

XAMNESIA:

Everything I Forgot in my Search
for an Unreal Life

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An Extract

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Some names and minor identifying details of some of the people portrayed in this memoir have been changed to protect their privacy. Dialogue is not always verbatim.

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dedication

for MG

PROLOGUE

On March 5, 2000, I wheel my bright blue Samsonite through Gare du Nord station in Paris, clutching a ticket for the Eurostar to London Waterloo International. I have a seat in coach five because I smoke a pack a day. My shoulder bag bulges with toiletries and pajamas so I can stay overnight in London and go out with my buddy, Idora. My main preoccupation is where Idora and I will go that night (Notting Hill Arts Club, please).

Inside my case is one million in American dollars.

The money is in 100-dollar bills so it fills my suitcase two-thirds. Anyone X-raying my bag can't help but notice it's all cash. Before I shut it, a sea of Benjamin Franklins gaze with a look of disquiet at this unscheduled field trip. A thick, purple plastic band cossets each 10K wad.

In case you think I am part of some cult forced into money laundering, or like that woman from *Orange is the New Black*, I might mention that I volunteered for this.

That morning I got a safe cracker to open the hidden wall safe in the property I manage because higher-ups requested that this cash get over to London today. I volunteered to take the cash because my overly adaptable personality reframes this

illegal activity into ‘doing what I have to do.’ You know, like any other regular day in the office.

I roll toward the ticket barrier with nary a care.

No way do I pull myself aside with a stern, “*Lizzie, what are you doing?*”

This is because I believe I’m invisible and invincible... so smuggling undeclared cash over an international border, without so much as a letter to say whose money it is, poses no problem.

Steal the money?

Doesn’t cross my mind.

There are several other trains further down the platform that could take me to Amsterdam, Hamburg, Cologne. I could be in Poland by sundown. I could easily abscond with all that cash in my suitcase, no sweat.

Nah, I keep right on rolling.

I clear check-in with a cigarette at my lips and an air of total indifference. Living in Paris yet barely speaking the language makes me a mime artist who smokes a lot, shrugs, and raises eyebrows to communicate.

I present my British passport to the double set of police in their tidy booths. The French police says nothing, the UK police bids me a good trip. I take that as ‘good signs.’ I’m on the right track. I hide my trusty passport with a sincere “*Merci*” and genuine “*Thank you.*”

A sudden thought hits me: if Notting Hill Arts Club is on the cards tonight, I really ought to grab a bottle of Veuve Clicquot at the kiosk after customs... to drink at Idora’s place

before going out. I can squeeze it into my Samsonite. The Benjamin Franklins can bunch up a little.

I am not panicked that I'll be grabbed or arrested. I believe I can slink around the whole world *unnoticed* if I choose because that's what has worked for me since I was a child.

I have a severe case of invisibility-plus-impulsive-behavior that I am calling, for the purposes of this memoir, *Xamnesia*.

It's a heady mix of feeling impervious to your reality. Like nothing can touch you. On March 5, 2000, I lived in an inner city fortress in Paris and had full-blown Xamnesia. No cure in sight.

I round the corner and sleepwalk right up to the customs agent with his muzzled, drug-sniffing Alsatian and ominous, gray X-ray machine. As if I were cloaked in a warm, gray fog.

What started me on the path to *this*—being twenty-seven and volunteering to smuggle cash from Paris to London? To see that I have to back way up—airplane-high—to see how *this* happened.

invisibility I

I grew up in New Zealand in a quiet bay on an island that resembles the island on this book's cover.

It's where a lot of stuff started that led me to Xamnesia.

'The Barrier' as everyone calls Great Barrier Island, is an unpolished diamond in the Hauraki Gulf, fifty miles off Auckland. The east coast is peppered with surf beaches and shipwreck sites. The west coast is a string of mysterious coves. It's opossum-free and the inhabitants proudly use generators or windmills for power; driving beat-up Jeeps or Holdens on rough roads that only saw tarmac a decade ago.

Mom, when I talk about the Barrier, leaps on the topic with great fervor, reminding me of several murders that happened when we lived there that she personally *knows* who perpetrated what to whom.

And about the cult of personality going on in the north of the island where several women hung out making love to the leader and scribbling news of it on postcards to send to their parents back in the States.

And the dope growers, who were periodically busted and sent to Auckland prisons, laughing as they boarded the sea plane to incarceration because they had so much money in

their post office bank accounts to return to.

And how my big sister Jocelyn's husband, Burke, pulled a knife on customers in the general store that my family owned and operated.

And how the one policeman said the island was a lifeboat you couldn't rock and that he was powerless to stop the tide of lawlessness running rampant.

But I have different memories of the Barrier.

Sure, I do remember my brother-in-law, Burke (twenty-one at the time), leaping atop a chest freezer and carving the air with a hunting knife because of some off-color remark from a customer. It may have been about Burke having sex with the man's wife, who knows? Burke had a lot going on, both in and out of his marriage to my sister.

I mainly remember all the fun we kids got up to because we lived a charmed, unsupervised life out in the bush, coming home to eat candy out of the boxes in the shop, refit ourselves with fresh flip-flops whenever we lost one, throw on our life jackets so we could go swimming in storms—nothing was ever a problem that we couldn't solve by eating chocolate bars or running non-stop on the bush tracks.

On top of running the general store of Tryphena, Mom and Dad managed the post office, gas station, and rental car agency, along with the telephone exchange for the whole island. We had a generator, but I still wonder how we kept the shop's fridge and freezer units cold enough at night when the generator was turned off? Or did we sell food that could kill you being half-defrosted then refrozen over and over?

It was a job for four or five people, not one couple of forty-seven and fifty-five with seven kids to raise. But Mom had that covered: older siblings and their boyfriends/husbands worked in the shop during the busy summer period. Hence my brother-in-law pulling a knife on a customer. That happened while Burke was *working*. Was it a scuffle about the postal service being late? The locals turned sour from time to time. It was all a bit *Lord of the Flies*.

We lived above the shop and school was fifty yards down the beach. We escorted ourselves to and from class even though my little brother, Sam, was barely five. We ordered meat pies for our school lunch and our afternoon snack was a Peanut Slab or a Popsicle. But we burned off this terrible calorie load by running.

Us kids ran from morning until night, unsupervised, getting in and out of mischief unaided. We were four, six and eight when we arrived and grew into seven-, nine- and eleven-year-old toughies. We reveled in our 'bush spirit' but really had no choice in it because Mom worked 24/7 and had no time to parent so she compensated by feeding us convenience food, ordering every book in the monthly Scholastic catalogue, and allowing us to go buy fish and chips every Friday night to eat out of newspaper on the beach.

Late at night when the electricity was turned off, we lay in our beds playing with lit candles, pouring as much hot wax into our palms as we could handle without crying. We went unaided on the zip line (flying fox as Kiwis call it). Wild boar crashed through the same bush tracks we played on. The dead

dolphin we found on the beach one day was a tragedy to be observed for barely a minute before we eagerly watched an adult douse the dead mammal in gasoline and set it on fire. The hot springs had amoeba in it, so you weren't supposed to put your head underwater or you'd catch meningitis and die. We were careful of that, but nothing else.

We knew the drill in calamity: run and tell an adult whenever there was blood. A friend fell off the Big Swing and broke her arm, we ran to tell Mom. A boy fell off the school trampoline and cracked open his skull, we ran to tell Mom. Everything added up to a funny story and we feared nothing.

Not even the creepy old guy who made swings and zip lines so he could catch a glimpse of little girls' underpants as we flew through the air. (My sister and I figured this out and only ever wore pants.)

Of course, between the knife-wielding brother-in-law and the creepy old guy we *were* in some degree of danger. For instance, I remember Burke got into the bath with us three little kids one day. Naked.

My big sister must remember that, too, because she hollered at the locked bathroom door that he ought to come out, *now*. I remember that because I'd never seen anyone's willy, apart from my little brother's before. But that incident borders on foggy, *Xamnian* make-believe because my brother and sister don't have any memory of this bathtub event. It took on a farcical murkiness like that scene in *Airplane* when the Captain Clarence Over has the kid in the cockpit and he says: "*You ever seen a grown man naked?*" yet the adults around

them don't notice the inappropriate turn in conversation.

The bathtub thing is still something I'm not sure of. Did it happen or not? My little brother and slightly-bigger sister don't remember it. And I can't get a straight answer out of my big sister, Jocelyn—whom Burke had wooed and married—who rapped at the door hollering because she has schizophrenia and when we talk it's about entirely different topics.



What *did* happen that jolted me out of innocence and I grew a boatload of shame around (hiding from my own memory banks for a long time) was what I did on the Flagpole.

I was about eight years old and school was out, but we used to go play in the school grounds regardless and one afternoon I was there alone and climbed the school flagpole... Except the way I hitched myself up that thing, I kind of accidentally gave myself an orgasm.

And then another. And then I hung out on the flagpole for at least another ten minutes, hitching a little higher and higher, swaying in wonder at what the heck was going on down *there*.

As I mentioned, my parents worked 24/7 so I know they were blissfully unaware that their youngest daughter was getting off on a flagpole, but that metal structure was like the Eiffel Tower of the bay and I was in plain view of several houses. Mrs. Miller, the Scrimgeours (our teachers!), the Dalys, the Forresters, Mrs. White... any of them could have

seen my pole-frotting. It wasn't as if the island was full of office workers, so it's a safe bet people were at home in the middle of the afternoon. And the schoolyard was on the main road. At least one car saw me, a skinny, spectacled, dirty-blonde-haired kid swaying atop the pole that sported our national flag of Union Jack plus stars.

The idea of people having *seen me* do that etched a dark groove of shame into me and was the first moment where feeling amazing linked to wanting invisibility, where enjoying life instinctively made me hide and forget.



When I told my husband about the Flagpole Incident, he doubled over with laughter, not with oh-my-god-why-did-I-marry-you disapproval, but in sympathy because he could see how innocent that whole thing was—I was eight!—and how nightmarish it is to think back on. He's been to the island, he's seen that ludicrous flagpole. He gave my hand a little squeeze when we walked past.



There were other moments of confusion about being seen or grabbing the limelight. Getting attention meant bad things.

At a community dance, for some reason still unknown to me, a huge handsome Maori guy who was lusted after by every eligible young woman there (that is, every young woman who wasn't up north shagging the cult-of-personality guy and

writing postcards about it), picked *me* out of the wall of females to dance with all night long, instead of girls nearer in age.

I was flung around the dance floor like this was *Dirty Dancing*, except it was all kind of wrong because, again, I was a child of nine years old and the handsome guy was over twenty and smoking *hot*.

No adult noticed how inappropriate this was because my trusty brother-in-law Burke spiked the fruit punch with vodka so everyone there was tipsy or downright drunk and Dad almost crashed the Holden on the drive home. Mom couldn't understand why her head hurt so much the next day.

I failed to talk to anyone about how embarrassing and weird my dance performance felt. From then on I failed to tell anyone in my family anything that was too icky. To this day, my sister has to pry uncomfortable details out of me. I preferred to be a closed book, open only with friends I trusted.



But here's why Burke pulled the knife on the customer. He sat there, legs lotus style, reading incomprehensible *Ulysses* by James Joyce, calling people out on their shameful secrets:

'Buck, we put your Jimmy Bean in a paper bag so your wife won't see!'

'Here's the dirty magazine you ordered from the mainland, Bob!'

'Your unemployment benefit's in your post office account you fraudster, Larry!'

'When are you paying your account, Steven, you owe us

over \$500 now!’

Until one guy threatened to slit Burke’s throat if he didn’t shut up. Out came the knife in reply.

Burke was into telling the truth, but he was also sneaky (i.e. that bathtub ‘memory’ and spiking the fruit punch). And meanwhile, by ceasing to speak up to my family about weird stuff, I didn’t realize the impact on things like a sense of self-worth. I didn’t see myself as important enough to mention.

