

Life Turned Upside Down

Chapter 1

Shocked and Ashamed

It was late in the workday. I was sat at my desk in the comfort of an air-conditioned office, in Birmingham City Centre, in early September 2009. The test automation wasn't going to automate itself. Getting to the bottom of what was causing the automated tests to unexpectedly fail often proved frustrating. Focus was required to remedy this 21st century issue.

My fixation on the screen was disturbed for a second. Out the corner of my eye I could see a usually jubilant Wilson approach. His agitated expression concerned me. I'd never seen this side of my South African colleague. I looked away from my computer screen to gather my thoughts. I directed my gaze towards Wilson and asserted my approachable manner. Unfortunately, Wilson looked in great pain. "Hi Wilson", I said, mimicking his concerned expression. Wilson looked down, "Phil is here to see you. You need to bring all your belongings.", he replied. I was confused. Phil, my remote working boss, why should he be here? He never appears without communicating his plans. Why did he send Wilson? Where downstairs is he? I continued quickly, in step with a flustered looking Wilson. My inner monologue occupied my mind. "It'll be good to see Phil. I'm sure he'll have some exciting news. Strange though, he's never done spur of the moment." Wilson and I continued our brisk walk outside, around the corner, and into the another building. "Come, David. Phil is in here", Wilson said, pointing to the entrance of a small meeting room.

The room was well lit and airy for such a small space. My attention was immediately grabbed by Phil's formal appearance on the other side of small table. "Please take a seat Dave", he said in his soft, East Midlands tone. His face showed concern, a seriousness that I had experienced once before when I was issued a warning. He made his point quickly, "Dave, the laptop that you sent back to the London office for repair. It contained explicit material. Our facilities management team have erased the material and all other media. Thankfully the explicit material was not of a nature requiring the police's attention. Did anyone else have access to your laptop other than you? Did you disclose your password to someone else?" "No, only I had access to that laptop." I replied. "I can only say that I'm disappointed in you Dave. You have two options: Refute the claims and face dismissal after a trial. Or voluntarily leave." It dawned on me at that moment the weight of the circumstance.

The rug had been pulled from beneath my 6-year, software testing career. A career that had begun with a start up and now ended at Europe's largest software testing consultancy. I had never planned for this event. The house... The mortgage... What are my family and friends going to say? I began to feel rage. My natural reaction was to blame others for my misfortune other than myself. Firstly, Facilities Management, those fcking bastards, why the fck did they choose to target me? Secondly, HR, you London fckers had me on your black list ever since the "Facebook incident". I lastly blamed Phil, the consultancy facing server of the bad news.

The rage subsided. The weight of the situation rested awkwardly on my shoulders. "What would you do Phil if you were in my position?", I asked. "Write a letter of resignation here and now. You don't want to drag this out.", Phil replied calmly. He presented me with a blank piece of paper and a pen. I asked him to dictate what I needed to write. I scribbled quickly, signing and dating the handwritten form before moving it towards Phil. I felt calmer, I stood up and shook his hand. "Phil, you're the best Manager I have had the pleasure to work

with.", I said. "Dave, would you willing to put that in writing?", asked Phil. I smiled and looked him in the eyes with a feeling of carefreeness. "No Phil.", I replied.

We exited the meeting room and made our way to the foyer where Wilson awaited. He still appeared flustered. All my personal belongings were strewn on the floor. He looked humbly at me. I returned an angry glance, treating Wilson as Phil's accomplice. I hurriedly tried to collect my items and exited the building with Phil as my escort. Phil was apologetic, but firm with the actions he presented. "Where are you heading?", he asked. I took the mobile phone out my pocket and looked at the time. My original plan was to play indoor football at Aston University, then head home to Lichfield. I hesitated, should I just head home? I chose to stick to my original plan. I indicated to Phil I was heading towards Aston University. He was heading towards the train station, which was in the same general direction.

Phil used small talk to alleviate the awkwardness. I tried to apply a smile to my grim situation, but it didn't ease my numb disposition. Phil shook my hand, wished me a hearty "all the best" before slowly disappearing towards the train station. I was left floating in my own thoughts as I continued my walk towards Aston University.

I was early, the leisure centre changing rooms were empty. I took my time getting changed, sighing as I sat down. As my football mates appeared, I tried to smile, but again I couldn't maintain it. The football match started, I was on the pitch, but I felt numb. My good friend Matthew Smith was playing along side me. When there was a break in the game I desperately reached out to him. "Smiffy", I took a deep breath, "... I lost my job today", I said. He looked at me quizzically, his focus was caught between me and the game. "What?", he quickly replied. "they found porn on my laptop...", I replied. There wasn't enough context in the information for Matthew to form an opinion. The break in play ended. Matthew's focus shifted to the game.

I couldn't remember the score. We showered, changed and began going our separate ways. I needed to share my feelings with the people I loved: family and friends. I decided to take the bus to my parent's house. My good friend Matthew "Doug" Doughty, who played on the opposing side, lived close to my folks. As he said his goodbyes to the other players, I immediately drew his attention, "wait, I'll head out with you." Slightly bemused, he waited. As we approached the nearest bus stop I built up the courage to talk about work. "Doug, I was laid off today." He paused, "what happened?", he asked. I took a deep breath and tried to explain in a succinct manner. Doug was one of the most supportive people I knew. His optimism lifted me from my depressive state.

As the bus approached our stop, Doug said, "if you need any help mate, just give me a call." I thanked him. I felt blessed that he was part of my support network. Speaking to Doug was a good rehearsal for the meeting with my parents. My story had to be succinct.

The suburb streets were dark, which in many respects should have helped focus my thoughts. Instead I felt distracted, tired and nervous. I reached my parents' house. I opened the front door laboriously and walked to the lounge. My dad's was happily surprise to see me. He said hello and asked how work had been. I sheepishly replied, "Yeah, okay". I sat down. I looked over at my father. I grit my teeth, hesitant to elaborate. "Dad...", my jaw began to quiver. I clenched my jaw shut as tears formed in the corners of my eyes. "I've been...". I paused momentarily. "laid off." I tried hard to hold back the tears. My dad was visibly taken aback. I continued, "My work laptop, they found porn on it. Nothing explicit, standard stuff." His reacted calmly. He responded in a way fatherly figures should. He offered reassurance.

Mom appeared, she was similarly surprised to see me. I relayed to her what I had said to dad. Like Dad, she was visibly shocked and offered her support with her quick-fired Irish accent. "Don't worry David, you'll live

forever on a paradise earth. You just need to follow Jehovah.", she said. Good old mom, she just wasn't herself unless she preached Jehovah Witness's propoganda. "You can stay here for as long as you like.", she said. I felt my stress burn away like fog at dawn.

I watched TV with Dad that night while mom spent time seeing to household chores (the life people of my parents' generation were accustomed to). Slowly, I felt calmer. The Friday night TV shows were an excellent distraction, which both of us enjoyed. As the night progressed, tiredness took the better of me. My mind, brimming with thoughts, slowly surrendered as my head melted into the lumpy pillow on my old bed.

The next morning, I woke up suddenly. My thoughts were much clearer. I felt good: Normal, stress free, happy. I could hear the radio in the kitchen blasting away with songs from the sixties, my parent's heyday. My mom sang above the volume of the radio track with her powerful falsetto. I smiled. I felt hungry, a sensation I hadn't felt since lunch time of the previous day. I flung the bed covers to one side and made my way down the creaky, carpeted stairs. My mother was always concerned about my health. "Now then, what would you be liking?", she said rapidly. She was happy to offer the contents of the fridge in a fried format. A smile appeared from the corners of my face as I exclaimed "I would love a toasted bacon sandwich with grilled tomatoes and HP sauce, my dwarling." "Dwarling" was a nickname I used. I found most of the humourous words I used were inspired by British comedies.

I was a picky eater, even at 30 years of age. I like the bacon sandwich prepared perfectly, the way my father prepared it: bacon, no rind, cooked-medium. Tomatoes sliced in half, stalk end removed, and cooked medium-well. I found out from my relatives that was father was nicknamed Fussy Fred because of his unusual high food standards.

The smell of burnt bacon filled the house. My mother offered a waitress-like service. She walked into the lounge with a tray of burnt bacon and baked beans sandwiches. It was plonked down on my lap. "I hope it's to your liking.", she said enthusiastically. My stare was temporarily diverted from the TV to the tray. I located the first half of the sandwich with my right hand. I continued watching TV as I took a bite. Disappointment entered my mind. "Mom, I asked for tomatoes, not baked beans", I shouted. It was no use. My mom was singing in the kitchen, she couldn't hear me. I had no intention of leaving the comfort of the sette. All I could muster was a grumble, before wolfing down the rest of the food.

My work clothes felt tainted by yesterday's events. I showered and changed into casual wears I borrowed from my father. I wanted to get back to my home in Lichfield to think over my short term future. Dad asked if I needed a lift to the train station. He was heading to his brothers for a catch-up was happy to drop me off. I asked if I could join him at my Uncle's before heading to the train station. I really enjoyed a visit to my Uncle David's.

Uncle D, aka Uncle David, aka David William Clarke, was my favourite Uncle. He was intelligent, laid-back and jocular. He was well versed in all aspects of life, but especially that of the car industry. Dave had seen the rise of Leyland and the fall of its subsequent owners, Rover. He ended his career at Land Rover aged 55; an unheard of retirement age for a blue-collar worker in Birmingham. In his lengthy career, from an apprentice to senior gear box specialist, he had worked for a company that had changed hands and names many times. Towards the end of his career he would bring prototype vehicles to my Parent's house. My fondest car experience was the MG GTB V8: A 2-seater sports car. With its low riding position, high acceleration and loud engine soundtrack, I loved it.

Dave's wife Jane answered the door when we arrived. In her jovial, feminine voice she invited us to take a seat in the lounge. Dave was sat, as he always was, on the corner sofa seat, perfectly positioned in front of the TV.

In his soft, approachable voice, he asked, "how are you Dave? How's work?". I was now well versed in answering this question, which I did succinctly. He responded with words of comfort and support. He didn't ask any follow-on questions. His attention switched to my Dad. The context of the conversation they began could only be appreciated by engineers and enthusiasts. They were to thank for my knowledge of the automotive industry.

Aunty Jane was a great host. She offered me and my Dad a wide range of drinks: Tea, coffee, cordial or the new flavoured sparkling water. Jane, in keeping up with the Jones's, was quick to point out that she was an early adopter of flavoured sparkling water. "Have you tried this?", with an example bottle to hand. "I only saw it in the shops last week. It's sugar free, so Fred, you'll be fine. It's okay for diabetics." she added. The sales pitch won me and my dad over. "Yeah, I'll try the fizzy flavoured water please Jane.", I said. "Yep, me too please Jane.", dad said enthusiastically.

Jane returned with two long glasses of ice cold, lemon flavoured, sparkling water. She perched herself next to Dave and began chatting at length about her mother and sons, Neil and Richard. Jane indicated she was coming to the end of her story, rolling her eyes and saying, "well, you know." It was a great moment for me and dad to say, "thanks for the drinks, unfortunately we need to make a move". It was difficult to remove ourselves from the comfort of the sette and stand up. We waved goodbye as we welcomed the sight of the family car, Dad's Toyota Avensis. It had luxurious leather seats, which made for a comfy drive to the train station, Marston Green.

It felt like my first day at school, leaving the comfort of my parent and entering the unknown of the near future. I purchased a ticket and made my way to the platform at the train station. With my mind undistracted, it was left to wander. This was a dangerous time. The weight of my situation became heavier. "What should I do with my life?", I thought.

The train departed, weaving its way onwards to my final destination, Lichfield City Station. The train journey was a good excuse to snooze. I knew it was a dangerous time. Ending up at the final stop, Lichfield Trent Valley, would result in a mile and a half walk home. Thankfully on this occasion that didn't happen.

I opened the door to number 26: my vacant, quiet, 2 story townhouse. I removed my shoes and placed them on the shoe rack in the hall. I hung my head and slowly walked into the cold lounge. I sat on the fat, tanned, leather recliner. I adjusted the recline, using the electric controller, to almost horizontal. I reached for my laptop and went to my first area of solace, my personal email. There I crafted an email to explain my current predicament. I added the email addresses of friends, family and colleagues to the anonymous field. I clicked SEND, sighed and I looked out to the view of my poorly maintained back garden. Thoughts of "how will this news be received...? Am I reaching out to the right people?", crossed my mind. I wanted so badly to right the wrongs. I wanted so badly to have my job back. I felt so desperate. Everything, it felt, was reliant on my incomings. Firstly, I needed to reduce my outgoings. Where do I start? The TV? The car? The house!?

It was late 2009, the housing bubble had burst in the Midlands around July of 2007. The effects of the subsequent recession was felt throughout the UK. No one had money and the ones who did weren't going to spend it. How did this affect me? I had originally bought my house for a cool £170,000 and owed over £150,000 to building society Alliance and Leicester. It was now worth less than £140,000. If I sold now, I would owe at least £10,000. Was it even possible to sell the property in the current housing market? What was the current rental market like?

The next day I composed myself and hesitantly walked to Bore Street, Lichfield's Estate Agent High Street. I began window-shopping in a formal order:

1. Tydemans
2. Jaymans
3. Bill Tandys
4. Hunters
5. Chattings

I popped in and spoke to a member of staff in each venue. By the time I got to the bottom of Bore street I was well versed in the housing market. Overwhelmingly, house rental was the recommendation.

Chattings and Tydemans Estate Agents signalled their interest. Both asked to see the property before entering into contract negotiations. I felt happier. I was desperate to complete the process quickly. Unfortunately, it was going to take time. Emailing and phoning my community was the best way I saw fit to spend my spare time. With the maturing of the internet, especially social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, it was easy to stay in touch with my loved ones and colleagues. All it took was a message, "I need your help!". I really appreciated my old colleagues forwarding me prospective job leads and helping me revise my CV. I contacted job agencies via job sites. Being desperately in need of a job I felt in a terrible bargaining position. Every time my phone rang I jumped on it, hoping to hear of a job opportunity. I so wanted every call to be "Dave, we found you the ideal job. It's in your field of expertise, a stone's throw from where you live, offering £40k+ and you start tomorrow!" Basically, my old job. I yearned to still be there at the office, working with amazing people and doing a job I loved. I had low self-esteem and lacked self-respect.

In the weeks that followed I became ever more desperate to find a job. I even made enquiries about my old job. Funnily enough, my previous employers were in no mood to offer me an olive branch. I appreciated the kind words of assistance from old colleagues. My hopes were lifted knowing I had support. Unfortunately, I had no opportunities.

I began spending more time at my parents home. The thought of being alone at this time would have been mentally challenging. One morning when I browsed social work site LinkedIn a post stood out. It was posted by an old Australian colleague, not any old colleague. Mark was the reason I was a software tester. He employed me as a graduate back in 2003. The posting read, "Looking for UK test consultants who may want to be sponsored into fulltime employment in Australia.". I initially looked at the advert dismissively. "Live and work in Australia?! That's crazy.", I thought.

In the days that followed my appetite for work grew. I found myself returning to Mark's LinkedIn advert. The idea, seemingly outrageous at first, became more exciting the more I warmed to it. I reached out again to my network of colleagues for any work opportunities in the UK. Nothing. I asked them if I should consider Mark's LinkedIn job posting. Unanimously they recommended considering it.

The next morning I set aside my stubbornness and inner fears. I crafted the following email, destination Mark.

Hello Mark,

I have now left the consultancy and am now seeking work opportunities. Do you have any further information wrt "looking for UK test consultants he knows who may want to be sponsored into fulltime employment in Australia"?

Thanks,

David Clarke

My heart raced as I clicked SEND. Throughout the day I thought of life in Australia, a life turned upside down, it brought a smile to my face.

Chattings, the estate agents, agreed to act as landlords of my Lichfield property. They quickly found tenants. A middle age couple: He worked in the Midlands, she worked in Manchester. They owned a dog. Was I happy with a dog running around my house? I pondered and warmed to that idea too having met the lady who viewed my property. She came across as a lovely person. Anything associated with her was going to be equally as lovely. It was reassuring to know that Chattings would ensure the tenants leave the property in a respectable state.

The letting agent phoned to inform the couple and their dog could move in, in the next couple of weeks. It was at that moment I began to feel relief. My largest financial outgoing, my mortgage, would soon be shared amongst two lovely people.

I excitedly returned to my emails that evening. I wondered if Mark sent a reply? It stood out amongst the retail news, at the top of my GMail Inbox.

"Dave,

What happened ? I thought you were a lifer. As you may be aware I am now working for a Test Consultancy in Australia. I am always looking to bolster my ranks of good consultants, especially with people who I know and trust. My new company is registered to take on people via the 457-visa program.

I have openings in Brisbane and Sydney at present. The company is very much in the mould of early days at Cresta. I have attached a guide to salaries, so you have an idea of what is generally on offer. Let me know if you want to take it further."

Prospects were splendid from a home rental perspective. The lovely couple wanted to move in within the next week. Unfortunately, it didn't leave me with a great deal of time to move out, given it needed to be unfurnished. I had a few ideas, eBay being only one of them. Talking to my practically minded father being another. He suggested I should have a house-wares sale. I duly created a spreadsheet of all my possessions (excluding my clothing) and emailed my close friends and family. The initial auction idea changed to a first-come, first-serve sale. How much should a person pay for an item? Whatever they thought was respectable. Items from the list took time finding owners. After much prompting, a handful of items aside, everything found a home.

Transporting items to their buyers was a tiresome task. A task assisted by a white Ford Transit rental van and my older brother Jon. An optimistic morning's work took the whole day. Just as the sun began to set the tiresome task was completed.

In many ways those weeks being out of work were a blessing in disguise. By living with my parents I got the opportunity to strengthen my bond with them. My parents were retired, but still active day-to-day. My Mom was the local taxi driver for her elderly Jehovah's Witness friends. Every day the phone rang. In most cases the first question they asked was "is ya mam there?". In many cases I had to disappoint them, she was obviously out taxi-ing another "client".

Dad was taking to retirement in a more relaxed fashion. His schedule was a mixture of DIY, cooking, fishing and rambling. The latter activity was a once-a-week joint adventure with his brother, David. Uncle David loved sourcing new Midlands walking trails on the internet. He loved the internet in general, purely based on the

obscene amount of knowledge it held. When it came to walking trails, the more obscure they were, the more excited Dave got about trying them. He even went as far as sourcing websites dedicated to unmapped walks in the Midlands. Given the time of year and the obscure country side trail we walked, we often got muddy. Rest assured we always found a pub that was strategically positioned at the trail's end.

Fishing with Dad and his mates on Wednesdays was the highlight of my week. Dad's mates: Ken, Alan and Malcolm, would make their separate ways to Barston Lakes, Solihull on the morning. We'd meet and greet in the large carpark located outside the golf club. Some took the fishing seriously, while others were more concerned about what the lunch options were. Bragging rights were given to the person who caught the single heaviest fish or the heaviest bag of fish. Late afternoon, after the last set of fishing equipment was packed away, we chatted about the day's adventures at Stonebridge Island Pub. Dad's mates were old school. Their views about life were told through stories from the past. "Do you remember that time when..." was often said. Ken, an amazing story teller, would tell the same story each week. "It was this big", measuring out 6 inches with his fingers, "between the eyes", he'd say in reference to the monster fish he'd caught. Banter, taking the piss out of each other, was much a part of the drinking culture as the drinks rounds. Pints of beer, beer snacks and good humour arrived warm and fast at our table. After an hour of socialising, when it was time to depart, all the drivers had stretched the recommended alcohol limits. I often fell asleep on the way home. Thankfully I was Dad's passenger.

Chapter 2

Time to Transition

One Wednesday morning, out with Dad and his fishing mates, I was notified of an email from Mark Pearce. I excitedly, but apprehensively read the contents. It detailed interest in bringing me to his Sydney team in Australia. He stated his willingness to sponsor my work visa application through the 457 scheme. I had mixed emotions. I felt a sense of accomplishment, trepidation and sadness. accomplishment: Finally, a job offer. Trepidation: I didn't understand what the visa application process was. Sadness: If successful, I would be leaving my family and friends.

Mark got me in touch with his HR department. The to-ing and fro-ing between them and I commenced. Sydney, Australia was 9 hours ahead of UK time. Our conversations were towards their end of day, 5pm AEST, 2am GMT. I would often try to stay up till the unearthly late hour. I failed every time. After being woken up after a brief spell of deep sleep, I was not as coherent as I had wished. Thankfully the telephone line was clear as a bell. Conversations were fruitful. The online application process was straightforward. Surprisingly, my visa arrived in 4 weeks.

It was late October 2009, nearly 2 months after the fateful meeting with Phil. I had been granted an Australian work visa. The requirements to work for Mark's company were met. The dream of working again were now a reality. Still, through all the excitement there were deep, stomach-churning doubts.

To announced the news, I sent an email to my family, friends and colleagues. I was now committed. Everyone was supportive. However, I could sense their disappointment. It was then I began to appreciate the value I added to those who I surrounded myself with. I had to sever those ties to satisfy my needs. v? Everyone accepted it; work was one of life's necessities. Years in school and further education prepared us for it. It was part of our identity and in many ways defined who we are. I wanted to define who I am. Australia would be where I could do it.

One morning, I searched for single way flights from Birmingham, UK to Sydney, Australia. The cost, as Mark had alluded to, would be my expense. Having been out of work for two months, my bank balance was low. The flights during the week were a lot cheaper and sooner.

Without consulting anyone, I hesitantly went through the booking process on the Emirates website. The prices marginally differed from one week to the next. With a committed attitude, the earlier, the better. 6 steps later in the online booking process, the congratulatory confirmation page appeared. £800 had been ripped from the faintly beating heart of my bank account. I may have had no money, but I had a:

- visa
- job contract
- flight
- place to stay, soon to be arranged by work

The doubts faded and the feeling of accomplishment began to bubble up. I was going to Australia. Wow.

My mom walked into the dining room on her way to the kitchen. I grasped her shoulders, looked her in the eyes and said, "Mom, in 4 days-time I'm flying to Sydney." She paused. Her usual bubbly demeanour changed to one of apprehension. "Oh, good", she said as she continued walking into the kitchen. I began feeling apathetic. How would this decision affect my family? I again questioned why I was doing this. In short, at that moment in time, to work again was the biggest priority in my life. I'll give it 2 weeks and see how it goes. It was a thought I sold to myself. A thought I would revise repeatedly.

Life refused to slow between the time I booked the flight and the day I was due to depart. I felt I was leaving with everything in order.

- The Lichfield house was due new tenants.
- My household goods were all but sold to close family and friends.
- Flights booked, bags packed, accommodation now organised.

I did my best to ensure I was going to hit Australia's red soils running. My soon to be boss Mark, advised I should setup an Australian bank account in the UK prior to my arrival. Unfortunately, it wasn't straightforward. Having secured an appointment with an HSBC advisor, the advice the tellor gave was "it's far easier to set up a bank account when in Australia". Outside obtaining sustenance and keys to my accommodation, my priority on landing in Australia would be to open a bank account.

My most immediate priority was packing. How do you pack for a new life? Could I base my packing list on recent summer holidays: flip-flops, shorts and a pair of speedos? It was summer time in Sydney, Australia. The weather forecast was for hot and humid conditions. I was probably fine with summer holiday wears. However, I needed clothes to shield me from conditions at the airport and on the air-conditioned aeroplane.

I had a rummage for packing list items at home. I forgot I had snorkelling wears. What better an opportunity to use them, but they were bulky. The fins alone barely fitted in my large suitcase. It did a fine effort in swallowing most of my wears. Excess baggage made its way into my small backpack. Unfortunately, some essentials would have to stay in the UK.

The day came. I followed the first steps of my extensive plan. Fly the first leg of the flight from Birmingham to Dubai. Mom and Dad were, just like concerned parents should be, happy to see me arrive 3 hours before the flight departure time. It was nice to be chauffeured in the family Toyota Avensis, "the princess" as I called it. The car was parked in the short stay, a mere one-minute walk from the airport's main entrance. Emirates, the

flight operator, had nearly half of the departure gates dedicated to their operations. Money = power, as they say. So, there I was, waiting in the queue to check in. I had a passport and flight ticket in hand, dressed in t-shirt and jeans. Mom and dad did a fine job making me anxious by asking embarrassing, interrogative questions e.g., "did you pack your verruca cream? You know your skin flares up when you don't...". It was a relief to be called up to the check-in counter.

I handed over my passport. The staff member asked me to lift my luggage onto the conveyor/scales. As the numbers on the scales began to increase, I began to stress. I was dumbfounded why my luggage was so heavy. Maybe my parents had thrown in the kitchen sink while I was occupied!? Well, something had to be taken out to drop its weight below the allowance. I pulled the luggage to one side. With my parents' assistance, we began shifting some of weight. The question was, what was going to be removed? I frantically began taking out some of the outer wears. I did what was akin to a scene in TV Drama Friends. I added more layers to me, wearing larger, outer clothing. Smaller items were then painstakingly condensed and squeezed into what remained of onboard luggage space. After packing shenanigans, my brow and first layer of clothing was laden with sweat. I felt uncomfortable. Additional outer layers were trapping the heat, keeping my temperature elevated. I sighed, better to bring too much than too little.

After a successfully checking in, Mom, Dad and I made our way to the departure lounge entrance. I fell silent as I looked at my flight tickets. Mom added a cursory statement "well that's it now" as we reached the top of the escalator. I saw the cordoned off area where a small number of passengers were queueing. I slowly turned to face my parents. I hugged my mom and kissed her. Dad was not an affectionate person. How should I greet him a long farewell? I knew a handshake was acceptable. In the moment after our handshake, I took a step forward and hugged him for the first time in my life. It was a short moment that felt like eternity. I turned to face the departure lounge, joined the end of the queue and waved back to my parents. I could clearly see tears in my dad's eyes. I had to force myself from crying. I continued to wave and onwards I walked into the departure lounge.

Birmingham International Airport was once my part-time place of work. It was a place where I earnt beer tokens during my time in college back in the late 90s. Back then I worked at the UK retail giant WHSmith. They had shops in all areas of the airport: check-in, land-side (before departures) & air-side (departure lounge). In total I completed 4 years' of service. On the day I left I was told I was close to being promoted to supervisor. I'm sure that would have been an interesting chapter in my life, or not.

The number of WHSmith stores in the airport were less than I anticipated. Another newsagent had taken trading turf. Who let that happen? In the departure lounge I took a whistle-stop tour of the shops. I started in duty-free, the fleeting focal point of any airport departure lounge. The duty-free section never failed to amaze. "Why so many expensive fragrances?", I uttered to myself. I tried not to look at the staff, a sure sign of interest. It had been well over 8 years since I last worked at WHSmith. There was a hope that when I moseyed on into a store, I would be surrounded with adulating workers. In such a transient workplace, were there any people I recognised? I looked at the staff on the check-outs. Who were these strangers? Where was the magazine stacker Matthew Eton, the literary expert, Anthony Bailey or boss lady Wendy? More importantly, where was my home coming celebrations? 'Ah shit, has no one told them!' I thought, before heading over to the car magazine section.

Even though I wasn't a car enthusiast, I admired cars. They were relatable things that my family appreciated. As I skimmed the final pages of Car magazine, I looked up at the departure information screen. The gate for Emirates flight to Sydney, Australia, via Dubai, was opening. Which gate? Yep, found it. It was now a matter of leaving the comfort of the shops and walking a long way to the arse end of the airport.

I could see the queue for the Emirates gate from a comfortable distance away. It was a good 50 people deep already. There were plenty of folk confined to the jail-like emirates gate waiting area. As I walked to the end of the queue, I took a good look at my soon to be flight neighbours. What I wasn't expecting was to see anyone recognisable. 'Was that?', my brain wasn't firing on all cylinders. It took a while to put the faces to names. In this case to a popular name in Birmingham music. Bloody hell, it's Moseley's finest, Ocean Colour Scene. A "back in the day" band that signalled memories of drinking unhealthy amounts of alcohol, hitting the dance floor & positioning traffic cones on monuments. Good times? Questionable, but the tunes that accompanied those days in the late 90s were bloody awesome. Maybe this journey would be special, given Ocean Colour Scene's presence.

As I waited patiently in the queue I peered out through the huge, bright departure gate windows. I knew the plane was going to be big, given the distance it was to travel, but nothing prepared me for the scale of the Emirates A380. It was the big foot monster truck of aircraft with an upper and a lower deck. It had to be special, given the length of time I was going to be using it for; Anything less than monster just wouldn't cut the mustard. After my boarding pass and passport were checked I saw the passenger tunnel(s) to the A380's entrances. It was an endless labyrinth with signs indicating seat numbers and class levels. I made a conservative guess which queue was economy.

I finally made it to the entrance. I stepped on-board, greeted by humble, female staff wearing saris, red caps and tanned business suits. Being a parochial Brummie lad, I stared at the elegant, foreign, yet smart attire of the crew. Thankfully, after a flick of the head I regained my composure. I showed my boarding pass, which usually resulted in a nod of the air host/hostess's head. This time, I was given Google Map style directions. I walked past the space-age capsule seats of first and business class, entering economy class.

This was no ordinary economy class. It was huge and more importantly it was empty. I had at my disposal a bank of 4 seats all to myself. "If only I had a mattress", I thought. I sat down. I felt an immense sense of joy taking off multiple layers of non-essential wears. My body felt unshackled, my skin breathed again. I sat up tall and stretched my neck. My vision was consumed by the display on the back of the seat headrest in front of me. "What, in the name of inflight entertainment was this? Is that a "wide" screen!?", I said excitedly. I reached for the controller that formed part of the entertainment system. This controller, much like a coin, had two sides. One was a straightforward interpretation of the couch potato's TV controller. The other side was reminiscent of the golden era of home gaming. What entertainment possibilities lay ahead? In the meantime, while the default, unchangeable flight path screen was visible, I just had to wait.

It was a time to get comfortable and aware of my surroundings. Having a weak bladder and a thirst for beer, I needed eyes on bathroom and kitchen locations. Dubai was a good 8-hour journey ahead. I wanted it to be stress free, with as much entertainment time that my brain could possibly process. One thing I love about long haul flights, apart from the video entertainment, is the free-ness of everything. Space maybe tight by the standards we are used to in everyday life. By aircraft standards, this plane's cabin room was huge. What was more awesome was the available elbow space. The row of 4 seats had no other passengers assigned to them. This made me think about the possible sleeping configurations that figuratively lay before me.

Priorities, firstly, take off my shoes. I noticed that Emirates had supplied a nice little bag of onboard night-time comforts: toothpaste, blind fold, slippers and bed socks. In my 30 years on this planet I had not tried bed socks, now was the time. Of all life's experiences I wouldn't say I was blown away by the generic, one size fits all, bed sock wearing experience. At least it made me appreciate the socks I took off, which fitted me.

I was buckled up and ready to go. After a surge from the engines, a climb to cruising altitude and with seat belt signs turned off, I looked around me. People were staring at their in-flight entertainment systems like zombies watching a documentary about autopsies. I sat back down and "do as the Romans do", absorbed the swathe of entertainment. Films, Games, Music, TV Shows & Flight Data filled my senses. While the joy of this 21st Century experience continued, meals (presented in accordance with a printed set menu), were served around the clock. I was even able to use the in-flight entertainment system to request snacks and drinks whenever I desired. I'm of the mindset, you get as good as you give. What was the catch? I had forgotten, I had spent close to a grand for this experience. This thought gave me more of a reason to order my money's worth.

We arrived at Dubai Airport early in the morning. I needed a bed. I also knew there was a long wait till my next flight. To stop myself falling asleep I needed a beverage or a night club. I walked from the A380 to Dubai Airport's Mall like Departure Lounge. I enjoy getting to know my surroundings. I walked, climbed, clambered to every Shop, café, newsagents, duty free in the environment. It was then when I saw it. I must have missed on my initial recce. The bar, situated on the first floor, looked like a shipping container. Where were the stairs? They were out of view, but accessible.

I climbed the stairs. What I didn't realise as I got to the first floor was the size of the bar. The draught selection was a magnificent medley of worldly alcoholic beverages. I was partial to a pint of Guinness. I placed my order. Before pouring, the bar man announced the price. I was shocked, hesitantly reaching for my wallet with mouth ajar. £5 for a pint of beer back in 2009 was more than double the price at a Birmingham public house. It even made inflated night club drinks prices pale in comparison. I closed my eyes and unwillingly handed the money over. The bar man asked me to take a seat.

A staff member escorted me to the lounge behind the bar. I quizzically looked at the large living space. "Is that a sofa all for me?", I said. I was handed a remote control. I bemusedly looked at the device, "what..", I turned to behold the large, widescreen TV that lay before me. I sat back, my body soaked into the large, sumptuous leather. My drink arrived, perfectly chilled and accompanied by a selection of savoury peanuts. I smiled as I pointed the controller at the TV. After pressing the ON button the hymn sheet of channels was presented. It was then I saw the Xtreme Sports Channel, the pinnacle of sports entertainment. I was a big martial arts fan at the time. I looked to the heavens and requested UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship), the pinnacle in televised mixed martial arts (MMA). I changed the channel. The "Best of UFC" began to play.

I placed the controller down and wiped the tears of joy from my eyes. I reached for a generous helping of savoury snacks followed by a slow measure of Guinness. The cool, smooth, roasty tones of my drink complemented the roasty notes of the nuts. I lay there, content as a pig in pig shit. My face beamed with a huge smile as I watched 2 UFC competitors beat ten bells of shit out of each other. The tiredness took its toll. As relaxing as it was lying on a sofa, what I really wanted was a bed. I felt I had to keep awake, after watching the concluding moments of the contest.

I made it back to the concourse for a lethargic wander. It wasn't the most comfortable of walks, lugging around an onboard suitcase, wearing winterwears. As I walked on, I saw what can only be described as posh, indoor sun loungers: Long, leather covered seating. The loungers I initially saw were all taken by forty-winkers. I walked on, staggering more so than walking, my brain experiencing a dull fuzz that I couldn't shake. It was then, as what happens when you least expect it, when I saw them. I looked to the heavens and said a thank you as I lay my eyes on the available loungers.

I literally leapt onto the bed like structure and tried to get comfy. After much faffing I got my contorted body into, what I thought was, the ideal sleeping posture. It was akin to the foetal position. I closed my eyes and... I felt my heart racing, my adrenaline pumping. I was still so excited about the journey ahead, I couldn't stop the mind racing. The mind can be a cruel beast. The battle between excitement and tiredness is one I reminisce of. As a child, the night before Christmas was one I wanted to pass by the quickest. It ended up being the longest night of the year.

I thought about moving from the comfy lounger, but where? Wherever I chose to sleep, restless shut eye would result. My thoughts changed from sleep to staying awake. What was the best legal high to bring coherence back? Caffeine. Costa Coffee was a welcoming, but quiet environment thanks to the time in the morning. Thankfully there was a fresh-faced barista operating the espresso machine. I sat with the piping hot, frothy coffee on the table. I slowly looked around at the moodily lit, empty cafe. With one hand clasping the saucer and the other lifting the coffee mug, I slowly consumed the flat white. Euphoria was instant. The brief hit was worth the money, but the lasting coherence did not persist as expected. What I really needed was intravenous, drip coffee.

I forced myself to move again. Maybe walking would restart my mind, body and soul. As I walked, I looked out of the huge departure lounge windows. Windows with a front seat view of the aeroplane stage show. It was dawn. The sky, a variant of red-ish hues, was illuminated further by the rising sun. I stopped, sat down and gazed at the horizon. The sun continued its path above the horizon. I was forced to look away. I looked at the time on my phone. It wasn't long till the connecting flight. I felt a short burst of excitement.

After reading what appeared to be a every car magazine in the Dubai Airport, I waited in a large queue at the Emirates departure gate. Like orderly ants we entered the colonies business, first and standard class chambers. I was more than happy to be back in the environment I got so accustomed to on the previous flight. Following prior onboarding procedures, I walked to my seat, reached for the night socks and re-acquainted myself with the onboard entertainment unit. As I lifted the controller and hit the on button, I talked to it intimately, 'Where did we get to?'.

Chapter 3

Heaven and a Half Pint

I love how large passenger aircrafts land on runways. It is a buttery smooth experience. Barely a bump was felt as we touched down at Sydney Kingsford Smith Airport. We taxied to our arrival gate. I looked outside to see the sun glaze over the tarmac. The heat made the air pulsate. The sign on the terminal building read "Welcome to Sydney". It took a while for this moment to soak in, then it hit me. I'm here. I'm in Sydney, Australia. I'm on the other side of the world. I never thought I would be thinking that so soon in my lifetime. This euphoric distraction was a temporary reprieve. I was exhausted.

The plane taxied to the arrival gate and came to a smooth halt. I gathered my cabin luggage from the overhead compartments, turned and looked out the window. This was the place I was going to call home for the foreseeable. I looked back at the nest of seats I had called home. A layer of me died during that journey. "Au revoir dead skin cells", I thought. I exited the plane into the fresh air. The brightness of the environment was amazing. It was like someone had peeled the protective layer off the sun. The humidity was high too. Being outdoors in bright, warm, humid conditions at the start of November felt unreal. "Welcome to the Southern Hemisphere", I thought.

I felt nervous as I walked to the security gate. "Is there any reason why I should not be able to gain entry into Australia?", I thought. I looked at the Australian travel entry card. It had a multitude of tick boxes relating to 'Have you recently been to country...' Thankfully, I wasn't a frequent traveller. I knew my work visa application was successful. I had email confirmation. My passport had been assigned a digital visa. What if it hadn't? What if there were other entrance issues?

I handed my passport and boarding card to the border officer. They looked carefully at my documentation and then at me. The officer looked European. When the officer began to talk, the tone, tempo and pitch reaffirmed I was now in Australia. He asked, "where's your visa?" I hesitantly replied, "I have a digital visa". His confused gaze made me feel nervous. He passed my British passport to his colleague who took it away. From afar I saw my passport being scanned. It was swiftly handed back to the first officer. He flicked through the pages of the passport with a level of care. On finding a fresh page an inked stamp was firmly applied. The passport was handed back to me. I felt elation as the stresses fluttered away.

My next goal, was to negotiate the luggage carousel. My suitcase was already doing the rounds when I arrived. I effortfully lifted it onto the floor. With it being a modern suitcase, it had wheels and a retractable handle. The suitcase was perfectly designed for navigating the smooth, buttery floor surfaces of the airport. The suitcase and I made our way through the "Declare or Nothing to Declare" zone and into arrivals where many a welcoming party stood. If a loved one wasn't present, a mobile phone provider was. Many Australian telecomms firms had booths. I recognised Vodafone. Vodafone was one of the worst performing service providers in the UK. I wondered, with everything being down under, was Vodafone the best mobile provider here?

I walked over to the Vodafone booth. I spoken to immediately by an enthusiastic employee. I was to discover the enthusiasm and energy levels of Australians was, relatively speaking, far higher than mine. Vodafone offered a number of deals. I had no clue if these deals were steals. I had to do my research before handing over my money. I took some of their literature and tootled on. I looked up and saw a set of large public transport signs. I was happy to see directions to the train station. I love travelling by rail. A recent trip to Japan, experiencing their luxurious, punctual network, elevated my appreciation.

At the ticket booth I enquired about a single ticket to the city. The train guard said, "You will need 2 tickets: a special ticket to enter the platform at the airport and one to exit the barriers in the city. Total cost is AU\$40". I was still used to dealing with costs in pounds. £40 for a regional train ticket was expensive. Was AU\$40? I belligerently paid the amount, still not clear on the amount in £s. I walked to the platform, calculated and baulked. The ticket cost was north of £20. For a 20-minute, regional journey, this was absurd. Was this amount to set a precedent for all retail goods in Australia?

The train arrived. It was like nothing I had experienced before, a double decker. I chose a seat on the lower deck given my bulky luggage. After managing to shepherd my wheeled suitcases, I felt a little calmer. I brought my awareness to the passengers around me. I caught myself people watching, fascinated by their fashion, chat & mannerisms. Teenage girls wore denim shorts, wedged so far up their arses that, from my perspective, it looked like their buttocks had consumed them. A couple of young women sat in the seats opposite me and chatted away. I was surprised by their unvarnished, blunt description of the world around them.

I noticed that me, the people watcher, became the one being watched. I was wearing dark clothing: A black T-Shirt, tight, dark blue jeans and a pair of narrow, pointy, brown shoes. I struck an impressive stature, given my wardrobe and athletic body. My paranoia waned as, out the corner of my eye, I saw the impending Sydney

cityscape. The skyscrapers towered, rising like shards out of a sci-fi movie. It reminded me of Toronto, Canada. Both were large, modern cities established in British colonial times. Sydney's skyline was unmissable with its large Shangri-La and CN Tower buildings. The two other noticeable landmarks were the Sydney Harbour Bridge and Opera House. The harbour at Circular Key, which encompassed the cityscape, was a hive of activity. Passenger boats appeared to be ballroom dancing, arriving and departing in a fascinating, coordinated fashion.

The A4 paper print out detailed the location of my accommodation. The next steps of my journey were to walk from Circular Quay station to the remote apartment. Upon arrival, I noticed a sea of vehicles, which was no shock given the accommodation was located close to the freeway. I turned to the next page of my print outs that detailed the apartment check-in procedure. Thankfully the instructions were illustrated. I entered the number sequence 9876 (a secure number if ever there was one) into the key safe. The door immediately sprung open, revealing a set of keys. The moment had the hallmarks of a scene from legendary Nintendo game Zelda. The accompanying "Level completed" music played sinuously in my thoughts.

On opening the door to the apartment I noticed a lack of walls. I was not used to such an open environment, having lived in a small, sectioned, terraced house. It was interesting having the bedroom, lounge and kitchen in one large room. You could literally watch your eggs fry from the comfort of your own bed. I did love the natural light levels. Light poured in through the windows on the one side of the apartment and diffused through light, beige curtains. I decided to take a closer look at the apartment's contents. I opened each cupboard and drawer to familiarise myself with their contents. I loved familiarising myself with my new surroundings. I would be calling this place home for the next 2 weeks.

There was nothing interesting about any of the apartments contents. My inquisitive needs were starved. I turned to my bag and began to rifle through it instead. Clothes, clothes and more clothes. "Ah!", I said as I had located my electronic gadgets. I had a gander at the labels on my back-up compact disks: Microsoft Office 2003, My Documents, Movies, TV Show Episodes, then I saw it, my porn collection. I loved soft porn, especially that of naked women with large breasts. I didn't realise then, I had an unhealthy addiction to this material. The adrenaline rush prior and the resultant orgasm post masturbation was a high I couldn't get enough of. The 2 days I had spent travelling to Sydney, 2 days without masturbating, was probably the longest period I had gone "cold turkey" in years. As I looked at those CDs I felt anger. My addiction was the reason I lost my previous job. Did I want to continue viewing this material?

I took each CD and broke it into shards. I poured the remnants into the bin. It was an empowering feeling, with a hint of regret. Like all addictions, it was eating away at my conscious thoughts. Even though I had rid myself of the pornography, it didn't stop the need. Where did I draw the boundary? Was I to stop masturbating *full stop* or masturbate under certain, allowable conditions? As I attended to these thoughts, I decided that masturbation was allowable if it wasn't stimulated by pornographic material. That decision gave me all the permission I needed to continue this sinful behaviour.

As I orgasmed and felt the temporary high that I seeked, I took a deep breath out and regained my focus. I still had a large list of jobs that needed completing. I showered and changed into my summer wears. I made my way to the bright, busy beat of the street outside. It was lunch time. The streets of Sydney CBD were buzzing. A large gathering of formally clothed office workers hung around St Martin's Square and George Street. I did what every tourist does in an unfamiliar environment, I people watched. George Street's shopping arcade impressed upon me a feeling of Victorian British pride. Details of its colonial heritage were placarded on its Victorian architectural cues.

I exited and looked across the crossroads. I nearly wept. "Is that... Woolworths!?" I said aloud. Woolworths had recently closed its UK operation, but it appeared to be alive and well in Sydney. The pedestrian crossing indicated it was safe to proceed. I walked diagonally across the road and in through "Woolies" entrance. My initial observations were one of amazement. This was a supermarket, not a hodgepodge discount store like its UK cousin. There were three floors. The lower ground level extended its reach into St. Martin's Square train station. I took a further look at the fresh produce. "Bloody hell, the bananas were expensive. These mangoes are massive! What's that? A huge watermelon!?" I said aloud. I felt like a vegan in a green grocers.

As my time spent in Woolworths elapsed, my paranoia increased. I could feel the security system eye-ing my every action. I couldn't walk out without buying something? I decided to buy something cheap. I waited in the queue at the checkout with a stick of chewing gum in my basket.

After exiting the store I checked my A4 print out that listed several tasks, including:

1. Open a bank account (this would help with getting paid)
2. Organise a mobile phone contract.

The sun was beating down on the high street. I was tired, sweaty and dehydrated. Where were the banks? Mark had mentioned setting a HSBC account in the U.K. Where was the main Sydney City branch? I hadn't a clue who the biggest Australian banks were. Which bank offered the:

- best interest rates
- coolest websites
- most ATM (cash points)

I was clueless and nervous. I knew once a bank was chosen, it would take some effort to move to another. I had to get it right first time. I had to be thorough. I cursed myself for not doing my homework. "Fiddly dee", I thought. As I turned the corner, by luck, I saw a HSBC branch. I wandered in, asked a few account related questions and exited. I visited another bank, Commonwealth. An intimidating looking bank with security watching my every move. I again entered, questioned and exited. I continued. Loving the colour orange, Bank West's logo colour grabbed my attention. It advertised a high interest account. I walked in. The branch had a more modern, open design than HSBC and Commonwealth. I was immediately made welcome by its staff. I took a seat and skimmed through their product information. The interest on their basic account was sky high. Given how the financial crisis had strangled UK interest rates, anything north of 2% was good. Bank West's basic account offered a monumental 5%.

It was a good time to be in Australia. The Australian dollar was strong thanks to an ever-expanding Chinese economy, which required large amounts of Australia's raw materials. The ease in which I set up the bank account was breath taking. All the bank required from me was a copy of my British passport and a signature. Me, David "the foreigner" Clarke, with no fixed address and barely a penny to my name had an Australian bank account.

One task down, one to go, or so I thought. There was another task, applying for a tax file number (TFN). A TFN was the equivalent of a National Insurance Number, a unique identifier that all people working in Australia required. How else would the government distribute the country's wealth? The accountant at the new Consultancy, a guy called Lyndon, had my tax affairs at hand. He emailed a form to me, to fill in. I astutely completed and returned it detailing my financial standing. Lyndon subsequently sent me an excel spreadsheet that calculated my living away from home allowance (LAFHA). LAFHA was a tax break for employees sourced from abroad, for the purpose of paying for their accommodation.

I remember looking at the wage calculations spreadsheet. My mathematics aren't too shabby, but the Chief Financial Officer's calculations baffled me. 'F*ck you Lyndon!', I said under my breath. My wages according to my contract were six figures before tax. Given the exchange rate at the time, I was set to earn the highest wage of my life. Given the higher price of living in Sydney, my dollars wouldn't be stretching as far. I had to be appreciative. I was employed and soon to be earning a wage after a good 2 months of being without. Even though I was unsure what I was earning, was correct.

I had a small amount of money to tide me by, AU\$1000 to be exact. The accommodation was paid for by the consultancy for the next two weeks. My only financial concerns were food, social drinking and transport. Food was expensive, Coles and Woolworths were the cheapest of the large supermarkets. In the U.K. I had developed a taste for protein. Whenever I visited a supermarket in Australia I made a bee-line for the cooked meats section, looking specifically for cooked chicken. This section was large. It always offered discounts. Portion sizes ranged from quarter, half to full. There were the other cuts of chicken too: drumsticks, wings and thighs, but rarely available at discount. Half chicken, stuffing, with salad and/or chips was what I lived on.

Cole's cooked chicken was naturally salty. I assumed salt was added to it. In fact, it was a consequence of the chicken's salty diet. The chicken was unusually greasy too, sickeningly so. The combined chicken grease and buttery stuffing could cause stomach upsets. The key to eating the bird without dramas was paper towels. I used these to mop the grease off the chicken, my face and eating surfaces.

Australia is where I discovered a love for several exotic fruits: the avocado and the mango to name but two. Mangos, grown in nearby Queensland were in season. Supermarkets had large numbers in stock, sold at a discount. They were messy; the fibrous tissue always got stuck between the teeth. The excessive, viscous juice always rolled down the chin and collected on my t-shirt. Australian mangoes, considered the sweetest fruit in the world, are a taste sensation.

Chapter 4

Same work, different climate

A couple of days had passed since my arrival. What had I achieved? I had a bank account, but my tax file number was still being processed. I still needed a mobile phone contract too. Other than that, I had nothing to worry about, right? It was another bright and warm day. I should be wearing t-shirt and shorts, right? Not today. Today was day one at my new place of work. It was to be, as it was in the rest of the western white-collar world, suited and booted. Thankfully I came prepared; the Hugo Boss suit, one my brother bought for me, was hanging neatly in the wardrobe. I decided to leave the jacket, a wise move, given the humid climate.

Mark had emailed me details of the consultancy office location and the time at which Bruce & Elliot (Sydney operations) were expecting me. It was a good distance from my accommodation to the office, via the Sydney Harbour Bridge. With the weather being so nice I decided to go on foot. As I began my walk I could feel sweat begin to pour off my skin. The heat at 9:00am was intense. Something I rarely concerned myself with in the UK was dehydration. In Australia I now had to account for it whenever I walked outside.

I reached the North Sydney address looking like a drowned rat. The high-rise premises had a reception desk located on the ground floor. I walked over to be met by a friendly face. "I.T. Consultancy?", I asked. "7th floor", replied the staff member. On exiting the lift on the 7th floor I peered at the plaque of business names. I turned the corner and noticed the vacant kitchen area. The all-in-one Nespresso coffee maker immediately drew my attention. I made a mental note to make use of it later. The floor had few offices, which meant locating the consultancy office was easy. I knocked before opening the door. I noticed staplers here, folders

there, mountains of laptops somewhere else. It was a bloody mess. In the corner of the office appeared a 6 foot plus, well-built man in a suit. My thoughts immediately were "was this the one of the guys that Mark told me about?". "You must be Dave", he said in a quintessential, deep, Australian droll. "Bruce, I'm responsible for Sydney operations", he extended his hand and I firmly shook it. "Sorry about the mess" he exclaimed, "we're in the process of moving." Bruce's appearance and manner conveyed a sense of importance. His actual role was pre-sales i.e. drumming up potential business. He tried his best to:

- play host
- introduce me to the company
- organise sales meetings
- arrange the pending office move.

Bruce gave me a quick tour of the office and facilities available on the floor. He, most importantly, described how to operate the coffee machine. The latte or "frothy coffee" was a taste and texture sensation. It also packed a caffeine punch, which my jet lagged mind appreciated. We returned to the office and the subject of business. Bruce briefed me on a piece of client work at a financial institution located in the city. He then began frantically searching his office. He was trying to locate a piece of paper with the phone number of his Melbourne operations colleague. He dialled the number and put the phone on speaker. "Mark P?", Bruce asked. Mark P quickly replied, "Hi Bruce". "I have Dave Clarke here in the office. Could you elaborate on the role at the financial institution?" Mark P guided me through the basic role requirements and questioned my related experience. Mark P advised me to talk to a consultant named Cuong, located in Melbourne. Cuong had a more technical view of the Sydney role. I frantically searched for a pen and piece of paper to note his contact details.

The speaker phone call from Mark ended and a more in-depth, one-to-one call with Cuong was started. Cuong began with a reference to what the IT test automation industry called a "keyword driven framework". Up until that point in my career I had never used one. The mere mention of this new framework got me all excited. The experience could open up more work opportunities in the IT industry. I confirmed I had the necessary appetite (but maybe not necessarily the experience) to implement it. Thankfully, Cuong mentioned he was happy to offer assistance.

I ended the phone call feeling confident. I thought "If all fails, I can call on Cuong". The client work (or gig, as the Australians termed it) wouldn't be happening till the following week, given red tape (background checks etc.). I was frustrated, I wanted to start work immediately. I had to be appreciative, I now had more time to acclimatise to my new environment. Meanwhile I could offer my services to Bruce, Head of Sydney Operations.

Bruce sometimes communicated seriously. Other times he was childish. His soft, fun side was a welcome contrast to his façade of importance. I would become familiar with these 2 sides of this personality over the next few days. Bruce was recruited as a salesman. His job was to sell human resources to potential clients. He would bring me along to his client meetings to:

1. keep him company.
2. impress. There was that sense of "watch this, I'm going to sell snow to an Eskimo".
3. show an example of a Sydney resource.

I had never, in my years working as a consultant, experienced a consultancy service sales meeting. Bruce's sales meetings were enjoyable:

- I didn't need to say a word.

- In most cases I got a free frothy coffee. In some cases I got a free lunch.

After his last business meeting, he was happy heading home. He was an awesome host. Knowing I knew no-one, he was happy for me to come along. Bruce's home was situated in the beautiful suburb of Manly. A paradise, just far enough away from the city and close enough to unspoilt coastline that it still felt remote. It could be accessed in a roundabout way by road. The best way to access Manly was by ferry. The beautiful sights of Australian icons The Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Sydney Opera House were witnessed during the journey.

Two classes of ferry service departed from the CBD at regular intervals: fast and standard. The Fast Cat (short for catamaran) ferry operated when the water in Sydney harbour was pancake flat. The robust standard ferry would operate whatever the conditions were. The heaviest of these could literally turn a ferry on to its side and turn a tourist's stomach inside out. It was a life affirming experience. On arrival, I would often kiss the Manly Pier in gratitude for being alive.

Bruce was a Fast Cat man. He liked to be seen rubbing shoulders with people in the upper echelons of Manly life. Maybe he thought it would rub off on his financial aspirations. Bruce was a generous person, which runs contrary to the financially astute nature of the rich. He liked to see it that I was paid for, and that he was reimbursed for his troubles by the consultancy. Before I had the chance to get cash out of my wallet, Bruce stepped in. "Dave don't worry mate, I've got this", he confidently announced, purchasing my ferry ticket. Bruce handed me a credit card sized piece of card and led me to the back of a short queue. We had to wait for the high profile arriving passengers to disembark the Fast Cat, before we were allowed on.

The two decks of the Fast Cat had ample space. The upper deck was fuller, filled with suited and booted businessmen with a drink in hand. This behaviour is common in the animal kingdom e.g., a male howler monkey announces his presence to other groups by getting to the top of the tallest tree and bellowing. The bellowing on the Fast Cat was helped by cans of alcohol, purchased from the circular quay terminal convenience stores. Bruce was no exception. He bought a bag load of "Bundy" (Bundaberg Rum) and coke cans. Bundaberg, a region in Queensland, Australia, was the namesake of the famous Aussie rum, which was surprisingly, and dangerously, tasty. Given Bruce's regular showing on board, he recognised several people, but wasn't on a conversational level with them. Instead he said "Hi" and walked on by. His calm demeanour soon turned into a rushed 2-step as he noticed someone on the top-deck. Bruce yelled "Doug!". Doug was unaware of his good friend's presence and continued to look on. Bruce's 2-step turned into a tango as he rushed on, dragging me with him, to get to the top deck.

"Doug, there you are. Why the f*ck didn't you turn around when I shouted," Bruce said in a slightly angry tone. "Dave, this is Doug. Doug, this is Dave.", Bruce announced. Doug took one look at me and shouted "Moby". I had been called many names in my life. I could now add Moby, the alternative music artist, to that list. Doug's observation made Bruce laugh out loud. Bruce, using a range of silly voices, said my new nickname.

Doug, a New Zealander, like most kiwis I was to meet, they were well built. Doug was no exception, he was six feet tall, had little in the way of hair, Mediterranean complexion and built like a human tank. He was 30 something and, like Bruce, looked confident: shoulders were firmly back. His pin-striped suit was immaculate. Doug worked as a consultant at an Australian Bank. He bragged about how negligent the company was. Doug and Bruce had a shared a personal history. They were flat mates once upon a time.

I noticed the change in Bruce's behaviour when he was around Doug. Bruce's 9-5 business façade was replaced with one of a sniggering, naughty child. The two of them were like a scripted double act. Bruce

would, with perfect timing, contribute to Doug's scandalous stories. In days gone by they had rented a house, or "shagging stable" as it was portrayed, in Manly. What happened in their house, especially after a few drinks, was embellished. The conversation moved onto "the buddies", a group of friends they socialised with each week. The person at the centre of the buddies conversation was Glenn. I was to find out soon that he and his girlfriend would become a bigger part of my life over the coming weeks.

On reaching Sydney Harbour we disembarked and made our way to the Bavarian Beer Café. The Bavarian Beer Cafés were a chain of German themed bars that adorned Sydney. I felt like a 5th wheel in the conversation, as Doug and Bruce continued to engross themselves in their past glories. I was less mesmerised by the conversation and more by the way Bruce handled his beer glass. Bruce was a seasoned drinker. The glass or bottle was an extension of his body language as he lavished in the foretelling of his extravagant life moments. Beer was social lubrication for Bruce. He unwound, pouring insights into his pre-marriage life.

It was apparent from his stories of old that Bruce had led a diverse life. In his 20s he had worked over in America as a ski instructor. Supposedly, this was something that many Australian university leavers did. I never asked him how and why Australians did this? 'Where did Aussies learn to ski?', was one for Google. Bruce had worked as a promoter too. The company he worked for took clients out on Party Boats around Sydney Harbour. The parties, according to his stories, got a little too loud for the authorities and were often cut short. Bruce told a story that every English person would love to hear. A story about an ex-girlfriend. Her name was Sheila. The conclusion of the story was "I had to leave her after realising that if we married, the bride and groom to be would have been Bruce and Sheila!".

Bruce had been married twice. His first marriage was a short-term juvenile fling. His current wife was Tiffany, or Tiff as she was known to the masses. She was heavily pregnant with Bruce's son to be. She was an amazing lady. A personality akin to a rising sun: Bright, full of warmth and energetic.

The sun was slowly setting on Manly Wharf. Doug was finishing his second drink, a Bundy and Coke. He looked down at the large, ornate wrist watch and showed a shocked expression. He placed his empty glass down, raised his sunglasses and embraced Bruce. Joyfully he exhaled, "See you bro, got to get home to the wifey." He released the embrace and shook my hand firmly. He returned his sunglasses to the bridge of his nose and adjusted his man bag around his lightly coloured unfettered suit. Bruce checked his watch and mentioned that Glenn would be arriving soon. Bruce cast his eyes towards the sun setting on the horizon, above the sea. "Dave, Moby, have a look at that" he said. With an Aussie droll (that felt like it lasted minutes) he said "Isn't it beeeeeee-yoooooo-tiful!"

Glenn eventually materialised. He had that high profile, fast cat passenger image: Beautifully suited and beautifully booted. Glenn was terser than any other Aussie I had met so far. He was one of the most complex too. He wasn't an open, approachable type. My fly on the wall existence was swatted as he chatted to Bruce in private. He didn't stay for long. He had little reason to, given he didn't drink. Closer to the truth it, he wasn't allowed to. Bruce talked about Glenn as a Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde type of character. His Mr Hyde, also known as Stifler (from American Pie movie fame), reared its ugly head after he had a drink. Andy, his girlfriend, kept Mr Hyde in check. She knew just how destructive drink was to Glenn's health and their relationship.

Soon after Glenn left for home, Bruce began making excuses. He switched on his business personality and replayed Doug's "I need to get home" body language. Anyway, it was a good time to be heading back to the mainland, the last ferry out of Manly to Circular Quay was moments away from departing.

The next morning I arrived at the North Sydney office later than expected. I could see Bruce in his office. He looked preoccupied with his laptop, which he duly closed and quickly limped towards me. I never noticed the

limp before. Bruce winced and said "bloody leg, I should get it looked at. Right, I'm late for a sales meeting. See you ladies later.". As he continued to hurriedly hobble home, he said that Elliot, his second in command, would be arriving soon. I took the opportunity to organise myself. One thing on my mind, which should have been priority one, was finding a new home. I had never rented, or house shared. It was only a week until I had to find somewhere to live.

The office door opened and Elliot appeared. He was lanky chap. He looked a good 10 years younger than his 30-something age. He had an expression of joy that lit up the room. His eyes portrayed intensity, contrasting his kind smile. Elliot extended his hand, which I shook firmly "you must be Dave, Bruce mentioned you'd be in the office. Elliot Caldwell, I'm working alongside Bruce to drum up business here in Sydney. Not long now until the financial institution gig", he said. "Yep, we've got you signed up for an initial 2 weeks of proof of concept work. That will naturally be extended. With Cuong's support we'll get the test automation framework ported over as quick as. Have you had a coffee?", he asked. "No" I merrily replied. "Right, I just need to read a few emails. We should head to the coffee shop around the corner. There they sell proper coffees. It's heaps better than this Nespresso rubbish.", he announced. Elliot loved his "proper coffees", a term which would soon become part of my daily lexicon.

Elliot's taste in coffee leant more towards the behemoth Starbucks varieties than the delicate Italian beverages. He sourced his caffeine fix from a café two blocks away from the office. I was fresh faced to the coffee scene. Having spent time with Bruce and now venturing with Elliot, drinking coffee would become an integral part my day-to-day life. "Having a coffee" was an acceptable excuse to have a long break and a chat. Elliot was a master in the art of appearing busy. He was a master of public speaking. His voice projection, tone, pace and vocal variety was textbook. Whatever he said was impactful. As we sat outside the conveniently located café, Elliot took out a cigarette and said, "you don't mind if I smoke?". He began telling me his life story. The significant events were his divorce, his 2 young daughters (5 and 7 years old) and his English born mother. I could tell he was fond of English people. He would often tell a joke, smile and end his sentence with "bloody English".

I felt Elliot trusted me, given his willingness to be open and venerable. The Australians I met were outspoken individuals. I was happy to lend an ear and they were happy to share their story. It was a role reversal for me. At home around my friends, it was me who was the outspoken one. It made me realise, by comparison, how unselfish and willing my friends were to listen to me.

The client's building was like many in Sydney central business district, a modern skyscraper. The ground floor shared its space with shops and food stalls. In the reception area I asked if my representative, Srikanth, was available. The security guard picked up the phone, chatted with someone and acknowledged someone was on their way. I proceeded to sit and wait. Dressed to impress, I wore a Hugo Boss suit, bought from its motherland, Germany. My Ted Baker pinstripe shirt hailed from my motherland, England. I donned an equally elaborate tie combo that glistened when observed at the right angle. The fashionable combo, given the hot, moist Sydney conditions, was a little uncomfortable to wear. It was fine for the air-conditioned confines of the modern office building.

My representative, Srikanth, finally arrived. He approached looking down, lacking eye contact. His mumbled voice was accented with Indian. The rotund, moustached man was clearly stressed. I was encumbering his working day. I approached Srikanth in a professional manner: I attempted to look him straight in the eyes, smile and offer my hand to cordially shake his. Given I couldn't get eye contact, I couldn't proceed to the next step to begin the handshake. Instead, Srikanth quickly directed me to reception's security officer. I was handed a temporary pass before being escorted to the main lift. As Srikanth and I entered, Srikanth swiped his

security pass and pressed button 5. He giggled and sheepishly asked "how are you?". I could sense his social discomfort. It was a far cry from the laidback Aussie style "How ya going?". In both cases a simple "good" would have sufficed. Bruce and Elliot would leave little time for me to respond. Srikanth offered me the stage to run with an answer. I took this rare opportunity to voice my opinion, to his bemusement. I literally talked Srikanth's ears off as we approached the financial institutions floor.

Srikanth was literally scratching at the doors to exit the lift. He chaperoned me to the desk of a European looking man. Before he opened his mouth, from a quick glance at his body language and dress sense I knew he was English. He swivelled his seat round dramatically. He looked up at Srikanth, paused, then looked me up and down. Srikanth beamed as Daniel, the level-headed English fellow, stood up slowly and offered to shake my hand. "You must be from the consultancy," he exclaimed, sitting down and drawing a breath. "Do you have everything you need Daniel?", Srikanth asked. "Yep, I've downloaded the software to a network share." Like a flash, he was out of his seat, keen to get the most of me. I followed Daniel to a cubicle with 4 standard looking PCs and a flashy looking Apple Mac. This section was labelled "multi-platform rig". The PCs were used to give the final quality check before their software went into production.

Daniel booted up the first PC. He jokingly positioned himself such that his finger presses on the keyboard were shielded while he entered the administrator username and password. The monitor revealed a screen with the financial institution's company logo. Daniel took a piece of paper out of his pocket. His eyes moved erratically from paper to keyboard to screen as keyed in the information. He hit the Enter key with a great deal of force to signify task completion. He looked up at the PC screen, double clicked his mouse on the file. An error message appeared. A sigh of frustration exited his braced teeth. "What's the issue now?" he trumped. Breathing out heavily, he hesitantly moved his eyes away from the screen and back to his piece of paper. "Right, wait here, I need to find a person in IT Security."

IT Security were in no way thugs in uniform. They were a one man team for starters. John was his name. He was a tough bloke, but only on matters of IT Security. Daniel brought John into the multi-platform rig area. He asked John if his privileges could be elevated. John frowned. "Sorry Daniel I can't do that", he said in an Anglicised, Australian accent. He continued, "but I can install that file for you using my elevated privileges." He tapped a few keys and low and behold the install sprung into life. The first prompt appeared on the screen, John looked uneasy. "What should I select here?", John asked, reading the options aloud. Daniel looked at me for direction. I instilled confidence in them both with a quickly reply. The next prompt appeared, Daniel looked at me again. After a few more prompts the screen was ablaze with a progress bar. The three of us stood there like the 3 amigos, arms crossed, waiting. Daniel was the first to break the silence as he quizzed John with a tone indicating an element of foolhardiness and comical wit. "So, John, how's the security 'team'?" John's eyes didn't leave the screen as he answered in a quick-fire manner that was enthusiastic yet reserved. "Well, we're getting version control installed on all PCs in the coming weeks", he clucked. "Full roll out is planned to be completed by years end", he said. I could sense Daniel didn't care. Daniel threw in some small talk. "How's the family?", Daniel asked. "Good, Mother just got back from surgery last week, she's doing well.", John replied. John was quick to point out that his mother was English, which explained his Anglicised accent.

"Right, it looks like the installation has finished. Do you need any further assistance?", affirmed John. Daniel smiled and gently shook his head. Daniel graciously thanked John for his help as the login screen appeared once again. John trundled off, Daniel quickly logged in and launched the test automation software. "Over to you Dave", he indicated. I asked a few questions about the test software before selecting the correct options and continuing. I demonstrated the automation software was working as expected. Daniel smiled, "Right, the next thing we need to do is get Cuong's framework setup and we should be away. That should be enough for today. We'll reconvene tomorrow.", Daniel said joyfully.

Chapter 5

Vagabond

The next couple of weeks were a blur. In drinking and socialising terms, yeah, a lot happened. I was seeing Bruce, Elliot and client staff on a regular basis. Bruce, in Manly, Elliot, in Annandale and the client, smack bang in the middle of the Central Business District. My tenure at the consultancy accommodation had come to an end. I hadn't gone to the effort to organise where I would be staying next. It was an unnerving, comfort zone pushing time for the next few weeks. I had to move from pillar-to-post each day. I booked the cheapest, last-minute, 1-bed accommodation that Sydney had to offer. It was expensive, all paid for with my dwindling cash reserves. I got by, just. One day it was hostel accommodation in the CBD, the next it was a temporary house share in Manly. It was pressure I didn't want to deal with. It was difficult enough dealing with the stresses of work. For the sake of my sanity and my wallet, I couldn't afford to do this indefinitely.

The move was on, not just for me, but the entire Sydney based consultancy team: me, Bruce and Elliot. We saw fit to load up Elliot's Tardis-like Holden Carlton with the contents of the North Sydney office. Amazingly, it only took 3 trips to complete the move. The new Central Business District address was packed to the rafters with, to be blunt, crap. The number of consultancy training manuals available to the Sydney office had reached epic proportions. This material was international standard quality. Unfortunately, it was unheard of outside Australia and not worth a pittance on a professional's profile.

The consultancy, as I was to find out, had an interesting history. It was created by one man, a humble doctorate in Computer Science, Kelvin. He had the brilliant idea of molding the best software engineering students into his software testing consultants. Some would focus teaching international standard quality theory, others would provide businesses with a software testing resource. The result, a consultancy of technical, academic resources, executing work to international standards. These academics were loyal to Kelvin and his consultancy, but lacked direction. The academics were not business savvy. This was why Mark was brought in as Chief Operating Officer (COO). He had one plan in mind, replicate the success of the UK consultancy I had left.

I understood that to grow business you need to get word of the business out there. This explained why Elliot's and Bruce's salesman skillset was required. Being salesman, they were great manipulators. They had Mark wrapped around their little fingers. Bruce chose the new Circular Quay office premises. He assigned himself the position "Chief of Sydney Operations". He wasn't a logistics expert and wasn't a chief. And to call him a salesman would be an insult to the profession. By definition, a salesman sells stuff. I had witnessed Bruce's sales patter first-hand. He would have difficulty selling Tigers to Tasmania.

"Mr Bradford", those words should be enunciated in a deep, smooth, UK radio DJ's tone. The bearded, 40-something, portly Canadian newbie was the next installation at the Sydney office. The finely groomed, minge-bearded man spoke with a mouthful of soft mumbles. He was, by Canadian standards, a reserved character. The intense, wide-eyed stare gave an indication of his focus. When he wasn't focussed on work, he focussed on keeping his head in the realms of reality. Unfortunately, he suffered from Asperger's, which made him a little less sociable, but allowed him to plough through work twice as fast as me.

Consultancy statements of work for the financial institution client were still being finalised. Meanwhile Mr Bradford, Elliot and I made use of the consultancy training manuals at the Sydney office. Elliot assigned himself the role of course provider. What that man couldn't apply himself to could be written on the back of a postage stamp. Bruce was rarely in the office. He was either at home or out entertaining potential clients. Mr

Bradford and I were technically "on the bench". It was a term all consultancies feared. A time when resources didn't earn money for the consultancy. I was quite happy being benched. I was still earning and learning.

Elliot covered the whole suite of consultancy training materials. As a consequence, Mr Bradford and I obtained lots of certificates and burned lots of the consultancy's cash reserves. I would consistently arrive at the Sydney office before 9am. Mr Bradford would turn up a little later because of the subtle variability in his 2-hour long journey. Elliot and Bruce rolled in as and when. Working from home was always an option for both. Their relationship was an interesting one. They didn't always see eye-to-eye and often bitched about each other behind each other's backs. The issues they had were many: machismo, power mongering and who had the better sales technique. Mark talked about the old Sydney team before his arrival. In Sydney, the consultancy was a two men strong team: Joel, a performance test specialist working at another Australian financial institution and Elliot Caldwell, the "lend his hand to anything" salesman. Elliot also did well as the Client Liaisons Manager. Mark saw fit to hire a new salesman, Bruce, to allow Elliot to bill more client hours. As with any major change, especially one around roles, Bruce's arrival had flustered the sure-footed Elliot. Elliot, when not working for the client, continued to follow up on leads and answer any of K.J.Ross's Sydney office phone queries. Both Bruce and Elliot were optimistic to the point of lying. Whilst talking to the duo, my inner monologue would say "Do you smell that? *sniff* Yeah, definitely bullshit". Elliot would often say that we needed more consultants to fill the roles. In reality, there were no roles to fill.

Chapter 6

Another Day in Paradise

Everyone I had met so far were accommodating, Bruce was by far the most generous. Knowing I was having difficulty finding a place to rent he got me in touch with Stifler, aka Glenn. Following an initial phone call he wanted to meet face-to-face. The meeting took place one lunch time in the city on a hot summer's day. I walked in and barely noticed Glenn. He was sat in a booth, suited and booted, next to an equally dapper looking colleague. Glenn stood up, his face was expressionless. I smiled and shook his hand. The expression on my face suddenly changed, from one of a relaxed, whimsical joy, to one of fear. "Was I about to be interviewed?" I thought. Glenn looked me up and down like a notice on a parking meter. The interrogation began. "What is your name? Where are you from?". His stare was intense. If I had looked away, he probably would have slapped me across the face with a leather glove. The interrogation changed from questioning to dictating the apartment rules. It was like listening to the laws of Fight Club (a film starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton). Thankfully he didn't say "The first rule of the apartment is... there is no apartment." He did say I could move into his Queenscliff apartment next week, the second week of December. I should vacate one week before Christmas. Everything was verbally agreed, nothing to sign, sweet.

The second week of December came along. I was all smiles, happy to know I would have one place to call my home for a couple of weeks. One early evening I made my way to Glenn's apartment. It was baking hot day in Sydney. I walked along the sidewalk of Manly Beach with all my luggage in tow and a long British jacket on my back. It was some effort walking up the hill to reach the ground floor of the apartment. My clothes were soaking with sweat. I looked at the text Glenn had sent me. Keys are located under the front wheel of the pick-up truck. That sounded straightforward. There was only one pickup on the drive. I took a "man look" for the keys. Nothing. Maybe Glenn meant one of the other wheels. Nothing. I looked under the whole car. Nothing. Bugger! "Where the hell were the keys?", I thought. This time I decided to be more thorough with my search. Yep, the keys were where Glenn said they were. I got to my feet and held the keys aloft. It was like a scene out of an old video game.

I approached the lift on the ground floor and hit the call button. As the sardine can of a lift opened, I was happy to see no one inside. "Now, where is the button to floor 3?", I said. The lift moved slowly. Its doors opened revealing a plushily carpeted floor. The door in front was white, modern and inviting. I tried the keys, a turn to the left confirmed great success. I nodded my head affirmatively. The door slowly opened revealing a space to call home. I was amazed at its large size. Thanks to the huge windows, light filled the interior. The centre piece of the apartment was a 50" flat screen TV placed the perfect distance from the sofa. My heart raced knowing I would one day get to indulge in this audio-visual showpiece.

A text appeared on my phone. It read "I hope you found your way into the apartment. Andy is on her way. She'll be happy to show you round. Glenn." I tentatively perched my bottom on the edge of the sofa and proceeded to melt into the cushions. The thought "could life be any better than this moment right now?" entered my head. Andy opened the door, shopping bags in hand. She directed a "hey" before beckoning the cats to the kitchen. Andy had presence. She was attractive, 5'9", tanned, toned, with piercing blue eyes. After putting food items into the fridge and dinner in the cats' dishes she turned her attentions to me. In a soft New Zealander accent she said, "David is it? Hi, I'm Andy, Glenn's partner. I'm not sure if Glenn has showed you around the place? I guess not with it being your first day at the apartment." Andy began describing the apartments contents including the spare bedroom and balcony. The bedroom was enormous and included an en suite. I plonked my belongings down and continued following Andy back to the kitchen. Andy offered me a beer labelled VB. I happily accepted. I was parched. The bottle of beer was screw top and handed to me in a neoprene holder. The Aussies called it a "stubby holder". The neoprene kept the bottle cold. Aussies joked about British warm beer. Australians prided themselves on drinking it ice cold.

Andy began talking about the finer details of the new living arrangements:

1. Be quiet if arriving back to the apartment late at night.
2. Keep the apartment clean at all times.
3. Keep this door closed because the cats could get out and injure themselves.
4. Rent is AU\$300 per week.

As the night drew in I looked outside my bedroom window. The bright lights of Manly reflected off the liquorice like sea. I took a final sip of beer and made my way into the lounge.

My eyes opened at the crack of dawn as the first beams of the sunlight enveloped the bedroom. In a light sleep I pictured an orchestra of harp playing angels. The soft, angelic sound faded out, replaced by the soft melody of Phil Collins "Another Day in Paradise". I opened my eyes and gazed at the balcony door. My body levitated towards the light and out onto the balcony.

I looked to my right, noticing a plethora of outdoor essentials including: A gas bbq and a well-worn wet suit. The air temperature was already 20 Degrees C, with a cool breeze sauntering off Queenscliff Beach. I walked to the corner of the balcony, posturing for the best view of the beach below. It was the weekend. The beach was packed with kids being drilled in life saver activities. In the sea a colony of surfers were waiting to catch the next wave in. I looked further into the distance to admire the glow of the sun behind Shelley Beach. I took a deep breath, the salty sea air tingled the back of my throat. 'Could life get any better than this moment right now?' I thought yet again. I headed slowly back inside to the lounge.

The huge TV seemed to stare at me blankly. I broke eye contact and visited the kitchen. I took out a box of Weetbix, an Australian cereal I found in the local Coles supermarket. Weetbix was not simply a misspelt Weet-a-bix (the British branded) copy. Australia's Weetbix was superior.

It had:

- greater depth of wheat-like flavour.
- larger and crumblier biscuits.

Australia offered many new taste sensations. I didn't know it at the time, but it was mango season. Fresh mango from neighbouring Queensland was cheap. The soft, yellow, ridiculously sweet, fibrous fruit tasted delectable. The other fruit high on the flavour stakes was the beautiful watermelon and the dragon fruit, also grown in tropical Queensland. All the tropical fruits grown in Australia tasted much sweeter. Independent coffee shop coffees were always beautiful. It was prepared to a high standard and sourced, in some cases from, you guessed it, Queensland.

A type of cuisine that was spawning a new type of restaurant was the gourmet burger. Manly, arguably had the best gourmet burger eatery in the world. Benbry Burger offered huge value for money. It was packed with customers most nights. Most were penny pinching travellers from the nearby hostel. Who could blame their meagre money stretching? For AU\$9 you got a succulent, Aussie-fied example of a premium beef pate and a sample of fries. For a smidgeon more you could upsize and add a drink, increasing the cost to AU\$10.

It wasn't all about American style food in Australia. The British had put their mark on Australian food culture from the time the first European fleet had landed. Granted, Fish and chips weren't around in 1788, but they did arrive soon after. Fish and chips shops were a common sight in Australian suburbs. Most were run by "Asians" (a term the Australians applied to anyone of far eastern decent). The layout of the Australian "chipper" was the same as that found in the UK. The main difference between them were the menus. Haddock and cod was replaced with shark and red snapper. I had to admit it, the fish in Australia tasted better, but the Brits had better quality chips.

Another British staple that the Australians made their own was the hearty pie. Freshly baked examples could be bought at the Corso Bake House, in Manly. They were hand-sized, contained a variety of fillings, topped with puff-pastry and served in a silver pie tray. As was tradition in Australia, a sachet of tomato ketchup was thrown in for free. Menu favourites included curried chicken and beef and mushroom.

I quickly ate my 3 weetbix breakfast before stepping onto the warm and bright Manly Corso. I was relieved to see Bruce turn up with a spare wetsuit at Manly Beach. I wasn't going to explore Manly to Shelley Beach Cove in sub 20 degree C temperatures without one! I was excited to be using my snorkelling equipment for the first time. In the corner of Manly Beach there was a calm spot where Bruce and I waded into deeper water. Bruce went off ahead and I followed. He decided not to wear fins because it agitated his bad leg. For a person that wasn't wearing fins, he swam incredibly quickly. Even with my large fins, I found it difficult to keep up.

The water appeared murky. It often did after a night of rainy conditions. During our swim I frequently had to lift my head out the water to catch a glimpse of Bruce's current position. I soon got into clearer waters. The shelves of the rocky seabed could now clearly be seen in the depths below. The underwater world appeared tranquil. Schools of fish majestically moved in unison against the ebb and flow of the sea current. The larger fish hid themselves from view under the shelves within the rocky reef. Bruce dove down to inspect the underside of a rocky lip. I, with a sense of trepidation, took a deep breath and descended. Not having dove so rapidly in prior sea swims, it came as a surprise to me how quickly the pressure changed. My hearing was the first of my senses to feel the effects. This was quickly followed by my smell, more specifically, I could smell blood. The pressure on my goggles caused my nose to bleed.

Bruce indicated heading back to the safety of Manly Beach. Off he blasted in a froth of sea foam, leaving me for dead. When I eventually reached shore, I saw Bruce take off his wet suit with difficulty. Thank goodness he was around to assist me. Bruce spoke enthusiastically about his sea life observations during the swim. On his list was a turtle, a shark and a giant cuttlefish. I didn't manage to see of any of those. I did see a parrotfish which, Bruce informed me, are ten to the dozen. For an Englishman used to seeing the murky outline of grey colour lake fish, a parrotfish was an exciting prospect. The swim was immersive, so peaceful and colourful. The clarity and temperature of the water enhanced the experience.

Chapter 7

Lady of My Life

It was on the approach to Christmas. Apart from working too many hours at the client, what other excessive work activities happened around that time of year? Of course, the work Christmas party. This year the consultancy's "do" was to be held in early December. What I loved most about Christmas parties were their potential to not go to plan. The path of a Christmas party is controlled by 2 factors, money & ambition. Mark, the COO, made the journey to Sydney from his home in Brisbane purely for this occasion. It was to be his and my first consultancy Christmas Party. Mark had direct access to the company's expenses. Funding for the Christmas party wasn't going to be a problem. How ambitious were our intentions going to be?

It was early Friday afternoon, the day of the Christmas party. In the office, Mr Bradford and I were making party preparations. Bruce was on hand to ensure that proceedings stayed true to the Australian experience. He turned up with enough beer to fill a small fridge. However, we were missing food. While the bottles of beer cooled, Bruce indicated that he and I should head to the Sydney Fish Market. Why a fish market? Cooked and unpeeled prawns. A staple of Australian Christmas food.

The Sydney Fish Market excited the senses. The seafood was so colourful. The prawns in particular were huge! Bruce didn't take long to grab the attention of the fishmonger and land a huge order. With an ochre "here-ya", the aromatic bags of Moreton Bay Bugs and Prawns were passed to me. The next stop on our travels was the bottle-o (off licence or liquor store). We had plenty of beer already, but Bruce assured we weren't going to run out of drinks this side of Christmas.

It was good I popped along. I was given permission to choose whichever types of beer I so desired. Bruce was a huge admirer of the Becks bottled beer. Being a man of distinction, the Becks image suited his social standing. I on the other had was an admirer of the Australian beers that imitated dark English beers. None came better than a brace of beverage beauties, Toohey's Old and Coppers Stout. I asked Bruce to grab several of both, forgetting that the rest of the staff were unlikely to drink these speciality beers.

With a fully stocked car consisting of fish and booze, we headed back to the office. Bruce had the smart idea to buy ice from the bottl-o. In the corner of the office lay an empty Esky, aka an ice box, which Bruce had the foresight of bringing. With the small fridge fully stocked, some of the newly bought additions made the Esky their home. As Bruce, Mr Bradford and I finished stocking, Mark appeared with a weekend wheely case in tow. He had an excellent posture for an ex-programmer. He was nimble, given his rotund figure. Suited and well groomed, he confidently strided through the office towards Bruce's meeting room. "Hi guys, Bruce, did you look into those new opportunities?" he quipped. Bruce blatantly ignored Mark's question. He tried to distract everyone's attention. He took out the fresh smelling bags of sea food and said, "tuck in everyone".

Mark saw me struggling to peel the jumbo prawns. He had eaten prawns all his life. He demonstrates the prawn peeling process. It took him literally seconds to peel and consume a prawn. "It's all in the snapping of

the head", he said. The technique is awesome. I tried unsuccessfully to imitate it. I got better, still my technique lacked the fluidity the Aussies displayed. We got through a hefty amount of Moreton Bay Bugs and Prawns. Soon the bins were filling up with shells. The fishy aroma mixed with spilt beer filled the office air space. Admittedly, it did not bother us enough to leave the premises.

Bruce, the man with a plan, proposed a game of poker in his meeting room. He asked Mr Bradford, the man with the company laptop, to play a selection of dance music to get us in the mood for later. The party was just kicking off when Elliot and Joel entered the office. Elliot, forever smiling, added much needed energy to the mix. He introduced us all to the relatively old hand Joel. Bruce's grin widened as he saw new punters to rope into the game of Poker. Bruce wanted to play for money, Mark refused, instead suggesting we play for candies. We drank more, ate more, bet more and, beginners luck, I won!

It was time to hit the town and leave the ripe smell of the office behind us. With Bruce as our guide, we hit the bars of Circular Quay. With the imminent turn of midnight, it was time to settle for a night club. Bruce knew exactly where we should be, The Argyle. I couldn't believe I made it past the bouncers without falling over. Focus was key to balance.

The venue was dark, brash and loud. Memories of the night became snapshots:

- The bar area, it was the last location I remember seeing Mark and Joel.
- Bruce, the man with the grimace like smile. He had free reign of the company expenses. The man started conversations with every group of women in the club. His excuse for chatting to the ladies was "this is my mate Dave; he's just come over from England and is looking to get fckd". His plan worked. I managed to get a young lady's phone number.
- A woman stole my hat that I somehow procured from some other random person.
- Urinating in the unusual men's room where the urinals were, from one angle, in view of the whole club.
- Happily eating a Macca's (MacDonald's) chicken burger and slurping down a strawberry milkshake.
- Taking great care to open the door to the Queenscliff apartment and locate my bedroom.

I somehow had the foresight, prior to the night out, to set my alarm for 9am. As the alarm rang, I tried to rise from my slumber. I scrambled to locate my phone. I hit the stop button immediately before going back to sleep. 30 minutes passed. The phone rang out again. This time it wasn't the alarm, it was someone calling me. Dazed and confused, I located the handset and accepted the call. With a strained voice I said, "hello." "Is this David Clarke? We're all here waiting for ya.", a cool sounding Australian said. My brain took a few seconds to process the question and response. 'Ah shit', I thought. 'Fuck, I've got that surfing lesson this morning!'. More profanities echoed in my head. What do I do? I've paid good money for that surfing lesson. I looked outside. 'Shit, it's a beautiful day too.'. I hesitantly demanded "Could you wait half an hour?". The cool-headed Aussie said, "Nah mate, we're ready to go now. Where are ya?". "Queenscliff", I replied. "Be on the corner of Bridge Road and Grey Cliff Street in 5 minutes if you want to be picked up.", he said.

I scrambled for my clothes, wet suit, deodorant and keys before running to the pick-up location. I reached the street corner. I could see a van with a heap of surf boards strapped to the roof. Was this the surf teacher? Sure enough, it stopped. Out jumped a surf dude dressed in board shorts and entertaining thick, white zinc cream on his lower lip. He walked over asked, "Dave?". I felt a sense of relief through the haze of grogginess. As I walked towards the van I felt sorry for the other passengers that had to wait for me, drunken Dave. I opened the van door, sheepishly said hello, before squeezing my cheeks between other learner surfers.

We headed a short distance further up the coast to an area named North Curl Curl. The area was majestic. The powdery sandy beach and calm lapping waters added to a sense of paradise. The conditions were, according

to the teacher, perfect for a spot of surfing. Unfortunately, there be dragons. More to the point, there be blue bottles (man-o-war jelly fish) sharing the surf area with us.

Before grabbing a board and entering the shallows we were shown the basics of surfing on the beach:

1. Swim through the "breakers" (breaking waves) to get to a calm spot just beyond.
2. Turn the board so it's front points towards shore.
3. Look over your shoulder.
4. When the wave approaching you is 5 meters away begin paddling with the hand and arms, don't stop.
5. If the wave passes underneath the board, hard luck. If you somehow feel the board is continuing to move forwards, you've fluked it!
6. Now's the time to think about getting onto your feet. Adopt a cobra stance then leap to your feet in one swift action.
7. Try to look cool. If you can ride the wave all the way to shore, you are bitchin' (good).

Yep, the basic steps would have worked for me if I had the energy. My body was owed at least one day's recovery. All I could muster during the surfing lessons was a lie down in the shallows. I was tired, thirsty and in need of sunscreen. I managed to slap factor 50 on my head and feet, but not my hands. When the surfing teacher called time, I was clearly relieved. I wasn't stung by a jelly fish and I hadn't wiped out. Having slept on my board for most of the day, there was never a chance of that happening. The only sting I would feel would be the next day, waking up to see my comical sun burnt hands.

I embraced snorkelling. It became the highlight of my recreational life on the weekend. I loved:

1. Immersing myself in the warm, clear sea.
2. The serenity. It was somewhere to clear my mind.
3. Observing beautiful, colourful wildlife in their natural habitat.

It was drawing ever closer to Christmas and the end of my tenancy at the Queenscliff apartment. My attempts to find a house share were still not going well. Desperation was setting in. Conversation would devolve into my fickle accommodation needs. My fellow colleagues offered reassurance and assistance. Elliot was more than happy to offer his spare room on the lead into the Christmas Break. I had no other options, so appreciatively jumped at the chance.

Something else that played on my mind, as a consequence of the Work Christmas Party, was an Australian lady. Since I did not have many phone numbers in the contacts section of my new phone, Elle's stood out. I, for many days, contemplated phoning her. Every time I looked at my phone and thought about it, I had that "fluttery" feeling. One day I plucked up the courage to send her a text. The language I used was not Shakespearean. It was brief and general, but still, it took me bloody ages to edit it. After hitting send, the anticipation of a response consumed my thoughts. Did I have her correct phone details? I wonder if she remembered me? What was she like? Is she going to reply? My ponderous thoughts were quelled when Elle replied. To my relief, she sent me a text mentioning Bruce's smooth talking and free drinks. Texts went back and forth effortlessly. We agreed to meet up.

I was temporarily located in Elliot's spare room in the suburb of Annandale. Coincidentally, Elle lived in Annandale too. Cool, we arranged a local, evening dinner date. But why should I be extremely nervous about meeting her? Well, I had no memory of Elle. If I was clever I would have used my new phone to take a photograph of her.

As I entered I took a look into all corners of the Italian restaurant. 'Would the real Elle please stand up?', I thought. I walked around the spacious Mediterranean diner, but no, I couldn't see her. Was she late? Had I overlooked her? Negative thoughts of 'I've been tricked' began to stew in the thoughts. I calmed down and took a seat. 'I'll give her 10 minutes', I thought. I nursed a bottle of beer while sporadically looking down at my phone. After 5 minutes I received a text. Elle had arrived and wondered where I was. We must have been in a similar state when we first met in the night club. We both had no clue what each other looked like. I again glanced into the corners of the restaurant to see which person could be Elle. My eyes locked onto one girl sitting by herself, wearing glasses and reading a book. Could this be her? I stared. I still did not recognise her. I took a second look around the room. Yep, she was the only woman on her own. It had to be her. I finished the rest of my beer and walked slowly towards the prospective dinner date.

As I approached, she looked up from her book. "Elle?", I said. She smiled, stood up "Dave, right?", she replied. I confirmed and gave her a cursory kiss on the cheek. We both sat down and began chatting about "that" night. Elle was much younger than I expected. I was 30 years old. She, as I was to find out, was 21. She became the youngest person I had ever dated, by a full year. Her skin was immaculate, even by UK standards. Elle was a 3rd generation Welsh Australian, voluptuous, a good 5'7". She spoke confidently and quickly, indicating her high intellect. We ordered food and chatted. Our meals were tasty, the conversation flowed somewhat, but the connection wasn't there. We kissed and left our fleeting relationship at "goodbye". I couldn't help but feel disappointed nothing more came of the date.

As Christmas drew closer I forgot about the date with Elle. I had my sights set on the summer break. As was the case across Australia, every employee was forced to use their holiday allowance over the Christmas period. It was a total of 2 weeks. In most cases people extended it. I had no appetite to extend mine. Every day at work in the office felt like a holiday.

I had no idea what my plan was. In the UK I would have been happy staying indoors and away from the inclement wintery weather. I briefly looked into available flights out of Sydney including:

- A 3-hour flight to New Zealand.
- A 4-hour flight to Fiji.
- A 4+ hour flight to Asia.

Down under it was the start of summer. It was baking hot most days. I wouldn't be British if I didn't get my top off and make the most of these conditions. Why go to the effort of flying here and not making the most of it. My line of thinking switched. What about a road trip in Australia? I pictured visiting the wonderful Great Barrier Reef with nothing but my snorkelling gear. If you had given me a map at the time I wouldn't have a clue where the Barrier Reef was located. All I knew, from the conversations I had, it was somewhere north of Sydney.

Given my slap-dash holiday plans, I headed to Sydney's bustling retail centre for talks with a travel agent. 'Which travel agency should I visit?', I thought. I walked through an arcade near the large department store, David Jones. As with many decisions, my first choice is my best choice. The choice was, in this case, STA Travel. STA Travel is not shabby by any means. It's not unprofessional by any means. It is basic and budget friendly. Perfect for thrifty me.

I looked inside at its brightly lit, cosy interior. I was captivated by magazines featuring capitalised words: "EUROPE", "ASIA" "SOUTH AMERICA". Where was "AUSTRALIA"? As I turned, I heard a bright, feminine, Australian voice. "Can I help?", the travel agent said. She indicated for me to take a seat. I sheepishly sat down before planting my sweaty backside on the synthetic seat surface. "Where were you considering of travelling

to? Would you be travelling alone?", she asked. "I want to go to the Great Barrier Reef. Yes, I'll be travelling alone.", I replied. She reached for a magazine beneath the desk and placed it delicately in front of me. "Do you know of Oz Experience?", she asked. I looked at her blankly. She continued "It's a bus tour that starts in Cairns and finishes in Sydney and vice versa. At the stop off points it's shared accommodation. Some meals are included. You can stay for as long as you desire at any stop off point. Optional excursions are offered. Up to you to get involved.", she explained. I pictured the holiday. Me, my own boss, cruising the freeway in a bus. Travelling to destination this and that. Having the option to stop off for as long as I want... Freedom. "Where do you recommend, I start?" "How long does the bus take to get to the final destination?", I asked. "I recommend starting in Sydney, less busy there. It takes over a week to get to Cairns.", replied the travel agent. Over a bloody week to get to Cairns. Did I hear her right? Where the bloody hell was Cairns on the brochure map. Looking at the small map, the distance looked insignificant. Then I looked at the scale. That's when I realised. To fly from Sydney to Cairns took 4.5 hours. A drive covering the same 1500 miles distance took, yep, a very long time. Put into context, the journey is double the length of the UK.

With Oz Experience ticket in hand, I was all set for the Christmas holidays. More good news had arrived. Doug, Bruce's friend, informed me that a room was available to rent in Manly. Given I had no other room rental options at that time, I accepted to move in after the Christmas break. I wasn't going to be an orphan on Christmas Eve either. Elliot had invited me to his girlfriend's mom's church gathering.

It was a clear black night, warm, with the feeling of the festive period joviality. 10 of us, Christmas's orphans, were shoulder-to shoulder, sat outside, around a long dining table. Elliot's girlfriend's Mom played the part of host, tending to our every culinary need. "Would you like some beer David?" I was asked. I looked at the beer bottle, noting the fluid level was below the stubby holder top. A swig progressed into a gulp, progressed into an empty bottle. "Yep, another VB would be great thanks." I replied. A cornucopia of alcoholic drinks appeared on the dining table. We were told the meal would soon be served. Elliot, his Girlfriend, his Girlfriend's Mom and Girlfriend's Mom's Partner were beavering away with food preparations. Out first were the vegetables: a selection of roasted potatoes, boiled carrots and greens. They were set down gently at the centre of the dining table. There was a brief pause before Elliot's Girlfriend's Mom returned with a huge silver platter. I looked at Elliot with dismay and asked what type of meat was being served. With his lively eyes and charismatic smile, he said "it's TurDucken, a deboned chicken stuffed into a deboned duck, stuffed into a deboned turkey!". Why someone would want to do this to three, fine feathered animals were beyond me. Why be dismissive? It may have looked ugly, but did it taste good?

I placed a roughly cut piece onto my plate and stared at it for a while. It was analogous to delving into an archaeological dig. I was happy what each layer represented. I skewered a piece of the beast with force. With one swift motion it entered my mouth. My focus switched to the flavours and textures of the TurDucken. My expectations were far higher than actual. Disappointingly, it wasn't a taste sensation. A wise man once said, "don't cross the streams". Applying that to TurDucken, "don't stuff many bird into one another". At least I could say I had tried it, but never again.

With TurDucken devoured, the table was cleared. More drinks arrived and were quickly consumed. The groups spread out in the four corners of the yard. The social aspect of the night kicked-off. I hung around Elliot like a shadow, not knowing Jack from John. Elliot began chatting to an athletic, vacant looking, middle-aged bloke. As I was listening in, I got the feeling that there was more to this man than met the eye. I could see that he was chewing gum like a cow chewed cud. He slowly looked towards me and introduced himself with a Kiwi droll. "Hi, my name is Tom, are you a member of the church?", he asked. I shook my head. "Ah okay", Tom replied. I could see Tom begin to relax, taking an open stance, he relayed the problems he currently faced in his life. Truth be told, the church was finding Tom to be a difficult nut to crack. Tom had substance abuse

issues. The church had tried hard to kick him from this habit, but he continued nonetheless. He had good intention. Go to church, say his prayers and stay clean. However, given his extensive history of "mixing with the wrong people" resulted in missed church visits and relapse. The church had mentioned he was on his last warning. Any more antisocial shenanigans, he was gone.

Tom was comfortable talking about his chequered past. He was first and foremost a fighter. A fighter in the blood sport sense of the word. A closer look at his weathered physique confirmed that. As he relayed stories of fights, he illustrated toned-down versions of the fighting techniques he used. I was in awe. I had some idea of fighting techniques, given my exposure to prize fighting and martial arts. The techniques Tom used were far more powerful than that of any fighter I had sparred. During Tom's life story he dropped in a cursory mention of UFC. It was a sporting event I recently watched in a luxurious Dubai Airport bar. This guy barely standing before me claimed he was the first New Zealand entrant into UFC. The fact he appeared to be punch drunk was testament to his lack of success. He mentioned that he never won a MMA match. Tom continued to describe his failed relationships outside of fighting, with female partners that supposedly gave him physical abuse. Tom's life story was one of the most interesting I had ever heard. You never know who you expect to meet on your travels, especially amongst churchgoers.

The next morning Elliot was kind enough to drop me off at the South Sydney Hotel. The hotel, located opposite Sydney Central Train Station, was one of the Oz Experience pick up points. I checked in and made my way to the hotel room. I opened the door, saw the large bed and threw myself onto it. It was so nice to have personal space in the relative lap of hotel luxury. I realised I had far too much luggage to take with me on the Oz Experience road trip. I hatched a plan. I was going to take just the essentials and cheekily dump my excess luggage at the Sydney consultancy office. Hopefully, it would still be there when I returned.

With luggage dumped, a slim lined and agile packed me was contemplating the finer things in my life. One of those things I considered fine were the hairs atop my head. An unkempt balding appearance is not good in holiday photos. To remedy this, without any specific hair cutting tools, I decided to use my Gillette razor to see to my hair. What I did not realise was how much effort was going to be involved. The amount of shaving cream and brute force used was literally eyewatering. It got the job done, with a nick here and trickle of blood there. Feeling a freshly shaven head is an unusual sensation. A bald baby's head feels soft, but the feel of a razor blade shaved head is like clasping a frog. The "skin head" look does have its good side. It is a symbol of rebellion and liberalism, a stance I leant towards. The bad side, it is associated with mindless violence, which contradicts the way I perceive myself. Hopefully people would see past its edginess and love the big softie beneath.

First thing in the morning I walked out the front door of the hotel and to see the large, white Oz Experience bus. A tall, thin Dutch looking man made his presence known as he walked towards me. He shouted out my name in a stereotypical Australian accent. I smiled. He threw my slim-lined luggage into the hold and asked to head on board.

The coach was large enough to accommodate over 100 people. It was surprising to find one group located at the back of the coach. I said an enthusiastic "hello" and sat close by. I noticed how young they were. I was 30, still within the age limit of Club 18-30s party holidays. These tourists were 10 years my junior: Two girls and a guy. They were from England, Germany and Denmark respectively. They all had Northern European pale skin.

We started discussing the trip ahead, noting what we were looking forward to. None of us has a clue what side trips were in store. We continued to chat as the bus's engine roared into action. The air conditioning fired up and off we went. I was the last pickup. It was now time to sit back and relax as the bus made its way

towards Sydney Harbour Bridge. As we navigated Circular Quay, a noticeable crackling sound was heard over the bus's speaker system. The sound was followed by a base-y explosion as Jeff, our coach driver and guide, began adjusting his headset. "G'day" he said. Jeff had one volume level, loud. I felt sorry for the coach's speaker system. "How are you guys?, looking forward to the journey ahead?", he asked. We shouted a loud and resounding "yes". Jeff, being at the other end of the bus, could just about hear our reply. He down-played how half-hearted our response was. We repeated, but this time with even more vigour. Jeff indicated he was not impressed with our efforts, and continued. His dry, terse, Aussie sense of humour came through as he described the Oz Experience. Jeff mentioned, amongst other things, the following:

- Passenger/coach etiquette.
- On board belongings security.
- Keeping the isles free of items.
- What should and should not be flushed down the loo.

Jeff mentioned some of the optional trips in the itinerary, including:

- Byron Bay Surf n Stay
- Fraser Island 4WD Tag-a-long Tour
- Whitsunday Sailing Tour - 2 Day, 2 Night
- Magnetic Island 1 Night Stopover

Given how fluid the itinerary was described, he had obviously rehearsed it many times. Jeff played a plethora of Aussie songs during the trip including one entitled "Come to Australia", which summed up all the fears that tourists faced when visiting Australia. Basically, be warned, you might accidentally get killed by spiders, snakes, crocs, sharks, and box jelly fish. Jeff used the gamut of Aussie phrases to ensure we were all well versed in the "No worries, no dramas, too easy" culture that Australia presented.

This trip was special, my first experience of Australia outside the big city. The highlight of the trip was the Whitsunday Sailing Tour. Being surrounded by the clear, warm, calming waters of the tropics took relaxation to a new level. I was united with many other Northern European travellers on the trip. Most tourists I met were from Austria (maybe they arrived to Australia by mistake?). We were united by drinking, which is a big part of the Australian social scene. The Australians have made it their own. Taking what the British have, adding better weather, more refreshing beer and a stubby holder.

The day prior to the Oz Experience trip, I visited Manly. I arrived at the entrance to a house located just off the boulevard. I rang the doorbell. Moments later a dishevelled woman with black curly hair and a loose-fitting dress appeared at the door. She spoke with a gravelly French accent, influenced heavily by smoking. She looked middle age, and smelt mature too. Flo was her name, and as her name implied, I had to go with her to check out the room for rent. As I walked through the large, open living space, I saw the room for rent. First impressions were positive, it had:

- A High ceiling.
- A Free bed.
- An En-suite bathroom.

The whole apartment looked dilapidated, but it had character. Anyway, it was better than the alternative i.e., moving from pillar to post across Sydney. I could tell Flo wasn't a salesperson. To try and seal the deal, she mentioned that she liked me. As if the thought of being liked by a person I didn't find attractive would sway

my decision. She asked me what I thought. I dismissed the former part of her comment, excusing her poor English. I didn't hesitate, I would be happy to move in if she was happy.

After an amazing Oz Experience I returned to Manly. This time I had all my possessions, most of which I had retrieved from the Sydney work office. Flo, the acting landlady, was there to let me in and quickly showed me around. She was late for work, apologised and left me in the empty apartment. I walked into my room and sat down on the bed shouldering my luggage. Unfortunately, the bed was as dilapidated as the apartment. The mattress and my bottom comically fell through the beams in the bed frame. I gathered myself back to my feet. I placed my items down slowly and looked under the bed.

I could see the problem. Originally there had been at least 10 wooden beams supporting the frame. There were now 7. If I wanted the bed to support my weight, I now knew where to place my body. Before arriving in Australia I had never house shared or stayed in a hostel for that matter. I was clueless how I should behave in an accommodation share. What were my responsibilities in the house? How did I share the shared space? My plan was to play it by ear and change my behaviour if there were complaints.

The shared space could be best described as "dishevelled Australian fused with a French flamboyance". It was hugely influenced by Flo. Flo was originally from France. She worked as a cook at the bar located across the corso, The Ivanhoe Hotel Manly. If Flo were a cheese, she would be a Bleu d'Auvergne, strong in flavour, but nothing to look at. Her shoulder length black, wavy hair, baggy dress and gravelly French accent gave her an unmistakeable presence. She moved with grace that contradicted such an appearance. She loved her cats, all four of them. As a general life rule, a cat owner with any more than one cat should have a full psychological assessment. The cats did what they wanted, which suited Flo's libertarian rational. They poo'd wherever they pleased. When they weren't eating their protein rich diet and relieving themselves, they slept. What goes in, must come out. The place the cats frequented when "seeing to their business" was the shower in the shared bathroom. Flo would usually clean up before Tom (the other flat mate) used the bathroom each day. There were several occasions when Flo didn't. Tom, on entering the bathroom, would let Flo and the household know by shouting at the top of his lungs.

Tom was in his late 20s. A dishevelled looking music festival goer, hailing from the North of England. When he was not finding cat shit in the shared bathroom, he was out drinking or in his bedroom. There he smoked marijuana and drank Toohey's New from his "beauty is in the eye of the beer holder" stubby holder. He spoke with an eloquence that contradicted his outward appearance. Tom was well educated and a seasoned traveller. We bonded over our love for Top Gear, beer, and England. Our conversations would be about the awful state of the apartment, and Flo's liberal cats. He had no job and no real direction in life. He was behind on his rental payments and constantly talked about leaving. I had no issues with Tom, I respected his point of view. He and Flo did not agree on much.

Flo, as I was to find out, was going to be the bane of my life too. The only reason she talked to me was to complain. She complained that I did little around the house and that I should contribute more to chores. I worked on the principle of what I use, I clean. What we share, the landlady takes care of. This did not lend itself well to the whole house-sharing concept. I hated confronting her.

The flat was vacant most of the time. Flo was busy working and Tom was busy drinking. It was strange, given Tom had no job, he could afford a social drinking lifestyle. His assigned shelf in the fridge was always fully stocked with beers. A regular at a local pub once said "man can live on beer alone". Tom was testament to this. I did not keep much in the fridge. I preferred to purchase my food from the local supermarket and eat it when I got home.

My post meal-time timetable was well structured:

1. Walk from the kitchen to my bedroom.
2. Carefully lie on bed.
3. Turn on the work laptop.
4. Plug in USB drive.
5. Binge watch American TV series.

The bedroom was large, high-ceilinged, with little furniture. The bed and chest of drawers were left by the previous occupants. A large walk-in-wardrobe was accessible as well as a shared bathroom. Unfortunately, with little TLC applied, it was left in a state fit for stoners, junkies and people desperate for a house share. The view from my room was surprisingly lacking given its proximity to Manly Beach. The only sea-front feature I could make out were the tops of fern trees. Directly below my bedroom window were many industrial sized garbage bins.

It was the height of summer. With the bedroom lacking adequate air conditioning, the window needed to be opened. If the noisome smell didn't agitate me, the cockroaches would. Being from the UK, my experience of large creepy crawlies was minimal. One particularly humid night I was asleep with bedroom windows wide open. I tossed and turned; the humidity was discomforting. As I lay there in a foetal position I felt something scurry across my feet. I was tired and dismissive about what it could be, so I ignored the sensation. Whatever it was, hopefully the encounter was a fleeting one. I quickly settled back into a light sleep. A few seconds passed. The sensation of something crawling up my leg caused me to kick out. My heart raced, I sat bolt upright and reached for the bed side light switch.

It was on the wall, and it saw me. The cockroach, a creature that could survive a nuclear bomb blast, was lying in wait for my next move. Given its size, it had a lot of life experience. I could sense it was beckoning me to make the next move. I stood there, clad only in boxer shorts. I reached for my bedside flip-flop (thong) ready to give the beast a trashing. I ran towards the wall and swung my flip flop into an empty, once occupied by the cockroach. The new space it occupied was a good 5 metres away. I again ran and slapped an empty space. This melee continued for 5 minutes. I placed my hands on my hips, breathing laboured, with flip-flop clasped loosely in my right hand. I shook my head. My plan of attack needed adjusting. I waited for a moment of inspiration. I had one simple thought. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. If you repeat the same actions, you're going to get the same outcomes. In my case, failure to exterminate the cockroach. As I began accepting defeat, the deft cockroach got bored and buggered off back out the window. My sweaty body slumped back into bed. I tried to sleep with one eye open, gripping my pillow tight.

When I woke on the weekends, usually hungover, I would often walk from my room into the kitchen. Enjoying breakfast was a simple matter of grabbing a bowl, spoon, 2 Weetbix biscuits, milk and a spot at the breakfast table. For variety's sake I would sometimes eat on the shared balcony space located the other side of the living room. The balcony faced the side street below. Its concrete floor was awash with used cigarettes and pots of sand. It was, for the most part, Flo's cheeky smoking nest. Unfortunately, cigarette smoke would carry in through the connecting door and into the lounge. The smell of stale tobacco could be found throughout the apartment.

I would sometimes take my breakfast over to the lounge sofa and turn on the TV. It was there that one day, wearing only my boxer shorts, I felt something crawling on my skin. It was a subtle sensation, but it stopped me in my tracks. I looked closer. Initially I couldn't see it. I studied my leg acutely. The only carpeted room in

the house was the lounge. My brain began to piece together the puzzle. Where did Flo's collection of cats often sleep? Yep, the lounge. What was on my leg? A flea circus.

I made a mental note to ask more questions to the landlady prior to accepting a house share:

1. How many cats do you have? If the landlady replies with a number greater than 1. Leave.
2. You're happy more than 1 cat lives in the house share. You ask the next question. Where do your cats go to the toilet? If the answer is not:
 1. "outside".
 2. "in a kitty litter tray". Leave.
3. You're happy the many cats poo in the shared loo. You ask the next question. Do carpet fleas trouble you? If you are happy the answer is no. You are a more liberal human being than me.

I could now see a haze that bloomed in the lounge, a haze of fleas. The only respite from the swarm was ontop of the furniture. I felt terrified. I had to get away from the carpeted area and back to my wooden floored bedroom. I did so quickly using the triple jump technique: A hop, skip and jump. I sat carefully on my bed and contemplated what to do next. I, like Tom, wanted to move out. I needed to find a new place.

As I became more settled in my new home, I realised had few people to socialise with. My best mates were Bruce, Tom and a circus of flat fleas. Unfortunately, they were all busy over the Christmas period. I sat in bed and thought about the date I had with Elle prior to Christmas. As uneventful as the encounter was, I felt there was a tiny connection. I thought, 'I wonder what she's up to? Would I be stupid to send her a short text message? I've got tails of my recent Oz Experience trip to tell.' With that the iPhone was out. The texting fingers quickly worked their magic, crafting the follow-up text. It read, "Hi Elle, hope you are well? I've recently returned from my road trip from Sydney to Cairns. I really enjoyed meeting you before the Christmas Break. It would be great to see you again. Dave" Short, sweet, simple, sent. I waited, like a patient fisherman.

I lay the phone down and tried to rest. Sleep was light as my heart pounded and thoughts raced. I was ready to pounce at the phone if, by chance, she replied. I waited. And waited. I got restless. I woke up, got to my feet and idly tidied my room. I glanced occasionally at my phone, willing it to make a sweet Apple notification sound. "Come on phone, do something!", I said. I repetitively walked over to check, nothing. "Elle, why? Why don't you respond?", I said. I checked the time. 2 minutes had passed. I felt suicidal. Anger took hold. I began turning the air blue. "F*ck it, I didn't like you anyway", I said loudly. At that moment, the phone buzzed.

I swooped down on the phone like a peregrine falcon snatching an unexpected pigeon. My heart was in my throat. I looked away. It was difficult to bring myself to reading the reply. A plethora of 'What ifs...?' filled my mind. I tried to second guess what the text could be. I unlocked the phone, opened one eye and cautiously read the first sentence. "Hey Dave, it was good to meet you too...". It felt like I had passed an extremely difficult exam. I leapt from my bed, punched the air with joy and shouted "yes, yes, yes". I was happy to leave my thoughts there but remembered there were still several sentences to read. I tentatively returned. "It would be great to hear more about your trip. I'm busy with studies over the next couple of days. I'm free Saturday evening? Elle x." Was that a kiss crafted at the end of the sentence? She loves me, she really loves me. Bloody hell.

I wanted to reply immediately, but there was a chance she would sense my desperation and ignore me. I had to be cool. Breathe, wait, think, text. I held my desperation for 5 minutes and began crafting my response. "Sounds great. I'm currently living over in Manly. Happy to head your way if its more convenient. Let's meet at a bar over at Circular Quay. How does 7:00pm sound?", sent. It felt like the interview stages of a new job. I had

passed the dating stage 1 and was happily progressing to stage 2. I pondered my chances of getting to the final stages.

My earliest memories of sex were odd. Before I reached the age of 10, I got an unexplainable pleasure from sliding up and down metal poles. I remember my first erection. I was watching music TV show Top of the Pops. A seductive 80s female Italian pop star overwhelmed my senses.

As a young teen going through puberty, I had an erection regularly. My penis stood to attention first thing in the morning, during the car journey to school, during class and on the walk home. I never doubted my sexuality. I had a socially acceptable attraction to females. I was obsessed by women with large breasts, who looked like my mother. But I never thought of my mom as being attractive. Nor a person I respected. I respected strong, masculine figures. My dad and Arnold Schwarzenegger were my idols. I socially distanced myself from women. I was shy, I didn't understand them and didn't have the courage to bridge the social gap.

In my high school and college years I masturbated to mental images of sexually mature women from school. It became an obsession. I didn't realise what impact this obsession was having on my mental health. My interactions with women became healthier on starting my first job as a shop assistant. There were lots of female staff members. My social intelligence improved. Slowly I began appreciating women as equals. However, my job did little to stop my masturbation habits.

In my 20s I began to mature sexually. I believed I was heterosexual. How could a person who masturbated to images of women not be? However, I felt an attraction to men. I could not deny that feeling. The thought of exploring that desire sexually made me feel uncomfortable. With all men that I got along with and found attractive, I never desired sex. I questioned if I was gay, straight or bi-sexual? Google's answer is great, "you are not alone in questioning your sexual orientation" i.e., it's complicated.

I had no long-term partnership experience prior to meeting Elle. I arrived at Circular Quay, having spent the best part of half an hour commuting across the Sydney Harbour Head. As I walked across the square, I felt nervous. 'Should I bail?', my inner voice said. A ridiculous thought given I was showered, smartly dressed and feeling positive. Elle chose the meet up point, a pub with outside seating. Again, I racked my brain as to her appearance. It had been over a month. The memory of her in the darkened Italian restaurant had faded significantly. Was she attractive? What did we talk about? I had a social plan of attack. If the chat didn't flow, I would talk about the Oz Experience. Were my holiday stories going to impress her? I felt optimistic.

As I approached the pub's outdoor seating area, I instantly recognised her, but she hadn't seen me yet. Thankfully, she was the only white, 20-something looking female. She looked prettier than I remembered. I watched her glance to her right, taking a vacant look into the bright space of the harbour. I nervously approached her table, smiled and tried to get eye contact. She recognised me. Her face lit up, a smile beaming across it. She got out of her seat and gave me a hug with the warmth one would give to an old acquaintance. I was happy and surprised to be greeted in such a fashion. We both sat down at opposite ends of the 4-seater, medium sized table. I looked at Elle's half full glass of cordial and asked if she wanted another. She took a large sip through the colourful straw. "Yeah, okay, lemon and lime cordial please. I need to study all-day tomorrow. I can't drink tonight", she said. "Right, lemon and lime cordial it is", I repeated.

I entered the bar and looked at the blackboard behind the bar attendant. The sign read "Mondays-Thursdays, 6-8pm, \$4 schooners of VB". There was another sign beside that, "Mondays-Thursdays, 6-8pm, Steak and Chips for \$10". I made a mental note of the future dinner choice. The drinks offer was one I couldn't refuse at that moment. Elle chose the venue to suit her student finances. I couldn't complain. The pub suited my wallet too. Having spent a fortune on my recent holiday. I returned to our outdoor table with drinks in hand.

I wondered when I should bring out the holiday stories. Not being a person to drive conversation, it was Ella that did the talking. She asked, in a heartfelt tone, "how are you?". She excitedly followed the question with, "what was your holiday like?". I had forgotten I had texted her during my trip. I found Elle's commanding voice very attractive. I was captivated by her sparkley eyes and cute button nose. I replied, "I'm good. The holiday was brill.". I began talking about the Oz Experience. I started with stories of Fraser Island. She corrected my phonetics "it's Frays-er Island, not Frayz-your island." Like all good Englishman did, I apologized. I continued, excerpts included:

- "It's the largest sand island in the world,"
- "The bus driver drove this close to the trees."
- "The bi-plane pilot didn't even bother looking out the window."

Elle was captivated. Time had flown by. Elle was looking at her watch signalling that she had to get back home to finish her studies. I looked at my empty glass of beer and was happily to see an end to proceedings. I kissed her goodnight and began walking back to the Manly ferry. My chest was out and head held high. I felt confident I would see her again.

Over the next weeks my relationship with Elle began to develop. I texted her constantly. This wasn't so bad outside of work. I didn't have a great deal going on in my life other than spending time in the Cole's cooked meat isle. However, at work, texting was a distraction. Writing computer code requires focus. Switching context from work life to my love life caused the former to suffer. My manager, Daniel, would pop into my section to mock me about the frequency of the text alerts notifications. Dan's interrogation technique was excellent. He would ask, "that your lady friend texting you?". He waited to expose a flaw in your response. He could switch from friend mode to manager mode in a couple of sentences. He often complained to his boss about my lack of productivity. My thoughts at the time were "well, Mr Allam if you stopped fckng distracting me, and if Elle could stop sending me texts every 2 minutes, we'd be more likely to meet your deadlines".

It was easy to befriend Dan. We shared many traits:

- Our Englishness.
- Sense of humour.
- Love of the outdoors.
- An ear for heavy metal music.

Dan was a rocker in a business suit minus the haircut. He knew Sydney's commercial district well. During lunch times, me and Mr Bradford would follow Dan's lead. He changed up the food courts we visited, but kept one place we visited constant. That constant was Allans + Billy Hyde Music, Sydney's largest music store. Dan had a penchant for the handmade, Maton acoustic guitar, Australia's best. I favoured electric guitars, especially the Gibson range. Dan tried his best to find a Maton that wasn't secured like Fort Knox (they were very expensive musical instruments). After finding one and a free stool, he would begin finger picking a soft medley. He was in a state of ecstacy. His senses focussed solely on the music.

When he was in that zen state I would find and play an electric Gibson guitar. All the electric's were out of tune. Unfortunately, I did not have the ear to tune the guitar manually. I would always began by playing The Animals classic "House of Rising Sun". As I continued playing, I tried my hand at a song from the band The Smiths. If the lead guitarist, Johnny Marr, were present I'm sure he would say in a broad Mancunian accent "put that guitar down, you've murdered that tune." After Dan removed himself from the Maton's heart strings, he would walk over as I switched to my 3rd and final song on the set list, "The Sultans of Swing" by band Dire Straits. My rendition did nothing to doff the cap to the musical artistry of lead guitarist Mark Knopfler. It was

more a gentle nod. Dan, with his husky, base-y tone would say, "Mr Clarke... and the Sultans of Swing. Lovely." I was happy it received his appreciation.

The subject of the texts that Elle and I exchanged ranged from idle chit chat to borderline sex chat. When we weren't sexting (texting using sexually provocative terms), we continued dating. Date three was a visit to Hoyts Cinema in Sydney City Centre. 3D was seeing a resurgence on the big screen. The film of the moment was an epic adventure entitled Avatar. Given it was a 3D film, we were forced to wear 3D Glasses. It was doubly frustrating for four-eyed me, who had to wear the 3D glasses over my ordinary spectacles. It was a great film to take a date to. It had moments of love, sadness and euphoria.

Elle and I, up until this point, had only kissed each other at the end of the date. Time spent sitting together in the cinema allowed a chance be more affectionate. I slowly reached out and held her hand. I could feel her grip tighten. We turned and tried to kiss each other, but the 3D glasses stopped our lips from meeting. We smiled, removed the glasses and began kissing. Elle enthusiastically asked me to follow her lead. She wanted a reproduction of the 101 Dalmatians kissing moment. We improvised, using popcorn instead of spaghetti. I smiled, we were beginning to feel comfortable in each others company.

Elle sent me a dinner invite via text. She said she would be hosting at her student flat in Annandale. I replied with an enthusiastic "Yes". I felt nervous. This would be the first time visiting a date's home. When I finished work I hopped on the bus. I gathered my thoughts:

- What, other than the meal, did Elle have prepared for me?
- What did Elle expect from me?
- Should I have a plan of action?

Stupidly, I didn't think to find the location of her flat on my map. Thankfully, Elle provided easy to follow directions in one of her many texts:

1. At address A locate block B
2. Go up one flight of stairs
3. Turn left. My place is the first white door on your right.

I knocked. It took a short time before the door flung open and a welcoming figure appeared. Elle stood there with arms wide open and a smile on her face. "Dave!" she exclaimed. She delivered the same warm embrace I remember from our second date. We kissed. As we released, I noticed she looked disappointed. Being a forthcoming person, she said "Where is my gift?". There was an uncomfortable pause. "You don't just turn up at someone's house and not bring along a gift for the host.", she said. I did what I knew best, humbly apologise and look sheepish. She returned a forgiving glance, smiled, hugged me again before skipping jovially into the kitchen. "I hope you like pasta, tomato and basil?" she shouted. "I'm sure whatever you're making will be lovely.", I replied. I had experienced 25 years of my mother's poor cooking, I was prepared to eat anything.

Elle was a student. By student's standards she lived well. The apartment was humble but included everything a person required to live in comfort. The front door opened into a tiny hallway, which led to the kitchen. The cooker was on the right, bathroom left, dining room centre and just beyond lay her high double bed. The bedside window let much needed light into the apartment, penetrating as far as the dining table. Elle found a home for my damp, sweaty suit jacket. I tucked my ruffled shirt in and asked Elle for directions to her bathroom. I was slowly adopting the Australianised word for toilet, bathroom. Thankfully, some British English words were still part of the Australian lexicon: mate, jumper, pub. I loved the Australian version of the

word duvet, doona. I returned from the bathroom and asked Elle if I could have a look around her home as she prepared food. She happily obliged. It didn't take long given its small size. One distinctive group of items were her books on politics. I realised that this was the subject she was studying.

Elle began serving the pasta dish. I could tell she loved food given the care put into its presentation. She walked over to her portable digital music player, pressed play and made a beeline for the bathroom. I was sat there, left to appreciate the first music track. The songs in Elle's playlist were all modern & melodic, but I didn't recognise any. As Elle returned, I asked which bands were playing? She smiled and said she had created a special playlist just for me. Artists such as: Sneaky Sound System, The Temper Trap, Powder Finger and The Cat Empire were represented. I smiled as I wolfed down the pasta dish. Elle ignored my unsophisticated eating habits. With eyes widened, a trivia question arrived on her lips. "Do you know what the tracks I've played have in common?", she asked. My focus was still on the delicious food as I slurped the remainder of the bolognese sauce. I shook my head. I knew the modern music scene in the UK well. They weren't on that radar. Elle bubbled with joy as she blurted out the answer, "All the bands you've heard are Australian!!". I contemplated responding with "good on ya". Unfortunately, the sarcasm would have been too subtle.

She rushed over to the fridge and returned with a packet of confectionary that looked somewhat like McVities Penguin chocolate biscuits. "Hey Dave, have you ever tried Tim Tams? More importantly, have you ever tried caramel Tim Tams?", she asked. My dumbfounded expression answered that question. She handed me the packet. I took a closer look. My first impression was wrong. I thought that the creators of Tim Tams had plagiarised McVities Penguin. I unwrapped one and began eating. One consumed crumbly, chocolatey Tim Tam, became two, became three. I was lost in the endorphin rush. Thankfully Elle distracted me from eating a fourth. I put the packet of Tim Tams down slowly as I contemplated the taste sensation.

Elle sat on the edge of her high, double bed and indicated to sit next to her. She looked at me, her eyes glistening, her smile radiant. She was cute, her skin looked so tender. I could see her focus shift from my eyes to my chin as she edged closer. I delicately reached out to feel how soft her face was. Our mouths touched. The kissing became more passionate. My arousal levels began to soar. She instructed me to kiss an area at the back of her left ear. On doing so she began to groan with pleasure. The sound was enthralling, spurring me to continue. After minutes of foreplay, I stopped to catch my breath. We stared at each other fondly. Elle broke the silence, "I get really horny when I get kissed on the neck... I will really want to fuck you if you continue to do that.", she said. Elle smiled again. I looked at her with intense focus. I leaned in and kissed her on the neck. We began to shed our clothes. I made sure they were well organised as I placed them on floor. I had to ensure I looked smart for work the next morning. I kissed Elle from neck to toe, spending a lot of time appreciating her breasts. This was the first time I had experienced foreplay without the influence of alcohol. It was more stimulating as a result. I continued, kissing her vagina, using my tongue to flick the labia. Elle's sounds of pleasure increased in pitch and volume. She shouted, "fuck me!" At that moment I sensed my penis was not fully erect. Any amount of self-stimulation was not working. I panicked, improvising, I began to penetrate her vagina with my fingers, and continued to lick her labia. Elle screamed with pleasure; it wasn't long before my right arm began to tire. The left arm was tagged to assist.

Given the lack of air conditioning and humid conditions, I was beginning to dehydrate. Elle could sense my frustration. We slowed proceedings. We sat next to each other on the side of the bed. She began rubbing my semi-erect penis, sucking it with a combination of tongue, teeth and lips. My penis, for a moment, became fully erect. Elle excitedly reached for a condom and attempted to place it on my penis. My penis began to return to its flaccid state. After multiple attempts of oral stimulation, with penis semi-erect, I ejaculated. The sex stopped. I looked apologetically at her. Elle offered words of consolidation as we hugged. We were both

tired. That night, as we tried to rest, I was happy to kiss her body all over. She had such beautiful, soft skin. I got little sleep.

When Elle's alarm rang first thing in the morning I couldn't muster the strength to get up. I turned to watch Elle as she readied herself. She looked completely different with her glasses on. They suited her, they expressed her high intellect. I could see she was focused on going through her morning routine. It took me much effort from releasing my body from Elle's soft mattress. My work clothes were organised, but crumpled. They were not at all fashioned for the daily grind at the client. Given how late it was, I had no time to shower. I donned the garments, yawned and looked sheepishly over at Elle. She looked ready to take on the day. I looked ready to take on more cans of RedBull. Thanks to Elle's energy I felt compelled to take her lead as she exited the flat.

She pointed in the direction of her university, turned around and pointed in the direction city. "Dave, you that way, me this way. Catch the 470 bus on this side of the road.", she explained. I lifted my head to give her one last kiss before saying goodbye. As she walked away, I saw the bus approach. I managed to flag it down, hop on board and slump in the first available seat. I felt paranoid. It must have been obvious to other passengers why I looked so dishevelled. I just wanted to sleep. I did manage to use deodorant that morning. The smell hopefully would disguise any whiff of sex that was present on me. I looked out of the window to see my ghostly image staring back at me. I closed my eyes briefly only for my thoughts to be consumed by what the day ahead had in store for me.

My laptop was my toolkit. It kept me in touch with the consultancy. Much like a Batman symbol shining on the clouds, it gave me access to a crime fighter, well, a test consultant to assist me. I wished a test consultant could have rescued me from the client that day. It was quite an important day. We were giving a presentation to the client. I was one third of its creative output. This didn't faze me. What did, was the thought of facing Dan's interrogations. The English joker was going to have a field day as I rolled into work, late.

In the testers lab area I unglued the backpack from my moist, crumpled business shirt and placed it on my chair. I took the laptop out of the bag and set it down on the desk. I could pick out the faint sound of footsteps. Unsurprisingly, Dan popped his head in with a not too happy look on his face. "Here comes the patronising chat", I thought. Dan took a good look at me. His seriousness slowly crumbled. It was replaced with a wide beaming smile. His demeanour reflected a fox that had taken all the chickens from the hen house. His voice was slow, and tone deep, "so Mr Clarke, was Mrs Clarke any good last night?", he said. He opened his mouth, extended his tongue and began simulating licking a lollipop. I looked at him with a smug smile on my face, "She was alright. I gave her 3 inches of oi, oi, saveloy that I'm sure she'll reorder.", I replied. Dan laughed out loud at my audacious claims. He applied a serious facial expression. "As you were Mr Clarke", he said, before skipping to the kitchen.

The client's kitchen area offered the usual conveniences. Dan stored his signature mug and a plunger, aka. cafetiere, in the cupboards. He stowed his special filter coffee in the locked bottom draw of his desk. His cup of joe was the coffee equivalent of Trebor's extra strong mints. It was Dan's morning pick me up and shake down. "Dave, would you like to sample the kick of a mule?", he asked. He showed me the bag of coffee. I liked coffee. Why not? 5 minutes later, the "mule kick" brew was prepared and poured. I took a look at Dan's smug face. I looked at my coffee mug. I took a large gulp and slammed the mug down on the work surface. I held on as reality went into warp speed momentarily. I shook my head and looked up at Dan nodding. I was out of breath. "By the beard of zeus!", I said.

It was a memorable day if Elliot was part of it. Today was his first time visit to the client. His aim was to sell the services of me and Mr Bradford. Elliot had the art of self-presentation mastered. He always looked the part when arriving on client site. His slim, 6'2" stature, boyish looks purveyed a trustworthy, respectful appearance. He made sure his formal attire was iron board smooth. The hair was gelled, filo-fax shining and his smile switched-on. Elliot exited the lift to meet me in the hallway. He shook my hand, smiled and immediately asked for the location of Srikanth's office. Srikanth, a man of Indian descent and head of IT, was the man in charge of the IT Department's budget.

As Elliot saw Srikanth his smile beamed, "You must be Srikanth, I'm Elliot Caldwell, Consultancy Services", he said. I returned to the lab to look at the presentation template Elliot had sent over last night. It was tainted with generic b*llsh*t "Savings after Test Automation". There was a section named "Test Automation Overview" that me and Mr Bradford contributed to based on work we had completed. In the short period of time Mr Bradford and I had been there, we had completed nothing substantial. In no way did we fulfill the clients expectations. The plan, during this presentation, was to use smoke and mirrors and the sublime presentation skills of Elliot.

Elliot, having finished his meeting with Srikanth, popped over to see me and Dave Bradford, with Dan in tow. Elliot's smile still beamed. The glint in his eyes indicated either he was going to make love to us or kill us. I was too tired to get screwed again. Dan left me, Elliot and Mr Bradford to the secrecy of the Test Lab. Elliot took a good look around. He asked "Can we talk privately here?", he asked. "Yeah, sure. What do you want to go over?", Mr Bradford asked. Elliot quickly looked at me, then Dave Bradford and said, "Did you get to look at the presentation template that I sent over?". We nodded, looked at Elliot and said, "Yeah". "Well, can I have a look at it?", he demanded. Elliot took one look at his wristwatch. He told us the presentation of our proof of concept had been scheduled for 11:00. The time was now 9:00am. We still had time to edit and rehearse the presentation.

I opened the presentation for Elliot to take a look. "Okay, yep, sales stuff. Okay, this is the section you guys have added. Right.", he said. Elliot paused to think. "We need 3 slides. One to explain A. A second to explain B and a third that prompts a demo." He delegated these tasks to me and Mr Bradford. He added a couple of slides on cost savings. We agreed Elliot would do most of the presenting. Dave and I would step up when it was demo time. We chose the most resilient automated test we had, which had a 50% chance of failure.

It was 10:45, we were ready. My laptop was under my arm as we approached the meeting room. It felt like we were entering a bar in a wild west movie. We, the outsiders, were walking into a saloon full of unsavoury looking locals. I flashed the embossed HP laptop logo as we approached the table. There was a huge audience, much more than we expected. Hopefully no-one was going to take a pot shot at us. Elliot looked at me and Dave nervously. He had high-level knowledge of our role, but relied on Mr Bradford and I for the technicalities. The projector took its time to warm up and mirror my laptop screen. I gave Elliot the nod. He took the baton like a well-verses relay runner. He looked up at the audience, walked to the front of the stage, adjusted his tie and beamed.

His stature commanded everyone's attention. The bustle of the room distilled into silence. He looked at me and nodded, indicating he would like to see the first slide. "G'day", he said. Throughout the presentation Elliot used succinct phrases. His pitch, volume and pace indicated confidence. As I proceeded clicking through the slides, Elliot's confidence grew and his tempo increased. The smile on his face widened when the cost savings slide appeared. It was obvious that this slide, his only contribution to the slide pack, was his shot at selling our services. Mr Bradford and I successfully answered all the technical questions from the audience. The flaky demo was more resilient than we hoped too. When the presentation finished, Dan and Srikanth looked at

each other in an agreeable, accommodating fashion. With the services of Mr Bradford and I unofficially sold, Elliot chatted to Srikanth's. The next steps were to get a Statement of Work signed.

Bruce, Head of Sydney Sales and Marketing, wrote the statement of work. It wasn't a difficult task: download the document template, update the client details, hand to client to sign. Unfortunately, Bruce had personal priorities in his life, which would delay the process. Once received by the client, especially a financial institution, authorisation could take weeks. What were Mr Bradford and I to do in the interim? We begrudgingly returned to the office bench.

There was always work for tender i.e., a document describing our services and our rate for the business being offered. I would often overhear details of tenders, which Elliot and Bruce debated over. Bruce gave the illusion of appearing busy in his office: He played solitaire on his laptop, shuffle papers on his unorganised desk and called his wife. When he wasn't appearing busy, he would pop his head in to speak to me and Mr Bradford. Rarely was the conversation work related, unless Mark had prompted him to speak to us. When Bruce spoke he would often emphasise a point by smiling. It didn't beam like Elliot's. It was a forced, almost excruciating looking facial expression. It could, in some circles, be described as gurning. Out of all the business deals that Bruce had wined and dined for. In his 2 years at the consultancy he contributed to the success of 2 tenders. All other business deals were signed because of the owner's reputation.

It was my turn to play host for the evening. I met up with Elle at Circular Quay. We enjoyed a relaxing "cruise" on the Manly Ferry as the sun began to dip. We docked at Manly Wharf. I prompted for me and Elle to depart. We held hands and gently strolled onto the pontoon. I had no clue where to eat in Manly. My Manly dining experiences included: Fish & Chips, Burgers and Pies. All these choices weren't, as I saw it, suitable for a romantic sit-down meal. Thankfully, Elle was happy to take lead. With a good eye for eateries, she pointed out an Italian restaurant across the road from Manly Wharf. We took a seat outside, to enjoy the fresh, warm seaside air.

Elle and I communicated effectively through touch: kissing, hand-holding and hugging. Unfortunately, conversation could be best described as jarring. Elle was much more intelligent than me. She talked rapidly about her political studies. I found it gruelling to engage in her line of questioning. I wasn't interested in the field of politics. I tried to look as attentive as I could, and hope Elle would change the subject. I could have changed the direction of dinner conversation to a subject closer to my family's heart, the West Midlands car industry. I'm not sure my closed question "did you know that JaguarLandRover are owned by Indian motor giant Tata Motors?", would have flowed on nicely from Elle's "Do you think residents of our state are free to engage in any business they choose?"

Ford, the car manufacturer, does have a footing in Australian culture with its gas guzzling family saloon, the Falcon and Commodore respectfully. By the time I had reached their shores, both Ford and Holden were on fighting terms with engine power output. The beefy aging V8 engines of both vehicles were being tuned to within an inch of their lives by their respective in-house tuning companies FSV and HSV(SV meaning Special Vehicles). Both had models that could easily top 400 bhp, which lead to very quick acceleration times and serious, serious noise. I loved the sound of the Aussie V8s from Ford and Holden. The tone was like the growl of a beast amplified to 11. The look of these vehicles too, set apart from their standard siblings with boxier wings, bonnet and boot gave them the muscle that would make them unmistakeable on the open road. They were Australia's mobile cod-piece extender. I loved everything about them, minus the emissions and fuel consumption. By jingo they even had a UTE (short for utility)version of each "mad" special vehicle. Given the space in the back, it would suit any nut job that needed to transport their flock or building materials at speed, with little care whether the contents of the boot would be in one piece at the destination.

Elle and I sat outside the Italian Restaurant as dusk settled in. Even though conversation didn't flow as I had hoped, we enjoyed each others company. Elle was adamant we split the cost of the meal. I thought this was admirable of her, given she earnt very little. We walked hand-in-hand towards Manly Corso. Elle enthusiastically asked if she could see my new home, "Flo's Apartment". "Yeah, I'll love to show you the place", I said with subtle sarcasm. I imagined several f*ck-up scenarios involving Elle and the apartment:

- She comes into contact with a bohemian French lady or stoner from England.
- She treads in cat shit that litters the hallway.
- She is eaten alive by carpet fleas.

Elle and I stood at the apartment entrance. I tentatively inserted the door key and applied my body weight to prize the door open. I flicked on the hallway light, paused and listened. The flat was deserted. I looked back at Elle, grinning, indicating my relief. We walked towards the kitchen. There weren't any signs of cat shit. My last concern wasn't in the end. Our footwear would protect us from potential carpet flea.

The door to my bedroom required a good dose of WD40. It creaked like a 18th Century pirate ship. Once inside, with door closed, privacy was ours. I looked at my room in a more judgemental light with Elle by my side. It was barely fit for someone who was accustomed to living without a home, let alone a 30 year old, I.T professional. Thankfully, Elle didn't share my concern. She confidently walked around the bed, running her fingers on the light bed sheets. The bedsheets were an untidy heap atop the mattress. She perched herself on the end of the bed. The look she invited me, I interpreted as fuck me here, fuck me now. I entertained many thoughts:

- Great, the apartment has not put the fear of god in her.
- I hope I can sexually perform, remember last time?
- Where was her erogenous zone? Yes, the back of her neck.

I began kissing the back of her neck. She immediately unbuttoned my jeans and sucked my penis using her unique technique. I was only slightly stimulated. It was my turn. I worked my way from Elle's neck down to her vagina. I checked the state of my penis as I continued licking her other erogenous zones. My penis was flaccid. I didn't know it at the time, but I was experiencing erectile dysfunction. I was now beginning to panic. I couldn't blame Elle, she used everything in her sexual arsenal to stimulate me. I continued licking her erogenous zones. Again, I had to improvise. Not being able to use my penis, I used the next best thing I had to hand, my hand. I used my digits like a button-bashing video game. Given grit and stamina, I finger fucked Elle like a game of Track and Field. The pace slowed. Both of us looked at each other. The sweat streamed down our faces as we caught a breath. Elle was beaming, "I've never come 3 times before!", she exclaimed. I was confused. I didn't sense her ejaculate.

We didn't get a great deal of sleep that night. We both lay wide awake. I lay on my back, Elle was on her front, resting her head on her hands. She began small talk. "That night was special", she said. She described her past sexual experiences. She excitedly added, she had never come 3 times before. She lay on her back and shuffled her body close to mine. She turned her head, to face me. "3 times.", she exclaimed. Elle said she was concerned about my erectile dysfunction. "The first time we slept together I was accepting. You mentioned you hadn't had sex for a while." Elle said. "Given we've been together for a short while, that shouldn't be the case. Don't you find me attractive?", Elle asked. "No!", I quickly responded. At that moment I felt alone. I thought back to the last time I had sex without issues. It was 4 years prior. My colleagues and I enjoyed a weekend of excess in Prague, Czech Republic. I had sex with a prostitute. There and then it was very easy to perform sexually, but why? What was it about that encounter? Why couldn't I perform for Elle? I didn't have

an answer. Elle looked at me with a concerned expression on her face. She told me the story of a male friend of hers. He discovered he was gay. Elle suggested I should see a specialist. With that, she got changed and left. My mind was scrambled. I felt frustrated and confused. What the hell was wrong with me? I'm 30 years old. I shouldn't have an erectile disorder.

Whenever Elle texted, she would ask if I had contacted the specialist. Thanks to her relentless prompting I contacted the Manly Practice GP to book a consultation. That dreaded day came. A day to swallow my pride and enter the GP's reception. I walked up to the information desk and whispered my name to the receptionist. "Please take a seat Mr Clarke, the GP will be with you soon.", she said. I felt anxious. I ran my hand over my brow to wipe away the sweat. I looked at the coffee table in front of me. I couldn't even entertain reading a donated car magazine. I looked up at the clock on the wall and watched the seconds hand rotate through a full 360 degrees. I wished I was somewhere else.

"Mr Clarke?", a voice said. I looked around. I saw a short lady with a loud distinctive Asian Australian accent. I clambered to my feet and walked towards her. The room was a regular office with a simple operating bed. Doctor Chan asked me to take a seat and explained why I wanted to see her. I cleared my throat, looked up and saw Doctor Chan with a clipboard, pen and paper. She afforded me her complete attention. I paused to organise my thoughts and build courage. I feared that whatever was going to be said would be covering new ground and may lead to me reassessing my life. No pressure. I cleared my throat, "Well... I am having issues... I cannot keep an erection." I said. I paused, my heart racing. "How long have you had these issues for?", Doctor Chan asked. I didn't feel comfortable enough to mention specifics. "Erm, this has been an issue for a while", I replied. Doctor Chan continued with the questioning, "How many sexual partners have you had?", she asked. I felt a deep-seated embarrassment by the answer I was about to give, "5", I replied. "Have you had any sexual encounters with men?", she asked. I paused to absorb the question. Hesitating as I reached into the recesses of my memories, "No", I replied. With all questions answered, Mrs Chan began delivering her recommendations. "See a sexual health officer to chat further about your feelings. In the interim I can offer a prescription of Viagra.", she said. I thanked her for her advice. I declined the medication but did take a business card with details of the sexual health officer.

I looked at the contact card that Doctor Chan had handed to me. I chewed my bottom lip, looked away and back again at the card details. I was finding it difficult to perceive myself as anything other than heterosexual. I attempted to contact the sexual health officer, but didn't get through. It was the only time I tried. The communications between me and Elle were tense in the days and weeks after that night at the Manly apartment.

It was leading up to Australia Day, celebrated annually on January 26th (marking the anniversary of the 1788 arrival of the First Fleet of British ships). Celebratory parties were organised in towns and cities up and down Australia. Climate-wise it was a great time to be in Australia. It was the middle of summer. Being in Sydney, it was humid. Most residents of Sydney celebrated Australia Day by drinking excessive amounts of alcohol and listening to Triple J Radio. Triple J Radio played the top 100 Australian Chart Music tracks of the previous year. Early one morning I received a text from Elle. She asked what my plans were in the afternoon. The only plans I had was a lunch date with a Cole's cooked chicken. She asked if I wanted to meet her and her friends in Annandale for Australia Day celebrations. I sat up carefully in my deshevelled bed. After much thought I decided to cancel my chicken dinner date. With my intent clear, I texted her back with a resounding yes.

I had a look out the ajar bedroom window. The cool breeze lightly filtered through. The humidity was draining. All I wanted to do was rest. With that thought, I lay down. I reached for my cheap guitar and began playing Metallica's "Nothing Else Matters". The tune required very little effort. I stared at the high ceiling as I

played. It was so peaceful in the Manly apartment, neither a French nor Southern English accent to be heard. I felt like lying there all day. Morning passed. It was soon time to leave and meet with Elle and friends. I submerged into the walk-in-wardrobe to find clothes to suit the humid conditions. I found a perfect ensemble: pants, flip flops, white cargo shorts and a singlet (vest). It was a style that Australians had a name for, the bogan (unsophisticated person).

I was unaware of my frowned upon appearance as I made my way towards the buzz of Manly Corso. The Corso hummed to the sound of pretention on the weekends. On Australia Day the pretention and buzz were amplified to a whole new level. The profits that pubs make on Australia Day must be extraordinary. I made a beeline for the ferry to take me to Circular Quay. I knew which bus to catch to get over to Annandale, but didn't know which bus stop I should depart at. On the bus journey I entered the destination details into my phone and watched it like a hawk. I hurriedly exited the bus. With eyes down, I stared at my phone as it directed me to a student apartment block.

I arrived at a front door, double checked the address in Elle's text and pressed the doorbell. Elle appeared at the door immediately, full of her usual enthusiasm. She paused, shocked by my appearance. I was insensitive to her reaction. As we walked up the steep staircase to the front door of her friend's apartment, I could hear the fizz of social drinking. The door opened. I was confronted by a young ginger haired man dressed in a polo shirt with a beer in his hand. He put the drink down and introduced himself. "George", he said, offering a firm handshake. "David", I replied.

George and Elle had known each other since childhood. He described the heated political debates they had at high school. George was the high school's debating champion, much to Elle's annoyance. All I think of was "master debater". The thought was used as a defence mechanism. I was jealous. I could clearly sense there was a spark between George and Elle. They talked politics and finished each other's sentences. George walked over to the balcony to talk to other party members. Elle and I walked towards the kitchen to get more drinks. I opened the fridge, she stared at me with arms crossed. "Why couldn't you wear a collared T-Shirt? You look like a bogan." she said. I didn't really know what a bogan was. Given the context and tone of Elle's voice, she was angry.

I still craved Elle's embrace, even though she had scolded me. I hugged her. She melted against my body and we kissed. Her angst soon softened as she loosened her grip. We made our way to the balcony where a group of Elle's mates sat. The balcony overlooked the main street, with views of other houses. George sat on a ledge with his back against the wall. A slim, young woman of no more than 17 years old sat on a chair in front of him holding a glass of wine. She began speaking to me. I had spoken to so many people since I'd arrived, asking the same sets of questions. My answers were getting easier to replay, but the enthusiasm I showed for those answers was beginning to wane. As with most Australians, she was surprised to discover I wasn't Scottish or Irish. Australians do not expect an English person to have a West Midlands accent. George's began talking about the state of Australian politics, comparing them to current UK politics. I wasn't interested in UK politics, so found it difficult to follow the conversation. I was embarrassed. George knew more about UK politics than I did. Elle became the centre of the conversation. She talked in great depth about her political views on Australian current affairs. Like debates of old, George and Elle would take turns presenting their point of view. I was more concerned with my bottle of beer. It was beginning to get warm.

The debate came to an abrupt end as the volume was turned up on the radio. Radio station Triple J began announcing the top 10 music tracks of 2009. The count down to the number one began. After the tense build up, UK band Mumford and Sons was announced as owners of the top spot. I hadn't a clue who they were at the time. After the announcement I looked at the time and began making my excuses to leave. I shook

everyone's hand and thanked them for a memorable afternoon. I made my way with Elle to the front door. We paused. Elle lacked her usual warmth and jubilance. She found it difficult make eye contact. "Dave, I think it would be a good idea if we end our relationship", she said. I sensed the relationship wasn't perfect, but didn't think it would end then. "Shall we be fuck buddies (sex-only)?", Elle asked. I was surprised and offended. I declined. I felt we just needed a break. With a heavy heart I made my way back home.

Unexpectedly, a few weeks later I received a text from Elle. She had use of her Aunt's car for the weekend. She wanted to show me the Blue Mountains. I happily accepted. The Blue Mountains are one of the must-see attractions available from Sydney. I felt happy, but skeptical about meeting Elle again. She wanted to be friends. I wanted us to still be together.

The drive in Elle's Aunt's luxurious Toyota Prius was smooth. The volume on the radio was turned up as Elle sung along to Triple J radio tracks. The car interior was warm even though the car windows were down. We stopped at a set of traffic lights. Out of nowhere a Huntsman (a large Australia spider) appeared, landing on the windscreen. This one wasn't a juvenile. It wasn't loving being outdoors either. It raced towards the open passenger window where I was sitting. I recreated an Indiana Jones like moment. My quick electric window button operation, narrowly stopped the mighty spider from making its way inside. Huntsman Spiders are renowned for hiding away in car's sun visors.

Elle stopped the car at a service station/sweet shop, serving fuel for both the car and sugar junkies. The sweet shop was cavernous. It held every kind of confectionary an Australian could ask for. It even sold a selection of UK sweets at extortionate prices. Elle gave her recommendations including:

- Jelly snakes
- Gummy bears
- Cola cubes

Sitting in the car, my hand was deep into the white, paper bag of sweets. I swallowed the large, gelatinous snakes with the grace of a hungry kookaburra. Elle asked if she could try one. I hung the snake in front of her mouth. Elle acted out an erotic scene using her tongue and teeth to tease it from my grip. We may have been playing friends during this trip, but there was still sexual tension between us.

There were many viewpoints to park up the car and appreciate the expanse of the Blue Mountains. All the time Elle and I spent together that day, in the car, walking trails, I just wanted to caress her. The tops of the Sydney sky scrapers could be seen on the horizon at the last viewpoint. The viewpoint was all ours, to share and appreciate. Elle and I looked at each and hugged. "I miss this", I said. Unfortunately, it would be last time I would see Elle.

Chapter 8

Meet the Expat Community

Dan, the British expat that worked at the Financial client, became a close friend of mine. He shared all his social invitations with me. Without Dan, there would be no:

- Dragon boat racing.
- Andy, Johnny & Carl.
- Becs and the Rose Bay Flat.

Firstly, what is Dragon Boat Racing? Think of a long canoe powered by 12 paddle peddling people. The best teams moved gracefully, coordinating with the cox (a small person located at the rear of the boat). Dan, in passing, mentioned the corporate Dragon boat racing event one day at work. He had no idea what preparation was involved. I thought it would be a matter of turning up, grabbing an oar and whacking the water as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, it was going to take a gruelling training regime at least twice a week after work.

The main organiser of the financial client Dragon Boat Racing effort was an Australian named Helen. Her and her long-term partner were members of the local paddling club. They managed to acquire a group of paddlers and a "cat's whiskers" cox. This tiny, bald fellow was definitely vocal. He coordinated our training efforts at the paddling club in Paramatta. He supposedly knew what our competition was. After a number of training sessions, he said, "You guys are up there with the best. We have a good chance of winning if we paddle at our best".

On race day it was a bright, calm morning over at Darling Harbour. I didn't know what to expect. All I did know was I had to meet the rest of the team in the designated "financial teams area". As I rounded the corner I took in the view of Darling Harbour. It was alive with activity. There were oars and singlet clad athletes dressed in their financial institution's colours. Dragon boats of varying oriental designs were parked side-by-side. Surprisingly, there was a huge spectator turnout. My eyes were the size of saucers as I walked through the participant area. As the epicness of the event became apparent, I felt nervous. Thankfully the stress ebbed away as I saw the white T-Shirts of our team. I went over to speak to the Helen, the team captain. She was glad I had turned up. We now had a full complement of paddlers. Helen asked me for my T-Shirt size. "Medium", I said. She handed me a white top that had seen a few events in its lifetime. Helen explained the format of the Dragon Boat Race day, importantly, what our start time was.

According to the cox, we could potentially win this huge event. The pressure was now on to perform. The team sat at the side lines. As time passed, the sunlight began to intensify. Sun burn was my concern. I reached into my bag and slip, slop, slapped on the factor 50 sun cream. Looking at our competition, I felt pessimistic about winning. Many of the teams consisted of Herculean examples of humans. All teams looked frighteningly good. I felt confused. Why the hell was our cox so confident?! Maybe I was overreacting. What seemed like impressive dragon boat performances, weren't. The litmus test would be our first event.

We walked over to the pontoon to enter our canoes. Words of motivation were bellowed by Team members as we nervously sat on the starting line, side-by-side with other teams. The boats were carefully lined-up by support staff. We looked ahead. We readied our oars. Silence fell. "HORN!", the klaxon sounded. We were under way, but we weren't paddling in stroke with the cox's beat. My team mate located behind me was out of sync. I re-adjusted to stop my oar from hitting hers. We were wasting energy.

It was the first time we were able to measure our progress against the competing teams. We looked right and left. There was less of a difference between the teams' positions than I originally thought. As we continued, relative to the other teams, we were moving backwards, not by inches, by feet. We crossed the finishing line and dug our oars in to the water to decelerate the canoe. My team mates helped me out. Despondency was shown on the faces of the team. Where did we finish? We waited for the organiser's announcement. Much to our surprise, we finished fifth (two places higher than last). Given oar synchronisation problems during the race, we had hope. A higher finish was possible in the next races.

We were called up again. Round 2. This time we were less nervous and more focussed. We had discussed lessons learnt from the previous round. We sat in the canoe. We looked ahead. We readied our oars. "HORN!",

we set off at a blistering pace. All of our paddlers were in time with cox. I watched the competition to my right. We edged backwards once again at an even quicker rate than in the previous round. I was astonished. We crossed the finishing line. Paddles in. We gave it our all, but I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. "In sixth position is Team Financial Client", the organiser announced. Disappointment. We were officially out of the competition.

The team's last race was for the wooden spoon. We finished 5th, which went a small way to fix our egos. Overall, it was an embarrassment. The team quickly went their separate ways, even before the winners were announced. Thankfully it was a glorious, sunny day and I wasn't sun burnt, which was nice.

At work, Dan would often hear me moan about my current living situation with Flo and her cats. One day Dan mentioned a friend of his, Carl. He was moving out of a flatshare located in the beautiful, expensive suburb of Rose Bay. Dan forwarded me an email with details of the accommodation. I studied the details. I noted the details of the flatmate, Becs. The apartment offered views of Sydney Harbour bridge. It was a good couple of hundred dollars per month pricier than the apartment in Manly. It didn't deter me. I wanted out of Flo's hole. I emailed Becs. She replied quickly, organising a viewing late on the Saturday. I was excited at the prospect. How difficult could a viewing be?

On the weekend I arrived at the flat. I was surprised to be met by a fatter version of Chris Evans, a ginger haired man wearing black, thick rimmed glasses. "Carl, please to meet you, please come in", he said. Carl was the departing flat mate. Becs, my potential flat mate, stood in his shadow. "Hello", she said candidly. As I entered I quickly looked at the recesses of the flat. My first thoughts were positive. It was a clean, organised, humble place. The kitchen was a separate room, located close to the entrance. The dining room, lounge and hallway formed the open living space. I was led to the large balcony. It had space for a table and 4 chairs. I was asked to take a seat. I looked to my right. In the distance was a view of Sydney Harbour Bridge. Carl asked if I would like a beer. I nodded. I couldn't take my eyes off the beautiful view.

Time seemed to accelerate as the sun set. I barely noticed Carl's flat mate, Becs. She took a seat opposite me on the table. We chatted briefly about our backgrounds. Becs was from Chester, UK. Our birthdays were one day apart. She was short with long, straight black hair. She had a husky British accent, no regional inflections. Her speech was measured and clear. She may have been diminutive in size, but authoritarian in stature. She, like Carl, was socially intelligent. Becs had a good grounding in HR. She was able to effectively read and apply herself to social situations. It came as no surprise that Becs was a Public Relations Manager for Sony Entertainment Australia.

Carl arrived back to the balcony table with 2 bottles of beer for me and him. The moment he sat down the tone of the meet and greet changed. The formal interview began. Carl played friendly cop. Becs played interrogator. Question 1, "Tell me about yourself?", she asked. I felt taken off guard by the formality. I hesitated. My hands felt clammy. I took a lot of time to answer a question I had answered frequently. Australians generally asked the following:

- Who are you? I am a 30-year-old bloke from Birmingham.
- Why are you here? I was forced to leave my previous job because the IT department flagged a porn video on my work laptop. I never felt comfortable with that answer. Instead I mentioned that the job offered an opportunity to travel and paid well.
- What are you drinking? Something dark, on draught

After finally answering Becs's question, it Carl's turn. He didn't ask personal questions. He used the interview as a stage, adopting the character "witty" Carl. He targeted his humour towards "serious" Becs to lighten the

mood. "How soon can you move in?", Becs asked. I didn't have a clue what my notice period was. I had no tenancy agreement documentation to reference. "One months notice...", I guessed. "Let me chat to my landlady first before I give you a definitive answer.", I added. Carl looked at my empty beer bottle and asked if I wanted another. I looked at the time on my phone. It was getting late. I wanted to make sure I caught the last Manly ferry from Circular Quay. I stood up and apologised for cutting the meeting short. They both smiled. Carl and Becs took turns to shake my hand before I left. On the journey home I felt happy with how the interview went.

The following day around lunch time I received a text from Becs. Was my gut feel right? The text read "Thanks for your time yesterday. Carl and I very much enjoyed your company and believe you make a great fit for the flat". I felt relieved and elated. I replied back. "I would be very happy to move in. Let me speak with my land lady. I'll get back to you." I had lived at the Manly apartment for 3 months. Flo and I verbally agreed a 6 month minimum stay. Stupidly, I paid a cash deposit to her, trusting she would officially deposit it. I thought there was a possibility I could recoup my deposit if I reasoned with Flo.

I sat in the kitchen seeing to my salty chicken supper. I could hear the sound of the front door clunk and bang in signature Flo fashion. She walked hurriedly into the shared living space. Her curly, long, black hair moved like a slinky. She looked angry. I had to use that opportunity to speak to her. She hadn't responded to my calls, texts or emails. "Hi Flo, I saw a new flat during the week.", I said hurriedly. She stopped briefly to look in her bag and empty out its contents onto the lounge table. A factious French sound came from Flo. "The flat is over in Rose Bay. It has a beautiful view of the Sydney Harbour bridge. Best of all it's available to move into in 2 weeks. How much notice do I need to provide if I wanted to move out?", I asked. Flo's attention moved quickly from her bag and towards me. She stared at me in silence. Her attention returned to her bag. "Didn't we agree you would be staying for 6 months?" she said quietly. I sheepishly looked at her. Flo's tone changed. "Since you've moved in you've done nothing to help. You don't clean the communal area and I barely see you around.", she said angrily. I retaliated. "What about the fleas Flo? We have fleas all over the carpet.", I said. "They're house fleas", she replied. Of all the excuses a person could use, that was up there with the more fantastical. "House fleas?!?", I said. I would have been happier if I'd heard the excuse, "Oh, those fleas. They're part of the Flea Circus. They recently ended their world tour in Manly". "Now is not a good time. We'll talk about this tomorrow. I need to get ready for work." she huffed. With that, Flo scurried away, slamming her bedroom door closed. I was left in the lounge, heart racing, feeling none-the-wiser about my living situation. My appetite was ruined. I was in no mood to lick the last of the greasy stuffing oozing out of my half chicken. After taking a deep breath I assessed the situation. How did I get my deposit back and end my tenancy early? I had no clear answer. My appetite took little time to return. I wolfed down the remnants of the salty chicken.

At the start of the week my thoughts were preoccupied with moving out and losing out i.e., the Manly apartment deposit. I didn't have a clue what my rights were and what my next steps should be to relinquish it. I entered the client's office. Dan was in the tester's cubicle with a beaming smile across his face. "How are you this fine morning Mr.Clarke?", he bellowed. I avoided eye contact "I'm alright", I said in a forlorn tone. I wanted to respond with full details of the chat I had with Flow. I just wasn't sure if he would be receptive to my social problems. Dan was skilled at reading a person's body language. I was an open book, and one with very few pages. "You don't seem your usual self, what's up? Is it lady trouble?", he said. "Kind of. I took a look at the flat you mentioned. I loved it. Great little place. Becs and Carl are really nice. I would love to move in at the earliest opportunity. The flat in Manly is a shit hole. The problem is, my land lady. I verbally agreed, back in January, that I would be staying for at least 6 months. I know a verbal agreement isn't worth anything. I have paid a deposit which, Flo, the landlady has in her possession. How do I go about leaving the flat and still keep my deposit?" I said. Dan was on it. He Googled about tenant's rights in Australia. "It looks like you as a tenant

have many rights. It says here, if you haven't signed any agreement, you just need to give written notice. Your deposit is safe. I can write a letter for your landlady if that helps?" he said. "Yeah, sure, that would be great.", I replied. It was great getting help from a friend. "There", he said, handing me a letter fresh from the computer printer. "Have a read of that, I can update it if need be. If it looks good give that to your landlady and see what she has to say.", Dan said boldly. I looked at the print like it was Willy Wonka's golden ticket. I beamed as I read out my rights as a tenant. "This is brilliant Dan, thanks very much.", I said. I now felt happier with the flat situation, knowing some of my tenant's rights.

After finishing work I got home and sheepishly placed the golden ticket on the kitchen table. I looked down at it. An element of doubt entered my mind. I lay in bed and looked blankly at the high ceiling. This place I called home, I was beginning to divorce myself from. I wanted to move into the Rose Bay flat immediately. With all good things, I had to wait.

The next morning, I walked into the kitchen. I noticed the letter Dan had crafted was missing from the kitchen table. "Could it have fallen on the floor?", I whispered to myself. I avidly searched, nothing. I felt nervous, the churn of doubt circled in my stomach. How was Flo going to respond? I returned to the Manly flat after another day at the client's office. As I entered I could hear Flo in the communal area. As I walked towards the kitchen I caught a glimpse of her barbaric, black hair. Fear hit. I tenuously greeted her, "Hi Flo", I said. Flo cocked her head to look at me and exhaled heavily through her flared nostrils. "So, I found your letter", Flo said clearly. If she could have followed that sentence up with "here's your cash deposit back", I would have wept with joy. She continued with a question. "Did you know that my boyfriend works in the police force?", she said. I thought briefly about this closed question. The answer that initially popped into my head was "What does that have to do with the letter?". I swallowed. "Errr, no", I replied. I was lying in an attempt to calm her. She had mentioned her Policeman boyfriend before. The volume and pace of Flo's voice increased. "How dare you write something like this!", she exclaimed. The last time I had experienced a dressing down like this was at senior school. The teacher read a joke in the back of my English Language book. The punchline was a swear word. She paused, with hands on hips and her gaze fixed on me. "I will not be giving you your deposit back, plain and simple.", she said. With that she left, slamming her bedroom door.

Well, that could have turned out better, I thought. That was it then, I could leave early. If I did, my deposit would be staying. I sighed deeply. I seeked comfort, which for me meant food. And no, I wasn't thinking of heading to Coles. I needed a special meal from BenBry Burger. Luckily it was Thursday, which meant all-day specials were available: Benbry Burger, chips, sauce and soft drink for a wallet-pleasing AU\$12. I sat outside Benbry Burger with my special on the table, in the company of Manly's sociable seagulls. I felt calm as the waves crashed onto Manly Beach. I sat, savouring the moment. I slowly took a bite of the sumptuous, sweet Benbry Burger. I sighed, reclined and smiled. I felt a surge of positivity. Forget about the deposit. Move out of the Manly apartment at the earliest opportunity.

Dan invited me for a spot of social drinking in Manly, with him and his expat mates. It was a beautiful sunny afternoon. I noticed Dan standing in a circle, drink in hand, with a group of 10 others. He was chatting to a sun burned, ginger haired bloke who wore black, thick rimmed glasses. I immediately recognised him. It was Carl. I smiled and waved at Dan. He raised his half-full pint glass. I approached the group with intrepitation. "Mr Clarke, good to see you made it. This, as you know, is Carlos.", he said nervously. Carl smiled, transferred his pint to his other hand, and shook my hand. In a quiet British accent, he introduced himself. "Hi, yes, we've met. Welcome to the British ex-pat community. Grab yourself a drink at the bar over there. When you return, I'll introduce you to the rest of the gang.", he said.

The humble, outdoor bar was situated in front of the beautiful calm Manly sea scape. Having seen what others were drinking, and wanting to fit in, I ordered a Toohey's New. The barman took a schooner (425ml) glass out of the fridge (a common practice to keep the drink ice cold) and began pouring. I returned to Carl. He took a sip of his drink before beginning the introductions. The group included Andy, Johnny, Pete & Dan. Each person said hello, some even threw in a quick introduction. It was great socialising with a group of English males, my age, from similar backgrounds.

My time in Australia made me question all aspects of my life:

- friendship
 - What bonded me to people?
 - How difficult was it to build friendships with people?
- hobbies & interests.
 - What hobbies did I have here in Australia?
 - What were inspired by my life back in the UK?

I didn't realise it at the time, social drinking was a massive part of my life back home and here in Australia. This was due to a number of factors:

- I loved the taste of beer.
- Pubs were comfortable, extensions of a persons home. Hosting was left to the bar staff.
- People are more open to talk about their lives' after a drink. Unfortunately, quality of conversation decreases as quantity consumed is increased.

Australian bars showed a range of local sports all day on big screens. Rugby League was Sydney's main sport. Australian league rugby was arguably of higher quality than found in the UK. The Roosters and Rabbitohs were the top 2 Sydney teams. Outdoor sports heavily influenced the Sydney culture.

I loved the weather on the evenings. When the sun set the temperature was perfect. The humidity helped the heat linger. Unfortunately, there were lots of mosquitos as a result. The clandestine critters were rarely bit an Aussie. The mosquitos seemed to treat an Australian as one of their own. It was common for Australians to mock an Englishman's lack of immunity to mosquito bites.

Being a social drinker was a great excuse to be outdoors in Sydney. The average Sydney bar catered handsomely for those choosing to drink outside. UK pubs catered for outdoor drinking with a beer garden and benches. Sydney bars took the experience to a new level, given the more clement weather. The Australians literally took the roof off the pub and added more TV screens. If the entertainment was poor and/or the beer tasted bad, there were plenty of alternative bars to head to.

The amassed group of Brits at The Manly Bar were looking more at their watches than the next drinking venue. It suited me. I was happy to stay. Home was a two block walk. The first of the watch-watchers was Dan. He'd barely touched his drink. It was obvious he didn't want to be there. The supposed text from his wife was an excellent excuse for him to begin his hour plus journey home. I continued my conversation with Carl. He had plenty of tips about the flat and living with Becs, my new flat mate.

Chapter 9

A British rose

I was so happy to be moving. The cost of rent was more, but I was gaining an improved quality of life:

- Conversation with Becs was going to be easy. A fellow Englishman, I would be able to use British cultural references without pretextsing the context.
- The flat was going to be devoid of fleas. Rent included the cost of professional home cleaning service once a week.
- I'd have an improved view.
- There were no cats.
- I didn't have to face a French female named Flo.

The initial issue facing me was the lack of bedroom furniture. I was informed the bedroom would be unfurnished before I moved in. Having listened to Carl's tips at the Manly social, I had the foresight to buy a bed prior to moving in. It was, unfortunately, going to be delivered 3 days after I arrived. In the meantime, I needed bedding. Where could I purchase high quality bedding to complement the refined Rose Bay apartment? There were 2 high-quality department stores that came to mind: Myer and David Jones. Myer was arguably the higher quality of the two. A light doona (duvet), bedsheets and soft bed cushions were required to smother my body with feathery kisses. A cost north of \$100, was the amount I paid at the Myer checkout.

Another mistake I made before moving in was not inquiring about home internet. I am an adopter of technology and a big internet user. Internet in the Rose Bay flat was accessed via a USB dongle with a mobile phone SIM card. This was 3G mobile technology, which was very slow at the time. On first use I searched, slowly, for superfast internet deals. Carl had described why the apartment had a mobile internet setup. It was to accommodate Becs's need for a telephone line to call her family in the UK. I found an deal. It was AU\$5 a month cheaper than the current mobile contract. I discussed it with Becs, who hesitantly agreed to make the proposed switch. A big improvement, so I thought. Improvement number two, again technology related. There was a noticeable space on the TV stand which needed to be amended as a matter of urgency. After a brief chat with Becs, the conclusion was, yes, a big screen TV would fill the gap nicely. In the interim we made do with a small TV Becs borrowed from her bedroom. It was a matter of time before this first world problem was rectified with a visit to Dick Smith.

The average British person is unaware of ANZAC Day. Ask any Australian about the day and they will educate you on its significance. Wikipedia reveals, in 1915 25th April, the British led Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) on a death march over in Gallipoli, Turkey. They were outnumbered, outgunned and were disadvantaged by their poorer strategic position. It was the only war the Turkish forces won during WWI. After this education and a subsequent information about America's role. America rescued Australia from a Japanese offensive in the WWII fight in the Pacific. It became clear why Australians, even though they are historically connected to the motherland, can feel resentment towards the British.

April 25th is a public holiday in Australia and New Zealand. ANZAC day, commemorates the Battle of Gallipoli in WWI. The day unites Australians. The equivalent day in Britain is Armistice Day, commemorated on November 11th. There is more to ANZAC day than commemoartions. A simple betting game, Two-Up, is made legal on ANZAC day at drinking establishments across the country. A well organised version of the game is something I would recommend experiencing. Remember, gamble responsibly.

It was a warm evening over in Coogee, Sydney. I had managed to arrange a social drink with the British expats and NZ Andi, my old Queenscliffe flat mate. The meeting place, the infamous Coogee Bay Hotel (CBH). I say infamous, the Sydney news press linked it to drunken disorderly behaviour. The CBH had a monumental outdoor seating area. I was soon to find out it had a immense indoor area too. I went to the effort to look my best that night. I wanted to avoid looking like a "dero". On arrival to the CBH I recognised some of the British expats. They formed part of a far larger group, the size of a small village. The numbers of British women

exceeded the number of men. I approached, people who recognised me began to smile and offered to shake my hand. Cullen, a girlfriend of a expat Andy (not to get confused with NZ Andi), went above and beyond to make me feel welcome. She presented me to everyone, even people I had met before in Manly. It felt great to be accepted at a time when I was becoming home sick. Little did I know at the time, over the next 6 months, they were going to be my rock.

Something I did question about the group was its size. How could so many people belong to one social group? Further analysis of its hierarchy revealed it was formed of three subgroups: Andy's, Carl's and Johnny's friends. These fine gents excelled at interacting with people from all walks of life. Unfortunately, it was clear there was an undercurrent of mounting tension between the 3 groups.

NZ Andi finally arrived. She looked stunning, taller than I remembered, 6' in heels. She wore a commanding, huggable red dress to complement the rest of her outfit. "Dave", she shouted. I turned round. My jaw dropped. Many men and women at the CBH were appreciating her too. I was a little embarrassed as she approached. The unwanted attention was now drawn towards me. I nervously smiled. Andi was gracious in presenting herself to the group. She was not too brash as to embarrass and not too dull as to tarnish her natural sparkle. As the group settled and the appreciators retreated, I began to feel comfortable. I was happy being in Andi's company again. She was such a positive personality. I even thought, imagine if she was my girlfriend? How jealous would people be of me?

After a big hug, I introduced Andi to my impressed British expat friends. After the introductions, Andi turned her attentions back to me. She indicated she wasn't here just to see me, her other friends were located inside. Andi generously made her excuses to leave, but left an open invitation to me. "Hey Dave I'll be inside if you want to meet up later.", she said. "Cool", I replied. Given the lack of a group plan, and the slow dispersal of the three sub-groups, it would be a short time before I would see Andi again. Most of the British expat group had been lingering around CBH for the whole day. As the sun dipped I was one of only a handful of expats still at the CBH. I was the only one still with a drink in hand. Being in a sociable mood, I was prepared to stay on into the wee hours.

I said goodbye to the few group members. I made my way to indoors to locate Andi. Inside it was shoulder-to-shoulder. I circled the bar repeatedly, but I couldn't see Andi. As I took my final lap, I heard Andi's laugh above the bar noise. "Dave! We're over here!", Andi said. I smiled when I saw her by a table with her friends. Her 3 mates said hello. I hoped the group were planning to stay on. Listening in on their conversation, this was going to be the case. Furthermore, Andi's friend Steve said, "What do you guys think about visiting the hall and playing a game of Two-Up?".

At the time I knew little of the Two-Up. With legal restrictions lifted on ANZAC day, it was a great time to play it. We walked from the CBH bar to what only could be described as a cavernous, dark hall. Given the amount of space occupied by the outdoor drinking area and indoor bar, I was surprised there was floor space for a hall.

It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the low light levels. Steve, Andi and I approached a large gathering of people holding aloft their money. We stopped and observed the action from a comfortable distance to listen and learn. We could see 2 officials with coin paddles, stood in a court surrounded by a crowd on their feet. "What were they doing?", I said to Steve. The penny literally dropped, we were witnessing a game of heads and tails on steroids. The general rules were:

1. Wait for the previous game to end.
2. Shout "HEADS" or "TAILS".

3. Find a fellow gambler who shouted "TAILS" to your "HEADS" or vice versa and wants to wager the same amount of cash.
4. Wait for the officials to release the coins and announced "HEADS" or "TAILS".
5. Won? Claim your winnings from fellow gambler. Lost? Hand over your losses to fellow gambler.

After an hour of walking between the 2 Two-Up betting pits, I had broken even. At that point I stopped all gambling activities and watched the action in the larger pit. The highlight of the evening was seeing Andi join the officials in the main pit to throw a set of coins. Much like her approach to life, she gave it her all. Unfortunately, the coins rolled out-of-bounds, much to the crowd's amusement. As midnight approached I was happy to say my goodbyes and head home. It was comforting knowing I only had a short journey to the flat in Rose Bay.

I skim read an email I received from who I thought was NZ Andi. Nope, it was one of the ex-pat group leaders, UK Andy. Coincidentally, they both shared the same last name. Why did Andy want to contact me? I had spoken with him. I felt honoured to have impressed my personality upon him. Andy looked like Paul McCartney. He was similar in height to the legend, but more athletic in physique. He was a sports enthusiast. He could talk endlessly about surfing, swimming, running, snowboarding. He led a fun packed life.

I replied to his email with enthusiasm. Andy was quick to reply. He suggested we meet at Luna Park, on the other side of Sydney Harbour Bridge. The meet up was a day out organised for his girlfriend's mom. He was planning to be there with girlfriend Cullen and mother, on Saturday, 26th April. He mentioned that Becs, my new flat mate was coming along too. Cullen's mom had arrived recently from the UK and was temporarily occupying the spare room at Andy and Cullen's flat in Coogee. Andy was counting down the day's until Cullen's mom got on the plane home. She had no home skills and expected to be waited on hand and foot.

Luna Park drew memories of yester-year. A 1930's fairground, refurbished in 2004 to cater for tourism related to the Olympics games. On meetup day, Becs insisted on driving me to Luna Park. Andy, Cullen and Cullen's mom aimed to meet us at the entrance. It was a gorgeous, warm, blue sky Autumn day. Becs and I parked nearby and walked through the ornate, circus studded Luna Park entrance. We reached the peer. Becs took her phone out of her handbag. "Andy, are you here yet?", she asked. She slowly turned, looked towards the entrance and smiled. I followed the direction of her gaze. I recognised the enthusiastic duo, Andy and Cullen. The other, had a stiff upper lip and a pale complexion. I rightly assumed they belonged to Cullen's mom. Andy and Cullen ran towards me and Becs smiling, with arms open wide. I shook Andy's hand. I embraced Cullen and her mom with a half-hearted hug.

The love they shared was in warm contrast to my touch starved life. Cullen's mom behaved more inline with my upbringing i.e., don't show your emotion and don't touch. I was a reserved person, even by British standards.

The women went their separate ways, leaving me and Andy to chat. On hearing Andy's strong southern accent, as a defence mechanism, I engaged my Birmingham accent. "How's it going?", I said. "Yeah, not bad, not bad.", he replied. The tone of his voice was upbeat. It was refreshing hearing a British style response. The Australians amplified adjectives, which like Americanisms, stifled the extremes of the English language. Andy began to chat about his love for Australian outdoor activities. I thought I loved health and fitness. Andy's enthusiasm for fitness far exceeded mine.

He mentioned snowboarding in passing. A sport he knew well, which he'd taken up recently in Australia. "Where can you snowboard in Australia?" I asked. "Do you snowboard?", Andy replied. I tried to respond modestly. "Yeah, I've been on a couple of snowboarding holidays. Austria, the other in Andorra.", I replied. In

reality, I had spent most of time learning how to snowboard at my local Tamworth Snowdome. Out of embarrassment, I stopped my chapter and verse. I looked over to Andy, his eyes were the size of saucers. "Do you fancy heading over to Thredbo?", he asked. "I've had a look at the weather recently. There is supposed to be a few inches of snow on the slopes. Failing that, they do have snow blowers to add a covering.", Andy said. What a friendly and trusting bloke. I barely knew him. For Andy to invite me and Becs to Luna Park was going out the way. For Andy to invite me, a stranger, on a snowboarding trip in Australia. To put it lightly, I was overwhelmed. "Yeah, perfect.", I said. "Cool, what's your mobile number? I'll text you when I find out more.", he replied.

Andy and I, having shown disregard to Cullen, the mom and Becs, walked over to see how they were. Cullen's mom had a rush of nostalgia when she saw a multi-coloured, multi-laned, undulating slide. Cullen began to smile, feeding off her mother's excitement. "Come on, shall we have a go?", Cullen said eagerly. Andy laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Why not, you only live once.", he said. It was a motto that defined Andy, given his already stellar life experience.

At the top of the slide we realised there weren't enough lanes to fit all 5 of us. We group split, again, according to gender. We set chivalry to one side as Andy and I took to the slide. Andy asked the carny (slide operator), what technique delivered the best experience. "Head first mate", he said. As Andy went missionary, in the adjacent lane, I lay on my back. I contorted my body to be as aerodynamic as possible. Andy began to cackle as he lay chest down on his hessian matt. He turned to the women, "Right could you girls give me a push on 3?", he said. The ambers of competitive Dave had been were stoked. I waited for the countdown. "3,2,1 go.", the women shouted. Andy and I began fast and furiously. The missionary was proving inferior to back-to-mat. I accelerated. Andy on the other hand was lost control and giggled frantically. He managed to spin himself and the mat a full 360 degrees. I glided in a textbook fashion to the huge black breaking matts at the bottom. I didn't outwardly celebrate the win. But mentally I could have kissed the sky. Andy eventually arrived, laughing out loud. Cullen shouted from the top of the slide, "Are you all right love?". "Yeah, all good, just a few mat burns, but that's all.", Andy replied. It was the ladies turn. They all ignored the carny's advice. They chose bum-to-mat, grip and glide. From the huge grins on their faces, it was clear they were having a blast as they slowly descended. All were laughing as they picked themselves and their mats up at the end.

We continued our Luna Park tour, experiencing some of the more traditional rides. The dogems and waltzers were some of the more memorable. An unforgettable, fun day in Australia, complemented by a British setting, in the company of British folk.

Before buying a car, you don't think about how many of that model is on the road. The same can be said for Canadians. Mr Bradford was the first Canadian I had met in Australia. I knew little of his extensive homeland. I discovered that Canadians are a proud people. Their cultural heritage is celebrated wherever in the world they are. That day is aptly named Canada Day. There were lots of Canadians in Sydney thanks to Australia's close links with other Commonwealth countries. Canada Day celebrations were advertised at many of Sydney's pubs.

Andi was the first female friend I socialised with on a 1-to-1 basis. She, like her male UK counterpart, was a trusting individual. After splitting with boyfriend Glen, she happily included me in her social invites. I think she enjoyed my laid-back personality and carefree social drinking exploits. On Canada Day, Andi was heading to a pub located near St. James's Park, Sydney CBD, with friend Mel. With it being June, the already short days were becoming shorter. On that day in Sydney, by Canadian standards, the weather was a beauty.

I made my way to the bar Andi had mentioned in her text. Its theme was heavily influenced by Bavaria and North America. I walked inside, big screen TVs covered the walls. They were all showing various classic Canadian hockey games. Small, blue, ice buckets surrounded the bar counter. They were filled with a selection of Canadian beers: Moosehead, Molson and Coors. These buckets could be bought for very little. I could see many people had taken advantage of this offer. I saw Andi perched on the bar wearing a Canadian NHL top. She wore it well, given her svelte figure. Stood beside her, at a commanding 5'10", was her Northern English friend Mel. Mel was blonde, cute & equally as svelte as Andi. She was the same age as Andi too, but still looked young, more 30 than 37. I was magnetised to her. Unfortunately, she wasn't interested. Andi, Mel and I had fun that evening. The Canadians, like the Australians, are an accommodating, warm group of people. They were happy to share their beers and in some cases their hockey attire.

Andy was becoming a good friend of mine. He was comfortable talking about his personal life. One aspect he talked about a lot was his relationship with girlfriend Cullen. Even though their relationship was healthy, Andy was having second thoughts. Cullen was an attractive, articulate individual. A great listener. She trusted few of the ex-pat group members, but she trusted me. She trusted me enough, to allow me and Andy to have a weekend of snowboarding in Mount Buller. Andy just wanted to get away. We both loved our experience of Australia's slushy slopes. After the trip we agreed, we should experience the best slopes in the Southern Hemisphere. Where? Queenstown, New Zealand.

Queenstown was New Zealand's outdoor sports Mecca, located in the South island. Andy and I set about organising a trip to there. Unfortunately, we couldn't get the same time off work. Our solution, make our own way there. Andy, having an eye for original plans, thought it would be a great idea to fly-drive. He wasn't thinking of hiring a standard vehicle either. Andy found a car hire company that offered the oldest hire cars available in NZ. The hire company prided itself on offering the driver, the "sh*t box" experience. He organised the visit to coincide with the arrival of Aussie friends. I thought this was a great idea, being a social animal.

I stood in Sydney Airport's Terminal 1. My dusty snowboarding gear, freshly arrived from the UK, was packed away in a huge bag and equally immense hold-all. This gear had to be taken straight to the oversized luggage desk. It was going to my first time flying with Air New Zealand. I was really looking forward to it, having read about their excellent level of service. Their in-flight safety videos were deemed to be the most humourous of any airline.

On board, buckled up, the staff began plane safety procedures. Small screens dropped down from above. The 2010 Rugby World Cup team inspired safety video began. I was captivated. By the end of the safety briefing I had a huge grin on my face. The video met all expectations. I was in a positive relaxed mood, set for the 7+ hour, 1-stop journey ahead. The smaller connecting flight from Auckland, NZ to Queenstown was memorable. I'm not one for passenger window watching. The approach to Queenstown airport can only be described as epically beautiful. There was a small amount of turbulence as the mountain air buffeted underside of the aircraft. As the mountains came into view, I could hear the passengers gasp with awe.

Queenstown airport was a good size airport, given it served a town of few locals. It was only a 10 minute car journey from the town centre. I opted to take a taxi. The taxi driver, like many in the western world, hailed from abroad. My driver was from South America. It was a stunning drive. The road twisted and turned its way around the mountains. Tourist style laybys were located on road corners. They allowed tourists to admire views of Lake Wakapitu, a monstrous body of water over 75km long. I didn't tempt the driver to stop for photos. I was too focussed on our conversation. One of the best aspects of travelling is talking to random people about life. In this case, the coversation focussed on New Zealand culture and Liverpool Football Club. Originating from South America, he loved football. Why support Liverpool F C? Why not.

We arrived in Queenstown centre. I was initially underwhelmed. It was humble. Sydney CBD's David Jones store was roughly the same size of the Queenstown's CBD. It did pack a lot into its quaint estate. There were many tourist centres, shops and hostels. The largest buildings accommodated the youth hostels, or backpackers, as they were known here. I was booked into Nomads backpackers. Hostels had become the travel accommodation of choice since arriving in Australia. Each hostel was a shared living space including a toilet, kitchen and sleeping quarters. They were by far the cheapest accommodation in the city.

I checked in at reception. The backpackers provided me with a set of bed sheets and pillow cases. I was assigned the lower bunk of a bed in a 6 person room share. There were 3 bunk beds and enough floor space to swing a mouse by its tail. I couldn't see the floor, such was the mess of clothes and hair dryers strewn upon it. I tippy-toed my way around the carnage to the vacant bed. I chuck my backpack underneath and headed out.

Andy text me to mention he had landed in Christchurch. He had picked up the "sh*t box" rental vehicle and was half a days travel from Queenstown. Instead of hanging around in the hostel I went into town to explore. The first feature to catch my eye was the stream that ran through the centre. The stream was surrounded by bars; the weirdest and most wonderous was a microbrewery pub for Mac's Beer, a famous New Zealand brewery. My excitement grew when I entered and saw a plethora of limited edition winter beers on tap. All the limited editions were dark and very strong.

Walking around town I saw cafés, adventure stores, more bars and a queue of people the length of the highstreet. I looked at the sign above the entrance, it read "Fergburger". I walked up to a random person in the queue and asked, "what's this place then?". "You've never heard of Ferg Burger? It's the best gourmet burger joint in town.", the gentleman replied. My immediate thoughts were, if it could better Benbry, I would happily leave on the next flight to Sydney. The queue was moving quickly. I was hungry, with time on my hands. I joined the queue. 30 minutes later I entered the small diner. There were a large number of staff members working in behind the counter. It was a production line: Cook, fetch, assemble, package and yell. I looked up at the hand written menu behind the counter. Their standard offerings included the Fergburger(beef), Cockadoodle Oink (chicken and bacon), Bun Laden (Falafel with salad) and The Codfather (blue code). Their most extreme burger was the the Big Al. He was $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of beef, lashings of bacon, a whole lot of cheese, 2 eggs, loads of salad and a big wad of aioli. Fries were at extra cost. When I received my Fergburger I did a double take. I could barely hold their standard size burger, given its enormous size. I strategised a plan of attack. Doing what only a fool would attempt. I opened my mouth as wide as I could and took a bite. This was a school boy error. By the time I had finished eating, my jaw muscles ached.

The hectic throb of the Queenstown highstreet made way for the serenity of Lake Wakapitu. Boats were abundant, offering tours of the serene, expansive body of water. I paused for a minute, took a deep breath and freed my mind of thoughts. It is no wonder why New Zealanders frequently use the adjective "epic". They are surrounded by so much natural beauty. I broke my gaze of the mountainous backdrop and focussed my attentions back to the throb of town. It was then I noticed the sculpture of the now extinct Moa bird. If only I could have seen this huge animal alive. I took another deep breath and walked towards the hostel.

I received a phone call later that day. It was Andy. He had just arrived in Queenstown, no dramas. He asked me to meet in some obscure car park on the edge of town. As I arrived I fixed my eyes on the hire car. What a terrible vehicle. A Nissan Fairlady, manufactured in the 1990s. Andy laughed, shook my hand, "Let me present our chariot for the week", he said. After pointing out the abundance of defects, "But she runs like a dream", he said. I imagined Andy having to manually propel the car along by foot, Flintstones style, via a huge cut-out in

the driver side foot well. Andy took photos of the lake then grabbed his snowboarding gear out the boot of the car. We headed town-wards.

Andy began to chat about his journey from Christchurch. Andy, an avid photographer, captured many photos of his road trip on an SLR Digital Camera. He showed me a few of his favourites. There was so much wilderness in the central region of the South Island. I was jealous of what I saw, but I wouldn't have missed that view of the mountain on approach to Queenstown airport for love nor money. We checked him into Nomads Backpackers and agreed to meetup in the hostel lobby before grabbing food.

As we stood in the hostel lobby Andy had a beaming smile, "I'm happy with my room matey. I've got the lower bunk of the bunk-bed. I just had a quick chat with my room-mates. The girl in the top bunk is dangerously attractive. She's blonde, fit as a butcher's dog, down to earth and from the UK.", he said. He deeply exhaled through pert lips, raised both eyebrows and started to chuckle. "Right, what shall we eat?", he said. I mentioned that I'd already eaten at Ferg Burger, and recommended he take a look.

We entered Ferg Burger after another lengthy wait. Andy's eyes went from viewing the menu to viewing the blonde-haired lady in the queue. Two beautifully crafted, floral patterned tattoos were exposed on her shoulders. I could sense that Andy admired them. "Those are a lovely pair of tats", he said in a loud southern English tone. The admired lady immediately turned around and gave me and Andy the dirtiest of looks. She grabbed her burger and stormed out. We were left bemused. I took a few moments to think about what Andy said. How could it be misinterpreted? "Do you think she may have misheard the word 'tats'?", I said. We both laughed out loud.

Andy received a text from his Aussie mates. The group were playing pool in an Alpine style lodge on the edge of town. Anywhere in town was less than a 5 minute walk, which Andy and I decided to commence. The lodge looked authentic from the outside. It was deceptively long on the inside. It covered a large space, sporting loads of indoor bar games including a dedicated American pool tables section. The bar counter was lengthy too. The booty of draught winter dark ales brought a smile to my face. I asked the barmaid for dark, flat ale recommendations. First up was Montieth's, I had tasted their "Black" version in Sydney. The choice on draught included flavours I'd never heard of: There was the Doppelbock Winter Ale, the Velvet Stout and the Oak-Aged Porter. I asked for a shot glass sample of each. They looked the part i.e., like drain water mixed with peat. Unfortunately, they were refreshingly carbonated, lacking the deep, sour flavour of UK dark ales. These beers, like the Mac's beers, had an alcohol content north of 5%.

With drink in hand and coordination regressed, Andy and I turned to "see the action". In a bar dominated by pool tables, the action was related to pool. The tables brimmed with people. The floors couldn't be seen for because of the saw dust. The bar counter could barely be recognised for the peanut shells. "Wait there", Andy said. He walked over and shouted to people on one of the pool tables. I could see Andy recognised them. He said, "Hey mate, how's it going?" to two of them, shaking their hands vigorously. Andy beckoned me and made introductions. "Dave, Steve. Steve, Dave. Dave, Jon and the rest I honestly don't know.", Andy chuckled. "They replied in unison, "Hello Dave!". Andy explained that this group of snowboarding Aussies were Johnny Sayer's mates. Being Aussies and being of the "boarding" community, they were cooler than being cool. If these folk were any more laid back, they'd be horizontal. From the subsequent conversation Andy had with them, a plan for the next day had been agreed. We were going to be joining the "Ice Cold" Australians.

The hostel has a store room where, the following morning, I picked up my snowboarding gear. I met Andy in the lobby. He was board-less. His equipment was "secure" in the boot of the hire vehicle. As we stepped outside the hostel we were met with clear blue skies, sunlight peering over the mountains and a shimmer on

the crystal-clear waters of Lake Wakapitu. I got into passenger seat of the car and performed a general assessment of its interior. Andy looked at me quizzically as he tried to locate the ignition. A turn of the car keys put life into the struggling, cold engine. Andy's concern turned to one of delight as the engine roared. He beat his hands down on the dashboard, "Yes!", he exclaimed with enthusiasm. Andy turned his attentions to the CD/radio player. He explained that the radio was, as he eloquently put it, f*cked. *However, the CD player was fully functional. The previous customer was kind enough to leave a number of music compilations. Andy asked me to choose one. Not only was the radio f*cked, but most of the CDs were scratched to f*ck too.* "Bingo! We have a winner.", I said on finding a marginally scraped disc. It inserted into the player with the smoothness of sandpaper. After a range of device related malfunctions, the music played at low volume. The sound was stereo, a combination of one working speaker on the rear passenger side and one on the driver's side. I turned the volume up, to eleven. Andy and I, turned, gave each other a puzzled look and burst out laughing. Whatever this person's tastes were, it wasn't mainstream, unless mainstream was Country and Western.

The sh*tbox was taking to the wintery New Zealand hills like a duck to trees. Andy was using every bit of his adolescent driving skills to get the back end of the car to kick out on the corners. As we took to the uphill road sections, the car was getting precariously close to the sheer drop at the road's edge. It was especially perilous when wider cars wanted to get by on single lane roads. The disbelief turned to tears of joy as we successfully passed the SUVs. With more ascent, there was more snow and ice on the road. It got to the point where the hire car's tyres began to lose grip. To further complicate matters, there was a big sign in the middle of the road. It indicated it was illegal to continue without tyre chains.

We were so close to the slopes. We could practically see the ski lifts in the distance. Andy stopped the car. We applied Isaac Newton's theory of gravitation, positioning the hire car in the far corner of a nearby bend. Safely parked, we pulled out the snowboarding gear and began walking. As luck had it, we saw two Korean ladies struggle to drive their car up the slope. We popped over and asked if we could assist. They pointed at a pair of tyre chains. We asked if they needed help installing them. Thankfully their English was excellent and replied with a euphoric "Yes!". 4 tyre chains constituted a full set. We were 2 short. Thank goodness instructions were supplied, which allowed us to install them to the rear wheels.

Without our new Korean friends, our journey to the slopes would have ended there. It nearly did. Installing our snowboards into their humble car with us 4 in it was analogous to fitting a herd of elephants into a mini. We applied an "if there's a will, there's a way" attitude to the situation. "A way" focused on reducing the blood flow to our legs, to provide extra space for the snowboards. The car pulled away slowly. The chains dug in and provided much-needed traction. Andy and I looked at each other and laughed manically at the ridiculousness of our situation.

I'd never seen a Kea before, the only Alpine parrot in the world. It's a lovely looking bird, speckled green with orange notes under its wings. I was mesmerised by their behaviour. In their circus (a collective name for them), the way they interacted with each other indicated a high level of intelligence. Like all intelligent animals, the ones that thrive are the ones that adapt. In the case of the Kea they have adapted their diet, eating all human signage and car parts. Kea have bloody sharp beaks which will rip through anything remotely soft. It was funny to see Kea warning signs defaced by the namesake.

The slopes were busy, but we easily found Johnny's mates. We just headed to the resort's bar. We all looked the part for snowboarding. I was dressed looking similar to South Park's Mr Hanky the Christmas Poo. The rest of the group donned a variety of brightly-coloured, eye catching outfits. The chair lifts were awkward to use, especially for me who hadn't used one for well over a year. I somehow coordinated a successful dismount,

side-stepping pain and embarrassment. That's not to say I wouldn't feel pain that day. Bring on the icy conditions.

It was a bright day and the slopes weren't particularly steep. There were two route options. Route one was a standard blue grade slope. Route two was park focused. Andy took to the park like a Kea to road signs. I, on the other hand, was more risk averse. When I built up enough courage to try the park I was surprised how well I took to the obstacles. As my confidence grew I began attempting more technical maneuvers. It was evident, as the day progressed, more ice was forming on the slopes. This may be fine if the slope was straight down. Unfortunately, the main slope had a number of turns. To take on a turn, the board needed to cut into the ice. My board was blunt, whenever I attempted to turn, I fell. Falling on virgin snow is wonderful. Falling on ice, bloody hurts. Given the number of times I fell that day, my confidence dropped and my body was in a lot of pain. In the past I snowboarded till closing. This time round, pain dictated I should stop. For me to continue on the slopes that day I would need either pain killers or a huge cup of concrete (grit). I considered the latter. After sitting down for a short period of time my leg muscles began to seize. I fretted, there were potentially 2 days of boarding left on this holiday. I carefully considered my options. Not being one to miss an opportunity, I took a dose the pain killers and got back to the slopes.

It was a relief to finish the punishing day on the slopes. The punishment would continue if we couldn't catch a ride back to our precariously parked hire vehicle. Andy's mate's car was full. There was no public transport. Our only options were, to take a long, sunset walk or hitch. The latter was to be a new experience for me. I had an idea of how to hitch hike. Stick the thumb out, look friendly and lock eyes on the person driving the approaching vehicle. Andy, as with everything he did, took to hitch hiking with a smile on his face.

We positioned ourselves on opposite sides of the icy road with a clear view of each other. Andy's more approachable demeanour (he is admittedly easier on the eye than I) worked like a charm. Within minutes a car came to a slippery halt just beyond Andy's hitching spot. He indicated to me to get my arse over asap. The single, 20-something-year-old, local lady was brave. She was about to let two randoms into her Subaru (pronounced "soo-BAAAHHHH-roo"). Given her choice of words, I could sense she wasn't a person to mess with. Andy and I made sure she knew how appreciative we were. The driver kicked off the small talk. "First time in Wanaka? Have you been to...? They say that there's going to be a dump of snow on Monday of next week.", she said. Conversation flowed, and my confidence grew. A question popped into my head, inspired by my New Zealand friends in Australia. I already knew the answer, but I had a burning desire to ask it.

I blurted out a condensed version, "Do you know the phrase 'Getting Ya Dick Wet?'" The once jocular atmosphere turned to one of silence. Andy slowly turned and looked at me in disgust. The driver's head and eyes, once fixed on the road began to turn slowly toward me too. My usual shy smirk was replaced with one of hang-doggedness. Oh shit what did I just say? She eventually replied, "What about it?" I wasn't sure how my follow-up question was going to be structured. I hesitated, sweat began to form on my brow. I licked my dry lips and responded nervously, "well, er, my New Zealand friends used to say it to me. Erm, I didn't know what it meant.", I said. "It means to have sex.", she said with a heavy sigh. I felt like an idiot. I realised I had a problem. I loved using shock value conversation pieces on people I had just met. I could sense Andy was burning holes in the back of my neck with his disapproving stare. The lengthy silence was broken by Andy. "Do you know of any good drinking spots around these parts?", Andy asked. The driver looked notably more relaxed. "There aren't that many pubs around these parts. There's the pub at the local hostel. The best entertainment, in my opinion, is at Lake Bar.", she replied. Andy's face lit up as he silently hatched a plan for the night's proceedings.

We soon arrived at the rental vehicle. I broke my silence, offering sincere thanks for the lift. We waved as the Subaru sped off down the road. There was never any doubt that the rental car would still be parked where we left it. It wasn't worth much more than the fuel left in the tank. Instead of heading back to Queenstown we decided on taking the sage advice of the Subaru driver, Lake Bar, Lake Wanaka. Lake Wanaka is, in my humble opinion, the most beautiful body of water I have ever seen. Lake St. Clair in Tasmania is a close second. On that day the lake was flat as a pancake. Unfortunately, the entertainment at Lake Bar was equally as flat. It was quiz night. Andy and I were far too tired to drink straight, let alone think straight. We left earlier than intended, back to Queenstown for our final night.

The next day it was time for Andy and I to part ways. Andy had a long trip back to Christchurch. I had a short taxi ride to the Airport. Before we said our goodbyes, Andy opened up. He was having second thoughts about his relationship with Cullen. He didn't love her and admitted to having a wandering eye. He talked in more depth about shenanigans at the hostel. "If I loved Cullen I would have stopped the conversation dead in the water, but I didn't", Andy admitted. "Do you remember that blonde girl at the hostel? We talked openly about life. Time flew by. Before we knew it we'd been talking for 2 hours. That feeling of wanting to have sex with someone other than Cullen. It's there and it isn't the first time I've felt this way during my relationship with her. I need to rethink the relationship.", Andy said. He smiled and shook my hand. "Thanks, I had a bloody good time." he said. We went our separate ways.

Chapter 10

The Broken Jaw Incident

I was beginning to yearn a change from my Sydney lifestyle. I wanted to either move to another Sydney suburb or move to another city entirely. What would be more exciting? I decided to plan a move to another large Australian city, with assistance from the consultancy. The consultancy had offices in the Brisbane and Melbourne. Melbourne was considered globally as one of the best cities to live in. Choice made. Now, the difficult part. I had to ask the my boss, Mark, if I could move. One day in October I sent an email stating my desire to work at their Melbourne office. Minutes after hitting the send button the phone rang. I was caught off guard by the immediacy. "Dave?", he said quizzically. "Hi Mark, did you get my email?", I replied. "Yep, that's what I want to talk to you about. I'm happy for you join the team down in Melbourne. You must be aware that they currently have a large number of people on the bench. Business is picking up, but currently it is running slowly.", he explained. "That's fine Mark. When would be an appropriate time to make the move?", I asked. "It's not going to be now. Once I know, I will give indicate the time window.", Mark said. I felt excitement and trepidation. Selfishly I had only considered my needs. I was forgetting the people I was beginning to forge meaningful relationships with, my friends.

Carl, and girlfriend Uma, had booked a table on booze cruise: a 3-hour harbour cruise, complete with dinner, unlimited drinks and stage-show entertainment. It was all booked through a reputable discount website. The cruise would be departing from Darling Harbour on Saturday evening in early September. Carl asked if I was interested. I said yes, without looking into the details of the trip.

I turned up to Darling Harbour at sunset. Note, I was sober as a judge. I looked out and saw a hive of activity in the harbour. Boats as large as the public transport vessels (capacity, 400 people) began to depart, one-by-one. Each boat was full with party goers. I looked at my phone to find a photo of the vessel I was booked onto. I sighed. The boat had a face only a mother could love. My attention was diverted from the queue of customers to the people walking around the harbour. "Where are Carl and Uma?", I said under my breath. I did a second scan. It took me a few seconds to pick them out from the crowd. They walked languidly in my

direction. Uma forced a smile and Carl looked at me with an air of disgust. "Hello dick head," he said. Thankfully, by this stage in our friendship I was accommodating to his put-downs. I knew he cared. A grin and a hello was as good as I could muster. "Who else was coming along?", I asked. Unfortunately, out of the group of nearly 20 Ex-pats, only 3 of us thought this was a good idea. I began to wonder why?

There was a flicker of staff movement on our fugly boat. Onboarding was to begin as the gang-way was lowered. The queue consisted of couples. I was only singleton. A member of staff checked our tickets as we embarked. Another looked at our ticket and directed us to our assigned tables. My small table for one was located to the rear of the first floor balcony. Uma and Carl were assigned a large table towards the front. I waved enthusiastically. Carl lifted his head, Uma beamed, as they both sat down. I was distracted briefly as a waiter placed a bottle of red and white wine on my table. A special "all you can drink", drinks menu suddenly appeared in front of me. Items included draught, bottled beer, spirits and more cheap wine. My excitement piqued. I poured myself a glass of red, necked it. I poured a glass of white, necked it. I ordered a bottle of VB, necked that. I worked my way through the whole menu, in a western top-to-bottom, left-to-right order. The pre-ordered meal arrived just in time for the stage show to begin. At this point I was beginning to lose consciousness. I knew better than to mix grain and grape based drinks. Stupidly, I wanted value for money.

In my semi-conscious state time passed by swiftly. Before I knew it, the show was over, the boat had docked and it was time to depart. Carl and Uma walked over to my table. Uma enthusiastically slurred something about the stage show we'd seen. I couldn't even speak, such was the impact of the alcohol. Carl indicated he and Uma were heading to the James Squire Bar before calling it a night. In my agreeable and wavering state I nodded and followed the couple to the embarkation point. The fresh air hit me. I was finding it difficult to keep conscious. It took a lot of focus to keep on my feet as I shuffled down the ramp. I looked across the Darling Harbour thoroughfare. The James Squire Bar was buzzing. A group of men dressed in Mariachi fancy dress were stood outside. My recollection of events from that point forwards is best described as hazy. I purchased a round of drinks for myself, Uma and Carl. I looked at both of them. They were noticeably drunk and tired. They left their drinks and wished me fair well.

I walked over to the group of Mariachis. I regained consciousness. One of the blokes from the Mariachi group asked me to hold a wedge of tissues to my jaw. He opened the passenger door to a taxi. I got in. The driver took me to the Sydney Hospital. I was unaware of my injuries. I sat, slumped in the taxi seat. I pulled the wedge of tissue away from my chin. I felt the warm trickle of blood. I reapplied the tissue. The taxi driver asked if I was okay. Thankfully my senses were numbed to the pain. I indicated all was okay. "Where we were going?", I asked. "We are heading to Sydney Hospital mate. Hang in there. You need someone to look at that chin.", he said.

The taxi pulled up outside the sleek looking hospital A&E entrance. I handed the driver a red coloured note. I hobbled through the first set of doors and into the waiting area. Immediately I was attended to. A nurse asked to see a form of ID. Thankfully, I had my Medicare card in my wallet. She made a note on a piece of paper and looked at my chin. "What happened to you then?", she asked. "Fell over, I think", was my belaboured response. "Remove the tissue and let me take a closer look", she asked. The nurse winced. "You'll be needing stitches!", she exclaimed. "Come on though to the ward, we'll get you a bed", she said. The nurse sped off, returning with a large plaster. She applied it to my chin with care. "There, is that better? Let me grab you a gown." she said. A distinctive blue uniform was presented to me. The nurse pulled thinly veiled curtains around my bed giving me privacy. It was a relief to remove my blood and alcohol-soaked clothes. I put the gown on and lay in bed. I stared at the ceiling, taking a moment to think about the enormity of the situation. As I yawned and closed my mouth, my top and bottom teeth weren't stacking atop one another. I strained my

jaw muscles on the right-handside of my mouth to correct the problem. My jaw ached. I used my tongue to probe the condition of my teeth. Some were jagged, others were loose. What the hell happened to me!?

The nurse was a welcome distraction. She asked me to sit up. The plaster was gently removed from my chin, the area was cleaned and injected with anaesthetic. A plastic stitch was laced through with a large needle. The procedure was performed quickly. A large bandage was applied over the stitching. "Please lie back", she asked. It went deathly quiet. I wondered if I was okay to leave. A young male nurse flung open the curtains surrounding my bed and closed them quickly behing him. He asked me to show my forearm. He warned I might feel discomfort. A large needled IV drip was inserted into the arm. It didn't bother me, I had grown up on local anaesthetics for dental treatments. The male nurse asked if I felt any discomfort other than the obvious IV puncture wound. The alcoholic affects were slowly wearing off. The pain from my leg and jaw was becoming uncomfortable. I winced, nodded my head then deeply exhaled. "Okay, I'll apply a dose of morphine via the drip", the male nurse said. Out the corner of my eye I could see the male nurse attach something to the drip and squeeze a syringe. I felt euphoria. The pain evaporated. The endorphin rush was on a scale beyond anything I had ever experienced. I was left breathless. My eyelids became heavy. I woke up hours later. The morphine had worn off and the pain had resurfaced. Not only had the pain returned, another patient had too.

There was a lot of commotion from the people surrounding the bed next door. My situation was clearly nothing in comparison to hers. I gathered from the conversation, my neighbour was a young party goer. She had inadvertently overdosed. The family was present, offering a prayer. Initially, it wasn't looking good. The noise from next door was drowned out by the discomforting pain originating from my bladder. I swung my legs to the side of the bed, grabbed my mobile IV unit and flung the curtains open. I located the bathroom, looked inside and admired its many mirrors. Like an inquisitive child, I stared at myself. It was more an assessment than a shallow admiration. I noticed the plaster on my bloody chin. My glasses look slightly damaged. As I suspected, my jaw was skewed. My teeth appeared to look okay, which was a relief.

I made my way back to bed and lay there, awake. I was tired, but the commotion from next door and the pain from my injuries was keeping me awake. I heard the cries of relief from the family as my next door neighbour woke from her drug induced slumber. It was only the pain that was now keeping me awake. Thankfully, I passed out. The hospital became enshrined in light as dawn broke. This angelic call made me stir and wince as I tried to open my eyes. The pain immediately returned. I was rested, but tired, tired of being in this hospital bed. I wanted to be back home. I knew my flat mate Becs would be worried.

A male nurse appeared. "How are you feeling?", he asked. Given my desperation for a reprieve, I enthusiastically indicated I was physically and mentally tip-top, never better. He asked a few general questions about my current state of health. A discharge form and pen was handed to me. "Right, sign here and you're good to leave!", he said. I was shocked, I can go? I sheepishly looked around. Moments later the nurse returned with my worldly possessions. They were marked with blood, dirty and abrasion. Still, I was happy to see the items of clothing. I changed and attempted to walk to the reception area. I could hear the clop of my hard-soled shoes on the bare hospital floor. At reception I handed over my discharge form and thanked the staff dearly for the care they provided. The sun made me squint as I approached the large glass door exit. Once outside the fresh morning air filled my lungs. Thankfully the alcohol levels in my blood stream had lowered substantially. The hangover, the come-down from excess alcohol consumption, was now coming into effect. As they say, the more you drink, the more you suffer.

I hobbled and winced as I walked the streets of Sydney CBD. I was reacting to both the pain of shame and my injuries. I tried to recollect what happened the night before. Unfortunately, there was too much I did not

know. I could, at best, vaguely recall what happened immediately after the fall. I had an inspired thought. I rummaged through all my pockets like a hungry ferret. I stopped and emptied all possessions from the front trouser pockets. Nothing. Coatpockets? Nothing. Back jean pockets? "What do we have here?", I whispered. It felt like a business card. I slowly extracted it and took a glance. The place name was flamboyantly printed in gold under a laminated exterior. I read the name, Velvet Underground. I got my phone out and Google-d it. A strip club. Did I visit there or did I pick up the card as I passed by? I was happier I knew my location between the time I left James Squire, to the time I entered the Taxi.

I returned to the Rose Bay flat. The journey from the hospital felt like minutes, such was my pre-occupation with my thoughts. In reality, the walk spanned over 2 hours. I collapsed on the sofa in the lounge and stared vacantly at the white ceiling. I realised I was on my own. Where was Becs? I wanted her to know that I was okay. I played out what she would say when she saw me. "Where were you last night? You dirty stop out.", she would likely say. She'd be right. I needed a shower and a night spent in the flat for a change. Before then I needed to rest and handle my thoughts I knew I didn't respect myself. I had a problem with the drinking side of socially drinking. I had been lucky, until now. This moment was to bring change in my relationship with alcohol.

My curiosity got the better of me. I wanted to see the state of my face. I got up from the sofa and looked in the mirror. My chin looked like a congealed mess criss-crossed with scabs and stitching. I moved my lower jaw in a clockwise motion. It ached. My teeth still felt alien. At least my designerware glasses were looking as sharp as ever. I took photos of my head from various angles to ensure there were no other surprise cuts and bruises. Thankfully, the only damage was where I expected it, to my mouth and chin.

My life over the coming weeks and months was an uncomfortable one. My jaw needed to be examined by a medical professional. A phone call, a bus journey to hospital and an X-Ray later, all was clear. My lower jaw had nearly broke in half at the chin. The doctor was amazed, she pointed at the X-Ray to show a hair's breadth of bone holding the jaw together. My teeth ached. I asked the doctor if she could take a look. She recommended I see a dental specialist immediately.

Becs recommended I visit her private dentist, located a couple of blocks from the flat. I booked an emergency appointment and visited the next day. On entering, I was warmly welcomed by receptionist, wife and aide to dentist, Mr Weinstien. "Do you have health insurance?", she asked. "No", I embarrassingly replied. The receptionist was surprised by my answer. Most Australians had health insurance because of the end of year tax benefit it provided. She warned that dental appointments were going to be expensive without health insurance. "Please take a seat in reception. The dentist will be with you shortly.", she said.

Dentist, Mr Weinstien appeared in the waiting room and welcomed me. His positive body language was unusual. It was midday. Sweat should have been dripping from his brow and he should have looked stressed. "David?", he asked, with a calm air of confidence. I smiled, got to my feet and shook his out-reached hand. The 50-something dental surgeon looked every bit the professional advertised on the plaque that donned the surgery entrance. "Come this way and take a seat in the dental chair", he said. I felt at ease. The dental chair was very comfy. He stood next to me, eyes on the computer screen, tapping away on the keyboard. "What is your fullname, date of birth, address including postal code...", he asked. Mr Weinstien paused. "So how can I help you Mr Clarke?", he said. I grimaced, "I recently fell and hurt my jaw. My flat mate recommended you.", I replied.

"Ah, okay, well let's have a quick look, shall we? Open your mouth as wide as you can", he instructed. I tried, an inch gap between the top and bottom sets of teeth was all I could manage. "Is that the widest you can

open your mouth?", he asked with concern. I nodded. "Ok, let's see.", he said. Mr Weinstien began to prod my teeth gently with his index finger. I could clearly feel some of my teeth moving. I indicated my discomfort with short, sharp breaths. Mr Weinstein recoiled. "Fuck!", he said. He retracted his finger from my mouth. I felt edgy and concerned. I had never heard a dentist use profanity before. "Ok David, I'll be blunt. It doesn't look good in there.", he said. I looked into an empty space, silent, concerned. "We need to take X-Rays to better understand the state of your jaw.", he added. I was led to a booth. I stood still while a device scanned my jaw. A few moments later the X-Rays were shown to me on a lit board. "As I suspected, given my initial analysis, there is major trauma here, here, here and here. Luckily, your front teeth and rear molars, which have sustained little impact, appear to be fine. What is very concerning is the state of your jaw. I don't understand. Given the details from the X-Ray there appears to be a fracture that cuts right through the centre. Apart from the obvious broken tooth, there are a few cracks and chips that need attention.", Dr Weinstien said. He turned off the back-lit board and asked me to escort him back to the waiting area.

"Ok Mr Clarke", said the receptionist. I heard a mouse click followed by the rustle of paper. "How would you like to pay?", she asked. I pulled the invoice towards me and peered at the cost break down. My jaw, that failed to open wide earlier, nearly dropped, as my eyes scrolled to the bottom of the bill. I uncomfortably smiled and shifted my position to get a different angle of the cost. It remained an uncomfortably high \$100. "Er, do I get a Medicare discount?", I asked. The receptionist smiled. "Unfortunately, we only accept private medical insurance", she said. I pulled my lips tight as I entered my PIN into the card reader. The receptionist tore off the receipt and handed me a copy. I booked a follow-up appointment. Its aim was to run through a plan of action. More to the point, a plan of extraction.

The dental consultation day had finally arrived. I was ready to agree on the extraction plan. As I waited in the dental chair for Dr Weinstein I felt relieved. A plan, however long, was going to result in my quality of life improving. "Right", Dr Weinstien sighed heavily as he brought the X-Rays to my attention. He referred to 4 teeth. "The 3 here will need to be drilled out. This broken canine... I discussed with a colleague. I believe he has a extraction device I can utilise. It's straightforward: Lasoo tooth, tighten. The tooth should dislodge, with a velcro-like action. You are looking at 2 visits. If you'd like, we can take care of the 3 molars now. The next session we can extract the canine. My wife informs me that you don't have health insurance?", said Mr Weinstien. I shook my head. "These procedures will be expensive. I will try to keep the procedure time and cost to a minimum. Still, I estimate it will be in excess of AU\$1000. If complications arise during the procedure. The cost will naturally increase." he said.

Early that morning, the consultation ended in 2 fractured back teeth being removed. The procedure took an hour and half. Thankfully, the anaesthetic shielded me from a lot of pain. The open gum wounds were sewed using a synthetic material to help the jaw bone heal. I had several gausses placed in between the 2 bloody gaps. The receptionist handed me a shopping bag of pain killers, advising me how frequently I should take them.

I exited the dentist AU\$960 down and under the influence of pain killers. I immediately headed to work. The anaesthetic slowly wore off. By 4pm the nerve endings in my mouth woke up. The pain I endured for the next two days was debilitating. It would frequently wake me up at night. Neurofen was my saving grace on many occasions.

During the second procedure I had a \$160 filling and the most intricate tooth extraction I have ever experienced. I'd never seen a dentist so elated by the outcome of dental work. "Wait till I tell my colleague when I next see him. I'm sure he'll be very happy his extraction tool was put to good use.", De Weinstein said. "With extractions completed, you will need to consider future options:

1. Have nothing done.
2. Removable false teeth.
3. Permanent prosthetics.

I highly recommend Option 3. The procedure involves drilling a hole into the jaw, inserting a plug and screwing a prosthetic into it. If you do consider having prosthetics you will have to wait at least 4 months. The jaw bone needs to fully heal before any false teeth can be attached. If you do opt for the permanent prosthetics option, please be aware that you could pay as much as \$4500 per tooth!", Dr Weinstien said. I took a mental picture of my soon to be pillaged bank balance and sighed. Thankfully I didn't need to consider taking action now. What would be the consequence of living without prosthetics? It was too early to make a call. Now the work to remove my teeth was complete, I was looking forward to eating without discomfort. I had taken that pleasure for granted far too often in the past.

Chapter 11

Melbourne's Calling

The 6-week performance testing engagement at another bank client was a short one, stressful and thoroughly satisfying. A highlight of my software testing career. Having to handle the pressures of work and the pressures of friendships was difficult. The friends that I cared for the most were Bruce, Andy, Andi, Becs, Carl and Johnny. I still hadn't informed them of my plans to move to Melbourne. Out of respect, i wanted to tell them, one-on-one, face-to-face.

I began closest to home, Becs, my flatmate. I explained in the only way I knew at the time, bluntly. I tried to sell the idea of moving to Melbourne as a means of experiencing more of Australia. She was clearly saddened by what I said, which saddened me. She explained that I had a close network of friends here in Sydney. They cared for me. "Why should you move when you are clearly enjoying life in Sydney?", she argued. When I have an my mind set on a goal, I follow it through to the end.

Out of the remaining close friends, Carl and Johnny were the people hit hardest by the news. Carl was so angry he told me get away from him. He couldn't bare to be near me. I reasoned it was fine for him to have such feelings. He had invested so much time in the relationship with me. To see that investment go bad, seeing me walk away, it must have left a bitter taste in his mouth. Johnny, a more distant friend, had feelings similar to Becs. My other friends were more forgiving. Their feelings about their transient futures were similar to mine. I was unaware how much people cared for me. I felt selfish. I hadn't taken the time to consider other people's feelings.

I reflected on my friends and family back at home and how the impact of my move to Australia must have had on their lives. To think, of all the people I knew and cared for, it was my mom who had the most interest in my life. Of everyone, it was mom who would keep me up to date with news back home. It was mom who would Skype me every week. It was mom, I realised, who loved and supported me the most in my life.

The move to Melbourne was pencilled in. Mark called to inform me it would be Monday 1st November. I crafted an email to send my network.

"As many of you are aware I've chosen to move to Melbourne. I've set the date for the big move, it is Sunday 31st October. It would be great if you could join me in celebrating the "Passing of the Dave" on Saturday 30th October at The London Bar at 7:00pm."

With email sent, it was time to put the plan my move. I had accumulated loads of personal items since moving into the Rose Bay flat:

- One king size bed with super comfy mattress and memory foam cushions.
- Side table.
- PS3
- 42" LG TV

I wondered how much it would cost to transport everything to Melbourne. The total retail value of the items was in excess of AU\$1000. Unfortunately, van hire cost was north of AU\$500. This cost didn't account for:

- handling of goods.
- drive time for the 900km, 600 miles journey.
- fuel.

Another option was employing a removal company. Again, this would cost north of AU\$500. I was out of ideas. The next step was to secure rental accommodation in Melbourne. Finding a rental property would not be a problem. The Gum Tree website had numerous listings. Unfortunately, my budget and time window in which to visit Melbourne was limited. I contacted five properties to determine availability. Of the five, two were still available. The first was situated in the Melbourne suburb of Hawthorn. The other was located further out from the city. The Hawthorn apartment seemed the most promising, given the pictures and description. It was obvious the second property was advertised by an estate agent given the cagey communications I received to my enquiries. I wanted to use the second property as a means of leverage. There was a third property. It was taken off the market a day before my flight to Melbourne.

In the second weekend of October I organised a fly-in fly-out, one day viewing of the properties. I flew from Sydney International to Melbourne Tullamarine Airport. Tullamarine had excellent public transport links to Melbourne City. What was frightening was the distance the airport was from the city. Thankfully the Skybus was a great value, rapid option. Melbourne may not have the iconic sights of Sydney. As the Skybus approached the city outskirts, the Melbourne cityscape cast a beautiful view.

We reached Southern Cross Station, the final stop on the Skybus's route. My first flat viewing was arranged in Hawthorn, an inner suburb of Melbourne. I was scheduled to meet potential flatmate Luncinda, a third-generation British Australian. Melbourne had a good transport system that included trams and overground V/Line trains. Hawthorn East's Auburn train station was close by to the rental property located on Lilydale Grove.

The property numbering system used on the grove appeared non-existent. I picked up the phone and called Lucinda. "Lucinda?", I asked timidly. A piercing, anglicised voice replied "Yes, is that David? Where are you?", she asked. I indicated I was outside. "It's not easy to find this place. I'll come downstairs and let you in.", she replied. Lucinda was out of breath as we met on the street. She smiled nervously, introducing herself with a piercing inflected tone. "Hi, my name is Lucinda, pleased to meet you.", she said. Her introduction was followed up with a nasally sounding giggle. "I can't believe you've come all the way from Sydney to Melbourne to view rental properties", she said. I was taken aback by how attractive she was: Lucinda was thin, with long black flowing hair and immaculate pale skin. She seemed really nice. Why had this property listing been live on Gum Tree for so long?

I began asking questions about the tenancy agreement. She had an arrangement with the landlord very similar to Flo's (of Manly apartment fame). Lucinda guided me to the apartment and began describing the

living space. The apartment was all open plan, modern and comfortable. The kitchen, dining room, and living room melded into one. I was impressed with the use of space. Lucinda giggled as she indicated her room. She gave the open door a firm pull to ensure its contents was out of sight. I was sold, it felt homely. It wasn't as prestigious as the Rose Bay flat. Saying that, what accommodation offered views of the iconic Sydney Harbour Bridge? Lucinda's flat was close to a train station. A 15-minute journey to the CBD. For my first Melbourne accommodation viewing, I was very happy. Was there something I'd missed? "Why was the property still available?", I asked. "The previous occupant of the room for rent was made my life hell. They missed payments, were untidy and left owing rent", she said. The old tenants were still being chasing for rent owed. I warmed to her heart-felt story. I shook Lucinda's hand, smiled and made my way to Melbourne CBD.

I had a little time to burn before the next scheduled viewing. It was lunch time. My phone suggested a pub up the road from Flinders Street Station. The battery sign flashed, the phone subsequently died. Bugger. I looked up and noticed loads of bars. The common deal each bar offered was "a pint and a parmigiana for AU\$10". I got to the top of the block, stopped, doubled back and entered the pub on the corner.

This was a proper British style pub. It was dark, chock-a-block with bar stools. The smell of stale beer lingered in the air. It had horribly designed carpets and a letter box style bar front. Perfect. I felt immediately at home. I ordered the obligatory deal, parmigiana and a pint. I set my eyes upon my powerless phone. "Do you have an phone charger?", I asked the bar maid. Given their state of the art entertainment was a 4:3 box style TV, I was expecting a definitive. Surprisingly, a resounding yes was received. I nearly wept tears of joy. I composed myself and handed over the phone. I walked back to the nearby table. A thought occupied my mind, work. Work had begun to spill into the chaos which was my personal life. I was working 12 hour days Monday to Friday to try and meet the client's delivery dates. I opened up the laptop and connected to the pub wifi. An email from the client sat in front of me asking questions. I baulked, fired up the spreadsheet. Took a closer look at the numbers, calmed my thoughts and answered the queries. After 10 minutes of typing I clicked the send button and felt a huge sense of relief.

My gaze was diverted from the glow of the laptop screen to the dish that was placed next to it. I closed the laptop and placed it in my rucksack. I slid the plate of Chicken Parmigiana into view and took a closer look. It consisted of a thin piece of breaded chicken, a tomato-based sauce and a portion of oven cooked frozen chips. There was a lot of hype surrounding this iconic Melbourne dish. Was it a taste sensation? No. I checked the time on the wall-side clock, got to my feet and downed the pint. I grabbed my phone and rushed to the high street.

I was happy to see my fully charged phone. It my only means of navigating me to my next property viewing. My pessimistic assistant informed me I would reach the viewing 5 minutes later than scheduled. No dramas, 5 kilometres and 1 hour to go. A message appeared on my phone. The sender, the Estate Agent. I read the message repeatedly to fully grasp its meaning. "I'm really sorry mate, I'm not going to be able to make the viewing we have scheduled this afternoon. Really, really sorry.", it read. I was angry. "As you are aware I'm heading back to Sydney this evening. I have no time today to reschedule, is there no way to make the arranged viewing?", I pleaded. "The next time I see you I'll buy you a crate of beer." he replied. I felt, if I ever did see him, like throwing a crate of beer in his direction. One thing that the house viewing cancellation did give me was time. I would be able to get over to Melbourne Airport with plenty to spare. One day in Melbourne, one house viewing and lots of travelling. Lucinda's flat was nice, but it was my only option.

The week after visiting Melbourne my boss called. He had great news of an upcoming role in Sydney. To sweeten the deal he said accommodation and any storage needs would be expensed to the consultancy. It was an offer was too good to refuse. Having informed my friends I was imminently due to leave for

Melbourne, I felt like the boy who cried wolf. I contacted Andy, Carl, Johnny and Becs to inform them that my leaving party was going to be a staying party instead.

I spoke to my boss to discuss the finer details of the new role. There was still much to organise. Where would my furniture be stored? Where would I be staying? I was due to move out of the Rose Bay flat at the end of October. Mark agreed to the following plan:

1. flat move day

1. The storage company would take my furniture.
2. Move into a hotel in the Potts Point suburb.

2. week one

1. Stay at the Potts Point hotel.

3. week two onwards

1. Move into guest house accommodation in the Glebe suburb.

On flat move day the storage company waited with a van to load my items. Their service didn't include moving of items. This task was left to me. It was an arduous task. My clothes were soaked in sweat on completing the exercise. When it was time to say goodbye to Becs, we hugged tentatively. My natural fragrance was a little too strong for Becs's nose. I made my way to the budget accommodation in Potts Point. I was happy to be inconvenienced by temporary accommodation. The work gig was planned to be short-term. My plan was still to move to Melbourne. I began getting tired of the consultancy's hr department moving me from pillar to post during my time at the new client. I took searching for accommodation into my own hands. I found a fully-furnished apartment that was cheap, plush and available long-term. The apartment was located in Crows Nest.

My personal life continued as normal before the move to Melbourne. I was in frequent contact with Carl, Johnny and Andy to organise social drinking meetups in the suburb of Paddington, Coogee and the city. My view on social drinking hadn't changed following the fractured jaw incident. As the wounds began to heal I continued drinking excessively. It was easy to consume large quantities of alcohol in a social setting, given all my colleagues were drinkers.

Teresa, Andy, Elliot, Bruce and I socialised at a bar located close to the office at lunch time. It started with relaxed conversation. Bruce and Elliot made their excuses headed home. Andy, Teresa and I decided to not return to the office. Teresa talked about her sons. Both were living with the couple at their new Manly house. The eldest, Brad, was in his early 20s. He was new to Sydney, and available to meet us. Teresa gave him a call and asked to head to the Lowenbrau Keller in the Rocks. "I love that pub", she said after finishing her call.

Teresa, Andy and I were already drunk by the time we had reached the rocks. Teresa saw a small wine store on the high street. "That's cute. Let's pop in and take a look.", she said. It offered a wine tasting experience in 3 steps:

1. Pay your money.
2. Collect your tokens.
3. Exchange tokens for wine samples.

Each wine was stuck to the wall along with its tasting notes. Staff members were on hand to guide us through the drinking process. The process involved:

1. Smelling
2. Swirling

3. Sampling.

From the cultured conversation they had with the staff, Andy and Teresa were in their element. As a novice, I went with the flow. I was happy to try whichever wines the staff recommended. When questioned about my thoughts on flavour, I gave a default response, "nice", which highlighted my lack of wine drinking experience. Andy and Teresa purchased 2 bottles before we made our way to the High Street.

Teresa's took charge when she got drunk. She strained her wine saturated vocals. "Right, to the Lowenbrau Keller!", she said. The fresh air mixed with the alcohol in my bloodstream. It was a repeat of the moment I disembarked the booze cruise. I again found it difficult to walk straight. The cobbled, slippery streets made walking even more treacherous.

The entrance to the Lowenbrau Keller was unassuming. We entered and walked down the stone staircase leading to a large room. The ceiling was low. The support beams were decorated with placards indicating it was built shortly after the first British arrived. It took concentration to avoid the tables, beams, low ceiling and trip hazards.

Teresa, in her inebriated state, shouted at the top of her lungs "Brad!". She flung her arms open, tilted her head back and rushed towards the long, bench where Brad and a random gent were sat. Andy and I tottered over like a couple of uncoordinated Cockatoos. Teresa embraced her son and gave him an exaggerated kiss on the cheek. Brad, bemused, looked at Andy. "How many has she had?", he asked. Andy gave Brad a glazed glance. Andy's face immediately lit up. "Brad, my boy.", he said. Andy entered into a fit of giggles. Brad looked astonished. "How many have you all had?", he said.

We all sat down on the bench as introductions were made. "For those who don't know. This is my gorgeous son Brad", Teresa proclaimed. Brad nodded sheepishly. "This is Dave, my work mate at the consultancy". I raised my hand slowly and nodded. "This is Andy, the love of my life.". Andy enthusiastically said "yeah", before entering into a fit of giggles. "This is Jon, an old work mate of mine. Right, everyone knows who I am", she said.

Teresa looked around. "How do we get drinks around here?", she asked. Brad spoke up, "It's table service mom. Some bloke dressed like a German will turn up and take our orders.", he said. Sure enough, a rotund Bavarian with brown braced shorts and white shorts appeared. Teresa took charge. "Shhh, I'm getting the drinks in. What does everyone want?", she asked. The drinks menu had an extensive range of beers and liqueurs. The schnapps came in a bewildering variety of flavours to suit all tastes. We opted for a selection to share. Personally, I was excited to order a 1 litre "stein" of my favourite beer, Hofbrau Dunkel. It made me smile saying it.

The drinks arrived quickly, delivered in Bavarian fashion i.e., one waiter/waitress, many drinks. It was an effort to lift the stein of beer: 1kg of liquid and a glass weighing over twice that. It took focus to raise the drinking receptacle to my mouth. I aimed to drink a mouthful. Unfortunately, more than that ended up on my light coloured work shirt. Light beer leaves a light stain. Dark beer... I leave that to you to work out. I wasn't overly bothered. I was quite happy with my efforts. Unfortunately, my efforts were noticed by everyone on the table. Andy, with fits of giggles, tried his best to coordinate his thoughts. "Dave, ha ha, next time you should bring a bib!", he said. His chuckle turned into a cough, which led to him spilling his beer. It was like a badly coordinated tennis match. This time, I returned a serving of laughter. Our table were in raptures. Teresa piped up "right, the selection of schnapps has arrived.", she said.

The wooden shot-glass holders were positioned in front of us. Teresa was first. She picked up the shot glass, held it aloft and paused. Everyone on the table followed her lead. "Cheers", Teresa said. We clinked our glasses and sunk the schnapps. I took a look at the facial expressions of each person on our table. It was one of elation. The sweet Peach Schnapps, a drink dangerously easy to consume, was admired by everyone. The remaining drinks didn't last long.

The pub began to fill up, much to our bemusement. A musical quartet arrived on stage wearing Bavarian attire. They set up their brass band. Excitement and anticipation filled the room as the band began to practice. I used my drink glass as a head support. Teresa swayed as she turned to face the group. Her dilated pupils indicated her drunken state. "Who wants another?", she asked. Through my hazy vision I looked at my glass and over at Teresa. I slurred as I spoke. "Yeah T, another dark'n, por favour.", I said. Teresa clicked her fingers to try and grab the attention of the waiter. It took a while to order, given the lack of staff and their unwillingness to serve us. The drinks eventually arrived, just in time for the first song to be played by the Bavarian band.

Every bench seat was now filled by a person mesmerised by the performance. We swayed in unison as the "umm paa paa" rhythm took hold. We all applauded as the first song came to a close. Then started the second. I recognised it instantly. "Pennsylvania Polka", which featured in Bill Murray's Ground Hog Day. I went to great lengths to show my appreciation for the song. I may have been intoxicated, but I could follow the rhythm and attempt a sing along. The problem was, I never learnt the lyrics. My efforts sounded like a baby communicating to an adult. Thankfully, I avoided screaming and pooing my pants. I did manage to stand up, sway and direct my cheerful singing voice at the rest of our group. Teresa laughed. "Dave, you crack me up.", she said. To complement my merriment everyone in our group stood up and swayed with me. As the song ended I held onto the last note and collapsed back to the bench.

During the intermission, a band member walked over to our table. He smiled. "Are you German? You know this song, right?", he asked with a thick German accent. I was honoured to be mistaken for a fellow Bavarian. "I heard it on Bill Murray's Ground Day.", I replied. "Good, good", he said. With that band member sauntered off to the bar. "Right", Andrew said, attempting to lead the rest of the group. "Onwards to Argyle!", he exclaimed. My enthusiasm was beginning to wane. I was finding it difficult to keep awake.

The Argyle, located just around the corner was distinctly trendy. A bar where 2nd rate Australian celebrities were found. As we queued I was aware of the many security staff members. They looked at me with disgust. Thankfully I was still conscious. I did my best to appear sober for the brief time that we queued. "How ya going? Had a good night so far?", bouncer-one asked. "Looks like you've had a good night so far?", bouncer-two added. Teresa piped up, in a commanding and serious tone. "Yep, been great so far, it'll be better when we get in. It's bleedin' freezing out here.", she replied. The bouncers were taken aback by how confident and outspoken she was. The bouncers surrendered to the beck and call of the alpha female. The triumphant Teresa confidently turned to us. "Come on then, remember I'm buying.", she said. Her serious tone turned jovial as she winked and smiled.

I walked over to the nearest stand-up only table. My body slowly crumpled onto it. "Right mate, you need to put some strength into those legs else we're not going to be able to carry you.", a voice announced. In my semi-conscious state I noticed two bouncers, one either side of me. It took a few seconds for me to realise I was about to be shown the exit. I blindly followed the bouncers instructions. I was escorted to the High Street where I was lain down. "Mate, best advice, take a taxi home", the bouncer said. I retorted in a sequence of slurs. "But my mates are in the club.", I said. I didn't care much about returning and I didn't care much for a taxi. Even in my drunken state I was tight on the purse strings. I needed to find cheap public transport home.

Having recently moved to new accommodation I couldn't determine where home was. I managed to get to my feet and walk to bus stops. I took a hard look at the lengthy queue that had formed at bus stop one. I concluded, length of queue = correct destination. As I entered the bus I fumbled for cash and grabbed a ticket. There was a free seat near the front. I sat down and passed out.

I jolted, gaining consciousness as the driver tapped me on the shoulder. "Last stop mate", he said. My state of mind was a little clearer at that point. I was able to assess my surroundings and direct a question to the driver. "Where am I?", I asked. The driver indicated a suburb that I had never visited before or since. "Where do you need to get to?", he asked. I paused, putting effort into my thoughts. I pictured a crow. "Crow, crow, Crows Nest", I blurted. "Jeez mate, you're a long way from home. I'm heading back into the city after a short break here. Stay onboard till the final stop and take a taxi.", he instructed. With that I got to my feet, stretched and exited the bus.

An overwhelming urge to poo entered my thoughts. "Is there a toilet nearby?", I asked the driver. "Nah mate, there are some bushes over there if you're desperate?", he replied calmly. I couldn't work out where "over there" was. I looked at my surroundings. I could only see the entrance lights of nearby homes. The idea of knocking on someone's door and asking to use their bathroom at gone midnight. There was the possibly the home owner could act out of character. I looked further afield. In the depths of darkness I saw a garden. A befitting place for an Englishman. Going for a number 2 in unfamiliar surroundings can be treacherous. Even in a sober state, the squat position is difficult. Getting non-essential clothing out the way and keeping a steady perch can prove difficult. When correctly coordinated, the squat is multiple times more satisfying than the sit-down. I went through the motions. The whole exercise was made a damn sight easier thanks to a fence I could hold on to. As I squatted, I clasped the metal bars firmly. It was text book.

With a load off my bowels I swaggered jovially towards the bus. I hopped onboard, sat down and smiled. The silence and darkness of the interior was replaced with the flicker of internal lights and roar of the bus engine. As I headed citywards I was happy to be sobering up, unharmed and heading home.

Chapter 12

The Boys Weekend

Johnny did a bloody good job of organising it for mid-October. The accommodation in a Surfers Paradise resort was for 13 of us, for 2 nights. The hotel had gathered it was a lads holiday. A AU\$100 bond was required for each room. I was to share a room with my best friend Andy.

Surfers Paradise was renown for being a destination where college students would visit after finishing their exams. They would, like all teenagers, make big mistakes under the influence of alcohol. During this time it was renowned for being edgy. There were people that went to Surfers Paradise looking for trouble. It was common for violent scenes to break out on the main boulevard. This was where the big pubs and clubs were found.

On arrival to Surfers Paradise we threw our weekend apparel into our hotel rooms and made our way to the hotel lobby. The plan, to visit many bars and drink over the course of the day. It is commonly known in the UK as the "all-dayer". I was cautious of the plan, especially after the "Darling Harbour" incident, but I thought it would still be a good idea. The group's thoughts were split. On the one side was "The Johnny All-Day-er", on the other was "The Carl Adventure Park Day-er". I wasn't a huge fan of either choice. I made a last minute 3 amigos (wallet, keys, phone) check just as "The Johnny All-Day-er" group were departing. Bugger, I pictured my phone lying on the bedside table. I rushed to my room, forgetting to mention my brief disappearance to

the rest of the group. I returned to lobby to find Johnny's group gone. Thankfully Carl and Matt were still waiting for their taxi. "Where is the rest of the group?", I asked. "They went off in taxis a few minutes ago", Matt said. "They didn't know if you were joining them, so they took off. Feel free to join us at the adventure park if you're stuck for anything to do.", Carl added.

The taxi eventually arrived at our hotel to Carl's relief. The three of us piled in and off we went. The taxi ride took us across a landscape far different to the Sydney city scape. Surfers Paradise, aka Surfers', was more tropical than its southern cousin Sydney. Banana plantations and swamps passed us by. The heavy rainfall had sculpted its red soils. Even though it wasn't wilderness, it still felt wild. The Warner Brothers Movie World appeared out of nowhere. The synonymous Warner Brothers (WB) logo was displayed on an art deco style arch that befitting a studio more than a theme park. Seeing the logo, I felt nostalgic. I was brought up on classic Warner Brother cartoons. With a sense of indebtedness, I was happy to fork out the stupidly high ticket price. Carl had a larger investment in the franchise than me, he paid extra for an "additional access" ticket.

It was surreal walking the fake Warner Brothers Movie World streets. Families walked around, entertained by individuals dressed up in Warner Brother character costumes. Warner Brothers shops, strategic positioned, sold a wealth of overly priced, WB branded confectionary for maximum marketing impact. Carl, Matt and I looked out of place. Three, thirty year old blokes were walking around a theme park targeting affluent families. Carl, in his usual downbeat, sarcastic manner asked me and Matt, "so what shall we do then? And don't think about that?", he indirectly indicated. "What?", Matt and I replied. "There is a lot of jail bait around these parts. Don't let your eyes wander.", he added. Teenage Australian girls wore little to entertain the imagination. Not surprising given the warm conditions. In an adult, social context, their clothing could be perceived as "sexy". Why didn't society frown upon it? It was an acceptable part of Australian culture.

We averted our eyes to other thrills in the theme park, the roller coasters. The older I got, the more excitement I sought and more impatient I became. I looked for a ride with a sub 5-minute waiting time. The Superman Escape was that ride. It looked like a standard roller coaster: It had loops and bends. My expectations, given my initial assessment, were low.

Carl, Matt and I sat in the roller coaster passenger train. The holster bars dropped down, secured and the count down was announced at a deafening volume. "There's a count down.", I exclaimed. Given my experience of rollercoasters in the past, the first few moments of a roller coaster ride were relaxed, steady and often bumpy. I participated in voicing the count-down, much to the amusement of Carl and Matt. If I knew of the hype surrounding this ride, I would have known the best moment of the Superman Escape experience would be after the count down. I was innocently at its mercy. As the countdown completed, there was a short pause. My heart raced. The roller coaster went from stationary to pant-stainingly quick in seconds. I felt a rush of blood towards the back of the head as my skull was firmly planted against the seat headrest. The skin on my face stretched and morphed as the car accelerated. My brain had little time to contemplate the initial experience. As the acceleration eased, the endorphin rush kicked in. I was in ecstasy. It continued through twist, turns and loop-the-loops.

As the roller coaster train slowed and the safety bar was released, I sat there. My eyes were wide open and my heart pounded. A staff member asked me politely to exit the ride. I broke my forward gaze, looked down at my pants and shook my head. I slowly got to my feet and exited into the sun baked Warner Brothers Movie World streets. My mind began to recount everything that happened during the Superman Escape experience. I began to smile. I turned and viewed the ride, this time as a spectator. Strangely, nothing in my mind married up with what I saw. I stood there, bemused.

My attention was distracted by a familiar voice, "Dave!", Carl said. I turned to see a jovial Carl and Matt. They were munching on chocolates bought from one of the overly-priced sweet shops. I looked agast at the super sized packets of M&Ms. "How much did you pay for that?", I asked. I braced myself for a response. "Just a couple of bucks", Carl quipped. He turned his attentions to his mobile phone. "I've just had a text from Johnny. He and the lads are over at the Wet 'n' Wild water park. He was asking about our whereabouts. Wet and Wild, what do you think?", Carl asked. I was happy to go with the flow. The distant look on the faces of Carl and Matt indicated they didn't care. Our Warner Brother passes included entry into the water park. It was close by too. We agreed, for the sake of group unity, to meet Johnny and the rest of the "all-dayer" group.

Wet 'n' Wild was nothing over and above other waterparks. What it did have, given the its tropical location, was heat, sunshine and high UV. We showed our passes, entered and headed over to the main pool. This is where most of the water slides were found. Johnny was the first to recognise us. His lairy southern accent could be heard above the sound of splashing water, aircraft, road drills. "Lads", he shouted. We looked up and saw Johnny in his damp, baggy trunks looking a bit worse for wear. We walked over. "Don't ask. Well do, but the answer is going to be:

1. Re-apply sun cream.
2. Don't wear sunglasses while tackling the rubber ring water slide.
3. Don't drink and slide

", Johnny said.

The rest of the lads looked rested. They took a strategic sleep on shaded sun loungers, saving themselves for the night ahead. "Well, I'm tired from all the standing and queueing I've experienced today" Carl said. Matt and I concurred. "Right, we'll see you back at the hotel Johnny", Carl continued.

The night kicked off, as it did in the morning, with everyone assembled in the hotel lobby. After a quick chat with the group it was decided we would take a relaxed approach to the night ahead. With that, we walked en mass to the high street. We stopped at the first bar with an outdoor seating area and comfy chairs. A number of the lads took a good look around before taking a seat. Their other halves had explicitly told them what they can and can't do on this trip. The people in long term relationships e.g., Andy, Johnny and Carl, seemed the most at ease.

Carl, known for his womanising, jocular comments, had one eye on his drink and another on any unsuspecting female passer-by. His degrading, womanising comments were taken with a pinch of salt. He wouldn't dare comment in the same manner if his girlfriend was present. In male company Carl would add mannerisms to assert his alpha status. Sniffing the air and gesticulating with the tongue were hallmark Carl-isms. I admittedly laughed along, even though I felt uneasy with the sexist jokes. Andy was giggling along like a Hyena, which cajoled Carl further.

Johnny, the self assigned group leader, was deeply involved in conversation with his friends. He appeared uneasy. Understandable, given his group leader role. Finding the correct moment to move to the next pub requires logistical skills. I think most of us could have sat in the same pub until closing time, such was the relaxed environment. Johnny had other ideas, his ideal night wasn't a relaxed one. He wanted to experience the high energy of the night club. Johnny got to his feet, rubbed his hands and exercised his jaw muscles. "Right lads. Drink up, we're moving.", he said. "Where to?", Carl frustratingly replied. "Well, we could sit around here, scratch our arses and make it back to the hotel. Or we could liven the night up and get our boogy on at some debaucherous club setting.", Johnny retorted. I read Carl's frustration. The rest of the group looked towards Carl. "Come on Carl, it won't be that bad.", Andy advised. Carl looked to me, quickly looked

round, then whispered his intended next move. "There's a descheveled strip club that I saw a couple of blocks away, what do you say?", he asked. He winked, and gesticulated. I paused for thought. I felt indebted to Carl. He'd been the most reliable mate I knew in the short time I had been in Australia. I made the choice to abandon the rest of the group, even if it meant upsetting them. This was more preferable than upsetting Carl, that I knew hated the club scene. Johnny didn't seem too bothered being rejected by Carl.

Johnny and Carl amicably went their separate ways. Having only consumed a few beers, Carl and I were all but sober by the time we made it to the entrance of the gentlemen's club. Like many strip clubs in the UK, the entrance was unassuming. There was very little to indicate what went on behind these closed doors. In many ways it added to the tease that these dives portrayed. We made our way past the bouncers and immediately into the dark reception area. It was here that a frantic and confident lady asked us for id and entrance fee. I could sense that Carl was excited. The sudden rush of blood made Carl more charitable. He was happy to pay my entrance fee. I looked towards the set of doors that separated us from the bar area. Carl carefully pushed the door. We looked at each other, towards the empty stage and then towards the empty bar. "Right, while the entertainment is readied, let's get royally ratted!", Carl exclaimed. I smiled, nodded and accompanied him to the bar area. "2 Yaeger bombs please", he said. They arrived swiftly. We clinked and consumed. After the fifth round of drinks the mood in the club changed. It was like a scene from a Michael Jackson music video. The dancer's stage lit up.

The modern, upbeat music pounded, shaking the club's foundations and its admirers. My eyes focussed on the criss-cross of multicolour stage lights that scanned the dancefloor. This was the first tease, making the punters purposefully wait. It felt like an eternity, but then, with perfect timing, there she was. I immediately craved for her, being sexually attracted to curvaceous women with large breasts. Unfortunately, the size of the dancer's breasts encumbered her routine. I turned to Carl, winked, smiled and nodded, indicating I was enjoying the show. He looked at me with wide eyes and gesticulations. I laughed and watched the dance floor. When the show girl finished she walked towards us. I glanced at Carl, looked in the show girl's direction. "I need to get a private dance with her", I said. I quickly got her attention. "Hey, how much for a private dance?", I asked. I hadn't been so concise in my life. She replied with a price list for: short, medium, long. I demanded the lengthiest.

Carl walked away as I handed over the money. She asked me to sit back and relax. Out the corner of my eye I watched her undress. Carl walked past, hand in hand with another show girl. GG, probably a reference to her bra size, forced her enormous breasts into my face. Knowing how strip clubs operate, I knew to look but not touch. It was difficult. I was aroused. I touched GG carefully, caressing her breasts. Thankfully there was no resistance. I knew it was a tease, but it was one of most stimulating I had experienced in my life. I had to curtail my sexual intentions and treat GG as a professional who had their breasts rubbing against my face.

When the strip tease finished I walked contentedly to the bar area to find Carl. I chuckled. He walked past me again, this time hand-in-hand with show girl number 2. I ordered a beer and looked towards the dance floor. I assessed the breadth of talent that appeared on stage. I was satisfied. My expectations were surpassed by the private dance with GG. My drink was reaching empty as Carl returned. He had a big smile plastered across his face. "I'm knackered", he said, nodding and winking. "Fancy making a move?", he added.

A common event at the end of a night out, was a visit to the kebab house. Thankfully, Surfers Paradise catered for the late-night-eat-seeker's needs with an abundance of takeaways situated on the boulevard. Given the early hour and number of drunk people on the street, it was always going to be a dicey. Carl and I witnessed

random fights break out. Their ferocity took us by surprise. We thankfully avoided the mele, but couldn't avoid kebab sauce spilling onto our attire.

The next morning, everyones luggage was assembled in the centre of the hotel lobby. The group members looked disheveled and disappointed. There were, according to the wise words of Johhny, a lack of "drinking holes and talent". Johnny's group also witnessed a large number of trouble makers on the boulevard. On hearing of Johnny's uneventful night out, I felt satisfied. The seedy option me and Carl chose had turned out to be the better one. Johnnny looked in our direction. "How was your night?", he asked. Carl looked like a cat that had the cream. Using subtle British sarcasm he downplayed the experience, "It was alright", he said. Carl turned to me, tapped the side of his nose with his index finger and said quietly "what happens on tour, stays on tour." Carl and I began sniggering like immature school boys.

Chapter 13

Smiffy and Kris Visit

Much was up in the air with regards to life in Sydney come November. I was still waiting for Mark, my boss, to authorise the move to Melbourne. Thankfully, I was living in a more permanent setting, a serviced apartment near the city. I was ready to accommodate guests, specifically, the arrival of my UK friends Matthew and Kris. They were set to arrive mid November.

It had taken months to organise the itinerary for an epic Western Australia road trip. It would begin in Broome (North Western Australia) late November and end in Perth (South Western Australia) 2 weeks later. The consultancy had no new client opportunities in November, across all offices. Every consultant in Melbourne, bar one, wasn't working for a client, my soon to be new home.

We had half as many consultants benched in Sydney. This took the pressure off Bruce, Regional Salesman. Elliot was busy working alongside Jason, a new senior consultant, at a large financial client. Mr Bradford had left the company. Only Andy Schevchenko, an Australian citizen of Ukrainian descent, and I weren't working for a client. There were rumours of a big project. Bruce had a contact at a media client. Teresa, was working on a strategy document to land the piece of work. Matthew and Kris's inbound flight was due to arrive in Sydney on Saturday 20th November and return December 13th. Our outbound flights departed from Perth, Western Australia. Matthew and Kris's flights to and from the UK were going to be epic. 20 hours each way.

The day came when my good friends arrived at Sydney Airport. At the time I was working at Bruce's media client, over in a suburb of Pyrmont. The client's working schedule was relaxed. A look online confirmed Matthew and Kris's flight was on time. I was all set to meet them, making the convenient but pricey train journey to Sydney Airport. I found the arrivals area. I looked at the arrivals screen with concern. I reconciled the flight information on the screen with details on my phone. The fight had landed. I peformed a rough calculation, given my experience of the Sydney arrivals process. They would be through customs and baggage reclaim, without hold-ups, in 15 minutes. I felt nervous as I waited with a group of people belonging to a large welcoming party. A set of doors flung open. A herd of passengers with luggage trolleys emerged. It took me some time to scan the group. I released a huge sigh of relief as I recognised Matthew & Kris. Matthew approached first with tired eyes and a huge smile on his face. Both Kris and Matthew looked jet lagged. "Alright mate", he said as he shook my hand. Kris looked a little fresher. She gave me a hug. I looked at their bulky luggage and asked if I could help. As host, I wanted Matthew and Kris's holiday to be a permeation of perfection. If it meant carrying them and their luggage on my back like an encumbered camel, so be it.

"Right, lead the way?", Matthew enthusiastically asserted. I was familiar with Sydney Airport. "Follow me", I said. We began to follow the signs to the train station. I began asking questions about their journey. "How was your flight? Did you get much sleep?", I asked. "Not much, the in-flight entertainment was cool though. What did we watch? Yeah,", Kris idley mumbled. I politely nodded, "good to hear", I said. We continued our walk. "To use Sydney Airport Train Station you have to pay a toll, which the government uses to pay for the money owed for its construction.", I explained. Stupidly, I wished I had warned them prior to their visit, to set their expectations. I was to find out that Kris and Matthew were on a tight budget. I should have paid the fee on their behalf, but I was being my miserly self.

We reached the train ticket office. My tired friends belligerently paid the fee and followed me to the train bound for Sydney CBD. I tried to stay ambivalent as Kris and Matthew threw their luggage on the platform. Kris uttered something angrily under her breath. I felt uneasy. I looked at the electronic board to guage when the next train was due to depart. Unfortunately, it was 15 minutes away. As Kris and Matthew looked in the distance, I took a look at my phone to distance myself. Coincidentally, an email appeared. It was from Carl. He asked if the ex-pat group would like to meet up at The London Pub in Paddington. I smiled as I read the puntuations of humour. Awesome, I hoped the interesting news would ease the tension. I looked up and asked Matthew and Kris. Matthew showed enthusiasm. Kris, less so. I think she was still angry with me.

The initial 15-minute wait was a more digestable 2-minutes. The sound of the doubledecker train echoed through the tunnel as it made its way to our platform. I felt relieved. The impressive double decker train was modern, a year 2000 example, bought to accommodate tourists arriving for the Olympics.

We approached Wynyard Station. I looked over at Matthew and Kris. Jet lag and a dose of Sydney summer heat had caught up with them. They were sat leant against each other, eyes closed, mouths open and bodies lifeless. I smiled. My original plans of drinks at the pub would need to be delayed until they had rested. The connecting train journey into Crows Nest was an impressive one by any city's standards. The Sydney Bay area is arguably the prettiest and most iconic view to grace any city. Even though Matthew and Kris were tired I could see their double-takes as we passed through Sydney Harbour Bridge. Given how often I had experienced this journey, I took the view for granted.

I was happy I had serviced apartment accommodation to use while my friends were here. It would afford Matthew and Kris the privacy and space they needed while they acclimatised. I opened the front door into the bedroom-come-lounge-come-kitchen-come-living space. It was clean as a whistle. Thank you cleaners. As host, I wanted Matthew and Kris to feel loved. I gave them the tour and showed flyers of tours in and around Sydney. I offered them use my comfortable double bed. I handed the spare key to them, wrote down my phone number and said that they should call me if they needed anything. I made a beeline back to work.

The day at work was a blur. I thought constantly about the well-being of Matthew and Kris. I still felt bad about the Sydney Airport Train Station debacle. A message appeared on my phone. Matthew mentioned that they felt somewhat rested and wanted to meet up with me when I finished work. He asked for a bar recommendation. Given work's proximity to Darling Harbour it would be stupid of me not to recommend The James Squire Brewhouse. I knew the place well. The last memory I had of it included Mexicans and a visit to the hospital.

James Squire Brewhouse was packed on the evenings. It was no surprise given its mix of large-screen-live-sporting-events and its huge range of beers. They served many speciality beers. The one that interested me was a stout. It was the closest Australia had to Guinness. With the Mexican inspired "La Cucharacha" theme

playing in my head, I amably texted back to Matthew. Given the beautiful weather, I asked we meet in the pub's outdoor seating area.

I crossed the bridge that led to Darling Harbour. The comfortable, humid, heat of the day was radiating from the brick-covered walkway. I looked over at The Brewhouse. I admired its open, commanding view of the harbour. I took a good look outside. Matthew and Kris weren't around. A text message confirmed their late arrival. Coordinating themselves in the haze of post flight jet lag must have been an exhaustive effort. I was comfortable waiting in such beautiful conditions.

I ordered a schooner of the James Squire Stout and nursed it in the comfort of the outdoor seating area. As I stretched my neck I saw Matthew and Kris. They looked much more responsive, having showered and changed into their summer wears. I saw a smile on Kris's face for the first time. I smiled in return. I stood up tall to stretch my back, having assumed a poor perched posture. "Would you like a drink?" I asked. They would have offered the same response if I asked "Does Dolly Parton sleep on her back?". Matthew was knowledgeable of Australian drinks. Unfortunately, the Brewhouse only had speciality beers. Kris, having lighter tastes, was happy for me to suggest a beer for her. Matthew, on the other hand, was mesmerised by the beer selection and wanted something a little more like lager. I knew exactly what to order.

We took our drinks to an outdoor table where we could stand, people watch and absorb the last rays of sun. This was the life for a social drinker. I asked Matthew and Kris how they were feeling. They replied energetically. It was a far cry from the energy sapped couple I picked up from the airport. I was as equally excited about Matthew and Kris enjoying themselves in Sydney as I was about our road trip in Western Australia. We amably sipped our drinks and chatted about plans for the rest of the week. It was great to hear Matthew and Kris had a visit to the Blue Mountains organised for the next day.

Kris and Matthew returned to the apartment from their Blue Mountain excursion. I happily returned from a yawnful day at work. The highlight of that day was an email from Andy. He and Cullen planned eating out prior to meeting Carl and co. at The London Pub. I was up for it, Andy and Cullen were valued friends of mine. Unfortunately, Matthew and Kris didn't have the same enthusiasm. They were cash strapped, having spent the day spending sums of money on tourist trap retail. Instead, Matthew, Kris and I went to a nearby supermarket and picked up a wealth of fresh food to prepare back at the flat. Queensland Mangos were excellent value for money. Being quite large I brought only a couple back for us to eat. The dinner main was a chicken salad: lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and my go to Coles Cooked Chicken. The day trip had worked up Kris and Matthew's appetites. It didn't take us long to consume the banquet. We showered, changed and began the journey to The London Pub. With it being a comfortable, beautiful day, getting around Sydney was a pleasure. I felt nervous. How well would my good old UK mates mix with my new ex-pat friends?

Playing host is tiring. Especially if, like me, you constantly worry about the wellbeing of your guests. Having caught up with Matthew and Kris's life story over the past couple of days I was now asking questions to keep the conversation flowing. I looked out the bus window as we journeyed to Paddington. When the conversation between Kris, Matthew and I subsided, my mind was consumed by random thoughts. My reflection in the bus window caught my attention. I noticed I was looking tired. Being forced to squint didn't help as the sun shone. Anxiety took hold as I looked down at my phone to see where the bus was on its route. Another 10 stops, 5 minutes. My mind was distracted by random thoughts again. I broke my window-ward gaze, looked down at my phone. "Shit, this is our stop", I said to Kris and Matthew. I clambered out of my seat to hit the bus's passenger stop button.

Matthew and Kris smiled as we exited the bus. They followed me, the map reader. My eyes were focussed more on my phone than my footing. I spoke out loud as I gestured our the route to The London Pub. The London Pub wouldn't have look out of place in any town in the UK with its black beams and white walls. We entered. The familiarity continued with its British pub style interior. Wooden stools were lined up at the bar area. Cushioned, wooden benches were positioned in the corners of the lounge. The decorated fire place was at the heart of the lounge. My ex-pat mates had commandeered most of the floor space. I looked over to see Cullen, Andy, Johnny, Carl, Uma and few of their attachments. I smiled as we walked over.

Carl, the astute socialite, took the lead with welcoming Kris and Matthew to the group. "Pleased to meet you", he said enthusiastically. He had an uncomfortably smug smile on his face. I remember seeing this side to Carl's personality when we first met over in Manly. He began introducing the group to Kris and Matthew in a smooth, open manner. Cool, my friends are socialising. Time to get the drinks in and relax. Thanks Carlos, you beauty. I asked the group, as British convention dictates, if anyone else wanted a drink. Looking at the quantity of fluid in people's drinking receptacles, they had recently arrived. Andy though, he was thirsty. He pointed to his schooner glass, to indicate it needed refilling. "Becks, por favor.", he replied. "Anyone else?" I said. There was silence. I turned to my friends. "Fancy heading to the bar to see what you'd like to drink?", I asked.

There was more than a hint of familiarity to the choice of beers on tap: Becks, Budweiser, Guinness, Speckled Hen. Being a fan of British real ales, I yearned for Speckled Hen. Matthew and Kris were more adventurous. They opted for Australian beers. "One Speckled Hen, a VB, a Becks and a Toohey's please?", I said to the bar man. Matthew, Kris and I made our way to the comfy benches with drinks in hands. Matthew and Kris, being our guests, were allocated the comfiest seats. The group, with its transient members, quickly adopted Kris and Matthew into the group. The conversation was high-brow too, which surprised me. Carl's suppressed his urge to talk in a derogatory manner. It was great Uma was on hand to censor Carl's conversation pieces. Carl was a literary genius and well versed in dictating the ebb and flow of chat within a social group. After saying something controversial in the presence of Uma, he would turn to her, smile and smother her with gratitude.

The flow of conversation was relaxed. There was no tension between group members. Thankfully the controversial ex-pat members were absent. I felt really comfortable during this get-together. I could see Kris and Matthew were relaxed and enjoying themselves too. The night was drawing to a close quickly, as great nights do. It was time for Kris, Matthew and I to bid farewell. As we walk back to the train station Kris and Matthew complimented me for having such an awesome group of mates. They were right. On reflection they were adopted to replace my best friends from back home, Matthew, Doug, Tony and Rob. It had only been a year since I last spent quality time with Kris and Matthew. Yet my relationship with them felt as close as it had ever been. We still shared common interests like social drinking, music, travel & admiration for the great outdoors.

I finished up at work, returned to the apartment and packed. Matthew, Kris and I travelled to the airport to catch a flight to Melbourne. It was, again, a brief stay before we flying to Broome, Western Australia, the first location of our impending road trip. The flight time, including a connection at Perth Airport, was 8 hours. The small plane began its decent into Broome Airport. I looked out the window to see a landing strip that included a strip of tarmac covered in a generous amount of red sand. I couldn't see a terminal, just a tin roof shelter. Departures and arrivals was the tin roof shelter, which simplified locating our luggage. It was great to have finally arrived at the road trip start point. The high temperature, 30 degrees Celsius and dry conditions were lovely. A welcome change from the cool, inclement weather we left behind in Melbourne.

All road trips require a mode of road transport. We had booked a Wicked Campers van prior to our arrival. The location of their Broome office was a lengthy walk away. A bit too much for tourists slugging around 2 weeks of holiday luggage. We hailed a taxi, arriving at the Wicked Campers address. The premises looked more like a scrap yard than a professional vehicle hire company. We tried to locate the office. Seeing a raft of colourfully graffitied camper vans confirmed the correct location. Wicked Campers, like many old vehicle hire companies, lacked hygiene standards. The maintenance staff wore grease and chip fat on their exposed skin. They were helpful, escorting us to the sales office.

The main hangar contained a raft of vans up on blocks, presumably requiring a lot of repair work. Hopefully our van wouldn't need any attention for the entirety of the road trip. We signed paper work and returned back to the forecourt. "Right, this is yours.", a representative said. I looked at the vehicle, crossed my arms and stared. It was a Mitsubishi, not any Mitsubishi, a diesel 4x4 van called Delica. It was tall, thin, feminine and emblazoned with tasteless graffiti. The representative provided us with documentation. "Remember, it's a diesel. Make sure the glow plug light goes out before you turn the ignition.", he said. Wise words. We were to find out, the Delica didn't like cold mornings.

Kris, Matthew and I shared the burden/pleasure of driving during our trip. Our whistlestop tour began at Kimberley Klub YHA. We made our way south to a number of nice little campsites including Captain Bert Madigan Park. Most of the campsites offered red sands, outdoor shared bbqs and an array of large creepy crawlies. Karijini Park featured a corrugated track. Speed and a firm grip on the steering wheel allowed us to glide across the small, evenly spaced bumps. The canyons at Karjoni Park were shallow, lush. Their small pools were perfect environments for snakes. Kris, Matthew and I encountered our first, the Mulga Snake (the largest venomous snake in Australia). The Mulga lay between us and our path out of the canyon. It was a stand off. Using a large stick and a lot of arm waving, we spooked the snake to retreat. It slithered surprisingly speedily.

Finding a place to sleep in Karijini National Park was straightforward. Keep off the corrugated road. When darkness set in and dinner time approached we took out the torches and opened the Mitsubishi Delica's boot. It was like the tardis, given the compact size of the van, it had a lot of interior space. A small gas canister was located in the Delica's boot. There was also a stove and an Esky (cool box). The contents of the Esky was kept cold with a mixture of frozen foods and bagged ice. Using the gas stove, Kris prepared a tasty vegan dinner. Penne pasta with spinach and a creamy sauce. We enjoyed eating our meal in the serenity of our road side location. There was no road noise and no light pollution. We relaxed with beer in hand and fold up chairs beneath our bottoms. When bed time beckoned, Matthew and Kris reorganised the interior of the van to unshackle the fold down bed. Their sleeping quarters were secure, out of the elements and supported by a lovely mattress. My tent, borrowed from my friend Andy, had the essentials: A canvas roof and a thin foam mat. Given the dark and silent environment, exiting the tent at night for the call of nature felt scary. Having a spot light angled at my feet, walking in an unfamiliar area. There was every chance I was going to get lost, eaten or wee'd on, by me if my bladder couldn't hold. While trying to get shut-eye, I heard the unfamiliar sounds of Australian outback. With my heart racing, headtorch flashing and back breaking (moist red sand is as forgiving as concrete) I had a restless nights sleep.

The tent had accumulated red soil by the next morning. For the love of cleaning, it could not be completely removed. It was blue skies in Karijini. The good weather conditions allowed for more driving routes to be accessed. The red muddy roads were now compacted, red sandy tracks. A different set of driving skills were required to exit the park. It was a challenge we relished. My spine and the contents of the van appreciated driving back on the tarmac of the sealed roads. With Kris as designated driver I was allowed to relax in the

back seat. The scale of Australia was difficult for me to understand. To not see a vehicle for hours. To see a brush wilderness that stretched endlessly into the distance. It was so peaceful.

On the journey to Exmouth we stopped at a caravan park. It was lunch time. We were surprised to see inhabitants other than people. Mobs of Australia's largest flightless bird, the emu, were abundant. The emus were unfazed by people. People equalled food. We had bought a water melon from a food stall before our arrival. Stupidly we decided to prepare it in the shared, outdoor area. The emus were on us. To holt the enslaught we formed a human shield. Like a pride of lions at a kill, we ate large quanities as quickly as we could. We eventually surrendered the melon, to save ourselves from being pecked to pieces.

Coral Bay, a pristine lagoon, was another scheduled stop on the journey to Exmouth. Forget the Great Barrier Reef. Coral Bay offered a better snorkelling experience, all accessible from shore. The untouched corral reefs, pristine, clear waters, and up close views of vibrantly colourful fish. Unfortunately pristine corral reefs are sharp, as Kris discovered. She scraped her foot, which prematurely suspended her snorkelling experience for the day. Thankfully, a kiss and a band aid was all that was necessary to make it better.

The town of Exmouth was a return back to the world of creature comforts. Our arrival was timed perfectly. Our onboard food supplies were low. With it being December, Kris found it appropriate to purchase a Santa hat. It still felt unusual experiencing summery weather in December. We took time out from our busy schedule to relax for a few days.

I'm the active outdoor type. I can't sit still while on holiday. On the morning, while Matthew and Kris were resting, I decided to look around town. What activities were available? Luck had it, there was a scuba and snorkelling excursion at nearby Ningaloo Reef. It departed in the afternoon. I returned to camp to relay the details to Matthew and Kris. Unfortunately, the cost of the excursion was too high. Selflessly, they were happy for me to go without them.

I wouldn't be alone aboard the Ningaloo Reef excursion boat. There were 6 of us in total: The captain, assistant, a Scandanavian couple, an East Coast Australian and me. The boat could have easily accommodated 10 – 20 people. The available space made for a relaxed experience. To make it even more relaxed there were endless supplies of coffee, tea and biscuits. The scuba diving and snorkelling was sublime. We decended 10 metres to the sandy bottom of the clear blue waters. We looked up to see white tipped sharks circle overhead. Even though white tips are small, they made me feel nervous. It was my first underwater encounter with sharks. I was a lot happier when the group gathered together at a safer distance. It was fascinating observing the sharks behaviour. The sharks chose this particular location, along with many other marine animals, to be serviced by small "cleaner" fish. It was like a nature documentary: A large animal would circle like a plane ready to land. When its turn came it would descend to the rocks. There the "cleaner" fish would appear from the nooks and crannies, and feed on the large animal's parasites. The only part missing from the experience was the David Attenborough commentary.

There was literally an even bigger surprise awaiting in the second part of the day trip. It was billed as "Swimming with Manta Rays". Initially, there was a problem. There were plenty of green turtles, but no manta ray sightings. It was looking like the tour might be cut short, but then... An enthusiastic yell from the boat's captain confirmed a manta ray sighting. We had to get ready quickly. Fins, wet suit, snorkel, goggles, in to the water. While the group treaded water, we listened to the instructions of our leader. We were told to keep within a certain distance of the Manta Ray in a diamond formation. Even though the manta ray was a good 5 metres wide, it was easily spooked. In formed a diamond formation to took a closer look. The Ray was so graceful. It calmly beat its wings to propel itself through the clear, shallow waters. It felt humbling being so

close to such a massive animal. The group leader manoeuvred herself closer to the Manta Ray, presumably the animal was becoming more comfortable in our presence. She rotated her body, head facing skyward, approached close to the underside of the Manta Ray. She looked into its massive filtering mandibles. She indicated to the group to move in closer. I was hesitant. I swam closer and tried the exact same movement as the group leader. With some effort I managed to do it. I was rewarded with a close-up view of the Manta Ray's underbelly. It was a thrilling yet comfortable experience. Each member of the group took their turn to take a closer look. I wasn't the only person in the group to feel hesitant. The wide eyes of the other group members revealed their amazement. In a swift flap of the Manta Ray's wings, the beautiful animal was gone. We got back on board the boat, smiled and caressed a warm beverage prepared by the captain. The boat was now heading for the dock. The group chatted, reflecting on our amazing experience.

Further down the southern coast, Francois Peron National Park offered special views of jelly fish plumes. There must have been thousands of "Blue Bottles", aka Man O' War, that stretched the length of the bay. We saw many animal related road signs along the way too. One rare example was a sign warning of the elusive Bilby, a type of marsupial rabbit.

Arguably the most memorable and plush tourist destinations on Australia's west coast was Monkey Mia. From Exmouth up until that point in the journey, most areas were destitute and remote. Monkey Mia was a resort with many amenities: A huge car park, check in, shop, private beach and extensive eating areas. I managed to set my tent up on a well-groomed lawn with loads of space around me. I felt spoilt. Palm trees swayed next to a board walk that led to a white sandy beach. Matthew and I were ecstatic. Once we parked up, we literally dived into the shallow waters of the bay. I was surprised how shallow the water was as I began wading out. I felt anxious as my foot glanced a sting ray that rested, obscured, on the sea bed. I reverted to swimming in the shallows. There was so much sea grass that I saw very little. The sea was like a large warm bath, given the water temperature and depth.

Monkey Mia offered breath-taking views of the surrounding bays that Kris, Matthew and I admired. We sat outside in 20+ degree temperatures sipping on beers we bought from the local shop. There was on site food take away. As good as our cooking had been, a takeaway offered a welcome change and no washing up. The next morning, instead of usually packing up and heading to the highway, we went to the beach. There the resort had an organised spectacle. Each morning a Monkey Mia staff member appeared on the shoreline near their offices. They brought a bucket of gutted fish with them. The staff member present this morning had a microphone and explained what we were about to experience. It was obvious, given the shape of the dorsal fins nearing the shore. These were dolphins, bottlenose dolphins. The staff member introduced each member of the pod and their back story. She also explained the interlinked history of Monkey Mia and the dolphins. The dolphins were what the tourists came here to see, and had been doing so for the past 30 years.

Once the dolphins had consumed the bucket of gutted fish, the Monkey Mia experience was over. It was time for us to hit the road again, to journey to Kalbarri National Park. We snorkelled at many secluded beaches, ending the day at the town of Kalbarri. As we arrived, we were welcomed by a road sign spelling out all the town's offerings: A caravan park, a fish and chip shop and a liquor store. It read our minds.

The next morning we headed towards Geraldton, the industrial centre of Western Australia. It felt like we were continuously overtaking multi-trailer trucks. These trucks were loaded with excavated riches from the nearby mines. They were by far the slowest thing on the road. To make reasonable time, overtaking them was our only option and an unnerving one at that. Even though the highways were long, straight and wide, the trucks took up a lot of their space. Given the number of articulations, they snaked over two lanes. My approach to overtaking was to use every last pony of the Mitsubishi Delica's engine. If I saw a convoy of multi-trailer trucks

from a distance, I was happy to approach the first truck at full speed. I would get in the truck's slip stream and slingshot the van into the over-taking lane. There could be more trucks than anticipated in a single convoy. God willing, there was usually a space to move our van into, if we were to approach oncoming traffic. Once in an overtaking mindset, I had little appetite for abandoning an overtaking manouevre. I'm sure the truck drivers didn't want to take their foot off the gas/accelerator either, given how much time and fuel is required to get the trucks to full speed.

Thankfully there weren't any incidents, as we successfully overtook many trucks on the journey to Nambung. My driving was criticized many times by the backseat drivers in teh van. In fairness I did take the van a touch above the speed limit when the road was clear. It was in Nambung that we saw a small scale equivalent of Stonehenge. The sand monoliths made for interesting, subjective viewing. "Look at that one, it looks like Rabbit ears", I shouted. Most looked like giant petrified boggies. With so many of these human size abominations, it made for an absurd amount of funny photographic moments. We succeeded in imitating the boggy-like sand monoliths.

We had a long journey ahead, clocking up nearly 12 hours of drive time to reach arguably our finest location, Margaret River. It covers a large area. The town is humble and bohemian. Businesses sell organically grown produce, surfing equipment and artisan coffee. Matthew, Kris and I did some window shopping. We were pleasantly surprised to see a travel-agency offering many cycling inspired trips. We took a closer look and found 'Sip n Cycle - Winery Tour'. The region is famous for its wines. On paper the tour didn't seem like the safest of excursions. An appropriate exercise after a glass of the grapes is a boogy on the dancefloor, not a bike ride. Having been sat in the drivers seat of the van for 12 hours, any excuse to move my legs was welcomed. We donned our silver helmets, sunnies & grabbed our hire bikes for the Sip n Cycle.

Thankfully, the pace of the bike riding was relaxed. The 18km of trails was as flat as French fromage. Having had some experience at wine tasting on my travels, I had a good idea what to expect and how to behave. I did try my best to try and follow the guidance provided by the winery staff. My attempts of sophistication were met with raised eye brows. As we travelled to subsequent wineries the alcohol lowered my guard. The result, humourous photos. Thankfully our bikes were reprimanded by the travel company at the 3rd and final winery. We subsequently fell asleep in the back of the tourist van while being driven back into town.

The beverage sampling didn't stop there. On driving out of town we found a beautiful country pub close by to a pool. It served many locally brewed beers. Matthew and I decided it would be wise to sample each one. Thankfully, the Bootleg Brewery pub had just the setup for us: 8 sample beers, each housed in a shot glass. After sampling fruity wines, the taste buds were in for a surprise. Deciding which was best wasn't easy. All the beers were refreshingly fizzy. The depth of flavour of each beer swung from tart sourness to malt bodyness. Being an appreciator of darker beers, it was the moderately tarty lager that won both Matthew's and my heart.

The magnificence of Margaret River cannot be fully realised until you have seen the Indian Ocean from the coast. The sea is so powerful. It heaved onto the shore. Any location that includes a lighthouse is close to danger. Where we were, the lighthouse prominently peered above the rocks. Seeing the sun set with the lighthouse in view was special.

Pemberton is known for its forest of giants trees. The Gloucester Tree or Firemans-Lookout tree was a typical immense example. To ascend to its perch at the top you had to navigate the steel bars that protruded from its trunk. Thankfully, Matthew, Kris and I took the climb in our hesitant, cumbersome stride. The view from the top of The Gloucester Tree, allowed us to see the Eucalypt canopy for as far as the eye could see. The view of the forest floor was equally impressive, but unnerving. On returning to earth we sought a picnic bench to

prepare and eat lunch. It was less a scene from Masterchef and more Doctor Doolittle. Colourful Australian birds arrived. Ring-Necked Parakeets and the Western Rosellas tamely waited to pick up food scraps. With the birds having finished our lunch, we chose to walk a path that led through the forest of Pemberton's largest trees. It was humbling.

Dunsborough was a 2 hours drive away. It is home to the magnificent Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park, offering a range of excellent scuba diving sites. Matthew and I, having completed our beginner, open water PADI certification, were interested in one dive in particular. The HMAS Swan Wreck Charter SCUBA Dive offered the diver to see a huge ship wreck. One beautiful, blue sky morning Matthew and I travelled to the beach where the charming sized Cape Dive boat awaited. Onboard, I was tasked with setting up my scuba diving rig. It should have been as simple as ABC: Air, Buoyancy, Clips. Thankfully the on-board staff saw the error of my ways. They reverted my efforts and set it up for me. Next, wet suits. The range was limited. The suit chosen for me was a good 2 sizes too large. At least my Oakley X-Metal sunglasses looked the part. An essential piece of poser wear. Matthew's convenience store, half-jacket plastic sunnies looked arguably prettier than mine. Out of pride I refused to tell him.

It was calm in the bay as we departed. When we ventured in to deeper waters the water got choppy. It felt like the poor dive boat was hitting concrete as it speedily made its way to the dive location. The only people on board were Matthew, me, 2 male South Koreans and a married British couple. The 2 South Korean looked nervously at the sea swell. We were instructed by the divemaster. "5 minutes till we enter the water", he said. The group readied themselves and jumped in. I opted to enter the water using the missionary style lunge with arms by my side. My mask forced itself deep into skull as my head entered the water.

Once in the water I laughed at the immense size of the ocean swell. It was like nothing I had experienced before or since. I looked over at Matthew, my buddy, to see if he was okay. He gestured the scuba diver "okay" hand signal. I felt a sense of relief. I looked over at the 2 distressed Korean tourists. Both indicated to the divemaster that they were uncomfortable and wanted to get back on board. The divemaster and Koreans duly beelined for the boat. The divemaster returned and indicated to remainder of the group to descend. I released some air out of the Buoyancy Control Device.

As per the onboard briefing, we dived till we met a steel structure. It was once part of the HMAS Swan. It was teaming with an attachment of molluscs. Their probes swayed in time with the ocean current. We remained at that depth for 10 minutes to enable our bodies to adjust to the increase in pressure. The divemaster indicated we should follow him as he led us to a depth of nearly 30 metres (my deepest dive ever). The water was surprisingly clear, allowing us to admire the exterior of the ship. We made our way to one of ship's rear entrances. Matthew and I were side-by-side as we swam through what was once a hallway. The rooms located either side lacked windows and doors. As we peered into the rooms, it was amazing to see large schools of fish. Matthew was more nervous than me, even though I was experiencing buoyancy issues. As we followed the passageway to the lower floor, Matthew was unaware of his missing fin. Thankfully my Prince Charming-like buddying skills allowed me to quickly retrieve and fit it. Before we knew it we were back at the top of HMAS Swan, swaying with the molluscs, waiting for our bodies to complete the decompression process.

From Dunsborough we made our final road trip journey, to the capital of Western Australia, Perth. Matthew, Kris and I had become attached to our mode of transport, the Mitsubishi Delica. It had never missed a beat, well technically it did, but on that occasion we somehow managed to resuscitate its cold diesel heart. We entered Fremantle, on the outskirts of Perth. We had stayed, for the most part, in sparsely populated areas. Fremantle is a bustling town. The van was covered in red dirt. Its windows were splattered with flies. Its non-

PC graffiti was still clearly visible. Understandably, we got unwelcome looks from residents. Unfortunately, it had to defend itself as we parked up and took a look around town.

The Moreton Bay Fig trees welcomed us as we walked towards the esplanade. Matthew was hoping his old University friend, Lea, would have turned up by now. The last text message Matthew received was, "on my way." She indicated we should meet for drinks at the Little Creatures brewery. Matthew, Kris and I found a table outside at the rear of the brewery where we sat, relaxed and drank. Lea arrived, bring with her a swathe of enthusiasm. It was in stark contrast to our more reserved Northern European temperament. We headed to Leighton Beach located further up the coast. The area hosted the annual Leighton Beach to Rottnest Island kite surfing race. This, the biggest kite surfing race in the Southern Hemisphere was the most expansive sporting event I had experienced in my lifetime. 100s of participants could barely be seen as they surfed towards us with the aid of their huge kites. Initially I could only see a helicopter in the distance. Minutes later, on the horizon, a line of white foam was forming. The skies above were lit up with painted kites. The best of the participants quickly came into view. They looked like bohemian superheroes, levitating above the water's surface. The surfers' kites were immense. To operate and command both kite and surf conditions. These athletes earned my respect.

We returned to our Lea's humble flat. It had a bohemian vibe. I took a good look around, popping to the bathroom to "spend a penny". I noticed potted plants & sauce pans in the shower. Why was there an egg timer hanging on the wall? This conundrum distracted me from the original purpose of my bathroom visit. Perth was at a similar longitude to Sydney, but on average it was much hotter thanks to the surrounding dessert. Lea informed us the kitchen equipment was in the shower to "catch" the scarce water due to the current drought. Matthew and Kris slept comfortably in Lea's spare room. I grabbed the sofa, which was a luxury compared to sleeping in the tent.

The next morning we were happy to be re-united with the Mitsubishi Delica van. Its offensive exterior obviously didn't insite anyone's vandalistic tendencies. Perth Wicked Campers rental service was located just around the corner. The garage included another random greasy, chip fat stained looking staff member. He approached us to claim the van keys. It was an emotional moment. The van had been more than simply a means of getting from A to B, it was a member of the group.

Another personality of the trip was my beard, which I had grown for 3 weeks. I decided the hair on my face, like the van, needed to part ways. A considerable amount of effort was required to complete the task. As I shaved each quadrant of my face, I stopped and analysed my appearance. I stopped when I saw a reflection of me with a moustache. I immediately thought of my dad, himself a long-term moustache-wearer. He would have been proud. I looked at my profile from a myriad of angles and pondered. Should I keep the moustache? I agreed, the top lip needed to see daylight. With that, I whipped off the remaining facial hair and hopped into the shower for a egg-timered, energy saving shower.

In the afternoon, Matthew, Kris, Lea, her friends and I visited the Little Creatures Brewery for our leaving lunch. Little Creatures Brewery arguably brews Australia's best beers. We sat outside, enjoying a relaxing social drink as an inviting, warm breeze massaged our showered skin. We visited the Sail & Anchor, a beautiful Victorian pub. Our final stop was Bathers Bay. We sat on the grass verge to admire the sun set. Good times, unfortunately, must come to an end. On the morning of our last day it was now time for Kris, Matthew and I to part ways. My flight back to Sydney was 4 hours long. Kris and Matthew's journey to the UK was the long side of 20 hours.

I arrived back in Sydney to discover my accommodation plans were changing. I was instructed to move to a serviced apartment in an outer suburb named Homebush. On the Monday, after a lengthy train journey from the new apartment, I was in the city. I returned to the consultancy office to be re-united with the bench. During that day I had a call with my manager Mark. His was of the opinion I should organise myself for an immediate move to Melbourne. I was happy and surprised.

On return to the Homebush accommodation I was packing my luggage once more. With it being Christmas season, the whole of the week leading up to imminent departure consisted of social drinking opportunities. Highlights included:

- Watching Irish rock band U2, with special guests Jay-Z.
- Leaving drinks with the Ex-pats in NewTown.
- The work's Christmas party in Paddington.

This was all happening at a time when I had to prepare for life in Melbourne. I wondered if Lucinda's flat in Hawthorn was still available? With days before my departure date on December 22nd, the stars aligned. I donated all my items in storage to my friends. Lucinda's flat was still available and ready for me to move into. All I needed was AU\$10 in the wallet. My first stop in Melbourne was going to the pub. A parmigiana and a pint please.