be creatively combined into lyrics, and created the song Chromatic Chakra. I never created the music, but I know how a melody could bring the lyrics to life.

The most defining event of my life has been September 11. As I woke up to this event unfolding, I closely watched what was happening on this momentous day. On the way to school, I was eagerly writing down my thoughts, and by the time I reached my first class, I was talking about a weatherman. 'What weatherman are you writing about?' my friend Brad Jones asked me. 'I'm not writing about a weatherman, just the idea that this day will be important in forecasting the future.'

As the events unfolded on TV and the Twin Towers collapsed, the day's emotion enthralled me. So, I continued writing my ideas down and put music to the song I created throughout the day on the night of September 11. By the time I fell asleep that night, I had the Weatherman complete. This is a lyric and song I was and continue to be incredibly proud of to this day. When I moved to Canberra in my first year of university, I fell in love with my First Love. I completed the bridge to this song and

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recorded it on an old eight-track recorder with my First Love singing and me doing a dodge backing vocal.

My high school years and my most prolific period of lyric and songwriting were concluded with my HSC composition. This song unfolded over many months, with the conclusion coming to me on a particular day. I recorded with song at a recording studio with the support of Drummer Clark, Carly, and her singing teacher. We took immense pride in getting the backing vocals right. Because the sound was a bit muddled, the sound engineer thought it would be a clever idea for the strings to be an octave higher, giving space for the vocals to sing. I stayed late into the night notating this song and was incredibly proud of the outcome. It was almost 12 months in the making.

Writing in Times of Learning

When I first went to university, I was overwhelmed by the amount of people and that it seemed like a hub of culture and knowledge. When I moved down to Canberra, I did not have a piano, so I found a small room with a piano to practice in the conservatorium at the Australian University. Here, I wrote A Young and Shining Mind, a summary of all the theories I, the young and shining mind, was trying to internalise at the time. This song was an epic trying to piece together all the fantastic concepts thrown my way at a time of great learning.

One of my assignments in my first crack of university was psychopathy and sociopaths. I was not seriously academic then,

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so I asked the lecturer if I could write a poem instead of an essay. The lecturer agreed and said, 'It better be good.' So, I wrote That's Justice, a story about Johnny Radar. It progresses into a future where there are no jails, but instead, criminals are given one last chance through surveillance to prove that they can exist in society. This is too much for Johnny, and he buys a gun to shoot himself. This poem explains that this ideal society has now been wholly ridden with psychopathy, with Johnny Radar being the last one. I am unsure what marks I got for this poem, but it is truly an epic that tells a great story.

Addiction is a lyric I wrote about what it says: addiction. When I tried to start a band up down in Canberra, it was initially aimed to have a separate songwriting and a lyric writing team. The lyric writing team aimed to come up with topics, brainstorm ideas and then put the lyrics together. I wrote addiction as an example, thinking of all the ideas concerning what addiction is and putting them all together in a rhyming, flowing lyric. When we later formed the band, Addiction became the hallmark song as we added the harmonies, 'Ooh baby, get addicted to love now,' to the lyric.

Diamonds Girl is a love song written to my First Love. She asked me to sing it to her as it was initially an acapella masterpiece. As time passed, Steve and I recorded it with acoustic guitar in his studio in Penrith before Steve made it a range of peaceful, relaxing songs. The chorus was added later by Steve. Apologetic was written during my first traumatic stay at Nepean Hospital when it was known as Pialla. It talks about Aboriginal rights, the importance of reconciliation, and the need to say

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'sorry' to the Aboriginal people to 'do justice for the sins of the past.'

In our early days on campus, Luke brought in some words he had written about his recently failed first relationship. This formed the first verse of Lessons, to which I quickly put the words to a melody I had been working with. Next, Romi added half the chorus, 'Life is like a fading end,' to which I added, 'It's hard to find a friend until the very end.' Over time, I added two verses to create a song with a strong melody and interlude. Once the solo was added, this song was complete and became one of the favourite songs at our one and only gig.

In my time after my master's and at HAC, I was doing a lot of voluntary work, writing songs for various reasons. I wrote For the Moment as my peace offering to the world. The Divine summarises my spiritual perspective and the life I would like to live. Nina is my ode to the planet and our need to sustain it. Self-Mastery is a song for my friend Sigrid, and a summary of what she has taught me over the years. I wrote two songs to my childhood heroes growing up that I read at their funerals. I would sing Poorpa downstairs at Nan and Pa's place in Kurrajong. Pa said he sometimes cried thinking of his influence on my life. Faith and Don are merely a summary of my grandparent's life that I proudly packed into one lyric.

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One Night at The Jolly Frog

One Saturday night, I was having a night out at the Jolly Frog in Windsor when I came across a familiar face from high school. His name was Steve. I went to school with his brother, Craig, at high school. I knew about him as he was in my brother Philby's year, and his reputation preceded him. He was well into a bottle or two of Canadian Club when he approached me. 'I hear you play a bit of piano,' he said. We got talking. He told me about his recording studio and invited me to do a bit of recording. The night progressed, and Steve drank more and more. As a schoolteacher, Steve clarified that 'it doesn't matter because I'm on holiday.'

I went down to Steve's set-up at Kurrajong. The recording studio was set up in a small three-bedroom shack his family lived in while their grand family home was being built on top of the hill. The shack was down the hill, but the set-up was remarkable. In the room you entered, Steve had the photography gear he was trying to set up a photography business. In another room was the band room with a drumkit, Steve's guitar amplifier, microphone, microphone stand, and enough room for my piano and another musician. The third room was Steve's recording studio, with two computer screens and the most impressive recording set-up I had ever seen. We got to work and recorded several songs in the coming weeks, including *Losing All Meaning*.

After a couple of months of recording and hanging out, we started a band. Nath became our bass player, and we had heard

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about one of Dad's piano students, Sarah, who was learning drums. By that point, Nath was working as a music teacher after spending years learning music at university, and Sarah was studying to be a music therapist at university.

As we practised, we had a wonderful time and enjoyed each other's company. While the songs Steve and I were practising and recording took the focus of our practice, we all had a chance to contribute our own songs. We all had a high degree of music theory behind us, so it was a true collaboration, an opportunity to contribute the music we had created in our personal practice.

After about a year of practising, we got to support the classy piano pop band Happenstance, led by the talented Nick Woodford, at the Jolly Frog Hotel in Windsor. Davy's friends all sat around and listened politely. My cousins Wendy and Michael came along, Orlando made the trip out from the Southwest, Philby's best mate Newts rocked up, and a host of other locals were either eager to hear the talent in our band or waiting to see Happenstance. Regardless, there was a rather good turnout.

We played the best we had ever played our songs. We played 10 quality songs, including Poof's classy All or Nothing and my Diamonds Girl. The song that got the most positive reviews of the night was my song Lessons, which Steve introduced as the song that was introduced as the song that would make the girls fall in love with me. The gig concluded with our jazzy Addiction; the audience seemed to get behind. We played well; even if the audience did not enjoy it, we 'felt addicted

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to love.' Steve was on a high for the rest of the night, and Orlando told me that he would be my biggest fan for the next two weeks.

We had one fantastic gig at the Jolly Frog. One unforgettable night where we could showcase the work we had practised for nearly a year. It was, however, our only gig as I went to China a few weeks later. When I returned from China, we practised a couple of times, and then Sarah dislocated her knee and could not play the drums. When her knee healed, Steve broke his finger and could not play the guitar. We all moved on a bit and decided to call it a day. We ended the band that never really had a name. We played with a few possibilities. The one we had on our one night at Jolly Frog was Monkey Knife Fight.

Recent Musings

Although I don't write as much as I should anymore, when I do, I try to make the poetry meaningful. When I do write, I feel that the tone of my writing has turned from dark and sometimes depressing to insightful.

Out-There was a poem that I started writing when I was having a psychotic episode. In this episode, I lost track of reality after thinking that I had seen my grandmother die in front of me. Although the reality of this situation was brief, as she resumed consciousness reasonably quickly, it had a profound impact on me. The experience pushed me 'out there,' and it was only when I returned 'in here' that I completed the song. I think this will be seen as an accurate perception of what it is like to be psychotic

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because it accurately portrays what many of my experiences have been like.

If My Name Was Love is my favourite 'love poem' I have ever written. It accurately portrays the nature of love, and I believe is quite clever how it turns around. You've Got Each Other To Hold was written as the first dance at my brother Davy's wedding. Steve gracefully took the lyrics and made it into a beautiful love song with beautiful harmonies. The Thought of a Cloud was aimed to be a meditation for Auntie Janet as she was dying. Unfortunately, I never completed it in her lifetime. A Pride of Lions is my anthem, explaining how the younger generation has the potential to transform the world. It highlights the importance of older 'surrendering their guard' so that the younger generation can take over.

Runs and Runs is the last poem I have written, and I hope to make it into a song soon. I wrote it during my time at the Hills Clinic. It highlights key themes of trauma explored in this book. It talks about my early success at crickets as a child. It talks about the trauma that made it difficult to talk about in early psychiatry sessions. Runs and Runs continues by exploring the years when I used to run as an outlet before this outlet was taken away. When I got ankle injuries, my outlet turned to poetry and then songwriting, ensuring that I have created all these beautiful songs.

Runs and Runs concludes by talking about how this process of writing my life story has been transformational in helping to process the traumas that have occurred. It explains that the exploration of a range of theories has allowed me to be

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

in a position where my mind is now free. Now that the trauma is out of the way, I am looking forward to seeing where all my learning and hard work will take me in the future. I believe there is a lot of potential for good. It is only a matter of time until the positive manifests.

ANDREW TURTLE

Lonely Hope

Why do we have war?

Why do we make each other suffer?

Why do we have a winner?

Why is someone always tougher?

Questions,

But the answers

The answers lie in you,

The answer is lonely hope.

How do the champions make it

Do they build themselves a boat?

How do they make it

How do they keep themselves afloat

Questions,

But the answers

The answers lie in you,

The answer is lonely hope.

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Summer Breeze

*Searching for freedom in a patchy haze,
Drifting in and out of a wishful daze,
Feelings are lost in a poetic maze,
In need of summer days.*

*Goosebumps appear upon the knees,
Winter's darkness leaves the soul to freeze,
The victim of a self-centred seize,
In need of the breeze.*

Chorus

*The summer breeze,
It sets me free,
The summer breeze blew me away.*

*The young and the old are equally wise,
Upon the breeze, the spirit never dies,
No worries and no need for lies,
Living on summer highs.
Only pick from the very best trees,
Escape to a world, wherever you please,
Rainbowed horizons are all the future sees,
The calmness of the summer breeze.*

ANDREW TURTLE

Chorus

*The summer breeze,
It sets me free,
The summer breeze blew me away.*

Bridge

*A red, red rose as the summer breeze blows,
Where it takes you, only the summer breeze knows,
A stone-cold smile as it grows and grows,
Upon the summer breeze.*

Chorus

*The summer breeze (blows and blows)
It sets me free (as it grows and grows)
The summer breeze blew me away.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

A Flower

Life is a flower, and it needs some time in the sun,

Life is a battle, and it is easier to say, 'it has won,'

I grew it from seed,

I gave it nothing to feed,

Asking, 'why do I bleed?'

If I answer with power and I grow each hour

Can it be beautiful?

Life is a flower and needs some water to grow,

Life is a challenge, and it's easier to say, 'I don't know,'

I grew it from seed,

It grew into a weed,

Asking, 'why do I bleed?'

If I answer with power and I grow each hour

Can it be beautiful?

Life is a flower, and it needs some tender and care,

Life is a lesson, and it's easier to say, 'I don't care,'

But I grew it from seed,

And I know what it needs,

Because I make it bleed,

And if I answer with power and I grow each hour

It can be beautiful.

ANDREW TURTLE

Slowly Through the Night

The feelings that burn,
The lessons we learn,
It feels like we are going around,
A page about the turn.
The journey life takes,
The hearts that it breaks,
When you cannot appreciate
The dark inside awakes.
Burn, burning,
Like a candle burning through the night
Burn, burning,
Even while you are slowly burning,
The world around you keeps on turning,
The heart inside you is always yearning,
Even when you are burning slowly through the night.
Slowly through the night.
The soul that grieves,
The one life deceives,
The one who holds up a white flag,
Who gives up and conceives is...
Burn, burning,

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Like a candle burning through the night

Burn, burning,

Even while you are slowly burning,

The world around you keeps on turning,

The heart inside you is always yearning,

Even when you are burning slowly through the night,

Slowly through the night.

That minute it takes to burn a hole,

It is often enough for it to burn out of control.

ANDREW TURTLE

In Another Man's Mind

Pulling out the queen of spades,
Life has turned to the darkest shades,
Why are you laughing down at me?
I've got the world at my feet,
I'm playing at the fastest beat,
Then why are you laughing down at me?
Thinking too hard, we are all the same,
The original has gone up in flame,
We're taught about what life is about.
Someday someone will figure it out,
I can't tell what tomorrow will bring,
I can't imagine anything.
In one minute, you can cross a land,
Smile, cry, hear a great band,
In one minute, you can press a dial,
Drift off to heaven for a little bit,
But in one minute, can you make a man,
No, we're watching; no one can.

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Chorus

From another man's heart.

You're tearing us apart,

I'm in another man's mind.

You're turning us blind,

You're leaving us behind,

I'm in another man's mind.

ANDREW TURTLE

Song for You

You opened up your heart,
It was hard to split us apart,
Because when we were alone,
We were flirting on the phone,
I feel so bright around you,
I know this feeling is true,
All I know is I want to be with you,
With everything you do.

When I see you smile,
My goosebumps go senile,
And when I see you frown,
I know I've let you down,
I feel so bright around you,
I know this feeling is true,
Is this real laughter?
Is there love forever after?

Chorus

You and me
Living Life how it's meant to be,
You and me

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*Like honey and a bumble bee,
For life, we'll stay together,
Best of friends forever.*

ANDREW TURTLE

All My Love

*I felt something the other night,
As we talked under the moonlight
So secure in your arms
Tickled by your charms,
It's not the alcohol talking anymore,
Would you believe me anyway?
I feel magic in your lips,
I wish that I could stay.
The heart inside me cries,
As you close your peaceful eyes
Is this something real?
This sensation I feel,
I want to feel your heartbeat,
I know you're dreaming of me,
It's you I want to hold me,
I wish that you could see it.*

*You say we should be friends,
There most friendships end,
There are too many corny lines,
For a friendship that always shines*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*How do I make you believe?
That I'm falling in love with you/
How do I make you see?
That my heart is screaming too?*

Chorus

*All my love is for you,
Should we talk things through,
Things are so complicated,
And my heart is turning blue,
Over you.*

Bridge

*Maybe it is the alcohol talking,
Making my mind do some walking,
Maybe this is an illusion,
Maybe it is all a delusion,
Maybe I should talk to you as a friend,
But I'm afraid our friendship will end.*

ANDREW TURTLE

The Human Spirit

The drink no longer tasted humble,

As the legs turned to a stumble

We laughed, thought this was fun,

Wow, the world even spun!

We sculled the grog we stole,

Then the eyes began to roll,

The head suddenly burned,

As the night quickly turned.

As the stupidity took its toll

He reached out for a bowl,

Vomit and truth diminished,

As his consciousness finished.

Weeks of pain followed,

As the truth slowly hollowed,

Demons arose from the wall,

As loss of sleep made the victim fall.

Chorus

It does not really matter,

Just try this drink, mate,

Oh, it doesn't really matter,

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Until it is too late.
It does not really matter,
Until the body cries,
Oh, it doesn't really matter,
Until the spirit dies.

ANDREW TURTLE

Walking on the Moon

*I remember when we dreamt of the stars,
An astronaut, we said, we'd prosper,
Now that disaster is in the air,
There will be times when you couldn't care,
As you hand in there, we will share a prayer,
And don't forget the person that you were.
Don't know where this journey's taking you,
You are heading into the unknown,
Day quickly turns to night,
Travelling at the speed of light,
As you fight this lonely and painful flight,
Remember, you're not doing things alone.
It feels like your body is floating in the air,
Now everything seems so far,
There are too many hours for thinking,
The specialists can't stop blinking,
As legs are tingling, the world below is sinking,
You're the only one who knows who you are.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Chorus

With each little step, you take,
It is a giant leap you make,
You never know what man can do,
Until you're walking on the moon.

Bridge

One small step for many is one giant leap for mankind,
Listen to what I have to say:
'Miracles happen every day,
We never thought that man could walk upon the moon,
The day when you will walk comes around too soon,
To take that first step all over again is enough to make a man insane,
But we know you are strong enough to prove every wrong,
Prove everyone wrong,
Oh, prove everyone wrong.'

Ending

Until you're walking on the moon,
You are going to be walking soon,
You're going to be walking on the moon.

ANDREW TURTLE

Chromatic Chakra

When I look into your eyes

All I see is you,

All I want to do,

Squeeze you tight till you turn blue,

Fly off together where the skies are blue,

When I look into your eyes

All I see is blue.

When I close my eyes

All I do is dream,

As unreal as they seem,

Clouds are a hazy shade of green,

The trees are huge, and they're always green,

When I close my eyes

All I see is green.

When I'm alone

All I do is write,

Interrupted by the night,

Haunted by a ghost, it makes me turn white,

Protected by my soul so pure and white,

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*When I'm alone
All I see is white.*

Chorus

*The colours of the rainbow
Blend in with the sky,
The sun will shine tomorrow,
The brightest of colours makes me high,
Colours make the strongest men cry,
I can see the colours,
I can see the colours,
I can see the colours of my life.*

Bridge

*Sometimes when you're grey,
Your heart is bleeding red,
Feeling down when you're feeling brown,
Pink and purple forever.
Sometimes you say the wrong words,
You're painting the wrong colours,
Green and yellow is always shallow,
Black and white together
Black and white together*

ANDREW TURTLE

Flooded Tears

*They learnt to make peace, not war,
Changed the world from those before,
Pushed the whole world forward.
The old world was just a stream,
Where you followed your heart, and you followed your dream,
The whole world was a changing,
To a flooded river of tears.
They gave birth to flooded tears,
Distortion ringing in their ears,
Worrying about the small things.
Walking through, they tried conserving,
The world keeps a changing,
To a flooded river of tears.
Baby is born full of laughter,
Stories are told forever after,
Of a face full of innocence.
Born is a generation gap,
From the moment they lay upon the lap,
The world keeps a changing,
To a flooded river of tears.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Chorus

Take my hand,
And make a stand,
Fill the gap between the two.

Take my hand,
And make a stand,
Build a bridge from me to you.

Bridge

Some things do not change,
The world is just too strange,
We're living in a hangover,
Of a long-forgotten dream,
If we are the future,
Singing songs of sorrow,
Those who are our children,
Will drift further down the stream.

ANDREW TURTLE

Who Knows Where

*She stares through the dense morning air,
Like a bird flies off to who knows where,
Staring beyond her distant reflection,
Bizarre and mysterious in its complexion,
She's sifting through thoughts of the finest sands,
Thinking so hard*

She thinks no one understands.

*Share continues to stare somewhere over there,
Like a gypsy travel to who knows where,
She looks beyond her slight perplexion,
Painting a picture of her direction,
She's sifting through thoughts of the finest sands,
Thinking so hard*

She thinks no one understands.

*I blindly glance at her long shiny hair,
Like a thinker drifts off to who knows where,
I see a beauty through this blank inspection,
So sophisticated, yet I feel a connection,
I sift through thoughts of the finest of sands,
Thinking so hard,*

I think she will never understand.

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Chorus

Are you dreaming?

Are you screaming?

Through those beautiful eyes?

Those beautiful eyes.

Are you frightened?

Are you enlightened?

Through those beautiful eyes.

Those beautiful eyes.

Bridge

She paints with pictures,

And I paint with words,

We are both paint people,

Does a nest hold bird,

Who knows where?

Cause the future is red,

Is it enough,

To have an artistic thread?

ANDREW TURTLE

The Weatherman

*We get our first light,
Dad has been up all night,
It feels different in the air,
Sleepy eyes wake and stare.*

*To see a man crying
Saying, 'the world I love is dying,
I hope the rains are falling for the very last time.'*

*I heard the news today,
The skies were covered in grey,
The weatherman was forecasting,
Did not know how long the fear would be lasting.*

*The weatherman was crying,
Saying, 'the world I love is dying,
I hope the rains are falling for their very last time.'*

*Glued to the TV set,
We see how bad people can get,
What the world has seen
It was straight from a Hollywood scene.*

*The entire world was crying,
As the innocent were dying,
I hope the rains are falling for the very last time.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Chorus

*Bring the world as one,
No war is ever won,
Clearing of the sky
Let the last of soldiers die.*

ANDREW TURTLE

Mother's Garden

Father planted mother a garden,
From the son, it supplied shade,
For when the son should have been shining,
The darkness of night was wearing him down.
Father came into the house,
To see the mess the son had made,
Because the morning rays had been scorching,
Like a knife, it cut them in two.

Pre-chorus

The fire in the soul was burning,
But the love between them was strong enough because...

Chorus

When spring comes round
There's more I've found,
And what I've found
Is there's so much love left in the garden?
Because I need you
And you need me,
To be the men we want to be,
To understand and learn to see,
That there's so much love left in the garden
In mother's garden,
Where there is shade

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

If The Sun Didn't Shine

The wind and the rain
The moon shines again,
Today I had a race with the sun.
But if the sun didn't shine
I'd forget about the time,
And everything would be half done.
When our minds are confused
And our feelings abused,
We look for the shade of the tree.
But if we let the sun hide
Life would stay at low tide,
The fish would disappear from the sea.
When the sun meets the sea,
It will fly over me,
Flying, over and over again.
Over and over and over again.
Until the day that I die,
I will look to the sky,
And it will tell me,
Where I am.

ANDREW TURTLE

A Young and Shining Mind

Not all as it appears,
Getting closer to our peers,
Combining different atmospheres,
Hold back your cheer until the fear disappears,
Life is a rager, a front-pager,
The world is just a teenager,
We are all born with a young and shining mind,
And hope...
The hard work will not resume,
Unless we learn not to presume, we all consume,
Uncertain how the future will loom,
Like a bride and groom
Life is a changer,
Away in a manger
The world is just a teenager.
We are all born with a young and shining mind.
I don't know why so I search for answers,
We are on our own we are all freelancers,
And I hope...
If we make a contribution,
We will find a global solution,

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Strengthened with revolution,

The answers lie in evolution.

Let our hearts globalise,

Search through the truth and all the lies

Work together with open eyes,

Individualism and a compromise

Life is an arranger,

A peace ranger,

The world is just a teenager,

We are all born with a young and shining mind.

I do not know why, but I search for answers,

We are on our own we are all freelancers,

Equality and fair chances,

Democracy and full romances,

We will be afraid until peace dancers.

With a young and shining mind

ANDREW TURTLE

That's Justice

*The last psycho takes his stand,
He rapes and murders his brother's daughter,
A brutal crime leaving all evidence plain to the eye,
An empty conscience left unaware of his crime,
Caught in an ego of pressing and driving thoughts,
Lacking planning, motivation, and moral control
Believing society had long shaped his resentment and anger,
The last psycho desperately asserted his stand on authority.
He chuckles as he tells the story to the jury,
'I slit her throat; what an effort, what an achievement,' he said.
Leaving the jury with only one conclusion.
Guilt as all the hidden injustices of man,
Guilty as all the natural disasters of nature,
Guilty as all the inactions of the last psycho's lonely and mistreated
life.
The last psycho left the courtroom free,
Free to change and to live in society,
Free to make choices and rewrite his future.
Freedom, however, never escapes the conscience,
Guilt and a peering eye take away these freedoms,
For every move Johnny makes Is now watched and monitored,
In the shower,
At work,
At the dinner table.
Some of the worst criminals had been changed by the system.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*For other's control was too much,
For the only thing between life and death was the control of a switch.
Johnny Radar,
The last psycho bought a gun,
Dreaming of blasting his temporal lobes out of his forehead
The lady at the switchboard, however, never gave the man a chance,
Sighing as she pressed the button,
She ended the life of a once innocent human.
Johnny knew the rules were there to protect him,
The last offer for freedom had been breached,
And Johnny Radar's life of injustices,
Immorality,
And lack of righteousness
It came to an abrupt and painful end...
Because between heaven and hell,
Restricted by his actions,
The last psycho made his choice.
Nothing more was said,
Because that's justice...
You get what you give.*

ANDREW TURTLE

Addiction

*An addiction is the fiercest contradiction,
A societal eviction, an inner conviction,
Triers, obligers are filled with cheap desires,
The highest flyers are sensation deniers.
The remains of memories and pain,
You contain, you refrain, create a stain,
You confide on a ride to find some pride,
Hiding from those feelings caught inside.*

Chorus

*(Ooh, Baby) Get addicted to love,
(Ooh, Baby) Get addicted to love now,
(Ooh, Baby) Get Addicted to love,
The more I see you, the more I need you.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Diamonds Girl

Will you be my diamonds girl?

Will you be my wishing well?

And take my hands, and make them warm?

Can you be the shelter from my storm?

To hold, till old, I will love you well,

Fill our lives with so many stories to tell.

Will you be my heartbeat, girl?

I love you more than words can tell,

For when I hold you in my arms

I feel a comfort in your calm,

When you walk into a room

You look like a flower in full bloom.

Your vibrance makes me feel like gold,

Your spirit has taken me by hold,

For you are the one I always wish

Will be the recipient of my kiss,

With beauty, innocence, and a ladle spoon

You've got me flying to the moon.

ANDREW TURTLE

Chorus

You are the door to the sky,

Will you let me in?

You blind me with your light,

You hypnotise me.

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Apologetic

The economist says, its land, right,"

When the native man replies.

"Grass castles have been burnt behind,

And boomerangs always come back.

From the first 'min min' in the sky

To the centipede on the Earth,

The land means so much more."

Leave an issue to sleep,

By creating a heaven in a dreamland

Where all is reconciled

And we are one with their ways,

Learning from our elder sons and daughters

We could breathe the same breath,

And taste the same flavours.

It has been a long time since the dreaming.

But they are still searching for those final words of peace,

The only English word that does justice to the sins of the past is 'sorry.'

ANDREW TURTLE

Lessons

You used to be,
The light inside of me,
Like the heavenly voices
Of god's most trusted angels,
Every time you smiled,
My heart began to cry,
For the happiness inside me
Was so overwhelming.
Life is like a fading end.
But it is hard to find a friend,
That will be with you until the end.

You used to be,
My best friend
You said 'life we'd stay together,
You and me forever,'
But time can be the one,
That makes you drift apart,
For absence does not make
The heart grows stronger.
Life is like a fading end,
But it is hard to find a friend,

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

That will be with you until the end.

As we both move on

Guided by the moon and the sun,

We will travel on strong,

The times that we had,

The memories we shared,

I am happy for you.

ANDREW TURTLE

For The Moment

*The essence of every race and class is the people,
Their purpose is always to love each other and live in peace,
Why, then, are we fighting over the tiny details?
When underneath the diversity
We are all the same,
We are all the same,
We want the same thing,
Happiness and the sound of laughter.*

*The essence of every religion is compassion,
Their purpose is always to expand our awareness,
Why, then, are we fighting over the tiny details?
When overcoming adversity,
And we will find that we are all the same,
We are all the same,
We want the same thing,
Happiness and the sound of laughter.*

Chorus

*Happiness for every man and woman, happiness,
Kindness for every boy and girl, kindness,*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*Freedom, empathy,
Love for all the beings on the Earth.
Love for all that it is worth.*

After Chorus

*For everybody to live in a world that is not conflicting,
For everybody to realise the pain their thoughts are inflicting,
We are all the same,
We want the same thing...*

Bridge 2

*When the empires have been defeated
And the civilisations are all but gone,
All that will remain will be people...
And love*

Chorus

*Happiness for every man and woman, happiness
Kindness for every boy and girl, kindness
Freedom, empathy
Love for all the beings on the Earth
Love for all that it is worth.*

ANDREW TURTLE

The Divine

*Find room in your soul to believe,
Listen to the messages you receive,
Through reason perceive,
Give them meaning to conceive,
Through wisdom, you breathe in the life.*

*With the heart, you will find the key,
The channel opens to all those who see,
In the wide-open sea,
Be the best you can be,
By finding time to breathe in the life.
All the glorious things we have found,
To realise they are all intimately bound,
What a sensational sound,
Building things from the ground
Creating comfort as we breathe in the life.*

Chorus

*Living harmoniously,
Foundationally,*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*With the ease and the flow of the heart,
It is from small beginnings that all journeys start.*

ANDREW TURTLE

Poorpa

*He fought through the depression,
Been through a war, then became a mayor,
He has seen the world and so many people,
Always finding time to care,
He loves his music like a boy in his teens,
Louise and Ella were the kings and the queens.*

*Not every day do I sit down and give someone my hours,
But not every boy is writing songs about flowers,
What is hard to accept, most people neglect,
But not my Pa; he receives my greatest respect,*

Chorus

*Jazz with my Pa and drinking ginger beer,
He is my teacher,
Jazz with my Pa, he sings a message so clear,
He says to play the piano,
Jazz with my Pa and unconditional love
My hero gives me traditional love.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Nina

*As I manage your time and travel through your space,
I became inspired and learned to love this place,
As I find my connection, I find my direction,
To understand the depths of my dimensions,
I believe, and I perceive in you,
I am with you.*

*As I gravitate towards the Earth,
I realise what values are worth,
As I begin to grow,
I learn to know,
That I am conscious of my dimensions,
I believe, and I perceive in you,
I am with you.*

*As I am integrated, I become at one with my soul,
Every experience makes me whole,
My decisions are my choice,
My image is my voice,
And I am responsible for my dimensions,
I believe, and I perceive in you,
I am with you.*

ANDREW TURTLE

*I will look after you,
I will preserve your beauty,
You are all I have,
I believe in you,
I am with you.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Self-Mastery

I have a wise teacher.

With whom I can be free

We can discuss things for hours,

Even if we disagree,

She says,

'Life is about self-mastery,

Learning from the good and the bad,

It is about reflecting on life critically,

Realising the reasons why we are sad.'

She says,

'There is always an honest answer,

Even if it hurts to work things through,

Life's about searching for love and truth,

And getting to know the real you,'

She says,

'To help all kinds of people,

You must first help yourself,

Overcoming all the burdens

Begins with one's own mental health.'

So, in viewing our common destiny,

We climb mountains of complexity,

ANDREW TURTLE

*We must satisfy the peace of the full
On our way to reaching our capacity*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Faith & Don

*Faith was brought up in an orphanage,
Where you were seen but never heard
She developed a photographic memory,
And can still remember every word.*

She only started school at eight,

Because she was so small

But watch out, Joyce Tricker

You can push, but you will fall.

Don lived through the depression,

With nothing but politics at the table

He was forced to eat his pet chicken,

And for the rest of his life, he was not able.

They both arrived with someone else,

At Petersham dance hall

And shoulder to shoulder and through his legs

They jitterbugged on the dance floor.

Faith admired Donnie's mother,

Visited every day while he was away,

Don out west received a letter,

Saying this girl is here to stay.

So, Don came home on a Harley.

ANDREW TURTLE

*They got married at twenty-three,
Conceived and raised two children,
And the rest is history,
Our Don and Faith*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Out-There

*Everything has been drifting along with reason and rhyme,
I have been conditioned by the normality of daily activities,
And a negative variance of mind,
Suddenly, I felt the reality of what other people think of the person I
am 'in-here,'*

And that made me sad.

Then it is as if I have been awakened from my dream

There is a haze, a cloud-like existence,

Out of control, but clarity in the dark,

It is as if I am in a heavenly existence.

Open to the potential of reality

With truths being realised to me,

While being 'out-there' is such a frightening state to be in

Beyond this, I feel I am finally here,

A reality I wish I could be in all the time.

As I awaken, I notice the smell of my sickness,

The fragrances that have become so familiar,

The mess, the poor hygiene, the organisation of the way I live my life,

Detached from what everyone 'else' is thinking.

I have been 'out-there' for a few days now.

A place where there is no rhyme or reason,

ANDREW TURTLE

While being 'out-there' is such a frightening state to be in

Beyond this, I feel I am finally here,

The reality, I wish I could be in all the time.

Then I take my medication

And I am back 'here,'

Back in the wind and grind

Now I must face up to the reality of being out of reality,

Or merely just being out of my mind...

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

If My Name Was Love

*If my name was love
I'd be as deep as an ocean,
I'd live a life of devotion,
Be a whirlwind of emotion,
I'd allow passion to lead,
For intimacy to follow,
I'd fill in all the gaps,
So that life is never hollow.*

*If my name was love
I'd have everything to achieve,
I'd have all the answers,
All I need to believe,
I'd guide you like a pilot,
I'd pass you down a rope,
I'd supply an eternal resource,
So that you can always cope.*

*If my name was love
Like light, I'd inspire,
Forgiveness would be easy,
I'd be your one true desire,
With contentment and compassion*

ANDREW TURTLE

*I'd never let you down,
I'd always do my best,
To turn that frown upside down.*

*If my name was love
There would be no war,
For in a peaceful existence
There is no desire to hoard more,
I'd give back to the Earth,
For endless a generation
Only in my moods
Would there be a rainbow of sensation.*

*If your name was love
Like a magnet, I'd love you back,
Through the law of attraction
Avoid fear, failure or lack.
So, if I love you unconditionally
Will you gravitate my way?
Will you be my endless aspiration?
Because I promise I will always stay.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

You've Got Each Other To Hold

*You are a rose without any thorns,
You are the morning of thirty-three dawns,
You have each other till you grow old,
Because you have got each other to hold.
You are the wind that blows clouds away,
You are the memory of a perfect day,
You have got forever to see what unfolds,
Because you have got each other to hold.
You are the morning, a bright day's begun,
You are a flower reaching up to the sun,
You don't need diamonds, silver, or gold,
Cause you have got each other to hold.
You have each other till the end of days,
To love each other in millions of ways,
You have a love that could never be sold,
Because you have got each other to hold.
Because you have got each other to hold.*

ANDREW TURTLE

The Thought of a Cloud

An affirmation,
Day by day,
Mother Nature heals,
In her own special way,
She is kind,
Dignified,
She is brilliant and resilient,
She is wise,
Compassionate and strong.
Believe it.
Ground yourself,
Close your eyes,
Immerse in the moment,
Internalise,
If there's pain
Just accept it,
Find a way to let it go,
For a thought is but a cloud
Drifting with the wind,
Believe it.

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

Bridge

Thoughts will wonder,
Moments will fade,
But memories last forever
When a life is so well made,
You have inspired so many,
With your beautiful mind
And tomorrow is about discovery,
So, leave nothing left to find.

Mother, Teacher

Lover, Friend

The Caesar of a battle

It will not be the end,

Because we are here

Loud and clear

And I know it will not be easy,

But your fight

Is our fight, and we will win,

Believe it.

Because you are kind

Dignified,

Brilliant & resilient

ANDREW TURTLE

*You are wise,
Compassionate and strong
Believe it.*

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

A Pride of Lions

Old man, surrender your guard,

We're not here to fight,

Guide me on your shoulders,

Guide me so that I can see.

Old man, surrender your guard,

We are not here to fight,

Guiding you on their shoulders,

Guiding us to where we need to be.

Chorus

If we all aim to make a contribution,

And we all give a helping hand,

You see,

The young they are a pride of lions,

Ready for them to hear them roar.

ANDREW TURTLE

Runs and Runs

He lives in a quiet street in the country,
He thinks about cricket all day,
He plays through the week and the weekend,
Scoring lots of runs
He scores runs and runs,
Runs and Runs
Runs and runs.
Things get a little bit funny,
It becomes all too much to bear,
He stays silent but is forced to talk,
He finds relief in yelling,
He runs and runs,
He runs and runs,
Runs and runs.
Going for runs gives him such freedom,
A chance to escape his mind,
He finds out he isn't too bad,
Until his ankle hurts,
He runs and runs,
He runs and runs,
Runs and Runs

He writes all types of poems,
To express how he feels,

A TURTLE'S JOURNEY

*It's dark because his reality is dark,
His mind finds a way to escape,
He runs and runs,
He runs and runs,
Runs and runs.
He sits down to play the piano,
He writes all kinds of songs,
His words turn from depressed too insightful,
But he still needs an escape,
He runs and runs,
He runs and runs,
Runs and runs,
He ignites someone he loves,
Their wisdom turns to anger,
Why do you yell great father?
Where does this anger come from?
He runs and runs,
He runs and runs,
Runs and runs.
The traumas take years to process,
For a long time, he keeps them inside,
He goes to uni to explore all kinds of theories,
His mind learns to be free,
He runs and runs,
He runs and runs,
Runs and runs.
Now he is tired of running,*

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*He wants to confront the truth,
He confronts the people he loves,
He is tired of running away,
They run and run,
He runs and runs,
Runs and runs.*



About The Book

"A Turtle's Journey" is a compelling memoir that chronicles the life of Andrew Turtle, a man marked by remarkable talents and profound struggles. The impetus for this memoir was born during Andrew's time in a mental health facility, where he grappled with the weight of traumas and grief that had long haunted him. He aimed to confront and dismantle the power of these memories to reconcile with the challenges imposed by a life shaped by mental health issues. This transformative journey liberated him from the shackles of trauma and compelled him to reconstruct the rich tapestry of his life story, culminating in this emotionally charged memoir.

Described by Austin McAuley Publishers as "a strong and moving memoir," "A Turtle's Journey" promises to captivate, amuse, move, and provoke deep introspection. Within its pages, readers will embark on a poignant exploration of life's traumas, lessons, and stories that unfold along the way, ultimately prompting a profound appreciation for the opportunities they have been given.

This memoir offers an intimate glimpse into Andrew's personality and life's path. It traverses his formative years, the continuous pursuit of knowledge, professional journey, travels, and interpersonal relationships. By providing insight into the underlying foundations of his thought processes, "A Turtle's Journey" also offers glimpses into the uncharted territory of his

ANDREW TURTLE

future endeavours, hinting at a forthcoming series of groundbreaking works.

"A Turtle's Journey" serves as a profound introduction to the life and aspirations of Andrew Turtle, setting the stage for what promises to be an inspiring literary journey for readers eager to explore what lies ahead.