

MARTIN EWEN

PANTO DAMASCUS

ONE CLOWN'S ALPHABET

Martin Ewen, an international clown soloist in search of structure, set out to compile an alphabet of experience.

Collecting a global alphabet of towns and cities over two decades, seeking out and finally securing the last seven letters took him ten years.

Once this arbitrary quest was fulfilled in 2009 he was again purposeless for two minutes.

His remedy is this book, a written memoir of his alphabetical compilation.

For Isaac

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Words are only marks on the page with no life save what we give them.

Joanna Russ

A story was a form of telepathy.

Ian McEwan

This book has taken a while. The oldest story, 'Teen Bed Zombie' is over 25 years old, while Dublin and Chicago I did recently. The rest are strung out over the period 1985-2010.

I am a selfish clown who set out to amuse himself at the world's expense. I have worked in many towns and cities in many countries and cultures. This book is stories from a collection of those places, the stories together becoming a story in itself. I have lived it, and written it down, and it is the largest part to date of 'my story' that I have to offer.

Tales will be told, half-truths explored, industrial strength criticisms leveled, circumstances abused, characters assassinated, room service cordiality stretched to breaking point, all my associates in the performance arena will be deconstructed and put back together hideously disfigured. Neither will the general public get off lightly. For legal reasons, nothing written here is true.

I did this, lived this life, because no-one else could or would have. My most redeeming feature, if any, was to create laughter from my confusion and pain. I have a measure of peace now, and getting here was far more than half the fun. The bruises inside and out cannot obscure the joy—I had fun, and this is me sharing it.

Welcome to my dysfunctional, rabid, bitter, unrelenting, acerbic, ego-gratifying, wasteful, well-traveled, jaded, irresponsible, irrepressible, abusive, insensitive, deeply sad world.

Chapter One

AUCKLAND THE ROYAL EASTER SHOW

DAY ONE

Woke up with an opaque foreboding. Remembered it was the first day of the Easter Show. I'd flown in the day before from Australia.

Got up off the floor at my friend Nick Nickolas's place and went to the bathroom to remove inexplicable bat-shit from my hair. Reheated two-day-old coffee in the machine and had a cigarette. Got a lift from someone nicknamed 'Porn Star' to the gig as Nick was still sleeping and had blagged off till 7PM.

I arrived and was ushered into a small dressing room with lit mirrors and an incongruous bath, to be shared by four of us. Next door, eighty-four teenage Girl Guides giggled and squeezed into costume pre-song and dance, and then one hundred geriatric crooners descended, harmonising randomly backstage.

I got elongated—stilts, whiteface, flying helmet, the full variety entertainer disguise—and went out among farmyard animals, cowboys, candy floss, Ferris wheels, steer roping, towing fire engines with your teeth, Polynesian bands, spa pools, climbing walls, paintball shooting demos, Michael Jackson impersonators, sausage rolls, a cat show, cheese displays, halls of mirrors, horses, hydrangeas and the general public.

And in that one bright shiny moment scores of atrocities both globally and locally were committed beyond imagination and mention. One of which was a large pond in front of the stage. Who put that there and why? A goldfish-infested security measure? The only guaranteed comedy was the St John's Ambulance caravan where you could peek at head injuries (fairgoers are forever falling over and landing on their heads).

More tomorrow...

DAY TWO

Woke up stoically fatalistic, bordering on good cheer. Got up off the floor at Nick's place and went to the bathroom to inspect various organs that had been sewn onto my body as I slept. The sky was blue and cloudless, melanoma farming weather. Drove in, passed the stage where thirty-four ten-year-old girls were singing,

'Thank God I'm a country boy.'

Backstage and the entrance to the dressing rooms was full of another contingent, these all 50-plus and dressed in lavender singing,

'You are my sunshine.'

Got to our room, switched on Cookie the Clown's TV, watched cricket. The TV broke. Cookie the Clown said it overheated, so I waited 'til he went out, then put the TV in the fridge for twenty-five minutes but it didn't help.

I have to stilt-up for the parade at 3PM every day. A brass band, four indiscriminate cheerleaders, three dancing girls (formal, lycra, sequins), five dancing girls (informal, casual attire), four assorted human stuffed animals, cowboys driving a ute. It's hot, sweaty, thankless work, and if not for the occasional hysterical infant there would be little light on the horizon as this is but Day Two.

These are the best days of my life.

DAY THREE

Woke up, gradually focused on a prize sow's pristine off-pink buttocks and realised I'd somehow slept over in the animal pens at the show. Squealed a quick apology and left. Made it back to Nick's place by late morning, He gave me some valuable tips on various animals' erogenous zones and how to deal with jealousy when you're not an alpha male ('focus on another species').

Went back to the Easter Show for Day Three. It was raining and a Monday, I put my stilts on and went for a walk. In order to lance the collective tedium contained within the stallholders and roustabouts, I chose to personify a bleak, unforgiving, emotionally insolvent, utterly bored, angry and dangerous pantomime. It was like a startling revelation crossed with a suppressed memory.

There was a middle-aged Polynesian woman with one eye focused several latitudes shy of the other working at a hot dog stand. She flirted with me by waving a tomato sauce-dipped hot-dog in my direction while crooning in Tongan. Disregarding the danger I accepted the hot-dog. I think she muttered some rude thing because her workmates almost fell into the deep-fryer laughing. The hotdog was average.

A guy sat in a stall for 'Putt Putts', toy boats that sail in small circles in the bath. He didn't engage anyone. He just sat there reading a book as a handful of his product clacked around a tub. He had a sign that read, 'Putt Putts—\$10 each or 2 for \$25'. I suspected he was not entirely committed to retail.

In the strongman tent today a large man towed an aircraft carrier 10 metres by a piece of dental floss clenched in his teeth. We drove home. Nick cooked, we ate and watched insufferable pompous twats reward each other for irrelevant renditions of third-hand fiction designed as both product placement and misdirection from life's pointless, purposeless futility. Otherwise known as the Oscars. I immediately started writing a screenplay about an individual whose principled stand and integrity brings a large multi-national corporation face to face with its immoral past and transforms it into a cancer-curing, non-profit organisation.

I call it 'Debbie Does McDonalds'.

DAY FOUR

Woke up. Hunched painfully up on the balls of my feet while making clucking noises, I hopped towards a saucer of seed in the corner. After giving myself a bloody nose pecking at it, I remember the hypnotism session with Nick the night before and get up. We have weapons-grade coffee, read the paper, check internet, discuss obscure philosophies, laugh heartily at the failings of others and head off to the Easter Show. We stop briefly to assist a throng of blind people crossing an intersection on their way to their annual scratch and sniff movie.

Some of us have thumb-tips for magic, padded groins like Porn Star, or personality, but others rely on makeup. Cookie the clown (more later) and I both put on our clown-faces while Nick lounged about producing inexplicable things from mid-air. Cookie is a fellow droll, into multiple revenue streams but still finds time to do dying cancer kids' birthday parties.

'Happy birthday, kid—It's your last.'

Between sets, Nick chauffeured Cookie and me up nearby One Tree Hill. Two painted clowns in the backseat, one American style, one European, up to this hill (only 5 minutes away) where you could see the whole city, Rangitoto, Manuherua harbour, Manakau harbour, the showgrounds.

Back at work, in the animal tent, the sow and her 8 piglets slept oblivious in the sawdust. There are various forms of Rodeo at the show and Cookie and I had come to label anyone paralysed or in a wheelchair for any reason 'Rodeo Clowns'. I played with them and let them ride between my legs. It's one of those all inclusive sad/bitter/proud things in a wheelchair that one can do with tall Clowns.

I spent the rest of the day being comically useful and dancing when the mood took me.

DAY FIVE

Surrounded by hostile forces, naked, with the entire cast of Bonanza pointing and laughing at my lacquered genitalia, I woke up. I had been placed into the still warm chest cavity of a recently killed cow as I slept. Sun dappled though yellow leaves of the large oak outside. The coffee this morning was so strong it coated one's entire digestive system in caffeine plaque. Hyperactive yet strangely sedated we proceeded to Day Five of The Royal Easter Show.

I arrived late, conveniently missing thousands of schoolchildren by mistake. Cookie the Clown did Clown-cover; I got my three hours in later in the afternoon. There was a mid-twenties Rodeo Clown today, going downhill. He must have had a souped-up battery in his chair and he whipped between my legs faster than any Rodeo Clown has previously, and that's after twenty years of Rodeo Clowns.

I patted a horse; it didn't mind. I sewed six rubber gloves to the front of my costume, filled them with custard, and lay down with the piglets but they were having none of it; the mother

became riled and scared onlookers by crashing, foaming and howling, in her nearby cage.

An older gentleman operated a toasted nuts stand, 'Cashews \$2 a bag'. He looked like he'd been sentenced to death. He hadn't had a customer in five days and he'd got the thousand-yard stare of the doomed retailer. You could wave things in front of his face, he didn't flinch.

Nick took Cookie and I up to One Tree Hill again, Cookie in the front seat and me in the back with my head out one window and my legs wearing stilts out the other. It's the halfway point and we'd planned an 'Over the Hump' party tomorrow. It's physically tiring and I was beginning to suspect I was mentally ill.

DAY SIX

Flayed by a lifetime of embarrassment, I thought the 'Over the Hump' party would be audio casual, a doddle, mildly recreational. Instead, I was bamboozled, hijacked, taken hostage, brainwashed, led astray, bullshitted, fed lines, stitched up, falsely encouraged, patronised, ridiculed, autopsied, preserved and cremated.

The day itself went much like the others; I tried as fully as possible to dilute Cookie the Clown's deplorable work ethic with the sweat of my brow. I patted the horse again and strangely it was more wary today than yesterday.

Whilst striding round tall and sardonic, I found a mannequin wearing a sleeping bag, and had a heart-rending, pathos-ridden relationship with it. No-one noticed.

Cookie the Clown, wearing a yellow wig, white face and large shoes, had the ignominy of having his six-year-old daughter see how he made his living. She wept. We all wept.

After work, the 'Mind Barracudas' at the party—Dave Sheridan, Nick, Phil, Andy and the Ghost of Christmas Past—had me sniveling in my cups as they craftily reminded me of favourite toys I'd lost and missing pets. Then they made excuses and went to bed and I spent time rigging an explosion of cheese the first time anyone used the bathroom. Tomorrow is the beginning of the Easter weekend and numbers should get ludicrous.

Wood chopping, chainsaw races, mustache competition for woman, high pitched scream comps for men, Little Black Sambo pancake races, all the wholesome multi-cultural texture of a nation truly in tune with its amalgam of Newcastle coals and bamboo. The moment I lay my head on a soft surface all this mental flotsam ceased.

DAY SEVEN

I woke up, my head encased in a cage containing, in a separate compartment, a rabid starving possum. Nick stood by with a shotgun in case of emergencies. We puffed on coffee and glugged down cigarettes. Easter Friday. Christ died for our sins and all the bars are shut and you can only eat candyfloss.

Checking to see that the fridge was well-stocked for the evening, we turned our backs on

domestic affairs and hopped into Nick's magic-mobile. There we morphed into the professional show business personalities and quick-fire, nimble-witted, verbally dexterous *artistes* for which we are so well-respected and so handsomely paid. The car wouldn't start so we morphed back.

The car started, we sighed and morphed again. The car leaked charisma all the way to the show.

The showgrounds were well stocked with bipeds. Many, many bipeds. More than all the other days together. Children and the elderly were trampled to their deaths as crowds surged from one hot-dog stand to the next. People stepped on bodies for toffee-apples. Fights broke out. Body parts were torn off the dead and used as weapons. In midstream the current was so strong that weak children spent the day being swept along recursive eddies.

Stilts are fun in dense crowds because your feet are at shoulder height and all you have to squeeze past people are two thin legs. The disadvantage is that you will never see the banana skin that matters. Or the pulpy potato chip, the bull, sheep, goat, duck, horse, rabbit or pig shit, the vomit, or the entrails thrown from the Gypsies' tent.

I tottered into the show-jumping arena and jumped all the fences. Just flicking my legs over before the competition, with a grandstand in full fettle providing raucous support. It was Easter so I got a few good crucifixions (a stock pantomime pose of mine) in as well.

Cookie dressed in his clown cowboy costume today. It's sad to realise that he's probably one of the few people on the planet who doesn't need help. He hypnotises chickens as a hobby. He has three. He actually convinces them they're chickens.

I did the parade, played with the animals, watch men sprint up twenty-five metre poles, watched fast cowgirls barrel-race, danced to Polynesian music, made cynical faces at all the wrong people, did flicky one-trick-pony stuff with my legs. Stole two ice-creams, one plate of noodles and some popcorn (people don't seem to believe the stilt-man will just walk off with it). Then it was over, the laughter faded, the happy children but memories. Life one day shorter and for what?

DAY EIGHT

Woke up, tired, very tired, my body wanting to decompose quietly and my soul to be kept in a potted plant. Still, at this stage, routine takes over and I fixed my rictus grin. Nick had bought a 'Sleepwalking' sleeping bag with legs and feet, and hands free for opening cans of baked beans in the next squat he'll inhabit in London (that much sweat in one waterproof sack!). At 11:30AM it ejected him with a loud belch.

I was there with the car keys and we went back to the Royal Easter Show.

A national opposition politician was going to skydive into the fair today (gosh, I'd vote for him), in tandem with the only guy that mattered, the bored professional skydiver tethered to the politician as he plummets to meet his constituency. It was called off due to inclement weather. I was furious.

By now I'm doing a lot of stock material. The Polynesians still press \$5 bills on me and tell me

to eat. The goats are still there to be stampeded. The pigs are understandably wary. The chickens are still unconvinced regarding road-crossing. I don't mess with the horses, too much history.

I stroll about; people seem to be urgently in search of distraction. I oblige; I'm not happy either. Nick gets rained out on his first scheduled show and spends the afternoon turning others' sunny dispositions into sour backgammon-loser refugee mindsets. I don't gamble.

I work the Rodeo instead. Hard men and woman used to compound fractures, faces worn by constant sunshine rather than weekends in garden bars. Horse-wise, dog-knowledgeable, hamster-friendly, stilt-wary till that crust is broken, then it's a chuckle-athon. Sad people, really.

The same human squirrels sprinted up the twenty-five metre poles, different horses jumped over the same fences. I'd been checking with the Saint John Ambulance on a daily basis to find out whether anyone had lost an eye yet. (It's not a proper party until...)

We had drinks after work. What else is new? Still, it was a sort of carnie bonding session. A perfect opportunity to find a woman who would ingest weed-killer to give you a two-headed baby.

DAY NINE

Four people lay in crumpled heaps on Nick's living-room floor, but only one wore a sleeping bag with legs with 'Sack with Attitude!' written on it. I went and bought steak-and-potato pies for everyone; Nick inhaled his in his sleep. I followed up with badly-cooked eggs and bacon, raw mushrooms and coffee, but Nick was hard to muster this morning. He's acting like a pony with colic, all pensive and brainless. The sleeping bag has taken a strange hold on him. He says he can feel it against his skin when he's not wearing it. He wrestled out of it at 1:15PM and we eventually drove to work.

Today's theme was drizzle. Drizzle on the parade, drizzle on the shows, the animals, the public, the stalls, the arenas, the rides, all was drizzle.

I wore my brand new disco stilt-pants; they look like liquid silver and really freak out the miniature pony. I wandered about in the rain while not lounging about the dressing-room listening to Porn Star (Gareth, Master of Fire and Steel) go on and on and on about the abnormally large penis that inhabits his perpetually leather-clad groin. He sometimes grabs it through his trousers for emphasis. Tomorrow is April Fool's Day and I intend to cut it off and go fishing with it.

Nick continued to acquire credit via backgammon. Cookie the Clown has gone professionally mute—I fear I am a bad influence on him, he no longer seems happy. We swapped ideas for a movie (starring us) involving mini-golf, looking at the job boards at social welfare, perhaps being sent on a quest by the International Clown Council to find a fresh new gag and save the world. Gee, we were bored.

Once again the parachuting was put off. I liked the idea that, for the last three days, a leading politician's put himself in a small plane with a big idea, buzzed the showgrounds at altitude,

then gone home unrealised. Maybe tomorrow.

DAY TEN

The last day.

A lot of the animals were sad because they'd made good friends with children and after today they had to go back to farms where they might be used for meat.

You know, if the Palestinians and Israelis could just get together over a Ferris wheel...share candy floss, win pointless stuffed animals, grin aimlessly...

The whole shell of the Royal Easter Show split open today to reveal a seedy underbelly full of colourful figures of note. The potpourri of old-timers with decades of experience with this tattered cultural icon was so dense with the rich seedy aroma of old money and an agricultural sense of 'Breadbasket of the Empire' that it was all I could do to keep my rancid personality in check in the face of their secure self-satisfaction.

Suffering from sensory overload, too many abstract exclamations, very little makes sense apart from the sleeping bags. I now have my own and have outfitted the family. Where was I?

I drove back home, remembered lost luggage and repeated the journey. Left my laptop on a horse float and remembered to drive back to grab it off the fender before the rain started. I was all messed up and humourless. Crying children under my belt, squealing animals, ten days of roving relationships, various reliable bands and Public Address Systems. The multitude of fast food stalls and political parties. Sick of it, I was going to bed. But enriched by an event that's my country's cultural staple.

Chapter Two

BARCELONA

I'm in Barcelona, sharing a small room with a one-legged American with literary pretensions. Still, even two-legged people need crutches or at least a self-inflated narrative of one sort or another to hold themselves up. I forgive him, which is big of me, I'll admit.

I arrived in my shared room in the middle of the day, leant my stilts against the wall and noticed his artificial leg leaning against the other. He was still asleep, or pretending to be. I knew that feeling, the disappointment of the inevitable roommate.

I quickly left for a short walk and coffee, returning an hour later to find him sitting up and prepared to banter. He confided that when traveling and overhearing an American accent, he cringes, afraid of the potential crassness of his countrymen. I mentioned an American two doors down, who was reading Hemingway (to try to reassure him), but he pooh-poohed both the writer and the reader by implication as lightweight. I told him he was full of insecure, elitist bullshit and he's been face down on his bed ever since.

Barcelona's a tough city. Every day you can find tear-streaked tourists numbly trying to comprehend that they've just been shown a knife and robbed of their wallets, or had their bag stolen from beside them at the Railway station, or, less seriously, been sold hashish that is in fact Junkie Turd.

There's this buxom princess on the *Rambblas* who approaches unsuspecting marks, grabs their hands and pushes them onto her breasts. While her victim is in momentary shock, she pickpockets him and hands the goods to a guy who passes behind her while she does it. It's a beautiful move, with just the right amount of cruelty, dark humour and venial heartlessness.

To walk the streets with all the money you have in the world sitting in your back pocket can be scary, but (more than for most I suppose) my occupation is a sort of insurance. When a Clown is robbed, as I have been, I have only to go out onto the street, gather a crowd, entertain them briefly, and again have funds to continue my haphazard existence. Obviously harder some days than others. To be more precise I am a Clown on stilts, removed from the ordinary man by a metre. I totter...I dance...I make mischief.

I am, in sort, a professionally unhappy pantomime, which is maybe why I snapped at the one-legged chap's dismissal of Hemingway as lightweight. I ask you—really—as if there is a point. As if intelligence is related to happiness. I don't want to sound cynical—I admit life is pointless, but so is death, and while life may be temporarily pointless, I have a suspicion that death is permanently so. But life contains a range of experience for intelligent and dull alike that you cannot not at least attempt to enjoy. As I write this, I am aware I am a jaded cheerleader on the game's periphery.

I meet my friends (fellow performers) and we wander around feeling like fringe-dwelling rascals. Alone afterwards, the strange barbarism of Barcelona reasserts itself. The old woman absently chewing on a piece of bread as she stands on the footpath, gazing dully through the

laundromat window, her urine running down from under her ragged dress and following me like liquid fingers as I walk away from her down the hill. The other woman, who suddenly, violently exclaims as she swivels, swings and with her open palm venomously slaps the wall beside her, transfixed with rage, glaring at the wall at the point of impact. Or the man I wished I hadn't seen, his face deformed yet smooth, one side tear-dropping down his neck, his brown eyes numbed to the startled disgust that springs involuntarily from my first glance. He walked quickly past me and ominous childhood dreams crept back. I was scared for myself.

Proof that life's worth living?

There shortly came a time I lay down in the room with the one-legged American where I had more sympathy, empathy and respect for the legless existence.

I was approached after my streetshow on the Ramblas by a well-dressed Spaniard who asked what I cost for a night's work. This, I realised, was my first European gig. I had worked nightclub and corporate and arts festivals at that point, so quoted X worth of the local currency.

Indifferent to the size of my fee, this gentleman secured my address and told me I'd get picked up the following evening. I was only told it was a nightclub and it was a little out of town. I went home chuffed at this new development, my limb-deficient roomie was still sulking, no words were spoken. A sedan came well before sunset the next evening and took me out to the coast somewhere.

The nightclub was isolated on the waterfront with its own breakwater and jetty for luxury yachts to dock. It was big, many theme rooms, some roofless. It was a major investment, I came to learn, some large corporate hospitality expense tax write-off, and the guy who ran it had been the man who approached me on the Ramblas.

I approached him; he grinned, shook my hand, nodded respectfully, called someone to show me a dressing room and issued my instructions.

'Do what you want.'

This guy was effortlessly cool. A Spanish Fonzie with that European calm self-satisfaction us New-Worlders cannot match.

I looked around. One roofless theme-room in the complex was 12 feet deep in foam with Gaudi-like pillars and ceramic tiling. There was a cozy little house bar, an enormous multi-level main room, tropical rooms, industrially-styled rooms, a casual restaurant area facing the sea.

I got ready and went out and did my thing. I went long, why not? I like my elevated position. I roamed and danced and played and hid and ridiculed. There was a lot of ground to cover. I worked three hours, then dismounted, cleaned up and went to visit the boss in the house bar to get paid and secure my ride home.

The advantage in dealing with advanced coolness is that it challenges you to expand your own cool. The boss thanked me for a job well done, ordered me a drink and pulled out a billfold. I thanked him for the opportunity to work in such a stunning venue. He replied with a little history of the place and just as he did so he put my fee down on the bar between us. I did not

take my eyes off his, staying attentive to him, undistracted by my fee between us. It seemed like the coolest thing to do, and basically polite.

He paused, smiled at me, another fluid movement and his billfold again was in his hand, he made some general complimentary remark and while doing so, doubled my fee. I smiled and looked away. We were playing. It was a great game.

He handed me a roll of drink tickets—not two or three, not five or ten, a roll of about 60 drink tickets—and suggested I go enjoy myself and get back to him around dawn to arrange my lift home. That I did.

Personally, I enjoy multifaceted venues, because I can spend my recreational time observing. It doesn't look out of place that you are isolated when you move purposefully, so I ambled from room to room. I knew nobody, and as long as that continued I could pretend to be a thin, preoccupied Spaniard.

I tend to react more manically and physically the more I drink. I presume it's something to do with the seduction of risk-taking behaviours.

I had a pass that enabled me to go anywhere. I passed guards who glanced at me indifferently and went out onto the breakwater to play. Great, three-pronged concrete shapes were piled deep in a line out into the bay. I bounded from prong to prong and clambered around happily. I pondered some time staring out to sea. I had a pocket full of money and as first European gigs went, I considered this a gift. I was drunk.

On the way back in, I mis-stepped and rolled my ankle with my full weight. A white flash of pain followed by nausea and an ominous throb. I stayed where I was for a good 30 minutes—I should have gotten ice on it sooner. I hobbled in, went back to my dressing room and convinced myself it wasn't broken. I was going to have to rest it for days until the swelling reduced and the bruising subsided enough for me to wear stilts again.

Eventually I got a ride back, embarrassed frankly at my inebriation, downplaying the injury, hard to do when you cannot use a leg but easier if you happen to be seated in a car. I assured my designated driver I was fine being dropped off a couple of blocks from my hotel at the nearest main road as he had suggested. I pushed my stuff out, thanked him and he pulled away.

The sun was out but not yet fiercely hot. I was exhausted, throbbing, hungover, but strangely cheerful. I slung my bag over one shoulder, my stilts over the other and commenced hopping.

Laden hopping is not easy. I rested frequently, leaning my stilts against a wall and watching the curious glances from the early Sunday morning passers-by. I took it about thirty yards at a time. It took close to an hour.

The hotel was quiet. I stood panting at the base of six flights of stairs. I needed a shower but I needed to be horizontal more. Those six flights cut deep into my reserve tank of stamina. I got to my shared room. The one legged gent was sleeping, his crutches and artificial leg propped up against the wall next to his bed. I propped my stilts up similarly and fell into bed.

I stayed in that room the better part of 4 days, going out for nearby food once a day. My one-

legged roommate had no pity. I'd showed him none and my condition was temporary. I admired his nonchalant use of his fake appendage, if not his personality. He checked out after three days.

It was five days until I could work again, realising how precarious a physically-skilled occupation can be when coupled with recklessness. At the time that was merely an observation. I'm still unsure whether I've really learnt that lesson.

Chapter Three

CHICAGO FIRST AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

My first American gig was a tangled, multifaceted dollop of hospitality, opulence, poverty, celebrity and celebration.

In London, I was sought out and contacted by American persons unknown who wanted to know whether I had any experience with large budget event parties? I replied that performing at retired Japanese starlets' 21st birthday parties was not unknown to me and that I had done 'party' work in the largest indoor nightclubs in Europe (I had spent an entire season on Ibiza).

They replied that they could tell me very little other than they wished to employ me for a private party, that James Brown and Aretha Franklin and a three-hundred-strong choir would be there, that it was to be held in an old ballroom Al Capone had had built and would I please sent them a contract and a rider.

What?

I knew what a contract was, I had sold my soul to the Catholic faith at around twelve, and scrutinised and signed a great many contracts since then, usually with a sigh of feigned indifference at the latitude taken by outfits like Panasonic, Coca-Cola and any multinational worth its attorney-driven, multi-revenue-streamed salt:

'Sure, you own my image and can use it commercially any way you see fit, and yes, I know that as well as providing celebrations of art you also sell laxatives.'

But this? These Americans empowered me as a matter of course. They wanted me to formulate an outline of business with them, very quaint from my perspective.

A rider?

Obviously some sort of 'buzzspeak'. I was uneducated.

This was in the mid-nineties, the internet was new.

I pre-Googled and found out that a 'rider' is a luxury certain artists employ, wherein they request a shopping list of pre-performance requirements backstage, to create a level of comfort at which said artist can best 'do their shit'.

So I emailed:

As to the contract, I will be satisfied with a gentleman's agreement in which you agree to pay me X for services provided Y.

As to the Rider, I have two needs, the first primitive, the second less so.

The primitive is a dressing area containing something I can sit on while getting my stilts on, quantities of ice water and/or soft drinks,

and the second involves four cheerleaders, a therapist and a puppy.

I hit 'send'.

The next day I received a brief reply,

'What kind of puppy do you want?'

I explained that as a clown I had studied this and found that the funniest puppy was the Irish Wolfhound, given its paws were about half its body weight, then got to business. They would fly me, put me up, feed me and return me, paying X. In return, I would provide 3 hours of my services and whatever time I needed to inspect the venue.

They agreed outright, stating that I would be flying United, as their employer, whose party this was, owned a great deal of the company.

I decided at this point an internal hissy fit was called for. I only charged them X? What is it with me and Catholic residue? I could have charged them XX. This guy owns airlines! I could have charged XXX! But then I calmed. I was going to America, James Brown would be playing at a private party, I was being paid to attend and be disdainful, it was all good.

The seat was first class (it was in the economy section but I was very impressed with it), with a window, and gave me a perfectly weighted sense of humility. I was deliberately penniless. I had decided to live the dream, to arrive in America without a cent to my name, achieve great wealth, and one day buy the very plane I was now traveling in as an indulgent memento.

To this day I wonder about these dreams I have, whether they're in the bow of a vehicle leaving distinct waves of unrealised potential. Only after a few years do most people have a look at their entire vessel, check the rudder, gaze at their wake. Sometimes that's all it takes to see that you have been sailing in circles for years.

I arrived in Chicago.

Customs was a breeze—four days, return ticket, invited to a party, 'Have fun sir, welcome to America.' Now when traveling I use a Brooks Brothers suit and shirt I bought for \$2, but in Chicago I was employing my fail-safe 'shoes and sunglasses' social signifier gambit. \$500 sunglasses, my Italian boots just slightly less. You only need to signify you have the means to spend discriminately and without reserve to glide through any number of social layers. I was looking forward to paddling briefly in America.

I was met by an extremely tall, black American holding my name on a card. He wasn't just tall, he was rock-n-roll tall, freakish, suited up impeccably, and he either had feline grace or a piece of shrapnel stuck in him somewhere. He led me outside, not to the car-park but to a nearby area where a black stretch limo sat. This was classic stuff.

I told my driver straight up that I couldn't tip him. I had no money at all, I apologised. He gracefully informed me that everything had been taken care of.

So I got in and started drinking. The back of the limo was salted and/or peppered with hidden compartments and baskets filled with impulsive treats— Champagne, chocolate, beer, cognac, fresh fruit. Outside, the highways seemed filled with lesser vehicles. Poor non-stretch limousines.

We eventually swished into some huge downtown multinational hotel. I thanked my driver and went to introduce myself to the staff, shrugging off the bellboys, 'I'm penniless, I'll get back to you.' I informed the front desk that I had no credit card to give them; however, if they were to allow me one local phone call I would arrange a suitable deposit. They humoured me. I again fought off the bellboys' advances and went up to my room, a suite with large windows, and most importantly, a telephone.

I lined up a couple of bottles of limo-swig to drown my sorrows if this didn't work, and picked up the phone. I rang my employer, got one of his secretaries, explained that I was checking in with them. Could they arrange a trip to the venue the next day prior to the gig so that I could look at it? And could they please immediately advance me 20% of my fee, deposited to my hotel account so that I might eat? She told me she'd call back and sure enough, within five minutes rang back to tell me that it was all taken care of.

Room service and I got on famously. They brought whatever I asked for. I asked for a typewriter. I hadn't planned on using it, but I liked the look of it. I typed a couple of hundred words so it looked all latent and creative, then ignored it. I asked for copious amounts of food and drink, signing for these and writing \$20 in the tip portion.

I scattered my costume and props artfully about., One hundred-year-old baby doll here—three pairs of stilt trousers draped thus—triangle, fly-swat, Swedish tank-helmet. Outside, from above, Chicago was a muted sunless grey forest of skyscrapers.

I planned to walk it the next day, but my day of arrival was all about gorging in my new habitat. Fueling up for a party in forty-eight hours. I handled about two hours of American TV before discarding it. Hard, it's quite hypnotic—its cartoon pace seductive and insulting, the adverts clumsy hallucinations. I read a book, 'The Box Man' by Kobo Abe, with my own selection of music playing, while drinking and gazing at the typewriter for its Feng Shui.

I read and drank until I could no longer focus. America was not so different.

My first morning in America found me full of vim and vigor. I ate a stupefyingly large breakfast in bed and worked it off by dancing 'round naked for a bit. I showered, grabbed the morning paper, and did the sociological thing I always do—looked to see how sex is framed.

New Zealand and Australia have pages devoted to the sex industry in the major papers. Other countries hide behind euphemisms like 'escort' or 'massage'; yet others are further disguised under 'counseling services'. Personally, I don't avail myself of professional sexual services. I've lived with partners who dabbled in providing them, but to me the transaction is too transparently humiliating to be worth using cash to paper over the cracks of your own inability to achieve intimacy. Plus, these types of adult transactions scare the shit out of me.

In most things, I've noted, the purchaser risks more than the provider. Defining a need is a form of nakedness no amount of money can obscure. I settle for the voyeuristic overview, perhaps I'm a coward. Missing some large inner asshole or something.

The Chicago newspaper was neutered. The yellow pages in my hotel room screamed sex with an inch thick or more of escort services, but the daily reality was scrubbed clean.

I formed a judgment. The society was in arrested adolescence. A dour and depressed sexual Calvinism overlaid with a plastic American coating of free will and limitless choices grated like an exposed nerve on the social subtext: God had already chosen his friends on earth; most of us were hell-bound by statistical probability; and we needed to be steered away from our natural state of depravity by the good folk who happened to own newspapers. This was confirmed by the hotel porn, which was littered with obscuring postproduction lampshades and 'objets-d'mask-the-genitals'.

The phone rang—I would be picked up mid-afternoon to visit the venue and there was something downstairs for me at reception.

So with a surplus of inner bacon and eggs and a deficit of sexual confidence, I ventured downstairs to flirt as best I could with America. Reception greeted me warmly and passed me an envelope full of money. My fee in full. I was off the hook for room service, sweet! It was in the thousands rather than hundreds—for Day One, I felt I was settling in well.

And where does a newly rich Clown shop while in America? Why, the first dollar store he comes to, of course.

One large bag of industrial-byproduct metallic tinsel and a handful of cheap plastic props later, I was back at my hotel room, decorating. The day had a whirlwind quality, I didn't dally.

Out again, observing; lots of power dressers, pinstripes, wannabe titans clutching their brittle slavery and attempting to project it—in a breathtaking attempt at style over substance—as confidence. Oh well, from what I'd been led to believe, the whole country was constantly hallucinating its own existence, I was just here to temporarily trip with them.

Downtown was all business. The buildings were muscular and Neo-Gothic; the only shopping mall I found might as well have been in Tokyo, London, Barcelona, France. Same electronic gizmos and shoes, same prices. The only interesting distinction was the high exposure corporate branding on clothing. Amusing to train a population to pay to wear cloth sandwich-boards. Loyalty cannot be bought, but selling it seems to be another matter.

The underclass shone shoes on the sidewalk, I saw no-one playing any instrument, no individual expression not off the peg of some retailer. Go Ford go! How about those Xeroxes! Given time, I could have found some soul (and later I did). I have—my natural optimism aside—a weakness for being overwhelmed with despair. Creating my own entertainment is my antidote. I left Chicago's grim, steroid-taut, inner-city rendition of itself and circled back to the hotel to get my ride to the venue.

A simple taxi arrived. A heavily fortified gentleman, seemingly locked in a tiny cell with a

steering wheel, sped off with me in the padded holding cell behind him. He knew where he was going. All I knew was that Al Capone was involved.

I forget my station sometimes. I'm merely here to keep myself entertained and be a cautionary lesson to others, but my mind wanders. The Aragon Ballroom cost two million dollars (and a bit) to make in 1926. Get your head around that. That's only 40 million dollars in today's money. Cutting-edge opulence today costs in the hundreds of millions for a competitive cultural landmark. There's some hidden inflation unmasked. Hundreds of millions today buys you what under three million would get you back then. I don't know what this means but I know it means something and I'm distrustful and suspicious of this overpriced hollow set that is America's well-staged façade.

Later, I read online:

[The Aragon] was designed to replicate a Spanish palace courtyard with its crystal chandeliers, mosaic tiles, garishly painted plaster, terra-cotta ceiling and beautiful arches. The shiny bentwood floor was created for dancing and rests on a cushion of cork, felt and springs. It appears to be a palace of illusions, where artificial stars twinkle overhead and projectors beam clouds scudding across the domed roof some sixty feet above the dance floor...

Opened in July, 1926, more than 8,000 people jammed the Aragon to enjoy its unprecedented beauty. It was dubbed the most beautiful ballroom in the world.

The Aragon enjoyed near capacity crowds every day. Weekly attendance regularly topped 18,000 during the 20s, 30s, and 40s.

Playing the Aragon was regarded as having obtained 'big-time' status. Acts like Frank Sinatra, Lawrence Welk, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Guy Lombardo, Xavier Cugat, Eddy Duchin, Benny Goodman, Sammy Kaye, Art Kassel, Artie Shaw and many more frequented the Aragon.

...in the Midwest those who weren't dancing perhaps sat at home by their radios and waited impatiently until the announcer ended his station break by saying: 'We return you to our studios in the Aragon Ballroom, where the dancing is now in progress', [and] spoke of the beauty and described the happy crowd enjoying the music of the best orchestras in the nation.

I walked in. There were all sorts of setup going down around the two head honchos sitting centrally on director's chairs. They were lounging, laid back and splayed. I love those first moments of contact. I know and recognise people who look at you like one expendable wheel on the locomotive they are tasked with.

We said hello. I share with a good number of my fellow clown eccentric soloists the blight of being hyper-vigilant. Gruff people equal brittle self-inflating reactionaries. Playful people are disciplined all-encompassists with a mission. These guys were the latter, and with the whole 'I need a puppy' thing behind us we knew where we stood.

I introduced myself, they smiled ruefully. I excused myself to put my stilts on and take a wander, checking for challenges generally. I found I could get everywhere; stairways are a specialty of mine. I looked for niches and cubbies and pillars and corners. The fact that it was all based on Spanish architecture and I had dealt with that in Spain suited me.

There was a grand, dual-stairway entrance, statues of what I took to be Egyptian/African giants at their bases. I found my way up to the choir-stands overlooking the dance floor, the second story of the plastered Spanish courtyard, an outdoor village set built inside. On the night, Aretha Franklin would have a choir of 300, split into stereo, 150 to each side; then James Brown, ‘the hardest working man in show business’ was to take the stage.

I found myself even higher in a loft and took it for my dressing-room.

I knew all they wanted to know was that I was confident. I finished walking the set, took my stilts off and let them know that I was pleased and ready and I’d see them tomorrow, the day of the gig.

They offered a taxi; I refused, stating I preferred to walk for a bit. I saw the cultural jar; they flinched. I was about to learn why.

The surrounding Chicago neighbourhoods were unattractive. Taxis knew full well the inhabitants were desperately poor. I walked a long way before one picked me up. I was white, I was male, I hadn’t been mugged yet, I was incongruous.

I arrived back at my hotel and tipped heavily—finally giving the bellboys something for nothing—went up to my room and ordered industrial quantities of food and alcohol. I had just under 24 hours until the gig.

Next morning I woke early and wrestled with my hangover. I got on the phone.

‘Yes, may I have a hot toddy please? Oh. OK, two ounces of bog average whiskey, two ounces of boiling water, a half teaspoon of honey, dash of lemon and between five and fifteen cloves. Nuke them, I don’t care, but I want them close to boiling when they come through the door. Yeah, make that two. Thanks very much.’

A brisk, uniformed chap wheeled in a trolley with two glasses in a steaming copper heater. I tipped, he went, I drank, sipping appreciatively, then ordered a heavy breakfast, gorged and went back to sleep.

Woke again midafternoon, ordered a brace of juices and smoothies to fluid up before massive stilt pantomime, high movement and dance levels, the omnipresent sweating of what I do.

Finally used the typewriter, killing a couple of hours recounting an amazing story an Icelandic bartender had told me a couple of months prior (see R). There was an internal symmetry—Iceland was the last time I had lived off free room service. I liked linking the surreality.

I got myself in order, shower, shave, etc; then got my personally eclectic shit together. Triangle and chimer, check; scary baby doll, check; plastic flies, singular juggling ball, pen with different coloured pop-top, magnifying glass, hand held mirror, industrial tinsel, medium size bathroom towel, flyswat, tank helmet, makeup, gaffer-tape, shin-pads, tips of stilts, costume. Check, check, check.

Tonight's soiree belonged to a mogul who started his career as a radio DJ and had evolved/devolved into a spectacular financial carnivore in the 80s/90s. He held a party every year, around three hundred guests.

The year before he had gotten special dispensation from the powers that be to have his party-goers meet in their own cars at set locations, then follow a second white line drawn on certain streets and roads to the party, in a large rented Cirque du Soleil tent.

The guy had new white lines laid just to direct people to his shindig.

A complete branch of his operations was dedicated to these parties full time.

This year the line up was James Brown, Aretha Franklin and a three hundred strong choir, Chicago's Redmoon Theater, myself, and a concrete-suited slow-moving statue with a camera in his hand and an open laptop strapped to his back, who walked slowly and took pictures all night. At the end of the night, all the stills he had taken were in the main exit hall, framed and for the guests' picking (getting ahead of myself here, I'm just walking in).

The foyer was a vast ancient American social esophagus, part of America's dream of itself since 1926. Personally, it reminded me of the scary piano player in a Thai hotel I stayed at who crooned meaninglessly with demonic chipmunk cheer and whose cracks in her smotheringly thick facial foundation had me imagining spiders living in her face.

Briefly looked into the ballroom. Redmoon Theater had a Da Vinci helicopter rigged in the ceiling. A sushi chef.

There were a few other food islands for guests to browse, and waiters as backup for those unused to not being served.

I went up to my lair to get ready. No puppy, no cheerleaders, no therapist. There was ice, and various soft-drinks, and someone must have accidentally left a joint on the table, which I put away—it messes with my timing, and for a non-vocal performer timing is prime. I stretched for thirty minutes and spent a further forty getting makeup and stilts on (a luxury, I can be ready in fifteen), then made my way down a variety of challenging staircases from my belfry to the event, just before the first arrivals.

The place was abuzz as these things usually are, formally dressed waiters and waitresses and highly-strung caterers doing that self-important theatre that is their stock in trade. The guests, some more formal than others, began to arrive.

My first bamboozlement was that, apart from evening gown-wearing women, everyone was made to wear orange T-shirts given to them upon entry. They were told it was so that staff could identify them. I thought it could have been some ridiculous American affectation, but the surprise on the guests' faces as they donned dumb, bright orange T-shirts put paid to that idea. I figured it was the host simply being an overbearing asshole right off the bat:

'Hi, welcome to my party, I'm in charge. As there's too many of you to actually kiss my ass, you will wear this T-shirt to show yourselves and me where the power lies in our arrangement.'

It made me feel a bit sorry for them, in American prison garb orange. Not good. Pity is my enemy. However, insecure people are my stock in trade so it balanced out.

Only three hundred guests in such a big space meant that critical mass and the usual group dynamic where people gel via common passion, expectation and a certain mutuality was missing.

Most of the guests struck me as a little overawed, a little off balance. I thought the guest list must have been political rather than fraternal, which would give me a great deal more leeway in where the line denoting acceptable behaviour from me might lie. I spent the evening ridiculing folk, mimicking them cruelly, glaring at them with malicious disdain, dumping tinsel on their heads and leaving small Post-It notes stuck to them that read:

If you can read this you're not as drunk as me.

I've been mocked...and it's not the first time.

I also danced when I grew tired of interacting.

Aretha Franklin opened the evening onstage, her three-hundred voice choir flanking her in the balconies. The strange thing about the dynamic—well, one of the strange things about the dynamic—was that the audience had no advance notice. They didn't know who would be performing, it was all a surprise.

Still, a good set and I didn't let the vague group discomfort inhibit my need to boogie. I'm a paid acerbic lubricant after all.

Aretha was followed by Redmoon Theater, a Chicago based arts collective specialising in visual spectacle. The Da Vinci helicopter descended on cue, piloted by a protagonist who then had various adventures with dry ice, groups of dark and somber stilt creatures and strangely clad musicians.

They were good—I actually worked with them a year later, again in Chicago, as a principal in a show that played the airport, the museum and various eclectic venues—but having myself graduated from a dark and somber stilt performance group [Stalker] some 10 years before, I used half their set to rest and grab some liquid. I did like the way they integrated their show into the midst of the partygoers.

Waiters and waitresses bustled hither and thither; a few canny guests had taken the seating vacated by the departed choir for an overhead view. I made a point of visiting them on my way to break and trying to conduct them in some choral manner. Sometimes others' annoyance is to me a sweet nectar. I rested for 20 minutes and pumped myself full of liquid and sugar.

I negotiated my way downstairs from my hide-away loft as Redmoon climaxed, dry ice hanging in the air as they took their bows and left.

James Brown was next. But James Brown isn't the kind of guy who shuffles onstage and whispers,

‘Hello, my name is James, I hope you’re all well, here’s a song I wrote.’

James’ band plays for 20 minutes without him, building up atmosphere and expectation, and then some pre-James takes the stage and hypes the imminent James.

‘ARE YOU READY FOR...?’

‘DO YOU WANNA SEE...?’

‘I CAN’T HEAR YOU...!’

‘LET’S LIFT THIS ROOF OFF FOR...!’

‘EVERYONE TOGETHER NOW, JAMES BROWN! JAMES BROWN!’

The guests, mostly ultra-rich sophisticates, did their very best to simulate a passionate rabble—an uphill battle—and the pre-James tried as hard as they did to convince himself that his efforts were working.

I thought to myself that the crowd’s collective muted enthusiasm was their direct reaction to their host’s limitless conceit, that no amount of money could buy their respect and in its stead he’d settled for a high budget Punch and Judy show with his guests as self-conscious puppets. These musings were curtailed by the appearance on stage of JAMES BROWN.

Now James was old. That’s true. But James was also the right kind of old. The ‘doesn’t give a shit about being old’ kind of old. He was a master. He had the moves, the signature vocals, his own tight band and a commitment to cantankerous perfection. I had no problem immersing myself in his legendary groove. Having stilts on usually means you are given room to move and if I do say so myself, I moved well. James gave it his all, and it was the least I could do to try and keep up.

‘Living in AMERICA.’

I can’t really recall the specifics. I remember he collapsed sweating at the end and the pre-James picked him up, and he shrugged it all off and did his encore. A classic piece of theatre he had made his own.

I was spent for real. I’d been performing 3 hours, paced myself well, and spent the last 40 minutes on turbo. My job was done. I made my way back to my dressing room, showered and went on a backstage trawl, met Redmoon, exchanged numbers and chatted. I figured James and Aretha were well gone. They were.

Back on stage, some apparently well-known local cover-band were winding down the night. I had a pass rather than a bright T-shirt and started ordering drinks and food delivered to a particular table, which I used as a halfway point, transferring the goods back to my dressing room in shifts and filling an empty suitcase I’d brought with booty to be taken back to the hotel. Old habits die hard.

I packed up, cleaned up my dressing room (another old habit), then discovered I’d run out of

cigarettes. I hunted down my boss, got thanked for the work, and security arranged to accompany me across the road to buy some. I crossed the road with my personal man mountain. We got peered at through bulletproof glass and buzzed into what anywhere else in the world would simply be a downtrodden, seedy bar full of downtrodden, seedy people.

It struck me that the point of all this protection was that the neighborhood itself was more dangerous than the bar. Which made me recognise how dumb I'd been the evening before, strolling round the 'hood like a neon dipstick. I got my cigs, stood outside the Ballroom, got my nicotine fix and smoked half the joint before popping back inside to grab my stuff and taxi out of there.

I made a point of not hanging round too long after the gig—the impression you have better things to do is ultimately more important than actually having anything better to do.

This time I let the bellboys take it all. I went up to my room, sorted out my sweaty stuff and rang the front desk for some late night laundry. I laid my purloined food and drink about artfully, and I confess, I scattered liberal quantities of leftover tinsel over furniture and carpet.

I spent the next few hours eating and drinking merrily, looking down from my window at Greater Downtown Chicago and marveling at the life I lead.

I was leaving the next evening, my first digestion of America complete.

Chapter Four

DUBLIN IN WHICH I WORK FOR TOM CRUISE AND EMPLOY STREET KIDS

I flew into Dublin, checked into some genteel B&B on the banks of the Liffey downtown, dumped my luggage and went to peruse Grafton Street. It was to become my newest home. Home is where the audience are, an amorphous zone, self-manifest and shared, celebratory.

Dublin in the main appeared chipper and optimistic after the dark jowls of London. I had come forewarned that forty thousand junkies woke up in Dublin every morning, but I saw no keening chemical need on Grafton Street.

The scrum of pale locals intermixed with continentally-tanned Spanish and Italian students enrolled in the cheapest English language classes in the British Isles, plus the usual speckled potpourri of international tourist mongrels from about the planet.

I reconned Grafton (the main pedestrian street) during the daytime to get a sense of the place. Flower-barrows were across lanes leading out from the thoroughfare. I knew they departed early evening—that would leave me corners. It was abuzz during the daytime. During the evening the pace would get more languid. But still, as I watched closely, the subculture emerged.

I had a keen eye, trained over years, for public places. I stayed a couple of hours, watched a copious slithering of ‘crews’ of different antisocial socio-economics. Two teenage street tribes met, exchanged words, separated. One gang was led by a short, muscular mid-teen. He had that grounded, radiant authority of a hard-fought veteran. I saw this pocket-bull-mastiff and his crew used the place, and communicated with passing gangs enough and in ways that placed them somewhere at the higher end of the pecking order. I liked this guy’s face. Broad. He was the smallest in his tribe and its leader; I liked that, too. I’d see if he was still around that evening.

Arriving back on Grafton Street from my hotel with stilts and costume bag I watched as the flower barrows departed. I had a corner pegged—a classic European 19th-century shop-corner. Upmarket downtown equestrian gear and country gentry re-stockists. It looked like I had myself a pitch to work; I just needed to clear it with the people who, unbeknownst to the general public, ‘owned’ the street.

I threw my unusual bundle over my shoulder and intercepted my preferred small Irish street-gang. The pocket-bull-mastiff gazed at me curiously. I explained that I was a blow-in, from NZ, just traveling through, and had a street show I wanted to put on, and that further, I was looking at hiring two locals for sixteen percent of what I earned in the hat, to simply look out for me and go fetch stuff while I had my stilts on and take my money in from my hat and bring it to me at the end of each show.

It was a cunning move, I’ll admit. They jumped at it. I was their new interesting foreign pet, I respected them, they respected me, and I got to work.

I'm repeatedly astonished at how well my simple show simply works. I dress myself up, whiteface, stilts, etc., grab a corner, and submit passing pedestrians to indignities. People laugh. My life is strange and hollow and predominantly contains this ability to generate crowds and produce laughter.

I had the leader working for me, and his most recent adoption, an eleven-year-old runaway on the street under a week. We'd talked and worked out he could get a sleeping bag with the wages he got from me within a day or two.

I did have to point a few things out to my street-people helpers. They initially treated the crowds like their own object, making remarks, etc., so I pointed out that the crowds belonged to me, I made them. I needed not to be distracted in my task of entertaining them.

They got it.

I also had to point out that they could not work for me drunk. Made me look bad.

They got it.

So the street-kids were my social foundation in Dublin, introducing me to all the other passing groups of knackers and scammers and tinkers who all found me interesting (and I them). As I sat within the bounds of a 'respected' crew known to all, I was protected to a much larger degree than I would have been without them.

Even so, their leader would wait outside the pub I kept my gear in overnight while I had a beer or two, and then as an improvised task he had created as part of his employ, escort me to a taxi rank so that I was not robbed of my takings on his turf.

On a level above that was my relationship with the police, who were never anything less than charming to me. I met my first uniform as he came up after a show. The street-kids knew him—there was some respect there, a wary mutual sufferance between teams used to meeting on the field, a certain dignity offered between rivals. I explained that I had informally got this crew working for me, made things easier, pointed out the new lad, now with a sleeping bag I'd paid for. Told the cop that I was just improvising with the situation but seemed to be doing more good than harm.

The policeman nodded and said,

'All power to you then.'

Which you have to admit is encouraging.

He then assured me that I had no need to worry generally, as even if I could see no uniforms about, there were consistently plainclothes looking for pickpockets in my audience. With the rare kind of security from this 'both sides of the fence' support, I spent my first few weeks in Dublin performing every night to large crowds who supported me generously.

After one evening's show, I was approached by a dangerously tanned gentleman (Californian, I suspected) who told me that he wanted to ask me about my availability.

I replied,

‘Are you propositioning me?’

He laughed and said,

‘Well, in a manner of speaking, yes I am.’

He was, he explained, a writer for a movie being partly shot in Dublin and starring TOM CRUISE. They were looking for a stilt-person of high technical skill. Would I be interested?

I was fortunate to have representation with an agent in London who had taken me on after seeing me work in Carnaby Street. I was the smallest guy he had; he represented comedians and Perrier Award winners from the Edinburgh Festival, but it certainly helped to hand this tanned American a card and say,

‘Call my agent.’

Days pass and my agent rings me to confirm it’s legit. A Ron Howard movie with TOM CRUISE and Nicole Kidman [1992, *Far and Away*].

Meanwhile I have my pattern set: I work evenings; I store my stuff in town; and I move to a university-run apartment (empty over the summer). I buy lots of Irish authors, all of Flann O’Brien—a stunning meta-fictionist—and a collection of graphic novels including ‘Ed the Happy Clown’ by Chester Brown (Canadian), best quote:

‘I’m not a penis, I’m the President of the United States.’

Elsewhere, Ron Howard is being consulted.

I’ve been told it’s a technically difficult scene. I have to walk on sloped cobbles, downhill, at night, under simulated rainfall, over strewn rotting vegetables...on stilts.

I have to audition. They have someone come pick me up and take me to the set, in inner city Temple Bar. I dutifully don my stilts and move confidently about on steep cobbles while footage is recorded to show the director for some final decision on my employ.

My agent rang shortly afterwards—he’d negotiated me a contract where I was paid as a principal actor, which meant I had to state a certain number of words on camera. Sixteen, as I recall. I would be paid all sorts of money and would have to remain in Dublin for any re-shooting, but that availability was built into the fee. I was to be contacted for costuming next and congrats.

So Grafton Street and my little position there for the season were secured every which way, and I worked with a joy—borne of the evidence before me—that I was indeed living some sort of charmed existence. Or I may have been mistaking various mania for actual emotions. I get confused.

The street was where I was happiest that summer. After the gaping, grinding maw of London

and its layers of dissolution, Dublin seemed by contrast unfettered.

I created mobs of howling folk, a few hundred at a time, all laughing at the situation I had designed as my lifestyle. One evening, a sheepdog skulked along the edge of the thoroughfare, a slinking black and white border collie. The audience became attentive to it, watching in delicious anticipation as it came closer to the corner where I myself was skulking.

We met. The audience howled and the dog, after the initial flinch, ran round excitedly in circles barking. This fueled the laughter, which in turn fueled the dog, who finally saw an activity that wasn't circular and darted to my hat full of coin, grabbed it in its mouth and bolted down the street, leaking coins from an audience whose hysteria had just gone up another level. They were cool enough to go and get my hat and money back after the dog finally dropped it a hundred yards away.

There was melodrama aplenty also—not all the passing gangs got on with each other. None were enemies of my adopted crew but there were some obvious rivalries between mobs.

One confrontation came between two related old-school crews, more traditional gangs than new urban byproducts, one led by a thin, hatchet-faced weasel in his thirties, far older than his underlings, and the other by a hefty teenage woman with a pugnacious outlook, called Rachel.

I was an oddity and an interesting philosophical interlude for some of these folk. Rachel explained to me that after a young lifetime of abuse, she was left with binary choices: to succumb to the deprivations and calculated insults of others, accepting her looks as the definition of ugliness and that she was in fact not attractive by any current shallow standard; or to conclude—as she had—that as soon as she stopped empowering her tormentors by investing in their rancid commentary, she was free. At sixteen, she had broken off and amassed a small crew who lived within her own moral dictates.

I saw her take abuse from the weasel for five minutes before rejecting all his threats and body-checking him into a shop window—which didn't break—then giving her rival just enough rope to withdraw beaten, impotent and whining.

There was also a development one evening where the mother of the street-kid who had afforded a sleeping bag from my wages, and her boyfriend, the overcompensating step-dad, came downtown late at night, the mother hysterically staggered around in circles screaming,

'Where is my son?'

The Irish can be cruel:

'He's BEHIND you!'

'It's not your sun.'

'Yeah, it's night-time, it'll be back in the morning.'

Meanwhile, the step-dad tried the steely gaze and approached me, threatening to prosecute for child exploitation. I referred him to my friend the 'All power to you' policeman, already

resignedly dealing with the drama. The kid himself was scarce; everyone could see why he'd left home.

Early another evening, three translucently beautiful French people approached me between shows, a stunning young couple in their early twenties and a radiant woman somewhere about 50-60. The glowing young beauties in broken English explained that the elder woman wanted to read my palm. I wear cotton gloves as costume and took them off and offered my palms. She told me that I had suffered but had experienced love in the past and that I would meet the love of my life in my 40's. I was a little disappointed, being only 27.

Around this time, my agent rang from London and informed me I was to be picked up and fitted as a 19th century NY stilt lamplighter.

I was like,

'Right-o.'

They sent a car. I took my stilts with me and was driven to a warehouse long enough to expose the curvature of the earth, lined with racks of costumes designated in centuries of human history. I was taken to 19th-century male and suitable duds were selected: hat, shirt, scarf, pants, suspenders, shoes. The shoes were going to be ripped apart so the tops covered those on my stilts, which I had to give to some department (briefly) to be 'aged' with burlap and rust paint.

I got given a script—TOM CRUISE asks me the time!—that let me talk for the mandatory amount to secure a principle actor wage while not telling TOM CRUISE the time.

These people must have really liked me. They even gave me a seventeenth word.

TOM CRUISE: WHAT TIME WOULD IT BE THAT YOU'D BE LIGHTING THE LAMPS THERE?

LAMPLIGHTER: It's a neverending job. All night to light the lamps, all day to snuff them out again.

Quite obviously riveting cinema, and had it not come to rest on the cutting-room floor, my dialogue would have undoubtedly propelled me into Best Supporting Actor territory. Fame can be so capricious.

It was at this point, too, I received my laminated go-absolutely-anywhere-on-any-shoot principal actor's badge. There were to be scenes throughout Dublin and this plastic card would get me through layers and layers of security to explore.

I flashed my card through outer and inner layer and got into a night shoot between Temple Bar and St. Stephen's Green, where an entire road that traveled three sides of a square and the accompanying footpaths and lamp-lights, every terraced house, every windowsill, bush and horizontal surface were piled deeply with glistening, synthetic, room temperature snow. Even in the middle of summer, it was hard not to imagine a slight drop in temperature. I strolled around, keeping out of everybody's way and gazing at passing horses and carriages and extras 'til past midnight.

Nothing left but work the street of an evening and wait for the day of the shoot, on which I was picked up and deposited in a nearby hotel room around noon. I had my own Personal Assistant, and was also a responsibility of one of Ron Howard's three main PA's who hustled in, made me feel very important, took me on a little tour, introduced me to Mr. Howard.

It was interesting to note that at the very core of this massively complex undertaking, with units filming in America and Ireland in multiple locations, sometimes simultaneously, that the person directing the enterprise carried no technology on him. Ron Howard would have one of the PA's hand him a phone with who he wanted at the other end. The assistants also carried two local communication handsets apiece,—presumably different departments?—so, three outside lines and six direct inside lines. Ron just strode around grabbing phones off people and talking and handing them back.

I was popped back into my hotel room and makeup commenced. Then I waited about three hours, shooting schedules, etc, etc.

I was in two scenes, one in daylight in which I put out a streetlight (silently) and TOM CRUISE noticed me from a window and remarked,

'I love this country.'

The country being America, the location being Dublin, Hollywood magic.

The other was a night shoot, with the rain and rotting vegetables and tethered faux-stray cats etc, where TOM CRUISE and I had our dysfunctional chronological discussion that is itself a searing, well-honed metaphor of the rawest kernel of the human condition.

It is my belief that the power of this scene, combined with the (all-too-obvious to me) fact that on scene, I dwarfed TOM CRUISE in the charisma department, was why the editing went as it did. The world was just not ready. It may never be ready.

I was brought down for the first scene and a ladder was provided. I don't actually like using ladders—they are unstable while leaning into them, which you have to do while putting your stilts on. Even though I was now being attended to by two PA's, I didn't want to appear precious so I muddled through.

I was then led to the set, where I was introduced to Mr. TOM CRUISE who would be in the foreground in a second story window while I worked the street. The street was covered at its end by a huge dark canvas to keep the curious throngs at bay, out in the real world. It shifted from time to time, revealing the throng beyond.

Mr. Cruise graciously broke the ice by suggesting I go out there on my stilts and make a little money. I countered by saying I'd do it if he held my hat. I made TOM CRUISE laugh. It wasn't difficult.

TOM CRUISE was at this point in pre-couch-hopping love with his co-star Nicole Kidman, who was probably then prone to his now-trademark excessive glee. With hindsight, perhaps at this point he was jumping on cushions privately and had yet to come out as a couch hopper.

Then to work, first getting the gait to where the director wanted it.

‘Not the rock and roll walk, Martin, you do this all day, remember.’

Apparently my gait was just too damn upbeat.

So a number of times, I walked up and put out a lamplight while above TOM CRUISE voiced his love for 19th century NY. While in Dublin. Hollywood magic, remember.

I was then thanked and bundled away by my PA’s, who led me to the catering area. I was not able to take my stilts off (and would not be able to until all this was over), so I grabbed a plate of food and went and sat on the edge of a roof of a car parked right next to the catering area. Vehicles are a good height and I’m careful not to scratch or dimple, I’ve been doing it for years without ever damaging anything.

So I sat calmly, having just spoken and worked with TOM CRUISE and RON HOWARD and about to do further work with these gentlemen, while nearby my personal assistants hovered, when I was approached by a man who leaned in close to me in my ultra-coddled state and said in a low and sinister and lilting Irish way,

‘How would you like it if I broke one of your fecking stilts off and shove it up your fecking arse. That’s my fecking car you’re fecking sitting on.’

I was flummoxed. I had felt myself to be in such a cocooned environment, I had looked so openly into his eyes as he began to speak that his well-designed aggression went shockingly deeper. Holding my plate, I stood up and, ignoring the car owner, an off-duty cop doing extra movie security work, I walked to my nearby Personal Assistant who was at this point innocently cheerful. I told her,

‘Please, two things. Get me somewhere to sit and get THIS FUCK,’

I pointed,

‘Out of my face immediately.’

These two things happened in relatively short order and I comforted myself in having had my first, altogether concise, Hollywood hissy fit.

Scene two was in heavy rain at night, on a cobbled road at a vegetable market where stray cats hid from the rain under abandoned 19th century stalls, as I trudged downhill through the muck on stilts, lighting the lamps. TOM CRUISE, looking both handsome and beaten to a pulp, stumbled up from under a table and asked me the time to which I meandered and then walked on.

Easy enough—‘Piece of piss’, as we say in NZ.

Ron Howard and the head voice-coach came up for some first time, last minute instructions. The voice coach was a cuddly overweight smug prick, who told me to ‘soften my Rs’ and then

tittered at my attempts. Finally, from my 19th-century costume I pulled a very contemporary Dictaphone and offered it to him in front of the director, saying,

‘I’m a mimic, you say it and I’ll be back in 5 minutes with it.’

He declined. I didn’t like him. He was more into his ego than getting the job done. Brittle people are OK but insecure brittle people who use others as fuel just bring out the worst in me.

Every take was prefaced with ‘Rain on [the pipes above are turned on and the rain pours down over a 50-foot area]...and...ACTION.’

TOM CRUISE did his bit and I did my bit and Ron Howard yelled ‘Rain on’, and ‘Action’, and we went through it four or five times. Then TOM CRUISE went back to his trailer and I got the second director with the recording unit and repeated my lines to him under his direction for fifteen minutes or so:

‘It’s a neverending job. All night to light the lamps, all day to snuff them out again’

around fifty times.

The whole shoot had been 12-13 hours. I still had my security card good for the rest of the movie’s production, and there was to be a wrap party that I thought I’d crash with my stilts on, but sadly I had already booked a wine festival in Germany that weekend.

So it was back to Grafton Street until my agent let me know the check was ready. I wished my little street protection unit all the best, and then down to London to pick up Hollywood cash and fall in love with a strange woman who wore mustaches for effect and had a dried foetal foal in a glass case in her bedroom.

When the movie came out, my father noted that in the credits my name was three above the prostitutes’. I am in the background, but as the subject matter in one scene, and in the other my stilts walk past the prone, handsome, beaten form of TOM CRUISE.

The whole scene, which has never been shown, was probably looked at once and the cinematic intensity was just too searing for the story arc at that point, or perhaps someone hung themselves in the background and that scene was used for evidence, or coffee was spilled, or the meaninglessness of the exchange was objected to by some concussion awareness charity, or it was deemed to be the worst line of tortured Irish accent TOM CRUISE uttered in the movie, or my accent triggered staggering dissonance, or...

Dublin revealed once more to me how a Clown can traverse with ease up and down the social ladder. Employed by Hollywood in one part of town while employing gang kids in another and working on the street for both.

Chapter Five

EDINBURGH

Call me deluded, call me a muckety-muck, but the Scottish and I have this thing. I was at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland, working off the main pitch, down a small lane. I had a corner. Just down from me was a four-piece jug band whose music I used from time to time to wiggle about to, as I temporarily overcame my 'Lurk' character's utter boredom.

After a couple of hours, the jug band stopped and passed me on their way to a pub across the road, inviting me for a drink when I finished. I finished immediately and hurried inside. The band and I got on famously—I liked beer and they liked beer, I have a mouth like an untethered firehose and they were probably sick of listening to each other anyway.

They hadn't finished for the day, however—they had a gig later on in the evening at a club and they invited me along to dance for them. I was into it, so we got ready to leave by buying about another six rounds, then left.

The club was large, holding about three hundred people. We got there early and met the cool and casual management who bought us all a drink. I checked out the dance-floor in front of where the band would play and the surface was OK, not too slippery when wet and the ceiling was high enough for my stilts. There were two rows of ceiling fans that were not yet turned on and I marked out their positions with gaffer tape on the ground, but it still left me lots of room to move.

The night wore on and the place started filling up a bit. The band only had to do one set, so we waited till about 10PM before going on, by which time the place was pretty much packed. The Edinburgh Festival was in full swing. It had been a long day, so I arranged to come out for the last ten minutes of their thirty-minute set. I dutifully pranced out and wiggled and wagged and kicked my legs about and generally simulated being groovy wearing my white face and tank helmet until about halfway through, when for reasons still a mystery to me to this day, I strayed into the territory of the now rapidly whirring metallic fan blades.

The first blade merely dug superficially into my tank helmet and flung it from my head, thankfully without damaging the blade or slowing the fan down at all.

My reactions (which is why I could have been a fighter pilot or game show host) were lightning quick and I tilted my head back as I moved forward so that the next impact only broke my nose at the bridge sending a minor torrent from both nostrils and the gash at the top of my nose itself. All this paled into insignificance with the third strike, which carved a six to eight inch slash right across my forehead.

Now as some of you know, head wounds tend to bleed profusely, but even with my prior head-bleeding experiences this one immediately impressed me.

I staggered blind 'round the nightclub with blood pouring down my white face and cascading from my chin. I think people found it hard to ignore me, which was a shame really, and there

were loud screams and panicked footfalls as people tried to avoid being bled on (I did hear later that at least three people fainted). As a true professional, I stayed upright, eventually found a wall, and sat on a ledge, where I peered curiously through my scarlet veil at the enormous pool of blood forming in the lap of my stilt trousers.

A barman holding a huge handful of sodden tissue appeared and pressed it to my face as I wrestled with my stilt-trousers and then my stilts. Towards the end I could hear the wail of an approaching ambulance. I was led through the crowd pressing a red soggy mass of toilet paper to my head. I can remember seeing a few sympathetic looks my way by pretty girls, and had it not been for the medical professionals I might have stayed.

At the hospital I spent three hours getting stitches across my forehead and having my nose plugged. I also seemed to be a source of entertainment to a constant stream of nurses who peeked into my cubicle while trying to keep straight faces, then departed giggling down the hall.

Released at about 3AM, I faced a choice: I could wander back to my hotel and wake the next morning all streaked and swollen and potentially embarrassed, or I could return to the bar.

I walked back in and ordered a beer. The barman said,

‘You were really good. If we’d known, we’d ‘ve turned the fans off.’

I found the next day that my helmet covered the stitches on my forehead nicely, and my whiteface covered the mess of my nose (only bleeding a bit when I removed it) so luckily I wasn’t without an income.

It was years later other performers told me that everyone had been calling me ‘Frankenstein’ behind my back and laughing. I didn’t care then and I don’t care now. The best memory I’ve kept from the affair was walking into some bistro days later and having a table see me, stand and clap. I must have given them a dirty look from underneath my stitches, and one of their number approached quite gently and explained that they weren’t taking the piss, that their ovation was sincere, that they were all staff at the bar I’d gotten my head chopped up at and were applauding me for having returned to the bar from the hospital.

As I’ve said, the Scottish and I have this thing. Call me deluded, call me a muckety-muck, but alcoholism can sometimes possess a certain brittle dignity.

Chapter Six

FORT GREENE (BROOKLYN) LURQUE DU SOLEIL

There I was, lounging in my woodland lair, juxtaposing rancid mind ulcers and bitterly corrosive mindsets while providing male-rolemodelship to a six- and a fifteen-year-old and support and hardship in relatively equal measure to my partner (who, much like a pillar of chocolate stuck into a lump of ice-cream, is used to being surrounded by mental dysfunction and survives and complements it without being directly affected by its flavour). I was—briefly—resting at home in Connecticut, as I was being far-flung fairly regularly that season, to various states of America, Canada, Germany and Japan to allow people respite from the contemplation of their own futile existences by the production of an instinctive and involuntary braying commonly known as laughter.

When I got this e-mail:

Bonjour Martin Ewen:

We are pleased to inform you that you have been selected to take part in our next acting audition in New York.

When: September 16th & 17th, 2003

PLEASE TAKE NOTE THAT ONLY THE CANDIDATES SELECTED ON SEPTEMBER 16th WILL BE INVITED THE DAY AFTER, SEPTEMBER 17th, TO CONTINUE MORE THOROUGHLY THE AUDITION.

At Cirque du Soleil, we are in direct contact with the public; like traveling performers, actors invent characters and magically transform themselves in order to hold the audience spellbound. Non-verbal performance underscores the fact that the body is always telling a story.

Please prepare a three-minute act, including make-up and costumes if necessary. You may use small props; however, masks, fire, water or any other messy substances are prohibited. This three-minute segment should not require much preparation time. If you wish to use a soundtrack on CD or cassette, you can, but please, in the case of a cassette, make sure it is already cued to the right place. During these three minutes, dazzle us! Surprise us! Show us who you are!! The presentation of the three-minute prepared acts will be followed by group and individual exercises.

The selection process will go on both days.

Regards, etc.

I succumbed to a mental flurry—trains entered tunnels, watermelons exploded, a small potbellied child looked up from the parched earth holding an empty chipped wooden bowl.

'I'll be fucked', I thought.

I immediately began my research:

CIRQUE DU SOLEIL AT A GLANCE

Founded: June 1984

International Headquarters in Montreal with over 1,000 employees

Number of employees worldwide: 2,500

Number of artists: More than 500

Average age of employees: 34

Number of nationalities: 40

Languages spoken: At least 25

Number of shows currently running: 9

Number of cities visited since 1984: Over 240 engagements in 90 cities

Number of spectators since 1984: More than 37 million

Number of spectators expected in 2003: 7 million +

Number of spectators per weekend in 2003: Close to 60,000

A little searching also revealed a robust tendency to expand productions and a profit last year of a little over \$50 million.

I had chatted with Lee Ross about his experiences; he had taken three principal character roles in Cirque's first Asian tour and before that was an international street performer; and I'd worked many festivals alongside the Stretch people, a duo high-skill balance act with stacked chairs who have that eccentric witty British banter thang going on. Stretch had worked all 2001 for Cirque in Belgium and were happy with what they had negotiated. 'Mutual respect, work you hard, pay you well,' was the impression I was left with.

I also found out that the whole Cirque mega-mega had grown from a group of Montreal stilt performers with time on their hands, one of whom had gone down to Hawaii and presumably camped on a beach and smoked enough spliff to have 'A Big Idea.'

Now as you know, I'm a stilt performer, and in all honesty I'm probably better at stilts than most of the pre-Cirque gang.

But that's all I'm good at—unlike them, I'm not a stilt performer with a grand vision that has cemented a distillation of circus, street and visual cabaret into a hybrid form of theatre that has successfully branded itself into the modern world's consciousness. (In this particular case, I mean the world that has \$50 disposable or more a day to spend, or that can imagine that possibility, and not the modern world where three billion people live on under \$2/day.)

I am merely a clown who has used stilts as a means to distance himself from people, and as a distraction when presented to their hideous expectations regarding entertainment. That I have been successfully peddling my brand of comic dissatisfaction for over 25 years is simply a cunningly designed consequence of my audience's innate insecurity, and their recognition of a furious discontent and subterranean disappointment that only a clown like myself can safely manifest in public.

That's the theory, anyway.

So I replied to the email with,

Sure, I'll be there.

I had so many questions:

How many people will be there?

Is this a select thing or a cattle call?

Are you looking to fill specific vacancies or are you working towards the ultimate database that is itself a substantial commodity?

How much heart remains inside your enormous lumbering and artful enterprise, and is it true that absolute power corrupts absolutely?

Probably most importantly:

Can I trust you?

No really, if I had to get all vulnerable and out on a limb and committed and self-sacrificing, can I trust you?

I'm little and you're big, do you retain any memories of being little?

Can you identify with my fear?

Will the 'greater good' philosophy, on which all self-sustaining groups fuel their existence, grind me into a malleable, disposable paste?

I kept my questions to myself, tucking them into my frayed mind satchel and filing them under 'Brood at Your Leisure.' A very large file, and my only superannuation plan to date.

So. Three minutes. Mmmm...

I went out to the driveway to stitch up some structure.

After a couple of hours I was tired and sugar-deficient and unimpressed. Did I mention that it was now the day before the audition?

I changed plans. I figured that as always, I'd wing it, and that I had enough material to cut and paste to whatever the situation offered. I'd just use a hastily compiled music selection as a loose structure.

Yeah, that sounds right,

I thought as I took off my stilts, knowing that the next time I put them on I'd be there.

So I caught a train to go across to New York City. The train broke down. I waited an hour and then I waited for another hour. The next train picked me up and then was halted by some station down the line that had been closed by the police for a further hour. At this stage it was nearly midnight, I should have completed a two-hour commute and six hours later I'm still on a train, thinking,

I'm going to head straight home, this is pointless, I miss my comfort zone, I'm speeding down life's highway in a hopeful vehicle that doesn't belong to me and I'm sure to be pulled over and fined by the disappointment police:

'I'm sorry, sir, but is that a larger than life aspiration you have tucked under your seat there? And by the look of your plates, you're a long way from Loserville. You're nicked, son.'

But then, this sort of despondency's where I get my best material. I reminded myself that despondency's my friend and I'm the kind of sick puppy that won't lie down. My mood lifted. After all, in days of yore, I'd walked sixteen subway stops at dawn in the drizzle with all my luggage to save my last five dollars so I could buy one last sandwich as I huddled in a doorway at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, waiting out the rain to eventually earn enough to book into a four-star hotel and dine on fine food and all I could drink by day's end.

The train eventually pulled into Grand Central and I went crosstown to Brooklyn and stayed with friends overnight.

Next morning I made my way to the Mark Morris Dance Center on Lafayette and got myself buzzed in and up to the 5th floor, an hour early at nine. It's a contemporary five-story building that simply states,

'We are a successful multi-storied, multi-studioed New York modern dance creative phenomenon and if that makes you feel foreign you probably are.'

Feeling suitably small-town antipodean I got into the lift (a remarkable metal box that transports people between floors of a building so that they do not have to tire themselves using stairs) and then disembarked in the fifth floor foyer to wait with the handful of prospective auditionees who had already gathered. I got out my book—*Porn* by Irvine Welsh—and sat down on my chainsaw-case with its protruding fly swat to kill an hour as the rest of us trickled in.

Peripherally, I couldn't help taking stock of the atmosphere, which was casual but tense, wary yet curious, introvertedly competitive but over-layered with just a touch of Stockholm syndrome. The unifying aspect was that everyone there was out of his or her depth.

This was a Cirque de Soleil audition, full of hidden subtexts, mysterious and esoteric benchmarks, and cloaked criteria.

Strange, French-Canadian slash pan-cultural slash neo-circus slash bleeding-edge visual and cultural value systems were at work here, and no sane individual goes to an audition without equal measures of ambition and vulnerability.

We were all there to be judged, we had all submitted ourselves to this process willingly only because surviving it looked to be in our best interests, much like a third world virgin bride prostrating herself willingly under a hairy, sweating foreigner in the financial interests of her family and the hope that one day she could grow to love him—so it was with us.

Or more simply, some of us may have had superficially cast-iron egos and a sense of adventure.

The registration period began; you gave your name and were given a number to pin on yourself.

I was 100, which is a 1, denoting substance, followed by two zeroes, one negating the 1 and the other taking the prime value, giving me the equivalent value of a void. My mind is forever calculating. Hey ho.

Your file was found and your CV checked. If your CV was not there, you were asked to briefly make one up on the spot.

Mine was not there.

I had previously submitted one, and it's on my website, but the reality of the situation was that, with 10 minutes to go, I had to sum up my professional live experience while merely guessing at the attributes being sought.

I listed Teachers, Groups I'd Worked For, Groups I'd Taught, International Arts Festivals, and countries where I'd done street theatre.

I felt it wasn't fair and that I was made to feel incompetent, but quickly reminded myself that I am but a speck of dust in the Cirque cathedral and that my sense of persecution is, in most cases, a defensive form of self-flattery.

In the studio proper, 50 prospective performers stretched, warmed up, renewed acquaintances and friendships, waited, spied on each other, feigned serenity, made strange vocal noises learned at drama school, paced, loosened limbs and otherwise surfed their stress tsunamis.

We were called into focus, we were thanked for giving of our time, we were told that Cirque had very specific needs and that we as performers should not try and guess them but just give of ourselves through this process.

We were asked who spoke French, and those who raised their hands were told to keep well away from the table where the director and three other staff members sat, watched and muttered critical asides.

It was added that Cirque had evolved from the world of street theatre, and that street performers colonised public places and worked with what they found there to sustain people's attention, and that we should use the space that we had been given to audition in with that in mind.

During our pieces, we might be stopped and directed to follow some unrelated exercise; this should not be seen as criticism but as an opportunity.

We were treated with respect, and an effort was made to relax a large group of nervous (and in some cases barely contained) human/golden-retriever-puppy half-breeds (I say that kindly, as people, especially performers who literally turn their nervous dispositions into art forms, react to stress in different ways).

One guy was literally bouncing off the walls with excitement, a useful energy. You could instruct someone like that to remove the snow from, say, an Olympic stadium, turn your back to make a cup of coffee, and it would be done.

We went through a basic warm-up where we did some spatial exercises, some mimicking

movement work, and pace was toyed with briefly.

Then we all sat down and got to watch 49 other people perform 3 minutes or so of audition each.

I was excused to get ready, as I was the only person using apparatus (special!). So I missed about five pieces, then re-entered and watched only two more before being selected.

Everything we did, individual and group, was videoed.

I did my piece, which I dedicated to the interpretation, from the perspective of a deaf person, of a jaded peacock accidentally stumbling into a nightclub staffed by vultures who are cruelly force-feeding geese to sell to the French, who are waiting in the chill-out room with burlap sacks for their livers.

One fortunate effect of spending 20+ years in a laughably narrow field of expertise is that, at worst, you become self-evidently above average.

So I pranced and pimp-walked, hither and thithered, wiggled and waggled, shimmied and spun. With what was left of my personality, I dredged animation from the turgid morass of my tortured, bitter and confused, yet defensively whimsical soul.

People clapped and I went out to change.

After returning I watched the range of personalities.

Some people flaunted a singular whim; they selected one premise and performed it for three minutes. Once you got their premise you simply had to see whether they could survive their time.

They seemed to be selling their flippant disregard for the laws of supply and demand.

Others, who I presumed considered themselves charmed, and life a fantastic adventure that one day they would sell the film rights to, simply went out and did the first thing that came into their heads.

This included (but was not limited to) pretending to pick up unknown objects before becoming engrossed in various body parts, rolling around on their backs grasping at their limbs, and bellowing aggressively in the faces of individual audience members.

Others had set movement pieces, of which some were tentative and relied on either a kind interpretation that subjectively lent depth or divine intervention.

Still others were simply breathtaking—engrossing, evocative, disciplined expressions of fully formed and capable physical artists.

The majority were in between.

Sometimes the director interrupted, and the participant would be asked to parody a modern

dance piece or given a theme.

There were some funny set pieces and some really good weird character work, both silent and vocal.

There was top shelf breakdancing and a specialist trick rope and whip performer. Ages ranged from maybe late teens-early twenties to late forties. The room was full of strange, singular show-offs. A break was called and the first cut made. Names were read out and those people met with one of the staff at one end of the room.

The rest of us stayed where we were and watched as the group were spoken to. It was done sensitively and I presume they were thanked for their time and told that they were not specifically what was being looked for this time round, but that on many occasions people in the past had come back for the next audition and been perfect for what was being sought then.

Those of us left obviously felt some relief, but the reality was that cuts were made continuously, sometimes an hour apart, and would continue over the next two days.

We looked at each other at that stage and it was still impossible to discern what the theme was. The most talented remained (about thirty of us), but some real talent had as well already left the room.

We then went through two exercises. Firstly, you had to cross the room diagonally one after the other, as if being pulled by your nose.

I thought,

These guys are taking liberties with transparent metaphoric puns.

Then we had to cross as if led by our hips. This was followed by a cut, only this time the names of those to continue were read out, and the numbers not called were generally thanked and made their own way out. We were down to about twenty.

More exercises followed. It was the last half hour of the first day. After which there was another cut. Numbers were called, of those people back for day two. The head casting woman read out the numbers then paused... AND SHE HADN'T READ OUT MY NUMBER!

I had failed. I was unimpressive, and I had risked vulnerability and would have to live with the consequences of my foolhardy, tatty, deceiving, hopeful, deluded, optimism. The only redeeming circumstance was that I was in New York and it shouldn't be too hard to go out into the wrong part of town and be shot before sundown.

And then she said,

'And I'd like to speak to these people as well,'

and read out my number along with two others.

I was convinced still that these extra people were singled out so that she could advise them to

perhaps try harder next time, and that they were the closest almost-rans she'd ever had the pleasure of discarding.

But no. We were called because we were specialists, and while the general cast continued the next morning, we were asked to rejoin them at 2PM for the final exercises, with the eventual final cut, when we'd be given an added opportunity to showcase any skills we had not included in our first three minutes.

The relief was tangible; however, part of my personality disorder is that relief from fear or disappointment or depression only ever brings me up to a relieved neutral.

I seem to lack the capacity for corresponding highs to offset my lows, to be at my best when articulating dissatisfaction, either written, mimed, or vocalised, and am indeed a strange and perplexed individual.

I do admit to a certain joy in dancing.

DAY TWO

Arrived at the casual hour of 2PM, just as the last individual was being sympathetically and with due respect led from the group.

There were now six remaining with the additional three 'specialists' making nine.

I guessed correctly that this was the final selection. We sat and watched for an hour as those 6 had further exercises; then a choreographer arrived and we all got put through our paces.

I was terrible, the worst. I have great body memory, but initially learning choreography is all in the head.

It was simple, really—eight counts and two counts and run this way and do this then run that way and do that and then skip this way and do this with your arms then do that with your arms then reverse your skip and same again with the arms and then spin thus and reach and grasp and slow clench and crouch.

I've worked with dancers before and always admired their quicksilver ingestion of instruction and their ability to just get it down so quickly while I lumber about, internally screaming,

'Just give me a set of instructions and two hours by myself, oh God I'm so shit at this!'

I was so embarrassed that passing motorists were inexplicably blushing as they drew by the building.

After we had done the piece in a group, we had to do it in twos. I was left 'til last and rejoined by one of the woman who'd already done it, because we were odd-numbered.

I got completely lost twice and would have jumped out the fifth-story window, had there only been one in the room.

After this I was asked to get ready to do some stilt work. Again, the relief was strangely hollow after such psychic disembowelment.

Still, I showed them how I could skip rope on stilts, how I could get down onto a folding chair and up again, and various stilt dance vocab.

We then went through the last stage—down now to eight, as one guy whose specialty was vocal was excused.

Our next task was to stare into a camera and change expressions as we were peppered with words.

We had to speak to camera and show our ability to stretch major ligaments.

We had to state our names, where we were from, sing if we wanted to and describe why we wished to work for Cirque.

Some things I didn't say were:

'Because I want a Mini with all the extras.'

'Because I'm tired of working in the rain.'

'Because with my experience and your name on my resume I could go back to New Zealand and live off government arts grants for the rest of my life.'

What I did say I'm going to keep to myself, but it was just as truthful.

We were then given a sheet of paper that read:

Congratulations! You have passed the first step! We are adding your name to our bank of possible candidates. This does not constitute an immediate commitment on our part. This means that you may be selected for a position in which your particular expertise is required.

Then followed instructions regarding passports and info updates and it finished with,

Be patient...and good luck!

So that was it.

Eight people were left out of fifty.

Eight people with pieces of paper and hopes and dreams intact.

Many who had not continued to the end were awesomely talented and all of the 50 were brave.

I had made it to the end, and the strange sense of fulfillment, relief, exhaustion and pride could almost be called happiness.

Chapter Seven

GLASTONBURY

England. The land that brings you drizzle, drudgery and an unhealthy disinterest in oral hygiene.

Glastonbury. The festival that gives you more stimulation than any man can stand coupled with the collective blind faith of 130,000 people who mostly plan on it not raining.

DAY ONE

A disgruntled stilt panto, a business manager, a ribald magician, a pavement chalk artist, a freakshow circus frontman, the world's loudest mime and a visiting eccentric Melbourne actress...

Hopped into a hired van and went to the supermarket to stock up for a week in the wilds. Several slabs of beer, multiple milks, oodles of orange juice, various varieties of vegetables, cases of condiments. This plus duty free single malts of Irish and Scottish origins and other illegal unmentionables.

Then off through the English countryside.

Did the sunlight dapple? Ask Nick.

Did the meandering hedgerows wind like a well-loved scarf towards the neck of our destination? Ask Nick.

Did the clouds teeter timidly across the face of England's robust sun only to skitter away harmlessly as their shadows ponderously fled over hill and dale? Ask Nick.

We were in the back of the van sitting on top of a week's supplies and several tents, windowless, packed like cattle, passive bovine units of entertainment waiting to be unleashed in a meadow.

After a brief, unspectacular, and minor collision with a family vehicle we got to Shepton Mallet where some of us picked our tickets up from the post office and we all went shopping one more time just to be on the safe side, second hand shop for silverware, more plates and bowls, and I picked up a pessimistic raincoat.

Then on to the Glastonbury site, which, being two days prior to the festival proper, it was a doddle to enter (sometimes queues stretch for miles and can take several hours and they close the gates at night so you can have just about made it then have to spend the night in the car before entering the next morning.)

We just sailed in driving behind some Christians' van. (Pentecostal Amphetamine Addicts for

Jesus I think they were. They drove erratically but with unwavering purpose.) Then we were in and made our way to the backstage theatre and circus and cabaret camping area where a prime spot had been reserved for us by Haggis with a big sign.

Haggis is one of the main organisers of the Glastonbury fest and specifically in charge of the theatre/circus/cabaret areas, He always provides just that little extra to us street folk as he's one himself, be it access to masses of firewood that we can burn for five to seven days heartily as well as make abundant furniture out of. Or just popping over with bottles of spirits and slabs of ale from his semi official secret performers-lube cache.

Not that we were short of anything as we circled the wagons and stocked up our larder tent, lit the fire, put the billy on, hyperventilated into inflatable mattresses and generally settled in. We were right next to THE FENCE.

THE FENCE is a five-mile long, final effort to exclude waves of people who have seen breaking into this festival as sport for as long as the festival has existed (something like thirty years).

Youthful mischief and getting something for nothing because you can is a big part of the draw. Bear in mind that this is a country where if you can get into an empty house and change the locks you can live in it for as long as it takes the owners to comply with legal back-flips, or send in thugs, and if you can stay in it for twenty years you own it.

But the festival was canceled last year, because the year before, 50,000 or 80,000 or 100,000 (depending on various accounts) broke in without paying. Predominantly people with a sleeping bag and £10, who cannot survive a three-day festival without theft or other acts of desperation, and so THE FENCE was built.

Twenty foot high with four-foot sharp overhang, dug into the ground and with another twenty foot of heavy metal slabs across the ground at its base to deter diggers. Winding five miles around the site with towers and spotlights and manned by security, THE FENCE did its job and shut out twenty-five thousand people who gathered outside it and unsuccessfully plotted.

There was one plan to attach a snowplow to a truck and try to crash through but disagreements among that particular group had one half removing the truck's engine while the other half slept. I only saw one guy make it over, reports range from one to thirty and while some of the older hands commented that the edge with Mad-Max-like survivors roaming about was missing, I must be getting older, because personally, I see enough fucked-up, drug-addled desperadoes with self justifying political stances among my peer group to not really mourn missing another twenty-five thousand people collectively lacking a quorum of neurons. How the fuck are you going to change the world if you can't even get over a fence?

Anyway, the spotlight that shone down from the watchtower made a good reading light for my tent.

Went walking and found the main stage, a huge outdoor film theatre, two outdoor theatre stages, a cabaret tent, a circus tent, a theatre tent, the hugest tent was the dance tent, a field of teepees, a field of woodworkers and their produce, an outdoor rave stage, two more smaller rave stages and two more music stages. There's also a hospital, a social welfare office and a rock-

hugging epicenter. It's miles of temporary community.

I went back to our spot, it had grown with the arrival of the rest of The Happy Sideshow (Aussie freak circus), Dirty Fred, Mika from Holland, still expecting Gazzo at this stage and missing Butterfly Man, whose priorities are confusing at the best of times, I putted about with a propeller on my head inhaling nothing more objectionable than campfire smoke and drinking naught but orange juice and coffee. One more full day before the fest even starts—I'm trying desperately to pace myself.

DAY TWO

Woke up on a bed of air provided by Nick's spare inflatable mattress and exited the tent to a bright sunny day and Peppe cooking eggs on the fire. Peppe works to his own inner calendar, a rare variation of liver-time: when the liver needs extra energy to process excess alcohol...you sleep. When it's finished...you wake up.

Peppe had also mysteriously adopted rooster like properties, but instead of cock-a-doodle-doo, he had for his own reasons come up with:

'WEEEEEE ARE THE BANANA KIIIIINNGGS OF THE WESTERN WOORLLLLD.'

This is repeated at volume ad nauseam until someone sticks their head out of a tent and screams at him to shut the fuck up. Anyway, after sticking my head out the tent and yelling I got up.

The fest starts tomorrow but people are beginning to stream in. Walking 'round the place all morning, most of the shops had opened and the competing sound systems changed the atmosphere every twenty feet.

Met Dougie from Invisible Circus who had set up their own stage and juice shop. Invisible Circus had been rehearsing a whole new show for the festival but some component or other had gone missing and so they were constructing an improvised show with twenty four hours to go (very Glastonbury).

As the crowds grew, little drum circles formed like fungi. Small rings of menfolk tapping away in interlocking rhythms, many of which would go on to last the whole festival. It was like corporate male bonding for the unemployed, and it was a beautiful thing.

Up at the stone circle, the shell-shocked forgone conclusions had already started stumbling through their four day overdoses because to really enjoy all a festival has to offer its presumably best to retreat as far as possible into your hallucinogenic entrails at the earliest opportunity and so shuffling shells hugged three metre rocks or sat and stared at blades of grass filled with infinite possibility.

I went back to our dude ranch and Lucky had arrived and was settling in. Bike-Boy had popped up as well. I decided to test the new stilts I had made after snapping my old ones in a nightclub in Toronto the week before. They were much heavier than I'm used to. I make them at borderline tolerances normally but these were downright clunky and designed to survive mud if required. I went for a wander, to seek out sound systems to wiggle to and generally get the lay

of the land.

It was fun being one of the only performers up and running, and it's always good to make contact with various stall-holders so you can get supplies of water on the hoof later on, and boltholes, should you antagonise the punters.

Two hours later I descended at Pee Wee's bar, took my gear off, and had a weapons-grade Bloody-Mary (it has begun) followed by a bottle of vodka, three lines of charlie, four meteor strike joints after which I wrote two short novels and a 'Abdominal Surgery for Idiots' self help book. (Or did I?)

Back at camp, night had fallen, the fire was roaring, fireworks lit the sky at intervals from various corners of the two hundred and fifty acres of the festival grounds and we all knew that this was the last night that the stages would be silent. Tomorrow it would start for real.

DAY THREE

Woke up, my mouth tasted like a vulture had pissed in it, my brain had somehow putrefied and my soul would have preferred living in a potted plant. I was primed and on schedule.

Burst out of the tent, had a shower, leftover stew, coffee, popped briefly down to Pee Wee's bar for a wakeup call, then ambled across to the main stage and caught Alabama Three, a cunning theatre group masquerading as a kick-ass rock and roll band. They look, speak, and sound like good ol' boys from down south USA, with brilliant banter between the songs, but are actually three blokes from Bristol.

Passing through the main thoroughfares, it seemed that the masses of people were all behaving and chilled out. Popped briefly into the children's area and saw the effort that had been put into making the festival cool for kids—story telling, opportunities to construct all sorts of stuff, rides, slides, masses of things to occupy the little ones while one parent or the other moshed on.

Back at the Theatre, Circus and Cabaret fields, Lucky was pumping out a show while four legged sci-fi stilt performers roamed. Two tough broads with sideburns and attitudes rode around in pedal-cars abusing other motorists. The Jazz field was going off, some Calypso band pumping the crowd. The stone circle was more heavily populated with drum circles than yesterday, and the shell-shocked forgone conclusions looked set to reach critical mass (a rare phenomenon wherein a like-minded herd of people instantaneously achieve a status of a collective half-brain, rip their clothes off and writhe violently in a huge pile, gibbering ancient football scores and long forgotten tax textbooks)

Popped into the Invisible Circus's area next to the Roller Disco Casino and Church and had a carrot juice and a talk to Dougie and Dado, then back to the dude ranch to get ready for work.

The camp was looking impressive with seats and tables made from firewood and a large table filled with snacks, all coming from a three-man tent filled with provisions. The fire kept whatever was available warm and ready, and Celia and Peppe and Beck and others had each at different times cooked enough for all. Praised be the tummy fillers.

Pee Wee had told me to more or less keep to the theatre field where I had been programmed, as out there in the mean-streets all bets were off with people likely to try and push you off your stilts for fun, and that Em had had a brick thrown at her out there at an earlier festival.

I've never been deliberately taken out, though there's been a fair share of attempts, and whilst part of me relished the idea of spinning and swiftly kicking some unsuspecting pillock in the head with a large piece of wood, I deferred to experience today and only briefly ambled out of bounds to the stone circle (trippers are slow moving) and wandered and danced madly at the jazz field also. There was an aptly named field of vagueness that had danceable bands as well, and as it backed onto the teepee tents and the woodworkers' field it was mellow and good for a wiggle.

Once my contractual obligations were done for day one I cleaned up, had a beautiful massage and fueled up with my fellow campers and chilled out as the evening bled to night. Then it was time to check out the acts I had either seen before or had heard about.

Caught a couple of good stand-ups, as well as a couple of overwhelmed and struggling ones. Saw the Bastard Son of Tommy Cooper whose wee-wee humour was surpassed by his slickness.

Miss Behave whose brilliant sense of style and pace was let down somewhat by miscommunication with the sound-guy (give the same emphatic hand cue three times...pause...music starts...go to mic...'No, the other one, darling'...continue).

The audience was on her side though, and that alone is two-thirds of being able to pull stuff off. Then outside to catch Dirty Fred's I AM show, next to the public toilets on his own portable stage.

Dirty Fred is one of my all-time favourites, for his mixture of confronting bravery, his intermittent gross content and the mastery with which he Ping-Pongs between high and low status. You really have to watch him to appreciate it. For example, if I told you he admits to having the ugliest white bum in the world and reveals one buttock to the audience only to discover a huge boil on it which he squeezes, sending fake pus squirting into the audience, and then gets a large lump of phlegm spat onto his hand by an audience member before popping it into his mouth and spitting it up into the air and catching it again, then deep-throats a banana while delivering a twisted heterosexual monologue only to have the banana ejaculate over his face afterwards—

'Oh I must have been better at that than I thought'

—Then burns his mouth while fire-eating, bends down, takes a realistic penis out of his fly and pisses in his mouth for relief, you would only have an ugly outline of what for me is the best example out there of the unique, unfettered freedom available to the fearlessly creative street performer. All this in an ugly American persona that's as sharp as anything I've ever seen. As well as being a highly skilled and fluid juggler.

I've received my share of compliments with the type of street performance I pull off. I can be mean and funny but Dirty Fred is mean and funny and consistently puts his show at risk as he pushes the envelope. He embraces that vulnerability. I'm more just a scared guy with a good

act.

Glastonbury, like all meetings of our kind can be a venue where we gather and josh about where we've been and done but the canny among us also watch others to discern perhaps where they'd like to go and do and no-one goes further than Dirty Fred.

I headed back into the secured performers' area and popped into the green room bar, then on to Pee Wee's bar which was packed with eccentrics, then back to stare at our campfire for a bit before kip.

DAY FOUR

It was cold last night, chilly, English summer but still it hasn't rained yet. Peppe crows at the new dawn,

'WEEEEE ARE THE BANANA KIINGS OF THE WESTERN WOOOOOORLLLD.'

The fire is a primitive constant, providing coffee, beans (9p a can) eggs (a-la-Peppe) and those sudden swings of breeze that engulf you in an acrid, eye-watering, Neanderthal kind of chemical warfare. The coffee kicks in and my world transitions from a Gothic 19th century horror to a mid 70s pastel blinkered optimism.

I put on my sleeping-bag with legs, a relic I'd picked up at the Easter show in NZ and go for a walk—it's early, and the early risers and the late nighters are all mixed up and bumping into each other. No performers are scheduled 'til at least 11, so it's all sound systems.

Go to the festival Post Office with Celia and send a few postcards home, check out the Invisibles, the aptly named Invisible Circus, no-one's about. Find a place where someone's imported heaps of sand from a beach to make their own little oasis with fake palm trees and speakers shaped like shells that play sounds of waves crashing, it smells salty, it's brilliant.

Passing by the pyramid stage where Jools Holland is playing ragtime and honky-tonk, he's a piano genius and it's infectious cheerful stuff. So I bounce back to the dude ranch and think about getting ready for work.

Nick's on at the same time as me, and we plan on me doing a bit of stilt-cam of his show in the circus tent. Afterwards he'll follow me about and show me where the Water Dragon is. Backstage, Nick's pacing about before he's on and I grab the camera and go out front, find a good spot and get his whole show (one of two he's doing). It's the cups and balls, which I've seen before (easily over a thousand times), but the audiences differ every time, and the subtle differences in how they're played still keep me interested.

There's one kid who comes up and tries to sabotage the show by grabbing something and just standing there not giving it back, in front of hundreds of people. He thinks he's powerful, but Nick just finds him interesting in a condescending sort of way and lets him play himself out 'til he realises that Nick's a comedian and he's a kid and there's another forty minutes of humiliating material where the last ten came from, the show continues, lovely full house, good finish, good footage.

Then I go wandering up to the stone circle, where off to the side, hidden in the brush, is the huge stone Water Dragon, with crystals embedded all down its coiled, scaly back, as it sits in a creek bed peeking out through bushes into the field. It was made many festivals ago and must be a bit of a freakout to discover in some altered state while stumbling about the festival site. I'd say the majority of folk never even know it's there, let alone find it.

Off to have a swing off a huge oak tree with my stilts on, then down to the jazz stage, then home via a quick pop-in to Pee Wee's bar. Big cook-up at the campfire as night fell, then off for a spin to see what was on.

Checked out the angel trapeze woman, suspended on some immense balloon that floated about tethered to roving strongmen who held her in check and let her descend to touch people before floating skyward again. I heard it was really expensive to produce, but I'm all for no-expense-spared metaphors. Saw another woman doing suspension work inside a huge inflatable clear tube in the middle of a field, and then onto the circus stage where a duo called Tumble Circus did a double trapeze act full of risk, strength and beauty, and towards the end of their piece (which was flawless), the woman acrobat's face was radiating with the joy of what they were both pulling off and the crowd fed on it and she fed off the crowd all the while fully concentrating on the highly risky moves they were pulling until the crowd simply couldn't take any more and erupted about thirty seconds before they had actually finished.

Then The Happy Sideshow, the slickest, funniest, most whimsical and friendly freakshow you are ever likely to see. Shep is a polished grinning ringmaster whose patter just leads the show effortlessly and the Space Cowboy's a grinning hardcore freak you could still bring home to charm your mum. Each piece builds on itself rather than being an isolated gross-out and while most freak shows I've seen are about the performers and what they can do, this show's more about giving the audience the best show the guys can come up with, right down to their catchphrase,

'It just keeps getting better.'

And so it did, as the shows ended and we spun off to Pee Wee's where we stayed submerged in debauchery till about eight in the morning before moving off to a caravan and topping off the unstoppable with red wine and more unmentionables 'til around ten.

DAY FIVE

Sunday, last official day, staggered up late. Missed Rolf Harris and his didgeridoo nursery rhymes (tears stained my pillow).

It was overcast and threatening to drizzle but after the brain chemistry enema of the night before I was in the psychological Bahamas, immune to ennui, free from funk, relieved of rancour, diverted from depression, vanquished of vitriol, devoid of disgruntlement, becalmed from all bitterness. (In short I was cheerful but my newfound addiction to alliteration was slowly starting to piss me off.)

In the distance I could hear Roger Waters reliving Pink Floyd moments, the main stage today

was going to be home for many dinosaurs with Rod Stewart due to wiggle his wrinkly pelvis later in the evening.

It was late in the afternoon and so straight to work. I wandered about, keeping a keen eye out for a specific group of guys who had been apparently spending the day hunting down stilt-performers and pushing them over. I pretty much know what to look for—sudden changes of direction, a deliberate (and usually pretty obvious) lack of eye contact and finally, sudden acceleration.

I went out into the bigger fields to act as bait and spun every couple of steps so that I couldn't be snuck up on. I did have a friend shadowing me as well and it was as I diverted down a small lane between two fields (a lane with a large, steep bank down one side) that a guy who had split off from his peer group moments before started to make his move.

It was interesting to note that he'd broken off from his mates who could no longer even see him so my guess is that he was playing catch-up with some sort of running tally. His angle would have had me fall quite a distance if he'd contacted but just yards from me a piecing whistle rent the air and he turned to see himself being glared at by my minder, (or as I like to call her, my benevolent tail); he angled off and disappeared.

There were heaps of good roving characters at this festival, Big Rory with his Kilt wearing stilt dad and giant pram, The stilt soccer-player and ref who played with a giant soccer ball. The pygmy woman, Petra, and partner with their pedal-cars, the sailor with the captured mermaid. Little costumed gaggles of eccentrics here and there. (I'd heard stories of a previous fest with a guy dragging a fish round on a leash.)

It started drizzling on and off which was the first rain of the festival and as it was the last day of work at Glastonbury I stretched it out a little, at the fields of vagueness there was a ska band playing, ska dancing is a kind of stylised skipping on the spot, I did it on stilts for nearly an hour until the tank was well and truly empty. Wandered back through the light rain passing stage after stage and finally took my heavier than usual stilts off for the last time.

Back at the ranch the campers were girding their loins for one last ferocious attack on the rural party syndrome, protein and social accelerants in equal measure, the fire roared, the eyes watered.

I didn't dawdle as there was one act I still hadn't seen, an act that I'd been recommended many times over the years by people whose opinions I valued.

So off I went to see Avner the Eccentric.

He's a mime/clown and while us mime/clowns are used from time to time to disparagingly represent everything that is twee and pathetic and self indulgent and irrelevant, I have one thing to say in our defense:

Suck pus, asshole.

It's only because it's so hard to do well and looks so simple when done well (and also because it's the refuge of a lot of twee, pathetic, self indulgent, irrelevant, government-subsidised

pseudo-intellectuals who mistake unpopularity for genius). But anyway, all a good mime has to do, in my opinion, is to stop you thinking about what you were thinking and instead follow his thought processes for as long as he can keep you, and if he's also a clown then laughter every couple of minutes doesn't hurt.

Avner's show lasts an hour and a half, and he plays with props, ideas and the audience collectively and sometimes individually. He's in his fifties and has a confident playfulness that's reinforced by his many years of experience. It's a gentle show with its own understated power as he takes a couple of hundred people on a journey into his world where nothing works like it should but he triumphs anyway, absurd, charming, skillful and beautiful, he fails, succeeds, gets angry, sad, frustrated, celebrates and shares it all with an audience of all ages who are spellbound.

It was a fitting end of a brilliant festival for me. I wandered round afterwards and caught the tail-end of one or two acts. Saw Dirty Fred once more, this time he had his scrotum out and was explaining that it wasn't offensive because you couldn't be aroused by a scrotum. He then pierced it with a metal rod, hacked into it with a trick knife, then just let it hang out, ignoring it while he continued his show 'til it got cold and he tucked it back in.

I passed by Pee Wee's but it was too busy to hear anyone speak, flitted also past the big green room tent which was half full and fairly sedate by our standards. So I ended back at the campfire where the atmosphere was almost post coital, people talking utter shit or staring into the fire. Some packing for an early exodus when the gates opened at 3AM but most of us were going to hang round for a couple more days till boredom hit or the food ran out whichever happened first.

Stayed up till 4AM. Bid farewell to a couple of the more organised friends then snuck off to bed.

So that was Glastonbury. Others might see it as simply a good weekend out but for far flung street performers it's that plus the opportunity to break bread and relax, surrounded by our kind, between sets.

Chapter Eight

HOLLYWOOD

Hollywood's where people who haven't made it yet congregate. A passage like a lower colon prior to the end game in the high-stakes, mass-entertainment gamble.

Those that make it are pre-masticated and fed as pap to the overly deodorised.

Those that don't, hang around, leading high-volume lives of increasing desperation.

It has every shade of extreme fashion, intermingling without friction by virtue of a common—yet lonely—greed and dissatisfaction.

Success, perceived as an ever-morphing respite, via the purchase of goods and services by the yearning, to fill the voids and vacuums that are in great part America's cultural core.

Lots of over-dressed try-hards with just enough philosophy to confuse the unwary into presuming depth. I meet new people daily and my impression is that most rely on 5 minutes of well-worn material in lieu of personalities; and because personal abdication in pursuit of success at any cost (leading paradoxically to dreams of independence) is the competitive social currency, then depravity is the biggest section in the yellow pages here.

I'm having a wonderful time.

I sit behind a curtain, entombed in the constantly teetering dynamic of a Goth S+M after-hours club in Hollywood. No-one got tortured today, someone got tortured yesterday. It was behind closed doors in the dungeon but I could still listen in.

I was tidying up around the place. It was a long session, past 3 hours with peaks and troughs. Alternate snuffling, passionate howling, a rigorous choreography of extreme discomfort. On the third peak of applied pain he went to the next step in his self-analysis

'Mummy...Mummy, oh no, Mummy,' he mumbled.

Pain/Mummy/love, nothing new under the sun.

I continued sweeping the dance-floor.

I went in later to inspect the tools of the trade; they went beyond spanky-spanky. It was more your trussed suspension, industrial nipple-clamped, scrotum twisting, deep and rugged anal probes while being injected with substances that increased intensity at chosen crescendos kind of operation. (I read in the paper today of a little girl, seven years old, who rang 911 because her friends had hurt her feelings).

I sit behind the curtain.

I should be sleeping, it's 9AM and the place usually closes between 6 and 8AM. But this morning, it sounds like there are extra efforts being made.

There's an orgy happening. Couches unfolded, flesh-slapping, moaning, encouraging words, various interwoven rhythms.

I could watch but I don't.

I could walk through and spectate but I don't.

I could part the curtain and peek but I don't.

I just sit behind the curtain and listen. Thankful really, that my life allows me such depravity-surfing circumstances.

I'm an inhabitant; I let myself out a side door unseen, onto Sunset Boulevard. It's hideously bright—stark, unfiltered, LA morning light. I walk two blocks to the 7/11.

I see the dapper, shopping cart-pushing street person. He wears a clean, pressed shirt every day, and a tie. He panhandles reflexively and is unfathomably chipper. He says,

'God bless you sir,'

as I hand him a dollar. He contains more divinity than I, because for a moment I do feel blessed. For a brief moment, I am not calculated flotsam.

On the way back from the 7/11, I meet the soul-bleached gaze of a crack-whore whose expression contains no enticement or sexual authority, but rather a candid, searching scan. Her eyes slide off me. I'm too fresh. I'm relieved and disappointed.

I let myself back into the nondescript building across the road from Hollywood High.

Chapter Nine

AIR IRAQ

Flying Air Iraq from Tokyo to Bangkok, a few months before Kuwait's invasion, you check in your luggage and bus out to where your bags are now lying beside the plane. You re-identify them, they shrug, and pop into the plane it goes, you following.

At the door, a steward with a chest the size of a kettledrum searches your scrotum for incendiaries. Then, flushed and post-coital, you proceed to your seat.

You are surrounded by middle-aged Japanese males, presumably off to be leashless in a foreign country, well away from the moral restrictions of home. The stewards and stewardesses of Air Iraq don't speak Japanese, and their level of cordiality is not the fawning type the Japanese are more familiar with.

The passengers in front have tobacco and duty-free whiskey and are acting like the naughty children they were never allowed to be. Their perms and arrogance mark them as lowest-level Yakuza gangsters, selectively bred for empty craniums.

The barrel of humanity contains dregs; take the cream of these and give them disposable incomes and you're heading in the right direction—but still nowhere close.

Directly in front of you is a crewcut beast, his protruding lower lip and jowls giving him the unlovable expression of a pouting three year old.

He is also afflicted with a mole the size of a small truck in the middle of his forehead. He bounces on his seat excitedly, making your writing difficult, his gonads obviously twitching.

His mother might love him but the stewardess—coming from a country where the thoughts in one's head and the look on one's face are immediate family and not distant relations—rolls her eyes and curls her lip every time she passes him. She does this even on the rare occasions he doesn't grunt at her and cackle mindlessly.

She's squatly muscular, dark haired, tanned, with bright blue contact lenses over her deep brown eyes. A cross between a savage, drug-dry Barbie doll and a cross-dressing truck driver.

Every thirty minutes, to add to the theatre, there are the security clones.

Same height, same mustache, same mirror sunglasses, standing, stretching and swiveling, fixing each and every passenger's face for signs of nervous perspiration or fanatical resolve.

Every 30 minutes, team of three, probably another playing possum.

They have special bullets, made for firing in planes that have just enough velocity to penetrate

your skull before exploding.

At the first sign of a stretch you deadpan, try to stare them out as the drunken Japanese mole-vehicle in front pants and rubs himself as he mounts his armrest.

You retire to the bathroom. The challenge is to keep the stream of urine focused on the bowl in the bucking 747 economy toilet while at the same time brushing your teeth. Having spent 20 minutes for the privilege of this reeking, blindingly bright, turbulent dunny, you want to be out quickly.

You mentally count the passengers, divide by the toilets and multiply the result by two cans of steaming output. A couple of bathtubs of piss have poured through this bowl.

You gargle and spit, shake and zip.

Sometimes I think I'm unhinged while other times it's obvious the world is.

Chapter Ten

JOONDALUP

I had performed eight shows in a day, I felt hard working and rewarded myself by catching a taxi to my good friend Chris's place.

He was having a housewarming and I decided I would go in a moderating capacity, knowing full well that everyone else there was going to get shit-faced.

There were about ten people there when I arrived; there was a table stacked with delicious homemade food. Everyone else had eaten. They were sitting in a roundish arrangement talking in groups of three or four.

There was English Chris, whose new flat it was; there was American Chris who had cooked and prepared the food (salads, curried chicken, lots of guacamole—mashed stuff and beans of sorts). Skipper Dave and his Danish main squeeze; a Welsh guy whose name escapes me and his reluctant, brooding girlfriend; Nathan, Rick, a carpenter called Danny who had a swollen face from a tooth and his girlfriend; and two English friends who no-one else knew who had arrived that day and were staying.

There were two cases of beer, a litre of twenty-year-old rum, a large bottle of blue label vodka, couple of bottles of wine, a tiny bottle of orange juice and five grams of assorted hash and buds.

I was tired, I was going to take it easy, just a beer and listen to the chat. I felt together.

Messy old mescal followed by vodka, interspersed with joints strong enough to simulate a direct meteor hit. I started to loosen up, my earlier tiredness and resolve dissolved. I opened my mouth and forty minutes of verbiage emerged. Stories of nighttime mescal raids, of snowstorms striking while up trees, speed stories, love stories, philosophic musings, enthusiastic sports quotes.

In energy, stamina and in total intake Nathan took the party by the horns and spearheaded the latter part of the evening. His curiosity, his capacity to overindulge while remaining conscious, his going where few others would want to. Standing, lashed to the wheel of a storm-dashed large sailboat mid-ocean, enjoying every moment. That was Nathan's condition.

Multiple repetitions of:

'Yeah pass it here—you know tequila's my very favourite drink,'

reaching for the bottle and the thimble-like plastic cup.

At one point he talked for an hour, his arms waving, his hands flicking. Hyper-manic happiness and you knew it was real, his condition could not mask the very real joy he was emitting.

Taking time out, he rolled everyone a large communal joint, then stood on the spot waving his arms about slowly. This enthralled us until he fell bum-first into a green plastic beer crate. He tried so hard and for so long to extract himself from that crate that we feared for his and our sanity.

In despair he fell sideways, and found that in that position he could simply push the crate away from him. To us all this was a great victory.

Nathan spent the next hour standing up, falling the length of the room then getting up again.

2AM. Half of us remain. English Chris wisely decides to make coffee.

Nathan could with difficulty hold his cup, but bringing it up anywhere near his head or specifically to his mouth was impossible. Chris took the cup and placed it on top of the fridge. Nathan devised his own dilemma- he could steady himself by hugging the fridge and tilting his mouth towards the cup on the edge. But to tip the cup with the same arm needed to hug the fridge proved, after many attempts, to be futile, the dramatic ending being an uncomprehending Nathan lying in a pile of bottles covered in coffee front and back, waving an empty coffee cup.

There were five people hanging off furniture or lying on the wooden floor in the morning. After waking and coffee and mild investigation, it was worked out that the last part of the party must have taken place in a collective blackout. Some lost their memories earlier and others could fill them in, but no-one could remember going to sleep, or anyone else going to sleep.

What did we say to each other? Who were we? A room full of celebrating people who had literally forgotten who they were.

Three cheers for the brain stem.

Questions remain.

Chapter Eleven

KITA-KYUSHU

I had been working in Japan for over a year and had gained a reputation as a bit of a drinker.

After growing up in New Zealand where leglessness was next to godliness, it was comparatively easy to reduce my Japanese companions to meek, shuffling, inebriated shells while I myself felt the night just beginning. I would often feign sleepiness and we would all go back to our hotel rooms before I snuck out and went back to the bar.

To drink alone in Japan implies that you are shunned by your peers, a social leper, a blight on the rosy collective harmonic Japan sells itself and others. I just like drinking by myself in bars.

Sometimes the bar manager would see me return, and quietly get on the phone and ring the rooms of my Japanese workmates. Sound techs and roadies and drivers would dutifully haul themselves out of bed to rejoin me. Sad, tired, newly-woken drunks descended on me to somehow make my life all that much more worthwhile.

I was working for Mitsubishi, being farmed out across the country at a different city each weekend, performing my stilt dance piece at—let's not quibble—car sales yards. They had activities for the kids and slot car racing for the adults with prizes, free nibbles, and performances at set times.

Now one of these places, I was told, was staffed by members of the Mitsubishi Rugby team, corporate rugby being big in Japan, incorporating as it does, sacrifice of the individual and an astounding pain threshold.

I turned up, did my first of two days' worth of performances, noticing these chaps did seem a little larger than the ordinary chain smoking salaryman and yes, there were prominent cauliflower ears associated with tight forwards, and faces (while not lacking the usual features) resembling some blunt object used to beat others into submission.

There were admiring rumbles, voiced for (I thought) my benefit, of effusive praise for the Kiwi All Blacks, who had put a third of Japan's national team in intensive care in a game a month previously.

I suspected nothing as they invited me to a bar after work that night. I had no foreknowledge that I was walking into an ambush at the Kita-Kyushu corral.

As I say, I was a serious drinker, so after work I went back to my hotel to prepare. Before a night of aggressive imbibement it is always best to prime your body to cope with the strength of poison you will shortly be subjecting it to in the name of a social life.

I began by ingesting a good quantity of milk, to coat the stomach lining, then focused on carbohydrates to inhibit the speed at which the initial wave of alcohol would be absorbed. It's pointless in the long term, but cosmetically it can give you the edge, as it's only the initial

stages of competitive drinking that are remembered by most. Remaining unaffected by the first salvo is what unsettles your opposition and is the fickle foundation on which legends are made.

I was picked up at my hotel by a van and driven to a bar owned in part by one of the workers at Mitsubishi. I was assured that the same van would be available to drive me home. I thought little of that at the time.

The bar had what a great many Japanese interiors shared—a sense that for all the rustic charm they tried to evoke, they may well have been put up the week before, deep oak that still smelt of the veneer glue, and mementos dulled by chemicals, not time.

There were about five Mitsubishi employees there when I arrived, one of them behind the bar, and I found out that he actually owned it and just worked for Mitsubishi to get on the rugby team. It was our own private gathering.

We started off politically enough, with a NZ beer they had behind the bar to break the ice and lull me into a false sense of security.

The barman asked me what the strongest alcohol I had experienced had been, and I launched into a description of the Icelandic home brew white spirit which smells like aviation fuel, tastes like impending doom, and kicks like a Clydesdale trapped in a burning barn.

He nodded sagely and asked whether I had ever heard of Soju. He explained that Soju was originally a Korean rice vodka that had been brought to Japan a few hundred years ago, it was the strongest drink available, and might I wish to try some?

I said I would look forward to it.

He produced a bottle of clear liquid, poured himself a measure, poured everyone but me a measure, and topped the glasses up with orange juice. He gave me a sniff of the bottle—sure enough, it had that massively distilled airplane fuel whiff to it.

He then poured me out two glasses, topping off one with orange and the other with pineapple, explaining that he didn't know my tastes, so would give me the opportunity to choose. So I had two drinks of unknown strength, to my opponents' one.

Once mixed, a drink of this purity disguises itself totally in its host, so that what I tasted was no more than a glass of orange and a glass of pineapple. I knew better, however, so I watched and took it slowly, but still, by the time the others had finished their first glasses I was just finishing my second, and maintaining a preference for the orange mix.

I felt as yet unaffected. And so it went, me on my third drink and they on their second. What they had not told me was that Soju is famous for sneaking up on people, and that many had been taken to hospital with under three drinks in them to be pumped out and treated for alcohol poisoning. I finished my third drink with the slightest warm familiar glow of impending intoxication as my companions were two-thirds through their second. I had no idea how strong the drinks I was given were, as I could not taste the spirit and I never did get to actually see them being poured (they were brought out from a working level below the bar) but two sips into the fourth that I knew I was in serious trouble. Everything went into slow motion. Neanderthal

memories of being far too far out on the prairie by yourself resurfaced, and the homing instinct that had saved me on many occasions kicked in, sadly far too late.

Within about two minutes I went from someone fairly much in control of his position in society to someone whose main function was to stay conscious, stay upright and get to a bed. They obliged, grinning as I staggered to their van and slumped inside, my head against the window, sweat breaking out as I struggled to remain conscious until I got to the room of my hotel. They let me off outside and watched as I ploughed through the lobby. I made the elevator, somehow put key to lock, and that was it, lights out.

I woke the next morning, and all was well for about the first 5 seconds until I was struck by an overpowering nausea (not that unusual in itself). I made it to the bathroom where the bilious contents of my stomach exploded into the commode. Shortly afterwards I experienced a strange buildup of pressure from an orifice situated at the other end of my body mass, and spent the next hour vomiting various fluids from either end. I hovered above the toilet spinning (like that funny revolving thing dogs do before they settle).

Finally, having expelled all available fluids, it was time to go to work. I called a taxi after ringing the venue to let them know I was coming in, and not in my usual ruddy good health. The taxi ride was an exercise in sphincter management. Japanese taxis are particularly pristine—their drivers even wear white cotton gloves—and they obviously take pride in their upholstery. I made gargantuan efforts to leave my lower bowel in its garage and my gullet in its upstairs apartment. All the taxi driver saw was a pale, seemingly preoccupied Westerner, sweating in spite of frigid air conditioning. He was not to know that inside said Westerner a mighty battle raged.

It was with a certain measure of pride and a rare psychotic relief that I eventually staggered from the taxi 15 minutes later and bolted past a bemused line of rugby-playing car salesmen to converse once more with my porcelain mistress.

They were not to know, but my revenge that day would be total, devastating and beyond any of their capacities to imagine.

After an initial evacuation that left me once again devoid of anything internal except my various organs and a poisoned blood stream circulating amongst them, I returned to the staff room to lie prone on a large leather couch. I explained that after being left at the hotel the night before, I had ventured out and eaten a bowl of noodles at a street stall nearby. My delicate Western constitution had obviously succumbed to some sort of bug contained in the meal, and the sad pitiful sack they saw before them was a result of a foolish hungry impulse.

The salesmen took my cover story in a spirit of fake concern and barely masked triumph, and left me to rest, allowing me to cancel my first couple of performances. They advised that they would see how I felt later on about doing the final show, which had been promoted quite heavily and was three or four hours distant. They then filed victorious from the staff room to mingle with their clients, leaving me to my own somewhat restricted devices.

I experimented with my condition, finding for example that if I lay very still, very little happened. I also discovered that anything ingested, be it water, milk or a biscuit, was ejected by my body through one or more outlets about five minutes later. With this knowledge I settled for

neither moving nor ingesting anything.

From time to time I was checked on to see if I were suffering sufficiently. Anger is not an explicit emotion in the Japanese vocabulary. Instead, I was treated to a brooding, escalating frustration mixed with a sort of parental disgust as the day progressed, the initial cosmetic sympathy slowly evolving through disdain to authentic yet understated fury at my inability to dance on stilts, as was my function.

Finally, pressure was brought to bear on my personal assistant (who had remained diplomatically scarce most of the day) to convince me to honour the terms of my employment, and to perform in front of the tiered seating at the appointed time. Initially, I point blank refused. No amount of trying to invoke sympathy for the organisers would work, no measure of guilt and implied irresponsibility could penetrate my poisoned pallor. Still, the pressure mounted, and my personal assistant at last played his trump,

‘Look at the position you’ve put me in,’ he pleaded, ‘Please be brave and just try, just try your best—that’s all I ask.’

I had had enough. I agreed that I would do my best and unpeeled myself from the couch.

My performance was a four-minute piece on stilts, different pieces of music with associated dance styles, starting with ballet (Mozart), moving on through light pop, heavy rock, back to ballet, and finishing with Fred Astaire with big band accompaniment, singing,

‘Saturday night is the loneliest night of the week.’

It was a high skill-level, high-energy movement piece, and I was in no mood for it. I had applied my make-up, donned my stilts, and had 5 minutes or so before I went on when I asked my assistant to kindly please fetch me a large orange juice. He returned with a litre carton, which I immediately consumed, then waited.

Shortly afterwards, a little porcelain doll of a Japanese MC got on the microphone, and in squeaky, awed tones, began introducing this superb performer all the way from New Zealand, performing his fabulous comic stilt dance piece so please make him feel welcome and put your hands together, etc.

The polite applause began. I stood up backstage and waited for my music cue. The Mozart began, and the choreography called for me to take a great many short steps sideways, giving the impression of gliding gracefully into the middle of the stage, my arms undulating in a well-recognised balletic cliché.

Thus I made my way to centre stage to increasing applause.

Then the almost unexpected happened.

I froze momentarily, then from my panto-white face issued approximately 1 litre of recently ingested, truly reconstituted orange juice in a bright orange fan, splaying over and onto the heads of my seated and (up till then) applauding audience. I had a brief glimpse of stunned, speckled, naked revulsion before squeezing shut my eyes to escape the image.

After projectile vomiting the entire contents of my stomach in one strenuous gut clenching effort I doubled over, still standing, as I was wracked by a further exhausting series of dry retching.

Focused as I was on keeping my balance as I tottered round a strange country making strange noises, I peripherally noticed an eerie hush had descended. A complete silence, a peculiar shocked absence of sound.

My assistant, bless him, was the first to move, coming forward to take my hand and lead me, blind as I was through my tears of heaving exertion, away, away from that strange silent scene I had produced, 'round a corner to a wall I could lean on while my spasms continued.

After discarding my costume and make-up I was led back to my couch of comfort as outside, my mess both physical and psychological was cleaned up as best could be by others. I no longer cared, if in fact I ever had.

My assistant was sympathetic and bravely shouldered much of the shame that I'm sure blanketed the event and my conduct. No-one else said a word to me, no-one was prepared to even meet my eye. I became a non-person, which quite suited me, and it wasn't long before the sound system was packed up and we were on our way to the airport.

I was given the whole back row to lie down in on our short trip back to Tokyo. Some diseased part of me marveled at what I had done and I can remember thinking,

Serves you all right. Give me the opportunity to humiliate myself and you'll end up with more than egg on your face.

I was still thinking more of others than myself, be it for their advantage or disadvantage. That I was a dysfunctional vehicle and they could clean themselves, while I carried (in a perversely proud sense) my own deep stain from place to place, escaped me. With time I have recognised that, although a conduit of laughter, for the most part my soul itself was marinated in vomit and I used the laughter of strangers, along with the anaesthetising properties of a variety of substance abuse, to mask that otherwise unbearable fact.

I had recovered fully by the next morning and word never got back to the Tokyo office regarding that unique piece of theatre.

Chapter Twelve

LYTTELTON (BY WAY OF COPENHAGEN)

I was working in Copenhagen when I got my first nun.

I'd been after a nun for ages and had narrowly missed a couple over the years. They had walked past as I was putting my stilts on or taking them off, but in retrospect, it was worth the wait because this nun was perfect.

I hid behind a corner as she walked past. I stalked her from behind, I blessed her and mimed sprinkling holy water over her, and then I went back to my wall and crucified myself.

Some of the audience were crying with laughter.

The next day, some guy came out of the audience and gave me a photo (it's the cover of this book).

It was all I ever wanted in a nun and then some.

I made posters for my friends with my motto, 'Who Dares...Grins'. This one image described who I am and what I do. Goodbye existential angst, hello fun with a nun.

After having lived overseas for a decade, I returned to New Zealand and moved back to my hometown. It was unsettling. There was my kindy, there was my primary school with the convent behind it. The convent had been sold and was now in private hands.

I was in the city stocking up on make-up remover, and I mentioned to the woman in the dept store close to where I worked that I was the nasty man on stilts. She said that she was pleased to meet me and what I did was marvelous and clever. She said that she and her husband had bought the convent in Lyttelton and were converting it into a conference centre and that they would keep me in mind for entertainment.

I told her I had been inside the convent as a child. A nun had dragged me inside by my tongue as a six-year-old, taken me to the kitchen, applied soap to a toothbrush and scrubbed my tongue and mouth out.

I gave her a copy of the picture on the condition that she frame it and hang it above the sink.

It's there,

I've seen it.

It's beautiful.

Chapter Thirteen

MELBOURNE

It's not often you get to see a butterfly of creative imagination emerge overnight from a pupae of generic pap. In Melbourne, under the arches of Southbank, I was both lucky and privileged to see such a transformation. As the only other performer watching, only I knew the context in which a performer left his generic juggling foundation and took wing, producing a whole new surreal, audience-participation-driven show that illustrated perfectly how commitment is key, and with it, new vistas of shared silliness are there for the taking.

I worked Bourke Mall six days a week—far from perfect, with fixed obstructions between me and my audience and trams disrupting every ten minutes as they drove through the show, but still OK for my needs. Australia loves a larrikin and Melbourne is an art-friendly city.

Working down from me was an interesting clown/poet, who took your name and then sat and stared at you before penning a poem on a pad with a carbon sheet, ripping out one copy for you and one into a large preserve jar beside his small ladder. He then got up onto the ladder and read the poem he'd written for you, always including your name. It disturbed me that I got him to write two poems about me, one as myself and one as my stilt character, and both had excessive drinking intertwined into the prose.

Was I that obvious?

I had worked on the Saturday morning and then ambled the walk across the bridge to check out Southbank, which was being turned into a potential new weekend pitch. All I saw there was some Canadian blow-in with a standard generic juggling show. Juggling knives, clubs and the patter was all stock. He was polished enough for it to work but not polished enough for it to be anything other than his first season on the road.

There are many ways to get into this lifestyle. I was lucky enough to go to a street theatre/clown school and did not begrudge anyone else's learning curve, but I did have standards for my own entertainment, and there was nothing in this guy's show that interested me. He had a crowd and was working it. Disinterested, I moved on, looking for my own requirements: corner, pedestrian flow, audience catchment area. Having found some potential I headed home.

Next day, I was there and so was the young Canadian. But this time he had a strange, cloth-covered box with him. I stopped to chat and he told me he'd been working on a new show and was going to try it out. I wished him luck and sat back to watch. Forgive me, I can't recall his name. Let's call him Derrick.

Derrick set up a delivery room on the street. He dressed up as a doctor, with a simple smock and one of those mirrors doctors wear on their forehead. I forget what was being given birth, I'm sure it was important, but what floored me was his infectious enthusiasm.

He got some big Australian male volunteer to get into stirrups to be the mother, and his contraption's design meant that the business end of the birthing process was under wraps. He

had another male volunteer run round his stage with a balloon filled with water in one hand and a pin in the other and every time he passed a certain point he'd have to scream,

'Have the waters broken yet?'

Derrick would dive his head under the covers and back out and yell,

'No not yet!'

and the balloon guy would have to run another circuit. There was a timer involved and the audience had been cued to yell,

'Breathe' at regular intervals.

I know it doesn't seem to make sense, but the audience was fully committed to this surreal tableau. It was just insane, and very funny. I couldn't believe this was the same juggler I'd seen the day before.

Finally the guy completed another circuit and yelled,

'Have the waters broken yet?'

and the answer was

'Yes!'

and so he popped the balloon with the pin and Derrick reached in and pulled out an infant doll, wrapped it up and gave it to its 'mum' briefly before taking it back and putting it tenderly into a bassinet he had handy.

His pacing had carried his audience to an enthusiastic crescendo as they howled at the conceptual disconnect of some Ozzie bloke giving birth for their amusement and Derrick used this to grab both volunteers and let them take their bows. This cleverly sustained the excitement and sending them back to their families he himself took a bow and put out his hat.

It was truly masterful. The crowd was still chuckling as they came forward to reward him.

He himself was in bliss. He had structured his strange imagination for profit and crafted a show completely unique to him that had succeeded beyond anything he had ever done before. I recognised his moment. It's that rare moment when you realise your limitlessness.

I waited some time, watching him collect and accept gratitude and begin to pack his stuff up in a space now empty where before he had filled it. I knew he would crash soon and wanted to cushion his fall. I moved in as he was finishing packing. I told him to sit down—he looked drained, happy, and a little frightened at what he's done. I recognised that, too. He sat.

I told him to remember today. He'd just proved to himself, to his audience and to me, a fellow performer who took all this seriously, that he had everything he needed to do anything he wanted from here on in. I told him when winter came in Australia that he should go to Europe

and start again in a new summer and that they would love him.

Then I walked home. There was no point in me working that day. He'd blown me away. I'd love to find out who he was and what happened to him.

Chapter Fourteen

NAGASAKI CIRCUS

Where to start?

The chimp? The elephant? The poodles?

Let's have the chimp first, shall we?

The chimp was large, with matted fur, and was stored in a wooden box six feet high, solitary confinement.

The chimp was in a cage inside the large wooden box, the top vertical plank missing so that his world was a dark box with a sliver of light facing the sky his only view. Food was thrown in over to him. The chimp was irreparably insane. A large, debilitating hunk of heel was missing from the head trainer, and so said irreparably insane chimp languished.

The reason I could see him was that I was on stilts, tall enough to look down at him. The white-faced, black-helmeted pantomime was the only contact the mad monkey had. The shaft of light framed his maniacal countenance (do forgive, mad monkeys get me all hyperbolic).

He would bear his stained teeth, exposing pale gums, and fix me with a stare that conveyed perfectly the depth of his hell while forcefully clapping, a slow clap that got faster and faster and then stopped, all whilst unflinchingly glaring. This was, I was told, part of his old act. I didn't like his new act at all; he was trying far too hard.

The poodles numbered about fifteen. If you synthesised their collective brains and put them in a body of, let's call it a Super Poodle, the intelligence of this individual would still see it good for nothing more than incessant barking and frantic over-activity that was harnessed for precisely four minutes a day (eight on weekends), spending the rest of its day straining on its lead and yapping unrelentingly. Of course, if you add a three-metre, stilt-loping giant into the midst of fifteen already hyperventilating poodles, what can you expect? Certainly not a settled backstage before entry into the big tent.

What with the poodles' cacophony and the insane chimp's clapping and dreadful stare, what more could you possibly endure? Oh look—over there in a tent at the end—it's an elephant, let's totter over and have a look.

I was warned about the elephant.

'Never trust the elephant.'

Setting out to prove that one man can make a difference, I walked in my strange, elongated form up to the opening in the tent, determined to trust the elephant.

The elephant swayed in perpetual boredom, one leg tethered by chain to a peg in the ground. I

knew that as babies, elephants were trained by pegging and as adults, could easily dislodge the chains, but programming ran so deep they ceased to question the strength of their bonds (these are some of the sorts of personalities I'm forced to work with.)

I approached the elephant cautiously, slowly, with my hand outstretched. The elephant stretched also, and we met hand to nostril, tentatively, or so I thought. It coiled its trunk slyly around my arm and started dragging me slowly yet purposefully towards itself while looking directly, unflinchingly, into my eyes, a gaze I feared while wrenching, at the last possible moment, my arm away.

Its whole demeanour seemed to shrug, underwhelmed, denied its chance to read its future in my entrails. The elephant had called my bluff, wanting me a blood-soaked pulp, and had it been able to disguise it in a fit of pique, I'm sure it would have ground me into the surrounding dung.

I stood back trusting nothing, man or beast. Yapped at by the poodles, grinned at and generally freaked out by the chimp's insanity, and having a real sense that the elephant wanted to kill me was enough to tell me this was another grotesque milestone in my surreal lifelong psychological safari.

But wait...there's more.

Every morning, unheeded, I lay in my bed and was vacuumed around by Japanese maids. They banged their attachments noisily against my very bed legs as I continued to feign unconsciousness.

They were abominable.

You do not exist, westerner, you lie in your bed and we ignore your very existence and clean 'round you, welcome to our world (maniacal sub-vocal laughter).

Meanwhile, inside my mind:

You do not exist, cleaners, you brandish your attachments but you impress me not a jot. I am your guest and yet you treat me like lint, begone foul unintelligible crones.

(These are some of the sorts of personalities I'm forced to work with.)

I was the only non-Filipino in the cast, and the only person in Japan (it seemed) who slept past midday.

I did the gig as a guest performer for the contracted ten days.

Japan can be guaranteed to inspire and revolt in equal measure. I'm due some inspiration.

Chapter Fifteen

ORLEANS (NEW)

I drove 1100 miles
Connecticut
New York
Pennsylvania
Maryland
West Virginia
Virginia
Tennessee
Georgia
Alabama
Mississippi
finally, Louisiana.

The serpentine asphalt slithered under the vehicle.

I went mad, I came to, I went mad again.

I listened to a great deal of country and western music. 'She thinks my tractor's sexy' impressed me with its irony.

Country and western people only pretend to be dumb so that they can outwit you.

People down south prefer to defensively feign stupidity, and people from up north are all \$50 hats on 99-cent heads, don't get me started on east and west.

I'm not from around these parts.

Flipping the dial on the radio
Fleetwood Mac
Eagles
Johnny Cougar
Christian rock, and preachers disingenuously selling 'non conformity', power ballads with dumb white-trash lyrics blaming the wife for the whining husband's lot in life.

It may as well be the seventies except all the car ads are for Japanese and Korean cars. There are blizzard warnings being broadcast as outside crisp clarity is replaced by decorative flurries which meld into a thickening curtain.

Stopping at Waffle House I wait twenty minutes to be noticed and a further twenty to be served coffee and a ham sandwich that costs about a week of third world labour (about three hundred pairs of Nikes or US\$4).

A statistic on the plastic-coated menu pointed out that the hamburger buns sold over a year by

this particular chain of gastronomic fiends, if stacked, would be the height of seven Everests.

Is it not enough that I am sold masquerading pap with the taste equivalent of white noise without being bombarded in my weakened state by Dada surrealist statistics?

Am I not already risking enough, here in the belly of the beast, as I drive from one end of the country to the other through this winter's now most violent blizzard to report on the disparities of a nation driven on one hand to the brink of World War Three by an obviously out of control Attila the Presidential Foliage, while on the other, deep in the south, in Louisiana, masses of Americans prepare to celebrate their culture in New Orleans by drowning their shallow brain-pans in cheap beer and purchasing peeks at woman's breasts with beads?

I do seem attracted and drawn to record cultural calamities because articulation is its own form of telepathy and while performance is mercurial I can revisit moments via text and if successful expand on my grand theme of turning confusion into profit. I guess also my need to be understood has an equal relationship with my need to understand.

Yes, I am going to Mardi Gras, because it's the only sane thing to do in these troubled times, and also because it's actually an adaptation of a Catholic pre-Lent ritual and I happen to be a deeply religious person. Spiritual bankruptcy be damned.

Also because my life is a succession of vivid horror stories, and I've been told that the streets of New Orleans during these festivities are awash with excrement and vomit. I think my pantomime character will be at home there, as it takes scenes of such cumulative mindlessness and excess to afford me even the smallest comparative self-regard.

I am presently snowed in at a truck stop; overweight men are sneering at me as I stumble about muttering in a sleeping bag with legs.

Arrive and stop to reside on a street, suspiciously close to the action called Bourbon.

'Bourbon' is historical, in that it is French for 'Lose all motor functions in a public place.'

Bourbon Street is Walt Disney as a lecherous, alcoholic, crack-smoking social architect.

I like the new Walt.

I wander inquisitively down the street and bump into various bit players. It's a little like LA in that everyone has a polished 15 minutes of standup rather than a personality.

Some great material: a jailhouse story from a guy called Thaddeus, about holding cells and how out of every 40 inmates forced to share a room, you'll always get the crazy who rips his clothes off and covers his body with his own shit and how you could learn from that and perhaps dab a bit of your own behind your ears in a potentially violent situation.

Got a couple of wary glares from a tripper, wild-eyed and blinking in a bar's doorway. Yeah right—you've overloaded your system with hallucinogens and dampened it slightly with six hours of drinking, you're over-stimulated and confused, your ego's been chemically peeled, and you're holding me responsible?

(I relented and lent him my mobile so he could ring his mum.)

I ambled along to Jackson Square, where at 3AM I could make architectural assumptions based on projected population densities. After running new data through my patented Street Performers 'All Possible Contingencies™' software, I configured a 34.596% chance of getting out of this alive. I went back to my Bourbon Street residence and went to sleep, briefly forsaking the dreams of others.

I woke lying on a couch with my laptop clenched to my chest. It had all been a dream, birds were singing.

Birds were singing? I lived in a frozen bird-less wasteland. It all came flooding back. I was in New Orleans where the sun was shining and there was no snow at all, ever, and plants were green and grass grew.

It was astonishing. I removed my skis and got off the couch.

Jackson Square contained a magician who held 15/20 people a time, also an escape personage, his stage edges taped, waiting...always waiting, straitjacket displayed, as well as four hundred and fifty people with tables and earnest expressions, who, if you gave them money, could look into your futures, a Dixie Jazz band at one end and a CD retailing unit on guitar up the other. There was construction to contend with, too. It was too early, I postponed myself.

My friends and I retired to a condemned warehouse in a slum. They prepared a cart, then got permits and stopped off at a warehouse to pick up six thousand dollars' wholesale of beads for the first few days.

The beads ranged from fifty cents to five dollars each wholesale, each a currency, a kind of accepted inducement for women from all backgrounds (except Amish) and all walks of life (except Presidents' wives) to bare their breasts in a public place in a unique fertility display native only to these shores.

Qualities required for a successful bead salesman are as follows

Cheerful

Energetic

Highly aggressive

Fairly intoxicated

Easy to please—an 'any breast will do' attitude infused with the venal cheer of a pre-op plastic surgeon.

A bead salesman should

'Just Be There,' in the words of an accomplished bead seller and multi-breast veteran.

'You have to be a Dapper Dandy,' he adds.

It strikes me that this focused Average-Jill (Joe's sister) sexual tension is not something to be taken lightly. It makes me wonder if in fact beads are the answer.

Beads, especially in America, have always been a metaphor for a swindle. Beads are what condescending white people give to natives.

‘Thank you for your civilisation with real estate attached. Here’s a necklace, please die now.’

Breasts as public real estate, only in New Orleans.

Last night was canceled due to flooding and a tornado warning, so everyone stayed home, played cribbage, talked to their plants or drank heavily from a reclining position. Today (Saturday) everything’s back on track with parades starting 2PM and going through ‘til around midnight. So I wander about and really, what can I tell you? Lots of cheerful drunk people, mostly overweight, bedecked and festooned with beads.

I ask myself, ‘How am I going to do this?’

Catalog a drunken archetype a day?

Get into trouble every day and write about it?

Just fling six or seven hundred words off the top of my head a day and hope? And why? (And hope for what?)

These people, these confused, drunk, celebrating people are at least in one place at one time, responding to marketing and their own inner demons. Trying to immunise themselves from an aching, all-pervading existential loneliness by accepting the lie that you can observe mass crassness without participating in it.

Mr. and Mrs. Ohio, both 55, stagger about pretending to be detached until Mrs. Ohio, wishing she had never married her shoe-polish chemist husband, receives an invitation offered by a 27-year-old New Yorker on a balcony (himself a deeply sad improvisational vehicle), to expose her breasts for a moment in return for a larger-than-average string of beads. Everyone just wants to be loved. And there, in that bright shiny moment, insecurities (like matter and anti-matter) meet, and are annihilated.

I am a group dynamic connoisseur, I amble looking for nodes. There are two basic group dynamic focal points: One is breasts; large circles form as a woman (well-qualified) bargains for her selected beads, confirms transaction, and then in a blaze of flashing bulbs, achieves her desire.

The second is arrests: The bouncer has him by the throat, pressed up against a wall, you wonder if this will be one of those sad, ‘He died from oxygen deprivation’ gigs as you see the punter slowly lose the will to participate before, hurrah, suddenly eight cops burst through, saving his life and adding humiliation, massive bruising and a police record to his holiday itinerary.

Being a total non-conformist I am sober, which is alarming, but interesting from an alcoholic’s point of view. These people are amateurs and doomed (I’ll catch up later).

I have to work tomorrow as I’ve put it off long enough. I’ll do Jackson Square early enough to only get tourists, before the less-than-cosmetically-deranged get out of bed, and I’ll do Royal Street later on, to rub the locals’ faces in me. I have nothing else to tell you, but I need you to love me (cackling laughter starts here).

I went to 'Freaks and Ho's'; it's a bar. Staff were advertised as sexy, freaky, or trashy. Obese strippers and tossed dwarfs.

The bar holds a couple of hundred, with two small stages at the back ends on which a succession of topless large women perform. It distorts the pace of striptease when what is yet to be revealed is so hard to conceal, and that's all I have to say about that.

The staff were either heavily pierced (which is freaky or trashy depending on your upbringing) or wore fishnets and visible bras, which is sexy or trashy depending on whether you need to close one eye to focus or not.

The punters were mostly locals as the bar is a couple of blocks from Bourbon Street. The usual smear of curious detachment as we all hung out for as long as it took to see a big guy throw a little guy across the room.

After three hours or so a large fat man (strangely non-naked) announced the main event of the evening. A gym mat was unrolled and a tiny man with a full face helmet, extensive padding, a cape and a handle in the middle of his back (who I'll name Timmy Trajectory) was introduced to thunderous applause.

Here's the gig: prearranged strongmen compete against each other to throw a dwarf as far as they can for cash. They have two throws each. The crowd lines the throwing lane, baying and hooting as the MC dredges enthusiasm from an over-mined resource. I suspect what's being celebrated is a bent but understandable form of non-dwarfism.

I really, really wanted Timmy's trajectory to go high rather than long, as I had noticed an overhead fan that could have provided a quality of entertainment that was otherwise lacking. But sadly, the sight of a caped dwarf spinning uncontrollably from a ceiling fan as people tried to dislodge him with brooms was denied us.

Instead, he was merely hoisted a matter of yards underarm, and the difference in distance between the competitors was about a foot. Timmy seemed to enjoy himself, and hung out at the bar afterwards receiving more attention from sexy, freaky, trashy people than he would, in my opinion, have got if he hadn't been flung across the room.

So on one hand we see exactly what a lonely dwarf might do for company and on the other, we get to see ourselves as sad, pathetic and cruel with a bottomless appetite for distraction.

Could be worse. Tomorrow's another day.

The evenings pass, I decide to observe until Fat Tuesday, it's ugly—not dangerous, just ugly—and I am predominantly off-put by the drunken tourists and the identical drunken tourists they have come to see.

I have an ideal base. My friends the bead salesmen are resident on Bourbon Street, and they work hard day and night while I rove about watching people piss and puke and leer and bellow. I watch various arrests before returning to the pad to watch 'Cops', which is showing people getting arrested here the year before.

So on to Fat Tuesday, where all the smaller, community-based Krewees take over the side streets and bars. I could smell the authenticity as the slick polish of the long-established Krewees were usurped by smaller, low-budget locals who mocked them. It struck me that that was what it was originally about, surely—mocking the establishment. As a clown myself, I'm drawn to this type of affair, and so I put my gear on, stilts, makeup, and joined them to celebrate ourselves rather than simply provide gawkers with disposable incomes an opportunity to close one eye and focus on glitz too big to miss.

I was adopted by each crew I joined, welcomed and offered booze and food. This to me was the real Mardi Gras and I was glad I'd saved my energy for this last long day. This was the year before Katrina, I doubt the city will ever return to pre-disaster days. Next visit I'm aiming to see how the place is on a normal week.

New Orleans has a spirit unique to itself, it teaches people how to party together, it's still and I guess always will be the all encompassing gleeful glad-handing drunken rascal of America that sells more guilt free hangovers than pretty postcards. In my own terrified, cynical and distrusting way I was charmed and seduced.

Chapter Sixteen

PARIS ARREST

Paris is in France. Which is a country at the northernmost border of Europe where civilisation ends (near where Britain begins).

I had driven up after working in Barcelona and Ibiza, a lovely drive except the one night spent low on gas, parked outside a closed gas station in the middle of the Pyrenees mountains shared between Spain and France.

It was very cold and being a wide-eyed optimist, I owned nothing but thin shirts to stave off the temperature which—to put it mildly—was a tad frosty. That in itself would have been problem enough, but the hitchhiker with me was some Latin dude who had the strangest affliction: as soon as he fell asleep, every ounce of viscous fluid in his body immediately made its way to his sinus and the back of his throat, such that hideous unearthly mind-bending noises burst from him at volume.

I'd wake him up, he'd apologise, go back to sleep, and seconds later the imitation of close quarter military jets taking off and landing resumed. It was a measure of my desperation as I sat there next to the most horrifying snorer in the world while shivering uncontrollably that I tried to knock myself out by bashing my head against the steering column.

The first blow was definitely committed and stars swum, but sadly, I was still among the living. So before I could regain what minuscule sense I originally had, I mustered my stupidity and had another go. I added a raging headache to the twin discomforts of noise and temperature to create a memorable French trinity of woe.

The rest of the trip was comparatively uneventful. Arrived in Paris, earned the hotel money the evening I got in and resumed my Paris pattern of daytime pitch a block from the Pompidou and night-time pitch in the Latin Quarter.

The daytime pitch was my own; a series of arches with apartments above formed the entrance into a large square. The edge of the square used to be a lane and was still labeled with a street sign (more about that later). In the middle of the square was a dry fountain where junkies hung out, and the arches themselves formed a passage for locals and tourists to pass to and from a nearby Metro entrance, various lanes and side roads towards the square and a large underground shopping centre beyond.

It had a good flow and I worked there a couple of hours a day; the crowds impeded no-one and all was well. I did my thing, out-Frenching the French in the disdain department and being, for all intents and purposes, just a wee bit dour. They lapped it up. One of my better memories was an old woman on the third floor of the apartments above me opening her window after a show and lowering a twenty-franc note stuck on a peg and tied to the end of a long string.

This was towards the end of the season, 'round October and what I didn't know then was that many European countries do immigration sweeps about this time to clear their cultures of

summer stragglers, cling-ons who would otherwise add demands to their finite social welfare systems.

It was my second week and settled into my place in French society when over the heads of my audience, I spotted a gaggle of French Guardia approaching in the distance. Eight in all, with a couple of muzzled dogs and a guy hanging behind wearing a Clouseau overcoat, obviously the semi-singular half-brain behind the operation.

The Guardia are the utility-overalled Dobermans of the French police force, selected for their single-minded zeal and unquestioning obedience, much like low-level gangsters or Orcs. I suspect that at the training academy they hang bright shiny objects at the entrance on recruitment day, and select for the Guardia those found transfixed, and who additionally have 'HATE' tattooed on their knuckles. ADD afflicted and amphetamine addicts are especially prized.

They were darting about snorting and peeing on posts. The junkies scattered, but still they caught some, handcuffed them and made them sit on the ground. They were a bit of a distraction, actually, as my audience kept glancing over at the competitive drama.

From about one hundred yards away they turned and looked at me, then as one turned to their over-coated keeper, who nodded. They rushed towards me, their knuckles bleeding as they dragged, the audience parting with an indignant disdain as they surrounded me, barking a threatening gibberish I could only presume was French.

'Gibber gibber,' they barked...I stared at them.

'Gibber gibber gibber growl,' they barked louder. One of them had dropped to all fours and was licking another's testicles while whining.

Remember earlier I mentioned that where I was working had been a road and still had the street sign? The sign was just feet away, so I tottered over to it and smiled and pointed:

'Avenue du Innocents.'

I thought it was funny and so did my audience, but unfortunately it sent these guys into an apoplectic rage.

Howling, they surrounded me, and in a stunning piece of improvisation pushed me over. Two got in front of me and four behind, and the two in the front pushed and the four at the back caught. It was like being back at clown school doing a warm fuzzy trust exercise, except it was half a world away from home and being done in public by evil-intentioned state Orcs.

Mercifully, the four at the back actually caught me and lowered me roughly to the ground. They still had a couple of problems; I was twelve foot long and couldn't understand a word they were saying.

Inaction to these people is like sunlight to Vampires, however, so one of the catchers stomped round in front of me and, grabbing a stilt, tried to simply yank it off. I moved about three feet. He tried again. I moved another three feet. My audience muttered darkly.

I obviously speak no French, but remembering how much is shared by common cultures I tried saying 'Impossible' with a heavy French accent.

'Empossaabeelle' I cried, as he pulled at my leg a third time (with diminishing enthusiasm, I had to note).

The audience had at this point become brave and abusive, having had to watch their clown being dragged around the pavement by morons.

The semi-singular half-brain Clouseau-clone now entered the fray in a sort of 'try and nip this surrealism in the bud' way and in halting English, asked me for my passport. A simple enough request, but unfortunately I lead an impossibly complicated life.

I did in fact have my NZ passport on me, but I had entered the country with my British passport. Therefore my NZ passport would have no record of me having ever entered Europe, and as such I thought it best to answer,

'No, it's at my hotel.'

Which it was.

So I was encouraged quite vocally to get my legs off. As I was unwrapping the gaffer/duct tape, one of the Guardia pulled out an evil blade and slashed helpfully at the top of my stilts.

Carrying my shoes (no time to put them on, apparently) my stilts, and my gear, and still with my makeup on, I was led surrounded by my honour guard to a grille-windowed bus parked round the corner that was now almost full of what looked like Algerian refugees.

We headed off to the main Parisian police station where I was first put into a single cell and searched. They found my NZ passport and told me that if I'd shown that to them they would have left me alone, but now as I had already entered the system they were obliged to process me. Having got my hotel's phone number, they would ring them and put me in a holding cell till a copy of my English passport was faxed to them. (At least I think that's what they said.)

So I was chucked into a room full of swarthy, Algerian, junkie ne'er-do-wells, still with smeared whiteface and shoeless. A few of them recognised me and tried to chat, but sadly we had nothing in common but our criminal records. Thankfully, I was unmolested and sat quietly, which was probably one of the best things to happen to me all day.

Eventually it was all resolved. The police said that the hotel had stuck up for me, sending a copy of my passport and additionally giving me a bit of a character reference. I put my shoes on and left, going straight to my night pitch to make up for loss of earnings, and the next day I was back at the Avenue du Innocents.

Chapter Seventeen

QUEENSTOWN, NZ

Queenstown is nestled at the foot of a range of mountains named ‘The Remarkables’ for good reason, towering over Lake Tekapo in the South Island of NZ. Anyone who believes that faith can move mountains should come here and pray, then perhaps lower their expectations a tad.

It’s where bungee jumping was invented and young and old and the occasional twitching Parkinson’s patient can safely jump or get thrown from a bridge tethered to a rubber band. It also hosts the famous shot-over marine jet experience where high-powered jetboats tear up the Clutha inches from the rock walls that define the gorge. Additionally tourists tethered to experienced para-gliders go wafting off cliffs to soar over the town squealing. There’s a summer luge run down brushed concrete tubes within the town’s borders, and come winter the nearby ski fields kick off. It’s an outdoors-person’s dream, and if you like nights spent by the fire there’s no better backdrop.

The local population seems at all times to be outnumbered by tourists. Every day looks like the day after Christmas, the visitors proudly wearing Kiwi clothing freshly unwrapped.

A hundred or so years back, gold was found in these parts. Now it’s just flushed through the place via busloads of tourists and a large, churning backpacker population. It’s interesting to visit certain cafes of an evening to witness the calm, almost post-coital vibe created by those whose bodies have faced what must have felt like certain death, jumping off some hundred-foot bridge with a rubber band attached or some cliff with an instructor attached or gone whizzing at excessive speed inches from sheer walls of rock in a jet boat.

Nick Nickolas, a Covent-Garden-forged, rollicking street magician friend and I had cavorted our way down-country from Auckland at its other end. He drove, I kept tally of the improvised commemorative crosses denoting road fatalities. He was going to get certified as a cliff jumping parachutist and I, as always, was simply at a loose end.

The structure of my life was contained within my clown’s performance and nowhere else, and I tended to be a free associating blunderbuss that my performance friends adopted for interesting company and perhaps, in their own twisted and generous and thus far heterosexual way, because they loved me. I certainly loved them, in much the same way a leper, diseased and self-serving, might get a platonic crush on a nun. My performance friends also tended to be fantastic people to drink heavily with. Leashless, the lot of them.

Both Nick and I had a couple of weeks to kill before that chestnut of a gig, The Christchurch International Buskers’ festival. We were both regulars there, had been since its inception.

The Queenstown pitch was a small pedestrian mall, full of upmarket tourist shops catering to predominantly Asian tourists buying wool-related products. The flow was pitiful—the place would be empty and then one or two people would pass down, and it was odds against whether they’d make it twenty feet before being drawn into a shop. It was a challenge, the longest slow-build test, in which you might work for thirty minutes to gather and keep a minimum of ten

people for an audience. The slow build is one of my talents—I can exist in character without attention. My clown justifies its existence easier than I do, pointless boredom being more comfortable with makeup and stilts. Still I struggled, managing one or two shows an evening, earning just enough for the required liquids, beer and petrol. Marking time.

Tourists are displaced by nature. I suppose I should identify with them but I don't. My ideal is to perform in places where my gift transforms ordinary places in people's everyday lives into something briefly uplifting, and the production of unexpected laughter in public places has been my chosen vocation.

To illustrate:

The most profound compliment I ever received was a shy man who sought me out after my show in a large city and meekly admitted that he had not left his house for some time but had forced himself to re-enter the world that particular day. He thought it important enough to admit to me that I had made him laugh, and what's more, he was driven to seek me out and thank me for showing him he still could. Moments later hidden down an alley, I wept—I actually sobbed with the joy of mattering.

Tourists are already divorced from the everyday. To them, I'm simply 'entertainment', competing with all the other experiences that are strands of a quilt their disposable incomes invest in to briefly disguise their lives' modulated captivity. Still, in Queenstown I did what I could in the county of my birth to defiantly add my tiny thread to their patterns, and in turn I forsook gratitude for amusement and got paid whatever my shallow distraction was worth.

Much like Queenstown itself this story could be a pointless, aimless distraction. Although, some crisp morning as you sit alone by the lake, gazing up to the towering mountains surrounding you with the shale that flows from them as the mountains themselves melt, on a timescale that renders our species as predominant and relevant as lint, the enormity that surrounds can make the seemingly unremitting cacophonous culturally and personally exformative static of your own bipedal computer, as it tries to grasp meaning within and beyond itself, briefly cease.

Insignificance can in its own way be liberating, and I believe within laughter lies this shared, celebrated truth. Dignity dashed, unforeseen circumstantial twists, sudden departures from routine. These are all clues.

That I can share this thought is, if anything I suppose, my point.

We are not here long.

Chapter Eighteen

REYKJAVIK, ICELAND

This is a remarkable tale, part parable, part adventure story, part travelogue.

There was a boy in Iceland who lived inland in a small village far away from anywhere, and in Iceland there is a great deal of nowhere, the entire country's population being about 250,000.

This village was on a hill, and although itself isolated by snow part of the year and as such the community had to function as a whole, as far as the children of the village were concerned the village consisted of three tribes,

Those at the bottom of the hill,
those in the middle
and those at the top.

In order to travel to school unmolested by a rival faction, the children mustered at three points where the older siblings, armed with home made swords, formed defensive lines and shepherded their groups to the school, which was accepted as neutral by all.

If one group met another on the way there were pitched battles, and it was not unheard of for children to lose fingers, chopped off by a rival's sword in the heat of battle. These battles were serious, and an equilibrium existed in which they happened rarely but regularly as first one group and then the other held fearsome dominance.

Small children cowered behind bigger brothers each day on their way to school, knowing no other experience of education, occasionally lending their elders hankies with which to staunch their wounds.

In a place so isolated children learnt to make their own entertainment.

There was, however, one poor little boy who pedaled everywhere unprotected. As the local paperboy, he traversed all three parts of the village, putting small, locally-produced pamphlets of local import through letterboxes.

Everyone thought he must work for the police—that is to say, anyone under the age of twelve thought he worked for the police. If anyone was sought by the police for anything, the paperboy was always the main suspect, being an outsider.

They tried to kill him in three consecutive ways. The first time they caught him, the lower village kids took the paperboy up to the top of the hill, tied him shirtless on his moped, doused his jeans with inflammables, cut his brake cables and pushed him off the top of the hill. He came off on a corner, flaming at high speed, and was saved by a snowdrift that broke his fall and put him out.

The second time, he was cornered by the top of the village kids, who got him off the bike, and

one holding onto each of his ends did the 1-2-3 over a cliff. The paperboy sailed out but again just bounced off snow (this was Iceland), only breaking his collarbone. He spent a time inside recovering and worrying that the children were keeping a watch on his house. He never saw them, but he was quite right in presuming they were waiting just around the corner.

What he didn't know was that one boy of twelve had stolen his father's double-barreled shot gun, substituted buckshot for salt, and had both barrels primed when the poor besieged lad at last ventured out.

Just before the paperboy got to his first corner the twelve year old with three fingers on one hand swung into view and stated,

'You're dead.'

Then pulled both triggers and blew this child off his feet with the blast of chunky rock salt at high speed, onto rather than into the chest cavity. (Meaning it hurts like hell but doesn't kill you.)

Anyway the poor salt stung paperboy lay on his back, unmoving, before eventually stirring, and in first a timid and then louder and more amazed tone, repeatedly chanted,

'I'm alive!' 'I'm Alive!'

The rifle bearer and his shocked cohorts ran away, leaving the paperboy yodeling his appreciation of not yet being dead.

Now, inside the same story, we move to...

A babbling bar in Reykjavik.

Seemingly out of nowhere a maniac with a knife jumps the bar and slashes the barman across the stomach. The barman, holding the protuberance of his intestines with one hand, subdues the assailant, briefly letting go of his gut to hold two broken bottles over the throat of his opponent, deciding as his frenzy subsides and every eventuality of the next few moments are suddenly frozen.

He, with his jagged bottles poised and his intestines popping out his stomach, decides not to kill anyone and concentrate on his wound rather than going to jail for a long time for a dramatic public murder. He rolls off.

He's rushed to hospital—which caters mainly to fishing accidents and knife injuries—and the doctor comes in and prods his guts back in and starts on binding and stitching the muscles of his abdomen, concerned with the wound for a good half hour before looking into the barman's eyes for the first time, double-taking, then calmly asking,

'Don't I know you?'

The barman blanches. The doctor sewing him up was the paperboy everyone wanted to kill and he was the boy who pulled the trigger of the shotgun.

The barman is filled with an indescribable shame, he lies with his guts in his hands, himself in the hands of a man, once a boy, he's repeatedly tried to terminate, now at the mercy of this man who smiles down at him and tells him to forget it, they were children, it was a long time ago, and continues stitching.

I spent a lot of times in bars and met a lot of bar staff and told and was told many stories, but this Reykjavik story was the kind of jaw-dropping moral epic containing an intimacy with its telling, that as drink-soaked as I was during this period, I found being gifted with this story in it's own way refreshingly sobering. Part of me knew then as it hopes now that these stories help define my journey.

Chapter Nineteen

SINGAPORE

Apparently you only get out of a country what you bleed into it. Singapore owes me. I was shortchanged.

The first thing that struck me about Singapore was a banister knob at speed. It hit me above my right eye.

Let's start again...

While Singapore might not have greeted me with open arms the intensive care unit was open and in lieu of any formal greeting. They simply fixed the gaping wound in my head and put me to bed next to some old fellow who, it was explained to gaggles of med students who passed through, was going through a multi-organ meltdown and was on palliative care, pre-expiry. He was an Indian guy; he'd toss and moan. Background soundtrack, dying Indian.

I'd gotten off the plane and three of us, global street performance veterans, Andrew Elliot, Dom Ferry and myself met up and were taken to Sentosa.

Sentosa is an island, apart from a bridge that connects it to Singapore itself. It has a musical fountain, caged monkeys who split coconuts, and at its highest point, a very large sculpture of a 'Mer-lion'—mermaid's back-end, lion's head, instant mystical emblem and marketing ploy. Sentosa also had a golf course, an aquarium and a tiki-bar that faced the refineries across the water.

I'd done some research—it used to be the graveyard for Singapore, formerly named 'Place where you bury dead people', or something close to that in Chinese, but that was thought not zingy enough for an amusement park and so it was changed and a Mer-lion invented.

We were employed to work it, doing shows for a retainer as well as being the first performers we knew of who actually had permission to busk, which made the small retainer worth the risk.

We got driven from the airport to our housing for the next six weeks, 'Holiday Chalets'—actually Japanese WWII officers' quarters with about forty additional coats of paint. Another critical factor was that the stairs were all different heights.

Got there 11PM, chat 'til 1AM, I get up about three to go to the downstairs bathroom, outside the air conditioned humming bedroom we were all sleeping in. Stumble on the stairs, put my arm out, get my underarm hooked on the rail and careen the length of the stairs before bashing my head on the large irregular piece of hardwood knob at the bottom and falling into the landing twitching, an extending puddle of blood forming beside my head.

HELLO SINGAPORE!

Dom had heard a noise and investigated. He'd not failed to notice I was a bleeding, twitching

shadow of my former self and had rushed the two hundred metres or so to the island police bungalow and summonsed an officer who walked the distance back to look at me, still bleeding, still twitching, before concluding,

‘Yes, I think an ambulance would be apt.’

I wake up the next day, there’s some Indian next to me fretting about in a coma. I have twenty-six stitches in my forehead, both eyes are swollen, I look like a disgruntled Panda. When I move my head it takes split seconds for my vision to calibrate the movement. I presume this means my balance is shot and wonder about my stilt career. I wonder also where the meter is that is recording the medical expenses and who will eventually pay it.

A doctor did his rounds, surrounded by a gaggle of students. I found out the guy next to me wasn’t expected to live out the day and that I had been brought in bleeding from the ears but they couldn’t find the fracture after repeated x-rays so had just stitched the hole in my head together.

Good to know.

My employers, whom I would grow to hate with a brooding molten fury but at this stage were the only link I had with reality, arrived. They calmed me by covering all expenses and suggested it may have been a drink related accident. I let that slide. I was to be let out that day, the day I was supposed to begin working.

I was in scramble mode. I’d put makeup on over facial injuries before—the swelling was going to be problematic, but with white-face, tank-helmet and goggles I might just be able to pull off that highly fashionable, ‘deformed panto’ look.

Stilts were out. I had no idea if this faulty inner ear thing would be permanent and I had a six-week contract to fulfill.

It was only later I realised this first day in the intensive care unit was the happiest day of the weeks to come.

I returned to the ‘Holiday Chalets’ to rest up. I’m pretty scary to look at. I take the next day off, my vision condition is mending.

Day three I thought I’d be all gung ho and depart from my circus-based, street-based stilt show and delve into the world of the human statue. After all, how hard could it be? Contractual obligations would be met. I did it for an hour. I will never do it again. Some little kid undid my fly. I wanted to kill him. But...I was a statue.

It was on day three a curious misfortune beset us. The currencies of Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia took a spectacular dive, sending Dom to his contract, where he noticed for the first time our payment was in Singapore dollars and not the Australian he’d presumed. Only about a 70% decrease in the value of our wages, never mind.

The next day I was gratefully on stilts again, my groin high above prying fingers.

Our job—and it was obvious no-one had thought it through—was to entertain crowds who arrived by the busload predominantly to watch the musical fountain. An only-minimally majestic piece of colourfully lit plumbing that whooshed about to classical music inside a custom built amphitheatre. The kind of thing, going off as it did on the hour, that could construe (to people living nearby with holes in their heads) cruel and unusual punishment.

What became immediately evident was that our presence on Sentosa was merely a sop to having our promo on the posters. In the collective hallucination that is Singapore, appearances are created like a shiny and over-promising ship's bow to forge through the deep waters of society, leaving reality to be formed (less importantly) behind.

The glitch in the system was the finely-tuned ballet of tour guides holding different coloured flags leading efficient Asian tourists past all and any distractive temptation towards the grail that was the musical fountain. These tour guides simply did not brook any dilly-dallying. We, who were trained and efficient at creating stages and audiences in public, were reduced to watching as meta-human caterpillars wove purposefully past. The tour guides were scary, they were screaming sergeants let loose on elderly folk.

The next problem, that even eclipsed the guides, the utter lack of any engaging point in our employ came in the second week.

We were employed to work between 4 and 7PM, six evenings a week. In week two, the 'rainy season' kicked in. One very distinctive feature of the rainy season is the monotonous precision of the daily deluge. It started every day five minutes either side of 4PM and finished within the same variance around 7PM. By the end week two, it was set to rain for those three hours for the rest of the contract. Just a little miffing.

On the short walk home every day, after dutifully getting ready by four and canceling by five past, I passed the cages containing the monkeys who split coconuts in their spare time. I had an excuse to feel self-pitiful; I had a big hole in my head and was trapped in some Kafka-like hell. I can remember feeling jealous that the monkeys had a more meaningful existence than I.

Our accommodations were surrounded by similar converted Japanese WWII barracks, housing a regularly replaced collection of Young Singaporean Born Again Youth.

They played guitar as badly as only a certain type of Christian has the gall to do and sung folk hymns 'til four in the morning.

At seven each the morning, given it was fall and leaves tend to fall, a squadron of leaf-blowing imported labourers meandered through the neighbourhood. By nine, the first of the Christians were up and at the guitar again.

The weeks dragged on, the hole in my head got better. I abandoned the job after our first scheduled payment was delayed. I flew back to Perth a couple of days before the six weeks ended, guessing our unseen employers and their PR catspaw flunky wouldn't even notice. They didn't.

Chapter Twenty

TOKYO TEEN BED ZOMBIE

She lay on her back in the corner of the tiny room, on a futon covered in the lightest mosquito net. So light that if you stood at the door, you could see if her eyes moved. They never did, she just lay there like a hypnotised chicken with its beak stuck in the sand. A piece of furniture, her eyes open, her expression slackly quizzical, a look of understated concentration.

I thought perhaps someone had nestled into her vulnerable core and planted a conundrum.

I lived in a musty, damp, rat-infested gaijin house in Tokyo. It was there I met my first and only teen bed zombie. A middle-aged, oily, soft-skinned American with a religious diploma had one.

He lived down the hall. We shared kitchen and lounge with 10 others in a communal situation. He'd waft around the house in his silk dressing gown with a puffy, just-woken expression that still contained a bemused cunning. He, after all, kept a glassy-eyed soulless husk upstairs.

He would leave his door open, sit at his desk with his back to her, and write letters, swinging around and talking to people as they passed, sometimes even inviting them in, never referring to or acknowledging his nineteen-year-old teen bed zombie.

Once, from the far end of the hall, I saw him put down his pen. He swung his chair and contemplated his woman, then stood and walked towards the door. Our eyes met and the door seemed to close very slowly.

She was there over a month; she spoke no English (I never saw her speak at all).

I was pretty sure he wasn't injecting her. I checked her out on her various trips to the bathroom; she had a post-traumatic stare (some alien, light-years away, suddenly feels watched).

I know heroin. Heroin doesn't look like that.

Maybe he'd found her next to the tracks with her exam results in hand, maybe life had given her, with a sudden jolt, more than she could or would ever want to comprehend. Maybe it wasn't a case of an older man with all the false serenity that age presents to the young, taking advantage of an empty vessel and lucking out with a sex toy, if not willing, at least grateful for the solitude between fucks.

I see myself in the people I distrust and wonder--are you living my guilt-free life or do I hate you?

Chapter Twenty One

UTRECHT

Utrecht had the misfortune of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Summer was over and the Grey had begun. Amsterdam had done me no favours, the first international city in my first decade in which I couldn't fully function. Attempts, all in different locations, all failing in some regard, all lacking that essential cohesion of three elements:

- A) passing pedestrian traffic
- B) a corner or niche

and

- C) an audience catchment area that does not disturb elements A and B

Amsterdam was (to my shock) proof that my sociologically experimental, financially self-perpetuating clown performance wrinkle wasn't bulletproof. So I caught a train to Utrecht and sat, not far from the station's potential pedestrian pickings, having serious doubts about my vocation.

It wasn't the damp. I'd triumphed in Glasgow in my first deliberate performance during drizzle.

It wasn't the paucity of the pedestrian flow. I specialise in the slow build. I am the most self-contained performer I know. I make my time into others' time, over time.

It wasn't anything external.

I'd learnt over the years that generally, after particular crowds or cities or weather conditions or seasons are set aside as excuses for why my show [occasionally] sucked, I was left with the inescapable conclusion that it must be some combination of my sense of entitlement and a certain lack of respect that can happen when a good thing is taken for granted.

I also wondered, as I sat in what I thought was a bleak place, having bleak thoughts, if perhaps all this travel was just a futile effort to outdistance some bleakness that had finally caught up on me and settled about as I sat and smoked and sipped sugary coffee in the grey dusk of Utrecht.

Eventually, when my situation—that of being moneyless in a foreign country at the approach to winter—prevailed, I did apply my makeup and stilts and insinuated myself in some dark corner a few blocks from the station, spending the next hour leering and dancing and making mischief.

Initially, I simply am. I'm eleven foot tall and obviously contrived, a scowling pantomime with one major pleasure, that of accosting passers on street-corners with the solid state of me.

I'm not what most people would expect and that alone I find is comedy bedrock. Additionally, I have a large quiver of gambits honed over twenty years in many countries and cultures.

That said, I really must apologise to Utrecht—I know it doesn't matter, but although you laughed and donated and sent me on my way with more than I had when I arrived, I must confess I was not predisposed to giving as I could.

Sometimes the bleak conditions are internal and those wonderful, light, out of nowhere, bursts of creative joy you may happen upon are as much a relief and release for the performer you are watching as they might be to you. These shows are mutual celebrations and contain within them the most consistent form of joy I've ever known.

My show in Utrecht was one of those very occasional shows where my disgruntled clown bled in and out of my underlying disgruntled artist and human being. Whenever I sense this it only amplifies my dissatisfaction, which as you could see immediately makes the whole situation negatively recursive with me an unhappy clown in its centre. The audience cannot be sure of the comedy; as theatrical timing and real timing are distinctly different, the bitterness seems too unforced. Laughter is created and so I redeem myself. But honestly, Utrecht, when I'm up I can achieve mercurial alchemy, where the human condition is distilled and just enough pressure applied and released that a sum of laughter greater than its parts is temporarily created and people revel.

I think for my second book (which I'll write even if no-one reads this one, because I have to recycle reality seemingly as some inner prime function), I'll revisit Utrecht and make up.

Chapter Twenty Two

VEGAS VIVA LAS CANCER

Vegas is the place least likely to find an Amish in the world and so I thought I'd go there and look for one. And though I searched extensively through the bars and Casinos, my entire mission was fruitless.

There were 128 slot machines between the plane and the baggage retrieval, so in theory you could lose all your money by the time you got to your luggage, left only to catch your return flight.

I had no time for feckless folly; I was on a mission, in Las Vegas to perform at a gig for a major tobacco company. To dive headlong into the moral vacuum and paddle about the evil, glancing sidelong at the depravity and recording, so that my life could, at most, serve as a warning to others.

The Vegas airport is right in the centre of town (no time to waste, holidays in haste). I caught a \$5 taxi to the MGM Grand, one of the gargantuan hotels in the area, with casino, shopping centre and 6,852 rooms (it has a chapel right next to its amusement arcade). The hotel is so vast that carrier pigeons are used to send in-house memos and trained to operate the lifts.

I was sailing blind, having flown myself across America the day after a 14-day engagement in Chicago on the strength of a couple of e-mails and phone calls (I was told with less than 24 hours notice that the theme was Middle Eastern).

Causes for misgivings:

- 1) No reservation in my or anything approaching my name. I pay myself.
- 2) I have been told that I am to work, roving a club, from 8 till 9. I wait in my room fretting in a void unable to contact anyone and wondering if this whole episode is some sort of phantom or mirage when I receive a call from front desk for assistance in a booking 15 minutes before my scheduled showtime.

Validation of misgivings:

The people I confronted at the front desk, I quickly opinionised, would have collective difficulties negotiating a pedestrian crossing, let alone a gig.

A gaggle of seemingly stunned, Goth gypsies, a sort of Spinal Tap meets the Addams Family meets One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest-type of visual scenario.

I went into shock, I can deal with any variety of observational weirdness but actually performing with the unhinged puts me on edge. And stumbled numbly back to my room (18330) to get my stilts and costume. I was shadowed by an ostensibly helpful, vocally

hyperactive member of their group, a seemingly endless cascade of gobbledygook issuing in the lift, in the corridor, in the corridor again, in the lift again.

My impression was darkening. Back to the lobby, then out to the car park where my equipment and I were stuffed into a rare cavity inside an old VW that then had to be push started. I noticed it had no brakes apart from the hand brake. I still knew nothing; where we were going, when I was performing, how long I was working.

I was far from chipper. I asked from the back of the van,

‘Could someone please tell me what’s going on?’

There followed an eerie silence. I followed up,

‘Alternatively you could pretend I don’t fucking exist.’

‘Wow—that’s harsh,’ mumbled a particularly skeletal Goth hybrid with mystical patterns etched on his cheeks. Apart from that, silence and darkness for ten minutes as I fumed, folded into some lightless crevasse in a V-Dub full of lost children.

We pulled up and there, in the twilight, was a perfectly ordinary nightclub. Grabbing my gear, I went in while the others comprehended the car park. This was the first of three gigs I had for Camel Cigarettes.

The benevolent multinational that has given some of us raging addictions masking as a lifestyle choice, and to the greater public has gifted annoying, elderly wheezing in the back of public transport, had looked out over its shrinking domain until it found a source of indifference to health mirroring its own. The liquor industry. And so, with guile reminiscent of Stalin on a heavy-handed day, it had fashioned a tour with DJs, dancing girls, open bars and big name acts like Run-D.M.C.

These events were targeted at bar staff. Those minuscule few bar staff who themselves didn’t smoke, whose work environments already hung heavy with a cancerous vapourous broth, were now invited to an open bar with scantily-clad cigarette girls brimming with three choices of Camel.

I walked into the bar staff meeting; the nightclub owner was just explaining that there would be two small monkeys walking round on leashes, one was cute and one a little grumpy, but not to worry as they’d both had their teeth pulled. I took a seat.

There were cigarette girls with sparkly, high-cut Vegas costumes and false eyelashes that could paint an aircraft hangar at half a bat. There were Turkish belly-dancing women, chewing gum, all on the unkind side of attractive. There were the bar staff—ironic really that on the only night of the year where bar staff got shouted, these guys had to work. I looked at them and they looked at me and the world shrugged, and the boss went on about how this night was strictly no sex, no drugs for the staff, he was sorry but that’s the policy; any sex, any drugs they’d be fired.

He then touched his nose and sniffed suspiciously, I thought.

At this point my new friends walked in—a morphing gypsy vampiress followed by a generic, buff, long-haired Adonis fire guy with smirk and leather, followed by a hyperactive masseuse, an oriental cowboy, an anemic henna tattooist, a dominatrix wearing token gypsy-isms, and an ingratiating Buddha Goth.

The boss glanced up briefly and continued,

‘This is an open bar and some of these people are going to hit it pretty hard. There will be security and if you start getting pawed or assaulted, let them know and they’ll deal with it.’

He then put on his best smile and said,

‘But most of all, remember to have a good time.’

He reminded me of the famous officer in the Boer war who climbed to the top of his trench and said,

‘Come on chaps, they couldn’t hit an elephant at this dist—’ before collapsing with a hole in his head.

The meeting was over. I quickly double-checked to see if I was having a good time yet.

I looked for a leader amongst the group I’d arrived with and settled for the most comfortably vague one, the ingratiating Buddha Goth. I tried to convey to him that, while I was mindful of the fact that he had just spent hours careening in a virtually brakeless van from LA to Vegas, in the company of what with grace could be called other multi-celled objects, I had spent the day traveling across the country at my own expense to get to this gig and my mood, at present gangrenous, was not likely to improve until some measure of confidence could be given me that this was actually a job with a beginning, an end, and a fee, and not some demented projection of my own as a career masochist.

There was a short pause, during which I had a vivid mental picture of this individual and a solitary plankton fighting it out on Mastermind. He spoke; he said,

‘Far out.’

I realised with startling clarity that it couldn’t get any worse.

The morphing vampiress gypsy was close at hand and the ingratiating Buddha Goth called her over.

‘Do you have his money?’ he asked.

I felt so cheap. She reached under the folds of her gypsy lace and gave me an envelope. The contents were the relief I’d been seeking; I thanked them and went to get ready. I still felt cheap but the difference between cheap and a complete loss is what’s made me what I am.

I went to the boss and introduced myself and got permission to focus on the earlier part of the night with its measure of semi-coherence, as opposed to later on when brain stems would

dictate. The boss thought I was funny because I wore a t-shirt that read 'Can't sleep, clowns will eat me' in repetitive and diminishing type. He cut me some slack.

The place had three main areas, each enhanced with life-sized glow-in-the-dark plastic camels. There were screens that silhouetted the back-lit belly dancers, there was a massage tent where the hyperactive masseuse would basically have epileptic fits on top of prone, off-duty barmaids. There was a guy with a couple of hookahs containing various tobaccos, there a fire show, and me.

I thought that the evening had the potential to be a little under-realised but then relaxed as the punters started coming in. They were corporate event virgins; you could tell because they all acted really cool and just nibbled a little and drank a little for the first hour and a half.

Dead giveaway—they acted like they thought experienced people acted at these events, little knowing that any seasoned corporate has a trained nurse to induce vomiting every twenty minutes, and that unless you chain some workmate or competitor to a chair and sexually assault then flay them, there is little chance of embarrassing yourself in a room full of people who make fortunes by differences in decimal points and who are duty-bound to exploit, for greed's sake, anything offered them for nothing.

I roved about ignoring people and entertaining myself (my specialty). It was all comfortably ordinary when my flabber- was well and truly -gasted by the sight of the monkeys. They were about the size of a breadbox, funnily enough, and were leashed to two obese Americans wearing fez hats and caftan-like arrangements. I couldn't tell which one was cute and which one was grumpy.

It's I AM, you happen to be a monkey, you happen to be in a nightclub next to speakers that are pumping dub strong enough to dislodge bananas off trees back in your natural habitat. Your idea of a good night is a quick hump and a comfortable branch, but are instead strobed and laser-lighted to distraction, yanked round by a lead, patted by inebriates, and to top it off, your masters have made you a chain smoker. Both monkeys had cigarettes clutched in their cute primate hands and were sucking on them like people do next to Greyhound buses.

Nicotine-addicted, tooth-pulled monkeys—a cruel metaphor if ever I'm short. It takes scenes of cumulative sadness on this scale to allow me even a chance of comparative self-esteem.

I called it a night, taxied alone back to my hotel, and wondered what tomorrow would bring as I traveled to LA and spent more time with my new friends.

Chapter Twenty Three

WINDSOR INTERNATIONAL BUSKERS' FEST

Canada is unique in that while having few street theatre venues, Toronto has a tiny one, Montreal another, Vancouver another, little else besides passing traffic sidewalk efforts, the country produces the largest number of street theatre festivals on the planet.

It started with Edmonton and Dick Finkle and then it blossomed out 'til there were scores of festivals throughout the country. Some 2 or 3 days and the big ones up to 10. Small communities in every section of Canada.

Communities began inviting strange people into their midst for no better reason than they were uniquely mildly amusing for short periods. (Who would have thought contrived creative responses to emotional deprivation would be so attractive?)

After years of irksome shopkeepers, traffic wardens with delusions of grandeur, anal constabulary and the like, it was always great to be invited and welcomed by communities who would gather us together and treat us well simply because they recognised the worth of the laughter we generate.

The respect was uniform if a little unexpected throughout these fests generally but each had it's different flavour, which brings us to Windsor, Ontario

Never has so much love, indifference and sweat been invested in a car park. Ken sets it up, his wife Patty's role is to help him avoid a mental breakdown, and this year Robert Nelson's wife Kumi stepped efficiently and unasked into the role of onsite programmer.

The first day is traditional for those performers with leanings towards venal aggressive politics to attempt to sway or coerce whoever's in charge of the scheduling to try to gain the best times and pitches for the biggest hats. I find it embarrassing to watch such hamfistedness personally.

It's really hard to vent your spleen at a diminutive, non-paid Asian, whose day-job involves serving you coffee at altitude without poaching your genitals. Kumi is a first class air hostess used to dealing with far worse than these.

And really, there was nothing for us to complain about. Same couldn't be said for various staff members of various service establishments at various times. Some of us left ashen-faced chambermaids, simmering bouncers, and fragile front-of-house staff in our wake, but we traditionally tip heavily and apologise profusely so it all worked out in the end. Ken had to stand outside some offices like a naughty schoolboy, forging doctors' notes that explained which of us suffered from Tourette's.

And that's because we're all highly strung individuals, so creative, so generous with our gift of producing laughter in others that we sometimes digress from society's norms. It has to be understood that this is just a natural side-effect of our genius and what's more, to be honest, we're really not much good for anything else.

Ken understands this. Here are some cast.

Alakazam's subtext relates to physically manifesting an arcane sexual statistic: that one ejaculation contains enough sperm to impregnate every female on the planet. Al's chosen quest is to do the same thing the long way. Obviously that's a great many people. If any woman reading wants to bump her name up on the list and get seen in the next ten to twenty years rather than later on when he's all wrinkly and jaded, I've heard he sells priority sessions on eBay. Al's act involves juggling, microbike riding, pole balancing and being a cheeky young scamp that woman of all ages want to sleep with.

Checkerboard Guy is this guy. And the checkerboard thing was a marketing ploy that grew like a particularly vicious virus until it devoured him whole. He has a great big cuddly juggling show that he can perform in fifteen languages and seven obscure Afghan dialects.

Reid Belstock is a clown with the rare gift of being as funny as himself as he is in character. He's a hilarious mass of contradictions too large to list here. He's the sort of person who, at a meeting, you just focus on the wall and wait for him to ask a question so that you can be entertained by the way his brain works.

Dado looks like Zippy the Pinhead and sounds approximately Irish and spends his career attracting rainfall (at least at this festival every time he went to perform it rained). Probably a really sad person to be but a really funny guy to watch.

Davio is French Canadian, and if that weren't strange enough, he speaks passable English and balances on women's bottoms before climbing a pole and striking impossible poses that last for ten seconds and take years to master. Sometimes whimsy frightens me.

Hotnuts and Popcorn: slick, sick and pass the shtick. Barely clinging to their sanity, every risk dynamic conquered, the only challenges left being general social norms and in-jokes. If they don't get rescued and taken off the street soon they'll either marry and breed, or join the foreign legion. Pulled off a ninety-minute, three staggered finales late night show masterfully, so there's still gas in the tank.

Stickleback Plasticus. Peewee and Em deftly use ironic manic enthusiasm as a comic device and are one of the few acts that are funny every time you watch them. Bear in mind that as performers we get to watch each act—if we want to—as many times as we wish, and that over time, very few acts cannot be digested as formula. Formula aside, no-one deals with energy levels like Stickleback. The Don Kings of ballroom dancing, plus all the spontaneity and guile of street theatre purists.

The Cowguys, Brian and John, have a sort of bovine burlesque that involves juggling and the sort of hideous puns that really should only be used in wartime. They have classical training and it's like Shakespeare and Bozo were put into a meat shredder and they've made sausages out of it.

Chalkcircle: Bev and Ulla are two Australian woman who sit in the blazing sun scratching the surface of the planet with coloured sticks. Patterns form and then they leave. I've never understood Australians.

Anti-Gravity Theater...what can I say? A cynical panto-sham with a drinking problem. The only redeeming fact being I don't have an ounce of self-pity in me.

Nick Nickolas is one of those freaks of nature that science is still struggling to understand. When small organisms were discovered living in unbelievably hot volcanic flues deep in the ocean, scientists actually called them 'nickyboys' until they were forced to change it to something suitably Latin. Nick has been credited with many things and discredited about twice that often. He is the reason for childproof caps and also for Mormons' special underwear. He is a magician and juggler and a sophisticated urbane raconteur. It is still advised that even if he asks you nicely, don't pull his finger.

Marie Claude is a face/body painter whose work and its quality carries her from major festival to major festival. She unleashes animals from the faces of small children and then sets them free. And that's apparently a good thing.

Mad Chad Taylor should be an ambassador for real Californians because he is in fact very real. It's a bit of a shock really—enthusiastic chainsaw juggling, genuine, upbeat, thoughtful I could tell he listened and was genuinely curious rather than as many do, simply waiting for a gap in conversation to sell themselves. Freaked me out when I first met him. He's the kind of guy who can go to a strip club and it doesn't seem dirty. He's what Alakazam could be with the right dosage of saltpeter.

Lee Zimmerman is the other sort of Californian... sort of Randy Newman, rock and roll show with puppets: deadpan, ironic, self-taught, highly skilled and witheringly articulate. Had this great monologue about being the bottom feeder of the festival, with the elevated jugglers being the sharks at the top of the food-chain and him being the only performer who really was risking his life rather than it just being a line because if he went home with no money his wife would kill him.

A challenge known well in advance that's unique to this festival is that it's a tourist draw as much as it is an opportunity for a community to celebrate itself. It's Windsor and it's just over the river from Detroit.

Every weekend, American tourists pop over in large numbers to exploit the slightly cheaper goods and services of their northern mini-me in a sort of 'living beyond, but within our means' sort of 'more bang for your buck' sort of a way. , I admit that Windsor depends on it. It's just another example of the dynamic of a border town. Copenhagen has the same thing with hordes of Swedes arriving every weekend to drink a cheaper kind of beer and have sex with a slightly different kind of blonde.

Now at this festival, which, in my opinion, is a two-and-a-half day fest held over four, the Mayor steps up to the mic and in his immaculately kept, politically astute and faultlessly jovial way, opens it and thanks the sponsors without whom none of this would be possible and to whom we're all exceedingly and sincerely grateful.

He really was remarkable. All the performers were crying and the sponsors and spectators alike were rushing up and hugging one another. One elderly woman was so touched, she there and then donated all her worldly goods to nobody in particular and walked naked into the river.

Bear with me, I have a disturbing habit of coming to the point when you least expect it. My point—such as it is—is that the Windsor fest is as much about getting Americans over the bridge to open their wallets at bars and casinos as it is to reward the local townsfolk with a festival that brings them together to celebrate both their diversity and ours. It tries gamely to do both and I think succeeds to a degree at both. For example, it is sponsored by both the Casino (tourists) and a mental health organisation (locals).

Lots of others as well but those two sum it up for me. At the majority of festivals, even though there might be significant numbers of tourists, the performers are generally aware that they are bringing something to the community and that is their prime function. While at Windsor (though good hats are made and undeniably good times are had) there are times when after strenuous efforts and much laughter, a show ends and at least two thirds of an audience turn their backs and insensitively head off to the next piece of free entertainment.

Why? Because they're tourists who owe Windsor nothing more than making their money last as long as it can before they head home.

There was one world-class performer (Emma from Stickleback), who held it in for an hour or more until safely away from the site before slowly subsiding into tears and as some of you will understand, it had nothing to do with the money. Just tired and spent and undervalued and used. Ken's great; and more than a producer. And it's necessary that Robert's there and the locals who turn up year after year as volunteers to support it and others who bring the whole family to laugh and cheer and celebrate are the reason most of us attend. But just because we're romantic doesn't mean we're stupid and the tourist showcase thing just might have to be addressed. (At this point Martin's name gets scratched from every festival casting list in North America because it equally can be argued that the performers make as much as they do anywhere else or else they wouldn't be there.)

Oh, but the moments make it all worthwhile, and really that's our strength. We can take tired old formulas and create beautiful original irrepressible moments. I'll just list one or two.

Moment Pee Wee and Em were starting their show with a couple of hundred people gathered in the daytime, just mucking about creating atmosphere, character and focus when Em notices three children in the crowd, seated and staring intently at the ground.

So she makes her way over and asks in a stage whisper,

'What are you doing?'

The children, serious as only children can be, point to three bugs on the ground and state,

'They're not moving.'

Em considers this and then asks,

'Are they dead then, do you think?'

The kids nod solemnly. After another brilliant pause, Em asks,

‘Shall we bury them, then?’

They nod.

So Em picks up the dead bugs and the kids follow and they walk through the stage and up onto the grass bank behind the stage and they dig a small hole and bury the bugs with all the respect accorded the moment and then walk back down and the kids sit down. The moment is over and the build-up continues.

Moment The festival is over; canceled early by a sudden downpour. Performers have been milling on the covered stage waiting for Robert’s decision...on or off; now it’s off. There’s another tent in which 100 or so public have sheltered hopefully. Nick can’t help himself. He cobbles a show together in his head that is not the show he’s been doing all season, just bits and pieces he remembers along with whatever props are at hand, and wanders over. He asks everyone whether they want a show and of course they do, although they don’t completely trust him at first because he’s a bit loose and weird and he’s standing on a table that’s not too stable.

It doesn’t take long and it’s all ripping along and even though the first two thirds of the show was uphill, we’re over the hump and Nick’s juggling three balls while trying to strip from the waist up and finally he’s done it. His slightly less than pristine body is exposed all sweaty with seismic subcutaneous waves sweeping across what years ago might have been a tight form. He’s juggling and exclaims,

‘Ladies and gentlemen, the body of a god,’

and I swear the kid was all of seven years old and quick as a flash he yells,

‘Yeah, Buddha.’

Moment John from the Cowguys is handicapped by the fact that he’s such a nice guy and such a good sport and just by existing in our midst reinforces all that is cruel and unfair and hilarious. He comes up to the buskers’ area from the public area of the bar and brings with him his dinner and a pint and sits at a table with Pee Wee (judge), Lee (jury), and Nick (executioner).

One of them addresses him while he’s eating and as he casts his eyes back to his meal he notices his beer is missing and Nick’s suddenly right across the room with a half-heartedly innocent look on his face and a suspicious pint in his hands. John laughs good-naturedly then makes a critical error. He says,

‘You won’t misdirect me again.’

Nick returns and replaces the beer, but then in a rapidly moving, spontaneously planned and coordinated series of events, John, with his arms protectively across his plate, manages to have the contents of his dinner disappear, item by item (I think it was steak, vegetables, mashed

potatoes but it really doesn’t matter) from underneath his eyes while ‘never being misdirected again.’

He’s befuddled, sitting there with an empty plate while Nick, Pee Wee and Lee weep with

laughter when the unthinkable happens; food starts re-appearing on his plate. The humour at this point strayed dangerously close to potential aneurysm and John finally started to get a bit pissed off as he realised that Nick had actually grabbed his nicely prepared steak off his plate, in the millisecond he wasn't focused on it, with his grubby little fingers.

It may have its downsides, but what we do to the public and what we do to each other and the skill and laughter that go with it are reason enough to meet up regularly and Canada really does lead the way in this area.

If I've offended anyone, sorry. If I haven't offended anyone, sorry. Thanks for the moments.

Chapter Twenty Four

XIHU

Xihu District (西湖), or West Lake is a district in Hangzhou, China. It has an area of 263 square kilometres, and a population of 520,000. The postal code is 310013. A palindrome. Please, please just shoot me.

It was my third trip to China, and China's third International Clown Festival. Out of a cast of 60 each time, there were only seven of us who had done each one. Prior to arriving this had made me feel special; however, arriving at the Shanghai airport alone with no-one there to meet me quickly put paid to any idea that I was anything other than a convenient clown-cog.

This was unhelpful because the Chinese don't like strays in their airports. Less than harmonious was I. Two days before setting off, my marriage had been canceled and I was still and would continue for a year to be, in befuddled, self-pitiful shock. Potentially helpful Chinese officials would approach but I had nothing for them. I was a Teflon basket case. Not a single point of purchase could they gain. No phone number, no name, (well ok, a Mr. Wang, go search China immediately) no name of destination, just my passport and case and stilts. Confucius says, someone else's problem. So I simmered gently, my marinade of woebegonany becoming richer and more viscous by the moment. Some hours later I was remembered and the director himself came to meet me. Then followed a four-hour drive to Xihu.

China

Population: Human

Numbers: Numerous

Collective telepathic anarchy as road transport system: Impeccable

It's a form of ballet, the way this many people use the roads. It's not black and white; you can drive down the wrong side of the road if doing so increases the greater harmony. Confucius says...um.

'Harmony' is an ideal writ large in Chinese culture.

However, Chinese people do not hesitate in yelling at each other.. It's not a transgression to berate someone with any measure of scorn and aggression. It was comforting to see, out the window as we drove, examples of Chinese people yelling at each other. Discordance is familiar and cozy. [Adjusts Beret. It is my chosen milieu.] Between cities I saw misty peaks, terraced rice paddies, ox-driven carts, plows and nuclear power stations.

The Hotel we checked into sat across the road from the local prison and mainly housed visiting relatives. It seemed that hotels of any higher status were not interested in the hassle that a large group of international clowns presented. I can sincerely sympathise.

Which was interesting, because at the first of these Chinese festivals, in Liuzhou, we had received an amazing reception. A palatial hotel, two receptions with the mayor, before and after. Hundreds of enthusiastic young volunteers whose devotion to our well-being was as enthusiastically genuine as it was disconcerting.

That event kicked off with a parade downtown, at which (we later learnt) over a half million people attended. It was probably the largest parade dedicated to Clowns in the history of Clown. It was awesome. I had focused on the Chinese elderly in the crowd because personally, I enjoyed giving them a short burst of directed attention just to watch the years drop off their formerly weathered, stoic expressions as childish delight stole across their faces and radiated out. Call me selfish.

Also at our inaugural festival a World Heritage-quality venue was provided, with stages built over a lake. The largest theatre in the city was lent to put on a special night-time performance, followed the next day by a performance of breathtaking quality by the province's main cultural theatre company.

We were given an after-hours trip to a museum of found rocks collected over 2000 years. A set of Clown postage stamps was printed in our honour and issued throughout China to herald our arrival, and certificates in both Chinese and English were given us that certified us as cultural envoys for the city. We were each given gifts. A book of photos of the area and a CD with a presentation on the city. Liuzhou is undoubtedly and will always be my Chinese hometown.

Three years later we were in a hotel housing prisoners' relatives, with rooms that overlooked the exercise yards and turrets manned by armed guards. I was used to social elasticity—it's a perk of the trade—and yet the speed at which China had demoted us was impressive.

Oh well, at least we had each other.

I checked in, went up to my room to find out upon whom I'd be inflicting myself, and sure enough, the powers that be had in their wisdom paired me with Peter Panic. A full blown eccentric with a purist-street-theatre heart whom I had known many years, and whose flaws were disguised by a tapestry of sharp wit, reckless creative impulses, a superb gift for storytelling and, for the general public, a skills-drenched juggling show. He's a wonderful friend. His boredom threshold is so high he's devoted his entire life and his impressive, wry stamina to providing himself entertainment, which for this festival meant leaving the hotel every evening wearing a Mexican wrestling mask, a cape, a cap pistol and a padded groin and push-biking out into the Chinese dusk, occasionally shooting at policemen directing traffic as he passed, until he was miles away and could feel, for the first time, fear.

Which was his signal to start the second stage of his nightly adventure. Somehow finding his way back to the hotel to join us all, with a new story to tell over drinks.

He and I shared rooms often; various administrations had nowhere better to put us than together. We are cheerfully incorrigible and that can be distracting to many. I had put (cooked) chicken-heads in his bed, the last festival we shared. He had, suppressing his gag reflex, jammed all the oily heads into his mouth—to his mind, the simplest way to display feigned indifference as I pulled a camera from under my bedclothes. Another milestone of our relationship recorded.

I unpacked and dutifully walked the quarter-mile to a pre-selected restaurant where clown stragglers were just finishing up with dinner. I smiled and greeted those few and ate. I was a couple of hours behind the social dynamic crest and my cohorts were long gone on their first night's adventures.

I ate and reconnected with Mia, a Chinese/American resident in the States, a professional cat-herder, trouble-shooter, maelstrom-surfer, calamity-wrangler and stress-devouring

circumstantial Jujitsuist with the outward appearance of a master poker player or Buddhist monk. She is a seriously powerful harmony generator and her receptors are tuned like a shark to perceive the faintest wisps of her diet, the disquiet of others, over astounding distances. I was to her, I suppose, as an abattoir washed into the sea. She absorbed my self-centred monologue while I absorbed the minimum of Chinese smorgasbord. She listened. I needed that.

Shortly afterwards I went back to my room, still Panic-less, and found respite in deserved and well-earned unconsciousness.

Morning came, no day off for anyone, straight to business. Peter informed me of three set times for shuttles to the venue and which floor had breakfast. Still jet-lagged, I headed for a dining room to ingest the company of fools, which has always been rarer and more nutritious than any simulation of a Western breakfast some well-meaning but unqualified prison hotel could manage.

I've learnt better since, but was still at the stage where food itself was an abstraction. Dangerous in my physical theatre business, but I'd survived twenty odd years on my abused body's reserves and in my then internally-dank condition the idea of doing myself any favours was a theory that lay beyond my horizon. That said, the 'coffee' provided at the hotel was an insult to all brown liquids that had ever existed.

With a cup of industrial slurry (once sipped never again ventured), the seed from which that day's self-hatred blossomed, I walked into my vocational element, a roomful of Clowns. Old friends and new, we were the mother-load of international career journeymen Clowns, a group 60-strong collected from America, New Zealand, Canada, Holland, France, Spain, Japan, Israel, Argentina, Belgium, Russia and Mexico. I had met many of them before, either on a prior Chinese gig or simply wherever it is in the world Clowns congregate. I'd done Circus rarely, mostly working as an international street theatre Clown, but I'd done my share of corporate and private mercenary clown gigs around the world and so had bumped into both the North Americans and the Europeans. I had been and continue to be a free agent, lending my absurdity to whoever required it. On reflection—and with all due humility—I suppose I'm one of the few trudging street-based globalists of my generation.

The Ringlings (Ringling Clown College-trained) were a clique; the New York clowns were interwoven with them. The Europeans were a cabal. Also mingling were the heavy-drinking brigade, combative chemical masochists from both sides of the Atlantic who met over vast quantities of liquor to spill and spin tall tales that, in a Clown's world, tend to be based more on actual events than imagination. One thing we do well amongst ourselves is tell good stories; we have high standards for legitimate hilarity but a lifetime of surreal potential to collect our shared stories of note.

Six clowns had secured the dubious but financially secure tenure of being 'Ronalds' back in the US. They are sworn and contracted to secrecy; you only ever find out via some other clown's loose lips. One ex-Ringling clown was also a police officer back stateside. Ages ranged from late twenties to approaching sixty. All they had in common was barely voids in their narratives. Such is the fate of a Ronald.

Some had come into this clown dimension late, some were born into it. Training ranged from self-taught to Russian circus school. There were also a smattering of professional international

eccentrics, a master face and body-painter or two, and additionally, from Scotland, Holland, France and Japan, the world's best balloon artists and their lithesome models, who were to put on a surreal fashion show.

What a relief for me to be here.

I was a realist. My opinion was that China, much like Japan in the late 80s-early 90s, had created enough internal wealth that a means was sought to educate populations and create a generator of wealth flowing back up to the proprietors of society. (Governments being little more than revenue generating media mechanisms run by a select few.) A standard, by-the-numbers, template middle class was instigated.

A middle class is defined essentially by disposable income and a means of being seduced by non-essentials packaged as freedom of choice and sold for profit back to the stratum that invented them.

Clowns (in my experience in Asia anyway) can be used as the shock troops of this campaign, along with more general commercial concepts like Valentine's Day, Halloween and Christmas. Events are manufactured in which pan-cultural experiences are sold at a profit to that portion of the public newly seduced by the reality of having more money than they need to feed their families. Hence products and experiences that we in the West are born with access to (and so rarely examine) are provided, and a newborn middle class is defined, expressing itself in a commercial dance choreographed by its paymasters. Think of a mining town's company store and apply that to an entire country. A profitable new seam opens up, and the mining company opens a pay-as-you-use activity centre. Spend a moment ceasing to be abjectly grateful for the doo-dads acquired via Third World slavery and you may see what I mean.

This is the reality I perceive. That does not blind me to the universal truth that laughter itself transcends any trite system that seeks to yoke it.

We all need our faiths. That is mine. Bite me.

Over the next seven days, I was to once more immerse myself in the mirth and levity only collective comic engineers/alchemyists can muster. I do love my professional tribe.

The venue itself was a temporarily walled-off, ticketed section of a public park. Three main stages, each with back-to-back programming. There were also roving clowns, roving models in balloon dresses, and for a fee designed to heavily bruise but not lacerate your Chinese wallet, you could get your child's face painted by an international artist in that field.

The days were spent hiding a genuine suicidal depression behind my makeup while being a backdrop for hastily contrived family photos. The crowds were too dense for anything else. Forty minutes at a time maintaining a brittle internal vigilance, while mobbed by competing family units fighting for the opportunity to crowd around me and flash the universal peace sign at the camera. Oh, the romance.

In the evenings, a gang of us had discovered a nearby improvised restaurant, a converted ad hoc concrete storage area, run by a local Chinese family. The prison guards ate there, and after the first evening our collective internal hilarity as we bantered and spun tales and giggled earned

some general tolerance. We adopted that family and they fed us and provided limitless beer. We gave them gifts and tipped heavily and they stayed open as long as we wanted while the mother sat against a wall creating ornate needlework pictures on purchased quilts. We bought all those as well.

Whatever the venue, wherever we meet, however we happen to be exploited in our chosen pursuit of making strangers briefly gleeful—these are my friends, my workmates, my brothers—

Whatever my life contained to get me here, with these people, these unstoppable, unquenchable flames of absurd eccentric incandescence who will not, who cannot simply grow up and stop playing and laughing and finding new ways to thumb their noses at that thing we all know, that thing that visits and attempts to devour us, that feeling of a life half lived, while they, blithely, for their own sake as well as for us all, test the borders of possibility and imagination and bliss, too, as Peter Panic did every evening in Xihu, return to show us that in fact there are no borders but fear—Whatever despairing inner provinces I've ever been stranded in have been worth enduring, simply because I have the companionship of this fraternity that loves me as I love them. Imperfectly, dysfunctionally yet with a humour that cannot be quenched and with a collective faith in that humor that is redeemed in the laughter we create.

I am so very, very profoundly grateful.

I had also collected 'X'. My arbitrary alphabetical quest was over. A sense of achievement settled for all of two minutes. I needed something else to live towards. I decided to write these stories. In the order they were achieved, and in the order they were written, this was the last. I wonder what my future holds?

I hope there's Clown in it.

Chapter Twenty Five

YATES COUNTY, NY

I did a charity gig, a birthday party for a 7-year-old, at a Mennonite compound in upstate NY.

They were going to pay me in maple syrup and a sideboard for the bathroom.

These people dress funny and tend to conceive via secondhand bathwater a little more frequently than average, but they are pacifists and hard workers, and gosh darn it Clown is universal.

So there I was, in a bare hall with 20 children with overdeveloped biceps and badly set limbs after farm related fractures, when I noticed the birthday boy had a harelip.

I know how it feels to be shunned by your peers simply because you look funny, slur when you talk, and wet the bed (I don't drink nearly as much as I used to).

So in the spirit of collective camaraderie and everyone walking a mile in each others scuffed farm-boots, I dove into my prop-bag where I keep arts admin, performance and sadomasochistic props, and emerged with a stapler, which I used to staple everyone but the birthday boy's (who didn't have one) upper lips to the base of their noses.

I then improvised a show, consisting of pratfalling while attempting to comically mop up their collective spittle and drown their cries for help by playing The Ramones at volume from my PA.

On reflection (and I've had time to reflect) I might have been a little too sophisticated for this particular audience.

As Gustav, the Clown whom I consider a mentor, once told me,

'Your primary responsibility in life as well as performance is to keep yourself entertained.'

So the doors were locked (which is the custom at these venues, apparently) but one of the tykes managed somehow to throw a wooden wheelbarrow through a window and escape, and next thing you know the doors burst open and a scrum of surly-looking parents and elders rushed in and with needle nose pliers undid all my good work before forming what I could only call a threatening circle about me.

It was at this point the harelipped birthday boy let out a silken peal of laughter. Everyone stopped and stared.

I had been warned on arrival that, along with the lip and the involuntary violent bowing and the missing ear and the club foot, that little Jacob the 12th-and-a-half had never uttered a sound.

I tried to remain humble, waiting for them to work out for themselves what a profound clown they had had the privilege of bartering services with, but instead they picked me up and roughly bundled me into

a windowless room that smelt vaguely of goat vomit.

I was stuck in that room for six days. Every day they brought me a preserve jar full of marinated yoghurt cheese balls.

I feared the worst. I thought I was being kept as breeding stock, but in a strategy worthy of a MacGyver episode, I escaped. After retaining six days worth of cheesy flatulence, I ignited it with a flint, blew the door off its hinges, and hightailed it.

Chapter Twenty Six

ZUSHI

Zushi is a small fishing and flower-growing village at the end of a railway line, an hour or two out of Tokyo.

I had moved out of the city to try and illogically evade a heartbreak. I tended to try and escape myself by moving away from nodes of my life's pain. Every mirror I met tattooed the pointlessness of this gambit on my withered soul, but stubbornly I stuck to the only flawed gambit I possessed.

Japan sold beer and whiskey out of vending machines that had internal timers, usually off by midnight and on again sometime of a morning. I had found a local malfunctioning unit permanently on. That and the slew of self-help books I'd bought were my solace as, is my wont, I marinated in self-pity, devouring good advice and alcohol until I lost the capacity to focus.

This desperate gambit had its small advantages. I had one good NZ friend in Japan, Rob MacLaren, a fellow clown I'd shared years (since my mid teens) of imaginative misadventures with. He was more or less an adult while I was an arrested child. He had set me up in a beachside apartment, and would visit and try not to smile too ruefully at the 'How to Be Happy' paperbacks scattered about the place with the empty bottles. Rob was one of the first of many to curse me with the unwanted responsibility of being a 'comic genius'. His love for me eclipsed the frustration he and others had felt, seeing my effortless talent wasted. My love for him meant I jumped at any mad suggestion he offered. He had suggested I come to Japan in the first place.

We'd both been in Stalker Stilt Theater, a dark, pretentious, romantically masochistic stilt company that lasted a couple of years and a couple of national tours before imploding under its own catholic residue. It took all and gave nothing. We were all on unemployment—apart from the director—and eventually the collective generosity expired.

But we had stilt skills out the yin-yang, and had trained in cultural isolation such that our methods, movement vocabularies, and skill-sets were unique. We had copied no-one.

Rob and I had scaled a cathedral on stilts for a photo-shoot, visited an abandoned mental hospital atop a hill on a pitch black night where you could not see the ground and the driveway dropped off sheer on one side, we had walked through the deserted capital city Wellington ('The Windy City') during a ferocious gale, wrestling each step forward. So when he visited me in Zushi and we saw the quarter mile sea-break with the lamppost at its end, we knew we had the afternoon covered.

We put on our stilts and scrambled up, using skills we had mastered to assist each other to our feet from a prone position on top of the wall. There was a danger either side, twenty feet sheer to a service road on one side and a fifteen-foot drop down to jagged rocks on the other. The top was only three feet wide, with a dogleg kink at the halfway point. Any mistake would mean physical disaster.

Taking small deliberate steps we set out, staggered so one wouldn't take the other out if anything went sideways. The wind was brisk and gusty and the lone lamppost seemed impossibly far away. The concentration and focus required to not put a foot wrong while keeping balance and keeping forward momentum to avoid disaster mutually accepted virgin territory. There was no going back once committed.

We each screamed with excitement and fear and mutual joy as we tottered under grey skies towards our objective. It took a good twenty minutes to make it out. First one, then the other, made it to the lamppost where we clung, ecstatic. The best of friends celebrating our common madness.

The occasional fishing boat re-entered the harbour, the crews gawking at us. Two twelve-foot, long-legged anomalies waving happily from a seemingly impossible position. Pan-cultural oddities.

We both made it back safely; it took longer and our reserves of adrenalin were fully exhausted by journey's end. We took our stilts off, looked back at the wall we'd conquered and shared a profound grin, packed up and, slinging our gear over our shoulders, casually swaggered back home, another youthful danger milestone invented and passed.

Testing oneself is a muscular reflex of youth. Most survive but there are always, among each generation's youthful peers, those who serve as a warning. Dead or maimed, early suicides, misadventures, diving off bridges, overdoses, paralyzed trying to get in the girlfriend's window, falling out of a helicopter deer-hunting. Youth means it's only in those last seconds, if that, that a fleeting truth manifests.

'I'm not special.'

For some, exceptionality never wanes. Hey ho.

This is my last story here. My life has been and continues to be a lesson in humility sought while showing off. I was, in my own wee world, a famous drunken creative. The lessons I learnt are contained here.

Laughter for me is the key. Make it happen and eventually the smiles of others will bleed across and you'll find some peace. Trust yourself. Close your eyes and face the sun. Say 'welcome' with each indrawn breath, and 'thanks' for each exhalation. Eventually you'll get over yourself.

Life is a near death experience.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could all share that thought and laugh in spite of it?

I will begin by strangling myself.

Vernon Vortex.

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So there's no marketing involved in this book apart from my request that if you liked it you simply tell a few people about it. Thanks.

Dedicated to...

Celia

Sam, Wes and Isaac

My Mother and Father

Jonathan, Mark and Paul

Aunty Francie and Uncle Lester and family

Alan Clay

Rob MacLaren

Fleur

Tania

Alison and Amy

The Stone Family, Mr. and Mrs. William, Charlie, Edward RIP, Mary-Ann, Dan and Prue

My mates, Rob Torres, Karl, Brendan, Hilby, Nick, LivingSpace, Holder, Peter Panic, Pete and Chris, Brady, Phil and Colin and extended family. Shelley, Lynne, Silver Elvis, many, many, many more

The Frost Clan

Robert Nelson, Butterfly, for testing my tolerances as I have tested others

Kumi

To Allison, who saw worth and edited.

To all in that great fraternity who go out naked into the world and create unexpected laughter

To the fellowship that took me in and loved me and finally helped me become whole

To laughter, for being what it is

The darkness is your mother; she behooves reverence,

*since the mother is dangerous. She has power over you,
since she gave birth to you. Honour the darkness as the light, and
you will illumine your darkness.*

Jung

[PheW]