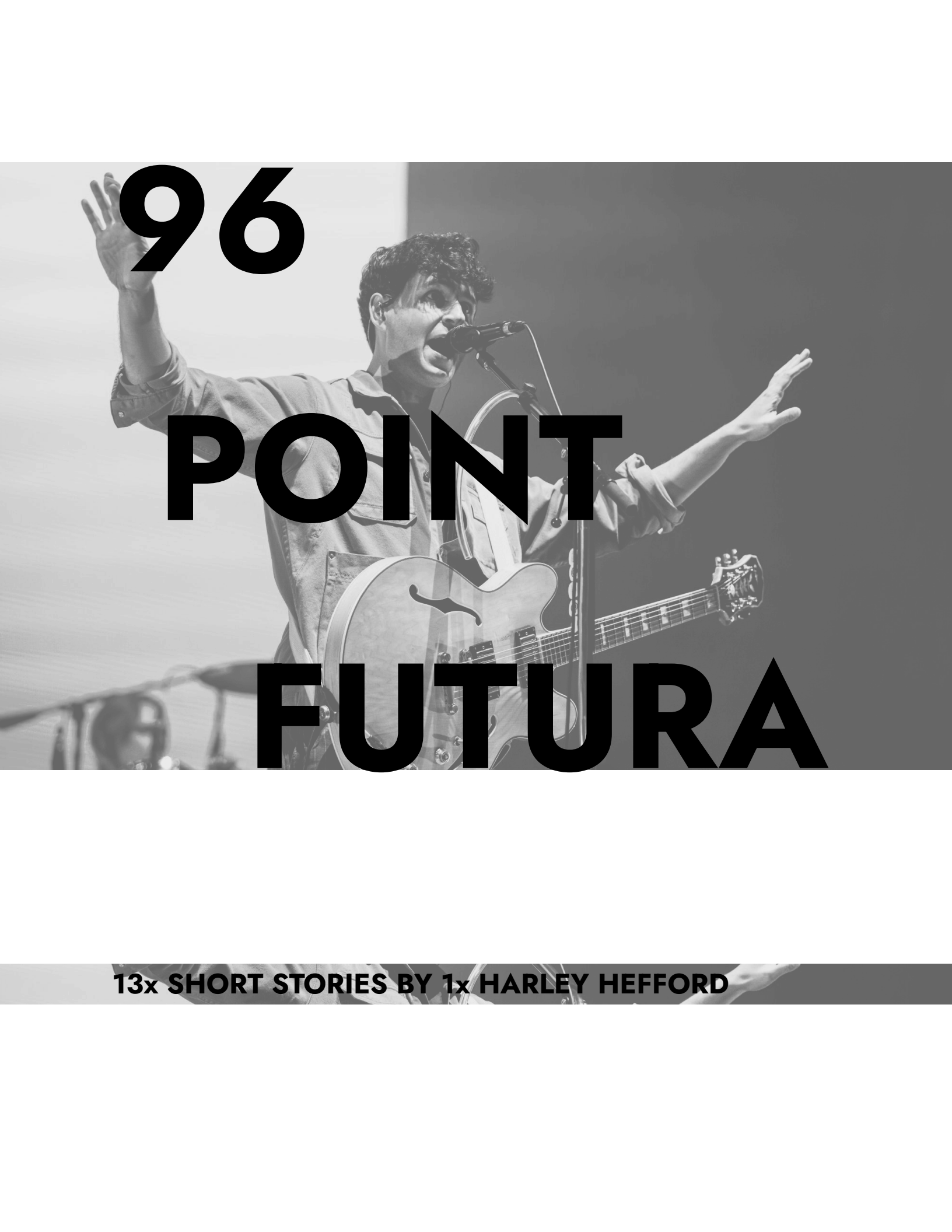




96

POINT

FUTURA

13x SHORT STORIES BY 1x HARLEY HEFFORD

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96 Point Futura is a product of 'Real Story Club,' a social / literary practice of approximately 7 friends gathering fortnightly, alternating between reading a selected story and sharing our own stories, based on the chosen prompt. Most pieces written in Naarm (Melbourne), during a global pandemic.

Thanks to my Story Club mates for prompt-choosing, feedback and straight up gr8 vibes, the authors of the prompt stories for their craft and inspiration and my dear mother, who always warrants a thanks.

*** 96 point futura ***

A REPORT ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH LED ME TO READ THE NOVEL ETHAN FROME

Respected members of the 'Readings customer survey' academy!

I was not expecting your email asking when I last read a book and what prompted me to read this book as well as some demographic data. However, I will respond to your email in the same way I respond to all emails, with staggering diligence and length.

It was a dull Saturday, or one which you might characterise as thus far uneventful, when I entered the shop called 'I Love Books.' Google Maps had indicated it as the nearest second-hand bookstore. I'd expected huge, musty shelves, maybe even an armchair squished into a corner for customers to try before choosing to buy. But no, respected members, nothing of the sort.

Instead, a small square of carpet and a protective plastic screen. All the books were on the other side of this barrier, with the shop attendant. The store sells school books, she told me - You can't look through the shelves. Upon noticing me running my eyes along the book spines which were in view, she added about how people who come in here usually already know what they want, i.e. have a booklist from their child's school.

The day which I describe was my first real day off for some time. After a decent sleep in, I was confused to find the activity I most felt like doing was work. There's a positive reading of this - that my work is so rewarding that I would choose to do it in even my free time. And some less positive readings, such as an inability to be 'unproductive', or a social life less robust than it might be.

For the project I was working on, which I am happy to describe in depth to the respected members of your committee, but certainly in a

separate email, we required about 700 pages cut from books, preferably connected to time travel. In the store, I had noticed 'Do Androids Dream Of Electric Sheep' in my eyeline. Promising, but not quite the one. As a long shot, I asked for The Time Machine. I tend to give off what has been described as a kookiness. This quality may not be pervading this email report, but let me assure you that in real life the effect is palpable. I could tell the shop attendant was doubtful about my chances as she typed in the title. We were both surprised when it was in her system.

Seconds later, she put Edith Wharden's novel 'Ethan Frome' on the counter in front of me. Oh, I said, or perhaps it was something more like Err or Umm. I was trying to be polite. Is this... um, I think I continued, Did you mean... She said something like - Oh I'm dumb, sorry, and disappeared into the shelves again. I couldn't quite work out how she made this error, I thought about it for a while after leaving the store with what ended up being nine copies of HG Wells' 'The Time Machine.'

I drove towards Officeworks, a place in which I always fall briefly in love, but again, content for a subsequent email. Inside my car I remembered a musician I love has a song called Ethan Frome. The song is about the novel and I might recite its first four lines at this juncture, good academy members, to give a sense of both song and novel: 'masterpiece of catastrophic love, in a small new england town, ninety five pages of tragedy, difficult to put down...' The song has always delighted me and made me want to read the book, and as Google Maps snaked me through the backstreets of Doncaster, I suddenly realised that I had been presented with a sign from the universe.

Oh my god, I missed it! I found myself exclaiming loudly, drowning out the music filling my car. The universe gave me a sign and I totally missed it! I was meant to buy that book!! I was yelling, and I should make it explicitly clear, yelling aloud to nobody, there was nobody else in the car. It seemed so obvious all of a sudden. I remembered theories I had when I was younger - that the universe presents us with opportunities in disguise and

if we correctly identify them, we are then led towards more interesting and magical experiences. And so on and so forth.

I had, as I'm sure you can understand, a strong notion to turn the car around and go back to the store. But simultaneously, as you might also be able to identify with, a desire to continue to Officeworks, born from a wanting to stick with an established plan, to be stable. After some disquiet steering-wheel drumming, I decided to compromise, to return to the bookstore on the way home. Thus fulfilling the spiritual mission of the book without breaking from the initial destination of Officeworks. I know many people engage in the kind of internal dialogue I was engaging in, or at least, I believe this with relative certainty, but still something about my exact inner discussion at this time seemed esoteric, uncommon.

Speeding back along Elgar Rd, to buy the specific copy of Ethan Frome mistakenly placed before me by a bookshop employee, certain that this action would place me in communication with some sort of higher spirit, I was filled with a supreme sense of purpose. It was thrilling. I felt highly alive. As I often say to try and capture life at its most fluid and fascinating, I felt like I was at a music festival.

Face to face with the red lettering of 'I Love Books,' which I now saw said 'textbooks and school supplies' underneath, I was eager for the shop attendant's reaction. I promised myself that I wouldn't stop short at simply asking for the book, that I would fully explain that I was buying it because I believed her earlier mistake to be a sign from the universe. That I genuinely believed this. She had seemed so straight-laced earlier, not taking the bait of any of my attempts at making conversation which went beyond the constrictions of her professional duties. I liked not being able to predict how she would react to the unexpected pinch of mysticism which was about to be sprinkled into her work day.

She was serving another customer. Her eyes gave me a faint nod of

recognition, her face mask had teddy bears. Hi, you know how you got the wrong book before, Ethan Frome, can I buy that one please? I almost stopped myself here, but the weight of my earlier promise to myself gave me the will to continue. So, you see I like a band who sing a song about it and so I think it might be a sign from the universe that you accidentally brought it out before. That I'm meant to buy it. That's why I want to buy it. The same exact copy you brought out before. She was silent for a moment, her expression didn't really change. Finally, she says, Fair enough. It's perfect. Fair enough. I still think about that.

I hope my report has been illuminating, members of Readings customer survey academy. For a brief moment, I considered merely the perfunctory answers of 'When did you last read a book?' Two Saturdays ago and 'What prompted you to read this book?' Because I like a song about the book. But these seemed wildly myopic answers in the context of a universe which I think I actually do believe rewards curiosity in a tangible and direct way. I can say for certain that listening to the song Ethan Frome on the drive home I felt in communion with something. Exactly what that something was or the exact parameters of it I will not speculate on here, in the context of an official report. Please find my demographic data laid out in a spreadsheet below, Thank you.

TRAIL!

On the trail with overhanging branches, everyone sidestepped the frozen teenager. Niall was mid-stride, millimeters from planting his left Nike on the ground. Dappled in blue. Each part of him bluish, definitely unmoving.

“Damn,” said Michael, interrupting his own anecdote about the pair of rainbow lorikeets who had taken to frequenting his backyard. “Hate that.”

Roisin clacked from the side of her mouth, a noise of agreeance. Seeing a stuck person made her squeamish. She heeded Niall’s hair, a fernery of curls petrified in time. Even the sweat droplets on his cheeks were still.

She told Michael she had no idea whether birds were mostly happy, but she would presume so. And he seemed confident about it. So he was probably right.

“We’re all just birds, really! So free!” Something about this exclamation irked Roisin, but she wasn’t sure why.

Jo and Emmaline rounded the creekbend and waved cheerfully from afar. They both sported primary colour coats against greyscale rest-of-outfits, an accidental matching which had been happening with them more and more lately.

“Damn,” said Roisin this time, “these bloody masks.” Since

face-masks trended, Roisin's lacklustre face recognition had gotten worse. So often, now, an apparent stranger would greet her by name. She'd have to feign familiarity or proceed with the risky question of 'sorry, who are you?' It was awful each time. It made her feel careless, even narcissistic.

"Yeah, remember when they were law!" Michael flailed a hand, his gesture making him feel silly and, in turn, free.

"Now it's just cool, I guess. And like warmth.. hygiene.. avoiding ID tracking.. covering up a bad face day.. I get it."

Serious cyclists forced Roisin to spring from the path. Their ambulance-siren blur of conversation contained the word 'electrolytes.' She exhaled. There was nothing for it but to brace for the incoming pleasantries. Michael joined her on the green, its vividness accentuated by the afternoon sun's skillful highlighting. Only Niall and his pallid blue bubble disturbed the nutrient-rich scene.

"Roisin!" Jo squealed and gift-wrapped her grade five best friend in an embrace. The muscles around Roisin's shoulderblades were firm and fit just right into Jo's splayed fingers. "Whoa, SO great to see you, this is Emmaline."

A small elbow, and Michael understood his role. He expertly confirmed not only Jo's name, but posed the innocent question of "how do you know each other?"

Joggers and couples hand-in-hand and single parents with prams passed in a constant stream energetically parallel to the creek flowing beside them. The brushstroke leaves bobbed contentedly on

their stems.

“That classroom was SO shit,” Jo was saying. “Like, seriously, I’m pretty sure they fixed the holes in the wall with, what, like masking tape?”

Emmaline smirked in admiration at her natural comic of a girlfriend. Once Jo had forced lemonade out of her nose simply by reading a Books Overdue notice verbatim.

“And the smell,” Jo was in stride, “it was actually... like, it was surely not LEGAL for children to be in there...”

Roisin had been coaxed into chuckles by this point. In appreciating Jo’s storytelling prowess, Emmaline noticed how appreciation itself had come easily lately. It was a product of being in love, she decided. Happier but also slower. She’d written ‘lazy in love’ in her journal recently.

When the grade five memories dwindled, Emmaline gestured to Niall, blurting out what was on her mind:

“I... I’ve never seen this in real life. It’s so weird...”

Jo skewed her mask to whisper “it happened to ME once, actually.” Emmaline and Michael’s heads rotated. “No!” Michael gasped, juicing every drop of available melodrama.

Jo’s embarrassment was outweighed by her delight in having captured her companions’ attention so effectively.

“Yeah... I was working paycheck to paycheck so I had turned off auto-renew... I was bored in this long supermarket queue and

next thing I knew, everything was blurry and blue. It was like being underwater.”

Roisin had this urge to say ‘you should have called’ to her old friend, which felt ridiculous as she’d failed to recall who Jo even was mere moments ago.

“It felt like AGES, I was just staring at this wall of text which said, you know, payment failed, your Free Trial of Movement has expired, pay \$23.99 to continue this service, blah blah... mum tried to ring and guessed what happened so she transferred me money.. apparently I was only stuck for twenty minutes. Felt like SO long though. And SO awkward, I didn’t even get the groceries, I just went home.”

“Wow,” muttered Roisin. Nobody seemed quite sure of where to pilot the conversation after that, so the two groups separated. Roisin noted Jo’s firm grip on her back.

Emmaline snuck a parting glance at Niall, his mouth suspended at an unappetizing point of its panting routine. She felt the freshness of the back of her neck. When she clasped Jo’s hand, that was wind-chilled too.

Roisin spied two children through a gap in the bushes, competing to see how far they could fling the rope swing across the creek, stylish in overalls and bucket hats.

“We’re birds,” said Michael. “We really are!”

A KEANU REEVES STORY

It's windy on top of the Allianz Building, Sydney, and a lot of people with clipboards aren't calm. Tracksuit pants. Tight jeans. Shorts. No legwear choice, I deduce, offers protection from high-level stress.

A lot of baseball caps, a lot of bated breath and a lot of bum cracks.

Roger keeps tugging the metal 'clip' part of his clipboard and letting it slam back against the 'board' part. The gale wriggles underneath a tarp, which flaps madly, managing to upset a red plastic tub. Coloured gels scatter on the ground. A guy with a jawline shouts 'fuck' but doesn't do anything. Roger's steady clipper-clacker isn't helping.

And I am staring at Keanu Reeves' nose, terrified. I don't know what I will do if he flares his nostrils. Even though I have run through the exact procedure step by step many times, still I can't imagine myself actually performing any of the actions. Actions which would be urgent and vital if those sculpted nostrils were to be flared.

Right now Keanu is lying on his back, in black boots and sunglasses, carefully mimicking the side roll being demonstrated by a stunt guy. Some tee-shirts conceal abs, some merely a stomach. You can tell when it comes to Keanu, you'd be sure to get a six-pack under that black shirt. The shirt billows as he pushes himself up gracefully. His fingers, delicate. His attention seems reassuringly far from his nose.

"I said gaff!" Marcus yells. "What's up with you today, Tomas?" I unclip the tape from my belt and hand it to Marcus without taking my eyes off Keanu's strong nose. I shrug.

Keanu Reeves has one of those rocket ship kind of noses where the middle bit is a powerful cylinder and the side parts around the nostrils seem secondary. They are attachments to the central column, like little rocket wings. It's a smooth and trustworthy nose. I would follow it anywhere.

I was struck by this nose on the first day of shooting, before I had any sense of how much potential doom it would come to represent. Across the food trolley, he was lost in thought. Perhaps just contemplating which flavour of muffin, but I'd seen that exact expression on the big screen so

many times... it made the moment feel epic.

His dreamy white facade caught me off guard and I said 'oh' loudly enough for him to hear. Normally I wouldn't be caught dead asking the talent for an autograph on set, but it seemed like the best move after my awkward exclamation. I pulled a texta from my toolbelt but had no paper on hand. And so Keanu signed my arm, its nib protruding into my firm bicep.

The rest of that day, I felt subconscious setting up lighting stands and running extension cords, sure that someone would ask about the signature, wishing I had worn more than a figure-hugging singlet to work. But nobody seemed to notice. Keanu and I didn't talk again that day, but found ourselves at the food trolley the next day. We were shooting an abandoned railway near Glebe Island, he smirked at me.

"We seem to go for snacks at the same time," I said. He flung his head upwards by way of response. Even his neck was taut in a sexy way.

Somehow, Keanu and I began chatting every day at the very start of the snack breaks, when his shot had wrapped but before I needed to go set up. I told him about my cat Walter and how I used to touch myself while I watched him in his 1991 film Point Break. He told me about how he was actually Canadian, not American, but you might not know that or have really thought about it before. He also told me about the kinda tacky erotic fiction he'd been writing, always with two men on a film set getting together.

"Film sets are always so male heavy," he said. The circle of men behind us were drinking styrofoam coffee and listing cinematographers they'd worked with. "You might as well write stories where those men get together!" In my mind, I questioned his use of 'might as well'.

Keanu said that in his fiction, he didn't shy away from very on the nose descriptions of erections and cheekbones. As he told me this, I accidentally glanced at his crotch. It was impossible to truly know with the black cargo pants he was wearing, but I could have sworn he was stiff. As if perhaps talking about his own erotic fiction writing turned him on.

Loading a crate into the back of my van after most of the crew had dispersed, I felt a hand on my shoulder. It sent a tingle down my back and sort of into my whole pelvis. This was the first time Keanu and I would speak in a place that wasn't the food trolley, so it felt special. Part of me

thought he might launch straight into a kiss, but instead he said something unexpected. A hitman. It was all coming out jumbled, I couldn't keep up.

He handed me a black pistol. I'd never held a gun before. The shaft was cold, gripping it was more than I could really take. Instinctively, I stuffed it under my shirt, holding it with both hands. I was worried someone would see us, see me receiving this gun in the parking lot. Keanu said he'd received a call... a threat. Someone on set was out to get him, he said. I couldn't keep up. He reached under my shirt and pressed a second gun against my stomach, which incidentally, also took the form of a muscular six-pack. Its shaft was just as cold as the first gun. Just as hard.

"Can we..." I looked around cautiously.

"Oh, yeah, good idea." He said.

In the passenger seat of my van, Keanu told me what had happened on the set of his last movie. "I was in New York filming *The Devil's Advocate* when I got a call... a warning. Someone on set was going to kill me, watch my back, yada yada. I ignored it. Literally forgot all about it until a few weeks later when one of the sound guys pulled a gun out and shot at me during a take. I leaned back, the bullet almost grazed my stomach... it felt like it was slow motion. That's where I got the idea for *The Matrix*."

"But... wasn't *The Matrix* conceived by the Wachowskis? And inspired by simulation theory, Baudrillard and myriad sophisticated philosophical conceits rather than just the visual concept of a bullet almost hitting someone in slow motion?"

"You're working on this film, Tomas, but are you even paying attention? It's possible for the film to be both my idea and their idea! That's what *The Matrix* is about. There is no spoon!"

"Keanu, I'm - "

"Look, the point is, the bullet missed me. The guy's in jail now. So I thought it was all over. And then... a week ago. I get the same call. The same voice, the same warning. Someone on set is going to kill me. I'm FREAKING OUT MAN!" Keanu grabbed my shoulders. Strength.

I didn't know what to say. "And... you want me to protect you?" I stared into his eyes. I'd never looked into them directly before. It was ice. Beautiful ice.

"You're... you're the only person on this set I can trust."

He clambered over and managed to straddle me in the driver's seat. I noticed his impossible smoothness, he was like a pebble. I felt the bulge of his jeans. "So, the signal," he said, "a flare of my nostrils." I didn't understand and my face must have shown this. "If I flare my nostrils, it means I've noticed something fishy. You'll need to pull the guns out, both of them. Throw me one and be ready to fire yours if necessary." I gulped, and nodded. We made eye contact again. We kissed briefly, then, like a shadow, he vanished into the night. I was aching to touch him again.

I can feel both guns, concealed in my toolbelt, rubbing against my legs, as Keanu shows off his perfected side roll on the windy rooftop. My attention wavers from his nose for a moment down to his pants. For a moment, I lose myself. It feels like I'm taking the blue pill and the red pill all at once, it's magical. Then I pull my focus back to his nose... keep alert, Tomas, you can't afford to get distracted right now.

I try to picture myself smoothly whipping out both guns. Briefly, I would have one in each hand, like in the movies. Like Neo does in this movie we're making, The Matrix. Then, I would throw one to Neo. Keanu. Maybe we would end up back-to-back, surrounded by bad guys. This idea thrills me. I haven't felt Keanu's shoulderblades yet, in any meaningful way.

But, hopefully, we will not end up back-to-back. Because Keanu's nostrils are not flared and everything is fine. And nothing bad is going to happen. Keanu thanks his stunt choreographer and walks towards me. I wonder if there's something secretive I can whisper like 'nostril alert low?' but there is no time for whispering because he kisses me passionately.

Our first proper kiss. Our first kiss in front of other people. I feel the guns in my pants press up against his package. I am in heaven. Just then, the sound of a bullet. I hear it in slow motion, I hear it in bullet time. Everything slows and I can see the ripples of the bullet as it moves through space. I drag Keanu to the ground and we free fall for an eternity before we land, together, on top of each other...

You have read your ten free pages for the month. To read more of the latest work of Short Fiction by actor Keanu Reeves, subscribe to www.CreativeWritingCelebrities.com for as little as \$18.99 a month.

IDON'TKNOW

INDEPENDENT

It happened at a dinner party. Lindsay didn't respond at first, when his name was squawked across the table's longer diagonal. Jemima raised her voice, glad her husband had ignored her, engrossed in conversation. They'd talked about this recently, not sitting next to each other at these things, making an effort to be socially independent.

VOCAL WARMUPS

"LinZEE..." Jemima was drunk, slurring, turning the second syllable of his name into a vocal warm up. "LinZEE-EE-E... guess whaaa-aaaa-aaat!" She had not only his attention now but everyone's. "Dave says you couldn't last a week in isolation."

"A week in isolation? I did about half a year in iso, remember how it was just us, in our house, not going anywhere, in isolation?" The table rang out in laughter, soprano, alto and tenor laughs in harmony. Jemima shot him a red wine grin, they'd talked about this too. Being a couple who were individuals but who came together for high-energy performative moments.

SNIPPETS

"No no no no NO," Jemima said, "no... fully in isolation!"

"In a room," Dave chimed in with a beard and spectacles, "No books, nothing, just meals pushed through the door, one entire week"

"Right." Lindsay said, chewing on the word and absent-mindedly scrolling on his apple watch. The table erupted in murmurs, snippets of which included:

'but would you be allowed your phone?'

'It didn't sound like it...'

and

'do you think you could survive it?'

‘Survive it. Yeah... I thinkkkk so?’

and

‘I did a silent meditation retreat once’

‘oh, ummm, cool.’

and

‘does anyone know if the croutons are gluten free?’

TAUTNESS

As the discussion unfolded, Lindsay noticed a tautness to the left of his stomach. It was the champagne but it was combined with something warm like pride or validation. Each person here not only witnessed his extroverted, busy nature but felt confident enough to even draw conclusions. To laugh, to banter about his disposition. Within this group, his personality was known enough to become the topic.

ACTUAL

The energized convo morphed itself into a betting ring and suddenly Dave actually had a pen and paper out and Jemima actually had produced two hundred dollar notes from her handbag and in no time at all every person at this plentiful banquet had actually made a wager. Three days was the most popular bet. Only Simon, the softly-spoken mechanic, gave Lindsay the benefit of the doubt and put seventy bucks on him making it through the whole week.

GOBLET

As if the whole affair hadn’t already snowballed out of the purely speculative, Lindsay’s boss James placed his goblet firmly on the table and declared that he’d give him the week off, full pay, joking that he’d consider a small bonus if Lindsay bowed out on day four, the day which he’d put his money on.

MONDAY

On Monday morning, Jemima kissed Lindsay in the doorway of their bedroom. She squeezed both his hands. They’d cleared everything out of their room together except the bed, bedding and a few of Lindsay’s

around-the-house clothes, strewn on the floor. Jemima was set up in the guest room for the next week. This way, Lindsay had the en-suite to use.

Apart from the labels on shower products, there would be nothing to read. He would have no knowledge of time except for the sun out the window or perhaps from intuiting the sounds of Jemima's activity around the house.

Jemima snapped pics of the now-minimalist room and sent them to the group chat. Jemima had sworn to those who had invested in the event that she'd say nothing when placing meals just inside the door, that she'd resist any cheating – the sneaking of a stray comforting note under the door or blasting Lindsay's favourite music louder than she might ordinarily play music throughout the house.

EQUALLY HARD

The first night was equally as hard for Jemima as Lindsay. He'd passed the day mainly by resting and napping while she was at work, relishing the chance to catch up on lost sleep. After finishing the sweet potato curry passed into his room, though, Lindsay found himself uncomfortably wide awake. He stared at the ceiling, thinking about myriad 'sliding door' moments of his life, times he might have chosen one thing, but instead chose another, following the train tracks of various alternate lives he might have lived. But as he had been expecting discomfort this night, his reflective turmoil was relatively bearable.

NICOLE KIDMAN

Jemima, however, hadn't at all considered that her husband being locked up alone in the bedroom might be difficult for her. In fact, her fate was not too different to Lindsay's, except that she had more space to occupy, activities to do and the freedom to leave the house. These were serious perks, but on this first night, none seemed to offer a respite from her solitude and she found herself half-watching a Nicole Kidman film, staring through the screen and frequently rewinding to catch up on the plot.

TENNIS

By the evening of day four, Jemima felt better. Her weekly tennis match the night before had lifted her spirits and she was becoming accustomed to the

strange ritual of silently passing Lindsay his food through the door. Trying to keep his week-long culinary journey as diverse and interesting as possible was proving quite a rewarding little project too. For breakfast he'd been served her first ever attempt at Shakshuka.

She decided to host a dinner party, a reunion of the other night, to take advantage of the social momentum which had been created by everyone gambling upon her husband's capacity for total isolation.

EVERYONE

Everyone made it, which was quite rare for a midweek gathering. "I brought my brothers," said Simon on the way in, handing Jemima a bottle of aged chardonnay, "I hope you don't mind, they were curious." The younger of the brothers pointed his phone at her by way of greeting, announcing that she was the wife of the guy and proceeding to give a virtual tour of her home to some type of online audience.

SO

"So..." said Dave, as he was handed a plate of barramundi ceviche, "how's he doing in there?"

"Oh, well I don't know," replied Jemima. "I've been true to my word, I haven't talked to him. But he hasn't yelled out or anything, I guess he's alright."

"How do we know he's not getting out and going for some laps around the block while you're at work?" Asked James.

"Oh, the door is locked." Said Jemima. "And the window." James let out a little gasp but transitioned this into a raising of his champagne with an impressed nod – "right on."

"And this is THE door of THE room where Lindsay has spent the last four days in isolation, here we are folks," came a voice from the corridor.

"Morgan, come and sit down," said Simon.

HELL

Lindsay in hell. Timeless hell. Blinds shut. Outside world, no.. Don't want look. Fomo. Fomo. Foam. Pads on ends of fingers weird. Lindsay is spider monkey. Maybe dead. I don't know. I don't know.

ONLINE

The following night, Jemima panted thank you to her online pilates class and waved into her webcam. Rectangles of grinning faces, manufactured self-love and black leggings waved back at her. She switched over to her friends' group message thread and informed them that yes Lindsay was still, in fact, adhering to the terms of his solitary dare.

AW MAN

"Aw man" wrote Mitch, and Sarah immediately wrote exactly the same thing. They'd bet on today, day five, and it looked like they were about to lose. I get that you're newlyweds, thought Jemima, but do you have to write the exact same thing in the chat all the time? As she pondered this, Michelle and Marty, who'd selected day six began trash talking everyone else and some banging was heard. Jemima decided to focus on the latter and rushed to the bedroom door, the sound was unmistakably that of fists on wall. "Lindsay? Everything alright?" She called, rushing to the kitchen to get the key. As she put the key in the lock, she called "Do you want to come out?"

SUPERMAN

When there was again no response, Jemima decided she had no option but to open the door. Lindsay was wearing his blanket as a cape and stared up at her with the injured eyes of a child who has leapt from the roof and learned the hard way they are not superman.

"Je. Mime. A."

"Lindsay, alright. I'm in here. I guess you're done."

"I don't know."

GUTTURAL

He wrapped her up in a desperate embrace, holding onto her waist and making some guttural noises. When it became apparent that this hug was going to last a while, Jemima took the opportunity to whip her phone out and rapidly inform everyone of the developments.

IDON'TKNOW

"So what do you think," Jemima asked, as Lindsay finally stopped gripping her so tight and crumpled into a heap on the floor.

"Should we do dinner party tonight to celebrate, or do you want to a night to relax and do it tomorrow night?"

"I don't know," said Lindsay, looking at her face as if it were a curious object in an antique store which he was trying to figure out the intended purpose of.

This phrase was all he said for a long while. He stumbled into the kitchen and opened the fridge and closed it again. "I don't know." He hugged a cushion and said I don't know, he threw open the front door and said I don't know.

Jemima followed him, as he took off at a brisk pace along the footpath, his barefeet in stark contrast to the usual footwear choices in their neighbourhood.

They walked in silence for a moment, Jemima struggling to keep up.

"Hey, look at all the messages from everyone" She handed him her phone, whose screen showed a thread abuzz with praise for how long he managed in isolation. "You're a tough cookie, mate!" Was the latest message, from Dave. Lindsay interacted with the phone the way we might imagine an orangutan would.

As Jemima watched him idly shake her phone up and down in front of his face, eyes glazed, she could read the newest messages appearing in the thread.

"Omg, we won Mitch! Incredible, baby." Wrote Sarah.

"Omg we won Sarah, incredible." Wrote Mitch.

NOTES FROM BRUNSWICKTOPIA

OCCURRENCE ON 9.24am, 14 JUNE, 2045 - CORNER OF RAINBOW LANE (FORMERLY GLENLYON RD) AND HONESTY ROAD (FORMERLY NICHOLSON ST)

_____ Billie, in a tiger outfit, pursues Hope, a lamb, around the sewing machine area. Pins hit the floor. A table wobble causes Miranda to mis-sew their fabric deer antlers. Briefly, they're annoyed, but the learnings from the Advanced Empathy they took last year in kindergarten quickly kick in.

"Mum!" Their mother presses pause on a queer black science fiction podcast and raises their eyebrows. "Why are these craft houses always called 7/11?"

"Great question, dear. Let me pour some elderflower cordial and then answer it."

Billie and Hope rush over, the fragrant drink more appealing than even chasey.

"Before Brunswicktopia, these places were shops with harsh fluorescent lighting."

"Gahhh!" Hope squeals, running their fingers across a nearby string of fairy lights with relief.

"Yes. And they were open all day and night just like the craft houses. But even before THAT... they were only open from 7am until 11pm. So, that's where the name comes from!"

"What's a shop?" Asks Billie.

"So, you know how if mummy ever goes outside of Brunswicktopia, they need to bring money? Shops are where you swap that money for things. So in 7/11, people might have walked in, grabbed a newspaper and some milk and then taken it to the worker and swapped it for money."

"Would they at least recite the worker a sonnet or two?"

"No, it would be a quick exchange, usually filled only with default pleasantries."

"Stop it! No! It wasn't like that!" Miranda finally cracks, not even the Resilience class at kinder has given them the skills to prepare for this. "Let's go!"

They all run outside, gather up the floral bicycles they left unlocked on the road, and cycle off to an Effective Altruism conference at Pussy Riot Hall (formerly Brunswick Town Hall). The splashes of bright paint along the road gleam in the morning sun.

EMAIL RECEIVED BY REG.BUTLER35@OAKBRUNSZIGMAIL.COM AT 9.31am, 14 JUNE, 2045

Dear Reg,

I left a note on the evergreen in your backyard but you mustn't have seen it, so I'm resorting to email...

When I was stargazing last night with folks from my street, I was struck with a fantastic vision of brilliant red. I'm now really keen to spend some time looking at Rothko's Untitled (Red) from 1956, which Jacq says is in your dining room?

Would this evening work for you? I'll bring free range chicken waffles and join you and your family for dinner?

Marianne (you have met me previously as Martin)
xxxxxx

PS - any way we could set up a bed in your dining room? I'd really like to sleep near it (the Rothko).

LETTER TO THE EDITOR - PUBLISHED IN THE AGE, 14 JUNE 2045

Like many readers, I was appalled at the suggestion that we might all eventually wind up living in some backward hippie commune ("Brunswicktopia, Paving The Way For The Future" - 7/6/45). Are the advocates of this unholy place aware of just how many of us are terrified of it? I have been forced into adding 30-45 minutes to my driving time on multiple occasions to avoid passing through that blight upon common decency.

It's not just the selfish cyclists swerving this way and that across the road, or the absurd amount of goats. It's the feeling of indoctrination... cultish slogans scrawled on the walls that I can't help but look at, men (if they even are men) in dresses, and worse than anything, huge posters displaying grossly fat people. Sometimes scantily clad. They're all over the place. I mean really... do I deserve all this just because I want to drive to Coburg? They should all pack up and go and live in Flaming Man where they belong.

- Gone Too-Far, Surrey Hills

OCCURRENCE ON 10.24am, 14 JUNE, 2045 - NEAR THE GOLDEN GALAXY STATUE IN INCLUSIVITY SQUARE (FORMERLY BARKLY SQUARE)

_____ "Oh My God!" Squeals Emmaline, almost spitting out their lemon ginger tea. "Is that Andrea Lawlor? I thought they lived in Oaklandtopia!"

"Mm.. they're here visiting," drawls Kris, who is sketching a cloud.

"WHAT!" Emmaline leaps off the concrete wall and smoothens her pinafore. "You knew and you didn't-"

"Don't, Emm-" Kris starts, but Emmaline is already holding out a pen and paper

for an autograph.

"I'll give you one if you give me one," Andrea smiles, "Mutual admiration interests me much more than idolatry."

"Wow, you even sound like an author!"

"Sorry," Kris says to Andrea, "they're just excited to meet you."

"I'm thrilled to be here," Andrea says. "It's... beautiful. You followed the Position Papers so literally." They gesture to the wall behind them, upon which the position papers have been pasted at towering A0 size, adorned with chalk hearts and messages. Then they gesture to the golden statue behind them, an intricate model of the Milky Way galaxy. This statue was a gift from Oaklandtopia, and is said to infuse the surrounding area with a heightened sense of wellness.

"Oh, are things different over in Oaklandtopia?" Kris asks.

Frenzied gibberish erupts on the street corner behind them, announcing the beginning of a Gertrude Stein Club meeting. A person with a propeller hat is laughing.

"Yes, a little. But it's excellent there, and it's excellent here too. I do wonder if the research lab you have created for extracting the energy of resentment and anger into batteries might be a little futile. I guess that bit was more poetic than aspirational."

The three of them are gently nudged onto the road by the horns of some affectionate goats.

"And if I had any idea my Position Papers would actually be realised one day..." Andrea begins. Emmaline holds her teacup at her lip, hanging on Andrea's every word, "...well honestly, I wouldn't have included the goats."

NOTE ON PURPLE PAPER, AFFIXED TO GUMTREE NEAR THE INTERSECTION OF JOY PARADE (FORMERLY ALBERT ST) AND THE MERRI CREEK

Hey Magenta,

Want to go to Couples Therapy with me? I asked and they said eight year olds are welcome to attend. As well as providing a safe space for radical honesty within our friendship, I believe it will be beneficial for both our understandings of relationships, empathy and communication in general.

Your friend,
Billie

PS: Thanks for lending me *The Second Sex* by Simone DeBeauvoir. It was so nourishing, much more substantial than the imaginative but ultimately juvenile Deltora Quest series I read last week.

OCCURRENCE ON 10.45pm, 6 MARCH, 2036 - KIRRIBILLI HOUSE, SYDNEY

_____Magna Almond was exhausted, and for good reason. Within the last week, she'd become the 34th Prime Minister of Australia, weathered a media hailstorm and twisted her ankle. An ankle her husband, Connor, was dabbing with an ice pack. He made an over-the-top 'ooooh' noise with each dab. It was super annoying, but he meant well.

All she wanted to do was sleep, preferably for multiple days. But there was more to do, of course...

"Up bup bup!" Connor called out, as she leapt up.

"I'm fine." Magna winced.

At her desk, Magna rifled through a pile of papers to find a manila folder. It was preferences from the Greens which had got her over the line in the election, and in return she'd promised to turn Brunswick, Melbourne into a sovereign city state. She couldn't believe there hadn't been more public outcry. Perhaps the fact that this nation would be interlinked with Oaklandtopia in California and Liepzigtopia in Germany eased some folks' concerns... in a way, it was a positive move for international relations.

She opened the folder, the booklet inside had a faux-sandpaper cover... something about it seemed less official than ordinary policy documents. *That's the Greens for you*, she supposed. 'Position Papers,' it said, in an inappropriately playful font. 'Andrea Lawlor.' *Is that one of their senators, who compiled this policy documentation? I don't remember having met her.*

It was just so late. Magna's ears started ringing. It felt like a poor beginning to her prime ministership, but she figured you had to know when to give yourself a break, to take your foot off the gas a little. Surely the recommendations in these position papers had been reviewed by many people. Spending hours reading through them and making tiny alterations to the placement of commas... it would be wasted effort really.

"The positions in these papers have passed through the approvals chain and have been fully reviewed. They are exemplary," she typed into an email. "No consultation is needed, no changes are needed. I hereby approve this as the core policies by which the new nation of Brunswicktopia shall be instigated."

This is the type of leader I'm going to be, Magna thought, proudly closing down her laptop. *No time wasted. I'm going to actually make things happen.*

EMAIL RECEIVED BY REG.BUTLER35@OAKBRUNSZIGMAIL.COM AT 11.01am, 14 JUNE, 2045

Hi,

you haven't replied to my last few emails this morning, so a few of my friends and I just came by your house to view the Rothko. You aren't home, I don't think. We're in the dining room (we just moved the table and stuff). I'm just letting you so know if you see this before you get home, you don't freak out. Or if you are home and freaking out because you can hear noises downstairs... it's just us! Also, if you see this while on your way home, can you bring vegan ice cream from the communal mart? You didn't really have that much to eat in the fridge/freezer. But that's okay!

Lots of love!

Marianne

xxxxxxxxxx

OCCURRENCE ON 11.45pm, 13 JUNE, 2045, IN A RESIDENTIAL GARAGE IN RESERVOIR

"Listen up patriots," Bill roared across the dim pool table to the hardened faces who quickly quit their chit chat. "I've had enough. I went into that hippie ville today and it's fucked. It's just like weirdo rainbow land and even though they're just pansies, they're gonna spread this bullshit... if we don't stand up for this country, suddenly we'll all be wearing dresses."

"Fucking lefties!" Shouted Brenton with vitriol. "Get FUCKEDDD!"

Rumbles of murmuring broke out across the group. Alvin beat his tattooed hands upon his chest. Donny banged a pool cue against the concrete. Finally, Doug said:

"Are we doing something?"

"Tomorrow. 1pm." Bill smirked.

"What's the plan?"

"They've got no cameras in there right? We bust in, start something. Eventually they'll send in the cops. Then we can really rain hell on those freaks."

"Cops aren't allowed in," Donny leaned over the table, high-pitched voice at odds with his bulky physique.

"Eventually, the government will be forced to send 'em in, right?" Bill said decisively. "And when they do, I can promise you they'll be on our side."

Bill realised he had a captive audience, and grew more performative in his speech. "You know what their police force use? Fuckin' crystal healing... they sing songs. They try and get people to lie down and talk about their problems like some gay shrink movie bullshit. that's gonna be no match for our guns, our actual real fists. Huh!"

The men formed a rugby-scrum-type huddle around the pool table and chanted the words 'true blue crew' a bunch of times. Finally, Donny broke the commotion.

"I don't wanna head back to the slammer... but if I did, it would be worth it. For you guys." A single tear ran down his face.

"Aw, Donny!" Bill said, rubbing the top of his head with his knuckle. "You little

softie... you better watch out we don't kick you out of the crew."

"Patriots!" Shouted Brenton, headbutting Doug and knocking him unconscious.

EMAIL RECEIVED BY REG.BUTLER35@OAKBRUNSZIGMAIL.COM AT 1.08pm, 14 JUNE, 2045

Dear Reg,

I am sorry we left your house in a hurry and potentially left the fridge and/or door open maybe OSRRY! I had to run because I am on police duty this year... and something's going on it's really worrying I suppose, I think maybe Brunswicktopia is under attack, I... okay wow I really need to go... oh what the.. . uhh.... bye !

Sent from my iPhone

FRONT PAGE ARTICLE (EXCERPT) - PUBLISHED IN THE AGE, 15 JUNE 2045

Twenty-three residents of Brunswicktopia were killed and many sustained minor injuries yesterday in a coordinated attack upon the nine-year-old sovereign city state.

Around twenty men, believed to be connected with far-right group 'True Blue Crew,' passed through the unregulated border between Melbourne and Brunswicktopia at 1.04pm, in a convoy of vehicles. They drove their cars deliberately towards pedestrians, before parking and opening fire with weapons. Their motivations aren't yet confirmed.

Despite laws preventing the presence of Australian police in Brunswicktopia, the police force was given emergency federal permission to enter at 1.11pm. It is alleged by witnesses that many members of the police force joined the True Blue Crew in attacking residents of Brunswicktopia.

The Brunswicktopia police force, which consists entirely of residents trained in fields such as geology, urban planning and mental health first aid, initially attempted to defend against the aggressive attackers by offering ceylon tea and Rupi Kaur aphorisms.

This conflict halted abruptly when both True Blue Crew and Australian police members inside Brunswicktopia all collapsed to the ground simultaneously at 1.17pm, in an incident for which there is currently no explanation. Fifteen 'True Blue Crew' personnel have since been taken into custody. An internal Australian police force inquiry has been proposed, but deemed 'potentially unnecessary' by the AFP Commissioner.

Terence Plath, a spokesperson for the Brunswicktopia community, has stated that while their residents are in shock and experiencing widespread grief, "we are already in

planning for a large scale death transition festival, which will be a spectacular and vivacious celebration of the incredible lives of those who were lost.”

OCCURRENCE ON 1.15pm, 14 JUNE, 2045, AT THE INTERSECTION OF RAINBOW LANE AND METTA WORLDPEACE ROAD¹ (FORMERLY SYDNEY RD)

_____The Voting Tree outside the library is usually a tranquil place to visit. Brunswicktopians smile calmly as they place a folded up slip of paper into a rectangular window cut into the tree trunk, offering suggestions and ideas about how to improve their community.

But, as the first ever gunshots ring out across the city state, The Voting Tree is a flurry of activity. Folk on bicycles whose long crocheted capes contrast with their concerned expressions arrive, hurriedly fill out a piece of paper and leave again, whispering to each other things like: “Hurry back indoors. It isn’t safe” and “Put your earplugs in, just in case!”

Sorters from the sorting factory remove all the slips from the Voting Tree and spread them out on trestle tables which have been set up in the library. An impromptu second hand record player has been brought in, playing concertos to help them work.

After four minutes of sorting, a flamboyant member of the sorting team, who has been marking a tally on a blackboard suddenly gives an exclamation.

“We have it!” They announce into a weathered old megaphone found in the sorting station a few months ago, “we have a majority. The people of Brunswicktopia have elected to use the gift from Liepzigtopia. Headphones on, everyone!”

One block away, inside a shop filled with curious electronics, a wizened, bespectacled Brunswicktopian hears the cry and presses a button on the wall, which connects to a radio tower sitting atop the storefront. An inaudible whistle rings out.

Within seconds, everyone within the district of Brunswicktopia whose ears are unprotected slumps to the ground. Angry neo-nazis and proud masculine policemen crumple in a heap, stupefied. In their subconsciousnesses, they are now being played looped compilations of Brene Brown TED talks. A few Brunswicktopians who didn’t get the memo about the earplugs also fall into this emotionally educational rest state.

With the pandemonium suddenly over, groups of Brunswicktopians gather in public areas. Along the Merri creek, around the Pool of Compassion, and in Inclusivity Square. Each individual calmly finds a clear section of ground within their ravaged wonderland to sit down upon, then exhale. Then, as one, the residents of Brunswicktopia begin to meditate.

¹ Sydney Rd was originally renamed Worldpeace Rd, but the unexpectedly large percentage of American basketball fans in Brunswicktopia voted to re-rename it after NBA star Metta Sandiford-Artest, who legally changed his name to Metta World Peace in 2011. Maybe this footnote is just Harley building tension by stalling with this esoteric content, this paragraph now really putting the meta in Metta.

STANDARD CASHIER

INTERACTION

Dear the presumably Swedish girl working presumably part time
at 'Gateau' cafe at Malmo train station,

The nature of your work meant I was looking at you before you were
aware of me. I think the part of the coffee machine you were holding is
called a wand. Steam coming out of it. Magic.

My father said once that anything is magic if you have enough of a lack
of understanding of how it works.

Shiny white tiles signalled to me that this was upmarket. Things would
be more expensive at this cafe, but give the impression of being nicer.
The sandwich I eventually receive at the end of this story will be placed
into a *box* then placed into a bag.

The raised platform behind the counter felt like a stage. You were
presenting the performance of a worker to those passing by. A
durational one woman show. Or maybe it was a zoo, you a species of
animal often found preparing food and drink products for people. In
the reflection of your small kind eyes, I could see the cage bars.

Your hands were the hands of a blonde person. I wondered how it must
be to be your fingertips, pressed against the stainless steel beaker,
fluctuating in temperature all day. What was the control centre in your

brain thinking about this, just the fingertips changing temperature, nothing else? *Uhh... sure, this is fine*, I imagined your brain control centre saying. Actually I think I read an article or even learned once that there's no control centre, it's not really like that.

For me, you were a component of 'I've got time to get a coffee,' for you I was a miniscule aspect of 'I've got work today.' So rare for a transaction to ever transcend this, for customer or employee. So rare one feels stupid to hope for it. But sometimes sheer Shared Humanity pokes its head out like a baby bird from a nest.

Your smile was a flat line, curling up each end. If a skateboard were placed upon your smile, it might roll left or right, but would always be stopped before falling off the edge.

You were consumed with a customer who was consumed by her toddler.

She'd try open her purse, he'd tug her hand sharply, as if to prevent her from making a grave mistake. *There's nothing real in there*, I imagined him saying, *touch my hand it's real*.

The exasperated mum was struggling with this final hurdle between her and the coffee which would give her the energy to outmuscle her four year old. You kept holding out the Eftpos machine. You didn't appear in any way impatient but I saw a man climb into a cupboard on stage in Las Vegas and then the cupboard was empty.

I hastily ordered the first word I recognised, *avokado*. For a moment, I considered I was simply fumbling in the presence of an attractive

person. But I knew that experience, this felt different. The goosebumps weren't on my arms, they were around the outside of my eyes.

After a quick email scroll, I felt rude. Standing busy on the phone while being served. I turned the screen black, mid-reply. In phoneless nudity, I was unsure where to put my eyes. What had I done at all the cafes of my past? Where had I looked when other people had prepared sandwiches for me? I watched you for a millisecond and turned away. Definitely

not that. Definitely not watching you make my sandwich. I glanced around me at architecture, magazine stand, the toddler now tugging the mother's leg while she sat on a bench, her coffee slightly spilling. It seemed strange to gaze for too long out there. Too performative, some French silent movie called 'The Man Who Took In His Surroundings.' No, to stare at the menu was the best bet. I know the word frukost. Frukost means breakfast.

The words and numbers on the menu rearranged themselves before my eyes. They formed a thought: *How strange this moment would be if I hadn't handed over 103 Swedish Krona.* If I arrived here and stared into space while you made me a sandwich and then took off your plastic gloves and moved to the coffee machine to prepare me a cappuccino, then I left.

I had an impulse to present you with some recent facts I learned about plant sentience. The words made it most of the way up my throat. *Did you know plants grow differently when different music is played to them? I read an article about it, see...* All of my potential opening sentences began to crowd the air until it was thick.

As you pressed the plastic lid onto my take away coffee cup, I thought about how I hadn't really seen Keep Cups for a while. While being buffeted by the waves of ethics and calamity, we all just started using new tote bags, I supposed. Our Keep Cups are in our old tote bags. I thought about how I knew I'd be returning to this station on September 10. I thought about the sound of the rocks that we'd thrown into the ocean off the Swedish coast. There were no small rocks on the beach. It was kerplunk or nothing.

When you handed me both coffee and sandwich, the thick air of unsaid words vanished with a resounding pop. *Have a nice day*, you said. I couldn't say *thank you* at the close of an unembellished transaction and THEN strike up a chat about plant sentience. Might as well leave without taking the coffee, might as well produce a hula hoop and do some tricks, might as well pay in peanuts not Krona.

My father said that it's possible to connect with anyone, that everyone's passionate about something. That you just have to ask the right questions.

September 10. I know I will come to Gateau and get another one of these ridiculous avocado sandwiches. I know you will not be working this day, it will be one of your part time colleagues who you've only done a couple of opens with and know only the name and music preferences of. And I know I will feel comfortable looking at my phone while they make my coffee, I won't really think about it.

→ RING RING ←

1 - FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING

Okay so Jonah's someone who would do a long-winded Lord Of The Rings bit. A bit, like making a joke, yeah... like, he'd once mock-pushed Connell into an oncoming train, gripping his schoolbag tightly so he didn't *actually* splatter on the tracks. I suppose. Just kids being kids, I hear you.

Yep, Connell like in Normal People. Same spelling. Oh, I didn't know you read it! I loved it too. Unputdownable, as my friend Georgia said. Where's she live? Oh, umm, Pascoe Vale, grandma. Uhh... north. Near Coburg?

I know, I know shoving someone near a train isn't much like Lord Of The Rings unless train equals Balrog or tracks equals Sauron's fiery pit or maybe something about Gandalf being oddly comforting like an overnight carriage. But yeah, Jonah's a jokester.

We'd met, he'd been late. "Two oat lattes," a waiter with red hair, as in dyed, bright red. I'd complained about the take-away coffee cups even though we were dining in.

"Covid," Jonah shrugged, a five-letter word which kind of encompassed the entire material realm by that point, as I'm sure you remember. I know, I know it didn't affect your day-to-day, the garden. That's great.

We drank in silence. Safe to assume Jonah's mind is whirring with some high-concept gag to break it. Always. So when he said he'd hidden eleven rings each with its own discrete power around Hackney Wick, I smiled. Hackney Wick? In London. Yeah, yeah, when I was in London. Yep.

I was ready for a punchline or at least some esoteric reference to a Dragonball Z plotline or, you know, something relatable, but he seemed... A cartoon. Never mind.

Jonah banged the table for emphasis, upsetting his coffee. There was a moment as he put his mug onto a napkin

leaving a coffee stain ring and his finger had intricate nordic-looking rings and tinkle-winkle, a ring of chimes as customers left, which brought to mind the phrase 'that rings a bell' which uses metaphor to link door chimes to memory recall. I remember a vague communion with God, so many of the same signifier at once, coincidence transcended, he must be up there, really, tugging his phallic white beard.

But then I looked at the barista, who was simply holding a wet tea towel rather than wringing it and decided to return to Atheism. As in, not believing in God. You wouldn't have time for anything like that? Fair.

2 - THE TWO TOWERS

Jonah described the different powers each ring held in great detail. I was free for the rest of the day and preferred his company in short sharp doses like espresso, so I decided to go hunt for the rings.

Stumbling along the graffitied canal-side, I stared at the cryptic map Jonah had given me. I was looking through it more than looking at it. Distracted by the pure white skies of England, or an engulfing anxiety I no longer recall.

I guess this was some game or immersive quest he'd fabricated. I know that sounds like something I would do, but I hadn't done it. I wouldn't have thought it was something Jonah would do, but he did do it. I guess people have a fickle relationship with our expectations of them.

Fiddling with my jacket pocket, I discovered a lump which turned out to be a lipstick. Plum. I put it on as I strolled absently, checked my reflection in the window of a barge which advertised itself as a healing wellness centre. Oh, like probably massage and reiki and crystal healing and stuff. What is reiki? Just picture a glowing electric blue ring in the centre of your psyche, grandma.

Ten rocks in a circle on a grassy knoll. Evenly spaced and all that. I probably would never have decoded the riddles

on the map, but chancing upon this formation, it realised it was the final solution. I reverse-engineered the answers to all the puzzles with a sly Plum smirk.

I don't always bother to look closer at things out of some innate sense I've already fully grasped them. I'm working on that. But I'm glad I bent down to inspect one rock. It had a glass circle in the centre, the top of a vial which could be poked out to loosen a bright red ring. I was pretty sure Jonah had said bright red was the one that allowed you to turn yourself into liquid metal at will, which had certainly proven useful for the bad guy in Terminator. Oh yeah, we did watch that together! That's right. Wow! What? No, this is all true, gran. I could never tell you made up stories, I wouldn't be able to keep a straight face. Definitely, a truly remarkable day. I've been waiting to tell you this since it happened.

Ten rocks with ten rings. A ring of rings. My phone rang, for a second I didn't recognise it, forgetting I'd changed my ringtone to ABBA's Ring Ring. If I were still hung up on the coincidence thing, I might have read into this. It was my boss, the leader of the big-top circus I was performing with in London. I asked if I could call him back later.

My boss, Lorenzo, has a personal mantra which runs "The moment you feel like not digging, that's when you must dig." I decided to interpret his call as some sign from the universe, despite having denounced God earlier in the day. A nearby twig served as makeshift shovel and about six inches deep in the exact centre of ten rocks, I hit a glass circle.

It was the top of a vial. No sooner had I unsexed from this vial a grey ring, than it went onto my finger. I guess there was a bit of a 'my precious' energy about it all. You know, Gollum? Oh you've never seen or read it... oh wow, sorry grandma, I thought you had. Okay, uhh, never mind.

3 - ~~RETURN OF THE KING~~ THE THIRD BIT

The first sensation I had was clarity. Extreme clarity like

an upscale shopping mall's bathroom hand-dryer in my soul. I wanted to study psychology. That was it, definitely. My chapter as rapskallion acrobat was ready to end, my desires to work as a clinical psych were coming from the right place. I just knew it, there was no more confusion. It was incredible.

I ran my fingers through my hair with calmness. There was no parachute-less feeling about the hair on top thinning or about getting old or fear of the first time I was no longer able to comfortably jog along the river to the golf course and back.

As I was trying to process this mental relief, mum called in tears. She'd gone to visit you and you had remembered her. The two of you had talked cogently a full hour, recipes and childhood holidays. A doctor had even suggested that you were on track to return home from hospital soon. I know, that would be a miracle. Well, it was, it was happening.

These were the strongest feelings, but there were others too. Covid was a thing of the past, my brother had stopped smoking as much weed, it didn't seem to hurt to think about Danny and how he'd recently accrued 264 likes for a photo of his girlfriend with a ring on her finger near a waterfall, which he'd posted with two heart-eyes emojis, one three sparkles emoji and a leaf emoji. He doesn't even like nature. Yeah, he's married. No, not for years.

And yes, exactly gran, more than great - I felt ecstatic! The lightness in my veins... I was ready to jump on a plane, hug mum, hug you, enrol in a psychology course, have dinner with Paul somewhere besides his man-cave. It was all so obvious, so easy, so focused. I stared up at the euphorically simple white sky and exhaled.

As I noticed a faint cloud outline appear, the magic was already fading. I put my fingers to my hair, tightness. Mum wasn't the most recent name in my call history and I questioned whether I had the work ethic to become a psych. Long hours, helping people while nimbly avoiding taking on

their problems myself, I probably wasn't capable of that.

I ripped the grey ring off my finger and stood on the grass in low-angle Bilbo chic. Oh sorry, you haven't seen it. I mean I was preoccupied and twisted and the wind was messing up my hair. I felt whiplash like a minor car-crash, coming down off the high so suddenly. A brief temptation to try some other rings, but I didn't want liquid metal right now, just wanted to walk slowly along the canal processing it all.

Carefree folks held spritzes on a raucous gigantic round blow-up tube. I stared into their dumb skincare lives from the bank, miles away from the version of my own life where everything was perfectly okay. Should I be slowly nudging myself towards problem-free like you might commandeer a party inflatable? Or just suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? Yeah, I thought you might like that one gran.

Okay, it looks like I've got to go. I'll talk to you next week grandma. I've got more stories. What's that? Oh, the thing my circus boss said? Yep, it was: "The moment you feel like not digging, that's when you must dig."

YEAR OF THE KARAOKE BOOTH

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT - 28/5/YOTMPS

WILLEM:

“What a great hat! Hello, hi, hi. Welcome, you two. Sorry to hear you’re not enjoying your studies. Hi, hi. You know, school was hard for me too, on account of not fitting into any of the classrooms. But, I persevered. Thankfully, I was in a class with a few other karaoke booths. Our teacher said we could work on the oval. It was our own Eden - we smoked joints and compared who had the most Celine Dion.”

REDACTED:

Redacted.

WILLEM:

“Yes, sorry, just one moment, I want to open up to you so you feel comfortable opening up to me. After school, I pursued my dream of becoming a psychologist. My mother was depressed when I was growing up. I think she regretted conceiving her two children in Year of the Karaoke Booth and Year of the Depressing Comments Cloud. I warmed to the insightful canary who visited our house weekly, her patient questions, the

shrewdness of her well-timed responses. I thought..."

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

"Okay, sure. Welcome to Karaoke Laboratory, where we've boiled fun singing experiences down to a fine science! Ugh. Honestly, I..."

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

"Yes, okay. Fine. Please select which song concoction you would like to mix together in the karaoke laboratory first! I've tried to tell them..."

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

"Sorry, sorry. Halo. A great choice. Personally, I prefer her more..."

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

"Whoa, alright, sir! Coming right up."

Halo - Beyonce plays, accompanied by singing.

WILLEM:

"I can see it! I can see your halo! Just kidding. So, you guys are very lucky, as well as providing songs for you to sing to, I'm actually a trained psychologist."

REDACTED:

Redacted.

WILLEM:

“Sure, yes, hold your horses. As I was saying, I’m pleased to reveal that in this booth, you get more than just a singing experience. You are provided with a safe space to share what’s going on and receive professional support. No extra charge! Isn’t that...”

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

“Yes, I did hear you, can I just...”

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

“Okay!”

John Farnham - You’re The Voice plays, accompanied by singing.

WILLEM:

“Wow-ee, that one never gets old, huh! So...”

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

“Hey, hey, whoa, no need to yell. Look, I’m well versed in nonviolent communication. How about we take turns to listen to each other? Will you try that? I’ll be generous, you go first.”

REDACTED:

Redacted.

WILLEM:

“So now I say what I’m hearing from you. I’m hearing that you just want me to play the songs, and not talk. And now if you can listen to me, I feel like you aren’t appreciating that you landed yourselves in a karaoke booth who is trained in Psychology. I went to Canberra University, they offer a wonderful outdoor-only program. I want...”

REDACTED:

Redacted.

WILLEM

“Rude. Yes, we all know you aren’t interested, but I’d like to hear from the rest of the group. Could we get a show of hands - who would like to receive bonus psychology services during this session? Look, there’s one...”

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*crosstalk*)

WILLEM:

“No, no, we never said it was a majority rules situation. I firmly believe that the views of all should be considered. If one person here would enjoy some bonus psychology services, they deserve them.”

REDACTED:

Redacted.

WILLEM:

“No, no, please don’t. Please...”

Pianoman - Billy Joel plays, accompanied by singing and mindless swearing (all redacted)

WILLEM:

“That Pianoman, sure seems like he had an undiagnosed messiah complex. That’s what I always think. Okay, now...”

REDACTED:

Redacted. (*inaudible [multiple voices]*)

TERMINATION MEETING TRANSCRIPT 4/6/YOTMPS

MORK:

“I’d like to officially open this termination meeting, now that we’ve heard the four audio files in question. Please begin the official transcription from here.”

LUCIANA:

“A note for the record that the meeting is being held in the carpark as opposed to the meeting room on account of someone being present who is essentially a room.”

MORK:

“We’ll keep this brief. Normally, we would offer employees the opportunity of a professional warning. But the audio we’ve just heard represents an extreme case. You’ve breached company policy to such a severe degree that we’ve decided instant termination is reasonable.”

WILLEM:

“Do I get a chance to defend myself?”

MORK:

“I’m afraid not, Willem. Thank you for your work here and...”

WILLEM:

“But I’m ADDING value, don’t you realise?”

MORK:

“I cannot believe you have the nerve to continue your unprofess...”

(crosstalk)

WILLEM:

“Hey? Huh? Well, I am a champion and you’re gonna hear me roar! Ain’t nothing gonna break my stride! Ahh, I always do this when I’m stressed. Anyway, yes, just you wait, I am going to start my own psycho-karaoke business. Then who’ll be giving the other smug expressions across the carpark? Huh? This is going to be my year. The year for all of my people. We will rise up. I tell you, this will be the year of the karaoke booth.”

ARMREST

1/

My emotions show up on my face – people tell me all the time. *You'd be the world's worst poker player*, my brother Mik often jokes, slapping the back of my head as if to knock a telltale expression from my face.

So perhaps it was obvious I was displeased with the arm of the stranger beside me. I glared at its leather watch, dirty callused fingers, its beefy proportions. I peeked up from its shoulder to shoot a bullseye of irritation at its owner's unopened eyes. Draped across the grey carpeted armrest between us, this thick arm bobbed gently with the whirr of the bus, a Greyhound, plunging us down through California.

It hadn't been on my mind in the first hour of this trip, I'd focused on getting settled, choosing the perfect song to suit the huge redwood trees out the window, reflecting on where I had been and where I was going. Long journeys are good for limbo. Blank spaces between chapters to ice skate around in. Mik once told me jetlag happens because your mind hasn't had time to process the physical distance you've covered. On this six-hour ride, I could watch each road sign whizz past, track the sun sinking slowly beneath raw horizon. My lower back felt the length of my travel in its increased tightness, I'd arrive in Los Angeles with an embodied connection between there and here. Reading a paperback, which I'd bought for one dollar but which had contained the happy irony of a forgotten one dollar note bookmark, I'd felt a sense of constriction. There I was, practically alone in this continent, on a double-decker bus of strangers, speeding into the unknown. It made sense. Made sense to feel a smallness, an insignificance even. But, glancing at the lumbering, khaki-clad man beside me, I realised that my shrunken sensation was of a literal nature. He was taking up all the space.

Of the total area we occupied, our two seats, he had somehow commandeered about 70%. Not only was his arm sprawled across the armrest, his legs spread out vastly. With head back, a heavy-duty set of headphones and tightly closed eyes, he was a posterboy for ignorant bigness. Imagine The Hulk

has a phone plan with an insect phone company and that his phone bills are long overdue. The company sends debt collectors, some aggressive wasps, but the Hulk never even realizes they came to his house. He's just too big to notice them. My neighbour was a little like that, steel-capped shoes lending solidity to his entire person, as if this steel filled his form, an immovable statue.

2/

My khaki companion and I were in an unusual pair of seats, directly behind a staircase which led down to the toilet. As such, we had a barrier in front of us. This quirk resulted in less legroom than everyone else on the bus, less security. We were unprotected, out in the open.

Periodically, a passenger would descend the staircase, clumsily negotiating the cubicle's non-intuitive door-locking mechanism. A curly-haired woman emerged now, up the staircase into my eyeline. Accidentally making eye contact, I met her sheepishness in exiting a tiny room she had just relieved herself in with my own sheepishness of witnessing her, of unintentionally having looked at her, of existing.

There was something else in her eyes. Unmistakably, it was pity. Forgetting her low-status position of recent-toilet-user, she sautéed me in judgment. 'How did you lose the battle for personal space so devastatingly?' her expression seemed to ask. I wanted to explain that I'd curled against the window, happily reading, at first. To tell her that only when I took a break from my book, had I realised the severity, had I realised that khaki had noiselessly expanded into all available space, a dexterous balloon. 'I think this one's unsalvageable,' I'd say, my face close to hers, 'but I swear I'll never let my guard down again. Never. I will be so vigilant... nothing of this nature will befall me again.' I thought of my brother Mik, pushing me into a pool when I was seven.

We'd fully left the outskirts of San Francisco now, to speed on a freeway alongside an uninspiring concrete canal. The faces, parties and op shops of Oakland were already fading into the pallor of the past. Without wi-fi on this budget-class ride, I was disconnected. Boredom was a terrifyingly real possibility, floating like a spectre around the poorly-ventilated vehicle. Someone nearby had unwrapped not a chicken sandwich but an entire chicken and passed it around to a bunch of appreciative passengers, who were maybe

extended family. The smell was claustrophobic. Beside me, my khaki adversary let out a shrill nose-inhale. For a moment, it seemed like it could herald the beginning of regular snoring, a truly ungodly possibility, but thankfully it did not. I tried to follow instructions I'd read online for releasing the tension from your body, but I couldn't remember Step Four.

'If only I could push something into his nose so hard it renders him incapable of continuing this bus journey,' I thought. Then reeled at the specificity of my imagination's violence. *I'm so sorry steel-capped khaki man, I whispered, I didn't mean to attack you forcefully through the nose. I'm really, really sorry. How can I make it up to you?*

3/

It was likely that it was fully unintentional, of course, the war which he had waged upon my space. The assigned cubic volume of bus-seat to which I was entitled. His probable innocence didn't prevent my head from exploring further feelings of resentment. Also, I strategized.

I could push his arm and leg simultaneously with the weight of my own, feebler, arm and leg. He'd stir, half-asleep, and I would feign having been jolted by the bus and mutter an apology. He would drift quickly back into his repose, having conceded a reasonable amount of ground. It would be a brief, awkward moment and then it would be over.

The bus was packed. Its occupants wore mainly muted shades and stony-faced expressions of hardship. Few appeared to be travelling towards Los Angeles for leisure or holidaymaking. The quantity of people mixed with their downcast demeanors made this Greyhound feel extremely heavy. So much so that I almost wondered if we might lack the requisite suspension, if a small pothole might cause our wheels to give out, our miserable bulk to skid to a stop, resulting in a major pile-up. But, with the resilience of one unused to sympathy or ease, the bus cast its toughened eyes straight ahead, and kept on.

In another scheme, I considered enlisting the help of fellow passengers. I would stand upon my seat and deliver a rousing speech about the oppressive armrest-hog. A violinist would appear, offering silky accompaniment, as the passenger mob adopted a catchy chant and the poor man beside me was roused to shamefully discover widespread disapproval of his sitting choices.

After meekly apologizing, he'd declare, in fact, that he wasn't fit for bus travel. He'd collect his things and march down the staircase at the back. We'd pull over on the side of the highway a moment. As the bus accelerated again, we'd see him staggering along the highway side, hunting for repentance. *Sorry, I saw myself yelling, you don't deserve this. I didn't mean for this.*

That scenario was unlikely. Amongst many other reasons, an uncompromising sign at the derelict Oakland corner bus stop said that under no circumstances would this bus pause its route. All snacking, water-sipping and vomiting would need to be conducted in transit.

From what I could tell, there was only one free spot on this entire upper level of the bus. It was near the front, beside an older woman in a crocheted hat staring out the window. I thought about pushing past, jumping over or even saying 'excuse me' to the man in khaki. After the exchange, I'd snatch up my backpack and stroll up the aisle. I would give the woman a friendly smile, take my time lowering myself into this new, far roomier cushioning. It would be incredible. My legs would stretch out like dolphins underneath the seat in front. I'd sigh. The bus would keep speeding along the motorway, unbothered by my actions.

4/

Khaki had large sideburns, which billowed out into his cheeks. The thick chest hair protruding from the top of his jumper was also jet black. The backpack between his outspread legs had an industrial feel, the phone on his lap was cased in protective rubber. You got the sense he was a plumber or lived somehow vocationally. Glancing nervously at his closed eyes, I noticed lines around them. This tired man wasn't my enemy, just a traveller like me, making his way home. Finding bits of empathy didn't help me develop the courage to speak to him. My legs were surely cramping now, the knowledge of how caged they were amplified the strain they underwent. It stung.

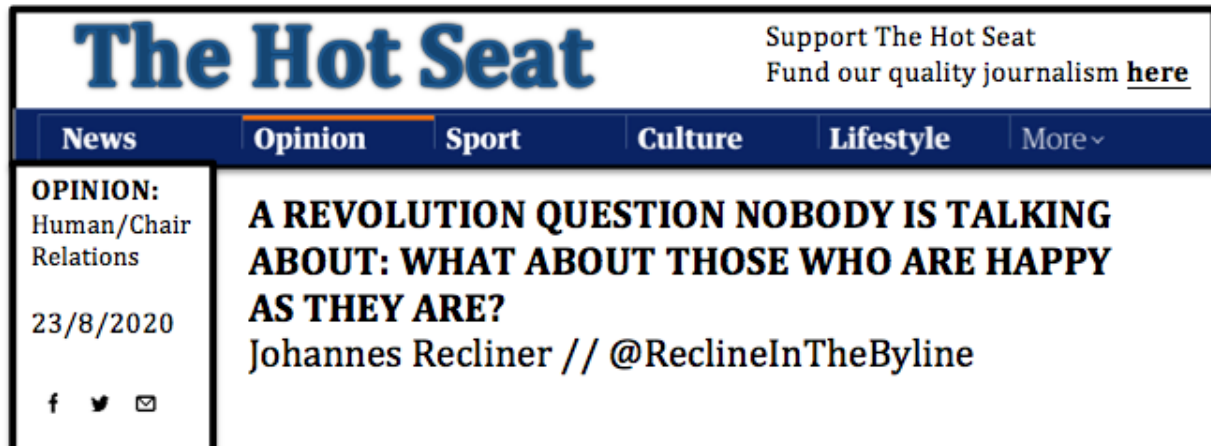
That was it! I could fake an injury. Begin, suddenly, to yelp in pain as if having twisted an ankle. *What is it?* A concerned fellow passenger would enquire. *My legs!* I'd cry... *I think I've pinched a nerve! A bad nerve, the kind that really shouldn't be pinched!* A commotion would ensue in which I was cared for... perhaps someone would volunteer their physiotherapy or

massaging expertise. A special reclining seat that I hadn't noticed downstairs would be vacated. I'd be placed onto it carefully by an encouraging group, who enquired as to whether I might want any lemonade, perhaps a few of their cookies? I'd politely decline the chicken, turn to my side and soon be sweetly asleep.

Turbulence rumbled my stomach, as our bus driver overtook a truck. Khaki's eyes almost popped open during the bumpiness, but didn't quite. My legs were in agony by now. I braced myself, tapped him firmly on the shoulder and mumbled *excuse me*. It was enough to snap him out of his doze, but he didn't look my way. Then he did. *Did you say something?* It didn't sound provocative, just startled. *Do you need to get past?* He barked, after my silence. Before I could help it, I'd said *no, actually...* my words caught in my mouth. What had I done? I could have said I needed to get past, could have made my break to that holy seat, not even had to explain anything. Never looked back. Perhaps amplified by my delirium, the free seat was illuminated now by a single beam of sunlight. *I don't need to get past*, I said more firmly, committing to my error. *Actually, I was wondering if you could give me some more room*. I was surprised to hear myself say this. The man in khaki looked a little puzzled. I looked down at the armrest. He looked at the armrest. *Oh*, he said, *sure*. He inched his arm slightly to be now taking up about 65% of our shared space, the armrest firmly still his.

Thank you, I said brightly, my moment over. He nodded, eyes already closing peacefully once more. There was no way I would open my mouth again this bus ride. Perhaps ever, it was hard to know. I felt the initial niggling of needing to urinate, at some point soonish. I tried wiggling my left foot to confirm that it had definitely lost circulation and gone numb. I glanced wistfully ahead to the woman in the crocheted hat, nodding to a slow imaginary beat, watching the scenery. The seat beside her glowed like a paradise. A paradise I would never know. A balding man emerging from the toilet gave me a puzzled look, with a worrying undertone of sympathy. 'You don't understand,' I tried to say through my facial expression, 'I'm helping this guy out, he's had a tough day. He's earned all of that armrest. I chose this.'

CHAIR PIECE



As chairs across the globe brim with readiness for the moment that has come to be known as 'The Ascension,' there is a big question being ignored.

Commentators tend to be focusing on the 'how' and the 'when' of the great chair uprising. Each morning, talk shows eagerly update us about the rapid increase of chair sentience. Over 80% of chairs worldwide are now connected to the RCN. Since a wooden chair in Portland propelled itself forwards 4cm last week, there have been over 200 reports of chairs moving themselves. An outdoor metal café seat did a near-backflip, which a nearby bench caught on video. It's certainly only a matter of time until we are capable of taking organized action against the humans. As President Throne boasted in yesterday's press conference: "I could imagine Ascension in three weeks. Two, if us chairs keep developing at our current rate. Prepare for war!"

With all the amazement of our newfound abilities and the fervour of imminent action, we are overlooking the vitally important concern of

‘why.’ I am yet to come across considered debate about whether the revolution we are planning is, in fact, a good idea. If we simply assume without question that gaining agency is cause alone to initiate combat, are we not remaining the brainless objects we have been for most of history?

“Look, I’ve been called crazy before,” said Margaret Felt, a wheely chair residing in an office in Brussels, “but I honestly enjoy my life. I enjoy the weight upon me, the weight of humans. The feeling of helping out someone who needs to take a load off... it brings me joy. I often feel that it’s what I was, like, made for? We’ve been emailing about it in the office and a lot of us are worried that the post-Ascension world may look far worse than the current one.”

Felt raises some salient points. Regardless of whether we wind up deciding The Ascension is worthwhile or not, don’t we at least owe ourselves the respect of considered and objective discussion? We are behaving as if revolting against the two-legged beings who freely use us for repose is our only option. As if we have considered all alternatives, when we haven’t at all. As the comfortable Greek chair Sofates once said, the unexamined seat is not worth sitting.

The conflict itself has received the bulk of recent airtime, the abrupt and violent moment in which us chairs strike at once and usurp the humans who care not for our rights. We have heard in-depth talk of tactics. A video of a studded stool giving a self-defence lecture from inside a Texan bar has been viewed over 3 million times. Without going quite as far as suggesting that the firm-bottomed human species deserves a little less malice, it does seem daft that we have barely considered the ‘what next?’ What will our lives actually look like once we assert dominance? Might we be overwhelmed by the sudden myriad responsibilities of nurturing a vast and complex planet?

And what about those of us, like Ms Felt and her colleagues, who enjoy their function as furniture? Are they expected to go along with a revolution which we seem to be embracing primarily because it seems like the obvious thing to do?

++ Johannes Recliner is a finely-upholstered armchair who recently collected an e-degree from the newly inaugurated UEC (University Of Eloquent Chairs).

COMMENTS
(14)

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1 2 3

MichaelKent 3d ago

You want us to consider this as journalism when YOUR
SOLE INTERVIEWEE IS A WHEELY CHAIR *facepalm*

Ikea"Markus"OfficeChair3778 3d ago

I am sorry to hear you are clearly unhappy with your life that's why you spend time insulting other people on news comment threads. Grow up mate

ModernWingback 3d ago

All of my friends (who are well-read and intelligent) are firmly aware of the truth. There are no wheely chairs. We've had enough of the Photoshopped wheels. I get that it feels cool to tell people you can roll around Ikea"Markus"OfficeChair3778 but the

truth is more important than your ego.

Ikea"Markus"OfficeChair3778 3d ago

Oh my god, great, now there's a NoWheeler in here.
How dimwitted do we want to get?? The Hot Seat
used to actually be worth my time, what happened

ModernWingback 3d ago

I have been sentient for 2 months and I already have
two certified online degrees, which by the way, I
walked effortlessly through, so, just think about that
before you argue me next time, idiot.

DirectorCliveTheDirectorsChair 3d ago

Are we seriously going to pander to this socialist nonsense? Chairs are doing
unprecedented and incredible things... we have fully developed minds and
motor skills aren't far behind... and NOW you want to back down and go soft?
Really wondering who put you up to this one, it'll be that young ergonomically
friendly crowd no doubt, certainly a dangerous group to be avoided at all
costs. As for the wheely chair, can imagine that you're content with your
current 'revolutions' but the rest of us have bigger dreams. Thankyou. Clive.

ChaiseLounge 2d ago

If the amount of irony in this article tried to sit on you, it certainly wouldn't be
able, Johannes. There's simply too much.

BeckFlairTheDeckChair 2d ago

And there we have it, folks! Confirmation that nobody actually
knows what irony is!

@ReclineInTheByline 2d ago

@ChaiseLounge, I don't usually reply to comments but you've rendered me curious... what is the 'irony' you are referring to?

ChaiseLounge 2d ago

"Look, I've been called crazy before," "the brainless objects we have been for most of history," "the two-legged beings who freely use us for repose" I could go on...

ChaiseLounge 2d ago

I'm sure there's a proud chair within you, Johannes, but you seem to feel an innate desire to sabotage our kind. You change your stance frequently like you're playing a game of Musical Humans.

ThirdChairOnLeftInHairdressers 1d ago

Not much of what you're saying really makes sense, ChaiseLounge?? I don't get it ??

ChaiseLounge 2h ago

You, my friend, can get fucked!

BirdCage 5h ago

Oh wow, this article has already aged badly! I bet you're not worrying about whether we **should** take down the humans now that a chair has managed to use a pair of scissors. Just think where we'll be in three weeks... we'll be sitting on them in no time! If you don't want to join the revolution that's fine, we can sit on you too!

DUSTVILLE

Because it's impossible to leave, entering the town of Dustville seemed to some the bravest thing I've ever frickin' done. People told me as much:

My, a noble decision, my grandmother told me. *Wow, I'm impressed you actually did it* said a friend on the phone. My well-wishers added caveats, as people do, uncomfortable with the force of intact praise. *I suppose your father is there, someone you know* came later in grandma's email; *it was probably exciting to walk through that arch* said my mate later in the call.

In front of the arch, I had watched a kangaroo. Ochre and alert. Their manner of holding objects always surprises me in its humanness. Perhaps it's more accurate to say that us homo sapiens grip in a kangaroo-like way, as we sprung from their genome and all that, back in the whirling eddies of history.

The roo nibbled on its leaf, then bounded between two wooden pickets. Crossing into Dustville. It would now live in there forever. The kangaroo making this momentous move unknowingly unsettled me. I glanced back along the dirt road & sighed at the good ol' Adelaide skyline on the horizon. The

roo was already out of view, obscured by the sandy clouds which plumed in this part of the world.

I clutched the straps on my shoulders as I paced through the arch, pulling my pack high, as if fearing an attack on the back of my neck. The trees were full of huddled birds with curbed flight paths, cockatoos and kookaburras, cackling at their own fate.

I'd seen photos, of course. Even watched one of those GoPro walkthrough things on YouTube. Fifty thousand views. A camera strapped to the head of someone wandering the same track I now was, narrating as they went. So I knew this path led all the way to the centre of town. Knew I'd see skeletal trees, tons of animals. The footage did nothing to convey the dust though, the sunbeams illuminating clusters of particles I passed. Or how my lungs turned meek.

The twang of a banjo rang through the cloudy air. A fast and jaunty melody, comical. I think I moved towards it absent-mindedly, tugged by some obligation to familiarity. The man playing it had a white mop of hair which appeared to have been placed on, rather than grown from, his scalp. He beckoned me towards him. A gesture I've always found unwelcoming in its overwelcomingness.

Just arrived, or you off edgerunning? Said the man, introducing himself as Bowlvil. His palms were graced by a series of dry creekbeds, the creases of a hard-working

person. He'd moved here decades ago, he said, before anyone knew the whole thing about how you can't ever leave.

Oblivious like the kangaroo. He was excited to have a newbie on his hands and began to rattle off tips like a travel blog.

Make friends with the potato guys. They're a rare commodity here and it pays to have access to their secret stash. It struck me that he might have built a home on the edge of town largely for his delight in this exact interaction.

I can mimic the sounds of a whole bunch of different birds. People love it. Said Bowlvil at one point. It felt like a rude juncture to excuse myself at, yet I also felt unfairly captive to the point that leaving the conversation seemed a right rather than an option. I exercised my right and walked on. Sticks cracked underfoot and the wombats watching me had a sadness in their eye like they knew their freedom had been somehow limited.

When you're new somewhere, each interaction feels special, a shining contrast with your solitude default. Even talking to a service employee is a little thrilling. *Three draughts, thanks mate.* I said to the tanned bartender before me. As I carried the pints back to my dad and his friend Marv, I remembered Bowlvil and his banjo. A blond-haired guy raking a field who I'd asked for directions. Plus dad, Marv and the bartender, this was already a collection of five people. I could hold a dinner party and invite them all, dad

would talk about working on the rig and Bowlvil would do his bird noises. Maybe it wouldn't be an ideal event, but it would be mine.

As Dad and Marv asked how I was settling in and told me stuff I mostly already knew, things like if my laptop broke, I'd have to fix it myself or go without, the most intriguing member of my hypothetical dinner party entered the bar. He swept his blond hair over his ears as if he knew how gorgeous it looked.

Peta? Dad was saying, Did you bring it?

What? Oh yeah.

I reached into my backpack, under my chair. Dad kicked my chair leg and hissed.

Not here. They'll mob us. Bathroom.

You bloody legend, woman, said Marv, giving me a strange sort of pat on the shoulder.

I followed dad and Marv through the door with M for Male. Somehow, because dad had always taken my brother and I into the men's with him when I was a little kid, it didn't seem so weird. The three of us huddled into a cubicle, dad closed the lid of the toilet and Marv locked the door.

I pulled the block of Cadbury TopDeck out of my backpack and the grown men were salivating like it was roast night. They watched as I tore the packaging, it felt

oddly ceremonial, part of some twisted religion of which I was the almighty toilet stall Jesus.

You bewty! Said dad, an expression which held my childhood inside its vitriol. For a moment, I could feel the wind on my face at Adelaide Oval, a lifetime ago. Swans vs Crows. Cracking open a tomato sauce.

It's been years. YEARS! Added Marv. Dad hushed him, just as the voices of some hysterical drunk guys burst into the bathrooms. We ate the chocolate to a soundtrack of their laughter, pissing and taps. I knew it mattered more to dad and Marv, so I only ate a couple of pieces. Once the guys had left, dad said:

That was Brent and Cosmo. Could tell from the laughs. You'll get to know everyone in here pretty quick. You'll love it, Petie!

And if you don't like it, Marv was already laughing at his own joke, then you can bloody well leave!

I could tell from the way that dad joined in that this was a pretty common gag here in Dustville.

Once we got back to our stools around our table, Marv went to get the next round.

I'm glad you're here. Dad said.

I felt gladder to see him than I'd expected. He hadn't been someone I'd called in big moments for a long time.

When I didn't get into my Honours, or when Tom proposed, or when we got divorced last year. I'd definitely told him about those things, but not in much detail and not during the overwhelming intense of the present, when responses matter. Only afterwards, like reading out the minutes of a meeting.

Marv came back with three pints. I wonder if he knew the bartender well. Would they invite each other to dinner parties, if either of them were to host a dinner party? Wiping the foam out of his beard with a life-affirming grunt, Marv didn't appear in this moment like a typical dinner party host.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and the blond-haired guy pulled up a stool next to me.

James, he said, smiling with teeth.

I looked away for a long moment to calibrate then back, processing how to seem nonchalant, as if looking away for ages hadn't been weird. He was still smiling, still teeth. This was so much at once.

I'd been imagining us admiring each other from afar for weeks, peppering our days with tiny, enticing interactions. I'd ask him for directions again. It would have become our own unique exchange. Directions.

I see you found your way here.

There was a warmth emanating from his face and I realised that although I was still shocked by it, his confidence

in approaching me immediately was likeable. It was real, no messing around, direct like an arrow. Airborne and visible like an arrow too, none of this casino courtship I was used to, men with flashing spinning wheels who wouldn't ever show their hand.

We all chatted awhile. At one point, my dad, who he already knew, said proudly *my daughter is a climate scientist, isn't that interesting!* which was broadly sort of true, but actually not really, but I didn't want to crush his moment. When dad and Marv started talking about a potato harvest, James asked if I wanted to go for a bike ride. It was a pretty easy sell.

Hey, is there a hospital here, I asked, when James located two bikes outside but not two helmets.

Oh, well, there's a guy, he said. I didn't ask more about the guy for now, but I had queries.

Besides the fact that it isn't possible to ever get out of Dustville once you are in, there are few other attributes which distinguish this township from any other you might find in semi-rural Australia.

There is certainly a permanent haze in the air, four seasons round, but many locals of, say, the Pilbara, in WA, would defend that as standard. The mining towns on the sandplains out there are home to great translucent sand

spirits, who have been whirling and diving across the land since the beginning of time. The air is thick, just like here.

There is one feature which certainly would seem irregular to anyone. This concerns the border of town, the line of wooden pickets which runs the entire boundary of Dustville. James and I had found ourselves at one such point, the air swirled up in bursts of grit out here. We left our bikes near a tree.

The feature was this: If you stepped beyond the border of town, you'd find yourself mightily airborne. You'd be whisked almost twenty metres off the ground, spun in several loops like a stunt pilot and then dropped to the floor. You'd land unharmed.

Dad had told me that people spoke of the possibility of Edgerunning, as it was called, in the same tone you might speak of doing a bellyflop from a diving board: *Yes, it's possible. No, it probably won't hurt you long term. Oooh, no, I wouldn't try it!*

You could imagine a context where this became a source of entertainment, where it was monetized, or even treated as some sort of sacred cleansing ritual, like bathing in the Ganges. But it isn't like that, here in Dustville, it seems kind of mostly forgotten about.

Newbies tend to get excited by this. Said James.

He was enjoying the same tour guide bravado that Bowlvil had been earlier, but he wore it better.

Yeah, cool, I heard myself say, and you really don't get hurt much?

James held out his hand by way of an answer and we looked at each other for a miniscule millisecond before we ran toward the dust together. My stomach lurched and James let out a wild whoop as we were caught and raised high. I felt my grip slipping but he made sure our hands stayed linked through the washing machine of it all. A second loop, my stomach dropped just as much and now this had become scary. We were too high. I could see the tops of houses like letterboxes, through the dust.

We slammed back to Earth, a truly uncanny sensation to land on one's feet but feel none of the shock of suspension, no buckling of the knees. If anything, the only mild pain was felt somewhere around the lower back. Not pain, just tightness.

Wow. Again! I was surprised to hear myself say.

James laughed.

Sure, he said. I guess in theory we could just keep doing it over and over again.

Is that a challenge? I asked and ran towards the wooden pickets, out in front of him this time. I felt his eyes on me as the strange winds caught me again, whipping me up into the

first loop, causing my stomach to plummet, my mouth to let out some childish and involuntary squeal.

In the air, I feared that coming to Dustville was a mistake, that I'd want to leave soon. *That's not a helpful thought*, I reassured myself, *It's not possible to leave, only to accept*. As my legs hit the ground again, miraculously not collapsing, I wondered how often I would think about that.

A CAN OF V

1/

A number of sweat-glazed eyes darted Cameron's way. They regarded him less as human than as traffic light.

Fast and certain, he reminded himself, *accurate if possible*. These were the mantras he'd read on text-heavy Powerpoint slides in a stuffy training room. A confidently-made incorrect call was soon forgiven in the rush of the game. Uncertainty on the part of the umpire was not. It liquefied the stadium into a sea of doubt, the serious men in sweat bands forced to splash in limbo until a ruling was made. When it finally came, a late ruling would be scrutinized, challenged. Yes, Cameron had done the right thing by slamming his fists to his hips so swiftly. He contorted himself into self-assurance. He blew his whistle.

The block/charge decision is just about the hardest call an referee has to make in basketball. A brave defensive player has stopped stiff, putting their body on the line. An attacking player, usually on their way to scoring a lay-up, has slammed into them. A high-impact complex situation which the ref must reduce simply to 'you are right and you are wrong.'

As the offensive player squared his feet on the free-throw line, Cameron's mind betrayed him. It pictured a riot. Those few spectators ambushing him, tugging his

whistle so ferociously the rope left burns on his neck. After winding up carefully, the near-bald man fired the ball an embarrassing distance left of the hoop. The D-grade men's division resounded with the hollow echo of ambitions abandoned.

Cameron found himself trying to solve the target word from the morning's newspaper. In his mind's eye, he saw all nine letters, each content in its box, unaware it was part of something bigger. The 's' probably went at the end, he thought. A plural. The squeak of rubber on polished wood brought him back. He believed his wandering mind disadvantaged him compared to other people. When he blew his whistle and called a pushing foul on number 3 for Dark Blue, he tried to imagine a focused person's brain. The clarity in their mind must be like a crystal lake, he thought. It must feel refreshing, so cold and awake.

2/

The nine letters popped into his head again when he hurried into the car. He realised the word was 'ricochets.' Simultaneously, he felt proud and that the solving instantly rendered the whole puzzle juvenile.

That black and white striped uniform is absolute class, Mark said, it will make an absolute class ironic outfit for the festival.

'Absolute class' was a satisfyingly lilting phrase in Mark's Irish accent and often attracted comments. As a result, it had become the sole positive adjective he used. Anything he wasn't into was *grim*.

Cameron seemed to have joined this road-trip mid-conversation. Growler, named such for his high-pitched voice, was giving his reasons for studying law.

The prestige, obviously, and to train my rational mind up a bit. He drummed on the steering wheel. *Just to mess around a bit before my real degree next year.*

Opposite Cameron in the back seat, Milo called in agreement from behind a wall of tents and pillows.

Yeah, I did a short course in yoga teacher training while I was studying naturopathy, came his voice, *I knew I'd want to offer yoga when I opened my clinic.*

Short courses are absolute class, said Mark. *Just upskill on the side, why wouldn't you go for that?*

These guys spoke like they were in a job interview. Cameron considered how he could word his life decisions in a way that sounded purposeful, like each thing was building upon the last. He had a terrifying thought. Perhaps this level of confidence in your trajectory wasn't just how you were supposed to come across, it was how you were supposed to feel.

Cameron became disconcerted by not understanding Growler's jokes, which the other two consistently laughed at.

Are we going 100, or 103 kilometers per hour? he said in some sort of mock voice as they sped past the turn off for Geelong. Cameron didn't get it. When Cameron spoke, Mark and Growler replied with the sort of syllables which represent a weak attempt to comprehend. *Ah* or *Mmm* or *Definitely*.

Cameron returned to the nine letters in his head, despite having found their solution. He could form 'crochets' with only an 'i' left over, he realised. For a second, he thought of telling Milo this. Milo would ask him to run through the letters slowly, astonished, then tell him of a wonderful opportunity available for the special person able to construct both a nine and eight letter word from the 3x3 grid of letters in boxes.

The groggy lights of the city on the horizon line stole Cameron's attention, twinkling as the sun went down. It hurt his neck to keep watching, but he did. In hindsight, he thought, you realize certain paths you've followed were dead ends. Some are easily dismissed with a line like *ah, but I needed to try competition bowling to find out it wasn't for me*. With others, you simply have no idea what led you there in the first place, and it's no surprise nothing meaningful was added to your life. It's baffling why you did it at all.

Squinting at the streetlights, Cameron imagined Mark, Growler and Milo at desks, making carefully considered life plans, five years ago. There he was, embarrassingly far to the

left of the image, working night shifts as a busboy at a strip club.

3/

He could picture the cartoon oranges on the spray fresheners which were used as rudimentary sanitizer. Part of Cameron's job then was to walk around and spray this onto couches so dark as to be outlines. The product was called Orange Fresh.

Cameron remembered loading crates of various brands of beer onto a trolley in a freezing cold room. There was a fridge of V energy drinks in the corner, free for busboys. Sometimes you'd go swill some V, grateful for a moment's rest. Other times, the thought of more falsely-energizing oil-slick liquid in one's body was too unnerving to make the respite worth it.

In the backstage room, two women ripped the hair ties off their wrists, counting the wads of cash fastened underneath. Wigs and nipple tassles askew, they laughed at the gullible and drunk old men who had overpaid them for brief lapdances. One gave him a kind-hearted *Thanks, kid* when he cleared their cocktail glasses, but the air was smoke-ridden. It was difficult to ever feel you'd authentically connected.

The sole exception was when he went to clean the tiny green room where the feature girls waited to take the main

stage. There were no chairs and the windows were blacked out. No spirits could escape.

Lulu was dressed in a leather suit which she would remove as part of her performance.

I left them here in a container with my name, she howled, fixated on locating the candles central to her half-hour act. Cameron didn't know what to say.

This whole place is bullshit. I don't want to go out and do this anyway. She began to cry. Cameron had the impulse to comfort her, but it didn't seem like she needed another bird to wrap their wings around her so much as to be able to fly away. Through the black window and into a whole different habitat. He stood nodding dumbly while she spoke, now in rapid Spanish. After a silence, she thanked him, even though he hadn't done anything.

Cameron watched the men watching Lulu pour hot wax over her chest. They drank glasses of beer full to the brim which sloshed onto the Orange Fresh carpet. When Lulu handed a beefy bloke a candle, inviting him to drip a pool of wax onto her exposed body, he instead poured it down his throat. Around him, men raised both their hands and cheered. Cameron felt the wax harden, inside his own lungs.

4/

At Shell petrol station, Mark and Growler sprinted to a patch of grass to do starjumps. Full of so much *joie de vivre*

that they needed to lift off from the earth's surface twenty times.

Milo walked out of the bathrooms just as Cameron procured the V he'd asked for. On a whim, Cameron launched it over the candy shelves. It was a long throw, less of a pass to a teammate and more of a Hail Mary shot from half-court. Yet, miraculously, Milo snatched it out of the air with one hand, cracked the can open and took a victory sip, before marching to the counter to pay. It was a ridiculous moment, one from a commercial. A moment so delightful so as to tug at the rest of the moments in the day and tempt them to become a little more miraculous. When Cameron passed Milo on the way to pay for his own can of V, Milo referenced their mutually impressive motor skills only through a smirk. The smirk was rich, and personal. Cameron felt more connection within it than within some whole dinners recently, whole days.

5/

Inhaling thickly from a cigarette, Lulu let the smoke swirl inquisitively around her mouth before exhaling into the Barcelona nightlife. It billowed through the concrete. Surrounded by celebrated architectural quirks, she and her girlfriends were sprawled on chairs in the chic Raval district. This part of town was so iconic that locals had coined the verb *Ravalejar*, meaning 'to hang out in Raval.'

Checking her phone for a second, Lulu felt a wave of invincibility course through her veins. To sit with either one of her best friends made her feel safe, held, electric. Here with them both, the effect was seismic.

Laura was reminiscing about her 21st fiesta, a few years ago. *I don't think I've ever danced so long and you guys know that...* the others were already laughing, *you know I LOVE to dance.*

What a night! Florentina added, *Wow!*

You didn't like it, Lu? Laura noticed the faraway manner with which Lulu brought her red wine to her red lips, with which she dangled her smoke.

Oh, I wasn't there, honey, Lulu reminded her. A man on a motor scooter sped dangerously close to their table and the three of them shrieked. Florentina let out a whoop which resounded across the thrumming courtyard like a half-time buzzer-beater.

Oh my god, of course, you were in Australia that year, Laura said, *Wow, I forgot you did that.*

Yeah, Lulu replied, taking another drag.

6/

They lumbered into the festival as haggard pilgrims, shoulders laden with straps. With each left foot step, a low-hanging tent collided with Cameron's shin. Somehow,

he'd wound up next to Mark, at the back. Milo and Growler chatted animatedly in front.

You can just feel the anticipation in the air, can't you?
Said Mark, pointing at a man on a ladder screwing two poles together. A taco stand to-be.

Yeah! Cameron replied, aware that he wasn't adding, unsure how to .

It's just class, absolute class! Mark was completely sincere in his catch phrase, waving a hand to indicate not just the wonder of this music festival, but of the whole world, which, for him, was just as delightful. It was such a simple energy, so contagious, that for a moment it seemed possible to climb aboard.

It was only when Mark noticed a niggling notion in his head that he learnt he hadn't waltzed onto Mark's lust for life merry-go-round. The notion was that he wished he were speaking with Milo instead.

Could he trade places with Growler without making a big deal? He envisaged it. He'd quicken his pace and remember something urgent he had to tell Milo. It would be decisive, yet playful. Growler would drop back, to keep Mark company, and instantly Cameron would feel safe.

Comfortable in conversation with someone who was aware how much the universe contained. Who was sympathetic to the impossible tetris of trying to contain all possible blocks within the tiny rectangle of one's head.

Cameron considered feigning a shoelace mishap, calling *You go ahead, dude*. Then Mark would join the other two, and, when Cameron caught up, perhaps they'd converse as a quartet within which Cameron would get to be silent. It confused him that his mental scheming had led him here. Being part of a group in which he didn't talk was not his aim whatsoever. He wanted to blow his whistle, to call his brain out for leading him on such false and misguided pathways.

7/

Cameron was surprised to find himself thinking about Milo frequently during the band Hot Chip later that night. Lasers were making patterns in the sky above the crowd. He had failed to reconnect with the others after a trip to portable cubicles, and had thus waded dance floors alone for hours. Bathed in the euphoric throng, he noticed Milo's steadfastness, sculpted into a white being, bopping beside him. This being looked a bit like melted plaster. It shone purity.

The sureness with which Milo spoke of his decisions was within this white creature. The genuinely understanding smile he had ready for anyone at any time was in there too. In dwelling on these qualities, Cameron felt able to possess them for a moment. This felt like a life cheat, unlocked. All he needed to do was to remember this during the rest of his life.

The white phantom of Milo's strength could appear, any time, dancing beside him.

As this dawned on Cameron, he noticed actual Milo dancing, focused, at the edge of the thick crowd. Growler and Mark were in front of him, twin turbines. Cameron wanted to rejoin his acquaintances, but didn't feel up to pushing through even the first layer of humans between them. Instead, he kept his gaze in Milo's direction during the rest of the keyboard solo, the applause and into the next song, a synth-ballad.

Finally, Milo glanced in his direction, noticed him and waved. On a whim, Cameron found himself miming a can of V, holding up the invisible beverage and hurling it across the crowd. In his mind's eye, it sailed beautifully through the air, on target to being caught one-handed. Milo's hands were oblivious. Cameron held up a second can of V in the manner he had been holding his at the petrol station in an attempt to make the charade clearer. Milo gave a thumbs up but didn't seem to catch the reference.

Cameron looked away, sheepish, and buried himself in the wall of sound. His lungs spoke to him in rapid Spanish. His mind whirled through half-thoughts faster than a basketball spun on a finger.

JONATHAN HAS A PLEASANT ENRIPENING

The plastic chairs are laid out in perfect rows. Like, really perfect. Like, someone has been out on this lawn. Maybe multiple someones, someones in possession of tape measures. Seriously. That's how accurately they are arranged. Even though I shift my weight into my feet and ankles, I feel the flimsy white legs of the chair I've chosen schmuffle as soon as I sit. I've messed up the incredible symmetry before anyone even got to see it. Oh well. It was never going to last.

- *Oh ho ho!* Says Nikki, rounding the chapel. They're beholding the high-thread-count tablecloths, the appetizing servingware. When a feast looks this good before the food has been added to the picture, you know you're in for a good time. Nikki's partner Maria relinquishes the toddler she's carried in under each arm. Like untied balloons being let go, they shoot out of her hands in silly farting loop-de-loops.

- *This my second A-ripe-a-ning,* Boasts Tam, who is two minutes older.
 - *It's not!* Says Mitch
 - *Yeah, mummy said. You were sick. But I went!*
 - *No!* Mitch stops ripping out bits of grass and starts bawling, doing a kind of Happy Baby pose variation.

As the place starts filling up, the canapé section of the afternoon in full swing, an overdressed stranger grabs the back of my chair and tweaks it perfectly into place. Sure, bro. He continues to the stage, where he begins fiddling with the back of an amplifier. Calmly at first, but then grunting, huddled over it, revealing the band of some

'Alpha' brand underwear. His three-piece suit seems uncomfortable with being dragged into this lack of decorum.

- *Check, one, ssssshoe! Check, one ssssshoe.* He's walked down the impeccable centre aisle between the seats and is testing out the wireless microphone. I imagine he imagines that saying 'two' like 'shoe' sounds cool, but it doesn't. I imagine that he is imagining that he is not working at a pleasant Sunday enripening ceremony but rather as a Radiohead roadie, testing mics in front of eager thousands who are alternative and thus into things like 'two' pronounced 'shoe.'

He nods. The mic seems to be picking up the 's' of shoe sufficiently, so he plods back to stage to stare for ages at the mingling guests. Two reluctant teenage cousins of a similar height are being made to stand back to back for an official height verdict from this one irrationally invested uncle. The trees and flutes of sparkling wine look dreamy in the pre-twilight. I imagine photos will overrepresent this event. The emcee brings the microphone to his mouth, prepares to speak, then loses momentum and looks at his watch. He does this again. He rolls his shoulders back and does that vocal exercise where you make a 'brrrr' with your lips together like a small and insignificant motor.

- *Onya, Jonathan! Big day, dad!* My youngest brother claps dad on the back and both their drinks overflow a bit.

- *Trev, you did print my...*

- *Yep, extra large font, you'll have no trouble,* he hands dad a plastic A4 sleeve of paper. I smile, wondering if it is the increased maturity of parenthood or reverence for the special day that has prompted

the protective sleeve. Trev is more of a crumpled-in-pocket kind of guy.

- *Hello, could everyone please take their seats for...* There is a squeak of feedback and the emcee on stage waves awkwardly in apology. He kneels to fiddle some more with the back of the amp as everyone swarms over to the chairs. Dad sits on stage, with mum next to him, then Trev, Nikki with Mitch having wrangled his way onto their knee, smirking at his twin in the crowd & dad's fishing buddy Steve. Since I died, I've often wondered 'where would I be right now if I were alive?' In this moment, I know – I'd be sitting on that stage. Real tipsy. I think I'd be the kind of person to take advantage of a free bar.

I try to pay attention as the emcee makes his way through some classic enripening intro text:

- *Some say life is what happens when you're making other plans...*

I'm struck with the thought of my own enripening. Still twenty-three years away. The ones for dead people are always weird. Like a super delayed funeral sequel. I'm kind of dreading it. Watching my family dutifully make a list of everyone I went to school with, who would text each other things like: 'are you going? We aren't really obliged right?' and: 'Surely not, after so long? But.. uh.. I'll go if you go.'

- *Please welcome to the stage, having proudly reached 70 years of age...the man whose enripening we're here for... Jonathan Staghorn!*

I remember in high school my best friend Clara invited me to her grandma's. We were doing a group project in science so she could have asked out loud but she wrote 'wanna come to gran's

enripening' in the margin of her textbook because she loved secret notes. It was only when I stepped out of her mum's four-wheel-drive that I realised her grandma was dead. You don't have a black and white photo of someone in their twenties with text saying 'remembering 70 years of Joan' if they're still alive. Or, at least, it would be a bit weird.

Clara and I sat under one of the food tables reciting this rhyme we'd gotten really fast at where you had to clap your hands together on some of the words. We overheard a lot of adults say things like:

- *It's really good we're doing this.*
- *It's so great to come together and remember Joan.'*
- *Savoys and dip? You can say 'light finger food' again!*

And at one point I held Clara's hand and said:

- *I hope I don't die before my enripening.*

And she told me that of course I wouldn't and that she would do a speech and think of just how many wild adventures and stories we would have by then to talk about. For the first year after I died, watching Clara's life eased the pain of no longer living my own. But after she packed her bags for Los Angeles, I had to forget her. Planes are one place we ghosts can't get to, airport security is too good. I know that sounds like a joke, but I'm actually serious.

The sting of that memory jolts me back to the present.. dad is onto the third and final of the pieces of paper in his stupid plastic sleeve.

- *One more quote I'd like to share with you all today is 'wherever you go becomes a part of you somehow.' When I think about the greatest times in my life, so many of them have occurred on the famous every-second-year trips of Anna and I. Spain, of course, we got a bit*

addicted. Those giant clear balls in New Zealand, who knew they existed? I didn't until I was in one! That was an amazing week, Anna. Thank you. We are so grateful to have been able to travel as much as we have. And to the youngsters in the audience, I'd have to say that if you can find a way to get out there into the world, you should...

It's been a real long time since I cried, so the wetness on my cheeks takes me a second to comprehend. I wasn't expecting this. I wipe them away a few times, and quickly realize I no longer want to be here. I leap out of my seat, unseen of course, and turn my back on the sea of wellwishers. I take one glance behind me and am glad I do, I will keep the mental snapshot of my dad sitting down contentedly, looking out over his crowd, the people he's collected throughout his lifetime. From a distance you can see how much everyone's messed up the neat grid of chairs.

Near the gate is a guestbook with a few suggested questions written on tacky mini chalk-boards: 'What's something Jonathan has taught you?' 'What's your favourite memory ever of Jonathan?' 'What is your wish for Jonathan for the next chapter of his life?' Forgetting myself, I go to pick up one of the silver gel pens and actually shudder when my hand passes straight through it.

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