

The extraordinary story of an ordinary boy.

SHINE

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Just Another, Ordinary, Extraordinary Life

They say every great writer is essentially telling the story of themselves over and over, that they imbue every character with someone they are, someone they know or someone they want to be. The people I discuss in the pages to come are people I love, people I hate, people I know, and to spice things up some people I wish I never knew. This is the story of people who are bold, beautiful and true, and it's also the story of people who are poisonous, venomous and undeniably insane. This is the story of the good times and the bad, the ones that can shatter your heart into a million little pieces.

This is my story, as seen through my eyes. It is the story of what it is to be me. Because I am equal parts whimsical, inspired and ADHD, the story of my life is best expressed as a collective of short stories with no real rhyme or reason linking them beyond the fact each story deserved to be told. There are stories of opportunity, stories of regret, stories of amazing moments and stories of devastation. They are the stories that make up a life both ordinary and extraordinary.

To protect the identities of the innocent and the guilty I have assigned pseudonyms and obscured identifying details. For the people I love, I do it to protect their privacy, and for the people I hate, I make only a token effort so that when they are easily identifiable for the poison they are, I can at least claim to have tried. This is a story of me. At times I will employ artistic license, because sometimes it is not the facts of the moment that matter, it is how you live through the moment, and how the moment shapes your life that matters.

This book is dedicated to all of the individuals who found a place in my story, and is an homage to embracing positivity and enthusiasm in even the darkest of times. It is dedicated to all those seeking the courage to walk their own path, and seek their own happiness. This is the story of my ordinary and sometimes extraordinary life. They say a picture is worth 1000 words, but this is a grown-up book, people, not a picture book, so break out your reading glasses and get ready to spend 2 or so pages reading about something that could have been easily conveyed with a single picture. (My editor is paid by the page).

My editor and I have had a disagreement about names. Because my story is an epic story of major social and historical importance, I have naturally used epic historically derived names for the players involved. A mix of Greek, Roman etc. My editor argues that the unfamiliarity of these names for many of my readers will make it difficult to read and impede the flow of my story. I know that my readers are an intelligent bunch who could easily overcome such minor hurdles and I consider it a test of their commitment to getting to the juicy gossip when they persevere. However, as a gay man, I am fundamentally against discrimination of any sort, so in the interests of inclusiveness I will dumb it down a bit for those of you who were looking for a more light-hearted easy to read airport bookstore type of story. So while my biography has a slight bias towards those of you who can read (at least until I can get Neil Patrick Harris to agree to narrate the audible version) and more specifically understand English (at least until the movie of my life is made and subtitled in other languages with Chris Hemsworth playing me because artistic license and all that) I have reluctantly agreed to the proposed name changes.

The Beginning

Now you could be asking yourself, what does a 30-year-old have to say about life that can't be said in a single tweet or Facebook post? Or maybe you are 20 years old and asking yourself how someone that old could possibly only have one book worth of interesting stuff in them, and God you hope that you are never that boring by the time you are that old. Well the answer is: if you asked yourself either question then you are a basic bitch and totally wrong. 30 is the perfect age to start a biography, old enough to

have seen a bit and done a bit, young enough to still remember it, and with current projected life expectancy it's the perfect starting point for any epic trilogy. So, without further ado, here is my story thus far, mostly ordinary, sometimes extraordinary. Where's yours?

While this is a biography based on true stories, no man is an island (unless he is a fabulous gay man and the island in question is Barbados in the 70s or Ibiza in the 90s). So, the stories I am going to tell are probably less about me than the people I have been lucky enough and at times unlucky enough to meet. They are not famous (and if they are, they have been anonymised because I'm aiming for serious but relatable author situation, not gossip rag 'journalist') but the lessons I have learned and the laughs I have had, while being ordinary, are the stories we all have inside of us #SuchAnEveryMan.

I grew up in a pretty typical middle-class family in Cherrybrook. Two parents, Two kids yada yada. For those of you who are not familiar with the demographic specifics of an outer Sydney suburb you have probably never visited or heard of, your lack of general knowledge is appalling and you need to put away your phones and go back to school, you are grossly unprepared for life and are probably a Millennial or whatever generation is currently being blamed for all the problems of the world while you read my book. To save you the seconds it would take to google Cherrybrook, it's the Bible Belt of Sydney and the spiritual home of Hillsong. In Australia the Bible Belt is middle class, and fond of tithing 10% of their income to a re-branded version of Christianity that is an ad man's re-imagining of what it would look like if you crossed evangelical with rock, while keeping the conservative moralising and mistakenly believing the addition of an electric guitar to your choir band made you cool. Thus, Cherrybrook is a place of conservative ideology hidden behind a veneer of modernity, where you won't find socks with sandals on people's feet, but you might find them on their souls. Back to me, I have one older sister and a loving mother and father, who I love with all my heart and socks-and-sandals-hating soul. I left Cherrybrook when I was 24, I now live in Dee Why, a suburb on the Northern Beaches of Sydney. Because I am a thoughtful guy, and I'm thinking of your mobile data limits, I will again save you the google search. The Northern Beaches is an outer suburb of Sydney and it's a beautiful place. Home to Narrabeen Beach (a famous surf beach), Manly (the backpacker mecca of Australia), and the Sea Eagles football team (possibly the biggest salary cap cheats in Australian football but they are mostly hot and sexually degenerate so it's OK).

Obviously I don't live in one of the nicer suburbs, I live in Dee Why. Dee Why is where the poor people live, recent immigrants, gay men who spend more than they should so need to live with flatmates etc. I live with a dear friend (if you don't get the joke then you need to google Joe Lycett, data limits be damned) called Zenas who will henceforth be called Charles Waterstreet (if you know your ancient Greek and your Australian tabloid gossip then you will know name change is apt). I have known Charles for 10 years; we have a roommate from Newcastle (the poor Northern cousin of the Northern Beaches) who won't get a name because third wheel room fillers never do. My sister lives in Newport, which if you have been paying attention is a nicer suburb. My parents will soon be moving to Narrabeen, so their days will soon also be filled with semi-dressed fit men and we will have more to talk about. You could say I am a very emotional, semi-grounded person. You probably would leave off the semi-grounded person bit if asked to give an opinion of me after you met me but you haven't been asked and I am the one writing this so it's going on the record as emotional but grounded. I at times get overwhelmed and can lack control (remember it's semi-grounded, people, not feet of clay). Being gay in the Bible Belt doesn't give you a lot of healthy outlets for your feelings. These days I deal with emotionally intense stuff in healthier ways, such as borderline alcoholism. Thank you, Frank Sinatra. When you are young

and everything you feel seems heightened and unfixable, you blame the world and the people in it for your problems. I am now old enough and wise enough to know the answers are there and the solutions are in me. Growing up in the Bible Belt in the 80s and 90s, being gay was probably my biggest demon. My father worked in IT so unlike most kids of that generation I had pretty constant access to the internet. Through Yahoo chat I slowly learned that there was a name for what I was and what I was feeling. I learned what gay was, and that there were other people like me out there, but they were apparently not in Cherrybrook so while I felt connected, I also felt very alone. Meredith was my first gay friend, and pretty much showed me the non-sexual ins and outs of being a closeted gay man in Bible Belt country. Meredith and I worked at the cinema -I know, total 'drama/theatre/actors and the gays' cliché. By the time I started working with Meredith I was semi-out. I was out to my friends, but still absolutely terrified that my family would disown me if they knew. Growing into your sexuality when the message around you is that you are sinful is hard. Being a teenager is hard enough without the added 'who you love and who you are makes you bad' message. Over time I have learned not to need everyone's approval, and that who I am is OK, but it took hating myself to get to that place.

Gossip Girl

Have you ever watched *The Bachelor* or *RuPaul's Drag Race*? Or any other reality TV that gets you invested in the story? They may be 'reality' but they still rely on characters; Villains, Heroes, Miss Congenialities, The Hot One, The Nerd, The Quirky Girl, The Jock. Reality TV is populated by the same tropes and stereotypes as its non-reality cousins. I find it funny how much editing goes into 'reality'. What I still find surprising however, is that I always end up loving those characters that in the beginning I hated. Contrary to the first impressions thing, the ones you instantly love turn out to be cunts and the ones you instantly hate turn out to be misunderstood dark horses. One simple edit, one piece of misinterpreted gossip can make or break someone's reality career, or their life. The old trope 'there's your truth, my truth and the actual truth' is very much a thing. Much like a reality TV show, with this book you only get to see one side of the story. In this book you are seeing only snippets of my life, told from only my perspective (with regular narratorial interjections by my editor) long after the events themselves occurred. You don't know the backgrounds or the histories of the characters involved, just a brief story about how they entered and exited my life from my perspective. They are people, with pasts, perspectives and stories of their own. But due to structural and contextual limitations inherent to storytelling, on paper they are little more than side characters to my tale.

Gossip spreads like a rapidly mutating virus and before you know it a skewed narrative about a person starts to emerge. The story mutates and distorts so quickly with each re-telling that the initial intentions of the story are lost, and the meaning behind it all becomes unrecognisable. The person being gossiped about then believes the source of the gossip spoke badly of them, and relationships are poisoned when they should not always have been destroyed. Now, anyone with any taste has seen the show *Gossip Girl*, but for those of you with dubious aesthetics and poor taste in TV viewing I will give you a quick run-down. *Gossip Girl* is the story of a country bumpkin who moves to NYC to live with his dad and is enrolled in a high school for the kids of the rich and famous. During his first days there someone starts a Twitter account and adds everyone from the school, and then the gossip begins. The anonymous person posts about all the people within the school, their fakeness etc. It causes a lot of drama, and quite frankly it's an excellent premise for a show and I wish I had thought of it. The plot twist that isn't really a plot twist is that at the end of the show we discover our gossip girl was our country bumpkin all along.

For those of you who need subtitles for your life lessons, the moral of the tale was the simple country boy was better than the rich kids all along. Yeah, he wasn't fake like the rest of them, but our simple country boy was also the most savage of them all, anonymously stirring shit and mind-gaming like a pro. Just goes to show that the author of a story gets to decide who the heroes and the villains are, objective truth be damned.

The cinema days were a rough time for me. I had supportive friends that I still keep in contact with today, but it was a bumpy time in my life. We were all a little lost, and with the suicide of our friend Ella, we all became a bit self-destructive. We were all still just kids, just out of high school, exploring our independence and trying to find our way in the world. Ella's life was just beginning when it ended, it should have been the best time of her life, but when she ended her life it became the worst time of ours. If this beautiful, young, smart person with the world at her feet wasn't happy with life, what hope was there for the rest of us? Ella's death put a lot of things into perspective for us, and our emotions became rawer and more heightened. We took everything personally. We became angry and defensive, ready to hurt anyone who dared try take our confidence, or hurt us. Her death, rather than tearing us all apart, bonded us together.

We were the ones she left behind. Change became a very hard thing for us; we started out as co-workers but had become friends. After her death, we were deeply resistant to any changes within our world, so when new management arrived, we didn't cope and pushed back against them. It was almost like we started to revolt internally, and destruction at all costs was our response to anything that threatened our status quo. We started to get drunk at work, called the mascots cunts, and generally angrily thumbed our noses at the world. During this time Gossip Girl started. To a group of angry, hurting young adults, the idea of creating drama and revolution without any consequences or fallback for the instigator was a deeply seductive idea. An outlet for our anger at the world, without any real risk to ourselves who wouldn't feel somewhat empowered by the idea? The truth could become known in a safe way, without repercussion for the source. In the naivety of young adults everywhere, we were fixated on truth and fairness, without stopping to think that our truth was not always the whole truth, and our beliefs about fairness were not always about the bigger picture of fairness. Now, I know that what is shared and what is withheld when sharing "truth" is always biased, and we are all pretty shit at differentiating fact from opinion. 'He hit me' is indeed a fact, but there is always a context. There is a big difference between 'a man I have never seen before in my life coward punched me when I was walking down the street' and 'my friend punched me after I called his girlfriend a whore as I was angry at the world because I didn't have a girlfriend'. Life is not a science experiment where variables can be objectively examined in isolation, in life context matters, and bias colours our every move. If you have ever been so drunk you start randomly swinging punches, you are more likely to look for excuses for a coward puncher's behaviour. Sure, there are facts like 'I got hit' but the mitigating factors and context are WIDE open to interpretation and the role of context makes it anyone's game in the 'I was victimised' story.

Myself and a coworker at the cinema were talking about the "injustices" imposed upon us by the new management. In hindsight, I think the managers were mostly worried about staff morale, but as angry young adults struggling with a recent loss, we saw their changes as an attack and wanted to fight back. Now, despite how easy it looked on the TV show, it's actually really hard to start an anonymous line of online gossip that includes an entire workplace without the legal department quickly becoming involved. My dad worked in IT so I knew the only way for them to trace the source was through an IP address. To

get the IP address would have required far more resources than the cinema had, and would have involved a police investigation. They were not going to involve the police over internal gossip in a cinema. My dad worked from home, and had a network of computers so they were never going to be able to identify the source computer. Being a popular bitch, I pretty constantly had co-workers over to my house. I set up the account, and we posted on different days from different computers in my house. If the posts were not posted at regular intervals and from the same computer, we had plausible deniability. We decided the best way to create this group was through Facebook. I created an independent email with a fake name and details so it could never be linked back to me. Once the email was created, we could create a new Facebook profile under that email name and make it whatever we wanted. The account was created and within a few days everyone had accepted our friend request.

Facebook page made people nervous, they didn't know what was going to be posted, didn't know who was behind the posts and there was a lot of nervous hype about what was to come. Gossip Girl was out, so they suspected what was coming, but they didn't know it was two of their coworkers, not one, who were behind it all. I don't condone what we did, and I'm sure my partner in this also regrets what we did. This is not a story that reflects well on me. At the time I was proud of fighting back against the world, of fighting back against the injustices I saw. I now see that they were not injustices that my life was coloured by, where my head was at, and some things I saw as injustices were not. I wanted to show the disconnect between the claims of the company and what was really happening. I can still definitely see the point and value in anonymous whistleblowing; it can be a good thing. It can be used to inspire uprising and revolution, to call out bad businesses, but suburban cinemas are not really the place for revolutions. You don't change the world by angrily protesting staff rosters at a cinema, it's not really wikileaks-league worldchanging stuff. To be honest I can't even remember what we posted, I'm pretty sure we got to three posts before we got shit scared about threats from head office "hiring" legal teams and so on and so forth. I knew most of it was bullshit but it pulled us into line pretty quickly.

The cinema had messaged Facebook and reported bullying due to the content on the page. We had deviated from our original plan of facts only. At the end of the day it was still gossip, and in truth our sources were not particularly reliable. The truth is gossip is always unreliable. If someone is not prepared to own what they say, at the end of the day there is no proof. We quickly realised that it wasn't really affecting any change in management, and was creating a dark, suspicious culture among our co-workers. No-one trusted anyone. When the area manager sat me down and implied he knew it was me because of the content, he said if it was deleted they would forget the situation ever occurred and not pursue legal action. He even quoted the specific email that was addressed to the account, so clearly he was on the right track. It would be an obvious admission of guilt if I deleted it that day, so I waited a week before deleting the account. I think deleting the account probably caused more drama than keeping it around, to be honest. The fact it anonymously emerged from nowhere and disappeared just as mysteriously became a source of gossip for months.

Chris had started as a lackey like the rest of us, and had progressed to management when a lot of the people he started with had stagnated on the bottom rung. As is always the way, the people who started out with him and didn't rise with him, did not trust him. The manager before him, Barry, was a shit manager, and the people who appointed him manager didn't give a shit. He would go missing for hours at a time. We would spend hours sitting in the candy bar talking smack and doing no work and he would just sit down and join in on the conversation. He didn't care that we did no work. He was the picture of management slobbery, he did nothing but get paid, and didn't care that his staff did nothing; he was

paid to do nothing but exist and expected nothing but presence and existence from his staff. The staff were happy to be paid for doing nothing, most of us were studying and working full time and simply didn't give a fuck. The movies paid for themselves; when someone had a complaint, he either just gave out complimentary tickets to shut them the fuck up or literally told them to shut the fuck up. Either way he did the minimum possible to deal with stuff so he didn't have to deal with stuff. Barry was the polar opposite of Chris, so when Chris tried to get people to do the job they were being paid to do, all hell broke loose. Chris wanted to create a positive environment for both the staff and the clients, but this required work. Work that we had always been paid to do, but until now had never done. We should have respected Chris, but instead we saw Chris as the enemy. The spoilt entitlement of youth. We had coasted along being paid for simply existing, and when someone actually asked us to earn our keep, we were outraged and felt a great injustice had befallen us. We spent our days resentfully tiptoeing and waiting for him to walk in and ask what we had accomplished for the day. I am aware that anyone with the slightest sense will struggle to feel any sympathy for me in this situation. However, in my defence it's the Millennial/Generation Y problem. We have grown-up incredibly coddled in some ways, told we are special, positively affirmed at every step. Awarded for participation, not effort. The real world is quite a shock to many of us. Have you ever watched X Factor or American Idol? Tone deaf people standing on stage truly believing they are owed fame and fortune simply because it is their dream. Genuinely confused that wanting something is not enough, that talent and effort are required. For many of them it is the first time in their lives that they have not got something they wanted, and they simply can't process it. In the words of my beloved Britney, "You better work bitch", but for many a millennial it's a shock to discover work involves more than just showing up.

Chris pushed us, he wanted us to strive to be better, but the old millennial curse had taught us we were good enough just as we were so there was no 'better' to strive for. Rather than embracing the change, and quite frankly growing up, we hid behind Ella's death as an excuse to maintain our comfortable status quo. We didn't want things to change, we didn't want to earn our keep, and we used our trauma to hold back the expectations of the world. Chris tried his best. He offered us free counselling. We all refused. In time we pushed him too far. We thought Ella's death was our trump card, we thought it made us invincible, and would forever be our excuse for failing to do our jobs. Bad stuff happens, and it can take your legs from under you, but after a while you are expected to pick yourself up and get on with it. The world won't carry you forever, and no trauma perpetually immunize you against all criticism or the need to earn your keep. Chris fired me. I now agree with his decision; I was out of control and willing to believe I could bring the world down simply because I was hurting. I pushed Chris beyond the bounds of compassion. I now realise I had to find myself, deal with my hurt and hate, and build a more positive life. Chris had been where I was, he had been a loose cannon, he had held drunken parties at work, told customers what he thought about them, but Chris had grown up and he was trying to help me grow up. He turned his life around, to the point where the old Chris was unrecognisable to the people who knew him in his spiralling days. The people who started at the same time as him were envious of him because they continued to wallow in inertia while he decided to make a go of life. He was trying to help me, but at the time I could not see it. Even though I only spent 18 months at the cinema, I packed a lot of living and a lot of life lessons into that 18 months. I owe a lot to Chris. I respect him, and the shame I feel for the disrespect I showed him at the time is something I will always live with. Hopefully this story shows that you can come back from a bad place that leads you down a bad path towards being the sort of person you don't want to be. I am a better person for having been a miserable hateful shit of a person who wanted the world to burn. There is no real justification for the hurt I

caused, but having been there, I never want to be that person again. I owe a lot to the man I once saw as my enemy. At the time I saw malice, but his intention was always to help me be a better man who brought value to the world. Sometimes the hardest lessons are the most valuable lessons, and sometimes the people who change you for the better are the ones you least suspect.

Friends

Six Degrees of Separation

When I was in preschool, I was besties with a boy named Taylor. Years later I was working in the cinema and I was the Bible Belt version of Paris Hilton. For those of you with no respect for history, Paris Hilton was an OG 'it girl' back in the day. Young, dumb, beautiful and popular. Girls and gay guys wanted to be her, and boys and closeted lesbians wanted to do her. Picture a low rent pre-breakdown Britney, but without the talent, living in middleclass suburbia instead of Hollywood. That was me. So, one day I'm sashaying around the local shopping centre with my mother like all truly fabulous it girls trapped inside the body of a still slightly chubby gay boy, when I spot Taylor and his mother. Not wanting my worlds to collide I tried to avoid him. At this time, I was not out to my family, so whilst they knew me as their slightly girlish son, they had never met the fabulous mean girl bitch I was when safely ensconced in my little cinema kingdom.

I was the Regina George of the Cherrybrook multiplex, the unquestioned queen bee, but like a superhero none of which I can name because I'm not into that shit - I was leading a double life. I just about shat my pants when my mother started waving and cooing "Hello Lavender" and Taylor's mother responds "Hello Poppy" and they start to chat. Have you seen the movie The Truman Show? For a brief bowel-clenching moment, I worried that I had been under surveillance and my mother knew all my secrets. My instinct was to shit myself and cry so the problem went away, an instinct I still fight to this day. Luckily my bowels were a bit slow that day because it turns out they were not needed to salvage the situation.

My panicked eavesdropping soon taught me two things, maybe three. First, I have a shit memory. Second, Taylor and I had been preschool besties. And Thirdly, I default to shitting myself far too easily. Taylor is now my roommate of two days. I hope he is intending to stay for a while because I need at least 6 months recovery time to deal with the trauma of getting his fucking bed up all of those stairs. Some people come into your life for a season, others for a reason, and some have to stick around a bit because they have elaborate fucking beds that are incredibly difficult to manoeuvre upstairs. Unless Taylor is prepared to pay a removalist, his role in my life will not be a brief one. I mention this because for a time between flatmates I had a series of Airbnb people renting the spare room.

One of them, Casey, seemed nice enough if slightly disrespectful. Casey never cleaned up after himself, and helped himself to things that most normal fucking people consider personal. I can't tell you how many times he used my toothpaste or helped himself to my condoms. I think he was just a bit naive, probably never lived out of home before and thought everything in a house was communal. I'm a bit suspicious of the parenting trend where everyone is besties and mummy and daddy supply the condoms for the kids. How do you rebel against an emotionally immature parent who desperately needs to be the 'cool mum/dad' other than becoming a Mormon? It's practically abusive, forcing your children into such a bleak future because you haven't moved on from the trauma of not being invited to Karen Sullivan's 6th birthday party because you didn't eat Dunkaroos like the cool kids did. I'm sure it was the highlight

of the social calendar in Rooty Hill Primary school, but you shouldn't be inflicting your psychiatric wounds onto your children. It's the cycle of abuse, people. Casey simply didn't show up on the day he was supposed to arrive. Eventually he phoned to say he would arrive somewhere between 7 and 10pm the following day. I'm not so sure why he needed a 3 hour window. How fucking hard is it to go: "I have to be there at blah, so I will leave at blah, so people are not waiting around for hours for me"? But as I said, Casey was useless at many of the things we simply assume functional adults can manage. I went to bed at 6pm because I had had a big weekend. I had given him clear instructions on how to find the place, where the key would be and I had left the kitchen light on for him.

Casey turned up drunk and stoned at 3am. Managing to locate the Buddha at the bottom of the stairs (lit by a tasteful floodlight for gentle ambience) was all too much for Casey. Look, I have been there myself, but that doesn't mean I'm not judging Casey. Instead of knocking on the door, he rang my other flatmate (who was overseas at the time) 17 times. Exhausted by the effort he had expended hitting redial, he climbed into the children's cubby house in my neighbour's yard to have a nap. After a short kip in the cubby house, he awoke at dawn to the startled faces of the homeowners peering in at him. Feeling refreshed after his night in the dolly bed inside some poor child's cubby house, he managed to find the key and let himself into our house. I had just awoken from a well-deserved 12 hour beauty-sleep and was naturally looking fabulous in the early morning light. Naturally I ignored Casey's rudely late/early (depending on your perspective) entrance and made him find his own way to his new room.

After a luxurious hour taking advantage of the good lighting to take some moody bed selfies, I got out of bed and allowed Casey to introduce himself. Luckily, he was hot or it just wouldn't have worked - us being roommates - no matter how temporarily.

Bali 2018

Have you ever been in such a shit place that your spinning and spiralling has hurt the people you love most? This is a story about an earthquake. A serendipitous moment where the very earth we stand on was mirroring my destructive inner world. I booked my flight to Bali at the height of my anxiety. Like all well thought-out plans involving leaving a toxic job, faking a sickie and running away from your problems, I decided to act on impulse and regret at leisure. In this case the leisure would involve a 5-star Balinese resort because there is no point in half arsing financially destructive impulses. Obviously, this subterfuge needed to be top secret, so equally, obviously the whole world knew of my plans before I left the country 48 hours later. Despite the last-minute booking, the cost was not too bad. On a scale of 'McDonalds dollar menu' to 'house on the Northern Beaches', it was heaps closer to the dollar menu end of the scale.

Like all good stories, my inner environment was dramatically mirrored in the outer environment. As I was arriving in Denpasar a 6.9 earthquake hit the city of Lombok and radiated throughout the rest of Bali. This was only the aftershock of the earthquake that hit 2 days prior. The aftershock that signalled my arrival in paradise killed 89 people. The plane circled the airport for an hour while they cleared the debris from the runway. I was in Bali to seek solace with my dear friend Buddy (again, the dear friend thing is really funny. Joe Lycett - google him). Buddy described the aftershock to me and said it was the scariest thing she had ever experienced. Buddy was in her hotel room on the second floor and hungover when the bed started to shake violently. Luckily Buddy came up with a super well thoughtout survival plan that involved waving a deck chair about and worrying that she had finally had one drink too many and was having a schizophrenic break from reality.

Luckily for Buddy, but unluckily for the Balinese people, it was an environmental disaster, not a psychiatric one that was causing Buddy's world to tremble. Luckily the damage seemed to be controlled to the Lombok area. On the drive from the airport to Legian Beach near Seminyak there was no obvious visible damage and people on the streets seemed at ease. The Balinese people are obviously far more relaxed with major environmental disasters of the external kind, than I am about my inner world spewing hot fire about. Buddy described the earthquake as pretty much the standard shocking scene from a disaster movie. Speaking of disaster movies, in the movie San Andreas, there's a scene where the Mum is meeting her new boyfriend's sister at the top of her new boyfriend's multimillion multi-story building. The actress was Kylie Minogue, a national treasure and I will fight anyone who says differently. There's a dramatic scene involving an earthquake. Watch that movie, it will show you what it was like that fateful day in Bali, and again Kylie Minogue, national treasure. From the absinthe fairy, to the bitchy self-serving person in the middle of a natural disaster, to the arse that looks fabulous in a pair of hot pants, me and Kylie just work.

Now when I started writing my story, I had planned not to speak about my friends too much out of respect for their privacy. However as with everything in life, every rule has an exception, and this is one of those exceptions. This is the tale of a person who empowers me and how I hurt them by accident when I was hurting inside. Buddy is awesome, Buddy is my best friend. Buddy is a person that knows who she is, knows what they want from life, and lives with grace and courage. Buddy has a loving partner and a beautiful child. Buddy took care of me when I first started working for KRONOS. She warned me about the poisonous culture and the spiteful crones. She took me under her wing, and took care of me, but never treated me like a feeble fool needing protecting. Buddy was my fierce and fabulous friend who was there to guide me but always saw me as an intelligent person worthy of respect.

Back to the story at hand. I went to Bali because I was hurting. Buddy had retreated to Bali to lick her wounds after her own clash with KRONOS and David. She was there for her own time out, but I was hurting so badly and wanted my friend, that I didn't think about what would be best for her. My surprise visit was not the most pleasant surprise Buddy has ever had. Buddy is first and foremost an independent kind of person, and my arrival at her place of retreat left her shook. Like all good alcoholics, my first night in aftershock paradise saw me drunk and whorish. The problems that had caused me to flee had mentally followed me. I had believed I was coming here to help my hurting friend, but the ugly truth was I had come expecting my hurting friend to help me fix my own hurts.

I saw Buddy as needing fixing, and from my muddled place thought I was just the man for the job. Picture a baby elephant rushing at full pelt towards its little Thai keeper, desperate to show its love, but crushing its keeper friend in the process. It was a bit like that, maybe a lot like that, OK exactly like that in a metaphorical sense. I had convinced myself that Buddy was being complacent and that I had the answers. I had convinced myself that I, a man drowning under the weight of the problems in his life, had the solutions to her problems. I was drowning, but I wanted to save my friend who had been dumped by a wave closer to the shore than I was at in my current predicament. Contrary to the core, if anyone told me what to do, I would spitefully take the extreme opposite action. Buddy is older and wiser than me, with far more life experience, she was my sounding board and mentor. But here I was travelling across the world to tell her what to do with all the arrogance of a Nigel. I am ashamed to say I interrupted Buddy's holiday for my own selfish reasons. At the time I thought I was doing her a favour, but now I know that it was in fact about me and my needs.

Paul

If I was going to describe Paul to you as a character in a movie it would have to be Amy Schumer, in basically any of her films. Amy, though delightful, is not known for her dramatic range or acting ability, so any film you watch of her will be the same character. So, feel free to imagine your Amy Schumer film of choice and we will still both be on the same page. Despite my catty opening remarks, stop clutching your pearls ladies, the catty gay man trope is a trope for a reason. I love Amy Schumer, snarky is simply how I show my love. I enjoy her empowering romantic comedies, sometimes you want the depth of a good scotch, sometimes you want the bubbles of faux champagne. Amy is faux champagne all the way.

Much like Amy, Paul was chubby but confident. He was as clumsy as a type of animal who is really clumsy, I'm not great at animal metaphors. The opposite of a cat - like if a cat was wearing high heels on a polished wooden floor. Nah a cat could probably still make that look more graceful than Paul in Nikes on a slip-proof surface. Paul was loud and carefree and yet oddly responsible. A balance I have never been able to manage myself, but one I admire in others. Paul was a hot mess, the real sort not the carefully curated Instagram sort that is contrived to make a botoxed barbie seem relatable.

Amy Schumer has just released a fairly new film called *I Feel Pretty*. The premise was pretty simple, Amy Schumer plays a character that works in a make-up company and has no selfconfidence. She decides to join a cycle class and while intensely cycling, the chair of the bike breaks from under her. Straight to the fat jokes, it's not Shakespeare people. She goes down hard and hits her head, then her hair gets caught in the cycle next to her and half of it is ripped off. I know it doesn't sound funny on paper but it was kind of funny. Unlike Amy, Paul doesn't have much hair, so the silver lining to his follicular shortcomings is that he will never be at risk of being scalped by a bicycle for comedic effect. She recovers in the back of the spin room with one of the receptionists and wakes up believing she is a whole new person. Amy has now in her mind become the hot girl that she always wanted to be. Her confidence is through the roof. The movie did get some pretty bad critic and audience reviews but I felt it touched on a bit of a human truth.

Who hasn't met an unfortunate looking person who thought they were hot? A person with low to average intelligence who thought they were a genius? A boring fucker who thought they were hilarious? It's the Dunning-Kruger effect. On the flip side who hasn't met someone so hot they make your legs tremble, who thought they were ugly? Someone so smart they made everyone else in the room look like nose-picking kindergarten kids who worried they were dumb? Someone so hilarious you started laughing before they got to the punchline because you knew it was going to be funny, who worried they bored others? Anyway, *I Feel Pretty* was light-hearted fluff, with an easy little lesson for the viewer too obtuse for a poppsychology message that hasn't been spelled out in pictures: highlight your strengths, believe in yourself. Instagram stuff really, just 90 minutes long.

Paul was definitely a key figure in my life, and at one stage was a really great and supportive friend during and after my breakup with Jordan. Sadly, even in the best of friendships, things can change quickly and dramatically. It's really more of a saga, because even though the story of Paul and I was short and sweet, it dragged on like a bit-part actor with a death scene who's dragging out their moment just to stay on stage. It all began when my partner at the time, Jordan, left me because he couldn't turn the air conditioner on. Being dumped because my boyfriend lacked the coping skills to deal with being unable to work an air conditioner contributed to the abandonment issues I nurture to this day. My roommate at the time and good friend Sam had tried to warn me about Jordan. I like to think I was

blinded by love, but truthfully the organ blinding me to his faults sat a bit lower on my body. Sam believed that Jordan was no good for me and was only dragging me down. Sam said that Jordan had no drive, and was a sponge who did nothing but smoke weed and binge watch TV. These things were true, but at the time I didn't want to see it.

Jordan was my first serious boyfriend, the first person who had loved me (however dysfunctionally this would prove to be), theseex was good, and I didn't want to be lost and alone again. So, like a stereotypical Scorpio, I pushed away my friend, who, with my best interests at heart, had told me something I didn't want to hear. I cut all contact and moved out. Sam had been a rock for me for the previous 4 years. We even bunked together in Sam's brother's house for next to nothing rent. I undervalued what Sam had given to me in so many ways, and threw away a friendship because I didn't like being told I was wrong.

While this was happening, I also had a huge falling out with Jordan. As you will see me demonstrate time and time again, I do nothing by halves, even destroying my life is a scorched earth event. I met Paul on an app and invited him over for a few drinks. Paul had just ended things with his partner of ten years, and just wanted a friend and a chat. We had a few ciders had a great banter and that was it. We met for coffee when either of us was feeling a bit down or lonely. After leaving Sam's, I moved back home to my parent's house. After a week and a half of having my bedroom curtains and sheets stripped by 6am (love you mum) even on weekends (apparently mothering is a 7 day a week job) - I felt it was time to move on. The next weekend was the Mardi Gras in Sydney. I had never been to one of the afterparties because tickets were outrageously expensive. Even in the gay community, on the gayest night of the year, nobody wants to hang with the poor people. Being fabulous is a costly business.

Being newly single and moderately depressed, I decided the expense was an investment in my future fabulous life. Ready to hit the booze and the booty, I went to my first Mardi Gras afterparty with Paul and his boys. Under the influence of molly and surrounded by hot gay men wearing very little, we decided to be flatmates. Within a week we were moving into our new home in Dee Why. The first year was great, I mean we were both alone and depressed, but we were alone and depressed with each other for company. We got drunk, made new friends, took work less seriously than we should have, burned bridges and damaged reputations along the way. Happy times.

Burning Bridges

Paul and I went to an Adam Lambert concert. I feel the need to make this point: I was an unwilling participant, there against my will, forced into attending because no-one else would. After the concert, we headed to an Oxford Street gay club, and that is where Paul met Seth. Seth was the destruction of all things good. The nosey fucker that could interrupt any conversation from five miles away. The person that liked to talk himself up but put others down. We have all met one of those dickheads whose greatest joy in life is making others feel small, who sees themselves as superior and makes sure everyone knows it. At first, he seemed nice and we were all supportive because we wanted Paul to be happy. Paul had been single for several months after the disastrous end to his previous relationship, and was now ready to move on. Having a new boyfriend, someone new to focus on and love, felt like a good thing for my friend. It didn't take long for Seth to reveal what a cunt he was. There was always something slightly off about Seth but it was something you just couldn't put your fingers on.

We initially moved to Dee Why because Paul had had two lovely friends nearby called Lane and Taylor. Lane and I never really understood Seth no matter how hard we tried. Everything was a competition

with Seth. If you tried to tell a story about seeing a goldfish, he had a story about surviving a shark attack. If you said you wanted a coffee, you had to listen to a story about the time he harvested weasel shit in some godforsaken jungle to make the most expensive coffee in the world. It was pathological. For a while it was funny making shit up just to see him try to outdo it. But it's the kind of funny that's actually really sad, you laugh because the only other option is to cry. You could have claimed to have a tiny dick and he would have had to tell you about his micropenis, you could have claimed to have a learning disability and he would have claimed to be functionally retarded. It didn't make sense, a grown man needing to compete on everything, needing to win every imaginary competition that began and ended in his own head. The relationship between the two of them jumped all over the place in the first 3 months. Paul called them "love spats" but they were the volatile explosions of a self-important man who had a meltdown every time things didn't go his way. Paul, my gentle friend, was an enabler, making excuses for Seth, always apologising despite never being the one in the wrong.

After we expressed our concerns, Paul started to withdraw from us and hide when he saw Seth. A few weeks passed and we decided to try to put our differences behind us and turn up to Seth's birthday in support of Paul. We had a few drinks, danced a little and tried to get along. Then like the destructive prick he was, Seth did his best to fuck things up. He whispered in my ear a private fact about me that I had revealed to Paul in confidence. Paul should never have told Seth, and Seth had no right to bring it up in the middle of a party. He knew it would upset me, he knew it would drive a wedge between Paul and I, so as a birthday gift to himself, he destroyed my friendship with Paul. I left the party furious and feeling devastated and betrayed. Paul had thrown away the friendship we had built, by betraying my trust to a man who messed with other people's heads and lives. The next day I confronted Paul who agreed that Seth should not have brought up the issue when and where he did. Paul agreed that the best decision was to break up with Seth. Seth had betrayed not only my trust but Paul's too. Like all great dysfunctional stories of abusive relationships, this was just the third of many breakups they would have over the course of their relationship. There were so many I learned to tune it out. The only one I remember with any detail was the breakup where Paul collapsed dramatically on the kitchen floor wailing and hyperventilating, clutching a spatula to his chest, until the fire brigade arrived in response to the fire alarm set off by the risotto that burned while he was thrashing about hysterically on the floor.

After this particular breakup, Paul and Seth continued to meet in secret. Paul disappeared for days, going on adventures with no warning or explanation. The atmosphere at home became awkward; Paul made the decision to move in with Seth. Obviously, I didn't support this patently ridiculous turn of events, but gentler methods were obviously not working, so Paul had to be allowed to make his mistake and feel the consequences. Before Paul moved out the happy couple decided to have a low-key night on the town. Nothing major, just your standard drugs, alcohol, high-speed drink driving, destruction of property, and finding your beloved in a toilet cubicle with their cock down some stranger's throat, kind of night. After finding Seth face-fucking a random in a piss-soaked bathroom, Paul responded with the cool, calm collectedness he had become famous for. He trashed Seth's apartment more thoroughly than any natural disaster could manage, got in his work car and drove to the Blue Mountains.

Along the way he obtained 2 high range speeding fines, had a single-car accident that resulted in the car rolling onto its roof, abandoned the car in the middle of a major road, failed to report the accident and then hitchhiked to a friend's house to wallow in self-pity for a couple of days. What he did was fucking dangerous, he risked God knows how many people's lives having a massive hysterical temper tantrum because he caught his cunt of a boyfriend being exactly the kind of cunt he had always been. I

understand hurt, God I understand it more than I care to think about, but it takes a special kind of fucking self-absorption to think you have any right to put others in danger while you spit your dummy.

Paul lost his job, his license, his partner and his self-respect in a single massive temper tantrum. He had hit rock bottom. I was deeply worried about him and staged an intervention. Paul decided he was no longer going to move out, but as far as I was concerned his staying was no longer an option. Paul was deeply unstable, irretrievably enmeshed in a dangerously dysfunctional relationship with Seth, and had completely destroyed all of our trust. Even after finding Seth deep throating some slob in a urinal (it really is a romantic tale for the ages) and going on a bender that cost him everything, Paul still believed that Seth was simply misunderstood and that he could save him. He moved in with Seth and soon discovered the full extent of Seth's lying, cheating and drug-taking.

Charles's 30th

Charles is one of my best mates and there have been plenty of ups and downs like any friendship. I guess the important thing is we both came out on top and are still closer than ever. Charles and I became friends through my uni friends that I had met earlier on in the year. We all went to university and studied various subjects, but we all interconnected at some point along the way. Ali and I did education studies together as well as Anthropology, and Kadin joined us in our Anthropology 101 class. Lafonda-Green had classes with both Eden and Kadin. Thus, through a series of lucky coincidences, the group was formed.

Eden and Lafonda-Green had attended the same high school and were both studying a health degree at uni. At high school they knew each other, but were not friends and didn't really hang out in the same group. Uni started, and when things are new and unfamiliar, familiar faces are a relief, so you are drawn to each other. Kadin and I were also from the same school. Kadin had graduated in the year above me, so we had never really seen each other at school and didn't know of each other. Ali was the only one that didn't have any clear ties to the group before uni had started. Outside of uni, we started to hang out with Eden's old school group which included Charles, Madison, Lumi and Micah. Charles and I just clicked straight away. We were both tall, skinny, pretty and completely lanky and retarded in all other aspects of our lives. We both hated exercise, loved to drink, and half lived at McDonalds.

The local shopping centre and Charles's bedroom floor became our new home when we were not at uni or McDonalds. We all stayed pretty good friends for a good few years, but then life got in the way. We became more selfish with our time, busy with partners, and focused on our dreams. The group just sort of faded away. There were still regular phone calls, random catch ups, and talk of seeing each other more, but it rarely eventuated. Everyone moved away from the area, including myself, and it just got too hard. Ali moved 2 hours south to a cute town, Kadin & Madison became closer and moved South together. Lumi moved North and created a life for herself there. Eden floated in between the inner West and the North for jobs. Charles was either overseas or living in the city. I first moved far out west, then did a u-turn and moved to The Beaches. Micah moved to The Capital and was also overseas a lot. The only one that really stayed in the area was Lafonda-Green. Lafonda-Green moved out a few times but ended up back in the Bible Belt I had grown to love and hate.

The year of 30th's arrived, and it was the perfect excuse for us all to pull our fingers out, put in the effort, and have a massive get together. Charles was the one that had really tried to stay in contact with everyone from the group. Charles had over the years made the effort to fly to Melbourne, Drive to Canberra and Wilton and even fly up to Coffs Harbour occasionally. Charles organised the whole

weekend without any help from any of the old crew. Charles booked it, paid for it all and even made a schedule for the weekend (one I failed to read several times, but that's what good friends do right?) I just showed up and Charles told me what to do or pointed at something and I did it. I didn't need to know the ins and outs, just that I was here for "the birthday", and I was to do birthday things. Charles hired a lovely cottage in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains during the peak of winter. It was able to take all 9 of us, and to my surprise everyone came.

For Charles, we were all prepared to come together. Micah caught a bus up from Canberra and stayed at Charles's house in Cremorne the night before. I picked them up the next day and we drove up altogether, the trip was shorter than expected. I always remembered it being a drag to get up to the mountains. I guess our age was starting to show. We enjoyed the ride up, and the views we took in as we went around the winding hills and up into the cold thin air. The air is different up in the mountains. It's crisper and fresher, and it has a joyful taste to it, like nothing could get you down. We decided to head up early and make the most of our long weekend. Most of us had taken the Friday off work for our great adventure. We met Eden, Lafonda-Green and Lumi first. We stopped for lunch in the quirky town of Leura, followed by a viewing of the Blue Mountains and The Three Sisters themselves before we checked into our Airbnb. Aboriginal legend has it that The Three Sisters were once real sisters who were turned to stone. The character of The Three Sisters changes throughout the day and throughout the seasons as the sunlight brings out the magnificent colours. We arrived at Bunyip cottage around 3pm after doing a big grocery shop at the local Woollies. The first night, our plan was to have a few drinks and make some pizzas and wait for everyone to arrive from their various destinations. The whole group ended up arriving by 8pm that night, but many of us had started drinking by 4pm. I was well on my way to a happy place. I was on holiday and ready to be joyful. There may have been some dancing on tables and a few glasses broken but all in all it wasn't too bad. I wasn't abusing the nearby possums or trying to make out with a chair, so on my best behaviour really.

Over the years we had had our share of feuds. Assumptions had been made, some had moved on, but some hung onto their anger. Most of the remaining lingering anger was directed at me. If anyone had had the right to be angry at me, it was definitely Ali. Charles and I had moved on from the past and said our sorry's. But Ali, I know, I had hurt the most. Even though Ali will never admit it, because Ali is damn strong, I hurt her. I had pushed her away, and I never had apologised for it. She had been trying to help, and I had turned on her. Although I was causing a ruckus, Ali was the most tolerant of my behaviour and attentionseeking. Ali was the last to arrive, and was well behind drinks-wise, but she quickly saw the joy in the moment and flowed with it. I now realise that Ali has always just seen me for me, which sounds pretty stupid when you say it out loud, but in life, very few people really see you, see you for who you are, not who they think you should be. No matter what I did, Ali supported me. Ali never got an apology from me, but still found it in her heart to forgive me. Ali was able to move on, see my current joy, and enjoy the moment. I admire her compassion, how she stayed true to herself, and how she was able to move on from hurts. I took an opportunity to drag Ali out on the balcony with me so I could smoke my cigarette. I thanked Ali while I was outside, and apologised for never taking the time to say sorry for all my past mishaps. Ali told me not to be silly, and that was that. I can't emphasise this enough, meeting someone who can forgive and move on is about as common as hen's teeth.

Forgiveness can be as hard or easy as you make it. Ali made it easy. I asked for forgiveness, and she forgave me. Whether time had had something to do with it, and it probably did, we both realised that we needed to live for the now instead of looking back. Spending 3 full days and 3 full nights with old

friends sounds fabulous. It definitely was, but it also causes conflict. Little habits and annoyances that drove you apart in the past begin to resurface. We were all on our best behaviour for Charles, and none of us wanted to cause any conflict and ruin her weekend. Sometimes people just clash and that's OK. As long as both parties try to reign back the behaviours that trigger each other into manic rages, it can still work out OK. We started our second day with a big breakfast to fuel us for the day's activities. Boy I had no idea what was coming. I should have read the bloody schedule.

The plan was that we would do a three to four-hour canyon walk, followed by a quick pub lunch, to then return to our single bathroom Airbnb to get ready for a photoshoot. Eden had organised the photoshoot for Charles as a 30th birthday present. We then had to drive twenty minutes to the location where we would set up a picnic and have photos taken of the group. After the photoshoot we would return to the house for a quick rest before dinner at a tapas bar twenty minutes down the road at 7:30pm.

The canyon walk nearly cost me my life. With unapologetic irony, while joking about throwing myself down the cliff so I could be airlifted out by a hot young paramedic, I twisted my ankle and rolled down the cliff. With incredibly poor timing and a tragic misstep, I looked like a spiteful bitch trying to ruin the walk for everyone else. I had turned to Kadin and said "I can't wait till this is over and we're at the pub having a burger and a pint of cider" when I slipped. Kadin tried to grab me, but unfortunately, I slipped through his grasp when my ankle completed a 90-degree turn and my body followed suit. I rolled down the stairs and boy did that motherfucker hurt. I had dislocated my ankle, and then bounced so violently down the stairs that it had popped itself back into place. Somehow, I had managed to kick myself up my own arse with a dislocated ankle, and my arse has popped the ankle back into place. What can I say, my arse is my magic. But not magic enough. I was in a lot of pain and my ankle was swollen to a frightening degree. Now I had two choices, whinge like a bitch and play up the drama, or suck it up and let everyone praise me for heroically refusing to let my disaster derail the day. Option number one meant waiting hours for medical help that might not have been a hot paramedic, option two meant temporary pain with cider at the end.

I chose option two. Walk on it, get to the top, and get the fuck out of the canyon so I could have my cider and burger. The second choice seemed more logical and quicker at the time. It was freezing anyway, and with no food and barely any water left, I was not willing to be sober on the side of a mountain while I waited for the medevac. We safely made it to the top of the canyon and my ankle looked bad, really bad. It was like the Elephant Man's leg. It was swollen and it hurt like a mofo to walk on. A few beers, some ice, and a pillow to elevate my leg, and I was sure it would be fine.

The photoshoot was delightful, and with that out of the way we were off to dinner. All a bit tipsy, and joyful from the champagne and wine we had downed during our picnic photoshoot. Dinner was at a fancy tapas bar in Lawson. It had large glass doors all around, and large stone tables. Very trendy, and a bit unexpected for the mountains. Everyone was dressed nicely and the staff seemed professional yet quirky. We all sat in our places and luckily I sat next to Ali and Lafonda-Green. We had always got along, we were the fun ones, the ones who pushed the boundaries, and the ones who kicked things off. Tonight, we behaved ourselves. As to be expected, I was probably the most drunk. I thought I was controlling myself pretty well, but apparently not. Eden and Lumi told me off. They told me to grow up and act more responsibly, respectfully and respectably.

I'm sorry, how old am I again? Yes. I am nearing 30 and I'm pretty sure I am socially aware enough to know when I am acting reasonably. I was not doing anything wrong, and Eden and Lumi had no right to

tell me off like a child. It made me feel like I was 19 again, and they like always had to find fault with me. Just because I didn't have a stick up my arse, and didn't follow their imaginary made-up rules for 'how to behave in a slightly fancy restaurant' didn't mean I was the one with the problem. Even if I was in the wrong, I'm 30 years old and it is not the place of Eden and Lumi to play surrogate mum on me after not having seen me in years. To be honest, it pissed me off. It made me want to act like a complete dick, just to embarrass them. Instead I stormed outside for a cigarette to try and calm down. On my return I noticed 4 people sitting up in the far back corner. Their table had stools and was higher than the other tables. It oozed drama and from the group's theatrical hand gestures I could tell they were fellow fabulous types. I decided to join them, and stayed talking to them for an hour. This allowed me to avoid any more arguments with my 'friends' and kept the peace for Charles. The new group embraced me for everything I was. My faults, my great personality, my pure raw drunkenness, and downright inappropriateness. Not once did any of my new friends lecture me about being respectable. They were at heart a different kind of people. People who took you for what you were, not what they thought you should be. Here, perched atop a stool, surrounded by strangers, drunk and dosed up on painkillers, I had an epiphany. Across the room were my friends, and here I was seeking solace with strangers. Just because you were once close friends, doesn't mean you always will be.

Lessons in Friendship

I've never really had a lot of gay friends but I have had a select few over the years. I've always kept my distance because there are parts of gay culture that I really don't like. Some parts of gay culture are incredibly self-destructive. The back-firing at parents when we struggle with childhood coming out. By the time you come out, you have had often years of getting used to the idea, working out what that means for you, adjusting your picture for your future. It's old news to you, but sometimes it's out of the left field, brand new information for the rents. They need time to adjust. If they don't adjust, learn to accept it and love you as you are, they are arseholes of the ugly variety, but good people sometimes need time to process stuff. So many gay people struggle to accept themselves, but by demanding instant hand clapping from the people you love as the minimum bar, you set the standard too high for most people to ever meet it. I'm all for standards, but if no-one meets your standards, your standards are the problem and your hurt is of your own making. I also don't love the bitchy gay queen trope. I do love a bitchy queen, but there is more than one way to be a gay man, and if queening it isn't you, then the stereotype is just another box you don't fit. Large groups of gays can become quite negative, bitchy and queenish. I mean, it's all good and fun sometimes, but when it's constant, it's negative and schoolgirlish. No one but a mean girl wants life to be mean girlish, and there is nothing more tragic than an aging mean girl desperately clinging to her heyday. I think it stems from a place of insecurity, and negative and constrictive cultural ideas about what it is to be a woman or a man or a gay man or whatever. We gays tend to have pretty high sex drives, coupled with the inability to accidentally spawn because of a broken condom, as a community we are not great at foreseeing the consequences of fucking all and sundry. No strings attached sex can be a lot of fun, but there comes a time when you want to be more to someone than an orifice. It's not great for your long-term mental health to see yourself as a cum dumpster instead of a person worth loving and committing to.

Drugs are always readily available in the gay community. Sex, orgies, gangbangs, lack of respect, lack of protection, these things at unhealthy levels are the norm for many gay men. It's like a cross between the fantasies of a teenage girl and an emotionally stunted man. Queens sleep with as many other queens as possible to maintain their place in the gay hierarchy. There is bitching, and savage takedowns, and while

it can be funny to watch from a distance, it's different when it is the world you have to live in. It's getting better, slowly people are learning that you don't have to be a walking stereotype. Being gay has only fairly recently started to be acceptable, it's like we are experiencing a cultural adolescence of gayness where it's all still hormones and popularity contests. I hope that with time, our community can create a new, more grown-up culture of positivity, empowerment and acceptance of each other outside of the tropes and stereotypes.

Ben, one of my good friends, decided to organise a group weekend away in the Hunter Valley. Corey had just arrived from the motherland and Ben wanted to give him a gentle entry into how Aussies do gay. As Ben's number 1 bestie and an internationally renowned icebreaker expert extraordinaire, I was obviously top of the invites list. Ben will hate that I referred to myself as his number 1 bestie but I am, so I have to add the little disclaimer, and then ignore it. We got this cute little Airbnb house in the Hunter Valley and drove up on the Friday night, a good 3-and-a-half-hour trip with stops to grab everyone alcohol and food so we were ready to buckle down for the weekend. The first night was very chilled. It was just Ben, Corey, Tye and I, making a mellow start to a relaxing weekend. Ben had a bit of a thing for Corey, so Tye was invited to keep me from being the proverbial third wheel while things hopefully went well between them. Ben had just come out of a long-term relationship and had met Corey on Tinder. Ben was making an effort to go out, meet new people and hopefully find the love of his life, his forever man. Corey was nice, Corey was the same age as us, and a veterinarian. He was in Australia for 3 months to see if sunny Sydney suited him better than gloomy old London. I had high hopes for Corey and Ben's love story for the ages.

Tye was a friend of mine. We had met two years prior through a work mate, Nick, at his Harry Potter themed 25th. Disturbingly, Nick was a Pauline Hanson fan and voted 'no' in the marriage equality referendum. In hindsight, I wonder why Tye or I were ever friends with such a fucked-up person. As the only two gays at the Harry Potter party it was assumed we would hit it off. Didn't happen, we ignored each other all night. I knew no-one at Nick's party except Nick, so naturally I arrived early. It's a tried and tested tactic for going alone to a party where you know no one. You help set up, meet everyone from the beginning and look like you belong halfway into the night, because now you know everyone, and you're drunk off your tits. A year later at Nick's 26th, Tye and I hit it off like besties that were made to be. We became good buds and Tye got a job at KRONOS, a major pathology company that Nick and I also worked at.

When I met Tye, Tye had his shit together. He did meditation on weekends, had a partner and generally had his life together. I didn't like Tye's partner but Tye was happy and I was happy my friend was happy. The relationship lasted about 6 months and this fuckwit basically told Tye that he wanted to settle down and didn't see Tye in his future. Given Tye was under the impression they were settled down, this came as a shock and messed him up badly. Looking back with what I now know, Tye's dickhead ex probably saw something I didn't see at the time. After the breakup, Tye became - there is no polite way to say this - a raging slut. Tye was obviously affected by the breakup as anyone would be. Six months doesn't sound like much, but emotionally it's long enough to fall in love. Does this explain or excuse his later behaviour? I will leave that you, gentle reader, to decide. Everyone can have a rebound partner or two, but he basically fucked his way through my entire group of friends. I don't want you to think I don't like Tye, I do like him and don't regret our friendship for a moment, but he hurt me quite badly when he spiralled after his breakup. So, on our first morning at the Hunter Valley I woke up early and cooked us all bacon and egg toasties. I'm quite the domestic goddess when I want to be. We sat in the sun drinking

morning mimosas and lining our stomachs with bacon and eggs in preparation for the finest wine country had to offer. The best way to shop for wine is with a buzz, so we were ready to shop.

Our first stop was one of the high-end estate wineries. Our lovely host Pam helped us kick off our first wine tasting. We quickly discovered we should all become best friends, because Pam is hilarious and the sun is shining and the wine is flowing. During our wine tasting I asked Pam if there were any prominent, young wine producers in the valley looking to sweep a young fun-loving chappie such as myself off his feet and carry him off into the sunset. Pam told me of a place next door to our Airbnb that might be home to my future husband, so we earmarked it for last, so that our weekend could have a spectacular happy ending. After hitting at least another five wineries we returned to our Airbnb for a few drinks by the pool while the sun was still out. The plan was to R&R before popping to the winery next to us just before closing time to meet my future lover. At 3pm, we staggered through the winery door just before closing. Once the winery staff realised how inebriated I was, they declined to allow me to take part in the wine tasting. This was probably a good thing because at this point, I was drunkenly demanding to see my future husband. Apparently, my future hubby was out the back old-school pummelling grapes in one of those big vats. Our lovely hostess took us on a stroll down to the back to visit. After pounding on the door, I was confronted by the hottest fucking specimen of manhood I have ever seen. Unfortunately, I was also punked by Pam. The man of my dreams, it turns out, was also the man of her dreams. Pam was delighted to see us, and proud to show off her super-hot boyfriend. Needless to say, my hopes of finding a wine making husband were not realised that day. After our big day of drinking we stumbled back to our Airbnb.

Do you need to hookup to have fun? Can fun be had without rumpy pumpy? I think so. Is it OK to shag someone your friend is quietly loving in the background? I think not. Ben had put himself out there for the first time in a long time, and he genuinely wanted a future with Corey. We were chilling by the pool and after a time Tye and Corey wandered off. They were gone quite a while so Ben went looking for them. When he came back outside, he had a shocked look on his face. "They are having sex" he almost whispered, shocked that Tye would so aggressively cut his own friend's grass. All I could say was "Are you fucking kidding me?"

Now you don't own someone just because you are attracted to them, but you also don't fuck the guy your mate is pining for. Ben had gone out of his way to plan a mellow weekend for Corey who was only in Australia for a short time, and Corey and Tye gave no fucks about Ben's feelings. Drunk and feeling self-righteous, I confronted Corey. I asked him why he had to ruin our bonding weekend by hooking-up with a 23-year-old who had just had a painful breakup. Corey called me jealous and said I was just pissed that Tye didn't want me. He said I was inlove with Tye, which I wasn't, but had heard a million times. Somehow this made it worse, he knew Ben liked him, he thought I loved Tye, and he fucked him anyway on a weekend away arranged by Ben while I was just outside. I asked Tye to think about Ben's feelings, we were all there to enjoy ourselves and what he was doing was hurting Ben. He didn't care about Corey and Corey didn't care about him; it was just sex. Was it really worth hurting his friend over a random fuck? I am not going to say I have never done anything similar; I have. But that doesn't mean it's right or fair or decent or kind. It's not. They ignored my concerns and made their choice. I fell asleep on the couch and woke at 3am. I went to the room I was sharing with Tye to find Corey and Tye stark naked and obviously post-coitally asleep. Corey was face down on his stomach with his arse still relaxed open. Tye was lying there with his cock lazily flopped over Corey's leg. I don't know what I would have said if either of them had woken and seen me standing in the doorway. I returned to the couch, being careful

not to wake Ben. The next morning Corey and Tye emerged from my room with the smug lazy smiles of people who have been thoroughly fucked. I stormed into my room without a word and grabbed my stuff. I stomped around the kitchen angrily cooking everyone breakfast. I was acting like a bit of a cunt, but I was angry that they both knew unequivocally that they were hurting people, but they did it anyway. The mood was now poisoned, so we left early and it was a long silent trip home.

I didn't really know what to do once we arrived back home. I'm not Tye's dad and nor should I act like one. I guess I have that fatherly love towards Tye, I see a lot of myself in Tye when I was younger, especially the self-destructive side. Tye definitely had his shit together more than I did at the same age, but right now he was self-destructing hard and he was hurting other people in the process. I decided to think it over for a few days so I didn't do or say something I would regret. I wanted to be calm when I decided what to do about my friendship with Tye and at this moment, I was still angry.

After a few days I called Tye to discuss the issue. I gave Tye some warning so the phone call wouldn't catch him off guard. I texted Tye saying I would give a call later that night to discuss what had happened. He knew I was still angry because I hadn't contacted him since we returned, and I wanted to give him the chance to prepare his defence of his behaviour. I wanted to tell him what he had done was wrong, he had hurt Ben and that wasn't right. If he blew me off, he wasn't the sort of friend I wanted in my life. If he was sorry for how he acted, we could remain friends. I wanted to know why Tye had been so willing to hurt someone as good as Ben for the sake of a random fuck. I wanted to know he was sorry for hurting another human being. We hashed it out over the phone. Tye had already apologised to Ben, which I thought was great. Ben pretended it was nothing and that he didn't care which made Tye believe it was no big deal to Ben and that I was overreacting. The thing is this wasn't the first bump in our friendship. Tye had worked his way through most of my gay friends. I was running out of friends he hadn't fucked in his post breakup heartbreak. But this was the first time I had seen him put his own desire for a meaningless fuck ahead of his friends' feelings. Ben was hurt by what happened, hurt more than he would ever admit to, and that meant nothing to Tye. Maybe I was simply jealous that Tye got laid and I didn't, but I don't think so. I learned that Tye put his dick ahead of his friends' feelings and didn't feel all that bad about doing it. After our conversation I told Tye that while we were still friends, I needed some space. I was so sick of people telling me I was in love with Tye, I think I actually at some point started believing it myself. Not seeing Tye would let me make sense of my feelings and would give me time to work out whether I wanted to be friends with someone who could be so ruthless with other people's feelings.

At the Hunter Valley I learned that my friend would do things I didn't think friends do to each other. I learned that my friend would knowingly hurt his friends for a meaningless moment of hormonal pleasure. I learned that he would prioritise an orgasm over another man's heartbreak. A little private piece of me broke. There is a small place inside of me that wants to believe that friendships where you genuinely want what's best for each other and care about each other's hurts still exist. Everyone loves Tye, everyone agrees that he is a good guy with the world at his feet, and he is. Maybe the problem is my naive expectations of friendship. I hope it's not. I hope that one day my feelings will matter, one day someone will care more about my hurt than their own passing pleasure.

S, Love & R

Sex, Love & Relationships

The Lion, The Witch & the Wardrobe

I was in a relationship with a guy called Jordan. After I was fired from my job in the café, I wasn't too worried because I had plenty of savings and not too many bills. With 15K in savings and rent only \$100 a week, I wasn't too stressed about finding a job. Yes, my canny readers, you saw this one coming, I went through my savings a lot quicker than expected. It turns out having champagne tastes and a high maintenance loafer for a partner costs a lot of money. Some things are an acquired taste, but I took to sitting on the couch all day like a duck to water. I think I was born to be a sugar baby, so any rich daddies looking for a man to lavish your affections and money on for very little in return, I'm a natural. As the one doing the sugar daddying, yeah, it's not my strong point.

I applied for jobs off and on but didn't turn up to half the interviews. It's hard to find the motivation to get back on your feet when you have a partner with no drive or motivation. Jordan never encouraged me to get back out there. Looking back, I now realise that for Jordan, I was just a meal ticket, and I was just too naive to see it at the time. Jordan was my first love and despite hindsight showing me how dysfunctional it was, he still holds a big place in my heart. I applied for a job as a store manager at a new and upcoming gourmet burger franchise restaurant. I may have been down and out, but I was still gourmet all the way. The interview was at a T2 store, how epic is that? Interviewing for a management position while drinking tea. It's like a poor man's version of the backroom deals you see on TV shows with an English twist to it. As awesome as this sounds on paper it's actually quite a confrontational interview technique and not for the faint hearted, which I very much am. I'm like one of those fainting goats. There's a tree, faint etc etc, avoidance is one of my favourite coping strategies. I consider it a strength. If I had to name my spirit animal it would probably be the fainting goat. The atmosphere was civilised but the undertone of the interview was intense.

This man was the sort that you see in military movies whose sole purpose is to sort the weak from the strong. I bullshit my way through it pretty well, all the time worried my bowels would betray me and cause me to actually shit myself while bullshitting the sort of man whose bowels are probably too scared of his intensity to work unless he gives them a signed permission slip. You know those overbearing people who want you to thank them for the life lesson they gave you while you are almost psychotic from trauma? He was one of them, and annoyingly I did learn a life lesson from the smug sanctimonious fucker. I progressed to the next interview and I thought I would nail it. In professional sports there is a term called choking. Don't worry gentle readers, I too had to google the meaning of such terminology in the sporting arena. It turns out it's a lot like the choking I was more familiar with, not the air-play version, but the other version. When you are doing something you are really good at and suddenly for no reason at all you mess it up and find yourself vomiting, or in this case unable to answer questions like "Why would you be good at this job?"

I didn't get the job. For some reason this rejection hit me like an atom bomb, and everything fell both into and out of place. My problems were the result of my insecurities, of always feeling like I was performing for others instead of being what came naturally to me. It was time to come out to my family. I was exhausted trying to be different things to different people, like a better-looking version of that movie about split personalities, Sybil. I broke down in the car on the way home. Now I'm not much of a crier unless I'm hungover, or sexually frustrated, or Uber Eats is down, or my serotonin levels have depleted my life which happens every Monday morning, just the usual stuff. Here I was ready to shout my truth to the world through streams of tears and snot, and my mother didn't answer her phone. I called her repeatedly with no answer. I don't know why parents even bother to have phones if they won't answer them when you are trying to come out of the closet on the side of the road. It's not the

kind of thing you leave in a voicemail or send as a text. I tried my sister and she answered on the third call. As you can see in the case of an emergency, I would be dead for a week before my family got around to responding to my calls for help. My sister thought someone must have died for me to be calling, so I spent the first 20 minutes reassuring her before I could make the announcement. It's hard to describe, the weight that lifts off you when you come out. It's a feeling of weightlessness, like a rollercoaster going in reverse. I don't want to sound like one of those smug arseholes who waits for people to applaud after each sentence that comes out of their unoriginal mouths but until you have come out, you don't realise how much not speaking your truth holds you down. I promise not to frighten you further with too much emotion, my gentle readers. I include these stories because they matter to me and I don't want you to think I am just a shallow hottie. An occasional flashing of my renaissance-man depth to draw you in with the promise of emotional connection incompatible with my man-whoring ways, so to speak. The next couple of chapters will definitely be full of the savagery and sass you have come to expect from your humble hero.

Drugs, Sex and All of the Above

Most people I know have dabbled in illicit substances. Smoked the happy weed, sniffed the nose candy, and ingested the love pills, whatever the term kids are using these days. It's funny how the terms change but the practices remain with each new generation thinking they invented a new kind of rebellion. It's like the word "bonk" or the even more offensive "boink". My parents bonked, their parents shagged, my generation is somehow more puritan and oversexed than our predecessors. We "get intimate" and "hookup". It seems like a deceptively polite way to describe letting a stranger plow you from behind in an alleyway behind a club, but language is strange like that.

I'm no Anthony Keidis or Keith Richards but I have had a low key dabble in my time. I'm no 'my body is a temple' type, but no one is calling me Sniffany to my face either. I was quite old to join the 'getting intimate' party. I was a 19-year-old virgin, not exactly a 40-year-old virgin, but to a horny 19-year-old it felt dangerously close to the same thing. Sex is everywhere, but at the same time it's not. It's in your face everywhere you turn, but at the same time people who have been celibate for 5 years or more either voluntarily or involuntarily is definitely on the rise. To a 19-year-old it feels like everyone is doing it and there's a certain shame attached to being someone no-one has never rubbed naughty bits with another person.

I was working in a cinema. Lafonda-Green arranged for the popping of my booty cherry. LG worked with a man named Terrie. To my 19-year-old self Terrie was a more worldly man than me, a man of experience, the ideal person to relieve me of my virginity and to induct me into the world of sexy shenanigans. In hindsight, Terrie was a 25-year-old still living with his parents in middle-class splendour in the Bible Belt, working for a popcorn shop, and deflowering awkward young virgins like myself in his spare time. To clear up any confusion my tendency towards hyperbole may have created, I'm not saying Terrie chased barely legals, I'm saying he wasn't the debonair man of the world I thought him to be at the time, he was basically me a couple of years older. Thanks to the machinations of LG, Terrie and I exchanged numbers and after some light saucy texting I was ready to sacrifice my cherry to the gods of peen. Like most cherry popping stories home was not an option. The idea of either of us bringing a guy home to our parents houses and shagging in our childhood beds before doing the walk of shame past the traumatised faces of our middle-class conservative parents who just listened to the awkward gruntings of their son negotiating arse sex for the very first time while they enjoyed their evening cocoa,

just didn't feel right. I love my family, but we are not one of those share everything families, and it didn't feel right to peripherally include them in my sex life. So, we did it in my car, a Nissan Maxima I still remember fondly, in the local lover's lane just a few streets over from the police station. I bet you weren't expecting such a 1950s turn of events from the man you have come to see as a plucky modern hero making his way in the world his own way, but yeah I lost my virginity the same way your mum probably did. There may have been more anal stuff involved for me, I don't know, I don't know your mum. I picked Terrie up under the cloak of darkness once his parents were snoring in front of the TV and drove to what I now realise was a disturbingly open spot where perverts were probably hiding in the bushes hoping to spot some teen girl being groped by her boyfriend. That night the perverts probably got the same shock I get when I turn on the TV and it's SBS and there is a Latin housewife sitting on the toilet; you know it happens in real life but you are just not used to seeing it casually appear before you.

My only thought at the time was I had to move heaven and earth to get this one, I was far too old to still be a virgin. I really didn't know what to expect. This was still the early days of the internet, and porn was pretty much limited to photos and internet chat room stuff. Nothing like the overwhelming amount of hardcore graphic stuff spanning every possible preference and scenario that is available at the click of a mouse completely free these days.

I cannot emphasise this enough to my younger readers who have never known a world without freely accessible internet porn of every description. I was a gay man, who was pretty sure something was going to go up my butt, but had no idea how the mechanics of this were going to happen. Yeah there was sex ed at school, but they sure as fuck were not discussing the howto's of inserting things in your rectum. It's quite frankly surprising to me that heteros ever worked out how to procreate before porn was so available - what I saw in sex ed was worse than fucking IKEA instructions. Shaft A goes into Slot B, but from what I could discern females were in possession of a couple of unclearly marked slots which could have been Slot B, and anyone who has ever tried to put on a wetsuit can tell you that stuff that is a tight fit doesn't just insert smoothly. No child of the porn generation will ever be shocked the way my generation was to find cum draining back out of them. Yes, what goes up must come down, but that was never clearly explained in any sex ed class I attended.

Anyhoo we got to the carpark and found a quiet spot and turned the internal lights off so we were not spot-lit by that little light that never seems bright enough when you are searching for your keys, but seems like a floodlight when your cock is exposed. It was summer time, so removing our clothes was rather pleasant on many fronts. I had no idea what I was doing and I didn't really enjoy it that much, but I had committed to seeing this through, and I did. Terrie showed me the ins and the outs of the ins and the outs of gay sex. I'm sure it was just as awkward for him as it was for me, but nothing that scarred either of us for life. I have had plenty of sexual escapades since then, and so has Terrie so it certainly didn't put either of us off.

Car sex is tricky at the best of times, but gay car sex when you are a 6 ft 4 virgin being deflowered by a man with very little more experience than a virgin is awkward ramped up to 11. Terrie was sweet, and I have no regrets, but definitely falls under the category of erotic comedy. All in all, my cherry popping was something to be endured, not enjoyed. The enjoyment came later when I got to proudly relay my newfound non-virgin status to my friends. Most of them were still virgins, and for a time I was like a god among my friends, a worldly hero who had been places they had never been and could regale them with tales of things they hoped to one day experience for themselves. I would go for drives with my friends

telling them the story with them cheering me on, until I got to the part where they were sitting right there exactly where it happened and I hadn't cleaned the seat. People are pretty much always grossed out and disgusted to find they are sitting right where you spermed things up, and they get a bit angry when they realise there might be wang juice particles from sex they didn't have clinging to their new trousers. It was a great time in our lives and new and exciting experiences just kept coming. I started to sleep around, I started to dabble in drugs. We would hit up festivals, get stoned, drink ourselves shitfaced. I had never thought about mixing sex and drugs, but the day I discovered drugs heightened everything, especially sex, and was in hindsight the start of a downward spiral for me. One of my university friends introduced me to ecstasy. It's not called the love drug for nothing. I was euphoric, I loved everyone and everything, life vibrated on a whole new level for me, and everything I touched felt imbued with meaning and joy. I would take MDMA at festivals and concerts and life felt good and free and happy. While I restricted it to festivals and concerts it felt like I was in control.

Musings

The Ass Cyst

I feel like all the weird, unusual illnesses happen to me, just to shake my belief that I am a classy, elegant, got-his-shit-together kind of guy. I feel like the universe likes to humiliate me every now and again just so I don't get cocky. I know I talk about wanting to experience new things but maybe that was too vague for the universe. Cocktails on the edge of a volcano, I'm there. Swimming with dolphins in Hawaii, sign me up. A cyst in my arse crack, nah I'm happy to skip that. But no, the universe has other ideas. I have never been invited to cocktails at a volcano or swam with the dolphins in Hawaii, but I have had a cyst in my crack, not once, but twice. Yes, you read that correctly, twice I have developed a cyst in my beautiful booty. Apparently, it can be caused by excessive sweating. Hairy people are more prone to them because the bacteria enters the body through a hair follicle. Yes, gentle reader, my hairy sweaty butthole is the prime breeding ground for bacteria that causes the most foul-smelling painful infection known to man.

It's called a pilonidal cyst. If, like me, you are always looking to drop a few pounds (life is not kind to tubby gay men. Honestly, gay men are judgy bitches) Google pilonidal cyst, you won't be able to face breakfast, lunch or dinner for a good couple of days after looking at the pictures. If you need to lose 5+ pounds, YouTube has videos of pilonidal cysts exploding. It will change your life and you will be bikini-ready in no time.

Apparently pilonidal cysts are actually very common in hairy old people. If you are over 30, hirsute, and tend to sweat like a pig with minimal exertion, a pilonidal cyst may be in your future. I had never heard of them before I contracted one, and I hope to never see anyone in the hospital experiencing one because they are beyond painful.

Life can be cruel. Not only could I not have sex, I was in serious pain. Once they surgically drain the cyst, you are left with a large open wound that takes weeks to heal and needs to be packed daily. Look, I'm all for daily butthole packing, but it seems quite cruel that I should have someone tinkering around down there every day without an orgasm in sight for me. They stuff that hole like a middle-American mom stuffing the Thanksgiving turkey (the wound hole not the arsehole). So not only is the sex hole seeing no action, the smell of the puss-weeping wound makes you react with revulsion to your very own arse. It is a very depressing time in a young man's life.

So, a quick refresh, August 2017 the upper ass starts to hurt. A small lump starts to form, we're talking coin size at this stage, like a twenty-cent piece. So, I wait a day, it enlarges to about a golf ball size and the pain starts to become unbearable. I see my local G.P, who gives me antibiotics and tells me to rest.

The next day I was admitted to emergency. Alarmingly I was immediately admitted and given heavy duty pain meds. I have turned up at hospital with breathing difficulties and not been seen so fast. It was clearly serious shit. The ER doc told me my GP was a complete fuckwit and should have told me to present myself to emergency straight away. The only thing that eased my emotional pain at the disastrous turn of events was meeting the hot anaesthetist that was going to be sedating me for surgery the next day.

Ten minutes before I was scheduled to be taken in for the surgery, my ass cyst exploded! I went to the bathroom to assess the damage. I pulled back the nappy that I was wearing (yes, nappy) to reveal a gaping hole near my beloved hole. Brown sludge that stunk like dead fish, that had been chewed up by a dog, then thrown back up, and then had sat in the sun for a good 12 hours was gushing out of me. In the confined space of the bathroom the fumes overcame me and I fainted like an Elizabethan woman whose corset was too tight. Fainting really is counterproductive in terms of survival. Why the fuck would my body do something that would leave me lying there in my own foul-smelling bacteria-riddled filth? Surely it would make more sense for me to fart and expel as much of the puss as possible with some solid anal sphincter expanding and contracting, but no I fainted and lolled about in it. The recovery took about three weeks. The Endone was amazing and I basically just watched Netflix and ate; honestly other than the no sex and daily arse packing I couldn't fault it. So, two months passed with no problems. I had a bum scar, not an awesome Harry Potter zigzag like I requested, but a scar that made me look like a dashing battle-scarred soldier. A soldier who went into battle bum first but a soldier all the same. I was now free to resume my sexual adventures, with the added bonus of an exotic and mysterious scar as an icebreaker and conversation starter.

That should have been the end of it, but it wasn't. I like to call what happened next "The Cyst Strikes Back". The first cyst was bad, the second one was like a competitive child determined to outdo their older sibling in every way. It was a 'leave no doubt who's the best' kind of cyst. The cyst of the fucking century was growing on my arse. This cyst was like the motherfucking mothership in Independence Day, it just wouldn't give up until it destroyed everything that I held dear. I took an Uber to the hospital where they drained it again. I was put on the waiting list for surgery to completely remove the pilonidal sinus. I was obviously outrageously vulnerable to cysts and it simply wasn't sustainable for me to run off to the hospital every 3 months to have the monster in my arse temporarily defeated. My arse was declared a medical emergency, and 2 months later I had my pilonidal sinus removed. Luckily for me the surgery went well and I have been footloose and cyst-free ever since.

Normal

What is the norm anymore anyway? The census tries to answer that question every 4 years but it's not really answering it in any meaningful way. It may tell us what average is but what's the point of knowing averages? So, we can know how far from Jo average we are?

Unless you are a billionaire, an Olympian or have a record-breaking penis, comparing yourself to Jo Average doesn't usually end with feeling better about yourself. But social norms are sneaky, we believe the ones we are brought up with, and believe them from an unconscious place that rarely gets

questioned. Do we believe them from a place of intelligent examination of the alternatives resulting in a well thought out conclusion? Of course not. Do we enjoy following them and attempting to meet the social demands of adhering to them? I know I don't. Or do we just do it because we feel we have to? Everybody in the house let me hear you say "hell yeah". Feeling philosophical but not entirely imaginative because it has been a long day, Ben and I retreat to the verandah with some wine and cigarettes to ponder life's big questions. I know that not all philosophers work inebriated with a constant cloud of smoke surrounding them but this is a musing about norms and stereotypes. A wild haired eccentric with a wine in one hand and a cigarette in the other is a far more evocative description of a philosopher and aspirational goal than 'non-descript university professor whose name you have forgotten 30 seconds later who jogs and eats vegetables'. I prefer the drama, romanticism and pathos of drunken philosophising to the unremarkable reality of life as a philosopher in the 21st century, so choose to go old school when asking the big questions.

Ben and I are both in our 30s, with no visible future prospects for a partner and the whole white picket fence life. We are both stuck on page 1 of the checklist of life while our peers seem to be on page 10. Partner? Nope. Well-paying job? Nope. Jobs we are happy in? Nope. No major debts other than a mortgage? Not a chance. A plan for the future? Sort of. I'm pretty pleased with myself that I remembered to open all of the wine bottles in the beginning so there will be no tears later in the evening when I am drunk and unable to work the bottle opener. So now that the background is out of the way and you can see that I am in fact a bit of a forward planner we shall move onto the bits I remember about the philosophy I developed one lazy balmy evening in vino veritas.

Life is a series of stages and as we grow older and progress through the stages, we are always young. Each stage you pass through is one of many, many being 3 in my theory. For anyone Page who wants to argue with me, 3 can be many. 3 in your marital bed, is that too many? 3 strangers watching you poop, is that too many? For the more sexually adventurous or exhibitionistic who answer no to the above, 3 Ks missing from your bank balance, is that too many? So now we have addressed the concerns of the inevitable annoying nitpickers we are ready to move on.

Stage 1: From birth to 30. Building the foundations.

The years you are expected to enjoy yourself, setup future plans, live with no real worries, travel slightly frivolously while figuring out who you are and what you want to do with your life. The latter years of this stage are when people start to ask about your plans for the future life. The latter years of this stage are when people start to ask about your plans for the future year plans etc. The closer you get to 30 the more serious people become in their questioning and the more alarmed they become about your lack of plans. The plan needs to be a husband/wife, kids, stable job and the plan needs to be a manicured PowerPoint presentation that could be quickly adapted into a pithy TED talk that would go viral under the hashtag #lifegoals, #motivation, #GYST or some other tag usually found on an Instagram plug for weight loss teas that make you shit out half your bodyweight (shout out to Taylor here, you know who you are). If your plan is not the sort of thing you would find hijacked by an influencer to sell teeth whitening strips, people will worry about your future and lecture you about immaturity or something; I phase out when they start so it might be some other word beginning with I, but suffice to say it's judgy and boring.

Stage 2: 30-60 years. Building on the foundations.

Sometimes people get to this stage and a beautiful building emerges, sometimes this is when they discover the foundation is shit and the builder has ripped them off and the building will be condemned.

Stage 2 is where you are blossoming, extending your family, business or work. It's about savings, so much about savings, saving for your children, saving for your retirement, it's all about squirrelling away the moolah. Never mind the fact the retirement age is constantly being raised, inflation is through the roof, market crashes are coming and our corrupt government's only interest is in serving itself rather than its people. I'm nothing if not an optimist obviously. This is where we see a lot of marriages fall apart, and people questioning their lives and how the hell it turned out the way it has.

Stage 3: 60+.

This is the retirement phase, where all things going to plan you get to pull back from the rat race and enjoy the fruits of your labour. Hopefully you are happy and healthy, and wealthy and wise and now able to enjoy the time you have left surrounded by the people you love.

Few people successfully progress through these stages happy, healthy, with beautiful families, to tick off the goals they had set for themselves in their youth. Life is a combination of Luck, Chance, Planning, Enthusiasm and Hard Work. Hard Work is not enough without Luck, and Luck is not enough without Hard Work.

Some of us are wanderers at heart. Plans and progressing through a checklist feel stifling, roots feel confining, predictability feels boring, expectations feel suffocating. Conservatives and traditionalists feel incredibly threatened by people who don't want the things that they want. They shun free spirits, label them as directionless and depressed. To the herd, not wanting what they want is the very definition of mental illness.

Why as humans are we so quick to shut down new ideas and different ways of doing things? Despite the divorce statistics people continue to get married. They continue to chase a promise that has proven unsustainable time and time again. An outdated norm that no longer offers the social, financial and protective benefits it did in the past. I have faith in the new generation, but I also despair of them as well. But ever the optimist, I still hope. I hope that one day the only question that will be asked when you meet someone is: are you happy? And the response will always be: yes.

I'm a man of contradictions. I perhaps/definitely drink too much. I perhaps/definitely smoke too much, which given I'm an asthmatic with sleep apnoea and enlarged tonsils (can you picture me wheezing and snoring? God even my medical conditions are super glamorous) is probably pushing my luck a bit too far. But, on the flip side no-one can match me for my extreme detoxes. There is no amount of partying that I can't do penance for with a week of juice fasting. Literally shitting the toxic parts of life away. More upsetting - take a seat before you continue, I'll wait - sometimes in my darkest moments I even exercise. Luckily, I soon regain my senses but we all take the wrong path sometimes and find ourselves sweating and grunting in a terribly unattractive way in ridiculous pursuit of the body beautiful. It is the burden I must bear for my bacchanalian soul, party hard and repent with ugly indignity. To paraphrase Cyndi Lauper: "Guys just wanna have fun." And Britney: "You better work bitch." Words to live by.

I have made plenty of big mistakes, and there have been enough emotional highs and lows to exhaust a councillor with weak emotional boundaries, but I don't have any real regrets. I am what I am because of what I have done, felt and experienced. I have sincerely enjoyed many of those moments, and have

some dramatic stories to tell about the less enjoyable parts. My non-plan for the future is to continue being a needle monkey. I enjoy the job despite its crappy pay, it's nice knowing you are playing a part in people's health. I want to continue living with people so hopefully I never become one of those weird anti-social shut-in types who thinks it's normal and OK to end up on an episode of hoarders. I want to create a home in my rental property that is my sanctuary and safe place, and for it to be a sanctuary for my friends and family too. It will double as a den of iniquity and vice should the occasion call for it; Christian upbringing rears its head again. I want to travel and explore the world. I want to stay close to my friends and make new friends wherever I go. I want to break free, have you seen that Queen video? I want that. You only have one life to live and I want to enjoy mine and live it in a way that makes me happy. I want to go out with a bang, and have plenty of them along the way too, no desolate nursing homes for me.

Responsibility isn't wrong, it's just not the right choice for me. You don't need to personally experience something to feel empathy and understanding. I understand that my choices are not for everyone, and other people's choices are not wrong simply because they are not the choices I would make. You don't need to lose a child to know it would rip your soul apart, you don't need to win an Oscar to know it would feel great. You don't have to literally walk a mile in another person's shoes, metaphorically putting yourself in their shoes and acting with kindness is enough. Society is built on norms, nothing wrong with that. There is also nothing wrong with finding your own path. For those who don't fit into the boxes and feel scattered and lost, it's OK to make your own way. You just might find that the 'you' that has been hidden is a fabulous witty gay man who will one day win a Nobel Prize for literature for his glorious story that examines the problems of our times in a hilarious and relatable way.

A Near-Death Experience

While living my best life I attended Eden's 30th birthday. The event was at Mosman Hotel in a small outside room upstairs. It was a hot stormy day, the kind of weather that sets the mood, that promises drama and excitement. It's the kind of weather that lacklustre cinematographers use to tell the story when they lack the artistic ability to convey a nuanced mood. But yeah, it was promising weather for a promising night. I was ready to get wrecked and the weather had my back. I generally have a pretty solid tolerance for alcohol. I would back myself in a drinking competition against anyone but the most hardened of alcoholic miners. Tonight, I was going to test the tensile strength of my liver and I was going to have a blast doing it. I was enjoying myself catching up with my old uni crew. It had been three months since we were all together, the last time was Charles's 30th . It was the year of 30th birthdays, the year of everyone saying goodbye to their twenties and most of them stepping up to the 'I'm an adult for real and proper now'. Obviously, I didn't do any stepping up, but the people around me were starting to make those life choices. I had polished off my 3 bottles of white wine and decided to switch to vodka, as you do in the second hour of drinking. I decided to be a reformed former smoker for the night as well because it seemed like a good idea at the time. By this stage I was visibly drunk, but there is never any stopping Dionysus. Dionysus doesn't want your speed zones, Dionysus doesn't see your stop signs, Dionysus wants to have fun, and fun happens at pedal to the metal. The thing that stopped me, my metaphorical wall if you will, was a cigarette. After smoke bombing myself for hours, it was a cigarette that tipped me over the edge. The room started to spin uncontrollably. It had been a while since I had drunk that much and smoke bombed myself that hard, and the consequences of my day hit me all at once. Like Sally Pearson, my system just gave up on me, lay down and cried, but unlike an Olympic rowing team there was no-one left to row row row my boat to shore. Like introverts everywhere I

decided to do the dodgy bail, to sneak away and order an uber and hope no-one noticed. To my surprise as I exited the pub there was 4 taxis already lined up. I tried to order an uber through my phone app because it's cheaper than a taxi but I was by this stage incapable of using my phone. It's entirely possible I was trying to order my Uber on the back screen of my phone or maybe even on a shoe like a funky modern version of Get Smart. The point being it wasn't working. I decided to take a taxi because, while expensive, it was within my current capabilities and I wanted to get home. We got about 2 kms in the taxi before I started to feel violently sick. As politely as possible when incoherently intoxicated, I asked the driver to pull over so I could throw up. He pulled over, and I opened the door just in time to throw up. I threw up so violently that I briefly lost consciousness and came to, face down in a pile of vomit in the gutter. Half in and half out of the taxi, I languished there like an uncoordinated flamingo. I had hit my head on the gutter, torn my ear at some point, and was covered in a foul-smelling wash of blood, vomit and shame.

The taxi driver came to help me, but not wanting to compound the disgrace of my moment I shrieked at him not to come near me because I didn't want to befoul his lovely uniform with my fluids. Yes, from my place in the gutter I shrieked about befoulment and body fluids. I slowly eased myself into the gutter and paid the driver and told him to abandon me where I fell. He was a kind man, and tried to insist I get back in the car so I could get home, but I waved him aside, and insisted he abandon me to my shameful fate. As he drove away, the sky opened up with an almighty clap of judgment. The rain belted down with the ferocity of a vengeful god. I sat there in the gutter, bleeding from a head wound, while the rain washed away the stench of my vomit with the strength of a power-hose turned upon a piece of fine bone china. I was feeling somewhat fragile, and when the gutter filled with rain I was briefly washed a moderate distance down the gutter. The only thing moderate about my story was the distance I was washed down the gutter in the middle of a biblical storm. I was convinced that God was an angry God, he was going to smite me, and I was going to die here in the gutter. The coroner would be unable to establish cause of death - alcohol poisoning, choking on my own vomit, drowning in flood waters or being suffocated by the shitty nappy floating towards me were all likely options. I was going to die in all of the worst ways possible because my body had betrayed me, and my shame was going to announce itself with maximum subtlety. Here in this gutter lies Dionysus Roberto Theseus, he died from alcohol poisoning, with shit in his mouth, and not even a class 1 storm could wash the shame away. Obviously, it didn't end like that, I'm here and I'm writing this story, but at the time I was sure that that was going to be my legacy. Elvis Presley was the king, he died on the shitter and that became his legacy. What hope was there for me, a humble homo who had not yet had my 'jailhouse rock'. Determined not to be the pervert found dead in the gutter with a nappy in his mouth after the storm broke, I summoned up all of my strength and called Emma. I gave vague directions to the location where I had fallen from the taxi, and explained I had travelled a brief distance through the gutters and luckily, she managed to locate me before I was washed down a storm drain. She took me home. I don't think I have ever felt so pathetic or ashamed. I had planned a messy night, but I had flown too close to the sun. I had never drunk-injured myself before, let alone seriously faced death in such a degrading manner. It was time to give the alcohol a rest, time to see if I could face the world sober on a regular basis. I was going to try 30 days without alcohol, but an addiction specialist told me it takes 90 days to really get it out of your system and get back on track. I don't know what the future holds, today is day 7. By the time you read this I may be free of my demons, or I may be living out my days in a rehab facility. Only time will tell.

Where Life Starts to Begin, Again

I have considered taking antidepressants before but I have always struggled with the idea of medicating myself. I think that largely stems from being gay for some reason. Coming out as gay is a huge thing, it's about saying to the world "this is who I am, like it or not, this is me, and it's OK to be me". It's about saying who I am is OK, so it feels like a bit of a betrayal to have to acknowledge that sometimes who I am is not OK. With chronic as opposed to episodic depression, there is a chemical imbalance within your brain that can't be chased away with happy thoughts any more than you can pep talk a diabetic pancreas into producing insulin.

I have struggled with both depression and anxiety throughout my life. I have had my emotional ups and downs, been battered about by the sharp turns my rollercoaster brain chemistry has taken. When you are predisposed to shaky brain chemistry, it doesn't take much of a push for you to find yourself in an emotional place that you don't want to be. It can be hard to talk about your issues, because it can feel like talking about them opens the door to a monster that will drag you back into its suffocating grasp. There have been a couple of times when my doctors have pushed me to try antidepressants, but I resisted, probably as a self-defeating act of self-sabotage. For those who are unfamiliar with psychopharmacology, I use the words antidepressant and anti-anxiety medication interchangeably, because they are somewhat interchangeable. Some people experience an easing of their anxiety symptoms using antidepressants and others find relief from their depression on anti-anxiety meds. The boundary between the two conditions chemically is not a clear boundary, thus there are no clear rules about which drugs work for which condition.

But now I am ready, I have finally decided to try anti-anxiety meds. I am in existential crisis, my job makes me miserable, I have no money, and my friends are leaving me behind as they settle into stable responsible adult lives. Everyone is moving on and I am all alone. I feel overwhelmed by society's expectations for me and my apparent failure to meet even one of them. I don't want to leave the house, I don't want to see other people, and the job that once brought me joy now feels like a burden.

Everything feels hard. The real red flag for me is that I have stopped drinking. Not usually a red flag for mental health, but I drink when I am happy. If I see no point in a glass of wine, I am close to being overwhelmed by my darkness.

I've booked myself into see a therapist on Wednesday on a recommendation of a friend who is also on antidepressant/anxiety meds. I'm not sure why I am resisting the idea of psychiatric medication. Why do I fight against taking a medication that might make me happy, that might blunt the bad days, and make the good days more frequent? I have taken more than my fair share of illegal mindaltering substances, so it's not the mind-altering part I am frightened of. I drink alcohol frequently, another mood-altering substance, so why not prescribed medication? Why do I resist the idea of something that could consistently help me, monitored by a professional, that might make things better? It would make sense, but I don't make sense. Why do I self-destruct? Why do I do things that will hurt me? Why do I do things that will make me fail? Why do I resist the things that could make me happy?

It's like I want to both live for the moment and destroy that moment, to hold the future near, but to raise the ground it will be built on. So, I sabotage myself, and my happiness. I am Kali, creating and destroying my inner world.

So off I go to a new doctor. As soon as the doctor called my name, I knew that Dr Alice had been the right pick, welcoming but not uncomfortably enthusiastic. I went through my medical history, the history

of my anxiety and depression, the ups and downs and all the inbetweens. I answered the tough questions about self-harm and all the other goodies that chemical imbalances can bring into your life. I had always refused to take prescription medications for my ongoing depression mostly because I wanted to believe that I could manage it on my own. I wanted to believe I could handle it. I was frightened they would suppress my feelings, and that's not what I wanted. I still wanted to feel things, I just wanted to cope with the feelings I felt.

I filled out a multiple-choice questionnaire testing for stress, anxiety and depression. I scored high on all three categories, not really the sort of high scores you can brag about in a dick measuring contest but yeah, here I was at the top of the charts, but they were charts no-one wanted to top. To my surprise the depression one scored the highest. I thought my issue was predominantly anxiety, but sometimes we can't see the problem clearly from our place inside it, and that's when you need someone to break out the multiple-choice quizzes and science the fuck out of your predicament. Dr Alice gave me a script for two months' worth of Zoloft. We arranged for me to come back for a review in two weeks, sooner if I experienced any unpleasant side effects. The list of side effects is pretty damn long, and 2 days in I am already experiencing several of them. So far, I've had on and off headaches, dry mouth, teeth grinding, light sensitivity, tiredness, dry eyes, and general spaced-outness. But already I also find myself more focused and committed to doing things besides heading straight to the couch to watch Netflix. It may be the placebo effect but I'm starting to feel more levelled out and more hopeful. Like a bear awakening from hibernation, the gorgeous, dazzling, witty, debonair chap you have come to know and love, is ready to face the world again.

Zack

Zack and I were best friends at school. We met in year 8 after the finger pulling incident. Zack is an attractive ranger (ranger as in orangutan, not as in national parks ranger or council ranger handing out ridiculous parking fines) that kept his body in shape (I know spherical is a shape, but in this instance, I mean in the shape of a hot wellbuilt man shape). Zack's parents were divorced and happily so. Zack's dad had remarried a Filipino woman named Mika, who was lovely. Mika had two sons of her own, Zayne and Tan. So, Zack had two step brothers.

Zack's mum, Cate, was also lovely. Bubbly and blonde, Cate was the cool mum. The sort who didn't mind us having sleepovers and getting up to trouble. We were basically inseparable, and once we got our driver's licenses, we were at each other's houses every inseparable, and once we got our driver's licenses, we were at each other's houses every year-olds used to do.

Zack was one of the first people I ever came out to. For some reason, when I told my close school friends, rather than it bringing us closer together, it kind of just made everything so different. No one had an issue with me being gay, it wasn't homophobia, but once it was out there, stuff just changed. Once we all left school, we kind of just scattered into the wind. We all went to different unis or TAFE and started real jobs, in the real world. We all slowly fell out of contact with each other.

To my surprise, I found out through the grapevine that Zack had come out a few years later and was dating a new partner. It's funny how friendships are formed, and funny how they end. I was hurt that I had told Zack my secret, yet he had never shared his with me. We had a few random encounters, not deliberately, but there are surprisingly few good gay clubs in Sydney so we ran into each other from time to time. We would do the drunken "we must catch up sometime" but it almost never eventuated.

Zack was keener to catch up than I was, he invited me to his birthday party a couple of years in a row. I never showed up to his birthday parties, because they always clashed with other plans I had made. In truth, I didn't want to go. It felt like too much hard work to fit into Zack's new life. Zack now had a group of super intimidating and judgy friends that made me feel anxious, and I didn't want that in my life.

Zack and I both turn 30 this year. It was probably time to make an appearance at 'The Birthday' and catch up with all the old school pals and family that I had been avoiding over the years. Zack and I were Facebook friends, so we recognised each other's friends from Facebook posts. One day Zack bumped into a friend of mine, Joseph, at one of the clubs we frequented. Zack recognised Joseph from my Facebook pictures. Zack walked up to Joseph and asked if I was the guy with Joseph in his Facebook profile picture. Props to Zack for unashamedly admitting to being a Facebook stalker, we all do it, but very few of us admit to it. Zack invited Joseph to his 30th, so this time I had a buddy to go with. This eased my anxiety a bit, and I think Zack knew this.

Joseph lived in my old hood, so I decided to drive out there one Saturday morning after work to catch up before we headed into the city. It was easier to catch a train to the city from there anyway. We went shopping, hung out, and had dinner with his sister. Before hitting the clubs, I decided to pre-game. A few pre-drinks. I was one week into my new medication and didn't feel the need to drink excessively but for some reason this night I got on a bit of a roll. I had been eating less due to the medication, and didn't think this would affect my alcohol tolerance, but it did.

After the bottle of white wine I had inhaled at Joseph's we made some roadies for the train. I halfemptied a 1.25 litre bottle of Coke, and topped it off with bourbon. It didn't taste too strong, but it kicked like a mule. The train ride to Newtown took 40 minutes. A short walk later and we arrived at the birthday venue an hour and a half late. Zack had a nice sectioned off area at the club and seemed happy.

There were a lot of people to catch up with, so I dived straight into it. My anxiety hadn't taken the night off so I thought a few more drinks would help. I switched to vodka to mix things up. Maybe it was the vodka that was the problem, maybe I should have stuck to bourbon, but truthfully it was probably an issue of sheer volume. I had already had a bottle of wine and a litre of bourbon in the space of an hour, but felt fine when I walked in, so was obviously having a delayed reaction. The chain smoking and vodka was the stiff breeze that toppled me over the edge of the mountain.

I felt like I was going to throw up, so I took myself off to the bathroom for a little vom. It didn't happen that way. I did however fall over non-existent trip hazards. As I tried to cross the room I probably looked like one of those fishermen you see in documentaries about ocean fishing where the waves are 20 meters high and they are tossed from one side of the boat to the other, and the only thing that stops them from drowning is a piece of rope. I made my way to the veranda in search of a glass of water and found Joseph. I babbled at him that he was my rope and it was his duty to save me from being washed overboard and eaten by the kraken.

Joseph tried to lead me to the stairs that lead down to the bathrooms. I projectile vomited across the floor. It was like a tsunami; here my metaphors become mixed. I was at the whim of a violent ocean, but I was the ocean. I was drowning, but floating. Luckily no one but Joseph had seen me vomit, and no-one else saw me standing there crying. Luckily Joseph still had his wits about him, he shoved me into the disabled toilet, not because I am permanently disabled, but right there and then I definitely was.

I washed my face and checked that there were no remnants of vomit on my clothes. When I came out of the bathroom, Joseph had already told the staff about the vomit and they were cleaning it up. Ashamed at the looks the staff were giving me, I headed back to the party. On my way back, stumbling and clearly still intoxicated, I decided that I didn't want to be seen looking like this and I begged Joseph to take me home. We left without saying goodbye.

Not listening to your instincts is always a bad idea. I knew I was drunk, but I kept drinking. I knew it would end badly, but I did it anyway. I don't usually ignore my gut like that unless I'm bordering on a huge mental breakdown, so maybe I was on that precipice that night. I had even predicted that it wasn't going to end well earlier in the week, but had talked myself into going anyway. I told myself that seeing everyone, and revisiting my past was a good thing, but my gutknew it wasn't, and I ignored my gut.

When you look back, there are always a series of circumstances and reasons for stuff. How do we really determine the reasons we had for doing stuff? Is it all a story we tell ourselves later just to make sense of how things turn out? For a week, I had been responsible about my new medication. What triggered my meltdown? Why did I ignore my gut when it said not to go? Why did I ignore my gut when it said to slow down with the drinking? Why do we make the choices we make?

The next day I messaged Zack and apologised. He was neither worried nor bothered, but I felt as if I had let myself down, and I had let Joseph and Zack down.

Hair, Masculinity & The Gay Man

Katie and I can dive into some pretty weird conversations. It's just what happens when two fascinating, intelligent, glorious human beings have a meeting of minds. To less enlightened beings with no imagination, our conversations may at first appear shallow or comical. Smarter people, like my devoted readers here, will recognise their potential brilliance and philosophical value right away. If conversations were roads, our conversations are roads not found on Google Maps. The destination may appear unclear but you don't find your way to the end of the rainbow by typing Dee Why RSL into the satnav. Our conversations - the philosophies we nut out via messenger conversations that start out about stuff like dicks and balls but diverge into universal truths - one day are going to change the world. I see a Netflix series in our future, a bit like series 8, but better. Us sitting on inflatable unicorns extracting philosophical truths about life and the universe from discussions about penis piercings, anal douching, STD scares and other unexpected topics. Hilarious, seductive and educational to boot. Somebody start a petition and make it happen. One particular conversation began like this:

Katie: I decided I need an in-case-of-emergencies bathroom in the city because I will be here for another 6 weeks. I went to the pub a street over from the museum & explained the situation to a very sympathetic bar man. He told me they had a special bathroom that was rarely used & I could use it if I needed to. He showed me & as we were leaving the bathroom, I walked straight into one of our transsexual patients (Leah). The pub special bathroom is a trans bathroom. Leah recognised me. I think she thinks I'm transsexual now. I wanted to tell her I don't have man bits but it felt inappropriate. My life is absolute bollocks at the moment

Dionysus: Like a sex emergency?

Katie: No. I don't use public bathrooms sober. I'm in the city for 10 hours I'm not going to get caught out & have to use a filthy pube infested bathroom if I am busting. Bar man doesn't think I'm transsexual I explained I am OCD.

Dionysus: I love a good pube bathroom.

Katie: He said trans men don't care about special bathrooms & trans women wax extensively so there will be no rogue pubes.

Dionysus: Well that's a bit of a stereotype.

Katie: True but it's probably an accurate one. Trans people are by definition going to be more masculine/feminine than ordinary. If you are cutting off/adding bits you are probably not androgynous. Hair is a big part of it! I can't believe we are having a conversation about the probability of trans people having pubes.

Dionysus: This is true, but I feel it needs to be discussed.

Katie: Alex is hairless from the eyebrows down. She says hair makes her feel blokey. (Alex is a mid male-tofemale transitioning trans friend of Katie's).

Dionysus: It def makes me feel more manly, I'd def want a landing strip if I was a lady. Just so I could make plane landing sounds when a penis was headed my way.

Katie: I'm dying. That is gold! This feels like the start of a chapter. Your thoughts on hair masculinity & the gay man. And so, from a humble discussion about an OCD person's search for a pube-less toilet seat that took an unexpected detour into trends in transsexual pubic grooming, emerged the philosophy you see before you. Enjoy.

Hair and masculinity, and by extension femininity, are intertwined. Hairiness and masculinity are a bit of a stereotype, hair sets the men apart from the boys. Likewise, the hairy lesbian stereotype is a thing, feminine women are hairless and hairy women are dykes. I have always connected my hair with my masculinity. I have had everything from a shaved head, to a ponytail. I have sported a full bush, I have trimmed the crowning glory to my glorious crown jewels, and I have shaved off all of my pubes. Hair-wise, I have tried it all. As someone who has been there done that with every configuration of head and body hair, I can say without a doubt I have felt more manly with hair. Don't get me wrong, Jason Statham is no less of a man for being bald, but you can bet the house on him having hairy bollocks. There is no way a guy like him gets Brazilian waxes. With gay it can go either way. Some gay men are smooth as silk, others are like fucking bear skin rugs, but the general rule is the more fem a gay man is, the greater the probability he waxes his nuts. Not having any experience in the matter, I can only guess the same applies in reverse to lesbians. The butch-er the girl, the greater the probability she is sporting some impressive leg hair.

As for me, my chest is a hairy mammoth, but only in the right places thank God. My shoulders and back are relatively hair free. Facial hair-wise I have done the beard, the goatee, the creepy looking 70s porn star moustache you see me sporting in my cover picture, and clean shaven. At 30 I'm still blessed with a good head of hair, but as per my earlier Jason Statham example, baldness isn't necessarily emasculating, in fact it's often the opposite. A short interjection from my editor. Male pattern baldness strongly correlates with serum testosterone levels. There is pretty solid evidence that men who lose their head hair generally have higher testosterone levels than men with luscious locks. The strong, macho, bald

man trope is in fact supported by science. Anyway, rocking a bald head shows confidence and can be a very masculine statement. Also, it's easier to wipe semen off a bald head, cum tends to clump and knot your hair. I have never been bald so any speculation I make about the advantages of baldness are simply speculation. I'm probably right, so you can take it as fact, but I accept no blame or responsibility if you let someone cum on your bald head and it doesn't wipe off easily.

On the topic of body hair, I'm on more expert footing. I love my body hair, and I have to admit I do feel more manly when my chest hair is displayed by a tastefully unbuttoned shirt. That said I have been known to display my chesty wares under a tasteless mesh singlet and I rock that look too, albeit in a less manly manner. I do feel more masculine with a welltailored beard, but that's just nature. Beards are pubes, you can't get your pubes out in public, face pubes are how you show the world you are a fully grown up man with all the fully grown up parts. My beard makes me feel empowered, here I am, a man and proud of it. That may seem a bit contradictory, but as a gay man I am usually put in a feminine box - not a woman, but not really a man by the normal manly standards. I am a fem gay man, but I am still a man. I'm all for embracing both your masc and fem sides, whether you are a man or a woman, gay, bi, trans, or straight. Own every part of yourself, but for me, part of owning my maleness is having a beard.

Masc and fem are the lazy boxes we use in the gay world, but they are pretty basic and inadequate descriptors.

We have our masc, we have our fems, but we also have our bears, our twinkies, our jocks, our daddies, our leathers. Personally, because I am a rampant slut at heart, I would happily sleep with any of these groups, hairy or not. But it goes beyond that too. If I find you attractive, I find you attractive, it's that simple. Well sort of, I'm not going to want to jump you if you have a vag, we all draw the line somewhere. I don't care if you could be mistaken for a grizzly bear or if you have not a skerrick of hair below the eye lashes, I can find most things attractive, just not a vag. Hair on other men does not matter to me, but hair on me affects how masculine I feel about myself. I love everything from jocks to daddies, but I definitely like a masc kind of man. As a fem, I can state unequivocally that fems are awesome, but a fem needs to be swept away by a masc kind of guy. Two fems just don't really work. The little woman big guy trope is a thing for a reason. Nothing feels safer, or better than being wrapped in a strong man's arms.

If I had to describe my perfect man (I know I don't HAVE to but I WANT to and it's my book so I'm fucking going to and you can't stop me) he would be like this: He would definitely be tall, masculine, toned but not huge like those freaky bulls that farmers sometimes have that are so muscled they can't even walk; I'm not into bodybuilders who walk like they have just shat themselves. He would have a hairy chest, and facial hair whether it be the beard or a moustache, however he could be bald or have long hair, that bit doesn't matter. He would be tanned, and have a symmetrically pleasing face. Basically, my dream man is a stereotypical good-looking masculine man. As much as I hate it when Katie is right, and she often is because she is terrifyingly smart, she is right about the whole body hair being intrinsically and irrevocably tied to our ideas about masculinity and femininity. She's wrong when she says I take too many selfies on the toilet, but yeah, on this she's right.

I was always a bit fem, most of my childhood was spent with my mother and my sister, where we usually played the girls games my sister wanted to play. I enjoyed the pink barbie cars and dolls, but I also loved my Game Boy and toy trucks. I loved to dress up, and I have many happy memories of dressing up in my mother's stockings, dresses and heels. I don't believe the shit about mothers making their sons gay, but I

think future fem gays are more open to exploring their feminine side as children. I was lucky I had a mother that allowed me to explore this side of my self without judgment. Dad was also part of the family, but he was simply around a lot less. He worked tirelessly to support our family and allow us to have the privileged upbringing that we had, but this meant working late nights and many weekends. Ironically, my father being a particularly stereotypical masculine man, meant his work took him away from the home more, and I had less regular contact with masculinity than femininity. So, if any balance was missing in my life, it was masculine influence. He was there, just less on a day to day basis than my mother was. My mother could be strict, but you always knew she was on your side. The empathy was visible in everything she did. In a way this encouraged me to explore my masculinity as the de facto man about the house in my father's absence. Perhaps this is why I like hairy, strong, masculine dominant men. I enjoyed my little excursions into hypermasculinity, but it's an identity I like to visit briefly, not inhabit. I want to be able to embrace my gentler more feminine side, and quite frankly I'm a natural domestic goddess who would make a fine trophy husband for the right kind of man. I grew up in an era in which hyper-exaggerated masculinity was forced down our throats from birth via films and TV. We were taught that a real man was the man of the house and it was his job as a man to be the provider and protector of the family. Even goddamn Disney had every princess being rescued by a man. Thank God kids now have Frozen and Maleficent to balance out the very narrow stereotypes that infused my childhood. We had Arnold Schwarzenegger in fast paced action films and Pierce Brosnan saving the world. Drinking a beer at the pub with your mates was what men did. TV ads told us that this was the path to manhood. Despite the constant messages from society, I'm a white wine man because beer tastes like shit and gives me gas.

I'm a weird mix of masculine and feminine characteristics. But it shouldn't seem weird. We are all just a mix of characteristics, like random herbs thrown in a bag and shaken about and voila a unique seasoning for your sexual snack needs. But when you think about it, it really shouldn't seem weird. It all comes back to those deeply ingrained ideas about what a man is, what makes him different to a woman, and what acceptable ways there are to be a man or a woman. It's about putting people in boxes. I think this is why there has been an explosion in sexual and gender identities. People don't feel they fully fit in the available boxes, and don't like being limited by brief descriptions. For some people, gay and straight don't properly explain who they are, they are bi or pan. Some people are equally feminine and masculine, so they prefer the term non-binary. I think this fixation with inventing new boxes is a push back against limiting stereotypes. Instead of doing away with the existing stereotypes, for some reason we have just created more boxes instead of discarding the old ones. I don't honestly know why people feel the need to box themselves in, but then again identity is a strange thing. I identify as a gay man, it's not all I am but I suppose I'm happy enough that the box fits well enough. To me it seems more limiting to call yourself a non-binary pansexual, than it does to say I'm me and I'm different things at different times because I'm fucking human. We are all a mix of many qualities, and we all have moods, and changing interests and preferences in life, it seems silly to put labels on yourself that essentially come back to 'I'm just like everyone else. I change my mind, and feel differently depending on the day'.

Returning to the topic of hair, if I was a woman, I would totally do the landing strip thing with my muff hair. It's probably my only regret about being born a man, that I don't get to have a landing strip muff and make aeroplane noises as a dick comes flying towards my vag. He could do the rotor thing with his dick and I could be their air traffic controller directing him to a safe landing. God I'm laughing so hard I just snorted. Honestly if you don't find that image hilarious then put down my book and walk away now

because you are tragically and irreparably humour deficient. Moving on. Anything equal to the side-splitting comedic potential of a landing strip muff for male pubes is just too high maintenance. You could shape it into a Pinocchio face, but that would take a lot of hairspray and would be quickly messed up. A sword handle would be funny but given no-one wants to be fucked by a sword it wouldn't help you get laid. The sad reality is that a muff is simply more suited to satirical styling. I know muffs are pretty labour-intensive genitals to have, but in terms of pubic styling women really do have the advantage on this one. Grooming the pubes is not however just for women and bodybuilders. In gay town the pubes that most divide us are the ones on the arse.

The arse is the centrepiece of gay sexytimes. Yeah, penises matter, but the truth is it's all about the arse. I mean who doesn't like a booty? Booties are just fantastic and should be appreciated in all shapes, forms and sizes. But booties, particularly male booties, have hair. In differing amounts for sure, but the one guarantee in life is that if you are a man and have been through puberty, you have hair on your arse. Luckily for me my hair is quite blonde and light so even though I have a layer of hair over my two beautiful cheeks it doesn't look like an angry Pomeranian or one of those creepy hairless cats. Hair on the booty cheeks isn't usually a problem, the exterior of the butt doesn't get much action, so a bit or a lot of hair doesn't really make much difference. It's hairy holes that inspire strong feelings in people. A lot of gay men have pretty strong thoughts on what is acceptable in hole hair. The hole being the goal, some men insist on an unobstructed view, while others, like nature lovers, enjoy a bit of foliage. It's more of an issue when it comes to rimming. No-one wants to lick out a hairy dirty arse, aside from any aesthetic issues it's really not hygienic. Now it needs to be said, I have a hairy hole and I'm a very hygienic guy. No one is ever going to find rogue shit in between my cheeks, but not all men adhere to my scrupulous standards. Other than the rimming issue, if you are looking to just whack your dick into an inviting hole, hair isn't going to stop it happening or interfere in any way. It would take an unnaturally sensitive dick to feel a few arse hairs while ploughing a guy. If your dick is that sensitive you should probably see a doctor because that doesn't sound healthy.

So hairy cracks or smooth holes, it's a preference thing. Being the owner of a hairy crack, I'm all for loving the hair you have. I don't want to do myself an injury trying to shave my arsehole. I don't want the hassle of contorting myself every few days to prevent itchy regrowth. I will trim my butthole hairs, but I'm not tolerating an itchy arse for anyone. If a guy wants a smooth hole to rim, he can look elsewhere. I like my hole just the way it is, and rimming is not really my thing anyway.

I guess what does make it easier for gay men is these personal preferences are usually laid out prior to sex, terms and conditions are negotiated before the hookup occurs so there are rarely any unfortunate surprises. This does help ensure all parties are happy at the end of the day. No-one is going to expect me to be masc and manly, and no one is going to expect me to have a smooth arsehole because these things are discussed ahead of time. Am I masc because I have butthole hair? If you even need to ask that question you haven't been paying attention. Go back to the beginning of the chapter and concentrate this time.

Masc men are usually assumed to be big, buff, strong, rough and charismatic. Once again, we see the stereotype. The biggest, bearliest gay daddy you have ever seen, could be the femest girliest gayboy you have ever met. What you look like on the outside doesn't always reflect who you are on the inside. As any closeted gay can tell you, you need to be comfortable with vulnerability to build up the courage to

show the world who you are on the inside. It goes both ways. The twinkiest, femest looking guy could be a football watching, beer chugging, laddish masc at heart.

Looking masc and being masc usually do correlate, but there are enough instances where they don't for the expectation that they will to be ridiculous. You can be born hairy of chest but girly of heart and you can be born feeble of muscle but macho of soul. To say someone is masc in the gay or straight world really means nothing in a way, you can control some things about the way you look, but genetic predisposition comes into it too. A 6ft 2 Greek man, predisposed to building muscle with the genes for hirsutism can be a princess at heart, and a 4ft dwarf who struggles to grow a bum fluff moustache can be a chest beating Neanderthal in spirit. You can change how you dress, how you groom, how much time you spend at the gym, but you can't fight your genetic legacy. Is a masc looking man who has a masc soul a double masc? Or does the double mascness make you a fem? Is a fem looking guy with a fem spirit just a woman with a peen? It's hard to know the answer. Like I said, I think the rise in the whole gender identity this has come from this place where people are finding the traditional stereotypes don't fit, so they are creating increasingly detailed boxes to describe themselves. The final body part we will examine (well not 'we', more me) in our analysis of the role of body hair in perceptions of masculinity is armpit hair.

Armpit hair is another one of those highly gendered things, sure some celebrity females and #woke teenage girls are making a thing of their pit hair, dying it, making it the focal point of their every selfie etc etc but generally speaking most men have hairy pits, and most women choose not to. I personally have never been with a guy with hairless pits. I mean I definitely trim mine, otherwise it would poke when I'm wearing a singlet, but I don't remove it completely. Most ultrafem gays shave their armpits, most masc gays do not. Because I'm feeling academic...so, in conclusion body hair is a very gendered thing. Generally speaking, it is associated with masculinity and its removal is associated with femininity. It's not an unbreakable rule, and some people will have more or less hair to contend with due to genetics, but it's a fairly safe bet that along the spectrum of masc/fem, the more feminine gay men will be more likely to remove their body hair than more masculine gay men.

The Wooden House

We were pretty lucky when we were younger, lucky enough to have a holiday house up the coast. It was located at Smiths Lake, which was about 20 minutes outside of Forster. The suburb was small, probably only a couple of football fields that was surrounded by a lake. One way in, and one way out. Mother and father had purchased a block of land that was on a vertical slant of 45 degrees that led up the hill into the forest. Smiths Lake would have bored the crap out of any high schooler. There was the lake to swim in, and a coffee shop and that was it. My sister and I ran up and down the coffee shop, disturbing anyone unfortunate enough to be there at the time, but that was all the excitement to be found at Smiths Lake.

It was less of getaway than a project. The building process had only just begun, so my sister and I were treated like child labour. Like we were living in a third world country, mother and father put the kids to work. Whether it was building the retaining wall - a wall that consisted of packing over 200 tyres with dirt and plants - or clearing bush weeds, there was always plenty of work for healthy young children to do. Had either of us been unhealthy children, I don't think that would have excused us from the backbreaking labour of building a holiday home in the Australian bush with our bare hands. We had the holiday house from the time I was 4 until I was about 14. I'm not clear on the exact dates, but it was

definitely preschool until well into my puberty years (editor's note: unless you experienced precocious puberty, it was a lot older than 14. 14-year-old boys may feel like grown men, but outside of a few medical exceptions, boys are not "well into puberty" at 14. I suspect that if Brendon's parents owned the place until he was "well on his way to adulthood" then they haven't yet sold the place. Probably due to sell it just before his 70th birthday by my calculations). There was so many defining and happy moments at Smiths Lake. From the 3-hour car trips up and back, to the shared goal of building our perfect dream holiday house. I bitch about the physical labour aspect of it, but there is something to be said for making things with your own hands. Even I had a sense of pride when I looked at that damn retaining wall. I made that, fuck I MADE that. That wall there, holding back the earth, I made that.

The one story I do think that needs to be told, was the story about painting and some kind of sexual awakening. I was given a bucket of oil paint and told to paint the outside of the house around the kitchen area. It was a wood of some sort, let's not focus on the specifics. I was young, I was ADHD, and I was bored. So, when I stepped up upon my magical ladder to paint the thick juicy wood it was an almost sexual experience. It could have been the fact I was surrounded by nature, it could have been the chemicals wafting off the paint, it could have been simply that I am a bit messed up and ever so slightly perverted. I decided that as well as the wood, my arse needed a coat of oil, my arse deserved to glisten in the sun in all its glory.

As usual, young me didn't worry about things like safety. I didn't climb down the ladder, I just slathered my arse from top to bottom while perched atop a ladder. The oil started to seep through the fabric and soon started to penetrate the skin underneath. The more macho, DIYish among you will know that when oil paint dries, it hardens. My mum wandered outside and asked me why my bum was covered in oil paint. I had no reasonable answer then, and I have no reasonable answer now. My arse was painted because it felt like a good idea at the time. My mother, realising little to no progress was being made on the wall painting, told me to climb down and tried to help me clean up the mess. Oil paint is full-on stuff. When it dries it hardens, and it's really hard to get off. Despite the scrubbing, it took about a week for all the paint to come off. I spent several days with an arse that cracked and flaked each time I bent over, but I was young enough and stupid enough not to care. I wonder if that paint brush represented some sort of phallic symbol, and that oil paint represented something else. Was it being surrounded by literal wood, that brought on my own wood? Was I just high on paint fumes? Was it just my natural instincts coming through for the first time? Who knows? But out there on that ladder, surrounded by the Australian bush, with a bucket of oily paint in my hand, I experienced a sexual awakening.

Work

Chef Poophead

Poophead was our head chef at Café Fig Tree, and God knows why. Poophead had been there for years, and like dead wood everywhere, he believed he was a law unto himself. He never listened to anyone, especially not the people paying his wages. Some people can get away with being dickheads, but the rule is the goods/skills etc you bring to the table has to outweigh the bad/dickheadishness. That's why Gordon Ramsey is allowed to be a foul-mouthed prick, what he brings to the table outweighs the smattering of C*%#'s that flow from his mouth like water from a fountain cherub's wang. Unfortunately, like X Factor rejects have proven time and time again, the most talentless schlubs are always the most convinced of their uniqueness and giftedness. Poophead was the type of guy who thought being a prick enhanced his aura of specialness, but he lacked any redeeming features to backup his narcissism and

arrogance. Have you ever met a weed smoker who thinks their stoned ramblings make them profound? Poophead was a meth smoker, which is like a weed smoker on, well, meth. Poophead was unapproachable and unpredictable. As the managers, Christy and I were both entitled to and expected to make changes to the menu. We were expected to adjust the menu in response to the changing wants and needs of our customers, and to ensure customer satisfaction by returning any meals they were unhappy with to the kitchen and arranging replacement meals. We were also, according to our contracts, entitled to a lunch off the menu during our break. Poophead did not like to do any unnecessary work, and in his eyes any work was unnecessary, but particularly any work that did not feed his idea of what he was worthy of. Preparing meals for the café managers was one of these tasks he felt was below him. In the tradition of all great passive-aggressives he would expend great effort doing the shittiest job possible, far more effort than it would take to just do the fucking job. We suspected he was spitting in our meals, so Christy and I decided to start putting our meals through as customer orders and wiped them from the system later. Once Poophead got wind of the game we were playing, his rage at being denied the chance to spit on our food couldn't be contained. He reported us to Don, which only made him look more pathetic than he already looked. When your manager has to design elaborate charades just to get you to do your damn job, you rarely receive the sympathy you are expecting to sooth your sense of betrayal. Poophead didn't scare me, I have met plenty of bullies in my time and as far as bullies go, he was pretty impotent. Spitting is pretty gross, but quite frankly your average preschooler eventually moves on from spitting to the really savage stuff like loudly pointing out women's moustaches, so in the scheme of things his methods were pretty stunted. Yes, the kitchen is the chef's domain, but if no-one wants the food you cook, you are lording over an imaginary kingdom. Unfortunately, like even the most remedial of preschoolers Poophead slowly learned how to bemoan a dickhead. People's tyres were being slashed and deflated in the parking lot. More specifically Christy and I were finding our cars with flat tyres far too often to be an unlucky coincidence. Poophead had bought a tyre-turner from Supercheap Auto and was unscrewing the caps of the tyres so they slowly leaked air out over a couple of days until the tyre went completely flat. You would refill your tyres and it would happen again, so you thought you needed to buy all new tyres. He got caught in the act playing this malicious and potentially fatal game and didn't even have the dignity to be embarrassed at being caught, what a petty piece of shit. This was a man who would tamper with someone's car because they wanted to add or remove something from his menu. I wonder if it was the drugs or if something in his brain was just broken. Poophead had a young daughter and a partner, another confusing paradox of hetero relationships. I'm not saying everything's unicorns and rainbows in gay land, but gays don't get preggers so accidentally finding yourself tied to a fertile psychopath is less of an everyday danger. Hopefully Poophead's family one day sees him for the psychopath he is and escapes to safety. Eventually the bosses could no longer ignore Poophead's behaviour and finally fired him. Straight out of the narcissist's playbook, Poophead fought back against this affront by smashing beer bottles against the café door, damaging our cars and an assortment of other delights that are part of an abuser's repertoire.

We decided to take the matter further with an AVO at Parramatta Court. Our case took a few months to register but once it was submitted, we were assigned a hearing date. We turned up eager to see this arsehole whimper before a judge but of course it didn't happen. Like the pathetic coward he is, he didn't show up. The judge declared that if Poophead did not appear on the second requested date the case would automatically be ruled in our favour, and an apprehended violence order would be granted. Two weeks later at the second court date there was again no sign of Poophead. The judge granted the AVO.

Poophead now had 3 separate AVOs placed against him. There is something wrong with the system when a man can inflict a reign of terror upon so many people that 3 times people are prepared to go through the whole rigmarole of taking out an AVO. It's not an easy process, yet 3 times people thought it was worth the time and effort to pursue it. 3 times the court accepted that he was an abusive dickhead who needed to be legally warned not to be an abusive dickhead, yet there he was still walking the streets. I really hope Poophead is in jail by now, or dead in a gutter from an overdose. The world does not need that kind of poison out there.

Don't tell me I'm a Hetero, Apollo

The system we use to log in and out of at work is called Apollo. You also use Apollo to look up doctors' codes, addresses, patient history files and results. Apollo is beyond outdated, it's archaic, it's a system that would have seemed old in ancient Egypt, but it is the pride and joy of our medical system. Keep in mind, up until less than 12 months ago we were still using a Kalamazoo to record payments. For those of you not working in the advanced field of medicine where technology is king, a Kalamazoo is the clicker clackers for credit cards that used to be used before ATMs, EFTPOS, tap and go etc. It's a system that has been out of use since before most of you were even born, except in medicine.

Now Apollo is basically a source code screen. It's a blue screen where white text appears. If you can't picture it, go watch an 80s movie with computers, I can't be expected to do everything for you, take some responsibility for your own education people. Apollo is big brother, for the intellectuals I know are among my readers it's George Orwell's nightmare come to life, for the rest of you it's the real-life version of that shit TV show where people became famous for having no dignity and no skills and mostly no personality. Apollo tracks your bleeds, what you have looked up etc etc. This means they are tracking our every move. When you look up your own test results to save the \$80 doctors bill to confirm your antibiotic-resistant throat gonorrhoea is slowly responding to the cripplingly expensive antibiotic cocktail you are ingesting daily for the next month, they know. I like to think that whoever is in charge of monitoring that stuff celebrated with me the day I got the all clear. That somewhere in a dark little IT room, some nerd fist pumped my gonorrhoea-negative result, and celebrated the happy ending to my story of a deceptively healthy-looking dick that caused me a chronic sore throat and cost me a fortune in antibiotics. But despite the title, this isn't a story about me contracting a throat STD from a hetero guy having a trial run playing for the other team, it's about iron. So, I had been checking my own blood test results for a while, despite my inability to understand the nonSTD related stuff. Probably because it's not an STD, I didn't notice my dangerously elevated ferritin saturation levels. Luckily, I started seeing a new doctor who paid attention to such things. Long story short, I have hemochromatosis.

This is a hereditary gene that causes elevated iron levels. When you are homozygous (have two copies of the gene) it can be very dangerous. High iron in the blood can lead to liver inflammation and deterioration, damage organs and can cause other serious side effects. The treatment is venesection, doctors remove about 500mls of blood weekly until the iron levels subside to a more manageable level. If it sounds a bit medieval, it's because it is. Obviously medical science peaked in the medieval times and it's been a rocky downhill slide ever since. Makes sense if you listen to paleo types - nutrition peaked in the Palaeolithic era; medieval medicine is absolutely advanced by comparison.

For me to have hemochromatosis, at least one of my parents had to pass their second-rate gene onto me. Neither of them had elevated iron levels so it was going to take some Sherlock Holmse'ing on my part to uncover the perpetrator. This next part is quite hard for me to write, so please forgive me if it is

less than easy to follow. If both my parents had passed a copy of the gene to me, I would be homozygous, but in a shock turn of events I'm medically hetero. I am homo to my very core but genetically I am apparently hetero, obviously I demanded a retest, but the results came back the same. As to be expected, I fought the results. I am clearly a homo, but inside of me are hetero genes. My blood is the blood of unicorns, but it is mud blood, corrupted and contaminated by heterozygosity. Apollo, the Greek god of poetry and music and art, arguably the gayest of gods, was also the god of medicine. His namesake backwards computer system was now telling me that not only do I have a medical problem with a medieval solution, I'm also a hetero. It's taken some therapy to not really come to terms with my shocking hetero genetic legacy, but one day I will get there. In science there are homozygotes and heterozygotes, in sexy-times there are homosexuals and heterosexuals. Genus-wise homo means man. Homo sapiens, Homo erectus (a gay man about to get ploughed for those of you whose science is a little rusty) and Homo neanderthalensis (science for footballer). The prefix 'homo' means the same. I bet you never thought you would be learning so much important science when you picked up this book, did you? Really this is definitely a frontrunner for book of the century - you have your history, your philosophy, your science, your computers, your dashing hero, your drama, and your comedy all in one delightfully easy to read manual. I sense a Nobel Prize for literature in my future. But back to the summing up, hetero or homo we all bleed the same. We are far more alike than we are unlike, and different amounts of melanin, or sexual preferences, or political ideas are arbitrary lines we draw to create the silly mountains too many people are prepared to die on. Also, I don't care what science says, I'm no hetero.

Tarot Reading

I have received a many a deck of tarot cards from my good friend Joseph, but I only really ever connected with, or I guess you could say appreciated, one of those decks. It turns out I can be an ungrateful shit, no surprise to those of you who have read my other chapters. Just kidding. I read somewhere that a little self-depreciation can be endearing, so I figured I would throw some fake self-hate out there and wallow in your adoration. Your humble hero is indeed a man of the people. Flawed in a relatable way, but still sufficiently awesome to serve as an aspirational guide for lost and weary readers looking for a guiding light on their journey to fantabulousness. The deck in question was a deck of angel tarot cards. The glittery, sparkly, shiny fairies/angels spoke to me in a way that boring ordinary tarot cards never did. I don't know why. Actually, that's a lie, I do know why, they were glittery, sparkly, shiny fairies just like me. People talk about the need for representation in the media, black people needing to see black faces on TV, disabled people needing to see disabled people in movies etc. Fabulous fairies need to see fabulous fairies in their tarot cards. It's a thing. Science has my back on this one.

Those of you with undiagnosed ADHD will understand this. There have been times where I have fixated on the cards for an afternoon, but more often than not I have failed to get beyond the first shuffle. It's usually when my life is spiralling out of control and I am looking for something to distract me from taking any real or useful action that I dig out the dick - sorry, deck. I use penises to distract me from the troublesome parts of life I would prefer to avoid too, but that's not what this chapter is about. I find the vague and insubstantial guidance the cards give me quite soothing. When you need reassurance that you are right, the angel cards are there. When you need confirmation that you have suffered an injustice, the angel cards are there.

The incident that prompted me to seek out the fairy angels, was more accurately a series of incidents. I never paid attention in science class but I vaguely remember something about motion begetting motion? Bad shit is like that, it sort of builds its own momentum, gaining strength from the extra shit it vortexes into its force field. Basically, shit spirals and draws more shit towards you with increasing intensity and frequency.

In the space of a week I had a massive fight with my friend and roommate Emma (that more than 2 months later we still haven't recovered from), my request for a pay rise was not only refused but I received an email calling me arrogant and delusional for even asking, and I had a massive fight with my manager Sharon that almost came to blows. When it comes to fisticuffs, I am a somewhat a stereotypical gay man, and my manager is a stereotypical lesbian. It was actually quite frightening in the moment, knowing she could and would beat the crap out of me. She didn't, but the genuine possibility was disturbingly close for a bit, and she did make some verbal threats towards me. Just your regular on-the-job quibbles and life bumps really, if *The Real Housewives of New York* is to be believed. Which it probably is, because why would reality TV lie to me?

Thus, my week was looking rather bleak. Thinking self-destructing would fix my problems, I grabbed a beer, followed by a bottle of white, followed by a bottle of red, accompanied by a pack of cigarettes and a Grindr boy toy that brought drugs. The plan was to get myself in a state where I would be incapable of work the next day if I had the misfortune of waking up at all. My life was in the shithole, so I broke out the shovel and started digging my way to China. If I was Thanos from *The Avengers* (when he clicks his fingers, he can wipe out half the population) I would have clicked my fingers 200 times just to make sure I did the job properly and no sneaky bastard evaded my destructive wrath.

I called in sick for the next two days. I got smashed, I took myself out to brunch #TreatYoSelf I went to a movie #TreatYoSelf I went shopping #TreatYoSelf I did all of the things I could think of to make myself feel better but none of it helped. In desperation I turned to the angels. I opened a beer and dug out the tarot cards. Now just to clarify, just because they represent the angels doesn't mean the answers are always happy and good. You can get a bad reading from these bitches, and they will smite you down like Voldemort's wand. Voldemort in the OG Harry Potter movies, not the porn versions. Voldemort from the porn versions could smite me with his wand any day and you can bet your arse I would be smiling about it. I grabbed the deck and held it for a moment, trying to send my broken vibes throughout the cards, hoping the angels could understand my scrambled thoughts and tell me why what was happening to me was happening and what I could do about it. I am from the 'if all else fails then read the instructions' school of thought. So, there is no real method to my madness when selecting the cards. A quick shuffle, see what happens and go from there. This time two cards fell out, one very viciously, the second a little later and I went for a third but it didn't want to show itself so I decided to put the deck down and pull the first card at the top as my third. I generally like a threesome when it comes to these things, it just works better.

The first card that was pulled was the five of earth. The five of earth represents fears surrounding money, the wisdom to accept help from others and uncertain self-employment. The card had a temple on it, like something out of Indiana Jones. A menacing temple with a gaping hole to its entrance. I'm not sure what the artist was going for, but to me it looked like a holy place bent over exposing its arse and begging sinners to enter. What was this card trying to tell me about the last few days' events? Was it trying to tell me my boss was an incapable, moronic and a mindless child that needed to be shat out the arsehole and ejected from a holy place of goodness? Sounds pretty accurate to me. Was there

uncertainty surrounding money? I had just spent two days in #TreatYoSelf mode, was heading to America for a holiday I couldn't afford, and was stuck in a low-income job I was beginning to hate. Yep, uncertainty around money fit too. But whose help was I supposed to be trying to accept? The lesbian boss Sharon who threatened to deck me? The area manager who called me delusional? Or the flatmate who was blaming me because her actions had consequences? Emma was the one who bitched about the wrong person, tried to throw David Brent and Tammy under the bus when she got caught, and then played the victim when it cost her a promotion. Emma got caught being a bitch, blamed the people who decide on promotions, then acted baffled when it cost her.

The second card I pulled from the deck was the two of water. The two of water is about forgiveness, relationships growing close, and the positive resolution of a conflict. This card had two seductive looking mermaids swimming with what looked like a killer whale but on closer looking was actually some sort of fucked up dolphin. The ocean above, calm yet mildly rocking, indicating maybe the storm was now coming to an end. This card gave me some hope. Hope that things could work out at work and at home. Maybe Emma and I could resolve stuff. Our argument had been about KRONOS stuff. Emma told me about a bitchy conversation she had with a cunt called Helga, about a Facebook post Katie had made, which detailed a small celebration at work. I told Katie and the shit hit the fan. Emma felt that I had betrayed her. She didn't get the promotion she had applied for, but she didn't get in any real trouble either. Katie however, got a visit from HR, Virginia, Napoleon, and David Brent where she was lectured about choosing her friends more carefully. Apparently, the problem was that she was friends with me, not that Emma was gleefully slagging her off behind her back for trying to celebrate a trainee passing her assessment. KRONOS punished the person being bitched about far harder than they punished the person doing the bitching. Helga, the cunt Emma was bitching with, filed a complaint that I was bullying her, because I had exposed her for the way she treated people behind their backs. Helga was a whining miserable British bitch, who hated her husband and kids. She was one of those aging mean girls who thought she was better than everyone, and revelled in cutting other people down. She blamed her kids and husband for her lack of a life, rather than seeing that she had no friends because she was miserable. Because KRONOS can be sadistic, Helga was moved to Dee Why, so Katie had to work every day with the woman who got caught speaking shit about her. Helga and Emma still think they are the victims in all of this. Life is not reality TV; you are not the victim of a bad edit. If you don't want people to think you are a miserable gossiping bitch, don't be a miserable gossiping bitch.

This fight was big for Emma and I. Emma hid in her room and avoided me. I got drunk and sent her several apologies over messenger but she ignored them. I passed out and woke at 3am with a shudder. My sleep apnoea was clearly in cahoots with the miserable universe and was trying to kill me while my back was turned. Fuck that, I'm not going to die until I decide I'm going to die of a self-destructive method of my choice. There was a message on my phone from Emma. Passive aggressive as usual, and attempting to make it look like she had the moral high ground in this clusterfuck: "I don't like you when you're like that." Wrapped in my glorious pashmina dressing gown and feeling suitably dramatic, I sat in my room and messaged her even though she was just on the other side of the wall. "Excuuuuse me!", "Like what Emma, like what?" Followed by a few argumentative statements which just served to undo all the work I had done apologising before bed. It spiralled from there, and thus began the fallout of international news-making proportions. Like a coward who knows that they are in the wrong, she avoided me. She would either go to her mum's house or lock herself in her room refusing to talk to me. The silence became a deafening scream. She silenced me by refusing to listen to me, so I drank more

and more. I felt like I had no voice at work, no voice at home, and that I was being punished unfairly everywhere I turned.

A few days later I decided once again to try to be “the bigger person”. I messaged Emma to try and resolve our conflict. I sent a simple message asking when she would be home because I wanted to discuss what had happened and put an end to the drama. Once again, she passive aggressively ignored me. Short of employing a kidnapper to tie her to a chair and tape her eyes open, I had no way of making her acknowledge me or listen to me. She wanted to wallow and play victim, so she did. Naturally, a lot like *Les Misérables* the whole drama just sort of petered out non-dramatically. Emma just decided to message one day saying “Let’s get some America trip stuff planned.” The trip had been booked ages ago, and she only ended her sulk when it threatened to derail her trip. A bit like a half-hearted orgasm after an unenthusiastic hand job, it was an unsatisfying ending to the saga.

The third card was even more engaging and convincing than the two before. It was the card of the lovers. For those of you who are interested, I have it tattooed on my right upper leg. I also got the date gay marriage was legalised tattooed on my arm. I’m a lover who believes in equality for all and will score you on your anal target-seeking accuracy. The card, the archangel Raphael, represented intimate relationships, carefully weighing your decisions, and good health. Which was basically just a repeat of what card one and two were about, but obviously angels are not subtle and like to ram their point home with repetition. Generally not a problem for me (Target tattoo et al) but sometimes annoying when you are looking for a little more gentle understanding from your angelic guides.

Scorpios Really Are Cunts

Being a Scorpio, and knowing many of them, I can say this with confidence: Scorpios can be cunts. It’s in our bones, it’s woven into our DNA. Scorpios can be vindictive, they can be petty, and when they are hurting, they do their best to make sure others hurt just as bad as they are hurting. Scorpios are saboteurs, they are stubborn and most of all they don’t EVER think they are wrong. Scorpios are decisive and unwavering, black and white in their thinking, and forgiveness is a word in pretty low rotation in the Scorpio vocabulary. Scorpios are fabulous at building walls, but if breaking down walls was part of a school report card it would definitely say “more effort required”. As a general rule, Scorpios are pedal to the metal, full speed ahead. If we have any faults and we don’t - it would be our inability to slow down when feeling righteous.

The humbling part of this story, and the lesson I have since learned, was that I was wrong about both KRONOS and Hermes Labs. I still maintain that they are both utterly and completely fucking useless in managing staff, but then I guess if you look closely enough, what company isn’t? Each part of the hierarchy is populated by fallible humans, all fighting to hang on to their power. They say people rise to their level of incompetence. Basically, you stop being promoted once you prove yourself incompetent, so by default, a manager will be incompetent otherwise they would have been promoted further.

KRONOS worked on a system of ‘we are watching you, and if you screw up you WILL get caught’. It encouraged dobbing, and back stabbing, and because they were sadistic fuckers, they would change the rules on a whim so no matter what you did you were going to be in the wrong at some point because someone changed the rules and never told you. You were constantly watched, by other staff and by the supervisors. You were under scrutiny from the trainers, the lab, data entry, at every level from start to finish. From the first patient contact until the lab results were received by the doctor. If something went

wrong at any point, you better bet that shit rolled down hill straight back to you. The lab lost the blood, must be the collector's fault. The results took longer than the doctor would have liked, the collector's fault.

Hermes Labs were the polar opposite. I don't think they could even tell you who was working at any given time, let alone who did what. They treated it more like an Easter egg hunt, give each staff member a basket and see who could collect the most Easter eggs, no questions asked. You could buy those eggs from a supermarket, or punch a small child and steal their eggs, they didn't care. All that mattered was who had the fullest basket at the end of the day. Obviously that kind of attitude won't work under close supervision, they can't claim ignorance of unethical practices (that they encourage) if they are watching it happen. So, they whisper in your ear "Do whatever it takes" then turn a blind eye while you push over a child, then pat you on the back and sneak you a wink when you return with the candy you literally stole from a baby.

It was like the juxtaposition of all juxtapositions. Like red wine to white, or vagina to penis though I guess one of those goes in the other (editor's note: indeed, it does in hetero situations my innocent gay flower), scrap that, it's like self-raising flour and plain flour, both useful but both for very different recipes. Anyway, my editor will fix up those comparisons for me. I know none of them really make sense, but she always knows what I mean and translates it to regular people speak for me (not this time my precious poesy. Your readers deserve a small glimpse at what I have to work with. That said, this is an actual line from a published book that sold millions of copies: "Arvo laughed. 'Ha ha ha' he giggled." Stephanie Meyer. New Moon. See, bestselling authors can write any old shit so long as there is sex stuff. We have that side covered poppet. Your book will be a runaway smash hit).

So here you had two major pathology companies, running the metaphorical race not dissimilar to an election campaign. Lots of dirt flinging, empty promises, and picking a stand on an issue based on it being in opposition to your competitors stand regardless of whether it makes sense or not. For those of you not working in health or pathology, I hate to break it to you, these companies do not give a fuck about your health, just your sweet sweet moolah. What they both have in common though, is their tendency to hire incompetent managers.

On the KRONOS side you had David. A short haired, menthol smoking terrier. The sort of woman who would return a \$2.50 toilet brush after she had used it, just because she could. On the Hermes Labs side, you had Sharon. A woman who had reinvented herself mid-life, post-divorce, as a rather aggressive lesbian determined to immerse herself in all things antiheterosexual. Before her divorce she was a semi-stay-at home mother/trophy wife to a jeweller. Post-divorce, she resented her children for preventing her from living her best lesbian life.

Life under the microscope, under the unblinking eye of David had its ups and downs. In my more generous moments, I can admit that you always knew she genuinely cared about the patient experience, and genuinely cared about maintaining standards. But she took it too far, no-one can function under that level of scrutiny without developing a stress induced aneurysm. The level of scrutiny only increased with the introduction of e-collect. An electronic tracking system. This story, however, isn't about David, her mistakes, and the people she ruined along the way. It's about Sharon. I mention David only to draw attention to the sheer contrast between her and Sharon.

When you start a new job, having previously worked with your new manager, you think you know what to expect. I had worked with Sharon and had never formed any negative opinions about her work ethic or capabilities as a phlebotomist. I knew her as a single mum, working hard to support her three kids. Yes, she was late occasionally, but who isn't. Yes, she slacked off occasionally but who doesn't. The thing is, I didn't work with her regularly enough to know it wasn't just occasionally - late and lazy was her default setting. Not to resort to racist stereotypes but she was a White South African, and they do tend to be whining, entitled motherfuckers, prone to tantrums when things don't go their way. I guess we bonded because I didn't really know her at all, I simply took her at her own self-inflated estimation. After Sharon had left her husband, and decided to go dyke, I tried to take her under my wing a bit.

Sharon is pretty in the default way all skinny blonde women are. Even when they are not pretty, they are still skinny and blonde so automatically a 6. Sharon has a Jewish nose, so she's only a 6, but at the end of the day she's still a 6. She's also a chain smoker. When Sharon got the job managing pathology collection at the new hospital, I had no reason to think she wouldn't be the excellent manager she promised to be. Her attitude was on point, she radiated excitement, but it turned out she's all talk.

Sharon's attitude towards leave was refreshing. She always says yes to any leave request and sick days were not a problem. Even when staff left her for a higher paying job in the hospital, she seemed happy for them. The flip side of that is that you might turn up at work to find she has given half the staff time off but never bothered to replace them. You find yourself trying to do the job of two or even three people. Sure, it's nice to be able to take a last-minute threeweek trip to London, but it sucks to be trying to do two people's jobs for three weeks whilst someone else is living it up in London. Sharon never left her office to actually help with anything lowly like collecting blood. When she wasn't hanging out in the back-dock chain smoking, she was staring listlessly at the computer, checking her Facebook and pretending to work. She was repeatedly told by security that the grounds were non-smoking and she couldn't smoke there, but she repeatedly ignored them and continued to treat the docks like her own private cigar club. She should just put a leather recliner and a fancy ashtray in the docks and quit the charade. She's there more than her office, fucks sake girl just own your shit. Much like the nepotism that frustrated me at KRONOS, Sharon gets away with it because the area manager loves her. Sharon the lesbian, shows off their #diversity. Never underestimate how far tokenism can take a person in these #woke times.

Everyone is trying to stand out, but instead of trying to stand out for being good at what you do, they focus on lip service. Hermes Labs wants to expand into Uber Blood. Basically, it lets doctors log onto an app so they can see where the bloods are at and when they will arrive on base to be processed. No doctor gives a fuck about where the blood is at, they want the fucking results. They are not sitting there constantly refreshing the app: "OOOH it's now on the third floor", "By gosh, that FBC I ordered is now almost at the second floor. Damn it Doris this is more exciting than the new Avengers movie." Hermes Labs are even investigating the possibility of doing drone deliveries. Fucks sake, the only people who would be impressed by that are teenage boys and hypochondriacs who want their online results so they can convince themselves they have cancer or a rare autoimmune disease. Here's a novel idea, how about you build your reputation for doing the job of collecting and testing pathology samples really quickly, accurately and efficiently. No bullshit drones or apps or any other technology designed to distract from the fact you are not all that great at your core business: pathology.

To be honest, it was a bad time for Sharon to be promoted to anything. She was getting married in 6 months and her partner was going to have major heart surgery. The leap from pathology collector working in a single collector room in a doctor's office to managing 40 staff in a new hospital that didn't have strong community backing would have tested even the strongest of people. Sharon obviously thought she had what it took, and could manage her work/life balance, so why shouldn't she be given the opportunity? The first week at the hospital quickly proved that Sharon did not and would never have what it took to do the job.

Working 12 hour days 5 days a week proved too much for her. Within a week she had let the staff know she was near breakdown and it would be up to us to run the show. The first week was always going to be hard, I don't know why she thought it wouldn't. But it took her by surprise and she fell at the first hurdle. If she was a horse, you would conclude that she just wasn't a showjumper and would send her to a riding school or somewhere that better suited her strengths. Instead Hermes Labs lowered the jumps, time and time again, but she still failed to ever clear a jump. Instead, the collectors had to pick up the slack. And boy did we do it well. We soon had the hospital pathology running smoothly, and like shit managers everywhere Sharon swooped in and took all the credit. We were doing our jobs, and between us doing 90% of her job too, but she swooped in for the glory and shat all over us. She became everything she always bitched about at KRONOS. A lazy, credit hogging, managementspeak sham. Most people in the hospital didn't even know Sharon was the manager, and no-one could tell you what she actually did besides smoking on the loading dock. It's kind of funny, at the time we were not angry at her lack of management skills, we just wanted her to have our backs. Many of us had come from KRONOS and were still giddy with the independence she gave us and we were delighted when she would overpay us because she couldn't keep track of the roster. In time we started to see Sharon's management as a joke rather than anything. A really bad joke where you just had to laugh or you would cry. We started to realise she was an incompetent twit, and the shit was going to run downhill if something went wrong. It was one of those stop-you-dead-in-your-track moments, the day I realised that we were managing our manager and doing her job, because if we didn't it would all fall apart in a bad way. She was big on empty management-speak. She had obviously watched too many motivational videos. Halfway out the door for her next cigarette she would toss random ditties like "Smash it out of the park team" or "Just take your time and communicate." My personal favorite was "Hey guys, we have two off sick today, you'll manage fine, just take your time and communicate." "Communicate" became her catch-cry. Communicate what and to whom? Sharon made a point of being unavailable both in person and on the phone. Who were we meant to be communicating with? She wasn't communicating clearly with us about what our actual job entailed, just vague "You will be fine, smash it out of the park guys" and "You will work it out." Some people speak a lot, while never really saying anything at all. Sharon was one of those people. All her talk of teamwork, communicating, and building each other up, was empty bullshit.

The Doctor Complex

Alice is my GP. She is stern, smart, forward thinking, knowledgeable, while also having empathy. Now, being a local GP, Alice's job probably isn't as stressful as those doctors that do ward rounds in a newly opened hospital, but stress is no excuse for being a cunt. If you don't have what it takes to do the job with the dignity and empathy it requires, you are in the wrong job. Doctors may be smarter than the average bear, but don't forget that the law of averages still applies, 50% of doctors will graduate in the bottom half of their class.

Statistically when there is a normative distribution - and medicine is not immune to the laws of normative distribution - 30% will fall outside of the bell curve. 12.5% of any group will be shit, 12.5% of any group will be fabulous, and 70% will make up the norm. 2.5% will be superstars, and 2.5% will be breathtakingly incompetent. The expectations applied to the norm will be different in different fields, people expect a doctor to have a better understanding of the human body than a personal trainer, but they expect a personal trainer to have a better understanding of the human body than an accountant. Norms are group-specific, and no matter how you spin it, most people are average, 15% are high achievers, and 15% are incompetent. The problem with this is, incompetence in medicine is dangerous. The other problem lies in the 70%'ers who think they are top tier superstars. Like ageing silverbacks who have developed myopia and can't see they are no longer the kings of the jungle, medicine is populated with a smattering of average old white men who can't see they are sliding into the bottom 12.5%. The problem is they never thought of themselves as average, and cannot comprehend that they are sliding towards shit faster than a skier taking a tumble on the black run.

Today, within a period of two hours, two medical silverbacks engaged in some chest beating that wouldn't be out of place in an Attenborough documentary about geriatric apes. My first run in was with a doctor called Cameron Peaman, a very well-known nephrologist. That said, there are only two nephrologists practicing privately on the The Beaches, so the bar for being well known in the field is pretty low. Nonetheless, being a rockstar in his own head, he felt entitled to treat others like shit. The rules of comedy state that it's funny to punch up, but no decent person ever punches down. Dr Peaman punches down so hard he's probably developed a rotator cuff injury from excess wear and tear on the joint.

A mentally disabled patient was admitted to the hospital, he clearly needed full-time care. He was harmless, but he followed around the nurses while they were trying to do rounds, could only communicate by grunting or pointing to things, and was terrified of needles. He was also fixated on my tattoos. After an incident where he ripped the needle out of his arm midcollection, we only collected his blood when two staff were available. I would hold his arm, and he would attempt to rub the tattoos off my arm. He didn't seem to understand the pictures were permanent, but it distracted him while we took his blood. One morning he decided spit would do the trick to get rid of the infernal pictures on my arm, so he spat on my arm and doubled down with trying to wipe the tattoos away. Once the blood was collected, I doused my arm in alcohol scrub and thanked my lucky stars that he didn't have MRSA, so I was unlikely to have contracted anything fatal.

We had to continue this ridiculous charade every day, Dr Peaman insisted on daily blood work and God help anyone who didn't prioritise his medically unnecessary posturing. Sometimes it took a few attempts but Angela and I always managed to get the blood before midday at least. Sometimes we would have to return several times before we could convince him to allow us to take his blood. It was a lengthy process and one we didn't really have time for. It would probably come as a shock to a narcissist like Peaman, but other doctors were also ordering pathology and expecting results ASAP. We had had at least another 40 patients that morning.

Most of the doctors don't even bother to visit their patients, they just request follow-up bloods based off previous blood results. They don't bother to check with the patients if their symptoms have changed, the people aspect of medicine is obviously a downside for many doctors. Then the doctors doing ward rounds order more blood work, so a patient may have 5 separate requests from 5 treating doctors who never consult with each other. One day our tattoo-fixated patient refuses to allow us to take his blood,

he becomes agitated and violent. We decide to try again later. This is the day that Peaman actually bothers to do his rounds, and he starts the inevitable shit flinging when he finds the bloods have not yet been done. He knows this patient is a difficult man, and because of this has avoided having any contact with him despite being his treating doctor. I have gone above and beyond to get blood from this patient every day for a week. We have developed a rapport with this man, I have let him rub me in a non-happy-ending kind of way on a daily basis for a week. Peaman shrieks and bellows "Why haven't you done these bloods!?" while waving the referral in our faces. Calmly, like when you are dealing with a particularly embarrassing tantrum-ing 2-year-old, I explained that in order to avoid being bitten or receiving a needlestick injury, it sometimes took time to get the patient to consent to the blood test. He had already made a scene and now he was prepared to defend his tantrum no matter what. He waved the referral in my face and said "What does that say!?", pointing to the urgent sticker which I had placed there myself. Without waiting for a reply, he bellowed "It says urgent so why hasn't this been done!? What if this was your brother who needed care, would you be happy if this happened to your brother?" I replied, "Speaking of brothers, would you expect your brother to commit medical assault by sticking a needle in someone without their consent, risking being bitten and attacked by a man while trying to do his job?" He then stormed off in his anger waving the referral around like a broken flamingo, muttering about broken systems and incompetence. I needed to clear my head so Angela got a nurse to help her try to collect the patient's blood.

Angela assumed that the nurse was more than capable of helping her during the venipuncture procedure. Sadly it backfired immediately. I received a call saying the patient had again ripped the needle from his arm, and that they hadn't managed to collect enough blood for testing. I returned to the ward and let him scrub away at my tattoos so that we could collect the apparently super urgent bloods. Peaman did half-heartedly apologise later to my boss, saying he wasn't angry with us, just disappointed with the system. Peaman never apologised to me for the way he spoke to me, and the super urgent bloods that caused the tantrum? The results were all normal.

The second incident which occurred not long after the first was with a doctor in the mental health ward. The hospital procedure for entering the mental health wards is to enter the ward through the atrium. You must be buzzed in by a staff member. Once we have entered the ward, we are to wheel the trolley with all the needles, alcohol swabs and tubes to the treatment room. We are at all times to be accompanied by another Hermes staff member, always in twos, never alone. We then proceed to the nurse's station, and a nurse with a duress alarm brings each patient to the treatment room one at a time.

We received an urgent troponin test for a patient up in mental health ward 3B. We followed procedure and entered via the atrium and went straight to the treatment room. In the treatment room was a fat, hairy, slobbery mess of a doctor on a roller chair, with a young blond girl next to him taking notes. We asked him if we could use the treatment room to take urgent bloods for a patient on the ward.

You would think I had just announced I had chlamydia and in the same breath demanded he suck my dick. For years I didn't understand the phrase "palpable rage" but now I do. His fat arse was in the treatment room and that's where it was staying. We were standing in the hallway of a locked ward with a trolley full of potential weapons, we were so far outside of protocol we had entered a different time zone. We dumped the trolley in an unlocked consulting room and went to the nurse's station for help. We told them about the treatment room situation and Dr Evil Fat Hairy Face. The lovely nurses on

station were furious that the doctor would not allow us to use the treatment to do our job according to hospital policy.

The nurses told us that most doctors were arrogant pricks. After decades working in mental health and dealing with prick doctors, she held more resentment for doctors than the patients who made a duress alarm necessary. It kind of says it all.

We ended up using a consult room to do the bleed. I don't understand why we had to break protocol. There were 3 empty consulting rooms Dr Fat Hairy Face could have used, why was he using the only room not set up for him? Why was it more important for him to assert his impotent dominance than to follow the procedures in place to keep us all safe? I will have to deal with this prick for the foreseeable future.

It always seems to be the older doctors that have a problem with staff and nurses. The young doctors are more reasonable and don't feel the need to posture about.

Should you end up in hospital with mental health issues, chances are you will be "treated" by a bitter, entitled, jaded old fucker with enough psychological issues to make Freud cum in his pants. So yeah, mental health in Australia is in excellent hands.

Enemies

I'm In Love with My Car

Where to begin? I've had a love hate relationship with cars over the years. I lost my virginity in the back of a car, and I have nearly lost my life in a car. My current Ford Territory has definitely been one of the worst purchases of my life. The unethical dickwad at the Ford dealership that sold me the piece of crap damn well knew it was a barely roadworthy piece of junk. Have you ever heard of a car brace that snaps in half forcing the driver's side front wheel to literally fall completely off the car with nothing holding it in place? Well this is just one of the many delightful faults these cars have, not considered "big enough" to recall the vehicles. Yep, wheels falling off are just "small" technical issues. That's not even the best part. A year ago, I drove over a speed bump in a car park at 10km/hr and the muffler detached itself from the front converter. I was driving slower than an old lady walks with a walking frame and that proved too much for a 4WD to cope with.

But that's not where this story begins. This story begins with the Nissan Maxima I purchased off my mother at the ripe age of 19.

The Nissan Maxima was long and sleek, and a gorgeous shiny champagne colour. It was a good car. My mother was a careful driver and had looked after it well. It was in tip top shape and had never been in any accidents. Boy did that change when it became mine. That poor car never had a chance once I became its owner. But I have fond memories of that car. It was my first taste of freedom, and it was where I lost my virginity. So many good moments were had in that car.

The first accident occurred during a small getaway with the old uni group. We went to Eden's Auntie's holiday house in Woy Woy. We spent most of the time drinking or playing games with all our mattresses bundled up in the living room. The other half of the time we spent at Erina Fair. A big shopping centre where we spent our days chasing a woman who we liked to call the Dolly copycat. This old dried up shell of a woman looked like a tree that had become leather and then started to weep. It was like she had

made a skin suit out of old shoes, then poured herself into clothes whose sole purpose was to only just keep her from being arrested for public nudity. A slightly chubby 2-year-old would have felt a bit over exposed in the shorts she paraded around in. She obviously got her makeup tips from drag queens, and if 'the higher the hair the closer to heaven' thing is true then any day now we are going to read about her being canonised alongside Mother Teresa. We spent happy days trying to photobomb her into as many pictures of us as we could. In hindsight we were nasty little bitches, but in my defence most 20-year-olds are. But it was all meant to be in fun spirit of the holiday away. We left my car in the shopping car park all day while we had our fun. One day on our return to the car, I had noticed a huge dent in the driver's side, just under the headlights. Someone had hit me, and hadn't even left a message to apologise, or left their details so I could claim it on my insurance. From that moment on I knew Erina was the scum of the earth and Woy Woy was forevermore written off the map, well for me anyway.

The second battle wound to my poor Maximilian was definitely my fault. I had been shopping with Charles at Towers when we had decided to leave. On the right of me was a cement pole which was lower than the car door and was not very visible. I had totally forgotten that the pole was there, and somehow reversed in a way that left the back of the car mounted half way up the pole. Being an inexperienced driver, my instinct was to accelerate more to fix the problem. Needless to say, it didn't fix the problem. There was a huge bang followed by a scraping sound. Charles and I got out to assess the situation. It was not good. I had basically pulled the rear bumper clean off. The next question was whether to keep reversing, or to drive forward again. Either way I was screwed, but I was trying to minimise how much further damage I inflicted on Max. Charles and I discussed it at length and came to a mutual decision that driving forward was the best option. Charles was going to watch as I drove forward, to make sure things ran smoothly during operation Save Maximilian. With a thud and a sickening crunch, poor Max was released from his impalement. He was looking sadly worse for wear, his second experience with poles going places they don't usually go had not ended as well as the first. To be fair he was not the one being poled the first time, I was, and he was basically just an observer in the situation. Max looked bad and it took several rolls of masking tape to make him capable of struggling home where my parents could again shake their heads at my stupidity and fix the problem for me. The demise of Maximilian was tragic. He was in my life briefly, only three years, but I drove his arse so hard he was eventually unable to recover and was sent to the great car wreckers in the sky. Vale, Maximilian, vale. It still hurts to talk about our last day together, but I feel Max's story needs to be told. I had partied pretty hard for 4 days straight with some work colleagues from the cinemas. On the Monday I was rostered for a day shift. I didn't call in fake-sick because I figured since it was usually pretty quiet during the weekdays, I could easily get some sleep during the sessions. However, I obviously didn't get enough sleep at work and on my way home I went into a micro-sleep. I was texting some friends while I was driving, because we were going out again that night, when I went into the micro-sleep. In bumper to bumper traffic, only 2km from home, I fell asleep. Instead of hitting the break I slammed my foot down onto the accelerator. I slammed so hard into the car in front of me I set off a domino effect. It was a hardcore threesome that no one had asked for and not one anyone wanted to be involved in.

My airbag deployed and ripped all the hairs off my arms. I was hit in the face hard enough to break my nose and gave myself nasty whiplash. My phone flew from my hand and hit the windscreen, making it obvious as fuck that I had been texting and driving. The first thing I did was jump out of the car, and ran to see if the people in the car I had hit were OK. Luckily, they were OK. I was clearly at fault, and could

have been charged with negligent driving for having my phone in my hand. At that moment the shock started to sink in. I lost balance and started to walk into the middle of the road.

Luckily a bystander grabbed me and sat me down on the grass on the sidewalk. It was at this point that I saw the damage to Max. It was all too much; Max had been brutalised and it was all my fault. The car I hit had a towbar, and it had rammed so far into my car the radiator had been pushed out of the bonnet. Max was leaking big green tears of radiator fluid onto the road. His windscreen was cracked, his radiator dislodged, he was ruined beyond repair. Luckily for me the driver at the front front was on heavy heart medication and was not supposed to be driving. He politely asked us not to call the police, and suggested that we could all settle the matter with the insurance companies without bringing the police into it. We all agreed and I got out of a heavy duty fine and got to keep my license. Poor Max however had to be towed home, where he sat on our lawn for two weeks until we sold him to some wreckers for \$1000. My next car was a Mazda Tribute. I'm pretty sure the Tribute holds some kind of record for the greatest number of flat tyres on a single car. I had 7 flat tyres on that car in the space of 12 months. It became ridiculous. However, I did become pretty expert at changing tyres; if the whole pathology thing doesn't work out, I could always work in a pit crew at Bathurst. To be fair this all happened during the Café Fig Tree/Chef Poophead period, it's not like the flat tyres were a design fault of Mazdas. I also ran the Tribute into a pole at the service station, after a 3-day music festival at Byron Bay. The Tribute suffered a few more bumps and bruises along the way, mostly from me parking in stupid places. It all came to an end for my beloved Mazda when another driver decided to slam straight into me.

I had just finished up at Café Fig Tree and was going to visit my parents for dinner. I was only 1km from home and I was driving up to an intersection where the lights were green. I indicated and was changing lanes from right to left. At the intersection, there was 'turn left with care' bay. This allowed people to enter the road I was on at any time, but WITH CARE. The other driver obviously assumed I was turning into the street they were pulling out of and decided to merge without realising that I wasn't turning at all. At full take off speed they drove straight into my passenger side. The force pushed my car and a convertible in the next lane right over the median strip and into oncoming traffic. The front passenger side of my car was ripped off all the way from the wheel to halfway down the bonnet. The car was completely and utterly totalled. Lucky for me I still had full comprehensive insurance. It was due to be renewed in 3 days and my cover was going to be lowered from \$11,000 down to \$8,000. In the 'every cloud has a silver lining' kind of way, if I was going to be in an accident of 'write-off my car' proportions, this was the perfect time. I got the full \$11,000 from my insurance company. This is when everything started to go downhill. With my insurance money I purchased the Ford Territory 2006 model from a Ford Dealership for \$13,000. Not being much of a car guy, I consulted my father before I bought the car and he encouraged me to buy it. 1 day after the 1 year warranty expired, I put the car in for a service and rego check. It didn't just fail the rego check; it was deemed unroadworthy. To get it to minimum roadworthy standards it was going to cost me upwards of \$5,000.

If I could go back in time, I would drive it off a cliff. No one should have such a piece of shit car in their lives. The number of things that went wrong with that car is insane. Apparently, Ford Territorys have a fault in the model that causes the engine brace to crack every 4-5 years. What that means in non-mechanic speak is that every 4-5 years the engine just falls out of the car. Obviously just a minor fault, nothing recall-worthy about a car engine falling out every couple of years. I wonder what the fuck would have to happen to cause a recall? The best one was when I decided to do a u-turn in my street. I was backing out of my driveway, and I was turning around when I heard a large thud. The right-hand side of

my car dropped a good foot. The car stopped moving backwards, so naturally I accelerated assuming I had got lodged on a bump of some sort. Accelerating didn't help so I got out to investigate. Not sure what I planned to do, I'm not particularly mechanically minded, but I was horizontal across the road, blocking traffic in both directions, so I had to look like I was doing something. Even to my untrained eye, it was apparent that wheels shouldn't be sticking out horizontally. It turns out that the wheel brace - the part that attaches the wheel to the car - had snapped in half. I had just driven home from work also so I'm lucky it didn't happen while I was doing 60km along the road. Apparently, wheel braces snapping and engines dropping out are minor mechanical issues, not genuine dangers. I'm no physicist, but I think if either of these things happened at even 60km/h you had better hope you had paid extra for an ejector seat and parachute. Both happening at the same time would have made for an interesting ride, but somehow this still doesn't necessitate a recall. Car companies really do like to play fast and loose with people's lives. So, after much macho posturing, realising that the car was going nowhere with one horizontal wheel, at 5pm on a Friday night, I was calling tow truck companies trying to get my car towed at least far enough that it wasn't completely blocking a residential street. As you can imagine I wasn't having much luck. Now is probably the time to mention that while the street was residential, it is also the main thoroughfare to Dee Why Beach. On a summer evening, as it was at the time, I was actually causing a fairly major traffic jam. The traffic started to bank up from both sides and people started to shout profanities at me. Some tradies tried to help, but nothing could be done. I stood on the side of the road angry-crying while an old lady called me scum and told me to fuck off. I had caused such a major traffic incident that the police came to redirect traffic until a tow truck could be found. Eventually a driver decided it was taking too long and he was going to fix my burdensome issue, not for my sake mind you, but nonetheless he decided to "help".

He said: Mate, why don't you just move the car, I'll help you push it. I replied: The wheel isn't attached I can't move it. The car is being held up by the wheel that has detached.

He replied: Ah fuck off mate, as if you can't move it. (Australian men are known for their gentlemanly ways).

At this point everything had gone to shit, and everyone had lost all sense. I did what any man would do. I went to my boot and pulled out a huge soup paddle. I raised it over my head in a threatening manner and politely told him to fuck off. That is how my father found me. Red faced and crying, whilst waving a soup spoon about and threatening to paddle strangers, in the middle of a major traffic incident caused by me, that required police to redirect Friday night traffic on a major thoroughfare. My father, being the stoic man he is, and with many years' experience in my mildly melodramatic ways, managed to calm me down. Soon after the police arrived and managed to redirect traffic so the tow truck could get to me and order was restored to the streets of DeeWhy. It isn't often that my father gets to witness me in a somewhat masculine state, so my violent antics impressed him to no end. If nothing else good came from that incident, and it didn't, I still got the chance to see my father look at me with manly respect. Less than a week after having the wheel brace repaired, the fucking muffler decided to detach itself from the front converter. As I write this, the fuckface Ford loiters uselessly on the street (parallel not horizontally this time). I have emptied it of all my personal belongings, I refuse to make eye/headlight contact as I pass it. Goodbye fuckface Ford. May you rot in hell with Satan and all his faux Gucci minions, I won't miss you.

The Finger

I guess school wasn't the best experience of my life, but I don't really hold any anger towards the institution for the bullying I received there. It was a different time, when bullying wasn't really recognised as a thing like it is now and I didn't really understand what was happening or why. Ironically, growing up in the Bible Belt doesn't make childhood arseholery less likely, it makes it more insidious and the veneer of Christian values leaves its victims without the skills to deal with it. I was a naive and sheltered child who truly thought that everyone was meant to be nice to each other, so when people were not, I had no frame of reference to deal with it. I hold no anger for my childhood torment because it made me the fabulous person I am today, but it still makes me sad that you need to be broken before you can be strong. I now wonder if the children who called me Gay Lord even knew what it meant. Side note if I was a superhero, I would definitely be the Gay Lord, saving the world one fabulous wristflick and snarky quip at a time. But back then I didn't know what gay was, all I knew is that it wasn't a term of admiration or endearment. I was half a step before the internet generation, living in the Bible Belt, so it's pretty unlikely that 12-year-olds knew what gay was beyond a slur. Despite the isolation I felt growing up I am eternally grateful that I did most of my growing up before social media took over the world. I'm not sure I could have survived the abuse I copped being inescapable wherever I went. Kids these days have a whole world of information at their fingertips, but they have no way to escape the constant intrusion this creates in their lives. I had my problems, but the fear of going viral for a teenage moment of awkwardness wasn't always over my head like it is for teenagers these days.

For me, home was a safe place to retreat from the world. While I worried about my parents knowing I was gay, it was still always a safe place to go home to. When you have been bullied relentlessly it all tends to blur into an abstraction and the individual moments no longer stand out. Like a Johnny Cash song, you don't focus on the single notes, you hear the song as a story more descriptive and emotive in its completeness than a series of individual notes and chords. No one wants to live with their most painful moments constantly coming to the surface, so we do what we have to do to push them back down. Some of us develop healthy coping mechanisms. Me, I drink. To the point of oblivion sometimes, but it works for me. I think I probably had undiagnosed ADHD as a child, a diagnosis that would never be missed in this era of aggressive labelling, but as I have said it was a different time. If I was a teacher, I probably would have sedated the fuck out of a younger me just to make me bearable, so yeah, it's probably a good thing I never decided to be a teacher. That said I honestly believe that the teachers are often a lot worse than the kids. Kids are arseholes, but they are innocent in their dickishness. Adults know better, except they either don't or they just don't care about the damage they do to the kids in their care. I would never be a teacher, God it would be fuck awful spending my days trying to corral other people's crotch goblins and managing the dysfunctions they bring with them from their messed up, too busy, but still know-it-all parents. It would grind you down, but that's the job, remaining aware of the power you have to shape kids' lives when they are at their most vulnerable and malleable. Every time you let a kid down you shape their future, every time you ignore bullying you teach a child that no-one will be there for them. I know I just said I was a bit of a handful, but I was a pretty well-behaved child. I might not have been the brightest or the prettiest (unlike now when I am definitely the brightest and sparkliest butterfly in town) but I absorbed those Christian messages of respect for your elders to my core. I did my best to pay attention and was always respectful to my teachers.

In year 2 I had a teacher called Mrs Meddle, a mean spirited meddling old bitch who saw the beginnings of what I would one day become and did her Christian best to break the sinful little fag inside me. I was 8. I do believe I was born gay, but at the same time 8-year-olds are not sexual beings, and this adult tried

to break the sexuality out of a child who did not yet have any concept of sexuality. Chalk one up to the Christian values. Mrs Meddle noticed that I only had female friends and decided this was a namby pamby flag of future fagdom and it was her job to save my soul by isolating me from my friends. She justified her phobic behaviour by claiming it was a mental health issue, apparently female friends are a sign of a broken psyche. Mrs Meddle I hope you rot in hell for hiding behind your Christian values to isolate and bully a child for being born the way they were born. I didn't choose to be gay, I am not gay to upset you, I am not thumbing my nose at your traditional values, I am not unnatural or sinful (OK occasionally sinful because damn it's fun). If given the option, Mrs Meddle would have trucked me off to a conversion therapy camp to have the gay tortured out of me. Meddling Meddle, the supposedly responsible adult, strategically turned my friends against me and even made false allegations to the headmaster that I was acting inappropriately towards my friends. Somehow in her messed-up mind, isolating a child and making revolting accusations about an 8-year-old was the answer.

My parents eventually got wind of Mrs Meddle's meddling, but too late to reverse the damage. I now had no friends either male or female, and became the loner weirdo social outcast. The hurt part of me feels my friends were not real friends if they abandoned me like that, while the adult part of me knows that rejecting adult interference is a big ask for a kid. Still the little boy that's buried deep inside of me always carries that abandonment with him. We all know that shopping fixes all manner of ills, and to make me feel better my Mum allowed me to save up and buy a barbie doll. I had been begging for months to be allowed to get a barbie doll from Franklins. My Mum didn't seem to mind my love of all things girly, and was happy for me to wear my sisters' hand me downs, but she was still always nervous about concealing that side of me from others. I had to hide that barbie from my dad, not because he was a bad person, but because he was not quite ready for a son that didn't fit the picture in his head of what a son should be.

Like the teen movies promise, I was sure high school would be different. I had some friends by year 6 and I thought high school would be my new start. One friend from my primary school was going to the same school as me, we were not close friends because she was in the popular group, but we were friends. I thought Kendall and I would naturally just hang out because we both knew each other. No such luck, Kendall was immediately accepted into the popular group to be pretty with the other pretty people, and I was ignored and forgotten like the less aesthetically pleasing of us tend to be. I'm not saying I would have done differently if I was her. I still hate the whole entitlement of beautiful people who have never been excluded, but damn it, it would have been nice to have the option of being the beautiful excluder.

Puberty brings many unpleasanties, and for me a newly discovered social anxiety reared its head. Hiding behind a classroom on your first day of high school because you are scared to go to the toilet and think you might wet your pants doesn't really inspire confidence to face the world head on. Hindsight is a smug and judgmental bitch. Even now, looking back imagining myself as a glorious green fairy godmother a la Kylie Minogue as the absinthe fairy in Moulin Rouge fluttering about whispering in my younger ear "Get up! Make friends! Who cares? Say something! Do something stupid! Better to be the class clown than dreadfully alone!", my inner fairy is obviously more the sassy type than the gentle encouragement type. In hindsight most approaches do lead to friendship, but you need to have the courage to approach people. Unfortunately, when your focus is on not wetting your pants behind the classroom on your first day of school, there's not a lot of mental energy left to devote to faking confidence and making friends.

For the first seven months I struggled. Eventually a new kid arrived called Ted. Ted was from a broken family and seemed to struggle with learning. Probably another one who would now be diagnosed with a learning disorder, but that's not how things rolled back then. I had made a friend, and from there things started to improve. We joined a group of misfits. All stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. The middle is a bit TLDR but the ending for Ted and I was pretty ugly. As I have said before, I was an annoying, socially awkward kid. I said something that annoyed Ted and he reacted with violence. This completely floored me. I was a closeted gay kid living in the Bible Belt, going to bed at 7:30 and not allowed to watch Home and Away because of its adult themes.

My picture was in the dictionary under both 'sheltered' and 'naive'. That anyone would ever physically attack me just wasn't on my radar. Ted broke my finger. It swelled like the ElephantMan's hard-on. I lied to my parents about how it happened, because I didn't want my friend getting into trouble. My version of it is I probably deserved it because I was being a dickhead. My editor says that it is creepily close to the narrative of domestic violence. Believing you deserve to be hurt, that you provoked it, that you will be alone if you say "I don't deserve to be treated like this". This is what teachers like Mrs Meddle do, thank you you fucking witch for breaking an 8-year-old to the point where they protect the people who hurt them and make excuses for them even 20 years later still believing that it must be their fault when people lash out. I had to have surgery for the fractured finger, how pathetic does that sound? I had to undergo major fucking surgery, wear a finger cast for 8 weeks and do 3 months of physio. People probably thought it was an RSI injury from too much teenage masturbation, and even now it still looks like a messed-up doodle. 15 years after I was a bit of a dickhead, I still have the reminder, an arthritic finger that looks like a manky penis gone wrong. Some childhood scars are internal, some are external, and some look like ugly broken penis fingers.

Stupidity That Rules The World

The defining moment of stupidity at KRONOS was probably when I got in trouble for "touching people" at our Mona Vale rooms. By "touching people" I mean either greeting them in the morning with a mutual kiss on the cheek, a causal hug (where the hands stayed in all the appropriate places), or even horror of all horrors, touching people on the shoulder. Scandalous stuff! HR told me that placing my hand on a coworker's shoulder was unacceptable. Mick had been sexually harassing and groping young female trainees without censure, but when I, a gay man, touched a woman on their shoulder, it was sexual harassment. Brief, non-sexual contact with a gay man was apparently frightful, but lingering arse grabs by a middle-aged creep in a position of power was A-OK. Hypocrisy is apparently a synonym for KRONOS.

I had recently attended both Christmas parties for KRONOS, the official one and unofficial one. I had planned and arranged the non-official one, and invited all The Beaches staff. The non-official party had a far better turnout than the official one. My reputation as the king of parties precedes me. The official party went quite smoothly but I do remember being convinced that Abigail's brother Mick was gay. Mick was creepy, and seemed to pay to close attention to the young guys. Later I would learn I was right about the creepy part, but young girls were his thing, not young guys. It turns out Mick crept on young guys for a different reason. You know the mean girl trope? The hot popular kids in every American high school movie? Mick was a middle-aged loser still fixated on trying to relive the high school days he never had. He was desperate to be one of the popular guys, so he lurked on hot young guys hoping to build his own sad KRONOS version of the queen bees. His sister Abigail was the same.

Always trying to set up little cliques, playing mind games and trying to manipulate herself into the position of queen bee. The thing is, in time people with any sense see it for what it is. To people like Abigail and Mick, you are never a person, you are a pawn in their game, to be used and manipulated. Kathy confirmed my theory. She used to date Mick, and even continued to sleep with him once he married and had kids. Mick used his power to prey on the staff, and KRONOS rewarded him with more power. KRONOS sure knows how to pick who to promote. Aspirational stuff right there.

A lot happened at the official Christmas party. A lot of questions were going around about my sexuality so to make things easier I started showing one of my work colleagues some inappropriate pictures that some love interests had sent me to clear things up. My phone was passed around the group. I forewarned everyone that the material was definitely NSFW and if they didn't want to partake in such an activity, they could just pass the phone on to the next person in the group without burning their eyes and staining their soul. Both Kay and Mick reported me to my supervisor the next day. They said my behaviour was inappropriate and they were worried about my future with the company. They said I needed to be talked to about appropriate behaviour, like I was fucking 3 years old. These KRONOS role models; these paragons of virtue were calling me inappropriate. Mick, who is a sexual predator any way you slice it, was complaining about me showing some pictures to informed and consenting adults??? And Kay the homophobic, girl-calling hater. In hindsight, Kay and Mick had it in for me from the very beginning.

The week after that, the unofficial Beaches party was hosted by mwah. It was an epic party that went down in history as one of the best events anyone had ever attended. I spilled an espresso martini on my supervisor's white pants, and she just shrugged it off, climbed over a table of twenty people and headed to the bathroom to clean herself up. So, there we had it, two parties, inappropriate stuff being done by just about everyone, but I was being singled out. We had a sexual predator working in the training department, being enabled every step of the way, and I was being called into HR for touching people on the shoulder.

Tiffany, the supervisor who had drunkenly climbed over a table of 20 people, was being forced to talk to me about "appropriate behaviour". I knew she thought it was bullshit, but was being forced by the higher ups to "follow procedure" and "discipline me appropriately". The strange part of it was, they were commenting on my behaviour at a non-official work party, which they quite frankly had no right to do. I could understand a complaint stemming from the official work party on work time, of course. But it was my party, arranged by me. I had invited my coworkers, but it wasn't a KRONOS sanctioned event.

Tiffany knew it was a setup, that they were going after me over the 'too touchy' complaint from Mona Vale. After my meeting with Tiffany, I went back to the Mona Vale room. When I walked through the door, Brynn hugged me. I told her loudly that I was not allowed to return her hug because someone had reported me for apparently sexually harassing the female staff. I waved my hands in the air, loudly proclaiming to all "Look at my hands, can you all see my hands? I'm not touching a female co-worker, I'm not sexually harassing her, see NO TOUCHING!"

This is what my life had come to, this is what KRONOS had driven me to. Here was a gay man, terrified to return a hug from a woman because he was being accused of sexual harassment by a business that harboured and rewarded and promoted genuine sexual predators and homophobics.

The Ending Is Always Subjective

I've had a lot of jobs in my time, 14 and 9 months is probably not the most ideal time to start a job. On one hand it creates independence, and gives you the financial freedom to waste your money on whatever you want. Whether it be drugs, general consumerism or the massive phone bills from all the data you were using. On the other hand, it gets you used to the idea that your money is all your own to spend as you please. This makes it quite difficult later on when you have genuine expenses related to keeping yourself fed, clothed and sheltered. It creates genuine resentment over having to pay for things like toilet paper when you have spent 10 blissful years spending your money on drugs and concert tickets while someone else took financial responsibility for the boring stuff.

I got my first job through my friend named Zack. Zack secured a job for the both of us through a step sister. She worked at a franchise called Candy Playland. Basically, a playground for spoilt kids, whose parents could afford to pay \$15 to abandon them in a maze so they could have 5 minutes of peace. The uniform was horrific, and the job itself was also horrific. It was probably even worse than working at McDonalds or Hungry Jacks. At least you could get rid of your clients there as soon as they had received their order. I was in charge of the super slide. The slide was big, maybe about 20 metres in length, it was basically a jumping castle blown up, but a slide. My job was to tell the kids how to jump down the slide so they didn't break their neck. Sometimes I would wish a little shit would break their neck, but it's actually not that easy to do on an air-filled slide, and kids are a lot like cats, they usually land on their feet. Because it wasn't cheap to abandon your kids without being chased by DOCS, our target market was the crotch goblins of entitled neglectful parents. The parents had money and treated everyone with disrespect, and their little shit spawns followed suit.

One day I was super pissed off by this stupid fat kid that reminded me of myself. He made me angry in the way that only someone who reminds you of who you used to ashamedly be, can do. I had no compassion, just revulsion for the chubby spoiled sook. I wanted him to do better and be better than that. He stood there with a long line of kids piling up behind him, paralysed with fear. I decided, fuck it, he was pissing me off, so I pushed him down the slide. He might have been scared at first, but once he was half way down he started enjoying it. I saw it in his face. When he got to the bottom, he turned back and looked at me like I had saw it in his face. When he got to the bottom, he turned back and looked at me like I had year-old.

The little fucktard ran straight back to his overbearing mummy and whined that the slide man had pushed him down the slide against his will. Mummy dearest made a complaint to our supervisor. I was in trouble. I was angry because I got told off by a kid. I got told off on the word of a sooky fat 6-year-old. If the mother had done her job and raised a well-adjusted resilient kid, I wouldn't have had to push him. I did him a favour, I showed him that sometimes you need a little push in life and it works out for the best. You don't get to make 100 other people wait while you workshop your self-indulgent fears. Did mummy dearest really want him to turn into a little bitch? I was no parent, but I saw myself in him and didn't want him to suffer the school years I suffered until I stopped being a pussy.

The next roster came out and I must have misread it or probably just ignored it because I was feeling defeated by the entitled mother and child incident. I received a call from the manager saying that I was rostered on for a shift that day and that I was already an hour late. She told me that I had to come in now because she had no one to cover the shift. I asked her what would happen if I didn't come in, probably not the best response, but the most honest. She told me if I didn't come in right now, I

wouldn't have a job. I told her I wouldn't have a job then, because I wasn't coming in. So, my first dabble in the employment waters was over.

My next job was at Apizza, a local gourmet pizza shop in the middle of The Hills. Apizza was a wellknown place in the heart of the Bible Belt. I'm not saying all our clients were Jesus lovers, but a solid 75% of them were. Thank God they were Christian and not vegan back then, a Christian is a sanctimonious son of a bitch, but a vegan is a Christian on steroids, all rage and lecturing. I did pretty well there. I was working full-time while trying to do a degree that I hoped would potentially lead me to a better life. It didn't. What no-one told us then, and probably still fails to rate a mention, is that the vast majority of graduates never end up working in the field they trained for. The market is flooded with graduates who were sold the story that a degree was a guarantee to a good job, but the number of graduates being pumped out far exceeds the availability of good jobs. KRONOS can pick and choose from a smorgasbord of medical science graduates desperate to simply get a foot in the industry door. Smart people who are \$40,000 in the HECS hole after a 4-year degree are sticking needles in people for sometimes less money than you make as a check-out chick at ALDI. There were a few problems at Apizza but I always have and always will take any opportunity to test the waters and stir the pot. The owner, Dick, was a chauvinistic pig with a superiority complex, a talent for verbal abuse and a really short fuse.

Of my time at Apizza, the thing I remember the best and most fondly was Sarge. Sarge was not his actual name, but we called him that because he used to be in the army. Obviously, life and the army didn't work out the way he planned, because here he was managing a pizza shop, but he seemed to enjoy the work. Sarge always seemed to be having partner problems. Looking back, I think his partner had drug problems, and maybe Sarge did too. I hope he worked his problems out and got his shit together because he was a good guy. Sarge was always nice to me and made me feel comfortable. Sarge's life was definitely a shit storm, but despite this, or maybe because of this, he took the time to mentor the younger staff. He was like a teacher, but also like a protective older brother. I worked at Apizza for three years. Even though the owner was an abusive jack hole, my memories of the time are mostly good ones, thanks to Sarge.

Charles then scored me a job at the local cinema. It seemed like a no-brainer; I could be paid to watch movies all day. Who would say no to that? Dick was pissed off when I resigned and offered me a franchise to get me to stay. I could run my own store under their franchise. In hindsight it was a horribly missed opportunity. I was still naively assuming my degree would mean something, and pizza shop manager was not how I pictured my future. A few years of hard work getting it up and running, and I could have been doing well enough financially to employ other people to do the sucky weekend shifts. Because I lacked foresight, and still thought life had better plans for me, I turned down the offer and went to work at the cinema.

Working at the cinema opened a whole new world to me. I began to make new and meaningful friends, I was able to work full time hours that fit brilliantly into my uni timetable. I got to work with my friends, and was actually a fairly responsible co-worker. I climbed the ladder fast and was quickly made supervisor. This gave me a level of independence and responsibility that, for a time, brought out the best in me. Then Ella came along, and a new friendship was born. We went to the same uni, both worked hard and partied harder. We could get the job done no matter how busy or crazy it got, but we were good at leaving it behind when we clocked out. Ella had only been there a few months when she committed suicide.

Ella's death had a huge impact on a lot of the staff. Ella had become one of our tight knit group. I remember receiving a call early Sunday morning around 6am saying that Ella had been found, hanging from the balcony in The Hills. The imagery itself was enough to disturb you for life. I called a few others as I didn't want people finding out second hand when they had just arrived at work. About 10 of us went to Charles's family house and jumped into bed. We all sat around for hours, talking and having tea. None of us really understood or believed what had happened.

Work tried to get us to go to counselling during this period, but many refused. I guess we believed we were our own support system. It was hard for a lot of us to swallow at the age of 19, this was meant to be the beginning of our lives. Not the end. I guess we used alcohol as our therapist during this time, and speaking only for myself, it became a bit of a lifelong crutch. All we did was work, party or drink far too much, then rock up to work again. It seemed to be the only response, rather than, you know, actually dealing with the issue at hand at that time.

It started to affect a few of us. Work was generally pretty lenient at first, when it just kept going, they were forced to intervene. The first incident happened when we decided to have some lunchtime drinks before we started a night shift up at the ten. That's what we called the cinema. We had just opened our new gold class down the other end of the cinemas and had a few snacks and about 4 bottles of wine between the three of us. By the time we stumbled into the cinema, we could barely make it to the staff room without falling over.

That day we were meant to be dressing up in costume as Cinema Boy and Girl. I wasn't dressed as a hermaphroditic cinematic hero, because that would have been awesome as fuck, so naturally it didn't happen. My life is a series of not so small disappointments at the mind-breaking dullness and lack of imagination in corporate Australia. I was Cinema Boy, a newly created superhero that represented the cinema's image, and boy did I represent it. Not the image that corporate had envisioned, but the one they would have envisioned if they had an ounce of imagination and my natural flair for drama. You would have thought a cinema would have been the perfect outlet for my gritty take on event boy, but like I said they were a bunch of bourgeoisie bores. Heath Ledger redefined the Joker in Batman with his gritty evocative take on the character, but because I have not yet won an Oscar, the powers that be failed to see the artistic merit in an event boy that calls a kid a cunt. When news of my powerful performance of Cinema Boy reached upper management, they pulled the receipts from gold class and calculated that I had drunk enough wine to take down an elephant. Technically this was "stealing" and being "unfit for work". They even made a short film for us to watch, it was the security camera footage of us stumbling down the hallway, falling and laughing. We skipped our first two warnings and went straight to our third and final warning with a "You're being watched." Yes sweetie, I saw the same film you did, and doesn't it just scream 'a star in the making'?

I knew we had pushed our luck that day and had gotten off pretty damn lightly. But like freedom fighters and first year uni students everywhere, we wanted to tear down the existing paradigms and watch the world burn. We didn't know who to blame for Ella's death, so we waved our fists at 'the powers that be'. During this time a new area manager Chris started working at the cinema. Finally, we had someone to scapegoat and blame. Chris hadn't been there when Ella died, but logic doesn't really come into it when you are trying to process pain.

Because dear reader, as you are well aware, my life is a series of well thought out and mature decisions, one day I got drunk and sent Chris a text. It was a text saying I wanted to rape him in a compliant way. Even I know this requires some explanation. I don't mean non-consensually rape; I mean the totally

consensual dirty rough sex that is enjoyed by all but leaves you with carpet burns on your scrotum. I was perhaps not clear enough about this in my message, and I do acknowledge that it's not the sort of thing you put in writing for your manager. As soon as I hit send, I found myself hoping Chris had hundreds of numbers on his phone, and hoping he would ignore it and just assume it was a prank. Because my god is a spiteful and vengeful god, it took them less than a week to go through all the staff phone numbers and find out that it matched my mobile. I was pulled into Chris's office and politely asked to resign. Luckily it coincided with my upcoming trip to Europe, so I left quietly and am not on a sex offender register.

After I returned from Europe, I started working at Café Fig Tree, we all know how that ended so that skips us straight into the depression years of KRONOS. I have covered my time at KRONOS in many previous chapters so I will skip straight to the dramatic bits. A company that would condone issuing veiled threats towards someone who was being bullied, harassed and treated unfairly.

I got up, showered, and walked down the road to work with an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had already decided that I no longer wanted to be around this poisonous company. When I got to Dee Why, I took a piece of paper from the fax machine and wrote a simple letter that stated "I hereby tender my resignation from the 24.08.2018 and give the courtesy of 3 weeks' notice."

By 1pm that afternoon Napoleon casually strolled into the Dee Why rooms and requested my presence in one of the doctor's examination rooms. Napoleon politely directed me to sit and told me that she had received my resignation letter. Napoleon informed me they wanted me gone. In fact, Napoleon said that I didn't even have to finish up my three weeks. I could just walk out the door there and then. Halfway through the day, grab your things and leave. I think I was in shock at first for a good few minutes. Then I was like wait hang on a minute. What about my three weeks minimum courtesy leave. I'm damn not missing out on three weeks of pay to just leave. To my surprise, I was then told that I would be paid for the next three weeks and I didn't even have to show up for work. The company wanted me gone, or to directly quote Napoleon "We don't trust you to keep quiet about your letter." It all made sense, I was getting hush money to resign and get out. They wanted me gone, and now that I had resigned, they could make my complaints disappear. I walked out with a three week payoff with no work, and my 160 hours of annual leave. I was asked to return all my uniform and folders containing any sensitive information and to drop them in on my own accord. I was told I could just leave them in any room and they could be couriered back to the appropriate people. After three years of trying to make things right I was pushed out the door and told to move on and never come back.

Because I hope this book is one day considered a must-read classic, I will attempt to sum up the major themes of this chapter for my less intelligent readers. Like a Cliffs Note TLDR for those of you writing HSC papers on the themes that emerge in the hero's tale. I don't think I have ever left a job on good terms. I tend to burn bridges like a compulsive pyromaniac, only partially aware of what I am doing but urged on by the voices inside of me encouraging me to new and higher self-destructive heights. When my working life is laid out in black and white, it sounds fucking awful. The thing is, I am an idealist, at heart a revolutionary, and a hint of unfairness brings out my vengeful side. I want to live and work in a world that is fair and transparent. I hate politics, and game playing, and when I fall foul of either one, I lash out hard. As much as I so desperately wish I didn't react so impulsively when I feel morally threatened, another part of me is proud of the fact I don't just roll over to the man (obviously we are talking about work and not sex here. Sex-wise I roll over for the man every time). Perhaps in time, my writing this book will prove therapeutic. Perhaps I will be able to see the patterns of my life, to see the

narrative whole, and to learn to react differently to some things. I have burned so many bridges, that some days I feel like I am carrying third degree burns all over my body that only I can see. God, I just don't want to always feel like I'm fighting with the world, that I'm always on the back foot, that no-one sees the best in me. I want to feel safe in the world, not always on the defensive, not always having to watch my back. I'm going to end this chapter on that note. Too much introspection for my brain to handle right now. I need a drink.

The End