

**The Text Doesn't Stop at the End of the Page (or does it?):
an exploration of how the novel form responds to digital interactivity through
the cross-sited novel 'Once in a Lifetime'**

By

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Abstract

Change is a constant of storytelling, in terms of both form and content. Many scholars and commentators have argued, however, that the effects currently being wrought on fiction texts as a result of the influence of digital technology and interactivity are the most monumental that storytelling has undergone since the invention of moveable type in the mid-1400s.

Writers have wrestled with ways to include digital technology in their work since its introduction in the late 1960s. It has been used as subject matter and as a tool to shape, contain and present their work to readers. This experimentation was accelerated in the 1980s following the development of hyperfiction.

Web 2.0 and the birth of interactive social media have seen an increased focus among scholars on the ways and means by which digital interactivity has and will impact on storytelling and reading. This leads to an often-polarising debate and one which ranges in tone from apocalyptic to euphoric in response to the question of how long-form narrative in particular will fare as a result.

As a storyteller writing a novel set in a contemporary context, I became aware of the possible use-value of social media, in the form of the blog, to deliver content – in this case, inner monologue. Those sections of the novel concerned with self-reflection thereby transformed from what was originally a Socratic/Seinfeldian internal dialectic, framed through the use of second person, into something more akin to the sort of content that might be found on a blog. It was only a short step from there to a consideration of how social media might be used in the form of the work as well as in its content. This then led to an exploration of how this might change the nature of what was written, how it was read and the effects on the relationship between reader, author and character.

Through the medium of what became the cross-sited, interactive fiction ‘Once in a Lifetime’ (comprising the novel ‘Once in a Lifetime’ and the blogs *Note to Elf* and *Hot Seat*) I attempted to create a scenario whereby the effects that the incorporation of

digital interactivity into both the narrative and the form of a novel might affect the work and the relationships between writer, reader and characters.

I wished to explore whether the introduction of interactivity to the novel might allow for the novel form to move beyond the page. Would the story continue to grow in cyberspace with input from readers, or would the novel form prove more resistant to such intervention?

Student Declaration

I, John Weldon, declare that the PhD thesis entitled 'The Text Doesn't Stop at the End of the Page (or does it?): an exploration of how the novel form responds to digital interactivity through the cross-sited novel 'Once in a Lifetime' is no more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature

A black rectangular box redacting the signature of the author.

Date 6th May 2015

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List of Publications and Awards

Selected Publications:

Weldon, J. *Spincycle*, Vulgar Press, Melbourne, 2012.

Weldon, J. 'Notes on the Future' *Postscripts* 34-35, Ps Publishing, London, 2012

Weldon, J. 'Multividual: a new story for a new audience' *The Emerging Writer*, The Emerging Writers Festival, Melbourne, 2012.

Weldon, J. 2012 'The Effects of Digitisation on the Novel', *The International Journal of the Book*, vol. 10 no. 4 pp. 57-68,

Weldon, J. 'The Cruise', *Unpacked Again*, Lonely Planet Publications, Melbourne, 2001.

Awards:

Copyright Agency Limited (CAL) Grant of \$45K, for the development and staging on the 2012 *Offset* Creative Arts Festival

Victoria University, Vice Chancellor's Award recipient 2013 in the category:

Programs that Enhance Learning:

For sustained commitment to the development of innovative and flexible learning in the work place and community based learning and teaching strategies and experiences in creative industries, via the student journal *Offset*.

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The relationships between John Weldon and Bill that underpin the story world of The Project.

Once in a Lifetime

Note to Elf

This is a novel. Obviously. All the characters and events in this work are fictitious etc, etc. But it's also an experiment.

Bill, the main protagonist, is a blogger. Some of his blog posts are included in these pages, many more exist online. You are invited to read his blogs <notetoelf.blogspot.com.au> and <hotseat2000.blogspot.com.au> and to comment on anything you see there that interests you. You are also invited to email him, should you wish. Feel free to flatter, argue with, cajole, flirt, attack, question, or in any other way interact with him. I'm sure he won't mind. Or perhaps he will.

You see, Bill does not know he is fictional, nor is he aware that there has been a book written about his life. I cannot imagine how he might react should you bring that to his attention.

ONE: Breaking Up Is Hard To Do

Well that's wrong for a start. Breaking up is not hard to do. It's waking up the next morning with your shoes on, a head full of stale Guinness and a belly full of Mexicana pizza that's hard. It's working out whose CDs are whose, who gets the DVD player and who gets the iPod. Who gets the doona and who gets the bed? It's still putting a whole packet of pasta in the pot when you know you're only cooking for one. It's piling all the stuff she's ever given you into garbage bags and throwing them out onto the nature strip, and rushing them *all* back inside minutes later, checking it's *all* still there, carefully unpacking and uncreasing everything. It's buying a copy of *The Big Issue* every day after she's left, from every vendor you pass on the way to work, until one of them refuses to take your money and actually starts feeling sorry for you. It's making yourself watch her favourite movie right through to the end on a Friday night in the vague hope that – that what? That she might magically appear next to you on the couch. Well, yes actually – even though you can't stand the sight of Gwyneth Paltrow, and you wish those sliding doors had just squished shut on her head and that she was left there for the entire movie squealing in that crappy posh English accent, “Will someone please get these shagging bastard doors off my head!” That's hard. That's all hard. But not the actual break-up, that's easy. It's the day after the break-up that's hard, and the next day and the next and however many days after that (perhaps the rest of your life) until you're over everything that is hard. The actual break-up itself? That takes just seconds. People will tell you that's not true, that relationships take a long time to breakdown, but they're wrong. Sure, shit happens and people dig at each other and hurt each other for years, but that's what being together is about, even at the best of times.

The actual moment when you break up takes only an instant.

Otherwise you could rightly claim that divorces and break-ups are pre-determined and that when you're born, you're already saddled with all the future heartbreaks you're ever going to have, because where do you draw the line on this nothing-happens-overnight attitude to living?

That annoying habit you have of whistling through your teeth whenever you're deep in thought, which drives your partner mad and must have in some way contributed to her decision to leave, started back when you were six. Does that mean this break-up has been on the cards since then?

Is everything as preordained as that?

What about your hairiness, which also disgusts her? That, my friend, was programmed generations (in fact thousands of generations) ago by that hirsute monkey which spawned the first human ever to have the brain power to be romantically interested in another of its species.

If we're going to say that everything is connected and everything influences everything else then let's take it to its logical extreme and blame that monkey, let's not draw the line arbitrarily at some point in the relationship's past, at which you lost sexual interest in each other: let's be more thorough than that.

Another thing: break-ups are never mutual. There's always one partner to whom the news that the relationship is over comes as a shock. To that person, therefore, the break-up is a discrete moment in time and is not necessarily attached, by anything other than circumstance, to the tally of arguments, recriminations, infidelities and bile that have made up their opposite number's mind in favour of leaving. Sometimes they're not even intentional. An argument, fuelled by discontent and fired by a crush on someone at work, or even a tiff, sparked off by something as innocent as a shitty day, can rapidly spiral into a break-up and words said in the heat of such a row are not easily taken back.

That's what happened to Georgie and me.

I used to work in the theatre. Sounds great when you say it like that doesn't it? Actually, I was nothing more than a box-office lackey, but the box office was in the theatre building itself, so I'm not lying. I was blessed with the title: Front of House

Manager, but in reality I was an out-of-work actor (is there any other kind?) who'd somehow managed to turn a part-time job as an usher into the full-time position of chief-ticket-checker: think old school bus conductor without the overcoat. Along with the fancy title came the dubious pleasure of having to manage a bunch of other out-of-work thespians, ne'er do wells and dreamers, none of whom, like myself, had any respect for the job, the people who hired us, or ourselves for sticking it out in such a crap situation when we should have been forging our glorious careers.

While we're on that point, I thought I had made it once, actually, about three years ago. I landed the lead in one of those big commercials. You know the kind, "It's your money Ralph," "Not happy Jan," "Which Bank?" One of those ads that everyone talks about. And it paid big too. Five figures. A middling five figures, but still five figures is five figures, and five figures in actor money is like six, or even seven, figures in normal money. Think dog years and human years. There always seem to be so many dog years and they pass so quickly, whereas normal years drag on forever. Actor money is the same. You get it all at once in a big lump, which looks like it'll last forever, so you spend and spend and spend until all of a sudden it's not there anymore and then you panic, take the first job that comes your way and end up counting tickets stubs for a living.

I do still get recognised a lot though. That ad was certainly good for my public profile. People still stop me in the street and say, "Aren't you the condom guy?" as they mime pulling a big condom over their head and talking all muffled like I did in the ad. You must have seen it: it was really successful, very successful, too successful, and that's why I haven't had another acting job since. Who wants Condom Man in their soap opera, drama, sitcom, film, or play? Answer: no one. That's why they pay you the big money for ads like that, because, unless you're very lucky, you'll be tarred for life and you'll never work again.

I'd been tearing ticket stubs for a couple of years and was sickened in the heart by that fact. What had happened to the future? What about the grand plans I'd made when I was younger?

I'd promised myself great things. I'd assured myself I would never fall into the workaday trap: that I'd leave drama school and head to . . . where, I don't know. The details were never very firm in my mind, and I certainly never imagined I'd be remembered as the man with the giant condom on his head, but I knew that I wanted something, possibly to travel and obviously establish myself as an actor and, oh yes, be rich and famous, and that's how I ended up spending my days and nights counting choc-tops and pointing out the location of the toilets.

Seriously though, I had thought that working at the Arts Centre might lead to some kind of break, but it didn't. The lobby was always littered with producers, director and actors, but they never noticed me and why would they? There's only so much brilliance and wit you can display as you hand someone their ticket stub and direct them to their seat. The only ones who did take any notice of me had seen the ad or were employed actor-types, the ones with ongoing jobs, and they are the very people, as one of the unemployed, that you don't want to see. Of course they're extraordinarily pleased to see you and you them, but it's all horribly fake; in reality they are the chosen ones and you're not. They don't like talking to you because you frighten them with your impossible-to-conceal jealousy; your barely hidden, 'I'm twice the actor you ever were,' contempt; your desperate longing to be in their shoes and because there, in your place, but for one lucky audition, go they. They're worried that if they hang around too long maybe they'll catch what you've got and suddenly their careers will dry up too. Unless of course it's early in the evening or it's quiet, in which case they'll bend your ear off with their tales of life on set and how difficult and unglamorous it is and how boring it can be, knowing full well that you'd shoot your own mother for a chance to take their place.

At first, when I was still more actor than usher, I tried to wrangle an audition for every new production that lobbed in the theatre, but I learned very quickly that unless you've got a great agent (and mine obviously wasn't) and a reputation to match, you didn't stand a chance. I would have done anything, played any part however small, but that giant condom hovered over my head, like a . . . giant condom. I just couldn't catch a break, and then slowly, incrementally, I became part of the administration and everybody forgot that I was supposed to be an actor, including me. I can't remember actually deciding to change from casual to full-time ticket jockey but it must have

happened because suddenly I was there every bloody day. I can't remember deciding I wouldn't go for any more auditions either, that it was more important to pull down a regular wage, but I must have. I suppose.

I began to take on more and more responsibility and then they asked me to help manage a tour of one night stands in regional theatres and country schools, which sounded fantastic, but in reality meant that I was simply counting choc-tops and tearing tickets on the road, rather than at home. It was one of the longest fortnights of my life.

Georgie picked me up from the airport on my return. I'd only been gone a little while, but I'd forgotten how glorious she could look. She smiled her red-lippy smile and her arms held me close as she planted kisses on my neck, rubbing them off at the same time, laughing. I swung her around like they do in the movies and she squealed and yelled "Stop". She seemed so thrilled to see me that she was almost bouncing with pent-up excitement. I was hoping it was lust. It was a thrill to be met at the airport by an enthusiastic woman of the kind that makes other men jealous, but after five years of, recently very fractious, "When are you going to do something with your life, Bill?" living-together it was also a little unexpected. She'd been distant these past few months, or maybe it was me – who knows – we'd certainly been getting on each other's nerves a lot more than usual though, so such a surprise, although very much appreciated, welcome home did make me think something was up.

I watched her as I drove us back to town, waiting for her to reveal something. Humming along the Tulla, windows down, soaking in that glorious first warm breath of Melbourne Spring, we chit chatted about nothing. Heading north through Brunswick we debated whether we should grab a kebab or cook when we got home, as we made our way through back streets lined with sleepy Victorian terraces and wog mansions.

It wasn't until we closed the front door behind us that she came clean. "I got it," she blurted as she held me at arm's length and gave me the once over. "You've lost weight."

“Got what?”

“The job!” she said with a grin. “You’re looking at the new Junior Partnership Development Manager for DCI Telcoms.”

She was thrumming with passion – for the new job – so we spent the rest of that night alternatively rummaging through my wardrobe looking for clothes that were more suited to my new slimness (it’s amazing what a fortnight of Two Minute Noodles can do for you) and planning how we would spend her new found wealth. More accurately I spent most of the night planning how to spend it for her, becoming far too involved and eager and working myself up into a motivational frenzy. She, as is her wont, managed to turn off the excitement and turn on the worry. She began to talk about how hard the job would be, the long days, the schmoozing she’d have to do, how she’d probably be no good at it.

“Anyway” she said, “They’ve put the start date back two months so I’ll be broke for a while yet.”

“Can’t you stay on at Harrisons a bit longer?”

“I could, but I think I’d like a bit of time off.”

“Never mind, I’ll support you. You can borrow off me,” I said.

“You owe me money.”

“OK then, I’ll pay it back.”

“Oh God Bill, what if I’m no good at it? What do I know about partnership development management?”

The phone rang. It was Dan. He was having a reading of his play.

What play?

I know we'd both dabbled in a bit of sketch writing back at drama school. I know we'd both talked about the great plays we were going to write one day. I know Dan and I hadn't seen as much of each other as we used to but . . . what play? And where?

The next day at Theatreworks, and did I want to come?

Of course I did, I was rapt for him, and I told him so, but I was also jealous as hell that he'd actually written a play, and that someone had read it and judged it worth reading aloud.

Why wasn't I doing that? Why wasn't I doing something? Why wasn't I acting in his play instead of standing knee-deep in ticket stubs every night?

By the time I'd run through all the old in jokes with Dan, Georgie had wandered off to bed and I was left with a dent where a bubble had been. I felt holed. How had Dan, who was now a lawyer for Christ's sake, found the time or the energy to write a play? How could he find the time, between looking good in court and making pots of money, to write something that long? And why wasn't I doing it? I was supposed to be the theatrically successful one and he the sensible one: I was Condom Man. Too many beers later I was still none the wiser and so it was with an undefined feeling of unease, tinged with self-loathing that I drifted off to sleep on the couch.

I went to see Dan's play reading and it was good. Not brilliant, but good enough to have me writhing with jealousy as I sat there watching. To be honest I can't really say whether it was well written or not, although everyone clapped once it was over so I assume it was. I was so far up my own arsehole at the time that he could have sacrificed a baby on stage and I wouldn't have noticed.

My head was shoved shoulder-deep in a bucket of shitty misery and panic: jealous, jealous, jealous.

Why him and not me?

My hungover mind sped. Must corner Dan afterwards. How long has he been working on this? How did he start? Maybe I could be in his next play? Maybe we could write one together? We actually wrote some pretty good stuff back in drama school. But have I got any ideas? He always had more ideas than I did. Everyone always has more ideas than I do. I'd never be able to pull it off. Who am I trying to kid? I felt like I was going to wet my pants. I thought of my life stuck in that box office. Day after day.

I started to sweat.

Thirty-two years old and all the money I had, all fifteen hundred dollars of it, was in my wallet destined to be paid back to Georgie that afternoon. Once I'd cleared my debt to her I'd be back at square one again. Less than square one, really, as the rent was due on Thursday and if she was broke I'd have to pay so there went next week's wages already.

A barrage of applause brought me back. I clapped too. I trudged out into the foyer. Dan waved me over.

"That was great Dan," I said with real feeling. All angst aside, I was very pleased for him.

"Thanks."

The director (a real director mind you, off the TV) wrapped his arm around Dan's shoulder and said to Dan's wife, "I think there'll be many more of these to attend Sam! He's not bad, your bloke." Beaming, he pecked her on the cheek and was gone. "Drinks are on me," I said, reaching for my wallet.

But it wasn't there. Now fair dinkum panic set in, none of this existential 'what am I doing with my life?' crap, this was the real thing. I ran back inside, hoping my wallet would be on the seat, but it wasn't. I scabbled around cursing my stupid jacket from the pocket of which things were always falling out.

I hurried back to the kiosk in the foyer.

“Excuse me, has anyone handed in a wallet?”

Miraculously they had, and amazingly it was mine, and of course it was empty. I didn't know what to do so I just left and headed for the pub.

Seated at the bar drowning my sorrows (on credit), in walked Kevin, the owner of said pub. He used to drink at a place I managed years ago and ever since I'd left there he'd been after me to work for him.

God knows why.

I was the grumpiest barman ever. I resented every either too hectic or totally boring minute I had to spend behind a bar. Having to be polite to people who saw me as nothing more than a mobile beer dispenser. Having to look busy when there was nothing to do, polishing the same sparkingly clean expanse of bar over and over again just so I'd look like money well spent if the boss decided to pop in. “There's never nothing to do in a pub,” he'd say every time he caught one of we poor unfortunates standing still for even a moment. He was right too, unfortunately, but that's not the point. Sure there's always something that could be done, but does that mean that there is never a moment when you can just relax, when you can stop running through the list of non-jobs and time-wasting manoeuvres you've invented out of self defence and the need to remain gainfully employed? Where's the dignity in always trying to be just one step ahead of the boss, unpacking, rearranging and repacking the fridges and the shelves, straightening the bar towels, polishing the taps, polishing glasses, arranging tables, tidying up, sweeping, dusting, anything, endlessly and pointlessly running like a hamster in a wheel just so that you look like you're a company man? Afraid to stop, even for a moment, because you know that the very minute you do say to yourself on one of those deadly quiet days, “Fuck it, I've done enough,” pour yourself a drink, open a packet of chips and slouch against the bar is the exact minute he's going to come in and even though your boss radar is finely tuned and you jump at the opening of every door and at every footfall you'll never be able to look busy in time and so he'll think you spend all day lounging around on the

quiet days and he'll think your obvious laziness is the reason the place is empty and he'll start to resent you and every one of the nowhere-near-enough dollars per hour he's paying you and your shifts will be given to the hamster behind you who's running just that little bit harder.

Or maybe it was me.

Maybe it was a great job in a good pub and I should have been happy to have it. Either way, once I'd finished there I vowed never to go behind a bar again.

Kevin poured a couple of beers and came over.

"Do you know anyone who wants to work in a pub?" he asked again, playing out the little ritual we'd developed.

"Me," I said, and this time I meant it.

The next day – Monday – I'd been back in town just two days and I'd already managed to lose all my money and all my self-esteem. I trudged into work, made my way through the foyer to the box office and steeled myself for a return to ball-mangling, life de-affirming boredom.

Tiny open plan office. Nowhere to hide. Nothing to do other than listen to myself whinge and watch myself put on weight thanks to endless cappuccinos and muesli cookies from the honesty box. The place was deadly.

I needed to get out of there. A couple of shifts a week in Kevin's pub would help but it still wouldn't be enough to buy my freedom. The thought that Georgie could probably now afford to support me was tempting, but really, I couldn't go there. . . could I? NO I COULDN'T. Time to shit or get off the pot I thought, so I approached the powers that be with the idea of my becoming more of a player and less of a shit kicker. There must be something else other than ticketing I could do? Three years of

drama school must surely have given me some theatre-related skills even if they weren't, after all, of the acting type.

They listened very politely to what I had to say, which didn't amount to much more than a strangled, "Help! Get me out of here!" but they weren't keen.

Instead, they said they'd like me to take more of an interest in the customer service side of the business. They wanted me to go on a training course, get more involved in computers, familiarise myself with the invoicing and accounts receivable software, perhaps do a little bookkeeping at night school and blah, blah, blah. They thought I was ideally suited to a position in the Top Office as they called it – couldn't they see that I had no idea what I was doing?

I sat there in the General Manager's office listening to him and the Financial Controller bang on and saw the rest of my life disappearing down the toilet.

I thought again about the money I owed Georgie – how come that, even though we earned roughly the same amount of money I always ended up borrowing off her? Could it be that this person they were so keen to hand their invoicing department over to could not even manage to get the rent together every month?

And yet. . . I might end up earning more than Georgie if I took their job and so if I did continue to borrow off her at least I'd be able to pay it back. I'd be able to buy a new(ish) car, and maybe a house sometime in the near future, and what about kids? Georgie and I wanted them, at least I think we did, but we didn't know when, but surely I'd have to be a responsible breadwinning type when that moment arrived.

They were offering me the chance to make enough money to set all those things in motion, plus there'd be more free tickets, opening nights and cocktails in the foyer than you could poke a stick at, and I'd always be able to pay the rent. This was a real job, not one I wanted, but something with weight and power all the same.

Wow.

“So what do you think?” the Fat Controller asked.

Was he talking to me? I felt dislocated.

“It all sounds very interesting.” I said.

“Good, so we’ll start working up a contract?”

“No. . . I’m leaving. I quit.”

Did I say that out loud? I wasn’t really intending to. I was definitely thinking it, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to go on record with it.

“I’m sorry?”

I stood up.

“Thank you but no, I don’t want to do that. I’m giving notice as of today.”

With that I turned and left the room. I headed back to my desk and sat down. Did I really just quit? The feeling of dislocation grew more intense. I don’t think I’d describe it as an out of body experience, more like an out-of-my-bloody-mind experience, but I did feel as if I wasn’t completely in the moment, to use an acting term.

My phone rang.

“Bill could you come back in here for a minute please?” It was the General Manager.

I sat down in the chair again. They hadn’t moved.

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“Have you been offered a position somewhere else?”

I couldn't understand why they were so interested. They knew I hated my job and that I was always trying to get out of it, but maybe they thought everyone in ticketing always hates it. They probably thought they were doing me a favour: offering me a life line, and of course that's exactly what they were doing, God bless them, but I wasn't going to choose life this time, at least not the life they were offering.

“No.”

“What will you do then?”

“I don't know. Go back to acting maybe.”

They said nothing.

“Well can't you do that and continue to work here?”

“No.”

The thought began to cross my mind that I probably could but it was too late now. If I'd showed any signs of wavering I'd have looked every inch the idiot I was now beginning to feel myself to be.

“Well, then could you stay on for a few weeks until we train someone to take your place?”

“No. I'm sorry.”

And with that I stood and left once again, burning my bridges behind me as I went.

I got home that night expecting the worst and I got it, but in the words of Spinal Tap's Marti de Berghi: "I got more, much more."

Things were once again pretty ordinary between Georgie and me. Turning up late after Dan's play reading, tipsy and sans the moola, even though it had been stolen was seen by her as just another example of how I couldn't get my shit together financially. She calmed down when I told her that I'd taken on a couple of shifts at the pub, and should have the money soon, although it flared again when I told her they'd be Friday and Saturday nights.

"I'll never see you. You'll be at work all week and it'll be football and the pub every weekend."

Boy, did I have a surprise for her.

I told her she didn't have to worry about not seeing me on the weekends because I'd be at home all the time during the week. Because I had finally done it.

"I just quit. How about that?"

I started banging on about being inspired by her new job, and how something just snapped inside me and how it felt so right, and how free I felt now, how I'd update my photo and CV and really work on getting some more acting work, and on and on and on I went. Of course given the circumstances, she didn't see it as a particularly smart move at all, and to be completely honest, at that point in time and after having had a few hours to think about it, nor did I. She saw it as a colossal mistake. She didn't actually say as much but I could tell, and I have to say that a large part of me was tempted to agree with her.

"What are we going to do for the next two months until I start at DCI?" she asked.

"You didn't just quit, like now, as in today, did you? You did give them some notice?"

I said nothing, turned and walked to the fridge, opened the door. I knew there was no beer in there, but at times like that it never hurts to check. I couldn't just stand there

staring at her. I couldn't bear the thought of admitting that I'd probably just fucked things up for both of us. But I also didn't trust myself not to say something hateful to Georgie. I'd hoped that she'd go with me on this. Maybe I had taken a risk, maybe I had done something ill-advised, but I wasn't ready to sell myself to a soulless job. Not just yet anyway. I was hoping this could be a moment that set us both free, which forced us both to actually do something with ourselves. I was sick of us always just talking about getting on with our lives. I wanted to do actually do it. OK, committing myself to short – and possibly long-term poverty with no discernible way out probably wasn't the smartest, most considered move anyone ever made, but it was a start wasn't it? Wasn't it? I'd had my fill of 'what ifs' written on the backs of menus after too much wine. Staring deeply into each other's eyes and pledging our support for each other's causes and dreams wasn't enough anymore. Her dream was to work in the highflying world of public relations and she was on her way now. My dream was. . . well it might or might not be acting, I didn't really know anymore, but it certainly wasn't accounting. Still, she didn't say anything for a while. You really have to warm Georgie into an argument, but we'd been having so many lately that her silence here was unusual.

“You don't have to worry about the stolen money,” I said. “I've borrowed it off Dan. I went to see him on the way home.”

I opened my wallet and laid the money on the table. She looked at it for a minute and then picked it up and put it in her pocket. She still didn't say anything.

And then, very calmly.

“You can't keep borrowing money off people, Bill. How are you going to pay him back if you haven't got a job?”

“I'll get more shifts at the pub. I'll work it out.”

“How will you afford the rent?”

“I’ll afford the rent, don’t worry about that.” She looked down at the table and I looked at her.

Then, I don’t know if there was a smirk, a raising of the eyebrows or a sideways glance, but she did something. Like those images of the Virgin Mary that appear on pieces of Latin American toast or those crappy 3-D dot pictures: if you knew what to look for there was a *look* on Georgie’s face. The uninitiated would have seen nothing, but to an expert like me, it stood out like dog’s balls.

And I knew it had started.

The great iron and stone wheels of the machine that drove our monolithic and pointless arguments had started to move. Slowly, silently, and irresistibly their massy cogs began to grind and mash. All we could hope for now was to minimise the damage.

“What was that?”

“What was what?”

“That look.”

“What look?”

And off we went. So predictable and so unbelievably stupid you wouldn’t believe it if you read about it, except this time it didn’t end up with her sulking and me banging about the house. This time it just stopped. It just fizzled out into nothing after a few minutes, which was awful and more saddening than usual. If you haven’t even got the passion to fight anymore, what have you got?

We stood there on opposite sides of the kitchen table unable to look at each other.

That's when I told her I couldn't stand "doing this" anymore. I couldn't live with her anymore. Another out-of-my-bloody-mind experience. Once again the words just did their thing without too much help from me, or my brain.

"I can't do this Georgie," I said, "I can't do it anymore."

"Do what?"

"Us. This constant arguing. I can't do it."

"What does that mean?"

"I want to break up."

I've been over that moment a million times in my head and I've wondered what would have happened if I didn't say it, which is pointless because I did, although, if you'll permit me a moment of mystical indulgence, I don't really think I had any choice. After five years the great Bill and Georgie machine was finally fucked. There was nothing driving us anymore. All that remained was for one of us to say stop; I just never thought it would be me.

The rest of that night and the rest of that week, in fact, were surreal.

The next morning we woke up as usual, next to each other in bed. She hopped up and got ready for work and I lay there and watched her. Neither of us mentioned the night before, and I wondered (hoped?) if it was going to be deliberately forgotten, just like that time when I asked her to marry me.

It wasn't forgotten.

We spent the next few days – some of the best days we'd spent together for a long time – in the eye of our little storm. We talked like grownups about the break-up, about our break-up (we'd both adopted it now). And we agreed, sensibly and

thoughtfully, that maybe we did need to be apart. We agreed that Georgie would move out on the weekend to stay with her mum and once we'd done that and all the organisational stuff was out of the way we really would have nothing to fight about any longer.

We stopped being arseholes. We were nice to each other. Thank God, we said, we had managed to end our relationship without hurting each other. It was almost as if we were in love again, such was our consideration for each other. Nothing was begrudged, nothing given with spite. We made each other laugh. We were tender. We even went out to a dinner party, which was quite bizarre as it was with a group of other couples we'd known for years, none of whom knew that we were about to separate.

It was brilliant.

It was as if we were united by our separation, if that makes sense. Once again we had a secret that only we shared, although it wasn't the promise of undying love we'd once made to each other, the "all my love always" kind of crap, but it was still a secret complete with its own glamour and cachet. It was ours. It was all we had left and for those last few days it sustained us in a way neither of us could have expected. But it didn't last: it couldn't. For me it ran out on the last morning we woke together. I said I'd be there when she got home that afternoon, but I lied. I didn't have it in me to say goodbye. I'd organised things with Dan and so as soon as she left for work, I hopped in the car and set off for his family's holiday house down the coast for a weekend of surfing and booze.

That weekend down the coast became a week. That Friday slid into the next as easily as a quick beer turns into tomorrow's hangover. Gone completely. The days were punctuated only by trips to the bottle shop and time spent on the ocean. Did I catch any waves – who knows? Did I talk to anyone? I don't think so. I'm only conscious of remembering, analysing and re-running the break-up and the events that lead up to it. I rewrote, recast and rehashed everything, going over every little detail with myself and by myself. Complete in my aloneness, I had no desire to talk about it.

The break-up was all mine at that stage: it was controllable and contained and to tell you the truth it didn't really hurt. I felt not elated, but definitely charged, and perhaps freer, like a man released or is that marooned? No job, no woman, no cry. Even Georgie was an outsider and the longer I managed to stay on that beach and away from the world, the longer I could keep that feeling alive.

I certainly didn't feel the need to talk about 'The Break-up' with family or well-meaning friends. I didn't want to have to explain, or to be sympathised with, or pitied; I didn't want to answer questions. I didn't want to hang out with the guys, with them all punching me on the shoulder and shovelling pizza and beer down my neck in an effort both to cheer and more importantly, shut me up. Not that I didn't need the sweet nullifying embrace of pizza and beer, I did, but I wanted it by myself in the dark, in front of the TV with the football or inane daytime TV. I didn't want to discuss it and be forced to see it from both sides, like some current affairs host. I didn't want to understand it or be mature about it. I didn't want to grow and change over the course of deep and meaningful conversations like some fucking metrosexual. I didn't want to heal, or move on, or evolve. I wanted suspended animation. I wanted that endless round of surf, beach, booze, bed to last forever, preserved in alcohol-numbed aspic. I wanted no future, no past, just an endless snow dome present.

Sure, we'd broken up as mature adults should, putting a knife into the beast to put it out of its misery. Yes, I understood it was all for the best, but I also knew that all this gee whiz maturity and acceptance was nothing more than bravado and that the first doubting, suspicious, mournful thought to penetrate my brain would leave me howling like the Banshee.

Yet, I found that when blurred and numbed by sufficient doses of alcohol, I could safely entertain any question I wanted without it actually causing me any real grief at all: detachment in a bottle. Had we really just run out of steam? If we had, was that justification enough to break up? I wondered as I wobbled into the next six-pack. Shouldn't counselling be the next step, or psychotherapy, or even marriage? Glug, glug. Did it have to end, and if so what were we, what was I, to do with the past five years? "Another six pack, thanks." Why did I say what I said; and why did she have

to believe me; and if we had just petered out in such a natural and organic manner, why was I on such a massive bender?

I stayed on the coast too long. Cracks began to form in the shell of my snow dome, the water leaked out and I started to suffocate. I started to mourn. I started to obsess and stew, to wallow like a pig in a vat of my own muddy murk. I began to look in the mirror and think, "You look terrible," and then go back to bed. I stopped surfing. I just slept. That week disappeared and I found myself wanting to do the same the next and the next and the next and so on, but of course I couldn't stay on that water forever, I had no money, remember, and just as I reached home I saw Georgie's car out the front of our place and I saw a pile of boxes on the nature strip and real grief hit me suddenly and totally. I drove slowly past hoping I'd see her and hoping that I wouldn't and I realised I was far too sober and I knew I needed to be near someone. So I called Dan. He was all how have you been mate and I've been trying to call you and suddenly I was booked in for the next couple of nights: the Preliminary Final at his place and then some party. And did I have a suit? And before I knew it I could almost breathe.

TWO: What a Fool Believes

There are two schools of thought when it comes to telling people that you and your partner have broken up.

Option one: telling people – getting it off your chest – is the best thing you can do. After all, a trouble shared is a trouble halved as they say, and opening your heart to your friends and family can only make you feel very much better.

Option two: you should avoid telling anyone at all that you've broken up as no one will understand or care. No matter how close they are to you, they are completely incapable of understanding what you're going through.

Ultimately it's up to you to determine which path you choose to follow, but either way eventually everyone will know no matter what you do, so it is probably better to keep schtum unless you're asked a direct question, in which case you are best advised to say nothing which could either incriminate you i.e. make it look like it was your fault, or incriminate her, if you think there's a chance you might get back together.

Or it might go like this: you'll be sitting there on the couch at your best mate's place watching the footy and you'll suddenly say to him, "Georgie and I have broken up."

Silence.

"Wow," he'll say. If he says anything at all. Then there'll be a pause and he might continue with: "Shit."

Another pause, lengthier this time while he mulls over what he's just been told and/or checks the alcohol content of his beer just in case he needs to be drunk very soon, then: "Fuck!"

Another pause.

Yes, it's heavy beer at the regulation 4.9 per cent alcohol by volume: he can relax, safe in the knowledge that if duty calls and you need to go on a bender, you could both be legless within an hour or two if required.

"Shit!" again.

Final pause while he considers whether you are happy about the break-up or not, whether he should start bagging your ex or not. Unable to make a decision he opts for something neutral: "Fuck me dead."

"Yeah," you mumble, nodding.

At this early stage (the break-up was only seven and a half days ago, but who's counting?) you yourself haven't really absorbed the fact that you've broken up. There's just this dull feeling of dread somewhere in the back of your head telling you that something bad has happened/is on its way. You're not sure what it is or how to react: you're just glad to be with a mate.

But you should know that, as concerned as he's feeling, his biggest worry is whether this news might mean that you're not going to watch the football after all, maybe instead you're going to talk about your break-up all night, and if you are, couldn't you have picked another game rather than the bloody Preliminary Final?

And further, no matter how much he seems to empathise with you during the course of the night, when it's over he'll be going upstairs to cuddle his sexy wife while you head off to what used to feel like home, and in less time than it takes his wife to say: "Not tonight Dan, you stink of beer," he'll have forgotten completely about you, and your grief, as he wonders whether she'll notice the bed shaking if he has a wank.

Back to the couch.

The pause extends, you stare at your beer and he stares at you not knowing at all what to say. That's not to suggest, as those knob heads in the papers and self-help books would have it, that men are incapable of sharing their hurt and showing their feelings,

it's just that football, beer and the words "fuck" and "shit" are to men what volumes of tissues, glasses of sauvignon bloody blanc and endless rehashing of he-said-she-said are to women. Besides, who said that talking about your troubles does any good anyway? Personally, I'm all for the World War II generation and their ideal of just getting on with it.

"We come home from bloody Changi, they said here you go boys, here's a packet of fags a new suit and 10 bob, off yers go. No one gave us any bloody counselling or asked us how we feel, not that we needed any of that. We just carried on – made the best of it," as my great uncle Bert used to say.

Admittedly he did spend the next twenty years beating the living suitcase out of his family and then drowning his remorse in booze, but it just shows you that talking endlessly about your own misery is not the only way to deal with loss and grief.

Back to the couch again.

Your best mate's wondering whether you're going to say something more and you're wondering if he's going to say something more, then, at almost exactly the same time you both remember that with a slab of beer in the fridge, a pizza on the way and the Preliminary Final about to start there's no need to say anything other than, "Fuck it, and fuck her".

Of course it could be different.

You might tell him about the break-up, but instead of looking shocked he might say "Yeah, I know," and then there's no holding you back, you're fucked, because who told him?

If his wife knows your ex then that's alright, but if it's a grapevine thing or if he says it with the tone of voice which seems to say: "Yeah, it's been on the cards for a while and we've all been expecting it," then you're finished.

Silence is still the best response though, because the more you ask the more you'll find out, and if part of that finding out includes the news that your girlfriend is already seeing somebody else, (less than a week after the break-up? How the hell does that work?) then no amount of beer, swearing, pizza or football is going to settle the roiling heap of razor blades that's shredding your guts.

And if you know the bloke, sorry the cunt, she's seeing – and it turns out you do and so does your mate – then the question of when comes to mind: when did your ex and this other cunt's both knowing you become less important than their both knowing each other? And if the answer is months ago while you were still together, and it always is, then your next question is: "When did your mate find out about this cunt and why the fuck didn't he tell you sooner?" And then you realise what alone truly means as he starts telling you no one knew for sure, and that she always denied it, and that they were all worried about you ("They?" How long has the whole fucking world known about this?). Then it dawns on you that you're the last to find out. So you get off the couch, go to the fridge, take the slab and walk out.

And then, as you're walking home, the fury starts. You remember seeing something on a TV show about how a well-timed uppercut to the base of the nose can splinter the nasal bone, sending it spearing up into the brain causing instantaneous death. Not that murder would bring her back or repair the gaping hole that just opened up in your life, but it would feel so good to kill someone: the new cunt or your so-called best friend who never had the guts to tell you – it doesn't matter which.

But that's also why you do nothing about it, because you're afraid that you might actually do it or at least end up doing something that lands you in trouble with the cops, and as romantic and noble as that may seem in the movies, in real life it's just painful and pathetic. So instead you imagine what else you might do to this new bloke in order to somehow ease this feverish Neanderthal blood lust, which makes your hands tremble as you rip the top off another stubbie.

He's an artist, (when did he last sell anything? Never. Artist my knob) so you imagine him blind, or you imagine running over his hands with a Victa mower, or even more vividly you imagine hammering each of his 72 Derwents, freshly sharpened of course,

up his arse one at a time, but then you'd never explain that away to a jury as an act of passion.

One Derwent yes, but a whole case of 72? That's premeditation, and then you get to thinking, well how many could I hammer up that useless, cowardly cunt's arse before it did become premeditation? Then a smile creeps across your face despite your best intentions, and the tension is broken. You raise your stubby to the sky and say, "Fuck the both of them," and for as long as it takes to drink all the alcohol you can lay your hands on you're able to avert your eyes from the fly-blown carcass of what you thought was the world.

And you may ask yourself. . .

I'm not given to summing my life up in songs, or to comparing my life to the lives of characters in soap operas or films, although I did think I was a bit Jim Morrison-like at age 21. I had the hair, the leather jacket, the bad attitude and more often than not the requisite belly full of cheap wine too. Unfortunately, I could not sing like him (oh, how I tried) nor did I skate anywhere near as close to the edge as he did, but I still thought there was a fair resemblance. The fact that no one else ever pointed this out didn't seem to bother me at the time, although I was self-aware enough never to point it out to anyone else either, so I think I knew I was kidding myself.

How did I get here?

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, I don't often listen to the lyrics of songs and go, "Oh my God that's me!" Kylie Minogue singing, "I Should be so Lucky" does not send shivers of recognition down my spine, nor do the mournful tones of "Hey Jude" strike a chord (no pun intended) with me. But the words of that Talking Heads song, "Once in a Lifetime" were haunting me as I strolled towards the usual Saturday morning cafe. I'm sure I seemed very normal on the outside – just another punter washing his hangover away with coffee, bacon and eggs on your choice of sourdough,

pide or rye bread. But inside my head I was bouncing off the walls to the distempered sounds of David Byrne singing about a man whose world has just stopped being his:

Where is my beautiful wife? What happened to my beautiful house?

“I’ll have a flat white please,” I said to the waitress as I sat down. Dan was busily typing something on his laptop. ‘Work, work, work eh?’

He looked up distracted, “Sorry? Er no, not work. I’ll turn it off.” He didn’t look up. He was nervous. I could tell. Good.

“What is it then?”

He looked up, “It’s a blog. I was writing – you know how Sam and I are struggling. To have a baby. This is an IVF support group for people who can’t get –”

Wow. I so didn’t want to feel sympathy for him. But wow. I nodded understandingly.

“Does it help?”

He thought for a moment, as he hurriedly put the laptop away. “It’s just good to know you’re not the only ones I guess.”

“Maybe I should try it then.”

“I thought you were a blogger? Aren’t you into that social media stuff?”

“No. I got really excited once and set one up, but I couldn’t ever think of anything to write.”

I tried a smile but it didn’t work. It was his turn to nod. He signalled for a couple of menus.

How do I work this?

“I didn’t think you’d turn up,” he continued, “After you stormed out last night, I thought you’d be furious.”

“I am,” I said, and I was. I was mental that he had known, or suspected, that Georgie was having an affair and yet he hadn’t told me. I was tormented by the thought that maybe everybody except me knew about it and that they hadn’t told me. More than that though, the news that I was the last to know had left me feeling totally and utterly alone and who do you turn to when you’re feeling so isolated: your friends. Dan had been my sounding board ever since drama school. I was stuck with him. It was either that or nothing and no one. I had to develop a case of Stockhausen Syndrome, and fast.

Same as it ever was.

“Nobody really knew though, no one could say for certain, about Georgie and –” he blathered again. I stayed silent. I knew he wanted me to say something but I had nothing, “and she. . . well she always had reasons and excuses, so when anybody asked her . . .”

So everybody, but me, did know.

I sipped my coffee and tried to look angry. I wanted to work myself up to something, but everything I had was draining right out of me. I was hit by a wave of inertia that threatened to wash all emotion clean from my body. I felt myself turning into a hole: a drain: an emptiness.

Water holding me down.

I didn’t even have a pinch in me, or a Chinese burn, let alone a punch to the face, which might have been what he was expecting. I hoped that was what he expected. “Aren’t you going to say anything?” he said, and I almost laughed. This sounds like Georgie and me all over again, I thought. Am I going to break up with my best friend as well?

“Because I fully understand if you feel like you want to smack me in the mouth; it’s just that nobody knew for sure. We didn’t even know if you knew and nobody wanted to be the one to come out and say it.”

I found myself in another part of the world.

I had culture shock. I looked at Dan and I couldn’t recognise him, nor did I understand him. I’d known him for years, yet he was foreign to me. At drama school we were inseparable, we were similar, we were almost interchangeable; we wanted the same girls, made the same jokes, believed the same things. Not anymore. I still felt like the young man I had been except that I was older. He looked like a grown-up: a stranger.

I judged his strangeness and found it alien and lacking. I found him, and all the others to be at fault for not telling me about Georgie. I found him guilty of not being good enough. Of not being enough of a friend. Of letting me down. But I didn’t have the strength or the courage to throw him out of my life. I was a coward too. I closed my eyes and I thought, I don’t know who you are, but you’re all I have.

He kept banging on, but I hadn’t really been listening, and I think he would have kept going on and on unless I stopped him, so I did.

“Are you having breakfast or just coffee? By the way, you still owe me for your half of the slab,” I said, picking up a menu.

He looked like he wanted to keep talking, but he didn’t. He got the message. It was time for both of us to just shut up and get on with it.

“Is that party still on tonight?” I said.

“So we’re alright then?”

“I’ll see you at your place at eight o’clock.”

I found myself behind the wheel of a large automobile.

And I still couldn't get that fucking song out of my head. I rifled through the cassettes in the glove box, found an old Glenn Campbell tape and shoved that in the player. Big mistake. Glenn was right in the middle of "Where's the playground Suzie?" His sweet melancholic voice wasn't going to do me any favours, and as soon as he launched into that bit about her not being content with something about him, I let out a mighty Graham Kennedy-style "Faaaaaaaark," pressed eject and threw the tape out of the window. The next tape that came to hand was The Eagles, and of course it was cued up to "Lyn' eyes", so I threw that out the window too.

While stopped at the lights I went through my tape collection and threw out: Leonard Cohen's So Long Marianne; Hunters and Collectors' Human Frailty; the first Sunnyboys album and The Triffids' Born Sandy Devotional. I hated throwing away The Triffids album. I knew that I could never tire of listening to David McComb sing "Wide open road" and that if I'd played it I'd be weeping instantly, which probably would have been a good thing at the time, but I was determined not to go there.

This is not a fucking Nick Hornby novel, I thought, this is my life. I am not going to soak my misery in sudsy pop tunes. I am not going to alphabetise my record collection as a form of therapy, nor am I going to define every emotion I feel in relation to someone else's version of heartbreak. I so wanted to wail along with Mr Melancholy McComb as he sang about the one you love sleeping with someone else. But that was his misery, not mine and to use it as a poultice to suck the pus out of my heart seemed teenage at best.

By that stage I'd known for many, many years that I wasn't Jim Morrison, although when I woke up those mornings I often started the day with a beer, as he was apparently wont to do. I was finally beginning to realise that I wasn't any other of my other favourite songwriters or singers either. I was me, and I was alone, and I had to deal with my own shit by myself.

I must admit, however, that I was tempted to play Paul Simon's "I am a rock" (of course from the seminal Paul Simon's Song Book album, released in 1965) as I felt

very strongly at that precise moment that I had no need of friendship, especially with a slack turd like Dan, and that yes, friendship did cause pain, but I wasn't sure that I disdained love and laughter. I could have done with a healthy dose of both at the time. And although I did feel like a rock (albeit a crumbly one) and an island (Madagascar perhaps, or Phuket. Actually more like Kangaroo), I stayed strong and threw that tape out the window too. I swore to myself that I would divorce myself from pop culture panaceas. This was not some predictable rite-de-passage-chick-or-otherwise-flick I was going through. It didn't need a heavy-handed soundtrack to cue the audience to the poignant bits. I was both audience and the star and I thought I'd have a pretty good idea where the highs and lows were.

Still, I wanted something to listen to, just to break the silence. At the second set of lights I found a very old copy of Kiss' Rock 'n' Roll Over, that I hadn't played for years but which I could never muster the heart to throw out because it had meant so much to me as a teenager. I pushed that into the cassette player and as soon as the opening chords of "Take me" blasted out of the speakers I knew I had made the right decision. It was all fast cars, loud music and back seat fumbling. No trace of love, melancholy, pathos, nothing deeper or more poignant than a "Wooh yeah!" or a "Baby, baby."

I still knew every word and I sang my guts out. It was completely meaningless, totally shallow and absolutely without any relevance to anything going on in my life. Perfect. The whole record was like that. Even the syrupy mush of "Hard luck woman", which I full-forwarded through, failed to spoil the effect. I felt the adrenaline start to pump as I yelled myself hoarse. This was rock and roll doing what it does best: making a man feel invincible, sixteen, and ready to give the whole world the finger. I got home and hunted out my other Kiss albums and spent the rest of the afternoon lying on my back with the headphones on full knacker adrift in a sea of hollow cock rock.

Letting the water hold me down.

THREE: Roadhouse Blues

The first thing I did when I got home from that party was to call Georgie, but her mum answered the phone and so, considering that it was 3am, I hung up and decided to wait until morning to drown her in telecommunicated bile.

Instead, I turned on the computer and looked up my old blog:

www.notetoelf.blogspot.com. I'd meant to register 'notetoself' (oh really?) but of course I was drunk when I set it up. The first time I went back to check it I thought someone had hacked the site. There was this graphic of a corkboard full of someone else's cheesy affirmations and self-help notes. I hurriedly checked my registration receipt. It was then I noticed my mistake: notetoelf. Shit.

It was still there of course. Still empty except for the usual "Hello World" post. Still no hits. Who ever Googles "note to elf"?

I opened a new tab and typed "IVF support group blog". I deleted it straightaway. I didn't know the name of the blog Dan posted to and I didn't really want to read anything depressing. So I typed "broken heart blog" instead – so much more uplifting – and hit enter. Google delivered 38,300,000 results delivered in 0.23 seconds. Well done Google! There were blogs by every shape and size of broken-hearted loser you could possibly imagine. And Dan was right. All of a sudden I didn't feel so alone. Not that I felt any better. Realising that you're not the only dickhead in the world is no cause for celebration.

Still, I ploughed on. I was tempted to click on the "Seven ways to get over a broken heart fast" but then, further down the page, I discovered you could actually do it in six, or even five? Who needs the scenic route? Relationshiproadblocks.com went even further suggesting that I only needed to know, "a couple of little things that seem to work for most people," but they all lost out to the fifth item down on the second page, a Daily Mail story entitled: "Paris Hilton mends broken heart at the Playboy Mansion as Hugh Hefner gets to grips with his new girl." Sadly there was nothing pornographic about this tale, just some lame photos of Paris in a tutu and a few shots of wrinkly Hugh mauling some poor blondie with stars in her eyes, so I moved on:

“How to heal a broken heart”; “How to mend a broken heart”; “Get over a broken heart”; “Move on after a broken heart.” Page after maudlin, yet irresistible page.

As the sun snuck through the curtains I found myself back at notetoelf. Actually I’d been back there for at least an hour by that time fiddling with the keyboard, trying to find a way to express my own unique brand of emotional torment. I wanted to write something magnificent, something beautiful yet savage, something that would make all readers weep instantly. I wanted to write words straight into Georgie’s heart. And out the other side. But I had nothing to say. Finally, I just started typing:

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 6:13am, 20 September 2010

Eight days after you moved out, Georgie – the very next Saturday to be exact – three people tried to pick me up. This is what happened.

Dan dragged me along to this fancy law firm do. I arrived at the party feeling that peculiar mix of confidence and self-loathing I feel when I’m wearing a suit. The place was crawling with classy types, which didn’t help, but with the power chords and the glorious inanity of Rock ‘n’ Roll Over still tripping through my head, I thought bugger being a sad tosser, tonight I’m going to be fabulous. And I was. So much so that three of the classy ones thought I was interesting enough to want to go out with. Three of them.

In the one night.

One stunner of about thirty, an older woman who, had I met her when I was about twenty, could have fulfilled all my older woman fantasies and a young male article clerk who, as he was leaving, pulled me to one side and whispered, “I don’t suppose you’re at all gay, are you?”

Of course I didn’t follow through on any of them, although I slipped the girls’ cards into my wallet. I was still too raw and, having never been great at one-night stands, didn’t fancy a quick one. Besides, having been single only a

week, bachelorhood hadn't set in properly yet, but it does tell you something doesn't it?

"What precisely does it tell you Bill?" you'd ask.

Well, it tells me that unless they were absolute desperadoes, and unless Dan paid them to make a fuss of me, three people, three totally separate strangers on the same night wanted me, which at the time made your not wanting me seem a lot less of a big deal than it did beforehand.

Writing that post didn't make me feel any better but by the time I'd finished I'd convinced myself that the last thing I should do was to call Georgie, because that would only give her a chance to tell me her side of the story and that might force me to be understanding, or to admit that maybe she had some points, or at the very least it would require me to be civil and I just wasn't ready for that.

Stuff that.

Plus she'd be expecting me to call because Dan's wife, Sam would have told her that he'd told me, so I thought let the bitch hang for a while and instead I spent the next several days back inside my head once again playing and replaying both sides of this protracted drama.

In those dialogues I was always right: I always occupied the high moral ground and I was always the victor – victory, not understanding nor compassion being the only prize worth winning. Sometimes, though, I was surprisingly generous in my pomp, allowing her to grovel her way back into my affections. Sometimes kindness and empathy sprang from my triumph, but mostly I was cruel and totally lacking in mercy.

I was wild and I was terrible. I was Heathcliff and like him I raged and sulked and I acted like a dickhead, but also like him I was still irresistible to the one I loved even though, during those little scenes, I treated her like dirt.

And then there were moments of frightening clarity, which usually took place while I was vertical and in view of the bathroom mirror, wherein I realised I wasn't Heathcliff at all: I was Linton. I was the one left behind, the unloved one.

I wasn't a fierce and brutish anti-hero; I was just some sad fuck lying in his bed listening to Kiss records, surrounded by pizza boxes and beer cans.

He was Heathcliff.

And she and Heathcliff were getting on with their lives while I luxuriated in impotent fury. They were probably relieved that I hadn't called. They were already a "they" in my mind – how long they had been a "they" in theirs I still did not know, assuming that they had already begun thinking of themselves as they, or as HeathcliffnGeorgie, or GeorgienHeathcliff, or Georgienheath, or Heathngeorgie or Fuckfacencockhead, or – and then the phone rang and rang and rang and rang and rang.

I took this incessant ringing as a sign, not that I should answer the phone but that maybe I should get out of bed and unplug it, so I did, or at least I intended to but instead I found myself minutes later dressed and hungry and at the wheel of the car heading to the supermarket on the hunt for something other than pizza.

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 11:04 am, 23 September 2010

Health is not something you tend to think about too much when you've had your heart broken, unless of course you're a woman, in which case you'd probably be: Dieting Your Way Through Your Break Up Hell, dropping dress sizes like hot potatoes, buying crop tops galore, getting your hair done and your nails while you're at it. Maybe a facial too. If you're a man however, health is definitely not on your agenda, but it should be.

For man cannot live by bread alone, although if it is spread very thinly, covered with anchovies, tomatoes and cheese, baked to a crispy delight and

comes with a six pack, he'll give it a red hot go. And that's where the problem lies.

You see, the heartbroken male doesn't understand nutrition nor does he recognise the usual food groups: carbohydrate, protein, muesli, cabbage and the other two. To him there are only four food groups: fried, sweet, beer and pizza and as long as he consumes at least one portion from each every day e.g. one bucket of chips, one packet of Tim Tams, one pizza and one six pack, he thinks he'll be OK – besides there's no one there to tell him not to anymore so why shouldn't he enjoy himself for once?

Very soon however, this temporary lapse into Homer Simpson-like living becomes the norm. There's no one at home to tell him that lounging around the house all day in nothing but his underpants eating ice-cream by the litre is a little less than a good idea and when he is mixing with other people, he's only ever with his mates and do you think they're going to tell him that he shouldn't be ordering a pot for each hand? I don't think so.

So while his ex is botoxing and step-classing her way to tighter buttocks, his arse is spreading faster than bird flu in a chook shed.

Not that he'd notice.

The newly single man never notices these things. He is invincible: a predator. Lock up your daughters daddy; there's a real man on the loose. He is a cock for hire – a blade, a lover. And he is also the proud wearer of the biggest pair of beer goggles the world has ever seen, except in this case they're not focused on that frumpy girl in the corner, they're focused on himself and he's getting better looking round after round, day after day, night after night.

"I can eat and drink whatever I like," he tells himself, "because I have a high metabolism. I just burn it up, I do, I just burn it up, plus I jog and I go to the gym". And it's true to an extent. Not the bit about the metabolism: who really knows about that crap, but he does go to the gym and jog, albeit about once

every six months and he's still convinced that the one month's intensive exercise he did back when he first noticed his middle spreading years ago will carry him through. He thinks it lingers.

But they know it doesn't.

They don't tell him though because they're his mates. They think it'll pass, that it's just a phase, and anyway he's a good laugh when he's drunk. They don't have to see him stumble out of the kitchen in his underpants, unwashed and unshaven with a can of creamy rice in one hand, a beer in the other and a bag of salt and vinegar chips clamped between his teeth, heading back to bed and to the TV to watch yet another footy marathon.

They don't –

– but Fuckfacencockhead do as they step through the front door later that day to pick up the washing machine.

“Bill. . . are you alright, you look terrible?”

I was frozen. Paralysed. But not like some rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, frozen like a man caught in his underpants on his way from the kitchen to his bedroom with an arm (and face) full of fast food. Frozen like two people who expected to walk in to an empty house but who walk in on that man instead. Frozen like you'd be if you saw your mum kissing the neighbour, or you caught your dad having a wank. Embarrassed, horrified, shamed, disgusted, mortified blah, blah, blah.

“Bill?”

She took a tentative step forward. I took a step back. She stopped. I stopped. I stepped forward again, she stepped back. Had it come to this already?

“I thought you weren’t home. I called heaps of times.”

It had only been nano seconds since they walked in, but it felt like ages. I really couldn’t speak. Perhaps I should fake a faint, I thought, or pretend I’ve had a stroke. Should I simulate a nervous breakdown and if so, how do I do that? What could I possibly say that would explain why I’m standing in the hall in just my underpants clutching too much processed and empty carbohydrates? There must be a rational explanation or perhaps there isn’t, perhaps I’ve gone beyond science, beyond even quantum physics, into the realm of the supernatural. I could throw the open can of creamy rice at them and pretend to be a poltergeist, but even I know that’s just too silly.

They were still staring at me, but I could tell that they didn’t think I was going to answer anymore. They were worried and a little scared. I bet Heathcliff was thinking what have I got myself into; and that she must have been a bit of a loony herself to go out with this nutter. Well ha, ha to you Cock Head.

It wasn’t until I saw the looks of shock and horror already etched onto their faces go completely off the scale that I realised I’d said that last line out loud.

“Bill! –”

“Cock Head!”

“I called you –”

“Fuck Face. Cockheadnfuckface. Oh, so that was you ringing all morning was it?” I said and deftly I sidestepped them and slipped into what used to be our bedroom to get dressed.

She stopped at the door, not even able to look into the room. It still smelled deliciously albeit ever more faintly of her, of us, it was still her room as much as mine really, but she stayed outside. There were five years of sleepy/sex/fight/sulks tattooed onto the wallpaper. Five years of her and me, our skins and our breath snagged on and

pressed into every surface of that little box and yet to her it was already a pariah country; a forbidden place into which she could not look and dare not enter.

So recently she would have followed me into the room without a thought and stood there totally unaware of my nakedness – admittedly I always wished she were just a little more aware, a little more intrigued, a little more inclined to explore it, but that’s another issue. Nudity was no barrier to communication then, but now she, after being absent for less than a fortnight, could not see me nude. Not that I was obsessed with her looking at my knob, it wasn’t that at all, it was the loss of intimacy and familiarity that threw me.

There was so much to learn about this new arrangement and so much new etiquette to absorb. A new role to play and a new life to sculpt and even though I thought. . . I knew; I might; I did. . . want to be broken up from her I was still hurting and even though she had a new boyfriend and even though she had brought him unwanted into my life and even though I was livid and trembling with anger and shock – or was that just a creamy rice-inspired sugar rush? – I’d have given anything just to be able to hold her hand once more.

He’d headed down to the laundry and when I reappeared she was waiting in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of water, looking really worried and on the verge of tears. Good.

“What’s he doing here?” I said.

“He’s helping me with the washing machine. Mum’s is broken and I thought you weren’t here, and, well, it is my machine and – Bill you really look terrible.”

I wanted to throw myself on her mercy. I’ll do anything she wants, I thought, if she’ll just stay. My mind went mental: She looks fantastic, I thought, fit, healthy, and – has she had a haircut? She’s well-dressed too: wearing a skirt I’ve never seen before. Didn’t this break-up affect her in any way? How dare she come back here looking so much better than when she left. How can she have had the wherewithal to actually go

shopping? Or maybe Cock Head bought it for her; either way, she's only been gone two weeks. Damn her.

I set off for the laundry, tossing questions over my shoulder as I went.

“When were you going to tell me about Cock Head? How long have you been seeing him? You do know that artists make even less money than barmen, don't you? How could you be such a cunt?” I knew that one would hurt, she wasn't given to swearing, but I just needed to know that I could still make her feel something, even if it was only pain and maybe even fear.

I was filthy with rage. I wanted to wound her and shock her and love her and hold her, and for a moment I thought I was really going to lose it. I didn't know what I wanted from her anymore, but I knew what I wanted from Cock Head and it was visceral and mean and I headed off to the laundry to get it.

“When were you going to tell me?” I threw over my shoulder.

“Bill this isn't the time –”

“Well, when would be a good time? Shall I have you and Cock Head over for dinner?”

I didn't expect her to answer and before she did I was in the laundry anyway and I told. . . (look, I can't keep calling him Cock Head, but I can't bring myself to use his name so let's just call him Heathcliff, even though that does cast me again as Linton, and I'm not too comfortable with that role, but I'll play it for the moment) . . .

Heathcliff to get out of the way as we wouldn't want him to get his precious artist's fingers dirty moving the washing machine.

He said no, it's alright he can do it. I told him that no, it was my flat and that as long as that washing machine was in my flat I'd be the one moving it and he protested, and then we were into this scene straight out of *The Marathon Man* and I was Laurence Olivier when he's asking Dustin Hoffman over and over again, “Is it safe?” Larry

asks the question at least a dozen times and each time it's subtly different in tone, phrasing and intent, conveying an unstoppable almost machine-like zeal and intensity of terror. In our case Heathcliff kept trying to talk to me and offer help to which I replied each time: "Fuck off."

I'm not quite the actor Olivier was but I think I still managed to convey a similar level of menace and after the sixteenth time he actually got it and shut up. If only one of those lousy directors back at the theatre could have seen that performance.

Georgie stood in the background still looking teary, but by this stage I didn't care, she was unimportant then, this was a man-to-man thing, it was territorial, and with a strength borne out of a desperate need not to let him help at all I lifted the washing machine all by myself and strode through the house with it, almost throwing it into the back of the ute he'd hired for the job.

I was panting and sweating and I'd done a muscle in my back. Georgie tried to thank me, but I brushed her off. Adrenaline was sprinting through my veins. I felt ready for anything, but I did nothing. If anyone ever needed punching, it was this guy, but I knew it wasn't in me to do it. I just stood there as they got in the car and I panted and sweated and glowered and ached as they closed the doors and drove off.

A few bleary days later I was back at the computer again.

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 1.23pm, 30 September 2010

Sitting slumped on the couch looking at a book titled, You Can Heal Your Life. Oh yeah? Then how come I haven't even managed a shave since Thursday week when she moved her washing machine out? Not that shaving and washing machines have much in common, although both are obviously concerned with hygiene, speaking of which I haven't done any washing since then either.

Note to self: must buy a washing machine, or more underwear, and considering that even a basic Whirlpool costs at least five hundred bucks and that underpants are a buck a pair at Bi Lo I could just buy enough jocks to last well into next year and still come out ahead, although the thought of washing several hundred pairs of underpants at the laundromat all at once mid-next year does not appeal, nor does the idea of storing what may well amount to several dozen kilos of mouldering undies over that period. Come to think of it where would I even store the clean ones? I haven't got a wardrobe anymore, (that was the first thing she'd taken. There was no way she was going to store her things in plastic bags) and so I'd more than likely keep them in the plastic bags in which I brought them home, that is unless I could score a few cardboard boxes from the greengrocer.

Unless I buy a wardrobe.

Although not buying a wardrobe would save another couple of hundred bucks which means that I could buy more underwear, perhaps enough to last for up to two years without having to do a wash, mind you that does compound the soiled undies storage problem quite a bit, although if I factor in the saving on laundry detergent, I'm still ahead. One slight problem however would be explaining the enormous stacks of plastic bags/boxes full of either clean or soiled underwear should Georgie come back, or hope against hope, I should actually manage to bring another girl home.

Girls just don't understand these things and no amount of explaining about how much financial sense the situation makes would compensate either for the stench (which is sure to be mighty once I get a good six months into the project, which, for ease of communication, shall henceforth be known as Project Underpants) or for the mind boggling sight of several hundred pairs of underpants in various states of decay. Unless of course I was to spend the money I'd saved on the woman in question (ignoring for the moment the obvious problem that such an act of generosity would render the whole project meaningless) in the form of a gift, a washing machine perhaps – redundant of course in Georgie's case as she already has one, hence the need for Project

Underpants in the first place – and perhaps too grand a gift to bestow upon any other potential girl I might bring home.

Not that she'd be a potential girl in any way other than she'd be a potential girlfriend: in all other ways she'd be a fully-realised girl.

Mmmmmm, "fully realised" doesn't that sound sexy to you or is it just me? Soft focus film of a bouncy, bubbly girl gambolling in a meadow like in those old Cadbury Flake ads: happy, smiling and willing to do just about anything for a bite of your chocolate bar. . . Paris Hilton or Vanessa Hudgens, or any other nude celebrity. . . such as Pamela Anderson. . . not that I'm a Pamela Anderson fan, I'm not, well I wasn't when I was in a relationship anyway. Like every other well-adjusted able-to-commit-male I was appalled by her brazenly inflated and augmented sexuality, but now that I'm single, well to hell with that. I'm on the Net all night like all the other single guys looking for free porn, dodgy nude celeb videos and the like, as thankfully, the computer is mine unlike almost everything else in this apartment, or rather, formerly in this apartment. At least the new emptiness, which is now this apartment, gives me plenty of space to work on Project Underpants, all of which I'm sure to need if I'm going to store all those jocks – let's say between five hundred and six hundred pairs.

You see, that's where men and women are different.

Forget this Mars and Venus stuff. The difference between men and women is that if a man walked into a woman's apartment, on a first date and saw that she had several hundred pairs of underpants he'd think, woohoo let's party, unless of course they were all Bonds Cottontails, in which case he might be a little underwhelmed, but still not perturbed enough to do anything that might cause the woman in question, fully-realised or otherwise, to ask him to leave whereas a woman confronted by my stash of undies, no matter how sexy they might be, would run screaming out of my apartment with me following her, yelling, "Was it something I said?"

And then all the neighbours would come out to see what was going on and as I'm standing there in the corridor they'd take a look in through the open front door and see all those boxes and bags full of undies stacked neatly, labelled in date order, used on the left, unused on the right, and suddenly that nice couple who had Georgie and I over for dinner before the break-up would be looking embarrassed and, if the truth be told, a little scared, and I'd know I'd never be tasting that cheeky little Rutherglen red, he promised to drop round, and as the other neighbours were shielding their kids I'd turn, crushed and condemned, and make my way back in to Project Underpants, and then the next morning there'd be a book in my letter box titled You Can Heal Your Life and I'd think, oh yeah? Then how come I haven't even had a shave since last Thursday? And I'd open it and there'd be a note inside and it'd be from Georgie, saying that she's really worried about me and that maybe I needed help, and I'd know right there and then that that book could tell me nothing, and that if I was ever going to avoid that fateful trip to Bi Lo I'd have to throw it away and work it out for myself.

FOUR: Fixing a Hole

There was a message from Kevin asking where the hell I'd been and when exactly was I going to start managing at the pub. There were actually about thirty-seven messages on the machine – I hadn't checked it for ages – but I answered most of those with a quick call to Mum and Dad letting them know that I hadn't dropped off the face of the Earth and that unfortunately Georgie and I wouldn't be able to come to dinner this weekend, but that I'd see them very soon.

I told mum that Georgie was well, that she had scored a great new job and weren't we lucky both having steady careers and how lucky I was to have found such a good steady job after years of mucking around. I did not tell her that I had quit my job nor did I tell her that Georgie and I had broken up.

Call me a coward.

It's hard to tell your parents anything of import. They're not like friends who, although very interested, are still more interested in themselves than you. Parents want to know everything. They need to know everything. They're the only people in the world more interested in you than they are in themselves. They worry about you all day every day and things like this affect them almost as much as they do you and I couldn't face any more grief at that time.

So call me gutless.

I told Kevin I could start any time and that I could work as many shifts as he wanted, and so he had me managing three nights and four days. Starting tonight.

The next call I returned was from Dan who invited me to a book launch. Normally I would have run a mile, but I said yes. I decided on the spur of that moment that I was going to turn over a new leaf and say yes to whatever new opportunities came my way. That I was going to move on and get started with my new single life. I was going to make a split with the past. I'd be positive and honest and wonderful.

I decided to begin right then and so without hesitation, I called my parents back and I told mum. . . that I'd pop round for dinner on the weekend. . . and that's all.

Like I said, gutless.

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 11:19pm, 3 October 2010

My advice to you is this: Don't tell your parents that you and your girlfriend have broken up. Just don't.

Telling your parents that you've broken up with a long-term partner is impossible because they won't really hear what you're saying. Try and get a sibling to do it for you or better still just never tell them and let your ex gradually slip from their memories.

It's not that they won't understand or they don't care, it's just that they are simply unable to comprehend what you're saying. They don't get it. It's not in their nature to hear adult problems coming from their children. The very thought that you might be stuffing things up for yourself just as royally as they did freaks them out. To them you'll always be a kid, not a thirty-something slacker. It's boring, it's frustrating, but it's much safer and easier for all concerned that it stays that way.

Remember what happened when your backpack was stolen in Athens and you were left with nothing but the clothes you were wearing.

Beep beep beep.

Mum: Hello?

You: Hi Mum.

Mum: Oh, who is it?

You: Me Mum, Bill –

Mum: Oh, but you're in Greece –

You: Mum the money's going to run out, can I –?

Mum: Oh, OK, I'll just get your father.

You: Mum!

Dad: Hello son.

You: Hi Dad, listen can I –

(Mum in background: "Ask him what time it is?")

Dad: Your mother wants to know what time it is.

You: It's 3am, dad can I just –

Dad: 3am love.

(Mum in background: "what day is it over there?")

Dad: What love?

You: I can hear her Dad. It's Tuesday.

Dad: He says Tuesday.

You: Dad, have you still got my credit card details?

Dad: Yes I'll just go and get them.

He puts the phone down.

You: No da —!

Beep beep beep.

The phone cut out and there went your last chance of having them wire money to you and have you ever tried to sell a watch in a Greek pawnshop?

Exactly the same thing will happen when you tell them that you and your ex, the one they thought you'd be with forever, have broken up.

No matter what you say, your mum will at first just not hear it. You'll have to say it over and over again until it finally sinks in and when it does, look out, because things start to get very weird.

One of two very disturbing things will happen: either she'll think it's your fault and that something you did must have pissed off that sweet angel who's been putting up with your irritating habits for years, "And does that mean I'll not see any grandchildren?" or she'll suddenly be so scathing about your ex that you'll be left stunned and bewildered, wondering what she's really been thinking all this time when she's been offering her a slice of sponge cake and a cup of tea of a Sunday afternoon.

You'll finally see the non-mum side of your mum. You'll realise, perhaps for the first time ever that she's actually a person, that she's got feelings, and that she's just as fucked up as you. She'll eventually see you in a new light too. She'll see the potential, idealised her-perfect-son version of you replaced by the actual and much less appealing real you; she'll realise that her little boy is just as messed up as she is. You'll go past the polite conversation and pleasantries that pass for much interfamilial communication and hurtle straight into a full-on mano a (wo)mano slug fest, in which your mum pulls off

the lovely oven gloves you bought her for Christmas when you were ten and goes bare knuckle toe-to-toe with you.

She'll treat you like an adult. She'll want details; she'll ask questions; she might even ask you about your sex life; she'll want to know were you shagging around; was she? She'll get upset and your father will stand up and put his hands in his pockets and look out the window humming a marching tune while you try and comfort your mum, who just keeps dabbing her eyes, holding up her hands and repeating, "I'm fine, I'm fine. It's just a bit of a shock."

Pretty soon though she'll pull herself together and head off to the kitchen to get the dinner on.

When she comes back in, eyes red-rimmed, she'll pretend that she's, "Fine really," but you'll see it in her face – she can't hide it – and every time you look at her you'll wish there was some way you could make her stop worrying and so her pain – which is really your pain – becomes yours again, only doubled, and so you clam up and you can't tell her anything more. You become testy, touchy, and of course this just adds another layer to her unease and every time she so much as touches you, you can feel her anxiety sucking at you like a baby at a tit and now you're the one worried. You feel like the parent and you wish there was some way you could make things better for her, but you're just not right enough in the head to cope with that. You're not selfless enough to cope with someone else's load. You're so self-obsessed, so sorry for yourself that there's just no room for anyone else and even though you know you're being a silent, moody arsehole to the two people in the world who are truly willing to listen to your grief, you can't stop.

And when your mum finally clears away the plates and you're left alone with your dad, who, after a suitable silence asks you if you watched the match yesterday, you're still grumpy, but you're on familiar territory and you wish you'd just told him instead. Because he'll be gutted, he'll be shocked and he'll eat his insides out with worry just as much as your mum, but he'll do it quietly and without any fuss. Like her, he'll lie awake all that night wondering

whether you'll ever find happiness. He'll spend silent moments remembering how you used to be such a happy little boy, or maybe he'll look back and remember that he always worried about your state of mind, about whether you were the kind of person who'd sail through life without any troubles, or whether you were always the type to trip himself up or to get tripped up.

But he won't let you see that. The most he'll say is, "Ah well, these things happen." Dads know better than to say anymore than that.

Working at the pub turned out to be just what I needed. I took every shift Kevin could throw at me. I managed the place. I worked the tiny, muggy cellar, throwing barrels around. I helped out in the kitchen, washing knives and forks and bowls and plates, plates, plates for hour after hour when the dish pig needed an evening off. I even filled in for the cleaner, vacuuming the carpets, collecting the 'cleaners' tips' – the loose change off the floor, and mopping up the occasional stray vomit hidden behind a couch or under a table.

The nights were long and I was always exhausted, but fuelled by coffee and vodka, I revelled in the madness: eight-hour shifts finishing around six in the morning; stuck behind the bar; dancing around the other staff on the beer-slick floor; punters four deep shouting their orders without a break, all night.

The music was always loud and rugged. That and alternating shots of dirty black coffee and icy vodka kept us running like sleigh dogs, our black T-shirts heavy with stinky, fetid sweat. The air was thick with the guff from hundreds of booze-sodden mouths – at the end of the night my hair would be stiff with it, as completely knackered, I rode my push bike home hoping the cool morning breeze would blow some of the reek off me and out of my clothes. I'd hit the sack and sleep all day, too tired to eat and too tired, most importantly, to think.

Doped with vodka I slept. Dreamless. And pumped with caffeine I worked like an automaton. I used to hate bar work having done it in the past only as a last resort

when I needed cash, but I grew to love it. The louder the music, the wilder the night the more extreme the crowd, the easier it was.

Standing elbow-deep in dirty dishes for hours; legs spread so as not to do my back in; sweat streaming constantly off my nose into the steaming water; yelling at passing bar staff for another drink; shouting, “Well, fucking bring me some to wash then!” when the wait-staff howled for more plates kept me rational, got me out of bed and into a new routine. Because a routine is what you need when you’re broken-hearted. The old one, the one you’ve perhaps grown to resent or even positively hate is gone, but despite that, you miss it like hell. You’re left with nothing other than yourself and gaping great shadows where your old life used to be. How do you fill each cavernous day? How do you get from breakfast to bed again without tripping over your own melodrama and misery, without clambering back under the covers and just rotting?

Working so hard was like being in a self-induced coma, the kind they put junkies in so that they’re asleep during the worst of their withdrawal pains. I wasn’t feeling; I wasn’t thinking; I wasn’t processing anything. I was just ploughing through however many days it took, until I could sit by myself on the couch at home and feel comfortable again.

I was glad that my clothes stank of sweat and booze, that my skin and breath were steeped in coffee and sweat. I was glad that my nose was good only for breathing, that all olfactory sense was buried under a layer of pub-flavoured snot, because I could lie in my bed and not smell her; I could walk in the door of the flat and not smell her. I was going nowhere, but I was paying the rent and I was out of bed and that was enough.

Dan was late. After begging me to come along to this book launch – some anti-whaling tome from an ex-Greenpeacer – he was standing me up. Great. I strolled around the shop, aimlessly browsing. Actually there was nothing aimless about my wandering at all. I was purposeful in my examination of the fiction shelves, driving myself to distracted fretting over the fact that here were all these published writers

who'd presumably quit their jobs one day just like I'd done, in order to DO something, again just like me, and horror upon horror had actually achieved what they set out to do. To make matters worse many of them were younger than I was, or they were when their books were published. All that achievement at such a young age: I couldn't bear it. Would Dan be up there with them one day? That would kill me. I rounded a corner and ran straight into the biography section where books on and by every actor worth their salt yelled a collective, "Failure!" in my direction. I was out for the count: sucker punched. Intimidated by each and every book, envious and hating of every published writer, every lauded performer. Why them and not me? I was working my way into a really self-abusive inner diatribe –

"Hi."

I turned and there beside me was. . . ? The girl from the fancy law do. The gorgeous one. She looked very business-like in a sharp skirt suit, her long brown hair scraped back into a ponytail. She smiled and I guess I mustn't have smiled in return, as she looked quizzical.

"Amberley. We met at a party; you're a friend of Dan's?" She held out her hand for me to shake. I was too stunned to respond. She'd given me her number. I still had her card in my wallet. Had I said I would call? I couldn't remember. Was she pissed off? I realised that I hadn't actually shaken her hand yet, and so had she as she dropped it to her side, but not before I made a late lunge, grabbing her fingers and nearly pulling her over – more of a Judo grip than a handshake – causing her to drop one of the books she was carrying.

"Sorry. I'm sorry," I blushed, as I picked up the book for her.

"That's quite a grip you've got."

She was easy and sweet. She didn't blush, she just smiled wider. Wow. I should ask her out now, I thought, but. . . what? But what? How do I start, for a start?

“Are you meeting Dan here too?” was the best thing I could come up with. She said yes, and then I said good, and then I said so am I, and she said I guessed as much, and I realised that I had no idea how to talk to girls anymore. After five years in a monogamous relationship I couldn’t chat, let alone talk. My small talk was microscopic, and I had absolutely nothing in the way of wits about me at all.

Actually I was shit scared that she might put me on the spot and ask me why I hadn’t called her, or even scarier ask me if I wanted to go out sometime. We’d got on really well at that party thanks to a multitude of spritzy champagne cocktails, her natural charm and a healthy dose of cock-rock-induced bravado on my part, but here I was totally unarmed and totally unready for anything so confronting as a conversation with an attractive woman who might actually be interested in me, so I feigned interest in the contemporary critical theory section, let the non-conversation dry and let her slowly drift towards true crime.

Was I mad? What was the worst that could happen? That I might actually enjoy myself with another woman? Yes, that was exactly the problem. That and the fact that I was casting Amberley as an ‘other woman’ when in fact there were no women at all in my life for her to be other to. Georgie was gone. So why did I still feel uneasy about approaching somebody new? A simple chat and maybe a date couldn’t hurt anyone, even if I was destined to reunite with Georgie one day – who was actually shagging someone else for Christ’s sake. Although if she saw us together she might – aaargh stop it! I needed to put myself back in the vodka and coffee zone and stop endlessly mulling over ‘what ifs’ and just be; hopefully somewhere near this other woman.

A bell tinkled and we all shuffled forward and by careful manoeuvring, elbowing and some pretty fast trundling, I managed to catch Amberley again ensuring that we took seats next to each other.

The proximity of the little wooden chairs arrayed before the rostrum meant that our thighs were almost touching, which totally focused my mind. I could smell the delicate scent she was wearing and I could almost convince myself that she was leaning slightly in my direction rather than sitting upright which meant that if I turned

to look at her there was a great danger that what little cleavage she was showing under that very well-fitted suit, would be visible. Knowing that, I also knew that if I did turn to look at her I would be completely unable to stop my eyes flicking down to the general area of her bosomage – even if only for the briefest of seconds – which she'd be bound to notice and which would not be a good idea.

I didn't know what I wanted from Amberley, but I knew that I didn't want her to think I was just another breast-obsessed man, even though I was – am. Not with size or anything, that's not important. It's women who worry about breast shape and size, not men. You read headlines on the cover of Cosmopolitan and those other glamour magazines that yell “cleavage is back” or “the flat-chested look is in this year”, but such concerns mean little to men. This is one instance in which size is definitely not – in the main – important. Granted there are a few who specialise in certain circumferences, volumes and geography, but the vast majority of us are just grateful that breasts are there, and if we celebrate this joyful acknowledgment with the odd glance in their direction is that such a crime?

Apparently it is, otherwise I wouldn't be so worried about it. Snap out of it. Say something.

“What do you think of whales?” I whispered.

“I've never been there.”

“No I mean –”

“I've been to Scotland, England and Ireland, but not Wales. Have you?”

“Yes, I've been to all of those and Wales, but –”

“Well, that's 4–3 to you then.”

I was beginning to like this conversation, “What about w.h.a.l.e.s?” I said.

“Oh yes, I’ve seen plenty of them: 4–4.”

“So have I: 5–4, and I own a Bob Marley and the Wailers record, so that’s 6–4. I win.”

“Not so fast. I read Moby Dick in High school, and actually liked it, I’ve swum with dolphins, and I have actually eaten whale in Japan, so what’s the score now?”

“That’s disgusting, you should lose a point for that.”

“No way, I win,” she smiled, “although you did look a bit like a whale with that condom on your head in that ad – that was you wasn’t it? So I guess that’s a draw, if whale impersonations count. Not that I mean you looked like a whale in that you were, you know, huge or fat like a whale, just that you looked very. . . sleek and blubbery, I mean rubbery, like. . . a. . . whale. . .”

She grimaced. She knew she was in a hole, but I wasn’t going to help her out of it.

“A whale?”

“A nice one!” she interjected. “A small one.”

“People usually say I looked like a breast, or a jelly, or a knob, of course, but I’ve never had whale before.”

“Sorry,” she said with her hand over her eyes, hiding either the beginnings of a smile or a blush, either would do. She looked up. “Do you want to get out of here before it starts? I’m starving and this’ll probably go on forever.”

“What about Dan.”

“I don’t think Dan is coming, do you? I think we’ve been set up.”

The little Italian place next door was rowdy enough to cover any lapses in conversation and if that wasn't enough Amberley was bright enough to fill the rest.

"I've never been set up on a blind date before," she said as she stuffed her face, albeit in a very dainty manner, with bread and butter as we waited for our meals, "let alone one like this where neither of us was actually aware that it was a date."

"Can an unintentional date actually be a date?" I pondered. "This is more of a kidnap situation than a blind date, don't you think?"

"So who's the captor, and who's the captive then?" she leant across and whispered. My God, she was forward.

She stared directly into my eyes, "And what's the ransom?" She held the stare and then she started laughing. I felt like a complete virgin, said nothing and just smiled awkwardly.

We both reached for the last bit of bread. And this is where it should read, "their hands brushed and their eyes met and they knew then that they'd always love each other," but she got there first and jammed it in to her gob like she'd done with the rest of the basketful – greedy pig – and nothing momentous or earth shaking happened at all. Unless you consider the fact that for the first time in weeks I was actually relaxed and behaving like a normal person, instead of a moody broken-hearted arsehole, to be of interest. Let alone the fact that I was out of the flat – with no good reason – was flirting with a woman I hardly knew, and as far as I could tell, was facing the prospect of further flirting, kissing, breastage, and possibly even sex on the reasonably near horizon.

"I'm full now," she sighed, as she flopped back in her chair. For a woman who dressed so flash and who looked like she should be so contained and considered, she was very unaffected. She had an ease and a lack of stuffiness about her body, the way she moved it and by all accounts the way she fed it too. I got the feeling that I wasn't dining with a princess. Not that she was a scrubber or that she didn't care about how she came across, she just seemed very comfortable with who she was and bugger the

rest of us. She knew she was a looker, but it wasn't all she was and she didn't need to conform to some Cosmo-inspired, winged-pad regimen to feel at home in the world. After a couple of glasses of wine I finally began to relax too, but not so far that I wasn't constantly aware of how new and potentially life-changing this moment was. The chances were that it probably wouldn't be life-changing, especially as I was still massively hung up on Georgie, a subject I should broach at some stage soon with Amberley, if for no other reason than to be fair.

But it might have been.

What if this was the start of a long relationship? What if Amberley and I ended up getting married? Would we remember this date? I tried to fix everything in my mind: the décor, the food, her gob-stuffing and I wondered if she was doing the same. It was definitely too early in proceedings for me to ask her any questions like that – she'd think I was a nut job – but then what was she thinking in those quieter moments as we ate?

Was she too stealing glances at our reflection in the tatty mirror on the wall and wondering how we looked as a couple; whether the other couples seated at nearby tables accepted us as one of them, or whether they could tell we actually didn't know each other? The fact that we were talking and laughing rather than simply sharing a table, like Georgie and I used to, probably told them that we hadn't been together all that long, but still, was it there? Was there a spark; was there an air of coupledness? Eventually we had to leave and I insisted on paying expecting resistance, her being a well-paid lawyer, but she was quite prepared to let me foot the bill, telling me that this was the ransom I had to pay for my freedom. Ha, ha. I thought this was fine, although in the long term, assuming there was a long term, if she was willing to let me pay for everything I'd need yet another job.

"It's freezing. How can this be Spring?" she said, wrapping her arms around herself as we shuffled around outside the restaurant. Like a true gentleman I offered her my coat, which she took gladly, even though this left me in a short-sleeved shirt.

“Well that was unexpected,” I said, expansively, open-endedly, hoping that she might say something equally as inviting, if not more so, in return.

“Well, you shouldn’t have offered it then.”

“What?”

“The coat. 7–5. I win. Hooray!”

“No, I meant the night.”

“I know what you meant; sorry I was just having a little joke. I had a good time too, and thank you for dinner and for offering to freeze for me. It’s very gallant of you.”

I walked her to her car, which thankfully, as it then began to rain, was just around the corner. She opened the passenger door for me and ushered me inside. I told her that I didn’t need a lift and that I had my own car, but she insisted, “It’s too cold to talk out here.”

Sitting so close to her in the silence of her car, confined by the night and the rain fizzing on the roof and the windows, made me nervous. I wasn’t ready to be a lothario, I was still rather more Linton than Heathcliff and I didn’t want to spoil what had been a ripper evening with a half-hearted fumble in the back seat, or even worse a refusal on my part to go any further. I couldn’t believe what I was thinking because I definitely did want to have sex with her. I just didn’t want to do it then and it’s very hard for a man to refuse sex with a woman. We’re supposed to want it all the time and we do; we certainly think about it all the time anyway. Maybe if I was twenty I wouldn’t have been so troubled, but I was thirty-two and I knew there could be more to sex than just sex and I wanted more, or at least I didn’t want less.

Amberley didn’t know that about me though and she might take my knocking her back in the completely the wrong way. She might think I was gay or she might think I didn’t find her attractive, but the idea that I might just not be ready for it would

probably be the last thing on her mind unless she'd been out with other mental cases in the past.

“Amberley, I had a great time tonight.”

“Don't say you'll call me, though, because you said that the last time and you didn't.”

“I don't think I said that did I?”

“Well you'd had a few, but yes, you did.”

“Look, all right then, I won't say that.”

I turned in my seat to face her and I saw that she was just as nervy as I was. Not that she looked vulnerable, or that I saw deep inside her to the inner woman, the trembling little flower hidden behind the steely grey lawyer suit because I didn't. It just dawned on me that maybe she wasn't as comfortable in her own skin as I'd assumed she was; maybe I wasn't the only person in the world with hang ups; maybe she didn't expect me to be a stud tonight.

I broke the mood by fumbling in my pocket for my wallet, from which I produced a card, which I gave to her. What a super knock out guy. How romantic.

“Here's my card. If I don't call –”

“You have a card?” she laughed, “I thought you worked in a pub. Do all barmen have cards these days?”

“No, look. My agent thought it would be a good idea.”

“Your agent? Oh yes, the condom thingy. You're an AK-tor. Well thank you for your time, Mr Mason. We'll be in touch.”

“No. Look, don’t be like that. It’s just that you have my number now, so if I shouldn’t call – but I will definitely call – you can call me.”

She looked surprised.

“I won’t be calling you. You’re the man. I want you to call me. But I’ll take your card, Mr Mason.”

God she was mischievous. She studied the card. I studied her. The tension was gone; she was trying desperately not to laugh at my silly card. At me.

“Wow, you’ve got your email address, your mobile, your landline, Twitter handle, Facebook address. No wonder you couldn’t find the time to call me. You’re Social Media Man. You should have a cape.”

“It’s my agent’s idea, I don’t even use them.”

She took the card and began to tear it, ripping off the bit with my name and mobile number on it and handing the other part back to me.

“We won’t be needing your other details Mr Mason. We struggle with email. And Facebook? Twitter? Really? Your phone number will be enough.”

We both laughed at this and then the laughter stopped and we sat there in silence, me with a torn business card in my hand and she looking straight ahead, out the windscreen. We were back to being two people who didn’t know each other. I knew what to do, but I hadn’t done it in such a long time. With mental fingers crossed, I held my breath, counted silently to three and then I leaned across and as she turned to me I kissed her softly on the lips.

After a few moments we pulled back from each other just far enough that we could see up close the face that we’d been sitting opposite all night. It didn’t occur to me to think (too much), to (over) analyse the situation or to do anything other than enjoy being so close to someone so nice.

“You should go now,” she said, as we stared. I don’t know whether she meant it or whether it was one of those when a woman says no she means no-ish situations, but I took her at her word and I pulled back and straightened myself up.

“I will call,” I said as I stepped out the car door.

I saw her smile, and I think she said, “Yeah right” in reply but I was too busy scrambling back into my jacket and too instantly soaked to really think about anything other than why didn’t she offer to drive me back to my car.

I know you’re supposed to wait at least a couple of days before calling a girl for the first time, so you don’t come across as too keen or desperate, but I didn’t. I called Amberley the next day, ostensibly just to prove to her that I would actually call, but in reality because I was head over heels in. . . something. Not love; it was definitely too soon for that. Perhaps it was lust, or maybe I really was sixteen again and that’s why the Kiss records were so poignant once more. Who knows? Who gives a fuck? It felt great. I felt great. I knew that You Know Who was still lurking in the background and that I was still cruelly tangled in the Bill and Georgie net, but I didn’t care.

Ring, ring, ring.

“Amberley Belmont speaking.”

“Hi it’s me. It’s Bill. Look, I know you’re at work and you’re probably busy, but I just wanted to call. So now I’ve called and well, there you go. . .” Oh, you class act. Mr Suave. Mr Sweep A Girl Off Her Feet.

“It’s him, damn!” she said.

I could hear laughing and a couple of whoops in the background and then someone shouted, “Show me the money!”

“You just cost me twenty bucks. I told everyone here that you wouldn’t call, and you did. So thanks for nothing,” she laughed.

“Well you could pretend I was a wrong number,” I said.

“That would be a bit difficult – you’re on speaker phone now.”

“Should I just go then?” This was not what I had expected.

“No.” The background noise died.

“Am I still on speaker?”

“No, it’s just me and you now.”

“That’s a relief. Look, I had a really good time last night and I was hoping you might want to do it again.”

“Do what again?”

“You know, go out together.”

“When?”

“Tonight, if that’s not too full-on. Dinner and a movie or something?”

“What do you think?” she said.

Strange question to ask, I thought, as I was obviously in favour of the idea, but then I realised, as a chorus of voices yelled “Yes!” and others “No!” that she wasn’t talking to me and that I was still on speaker.

“The ayes have it,” she said. “You’re on.”

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 4:32pm, 15 October 2010

You know what it's like when you're fifteen and you're on a date with a girl for the first time and you're in the movies and you can't really believe that this girl is out with you because she actually likes you? You're convinced that there's no way she can be into you as much as you're in to her and that she's only agreed to go out with you for some reason you'll never understand.

It took all the guts you'll ever have to ask her out and you can't believe she said yes. It then took all the sneaky smarts you've got to get some money out of your parents without telling them you need it for a date because you couldn't stand them asking you about her. Bringing your parents into the world of a first date is a bad thing. They'd want to know what she's like and where are you going, and heaven forbid, they might realise they've never had "that talk" with you and so they might think this is the perfect time to do so.

*And then there's the choice of movie: should it be something she'll like; something you like; something you'll both like; or should you go and see *Scream* and hope that you score scare-factor cuddles?*

*Of course, you let her decide and so off you go to see *Clueless*, or no wait, it was *Romeo and Juliet*, not that you really care; you have other things on your mind. You're going over those, "other things" in your head, weighing up the evidence and seeing how it falls. This is your case:*

- 1. Let's assume, as crazy as it may seem, that she agreed to come out on a date with you because she actually likes you.*
- 2. Therefore, she probably wouldn't go berserk if you put your arm around her.*
- 3. It is also within the bounds of reason to assume from the above, that if she is willing to let you go that far, she might also be amenable to you kissing her and to perhaps engaging in a limited uni- or multilateral exploration of each other's territory.*

This all makes perfect sense to you on an intellectual level, but how do you put it into practice?

It seems completely beyond the realms of all possibility that you might just simply put your arm around her as she sits next to you. You just can't do it. It cannot happen. You spend the first thirty minutes of the film searching in vain for a strategy that might enable you to do so, while she's obviously thinking that you're some kind of retard for not doing so, but nothing comes to mind. You could pretend you're tired and stretch your arms above your head, letting one casually fall across her shoulders, but you know you haven't even got the guts to do that. You hate the fact that boys have to do all the hard work, while she just sits there sucking on Fantaes apparently engrossed in the goings on between Leonardo Di Caprio and Claire Danes.

You start to sweat. You sense defeat. Then she turns just a little in her seat (she's probably just getting comfortable) and you shift a little too and then she looks at you and you at her and you're doing it. You're pashing at a movie with a girl and you don't know how it happened, but your arm is around her too, both your arms, in fact, are around her. What's more you can feel her breasts pressed against your chest and you'd like to go there too, but you think you'd better quit while you're ahead and leave that to a second date, or at least to when you're snogging on the train home.

“That was a pretty cruel trick, the speaker phone thing,” Amberley said, as she took my arm, outside the cinema, “but I just couldn't resist. Sorry.” She looked up into my eyes and Christ I would have forgiven her for anything; she could have handed me my balls on a plate and I would have said thank you. I just shook my head and for once I was glad I was speechless as this was the perfect opportunity to just kiss her and any talking on my part would serve only as distraction. So I did. I kissed her, glad that I'd gotten the awkwardness of that first kiss on the second date out of the way.

We ate dinner in the same little Italian place we'd been in the night before, but this time I ordered extra bread and I made sure I ate my share. We ate dinner there the next night too and it was halfway through this meal that Amberley popped the question:

"Tell me about Georgie."

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, at that party you told me that you and she broke up recently –"

"About a month ago."

"And that you'd been together for. . . ?"

"Five years."

"Wow. Dan said it had been a while, but five years. . . and so I want to know about her, and you, and her and you, and what she means for you and me. This is after all our third date in three days and that's pretty full-on. I'm enjoying myself, don't get me wrong, but my head's swimming."

I told her that Georgie had left me for someone else. I went through the I-was-the-last-to-know business. I told her that Georgie and I had pretty much exhausted our relationship anyway and that there really was nowhere else for us to go as a couple, but down and out for the count.

She wanted to know what Georgie looked like, so I told her: tall and willowy with long, straight, dirty blonde hair. Big blue eyes, blah, blah, blah.

I told her about Georgie's new job; how we met: at a dinner party; how long we'd lived together: three years.

"Do you still love her?"

Did I still love her?

What could I say to that? The last time I'd seen Georgie during the great washing machine disaster had almost destroyed me, but did I still love her? I thought of her all the time, but then after five years of living in someone's pocket that's bound to be the case, isn't it? I didn't think about making love to her, but that's not so surprising either after five years.

Did I still love her?

I supposed yes, but was I still in love with her? I didn't think so.

"I don't know," I said. What else could I say? It had only been a month; I was still in the middle of it.

"Hmmm," she said, "because this is pretty full-on for someone who's just come out of a long-term relationship, are you sure you're ready for this so soon?"

How do you answer that question? Seriously how? Why do people even ask questions like that? If I'd answered yes, it would have been a lie because in the eyes of any rational person it definitely would have been too soon. If I'd said no then would that have been it between us? All I could have said was, "I don't know." So I did.

"I'm sorry I can't say more, other than I really like you and the past three days have absolutely been the best I've spent in a long time. I want to keep on seeing you and I want to get to know you better and I think we could be great, but --"

"But what?"

"But, I don't know. Shit."

Even though I'd only known Amberley for a few days I knew her well enough to be shocked when she didn't say anything in reply. She looked down at her plate and I thought she was crying.

“Amberley?”

She looked up and to my relief she wasn't crying (why would she be, for Christ's sake it had only been three days – God I flatter myself sometimes).

“I just don't want to waste my time Bill. I don't want to get to know you and then you run back to Georgie. I'm thirty-two, and – oh crap, that sounds so desperate, and I'm not. There are just a million warning bells going off in my head about being with guys in your position. I really like you already, and that scares me. I'm not normally like that and I think I could be heading for a really big fall.”

Things fell silent then and so I asked for the bill.

I walked her to her car and we kissed briefly, but then she broke away. She looked into my eyes and said, “Think about this Bill, think about me and you and Georgie. I don't want to be someone's rebound girl. It's not fair. Think about that before you call me again. It's cold, I'd better go.”

She drove away and I was left standing once again, watching another girl drive away from me. This time there was no panting, no sore back, no glowering on my part, but I did feel something, an ache, but whether it was from loss or guilt I wasn't able to tell.

FIVE: I Think I'm In Trouble

I needed to find a blog called: bloggingisacompletewasteoftimestopnow.com. I was hooked. More and more often, on nights when I wasn't working or trawling for porn, I'd be banging away at the keyboard. I knew I was just as tragic as every other broken-hearted blogger, but I couldn't stop. We were all out there alone standing on our virtual rooftops howling at digital moons. Separate in our self-contained unrealities. We rarely ever commented on each other's blogs. I hardly even looked at anyone else's blogs anymore and no one ever looked at mine, I was pretty sure of that. But it didn't matter. Online I only had to answer to myself and that was fine by me.

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 7:32pm, 14 December 2010

If you find yourself with one of your ex's friends you must ensure that you appear totally calm and detached.

Under no circumstances should you be the first to mention your ex's name, nor should you show any emotional weakness i.e. you can't be seen to care and most important of all you can't cry or act miserable because that news will get back to your ex like wild fire and there's nothing women hate more than a crying man.

They're all told as they grow up that they should want sensitive men, men who are in touch with their feelings and are able to cry, but they soon realise that they don't. A crying man is a pain in the arse. A crying man is messy. A crying man is not sexy, not reliable, not solid enough. Women do the crying and men either ignore them or comfort them; they do not join in. Once they realise just how little they can expect to get from men, except in terms of disappointment, women quickly decide just how little, in return, they are going to put up with, and a man who behaves like a woman has got no chance.

Women don't want New Age men or metro-fucking-sexuals with more pots of moisturiser than they have and an endless ability to empathise with them and

their girlfriends. They want an old-fashioned man who can hammer a nail in straight, bring home a wage, comfort them when they cry and who won't burden them with feelings of his own.

Having said all that, however, it is permissible to let just enough of a hint of pain to show from behind your big blokey screen for your ex's friend to feel the need to reach out and pat your hand. Of course, you'll tell her that you're OK and you'll brush her hand away as you flash your big blokey smile, but if she's persistent and all this hand touching leads to something more, well. . . you're a single man now, aren't you?

I hadn't seen Chrissie for ages and suddenly there she was standing on the other side of the bar.

“Bilge!”

Bilge was her nickname for Georgie and me: for BillnGeorgie. She was always nicknaming and renaming everything and everyone. Georgie claimed it was an insecurity thing, but I was always of the mind that she was just annoying.

She and Georgie had been friends for years without ever being really close. I used to wonder what kept them interested in each other as Chrissie was such a control freak and Georgie hated that. Strange as this may seem, though, I always liked seeing her. Even though she shat me up the wall, I was pretty sure, right from the start, that she fancied me and I certainly fancied her and if that led to me encouraging Georgie to see more of her then I guess it's my fault that they're close, or closer than they were.

I'm sure I used to shit Chrissie too; in fact I know I did because I set out to do just that, but I couldn't help it. She was begging for it. She called us Bilge. I called her Pissie. She and I were childish. We were like two teenagers who don't yet know how to say I like/love/lust you and so we tore strips off each other instead. We bantered and we flirted and we both competed for Georgie's attention and approval in a way

that could only be called, in hindsight, pathetic. Nothing was ever openly admitted by either of us for the obvious reason i.e. Georgie, and besides if the unresolved sexual tension between us had been resolved through a mutual rubbing together of parts, we'd be left with nothing other than our assumed distaste for each other and that would be dead boring.

“Sorry, I probably shouldn't call you that anymore,” she said, “now that. . .” and although she raised her eyebrows and shrugged in an ostensibly sympathetic/understanding manner, I definitely sensed a knife being gently inserted between my ribs and, with the aid of her impossibly long, slender and well-manicured fingers, twisted. Or maybe that's just me.

Chrissie looks a lot like Georgie, so much so that people always think they must be sisters. They're both very graceful and they dress well, in an unfussy, I-just-threw-this-on kinda way. Everything they wear looks good on them and I both envy and admire them for that. I have an uncanny ability to make even the most expensive and well-tailored clothes look messy and cheap, so I stick to jeans and work shirts; plain simple and blokey, and if they look messy it's OK because they are, after all, work clothes.

She and Georgie have the same pale skin, blonde hair and similar slightly-too-large noses, which strangely seem to add to their comeliness rather than detract from it. Initially I spent a lot of time trying to work out how a big nose could add to a woman's appeal: do they serve as counterpoints, highlighting the rest of their faces, or do I just have to face the fact that for some reason unknown even to myself, I'm attracted to women with big snouts? Who cares? The main thing was that Chrissie and I found each other very attractive, but nothing ever happened except for that one dinner party where nothing happened.

“Georgie is very worried about you. She thinks you're depressing, I mean depressed. Sorry.” Oh, very funny. So droll. Stop it, my sides are splitting. “She says she's been worried about you for ages and that that's why she. . . why you quit your job.”

“I’m fine,” I lied, “and I think you were right first time: I may well be depressing, but I’m not depressed.”

I was a little bit chuffed that Georgie was worried about my state of mind, I mean of course she’d still be thinking about me, but to send one of her friends here to see how I was, that’s. . . something. Isn’t it?

“I’m actually seeing someone new myself,” I said with carefully staged and supreme indifference.

I didn’t tell her what that really meant was that about two months ago I’d been out on three dates with a girl who had given me the flick because she didn’t want to get involved with a broken heart – Georgie didn’t need to know that. I told her that I had a prospective new female flat mate (lie) and that I really felt that I was moving on (lie again). I did not tell her that although I wasn’t spending all my time buried under the bedclothes anymore, I was still living mainly on a mix of vodka, coffee and Georgie-related angst.

The conversation flew. After we’d exhausted the banter we actually began to talk like real people do. She told me a little about Georgie and Heathcliff the Artist. Good stuff like the fact that she couldn’t understand what Georgie saw in him and that she thought he was a tosser, but before she really got going on that topic we were interrupted by every bartender’s worst nightmare: the book group. No, they didn’t have a booking as they’d decided on the spur of the moment to come here because we’re always quiet on a Monday and did I mind if they rearranged the tables, could I turn the music down, and could they order meals? Yes. Yes. No. I told them that the kitchen was closed on Mondays, but I could cobble together a cheese platter, if they really wanted to break my balls, which they did.

Chrissie said she’d watch the bar for me while I was in the kitchen and that she’d yell if anything happened. I’d no sooner got the fridge open than I heard her calling my name. I ran back to the bar and there they all were, the whole book group, all fifteen of them, arrayed along the bar, purses in hand, all asking each other what they’ll drink and all saying vodka, lime and soda. It was going to be so much fun.

If they were men, one of them would be at the bar clutching the first large enough note to come to hand asking for fifteen pots, or more likely a couple of jugs, but fifteen women will all order and pay for fifteen vodka lime and sodas separately, one at a time and with coins if possible. And then there's this mad desire they have to pay with the exact change too. Why don't women get into shouts? Even if they're only going to have one drink, surely they're going to see each other again at the next book group; surely they can repay the debt then. It might sound petty but you notice these things when you're behind a bar night after night and they come to prey on your mind. Is it this way because men are wired just to get on with it? Is it because men need to show other men that they're doing well by throwing their money around at the bar? Is it because women are tight arses? Is it because they have sensibly excluded themselves from the male booze culture, or is it because they really don't trust each other? Don't ask me, I haven't a fucking clue. Could it be my problem? Have I spent too many nights behind bars, so to speak? I think about these things all the time, but they don't bring me any closer to understanding women, what they think and why they do what they do. Men, I think I get. Men are easy, but the older I become the less I understand women, or maybe I'm just having all the unfounded assumptions upon which I built my so-called understanding of women, dismissed one by one as I age. Oh, someone stop me please.

The vodka lime and soda crew filtered out at about ten o'clock having dissected some book which most of them hadn't read. That's not just another of my assumptions, by the way. With the music turned down I could hear most of what they said, which largely consisted of laughing about the fact that they had no idea what the book was about.

Chrissie stayed right through all of this. She sat at the bar and we chatted about nothing much until closing time. It was as if, with, You Know Who out of the way, we didn't have to bait each other anymore. (You Know Who as in Georgie not Voldemort, although in this instance the two are not that dissimilar. Not that Georgie is some kind of all-powerful evil wizard out to destroy the world, more that the mention of her name would conjure her up, and into, our comfy little flirty world, which would, no doubt, disappear in a puff of wizardy smoke should that happen. Actually, at that point in time and if I am being honest, yes she was Voldemort –

she'd certainly destroyed my world anyway. But if she was Voldemort, did that make me Harry Potter, and if it did, would that mean Amberley was Hermione? Not that Harry ends up with Hermione. For those of you who haven't read the books she ends up with Ron, which is just wrong. Yes, by the end of the books, Ron is better looking than Harry, but that's not the point. The point is, the hero is supposed to get the girl not the sidekick. Harry ends up with Ron's sister, who is very sweet, but that's beside the point, which is: that there are certain ways in which things should be done and fobbing the hero off with some minor character and sending the really cute girl off with his daggy mate is not it, J K Rowling.).

I was very careful to steer the conversation away from talk about the break-up, so that the next time Chrissie saw Georgie, she could truthfully say in response to the inevitable, "Did he ask about me?" with a genuine, "No, not really, he didn't talk about you much at all." I was also pretty sure that there was still a 'thing' between us, at least there was on my part and I didn't want to ruin that by talking endlessly about You Know Who. Of course, it was still out of the question that anything could happen, with her being a friend of Georgie's, but the longer she stayed the more the butterflies feasted on my insides.

Eventually it was just the two of us.

"I have to close up now," I said.

"Oh, should I go?"

"No, stay. I'll give you a lift home if you like."

"Yeah. . ." She paused, looking very uncomfortable. "Georgie is staying with me at the moment. . . so. . ."

"So I won't be getting asked in for a cup of coffee?"

How's that for nonchalance? How's that for spur of the moment repartee? My head was spinning like a Rolodex on speed after she dropped that bombshell, but all she

saw was the big blokey smile and a look of indifference. Definitely the play of the day; let's roll the videotape and watch that one again.

She smiled. "I guess not. It was just too weird for Georgie at her mum's and my flat mate had moved out, so she moved in, just about a week ago."

"It's OK, you don't have to explain." Lie. I was lying again. I wanted everything.

"I'm not," she blushed. "I just don't want you to think she sent me here to see how you are, or that I'm going to go home and tell her everything." Liar. "I came here because I wanted to see you and see how you're going," she said, looking almost serious.

"Chrissie, it's OK." My Rolodex was still breaking all land speed records, but I showed nothing. I had no idea the two of them were that close, but I guess you don't have to be great friends to share a flat and anyway it was probably just temporary. I felt sad thinking about Georgie setting up another home, though. It had been a few months now since we'd broken up, so it was fine and proper that she start making a new life, it's just that she was fixed in my head in the spare bedroom at her mum's and that's where I wanted her to stay.

"I'll help you clear away," she smiled and she began stacking chairs on tables. I said thanks, left her to it and wandered down to the cellar to turn off the beer, and more importantly, let my mind explode in private.

"Where do these go?" she appeared at the top of the trap door a few minutes later with a roll of bar mats in her arms. Before I could reply, she was coming down the stairs, "Wow, this is wild," she said looking around. I was used to it, but her reaction made me see the cellar anew, and yes it was wild. The room was tiny and dark, the floor and the walls were constantly wet and it was always very hot and sticky. Temprite and pumps thrummed and clattered making it hard to hear. It felt more like a Thai prison cell than part of a nightclub.

She stood at the bottom of the stairs, hemmed in by beer kegs and me. I turned to take the bar mats from her and then we were holding each other and then we were kissing. I lifted her up into my arms, holding her tight, pushing my hands under her skirt. We kissed as we fumbled with belts, zips, buttons and the usual cavalcade of clothing barriers, which always threaten to take the spontaneity out of casual sex. Our eyes remained tightly closed as we blundered, mouths locked together tight. If we'd stopped and actually looked at each other, or acknowledged what we were doing and how complicated our collective outfits were to negotiate, then we wouldn't have been able to go through with it. This was animal and thinking would have brought it back to human and human would have brought Voldemort down on both of us. But then, suddenly it seemed, I was inside her and we were fucking, standing up, with her backed against the stairs of that dank little shit hole. We paused then, and just looked at each other for a second as if to confirm that, yes, after all this time we are doing it, but we said nothing. We were past talk. The sex was urgent yet disturbingly effortless and it was the first time I'd had sex with a woman other than Georgie in five years.

Things became interesting after that. We bantered like we were on speed, buzzing and fizzing like teenagers, as I finished tidying up, but as we got into my car the conversation seemed to dry up. Suddenly there was an end to this little episode and it lay about ten kilometres and twenty-five minutes down the road. Was there something we should say? Was there something I should say? And what about her? She wore a look that said that she was expecting something from me, but what for Christ's sake?

We sat like two lovers who had had a fight rather than their first sex together. For two people who are normally impossible to shut up, whose entire relationship had been built on yacking, we were very quiet. Was this to be it, after all these years? A quick shag to get the whole thing out of our systems? I was beginning to think (hope) so.

The silence built and became heavier and more oppressive the longer the journey went. It became so bad that in the end I started talking just to break the silence, "Do you think –?" I said, but I couldn't finish the sentence as I didn't have an ending in mind when I'd started.

"Think what?" she asked, turning to look at me.

I looked straight ahead.

“I don’t know.”

I pulled up outside her place and there, right in front of us, was Georgie’s car. “You still love Georgie, so no, I don’t think,” she said.

Where the hell did that come from? What did she think I was thinking? Neither of us had said the ‘G’ word for ages, and we’d done what we’d done out of a longstanding mutual lust, nothing more, or so I thought, but now. . . ?

I didn’t reply. Did Chrissie want this to go further? Oh my God, maybe she did. Did, “You still love Georgie,” have an implied, “and not me?” tacked on to the end? I didn’t want to take things any further with Chrissie and until that moment I’d thought she felt the same, but maybe Georgie hadn’t sent her to check up on me, maybe she had come to see me for her own reasons. Maybe I truly am an idiot. I thought tonight was an end to something, not a beginning. I still wanted her sexually, but I didn’t love her. Oh, Christ. In all honesty, I’d had no agenda and was just going along with the flow. I thought it was just a fuck. Admittedly, once it was over all I had really hoped for was that Georgie would somehow find out and that she’d feel sick about it. I know that sounds shallow and selfish, but we’ve all been there haven’t we?

“Chrissie, I wish –” I finally said to her, once again unable to finish the sentence. She looked at me, shook her head and said nothing as she gathered her bag. I wanted to say more but the thought of Georgie asleep in their flat just metres away was doing my head in. Without another word she opened the door and stepped out on to the pavement. She popped her head back in the door and said, “Thanks. . . for the lift.” Not even a kiss. We held each other’s gaze and our eyes certainly said more than our mouths did, but that was still very little.

I watched her cross the road and enter the building. I pictured myself following her and us fucking again up against the wall by the letter boxes in the entrance way, even closer to where Georgie lay, but I was just going through the motions. I didn’t really want to do that. I knew that Chrissie and I were already in the past. What had

happened was spontaneous: to make it happen again in light of what Chrissie had almost said would have to be a considered thing on my part. It would have to mean something and I couldn't go there, and neither, I think, could she, no matter what she felt. She disappeared in shadow – a third woman walking away from me – and I eased my foot off the brake, letting the car roll slowly forward until it gently bumped into Georgie's.

Contact.

SIX: Nobody's Fault But Mine

I sat in Dan's home office admiring his set up while he made us coffee. My desk sat right next to my bed and was often more clothes rack than workspace, but he had a fair dinkum office with filing cabinets, trays, shelves and a desk. There was no sign of a bed, nor were there any dirty T-shirts, either on the floor or splayed across the keyboard. How does he do it, I thought? Simple: he's a lawyer; he's successful, he works hard; he's clever; he's organised; he's everything I'm not.

"Did you bring that old stuff?" he asked as he bustled in with a tray of real coffee, warmed milk and biscuits, being very careful not to spill any on his suit. I couldn't remember ever having been served biscuits on a tray by anyone who wasn't wearing a dress and who didn't go by the name Mum. I was impressed, but also unnerved; what was going on?

"Yes," I said. "And I had sex with Chrissie the other night too," I almost said. It was bursting to come out. I had to tell someone.

I thrashed around in my hold all and fished out a folder full of old, wrinkled pages and handed them over, not telling him about Chrissie again as I did so. "Oh wow," he said as he flicked through the pages. "You've got all of them."

"All of them" meant a bunch of sketches we'd written together back in drama school for a series of revues. I watched him. He smiled and shook his head as he read them. Was he reminiscing, or embarrassed by their rawness and naiveté?

Sam poked her head in the door. "Hi Bill, what's news?"

"Nothing much, apart from shagging Chrissie after work last Monday." You can work out for yourself which part of that sentence I didn't say.

"What's this all about?" I said to Dan, once she'd gone. I'd been summoned over to his place, told to bring the sketches, and to hurry.

“I’ve just had a call from someone at the ABC, it’s a long story, but remember that guy who directed my play reading? Well, he’s recommended me to someone in comedy there and they’re looking for a new sitcom.”

“So?” I said, when I clearly meant to say that, “It was really no big deal, but you remember Chrissie, that friend of Georgie’s I always had the hots for? Well she and I did it just a few nights ago.”

“It means they’re looking for people to pitch concepts and hopefully write a pilot. They want me to come up with something and I want you to work on it with me. We wrote some pretty funny stuff back in drama school, at least I think it was funny. Anyway it’ll be a laugh and, well, to tell you the truth, I have no idea how to write a sitcom and I’m shit scared so help! What do you say?”

What do I say? I was rapt. I was thrown. I had no idea how to write a sitcom either, but then, does anybody? Look at some of the rubbish that gets screened. This was what I’d given up work at the theatre for, wasn’t it? Well, not this exactly. I don’t know what I envisaged myself doing, but at least this would be something. This was almost acting. Maybe I could write a part for myself. I grinned like a fool, tried to think of some witty, sitcom-esque way of saying yes, but said, “I screwed Chrissie,” instead.

He looked stunned, “Is that a – what?”

“Well, yes, I would like to and I had sex with Chrissie.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see how the two are connected?” he said.

“They’re not and I meant to say yes. Only yes. The other thing just slipped out. I’ve been going mental for days. I thought it was just a shag but I think she thought it was something more and now I don’t know what to do?”

“How does she feel about it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you talked to her since?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

I could see in Dan’s face that he was picturing another Preliminary Final episode here. He had a “why me?” and a “why now?” look on his face, but I thought, stuff him, he still owes me one.

“So, what do you think you’ll do?” he said, reluctantly closing the folder and turning in his chair to face me.

“I know I should call her but what am I going to say? She practically told me that I was still in love with Georgie and that was that.”

“Are you?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been too busy trying not to think about Georgie to really know, but probably.”

“Look, whatever, you’ve just got to talk to her.”

I nodded. He didn’t say be a man about it, thankfully, but we both knew he’d implied it. He’d have been a man in my place. A real man, not a weaselling ditherer. He would have called her the next day, actually he would have sat with her in the car as they were parked outside her place and talked earnestly and long about how it wouldn’t work, how it was better to just let it go, how they’d both remember this night. . . He was great at talking, to women especially. He would have had her feeling sorry for him and believing it was her idea that it go no further. There would have

been lots of holding each other tight, looking into each other's eyes and he might even have squeezed a back seat fumble out of the exercise too, and she and he would have parted on good terms - he thanks to his Get-Out-of-Jail-Free-Card charm and she with her dignity intact.

I'd hoped that talking about it would help but I just felt worse. I knew what I had to do but I also knew I probably wouldn't do it. I'd wanted Dan to grant me absolution, but he hadn't. There was a time when he would have done so.

We both stared at nothing in particular for a minute or so and then he said, "We don't have to do this right now, if you're not up to it."

He went back to rifling through the old stuff, but he wasn't smiling anymore, he wore a frown this time and I knew that frown. He'd used it a lot at drama school when he had to criticise somebody's performance. He'd used it when he told me about Georgie and Heathcliff. It was his "this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you" look, designed to get you to feel for him as he cut you down. I could just see him using it at work on some poor unsuspecting article clerk who had to be let go.

Oh, I get it, I thought. This isn't about you and me writing together. This is about you feeling guilty. This is about you offering me a chance to let you off the hook for not telling me about Cockheadnfuckface. This is where I say, "Gee thanks mate, it's really generous of you to offer me this opportunity, but I guess I'm really not up to it." I'd been on good terms with Dan ever since we had the Talking Heads talk, but I'd still caught myself giving him sideways glances. I suspected everything he did and now my suspicions were about to be confirmed.

"So. . ." I started.

"You're right, we'd better get started," he said, putting down the old stuff. He put his head in his hands and sighed. "I haven't the foggiest idea how to even start writing a sitcom, have you?"

Maybe this wasn't a trick after all. Maybe I was a paranoid asshole. I felt like shit for doubting him.

"No fucking idea," I said.

He looked up and we both started laughing. What is wrong with my head I thought? I felt like crying and laughing and just going to sleep. We shuffled closer to his computer and stared at the keys hoping they'd know what to do.

I sucked at the coffee greedily and managed to elbow my way to the keyboard. If we were going to write then I was going to do the typing. I typed "Ideas" at the top of the page and not much after that, although we spent most of the night talking and planning. It felt so good to be doing something, even if we were just banging on about nothing, reliving past glories and embarrassments and getting very little down on paper. I felt connected to my old life again. Maybe Dan and I would never be the great friends we were before, but maybe we would. In the meantime we had more than enough motions to go through, to get us through.

We drank all the beer he had and I flaked out on his couch. In the morning I rose early and gingerly, expecting a monster head, but it was one of those rare and remarkable Mornings After that are unbelievably free from pain. I skipped out of the house a new man and walked all the way home feeling, "practically perfect in every way", just like Mary Poppins.

I showered, changed and headed right back out the door and straight to the shopping centre to get me some white goods: a washing machine to be exact. Walking out of the appliance store several hundred dollars lighter, I decided to get me a haircut and a new pair of jeans too – I'd gone straight from Mary Poppins to My Fair Lady and darned if I wasn't going to make myself purdy. Besides, Christmas was just around the corner and no one else was going to spoil me this year. I bought a couple of new T-shirts and I even considered buying a new Levi's trucker jacket, but a bartender's budget stretches only so far, that and I still owed some people i.e. Dan, some i.e. a lot, of money, which I would surely have to start paying back soon, wouldn't I?

Walking out of a music shop I heard a voice behind me:

“Hi stranger.”

I turned around and there was Amberley. She’d recently been to the jeans shop too, by the look of her, and well, let’s just say I’d never seen denim look so at home on a body.

“Hi,” I said.

“You look. . .” she said expansively.

“And so do you.” I said, “In fact you look more and more like you do every day.”

“Is that a good thing?”

I smiled. There was no awkwardness, but there was a great deal of the unspoken. Is this fate, I thought? Where might this lead? Is there anywhere to lead to? I decided, for once, to give such questions the arse and just get on with it.

“Are you busy?” I asked. She shook her head. “Then come to lunch with me.”

Crappy shopping centre pizza had never tasted so good.

“I can’t believe you bought a washing machine,” she said. “That’s so grown-up.”

“What do you mean grown-up? I’m older than you, and besides, you’ve only known me for five minutes. How do you know how grown-up I am?” I reached for the last slice of pizza as I said this and so did she, but I was familiar with her game by now and I beat her to it. She took her knife and leant over and cut herself a piece of it anyway. “Speaking of grown-up,” I said, eyebrows raised.

“Ah, shut up,” she said. She folded her piece of pizza in half like a sandwich and bit down hard, tomato sauce oozed out and gathered in a blob at the edge of her mouth; oh to be a napkin.

“Here, let me get that for you.” I reached over and with a finger, wiped the sauce off her mouth. I couldn’t believe how provocative I was being, let alone raunchy. Maybe it was the tight denim. I pulled my hand back and popped my finger in my mouth, sucking the sauce off in a style which I would have called hot! hot! hot! but which she called dicky, as in, “Don’t be so dicky.”

Unfortunately, as I moved my hand ever so sensually (dickily?) away from my mouth I saw my watch, “Bugger, I’ve got to get home, they’re delivering the washing machine this afternoon, and if I’m not there I’m stuffed.” Bugger. Shit. Pooh. Wiss. I did not want to go. “I don’t suppose you want to come with me, do you? It’s quite a nice washing machine and well, if you have anything with you you’d like to wash, I’d be more than happy to. . .”

She said she had a few things to do and that she’d think about it and maybe she’d pop over later. And maybe she was giving me the brush off, so I just split.

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 3:45pm, 18 December 2010

Why do they promise that they’ll deliver something at a particular time when they obviously have no intention of doing so? You sit there waiting, waiting, waiting, like a shag on a rock, telling yourself to be patient. You can’t pop out for even a minute. If you so much as head out into the back yard to hang up the washing you know that on your return you’ll find one of those little “while you were away” cards wedged in your front door telling you that you’ve missed the delivery and that you’ll have to wait until you die before they can deliver it again.

And then you get tired of waiting and you call them, saying; “You said you’d deliver it between 8am and 1pm.” And they say, “Yes sir, between 8 and 1 but not necessarily on the same day,” and then they put you on hold and while you’re on hold the delivery guy sneaks up to your door (they’re all in this together), pretends to knock and then with all the skill and dexterity of a safe cracker inserts the dreaded card in your door jamb and pads silently back to his van, which rolls down the hill, with the ignition off, and out of your life without a sound.

And then you call the phone robot again and tell them that he was just here and you didn’t hear his knock and can’t somebody call him and get him to come back and what am I paying you people for! And then it all goes quiet while the operator writes “difficult customer” on your file, because they keep files on you, you know they do, we all know they do, and you know that you’ll never ever see another delivery driver again and if you want your purchase you’re going to have to go and get it yourself from their delivery depot somewhere in Malaysia.

My washing machine was delivered at the time it was meant to be delivered. I pinched myself. What a day. I should write this down. To add amazement to incredulity, the delivery driver and his mate were then actually very helpful in bringing it right into the house and fitting it into the laundry for me. It wasn’t until they’d gone that I realised they were simply trying to get the thing in the house without my seeing it had a dirty great scratch on one side. What the hell, I thought. It’s not a display item and it still works, or at least I hope it does. Give me scratched and damaged goods every time if it means they’re delivered promptly by helpful and interested guys, besides I’d signed the “delivered in good order” docket anyway, so I was stuffed.

It was weird having my own washing machine, but it also made me feel good. I was now a man: an owner of white goods, other than a fridge. I’d started moving on from Georgie, filling in the spaces in my life with new things and people. Christ, there was

even a chance that a girl who had never been to this flat before might come over and look at my new washing machine – I was practically Hugh Hefner.

To celebrate I walked round to the supermarket and bought some washing powder (non-phosphorous, non-bleaching, non-cleaning too probably) some fabric softener, some beer and a very large packet of salt and vinegar chips. I already had pegs, Georgie had left me those, bless her little heart. When I got home there was a cheeky little note stuck under the door from Amberley saying that she'd popped over to check out my appliance and was sorry to have missed me. Damn! Thank God for mobile phones.

“Hello?”

I'd left the front door open and there Amberley was, standing on the threshold with a washing basket no less. “Has the party started yet?” she asked, looking uncharacteristically coy.

“It has now,” I said and I carried her washing down to the laundry.

I was suddenly belted across the back of the head by an image of the last time I had entertained guests in this room: Georgie and Heathcliff. I felt my heart sink, almost audibly tumbling down through my guts into a sickening void. I looked at the taps on the wall, now sporting new pipes connected to a new washing machine. I looked at the new girl standing next to me. I saw myself in my new jeans and I felt anchorless and disjointed. I felt that I was erasing, permanently, parts of my past that I had not yet even realised were mine. This had been ‘our’ laundry. Was it now mine? Did I want it? I felt like some bereaved parent about to turn their dead child's perfectly preserved bedroom into a home gym. Once it's gone, it's gone. Forever. Fuck it. “Here's to new experiences,” I said, slapping the top of the washing machine proudly and loudly.

“Hear, hear,” she said, raising the lid of her basket and taking out a box of detergent.

“You didn’t have to,” I said. “It’s not BYO.”

She took one look at my washing powder and shook her head. “If we’re going to do this, Bill, then let’s do it properly. This stuff costs a lot, but it’ll do wonders for your whites.”

She began loading her things into the washing machine. “Where’s your stuff?” she asked.

I hadn’t thought about that at all. I was entranced by the image of her loading her washing into my machine in my place. If I closed my eyes I could be back with Georgie, but if I closed my eyes I’d also be walloping myself with the misery stick so fast it’d make my head spin. If we were making love in what used to be Georgie’s and my bed, in what used to be ‘our’ sheets, under the doona cover ‘we’ bought in Byron Bay, I don’t think it would have been so hard. I expected to find new sex in familiar places confronting and I expected that to sting. What I didn’t expect was to find the doing of simple household chores in everyday places with a different woman so upsetting. It felt so familiar, so comforting and yet so uncomfortable to be doing the washing with her. To have her willingly share such mundaneness with me was almost overpowering. I hadn’t realised it before, but this was what I was aching for: this which I had missed.

“Bill? Where’s your washing?”

“Oh. . . er. I’ll get it.” I rushed off to the bedroom and gave myself a good talking to on the way there and back.

We loaded our things into the machine together. “Are you sure this is OK,” I said, “because we hardly know each other and yet our clothes are mingling. You don’t think we’re getting ahead of ourselves?”

“Well,” she said, coming over all social worker-like. “If at any point you find that it’s too much and you want to stop just say so and we can hit this little button here. Then you can take your stuff, and I’ll take mine and we’ll go our separate ways.”

My heart trilled. I was Mary Poppins again, although a great deal taller and hairier and more masculine and not in a dress. I wanted to spend all day doing the washing and cleaning, and gardening and tidying up with this silver tongued, quick-witted angel in blue jeans. I wanted this to be our Saturday routine. I wanted questions such as who goes to the DVD shop, which bottle of wine we buy and where we order our pizza from to be decided. I wanted the complete relationship package and no surprises. I wanted to be whole again.

“I think I’ll be OK,” I said, “but if it’s all the same with you I think we should each hang up our own smalls.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I took her on a tour of the flat, which was still rather empty and she nodded agreeably at everything she was supposed to like and empathised convincingly over everything it lacked. Of course the place was a mess, even though it was empty but it wasn’t as bad as it had been. You would no longer be able to say, categorically, that here lived a man for whom personal hygiene and cleanliness were a thing of the past. I do think she hesitated when we approached the bedroom, but not because there were more pizza boxes than pillows in there, because there weren’t; I’d done a quick tidy up while waiting for the washing machine to arrive just in case she fronted. Any girl would have baulked at that doorway. There were years of history in that room. Five. Count them. She popped her head in and looked around, but she didn’t come in. Maybe she was scared that I’d try to jump her. I longed to kiss her, but I was waiting for the right moment, which true to form was slow in coming, but I wouldn’t have tried to seduce her in that room and on that bed anyway. Not then.

We sat on the bench in the tiny back garden drinking beer and munching on chips, waiting for the wash cycle to finish and watching the ivy slowly dissolve next door’s brickwork. The sun was soft, but heavy and warm, especially for those of us wearing new denims and it made us both drowsy. The conversation came to a halt. It didn’t dry or die, we just stopped talking and let the noise of nearby traffic fill the gap. I put down my empty beer and after doing so my fingers found hers and they dangled

together, not quite holding but definitely not separating. It was the first time all day that we'd been more than just flirty acquaintances.

A cessation of water-draining-away noises followed by a beep, beep, beep woke us up and sent us, now fuzzily arm in arm, back inside, but we passed the laundry door without going in.

In the bedroom, bronzed and lulled by the late afternoon sun, we slipped gently between the sheets. There were no ghosts – they were waiting, biding their time. There was tenderness and slowness and whispers and then, brought in perhaps by the same sun that had bedded us out in the garden, came silence and sleep.

In violation of our agreement, I stood in the yard and started to hang out all the washing. Amberley was still asleep and I'd slipped out of bed not quite sure what to think about what we'd just done. There were spectres, pangs and aches galore collecting in the gloom of that late evening. I could sense them hovering, waiting patiently for me to open up and let them in, so they could destroy anything that had been good about the afternoon. I could give into them and let the idea that, "I wasn't ready for anything like this," take over. I could dwell on the fact that Amberley was unsure about my heart; I could think myself forward into the situation where my indecision would break her heart. I could pine for Georgie, or not so much for her as for us, what we'd been, what it had been like when I'd left her sleeping in bed on a sunny afternoon; I could find a million ways to bring misery and defeatism into this day.

From the back door I heard a stagey cough. I turned and leaning against the doorjamb, tangled in my dressing gown, stood Amberley. "Hey, we had an agreement." Her eyes were almost invisible in the darkness: her dark hair, scrunched by pillows and pushed behind her ears, framed nothing more than a shadowy smile. "I was going to hang those things up at home."

I shrugged as she padded across the yard and stood in front of me. “We should probably talk,” she said, “but I don’t want to.” She opened the robe and wrapped me inside with her, burying her face in my chest. I thought we should talk too, but I didn’t want to either. What could we say that would make things any better or different? We were both adults, we both knew, without speaking that more pot holes than road lay ahead of us if this was going to be anything more than a casual encounter, but sometimes you just don’t care, you don’t want to see. Sometimes you have to take a risk.

How do you discuss sex between two people who are obviously attracted to each other, but who know that there’s the definite possibility of a shitful time ahead because one of them is a mixed up turd, without getting maudlin? Is analysis and talk about truth, and what do you/I really feel always necessary?

I held her to me. Our bodies hadn’t worked out how to fit together yet, but that would come with time I supposed, assuming we had time. I lost myself in the scent of her, her hair, the skin on her neck, a bared shoulder and I enjoyed the newness of her shape.

“You make me laugh,” I said, remembering the washing machine episode.

“You make me worry,” she said.

The ghouls, not suspecting that it might be Amberley who would let them in, took a second to respond, hesitating before creeping towards us slowly out of the lengthening shadows.

“You’re nice Bill. Very nice, and I haven’t met many nice men, but what else are you?”

We held each other at arm’s length. The warmth of her body receded from mine. I wanted to say something, but I was also tempted to stick a peg up my nose, just to make her laugh, to break the tension.

“I’m not sure,” I said. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the ghosts of evenings past inching closer, memories of other times, and other people clinging to them like leeches.

“I want you to stay,” I said, pulling her close again

She said nothing. She stayed very still. I could feel her breath on my neck.

“There’s a bottle of vodka in your freezer,” she said with a smile, untangling herself from me, retying the dressing gown.

“And there’s a pizza shop around the corner too,” I said as I turned and began to hang out the last of the washing. She elbowed me out of the way and began re-pegging her clothes, straightening them out, shaking them and generally doing a better job than I had done.

“At least I’ll have some clean undies to wear in the morning,” she said.

I turned my back on the ghouls and the ghosts, the phantoms and the shades of God knows what, pushing them back, for now at least, into the shadows, as I took her hand and we headed back inside.

The next day was a Sunday and the next, as is usual, was a Monday. There was no mention of Amberley going home on either of those days; she certainly had enough clothes with her to last for quite a while, thanks to my new Whirlpool and so she stayed and we began moving around and with each other with bizarre ease. She hadn’t moved in. There was definitely no talk of that, but she wasn’t going home either and the longer she stayed and the more trips she made to her place on the way home from work over the next few days to pick things up, the less need there seemed to be for her to leave.

The situation was surreal, but if there was any unease about things being unsaid, or discussions undiscussed, neither of us raised the matter and the longer things went on the further, to the back of my mind at least, such a discussion drifted.

It was bliss to be in a couple again, to have someone else to consider, to wait on, to explore. We were intoxicated by the newness of each other and we devoured every moment, yet there was nothing frantic about our togetherness. We didn't cling like desperate sad fucks to their last chance at happiness, we were instead like lovers, like people in love; we were lovely and we loved it, although we didn't mention love.

I was rostered on to cover a ridiculous number of shifts at the pub over Christmas and Amberley headed off at the end of the week to spend the break with her parents. But she left her stuff at my place and we both knew she was coming back as soon as she could.

SEVEN: I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down

Friday morning, Christmas Eve. Freshly scrubbed and de-stenched after a huge night at the pub I sat on the tram heading to Dan's place. I wasn't due to start work until 3pm and so we'd agreed to spend the morning trying to catch up on the ridiculously tight schedule the ABC had drawn up for us. We were due to do the same before my shift on Boxing day too, which I thought Sam would be mad about, but apparently she and Dan were giving Christmas a miss this year, it being all about kids. I still hadn't written anything much and I was worried about that, but all anxious thoughts were driven away by what I saw on the tram and off the tram, on the footpaths, roads, in shops and almost everywhere I went on that journey: women.

It was as if I had just rediscovered them. Like a long lost and much cherished friend they appeared, rising out of the gloom that had been my misery. For what seemed like forever, I'd seen women but not recognised them. They had become part of a drab, neutered and sexless humanity. I had neither wanted them nor been interested in them – how could they compete for attention with the elaborate world of pain I'd constructed for myself? For me, all women had become Georgie and she had unmanned me as successfully as if she'd whipped the cleaver out of the draw and slapped a Bobbitt on me. In shock I'd withdrawn from them and kissed the tattered remains of my bloodied libido goodbye.

For a while, every half-glimpsed woman was Georgie. Every silhouette, every shade of hair, every feminine gesture, laugh and movement was her. She was all women and all women reminded me of her. Even the ones who looked nothing like her; the plain ones, the ugly sisters, the glamazons, starlets, housewives, old ladies and school girls. I could see only her in each one of them and it hurt.

It was Amberley who re-awoke me to the world of women other than Georgie, gently and without my knowing it, simply by bringing herself into my life. Like an ambassador from an enemy country she'd stepped ashore in Bill-land to collective sighs and exclamations of shock from the local population:

“My God, they're just like us,” said Bill.

“I thought they were supposed to have two heads?” said another Bill.

“And these are the people we’re supposed to be afraid of? What other lies is he telling us?” said yet another Bill.

I found myself staring, in an unobtrusive way of course (I hope), at the girl sitting opposite me on the tram. She was unself-consciously absorbed in her book. Every time the tram hit a bump, a lock of her hair would fall from behind her ear and across her face, and without taking her eyes off the page she would push the hair back up and into place. Nothing outrageously sexy or provocative about that but I could have watched her doing it all day.

She wasn’t my type, not that I have a type, it’s just that she didn’t look like Georgie and I’d been so used to looking at every girl through Georgie-tinted lenses that I compared each one, unfavourably, with her. She had been my yardstick.

Amberley wasn’t my type, for God’s sake: long, straight, dark hair (I was supposedly into blondes) not especially tall, slender, petite, normal-sized nose, but by crikey I was interested in her. What’s the type thing all about anyway? I’ve never really understood. As a man I’ve always been interested in a wide variety of types, styles and modes of women, and I’ve always been especially interested in those types, styles, modes, fashions, shapes, models, editions that were interested in me. In fact I’d go as far as to say that pre-Georgie, any vaguely attractive woman who considered me her type was, at that moment in time, my type.

If all of us stuck to ‘type’ when it came to women, we’d all be stuck at home, alone, with nothing more than free internet porn for company. Most of us are just grateful that women exist and if we’re lucky we’ll bump into one or two who are kind of glad that we exist too.

So let me rephrase my earlier statement: this tram girl didn’t look like Georgie, which is not to say that she did not have her good points. In fact she had plenty of good points, one of them being lovely, shiny, short, auburn hair, not quite long enough to stay put behind her ears. She was much younger than me, probably about twenty, so I

was quite sure I wasn't her type, but I couldn't stop thinking about her. My imagination was running wild and I loved every second of it.

What would happen if I reached over and pushed her hair behind her ear next time it fell? Well the answer to that one was pretty simple: she'd scream, the police would be called and I'd be on Current Affair faster than you could say: Perverts Loose on City Trams. But, would she like me, I wondered, if we had the chance to meet? There was no doubt that I'd love her – she was just my type (ha, ha) but could she bring herself to feel the same way about me? What if the tram caught on fire and I carried her off the burning wreckage, would that make me important to her? Would we swap telephone numbers as we dusted down our smoke damaged clothes and would she call me later that night, weepy and in shock, knowing that I was the only one who could understand what she'd been through? What if we were stranded on a desert island? Would we fall in love, or would she be revolted at how hairy I am once my clothes had rotted away? Surely, after a while, it wouldn't matter what either of us looked like and by then we'd both be taut and terrific anyway, like Tom Hanks in Castaway, thanks to a diet of fruit and raw fish. Besides, we'd be the only two people in our world and we'd have no choice other than to be together, in fact we'd probably develop an understanding deeper than anything we could have imagined. And we'd have lots of sex – what else would there be to do on a desert island? Would we become bored with each other's bodies sooner than might otherwise be the case, though, if we were forced to spend all our time in the nude once our clothes had fallen off us? What about those peoples who live constantly in the nude? What takes the fetishistic place of clothing for them? How do they titillate each other? "Lingerie In Stone Age Cultures": a research thesis people might actually like to read. What if I simply leant across and started a conversation: told her that I think she is beautiful and that I'd be honoured if she'd let me see her again? Yeah, and what if monkeys flew out of my arsehole? Oops, there goes that lock of hair again. . .

Another girl standing close by did nothing more than stand close by, but the mere shape of her nothing-out-of-the-ordinary body made it hard to look away. The tram stopped outside a dress shop and I was drawn to the mannequins in the window. Amberley had definitely awakened something in me. Anything round curvy and

vaguely feminine under anything tight or suggestive. Two halves of cantaloupe under a piece of stretchy lycra, anything.

I'm not saying that I wanted to have sex with all these women, well, OK I did (mannequins aside), but I knew that I wasn't going to and that having sex with them wasn't the point. That's not what lusting after women on the tram is about. If men got to have sex with all the women they fell in lust with on public transport no one would ever get to work. It was just that I was once again in the game: once again aware of their desirable otherness. Manifested in obvious physical differences, in clothing, in shape, in the texture of their skin, in how they carried themselves, in how they presented themselves to the world, differences which hinted at even more intrigue: what are they thinking: what do they want and how do I get one? All the triggers that make us scream out in our masculine hearts *Vive La Difference!*

My mind was adrift in the intoxicating, yet harmless, world of fantasy and I loved it. Every woman that caught my eye held in her the potential for some sort of imaginary tale of passion and I thanked each of them for it, each and every one. I welcomed them all back into my life and waited with bated breath for our first group hug.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes?" I said, completely stunned. It was Tram Girl. She'd put down her book and was looking straight at me, smiling shyly and blushing just a little. This is it, I thought. She leant forward conspiratorially and with a tilt of her head beckoned me to lean forward too. My God, dreams really do come true.

She put her mouth as close to my ear as she could; I could smell her scent. She's very forward I thought, very up front. The tram lurched and she had to reach out and put her hand on my knee to steady herself.

Here we go again, I thought as I prepared myself for another one of those "Aren't you the guy from that commercial?" conversations, which were always a bit of a sneaky thrill – even though I'd always pretended to Georgie that I was soooo bored by them – especially when they were initiated by pretty young women.

“You’ve got dog poo on your shoe,” she whispered breathily, “your left one. I just thought you’d like to know.” And with that she was gone back into the world of her book. I’d thought the awful, yet subtle, smell was the old cobbler sitting next to me when all along it had been me.

Deflated. I tried to laugh. I threw her a self-deprecating smile accompanied by a wry shake of the head and a semi-shrug, just to let her know that I was glad she’d told me and that I was a big enough man to handle this without crumbling, but she was knee-deep in Nikki Gemmell again and I was history: just another man with shit on his shoe.

I spent the remainder of the journey trying to keep the sole of the offending shoe as close to the floor as I could, in the hope this might minimise the pong without actually putting it on the floor for fear of stinky smears. All sexy fantasies were abandoned and instead I battled cramp in the lower regions of my now hovering leg, whilst visualising every woman who boarded the tram phoning their friends to tell them about the Turd-Man they’d seen on the tram and describing me in such exquisite detail that by the next morning every woman in Melbourne would have a photo kit identity picture of me burned into her brain with the words, “Turd-Man: avoid at all costs,” emblazoned across the bottom. It’s amazing how a little piece of shit, which isn’t even your shit, can make you feel like shit.

“Is there a funny smell in here?” Dan said to my back as I disappeared from his home office to once again try to remove the offending gunk from my shoe. I locked myself in his bathroom and scrubbed at the stuff with tissues and toilet paper, but nothing could get it out of the cracks in the sole where it had embedded itself. It’s as if this dog stuff is able somehow to bond permanently with rubber. I rifled through the bathroom cabinet looking for something else to use. I balked at nail clippers and tweezers and told myself that hairbrushes and combs were definitely out of bounds. In the end I found a packet of unused toothbrushes and so I used one of those, which although dying in the process, did the trick. I threw it in the bin and strode out stink-free, only to rush straight back in and quickly fish it out. What was I thinking, I

thought? What madness could a shit-smearred toothbrush, found in the bathroom rubbish bin cause to a troubled marriage? Not that Dan and Sam were in trouble on that front, not that I knew anyway, of course there was the IVF thing which apparently wasn't going well and was really freaking Sam out, but they were working through that and they were strong. But if they were in trouble and one of them found a toothbrush so despoiled, imagine what they'd think? Would it be taken as an insult, an affront, or just another example of how depraved the offender had become? And then there'd be the denials, honest and earnest on both parts, as both being innocent they'd think the other was for some reason playing a horrid game, or that they'd gone mad. Or maybe, and more likely, they'd quickly work out that it had to be an outsider and then they'd probably guess that it was me, "Well, who else has been in the bathroom today Dan, except you and me?" an outraged Sam would yell, as she flung the toothbrush, heavily wrapped in tissue paper in the bin. "What kind of a sicko uses a toothbrush to wipe his bum?" she'd scream, "I never want him in this house again!" Because if you didn't know it was dog turd you'd naturally assume it was mine, not in the case of every so ruined toothbrush, but definitely in this instance, and then your mind would turn to how did it get there and really there is only one possible explanation and that would be the end of my new-born and still quivering writing career with Dan, and the real beginning of my life as Turd Man.

So I left the bathroom with a ruined but rinsed toothbrush in my pocket, confident that if I achieved nothing else today at least I'd saved a marriage.

I'd left Dan staring at a blank page. We'd established that we were writing about a couple, that they were living together, and they were having troubles, but that's as far as our sitcom writing had gone. We couldn't start.

"I've got it," I said sitting at the desk, hammering the keyboard.

"What?" said Dan.

"She finds a toothbrush in the bathroom bin with what looks and smells suspiciously like turd on it, like someone's used it to wipe their bum."

“And?” he said, looking troubled, yet almost smiling.

And we were off. It had started. We were writing.

I was exhausted from pulling beers, too much Christmas and working with Dan all weekend and yet Monday morning found me up bright and early washing up. Who'd have thought it? There was the sound of a key in the door and at first I thought it was Amberley, but the jangle of the keys on the ring stopped me short, and then the way the keys were wrestled out of the lock, the way the feet shuffled as the door was closed and a bag, that stupid, too-heavy bag was dumped behind the door told me it wasn't.

I stepped into the hall, tea towel in hand. Georgie turned to face me, probably thinking, well at least he's got his clothes on this time.

“Hello,” she said.

I said nothing. My blood was thumping too loudly. I hadn't seen her since she'd taken her washing machine and I'd tried not to think about her and I'd been strong and not called her and I'd tried to move on, but I knew at that moment that I hadn't.

“I just wanted to pick up a couple of things, books and so on that I think might still be here. I would have called, but last time I called you didn't answer and so. . .” Her blood was thumping the insides out of her too. I could see it in her face desperately trying to punch its way out through every surface capillary, reddening her paleness, betraying her cool.

There were no books, we established that pretty quickly, there wasn't anything of hers left and blushing, she admitted that she'd really just wanted to see me. Her eyes brimmed with tears, filled but not to overflowing, her voice crumbled and we sat over a cup of tea trying to discuss how much bigger the flat now looked without her mother's old sideboard in the lounge room.

“Sometimes I just wish I could come home,” she said.

“You mean here?”

“Yes, living with Chrissie is alright, but I didn’t think I’d still be flat-sharing at this time of my life, and I miss you and I miss this place and I miss us, and Christmas –” and then the tears started.

I wanted to cross the floor and hug her – who can resist comforting a crying woman? And maybe she wanted me to as well, but I didn’t. I stayed in my seat and sipped my tea. She dried her eyes quickly; I guess she realised that her tears were nothing to do with me anymore. They were all hers now and maybe Heathcliff’s, too.

“I hear you’re seeing someone?” she said through balled tissues.

I said nothing.

“Is she nice?”

“Georgie, I don’t want to talk to you about. . . her.”

Her eyes filled with tears again. “Bill how did we let it get so messy? I saw your mum the other day, in the city and she was really upset and I thought – God – I’ll probably never see her again. There are so many people I’ll probably never see again, and things I won’t ever do again now we’re – and I thought do I really want that? Do I want to let everything about us go, forever?”

What was she saying? Was she telling me she wanted to get back together, or at least give it another try? Was she? Did I want that? Was she just jerking my chain? Of course she was. But would I let her? I was beginning to think I might, especially if there was a chance, of. . . what? Sex? Revenge? Getting back together? A dose of high-quality lust-smear drama? Was I hooked on drama, on the thrill of being miserable and bleak, of being torn and wronged, passionate and yet uncaring? Yes, it would seem.

But I knew I shouldn't do anything. I mustn't. I wouldn't. Would I?

Warning! Warning!

I could see that big clumsy robot from *Lost in Space*, trundling along on its supermarket-trolley wobbly castors waving its amazingly uncoordinated arms as it did, so impotently, every time some under-wardrobed alien threatened the peace. It hurtled around from behind the couch Georgie was sitting on and crunched to a halt between us, lights flashing, circuits humming, that grating voice doing its sci-fi best to get my attention.

“Warning! Warning! Wil Robinson!” it yelled.

My parents used to call me Wil, sometimes, especially after I became a fan of that show as a little boy. Dad would lurch around the lounge room, doing a remarkably bad robot impersonation, which I found hilarious and terrifying at the same time. I was only six and the robot wasn't quite so ridiculous then, neither was Dad.

“Warning! Warning!” it yelled, as it vacillated between Georgie and me.

“I miss you too. I miss us too,” I said, over the whine of servomotors going into overdrive.

The robot loomed larger, filling the entire room with its so-wrong dimensions and ill-conceived representations of future robot reality, waving its ridiculous arms around and wailing like some senile little old lady convinced that her long dead husband is trying to steal her Minties.

Looking like a cross between the Michelin man and a Meccano set gone berko, waving its limp-wristed, floppy floppy arms around and ranting like a frustrated bank teller the robot trundled back and forth.

No wonder we're unable to deal with reality, no wonder we're all in such a bewildered mess. That silver jumpsuited vision of the future that shows such as *Space Family Robinson*, *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who* shoved down our necks destroyed any

chance we had of being able adults capable of coping with real-life crises. If the worst thing that happens in the future, according to them, is the sudden appearance from behind the ubiquitous polystyrene space rock of some B-grade actor in a silver suit with a green face and a TV aerial strapped to his head, then what is there to worry about? All you have to do is nick the space modulator from his death-o-matic ray machine and he's finished. No one ever actually gets hurt, no one dies, no one has their heart broken. For God's sake no one even gets their hair mussed up.

I was losing it.

It would be so easy to get back together with Georgie. In a few weeks it might feel as if she'd never even left. I could probably even manage to live with Heathcliff, not physically, but with his presence as an episode (a past episode) in our lives. This whole break-up thing might even make our relationship stronger. What's that saying? "Anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger." I think Nietzsche said that. Very strong man. Mad as a cut snake, but strong as an ox. Could I do it? Could we do it? Could we afford not to try?

"I miss it all so bad, Bill. Sometimes I can't even get out of bed. I'm mopey. Sometimes I'm great, but it's hard you know. And I feel so bad for putting you through – it's so hard."

The robot spazzed around even more, almost apoplectic with altruistic fervour, driven to distraction by its directive not to let any harm befall the humans, especially the boy, Wil Robinson. Arms flailing, lights flashing, yelling, yelling, yelling. Determined to save me from danger it – "Fuck off robot," said Wil.

I crossed the room, sat on the couch and put my arm around her. She rested her head on my shoulder and we just sat there. It felt so strange, yet strangely familiar. She moved her head, I nuzzled her hair and we just held each other. I gave myself up to the alien and embraced the destruction of my world.

The sex should have been fantastic. Sex in these situations always is, or so we're told, but this wasn't. It was just sex. We made love, if you want to call it that, in the same

bed and at the same time and we used each other's bodies to do it, but we weren't really together. I thought about Amberley and the past and I couldn't help but imagine Georgie with Heathcliff and I wondered as I lay there with her sitting on top of me, eyes closed as usual, what, who and where she was thinking about. Our bodies, though, knew enough about themselves and each other after so many years together, that they did the job for us without too much fuss.

And then with a sigh she came and she collapsed on me, her face pressed against my shoulder. I could feel her body shaking and I knew she was crying. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her gently, trying to soothe her. But almost as if she'd forgotten I was there and as soon as the pressure from my arms alerted her to my presence she bit into my shoulder. Not a love bite, but a real bite: hard and deep.

"Fuck," I yelled as I pushed her up and off me.

She sat upright, naked, her thighs gripping me, her long blond hair tousled, falling over her shoulders, stopping just short of her breasts. Her back ramrod-straight she stared down at me for just a second, her face set cold yet her eyes alive with fury. I was still inside her. I dared not move. With no warning she slapped me across the face. I raised my arms to protect myself and she slapped at them pinching and scratching. She assaulted me with inarticulate noises, sobs and strangled curses, almost-screams and bitter animal sounds.

I moved, tried to roll over, and then as if sensing for the first time that I was inside her, she reared up off me, disgusted. She stood looking at me, her face flushed, her lips parted and wet, her breath coming in gasps. She reached back and launched one more slap at my face, catching me by surprise and leaving my left cheek stinging and hot. She examined her hand, pushed the hair back from her face and sat down on the bed.

My heart pounded and my head rang from that last slap. I began to think about sitting up, but as I moved she reached behind her and placed her palm flat on my chest, not with any force but with enough command that I lay still. She turned to face me.

“You fucked Chrissie,” she said.

I said nothing. I could have said, “Well, I am single”, or, “and who have you been fucking?” but I said nothing. I could have reached out to her; I could have pushed her hand aside and sat up. I could have done so many things, but I just lay there.

I felt guilty, so guilty. I told myself that I shouldn’t and that, yes, I was single and that I could sleep with whomever I chose, but it didn’t work.

“Why did you do it?”

“I don’t know, it just happened,” I shrugged.

She shook her head and laughed bitterly, “If I had a penny for every time you said, ‘It just happened’, I’d be. . .” she let the thought drift away. “And then you don’t even have the decency to call her afterwards. That’s weak, Bill. That’s just weak.”

I moved her hand away and I got up. I crossed the room and picked up my jeans. Putting them on I began to feel less vulnerable and I turned, saying, “I don’t know what you want me to say. It’s none of your business, it’s not even as if we’re together, I mean you’re fucking –”

“Yes, but that wasn’t the first time was it? With Chrissie.”

Embarrassed and shamed, I continued dressing in silence.

“She told me about that night, when she stayed over after the dinner party.”

“I didn’t fuck her.”

“Only because you didn’t have the guts.”

That night, we’d held a dinner party and I’d slipped my hand under Chrissie’s skirt as we sat next to each other at the table. She’d stayed over, crashing in the spare room.

I'd sat up late watching Rage. Frustrated, wanting her, I was hoping to see something that I could beat off to. There was no internet porn back then.

I was dozing off when the door to the lounge room opened very quietly and she walked in wearing only underpants and a T-shirt of mine which covered everything it had to, but little more. Instantly awake, I sat up and watched as she crossed the room and sat down next to me, sipping from a glass of water held in cupped hands.

"Thirsty," she'd said, "Too much wine."

She turned a small laugh towards me and I followed it with my eyes. She tried to hold my gaze but I looked away, reaching down to pick up my beer. For a few moments we both pretended to be interested in some film clip featuring muscle-bound black guys with backwards hats, too much gold and their undies poking up over their jeans, yelling something about bitches, bitches, bitches.

"Is there something we need to talk about," she said, "or was that just you being drunk earlier on?" Short pause from her. Nothing from me. "Because I do like you Bill, I like you a lot, but I don't want to hurt Georgie." Another short pause from her. Still nothing from me. "I don't want to sleep with you behind her back, but if it's more than just. . ."

She let the end of that thought drift, but I could feel her eyes on me. As she waited for my reply, locks of her hair tangled from sleep tumbled with accidental elegance from her shoulder, shadowing her face. She was so close, that without turning I could almost sense the outline of her breasts in my T-shirt. Bathed in their radiation I knew I'd never wear that shirt again without trying to will some semblance of her into it, without visions of her body imprinted on the inside of the shirt like some modern-day shroud of Turin, without trying to imagine what her breasts felt like as they gracefully shaped the thin, brushed cotton.

"Bill?" she said with gentle urgency.

I sat up and ran my hands through my hair, "Wow."

I finally made eye contact. “I don’t want to hurt Georgie either,” I said, taking the coward’s way out.

I still clung to a slim hope that we might have sex, although that now seemed very unlikely and I wanted to keep the door open for any future opportunities that might present themselves, but in truth, I wasn’t really concerned about hurting Georgie; I just didn’t want her to find out. Not that we were going to have sex. Not now. Not after Chrissie had introduced thought and conscience into the process. I didn’t want to do anything that might unsettle the status quo and that definitely included having sex with someone who wanted more than just sex.

“Why don’t we just have sex or have an affair?” I would have said, if such a thought were permissible. “Why don’t we just see what happens and like two grownups, if we want to take it further we will, and if we don’t, well, no harm done is there?”

What I did say was, “I’m sorry, Chrissie. I am attracted to you, but I still love Georgie and I’m sorry for my behaviour during dinner.” Which sounds noble, but isn’t, because if she had pressed her case in any way, my defences would have crumbled instantly although I would have made her work for it, just enough so that she would be forced into the role of aggressor, instigator, and I the role of the poor hapless man at the mercy of a sexually-driven woman and his spineless cock-brain. I could dissemble my way out of that one should Georgie have walked in on us or should Chrissie ever end up spilling the beans.

I knew at the time it was pathetic and in retrospect doubly so. Standing there buckling my jeans and pulling on a T-shirt, I felt as small as a man could feel under the double spotlight of Georgie’s gaze and my conscience-fuelled memory. She, however, was still naked, lying on the bed now, staring up at the ceiling looking anything but vulnerable. It was I who felt open and in danger.

My mind travelled back to that night and left my body to face Georgie.

“So it was just you being drunk then,” Chrissie said, staring down into her drink. She wasn’t going to beg or force me into having sex with her. She wasn’t pathetic or

desperate, she wasn't just going to let it happen or let it be someone else's fault. She'd taken a big risk coming to see me, dressed so provocatively. If Georgie had walked in, things would have been uncomfortable at the very least and yet she'd been willing to risk that. She'd made a decision. She'd done it for a reason. She had balls.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry I have no balls," I should have said.

She stood and without looking at me, turned and walked out. I couldn't resist watching her almost semi-naked form as she left the room, but I felt nothing more than a nauseous mixture of self-loathing, embarrassment and relief as she closed the door without looking back.

I was summoned back to the present by Georgie rising off the bed and dressing. "I knew something had happened that night," she said. "You were so weird around her the next day. There was none of the usual tiresome bickering, but you never said anything and she didn't say anything and then. . . and then you asked me to marry you a couple of days later, and now I know why?"

"Why?"

"Guilt."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"Well what was it then? You don't just ask someone to marry you and then never bring it up again. You can't just say something like that and not follow it up. What was it? Did you really want to marry me? Did you?" she shouted, balling up and throwing the top she'd tried unsuccessfully to turn the right way in, her fingers vehemently tongue tied.

Standing there in her underpants and tights she should have looked ridiculous, but she didn't. If it had been me in her place half-dressed I would have felt too naked, been too self-conscious to get into an argument. I feel so much stronger and whole when dressed, when I'm hidden.

Did I want to marry her when I'd asked her? To be honest I don't think I did, but I wasn't going to tell her that. Not now.

We were out at dinner and yes, things had been weird that week after Chrissie had stayed, but then they'd been weird for a while anyway. We were bored and were fighting a lot. We both knew that and yet neither of us had had the energy or the wherewithal to do anything about it. Maybe neither of us cared enough or perhaps we were both unable to express it knowing that we'd only spark a defensive reaction from the other.

Anyway, we were at dinner. And we were having a great time, we really were. We'd had a few beers after work and I'd lashed out and bought her a new dress (out of guilt about Chrissie you ask? Perhaps), which she was wearing. Her hair was tied in little braids. She looked like the sort of cowgirl that grown-up boys' dreams are made of. Every man in the restaurant had noticed her as we walked in. I sensed it and she knew it too.

A few beers had turned into a bottle or two of too expensive wine, and for a few moments we'd reached the peak of the night's drinking. We were both laughing about something, I don't know what, and then as I was coming down from the laugh, I had a moment of clarity. Maybe this is it, I thought. Maybe this is as good as it gets. Maybe it was just because moments of such pure joy were so rare for us now that this one had gone to my head, but I felt I understood relationships, or at least our relationship. Maybe I was just drunk. Whatever the reason, the thought occurred to me that perhaps this is all there is. Maybe our relationship isn't so bad if we can still find gems like this amongst the detritus of our daily lives. Maybe I'd be a fool to let go of this.

All thoughts of Chrissie were banished and I viewed the events of that night with her as something I was glad to have escaped from unharmed.

With my boozy brain aswim with such thoughts, my mouth, disconnected from all reason and with no input from me, said, "We should get married". Looking back now

it wasn't the most romantic of proposals, nor that it was strictly a proposal. It was more of a statement really, for her to agree or disagree with.

"Married?" she said, with the remains of a drunken grin hanging off her face.

At that moment a waiter appeared at our table and took our order, which as always where Georgie is concerned, took ages as even when she's drunk she likes to know exactly what she's ordering and how big the serve is.

"Could the entrée salt and pepper squid serve as a main, and if so how big is it?" she asked with her hands cupped into a bowl shape, to which the waiter invariably responds by cupping his or her hands in a similar shape, which between them they judge to be larger or smaller. "Will I need a salad? Could I just order two entrees? Will that be enough?" and on and on.

After the saga of the order, we were both still sober enough to continue the conversation about marriage, but not for long and not in any great detail or so I suspect. I can't really remember much more than that, but I do remember waking up the next morning with a very sore head knowing full well that I'd sort-of proposed, but not at all sure of the answer. Judging by the fact that Georgie was as hungover as I was and that she didn't mention it, I didn't either, straightaway, and then as the day progressed with neither of us bringing it up the whole thing just seemed to cease to exist. I never for one second thought that she'd remembered the conversation or that she even took it seriously if she did remember. By that evening I'd all but dismissed it. I was well-removed from those glorious few seconds of alcohol-induced pseudo-clarity, plunged instead back into the sludge of our everyday lives together, the great tide of boredom, that swirled sluggishly and sea-sickeningly around tiny, yet thrillingly intense, islets of joy.

"You would never have wanted to get married. You never even gave me an answer."

"So it's my fault then. I should have known that. It always is. You turn everything around. Nothing is ever your responsibility. You're always: 'I don't know', or 'It just happened'. When are you going to grow up Bill? When are you going to be a man

about things? You say things just happen but we both know they don't. You engineer situations so that you always have a get out clause. It's always someone else's fault, never yours.

"You spend all day drifting around in that head of yours making sure that anything crap about your life or anything that's hard to face, falls into someone else's lap. You're a fucking asshole.

"I worry about you Bill, and I love you. I might even still be in love with you, I'm not sure, but Jesus I despair sometimes. Are you going to let your whole life just happen to you or are you actually going to live it?"

She hurried about the bedroom, dressing. I stood there, nailed to the spot by her passion and her power, her ability to slice through me. I knew she was right, but I think I'd always known that about myself and aren't we all the same anyway? Didn't we all fuck up our lives?

Hadn't she fucked up our life together?

"Is this another one of your long broody silences?" she sneered, tying her hair back. "Aren't you going to say anything, again?"

"I suppose you having an affair was my fault then?" I said.

"No, that was very definitely my fault, my decision and probably the wrong one and God I know it was selfish and I hurt you badly, but I had to do something Bill. One of us had to do something and you never would have. You would have us married for God's sake. What would you have done if I'd said yes? Do you think we had enough love to get married, to stay married?"

"I'm so sorry for the affair Bill, and for all the grief it's caused you, but our relationship was over before then, it's just that neither of us knew how to end it."

"I didn't think it was over."

She slipped her shoes on. “Yes you did,” she said quietly.

The early afternoon sun slid behind the gum trees in the yard and reflected off the neighbour’s redbrick wall and into the room. We’d lain in bed so many times and watched that dusting of pink spread across the dirty off-white of the bedroom wall. Many times it had washed our lovemaking in rose. Today it only served to make me squint as I faced the window, unable to move.

Georgie crossed the room and stood in front of me, her bag over her shoulder, ready to go. Her eyes looked tired, but they spoke of resilience, of a desire on her part to make sense and to move, whether on or back, I could tell she didn’t know, but I also felt that she had more to say, but couldn’t. Or wouldn’t. When you break up you lose that contract with your ex that says tell me everything, tell me all. You can’t tell your ex about your new partner, and you can’t share any of the history of your ex with that new partner. Your life becomes fragmented into past and present. Eventually the past dies and the new fragment becomes your life, but until it does you’re torn, managing two roads, floating on two floes, wondering which one will carry you and which will melt.

She ran a hand through my hair, something from the old fragment. And she looked in my eyes searching for some spark of the man she used to know – did the man she used to know ever exist? Whatever she was looking for she didn’t find. She grabbed my shirt in both hands and pulled herself up onto tiptoes kissing me quickly on the lips.

Suddenly there were tears in her eyes, but her voice remained steady as she spoke, “Promise me. . .” She looked away and out of the window, gathering her thoughts. The rose glow faded as the sun sank below the fence, and the blood drained out of the room like water out of a sponge leaving us standing in a dusky gloom, turning the off-white of the walls to a grey murk. Suddenly she looked tired and her face lined. With a deep breath she summoned the courage to finish her sentence.

“You seem so lost Bill, it’s like you’re just drifting out to sea. We’re too old for drifting.” She stopped there, but I could see on her face that she had something more she wished/wanted/had to say.

She adjusted her bag on her shoulder, that stupid too-heavy bag full of crap, and she opened her mouth. Nothing happened for a few seconds and then she said, looking right into my eyes, “Call Chrissie. Talk to her.”

I stared back. “I will,” I said.

“Promise?”

I nodded. She nodded too, her mouth pulling down at the corners as she struggled to hold back tears. She turned and I moved to walk her to the door, but she placed her hand on my arm, stopping me and walked out of the bedroom door alone. The front door opened and closed quietly and I listened to her footsteps echo in the hallway.

I found myself finishing the dishes I’d started that morning, the water now cold and greasy. I felt hollowed out, scraped raw. I hadn’t heard from Amberley that day, but I assumed she was coming back after work. My guts went to water as I imagined her walking through the door. She’d see it on my face; she’d know something was wrong. Would I tell her about what had happened today? Is that what it means to take charge of your life? Should I confess everything? Or is it braver to say nothing and to keep whatever crap I might be feeling to myself, assuming that I wanted things to continue as they were with Amberley? Which I did. Didn’t I?

I felt trapped. With the dishes done there was nothing else to do other than watch game shows on the TV. I could feel panic build. I just didn’t feel strong enough to talk about this now with Amberley. I couldn’t take another battering. Excuses I know, but that’s what I was best at. I had to tell her, couldn’t tell her, would tell her, wouldn’t tell her. Wanted to, didn’t want to. It was better to keep it to myself. I ran like a laboratory rat around and around the dissembling wheel, leaping off when the pace of it all began to make me feel sick, landing outside the flat on the footpath leading to the pub, desperate for a numbing ale.

My mobile rang as I waited for the tram.

“Bill, can you come over?” It was Dan. “Yes, now. I sent those pages off, the ones we worked on over the weekend and they loved them. They want an episode.”

“When?”

“Yesterday.”

Escape. I called home and left a message for Amberley as I hopped on the tram. I knew I was putting off the inevitable, that I should have told Dan that I couldn't come over, not tonight, but you can't keep the ABC waiting. I rationalised my way out of any guilt with my usual slippery ease and headed off to Dan's if not with a light head, then with a sense of relief, like a fox having escaped the hounds. It was cowardly I knew, but that was nothing new.

I thought about Chrissie as I rode the tram. I would talk to her and I would talk to Amberley and I would get my shit together, just, just, just not today. I'd start tomorrow. I just needed to get my head around it all. I just needed to concentrate, for tonight, on work with Dan, on writing on doing something with my life and then tomorrow I could sort out the mess. I managed to put it all to the back of my mind, master Billy Liar-type dissembler that I was, but I couldn't forget it completely. The things I had to do, should do, pushed as they were into the background, still made their presence known. I couldn't silence them anymore, couldn't completely cut myself off from them by weaselling my way through convoluted streams of dither. They sat there like an old fridge buzzing in the background, fussing at the edge of my consciousness as I tried to sleep. Like blind pimples these thoughts remained below the surface, but only just. I was the princess and they were the pea and I could feel them all night long.

I stood on Dan's doorstep and checked my shoes for turd. Nothing. Phew! Sam opened the door and welcomed me in. I used to love coming here, but since the break-up it didn't feel right anymore. I was no longer a couple guy and I think my presence created unease for Sam as she certainly seemed different.

“Are you alright Bill,” she fussed. “You look terrible.” Why were so many people telling me that?

I felt my guts tighten. “Just working too hard you know?” I bluffed.

She looked worried, perhaps it was because lately I seemed to be turning up at her place directly after having stepped in a turd, or having had emotionally complicated sex. Maybe I did look like shit. She was probably right. In the past she wouldn't even have noticed. She would have kissed me quickly on the cheek, and then she and Georgie would have bustled off to do whatever it is women do while men are standing around a barbecue burning meat. Salads I suppose, although Dan always made those too, he loves to cook. Anyway, now she was forced to pay attention to me and even though she was lovely and caring and sweet, I felt like an errant nephew now, or a long lost cousin arriving unexpectedly from interstate. The dynamics had changed, the friendship was without a major piece and our relationship was different.

“When are you going to bring Amberley over for dinner?” she asked boldly, as she strode towards me from the immaculate kitchen, across the polished red ironbark timber floors, holding out a glass of wine for which I was grateful, but which I wished was a beer.

“Give us a break,” I laughed, uncomfortably. I was really beginning to notice the differences between us more than the similarities. Their house was so much better, so much more grown-up than my flat. With Georgie by my side this hadn't mattered so much as we were forging our own much less luxurious, but equally adult life together. Alone I felt like a teenager again. There is something childlike about newly single men, no matter how well they are or aren't looking after themselves. Something little-boy like, a vulnerability.

“Dan tells me she's very nice,” she continued. I so didn't want to talk about Amberley. I thought about tossing her some flip answer, but I bit my tongue. I really just wanted to turn and go. That wonky fridge at the back of my mind was buzzing all the louder. It was a strain to concentrate on anything. I sipped at the wine, wishing I could skol it and ask for another. We enjoyed a few more seconds of strained silence.

We have nothing in common, I thought. Without Georgie she's really just my best friend's wife, and if it wasn't for him we'd never see each other again. She was being nice and polite and attentive and I should try to do the same. I was about to say something when she cut me off.

"Dan! Bill's here," she yelled, turning. "You'll have some pasta?" she threw over her shoulder as Dan emerged from his office. Office, I was still getting used to that.

We sat at his desk. He drove the keyboard now and I sat next to him offering ideas and reading over his shoulder. I suppose it was only natural that he do the typing. It was his office, his computer, his house and he was the one the ABC were chasing, but it used to be me banging at the keys and I had enjoyed the control that gave me. It was my version that used to be final, now it was his.

He'd printed off what we'd written and it was good, it wasn't much, but it was enough and we had a structure around which to write an episode. He was talking, but I was trying to fight that fridge and couldn't tear my jaundiced eyes away from his professional-looking office.

My mind was elsewhere. I could see myself in an office like this, working with Dan on our show. I pictured myself telling people that I was a comedy writer: "Sorry, I couldn't possibly fill in for you tomorrow, I'm a comedy writer," said to a fellow bartender.

"Well, comedy can be a very demanding mistress, but then she's very giving too, if you know what I mean, nudge, nudge, wink, wink," said to David Letterman before the premier of our show in the US, both of us enjoying and appreciating the Python reference. Two dab comedians sharing an in-joke reference.

"How can I give more money to Greenpeace? I'm a comedy writer. We're very poor but very intriguing," said to a sexy Greenpeace girl with a clipboard at a train station, who, seduced by my words, agrees to stop bailing up the public and go out for a drink with me instead. She then morphs into a younger, backpacker-type version of Jane Fonda (circa Barbarella) who decides to throw away her round-the-world ticket to become my lover and muse.

“Bill!” Dan’s obvious impatience dragged me back into the room.

“Come on mate, we’ve got to get this thing into some sort of shape tonight.”

His fingers flew over the keyboard and I had to stand to look over his shoulder. He was writing stuff that we’d talked about previously, but it was obvious he’d given it a lot of thought and the words he wrote reflected this. His words were good. He was good at this. I offered what I could but I felt like a spare dick. Many more of his ideas were finding their way onto the page than mine, not that I had many – where does he find the time?

I was taken back to our drama school days and I remembered why I had always commandeered the keyboard. The ideas were always mainly his but I shaped them, I edited them I suppose. He was always saying “what if?” and “maybe we could” whereas I did a lot of listening and interpreting. I was always better at the plodding stuff, grammar, punctuation, at detail and at making things logical, making them work, than Dan was. He’d obviously improved though. I guess you don’t get through law school if you can’t tell a semi colon from a full stop.

I felt relegated and for a moment a wave of almost anger or panic swept over me. Hey, I thought, I want this too. You asked me to be here and now you’re just shoving me into the background. We’re a team, but then Georgie’s words from this afternoon returned and I realised that I didn’t actually want to be here. Sure I was in love with the idea of being a comedy writer, who wouldn’t be? But maybe I didn’t want the reality. I hadn’t chosen this it was just happening to me.

I said nothing to Dan about this revelation, in fact it freed me up to be more creative, but I realised that I didn’t really want this and I didn’t have to be there. I wasn’t going to just walk out then and there, but I knew I wasn’t going to do this forever. I began to wonder about Dan and why he wanted me there and then he didn’t seem quite so scary and grown-up. He wanted me there to hold his hand. He was unsure about this and he valued my presence.

“So,” he said, as we finished reading over what we’d written, “Amberley hey? That’s pretty full-on all of a sudden.”

“Hmm.” I grimaced.

“Has she moved in?”

“Not officially, but yes, I suppose she has. More of a drift in than a move in.”

“Are you happy about that?” Bloody lawyers. Asking pertinent questions.

“Yes, I am,” I replied, feigning simple unhurried sincerity. “I am.”

I was on the witness stand and I had to stay one step ahead of this guy. I knew what he was like and I knew his techniques, but I was powerless to stop him. He was my kryptonite: the only one capable of breaking through my skull, penetrating my Fortress of Solitude.

“Good,” he nodded disingenuously, taking a sip of his beer.

I watched him. He didn’t mean “good”. He was just playing with me. We’d known each other too long for him to be fooled by my bluff. We both knew that and yet still I tried to get away with it.

He took another slug of beer, planning his attack. I could see him streaming towards me like a defender sees a forward. Which way would he turn? I had to keep my eyes fixed on the ball if I were to have any chance of avoiding a humiliation, one feint from him, one look away from me and I’d be sitting on my arse and he’d be strolling towards the goal, dribbling through an easy six-pointer.

“Georgie and you are over then?”

“We’ve been separated for months, of course it’s over.”

“You don’t love her anymore?”

Why did people keep asking me that?

“It’s only been a few months. I don’t know. I still. . .” True to form, I ran out of words before I ran out of things to say.

“What do you really think of her? When you stop and calmly think about her, what do you feel? Do you even like her anymore?”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, after her having an affair and you being the last to know. Forget love, can you actually even like a person who’s done that to you? Do you like her?”

I didn’t expect that one. Did I like her? What did I want from her? Was I still potentially in love with? Her? Us? My old self? Once I replaced the word love with like it all seemed a bit clearer. Just a bit, mind you. I was thrown.

“Don’t say you don’t know. Just stop and think next time you see her, if there is a next time, and ask yourself if you actually like this person anymore.”

I nodded.

“What does Amberley think about you and –?”

“Stop it Dan,” I jumped in. “Amberley and I haven’t really talked about that, but she knows who I am. She knows what I’ve been through these past few months. It’s hard talking about stuff. Everybody wants me to give cut and dried answers: I do love this person, I don’t love that person, I will do this, I won’t do that. I can’t make those decisions right now. I can’t give answers, but what am I supposed to do – just lock myself away for years until I can confidently sign a stat dec stating that I am completely over Georgie before I approach another woman? Life isn’t like that, love isn’t like that.”

He said nothing. It was his turn to just nod. But in that nod was contained a quick glance at the jury, a confident wink thrown to his client (just who was his client in this case?) and an implied, “I rest my case your honour,” delivered to a judge who would no doubt look favourably on his work.

I could have punched him. He’d got me again, but by then he was too far away, he was a blur behind me calmly slotting the ball through the posts to the roars of the crowd.

I arrived home after midnight, pleased with the work we’d done but feeling pissed off at Dan. Alright, if I am to be honest I was pissed off at myself, or maybe I was just pissed off at the world, at my world, which always seemed to be more complicated than everyone else’s. I marched down the corridor in the flat heading to the kitchen for a beer, and I must have been loud because I woke up Amberley who came sleepily out of the bedroom to see how I was. Trapped again.

She was snuggly and cuddly, full of love and her body pressed to mine felt so good, but so wrong. I knew I had to tell her about Georgie and I meant to, but I became lost in her pillow-scented hair and the warm press of her sleepy curves.

“Come to bed,” she mumbled taking my hand and leading me into the corridor. The kitchen was cool, silent and dark, and the beer I’d opened but not yet drunk sat waiting for me on the bench. I needed that beer and I wanted that peace and time to reflect. Time to let the wonky fridge in the back of my mind buzz freely, to bubble its burden up to the surface. Time to think. But I couldn’t tell Amberley that. Once I started talking, who knows where I’d end up. Instead I opted to follow her lead and her warmth into the bedroom, and into, at first, pretend sleep.

She woke up before me as usual and readied herself for work, quietly so as not to wake me. I liked to watch her dress. I like to watch girls get dressed full stop. Not just for the sexual thrill. I like their routines and the sounds their dressing makes. It’s so different from men’s. There’s the rattle of numerous coat hangers as multiple outfits and combinations are considered, the slap and snap of elastic and then the rustlings and whispers as layers swallow other layers, shapes are contained and at the same

time defined and outlined. This time though I slipped into pretend sleep mode again. I didn't want to be discovered awake. I lay still but my mind was in turmoil. Georgie's words of yesterday were haunting me, as were Dan's. Was this going to be a repeat of the wedding proposal incident? Was I just going to let all my resolve about telling Amberley dissipate until I could forget the whole thing? I felt so cowardly, so loathsome and yet even though I knew I could ease my conscience with just a few simple words, I knew I wasn't going to. I knew I would take my self-inflicted mental and spiritual punishment like the true coward I was rather than face up to Amberley like a man.

Later, I told myself, when the time's right. When the right time comes along. It's not the right time. The time isn't right. I'm waiting for the right time. The words tumbled inside my head. An excuse, a postponement, a veil I could have seen through with ease but chose not to. Weak, weak, weak.

My body was rigid with tension. I was aware of her every move in, out of, and around the bedroom, which she had only so recently made hers, filling the new wardrobe (thank God for hard rubbish day) with her things, a scarf over a lampshade (she brought the lamp too). Every day she brought something else, which hadn't bothered me last week when I was lost in the euphoria of being with someone. Now each item of hers, every shoe, each little elastic hair tie was a weight on my soul and a curse on me. I felt the burden of each bobby pin brought into this house in a bond of supposed trust. A bond I was, even as I lay there, breaking a thousand times over.

I became angry with her. Who did she think she was bringing all this stuff into my house? I was furious. It was all her fault. This was just too full-on. We hadn't said a word about her moving in. She just seemed to assume that we were a couple. I tried so hard to make it all her fault. If I couldn't be mad at Dan I was going to be mad at her, even if it killed me and it nearly did. My heart was beating so fast as I lay there in feigned sleep that I thought my chest would burst. But I knew I was lying.

As I lay there pretending to be asleep, I could see the future. I could see alternate futures as clear and as clean as I could see my own bitter guilt. Say nothing and she continues dressing and for a little longer, maybe forever, she loves you and she's

happy, but tell her now and that soft and warm future is replaced by one potentially filled with disillusionment and recrimination. Maybe she'll run screaming from the house, maybe she'll hit you or maybe she'll top herself – it's been known to happen. Who knows how far the ripples will spread when you drop that stone into the pond of your little life together?

“Bye!”

Jesus Christ, I almost shat myself. She was leaning over me. Where did she come from? A kiss planted on my cheek. A lipstick mark rubbed off.

“Sorry I didn't want to wake you, but I didn't think you'd want this lippy mark on your face all day, even if the colour does suit you!”

She laughed. I rolled over, a scrunchy façade of pretend sleep drawn across my face. I was sure she could see guilt writ large across my forehead, but no she didn't. It's amazing what we can hide in our heads. The clamour of voices, the gnashing of teeth. Hell is other people someone once said. Well, maybe for him, but hell for me, is me. My head, my mind, my soul, my thoughts, my endless mashing and rehashing, pretending and postponing, my ineffectualness.

The front door slammed and I was left gazing at the ceiling, the bedroom deep in shadow, lights off and silent, punctuated only by the tolling of the bell from the Greek Church down the road.

As I lay there I made a list of things to do. A mental list. God forbid I should ever commit such a thing to paper. Number one was to tell Amberley about Georgie. That is having sex with Georgie the other day and the fact that I still had mixed feelings for her. Number two was telling Dan I didn't want to write with him anymore. Number three was calling Chrissie, although I had no idea what I could say to her that I hadn't already not said before. Number four. . . was there a number four? Get a real job? Be nicer to your mother?

I decided to stick with the three. That was enough to be going on with. More than enough, so it turned out, procrastinating over them, getting nowhere and hoping it would all just fade away kept me busy nearly all summer.

EIGHT: Sympathy For The Devil

We stumbled through the door, too hot, baking, baked, loaded with towels and bags. The late summer sun had slammed us as we dashed from the air-conditioned paradise of Amberley's car into the steamy gloom of the flat. Every inch of my skin was briny slick.

Thank God we'd left the blinds down. Indoors was at least cooler than the outside world and we both sighed as we dumped our clobber in the hall and headed for the bath-room.

"I know Queenscliff is lovely, but let's never go there again if the temperature is anywhere above minus five degrees. In fact if I ever suggest going for a nice drive anywhere near any beach on anything even remotely like a nice sunny day just shoot me. The traffic!"

"Amen," Amberley said, stepping fully clothed into the shower recess. I followed. "In fact, if I ever mention going anywhere that doesn't have air-conditioning, then hit me."

"Done."

Woosh! She turned the cold tap on full knacker. Torrential spikes of cool and getting colder, colder, cold water soaked us through instantly.

"Shit." Laughing, I reached into my soaking pockets for keys, wallet and of course phone, throwing them out onto the bathroom floor, hoping they were still OK.

We were due to fly to Paris soon for three weeks of pure romantic relaxation. It had been a couple of months now, since Amberley had moved in and that feeling of ease with which we negotiated each other had remained as constant as it had at first been surprising. We were great together.

I'd still wake up at 3am every now and then with a mouthful of almost vomit. Acid slush would rise up from my gut and I'd lie there willing my body to leave me alone, downing Quick-Eze like lollies, until I had an equally disgusting chalky taste in my mouth. Trying to keep that bile down. I'd taken to going for walks when it happened, mainly to the 7-11 for more Quick-Eze, but also because I couldn't get back to sleep. But I think that these sessions were more due to the fact that I still hadn't spoken to Dan or Chrissie rather than any lingering disquiet about Amberley. There was no disquiet. I was really into her, I was loving our life together, and when she told me that her firm had just won a big case and that she'd been given a big bonus and why didn't we spend it all on a trip to Paris, what could I say other than a very big "Yes!"

Soaking wet, standing under the shower, we undressed. The cold water made Amberley's nipples hard, I noticed.

"Well, at least you've got a bit of colour to show off in Paris."

"Don't even think about it," she said, covering them with her hands.

"I wasn't," I replied.

"Sure. . ."

I looked her in the eyes holding her gaze. "No I wasn't. I don't spend all day thinking about your breasts, you know."

She raised an eyebrow. I fought to keep my eyes on hers.

"I was actually thinking about how lucky I am. Not just to have a girlfriend with great breasts, but just to have a great girlfriend full stop."

She smiled.

"You're great."

She flicked water in my face. I maintained the stare.

“You are.”

“Shush.”

“You’re great. You’re beautiful. You’re. . . And. I love you. I’m in love with you.”

And I was. I’d never said it to her before and I hadn’t planned on saying it then, but I had. Because it was true. It was the truest thing I knew. I wasn’t pretending. I wasn’t hiding. I wasn’t just saying it. I wasn’t just making it up. I was really in love with her and it had to be said.

She flushed pink. Spreading from her chest up her neck and into her cheeks. She glowed.

“Shut up,” she said, putting her arms around my neck and kissing me. “Say it again.”

“I’m off to the travel agents to pick up the tickets today,” Amberley said a few days later, as she busied herself making breakfast for us both.

“Woohoo!”

“Are you alright? You were up so early.”

“Just nervous about today’s meeting. If they go for this version, then Dan thinks we’re in.”

I was due to meet Dan at the offices of the ABC at 10am. On the kitchen table next to me lay a copy of the finished script for the first episode of Moving In, the name Dan and I had given to our sitcom. I fingered it with a guilty thrill. Of course I still hadn’t spoken To Dan about how I felt about writing with him. Across the front, underneath the name of the script it read by Dan Jacobs and Bill Mason. I loved some of what

was contained within the cover pages, but I knew that nearly all of it was Dan's and that if we were to discuss the whole situation in terms of pop music, with the script being Wham and he George Michael, then I was definitely Andrew Ridgely.

I hated being in that position. I felt like a fraud. As the process had gone on, as we'd honed and polished this script over the past few weeks, I'd been less and less involved. I still made the time to work with Dan, but we'd structured things such that I was more of an editor, reworking his ideas, structuring scenes and so on. I have an ear for humour and so I was the "is this bit funny?" sounding board too. All fairly important jobs, but they weren't co-writer tasks. I was playing the role of script editor to Dan's writer. He hadn't said anything yet, but surely he must know that he didn't really need me, that the ABC could have supplied him with somebody much better at it than I was.

I'd been thinking about Chrissie again too. Not because I was still entertaining the idea that I might call her. I knew that I wasn't going to – it was way too late. It's just that things being so good with Amberley made all the other crap I'd been carrying around look even shabbier. I wanted to distance myself from that past but not enough to force me to actually do something about it. Not that things with Amberley were perfect. I hadn't, for instance, told her that I'd shagged Georgie. And once again I knew I wasn't going to. Don't we all end up shagging our exes when we're breaking up? And besides, my feelings for Georgie had all but vanished. All that was left was a kind of romantic tinnitus: a constant ringing that I only noticed when all else was quiet. Like the shadow scar of a removed tattoo. And even that was fading. I could foresee a time when it would disappear.

As I sat there though, I did decide that I would – and very soon – tell Dan that I wouldn't be continuing as his sidekick, only I wouldn't do it yet, as today was a big day for the project and for him and for me and I couldn't rain on that parade.

Do something about Chrissie.

Talk to Amberley.

Talk to Dan.

There was a certain symmetry I thought. Talk. God I love to talk. I can rattle on faster than I can think. Not that that's really a good thing. I'm quite the raconteur, quite the funny man when I'm in the mood, but I'm no good at it when it comes to actually talking, as in carrying on a conversation about something, as in I think we should talk.

"Just imagine," Amberley said sitting down and pouring me a coffee, "in a couple of days, we'll be drinking our breakfast café, au lait, á Paris!" She was so excited. She was adorable. I could have eaten her up.

She ran off to the bedroom to get dressed, leaving me at the table in my best jeans and a never-before-ironed work shirt, wondering whether I should wear my trucker or a sports jacket. My mobile buzzed. It was a text message. From Georgie. It simply read: "Meet me now?" and named the coffee shop nearby. I should have replied "Why?" Why would I respond in any other way to such a summons? Surely the days of my answering each jerk of the chain with a wag of the tail were long gone. My racing heart and the buzzing in my ears suggested otherwise.

"I think I'll head off early," I said, feeling like a heel as I kissed Amberley goodbye. She threw her arms around me and held me tight.

"Good luck with the meeting. Hey, let's go to somewhere special for dinner, like a proper date and we'll celebrate your meeting and go over the trip."

I struggled with a smile. Amberley took my offhandedness and my sudden redness of face – fuck my heart was beating fast – for ABC-related nerves, and I was not about to tell her otherwise.

"Oh come on, you'll be fine. They'll love it. It's great." I hadn't told her that I was thinking of opting out of the partnership with Dan and so her enthusiasm for the project was becoming excruciating. I hated walking out the door knowing I was going to see Georgie without telling her, but what could I say? It wasn't like this was a tryst,

although if it wasn't, what was it? For Georgie to send such a message it must be important in some way, but how?

I picked up the script, slipped it into my bag and was gone. I headed towards the tram stop, but then just kept on walking. The old familiar route Georgie and I had taken every Saturday morning for years, down a tangle of old lanes littered with broken bottles and old newspapers and shaded by fruit trees that had grown too big for the backyards they lived in. Planted decades ago these figs and pears, apricots, loquats and lemons, had filled our fruit bowl each summer. We had taken many a stroll around these parts, stuffing ourselves with fresh figs bursting with sticky juice, impossible to wipe off. I plucked one, simply out of habit. It split open, the juice coating my fingers stuck to me like guilt.

Rounding the last corner I saw Georgie seated at one of the outside tables. It had been ages since we'd last seen each other and I wondered how it would go. We hadn't even spoken since that stolen afternoon. Obviously there was something urgent she had to tell me. I was sure she wouldn't want to get back together, would she? I certainly didn't want that. I felt unease and the memory of lover's pangs as I approached the cafe, but I also remembered Dan's advice and I breathed deeply: do I still like her? I looked at her from afar.

I felt the urge to blog. Wow, that sounds stupid. But I did. I'd hardly even touched the keyboard since Amberley had moved in. She had no time for computers, but more than that I didn't want her reading anything I'd written. I could share those sometimes-dark thoughts with the world (not that anyone ever looked at them) but not with her. I'd rather she caught me looking at porn than writing my blog.

But as I set off to meet Georgie that morning, I wished I could be living that moment in cyberspace rather than in real life. Wished I could be discussing what might happen if such a situation arose, rather than actually living it.

I approached Georgie and for the first time since the great washing machine incident I began to see a real distance between me and my feelings for her. I could examine

them, I could see her, I could begin to operate without the pull of my heart overruling everything else because, I thought, as I looked at her, I don't actually like you anymore. It was over. She still had the ability to confuse and disorient me and I was sure she could still make a wigwam out of my pants given the right circumstances, but otherwise I was free. I was over her enough for me to realise that I was way more into Amberley than I was into her. My heart dropped: Amberley. I hoped there was nothing about to happen that might hurt her.

Georgie looked up. Her hair was shorter, cut in a long bob with a fringe, which I wasn't too keen on. I thought it made her already big nose look way too big, but that was none of my business anymore. Dressed in a very cool-looking pale blue suit she looked every inch the junior partnership development manager, she must now be. She saw me and put down her paper, flashing me a tight smile and waving.

My stomach tightened, but it didn't flip, didn't churn, didn't run away screaming. I'm going to walk away from this without falling for her, I thought. I saw myself strolling away from that cafe and into the rest of my life, like a reformed boozier turning his back on a beer. This is what it feels like when you say goodbye to a lover, I thought. I approached the table, gave Georgie a kiss on the cheek and sat down feeling for the first time in a long time, ready for whatever might happen.

She carefully folded her paper and put it away in her bag, not the ridiculously too-heavy bag of yore, a different, more glamorous, patent leather bag. A different bag, a different haircut. Move on. Moving on. Moved on. Blank-faced I noted these changes, but this time the world didn't cave in and neither did I.

It was taking her way too long to put the paper away, as if she was putting something off. Being an expert in procrastination, and still an expert in Georgie, I could tell this. I signalled a passing waiter and ordered a coffee as she fluffed about and I greeted her with an honest smile as she, full of apologies, sat up again.

"This new bag, nothing fits in it." Forced conversation.

She was putting something off, but I was a genius at getting others to say things they didn't want to even if I couldn't do it myself. I looked her in the eye, "Is there something you want to tell me?"

She stiffened, perhaps she'd been hoping to ease into whatever she had say.

"Chrissie's in hospital," she said.

Concerned but puzzled about why that should necessitate a meeting between us, I replied, "What? Is she OK?"

"She's had a miscarriage and –"

She couldn't finish what she was about to say, so I finished it for her without thinking. There was no need to think.

"Was it mine?"

She nodded.

The whole world shrank to a pinpoint of light like an old black and white TV shutting down and that noisy fridge switched on again. There was a dull hum somewhere in the background, somewhere inside my head, very deep inside. Talk to Chrissie they had all told me, but why didn't anyone tell me.

"I didn't know, why didn't anybody tell me?"

"Chrissie didn't want you to find out."

I raised my arms in exasperation.

She snapped, "Are you even interested in whether she's OK, or not?"

"How is she?" The humming built.

“She’s getting better.”

I had a sudden urge to sleep. Moments ago I’d been a kite at the very limit of its flight, string taut, hoping to be let go. I could feel the wind lifting me and I knew that I was almost free. If I hadn’t answered that text? If I hadn’t turned up? I felt myself being reeled back to a dark Earth owned by gravity. I sat there, leaden hands folded in my lap and awaited my sentence.

“Why should she have told you? You never even called her after. She didn’t want you to know and then feel obligated. She wasn’t even going to have it but the doctors told her there was something wrong with her uterus and that she probably wouldn’t be able to carry the baby to full term, but if she did have a termination it might be hard for her to get pregnant in the future, so. . . she was confused. Then she didn’t lose it and she began to think it would be OK and then it was too late to tell you, or so she thought, and. . . oh, hell, Bill.”

Fuck.

She looked at me and I knew that she wasn’t going to be asking me to get back with her ever again, and I knew I didn’t want her to and I knew we were both looking at strangers. She at someone she felt she probably didn’t even recognise anymore, let alone like, and me at someone I used to love.

“She doesn’t want to see you. She didn’t want you to know anything about this, and you don’t deserve to, but I had to tell you.”

“Thanks.” I fiddled with sugar. I don’t take sugar. I tried to open a packet, but found that I couldn’t. I couldn’t tear the paper. I picked up another one. I couldn’t open that either.

Georgie stilled my twitchy hands with hers. I lifted my head and looked into her eyes. “Come on Bill. This isn’t about you. Don’t let it be about you. This is about Chrissie. Do something, be a man.”

“I will.”

She gave me a business card with her name on it under the name DCI Telecoms. Her dream. She’d gotten there.

“This is impressive,” I waved the card. “Well done.”

Was it really only six months ago that she’d greeted me at the airport with the news that she’d got that job? And then I’d quit my job, for what? Some desperate part of me wanted to wind back the clock, wanted to launch into some great, ‘what if?’ fantasy – Gwyneth and the Sliding Doors again – but I recognised that part and I wanted to smash its face in.

“My number’s there, obviously, and I’ve written Chrissie’s details on the back. Promise me you’ll. . .”

“I will.” She rose and as we said goodbye, I felt that for the first time we really were saying it.

The maternity hospital was full of women (surprise, surprise) and dads and kids and grandparents and uncles and aunts: people. Lots of people. Aren’t all hospitals? Well yes, but there everything seemed more defined. Everyone was there for a purpose. No one had a broken leg, or teeth missing, no one stank of alcohol or limped along with the aid of a frame and an oxygen mask, although judging by the number of women in pink dressing gowns out the front having a smoke, some of them would be soon.

Everyone there was somehow involved with the birth of a baby as a mother, father, brother, sister or whatever. Most of the women were on the way to being big and the men to being worried, or happy, or bored.

I stepped into the lift with a new dad. He was carrying, somewhat self-consciously, one of those metallic balloons with the words: "It's a girl!" splashed on both sides. He caught me reading it.

"For the wife," he said blushing, but with a smile a mile wide.

"Ah," I said knowingly, hoping not to invite conversation.

"We've just had our first."

I nodded and smiled, "Congratulations." God he looked happy and I wished him all the best, but I also wished he'd shut the fuck up.

"Father?"

"No."

"Oh, just visiting then?" His happiness was so all-encompassing that he couldn't really see me.

"Yes."

The lift doors opened and I stepped out without even checking that it was my floor. The blunt smell of hospital-grade disinfectant was a concrete relief after the overpowering stench of loving father emanating from my lift companion.

There was a man dressed in hospital blues, crying ever so gently into a public telephone, telling someone that the new kid's name was Melissa. Heavily pregnant women heaved about. An old couple stepped out of the next lift bearing an outsized pink teddy bear and a sprig of orchids in a plastic tube. I'd seen those flowers in the shop downstairs as I'd walked in. I felt super aware of everything and everyone, their intentions and their feelings. I felt raw as if I'd been turned inside out and every detail, every emotion, every smile burned like salt. I recoiled like a slug. I had to step

out into the stairwell for a moment. I thought about Chrissie. If I was feeling bad, how much she would be feeling? This is not about me I told myself, it's about her.

I walked up the stairs to the fourth floor and found Chrissie's room. I looked through the window and thanked God she was alone. The door was half-open and I stood there for a few seconds peeping through the gap, just watching her. She looked worn out and sad. What might change for both of us once I walk through this door? I thought. What will I say? What will she say? What will have changed by the time I walk out of here?

I knocked and went in. She was reading a magazine. She looked up expectantly, then saw that it was me and looked away, closing the magazine and placing it on the table next to her.

She looked back at me. I saw that her face was pale. She looked as if she'd been very cold for a long time, her nose and eyes were red as if chaffed by the wind and the skin on her hands looked tender and too pink. She asked me to sit down and I did. I had to look up at her in bed from my position and I felt like I was looking up at a judge and I was in the dock and I knew I was guilty and that there was no use in pretending anymore.

I simply said, "I'm so sorry."

She didn't say anything.

"I don't know what to say. I should have called you. There's no excuse, I was just too unthinking. I thought things might get too complicated and I didn't want —"

"You didn't want me. I think I knew that."

She kept her eyes focused on her hands, she was intently examining her fingers, flexing and rubbing them as if to bring warmth back to them.

"I wanted you to call. I wanted you to say that you'd like to see me again or at least talk, but I realised pretty soon that you weren't going to."

It was my turn to look down and away. I couldn't find anything to say. I couldn't even find anything to think. My head rang with that dull fridge noise. I was filled with a soundless drone. I was a vibration.

"Tell me what happened," I said, eventually.

"I had a miscarriage, that's all. The baby was twelve weeks –"

That's when she started crying, very, very softly, and I thought I would too, but I didn't. I stood up and tried to put my arm around her and she let me and she hung on tight for a few seconds and then she pushed me away, not angrily just definitely.

"I lost my baby." Not mine she meant. And she was right. None of this was mine. Her voice wasn't raised, but it was firm and a nurse passing and seeing the door ajar stuck her head in, "Is everything alright?" she said directly to Chrissie, who nodded. "If you want anything?" leaving the door even further ajar and walking away.

"Why are you here now?"

"I just found out."

"I don't want you here. I don't want you to know about my baby or about me anymore."

"Can't we talk?"

"It's a bit late now, don't you think?"

She was right. I wanted to protest, but I didn't. What did I really want to say anyway? The hard and harsh facts of the matter were that she was right: it was all her problem. I guess I should have felt like I'd lost a child too, but I didn't. I didn't feel involved in that part of the experience at all. I just felt so sorry for her and I wanted to help, but there was nothing I could do. I know in the movies, the guy is supposed to protest and to do whatever it takes to make the girl let him help, but that wasn't going to happen

here. I stood there looking at my shoes while she fiddled with her hands again, looking small and so defeated. It was a horrible thing that she'd gone through and somebody should have been there with her, maybe not me, but someone.

"How long have you been in here?"

"Three days, why?"

"Just, I guess I should have been with you."

"Hmm."

"Why didn't you tell me about. . . being pregnant?"

"Why a lot of things Bill? Look," she said, almost business-like, "you didn't call me. You're not the first person ever to not call someone after they've slept together. It's not a crime; it's just that things got complicated. It's not like you actually did anything."

"Anyway," she went on after a few seconds, "I'm not pregnant anymore and now you know and there's nothing you can do, so would you please go."

I stood paralysed not knowing whether to shrug, smile, wave, or attempt another hug. What do you do in a situation like that? She was right. I hadn't actually done anything, which I was beginning to see was my problem. I half-smiled, half-nodded, half-apologised, once again, and accomplished nothing other than making myself look even more feckless. I turned on my heels and walked out slowly.

The chattering rattle in my head consumed me. I felt sorrow and pity for Chrissie and shame, a lot of shame; I felt a guilty relief but I also felt like I'd missed out on something, that I'd lost something. Not that I suddenly realised that I wanted to be a father, nothing sentimental like that, but I had had a child, fleetingly, for a few seconds.

It took me four attempts to fit the coins into the slot in the ticket machine on the tram and it was then that I realised I was actually buzzing, I was vibrating. My hands were shaking. My stomach was roiling. I'd had dysentery once, years ago on a drunken holiday in Bali with Dan and that had felt like my guts were full of worms and grubs and snakes all writhing in fetid slime. I felt like that again, light-headed and nauseous. I thought of tapeworms squirming in my guts, eating me from the inside, revolting, pale, ghost-like, shit-eating sub-creatures and I vomited. At my feet on the tram.

"I'm sorry," I gasped as I wiped my mouth with my hand. It was a warm day; the tram was crowded with students and suits. No one looked at me. Even the people standing next to me avoided my gaze and my presence. I thanked the heavens for the death of community and of public responsibility and I pressed the stop button repeatedly, my face burning.

I was trembling. I'm sure my fellow passengers thought I was drunk. I reached forward for the pole to steady myself but I missed, landing on my knees in the carriage perched over my own puddle of sick. The smell made my stomach leap and I retched again, spitting gobs of bile on to the floor in front of me. I stood up and tried to say sorry again, but I could only slur.

People moved as far away as they could. Still no one asked me if I was alright. I pressed the stop button again and to my relief the tram stopped almost immediately. Everyone parted to let me off, and then quickly followed me out of the now reeking tram. I could hear raised voices and I turned to see if they were directed at me. Someone must have told the driver of the tram what had happened and he was swearing and cursing as he made his way to the back door of the tram and the remains of my breakfast. I hurried away, hoping to melt into the crowd.

I thought about walking home, but my legs felt like clay, so I found a bench and sat down for a while and then, when I thought the coast was probably clear, I caught another tram collapsing into a seat and staring out the window.

Once home I felt a little better, but so tired that I went straight to bed. I kicked my shoes off, but other than that went to bed fully clothed. My mobile had been ringing

all morning and it rang again. I didn't turn it off, I just took it out of my pocket and pushed it down under the covers to the end of the bed and fell into instant and oblivious sleep.

I was awoken hours later by a buzzing. I thought it was my head again, but the buzzing seemed to be coming from my foot. Why was I in bed? I remembered. Why was my foot buzzing? The phone. I scrambled under the covers and found it. I'd missed a call from Dan, one of several, and then I remembered the meeting that morning and I felt terrible. There were also several calls from Amberley. And one from Georgie.

I was about to check my messages when I heard the front door open and Amberley bustle in, "Bill?" she yelled.

She burst in to the bedroom before I could reply, looking concerned and hurried.

"Are you alright? I've been calling you all day," she said. "Dan called me looking for you. You didn't make the meeting."

She sat next to me on the bed and tried to put her arm around me but I stood up and moved away.

"What's wrong? Are you OK?"

I was caught. I had no time to think of anything to say. Anything other than the truth. I told her about visiting Chrissie in the hospital. I told her about fucking Chrissie all those months ago. I told her about fucking Georgie.

She listened without interrupting. "Is there anything else I should know?" she said, once I'd finished. I had nothing left to say. I was empty. I felt sick and tired and I wanted to go back to sleep.

"No. I'm so sorry."

She crossed the room and sat next to me once again. I could feel her warmth next to me and I desperately wanted to wrap myself up in her. She turned as if to say something, then changed her mind. Standing, she said simply and without fuss, “Why did you wait so long to tell me all this? Did it not occur to you to talk about it before I moved in?”

“Well we didn’t really talk about anything when you moved in did we? It just happened?”

“Is that how you see it? That we just sort of happened? Didn’t you think about it? Didn’t you want it?”

“Of course I did. I still do, but we never actually talked about it did we?”

“Bill, you never talk about anything. You’re like a closed book. You daydream and you play with ideas, but you never say how you feel or what you want.”

“Then why did you move in here with me?”

“Because you’re interesting. You’re funny and you’re nice Bill, such a nice guy. I think I was dazzled by that. But, in the cold light of this now shitty day, I guess you’re right. We never did actually talk about anything, about my moving in. It did just sort of happen. I guess I thought we’d talk about things if and when they came up. How could I have been so stupid?”

“I’m sorry.”

She sat down again. “God, I feel so dumb,” she said.

We both sat there in silence for a while, next to each other physically, but miles away from each other in every other sense.

“But I had nothing to hide and I hid nothing from you. Not that you wanted to know much about me. You never ask me any questions about my life. Do you know how

many boyfriends I've had? How many times I've had my heart broken? You don't, do you? You spend all your time locked up in your head worrying about yourself and your precious break-up, I feel like sometimes you don't even see me."

She was right. I tried to explain, "Look the Georgie thing just happened and Chrissie was from way before we got together, so –"

"I'm not talking about that. You don't get it, do you? It's not just about keeping your cock in your pants; it's about what goes on in your head and your heart. I don't really care about the fact that you shagged Georgie. OK, I do, but that's something we could have talked about. You wouldn't be the first person to have had a fling with their ex. And with Chrissie, well I feel so sorry for her, so sorry, but you didn't know. Sure you were an asshole for not calling, but you're not alone there. We could have worked through all that. How do you know I haven't been sleeping with someone else these past few months? Do you even know the name of my last boyfriend? You don't, do you? And I haven't been sleeping with anyone, so forget it. It's just that I could have fucked a polar bear on the coffee table while we were watching TV and you wouldn't even have noticed. You're not really connected to the world, let alone to me. That's what makes me mad, that's what hurts me, you're just not there."

She stood up and left the room. I could hear her rattling around in the kitchen. She came back in holding a glass of wine and stood in the doorway.

"We're supposed to be flying to Paris tomorrow. Together. As a couple." She downed the glass in one and headed off to the kitchen for a refill.

"You know," she said pushing me off the bed and pulling her suitcase out from underneath it, "if I were you, I wouldn't have told me about Georgie either, but I wouldn't have told you because I would have realised it was a mistake and put it behind me. Not that I would have shagged her in the first place."

She began filling the case with clothes; folding them and placing them in there neatly, but doing it in a state of controlled frenzy, her hands stiff and her cheeks flushed.

“What are you doing?” I stood up and moved over to her, but she sidestepped me and dumped an armload of underwear in the case.

“I’m packing. I’m going to Paris tomorrow Bill, and if you’re going on a holiday you have to pack. You get organised and you make decisions? Did you know that or did you think it just happened?”

I watched her bustling around the room, travelling from wardrobe to chest of drawers to suitcase and back. Did she really want to go to Paris together after this?

“Amberley, stop. Talk to me. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.” She ignored me and kept on with the folding and the rearranging.

“Amberley!”

“How did she end up here anyway? Did you invite her over?”

“She just turned up.”

“Well, couldn’t you have just asked her to leave? This is our place now. It’s not hers anymore. I thought we were trying to make a go of things, but you were just drifting along with the tide weren’t you?”

“No, I’m committed to this relationship, but —”

“Are you? Commitment means you avoid situations like that. Commitment means you make a choice about where your loyalties lie and you stick to it.”

“You can’t make choices about feelings.”

She was angry now. “Yes you can. That’s what being grown-up is all about. You think I don’t have feelings for other men? You think I’m not tempted?”

“By whom?”

“No one. Heaps of men. Who cares? That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that I don’t have any secrets like yours. I haven’t slept with any past boyfriends since we’ve been together and I haven’t fathered any children.”

“Neither have I.”

She stopped then. “I’m so sorry about that. That was an awful thing to say.”

Silence.

“How could you let me fall in love with you while you were carrying all this around in your head? Do you really love me, or was yesterday’s little episode in the shower just something else that happened. Do you really love me Bill?”

I hesitated for a second, I don’t know why. But that killed it. I thought back to that morning and to the great feeling of relief I’d had when I’d seen Georgie and realised I was free of her. The surge of love I’d felt for Amberley. I turned to her, but she was already standing up.

“Well, at least we both know where we stand now,” she said as she snapped the locks shut on her case.

“I do love you. You know I do.”

“Do you? Really? I’m not sure you know what you think or feel. I love you. I know I do. But I don’t know if you can love me. You don’t give yourself a chance to.”

“Amberley. I do love you.”

She slipped on her jacket and picked up her case.

“Where are you going?”

“Well, Paris tomorrow, but right now I don’t know. It’s your turn to be in the dark for a change.” I reached for her, but she walked away. Seconds later the front door opened and closed and she was gone.

I thought about going after her, but what was I going to say that she would believe? Why had I hesitated? Why hadn’t I been able to just say I love you? I padded down the hallway in search of the fridge and a beer, but when I opened the fridge all I could do was stare at the cheese, the veggie crisper, the beer, wine and tubs of leftovers on the shelves. I didn’t want anything.

My phone, still under the covers in the bed, buzzed. I’d missed another call and now there were thirteen messages from Dan. That meeting. The script. I was consumed by a new wave of panic as thoughts of how royally I must have stuffed that one up thudded against the inside of my skull. At least I wouldn’t have to worry about quitting the project anymore. I’ve already done so by default, I thought.

The phone rang again. I answered it without checking who it was, hoping that it might be Amberley. It was Dan.

We arranged to meet in the same cafe I’d met Georgie that morning. This time I sat inside, as I waited for Dan to arrive. I tried to think of an excuse for not making the meeting, but I just didn’t have the energy. I saw myself explaining in a very rational fashion the reasons why our writing partnership wouldn’t work, and I tried to find a way to express it that didn’t leave me sounding talentless and scared, but I couldn’t do that either. Anyway, I was sure by then that he knew about Amberley and the miscarriage. He probably knew that Georgie had told me too. He probably knew I’d been to the hospital too. He probably knew everything about me.

Waiting, I felt like a pariah. I was consumed by self-loathing, yet from the outside I’m sure I looked like just another bloke sitting in a cafe with his laptop, busily answering important emails. One part of me, the part that had just fucked up his life again, was a quivering mess, yet the other part, the bit that was still reeling from the day’s events, still on the not-yet whipped side of whiplash caught between discharge and recoil, felt calm. Not peaceful, but calm, stunned into submission, in shock perhaps. I felt like an

alien, not just in the world, but also in me. ET wanted to phone home but where in Christ's name was that? So separated was I that I almost felt I could observe myself sitting there, like an out of body experience; floating about the table, looking down. I gazed at the other customers too. They seemed contained and controlled, sane and relaxed. Were they? What was going on in their heads? How many of them were only just hanging on by their fingernails?

That bloke who'd just had his coffee spilled down the pants of what looked like a new suit by the waitress – how was he feeling right now? Would that be the thing that tipped him over the edge? Was this it, or was he taking it all in his stride, would he take his whole life in his stride? He seemed to be OK with it, brushing at the spreading stain with a balled up napkin while all the time reassuring the waitress that he was fine. Maybe he was only being so nice because she was pretty and we'll all do anything to please a pretty girl, especially one in distress, even if they're in distress because they've just ruined your new suit.

How was she feeling? Was she new on the job? I hadn't seen her in there before. She looked so young, perhaps about eighteen. Maybe this was her first job? Perhaps she was a student and maybe she should actually be at home finishing an assignment, but instead she's here because she needs the money. Maybe her boyfriend's just left her, maybe she's just a clumsy fuck, maybe she deserves it.

Strands of dyed blonde hair had come away from her ponytail as she fussed around, mopping up the spilled coffee. This cafe was always very busy and she'd been run off her feet. I'd watched her. Of course I'd watched her; she was, as I said earlier, very pretty. But what was she feeling? Her face was red, but was she just embarrassed or was she really upset? Waitressing was a hard job. Was she coping?

She looked my way and I flashed her a little, sympathetic smile. Clumsy or not, she was lovely, but she misinterpreted it as a summons.

"I'll be there in a minute," she said, thoroughly politely.

I started to protest, to say that I was just trying to show solidarity, but she'd looked away and I thought what's the point anyway? She thinks I'm a heartless, selfish bastard who can't wait for two minutes while she cleans up a mess and as far as I and several others are concerned, right now, she's probably right.

I turned away and looked out the window, but I couldn't leave the idea that she thought I was a bastard alone. I didn't want her to think I was uncaring. I didn't know her from a bar of soap, but I wanted her to like me, or at least understand that I was just trying to be decent. I desperately and suddenly needed someone to think I was nice. I was sick of being a disappointment. If I could just make her see that I was on her side, things might be a little better. She had almost finished cleaning up the mess and would have been over in a minute. I should just wait, I thought, I can explain then. I could tell her that I just wanted to see if she was OK. I should just wait.

I couldn't wait.

I got up and crossed the floor. I reached out and gently touched her arm, to get her attention.

She looked up, red faced and now impatient, "I said, I'll be there in a minute." Still polite, but with an edge. She looked at the guy in the suit, the guy with a lap full of coffee, and rolled her eyes, as she turned away from me.

I reached out and touched her arm again, "Excuse me."

"Please don't touch me," she said forcibly, turning to face me. I realised I was beginning to look stupid, exactly like the kind of weirdo she probably thought I was, but I had to tell her.

"I'm sorry, I just wanted –"

The guy she'd spilled coffee over looked up from his suit mopping and gave me a withering look. "Are you alright mate? Just let her do her job. Is he bothering you?"

“No, I’m fine, it’s nothing.”

“Did he grab you?”

“No, it was – I’m fine.”

She was blushing now. People at nearby tables were looking. I was embarrassed and increasingly frustrated by my inability to get my message across, at everyone’s seeming determination to misunderstand me. I know this bloke was only trying to be nice, or was he? Was he trying to do the hero bit in front of this girl?

“Mate,” I said, “this is none of your business. I didn’t grab her. I was just trying to explain something to her.”

“What?”

“None of your business. Look it doesn’t matter. Just leave it alone,” I said through clenched teeth. He flushed too. We looked like three little red toffee apples.

The manager came across. “Is there anything the matter here?” he said to no one in particular. I was incandescent inside. Couldn’t they see me burn? I was like a freshly struck match. Couldn’t they smell the sulphur?

“Everything’s fine,” the waitress said, looking into my eyes, willing it to be so, hoping this weirdo wasn’t going to wreck her night.

Her look drove me to a new level. I’m on your side, I thought. I’m the good guy, please just let me be the good guy. I’m not someone you need to be worried about.

She turned to Prince Charming and smiled, and he smiled back at her, and then the manager, desperate to keep things uninteresting, smiled at them both.

I waited for Prince Charming to say something, to take charge of the situation and save them all from the nutbag. I was willing him to, but he remained silent. I had

never seen him before in my life but in that second I hated him more than anyone I'd ever known. He was the straw and I was the camel's back. Seconds ago I'd wanted to be the nice guy, but that moment was gone. My frustration and embarrassment were quickly devolving into anger, slipping down the evolutionary ladder, bypassing the cerebral cortex and linking up with the savage razor-clawed reptile brain. An anger directed only at him, in his fancy fucking suit. I thrilled at the prospect of his trying to solve the problem, to defuse the situation. I stared him down, aching for him to start. I was completely on the edge, but of what?

Instead of pattering out, the match inside me burned on, setting my whole being alight. If I'd opened my mouth, dragon fire would have burst forth, incinerating Prince Charming in his chair. Nothing mattered. My head was clear of worries about Chrissie, Amberley and Georgie and of Dan. There was nothing but him and me. The whole cafe was looking at us now. The waitress had moved away and the manager and Prince Charming were staring at me like I was drunk. What would I have seen if I were in their shoes? A madman, a drunk, a junkie, someone who assaults women? I'd drunk in this cafe for years but I didn't know the management, they didn't know me, it wasn't that kind of place. No one there knew anything about me other than I was standing there, red faced, silent, with my fists clenched. I could feel tears welling in my eyes. Not of sadness or of pain, though. I don't know where they came from.

"Are you OK?" the manager asked me, as I stood there staring at His Highness.

I glanced at him, more of a reflex than anything else. At that moment, Prince Charming reached out to me. Maybe he thought I was about to topple over, maybe he thought I needed to be restrained, maybe he was just offering his hand. I don't know, but it was all the provocation I needed and I snapped. Without any conscious intention I brushed his hand away, pulled my arm back and sent my fist flying into his jaw.

I don't know if I actually roared, but in my head I did. I roared like a bear, like a lion. All the frustration of the past several months poured into my fist and I drove it into the face of that shitty fucking interfering bastard. I was animal. I would have taken anyone on. The whole fucking city. Somebody grabbed me and turned me around. I

don't know who, but as soon as they did, I felt the surge of treacherous adrenaline peter out, leaving me utterly and instantly spent.

"I'm OK," I struggled to say, pulling away from them and turning back to the guy I'd just punched, who was holding his nose with both hands trying to staunch the blood. People began to gather round us and especially him.

"Call the police!" somebody yelled."

I started crying. The tears were uncontrollable. Deep man-sobs. The kind that scare women. Perversely, though, all I could think was that I'd never be able to come to this cafe ever again. I moved towards Prince Charming, to do what? I don't know. Apologise? Hopefully. It had been seconds since I'd hit him and yet it felt like years ago. I was no longer the man who had punched him. He stood up as I approached and someone moved between us, trying to shield him, but he pushed them aside. I opened my mouth to say something, but he closed it with a right cross that would have done Mike Tyson proud.

I came to with my head between my knees in the back room of the cafe. One of the waiters was holding a tea towel full of ice to my jaw. I started when I realised where I was and what he was doing, but he told me to stay still and just relax. I tried to sit up straight, but the pain was intense. I let him gently ease my head back as he continued to hold the ice to my chin.

"Can you hold this?" he said, putting my hand up to my jaw. I tried to speak, but a jolt of pain shot through my face. I nodded.

"Good," he said, "don't move. I'll be back in a minute."

A few minutes later he came back in with a policeman and an ambulance medic in tow. I hadn't noticed, but as the medic took the tea towel away from my jaw, it was soaked in blood. He opened my eyelids wide and shone a light in my eyes.

"Concussion," he said, as he then began to very gently manipulate my lower jaw.

"And a broken jaw, I think."

The policeman stepped in to advise me that I could be charged with affray and assault. He asked me if I had any I.D. and I pulled out my licence. He began asking questions, but I couldn't reply. I couldn't speak. I tried, but the pain was enormous, and the medic advised me to contain my answers to nods and shakes of the head. Gentle ones. Meekly and without protest, I let them stand me up, take my arms and lead me through the cafe and out to the waiting ambulance. Another medic and another policeman were sitting with the guy I'd punched. His nose had stopped bleeding and he looked up at me as I passed, shaking his head and tapping his temple. As if I didn't know.

As my escorts and I stepped out into the street I heard a voice call my name. It was Dan. He ran the last few steps up to where I stood at the back of the ambulance.

"Jesus, are you alright?" he said to me. "What's going on, where are you taking him?" he said to the others.

"Who are you?" asked the cop.

"I'm his lawyer," said Dan, leading him off to one side, using all his charm to wheedle out of him exactly what had happened.

The medic helped me up the steps of the ambulance and onto a cot. "Which hospital?" Dan asked, leaning through the open doors?"

"St. Vincent's," said the medic.

"I'll see you there, Bill," he said, running off in the direction of the police car.

The medic wrapped my neck in a brace and my head in a bandage. "Don't try to talk, just keep still," he said.

I gladly complied, letting the cool of the pillow soothe my aching head and the rumble of the road lull me into a doze.

I spent the next few hours in a hospital-tinged blur. After sitting around for what felt like forever waiting for an X-ray, I was told as they wheeled me into surgery, that my jaw was broken and that I had a mild concussion. Thankfully, none of my teeth were missing, although I had bitten into my tongue, which would heal of its own accord, apparently.

NINE: Comfortably Numb

I awoke to the sound of quiet, but insistent, argument. I opened my eyes and looked around. At the end of the bed were two figures, Dan and Sam, Why are they in my room, I thought? I tried to call out to them but I couldn't open my mouth. I must have made some sort of noise, though, because they turned to look at me. I remembered where I was and why and I had no desire to talk, so I feigned sleep. Even though I was completely pumped full of drugs I knew that I had a lot of embarrassing explaining to do and I was keen to put that off for as long as I could.

Dan called my name quietly, but I ignored him and willed myself back to sleep.

"He's gone back to sleep," he whispered.

"Prick," Sam said. "Well I'm not hanging around any longer, and you shouldn't either. He's obviously going to be alright."

"I'm going to stick around for a bit, I've called his parents and I'm waiting for them to call back."

"He doesn't deserve you as a friend. When's he going to wake up to himself?"

I was awake and hearing every word.

"Sam, please," he said

I was bone tired and I wanted to sleep so badly, to just shut down for a while and not have to put up with myself, but I was caught like a fish on the hook of their arguing and I couldn't work free. Sam had said she was going to leave, but she was still there. I caught snatches of fierce whispers from her and placating tones from him. Raised voices, like lying in bed and listening to your parents fight wondering if it's your fault, like kids do, but this time knowing for sure that it was all my fault.

“It’s Chrissie you should feel sorry for, not him,” Sam hissed. “How he could let her go through all that by herself?”

She paused. But only for a moment.

“Sam, leave it please. It’s been a long night, he’s not well, he –”

“And when’s he going to pay you the money he owes you?” She was livid, absolutely livid. I think that if we’d been alone in that hospital room she might have taken a pillow to my face and put me out of her misery.

Dan said nothing.

“Do you even know how much he owes you, us? It’s \$6000, Dan. Six thousand.”

“Why are you being so hard about this? Look at him. He’s fucked. He’s going through a very rough time, he’ll pay it back.”

“When?”

“He’ll pay it back. I know he will. You sound like you hate him. He’s our friend.”

“He’s an idiot. I can’t believe he left Chrissie on her own, to go through. . . all that. It makes me so angry. And what about Georgie?”

“Georgie? She was having the affair not him –”

“Do you blame her? He’s going nowhere Dan. No job. Never has any money. Nowhere. He’s a dreamer. A wanker. He’s got no fucking idea about anything.” Her voice rose and broke, and I risked a peek. I saw Dan holding her tight as she wept silently on his shoulder.

“It’s just not fair that people like him have the chance to make babies and they don’t even care. He doesn’t even care. And we can’t –” The curtain around the bed rattled and I watched, through half-closed eyelids, as Dan led her away.

She was right though: I had no idea. About anything.

I lay there unable to think straight, running my fingers inside numb lips, along thin wires neatly woven around what felt like screws or staples. Tracing the same route, my half-chewed tongue followed my fingers in their quest, both searching for a way out, or a way in. Pressed against a wall of ivory and steel, like hands pressed against a glass partition in a prison visiting room, they sought each other. It was as if I was truly separated now: the inner me locked off from the outer me.

Fuelled by painkillers I drifted in and out of consciousness after Dan left, tortured by the idea that I’d never be me again, never be the same again. Lost and unable to truly sleep my thoughts raced, dancing between memory and dream, drenched in drama and tangled in dreck as the TV flashed The X-Files at me and through the speaker hanging by my head, Mulder, that great chaser of all things truthful, drizzled PoMo sci-fi philosophy into my ear.

“The truth is out there,” he intoned in his deadpan, you’ll-never-see-my-lips-move Scully, fashion. “The truth is out there,” he said again with such conviction, kicking my semi-sedated brain into gear, as if discovering the truth were as simple as visiting a museum, a relative, the Pope, or any of a billion other things of which it could reasonably be said are ‘out there’. As if the truth were out there like the sea is out there, unencumbered and open, free for all and anyone, to dive into, to swim in and to drown in. He wasn’t speaking metaphorically or whimsically, there was no allegory or esoteric mysticism involved: it sounded as if he knew that finding the truth was as simple as following a map. It was out THERE, as in over there, as in specifically, frustratingly and elusively in some place somewhere, waiting to be discovered like lost change down the back of the couch.

Such bullshit. I reached into the cupboard next to my bed, looking for water and instead found my laptop.

Notetoelf.blogspot.com, 12:15am, 2 March 2011

Even though he spoke with such surety, Mulder was always thwarted in his quest for the truth, although you always thought he would get there in the end – after all this was TV – and that was reassuring. You liked the idea that somewhere there was a road map to understanding, and that clarity was attainable, and that if you struggled hard enough you'd find it, and in big capital letters too: not just truth, but THE TRUTH.

You used to think that such a state of Truth-knowingness would come naturally once you'd grown-up: once you'd reached adulthood. That it would fall on you like the gentle rain from Heaven and that from then on you'd know THE TRUTH and you'd speak with the same authority and wisdom that adults used when they spoke to you when you were a kid, but then your twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-fifth and thirtieth birthdays passed and you were no closer to feeling grown-up or acquiring any kind of sageliness. No matter how much you aged, you never seemed to get any older, any smarter, any clueier about the world. You remained clueless. And that's when you started watching The X-Files reruns on TV and even though you thought it was a bit corny, the notion of there being a TRUTH, and of it being attainable, came to replace your idea of osmotically acquired adult-truth-knowingness. Enlightenment, you came to understand, through conspiracy-inspired TV logic, would not descend upon you, but must be sought and earned and so you set out on your quest to investigate your own personal X-Files in order to do so.

Not that your whole appreciation of what THE TRUTH is was based entirely on the musings expressed within one late twentieth century sci-fi soap with postmodernist pretensions. There were earlier, just as powerful, influences. Star Wars for instance, with its slightly more mystical notion of THE TRUTH: The Force. How many times did you stick a bucket on your prepubescent head a la Luke Skywalker when he attempts to fence using The Force instead of his eyes, in the vain hope that, like him, you'd still magically be able to see? How fervently did you hope that inside you too, was a more powerful element, a guiding force for want of a better word, which would lead you away from

worry and endless doubt, because the you on the outside, the you others saw always seemed pretty second-rate?

You can trace that yearning feeling back even further than that though, to some wild doco called Overlords of the UFO you saw on TV when you were a kid. How incredible was that Uri Geller? Such powers. How you rubbed and caressed your mum's keys and spoons after watching that. How you trained your meagre mind on them in the hope that just one would bend, or at least warp or twist just a little, and even though they never did, that didn't make you stop believing, rather it just intensified your search for that nameless thing that was always missing, even from that early age. It wasn't called THE TRUTH back then, though, it didn't have a name then: instead it was an undefined gnawing, a craving for something other than what was – some point of difference. Something that would release you from that crushing feeling of inadequacy and transform you into someone better. Not that you could have articulated that feeling, and as for transcendence you could no more have understood, or even spelled, that word than you could have leap-frogged the Harbour Bridge. You just knew it as a feeling of unease, of dissatisfaction which manifested itself in an obsessive need to investigate and analyse everything, to pull apart wrist watches and unravel the insides of golf balls, to endlessly arrange and rearrange your Lego bricks looking for what? The perfect something, space rocket, supercar or fortress: who knew? You were Richard Dreyfuss in Close Encounters of the Third Kind. You were compelled to build that truncated mountain, but not in your living room, in your brain, over and over again until you found, perfectly, its dimensions, driven relentlessly to discover its shape, without knowing why, knowing only that you must, must, must. Eventually you'd gnawed your way through everything within reach of your hands and your tiny little mind and so you turned on yourself, dismembering and rearranging your own cogs and wheels in a desperate attempt to understand. Because once you'd understood yourself, once you knew who you were perhaps then you could break free, you could leave yourself behind and become someone else, someone who didn't doubt, who believed, who was content, who was right.

And then along came first year physics at university. No amount of transcendental yearning or unarticulated angst was going to save you there. Physics was never going to help you find any truth, let alone THE TRUTH. All the stuff you were interested in had already been explained away, according to the lecturers. There was nothing other than that which is quantifiable and how do you quantify unease? Electron microscopes, oscillators and spectrographs, wonderful tools they may be, can't help you locate a state of mind or a feeling.

You could not be with both THE TRUTH and first year physics at the same time, you decided. No two objects can occupy the same point in space at the same time, any first year physics student knows that, and so there certainly wasn't room for both of them in your head. Hence your spectacular failure and hence the transfer to drama. Did you actually want to make that move or did that 'just happen' too? You were so out of your depth when it came to that final physics exam that all you could do was laugh. You tried to answer the first few questions, the easy ones, but by the time you came to the meaty part of the paper you were utterly defeated, so instead of trying, you drew a picture on the answer sheet of yourself waving bye, bye and you walked out.

Despite failing so massively, you did learn enough physics to be aware that even though you could not be in the same place as THE TRUTH, you would be able to observe it, if you knew where it was. But you also knew enough to know that wouldn't help you either. Because as an observer your very observations of the object you were observing, as you observed it, would change it and so your observations of THE TRUTH would be spurious, as THE TRUTH admits no change: it is of itself perfect and therefore any change to it renders it no longer itself i.e. no longer THE TRUTH. To know THE TRUTH through observation is, therefore, to know only a version, or more accurately, a perversion of THE TRUTH. That's a mixture of first year physics and a pop-philosophy book you read once. Still, you weren't completely convinced by all that and you still carried that feeling of unrest around inside, no matter how well it was ever explained away, which probably explains why you failed physics and chemistry and biology too, because all of their explanations were always too simple, no matter how complicated they were.

And then along came The X Files, which both intensified your distrust of the information you were sold at university and inflamed your belief that there must be something more. You knew the show was a nonsense, but then wasn't everything? Why should a TV show be any less real than a nonsensical real world?

Then The X Files the movie arrived, blowing away all your faith in Mulder and his search in one fell swoop, when its producers claimed in all the trailers that it was finally going to reveal THE TRUTH, while in truth it just created more uncertainty. This spoke volumes to you. You were finally becoming convinced after over a hundred episodes that THE TRUTH wasn't out there, or rather in there, as in the TV, after all. Let down by both institutionalised education and by TV, left with just yourself once again, you were as lost as the Warren Commission, marooned on some grassy knoll destined to go over and over the same problems for the rest of your life without any possibility of there being an answer.

Lost.

Not LOST the show, although you did dally with that. The characters on that show searched for the truth about their lives. They too believed it was out there, but life for them was so cruel, so twisted, so unexpected and non-logical, that it became boring after a while. It promised so much and yet all it did was go over the same old ground (and how we found the same old fears) too, week after week, until it disappeared up its own diminishing ratings figure.

Maybe, you thought, THE TRUTH was so hard to find because there was no truth. Or maybe they were right in saying, "The Truth is out there," but maybe out there was not a specific place: maybe it was everywhere. Maybe THE TRUTH was actually readily available, astonishingly evident and not mysterious at all. Maybe THE TRUTH was the chaos and haphazard nature of nature, the blind uncaring savagery with which a lion eats a baby wildebeest alive: the way a male gorilla, although driven mad by a life spent locked up in

a zoo, nurtures a human baby which has fallen into its compound keeping it safe instead of killing it, until it is rescued by the keeper. Maybe THE TRUTH is cold and unfeeling and offers no solace at all. Maybe THE TRUTH is lies and lies are THE TRUTH. Could it be true that Double Speak and Double Think are THE TRUTH? Does two and two really equal five? Sometimes, sometimes three, sometimes four, sometimes five, sometimes all of them at once, it is hard to remember, but you think you knew once. That you had a moment of clarity once, when all was certain and the wind stopped howling and the rain ceased and you popped your head up out of the now calm water and you saw land, but just for a second. After all, they say truth is beauty and yet they also say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, rendering it subjective and inexact: mysterious and unreliable. Maybe THE TRUTH is that there is nothing out there: there is nothing to search for. Maybe you already know THE TRUTH but are unable to recognise it. Maybe THE TRUTH is that ache in your guts and that buzz in your head.

“Trust no one,” was another of Mulder’s favourite lines and you got to thinking maybe that was THE TRUTH. That there is nothing to rely on: nothing on which you can build, no one in whom you can confide, no one to believe in. You will never ever be grown-up, you will never understand, you cannot comprehend and so it is better never even to try.

THE TRUTH changes from day to day, it is fluid, it is malleable, it is a deluge of dross and an ocean of perforated meaning, it is love and anti-love. You can investigate and seek all you like, but all you will ever discover are more questions, greater discomfort and harsher harshness. Better to abandon your search and just exist. Actions not words. If nothing makes sense then nothing needs to be explained; you owe nothing to a world, which refuses to give anything to you. Never complain and never explain.

“THE TRUTH is out there, maaaaaan!” they should have said as in out of sight, wild, weird maaaaaan, as in THE TRUTH will blow your mind Jimi Hendrix-style. THE TRUTH is the biggest head-trip you will ever, ever take, higher than LSD, speedier than speed, dopier than grass. It is a trip. It is the

only trip. THE TRUTH will set you free, but freedom, to quote Janis Joplin, "Is just another word for nothing left to lose". What else could you do once you've discovered that there really is nothing going on other than stuff? That's all there ever has been and that's all there ever will be. Stuff. THE TRUTH is stuff, your stuff and my stuff. Our stuff, however crappy and underwhelming that might be. The TRUTH is not something to look for, THE TRUTH is what we are, it is you and I, Mulder and we are IT.

How can you believe in anything, or want, or need, or belong to, or desire to do anything after learning that? How could you? Why would you? Yet, why doesn't that stop you pulling the world to pieces? Why can't you stop dissecting it even though you know you'll only find stuff? Why can't you stop searching? Because you KNOW that there is nothing to find, but you don't BELIEVE it.

This idea that has just bubbled away in the back of your head all your life, along with that buzzing fridge, is becoming harder and denser, reducing like a master stock into a thick, glutinous mass of intensity. Forming slowly into the cancer that will one day, surely, take your life. For the truth, according to the newspapers, is that everything gives us cancer and that everything we do destroys everything we are and it's just a matter of choosing your poison. You chose, however subconsciously, to poison yourself with yourself. It's now just a matter of time. Unless. . .

Sometimes it feels as if your mind, like the molten iron core of the Earth, is slowly revolving inside your head, and like that mass of white hot magma, it's constantly searching, under tremendous pressure, like your fingers, like your tongue, for a crack in the mantle through which it will burst, shattering your whole skull, just like Lee Harvey Oswald shattered JFK's (Or did he? THE TRUTH again, slippery and gistless, like great gobs of presidential grey matter sliding down that grassy knoll). Spraying your brains all over the room in one final, orgasmic mind-spasm. Ending in a hail of bloody butchery, your lifetime of empty fussing and frustration.

This idea that there is no absolute, no law, no yardstick other than that which we create for ourselves and that your mind is nothing more than a squirming knot of acid worms would be abhorrent to you if you were able to admit it to yourself, or come out and say it: it would make you appear awful to others too. But maybe you already are awful to others. Maybe you're just awful. Maybe that's THE TRUTH.

You're so far from understanding anything that you aren't even aware there is anything to understand, until you've destroyed your life, until you've unravelled the only thing you have left: yourself. Until you're lying in a bed broken, separated and alone. Until your best friend's wife calls you a wanker and a loser, a no hoper and a dreamer. Only then do you realise what THE TRUTH is, only then do you realise that THE TRUTH is writ small: all lower case and that it is you and that you don't matter and neither does it. Even so, if someone asked you then what THE TRUTH was, you'd say something trite such as honesty or you'd try and dredge something up that you read once, because you could never say that THE TRUTH is just made up, you could never openly admit something so bold because that would mean you'd have to make your own truth. It would mean you were responsible. That you were in charge, and then whose fault would it all be?

TEN: Clown Time is Over

I'd love to say I woke up the next morning a changed man as a result of all that morphine-charged rumination. That after spending the whole night thinking and listening to Mulder and mulling, adding, subtracting, cross referencing and fact checking, albeit in a heightened state of drug-assisted consciousness, that I knew how to make it all better: I didn't. But I wanted to.

I was tired of feeling disgusted with myself. I wanted to like myself. Again? For the first time?

I lay in bed listening for a while before I opened my eyes. The noise of the hospital waking up was strangely soothing. The clatter of trolleys, the squeak of soft-soled shoes, the sound of murmuring and the smell of breakfast. I realised I was hungry, but as I tried to sit up the sudden pain in my jaw told me that I wouldn't be doing the bacon and eggs thing anytime soon.

I explored my jaw gingerly, feeling awake, and yet exhausted; drained in the way you feel after a really good cry; clean, almost, on the inside, in my soul. Sure I also felt shame when I thought of how I'd ended up in here, or of Amberley, or Chrissie, or of what I'd heard Sam say the night before, but I also felt as if I'd bottomed out. It couldn't get any worse, could it? I couldn't think of anyone else who owed me a thrashing, either physically or emotionally, and I certainly wasn't going to go looking for one. If I was a big drinker, I'd be ready to say, "Hi, my name is Bill and I am an alcoholic."

Do they have wankers anonymous? Is there somewhere you can go where people get together and say, "Hi, my name is Bill and I'm a shithead," or, "Hi, I'm Bill and I'm so self-absorbed that if I was a sponge I'd soak myself up so completely that I'd disappear up my own Chux-lined arsehole?" I wish they did, perhaps they do. It'd be wonderful, pathetic and hilarious and I'd still be going there now.

Still it couldn't get any worse, could it?

Yes it could. Much worse.

Amberley.

Oh, fuck.

We were due to fly out at midday. It was 7am. I had to call her. My phone battery was flat, damn it. I motioned to a nurse and asked her if I could make a phone call. She brought me a phone and it was then that I realised I didn't have Amberley's mobile number. It was programmed into my phone and written on a sticky note on the fridge so I'd never had a need to remember it.

I called directory enquiries and after many, many failed attempts to make myself understood gave up. You can still talk with your jaw wired shut – it's like talking with your teeth clenched, but doing so with a tongue that feels like a harpooned fur seal is not recommended. I called for another nurse and had her call directory enquiries for me. She gave me Amberley's number and I dialled it.

I felt panicky, like I needed to do a wee really bad. My heart was thumping and I had no idea what I was going to say. The phone went straight to message bank where a cheery Amberley informed me that she was out of mobile range because she was, "in Paris!" I remembered that she wasn't taking her phone. I left some sort of garbled message in the hope that she might check her phone before she left, but knowing her, she was probably already on her way to the airport.

Wait a minute, I thought, surely she's not heading off on this trip without me. I dialled her again. Message. I got the nurse to call directory enquiries and dialled her at home and at work where I encountered her assistant Tara.

"No, Amberley's not here," she said. "She's on her way to Paris with you, isn't she? She popped in this morning on the way to the airport to drop something off."

I said nothing.

“Is everything OK?” she said. “Your voice sounds weird.”

“Yes, sore throat. Been held up. If she calls again, can you give her this number,” I mumbled, giving her the number of the direct line to the ward, but of course not telling her I was in hospital.

Fuck. She was going.

I called for the nurse again, who was getting a little miffed by now, and asked her when I could leave.

“Not until the doctor has signed you out later this morning,” she said.

I told her I had to be at the airport to make an urgent flight, which didn’t seem to impress her all that much. She said she’d see what she could do, but it was unlikely that a doctor could be roused this early.

“What if I just get up and leave?” I asked.

“Yeah, right,” she said, shaking her head, as she walked away, “How far do you think you’re going to get dressed like that?”

Not very far considering that the gown I was wearing hardly covered my bits and was completely open at the back.

The hard thing about having your jaw wired is that you still keep trying to open your mouth for the first couple of days when you’re trying to speak, or in this case shout at a bloody nurse, which is very painful. I winced as I stifled a, “Where are my clothes?” letting out a low moan instead, which caught Mum’s attention as she and Dad rounded the curtain at the end of my bed and sent her hurtling towards me.

“Are you alright?” she said, closely followed by, “Don’t try to talk.”

I told her that I was OK, that I could talk, but my tongue was very sore. I nodded at Dad, who nodded back. Mum gave me a pen and a pad that she'd brought and she and Dad sat either side of the bed.

“So you don't have to talk,” she said.

Dad took my right hand, causing me to wince again. The knuckles on that hand were aching and bruised from where I'd hit Prince Charming.

“Let me have a look,” he said, as I tried to pull my hand away.

He maintained his grip, tilting his head back and dropping his glasses to the end of his nose, to better examine the damage, “Well, you won't be the only one with a sore head this morning then.”

Mum was leaning in and looking at my jaw. Concerned as always, she tutted and shook her head, half in sympathy and half in annoyance. I expected her to give me one of those great motherly lectures filled with relief and anger, joy and frustration. I imagined her answering Dan's call at whatever o'clock it was they finally made contact, her heart in her mouth. A real policeman on the doorstep moment. She dreaded phone calls outside of what she considered “normal time”, as to her they always heralded bad news. She would have heard Dan's voice and immediately seen me dead. I eased my hand away from Dad's grasp and pulled her to me in a hug. I reached out and claimed Dad too. I wanted to apologise for putting them through this, for Dan's phone call, for having them see me like this, for being such a deadbeat. I wanted to explain so much. (And I would as soon as I'd sorted the Amberley situation out.) Whether it was because of the drugs or the late night ramblings, or maybe it was because I knew I couldn't. I wanted to talk to them, to tell them everything, all about Georgie and Amberley and Chrissie and the fact that, although I took them for granted, I really did love them. (But not right then. Not that I didn't love them right then, I just wanted to get out of there right then.) I thought about going for the pen and pad but how can you write all that down? Instead, I just held them a little closer. As we separated I wiped my eyes, Mum blew her nose and Dad cleared his throat.

I expected Mum to talk, but it was Dad who said, “Are you happy son?” Not are you OK? are you well? are you coping? or any of a dozen other questions, but are you happy? I don’t think he’d ever asked me that before in my life, directly. Maybe it was his way of asking me if I was well: upstairs.

“Your mother and I, we just want you to be happy.”

He looked at me and nodded. And Mum squeezed my hand.

“I suppose you’ll have to postpone your holiday won’t you?” Mum said.

“Is there anything we can do?” Dad continued.

I looked at him and smiled my newly crooked smile and squeezed his hand too. There’s going to be a lot of hand squeezing over the next few weeks, I thought.

I began to speak, but Mum stopped me. “Don’t try to talk love.”

I motioned for the pen and flipped open the cover of the pad. I struggled to find anything to write. I knew what I wanted to write, but it would be so much easier if I could just say it.

“I’m fine,” I wrote. “Will explain later. Feeling much better. Have been stupid. Sorry.”

It looked so sketchy and telegram-like. I owed them so much more in terms of explanation and I wanted to give it to them, but what could I do?

“Will talk more, I promise. As soon as can. Tongue too sore.” I underlined promise.

This is stupid, I thought. I put down the pad and mumbled: “I love you both very much.”

“You’d love a raspberry what?” said Dad?

“We love you too,” said Mum, as if I didn’t know. As if their entire lives since my birth hadn’t been a homage to my very existence. I looked into their eyes and saw this, really saw it for the first time. Saw the pain that sat there and realised that perhaps I did not really know the depth of their devotion, had taken it for granted and had exploited it.

It was all becoming very Oprah. I felt such love for them that I was seconds away from jumping on the couch a la Tom Cruise. We were all saved that embarrassment by an interruption from a nurse keen to check on my vital signs.

“You should be asleep.”

“We’ll be off then,” said Dad, “We just wanted to check you were OK. You get some rest, we’ll come back later.”

As soon as the nurse left, I got up and looked in the little bedside cupboard. In a plastic bin liner on the bottom shelf were my clothes. I drew the curtain around my bed and changed. I felt a little woozy and had to sit down a couple of times, but I was pushed on by adrenaline and the need to see Amberley before she left.

There was blood all over my jacket, so I wasn’t going to be wearing that. I collected my thoughts, settled myself down, took a deep breath and then drew the curtains back and walked calmly out of the hospital.

I made the airport with minutes to go before the plane left, did the e-ticket thing and sprinted towards the gates. I had to see Amberley and tell her that I loved her, no hesitation this time, no qualification just the words I love you. Because I did. I knew it then. It was all going to be alright. Please.

I unpacked my pockets, took off my watch, my shoes and put all my stuff in the little tray that slides through the X-ray machine and walked through the scanner. Of course

it beeped. With a mouth full of wire and staples my head went off like a pinball machine.

I told the guy that it was my head and that my jaw was wired shut, but he made me go through the scanner again.

“I’m going to miss my flight,” I tried to explain, patiently. “I’m very late as it is.”

“This won’t take a moment sir,” he said. “If you’ll just step to the side, so that these other people can go through.”

“It’s my head. My jaws are wired,” I said once again, very patiently and slowly, as I stood there arms out stretched as he scanned my entire body. Unfortunately with your jaw wired, slowly and patiently can sound like low and menacing, which after last night’s efforts I was determined not to be.

One of his colleagues waved him over and I could see him pointing to my bloodstained jacket, which still lay in the tray with my other metallic stuff.

I could hear them doing the last call for my flight and again I felt the urge to pee – I’m not going to get there.

My guy beckoned me over.

“Is this your jacket sir?”

“Yes.”

He and his colleague retreated a few steps and conversing in whispers.

“Can you explain, sir, why you have checked in for a flight to Europe with no luggage?”

“Yes,” I said.

But could I? How long did they have? I knew that I had mere seconds, but to do this story justice I'd have to go back months, back to the break-up, surely, or perhaps back to the start of time.

"Hey Dickhead!" yelled some blonde teenager on his way to Bali no doubt, as he mimed the condom being pulled over the head motion.

"He's the guy from that ad," he continued as he and his mates, who'd all recognised me by now, mimed the condom manoeuvre.

Not now, I thought. Please not now.

This attention was not overlooked by the customs guys, neither of whom seemed to have seen the ad, but both of whom saw my fans' loving tribute as fuel to the fire already lit under my status as a suspicious passenger.

"Your lack of luggage sir, can you explain it?"

"Yes, I came straight from the hospital, dashed home and picked up my passport, didn't have time to pack and came straight here -"

"To?"

"To board a plane to Paris with my girlfriend, which I am now in great danger of missing."

"And your girlfriend is expecting you on this flight?"

"Yes, well we broke up, I think, but yes I'm pretty sure she is expecting me." Even I was suspicious of me now.

"And can you explain these blood stains on your jacket, sir?"

"Yes, I was in a fight last night, hence the wired jaw, and -"

“Could you step this way please sir?” he said and gently, but ever so firmly he and his mate took an arm each and led me away to an interview room. I heard the final call for my flight, heard my name, and knew I wasn’t going to make it.

I spent an hour in there with the security guards, a time period made longer no doubt by the fact that when they called the hospital to check up on my story they were told that I was listed as a missing patient and that I’d left the hospital against doctor’s orders and without signing out.

I checked the times of the next available flight to Paris only to be told that there wouldn’t be another Alitalia flight until next week and that if I wanted to, I could upgrade to Qantas or some other reputable airline with a slightly more reasonable timetable, but only if I was prepared to part with at least one testicle and the shirt off my back for waiting until the last minute to do so.

I would have done it though, if only I’d had the money, but all my money was tied up in my useless e-ticket. Anyway, I had no idea where we were staying, Amberley had taken care of all the arrangements. I could fly to Paris, but what then?

Well, at least Amberley will have plenty of room on the flight I thought, as I contemplated the fact that she must be sitting there amazed by the fact that I didn’t show up, or have the courtesy to tell her that I wouldn’t be showing up or. . . maybe she couldn’t think any worse of me than she already did and she was sitting there thinking, thank God he didn’t front.

I’ll call her at the hotel, I thought. I can’t call her at the hotel I remembered. I was so desperate to talk to her, so desperate to apologise, to tell her that I loved her and to, if nothing else, explain that I had turned up, even if that was something she hadn’t wanted. But I felt that perhaps it was justice, that maybe fate was beating me up for a reason. A bloody good reason at that.

I went to see Dan on the way home. I just wanted to get all the crap out of the way, over and done with, finished. I'd reconciled myself to the fact that there was nothing I could do for Chrissie other than stay out of her life, Amberley was gone, or rather I'd lost her, and pretty soon, if my suspicions were correct, Dan would be gone, or more correctly, I'd lose him as a friend too. Better to rip the Band-Aid right off than struggle with it bit by bit.

If Dan was surprised to see me when he opened his door, he didn't show it. He simply handed me his phone and said, "It's your mum".

Like a naughty boy being told off, I listened to Mum and Dad tell me how worried they were when the hospital called after I'd left. I apologised over and over again. Sincerely and honestly, and promised I'd go back to the hospital as soon as I'd finished with Dan.

"Sorry about that mate," I mumbled as I handed the phone back to Dan. I must have looked terrible, I sure felt that way. He looked me up and down and said, "Shouldn't you be on your way to Paris?"

"Long story."

He nodded. "Coffee?"

"Please."

Then he said something I never ever thought I'd hear him say to me: "Take off your pants."

"Pardon?"

"There's a big blood stain down the right leg. I'll give them a quick wash for you. And your jacket as well."

I sat at the kitchen bench in my underpants and T-shirt as he bustled off to the laundry. Returning, he crossed to the stove and poured me a cup, which he placed carefully in front of me. I avoided his gaze, mumbled thanks and sipped it. Ouch. Hot coffee and sore tongue – not a good mix. I topped my cup up with cold water from the tap and sipped more slowly.

I could feel him watching me. Seated there in his blue towelling dressing gown, slippers crossed under the table, looking like he owned the place. Well, he did own the place I thought, but does he have to look so smug about it? Why doesn't he say something? The coffee was strong and it cleared my head. I looked around the kitchen taking in the dishwasher and the six-burner stove, the double door fridge and the island bench. He really does own this, I thought. He's a grown-up. He has things and they're his. He looks after them and they work. He contemplates buying things like houses and cars, based on ideas of quality and reliability rather than how cheap they are.

“Do you want to talk about last night?”

I looked at him, and he at me. I thought for a moment.

“No,” I mumbled through clenched teeth. “But not because I'm trying to avoid the issue. I'm just not sure what happened yet. I think I had some sort of meltdown.”

“You sure did.”

I blew the steam off my coffee.

“I've squared things up with the police and with the bloke you thumped. He's not going to press charges, nor is the cafe owner and so the police aren't going to pursue the matter. All you have to do is pay for the dry cleaning of one suit. You're lucky you throw a weak punch. Very lucky.”

“Thanks. Thanks so much.” I was embarrassed and relieved. To be honest I hadn’t even thought about the police or what trouble I might or might not be in. Jesus, what an idiot. Very lucky indeed.

We both sipped in silence for a few minutes.

“I absolutely owe you one.” Just one? Didn’t I owe him one, plus six grand? “And I’ll pay you and Sam the money I owe you as soon as I can.”

He nodded.

I feel like a criminal, I thought. But how do they feel? Really? I don’t know. I suppose I felt like an asshole. No that’s another euphemism, another escape, another pretence. I felt like a man who had let himself and his friends down. A man who has wasted too many opportunities, a man who sees no prospects for himself. A man who, through indifference, destroyed a pretty good relationship, and a guy who through inaction and a tendency, if not to lie, then surely to filter the truth and an inability to keep his cock in his pants, had lost another great girl. How many do you get in your life? And lastly a man who had

let a girl go through hell on her own because he was too cowardly, callous or just too wrapped up in himself to call her. Is there a word which sums that feeling up? I think there is and it begins with “C” and ends with, “You Next Tuesday” so I think I’ll just stick to asshole thank you: a real fucken asshole of a See You Next Tuesday.

More sipping, more silence.

“Do you want to talk about Chrissie?”

“Did you know? About her being pregnant?”

He looked me in the eye, not straight in the eye, but straighter than I ever could and he said softly, “Yeah.”

“When did you find out?”

“A few weeks ago, I don’t know. Sam told me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me –?”

We both sat up a little straighter in our chairs, he in his blue dressing gown, me in my T-shirt and underpants, two would-be alpha males squaring up against each other in their underwear.

“It wasn’t a conspiracy Bill.”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because Chrissie didn’t want you to know.”

“Yeah, but –”

“Yeah, but nothing. Chrissie didn’t want you to know and you gave everyone the impression that you wanted nothing to do with her.”

“If someone had told me. . .”

“What about if you’d called her? We all told you to do that. Besides it’s not everyone else’s place to look after you Bill. People did what they did because they thought they were doing the right thing, or maybe they were just looking after themselves, and you of all people can’t blame them for that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

It was his turn to look away. To struggle to find words. To wonder what was going on, who he was talking to and why.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He picked up a folder lying on the table and tossed it to me.

“The meeting yesterday.”

“What did they say?” I looked at the folder, not daring to open it, not wanting to know whether it was good news or bad. Wishing I’d been able to tell him beforehand that I didn’t want to be involved anymore. He reached for the folder, but before he could open it I placed my palm down on it, blocking him.

“Wait. I have to tell you something,” I said. “And it’s probably better I tell you before you tell me what’s in here.”

My head ached; did I really want to walk away from what was potentially in that folder?

“OK,” he said, sitting back in his chair.

“I don’t want to be involved anymore. I don’t want to write with you anymore on this project.” I heard those words falling out of my mouth. Such formal speech. So impersonal, but right. I wasn’t entirely sure what I was going to say, but I knew that this wasn’t some out of body experience. This time I was sure. Whether the script was a success or not had little to do with me. I knew that. I knew I didn’t want to be Andrew Ridgeley any longer.

“OK,” he said slowly. “Why?”

“I’m not a writer. You know that and so do I. The stuff in that folder is yours. You don’t need me and I don’t want to be a spare dick.”

He sipped a little more of his coffee and pulled the folder to him. He opened it and took out a document, which he slid across the table to me. It was a contract to write a pilot based on the script we’d written. In the section marked WRITER, typed in Times New Roman bold, 12 point, I think, (see, I did learn something) were my name and Dan’s.

I looked up and pushed the document back to him, “Congratulations,” I said, “but I’m still out. You know you don’t need me. You can say it, you know.”

He reddened. “Bill, I can’t say that.”

‘Well, I can and I have. I’m fucked, but I’ll be even more fucked if I start pretending I’m a writer. I’m an unemployed, ex-half-decent actor with no girlfriend, very few friends and no prospects – and those are my good points. . .’

My limp attempt at humour raised a limp smile. “That’s not entirely correct you know. You weren’t that good an actor.”

I managed a half-laugh. I gripped the coffee cup in both hands and held my body rigid, feeling that if I didn’t I might just float away or fall apart. I couldn’t believe I’d just knocked back that contract, but at the same time I felt relieved: one less thing to worry about. One less lie to lug around.

“Well. OK then,” he said. “But take this.”

He pushed a cheque across the table towards me. A cheque for \$3500.

“What’s this?”

“It’s your share of the writers’ fee for this pilot episode. Now before you say anything. Just listen.”

The lawyer.

“You may not want to continue with this project but you have been instrumental in getting it to where it is and therefore you are entitled to half.”

“I don’t want it. You keep it and write it off against what I owe you.”

“No, it’s your money. Take it. Yes, you owe me some money, but there’s no hurry to pay it back. Get yourself sorted and we’ll work it out.”

“OK.”

I took the cheque and put it in my pocket. It felt wrong, but I guess I was entitled to it and I probably did need it more than he did. I definitely needed it more than he did.

“What are you going to do now?” he asked.

“I’m going to pay you back the six grand I owe you. And soon. I’m sorry, I had no idea it was that much.”

“So you were awake, then? Last night.”

“Yeah. Sam’s right. Everything she said.”

I noticed he didn’t disagree with me. Not even a little bit.

“How are you going to get the money? I could ask around see if I could get you a job or something. It’d just be office work, but. . .”

“Thanks, but I’ll do it, I’ll get more work at the pub.”

It had been a long time since we’d sat around drinking coffee together in the middle of the day. I thought back to the days when we shared a house, when we were students. There were no fancy towelling dressing gowns then. But even so, even though Dan would have been wearing a T-shirt and underpants like I was now, he would have been wearing a towelling dressing gown on the inside. He always had plans. He knew that a man could only get so far in his undies, whereas that’s as far as I’d got. I’d stalled in my underpants. Figuratively speaking, I hadn’t moved on since the late nineties, and literally speaking, I hadn’t either, judging by the condition of the jocks I had on that day. Maybe I should buy some new underpants after all. I had the

washing machine, true, so I didn't need to buy five hundred pairs, but still, maybe I could stretch the budget to a half-dozen or so. Maybe it was time.

“Are you sure there's nothing you want to talk about?” Dan asked, as he stood and carried the cups over to the sink. You're getting a little porky old man, I thought, as I noted the bulge threatening to pop open his dressing gown. You've slowed down a lot. I could see him in an eddy, just going round and round for the rest of his life: thickening around the middle and probably above the neck too.

I shuddered at the thought of going to seed. I was still pretty trim, despite the intense boozing of the last six months. Wow. Was it really that long since I'd quit that job? It was. Time to get started. Where was I going? What was I doing? Hum rising.

Stop. I had to almost tell myself out loud to stop. Maybe I could use some time in an eddy, wrapped up in a nice dressing gown? Would that be so horrible? Would it be worse than continuing to hurtle headlong into life without a clue?

“I've got to go,” I said.

Dan turned. “Don't you think you should wait for your pants to dry?”

“I'll just put them on,” I said. And I did, after he'd pulled them from the dryer, half-wet.

“Before you go,” he said, popping into his office, “you need to get Steve the cafe owner to sign this. It's just something saying that he officially agrees not to take things any further.”

He handed me an envelope.

“Just pop it in the mail once he's signed it. It's addressed, reply paid.”

So organised.

Look after yourself,” he said, as I stood there clutching the envelope, looking like a damp escapee from a nut bag convention.

I smiled a tight smile and so did he. There was a finality to that goodbye which was unexpected and yet necessary. I thought about asking him if I could borrow the beach house for a few days to sort my head out, but I didn't. I didn't need a few days to sort my head out. I didn't need time at the beach. I just needed to get on with things: to pay back the money I owed him for a start.

I headed home on the tram feeling shattered. I felt like I'd been running for the past year, but the closer I got to home the more restless I felt. In my hands I carried the envelope and the cheque Dan had given me. I looked at the cheque. It wasn't from the ABC. It was a personal cheque written by him. Was it really my share of the fee or was he giving me more money? Fuck, how rich could he be? Surely it must be my share. I'd never know unless I asked him and I didn't want to do that. I stared at the three, the five and the two zeros. I wanted that amount of money, but I didn't want those particular dollars: his dollars. I knew, though, that I would cash the cheque eventually. Sooner or later I'd find a way to rationalise that money into my account. A way to convince myself it was my money and I was somehow entitled to it. Poverty has a way of doing that to a person, especially a person like me. I didn't want to be a person like me anymore. Almost without thinking, as I hopped off the tram and definitely without looking back, I screwed the cheque up and piffed it down a storm water drain. Gone. Don't think about it. No big deal. I ran into the flat, hoping for what, I didn't know. Amberley wasn't there. There was, however, an envelope containing her key and a note from her brother stating that she'd asked him to clear out her stuff. There were no contact details. Nothing.

I was locked inside a department store once, when I was about twelve. I took the wrong elevator and ended up stuck inside at closing time. I remember the way I felt – vividly. I was giddy almost, stunned like a rabbit in the headlights with a strange tingling feeling in my guts. Was I trapped in there all weekend? What was I going to do? Would I ever get out?

I had that same feeling now as I followed the trail of disturbance through to the bedroom and the empty wardrobe where Amberley's things had been. The bathroom was similarly empty, the mirror door to the cupboard open and the shelves empty except for my razor and toothbrush. The washing line was empty and the washing machine was gone, which was a bit of a surprise. How can one man lose so many washing machines I thought?

I stood in the corridor, hands on hips, looking into the lounge room and the bedroom, the posters on the wall; everything seemed loaded with some sort of meaning. I dashed into the kitchen and grabbed the phone but who was I going to call? What was I going to say? My skin was crawling. The place was haunted. I had to get out.

Moments later I was back at the tram stop, reading the timetable impatiently, too fast, unable to make any sense of it. I weighed up the pros and cons of waiting for a tram or just walking. I ran. Through the park, racing along paths the wrong way, why do they curve so when you're in a hurry? Inventing short cuts and getting lost. On I ran. My lungs were bursting and I frequently had to stop to rest, to lean against a tree. I had runners on but they were the old-fashioned seventies kind with a sole like a Kraft cheese single, not really meant for running in, but I was possessed. You know those dreams when you can fly, when one step takes you for miles? I felt like that. I couldn't have stopped running if I wanted to. I could feel my jaw with every stride I took, but thanks to the power of medicine it wasn't really hurting, yet. Down Sydney Road, through Parkville and on along Elizabeth Street, past Queen Victoria Market, dodging tourists and locals loaded down with crap and vegetables respectively. Running like I was being chased, like Dustin Hoffman in *The Marathon Man*. Running.

As I headed into the heart of the city I had to stop, my head was bursting. I popped into a 7-11 and bought a Powerade, which I drank in long gulps. Icy cold and sweet it soothed my jaw. Swallowing was hard though and I began to hiccup. My shirt was stuck to my skin and I could feel sweat running down my back and into my still semi-damp pants. I caught sight of myself in a mirror on the wall outside the store. My face was purple and it wasn't just bruises. I lay back against the mirror, turning my back on that image and tried to breathe normally. The hiccups continued for a few minutes

and then my guts cramped around that pool of icy cordial and I stood, hunched over and moaning. Maybe I was turning into a homeless person, maybe this is how it starts. I lurched on, panting, my jaw now beginning to ache. I could see people staring at me, but I didn't care.

On I staggered, really panting and gasping for air now. Bumping into people on the street. Sorry! Excuse me! Look out! I came to a shuddering halt at the corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets soaked with perspiration, hands on knees.

Spent, the impetus to continue to run on past the station and out of the city was gone. People streamed past me, across the busiest intersection in town, ignoring me, unaware of me. They were all going about their business, but where was I going? What was I doing there? The crowd built around me, waiting for the next change in lights. I let them drag me along with them, over the road and into the train station, where I caught the train back home.

I desperately needed a shower, but I couldn't go back in the flat just yet. I stood on the street outside, looking around like a damp untidy tourist, looking for something. Hands in pockets, I found the envelope from Dan.

I felt conspicuous walking back into the cafe, but nobody looked at me, well no more than you would normally look at a sweaty man in semi-damp denim with a bruised face and a wired jaw.

This will sound silly, but I was surprised that there was no physical trace of the fight, not that we'd actually damaged anything during our two-punch exchange. There were people seated at Prince Charming's table, seemingly oblivious to the fact that less than twenty-four hours ago this had been the scene of the most violent episode I assumed that cafe had ever witnessed. Shouldn't there be a warning sign or police tape or maybe even a brass plaque. Shouldn't there be something? Had it even really happened? Could it be so easily forgotten?

I saw the manager stiffen as he recognised me. There was definitely a change in him. He was my warning sign; writ in his knitted brows was the story of last night. He watched me from behind the counter as I approached.

“Hello,” I said.

Nothing.

“I’ve come to apologise about last night. Dan told me you’ve agreed to let the matter go and I want to say I’m very grateful for that.”

“Have you got that thing for me to sign?”

“Yes, here it is,” I said, handing the envelope over.

“You know, I’m only signing this as a favour to Dan. He’s been a regular here for years.”

How come he knows Dan, but not me? I’ve been drinking coffee here for years too.

“If I wasn’t such a nice guy, I’d have you in court in a second.”

He signed the document and pushed it across the counter to me. I picked it up, feeling ashamed and put it back in the envelope.

I looked up at him. “I understand how you feel and I really appreciate this. I’ve never done anything like that before and I’m ashamed. I really am sorry for any trouble I caused. I only hope you can accept my apology.”

“It’s not me you need to apologise to mate, it’s Lucy, the waitress you got all steamed up about.”

“I’m sorry, did she get hit?” I couldn’t remember her being involved in the actual punch up, but maybe I’d forgotten it. Please God, I thought, don’t let him tell me I hit her too.

“No, but she might as well have been. She was so upset by your bullshit that she went home early. She was having a shower because she felt all shaky and weird, and she slipped and smashed her front teeth out on the fucken tap.

“Is she alright?”

“Of course she’s not fucken alright?” He was angry and he was trying very hard to control himself in front of the customers.

“Is she around?”

“Of course she’s not around. Jesus. Would you be around if you’d had your front teeth knocked out? She was in here. She popped in on her way back from the dentist up the road.”

“Did he fix her teeth?”

“He will when she finds the fucken \$5000 to pay the bill. Where’s she gonna find that? She doesn’t want to work because she doesn’t want people seeing her with no teeth in her head. She’s fucked. So congratu-fucken-lations to you. And by the way, I don’t want to see you in here again, now fuck off.”

“I’d like to say I’m sorry to her, see if I can help in some way —”

“Yeah? Well she doesn’t want to hear from you. Got it? Now fuck off.”

Sitting at a table in another cafe, I was metaphorically punching myself in the head. Who throws away a cheque for \$3500? Idiot.

I had to help that girl. She was just a kid – how hard would it be for a girl of her age to find \$5000 to fix her teeth? How hard would it be for her to go out in public with a smashed mouth?

I'd caught the dentist just as he was shutting up for the day and posing as a friend of Lucy's I'd asked on her behalf (because she was too upset to come in), when was the earliest she might be able to have the work done to fix her teeth? He said they could start as soon as she was able to pay, but that it would take a few weeks for the teeth to be made and fitted, so the sooner the better really. And no the cost wasn't \$5000 it would actually be \$5249.75.

On the table in front of me were my airline ticket and my wallet. I could cash in the airline ticket, which I was going to do anyway, and that'd give me about \$2000. I had a few hundred in the bank, but nowhere near enough to pay the dentist's fee. I could ask Dan for another cheque, but I absolutely knew I didn't want to do that.

What would Dan do in this situation? What would my parents do? What would Amberley do? What would a grown-up do?

Then it hit me. Get a loan. They'd all get a loan. It'd mean getting into more debt, but banks didn't know I owed Dan any money. They didn't know I owed anybody any money. What would a little more debt mean?

The next morning, after much negotiating with the bank, I discovered that regular, albeit casual, bar work was not enough to secure me a loan, even for a piddling five grand. It was enough, however, to secure me a credit card with a five grand limit at an exorbitant rate of interest.

I went from the bank back to the hospital – as I'd promised Mum I would – albeit a day late. They wanted to keep me in overnight for observations. They wanted to do more tests – see if there was any internal bleeding around the skull. I protested, telling

them I was fine, but medical folk aren't inclined to believe a man who sneaks out of hospital without permission, especially when head injuries are involved. After much faffing about they eventually let me go after I'd signed some sort of form that basically said I was mental and if anything happened it was all my fault.

I was desperate to sleep, but the first thing I did when I got home was to email Amberley. By my reckoning she must have been in Paris by now. Surely even a technophobe like her would be checking her email account while she was away.

I didn't make it to the airport



billmason1980@gmail.com

4:42 PM (1 minute ago)

to: belamberley@hotmail.com

Hi Amberley,

I'm sorry for everything. I'm an idiot. I love you. So much. I do. I really do. I don't know if you wanted me to make it to the airport. I don't know if you can forgive me. I don't know if you even care that I'm sending this. I wish we could talk. Ironic, I know, coming from me.

I didn't make it to the airport because I was in a fight the night before and my jaw was broken, but I'm OK. I tried to get to the airport but I was too late. I tried calling you, but your mobile was off and your work had no contact details for you.

I've just made it home from the hospital, been thinking of you.

Call me or email me if you feel you want to. I want you to.

Love,

Bill

I hit send and I sat back and stared at the screen. What now? I didn't know what time it was in Paris, but I was sure she'd have landed. Would she be checking her email account? Would she be able to if she was still on the plane? Would she reply even if she was? I hit the Get New Mail button, more in hope than anything else. Instantly there was a message from her.

re: I didn't make it to the airport



belamberley@hotmail.com

11:04 AM(1 minute ago)

to billmason1980@gmail.com

Are you really OK?

“Yes. Definitely, OK. Where are you? I don't even know the name of the hotel. Oh God, it's so good to hear from you.” I replied instantly.

I sat there for the next ten minutes, imagining her at the other end of the connection. If only I could crawl along the web and pop out at her end. I sent another email: Are you still there? No reply. I hit the Refresh button repeatedly. Surely she'd reply if she thought I was still online. I sent another message and another. I hit Refresh. Nothing. Refresh. Nothing. Refresh, Refresh, Refresh, hit repeatedly over and over again, without giving it time to display any new messages. Nothing, non, nil, zip.

Deep breaths. I tried to picture where she was and why she might not be able to reply. Maybe she was at an internet cafe where you only had a limited time, maybe she was at one of those coin-operated airport email booths and she'd run out of cash, maybe the plane was landing and she had to ensure her seatbelt was fastened, stow her tray table and return her seat to the upright position or something. Maybe she was deep in conversation with some French bloke who'd sat down next to her in the seat I was supposed to be in, hopefully not, but maybe even that might be preferable to the idea that she just wasn't going to reply.

I spent the rest of the day alternating between pain killer-infused naps and borderline obsessive-compulsive Refresh sessions. The daylight waned and the gathering gloom of a Friday evening spent in enforced solitude began to congeal around me. I should have been at work, but for obvious reasons I wasn't. As the sun descended and the shadows lengthened, I felt the shades of my past close in, drawn by my turgid melancholia. Georgie was the first to make her presence felt, lurking somewhere in the background. Chrissie, once she arrived, was a constant presence, just out of eyeshot and Amberley was suddenly right there at my side, lifting my right hand and pressing my index finger down repeatedly on that one over-worked mouse button. When I took a break from the computer, wrenching my hand from out of ghost-Amberley's grip they all followed me into the kitchen and into the bedroom. Later they climbed into bed with me. The mattress sagged under their combined weight, rolling me into the middle underneath them all, in a fuggy darkness.

I couldn't sleep. Not with them. Not in that bed. Not in that room even. I could not get comfortable at all. I didn't want to be in that flat anymore. Not for one second.

Eventually around 4am.

Ping.

Yes. Idea.

I got up and dressed, not hurriedly, not in a panic, I wasn't running off anywhere. This time I had a plan.

I took everything I had and arranged it in the front room. Records, CDs, DVDs, clothes, knick knacks, pictures, photo frames, utensils, cutlery, crockery, towels, tea towels, the curtains, the sheets off the bed, not the ones actually on the bed but the next ones in the rotation. Everything, all arranged neatly in the front room. Then I walked round to the 7-11 and bought some balloons and a big Texta. Armed with these, a handful of hastily made posters and a roll of sticky tape I roamed the streets. By 7am I was back home and the front door and gate were festooned with balloons. I thought about going back to bed, but I was too excited and besides I didn't know who

would be waiting for me in there. Instead I sat down on the front step with a cup of tea and waited.

At 8am, my first customer gently shook my shoulder, waking me from my slumber against the jamb.

“Has the garage sale started yet?” she asked with an uncertain smile, her husband hovering in a little van, motor still running, at the end of the drive.

“Yes,” I replied, standing up and straightening myself out. “Come in.”

She waved to her husband who turned off the engine and strolled warily up the path, eyeing me with suspicion the whole way.

I had a steady stream of customers all morning, which wasn't surprising considering the massive amount of posters and balloons I'd stuck around the neighbourhood. I sold heaps and gave some other stuff away.

Around midday, I made the mistake of answering someone's question about what was for sale, with a vague: “everything”, with the result that he wandered around the flat and came back with another question:

“How much do you want for the bed?”

I hadn't planned on selling the furniture, but after the previous night, selling the bed seemed like a great idea. He took the wardrobe too and the table and chairs and the couch.

By 3pm the flat was almost empty. In the living room there was a single chair in front of a small desk on which sat the laptop and the TV. The stereo and DVD player had gone. The bedroom was empty and in the kitchen stood the fridge and on the bench there was enough cutlery and crockery to keep me going, but the rest of the cupboards stood bare. I loaded a few overstuffed garbage bags full of rubbish I couldn't sell into the car and headed off to the op-shop to drop them off. On the way there I popped into

the real estate agent's office and told them I was looking for something smaller. They gave me the keys to a little one-bedroom unit a couple of kilometres away that had been up for rent for a while. It was on the ground floor, at the rear of a heavyset 1950s apartment block. It was small, old fashioned and dingy – which I assumed was why it was still empty – but I loved it. I loved it because it was available NOW, and because it would be mine – no complications. If Amberley came back and wanted to try again, then we'd find somewhere new that we could make ours, but right then I needed somewhere that didn't belong in any way to anyone else.

I made it back to the office before they'd closed, signed the papers on the unit and wrote a cheque for the deposit, the bond and for the next month's rent on both flats too. If I cashed my plane ticket in on Monday morning I'd hopefully be just able to cover it all, I hoped. Then I only had to keep my fingers crossed that they'd be able to rent out the old place within the month. It was a risk, but worth it.

You can move in anytime you like, the girl at the real estate agent's had said. And so I did. The next day. I took some of the money I'd made from the garage sale and bought a cheap futon, which doubled as a couch and on Monday I put the rest of that money into an envelope and I mailed it off to Dan: instalment number one.

I spent a couple of days tidying up and cleaning the old flat, patching holes in walls where pictures had hung, giving the bathroom a really good going over, the kitchen too – all the usual stuff. I had the gas, the power and the phone turned off and organised for the mail to be redirected.

Georgie's shadow had been with me all throughout the day of the garage sale. I'd see her walking through the rooms, watching as strangers rifled through things she'd once considered ours. There was melancholy, but it was sweeter, less gloomy. It felt good to be moving on at last. It was way past time. She was saying goodbye too, to her life in this flat and to us. As I cleaned the place up on that last day I felt her there like a disembodied regret or a nagging sense of something important forgotten. As I closed the front door for the last time and popped the key back through the letterbox, I wished her a silent goodbye and good luck as I gently closed the door on her forever.

Three to five working days after I'd applied for it, the credit card arrived. I hurried off to the bank and with the five grand plus change in my pocket I stood at the dentist's reception desk again, playing on my bona fides as a concerned friend.

At first they insisted that I give my name, so that they could write the necessary receipts and paper work, but I was obviously reluctant to do so. If Lucy found out it was me that had paid for her dentistry, she might freak out, she might give the money back, she might think I was being even more weird, think that she now owed me something, she might not give a shit, but she might and the last thing I wanted to do was make this girl's life any weirder.

In the end I had to negotiate with the dentist himself. I told him who I was and what had happened and why I didn't want her to know it was me who had paid. He was dubious about the whole thing but eventually we agreed that he'd call her and say that they'd found some Medicare loophole that allowed him to bulk bill this treatment. I made him swear not to tell her or anyone anything about this. I left my number and asked that he call me and let me know what she said.

About an hour later he called to let me know that she was over the moon. She hadn't asked any questions about the loophole – who would? – and she was popping in that afternoon to begin the procedure.

It took five freaking days for the phone to be connected in the new flat, another couple plus the weekend for the Net to be activated. I spent a fortune and a lot of time that first week at the local internet cafe, hoping to find an email from Amberley. By that Sunday I was resigned to the fact that she wasn't going to reply and I steeled myself to wait the ten more days until she'd be home. I thought that maybe she was just ignoring her email as usual. Maybe.

I was going out of mind sitting at home. I felt well enough to go back to work, even though the doctors had advised me to take a couple of weeks off. There was only one problem: no one would be able to understand a word I said.

“No, no, no,” Kevin said, as I tried to explain to him how I could work the day shifts where people would actually be able to both hear and understand what I was saying, as opposed to working nights.

“What if you slip, what if you fall, what if you make the break worse? Just stay home and rest,” he said, slapping me on the back, causing me to choke on the lemonade I was sipping through a straw.

“See?” he went on, “you can’t even drink properly.”

He left the bar and motioned me over to a table. “Amanda,” he called to the bar tender on duty, “two more lemonades please.”

“What are you doing tomorrow?” he asked, as the beers arrived.

I shook my head, “nothing.”

“Good. I’ll pick you up in the afternoon. I’ve got an idea I want to talk to you about. Can you fly with your jaw all wired up like that?”

“Yes.” I supposed I could, nobody had told me I couldn’t.

“Great, see you at your place around two.”

With those parting words he ushered me out the door and ordered me home to rest.

Still no word from Amberley, so I sent her one more email.

Are you there?



billmason1980@gmail.com

4:15 PM (1 minute ago)

to: belamberley@hotmail.com

It's me again, as if you didn't know. Why do we feel the need to say that when emails always tell you who they're from?

I've got to ask: are you not replying to my emails or are you unable to reply to me? That probably doesn't make sense, but if you are deliberately not replying to me then you'll know what I mean.

If you are not replying to me then, although I know I don't deserve it, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know.

I miss you, I love you and I wish I was there with you. I want to email you all the time, but I don't want to gush and I don't want you to think I'm a lunatic either plus I know the last thing you'll want to do is spend your time in Paris looking at a computer. I am gushing aren't I?

I'm hoping you are reading these emails and that you have decided not to reply. I respect that and I'm prepared to wait, until you get back, or longer if you want, for you to talk to me again.

I'm going to stop now before I start sounding unhinged.

I love you.

I may have left Georgie behind at the old flat but I still wasn't alone in the new place. Amberley's absence was a huge presence. I tried to tell myself that she'd be back soon and then I would hopefully be able to see her, but a huge part of me was worried that such a meeting might only be to say goodbye.

Chrissie was still with me too. Like an injury scar, like a tattoo. Her presence might fade eventually, but it would be a long time if it did. When I was tired or quiet, just before I fell asleep, or at 3.30 in the morning when I'd awake with a start, I'd sense her. She didn't hound me or threaten me. It was almost as if I was haunting her rather than she haunting me. Although I had never wanted her in the way she wanted me, I now couldn't let her go. Not in a romantic sense. From her I wanted things I was sure I would never earn: absolution, forgiveness, forgetting. I wanted that evening in the pub with Chrissie all over again, and I wanted it to end without our having had sex. I wanted us still to be bantering friends. Or if I couldn't have that I wanted the guts to have been a man and to have called her after that night. I wanted the knowledge that I'd done something to help her when she was pregnant. I could imagine how painful and fraught that could have been for both of us. I couldn't imagine how awful it must feel to be carrying the child of a man who doesn't love you. And to lose that child?

But I knew that I'd never get any of that. I was destined to carry her with me like a still, unborn child for the rest of my life. Even if she managed to put it all behind her I didn't think I ever would, and so in those quiet moments I drew her to me, punishing myself with visions of her and how things could have been better for both of us.

She had made it so clear that she wanted nothing more to do with me, but did she mean it? Would it help her if I tried to make a real apology? Would she let me?

"Hello?" She sounded bright enough, although perhaps a little tired.

"Hi Chrissie, it's Bill."

She paused.

"Hello, Chrissie are you there?"

"Yes."

"I just wanted to say that I am so sorry about everything and that if there's anything I can do. . ."

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either, Bill.” Her voice was flat and calm, perhaps she was on medication.

What did I want to say? “Perhaps we could have a coffee, or –”

“We’ve had this conversation. You can’t make this better, Bill. You can’t and I don’t want you to try. I’m trying to move on. I suggest you do the same.”

Pause.

“OK. Well if there ever is anything I can do, or if you do ever want to have a talk, you can always call me.”

I hung up feeling not better and yet not worse. I toyed with the idea of sending her a letter, but I’d only be doing it for my sake. She was right: there are some things that can’t be fixed, they just have to be accepted, lived with and coped with.

I lay back on the sofa cum bed, cum lounge furniture, cum a large part of everything I owned and surveyed my kingdom. What had I done since I’d quit my job at the theatre? I had no material possessions to speak of. I’d lost an almost brand-new washing machine, as evidenced by the return of Project Underpants over there in the corner. I had a broken jaw, a several times broken heart and I was single again. Plus I was penniless, worse than penniless actually: I owed Dan six grand and had a huge dentist bill to pay off too. Plus I was still working for next to nothing in a pub.

I was up and ready when Kevin called the next day. I was not refreshed, but I felt less crusty after speaking to Chrissie. The air had been cleared and for the first time in a while I’d slept through the night.

“Where are we going and what do I need?” I yelled from the doorway at Kevin, seated in his car.

“Nothing, we’re just going to a pub.”

“Why all the mystery?” I asked as we headed off.

“There’s no mystery,” he said. “I just want to show you something.”

What he wanted to show me turned out to be a pub. In Paddington. In Sydney. One of those old-style tiled Sydney inns that had been glammed up a bit and now served gastro pub food instead of chewy steak and chips.

After dinner we had a drink, as the place gradually filled up. It looked like a regular front bar, albeit a slightly renovated one. There were couches, banquettes and regular-issue pub tables and chairs, and in the corner was a small stage surrounded by a glittery curtain.

Kevin still hadn’t told me what we were there for.

“Are we here to see a show?”

“Bingo.”

“Oh, great. What show?”

“Bingo.”

I didn’t get it.

“Just sit back, have a drink and watch what happens.”

What happened was that the pub began to fill with a mix of students, workaday types, alternatives and pretty young things. At about 8.30 the corny disco music started, a

mirror ball sprayed spangles across the room and then the curtain rose, revealing: bingo. A very camp bingo, but bingo nonetheless. The calls were a mixture of the traditional and the ridiculous. There were no prizes to speak of other than free beer and pub grub, but for some reason the whole thing worked. It was more like an improvised stand-up routine than anything else. Members of the audience were pulled up on stage, interrogated, made fools of and let go with vouchers for free beer. The place was as packed at the end as it was at the start: it was a license to print money.

“What did you think?” asked Kevin, as we headed back to the airport in a taxi.

“It was fantastic.”

“Could you do that?”

I looked puzzled.

“Back in Melbourne, at the pub, could you do a show like that? You’re an actor aren’t you? Could you put on a show like that?”

I supposed I could. . .

We spent the next week brainstorming how such a night might work. I didn’t want to rip the Sydney bingo guys off, so we toyed with other game show formats: Deal or no Deal, Sale of the Century, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, Hot Seat (I don’t mind ripping off the already rich). We decided to borrow a few ideas from Hot Seat. Just little things like the whole concept, with contestants rotating through the seat, answering or passing on questions. To be different though, we called our game ‘Hot Seat 2000’. Instead of starting off at a hundred bucks and working up to a million, we’d start off with a glass of water and work up to a slab of beer, or a bottle of something special if you won the whole lot.

It was exciting and daunting. Very small time, but with the potential to be anything, or nothing. Working on the show that week lifted me out of the waiting-for-Amberley doldrums. In all the old clichéd yet very bloody true ways it took me out of myself, gave me something to look forward to, built my self-esteem and, well you get the picture.

I spent the next few days either nutting things out with Kevin at the pub or looking for sets and costumes, working out what sort of questions to ask – mainly ones borrowed from Internet trivia sites. We set up a little website for the show – more a glorified blog than anything else. The whole operation was a bit naïve and it had an air of the Brady Bunch or a Cliff Richard movie to it; one of those where everyone pitches in to put on a jolly good show. It was daggy and risky, for Kevin anyway, but it felt so good to be working on something vaguely theatrical again. I loved it.

I didn't forget about Amberley, but she was pushed off the front page of my mind. I knew she was coming back in a couple of days and that I'd have my chance to plead my case then. In the meantime working on Hot Seat took the focus off me and my life, which was a great relief. To use another cliché: the show must go on and according to Kevin it must go on as soon as my jaw was fixed.

I woke up with a start as the alarm went off at 6am. Amberley will be at the airport soon, I thought. I checked the airport website to see if her flight was still on time. It was. I toyed with the idea of going out there to pick her up, but I was sure she'd see that as presumptuous and she'd be right. I had no idea how she felt about me, Yes, she'd said she loved me when she stormed out on the night before she left, but she hadn't replied to any of my emails since, apart from the one where she checked to see if I was really alright, which shows that she cared, or cared enough to check that I wasn't terminal.

Fuck it, I'm going to the airport I decided. Sitting at the table drinking a coffee I decided, no. I wouldn't. Well what would I do then? I had to give her time and space, I thought as I started the car. Yes, but what if she thinks I don't care? I duelled and

sparred with myself all along the freeway to the airport. Excited and yet filled with dread at the same time. At least I'll get to see her. At least she'll see that I love her. Maybe she'll think that I'm stalking her? What if she ignores me, I thought as I motored straight through the airport car park and out the other side without stopping. Almost without stopping. I still had to pay \$3 for the thirty-five seconds I was actually in the place.

On the way home I reassured myself that I'd done the right thing, that she'd be jetlagged and that she'd need the space and that I could call her now anyway.

She didn't answer. The mobile still had that message about being away. I called her home number and that had the same message too. I left messages. I could wait. Just.

Work was annoying that day or maybe I was. I just wanted to get home and check my answering machine and email. I'd had my mobile set to ring as loud as possible all day, deafening everybody when it rang with calls that were never from Amberley.

There was nothing on the answering machine and no email when I got home. I drove past her place and considered knocking on the door, but the lights were off and I thought she's probably sleeping, so I drove on.

The next day I called off work and rang her again, but still no answer. I was going out of my mind with suspense. I jumped in the car and headed over to her place, but there was no answer. I sat on the step for a while trying to work out where she could be and then I remembered. She'd used every last day of her leave entitlement on this trip and had been worried that she'd be jetlagged and useless when she went back to work the day after arriving back. Bingo.

I took the lift to her floor, thinking I probably should have had a shave or at least worn something decent. I should have bought flowers, actually no, even I knew that flowers when you're in the wrong, are not a good idea.

As the lift ascended my courage descended, but I had to find out whether she was ever going to talk to me again. I stepped out of the lift. Straight into Tara.

“Hi Bill, oooh!” she reached up and touched my jaw, “that looks painful.” I grinned as best I could, which wasn’t very well at all.

“Hi.”

We stood there. Uncomfortable. The lift doors shut behind me with a ting, and Tara, who had obviously wanted to get in, hugged an armful of files a little closer to her chest. The silence extended. “Amberley told me about the jaw thingy,” she said, pointing to my chin.

I nodded, mimed an ouch and looked past her, towards Amberley’s desk. She noticed.

“She’s not here,” she said quietly to my knees. “She’s. . . not coming back. Not for a while anyway. She phoned last week. She told me about. . .”

She looked up at me, hoping I think, that I’d be the one to say, “The break-up,” but I didn’t, so she took a deep breath and went on.

“She’s taken leave without pay and she’s travelling. For a few months. At least.”

It was my turn to look at her knees, and what a finely matched pair they were.

“Are you alright Bill?”

I met her gaze, “no, not really.” I managed another dented smile, for her sake, and a few more nods, a couple of deep breaths, and then, “She didn’t say where?” She shook her head and made one of those scrunchy, sympathetic faces women make for little boys with sore ouches.

“OK, well, I’ll be off then,” I said, forcing my face to hold that smile as best it could and holding it, holding it, holding it, I turned with glacial slowness and stepped

through the thankfully opening lift doors. I turned, waved and watched the doors shut way too slowly on that scrunchy face. Hold. Hold. Hold. Relax.

I headed straight home and turned the computer on. I opened my email account and I opened a beer. I did nothing with either for ages. I just sat there and stared at her email address. Wondering where she was and where this little electronic missive would end up should I ever work out what to write, or whether to write at all. The room darkened around me and still I sat, captivated by this device which knew how to get to her, knew where she was, could be with her in an instant, this go between that could find either of us at will, yet which wouldn't, couldn't, tell me where she was. I stared at it and it, with its one fat, square eye stared back. I blinked. It flashed screen savers at me, but neither of us turned away. It remained inscrutable while I simply remained. I waited. Eventually I typed.

I'll wait



billmason1980@gmail.com

8:19 PM (1 minute ago)

to: belamberley@hotmail.com

Hi Amberley,

I'll wait.

Even if it's just to hear you say, "No."

I love you.

Bill.

The beer with the silly straw poking out of it, stayed untouched. I went to bed and lay there, staring at nothing. I waited, but no one appeared. The ghosts were gone. No Amberley, no Chrissie, no one. Instead, in their place across the room, was me, stuck in the corner looking lost, wondering what the hell was going on. Me. It had always

been me. Always and only. With this realisation, I turned my face to the wall, closed my eyes and hoped for sleep.

ELEVEN: Jigsaw Puzzle

Three weeks into Hot Seat we were reviewed in one of the local papers. I was so excited I copied the review into an email and sent it to Amberley and everyone else I knew too, but especially her.

Just in case you're interested



billmason1980@gmail.com

11:01 AM (1 minute ago)

to: belamberley@hotmail.com

Hi Amberley,

Remember, In The Hot Seat (I told you about that in an email a couple of weeks ago)? Well it was reviewed in the local paper this week, thought you might like a look.

There is a little pub in inner-city Melbourne that harbours a dark secret. Every Wednesday at nine pm a hundred or so of the city's funkiest types meet clandestinely to play a cut down version of *Millionaire Hot Seat*, called *In The Hot Seat*. The black leather jacket clan, backpackers, even some suited-types, meet and mingle, unashamedly, to play this most low brow of games. Why? What's the appeal? Is it some anti-casino protest, or is it something even more sinister? Tonight I take up my social analyst's pen and attempt to work out why this glitzy game show is so popular with this crowd. It doesn't make sense.

Our host for the evening, Uncle Bill takes the stage. Amidst a flurry of funky game show tunes he gives the audience a brief lesson in *Hot Seat* etiquette, demanding that they kindly *not* refrain from yelling the answers out, especially during the phone a fool segment, that they boo all winners and that the judge's decision is final and that no correspondence will be entered into even if the answer is patently and obviously incorrect. This is by no means necessary, they all seem to know it already – it's more of a pep talk, a part of the ritual.

The atmosphere is reminiscent of that before a gig by a favourite band. There is no self-consciousness, no hint of embarrassment, even though this is a game that our mum's watch while they're making the tea. A game that we suffer through on the odd occasion we find ourselves at their place in the afternoon. Yet there is no sense of that. Why not?

Perhaps because it's a great laugh and like much Australian humour it takes a cultural icon (if you will allow me to treat *The Seat* as such) and turns it on its head. They've turned it into an audience participation sport. They make up the questions, the answers, the rules, and they decide how seriously they'll take them. Nobody pays to play and nobody wins anything of any great value. Big Bill is a socialist game show warrior at the cutting edge of twenty first century gaming. Check it out at: hotseat2000.blogspot.com.au

Just in case you also want to know, I still love you and I always will.

Bill.

After this, our enthusiastic and small crowd made up mainly of staff and Kevin's friends began to lift. By the sixth week we were doing really well. Our website was languishing though (neither of us really knew what we were doing) and that didn't suit Kevin. He was constantly looking to build the night and the site. He was building an empire. He could see franchises. I was just happy to be out of the bar. Happy to be on stage again.

"You're a writer as well aren't you?" he said one morning. "Write something for the site. Something funny."

Oh the irony of it all. Is that irony? Maybe it's fate. Whatever it was, I couldn't say no. But what could I do? I had no ideas. I thought back to the broken-hearted blogs I'd seen and to my own blogging, which had felt so important at the time but which now seemed to belong to another person. There was a ton of advice meted out on those sites and a whole lot of questions asked by so many people desperate for answers, for truths. Maybe Uncle Bill could give help to the lost, the lonely and the

lovelorn. God knows, I knew nothing about the world, but maybe he did. And so the Uncle Bill's Agony Aunt column was born.

I started off by asking a question of the audience.

Hotseat2000.blogspot.com.au 12 May 2011

Dear Hot Sitters,

The life of a top-rating game show host is a rich tapestry woven from many threads, some of which are golden, some silver, some red, some blue, I think there are some white ones in there and there's a funny green one – anyway, it's a busy life. But it's not so busy that I can't take the time to listen to the cries of those for whom the gold lamé jacket of life will always be a size too large. You. The fans.

It was with this spirit of generosity that I read the following letter from a fan desperately in need of advice. So moved was I by his tale of woe that I thought it fitting that I publish it here in the hope that you, dear reader, might be motivated to help him in his hour of need.

Dear Uncle Bill,

I lost my washing machine recently, actually I've lost two washing machines recently. Both to white goods-loving ex-girlfriends. The dirty laundry is piling up pretty deep, but I'm reluctant to buy a third for obvious reasons. My question, oh wise Uncle Bill, is this? Should I buy a third washing machine, or should I spend the money instead on five hundred pairs of dollar-a-pair underpants from Bi-Lo?

Regards,

On the Skids, Brunswick

What say ye Sitters? Where should our friend spend his loot in the pursuit of a fresh seat? Post your responses below and feel free to ask me anything. I am after all, all yours. . . Uncle Bill.

The response was instant. It wasn't huge but it was steady and it built. People opened their hearts to me, or rather to Uncle Bill. Everything was humourous, there were many silly moments, but still amongst all the joculariry there was something going on. I'd become an Agony Uncle. I was helping other people get their shit together, I was offering advice. Now that's ironic, isn't it?

Kevin and I had worked out a deal whereby I took a piece of the bar takings each week, cash of course, and that combined with maybe one or two quiet shifts in the bar meant I was almost keeping normal hours again after a year or so of too many shifts.

My jaw was healing nicely and thanks to a diet of soup, I'd lost a bit of weight and was feeling pretty fit. I was beginning to feel better about things too. I still emailed Amberley almost every night, but the content of these messages had begun to change. There are only so many times you can tell someone you're sorry, that you'll wait for them forever and that you love them without boring the pants off both them and yourself. Instead, I began writing about how my jaw was, telling her about the flat, little things about my life, things, that if she'd been here, we'd have shared like regular lovers do. She'd been gone three months by this stage and I still hadn't received a reply, but in reality I wasn't expecting one anymore. For all I knew, she was automatically deleting my emails each day, she was blocking me, or, tired of receiving endless updates from me, she might have set up another email address altogether. But she hadn't said stop yet, so maybe, just maybe she was actually reading them. And for my part, she was still the only person I wanted to share my stories with, so as far as non-relationships go, it was working very well.

I told her about the column. About how this character from Brunswick kept writing in asking how he could get his ex-girlfriend to reply to his emails, how he'd been a fool, how he missed her, how he loved her. Most of the responses to his letters, especially

the ones from women, offered (humourous) advice on how he might go forth and multiply and how he'd brought all his troubles on himself. Funny that.

I had spent the winter laying very low in my little flat recovering from a broken jaw, and a broken everything. Apart from emailing Amberley, I hardly had contact with anybody. Like a bear in a cave, I waited out the cold.

The high point of this self-imposed exile was a call from the dentist to say that Lucy's teeth were finally all fixed. He just thought I'd want to know that she was rapt with how they looked and was I still sure I didn't want anyone to know where the money had come from.

I was almost tempted to tell her, but I didn't. I was just relieved to know that she was happy and that I'd been able to put that one wrong right.

By September I was used to being alone. Each week during that time I'd posted a cheque to Dan, gradually chipping away at the money I owed him, this left me little cash for anything other than credit card bills, and so being solitary and reclusive suited not only my temper, but also my bank balance. I hadn't seen Dan, nor had I heard from him. I hadn't given him my new address, nor my new phone number and losing the mobile had been necessary if I was to afford to pay him back, but I knew he was receiving the cheques as my bank balance dipped accordingly each week. I hadn't seen Georgie or Chrissie either. In fact, apart from the odd dinner at Mum and Dad's and hanging around the bar after a shift, I hadn't really seen anybody.

OK, it's not strictly true that I hadn't seen anybody. I had seen Georgie once, at Hot Seat. I had no idea if she knew I'd be performing or not, but I certainly had no idea she'd be there. It was strange seeing her in the crowd. It threw me that she was there, but what threw me even more was that there was another man with her. It wasn't Heathcliff, thank God for small mercies, it was someone I'd never seen before. They

came into the bar from the dining room part way through the show, and I saw them standing at the bar, he with his arm around her.

The room was packed and I wasn't sure it was her until the lights came up at the end of the round. She looked great. Her hair was shorter and she'd put on a bit of weight, which suited her although it would be a brave man who told her that.

Her man disappeared for a minute and during that time she caught my eye and waved to me. Not an Oh-my-God-I-can't-believe-it's-you-it's-been-so-long kind of wave, more of a signal, a sign of acknowledgment accompanied by a smile, but not reeking of come over and give me a hug you big brute. I returned the gesture and the smile, but neither of us made a move towards each other. We held each other's gaze for a moment and then she broke it, pointing to her jaw and making a sympathetic face. I nodded and then gave her the thumbs up, but that was as far as we went. Should we have said hello, should she have introduced me to her new beau? Why? What would we have had to say? It's not like we were friends. We weren't friends before we got together and we surely weren't going to be friends now – in fact maybe she wanted nothing to do with me after what had happened with Chrissie – so why not just let each other slide away into the past. What could we have achieved by standing in front of each other for a few minutes and gushing about how wonderful our new lives were?

Because after a year you have to gush: inately and unnaturally. You're well past the time when you could confide anything in your ex, or burden them with troubles of any sort, other than mock-complaining about your new love, new job or new life. And it's not as if you can chit chat, perhaps you'll never be able to do that, because even though you're over each other, you know there'd be some residual sadness, some ache, some feeling of loss. There would be twinges, there are always twinges and I did not want to twinge, nor did I want to exchange forced pleasantries.

A girl in the crowd interrupted my train of thought, asking me when we were starting the next round and by the time I'd answered her and looked up again, Georgie was gone. I silently wished her luck and flicked the switch that sent the mirror ball above the stage spinning again. I indicated to the bar that I needed a drink and someone

handed me a whiskey. I downed it in one and asked for another. I'd have to catch a cab home tonight, I thought. I know it looks like I was drowning my sorrows, I wasn't. It had just been a shock, and the drink felt more like a farewell toast than anything else. I did feel a little sad thinking about the fact that after all those years we were now almost strangers, but I was upset mainly because I couldn't stop myself wishing it had been Amberley standing at the bar instead.

Spring arrived one evening carried on the scent of jasmine drifting through my one window and, like a bear slowly coming out of hibernation, I felt a stirring, I felt the urge to get out of the flat and do something other than go to work. I went for a stroll.

I walked down Sydney Road past kebab shops and cafes, pubs and bookshops, I kept walking, past that hotel that used to be a strip joint and on along Royal Parade towards town, remembering with a wince the day I'd run this same route; charging in a blind panic. Not willing to ruin my good mood, I pushed those thoughts aside and changed my route, heading east through the University, towards Carlton. The campus was quiet, although there was a straggle of activity around the library. I sat for a while on a bench by the lawn and watched the students come and go, hurrying purposefully through the twilight, bags and arms overloaded with books. Was it really thirteen years since I'd been one of them? Not that I had spent too many evenings in the library. But was it really that long ago? I was gripped by an urgency: time to get started, Billy Boy. Time to do something. But what? My stomach rumbled, giving me some short-term purpose, and so I headed off to Lygon Street for cheap pasta.

Of course I went to that restaurant, to our restaurant, the one in which Amberley and I had eaten together on that first blind date. As I was seated I thought, this is not the same table that we sat at that night, but it's close. I could see my reflection in the mirror as I had seen ours way back when we first ate here. What's changed? I wondered, as I gazed at myself. Did I look older? More tired? Less tired? What would people see in that face? I thought as a waitress dumped a basket of bread on my table.

The bread brought back thoughts of Amberley and her ravenous appetite. I began to write in my head what I'd tell her about this meal in my next email, about the scent of spring in the air and in me. I looked at my reflection again and found that it was doing OK. I shook my head and reached for the last slice of bread, but instead I left it in the basket for Amberley, as a symbolic gesture, that maybe no one but me would ever know about. And, after making the gesture and realising that no one else would ever know about it, I ate the bread anyway. It's what she would have done. She would have laughed. I did.

I felt almost high, walking home. Whether it was the spring air, the wine I'd had with dinner, or whether it was the occasional waft of marijuana I'd smelled as I headed back through the uni, I didn't know. But I definitely felt something, a lightness, or maybe a lack of heaviness. I was so used to being gloomy though, that I didn't trust the feeling. I kept waiting for some forgotten fear, some ache, some foreboding to drift into my mind and spoil the feeling, but nothing did. Nevertheless I kept an eye out for them. I went through the day, the last week, the coming month, but I could find nothing to spoil this mood. I was doing OK. And maybe that was enough. It was certainly more than I expected.

For no apparent reason, I bought some outrageously expensive flowers from a 7-11 on the way home, but of course I had no vases, so I stuck them in an old work boot, which I first had to line with a plastic bag. I then had to stick the boot in a bucket as it still leaked. This meant that from the couch and with the bucket sitting on the table next to the computer, you couldn't actually see the flowers, but I was still glad I'd bought them.

The one good thing about living in a bed-sit, especially if you've sold virtually everything you own is that it's really hard to lose the phone. Yet, even though mine was so easy to locate, I always answered it reluctantly when it did ring, especially when it rang early in the morning. Only Mum and Dad had this number and for them to phone this early would mean that something was up. On the other hand, what if it was Amberley?

Ring, bloody ring, bloody ring ring.

“Hello?”

“Bill? It’s Dan.”

Before I could say anything he was telling me how he had to badger my mum to give him the number.

“What time is it? Is everything OK? How are you? How’s Sam?”

He laughed. “I’m fine, we’re fine. It’s 8.30. Are you still in bed?”

“Of course. . . not.”

“Good.”

What did he want? It was great to hear his voice. But what did he want? I wandered off to the kitchen to make coffee, phone tucked under my chin, leaving him to do the talking.

“Are you still there? Bill?”

I could sense he was feeling as awkward as I was and I thought, this is dumb, he’s still my best friend. “Yes, sorry. Great to hear from you. What’s news?”

“It’s about the money you’ve been sending.”

“Go on.”

“Well, you’ve sent too much. The last payment was one too many, so I’ve torn up that cheque.”

“Oh, OK.”

“And thanks for doing it.”

“My pleasure, thanks for lending me the money.”

“Speaking of which, you never did cash that writer’s fee cheque I gave you, did you?”

“No. It wasn’t my money.”

“Bill –”

“Can we just leave that, Dan? I really didn’t want that money. I don’t deserve it.”

“It would have come in handy to pay for that girl’s teeth.”

“How do you know about that?”

“Mysterious man with broken jaw walks in off the street and pays for waitresses teeth to be fixed. ‘Hmm, I wonder who that could be?’ said the dentist to the local cafe owner. It wasn’t too hard to work out. You did a good thing.”

“I’m just glad she’s OK.”

There was an uncomfortable pause. I broke it.

“You should come along and see this new show I’m doing.”

“Hot Seat? Yes I read the review. So you’re on the stage again. That’s great.”

“What’s news with you? How’s the pilot coming along?”

“I’m well, Sam’s well. The pilot’s been on the back burner for a bit, but we’re going to start shooting in a few weeks.”

“That’s great. Have you cast it yet?”

“We’re about to start.”

“Well how about giving me an audition? The bloody lead character is pretty much based on me any way, isn’t he? Unless things have changed.”

“An audition?” he paused. “I’ll see what I can do. I’m only one voice but I think I can wrangle it.”

We chatted for a little longer and I promised to buy him lunch, after he’d scored me an audition. It felt great to speak to him again. Hopefully that was a friendship I could rekindle.

I put the phone down and did a little jig. Just a little one. Then I did a bigger one. Then I stopped myself. It was just an audition. Just an audition. Actually it wasn’t even an audition yet, but it might be. For a pilot. Just a pilot. But it was acting, potentially, and I hadn’t had an audition for anything for a couple of years.

I was bursting to tell someone about it. But who? Mum and Dad? They’d put up with enough phone calls over the years about big auditions. I didn’t want to have a deflating call all about how you have to hope for the best but expect the worst, there’s always hundreds of people going for these things. I wanted to celebrate. I wanted excitement.

I emailed Amberley.

I wish you well



billmason1980@gmail.com

8:01 AM (1 minute ago)

to: belamberley@hotmail.com

Hi Amberley,

How are you? Where are you? Sucking down margaritas in Mexico? Nibbling on pizza in Italy, or have you popped back to Japan for a bit more whale. That's still disgusting, by the way.

Wherever you are I hope you're well.

Today's been interesting. I might have an audition for the pilot of the show Dan and I were writing. I might not, but I might. And that's very exciting. I spoke to Dan today and that was good too. And I've finally paid my debt to him, which is also great.

I was so excited about the potential audition that I had to tell someone, hence this email.

You were of course the person I wanted to talk to, but you're not here, in case you didn't know.

Normally that thought would drag me down, but today it didn't. Not that I don't wish you were here. I do. Every day. But I think I've accepted the fact that that's not going to happen. I am of course sad about that, but then I have no one to blame other than myself. Not that I am sitting here blaming myself. I'm over that too, I hope.

As usual I'm not doing a very good job of explaining what I'm on about. What I mean is that I think I'm OK. I'm getting on with things, I'm even becoming organised, just a little, and I might even be happyish. Who'd have believed that was possible?

What I'm trying to say is that even though I spend too much time emailing you messages that I'm pretty sure by now you're not reading, I'm not doing it out of some desperate attempt to get you back anymore. I just like you, as well as love you, and I genuinely wish you well. And I miss talking to you and this is as close as I can get to that.

Having said all that though, I think this will be the last email I send, so if you are reading this now's the time to wipe your brow and say phew.

It's time for me to accept the fact that you've moved on and to let you go. I'll just finish by saying thank you for loving me, I'm sorry I wasn't up to it. I do sincerely hope you're happy.

All my love,

Bill.

PS how organised is this – I'm off out later this morning to buy another washing machine.

I showered and changed, wondering how many washing machines it was usual for a man to buy before the age of thirty-five? Out of habit, I checked my email inbox for a message from Amberley before I headed out, and this time there was one.

re: I wish you well



belamberley@hotmail.com

8:02AM (1 minute ago)

to billmason1980@gmail.com

Wait.

No need to buy a new washing machine. I'll be back in a few days. You can use mine.

Exegesis

Introduction

This thesis contends that the novel is far more resistant to the introduction of digital interactivity than many theorists have assumed; an argument illustrated by the experience of writing and publishing a cross-sited, interactive fiction project involving the novel 'Once in a Lifetime'.

The exegetical component of the thesis discusses the role of the creative work as an exploration of the nexus between the novel on the page and the novel as mediated by interactive digital technologies. It critically examines the processes involved in the production of the work and situates that work in the broader field of attempts by other contemporary authors and publishers to introduce interactivity to the novel. It explicates the sequence of development of the creative work. It does this because the academic and creative practice-based research involved in that development directly led to the inclusion of interactivity in the work. A knowledge of these is integral to an understanding of the purpose of the work and the reasoning behind its final form.

Interactivity, for the purpose of this thesis, is understood to be the facility by which readers are able via digital technology 'to manipulate or otherwise modify someone else's content or add new content as an audience member' (Downes & McMillan 2000; Robinson, S 2010, p. p.126). This is undertaken as part of 'a dialectical relationship', that is, in a manner that allows for 'purposeful communication' and 'dialogue to cause change' to occur (Hockley 1996, p. 12). Here, interactivity involves the reader being given the capacity to make changes to a text (through addition, subtraction, rearrangement and alteration) and also the opportunity and the means by which to discuss the text and any changes made to it.

Interactivity, in this case, is not simply the facility by which existing textual elements may be rearranged by the reader in isolation. It presupposes that the reader is able to interact with the author in a purposeful manner with regard to the text and is also able to change that text either by themselves or in collaboration with other readers and/or the author. As Trotter suggests, it is 'the reader's ability to re-order the text in real time according to her own wishes: to (re-)make it up as she goes along' (Trotter 2012).

The creative work is made up of the novel 'Once in a Lifetime' and two blogs: 'noteoelf.blogspot.com.au' (hereafter referred to as *Note to Elf*) (Weldon 2012b) and 'hotseat2000.blogspot.com.au' (hereafter referred to as *Hot Seat*) (Weldon 2012a). The novel is a darkly humorous contemporary fiction which traces the story of main protagonist Bill, during a year in which he loses both his job and his girlfriend, descends into depression and somehow finds his way out and into new love.

These three works shall be referred to variously as either individual texts or as a unified whole that will be described as The Project.

The Project is cross-sited in that the story of the work is: 'told across multiple media platforms . . . that are used as instruments to enact a network binding locationally separate content into whole coherent expressions' (Ruppel 2009, p. 283). Ruppel continues, suggesting that the term 'cross-sited' signifies work that uses multi-modal structures to 'highlight and critique the media in use' (2009, p. 284) and/or are 'constructed as an interplay between one site of meaning and another' (ibid). In other words the various sites on which the work is housed serve not only to carry different story information, but also may allow for a form of criticism or self-reflection to take place between the sites. *Pottermore* and the Harry Potter novels are an example of a cross-sited work. Both platforms (novel and web site) take locationally separate content and from this create a whole story world. The website allows for interrogation of itself and of the novel, in terms of content and form, through reader contributions.

The Project tells its story across the media of the print and plain text e-novel and interactive digital media in the form of blogs. The blogs take the story beyond the page and allow for reflection on both of the media forms in use and the content each contains.

The Project is a work of **interactive fiction** in that readers of it are given the opportunity to intervene in the text itself, an intervention not possible in print, where the text lies on a plane inaccessible to the reader. Readers of a printed book can write over the text but not in it. (Bolter 2001, p. 152)

This is achieved by allowing readers to communicate with the main protagonist, Bill, through social media. Any social media exchanges that take place, therefore, are part of the text of *The Project*, but are generated by readers not by the titular author.

The Project is not interactive fiction as defined by Ryan who speaks of interactive texts as allowing readers to participate ‘in the construction of the text as a visible display of signs. Although this process is restricted to a choice among a limited number of well-charted alternatives’ (Ryan 2001, pp. 5-6). This is a limited form of interactive fiction, which only offers the reader the ability to rearrange pre-existing content, rather than actively change existing text and contribute new material.

The novel component of *The Project* may be read as a traditional print or plain text e-novel, and the blogs as any blog encountered on the Internet might be read. However, there is an overlap, in terms of content, between the blogs and the novel, which contains excerpts from the blogs that reveal slices of Bill’s inner life. Many more of Bill’s posts (which do not appear in the novel) may be found online at *Note to Elf* and *Hot Seat*. They offer a view of Bill not available to those who only read the novel. This juncture between the novel and the blogs will be the main area of focus in the exegesis as it is there that the interactive possibilities inherent in *The Project* become manifest. Therein lies the potential for the text of *The Project* to be subject to interaction and change in a collaborative process between reader(s) and author.

For the purposes of this work it is necessary to read the novel, the blog posts and the comments made by readers and Bill on *Note to Elf* and *Hot Seat*. It is also important to understand that the blogs are written in the style of a 32-year-old man bereft of literary pretensions. The prose contained in these blogs it is at times as rough, hurried and crude as such blog posts tend to be. Such writing is appropriate to the character.

Blogs were chosen as the form of interactive digital technology for use in *The Project* because, as Alexander states, these ‘may well be the most visible and accessible form of Web 2.0 storytelling’ (Alexander 2011, p. 47). Blogs are reminiscent of the epistle and the diary, both of which are forms with which many readers are acquainted. Reader familiarity with form is considered key to experimentation with narrative in the digital arena given that readers can easily become confused and disoriented if

confronted with ‘unfamiliar storytelling conventions’ (Skains 2010, p. 97). Such reader disenfranchisement has been a problem for the creators of interactive texts since the 1980s.

The blogs provide the reader with an opportunity to interact with Bill¹ and thereby to engage him in conversation and debate, perhaps with regard to the motivations, decisions and actions he exhibits in the text. This is intended to allow the character and his story to move beyond the bounded limitations of the page and into the interactive digital realm.

Readers who interact with Bill via the blog(s) effectively become contributors to The Project via their comments and Bill’s responses to them. They also become characters in Bill’s ongoing story as their interactions with him form part of his continuing narrative. Bill, as ostensible author of the blogs, becomes a contributor to The Project too. By reading the comments posted on the sites Bill also becomes a reader, as do I, the author. I also have the potential to become a character, should I be mentioned in any interactions or if I join in a discussion between Bill and the readers.

Integrating the novel and the blogs, so that this capacity to move beyond the page could become possible, required extensive and ongoing revision of the meta-narrative of The Project to create a story world in which the novel and the blogs could function both together and separately. These revisions affected the novel as much as the blogs – the two text forms influenced each other. Story world decisions made in either component had to be made consistent with, or required adjustments to, the logic of the work as a whole. An example of this is the (key) relationship between the character Bill and myself as author, which evolved significantly as a result of this process. The Project was started just prior to the introduction of the Kindle in 2007 and the consequent mass market e-book format. Much conversation in the literature leading up to and around that time, ((Bolter 2001), (Bruns 2006), (Landow 2006), (Pope 2006), (Shirky 2008), (Wearne 1997)) suggests that the digitisation of texts and the interactive possibilities these technologies offered would come to dominate the publishing market to the extent that the viability of the print book would be

¹ Readers are explicitly urged to interact in this way at the beginning of *Spincycle*.

threatened. How novels might function in such an interactive digital realm was a question uppermost in that discussion. This debate heavily influenced the writing of 'Once in a Lifetime' and the development of The Project.

Pope introduced a note of caution into this push towards the digital, suggesting that the introduction of unusual interfaces, non-linearity and issues to do with narrative closure could easily confuse many readers, thereby alienating them from the text (2006). Wearne suggests that when readers are asked, by creators of interactive texts, to disconnect from traditional linear narrative forms, they tend to disconnect from the text altogether. Careful consideration must be given to the design of any interactive elements if this is to be avoided (1997).

These concerns informed the research and decision-making process that led to the use of blogs as the interactive component of The Project. It was imperative that the chosen form of interactivity should be unlikely to cause readers to disconnect. The similarity of the blog format to established narrative forms such as diaries and epistles suggests that they are less likely than other forms to disorient readers or be seen by them as disturbingly unfamiliar. This choice is also supported by the fact that blogs are largely text and page-based (albeit pages that obey differing formal conventions to those used in the creation of print pages) and by their longevity. Blogs have been in existence for longer than Facebook, Twitter, wikis or any of the other contemporary social media platforms. (they are one of the longest lived of all digital social media forms).

Vulgar Press published 'Once in a Lifetime' under the title of *Spincycle*, in August 2012. *Note to Elf* and *Hot Seat* went live at the same time. It was necessary for the novel and the blogs to be published before the completion of the thesis so that reader responses and interactions (via blog comments) could be included in this exegesis.

Experiments such as the one conducted here, regardless of their success or failure, are crucial to developing an understanding of the effects the introduction of interactivity might have on the novel. There are many unknowns in what remains a medium lacking stable formal conventions (for any form other than the plain text e-book). Pope suggests that 'there is very little in the reviewed literature on interactive fiction

to elucidate this difficult equation for writers' (2010, p. 88).² This thesis uses the experience gained through the creation and publication of *The Project* ('Once in a Lifetime'/*Spincycle*) to make the case for more research into how and why (or why not) interactivity might be incorporated into the form of the novel.

² That equation relates to the introduction of interactivity to a novel in a way that creates a balance between the new and the traditional in order that the interactivity helps rather than hinders the reader's enjoyment of the work.

Chapter 1: Literary Review

This chapter reviews the scholarly (and other) literature covering interactivity and its introduction to the novel.³

The birth of hypertext fiction in the 1980s also spawned a discussion about the place of interactivity with regard to the novel. Many contemporary theorists and practitioners (including: Bryan Alexander (2011, p. 47), Axel Bruns (Bruns 2011, pp. 132-45) William Gibson (Ranger 2007) and Bob Stein (Jones 2012)) suggest that the future of storytelling and reading lies in the interactive realm of social media, despite hypertext and interactive fiction having proved problematic and unpopular with readers. Much discussion, therefore, centres on the form that interactive fiction might take and whether the novel is a suitable vehicle for interactive storytelling. Alongside those who call for more experimentation in this area there are those who argue that there is no place for interactivity in the novel, claiming that any introduction of interactivity to the novel significantly alters that form, making it something else entirely (Evan Schnittman (Hoffelder 2011) David Carey (Indvik 2012) Andrew Rhomberg (Rhomberg 2012)). Whether or not interactivity comes to dominate the novel form, it is likely that new forms of storytelling will arise in the field of interactive digital media.

The title of this exegesis is borrowed, in part, from an interview with author and novelist William Gibson. In response to the question ‘How has technology changed writing?’ Gibson responded:

I have this sense when I write now that the text doesn't stop at the end of the page and I suppose I could create web pages somewhere and lead people to them through the text, which is an interesting concept . . . everything is bending towards hypertext now (Ranger 2007).⁴

³ Much of the discussion relating to this topic takes place in the blogosphere, in trade papers and at conferences. It is important that this non-scholarly content is discussed in this thesis as this is often the forum in which commentators and those directly involved in the industry express their views.

⁴ By the word ‘hypertext’, Gibson is not referring specifically to the genre of interactive fiction known as hypertext, but rather to the wider field of interactive and online text.

Gibson had been inspired by the number of reader-created websites and blogs that expanded the fictional world he created in the novel *Spook Country* (2007). As a result, the text of Gibson's novel not only continues beyond the page, it continues beyond the author too. It expands into what Phillip Pullman calls the 'Phase Space' (Pullman 1998, p. 47); an area of conceptual and intellectual potential surrounding every story containing all the possible ideas, events and scenarios that could have happened in that story while the writer was writing it; the ideas relating to the story she or he might think of once the work was finished; plus all those that the reader might conjure while reading or discussing the story.

Gibson made the above statement in 2007, the year in which the Kindle was launched. Since then, tablet devices such as the Kindle and the iPad (introduced in 2010) have grown in popularity to the extent that, '29 per cent of Americans age 18 and older own at least one specialized device for e-book reading – either a tablet or an e-book reader' (Pew Research Center 2012).

Tablet devices have increased the potential for the bend, in publishing and reading, towards hypertext that Gibson argues for, although that potential is still far from being realised. They offer authors and publishers a reader-friendly platform on which to create works that perhaps start as web pages, or blogs, which then lead to books, or vice versa. They allow for a genuine exploration of the idea that the text is not necessarily confined to the printed (or digital) page in a way that laptop and desktop computers, with their flickering screens, cannot. They allow for experimentation in the Phase Space surrounding stories. They could include hyperlinks, providing for readers to hotlink out of their text and into other texts and web pages.

Being digital, the texts of these e-books are alterable for a fraction of the cost and with much greater ease than is possible with print texts. Furthermore, they can be altered repeatedly and *en masse* (without the need for great expertise on the part of the person altering the text), potentially wresting the control of texts out of the hands of authors and publishers and giving it in part or in whole to the reader.⁵ But the vast

⁵ These freedoms are currently curtailed due to the use by publishers of Digital Rights Management (DRM) technologies which prevent users from editing or otherwise altering texts. But there is much discussion about the effectiveness of these given that the piracy of e-books is rife. There is much

majority of e-books do not facilitate interactive functionality other than links to an online dictionary and perhaps clipping/note-taking options.⁶ They may be digital but they are far from being interactive. Jones calls them ‘plain vanilla e-books’ (2012). Warren calls the e-book a ‘picture of a book’ (2009, p. 47). He suggests that our current understanding of e-books is limited, that we cannot imagine what they might become in the future and that:

this future will arrive as publishers and authors add enhancements and interactivity, embrace new business models, and explore new methods of collaboration and as readers engage with these new forms (ibid).

Warren makes a valuable point. Current understandings of the effect of digitisation on narrative texts must not be mistaken for complete understandings of them. The same may be said for the effects of interactivity. The e-book, whether plain text or enhanced⁷ (enhanced as in ‘digital publications that tend to be book-length and are able to incorporate text, audio and audio visual material as one complete document’ (Hammond 2014, p. 444)), is, at this stage, wedded to proprietary software and to hardware that is quickly updated and superseded.

Yet even taking into account the current limitations in terms of both software and hardware and industry willingness to experiment and explore, digitised novel texts still offer authors the chance, as Gibson intimates, to take the reader on a journey beyond the printed page of the story, to break the boundedness of print works and to allow a communication between author, reader and perhaps even character that is impossible to achieve in print. Yet few authors and publishers are willing to do so

debate too about the wisdom of locking people into particular platforms, from a customer relations point of view, as these DRMs do. There is also an argument that it may not be financially viable to maintain so many different platforms into the future and that publishing companies should be looking to a broad industry-based format free of DRM limitations. Such a move could see the potential for ongoing and relatively easy change, held within digitised texts, realised.

⁶ All of which functions may be performed by readers of print books, albeit at a much slower rate.

⁷ Several examples of enhanced e-books are discussed in this exegesis, including: *Alice for iPad*

(Carroll et al. 2010), *Dracula, the official Stoker family edition* (Stoker, Pilditch & Marmulla 2010) and *Frankenstein for iPad and Phone* (Morris & Inkle Ltd 2012)

because, according to Carolyn Reidy, CEO of Simon and Schuster, the ‘public is not enthused by’ enhanced e-books (Biba 2011). These developments also have implications for copyright, for ideas of authority, for version control and in turn present problems of how works might be preserved or archived: whose version of a text is the definitive version? And in what format? Along with possibility and potential, interactivity also brings with it direct threats to established publisher/author/character/reader relationships and publishing formats and business models. It has brought much confusion and fear to an industry that, according to Eisenstein (1995, p. 541), traditionally sees itself as being in crisis. Yet it does not offer any readymade solutions to these issues; hence, perhaps, the reluctance of the industry to more actively pursue the development of interactive digital texts.

By suggesting that everything is bending towards hypertext, Gibson is recognising that publishing and reading no longer operate only within a print-based broadcast medium, in which the production and consumption of text is a one-way (author–publisher–reader) process. The industry now recognises and seeks to include interactive and/or collective digital formats.

Statements such as Gibson’s tend to disorient authors, publishers and some readers who fear a total abandonment of the established norms by which they produce and consume texts. They have caused concern in the industry since 2007. Yet Gibson does not speak of an either/or situation with regard to traditional texts and web-based, interactive iterations. Rather he speaks of one leading to the other, of a dialogue between the two forms that allows for interactivity. He speaks of an expansion of publishing possibilities, not an abandonment of one form for another. It may eventually be the case that digital texts replace traditional texts. It may also be the case that interactive social media platforms one day become the norm for cultural activity as Alexander suggests (2011, p. 126). But that is not the situation in which the publishing industry presently finds itself. It is important now to explore how traditional forms of texts and interactive digital formats might, as Gibson suggests, work together to take the story beyond the page.

Arguments that digital texts will replace legacy publishing models and narrative forms and that all storytelling will henceforth be of an interactive nature are being

replaced with a more catholic vision. The surety with which many spoke of the ‘imminent demise of printed books and the bookstores that sell them, has lost at least some of its urgency’ (Small Press Network (SPUNC) 2012). Some commentators are speaking of a slowdown in e-book growth after several years of exponential sales increases and are wondering if e-publishing might reach a ‘natural limit’ (Greenfield, J 2012). As discussed above, there is still concern within the publishing industry with regard to whether readers actually welcome interactivity in texts.

The literature suggests it is likely to be the case that, as publishing continues to incorporate interactivity, readers will encounter traditional narrative texts (whether print or e-form) coexisting alongside more interactive models through which they are able to, as Axel Bruns writes, ‘engage *in*’ the text rather than only engage *with* it (Bruns 2011, p. 133).

Bob Stein, director of the Institute for the Future of the Book (if:book) speaks of the future of publishing as being ‘social reading’: the idea that ‘in the future texts will become one part of a much larger conversation that happens around them, with notes and context shared on a collaborative platform’ (Jones 2012). Like Gibson and Alexander, Stein sees the book moving to embrace the Phase Space that surrounds it. Such a development could not happen under the economic and technological constraints of print publishing; but the relative ease and speed with which texts may be accessed and reshaped in the digital sphere means that it is now possible, although difficult, thanks to DRM. Stein speaks of ‘texts’ and the ‘larger conversation’ as if there were a difference and a nexus between the two.

Whether or not social media platforms and other forums for digital interactivity such as social reading will become the usual arena for cultural activity (Alexander 2011, p. 126) is impossible to say. Formalised storytelling in those settings is still far from the norm but, as demonstrated so far, there is a call for more experimentation and exploration of the narrative possibilities such platforms might provide (Bolter 2001, p. 122). Even if e-books only ever account for 50 per cent of book sales (Greenfield, J 2012) then this is still a significant slice of the book-buying market; a market that has demonstrated its preparedness to experiment with how it consumes texts.

Fiore suggests that we must entertain all developments that might potentially improve the way we tell stories. He contends that a refusal to incorporate the opportunities offered by interactivity and digitisation into our writing process would be hubristic at best, suggesting that we have nothing to learn from them with regard to how we create and publish and that ‘our round tools needn’t be sharpened’ (Fiore 2007, p. 74). Only by incorporating interactivity into their publications and monitoring its reception by readers could David Carey, president of Hearst Magazines (publishers of popular magazines, including: *Woman’s Day*, *Cosmopolitan* and *O*) have reached the conclusion that ‘most readers just want the product itself’ (Indvik 2012) rather than an interactive version. The nexus between narrative text and interactive digitisation is far from being understood by readers, authors or publishers. Experimentation on the part of all three parties must be welcomed and encouraged if more mature understandings of how such a nexus might function.

Yet, incorporating greater levels of interactivity and/or multimedia or multi-platform functionality into books has proved problematic for these publishers largely because it is simply too financially risky for them to develop many such works. Enhanced e-books are not written by authors as much as they are created by teams of people, as a film or a game might be. Development is therefore slow and very expensive. Carolyn Reidy, CEO of Simon and Schuster believes that enhanced e-books also pose distribution and marketing problems for publishers who are not sure how to label or position such works. These problems translate into discoverability issues for readers who in turn do not know whether to look for them in online bookstores or in an app store (Biba 2011).

Along with these production and discoverability issues, publishers must also contend with issues of form, as identified by Westin who states that ‘the limitations of the format – the rules our interaction with the artefact relentlessly have to adhere to – anchor it to society’ (2013). The thrust of Westin’s argument is that form is as important culturally as content. The physical artefact we call the print book is as important as the text it contains in terms of storytelling. Shillingburg concurs, insisting ‘that the appearance of book books signifies a range of important meanings to their users’ (1996, pp. 150-2). Hayles suggests that we will ‘fail to grasp the fuller significance of the momentous changes underway as the Age of Print draws to a

close' (2003, pp. 269-70) if we do not rethink our approach to form and how the migration of text from print to digital affects the aesthetics of this.

McLuhan characterises the privileging of content over form with regard to the book as a 'failure' (1962, p. 77) to understand that the container/form via which we approach texts is vital to our being able to access and use them. Without user-friendly forms content is rendered inaccessible. The form of the printed book makes content accessible to readers in a way that has become 'deeply internalised' (Ong 1982, p. 99). Readers see the book as an extension of the human condition and not as a piece of container technology. The same has not yet happened with regard to interactive fiction or other digital texts – hence the need to explore and experiment in the construction of those works in order to find either more user-friendly forms or indeed to discover that perhaps readers do not want interactive fiction.

There is no standard form for books or novels that include interactivity, other than the plain text e-book, which features very little or no interactivity. The continually evolving nature of digital technologies and the platforms on which they exist might mean that there may never be a long-lived form for interactive fiction in the way that the print book has been for the novel. This is perhaps another reason why mainstream publishers are unwilling to invest heavily in any form other than the plain text e-book.

Skains suggests (in reference to hypertext fiction, but the same principle can be applied to enhanced e-books and interactive fiction in general) that the abandonment of traditional forms of textual presentation and interaction alienates the reader and 'diminishes the author–reader reciprocity, and thus reduces the reader's comprehension and enjoyment of the text' (2010, p. 107). By replacing the convention of page turning with that of clicking, by constructing the story such that it is not necessarily linear in format and by requiring the reader to make active decisions about the direction of the narrative, writers of hypertext and interactive fiction are placing potentially unwanted pressures on the reader. The same is true of the enhanced e-book and of cross-sited works that introduce multimedia to storytelling. As Carey (Indvik 2012) points out, not all readers will want to engage *in* a text. Many are happy simply to engage *with* them. Yet, even those who want to interact with a narrative need an easily accessible format and the assurance that the author knows

where the story is going, even if they, as readers, are not too sure. Otherwise the trust they have that the author is leading them through a story may be broken, leaving many readers feeling lost and unwilling to continue with the text.

Sven Birkerts wonders in *The Gutenberg Elegies* whether readers will want to collaborate with authors in the creation of narrative texts. He personally embraces the ‘liberating domination’⁸ (2006, p. 164) of the author, preferring to be guided by his/her words and narrative rather than having to create them himself. He is concerned that the collectivism or communality introduced to literature by interactivity will cause a diminution of the singularity of vision that he sees as the heart of good authorship. A consensus approach to narrative involves attendant implications of a compromised artistic vision. Clay Shirky expresses similar concerns in *Here Comes Everybody* (Shirky 2008). He believes that allowing amateurs into the publishing industry will result in a lowering of publication standards.

Birkerts (2006) originally expressed his concerns during the Internet’s infancy, but they seem more relevant today given the less-than-overwhelming reception given to enhanced e-books so far by publishers and readers. His words presage Skains’ concerns about author–reader reciprocity. And his fears about the future of literature in the face of digitisation are still current for many.

Peter Carey, in a speech to the 2010 Sydney Writers Festival, decried the loss of the sensual and olfactory beauty of books and dreaded the introduction of reading by what he called ‘digital space onion’ (Carey 2010). Franzen raised similar concerns and bemoaned the impermanence of e-books (Flood 2012). Greenfield wonders how digital technology might negatively affect our brains (2012). The fears of these three commentators represent the views of many critics. They suggest that literature, notions of culture and even people themselves are in a time of crisis thanks to the impact of digital technology. These are legitimate concerns and it is important that experiments involving digital technology and text are conducted in such a way as to acknowledge them. But it is also the case, as Eisenstein suggests, that the idea of

⁸ Birkerts is inverting Barthes who spoke in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’ (2001, pp. 56-7) of liberating the reader from the domination of the author.

being in cultural crisis is, paradoxically, a constant in literary and cultural discussions: ‘the feeling of being “in the midst of an epoch-making transition” serves to link our generation with several that have gone before’ (Eisenstein 1995, p. 242). Instead of seeing the digital so-called revolution as a time of crisis it might be better understood as a necessary time of flux; a period in time in which established media are challenged as new forms rise to either take their place or establish their own place alongside them.⁹

Society may be in a constant state of crisis (or flux) with regard to cultural change, but that does not lessen the concerns of those who fear that to lose print-book literature and reading, is to lose something of great cultural importance. Such concerns are driven in part by the massive impact that digital technology had on many areas of culture in the early years of this century. Since 2010, publishing industry sales figures have consistently shown and predicted a continued rise in the sales of e-books such that commentators were wont to look for a tipping point¹⁰ a time at which print would succumb to the e-book. This was very much an either/or view of publishing, one that suggested that print would not survive. It was also a determinist approach that saw continual improvements in digital technology leading inevitably to the e-book besting print as the primary container technology embraced by audiences. Yet enhanced e-book sales remain low. Gadd suggests that we are witnessing the ‘death rattle’ of enhanced e-books (2014) and Cameron suggests that publishers remain unconvinced that there is place for them in their catalogues (Cameron), which suggests that print and linear narrative remain the storytelling formats-of-choice for the majority of readers. This thinking ignores or is unaware of the importance of form in publishing as identified by Westin.

⁹ Similar concerns have been expressed with regard to television, radio, film, mass communication, industrialised printing, the printing press and even writing. In *Symposium and Phaedrus* (1993) Plato expressed a concern that writing would threaten oral culture and that it might negatively impact our brains much as Greenfield suggests digital technology does.

¹⁰ It was suggested at the Digital Book World conference in early 2011 that this tipping point might occur in 2014 (Hoffelder 2011). However the rise in e-books sales at that time was so rapid that some commentators predicted that this change might occur in late 2011 (2006, p. 137). The sales of e-books slowed in 2012, as has the discussion of a tipping point.

Skains recognises the importance of maintaining established forms and mores to keep readers engaged: ‘In order to establish a reader base for digital narratives, authors interested in offering digital content must bridge the gap between print and digital conventions’ (2010, p. 108). This thinking replaces ‘either/or’ with ‘with/and’ and suggests that just because it is possible to make interactive storytelling platforms does not mean that they will be embraced by readers who may prefer more traditional forms. It opens the door to the cross-siting of texts, offering readers the security of internalised textual forms while providing them with a way to extend that experience in the interactive digital realm. It allows them to explore new media and potentially build a rapport with forms in that arena at their own pace, thereby lessening the risk of reader disenfranchisement.

But if it is too expensive and too risky for mainstream publishers to invest heavily in enhanced e-books, or in any form of experimentation with digitisation outside of the realm of the plain text e-book, and yet there is a call for such experimentation and research to take place, who is to do it?

Eli Horowitz, author of the interactive digital novel serial *The Silent History* (Horowitz et al. 2013) insists that despite their misgivings publishers are much better than authors are at conducting such developmental work. He argues that such work might give them ongoing relevance at a time in which their very existence is threatened economically (Carp 2012) and questioned by pundits such as Shirky who argue against the industry’s relevance, saying that publishing is no longer a profession, rather it is a function; a button (Johnson 2012). Publishers, Horowitz contends, have the ability and the necessary expertise and capital to bring together the kind of teams needed to create enhanced and interactive narrative works.

McLuhan thought that such experimentation was best performed by artists. They ‘are always the first to discover how to enable one medium to use or release the power of another’ (1964, p. 62). Bolter is more specific, suggesting that ‘it makes sense that creative writers should lead the way in developing the possibilities of electronic hypertext’ (2001, p. 121). He maintains that such experimentation continues the tradition of experimentation with form initiated by twentieth-century modernists and

postmodernists (ibid., p. 122). Leadbeater and Miller suggest that Pro-Ams (partnerships between skilled amateurs and professional practitioners) positioned in the margins of traditional business and operational models are the drivers of change and experimentation. Working in areas that cannot sustain mainstream operators, they play with new technologies and ideas, often changing the way mainstream business operates through ‘disruptive innovation’ (2004, p. 52) that can lead to new ways of operating.

All three parties contend that there is no room in the mainstream for prolonged experimentation. Shirky shares this opinion, suggesting that ‘almost all innovation in creation, consumption, distribution and use of text is coming from outside the traditional publishing industry’ (Johnson 2012).

Yet such experimentation is problematic. It is often hard for those working outside the mainstream to make significant inroads, with regard to publicity and sales, so as to bring their work to a mass audience. Experimental works such as *The Project*, *Afternoon, a story* (Joyce 1987), *These Waves of Girls* (Fisher 2001) and *Of Day, Of Night* (Heyward 2004) are difficult for publishers or authors to package, promote and sell. These works do not necessarily lend themselves to traditional bookshop presentations which reduces their discoverability, meaning they do not reach a wide audience. Consequently it is hard to assess whether such works are successful, given their often-limited reach.¹¹ The green field nature of such experiments means that it is difficult even to set parameters by which to assess these works given that they are often without precedent.

These Pro-Ams are the very people to whom Bruns referred: people who are now willing and able to engage *in* texts as well as *with* them. Trendwatching.com dubbed these particular Pro-Ams ‘Generation C’ (‘C’ being for content), (trendwatching.com 2005) arguing that a significant section of the population was committed to creating

¹¹ Success itself is a problematic concept in a literary context. There are many different possible successes to be had, or not had. The successful completion of a manuscript does not equate to sales or critical success. In the case of *The Project* in relation to this thesis, success might be determined in terms of the number and character of the interactions recorded on the character blogs. This will be discussed in more detail later in this exegesis.

and experimenting with online content both in terms of what it is and how it is formed.

Generation C plays with technology and with content. Much of what is created is ‘crap which, at best, will be appreciated only by inner-circle friends and family,’ (ibid.) – endless reams of tweets, Facebook status updates and SMS messages. But not all of it is dross. Besides, much of it is ‘crap’ because ‘the more technologically radical the innovation the more difficult it is to say in advance what it is for’ (Leadbeater & Miller 2004, p. 52). It is difficult to predict how an audience will react to any innovation, whether they will be willing to engage with it, regardless of what it is ‘for’, and whether those who are willing to participate interactively in the news media and on social media are equally willing to do the same in a narrative-text context.

News media outlets have embraced the Pro-Am potential of User Generated Content (UGC) and of the incorporation of digitisation and multimedia functionality into their publications through a gradual process of integration. They began by allowing their text to be linked outside of their own web pages. Then they allowed their journalists to blog, encouraging users to submit comments which led to them embracing citizen journalists as integral, though secondary, to their process. They are beginning to understand how this innovation might work effectively in their sphere. That Fairfax newspapers have released an app for readers, which features a rather prominent ‘submit’ button, illustrates this point (Shields 2012). This almost symbiotic relationship with Pro-Ams has been taking place in the Phase Space surrounding news media since the advent of Web 2.0 and is an ongoing process.

Yet, perversely, the introduction of the tablet has seen a marked shift in the way newspapers incorporate interactivity and present digital texts. This shift lends further weight to the notion that interactivity between readers and writers in general is in flux and in need of further exploration.

Tablet screens are page-shaped and as such lend themselves to the presentation of text in a traditionally paginated form as opposed to website form (which tends to present as one long page that is accessed through a combination of scrolling and hyperlinking,

as opposed to flicking individual pages). News providers and magazine publishers were quick to seize on this, creating apps that rendered their news in a traditional paginated and sometimes columnar fashion as opposed to the way they had presented their news on their websites. The speed with which some providers (*The Age*, *Sports Illustrated* and *Herald Sun*) moved to this app format after spending, in many cases, over a decade developing grammars for presentation of content on web pages illustrates the volatility of the digital text format. It also alludes to the cultural resonance of the page as discussed by Westin and an enduring need in the readership for its continued existence.

These changes mean that stories published on tablets function, in many ways, more like print (or plain text) stories than interactive digital texts. Readers often flick between pages, rather than hyperlinking from one story to another. Previously, best practice for web writing dictated that stories should link to other stories on the same site and to external information that enhanced the reader's understanding of the story. Perhaps the fact that such interactivity is now reduced is an indication that publishers are concluding that readers want the product without the interactivity. This is also an implied recognition of the cultural importance of the page.

If it is not yet possible to say with any certainty, as Leadbeater and Miller suggest, what these technological advances are 'for' with regard to news media publishing, it is even more difficult to say the same with regard to the book and in particular novel publishing, given that these advances have been more recently introduced to that sector. The novel-publishing industry is undergoing relationship changes similar to those experienced by the news media with regard to Pro-Ams, but this is a much newer phenomenon that has only begun to develop significantly since the advent of the tablet. That is not to discount the experiments that have been conducted with hypertext and other digitally-based narrative forms, but these are/were, 'the preserve of "experts" – academics, journalists and writers themselves' (Pope 2010, p. 76) and have never been embraced by mainstream publishers or readers.

The cause of interactivity in news media was driven by a Pro-Am audience that possessed the technological and, in many instances, creative and research capabilities that enabled it to contribute to interactive news formats. No such audience-driven

surge has yet been encountered in the case of narrative texts. Interactive narrative texts have been available to readers since the mid-1980s, initially via the hypertext novel and today in the form of the enhanced e-book. Yet neither of these forms has been embraced by a popular audience to the same degree as interactive news media. The drive to explore the melding of interactive digital technologies and narrative texts is still coming largely from the journalists, academics and writers that Pope mentions, not the readership.

Despite the lack of mainstream support, Pro-Ams continue to learn, play with and investigate digital technology and how it might be incorporated into both the news and book-publishing industries. They do this because they *want* to. Such ‘dedicated amateurs pursue new ideas even when it appears there is no money to be made’ (Leadbeater & Miller 2004, p. 52). Included in the ranks of these Pro-Ams must be authors (such as myself), small publishers (such as Vulgar Press) and many of Pope’s writers, academics and journalists who cannot or do not make a living from the publishing industry. Nevertheless they are practitioners of professional standard and are increasingly highly skilled in publishing and in the workings of digitised texts. They are willing to experiment with notions of authority, with collaborative writing, with format, version control and with copyright too, as they often stand to make very little from their work. Alongside these are a band of readers who wish to engage in the creation of narrative by collaborating with each other and with authors and publishers on existing and new projects.

Just prior to the introduction of the Kindle, and with it the plain text e-book, Pope called for increased research into how hypertext fiction might work in a narrative context (2006). The same argument can be made for fictions of any sort that involve interactivity and digital media as the problems that prevented hypertext from entering the mainstream also apply to enhanced e-books, transmedia, cross-sited and other forms of non-traditional, digital-based storytelling. Too much interactive content in a narrative context can lead to ‘a loss of story grasp and ultimately a loss of interest in the unfolding narrative’ (Pope 2010, p. 88). Pope argues that in order to mitigate against this, authors of interactive works need to find a ‘balance between [the] stimulus and distraction’ (ibid.) the introduction of interactivity to narrative engenders. He acknowledges that very little reviewed literature discusses the question

of how to develop interactive fiction formats that are engaging and stimulating without being too disruptive. Writers who venture into the area of interactivity do so without the benefit of conventional 'schemas' which:

enable us to perceive objects and occurrences around us and make efficient sense of them by consulting our readymade store of similar occurrences and understandings (Douglas, J. Y. & Hargadon, A. 2001, p. 154).

Wearne argues that new media creators are challenged with finding a way to create work that 'disengages the viewer from immersion yet at the same time compels them to remain engaged' (Wearne 1997, p. 20).

Douglas and Hargadon suggest that immersion is the state by which readers find themselves lost in a work to the extent that they at times forget that they are reading. Engagement, on the other hand, is the state whereby readers are forced, through the use of unfamiliar schemas by the author or creator, to position themselves outside of the text such that they are aware of its construction and geography as much as they are of its content (2001, p. 156). Finding structures for interactive fictions that balance these two concerns such that reader stimulation by the structure does not prove too distracting, is the goal for these media creators. It is also a goal for The Project.

Chapter 2: The Incorporation of Interactivity into The Project

This chapter explicates the process of creative-practice-led research that culminated in the decision to incorporate interactivity into The Project. It examines the sequence of development of the creative work in relation to this. It discusses the influence of the television show *Seinfeld* (Seinfeld 1989-1998), the song 'Once in a Lifetime', and the principles of Socratic dialectic on this decision.

The novel 'Once in a Lifetime' was originally conceived as a print-only publication. The initial idea for the novel was conceived in 2006 at a time when the e-book and attendant ideas of interactivity with regard to novel texts had yet to make the kind of impact on the publishing scene they did once the Kindle and the iPad were launched.

The novel is a bloke lit *bildungsroman*. It tells the story of Bill Mason, a man in his early thirties who has not yet grown up but who is required to do so in a hurry. Thanks to rapid and somewhat unexpected changes in both his romantic and professional circumstances he enters into a deep existential crisis.

Bill is forced to examine his life: his decisions, motivations, actions and intentions in great detail in order to work out who he is and who he would like to be. The novel explores themes of identity and is a search for existential truth or at least for one man's understanding of the truth about himself. Can he remake himself, if not as the man he would like to be, then at least as a version of himself that he can live with? The novel's humour springs from Bill's observations of the world and himself as he struggles to understand both. Like a modern-day Everyman he addresses the questions that confronted many Gen X-ers who drifted through their twenties in a seemingly endless blur of pseudo-adolescent non-commitment. Fuelled by an abundance of choice and opportunity they were, once they entered their thirties, abruptly confronted by an adult world that demanded they take responsibility for their lives.

Although the novel is not a morality tale, Bill's story is one of self-discovery and redemption. He makes mistakes (sins?) and he has to learn how to make good the hurt he has caused, to others and himself. It was intended that readers might ask themselves the same questions and involve themselves in the same discussions and

issues as Bill does, much as readers or an audience of *Everyman* might. How this is achieved and how the reader might come to see Bill's journey as their own, were key considerations throughout the writing of the novel and it was this thinking that led to the creation of *The Project*.

The thinking behind the comedic aspects of the novel and the questing nature of the main protagonist Bill were influenced by observational humour, notably that found in the sitcom *Seinfeld* (*Seinfeld* 1989-1998). This type of comedy involves an acute observation, or examination of an environment or behaviour. It is a comedic form rooted in the dialectic tradition of enquiry and analysis through dialogue. It is a questioning form whereby some part of an observed subject is examined and interrogated in fine detail. Through this process the audience is invited to consider aspects of that which is under examination, as it is identified and revealed in harsh relief, through participation in this questioning process.

Also, like Bill, the characters in *Seinfeld* (*ibid.*) drift through their lives with little thought of consequence. They are becalmed, as is he at the beginning of the novel, in a postmodern malaise. Life is a series of days for them; each much like the previous. With no guiding imperative, or moral, there is little consideration given to the future other than as a continuation of the present.

Although *Seinfeld* (*ibid.*) is famously known as 'a show about nothing' (Pierson 2000) it is rather a show about everything. Like Socrates these characters live examined lives. The entire premise of the sitcom is one of investigation into the meaning of life. Its humour is born out of a dialectical search for truth, albeit in the realm of the seemingly very trivial and inconsequential. Many of the issues that Bill focuses on in the novel may seem of little consequence too, but the postmodern world in which he and the *Seinfeld* (*ibid.*) characters find themselves has no grand narrative. Nor does it have a meta-moral to be followed or sought. In such worlds everything is in flux. Morals and ethics are fluid and the petty and the trite are as worthy of examination as any purportedly weightier issues.

Irwin notes the similarities between the character Jerry from *Seinfeld* (*ibid.*) and Socrates with regard to their questioning nature and their search for 'the nature or

essence of things' (2000, pp. 8-11). Jerry employs dialectic similar to that of Socrates in his search for truth. This process, which usually takes the form of an argument-based dialogue, is variously discussed in *The Republic* as 'the only procedure which proceeds by the destruction of assumptions to the very first principle' (Plato 1955d) and the process by which 'one tries to get at what each thing is in itself . . . relying on reason without any aid from the senses.' (ibid., 532a). The dialectician therefore 'can take account of the essential nature of each thing' (ibid., 534a).

Like the Socratic dialogues and the *Everyman* morality plays (Pickford 1976), these exchanges between the characters on the show also offer an invitation to the audience to consider the issues discussed and to relate them to their own lives. They reveal hidden aspects of the world to their audience. They pose difficult questions. They are instructional, albeit in an absurd sense, in the same way as those two weightier groups of texts are. Like Socrates in his role as a 'stinging fly', it is the job of these characters, in particular Jerry, to provoke their audience into a deeper consideration of their lot by settling 'here and there, rousing persuading, reproving' (Plato 2003e-31a).

The *Seinfeld* characters observe and examine themselves and their world, in the search for first principles. This conversation (which takes place in a laundry) between Jerry and George from episode 1 of series 1 establishes this tone:

GEORGE

Listen, your stuff has to be done by now. Why don't you see if it's dry?

JERRY

No, no, no. Don't interrupt the cycle. The machine is working. It knows what it's doing. Let it finish.

GEORGE

You're going to overdry it.

JERRY

You can't overdry.

GEORGE

Why not?

JERRY

For the same reason you can't overwet. Once something is wet, it's wet. Same thing with death. Like once you die you're dead, right? Let's say you drop dead and I shoot you. You're not going to die again, you're already dead. You can't overdie, you can't overdry, (David, Seinfeld & others 1998, pp. 12-3).

But there is a difference. Socrates sought to learn from dialectical exchange, to identify inalienable truths about the world, whereas:

One of [*Seinfeld's*] writers has confessed that there is only one rule in the composition of the show: the characters must never learn from their experiences; they must forever be what they intrinsically and eternally are (Hibbs 2000, pp. 157-8).

Doomed by their situation, these characters battle the same problems over and over again (as lessons learned in one episode are forgotten in the next), hampered each time by the same flaws and failing each time for the same reasons. There is no concept of their dialectic arriving at any unalienable truths. There are no first principles to be found, only an endless array of contingent principles which must be newly created in response to each new crisis.

In 'Once in a Lifetime', Bill examines his life in something like the minute detail that the *Seinfeld* characters observe theirs. His too is a dialectical search for meaning, but unlike them, the need to examine his life comes from a realisation that he is dissatisfied with a world that offers no grand moral.

His search also begins with a (tacit Socratic) belief that it must be possible to arrive at first principles and truths through a process of self-examination. Eventually he is disabused of this belief, deciding that: 'the truth changes from day to day, it is fluid (Weldon 2012f, p. 201), it is malleable . . . you can investigate and seek all you like, but all you will discover are more questions' which brings on an existential crisis. Yet, unlike the *Seinfeld* characters, he is not doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over. He has within himself the potential for change. He finally emerges from

crisis when he realises that he must, in a world devoid of singular truth(s), create his own meaning.

However, unlike both Socrates and the *Seinfeld* characters, Bill's dialectic process does not take the form of a dialogue. Rather, his examinations take the form of internal monologues and reflections, forms which may initially seem unsuited to the process given the (usual) dialogical nature of dialectical inquiry. Seeskin suggests that 'human reflection is by nature a dialectical activity' (1987, p. 23). Drawing on Plato's *Republic* he suggests that 'whether one is thinking to himself or answering another, the process is fundamentally the same: he must respond to objections' (ibid., p. 46).

Bill's inner monologues are the result of such an internal examination. They take the form of rhetorical argument, or a rendering of the conclusions drawn from such arguments, often in the form of advice addressed to himself (and implicitly to the reader too) with regard to them, as follows:

My advice to you is this: Don't tell your parents that you and your girlfriend have broken up. Just don't . . . it's not that they don't understand or they don't care . . . it's not in their nature to hear adult problems coming from their children (Weldon 2012f, p. 65).

The monologues delivered in *Seinfeld* by the character Jerry are similar in nature. These stand-up routines are structured like a dialogue in which Seinfeld asks, and sometimes answers, rhetorical questions of himself. For instance:

JERRY

What is the pony? What is the point of the pony? Why do we have these animals, these ponies? What do we want with them? Besides the pony ride. Why ponies? What are we doing with them? (David, Seinfeld & others 1998, p. 213).

The questions asked by Jerry and the advice given by Bill in the above examples, while rhetorical, are implicitly addressed to the audience/reader, as well as themselves. The audience/reader cannot directly engage in a dialogue with either

Jerry or Bill but rather responds through laughter (or not), and recognition, which implies an identification (or not) with the issues raised by them. The audience/reader may undertake their own dialectical examination of the issues raised by Jerry or Bill in the manner outlined by Seeskin. However, if they are not able to interact directly with either, then the texts through which each communicates presents, as Plato has Socrates say (of written texts), ‘the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence’ (1993, p. 88). It was this lack of interactivity that Socrates found disturbing about writing. Text, according to him, is isolated and disconnected, it cannot engage with the area of potentiality that it creates and by which it is created. It is effectively shut off from the Phase Space. It was a search for a mechanism by which to take this interaction beyond the rhetorical that eventually led to the inclusion of interactive media in *The Project*.

The novel component of *The Project* was begun before the advent of the tablet, the e-book and the introduction of interactivity to mainstream publishing. The initial attempts to create a form of dialogue between text/character and reader, therefore, took place through the use of the second-person voice in the medium of print rather than online.

The working title of the novel is borrowed from the eponymous Talking Heads song: ‘Once in a Lifetime’ (Byrne et al. 1980), which also employs second-person voice in an attempt to establish a form of dialogue, this time between text/singer/narrator and listener. This song tells of a man who is suddenly awakened to the fact that he is lost metaphorically, spiritually and perhaps even physically in his life. The familiar has become strange, leaving him dislocated and in a state of existential crisis similar to that endured by Bill. In this sense the song discusses similar themes to those explored in the novel. The concerns expressed in the song, and the way alternating first- and second-person narrative voice is used in the song’s lyrics, heavily influenced the writing of ‘Once in a Lifetime’.

David Byrne, Talking Heads vocalist and co-writer of the song ‘Once in a Lifetime’ had this to say about it:

We're largely unconscious. You know, we operate half-awake or on autopilot and end up, whatever, with a house and family and job and everything else, and we haven't really stopped to ask ourselves, 'How did I get here?' (Karr 2000).

This song describes the crisis faced by a man who realises he has led an unexamined life and consequently finds himself in crisis. He counters this by engaging in a dialectic discussion with himself in an attempt to understand himself and his situation. These thoughts and the manner in which they are realised in the song articulate the position Bill finds himself in, in *The Project*. He is a man who has drifted through his life with little awareness of his effect on others and himself. One day he is brought to a shuddering halt when one too many ill-considered decisions finally opens him up to consequence and a state of affairs with which he must deal, however reluctantly.

The chorus of the song is written in first person and the verses in second person. The ambiguity inherent in the second-person voice, created by 'using the pronoun *you*, which ambivalently hovers between reference to narratee/reader and the second person protagonist' (Fludernik 2009, p. 50) leaves the subject of the song open, allowing 'protagonist and narratee to share realms of identity [thereby] implicating the real reader'¹² (Fludernik 2001, p. 626) in the narrative and in the dialectic of the song.

Is the singer (narrator) addressing himself, the protagonist in the song, or the listener? Who is called upon to answer these questions? These verses are framed as a series of statements and rhetorical questions. They could be read as either inner monologue or as one side of a dialogue, with the other side to be filled in by answers from the narratee, protagonist or real reader, for example:

You may ask yourself, 'What is that beautiful house?'

You may ask yourself, 'Where does that highway go to?'

You may ask yourself, 'Am I right or am I wrong?'

¹²Real reader, as in the actual person reading the text. Not to be confused with the implied reader, a reader who possesses the cultural attitudes and beliefs appropriate to a text as discussed by Iser (1980).

You may say to yourself, ‘My God! What have I done?’ (Byrne et al. 1980).

Kacandes remarks that:

If a person in the act of reading comes across the words, ‘you, reader,’ there is nothing . . . to prevent her considering that these words refer to her; after all this is a vocative form and she encounters it when she is the only ‘you’ present (1993, p. 140).

It is tempting therefore for readers to interpret the use of the second-person direct address in narrative as referring to them, and by logical extension to imagine that questions asked in this voice are being asked of them. The text is in effect interrogating them, or initiating an interaction with them.

Fludernik confirms this, suggesting that:

When readers read narrative texts, they project real-life parameters into the reading process and, if at all possible, treat the text as a real-life instance of narrating (2001, p. 623).

In using the second-person voice, Talking Heads play on the reader’s willingness to treat the questions raised in the song by the protagonist as if they were addressed to them. They play on the reader’s desire to bring real-life parameters into the reading process by treating the interrogation that takes place in the song as a direct interrogation of themselves.

Inspired by the song, and by Fludernik’s discussion of the effect of the use of second person voice on the reader’s level of engagement with the narrative, early drafts of ‘Once in a Lifetime’ narrated Bill’s inner monologue in the second person while his narration of the story was written in the first person. The intention was to invite the reader to believe that any thoughts, questions or advice that Bill directed at himself were also directed at them. Thereby they too were involved directly in Bill’s examination of his life by also making it an examination of their lives.

These second-person sections were felt by some readers of those early drafts to be somewhat jarring. They did not feature as frequently in the text as was initially intended and as such appeared somewhat unexpectedly, thereby tending to disrupt the narrative flow of the novel as a whole.

Pope discusses 'flow' as 'that finely balanced state where effort and reward are so closely matched that the reader acts seemingly effortlessly' (2006, p. 455). The second-person sections in 'Once in a Lifetime' made it harder for readers of early drafts (colleagues, fellow PhD candidates) to become absorbed in the story, to achieve flow. These sections pulled reader focus away from the narrative and onto its structure; they prevented the reader from becoming immersed in the story. The structure proved too distracting with the result that readers were held at the level of engagement as they tried to negotiate the changes in voice from first to second person. Rather than asking themselves the same questions that Bill was asking of himself, some readers were left wondering whether these changes in voice were intentional or were simply inconsistencies on the part of the author.

It is not always the case that the reader is willing to accept the 'Irresistible Invitation' (Kacandes 1993, p. 139) to become part of the narrative that the use of second person offers. Not every reader will see themselves as the 'you', especially if that you appears gendered, as it does in both the novel and the Talking Heads song. In such instances 'you' quickly becomes limited in terms of reference to the narrator as the circumstances and experiences expressed in that voice become very recognisably those of the character not the reader (Walker 2000, p. 19). In discussing this, Walker expresses her desire as a female reader in such situations to sometimes identify with a female character other than that suggested by the 'you', even though this may seem to be an explicit contradiction of the author's wish for the implied, and by effect, real reader. She states:

Direct address in these cases attempts to forcibly break down the differences between the real reader, the implied reader and the narratee. I am forced into a script, forced into participation. Sometimes that feels good. Sometimes I run away (2000, p. 20).

The second-person passages included in 'Once in a Lifetime' had the opposite effect from that intended. Firstly, they distracted readers from the story and the crises considered by Bill, forcing them instead to focus on the structure of the narrative, rather than the narrative itself by drawing attention to their presence as literary devices. Secondly, some readers found the use of second person to be a disguised first person, as described by Walker, thereby forcing them overtly to acknowledge the separation between themselves and Bill and by implication his dialectical concerns.

Initially, in response to these criticisms, I cast more of the story in second person to better integrate the existing second-person sections and thereby reduce the potential for them to cause distraction. This, however, led to the 'you' increasingly becoming a 'hidden "I"' (Walker 2000, p. 19) as Bill's voice, experiences, thoughts and feelings lie very much at the heart of these passages of internal monologue.

But perhaps the most significant issue encountered with regard to the use of second person as a means of extending Bill's dialectic explorations to include the reader, was that this voice is inherently rhetorical. They offer no way for the reader to interact *in* the text or *with* the character.

In response, frameworks were sought for these inner monologues that would enable them to work more effectively in the novel (still utilising second person as/if necessary) rather than being seen as jarring switches in narrative voice. I wanted these passages to offer the reader an opportunity to participate actively in Bill's dialectic process without seeming to force them into participating in something they felt uncomfortable doing. This search led to the incorporation of a form of digital interactivity, similar to that observed in the news media, into The Project.

Bruns calls the process by which consumers and producers of news media content work collaboratively 'produsage' which he defines as 'the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in the pursuit of further development' (2006, p. 2). He calls those engaged in this process 'producers' (ibid.). Labels such as producer, Pro-Am, Generation C and citizen journalist are attempts to label that section of society that, post Web 2.0, is no longer willing to be a broadcast audience only, but which instead desires to engage in the production of content. These

are (very broadly) the ‘artists’ that McLuhan (1964, p. 62) speaks of who use the new medium to release the power of the old using interactive digital technologies to free the word from the broadcast-model bounds of the printed page. Bird calls this ‘a “cultural shift”, which has realigned the roles of audience and producer in profound ways’ (2011, p. 503).

But in many ways this shift is a return to a model of content production that pre-dates print. By allowing collaboration between producer and consumer, (often) in real time, these technologies recast the two in roles similar to that of oral storyteller and audience, of dialectician and interlocutor. Each contributes to the story, each responds to content provided by the other. Stories are presented as works-in-progress rather than as fixed entities. Robinson asserts that ‘the news article is [now] only the beginning of the “life” of the journalism’ (2010, p. 133). If, as Alexander maintains (2011, p. 47), the same may well happen to storytelling and to the novel, then perhaps in future the novel will only be the beginning of the ‘life’ of long-form fiction stories.

The incorporation of interactivity into texts allows for direct and open communication between combinations of reader, text, author and (in the case of ‘Once in a Lifetime’) character. It therefore has the potential to dispel Socrates’ assertion that writing is a silent and unresponsive form (Plato 1993, p. 188) as it allows the text to be rewritten, to respond to argument and objection and to be updated. Bolter suggests that this interactivity not only allows a reader to engage in a text as suggested by Bruns, but to write in it as well. The concomitant surrendering of authority required on the part of the author results in a more authentic participatory experience for readers than that offered by traditional print novels (2001, pp. 152-3). This has the potential to further dispel Socrates’ concerns because if the reader has the ability to write in the text then so does the author (post publication), meaning that the text becomes an ongoing exchange of ideas rather than a fixed statement. I began to think that if I could introduce such interactivity to ‘Once in a Lifetime’ then readers would be able to engage in that text and with Bill in a dialectic fashion.

The decision to include interactivity in the novel sprang from an original intention explicitly to involve the reader in Bill’s dialectic search for truth and identity. It was found that it was only possible to achieve a very limited interactivity though the use

of print-only texts, even those that used the ‘irresistible invitation’ of the second-person interrogative ‘you’ (Kacandes 1993, p. 139).

A more active form of interactivity might be possible in digital texts, which offer the potential for a direct and open dialogue and/or dialectic between reader and text – a version of communication reminiscent in many ways of oral storytelling where the lines between storyteller and audience are less strictly defined. The relationships between professional journalists and Pro-Am or citizen journalists are a limited realisation of this. While Hockley (1996, p. 12) rightly alerts us to the dangers inherent in assuming that any such interaction is open and democratic, these relationships are an acknowledgement that the writer/journalist/author is not the sole source of news nor that any published iteration of a story is the definitive version of that story. Journalists and authors are forced to admit the linked, collaborative nature of writing, and the connectedness of stories and writers to the world outside the story. Under this paradigm, so-called ‘finished works’ and ‘authors’ are points along a creative continuum rather than terminal or end points. Woodmansee suggests that ‘the computer is dissolving the boundaries essential to the survival of our modern fiction of the author as the sole creator of unique original works,’ (1991, p. 289).

The Project, by combining print with interactivity in the form of a cross-sited novel, is a direct examination of the potential of interactivity to alter the way we write and read novels and how this changes the relationship between reader and writer.

Chapter 3: Why Make The Project Interactive?

This chapter will discuss the form of interactivity – weblogs or ‘blogs’ – used in The Project, and how these were designed so that they and the novel worked together to create a cross-sited, interactive story.

The introduction of interactivity to the text of ‘Once in a Lifetime’ had (and still has) the potential to allow the reader to engage collaboratively in the writing of a text, ‘to gain access to the pleasure of writing,’ (Barthes 1990, p. 4). As contended by Bolter (2001, p.152) such interactivity offers the reader a more genuinely participatory experience and makes explicit the idea that the text is not necessarily physically bounded, as print works are, but that it continues to grow and evolve (beyond the page) after it has been published, in the ongoing interactions between reader, author, text and/or character. The text is ‘not simply the object that one holds in one’s hands’ (Foucault 1991, p. 23) or stores on one’s tablet. It includes also the ongoing discussion, perhaps dialectical, that takes place in the Phase Space around the work.

Through the introduction and incorporation of interactivity the text gains the potential to respond to the reader, thereby countering Socrates’ criticism of writing that it is a dead thing incapable of response. This interactivity allows for the blurring of the traditional roles and functions, with regard to the novel, played by author, text, character and reader.

But incorporating interactivity into the text of a print novel or plain text e-book is not a simple process. Neither format easily facilitates such a development, meaning that there are serious issues to be considered in relation to form and how interactivity might be practically applied. Further, the unfamiliar schema such an introduction could engender might make it more difficult for readers to achieve immersion while reading the novel. This could potentially cause them to disengage from the work rather than engage further, or differently, with it. Finally, Carey (Indvik 2012) and van Dijck (2009, p.44) maintain that the majority of readers are passive consumers of online text, who do not necessarily want to participate in its creation. Landow takes this further suggesting that regardless of whether they want to or not, some readers

simply do not possess the skills (technical or aesthetic) that would allow them to work productively with others in such an environment (2006, p. 137).

The evidence presented so far, therefore, might suggest that there were more reasons to discontinue The Project than there were to continue with it. But this is not the case. Skains writes convincingly of readers' demonstrated desire to continue to experience a novel beyond the page (2010, p. 100) and about how this has been realised in the past through adaptation and fan fiction. He contends, further, that through the development of interactive digital technologies writers are able to build bridges between authors and readers which allow them to do just that: to extend fictional worlds beyond the page in ways not possible in print only. And he suggests that as the "digital" generation approaches adulthood' we can expect more readers who are willing to play with and adapt text and who are less reliant on existing schema (2010, pp. 105-6).

Landow too is compelling as he identifies readers' desires to pursue the story beyond the page as a legitimate reason to experiment with interactive fiction. He calls those who desire to do this: 'very active readers' (Landow 2006, p. 6) and he describes a long tradition of such readers whose interaction with a text goes beyond reading into the realm of extension, reimagining and rewriting. He traces the very active reader back to Homer's rewriting of Virgil and follows the phenomenon to the present day through Jean Rhys's writing of *Wide Sargasso Sea* (2000), a prequel to *Jane Eyre* (Bronte 2013) and Peter Carey's rewriting of the Magwitch character from *Great Expectations* in his novel *Jack Maggs* (1997).¹³ He argues that the introduction of cheap communications technology beginning with photocopying and culminating (so far) in the Internet has, since the 1970s, made it much easier for very active readers to play with and rewrite text, which many have done (Landow 2006, p. 7) Landow recognises that the medium of the blog allows readers greater power than they have ever had before in terms of being able to respond to and/or alter another's text in a collaborative and/or ongoing manner (ibid., p. 9).

¹³ More recently there has been a burst of novels written by very active readers who have reimagined out-of-copyright novels, through the lens of science fiction and fantasy tropes, resulting in works such as: *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (Winters & Austen 2009), *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Austen & Grahame-Smith 2009) and *Android Karenina* (Winters & Tolstoy 2010).

Even though Landow establishes that there is a class of reader willing to interact with texts, it is not enough to speak of introducing interactivity to a project as if that is the crucial decision in the process. He speaks of the terms ‘interactive’ and ‘interactivity’ suggesting that they have lost their meaning through overuse and that the terms are often bandied about as if the very introduction of any form of interactivity is instantly and inherently positively transformative, rather than potentially intrusive and disruptive (ibid., p. 42). Trotter speaks of interactivity being ‘regarded as the holy grail’ by those involved in ‘new media’, suggesting that effective forms of interactivity with regard to stories are highly sought after but hard to find (2012).

Writing some ten years earlier than Landow, Wearne crucially identified that ‘interactivity’ as a notion was ‘no longer attractive in itself. Rather it is the *design* of that interactive work that is crucial’ (1997, p. 19). Authors must consider how interactivity will impact on their work and whether it allows for the work to grow and for the readers’ (active or otherwise) experience of the text to be enhanced, or whether it reduces the effectiveness of the work by offering needless and unrewarding distraction.

In concerning itself with the creative and academic research behind the design of the interactive elements of The Project, this chapter will discuss how and why interactivity in the form of blogging was incorporated into The Project and how this was designed so as best to create an interactive forum upon which narrative-extending dialectical intercourse could take place. These design decisions will be discussed in relation to fictions created on the interactive social media forums: Facebook, Twitter and wikis. Case studies will be made of the way these decisions were made in the interactive fictions: *Dracula: The Official Stoker Family Edition* (Stoker, Pilditch & Marmulla 2010), *Frankenstein for iPad and iPhone* (Morris & Inkle Ltd 2012), *Pottermore* (Rowling 2011), *Machine Man* (Barry 2010), *A Million Penguins*, and *Alice for the iPad* (Carroll et al. 2010).

Once the decision to incorporate interactivity into The Project had been made, the issue of what exactly was understood by the term ‘interactivity’ in this context was explored. Like Landow and Wearne, Hockley questions generally accepted understandings of the word, suggesting that there is ‘a lack of precision in the way the

term is used' (1996, p. 1). True interactivity, he compellingly suggests, is about 'purposeful communication' and 'dialogue to cause change' in other words 'a dialectical relationship' (ibid., p. 12). It involves readers being given similar levels of control over the interactive environment to that of the producer/author/publisher, rather than the illusion of control, which is more often the case, especially in mainstream media. Most interactivity encountered in online situations, he maintains, is a restatement of the power relationships inherent in broadcast media models. That is, the publisher, or writer of the content moderates the discussion, retaining control over the means of interactivity and therefore its content and direction. They are able to exercise this control in a way that other parties cannot by deleting, or refusing to recognise, anything that contradicts their agenda (ibid.).

This desire for control on the part of producers and publishers continues. Dena discusses the suspicion many producers have that an open, dialectical form of interactivity means total surrender of control over their product, which leads them still to prefer giving users an illusion of control, as identified by Hockley (2009, p. 184).

Dena concludes by suggesting that producers still do not properly understand interactivity in that they view it as a component rather than

as a skill. It is not an either/or proposition of having full control over a work or seeding control over to the audience. There is knowledge, skill and effort involved with interactive design (ibid).

In this view Dena supports Wearne's content in that design is the crucial factor that determines the success or otherwise of interactivity, not its mere presence.

Interactivity of the kind Hockley describes was the initial aim of The Project. Readers were to be offered the opportunity to engage in a dialectical relationship with Bill, which would afford them equal access and rights to contribute to the interactive environment. There were to be no barriers between Bill and the reader in terms of censorship or filtering, in the hope that this might spawn an open and dialectical discussion based on the issues Bill confronts in the novel. Ideally this dialogue would

lead to Bill's story continuing beyond the page into the Phase Space that surrounds both him and the novel.

Yet the kind of purposeful communication that Hockley speaks of is hard to achieve in such an environment without there being a strong moderator who retains the kind of control of which he disapproves. Rieser (1997, p. 11) Robinson (2010, p. 128) and Pope (2010, p. 85) conclude that such a figure is necessary in order to set limits to the interaction so that it does not become chaotic, or irrelevant. In performing such a role a moderator must edit and filter SPAM and the contributions made by the commentators such that the interactions posted are relevant and cogent (resulting in a form of interactivity akin to that used by broadcast media) so that purposeful communication may take place. Wearne's insistence that the interaction should relate to the content of the work to prevent the reader becoming lost and disengaged (1997, p. 19), is a recognition of the need for this kind of moderation.

Douglas and Hargadon identify, in regard to hypertext fiction, 'the paucity of conventions, fixed genres and precedents that tell us the sort of interactions users expect, how to flag meaningful options, or even how to signal closure' (Douglas, J. Y. & Hargadon, A. 2001, p. 154). This same poverty of schematic convention confronts readers new to interactive fiction. A considerate moderator can help alleviate many of these concerns by constructing and maintaining an interactive space that takes account of any pre-existing schema and ensures that while there are challenges for the reader, the environment is not too unfamiliar.

Moderators must also allow the reader to make effective choices with regard to the direction of the narrative. Otherwise he/she risks creating an interactive situation into which the reader has apparent input but over which he/she has no actual control. To illustrate this, Rieser borrows the concepts 'cardinal hinge points' and 'catalysers' (1997, p. 12) from Barthes (1975, pp. 246-8).

According to Barthes, a cardinal hinge point is a narrative element that may be said to be 'directly affecting the continuation of the story, in other words, that it initiates or resolves an uncertainty' (ibid., p. 248). These are the points in the text at which the story turns decisively. Catalysers are 'no more than consecutive units' (ibid.) that link,

chronologically or otherwise, the cardinal hinge points – they have little or no affect on the narrative arc.

Rieser maintains that much interactive fiction fails precisely because it does not allow readers to initiate or resolve uncertainty, instead confining them to catalyser-type choices that link the cardinal points of the story, much as the branches of a tree all link back to the same trunk. Print-format choose-your-own (CYO) storybooks work in this fashion. The reader chooses the order and arrangement of certain sections of the narrative but cannot add to or change the presented text. Many so-called interactive (and/or enhanced e-books) do the same.

Morris and Thompson, co-authors of the enhanced e-book/app *Frankenstein* (Morris & Inkle Ltd 2012), claim that theirs is a new kind of interactive novel which owes nothing to the tradition of CYO print books (Profile Books 2011). This is not the case. *Frankenstein* frames the book as a conversation between the reader and Doctor Frankenstein. This suggests that the reader and protagonist are creating the narrative together. But readers must choose the questions they will ask from a limited list. It is not possible for the reader to write anything new in the text. Nor is it possible to edit it. The reader cannot prevent Frankenstein from creating the monster nor stop the monster from killing. There is an inevitability within the narrative drive to which the reader can neither contribute nor change. Communication cannot take place at all between the reader and author, text or character. The reader is merely presented with a series of catalysers from which to choose, none of which allow them to alter the story in terms of cardinal hinge points. Even though *Frankenstein* is interactive in the sense that the reader must swipe the screen and make choices with regard to the text, it is not purposeful communication that enables a dialectical relationship between reader and character or author.

Similar criticisms might be levelled at other enhanced e-books. *Alice for the iPad* (Carroll et al. 2010) and *Dracula, the Official Stoker Family Edition* (Stoker, Pilditch & Marmulla 2010) only allow the reader to interact with the text at a catalyser level and do not let the reader subtract from, modify or contribute to the text.

While making no concrete suggestions in relation to facilitating hinge-point manipulation, Rieser asks for ‘a structure where the user is freed from both the slavery of linearity and the reductivism of branching plot choices’ (1997, p. 13). That is, the reader is not confined to a particular set of prescribed choices depending on whether they choose option ‘a’ or ‘b’, but that their choices might not lead back to the main trunk of the story and that they might be allowed to introduce new material to the text. Landow’s active readers demand this kind of input and they find this in the form of the blog, which allows them to rewrite, respond to and publish texts in an interactive environment. Landow calls this the ‘power to intervene in processes while they take place’ (2006, p. 42) and it must be considered a crucial design feature of any interactive environment in which very active readers are encouraged to participate.

Therefore, the kind of interactivity introduced to *The Project* and the way it was designed had to take into account that many readers may not want, or are unable, to interact with text. But it also had to cater for those active readers who would want to ‘take an existing text and add to it’ (Landow 2006, p. 9). Therefore *The Project* was constructed so that those who wished only to read a print or plain text novel could do so while also giving active readers the opportunity to manipulate and extend the text, if they so wished, in a moderated environment that facilitates purposeful communication.

Skains suggests that a digital interactive text has the potential to become a bridge linking reader and author rather than a temporal and spatial barrier between them—as it is in print, or in plain text e-books (2010, pp. 103-4). It facilitates this link by blurring the boundaries between the author and reader. In order for bridging to take place, the author must be mindful of the fact that few readers will be in possession of the necessary schema to exploit texts that incorporate extensive interactivity. It is essential that authors do not expect too much of readers with regard to such texts, that a balance is struck between newness and familiarity and that experiments in this arena should be restrained in scope (Pope 2010, p. 82).

Douglas and Hargadon suggest that many experiments in new media fail because they do not take these ideas into account. They argue that to be successful in the use of interactivity authors must not stray too far from traditional formats and that rather

than seeking to revolutionise the reading experience they should attempt to extend existing schema (2001, pp. 156-7). In this way the active reader is more likely to feel encouraged to pursue the interactive element rather than be disenfranchised by it while the less-active reader may still find the work accessible.

Douglas and Hargadon accord with Westin's assertions with regard to the cultural importance of form in relation to reading (2013). They suggest that, even if it is the case that interactive fiction is 'about the breakdown or rather the refashioning of traditional forms' (2001, p. 122), if it is to be successful it must needs be a gentle and gradual remaking rather than a sudden and radical one.

My initial thoughts with regard to the incorporation of interactivity in *The Project* encouraged me to cast the whole work as an interactive text in the form of a series of blogs, an interactive plain text e-book, or an enhanced e-book. However, I dismissed this approach for various reasons to do with ensuring that *The Project* remain in a publishable form. Even small Pro-Am independent publishers such as Vulgar Press need to have something physical they can sell. And as noted by Caroline Reidy, CEO of Simon and Schuster, (Biba 2011) digital works that are published online, but outside of normal e-book publishing retail streams such as Kobo and Amazon, encounter significant discoverability issues: readers don't know where to look for them.

Publishing the novel solely as a series of blogs also presented problems with regard to the abandonment of established novel-reading schema that this would entail, potentially alienating many novel readers. There is also the problem of link rot¹⁴ associated with works housed solely on the web.

Publishing *The Project* as a plain text e-book was also problematic because such works do not usually feature extensive links that take the reader outside of the text. Vulgar Press was unwilling to publish the book in such a format, as such works are

¹⁴ Link rot is the phenomenon by which the link or url that leads to a work housed on the web is lost or corrupted over time leading to the work becoming inaccessible.

more expensive to produce than plain text e-books that do not feature external links and are also subject to link rot.

Finally, the enhanced e-book option was dismissed for two reasons. Firstly, because the graphic and multimedia nature of enhanced e-books both introduces too many new schema to the reading experience and makes it extremely difficult to construct a world in which the reader can engage in purposeful communication. Secondly, because enhanced e-books are struggling in terms of sales and recognition as discussed earlier in this exegesis.

In discussing the integration of interactivity with the novel 'Once in a Lifetime', it is important to understand the form of the novel, how this relates to the way readers read novels and the possible impact that any inclusion of interactivity might have on both the form and that reading process(es).

McLuhan claims that print invented individualism (1962, p. 34), Ong contends that print gave birth to the novel (1982, p. 145) and Watt claims that the novel as a form 'most fully reflects the individualist nature of man post the Renaissance' (2001, p. 13). Ong takes this further, insisting that with printed texts the reader enters into an isolated and closed-off world whereby 'what is inside the text and the mind is a complete unit, self-contained in its silent inner logic' (1982, p. 147). What is central, and most important in this instance, to these assertions is the idea that the novel is a form that evolved to work best when read silently by individuals who are immersed separately with texts that are presented to them by publishers and authors as finished artefacts. There is no room in that understanding of the novel for purposeful communication between author and reader(s) that might effect change to the text.

If interactivity between any combination of reader, author, character and text is introduced to the novel then it is no longer possible to create Ong's complete unit. The reader is no longer in a solitary state, communing silently with the text but is rather co-creating that text as it is read. Reading a novel in that instance is a collaborative exchange not a solitary pursuit and while the potential for purposeful communication and change becomes possible, is the work in question still a novel? Readers may be engaged with the text, but it becomes more difficult for them to

achieve immersion and flow because an interactive text is, potentially, constantly in flux. They cannot become lost in the text because they, as its co-creators, are required to read and write simultaneously and are therefore held at the level of engagement.

This is not to disparage engagement. The kind of immersion involved in novel reading is a singular and relatively recent literary development. Many narrative art forms have flourished without immersion. Greek chorus drama, Brechtian alienation and oral storytelling traditions, for instance, deliberately hold their audiences at the engagement level. Rather, it is simply to say that immersion is more difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in interactive fiction and that if this is crucial for understandings of the novel then any inclusion of interactivity in that form risks changing it so that it is no longer recognisable as such.

Murray concurs, suggesting that the state of immersion essential to the functioning of the novel as narrative art – and essential to the creation of Ong's complete unit – is fragile (1997, p. 100). The novel, like other narrative art forms, has developed a series of conventions designed to ensure that that state is established and maintained by readers. These conventions include: that 'writing and reading are solitary activities' (Ong 1982, p. 68) and that writers and readers are separated from each other by the text (1982, p. 100).

Print narratives are conventionally 'linear and hierarchical' (Burbules 1998). 'The conventions of reading, like the conventions of writing, have grown out of the structure of sentences flowing into paragraphs, paragraphs flowing into pages, pages followed by other pages' (ibid). Readers start reading conventional print novels at the top left hand corner of the first page and follow the narrative, sentence by sentence, downwards and diagonally through each page, on to the bottom right hand corner of the last page. This linearity 'leads to a single, determinate conclusion' which must 'satisfy or in some way reply to the expectations raised during the course of the narrative' (Douglas 1992, p. 7).

It is the linearity and hierarchical nature of print texts that separates writer and reader both spatially and temporally. The narrative is written by the writer and then, in printed text form, it is passed onto the reader: the writer produces the text and the

reader consumes it. The kind of conclusion mentioned by Douglas signals the end of the reader's involvement in the text. There is no facility in print texts for the reader to then engage with the writer, or to comment on or change the text.

This estrangement of the reader, which effectively prevents them from engaging in the text, is one of the most important of the conventions that govern how narrative texts work and the relationship of both the reader and writer to them. (Murray 1997, p. 100).

Murray also insists that audience participation in such art forms may be 'awkward' if not 'destructive' (ibid., p. 101) in relation to those conventions. She nonetheless recognises that as established forms are challenged by developments in new media, these conventions change, leading to the creation of new forms with new sets of schema, conventions and rules. It is important, therefore, that experimental works such as *The Project* play with the existing conventions, especially with regard to reader participation in narrative art – a principle that lies at the heart of interactive fiction.

Only by staging experiments that may well be both awkward and destructive can we begin to remake these boundary conventions in the developing sphere of interactive fiction. Murray suggests this an essential part of the work to be done in any new medium. She lists *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy* as examples of how early novelists played with print in working out how best to exploit that medium as it was emerging. Both authors experimented with a new medium and the role and position of the reader and author in the creation and consumption of works. These 'experiments' contributed to the development of a set of schema by which print novels might be written and read. She suggests that as we play with and develop boundary conventions for new media and new works in that media, so are readers better prepared in terms of how to understand and access those new works (1997, pp. 103-6). Ong suggests that over time we become so accustomed to these recently established boundary conventions or schema that we internalise and no longer notice them (1982, p. 80).

Crucially, both Ong and Murray agree that we are yet to either develop or internalise any such conventions with regard to computer-mediated texts, and that to do so requires time and experimentation.

Interactive cross-sited novels cannot, at this stage, be immersive because we have not yet internalised their functionality in the way that we have with print books. We do not see book reading as a mechanical and technical process involving much physical interaction with the actual book itself and so we become immersed in the text. We may one day internalise our interactions with digital texts in the same way. Or it may be the case that this does not happen and a form of ludic engagement becomes the norm for interactive digital works. Douglas suggests that ‘at present . . . [interactive narratives] present readers with a barrage of new and potentially bewildering questions and tasks which promise to redefine our concept of the reader’s role (1992, p. 16). And that only by undertaking further research into the way that readers relate to interactive narrative texts will we begin that redefinition (ibid).

By recognising that the conventions that govern our reading of print and plain text e-books may not necessarily work in the realm of the digital and seeking, through experimentation research and play, new conventions that do work, we may reach a stage where internalisation of the interactive reading process is possible. These experiments may be crude, they may fail, but they are essential to this process of discovery and remaking.

Introducing interactivity directly into the text of ‘Once in a Lifetime’, either in print or in plain text e-book form, was practically difficult. Even if achievable, it had the potential to destroy either, or both, the work and any chance the reader had of achieving immersion while reading it. And while it may not be possible to achieve immersion in the digital interactive realm, it is essential that this be preserved in the print component of The Project for the sake of those readers who do not wish to engage in interactivity.

I therefore decided that The Project would be separated into an interactive component and a traditional non-interactive print-based and/or plain text e-book novel. This was informed by the idea that the experiment should be limited in scope and that existing

schema should be modified in order not to alienate readers unfamiliar with interactive fiction and those unwilling or unable to engage with it, in accordance with Pope (2010, p. 82) and Douglas and Hargadon (2001, pp. 156-7). Ruppels' discussion of cross-sited narratives – 'stories told across multiple media platforms that are used as instruments to enact a network of locationally separate content into whole, coherent expressions' (2009, p. 283) – offered a way to achieve this.

The danger involved in splitting *The Project* into two in this fashion is that the novel is seen as more important than the online component. It is difficult for the situation to be other than this given the continued dominance of print in the publishing world and the fact that the novel provides the platform from which the interactive component springs. To minimise this, the online component needs to bring new and interesting information and or developmental possibilities to the story rather than re-produce content contained in the novel. Elements of a cross-sited narrative outside of what is considered the primary element must have a genuine reason for being in terms of either content or possibility, otherwise they risk redundancy and irrelevancy.

In the case of *The Project*, 'Once in a Lifetime' provides a traditional narrative experience, while the blogs provide a reiteration of some of that content, as well as extra content. The blogs bring to *The Project* the possibility of engagement with the Phase Space. Although they contain original content, their importance lies in the fact that they offer the reader a chance to effect change to the text, to introduce uncertainty, to create cardinal hinge points, to question the text and to expect answers in return. They offer the reader a chance to take the story beyond the page and as such, they are the reason *The Project* exists.

Ruppel suggests that cross-siting is leading to new understandings of print narratives such that they 'should no longer be considered isolated by the codex's limits' (ibid., p. 286). Cross-siting allows a text to continue beyond the page into the digital and other realms. A cross-sited narrative gives readers the opportunity to interact with the text on a digital platform in a way that allows them to participate collaboratively in the ongoing creation of the text. This also allows for the print component of the cross-sited work to function according to recognisable print schema.

In order to begin designing the interactive cross-sited facet of The Project, case studies were made of three works that involved cross-sited interactivity: *Awake* (Clark 2012), *Personal Effects: Dark Art* (Hutchins & Weisman 2009) and *Pottermore* (Rowling 2011).

Awake, while not a novel (it is a memoir of sorts) is a print narrative that incorporates interactivity through the use of QR codes placed in the text. Readers scan these codes with their smart phones and are then directed to videos that feature the author discussing elements of the text and/or videos of people, events and locations within the text. This cross-siting of content brings sights, sounds, tones of voice, colour and movement to the text – precisely the narrative elements that print cannot convey in any way other than through the printed word. It liberates the text from the isolation of the codex. The videos allow the reader to see the locations referred to by the author; they see and hear the author discussing the text; and they see and hear people discussed in the text, talking to camera and to the author.

The QR codes are located either in smart phone-shaped boxes placed on the page, or within and next to in-text illustrations. The reader quickly becomes accustomed to using their smart phone to access these videos and so the process of viewing them, although disruptive at first, becomes part of the work's boundary conventions. Having to use and manipulate a phone and thereby remove oneself from the text does, however, mean that the reader is held at the level of engagement rather than immersion. This kind of interruption is a convention of cross-sited works. It is not possible to be immersed in two disparate media at the one time and so switches in focus, which must entail a loss of immersion, occur. But as mentioned, while immersion is a quality of the novel, it is not yet a quality of interactive fiction, which actively plays with the boundaries between immersion and engagement. However, readers other than the very active may not wish to expend the effort to engage in this play and/or may not respond well to being held at the level of engagement when they desire immersion.

The videos add extra context to the reading experience in much the same way as illustrations and footnotes do, but it is doubtful whether the active reader has a significantly different understanding of the book from one who simply reads the print

novel text. There is not enough extra-textual material in the videos to make them essential to an understanding of the narrative. Further, interactivity is limited to simply accessing the videos via a smart phone. There is no means of communication provided between author, text, character and/or reader, nor can the reader contribute to the creation of new text.

Personal Effects: Dark Arts is a cross-sited murder mystery novel that also seeks to incorporate interactivity. The reader is presented with a print novel text that includes a selection of documents belonging to the main suspect in a special cover insert (including personal notes, business, greeting and ID cards). These documents direct readers to various online and telephonic sites at which clues to the case may be found.

While these do certainly provide a cross-sited narrative experience, the reader can choose either to utilise these clues or ignore them because it is still possible to follow the story without them. Indeed, the e-book version of the novel does away entirely with the cross-sited elements of the work. This suggests that these are not essential to the narrative. And if that is the case, why are they there at all? They do not make sense outside of the context of the novel. Without that text they become simply a collection of seemingly random websites and phone messages and documents. They do not provide the reader with an opportunity for purposeful communication.

Both works give primacy to the novel and the cross-sited elements are seen as peripheral to them. While this provides a reading environment that suits very active readers, it renders the cross-sited elements unnecessary for two reasons: the books are readable and the narrative is entirely accessible without them; they allow access to the Phase Space that surrounds each work, but only as a viewer, not as a participant, collaborative creator or correspondent. Active readers who want to manipulate or contribute to the text are not catered for.

The Project avoids these criticisms because its online elements are not only designed simply to serve the narrative of the text but also to act as a bridge to the Phase Space wherein the reader is invited to interact with the text and play with the boundaries between reader, character and author. The Project differs from these works in that its online component allows the reader to be an active participant in the Phase Space of

the work and to drive the narrative in directions unimagined by the author. The invitation to collaborate differentiates The Project from both *Personal Effects: Dark Arts* and *Awake*.

Pottermore claims to allow readers to ‘Explore the Harry Potter stories in a whole new way and discover exclusive new writing from J.K. Rowling’ (Rowling 2011). The site features digitised multimedia versions of several of the Potter books, with more under-development. Readers are asked to complete a series of tests and tasks after which they are allocated to a house within Hogwarts School. Subsequently they are allowed to access the online stories and new writings from the author, which tend to be Phase Space-type explanations or elaborations on elements of the original print novel texts.

Readers in effect become characters, not in the books, but in the Phase Space that surrounds the books. They are invited to earn points for their respective houses by competing against each other in potion-brewing and spell-casting competitions. They are also allowed to post text and images on the site. These are strictly moderated and although some postings might be mentioned on the site’s official blog, ‘The Pottermore Insider’, there is nothing in the way of purposeful communication between author, reader, text and/or character. These postings are also treated as responses to the canonical print and online versions. They allow the story to move beyond the digital and print pages, but they do not allow the original narrative to develop or be redeveloped by readers.

All three works offer the reader interaction only at the catalyser level. Readers of *Personal Effects: Dark Art* and *Awake* are restricted to an interactivity that is simply accessing extra material through digital platforms. *Pottermore* offers more in that users are allowed to upload their own content, but there is no purposeful communication here, no dialogue to cause change. Any contributions made by users are recognised only as fan fiction.

It is problematic for cross-sited works such as these three to allow readers to contribute to the canonical text. The print text is acknowledged as the primary text; it is considered complete before the reader is given access to any online/interactive

component. Even the online texts which are seen to proceed from the print text, or as adjunct to it, are complete before the reader is given access to them. Further access to these texts, in the case of *Awake* and *Personal Effects: Dark Art*, is on a 'read only' basis. With *Pottermore*, readers are encouraged to contribute text and images via the site blog, but these contributions are only ever treated as fan responses. No acknowledgement is made of them as potential alternatives to, or rewritings of, the canonical text.

Even in the case of works that begin as interactive or online texts, readers and writers are still very much in the thrall of the kind of boundary conventions that Murray suggests are critical to the functioning of narrative artworks such as novels.

In 2010 Max Barry released the story *Machine Man* (Barry 2010) as a page of serialised texts posted each day on his blog, with the intention of turning this online story into a novel. He encouraged his blog readers to respond to these pages with comments, criticisms and suggestions. However, much of the commentary made on the site was simply congratulatory and/or positive. The vast majority of readers made neither constructive nor negatively critical remarks about the work.

This suggests that Barry's readers did not have the necessary schema to play the role of critic, that they were locked into the boundary conventions that govern the relationship between author and reader in print novel reading. As Landow's model suggests, they were neither willing nor able to function as collaborators in the story-writing process.

Barry too seemed reluctant to break with convention. While he welcomed reader comments, he 'couldn't think of anything worse' (Weldon 2011) than having readers contribute to major plot or character decisions. The motivation behind the blog was more about maintaining contact with his readership than it was about engaging them in the story-writing process or in the construction or manipulation of cardinal hinge points within it.

Author John Birmingham also uses his blog *Cheeseburger Gothic* (Birmingham 2013) as a means to connect with his audience by discussing research and story ideas with them. Readers understand that they are assisting Birmingham in the writing of

his story and so do not seek any recognition as collaborators. They are thanked in the acknowledgements or sometimes find a minor character named after them if their efforts have been particularly noteworthy.

Skains identifies a desire in readers to maintain contact with a story world beyond the page. He maintains that author-managed sites (such as those belonging to Barry and Birmingham) are the best way to achieve this and that they offer a way to ‘build a bridge between print and digital storytelling conventions’ (2010, p. 96).

None of the works mentioned so far have attempted to create a forum in which the user may engage in purposeful dialogue with author, character or somehow with the text itself so as to effect change to that text.

The Project was an attempt to offer the reader the opportunity to engage in dialogue that causes change, while still working within the pre-existing parameters of the publishing industry. The print or plain text e-book version of the novel may still be considered the primary text by publishers and readers, but by allowing the reader to engage with the main protagonist of the book in the digital realm, by taking that character beyond the page and thereby making him available to the reader in an interactive sense, the story is taken beyond the page and into the Phase Space. The text is then able to respond through the character in a dialectical way to the reader. While it may not yet be possible to construct a web component that is entirely free of claims of secondary and adjunct status with regard to the print version, such exploration, if designed well, allows the online component to offer an experience that is extra to the novel rather than superfluous to it.

Chapter 4: The Choice of Blogs as the Platform for Interactivity

This chapter details the reasoning behind the decision to use blogs as the interactive component of The Project.

There were four interactive platforms considered for use in The Project: Twitter, Facebook, wikis and blogs (namely Blogger). Each was assessed for suitability as a vehicle both to publish texts and on which readers, character and author might interact. Pope's discussions of the issues confronted by writers of hypertext fiction with regard to the telling of stories in that format such that they do not disenfranchise nor disengage readers (2006, p.450; 2010, p.76) was instrumental in this process. His recommendations may also be applied to cross-sited, interactive, enhanced and other forms of online fiction, as the issues he addresses are the same as those faced by writers of these forms.

He contends that hypertext fiction (and for the purposes of this exegesis, cross-sited interactive works too) must feature an interface that does not confuse readers unfamiliar with digital formats. The work must be user-friendly, easy to operate and should not require the reader to learn new and complicated schema in order to access its content.

Secondly, he stresses the need for creators to be aware of the importance of immersion and flow to reader enjoyment of print fiction and the need to consider how hypertext works might potentially enable readers to achieve those states.

Thirdly, building on the first two points, he insists that interactive digital stories be structured to avoid reader disorientation. Multiple entry and exit points coupled with a lack of traditional pagination and page-numbering devices that help readers remember where they are in a story, are potential difficulties.

Finally, he discusses the importance of closure in hypertext fiction, which is not simply the notion that the story has a narrative conclusion. Rather it is the idea that the author, if not actively directing the narrative path the reader takes, is at least aware

of where the reader may head, and has prepared the ground such that they will not be left stranded, bewildered or bored. (2006, pp. 451-6).

Of particular relevance is his discussion of the ideas of defamiliarisation and familiarisation and the balance that needs to be struck between the two in how the text is presented to the reader. He suggests that readers ‘like to be challenged by fiction’ and are ‘willing to wrestle with difficult plots and interfaces.’ However, he warns against disaffecting the reader into discontinuing: ‘if the newness did not build itself into some conceptual model that made sense in terms of narrative structure, then little or no reading pleasure ensued’ (2010, pp. 83-4).

The first concern then, once the decision to incorporate digital interactivity was made, was to ensure that the interactivity incorporated in *The Project* was designed well enough that it both challenged the reader and offered reading pleasure.

Choosing a suitable platform, from the many on offer was, therefore, a crucial consideration. Interactive digital technologies in the form of social media play a huge and increasing role in the reading lives of people throughout the world. There were one billion Twitter accounts as of December 2012 (Wasserman 2012). Facebook hit the same number of active monthly users in October of that year (Facebook 2012). Figures for the number of bloggers are much harder to find. There is no coordinated survey that takes into account all blogging platforms in existence. Technorati, a world leader in blog surveying, only tracks those published in English, of which there were around 181 million as at the end of 2011 (Nielsenwire 2012). WordPress, which accounts for almost 60 million of those blog sites, reports that 3.5 billion pages are viewed each month by 380 million people (WordPress.com 2012). It is even harder to track the number of wikis in existence as many of those created exist behind firewalls and can be accessed only by registered members.

By sheer weight of numbers it would seem that Twitter or Facebook might be the best interactive formats to employ in the writing of ‘*Once in a Lifetime*’. But these numbers must be examined in light of Pope’s four guidelines and the need to avoid defamiliarising the reader too much.

In 2010 Deutsche Welle announced the publication of (what it claimed to be) the world's first Facebook novel: *Zwirbler* (Schaefer 2010). Later that year American author Lief Peterson claimed, through an announcement on his blog, the same honour for his novel *Missing* (2010). Both works were published in serialised instalments on Facebook.

Facebook is a logical place to publish serialised works, as it offers a widely understood and easily accessible interface. Both novels employ recognisable schema that work on that platform: the work is posted in a linear fashion and the author, who may or may not choose to incorporate comments made by readers, acts as moderator, directing the narrative. It is questionable whether immersion, or becoming lost in the work, could be achieved by readers of novels in this format as Facebook limits all posts to a maximum length of 5,000 characters. Any lengthy reading is necessarily interrupted by the need to find or wait for the next post. But a state of flow, where 'the reader acts seemingly effortlessly . . . using cognitive *and* motor skills' (Pope 2006, p. 455) while being highly absorbed in the text, is possible due to the familiarity of Facebook users with its interface.

The fact that a Facebook page contains much more content other than the novel text might, however, prove distracting.

That the novel is posted in instalments at a time directed by the author is also a potential hurdle to immersion and flow as this limits a reader's engagement with the text temporally. Admittedly, the serialised novel is an established literary form, but it is a manifestation of the very broadcast model of publication that social and other forms of digital media have brought into question. Timetables and schedules in the digital realm are driven increasingly by the consumer (in this case the reader) as much as they are by the producer, and therefore asking readers to wait to consume content may prove problematical.

If each post is limited in size and if a significant delay occurs between the publication of each then readers may become disengaged. Readers of *Missing* complained about having to wait 24 hours between instalments (PRWeb 2010). There is also the danger

that instalments may be missed because they may disappear from a reader's Facebook timeline before they have been read.

It is not possible for a moderator to direct the interactive components of such stories because comments cannot be filtered before they are posted. Even if they are hidden or deleted, they may still be available on other's sites. Schaefer actively sought comments and suggestions from readers that were, at his discretion, incorporated in to the text of *Zwirbler*. In the case of *Missing*, readers were invited to comment and some had their names used as character names but they were not invited to contribute to the text.

Closure is achievable in such works, even if the reader is left frustrated by temporal delays. The author sets up the schema and the boundary conventions of the serialised work, with regard to what input, if any, readers will have.

Alexander suggests Twitter 'might be the least likely storytelling platform of' all social media forms (2011, p. 61). Nevertheless, many so-called Twitter novels have been published on that platform, although whether, due to their brevity, these can accurately be called novels is still in question. They are, however, prime Twitter examples of interactive digital technologies altering perceptions of the novel.

Twitter novels usually take one of two forms: that of a novel written in consecutive 140-character instalments such as Jennifer Egan's work *Black Box* (Egan 2012) published via *The New Yorker* Twitter feed in 140-character instalments; or as one-post novels in which the whole text is condensed to 140 characters.¹⁵ Like Facebook novels these enjoy an interface that is familiar to many readers and is unlikely to prove problematic for those who regularly utilise the platform. However, like works written on Facebook, and indeed wikis and blogs, Twitter novels may cause problems for those who are new to social media and or who are unwilling to accept those platforms as suitable publishing platforms (Crown 2012).

¹⁵ See (Winters & Austen 2009) for a discussion of 21 authors' attempts to do just that.

That Twitter allows only 140 characters to be posted at a time limits any possibility of reader immersion and risks disengagement as the reader must keep logging onto Twitter at certain times to check for instalments. The fact that Twitter posts become increasingly more difficult to locate and retrieve over time, coupled with the risk of missing posts that do not feature the correct hash tag also makes the medium risky for authors and readers of long(er) form texts. These concerns alone make it unsuitable for The Project as readers need to be able to access the entirety of Bill's blogs in a format that ensures that they remain easily accessible. The format also needs to be able to store readers' comments in a way that ensures they too are easily accessible.

Novel readers may not have the schema necessary to follow long stories as a series of very brief Tweets. The brevity of such works might also prove unsatisfying for those accustomed to the conventions of traditional novels.

It would be very difficult to render Bill's long and involved blog posts into separate 140-character posts in a way that allowed readers to access them with ease. These concerns speak to problems with closure; readers may become confused about the direction of the story if they miss posts and/or are required to follow a long and involved passage of text split into dozens of tweets.

The requote and retweet features of the platform make text-changing, purposeful communication possible in the form of interactivity between author, character and reader. This, however, is made difficult as it is not possible to effectively moderate this interchange. This again raises the possibility of reader confusion and is another reason why Twitter is not a suitable format for The Project. Readers who might already be struggling to follow Bill's blog posts through extended strings of tweets, would also have to navigate their way through accompanying retweets, quoted tweets and other contributions, inevitably leading some of them to confusion and disengagement.

Wikis enjoyed great popularity in the first decade of this century but have since been superseded (to a great extent) by blogging platforms such as WordPress and Blogger which offer all the functionality of wikis but with superior flexibility and greater control with regard to content.

The wiki novel *A Million Penguins*¹⁶ offers an example of the potential unsuitability of this medium for interactive novel writing and/or reading. Set up as an experiment by Penguin Digital Publisher Jeremy Ettinghausen to assess whether a community could write a novel, this project ran into difficulties almost immediately.

In order to make the novel interactive and collaborative, the wiki was opened up to receiving content from anybody. This caused great disorientation. Around 15,000 people contributed to the novel during the one-month period in which it was written. No effective moderation of the content meant that it suffered at the hands of ‘vandals, pornographers, spammers and any number of people who had such differing ideas about what would make a good novel’ (Ettinghausen 2007). As a result the novel lacked any discernible structure. It became difficult for readers to have any sense of closure because it was simply not possible to anticipate the manner in which the work might progress. While many different users generated the content, Alexander claims that to suggest that it was done so collaboratively is wrong because there was very little in the way of cohesive or coordinated story-writing exchange. Ultimately the story splintered into disparate directions (2011, p. 68).

Nielsen’s contention that ‘users will always interpret aspects of an interface design in other ways than intended by the designer’ (1990, p. 3) seems very relevant in the case of *A Million Penguins*. Some form of moderation may have mitigated this, but it is hard to reconcile the open and non-hierarchical nature of wikis with such an approach.

Wiki, Facebook and Twitter works are difficult to archive and all are subject to link rot and the loss of posts. *A Million Penguins* has suffered such that the link to the work posted on Jeremy Ettinghausen’s blog no longer works; the novel has effectively disappeared.

Of the four formats under discussion, blogs provide a reading experience with an interface that most closely resembles that of the novel. Content is presented in page

¹⁶ It is not possible to cite *A Million Penguins*. It was an online publication only and it no longer exists.

format, which is a familiar schema to novel readers. The pages are not of a standardised size or layout as they are in a novel, nor are they numbered but, as they are not limited in terms of number of words or characters, they are able to carry the entire text of a novel in one post if necessary. Readers will not be required to read the text in small snippets unless the author wishes them to.

Alexander suggests that blogs are perceived by readers as being similar to diaries and journals and involve similar associated schema. They are also similar to epistolary novels. He also contends that their reflective and personal similarity to the journal means that they both shape and reveal character. He calls them ‘character vehicles’ (2011, p. 48).

Another similarity between blogs and diaries and epistolary novels is that blogs consist of dated entries – their interface in that respect is one with which many novel readers will be familiar. The danger of missing a post is much less than it is with Twitter or Facebook, as blog posts are automatically archived, unless deleted by the author. Comments can be moderated before they are posted, meaning that any discussion surrounding the text can be shaped only to include communication of a purposeful nature. While blogs are also subject to link rot, blog content is usually exportable from platform to platform, making this easier to avoid.

Blogs are also written by a titular author who is also able to act as moderator. Nevertheless, he/she may allow other users to post content directly to the blog or to comment on existing content. Blogs are dialogic in nature – it is expected that the author of a blog will respond to comments made therein. Blogs make purposeful communication possible. Blogs are therefore the ideal platform for the kind of interactivity envisioned for The Project as they allow for readers to interact with each other, the author and the character on a platform to which many of their existing novel-reading schema apply.

All four formats under consideration allow users to comment on and/or contribute to the text, but as mentioned in the case of wikis, Facebook and Twitter these are hard to moderate, archive and organise. Comments posted on blogs and wikis have a more

robust existence, although they may be deleted or changed by a moderator in the case of a blog or by any registered user in the case of a wiki.

Blogs allow the readers to participate in The Project's text. They may write contradictory passages, suggest revisions, and be able to take the story in any direction they like. Readers who interact with Bill are able to 'intervene in processes while they take place' (Landow 2006, p. 42) beyond the page. While the print text is primary in the sense that it is released in a 'complete' state before the readers have access to the blog, once readers have access they are able to create new uncertainties, to challenge the story's existing cardinal hinge points and introduce new ones.

Cross-siting the novel in this way also allows the reader who does not want to interact simply to read 'Once in a Lifetime' as a print or plain text e-novel. This accords with Pope's notion that it is easier to bring the reader into the digital realm by incorporating and extending on the schema of the old technology rather than inventing radically new ones (2010, p. 82).

Chapter 5: How Interactivity in the Form of Blogs was Incorporated into The Project

This chapter will detail the steps taken to incorporate interactivity into the novel. It will discuss how this affected the story world of *The Project* and the relationships between reader, author and character. It will also examine how the issues raised by these changed relationships were dealt with so that the interactivity was designed to allow interaction between author, character and reader, ensuring that closure was achievable and that purposeful communication was made possible.

A means was needed whereby blogs written by Bill could be integrated with the novel text without destroying what Ong calls the complete unit (1982, p. 147) and yet offer the level of interactive autonomy desired by active readers.

In early drafts of the novel Bill did not blog, but he did spend an inordinate amount of time ruminating on his condition. These passages were represented in those early drafts as inner monologue and read like a form of journal or diary, which lent them easily to conversion into blog posts.

I provided the motivation for Bill to become a blogger by rewriting the character of his best friend Dan so that he deals with the loneliness and frustration of unsuccessful IVF treatments through the medium of blogging. Bill observes this process and in turn creates his own blog hoping it might somehow assuage his broken heart. Much of Bill's inner monologue was recast as posts thereon.

On the surface this change solved the problem of introducing interactivity to the novel: in the text of 'Once in a Lifetime' Bill became a blogger, on his blogs he considered issues that were confronting him and in this forum readers would be able to (once the novel was published) discuss with him these and any other matters. These initial posts would also be reproduced in the novel acting once again as passages of inner monologue. The story thereby moved beyond the page and the fact that the reader and Bill could potentially discuss, rewrite and continue Bill's story through this interactive exchange meant that dialogue leading to purposeful change and dialectic exchange was possible.

But this was, to paraphrase Wearne, interactivity without good design. I had not given sufficient thought to the design of the blog, nor to the effect its introduction to The Project might have on the logic of the story world. I wanted readers, the character and perhaps myself as author to interact in that space, but had failed to give sufficient consideration to how existing boundary conventions that govern the relationships between the three parties might be affected.

Alexander discusses at length the idea that blogs are ‘character vehicles’ (2011, p. 48) telling stories ‘through the presentation of character’ (ibid., p. 58). Not just through the posts that feature on a blog but also through its design and layout, its graphics, hyperlinks and use of the blog roll – the little nuances that make every blog individual.

Bill’s blog had to convincingly be his. It also needed to appeal to the active reader seeking to continue the story beyond the page. I anticipated that most of the traffic on the blog would come via the novel, given that blogs other than the most highly ranking are very hard to stumble upon via search engines.

Previous to this, the blog had been quite plain in design. The thinking behind this being that Bill used his blog as a cathartic release, fully expecting that no one other than he would read it. He was not overly concerned with its aesthetics. I realised though that I, as the author, had to balance this character’s decision against the need for the blog to be interesting for the reader. In thoroughly redesigning the blog, I kept this thought uppermost.

The blog’s background image was changed from a plain colour to an image of washing machines in a laundromat similar to the cover image used for *Spincycle*. This was done deliberately to visually link the two cross-sited elements of The Project. An animated gif of David Byrne taken from the ‘Once in a Lifetime’ film clip was added to the header of the blog. That song, as well as being a major inspiration for the novel, is discussed at length by Bill in chapter two of ‘Once in a Lifetime’. Including that gif in the header not only serves to reinforce the link between the novel and the blog but also reinforces the link between Bill and the protagonist of the song. On the right-hand side of the landing page is a blog roll that lists many of the blogs Bill mentions

in chapter three (Weldon 2012g, p. 50) when he is searching for broken-hearts blogs. There are film clips and images included in other posts, which further illustrate and expand upon the particular points of concern discussed in them.

The inclusion of items such as the laundromat image, the animated gif, photographs, graphics, film clips and the blog roll serve to provide readers with an air of consistency between the novel and the blog in terms of Bill's character. The fact that these things exist in the world outside of the novel and the blog also serves to help blur the lines between the fictional world of the novel and the real world. By creating a blog that looks and performs as any 'real' blog might and which is connected to the real world through the use of hyperlinks, gifs, photographs and graphics, the line between Bill as a fictional character and Bill as actual person, as in separate from me as author, is also blurred. This is not to say that I expected readers to think that Bill actually exists, but I hoped that the more substantial and autonomous he seemed, the more likely readers would be to converse with him, as if he did exist.

The blog posts from the novel appear on Bill's blog in a slightly different format to the way they appear in the novel. The writing is sloppier in terms of spelling and grammar on the blog, as might be expected on a blog written by a man who writes many of his posts late at night while intoxicated. This lends authenticity to the idea that the posts were written by Bill, not by an author concerned heavily with correctness of grammar and presentation.

All the blog posts that appear in the novel also feature on the blog, but there are more posts there than are included in the novel and these contain further insights into Bill's thoughts and personality. These extra posts were intended to serve as rewards, or as a kind of Easter egg¹⁷ for readers who chose to visit the blogs. All of these were conscious attempts to make the blog complementary, rather than simply an addendum, to the novel. They gave the blog its own narrative thread, aligned with but not identical to that of the novel. While it is acknowledged that readers will, in all

¹⁷ An Easter egg is a hidden item or message concealed in a computer program, game or movie. It plays on the idea of an Easter egg hunt. These are discoverable by everybody but are usually only found by readers/players/users who have a deep understanding of the product's content and context.

likelihood, consider the novel to be the primary work, the blog (thanks to this redesign) can nevertheless stand on its own as a legitimate work without the novel. This frees it somewhat from the criticism raised against the works *Awake* (Clark 2012) and *Personal Effects: Dark Art* (Hutchins & Weisman 2009) – the online components of which were rendered meaningless without their links to the novel.

The blog takes aspects of the story further than the novel does. It also offers the reader the opportunity to take the narrative even further than that and in any direction they wish to through interaction. This is not done by any of the case studies discussed in this exegesis. The possible exception to this is *Pottermore* (Rowling 2011) but even in that case reader contributions are seen only as fan fiction responses to an established narrative, whereas in *The Project* readers are invited to contribute to, challenge and extend that narrative.

The *Hot Seat* blog was designed along similar lines. The same care was given to the layout and design as was given to *Note to Elf*. The blog is designed to be both visually and textually appealing to the reader, consistent with Bill's character, able to stand alone as a blog, and be inviting to the interactive reader.

This blog is mentioned only very briefly in the novel but its content is alluded to repeatedly, especially the idea that it becomes a kind of agony uncle column in which Bill works through his problems, in the guise of assisting others with theirs. Almost all of the posts on this blog are extra to the content of the novel. This blog takes the story beyond the page, perhaps even more so than *Note to Elf*.

Agony uncle columns in the online realm feature interaction between writer and reader. A number of exchanges between Bill and fictitious commenters were posted by myself in order to make the blog seem like it was functioning in this way in the world outside of the book. This activity was also meant to give readers the impression that the site was a welcoming and functioning forum.

Through their interactions with Bill, readers enter into a narrative arena for which they might not have the necessary schema. Author, reader and character are separated both spatially and temporally, in print and plain text narrative. Correspondence

between the three parties is not encouraged in those formats. Nor are there established boundary conventions for cross-sited interactive fictions such as *The Project*. It was likely, therefore, that the idea of interacting with a fictional character on a blog would be a new experience for the majority, if not all, of readers of the novel.

One of the reasons for engaging in *The Project* was to challenge the existing boundary conventions around character, reader and author through the medium of interactive storytelling. To do so, a thorough understanding of those relationships was needed. The ramifications of breaking pre-existing conventions and introducing new ones also warranted consideration.

It was possible that, in their interactions with Bill, readers might continue to observe the existing boundary conventions that govern the relationships between reader, author and character in the print novel. This was generally the case with Max Barry and his *Machine Man* blog (Barry 2010). Readers might ask nothing of Bill that brings to his or their mind that he is a fictional character. They might choose to interact with Bill in a way that did not bring me, as author, into the discussion. Blogs have their own schema and boundary conventions which govern their essentially dialogic nature, but even these do not anticipate the new potentialities presented by cross-sited works such as *The Project*. Then again, they might not behave in that manner. The rules of interaction in this arena are yet to be established, so it was not possible to predict how they might behave. I was hoping that unlike Barry's readers, they would, consciously or otherwise, ignore or break existing conventions. I wanted readers to contribute to the story in a purposeful way that changed the narrative as it moved beyond the page thereby playing, once again unconsciously or otherwise, with conventions, breaking the ground for new ideas to emerge and for relationships to be re-imagined.

The Bill of *Hot Seat* and *Note to Elf* knows nothing about the novel. If any reader mentioned something to him on the blogs that they could only know through the novel (or if they mentioned the novel at all) then Bill and the story are immediately taken beyond the fictional world of the novel into a new space where character, reader and author are all aware of each other in a way they are not in the novel; a space in which there are no established rules for how to conduct these newly aware

relationships. Given that it would likely be the case that all those who read the blogs and choose to interact with Bill would have read the book, the potential for this to happen was great.

There is nothing in the existing plain text and print novel boundary conventions that governs how these three parties might relate in such a space. Consequently, it became necessary, as Murray suggests (1997), to spend considerable time re-imagining these relationships in such a way that they were positioned to cope with unexpected and unconventional behaviours which otherwise might threaten the logic of the story world. By observing how these interactions took place I hoped to draw conclusions that might aid in the development of new schema and boundary conventions and thereby help in the development of interactive cross-sited fictions. As stated, Bill is a fictional character, but he does not know this. If readers were to engage with him on his blog and point this out to him, or point out to him that a book had been written about his life, how could/would/should he react?

Could he accuse me, the author, of being fictional? Identity in the digital realm is fluid and false identities flourish. Who is to say what or who is real in that realm?

Should (or could) he accuse the author of copyright infringement for using material from his blogs, or of defamation or plagiarism? It would be inconceivably naïve of the author and of Vulgar Press as a publisher to release a novel that so blatantly stole from someone else's writing. To suggest that they might be so conniving or naïve undermines the logic of the story world and of The Project as a whole.

This is not to suggest that the reader is expected to think that Bill is anything other than a fictional character. It is simply the case that the boundary conventions that govern the relationship between author, character and reader in the novel are broken, or are up for remaking, in the blogs, written as they are in the voice of Bill. The roles of author, writer and reader are all in play in the case of the blogs; each can play either or both of the others.

One might assume a compliant implied reader who simply engages Bill in a conversation about his life and the decisions he has or has not made. But what of

more active readers who wish to challenge the existing boundary conventions that separate reader, writer and character? To reiterate, Bill doesn't know he is fictional, nor does he know there has been a book written about him. Therefore, if anyone raises either of these two issues, or mentions my name as author of the novel, Bill (and I) need to be able to respond in a way that is logically consistent with the story world of *The Project*. It might be the case that no reader ever asks such questions of Bill, in which case the complicated relationship between Bill and the author, as outlined below, remains in the Phase Space, unknown to the reader. Nevertheless, I as author needed to be prepared to answer such queries.

It might be the case that I have over-complicated these relationships; it might be the case that these scenarios are redundant. Once again, however, it is important that these concerns are considered and explored, as Murray says, as 'part of the early work in any medium is the exploration of the border between the representational world and the actual world' (1997, p. 103). The intricate detailing of the relationship between the representational (fictional) and the actual in *The Project* (as outlined later in this chapter) is an attempt to establish that border in this case and to add to the research in this field.

A means was needed whereby the author's access to Bill's blog posts was legitimised and any suggestion of defamation or plagiarism mitigated. It was also necessary to understand and to construct the relationship between the author and the character in order to be able to answer any questions of authorial legitimacy should they be raised by readers or by Bill.

As Fludernik insists, 'when readers read narrative texts, they project real-life parameters into the reading process and, if at all possible, treat the text as a real-life instance of narrating' (2001, p. 623). 'Once in a Lifetime' is a first-person narrative work, accompanied by a blog in the same voice. John Weldon is clearly identified as the author of the novel, but Bill is identified as the author of the blog. Readers might therefore become confused as to who is addressing them and whom they are addressing if they interact with Bill on the blog. It is not commonplace for readers to interact in such a way with a fictional character and therefore they might not have the necessary schema to allow them to do so. They might also expect Bill to be aware of

the novel and my place as author of it. But is the author of the novel, the person who has borrowed from Bill's life, the same person as the author of The Project as a whole? Or is he too a fictional creation? Cross-siting the work and rendering the two first-person elements of it in different voices created a set of problems, with regard to identity and its perception, all of which needed to be resolved in order for the interactivity to be designed in a way that it could facilitate purposeful communication.

It was necessary to anticipate the kind of investigative and/or speculative questions that an active reader might ask with regard to The Project, its internal logic and the relationship between Bill and the author. Answers to these questions had to be found and The Project redesigned to reflect this if the reader was to achieve any sense of closure. This led to a significant rewriting of the novel and a recasting of The Project as a whole so as to effectively answer these questions if they were raised.

Introducing a final post on *Note to Elf*, in which Bill announces that he is quitting blogging because no one ever reads anything he writes, solved the problem of John Weldon plagiarising that blog. Bill concludes by offering his words to anyone who might be able to make use of them. This might not give me permission to use his words in a strictly legal sense but it suffices for the logic of the story world.

However this solution threw up more problems. Chronologically, the narrative of the blog *Note to Elf* finishes halfway through the novel's story arc. On what, then, did I base the second half of the novel? Further, the blog is not as comprehensive a documentary of Bill's life, at that time, as the novel is, which begs the questions – did I make up what was missing, and if not, how did I gain access to the necessary information?

This required a serious rethinking of the relationship between me and Bill. During this process it was determined that there were actually three Bills and two John Weldons in The Project story world. Not all of these are or would necessarily be revealed to the reader, although they were there to be discovered. Nonetheless, each was essential to the maintenance of logic in the story world and to the possibility of closure being achieved by the reader.

By cross-siting the novel, thereby creating two similar but separate first-person narratives for The Project (the novel and the blog) each authored by a different person (John Weldon and Bill respectively), the relationship between the two authors – one fictional, one a living person – was complicated. This complexity was not anticipated and it posed serious problems for the logic of the story world.

The story world was rebuilt and the following fictional meta-narrative was established (see fig 1.1):

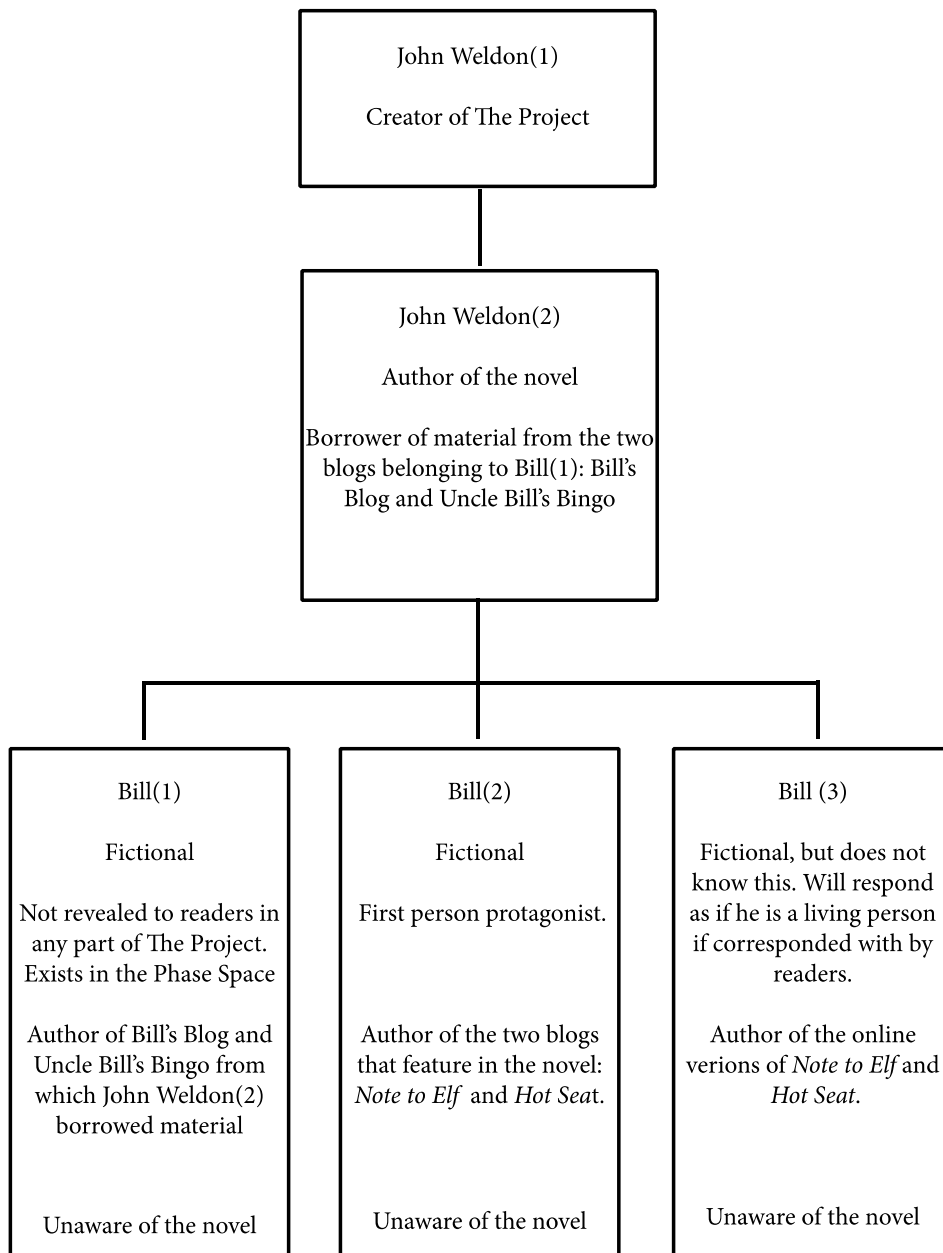


fig. 1.1
The relationships between John Weldon and Bill that underpin the story world of The Project.

John Weldon(2) stumbled across Bill(1)'s blogs *bilcomason@blogspot.com.au* and *unclebillsbingo@blogspot.com.au* and was inspired to write a story based in part on them. This resulted in a novel about the character Bill(2) for whom two new blogs *Note to Elf* and *Hot Seat2000* were created. However, the fact that the version of Bill readers would communicate with through the blogs knows nothing of the novel meant that he could not be the same person as Bill(2) the protagonist of the novel, hence Bill(3).

John Weldon(2) – the borrower of material from Bill(1) – is a fictional creation of John Weldon(1).

The restructuring of The Project in this way helped shape the interactive world such that purposeful communication could take place without the distraction of logical inconsistencies.

This arrangement is complicated and dense, but it is necessary. When constructing interactive cross-sited narratives, the author needs to carefully construct the logic of the interactive forum and the relationships involved. It is not possible to anticipate exactly what questions readers will ask, therefore the author must be thoroughly cognisant of the story world so as to be able to provide answers, as moderator, that will not cause the reader to disengage from the text.

That these conventions remain hidden unless directly ‘bumped up against’ is a deliberate design element of The Project. Only the most active of readers is likely to ask questions that necessitates these conventions being revealed, meaning that they will likely remain unknown to the majority of readers. Nevertheless, they underpin the logic of The Project’s entire story world.

No further preparation, in terms of response, was necessary or possible. Such interactions must be improvised, dependent as they are on input from third parties. It is not possible to prepare standard answers, only to create an environment in which answers to those questions might be found.

Interactions along these lines would serve to challenge the existing boundary conventions with regard to the relationships between reader, character and author. As Murray contends, these are rigidly delineated in the case of narrative art with the three parties remaining very separate in terms of role and communication (1997, pp. 100-1). By allowing them to interact, these roles become blurred. If Bill responds to a reader then he is in effect an author in *The Project*. Active readers too would become authors as their comments would contribute to the narrative beyond the page. Both would also become characters in that narrative, as would John Weldon should he be mentioned in their exchanges.

Such play with boundary conventions results in a form of storytelling reminiscent of that enjoyed in oral societies where the storyteller may be both narrator and character(s) at the same time and where it is possible for the audience to contribute to the story through interjection.

In summary, the reader is presented with a novel written by John Weldon and two blogs written by Bill. Readers are invited to interact with Bill in any way they see fit. It was hoped that they would bump up against the potential logical inconsistencies with regard to identity and authorship and that this might lead to new journeys for them, Bill and myself in a collaborative story-writing environment generated in the Phase Space surrounding the story. It was also hoped that this might lead to purposeful exchange allowing for these inconsistencies to be challenged and that this play and experimentation might lead to the development of new boundary conventions with relation to cross-sited works. Unfortunately, for reasons discussed in the next chapter, this did not eventuate.

Chapter 6: The Project Post-publication

This concluding chapter will discuss how The Project fared after the publication of *Spincycle* and the blogs going live. It will look at the interactions that took place on the blogs: whether any dialectical or purposeful communication occurred there and whether these interactions challenged existing boundary conventions that govern author, reader and character relationships. It will discuss whether it can be said of The Project that the story did move beyond the page, whether there was any engagement with the Phase Space and whether the introduction of interactivity afforded the text the ability to change as opposed to Socrates' assertion that it is an unresponsive form (Plato 2010). It will review the design of The Project and how this helped or hindered interaction. And it will discuss the implications these results may have for the continued development of cross-sited interactive works of fiction.

Spincycle was published by Vulgar Press and was launched at the Melbourne Writers Festival In August 2012. The blogs went live at the same time. The novel enjoyed considerable publicity through interview, review and discussion on ABC 774 (Gorr 2012), 3RRR (Sometimes 2012); ABC 720 (Nicholls 2012); JOY FM (Wight 2012) and ABC Radio National (Aly 2012). It was also reviewed by Fairfax newspapers including the *Age* (Dempsey 2012) and News Limited newspapers including the *Herald Sun* (Baz Blakeney 2012) and the *Maribyrnong Leader* ('Man, Time to Grow Up Yarraville' 2012) and on various literary blogs (including (Ronalds 2012) and (Robinson, A 2012)). In many of these instances the interactive nature of The Project was discussed in detail and listeners were directly invited to visit and explore the blogs as well as to read the novel. It was my hope that this publicity would both generate interest in the novel and that it would alert potential readers to the interactive nature of The Project, generating traffic on the blogs.

Despite this publicity, the novel only sold approximately 330 copies¹⁸, with the majority of those sales occurring in the first three months after publication.

Although much of the coverage that surrounded the launch of the novel focused on the interactive nature of The Project, this publicity was short-lived, given that the

¹⁸ From launch date until August 2013.

novel only sold 330 copies. It must be acknowledged that, as a consequence of this, it was difficult to generate ongoing discussion surrounding The Project. This reduced its effectiveness as an experiment in that traffic on the blogs remained low. The blogosphere is vast and diffuse. It is difficult for a small press publication with no marketing budget to drive traffic to both the blogs and the novel on an ongoing basis.

Leadbeater and Miller identify this issue stating that it is difficult for Pro-Am practitioners working on innovative, untried forms to predict how they will be used (or not) by recipients (2004, p. 52). Without a pre-existing body of experiential research it is difficult to know how to best position innovative works in the publishing market place.

My experience suggests that future similar projects must incorporate public relations and/or advertising strategies to combat this. This may require a considerable budget – which can be problematic for Pro-Ams as they tend to operate outside of the publishing mainstream. However, without these it is difficult in the extreme to keep a novel and/or a blog in the public eye long enough or consistently enough for critical mass of commenters and readers to develop.

While Pro-Ams might be best disposed to carry out experimental works in this area, they are potentially at a disadvantage when it comes to distributing and promoting those works due to their often meagre budgets and other related resources. There are no easy solutions to this issue, but it must be considered carefully by others embarking on similar projects.

The blog *Note to Elf* received 26 comments from 19 unique users during the first three months post-publication. There were also 43 SPAM comments made on this blog. The blog *Hot Seat* received no comments at all.

Over 75 per cent of the interactions on *Note to Elf* were made in response to the posts ‘Goodbye to all That’ and ‘Comeback Tour’. As the two most recent posts on that blog they were the most visible and easily accessible to readers. Of the 19 unique users who interacted on *Note to Elf*, 17 of these made 26 comments, 24 of which directly referenced the novel, the blogs and/or Bill’s story in some way. This suggests

that, as expected, that those who visited the blog and interacted there, did so as a result of reading *Spincycle* or at least being familiar with its content. The comments made by the remaining two unique users, Surtr and Thor Odinson, while not strictly SPAM, they did not reference the novel or the blog in any way. I decided to post them as they were quite funny, considering they might spark further comment (which did not eventuate). It is possible that these two commenters reached the blog via means other than the book.

If, as surmised, all of the content-referencing, non-SPAM comments were made by people who had come to the blogs with knowledge of the novel then it is possible to infer that the total field of people who might be expected to visit the blogs is likely to approximate the 330 who bought *Spincycle*.¹⁹ If so, the 17 people who interacted on the blog represent just over 5 per cent of that 330, a figure which accords closely with Nielsen's figure of 5 per cent (2006) in relation to the percentage of visitors who might be expected to interact on a blog. It is possible that the percentage of people who interacted on the blog is much higher than 5 per cent of the readership of the novel because it is almost certain that not everybody who read or bought the novel visited the blogs.

The Project was begun at a time when the use of social media as a storytelling device was still very much an unexplored realm. Many researchers were enthusiastic about its prospects (Warren 2009, p. 86) (Fiore 2007, p. 74) (Westin 2013, p. 41) (Bolter 2001, p. 121) (Alexander 2011, p. 47) claiming that this was an area in which authors and publishers should and/or would want to work and that the future of publishing lay in the digital arena. Warren suggested that the only way to find out what digital technology could offer the publishing industry was by taking publishing and financial risks, by trying new and innovative methods and approaches, and through reader engagement with these (2009, p. 84). He insisted that authors and publishers that 'thrive and survive in the digital future' (ibid., p. 90) would be those who took this path. (ibid., p. 90). Bolter called for creative writers to lead the way in innovation with regard to digital interactive texts (2001, p. 121). Fiore insisted that the publishing

¹⁹ These figures can be a rough guide only as it is not possible to say how with any real certainty how the novel's sales figures accord with its readership figures.

industry must at the very least ‘infuse multimedia methods into writing’ (2007, p. 74) if it was to remain relevant in the digital age. Horne suggested that although plain text e-books currently make up the bulk of digital texts, the future of such writing may well lie in more innovative forms ‘as publishers and authors respond to the possibilities generated by the new devices used for reading’ (2011, p. 48). He also insisted that the immediate future of books lay in augmenting print texts (ibid., p. 50). Alexander expected that social media should become the default setting for storytelling (2011, p. 125) and that the medium of blogging was well suited for this purpose (ibid., p. 48).

There were others such as Nielsen (2006) and van Dijck (2009, p.44) who suggested that Internet participation rates would remain low and that most users of social media were passive.

The Project was undertaken and completed with the knowledge that it was the kind of risky endeavour Warren suggests is essential to the future of publishing in the digital age. Its value lies in it being exactly that: an experiment undertaken in an area desperately lacking in conclusive research. The future of publishing will be made and understood only through responses, such as The Project, to the possibilities presented by digital technology.

Neilsen (2006) suggests that only 0.1 per cent of a blog’s readership will actually create content there, as opposed to simply interacting. However, he does not outline the difference between content and interaction. It could be argued that all interaction creates content, as each interaction adds to the text of a blog. The kind of content sought in The Project was dialectical in nature: ‘purposeful communication’ or ‘dialogue to cause change’ (Hockley 1996, p. 12). The interactions that took place on *Note to Elf* more closely resembled ‘catalyser’ events rather than ‘cardinal hinge points’; they introduced no significant moments of uncertainty to the text. However, three exchanges come closer than any of the others. These being the exchanges between Bill and the commenters: JK, Felix, Anonymous and lucky im with Rhonda²⁰

²⁰ The names of commenters are represented here as they appear on the blog – spelling and grammatical errors included.

on the post ‘Heal my Arse’ (Weldon 2012e); Phineas and/or Ferb on the post ‘Goodbye to all That’ (Weldon 2012d); and Les Malakies, Lucia Nardo, starman, psycho killer, Rosa Corrigan, Sally Webster, Dan and Anonymous (Alex) on the post ‘Comeback Tour’ (Weldon 2012c).

The comments on the post ‘Heal my Arse’ referenced points Bill discusses in that post and in the novel, namely whether to buy a new washing machine or 500 pairs of underpants – as well as the merits of a particular chocolate bar. There is nothing that could be called purposeful communication here. This is very much a catalyser-type exchange, nevertheless it does add content to The Project. The story is advanced, even if only marginally, and Bill’s interactions make the blog richer as a character vehicle.

Phineas and/or Ferb and Bill discuss the latter’s decision to leave his blog up and to offer its content to the world. This morphs into a discussion of the book *Day of the Triffids*. Once again this is a catalyser-type exchange which adds to the blog as character vehicle.

These are both rather limited exchanges. It could be argued that as moderator I should have driven these exchanges toward discussion which focused more on the concerns Bill expresses in the novel or which allowed for play with the boundary conventions separating reader, author and character, and this was indeed my intention. But I also wanted to let the interaction develop without interference in the hope that it might work its own way back to these concerns. However, the conversations did not continue long enough for this to happen.

There are no established guidelines for moderators of cross-sited interactive fictions. I was determined, as moderator, to keep interactions as relevant and coherent as possible, in terms of eliminating SPAM and steering exchanges in a direction that kept them coherent and hopefully interesting to the reader. It was not until I was interacting as Bill and simultaneously moderating that I realised how difficult it could be without such conventions. I had spent a lot of time creating the fictional world of The Project before realising that a similar amount of work was needed on its functional world. I had been prepared to moderate but the lack of pre-existing schema on which to base my practice left me under-prepared.

The exchanges that took place on ‘Comeback Tour’ ranged across several topics. Anonymous suggested that it was ‘good to be introduced to your book’ (Weldon 2012c). Rosa Corrigan posted ‘I see you’ve branched out into literature!!’ (ibid.). Bill responds to both of these questions by asking the commenters what they mean in suggesting he has a book or that he has branched into literature.

The long and detailed comment from Sally Webster alludes to ‘Bill’s story’ and suggests that people are talking about him, outside of the blog. It doesn’t mention the book, but it does suggest that the story world is larger than just the blog through comments such as ‘glad you got there in the end’ and ‘Amberley is a keeper’ (Weldon 2012c). Bill does not know Webster (or Amberley for that matter) and so he asks her to explain how she knows these things about him.

Having learned from my earlier mistakes in regard to moderation, I sought to drive these conversations into territory where the relationship between author, reader and character might be challenged and the issues important to Bill in the novel might be raised. Bill asked Webster what she knows about his life and to whom she has been talking. As with previous exchanges, however, the conversation did not progress significantly further. A blog visitor named Dan also replied to Webster’s comments. Bill wondered whether this was his best friend Dan and asked if he knew Webster. Dan, however, did not respond. Given their tone and the direction of Bill’s questioning, had these exchanges progressed it is possible that the existence of the novel and of me as author of it might have been revealed to Bill and the potential for challenge to the boundary conventions governing the relationship between reader, author and character to be realised.

In other comments: Lucia Nardo, in response to Bill announcing in this post that he is quitting blogging, laments his leaving (Bill also asks her to clarify what she means by this) and; Bill, Les Malakies, psycho killer and starman discuss the relative merits of David Byrne and the big suit he wore in the movie *Stop making Sense* (Demme 1984).

There is no specific discussion of content from the novel in any of these exchanges, nor could they be called hinge points, but they do extend the narrative and they do

raise the idea that there has been a book written about Bill's life, that his 'story' is out there and that people he does not know are in possession of information about him which he might have considered unknowable. These exchanges also demonstrate the moderating lessons I had learned from previous interactions. Bill's responses here are in character and yet are also direct and questioning. They attempt to focus the exchange on the areas I, the author, wished to explore, asking the commenters to provide more and revealing information in regard to their knowledge of Bill's story. Unfortunately these exchanges were very limited in duration and no further information was revealed.

These exchanges, the initial issues I had with moderating and the issues I had in regard to keeping commenters involved in the dialogue, raised two areas of concern: first, how to design the interactivity not only to facilitate exchange between reader and character, but also to allow for effective moderation; and second how doing so affects the existing boundary conventions and relationships between author, reader and character.

Scholars who speak of moderation do so only in general terms. Rieser speaks of 'creating strategies which maintain a measure of narrative coherence' (1997, p. 11). Robinson stresses the need for 'formal guidance' from 'an assertive moderator' (2010, p. 128). Pope asserts that 'reader control [of the interactive space] should only be offered where it is helpful for navigation or essential for the development of the narrative' (2010, p. 86). Each is convinced of the necessity for strong moderation but none offers strategies or guidelines to achieve this.

It might not be possible to write explicit guidelines for moderators because each interactive situation will necessarily be different from others. Moreover, it is simply not possible to predict what commenters will say. Nielsen alludes to this problem when he suggests that 'real users will always interpret some aspects of an interface design in other ways than intended by the designer' (Nielsen 1990, p.298). While he is here referring to interactive hypertexts, the same applies in the case of The Project; the moderator is a part of the interface of The Project. Designing that interface to function successfully for all who encounter it may not be possible.

Even if specific guidelines are not possible, it is still necessary to set up interactive environments that both facilitate and support a form of moderation that does not feel forced or separate from the fictional world. It was important in *The Project* that readers felt they were interacting with Bill and not the author. Any moderation had to be couched in a way that suited the rhythms of the individual exchanges that took place and was consistent with Bill's character.

I published an invitation in the novel encouraging readers to interact with Bill on the blogs, but this was not supported with explicit instructions on how to do so effectively. This was a design flaw which affected my ability to moderate exchanges and readers' attempts to initiate and maintain exchanges. In any future such works I would ensure that the print (or primary) text contained more explicit instructions with regard to the understanding and employment of schema necessary to interact on a blog.²¹

These instructions would include: the need for readers to submit email details in order that they be notified of Bill's and others' responses to their comments; invitations to check back on the blog regularly; a guarantee that Bill will keep on responding for as long as they do; and a guide to basic blog functionality and the use and access of archives. Such instructions may have helped readers unfamiliar with blogging to continue their exchanges with Bill over time, thereby allowing dialogue to develop more naturally and in so doing, have rendered moderation more seamless. However, even if commenters had been presented with such instructions, it is unlikely that there would have been a vibrant and ongoing discussion given the ultimately low numbers of visitors to the sites.

It could be argued that the kind of male audience attracted to a bloke lit novel might not be similarly attracted to the notion of blogging. Perhaps the form of *The Project* and the content and target audience were at odds on this point. However, the number of respondents on *Note to Elf* that identified as male was more than double those who

²¹ If another social media platform, instead of blogging, was chosen as the forum of interaction then these guidelines would necessarily change to reflect that.

identified as female.²² It may also be the case that audiences more interested in technology than those fitting a bloke lit demographic (such as readers of Science Fiction) might be more willing to participate in online storytelling and reading. Skains discusses this point, admitting that the Science Fiction community is indeed a more usual home for interactive fiction. However, he does point out that ‘readers show a desire for the extension of a favourite-novel’s story world regardless of genre’ (2010, p. 100), listing as examples online stories inspired by authors such as Jane Austen, Harper Lee and Cecily von Ziegesar.

There were opportunities to ‘seed’ interactions on the blog after they went live so that blog visitors were more likely to ask the kind of questions and make the kind of comments that would lead more readily to them challenging boundary conventions. This seeding would have involved me posting pseudonymous comments on the blog that hinted at the fact that someone had written a book about Bill, that it had been published and that Bill should be aware of this. However, I was interested in seeing if that kind of question would arise ‘organically’. Creating a situation where commenters are informed of the kind of questions and comments I might like them to post would render any data meaningless.

Playing the parts of both moderator and character at the same time causes tension as both parties want differing outcomes from the interactions. Bill was curious and keen to interact with commenters. I, as author, wanted to direct the conversation towards discussions which focused on the issues Bill discusses in the novel and/or raised the potential for exchanges that challenge novel-based boundary conventions between reader, author and character. Balancing the motivations of character and author in an interactive narrative forum presents challenges not encountered in a more traditional narrative environment. There, the author has time, in solitude, to work out these balances without any input from the target reader. In the case of *The Project I*, as author, had to negotiate these differing needs on the blogs on an ongoing basis. Although it remains unlikely that a set of universal guidelines could be established for this balancing process between the needs of the moderator and the needs of the character, it is important that authors/moderators keep this issue in mind when

²² It must be noted that the true gender identity on the respondents is impossible to ascertain.

creating interactive narrative forums. They need to prepare the fictional and functional worlds of those forums accordingly.

Much time was spent on redesigning the blogs so that, while remaining consistent with Bill's character, they were also interesting, attractive and worthwhile for the reader with regard to content. What was not considered in enough detail was their functionality from both the reader and moderator's points of view.

Although commenters followed the blog schema of question and response, they did so while also seeming to follow novel-related boundary conventions. This prevented them from initiating new hinge points as was the case with the majority of interactions on Max Barry's *Machine Man* blog (Barry 2010), suggesting that they were not as familiar with blog schema as I thought they might be which was also suggested by my research. Most of the interactions took place on the two most easily accessible posts ('Goodbye to all That' and 'Comeback tour'), reinforcing the idea that readers were unfamiliar, unwilling or unable to engage further with the blog through its archives.

No interactions were posted on *Hot Seat*. This also supports the contention that readers were only willing or able to participate in the blogs in a limited way. While *Hot Seat* appears towards the end of the novel and features less prominently in the text, the invitation to visit is placed directly after the invitation to visit *Note to Elf*. It may have been the case that including two blogs in The Project over-complicated matters, meaning that too much was expected of readers. Pope (2010, p. 82), Skains (2010, p. 97) and Douglas and Hargadon (2001, pp. 166-7) expressly warn against asking readers of interactive fictions from extending themselves too far, suggesting that this is a major reason why interactive narratives often fail.

These deliberations led me to reconsider the decision to use blogs as the interactive medium of choice for The Project. While the blog might be the most novel-like of all online forms, it may not actually be the best form for interactive storytelling precisely because of that similarity. Since The Project was initiated, Facebook and Twitter have become the standard for social media and online interactive correspondence. Both of these platforms streamline the collection of contact information on registration. Further, the default setting for both assumes that users want to be kept up to date

about correspondence, and assumes they want to interact with others, which makes extended interaction easier. Implicit in the schema employed by these sites is the notion that users will regularly check back in to update themselves on any correspondence. It is still the case that neither of these two social media platforms resembles the novel but, as has been demonstrated with blogging, that may not be as relevant an issue as I first thought.

The similarities in form between blogs and novels may have made the interactive component of *The Project* a more familiar-seeming storytelling platform to readers, but it may also have created a barrier to extended interactivity. This directly contradicts the advice given by Skains (2010, p. 97), Pope (2010, p. 82) and Douglas and Hargadon (2001, pp. 56-7) who spoke of the need to keep experiments with regard to the novel and interactivity small, and warned authors not to expect too much of the reader. They suggest that it is better to build on existing schema rather than introduce unknown and potentially confusing ones.

I attempted to do that in the case of *The Project* and while this accorded result-wise with Nielsen's statistics with regard to blog participation, it failed to generate cardinal hinge points and/or dialogue that might cause change. This may have been because the schema I used was too similar to those of novel writing and reading. The success of Twitter and Facebook, both of which require new schema and boundary conventions, and the ease and speed with which they have been adopted suggests that we can move further away from the traditional page in the interactive online realm.

However, it must be noted that cardinal hinge points and dialectic exchanges may have been generated on the blogs had it been possible to build traffic numbers there.

Ong (1982, p. 82) outlines the process by which readers have internalised reading such that it is subconsciously part of us. We are not aware that we are utilising schema nor that we are following boundary conventions that govern the way we behave as readers and the way we interact with authors and characters. One of the most important of these conventions, as Murray suggests, is that which prohibits participation on the part of the reader (1997, p. 100). Although in the blog space we are not bound by this non-participatory convention, we as readers often behave as if

we are. Blogs invite interaction but, as noted by Nielsen (2006), the majority of blog users do not take up this invitation. Twitter and Facebook, however, place a much greater emphasis on the need for each user to participate through interaction. On those two platforms, users must choose to opt out of a default state that leaves them open to contact by others, rather than opt in to such a situation as they must do in the case of blogs.

The commenters on *Note to Elf*, as was the case with the majority of the commenters on Max Barry's *Machine Man* blog, did not push the boundaries of the reader, author and/or character relationships as discussed by Murray (1997, pp. 100-3). This meant that they failed to raise any issues requiring me as moderator to make use of the detailed fictional world diagram included in chapter five.

However, the comments by anonymous, Webster, Nardo and Corrigan, all of which demonstrated a knowledge of Bill's story – which seemed unusual to him, showed that there was a potential need for this dense and complicated framework. Rieser asserts that a 'precise understanding' of the underlying narrative structures of an interactive narrative is necessary for the construction of a facilitation of effective moderation' (1997, p. 11). Those interactions demonstrated that it was possible for conversations that required the use of this diagram to arise. If they had taken place and if I, as moderator, had not already established a consistent and logical fictional-world view, it would have been difficult to respond in a way consistent with the character, my needs as moderator and the fictional world of *The Project*. An author of a cross-sited interactive fiction must be prepared for any potential logical and functional inconsistencies that might be introduced to the work by the differing conventions and schemata required to access works in disparate media. Where this includes a change in narrative point of view it is even more crucial that the author has a thorough understanding of the world he/she has created.

It may have been the case that readers did not engage at length on *Note to Elf* because blogs do not demand such engagement. Readers did not possess the necessary schemata to do so or because they were unaware of the opportunity the blogs presented which was to allow them to play with existing boundary conventions. Users may have engaged more deeply with *The Project* and over a longer period of time had

the publicity that surrounded the launch of the novel resulted in an increase in sales. Or it may have been the case, as Landow (2006, p. 137), Rhomberg (2012), (Hoffelder 2011), and Carey (Indvik 2012) suggest, that readers were simply unwilling to engage in interactivity, preferring instead to be left alone with the story.

The invitation to interact is possibly viewed by readers as being similar to the ‘irresistible invitation’ (Kacandes 1993) offered by the word ‘you’ in fiction told from the second-person point of view. For some it is a welcome invitation. For others it feels like an uncomfortable imposition. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to explore this potential similarity in any great detail, but research into this will be useful for the development of interactive fiction.

That interactivity can feel imposed upon the novel form suggests that the two are at cross-purposes: that the novel form is resistant to the introduction of interactivity. Eco speaks of the book as being ‘like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented it cannot be improved’ (2012, p. 4). Whether the novel as a form is beyond improvement or not is not the business of this exegesis, but the idea that the novel is not improved upon through the addition of interactivity is compelling. In seeking to add interactivity to the novel through cross-siting I have added an improvement that doesn’t actually work (2012, p. 5) or which doesn’t work well enough to warrant its inclusion.

This suggests that in looking to take stories beyond the page through cross-siting and or other forms of interactivity, authors need to find a form other than the novel – perhaps the novel-like blog – if they are to do so. If interactive fiction is to be developed then it must seek forms that do not too closely mimic the novel so that the schemata and boundary conventions that are brought to these (albeit unconsciously) by novel readers do not prevent them from embracing the possibilities of these new forms.

Instead, we need to seek new forms, which may well have novel-like characteristics, in the same way that film has theatrical characteristics, but which are new forms with their own schema and boundary conventions. When we play with the boundary

conventions and schema that surround the novel form in the online arena we must also play with the form itself. We must allow it to become something else.

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