There came a day in my early twenties when I happened to realise that the pallor that had hung over my life thus far might in fact be my own fault, rather than some inevitable curse laid upon me by spiteful God. This realisation arrived to me one otherwise unremarkable morning as I lay hungover on a friend's couch. The mid-morning sun's rays slipped through the gaps in the cheap plastic blinds, falling right onto my eyes. Their irritating brightness woke me from the restless few hours of alcohol-addled sleep I'd managed to eke out since my 6am collapse. With a copious amount of groaning, I slung my legs over the edge of the couch and sat up. I ran my hands across my face, moving gradually from my stubbly chin upwards, feeling each part as I went, noting the cracks in my lips, the dryness of my skin, and the greasiness of the few strands of long hair that dangling over my mouth. I felt horrible. Probably looked it, too. In that moment, as regret and self-loathing swirled and mixed in my gut with the cheesy Halal Snack Pack I'd eaten the night before, the pallor on my life seemed to thicken somewhat. It was the sixth time this week.

It may appear silly to say that I realised something so obvious as '*maybe my poor choices are having a negative impact on my life*', but I'd like to defend myself by making some clarifications. It's hard to grasp large-scale things like this, isn't it? You accrue a lot of little experiences in your life. It's like how often the more you get to know someone, the less you understand them. I'm stuck with myself the whole fucking time, so how the hell am I supposed to know myself?

A gangly redhead with a wispy moustache wandered in from the kitchen. He had a Bialetti in hand, and two mugs swinging from his index finger.

"Finn, I'm never drinking again," I said to him, head in my hands and stomach churning.

He gave me a funny look and placed a mug down on the coffee table in front of me.

"Well, good for you," he said, pouring coffee into my mug. The steam made spirals in the air between us, bringing the acrid fragrance of freshly brewed espresso to my nose. "Today's Sunday though, and I don't see how you're going to manage this week's Safari sober."

I took the mug in hand and reclined back on the couch, crossing my legs for comfort. The thought of what Finn called our 'Sordid Safaris' impressed a fresh level of pain upon my head. On these Safaris, Finn, myself, and another friend named Mateo would buy a bottle of Scotch and a few tabs of acid, polish off the lot, and then spend the night wandering the Northside of Melbourne. These walkabout nights of debauchery led to all sorts of shenanigans, but mainly we just sat around and yakked with Melbourne's finest. Demographics ranged from drunken yobbos freshly kicked out of their local pubs to heavily tatted hipsters in the smoking areas of hip bars on Brunswick or Smith St. The three of us were all creative types, and these safaris presented a convenient way to magic up some fresh stories to distil into our plays, novels, and films. Getting in touch with our Dionysiac desires, you could say.

Finn settled down into an ugly looking armchair that he'd 'saved' from the nature strip a few months back. It was a terribly tacky looking thing that could only be described as 'lumpy', though perhaps I'm biased. The memories of how much of a pain in the ass it was to carry still haunt me. I reckon that might've been the worst favour I've ever had someone call in. My shoulder was bruised yellow for days – a girl I was sleeping with at the time even asked if I had jaundice. Finn picked a newspaper up off the coffee table and flicked through to the crossword section. I sat watching him absentmindedly, sipping my coffee. As he sat with furrowed brow, occasionally twirling the pencil in

his right hand, he struck me as a strange looking man. His features, just like his moustache, could be best described as ‘wispy’. There was a real substance there, don’t get me wrong; a presence of character that most people lacked, but his looks felt soft at the edges. It lent his face an odd transience – a sense of breeziness that defied easy definition. My brain was even more of a steaming pile of shit than usual at this point though, so maybe I’m just talking pure shit.

“I’m not going out tonight, Finn.”

“Fifteen down, ‘author of a famous detective series’, three words, five-five-five,” Finn said, not looking up from the paper.

“Arthur Conan Doyle. But Finn, you’re not listening to me. I don’t want to drink tonight.”

“Can’t believe I didn’t get that one. Such a freebie,” Finn said, jotting down my answer. He then looked up at me, his face holding a relaxed and largely indifferent expression. “What’s caused this change of heart, *monsieur*? You’ve never missed a Safari before.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” I responded. “The fuck do you think that does to a guy?”

Finn looked at me with curious eyes. I met his gaze, watching him think. The warbling of a magpie tumbled in from outside, filling the room with a charming melody.

“Right,” he finally replied, looking back down at the paper. “Also, eight across, ‘common native garden bird whose females are known for their blue plumage’, two words, six-nine.”

I sat my coffee with care upon the table, then leaned forward, hands crossed in front of me. The movement incited a swirling of nausea in my belly, and I winced as the room spun slightly.

“Let me ask you something, Finn. Do you know how many nights this week I’ve spent at home?”

“Fuck, I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Two, Finn. Two. And do you know how many I’ve been sober?”

Finn didn’t respond, but he looked back up from his crossword. His expression was clear, a composed visage that took pains not to let anything through – nearly perfectly so. But in its perfection, it said more than he intended. I knew Finn, and I knew that this meant he was uncomfortable.

“One day. One-in-seven. And that was only because I was so hungover that it’d just get thrown back up anyway.”

“How the fuck did you even manage that?” Finn asked, frowning. “I was only with you for two of them.”

I sat back against the couch, sighing. *How the fuck did I manage that?* It was a fair question.

“Last night, had work till two, then met you at that house party. Friday, got fucked up on shift, went out afterwards. Thursday, the same. Wednesday, fortnightly dinner with some mates, then went

to a bar after. Tuesday was spent recovering from Monday, when I was bored at home so got pissed for the hell of it."

"That's… impressive," Finn replied, shifting slightly in his chair.

"No Finn, it's fucking concerning."

He watched me closely for a moment, then nodded once.

"You're probably right."

"Probably."

We sat in silence for a moment, me sipping at my coffee, Finn twirling his pen and frowning at the paper.

"It's 'Superb Fairy Wren', by the way," I said.

"What?"

"Eight across. *Superb Fairy Wren*."

"Ah. Cheers."

The living room was silent save the scratching of pencil on paper.

"Look James, it's fine by me," Finn began, putting the crossword aside and pouring more espresso into his mug. "Honestly, it is. I even commend your efforts to get a grip on yourself. God knows you need it."

"You can get a grip on these nuts, mate," I said, scoffing. "Miss me with that condescending bullshit."

"What do you want me to say, then?" he replied, eyebrows raised. "It's your life, not mine."

I sighed, reaching forward and gulping down the rest of my coffee.

"I don't know, Finn. It's just… something needs to change. I've been drinking daily since the day I finished high school, you know that?"

"You've mentioned it."

"Right. And it got worse. One drink a night became two, then three, then four or even five. And then all it takes is one bad week for it to go fully tits up."

"Seems like you've had a few bad weeks lately, then."

A flare of irritation arose within me at this comment. I stifled it, but it still smouldered beneath the surface. No matter how true such statements may be, hearing them come from another mouth brings its own kind of sting. Words in the air always feel more real than those in the mind, and the words of others have a special power in this way.

"I guess so," I replied, somewhat deflated.

I went to drink from my mug, only to be rewarded by a disappointing trickle of coffee dregs.

"You got any more of that wake-up juice?" I asked, swinging the mug from my finger for emphasis.

"No, sir. We are all out of that sweet-sweet nectar, unless you fancy putting on another pot."

I groaned and collapsed back on the couch, stretched out prone with my hands resting over my tender stomach. The cracked paint of the ceiling above me still swam slightly, feeling as if my eyes were slowly slipping down to the bottom right. Every time I readjusted them, they started to slip again. It really hadn't been that long since we'd gotten home, and something was clearly still in my system.

"I get that you're not drinking, but you could still do other shit, right?" Finn asked, his voice pulling me from my thoughts.

I propped myself up on one elbow. The considered-ness of his tone told me he had something in mind. It was like listening to a barrister in court preparing for their *coup de grace*; first came an innocuous lead-in to set the stage.

"Go on then," I said, eyeing him closely.

"A mate who lives out bush dropped off some meanies last night. There's been a good bit of rain lately, so he had himself a nice little harvest. Could still have a decent Safari if you munched a couple of them, couldn't ya? No booze involved – all natural, baby."

I hesitated, temptation hovering above my better reason like a burgeoning raincloud.

"Ah fuck it, why not?"

Twelve hours later I was hunched over a shit-smeared toilet-bowl in the bathroom of a Fitzroy bar, hallucinating that the vomit swirling beneath my nose was a boiling broth of stew. Four hours after that, I stumbled through Finn's door and collapsed onto the very same couch I had woken up on the day before.