

**BRIAN
MENTAL BOOK ONE
A SERIES OF NOVELLAS**

by

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When I was sixteen I would kick holes in the wall of my school and break furniture. The internal walls were very flimsy and they caved in easily, even to my trainers. Nobody noticed but it made me feel a little bit better. There was a manky old armchair in the corner of the manky old common room where I would habitually sit and block out the world with a book or my headphones. I used a mathematical pair of compasses to gouge open the arm and rip out all the stuffing. It was probably a substitute for self harm – I didn't have the guts to cut open my own arm. Once I left a pile of stuffing on the floor. One of my friend's said "You'll have to clear that up." "No I won't," I said, got up and left. The next day it was gone by some method.

One day I destroyed the library. Well, I didn't burn it down or anything, though I thought often about that sort of destruction. I was always at school by eight o'clock, half an hour before even any of the teachers, because I lived ten miles away and had to have a lift from my father on his way to work. I would wander around on my own and nose about in classrooms I didn't usually go in, seeking anything to alleviate my pathological boredom. I would often grab some chalk and write something pointless on the blackboard: "Aardvark's don't bounce", "Sarcasm is the lowest form of shit", "Get to Falkirk". Again, nobody noticed but it made me feel a little bit better.

I was bored on that morning so I decided to turn the library into a modern art sculpture. I put all the chairs onto the tables and arranged hundreds of books onto the floor in random piles. Then I saw how many books I could stack on top of the chairs. I closed the heavy curtains at the windows and over both sets of doors, leaving the room in darkness, and went next door to the common room.

The first kids that turned up assumed there was a teachers meeting going on so nobody went in. By the time a teacher arrived there were two hundred pupils milling around and nobody ever found out who did it. Looking back

now I feel bad that somebody would have had to go through all the books and put them back on the right shelves but that never occurred to me at the time. It was the sort of pointless destruction that can only come from teenage existential frustration.

At home I spent all my time in my room listening to music and trying to block out the noises in my head: the self-loathing, the deathly boredom, the feeling that absolutely nothing was worth doing and never would be, the constant desire to go to sleep and never wake up, for the whole world to just fuck off and leave me alone.

Then there was the time I stole the library register. I was nearly eighteen and they were still treating us like little kids. They took a register every period to check that anyone who wasn't in a lesson was in the library studying (they *actually* used to say "It's not a free lesson, it's a study period" like John Cleese in the film "Clockwise"). You were only allowed in the manky common room once a week. I resented this on a deep level. Others were only mildly annoyed by it but it burned away at me.

One lunchtime I found myself sitting at the desk in the library with a couple of friends and there it was. The A4 green hardback ledger book with all our names in it. After taking the register some teachers would even take it so far as to go into the common room and 'fetch' people. It was draconian and humiliating. It was also legally unenforceable because one teacher told me when I was being 'talked to' for having done something or other that, because we had *volunteered* to come back to the sixth form, they couldn't give us detention or anything, they could only ask us to cooperate and behave. Once I learned this it took a great weight off my shoulders. I didn't care if I got kicked out of school so I instantly relaxed and just did the bare minimum amount of work and never quite crossed the line of behaviour or vandalism where they would expel me.

Anyway, the little green bastard was there on the desk, taunting me. I don't remember actually making a decision, I just discovered myself in the act of doing something that some part of my brain had apparently decided it was going to do. That happens a lot. I often don't realise I've done something until somebody else points it out to me. Even then I sometimes don't know *why* I've done it. Things just happen sometimes and I appear to have been the agent of them.

"Fuck this, I'm sick of this," I found myself saying as I picked up the register and put it in my bag. Two people saw me do it and they displayed expressions of astonishment, as if I'd suddenly set fire to a baby or something.

I hung around in the library after lunch to see what would happen.

“Has anyone seen the register?” asked the teacher.

I was the only one present who knew it was in my bag. Everyone else looked puzzled, some actually looked as if the fact of the little green bastard not being on the desk where it had been for months was something of interest or significance. The teacher found an exercise book and wrote everyone's names down in that.

Later in my English lesson the head of year came in and asked if anyone had seen the library register. She had obviously been around all the classes because this was a matter of such importance that they might have to bring in the United Nations to sort it out. Again, everyone looked around with puzzled expressions and a smattering of muttering. My friend next to me shifted slightly in his seat because he knew it was in my bag under the table.

I really thought she was going to search all our bags, that's how petty they were in my school. I wasn't in the least bit worried because I knew they couldn't do anything to me that would bother me. I began preparing a little speech on how patronising it was of them to treat us like infants. But there was no bag search.

On the way home I took it out of my bag and showed it to a few people. They also seemed surprised that somebody had taken it. Or rather that someone as uncool and invisible as me had taken it.

The following day, when I was once again early, alone and bored out of my mind, I went into the library and stole the replacement register. They replaced it. By the end of the day I had stolen the replacement replacement register.

After that they used a new sheet of paper every day. I took all of them and tore them up or threw them away in the corner of the playing field or flushed them down the toilet.

A week or so later they permanently abandoned the system of the library register. It was a small victory but it made me feel more than a little bit better.

One Saturday afternoon about a year later I took the former library register to the pub, where a friend and I proceeded to scribble sarcastic comments all over it and put asterisks next to all the girls we wished we had had sex with.

Stealing that register was the unequivocal highlight of my teenage years.

Now, thirty odd years later, I have a job, a house, a wife, two children, but nothing has changed. I still feel like that sixteen year old invisible loser with nothing to do and nowhere to go. I can't feel anything except a lack of feeling, the black hole where my life is supposed to be.

By the time I was sixteen the nihilism was firmly entrenched and really everything else was inevitable. I suppose the true beginning was four years earlier, in the events of the few months before I became a teenager.

I had been pretty happy in junior school. I liked having the same classroom, the same teacher, the same desk for a whole year. It suited my temperament and I found the lessons and the work relatively easy. I rode around the streets on my bike and did stupid kids things like you were supposed to (like you were allowed to back then, before the cotton wool brigade came along and reduced childhood to a virtual experience). I had a tiny black and white television in my bedroom and would spend my pocket money at jumble sales, picking up old records and books for a few pence. I enjoyed myself most of the time and didn't really think about *life* or my *future*. If asked at the time I would have described myself as 'happy'.

But high school was a shock for which I was woefully unprepared. I went from a school with fourteen teachers and a few hundred kids to a huge monolith of a building – several buildings in fact, more like a compound – with a hundred and twenty teachers and two thousand pupils. We were given a map on day one to help us find our way around. There were so many staircases they all had numbers and finding the right room was impossible. I got shouted at by a teacher on my very first day for hesitating on a staircase because I didn't know where I was going. He turned out to be the teacher for my first lesson. There were kids there who were taller than the teachers and had beards and cars and cigarettes. I was terrified and confused from the start and that never really changed. I never ceased to find that school oppressive and prison-like and the teachers sour and quick tempered. Showing any sign of imagination or individuality was a cardinal sin, you were supposed to sit down and keep quiet while they taught at you. The 'right answer' was the one that agreed with the teacher or the text book, not one where you had actually applied some original thought to the problem.

By the end of the first year my personality had changed drastically. I was definitely no longer happy and I was starting to think about 'Life' with a capital L. During the six weeks of that summer holiday I spent most of the time in bed. My best friend called round every day the first week. I knew it was him because he came around the back through the garden gate and knocked at the kitchen door. Nobody older than sixteen ever did that. My parents were at work so I was alone in the house. If I was still in bed I just stayed there. When I got up I closed all the curtains and watched TV with the sound down low until after he had left. Every summer holiday for the previous five years we had spent most of the time together but now I just

couldn't face the company. I don't think I ever told him why I was avoiding him. Well, I couldn't, because I didn't know the reason myself. Eventually he stopped turning up but I kept the curtains closed all day anyway just in case.

I didn't see anybody that summer, I just slept and watched TV without ever really enjoying it. I began writing in exercise books, little essays I suppose they were. I was losing any sense of meaning or purpose and those books were my attempt to find some, to figure out what the hell life was all about and what I was supposed to be doing.

I began to be obsessed with the universe and would spend hours every day thinking about things like what it was made of and, if it was expanding, what was outside it. I wrote a lot about space and time and what a thought was made of and where they came from. I threw out all those books many years ago and I've never been sure whether they were a positive or negative factor in my life at the time. I suppose at least it was something that occupied me and 'got me out of myself' – if nothing else I had to at least get out of bed to find a pen. I began to listen to science programmes on the radio and record them – I still have some of the cassettes now, though I no longer have anything to play them on.

When we started back at school I was unrecognisable from the boy I had been a year before. I had shaved off all my hair, which back then was seen as very extreme and people would cross the street to avoid you. I had also lost quite a bit of weight because I had spent six weeks mostly in bed not exercising and hardly eating anything. Combined with a sudden growth spurt and the onset of puberty giving me a deeper voice and a bit of stubble, I looked sufficiently different for many teachers to not even recognise me. I slouched around avoiding eye contact unless absolutely necessary and did my best to shut out everything and everyone around me. I didn't speak unless I had to and then in as terse a manner as I could get away with. A few teachers tried engaging with me or making jokes about my new physical awkwardness but I didn't respond and eventually they stopped bothering to make any effort with me.

The first time I was aware of my best friend was about three weeks after term had begun. I was in the far corner of the playing field one lunchtime, the furthest point I could get from anybody, laying on my back and trying to sleep. I was just starting to nod off when a football rolled over and came to rest against my elbow. I tried to ignore it but several kids were shouting for it so I stood up and prepared to kick it back to them.

I looked at the boy who ran towards me to get the ball and then stopped as he recognised me. We hadn't spoken for two months and I only realised in that moment that I had been avoiding him as well as everyone else on the planet.

He looked at me for a few moments after I had kicked him the ball. I thought

he was going to say something and I wondered what it would be and what I would say in return, if anything. But all he did was shake his head in a mixture of disgust and sadness and turn away back to his friends and their stupid game. We never again exchanged a single word.

Twenty years later I ran into somebody else who was in our year back then and she nervously told me that the story going around at the time was that I had got into drugs. I don't know where that story came from but it certainly explained why most people avoided me from then on and also why several low life's used to try to hang around with me - they were hoping I would share some of my drugs with them.

Then, things got much, much worse.

The first thing that happened was that my granddad died. He was the last of my grandparents and by far my favourite person in my family, the only one I ever really felt I had anything in common with. For the previous eighteen months it was only his weekly visits on a Sunday that had made life bearable. When he was gone I started to bunk off school and generally let things slide.

And then, a few weeks before my thirteenth birthday, one of my cousins died. I hadn't been allowed to go to my granddad's funeral so I insisted on going to my cousin's. It turned out to be the worst decision of my life.

My cousin was a year younger than me and died in an accident that could have happened to any kid. At the service I couldn't help comparing myself to him and he beat me in every single department, other than that of still being alive. All the nice things the vicar said about him were true and none of them applied to me – I was neither popular nor good at sport nor 'beloved' by anybody except my granddad, who was now also in a box. There were a dozen attractive girls in the front row and I knew that none of the girls at my school would even notice my absence let alone bother to come to my funeral and cry. My cousin was liked or loved by everyone who knew him and good at everything he ever turned his hand to. I was a pitiful failure by comparison.

I walked away from that funeral with an unshakeable impression that has never left me and had formed the guiding philosophy of my entire life: it should have been me who died, not him, he would have done so much more with his life than I have, therefore I don't deserve to live.

The other thing it left me with was an inability to see any kind of future. If his life could be snuffed out so quickly and easily, so casually, then surely mine was on an even slenderer thread. Ever since that day I have been totally incapable of imagining anything beyond the next few weeks. If ever I tried to think about what I would be doing in a year or five years, or even just six months, all I could envisage was a blank, a void. And if you can't see any kind of future then you have no dreams, no ambitions, no plans. You live in a

permanent state of suspended animation. Welcome to my world.

8.29 a.m.

Another night of no sleep. And when I say no sleep I don't mean a night where you lie awake for part of the night. I mean *no* sleep. As in I didn't even bother going to bed because I knew it would be futile.

By one o'clock I just knew it was going to be another night of full on insomnia. I tried reading a book but I couldn't concentrate. The words didn't seem to make sense. I read the same page seven times and it still didn't make sense.

I tried listening to the radio but it was either depressing news or a bloody football phone in that seemed to last for days. Television is always the last resort. I flicked back and forth and up and down and sideways through more than six hundred channels. After a while I was merely exercising my thumbs and staring uncomprehendingly at a staccato collage of lights and sounds.

By four o'clock I found myself sitting in the kitchen with a glass of brandy staring at the toaster. I could see the reflection of a man in the shiny chrome surface but it wasn't me. I didn't know who it was. I didn't recognise him.

And now I'm sitting on the train trying to stop my head from resting against the window because if I allow my eyes to close for two seconds I will fall asleep and miss my stop. That's happened before.

I talk myself through what I absolutely cannot avoid doing in work today. A few people give me strange looks and I realise I'm talking out loud again. No, I'm not mad, I'm just tired. Epic tiredness. Mountainously tired. I'm just tired, alright? I hope I didn't say *that* out loud. I think I did.

I half fall out of the train because I am dizzy with sustained lack of sleep and narrowly avoid tripping and landing flat on my face. I can see people giving me dirty looks and thinking I'm drunk or on drugs.

The ten minute walk to the office involves the usual trying and failing to avoid bumping into people. As often happens I was just barged out of the way with nothing more than a cursory snarl or muttered obscenity. On the rare occasions where somebody threatened to turn violent my total lack of reaction would usually diffuse the situation fairly rapidly. If you don't follow the accepted script in a social encounter people become very wary of you,

even violent bullies.

A man once punched me squarely in the face. I can't remember whether I had done anything to precipitate this but it appeared to me that it was something happening to some other person, not me. I observed the encounter from a far as I had done many times in school – I had no kind of emotional connection to the person to whom this was happening, the outcome was of no consequence to me therefore I felt no impetus to intervene in any way. It was like doing things in school that might get me expelled – I didn't care whether I was expelled just as I didn't care whether or not this man punched me again. It seemed to be happening in another time stream, not the one in which I was observing the event, therefore I was powerless to act even if I considered it worthwhile. The man followed up the punch with a brutal shove to my chest and let forth a stream of words that seemed to echo away into the distance without ever fully reaching my ears. I have no idea whether this event lasted ten seconds or an hour; when I'm in one of these separate time streams chronology collapses in on it self and I remain in a kind of stasis.

Anyway, whatever was happening continued to happen in the other world on the other side of the thick, heavy curtain that blocked out most of the sound and colour and time. Without witnessing the intervening movement I became aware that the man was now holding a small knife of some kind and was saying more words at me. I still couldn't hear him properly and was vaguely aware that I needed this event to end soon because I had to go and be somewhere else. It had been raining earlier that day so I had left the house with my trusty golfing umbrella. After another unknown period of time had elapsed and vanished into nothingness I observed that the man was no longer holding the knife. I was now holding the knife and the man was on the floor with blood on his face. My hands were a bit sore and the handle of my umbrella was smeared with blood.

When I got on the train to go home there was some kind of frantic conversation in the carriage and people seemed to be greatly exercised about something. When I alighted at my stop there was some shouting and two policemen were walking slowly towards me. They were also shouting some kind of words at me but I was so tired by this point that I was micro sleeping, falling asleep on my feet for a few seconds at a time before my head lolled onto my chest and jerked me awake. After a couple of these I looked down and observed that I was still holding the knife and that my hands and shirt were now smeared with blood from the umbrella. The police people appeared to want something from me so I offered them the knife and umbrella but this just made things worse. I normally get home from the train about ten to six. That night I got home at half past midnight. My wife said a lot of words to me but I fell asleep and then in the morning I couldn't remember any of them. She didn't feel inclined to go over it all again so I never found out what she said.

8.53 a.m.

I have two mugs of black coffee on my desk with four sugars in each. I don't even like coffee, it's like drinking a newly tarred road, but I have to stay awake. Seven minutes until I get paid but I start work anyway because if I just sit here and do nothing I will fall asleep and once I start sleeping I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stop. Thankfully my job doesn't involve taking phone calls or dealing with the public. I sit alone in a tiny partitioned corner of the office where hardly anyone ever goes. I stare at pieces of paper and then I press buttons on a computer. That's my job. There's obviously more to it than that but when I'm this tired that's what it becomes reduced to. It has little meaning at the best of times beyond providing food and shelter for my family. Some days it seems positively absurd.

Time drifts by like an abandoned plastic bag floating down an alleyway. I cover up the taskbar on my computer so that I can't see the clock. There is no other clock in view and I don't wear a watch so I'm not tempted to constantly check the time and tick off the passing minutes. The reason I don't wear a watch is that I used to be obsessed with checking the time. One day a teacher called me "The man with the watch" because I was looking at it every thirty seconds. This wasn't any kind of anxiety over time itself or a feeling that I was going to be late for something, it was a compulsion to look at my watch constantly because as soon as I had looked at the time I immediately forgot it. Often I would *look* at my watch but I wouldn't *see* the time, my attention was too diffuse and I glanced in a unfocused way at the watch without actually reading the time from it. It was also a nervous tick – if it hadn't been that it would have been something else.

11.26 a.m.

I finish a batch of files and finally allow myself to check the time. Thirty four minutes. I can't start another batch because our archaic software doesn't allow you to save a batch part way through – once you've input the first item you have to finish it in one go. The next batch on my desk will take at least two hours and I can't sit here for that long.

What can I do with thirty four minutes? Nothing that is going to contribute anything to human happiness or make my life any better. A thought enters my head. If my job is meaningless then why bother doing it? The mortgage is paid off, my wife has a good job, my children are in college and don't want or need anything from me any more, so what would actually happen if I just got up and walked away now, right this minute? If I suddenly wasn't here to open these files and press these buttons and crunch these numbers, what would

happen? Would the world spin off its axis? No, just like when I stole the library register, nothing will happen and nobody will notice.

Right then, so I will leave. I'll leave at lunchtime to avoid any awkward questions. But what will I do, just go home? Will I mention it or pretend nothing has happened? I saw a TV drama years ago about a man who lost his job and was so afraid of telling his wife that he left the house every morning and pretended to go to work. I don't have the energy for that sort of caper. So I'll tell her then. Will she be angry, disappointed, hurt, ambivalent?

Hang on though. If I'm going to walk out of my job why not also walk out of my life? I don't mean suicide, that also requires too much energy, and I'm not worthy of such a grand gesture. Why don't I just leave, go somewhere and see what happens, let God or fate or random chance or whatever makes things happen decide my future? I could, couldn't I, just go? There's nothing stopping me. Only my wife and children will notice and I'm just dragging them down anyway with my stupid moods and inability to make any decisions. Maybe this is one decision I can make and actually stick to.

Where would I go?

Somewhere different, otherwise what's the point? I live in a city so I'll go to somewhere with plenty of countryside. I turn back to the computer. I'm not supposed to use the internet but what are they going to do, sack me after I've walked out?

I look at a map of Britain that shows areas of greenery and pick somewhere I've never been that is only about an hour away by train but far enough away from home and this office that I won't run into anybody I know.

I could go home and pack, there won't be anybody there but then I run the risk of one of the kids skiving off college and coming home unexpectedly. Also, what is there at home that I need anyway? What am I going to do with my future except sleep? That's all I want, I just want to be left alone to sleep.

Am I actually going to do this? It would seem so. As with many decisions in my life I don't feel that *I* have decided to do this, more that I *know* that this is going to happen and I lack the energy to prevent it.

11.59 a.m.

After tidying my desk and closing down the computer, washing out my coffee mugs and putting them on the draining board, I take the finished batch of files and put them on the shelf where they will be picked up by somebody else and put through the next level of processing. Thankfully this doesn't

involve any form of human communication. It is requiring all my strength and discipline just to keep my eyes open and walk upright.

I walk down the stairs rather than queue for the lift with everyone else. I think somebody calls out my name but I'm not sure. I ignore it anyway. I take an inordinate amount of time traversing the stairs so that the others will be out of the way when I exit the building.

I also take the long way to the train station to avoid the busy streets where people from the office will be buying various things and saying various things, none of which I understand. It is sunny and dry and what probably passes for a nice day but I can't feel the warmth or the slight breeze because most of me has shut down, everything diverted to the task of keeping my eyes open and putting one foot in front of the other.

1.53 p.m.

I may have slept briefly on the train but the constant noise of people and the screeching of brakes and throbbing of engine kept waking me up every couple of minutes.

The room in the bed and breakfast will not be ready until four thirty so I have some time to kill. I consider going in a pub but the one I find is dark inside and that will make me go to sleep. I must stay awake until four thirty. Besides, I have to find a shop where I can buy an alarm clock. Normally, of course, I would use my phone as an alarm but I've switched that off because something tells me that I will get into trouble for leaving and that people will be phoning and bothering me. Besides which I haven't brought the charger with me. I haven't brought *anything* with me because this morning was just another morning where nothing out of the ordinary was supposed to happen.

I find a small radio alarm in a gift shop (can you even get analogue radio any longer? I suppose there must be something being broadcast or they wouldn't bother making the radios any more). Then, although I am not thinking clearly, I realise that I need some other things. The bed and breakfast place provides towels and a dressing gown but little else so I find one of those large discount chemists and purchase a small overnight bag and a pack of razors, some soap, toothbrush, paste and mouthwash and a few other items.

Finally it is time to check myself in; not to a hospital, which is maybe where I should be going, but to a bed and breakfast. Ah well, both afford an opportunity for rest, and at least the people here won't be contacting my next of kin or forcing tablets down my throat.

After an exhausting five minute chat I am finally left alone in my room. I close the curtains, use the separate but private bathroom, undress and get into bed. I set my alarm for eight fifteen, giving me forty five minutes to get up and get downstairs for breakfast.

Time for sleep.

I have more than fifteen hours ahead with nothing to do but sleep.

I look at the clock radio. It is almost six o'clock and I haven't gone to sleep yet. What the hell have I been doing for the past seventy five minutes? Oh yes, thoughts have been happening in my brain. Yet again I can't switch them off. I remember now. My brain has selected more random, meaningless memories to taunt me with.

I left school after getting mediocre A-level results with no plans for the future. The only advice I ever received from my parents was "You have to get a job, we're not going to keep you", or "You can't just sit around at home costing us money". It was never said explicitly but it was definitely hinted at that, when my child benefit ran out the following month, I could not automatically expect to be fed.

Standing alone on the street corner outside the school after chatting to several people who had all got very good results and were all cheerily off to university, I wondered what I was going to do with the rest of my life. Then another thought struck me: "What am I going to do tomorrow?"

With no money to my name apart from forty pounds in an old post office account and a pendulum of Poe-esque proportions hanging over me, how was I going to survive with absolutely no support from anyone? It was just before eleven o'clock. Unless I could find a job before my parents got home that evening things were looking very bleak.

Just as I was about to head off to the job centre, one of the many people I had been pretty good friends with but would never see or hear of again passed by.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I said gloomily. "I need a job or I'm fucked."

"They're hiring down at the cash and carry," she said, referring to a place we had both worked one Saturday the previous year. Sometimes they would ask at the school for sixth formers to work there during busy periods. It was

boring, repetitive work but it was work. Perhaps the fact that I had worked there before doing stock taking would prove an advantage and make up for having no experience, employment history or decent qualifications.

“Thanks, I'll go down there. Good luck with University.”

We hugged briefly and then I hurried away. I used to go to her house for tea on a Friday before a group of us went to the pub. I would read 'Thomas The Tank Engine' to her hyperactive younger siblings while they threw toy cars at my head. Then we would go to another girls house where they would put loads of make up on so that they could buy cigarettes in the shop on the way.

I wonder what became of her. I wonder what became of any of them.

I had been graciously given the money for a bus ticket for today. The cheapest ticket was a 'day to go' you could use all day within a certain area. The cash and carry was within that area so I ran to the nearest bus stop to get home and change.

I had a quick shave, combed my hair as flat as possible, put on a clean shirt and my black school trousers and borrowed a matching suit jacket and tie from my father's wardrobe. Surely even he couldn't object to that? Mind you, if I came home without the job, he would find a reason.

It was probably over the top to wear a suit but she hadn't mentioned what type of job was going. It was almost certainly something lowly and low paid but it might be an office job so it was better to be over than under dressed. Or at least that's what I thought at the time. What did I know? Nothing, that is precisely what I knew of the world and how to get on in it. Nothing.

As I had been there before I knew that the entrance to the office was round the back. Just as I was approaching the door a man came out, yawned, stretched his back and then lit a cigarette. I remembered him from when I had been there the year before.

“Excuse me,” I said, “sorry to bother you but I hear you have some jobs going? I worked here last year as a student. I've just left school and I badly need a job.” Shit. I'd rehearsed my introduction on the bus but my real feelings had slipped out in the heat of the moment. “I can start tomorrow and I'll do as much overtime as you can offer. I'm happy working in the warehouse but I also have an O-level in computer studies so I could do office work as well.” I hoped that I hadn't blown it by being too pushy. I shut up and waited for a response.

He took a long drag on his cigarette and looked me up and down.

“Didn't get the A-levels to get into Uni?”

“No, it's not that,” I blurted out, “I never applied to anywhere. I just want a job, I need to earn money.”

“Well, you don't exactly need A-levels to work here mate.”

Mate. Was that a good sign?

“As it happens I've been dropped in the shit by a couple of people. We have advertised anyway for more stock takers but there are now two of us running the whole place when it needs four or five.” He looked at his cigarette then reluctantly crushed it under his foot. “I haven't even got time to smoke a whole bloody fag! Come on, let's see if you can brighten up my day.”

I followed him into the office.

“What's your name, son?”

“Brian.”

“I'm Rob, that's Kev.” He pointed to a harassed looking man on a phone who glanced up and made brief eye contact with me before turning back to a sheet of paper and the voice on the phone who I could hear from the other side of the room.

Rob took me over to a desk which contained an old, monolithic computer.

“You can do all this stuff?” He sounded quietly hopeful.

I looked at the screen.

“Spreadsheets, yes. And database and word processing.”

“What's your typing speed like?”

“Copy typing forty plus words a minute.”

He looked momentarily as if he thought I was lying. In fact I was usually much faster than that but didn't want to sound like I was boasting.

He took me over to an electric typewriter and motioned for me to sit down. Then he put a letter in front of me.

“Copy that out, Brian, I'll be back in a minute.”

I don't know whether or not he was surreptitiously watching me because I was solely focused on the typing and not making any mistakes. When I had finished I looked around and he was standing next to me.

“That's a lot bloody quicker than forty,” he said. I shrugged diffidently. “Okay, Brian, I'll level with you. I have reservations about hiring someone as young as you but I am deep in the shit. If you can stay here until six tonight

and get stuck in I'll pay you for the whole day and take you on on a one month trial basis. It's two pounds an hour.”

I remembered that a few weeks ago I had gone to the job centre and most of the jobs were one pound an hour. I had no idea why this paid twice as much but I wasn't about to question it.

He held out his hand. “Are you onboard?”

“Yes, absolutely,” I said enthusiastically.

He quickly showed me around the office and the filing cabinets and everything that was done on the computer. After ten minutes he left me with a huge pile of paperwork that needed to be transferred onto spreadsheets. The work was simple but I concentrated hard because this wasn't an exercise in a class room, this was the real world and real money I was dealing with.

Half an hour later I had finished the first pile of paperwork. Rob was out in the warehouse so I asked Kev what to do with the completed papers.

“Fuck me, have you done all that just now?”

“Yes,” I said quietly.

He showed me the tray where they went before being filed away.

“Tea, coffee?” he asked.

I initially wondered if he was expecting me to make it but he picked up the kettle and began filling it.

“Tea, please.”

Rob came back in.

“He's only fucking done all that already,” he said, pointing at the tray.

Rob picked up the papers and walked over to the computer. I pretended not to notice that he was checking my work.

“Excellent work, Brian,” he said. “It would have taken me over an hour to do that, and Kev would be there till Christmas.”

“Fuck off,” said Kev, lighting a cigarette and offering me one. I shook my head.

The kettle boiled and we stood around for a couple of minutes until the phone rang and Kev, cursing like a docker, went back to his desk.

Rob looked at the rest of the files he had given me.

“When you've done them you can go home. That's an afternoons work to me but I reckon you'll be finished by four. If I'm not here when you finish come and find me and I'll give you some cash.”

I wasn't sure what that meant but I nodded and took my tea back to the computer. It was against all common sense to put my mug next to the computer and paperwork but they were both *smoking cigarettes* so sod it.

As I continued typing I couldn't help wonder what he meant by 'some cash'. Was this whole job dodgy, 'off the books'? Then again, I was only just out of school, I could always claim ignorance and nobody could prove that I had ever heard of National Insurance contributions. I decided that as long as they paid me by some method I didn't care.

I did indeed finish just after four and went into the warehouse to find Rob.

“I've put them in the tray,” I said.

“Brilliant, you've made my day.” He took out his wallet and gave me a twenty pound note. “A little starting bonus, for saving our bloody bacon. Are you happy to turn your hand to anything, shift some boxes, stack some shelves, stock taking?”

“Yes, anything.” I said. “And I'll work weekends if needed.”

“Fantastic, I might hold you to that one day soon. I'll put you on the books tomorrow, shall we say nine 'till six with an hour for lunch, overtime to be discussed as and when? And you'll be paid weekly in areas, overtime a week later.”

“That's great,” I said, already doing the mental arithmetic on my wages.

“See you tomorrow then.”

I got the bus home in something of a daze. I had been on two pounds a week pocket money for years, which was just enough to keep me in deodorant, razors and other essentials. It was only thanks to the money I received in cards from various relatives at Christmas and birthdays that I was ever able to buy any clothes, never mind records, books or anything for myself. Now I would be earning *sixteen pounds a day!* Even after tax I would have way more than I'd ever had before.

One the way home I bought jumbo fish and chips, a rare treat, and ate them in my room with a massive smile on my face.

My parents always came home from work together so when I heard the key in the door I braced myself for any holes they would pick in me and went downstairs.

“I won't be needing tea tonight,” I said before either of them could speak, “I've already eaten. I didn't do very well in my exams but it doesn't matter because I've already got a job. I started today and I'll get my first wages at the end of next week.” I didn't mention the twenty pounds. “I'll take money out of the post office to cover my bus fare so I don't need anything else from you from now on.”

Perhaps there was a sour tone to the last sentence but they didn't seem to notice.

“What's the job?” asked my father. No congratulations or enthusiasm or anything I noticed, trying not to be bitter.

“Computer stuff in an office.”

I didn't elaborate and they didn't ask. I don't know why but I didn't want to tell them where I was working in case they turned up and embarrassed me or caused problems with my employer.

My mother immediately demanded ten pounds a week, which I thought was a lot, but neither of them ever asked how much I was earning. I never told them. After three months of incessant overtime and parsimony I moved into a flat. It was tiny but it was all mine and my life as an independent adult had finally begun.

At some point I must have fallen asleep because the radio woke me up the following morning. I felt somewhat rested but nowhere near enough; everything was still a bit foggy. After breakfast I went for a walk as we had to be out of our rooms between ten and two.

Strolling through a park I felt suddenly dizzy and out of sorts. I staggered to a nearby bench and slumped down. There was something odd happening in my head, a sort of whooshing sound I couldn't identify. I wondered if it was a migraine though I'd never had one before. The dizzy feeling just wouldn't go away so I remained on the bench with my eyes closed for about twenty minutes.

When things seemed to have finally settled down in my brain I opened my eyes. My vision was totally clear but when I stood up my legs felt different, weaker. It was starting to drizzle so I walked steadily, concentrating on staying upright. Maybe my blood sugar was low. The nearest place where I could sit down was a pub so I ordered a meal and a pint of orange juice.

Steak, chips and a salad revived me somewhat and I followed it with a pint of Guinness.

I thought that exercise was the best thing if I had developed some kind of physical malady so I went for a stroll around the small town centre and found a book shop. My legs felt better but still not quite right and there was a new kind of fog in my head, subtle yet definitely there somewhere. I picked up a few books and flicked through them but it was harder than normal to read. The words seemed smaller than usual and I found myself squinting to try and make them out. I found a few large print books and they were much easier to read so I bought three of them.

When I got back to the b&b one of the owners gave me strange look.

“Are you feeling okay?” he asked.

“A bit under the weather,” I said. “Just been over doing it at work. That's why I'm here, rest and recuperation.”

He looked as though he didn't quite believe me but I had paid for a week in advance so he let it be. I went up to my room, closed the door and flopped gratefully onto the bed.

I had no idea what was going on in my head or my body but I didn't like it. Was this my brain rebelling against what I had done, abandoning my life and family? Maybe it was just my nervous system freaking out a bit at my new and uncertain situation. Or else I was just becoming a hypochondriac and imagining it, or subconsciously willing myself to become ill as a punishment for my selfish behaviour.

Whatever the answers, I knew one thing. I needed a lot more sleep.

I woke up on the bed fully clothed. It was dark. I turned over and looked at the radio alarm to find that it was just after one thirty in the morning. I wasn't sure how long I had been asleep but it felt like a very long time. The only reason I was awake now was because I was desperate for the toilet.

After visiting the bathroom across the hallway I went back to my room and quietly closed the door. I felt wide awake now and wasn't sure what to do. I had some vague memories of being awake at night and things I would do to relieve the boredom but that was back home, not in a bed and breakfast filled with strangers. I couldn't go downstairs and sit in the kitchen with the radio on now.

Home.

The word conjured only thin, wispy memories, as if it was a place I had not visited for decades. I tried to concentrate and bring to mind the people who were back home, for I knew there to be some, but the memories were gossamer and insubstantial.

I knew that something was wrong with my mind but there was no sense of panic. I felt totally calm, as if I knew that this were merely a temporary blip that would right itself sooner or later. I didn't feel in any danger. I was sure that I hadn't *lost* my mind, just that a part of it was shut down for the time being, for reasons of self protection. When I had rested enough and got enough sleep then everything would again be normal, whatever that had once been.

A thought popped up from somewhere and I looked through the carrier bag next to the bed for clues to the past that seemed to be slipping away from me hour by hour, thought by thought, piece by piece. Nothing there. Then I noticed the jacket hanging on the back of the door and went through the pockets. My wallet contained only money, a cash card and two credit cards, no photographs or anything with my address on. I recognised the name on the cards as being my own name and discovered that I could remember the pin number to all three cards. I picked up the pen and notepad I had bought the previous day, for a reason that now escaped me, and wrote them all down lest my mind decide to erase that information as well. I knew these were my things and that this person was me but I could no longer feel any connection to him. I didn't feel like I *was* him.

Then I found my phone, and recognised it as my phone and knew how to switch it on, but something stopped me. I would be missed by now, I would be officially *a missing person*. I didn't like that idea so I pushed it away. Curiously that was the first moment that the actuality of what I had done occurred to me. I had done something massive and life changing without really being aware of what I was doing. I pushed that thought away as well.

I did briefly consider switching on my phone, that somehow that was *the right thing to do*, but I didn't. If I switched it on there would be messages, *stuff to deal with*, and the reason I was here was that I could no longer deal with *anything*. I sensed that I was at the point of no return, that I could go home now and it wouldn't be a *total* disaster. But I knew that I wouldn't. All I wanted to do, all I was capable of doing, was staying here in my cave and sleeping. Maybe one day I would be a real person again and be able to go out into the world and do things. But not today. I slid the phone down the back of the wardrobe where it would be difficult to reach.

I figured that I must have had a good reason for doing what I had done and ending up in this place. People don't just do things for no reason, do they?

Just because I could not currently remember what the reason was, didn't mean that it wasn't hiding there somewhere and perfectly valid.

I also considered going to a doctor and admitting to everything that was going on in my head, but that would just bring even more stuff to deal with. And in any case, I couldn't think how I would be able to describe my symptoms to a doctor. You can't accurately report on a faulty mind using a faulty mind. No, on balance, I thought it best to sit tight for a few days, remain invisible and let nature take it's course. Surely my mind would return sooner or later.

All that thinking had exhausted me so I undressed and got into bed, hoping for the sweet, calming oblivion of sleep. I did sleep, but of course my mind would not rest. It kept on unravelling my life in all it's horrible detail.

I think that, after leaving school, I had about two years of living in a state which could be described as happy before my mind once again began to work against me. A few months after I started, Kev left and I incorporated his role into my own job, with a commensurate pay rise. Rob and I ran the place pretty efficiently between the two of us. I spent a lot of time on the phone and the rest at the computer, and the office was nearly always frantically busy, but I enjoyed the work. I found that I was suited to that level of responsibility and I matured into a young man fairly quickly. I began to feel like an equal partner in the office rather than just the new kid, and Rob was certainly by then treating me as such.

I still had no long term goals or ambitions because I still couldn't imagine being any older than I was. I knew that I didn't want to turn into my parents or live their kind of life, but I had no idea what sort of life I *did* want. I expected that at some point I would just *become* the person I was meant to be, that my brain would eventually mature and I would magically know what I was supposed to be doing and how I was going to live the rest of my life. But mostly I just didn't think about the future because I couldn't make any sort of connection to it, especially an emotional connection.

Another factor was that I grew up during the cold war and my childhood was littered with terrifying documentaries about the imminent threat of a nuclear holocaust. I remember that sometime at the beginning of the 80s when I was in my early teens I decided that there was a fifty fifty chance of getting to the end of the decade without a nuclear conflict. The rhetoric of Regan and Thatcher and the whole mood of the time made this a fairly realistic assessment. Combined with the death of my friend a year or so before, I became utterly convinced that I was going to die at any moment. That feeling has never entirely left me. That's why my life has turned out the way it has – things have just happened to me and I've always submitted to them. I've never really *done* anything, I've just passively reacted to whatever life has

thrown at me.

In those days you could still just about have one job for the entirety of your working life and so I never made any plans to 'move on' or look for any alternative employment. My savings built up rapidly with all the overtime (and very high interest rates at the time) and I soon bought a fairly good second hand car. It made me feel like an adult, a proper member of the human race, to drive to work every morning and park my car outside the office next to Rob's.

I had few friends and no girlfriends because I was working six days a week and was totalling up to seventy hours; I just never had the time nor the inclination to go anywhere where I would meet anybody new. I never felt tired during the first two years, I was just happy to keep going and accumulate savings. I figured that in a few years I would be able to buy a house. I didn't particularly want to buy a house, I didn't need one, but that was what you were supposed to do, wasn't it? Climb the ladder and all that.

I didn't stop for two years. It was when I did that the problems began.

I would work all week and most Saturdays. Saturday night I would go out drinking with the two friends from school I had managed to avoid alienating. They had moved to our school in the sixth form and so only ever knew me as I was at sixteen, they weren't comparing me to my previous self and I hadn't done anything to piss them off. By that point I was virtually invisible at school and would often leave the premises at lunch time or during a free lesson to avoid people. Everyone who had known me in previous years just stopped talking to me and I did nothing to change that situation.

One lunch time I got a bag of chips and went to sit in a park, expecting it to be as deserted as usual. The high hedge around the perimeter prevented me from seeing that two of the swings were occupied. By the time I had entered the park they had spotted me and called me over so it was too late to back out. I considered being rude and just walking away but I found myself carrying on and sitting on the vacant swing next to them. Simon and Jeff were brothers whose parents had divorced the previous year and their mother had been forced to move, hence the change of school.

They were in one of my classes but we had never really talked much outside of lessons. They were both drinking cans of Hoffmeister, which was one of the cheapest lagers you could get at the time. I was loathe to share my chips with them because I had so little money that they were a massive treat, but when they offered me a can I suddenly really wanted a drink, so I accepted the can and shared the bag of chips.

I'd never been a big drinker because I couldn't afford it. I asked how they could afford to be drinking at lunchtime.

“Guilt money from our dad,” smiled Simon. “He's got a really good job and he gives us twenty quid a week, each. Mainly just to piss mum off but we're not complaining.”

I almost dropped my can. Twenty quid a week was more than unemployment benefit back then. It would be like a sixteen year old today having eighty or ninety pounds a week.

“And we get them cheap anyway,” added Jeff. “Our older cousin works in an offy. He gets staff discount and the odd crate goes AWOL. It's a nice little scam the manager runs. You always get a certain amount of breakages and stuff that goes out of date so he claims stuff as having been damaged goods and they take it home. These ones are sell by the end of the month so they'd hardly make anything on them in the shop. We got 'em for 20p a can.”

Even I could just about afford to drink at that price. It transpired that Jeff, like me, also had a free period after lunch. When Simon reluctantly went back to school to endure a history lesson I gave Jeff 40p and helped myself to another can. The camaraderie of drinking in the park during school time, along with the unexpected rush of lager itself, worked it's magic and we became firm friends. The three of us would have a liquid lunch in the park most days after that. I'm not sure we ever had anything in common except drinking and making idiotic jokes but it was enough for me, the first connection I had felt to another human being for five years. I started also spending a lot of time at their place instead of suffering through the stifling awkward atmosphere at home.

During my first two years at work I would get slaughtered with Jeff and Simon every Saturday and then spend Sunday lounging around watching all the TV programmes I had video taped during the week. Sometimes I would go for a drive and listen to the radio, just because I could. I never visited my parents and eventually they got the message and stopped pretending to invite me. They divorced soon after that and I don't even know where my father lives now, or even if he is still alive.

This way of life was perfectly acceptable and it may well have continued to make me content for many more years had my routine not been disrupted.

For various reasons we moved to new premises, resulting in business being on hold for almost a month. I think there was something else going on higher up in the company but I was never privy to those details, though I heard rumours about some sort of tax dodge to which I dutifully closed my ears. So long as they continued to pay me I didn't really care how the company chose to run its business affairs.

I had never taken any time off apart from the odd sick day or dentist appointment, or one time when my car broke down, and Rob insisted that I

have three weeks off before helping with the final stages of moving into the new building. He saw it as a reward for all my hard work but I had no idea what to do with myself. I was twenty and possessed with a restless energy so just lounging around at home and watching TV didn't appeal to me. On the other hand, there was nothing that I was really interested in doing. The idea of going on an actual holiday on my own seemed odd and untenable. For a few days I went out in the car but the novelty soon wore off.

I quickly realised that I had no life outside of my job. Until that point there had seemed a purpose in working all the hours I could and accumulating lots of money. Because I had been working so much I hadn't had time to sit and think, to be introspective and think about 'life'. After a few days off I began to think about myself and my circumstances and nothing good came of it. I suddenly saw myself and hated what I was looking at. I was a twenty year old virgin with two friends, no girlfriend, effectively no family and no real interest in anything. For the previous two years I had been under the illusion that I was happy because I was so pleased to be away from school and my parents, but now I saw the unpalatable reality. I had several thousand pounds in the bank, a car and a rented flat, but that was it, the sum total of my life. Now that I didn't have work to focus on I realised how empty and pointless my life was and how cosmically, existentially bored I was. For a couple of days I floundered around trying to find something to do, something to engage me and maintain my interest, but I drew a total blank.

This was now a pressing concern because when I returned to work there would be a new person in the office so I wouldn't have to work so many hours. I would be on a regular nine to five, Monday to Friday week with overtime only when we were especially busy. I was fine with that, I had more than enough money for my needs, but what the hell was I going to do with all this free time?

After a week I had reverted to my eleven year old behaviour of staying in bed most of the day and having zero energy. But it didn't soothe me as it once had, and so I did the only other thing I could think of doing at the time: I started drinking. I drove to the supermarket and bought loads of food and everything I needed for the foreseeable future so that I wouldn't have to leave the flat, and six crates of lager – one hundred and forty four cans. After nine days I had run out so I got another six crates.

For two weeks I got up at lunch time, sat in the chair in front of the telly and drank until I passed out. I wouldn't say it made me happy but there was a definite appeal to that level of indulgence and lack of any responsibility. After a while it began to make sense to live in this manner. Because I knew that I was going to be drunk all of my waking hours I stopped worrying about having no life, I stopped worrying about anything. Slowly I began, in some sense, to *enjoy myself*. I even began to think, callow youth that I was, that

there was something heroic about drinking so much. I was saying a big *fuck you* to my parents, the world, to the notion of adult responsibility, to life itself.

After a while I got sick of the bloating effect of drinking so much lager and so graduated to bitter and then I discovered real ale. A lot of it was much stronger than lager and so I got 'more bang for my buck'. I found that mixing different types of ale would get me drunk a lot more quickly and so began to work my way through the shelves of the supermarket and local off licences.

The first day back at work I took the bus because I had a terrible hangover from being awake for an hour without a drink and couldn't face driving. I was so miserable in the office that everyone who saw me asked me what was wrong. I said I had a stomach bug, which was what it felt like anyway. By lunchtime I had to get out of there. The three of us took different breaks so that there was always enough cover for the phones.

I walked alone to the nearest pub and ordered a meal, for I felt ravenously hungry, and a pint. Ten seconds after starting the pint I felt considerably better. I walked back to work after steak and chips and four pints feeling on top of the world. During the morning I had been wondering how on earth I could cope with the job any longer but now I had found the solution. I could comfortably afford a pub lunch every day so that's what I would do from now on. When I got home I had a takeaway and eight cans and passed out in the chair as I had been doing every day for the previous fortnight.

The following morning I still felt too rough to drive so again I took the bus. It was hard to get through the four hours until my lunch break but once again I went to the pub and had four pints. If anyone at work noticed they never said anything. Providing I could still do my job I don't think Rob would have cared if I'd had a bottle of scotch or some heroin.

On the third day back I had a brainwave. If I walked to work I could have a couple of cans on the way to get me through the morning. This worked very well and I only needed three pints at lunchtime. After a month I sold my car because I never used it.

And so life continued, for five years.

My drinking never affected my ability to do my job and it never gave me any serious health problems. I sustained a few minor injuries and one twisted ankle from falling over but other than that it was all fine. At that age you can do a lot to your body and it will acquiesce with little in the way of protest. Everything was fine.

Except of course, that it wasn't. My body might have escaped relatively unscathed, but my poor mind was broken. One of the things drinking does is

disrupt your sleep but again, at that age I could cope well enough. I became used to getting little sleep and my body adapted to being permanently drunk.

For five years I thought about little else but alcohol and how long I had to wait for my next drink, the next top up that would enable me to remain numb to all worldly concerns. When I wasn't at work I would be either drinking or sleeping. After a couple of years of this exhausting way of life I could no longer summon the energy to go out on a Saturday and eventually I drifted away from my two remaining friends.

Even taking a shower and getting dressed became a Herculean task so I would go shopping on a Friday evening after work for food and drink and then spend the weekend in my flat in a dressing gown. I would listen to music and watch TV and I enjoyed being an audience to things that were external to me, I suppose it was the basic escapism that everyone indulges in to some extent. I think that some of the time I was happy, or at least content, but the drinking blocked out any level of complex thought so life just carried on. I would have occasional flashes of shame at the state I had let myself get into but they were easily dismissed. Now and then I would run out of beer and have to shuffle down to the off licence, attracting pitying or disapproving looks because I was wearing dirty, food stained clothes and hadn't washed or shaved in days but I had long ceased to care what anybody thought of me and this was also easily brushed aside.

It may seem strange but I didn't notice what my life had become. If you start drinking as soon as you wake up then you never properly sober up, never fully regain your senses. Because of my innate inability to see the future I was never really aware of time passing. I never had any thoughts along the lines of "I've been drinking constantly for three years, this sickly, sugary liquid is my entire life, what the fuck am I doing?". I never, ever thought about what I was doing, I just continued to do it. I honestly never had a single moment of worrying about my health, because that was the future, which didn't exist. I guess walking to and from work and all the miles I accumulated walking around the warehouse kept the weight off and kept me relatively healthy.

It never occurred to me that this could kill me because, as per usual, I couldn't connect to any possible future.

When I was twenty five and had been in the job for seven years the company closed down and I suddenly became unemployed. In the same way that the three weeks off had started the problems, this new change of circumstances

was the beginning of me sorting myself out. I received a generous redundancy payment as this was the days of union power and workers being treated decently. I worked out that, with this and my savings, I had no immediate need to worry about money. Other than rent, bills, food and cheap crates of supermarket beer I had no expenses and calculated that I could survive for at least a year before I had to worry about my lack of income. I didn't want to endure the indignity of signing on and I didn't really need to.

And so I found myself in an entirely new situation. I didn't have to get up in the morning, I didn't have to go anywhere or do anything, I was totally free. I realised how tired I had become so I stayed in bed for a few days and slept around fifteen hours a day. I was too tired to even go out to the shop and so, by default, I stopped drinking.

After a week or so I woke up one morning about ten o'clock and my body was telling me that I had had enough sleep. It was time to get out of bed and do something with my life. Without even thinking about it I got up and had a shower, shaved and put on clean clothes. I felt restless but in a positive way - I had the urge to get out and do something.

I walked into town and, walking past a concert venue, discovered that a band I liked was playing that night. I went in and bought one of the few remaining tickets, having never seen live music before. There was seven hours to kill until the concert began and there seemed little point in going back home and sitting around waiting so I decided that I would have a day out instead.

I had barely read anything for the last five years but now felt a compulsion to visit a bookshop. I bought a paperback novel and went to a cafe to have some lunch. For over an hour I sat and read and drank tea. Then I bought a sandwich and a can of orange pop and went to the large park in the middle of the city centre. By the time I realised that I needed the toilet it was gone five o'clock and I had read more than half of the book.

I put the paperback in my jacket pocket and walked to the public toilets. I still had more than two hours to kill and it was starting to rain so I ducked into a burger bar, ordered a large tea and fries, installed myself in a quiet corner and finished the book. Looking at my watch I saw that the venue doors were now open so I made my way over.

Standing in the foyer there was still half an hour to go. I looked around wondering what to do and saw that nearly everyone was standing around drinking. It hit me like a hurricane that not only had I not had a drink in nearly a week, I had not thought about alcohol either. Still, it would be boring just standing around so I went to the bar and got a pint of lager.

Normally it would take only a few seconds for a pleasant wave to wash over me, but this time the drink tasted odd. I persevered but, after ten minutes, I

had only managed a third of the pint and realised that I wasn't enjoying it. Was I suddenly a teetotaler? What the hell was going on?

People were beginning to drift in so I followed suit and made my way to my seat. The concert was amazing, though I couldn't believe how loud it was and I could barely hear any of the vocals. It was an energizing experience that I would definitely be repeating as soon as possible.

After it had finished I battled my way through the crowds and had an entirely new experience. I was sober among a lot of drunk people and I found them incredibly annoying, even frightening. Was that how people had been looking at me for the last five years? I shuddered at the thought. It was with huge relief that I got out of the town centre and away from the drunken mob.

When I got home I stayed up most of the night thinking and writing down ideas. I never declared that I wouldn't drink again but I certainly wasn't going to go back to my previous way of life. Now that my head was clear and I had some perspective I found it very hard to believe that I had been like that for so long.

The following day I went back into town and bought ten more books and some new clothes. I vowed that I would never again let myself go like that and determined that I would finally begin to do something worthwhile with my life.

My poor diet and alcohol intake had added about two stone to my stomach so the first thing I decided to do was get fit. I would get up at eight o'clock every morning (including Sundays - now that I wasn't drinking I was sleeping normally and had no desire or need to stay in bed), shower and shave and be out of the flat by ten.

I started going for long walks, tried running but didn't take to it, before giving cycling a go. I hadn't ridden a bike for over ten years so I went to a shop and had a look around. I opted for a mountain bike because I fancied the idea of going out in the countryside rather than just pounding the streets and fighting the traffic.

Within a couple of weeks I was cycling around thirty miles a day and loving every minute of it. I bought some maps and looked for new places to go and it quickly became my main activity. The weight fell off and after three months I was very fit.

I went to see a lot of bands and began buying music magazines. I also began to frequent the library and borrow two or three novels each week. During one of these visits I happened to glance at a prospectus for the local university. I had never been bothered about higher education when I was in school but now I began to consider it. In those days not only was university free, they

actually paid you to go. I didn't want to go straight into another office job and couldn't think of anything else to do with myself. My money wouldn't last indefinitely so I would have to make a decision at some point.

I took the prospectus, found a chair in a quiet corner and sat down to leaf through it. I looked in another book at the level of grant I would get as a mature student. I worked out that by doing some kind of summer job I could just about make it through the three years of a degree and keep my flat going. Suddenly it seemed like the right thing to do and so I began to swot up on the application process and entry requirements. My A-levels were okay but nothing spectacular. I noted, however, in the section for mature students that work experience counted towards gaining a degree place. I had been working with computers for seven years and was aware that they were becoming increasingly important in the work place, and society in general. At the time computers were just beginning to be linked together and a very, very crude version of the internet was being used by a tiny number of people. Surely if I did a computer science degree, that and my previous experience would enable me to get a pretty good job somewhere in three years time. Instinctively it just felt right, that this was what I should be doing, so I made a note of all the details and decided to apply to the local university. It was about eight miles from my flat but I could easily cycle there. The following day I wrote off for the application form.

Another reason I was now keen to become a student was that I was a twenty five year old virgin with no friends and no social life of any kind. I had spent so long hiding from the world and avoiding people that it was now a matter of urgency that I reintegrate myself into normal society.

However the idea of going from nought to sixty in four seconds, from my current life to the first day of a degree course, was terrifying. I needed a way to ease myself in. It sounds pathetic but I needed to practise being among people again. It was another eight months before the course would start, assuming I was accepted, so I signed up for a number of evening classes. I chose the subjects almost at random: cookery so I could make proper, healthy meals; study skills, to help with my university application; and bicycle maintenance, to maintain my bicycle.

The cookery course proved a mistake. Everyone else in the class was middle-aged, middle class, female, and deeply suspicious of me. Except for one, who clearly wanted to take me home with her. I persevered for the second week but I wasn't learning anything useful so I cut my losses and bailed.

Bicycle maintenance proved much more useful and I ended up joining a club of people who went out every Sunday on dirt trails and countryside paths. It was the first social activity I had engaged in for years and it did me the world of good. I made some genuine friends and we began going on evening rides

during the week in twos and threes. One of those friends was female but she was thirty seven and married so no romantic opportunity there, but I used her to practise trying to be normal around women. After a few weeks I began to feel normal, as if I fitted in and belonged with these people.

Study skills was the one that really changed my life. That was where I met the woman I would marry.

I woke up feeling as if I had just run a marathon. I couldn't fathom why my brain had decided to run my life story past in this manner. But then, as soon as I tried to reflect on what had been presented to me, it evaporated like mist and I was wide awake with little awareness of myself and my recent life. I had a repeat of the strange dizzy feeling I had experienced in the park, only this was much worse. I staggered to the bathroom and was sick in the toilet. Then I lay on the floor and tried to regain my senses. Some sort of survival mechanism kicked in and I passed out.

By the time I regained consciousness I could hear people in the hallway outside going down to breakfast. I felt very weak but managed to run a bath and ease myself in. I didn't trust myself to shave but I felt a bit better and vigorously brushed my teeth.

I managed to get through breakfast without any involved conversations and went straight out. I didn't feel dizzy any longer but I felt weird in some indefinable way. I was overwhelmed with a sense of gloom, as if an imminent disaster were about to befall me and I could do nothing to prevent it. My thoughts were very confused and I felt the need to hide away out of sight of humanity, but I couldn't go back to my room for another five hours.

Some vestigial memory told me that alcohol was the solution to all my problems but no pubs were open yet. I went to a supermarket and, in yet another instance of some part of my brain working independently and against the rest of me, bought a bottle of brandy and some paper cups. Going back to the park where I had had the first dizzy attack I went into a heavily wooded area and made myself a little nest. I settled down next to a high wall behind some trees and bushes. Nobody could see me unless they also fought their way through the foliage so I was safe. I filled one of the tiny paper cups with brandy and started drinking.

Alarm bells were ringing somewhere in my head but it was hard to pick them out amongst everything else that was going on in there. Thinking was hurting my head so I needed to stop thinking. It wasn't comfortable enough to sleep

there so the drinking would have to do for now. I gave no thought as to what would happen when I returned to the bed and breakfast that afternoon after consuming a neat bottle of brandy, nor what effect it would have on the physical ailment I was clearly suffering from. Just as twenty five years earlier I gave no thought to what drinking fifteen pints of lager a day was doing to me. I couldn't give any thought to anything any longer – I had nothing left to give, not even a thought.

Time seemed of no importance in my little green nest. I just sat there and drank. I dozed off for a while and woke to discover an empty bottle. My watch told me that it was nearly half past twelve. I stood up and, not unnaturally, found it hard to move about. I remembered a shop nearby that sold hiking equipment and, slowly and carefully, I walked there and purchased a metal walking stick. It made me walk slightly lopsidedly but at least it would prevent me from falling over if I had another dizzy spell.

I wondered if they would serve me in a pub or if I would seem too drunk. I deliberately chose the grottiest looking pub and hoped that the stick would make them think I had some serious mobility problem that accounted for any wobbliness. The man behind the bar didn't bat an eyelid as I ordered a pint of Guinness and steak and chips – my money was as good as anyone else's.

If I was going to be drinking then clearly Guinness was a much more sensible option than brandy. The food sobered me up enough for me to consume another four pints, by which time I felt in need of a good sleep. I managed to make my way up the stairs to my room without encountering anybody and gratefully collapsed onto the bed.

If I dreamt that night then I remembered nothing when I woke up. Maybe my brain had just given up trying to tell me anything, knowing that what was about to happen was simply inevitable.

The following morning I stayed in the b&b until the last possible moment, when I heard the man coming to Hoover my room.

I went to the park and sat on a bench until the pub opened and then installed myself in the same quiet corner. Again I stuck to Guinness. It had been almost twenty five years since I had forsaken lager.

After signing up for evening classes and slowly building a new social life I would go for the odd drink. One night I was with two people from the cycling club and one of them was getting the first round. He ordered a Guinness and, on the spur of the moment, I asked for the same. It took me over an hour to

drink my first pint but I was soon a fanatical convert. Although the liquid was much thicker and heavier, almost like gravy, it didn't bloat me at all and didn't give me hangovers. I also didn't feel the compulsion to start drinking it at eight o'clock in the morning. Guinness seemed like the sort of thing I should be drinking in my mid twenties, lager and cider being for teenagers and people with tattoos.

After the first study skills class, the only other person there that was near to my age asked me if I fancied going for a drink. Being a twenty five year old virgin I naturally assumed that her intentions were purely platonic. The idea of her being physically attracted to me never even entered my head.

She was a year older than me and preparing to do a science degree at the same university. Initially, to break the ice as it were, she asked me about computers. Her field of study had suddenly taken to computers in a big way and she was feeling a bit lost in the new technical world. Back in those far off days there were no such things as apps and icons and user friendly interfaces. If you wanted to get a computer to do anything whatsoever you had to type in lines of code. They were painfully slow, spectacularly prone to crashing if you so much as looked at them, and generally a royal pain in the arse most of the time. The programmes she was running would take days to complete such was the pathetic processing speeds in even the best available computers at the time. Home computers or the sort of PCs found in offices were little more than typewriters and calculators.

Carla had a part time job as a lab assistant and wanted to become a research scientist. Her employer were sponsoring her to do her degree so she seemed to have a bright future ahead of her.

After an hour or so she began to ask me about myself and my life. This came as a big shock – I think that was the first time anybody had ever shown such an interest in me. Still very much in the early stages of my social reintegration I found this aspect of the conversation painful and difficult. I gave her some bland snapshots of my childhood and school, skipping over all the negative stuff. Of my adult years I just said I had been made redundant after seven years in the same job and didn't know what to do next. I said I enjoyed cycling and was in a club and doing some other evening classes.

I mentioned that I had decided to bail on the cookery course. When she asked why and I told her about the suspicion of the middle-aged women she found it hilarious and I suddenly realised that I was sitting in a pub with a gorgeous woman telling a funny story and making her laugh. This was such a new experience that I felt giddy with the possibilities of what I could do in the future if I was now capable of doing this.

When I had extracted all possible entertainment value from the class Carla asked me why I had signed up in the first place.

“I can't cook and I think I'm now too old to live on takeaways and snacks.”

“Cooking is easy,” she said, “come to my place one night and I'll show you how simple it is to make something that looks impressive.”

I could feel a blush spreading across my cheeks so I began to bluster away.

“I don't have any... you know, cooking things. I have an oven but I've never once used it in seven years. I just warm things up in the microwave. I don't even have a saucepan.”

“You really are a confirmed bachelor aren't you,” she smiled. “Didn't your mother teach you any domestic skills?”

The sudden mention of my parents caught me by surprise. I looked down at my pint and tried to think of something to say. After five seconds of silence I was still drawing a blank.

“Touchy subject,” she said quietly, seemingly with genuine concern.

I nodded and took a deep swig of Guinness.

“Friday night?”

I looked at her with puzzlement.

“Sorry?”

“Are you free Friday night for your first cookery lesson?”

First. Did that imply that there would be more than one? Was she saying that she wanted to see me repeatedly? I was struggling to process this totally new situation.

“Umm, yes, I don't have anything planned for Friday.”

She took a pen and notepad out of her bag, wrote down her address and phone number, tore off the page and handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I muttered shyly, taking out my wallet to ensure that this piece of treasure was as safe as it could possibly be.

The following day I went to Argos and, after about twenty minutes of deliberation that was verging on panic because I didn't know what half of the items I looked at were used for, I eventually purchased a large set containing, hopefully, everything I needed to cook a proper meal. I struggled home on the bus with the enormous cardboard box.

At home I unpacked the box and tried to find space for all these new utensils. So what now, did I take all this stuff to her place on Friday? No, that would be stupid.

In the event I was being unnecessarily anxious. I took to cooking like a duck to orange sauce. Within weeks I was inventing my own recipes and stir frying left, right and centre.

As for the rest of the evening...

The long and short of it was that I was being sociable and drinking wine because that was what she was drinking. I had never drunk wine before and it went straight to my head. After the fantastic meal that she cooked and the best part of three bottles of wine between us I didn't really know what was going on. When it looked as if things were progressing in a bedroom sort of direction I had what amounted to a minor panic attack. I was so flustered and out of my depth that I blurted out to her that I was a virgin and had no idea what the hell I was doing.

I sat back, took a big slug of wine and waited for the ridicule to begin. She looked at me for an age, and then smiled gently and took my hand.

“I'm not going to make you do anything you're uncomfortable with, Brian. It's nothing to be ashamed of.”

She handled it so well that I couldn't help falling in love with her.

We cuddled on the sofa and kissed a bit and then I staggered home.

She came to mine a few days later. I bought a bottle of wine for her and stuck to four cans of Guinness. I tested out my new culinary skills on her and she didn't choke to death or develop food poisoning. We cuddled and kissed some more and I gradually began to feel comfortable in this strange new world.

After two weeks we slept together. It was amazing and revelatory and totally different to what I had been expecting. I wasn't at all prepared for the connection I felt with her and once my emotions were unleashed there was no stopping them. Having no previous experience of love I automatically assumed that this was it. For life. The idea of this ending and another relationship beginning never occurred to me.

By the time we started our university courses we were a well established couple. Her flat was bigger and much nicer than mine so I moved in with her. Sharing the rent, bills and food shopping between us made a big difference to our ability to live a fairly decent life on our student incomes. Carla had her part time job and sponsorship and I did some temporary work during the long summer breaks.

Those three years were utterly wonderful. We worked and played and loved and the good life seemed to stretch infinitely before us.

After our degrees Carla worked her way up to being a fully fledged research

scientist. I've never properly understood what she does but she loves it and it's well paid and she achieves things that impact the world.

I have had three different office jobs with varying degrees of responsibility. None of them have really contributed anything to society but they pay the bills and have enabled us to live a fantastic life.

A fantastic life which I have now destroyed.

We never discussed the matter of children and it wasn't something I had ever thought about, beyond the fact that I was pretty sure I *didn't* want to be a father. I'm sure much of that was purely based on how much I hated my own father but nonetheless that was my stance.

So it was quite a shock when, two years after we had both finished our degrees and had been happily cohabiting in her flat and getting on with our lives, she announced that she was pregnant. What is it about my life and periods of five years? Would this be a new beginning, like when I woke up to my drinking, or just the beginning of an awful life I didn't want and would be forever seeking to escape?

I never considered bringing up the subject of abortion because it seemed outdated and impolite. She so obviously wanted this child that I couldn't think of any valid reason not to go along with it. I masked my trepidation as financial worries and concerns about her health, though both were all too genuine.

Back then it was very unusual for men to be present at the birth and I was more than happy to go along with this well established tradition. I didn't smoke any cigars but I did pace up and down for hours, much to the annoyance of everyone who was forced to share a room with me.

Hours.

How can it take so long for a tiny baby to come out? Surely several million years of evolution should have sorted out this process by now? It all seems unnecessarily complicated to me.

Anyway, after a minor aeon had elapsed, I was eventually ushered into a room and confronted with my exhausted, sweat drenched wife (we had done a quick registry office wedding a few months previously) and my new baby daughter.

There probably isn't anything that can prepare you for this experience and nothing had. Carla told me afterwards that I stood and stared at Andrea for a full five minutes without saying a word. One of the many wonderful things about her is that she let me have this prolonged moment of panic and existential bewilderment before finally handing the baby to me.

In a few seconds I saw what this was all about. Two years later I was delighted when we had a son.

Everything was wonderful, for many, many years. Until, in fact, extremely recently.

All this seemed to flash before me in an instant but it turned out to have been seven hours.

It all begged the fucking obvious question, why had I just run away and abandoned my family? If it was all so wonderful, why had I left? I stood up, determined to go straight back to the b&b, phone Carla and ask for her forgiveness and help, in that order.

Only I didn't stand up.

Because I couldn't.

I rose only slightly and fell heavily, knocking over the table and hitting my head on the floor.

And it wasn't just the alcohol.

I had been sat in the pub for seven hours drinking Guinness (and, I found out later, several brandies), all the time being almost totally unaware of my surroundings. So overwhelmed by these memories was I that I didn't realise what was happening until it was too late.

The warning signs were there. Had I been at home and everything else normal I would have noticed. The dizziness, headaches, the numb feeling in my limbs. My body had been screaming at me for days. Perhaps that's why I ran away. I thought I was going to die and I didn't want to do it in front of my family.

Or perhaps that is just my post hoc justification for my appalling actions.

I'm not sure that anybody else had ever had a stroke in such circumstances, but that's what happened to me.

I'm not sure that 'waking up' is the correct phrase for what happened to me in the hospital. It was more akin to my early twenties and the coming out of an alcoholic stupor: consciousness was knocked back into me and I would come to some kind of awareness with a startling jump, sometimes to discover that I was in the middle of a conversation in a room I had no memory of entering with a person I had no memory of meeting. I slowly became aware of the fact of talking to them and realised that we had been having a conversation for some time, though I had no idea whatsoever of the content; I had to focus and listen to what I was saying to try to work out what was going on and how I had come to be there and not the last place I remember being.

I was saying something but I couldn't hear myself, nor the other half of the conversation. I realised that my eyes were closed so I opened them and looked up at my interlocutor. I knew on some level that this woman was my wife but she didn't look quite right, in a way I couldn't put my finger on.

Standing behind her were two younger people, both of whom were shuffling awkwardly and staring intently at the floor. The same intuition told me that they were my son and daughter although I couldn't honestly say I recognised either of them from their physical appearances. The memories I had of them were all jumbled up so that the same person appeared to be both the age they were now in front of me and the age they were ten or more years ago, producing a strange Picassoesque effect that I found deeply disturbing.

The girl that the part of my brain still operating on reason told me was my daughter looked up at me hesitantly yet expectantly, as if hoping for some kind of connection with me. In my mixed up state I found her facial expression threatening and, seeing me recoil from her, she gave a loud gasp and ran, crying from the room. My wife said something to me but things were getting more foggy again and, taking the coward's way out, I closed my eyes and welcomed the safety of unconsciousness.

Nine months later and things have moved on. I have forsaken alcohol entirely and am now addicted to Early Grey tea and chocolate hob nobs. I have put on two stone but I was too thin before anyway, and at least my liver has stopped squeaking in protest.

My memory has largely recovered but there are things I still can't remember,

but I think that is because I don't want or need to. It turns out, so I am told, that I was being put under a great deal of stress at work by a manager who used me to cover his own tardiness and neglect. Some of the examples of bullying uncovered during the inquiry that followed my abrupt departure sounded horrendous so I choose not to work to recover those memories. In exchange for keeping quiet and sweeping the whole affair under the carpet I was offered voluntary redundancy on health grounds and a generous pension. With the mortgage paid off and Carla in a great job and the kids now more or less independent, though they still both live at home, we have enough money to live on so that I don't have to work. Not that I could go back to office work anyway. The stroke (or more accurately, series of increasingly large strokes) may have left my cognitive abilities relatively unaffected but my physical responses *have* been affected. I can no longer type or turn the pages of a book without considerable difficulty and some pain and I have to have my food cut up for me, which is humiliating. I attend physical therapy three times a week and walk, quite slowly, for half an hour twice a day while the dog runs ahead and looks back at me with thinly veiled contempt. I don't know what I am going to do with the rest of my life except the old cliché of trying to look forward and not backwards. I keep my mind occupied with audio books and the radio and fill my days as best I can.

The best thing is that my family seem to have accepted that I was running away from the situation at work and not from them, and that I was literally out of my mind when I did it. The official line is that I have retired on health grounds and am working to combat the effects of a stroke. That is all anybody needs to know and it is all that I want to think about.

Unfortunately that is *not* all I have to think about. While my wife had been more than understanding she has insisted that I have long term psychotherapy, although neither her nor the therapist have specified exactly how long that term may be. I go once a week on my own and once a fortnight with Carla. I don't like it and I think it's a total waste of time but I can't say that and I have to go along with the whole charade in order to keep the peace at home. The shrink obviously has a deeply vested interest in stringing it out for as long as possible and I'm trying not to be uncharitable and think that Carla is going to make me do this for the rest of my life as some form of punishment.

However, today, after a typically futile and irritating exchange, I have finally been forced into putting my foot down.

“So, Brian,” said the shrink, a man who calls himself Zeb, which is obviously a name he's made up to try and make himself sound more exotic but actually makes him sound even more of a tosser than does everything else about him, “have you had any cravings for alcohol lately?”

This is his standard opening question, to which I usually just sigh to myself and reply in the negative, trying to ignore the feeling that he's going to pat me on the head and give me a lollipop. For some reason, probably just a cumulative build up of eight months of his bullshit, on this occasion I snapped.

“I have not had a drink since I left hospital nine months ago, I have no desire to drink, the after effects of the stroke are bad enough without having to deal with a hangover as well, I will never, ever, ever touch alcohol again.” My temper and volume increased, hard as I was trying to keep myself in check. “I don't think about drinking from one day to the next, the only reason I ever think about it is because you keep fucking banging on about it every week like some spoilt child demanding ice cream. It would help me greatly if you kept your facile, pointless enquiries to yourself.”

The look on his face was infuriatingly calm and I cringed as he leaned forward earnestly, his voice dripping with saccharine sympathy.

“I'm sensing a lot of hostility from you, Brian. What do you think that is about?”

I totally lost it. I would agree to see anyone else Carla chose but this twat was making everything worse for me.

“My anger is about you, you fucking moron. You've taken my money for eight months and all you've done is wind me up. This is more like punishment than therapy.” I stood up, hoping that he would accept the slight shaking as a symptom of the strokes rather than psychotic, sectionable rage. “You are making me worse not better and I shall be complaining to your professional body, if you're even a member of one. Now wipe that smug look of your supercilious face before I punch you. Use this extra free time to get ready for your next gullible victim.”

I stormed out to the extent that my physical condition allows, already beginning to rehearse the conversation I would have to have with Carla that evening. For the first time in nine months I actually fancied a drink but that would prove the smug fucker right so I kicked his front door a few times on the way out to dissipate my anger.

When I got home I felt much better about everything. If I could survive eight months with that prick, especially today, and still not have a drink then I could deal with anything. It was all going to be fine. Whether this whole mess was brought about by my drinking or whether that was a symptom of an underlying depression or mental illness of some other undiagnosed kind I neither know nor care. What caused it all is irrelevant now – it's happened, it won't happen again, and so now I move on, hopefully with the continuing love and support of my wife and children. I have found lots of documentaries

and information online about both strokes and mental illness but have thus far chosen to ignore all of it. Whether that will one day change and I choose to go down that rabbit hole and try to figure out my life and how I ended up here is still open to question. Reliving all this for the therapy sessions has not proved especially useful, and so now I try to keep in mind the quote from Kierkegaard: “Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards”.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcus Freestone has been publishing novels and non-fiction since 2013. This thing that you have just finished reading (or are unwisely looking at the end of before you've started, tut tut, do people do that with e-books?) is his fifteenth published book. Before that he worked in journalism, a variety of tedious office jobs, completely failed to build a career in stand up comedy and was once paid £250 for a script for a TV series that was never made for reasons that were nothing to do with him or the quality of the script. His biggest success to date has been the almost 100,000 downloads of the free version of the e-book 'Positive Thinking And The Meaning Of Life' (though he is probably prouder of the time he stole the register from the school library, as is detailed in this very book). He will continue writing books until he is too old and tired to do so.

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He does not do twitter because his mind is too hyperactive to cram anything into 140 characters. He tried it once for a few weeks and couldn't see the point of it, and anyway all the #'s and @'s gave him a headache.

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