

# SPARK



DUNCAN SMITH

**Spark**

**Duncan Smith**

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## Table of Contents

1. <a href="#">Introduction</a>	1
2. <a href="#">Hookup Hell</a>	2
3. <a href="#">The Golden Rainbow of Love</a>	17
4. <a href="#">Now For Something Quite Different</a>	30
5. <a href="#">Indian Summer</a>	31
6. <a href="#">Eleven</a>	39
7. <a href="#">Why This Ebook Exists</a>	59
8. <a href="#">Robin Hood Rides Again</a>	62
9. <a href="#">People Who Don't Read Fiction</a>	64
10. <a href="#">Liking Things Ironically</a>	70
11. <a href="#">The Vortex Winder</a>	73
12. <a href="#">Iolango</a>	75
13. <a href="#">The Maelstrom Ascendant</a>	82
14. <a href="#">The Unwild West</a>	83
15. <a href="#">Politics and Art</a>	89
16. <a href="#">Meditation Made Me a Fascist</a>	92
17. <a href="#">Angela's Antifa</a>	99
18. <a href="#">The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club</a>	109
19. <a href="#">Marla Okadigbo</a>	110
20. <a href="#">Hammer and Heat</a>	117
21. <a href="#">Fear of Sleep</a>	118
22. <a href="#">Cultown</a>	122
23. <a href="#">Debunked</a>	123
24. <a href="#">The Vast and the Spurious</a>	131
25. <a href="#">Twenty-Five Problems</a>	132
26. <a href="#">Some More Non-Fiction</a>	138
27. <a href="#">The Top Five Paul Gallico Books</a>	139
28. <a href="#">A Horror Film With No Apparent Foe</a>	142
29. <a href="#">The Wisdom of Solomon, Clapton, and Catweazle</a>	145
30. <a href="#">Final Words</a>	148

# 1

## Introduction

Dear Reader,

When I began as an author many years ago, I thought all I had to do was write a good book and people would buy it. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. You've never heard of me, so why should you risk spending your money in the first place?

That's why this ebook, *Spark*, is free. It contains extracts from my four novels, my non-fiction books, and my short story collections. These may inspire some readers to seek out the books from which they come.

My writing covers a wide variety of topics. Some of my work is serious and some is just for a laugh. I'll start at the lighter end of the scale, with two humorous short stories. 'Hookup Hell' is about a lovelorn Romeo in the age of Tinder, and 'The Golden Rainbow of Love' is the tale of three feuding sisters.

Strangely, for a book that's meant to showcase my work, the first extract starts with some deliberate bad writing. 'Hookup Hell' is a comical romance, and I tried to make the opening as absurd as possible. The writing does improve from there.

Duncan Smith

## Hookup Hell

Robert Cornbuckle slumped on the bed, clutching his phone. For the umpteenth time that day, he checked his Tinder profile. ‘Still no luck,’ he exclaimed in tones of devastated disappointment. With a cry of spiritual dismay, he stood up and went to his laptop. He photo-shopped a hot guy's face onto his profile pic, then cast his line into the Tinder wilderness once more. Within minutes, a beautiful young woman named Imogen reached out to him. To his extravagant joy, they arranged a hookup in minutes, as she lived not far away.

The only concern, as he hurried to the rendezvous, was the fear she might be repulsed when she saw his real face. But in their brief phone messaging, he’d clearly specified he was after personality, not looks, and asked if she was OK with that? To his immense relief, she’d said ‘yeah whatever LOL.’ Still, a nagging voice in his head wondered what would happen when she saw how ugly he really was.

He stopped and texted that he was running late, then popped into a clothing store and bought a black woollen ski mask which covered his entire face except for his mouth and eyes. That should do the job, he thought. Then, stuffing the mask into his pocket, he walked towards the cafe for his date with destiny.

He made a low key entrance, then went into the cafe’s bathroom and slipped on the ski mask. In the mirror he saw his own head covered in a black woollen sock, with just little holes for his eyes and his mouth. It felt quite snug. Satisfied, he walked back out to the cafe’s front room and saw a girl working on a laptop. At least, he *thought* it was a girl, due to her body shape, but he wasn’t entirely sure because she was wearing a black woollen ski mask on her head.

‘This is a bit of a *faux pas*,’ he said as he sat down. ‘You’re Imogen, I presume.’

‘Megan,’ she replied. ‘I’m waiting for my date.’

‘Oh,’ said Rob, jumping up from the chair. ‘I do apologise.’

He made a rapid exit, then walked through to the courtyard out the back - and there she was, sitting at a table under a tree, staring at her phone. The girl was even hotter than the profile pic he’d seen on Tinder - a stunning beauty with long straw-blond hair. He adjusted the ski mask and approached the table.

‘Imogen?’ he said, a friendly smile lighting up his unseen features beneath the ski mask.

She looked up from her phone.

‘Yes?’ she said coldly.

‘It’s me, Rob.’

‘Oh,’ she said. She glanced back at her phone, which he now saw was displaying his Tinder pic with the hot guy’s face photo-shopped onto his body.

‘May I join you?’ said Rob, sitting down at the table.

‘What’s with the...?’

‘Sorry I’m late.’

‘The mask?’

‘The what?’

‘On your head.’

He put his hands to his face, as if in surprise.

‘Wow, I’ve really done it this time. Sometimes I’m so engrossed in analysing the stock market I get dressed automatically without realising what clothes I’ve put on.’

‘Are you going to take it off then?’

‘Oh, it’s there now - may as well leave it.’

‘You look like you’ve just held up a liquor store.’

Rob laughed, slapping his thigh.

‘Held up a liquor store! That’s what I want - a girl with a sense of humour. Look, I’ll come clean. I’m just finishing my experiments into invisibility.’

This drew a blank look.

‘The Invisible Man,’ said Rob. ‘You know? The movie where the scientist turns himself invisible and binds up his body like an Egyptian mummy so people can see him. You haven’t seen the invisible man? Not many people have!’

He slapped his thigh again, then realised he was trying too hard. Better cool it.

‘Are you filming? Is this some kind of reality TV show?’ said Imogen.

‘No, just plain old reality,’ Rob replied.

‘I’m not sitting here with you wearing that.’

‘If it makes you feel better,’ said Rob, ‘why not leave your phone in your eye line so you can see my Tinder pic. Then you can imagine my face while we’re talking.’

Imogen looked at the photo again, then at the ski mask.

‘I should probably get going,’ she said.

‘Imogen, wait,’ said Rob. ‘I haven’t been completely honest with you.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Imogen said, with a wary look.

‘I’m not wearing this mask by accident. You know how I said I wanted personality, not looks?’

‘Uh huh,’ she replied, glancing round to check her getaway route.

‘Then here’s the truth. I’ve learned the hard way how shallow a lot of girls can be. After my last heartbreak, I swore that if I was ever going to find ‘the one’ she’d have to love me for my personality, not just because I’m a hot guy with a lot of money.’

‘Is that right?’ said Imogen, relaxing a little.

‘Let me give you an example. I’ve got two cars in the garage. If I take the Jag to a first date, it attracts the wrong kind of girl. So I always drive my beat-up fifteen-year-old Ford Laser. If the girl still wants to date me, it shows she’s not after my money.’

‘I’m not into mind games.’

‘It’s not a game, just a filter to get rid of the phonies. And that’s why I’m wearing the mask. What’s the point of a relationship based purely on physical attraction? Yeah, it might last a few months, but what about in twenty years when I’m not a male model anymore?’

Imogen’s eyes flicked back to the picture on her phone.

‘Uh, OK. It sort of makes sense.’

‘One thing for sure, I’m not going to find ‘the one’ with my face. It’ll attract hundreds of the *wrong* ones.’

‘But I’m not like that. You don’t have to wear a face mask for me.’

‘Imogen, if you’re staring at my face, you won’t be listening to my words. I want you to fall in love with my mind.’

‘But Rob, what if we want to kiss?’

‘We can kiss. Can you not see my lips through the mouth hole in my mask?’

Rob reached out and took Imogen’s hand. She stared intently through the eyeholes in his mask, then down at the phone picture again. She shut her eyes and imagined his face.

‘As long as you take it off on our second date,’ she said, opening her eyes again.

‘Too soon. Far too soon.’

‘Then how long?’

‘I’m very serious about this, Imogen.’ He took both her hands this time. ‘I’m very serious about you. In fact, I might leave the mask on right up until our wedding night.’

She laughed, but he could feel her pulse speed up a notch.

‘You’re something else, Rob. I came here for a hookup and you’re talking marriage!’

‘Do you mind?’

She glanced at the photo again, then back at him.

‘You *are* pretty hot and you’re not like other guys. I can sense that. But you’re not serious about leaving the mask on until we - I mean until you - get married. Are you?’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. I’ll have to play it by ear.’

‘But won’t it be a bit weird if we...you know...if we *do* hook up in the meantime?’

‘I don’t see why.’

She gave a coy little laugh and looked away.

‘It sort of turns me on, in a way. The thought of you naked and wearing the mask. You’re a real man of mystery.’

‘To be honest,’ said Rob, ‘I don’t even want to do the whole sex before marriage thing. Not with you, Immy. I’m an old fashioned guy at heart. When it comes to our wedding night, let’s try to retain an air of innocence like there was before this awful hookup culture ruined everything.’

‘Oh Rob. You really aren’t like other guys.’

He pulled out his phone to check the time.

‘And now my love, I must fly. Business calls.’

‘When can I see you again?’

‘Let us meet in our dreams tonight. Before you go to sleep, say my name three times and blow a kiss heavenwards.’

## II

For the next few days, Imogen pursued him online. Robert Cornbuckle deflected her hints and entreaties, which made her pursue him all the more. Rob was oscillating between triumph and turmoil. He’d spent the first night on a heavenly high, certain he was in love. The next day, he realised he’d gotten himself into a bit of a jam over the whole mask business. How long could he keep it on before Imogen saw his real face?

At last in despair, he contacted a dear old friend from schooldays. Emily Turntable was a pal who’d had his back ever since he was bullied in high school. The other kids laughed at them because of their unusual last names. ‘Ooh look,’ they’d say. ‘There goes Cornbuckle and Turntable,’ as if the mere possession of a silly three-syllable name was enough to earn their derision. Still, after Emily had dished out a couple of violent reprisals to the ringleaders,

the would-be bullies had backed off. Now, at his time of crisis, Rob turned once more to his faithful old pal.

‘I’ve really done it this time, Em,’ he confessed. ‘I’ve fallen deeply in love with a beautiful young lady. And I think she loves me too.’

‘Really?’ said Emily Turntable, failing to keep the surprise out of her voice. ‘So what’s the problem?’

Rob explained what he’d done, upon which Emily burst out laughing.

‘Good one, genius!’ she said. ‘So what’s your next move?’

‘I’ve no idea. That’s why I’m calling you.’

‘Well, what did you *think* would happen?’

‘In hindsight, I didn’t really think it through. I was acting on impulse and just thought I’d wing it and hope for the best.’

‘You do realise you’ll have to wear that mask for the rest of your life?’

‘Could I? I did say I’d wear it up until the wedding night.’

‘No, dummy, of course not. Look, Rob, were you just after a fling? Did you think she’d take you home and let you do it with the mask on?’

‘No, I’m not like that. I was serious about Imogen from the moment I saw her on Tinder.’

‘Tinder’s not the place to look for your soul-mate. It’s just a hookup site, really.’

‘Too late. I’ve found her. I think we’re in love.’

There was a silence, then Emily replied.

‘Let’s be real here, Rob. You’re not in love and neither is she.’

‘How would you know? You weren’t there. The electricity between us was magical.’

‘Really? What do you even know about this girl, except that she likes picking up hot guys on Tinder?’

‘I haven’t known Imogen long, but I’ll tell you what I *do* know. She has a lively intellect and an independent spirit. She’s as comfortable in jeans as she is in an evening gown. She wants a man who’s in touch with his feminine side but can be macho when he needs to be.’

‘Did you infer all this from your brief meeting, using your Sherlock Holmesian powers of deduction? Or is that just the crap she wrote on her Tinder profile?’

‘One meeting was enough, Em. It was love at first sight.’

‘At first sight? She hasn’t even seen you! You had a stocking on your head. Let me tell you, Rob, I can predict what will happen when she finds out. She’ll act shocked, then

disappointed, then she'll get self-righteous and say *it's not your hideously ugly face I mind, it's the lying*. Which itself will be a lie, but never mind.'

'Stop it!' screamed Rob, suddenly furious. 'Stop slandering my girl! We're practically engaged.'

'Fine. Next time you see her, take off your ski mask and get back to me then, you poor, deluded fool.'

With a howl of spiritual anguish, Rob threw away the phone. Emily Turntable was right and he knew it.

'Oh Imogen,' he cried in constipated consternation. 'What will become of our tender love?'

He bent down and picked up the phone from the floor.

'Emily, are you still there?'

'Are you OK, Rob?'

'What should I do, Em? Give me a serious answer please.'

There was a brief silence.

'OK. Here are the likely options in this absurd rom-com scenario you've created for yourself. First, you could keep the mask on as long as possible as a stalling tactic. In the meantime, get a top class plastic surgeon to gradually alter your face so it resembles the guy you photo-shopped onto your profile pic.'

'Oh my god. That's it. You're a genius, Em.' He paused. 'Would it be expensive?'

'What do you think?'

There was another howl of anguish from Rob. His meagre wage as an office clerk would never cover the bills of a top class plastic surgeon whose normal clients were probably all film stars.

'Your second option is to keep the mask on as long as possible and make her fall in love with your mind and personality.'

'Gosh, that's worth a try. Do you think it would work?'

'It's about as likely as the mainstream media reporting the news in a fair and balanced way, but at least it's cheaper than surgery. You know, maybe there's a quicker way. Just show her your real face. You're not that ugly, you know.'

'Oh but I am, Em. I'm hideous.'

'What rubbish. If you weren't so mentally disturbed, I'd make a play for you myself.'

‘Emily Turntable, you’re too kind trying to bolster the ailing hopes of a lovelorn fool. Counsel me, old friend. How can I win the heart of the fair Imogen?’

‘Why not make a fake profile on Tinder using your real face in the picture? Then send her a message and see what she says? Maybe she’ll find you attractive.’

‘My real face? It’s a wild and desperate gambit.’

‘At least you’ll know where you stand, Rob. If she accepts you, problem solved. If she rejects you, you’ll know to keep your face covered for the rest of your relationship.’

### III

Eventually, Rob could stall Imogen no more. He bit the bullet and asked her back to the cafe for a second date. He had his ski mask professionally laundered and wore his best pants and jacket, with a red carnation in the breast pocket. He walked into the cafe courtyard, and there she was at their usual table under the tree, staring at her phone. His heart soared like an eagle majestically careering over mountaintops.

‘Ah, the girl with the flaxen hair,’ he proclaimed with a confidence that eluded him.

‘The man in the iron mask,’ she parried.

‘Debussy,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘*The Girl With the Flaxen Hair*. It’s a piano piece by Debussy. I’ve been listening to it all week, my love. Ever since I met... you.’

‘Oh Robert,’ she cooed with benign elucidation. ‘I know it’s Debussy. It’s one of my favourite works by the old French master. Topped only by *La Mer* and of course *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*.’

‘Imogen, you become more perfect by the moment. To think that you too are a lover of fine music. Who else do you enjoy?’

‘Bartok’s *Concerto for Orchestra*, of course, along with Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. It brings out the pagan whore in me.’

Robert’s eyes showed shock through the eye holes in his mask. Then he turned it into a rambunctious laugh.

‘You’re a wondrous woman of many parts, Immy. Affecting a ribald streak to gently tease me from my lofty aesthetic perch!’

‘I do enjoy toying with you, my stallion,’ said Imogen ‘and taunting you to untapped heights of punishing poetic passion. Yet, if I may allude to another, more recent musical work, you also put me in mind of *Phantom of the Opera*. Tell me, my love, are you hideously deformed beneath your mask?’

‘Never!’ said Robert with an emphatic snort of derision. ‘Take a look at my Tinder profile pic if you don’t believe me.’

Imogen stared at her phone, then turned back and took Rob’s hand.

‘This is yet more playful teasing, my warrior,’ she breathed. ‘Truth be told, I care not if you have a donkey’s behind for a face. Ours is a meeting of the mind and spirit, not the coarse, ephemeral flesh, fickle in its impermanence as it mocks us onward to the grave.’

‘Oh my maiden,’ cried Robert. ‘I see our love has elevated your discourse far beyond the vulgar commonplaces of our first encounter last week.’

‘What has come over us, Rob? Could it be we inhabit an altered state of consciousness bestowed upon us by the God of Love?’

‘I believe so, Immy. Furthermore, your words embolden me to heights of decisive action of which I barely dared dream, yet prepared for just in case.’

Robert Cornbuckle stood up, took something from his jacket pocket, then got down on one knee.

‘Imogen, would you do me the honour of becoming my lawful wedded wife?’

‘Oh Rob, so soon. You overwhelm me with your passion, yet confounded by your ardour, I cannot resist.’

‘So you consent?’

‘If I say yes, will you one day remove your mask?’

‘To become your husband, my love, I would remove my own head and lay it at your feet.’

‘Then yes, Robert. You will be my husband. A thousand times yes!’

‘And now my love, I must fly. My work is done.’

‘When can I see you again?’

‘Let us once again meet in our dreams tonight. Before you go to sleep, say my name three times and blow a kiss heavenwards.’

## IV

Now he was engaged, Robert Cornbuckle, was more unhinged than ever. All his dreams were on the verge of coming true. He'd promised to remove his mask, but that was in the heat of his marriage proposal. No, it must stay on. Yet could he really keep the mask on indefinitely? It was alright in winter, as it was now, but what about when the summer months came around? Besides, could he really trust his future wife? They might be lying in bed together on their honeymoon and curiosity could get the better of her. He'd be lying there asleep in the middle of the night and she'd be tempted to peel back his mask millimetre by millimetre, just for the sake of a quick peek at the man she'd married. Then what? It would certainly make for an awkward conversation at the breakfast table.

He'd better run the fake profile idea, just to see what happened. He logged onto Tinder, made the profile, then reached out to Imogen with a message. 'Hey, I love your pic with the Greek statue behind you. Are you interested in classics?' He pressed send, then flung himself onto the bed in an agony of speculation. Would Imogen accept the approach from his real self? He told himself it didn't matter. If she rejected the fake profile with his real face, he could still court her with his real profile and the hot guy's face photo-shopped onto his body, meanwhile wearing the mask for the rest of his life.

He lay on the bed fidgeting away. When he could stand it no more, he stood up and went to run a few laps of the oval at a nearby park. When he returned, he saw Imogen had replied to his message from the fake profile with his real face! He texted his friend Emily Turntable. She called back immediately.

'What's up, Romeo?'

'I did what you said, Em. I made the fake profile using my real pic. Now Imogen wants to meet me.'

'Oh my god, that's great! When?'

'Now. She seemed really keen.'

'Then why are you talking to me! Soon as you get home, though, I want a blow by blow account.'

Rob hung up, dressed nicely, then arrived for the tryst at a different cafe to the one where he'd first met Imogen. Soon after he arrived, she turned up wearing the same outfit she'd worn to their first meeting. Robert stood up awkwardly, feeling horribly naked without a full woollen ski mask covering his head.

‘Hello. Imogen, is it? Nice to meet you.’

‘You too, Pete,’ she replied, using the name he’d adopted on his fake profile.

‘Do you live around here?’ he asked.

‘A couple of blocks away,’ she said.

‘That’s handy,’ he observed.

‘And my flatmate’s away for a couple of days,’ Imogen said. ‘That’s even more handy.’

There was, perhaps, an insinuation in the remark. Imogen seemed a bit wound up. Rob found it strangely discomforting.

‘I don’t care much for this awful music they’re inflicting on us here,’ he said. ‘I’d prefer something a little more refined. Some Brahms, or perhaps...Debussy.’

‘Yeah,’ she agreed. ‘It’s hard to talk, isn’t it. Maybe we should get out of here and go somewhere quieter.’

‘Perhaps the art gallery,’ said Rob. ‘The Impressionists exhibition is still on. I checked before I came out.’

Imogen shrugged.

‘Look, Pete, I don’t want to be rude, but can we cut the small talk?’

‘I hardly think discussing Impressionist art is small talk. Big talk, more like.’

‘Big, small, whatever. I’m not really here to talk, know what I mean?’

‘Then why *are* you here?’

‘What do *you* think? I haven’t had much physical exercise for a while. I need a workout buddy, if you know what I’m saying. The type you can do in the privacy of your own home.’

‘But Imogen, I want to get to know your mind. I think we might have a real rapport.’

She looked away for a few seconds, then back at him.

‘You know what, Pete? I already have a few people in my life for intellectual conversation. That niche has been filled. If you really want to know what’s on my mind, come home with me and I’ll show you.’

‘Oh,’ said Rob. ‘I see.’

Imogen raised her eyebrows.

‘What’s up? You look a bit weird.’

‘I am a little...surprised. I didn’t expect this to move so fast.’

‘What are you doing on Tinder then? Are you coming or not?’

She stood up, took his hand, and led him out of the pub. Rob tagged along, not sure how to process the chain of events. They walked a couple of blocks, then Imogen turned and began

kissing him on the lips. He was slow to respond, then began to reciprocate. Imogen's hands found the small of his back, then began to travel south. At that point, Rob pulled away.

'Imogen, what are you doing?'

'What do you think I'm doing?'

'We've only just met?'

'And?'

'I can't, Imogen. Not like this. It's all happening too fast.'

'What your problem?'

'I don't want to do it on the first date.'

'It's not a date, it's a hookup.'

'Not for me.'

'Then why are you wasting my time?'

Rob backed away.

'I'm sorry, Imogen. I'll message you later.'

'Don't bother!'

Robert Cornbuckle turned and ran off in a state of exasperated perplexity.

'Loser!' she called out after him.

## VI

'Emily,' he said on the phone, after relating what had happened. 'What am I going to do now?'

'Open the champagne, by the sound of it,' Emily replied. 'She saw your real face and still wanted you. Perfect outcome.'

'But Immy's engaged. To me.'

'Well yes, she's engaged to someone with a ski mask on his head. Now she wants to have sex with him too. Happy days.'

'I'm so confused, Em. What do I do?'

'One thing's for sure. Now you've carried on like a complete klutz, you'll have to keep that mask on for the rest of your life so she doesn't find out it was you. Oh the irony!'

'Oh no. Just when I thought we'd made a breakthrough. So I really have to wear it permanently now?'

‘No, you fool. There’s only one thing you can do now - fess up. You’ll have to come clean about who you really are. With some luck, you’ll both have a good laugh about it before the weeding. Ah, I mean the wedding.’

‘Gosh, my love life really is the stuff of a Hollywood rom-com, isn’t it?’

‘More like a French farce. Anyway, you’d better see it through - and as soon as possible.’

‘Tomorrow night, then. My whole future depends on it.’

‘Good luck - you maniac.’

## VII

The next night, wearing his mask once again, he met Imogen at their favourite cafe for dinner. She looked radiant in a black dress, a jewelled pendant hanging from her lovely neck. He drew in a sharp breath of bewitchment when he saw her, and reached down to kiss her gloved hand through the mouth-hole in his face mask.

They chatted their way through the entrée, speaking of matters both thoughtful and socially conscious, as befitting a betrothed couple. In their loving chat, they touched upon Elizabethan poetry, Keynesian economic theory, and the textural homogeneity of Polynesian sculpture. Reassured by their easy chat, Robert took Imogen’s hand.

‘I do enjoy intercourse with your mind, my love,’ he said.

‘Do you now?’ said Imogen, with a flirtatious laugh. ‘As long as that’s not the only part of me you enjoy it with.’

She put her hand to her mouth in a coy little gesture, then speared an oyster from her plate, tilted her head up and to the side, and placed the oyster onto her tongue in a wanton manner, glancing sideways to view his reaction through the eyeholes of his mask.

‘Imogen, please. This is a public venue. Let’s try to keep our discourse appropriate.’

‘Oh loosen up, darling,’ she replied. ‘You really are awfully stiff at times. Oh dear, did I just say that?’

Again came the coy hand to mouth gesture.

‘Imogen!’

‘Why, Robert, I do believe you’re blushing beneath that mask.’

‘How much wine have you drunk?’

‘Not enough, and neither have you. Let’s order another bottle. Waiter!’

‘Steady on, Immy.’

‘Look, Rob. I know our marriage is a wonderful meeting of minds, but one can’t be cerebral all the time. A girl has needs, you know. Frankly I’d like to take you home and rip that mask off along with the rest of your clothes.’

‘Have you been listening to Stravinsky?’

‘Or leave it on. I don’t care. Just take me home.’

‘What about our vow of chastity before marriage? What about our meeting of minds?’

‘Oh bugger that.’

Robert adopted a sober expression, unseen beneath his face mask.

‘I’ve a confession to make, Immy.’

‘Oh really? A good one, I hope. Have you been naughty, Robbie? Do tell Immy.’

‘It’s serious, I’m afraid.’

‘Let’s have it then. As the actress said to the bishop.’

‘I’ve been having serious doubts about our marriage.’

‘What? I thought you said you were madly in love with me.’

‘I was. I am. Desperately in love.’

Robert bowed his masked head and put it in both hands. At the moment of crisis, his true nature came out, and he uttered a fulsome sigh of baffled bewilderment.

‘Goddammit. Never in all my born days have I known a more confounding woman than you, my dearest. One moment I’m high as Mount Everest, the next as despondent as a forest dwelling rodent with no tail.’

‘What on Earth are you talking about, Robert? It’s not like you to be so melodramatic.’

Rob was about to let out a howl of bewildered bamboozlement, but checked himself so it came out as a small squeak of minor dismay.

‘Oh good lord,’ he said. ‘I love you more than life itself. But damn it, Immy, I’ve reason to believe you’ve been cheating on me.’

‘Cheating on you, Rob. That’s absurd. Cheating on you? With whom?’

Robert Cornbuckle sat up straight in his chair, placed a hand upon his mask.

‘With whom? By Cupid’s tiny penis, I’ll tell you with whom. With me, you lying strumpet!’

And with one firm hand, he tore the ski mask from his head, and flung it aside where it landed in someone’s asparagus soup. He stared his fiancée directly in the eyes.

Again, Imogen put a hand to her face. This time the gesture was not coy, but defensively confused.

‘You,’ she said. ‘You?’

‘Oh Imogen, how could you?’

‘How could I what?’

‘I thought our love was pure and would last forever. But as soon as my back was turned, you whored yourself out to the first pretty boy you met on Tinder.’

‘Well, Robert. You made me wait so long to consummate our love. A girl can’t wait forever.’

‘This is our third date. We only met two weeks ago.’

‘We may be engaged, Robert, but it’s your own fault. I told you I’m not into mind games, but here you are with a mask on your face courting me to the point of marriage, and also cheating on yourself with me using your real face. What are you, some kind of weirdo?’

‘I thought I was too ugly for you, Immy. That’s why I wore the mask.’

‘You’re not ugly, you imbecile. We could have had it all if you hadn’t cheated on me.’

‘*You* were the one who cheated. Don’t try to put the blame on me, faithless wench.’

Imogen took the ring from her finger and slid it roughly across the table towards him.

‘What are you doing?’ gasped Robert. ‘Our first fight and you want to throw our marriage in the trash. So I *am* too ugly for you, after all.’

‘Oh, Robert. It’s not your face that bothers me. It’s the lying. Go and find some other girl on Tinder.’

And with that, she stood up and stormed off with nary a backwards glance. Robert threw back his head and howled at his abject folly, and the love that had flared up so briefly like a struck match on a windy night. He ran out of the cafe, on the way throwing his entire wallet at the cafe proprietor to cover the bill (it later counted out to \$765 dollars), and ran until he could run no more. Then his phone rang.

‘Well?’ said Emily Turntable.

‘It’s over,’ Rob said forlornly. ‘Imogen’s broken our engagement.’

‘Oh no. Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No, Emily Turntable. We will never speak of this. Not until the scars have healed.’

‘Sometime next week, then. That’s about how long your last heartbreak took to mend.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Rob.

‘Olivia, wasn’t it? Sometime last month. You got engaged to her too, remember?’

‘Good lord, you’re right. I’d forgotten all about her. My word, Emily, I should take up cards. Lucky at cards, unlucky in love. That’s how it goes, isn’t it?’

‘So they say. In the meantime, why don’t you come round for a beer and we’ll listen to some music?’

‘As long as it’s not Debussy.’

There was a brief pause before Emily replied.

‘Debussy’s not the only composer, you know. He may have written *La Mer*, but he’s not the only fish in it.’

‘In what?’

‘The sea, Rob. The sea.’

And with a sigh of penitent relief, Robert Cornbuckle hung up. His old pal was right. She was a dem fine woman, Emily Turntable. Perhaps one day...I mean, who knows? Could it be the answer had been right under his nose the whole time? Was it conceivable that one day his old school chum might be Emily Cornbuckle-Turntable? I mean, she did have a scintillating intellect, a wry yet compassionate nature, and enormous breasts. He raised a quizzical eyebrow at his own folly, then chuckled in whimsical abnegation.

‘Too soon, Cornbuckle. Too soon. Don’t you ever learn?’

And with a frenzied and rueful laugh, he put his hands in his pockets and continued on his way.

### 3

## The Golden Rainbow of Love

### I

One cold morning in Autumn, a young woman walked into a graveyard. She was a petite woman of about thirty, fair skinned, with dark hair tied back in a bun. Conservatively dressed in a trim grey coat and navy scarf over a white blouse, she might have just stepped off a London bus on the way to the office. Instead, she was here to visit her sister's grave.

Sylvia Scott's visit was long overdue. She'd been putting it off, but facing it was the only way to find closure and move on - for when it came to Eliza, so much had been left unsaid. Indeed, as she walked through the grassy fields of Hurlstone Cemetery in West Sussex, her mind was full of memories.

They'd been typical sisters, playing and squabbling through the years as siblings do: sharing a bedroom at first, fighting over toys, running over the sand on seaside holidays. When little sister, Imogen, arrived five years after Sylvia, they'd taken turns raising her too. Then, in teenage years, a succession of love interests and fleeting melodramas had kept them busy. Liz, Syl, and Immy, the three sisters.

A stranger passing this demure young woman would not have guessed at her lively girlhood, for she had the sober air of the bereaved. Sylvia walked down long paths between rows of graves. Head bowed in mourning, she passed by a copse of trees and rounded a corner, until at last she reached a familiar part of the graveyard. She'd been here once before, but had not lingered. The loss had been too fresh. Still, one cannot delay these things forever.

There was the gravestone, so white and new compared to those around it. The others, in varying shades of grey, were monuments to griefs of decades, even centuries, past. The gravestone rose vertically from the ground, ending in a smoothly rounded curve at the top. Slowly, Sylvia approached the sombre memorial, reading the stone's inscription in all its gothic finality.

Eliza Scott

1984-2016

Weep not that she is gone

Rejoice that she has been

The surprise came once again, a recurring aftershock. To think it was Eliza - always so assertive, so in control - to be the one cut down by a freak accident. It made no sense. Sylvia sighed. All the things she should have said but hadn't - now all she could do was say them to a grave.

Sylvia took a look around, to the left, the right, and over her shoulder. Then, satisfied she was alone, she reached into her handbag. She took out a bottle, full to the brim with a golden elixir, the hue and consistency of a finely distilled Scotch whisky. And indeed, a whisky bottle it was, full size, but just small enough to fit in her handbag. She'd had to tilt the bottle slightly upwards to squeeze it in - all the better not to spill the contents.

A passer-by may have inferred that the young woman, in her grief, sought solace in the warm fires of alcohol, and would have forgiven her indulgence at the unseemly hour of eleven in the morning. For such are life's sorrows that at certain times one must look the other way.

Sylvia unscrewed the lid from the bottle and poured half the contents over her sister's gravestone. It made a conspicuous wet patch on the top and down the front of the stone. Then, at last, she spoke.

*'That's what you get for unfriending me on Facebook!'*

## II

Oh. What a strange remark for a mourner to make. For what indeed had Sylvia dispensed upon Eliza's grave? Was it Scotch whisky in some kind of holy water blessing? Was it perhaps apple juice, a refreshment of the same colouration? Alas, it was neither, but another liquid that is a by-product of those beverages. One that is produced without effort by the human body, which indeed Sylvia had produced *herself* over the past twenty-four hours in her own home, transferred carefully to the whisky bottle for camouflage, then carried onto the bus in her handbag. Good Lord, she had doused her sister's grave with piss!

We can only speculate on what kind of twisted psychology would inspire so profane an act. What state of 'sibil war' could produce such a grievance between fair sisters? We are about to find out.

Sylvia had always possessed a vivid imagination and now, in her mind, she saw Eliza's ghost rise up from the grave. She looked just as she had when Sylvia last saw her. Tall,

querulous, rather haughty. She was still wearing the same old specs too, so either the afterlife hadn't improved her eyesight or - more likely, one would think - the spectre was projected from Sylvia's own thoughts. If so, Syl must have been imagining her reactions too, for Eliza looked coldly enraged - as, to be fair, one would after what had been done to her last resting place. The phantom rose up and stood behind the gravestone, arms folded, and fixed her living sister with an angry look. Sylvia, held up the bottle - still half-full - in defiance.

'What do you think of *that* then, Liz!'

Eliza's ghost said nothing, but merely maintained that lofty stare.

'Not that we were ever that close,' Sylvia continued. 'But family is family. To be cut off like that, and not a word of warning. No, I just wake up one day and all your Facebook posts are gone. Blocked, I am. Blocked! And no idea why. Oh yes, I sat around for a while, racking my brain over what awful crime I'd committed this time. Did I insult your home decor? Did I kick your cat? Was it something I said?'

Sylvia began pacing back and forth in front of the grave.

'And clearly it was one of your Royal Decrees - because Imogen unfriended me too. Imagine that. You turned my own little sister against me. I tried to let it go. Tried to put it down to one of your passing moods. That's just Lizzy, I said. She'll get over it. Then a month later, no phone call on my birthday. Well ... '

Sylvia spun around to face Eliza's ghost.

'I wasn't even that upset,' she yelled. 'Don't flatter yourself! It's the disrespect, that's all. So I blanked you myself and tried to pretend I never had a sister. It would have been fine too, but for one thing.'

The ghost stared stonily back at her as she continued.

'I just wanted to know why. Looking back, I wonder why it seemed so important, but you know me - I never *could* let things go, could I? That's why I sent the email.'

Sylvia raised the bottle in anger, towards her sister.

'And that's how you won. Imagine - me, grovelling to you. Look what you'd turned me into - one of those pathetic girls sucking up to the in-crowd. *You* did that to me.'

Sylvia leaned forward, scowling at the apparition.

'So - did you give me the courtesy of an answer? Did you apologise and say it was all a misunderstanding? No, all I got was a reply from your secretary. Your secretary! Far be it from the great Eliza Scott to perform such a lowly task herself! Oh no - you're way too high and mighty for that. And the message, one miserable sentence. I know it off by heart - not

really a big ask, memorising that one. *Dear Sylvia, This is to confirm that you were unfriended on Facebook on December 27th. Regards, Patricia, assistant to Ms. Scott.*

Sylvia tossed back her head and laughed wildly.

‘Isn’t that you to a tee! Your arrogance, your complete lack of manners and respect. And you know what, Eliza? A year later when I heard about your accident, I never shed a tear. Oh yes, I was shocked. Of course I was. After all, unlike you, I’m a human being. But you want to know my first words when I got off the phone with Mum? *Good.* I said. *Good! Serves her right!*’

Sylvia laughed again, even more wildly.

‘I didn’t even go to the *funeral*. They tried to make me, but I refused. I had a ‘prior commitment,’ you know. Some vacuuming, I think it was. Terribly urgent. Because if you think you can treat me like that and I’m going to show up at your funeral and talk about how wonderful you are ... you can forget it! Mummy wasn’t thrilled. But I said I’d make peace with you my own way, in my own time. And here we are, just like I promised. So let’s finish the job, shall we, Lizzy? Here’s the rest of the *peace* I’m going to make with you!’

Sylvia lifted the bottle and prepared to tip the rest of the piss all over the gravestone. Yet so engrossed in the little scene had she been, she’d failed to notice the arrival of long time family friend and town vicar, the honourable Stephen Brooking, who was standing right behind her. A tall, bespectacled, silver-haired man in his fifties, Vicar Brooking was dressed in his Sunday best like he’d just stepped out of the pulpit. He took off his glasses and squinted.

‘Good Heavens - Sylvia. Is that you?’

### III

‘Oh... Vicar.’ She spun around and snapped back to the real world. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I’ve just finished a service. I was strolling back to the car when I heard a commotion. Turned out to be you. Who were you talking to?’

Sylvia floundered for a moment, white-faced, wondering how long the man had been standing there. She placed the whisky bottle on the ground next to the gravestone, hoping he wouldn’t see it.

‘I was just ... chatting to Eliza,’ she said, slowly edging away from the bottle.

Vicar Brooking looked at the headstone and nodded soberly.

‘Of course. Dreadful tragedy. I’m so sorry for your loss.’

Sylvia inferred, with a sigh of relief, that the vicar had not picked up the finer details of her rant. Yet now the man’s brow furrowed.

‘It must be nearly a year. Or is it two? My memory’s not what it was, but if I’m not mistaken, you weren’t at the funeral. Were you abroad?’

Sylvia considered accepting this ready-made excuse, then realised it might be exposed next time the vicar spoke to her mother.

‘Oh no, Vicar. I was ... too upset. I couldn’t face it.’

Reverend Brooking reached out and patted her shoulder.

‘Quite understandable. Grief affects us all in different ways. We must each find our own path through the mourning process. With faith and the forbearance of the Lord, we can move through our sorrow and attain peace of mind.’

Sylvia nodded earnestly, then with a mild sense of alarm, noticed the vicar wrinkling his nose. At the same time, she saw him cast a querying look at the half-full bottle of scotch beside the grave, then at the gravestone with its rather obvious wet patch. Sylvia’s imagination was still vividly at work, and in her mind she continued to see Eliza’s ghost lurking behind the gravestone. Acting out Sylvia’s unease, the apparition was pointing at the bottle, trying to subliminally draw the vicar’s attention to it, and all the while smirking at her sister’s discomfit. Searching for a distraction, Sylvia raised a theological dilemma.

‘But why would God take her so young?’ she said. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘The Lord’s ways are ever mysterious,’ Brooking intoned, slipping with ease into his preaching persona. ‘Bitter are the tears shed by the living, but if Eliza were here now before us, a radiant angel accepted unto God, she would no doubt assure us Heaven’s peace is everlasting.’

Eliza’s ghost pointed a finger at the side of her own head and rotated it in a ‘cuckoo’ gesture.

Despite herself, Sylvia felt herself in danger of erupting into nervous laughter. As the vicar carried on his pompous spiel, she could feel it tickling her.

‘Your sister’s grace and moral character was well known,’ he droned on.

A laugh exploded from Sylvia. She quickly turned it into a cry of anguish, threw her hands to her face and attempted to sob. The vicar turned away respectfully while she composed herself.

‘There, there, my child. It will do you good to purge yourself of these sorrows.’

‘Thank you, Reverend,’ came Sylvia’s muffled voice from behind her hands. ‘Your words have comforted me. If you had not arrived when you did, I may have lost my faith.’

Eliza’s ghost put one finger to her mouth and made gagging gestures. Unseeing, Vicar Brooking’s face took on a look of smug satisfaction.

‘I am merely a vessel, my child, for He who works through me. Glad am I to do His work, whatever it may be.’

‘Thank you, Vicar. And now you have guided me through this crisis, perhaps I should take my leave.’

‘Of course, my dear, and I would be most gratified to see you at church this Sunday.’

Even as he said this, Reverend Brooking was looking askance at the scene before him, as if some small subliminal detail were bothering him. He frowned and wrinkled his nose, as he’d been unconsciously doing the whole time. Then, eyeing the wet patch on the gravestone, he took three steps towards it and picked up the whisky bottle from the ground.

‘I say, Sylvia, have you been drinking?’

It seemed best to admit it.

‘Oh, you know. Just a drop.’

‘Good heavens. The bottle’s half-empty. That much intoxicating liquor before lunch is rather concerning.’

‘I was upset. That’s all.’

‘Even so. I mean, really.’

Sylvia, summoning her teenage self and lingo, pointed at the grave in faux outrage.

‘Hello? My sister’s dead. Know what I mean?’

Brooking was unconvinced.

‘Do you have a problem with the stuff? Perhaps we should have a chat.’

‘Look, I don’t have a problem, alright? Just give me that bottle.’

The vicar tut-tutted.

‘Oh dear. That’s right out of the textbook. You’ve no idea how often I’ve heard those words.’

He held up the bottle and squinted, apparently bothered by its appearance.

‘Rather an odd colour, I must say.’

‘Give me that bottle. It’s mine.’

‘Something doesn’t add up here.’

Vicar Brooking made a move to unscrew the bottle top, as if to sniff the contents. With a desperate cry, Sylvia sprang at him and snatched the bottle from his hands. The vicar staggered back a couple of paces. It took him a moment to regain his composure.

‘Sylvia! I had no idea you were so far gone. I see why the Lord has guided me here today. Well, you’re in luck. I’m facilitating a twelve step next week. Why don’t you come along and meet the gang?’

‘Oh for God’s sake, Vicar! I don’t have a drinking problem.’

‘I’m afraid your conduct says otherwise.’

‘I just wanted to have a drink to get through the ordeal of visiting my sister’s last resting place.’

Brooking fixed her with a paternal look.

‘I don’t want to lecture you, but I’ve spent a lot of time around alcoholics and, let me tell you, there’s always a reason. They had a rotten day at work, or the TV’s on the blink, or ... they had to visit their sister’s grave. I’m afraid we rather frown upon that in the program. It’s that whole excuse culture we need to move on from, or nothing’s ever going to change.’

The vicar stopped, as if remembering something. Finally it seemed to click into place.

‘I say, Sylvia, now I think of it, I do believe you were pouring some of that liquor onto the gravestone. That’s what I saw from a distance. Is that what these wet marks are? But it doesn’t make sense. I know how jealously alcoholics guard their poison. If you’ve got a drinking problem, why would you be tipping it all over your poor sister’s headstone?’

Sylvia drew in a breath and wondered if there was any escape from this farcical scene. She was still seeing Eliza’s ghost, which now adopted a quizzical expression in response to the vicar’s query. Sylvia considered fleeing, but reasoned Brooking would then examine the gravestone more closely, which wouldn’t be good. She sighed.

‘If you must know, Vicar, I confess. I am an alcoholic. When Lizzy died, I made a promise to give up, out of respect for her memory. So every month, I come here with a bottle and tip it on Lizzy’s grave as a reminder of my pledge.’

‘Oh, I see,’ said Brooking. He shrugged. ‘I’ve been running the program for over ten years, and I must say that’s a first. Tipping liquor on your sister’s grave. A rather unique story, come to think of it - and all the more reason you should come and share it with the group.’

‘Oh God. If I must.’

‘Splendid. We’re always looking for inspiration ... although, again, it’s rather an odd story. Almost too odd.’

He frowned again, and peered suspiciously at the bottle Sylvia was holding.

‘I say, give me a look at that whisky? It smells awfully rank. What brand is it? I don’t mind a tippie on the odd occasion, but only the decent stuff. Are you in financial straits too, to have to drink such dreadful bilge? Moonshine, is it?’

‘Oh well,’ said Sylvia. ‘It must have passed its use-by date and gone off.’

‘Gone off? Whisky doesn’t go off, my girl.’

The vicar cast a sudden accusing glance at the wet gravestone.

‘I say, hang on a mo. I don’t believe that’s whisky at all. Give me that bottle at once!’

Sylvia thought of running, then, in a final desperate gambit, unscrewed the lid of the bottle and took a small sip. She tried holding it in her mouth, so as to spit it out again, but under the inquisition of the vicar’s gaze, forced herself to swallow. Then, dealing with the awful aftertaste, stood there ashen-faced, grappling with the compulsion to wince.

Brooking, although thrown off a little, still wasn’t persuaded.

‘The bottle!’ he repeated, with slightly less conviction.

Sylvia decided to give her ruse one more shot and if that didn’t work, make a run for it. She took another slug from the bottle and drank it down. With a tremendous act of will, she resisted the urge to hurl. She held on gamely - and for a moment, the bluff seemed to have worked.

‘Oh, so it is Scotch,’ said the vicar. ‘But I thought you said you’d given up. I’m afraid that settles it. You’re coming to the meeting next week, and I’ll not take no for an answer.’

Sylvia, now in danger of losing the arm wrestle with the urge to be violently sick, could only agree.

‘Yes, yes,’ she gasped, ‘I’ll be there.’

‘Do I have your word?’

‘That’s what I said. Jesus Christ!’

‘Yes, he’ll be there too,’ said Brooking with a wink. ‘Indeed the first step is to admit we’ve lost control of our lives, and surrender to a higher power.’

And at that moment, the battle was lost. With a cry and a great surge, Sylvia turned away from the Honourable Stephen Brooking and sent a tremendous rainbow of vomit arcing through the air, to land with spectacular precision all over the white marble of Eliza’s headstone. Then, realising what she had done, Sylvia could take no more and fled from the

scene as fast as she could. And, in her wretched state, the only consoling thought was that the pungent aroma of vomit would be sufficient to overpower the urine, thus covering up her original crime and her considerable public embarrassment.

#### IV

Or so she thought. For there the story would have ended, if not for the recent installation of security cameras. There are fewer and fewer public areas that go unmonitored these days, and Hurlstone Cemetery was one of the latest to go CCTV. Whether this was done to pick up acts of trespass and vandalism, or put there by optimistic teams of psychic researchers hoping to find signs of supernatural activity, who knows? In any case, a security guard, testing the new equipment, was idly glancing at the footage when he spied the strange incident of Sylvia Scott sending a rainbow arc of vomit all over the white marble of her sister's gravestone.

Through a stroke of luck - or perhaps, some divine intervention - the footage was clear. The public spirited chap passed it on, and from there it was only a matter of time before the story made social media, then the press. Because Vicar Brooking was so beautifully also in shot, Sylvia was even dubbed 'Exorcist Girl,' after the scene in *The Exorcist* where Linda Blair projectile-vomits pea soup onto the priest. Fortunately for Syl, there was no audio on the footage, but when the press found out her identity and connection to the gravestone, they knew they had a winner. *The Daily Mail* ran a story with the headline 'Drunk Woman Vomits on Sister's Grave,' and the story quickly blew up all over the net.

By the time Sylvia found out, it was too late to do anything but let it blow over. Which it quickly did, of course - but in the meantime, Sylvia gained momentary worldwide fame. In horrified surprise, she watched over and over the mortifyingly clear footage which showed her holding a bottle of Scotch while shouting at her sister's grave, arguing with the vicar, and finally snatching the bottle from his hands, vomiting on the grave, and running off.

Some wit had seen fit to set the scene to *The Exorcist* theme music, which made everything just perfect, didn't it?

As a side effect, the sudden notoriety brought a rush of attention, ranging from some unanswered phone calls from her mother, to several Facebook friend requests from people she hadn't seen since school, and indeed some from people she'd never met.

After three days of the frenzy, there was still one person who hadn't got in touch, and that was her little sister, Imogen. Not that they'd ever been super close. The five year gap, not to

mention her blonde hair beside Sylvia's dark, had caused many in the past to express surprise that they were sisters. But as Imogen, having unfriended her along with Lizzy, had something to do with this whole chain of events in the first place, Sylvia decided it was about time they had it out.

She arrived at Imogen's house and knocked at the door. After a while, the curtain in a side-window parted and a sleepy looking blonde face peered out. The door opened.

'Look who it is,' said Imogen. 'Exorcist Girl.'

'Don't call me that,' said Sylvia.

'I didn't. It was the press. Oh well, come in.'

Sylvia walked into an untidy living room. Working from muscle memory, Imogen called up some manners and offered her sister a cup of tea.

'Where have you been, anyway?' Imogen said, when they'd sat down. 'Now I think of it, I haven't seen you around for ages.'

Sylvia bristled.

'Now you *think* of it? You've only just noticed?'

'I've been busy.'

'It's been *two years*. It's nice to know the gaping hole my absence leaves in people's lives.'

'Well, where'd you go?'

'I didn't *go* anywhere. You unfriended me on Facebook!'

'Did I?'

'Don't deny it.'

'Now you mention it, I do sort of remember.' She paused. 'Don't tell me you've been in a tiff all this time over that.'

Sylvia took a moment to ponder the indignity of something she'd been het up over, being dismissed as trivial. You would *expect*, she thought, that losing one sister might have made Imogen value the other. Apparently not.

Imogen seemed to sense something more was expected of her.

'I don't really use Facebook anymore,' she said. 'So it's not like it's a big deal.'

'Aaaargh! I could strangle you sometimes.'

Sylvia picked up a cushion to throw, but restrained herself.

'Why'd you even unfriend me?' she said. 'I just want to know why, that's all. What did I do to deserve that?'

‘Gee, Syl, keep your bra on. It was Lizzy told me to.’

‘Really?’ Sylvia nodded grimly. ‘I knew it.’

‘Oh yes, she was in one of her moods, you know. I assumed it would blow over. Then there was the accident.’

Imogen thought for a moment, putting two and two together.

‘Is *that* why you weren’t at the funeral?’

‘Yes! It might seem ever so trivial, but obviously some people don’t understand how hurtful it is to be cut off like that by your own sisters.’

‘If it means that much to you, let’s friend up again. OK?’

‘It’s a bit late now.’

‘Suit yourself, Syl. Gee, all this over some silly old TV show.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘That’s why you got unfriended. Remember last time we all went over to Mum’s for Christmas?’

‘Just before you cut me off?’

‘It’s kind of dumb, now I think of it. Anyhow, we were all sitting around on Christmas Day, killing time. Some old 1970s sitcom came on TV and you laughed at it.’

‘And?’

‘That’s all. You laughed at it.’

‘It’s a sitcom. That’s what you’re supposed to do - right?’

‘Oh no, Syl. It was one of those really sexist ones that they had in the seventies. Like, the one with the sideburns guy living with two girls.’

‘*Man About the House*?’

‘I don’t know what it’s called, Syl. My friends and I don’t watch anything more than two years old. But actually, now I remember. It was that one in the department store - Grace Brothers.’

‘You mean *Are You Being Served*?’

‘The one with the woman talking about her pussy all the time. And the camp sales assistant, and the straight guy sexually harassing the young girl in the women’s department. Anyhow, that old sexist seventies humour didn’t go down too well with Lizzy. She would have turned it off except Mum was enjoying it. But when she saw you laughing too, she stormed out and went home.’

‘That’s not fair, Imogen. I was probably drinking at the time. It was Christmas Day. Besides, I was just humouring Mum.’

Imogen shrugged.

‘You think I care what you laugh at? Please. But the next day Lizzy rang up all huffy and told me to freeze you out. She said, if Sylvia thinks gender stereotypes and sexual harassment are funny, she’ll soon find out different.’

Sylvia was quiet for a minute. Finally she spoke, in tones of astonishment.

‘Do you really mean to say it was all over that?’

‘Looks like it.’

‘You mean I stayed away from my sister’s funeral, had all those sleepless nights, pissed on her grave, and got famous as Exorcist Girl just because of some old seventies sitcom?’

‘Pissed on her grave?’

‘Ah, I mean vomited. Slip of the tongue.’

‘I suppose when you think about it, it’s kind of silly, don’t you think? Anyway, Syl, why don’t we put it behind us? I’ve only got one sister left now, and that’s you. Maybe we can even turn a negative into a positive. Maybe it’s all for the best what happened. Let’s try and see your vomit as a symbol.’

‘A symbol of what?’

‘Let’s not see it as a big arc of projectile vomit. Look at it as a bridge. A golden rainbow of love that brought us back together. I mean, even Liz would want us to move on, don’t you think?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Just think. If you hadn’t barfed on Eliza’s grave, it never would have gone viral. Then you wouldn’t have come to see me today to have it out. Then we might never have reconciled.’

‘Wow, Imogen, maybe you’re right! Let’s try to see it as a bottle half-full not half-empty. We can’t bring her back, but at least we can salvage something from what came after. At the end of the day, a viral vomit video’s brought us back together.’

‘Oh Syl, let’s never fall out again! Let’s be sisters forever and honour Eliza’s memory.’

Suddenly the two sisters were embracing, their estrangement ended, and they cried tears of joy at such a wonderful reconciliation.

A few weeks later, there they were - the whole family sitting around for Christmas dinner, with a long time family friend as the guest of honour.

‘I say,’ said Vicar Brooking, raising a glass of scotch. ‘I propose a Christmas toast to family and the holy spirit.’

‘Thank you, Stephen,’ said Sylvia’s mother. ‘It’s so wonderful we’re all back together again.’

‘Hear, hear, Mummy,’ said Sylvia. ‘And just think - if I hadn’t vomited on Eliza’s grave, it would never have happened.’

‘The Lord works in mysterious ways,’ intoned Vicar Brooking with a wink.

‘The golden rainbow bridge of love brought us together,’ said Sylvia.

‘God bless us every one,’ said Imogen, quoting Dickens.

Then, truth be told, they all got a bit jolly, and a fine time was had by all. After dinner, they were channel surfing and some old seventies sitcom came on. They were just tipsy enough to have a guilty laugh or two. Mind you, there was some mysterious banging and clattering, such as the gullible might ascribe to a poltergeist - but more rational minds knew it was just a Christmas wind rattling through the town.

‘Hookup Hell’ and ‘The Golden Rainbow of Love’ appear in *The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club*. Available here on Amazon <https://amz.run/4Nd5>

## 4

### Now For Something Quite Different

This ebook is meant as an introduction to my work. The first two stories were light and humorous. At the risk of confusing readers, the next two are very different. They are rather serious, almost melancholy.

‘Indian Summer’ is about a man questioning his will to live after a broken engagement, while ‘Eleven,’ is a *Twilight Zone* type tale of an obsessed sports fan. You don’t have to be into sports to appreciate this one. My wife hates sport but loves *Twilight Zone*, and this story is one of her favourites.

Both stories are from *The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club*.

## 5

### Indian Summer

#### I

No matter how good the relationship, something always went wrong - and something different every time. With Rebecca it had been political views. With Gina it was money troubles. With Serena it was a farcical fight over music. Whatever girl Dave Laurence partnered with, he couldn't make it work.

On top of that, he could never get past four years. The record had been set way back in Dave's early twenties. In the three decades since, he'd never been able to break it. Take Sarah, his latest failure. They'd even gotten engaged and he was sure he'd finally beat the four year mark, just as runners once cracked the four minute mile. But wouldn't you know it? After three years and eleven months, she said she didn't want to get married after all.

'But why?' he asked for the tenth time that day, after she gave him the news.

'I want a house in the country.'

'What's wrong with our apartment? We're one block from the beach.'

'I never go.'

'People save up all year just to come here for their holidays.'

'I want a backyard and a dog.'

'What's wrong with Izzy?'

'He's alright for a cat but he's no Irish Setter.'

'Can I keep him then?'

'No. Izzy's mine.'

This was true. Having brought him to the relationship, the cat was technically hers, but Dave's heart sank as he watched the little fellow being put in his carry cage and taken away when Sarah moved out the next day. That first night alone in the empty flat, he had to go out for a drink just to escape the silence.

'Why didn't you go with her?' asked his friend, Ray.

'She didn't want me to. Besides, there's work. Eighteen years in the same department. You think I can just walk away? How am I going to get a public service job in the country?'

'Do something else.'

‘Bit late for a career change. Anyway, we were going to get married. I would *never* have left her. Loyalty has to work both ways.’

‘You’ll meet someone else.’

Dave sipped his beer forlornly.

‘I’m not sure I can face another trek up the mountain.’

As he struggled out of bed the next day, he realised it was true. He’d invested all his hope in Sarah - where to from here? Throw in the towel on relationships? Let the rest of his life fizzle out as a single man? Perhaps he’d have to learn to get by without women from now on.

Well, he *could* do that, except for the practical problems. With a dawning horror, he realised he’d have to re-enter the hell of flat-sharing. Not, at least, moving into someone else’s place - out of the question - but someone would have to move in with him. He’d then have to go through the routine of forming a benevolent dictatorship while pretending flat-sharing at the age of fifty-two was just what he’d always wanted.

There was no real alternative. His salary as a lowish middle manager at the Department of Transport would not stretch to cover Sydney’s exorbitant rents. Even if he could take on the emotional challenge of living alone, it was too much financially. So, flat-sharing again - a ghastly prospect! Surely there was another way. Perhaps he should get a new girlfriend immediately and invite her to move in, on the off chance it might work out. It was a reckless idea and bound to end badly, but he was crazy enough to consider it.

What about Ryanna from work? She’d given clear signs of interest last year. Had he been an adulterous man he could have responded, but he’d played a dead bat to her overtures. With a sense of unease, he realised he was now free to pursue her. Still, what folly it would be. The woman - girl - was thirty at best, two decades younger than himself. They might hit it off for a while but it was only a matter of time before something went wrong.

By long habit, he forced himself into the cold shower to rouse himself from the already-tired state in which he woke more and more often these days. As he dried himself, he turned over his options once more. While he was shaving, the answer appeared.

The idea hit him with clarity, much as it must come to aging, once-elite sportsmen who realise their time is up. *Why even go on at all?* The world he’d known and loved was gone. Take music, for example. It was all streaming and playlists now, rather than the vinyl LPs he’d grown up with or the CDs he’d enjoyed in his prime. What’s more, most of the bands he liked were either finished or on their last legs. He’d always been into heavy rock but all the classic bands were just about done. Sabbath had retired. Malcolm Young, AC/DC’s driving

force, had died only last month. Judas Priest were fighting on, but surely not for much longer, and even Slayer had just announced a farewell world tour.

Then there were the sporting teams. He'd loved Australian cricket, but the two golden eras of his lifetime - the seventies and the nineties - were *long* past. What's worse, test cricket was dying, or so some people said. It was all T20 now - cricket for the smart-phone generation.

*I'm old*, he thought as he sat down at his desk. *I'm yesterday's man*. With a shock, he saw the truth of it. He began to speak the words out loud as if to understand them better. 'I'm at the point where suicide is no longer the irrational option.'

Curtains then? Maybe it really was time to 'bow out,' so to speak, and sadly no one was going to call him back for an encore. His exit wouldn't leave much of a hole in the world. His few remaining relatives would be saddened but hardly devastated. He'd lost touch with the friends of his youth, and gotten absorbed in 'couple life' at the expense of more recent friendship. Who would even miss him?

'Jesus Christ,' he said. 'It's true.'

*But how to do it?* Ah, the gruesome logistics. Not knives - he hated blood and blades. Not guns - too violent, and horrible for the person who found him to clean up. Besides, he'd never fired a gun in his life. A bridge jump? He couldn't stand heights. Hanging? Too macabre. It would probably have to be some kind of poison or OD. Then again, what if poison was *worse* than the alternatives? It might be slower and more painful. Didn't that nut job Jim Jones shoot himself rather than take the poison at Jonestown?

This would require some thought. Oh well, no rush. He would sort it out in due course. It was a cold Saturday morning so he put on his coat and set off for the park to think it over. He bought a coffee to drink as he walked along. A few minutes later, he looked around for a bin to throw away the empty cup, but the only one he could see was on the other side of the road some thirty metres behind him. He crossed over and tossed in the cup and was about to resume his journey when he caught sight of the veterinary clinic, where three small kittens were playing in the front window.

He leaned up against the glass and watched them. They could not have been more than a couple of months old. One was asleep on a cushion and two more were having a play fight. The one that caught his eye was a little ginger kitten with green eyes. When it saw him looking, it walked right up to the glass and stared. How he longed to pick it up, perhaps even take it home. And at that moment Dave thought, *why not?* He saw a new path open up. Rather than going MGTOW, or topping himself, perhaps another cultural model would serve him

better. Become a 'cat lady'? Maybe it would do. He wouldn't need a girlfriend any more, just a cat - and unlike the girl, the cat would never leave.

He looked again at the ginger kitten, staring up at him with hope and curiosity, and decided to take it home. Yet he immediately knew it was a selfish desire. He still had to face the problems of the morning, the very ones which had prompted thoughts of a drastic exit. The flipside of rejection was commitment. Dave knew that if he took the kitten home and loved it, he could not later abandon it if his own problems proved too much. What if it all became too hard in a couple of years? How then could he kill himself and abandon this innocent creature? After all, how long does a cat live: ten, twelve years? That was a long time for his own escape route to be closed.

He looked again at the ginger kitten, gazing up at him with those big green eyes, then turned and walked in through the vet's front door. There was a young girl at the reception desk. They all seemed young to him now. She smiled, as if pleased to see him.

'Hi. How's Ozzy?'

'Oh, you mean Izzy,' said Dave. Now he remembered the girl, and her name - Kate. He'd seen her a couple of times when he and Sarah brought Izzy in for treatment.

'No idea,' he said. 'My ex took him when she moved out.'

'Sorry to hear,' Kate replied, with a sympathetic look.

'That's why I came in,' said Dave. 'The kittens in your window - are they for adoption?'

'Sure - and we'll throw in micro-chipping and de-sexing for free.'

'Really?'

'As long as they go to good homes we don't mind.'

He stared into the distance.

'But they're kittens. How long does a cat live?'

The girl beamed.

'Ten years, at least. Fifteen. My auntie's cat went to twenty-one!'

Dave frowned and spoke quietly, as if to himself.

'So long...I can't be sure. Ten years.'

Turning back to Kate, he said, 'Do you have anyone older?'

'Older?'

'Any mature cats. You know, that have been around a bit.'

'There's Gwyn,' she replied. 'We've normally got two or three wanting re-homing, but there's just Gwyn at the moment.'

‘Funny name. How’d you spell it?’

‘G-W-Y-N. It’s Welsh, I think.’

‘What’s he like? Is it a he?’

‘Yeah - a beautiful old tabby, twelve years old. Loves people, loves attention. Want to meet him?’

She led Dave off to a room at the back of the clinic, and there was Gwyn. An old grey cat, dozing in an enclosure. He half opened an eye when they approached, then shut it again.

‘Skinny old boy, isn’t he?’ Dave remarked.

‘That’s not unusual for an older cat,’ said Kate. ‘Let’s take him out.’

She reached into the enclosure and picked up the cat, then handed him over. Gwyn began purring at once.

‘I think he’s chosen you,’ said Kate.

Gwyn’s fur was very soft, like a rabbit’s. Dave stroked it, and felt the cat’s slender bulk. He didn’t weigh much more than a big bottle of milk. Dave remembered his mood of the morning, his dark urges. They seemed to have receded, just like a bad dream.

‘Twelve years old?’ he said aloud. ‘That’s not bad. Not bad at all.’

‘He could go another five at least,’ said Kate brightly. ‘With the right love and care.’

‘Five!’

She misinterpreted Dave’s look of concern.

‘Or ten. You never know.’

‘Ten?’ he repeated. ‘Oh my god. Then again, it might just be one or two.’

‘Who knows?’ said Kate.

Dave made up his mind.

‘I’ll risk it. And however long it is, so be it. When he goes, I go.’

The words made no sense to Kate, so she simply turned to walk back to the desk.

‘I’ll get the paperwork.’

## II

Gwyn settled into his new home like he was born there. Not just into Dave’s flat, but the whole address. The cat became a familiar sight at the block of units, sitting sociably on the stairs watching the flow of people into the various apartments. Most of them would stop to give him a pat or a scratch under the chin. He’d even go into the apartment below Dave’s for

a change of scene. Although he was on 'frenemy' status with the cat therein, its human owner enjoyed his visits.

It was surprising what a difference the cat made. Dave no longer found himself fretting over the departed Sarah. An amiable creature, Gwyn sat beside him on the sofa, or slept on the desk while he was using the computer. In Dave's mind, the idea of a future began to open out. His job wasn't that bad, really. Sharing the flat wouldn't be so terrible either. He'd done it before, he could do it again - and indeed, three weeks after Gwyn's arrival, a polite mature-aged university student moved into the spare room. Between studying and a part time job, the guy wasn't around enough to be any real bother.

As for the cat, he did have a few annoying habits - like demanding food at 4am, or jumping onto the rim of the bathtub and meowing for the tap to be turned on. The running water was apparently so much better than the water in his bowl. Its other peculiarity was the 'bedtime song.' For some reason, when Dave went to bed at night, the cat saw fit to perform an odd series of meows and squeaks as it settled down on the doona beside him. Perhaps its mother had taught it to him in the kitten crew all those years ago. After lights went out, however, Gwyn had the awkward habit of creeping up to the pillow beside Dave's head right next to his face. At a loss how to respond to this flattering show of affection, Dave tried to put up with it for a few minutes, then he'd give up and turn his body around so the cat was behind him. At this point, Gwyn would very patiently and politely stand up, walk a semicircle around the top of Dave's head, then resume the same position on the other side. With sleep a non-negotiable, Dave had little option then but to move the cat into a more comfortable zone lower down the mattress.

Dave was delighted with the cat, perhaps because he'd never before had one to call his own. At the same time, he was always aware of the creature's advanced age, that its days were numbered. He'd stare at Gwyn and remind himself - *any day soon he could be gone, and I will miss him*. Then he'd remember the terms on which he had chosen the old cat rather than the ginger kitten and repeat the mantra to himself. *When he goes, I go*.

In an odd sense, then, Gwyn was a kind of clock winding down his own life. Yet, having rediscovered through the cat not a zest for life, but at least a contentment, Dave wondered if he would go through with his plan when the end inevitably came. As time passed, it became an abstract speculation rather than a pressing question - and pass it did. Weeks became months and even years: one, two, then three. Finally, well into the fourth year, Gwyn became

ill. He became unwilling to walk or jump, to perform his usual visitations round the neighbouring flats, and even lost interest in food, unheard of for the normally gluttonous cat.

Dave delayed it a while, but at last took him to the vet when the cat's condition became undeniable. Kate was no longer working there, but a new girl showed him through to the consulting room. Dave took Gwyn out and placed him on the table. As the vet, a young Scottish woman, inspected the cat, Dave was afraid to look at her face for he knew what was coming. At last she looked up at him with a sad expression.

'It's his kidneys.'

Dave closed his eyes. It was as he'd feared.

'That's terminal, isn't it?'

'We could try him on medication but that's only delaying it. If we'd caught it earlier, maybe - but he's pretty far gone.'

'So that's it then.'

'I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do.'

Dave looked down, stroking the cat, aware of its bones beneath the soft fur.

'I'll just take him home for one more night, then bring him back tomorrow. Is that OK?'

'Of course. I'm sorry we can't do anything for him.'

Dave drove home with Gwyn and sat with him through the night, talking to him, trying not to upset the cat by becoming too emotional. That could wait until after tomorrow. Dave tried to stay calm, gently stroking his fur, thanking him for having been part of his life. He offered Gwyn a saucer of milk. The cat attempted a couple of tired laps, as if to please him, then gave up and lay quietly on the bed.

The next morning, Dave took the cat back to the vet. He put his hand behind Gwyn's head and held his little paw as the vet injected him. Soon, very soon, the cat's eyes closed for the last time.

Dave left as quickly as possible, wanting to get away, but realising there was nowhere he could really go that was any better. *So this is how life ends*, he thought. *Not with any fanfare, but in a quiet street on a mundane Tuesday afternoon.*

In his flat later that night, Dave poured himself a large Scotch and looked at the photo of Gwyn he'd just put on the wall.

'Do you know what day it is?' he said. 'March 27. The fourth anniversary of taking you home.'

He smiled sadly.

‘You know what that means? I’ve cracked the four year mark. Took me a lifetime but I finally did it. Thanks to you.’

A tear rolled down his cheek.

‘Not only that,’ said Dave. ‘You kept me alive.’

His old mantra came back to him. *When he goes, I go.* What of the dark promise he’d made to himself four years ago? Perhaps he should honour that now. Then again, such a choice was final and life still had its small pleasures. Maybe he should have taken the ginger kitten after all. It was too late now.

A thought occurred to him. *Either way, what does it matter? I’m old... and I don’t care. Today, next week, next year, five years... it’s only a matter of time. And so what? What does it really matter?*

There was an odd sense of liberation in the idea. He’d always taken life so seriously - and for what? *Why does a cat live or die? Why does anyone? Why do we strive so hard when we don’t even understand why we’re here?*

‘I don’t know,’ he said aloud. ‘But I’m not afraid anymore.’

He looked once more at the photo of Gwyn, finished his drink, then went to bed.

## 6

### Eleven

#### I

Graeme Hillman had just parked his Ford when 'Heartbreak Hotel' came on the radio. Instead of pulling out the car key, he lit up a cigarette. When the Elvis classic was replaced by the Stones' 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction,' he stubbed out his smoke in the ashtray, got out of the car, and entered the offices of Dr Gideon Mackay, psychologist.

He sat in the waiting room, legs crossed, absently smoking another cigarette. These visits always made him nervous. Frankly, he had no real idea why he was here, yet somehow these sessions had become part of his routine. He considered himself a man with very few complaints in life. Yet he found himself back in this office time after time.

For his type, Hillman was average in every respect. He was a presentable, thirty-three year old, dark-haired Australian man, just under six feet tall. He was neatly dressed in trousers and a light-blue collared shirt. Only the occasional twitch of his left cheek hinted at any inner unrest.

With a complete lack of interest, he thumbed through some old copies of *Readers Digest*. He assumed Dr Mackay was busy with another patient, for he'd been waiting over ten minutes. Yet when the receptionist called him through, no one came out of the consulting room. He stood up, stubbed out his cigarette in the glass ashtray and walked through the door.

'Ah, Mr Hillman. Come in.'

In appearance, Gideon Mackay was a classic psychologist, as if he'd set out to model Freud himself. The neat, greying beard and scholarly spectacles were straight out of the textbook, as were the tidy bookshelves and soothingly bland paintings that made up the internal decor of his room. Mackay did not stand or offer a handshake. He remained seated behind his desk, flicking through a pile of papers.

'Sit down, Mr Hillman. How have you been?'

'Fine. I don't even know why I'm here. I suppose Louise has got something to do with it.'

'No doubt your wife cares for you a great deal. Are you still having the headaches? The memory losses?'

'Every now and then. Surely there's a pill for that. I don't see why I have to come here.'

Dr Mackay levelled a long, blank stare at his client, before he spoke.

‘I think we’re both aware that your problems aren’t physical. If they were, I’d have sent you to a medical doctor.’

‘You saying I’m a kook? Is that it?’

‘Mental health,’ said Mackay, ‘is everyone’s concern. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Tell me, Graeme. When your car’s not working, what do you do? Take it to a mechanic. When your mind’s out of alignment, you take it to a mind mechanic. You’re just here for a tune up.’

‘OK, Doc. If you put it like that. I suppose there *have* been a couple of weird incidents of late.’

‘Oh yes?’

Hillman sat back in the chair and closed his eyes.

‘It’s not really an *incident*,’ he said. ‘Just a mood. It was a Saturday afternoon and I was playing golf. Nine holes, it was meant to be, but Brownny talked me into staying on for eighteen. I was in a run of form so I agreed. But the St George game was going to be on TV. St George against Manly.’

‘St George? Ah yes, your rugby obsession.’

‘It’s rugby *league*, not rugby. Well, I rang my wife and got her to tape the game so I could watch it when I got home.’

Hillman lapsed into silence. It went on so long the doctor offered a gentle prompt.

‘Don’t tell me she forgot to tape it?’ he said with a smile.

‘Oh no. She knows what St George means to me. She knows I’d go off my head if that happened.’

‘I see,’ said Mackay, raising his eyebrows a little. ‘But tell me. If you’re such a big fan, why didn’t you go to the game?’

‘All the way to Manly? I’m not crossing the bridge for them. And truth be told, there was a little... altercation last time. I reckon I’ll stay away for a while.’

‘Oh really?’

‘But that’s not the point. Point is, I got home, had a quick steak, then put the game on - and that’s when it happened. See, I’m sitting there all tense, swearing at the TV, getting into it like I always do. Then suddenly it hit me - I was only watching a replay. I realised the game was already over. It had been won and lost hours ago. By now, the players were showered and dressed, probably having a steak and a beer like I was.’

‘I’m not sure I understand the problem.’

‘Don’t you see, Doctor? All my cheering, my swearing at the TV, my excitement and fear...it was all useless. The result was already decided, so my emotions were completely futile.’

Dr Mackay adjusted his glasses and looked at his patient closely.

‘Don’t you think you’re taking it a bit too seriously? It’s not a matter of life and death. It’s just a game of football.’

Hillman bristled and sat up in his chair.

‘Not to me it ain’t, Doc. St George is my life. Kearney, Provan, Raper, Gasnier. I live and die by those blokes. I’d lay down my life for the Red V.’

‘The what?’

‘The jersey. The all white with the big red V.’

Mackay said nothing for a few moments, waiting for Hillman to calm down.

‘Let’s get back to your...sense of futility. You say you felt useless, watching the playback of the game.’

‘Exactly. It was sort of artificial, you know, like there was no point cheering. As if the game had played out long ago, like it was all done and dusted and locked up in a museum somewhere. But that ain’t the worst of it, Doc. That was only the start.’

Hillman shuddered and ran his fingers through his hair.

‘The next week, St George were on TV again. The Souths game. This time I made sure I stayed home to watch it live.’

‘Live on TV?’

‘Yeah. So the game started and the same thing happened. I’m sweating, swearing, yelling at the TV. My wife even asked me to keep it down. That’s when I realised I was trying a bit too hard.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I was trying too hard to get excited, to show that I cared about the game. But the whole time I had the same feeling as the week before - that it was already over and all my cheering was useless.’

‘You said it was a live broadcast, didn’t you?’

‘That’s the point. There was something off about the whole thing. It’s like the whole game was predestined to pan out a certain way no matter what I or anyone else did.’

‘And what does that suggest to you?’

‘That our whole lives are pointless. That everything’s all mapped out and nothing we do really counts.’

Dr Mackay regarded his client sternly for a moment, then smiled.

‘That wasn’t quite the answer I expected. I never realised football fans could be so philosophical. Did you ever study it?’

‘I’ve been studying football all my life.’

‘Philosophy, I mean. There’s a fellow named Nietzsche had a theory everything’s on a permanent loop. That’s what your predestination theory reminds me of. Of course, some other philosophers say there’s no such thing as free will. We feel like we have it, but it’s an illusion.’

‘I don’t know about any of that fancy stuff, Doc. I just want to get back to where I was.’

Mackay adjusted his glasses once more, and put down his pen.

‘Mr Hillman, there’s something I don’t understand. You say that when you stayed on to play golf, your wife taped the game for you.’

‘That’s right.’

‘How did she do that?’

Hillman frowned.

‘Video, I suppose.’

‘Then tell me - what year is this?’

‘What sort of a ridiculous question is that?’

‘It’s a simple enough question. What year is it?’

Hillman stared into the distance.

‘I always work it out by grand finals. We beat Manly in ’59, then Easts in ’60. That was our fifth premiership in a row. Then it was three against Wests, the last one in the mud. That was our eighth - in ’63, the last one I remember. So - it must be 1964.’

‘If you don’t mind me saying, that’s an awfully roundabout way to answer my question, which, as you’ll agree, was a simple one. I asked you what the year is.’

‘You calling me a kook?’

‘I’m not calling you anything, Mr Hillman - just asking how your wife taped the game off TV in 1964.’

‘I told you - with a video.’

‘And what is that?’

‘I...don’t know. Look, who cares how it happened? It must have been a replay. Yeah, that’s it. The ABC showed a replay on TV and I watched it that night when I got home.’

‘You seemed very sure. You said you stayed on to play golf and called your wife asking her to tape the game for you. It’s right here in my notes.’

‘What does it matter? Look, Doc, I don’t know what you’re driving at but I’ve just about had enough of this.’

‘I agree. That’s enough for one session. But I do want you to speak to my secretary and make another appointment.’

Dr Mackay picked up his phone.

‘Miss Ainscough, could you come in here a moment?’

The unusual name he pronounced as aynes-co. Almost at once, the door opened and a tall blonde woman entered the room.

‘Book Mr Hillman another session,’ said Mackay.

Hillman stood up abruptly.

‘Don’t bother, Doc. I’m done with this.’

‘It’s too late, Graeme. We have to go through with it now. Miss Ainscough?’

The secretary approached Hillman and slapped him hard across the face. He immediately put his hand to his cheek.

‘What the hell did you do that for?’ he cried. ‘You’ve ruined everything!’

He turned and ran for the door, but tripped and found himself sprawled on the floor. He turned his head and saw Mackay and Ainscough looking down at him.

## II

‘Ah, Mr Hillman. Nice to see you again. How are the headaches?’

‘They come and they go,’ said Hillman. ‘It don’t bother me.’

He was back in Dr Mackay’s office again. He looked around at the white walls, neat bookcases, and soothingly bland paintings. There was a framed certificate on the wall licensing Gideon Mackay to practice psychology.

‘You’re feeling better then?’ Mackay said.

‘Have we met before? You look familiar.’

‘Mr Hillman, you’ve been coming to my office every year since 1956.’

‘Ah ’56. The start of our golden run. The greatest sporting achievement our country’s ever seen.’

‘I must say the Melbourne Olympics brought a tear to my eye too.’

‘Not the Olympics. St George. Eleven premierships in a row and it all started in ’56 with the win over Balmain.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘It’s God’s own football team. Provan, Raper, Gasnier, Langlands. We’ve never seen their like before and we won’t again.’

‘I see you haven’t forgotten your football obsession. But eleven in a row, you say, starting in 1956. It’s ’65 now so that must be nine.’

‘I stand corrected, Doctor. Nine in a row, and long may they reign, the mighty Dragons.’

Dr Mackay made a note in his notebook.

‘Last time you spoke about your sense of despondency. Your feeling that everything’s predestined and all your actions are futile. Do you still feel that way?’

‘Well, Doc, that’s probably how all the mugs who don’t follow St George feel. Just imagine what it’s like kicking off another season against the might of Gasnier, Langlands, and co! Year after year they line up for another beating - Wests, Manly, Newtown, Balmain. As for Norths and Canterbury, I don’t think they’ve got a win over us in the last ten years. Even Souths have slunk away in shame and despair - how the mighty have fallen!’

‘Why are you so obsessed with football?’

‘I’m not. I’m obsessed with St George.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we are the best. Ryan, Kearney, Walsh - what a side! Even Poppa Clay had a stint in reserves, that’s how good we are. And him with eight grand finals to his name. That’s why St George always wins.’

‘Do they, Mr Hillman?’

‘We might drop the odd game through the season, but we always win when it counts - the grand final. We always win that.’

‘Doesn’t it get boring to win all the time?’

‘Never. It’s only right that we win. We are St George.’

‘I must say I admire your passion, single-minded though it is. I don’t quite understand it, but I admire it.’

‘Which team do you follow, Dr Mackay? Don’t tell me you’re a Norths fan. If so, we’d better swap chairs!’

‘I don’t follow rugby, Mr Hillman, I’m from Melbourne. I support Collingwood in the VFL.’

Hillman winced.

‘Never could make head nor tail of that sport. Aerial ping pong! Collingwood, you say. Are they any good?’

‘I don’t mean to brag, but we did win four titles in a row back in the twenties.’

Hillman stifled a laugh.

‘Four in a row! Well, well. I suppose not everyone can win eleven in a row like St George. Four’s not bad, really. We achieved that back in ’59, then kept going. Four in a row. It’s something you Melbourne people can be proud of.’

‘You never know. One day Melbourne might have their own rugby team competing against your beloved St George.’

Hillman laughed loudly.

‘Melbourne playing rugby league? They’ll put a man on the moon before that happens!’

‘You seem very sure.’

‘It’s ridiculous, Doc. Laughable!’

‘Why are you getting upset over such a trivial remark?’

‘Because it’s rubbish, Doctor Mackay. You’re supposed to be curing my headaches yet you insult my intelligence with an absurdity like that. I’ve had just about enough of this. I’m out of here.’

Hillman stood up and walked towards the door. Mackay picked up his phone.

‘Miss Ainscough?’

The receptionist appeared at the door.

‘Get away from me,’ said Hillman.

She slapped him hard across the face. He recoiled.

‘Ow! What the hell did you do that for? You’ve ruined everything.’

### III

‘Ah, Mr Hillman, come in. Sit down.’

‘Thanks. Doctor...?’

‘Mackay. Doctor Mackay. Still troubled by the memory lapses, I see.’

‘They come and go.’

‘Like the headaches, then.’

‘I don’t let it worry me, Doc.’

‘Let’s start with the basics, shall we? Just answer a few simple questions.’

Dr Mackay picked up a pen and his notebook.

‘Name?’

‘Graeme Hillman.’

‘Address?’

‘44 Barnaby road, Hurstville.’

‘Age?’

‘Thirty-three.’

‘Date of birth?’

‘May 22nd, 19... what year is it now?’

‘You tell me, Mr Hillman.’

‘I always work it out by the grand finals. Easts in ’60. That was our fifth. Three against Wests, the last in the mud in ’63. Then there was Balmain in ’64, and last year Souths with the record crowd. Must have been ’65. Ten premierships in a row - that’s unheard of! And that means it’s 1966. So using my elementary powers of subtraction I guess I was born in 1933. Quite a coincidence eh, Doc. Born in ’33, and I’m 33.’

‘Why are you so obsessed with St George?’

‘I’m not obsessed, I just like to celebrate greatness - and we are the best. Provan, Kearney, Langlands, Clay...’

‘Gasnier, Raper, Mundine,’ finished Dr Mackay.

‘Never heard of that last one, Doc. Must be one of your Collingwood boys.’

‘Five-eighth, wasn’t he?’

‘You’re mistaken there. Raper played five-eighth in the ’62 grand final, Pollard in ’63. Apart from that, it was Brian ‘Poppa’ Clay all the way.’

‘You know that’s not true. Why don’t you stop pretending?’

Hillman stood up.

‘Look at you. A Melbourne boy trying to tell me about the mighty St George! I’ll not stand for this, Doctor.’

‘I believe you just did, Mr Hillman. Now, if you don’t sit down again, I’m going to have to call my secretary.’

Hillman made a dash for the exit but tripped and found himself sprawled on the floor inches from the door.

‘Missed it by that much,’ said Mackay. ‘Go and sit down.’

Hillman shuffled back to his chair. Mackay regarded him sternly.

‘Why is St George so important to you? It’s just a football team, not a matter of life and death.’

‘Yes it is. This ain’t football, it’s war!’

‘Mr Hillman, please. You say you were born in 1933. That means you lived through a real war. Your father probably served in it, right? A little perspective, perhaps.’

‘Don’t tell me about the war, Doc. My father never came back.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Would you like to talk about it?’

‘It was a long time ago. I’d sooner forget it. But who needs a father when you’ve got St George? There’s thirteen fathers every time they walk onto Kogarah Oval.’

‘And your wife? What does she think of your obsession?’

‘She puts up with it. Doesn’t understand it, but she puts up with it. Sometimes if I’m watching a big game on TV, I actually make her leave the house. She goes to her sister’s for the night.’

‘I see.’

‘Otherwise there’s no telling what I might do. I’ve been known to break things, throw stuff at the wall. I just get so involved in the game, know what I mean? My wife says I ought to show that much passion in the bedroom!’

‘But Mr Hillman, I thought you said you had a sense of futility watching the game, like the result was predestined.’

He picked up his notebook.

‘...as if the action had all played out long before. It was all done and dusted and locked up in a museum somewhere. That’s what you said.’

‘I don’t recall that, Doctor.’

‘I can’t help you if you lie, Mr Hillman. Answer me this: why does St George always have to win?’

‘Because we are the best!’ yelled Hillman. ‘We always win. Provan, Porter, Langlands...’

‘Blacklock, Barrett, McGregor,’ shouted Dr Mackay.

‘We won eleven titles in a row,’ said Hillman. ‘No one can ever take them off us.’

‘You said it was ten.’

Hillman leapt to his feet.

‘I never did.’

‘Ten! You said ten, soon as you came in.’

‘Ten, eleven, twelve, fifteen. We’ll win a hundred, because we are St George and we’ll go on forever!’

‘Sit down, Mr Hillman, or I’m going to have to sedate you.’

There was a standoff. Dr Mackay stared into Hillman’s eyes for a long moment, until Hillman at last looked away and sat down. He buried his face in his hands.

There was a long silence. At last, Mackay spoke, in calm, measured tones.

‘Mr Hillman. This has gone on long enough. Now, I put it to you that your memory losses, your headaches, leave you in a state of continual anxiety, which in turn leaves you desperate to cling to the one thing that feels certain - the supremacy of St George in rugby league. I also put it to you that the entire concept is an illusion, and that only by letting go of this false idea can you free yourself from your own enslavement. St George doesn’t always win.’

‘They do. It’s a historical fact. Look it up. Eleven in a row.’

‘They don’t. You know it. I know it. We all know it.’

‘We always win. We are St George. So it is and will always be.’

‘I put it to you further, Mr Hillman, that you were not born in 1933.’

‘I never said I was sure. I just counted back from our premierships.’

‘You never saw any of those premierships. You were born in 1966.’

‘I saw ’em all, goddamn you!’

‘You were a babe in arms when they won their last.’

‘You’re crazy. I’m not listening to this rubbish.’

‘You might not listen to me, Mr Hillman, but here’s someone else to tell it to you.’

The office door opened. Hillman looked up and saw a granite-jawed, rock-hard man. He looked like an old school cop, tough enough to put the wind up the hardest crim of 1960s Sydney.

‘Kevin Ryan?’ said Hillman in disbelief.

‘Morning, Graeme,’ said Ryan, extending his hand to shake.

Hillman felt his hand engulfed in the giant paw of the great St George forward.

‘An honour to meet you, Mr Ryan - but what are you doing here?’

‘I’ve come to give you the truth. Then I’m going to take you away.’

‘What for? I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘Don’t make me hurt you, son.’

‘I don’t want any trouble with you, Mr Ryan. Not with the hardest forward who ever took the field for St George.’

‘Not me. That was Billy Wilson. Kearney, Provan, Rasmussen...no one soft ever played for St George.’

‘Wait. I remember now. I remember what you did.’

‘Let’s go. Your time is up.’

‘Why should I go with you? It’s your fault we lost. You went to Canterbury in ’67.’

‘All things come to an end.’

‘Eleven in a row, then you went to Canterbury and helped them knock us out in the final. You’re a traitor! We could have had twelve, thirteen, a hundred!’

‘That’s football, son. Nothing lasts forever. Now, I’m warning you. Either come quietly or I’ll take you out myself.’

‘You betrayed us. All of us who sat on the hill at Kogarah and the SCG. You let down your mates. Langlands, Walsh, and Johnny King. What about Huddart and Maddison? They only got one title thanks to you. They could have had another three or four if you hadn’t left us. What the hell did you do that for? You’ve ruined everything.’

Ryan looked sideways at Dr Mackay, then turned and punched Hillman hard on the jaw. Hillman blacked out. By the time he woke up again, the psychologist’s office had gone and he was sitting in a darkened theatre watching a scene unfold.

## IV

September 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Grand final day. The great St George rugby league club had merged with another team, Illawarra, to become St George-Illawarra. Graeme Hillman, like many other fans, chose to ignore this. They were the St George Dragons and always would be. Today, in the grand final, they were up against another newly formed club, the Melbourne Storm.

He’d thought about going to the game but ruled it out. Crowds, transport, long queues for a beer, and no TV commentary. Better to stay home and watch it on TV in his comfortable lounge room at 44 Barnaby road, Hurstville.

Louise had been given strict instructions. She was to be out of the house by noon and not return for twenty-four hours. It was a rule applied whenever St George had a grand final, or a big semi final. Used to this by now, she'd arranged to stay with her sister.

'Nothing personal,' Hillman said. 'But you know me. As soon as the game kicks off, the atmosphere's going to get pretty volatile round here. Better stay outside a one mile radius.'

'You're a pain, Graeme,' his wife replied. She was a petite brunette of Italian descent. After seven years of marriage, she accepted her husband's odd obsession, but went through the ritual of complaining just to hold her end up.

'It probably won't matter,' said Hillman. 'I mean, it's only the Storm. A rugby league team from Melbourne. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous? But stay away, just in case it gets close - and don't come back tonight. I'll probably be that drunk after the game you wouldn't want to come near me anyway.'

Louise glowered.

'Just make sure you don't break anything this time. If I find even one mark on the wall, you'll be repainting. Got it?'

'Come on, Lou. I ain't broke anything since the '96 grand final. Ridge was tackled and they let him play on to set up a try. What do you expect me to do? It was only the turning point of the game!'

'I don't care, Graeme. Losing a game of football's not worth smashing up your house for.'

'I'll do anything for the Red V. I'll smash up my own house and the neighbour's as well, if it comes to it.'

'Calm down. It's only ten to twelve and you're already acting like a lunatic.'

'Don't say ten to twelve - it sounds like a losing score! Say twelve to ten for Christ's sake. A bit of sensitivity please.'

'I thought you said it was in the bag. You think St George will only get up by two points?'

'We smashed them 34-10 a couple of weeks ago. We'll probably win by forty this time.'

'Then stop acting so nervous.'

'Lou, no offence, but will you just go? You're meant to be out of here by twelve.'

'You're a pain, Graeme.'

'You already said that. I'm going out to buy beer. When I come back, make sure you're gone.'

'Maybe I won't come back.'

'Better bloody not - until tomorrow anyway.'

‘How about a goodbye kiss?’

‘No sex before the game. Oh alright, just a kiss.’

‘Right. I’m off. Good luck.’

Graeme Hillman got into his car holding a small bag, inside which was ten-thousand dollars cash. He’d made several withdrawals over the last couple of weeks, ready for this day. He drove to the TAB and put it all on St George. At \$1.50 for the win, it would net him a neat five-thousand dollar profit. He placed the betting receipt in his wallet, then bought a carton of beer and a bottle of Scotch.

He drove home and tried to kill time until 3pm. It was useless, but at least he could have a couple of beers to take the edge off. He suffered through the preliminaries, the build up, and the national anthem, until at last the game finally kicked off and the terror began.

Much as he tried, Hillman could not sit still upon the couch he’d placed at optimum viewing distance from the TV. After five minutes, he gave up and stood upright, shifting his weight from foot to foot every so often, clenching and unclenching his fists.

When Fitzgibbon scored for St George in the fourteenth minute, Hillman punched the air and ran around the living room with a cry of triumph. But that was nothing to what happened at the thirty minute mark when Nathan Blacklock gathered a kick and ran seventy metres to score under the posts. 14-0!

‘This is ours!’ Graeme Hillman shouted, opening a bottle of beer and drinking it in one swallow. At halftime, he smoked two cigarettes, basking in St George’s clear ascendancy.

Melbourne got a penalty goal just after halftime to make it 14-2. Then, at the fifty minute mark, St George were set to seal the win when Mundine chipped ahead and regathered - but he dropped the ball over the try line. That would have been the game. Hillman swore savagely and threw a plastic water bottle against the wall, where it left a clear chip in the paint. Looked like he’d be repainting.

That was the start of the Melbourne comeback. In an extraordinary eight minute period, they scored two tries to St George’s one. With ten minutes to go, Melbourne had clawed their way back to 18-14, just four points behind. Graeme Hillman swore and sweated through the terror, feeling each blow like a mortal wound. One more score and Melbourne could steal the game.

The wave of fear built to a crescendo just before fulltime when the Melbourne half, Kimmorley, put through a high kick which was caught over the try line by his team mate,

Craig Smith, who was then knocked out by a tackle from St George winger, Jamie Ainscough.

‘He dropped it!’ shouted Hillman. ‘He dropped the ball. We’ve won!’

But something was very wrong and he knew it.

‘Oh no. St George could be in trouble here,’ said one of the TV commentators. ‘Ainscough’s hit him right in the head. Harrigan’s sent it straight upstairs to the video ref. This could be a penalty try.’

‘No. No,’ said Hillman, with a howl of anguish. The St George winger, Jamie Ainscough appeared on the TV screen, hands on hips.

‘What the hell did you do that for?’ Hillman screamed. ‘You’ve ruined everything!’

‘He would have scored for sure,’ the commentator said. ‘This could be a penalty try. That means they’ll kick the conversion from right in front of the posts. This is going to give Melbourne the game.’

‘No! No way!’

On the TV screen the Melbourne captain, Glenn Lazarus, could be seen walking away from the referee, Bill Harrigan, a look of disbelieving glee on his face.

‘That’s got to be a penalty try,’ the commentator said. ‘Ainscough’s slapped him right in the head and knocked him out. That’s a penalty try, no doubt.’

The head commentator, Ray Warren, chimed in. ‘I think you’ll find that Bill Harrigan is about to make one of the biggest calls ever been made in one hundred years of rugby league.’

Slowly, Graeme Hillman backed away from the TV screen. Step by agonised step, he reversed until his back was against the rear wall of the living room. Even from that distance, he could see the on-ground scoreboard about to flash up the decision. Graeme Hillman looked on in horrified refusal, a white-hot surge of fury forming inside him. Then, as he knew it would, the result flashed up on the screen. TRY.

When those three letters T-R-Y appeared on the screen, something inside him snapped. With a violent oath, he launched himself in a full pelt charge towards the TV, lowered his head like a wounded bull, and butted the screen with the full force of his rage. In so doing, he knocked himself even more senseless than the Melbourne player who’d scored the winning try.

At least he didn’t have to witness the fulltime siren and the despair of the St George players and their fans.

## V

‘Ah, Mr Hillman. You’re back.’

Hillman looked around him at the neat consulting office. There was the framed certificate on the wall licensing Gideon Mackay to practice psychology.

‘How are you feeling today?’ Mackay said. ‘Headaches still bothering you?’

‘They come and they go. I don’t let it worry me.’

‘I believe you’ve said that before.’

‘Sure thing, Doc. I’ve got déjà vu all over again. And you won’t believe the crazy dreams these headaches are giving me.’

‘Oh yes?’

‘I dreamt I was in the future. St George were called St George-Illawarra, and they played Melbourne in the grand final. Can you believe that? Insane! St George were up 14-0 at halftime, then one of the players dropped the ball inches from the try line, and another one gave away a penalty try in the last minute. It’s your classic nightmare! Then I charged head-first into the TV and that woke me up, thank God.’

Dr Mackay sighed. He took off his glasses and placed them on the desk.

‘You’re still in denial. I thought surely this time we’d get through to you.’

‘What are you talking about? I reckon I’m about cured now. It’s probably time I got home to the wife. Must have missed a couple of St George games by now. We’re not far off winning our eleventh title. Eleven in a row. Can you believe that?’

‘It wasn’t a dream, Mr Hillman.’

‘It certainly was - and a most horrible nightmare, too. The sooner I forget it, the better.’

‘It wasn’t the future.’

‘I agree. I mean, St George and Melbourne playing out a grand final. When it comes to the future, I’ll cop flying cars like in *The Jetsons*, but I won’t cop that.’

‘You need to face up to what you did. Your mind has been in denial - of St George’s loss in the 1999 grand final, and what you did afterwards. You’ve been in Purgatory ever since - for the last eleven years.’

‘What are you talking about, Doc? I thought you were a man of science.’

‘So strong was your denial that you hallucinated an entire fantasy life for yourself, set during St George’s eleven year reign in the fifties and sixties. You returned to a lost, halcyon age when St George were invincible.’

‘They were simpler and better times. I’m glad I was born to live through that era.’

‘You never lived through it. You were born in 1966. You were thirty-three when you died during the 1999 grand final.’

‘It ain’t fair, Doc! I always heard about the golden era but I never got to taste it.’

‘Your era had its own glory.’

‘The grand final win over Parramatta in ’77 when I was eleven. What is it about that number? It’s haunting me.’

‘Was that all?’

‘Sure, we beat the Bulldogs in ’79, but I was just a kid. Two titles, Doc, and that’s all she wrote. From ’77 then eleven times two - twenty-two years later and it’s 1999. We were due. It was our destiny to win it that day. Why’d you think I put on that ten-thousand bucks? I’m not normally a betting man but we couldn’t lose.’

‘Yet you did - and you lost far more than money. Until you accept what happened, you can’t move on.’

‘We can’t have lost. It’s a lie. A horrible nightmare. Thank God I’m back in my real life and the glory of St George. Gasnier, Smith, Walsh, Lumsden...’

Dr Mackay picked up his phone.

‘Miss Ainscough. I can’t get through to this fellow. We’ll have to pull out the big gun. Send him in.’

The door opened and a giant of a man filled the doorway. Hillman looked up, then froze in shock.

‘Mr Provan. What are you doing here?’

The square-jawed colossus walked forward and shook Hillman’s hand. Hillman turned to Mackay.

‘You see, Doc. The man himself. Norm Provan, St George’s greatest ever captain. He don’t look a day over thirty. You still want to tell me it’s not 1965?’

‘That’s not Norm Provan. The ‘man himself,’ as you call him, is still alive back on Earth. One of my colleagues has agreed to take on this form in a last ditch effort to reach you.’

‘That’s gibberish. This is the great Norm Provan or I’m not here.’

‘If you believe that, it’ll help us achieve the task of waking you.’

Mackay and Provan looked at each other, as if exchanging a silent signal. Then Provan turned back to Hillman.

‘Time to go home, Graeme.’

The psychologist's office vanished. Hillman found himself standing at the front door of 44 Barnaby road, Hurstville.

'Got your keys?' said Provan.'

Hillman unlocked the door and they walked into the house. They could hear the TV blaring from the living room. When they entered, Hillman caught sight of his own body, passed out in front of the TV. He was lying on his back, his head lolling slightly to the right. A small amount of blood had congealed on the top of his head and on the cream-coloured carpet, the red and the white combining in the colours of St George.

'What's this, Mr Provan? We're back in the dream.'

Hillman glanced at the wall clock, showing 12.30pm. At that moment, there was the sound of a key in the lock, then footsteps and his wife's voice. There was a note of apprehension in it.

'Graeme, are you there?'

His wife entered the room and caught sight of his body on the floor. She ran forward and tried to rouse him, then turned off the TV and called an ambulance.

Suddenly they were in a hospital ward. Hillman looked down at his own body, hooked up to life support. He walked around the bed, examining his body from every angle, realisation dawning.

'So it's true, Mr Provan.'

'I'm sorry, Graeme. You've got to face up to what happened.'

'Did we really lose the '99 grand final to Melbourne?'

'That's right.'

'It's not fair. We were up 14-0 at halftime. They only scored in the last minute to take it off us.'

'The second half is as important as the first half, and the last minute is as important as the first. We should have beat Melbourne but we didn't. That's football, son. You can't change the past. You can only move forward.'

'I just hate losing.'

'So do I, but in sport there's always a winner and a loser. That's why we play so hard. There's no quarter asked and none given. If we win, we shake the opposition's hand with good grace, and if we lose we do the same.'

'Why'd Mundine have to drop that ball over the try line?'

‘Look how many tries he scored for us that year. We wouldn’t have made the grand final without him.’

‘Why did Ainscough have to knock that bloke out? If he’d just let him score out wide they might have missed the kick and we would have gone to extra time.’

‘That’s hindsight. He was trying to stop them scoring. Would you have done any better? We all make mistakes. Don’t we?’

He nodded at Hillman’s body, hooked up to the life support.

‘If you’d let your wife stay home that day, maybe she could have got you to the hospital in time. You always took it too seriously. It’s football. It’s not life and death. Except for you, it actually was.’

‘Can I go back and change it?’

‘Sorry, son. The fulltime whistle has blown.’

He saw his wife walk into the room with a doctor. She held hands with the unconscious body as the doctor turned off the life support. Hillman felt a dawning terror.

‘What have I done?’

‘You cared too much. There are worse sins.’

‘I wish I’d cared more about my wife than St George!’

‘It’s done and dusted now. You have to shake hands with your life. Own your mistakes and move on. Forgive yourself. There’s no one living or dead never made a mistake.’

The giant figure of Norm Provan turned to him with a kindly expression.

‘Let’s give this story a happy ending.’

Hillman turned to him in hope.

‘You’ll let me go back? Give me another chance?’

‘Not back. Forward. We’ll go forward in time another eleven years. October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010. The 2010 grand final where St George have finally made it back to the big stage. Do you want to watch the game?’

‘Who do we play?’

‘Easts.’

‘The Roosters, eh. We beat them in 1960. Not in ’75 though. The towelled us up 38-0. Langlands’ last big game. No, I can’t stand to watch it. Just tell me the result.’

‘Are you sure you want to know?’

‘Yes, Mr Provan. Give it to me straight. Do we win?’

‘Sure, son. We win 32-8. Gasnier’s nephew Mark scores the first try.’

‘Oh, thank God. At last.’

‘If you don’t want to watch that one, why don’t we go back to ’66? We can watch our grand final win against Balmain. The last in our eleven year run. Funny coincidence. We beat ’em in 56 as well to kick it all off.’

‘Can we do that?’

‘Let’s go.’

They travelled back to the SCG in 1966 and saw St George beat Balmain 23-4, with tries to Huddart, Pollard, and Ryan. The end of St George’s eleven year reign, the likes of which would never be seen again.

Nearby, in a modest suburban home in southern Sydney, a three month old Graeme Hillman kicked and gurgled in his cot.

## VI

‘Last stop, Graeme,’ said Norm Provan. ‘Time to say goodbye.’

‘Where are we? When are we?’

‘Rookwood cemetery. October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010.’

Louise Parker, formerly Louise Hillman, walked into the graveyard, eleven years after Graeme had last seen her. She carried a wreath of red and white flowers. Although remarried, she never forgot her former husband. She laid the wreath upon his grave.

Graeme Hillman

1966-1999

Fondly loved and remembered

She stood in silence for a few minutes, dabbing at her eyes. Then, at last, she turned on her heel and walked away.

‘Louise. Wait! I’m sorry.’ Graeme called after her.

Norm Provan laid a hand on his shoulder.

‘She can’t hear you, son. Come on. There’s a time and season for all things, and this one’s done. It’s time to rest and recharge, then you’ll come back fresh and start again.’

The two men shook hands, there was a flash of light, and the graveyard was empty once more.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

St George's run of eleven successive titles has never been matched. They reigned from 1956-66. They won the title again eleven years later in 1977, then in 1979. The club went on to lose grand finals in 1985, 92, 93, 96, and most famously, 1999 with the last minute loss to Melbourne. St George fans had to wait another eleven long years to play a grand final, which they won in 2010 against Eastern Suburbs. St George have yet to win another title.

They're due in 2021.

With due respect, the famous St George players Norm Provan and Kevin Ryan who appear in this story are, of course, not the actual people, but simply hallucinatory forms taken by Dr Mackay's colleagues as a way to communicate with Graeme Hillman.

At the time of writing, both of these esteemed gentlemen are still alive in the real world.

'Indian Summer' and 'Eleven' appear in *The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club*. Available here on Amazon <https://amz.run/4Nd5>

## Why This Ebook Exists

Dear Reader,

When I began as an author, I had the same naive ideas as most other rookie writers. I thought all I had to do was write a good book. Then a publisher would put it out, the book would go into shops, and people would buy it.

The reality is very different. It's harder than ever for new authors to succeed, even if they are good. Here are some of the reasons:

### **I – TOO MANY BOOKS**

Readers are spoiled for choice. If you want something to read, you can choose from all the books published this year, as well as the ones that came out last year, last decade, or last century! There are literally millions of books in the world. With so many others to choose from, a new book is like one grain of sand trying to stand out from all the other grains of sand on a beach.

### **II – AND NOT ENOUGH BOOKSHOPS**

There are far less bookshops than there were 20 or 30 years ago. That's a sign the traditional book world has largely collapsed. It's even harder to get published now and get into those few remaining shops.

### **III – THERE'S NO SYSTEM IN PLACE**

If only the book world was like sports. In the sporting world, there's a clear structure and pathways to advance. Players start in a low grade and move up to higher grades through performance. If they're good enough, they eventually reach the top.

In the book world, there's no real structure. There's a haphazard set of procedures - reviews, competitions, etc - but it's all over the place. Yes, there are agents and publishers

who look for talent, but with supply and demand so out of balance, they rarely take a chance on new writers.

#### **IV – THE MATTHEW PRINCIPLE RULES**

The ‘Matthew Principle’ is the idea that the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer. It applies in many areas of life. In publishing, it means established writers are helped and supported, unknown writers aren’t. So you can be successful, but only if you’re already successful. Tough ask!

#### **V – WANT TO BE A WRITER? MAKE SURE YOU’RE FAMOUS OR GOOD AT SELF PROMOTION**

For authors, the hardest part is getting a start. You need someone who’ll give you a break. So you have to find allies to get you into the system. That’s fine if you’re good at networking, but not if you’re lousy at schmoozing and selling yourself.

The other way to get started is if you’re a well known public figure, so people will buy your book because they’ve already heard of you. But as most new authors aren’t well-known, this isn’t much use to them.

#### **THE GOOD NEWS**

OK, enough complaining - now for the good news.

One reason the traditional book world has collapsed is that the internet has changed the game. Authors don’t have to go through the big publishers anymore. They can sell their books independently, right around the world.

But even though my books exist, why should you buy them? You’ve never heard of me. That’s why this ebook is free. You can try my work, without spending money on a book you may not like.

If you do like my writing, however, it greatly helps my cause if you buy one or more of my books or ebooks. Or share my work with your friends, or on social media.

This sort of grass roots support makes all the difference. It helps my writing become better known, and every little bit counts.

Now, let's go on. Here are some short non-fiction items from my blog. The first one is a small tale of modern piracy. That's followed by two items about strange attitudes which are surprisingly common: people who don't read fiction, and people who like things 'ironically.'

## 8

### **Robin Hood Rides Again**

Back in 2017, there was a big boxing match between two fighters, Green and Mundine. It was so big the pay TV company, Foxtel, charged people \$60 just to watch it on TV. Meanwhile, there was an odd sideshow to the main event. It's a little story I'll call Robin Hood Rides Again.

What happened was that some guy tried to live-stream the fight on his Facebook page. That means he put it on the internet so people could watch it for free. This was greeted with joy by 150, 000 Aussie boxing fans who didn't want to pay Foxtel the \$60. Legend! Hero! Champion Aussie Battler! These were some of the comments on Twitter and Facebook applauding the guy. No surprise there. After all, Australia has the biggest rate of internet piracy in the world.

In olden days, Robin Hood stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Now in 2017, this guy was stealing from the rich Foxtel company and giving to the poor boxing fans of Australia. Legend! Hero! I'll call him Robyn to distinguish him from the original.

Foxtel wasn't too thrilled and rang Robyn at home telling him to stop. After all, they'd paid a lot of money for the broadcast rights. Not only were they losing potential income, it was a slap in the face to those who'd already paid the \$60, and set a lousy precedent for the future.

Robyn wasn't pleased about being called at home. 'How did you get this number?' he demanded, miffed at the violation of his rights. And no, he wasn't going to stop streaming. He was feeling pretty good being the centre of attention, getting called a legend, an Aussie hero, and so on. As he told the Foxtel rep, he didn't think he was doing anything wrong. After all, he himself had paid the \$60 to watch the fight. So why shouldn't he stream it?

To answer the question, it's for the same reason that if there's a concert selling ten thousand general admission tickets, I can't buy a ticket, make nine thousand photocopies and give them out free - even though I did pay for mine.

Well, next thing you know, Robyn's getting sued by Foxtel - and as Alanis Morissette used to say, isn't it ironic? Because Robyn's glorious act of charity could now cost him a lot of money, money that was lost by Foxtel. But wait! Suddenly there's a crowd funding page set up to pay Robyn's fine and legal fees, which may be substantial. All he has to do is rely

on his new mates who called him a legend on Twitter. If they'll all just rally round and cough up a small amount - say, maybe \$60 each - there might just be enough to pay Robyn's fine.

But what's happened? Suddenly all Robyn's friends have melted away into thin air. Oh no. As a post on Twitter put it 'Spare a thought for our old mate today, also known as Unofficial Australian of the Year. 150,000+ Facebook users watched his live streaming. At \$60 per viewer, Foxtel could easily argue a loss of earnings of \$9million. He has set up a crowd funding page to assist, yet after seven hours, just \$150 has been donated.'

\$150? \$150! That means those 150,000 mates only gave up an average of 0.01 of 1c each. If that's not a modern Shakespearean tragedy, I don't know what is.

So now Robyn's sitting sadly at home wondering what happened. He'd invited 150,000 mates into his living room and they all turned out to be wombats. Maybe he wasn't a legend after all. And if you think about the difference between him and his medieval forerunner, he wasn't. The real Robin Hood took on the king's army, who tried to hunt him down and kill him. Robyn just took on a pay TV company. Robin risked his life to help people who were actually poor - peasants living under the harsh system of feudalism. Robyn just helped a bunch of Aussie cheapskates watch a boxing match. Robin fought the king, risking a sudden and violent death at any moment. All Robyn did was sit in his living room and point a webcam at the TV.

What's that Donald Horne quote again? Something about the lucky country and second rate people who share its luck. Including poor old Robyn, who found out the hard way that Aussie internet thieves are not the ones you want to go shoulder to shoulder with in the trenches of 21st century life.

## People Who Don't Read Fiction

Every so often I meet people who don't read fiction. They're proud of it too, the way other people are proud of not drinking or gambling. But why? Today I'm going to try to understand the strange mentality of those who take up permanent residence in the fact world. They come in various types.

Mind you, the first two types are victims, so they can be forgiven.

### 1. The BFZ - Book-Free Zone

The BFZ grew up in a house without books because reading wasn't valued. BFZs were never taught the pleasure of getting lost in a book. You've got to feel sorry for these guys. They're doomed to spend a lot of time on the train playing games on their phones.

### 2. The RLM - Ruined by Literary Masterpieces.

The RLM also grew up as a non-reader, but decided to give it a try. He then had the bad luck to start with some awful prize-winning book. When the literary masterpiece turned out to be an overwritten mess with no story, the RLM returned to watching TV, convinced fiction is not for him. He may still read non-fiction for its clarity and practicality, but has been scared off fiction for life. (By the way, I will use 'he' and 'she' alternately, but all types come in both genders).

Some other RLMs have been made that way by being forced to read clever but dull literary works in high school.

Now, enough of the victims. We'll move on to the hardcore anti-fiction types. These people make a point of actually *avoiding* fiction.

### 3. The OWSI - Obsessed With Self Improvement

The OWSI takes herself very seriously. She's not obsessed with self help, like poor cousin the OWSH, but self improvement. She has native high intelligence and wants to take it as far

as possible. The OWSI has a commitment to learning, and wants to understand the true nature of the world before she dies.

The OWSI can be a little paranoid and wants to empower herself by learning about as many topics as possible - from nutrition to networking, to neuroscience. (See, she's halfway through the alphabet of topics already!) Driven and ambitious, she thinks anything that doesn't teach her a practical skill or improve her mind is a waste of time. She regards fiction as a frivolity.

This is a blind spot in her armoury, for the division of life into 'true and false' is too simplistic. Fiction would also enhance her sense of empathy - a highly practical skill.

#### **4.The LAE - Life as an Exam**

A close relative of the OWSI, the LAE is also obsessed with learning - partly from innate curiosity, but mainly from the deep fear of failing exams. That 'exam' could take the form of dinner party chat on a topic the LAE hasn't read up on, making bad investments, or falling foul of some local custom while travelling overseas.

The LAE makes a point of reading serious non-fiction on as many topics as possible, and always at the back of his mind is that childhood nightmare of getting 49% on the 'exam' through lack of study.

The LAE is the type of person who takes a holiday but thinks only of work - because life is serious business and leisure is for losers. In other words, the LAE is a workaholic and proud of it... and that's not helping.

#### **5.The OFAR – Only Facts Are Real**

No doubt the definitive type of person who won't read fiction, the OFAR doesn't want to know about anything that is 'just made up' - although by that logic he should also avoid songs and movies.

With his insistence that facts are real but fiction is made up and therefore worthless, the OFAR is thoroughly literal-minded. His view is that facts = real = useful, and fiction = not-real = useless. It makes one want to exclaim, 'OFAR fact's sake, there's more to life than facts!'

He will read newspapers, textbooks, or other ‘factual’ works. At a stretch, he may read a biography, but not a book about the life of a fictional character. An extreme OFAR may even regard movies as a waste of time. Indeed, if you’re trying to sell fiction to an OFAR, your only chance is by luring him into the next category.

## **6.The BOATS – Based on a True Story**

The BOATS is an OFAR who has softened her stance and decided to read a novel (or watch a film) because it is Based On A True Story! It is for these people this catchphrase was made and tacked onto the end of movie posters. Imagine you’re trying to appeal to an OFAR. The conversation might go something like this:

‘Have you read X? What an amazing story!’  
‘What is it - a novel?’  
‘Yes. It blew my mind. Wait til you read it.’  
‘I don’t read fiction. It’s a waste of time. ‘  
‘But it’s brilliant.’  
‘It’s not real - it’s just made up. ‘  
‘But,’ (wincing internally) ‘it’s based on a true story.’  
‘Really? Perhaps I’ll take a look if I have some spare time.’

Now for some honourable mentions. The following types will read fiction, but only in a particular way.

## **7.The CFL - Condescending Fact Lord**

For a time, novelists were regarded as authorities on life, human nature, and other weighty topics. For the CFL, this role has been seized by those kings of the fact world, the scientists - and authors have been relegated. Authors are now little more than court jesters, providing light entertainment for their betters.

The scientist Richard Dawkins is a cultured, well-read man, but also a CFL. He quotes with approval the late Douglas Adams. Adams said that while he once looked to writers for the great truths, it is now only scientists who can provide them. His own light comedies were perfect examples of Adams’ willingness to play court jester in the new world of the CFL.

## **8.The GPA – Guilty Pleasure Apologist**

The GPA does read fiction, but only what she describes as ‘trashy novels.’ She’s a serious person over-concerned by what others think of her cultural habits. Believing she’ll be judged, the GPA allows herself to indulge her real tastes by using the ‘guilty pleasure’ disclaimer. Also known to apologise for ‘dancing to cheesy love songs after a few drinks.’

## **9.The GOOJFIC – Get Out Of Jail Free Irony Card**

The younger relative of the GPA, the GOOJFIC is also worried about how others see him. He’s supposed to only like indie rock bands, along with obscure books and movies. In reality, the GOOJFIC secretly likes some popular stuff too. Recent invention of the Irony Card allows him to enjoy mainstream culture while pretending to hate and disdain it, because he is ‘liking it ironically.’

## **10.The NFS – the Non-Fiction Snob**

The NFS belongs to several of the above groups at once, and enjoys a constant state of smug superiority over other people. He or she will always be smarter, cooler, and more successful than you. Then again, at the end of the day, the NFS will still end up dead like the rest of us.

So, having listed some of the main types of people who don’t read it, here are my top five reasons why people *should* read fiction.

### **1.Life is Not an Exam**

Working hard is good; being a workaholic... not so much. Workaholics are one of the few types of ‘holics’ who are proud of their disease. People who read only non-fiction through a need for constant learning are leisure time workaholics. That is, they can’t do anything in their spare time unless it has a constructive purpose. They can’t just go on holidays and lie on the beach, they need to do something worthwhile.

These guys need to lighten up a bit, for life is not an exam. Well, not all the time anyway. It's good to sometimes read for pleasure, not just the pursuit of knowledge. Besides, if they think they'll only learn from non-fiction, they're being way too literal-minded.

## **2.Fiction is Truth in Concentrated Form**

A good fiction writer can extract a truth about life and express it succinctly in a structured form. Such a truth is as good as a fact, and perhaps more useful.

A fiction writer can put a fact in a context that illuminates it. A good writer will express a truth through characters, actions, and a sequence of events so it is vividly understood. Anyway, documentary film makers work in much the same way, constructing a narrative to show a truth - thus mirroring the techniques of fiction. The film maker selects from a large range of material to shape a story. More to the point, the distinction between fiction and non-fiction is far less than one might think.

I could point out that many novels are heavily researched or based on lived experience, but that's getting a bit close to the 'based on a true story' spiel. It shouldn't be necessary to sweeten the deal for the anti-fiction brigade.

## **3.Escape From the Self**

One of the greatest tyrannies we face is being trapped in our own minds. A good novel frees us from this prison and allows us to enter the mind of not just the author but the characters in the book, whose personalities may be quite distinct from the author's.

A novel can give you the power of time travel into the past, or the imagined future. As the saying goes, the past is another country, they do things differently there. This allows us to escape the pathological myopia of assuming the way things are now is the way they always were or will ever be.

Escaping from the self helps you realise there are other selves out there, each with their own concerns even if they are different from your own. In that way, reading fiction is a weapon against bias and self-absorption, and in the age of the selfie, we need that more than ever.

#### **4.Fiction Is Better Than Life**

The real world can be pretty damn tedious. There are plenty of things you would like to happen which probably won't, due to obstructions of various kinds. In fiction, you can skip past the tedium of mundane reality and the blockages of the fact world.

I'll admit that in my own novels, what happens in, say, chapters 3-20 is dependent on events happening in chapters 1-2. In the real world, those events probably wouldn't happen. This means that in real life one is often stuck, so to speak, in the frustrating world of chapters 1-2. In fiction, you can get past those tedious limitations and go on to the interesting world of chapters 3-20! And that's fine, as long as you don't turn it into a 'Mary Sue,' in which case your preference for fiction will have become pathological.

#### **5.Who Wants to Hang Around With an OFAR Anyway?**

Some people are intelligent but not too smart. The guy who says only facts are real is only using half his brain, and for no good reason.

The line between fact and fiction is considerably blurry. One has only to look at history. Many inventions and social changes started out as imaginative fiction before becoming facts. Many things once believed to be facts turned out to be fiction. Some of the great characters of fiction are far more real in the mass human psyche than actual people who have lived and died unremarkable - indeed boring - lives.

In the end, we don't have to set up any great opposition between fiction and non-fiction. Both are worthwhile. Yet reading is an end in itself, not just a means to an end. Still, if we're going to take a utilitarian approach to reading, the bottom line is that reading fiction may or may not make you smarter or better informed, but it will probably make you a better person. There's no more practical outcome than that.

## Liking Things Ironically

You know that phrase ‘the guilty pleasure.’ What’s that about - binge drinking? Gluttony? Serial killers who enjoy their work? Actually, serial killers don’t tend to suffer from moral angst. No, the guilty pleasure is about ‘cool’ people who like ‘uncool’ things in popular culture.

Lots of people think they’re too smart and discerning to like some item of pop culture. But they do like it and that’s a problem. If they like something uncool, does that make them uncool too? The solution is to call it a ‘guilty pleasure.’ As long as they confess guilt for liking it, they’re off the hook. That’s a relief because the most important thing in life is being cool.

Your coolness is often judged on your clothing, speech and behaviour, but especially on your cultural tastes, that is, the kind of music, books, and films you like. The problem is, most popular culture isn’t considered cool at all, even though by definition lots of people like it.

People have come up with a new solution to this devastating social problem. It’s like the ‘guilty pleasure’ but taken up a notch. The solution is *liking things ironically*. It’s a strange concept but as far as I can tell, it means you’re allowed to like something as long as you make it clear that you really regard it with the utmost scorn and derision.

For example, back in the last century a friend and I went to a vampire movie. This was before vampires were cool. It was a good film and the vampire quite frightening, but every so often my friend chuckled dismissively to show her superiority. In those days, sophisticated adults weren’t supposed to like vampire movies. In that case, why were we watching it? I suppose she was liking the film ironically, even though the phrase hadn’t yet come into vogue.

Liking things ironically is a new, updated version of the ‘guilty pleasure’ concept. The classical musician who likes Abba; the literary critic with a stash of whodunits; the academic who watches a bit of ‘trash TV’ at the end of the day. Why should these people feel guilty about such pleasures? Because it threatens their image as people of impeccable taste and refinement, or on the cutting edge of underground cool. It seems culture isn’t there to be enjoyed, it’s a social marker. If you want to be thought urbane, arty or cutting edge, better

watch what you watch. If what you really like is simple fare like rom-coms, disco music, or whatever, you're outing yourself as a simpleton of the highest order.

That's the beauty of the 'ironic' solution. Liking things ironically is a blank cheque to like whatever you want. You can like any old film, song or TV show and as long as your irony is made clear, you're not kicked out of the cool club.

It's important though to make it clear you *are* doing it ironically. By all means like pop culture, but from time to time you must affirm that you really regard it with scorn and derision. If you don't, people will suspect that you actually like it, rather than just pretending to.

It's all very complicated, isn't it? But not everyone has gone down the ironic route. Some people have taken the radical step of liking things straightforwardly rather than ironically. This is shown by the rise of 'geek' culture, in which comics and science fiction, for example, have been openly celebrated. The actor and writer, Simon Pegg, said:

Being a geek is all about being honest about what you enjoy and not being afraid to demonstrate that affection. It means never having to play it cool about how much you like something. It's basically a license to proudly emote on a somewhat childish level rather than behave like a supposed adult. Being a geek is extremely liberating.

Another solution comes from the academic world. With the invention of 'cultural studies,' the old distinction between high and low culture has been removed. By turning highbrow thought onto lowbrow fodder, academics can do whatever they want without fear of reprisal. Any part of popular culture is now up for study and analysis.

Yet for those who aren't geeks or academics, the best solution is still liking things ironically. It's win-win. You get to like anything you want, and as long as you make it clear how much you actually despise it, you're still cool.

Liking things ironically? What a concept! Humanity - how do you come up with this stuff?

I've got to be honest, though. In younger years, I *did* care too much what other people thought of me. While I never liked things ironically, I did sometimes hide my liking for the parts of pop culture that weren't considered cool. Thankfully, when you get older you stop being so self conscious and realise it's a lot easier just to be honest.

A writer named Christy Wampole had something interesting to say about irony, and its opposite, authenticity. She says:

Where can we find other examples of non-ironic living?... Non-ironic models include very young children, elderly people, deeply religious people, people with severe mental or physical disabilities, people who have suffered, and those from economically or politically challenged places...

Observe a 4-year-old child going through her daily life. You will not find the slightest bit of irony in her behaviour. She has not, so to speak, taken on the veil of irony. She likes what she likes and declares it without dissimulation. She is not particularly conscious of the scrutiny of others. She does not hide behind indirect language. The most pure non-ironic models in life, however, are to be found in nature: animals and plants are exempt from irony, which exists only where the human dwells.

She's right. The pose of irony is a purely human affliction, infecting those from teenage years to adulthood. It's only the old or very young who don't care what others think. Young children have not yet learned to care what others think of them and the elderly can no longer be bothered.

When it comes to culture, you either like something or you don't. You can't like something under the guise of hating it. At least, not without a good deal of effort.

## 11

### The Vortex Winder

I'll now move onto two of my novels - *The Vortex Winder* and its sequel, *The Maelstrom Ascendant*.

Strangely enough, both books come with a musical soundtrack. At the time of writing *Vortex*, I had my rock band, Lighthouse XIII, and decided to add songs to the book. So, *The Vortex Winder* is both a book and an album. It's like a movie musical where each song fits into the story.

Some people have thought they're supposed to listen to the music while reading the book, but that's not the case. The music and novel are separate but related.

These soundtrack albums are available on CD, on iTunes or Amazon music, and Spotify.

As for literary genre, the books could be filed under 'magic realism.' That is, they're set in the real world but include supernatural elements that go beyond it. One reader called *The Vortex Winder* 'a modern fairytale,' which is a good description.

These novels feature the adventures of Jimmy Brandt, a knockabout guy trying to make sense of life in the 21st century. He's not your conventional hero - indeed, *The Maelstrom Ascendant* shows his turn to evil - but *The Vortex Winder* begins with an act of kindness when he saves the life of an insect. The insect turns out to be a magical being who gives him the 'Vortex Winder,' a device which grants Jimmy's wishes, at least in the short term. Just as in traditional fairytales, these wishes rarely work out as expected, and lead to complications of one sort or another.

Jimmy's main drive is to become a famous rock musician, but he's drawn into various other adventures: a love affair in Germany, a stint in a Thai prison, and a short burst of social media infamy. Along the way, he's guided by his mentor, Iolango, and pursued by his nemesis, Elijinx.

#### Lighthouse XIII

My rock band, Lighthouse XIII, doesn't fit into a definite genre. It's riff-based guitar rock, on the heavy side, but with melodic, 'alternative' style vocals. Someone said it's like Morrissey singing over Black Sabbath.

The band has recorded four albums: *Waves Upon Waves*, *Vortex Winder*, *The Maelstrom Ascendant*, and *Cultown*. They are available here.

*Vortex Winder* <https://amz.run/4SFr>

*The Maelstrom Ascendant* <https://amz.run/4Nmj>

*Cultown* <https://amz.run/4Nmi>

My albums are also on YouTube. I can't link directly to songs from this ebook, but here are a few you might look up.

**Vortex Winder** - title track of the album.

**Spark** - a song of hope in dark times.

**In Nihilum** - a moment of inspiration from Thomas Swan.

**Skeptic Eclectic** - What is a skeptic? Swan ponders this question in *Cultown*.

**Triangle of Fire** - I like the guitar solo!

**Life Line** - One from the heart.

**High and Mighty** - a moment from Jimmy Brandt's dark period.

**Quitter** - here's a poppy one!

**The Price of Dominion** - this one's pretty heavy, but still melodic.

Now, back to the book, of which the first chapter will be presented here.

## 12

### Iolango

#### Chapter One of *The Vortex Winder*.

Some moments are life changing, yet random. For example, a friend of mine met her future husband for no better reason than that he dialled a wrong number and she answered the phone. Now, why would that happen? Whether it's all fate, luck, or a ricochet in God's random plan, who knows? Yet when it comes to life changing moments, the last place I expected one was in the Excelsior Hotel toilets at a heavy rock concert. Who would have guessed an act of compassion for a drowning cockroach could lead so far?

Now stop right there. Don't make that face, turning your nose up like that. Yes, I too wish this story had a more glamorous opening. If only it had begun at a Frank Sinatra concert at one of those Paris restaurants you have to book a year in advance, it would have been much more convenient for me. But it didn't, and I'm obliged to present the facts as they happened.

The show was on at the Excelsior Hotel in Surry Hills, Sydney. The band 'Nevermore' was playing that night, and I was warming up with a couple of drinks. My rigorous preparation for the show had begun on the bus on the way in. I'd sipped discreetly from a beer bottle, without attracting the interest of the bored, balding bus driver whose life had slumped to the depths of working on Saturday night. How could he do it? Personally, I can't stand working when other people are enjoying themselves around me. Like the time picking up glasses in that city nightclub a few years ago. Never again.

The bus stopped and I got off in the back streets of Surry Hills, an inner city suburb once frequented by street gangs but now semi-respectable. Not knowing where to find the hotel, I asked some young guys in black t-shirts for directions. Judging by their attire, they were going to the same place as me. They gave me the brush off, which was odd, but then I saw it from their side. Here I was, alone in a Surry Hills backstreet, clutching a bottle of beer in a brown paper bag, with the first flush of my youth somewhere over the rainbow. It seemed that the lads took me for some kind of unsavoury character, and did not identify me as one of their own. It was a sobering thought, speaking metaphorically of course.

Brushing off the slight, I simply followed the lads' general tracks, and before long the Excelsior Hotel loomed up above me, with many more black-shirted rogues spilling out into the streets before the show. Through force of habit, I scanned the various displays of band allegiance on the guys' t-shirts. It was all fairly predictable, with the usual clues to personality on hand. A few conservative Megadeths and Slayers. Some more recent fare like Opeth and Arch Enemy. A faded, retro Metallica from the Justice tour. Then there were a few pretentious underground types wearing the shirts of bands no one's ever heard of. It seems a bit contradictory putting your arcane knowledge on show like that.

Inside the hotel, the support band were thundering through their last few songs. I decided they weren't quite worthy of going deaf for, and headed off to the gents to relieve myself. The toilets weren't yet crowded. It wasn't like the chaos at one of the big rock shows, where you almost have to take a ticket to line up. At the moment, the toilets were almost empty, with no queue for the trough.

Metal fans are a mixed bag, but my impression from twenty years of attending shows has been that they are a decent bunch on the whole. There's also that sense of family, so that no matter what your outside story – whether you're a plumber or a pilot or an accountant – once you put on that black t-shirt, you're a brother. This view is perhaps somewhat idealized, and it only took a few weeks exposure to the Blabbermouth website to realise that metaldom, like most subcultures, is the usual cross section running from intellectuals to idiots. Still, you get that anywhere, don't you?

In the Excelsior Hotel toilets that night, I ran into a couple of the idiots, and was quite disgusted by the casual cruelty on display. As I reached the urinal trough, I glanced down to observe a large cockroach all at sea, struggling between dry icebergs, floating in a sea of flush, and - most disturbing of all - being callously pissed upon by a couple of sniggering, drunken young guys. Caught between this triple hazard, the poor creature was floundering desperately, and its prospects of escape were grim. Even if it could somehow escape from its watery peril, it would still be trapped within the stark surrounds of the men's toilet, a windowless prison soon to be invaded by herds of stampeding drunken giants in black t-shirts, as soon as the support band finished their set.

I found myself disgusted by the pissers' cruelty. There was no need for this weak act of inter species bullying. A drowning cockroach was an easy target, but it would be nice to take these two to an African wildlife reserve and see if they were tough enough to piss on some passing lions. I was almost as disgusted to note one of the guys was wearing a Guns and

Roses shirt. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there was no call for that. G'n'R were a decent hard rock band in the early 90s before imploding under the weight of their own egos. They'd blown the chance to create a great body of work by being rock stars rather than musicians.

Despite my feelings, I was no saviour and said not a word of protest. I grimaced internally, but was not bold enough to rescue the drowning insect. In the macho atmosphere of a metal gig, I did not want to be thought either soft, or someone who sticks his hands into piss-filled urinals.

The next moment, however, the two urinators left and returned to the hotel, and for once there was hardly anyone in the bathroom. Just a couple of guys behind me at the wash basins. The poor cockroach was still struggling, more feebly now, as it faced its liquid doom. There would be no escape for that wretched creature. Unless I did something very simple.

Impulsively seizing a decent sized wad of toilet paper, I stooped down and wrapped it around the wet insect before heading straight for the exit. There was hardly anyone around, apart from a big guy standing by the door. I glanced up anxiously as I passed, hoping he'd not seen my act of rescue. In this glance, I took in a Morbid Angel t-shirt, and was surprised by the look of extreme malice its owner shot at me. I brushed past him as quickly as possible, moved through the hotel crowd, and emerged into the cool night air. Behind the hotel was an empty beer garden with a few trees and plants. Removing the wad of toilet paper from my shirt pocket, I dumped the cockroach onto some dirt at the base of one of the trees. It crawled weakly away to safety.

Now that I was alone in the beer garden, I took out a cigarette and lit it. I never smoke, except after a few beers. I'd have to hurry. It would soon be time for Nevermore's pulverizing musical attack. I took a few quick puffs, nervous in case the band started without me. There would still be a fair bit of jockeying for position in the crowd before the band's entrance, yet I was by now a veteran of moving through densely packed crowds at gigs. There are two rules. One: keep moving, don't lose any momentum you've built up. And two: let someone else do the work. Find someone who's already blazing a trail through the crowd, and simply follow through in their wake when they've done the hard yards for you.

There's nothing like the start of a rock show. Those first moments when the lights dim, the curtain falls, and the crowd roars as the band appears. The powerful manifestation of a great musical entity is always a climax. With a sudden sense of urgency, I turned, ready to walk back into the hotel, only to be interrupted by a voice behind me.

'Wait.'

I'd been sure the beer garden was empty, and turned around in surprise. A man was sitting at one of the tables. Some old homeless guy. I ignored him and turned away. Who cared about him, when Nevermore were about to come on? But again he called on me to wait.

He was dressed in a drab brown suit which looked way too warm for the time of year, so it was no surprise to see him perspiring freely. Even his clothes looked a little damp. And he was close enough for me to notice that his choice of cologne left a lot to be desired. It seemed that *eau d' Urine* was scent of the month in *Homeless Guys Weekly*. What a disgusting, smelly wino! Yet basic manners forced me to acknowledge him.

'What is it, mate? I've got to go.'

'Let me thank you first. We need to talk.'

The comment made no sense, and there was nothing this guy could offer me. Nevermore would be on stage any minute. I was about to turn on my heel for the last time when something very odd happened. The perspiration so visible on the man's face seemed to dry up right in front of my eyes, and more dramatically, the drab brown suit began to gradually change colour. It lightened to tan, morphed into gold, evolved through red and green, before finally settling into a dull luminescent blue. The odour of his 'cologne' also receded, and I was standing in front of a handsome man in a blue robe.

'That doesn't usually take so long,' the man said, 'but I was exhausted. Without you, it wouldn't have happened at all.'

In my twenties, I had a couple of times taken LSD, but I'd never seen anything as weird as this. Yet in spite of what had just happened - and this should give some idea of the single-mindedness of the metal fan - the main thought above all others was the need to get in and get a good spot for Nevermore! So if this guy thought I was going to stand by while he drew me into some long winded conversation, he was mistaken. I still didn't know who he was, and I didn't much care.

'Good trick,' I said. 'Whatever you just did, very impressive, but I've really got to go. So whatever you want to say, you've got about ten seconds.'

'You don't know who I am?'

'No idea. Never seen you before.'

'Until tonight, when you saved my life.'

I was starting to get it. The guy was a religious freak, and he was about to convert me, then ask me to deposit ten thousand dollars into a Nigerian bank account.

‘I am in your debt,’ he continued. ‘Through my long and hazardous lifetime, I have faced many perils and sometimes wondered how I would finally meet my end. But to come to such a dire end as nearly happened tonight would have made me a tragic laughing stock. Which was exactly what Elijinx intended.’

‘Who?’

‘Elijinx, my mortal enemy. We passed him on the way out.’

‘Out of where?’

In hindsight, I’m ashamed of my slow-wittedness.

‘You’re in a hurry, so I’ll get to the point. My name is Iolango. Elijinx and I are shape shifters. We live in the shadows of your world, the nocturnal realms. We can change our form to blend into the patterns of your planet.’

‘Change your forms - what, change your clothes like you did just now?’

‘More than that. We can change our bodies too.’

‘Change your face?’

‘Easily. And our race or sex. All that was mastered aeons ago. There’s more than that. We have gone far beyond identification with any one species by now. We enjoy the myriad creature forms in this world.’

‘Meaning what - you can change into animals too?’

‘We can and we do.’

‘Really? That’s great, but I’m still not giving you any money, OK? I’m broke, so forget it.’

‘We have no need for money. That’s for you humans. But if we ever do need it, there is no problem getting it.’

‘Speaking of getting it, can you get to the point? Nevermore’s about to start.’

‘Very well - two points. First, we can, as you say, turn into animals. And second, you saved my life tonight. Understand?’

‘To save time, and I’ll take the express route and bypass the sceptical inquiry stage. So tell me, do you and your pals ever turn into birds, or even insects?’

‘We do indeed. As I did this very day.’

‘Are you trying to say you’re that goddamned cockroach I fished out of the piss trough tonight?’

‘Yes, and thank you for saving my life.’

Iolango extended his hand to shake. I began to extend my own, then quickly retracted it. Who knew what I was really shaking hands with?

‘So you people are some kind of magicians?’

‘Magic is only a word. It is technology really. Clarke’s magic, to use the words of one of your own kind.’

‘Oh yeah, I’ve heard that one. ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic. ‘ Arthur C. Clarke.’

‘Exactly. Anyhow, Elijinx and I have feuded for longer than I can remember, and tonight he nearly brought me to an ignominious end. It was Elijinx who changed me into the cockroach and dumped me in the loo. I couldn’t break the charm while he was in the room. Watch out for him, by the way, you’ve made a foe there.’

‘My friend’s enemy is my enemy?’

‘He is now. Watch your back. And your front and your sides. Especially your sides. He’s very cunning.’

‘You mean that guy in the Morbid Angel t-shirt is Elij-whatsisname? I’ll keep an eye out for him then.’

‘He won’t look like that next time though, will he?’

‘Oh yes, of course.’

‘But you may still have an inkling. Look for the shadow behind the smile. A certain malevolence which can’t be hidden by change of form.’

‘What about you? Will I bump into you again?’

‘More than likely. But I’ve a gift for you, a gift that will offer some protection on your travels.’

‘Travels? I’m not going anywhere, am I?’

‘It’s up to you. You’re stuck in a rut. Give yourself the gift of freedom. Go and do something different, have some adventures. And take this, it will help you.’

Iolango handed me a small rectangular device. It looked like some kind of smart phone.

‘That’s the Vortex Winder. It will provide you with special powers, a different one every week or so. Explanation will come at the time, when you require them. Then use them as best you can.’

‘Thanks, I’m sure. Very good of you. Now I hate to be rude, but I’ve got to GO! Nevermore is about to start.’

‘OK. Go and start your travels. Your random, surprising adventures. My people do not have a monopoly on shape shifting.’

That was the last thing I heard before I ran back to the hotel, where I made it inside just in time to find a prime position to see Nevermore and their opening song, ‘Enemies of Reality.’ Brilliant!

## 13

### The Maelstrom Ascendant

The narrator of the previous chapter, Jimmy Brandt, has many strange adventures through the rest of *The Vortex Winder*.

*The Maelstrom Ascendant* is the sequel. In the tradition of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, this book looks at the darker side of human nature, and Jimmy's in particular. Most novels don't have characters who are solely good. Indeed, evil characters are often more interesting.

In *The Maelstrom Ascendant*, Jimmy Brandt, turns to the dark side. As the story begins he's leading a quiet life, having given up on his former days as a rock musician. Yet almost against his will, he's drawn into making a comeback to rock n roll. But the further he goes, the more he sees that the showbiz world is rotten and corrupt and there's no point resisting it.

He turns to the path of evil and so falls into a sequence of events he can no longer control. In the end, perhaps only an old, forgotten friend can save him - that is, if he wants to be saved.

There's a lot of ground covered in *The Maelstrom Ascendant*. I would like to have included more extracts here, but it's a spoiler to present events out of sequence, and detracts from how the story unfolds. I've chosen to present only the opening chapter of both *Vortex* and *Maelstrom*.

Mind you, that does put me at a disadvantage, as both opening chapters are rather low key. I'd like to assure readers that both books turn out considerably more epic as the story unfolds.

Of the seven books I've written so far, my two favourites are *The Maelstrom Ascendant* and the latest one, *Conquest By Concept*. If you only read one or two of my books, those are the best.

*The Vortex Winder* is available as an ebook on Amazon here <https://amz.run/4NdJ>

*The Maelstrom Ascendant* is on Amazon here <https://amz.run/4NdK>

*Vortex* will be republished in hard copy later this year.

Here's *Maelstrom* Chapter One.

## The Unwild West

### Chapter One of *The Maelstrom Ascendant*

It felt so good to be a quitter.

There I was, having given up on my dreams and resigned myself to a quiet life. My guitars were in storage and the Vortex Winder lay dormant, just as it had for the last three years.

Even Sandra was back on the scene having forgiven me my madness of the years before. We'd left the glamour of Sydney's east to live in the unwild western suburbs. After all, that's what she'd wanted. It was in fact west of the west – in the Blue Mountains out past the city limits. I retired from music, got a real job and settled into a quiet domestic life.

Sandra? The Vortex Winder? Forgive me. I must remember that many readers have no knowledge of my past adventures.

And whose fault is that? Yes, this book is a sequel. Goddammit - if a few more of you guys had read the first one, we wouldn't be having this difficult conversation! As it is, I'm not only forced to give a summary of that book, it has to come without spoilers. Otherwise none of you will ever go back and read it at all now, will you? Really, you are very thoughtless at times.

So here's the deal. I'll give you a spoiler-free summary of the first book. In return you'll agree to suspend your disbelief about the strangeness of the events described. There's no denying the story was rather bizarre. That's just the way it is. It will soon be obvious we're 'not in Kansas anymore,' just somewhere that looks very like it on the surface.

It all began one night when I fished a drowning cockroach out of a hotel toilet. And granted, while that was probably the worst start to a book in recorded history, this random act of kindness changed my life. As if in a modern fairytale, the cockroach turned out to be a shape-shifting being named Iolango. He rewarded me with the 'Vortex Winder,' a wish-granting device which awakened my old dream of being a famous writer and musician.

In pursuit of that dream I broke up with my girlfriend, Sandra, and embarked upon a wild ride. The Vortex Winder led me down a path that included a love affair in Germany, a period as a pro gambler, and a hellish stint in an Asian prison. After my escape from the prison, I did indeed release a book and an album. Yet the only fame to result came from a ludicrous

YouTube video that went viral. Finally I was drawn into a showdown with my nemesis, Elijinx. A shape shifter like Iolango, Elijinx brought me within a breath of extinction before I escaped to fight another day.

Out of remorse for the trials he'd put me through, Iolango offered to return me to the point in time where the story began, erasing my memory so I could take a different path in life from that point. I'd refused, choosing not only to preserve my memories but to relate them as 'fiction' in a novel.

The novel was itself called *The Vortex Winder*. When it was published, I had high hopes for it. Ever the optimist, I'd believed it could be a hit - but it never really took flight. Turned out the book industry was on its knees. It had been hard enough to publish and sell books ten years before. Now, like many other traditional trades, the book world was being eaten alive by the internet. Bookshops were closing down, publishers were going broke, the whole system was falling apart.

The novel even came with a soundtrack album of songs by my band. But as the music business was just as screwed as the book business, that didn't much help.

In my efforts to promote the book, there *had* been one flicker of interest from the publishing world, although it turned into a bit of a comedy scene in the end. I'd gotten through to a literary agent who'd taken a mild interest in my work. Let's call him Richard. Turned out he was prepared to republish it, but only if there were some major rewrites. I dropped into Richard's office one day to find he'd made it through the first six chapters.

'I've got to tell you, Jimmy, you've got something here. This whole modern fairytale shtick is a new twist on an old genre. It's contemporary and you're keeping some kind of realist edge without going the full-Potter. I like that - and the soundtrack music certainly adds something new. But there'd have to be some big changes before I'd even think about taking it on.'

'Changes? Like what?'

'The cockroach for a start. Not a very charming animal, is it? Your Iolango's a shape-shifter, after all. Let's change him into something a whole lot cuter.'

'A kitten, maybe?'

'That's more like it. I mean, a cockroach in a toilet? At a heavy metal show? Please! You can't expect me to sell that.'

'Why not - what's wrong with it?'

‘What’s the largest demographic for fiction? Women 35-60 years old. You’ll have lost half of them by the end of chapter one. If you want to reach that market, then write for it. I mean chapter six, the love affair with Freya - that’s more like it. But why make her German?’

‘Why not?’

‘Why not make her Italian? Or at least French.’

‘Well... because she was German?’

‘I think you’ll find Italy and France road test better with our focus groups, so why not roll with that?’

‘That’s pretty offensive to the Germans.’

‘That’s the research. For the same reason, I’d get rid of all the heavy rock stuff. Take out all the irrelevant little comments about music. Frankly, I’d change the soundtrack too.’

‘You said it added something.’

‘Sure, but again you’ve got to write for your demographic. Don’t take it personally, but you’d be better off with an album of R&B or show tunes. If you can’t do that style yourself, hire some pro songwriters.’

‘This is a joke, right?’

‘It’s common sense. Also, dump the gambling chapter.’

‘But it ties in with the themes of the book and it’s crucial to the plot. How do I - I mean how does he - get the money to go overseas if he doesn’t master the Black Art?’

‘Why not let him have a big win on lotto or the pokies? That way you can get rid of all the boring detail and cut it down to a couple of pages. Get to the point.’

‘Did you even read what I said about lotto in that chapter?’

‘If you really must talk about sports gambling, at least pick a sport with more global appeal. Rugby is only played in a few countries isn’t it? You’d be better off making it about real football. The round ball version. That would have a broader appeal. Why not make him a Manchester United fan? They’re a global brand now.’

‘Because that’s not the way it was. Everything you’re suggesting has nothing to do with what really happened. I can’t change the facts.’

‘What facts? It’s fiction, you can write whatever you want. As long as it’s what readers want too. If you want to make a saleable product then think about your target audience. Look, how about this - would you be open to workshopping the story with a small focus group?’

‘Creation by committee? Dumbing down to the mainstream? Taking away the quirks that make it unique? I don’t think so.’

‘Then I really can’t help you.’

‘Let’s wrap it up then, Richard. You want me to change Iolango from a cockroach to a kitten, dump the heavy rock for show tunes, and make Freya Italian. You want to change it from a creation with quirks and the ring of truth into a bland product with mass appeal. And you’re only on chapter six. Forget it.’

I walked away from Richard’s office and decided to pack it all in. The encounter was only the latest in a long line of obstacles in the quest to sell the book and its music. It was clear the thousands of hours it had taken to create them had been largely in vain. So I quit, got a job, got back with Sandra, and we took out a joint mortgage on a house in the Blue Mountains.

Sandra was the yin to my yang. The teasing yet warm-hearted pragmatist I’d lived with a while back, before going off to chase my dream. Mind you, she *did* leave me first.

Unlike me, Sandra was secure in the corporate world, a manager with a salary several times my own. A sensible girl, she’d set herself up with superannuation, health insurance, and all those other practical perks I’d missed out on in my risky life as a muso.

Although Sandra respected my artistic side, she did not approve of me spending thousands of dollars making albums that wouldn’t sell. When I’d taken that path instead of the mortgage she aspired to, it had put our relationship under a terminal strain.

It was my own fault. Sandra can’t really be blamed for turning her back on me and taking up with someone more suited to her station - a fellow executive from the corporate world. Yet as it turned out, the affair didn’t quite work out as she’d hoped. I don’t know the full story but it turned out the guy was a self centred workaholic who never had time to do with Sandra all the things she liked doing with me. So by the time I’d finished all my Vortex Winder adventures, she’d returned to her status as a single woman and replaced both of us with a cat.

It was the cat who got me. Finzi was a real charmer. Some cats are aloof, but Finzi was a grey haired, golden eyed purring machine. I met him the first time I called on Sandra, a couple of years after our break up. We were sitting around chatting in her flat and as I stood up to leave, Finzi literally jumped into my arms. As Sandra told me later, she saw this as an omen and it swayed her to thoughts of reconciliation.

It seems Finzi had a fine instinct for Sandra’s best interests. She trusted this and made good use of it. After breaking with the exec, Sandra had a string of suitors. But whenever she had a prospective new boyfriend, the litmus test always came when he had his first meeting with the cat. Finzi, circling sternly like a disapproving father, would check the guy out using

his impeccable feline radar - and woe betide the prospect if he didn't measure up. As soon as a guy walked in the front door, Finzi would sniff and stare at him with an air of the utmost suspicion. If Finzi turned his back on her date, Sandra took it as a bad sign. If Finzi actually sat between her and the date on the sofa, well, the fella may as well have walked out the door then and there. On the other hand, if Finzi gave his approval with a purr and the consent to be stroked, the guy had passed the test and was allowed back for another date.

This sort of vetting procedure had been going on for some time when I decided to look Sandra up for old time's sake. It had been a couple of years. I entered her unit and gazed at her with fond remembrance, settling back seamlessly into the domestic scene. Almost without thinking, I began stroking the cat. The green eyed charmer at once set his purring machine in motion and blessed me with a lap-sit as I sipped a cup of tea. A light bulb went on in Sandra's eyes at this point, though I didn't know why. I was simply glad to be back in her company. The cat added that note of warmth and a homely feel to the whole scene.

'So you *did* end up making your album,' said Sandra. 'How'd it turn out?'

'Great. I'll give you a copy.'

'I'll buy one, of course. What'd it cost you in the end?'

'About ten grand, all up.'

'Oh my God!'

'That's not much. The big bands spend half a mill.'

'And you got it all back?'

'Not even close. It's tough selling music these days. Nearly all the record shops have closed down. Haven't you noticed?'

'Now you mention it, I suppose they have. I wonder why.'

'The internet, of course. People stream or download their music now. Same with books. You can buy them cheaper on the net, so most of the bookshops have closed down too.'

'Right.'

'So here's me with impeccable timing putting out a book and a CD and nowhere to sell them.'

'There's a book too?'

'I was coming to that. It's mostly fiction, so don't get upset... but actually, you're in it.'

'Me?'

‘Under another name, of course. Nothing bad - you’re a likeable character. Well, apart from when you went to Melbourne and dumped me. That was in there - but I admitted it was my fault.’

‘Really Jimmy, if you were going to put me in a book, you might have let me read it first.’

‘I meant to. Anyhow, who cares? No one read it. This cat’s a champion. Where’d you get him?’

Sandra didn’t answer this. She seemed more interested in me, all of a sudden.

‘So what are you up to now, Jimmy, still playing music?’

‘Nah, forget it. All that work, thousands of hours, and for what? I’ve got a real job now. With a salary, holiday pay, sick pay, the lot. Might be normal for you but it’s a real novelty for me, believe me.’

‘You’ve really settled down this time? It’s hard to believe.’

‘Come on, I’m forty. I haven’t just thrown in the towel, I’ve thrown it out. You were right all along. A job, a mortgage? Bring it on.’

‘Are you sure, Jimmy? It’s weird seeing you like this. So if you’ve gone straight, I guess you’re married too.’

‘One of these days. Why not, if I meet the right girl? Well, great seeing you, Sandy.’

I stood up to take my leave and moved Finzi gently from my lap to the sofa - only for him to crouch and take a giant leap right back into my arms! I found myself clutching the cat and laughing in delighted surprise. Sandra too was smiling, for her own reasons. You can guess the rest. It was only a matter of time before our romance was back on the table and we’d taken out a mortgage on a house in the Blue Mountains.

So, between the efforts of Richard the agent and Finzi the cat, Sandra and I were rejoined in holy de facto matrimony and I became a normal person at last, living a simple life in the unwild west for evermore.

Or so I supposed.

## 15

### Politics and Art

Now I'm going to get a bit more controversial.

One of the most disturbing trends of our time is the rise of censorship. A few decades ago, this was associated with right wing conservatives, Christian fundamentalists, and the like. It's now almost solely a feature of the 'progressive left.'

A 1970s punk rocker said recently:

I never thought I'd live to see the day when the right wing would become the cool ones giving the middle finger to the establishment, and the left wing become the snivelling, self righteous ones going round shaming everyone.

He has a point. We live in the age of 'cancel culture,' which is the puritanical drive to destroy any artist or public figure thought to have the wrong views. It extends to banning books, songs, and TV shows, from past eras, which are seen as politically incorrect by today's standards.

The aim of this movement is to force everyone to accept a particular set of ideas, and to silence anyone who might question them.

My view is that censorship of free speech has no place anywhere near artistic or intellectual work. There is also far too much concern about whether certain groups or individuals might be offended by what someone says. Frankly, I am offended ten or twenty times a day by the ridiculous things people say, but that doesn't mean I want to shut down their free speech.

It is the job of artists and intellectuals to question social norms and beliefs, and to risk upsetting people. Cancel culture, however, is the attempt to enforce social norms and beliefs, and a forlorn quest to prevent anyone ever being offended.

I will never support a movement that endorses censorship. That this trait is now associated with the 'progressive left' is one of the main reasons I am no longer aligned with the left side of politics.

I now consider myself an independent, and I will speak the truth as I perceive it, regardless of what others may think.

When it comes to politics and art, we need to be far more open-minded, and include a diverse range of opinions. Not ‘diverse’ in the superficial sense of race and gender, but in the sense of allowing actual *differences of opinions*. We may not agree with someone’s views, but we should respect their right to have them.

With that preamble out of the way, I’m going to turn to some of my recent fiction, which does have a political element, and may be controversial to some. For that, I make no apology.

First, are the opening two chapters from *Conquest By Concept*, my most political work so far. *Conquest By Concept* is a novel about the ‘culture war.’ It’s the story of John Gilbert, an ordinary guy who is fairly mainstream. However, his girlfriend, Angie, is in Antifa and a left wing political activist.

Problems begin when John meets Edward Hall, a charismatic right wing speaker. Hall makes John question Angie’s politics. Soon, John can no longer tell which side is good or evil.

Caught in a political ‘love triangle’ between the far-left and right, John faces a choice. Will he stay true to Angie’s passionate progressive values, or can the seductive Edward Hall turn him to the dark side?

Yes, it’s another novel about turning to the dark side! But the fine line between good and evil is a recurring theme in my work.

Although this is my most political book and takes on serious subjects, I’m pleased to say it’s had a good reception so far. I thought the book might be too controversial for some, but the response has been good. Indeed, I’m going to include a few comments from readers:

- ‘I’m halfway through *Conquest by Concept* and I can hardly put it down. It’s brill! A breath of fresh air ramped up to a gale force wind.’ MG
- ‘Just sat down to start reading your book and ended up reading the first six chapters straight! Extremely good book!’ DB
- ‘I’ve just finished reading your book... Marvellous! Very big subject, very well addressed. I found it interesting and responding to a big challenge of our time.’ JM

For those who don’t know, the culture war is the bitter battle between the political left and right for control of the direction of western nations. This battle has raged since the 1960s, but

never more fiercely than in the last five years. Trump, Brexit, Antifa, Black Lives Matter, the far-right, far-left, refugees, fake news, feminism, men's rights, trans rights, race riots, climate change... it's all in *Conquest By Concept*.

The first two chapters are presented here. In chapter one, the main character, John, nearly falls victim to a misplaced Me Too allegation. In chapter two, he goes to one of Angie's Antifa protests against a right wing speaking tour.

*Conquest By Concept* is out now on Amazon <https://amz.run/4NdE>

## 16

### **Meditation Made Me a Fascist**

#### **Chapter One of *Conquest By Concept***

If you want to conquer evil, you have to understand it. To understand it, you may need to become it. When you become it, you may learn that evil was something different all along.

So, to the tale of how I became a ‘fascist.’ That’s a joke, by the way. I’m not a fascist, even if that’s what the Antifa called me when he tried to knock me out. Everyone seems to have gone mad these days. It’s now normal for complete strangers to attack each other in the street. I’m going to explain how we reached this point, or at least my own part in it.

For me, it all began that night I went to meditation class. It was a last minute decision to even show up. I hadn’t been to the Bronte Buddhist Centre for months. Too busy with work, study, and trying to live in harmony with Angie. That’s why a little inner peace was so badly needed. ‘You haven’t got time to meditate? You haven’t got time *not* to meditate.’ That’s what Dipak, the head Buddhist, used to say. Not that I was a Buddhist myself, I just liked to hang out with them sometimes.

So what started my turn to the dark side? It happened like this. I had dinner with Angie, drove to the centre, and parked my car. Then I meditated, came home, and went to bed. And if that lurid tale doesn’t lay bare the slippery slope to evil, nothing will.

Actually it was what happened the next day that did it. I got home mid-afternoon, slumped onto the couch, and heard my phone ring. It was Dipak - and he sounded weird.

‘John, we need to, uh, have a chat. Can you drop over for a few minutes?’

‘I just got home. What’s up?’

‘It’s a... um... a delicate matter.’

‘I can’t go out again now. Just tell me over the phone.’

‘It’s a bit awkward, to be honest.’

Dipak was starting to worry me. Clearly something was a big deal, but I wasn’t going to play guessing games. By the way, despite the fancy name, Dipak was a white Australian guy like me. His real name was Steve, but he changed it to Dipak when he became a Buddhist.

I sighed.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘whatever you’ve got to say, lay it on me.’

‘Alright. Is there something you’d like to tell me about... what happened last night?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Something you did that may have upset someone?’

Alarmed by his tone, I cast my mind back over the events of the night before, yet with no clue what he was on about. Then again, maybe I *had* done something offensive without realising. It wouldn’t be the first time.

‘Sorry, I’ve got no idea what you mean. Just tell me.’

‘OK then. Someone at the meeting last night... ’

There was a long pause.

‘Yes?’ I prompted.

‘Someone said they saw you... exposing yourself last night during the meditation.’

‘I’m sorry. What?’

‘Exposing yourself. During the meditation.’

The words finally registered.

‘Huh? What the hell are you talking about?’

I’m going to omit the next part of the conversation, as it would be in poor taste to start this story with a stream of profanities. Faced with such a bizarre accusation, you can’t really blame me. Still, it can be left out of the current account. Here’s a cleaned up version of what was said, and I’ll skip forward a bit.

‘I can’t believe you’re taking this seriously, Dipak. Do you really think someone’s going to go to the Buddhist centre, sit around in a circle with everyone else, and pull out his penis during the meditation? Do you realise how crazy that sounds?’

‘I know.’

‘Who would make such an absurd claim anyway?’

‘I’m not going to say who it was.’

‘So some nut job is allowed to destroy my reputation, and you’re going to protect *her*. It *was* a her, wasn’t it?’

‘I’m not going to reveal her gender.’

‘You just did. Jesus Christ!’

‘It’s a serious allegation and I’ve a duty of care to protect the victim.’

‘*I’m* the victim! I can’t believe we’re having this conversation. How can you possibly take this seriously?’

‘It is odd, John, I’ll admit. But why would she make such a story up? What would be her motivation?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not a psychiatrist. It must be this Me Too mania. I mean, of course I support the fight against sexual harassment. Who wouldn’t? But if this is what it’s come to, it’s turned into a damned witch hunt - and I ain’t no witch.’

‘I believe you, John. At least I want to. Look, can you think of anything that might have caused this person to make a mistake? Something she may have misinterpreted?’

The events of the previous night flashed before my eyes, like in one of those near-death-experiences you hear about. There I was hurrying to finish dinner with Ange. Then I pulled a pair of long trousers out of the wardrobe, squeezed into them, and drove to the centre.

I like to meditate sitting up, and I remembered putting a chair in the circle, moving one of the red yoga mats aside to make room. Soon after, a young woman I didn’t know came back from the bathroom and sat down on the mat I’d moved. She’d seemed to frown a little, which seemed of no account at the time.

As Dipak began leading the meditation, we tried to get comfortable so we could sit still for forty-five minutes. I’d found it harder than usual, realising as I struggled that I’d put on a couple of kilos since last year and the trousers were a bit snug. It’s harder to lose weight in your thirties. In search of a comfortable posture, I’d undone the top button and loosened the zipper... by about one centimetre. Two at most.

No. Surely it can’t have been that. Then again, what else could it be?

The flashback continued. The aftermath when Dipak went round the circle ‘checking in’ with everyone about how their meditation was. I’d said mine was fine! Then the girl who’d given me the stink eye when I moved her mat had declined to comment. There was a sort of weird vibe when she said it. Yes - it was definitely her who made the complaint.

I returned to the phone call.

‘Look, Dipak. I think I know what happened. I haven’t been in for a few months, right? You might have noticed I’ve put on a little weight.’

‘Well... er... maybe a little.’

‘So my pants were a bit tight and I undid the button and put the zipper down a centimetre. But how did this nut job turn that into me *exposing myself*? What the fuck, man!’

I would never normally have sworn while talking to a spiritual man like Dipak, but I was rattled.

‘I know who it was too,’ I said.

‘I’m not going to say who it was,’ Dipak replied.

‘It was the girl on my left.’

‘All I know is she was extremely upset. She came up to me after the meditation almost in tears.’

‘Call me heartless,’ I said, ‘but I don’t feel a great deal of sympathy. I mean, I go in there for a little peace of mind and this happens! It’s outrageous.’

‘Look, John, leave it with me. I’m going to have a word to the person who made the complaint. See if she might agree she could have been mistaken.’

‘Sure, Dipak. You do that.’

I hung up and swore loudly. Then I texted Angie, ‘You won’t BELIEVE what just happened!’ Still seething in righteous indignation, I was about to call her.

Then stopped.

My mind flew back to our conversation from last month during the Ford-Kavanaugh sexual assault case in America.

Some judge named Brett Kavanaugh had been chosen to head the US Supreme Court. Then a woman, Christine Blasey Ford, made an accusation he’d assaulted her at a party thirty years before, when they were both teenagers. Kavanaugh was President Trump’s pick for the Supreme Court, and some said Blasey Ford’s action was a political stunt to get at Trump. Others said it was a scandal that a possible rapist could be given the highest legal job in America. So, was Kavanaugh guilty? There was no real evidence either way. It was just another he-said-she-said.

The case was a big deal, especially with the recent Me Too craze about women being sexually assaulted by men in power. Even here in Australia it was all over the news. Angie and I were sitting there watching it on TV one night. Blasey Ford, a middle-aged blonde academic, was in the witness stand wearing her fragile, brave survivor look. Later it was Kavanaugh’s turn, his dignified features tarnished by anger under cross examination. I had my hand in the small of Angie’s back, and felt her body tense up when Kavanaugh appeared.

‘Look at that jerk,’ said Angie. ‘Sorry, frat boy. You don’t get to be supreme justice if you abuse women.’

Angie is Australian but has picked up American terms like ‘frat boy.’

‘You think he’s guilty?’ I said.

‘Look at him. He’s just the type.’

I stared at the TV and saw a middle aged white man. He could have been my dad - and I mean that in the same way Obama said Trayvon Martin could have been his son.

‘What about Ford?’ I said. ‘What’s her type?’

‘She’s one of us. All of us,’ said Angie. She raised her voice and addressed the TV directly. ‘We believe you, Chrissie!’

Angie stood up, as if roused to action. Even angry, she was still gorgeous. Petite, pretty, with short dark hair. She turned to look at me, wagging her finger like an enraged pixie who’d caught me stealing her brownies.

‘Why is this case still going? He’s guilty!’

I hesitated.

‘It’s probably just the lack of evidence.’

‘You can’t expect evidence after thirty-five years!’

‘I suppose they just want to make sure.’

She stared at me with sudden intensity. ‘You believe her, don’t you, John?’

As she stood looking down at me, I was overwhelmed by her elfin beauty. I wanted nothing more than to pull her down to simultaneously comfort and ravish her. Yet it was hardly the appropriate time for that.

‘Of course!’ I replied. ‘As a feminist, as a male ally, I believe her. But what if she’s made a mistake? Or... or remembers things different to what really happened?’

‘Why would Christine make up something like that?’

‘I’m not doubting her for a second, but I heard she’s a professor at a top university, and she wore a pussy hat in the women’s march against Trump.’

‘Fuck Trump,’ Angie said automatically, in the way some people say ‘Bless you’ after a sneeze.

‘Fuck Trump,’ I quickly echoed. ‘But maybe there’s some agenda there. You know, to get at Trump through Kavanaugh.’

‘There’s an agenda alright,’ Angie said darkly. ‘To push back women’s rights and ban abortion and contraceptives. They want to send us back to the fifties. Kavanaugh’s a Christian, you know.’

‘I see.’

‘Only a small number of rapes get reported, John. You know why? Because the victims have to go through another ordeal in the courts. It’s like a second rape. No woman should

have to do that, and it's about time we started believing survivors instead of violating them all over again.'

'Sure. I've got no problem with that. We should always believe women - and any man who's done nothing wrong has got nothing to worry about.'

I jolted back to the present. After this meditation incident, maybe I was Kavanaugh now. Instead of phoning Ange, I went to my laptop and Googled 'false accusations.' The search results were too general, so I tried 'false sex accusations.' This brought up quite a few cases.

I then searched for 'why we should believe women,' which brought up a lot of feminist blogs, yet also a video, which turned out to be some kind of satire about the Ford-Kavanaugh case. To my surprise, it seemed to be mocking women in general, and Ford in particular. As a male ally to feminism, this seemed jarringly misogynistic. Yet after the shock of Dipak's phone call, a part of me was newly receptive to seeing women treated as less than saintly, infallible beings.

A couple of lines in the video stand out, both of them voiced by women. 'Because my inability to get over a two second ass grab from thirty years ago makes me a strong woman,' was one. The other was, 'Because a man's right to due process is far less important than me showing I don't like rape, like, at all.' This was said in a foolish, vacuous tone of voice meant to represent people on social media. I laughed, then looked around guiltily in case anyone had heard me.

My phone beeped. *What's up?* Angie texted.

I was about to text her back when the phone rang. It was Dipak and he sounded relieved.

'John, I've had a chat to the person who made the complaint.'

'Did you tell her what I said?'

'She does allow for the possibility she may have made a mistake.'

'She's not a complete nut job then.'

'You've got to understand, John. Buddhism attracts some people who are deeply troubled, one way or another. Whatever happened last night to trigger this person has got nothing to do with you.'

I felt my anger rise.

'It bloody nearly *did* have something to do with me, though, didn't it? People have had their lives ruined by this sort of thing. I've nearly finished my teacher training. Before you

can even teach in schools, you need a police check to prove you can work with children. This rubbish could have ruined my whole career before it even started.'

'I know it's not fair.'

'I mean, look at you, Dipak. You've known me for years, but you were ready to believe her.'

'She was extremely convincing. She seemed so sure.'

'I take it back then - she *is* a complete nut. Anyone who thinks a guy is going to sit around in a meditation circle and pull out his penis needs her head read.'

'We should really try to sympathise. This person has no doubt been abused in the past.'

'What's that got to do with me? Sorry, but I'm not going to be collateral damage to whatever trauma she's been through. Don't expect to see me at meditation for a while. I'm going to stay as far away from this person as possible.'

'I want you to feel welcome back anytime. We want it to be a safe space.'

'If you keep people like her away, it might be.'

After our chat finished, I texted Angie.

*Forget it. Just a mix up. See you when you get home.*

I shuddered and sank back onto the couch, hoping that would be the end of it - and in one way it was, and in another way, it was only the beginning.

## Angela's Antifa

### Chapter Two of *Conquest By Concept*

I got home the next afternoon to find a posse in the living room. For a second I thought they were there for me, but it was just Angie and a few of her student pals.

As usual, I had a sense of being the 'older guy,' barely visible, but given some substance as Angie's boyfriend. I was thirty-five, for Christ's sake. Resisting the urge to greet them with a facetious 'hello fellow kids,' I sat down in an armchair. Some of them were wearing black masks, slipping them on and off their faces as if trying them on for size.

'Why didn't you tell me it was fancy dress?' I said.

The remark drew no response. There was a strangely solemn air to the little gathering.

'Why the long faces?' I persisted. 'Seems more like a wake than a party.'

'Tonight's the Nazi rally,' said Angie. 'I told you ten times already.'

That explained the masks. Angie's Antifa comrades were suiting up for combat. Antifa, the anti-fascist group dedicated to fighting the new wave of right wing extremism.

'Oh yeah - the rally.' I raised a fist. 'Bash the fash.'

Angie gave me a terse look. My jokey tone was only meant to cover social awkwardness, but perhaps it was coming off as mockery. I quickly moved the conversation on.

'Who is it again?'

A young guy in a Che Guevara t-shirt answered. Leon, I think his name was.

'See for yourself,' he said, pointing at the flyers on the coffee table.

I picked up a flyer. It showed a bald, middle aged white man and a beautiful young blonde girl. The words 'Hate Speech is not Free Speech' were printed across the top.

'Stefan Molyneux,' I read out loud. 'And Lauren Southern.'

Angie cast a hateful glance at the images.

'Give me five minutes alone with that Nazi bitch. That's all I ask.'

'Me too!' I nearly said, but remembered just in time the lecture on 'rape culture' Angie hit me with last month. Those sort of old school innuendo jokes were on the nose these days.

Leon took the opportunity to showboat in front of my girlfriend.

‘You get her, Ange, and I’ll take Molyneux. If only the pussies didn’t hide behind security. They wouldn’t even say where their rally was ’til an hour ago.’

‘Then how can people attend? I asked.

‘They keep the venue a secret ’til the last minute,’ Leon replied. ‘Shows how tough they are.’

‘What are they afraid of?’ I said, rather surprised.

‘Us,’ said a blue haired waif, who looked about sixteen. ‘They want to deny us our free speech to protest their event. Typical fascists.’

I hesitated to reply. The girl, Nina, was one of Angie’s best friends. She was tougher than she looked and had a fiery temper.

‘I suppose they’ve got a point,’ I said slowly, ‘if you’re trying to shut them down.’

‘They shouldn’t be here in the first place,’ Nina snapped. ‘New Zealand kicked them out, why can’t we? If only we had a strong leader like Jacinda Ardern instead of the pathetic racist government we’ve got here.’

I picked up the flyer and scrutinized it.

‘So they’re Nazis, are they?’ I said. ‘What have these people done?’

Angie snorted.

‘What *haven’t* they done? They’re Islamophobic, misogynist, racist. Did you see what Lauren Southern was wearing when she got off the plane? An *It’s OK to be white* t-shirt. Disgusting.’

I stared at her blankly for a moment.

‘Er... yeah. So what are you guys gonna do?’

‘We’ll meet up in town with everyone else, then stalk the venue and call out the lowlifes going inside. A few of us have got tickets to get in so we can really fuck those guys up. Anyhow, you’re coming, aren’t you?’

Angie stared at me with those big brown eyes. I looked away.

‘I would but I’ve got that assignment due Monday.’

‘Do it tomorrow. This is important.’

I paused. Staying in good with Ange was always a priority. I was still dreading the thought of her hearing about what happened at meditation, even though I was innocent. Better not push my luck. Besides, there was no way I could knock her back in front of her Antifa pals.

‘Alright, I’ll go.’

Angie took my hand.

‘Maybe you can do the movie with Leon.’

‘What movie?’ I asked.

Angie gave the flyer a withering look.

‘The bitch has made some propaganda film about South Africa. Probably wants to bring back apartheid. Can you believe it?’

‘How can they?’ I said. ‘South Africa’s majority POC, isn’t it?’

POC means *people of colour*, if you don’t know.

‘Like it always was,’ said Angie. ‘That’s imperialism for you. Ten percent of the population and they think they can run the country. We’ve got two tickets to the film, so someone has to go in and disrupt it.’

‘What do they have to do?’

‘Fuck them up, one way or another. Yell out. Get into the projection booth and smash the equipment. Whatever resistance you can come up with.’

I frowned.

‘Geez, I don’t think I can smash the equipment. Bit extreme, isn’t it?’

Angie rolled her eyes.

‘Yeah, like apartheid isn’t extreme or anything.’

‘If I get arrested, that means a criminal record. It might stop me working in schools.’

‘For stopping Nazis? That should get you *more* work not less. You *should* be teaching kids to oppose fascism.’

‘If I heckle and boo, will that do?’

Angie turned away with a disappointed look. ‘You up for it, Leon?’

‘Hell yeah. I’m a-gonna punch me some Nazis!’

‘There’s two tickets so someone has to go with you.’

She looked around the group. A young Somali woman raised her hand.

‘Not you, Bilan,’ said Angie. ‘I don’t expect a woman of colour to sit through that white supremacist filth.’

She looked round the room once more, until her eyes settled on me.

‘Looks like you’re it, John.’

I raised my hands in surrender.

‘Fine - but what will the rest of you do?’

‘We’ll be outside confronting the scum going into the show.’

‘Won’t they be at the movie?’

‘No, that’s just a warm up. The main event is Southern and Molyneux giving a lecture about their racist crap. As soon as the film’s finished, come and meet us outside and we’ll try and stop people going in.’

We picked up the train at Bondi Junction. Angie spent most of the trip texting, probably liaising with other members of Antifa heading to the rally. I spent the trip staring at Ange. It was kind of pathetic, really. I was like one of those teenage girls who writes her boyfriend’s name in her diary. *John Gilbert plus Angela Gardiner*. Not that I ever called her Angela, although I might on our wedding day, if that ever happened. Certainly never Angel. She might have punched me. But definitely Ange or Angie, as the mood took me. As she tapped messages into her phone, I sat by her side, staring at her impossibly cute features and dreamy creamy complexion, dark brown hair in a pixie cut, and cherry red lips. Yes, I was definitely one of those pathetic teenage girls.

She caught me, and laughed.

‘What are you staring at, you old perve?’

I laughed too, a little too loud. Yes, I was ten years older. So what? It was perfectly normal for a guy to date a younger woman. Ten years was nothing. When she turned forty, I’d only be fifty, and our kids would be in school.

I checked out my own reflection in the train window. Not bad, not bad at all. Not totally tall, dark, and handsome, but at least tallish, darkish, and handsome-ish. Conventional good looks - nothing wrong with that. I’d thought of getting a tattoo, but nah. It would look try-hard. I was a solid 7.5. Good enough. Yeah, Ange was a 9, but so what? It would even out over time. I gazed at our combined reflection. We looked good together, dammit. A handsome couple. Anyone would have thought so.

The sign for Town Hall station appeared.

‘Come on, John,’ said Ange. ‘Let’s go.’

We walked the few blocks to Darling Harbour. The first surprise was the size of the venue. The Convention Centre was no shady dive, but a modern glass-fronted building in the centre of town, and on the harbour to boot. Whoever was coming to this meeting, it looked like we weren’t dealing with the back street fascists.

‘Who knew there were so many Nazis in 2018?’ I said to Ange, walking beside me.

The second surprise was the number of cops. There must have been thirty or forty of them spread out around the entrance to the Convention Centre. There were also quite a few Antifa keeping an eye on the joint, clustered in groups a little further back. As for the people

attending the event, those who were here for the propaganda film had already begun filing into the venue. Some had their heads down, aware they were under scrutiny. Others strode ahead, wilfully defiant.

Angie's crew had already masked up, but as my brief was to infiltrate the movie, that didn't apply to me. Angie came up and slipped the film ticket into my hand. She gave me a kiss on the lips, and with the romantic exhortation to 'Fuck them up, babe,' sent me on my way.

I joined the back of the line and began walking towards the entrance. As the line progressed, I was suddenly aware that to the watching Antifa, I must now look like one of the enemy. There were many more Antifa present than the handful we'd travelled in with, and most of them didn't know me. Realising this, I turned to the crowd with a cheeky wink as if to tip them off about my true allegiance. When this seemed to inspire a low rumble of anger, I put my head down and hastened through the glass doors and into the venue.

Once inside, I checked out my fellow filmgoers. They were mostly white and male, but with a scattering of women too. We took the escalator up a level to the main auditorium, a spacious arena which could have easily seated a few thousand. There were only a few hundred here now, although numbers would swell for the speeches to be held after the film.

Leon and I went to opposite sides of the auditorium, working on the theory that yells from each side would create the illusion of a bigger protest. We agreed that half an hour or so into the film, Leon would start chanting slogans, and I would immediately join in from my side, possibly also making an assault on the projection room itself with the hope of stopping the screening. Yet as I settled back in my seat, I decided projector smashing was out of the question. Some loud yelling should be enough to show Ange I'd 'done my bit' to stop the march of white supremacy, after which I'd beat a hasty retreat and rejoin the comrades outside.

The film began and my eye was drawn to the evil Lauren Southern herself. *What a doll*, I thought, before quelling the shameful sexual objectification from my mind. Still, there was no denying her beauty. How could it be that a maiden so fair was infected by the curse of fascism?

Southern started by giving a brief history of South Africa. In truth, she was less arrogant than I'd imagined. I'd expected a smug supremacist. Then again, this was a propaganda film, and no doubt she'd been told to tone it down so as to draw in the gullible.

As for the film itself, it was mainly Southern interviewing local South Africans, mostly whites, and a few token people of colour. Again, I was a little surprised. I'd always had an image of white South Africans as aloof imperialists, yet these people seemed like decent folks. Given that most of them were farmers, this wasn't really a representative sample. And, to be honest, the tale they told *was* a little harrowing.

Southern's film, *Farmlands*, was about the plight of white South African farmers. The claim was that since Nelson Mandela's ANC party came to power in the 1990s, conditions had declined for the white population. Now, with Mandela's relatively benign influence gone since his death, hostility to whites had escalated. Land owned by whites was being reclaimed by force, and even the black government itself seemed on the point of making this legal. More shockingly, there had been several - perhaps many - cases of white South Africans being murdered on their own farms by blacks out to avenge the apartheid years and reclaim the land in the name of justice. Or so the film claimed.

Southern did one interview with a blonde lady farmer who described, in graphic detail, how her own father had been viciously murdered by intruders in the very living room where they were now speaking. All the while I was trying to manage my surprise, telling myself this was nothing but propaganda. Yet the woman seemed authentic. Shortly after, there was another interview, this time with a black government official who said land repossession would soon be a legal right.

I was speculating that Southern had paid some poor wretch from Soweto a few dollars to perform this fictional scene, when there was a commotion on the other side of the theatre. My comrade, Leon, no doubt thinking along the same lines as myself, had risen to his feet and was creating a ruckus with a chant of defiance.

Fascists, go away  
Come again no other day  
Hate speech, spreading fear  
Nazis are not welcome here

I was about to join in, but was stalled by the chorus of boos from the crowd on Leon's side of the room. Truth be told, I was reluctant to go up against a roomful of racists on my own. I could make out Leon scuffling with a couple of attendees, and it wasn't long before security

seized him and evicted him from the theatre. To his credit, he continued to chant as he was dragged away.

I opened my mouth to take up where he'd left off, then stopped. After what had happened to Leon, what would be the point? Perhaps I could do more good as an observer, assessing the propaganda film and reporting back to Ange later that night. I settled back in my chair.

The rest of the film was a grim tale of a country in danger of falling into civil war. When Mandela had come to power twenty years before, we'd heard talk of a rainbow nation and a new age of racial harmony. If you believed this film, it was nothing of the sort. The white South Africans seemed to hide behind walls, in the city or on their farms, and the murder rate was as high as anywhere in the world. What had happened to Mandela's rainbow nation?

I walked out of the theatre in a pensive mood, intending to meet up with Ange and the rest of the crew. I joined the other filmgoers and began filing out of the building. As we got near the glass exit doors, it was clear the size of the crowd had swelled considerably. People who had showed up to hear Southern and Molyneux speak were milling around near the entrance, and the numbers of Antifa had also risen. The mutual hostility was palpable.

I once read a book called *Legends of the Firm*, about football hooligans. It was a bunch of interviews with members of the 'firms,' as they called their gangs, of which there was one for each football club. Apparently, violence was some kind of bizarre hobby for them. Standard procedure was rival firms setting up some kind of 'gentlemen's agreement' whereby they'd meet up before or after games to beat the crap out of each other. These clashes could be between rogue units of five or ten thugs from each firm, right up to full scale battles with hundreds on either side.

That's what it was like tonight. Antifa was on one side, most of them wearing their anonymous black masks, and the fascists here to attend the meeting were on the other. It seemed about to boil over at any minute.

And it did. Just as I cleared the glass exit doors, fighting broke out some twenty metres to my left, the very direction in which we were moving. I resolved to press on, hoping to meet up with Ange and her crew somewhere among the throng. As it happened, there was little choice due to a surge in the crowd behind me. Within a few seconds I found myself spat out of the line into a little laneway with about five of my fellow filmgoers. As bad luck would have it, the space was filled with ten or fifteen masked Antifa, who immediately set their sights on us.

'There they are!' one of them yelled.

Realizing my predicament, I raised both my hands and my voice.

‘Wait! I’m one of you guys!’

A burly, masked Antifa laughed at me.

‘Bullshit. I saw you go inside. Let’s see you wink now, you fucking Nazi!’

‘What! I’m Angie’s boyfriend, you fool. She’s high up in Antifa. Give me a second and I’ll phone her.’

I pulled out my phone and tried to dial Ange but the Antifa guy knocked it out of my hands with a violent swipe.

‘What the hell’s wrong with you?’ I said, now more angry than afraid. To which he replied - and I’ll never forget this -

‘What’s wrong with *you*, you white cunt?’

On impulse, I reached out and grabbed his mask, ripping it away from his face. He was whiter than an albino’s ghost. I looked round the group and saw the skin showing, up above their masks. They all were.

Then it was on. The Antifa dude threw a right hook at me, which I just managed to avoid. The rest of his masked mates joined in, fighting the half dozen filmgoers who’d been spat out of the line with me. The next minute was a chaotic mess of punches, kicks, oaths, and cries of pain. I’m no brawler but was surprised to find that cometh the hour, cometh a capacity for self defence previously unknown. I landed a blow on the face of my assailant, who went down hard. Yet just as I was standing over him in an uneasy haze of triumph, disgust, and adrenaline, I felt a surge of pain from a blow to the back of the head, and my consciousness went out like a light.

### **Chapter Three of *Conquest By Concept* (excerpt only)**

I woke up with a headache and two guys standing over me. There was a tall, gangly fellow, and a thickset stocky one. I made a weak attempt to snap back into fight mode, then realised I was no longer in the street. It looked like some kind of cheap hotel room. I was lying on a tatty old couch at the side of the room.

‘Take it easy,’ the taller guy said. ‘Don’t try to get up.’

‘What happened?’ I said.

‘Fucking Antifa,’ the stocky one replied. ‘Lucky for you our hotel was only a couple of blocks away. You can crash with us, but you’d better stay here. We’re going back to the show.’

Realisation dawned.

‘So you guys are from the Nazi rally.’

The tall guy laughed.

‘The Nazi rally? Yeah, just like you, mate. Are you OK? You were out cold.’

I tried to stand up and winced. The guy put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me gently back down on the couch.

‘Better sit this one out, old boy.’

A thought occurred to him.

‘Hey, give us your ticket. I know someone who needs one. May as well use it.’

I felt a rise of panic. When they found out I had no ticket to the event, my cover could be quickly blown. I sat up and went through the motions of searching my pockets.

‘Oh no. I must have dropped it in the fight.’

‘Never mind,’ he said. ‘Come on, Davo, let’s go.’ He gave me a backwards glance. ‘See you later.’

I lay on the couch for a few minutes. When the two Nazis didn’t return, I got up and made a cautious inspection of the room. Despite its cheap look, it was quite spacious, almost like a living room. Two single beds on one side; the couch on the other, and a table and chairs in the middle near the door.

The room itself was on the second floor above street level. I looked down and saw traffic and a few pedestrians. I tried the door, half expecting my new friends to have locked it from the outside, but it opened easily onto a hallway and a flight of stairs leading back to the street. I was about to make a hasty exit when it occurred to me I’d have to head back to the rally to meet Ange. Having been knocked out once, going back to a riot wasn’t an appealing prospect.

What then - go home? It would look a bit weak if Ange came back and found me home in bed, having bailed out of the fight. Maybe I should stay where I was. Hell, this might even be a happy accident. I’d managed to infiltrate the enemy’s camp without even trying. What if I stayed for a while, got talking to them, and found out their plans? Acting as a double agent, I could eavesdrop on their white supremacist talk and win big points with Ange when I

reported back to her with the lurid details. If nothing else, it would make a great war story and put Leon's film arrest in the shade.

Then again, facing up to these fascists wasn't very appealing either. If I gave myself away somehow, they could murder me in this room and no one would ever know. To make matters worse, my head was still aching from the blow. I decided to lie down for a few minutes and think it over.

I sank back onto the couch and closed my eyes. I must have dozed off because the next thing I heard was the sound of a key in the door, as the two white supremacists came inside. The taller guy led the way, followed by the stocky one holding a carton of beer. As soon as they were inside, he placed the carton on the floor, relieved at laying his burden down. He tore open the top of the box, took a bottle for himself and handed one to his colleague. Then, catching sight of me, he gave me a bottle too. Not knowing what to do, I sat up and accepted the beer, then took a big swig to settle my nerves.

'How you doing, mate?' said the taller one. 'On the mend?'

To read the rest of the book, *Conquest By Concept* is available on Amazon here <https://amz.run/4NdE>

## **The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club**

The second controversial excerpt is from ‘Marla Okadigbo,’ a novella that appears in *The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club*. A novella is a short novel. Perhaps one day I’ll publish Marla as a stand-alone book. I’ve seen shorter novels! The story is in ten parts, and just part one will be given here.

‘Marla Okadigbo’ was first published in 2018. For better or worse, subsequent events have made it even more relevant.

## Marla Okadigbo

### Part One of Ten

The author, Winkler Jones, woke up one day to find his website had vanished. He rang his agent, Steve Cassel, who admitted he'd taken the site down but refused to say why - at least on the phone. If Jones wanted an explanation, he'd have to go to the office in person. It was with some annoyance, then, that Winkler found himself forced to take the train to New York.

Winkler fumed at home for a while, deciding not to go. Then he changed his mind and fumed for most of the train trip from New Jersey. Finally, he fumed a little more as he marched into the office of the Steve Cassel Literary Agency. He didn't bother to say hi.

'This had better be good, Cass. I'm on a deadline and you make me come into the city. We could have done this on the phone, couldn't we?'

'Sure, Wink. We *could* have, but whether we *should* have's another story.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, just a little rule I live by. Never say on the phone - or in email - what you wouldn't want printed in *The New York Times*.'

Winkler sat down, crossed his arms, and faced his agent over the desk.

'So, what's up?'

Cassel stared at him, his expression bland. Although both men were in their thirties, Cassel looked twenty years older. With his elegant attire, the bespectacled agent had the look of mature respectability. Winkler, however, would look boyish into his fifties. Both appearances were useful illusions. In private, Cassel dropped the mask and spoke like the hustler he was. Still, his relationship to Winkler was avuncular. Today, and not for the first time, he found himself in the guise of a prudent uncle scolding an errant nephew.

'How many times have I told you to watch your words?'

'Who did I offend this time?' said Jones. 'Was it something I said?'

'Something you wrote, actually - on your blog. That's why your website's 'down for maintenance' until we sort this out.'

'That bad, huh?'

Winkler did a quick mental scan of recent blog topics: PC Halloween costumes; the state of modern pop music; people who like things ‘ironically.’ They weren’t that bad, surely.

‘I give up,’ he said. ‘What was it?’

‘Your books of the month.’

Winkler read a book every week, then at the end of the month, posted his thoughts in short, pithy reviews. Knowing how much work went into writing, he always tried to be complimentary. But the exercise would have little worth if he did not also venture a little criticism.

‘What did I say?’

Steve Cassel swivelled round to his computer screen and pulled up Jones’ blog entry that he’d saved.

‘Let me refresh your memory. I’ll read it out loud.’

### ***The Handmaid’s Tale*, by Margaret Atwood**

First published in 1985, this piece of oppression-porn is making a comeback. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, a societal breakdown has stripped women of all rights. In some unspecified near-future, women have been reduced to a childbearing role and are subject to full male control.

Thirty years after publication, you have to wonder why the book is so popular. But with Third Reich Feminism’s campaign to persuade Western women they’re more oppressed than ever, it may have been taken for a work of documentary.

Jokes aside, the book is really a work of naked misandry. It’s based on the paranoid belief that men, given half a chance, are eager to put women into a state of slavery. Thus, collectively and individually, men want nothing less than complete control of women. This is shown in the pivotal scene at the point of societal collapse - shown in a flashback - where the handmaid’s partner, Luke, is secretly pleased to gain power over her.

This may strike a chord with those who think oppression lurks behind every friendly face, and indeed, the new TV series version has found a ready audience. I

haven't seen it, but caught the previews, which feature women in identical nun outfits - albeit in a sexy shade of red. It seems the Handmaid girls aren't oppressed enough to go 'full-burka,' but are still allowed to flaunt their faces. (Has anyone made the connection with Islam, or is that off limits?)

Atwood is a good writer - and I'm a fan of *The Blind Assassin* - but *The Handmaid's Tale* shows a preoccupation with the past. Why not imagine a better future full of empowered women? Oh wait, we already have the new *Star Trek*, the new *Star Wars*, the new *Dr Who*, and umpteen female superheros kicking the asses of men worldwide. Margaret, perhaps it's time to update your tale and give the handmaid some superpowers to lead a *Hunger Games* type revolt to a new matriarchal Utopia.

In the meantime, it's only a matter of time before an African-American author pens a dystopian tale in which slavery is restored. It's *gotta* be a hit. Right?

Steve Cassel swivelled back around to face his client.

'Well?' he said.

'Hmm - not bad. I think I got it about right. Don't you?'

'What were you thinking, Winkler? In three hundred words, you've probably managed to piss off the feminists, Muslims, and Black Lives Matter.' Cassel shook his head. 'And no doubt goddamn Margaret Atwood as well!'

Jones affected a look of innocence.

'What for? What did I say?'

'Cut the crap, Wink. You know very well what you said - and it's not on. Not if you want a career. You hear me?'

'Gee, Steve. Everyone's so sensitive these days.'

'There are some things you can't say anymore.'

'This is America.'

'Don't give me the this-is-America routine. You know you can't say anything to piss off the liberals these days.'

'Wait - *I'm* a liberal. Well, basically, anyhow.'

‘Then what are you doing taking pot shots at feminists?’

‘All I said was they’re a bit paranoid if they think men are trying to turn them into handmaids.’

‘You wrote Third Reich Feminism.’

‘Did I? Must have been a typo. I meant Third Wave Feminism.’

‘Sure you did, Wink. I guess that crack about the burka was a typo too.’

‘Well - a bunch of women wearing identical nun outfits and veils. What do you *expect* me to say?’

‘I expect some common sense, that’s all. Maybe you’d better lay off the book reviews for a while. Or at least run them by me first.’

‘Like that, is it? I won’t bother.’

Suddenly, Cassel thumped the desk.

‘For fuck’s sake, Wink, why can’t you just do the Trump-bashing like everyone else! What’s so hard about that?’

‘I could, but what’s the point? You know I hate clichés.’

‘At least people would know your heart’s in the right place.’

Jones looked unenthused.

‘I can see the headlines now,’ he said. ‘Artist boldly goes where five thousand artists have gone before by slamming unpopular president.’

Cassel shot him a suspicious look.

‘Don’t tell me you support him?’

‘Steady on, Cass, I don’t support any of them. I’m an independent.’

‘You’ve got to watch yourself these days. It’s all about perceptions now - and if you screw up, you’ll be all over Twitter for the wrong reasons. And if you’ve got any hopes of Hollywood ever adapting your work, forget it. You’ll be blacklisted - and nothing personal, but if you’re blacklisted our contract’s not worth a pinch of poodle poop.’

Winkler raised his hands.

‘Alright, alright. Wipe my review.’

‘Good man,’ said Cassel. ‘I’ll do that today, then put your site back up.’

Winkler yawned.

‘Jesus Christ. We really could have done this over the phone. Can I go now?’

‘Wait. There’s something else.’

An odd look came over the face of Steve Cassel, literary agent. A strange, furtive look. He left his desk, opened his office door to check for eavesdroppers. Then, satisfied, he returned to his seat.

‘I gotta tell you, Wink, your review wasn’t all bad. In fact, you’ve given me an idea.’

The literary agent glanced at his computer screen once again, then read the last paragraph aloud.

‘In the meantime, it’s only a matter of time before an African-American author pens a dystopian tale in which slavery is restored. It’s *gotta* be a hit. Right?’

He turned back to Jones and looked him square in the eyes.

‘So how about it?’

‘I don’t follow you, Steve.’

‘The slavery book. When are you going to write it?’

Winkler Jones said nothing for a bit, then laughed.

‘Get outta here.’

‘Look, you said it yourself. It’s only a matter of time before somebody writes a book like that. Why not you? Are you going to let someone else steal your idea? Publishing’s all about timing, getting in ahead of the trend. Racism’s a hot topic right now, thanks to Black Lives Matter protesting against white cops killing black teens.’

‘You *are* serious! Looks like it’s time for me to give *you* a reality check. I can’t write a book like that cos I’m white. I’d get smashed.’

Cassel made a wafting motion with his right hand, as if batting away a fly.

‘Of course it wouldn’t go out under your name. We’d give you a pseudonym.’

‘Really?’

‘And a black persona.’

‘A whole fake identity?’ Winkler rubbed his chin. ‘But what about publicity, interviews, book signings?’

‘Who needs publicity when Black Lives Matter’s making such a noise? Every time a white cop shoots a black teenager, they go crazy about racist oppression. They’ll do all your press for you. All we have to do is wait for the next time some cop caps a black kid and away we go.’

‘Wow, Cass. I’ve gotta say you’re blowing my mind. You want me to write a dystopian science fiction tale where slavery’s restored and the negro’s back under the white man’s thumb again. And you think the Black Lives Matter movement will be on board with that?’

‘For Christ’s sake, Wink, if *The Handmaid’s Tale* works for feminism, I don’t see why we can’t come up with our own book to highlight America’s oppression of the black man. But you’ve got to be quick, before someone else has the same idea. Why don’t you bang out a book proposal and I’ll shop it around? If we do it right, a decent advance isn’t out of the question.’

‘How much?’

‘I don’t know. Quarter-mill, maybe.’

‘Really?’

‘Then there’s movie rights. I’m telling you, the sky’s the limit.’

‘Hmm. Maybe you’re right. Tell you what, that sort of cash would get Sonia off my back. She’s been busting my balls for a while.’

Cassel stiffened, as if Jones had said something deeply offensive.

‘Let’s get one thing absolutely clear,’ he said, enunciating each word precisely. ‘If this project goes ahead, it is a matter of complete secrecy. One word to Sonia, or anyone else, and you’re a dead man.’

‘Whoa there. I’m not a complete dunce. I don’t exactly trust her myself these days. A bit of a payday, though, might smooth over the cracks in our relationship.’

Winkler Jones was silent for a while, focusing on the internal vision running through his mind. At last, he turned to face his agent and stuck out his jaw.

‘There’s one thing I want to get clear, Cass. If I do this, it’s not about the money. I just want to do my bit to highlight the plight of the black man in America today.’

‘And woman.’

‘Yeah, and the black woman. I want to do my bit for the cause of race relations, to stand up for the black men and women of America in their continual struggle against the legacy of slavery. And I’ll do that by imagining a world in which slavery is restored in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.’

‘That’s beautiful, Wink.’

‘The implication being, of course, that slavery really *does* exist even today. The chains may be invisible, but they’re there. They’ve just been internalised due to a racial hegemony which oppresses blacks systematically.’

‘Love it. I guess you can pull in the university crowd as well with that highbrow crap. Your book could become a mandatory set text. Hell - this is a home run for sure! Why don’t you write up a proposal right now so I can start pitching it?’

‘Can you give me a couple of days to brainstorm it? You know, just to be sure in myself I can pull it off?’

Cassel looked peeved.

‘There’s no time to mess about. It’s only a matter of time before someone else does it first. But you know, if you don’t think you can, maybe Cantor could do the job. After all, he’s black.’

‘Piss off! It was my idea.’

Jones suddenly shot his agent a look of suspicion.

‘Hey, wait a minute,’ he said. ‘Why didn’t you ask Cantor to write it anyway? He’d have a bit more credibility.’

The agent contrived a hurt expression.

‘Professional ethics, pal. It was your idea.’

‘Come on, Cass. I know you better than that.’

‘Alright, you got me. I did think of sounding him out but I didn’t think he’d go for it.’

Winkler Jones laughed.

‘Pitching slavery to a black man. Tough sell, eh. But old Cantor’s not seeing the big picture, is he? Well, I’ll take the job. Only by making racial oppression explicit can I show the racism that’s implicit right now.’

‘You got it, Wink. See - no one can write this stuff better than you. Now get the hell outta my office before I call the cops!’

*The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club* is available on Amazon here <https://amz.run/4Nd5>

## Hammer and Heat

*Hammer and Heat* was my first published book. It's a collection of ten short stories. My favourite is 'The Bishop, The Knight, and the Rookie,' but as that's the longest story in the book, the much shorter 'Fear of Sleep' is included here. It's a little experimental in style, and one reader commented that 'the sense of surrealism is overwhelming.'

*Hammer and Heat* came out under a pseudonym, 'John Silvern.' A well meaning but rather paranoid friend convinced me it was safer to publish under a pen name. Given my recent more controversial work like *Marla Okadigbo* and *Cultown*, she may turn out to be right! But really, it's hard enough already for writers to promote their books without the added confusion of using false names. Besides, I'm not going to hide my opinions. I'm going to speak my mind, and people can take it or leave it.

*Hammer and Heat* is currently out of print, with only a limited number of hard copies still available. One day, I might revise and republish it. Until then it's not available on Amazon and can only be ordered through my website <http://vortexwinder.com>

## 21

### Fear of Sleep

Once upon a girl there was a time. Nestled under the bedclothes, she dreamt she was flying round the world in one of those old aeroplanes from the early twentieth century. As she looked down at the chiselled coastlines far below she could hear the plane's engines droning, but woke to find it was only the sound of her cat purring. The cat had tucked itself around her neck like a muffler. The girl, whose name was Joanna, pushed the cat away. She returned to her slumber, then woke with a start, for she remembered it was her birthday and she was seven years old.

She bounded downstairs at once. Her parents were already awake, and smiling at her from the breakfast table. 'Happy birthday, Joanna,' said her mother. 'I'm glad today's finally here after all the fuss you made about going to bed last night.'

'We told you,' said her father. 'The sooner you go to sleep, the sooner the next day comes.'

But Joanna was only half listening. 'I've already forgotten yesterday,' she said, 'I only care about today. Are those for me?'

'Of course. Do you want your presents before or after breakfast?'

'Before!'

Joanna was an only child, so she got lots of birthday presents. Like most children, she went in order of size, from biggest to smallest. When she came to the last one, it was a square object no bigger than her hand. She removed the wrapping paper to find a black case, and inside the case a beautiful and delicate wristwatch. Turning the watch around, she found there was an inscription on the back, but engraved in letters so small it couldn't be read with the naked eye. One of her other gifts had been a magnifying glass, and she used it to study the inscription, which said:

*There's no time like the present.*

'There's no time like the present,' Joanna repeated.

'And no present like the time,' said her father. 'Anyway, what *is* the time?'

‘It’s eight o’clock’.

‘Then as soon as you’ve had breakfast, better hurry off to school.’

‘Why do I have to go to school on my birthday?’

Her father shrugged.

‘It’s only for two hours in the morning, then the rest of the day is yours.’

Joanna complained for a moment, then got moving. She arrived at school at nine o’clock. When lessons began, she forgot everything else, so absorbed was she in history and music, science and literature. As an only child, she was also intrigued by her contemporaries in the class. The other students were strange to her, as she was to them. By ten o’clock her blonde hair had darkened to brown, but by eleven it had returned starkly to blonde. Every so often she loosened the watch band around her wrist, and remembered there’s no time like the present.

At eleven thirty, with fanfare and handshakes, the students said goodbye to school. It was time to get on with real life. What outlandish garb they wore as they departed the school gates, and what a strange dialect they spoke that had been taught in no classroom lesson.

Joanna bumped into her school friends Hugh and Carly on the way out. ‘Hey Jo,’ said Hugh. ‘Come for a fad.’

Joanna jumped into the car with Hugh and Carly, which sped off much too fast. They came to the edge of the wild woods, abandoned the car, and entered on foot. The woods were full of strange and exciting sounds, and although Joanna was frightened, she was drawn over the threshold. The three friends ran whooping like monkeys into the forest depths.

Dimly from childhood, Joanna remembered a story about a witch and a gingerbread house, but such nonsense was far behind her.

The three friends came to a pool in a clearing in the forest. ‘Try these,’ said Hugh, offering some black berries to the other two. They were sour to the taste but they ate them anyway. Then they shed their clothes and dived into the pool. Such a sense of vigour gripped them as they splashed about in their jungle paradise.

Finally they emerged from the pool and dressed, then walked deeper into the woods until they came to a field of poppies. A sudden drowsiness came over them. Unable to resist, Joanna and her friends lay down for a nap.

An inestimable time later she began to rouse, and through heavy lidded eyes saw her two friends also lost in slumber. Hugh was stirring, and Joanna felt suddenly afraid. She came to her senses.

‘Hugh, wake up! I’ve got to get home. It’s nearly one o’clock’, she said, looking at her birthday watch. ‘The day’s being wasted and there’s so much I want to do.’

But Carly could not be woken. No matter how much they called her name or shook her, she was lost in a dreamless sleep.

At one thirty, they arrived at Joanna’s house. The fresh farewell of the morning was a distant memory. By now, they had forgotten Carly, for one cannot live in the past. There’s no time like the present.

‘You look tired, Mother,’ she said.

‘It’s hard on my own,’ her mother replied.

‘I’ve got some good news,’ said Joanna, ‘Hugh and I are getting married.’

‘About time too, darling. I only wish your father was still here to give you away.’

The wedding took place at two o’clock. The sun had passed its zenith and begun the second half of its long journey. There were no children born that afternoon, but Joanna didn’t want to spend the day changing nappies. There was still a lot to be done. For one thing, the great monopoly game was about to begin in the village. Some people played the game, others sat around betting on the players. It was so absorbing, by the time she looked at her watch it was already five o’clock. Then Hugh had some bad luck. He got the ‘go to jail, do not pass go’ card, and was locked up for half an hour.

By the time he got out, shadows were lengthening and it was time to go home. When they returned to the house it was nearly dark. There were only a few lights on inside, and Joanna felt a sense of unease as she entered. Walking through the house she called out for her mother, but there was no reply. Her cries made hollow echoes in the empty rooms.

After their evening meal Hugh said ‘What shall we do now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Joanna answered. ‘Something gay, dancing perhaps. I hate the night. It’s so morbid.’

‘It’s a bit late for that,’ replied her husband. ‘I can hardly make it up and down the stairs. I think I’ll retire to my room and write my memoirs.’

‘Don’t leave me, Hugh. I don’t want to be left alone. Stay here and we’ll just talk.’

‘Maybe tomorrow.’

‘What is tomorrow? There’s no time like the present. That’s what my old watch used to say, the one I got for my birthday when I was a little girl.’

And with these words she saw that her watch was no longer upon her wrist. She’d noticed it becoming looser recently and had meant to tighten it. Perhaps it had fallen off in the

garden. She would have gone outside to look for it, but the pitch black of the night filled her with fear.

Where had the day gone? She could still remember the fresh immediacy of the morning, the way the swirls of frosty air had risen like wraiths from the ground, doing battle with the sun's warming rays. Now the sun was long gone. All had vanished - her parents, her classmates, her freedom - and she was left almost alone in a crumbling house.

In a panic Joanna went upstairs to make sure Hugh had not vanished too, and she was relieved to find him sitting at the desk in his room.

'Hello. Who is it?' he called out.

'It's me.'

'Who?' he said peering dimly through a haze.

'Joanna. Your wife!'

'Oh yes, I remember. How are you, my dear?'

'Awful. Have you finished your memoirs?'

'Yes. I can't think of anything more to say. Now, I'll just lie down for a little rest.'

'Don't do that.'

But he was already stretched out upon the bed.

'Don't close your eyes Hugh. Talk to me.'

'I'm just going to have a nap, then I'll be up and about. Why don't you have one as well?'

'It makes me angry. Why are the days so short? It's not fair. I don't want to go to bed. I want this day never to end.'

'Never mind my dear. I was reading something in the paper only this morning. Some scientists in America are working on an amazing new technique. Apparently they're going to extend the day so that it lasts for twenty-eight hours instead of twenty-four. Clever, don't you think?'

'That's no use to me. I want *today* to last longer, not some day in the future.'

'Patience, my dear, patience. The breakthroughs are sure to come. It's only a matter of time.'

'Time, time. Why do you tease me so?'

But Hugh had fallen asleep and she was alone in the empty house. As she opened her eyes wide, all the horrors of the dark pressed their faces against the windowpanes, and the creeping assassins of Morpheus closed in upon her.

## Cultown

*Cultown* is another novel dealing with the dark side of human nature. It's the story of Thomas Swan, a charismatic man who forms a cult called the Milinish. The cult starts in Australia but relocates to a small town in the US where Swan establishes his own mini-kingdom.

In writing about a cult, I wanted to avoid the usual 'victim tale' as might be told by one of the cult members. Instead, the book is narrated by Thomas Swan himself.

The story begins with Swan as a small time wannabe religious leader, after a mystical experience. When his views are mocked by a skeptical scientist named Rudolph C. Orantor, Swan loses his faith. Through an 'conversion' of sorts, Swan takes on some of Orantor's own beliefs and forms his cult, which has a mix of scientific and religious doctrines.

Later in the book, Swan and Orantor come face to face in confrontation, because *Cultown* is really about the clash between science and religion. I wrote the first version of the book while studying philosophy of science at university. I was interested in the battle between religious and scientific explanations of the world, and the extremism shown by both sides - for science too has its cultish aspects.

*Cultown* was written a full decade before *The Vortex Winder* and *The Maelstrom Ascendant*, but not published. Through writing the latter two books, I had become a better writer, so went back to *Cultown* and improved it from the original version. I also added another rock soundtrack album featuring twelve new songs which fit into the story.

*Cultown* may be a controversial book, but some readers might find it both provocative and entertaining. It's available on Amazon here <https://amz.run/4NdM>

The first chapter, is called 'Debunked.'

## Debunked

### Chapter One of *Cultown*

When they first called us a cult, it was an insult. Now I take it as a compliment. See? Even my enemies' barbs turn to roses. A cult, you say? Damn right we are, the best there ever was. We're the ultimate, the cultimate. And it's all thanks to me, the accidental messiah.

Yes, it is I, Thomas Swan. Accept no substitute. I've decided to finally tell the story of how I formed the Milinish, and the glorious debacle that followed. And why, you ask? I'm just sick of the lies. Not from me, for I value truth above all things. It's the lies of others. The press, the government, and the pathetic ex-members who were too gutless to face the apocalypse with us.

That's what hurts the most. You expect the tabloids to lie, that's what they do. It's the betrayal of old comrades that gets me. See, I heard there's another book about the Milinish set to come out. It's by a young fool named David McHugh who was only with us a few months. McHugh? More like McWho? I'm racking my brains just to see his face.

It's not hard to guess the sort of book it is. It'll be one of those bullshit exposés. You know, 'how I was brainwashed and victimised by an evil cult,' that type of caper. The really outrageous thing is the title. *Milinish: The Inside Story*. The inside story? This clown has the audacity to write the history of the Milinish when I, Thomas Swan, can't even remember him. You might as well get some faceless Nazi private off the Russian front to write the inside story of the Third Reich. What a joke! So look, people, if you want the real inside story of the Milinish, listen to the guy who created it in the first place - me.

A word of warning, though, it isn't a very nice story. But why should it be? This ain't Sophie's world! No, you're in Tom's world now and a twisted place that is to be sure. Still, the tale of the cult to end all cults is one that even the squeamish should hear. If there's a moral of the story for you surviving humans, it's to ponder the kind of spiritual climate in which something as mad as Milinish could arise in the first place.

Some will find this tale disturbing, others will find it amusing. Most of all, it's enlightening. Yet enlightenment comes at a cost. I had to steal your children to make you

listen to me, and they aren't coming back. No, the children are mine, and with the likely fallout to follow publication of this account, it's kinder to take them with me. With me? Where are we going then? Into the great void of non-being, the vast caverns of extinction that are the destination of all. One day you'll join us there.

Before we proceed, let us clear up the important matter of pronunciation. Come on, it's really not that hard. Once and for all, it's M'linish with the emphasis on the in. The first syllable is not stressed, it's just a short stab as in m'lord. Have you got that? It's not melon-ish, but mer-lin-ish. The name has no great meaning, it's just a corruption of the phrase 'my lineage' that struck me in an idle moment. When events took the surprising turn they did, I was stuck with it.

I am thirty-nine years old as I write this, and I was thirty-three when the Milinish began. Of my life before that time - school, family, work - I will not speak, but the press has already described me as a drifter who went from job to job after dropping out of uni.

Technically, they are correct, and so what? I may have rejected formal schooling, but I got my learning elsewhere. There's no denying I dabbled in many pursuits along the way, some noble, some nefarious, but wisdom was never gained by sticking to the straightest paths. I've been many things - artist, traveller, entrepreneur. Just before the Milinish, I was playing guitar in a rock band, but I won't go on about my earlier life here. Most of you humans are too self-centred to pay attention for more than two minutes so let's cut to the chase, which was about the time I wrote my first book.

Please don't think I have always been a cynic. When *Old Religion, New Science* came out, I was still a young man, full of the idealistic belief I had something important to give the world. The book was directly sparked, so to speak, by a mystical near-death-experience in my own home.

I was living alone in a one bedroom flat in Bronte, a beach suburb in Sydney, Australia. One fine morning I was about to have a blast on my electric guitar when I got a blast of a very different kind. When it comes to replacing frayed electrical cords, you really shouldn't procrastinate. *I'll do it next week*, I thought as I shoved the chord into the back of the amp and got the shock of my young life. It was very nearly over for Tom Swan right then and there. I copped a piercing dose of voltage and dropped my guitar.

With an agonised shriek, my consciousness fled from my body. Next thing I knew, I was rushing through space towards a vast fiery triangle out among the stars. As I neared the

triangle, a thousand voices and images reached me, all in an instant. Then there was an explosion of light and I was back in my body.

As I lay humbled on the floor of my little flat, a revelation came to me with complete certainty. I was an immortal soul who had lived before, I was divine, and after death I would return to my true home in the hereafter. I was not alone in this. In fact, every person alive was a spiritual being visiting the planet in physical form.

A profound cosmic awareness enveloped me. I felt the presence of all Earthly beings: the beauty, the hunger, and the love. If only everyone could share this awareness there would be an end to suffering. It was up to me to show the way. I'd use my spiritual vision to start a new science of mental health and unite the planet.

Now that I had the truth, it had to be communicated to the world at once. I stood up, walked to my desk, and immediately began to write my great book, *Old Religion, New Science*. It was the story of my life, my death, and my vision for humanity. What a glorious future awaited the world when it learned the truths gained from my near-death-experience.

How naive those hopes seem now, yet at the time there was no doubt about the importance of my revelations. Here, finally, was proof of life after death. I wrote the book in an extraordinary burst of creativity over seven days, working up to eighteen hours a day. In that unstoppable frame of mind, and using contacts gained during my time as an entrepreneur, I signed a deal with Millennium Books, a 'New Age' and self help publisher. Sure, I had to chip in for the costs, but so what? I gladly paid them extra just to hurry things along. Like a man inspired, I rushed through the publishing process until the book was out. Then, bristling with expectation, I returned to the solitude of my Bronte flat and waited for the book to sell and to change the world.

It did neither. To my dismay, my little work of genius sold barely a dozen copies. So to the twelve people who bought the book, thanks. To the rest of you, thanks also - without your stupendous apathy I would never have gone on to form the Milinish!

Wisdom comes with hindsight, however, and at the time I was aghast at the fate of my work. What use is it discovering profound truths if no one knows about them? The book sank without a ripple, although Millennium Books didn't seem to care. They assured me this wasn't unusual for a first time author and my second book would do better.

The reassurance meant nothing. It was clear the book was limping into oblivion, and with it the incisive wisdom of my vision. I can barely convey the sense of outrage that gripped me

as the book continued to be ignored. It was this emotion, however, that led me on a circuitous route to ruin and then salvation.

The turning point came one evening after I made a visit to Spiral Architect, a New Age bookshop in the city. This was several years ago, of course, when there were still a few bookshops around the place. Not that it did me much good, because clearly my work continued to be shamefully ignored. Not a single copy had been sold during the week since my last visit. What's more, the moronic look of the shop's customers made me want to grab a copy of *Old Religion, New Science* off the shelf and slap their stupid faces with it. But I didn't do that. Instead, I went straight to the nearest pub and got blind drunk.

God only knows what tirades of retribution the poor patrons had to put up with that night. I must have stepped over the line at some point, because through the blur of that evening I do recall getting thrown out. I stumbled into a taxi and ended up at Bondi Beach. The last thing I remember is hurling an empty beer bottle into breaking waves, and from there it's a blank.

I woke in darkness on the sand. The tide lapping at my ankles prompted me to seek higher ground. I limped up to the parkland above the beach and made a bed under a park bench, complete with newspaper for blankets. My last thought before falling back to oblivion was the realisation I'd become a living cliché.

If any joggers had spotted me the next morning they may have thought 'the apprentice winos are certainly getting younger.' Then they would have jogged by and got on with their smug, non-book-buying lives. Unfortunately for me, that was the high point of the day. It was all downhill from there.

The fact is a calamity was about to happen - but it was also a miracle from the Lord above. He truly moves in mysterious ways, for he spoke to me that day through a newspaper. That in itself was a minor miracle. Last century, the winos had it easy - there were papers everywhere. With everything online now, newspapers truly were thin on the ground these days. And yet the good Lord chose to speak to me through this antiquated medium.

It happened like this. As the violent rays of a new dawn began to wake me, I opened my eyes and wondered where the hell I was. My bedroom had certainly changed since the day before. Then it all came flooding back - the book, the pub, the waves, the whole debacle of the night before.

It seemed advisable to ease my way back to consciousness, one sense at a time. Let's see, there were five of them weren't there? Taste (ugh, dry mouth), touch (ugh, wet grass, hard ground), hearing (ugh - traffic). Three duds, better try sight. I decided to focus on the fine

print of the newspaper which had warmed me in the night. That way I'd be able to gently coax my awareness through the post-alcohol minefield of that morning.

My eye drifted over the front page. It was the usual rubbish - money, war, fear-mongering and the like. It was nothing but conflict - no wonder I never followed the news these days. But as I flicked through the rest of the newspaper, my eye was drawn to a small article at the bottom of page 13, I was stung into wakefulness by something amazing - mention of my book, the very book which had triggered the calamitous events of the night before.

Surprise turned to dismay when it became clear the mention was anything but flattering. The news item was headed 'Scientist Slams Dummies.' Some guy named Rudolph C. Orantor had chosen my book as an example of the growing number of non-scientific works masquerading as science. I learned that the full article appeared in the latest edition of *Real Science* magazine. Sickened and stunned, I went straight to a newsagent, and paid money to find my spiritual vision vilified in print. Here is the article in full.

### **Science: Dinkum, Dumb, and Dodgy**

**by Rudolph C. Orantor**

I am not the first person in recent years to lament the low level of scientific literacy in society, or the depiction of scientists in pop culture as either lunatics or socially inept nerds. But when a recent survey shows that over fifty percent of adults believe in some form of religious creationism, questions must be asked about the type of future we are creating for our children. Are they to inherit a world where astrologists are more valued than astronomers, and faith healers are preferred to medical practitioners? Whatever happened to modern science?

Somebody recently sent me a book which exemplifies the whole problem. Thomas Swan's *Old Religion, New Science* is the sort of pseudoscientific nonsense I would normally ignore, but the credence now given to such questionable publications forces me to examine it with a somewhat sterner eye.

Mr Swan claims to have ‘written this work in a burst of revelatory vision over a seven day period,’ causing one to wonder if he actually wrote it in six and took the seventh off as a day of rest. Whatever Mr Swan’s working methods, he advances some highly dubious claims. Not only does he purport to have survived death and found proof of reincarnation, he also implies possession of the full range of psychic abilities - precognition, clairvoyance and the rest of the usual suspects.

Unfortunately, Swan’s work demonstrates, by default, the strength of the scientific method. Where is the thought-out hypothesis tested under controlled conditions; the careful and cautious piecing together of the data; the cross referencing with previous findings in any area of study; the rigorous skepticism applied to one’s findings? More simply, where is the evidence? Not only does Swan apply no critical perspective to his ‘revelations,’ he fails to satisfy that small and inconvenient need for evidence in support of his extraordinary claims. All the reader gets are assertions, and it is with dismay that one realises most readers will accept these assertions as uncritically as they are given.

Is our species to revert to a Middle Ages mentality where charlatans rule the credulous? Are we, some time down the road, to face the prospect of Mr Swan’s ‘science’ being taught in schools? Are we ‘evolving backwards’? We, the science community, are at risk of becoming obsolete in a world that ever reaches for the quick fix, the easy answer. It is high time that not only do we collectively raise the public perception of scientists, but also the level of real science education in the wider community. Otherwise, we are headed for a new dark age. So strongly do I feel we are under threat, it is necessary to adopt a more forceful tone than is customary for this journal. The mentality that produced *Old Religion*, *New Science* is deluded. It is dangerous, it is irrational, and it must be combated before civilisation falls into decay.

Thud! My morale hit the pavement and bounced into the gutter. So much for my efforts to help humanity. But the immediate question was, why me? Why my book out of the hundreds of New Age or religion books out there? Maybe because I had the audacity to use the word

‘science’ in the title. Yes, that must have been what stirred up old Orantor, who after all was a ‘real scientist.’ I slunk off home to my little flat and collapsed onto the bed.

You may wonder why I did not shrug my shoulders and dismiss Orantor’s words as simply the opinion of one man against another. Did I have so little faith in my own vision? The sad truth is that in those pre-messiah days I still had enough self-doubt to see another person’s point of view. Perhaps if the hangover wasn’t so bad, I wouldn’t have taken it as hard, but the rest of that day I could barely rise from my bed of gloom. What if Orantor was right and my great insights were no more than deluded fantasies? I reread his article obsessively, seized by humiliation and even remorse.

I lay bedridden all day and half the night. At 3am, I rose from my sickbed and wandered city streets as a penance. I searched my spirit for guidance, but nothing came. No visions, no lights, no wise words. There was only emptiness and the growing suspicion Orantor was right.

The next day I conceived a response. I resolved to confront my nemesis head on, at least intellectually. It turned out Rudolph C. Orantor was an author himself. Indeed, he almost seemed to have his own shelf at the local bookshop. There was no doubt about it, old Rudolph C had the pop science market by the throat! If he wasn’t holding forth on evolution, he was pontificating on physics. One minute he was glorying in the history of science, the next he was waxing lyrical on the origin of humanity and the universe itself. No topic was too large or small to escape the supreme scrutiny of Lord Orantor.

Perhaps it was excessive self flagellation, but I bought them all and sat down to read. If my hope was to find signs of weakness, I was sorry to find that the man was no fool. In fact, in the light of his lucid conjecture, my own *Old Religion, New Science* began to seem profoundly unsound. The sense of dismay grew in me like a cancer.

Was Orantor right in judging my book to be hollow, sensationalist, and quite without foundation? It seemed he very well might be. It was clear now that my near-death-experience had been a delusion. My ‘revelations’ were nothing more than wishful fantasies based on a fear of death. It was Orantor, not I, who understood reality. The scientific worldview he described in his books was the correct one. The implications for me were immense.

My life was not, after all, a spiritual journey into matter. No, it came from the pairing of gametes in my mother’s womb after the evolution-driven fornication of my father and mother. That, it seemed, was my real genesis. Granted there was a larger context within the expanding universe and the evolution of life, but the specifics of me came down to the

random coupling of one among millions of sperm with an egg. All my characteristics of body and 'soul' could be explained by the genetic material - the DNA - that formed them. That was why I was. And I should be grateful for having been that sperm, that one in a million chance. I should feel wonder at the miraculous complexity of it all, and seek to make a saner and better world for all humanity. In facing up to the truth, I should feel renewed vigour and a sense of hope. Of course, Orantor was right.

There was just the small matter of my imminent demise.

Not - with any luck - next week or next year, but inevitably sometime in the next fifty years my services would be dispensed with and I would return to the earth from where I came. This regrettable mortality could perhaps be overcome by having children. There was - apparently - some consolation in knowing that while I would die, my DNA would live on in the form of descendants. Somehow, a hollow feeling remained at the thought that this complex genetic machinery would discard me into the pit of history. Yet it was clear that Orantor was right - there was no evidence for anything else and it was wishful thinking to conclude otherwise. I had simply been wrong.

If only Thomas Swan had been a good loser.

I have in my time flung chessboards, abused racquets, and violently torn up losing betting slips. Once I hurled a golf club fifty metres skyward where it lodged in the upper branch of a tree to surprise passing golfers for the rest of the day. Now, having been humiliated by Orantor, I began to pace deliriously around my tiny flat.

I had been debunked by science to add insult to the injury of being ignored by the New Age community. Deep in the seething resentful chemicals of my brain, a terrible revenge bubbled up into some half-formed impulse.

If religion was no more than an institution for achieving social control, perhaps it could be inverted to achieve chaos. And if it was true, as science said, that I was just a piece of physical debris flung out in the wake of an ancient and accidental explosion, then I might as well wreak as much mayhem as possible before returning to nothingness. If Orantor wanted to paint me as a religious crank, I'd give that learned gentleman all that and more - a caricature of all the beliefs of the world in their chaotic and meaningless glory.

And in that moment, the Milinish was born.

*Cultown* is available here <https://amz.run/4NdM>

Music soundtrack album here <https://amz.run/4Nmi>

## The Vast and the Spurious

Now, I'll come to another of my controversial books: *The Vast and the Spurious: 25 Problems for Feminism*.

I was raised by progressive parents, and accept the basic idea of feminism: that men and women deserve the same rights and opportunities.

However, I do not agree with another core premise of feminism, which is the idea of 'male privilege.' Some years ago, I wrote an essay questioning male privilege, which is the notion that men are better off than women. It turned into a book. I became interested in the whole landscape of the gender war, with its many contentious issues.

Feminism was supposed to lead to a new age of equality, but there is more distrust and antagonism between the sexes than ever before. This book looks at the various issues and tries to sort truth from fiction. Unless we can listen to both sides of the argument and find common ground, the gender wars will rage 'til doomsday.

Here are some reviews that appear on the back cover of *The Vast and the Spurious*.

"This is no angry polemic, but a light-hearted, fair and factual introduction to feminism's various contradictions."

Karen Straughan, leading vlogger on gender issues.

"Whether for the uninitiated, the curious, or the indoctrinated, this book offers a witty rebuttal to modern feminist claims and exaggerations. Grounded in common sense and empathy, it makes the rational case, too rarely heard, for harmony between the sexes and respect for men's contributions."

Janice Fiamengo, Professor of English, University of Ottawa, Canada, and editor of *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say*.

*The Vast and the Spurious* is available here <https://amz.run/4NdG>

## Twenty-Five Problems

### Chapter One of *The Vast and the Spurious*

This book discusses twenty-five problems with feminism. One of the main problems is you're not allowed to criticise it in the first place. As I'm going to do so at some length, this will make me a target for attack. In that case, I'll start by explaining my position and why this book has been written.

Some people think any critic of feminism must be a right wing thug who wants to send women back to the 1950s. But I believe women should have the same rights as men and be free to pursue any goal. Why shouldn't they? Still, supporting the fair reforms of the 1970s doesn't mean you have to endorse the cultish fanaticism that goes on today.

Of course, a movement as big as feminism doesn't exist without reason. On some topics feminists are right, on others they are wrong. The aim of this book, *The Vast and the Spurious*, is to try to understand which ones. Where they are right, their efforts may lead to a better world. But where they are wrong, their mistakes will lead to a worse world - for everyone. #Feminism hurts women too.

I am male. For some, that disqualifies me from having an opinion on this subject. But as the modern agenda consists of hectoring men about their enormous power and privilege, it's clear feminism is not just about women's issues. They will accuse me of 'man-splaining' feminism, but as feminists have been woman-splaining for years how patriarchy ruined their lives, it's only fair to return fire. Still, in deference to those who've gone before, let's start with the ceremonial rites.

### Acknowledging the Traditional Owners of The Land

As a man writing on this topic, I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Gender Studies: feminists.

Apparently they own the land. They get very angry if a man trespasses on that land by having a voice, or even a thought, about gender issues. This anger may be cloaked in the

pretence that they don't care what men think. They will sometime declare, with passionate indifference, just how much they don't care. Indeed, when it comes to feminist books, it seems to be a genre convention for authors to assert that they 'don't give a fuck' what men think of their field. Clementine Ford says this in chapter eight of her book. Jessa Crispin says it in chapter seven of hers. Probably a hundred other women have said it in theirs.

This is really a wonderful liberation for a fellow like me, for when I began writing this book, an inner voice would often be nagging away about whether feminists would approve. It's a great relief to learn that they don't care what any man thinks.

Still, having entered the field of feminist writing, it's only polite to observe the genre conventions with the ritual words: I don't give a fuck what men think about feminism. There. Was that OK?

Now the formalities are over, let's get on with the book.

### **A Few Points to Begin**

To be honest, that was a lie. I do care what people think, and maybe this book can even change a few minds. Not the hardcore feminists, of course. That will never happen. But the book isn't written for them. It is for the open-minded woman or man who wants to hear a different view than the media allows. It's for the kid starting university about to be force-fed identity politics for the next three years. It's for those sick of the one-sidedness of the conversation.

Still, before criticising feminism in detail, it's worth remembering why it exists, and the sort of thing that fired women up in the seventies and sometimes still goes on today. For example, I recall one time from my own university days when a pompous male academic lectured for an hour, then also dominated the tute group that followed. We sure got sick of his voice. Then there was a recent YouTube clip where a young woman gave a brilliant performance on the bass guitar. One of the top comments was 'the best part of this video is her smile.' This retro chauvinism would easily make that *Everyday Sexism* website.

So, while this book does query feminists, it is sympathetic to them when they have a fair point. Apart from being a matter of ethical fair play, there's more chance of changing people's minds if you show some empathy rather than just trying to blast them into oblivion. They might then start to listen and empathise with you too. Of course, if that doesn't work, you can always fall back on plan B, which is to blast them into oblivion.

In the same spirit, this book won't be taking any cheap shots at the physical appearance of any feminists. That sort of personal attack is irrelevant, and reflects badly on the attacker. Behavioural ugliness on the other hand - such as lying, bullying, or slandering - will be called out whoever is doing it.

For the record, I support some of the basic feminist causes, such as equal pay for the same work and a fair deal on housework and parenting. Ironically, the only way feminists will ever actually solve those problems is to stop lying about the 'gender pay gap.' That is, lying about its real nature and causes.

As for whether males and females have the same innate abilities, let's just say people should be treated as individuals, and get the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise.

As for other issues, I support women's right to sexual freedom and to not have to face blatant sexual harassment, but oppose the recent excesses of the Me Too movement.

Then there's rape and domestic violence. It's pretty obvious stuff, you would think. Domestic violence, for instance. You mean it's *wrong* to beat up your own family? Who knew? But that applies whichever gender is doing it. Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't just go one way.

What I chiefly oppose in feminism are some key delusions, some behavioural traits, and the overall mental climate these create. Among the main delusions are that women are always worse off than men, and that men are always villains and women victims. Another problem is the fixation on gender where it has no relevance.

As for behaviour, I oppose the feminist attempt to leverage historical suffering for present day gain, and its culture of bullying and intimidation. The overall climate all this creates is one of hatred between the sexes. While this is not all the fault of feminists, they have certainly played their part.

## **Origins of this Book**

This book was prompted by several events, of which two stand out. One was reading a newspaper article about 'male privilege,' which is the idea that men are better off than women in almost all areas of life. The implication was that men cruise through life as pampered lords, while women struggle through like the damned in Hades.

The other event happened when the book was already half written. It was the attempted screening in Australia of a film called *The Red Pill*, which gave a sympathetic hearing to

Men's Rights Activists (MRAs). This was an act of profanity for feminists, who protested and got the film banned. MRAs are those who challenge the premise that women are always the disadvantaged sex. What's striking about *The Red Pill* is it started out as a hit piece on MRAs, but its female filmmaker changed her mind once she got to know them. This was pure heresy for feminists, who called it a propaganda film. That was odd, because when I finally got to see the film, it turned out to be an *alternative* to the propaganda we normally get in the media.

Really, *The Red Pill* just offered another view on gender relations, but the whole protest debacle shows there is something wrong with feminism today. If the way you deal with critics is to silence them or lie about them, this is revealing about the sort of movement you are.

So, *The Red Pill* is 'a propaganda film,' is it? If by propaganda they mean *someone's opinion*, then we are all propagandists. The difference is some people get to deliver their propaganda through national, mainstream media. Clementine Ford, for example, writes one or two newspaper columns a week - and while Ford is a formidable warrior for her cause, she only ever argues one side. Still, by all means read her columns and books. Then for the sake of balance, go and listen to a YouTube talk by Janice Fiamengo or Karen Straughan.

Karen Straughan is one of those evil Men's Rights Activists you hear about. She's popular with men due to her eccentric penchant for not hating their guts. I had actually never heard of MRAs when I began writing this book. Since then, and after watching *The Red Pill*, I've heard a good deal more about them.

Feminists need to move on from the idea that they have a monopoly on sorrow. Injustice takes various forms and is experienced by many types of people - even some of those white males they think are so privileged.

This book was originally two long essays. The first was called 'Agony: Much Worse Than Yours,' (meant humorously, of course). It looked at twelve problems to do with the idea of male privilege. The second essay, 'The Vast and the Spurious,' looked at a further twelve problems.

I've kept those original 'problems' and spread them out over the chapters of the book. Some are dealt with briefly, others at much greater length. 'Problem 25' will make up the last chapter.

In fact, some of these are problems *for* feminism, not problems *with* feminism. For example, problems 12-14 are sympathetic to them. Here is a full list, with the names I've given them.

1. Trump or the Tramp
2. The CEO Problem: Check Explanation, OK
3. It's Not 1970 Anymore
4. Female Privilege
5. Agony: Much Worse Than Yours
6. We Are Not a Gestalt
7. Gender Doesn't Matter
8. How Dare You Resist My Attack?
9. Big Sister is Watching You
10. Misogyny vs. Misandry
11. The Gender Pay Gap
12. Yes, That's Annoying
13. The Weight of History
14. Dickheads Anonymous
15. It's Still Not 1970
16. What Ya Gonna Do?
17. Bullshit or Not?
18. Whinge, Whine, WTF
19. So Fucking What?
20. Stop Caring What People Think
21. Assert Yourself or Die
22. Do Something
23. Give Me My Privilege!
24. Turning Male Problems into Male Privilege
25. Addicted to Feminism

Apart from these twenty-five problems, the book has five main parts. Chapters 2-4 are about male privilege. Chapters 5-8 discuss the capacity for evil in both men and women, and respond to a feminist's attack on MRAs. Chapters 9-12 deal with the gender pay gap, and the

battle over work in and outside the home. Chapters 13-17 return to male privilege. Then, chapters 18 and 19 complete the book, and include the Utopian vision, 'A Dream of Fecunda.'

It's worth noting that this book is about Western nations, and does not discuss feminism or the position of women outside the West.

To read the rest of the book, *The Vast and the Spurious* is available here <https://amz.run/4NdG>

## **Some More Non-Fiction**

To round out *Spark*, I'll include a few short non-fiction pieces. First, while this ebook is meant to publicise my own work, I'd like to say a few words about another author, Paul Gallico, and why I like him.

Then there's a piece about a rather unusual 'horror' film, one lacking any obvious villain or monster.

I'll close with a few words about technology and magic.

## The Top Five Paul Gallico Books

Paul Gallico was a 20<sup>th</sup> century American author. His best works are dark romances which show how love survives in harsh conditions. Literary snobs of the time tended to dismiss him as a ‘popular author.’ While he made no attempt to be highbrow, Gallico’s writing shows a compassion and understanding of human nature rarely found in other authors. He wrote many novels and novellas. Here are my top five.

### 5 – The Poseidon Adventure

Wait, wasn’t that the movie that kicked off the ‘disaster film’ genre in the 1970s? Yes - and Gallico wrote the original book.

A freak storm at sea flips an ocean liner upside down and a group of survivors has to find their way out of the ship to reach safety. It’s a page-turner, but the real story is how each person behaves in crisis conditions. It’s a thriller with soul.

The editor, Sol Stein, said of fiction writing that ‘we need to know the people in the car before we see the car crash.’ We need to care. Oddly enough, this is shown in the two film versions of *The Poseidon Adventure*. The 1972 film has real characters, but in the terrible 2006 remake it was like watching cardboard cut-outs trying to escape the sunken ship. All action, no soul.

### 4 - Flowers For Mrs Harris

Mrs Harris, a London cleaning lady, pursues a lifelong dream to own a Dior dress. In a classic underdog tale, Mrs Harris is a poor, old, uneducated woman who dares to reach for something beyond her lowly social status. Her quest takes her on a roundabout route to the House of Dior in Paris.

Gallico’s sense of compassion is to the fore, as he draws together a range of characters and plot lines to a satisfying end.

### 3 – Love of Seven Dolls

A dark romance featuring Mouche, an innocent street girl, and Capitaine Coq, a harsh, abusive showman who can only communicate through the seven dolls in his travelling puppet show.

Mouche is a typical Gallico heroine - an innocent struggling to survive in an evil world. Capitaine Coq is part of that evil. Mouche can only reach him through the puppets. This leads to an extraordinary final scene which goes beyond ordinary life into an elevated realm.

Some modern readers have criticised the book for Capitaine Coq's violent behaviour towards Mouche. One review even accused Gallico of '1950s racism.' As the book came out in 1954, so what? This is a misguided way to think. To view past eras through the censorial standards of 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes is to shrink human experience down to a very small world indeed. The past was what it was. Though we may live in more enlightened times, it will be a sad day when the thought police start rewriting old novels to fit today's standards. A strength of Gallico's dark romances is he doesn't sanitise life or human nature. He shows it as it is, for better or worse. Or rather, the way it was during his lifetime in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gallico is a true romantic and *Love of Seven Dolls* is a tale of redemption where even the black hearted Capitaine Coq can be saved by the power of love.

### 2 – The Lonely

Tells the story of Jerry, a young American pilot in World War Two who falls unexpectedly in love with Patches, an English girl. This throws his whole life into upheaval. Jerry's background is rock solid - family, social class, career and fiancée. Yet his entire mapped-out future is thrown into jeopardy by the unplanned romance.

In his decision to marry Patches, Jerry has to overcome a huge weight of social pressure, not least from his own parents. In the end, love prevails, but only after considerable turmoil.

It's sensitively handled. Gallico doesn't sneer at Jerry's family or background. He shows them as limited but honourable people dealing as best they can with a tough situation. Jerry's

father is pivotal to this and Jerry has to grapple with notions of what it is to be a man as he discovers an untapped wisdom within himself.

### **1 – Love Let Me Not Hunger**

This is Gallico's best dark romance. An English circus in the 1960s goes on tour in Spain. After a serious accident, the circus owner and most of the crew return to England. Some of the circus workers are left behind with very little food or money to look after the animals. When help doesn't arrive, the situation grows desperate until each character is drawn to a crisis point.

The physical starvation is a metaphor for each character's hunger for love. They're a motley crew, with their various physical and emotional deformities. The grotesquery on display make it so much more real. This isn't some sanitised TV sitcom filled with the beautiful people. It is life in all its unvarnished reality. In this desolate landscape, acts of compassion shine bright. This is Paul Gallico at his best. An underrated and little known classic.

As a footnote, *Thomasina*, is another classic Gallico and should probably have made this list.

## A Horror Story With No Apparent Foe

A nightmare is normally something you wake up from with a sense of relief. For John Grant the 'nightmare' is something he awakens into, in a state of dread, each morning for five days. Hence the title, *Wake In Fright*, of a brilliant 1960 novel by Kenneth Cook, which was made into an equally good film in 1970.

*Wake in Fright* is a horror story with no apparent foe. There are no ghosts or demons, no serial killers, no predatory animals or aliens. It's far more subtle than that. The sense of dread is barely noticeable at first, but steadily grows. The enemy as it turns out is the environment itself and its 'friendly' inhabitants.

John Grant is a sensitive, intellectual school teacher from the city. He calls himself a 'bonded slave of the education department.' This refers to an actual policy of the time by which teachers had to do a two year apprenticeship in the bush before being allowed to work in the city. Teachers posted a bond of \$1000, which was forfeited if they skipped out on the deal. \$1000 was a lot of money in 1960.

John Grant has been assigned to Tiboonda, a tiny one-school town in the outback. He's just finished the ordeal of his first year. This is at the height of summer in what is essentially a desert. It is a cultural as well as a physical desert. As a phrase from the movie puts it, 'there's nothing out here except heat, dust and beer.' For the aesthetic Grant, Tiboonda is a place viewed with horrified disbelief. It can be kept at arm's length by his sense of his own identity, and endured by knowing it's only temporary. He's been kept sane by the thought of his six weeks annual holiday coming up in Sydney. As he boards the train at the end of term, he's tantalised by dreamlike visions of water; breaking waves at Bondi Beach, his bikini-clad fiancée among them.

These images are mirages for Grant never escapes. He's booked a stopover at a larger town named Bundanyabba, staying there one night before catching his flight to Sydney in the morning. In a holiday mood, Grant goes out for a beer to kill time. Then, in a local bar he meets Jock Crawford, the town cop, one of the 'devils in human form' of this story. Crawford puts the twin demons of booze and gambling in Grant's reach. These vices don't seem native

to Grant. He looks on condescendingly as the locals partake in them. Yet Crawford somehow gets him to down a few beers before joining a Two Up game. By story's end, Crawford shows a quiet satisfaction in Grant's debasement.

Grant is soon drunk enough to have a go at the Two Up gambling. Sure enough he wins three times in a row and triples his holiday pay. Whooping it up he runs off to his hotel room before the devil within plants an idea in his head: one more win will give him enough money to pay off the teacher's bond so he won't have to return to Tiboonda for the second year, or indeed at all - *ever*. In the grip of this wild hope, he returns to the game and of course loses all his money on the next play. He no longer even has his fare for the plane home. (Presumably in 1960, there were no prepaid bookings!) He stumbles off to bed, then wakes the next morning in a strange hotel room, naked, penniless, baking in the desert heat, with the hangover from Hell and the knowledge he now has no means of escape.

As a personal aside, this story resonates with me because I was once in a similar position. I was moving from Sydney to Adelaide, driving the 1000km journey with all my worldly goods in my car. Speeding recklessly at the end of a long day near a small town called Hay, I crashed and rolled the car. I woke up the next morning in a strange hotel room, at the height of summer with no car, virtually broke, shattered and disoriented. I vividly recall the desert landscape, the heat, the fear, the sense of having been stripped of all power and trapped in a remote Australian town.

John Grant's nightmare has now begun. He's stuck in Bundanyabba with no means of escape - but it's not as if anyone is hostile to him. Here again is the strange subtlety of this film. The locals are aggressively hospitable, buying him endless rounds of beer, only getting offended when he asks them to stop.

'New to the Yabba?' he's asked repeatedly. The locals love the place John Grant despises, something that confounds him. 'All the little devils are proud of Hell,' says Doc Tydon, a cynical, alcoholic doctor who Grant meets in a bar. Tydon's 'disease' has prevented him working in the city, yet in Bundanyabba it is 'barely noticed.'

It is Tydon who represents the worst horror for Grant. Given to quoting philosophy and literature, Tydon has become a sort of educated beast, living in a squalid hut, permanently drunk, maintaining a thin veneer of civilisation. Grant is later taken on a drunken kangaroo hunt and sees Tydon cutting the balls off a dead roo. Apparently, he prizes them as a delicacy to be cooked and eaten later. This has added significance for a later event implied but not shown.

Doc Tydon has been all but absorbed into the hostile environment, slowly transformed into a kind of talking pig. In John Grant's waking nightmare, he sees this as his own eventual fate. Day by day, he realises his former self is evaporating into the desert heat. The only option is to surrender and become a beast himself. By the end of the five days, that is what he has become.

*Wake in Fright* has no monsters, no ghosts, no sharks or serial killers. Even the humans are friendly to John Grant at every step of the way. At no time are they hostile. They're all simply incidental devils living in the strange hell of Bundanyabba into which Grant has blundered.

The film could be said to caricature a certain kind of Australian masculinity, with its violence and drunken hedonism - but no, it is all too real. The story is filtered through the consciousness of the intellectual John Grant, a man who would be more at home in England's 'green and pleasant land,' or walking the corridors of Oxford University. His waking nightmare is a quite English perception of the Australian male, or a European's sense of the harsh Australian outback. Grant's own fear has undone him for without his desperate wish to escape the place, he'd never have risked his plane fare on so reckless a wager.

Money is power, its absence is slavery. For gamblers, the sides of the 'Two Up' coin are not heads and tails, they're freedom and enslavement. Gambling is one of the demons of this nightmare. Alcohol is another. Beer is the same colour as sand. Beer is the liquid version of the desert dust. In the end, it comes to the same thing. All drinkers know the 'heat' of dehydration and the futile illusion of drinking more to combat it.

This is all part of the awful brilliance of *Wake In Fright*. You can have your *Evil Dead* or *Friday the Thirteenth*. Real horror is to be found in the brutal banality of daily life with its harsh grind, its relentlessness, and the constant flux between hope and fear. *Wake In Fright* is the nightmare where the hope of escape tantalises again and again, only to vanish like a desert mirage and return you once more to your starting point. Forget twilight and midnight, real horror happens under the sun in this Australian classic.

## The Wisdom of Solomon, Clapton, and Catweazle

There's one idea quite a few religions have in common - that physical life isn't much good. It seems the spiritually advanced believe that all the pleasures of physical life are unsatisfying and aren't worth much. It's only when you transcend the world and get in touch with a higher power that you find real satisfaction. Religions accept this idea in various forms.

Anyhow, I'm not buying it. I'm going to start a religion which celebrates the beauty of the physical world. To quote Thomas Swan from *Cultown*, it's the gift of life, not the wheel of life.

What's with this need to put down our world? A while ago, I read a story about the famous king, Solomon, he with the reputation for enormous wisdom. According to this story, Solomon was a wealthy king, could indulge his every wish, and had a harem of a thousand women. After a while he got sick of it all and came to the conclusion there's something deeply unsatisfying about physical life itself.

That's one theory; here's another. How about the theory that anyone who needs a thousand women is psychologically disturbed to begin with? Even a hundred women is way over the top. If you can't manage with a hundred, a thousand is not going to do it for you either. So, instead of accepting some 'deep' conclusion about the inherently unsatisfying nature of life, we should realise that the experiences of the mentally ill are not those upon which to base our beliefs.

I mean, imagine there was some deep-thinking beggar in Solomon's kingdom. Suppose he broke into a pie shop one night and ate a lot of pies. After a while he'd get sick of it. Should he conclude there's something deeply wrong with pies? Should he adopt a theory of the intrinsic worthlessness of pies?

No doubt there was far more to the character of Solomon than this minor anecdote relates, as that reputation for wisdom must have come from somewhere. But purely in relation to the tale of the thousand women, there are no deep conclusions to be drawn.

Go forward a few millennia and another story comes to mind. In his autobiography, rock star Eric Clapton wrote about a new guitar he coveted as a young man. The guitar was on

show in a shop window, and the young Eric gazed at it with longing day after day. He was obsessed with the guitar, consumed by the burning desire to possess it. He finally got it, and you can guess what happened next. As soon as the coveted guitar was in his possession, he lost all desire for it. It suddenly meant nothing to him.

What are we to draw from the story? Is there a deep philosophical lesson here about the foolishness of desire and the emptiness of physical life?

No, not really. The only conclusion we need draw is that Eric was very confused at the time. The young Clapton was right to desire that guitar with all his heart, because a guitar is a wonderful thing. Clapton should have grabbed that guitar and loved it and played it six hours a day and thanked his lucky stars. Instead, the youthful Eric only showed he was disturbed and spiritually ill, as his imminent stint as a heroin addict was to show. Still we are all a bit foolish when young. By now, Clapton is no doubt much older and wiser.

The point of these two examples is that, for some reason, people sometimes confuse psychological illness with wisdom. People hear about Solomon's harem of a thousand women and Clapton's guitar and nod their heads earnestly as if some profound truth has been revealed about life, when all we're really seeing are the first world problems of two spoiled young men.

Instead of believing there's something deeply wrong with physical life, I'd rather believe it is a blessing we should enjoy while we can. Buy that guitar and play it. Love your one woman or man. If you've got one, you don't need a harem of them. Come to think of it, you don't need a hundred guitars either.

One more story. This time it's fiction but has more wisdom than the first two. In the late 1960s, there was a brilliant TV show called *Catweazle*. The title character was a magician who lived in the eleventh century, around the time of the Norman conquest of England. At the start of the series, for reasons I won't go into, Catweazle travels through time, nine hundred years into the future to the mid-twentieth century.

For the sorcerer transported to 1966, suddenly *everything* is magic. Through eleventh century eyes, Catweazle sees magic all around: electric lights, cars and planes, TVs and telephones. Every person alive is a magician, casually using these amazing creations. Every day some new wonder turns up to blow Catweazle's mind.

Still, that's not how *we* think, is it? We quickly forget our good fortune, and become jaded by everything we have. It's nearly fifty years since *Catweazle* was made, and the people alive

even in the 1960s would be amazed at how we live now. They wouldn't have imagined the internet, for a start.

Yet you look at how some behave today, and wonder if people in general are dumber, angrier, or unhappier than ever. Is this because, no matter how good we've got it, there's something wrong with physical life itself? No, I don't think so. That's the false conclusion a young Clapton or Solomon might reach. The real problem is we forget how good we've got it compared to the way people lived fifty or a hundred or a thousand years ago. Maybe we need to take a step back and see the world the way Catweazle sees it. It's a world full of magic. We've just forgotten to see it as it truly is.

## Final Words

Dear Reader,

That's the end of this book. If you've made it this far, you must have liked some of the material. If so, I hope you'll support me by buying one of my books, ebooks, or music albums.

It takes me hundreds of hours to create a book or an album. My wish is to be able to continue writing and to do it fulltime. Your support will help that to happen.

As mentioned, my best books are probably *Conquest By Concept* and *The Maelstrom Ascendant*. But *The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club* is also a good place to start, featuring stories on a range of topics.

*The Vortex Winder* is a 'modern fairytale' on the border between fantasy and the real world. *Cultown* and *The Vast and the Spurious* are a little more controversial, but will appeal to people interested in the topics they cover.

A full list of my work currently available is on the next page.

## List of Links

Note - links go to the main Amazon site in USA. They may redirect to the Amazon site in your country.

### Conquest By Concept

Amazon <https://amz.run/4NdE>

### The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club

Amazon <https://amz.run/4Nd5>

### The Vast and the Spurious

Amazon <https://amz.run/4NdG>

### The Vortex Winder

Amazon <https://amz.run/4NdJ>

Music Album <https://amz.run/4SFr>

### The Maelstrom Ascendant

Amazon <https://amz.run/4NdK>

Music Album <https://amz.run/4Nmj>

### CULTOWN

Amazon <https://amz.run/4NdM>

Music Album <https://amz.run/4Nmi>

Lighthouse XIII Music on Spotify <https://bit.ly/LighthouseXIII>

## **Books By Duncan Smith**

The Vortex Winder

The Maelstrom Ascendant

Cultown

The Vast and the Spurious

The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club

Conquest By Concept

Hammer and Heat

## **Albums By Lighthouse XIII**

Waves Upon Waves

Vortex Winder

The Maelstrom Ascendant

Cultown

## **Contact**

Books and albums can be ordered from [www.vortexwinder.com](http://www.vortexwinder.com) or on Amazon or Book Depository.

Alfadex Books can be contacted on [matthew.alfadex@gmail.com](mailto:matthew.alfadex@gmail.com)

## Summary of Books:

### Conquest By Concept - <https://amz.run/4NdE>

John Gilbert loves Angie, his far-left Antifa girlfriend. Then he meets Edward Hall, a charismatic right wing figure. Hall makes John question Angie's politics. Soon, John can no longer tell which side is good or evil.

Caught in a political 'love triangle' between the far-left and far-right, John Gilbert faces a choice. Will he stay true to Angie's passionate progressive values, or can the seductive Edward Hall turn him to the dark side?

Wars are fought in the mind, not just on the battlefield. It's conquest by concept - with an emphasis on the con.

*'Politics used to be boring. Not anymore. Brilliantly written, with an unusual take on recent world events.'*

J.C. McKinlay

*'Equal parts high drama and French farce, this is a vigorous romp through the culture war. In divided times, this is a provocative and witty tale of one man's quest to make sense of it all.'*

David Miller.

### The Tightarse Tuesday Book Club - <https://amz.run/4Nd5>

This new set of stories has some of Duncan Smith's best work. 'Hook Up Hell' is a comical Tinder farce, 'Badminton Boy' a superhero send-up, and 'Ghost Squad' a wry look at celebrities who pretend to write books. But it is the novella, 'Marla Okadigbo,' that has caused all the fuss for its take on the hot topic of racism in modern America.

This is the story of a literary scam that takes America by storm. White male author, Winkler Jones, pens an online review of The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood's book about a world where women have no rights and exist only to serve men. Jones calls it 'oppression

porn for feminists' and says it's only a matter of time before a black American writes a novel where slavery is restored.

Jones' crooked agent tells him to delete the review and write the slavery book himself. Jones does so, putting it out under the pen name, 'Marla Okadigbo,' supposedly a black American woman. The book is a hit until the author's true identity is revealed. It then becomes a scandal, and perception of the book changes from a story of the struggle for black liberation to one of oppression by white supremacists.

Meanwhile, Jones is haunted by the spirit of the real Marla, a black slave from the early 1800s, and feuds with his girlfriend, Sonia, a white English teacher struggling to help school students in the poor neighbourhood where she works.

#### **The Vortex Winder - <https://amz.run/4NdJ>**

When fading rocker, Jimmy Brandt, saves the life of an insect, his own life is forever changed. The insect turns out to be an advanced being who gives him the 'Vortex Winder,' a device which grants a different special power each week. Each power leads to unexpected results.

Jimmy makes a comeback to rock music and records his album. Yet his comeback is a quest within a quest. Driven by the Vortex Winder, Jimmy makes an amazing journey. From a simple job interview, to a love affair in Germany, or a harrowing stint in a foreign prison, the adventures of Jimmy Brandt are always a surprise. Trailed by his mentor, Iolango, and his tormentor, Elijinx, Jimmy follows the events of his life to a stunning conclusion.

#### **The Maelstrom Ascendant - <https://amz.run/4NdK>**

Rocker Jimmy Brandt has given up on his dreams. He's settled down in the suburbs with his girlfriend and cat ... until strange forces tempt him back to his former life. Soon he faces a choice between good and evil - and life is so rewarding when you turn to the dark side.

Flying high again, Jimmy battles divas, despots, and most of all, himself. Yet the higher you fly, the further you can fall. Only an old, forgotten friend can save him. But does he want to be saved?

**Cultown** - <https://amz.run/4NdM>

Thomas Swan forms the Milinish, a cult with an odd mix of scientific and religious beliefs.

From humble beginnings in Sydney, the Milinish moves overseas to become the fastest growing cult in America. Yet Swan's mad reign spirals out of control. Finally, on the brink of disaster, he decides to tell all.

Here, in the ultimate inside story, Thomas Swan reveals the secrets and scandals inside the Milinish, the greatest cult of the 21st century.

*'Exposes not just the cultishness of religion, but of science too. This is the best novel yet written on the trouble between science and religion.'*

J. Williams, Fuse.

**The Vast and the Spurious : 25 Problems For Feminism** - <https://amz.run/4NdG>

There is a backlash against feminism. Some will dismiss it as misogyny, but this is a mistake. Feminism can no longer assume it owns the high moral ground. Unless it answers its critics, it will never gain popular support, and the gender wars will rage til Doomsday.

Some see feminism as a fight for justice. Others see it as a zealous regime. One thing's for sure – there's more anger between men and women than ever before.

'Whether for the uninitiated, the curious, or the indoctrinated, this book offers a witty rebuttal to feminist claims and exaggerations. Grounded in common sense and empathy, it makes the rational case, too rarely heard, for harmony between the sexes and respect for men's contributions.'

Janice Fiamengo, Professor of English, University of Ottawa, Canada, and editor of *Sons of Feminism: Men Have Their Say*.

## **Lighthouse XIII Albums**

### **Waves Upon Waves**

Mountain Gods, SMS: Save My Sanity, Between the Stairway and the Highway, Reaper Bones, Leuchtturm, LHXIII, Temporary Kingdom, Retro Stereo, Waves Upon Waves, New World Alchemy.

### **Vortex Winder**

Vortex Winder, Road Rage, Trade Winds, Black Art, Life Line, Spark, Z Club, Epitaph, Eljinx, Oceanus.

### **The Maelstrom Ascendant**

Black Phoenix, High and Mighty, The Price of Dominion, Moonlight Tiger, I for an Eye, Haunted, Death Bed Regrets, Extinction.Net, Quitter, The Maelstrom Ascendant, The Ephemeral and the Eternal.

### **Cultown**

Amnesia, Skeptic Eclectic, Evil But Not Vile, In Nihilum, Cultown, Helix Eternal, Doom Pipers, Fallen to a Higher Place, The Scythe and the Scalpel, Triangle of Fire, Transcendence, The Culminate Culminates.

Listen to the band on Spotify here <https://bit.ly/LighthouseXIII>