

Volume One, Creative Work

Tunnelling

Volume one of a thesis submitted in total fulfilment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy, Creative Writing

Discipline of English and Creative Writing

Faculty of Humanities University of Adelaide

June 2013

Abstract

Tunnelling, the first volume of this PhD is a memoir. It tells the story of my life working in the western trunk sewer project as an underground construction worker in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is also a story about my eldest daughter's recovery from a brain injury. She is in a 'tunnel' of a different kind. The ramifications of my early drinking years and her brain injury shaped my life, my wife's and my other children's lives in ways I could not have predicted back then. I have attempted to take the reader into the underworld of blue-collar workers and a family under siege.

Tunnelling follows on from my first memoir *Beaten by a Blow*. I spent seven gut-wrenching years working in the tunnel. It was not painful because of difficulties or hardships, but rather because of the mindlessness of our work, which took place in a tunnel that was five metres in diameter, eighty metres underground and seventeen kilometres long. We were the concrete gang, building and moving forms, cleaning out muck and pouring concrete.

At the same time my first daughter had developed a retarding form of epilepsy. The prognosis was a ninety percent chance of severe retardation, and an early death was possible. By the age of three it was clear she was not as bad as predicted, but she couldn't talk, walk properly, mix, or engage with us in any meaningful way. Around this time we started a home program for brain injured children. It involved lots of exercises designed to stimulate all her senses. Despite numerous setbacks, Nicole made it to school only to be confronted with years of bullying.

The story's other main strand follows me stopping drinking and joining Alcoholics Anonymous. Combining the teachings of A.A. and the ideas from my daughter's program, I start to change my life. My daughter's circumstances and my own issues have a profound effect on the dynamics of the family.

The exegesis, *Blue-Collar Work*, relates to one aspect of the memoir, as its title suggests. It sets the memoir in the context of some literary representations of work. It opens with an overview of a range of approaches to writing about work. Chapters one and two locate some of the problems Katharine Susannah Prichard and Jean Devanny have representing workers in *Working Bullocks* (1926) and *Sugar Heaven* (1934), respectively. Chapter three is about the kind of blue-collar work represented in *Tunnelling*. It traces the effect of Taylorism on work practices, and discusses the lack of agency for the tunnellers.

For a thesis that does not contain work already in the public domain

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library Search and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

Signature:.....Date.....

This is to certify that-

- (1) this thesis comprises only my original work;
- (2) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used;
- (3) the creative component of this thesis is 65,000 words in length.

Dennis McIntosh

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr Philip Butterss and Dr Phillip Edmonds for their guidance, support and encouragement, and the real opportunity to say what I wanted to say. Thank you.

I would also like to thank my colleagues, especially Emma McEwin. Also I would like to thank Steve Brock, Geoff Goodfellow, Sue Holoubek and Margaret Campbell for taking the time to read and give feedback to drafts of my work.

Contents

A birth	11
A pond to grow in	25
Get out plan one	49
The tide goes out	77
Get out plan two	93
A race, a lap, a life	109
Swimming upstream	129
A boat, the sea, the old man and me	145
Get out plan three	159
All at sea at school	173
Rita of Corsica	189
Swimming with sharks	203
A young dolphin	215
Ocean bound	223
Epilogue	247

Curled into a ball, tumbling along the sandy bottom of the sea I wait until the rip has quietened and my little body is again mine. Securing my feet in the sand, I shoot for the light. Breaking the surface with relief, delight, I suck desperately for air, deafened by the sounds of the sea. I look for my father's back, and scramble through the swirling white water to a shoulder or an arm and wait...for the next dumper.

A birth

On the fourth of August 1978 my first daughter, Nicole, was born. Her pink body was wet, covered in a film of saline. There was no awkwardness about her then. She seemed a perfectly formed healthy baby. But in less than nine months she would be gasping for life, dried up, a little fish thrown from the sea. Her descent was swift and brutal. She would have no recollection of her early life, remembering only the games we played later.

I was shearing around Jerilderie when I got the call to come home and I drove all night to get to the hospital on time. Nicole's birth eradicated all my regrets and fears about becoming a father at nineteen. Her mother, Leanne, was eighteen. I was stirred with a flood of adrenaline as Nicole came to life in front of me. I changed, if it is possible, almost in that instant, from wanting to run away to being her protector and provider. Right then, right there, I wanted that role more than anything else in the world. The more difficult work I had, the dirtier it was, the greater sacrifices I had to make, the more it showed my love for her, for them.

When she came home from hospital Nicole slept in our bed and we got high just looking at her and looking at each other. All I wanted to do was be one with Leanne. We hugged and kissed all night. And my lanoline-soaked hands, softened by the wool I tore through every day, touched her body with the deft touch of a gun shearer and I kissed her face and her back and her arms and her belly with just the bare tip of my lips. She was my goddess and if I needed a bonus, she was a great cook as well. I had a family, my own beautiful family. It all seemed perfect.

I watched Nicole feeding as if she was the first baby to have ever suckled its mother's breast. We spent much of our time playing with her in our bed. Every movement she made we thought was amazing. After a few months she developed this infectious giggle and occasionally, when she got a little older, she would have these bursts of sheer energy, kicking her legs and shaking her arms. It was thrilling to watch her and at night when they were asleep, I found myself gazing at her, at them.

At that time I travelled home on a Wednesday night and weekends from the different sheds I was working at around the Western district of Victoria. I couldn't wait to get home. If I couldn't get home I would go into the nearest town and ring. That was when the first sign of a problem arose. Nicole seemed to be crying whenever I rang up. She wasn't sleeping well. Leanne sounded tired and a little dejected but, overall, she still had the bubbling enthusiasm for her baby. Nicole wasn't always crying, just enough to cause some worry. I brushed it off. The doctor said it was colic and Leanne, being only eighteen, thought she might have been feeding her too fast.

The word 'colic' was also the first word I noticed in a pamphlet on infantile spasms I read at the Children's Hospital in Melbourne six months later. At that stage I was still in denial that there could have been anything wrong with her. I was in denial

for years, I think, but when I read that children with infantile spasms often suffered from colic before the onset of fits, it stood out.

On Boxing Day of that year, 1978, we hooked our new second hand caravan to my HG Holden 161 and set out to Bourke, New South Wales, for the start of the shearing season. Nicole was now twenty-three weeks old, and although the doctors had said she would grow out of her colic, she was getting worse. When she wasn't sleeping in the car she cried and screamed. It took a few days pulling the van to drive the 1000 kilometres to the far north-western corner of New South Wales. Despite the oppressive heat and Nicole's crying I felt upbeat about our futures. I had worked like a robot for a few months in the off season in a factory. Now I was free again. We were making a life for ourselves. We found our way to the infamous Paddle Wheel Caravan Park and set our van up beside the beautiful Darling River. It was sweltering, and the smell of eucalyptus and the towering gum trees shading the edges of the river and the Caravan Park made for a unique environment.

The caravan park was full of young shearers, wool pressers, shed hands, railway and meat workers. A few blokes about my age came and knocked on our van and offered for us to join them. They were dropping off a group of people with tractor tubes at the North Bourke Bridge about six kilometres away. Then we would float down the Darling River to the caravan park on the tubes sucking on a few cans. We floated down the ancient water course shadowed by the magnificent red gums. What a life I thought we were going to have up here. Leanne and I had taken turns to look after Nicole. She wasn't too bad on the first day but by the third day her crying had stopped everything.

We had run out of her colic medicine. It had taken the Bourke chemist more than two days to fill her prescription. After three days on the road and three days in

Bourke, Nicole was in a state of intense pain. Her knees were curled up. She at times went white and her screaming was pitched so high it produced no sound. At dusk on the third forty-five degree day, we gave Nicole a teaspoon full of her new prescription. A few moments later lying in her makeshift cot with Leanne and me looking on, her little fat beautifully formed body twitched. The crying stopped. Her face became absent. For about thirty seconds her eyes flickered and turned in and out in unison with her puffy red arms. We came to know those fits as salaam spasms. Then she fell into a deep sleep and we fell into a deep silence.

The next day I headed out to Brewarrina for the first shed of the season and didn't return until the Friday evening. Leanne said when Nicole heard the car pull up she got excited. The anticipation in Nicole's eyes was electric and when I saw her, her whole body moved and wiggled with energy. When we were in the same room she followed my every move with uncommon focus. I had never felt so wanted or loved. Her personality was really starting to shine through. I thought, there's no way she has got a problem. During the week Leanne said the fits had continued with three, four, six, eight of them a day. She would go into a series of up to twenty little seizures in each cluster then fall into a deep sleep. When she woke she seemed normal; she had a huge belly laugh by then. I didn't believe what the doctors were saying.

On the weekend we went to the local pool, rather than the river. Nicole with her face full of wonderment, cradled in her mother's knees, kicked and wiggled her arms ferociously. With Nicole held between us, we ventured into deeper water. In the cooler depths we were in familiar territory, rather than a foreign, hostile land. We ducked our heads and kissed passionately, still stealing kisses, still unawares of what was to come: still children playing at the pool. We swam around in small bursts of time. It was too hot

to be out in the forty plus degree sun for long. On the front page of the local paper there was a picture and a story of a stockman, out fencing, who cooked an egg in less than the regulation three minutes on a shovel in the sun.

The early diagnosis of hypsarrhythmia epilepsy came through within a few weeks of Nicole's first fits. She had irreversible retardation. She would probably never walk or talk and as she got older she would get worse and an early death was probable. The doctors suggested a special home. Children like her, we were told, can be too demanding on a family. At that time they couldn't find any injury to her brain. Thirty years later, however, doctors discovered the calcified remains of a large bleed in her occipital lobe. She had in effect suffered a massive stroke on that fateful night in Bourke. It was caused by a split in the wall of a vessel, which was a pre-birth vascular defect.

It was decided when I was out at the shed to move back to Melbourne where Leanne had more family support. On the following Friday night when I returned from work we went to the hospital to collect the forwarding letters from the doctors at the Bourke Hospital. While Leanne met with the doctors, Nicole and I played in the waiting room. She stood up holding onto the coffee table and took a few wobbly steps around it. She laughed and giggled in her trademark style. She was so proud of herself and I laughed with her. What a personality, I thought. I hung on to that memory of her laugh and giggle because it was the last I saw of that Nicole. When Leanne hugged me goodbye she hugged with a terror in her heart and an overconfident smile that hid the sick feeling that was in the pit of both our stomachs.

I got drunk for about a month after they left. I couldn't cry at the bad news that was being relayed back to me until one night, locked up in the Bourke Police Station for

drunk and disorderly, I couldn't stop crying. The grief just poured out. I cried for Nicole, for me, and for Leanne. I kept sheering for a while, determined to still make a life for myself, to carve out my own existence, but I was still that little boy tumbling along the sea bed floor being thrown by the currents. Out of my depth, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to face a life I didn't choose. I'd had a childhood like that. Adulthood was supposed to be of my choosing. But it wasn't. I was trapped. I had always felt trapped. I knew what this meant for me, a life in the factory, being owned by a boss. I pulled myself together, fixed up my damaged car, hooked the caravan up and, despite wanting to shoot through, went home to face a future I didn't want.

Nicole was lying on the floor when I walked in the door. Her vacant eyes drooped. One eye was turned inward. Her chin had dribble sores on it. The energy in her body had been replaced with a discontentment, and my arrival went unnoticed. In the space of six weeks the fat Nicole that had giggled trying to walk around the coffee table in the Bourke Hospital was gone. The doctors had been right. She murmured out a whine lying on the floor. I picked up her scrawny body. Her head flopped and Leanne grabbed it. She had no muscle tone and her legs dangled beneath her like a rag doll. Leanne greeted me with a desperate hug. From the beginning Leanne and I played out this game that she wasn't too bad. Leanne would speak for Nicole to me, and I would speak for Nicole with other people. I know all mums and dads do that, but this was different. We were compensating a void, not explaining what a certain smile or look meant. Nicole gave nothing.

Her potential had disintegrated in front of our eyes and we were left with the shell of a body, and the regrets of what could have been. And the endless recurring fear: what will happen to her when we are gone? Leanne had been so in love, so overjoyed

with her baby. Now the anguish and disappointment was etched into her face. Had we done something wrong, was it my fault, could I have done something differently? I thought it might have been the heat in Bourke, but the doctors said she would have had to be put in a furnace to suffer the type of injuries she had. Leanne said she fell out of the cot. They said she would've had to have been hit with a sledgehammer. Was it the medicine from the chemist...because Leanne had said it was odourless and her usual medication had an odour? He said the medicine was only a sedative to shut parents up. It was never tested and I regret a million times not stopping the doctor at the Bourke hospital who slipped the medicine bottle into his coat pocket and said, 'I'll check it out.'

Over the next few years Nicole was hospitalised numerous times as they adjusted her drugs and tried to minimize her fitting. Doctor Bryant, Nicole's specialist at the Children's Hospital, spoke with such quiet confidence that we totally trusted him, but we were looking for signs of confidence he might have in a recovery for Nicole. He never gave out any signs of enthusiasm for her. If anything he was overly dour when he spoke about her. If we had have seen any spark in Dr Bryant's eye or heard a change in his voice tones or his mannerisms or any of the other specialists, but especially Dr Bryant, we would have read into them that she was getting better and they were just being cautious.

When Nicole was about nine months of age, Dr Bryant said he was increasing her Epilum and reducing the dosage of Valium. We left his office and rushed to the chemist to get the new revised dosage mixture. We were thinking, hoping, this new mixture would give us back our Nicole. Another Electroencephalogram (EEG) scan might reveal a secret not yet found or show signs of improvement. The scans were grossly abnormal and there was even less normal background activity. She was going backwards, still.

Leanne never let anyone look after Nicole during that time. I think she must have felt under pressure to prove herself: that at nineteen she wasn't too young. I don't know for sure because we never talked about it. Not talking about things became the first emotional rule in our new relationship. Dr Bryant reordered his observations and wrote down everything Leanne said about Nicole's activities in the weeks between visits. He noted her pathetic grasp, lack of crawling and lack of muscle tone. Leanne did cope, though. I think she even salvaged something from her situation through the interaction with the doctors and nurses. Leanne also tried things on her own. She had heard of and implemented a diet called the 'Fergold diet'. But it made no difference.

Nicole was admitted back into hospital at about one year of age. By then we needed a break. She had returned to fitting every day and vomiting. She could stay awake for twenty and thirty hours at a time when they changed her drugs. I'd take her for drives in the car when Leanne couldn't cope. Nicole almost liked her drives in the car as much as her bathes. I'd talk to her and sing and she'd look out the window. She had a sort of half-miserable cry. That was mostly the only sound she made. But she seemed to like the noise and movements of the car. She'd even whined in rhythm sometimes. But I could have imagined that, I was so desperate.

Some nights in summer we walked her around the streets in the pram until the early hours of the morning. One hot summer's night she was so hyperactive after yet another round of drug changes, we strapped her into her pram and walked the streets till dawn. Before I went to work I would call in and look at her in her cot. One morning I found her fitting in silence. Her arms and eyes were flickering and turning in and out, like she was being quietly electrocuted. I just wanted to cry for her. Her silence—more accurately, the sound from her movement—was a warning bell to us that she was

fitting. She didn't make any noises or collapse or jolt. Afterwards she would sometimes make a brief desperate cry that seemed to come from her soul. Then she would always fall into a deep sleep.

In the evenings, she would cry and sleep the night away. I wanted to give her to my mother for a break but Leanne said no. By then Leanne was making all the decisions regarding most things. My advice was not sought. She had irritating cleaning regimes. There was no place to live in the house, no space for living. Spontaneous sparks of rage started flaring up between us. I comforted myself by thinking of the Leanne I fell in love with. I replayed how we made love all the time and how we touched each other, how we only had each other, how we had lived inside our own bubble, and when we were younger we didn't care what anyone thought or said. I replayed that version of Leanne many times in my head and felt those memories in my heart because, like Nicole, that Leanne was also gone.

I told myself, Nicole wasn't gone: she was lost inside herself, trying to get out. For me, letting go of who she could have been and accepting who she had become was a bridge too far. The hardest thing was the lack of emotion on her face. She made an annoying whining sound, but a few years on, even losing the whine seemed a loss. I would hold her up on her feet sometimes and she would jerk as if she was having one big fit, then she would roll over my leg on her back and hang upside down. It was her favourite position. Maybe she did show some feelings and acknowledgement, and maybe she did laugh, but it was lost in the reality of what she had become. Not only did she have the brain injury to contend with, she was heavily drugged as well. I liked cuddling her the most when she was asleep. She couldn't fight or wriggle and I could snuggle her into my chest and put my arms around her.

On her first birthday, the kitchen was full of balloons and streamers and there was a big spread of food after a day's cooking. Both sides of the family were there and a few friends. As we sang 'happy birthday' she wiggled to get out of her chair to chew something on the floor. Leanne said she could have been raised by an incubator. Leanne looked after her all day and night and I did what most dads did: I was the designated play friend for her when I came home from work. She played a little, but mostly as she got older she chewed—everything from windowsills to ashtrays. I wondered if her tongue was the only sensory stimulation she was getting. What if this was it for her? I didn't want to think that way, and it didn't help the situation. I had to believe in her. I had to. The way she looked through us rather than at us, though, was difficult. At that stage she made some sounds but no babbling or talking.

Leanne hated it when other mums came around with their babies, not that it happened much with us being teenagers when we became parents. Nicole would spend the whole time chewing a chair leg totally oblivious to the other children. Leanne took her to a few mums and bubs things but it was confronting to see her lack of progress. A day out with other families was a sinking feeling. We generally vegged out in silence when we got home. As was our way, we never discussed how we felt.

By nineteen months Nicole's fitting had reduced and her EEG scans had improved. Her flaccid toneless shape had morphed into a rigid scrawny body with stiff disjointed movements. However, she did get to her feet and make a few independent steps. She looked like she was standing on a wobble board, or had a broken circuit somewhere; one or both legs would collapse under her at random moments. She went from rolling to walking—she never crawled. She started by taking one or two steps between Leanne and me. It wasn't much, enough for us to say she could walk. We

started using her helmet again. This time it was to try and save her head from any bruising when she fell, but we couldn't protect her face from rolling into things. She always had a healing scar or fresh bruise on her face somewhere. By nearly two years of age she would run and fall from one chair to the next. At two and a half she would run, fall at the end of her run, get up and run again until she fell. From the time she started her run she was ahead of herself and over the next year or so she extended her ability to delay her fall. It was the speed that kept her up. She was too unstable to walk slowly. We thought, with this improvement, she was going to make it. The doctors said we were still in denial. An assessment at that time evaluated Nicole at ten to eleven months in some areas and six to seven months in others. The report's main concern was at Nicole's cut off behaviour and the limited responses she made towards her mother. Leanne said she could be a better mother for Nicole if she had a child that could love her back.

Nicole was a month short of two when Rhiannon was born in July 1980. The doctor spent half an hour reassuring a distraught Leanne, immediately after Rhiannon was born, that she was normal, such was her fear and anxiety. But, you could tell straight away that Rhiannon was no ordinary child. She was petite and symmetrical, beautifully balanced. She was soon making sounds and interacting in a way Nicole could not. On her own, Nicole wasn't so noticeable, but with Rhiannon around she looked like she was drowning. You might say the psychologist's report that we were in denial of Nicole's condition proved to be true, by our astonishment at Rhiannon's rapid development. At those moments when Rhiannon overshadowed Nicole, the pity we focused on Nicole transferred into resentment towards Rhiannon. It was as if she had to hog the limelight, but she didn't. She shone naturally.

After Rhiannon was born, we moved into a farmhouse. I had quit my brainless water board job and started shearing with a local contractor. I could earn better money and I planned to buy a home, plus I could still be home every night. Leanne started weaning Nicole off the drugs. She had recorded every fit and every cluster of fits. Slowly the number in the cluster reduced. When the gap widened between clusters Leanne reduced the medication. Nicole went through waves of hyperactivity and sleeplessness in her withdrawals. She was angry, screamed a lot and at times she was untouchable. We couldn't put her back in hospital because they would put her back on drugs.

Leanne had returned to work, finishing off some basic nurses training. She came home after a night shift to find me still on the couch in yesterday's work clothes, hung over, and Nicole asleep on the lounge room floor. Nicole had wrecked the place and covered the walls with faeces. Rhiannon was too young to get out of her cot and slept through the night. I had to shear sheep the next day and I couldn't work all day and stay awake with Nicole all night. And I couldn't lock her in her room, so I locked the doors to the house. I was angry with Leanne. Why couldn't I work and she do something locally. After Nicole had gone through the drug withdrawals she did improve. I didn't. Leanne finished her course and quit her shift work job because I couldn't stay up all night with Nicole and shear all day. Despite the difficulties of home I had two good shearing seasons around Werribee and saved a deposit for a house.

In August 1981 we bought a Commission house, escaping the field mice and river rats that we had shared our places with. It wasn't much but at least we were out of caravans and farm houses. Leanne's mother cried at the sight of it. Her father turned up with his paint brush and ladder and painted the house. It had a big four car garage that

we later used for Nicole's program. Nicole had just turned three when we moved in and Rhiannon one. Nicole had become, as the doctors predicted, silent. She was emotionally absent, hyperactive. She didn't respond in a personal way or show any feelings.

Rhiannon, on the other hand, had the energy of two; she was spontaneous, and drew attention with her personality and charisma wherever she went. She crawled at four months and walked at eight months. Soon after we moved into the house Rhiannon climbed out of her cot, out the window and was found playing in the sand pit in the back yard. She was so quick. Nicole had been given a series of therapies to help her. They had put splints on her legs and rolled her over a ball. Leanne had taken her to a special playgroup recommended by the Children's Hospital but found it too depressing. The one thing that Nicole had going for her was she had been drug free and fit free for several months. It was about this time that we saw a flyer in one of the hospitals advertising a talk on 'How to Teach Your Brain Injured Child'.

A pond to grow in

The talk on ‘How to Teach Your Brain Injured Child’ had been advertised on posters around the local hospitals. It was being run by Claire and Tim Timmermans, better known in swimming circles for training parents to teach their babies to swim. They had recently returned from a program in America called ‘The Institute for the Achievement of Human Potential’. The Institute taught parents how to teach their brain injured child through a series of radical exercises.

Nicole’s brain injury, it seemed, had stopped the rest of her brain from developing and learning. It made sense that one dysfunction in the brain could stop the non-injured part of the brain from working properly. In Nicole’s case she had severe erratic electrical brain impulses occurring even when she wasn’t fitting and, as we learned years later, a large area of her occipital lobe was damaged. The exercises were designed to build new pathways to do the work of the injured or non-functioning areas. Two things were happening, as I later came to understand. Firstly, other parts of the brain were picking up the role of the damaged parts. Secondly, the brain as a whole was being trained manually to overcome the shutdown effect of the injured area and her erratic electric brain patterns. Nicole had never crawled on her belly or her hands and knees, she couldn’t. She’d learned to roll instead.

The process of improvement through the exercises was explained as a loop or, as I imagined it, an electrical circuit in a house. The electricity going into the brain was through feeling, touching, seeing, tasting, smelling, hearing and balance. The house was

the brain and the light going on was the output or the motor pathways to functioning. The electricity went into the house as energy and was converted into light just like the brain converted feelings, noise, seeing, balance and touch into knowledge, information, talking and actions. What I learned years later was that we were training her cerebellum through the ocular/vestibular process, the eyes and the inner ear. The cerebellum is responsible for the adaptation of sensory information among many other things. It is generally accepted as a key pathway for educational and skill development.

At the end of the talk Mrs Timmermans grabbed us walking out. She seemed very interested when we spoke about Nicole. We organised an interview to see if she was suitable. At the Timmermans' house a few days later, Nicole was her normal dribble-chinned self, hanging upside down on the couch, responding to nothing. Mrs Timmermans had to stop Leanne from answering for her. That didn't go down too well. Mrs Timmermans was showing Nicole a series of different cards and she picked out the letter 'I' hanging upside down off the couch looking vague and disinterested. I was amazed. Leanne said it was a fluke. Mrs Timmermans said she was in there wanting to get out. That was all I needed to hear. I was hooked. Who cares if it doesn't work, I thought. It couldn't hurt her; it didn't involve drugs. I just wanted to feel like I was doing something.

Leanne was apprehensive until Mrs Timmermans said Nicole would not be accepted into kindergarten, based on her level of non-communication and her anti-social hyperactive behaviour. Leanne's face changed. She asked if the patterning exercises would hurt her limbs. The Timmermans said Nicole was flexible enough and it didn't go outside the normal movement range of a child. What about turning a 500 watt globe on and off? Would that injure her eyes? Mr Timmermans said 500 watts was less than a

sunny day. It was no different than leaving a dark room and going into the sunshine. What if rubbing her skin with a scrubbing brush hurts her skin? Don't do it so hard, he said.

When Leanne gave me a certain look I knew she'd agreed. Tim Timmermans then took us through the patterning exercises and the other activities. Claire Timmermans explained the dietary requirements. No dairy products and lots of vitamins, especially vitamin 'c', was the main thrust of the diet. Within a month Nicole's dribbling mouth and mucousy nose had dried up. Scrubbing her tongue with a toothbrush had progressively reduced her chewing chair legs until it eventually stopped altogether.

Despite Leanne's reluctance, we applied for the disability allowance, the price the Timmermans charged. Leanne had, over the years, stubbornly refused to apply for it, despite doctors', social workers' and her mother's encouragement. When I had mentioned it, she asked, 'do you want to live off the profits of her misfortune?', so I dropped it. It always had to be her way. I think she thought if she applied for it, it would mean she would have to acknowledge Nicole had a disability and maybe she would have been stigmatised or set on a pathway mired in bureaucratic red tape, a process she wouldn't be able to control.

The program consisted of three shifts of people. The patterning was manually moving Nicole's arms and legs to simulate commando crawling on a table. There was one person on either side of Nicole moving an arm and a leg and the third person moving the head. In the morning Leanne, a friend and a volunteer came in and they did three twenty minute sessions of patterning. The lunchtime crew was Leanne and two volunteers. In the evening it was Leanne, her mother and me. If I was away another

family member or friend would come over. We scrubbed her tongue with a toothbrush three times a day. In the evening I would turn a 500 watt globe on and off in a blacked out bathroom. I had to wait until her eyes had dilated, forcing her to respond to the stimuli. Nicole was bored and fidgety, but we just pushed through the exercises. We would vigorously rub her body down with a rough towel, three times a day, trying to stimulate her tactile senses. Nicole was slow to react to the scrubbing which meant she didn't have the same sensitivity as other children might have. We had a constant flow of music and foreign languages playing. I never learnt one word and neither did anyone else, including Nicole, but we did it anyway. Nicole was put in the lounge room to sleep on a sheepskin blanket so she could access any family stimulation, rather than be shut out in a bedroom.

We bought Claire's book *How to Teach Your Baby to Swim*. This was something we all enjoyed. We started in the bath blowing bubbles then progressed to the local pool. Eventually we taught Nicole and Rhiannon to dog paddle and roll and swim underwater. They could jump off the edge of the pool, roll on to their backs and kick to the wall. Rhiannon had mastered it in no time at all. When we got to the pool we had a little ritual we went through. We would all hold hands and jump into the deep end and see how long we could stay under. Nicole's hair was like wild seaweed and Rhiannon would streamline for the surface like a little tadpole. Under the water we were a family away from our struggles.

It was about mid 1982. I was back shearing again after the winter break. I had a real problem. When I wasn't shearing, the only work I could get was low-paid casual jobs. I had been earning six dollars an hour on civil construction sites making roads and laying sewage pipes and we were dead broke. I couldn't put more than five dollars of

petrol in the car at any one time. I hated being so poor. I thought if we could get rich enough to fill the car with petrol whenever we wanted, I would be happy with that. I had even started buying cask wine because I couldn't afford beer.

Nicole was three years and ten months. She had been doing the exercises for about four months with no results. We were doing everything we were told. Leanne was in charge and my role was to do the exercises with her. Nicole was sitting on the floor in the lounge room with different shaped blocks and an octagonal ball, which had holes for the corresponding shapes. She had the ball propped between her knees holding a star-shaped block in her hand. The shape slipped. She picked it up, turned the ball until the corresponding hole was nearly at the top and dropped the star shape again and lost her place. She retrieved the star, using her chin to secure it while she turned the ball around.

Feeling frustrated, I went to help. Her clumsy hands were working tirelessly. I switched the light on but she was half under the table and it didn't add light. I couldn't bear watching and I'd stopped helping her long ago. I left and returned a few minutes later. She turned to me, looked, lifted the ball and started babbling. I listened for a few moments without realising what was going on, went into the kitchen and said to Leanne, 'Nicole's trying to tell me something.'

Leanne and I looked at each other and went back into the lounge room. Nicole was still babbling. She was showing us the ball, looking directly at us, making real eye contact. She'd put the star into the hole. Leanne got the notepad out as we were told and wrote down the sounds. She had been silent for nearly a year and suddenly she had started making noise—more than noise, she was communicating. This was the first real connection we'd had with her since she left Bourke more than three and a half years earlier. I thought if she could improve a little she could improve a lot, she could make it.

Why not, I thought. Despite the criticisms we had heard about the program not being proven, that moment convinced me we were on the right track.

When Nicole come out of her vacuum and engaged with us it was the start of her recovery. What it also said to me was I could change, too. I wasn't trapped in the life I was given. My destiny lay in my brain, not my parents or a school's legacy, not in the expectations of those around me. The brain just needed to be patterned to adapt to whatever skill a person wanted to learn. Adapt to a stress rather than learn, because the word learning had a connotation to it that there were levels of intelligence, but the brain is amoral; it just adapts to the stress it is put under. We aren't smart or dumb. This idea eventually became my point of reference. Nothing is fixed. We can change.

Once Nicole started babbling she never stopped. It was like she had been released. Slowly she started forming words but her lips were loose as if she had no lip muscles. When she kissed she slobbered. But she had become very affectionate; I always thought she was saying thank you for getting her out. She was clumsy and tripped a lot but she had started slowing down and could walk rather than run from one station to the next.

Nicole was progressing and the program changed with her improvements. My father made her what the Timmermans called a crawling box. It was about four metres long and only about fifteen centimetres high with a mesh over the top. Nicole had to learn to stay on her belly and commando crawl. She couldn't and wouldn't do it. That was until Rhiannon jumped in. After several failed evenings of trying to get Nicole to do it, Rhiannon showed her how then Nicole followed. Nicole hated it and we had to go along pushing her back down to keep her stomach on the floor. Reluctantly she did it. Then there was a beam, ten metres long, and ten centimetres high and wide, that she had

to walk on every day. She was so bad we had to use a flat piece of ply wood to start practising on. This was for her depth of vision training. She practised this for many years without any substantial improvement. I kept going because I didn't know what other part of the brain was being stressed or benefiting. Later, finding out about the damage to her occipital lobe, her lack of improvement made more sense. The same went for the mini minor tyre obstacle course.

The other activity was a monkey bar. Here she excelled. My father had constructed a purpose-built monkey bar with adjustable sides. We painted the bars different colours and she had to follow the colour sequences we called out. Also she swung from bars in one-two formations, or by threes or any other combination we could make up. Then we did the strangest thing. We hung her upside down and swung her by her feet. She had special shoes and we had a special swivel lock so she wouldn't or couldn't fall. This idea had come from a National Aeronautical Space Agency (NASA). Apparently they had used a space simulator to assess the effects of centrifugal force on dumb people and they had started speaking. Actually they had started swearing. In any case she loved it. Her hair hung down like the mane of a horse and she was as free as a wild pony running through the bush when she was swinging. I hoped she would one day be that free. In a short time she could swing in any formations you told her. She especially loved doing figure eights.

This is how it panned out. In that early period she improved almost every week, especially with her speaking and communicating. She could walk slowly, climb, crawl, swing and do monkey bars, but she had little balance skill or hand-eye coordination. At school she eventually learned to read and write, yet struggled with maths. Later, at high school, she was good at humanities but hopeless in subjects like geography. She was

good at articulating how she felt but had no sense of direction and would get lost in a crowd very easily. Persevering with the things she was no good at like balancing and hand-eye coordination didn't help her hitting a ball but it might have helped in some adaptation to the weaker areas of her education. Despite Nicole not showing improvement in some areas we continued. Even her ability to persevere had improved dramatically. That was a great skill. I wanted to tell the world about the program. I couldn't understand why people weren't flocking to the program. Then I found out why.

Late one evening we had a visit from a teenage girl and her mother who had heard about Nicole. The girl had just had a baby boy who the doctors had said was retarded and recommended the child be put in a home. They came in and we made them a cup of tea. She asked a lot of questions about the exercises. We gave them the phone number of the Timmermans. Their doctors were strongly against the exercises. They said the program had no proof of achieving any real intellectual improvements in retarded children and it appealed to the most desperate and vulnerable people.

I told them what they said about Nicole when she was born and how far she had come. I thought the program should have been on the front page of every newspaper in the country. I couldn't understand why it wasn't. Despite her age, the mother was switched on and as cautious as a desperate young mother with her first child facing a life of retardation could be. Her eyes popped open at the possibilities.

They started the program and as we finished with things like the crawling box we gave them to them. We went along and worked as volunteer patterners for a while, but I dropped off. I can't remember if I missed a few sessions because I was drinking or not. After a few months the doctors said their baby's joints were dislocated from the patterning. They were continuing with the program but their talk barely hid their

distraught feelings. I didn't remember how much help I had promised the night she had come around but maybe I didn't help in the way I said. I never found out.

A few years after they had stopped doing the program, the little boy died. It was a closed funeral so we never got to say goodbye or sorry. I saw the mother up the street many times and often she crossed the road to avoid me. I felt like I was a living memory of the unfulfilled hope they once had for their baby.

Many years later, more than seventeen years after the mother had come to our house that night, I walked into the same aisle as her in Coles. I panicked. I went to turn away to save her any more grief. Before I had turned she smiled at me. Strands of grey had started inching around her still youthful face. We spoke briefly. Her eyes glazed for a moment but then she pulled herself back. She had let go of the past. I went outside and sat in my car and quietly wept. I was not sure why, or for whom.

By the end of 1982 Nicole had improved enough to be accepted into the following year's kindergarten intake. We thought she had made it. The teacher didn't, and she was kicked out after only a few days. She had made massive improvements in her overall abilities and her initial acceptance was validating. Nicole looked normal for the interview and Leanne would have answered most of the questions leaving an impression, without saying it, that Nicole was a little shy or easily distracted; or she would have alluded to her condition by saying she had had some fits when she was a baby. Maybe she would have called them convulsions. Leanne had refused to tell the kinder teacher the full extent of Nicole's past or medical history. She said she didn't want to prejudice her and Leanne felt that if the teacher thought Nicole was alright in the interview, she was ready. And as far as she was concerned that was that. Leanne was

dressed up on Nicole's first day of kinder and she had made Nicole's and Rhiannon's clothes. No matter how broke we were, Leanne always had the kids looking beautiful.

Nicole was no longer floppy or rigid with bruises on her face and sores on her chin. Her helmet and splints for her legs were gone. Every step she took, every word she spoke, every smile she gave, I viewed as miraculous. When Leanne went to collect her on the second day of kinder they said they weren't equipped to cope with her. It was a shock to both of us. She had failed her first real test.

'What did they say, exactly?' I asked when I came home from work.

Leanne didn't turn towards me when she spoke. 'I didn't ask any questions, right. I just brought her home. The teacher is at the kinder until five if you want to speak to her.' Leanne looked out the window lost in her blank stare while she repeatedly wiped down the same part of the sink. We knew each other so well, words didn't mean much. I knew what I had to do.

I rang and was told to come over straight away. As I was heading out the door, Leanne said, 'Don't say too much. Don't blab.'

I figured that was part of the problem. I thought that if the teachers had been a little more prepared for her, they might have been willing to persevere. Nicole did everything we asked of her at home; she was a model child. I kept thinking of the little girl I'd come back home to from Bourke four years ago, and how far she'd come since then. By the time I arrived at the kinder I was wound up like a clock. I'd talked myself into a frenzy. I would do anything for them to keep her. I felt this was the moment that would determine the rest of her life. If she had to go back to a special kinder she was on an institutional path for children with a disability. If she was just given a chance at this

kinder, I was sure she could adapt and work her way into a normal education. She just needed to be given a chance.

At the kindergarten the teacher sat me down. I was as dirty as a chimney sweep. I was working cleaning up old dusty slates that had been taken off roofs. I became aware of myself in her clean feminine kindergarten. A few awkward moments followed while the teacher organised Nicole's enrolment papers. Finally she said, settling herself down. 'Well, Nicole has problems we didn't pick up in the interview. Mr McIntosh does she have any medical problems?'

'She had epilepsy ... sort of.'

The teacher looked through Nicole's application. 'There's nothing written down here about it. We need to know these things. When was the last time she had a fit?'

'A few years ago.'

'What about autism? Has she been checked for that? Because —'

'She's been checked by a million doctors and specialists and had lots of brain scans and she's only got epilepsy. She will improve.' I must have been getting louder and louder because she responded in almost a whispery voice. I thought it might have been a strategy against my loudness. She was right though, I was scared. I did feel under attack, but I wasn't violent, not like that, not towards her anyway, but I could see how she might have been scared of me. Her quiet voice, though, was soothing for me.

'Mr McIntosh, she said almost fairy-like, we can't understand her when she speaks, and I've been teaching for over twenty-five years. She doesn't mix with any of the children and she just gets up and walks out of story time. She walked straight over

the other children today. She's knocked over the bookcase, more than twice every day since she started. She just walks through things. Have you had her eyesight checked?'

'They said she was too difficult to test, but we can try again.'

'She's inside her own little world. Are you sure she hasn't been diagnosed with anything else?'

'No, but she will improve, I know her. She already has improved, a lot.'

The teacher sighed. She put her hand tentatively onto my dusty, sweaty bicep. 'Mr McIntosh, Nicole will be five later this year and she can't even hold a pencil in her hand. Don't you have any pencils or crayons at home? She looked me up and down in my footy shorts and work boots. 'Bogans,' she was thinking. 'I'm sorry, but we're just not set up here for a child with her needs.'

I didn't know what to say. I only had one plan: that she would make it. I knew she would make it. I'd seen the change. She had the ability to learn, but the kinder teacher couldn't see that. Perhaps the stress of the situation had got to Nicole and the teachers. The teacher was describing a Nicole from the past.

'Have you got any colouring pencils at home?' the teacher repeated.

'I don't know.' We'd been so busy doing Nicole's training, I'd never thought of it.

'Pencils are basic things for children of her age, Mr McIntosh. And you know, there are things you can do, some home therapy.'

If she only knew. But I didn't want to tell her about the cross-patterning exercises on the kitchen table. I thought she'd think we were crazy. I remembered what Leanne had said about not saying too much.

'Nicole has very poor hand control,' the teacher went on, 'but she can hold a pencil in a clenched fist. What you need to do is buy some pencils for her and get her drawing circles. A lot of words and shapes can come from a circle.'

I nodded. 'Okay, I'll get some and we'll start practising.'

Her voice softened with compassion, rather than her trying to manage my volatility she had some feeling for our desperate situation. 'Well, what about you try bringing her along for a couple of hours twice a week and we'll see how she goes. What about that?' I felt my chest relax and I started breathing again.

'Thanks, that's great. It'll give her a chance to get used to the kinder, and we'll start her on pencils and practising her writing.'

She walked me to the door and I went straight to the shop and bought crayons and coloured pencils. Then I drove back to the kindergarten to show her. I felt like a fool but I went in and showed her anyway. She smiled politely and said, 'My, Mr McIntosh, you are determined.'

Leanne and I had become accustomed to Nicole's speech and mannerisms. And she, for her part, had adapted to her environment at home more than improved her coordination: she used the furniture as props to run from chair to chair, for example, rather than developing her motor skills. The familiarity of home was holding her back. I would have to find new things to challenge her.

Leanne and I were pretty deflated after the teacher's assessment. We thought Nicole was normal. How far off the mark were we? At least she's still there, I thought, and we can work harder. I did feel a bit down about all the effort we were putting in. I had an imaginary stone grinding-wheel inside my stomach and it never stopped turning. I called it my wheel of determination. I would never give up.

In addition to her other activities and the commando crawling we did pencil training. We made circles and Mrs Worsnop provided some sheets for her homework. As well as that, Leanne introduced flash cards and we practised them before bed. Nicole seemed happier at home than she did going to kinder, which was a worry.

The fights between Nicole and Rhiannon over the flash cards were unresolvable. I couldn't do the reading training with them together because Rhiannon said every single word before Nicole spoke. She couldn't wait her turn; she refused to wait her turn. She had to beat Nicole and although she was not yet three, she made Nicole, who was nearly five, look bad. When I worked with them separately, Rhiannon refused to do it without Nicole. The trouble was Rhiannon's development seemed effortless and I viewed it as normal; Nicole's development was miraculous and that is hard for anyone to compete against.

We started the flash cards with one word on a large piece of white cardboard and a picture on the following card of the word. For example, if I had the word 'moon' on a card it would be followed by another card with the picture of the moon. Leanne did themes and Nicole seemed to adapt well but she was very slow in sounding the words out. The maths cards were a series of red dots on a card from one to a hundred. It was eye recognition. Again we lifted the card, for example, with fifty-five red dots on it and we'd say 'fifty-five' followed by another card showing the numerals.

I started to take Nicole and Rhiannon to walk around different sand pit ledges and bollards and sometimes we walked over rocky or unfamiliar ground, exercising her depth of vision perception. Whatever she did from then on had to be unfamiliar, so I knew she was being challenged. Mrs Worsnop spoke to Leanne a few weeks later and said she had shown some improvement and was allowed to come a few more hours a week. After the first holiday break she was allowed to go full time. I think it was a combination of Mrs Worsnop taking an interest and getting used to her, and Nicole acclimatising to her kinder room. She occasionally walked out of reading time but eventually settled down and didn't knock over the book cabinet again. Unfortunately she never secured a friend at kinder. It was to be her life-long quest.

In May that year Becky was born. Small, but very determined, she proved to be very different than the other two children. Nicole and Rhiannon seemed to be at the polar ends of our family. Becky, from the beginning became her mother's normal child; Rhiannon was in overdrive and Nicole demanding.

I turned up at the hospital in visiting hours still in my dirty work clothes, unshaven and in the middle of a binge. I still cringe at that moment when Leanne's eyes dimmed towards me. With the children billeted, I went on a week-long binge. I seemed to be okay for periods of time then I'd have these horrific bust-outs. I had started hating when I did it and I couldn't see any patterns to it either. It just seemed to come on unexpectedly and when it did I was reckless. I didn't care what anyone thought or said. I was unstoppable in that frame of mind. Getting locked up, smashing the car or some other catastrophe stopped me; it was never my will power or common sense. I had neither in those moods. The remorse afterwards was unbearable. How many times had I said I wouldn't do it again?

The last time I had got that drunk I had fallen into a sort of coma. Leanne was again on a night shift and she made me promise not to drink. After Nicole and Rhiannon were asleep I decided one bottle wouldn't hurt and I would go to bed. No one would be any the wiser. The next morning I woke up from a nightmare. I had dreamed Nicole had locked herself out of the house and was in the street crying. I couldn't wake up to get her. I could hear her but my body felt like it was entombed in concrete. The next morning when I woke I jumped out of bed and raced outside. She wasn't there. Then I realised I must have been dreaming. I went into her bedroom and she wasn't there. I wasn't dreaming. I rushed outside again and panicked. I ran through the house. She sometimes played behind the curtains. She wasn't there. I ran out the back, but the river was behind us. I couldn't bear the thought that she had climbed the fence and drowned in the river. I knew I should have called the police but I couldn't even let my brain think it. If I got out of this I swore I would never drink again. I went into the house, out again to the back yard, ran through the bedrooms and finally, white and weak with shock, I went into my room to put a shirt on. I tossed back the doona to find my clothes and there was Nicole, asleep in her nappy. I was dreaming.

That afternoon a lady who had just moved into the house across the road knocked on our door looking for Leanne. I felt sick. She explained at about three in the morning she had heard a baby crying in the street. Leanne looked at me with daggers. She was worried about the pit-bull dogs that the neighbours had. She got out of bed and brought her in. She said the front door was locked so she tried the back door and it was open. She turned the lights on but no one seemed home. She walked into my bedroom saw me half naked on the bed and panicked. She threw Nicole on the bed and ran out. She was new in the area and didn't want my wife to think she had been visiting me

when she was not home. Leanne and I didn't speak for weeks after that and I stopped drinking again.

Towards the end of that year Mrs Worsnop wasn't sure if she was up to school, but by then, she was on our side. Leanne went to the local doctor to get a referral to the Children's Hospital. The letter described Nicole as a retarded child who was now approaching school age. Couldn't he see how much she had improved? When we read the letter neither of us could say the word. We could never say the word. It was as though we couldn't get the word from our brain to our tongue.

Sitting in the foyer of the doctor's rooms in the Children's Hospital we saw Dr Bryant through the glass window of his office. I was a little excited, hoping he would be shocked or at least surprised at Nicole's improvement. He hadn't changed. He was cautious rather than enthused, and appeared unemotional on Nicole's developments. Later, I would read in the files, that he said Nicole appears to have far fewer problems than originally thought. He noted in his records that she had been on the Glen Doman program for brain-injured children for twenty-two months.

When we mentioned the program he said he knew of it. I was angry. I asked why he didn't tell us about it. He said while it had produced some positive results it hadn't been proven to improve the intelligence of the patients and much of what it based its science on was false. He also went on to say that it was the opinion of many experts that the demands of the program are detrimental to the rest of the family. But he acknowledged she had improved.

What he didn't know then was the Glen Doman program had success in a particular area. A paper on the Doman method was published in a neuroscience journal

years later claiming patients that had vision impairment through a brain injury, not through a problem with the actual eye, had significantly improved using that method.

I think Nicole had a visual deficit problem as a result of the substantial injury to her occipital lobe. That made sense of her knocking over the bookcase at kinder, which we had previously attributed to clumsiness and poor motor control. How could she tell if she wasn't seeing the whole picture when she had never seen the whole picture? I believe not only did we stimulate the learning process in the brain, the brain found a way to compensate both her arrhythmic electrical impulses and the damage to her occipital lobe. It turned out the Education Department can't comment on or assess a child until they are enrolled in a school and that is how Nicole was accepted. We enrolled her.

Towards the end of 1983 I went away for a couple of sheds to get a bit of money to get through Christmas. Maybe I went to have a big drink away from Leanne, rather than take a local job somewhere. I had the worst drinking binge I had been on. I had taken on the North Lavington football club in Albury and got my head kicked in. It was a two-week solid bust. I quit shearing for good and I tried again to give up drinking. I could not trust myself to have one drink anymore. If Nicole was going to school I wanted to do everything for her to make it, so I dedicated myself to her program. It was also my way of staying off the drink.

In December of 1983 I started working on day construction sites digging trenches and laying sewage pipes near home. It was there I befriended the Board of Works inspector. We had met on other sites when I was working in my off season. On this site he invited me in to his caravan for a coffee. He had a girlfriend visit him

sometimes and we'd have a chat. He was a good bloke and later he would play a significant role in my life. He died suddenly a few years later of a heart attack, out doing what he loved, bike riding.

On this job I could be home early every night to do the extra crawling and exercises. We stepped up the crawling to one kilometre a day and I did it with her. I added totem tennis games to Nicole's regime to improve her hand eye coordination skills but despite years of practice she didn't improve one percent. We went to the Brisbane Ranges occasionally and walked up different bush tracks. Later, on weekends and holiday visits to Apollo Bay we would find new tracks to walk. I called them dad's bush adventures. When Becky was old enough she banded together with Rhiannon to refuse to go. They hated them. We also maintained the swimming, which also allowed Nicole to be free, suspended in the water. She and Rhiannon had added somersaults and flips to their underwater swimming and dog paddle. Becky, from almost the beginning, could bob like a cork for hours in the water. More importantly when we were at the pool we seemed to be in a different world. There was no fighting and yelling. There were no problems. It was just our little family under the sea.

Nicole's improvement was undeniable. The family didn't believe that Nicole could read. They thought she had memorised her booklets. Even if that was true, I thought, that's a sign of intelligence. One day we were lost in another suburb looking for a street. Vandals had twisted the street sign upside down, but Nicole had recognised it first. I had to stop the car and turn my head upside down to read it. That wasn't memorised. I smiled at Leanne; she glowered back.

Nicole started school in 1984. What an achievement. We never made much of a fuss, not after our kindergarten experience. Nothing was certain with Nicole but, on this day at least, she looked like a real schoolgirl. She had a green checked uniform on with

white socks and polished Bata black shoes. How we had dreamed of that day. She continued practising with her pencil, reading her readers and doing her exercises. Nicole couldn't skip, jump, run or hit a ball with a bat even when I held the ball by a piece of string. She was good on the monkey bars and she loved the water. On the basis of how much physical exercise she did, her improvement in sport was disastrous and her learning miraculous. That told me we were training the brain academically and the brain injury was still restricting her physical dexterity.

Leanne walked her to school most days. She was a teacher's aide at the same school that year in prep, but not in Nicole's class. She didn't want Nicole to have an aide. And again, she didn't say too much about her past. She didn't want the teachers to pre-judge her. Even with Leanne at the school I couldn't get a handle on Nicole's social status. She never brought a friend home. The year progressed well. When she came home we read her readers and did our crawling, monkey bars, balance beam, swinging upside down and mini minor tyre exercises. Swimming would soon take over the crawling and gymnastics would replace the balance beam. Nicole could walk, run, swim (she was water safe), talk, smile, laugh, converse, argue and fight her sisters. She was all our dreams come true, except she didn't have a single friend at school or at home. By that I mean she hadn't built one relationship on her own or outside of the family. Some of our friends' children befriended her but she wasn't able to attract a friend. It was about that stage Leanne felt that after two and a half years, the Glen Doman Program had run its course. Towards the end of 1984 we ended our involvement with the Timmermans.

I believed in the program, not only because of the obvious improvement in Nicole but also, having performed the crawling and exercises with her, I had felt the

improvement within me. I felt less hyperactive, more centred. The Timmermans had put my end-of-season best and fairest award in football down to the crawling I had done in the program, and so did I.

Nicole came in to my room on my day off to get me up and take her to school. ‘Dad, mum said you have to walk me to school.’ There were no sleep-ins for me. Nicole was shaking me back and forth. ‘Get up, get up, Dad. Come on.’ Nicole leaned her head further forward, her chin poked out a little. Her boyish short hair had replaced her Shirley Temple curls. ‘I have to go to school and you have to take me. Get up.’ I rolled over just to get another thirty seconds with my eyes shut.

I crawled out of bed and mumbled, ‘Keep your hands still when you talk Nikki’. Her forearm was going up and down with her anxiety. She was holding her brown school case in her other hand.

‘Okay, now look at me and try to keep your eyes straight.’ She smiled, eager to please.

Rhiannon came in to show me her hair, which she’d done herself, pulling it into a tight bun. She had on a pinafore dress and was dragging next year’s kinder case around. ‘You look good, darling,’ I said, but turned back to get Nicole looking as straight as possible. The squint in her left eye forced her to turn her face almost sideways which made her eye appear even worse.

‘Face straight, Nicole. It looks like you’re talking to someone on the other side of the room.’ Her lips turned down indignantly and her wrist turned up and her hand twisted out slightly.

‘Come on, Dad, let’s go.’ She negotiated her small hand around my wrist, slipping her fingers into mine. Rhiannon lugged her case back to the living room and sat in her little chair watching TV with her book open. She threw me a big smile. Leanne would drop her and Becky at the babysitter after she put the clothes on the line.

Nicole and I walked through our fibro suburb. One neighbour’s front yard had grass growing over a few diff’s and chassis; the next had award-winning rose bushes. The smell of freshly cut suburban grass whiffed across our path. I had loved the smells of freshly cut hay and silage when I was younger, but the smell of cut grass in the suburbs reminded me of where I was. Caught between the freedom of the bush and the responsibility of my family, I had put the noose of a mortgage and the misery of the suburbs around my own neck. When we reached the cyclone-wire fence at the school, Nicole spotted a few students she knew.

‘That’s far enough.’ She stopped and almost pushed me back. ‘You can go now.’ She quickly kissed me goodbye, shooed me away and ran off with her uncoordinated gait and knocked knees. She yelled in an exuberant voice ‘good morning’ to the group and waved, then turned proudly back to me and grinned triumphantly.

The girls looked at her and turned their backs. Nicole halted. Then she started walking more tentatively. She moved to one side of the group but a knee buckled and she nearly fell. Her smile transformed into a strain on her little face. She straightened and started following them but her fledgling confidence ran out. She leaned over, poked her chin out and tried, ‘Hi’ to the group again.

The little blonde girl on the outside turned round and pulled a retarded face. Nicole standing on the bitumen with her back to me knew I was looking through the caged wire fence. I wanted to turn away and save her further humiliation but I wanted

her to know I was there for her. Dutifully she turned with the slightest of glances and caught my eye. She thought she had let me down because she didn't have any friends but she could never let me down. I wanted to curl her up inside my chest and wrap my arms around her like I did when she was a baby. I couldn't do that anymore. She was on her own. Nicole had come so far in her life, but her life had become so much crueller in ways I could not have possibly imagined.

Get out plan one

In August 1984, not only had I won the local club's best and fairest, I'd beaten the captain coach by a vote for the league's best and fairest, won the premiership and a radio, and got that drunk I was carried out of the pub. I'd woken in my car about five in the afternoon. I had been poured in and driven home because I woke in the back seat. It was several days after the grand final and Leanne had been waiting for me. Leanne had locked me out of the house and told me the only way I would get in is if I bashed the door in. So I gave her what she wanted. I smashed the back door off its hinges. I kicked and rammed it with my shoulder until it buckled and splintered. The residents in the court were on their verandas listening. No one wanted to be seen calling the police, so no one did. After about twenty minutes the door broke off its hinges smashing into the fridge on the other side of the kitchen.

It was my house, I screamed. I could fucken kick it in if I wanted. I was sick of her. Why couldn't she just leave me alone? I could never have any time to myself. She always had to interfere. She'd rung the pub all weekend. When I crossed the threshold into the kitchen, Leanne, to my left, was waiting for me with a bone-handled carving knife raised in the attack position, her eyes full of hate. To my right the children were lined up, dressed in their nighties. Nicole's and Rhiannon's faces were frozen. Little Beck sat sucking her fingers. The fear in their eyes turned my rage to shame.

What had I done? What was I doing to my children? My mind flashed, in those split seconds, through a thousand random images and broken promises. My childhood

was becoming my children's, like my father's life had become mine. It's not what I wanted. I was going to be different. I was all my mother's fears come true and worse.

I woke the next morning from a recurring nightmare. I was trapped inside an endless mire of red-hot fencing wire. I sat up on the couch. The backslapping, cheers and the reliving of the premiership magic moments in the pub were gone. The special handballs, the gutsy dive, the game-changing tackles, had lost their glory. I felt a strange calm. Not the calm of peace you can enjoy after a success. It was more like the calm after a war, when there was nothing left to destroy.

A cold draught poured through the back entrance. I could hear the river gums rustling in the wind and the spinning wheels of a hoon out the front. The bashed-in door was lying on the kitchen floor. A corner of it had ruptured the lino where it hit and the photos of the children on the wall were skewed. In the kitchen I stared into the bashed-in fridge where the door had hit it. I picked up the splintered door and leaned it against the doorframe, straightened the milk-ringed tablecloth. My best and fairest photo with my arms crossed was lying on the table. I felt sick.

The hallway door leading to the children's bedroom creaked open. I turned shamefully. Nicole's face with her soft cheeks and rumpled hair peered out. She grinned towards me. Rhiannon, with Becky sucking her fingers and holding on to Rhiannon's winter nightie, followed. With a book in her hand, Rhiannon smiled sheepishly. 'Are you okay, Daddy?' Being perfect and disturbing nothing she sat on her little chair next to Nicole nursing Becky with the TV on and smiled her cheeky little smile at me as if we had just got home from a family day out, as if all was good with the world. I nodded – I couldn't speak. Right then I knew everything I ever needed to know for the rest of my life. I shouldn't drink. I should never have drunk.

This time I knew I had broken something in Leanne, something that I was never really able to fix. How many times did I promise her I would give up drinking? More importantly, how many times had I promised to never have those bust-outs again? I hated myself for them. Maybe it was a culmination of being married too young, the stress of a sick child on a family, or living in constant fear of Nicole not making it. Or it was the chaos of life and poverty and wanting our own freedom and being underdeveloped as people. Maybe Leanne just gave up on me ever being a real husband. Or maybe it was just one drunk too many. Maybe it was that simple.

I never thought about what I was doing to myself. I never thought that I had broken something in me, crossed a line of no return. I always thought about the effects of my drinking on other people. I didn't realise how I destroyed myself. I lived in emotional chaos but I knew nothing else, until I was no longer in chaos. I knew the chaos I lived in only through the eyes of 'afterwards'. I think, as Nicole recovered, it created space for the next thing wrong to emerge that needed fixing. That was me, my drinking. It was much like an injured person who on inspection feels no pain. After they restart the person's heart they feel their torn flesh; after it is sewn up and bandaged they feel their broken bones; after they are bandaged they feel their own sadness.

I picked up the door I'd kicked in the night before and put it beside the wall and walked out through the space the back door had occupied. I felt like I was escaping the scene of a crime. I glanced across at the garage, where Nicole's exercise equipment was set up. I'd been going so well with not drinking and doing the exercises with her. Concerned with only Leanne's response, I didn't see the danger I was in.

Swirling gusts carrying paper rubbish and topsoil cut through me. I covered the side of my eyes and looked up into the sky, hoping the building site would be rained out

today. In the van I pumped the accelerator half a dozen times, tugged on the choke, turned the ignition on and revved the engine a few times. Before I drove off I glanced towards the house. Rhiannon's face was neatly framed between the curtains, her cheeks chomped into a smile, her blue eyes darkened. She waved her little fingers and tiny palm. Leanne was asleep in Nicole's bed. I didn't know if they'd be there when I came home this time. I drove off through rows of square fibro boxes, back again engulfed by a shadow.

Mum had never championed my old man, except to say, 'he was a good worker'. It had been drilled into us not to drink. It was no life for a wife or a family, she would say. I had listened. I just couldn't seem to do it. I arrived on site two days and a few minutes late for work. I was working for a roofing company, usually cleaning up work sites. We were re-slatting the roof on a mansion in Toorak. The marbled entrance and stairwell alone were bigger than my house.

I was impatient, hyperactive. My brain never stopped, and when I was in overdrive everyone else seemed to be travelling in slow motion. My itinerant shearing years were intense and fitted seamlessly into my nomadic urge. With no qualifications or education, and Nicole's illness ending my shearing career, I'd ended as a casual labourer. Her program had been my focus. As she improved, the program was finishing and I was still a day labourer. I was puzzled. Why couldn't I get ahead? What was wrong with me? She was improving with a brain injury and I was going backwards.

'Hey, Dippy,' the roofer yelled from the roof, 'we need four hundred slates holed before lunch.' He didn't stop what he was doing. 'Daft as a bucket of sheep dip,' I'd overheard him say to another contractor one day, and now I cringed every time I heard the name. How could my children be proud of themselves with a dad like me?

One of the blokes came down the ladder to get more slates. I had replaced him as the rubbish collector and the workplace scapegoat. He had a bad gambling habit but he always managed a soft word for me, or a smile that said I was okay. Not today. He picked up a handful of holed slates, nodded with a vacant look in his eyes and returned to the roof. I'd done it this time.

It wasn't just being late, or missing days. It was the way I destroyed anything good in my life. I wasn't always bad, but I was always a time bomb when I drank. Teachers and bosses over the years had seen potential in me but I'd feel trapped or used by them and self-destruct. It was my way of freeing myself of others expectations.

The slaters worked through lunch and left at a bit after two. No-one said good bye or even looked my way. The only sound of them leaving was the aluminium ladder rubbing against the gutter. I continued working until three that day then headed home. The van's rusted exhaust provided some noisy relief for my brain. By the time I turned into my street I still hadn't found an explanation for my behaviour the night before. I could hardly have been expected to not drink when we won a premiership. I thought it was fair enough to think, after being off the drink for several months and doing all that crawling, that I might have been cured and that this thing inside of me might have gone. I had fragmented memories of victory shouts and songs and brawls but I couldn't piece together a cohesive story. Was the damage that bad? I thought if I can get out of this I will never drink again, for sure this time.

I parked in the drive and walked past the kitchen window. The house had a childless silence about it. This wasn't the first time I'd been through this but I'd never smashed my house up before, never put the kids in danger. I stepped through the doorless back doorway and stood in the kitchen. The photo of Nicole's first day at

kinder was on the wall next to the smashed door. I thought I should cry or feel something. She hadn't taken any furniture, only the children. The house was lifeless. I slid down the wall, sat on the lino and stared into nothingness until it was dark. The thought of Lenny popped into my head. He was a board of works inspector, who had befriended me on a few construction sites when I was laying sewage pipes. He was the only person I knew who admitted to not drinking, I remembered that. He had invited me out months ago. He had asked me about my drinking. I didn't go then, but I thought I'd see if I could catch up with him now. I needed a major get-out-plan and that's all I could think to do.

It was a balmy type of evening for the first week of September in 1984. It was about seven thirty in the evening and it was just dark. I found the place I was looking for. Lenny was my ticket into the meeting. I walked through the back of a churchyard and got my going-out shirt caught in a hedge and stained with a smudge of green. I saw a smaller building with the light on through a window and thought, that's the place.

Looking through the door from the corridor I saw about half a dozen well-dressed men sitting around a long table. Some were more than twice my age, but no Lenny. Maybe I wasn't old enough. I didn't know if there was an age limit. I told myself to just do it and I walked in and sat at the end of the long table. The men kept talking as if I wasn't there. That's how well they knew how I felt. I was impressed with that. I started reading the signs on the wall. I saw the word 'inventory' in a jobs list or something and thought of the cavalry and the French Foreign Legion, with Beau Geste walking blindfolded to the edge of a cliff. Like Beau, I couldn't see the cliff edge either but I thought I was about to fall off one. The men continued talking and laughing. In turn they looked at me and nodded.

A small nervous bloke came over and introduced himself. ‘G’day, I’m Marvin.’

I nodded and said, ‘Hi’.

He asked where I came from? I didn’t say. I didn’t want anyone to know I was here. I asked about Lenny?

He made several attempts to say something, as if every word needed maximum impact. Then he said Lenny didn’t come to this meeting. He said he sometimes goes to North Melbourne. I hadn’t seen Lenny for about six months. Finally, with my lack of response, he said ‘well, okay then.’ He grinned mechanically and sat down.

The oldest man at the meeting was covered in gold necklaces and rings. He was over seventy, a big rangy knock-about bloke. He sprawled his arms out on the table and looked at me. He wouldn’t take his eyes off my eyes. He nodded his head up and down. ‘It can get a lot worse, boy.’

I nodded back. My hands were shaking and I put them under the table, then I sat on them. I wasn’t shaking from grog or withdrawals like you might think if you were sitting in your first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I was shaking because I was nervous.

A woman who looked like a teacher came in and I expected her to head to the whiteboard and start drawing diagrams. Instead she sat at the head of the table and asked the old guy to speak. He talked about a world tour he and his wife had just returned from. I sat feeling hemmed-in, worried that I would be caught out if they asked me to speak. The door, from where I sat, seemed a mile away. The old bloke slowed his speech until I became aware of him staring me down again. I stopped looking at the door. He had been in Pentridge Prison more than twenty-five years ago, he said.

I started to listen.

He had grown up on the streets of Collingwood during the Depression, played footy for Jock McHale, along with all his brothers, and had learned his trade as a safe-cracker in Pentridge. 'Crime's a way of life, you know what I mean? The thrill of a burg is nearly as addictive as drinking, and it's what all yer mates do. We'd all done time and we were all in the trade. I had to leave everything I knew behind.' He scanned the room. 'I've never believed in God but I saw things in Egypt that couldn't have been built by man. He pulled a card out of his wallet and shook it in the air like he was on a picket line. 'I'm still a card-carrying member of the Communist Party.' He rose to his feet and yelled. 'And proud of it.' I was impressed, and a bit scared of him. I'd never met a safe-cracker, a bank robber or a real communist before, except for a boilermaker up the pub.

The next bloke that spoke was ten or twelve years older than me and he looked real mean. He gave a rehearsed speech. He was an organiser with the Painters and Dockers' and had done a few stints in prison but he hadn't been back inside for more than four years. One story he told that did get to me was about his children coming into a Sunday-morning barrel club to find him, and how he couldn't leave. He didn't want to stay there, but he couldn't leave.

I'd done that. I found myself feeling sorry for his wife and children. I'd been in Sunday-morning barrel clubs when the kids had come in to ask me to come home. I hadn't been able to leave either. I'd think Leanne wouldn't leave me alone. Hearing the same story from another person made me feel guilty. I stopped hearing the rest of the story and drifted back into my own guilt ridden past. But for the first time I saw my life through the kids and Leanne's eyes. I felt sick.

Afterwards a thickset, red-faced, raucous bloke came up to talk to me. He'd brought prostitutes home, destroyed half his house and smashed his backhoe bucket

over someone's head. He seemed a good bloke. 'Well, what are you doing here?' he asked. I wasn't sure what to say. I said I hadn't been to Pentridge but I'd been locked up a few times, but that was all at this stage. I found myself trying to qualify. I asked 'Do you know a bloke called Lenny?'

'Lenny,' Bob said, smiling. 'He did a lot of time, too, you know.'

That squeaky, clean-freak perfectionist had been in prison? Great, I'll never get accepted, I thought. 'Where is he?'

'He doesn't come here. Well, he doesn't particularly like some people around here.' He lifted his head slightly to the left. 'Not everyone who comes here is a real alcoholic you know.' I assumed from his head gesture that he was talking about Marvin, the bloke who'd introduced himself. The chairwoman made an announcement and broke the conversation up. She said there was a meeting the next night at Ardeer, a suburb on the western rim of Melbourne. As the crowd re-mingled I snuck out just as I had entered. I thought I had about fifteen or twenty years of drinking left before I needed to come back. I went home, lay in bed consumed by my past and by what would happen next. I woke to the morgueish silence of a home with no children, no exercises, no action. I spent a morose day at work shovelling broken slates off stripped rooves and had porridge for dinner. The phone didn't ring with concerned friends or family. By seven o'clock that night I thought, why not, I had nowhere else to go and went to Ardeer. Maybe Lenny'd be there. I didn't realise there were so many meetings. I didn't think I needed it but if AA could stop those blokes from drinking it should be able to help me. I figured six months off the grog should be enough time to fix my life up and get things right again with Leanne.

I slipped through the doorway at Ardeer and into a homely room with some twenty people. Chairs were being positioned in neat rows; signs were placed around the room. Several small groups were immersed in conversation, sipping compulsively from coffee mugs. No Lenny. A woman came to welcome me. She looked like someone's mother, not some dero or bank robber or murderer. She made me a coffee then organised the meeting and selected the chairman.

The first person called was a woman. She looked like a female soak and I could easily imagine her sitting with the men in a bar, past her use-by date, flirting for a drink. I could picture it because I'd seen it. She was overdressed and over-indignant. From queen of the late night bars she had progressed to the queen of A.A. She was a 'real' alcoholic and that meant in here she was a 'somebody'. When she mentioned losing a baby, she changed. She didn't blame anyone or anything; it was just part of what happened to her.

I had a flashback to a red bath full of my brothers and bubbles. My mother dived in, holding us one at a time crying, holding her fat belly. She kept saying something's wrong with my baby. She struggled down and sat beside each of our beds to say our nightly prayer and we'd pray in vain for the baby that came to be known as Peter number one. Four years later mum had another baby and she called him Peter as well. So the still-born baby became Peter number one and the second Peter became Peter number two.

It wasn't until mum came home from hospital and walked through the smoked glass doors like a princess, dressed in her bluebird summer nightie and dressing gown that I realised there was no baby. We were dragged off her. She was too fragile for the roughhouse tactics of the three older boys. She chose the youngest to nurse. We moved from Newcastle to Melbourne soon after. Four years later she had Peter number two.

The next three speakers were men who lived in special accommodation housing. Their wrinkled Saint Vinnie's shirts and jackets with Saint Christopher medals and Christian crosses hanging on the outside didn't do it for me. I thought they were one rung off the gutter, deluding themselves with talk of love and God. I'd kill myself if I was them. I wanted to puke. After the meeting, I asked the bloke on the door, the bouncer I thought, if he knew Lenny. He said he did but he didn't come to this meeting often because he didn't like some of the people. I wondered if he liked anyone.

I hadn't heard from Leanne and the girls or any of my family. I was self-absorbed and didn't notice or care that no one was speaking to me at work. Fragmented thoughts and memories flooded through my mind while I drove around. It would take years to curb my obsessive thinking and many more years after that to learn not thinking. I started writing my thoughts down as I drove. It felt like I was channelling streams of knowledge that seemed important at that time. The only thing I had to write on were the used West Gate Bridge tickets scattered on the floor and I only had a carpenter's pencil to write with. I'd pull over and scribble madly or when I was stopped at traffic lights, a book full of thoughts would go through my brain. At the end of a week my truck was full of scattered bridge tickets with indecipherable notes written over them. I was manic.

With no children in the house when I went to bed, it felt like a Sunday night in the shearing huts all over again. I always returned to this black hole, after a binge. The morning after the Ardeer meeting I was woken by pots and dishes clanging in the kitchen, the washing machine's spin cycle and the fly-wire screen door banging. They were back. It was sort of good to hear Leanne banging around in the kitchen and I'd get something different to eat than baked beans and porridge. If I could just get out of this

one, I thought. She'd give me the cold angry stares for a few days and the silent treatment for a while and I would have to wear it. I went to work without actually setting eyes on her. So before the silent treatment I would have the 'you don't exist treatment'.

Leanne, as expected, wasn't home when I returned after work. She had gone somewhere with the kids. I went out again. This time the meeting was at the Western General Hospital in Footscray. The room was a cross between a church and a football club. Rules and motivational jargon hung around the room. I was washed and in good casuals. Bob, the backhoe operator, who I'd met at the Laverton meeting, was already in the room drinking a coffee. 'Still coming, hey,' he said.

Then Lenny walked through the door. I was happy to see his familiar, tight-faced smile under his distinguished grey hair. He said 'You made it, son. Good for you.'

'You haven't yet,' Bob said.

'I went to Ardeer last night,' I told Lenny after Bob moved away.

'I know.' He smiled again. 'How're you going?'

'Heard you won the best and fairest.'

I cringed. I could see it. "Dennis McIntosh kicked out of AA—not a 'real' alcoholic. Not bad enough. I thought if I'd only been to prison or drunk a bit of metho or spent a night in the Gill Memorial I might have been more acceptable. Failure had credibility in A.A., not success. I learned that very quickly.

The coach of the football team introduced me as 'the biggest drunk in the club' at Presentation Night. I had stopped drinking by then and wanted to die. Yeah, I

thought, I had won a radio and ended up in A.A., that's how well I went. I deeply, deeply regretted the way I continually fucked-up my life and my family's. I said to Lenny, 'Yeah but I really did it this time.'

'Well, don't worry about it now. You don't have to wait until you finish at the end of the line to stop drinking. Just keep coming to the meetings even if you don't like them.' I thought I was probably on the second or third station with my drinking. More at the start of the line compared to the other people I'd heard in the meetings. I wasn't that bad. I used to say I wasn't hurting anybody else. What I didn't realise was my children were probably on the eighth station and my wife the ninth station. I was already affecting my kids' esteem, training them into accepting less, being forgotten, being let down. I was giving them a bad model of a man, a father and of a husband. A model they might take into their later relationships. I wasn't building their worthiness and giving them a feeling of hope for the future. I was giving them an expectation of doom. For all the good things we had done with Nicole I destroyed so many unseen things through drinking.

'Yeah, I want to stop. Leanne's really sick of it.'

'How're things at home?'

I looked down into the carpet. 'Not bad, you know. Okay.'

'How're things at home?' He repeated.

'Pretty shithouse. I think it's over this time.' I couldn't tell Lenny about kicking the back door in. Not yet.

'Would you like me to talk to her?'

‘No. She doesn’t know I’m coming.’ I felt guilty then, because I was just using Lenny as an in, into AA I thought, I will be gone in six months.

I told him I had spoken to Marvin from the Laverton meeting last Tuesday night.

‘Him.’ Lenny’s mouth soured. He mumbled something to the effect that Marvin wasn’t a real alcoholic and then said, ‘Not everyone in AA’s an alcoholic, you know.’

Was he trying to tell me I wasn’t a real alcoholic, or not? Didn’t they realise how embarrassing it was to come to these places. Some even thought they’d been selected by God to be there. Lenny said to come over to the North Melbourne meeting on Sunday night. I thought people must decide whether you were an alcoholic or not and invite you to join their group. In the space of thirty seconds I had gone from feeling a bit indignant that he thought I wasn’t bad enough to be regarded as a real alcoholic to feeling a bit cocky that he wanted me in his group.

The main speaker at the hospital meeting that night was an ex-jockey who said he’d grown up loving horses. I listened a little more intently. I too had grown up loving horses and wanting a life on the land. The speaker had done track work around Bendigo until he became too heavy, then he came to the city and took a job with the railways. He married his childhood sweetheart and they settled in the suburbs and had a couple of children. His decline into alcoholism began with drunken Friday nights followed by swearing off grog the morning after. Soon his drinking binges had morphed from one or two days to four or five days, accompanied by borrowing money from workmates to get through until payday.

I thought I was being set up.

Then he was drinking alone, and the fights at home became more constant. There were small separations, with his wife and kids disappearing to her parents' place, and he started staying with mates for a few days or so. Some mornings he would wake to find a hole in the plaster wall, or a smashed door.

I thought, this can't be for real. I glanced around the room to see who was looking at me. I thought they must have been waiting for me to identify with the jockey and join the club. That's how they did it. But no one was looking at me. The bloke kept talking— said he'd changed drinks, got on to cheaper wine, that beer was like water. He started being late for work, then missing days.

But it was what came next that really shocked me. He told my future and I believed him. He was sacked from his job, his wife asked him to leave for good, and he ended up at a mate's place for a while, on the dole. From there his decline was short and sharp. He got accommodation in a halfway house but was expelled for fighting and found himself at the Gill Memorial, the Salvos. The wine got cheaper; then it was methylated spirits, followed by squats, and finally sleeping in cardboard boxes.

Soon after, he was admitted to the Smith Street Clinic to dry out, followed by a stint in Pleasant View. It was there he found Alcoholics Anonymous. He said that he never did get his family or his job back. He mused that after he'd left his family he'd been in an alcoholic haze, oblivious to time. But on recounting, he'd probably been on skid row for less than a year. His recovery, he emphasized, had taken years. I thought this bloke had walked off the same cliff that I was standing on.

He had met a new partner and was about to begin a full-time job in the country. After five years he was starting to come good. 'Five years' I thought, I only have six months. When he'd finished talking he looked at Lenny and they nodded to each other.

Instead of thinking Lenny had been the one who'd set me up, Lenny, I thought, was a power broker.

After the meeting I was bouncing around like a basketball. A surge of electrical energy was running through my body, and continued for days. Leanne was back from her night out when I bounced into the house. I could see that her curiosity was eating into her rage. She looked me up and down trying to smell my breath without getting too close. After her visual interrogation she went again to Nicole's room. Round one was over: I existed again.

The next afternoon, when I came home from work, Rhiannon and Nicole were playing grown-ups. Rhiannon was playing me, wearing a pair of my old shearing dungarees, a work shirt and holding a can of drink in her hand, pretending to be drunk. Nicole, playing her mother, was going crook at me. Leanne, who was watching, laughed. My heart skipped a beat. I hoped I wasn't too late. Was their future already cast into a drinking culture? I always said my drinking didn't hurt anyone. But my actions were influencing my unsuspecting children, emotionally enrolling them into my tumultuous world and burning the heart out of Leanne's love for me. I didn't laugh.

I went out again on the Friday night after the hospital meeting. It was my fourth meeting since Tuesday night. It was as though I'd walked off the street into an underworld. It was full of characters and stories. There was a meeting held in a CWA hall in Footscray. I heard someone say at the meeting last night, 'See you at Footscray.' I didn't know whether I was expected to be there? By then, I didn't want to miss out on something.

Being early, I sat in the car waiting for the start time. Black smoke blew out of a bus leaving the Hyde street bus stop and when it cleared I saw an old man hunched

down in a wheelchair. He was just sitting there, chomping his flabby chops. Then he started to push the wheels and after one push he rested. He pushed again. Painstakingly he edged along the footpath. I went into the meeting and thought no more about him, until he came through the door and parked up the back in silence.

He wore a pale blue suit with stains on it and a yellowed white shirt, both about three sizes too big for his gaunt, ravaged body. The collars and cuffs on his jacket and shirt were frayed. He had hanging skin for a neck, his eyes were cloudy and he sat staring forward, motionless.

A wharfie was the main speaker that night. He said he'd spent most of his life thinking that his drinking didn't hurt anybody. About six months ago, he was drunk in the kitchen at midnight when the police raided his house looking for stolen goods. They pulled his wife and children out of bed and trashed their rooms. It wasn't the actual drinking, he said, that got him; it was what he was doing to earn money. That night he saw how he was harming his family.

He said he didn't want to end up like his father. The wharfie had spent his twenty-first^t birthday in prison. Prison I could see was a badge of honour in here. I didn't have any badges of honour. I only had shame. People wanted to position themselves as notorious rather than weak or flawed and so did I. A few years later he recognised his old man when he walked into a pub. His father bought him a beer and left. The last time he'd seen him before that was when he was about eight and his family had visited him in a mental institution. Now he thought that his father might have been an alcoholic, not insane. The wharfie had been in AA for six months. Said he wanted to give his kids a better life. That's all I needed to hear. If a wharfie can do it, so can I. Six months like this and I should be flying.

I spoke to him after the meeting and said how much I hated my father too. He said he didn't hate his father, he never really knew him. I said to him that I'd never been to prison. He said going to prison wasn't that bad; letting your kids down could be a lot worse. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'See ya, sonner.' Strangely, the wharfie made me feel better about my shame by ranking it above prison. He validated my shameful feelings and I was able to own them rather than torture myself with them. He made me feel I was in the right place and that I had a valid claim to being there. Unworthiness makes you feel unworthy, even in AA.

Whether I was high or low from the meetings when I went to bed I couldn't sleep. My head spun with conversations and scenarios. The next day I found it difficult to get going again. Buoyed by the stories in the meetings, I took Nicole to the oval on the weekend, where we crawled around on our stomachs, swimming through the grass. I did this to lengthen the distance she covered. We could do up to a kilometre in the house but only in short bursts. I wanted her to stretch out. It was like a long distance crawl and we still walked new tracks when we could find them. A new track spelt brain training to me. She was my inspiration and I wasn't prepared to stop working on her. In fact, I kept going for another fifteen years. I was her coach and that's how I went from a shearer to eventually a swimming coach.

After a few weeks of attending meetings I went to Lenny's North Melbourne group. It was in a dingy old bluestone hall at the back of a church, with an entrance down a side alley. The room was dimly lit, with water stains blotching sections of the floorboards. It was a no hugs and kisses meeting, unlike the others. Mostly men attended and most had been in prison. They were wary of each other. Lenny was faithfully waiting for me. He was to be that night's speaker. He'd been in AA for over

twenty years but had broken out a few times. He'd been back in for about eight years now. He told me he knew when he'd finally had his last drink.

He had also done stints in places like Pleasant View and Royal Park. Quite a few people at the meetings had mentioned these places. I was jealous. I felt like I'd missed out on all the fun of being an alcoholic. I thought Pleasant View sounded like some type of holiday resort, then I found out it was a hospital for alcoholics and Royal Park was an insane asylum. If I had of known of other places I could have gone for help, I think I would have tried them first because AA had such a cringe factor. I was getting hooked but the high I had experienced at the hospital meeting the other night was starting to wane. I imagined being sick in a hospital bed with nurses around me. That seemed much more suited to me. I could see Leanne and the kids holding hands coming into my ward, Leanne feeling guilty for locking me out of the house, and saying it was all her fault. She always had her remorseful period after I had a bust out. She always felt some responsibility for my actions; after all she was in charge of me, of everything. The kids could sit on my bed, while I ate dinner.

Then the chairman broke my daydreaming by calling on me to speak. I stood up. I didn't think I could say no, didn't think I had a choice. All the speakers had declared their allegiance, now it was my turn. Walking to the front of the hall, I felt like I was going to my first confession. My brain went fuzzy. I didn't have a story. I was only coming for six months. I was an imposter. Right up until a few weeks ago I had associated being an alcoholic with leprosy. But as I reached the front and turned around I was transformed. I didn't just want to be an alcoholic; I wanted to be a 'real' alcoholic.

I looked out over the group. I thought of the honesty of other speakers I'd heard in various meetings. I couldn't fool these people. I didn't want to. My mind quietened. I put my head down and was overwhelmed with waves of guilt about my drinking. Hearing parts of my life through the eyes of other people's lives had affected me. I went back to my last night on the grog. This was confession.

Nothing about my drinking had been deliberate, and even though I didn't really understand it or myself, I knew the people sitting in front of me did. For every rule I'd broken, for every teacher I'd fought with, every school I'd been suspended or expelled from, every wrong thing I'd done and thought I'd got away with, I knew, standing in front of these people, that I hadn't got away with anything. I had no discipline and no one could discipline me. I'd wanted someone to beat me, push me in the right direction. I think I wanted someone to actually fight for me. It was alcohol that had beaten me.

I thought back to my last drinking binge and the look on Leanne's face as she'd waited for me with a knife in her hand. I thought back further to our teenage years when a sparkle in her eye would light up when she saw me as she got off the school bus on those summer days, and when we met in the late evenings down by the pier as I waited for her to escape her parents. We had been so in love, and after we were married and Nicole was born we had been in a sort of heaven. I'd lost it all. I'd lost her.

I didn't speak for too long at that meeting. I said I wanted to straighten out my life, put things right with my wife. I'd said sorry to her so often it didn't mean anything. After I sat down, apart from feeling self-conscious, I felt relieved and humbled. The brick-walls I had built around me came down a little for that moment. For the first time in a long time I felt on the right track and I couldn't remember the last time I had been this honest with myself. That night opened up a line of thinking that I had not had

access to before. AA imagined a future for me that I could not have envisaged alone. Its 'vision' of the future was a good life without drinking. I had only heard of biblical characters having visions and I had never thought of life without drinking as a good life. That was my insanity.

I came to see alcoholism as a form of a brain injury. My brain needed rewiring. I thought of it like that obviously because of the training I had had with Nicole's program. But it was an image I could use and understand. I didn't need to learn to walk or talk; I needed to re-pattern my thinking and my emotional responses to people, places and things. It was the thinking that preceded a drink that was the killer. I couldn't listen to my own thoughts and trust my feelings because they were patterned in a skewed way and it wasn't just from my drinking years, rather it was from my whole life, going back to my childhood, teenage years and my dysfunctional school experiences as well. I had to build new neurological pathways by manually choosing a different way to think and feel about things, and at the same time blocking my natural reactions. I had a lot of anger. I am always capable of reverting back to old patterns, especially if I am feeling out of my depth or my self-esteem has been knocked. Practising being out of my depth and managing it is also a strategy to strengthen my mind. My greatest protection against regression is having a go in life. That is more important than winning or losing, or striving for happiness or being rich. Do what gives me life.

After the meeting, Lenny asked if I could give Ricky, an old Irishman, a lift home. A spray painter with the government's ordinance factory, he wore his green work clothes to the meeting. I liked that. I could tell straight away that he was sharp and down to earth. On the way home in the car Ricky was talking, and I started thinking of what I was going to drink on grand final day and my birthday. It wasn't as if the last two hours

didn't exist anymore. It was the polar nature of my life, swinging wildly from one extreme to the other just driving home. I didn't want to commit to anything. I didn't want to be trapped in AA. I didn't trust myself to go the distance. The more questions Ricky asked the more I felt hemmed in. I hadn't let anyone this close to me before. I felt like a wild animal caught in a cage and couldn't wait to get him out of my car. Sensing my withdrawal, Ricky sliding off the seat said 'Thanks for the lift, son.' Before he shut the door, he added, 'if you're still around, might see you another time'.

Back at home, Leanne cooked, cleaned and clothed the children. I received my directions from the fridge list sheet as was usual. For my part, I went to work, paid the house payments and bills on time, came home after work, did Nicole's exercises. I still kept the crawling going, and attended meetings, lots of meetings. Leanne had never known me as a non-drinker and along with her father's drinking had an entire emotional life built around a drinker. Our roles became robotic in the absence of knowing how to act with each other. I met up with Ricky again and we started going to the meetings together. At meetings I felt wanted and I enjoyed Ricky's company. At home I felt like a boarder. I needed to do something to start feeling like I belonged there. I decided to start a garden out the front. Leanne said that was her garden. I went to the backyard and she said the same thing. I eventually negotiated a one metre square piece of sun-deprived clay pan beside the cubby hut. With some top soil and colourful seedlings I had a beginning.

The next day the seedlings had been shifted and watered. I went to help with the dishes. Leanne accused me of trying to steal her life. She even followed me up the street when I went to buy some clothes. She said that was her job. She labelled all the roles in the house as hers. From being accused of not doing anything, I was then not allowed to

do anything. I was so caught up in Leanne's need to be in charge of everything that I ended up secretly washing the car for her. I thought she might be pleased, except it was my car.

In the end her mood had been 'nothingness' towards me. There was no anger and no communication. I realised I had been the one who changed, but maybe our circumstances had been like this for longer than I had realised. I left for the meetings before dinner and when I returned home I ate alone and went to bed. My early fears for our relationship were confirmed. Leanne didn't care anymore. It had probably happened a long time ago. I could just see it now.

A few months later, I suggested she come with me to a meeting. She refused. Ricky asked if she had a drinking problem.

I said 'no.'

'Then she doesn't need the meetings, does she?'

What was that about, I thought.

She totally rejected the idea that I'd been an alcoholic. She said I was a drunken no-hoper and through gritted teeth said 'You have to pay, you have to fucken pay. Don't think you can get out of it this easy, you asshole.' She did reluctantly agree to come with me to the drug and alcohol department at St Vincent's Hospital. The idea of me having something wrong with me seemed to flip me from villain to victim in her eyes. I thought I needed to be punished too. I still thought it was self-inflicted. I was yet to grasp the damage I had inflicted on myself. I didn't stay off the alcohol because I went from being bad to good. I never drank again because I realised I had been unwell, trapped in an addiction and when offered a way out I took it. I could see what I was

doing to myself and my family. Faced with the chance for freedom, real freedom, I took it: who wouldn't?

Ricky had recommended I have a check-up at the drug and alcohol department at St Vincent's Hospital. It had a good reputation for helping people. Leanne had said she couldn't stand all my ups and downs any more. In her opinion I was worse off the grog than on it. She'd had enough and bought a couple of bottles of beer for me to drink. At least I wasn't boring or nutty like I had become off the drink.

I think she went as some sort of closure and it was better than attending any embarrassing meetings. It riled her when I said she was sick. In fact, I said, she was that sick she didn't know it. And it didn't help when I said I wanted to manage the money. She'd been in charge for the last seven years and we had nothing.

She was interviewed separately by the doctor before I was interviewed.

'Do you talk to yourself much?' the doctor asked me.

What a question. I told her I didn't.

'According to your wife, you walk around the house talking to yourself. Do you talk to yourself when you're watching television?'

'Jesus – I don't.'

The doctor looked at her sheet, looked back up at me. 'Your wife claims you also sit on the end of the couch endlessly talking to yourself.'

'Fucken hell,' I mumbled to myself. Next the doctor wanted to know how many A.A. meetings I went to each week.

‘Five or six,’ I said.

‘Why do you go to so many?’ She looked at me, I thought, judgmentally. She sounded just like Leanne. Afterwards, I realised she was reproducing the arguments we had at home to see how they played out. I wasn’t looking too good at this point.

‘What’s the problem? I’m not drinking.’

‘Yes, and that’s good, but are you at meetings every night of the week?’

‘No, I do some day meetings on the weekends.’

‘Can you explain why you go so often?’

‘Because that’s what they said to do.’

‘Who said?’

‘Listen, I can go to as many meetings as I like, it’s up to me. What’s so wrong with that? Would you prefer I drank instead?’

She gave a fake smile. ‘What makes you think you’re an alcoholic? Have you been diagnosed by a doctor?’

I got very agitated. How did I know I was an alcoholic? I didn’t know officially, I said. ‘I haven’t been diagnosed.’

‘Have you been hospitalised for alcoholism?’

‘No,’ I said. Fuck, my anger was rising and I wanted to make a good impression. I thought I was being secretly videoed and recorded.

My feelings never existed. It was one of Leanne's strategies. If I said I was an alcoholic, for example, she'd say I wasn't that bad. If I said I wasn't an alcoholic she'd say I was an alcoholic. Whatever I was, I wasn't.

Once she'd finished filling in her sheet I asked her if she thought I was a schizophrenic. She said no. What about a psychopath? She looked puzzled. Where were these questions coming from? I said I'd heard people mention them at meetings and saw those words in pamphlets. I went to a library and looked up the meanings. She told me I wasn't anywhere near well enough to read anything for at least twelve months. At the end of the consultation, the doctor said she didn't see much future for us and suggested I come back on my own.

The next week Dr Addis took a scan of my brain and checked out my stomach. She said sometimes alcoholics think they have a tumour in their brain that causes their drinking, and she smiled. She seemed a different person on the second meeting. She strongly recommended I take a course of medication to ease my anger. I said I wasn't angry and I had never taken drugs. She said sometimes people had the wrong idea about medication. I wouldn't budge. I couldn't risk it. I knew I'd do anything to escape the way I was feeling. I rang Ricky and he said I was wise to not take the medication if I felt like that. 'A lot do take it. Some need it,' he said, 'and some take advantage of it.'

If Leanne took over the relationship when we returned from Bourke, she was determined to reinforce her power in it now. Stopping drinking had unsettled the balance. Her latest thing was getting dressed up and going out. I wasn't invited: too boring. I stayed home and looked after the children. She said she felt old at twenty-four and wanted some fun in her life. She wanted to feel young again.

Ricky said she was giving me the children to care for and that was a privilege. After a few more months she said she wanted me to leave. The meetings, she said, had become another obsession. It didn't add up. All the years of drinking and disruption and when I'd finally stopped drinking she wanted out. We made Christmas exciting for the kids. We were good at pretending. After Christmas I retrieved my shearing swag and put a few things in it. The kids were away at their grandparents so there were no goodbyes. I found a place for rent about twenty minutes from our home in North Altona, close to work and meetings. It was a small fibro shed with a kitchenette and shower, an all-in-one room, tucked in behind a vegetable patch. It was a hot and sticky day in mid-January of 1985 when I moved.

The tide goes out

I drove home to the shed I was living in after visiting the children. I kept thinking things would work out. That they would get better soon, but they weren't. I thought I would have been better after a week off the grog, and cured after six months. I was going backwards and couldn't stop it. I lay on my bed back at the shed and traced the outline of the little stick figures on the crayon drawing the kids had given me. Rhiannon had drawn Nicole in her crawling position and there were swings and some grass, even a little dog in the background. Everything I had stopped drinking for hadn't eventuated. I'd fallen down a crevice and couldn't get my life back.

I couldn't talk to people anymore. The last time I worked with someone I dropped a load of bricks on their hands and they refused to work with me. I told Dr Addis that and she just said, 'Well, it worked.' Sometimes I couldn't remember what I had to do next. I'd drive to work instead of home or find myself on a wrong freeway going to a wrong place. People said I seemed morose. They thought the funny bloke they knew had disappeared. But I had been a clown masking another life. I could be full of hope in a meeting and half an hour later want to kill myself. I couldn't sleep at night and couldn't get out of bed in the mornings; some days it was after eleven before I woke up. My head was like lead in the morning.

Going from job to job in the past, always on the move, and my drinking, my fucking drinking, getting a drink, not having a drink, giving up drinking, making up for what I did when I was drunk, I hated it. Losing my children and my marriage, the things

I feared most, had happened. I should try being frightened of being rich and happy. My house of straw had collapsed listening to the lives of other people at the meetings. The façade that was me fell apart and the depression that I think I suffered from as a child, the shadow I had run from, had finally caught up with me. I couldn't fight it anymore. I'd had enough. I was tired of trying. I wanted to shut my eyes and feel peace. I didn't want to wake up. And on that thought I fell into a deep sleep.

'Cheer up, Dippy, you look like you want to neck yourself,' the runtish Scottish plumber's sharp guttural voice pierced through the broken slates crackling under my feet. He was leaning against a wall of the roofing factory, steam coming from his coffee and smoke from his cigarette. The other men laughed. The factory was in Willtona, an industrial estate between Williamstown and Altona a few minutes from where I was now living. I hadn't had a drink for a little over seven months.

The roof contractors called in when they wanted supplies or details on a new job. The regular casuals were dispatched from the factory site every morning. I grabbed a coffee, walked out, got into my truck and left. Now that I wasn't drinking, I didn't like the way I was laughed at. I hadn't realised how much like an idiot people treated me. I hated it. Without my children and the bustle of home I felt stripped bare and trapped inside myself.

I arrived on a site at the mid-morning break and started clearing up the rusted corrugated sheets and broken slates. The boys on the roof looked down and yelled, 'Hey Dippy, had a drink yet?' laughed and threw their empty Coke cans and hamburger wrappers down for me to pick up. I picked up their rubbish and put it on the truck. Some of those men on the roof had been hired after me and now they were roofers. I

was twenty-six years old and going nowhere. Other people at the meetings seemed to be progressing. Once I had a full load on the truck I roped the old sheet roofing over the top of the rubbish and decided to go to the lunchtime meeting in the 'Gallery' at Saint Francis Church in the city. I had twenty minutes to get there before it started. It was my lunch break and the bosses had given me some leeway. I started to think AA was the problem. I didn't seem this bad before I went to the meetings. I should come back in ten years, when it would be easier to accept that I was an alcoholic. The problem was I couldn't accept that I was an alcoholic. I was too young to be going through all this.

AA was supposed to be the supplier of miracles. I thought I'd be somewhere extraordinary by now; instead, I'd been kicked out of home and was dragging my arse around. Many people at the meetings didn't have a job, and seemed to think I wasn't that bad because I could work – another reason I wasn't a 'real' alcoholic. I got a grip on myself. I had to control my mind, not let my mind control me. The desire to drink didn't come as a desire to drink. It came as excuses, resentments, justifications. It was a war inside my head. My mind was telling me one thing and I was trying to tell myself not to listen to it. Drink had always been the answer; now it was the easy way out and the pull was powerful. Did I destroy myself before others did it for me? Did I think that's what I deserved? Was I addicted to self-destruction?

I thought: I'll blow AA anyway – why suffer through it now when I can have a drink? I kept my foot on the accelerator. Drinking was always the answer to everything from a reward for a hard day's work to an escape from people. According to the old man, I was born without a stop button. Drinking had stopped me. I was coming down Lonsdale Street with a maximum load on the truck when I spotted a park, did a U-turn past the traffic lights in front of Myer, fitted straight into the loading zone and headed

for the meeting. I passed two stiffs from the Gill Memorial. It was a rooming house for derelicts just around the corner. They were sitting on a bench and I felt angry towards them. I couldn't help myself, I was jealous that they could drink and I couldn't. Why should I stop drinking when they were allowed to drink? Why didn't they have to go to AA? I went up and asked them if they wanted to come to the meeting.

They were sharing a bottle in the classic brown paper bag. The first thing I noticed was how brain damaged they were. They could hardly string two words together and their eyes were ravaged and disfigured, not so much from drinking that day or that week, or from years of sleeping rough—I'd seen plenty of that—but from a damaged brain. I knew that too. One of them mumbled, 'Nah, I'm not that bad.' He pointed to his mate. 'He's worse than me, I only have a couple.' I was stunned. I thought, that's what I say. Was the only difference between me and them time? Was this my big chance. From where I was, it didn't feel like it, so I went to the meeting. I went into the building and down the stairs, squeezed my way through the crowd to get a coffee, and sat down. There were familiar faces here but not enough to have to shake hands. I liked that. I could be anonymous in Alcoholics Anonymous.

I was twitchy and ratty, not from alcohol withdrawals, but because my mind had gone into a frenzy. I calmed with the voice of the first speaker, an old street sweeper. He was a Saint Augustan's orphan who'd run away at the age of thirteen and spent thirty years on the road, drifting and working all over Australia. A fellow skid-row friend, an Aborigine, had found AA and passed it on to him. He'd been in since he was forty-three, and had slowly improved enough to score a job as a sweeper with the Melbourne City Council. He'd held the job for the past ten years. Best job he ever had, he reckoned.

What appealed to me about this man was the pride he took in his work, and in his work record. He'd never had a girlfriend in his life either, until he met a woman in his fifties and got married. Now he not only had a wife, he had a family. How ungrateful was I. Someone else telling their story made me see my story. I didn't appreciate that I had a job, a home and children. I was only twenty-six. Compared to him my life was in front of me. It wasn't too late for me to find my purpose in life, to find my way. My life had a purpose to it – I could feel it in my bones. Sitting in that meeting I stopped thinking about having a drink.

The street sweeper said the biggest resentment he'd had to deal with was the amount of time drinking had taken off his life, but now he was thankful for what he had, not bitter about what he didn't have. That one concept helped me turn my thinking around. He gave me a licence to be happy, to feel free.

I left the meeting with my own little saying: *Happiness is wanting what you already have*. I was selfish and when I didn't get what I wanted I receded into drinking and fantasising. I doubt anyone could have tried harder than me not to end up in a place like this and yet here I was. I had set out in life determined to be different to my father, to not let the drink run my life. Instead of not drinking as you might think if someone wanted to be the opposite of a drinker, I was convinced I would control it and that made me the same.

I escaped my home as a teenager with two of my mother's sayings burned into my head, 'Don't be like your father' and a line from a song she'd sing, *Stand up and fight until you hear the bell, the final bell*'. She fought against the odds all her life. Like a good Catholic girl she never left. Years later, I wondered whether part of my motivation for getting sober was to fulfil my mother's wish for my father. Was I doing

what my father wouldn't, or couldn't do, bridging another gap, fixing another problem between my parents? Part of me was my father, and I couldn't run from myself forever. I had run from mum leaning on me, wanting me to help her all the time. I had run away from home at the age of ten, moved out at fourteen, and never really went back, as if distance or absence could be the thing that freed me. I had been a tethered horse running in circles. I rebuilt my very same emotional circumstances wherever I went. It seemed the trajectory in my life had been unavoidable. That was until Nicole had improved. If she could improve, I could change. Look at myself, I thought. This moment, I thought, didn't have to be my destiny. Change my thinking if I wanted to change my life.

After the meeting, I chatted with the street sweeper. He told me we had to try and be debt-free in our lives. I didn't understand. He said, 'Well, you don't like owing people nothing, right? Botting all the time and having to pay back.' He rubbed his gnarled hands together, like an old cocky rubbing up some tobacco. 'If ya don't pay the electricity bill they keep sending letters, and same with yer life. If ya owe someone something, pay 'em back and be done with it. If yer angry with someone, get him outa yer head. Say sorry or stay away from 'em. Grudges and revenges don't work for us. We're not doing it for them, we're doing it for ourselves, got me?'

I nodded. I said I would start forgiving people after I got even with a few first. He said I'd never get my thinking straight like that, and even if I stayed sober I wouldn't be happy. The street sweeper wandered away and another member brought someone new to meet me. He was a well-dressed, well-spoken man and he said he'd got a strong message from me and from another 'chap,' as he put it. 'Fancy,' he mused, 'a street sweeper and a truck driver have given me an insight into what AA is about.'

The member said, 'How's that, a shearer helping a Queens Counsel.' I didn't think much of it at the time because I thought a QC was the person who introduced people at weddings. I had been so ashamed at having to come to AA and it turned out to be a step up the social ladder for me. I met real businessmen, squatters and lawyers, and when I saw them suffering, losing their families and businesses, it humanised my idealism. I'd been as blinded by my class prejudice as were the people I accused. I didn't have to hate rich people or suits. 'Never trust a man, who wears a suit,' was another of my mother's sayings. I'd never thought that I didn't have to hate what someone else said or did. I could just stop thinking about it. In AA the silver tails weren't in the mansion and I wasn't in the shearers hut.

I spotted Ricky after the meeting and gave him a lift home. I needed help, but I was terrified at the thought of someone knowing all about me. I asked him to help me but it was worse than asking someone to marry me. Actually, I'd never done that either. When Leanne got pregnant my father got a pen and paper out and arranged the wedding. He said I'd had my fun and now I had to pay. People always wanted me to pay.

Ricky made me take responsibility for my part of the relationship, something I had never done. He agreed to my request, though, and we became a team. I wasn't a loner, or anonymous, any more. I went to the meetings with Ricky and afterwards we would discuss what was said. No story was wasted. Ricky was there to keep my mind focused on my problems, not on what other people should do. I was a member simply by saying it; joining a group made me a member of that group.

The first thing Ricky said when I told him about my living situation was that I had a home I was paying off and my children were living in it. He said I didn't have to

sleep in the marital bed but it was my house. I had a right to be there. It was that simple. He was right. I acted as though I was guilty and always in the wrong. I was paying the mortgage of a house I wasn't living in. Moving back into my house was taking back part of my life and I was ready to do that.

When I woke in the shed the next morning my head felt lighter. I'd slept well. I walked outside, past the cabbages and silver beet in the garden, got into the work truck and thought: I'm free. The depression was lifting. I didn't need a sign I was improving; I could feel it. I was coming to life again. The grass looked fresh; the tops of the gum trees at the end of the street were swaying in the morning wind. They reminded me of happier memories, camped, waiting for a shed to start, under the trees along the Murrumbidgee River with Smokey, my dog. We'd swim along the sand-beaches of the river and have a billy boiling for hours. It was a time when the smell of eucalyptus and the heat from a sunrise or a wild wind stirred something of life inside of me. Under those swaying gum trees, a sky full of stars and the magic spell of youth, my dreams were real and life was hopeful.

I went home to my children in the March of that year. I had been away from them for about six weeks. I hadn't had a drink for nearly eight months. I didn't tell Leanne I was coming. After work I packed the car and simply went home. Leanne resisted at first. I just said it's my house and I'm paying the rent.

She responded, 'I knew you'd do something like this. I hate you, I fucken hate you'. Nicole ran over and gave me a great hug. Rhiannon wanted to carry my bag for me. It was too heavy for her but she was so excited to have me back she just had to help. It wasn't going to be easy. Moving back home was the first assertive move I'd made in years. I started taking back some control of my life. Another year later and

Leanne would make her next main move and ask me to leave again. We were separated for a few months that time. Our relationship was never the same after I stopped drinking. Over those years we lived out what seemed normal lives. We bought a better car, got a better house, took the kids to the ‘worlds’ in Queensland. We even loved each other, but underneath, the power positioning continued.

For my part, I decided to do my best for the next ten years. After that, if it didn’t work, Nicole should be self-sufficient and I could leave. My thoughts may well have been a self-fulfilling prophesy because in 1995, ten years later, I left. It never occurred to me at the time that Leanne may have had her own agenda for the relationship.

Obsessed with drinking, then AA, then work, I tried to understand what I might have been like to live with. Maybe she had to protect herself from me? Maybe I took too much oxygen from her? When she said I was unlovable she might have meant that no amount of love was enough for me? Maybe that’s what she meant.

Nicole started grade one in the February of 1985 and Rhiannon started kindergarten. Nicole had made great progress in prep. She had gone from drawing circles with her pencil to making shapes, and although it was badly done she was making progress with her handwriting by following the alphabet work sheets. Now, however, she had plateaued from her rapid growth over the last few years. Nicole said grade one started off well with a few kids talking to her and she even had a friend for a while. Rhiannon was a wiz at kinder and Mrs Worsnop couldn’t believe she was Nicole’s sister. Mrs Worsnop would often have Rhiannon read to the class.

It was about this time that we found out the grade two kids had been raiding Nicole’s bag and eating her lunch. She didn’t stop them because they spoke to her. She was almost defending them. First, it had been one student. Then she brought friends

along. The teacher caught them; that's how we found out. Even back then Nicole wouldn't tell us what was going on at school. She also blew the cover of her secret friend and said 'Hi' to her in front of her friends and as a result the friend had stopped coming around. I suggested she might not be a real friend but Nicole defended her, saying she'd be kicked out of her group if she played with her and explaining that she didn't want to lose her friends.

I wondered whether she couldn't read the facial expressions of individuals in a group setting. We increased our swimming around this time and did lots of dog paddle and underwater swimming. We'd train for a while then they'd play while I did a few laps. It was a great way for her to forget about school.

I decided it was time for me to move on from the roof company. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I thought I would just try things. After a long interview at the unemployment agency I had an interview with Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). The following week I was to start at their factory in Laverton making paint. The ICI boss said this was a career move for me. On my last day with the roof company, the owners wished me well. I pulled the truck into the factory yard, unloaded it, locked it, hung the keys in the shed and walked out, leaving Dippy behind.

In May 1985 I had started my new job at ICI and Leanne had started a new life. She was still at home but only bodily. I was waiting for her to come back to me emotionally. Ricky asked me how many years had I let her down and reminded me of the magnificent opportunity I had to see my children, which so many men don't have.

I lasted a week at my new job with ICI. I was put to work making paint in an abandoned section of the factory. In the Solvol-smelling toilets, where thick grime was etched between the tiles, I saw myself in the mirror, covered in different coloured dyes,

and quit. Within a week of leaving the roof company I was back doing the rounds of the factories in the western suburbs. Temporariness wasn't as unbearable as the confines of a factory. I walked into a concrete works and got a start as a driver. I arrived at 6am and was assigned to an older driver to learn his route. Over the next three days he took me to all the major worksites where the company delivered concrete. At six in the morning, the sound of the engine, the warmth of the heater, and the inviting old leather seats were too much for me and I nodded off. Some days I slept for hours. The driver started off talking to me but after the second day he didn't bother, which was good because I could get to sleep quicker. On the Thursday afternoon the boss paid me for the few days I'd slept and sacked me.

Ricky asked 'Was it a good sleep?'

Before I went back scouting for casual work on the Friday, I checked in at the unemployment agency and saw a notice about a work scheme building a rose garden at Werribee Park. Gardening sounds good, I thought. I applied and Friday afternoon I signed on. I wondered briefly if I should go back to the roofing company. But my get-out-plan was to burn my bridges, no turning back, no retreating to something I knew. I was on a mission to find my purpose and change my shithole of a life.

On that Friday night I went to the Footscray meeting. I looked down the street before I went in and saw old Kevin on two tripod walking frames. He was painfully putting one frame down and then the other, followed by a couple of frail steps forward. He was still wearing the stained, pale blue suit frayed at the collars and cuffs, and that yellowed white shirt. Kevin, from the Gill Memorial was out of his wheelchair but his ritual of sitting up the back and not speaking or looking at anybody hadn't changed. But still, he was out of his wheelchair.

The following Monday, I started with the unemployed gang in the front gardens of Chirnside Mansion in Werribee South. I found myself thinking of Kevin. He'd made so much improvement – more than that, he was being rejuvenated. I wondered if I had improved. I half wished I could live in a place like the Gill Memorial, where I didn't have to work, didn't have to try to fit in, where I'd be given three meals a day and only had myself to worry about.

The job went okay for a few months. We worked in the hot house and raked leaves and cleaned up old sheds. Being outdoors I managed to stay awake. Lunchtimes and smokos I slept. Everyone thought I had two jobs. Shaping the garden beds and softening the soil in the late autumn weather wasn't too bad, until I got paid. I was earning a dollar an hour more than the dole.

In the July of that year a new team of men started. They belonged to a contractor and the contractor's foreman took responsibility for both groups. I knew him. He had been a rival opponent in football. He played rover and I played back pocket. Now, he was the boss and I was on the unemployed scheme. One day working in the rose garden the landscape architect had arrived dressed in a suit. He told me to throw the fertiliser a different way and I told him to 'get fucked'. He went straight over to the leading hand and had me removed. Good I thought. I picked up a whipper snipper and started cleaning around a tree in the larger grasslands of the mansion. Without warning the machine was turned off from behind me and yanked out of my hands. A homicidal rage whipped up my spine. I turned around. It was the new foreman. He said men in the unemployed gang were not to touch the mechanical tools. We were only allowed to use shovels, rakes and the wheelbarrow. I must have looked how I felt because he took off

and I chased him into the compound and he locked himself in the toilet. I had lost my surge of anger but felt compelled to yell at him, so I gave him a serve from the yard.

The following day the contractor turned up. He handed out the jobs and I was left behind. He came over and told me I was sacked. I had an overpowering urge to smash his face in with the shovel and shove the crow bar up his arse. It took all my strength to walk away. Work was my life. It was who I was, and now I wasn't anywhere. I wasn't anyone. I wasn't anything. There was no place for me. Sacked from an unemployment scheme, how low did I have to go? I had a hot temper and couldn't take orders or be told anything. At the roofing company I'd worked alone. If I had to work with people I got into trouble. I was unemployable. I walked the seven kilometres home. Leanne had dropped me off at work that morning.

The house was empty when I got home. I dreaded telling Leanne I'd lost another job. I felt such a loser. I didn't believe in God—at least, I didn't know. But out of extreme desperation I asked that if there was a god or a spirit of the universe, could it take away the gnawing feelings in the pit of my guts. But nothing happened, not straight away. When Nicole and Rhiannon came home they were eager to go swimming. We went to the pool and for the time we could hold our breaths, after we jumped in, we were the family under the sea again. On the bottom of the pool we smiled at each other before shooting to the surface. We followed up with some exercises and then played. By then I had forgotten I had just been sacked again.

I'd sworn I'd never go back to shearing after the wide-comb dispute, but now I couldn't see an alternative. I had to work. I rang the local shearing contractor and got a start on the Monday morning. I'd failed. I started shearing on the Board of Works farm on the outskirts of Werribee. When I dragged out the first of a pen full of crossbred

wethers, pulled the hand piece into gear and started shearing, I knew this part of my life was over. This wasn't the answer. Lenny had rung me a few times and told me the Board of Works was putting on blokes for a sewage tunnel that was being dug in the western suburbs of Melbourne. To shut Lenny up, I'd called in to enquire. I'd never worked underground before, and if I felt trapped inside a factory, I didn't think I'd cope being in a tunnel all day long. After getting sacked a few times, I couldn't be picky anymore. To my surprise all I had to do was pass the medical and meet the foreman on site the following Monday.

On my way home from the medical I was in a traffic jam on the freeway in the industrial section of the western suburbs of Melbourne. I realised I felt okay. Those hollow-gutted feelings that had been eating my insides out were gone. I kept saying to myself, I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm going to be okay. I even patted my chest to make sure it was real. Everything internally and externally seemed neutral, not high not low; I wasn't morose, anxious, self-absorbed, manic, or guilt ridden. There was just a feeling of neutrality. In that moment in that traffic jam I thought I'd had a spiritual experience. I wasn't in an ashram in India. I wasn't surrounded by gurus or dressed in spiritual clothes. I had never meditated or read any spiritual books. I knew no religious language, except what I had remembered from the stories the nuns had read to us. I didn't even really believe in God. I was twenty-six years old and knew nothing, had nothing, belonged nowhere. I came to know what those feelings were that day and the following weeks. It was called being normal. I had forgotten what normal felt like. I had lived in such states of constant turmoil going back to my childhood that normal felt like I'd gone to heaven. It didn't last, but the sickening feeling in my guts never returned either.

The tunnel position was permanent with holiday and sick pay. There'd be no more living from week to week. When I told Lenny about it he said, 'No matter what happens, don't quit. Don't snatch it.' Why would I quit? I'd just hit the jackpot: a job digging a sewage tunnel.

Get-out-plan two

The sign on the cyclone wire fence read ‘Western Trunk Sewer Project, Hoppers Crossing Site. No hard hat. No entry’.

It was an overcast windless ordinary sort of day in late July 1985 when I walked onto the work site. Grey bull dust covered the hardened surface: no signs of machines operating. Railway sleepers, drums of dog spikes and stacks of rusted rail line were roughly catalogued behind the large crane jib that hung over the main shaft. I spotted an old man in his khaki work-issue clothes half asleep in the dog man’s box. A closer look revealed a few shrewd eyes peering out from the welders and fitters’ workshops. Rusted reinforcement tacked to the railing, with black plastic hand-wired to it, served as the shaft’s safety fence. The cage, a rust-speckled eyesore, with squealing hydraulics, surfaced from the underground like a Doctor Who portal.

Gamble, the site supervisor, was in the yard. He was a tall fit-looking bloke with a natural smile. He inflated his hugging T shirt with his barrel chest as he put his hand out to shake.

The Project was a seventeen kilometre tunnel being dug about eighty metres underground. It was five metres in diameter and went from Hoppers Crossing near the Werribee Sewage Farm to the Brooklyn Pumping Station under the Westgate Bridge on the western side of Melbourne.

‘Where have you been working?’ He looked down on his clip board for my name, ‘Dennis.’ He looked up.

‘I’ve been shearing down the Board of Works farm out of Werribee.’ I didn’t tell him this was my get-out-plan from shearing, or that I’d been sacked from my last few jobs.

‘Worked underground before?’

‘No’.

He was taken back, ‘Never?’

I said ‘No, never.’

He shook his head, eyed the horizon and looked up into the sky. I could see the cogs in his brain turning. Then, to my relief, he bent over and grabbed the door handle of the cage, studying my face, as if he was thinking, how long would I last?

My heart skipped a beat at the thought of going back to the unemployment office.

He bent over and opened the cage door to go down the shaft. I had a start. No more shearing, no more going from job to job, home every night. This was it. I was going to make a go of it, settle down. My family needed regular money. No matter what happened, I decided there and then to stay in this job until I got to the end of the tunnel. At least I knew it would end one day and I had to learn to stick something out, to see it through, not for the job, but for me.

I was employed by C group, a division of the Board of Works (B.O.W.). It was later sold to Transfield Construction Company along with everything else the Kennett

Government sold in that era. The job had holiday and sick pay, long service leave and superannuation. I was even supplied with brand new khaki pants and shirts, a bluey jacket and the best work boots I'd ever seen. They had a special rubber sole preventing slipping. I could even use them as going out shoes they were that good. I didn't know why Lenny had said don't quit. I just had to learn what a tunneller did.

My stomach went into my throat as we jerked down the shaft. I looked back to the caged-in rock wall, loose boulders pressed against the reinforcement. The rings around the shaft I had looked down at, I was soon looking up at. Water was starting to appear from the cracks in the rock wall and loosened black plastic flapped in the upward draft. Chilled rising air hit me as the surface heat was left hovering in the top part of the shaft. The sound of water surging out from the walls drowned out the screaming cage's hydraulics. The temperature dropped again and the shaft darkened. I wanted to put the boss's mind at ease, to reassure him I could do the job, but I didn't have a single thing to tell him.

Diggers scraping, jack picks splitting rocks, surging water, straining industrial water pumps and suction fans compounded into deafening sounds. I looked out through the cage door. To my left, about forty metres away, two Kato's were digging and a pick was breaking up protruding rocks on the floor of the shaft next to the bell chambers. They were going to divert the flow of sewage down to the board of works farm. Steel fixers were building a complex web of reinforcement around the shaft wall. Three men on jack picks and a couple of men shifting the broken rock were in front of me. A sparky was pinning some hooks for more cable, and a welder was building a frame. The men looked, but didn't speak, didn't say hello; they just stared.

I had gone through four jobs in the last few months. My plan was to just get through the day and not think past that. The boss opened the cage door and we walked out onto a rail platform. I looked up and saw the sky moving across the shaft and felt giddy, then ducked for cover thinking loose rocks could fall on my head. I took a few steps into the safety of the tunnel. The boss got onto a loco and told me to jump on a shiny, bashed-in lip welded onto the back of the loco, about ten by twenty centimetres. He said, 'See that white dot.' I looked down the tunnel and saw a small intense white spot about the size of a golf ball in the distance and said, 'Yes.'

'That's the face. That's your new home.'

I would be there for the next seven years.

We crawled out of the darkened junction jerking through two rail switches. I hung on, white knuckled, to the steel handle. I kept my eyes on the roof, waiting for it to fall in, and disappeared into the darkness. Once out of the junction he floored it. The headlight on the loco shone on the steel rings that were placed every ten metres. Some areas had rock bolts drilled into the volcanic roof where it was stable ground; in other areas the tunnel was a patch work of timbered sections, concrete blocks and black plastic with pooling water in them. I tried to imagine what I would do if it was derailed. There was too much happening for me to think straight. My gumboots were slipping from under me and we jerked over every rail join. I thought a fall might kill me.

Next, I was soaked by an unplugged stream from the roof. The boss yelled, 'Have to put some plastic over that.'

I was ducking at ghosts. The roof had various sections of heavy streams flowing from it. The darkness was broken by periodic tunnel lights. It was like travelling back in

time through a hole the size of a ballpoint pen, buried under the weight of eighty metres of earth surviving by the strength of a few strips of steel. After about fifteen minutes we drove onto a switch and parked the loco in a junction deep in the earth. It was warm and noisy. A slow sounding rock breaking machine was hammering further into the tunnel. I couldn't see past the spotlights in the junction. Water pumps were sucking and air fans spinning. An amateurish spray painted sign wired to the wall read 'The Starship Enterprise.' I was on a massive one hundred metre movable platform, technically called a Californian Switch, unofficially, an outstation of the galaxy. The cramped crib room on the left, built into the curve of the tunnel, had a few mugs and hessian bags on the tables. Electricians', plumbers' and fitters' workshops were also built into the side of the carriage curving into the half-moon shape. I kept waiting for the roof to fall in. I followed the boss through narrow walkways weaving in and around machines and pumps and empty muck buckets. Then we crossed a live part of the tunnel. I balanced on the rail, jumping from one sleeper to the next because I couldn't see the bottom. I slipped and fell but recovered quickly. Only my knee and one leg got wet. I didn't want the roof to fall in on me and scampered to the next section.

The boss shook his head. 'Careful. Try and at least get through the first day.'

We came to a large machine and climbed a flat steel rung ladder. Everything was slippery and awkward in these borrowed gumboots. Massive spotlights shone up from a hole about ten metres away from us. I still couldn't see the rock face. We crunched our bodies down under the roof of the tunnel as we walked along. The rock roof was warm to touch. I was breathing fast. I kept hitting the roof with my hard hat and took it off. I couldn't get my bearings and kept thinking that if the roof collapsed, I'd be buried alive. The boss said, 'Don't worry about the roof falling in; worry about a tool or bolts falling and giving you brain damage.' I put the hard hat back on.

Premature grey hair sprung out from under the operator's hard hat. He had a face recovered from childhood acne and was a picture of concentration operating his levers. The machine started to lift up and I grabbed on to something. I looked out to the arm of his digger gouging into the rock face, ripping the earth apart. The operator was trying to dislodge a fractured piece of rock. Above him was a platform with a drill and a temper rod for explosives. I walked forward and looked down into a small quarry as if it were a movie set. Three workers under massive spotlights were in the sludge trying to contain mudslides that were oozing in from both sides of the unsecured section of the tunnel.

The rock face, fractured from explosions, had water streaming out of several places. Welding sparks shot up and electrical sparks from the welding leads were being released. One man scraped the mud away while the welder tacked on a weld. The boss turned to me and gave me a pelican pick. It was a pick with a soup ladle and a point like a pelican on it. 'Off you go.'

'Me?'

He smiled, 'Get down and help the welder on this side,' he pointed in front of me, 'and scrape away the mud from the plate for him and then shore up the walls. Off you go, now,' and he moved to the side, opening access to the ladder.

I thought I was on a tour of the site. I didn't want to go down. Goose bumps lifted on my skin. Cautiously, I stepped down three metres into a mud quagmire. The men working frantically didn't say hello or even acknowledge me.

From behind his mask, the welder on the left waved his hand. 'Scrape,' he yelled, 'scrape the mud, around there,' he pointed to the plate the beam had to be welded on to, 'Quick.' I grabbed the pelican pick and went for it. The welder, still

hidden behind his mask, put his hand on my pick handle as I scraped and turned it on its side controlling my movement. Holding it sideways I grabbed large waves of mud and scraped the area clean with only a few swipes. The floor of the tunnel around the twelve inch squared plate was moonscaped. The plate was rock bolted to the floor. The pelican pick effortlessly manoeuvred the contours of the tunnel floor. This was the best tool I'd ever used. The plate was clean enough to weld. He had to be quick—more mud was coming. My welder intimated to lift his welding leads out of the mud so he didn't get a short out.

He yelled, 'don't worry; you won't get electrocuted. Just don't fucken move.'

Fixated on the roof, I yelled to the welder, 'I'm sinking, I'm sinking.'

He yelled back, 'Been underground before?'

I said 'Na.'

'Never?' he said.

'No, never,' I screamed.

'Fuck me.' He shook his head and kept welding.

The spotlights sizzled from flung mud, and I started sinking further. I held the steel beam with one hand and was getting mild electrical shocks from the welding lead in the other. Welding sparks filled the pit like cracker night and landed on my exposed neck. The machine screamed, juggling a boulder on top, and water sprayed over me from the walls and face. I thought, 'Shit, I think I need another get-out-plan.'

The welding sparks burning into my skin were familiar experiences and in unfamiliar territory the pain became strangely comforting. As a child, holding a piece of

steel being welded by dad when the sparks burned into my skin was an act of bravery. I learned to ignore the pain of his little betrayals and broken promises in the same way. I thought it was part of being a man.

My old man thought I drank too much because I had shot through from my apprenticeship. He thought fitting and turning was the way to go. In the factory I didn't see the sun from one day to the next. At the end of a day's work on a lathe I walked out through the corrugated iron corridors, a number amongst thousands of other ashen-faced numbers. I ran away to the bush and became a shearer. Now I was the welders' labourer, maybe I should have done my apprenticeship.

A man appeared above my head in the tunnel. Handing down several lengths of timber, he climbed into the pit with Gympie hammers, a saw and a hessian bag of timber wedges.

'Boots.' The bloke who'd climbed into the pit put his hand out.

I shook it and said, 'Who?'

'Fuck'en Boots, that's me name. Me mum's the only one who still calls me Ray.' He smiled.

'Okay.' He put the timber beside the rock wall and marked it and said, 'cut it there. Quick.' I took the bow saw out and cut the first timber up against the machine. I couldn't cut straight.

Boots put the timber in behind the steel beams and knocked it down with the hammer. 'Don't watch me. Cut another twenty and cut'em straight this time.'

Each timber was wedged into place and soon a wall came into existence. Finally, we had a space between us and the live earth. With both sides of the tunnel timbered, the mud slide stopped.

‘Okay, now we can take it easy. Fuck’em. We’re not working our guts out when there’s no bonuses. What we gotta do now is clean out the bottom.’ We had shovels, hessian bags, a hose and pump. The sparky had wired the water pump and we dug out the mud.

Boots was about thirty-eight, solid with tattooed round shoulders and a skinhead with a rat tail. ‘Where ya been working?’

‘I been shearing...down the farm...the Board of Works Farm.’

‘Fuck me, Gamble wouldn’t have liked that. Been underground before?’

‘No.’

‘Never.’

I said, ‘Never.’

‘Fuck me, you’re lucky. A lot o’ blokes would wanta get on here. Once we get back onto shift we start making bonus money. You’re lucky you got on.’ Water dripped everywhere. Disorientated, cringing from the fear of the roof caving in and suffering from a permanent tight chest and shallow breathing, I couldn’t see the ‘lucky’ side of it.

‘Me, I been up the Thompson for the last few years. Made good money there.’

‘Where?’

‘Fuck me, come on Dennis, the Thompson River Project. We built all the tunnels under the dam up there. Most of the blokes here are from the Thompson and the Croatians and Serbs have been digging tunnels around Melbourne since they came over after the Second World War. Okay, let’s get some bags filled.’

‘Fuck me, try and get some of the mud in the bag, hey. Look just tip it in.’ After we had shovelled the mud, I scraped the floor with my pelican pick.

‘Okay, I’m going up top. Put those bags in the muck truck. Take your time and then clean up the other side. I’ll be back soon.’

Boots climbed the ladder, looked back and winked, ‘You’ll do alright here, Dennis. Just take it easy.’

I sat on a drum for a minute in a dry spot and rolled a mud-stained smoke. The machine had stopped. The men had gone. Ricky thought the tunnel would be good for me. He said the word humility came from humus, the earth. He thought eighty metres underground, two kilometres inside the tunnel, was about the right amount of humility I needed. He said, ‘Now that reality is what I call ego deflation at depth,’ then laughed. The pumps sucked, the air vent fan spun, water spurted out from the roof, and I puffed on my smoke waiting for the roof to collapse and thought how was I going to get out of this one?

The next day started where the last one finished: in the pit. I was put in Boots’s day shift gang and at five to seven every morning the wiry grey-headed machine operator with a face that was scarred from childhood acne screamed from the lunch room through to the change rooms, ‘Let’s go, you fuckers.’ He walked down the hallway towards the showers and industrial dryers. He looked at me and pulled his head back, ‘Come on, mate, time to go. Get in, get out.’ Then he walked out.

About ten tunnellers squashed into the cage and jerked down into the tunnel. Some men went to work on the bell chambers to the right of the cage. The rest of us climbed into a converted muck bucket with a roof and seats and headed into the face. Heads down in darkness and silence, our bodies bashed into each other through the jerky rail ride. I partly adapted to the work but not to the trapped, dank tunnel.

This day Boots dropped a Croatian and me off at a boulder they called a floater. It was a large loose rock that floated up and pushed through one side of the tunnel. The tunnel bottom had a steady flow of water running down towards the pump. The timber sleepers were slimy and slippery, particularly under rubber gumboots. The rail, where it dipped, was partly submerged in water. The temporary work site was close enough for us to see the shaft and far enough that the bosses and Engineers couldn't see us. We screwed some lights into the cable, ran an air hose out to the connection and poured some oil into the hose to lubricate the jack pick and stop it freezing up with the cold air.

‘What would you do, Dennis?’

‘Me. Well, I'd try and split the boulder in the middle and then break it up.’

Boots shook his head. ‘Okay then...Alright, we'll do it that way. If you start breaking jack pick tips, chip away from the outside. One bloke work the jack pick and the other watch for trains and don't get run over on my shift, eiver.’ He laughed. ‘And watch out for fucken Monty coming out from the face. He won't stop. You know what he's like.’

The Croatian or Serb—maybe he was something else—he looked shady as if he had been on the Germans side in the war or something or a Yugoslav. I decided he was Croatian. The other Croatians and Serbs didn't like being called Yugoslavs. There was a

difference but I didn't know what it was. His weathered face, rotten teeth and drooping eyelids gave away nothing; he was hunched and avoided eye contact. He'd worked for C group some years ago. It was strange he wasn't put on Dragovic's shift with the other Croats. Big Bad Dave reckoned they were getting them out of the geriatric centre they were that desperate.

When the sound of the loco had dimmed I said, 'G'ay, I'm Dennis,' and looked at him.

He had been hedging away from me since the loco left. He finally threw his head up like a small head butt and turned his back.

I said, 'I'll start jack picking.' He started cleaning around the boulder. I decided to watch out for Locos. I didn't think he'd save my neck; by the look of him I thought he might push me in front of one. I started the long process of hacking into this rock with my jack pick. I liked being busy. It made the time go quicker. I drifted off—Croatian dug under the boulder with a shovel—I wasn't self-reliant at all. I leaned down into the jack pick until it was muffled, moved the pick into different angles. I made several starts before I could feel the boulder splitting. I thought whatever actions I had done in the past I had to do the opposite now. I had to learn to work in a team, not be a loner or overly reliant.

The pick started faltering. I put more oil into it and we had a break. I moved to a new spot on the same longitude and banged away again. Croatian had an extra smoke. Finally I got some more movement. When I looked up he had his hand in behind the rock. I screamed as the rock split. In that instance it caught one of his fingers against the six-inch concrete panel. Croatian screamed and pulled his hand up. His finger had been mangled. I threw the jack pick down and grabbed him.

I said, 'show me, sit down, sit down.' I thought it would have sliced his finger off.

He backed away from me and tore his hand out of my hand. 'Fuck you', he said angry with me.

The top of his index finger was half torn off and squashed. He put his glove on and kept working.

'You can't work. Fuck me, come on. You'll have to go to hospital.'

He leaned back and smiled as best he could. He was white. That was shock. 'No, no, work, work.' He picked up the shovel again. I couldn't stop him. I stuck to my plan and didn't try and control him or make him do what I wanted but I thought I was making a big mistake. I went back to jack picking the rock into smaller sections. Croatian had dug under the concrete panel and we pushed it back into place. We stopped and sat down. The noise of pumps sucking filled the void. Boots sent a muck bucket in and I loaded the broken rock into it. I wouldn't let Croatian help. He nodded. We went back and had lunch in the crib room. He kept his glove on and his mouth shut and returned to bludge in the dark silence for the afternoon.

Sometimes you can't feel a wound if it's serious enough, only a numbness or coldness in the injured area. The loco came screaming out from inside the Starship Enterprise. It wasn't slowing down. I leaned back against the wet tunnel wall expecting the worst and sure enough, Monty was driving. Croatian grabbed me, shook his head, 'don't say, don't say.' I nodded. He was scared of losing his job, getting called accident-prone and then no shift boss would want him. I didn't interfere. Blokes were hanging

off the back of it when the loco screeched to a halt, as if he had always intended to stop. Emotionless, Monty nodded his head upwards. That meant, 'get on, fuck ya.'

The blokes were a bit high after being together all day, hiding. It was down time. We were between the digging and the concreting. It was the tradesmen's time for building forms and platforms in preparation for the big concrete pour. Big Bad Dave yelled in my face, 'Ahh, ya bald little prick, get on.' I got on the loco and just nodded. He was a one hundred and thirty kilo monster. 'Is it true ya don't fucken drink?'

'I just nodded.'

He snarled, putting his twisted fat face closer into mine, 'I fucken hate people who don't drink. Fucken wowsers or worse, fucken reformed drunks. There's nothing worse.' Then he laughed. I didn't. He didn't like it and I didn't care. The others laughed enough to reassure him. Nothing could upset me today. Monty roared out of the tunnel. We hung on and all jumped off onto the platform. The caged lift was open waiting. The sky was blue and a few trails of faint clouds traced over the shaft. Ascending, we hit our first warm air and my skin softened. Closer to the top the sunshine broke through the cage and the sky opened up like we had turned the page in a children's picture book. In the change room Croatian brought me some grappa, 'drink, ha, drink.' He smiled.

I shook my head and said, 'won't say nothing,' and went swimming.

In the early afternoon the old outdoor Olympic pool was vacant. Diving into the deep end I was suspended again in my other world, washing away the tunnel, the dark, the sticky air and the constant noise of the jack pick and pumps. I swam stroke for stroke, cleansing my skin, freeing my mind. I could only hear the soft muffled sounds of

my arms propelling me down the lane and my rhythmic breathing in the water. I thought of the sea and swimming on dad's back, training and competing as a child, and lying in the shallows as a teenager with Leanne, oblivious to the world, while the waves and white water washed over us. I stretched out my stroke and slipped through the water.

A race, a lap, a life

In 1985 Nicole was doing well scholastically in grade one. It was never a problem for her to come home and do more homework. Rhiannon had turned five and did very well in kindergarten. Sometimes Rhiannon would, after school, come hurtling through the back door like a whirlwind. Becky had turned two earlier that year. She rarely talked in front of visitors and still often only spoke to her mother.

Nicole didn't share her things well, particularly with Rhiannon. If being selfish and possessive was a sign of her recovery then Nicole was recovering fast. Amanda who had sometimes come over to see her would invariably end up playing with Rhiannon. Nicole and Amanda usually started by sitting on the trampoline talking. Nicole seemed to want a much older type of conversation. Rhiannon liked games and dress ups and playing in the sandpit. Amanda, to get away from Nicole, would invite Rhiannon onto the trampoline. Often that was enough for Nicole to drop her lip and walk off.

Rhiannon, the little gymnast, would climb through the corner of the trampoline and flip herself up onto the mat: her standard entry. Out would pop a drink and a small packet of her only-for-school-Cheesels that she'd flogged from the pantry. She'd pull the pack apart and Cheesels would spread across the trampoline. 'Want one,' she'd offer.

If Rhiannon hadn't convinced Amanda to come with her she'd start bouncing. Nicole would scream, hanging onto the trampoline's steel rim. I'd have to kick

Rhiannon off and she'd go to the sandpit. Amanda always followed her and Nicole always charged into the house slamming doors behind her. Leanne yelled for me to do something. I wanted to go swimming. I encouraged Nicole to try and play with her sisters but it was impossible. In the beginning I called Rhiannon into the house and she would sit in her little chair and read, her great escape. And Amanda would go home early, again. Nicole would then try and get her to stay, almost begging her. The next time she came they would pretty much go through a similar routine with the same outcome. Afterwards, Nicole would occupy herself with feeding and bathing the family dog. Becky had her Barbies. She preferred to make her games up on her own. Her and Rhiannon, if they were friends, would snuggle up and watch TV but never Nicole. At nights I went to meetings.

The first thing I looked for at the Friday night meeting was Kevin from the Gill Memorial. I had become the Secretary, hoping it would help me, and I turned up early, as much to watch Kevin walking from the Hyde Street corner as to set up. There he was slaving down the footpath with his large walking frames wearing the same stained light blue suit, frayed shirt and tie. He had a spring in his step, if you could say that, or a determination in his movements. When he arrived at the meeting he sat in his regular seat at the back, was uncommunicative, and seemed to stare into space

The main speaker was new to me. He spoke fast and his story at the beginning was a familiar one. Alcoholic father, never going to be like his dad, he had been a garbo, running behind the truck for the local council. At twenty-five he could outrun everyone. At thirty he had outlasted everyone. At thirty-five he watched them pass through. At forty he'd been left behind. He kept on running right up until he was forty-

three, until he stopped drinking. He broke down and ended up in AA. He kept running behind the truck after he got off the grog and one day he asked himself why he was still running. He stopped, booked himself into night school and did a course. He couldn't read or write. Dressed in a suit, I knew he wasn't a garbo any more. He went on to say he became a real estate agent and he actually passed the course and now lived on the coast of Western Australia with his own business. He said if we put half the effort we put into drinking into something productive we could achieve anything. I was really inspired.

I could hear my mother singing 'Stand up and fight until you hear the bell.' What could I do with my life? Surely there was something better in store for me than the tunnel. I was doing everything right. It had to happen soon. It was just a matter of time. After the meeting the garbo was swamped by old friends and I couldn't get near him to talk to him. I wanted to know how he did it. I waited until I was driving home and asked Ricky when he thought I would improve. He said, 'When you start doing it for yourself.'

'I am doing it for myself. And I want what happened to the garbo to happen to me. I want to get out of the tunnel and have a really good job and I want money.'

When I dropped him off he said, 'Dennis, you're going well son, you really are, but you're still not doing it for yourself. There are no rewards,'—he looked at me—'for not drinking. See you tomorrow.' He shut the door and went inside.

The first night shift for 1986 signalled the start of concreting the tunnel. The familiar 'let's go, you fuckers,' rose over the ruckus of men in the showers, card games and

bashing noises of industrial dryers beside the change rooms. I was in the locker room lying on the three slat seat, reading, trying to pick out something positive to focus my day on. Nothing good had happened to me yet, but I was hoping it wasn't far away.

Tonight was my today. My action plan was to not show my feelings were hurt even if I was in the right. I was thin-skinned and highly sensitive to other people's moods and to their attitudes towards me. I opened the door into the yard and leaned into the swirling winds. It was after eleven o'clock at night. I crossed the yard wrapped inside my Bluey jacket with my head tucked into my chin like a tortoise. Boots was waiting in the open cage door and yelled, 'Come on you blokes, let's go.'

Boots, Monty, Jimmy, Manfred, Big Bad Dave and myself went down the shaft. Budgie would come in on the next loco. Others would work up top. Monty, if nothing else, was consistent. He said little and puffed on his smoke. Jimmy, a general tunnel labourer, was small with what seemed a slightly twisted torso; a country bloke, single all his life, he had mainly worked on bridge constructions. Manfred was a bitter, balding German red head. It was the tunnel or the factory. Four kids and one income weighed heavy on his life. Big Bad Dave was a big fat, mad, boss's man. He hated the wogs.

Manfred threw a vindictive side glance towards me.

I ignored it. He wouldn't show me how to do anything in the tunnel and Monty was always pressuring me to hurry up.

Then he mouthed, 'You da leading hand yet?'

Smart arse, I thought, but I had my plan. This was the only moment in my life that mattered. Right then, in that moment, I pretended and smiled back to Manfred and said, 'No.' A victory for me. I didn't react.

Monty, the gun, replied for Manfred. 'You couldn't do a bolt up in a bike shop, useless cunt.' Then he laughed.

Again, I didn't say anything. They even made me feel good. I was controlling myself.

Big Bad Dave said, 'I'm going to undermine you, McIntosh; I'm going to trash you. I hate fucken wowsers.' He laughed and, as was usual for him, stuck his face into my face.

I told him he'll need a jack pick to do it.

'For fuck sake,' Boots laughed, 'it's our first night shift. Can we at least get to the bottom of the shaft before we fucken kill each other? Fuck me, we've only got about five years of concreting to go. Boots had only a blue singlet on under his jacket and his top lip elongated over his bottom lip when he laughed.

The familiar sounds of pumps and water gushing out of the roof and walls took over the niggling chatter in the cage. As opposed to the day, the descent into the shaft took us into a warmer enclosure.

Light and shadow lived side-by-side underground; day and night, summer and winter belonged to another world. I had started to acclimatize to the fear of the roof collapsing. By that, I mean I didn't suffer heart palpitations and I had gained confidence from the manner of the other men, much like I did in AA. We climbed into the converted muck bucket and headed off, heads down, jerking and swaying to the twisted track.

Hunched over, we arrived onto the Starship Enterprise, went into the crib room, put our food on the tables and walked directly to the face. The quicker we finished the quicker we could get to sleep. There were five collapsible steel forms that had to be bolted together and secured against the wall of the tunnel. Monty drove the traveller, a machine that carried the collapsible forms, from one end of the form work to the other, via the rail line. It was a strange feeling being busy working down in the earth under spotlights while the rest of the world slept. Manfred and I were bolting the forms but I was slow and Monty kept bombing me to hurry up. I tried to watch Manfred to see how he was doing it, but he shielded his knack of wiggling the bolts in from me. He enjoyed beating me. I didn't like to look bad or the weak link. Once we had bolted form onto form we secured the construct with one metre spud bars that were screwed through the steel form. This part was tricky. It looked like an ancient satellite orbiting a universe in some distant galaxy, or a World War One spiked German mine floating in the ocean.

I was on the outside of the form wedged between it and the wall of the tunnel holding the plates on the rock for the spud bars to grip into. I had to be careful I didn't get my fingers squashed, especially with manic Monty on the air gun.

'Next,' he yelled, like a drill sergeant. Eager to please, I shuffled along on my back to the next spud bar using my feet to push off the wall of the tunnel and my shoulders to wiggle along. The form was oily. While it made it easy to manoeuvre, it was slippery. Lying on my back between spud bars I watched, a few centimetres from my nose, a streak of water run along a jagged edge of rock, pool at the end before dripping onto my face. I couldn't get my hands up to wipe it. Lying beneath eighty metres of rock, earth and probably a freeway, I started hyperventilating.

I repeated several times to myself to stay calm. In this confined space the feeling wouldn't die, though. I had to get control of my mind. I told myself just do the next thing. And I did. I convinced myself I was growing through this experience, that I wasn't wasting my time, wasn't jumping through hoops that I didn't need to. I took my mind back to my days on the farm school, riding the horses along the Bendy Road and through the lucerne crops, bare back. The sweaty smell of Granite, the school's Roman-nosed, dapple-grey powerhouse of a horse, whiffed up through my nostrils. The other boys on their horses beside me lifted my spirits as we galloped to Snake Island, our gang's cubby hole. I held on to those carefree times.

Water again dripped on my face and I stared into the jagged roof of the tunnel. I tried to push out the sandwich image I had of the roof, the form, and me in the middle suffocating. I stopped for that moment feeling engulfed by the darkness. I thought every time I had a victory over myself I was getting my life back. I yelled over the noise of machines and pumps, 'Okay, okay; I'm ready, but take it easy when you're getting near the end.' I moved to the bottom section of the form work and looked up and along the forty-five metre monster form work. It reminded me of the Steve McQueen sci-fi movie *The Blob*. The Blob was a rolling piece of black tar from outer space that squashed everything in its path. The steel form took on a sinister persona from down where I was standing, but I could breathe with my feet on the floor and a little more room to move. If the form collapsed on top of me, I pretended I would try and lay in the corner of the tunnel where the floor met the wall. I mentally practised the moves while Monty drilled another spud bar into the wall.

The thought of being trapped ate away at me and I panicked. I dropped my gear and climbed up and out of a portal window for a break. Monty looked surprised but

knew what was going on. He threw his head up...that meant okay. He dropped the air gun and pulled out a smoke, shoved his packet towards me. I shook my head and took a few deep breaths. I felt as though I had been winded. I had to stop thinking so much; it was paralysing me. It seemed when I thought I was over something, I was tested and re-tested.

Over time my panic attacks lessened until I started to feel comfortable at work. As the months and years went by I pretended I was an astronaut, out behind the form with the spotlight lead my link back to the space ship, traversing the darkness beyond form and man. It was my strategy to think myself into the job. I had never thought of myself in any way other than as a worker. My dream job had been as a fork lift driver, where the machine did the work and I knew where all the stores were shelved. I thought it was my deeper desire for order. I realised later you can't become or develop yourself without first imagining it or seeing some potential within yourself. I couldn't see any potential in myself. Ricky could.

My journal had turned into little poems about life and different people. I felt a little ashamed of myself for writing poetry. I saw my writings as a weakness, a softness that could be exploited. And anything connected to schooling left me cold. Consequently, anything to do with writing or learning I had discounted. Real writers lived in a galaxy a million light years away, and a dream like that could crush me down here more than a cave in. I forced myself to stop writing before I was found out, before I gave people a chance to laugh at me. One Croatian saw me write in my notebook and thought I was spying on him and taking notes on how long he was taking to do his job. 'Spies' were the Tunnellers' number one enemy. And the Croats and Serbs were always on the lookout.

The spud bars completed, I had to re-oil the forms with a spray unit much like a weed spray can. Sometimes, when I was on top of the form I peeked through the manhole down on our tribe of cavemen busying themselves by our green river. Except it was a concrete river. I imagined life when this area was the surface of the earth. We were living on a space ship tunnelling through rock in the earth that was formed millions of years ago from the Brimbank Park volcano about thirty kilometres away.

I knew there were no humans on the earth then but I imagined tribes living by the water highways of the past. In some way we too had to stay connected to our concrete river for our food and shelter. It was our provider. Spraying the forms with oil ensured a smooth finish to the concrete and avoided the skin of the dried concrete being ripped off. It also helped cracking the suction between the form work and the dried concrete. My clothes and overalls were beyond redemption; no amount of soap and washing could get the oil out and I couldn't replace them until they were worn through. My alcoholism was a bit like that. I had to wear out that skin of my past. It was imbued with my drinking and addictive thinking. In the tunnel I was building a new skin, a thicker more robust hide. Ricky said I definitely needed one.

As each man completed his job on night shift, they trudged in their slippery gumboots back to the crib room to eat and try to sleep. My last job for the shift, and the last piece of the form work construction, was to build the bulk head. Manfred and Jimmy were finishing off bagging up the sludge between the Starship Enterprise and the form work. They were black and putrid. Big Bad Dave prepared the concrete pump and Budgie was loco driver, bringing supplies in and out to us. Boots operated as an all-rounder, helping anyone who needed it, but mostly he was in the form arguing with Monty.

After building the bulk head, I sat on a drum in the shadow of the light with my back resting on a section of a dry rock wall. I had a few fresh rolled-up hessian bags for a head rest. The smell of the hessian reminded me of the chaff and hay I had bought for my horse years ago. I sucked in the musky smell and drifted back to the horse stables and breaking-in yards I'd cleaned and worked in as a boy. The noises of leather saddles, boots, stirrups were more the sounds of music to me than my brother's record of 'Stairway to Heaven' and I replayed them like music in my head.

Untamed horses prancing around a yard or flaring their nostrils in the wind I saw as symbols of freedom and unbounded energy. In the past I had invested my nameless yearnings into animals and places and sunsets. As a young man I dreamed of owning a farm, ploughing the earth, watching the wheat and oats grow to maturity and seeing lambs turn into sheep and calves, cattle. My unnamed yearnings were for me to grow. I wanted to develop and mature. Without any insights into myself I had projected my yearnings into nature and the bush. In the tunnel I had no projections to focus on. It was the stone wall, the bare facts always staring back at me.

I had a smoke. It was the end of another weekend and I was back in reality. At Leanne's insistence we separated again in the January of 1986. Nothing I did to get her back worked. She hated me. She wanted me out. I didn't think it was going that bad between us.

In the tunnel it was approaching four in the morning when I succumbed to sleep. Thinking of someone else in my home, maybe my bed, kept my mind churning. I craved my warm soft doona. I headed to the steel crib room, my body soaked in oil, wrapped myself in the dampening hessian bags, and despite the lights being on and an insistent

fluorescent flickering, pumps splurging and sucking, I fell asleep. Boots woke us at five thirty. Time to go to the surface.

Boots was making a cup of tea in the crib room. I moved slowly but could hardly move my sticky body. We had a cup of tea and waited for the carriage to take us out of the tunnel. Heads down swaying back and forth we headed out in the muck truck. No one spoke. In the change rooms on the surface I showered in slow motion. I couldn't wait for bed. I just wanted to put my head on a pillow for five minutes. I craved the feeling of clean crisp sheets. I searched through my bag for my keys and couldn't find them. I looked in my locker. Nothing. I went to shut the locker door and I smashed it shut with an unexpected surge of rage. I accused the men on shift of stealing my keys. I tipped everything out of my bag on to the concrete change room floor and started kicking the stools and walls.

Boots was called. 'Settle fucken down, settle down son; what the fuck's going on?'

'Some dog stole my keys.'

Boots laughed softly, 'No one wants your old Holden, mate. Are you okay, anything the problem?'

'I can't find my fucken keys.'

'Hold on, hold on, son. They'll be here somewhere. Did you have them in your work pants?' Boots started looking on the ground with me and then stopped, looked at me and grabbed my shoulder. 'What the fuck's going on?'

‘I’m not living at home anymore. And I drove past my house before shift and a mate’s car was parked out the front of my house.’

Boots shifted his weight from side to side a few times before he spoke. ‘Yeah,’ he nodded looking at the ground. ‘Know the feeling.’ He put his hand on the wall and leaned into it. ‘Came back from “Sugar Loaf” when I was working up there and the fucken missus, me first missus, had all my gear out on the lawn. I punched the shit out of him. He was hiding in the kitchen in my fucken house.’ Boots was half-dressed when he first came in. He stopped leaning on the wall and started redressing himself while he was talking. ‘And I was paying the house payments while she was fucking him...’ He chuckled. ‘It all worked out in the end, you know. Well, not with the kids and that.’

Boots looked down as he buttoned another hole. ‘I started seeing the kids every weekend but coming home from visiting them on a Sunday night I’d wanna knock meself, you know what I mean.’ He looked up. He moved to tucking his shirt in. ‘So I stopped seeing them. They’ll probably find me one day and want to kill me. Then I met Jen and we’ve had a family together.’ He’d finished dressing and laughed. ‘You’ll be okay. Go home and have a sleep. We’ve all been through it.’

The night shift gang had left, day shift had descended into the tunnel and the Boss’s gofer had come in to sweep the change rooms. Without my car keys I walked out through the clouds of dirt and cement dust that hung in the air and walked the six kilometres down the highway to my flat and went to bed feeling like I wanted to cry. I woke up four hours later and found the car keys stuck under the Masonite base in my bag. I was going crazy. I let go of Leanne. I had to.

Nicole was going okay in herself and better than okay at school. Her writing had started to come together. That was a big shift. She did lots of practice and nothing seemed to happen then when we thought it wasn't going to happen, when we feared she might have stopped progressing, it suddenly seemed to come together and she pulled through.

I was seeing the children at swimming. I missed them so much it ached sometimes, but they seemed okay. I knew I had to get myself right and on solid foundations for the rest of my life so I looked at the bigger picture. Wrong, bad, no good, a loser, a drunkard, sick, a sinner, no matter how you framed it, I did the drinking and these were the consequences. These were the circumstances of my life and I had to fix them. There was no magic cure, just putting in the effort, soul searching, and a lot of not doing anything, not reacting, not thinking too much, not working out what this or that meant, allowing people to live their own lives, especially Leanne. I was in the tunnel and I was prepared to put the work in to get my life back on track. I was a hoarder of past experiences and good at rehashing them when I wanted to torment myself. I had to change the way I thought and how I positioned myself in the overall scheme of things.

I went to Ricky's that afternoon after I'd had a sleep and found him outside his house, standing there holding onto shopping bags. He was built like a channel beacon that seals slept on. He had narrow shoulders and broad hips and when he walked he swayed. His skin was white and he had a front wave in his short back and sides grey hair. He'd locked his keys in the house before he went out.

I said, 'Don't worry, I can get in for you.'

'How?'

‘Easy. Is the manhole in the laundry?’

‘Yes...yes, I think it is.’

I went over to the paling fence and climbed up, jumped from the top of it onto the corner of the roof. The tiles were glazed terra cottas. I walked over the ridged corner, slipped a few tiles out and slid in between the roof batons. I removed the cover of the manhole, opened the front door and climbed back up, replaced the tiles and walked back through the front door.

‘Dat’s amazing.’

I smiled. I knew my way around a roof and it was good to do something for him.

‘Well, you taught me something. I spent all that money on locks and you got into my house in two minutes. Nothing’s safe.’ He shook his head again, almost disappointed I had got in so easily.

After he made the tea we sat down at his pale-green laminated kitchen table and he asked how I was going.

‘Not bad. I hate night shift, though.’

‘But how are you going?’

‘Okay.’

He repeated with intent. ‘How are you going, Dennis?’

‘I went round home last night and saw another car in the drive.’

‘Like you said you wouldn’t. So her boyfriend’s moved in.’

‘He hasn’t moved in; he was probably just visiting. He used to come around for dinner a lot.’

‘It’s not your business anymore, son. It’s her life.’ His face turned ugly. He leaned over putting his face close to mine. ‘But those children are yours.’

On leaving, Ricky reminded me that the best thing I could do for my children was make a success of my life. ‘You’re not a loser. Dippy’s gone,’ he said. I wanted to believe that. I really wanted to believe that.

The day shift followed night shift in the rotation. During the early part of the pour I traversed the outside of the form work as an astronaut with a pencil vibrator pushing the wet green concrete into every hidden nook and cavity and ensuring a smooth finish. The concrete was pumped in at about a metre and a half per push. With a couple of quick pumps in a small section of the tunnel, the concrete would suddenly run. Monty, as usual, was the danger man. That’s when the panic returned, the thought of being buried alive in concrete in a dark obscure corner of the tunnel that far underground. How would they get me out if I snagged myself on a wire or a bolt? On some occasions I accidentally pulled the light lead out of its socket and it was pitch black. I could only hear the sound of the concrete running along the form. I lost my drive for sticking it out and thought I might leave. That’s when I started to realise I was trapped down there.

I hated the tunnel, but I hated more that I couldn’t see how I was going to get out of it. I didn’t want to get used to it. I didn’t want my life to stop here. Ricky said I needed to become Mr Plod. I felt more like Mr Stuck. Even in AA things had changed. In the first twelve months in the meetings I thought I was an AA rock star. But my star had dimmed. I was not new anymore, and there were other new members getting a go.

In my shearing swag had been an old leather-covered Gideon's pocket bible. The inscription read, 'From Brother Bell, 1971'. That was a time before I had been kicked out of school. Being separated from my family again I set out to read it fifteen years after he gave it to me and a year after Dr Addiss told me I wasn't well enough to read anything. I thought The Bible was a good place to start. I didn't want to find God as much as I had a thirst to learn, to understand myself and the world around me. I'd been a Catholic all my life and didn't really get it. I couldn't put it down and kept notes on key ideas. I had not reconciled the discrepancy between the nightly prayers at home and the fights. Even the years we prayed to get Peter number one out of limbo seemed foolish. Maybe we were all in limbo, somewhere between heaven and hell. The religious fervour of the nuns and the beatings at primary school never matched. At secondary school, neither did listening to the morning homilies and then having to put up with the premeditated bullying by ordained teachers. At the farm school I was always in trouble, regarded as a ruffian. Mum said I had spirit, but I could be a bit wild and reckless.

If I was to capture the theme of The Bible, then it was two sentences. I was being asked to give up my will, dedicating it instead to seeking out God's will or a life's purpose. I'd seen it in Kevin and the Garbo. I thought my path would become clear to me. I believed one day I would wake up and it would be there. It didn't happen. Even though I had had those inner sparks or moments when I seemed to transcend my suffering, they were like motivational moments to keep me striving, rather than a state of being. Nothing I learned substituted for dedication, persistence, resilience and hard work. But especially for me, the key in turning around my life was a willingness to learn. I had been unteachable, now I was teachable.

The other phrase was: we are his temple and God lives within. I thought God may represent our higher selves, like a baby with all the potential in front of it unhindered by human intervention. We were not so much born in the image and likeness of a human image of a creator as we were born with a nothingness or spirit. I thought we were largely made up by our experiences.

I couldn't see the point in wrestling satisfaction in my old age from surviving a life of hardship or misery or even unhappiness. My mother's faith as interpreted by the church kept her in difficult circumstances. I thought faith was too powerful, too blinding. I chose uncertainty. It was about this time that Leanne invited me home for dinner.

About March 1986, after a few months separation, Leanne asked me to come home. I had used the time as a sort of sabbatical. We decided to go away to the Benalla weekend swim meet for a holiday and a new beginning. My mum and dad and my younger brother and sister came along. We swam in the pool races on the Saturday and on the Sunday there was a swim around the lake. Nicole was entered into the freestyle and the backstroke. Breaststroke and butterfly were way out of her league. Freestyle and backstroke were bilateral strokes and she was able to better master those than the symmetrical strokes. She was keen to race and I was keen to see how well she went. She had just turned eight.

Finally her event lined up behind the blocks. She smiled and looked around for us with her familiar turned face and little chin poking up. We yelled. She heard our voices but looked in the wrong direction. She looked anywhere but where we were. Information went in one way and was still coming out another. She scanned the horizon but couldn't find us. We were the idiots yelling and screaming in the stands. Rhiannon

ran to point out where we were but the first whistle blew and she climbed to the back of the blokes. She was still looking around with her chin lifted. I wondered what she could actually see, or how she saw things.

The second whistle blew; most of the other swimmers wrapped their toes over the blocks. A couple of the swimmers, including Nicole, leaned over with their feet still at the back of the block. The official moved them forward but she remained about ten centimetres from the edge. She didn't have the balance to be any closer. Her tongue was out of her mouth and screwed to the side, a picture of pure concentration. She had her hands out-stretched, her head up and back bent when the gun went off. She belly whacked the water and took off. The swimmers in the middle were well trained and quickly moved through the water; the swimmers in the outside lanes less so. Nicole hit the water thrashing her arms and legs in a flurry of raw energy and determination. By the fifteen metre mark she had started to wane and that's when she got some traction. She was moving smoother, but still looked like a baby wildebeest crossing a river on the Serengeti. By the twenty-five metre mark she was exhausted and the rest of the field had finished. The crowd were talking amongst themselves waiting for her. The life savers with their shirts off walked beside her. She wasn't ready for it. It was too early. I was ready to dive in and grab her. Nicole took another stroke, but it didn't get her far. Her feet had sunk. When she took a breath she sank again. The next stroke came over and she surged again and I thought she was going to be ok. At the thirty-five metre mark she looked spent and again the life guards were in the ready position.

The kids in the marshalling area, the parents and grandparents in the stands, the officials and the time keepers at the end of the pool went silent as though the wind had suddenly changed, then they started cheering her on. She surged again. Ten metres out

from the wall the crowd were fixated on her, willing her on. She managed to get one arm over the water, the other through it. Her body was sinking to the bottom, again. The spectators went up with delight when she took another stroke and almost intuitively were gripped with the drama of her life that went beyond that race and that day when she looked like she wouldn't make it. She hit the forty-five metre mark where the flags were. She had been instructed to put her head down and sprint, hitting the wall on a full stroke, out stretched. And at the flags she didn't breathe. Willing herself to the wall, she looked up to a standing ovation. She thought she must have won. She beamed a victorious smile. The crowd, within a few minutes had been caught in her momentous struggle and she, mercilessly, pulled at the heart of every spectator that day.

Later, I was in the fifty metres freestyle and I stuck with the field for twenty-five metres and then they left me in their wake. Nicole ran beside me bent over with a towel around her waist following me beside the pool yelling, 'Come on dad, you can do it. Don't give up, keep going.' My old man cried watching her encourage me.

I got to the end of the pool and I said, 'shhh, will you.' Did I sound that bad?

'Well done, dad,' she continued, 'you did it and you didn't give up.'

Was I that bad? That night we had a BBQ, played on the water slides, and relived the day. On the Sunday, we swam around the lake and went home hopeful as a family.

During 1986 we finally got our lives back on track. Nicole was doing well in grade two and Rhiannon had started prep. Although Nicole was no longer doing the prescribed exercises, treating the brain as a muscle had become an entrenched way of thinking. The afternoon and weekend home therapy had transformed the cross

patterning exercises into swimming drills. I was able to manipulate the exercises easier in water and I developed an array of brain exercises to improve her co-ordination and hopefully improve her brain's ability to learn. We did alternate arms with polo kick or alternate polo kick, flutter kick or one-legged kicking. I did figure eights with her arms, outward sculling with symmetrical and bilateral movements. I did whatever would confuse her and we persevered until she had adapted, or partially adapted. I tried the exercises on myself first, testing them, and hopefully keeping my own brain fit and improving.

Swimming upstream

Late in 1986 Nicole burst through the front door straight after school. Rhiannon dragged herself behind a few minutes later. The security door slammed behind her. 'Dad, dad, where are you, dad?'

I was out the back building a pergola with some leftover packing case timbers. Part of my new plan was spending one hour every day building or making something around the house.

'Dad.' Nicole rushed out the back door.

'What?'

'Dad, guess what?'

'What.'

'Guess.'

'You've got a friend?'

'No.' She leaned over and put her chin out. She was grinning and giggling. Her elbows were pushed into her ribs and her arms turned out. Her knock knees similarly were turned in and her feet pigeon-toed. 'I still play on the monkey bars, dad. Go on guess.'

'Just tell me.'

‘Well,’ she grinned and took a deep breath. ‘I had my work displayed in class. Miss Tinkler put my writing on the wall. I did every letter inside the lines and I joined up the circles without crossing over.’

‘Really.’ I put my gear down and gave her a hug and we danced around the back yard laughing together. We danced down to the end of the yard and back again and we started singing one of her patterning songs, Patsy Biscoe’s “Little Red Caboose”.

‘I can’t wait to tell mum when she comes home.’ Her mother had gone back to school and was doing year twelve.

‘Well, go and do your homework and we’ll go to the pool.’ Wow, she’s still improving, I thought. Rhiannon went straight to her chair and her book.

I went in and said, ‘How was your day, Rhiannon.’

‘Uhhh, I’m tired. I can’t talk much,’ and she flopped onto the floor.

They packed their bathers and we went to the pool. The next day I had a gut feeling about Nicole and went past the girl’s school. Rhiannon, playing in a different part of the school was surrounded with friends. She spotted me, smiled, looked over at Nicole, and with a low discreet hand movement waved and walked off. I had some idea how Rhiannon felt. Nicole and Rhiannon’s relationship had some similarities to my relationship with one of my brothers. He was about fifteen months older than me. The convulsions he suffered from when he was young were attributed to the attention I drew away from him. There was always some guilt associated with my success, as if I had taken something from him. It was also the guilt of not wanting to be responsible but feeling it was expected of me. When I laughed at some of the things Rhiannon did she thought I was laughing at her. I was laughing at seeing myself in her but Rhiannon

hated being aligned with me, so did my brother. We didn't know how to be brothers. I only knew how to compete.

I spotted Nicole in the school yard. She looked like she was escaping someone. Her eyes were wide open and her little face was white. She kept looking back, and then put her head down trying to be unnoticed. She walked around one side of the building and walked straight into a wall and stood there with her arms motionless by her side, as if she was invisible. A large girl was heading straight for her.

I got out of the car and walked to the fence.

The bigger girl's hand locked onto the back of Nicole's neck. I thought she was about to knock Nicole's head into the wall. I yelled out, 'Nicole, Nicole.' They both turned and I gestured for them to come over to the fence.

Nicole ran in her awkward way, sometimes slowing to a more coordinated walk. Then, with a burst of enthusiasm and impatience, she started running again. 'Dad,' she puffed, 'what are you doing here?' she said with a big grin on her face.

'I was just going by, saw you and wanted to say hi.' I joked, 'Is that okay? Am I allowed to do that?' By this time the other girl, to my surprise, had the audacity to come over. Nicole shrunk in her presence.

Michelle's eyes were squashed into their sockets by her bulging cheeks. She was a year older than Nicole. 'How are you?' I said.

'Mmm...', she nodded her head, looked around a little. 'Good, I think. Are you Nicole's dad?' Michelle was the girl who had stolen Nicole's lunch.

'Yeah, I am. And are you Nicole's friend?'

‘Mmmm...Not really. She hasn’t got any friends.’

Nicole frowned at me. I wasn’t leaving. ‘What do you do after school?’

‘Me...’, she shrugged her shoulders, turned her mouth downwards, looked around. ‘Nothing.’

Nicole frowned deeper and gave out a hissed, ‘Dad.’

‘Have you got any brothers and sisters?’

‘Yeah, my oldest brother’s in prison and we go and see him every month, but last month we couldn’t cause mum was working.’

‘Why don’t you come around after school and you can play with Nicole at home.’

‘I can come tonight. I can come straight after school because I only live there.’

I turned around and she was pointing at a house across the road about one block from our house.

Nicole bravely turned to Michelle, ‘I’ve got homework.’

‘You can do it later,’ I said.

Through gritted teeth she seethed out, ‘daaad,’ we have to go swimming tonight.’

‘That’s tomorrow.’

‘I’ll come home with Nicole because my mum doesn’t get home from work until five, anyway.’

Nicole impersonated a smile. She arrived home after school a minute or so before Michelle. Michelle told me she couldn't be seen leaving the school with Nicole.

I shook my head at her brazen honesty and gave them each an ice cream. Nicole took hers outside and they sat on the trampoline together. They seemed to talk okay and then they took turns jumping. Nicole didn't have Barbie dolls. She wasn't that sort of a girl.

'Daddy,' Rhiannon yelled coming through the door, 'daddy.' She came in and smiled, dropped her case and leaned forward with her hands on her hips. 'You been sneaking over to the school to watch me, uhh?'

Rhiannon went out and sat with Nicole and Michelle for a while but with Nicole's complaining, came back inside to read her book.

Every lunch time that week I walked to the corner and watched Nicole wandering alone in the yard scanning the horizon with her familiar turned head and poked chin. She invariably ended up at the monkey bars repeating her old routine of swinging up and down and then hanging upside down and swinging her body in figure eights. Then she would wander through the school yard, looking for someone to look back at her and maybe talk to her. Rhiannon always had friends around her but she often preferred the characters in her books. I had one daughter who couldn't find a friend and another who had too many.

Michelle came around a few times briefly after her first visit. She stopped bullying Nicole at school and they did spend some time together in the playground. At that time we were mainly concerned with her loneliness. I thought her bullying experience was an isolated incident. However, it was only a taste of things to come.

Despite her lack of success socially, scholastically Nicole thrived under Mrs Tinkler, her teacher. She was always the slowest in the class but as the year progressed she started bridging the gap. Nicole always gave one hundred percent even when her results were poor. Over her school life Nicole only improved in years two, five, seven, eleven and twelve. The other years were either poor teaching, the effect of bullying, or she had plateaued. Nicole never improved from January to December.

Rhiannon in prep was a gun student, but her enthusiasm for learning had stopped by grade one. For most of her education Rhiannon read her novels in class. So did I. Maybe I should have told her that that is what I did. Then she might have done the opposite. I didn't know how to chastise her when I had done virtually the same thing. The only difference was the teachers let me read, provided I didn't disrupt the class. I tried encouraging her, but that didn't work with Rhiannon.

In the tunnel the engineers were changing the rules. They shifted the workplace site from the change rooms on the surface to the crib room two kilometres into the tunnel. We had to be ready for work by seven am at the face, not the work site change rooms. That meant we had to travel the thirty minutes in and out of the tunnel in our own time. The union agreed for us to keep working until it was resolved; we started on the Starship at seven in the morning.

Boots yelled reluctantly, 'Boys, get those fucken vibrators off the loco and bring them down to the form.' He walked off along the tunnel with his head down sucking on another smoke, stopped and turned back to us. 'Have a coffee first...fuckem. Where's the fucken union when you need 'em.'

Manfred looked at me. 'Where's your great Bob Smith, now?' Smith was the Union organiser for our site. Manfred threw down one of the two vibrators he was carrying, as if it was my fault we were starting earlier and finishing later without pay.

'I didn't see you putting your hand up to say anything, Manfred.'

He pouted. 'It's your country. You're Australian. What's the point, anyway? No one wants to go on strike. No one ever says anything at the meetings.'

Budgie said, 'They all whinge afterwards but no one says anything when the meetings on.'

Big Bad Dave yelled excitedly, 'Ya bunch a weak cunts. I love it. Fuck the wogs.' His head was bouncing up and down on his neck. 'Bunch a hungry slimy cunts. They all got two fucken houses. Fuckem.' He started laughing hideously.

Budgie said, 'Why didn't you speak up at the meeting, if you liked the idea then, Dave.'

'Me,' he pointed to himself, 'I'm management. They made me a leading fucking hand.' He leaned over into Budgie's face and he laughed again. 'Come on, let's get going.'

Leading hand already! How did that big-mouthed butter ball get a promotion and I couldn't even get on a loco? We ignored Big Bad Dave, had a coffee and carried one vibrator at a time to the form, a pathetic unofficial go slow. The vibrators were small heavy units that fitted on to the form by a wedging system. After we fitted the twenty or so vibrators along the floor of the form work, on the sides, and in the roof of the form,

we connected the floor vibrators with air hoses first because that's where the concrete flowed. Rather than shift vibrators we only had to move air hoses

I was taken from outside the form to work inside it. We had hand vibrators hanging outside the window and Boots, like a concert maestro, stood on the walkway pointing. Budgie and I would turn the air on for the vibrators for as long as Boots held his hand out. The noise was deafening and, according to the occupational health and safety officers, the form vibrators were rattling our joints to bits, as well as the concrete. When Boots' hand dropped we turned them off. I couldn't hear anything afterwards and my body shook.

The lights went on and off, generators cut in and Monty kept pumping the concrete and pulling back the pipe. We could run up to eighteen vibrators at a time. We were all experiencing sleep deprivation and restlessness. At the end of the shift no one talked to anyone. There were no jokes or ribbing each other. Work had changed. I was in the second group to leave the tunnel. Monty went up early with Boots. Dave went out with the last aggi truck. There was a meeting with all the shift gangs.

The meeting opened with management saying how much they valued and liked the workers. That straightened the men's backs. Everyone was thanked for implementing the new starting place at the face of the tunnel and not at the change rooms

It was still in dispute; the union had asked us to keep working while they negotiated. As of next week they were putting on a further nine metre section of form which meant we were going to put four hundred metres of concrete into the tunnel every day. That was a record for underground construction. The bonus money, he said, would

be renegotiated. Men caught each other's eye waiting for someone to speak. Not one tunneller said anything.

'More grappa,' one old guard yelled. Management laughed. Arsehole, I thought.

I had a light bulb moment in the midst of the business of the meeting. I hadn't thought of a drink for a while. In fact I couldn't remember the last time I'd thought of a drink. I got high on that. I was doing it. I was really doing it.

If our C group wanted to win new contracts, they said we had to show ourselves to be a capable unit. There was talk of selling C group to private investors. He said they were in the process of quoting for the Domain tunnel, under the Yarra River, so keep up the competition amongst the shifts. Good work, chaps.

At the next union meeting I was voted in as union rep on our site. Ricky had said to me that when I speak, people listen. Talking was my strength. More concrete for less money, that's what I heard, I said. There were no promotions for us, unskilled uneducated workers, only the money we earned, and they were cutting that.

After the union meeting I went straight to the outdoor pool. In the early afternoon, protected from the winds by river gums and with only the soft rays of sunshine breaking through the clouds warming my body, I dived deep into the pool and hung there surrounded by bubbles until the pressure slowly pushed me to the surface, free again. Propelling myself through the water I swam, breathing every three, five and seven strokes. With the sun on my back and the cool water flowing over me I moved through the water bringing myself back to life.

Grime scuffed up from the floors. Concrete trucks rolled by. A continuing card game broke out into a fight. Men were in showers. Locker doors being banged shut.

Dryers worked overtime and Monty's call rang out over the noise with his usual, 'Let's go, you fuckers'. Work continued but there was unrest over the potential slashing of our bonus. Dragovic had a skeleton day shift crew waiting in the tunnel for us to come in. Monty, Jimmy, Manfred, Budgie, Boots and me went down. Descending into the tunnel, the chaos of the work site was replaced by the chaos at the bottom of the shaft.

The concrete pelted down the shaft pipe like a rock waterfall into the waiting torpedo barrels, vibrating the locos and us. One truck load went hard and Dragovic's men were jack picking it out. Boots yelled, 'Must have had a break down in the tunnel to lose a truck of concrete.'

Monty rolled his eyes, 'We're in for a long night to catch up.'

We'd try and catch up to keep the bonus money at the level we had. Nothing stopped us from getting our quota. Also, if we didn't catch up, night shift would have to work all night and that was against an unwritten rule. Two aggi trucks were spinning in the switch when we arrived on the Starship and the boys were putting water into them to keep the concrete moist enough to pump through the pipe into the form. Dave took over that job. We ditched our gear into the crib room. Boots and Monty took a coffee with them.

Boots thought it was too dry to pump through the six-inch pipe, considering it had a hundred-mill rock in it. If it dried too much it would jam in the pipe and we'd have three hundred metres of solid concrete in the six-inch pipe hanging off the roof of the tunnel and we'd have four aggi trucks, two in the switch on the Starship and two in the shaft waiting to come in full of concrete. That's thirty-six metres of concrete we would have to either ditch or jack pick out if we were too slow. Then there were several

trucks up top waiting to unload. They'd have to ditch their loads as well. It would take three or four days to catch up.

Monty yelled. 'Put the fucker in.' Threw his hands up, walked to the form and pressed the green button and yelled at the top of his voice. 'Concrete, fuucckkyaa.'

We listened as we worked to the slow squeezing sound of drying concrete scraping through the pipe all evening. We did it.

After the concreting, all the sludge, concrete slurry, mud and oil between the form work and Starship had to be bagged and taken out in muck buckets. There was about two hundred metres' gap between the form and the Starship. That was my new workplace after being kicked out of the form. I'd complained about the noise.

Boots put on eighteen vibrators at a time to ensure a quality finish rather than the three recommended. He said he wasn't having any holes in his concreting and then losing bonus money. It was more than that, though, he didn't want to do a bad job, didn't want to be the weak link amongst the other shift bosses. They told Boots, 'Put real men in the form.' Being relegated to what we called the bog pit was better than losing my hearing and having my joints rattled to bits. Jimmy and Budgie were put inside the form, turning vibrators on and off, shutting portals. Monty pressed the button to signal the concrete pump. At the end of the shift Boots and the boys in the form looked wrecked.

The bog pit was in semi-darkness. With each forward pull, as the form filled with concrete, a wave of sludge came rippling back down the tunnel, tipping over into our gumboots. I was soaked in rotting black sludge. The concreting, on this day,

finished about seven pm. We didn't stop for dinner. We had a coffee and kept working to catch up for lost time.

Boots screamed 'Don't pull that fucken form off, Monty, fa fuck sake.'

Monty kept unbolting it with the air gun.

Boots went up to him quietly. 'Go up top and ask Gamble for my job.'

Monty didn't look up and didn't stop maniacally undoing bolts.

Boots cut off the air to the gun and said again louder and slower. 'Go up and ask Gamble if you can be shift boss. If he says yes, I'll do what you want. No worries. If he says, no,' he emphasised with a searing quietness, 'that means I'm the boss.'

'Fuck ya.' Monty yelled. 'The concrete's dry, Boots. We're only wasting time.'

'Okay. If it's not, and it falls out, you fix it. I'll be in the crib room.'

Budgie intervened after Boots left and told Monty to wait another half hour.

I finished cleaning the floor of the tunnel at about 9.30 and then we got a muck truck in and we loaded until night shift took over. Boots came and helped. I stunk. The forms got built and night shift got a sleep. The following evening we were ahead and finished everything at about 9.30. The boys went back to the crib room and I sat on my drum and smoked. The pumps surged and sucked and the fans whistled. I had become fond of my time alone after the work was done. The rise and fall of the noise in the card game always told what was going on. Afternoon and night shift, we were the bosses. I sat in the shadows surrounded by stone and water, waiting. I thought something good would happen for me soon.

I had gone to Ricky's earlier in the week and we had a cup of tea. 'Look at that...on the news,' he said. 'I painted those planes.' He turned towards me with pride. 'I was the only spray painter in the southern hemisphere that could do my job.' It took him two weeks to learn the technique. He did the same thing every day for ten years until he was pensioned off with asthma for the rest of his life.

'How's the tunnel going?'

'Not bad. I hate it.'

'What about doing a course or getting on a machine. Who drives those locos?'

'I tried to get on as a loco driver but they said there were blokes waiting, same as the big Katos. You have to get a leading hand's position before you get a go at a machine.'

'Well.'

'I been there nearly two years and I can't get off the shovel. In fact I even got kicked out of the form work for complaining about the noise.'

'Ohh well, that'll be good for your humility then.'

I changed the subject. 'My old man works in factories, a bit like you do.'

'I never hear much about your parents. What's he do?'

'He's a boilermaker by trade, but he invented some machines. We had a big falling out a few years ago. We haven't spoken much since. I went down to smash his face in one night, but...I couldn't do it.'

Ricky sat up. ‘Tat’s a big resentment, son. You know you’ll have to make amends to him sooner or later. You can’t live with that anger in you, you know that. What happened?’

‘I can’t quite remember, now. I was pretty drunk. I was just sick of him using me and I snapped one night. Yeah, I’m not that angry any more. We just say hello now, that’s all.’

‘Look at your fists, son, they’re clenched. I can hear your teeth grinding. You’re going to need to make amends to him.’

‘You mean he’s going to have to make amends to me, don’t you? I’m the one in AA.’

He took a bite of his sandwich and chewed it slowly. ‘Amends is forgiving yourself, son...forgiving yourself. It’s okay to accept who you are.’ He put his hand on my shoulder. ‘Is your father trying to straighten his life out?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Is he going to AA? We are our father’s sons.’ Ricky got out a pen and paper and asked me to write down all the faults my old man had. That was easy and I quickly wrote a list. He said, ‘Okay, sign it.’

‘What?’

‘Sign it.’

Anger whipped up my spine. ‘What for?’

‘Because that’s you.’

He picked up his cup of tea in one hand, his sandwich in the other and turned, settled into his chair with his remote control. I sat there for a while, put the paper in my pocket and went home. Was I really a selfish, manipulative, lying, using cunt?

A boat, the sea, the old man and me

The old man's Jubilee sailing boat was tied to the pier. It was the same pier I first saw Leanne, swimming in a tractor inner tube. She was about ten or eleven then. Dad was pulling the cord of the outboard when I climbed aboard. He yelled out, without turning, 'check the flares and safety jackets.' No hellos or personal remarks was a good way to begin. It was a mild day, with a soft offshore breeze rattling the masts and stays. The layered sailcloth rubbed back and forth in unison with the chop, rocking the boat. The few clouds circling didn't mean much. We were going out early. Old Mick, the fisherman, with half a nose and half an ear, who lived next to us when he was alive, accurately predicted the weather from the clouds. Now the locals relied on the flawed weather reports. We would be back early to avoid any strong winds that might unexpectedly arise.

We headed out the mouth of the river following the markers that indicated the narrow man-made channel. Old Mick warned them that they were not dredging the natural course of the river. No one listened. Consequently, the channel silts up as the season progresses and it has to be dredged every winter. The pelican family were on the sand bar spit opposite the pier watching us. I wondered if they remembered Old Mick. Dad grew up in Stockton, a spit on the Hunter River, in Newcastle. We could have been pulling out of a pier from his childhood, it was so similar.

I pulled the jib up on a loose tack and then pulled the mainsail tight, cutting into the edge of the wind, and dad turned the motor off and pulled it out of the water. We

were sailing. I looked back and saw our house. A packet of cigarettes on top of a box of matches was how he described it after designing it himself. We sat awkwardly making small chit chat. Silence was awkward. The last time we were alone in a boat we were out fishing. I was eleven or twelve. He told me about the rule of the sea. He said if he was drowning I was not to leave the boat. The rule of the sea was self-preservation. 'Save yourself,' he had said. And I was.

The tension was broken by tacks and by shifting the sail angles looking for wind gusts. When the water rippled in the distance you knew a gust of wind was coming and dad would instruct me where he wanted the sail set. We faced each other. He was sitting by the rudder and I by the jib. I knew where he wanted to go, what he was going to say and do, even the way he was going to say it.

The sagging skin under his eyes was hereditary. I felt for mine. The gusting breeze whipped off the spittle from his wobbly chops, vanishing into the sea spray. His eyes were staid and firm scanning the horizon. A tinge of stubble greyed his jaw and cheeks. His legendary long shorts and bare feet reminded me of his primary school photo. He marked his course and we set sail for Port Arlington.

Dad started the conversation, saying mum thought he had been spoiled by his four older sisters. Maybe he was, he conceded. Dad's acceptance of some criticisms wasn't an acknowledgement of a flaw, or accepting the need to take responsibility for his actions. On the contrary, it was his excuse for abdicating responsibility. He was performing, showing he could accept criticism. He often used the same explanation about the charge of being labelled an alcoholic. 'Okay,' he'd say with the appropriate amount of reluctance and with an appropriate touch of regret. 'I accept that,' and kept on drinking. I'd tried that one myself. I'd come to understand being spoilt as something

very different than what dad was suggesting. I didn't see spoilt as receiving a lot of attention as much as not receiving proper tuition and effort and care from your family. For me, it was neglect.

Dad was one of the few boys who was awarded an apprenticeship at the Newcastle dockyards towards the end of the Second World War. 'I never learned to weld in my apprenticeship,' he said. 'As soon as they realized I could read drawings I was put into the office.' After his apprenticeship time was over he worked for Frost Brothers, building factories all over the country. He loved it, he said. 'It was like playing with Meccano sets and it was great making something from nothing.'

'I was away a lot,' he conceded, and he acknowledged the strain it must have been on mum. 'She was a good mother. You boys were lucky to have a good mother.' That was a stock-in-trade response whenever dad reflected on our childhood. I wondered if he thought that compensated for his absentness, appeased his guilty feelings. I can't remember missing him but can see how much I craved a father in all my actions.

A trip to the beach was fantastic with him. The trip home meant hours in the car while he was in the pub. 'Ungrateful' was his answer if we complained. Reward and payment was his modus operandum.

I tacked. He looked out to sea and coughed.

I turned and looked at him. The sun shone through his sparse, evenly placed grey head of hair with his Anglo-Saxon freckled skin. He was a red head without the red hair. Was I him? Was that what I ran from? As a young teenager I smoked the same brands: Havelock, Champion Ruby or Capstan. I rolled them with the same level of indifference and licked the paper with one neat swipe, hung it out the side of my mouth

on the same angle. When I used my hands to do up a bolt or carry a bag I inhaled in one side and exhaled out the other side as he did. I wanted the hard calcified hands, the fatigue of a hard day's work behind me when I came home. I wanted to smell like work. That early desire to physically emulate him was muddied by mum telling us not be like him.

But I was like my father. I even had the same voice tones as him.

We jibbed and tacked, shifting from one side of the boat to the other, and remained in opposite corners.

He said mum could be so hard and uncompromising sometimes. He never felt understood by her, not really. In some aspects in his relationship he felt lonely. He said he had that many ideas in his head sometimes. But she always found a way to squash them. Dad did lose a few businesses. Mum said it was because he drank too much.

I set out in my late teens to be different to him. And I was. I was a worse drunk, more volatile, less responsible, less educated and less skilled. I had the mantle of the next generation alcoholic, more dysfunctional, more paranoid, neurotic, unstable. That's progression.

Dad called, 'jib'. We tacked into the wind. I whiplashed the rope out of the cleave, ducked under the boom and pulled in the opposite rope and set the sail. Did I create the near impenetrable magnetic field that separated us? Was it me that couldn't let go, couldn't let him back into my life. Or had he never let me in, in the first place. I could never fully submit to his will. I could almost tell you what he was thinking, how he was crafting his sentences, building the images of his next round of telling. Did I refuse to buckle to his will, to respect his life? When I rejected my apprenticeship did I

reject his life, his view of the world? Did I pigeon hole who I thought he was in my memory? Was my mind closed to other aspects of him? Or was I just one of mum's soldiers pitted against him in her war against the drink?

'But I've always worked,' he continued. 'You should be grateful for that you know. Still, I haven't always been good for your mother. I know that. It probably started after we lost Peter number one...' He looked out to sea. He wasn't crying or upset. Just remembering and gathering his thoughts. 'You know what I regret and it's a funny thing when you reflect back on your life what sticks in your mind. I still feel sick in the stomach when I think about it. The priest turned up to bless Peter number one after he was born dead, and I cracked the latest joke going around. He just turned and looked at me. I can say some stupid things at the most inappropriate times. But I still squirm when I think about that.' He ground his teeth.

'I had to rescue Peter number one from the hospital incinerator, you know. Your mother wanted him buried. They told her he was still born and didn't require a burial. She got so angry. It lived inside her, she told them. She wanted his life acknowledged. "He did live", mum kept saying, "Inside me. He did live."' The nurses understood and left him in the back room. During visiting hours dad went in and found Peter number one. He was almost black, a dark, dark blue, and his arms crossed in front of him. He'd been dead for more than a week inside mum.

He said he couldn't look at his little face. He wrapped and sealed him in newspaper. Fish and chips were wrapped in newspapers at that time. He walked out past the crib room with the other fathers, children and grandparents nursing and looking at their babies in bunny rugs. He walked past with his baby, dead, wrapped up to look like a parcel of fish and chips. He laid him on the passenger seat and drove to the ferry and

crossed the river to Stockton. Max, who worked at the cemetery, had dug a hole out from the side of Par, Dad's father's, tombstone. He laid Peter number one down and unwrapped the newspaper. Through the cloth he could see his little McIntosh ears and thick, jet-black hair.

Dad placed Peter number one in the little grave under Par's tombstone, put the paper over his face so he didn't get dirt in his mouth or on his little face. He deserved at least that. Max patted the dirt down with the back of the shovel and recited the Lord's prayer. Dad prayed in silence. He went home, climbed into bed without taking his clothes off and cried himself to sleep. I know this because my eldest brother climbed into bed and gave him a cuddle.

'Mum wouldn't get help,' dad said. 'It's not like it is now with counsellors. She was angry with me. She was angry with everyone. She said the baby had stopped kicking weeks earlier. Nobody listened. The doctor dismissed her concerns. Afterwards, she burst into tears at any time. I didn't know what to do. I sent her to the priest and he just told her to pray. That didn't help.'

Dad's eyes darted in a vacant stare.

'She wouldn't take communion because she thought she was no good, a bad mother, and she wouldn't talk to anyone. She thought she let her baby down. She blamed herself for not speaking up and not being stronger when the doctor treated her like an idiot and sent her home. She couldn't make anyone listen to her and she knew something was wrong. Within a year we had left Newcastle for a new life in Melbourne.'

‘She wanted more children. I was forty by then,’ he said, ‘but how could I say no? It just meant I had to work seven days a week for another twenty years.’ The next child born, Peter number two, helped mum heal from Peter number one’s death, four years earlier. A year after that she had her sixth child, a baby girl, after six boys. They finally had their girl and their new family: the upstairs family.

We tacked twice to get around. The chop was up and it rocked the boat in the turn. The winds picked up, and we headed back to the mouth of the river in the breach position. We looked like a Chinese Junk with our boom at right angles to the boat, surfing the small Port Phillip Bay waves.

‘The things I’m most proud of, though, are those machines I built at Plasdip. Now they were works of art.’ His eyes lit up.

‘We cornered the Japanese market, then the world market for plastic coating curtain brackets. Did you know that?’

I did.

He glowed with a pride that I had never seen for me. I wished when I was growing up that I had been a curtain bracket machine. No sporting awards took his attention. When I played well in soccer he said nothing. I watched him watch me one rare day at soccer. I looked at him standing at the back of the crowd hoping he’d smile back or wave. He wore a brown work jumper splattered with welding spark holes. He seemed distracted, as if I was keeping him from something. When I was school swimming champion, he said the squad were racing greyhounds for the parent’s pleasure. When I won a league’s best and fairest he said it was a weak competition. When I got suspended and expelled from school he didn’t say anything. When I came

home drunk, went to work dirty, never left the pub, they said I was just like my old man.

I said sorry to him for all the trouble I got into at school and coming home drunk when I was a teenager and the night I wanted to smash his face in. He shook his head and said I had two chips on my shoulders growing up. And I made everyone suffer around me for it.

What I should have said was: I was sorry for not being able to forgive him; for always judging him as not good enough, not worthy; for not ever saying thank-you that he worked six and seven days a week for forty years; for not appreciating the chance he created for a good education. I should have said sorry for always looking at what he didn't do. But I didn't, I was still too young then.

The old man lived his dream and had the courage to follow his hunches. Went out on a limb, had the guts to try and fail yet try again. He didn't worry about money and money came to him when he needed it. These were his legacies. His gifts were not handed down in things. It was his spirit of curiosity, determination and resilience. He could get things done and see things through. In time I embraced the strength and fortitude of my father. In this way I honoured him and embraced that of me which was from him, and in doing so freed myself of self-hatred.

We manoeuvred a wide tack into the channel. The sailing trip was coming to an end. We'd never had a conversation like this and I knew it wouldn't happen again. People were walking their dogs along the shell-speckled beach. Fishermen were setting rods around the mouth waiting for the changing tide. Wash from snapper boats heading out collided with the competing natural and unnatural water currents and the resulting waves crashed into the sand, pounding the beach.

‘You know,’ dad said, ‘you started concerning me when you were driving down the main street with a cask of wine beside you, filling up your tin mug. But I’m glad you have stopped drinking. I don’t like AA I have to tell you that. Bill Beggs went and said they rat on their families. We’re Catholics and we have confession for that. You don’t go round ratting on your family. I know I drink too much, but I’ve always worked and you’ve always had a good mother,’ he said again. He said he hardly went to the pub these days. He claimed he’d cut back on his drinking. But he could see the changes in me.

He thought I could have made a living out of soccer. I had that determination even back then. He was sitting at a mate’s place in Stockton and his son came in from soccer and his dad asked how he went and he said, ‘alright but some kid from Adamstown kicked nine goals.’ ‘When I got home I found out it was you.’

Didn’t he realise the significance of it being his old club? I pulled down the main sail. The breeze was strong enough with only the jib up to propel us into the pier.

‘And, I still think had you done your apprenticeship you would have had direction. You never seemed to have direction in your life.’ He smiled, satisfied with the outing. We unloaded the boat and moored it back in the river and rowed the dinghy to the boat ramp and went home. Dad went into the shed. I went inside and peeked into our—the three older boys’—downstairs bedroom next to the laundry. The steel beams were covered over and the walls were double-bricked now. No rain or salt could get in. It looked like a real bedroom.

I could still see dad putting his fists up to fight Neil one terrible Saturday afternoon. Dad had been drinking. It was the only time he ever got violent. Neil had been nailing beading around the walls in the stairwell for mum. He was doing jobs mum

had asked dad to do for months. She wanted the house finished. A quarrel quickly erupted when dad came home. 'Fuck off, you smart arse,' dad yelled.

Mum listened through the vent. Neil was still a young man: about twenty. They wrestled into the laundry and dad pushed him back into his bedroom.

'You're gutless,' dad said, and put his fists up.

Neil cried. He said he didn't want to hit his father and it ended with him leaning back on his bed. I still remember dad's gritted teeth and mum's scurrying footsteps back to her kitchen when dad headed upstairs.

I headed up the same stairs. The angry young man that had trod those steps was a ghost walking with me. I'd changed. I was emotionally returning from when I left to work on Cunningham's farm when I was fourteen. I stood between the kitchen and lounge room, the scene of many battles. Mum was in the kitchen. She was always in the same position when dad came home. One night, armed with the whispers of her complaints, I confronted dad about there being no money for food.

He smelt of welding fumes, beer and pub smoke, and had the paper wrapped around a couple of bottles under his arm. He looked at mum. She panicked. He didn't know what I was talking about. She switched and left me there, fighting her battle while she supported dad, much like she did with Neil. 'Your father works hard and he works seven days a week,' she said moving next to him. Dad went to his chair, opened a bottle and mum served him dinner. We all had our turn in the bull pit with dad, fighting mum's battles. I could feel the rage returning and stopped myself. The rage could end with me, if I wanted.

I noticed mum's tentativeness waiting for me to come to her. She was nervous. Why wouldn't she be; I hadn't hugged her in twenty years. So I hugged her and held her tight to my chest trying to make up for those years. She put three meals a day on the table for her six children, dad and her father. We always had clean sheets and clothes. Six loads of washing and mountains of ironing, she never let us down. I put myself into my mother's shoes as much as a young man could imagine what it would be like to carry a dead baby around and look after four little boys. I was touched by her incredible efforts and told her I loved her and that she was a great mum. I believe mum suffered a depression after she lost Peter number one. Add dad's absence and the insecurity his drinking created, six children and her father to look after. It was too much. She didn't quite cope but she never let us down either.

'And I've loved it too, even the bad times,' she said. 'I knew you'd make it. They tried to break your spirit at school but I wouldn't let them. You had too much spirit for them.'

'Mum, I wasn't that good either.'

She smiled and I left her in the kitchen cooking dad's dinner.

Dad was in the shed; he had a stash there. He looked like he was cataloguing his tools, drill bits and fasteners and he had some country and western music going. I had won the shed for dad when I was suspended for fighting at school. Dad and I had to visit the families of the boys I had fought and apologise before I was allowed back. Dad got talking to one of the fathers and he gave the old man the shed. Dad said, next time could I get into a fight with a bricklayer's son?

I yelled goodbye from the carport. I thought we might have got closer after I stopped drinking, but a drinker doesn't want a non-drinker around him, even if it is his son.

Ricky was in his kitchen listening to his Irish music. By the time I got there I was agitated. Ricky knew I went sailing with the old man.

'I wanted him to say sorry to me.'

Ricky shook his head. 'Why?'

'Why? Because I want to let go. I want to.'

'You want. You want. You want. When are you going to get it Dennis? Ha.' He looked me in the eye.

'I wanted him to say...he was always undermining us. I wanted him to say sorry for the times he let us down, didn't turn up, borrowed our money and never gave it back. Why didn't he come and watch our soccer games? Why didn't he ever watch us swim or play footy, why?'

Ricky didn't say anything for a while. 'What did you want from him, Dennis?'

'To say sorry.'

'For what?'

My mind went blank, fuzzy. I couldn't think. I pranced up and down his flat.

'What did you want from him, Dennis? Say it. Go on.' Ricky got animated, 'say it'.

Ricky got his lolly jar down from the shelf and went inside to watch TV.

Get-out-plan three

It was 1987. I had been in the tunnel for nearly three long years. Nicole was in grade three. She had passed grade one with little improvement but in grade two under Miss Tinkler she had dramatically improved. Rhiannon was in grade one and Becky was in a playgroup. Leanne was in the second year of her year twelve studies.

‘She went like this dad. She was waving her hand, shooping me away and she was shouting, “Nicole, Nicole, go over with Michael.”’

‘She always huffs and puffs when she talks to me and she called me an idiot today.’

‘What?’

‘She called me an idiot.’

‘How? What happened? How did she say it?’

‘Daaad, I don’t know. She just huffed and said, “ohh, you idiot sit down.”’

Because I couldn’t answer a question.’

‘Where were you? Where was she?’

‘She was sitting behind her desk and I was in my seat.’

‘Well, we better go and see her.’

‘No, you can’t. I’ll only get in more trouble.’

‘You won’t, darling, and she knows she’s in the wrong.’

‘No.’

‘Well, what was the problem?’

‘I can’t get my times tables right and we have a weekly competition. Every day I have to sit with someone to help me. I often end up with Michael. He sits near me and he’s good. He shows me the sum and then he shows me how he gets the answer. But the teacher told him off for telling me the answer. Can you believe that? I get palmed off every day with a different student.’

Her lips pouted. In Miss Tinkler’s class she made me feel like I could do anything.’

‘I can teach you the times tables. They’re easy. Which ones are you learning at the moment?’

‘We’re doing them all, dad.’

‘Okay, let’s get started.’

It was the main rule: practice, practice and more practice. And I always combined the physical and the mental processes. I never thought about the task we were learning; rather I thought about the activities as brain training.

We started on the twos, then we did the fives. Every night I added one times table and reinforced the previous night’s times table.

In Nicole’s class they played a game called ‘Around the world’. The students paired up and the teacher asked an equation question to each pair. The first child to

answer the question remained standing. In the second round the remaining students paired up again until there was only one pair left. Nicole continued to get put out on the first round despite knowing the answers. She was too slow.

We continued after the twos, fives and tens with the elevens, threes and fours. We practised at home, in the car, when she went to bed and then I started testing her when she was swimming. I combined her swimming training with her maths. I was coaching twice a week at the club. The parents thought I was doing swimming training but I was only doing Nicole's brain training. When the athletes were fatigued from a lap or two, or from doing a sprint I'd ask questions. Most couldn't think. They were too pre-occupied with getting their breath back. One or two of the brighter kids answered the questions. I'd get Nicole to answer the easier times tables. Then I started getting them to sing and swim. She loved it and so did the kids. They thought it was a game but the bilateral movement of the arms coordinated with the cardiovascular system was one thing. Singing, I thought, had to come from a different part of the brain. I could only guess but I thought I was training the brain and forcing adaptation.

Then I taught her the nines and twelves. At school, Nicole started getting past the first round; twice she got past the second round. Then I used all the other tables to teach her the hardest ones, the sixes, sevens and eights. At school she got to the third round once and regularly made the second round. At swimming training she was getting quicker and quicker with her responses. The hard ones were coming but she had a delay in her reaction time that I couldn't eliminate. So I went back and we started counting by sixes and sevens. I did it forwards and backwards until she became fluent in getting her mouth around the answer quicker. She started getting to the last pair at school. Finally, I made her answer the questions while she was doing dogpaddle as an

overload. At the end of term Nicole made it into the last two and a boy just outgunned her for speed to win the competition. But she knew the answer. She was so happy. Some of the kids, once their friends had been knocked out of the game, barracked for Nicole.

At parent-teacher interview the teacher highlighted her success at the times tables. She broached the subject of calling her an idiot and apologized. So we left it at that. She couldn't cope with Nicole at all and Nicole's development reflected her attitude.

The teacher showed us examples of her work. One story was titled 'The day my dad went to AA.' Apparently Rhiannon and Nicole had taken the AA news to school for show and tell as well. I thought of all the effort I had put into being anonymous. And I thought I was being paranoid that the teachers were looking at me when I went to the school.

Nicole had a flat year three. Her adaptation to learning took its own time. Socially, she had made significant gains in classroom management, conforming to rules, timetables and other commitments, but she still had no friends and that was starting to affect her behaviour in little ways.

I picked Ricky up and went to the Essendon AA anniversary. It was packed. There must have been more than two hundred people mingling in the reunion. Speaker after speaker spoke about Bill C., the priestly-looking old codger who I had mistakenly thought was one the founders of AA. Over the last thirty-five years Bill C. had spawned a church hall full of sober people.

When they called a 'Kevin', I turned and looked. And it was Kevin from the Gill Memorial standing up in the middle of the room. His St Vinnies pale blue suit and yellowed white shirt had been replaced with a deep sea-blue based Hawaiian shirt with gabardine bone pants. He walked to the front of the meeting with the aid of a stylish walking stick. His legs were a bit rubbery but he had mastered walking. I had never seen him open his mouth, let alone speak.

His wrinkled face had life in it and his once-cloudy eyes searched the hall of faces with clarity and engagement. He spoke with a plum in his mouth. I couldn't believe it. He had been educated at exclusive schools and for thirty years worked around the world as a jazz musician. As his marriage disintegrated and his career evaporated he never once contemplated giving up, slowing down or stopping drinking. His visits home became less and less until he stopped going. His work became sporadic and he sought cheaper and cheaper accommodation. The Salvation Army found him four years ago, collapsed in the Fitzroy Gardens.

Stopping drinking by that stage was easy, he said. For six months he was attended to by nurses and put out in the sun during the day sitting in his wheel chair. His lucky break came when he was relocated to the Gill Memorial for Homeless Men in A'Beckett Street North Melbourne. I'd been there. It was no lucky break. He met Warren, a god and AA evangelist, and he took him to the Footscray meeting one Friday night. At first he didn't know where he was going, but he soon realised. After a while he got himself to the meetings.

That's when I had first seen him. Though he didn't speak for a couple of years, he listened and he started getting better. He bought an old pale blue suit, a white shirt and grey tie from the op shop. Despite them being oversized and the edges frayed, his

weekly goal was to make sure they were washed and ironed for his Friday night meeting. He was so proud of his suit because he had ironed it every week and he felt clean and fresh in it. Soon he started catching the bus to Hyde Street on his own, he said with great pride. 'I negotiated the 200 metres from the bus stop to the meeting. Firstly, in my wheel chair, then a walking frame and then walking tripods, now, after a little over three years I am left with this.' He raised his walking stick.

'Every week I made it from the bus stop to the meeting, I got stronger. Those two hundred metres were my sobriety. I was stuffed for the night by the time I got there, but I did it.'

He was leaving Melbourne to be reunited with his daughter who he hadn't seen in thirty years. She had found him through the Salvation Army's missing person's unit. He also had two grandchildren that he had never met waiting for him in Brisbane. Lastly, he thanked Warren, the person who brought him to AA Warren, he said, later hung himself, but he did pass on the gift of life to him.

After the meeting a few of the musos put on a jam session and, although his voice was a bit rusty and despite his age, he could really sing. I wanted to go and say hello but I sort of liked that I had never spoken to him, that he never knew I existed, yet he had taught me so much. He was inspirational.

There was no inspiration at my work. We did the same thing every day, every week, every month. There was no initiative and no thinking in our work. In the tunnel I was in no mood for talking. The issues over cutting our bonus money, increasing our workload and forcing us to start our shifts in the tunnel instead of the change rooms boiled over eventually and we went on strike. We had the full support of the men and the union, but it backfired. Four men out of eighty turned up on the picket line. The

tradesmen, and inspectors, except for Boots, all broke the picket lines. It was a union sanctioned picket but the shop steward and the organiser had their own agenda. After two weeks on strike we were ordered back down the tunnel by the arbitration commission.

The unpopular, pale-faced trainee Engineer who had been floating around on the Starship Enterprise, returned. He was tip-toeing down the tunnel. No more questions I hoped. We had returned to work in body only. We were yet to start concreting. 'Pick up those spud bars and put them into the form, will, you?' he told me.

'Fuck off. I told you what a spud bar *was* two weeks ago, you fuck wit.' He scurried back to the rail switch and waited for a loco to pick him up. I didn't have to take orders from him.

I went back to the crib room and had some tea. I felt really stupid. The tunnel, when there was no concrete running, seemed hollow, like a schoolyard on the weekends. The pumps surging and fans whistling were a constant. I couldn't get comfortable anymore on the cold steel seating in the sticky, damp crib room.

Boots and Budgie came in. Boots said 'Don't worry about it.' He threw his head back. 'They're all weak cunts. They always have been. You won't get these blokes being seen on the union's side. They want everything, but don't want to be seen against the bosses'.

Budgie said, 'You tried. Fuck'em. Forget it, at least you tried. What was that thing you said at the meeting? "The purpose of work was the worker." I don't even know what that means and I can speak English.'

Boots yelled back, 'These blokes only want money, mate. Think about it. We lost twelve hundred bucks and what did we get? We pulled a little bit back on what we lost on the bonus money.'

'I feel like an idiot.'

Boots said, 'You are. I mean, you were. You were the dummy. Look at Black George (the shop steward) and Smithy (the Union Organiser). They're heroes. They got the men back to work. Don't take it personal or nothing but the big boss said you'll never leave the face of the tunnel while he's in charge. He didn't like you locking him out. That was going a bit far.'

When I was elected unanimously as union rep for the Hoppers Crossing worksite I took it seriously. I thought this might be my future: advocacy at work. Black George, the shop steward for the whole job, grabbed me after I was elected. The Union had a message for me. 'Don't look for problems.'

I said, 'that's Bob Cutler, the secretary, speaking. He called me a red ragger back when I was shearing.'

'Well, just take it easy,' he said, but I didn't. After stripping back our bonus money we had to get an added hundred metres of concrete into the tunnel a day to make the same money. Four blokes from my shift, out of eighty Australian Workers Union (AWU) members, turned up on the Australian Council Trade Union (ACTU) sanctioned picket line. After three days the contract welders, sparkies and fitters broke the line on the promise of being paid even if they didn't work, and they were members of unions. I locked the boss out on day four and convinced the police it wasn't a civil matter. On day five Bob Smith and Black George told us to hang on and they came in and did a small deal with management. The travelling money

stayed, the work issue clothes allocation was revamped and the bonus was marginally improved from the original reduction, which meant we lost less than their original offer and had an extra 100 metres of concrete a day to put in. No repercussions were to be handed out to the contractors or leading hands who had broken the picket line. That was a union directive. I wanted a total black ban on those men. I lost and quit as union rep.

I had really believed it was our labour to bargain, but that was bullshit. The union was bullshit. We didn't even own the crappy work we did. Then a kid who doesn't know a spud bar from a shovel with a fucken tie on can come in and tell you what to do because he has a degree. We had no boundaries at work. They could walk all over us and they did.

That afternoon we were back preparing the form work for the next day as usual. No one spoke much. Even Big Bad Dave was quiet. 'You tried, he said. 'Least you had a go.' After a week away from the tunnel I didn't want to go back. By the Friday night we were back in our routine. Boots, trying to lift our spirits, said, 'It's like we never left. Come on, fellas, just do the fucken thing, that's it. This is our lives.'

A few weeks went by and it was the end of another week. It was close to three in the morning when Boots said, 'Finish that ahh...fucken bulk head, Dennis, and come up f'r a Barbie. Budgie and Monty caught some snapper today. We're having our own farewell to Louie.' Boots threw the remaining timbers up onto my scaffold and went out. I had a smoke and slowly finished off the bulk head timbers and tightened all the steel braces. I climbed onto the form and crawled over it spraying oil. I could even do it without lights.

Louie was sixty-four and, after twenty years on the job, was next in line to be Gamble's gofer when he died. He had hated the union but he really loved his bluey

jacket and his new work boots. He'd been out of the tunnel for a few years, except when we were desperate. Louie, a yardman, was working with the mobile crane when the jib hit a power line. Louie was holding the chains and it threw him backwards. In the sick bay he kept trying to go back to work, insisting he was alright. They let him go back after lunch. A few days later he was too sick to come to work. A few months later he was dead. They insisted his cancer had nothing to do with his electrocution.

I sat on my drum, down near the face. I wasn't going up. They'd be getting half pissed and we didn't have the balls to pull the pin on the job and go to his funeral. A directive was sent down the tunnel that anyone who attended his funeral would have their pay docked. All men were required at work. An engineer representing C group attended Louie's funeral.

I think it was partly because of Louie's death that I became depressed. My insides felt like they'd been rubbed by a cheese grater when I was at work. I couldn't take the relentless repetitiveness and menial work anymore. I was going nowhere and there was no way out.

In my shearing years I lived from week to week, broke by Tuesday and paying back loans on Thursday. Now, with overtime, double shifts and bonuses, I was earning the best money in my life and I couldn't keep up with the debt. I worked to pay the bank, council rates, Telstra, the SEC and all Leanne's credit card debts. I was buried under it. I wanted my life to mean more than that. At work we were less than the job.

It was passing three in the morning. The spot lights' splattered concrete cast a dull light. The walls leaked. This had become my tunnel under the sea. The pumps sucked. To my right were the indestructible steel forms bolted and welded into place. The lights inside the form sizzled and crackled. The concrete splattered timbers around

the oily bulk head were secured with right-angled quarter plate. To my left was the abandoned Starship Enterprise; the defunct station was orbiting aimlessly in some distant galaxy lit only by emergency lighting, the crib room empty, the tools put away, the German concrete pump dismembered. I sat, as usual, on a drum with a few hessian bags to protect my arse from the rim.

The years had rolled by since I had stopped drinking. I didn't know how to get out. I had been waiting for a promotion, someone to come along and recognise my talents, someone to reward me for a job well done. It was only a matter of time, I had thought. I had done everything asked of me. I'd worked hard on myself, tried to do the right thing with my family. I deserved a break. I'd earned it. I wanted it. The tunnel had become my tomb. I was there for life. No education, no road out, just bills and more fucken bills. Leanne had gone to Nurse's training and had spent thousands and thousands of dollars over our budget and left me to pay it off. I did, but it was also the moment I knew I was in a loveless marriage. With three little children and Nicole still needing a lot of support, I was trapped. No one cared what I did to pay the rent. I thought about the sparse traffic above me. I was somewhere under the Westgate freeway eighty metres under the surface, two kilometres inside this five-metre rock cavity. And then I realised I was down there waiting to be discovered.

No one was coming, not even God. No one even knew I was there. That was my spiritual awakening. It wasn't the sun coming over the snow-tipped mountain or the waves rolling in at sunset on a distant beach. My awakening was reality. Set in a sewage tunnel surrounded by mud and slurry, I saw an image of myself as I really was. After the bravado of an adventurous life, the physical prowess on the sporting fields had

passed by; after the drinking and grandiose façade had been pulled down, I was an unskilled labourer with no education and no way out.

Two ideas transformed my life from that point. Nicole had shown me the brain was only a muscle. If she could improve, why couldn't I get an education? I didn't think in terms of traditional education because under those conditions people were either smart or dumb. There were those that could write and spell and those that could not. I could not. But I could learn by patterning my brain just as Nicole had learned. The other idea was time. If I had divine intervention at that moment, then it came through this intuitive idea. I had no time to myself and really time was the only thing that was valuable. Louie showed me that. All the things he was going to do when he retired. That night I took responsibility for who I was and importantly who I wanted to be.

I had to find a more fulfilling life. I stepped over my insecurity, my lack of knowledge and took up the challenge. I didn't know what to do, where to look or who to ask, but from that moment on I became 'the no excuses man.' This was the positive side of my father's legacy and my mother's training. I had two thousand four hundred weekends left to live. People born in my era lived on average to seventy-four point six years. That was about three thousand eight hundred and seventy weekends for a lifetime. I had already spent fourteen hundred. It had taken two billion years of evolution for me to be born and life would go on for another two billion years afterwards. We were like those insects on those documentaries that had sex and died. We just didn't know it. Time. Working people never had time. Being busy was easy. Everyone did it. I didn't want to spend what time I had on earth, living for my weekends or working for a retirement, a retirement I might never have. I wanted to live now, be alive now. And I hated more

than anything thinking that my labour made someone else rich. I wanted to be the one who benefited from my labour, not an engineer's career or some suited prick.

Jesus didn't work. Buddha, the fat man in history, sat under a tree. All the religious characters I had read about didn't work. Rich people didn't work. The more money I'd earned, the more debt I was in. The less money I had the less debt I had. Money was a problem. My old man never worried about money. He lived by the creed that it came when you needed it. Kevin from the Gill Memorial never had money and he improved. He didn't get wealthier; he got happier. How much money did we really need anyway? I started thinking in currencies of time. I made time my money and I took a vow of poverty. It wasn't that I didn't want to be rich. I wanted to eliminate the anxiety of not being rich. In doing so I freed myself of the need to spend my life striving to be seen-to-be-successful. I wasn't going to spend any more of my life playing that game. It keeps a person hard-working and dumb. When I thought of a job I had to do or something I wanted to buy, I thought how much time working will that cost me. I wanted time to think. I could feel I needed that more than anything. And Leanne couldn't spend free time and you don't pay tax on it. Not yet, anyway.

Making time my money became my get out plan from the tunnel. Despite committing to stay in the tunnel until I got to the end of it, I started applying for internal jobs within the Board of Works. The boys said 'Water Maintenance Depot' and 'Deep Sewer' were two of the best jobs on the board. Water Maintenance though was difficult. I had to have a family member work there and take their place when they died or retired. I targeted Deep Sewer Maintenance. A regular job, holiday pay, being called out on emergencies, my own ute—it had it all. I thought with my years in the tunnel I would be certain of an interview. Every application met with no reply. Boots reckoned either

they weren't allowed to take blokes off this job, or it was because of the trouble I caused during the last strike when I blocked the boss from entering the site.

All at sea at school

In 1988 we moved back to Werribee South near the sea and the mouth of the river. The kids were enrolled into St Mary's School.

'Dad.' Nicole turned back with the car door open. 'I'm going to show the Glen Devon kids I can make friends.'

Rhiannon getting out the back yelled, 'Nicole, shut uuup.'

I turned towards her and stared at her to keep her voice down, then turned back to Nicole. 'Don't try too hard, just take it easy,' I pleaded. 'Don't rush in.'

Nicole pouted at Rhiannon and turned towards me. 'Dad, I can do it.' She pushed two awkward fists towards me like the little red caboose that could. 'I'll show them.' She smiled, leaned back into the car and kissed me goodbye and ran off. Rhiannon rolled her eyes, nodded and followed Nicole into St Mary's, their new school.

'Good luck,' I said, looking towards Nicole but thinking of Rhiannon and missing both of them.

Nicole was almost running. 'Hi, I'm Nicole. I'm new to your school.' She smiled as if she had never experienced rejection in her life.

Within ten metres of entering the school yard Rhiannon watched kids laughing at her gushing sister. I have reflected on this a lot and maybe she had a visual deficit. I wondered if she couldn't read the political scene at school. Maybe we need to read the

facial shifts and the more complex nature of the group's reaction to get the bigger picture of what is going on. She was clearly intelligent and—one-on-one—engaging, personable and humorous. To Rhiannon and Becky she was selfish, hogged the limelight, was belligerent and stubborn. Either one was clear communication. At school Nicole couldn't read the politics.

She was going into grade four, Rhiannon grade two. Becky was starting kindergarten and Leanne, her first year as a training nurse. Rhiannon had been the last thing we took out of the Flax Court house. She didn't want to change schools, houses, friends, bedroom or her bed.

'What's wrong with your sister?' a kid from gymnastics walking next to Rhiannon asked. She cowered backwards, shrugged her shoulders and slowed down. Rhiannon, almost stationary, was brushed aside by the first day rushes. Many of the kids at the school were related and, with one playground for everyone, Rhiannon wasn't going to be able to hide from Nicole's scenes. It was supposed to be a more intimate Catholic school where Nicole would hopefully get more personal attention. How I came to wish she could have been back lost in the crowd.

Within a few short days Rhiannon dragged herself into the house screaming, 'Will you shut up. Just shuut uuup, will you,' trying to drown Nicole out of existence.

Nicole looked tired and defensive. The lines on her faces seemed deeper. 'I'm trying humour as a strategy,' she emphasised. 'That's all.' She had dropped her bag defending herself. Her hands were, as usual, awkwardly extended, wrist bent, head turned, and her turned eye looked bad.

I said, 'What's going on? How'd you go today?' I looked at both of them.

‘Good.’ Nicole said. She pushed her chin up and went into her room. Rhiannon slammed the door shut.

‘Nicole?’ I said.

‘How was your day, dad?’ She interrupted. ‘What shift are you on?’

‘Nights. Come on, what’s going on?’ There was no sparkle, no stories about school. Some days the tension between them was worse than others.

‘Dad, I’ve got homework to do. I’m sorry.’

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

‘Dad, please.’

I tried to go into Rhiannon’s room but she lived in the world of *The Folk of the Far Away Tree* and her real friends were *The Fantastic Five*. Rhiannon, the chirpy bubble of energy, had grown to hate me and I didn’t know why. I guessed it was the time I’d spent with Nicole’s program but I thought later I was her release valve. She had no one to scream at.

‘Go away.’ She got up and shut the door.

It appeared Rhiannon had made friends with the three girls that were her age. They played or talked near their classroom. But she couldn’t escape Nicole’s lunchtime and recess bullying, but neither said a word. A few Saturdays later, I dropped Nicole off at Mary’s house. She was a friend from school, so I thought she was going okay.

This particular afternoon, I came home at the same time as the kids. My ears were still ringing from jack picking dried concrete out of an aggr truck when I walked

into the kitchen and heard faint sobbing coming from Nicole's room. I opened her door and she was curled up, knees under her chin with her arms wrapped around her legs. Rhiannon had her door open, opposite, reading in a subdued way. The lines in Nicole's cheeks were wet from tears. She looked tortured, old and desperately miserable. Her lazy eye had turned sharply inward making her look severely cross eyed.

I knew this was coming. I'd seen a change in her behaviour. Nicole had gone backwards—socially, and I didn't really know why. She was bending to the shape of her loneliness and I felt powerless.

Nicole composed herself, a little. 'What's wrong with me?' She started crying. She sobbed uncontrollably, 'what's wrong with me?'

I let her cry. I didn't hold her or try and hug her. It wasn't that sort of a moment. I just sat there with her until she had stopped crying.

'I am ashamed of myself,' she confessed. 'I thought for sure I would have had friends at my new school. I feel like I've let you and mum down. I've let everyone down and I know mum will be disappointed in me, but I tried, I really did. I don't know why nobody wants to be my friend.' She started a pain-filled deep sobbing.

I tried to reassure her that we were proud of her and I told her what I could of her early life, to explain how far she had come. Her mother bought her a set of books on people who had overcome great difficulties to triumph in their lives. It was about this time that Nicole felt her sense of faith developing. I told her she wasn't alone in life, that she always had an inner strength to draw on. She believed in God and like my mother drew on saints for strength. Nicole had learned about them from the 'Tuesday

School' lessons she had taken once a week for her first communion. She had nothing going for her and I had literally nothing else to give her.

I leaned over to her and grabbed her arms and shook her gently. 'You are going to make it. You will succeed. Those kids will come and go and you will be still improving. This is just another test. Your mum believes in you.' I looked her in the eye until she looked back. 'Dream your greatest dream and go for it.'

She laughed through her sobs. 'I am going to make it, dad. You know what I want to be?'

'What?'

'A teacher.'

'What, and put up with those kids?'

'No. I want to be a teacher and I want to make a difference to kids in trouble. Then I'm going to be a missionary.' I thought she was already living her greatest mission. She didn't need to do anything else.

'A missionary? I think you can do it, too. I know you can do it, but it's not going to be easy. There's a lot of work to be done. Firstly, I think you should increase your homework and we'll pick up your swimming training and gymnastic practice. Secondly, we need a plan for school. What about reading a book at the smoko breaks.'

'What?'

'The recesses, playtime.'

'Okay.'

‘And you can’t keep things from us. We’re here to help you, darling. You’re not alone, okay?’

‘Thanks, dad’. But she never told us what was going on at school.

Rhiannon told her mother they call her Dicole, instead of Nicole; and that it was the whole school. Even the grade two boys followed her around teasing her. Leanne said to me later, ‘when she does sport she’s called spastic.’ Nicole still couldn’t skip, run properly, jump or hit a ball.

Rhiannon’s friends asked her what was wrong with her sister. She screwed up her face, but didn’t say anything, not wanting to betray her sister and not wanting to alienate herself in her new school. She said she turned her back while the grade four boys followed Nicole around pulling retarded faces at her. In the class they walked by Nicole’s desk and breathed all over her, one after the other all day, every day. She went to the monkey bars or to the oval and they followed her. There was nowhere to hide in a small school.

Then it went to a new level. A “Get-ay-mate” was accompanied with a whack on her arms or her stomach or back. Rhiannon said she tried to go where she couldn’t see it. Nicole tried saying, ‘Hi,’ back to them and tried hopelessly to deflect the abuse with humour. Rhiannon kept telling her to shut up. She only made it worse when she spoke back.

I looked into Rhiannon’s room after Nicole calmed down and she had tears in her eyes. ‘Get out,’ she screamed, ‘get out.’

‘Can we talk?’

‘Get out.’ She got up and slammed the sliding door shut and snibbed the lock. She had a wall around her just like mine.

In time the frenzy on Nicole reduced and she still had a sporadic friendship with Mary. Mary was a very timid girl. Nicole also spent some time with Belinda. Belinda was blind and popular, but the students were naturally selfish and didn’t want to always hang around her. A small vicious group of boys persisted in pursuing Nicole. I persevered with Nicole’s swimming. At training she was uncoordinated and it was difficult for her, but afterwards, under the water swimming along the bottom of the pool she was a little fish thrown back into the sea.

At swimming four or five kids turned up two nights a week along with Nicole to be coached when I wasn’t on shift. I coped with her situation through her training and home-work activities. At work there was a forklift licence training course being held on site, run by the Board of Works. I put my name down. I rang TAFE to see if there were any construction courses I could do and I called in on dad. He said he might be able to get me an apprenticeship, but it would be boring. I’d have to do a lot of continuous welding. I put in, again, for another ‘Deep Sewer Maintenance job. They kept advertising the positions but I never heard anything. If I had my forklift licence that might help my chances at Deep Sewer. I also applied for a new intake of trainee firemen advertised in the paper by the Country Fire Authority. No experience necessary the ad said. Try everything was my motto.

I was knocked back on the construction course. I didn’t have the educational requirements and Boots delivered the ‘sorry mate, you didn’t get selected for the forklift driver’s course.’

‘The strike?’

‘Probably. Don’t worry about it. The ticket is only valid on the Board of Works. That way no one can snatch it and get another job.’

Big Bad Dave, who had been a little subdued since the strike—even normal—sarcastically re-emerged. Thinking he was speaking for most of the blokes he said, ‘You can have my leading hand’s position, or my operator’s job.’ He got louder. ‘Or go drive the locos or take over Monty’s job as the operator. What about Budgie’s leading hand position or the boss’s job?’ ‘Fucken hell,’ he turned and walked off.

‘It’s not so bad here, Dennis.’ Boots put his hand on my shoulder. ‘The nuns reckoned I’d end up on the end of a shovel. Haven’t done fucken bad with a shovel, mate. Own me own house in the hills, you know and Jen’s got a chicken shop...but...if you’re not happy you’re not happy.’

Budgie said, ‘Just keep putting in for things. Something’ll come up. Might even do a course myself. Actually I just found out I’m not who I thought I was?’

‘Yeah, I found out that too.’

‘No, I mean I was adopted. I didn’t know.’

‘Oh, sorry.’

‘It’s alright. Could be interesting finding out.’

Big Bad Dave overheard: ‘You look like a Greek fish and chip shop man.’

They all agreed that Budgie looked Greek.

I did get an invite to sit the fireman’s test. I was rapt. To my surprise I passed the test and got an interview. I thought if I get it I’m out of the tunnel for good. There

were four heavily-suited interviewers with decoration all across their chest. The first few questions went well and then the young cowboy fireman on the end turned aggressive. You'd think he'd done four stints in Vietnam. He was the old men's protégé. I knew I was in trouble when I was sitting there thinking he probably started the fires.

'Why did I want to be a fireman?'

I said, 'I worked underground and it had a lot of difficulties, so I thought I might have an aptitude for handling dangerous situations. I like being fit and enjoy training and I wanted to do something more meaningful with my life than what I'm doing.'

'Have you ever been a volunteer?'

'No, but I went out to a fire with volunteers some years ago.'

'What did you think?'

I thought they just liked riding down the main street on the truck, but I couldn't say that. I said 'It was okay.'

'Have you ever been inside a fire station?'

'No.' I'd never thought of that.

'Why haven't you?'

'Why haven't you become a volunteer if you're interested in the Country Fire Brigade?'

‘Were any of my friends in the fire brigade?’

‘No.’

Right then, sitting in that interview with three decorated war lords staring back at me, and the cowboy, who’d seen one too many fires, standing over the desk leaning on his knuckles, I realised I didn’t want to be a fireman. The rejection letter came a few weeks later.

‘Try not trying.’

I said, ‘Try not trying?’

‘Yeah, try not trying.’

‘How?’

‘Just don’t try.’

‘Just don’t try? I want to get out, Ricky. If I don’t try I won’t get anywhere.’

‘Is it working going bull at a gate at everything? If I saw you coming I’d duck. That’s for sure.’

Even though I wasn’t happy at work my new plan was to be happy even if I had no reason. On day shift I was in the muck between the form work and the Starship Enterprise, which I hated. I let Manfred be the shoveler and I held the bag. The sludge spillage landed over my arms, cuffs and soaked through my gloves. The sludge was rotten. I liked sludge that day. I liked being covered in it. It was real and I was supporting my family through it. Whatever I did I had to do it for itself. Not for a

reward. The less ambitious I became the less stress I felt. It was that simple. It dawned on me I had been driving myself to be rewarded for not drinking. I wanted compensation for stopping drinking. The reward for stopping drinking, as Ricky had told me years ago, was not drinking. I got it. I started to embrace nothingness, a spiritual nothingness. Not trying started to work. If I dug a hole, I dug it to the best of my ability and I dug it for itself.

After work I went to the pool with the kids. They looked up from the water's edge with eager smiling faces. I dived in and sat on the bottom of the pool. The kids followed but they were like tadpoles and floated to the surface. One day while giving a group of young students instructions for the warm up I started doing tricks with a yoyo. They quickly followed showing each other better tricks. No one had a yoyo. Kids could just weave in and out of any world. I thought that was amazing. Our first drill was right arm freestyle, left leg breaststroke. The left hand had to hold the right foot. Nicole had no hope. One of the other kids mastered it in twenty-five metres. A parent pulled me aside and said. 'Look, I didn't bring my kid down here to play stupid games.'

I said, 'Relax.'

'What?'

'Relax. Take it easy.'

He went over and called his kid to get out of the pool. The child wouldn't go and he huffed off. I wasn't playing games. I was doing brain-training exercises to maximise their coordination ability before I taught them a skill. I used the same idea on myself. We did a few laps and practised starts and turns. No one could tumble turn and I only knew the way I was taught twenty years earlier, but it was a start.

I saw a level one swim-coaching course advertised on the life guards' window. It required no qualification. At last I qualified for something. And I could say I had level one when the parents asked if I was trained. The course was held in the Ivanhoe Grammar school's swimming pool over a weekend. I put on my best shorts and bought some runners to wear. The kids had called me Romper Stomper because I wore my slip proof boots from work around the pool. I didn't want to look like Romper Stomper. The course was held in a Physical Education classroom beside the pool. I'd never seen a school with such good facilities.

I walked in and collected my badge and clip board. I was scared someone was going to ask my name and I'd say, 'I'm Dennis and I'm an alcoholic.' I'd been practising all week not saying it. That meant I probably would say it. I didn't want anyone to know I worked in a tunnel, either. I just wanted a chance to experience new things. If I was an alcoholic in one world and I went to AA and stopped drinking I was a product of that environment. I worked in a shearing shed. I became a shearer. A tunnel produces a tunneller. I was shaped by the things I did. Swim coaching was a new experience and it could shape me in directions I couldn't imagine from inside the tunnel. I had to put my mind where I wanted to be and pattern my thinking towards my goal. Swimming coaching was positive, healthy, exciting and fun. If the brain was just a muscle then it was adapting to whatever experience I was giving it.

The bleakness of the tunnel was replaced with a room filled with colour, kick boards instead of spud bars, lecturers and stories instead of management and instructions. Coaches master minded their own programs and relied on inspiring their swimmers. Their results were their qualifications rather than degrees or positions of power. It was a more level playing field in that way. That gave everyone a chance, if

they were good enough. Steel, rock, earth, darkness, concrete, hammers and noise were replaced with water, movement, colour, rhythm and feeling. There were no Romper Stompers at the coach's course. All the speakers had either been national swimmers or Olympic coaches themselves.

The more notes I took during the seminar, the more excited I became. I understood what they were talking about, mainly because of Nicole's early training. They talked about the motor pathways to the brain, cycles of training and adaptation. I waited for them to talk about brain training, but they didn't. I thought, 'I'm on to something.'

I left there, bought Maglishgo's *Swimming Fastest 2* and a couple of other recommended books on physiology, biomechanics and sport psychology and set about educating myself to pass my level one swim coaching ticket. I completed a five hundred word essay on swim training. I couldn't spell and didn't know where the commas went. I passed because I understood what they were saying. Training the motor pathways to the brain with Nicole was no different than training the motor pathways of an athlete. If Nicole could achieve what she had on her training, what could other children do if they put the effort in? I saw every child as a little Nicole with hidden talents.

At my first swim coach's conference, two years later, I was still working in the tunnel. I listened to the keynote speaker, a vice-chancellor of a prestigious German university. He talked about maximising the coordination potential of a young athlete before the acquisition of skills. East Germany's procedure was to improve the coordination of the brain before they went to specific sports. They did things like sliding on a cloth across a floor, walking on a beam, sliding on a cloth on a raised platform,

bouncing balloons in the air with different levels of water in them. I saw all these ideas as variations on the brain training we had done with Nicole.

The vice-chancellor likened it to a racing car driver who goes around a corner too sharp and skids out. The next time he goes around the corner he manages it better. He has adapted to the speed, the curve, the car's ability and so on. Practice plus adaptation equals improved skills. He said the low-skilled child won't necessarily beat the highly-skilled child but they can maximise their potential. It was a policy I used for the many years I coached swimming, an idea that doesn't date.

I also kept my own coordination practice going by swimming, reading and taking notes. I had burned my poetry journal. When a poem came to me I practised getting it out of my head. I kept doing that every day until those moments slowly disappeared and finally stopped.

I was re-connecting with some of my good childhood experiences. I was school swimming champion in grade four. That was good. I'd swum with the Newport Swim Club for a few years after we came to Melbourne. The manager of the pool had picked me out of the school swimming lessons. In one race for the club, at the end of the third lap, the seventy-five metre mark, I was in front of the state champion in the one hundred butterfly. I turned, looked up, my coach was barracking for me at the end of the pool. No one had ever barracked for me like that before. I thought I'm going to go for it and died. I couldn't get my arms out of the water. I still don't know if it was an early sign of things to come, that I couldn't handle the expectation of success. That day it was just ten metres away. After that swim all I wanted to do was butterfly. I wanted to do it in the warm up, in the main sets when we did kick and arms only sets. I didn't. I was too scared to ask.

Soon after that we moved to Werribee. The local swim club had shut down. I tried to train in the Werribee River. I was going to do butterfly to the bend in the river and back every day and make it to the Olympics. It was too hard on my own and that ended my swimming career. I went picking onions to buy a horse instead. I replaced the black line from the pool with lines of onion, the chlorinated air with a salt sea breeze and a horse I could see instead of the Olympics. I went up and down those endless rows all that summer. Maybe I could give the Werribee kids the chance I didn't have. There were no swim coaches or squads in the area. This was something I thought I could do.

Rita of Corsica

In 1989 Nicole was in grade five, Rhiannon grade three and Becky prep. One afternoon, waiting for the kids to finish school, I jumped out of the car and ran over to Nicole. She was screaming, bent over holding her shins on the nature strip in front of the school. She'd been kicked in the legs by one of the bully boys. Miss O'Sullivan, Nicole's new grade five teacher, came out and took us into the first aid room and the boy to the Principal's office. Nicole had a few bruises on her leg but sobbed from her ribs. The boy was later forced to apologise and was given some menial punishment. I had really thought she was improving with her friendships. I didn't think I could take much more.

After Nicole calmed down Miss O'Sullivan took the opportunity to speak to me. She said that Nicole has bluntly refused to do homework. She told her teacher she was too busy with her swimming. I was taken aback. I reassured her that the homework would get done. Then she hedged around, finally saying Nicole claimed Jesus was an alcoholic. She looked at me.

I had taken Nicole to Alateen, an organization for the children of alcoholics, thinking it might help. And I thought if the kids could learn what I'd learned, it might save them a lot of heartache later in life. I didn't take them back.

I told the teacher I would fix it and thanked her for letting me know. She smiled back and I left.

The school year started with renewed vigour from the bully boys. After a few days I asked whether it was getting better and what was going on with her friend, Mary. ‘Yeah, Mary was forced to choose between me and Antoinette. She chose Antoinette, but she said I could play with her at home.’

‘But not at school?’

‘No, not really. She says hello, though. I have some grade four friends. I hang around with them, Olivia and the Cunningham twins. I’m not in their group but they let me hang with them.’

‘What about the boys?’

‘They do it behind the teacher’s back. But I am trying to ignore them.’

Rhiannon played with her friends close to the portable. She said Nicole wandered around the courtyard, over to the monkey bars then walked the length of the field. Then she’d do it all again.

The parent teacher interview was frank. Nicole was failing grade five. Miss O’Sullivan said if she didn’t improve substantially she would need to repeat the year. Nicole hadn’t really improved since grade two. Nicole responded, moving from Es to Ds and D pluses. She did draft after redraft of her essays and Miss O’Sullivan taught her planning and preparation. She was uncompromising and Nicole lifted to her expectations. That year Miss O’Sullivan taught her to study. She stayed on D pluses for much of the year. She also went on student council and participated in monthly meetings. At the end of the year her essay writing and ability to order her thoughts had improved so much she received a B for her major project and surpassed, scholastically, many of her bullies, topping it off with the school student of the year award. She thrived

under Miss O'Sullivan. She won a selection of Banjo Paterson's poems, the respect of her teachers and a measure of respect from her peers. She'd earned it.

The following year Nicole plateaued scholastically. She chose Rita of Corsica as her patron saint for her confirmation. Rita had watched her family die before joining the convent. God told her to put a dead twig in the ground and water it every day. Despite the heckling of the other nuns, she religiously followed instructions and the twig grew into a beautiful oak tree. It was a good metaphor for Nicole.

Nicole had hand sewn Nicole RITA on to her sash. 'Nicole retard,' wailed out across the courtyard as we walked from the car to the church. Nicole turned and looked straight towards her mother with that distressed look on her face. Again, she was more concerned with our response than what was happening to her. The boys couldn't even shut up when she walked down the aisle in church, snickering 'retard' and coughing.

At the end of the year, I called in to school and found Rhiannon sitting reading alone. The teacher told us the girl's relationships had been an on and off affair most of the year. Rhiannon had been ostracised by one child in particular in the group and she retaliated by performing at year eight standard in the grade four class. The market gardening parents ran the school and one particular parent virtually lived at the school, according to the teacher, and manipulated the friendships amongst the kids. But, she said, with some pride, Rhiannon showed them in the classroom. And they couldn't compete. The teacher urged us to take the kids to another school.

In 1990, Nicole's end of her grade six year was an anti-climax. The other grade six girls held her down and took her panties off in front of the grade five and six boys. Rhiannon told us. The Principal and Nicole's teacher, who had been so supportive of Nicole the year before, defended the students against Nicole. We moved back into

Werribee, and Rhiannon and Becky were enrolled into the local primary school. When the kids left St Mary's school all I wanted to do was blow it up with gelignite and rip those bullies' heads off and shit down their miserable necks. I really wanted to do that. However, she might have left the school but her time with the St Mary's boys wasn't over yet. Nicole started at secondary school with the enthusiasm a new beginning brings. She acted like the problems of the past were at the school she had been in, as if the new school would be different. It was. It was worse. The early signs, though, seemed okay, but that meant nothing. Nevertheless, seeing her in her secondary school uniform was cause for reflection. She continued to defy every obstacle and negative expectation put in front of her. Her mother constantly worried and stressed about her. I chose to look at her life as a quest, a quest I willed myself to believe in. That's how I coped.

The numbers in my squads had grown. I was even being paid. Every night I studied the swimming books on physiology and biomechanics. I read swimming magazines and cut out programs from elite coaches, filing them under different energy systems for referencing. In a way it added to me hating, absolutely hating, my job. I was patterning my brain for a new way of thinking and working, but I couldn't overcome the sickening feeling I got from doing the same thing every day. The squads in the outdoor pool swelled over winter in the indoor heated facility. I relished the challenge of developing a program and building a culture. Creating my own future was the ultimate in autonomy.

The knowledge I had gained from the course and my reading coupled with lots of co-ordination exercises had produced a more comprehensive program and we had won C grade in the district and had been elevated to B grade. We were getting a good

squad together. My swimmers were improving and the first lot of kids to come through left and went to a higher level coach. I was devastated. If they swam well the parents moved them to a higher squad. If they didn't perform they asked me what was wrong. Worse still, if a couple of the kids improved faster than others I was accused of favouritism.

It was an emotional minefield compared to the tunnel. Every word I said, every action I performed, was evaluated by the growing gallery of parents. Coach watching and coach evaluation was a parent sport. Most parents, though, just enjoyed the spectacle of watching a squad in action and it was poetic when the squad trained well. I learned to forget about the eyes watching and to concentrate on coaching. I thought if I could produce a few swimmers with a good program I could produce more swimmers with a better program. Nicole trained hard too, but she wasn't good enough to represent the club and Rhiannon hated swimming training with me and turned to diving. I even began to relish problem solving, whether it was a technical problem or a relational problem with the parents or children. Bullying in the squads was the most difficult, and, despite my experiences with Nicole, I couldn't always stop, particularly girls, from isolating one or two other girls. When teenage girls turned on another girl, they were the most brutal, ruthless group in the human race. Over the years I learned to build a culture to minimise the bullying. A lot of bullying often went back to the power the child thought the parent had in the swimming club. Keeping parents on an even keel helped a lot; so did transparency.

I was in my fifth year in the tunnel when I started permanent day shift on the concrete loading bay. My coaching was growing and making time my money was working. I had given up shift work, doing double shifts and Saturdays. I worked at the

bottom of the shaft loading the aggi torpedoes with concrete. I opened the lids and pressed the button for the concrete to be released from up top. The concrete filled the torpedoes and I locked the lids. My day consisted of seven or eight moves. I did them every minute, every hour, every day, week, month, and as it turned out, years. I was going insane. But so were the men. Absenteeism was a rising problem. Injuries at work increased because men became slack, and safety practices were shoddy. Drinking also increased and at times there was some bizarre behaviour.

On the loading bay every day, Joe, the boss, and his offsider came back from lunch half-drunk from a bottle of home-made wine. By then there was only an hour or so of concreting left for the day. They would rub themselves up against me when I leaned over to do up a lid. After a while they pulled their cocks out and tried dry fucking me when I bent over the rail to open or shut an aggi door. They thought it was funny. I was sick of it, sick of them playing with their cocks in front of me, or pretending to wipe their cocks on me when I was locking a lid on the aggi trucks. The longer the year dragged on, the drunker the day shift men got. The toppy, drunk most days, sent concrete down on our heads a few times. Loads on the crane swerved, banging into the tunnel wall. If they hit us there would be no need for an ambulance. I didn't think I'd get out alive. I figured I'd stopped drinking but I was about to be killed by drunks.

On a maintenance day in the tunnel I was sent into the Board of Works head office on an errand and I thought it couldn't hurt if I asked for the counselling section. I laid out the problem and the counsellor thought I should speak up and report them for their own sakes. If I couldn't, he said I should try speaking to the union organiser or the shop steward.

The shop steward, Black George, was the alcohol supplier. He'd been selling the steel drums that the dog spikes and bolts came in to Whelan the Wrecker and using the money for a sludge fund to buy grog for the boys. Despite that I still considered speaking to the union organiser, but I didn't know him well enough.

A few days later Joe and his offsider came down after lunch sober and sombre. Someone had lagged the men in on the drinking and shit had hit the fan. I walked across the site yard after work and thought at last someone had caught on to it. I figured they found out about Slavko, the toppy. He went home after work so drunk a few days earlier—the same day I went to town—that he drove to Melton instead of Doncaster and went the wrong way up a street, hit a mother with three kids in a car and put them in hospital. They were okay but he was in deep shit.

Gamble was interviewing every man on the Hoppers Crossing site. The hunt was on. I didn't realise then that the hunt was for me.

Dragovic's Croatian crew came down the cage to go in on afternoon shift.

'Fucken, fucken, cunt,' Young Tony screamed. He didn't look at anyone.

'Move, you bastards,' Dragovic, red-faced, yelled in part Croatian. He looked up at me and in a soft voice said 'Get'ay Dennis', then started yelling at his disgruntled men again. He was very respectful to me and I held him in the highest esteem in the tunnel. There was no better boss than Dragovic. Boots was like family; that was different.

Dragovic said something to Joe in Croatian. Joe said they can't have BBQs or grappa with their dinner anymore and he wasn't happy. The Croatians weren't the problem, I thought.

Boots's crew came out from the face, dirty and cranky from the day shift. I could see the effects of the vibrators on their agitated faces more now than when I worked on shift with them. I had felt like a traitor getting off their shift. Big Bad Dave got out of the train and screamed as if the vibrators were still on. 'It wasn't me. It wasn't fucken me. I never said a fucken word but I wished I had off. Miserable hungry cunts getting pissed and getting the fucken bonus money we make.' And he looked straight at Joe. He hated that Joe was a third-class inspector and a wog. Big Bad Dave thought he should be an inspector. His face screwed up as if the bonus money the day crew were getting was coming from his pay.

Boots looked up, bent over and wrecked. 'Get'ay Den,' he said, shaking his head, 'All hell's broken loose. The phone from Gamble's office hasn't stopped ringing.' He looked at me and laughed. 'And I've gotta be fucken interviewed tomorrow morning.' He pointed to himself. 'Me. What the fuck do I know about what drinking's been going on?'

Monty sucked on his fag and went straight to the cage along with the other boys, too ragged to talk.

I went up after we cleaned the aggis and got a few strange looks. Something wasn't right.

The interviews went on all the next day. That afternoon Dragovic's crew came back down for afternoon shift. No one told me to get fucked. I thought something wasn't right. One of his men getting into the carriage, looked up and said to me, 'Wait till we find out who dobbed us in.'

The next day it was my turn for an interview. Gamble leaned back in his leather swivel. 'I suppose you've heard...there's been a reported,' he stammered for words—I smelt a rat. 'There's a drinking culture on site.'

I nodded.

'Now, when did I send you into head office?'

'...It was me.' I was no good at lying. He knew it was me. Those pus-sucking counsellors had broken my confidence and said something.

Gamble smiled till his moustache was stretched. 'I thought it was you.' He pointed. He couldn't sit still. He stood up. He thought he was Detective Colombo and had solved the crime of the century. 'I thought it was you.' He grinned.

I felt panicked. 'I spoke to some blokes in head office because I was concerned with the drinking. Sometimes Slavko's that pissed he drops concrete on us.' I didn't tell him about Joe and the other worker being half-drunk, wanking themselves or trying to rub their cocks on me after lunch.

'Why didn't you come to me?'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'I was getting some advice, that's all.' Black George was in Gamble's office more than he was at work. Why did he think I would trust him?

'No worries, we'll sort it out.' He nodded, smiling... 'You can go now.' And that was the last interview he conducted.

I went to the pool. It was protected from the winds by huge river gums. It was a soft place where potential blossomed. I dived in and tried to swim away the sickening feeling I had about work.

The toppy, workshop fitters, welders, sparkies, the crane driver, the two dickheads I worked with on the platform, even Gamble's gofer, they all turned their backs on me. No one said hello, or spoke and it went on for months.

Dragovic's shift came down at the end of the week and went in without comment. Tony came back out on the loco and said. 'We have a message for you. The boys want you to know that the first thing that is going to run down this tunnel is your fucken blood.' He engaged the loco and drove off.

'My blood,' I screamed. 'Who is going to do that? None of you cowards turned up on the picket line.' But he had returned into the darkness and the noise of the tunnel swallowed my rage.

Boots's crew came out. Even Boots looked flat. He didn't look at me or say anything. The other boys went straight to the cage without speaking to me. I felt sick.

I rang the counsellors in head office and said, 'What have you done? You've dobbed me in.'

They said they had a responsibility to report certain things if they became aware of them. He stressed he didn't mention my name and that they didn't know who I was. I screamed into the phone 'Yes, they do.' The counsellor was an old school buddy of the project manager.

The no talking went on for weeks and the speculation mounted. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't wake up to go to work. I couldn't get to work on time. The longer it went the sicker I felt.

Boots's crew were back on day shift and Monty, in the middle of concreting, walked out and came out to the shaft on a loco and screamed to a halt. 'Macca, was it you?'

Everyone stopped work. I was standing on the platform. Even the sparkies and a couple of welders thirty or forty metres away stopped and listened. The tunnel went quiet, as if all the sludge pumps and machines became silent. I didn't answer.

'Macca, for fuck sake. I don't care if you did or didn't do them in. We're defending you and we've been told by people in high places it was you. We just don't want to make dickheads of ourselves. Was it you? Yes or no, that's all I want.'

'Yes, it was me, but...'

'We don't give a fuck, mate. We do all the work and those dogs have been bludging on us getting the same bonus, all the Saturdays and all the overtime since the job started.' Monty went back into the tunnel.

At the end of the day Boots came out. He smiled, 'Fuckem, we're working our guts out and the day shift are getting pissed. That's how hard they're working and Black George and the boys are getting all the bonus money.'

Big Bad Dave was right on board once he knew it was me and the momentum swung back towards me. Boots's shift stood up for me. Gamble, the site foreman, was loaning the ute for Black George to take all the drums to Whelan the Wrecker. They were all in on it. It split the men. The shift workers were dirty on the bonus money being shared with day shift. Now they had a reason to go after them.

That afternoon I hitched a ride in with the last load of concrete. Dragovic's crew were on. I walked from the switch on the Starship Enterprise right through to the end of the form and looked at every man. No one stabbed me. I knew they were all bosses' men. Fuck'em all, I thought, and walked out.

Gamble said my biggest enemy was the big boss, Bob Cooper. I had put a black mark on his copy book and they don't like that. One afternoon I was pulled out of the shaft bottom and Gamble casually asked me to do a Mickey Mouse errand to the operations office eighty metres away on the other side of the cyclone wire fence. While I was waiting in the room, an engineer entered.

'We're a family here,' he said without introduction. I didn't know who he was at first. Six years on the job, and I'd never seen him. His nickname was 'pus eyes'. That's how I knew the bloke in front of me, with what looked like severe conjunctivitis, was Cooper.

'You cross me and you stay crossed. I'm the boss. Any problems, you don't go past me. You understand.' I acted dumb and left.

Black George and I used to be mates. We didn't talk anymore, but one day we ended up having a piss at the same time. I said, 'How you going?'

He said, 'all right now.' And smiled, looked at his cock pissing. 'Once we knew it was you, we back tracked your movements and explained to the counsellors you were an alcoholic and you went to AA. And you know, alcoholics think everyone's an alcoholic, especially those AA's. You nearly cost Gamble his job.' He shook his head in disbelief, wrung his cock out and left. Black George later left the tunnel and went on

to work for the union when Bob Smith, our organiser, took over the secretary's job, knocking out Bob Cutler. Cutler was the last link back to the shearers in the AWU.

It didn't help me get up in the morning for work. The isolation only added to the Mind-numbing work, and for the first time in years I felt like a drink. I didn't really want a drink. I just wished I could drink.

Swimming with sharks

In 1991, after only a week at Werribee primary Rhiannon had her friends waiting for her at the gate when I dropped her off. Becky trailed behind, basking in her sister's popularity. I hoped Rhiannon would do more than just read in class. Nicole got out of the car at her secondary school and having been to orientation day knew the landmarks to follow to her classroom. She smiled at me. She was excited but more contained and I said, 'good luck, darling.' She brought a few stories home about different teachers and other boys and there seemed no signs of problems, but I was scared to let go, to relax. I was anxious. I just wanted her to have a real friend.

Her first major essay, on Kuwait, was read to both her class and the other year seven classes. I was proud of her but suspicious at it being read to the classes, but again, she came home looking okay. There were no obvious signs of stress or rejection. No friends but no problems either. Mary, her St Mary's friend, was in a different class and she was meeting other new people. Nicole understood that.

Mr Noonan, her teacher, called us in for a meeting. Nicole was nervous but insisted it was routine, 'a getting to know the teacher meeting'. We followed Nicole through the school up a flight of stairs to her home room where Mr Noonan, the year seven coordinator, was waiting for us. He was a stocky ginger-haired man with an open shirt. His jovial mannerism belied a sharpness. He highlighted Nicole's recent essay and then his eyes moved between mine and Leanne's, carefully evaluating us. 'What's

Nicole's history? Has she had any illnesses or...?' He scanned papers on his lap then lifted his head and just looked.

I could feel Leanne's anxiety. I thought, here we go again, and despite feeling sick in the stomach, I spoke. I wasn't good in silences. Leanne had again insisted on not revealing Nicole's history in case it prejudiced her. 'She had epilepsy when she was a baby and we had her on a brain training program for years. They said...'

Mr Noonan's eyes lit up. 'Does she still take fits?' Mr Noonan shifted his gaze to Leanne. He didn't want to hear from me.

'No,' Leanne said. 'She hasn't had a fit since she was about two and a half...'

'Is she on any medications?'

'No, no, no. She hasn't been on medication since she was about three.' Leanne parodied a smile. 'She's recovered from her epilepsy. She passed grade six. Year seven's next.' Her fist released from under her chin to form an open palm. 'What's the problem?'

'Well, she seems overly enthusiastic. The kids picked up her, her...' He looked side to side searching for the right word. 'Gullibility. And they got tired of her answering every question...and, and I noticed, out in the playground she's been...on her own, just wandering about.'

Nicole cringed, dipped her neck, dropping her head for a moment, and looked sheepishly at her mother. Again, she was more concerned with our reaction than the reaction of her classmates.

'I'm also having a little trouble getting anyone to work with her in groups.'

She interrupted, 'I'm, I'm used to that Mr Noonan. It's okay, I don't mind...I like working on my own.' She nodded her head trying a reassuring smile on Mr Noonan as if she could make him feel better as well. 'Other kids don't really like me.' She nodded her head. 'I'm used to that.'

'Your story, Nicole, on Kuwait, was very thoughtful, and I thought reading it in the class might help the other students see another side to you. In fact,' he looked back at us, 'I had the other homeroom teachers read it out in their classes as well. And it was well received...I even read it to my wife. She liked it too.'

I said 'Nicole's always had lunchtime plans for school. What about she reads in the library, or practises her piano in the music room? Could she do that?'

'Sure, sure we could arrange something like that.'

I continued, 'As far as her class room behaviour goes, could we have some strategies for her to not try and answer every question and not put the other kids off side so much?'

Mr Noonan had an idea mulling around in his head, 'Sure, sure,' he said vaguely. 'Umm, leave it with me and I'll work out some plans with her on how to answer questions in the class and maybe some other ways of approaching the kids. Trouble is,' he nodded, 'once a child's got a reputation at school it's hard to break it. Okay, look, thanks for coming. I don't like to leave these things too long. A lot of children have trouble adjusting to secondary school, so we'll see how she goes in the next few weeks and I'll keep you informed along the way.'

The next parents were anxiously waiting outside the classroom and we left.

In the past Nicole had felt ashamed or embarrassed, but not this time. Somehow, she was more aware of what she was doing than she made out. Leanne thought she could control her behaviour. I thought she'd learned how to get attention and any attention was better than nothingness. I couldn't argue with that, but I don't think it was deliberate as much as it had been patterned. It was a powerful emotional experience and she was replicating it. This fitted with the brain being amoral; it just reflected what was patterned onto it. Nevertheless, I was proud of her essay acknowledgement. It showed another side of development. It wasn't the recognition as much as it was a clear sign she had academic ability. I also took comfort she was in safe hands with Mr Noonan.

Nicole ran ahead down the stairs. She saw a small timid girl from her class with her parents. She acknowledged Nicole. Nicole ran half over before stopping herself. The other girl looked away. Coyly, Nicole said 'hi' from a distance. Leanne strode ahead. In the car Nicole was bubbly. 'Dad, are we swimming in the morning?'

'You can come if you want to. You don't normally swim in the mornings.'

'I know but,' she put her chin forward, 'I want to. I want to do more.'

Leanne looked at me in the car. 'I think we should start to look at a traineeship.' Leanne turned her head a little further towards Nicole. 'What do you think, Nicole? Would you like a traineeship?'

Nicole put her head over the back of the front seat to talk to us. 'I'm going to be a teacher, mum, and a missionary. I want to go to university. I want to help other children.'

Leanne shook her head. Her lips tightened and her voice went up a register. 'I'm just trying to be practical. You could be working and have a career after year nine or

ten. I don't want you to get disappointed; that's all. You don't have to go to uni, you know. There's a lot of other jobs you can do.'

Nicole bounced back into the back seat and clamped her lips.

What was the big deal, I thought. When she plateaued, that would be it. Why not aim for the stars. Why not dream the greatest dreams? But that's a dad's role to inspire the children. A mum's role was to keep their feet on the ground.

Nicole had a piano lesson, swam and did gymnastics. We still went on occasional bush walks, walking on ledges or around sand pit borders. Surprisingly, her totem tennis had not improved one percent in all those years. I kept at it. I didn't know what it might be doing in her brain. My coaching training had taught me the process of practice, load, overload and recovery. Socially, Nicole was not adapting. I thought it was a question of persevering until it happened. In coaching they talked about failing adaptation, when the body breaks down from too much effort, from trying too hard, and regresses.

After school, if Rhiannon didn't have diving practice, gymnastics or dancing she was on her bed reading. All the coaches wanted her to specialise in their sport. She just did what she had to. Becky played with her Barbie dolls and Nicole practiced piano, washed and dried her hyperactive cocker spaniel, Cindy, went swimming and did homework.

After the year settled down, evening phone calls started. Nicole had never received phone calls. It was one of her griping complaints. Whenever the phone rang we had to rescue the caller from her. Now the phone calls were for her and they were endless. This was it I thought. If she could have made it into the group it would have

literally changed her life. The initial positive tone changed over days and weeks into something more sinister. She was being manipulated out. Every girl was shoring up best friend status with another one of the group. Nicole would eventually be the one left out. But it was a slow desperate struggle back to her aloneness. So close but she still couldn't pull it off.

This was the first time Nicole had actually got this far with any group not manufactured by a teacher. It was a sign of real progress. Notes were passed back and forth; secret diaries, with tiny gold locks on them, were interchanged over recess and lunch. Nicole said she was interrogated on how often Sandra, one of the girls in the group, had been to her place. Was she Sandra's best friend? Did she really want to be her best friend? Nicole said she wasn't sure what to say. If she said yes, she would have a war with Gillian. If she said no, she might upset Sandra. Nicole tried to keep the conversations neutral, group friends. Notes and diaries continued being swapped around, but none to her.

Nicole spotted the four girls in their usual spot on the school oval. They were about sixty metres away. She put her head down and forged apprehensively over to them. As she approached they turned their heads away from her. She sat outside the closed circle and said, 'Hi.'

The group ignored her. After a prolonged silence Gillian, operating as the spokesperson, accused Nicole of treachery. When Nicole relayed a phone conversation they'd had, the girl retaliated, 'I wouldn't ring you, you crossed-eyed spastic.' Then she parodied retarded faces and actions, 'Uuuuhh, uuhhh.'

The group got up and walked away. Nicole just sat there. She later found out that a boy interested in Sandra didn't like Nicole. The boy was in Nicole's class. The

next few recesses Nicole went back to familiar meeting places looking for the group but they had changed their hang out. Nicole found herself spending her break time searching. It became a game to find them. She loitered twenty to thirty metres away, hoping she might get a reprieve. Instead, they hated her more for not getting the hint. She was locked into a marginalised life.

Nicole continued walking the ovals and bitumen courts of MacKillop during her recesses, as she had done at St Mary's and Glen Devon, looking to see if someone would look back and say hello. But mostly she just walked along with her head on an angle and her neck slightly forward. Mr Noonan often watched over her break times and she hated it. I appreciated it. In a school of twelve hundred students Nicole may well have remained relatively anonymous. Unfortunately, she came across the St Mary's boys.

They reverted back to pulling retarded faces in her face and mimicking her. Her wandering through the play areas changed to hiding from the gang of boys. Somehow she had let them back into her life. At home there was no mention of it. I was never quite sure how it happened. I think she just acted out what she knew. Despite the trauma, Nicole continued to develop scholastically and, at the mid-term parent teacher interviews, each teacher had the same message. She was a thoughtful, hard-working student but seemed so alone and rejected by the children.

Despite failing her maths, the teacher thought she was working to capacity. I decided to increase her swimming program to see if intense freestyle work outs could help. It was the exercise that best replicated the cross patterning she had done as a baby. Nicole was keen to do the extra afternoon sessions. That also kept her busy and tired.

Swimming, Nicole's arms jerked through the recovery phase of the stroke thrashing the water. She couldn't bend her wrist and hold the water; consequently, she had no traction and took ninety to a hundred strokes to do a lap. Other swimmers her age took between forty and fifty strokes. Alex Popov, the world champion at that time, took twenty-five. Her hips pushed up and out, her head bobbed around like she had a loose spring in her neck, and her legs crossed over in the flutter kick, knees excessively bent, toes pointing down instead of backwards, and her ankles didn't swivel at all. Despite her non-athletic disposition she trained in the squad. Last in every set, when she came in and touched the wall, she looked straight up and grinned. She never gave up. The energy she expended in doing one lap was equivalent to a more elite athlete doing four hard laps. I knew her body was producing high levels of lactic acid early in the set but I didn't care. She was turning thirteen and the idea was to push her to the max of her coping mechanisms. Her cardio-vascular system was in supreme shape and she had the inner drive to do it. She swam for me.

I planned all my sessions on the concrete loading bay at work. I was aiming at three to four kilometres a session using cross patterning and cross training drills in sets. I added in the many coordination exercises we had done in the past as part of her warm up and swim down. Nicole exited the water smiling and stuffed. She enjoyed being in the water with the other kids and won admiration for her tenacity. Afterwards, as everyone dried off, she spoke to the kids a little, but she was incredibly shy. The non-MacKillop's spoke to her. She walked to the change rooms and I noticed one of the kids from her school walk past her. Nicole said hello. The other child turned her head down and away. It wasn't that she didn't want to talk to Nicole; the other girl didn't want to establish a connection she would have to deal with in front of her friends at school. I felt sick.

Late one afternoon a parent of one of the former St Mary's boys knocked on our door. I could see her and her son through the screen. He wasn't a boy that I thought was part of the bullying group. I looked at Nicole. She turned away. Leanne gripped herself. 'What now, Nicole? What have you done this time?'

Nicole looked down and tentatively lifted her eyes, shifting them between her mother and me.

I opened the door. Mrs. Phillipin looked angry. She had married into a Werribee South market gardening family rather than being from the area.

'I'm sorry for bothering you, Mr McIntosh.'

'Dennis, just call me Dennis.'

'Well, I had to come here straight away.'

'Would you like to come in?'

She took a few steps and started talking 'My son...' She grabbed his jumper on the shoulder and thrust him into the front of her. He was red faced. Head down, he glanced across at Nicole a few times. 'My son. Look at Mr McIntosh.' She shook him again with a quiet rage. He lifted his head. The redness in his face and neck blotched. 'My son,' she gulped, 'hit your daughter with his school bag and I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. I know what your daughter gets put through and I will not stand for any of my children being part of any bullying.'

Jeez. I turned to Nicole. She looked guilty. I knew what she was thinking. She thought she'd let us down. That's what was worrying her now.

‘My daughter came home. She came home and was physically sick by my son’s treatment of your daughter. She told me he swung his school bag, full of books, into her stomach. I am so sorry. I am so sorry that my son has done this to her. Is she okay?’ She looked at Nicole. ‘Are you okay darling? I am sorry. I am really sorry.’

Nicole welled up but refused to cry. ‘I’m okay. It wasn’t that bad.’ She parodied a smile.

Mrs. Fillipin shook her son’s shoulder and he looked up at Nicole, put his head down again and said, ‘Sorry, Nicole,’ looked at me and nodded and said, ‘Sorry Mr and Mrs McIntosh.’

‘Thanks for coming and telling us, Mrs. Fillipin. I appreciate it. I’ll talk to Nicole about it. Is she being bullied on the bus much? Do you know? She won’t tell us anything.’

She nodded. ‘I believe so. But she will not have a problem with my son again and if anything happens involving him, please tell me. You have my full support, Mr and Mrs McIntosh.’

Mrs. Fillipin grabbed her son and pushed him out the entrance and I walked them to the door.

Nicole said straight away, ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘No, you have to talk about it. What happened?’

Leanne said, ‘You have to shut up. Just don’t talk back to them.’

Nicole’s arms were going up and down. ‘It’s not...it’s not my fault. He just swung his bag of books into my stomach.’

I don't think she really understood why he'd done it.

'Are you alright? Do you need to go to the doctor's?'

'No, I'm alright.'

I said, 'Why, why did he do it?'

'I don't know.' She started getting upset. Her hands were out the front and she leaned into me and said emphatically, 'I don't know. I don't know.' Defiantly, she wouldn't cry.

It was obvious Nicole's abuse was better known to others than it was to us.

She later said they slapped her legs and taunted her with the usual 'spastic' and 'retard', but the bag of books being smashed into her stomach I guessed was because she stood up for herself or argued with them or embarrassed one of them. She could be quick. She said she was often kicked out of her seat but then they'd change their mind and she'd have to move to another seat and that could happen three or four times in one trip.

After I reported it, the school appointed the bus captain to look after her but, as we later learned, he was one of them. I could see Nicole not tolerating their bullying and I could see the young Italian students on the Werribee South bus coming after a girl, particularly an Australian girl. We organised for Nicole to go straight to the pool after school or get a lift home from one of us. She only caught the bus when no other alternative was available.

A young dolphin

In late 1991 two alarm clocks couldn't get me out of bed. Being ostracised at work was part of it, but the thought of going to work and doing exactly the same thing had become unbearable. An hour took a day and a day was a waste of a life. I wasn't depressed in my head. It was just my body wouldn't work. I'd run out of days off, sick days, other workers' patience and the boss's tolerance. I was late again. The fact that Gamble had slipped my name to the men over the drinking episode had held him back from sacking me earlier. On entering the site Gamble waved me over to his office. I was gone.

He was calm, shook his head. 'Look, I've given you plenty of warnings.' He threw his arms up in the air. 'We can't keep working a man down every day. Every day you're either late or you don't come in. I'm sorry Dennis. I have to put you off the concreting.'

'Yeah, I understand.'

'Is there any reason?' He looked around, wanting me to help him out, give an excuse for my behaviour.

'When I wake up I can't lift my head off the pillow. I try. Believe me, there's nothing worse for me than being late every day. I'm sick in the stomach driving here knowing I'm late again.'

‘Well, we’re not a therapy group you know. We’re building a tunnel. I’m sorry mate. You can work down on the platform today and Monday start as my gofer. You’ll have to clean the toilets, the change rooms, collect the lunches and whatever else I want.’ He leaned back on his swivel chair. ‘No bonus money, no Saturdays or overtime and there’s no tunnel allowances. It’s base rates so be prepared for a shock in your pay. Don’t say you weren’t warned about it. You had a good job down there, bonus money and overtime on permanent day shift. Most blokes would have jumped at the chance to be in your position.’ He shook his head. ‘Alright, off you go and start up here Monday.’

Becoming Gamble’s gofer, I’d have to put up with the shift workers walking past me thinking their shit didn’t stink. The shift tunnelers thought they were making the money that paid everybody’s wages. I was not regarded as a reliable or good worker and that hit hard. I really wished I could have been like the other blokes. I wished I could have revelled in the struggle and the muddy tough conditions but I couldn’t. I couldn’t pretend. I couldn’t get high on a few drinks afterwards. I didn’t go to the pub or hang around with other blokes and talk about work. I think the intellectual challenges of swim coaching had added to my dissatisfaction in the tunnel.

I decided to try and do a good job cleaning the toilets, lunch rooms and the change rooms. More than six years on the job and I hadn’t got one promotion. I felt a bit of a failure. I didn’t value the work or aspire to leadership. The concreting had dragged on for years and the absenteeism paralleled the length of the job; injuries and sicknesses were also peaking. It was under these conditions that an unexpected change occurred. The first morning I arrived for day duty the day shift boss was short two men and asked if he could borrow me. I went down on the first day and did a number of different jobs.

Whoever I worked with eventually started talking to me. It was small talk but it was a beginning.

The next day the boss asked for me again and I did a different job and spoke to different men. Again it was only small talk but it was a start. The rest of that week I spent in the tunnel, either driving locos, plugging in the electrical ports that ran the Aggi trucks, cleaning the muck in the middle of the tunnel, vibrating the concrete back out in outer space working behind the forms. The following week the same thing happened. After a few weeks I become a permanent day shift all-rounder. I soon became the expert on the break downs. The Starship Enterprise had one to two centimetre clearances from the tunnel floor in places. I came to know the underbelly of the ship and where it was likely to get caught on protruding rocks and I was efficient at levering it free with the crow bar. Next, management taught me how to use the five hundred thousand dollar concrete pump and I became a valued, versatile worker. The blokes even forgave me, sort of. And the boss I locked out of the tunnel retired. Towards the end of the concreting, Boots told me they were looking at making me an operator on the Tunnel Boring Machine after the redundancies were offered. I had other plans.

I had a few more swimmers coming through and I had a young lad that nobody knew about. I thought he was about to explode onto the swimming scene. He'd won the district championships. I got him up enough to win it without him being too noticed. The other coaches had been national champions or international representatives. Some had Olympians in their squad. I was still a tunneller, coaching out in the outer western suburbs of Melbourne. If I was going to make it I had to prepare the kids to peak at major meets, not the minor ones, otherwise my squad was going to be continually raided before I had any success. It was prestigious for parents from the west to go into a

city squad or have a recognised coach approach them. It was hard for me to compete with their reputations. And I'd seen what happens to some parents when their kids had a bit of success.

I told Boots if I could get a redundancy I was taking it. This was my, 'end of the tunnel.' Only Dragovic, the person I most respected, never forgave me over the drinking.

Kirner, the then Premier of Victoria, was opening a section of the tunnel. Back on Boots's day crew, I volunteered to do the tunnel clean up. That meant a drive through on the Dumpy truck picking up cement bags from where I started at the Hoppers Crossing site through to the Sayers Road Site where we had finished that section. It was a victory march for me. I had stuck something out. At the last shaft I pulled up. Premier Kirner and Steve Bracks, soon to hold the seat of Williamstown, along with other dignitaries and management, were congratulating each other on the tunnel that they had built. I watched from the bottom of the shaft. No one could be happier or prouder than me that day. I had stuck out one job for nearly seven years. Fair enough I couldn't get another one but I didn't quit either. From getting stuck in the mud and wanting to snatch it on my first day I had achieved something very important for myself. I had more than just survived. I had retrained myself by putting my mind where I wanted to be and training it.

I saw coaching as my chance and took it. The idea of a coaching career had come slowly to me. Sometimes opportunity knocks gently and it's not always from the door we think. None of the coaches I met had been shearers or tunnellers. But they encouraged me and said I had the two most important things. I was enthusiastic and I

had a pool full of young kids that wanted to swim. I was proud of myself and believed there was nothing I couldn't do if I was given a chance to learn.

I had to go for it and adapt to new stresses if I wanted to grow into my new life. I loved the feeling of being the creator of my programs and being my own boss. Coaching and swimming were all about numbers and counting: percentages, angles of hands, elbows and feet, of technical excellence and trajectories, resistance and force. I'd been counting all my life: counting onions, sheep, bolts, forms, time. And I'd been working on percentages. Coaching also allowed me to see other parents in action. I watched how they managed their children and their relationships. Coaching was working with children and people's motivation, hidden agendas, egos, self-esteem, self-interest and especially with those children that sabotaged themselves and blew up at their main events. There were a lot of them. It was about solving problems and dealing with management and councils. But mostly it was about relationships and understanding people's feelings because that's where their motivation lay. I had a lot to learn in that new world.

In my last few months in the tunnel Boots gave me a lot of leeway starting late and finishing early, but not from depression. I was busy. A new life was starting for me. I hired lanes at a pool and started coaching at four thirty in the mornings. I had six to eight swimmers committed to the winter program. I completed first aid courses, a life guard's course and a Halliwick program designed specifically for disabled swimmers. I also visited other swim programs in the city and took notes and looked at their coaching and squad structures. I had a mentor coach, Gene Jackson, in the state swim centre who had several Olympic swimmers in his squad. I often helped him coach and it gave me great exposure to working with high level athletes. He had one junior athlete he said

was going to be the biggest swimmer in Australia. They had just migrated from Canada. They called the eleven year old boy ‘lumpy.’ His real name was Michael Klim.

In the last six months in the tunnel my confidence soared. Nothing, it seemed, had worked for me in the tunnel. Then it all happened. I went down the shaft a shearer and came out seven years later a swim coach. I hated every day that I was in the tunnel and I’ve loved every day since I’ve been out.

Before Christmas that year we attended Nicole’s piano recital as part of her school assessment. We were greeted in the hall by the maths teacher.

He was excited. ‘She passed. I didn’t think she would do it, you know.’ His hands were in front of him like he was marking a stab pass. ‘I didn’t think she could improve. I thought she wouldn’t get better than an E and you know, sometimes—I’m a parent too you know’, he interjected and pointed to himself—‘with homework and assignments we can help too much. I’ve done it myself. But she passed the tests in class, He clasped his hands.

I went to say how special she was and stopped at Leanne’s glare. I said ‘Thanks.’

He continued. ‘People think it’s our best students that give us the most pleasure, but it’s not you know.’

I understood what he was saying about Nicole. She had been giving her best her whole life and she was an inspiration to those that could see it. They called for people to take their seats and we sat a few rows back from the front in the aisle seats. The increased swim training we had done coincided with her improvement. I am convinced her coordination improvement through those sessions contributed to her maths

improvement. I can even pinpoint when I thought her neurological pathways were adapting. It was when I put flippers on her and Nicole, like a little dolphin, kept up with the other kids as she was dragged along by the squad's momentum. She sat higher in the water with the increased speed and as a result her technique improved. She also had group pressure and her improved movements from imitating the technique of the better swimmers. Also she was able to swim faster with less energy because of the drag effect of the squad.

As the recitals started a few students performed before Nicole came out. She had long black wide-legged pants on with a matching coat that came down below her hips. Her hair was shoulder length and her freckles were thickest in the centre of her face. She bowed and went to the piano, put her sheet music up and turned the page. Then she started playing. It was flawless. I couldn't tell anyway, so it was flawless to me. She played for a few minutes. One thing pounded in my head. 'She's making it. She is really doing it.'

If only she could realise she was there scholastically and physically, but the loneliness, the rejection, was beating her and it was killing her. She wasn't an optimistic bubbly kid anymore. She'd started spending more time in her room, in her bed. No friends visited. No calls on the phone. No class mates. No group assignments. I was worried about her and then she does this magnificent performance. But she didn't really smile. It was forced. Nothing seemed to mean much to her at that time. She was angry and could blow up at the slightest word from Rhiannon or especially Becky. Becky just had to look at her and it caused a screaming match.

Mrs Dowling, a grandmother to one of the children in the band and the mother to one of the women that helped in the patterning program, came up after the recital,

amazed by Nicole. She was a small feisty lady, the wife of one of the long serving local councillors and former Mayor. She smiled. 'I never would have believed that unless I saw it with my own eyes. I thought she would have ended up in a home a long time ago. I'm so thrilled for her and you've done a marvellous job with her.'

Leanne smiled and said, 'Thanks, we're very proud of her too.' At that stage we didn't know how much longer she could go on.

I was out of the tunnel but Nicole was still in hers.

Ocean bound

Nicole was unenthusiastic at the beginning of year eight. It was 1992. I thought that was more real than her overenthusiasm of earlier years. She came home from school, seemingly less stressed than she was towards the end of the previous year. There were still no friends, phone calls or group projects. She washed, groomed and walked her dog as usual, swam with me a few times a week, did her gymnastics. Beam and somersault exercises were in her routine and she did homework. This calmer Nicole, though, had an unsettling quiet about her. Had she accepted her lot in life?

Nicole's hypersensitivity and tantrums around the house towards the end of 1991 had been unbearable. Her huffing and puffing at the slightest comments had turned our house into a sort of war zone. No one could say anything or look at her. Rhiannon locked herself in her room and read most evenings. She looked at me as though she hated me sometimes, and Becky relentlessly tormented Nicole. We had become a house of screamers.

It occurred to me that Nicole's depression and anxiety might have been a sign of progress rather than regression. Over the years, I had wondered whether her lack of concern for her predicament meant that she hadn't fully comprehended the rejection and bullying she had been subjected to. How else could she have coped, I had often thought.

Nicole was quick to pick up changing moods in people at home and shifts in facial expressions, but not in a big group. That was the vulnerability I think kids picked up on very quickly and exploited. She didn't get it. She was missing something. That's

what I think the children assumed. She was so easy to trick they had no respect for her. That changed in year eight. Her flatness was a sign of her growing self-awareness. In coaching terms adaptation was occurring. Unfortunately, the constant bullying had also patterned her brain and would leave its mark.

Things were generally looking up for everyone in the summer of 1992. Nicole was finally old enough to have an operation on her turned eye. They tightened the muscle and the effect was striking. She looked straight ahead for the first time and I hoped this would at least help a little as she went into year eight. Rhiannon went into grade six and Becky grade three at the local primary school and the two younger girls loved their school. That summer Rhiannon was victorious as the school swimming captain for the girls team and qualified for the All Schools National Diving Competition. And after one of my swimmers won our first gold medal at the State Championships I set out preparing for my first National Championships at Easter.

A month after the school year started we had parent and teacher interviews. They were getting-to-know-you meetings and the teachers would outline the year ahead. Nicole seemed calm before the meetings. I suspected nothing. We pulled up our chairs at the first teacher's desk. It was only week three or four. What could they say?

After the hellos and introductions Nicole's new homeroom teacher said, 'Nicole seems to have settled into her classes okay, but.' He took a deep breath and stalled. Leanne glanced towards me. I could feel her anxiety. He said nervously, 'She's been hiding in the toilets during recess and lunches and we are concerned about her.'

I glanced across. Nicole looked guilty, dropped her head and looked up sheepishly.

‘All her teachers are quite concerned about her lack of friendship.’ They are at a loss to understand her unpopularity and the way other kids criticise her, in light of her often insightful comments in the class.

Nicole said later that hiding wasn’t so much to get away from the small group of St Mary’s boys; it was because the teachers saw her everyday eat her lunch and have her drink alone. No one spoke to her anymore or even made eye contact. She didn’t want us to find out she had no friends. She thought she was letting us down. No one would show her any kindness.

Later she said it wasn’t that bad. Everyone that came into the toilets spoke to her and the smokers would talk to her for a while, or at least for the length of a smoke.

I asked if the kids followed up talking to her outside the toilets.

She shrugged her shoulders meaning, no, and said at least they talked to her in the toilets. There were two boys in her year level that did speak to her, but that was it.

I was home now during the day. I had the coordinator’s number and we agreed for me to ring him every day and call in and see her, even though she didn’t want that. Last year Mr Noonan monitored her every move as much as he could and she hated it. I really couldn’t take anymore and I didn’t know what to do. I kept thinking she would click in like she had done with most other things, but I think now I was in denial. So was the school and the teachers. I knew she had improved but her reputation was entrenched. The other students wouldn’t risk their reputations on befriending her.

I called in one lunchtime soon after to see her and she was sitting alone on a bench in a courtyard with her empty lunch wrapper and Prima beside her. Kids stared at her as they walked by. It ripped my insides out to see her so alone, so rejected and such

a spectacle. They were the times I pretended I was her coach, not her father. I pretended I was sent to get her through. She was my mission. That was the only way I could bypass my own feelings.

On most afternoons she was either picked up or she went to the pool to avoid bus bullying. One afternoon, a few weeks after the parent teacher interviews Leanne and I couldn't pick her up from school. I had rung my mother but she was busy, too. I couldn't arrange for anyone else to get her and she had to, against my best gut instinct, catch the bus.

I raced home afterwards feeling sick. I knew I'd let her down. I walked into the patio. It was dusk and the house was unlit. I opened the door and heard her sobs. Hidden in the fading light, she was sitting on top of her pillow with her back in the corner of the room. Her bruised knees were up under her chin and her arms were wrapped around her legs. She was crying uncontrollably. A St Mary's boy had beaten her around the legs with a wooden picket at the bus stop, making her jump.

I wanted to scrape the skin off his skull with rough edged concrete. I couldn't console her. I couldn't calm her. She didn't want to live anymore. She'd had enough. It always came back to the same question. 'What's wrong with me, dad?' she sobbed.

I listened. I had no words.

She took a few deep breaths. 'What, dad?'

She looked up. 'What is wrong with me? Why do people hate me so much?' She put her head to the side and her chin went out. 'I can be funny,' she said in defence of herself. Her arms were slightly outward. 'I can talk about a lot of issues. I can be interesting to talk to. I'm a good listener too, dad. I am. And I know I can be a good

friend, a really good friend if someone gave me a chance.’ Nicole’s tears rolled down her cheeks and she sobbed from her ribs, breathing in broken spurts. ‘What’s the point of going on?’ She looked around her room and back at me. ‘What’s the point?’ Her arms were outstretched and her lips were quivering.

I didn’t know what to do or where to turn. She didn’t want to live anymore. Nicole was a social leper. How could she be so unacceptable to the world?

Nicole was relieved when I turned up at school the next day, pulled her out of her class at the end of the day, let her say goodbye to her teacher, emptied her locker and took her home. Walking out of the school with my daughter, I could not have been a prouder father. She pointed out one of the problem boys in the car park. I snapped and followed him to his parent’s car. I wanted to smash someone in the face. But, when he opened the door of the car, I was about ten paces away and his mother started screaming at him. He had a disabled sister sitting in the front seat.

The next few days, with the fear of retribution gone, she spilled on all the bullying she had put up with from year seven and the start of year eight. The worst was setting her up with potential love interests. They arranged for her to meet boys at lunchtime and after school at designated areas. They watched her turn up and wait for no one to come, then laughed at her. She said, of that time, she lost confidence in herself and faith in her judgments. She said she was so desperate for friendship she wanted to believe that what they were telling her was true.

At the meeting with the vice-principal we highlighted it had been the year twelve bus captain, a market gardener’s son and school favourite amongst the teachers, who had been a ring leader in bullying her on the bus. The vice-principal said he was really a good lad. He was echoing the words and intonation of the St Mary’s principal a couple

of years earlier. He said they were a Catholic school and pretty much had to accept who ever applied. He thought Nicole would be better off at a new school

Nicole lived with the pressure of every movement in sport or in the yard and every word she spoke in class being judged, evaluated and snickered at, day in and day out, week after week, year after year. It must have been horrendous. The end of her time at MacKillop brought to an end the worst years of her life. Then the hard work began.

Her mother felt that a small girl's school might suit her. Rhiannon had already had an interview at Vacluse College in Richmond. It was close to the Batman Avenue Olympic pool where the divers trained. Rhiannon had relished being at Werribee Primary School, away from witnessing Nicole's bullying, and she had planned to go to Vacluse with many other divers. She did not want to go to MacKillop. Now Nicole was going to be with her. She was upset.

The principal at Vacluse College gave a one hundred percent guarantee that there would be no violence or bullying. With 400 students compared to 1200 at MacKillop she would be more visible. Concerned with the travelling, Nicole and her mother had a few practice runs to the school. Nicole had no sense of direction and would often get lost, especially in a crowd. We had often seen her amongst a group of people and called her. She could never tell where the voices were coming from and she'd usually look the other way. That was her most obvious difficulty.

We moved back into Werribee, close to all schools and public transport, and walking distance from the pool. Nicole caught the seven am train to Flinders street and walked across the road and caught tram forty-eight to Church Street, Richmond, and then there

was a short walk to the school. When she had arrived at school she went into the office at 8.15, rang home, and was in class by 8.20 for an 8.30 start. It was the second term in year eight.

The first afternoon Leanne went in to meet Nicole in the city, worried she might get confused in the peak hour rush. I waited to meet them on the afternoon train but they weren't on it. The next train came in twenty minutes later and still no one. I went home. Nicole later rang from the Werribee Station to be picked up. No Leanne. She said she waited for her mother and missed two trains when she didn't turn up. Nicole thought she better catch the next train home. Leanne had fallen asleep and woke up at the train terminal that evening. She rang worried she'd left Nicole at the station. Nicole was home worried about her mother being lost. We didn't worry about her after that.

There was no fanfare or hype surrounding her new school and we knew there were no guarantees that she would find friendship or acceptance. The first few weeks were uneventful. Mrs Yau, the principal, had undertaken to mentor Nicole. She had advised her to read her book in the breaks and wait until a person or a group approached her. A few girls thought she seemed mysterious and asked her to join them. They gave her a special pin with coloured beads. The relationship lasted about three weeks and they decided there wasn't enough in common between them. She saw it coming. There were six girls in the group and each best friend started shoring up their relationships. No one wanted their 'best friend' to defect to the new girl.

Nicole was snowed under with homework and the travelling was fatiguing. The next mention of friendship came from a few train friends she had met. She maintained her vigil of reading and not initiating any contact in the recesses. After several weeks another smaller group of girls invited her into their group. Soon the phone calls started,

but this was a different dynamic than before. Nicole was more confident of their sincerity.

Later that year Shannon, one of the girls in the group, came home for the weekend and they talked all night. They seemed to be building a good friendship. I'd seen it get this far before and fall over. Despite the dynamics in the group changing every weekend, Shannon and Nicole's relationship grew and Nicole's confidence grew with it. I thought it was the most important development in her life. Nicole started to get out of her habit of huffing and puffing and walking out at the hint of disagreements. She spent a few weekends at Shannon's house and occasionally she stayed at other friends' houses.

The girls at the school gave her a chance and it helped having no boys to impress. She ended 1992 in year eight attaining Ds and Es and had a lot of work to do to lift her standard. Once the bullying had been removed all her secondary problems could be addressed. Her organizational skills were poor and the travelling was difficult. She improved, but it was slow and at times painful. She was quick to feel rejected and often looked for it. Her clinginess with friends was a problem she would have to address over the next few years. She often set herself up for failure by pre-empting what was going to happen in the friendships. Despite all that I was pretty sure she was out of her tunnel. Her biggest struggle was over.

At Easter I had gone to the 1992 National Age Championships. My swimmer made two finals and was ranked in the top eight in his age group in Australia. I wrote a letter to Mr Joe King, then a regular Olympic coach, to ask to meet him and to see if he could give me some pointers on swim coaching. He wrote back on the outside of the envelope: 'In haste, yes.' And he was a former journalist. I followed him for three days

without him saying anything. Eventually, staring into the swim down pool with his back to me, he started spewing out details on length of sets for each age group and heart-rate levels for certain sets. He went on for thirty minutes and then he left. I thanked him sincerely. It was such a big buzz meeting him, even if I mostly only saw his back. I then had a dossier of real Olympic programs to compare to the sport science I had been reading. That way I could see how different coaches implemented programs for different energy systems.

All I thought about at National Championships, surrounded by Olympic coaches and future Olympic swimmers, was that I wasn't in the tunnel. I couldn't believe it. I was out. Michael Klim won seven gold medals and Daniel Kowalski, in a few age groups up, won six. They were the two outstanding juniors at the meet. Nicole, though, was the greatest of them all.

Shannon was fascinated with Nicole and they spent much of the Christmas break that year together. Towards the end of the February in 1993, Nicole had a sleep over and Shannon gave her a necklace to cement the relationship as best friends. Nicole rang me straight away. Her dream moment had come true. She was in a group and had a best friend. She was nearly fifteen. When she came home her face was radiant. A thousand failures had been erased with one real success. It had put her into another universe.

In 1993, at Vacluse, Rhiannon went on to be year seven swimming and diving champion and Nicole was joint year nine swimming champion. It was a good start to that year. To Rhiannon's relief, Nicole wasn't as embarrassing as she had feared. They had different friends, mixed in different circles and congregated in different areas. They developed mutual friends from the train. Genevieve first recognized Nicole and

Rhiannon from swimming and soon her friends and their friends met every morning and evening on the train. Genevieve came home and in the new house Rhiannon and Nicole shared a room. Nicole said it was the year Rhiannon and her finally became sisters.

I was living the dream. I coached in the morning, took Becky to school and did a lot of the bike education programs with the PE teacher, helped out with the swimming program and was often asked onto school camps. These were good times, although Becky said I was embarrassing and insisted on calling me Dennis. During the days I was studying other programs and reading articles on swimming, and in the afternoon I went down the pool again and coached. I was doing it.

At State Swimming Championships in December 1993 I had five swimmers qualify for the 1994 National Age Championships in Brisbane the following Easter. Afterwards I stayed to attend the coaches conference and completed my level two courses. It was great listening to passionate people. The squads were growing and we had won A grade in the district for the last two seasons. We went on and won it for the following ten years, until they cancelled it.

In 1994 Nicole went into year ten. Shannon and Nicole had started to pull apart and the group fractured for a while. During that year Rhiannon left the school, sick of the travelling and the girly attitude, and attended a local school. Nicole regrouped but it wasn't quite the same. By then Nicole had an eclectic group of friends she could turn to. There was no one close, but after the years of being alone she was either too clingy when someone showed an interest in her or she'd push them away, remaining aloof. People read it as a lack of interest.

Nicole had smothered Shannon. For the first few months Shannon had been as intense as Nicole. They were together all day, on the phone at night and at each other's

houses nearly every second weekend. It took a few months for the relationship to cool. The first weekend they had away from each other, Nicole's anxiety was visible. Nicole couldn't let the relationship wax and wane and Shannon moved further away. Nicole tried to reassure Shannon that she could change herself. She said to me one night, desperate to hold on to Shannon, 'I'm too clingy, dad. I know I am, I know I am.' I could see her brain ticking over as she spoke. 'But I can't help it,' she pleaded.

I said of course she could. She was just adjusting to years of being alone. That was all. It was no different to anything else she had learned. Shannon was a beautiful looking girl and everything about her was in order. As Shannon started moving away Nicole started to dress more like Shannon. I hated her trying to turn herself into something she wasn't. Imitation is worse than death. I wanted her to own up to her problem not turn herself into something she wasn't. Copying Shannon didn't work, but their friendship didn't suddenly end either. Shannon oddly couldn't quite let go of Nicole and kept reconnecting from time to time. Nicole saw every phone call and invite as a recall. After a couple of years Nicole lost her attraction to Shannon, but we never forgot that special day when Shannon asked her to be her best friend.

By this time Nicole had her train, school and Christian friends who attended St Jude's church in Carlton. She seemed an outsider in that group but she said she wasn't. There was a boy she'd met in the group that she was very interested in. He was friendly in a missionary sort of way, as was Jacinta, her next friend from school.

She was well-meaning and Nicole was her mission. I didn't know what to think about this type of friend. On the one hand it was company. On the other it wasn't real and Nicole wasn't really negotiating a relationship on equal terms. Nicole had to learn it wasn't genuine and I figured that was real. Similarly with this boy, the feelings weren't

reciprocal. He was polite and sincere to a point. In his defence he remained friends with Nicole and he could have broken her heart, but he didn't.

Jacinta came to our house a couple of times but she was self-conscious in front of us. She was honest with Nicole about her clinginess and Nicole listened. Jacinta said she had just come out of an intense friendship and didn't want another one and asked if they could remain friends without being too close. Nicole became a self-learner after that. She booked herself in to see the school counsellor for weekly therapy.

She continued swimming once or twice a week, learning the piano and singing in her choral group at school. When her closer relationships fell away she had a base of casual friends to socialise with. I kept her busy and introduced bike riding. She joined a bike club, went to a bike shop twice a week after school for technique training and competed in the weekend events. She got lost on the weekend road trips, which were held in the Brisbane ranges, and I was the search party. I had a sixth sense with Nicole. I thought the bike trips were great training, getting disorientated and having to orient herself in a completely foreign environment, and it was a way of learning the road rules and the power and danger of cars.

In 1995, Becky was in grade six, Rhiannon, year nine, Nicole year eleven, and Leanne had found yet another course to do. Within a few years of making time my money and thinking of my brain as a muscle and patterning new ways of thinking, I'd escaped the tunnel and was self-employed with my own squads. Then I left Leanne. Leanne had decided to tell me about the relationship she had had when I stopped drinking. She said I shouldn't react because it was nine years ago, but it wasn't nine years ago. It had festered unresolved between us for nine years. It never quite went away. Questions periodically arose and she always responded with rage when I bought

it up. It was a mental jigsaw puzzle I couldn't finish. I had given her the chance to tell me, so we could have started afresh, or I could have made a decision about my future. She said she told me because she didn't want to live with the guilt anymore, but I had escaped her grasp. She wanted me to kick another door in and in some ways I did.

I fell in love with someone else. Actually, I became infatuated with another woman. But that is not why I left. I knew after she told me about her relationship that I would never forgive her. More accurately, I would use it to torture her in every small way I possibly could, until I cracked her with no visible signs of aggression or stress coming from me. It would have been a subversive strategy to destroy her. That is not what I wanted for myself or for her. I had always wanted the happy ever after, but I could not, would not forgive her. I felt owned by her and I just wanted to feel free. Leanne said I belonged back in the tunnel. But the truth was maybe her own guilt over the years eroded our relationship, drove her to maintain control of everything, never let her relax into the relationship. Maybe she had already tortured herself over it. A dish in the sink meant I didn't love her. The cheese not wrapped up properly meant I didn't love her. The washing not hung properly meant I didn't love her. During her home inspections after she came home from work I wanted to strangle her.

I had bought a small plant that I liked and put it in a space in the garden driveway, not long before her confession. I liked it and wanted to look at it when I drove in the driveway. It was gone after two days. Leanne said it didn't belong where I put it and she moved it. I knew it was not really an important enough issue to want to stab her in the heart with a red-hot pitch fork, but that's what I wanted to do. After all these years I still didn't feel like I belonged in my own home.

I was ruthless. I saw a lull in our relationship and I jumped ship. It had been ten years since I had stopped drinking and ten years since I said I would stay for another ten years and see what happened. In those ten years she had done school, nurses training and course after course. It was never, never ending. I didn't want anything except my freedom. I threw a few things in the back of my old car and in 1995 drove out the drive. I devastated my children. It never occurred to me, not for one second, that I would lose my relationship with the girls. Nicole came to live with me. Rhiannon followed a year later. But Becky and I remained estranged.

In that year, despite meetings with the teachers Rhiannon wouldn't work at school. She read her books in class and passed her exams much to the teacher's disgust. I didn't worry about her. I thought when she was ready she would study and achieve what she wanted. I was wrong. How do you get a child to do schoolwork who refuses? Home, her bedroom, friends and family were her motivation, not study. But at home Leanne kicked her out for again wearing her clothes and using her make up. The more Leanne rejected her, the more Rhiannon fought for her mother's affection.

In year eleven, Nicole had recommitted to her goal of going to university. She still wanted to be a teacher. She booked into a pre-VCE summer course at Melbourne University with her St Jude friends. It was there she got to know Daniel, her first real boyfriend. He was a theatrical funny little guy, a sort of Puck type from *A Midsummers Night's Dream*.

They studied together and went to plays, movies, picnics and parties with their group. She really fell in love with him. One afternoon she came home after a weekend at Daniel's place. She had left her wallet at his house and he met her halfway to return it. She left home full of chatter at what had happened and who said what and who did

what. Daniel broke it off on the Flinders Street Station. She cried all the way home in the train and she cried all the next week. She lay on the bed holding her heart as if it had literally broken in two, and her pain was palpable. The break-up of her mother and me on top of the break-up with Daniel was too much.

Nicole failed a couple of subjects in her first term. Mrs Crow, her teacher, sat her down and helped her with stress management and strategies for her homework. She dropped business studies to concentrate on maths, which was a required subject in the course she had chosen for university. One less subject would limit her score but she had to risk it all on her best ones. She also sought more counselling. She refocused on her study and her goals. At the end of the year she had passed all her subjects reasonably well, but still below the marks Mrs Crow thought she needed to get into university.

During that year a new tall intimidating girl had come to Nicole's school. Nicole said in class the new girl mimicked and exaggerated her voice, saying derogatory things about her. During recesses she followed Nicole around continuing the bullying. Nicole said she found herself reverting to her old patterns of behaviour. She put her head down and walked away and hid. She felt the fear rise up and paralyse her. Then she started acting out, as she had done in the past. This time the girls in the class coached her through the ordeal. They told her to ignore her and she did, but the bully intensified her verbal abuse on Nicole.

One afternoon at the lockers there was a confrontation. Nicole walked over to her in front of her friends and said, 'If you need to pick on me to get your rocks off then you're really sad,' and walked off. That was the last bully Nicole encountered at school. Her assertiveness grew out of hard experiences. She continued counselling to deal with the bullying she had endured and years later she completed a counselling

course. While she didn't go on and work as a counsellor it did enhance her communications skills considerably. At the end of 1995 she had done reasonably well, but needed a big year twelve if she was going to achieve her goal.

In 1996 Nicole came and lived with me. She again went to the pre-VCE course held at Melbourne University and re-committed to her goal. She was so focused and I couldn't help her. I'd had no education. Eighteen drafts of her English CAT gave her a B+; twelve drafts of her drama CAT got her B+; for History she managed B+. It went on all year, drafting and redrafting. Sometimes she worked throughout the night. Year twelve was her year of study. The house was freezing. I slept in the lounge room next to the heater with a beanie on to keep warm. The dishes weren't done until the end of the week. We ate out of ice cream containers and drank out of cups with broken handles. We weren't poor; I just never thought to buy things like that. We slept in sleeping bags, and newspapers were sprawled all over the lounge room floor from Sunday to Thursday. Despite all that Nicole thrived. I thought all the trappings of a home were what was important, but they weren't to her.

One night I drove around for hours. I couldn't sleep. I had words banging into the inside of my forehead. When I got home I wrote them out so I would be able to sleep. My first poem popped out like a birth of new life, new energy. This was a new feeling that I had not experienced before. I had burned my poetry in the tunnel, discarded my journal some years before that, stopped writing letters home as a teenager when I found them on the fridge with the spelling mistakes highlighted. I was touchy about that. I stopped writing songs as a kid when people laughed at me. I was touchy about that too. This time I let it rip. I saw it as part of my new life. I kept writing because I couldn't stop.

It was as unexpected to me as it was to other people. But there it was: I had poetry pouring out of me. I didn't know what to do with it straightaway, so I just kept writing. People laughed, I knew I had to get used to that. I completed a poetry course and visited the local writing scene. They thought I belonged with street poets. I went along to the pubs and cafés for a while and performed my work. I even won a poetry slam at the Espy hotel, but that wasn't my scene either.

My poetry taught me to articulate and condense feelings and thoughts. Whether the poetry was good or bad didn't matter. I was educating myself. I did send one of my better poems off to the Henry Lawson competition to see if it was any good. The judge gave me a highly recommended and wrote me a letter. She said in all her years of reading, writing and judging poetry she had never come across a poem like mine. When I showed my father he cried. I had a thousand trophies in a box somewhere that didn't mean anything to him, but that poem touched a side to my father he had never shown us.

I wrote Nicole a poem for her eighteenth birthday and she celebrated her birthday in the city with her Vaucluse school friends, her friends from the St Jude's church she attended, and her sisters and family friends. I was still worried no one would turn up for her but they all did. In November we went to an open day at a local university. Walking through the campus and the lecture theatres was a proud moment. No matter what happened she'd done her best. She was young, bright and full grown. Her hair was flowing and her smile and enthusiasm radiated from her face. She was swimming out to sea over and under the waves and through the white-water. She was free, alive and beautiful.

All she talked about was what she was going to do as a teacher. She would never let a child be treated the way she had been. She wanted to make a difference in life. She didn't get a first round offer as Mrs Crow had predicted. In late January 1997 she was offered a place at Ballarat University to do a four-year primary teaching degree. What a magic moment in a life. We all met there to settle her in. The girls walked around the campus with her using the map to find her room and the eating hall. She seemed ready for it. Leanne was nervous for her, but this was her time. She was on her own.

Nicole rang regularly and came home a lot in the beginning. That was until she started a relationship with an economics student. She brought him home and he seemed a nice guy, full of ideas about what he was going to do with his life after university. He would say something and Nicole would add a bit more detail. I could see she was keen for my approval and I was chuffed at that. Weekends at his place replaced weekends at home. They had a group of friends that studied and went out to movies and plays. She wasn't in an in-group but she had a group.

She received passes and a few credits in the first year and during the Christmas break breezed past on her way to her mother's home and to see some of her friends. In the second year her grades improved a little and she got the odd distinction. The results of her teaching rounds were mixed. Some gave her a good report and other said she couldn't always engage with the students. She was undeterred. When her boyfriend said she was the one, I didn't say anything. When she said she was happy the way they things were with him, he started to change. He became clingy and possessive and worried about other boys. Even if they were gay, he worried.

She complained about his clinginess. I laughed. They broke up and she wanted to stay friends but he was too angry with her. Nicole was alone for a while and went to

the campus doctor over her weight. She ticked the box on the form that said she had had epilepsy. He investigated her condition and point blankly didn't believe that she had hypersarhythmia epilepsy. He sent her for brain scans and to his shock found that Nicole still had low-level epileptic activity going on in her brain. He warned her against fatigue, excessive drinking or drugs, as she was more susceptible under these conditions to an epileptic relapse.

Nicole had asked about her medical condition and what had actually happened to her. I rang the Children's Hospital and asked if I could see her records. They were stored in the archives and I made an appointment and went along a few weeks later. Escorted up three flights of stairs, I waited in a white empty room, much like a laboratory. Looking out the window at the men gathering around the entrance to Ozanham House on Flemington road I thought about Ricky. He had lived in there at one time. The door banged open. The orderly wheeled in a trolley with a box of filing cabinet binders in it. I was nervous. I was expecting a few notes; instead there were one hundred and fifty pages.

It was a record of our lives. There were scans, graphs, appointments, letters from all the doctors, local and interstate, and from the different hospitals she had been admitted into. There were reports and evaluations on us. I picked up the first record; it was the letter the Bourke doctor had sent to the Children's Hospital. Marked the 4th of January 1979, it stated that Nicole had taken her first fits on the evening of the 30th December 1978.

I cast my mind back twenty years to that fateful night in the fading light at dusk in the Paddle Wheel Caravan Park on the Darling River. I could still smell the red earth of Bourke, the eucalyptus from the river gums, and could feel the searing heat at dusk. I

relived lifting Nicole's head while Leanne gave her that half teaspoon of medicine. I was twenty then. I was now forty.

I walked over to the slanted window and looked up and once again saw my twenty year old self in the reflection of the window. It was then, when I felt goose bumps, that Leanne's image entered the reflection. I could see her as if it was yesterday. She was sexy and sweet and still looked sixteen. She was wearing her tight-fitting green tank top. How much I had loved her. And Nicole was still a perfect baby.

Leanne's image stood silently behind me. Now she was twenty-five. She had the yellow dress she wore on Nicole's first day of kindergarten. I wanted to say thank-you for all the beautiful meals she cooked, and the lovely home she made out of nothing, and the way she dressed our children when we were poor. I wanted to say thank you for all the lamp shades she had made and for the curtains she stayed up all night sewing, and for the Care and Concern furniture she fixed when we first moved into our house. I never said thank-you for that. I never said thank-you for anything. I wanted my time back. I knew what to do now. I was ready now.

After the court case we sat opposite each other. The sting taken out of our hatred. I saw the girl I had first seen swimming around the pier. I wanted to go to her and say goodbye. Give her a hug. Say thank-you. Say sorry. Say something. But I couldn't. I got up and walked out of the court room. And when I finished photocopying Nicole's records, I walked out of that door.

I took Nicole's records for her to see. She was fascinated with her EEG scans showing her arrhythmic electrical patterns in her brain. It was amazing how much she

had achieved while still enduring low-level erratic electrical patterns in her brain and the damage to her occipital lobe.

Eventually university took over Nicole's life and I slowly saw less and less of her. In late 1998 a solid knock on the door woke me from a doze at about 10.30 in the morning. I was annoyed more than curious. I started cleaning. I couldn't let anyone in until I'd at least cleaned up the newspapers. If they left, I didn't care. I thought it was probably a door-to-door phone salesman and I hated rejecting the university kids that usually did that job. The windows were locked to keep the heat in and the house had a slight runners-with-no-socks smell from swim coaching in the mornings.

It was an old concrete house with porous cement tiles on the roof and no insulation in it. I'd become an expert on these sort of old houses since my divorce. They worked like convection: the house sucked the cold into it. I hoped the visitor wasn't a swimming parent wanting to talk about their kid. My day started at five in the morning. I arrived at the pool before training, took the mats off the pool, and allowed the toxic layer of chlorine that hovered just above the water to clear. I was usually home by about eight am for a big breakfast of cereal in a two-litre ice cream container then a read of all the day's newspapers. That's when the early morning start hit and I'd doze off.

There was another forceful knock on the door. I was ready enough. I opened a side window to let some air in and threw the sleeping bag into a bedroom full of thrown in things and shut the door. I saw the outline of only one person's head through the smoked and serrated glass in the top section of the door. They knocked for the third time. 'Who was that determined to see me?' I thought, as I opened the door.

I was greeted with a huge smile and a giggle. I didn't see the twenty-year-old grown-up Nicole standing in front of me. I saw the baby with a vivacious giggle who

had walked around the Bourke hospital's coffee table twenty years earlier, before the effects of her brain injury, before she imploded into her own world of fits. We hugged and she squeezed me with real joy. She was full of stories and her smile lit up the room, and she lit up my heart as I sat back and listened. She was flushed and full of colour, vivacious and fresh. I was so proud of her. She was resilient, self-motivated and independent. My life had been blessed. I felt complete. She had made it. She had really made it. I wanted to ring Leanne and say we did it, we really did it. But we didn't talk anymore.

The next day I went to the pool at the usual five am. The sprawling gum tree in the middle of the grassed area slowly came into focus, its branches weighed down with gumnuts. Behind the pool, the river gum trunks emerged like centurions guarding the ancient watercourse. Stars came and went behind cloud cover sweeping across the sky. I thought I could feel the earth moving on its axis. At ground level the air was icy, pristine. The morning star appeared and the sky went all the way to space. I knew the sun would draw the earth's warmth when it rose. Then the sky on the horizon turned pink and the tufts of clouds in the distance had a glow along their underbelly and the top of the soft yellow sun came into view. The moon was in the opposite sky hanging on. It knew light and dark never merged. It was a rule that couldn't be manipulated. I dived into the deep blue water, steam rising off the surface and lay suspended in the deep. Out of breath I pushed up breaking the surface tension and the silence, filled my lungs, felt the bite from the crispy air on my skin and headed off down the pool.

In 2001 Nicole completed her teaching degree and a Masters degree some years later. She spent most of her eleven years teaching children with special needs. In 2012 she had a career change and is now studying law. Despite substantial damage to her

occipital lobe and her ongoing low-level epileptic activity, Nicole continues, to this day, to defy her predicament.

Epilogue

I couldn't settle in the days after Nicole's visit. I found myself experiencing a deep feeling of loss. I bought a computer and Rhiannon, who had come to live with me, showed me how to turn it on and taught me the basics. Although I had only written poems up until that point, I decided to try and write Nicole's life story and give it to her for her 21st birthday, which was a little less than a year away. That was in 1999.

Leanne finished her nursing degree and has worked as a specialised nurse in a number of jobs. Her family and friends said our separation was 'the making of her'. I had held her back. She has remarried and by all reports is happy.

Rhiannon works at a local community centre and is married with one child. She lives in a coastal resort. Becky has three children and is a stay-home mum and bookkeeper for her husband's business. I heard on the grapevine that their lives are good.

In 2005, mum and dad had their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Dad said sorry for forty years of drinking. He meant it. Mum had a small plaque made for Peter number one and mounted it on Par's gravestone in the Stockton cemetery, Newcastle. She gave dad a photo of it and he sat in his favourite chair and looked out over the water of the Werribee River. On a 'Back to' tour of Newcastle we visited Par's grave and saw the marble plaque.

'Peter No.1 McIntosh

Stillborn 7th March 1966

Baby of Carmel & Doug

McIntosh

Always love you

In God's care'

It looked great and Mum looked at peace when she saw it.

Dad died on the 16th of April 2012. We had eight good years when we spoke most days, and I can feel him with me now. Mum is in a nursing home with dementia.

Ricky and I periodically lost contact but I periodically found him. He read a draft of Nicole's story and was amazed. He said, 'and you never said a word for all those years we were together'. He shook his head. During my educational years, I would ring Ricky at about nine or ten in the morning and read him a story or part of an essay that I had been working on the day before. He loved it. He suffered a series of strokes and spent his last few years also in a nursing home. He died on the 5th of November 2009. His funeral was on Remembrance Day and I will always remember.

