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Griffith REVIEW 45: The Way We Work

INTRODUCTION

The power of tales well told

Hamish Townsend

WHEN ALL IS said and done, it's about the licence. That social pass that says because you're a journalist you can ask the kinds of questions few others can ask, meet with the kinds of people others rarely meet, get up close to the real story and tell the rest of us about it.

At its best, journalism is created by men and women who go to the places and meet the people we can't and ask them the questions we are not able to. It sifts the answers from the public record, private observation and as much investigation as possible. The result should enlighten us about events, people, opinions and policies that affect us.

Despite an up and down reputation, and sometimes falling short on these lofty ambitions, everyone loves a good yarn and most believe the press should be as free as possible. Australian journalist, Peter Greste, with two colleagues is currently serving a seven-year stretch in an Egyptian prison because this licence is not accepted everywhere. Having a sceptical eye toward people in power can be a dangerous occupation. Greste, who works for Al Jazeera, had only been in Egypt for two weeks when he was arrested and convicted on evidence that, from this distance, and with our acceptance of the importance of press freedom, seems political and bewildering.

This ebook is dedicated to Peter Greste and his colleagues.

Their trial has been covered by some excellent journalism, especially the ABC's coverage throughout the long trial process. The shambolic nature of their trial is alien to most Australians and Griffith REVIEW wanted to know how such a justice system develops. Researcher, Gijs Verbossen has been on the ground in Egypt and provides this ebook with an excellent background to how a revolution became a war on information and objective reporting can be threatening.

Journalism can also be grubby, intrusive, demeaning, mendacious and obsessed with the mundane piffle of celebrity, crime and scandal. This fog

does little to inform readers or enrich their capacity to empathise with each other.

Three famous and powerful English people escaped criminal charges for hacking into private phones in the same week Peter Greste received his seven-year sentence. As Nick Davies wrote in *The Guardian,* the trial was as much, or more, about power than journalism – as the Greste trial shows the two are always closely related. Andy Coulson, the British Prime Minister's one-time media adviser was found guilty. Rebekah Brooks, one of Rupert Murdoch's most trusted executives, was not. In the struggle between political and commercial power, Davies argued that commerce won. Arguably journalism lost in both courts.

THIS EBOOK FEATURES some fine pieces of journalism and stories about journalism by Sonya Voumard, Kathryn Knight, Phil Brown, Frank Robson, Peter Mares, Craig McGregor, Gijs Verbossen and Rachel Buchanan. It represents an important companion to *Griffith REVIEW 45: The Way We Work*.

Few industries have suffered as rapid and tortured a change as journalism. Anyone left from 'the old days' has been forced into digital production, but also managed workplaces, fewer resources, less time, lower pay and greater demands.

What this means in gritty practical terms is illustrated in Rachel Buchanan's essay, which describes working offshore – in New Zealand – to produce content for Australian newspapers. The globalisation of the service economy is not confined to call centres in India and the Philippines. Even at the beginning of the century, when talk of journalists being 'content producers' first entered the newsroom lexicon out of the well-remunerated kit bag of management consultants, no one predicted local journalism could be done from another country.

Phil Brown is of the old school. Phil is currently the Arts Editor for the *Courier-Mail* in Queensland, but this means he is forced to hide the fact his favourite movie is *Dirty Harry*. Phil writes of how he spent the 1980s swapping gossip with gangsters, while reporting on Expo '88 from his bedroom across the river – without ever visiting the site.

From the same end of the same town, Frank Robson writes about a crime that won't let the city go. Nor will it let go of the relatives of some of the central characters. The Whiskey Au Go Go fire was, until Port Arthur, one the worst mass killings in contemporary Australia. Robson suggests that the flaws in the police investigation that followed made it worse. The impact of this incident in the life of the family of the man accused of the lighting the fire will stay with you long after reading.

Frank's open style also brings us close to the craft of connecting with people, listening well and asking those questions the rest of us never would.

Kathryn Knight writes about being on the receiving end of the news process and feeling her 'story' – the life of her family and disabled daughter – was 'sullied' by the agenda of the journalist. She illuminates the oft-quoted Joan Didion line about journalism being the art of seduction and betrayal from the perspective of the reluctantly seduced.

Sonya Voumard was born with ink in her veins and spread across her kitchen table. Born into the profession through a father reluctant to encourage her to follow his footsteps, she 'grew balls' and joined the *Herald* in Melbourne. It was the start of a halting career in the conservative corridors of 'old-fashioned journalism'.

Covering everything from courts to theatre to politics, Voumard picked up 'the thrill of by-lines and how your adrenalin kicks right through your body as soon as a big story breaks. It's a feeling that never leaves you.' But the uninspired daily grind led to falling out of love with a dying medium.

Peter Mares and Craig McGregor provide two excellent pieces of journalism from our printed edition which were too perfect to leave out of this ebook.

As no one has quite learned how to make money from news on the internet yet, how journalism settles into its digital world is a work in progress. There are many optimists who see an exciting new world. As Voumard writes, 'Maybe the next wave will be more inclusive, maybe it will be better.'

We hope you enjoy this ebook. It is filled by people who know how to tell a good story and about some of the ways journalists work, now and in the past.

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ESSAY

Collateral damage

Peter Greste and Egypt's information war

Gijs Verbossen

DEPOSING A DICTATOR does not make a revolution and a quick military coup does not defeat one either. For better or worse, the so-called Arab Spring is ongoing with a markedly different process in each country. In some it is becoming a virtual Winter. Depending on the makeup of society, the configuration of state institutions and geopolitical significance, the revolutionary process continues by gun in Syria, tolerates technocratic respite in Tunisia, or makes casualties by newspaper in Egypt.

Egypt is in the midst of an information war between old interests and new ideals. On the one side is the military establishment, in unhappy wedlock with interior security and former President Mubarak's old business cronies. On the other is the remainder of the revolutionary seculars, who now find themselves among Islamists when taking to the streets. They compete for the attention of the lower- and middle-classes, who provided the weight that pushed out presidents Mubarak and Morsi, and now cautiously keep President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in power.

No matter how authoritarian it may appear, the present government knows it needs the consent of the majority of Egyptians to govern. In order to gain and keep this consent, it needs to be seen to be in control. But more importantly, it needs to be the people's best option and to do this it needs complete control over public perception of any alternative. The choice is between stability through authority or instability through reform. Whoever dominates the public perception wins the war. It is a highly asymmetrical war; most of the media is state-owned, social media and mobile communications are constantly monitored and anyone not in line with the government's message is a target for Egypt's deep-rooted security establishment and co-opted judiciary.

This is the war Australian journalist Peter Greste stepped into, when he landed in Cairo to fill in on the Egypt desk of Al Jazeera English. As has been well told elsewhere, two weeks after his arrival he and his more locally established colleagues, Baher Mohamed and Mohamed Fahmy, were arrested and sentenced to between seven and ten years in jail. They were found guilty of 'conspiring' with the now-banned Islamic organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood, for broadcasting 'false' news considered 'defamatory and destabilising' to Egypt.

I do not know Peter Greste or his colleagues. I do know the world that has swallowed them up.

ON MY FIRST trip to Egypt as a young researcher of revolutionary politics I began by meeting a foreign correspondent. We sat down for dinner and discussed life in Cairo. She warned me not to mention the names of the main political players, since minders might be having dinner two tables away: 'You never know what list you could end up on,' she said. I never saw her again. Later I learned from a foreign news service that she had been forced to hide in her national embassy before fleeing the country. She was sentenced, in absentia, to ten years imprisonment.

Independent Egyptian journalists can be at risk from either side, desperate to see their story gain the upper hand. In March 2014, a twenty-three-year-old journalist for an independent newspaper was shot dead while she covered a Muslim Brotherhood protest. The police blamed the Muslim Brotherhood and the Muslim Brotherhood blamed the police. It is unlikely anyone, except the assassin, will ever know the truth.

In an age of social media, the distinction between journalists and activists is slight, especially to Egypt's present regime. In 2011, Ahmed Maher, a leader of the April 6 Movement, was hailed by the public as spearhead of the revolution against Mubarak. But he refused to publically endorse the military as the guarantor of the revolution and in December 2013 was sentenced to three years jail for breaking President Sisi's controversial anti-protest law.

When I observed a small protest against political imprisonment, men in casual wear watched me. From across the road they spoke to their handhelds while screening the crowd. There was no way of confirming they were secret

service, but demonstrators in the crowd assured me that some of them would be picked up and interrogated by these same men on their way home for breaking the anti-protest law. It happened regularly. A regime strategy in the information war seemed apparent when one demonstrator echoed the words of the correspondent: 'They keep lists, you know?'

It is common knowledge that the security services tap phones, email and social media. Obviously the regime never admits to such practices, but first hand accounts tell otherwise. Several people told me they receive empty text messages during demonstrations, meaning the authorities are trying to determine their exact location. They needed to take out their phone batteries and move elsewhere, or run the risk of being arrested, or worse. In July 2014, Egyptian independent news outlet Mada Masr published a graphic account of a female activist receiving regular anonymous physical threats over the phone. When the threats did not silence her, she was assaulted and raped.

The persecution of activists is part of the same information war that sees journalists flee, jailed and killed. Peter Greste, Baher Mohamed and Mohamed Fahmy ended up on the so-called Marriott Cell list, named for the hotel where they were arrested.

THIS INFORMATION WAR is vital to the regime's survival strategy. Revolutions are generally spearheaded by a section of a small middle-class intelligentsia, but they traditionally gain weight and momentum through broader social support, especially from the poor. However, economically vulnerable people are more likely to surrender early revolutionary gains to old-regime apologists, as they simply cannot afford the inevitable instability of genuine political transition. Knowing the power of fear from their proximity to the previous regime, the new government play on the fear of instability, insisting on their indispensability in preventing further chaos. While such programs can certainly be violent, they are essentially propaganda campaigns.

The Egyptian story, sold relentlessly through state media, as well as dramatic YouTube videos, posters and radio broadcasts, is that the Muslim Brotherhood came to power under false democratic pretensions. Egyptians are told the Brotherhood are actually trying to establish an Islamic state with strict sharia as the only source of law. According to this narrative, the ultimate

powers behind the Brotherhood are foreigners, especially the government of Qatar, which intervened in the form of a Trojan horse called Al Jazeera. Fortunately, according to this story, the good people of Egypt quickly caught on to the Islamists' deception of their revolution and asked the benevolent military to come to their rescue. Thanks to the firm hand of the state, the Islamist threat has now gone underground, but apocalyptic terror awaits Egypt if they and their foreign conspirators are allowed to rise again. The revolutionary youth of 2011 are thanked for their work, but are warned against bothering the regime with requests for social justice, transparency and accountability.

For regime opponents, both Islamic and secular, the record of Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood-led government gave this narrative just enough truth to sustain it. During Morsi's reign he insisted on amplifying the constitution's religious nature and failed to guarantee minority rights. Most importantly, he didn't improve economic conditions for the majority of Egyptians. The question remains whether President Sisi can do better.

Former US President George W Bush's War on Terror tagline, 'you're either with us, or against us', sums up the Egyptian regime's campaign. In March 2014, Associated Press reported official government sources stating sixteen thousand imprisonments had occurred since Morsi's removal (including the former president himself). Human Rights Watch (HRW) says this large number falls well short of the actual total. They cite the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights reporting of over forty-one thousand arrests and indictments for protesting, or on suspicion of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. HRW reports more than 2,500 people have been killed in protests put down by police and military and some seventeen thousand have been wounded since July 2013. In turn Jihadists have attacked police and military personnel, killing about three hundred officials. The regime blames the Muslim Brotherhood for these attacks, but most of them have been claimed by a Sinai-based group, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. Their cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood is yet to be proven.

In a country where half of the population lives on the poverty line, an apocalyptic scenario fuelled by chaos and instability is persuasive. Most media is under active state control, so it is easily promulgated.

The lower classes' fears cannot be easily dismissed. Most rely on day-wage labour – street vending and impromptu services – to survive each day. This informal economy quickly evaporates when fear empties streets, squares and markets. What they want is stability: 'Mubarak was a crook, but at least we knew what we'd earn at the end of the day; the last three years we didn't know if we could feed our kids,' is the mantra on the streets.

JOURNALISTS ARE PAWNS in this domestic populist electoral campaign. For the regime there is no virtue in a free press. A free press may challenge the regime's apocalyptic narrative and thus their survival. Al Jazeera raised the stakes. The coverage of its local Egyptian satellite, Al Jazeera *Mubasher Misr*, 'Egypt Live', was outspokenly pro-Morsi, to the extent that several of its employees quit. In the public's eye *Mubasher Misr* was a Muslim Brotherhood news channel, a view compounded by the fact that its Qatari owner is currently the Muslim Brotherhood's primary international patron. When the military arrested Morsi and declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, its media outlets and those perceived sympathetic to the cause were also shut down.

Despite its editorial independence, Al Jazeera English was collateral damage. The anti-Brotherhood fervour is unrelenting in Egypt and needs feeding. Whether a canny survival strategy of the regime, or a genuine attempt to protect the country by the judiciary, the function of the prosecution of Peter Greste and his colleagues is clear. They are sacrificial lambs fed to the domestic electorate.

Any hope that Greste and his colleagues may get out of prison will depend on finding a new scapegoat for Egypt's continuing misfortunes.

Journalists and activists in Egypt are twice unlucky. The international community that claims to rally behind freedom and democracy cannot risk losing the favour of a pivotal partner in an unstable region. The week before Greste and his colleagues were convicted, the US 'unlocked' nearly A$600 million worth of foreign aid in the form of Apache attack helicopters, mainly destined for anti-terrorism campaigns in Egypt's Sinai desert.

Yet every minute activists and journalists spend behind Egyptian bars, both President Sisi and his international partners know that claims of a free

and democratic Egypt are flimsy. Only when Egypt's marginalised majority can look beyond their leaders, their poverty and their uncertainty, can its revolution bear freedom and democracy.

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ESSAY

Danny's story

The stink of the Whiskey case won't go away

Frank Robson

BRISBANE'S BOGGO ROAD Gaol, where forty-two prisoners were hanged by their necks until dead, is now part of a popular Sunday market-place offering snow cones and slushies, books, hats and T-shirts, Hungarian donuts, German sausages and handmade ukuleles. Danny Stuart stands before this array scratching his head as though spoilt for choice. He's actually calculating how difficult it would be to break into the defunct prison and climb onto its roof.

What remains of the heritage-listed hellhole squats defiantly on a knoll in Dutton Park, just a few kilometres from the CBD. Danny walks several times around its perimeter, assessing likely points of entry. At fifty-three, he's a tall, lean figure with the flinty, uncompromising features of a cowboy, although every so often – when he stops and stares up at the prison roof – the hardness goes out of his face and he looks as though he might be about to cry.

The night before, when we were drinking on my veranda, I noticed that Danny has several quite very different 'faces' and isn't always aware of which one he's wearing. Given the nature of his life so far, that's not surprising. Beaten and tormented by his psychotic father, Danny was just thirteen when his uncle, John Andrew Stuart, became one of two men convicted over the firebombing of Brisbane's Whiskey Au Go Go nightclub in 1973. The fire claimed fifteen lives and is one of Australia's worst mass murders, although – like a lot of others – Danny never accepted that his uncle did it.

John 'The Unbreakable One' Stuart protested his innocence right up until his own suspicious death at Boggo Road on New Year's Day, 1979. A couple of years earlier, Stuart somehow got on to the prison roof and, while news choppers hovered above, used bricks to spell out the words, 'Innocent victim of police verbal'.

Now, almost four decades later, Danny is thinking about doing something similar. Danny isn't a criminal. He's a natural therapist with two grown daughters, a woman he loves and a little dog who sleeps on their bed. Danny was the favourite grandson of the Stuart family matriarch, Edna 'Ma' Watts (the mother of John Andrew Stuart and Danny's father, Daniel), who died in 2003 still trying to prove that Stuart was innocent of the Whiskey murders.

She accumulated several suitcases full of information about the 'real' culprits, and Danny, unable to accept that his beloved Ma would be forever cast as the mother of a mass murderer, vowed to one day write a book that would bring out the truth. Several years ago, after the death of Ma's second husband, Clive Watts, Danny inherited the old woman's files, closed down his health clinic and set out to keep his promise.

His book is a dark, unruly, harrowing thing in which the Stuart family demons vie for attention with an ever-expanding cast of bent cops, corrupt politicians, venal businessmen and LSD-gobbling thugs. The whole greed-crazed misadventure in the early hours of Thursday, March 8, 1973, to the bodies of ten men and five women being laid in neat rows on a concrete driveway outside the firebombed nightclub in Fortitude Valley.

Danny Stuart isn't a worldly man and confronting his own memories for the book almost unhinged him. 'On some days,' he wrote of his childhood, 'I thought I would go mad and never know the outside world, or even live long enough to grow up.'

When I first read that, about a year before Danny and I came to check out the prison roof, I thought it might be the most heartbreaking sentence ever written by a natural therapist.

But now it's almost the end of 2012 and Danny's book still hadn't found a publisher. His early enthusiasm (he tried to engage Harry M. Miller to negotiate with the film producers he imagined would be competing for his story) is gone, replaced by dejection and bewilderment. He's also half-convinced that the now doddery ex-cops whose villainy he's trying to expose are somehow preventing his book being published.

I laughed when he told me that, but – as events will show – fate does seem to be favouring those who would rather the Whiskey case was left to its

slumbers. Either way, Danny's paranoia is understandable. Among the varied horrors he experienced as a boy was the spectre of his father, Daniel – 'a weak, sly, woman-bashing, child-bashing prick' – conspiring with police to give false evidence against his own brother in return for the $50,000 reward offered in the case.

And now, after one last circuit of the brick monstrosity where John Stuart died, Danny reckons the stunt he's devised to bring all this out into the open could be a goer. 'I'll get up on that roof with about fifty copies of the book on USB sticks,' he says. 'Then, when the shit hits the fan and the reporters arrive to see what I'm doing up there, I'll just throw the sticks down to them. Whattya think?'

I THINK JOURNALISTS who live in the same place long enough absorb its tragedies in accumulating layers, like growth rings on a tree. About halfway through my own chronological stratum, within the seemingly interminable Joh period, is the impression of Edna Ruby Watts icing a sponge cake in the kitchen of her neat little weatherboard house in Brisbane's dreary northern outskirts.

It was 1982, I was thirty-one, and Watts, sixty-nine, had agreed to talk to me for a story about the Whiskey fire and her two 'lost' sons, John and Daniel Stuart. At that stage, John was three years dead and Daniel was hiding from the world, tormented it seemed, by what he'd done to his brother. With the sponge finished, the deeply religious Watts settled next to me on a sofa and told the family history, which unfolded like an old testament nightmare based around the Sins of the Father.

Her first husband, David James Stuart, was an embittered invalid who bashed her and their four children. When the older two had left home, leaving just Daniel and John, their father took to locking Daniel in a dark cupboard under a stairwell, where his screams could be heard by the neighbours.

Sobbing, Watts said Daniel grew into a 'moral coward with a mighty inferiority complex. If someone told him he was a duck, he'd quack.' In contrast, John (whom she called 'my Peter Pan' because of his boyhood appeal to other kids and local dogs) was strong, handsome, highly intelligent and seemingly fearless. After their father died in 1950, John, although fifteen

months younger, soon emerged as Daniel's physical and mental leader, as well as best mate and protector.

But at fifteen, John stole a car and ended up serving two years in Westbrook, a now defunct borstal near Toowoomba that became notorious for physical and sexual abuse of boys by staff. (A fellow inmate, Al Fletcher, has described seeing Stuart being flogged by a warder until pieces of flesh were stripped from his back: '…they couldn't break him…so they kept on hitting him.')

Watts said Stuart emerged from Westbrook 'full of fury'. He became an habitual offender, and was soon lost into the prison system that would claim twenty of his thirty-eight years. Feared by prisoners and guards as one of the toughest and most intractable men inside, he sewed his own lips together to protest his innocence, spat on warders, broke bones (typically those of men who'd abused women or children), did time in Boggo Road's horrifying 'Black Hole' punishment cell, befriended spiders – '…when I'd hold my breath I could, eventually, get my eyes within inches of theirs and we could stare at each other' – and wrote hundreds of thousands of words of verse and reflection in tiny copperplate:

> One by one the slow years drew him to their
> keeping
> And broke the heart that once had held such
> fire…

Ma Watts spoke guardedly of her 'dangerous' Whiskey investigations, and the help she was getting anonymously from sympathetic cops, lawyers, prisoner guards and criminals who also believed Stuart and his co-convicted, James Finch, had been set up for the crime. She told me Stuart was slowly poisoned to death in jail because he 'knew too much'. (At his inquest, Watts testified that several months before Stuart died, officially of a viral heart infection, a warder warned her 1080 dingo poison had been smuggled into Boggo Road, and 'it was meant for your son'.)

As I left, she gave me a tremulous hug and said she believed God had sent me to her. If this was true, He chose an odd vessel. As I'd told the old lady, with some trepidation before my visit, the story was for the Australian edition of *Playboy*. (I didn't tell her I was a non-believer, or that *Playboy's* local

contributors coarsely referred to it as a 'one-hand magazine'.)

But I wrote a sympathetic piece about the injustice of it all, which included the following sentence: 'In Queensland…"no answer" is often the most one can hope for. For years, in politics and in criminal and police matters, "no answer" has worked just fine for the people not making the answer and the public not receiving it.' After the story appeared, of course, nothing happened all over again.

ANOTHER RING IN my Joh period represents Brian 'The Eagle' Bolton, a rotund little crime reporter with Murdoch's since-closed *Sunday Sun* in Brisbane. In the late seventies, when I worked there, Bolton wore appalling safari suits and drank pretty much all through the day. Named for his tattoo, The Eagle was a good-hearted bloke and a clever sleuth, but sometimes trod a fine line between keeping his police sources happy and serving as a mouthpiece for their dodgy agendas.

In 1972, when John Stuart was released from Parramatta Prison and returned to Brisbane, Bolton was his local media voice. After the Whiskey was fire bombed, Bolton wrote that Stuart had been recruited months before the crime as an undercover agent by dissident police working to bring down a group of senior but corrupt officers known as the Rat Pack. The dissidents called themselves the Committee of Eight; Stuart became Agent Emu, and his role was to gather information on Rat Pack members involved in vice and gambling rackets.

Most of this action centred around nightclubs, illegal casinos and brothels in Fortitude Valley, where the bent cops and their protected crooks liaised profitably behind the sanctimonious facade of the Bjelke-Petersen government. Insurance fires and protection rackets were all the go. There were four suspicious nightclub blazes in late 1972 and early 1973, including the firebombing of Torino's in the Valley, which occurred only two weeks before the Whiskey Au Go Go inferno.

During this period, Stuart told Bolton that a Sydney crime syndicate had tried to involve him in a plot to burn the Whiskey, an upstairs bar/disco in Amelia Street on the Valley's northern fringe. Bolton personally passed the warning on to then police commissioner, Ray Whitrod, and to the

Commonwealth Police.

This was later acknowledged, but only after a series of indignant denials by police and then police minister Max Hodges, who called Bolton a liar and the 'town drunk' under parliamentary privilege.

Why didn't the cops do anything?

No answer. Both Whitrod and Hodges have since died, and it wasn't until the Fitzgerald inquiry in the late 1980s that the extent of the Rat Pack's corruption was revealed.

But Bolton stuffed up too, in a way he could never forget. Before the fire, Stuart told everyone who'd listen that cops involved with the Whiskey plot planned to pin it on him, and was desperate to establish an alibi. He'd arranged for Bolton to meet him in the Valley at 9 pm on Wednesday, March 7, 1973, so they could go together to the Whiskey and other clubs spreading the warning. Bolton agreed, but got drunk with mates, went home for an afternoon nap and slept through.

At his trial, Stuart said he rushed about for hours searching for Bolton and leaving notes on his desk at the *Sunday Sun* office in the Valley. He left his last note for Bolton at 2.20 am on March 8, and was crossing the street outside when he saw fire engines racing towards the Whiskey. The nightclub had exploded into flame at 2.08 am when two 18-litre drums of petrol were ignited just inside its downstairs doorway. Flames tore up the staircase and into the club itself, where most of the victims died within minutes of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Ominously, the police investigation was over almost before it began. Within three days, acting on information from Stuart's brother, Daniel, police raided a barbecue gathering at Daniel's home and arrested Stuart for the crime. A few days later, Stuart's one-time prison buddy James Robert Finch was found and also charged. At their trial, where both pleaded not guilty, Daniel said he'd heard Finch and his brother discussing the Whiskey and using words like 'burn' and 'cook'.

Stuart made no admissions and in the end both men were convicted largely on the basis of an unsigned 'confession' to police by Finch, which he denied making. In 1988 an unnamed policeman – one of six present when Finch made his supposed confession – told *The Bulletin*, Finch had

been verballed, meaning his confession had been manufactured by police. 'It was the way all cops in Australia did things then,' he told the writer, Bruce Stannard. In the same year, three other unidentified cops publicly attested that Finch's confession had been fabricated by police, but all declined to make official statements.

Nothing happened: at least not to any of the cops allegedly involved in the verbal. But on March 3, 1988 – five days before the fifteenth anniversary of the Whiskey tragedy – Brian Bolton committed suicide. He'd told a lot of us over the years, often in late night phone calls, that he was 'totally fucked' and couldn't deal with his guilt over not keeping that appointment with Stuart. It was as though Bolton had become trapped forever in one of his own crime yarns. One night Ma Watts found him sobbing and bumbling about outside her door. She put her arms around him and told him she forgave him, and the Lord forgave him, but it seems The Eagle couldn't extend that kindness to himself.

THE JOH PERIOD finally ends. Sir Terence Lewis, Bjelke-Petersen's handpicked police commissioner (and leader of the corrupt Rat Pack) is stripped of his knighthood and imprisoned. James Finch is released from Boggo Road and deported to his native England, where he sells the story that he and Stuart did burn the Whiskey, then reneges, saying he invented his confession for the money. Joh dies. Edna Watts dies. Daniel Stuart dies, freed at last from his misery. Fewer and fewer people remember the Whiskey, but among those who do it's hard to find any who think the case has been solved. Yet nothing happens.

In mid-2010, my phone rings and a voice I haven't heard before says, 'My name is Danny Stuart and I've been looking for you for years.' Danny is holed up on a property near Brisbane, working on his book. He says he's holding a copy of my *Playboy* article, and that Ma Watts told him it was the 'truest' thing written about John Stuart. Spooked by the enormity of his task and convinced the Whiskey 'baddies' are watching his every move, Danny is hoping I'll write about what he's doing in case something 'goes wrong'.

When we meet outside his bush retreat I'm stunned by his resemblance to his notorious uncle. 'A lot of people think that,' he says. 'There've even been

rumours that John was my father, which would have been fine with me, but I don't think it's true.' He leads the way into his workroom, where photos show Stuart hugging his mother and posing with various glamorous women, including his lover and occasional 'getaway driver' Laura Lee, who sang in nightclubs and once appeared on *Bandstand*.

Danny says that for him and his younger sister, Jenni, life with their sadistic, gun-obsessed, petty criminal father was a matter of day-to-day survival. Danny was five when Daniel Stuart left their mother, Delerie, for a six-week fling with a girlfriend. When Delerie refused to take him back, he beat her so badly she was hospitalised, then fled to Far North Queensland with the two kids and his girlfriend. Delerie spent years searching for her children before remarrying and moving overseas. It would be fifteen years before Danny and Jenni saw her again.

In the meantime, they kept moving: all over Australia, to Papua New Guinea, and back again. 'I went to thirty-one different schools but didn't learn much,' says Danny. 'I think I was twenty-one before I was able to read a book.' He and Jenni saw their 'new mother' endure brutal bashings by their father, who also flogged them with the buckle end of a belt, and on several occasions made them watch – 'to instil fear and obedience' – while he used an axe to slaughter their pet dogs.

Danny weeps recalling this. 'Dad was the one who should have been in prison all those years,' he says. 'He was the truly sick puppy. He was as crazy as a coconut.' Through occasional visits to Ma Watts in Brisbane, Danny became fascinated by tales of his wild and handsome uncle. But they didn't meet until 1972, when Danny was thirteen and Stuart, recently released from jail, came to their home in Brisbane for dinner. 'And straight away I felt comfortable with him. We could just speak with our eyes, you know? I felt some sort of connection with him, beyond what I'd ever had with anyone else.'

By then Daniel was using and selling large amounts of LSD, often taking Danny with him on high-speed drug runs to the Gold Coast. He'd also taken to hosting orgies (Danny emerged one morning to find oddly familiar TV weather girls and newsreaders sprawled naked about the house), dressing 'like Elton John', and supplying acid to a group of crazed criminals known

as the Clockwork Orange Gang, whose names have long been linked to the Whiskey fire.

(Years after Stuart first met Danny and Jenni at his brother's home, and a month before his death in 1979, Stuart wrote their mother Delerie a letter, later passed on to her by Edna Watts. It seems to have been a simple act of kindness, telling 'Del' the kids were well when he saw them, even if subdued and 'robotic', and that they still thought of her and loved her. He wrote that after the family dinner in 1972, 'my spineless, gutless brother' flew into a rage because Stuart had spoken of Delerie in front of the children. Daniel had screamed at him, 'Don't you ever mention Del to Danny and Jenni – never! Don't even think of her in front of them. Nothing! Never!'

The letter continues: 'I've seen plenty of fear in men, Del – I've seen men shit and piss their pants, literally – and true fear, in a coward like Daniel, is insanity… Even if living in fearful subjugation, Danny and Jenni must exude something that only Daniel [recognises]…their childhood memory of, and longing for, you…and the harder he tries to drive you out of their minds, the deeper he is driving you into their hearts… Don't give up, Del. Affectionately, John.')

On the Sunday after the Whiskey murders, in a plan pre-arranged with his police contacts, Daniel invited Stuart to a family barbecue at his home. Danny was standing next to his uncle, who he 'felt proud' to be seen with, when police with flak jackets and shotguns stormed in and took Stuart away. Danny never saw him again. A few days later, Daniel was visited at home by a group of detectives. 'They must have thought I was just a dumb kid,' says Danny, 'because Dad and the cops were all patting one another's backs and sharing congratulations about what a great job they'd done. That's when I knew Dad had actually sold out his brother.'

In the lead-up to the trial, he watched his father drinking with the same detectives while they openly rehearsed the evidence he would give against Stuart and Finch. In court, Stuart, handcuffed to the dock, wept when Daniel told of hearing him and Finch planning the crime. 'Dan!' he shouted, 'you're lying…you're lying for reward. It mattered when we were kids, didn't it?' After he and Finch were sentenced to life for the murder of one of the victims, Jennifer Davie, Stuart said he hoped his brother choked on the caviar he got

with his '30 pieces of silver'.

Daniel and his unhappy family left Brisbane soon afterwards and resumed their roaming. They settled for a while at Airlie Beach in the Whitsundays. 'That must have been when Dad got the [Whiskey] reward money,' says Danny, 'because all of a sudden we went from broke to rich.' Later, when they'd returned to Brisbane, Daniel was visited by two of the same detectives who'd schooled him before the trial: 'I heard them threatening to throw Dad in jail, and stuff about what he had to do for them. Later, Dad was going on about how he had to buy two new Ford cars for the bloody detectives. He was cursing and saying things like, "When are these bastards going to leave us alone?"'

Danny ran away soon afterwards. He says he was desperate to become part of the conventional, law-abiding 'outside world', but didn't know how to go about it and ended up in Adelaide, dossing under a disused building with a group of prostitutes. By nineteen, he was an amateur boxer and full-time bouncer, married with a baby daughter and living near the Gold Coast. His sister Jenni escaped their father soon after him. Through Edna Watts, she and Danny were eventually reunited with their natural mother, Delerie, now an aged pensioner living alone in a council flat near London. Asked to speak at their father's funeral in 2004, Danny and Jenni declined because they 'couldn't think of anything nice to say'.

MARCH 6, 2013: Danny Stuart and I are back on my veranda in South Brisbane, drinking rum and watching the city lights. He's given up the idea of a mass USB drop from the roof of Boggo Road Gaol. Instead he's come down from his home/clinic in Bowen to attend a memorial service for the Whiskey victims on March 8. Danny is very nervous about becoming the first Stuart to meet with the relatives and loved ones of the victims. He's already sorted out his best outfit and set it aside in my guestroom, along with many reworked notes for his address to the crowd, and a jar of the foul-tasting barley water concoction he drinks for breakfast.

There have been other developments. Danny has teamed up with a veteran crime writer, Tony Reeves (who has since died), who reckons his investigations have uncovered the identity of the real Whiskey arsonist,

the businessman who put him up to it, and the cops who framed Stuart and Finch. Independent MP Peter Wellington has undertaken to name the arsonist and call for a judicial inquiry into the case during tomorrow's session of the Queensland Parliament.

Danny and his co-author have already done media interviews about the 'breakthrough', and Danny's girlfriend Jennifer has told him by phone he should get a good sleep to be fresh for tomorrow's action. But he's far too excited to sleep. 'This is it!' he keeps saying. 'At long bloody last!' At the same time, he's still a bit jittery about the baddies, fearing they'll even now find a way to head truth off at the pass.

So we drink on. Since we became friendly I've come to understand how easily Danny could have drifted into a life of crime. He came close as a young boxer/bouncer, when police called him The Cleaner for his efficiency in dealing with messes. But even then, when he worked at clubs controlled by various knockabouts and crime figures, Danny did things differently. 'Sometimes,' he admits on the veranda, 'I'd do my nana and put a lot of blokes into la-la land. But that usually only happened if they'd been assaulting a woman or something…'

More often, when he knew a patron had consumed too much and was about to cause trouble, Danny would 'put him to sleep' pre-emptively.

To sleep?

He leans over and touches the base of his open palm to the side of my jaw. 'Just a quick tap,' he says. 'It doesn't cause damage, and they'd go straight to sleep. Then I'd carry them out the back, to the garden or wherever, and lay them down and leave a glass of water beside their heads. The water was sorta like my trademark.'

A friendly policeman, who knew of his past, urged Danny to get away from the club scene, so he became a boat builder at Airlie Beach. He formed his own company and ended up with a dozen employees, but quit the chemically dangerous industry after a cancer scare and studied to retrain as a natural therapist.

And now, fired up by tomorrow's potentialities, he wants to know how I think Mel Gibson would go playing his uncle John.

'Too old,' I tell him, not for the first time. 'And too fucking mad.'

Danny nods, disappointed. 'I guess,' he says. 'But maybe he could play one of the bent coppers.'

MARCH 7: DANNY quaffs his barley juice and heads off to do more interviews with Reeves. After that, they'll go to Parliament House where Danny has organised to meet up with his sister, Jenni to watch Peter Wellington drop his bombshell. But it all goes horribly wrong.

In an astonishing coincidence, a media flap broke out a couple of days earlier over the wrongful public release by the Crime and Misconduct Commission of 'sensitive' Fitzgerald Inquiry files from the Queensland State Archives. And now, because Reeves had legally accessed some of the files in October 2011, Wellington (a member of the Parliamentary Crime and Misconduct Committee) has had to abandon his plan to name the alleged Whiskey arsonist while the Committee investigates how the files – which carried a 65-year embargo – came to be released.

All Wellington can say in parliament is that he has information suggesting people other than Stuart and Finch committed the Whiskey firebombing. Wellington passes Reeves' supporting information to the LNP State Government Attorney-General (a man with the disquietingly familiar name of Jarrod Bleijie), with a request that he reopen the still-adjourned coroner's inquiry into the Whiskey deaths.

Danny can't be persuaded that the baddies didn't bring all this about. Slumped on the veranda with a beer, he fields a call from his equally sceptical sister. 'The bastards have won again,' he tells her. 'Poor old Ma must be turning in her grave.'

MARCH 8: DANNY is up early reironing his best shirt for the 2 pm memorial service. He's trying to be upbeat ('at least there'll be plenty of media there to draw attention to the case') but can't disguise his anxiety over what lies ahead. A group of us have lunch in Fortitude Valley, and then – just as the TV news crews should have been setting off for the Whiskey memorial – word comes that a man with a pistol has run amok in the Queen Street mall, screaming, 'Shoot me! Shoot me!' at police and igniting a panic that has brought the CBD to a standstill.

At the Whiskey site, now occupied by a Pagemasters sub-editing plant, a small crowd has gathered on the footpath. But of course all mainstream journalists have been diverted to the siege. 'I can't believe it,' groans Danny, deprived yet again of his media moment. 'How did the fucking baddies organise this?'

Among the gathering are Brian Bolton's widow, Joan, and son, Mark. A few weeks earlier Mark contacted me for the first time in twenty-five years to confess that he was the one who'd promised to wake his father so that he could meet with Stuart on that fateful night in 1973: 'He said it was important, but in our house a sleeping Brian was always better than a drinking Brian, so I let him sleep. It's troubled me for a long time.'

When the time comes, Danny, sleeves buttoned to hide his tatts, fronts the microphone with a doomed expression. 'My name is Danny Stuart,' he croaks, 'and I'm not a crook…' But he gets better, acknowledging the grief of his listeners and describing his own long quest to find what really happened here on that awful night. Afterwards, when relatives of the victims approach him tearfully and extend their hands, Danny's whole body seems to sag with relief.

'I thought they might hate me' he says, his hands still trembling. 'But they don't seem to, do they?' A woman releases sixteen white doves, one for each victim and another for the survivors, and we all stand watching them spiral above the buildings and disappear into a grey sky. Danny Stuart goes home a couple of days later, still hopeful that Attorney-General Bleijie, armed with all that new information, might actually do something about the forty-year travesty known as the Whiskey case.

But nothing happens.

Frank Robson is a well known journalist and author. He has won two Walkley awards for feature writing, and has worked for a range of publications here and overseas, including *TIME* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

MEMOIR

In the last days of Joh

News in unmarked brown envelopes

Phil Brown

ALL THIS HAPPENED in the last days of Joh.

I was working – if that's the right word for it – as a journalist on the *Daily Sun* in Brisbane's seamy Fortitude Valley.

The Valley was then the spiritual home of everything rotten in the state of Queensland. With its crummy nightclubs, tawdry brothels and sly gambling dens, it was a seedy playground that was literally on our doorstep. It was full of 'colourful characters' – a euphemism for crooks and loonies, some of whom occasionally made forays into our building. We had no security to speak of and any nut could just catch the lift up a couple of floors to seek out and berate a particular journo or just to rave incoherently at us, the esteemed fourth estate, slaving away over hot keyboards in a cool, gloomy world. The windows of our dowdy newsroom – I recall dull hues of grey and brown – were constantly fogged with grime and condensation from the air-conditioning that protected us from the fetid humidity of our corrupt, subtropical city, with its crumbling democracy and its cynical politics.

After a brief stint on *The Australian* next door – a nice gig where we often enjoyed a cocktail hour complete with cheap bubbly and antipasti from a local deli – I went to work at the *Daily Sun*. I hadn't realised it at the time but I'd actually been hired as assistant political reporter. An old chum, Wayne Sanderson, was the head man. This was a terrifying prospect because I knew nothing of politics and was much too fragile at the time for the hurly burly of that news round. Also, I rarely ventured outside my home or the office and its environs – partial agoraphobia may have been an appropriate diagnosis and was just one of the conditions I suffered from at that time. The prospect of following barnstorming politicians around the state was something I didn't relish. I was afraid of flying as well so I was, as they say, crapping myself. But,

at the last minute, the condemned man was reprieved.

It happened like this: the chief of staff called me over, usually a bad omen but not in this instance. 'Mate, we're going to make you a star,' he said.

How does one respond to such a statement? 'Okay,' I said, a little gingerly. 'Do tell.'

Being the debonair man about town that I was – a front I cultivated to obscure my slow disintegration – I was, apparently, to be the newspaper's daily columnist, with my own page: 'A Place in the Sun with Phil Brown'. This was a job that suited me; this was something I could make up as I went along, something that didn't require me to leave town. I could start late, finish late and as long as I filed my copy by a certain hour everyone seemed happy. I threw myself into my new role with gusto or a pale imitation of gusto at least, fuelled by a cocktail of tobacco, alcohol and benzodiazepines in my bloodstream.

I worked devilishly fast when I worked, a cigarette constantly burning in a foil ashtray by my keyboard, a cup of sludgy coffee on the other side and a small snuff box full of pills in my pocket.

Each morning after arriving at work it became my habit to depart again, almost immediately to partake of 'elevenses' at the Cosmopolitan Café a few hundred metres down Brunswick Street. The street was a traffic thoroughfare in those days, not the tatty mall we see today. The Cosmo, as it was known, became my field office. It was a hub for arty types, heroin addicts and shady characters, as well as the odd journo, and I was a pretty odd journo.

I drank flat whites and ate baklava in an attempt to stabilise my blood sugar, while sucking on a Benson & Hedges, often sharing a table in the tiny, cramped interior. There was a coffee roaster at the rear of the shop and the smell of freshly roasted beans pervaded the joint.

IT WAS HERE I met Gerry Bellino, the most notorious of the Valley's colourful characters. I often shared a table with Gerry, whose vice-like handshake seemed as much a statement as a greeting. His friend and associate Vic Conte was sometimes at the table too. Vic's husky wise-guy voice was pure Hollywood. The Fitzgerald Inquiry was still a year away, although revelations about Queensland's underworld were well known and would

become even better known thanks to the pioneering work of journalists such as Phil Dickie and Chris Masters.

Gerry and Vic, accused of running a network of illegal casinos and brothels, were high on the list of significant names in what would come to be called 'The Moonlight State'. Each morning I was, it seemed, having coffee with the two Mr Bigs. I became friendlier with Gerry and sometimes, when the tables were full, we sat side-by-side at the counter imbibing caffeine and chatting. We really didn't talk much about the elephant in the room. Gerry talked about his family mostly and I was fascinated by his early career as an acrobat and kind of circus performer. He exuded physical strength with a touch of menace, accentuated by that handshake and a barrel chest. I happened to like him.

Occasionally, however, I noticed people looking at us, wondering perhaps what the relationship was. Was he feeding me stories? I didn't write that sort of stuff anyway. Or was I feeding him information? Giving him a heads up? I didn't know enough about that serious political stuff to give him a heads up about anything. My beat included the social whirl, celebrity gossip and other inanities.

I had, it must be admitted, a reputation as an eccentric though and perhaps consorting with underworld figures was par for the course.

As daily columnist I manufactured the image of a remote dandy. I often wore a natty double-breasted suit and signature red socks, which I wore on a daily basis. This meant I was definitely gay according to one of my colleagues. This view wasn't helped by the fact that I was once seen having my nails done at a Fortitude Valley beauty parlour. A tough police reporter had been walking by one morning when he spotted me as the beautician was giving my nails a final buff. The look on his face was an exquisite mixture of horror and surprise.

Most of my colleagues preferred to do their socialising at the Empire Hotel which was, rather conveniently, next door to the newspaper building, a mere stumble away. Our building, on the corner of Brunswick and McLachlan Streets, was a proper newspaper building too, the presses rumbling away in the bowels of the structure giving it the feeling that we were sailing in some tramp steamer en route to nowhere. I preferred The Cosmo to the pub.

It was a tiny snapshot of the demographic of the Valley. Besides, I was never able to face a drink before the afternoon.

My daily chats with Gerry Bellino went on and soon drew the attention of a rival columnist from our competition, the *Courier-Mail*. He spotted me one day at The Cosmo chatting with Gerry and Vic and the next day wrote that I had been seen consorting with them in Fortitude Valley, implying some sort of impropriety, I guess. I was kind of chuffed about that. I could have retaliated in print but I didn't. I couldn't care less and besides, in the Valley everyone seemed equal. The seediness was just part of daily life and even today, despite years of attempts to gentrify the place, it retains a satisfying unsavouriness.

MY FRAUGHT LIFE at the *Daily Sun* was unsustainable, but fun while it lasted. I lived in a bachelor flat in Paddington when I first started there. And by 'bachelor pad' I mean a pad with hardly any furniture and one tomato in the fridge. I survived on Heineken and takeaway pizza.

Later I moved to New Farm, to an old federation building in Bowen Terrace, rather grandly named Hampton Court. It was just a five-minute walk to work, which was handy since I had lost my licence for drunk driving.

I occupied a third-level, top-floor apartment facing westwards. At night my view was stupendous, the Story Bridge, lit up like a Christmas tree. I had the best view in Brisbane. I sat at the dining room table there in the evenings smoking, typing out poems on my old Remington, listening to jazz and keeping the Beat generation dream alive as I watched the traffic on the bridge dwindle into the wee small hours.

At work I was increasingly becoming what used to be known as 'tired and emotional'. Writing a daily column tended to frazzle. I burnt out and moved on to become a feature writer and general reporter, living in fear of my daily assignments.

All this was, as I said, in the last days of Joh.

It was a time of change: something was coming to an end, something was beginning but we didn't quite know it yet. Revelations of corruption led to the establishment of the Fitzgerald Inquiry in July 1987. What's the refrain from Yeats…'a terrible beauty is born'?

While I dodged work, the Inquiry got under way in Brisbane District Court No. 29. The collusion between the criminal underworld, the police and various government ministers rocked the very foundations of the state and pressure was mounting on Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, the 'Hillbilly Dictator', to resign. In November it looked like his time had run out, though he didn't see the bus coming until he was under it.

Towards the end, the embattled Premier went home to Kingaroy to consider his future. In those last days I was sent to stake him out, to get one last interview before the axe fell. Photographer Bob Fenney and I waited for Joh to return to his property at Bethany. A job that was supposed to take a day turned into several as we cooled our heels waiting. We were so unprepared we didn't even have a change of clothes with us. We booked into a local motel and had money wired for expenses, food and, embarrassingly, to buy a change of underwear.

Sir Joh finally flew himself home by helicopter on Friday, 27 November, 1987, at 4.30 pm. We were at the entrance to his property, blocked by his bodyguard, a certain Detective Sergeant Tom Lunney. We looked like the loneliest paparazzi in the world. Nobody else had bothered to come to Kingaroy as far as we could see. We were hoping for a scoop but were not too confident about getting one until, surprisingly, Dt Sgt Lunney waved us up.

'Gee, you blokes are lucky,' he said.

Sir Joh, it seemed, couldn't resist feeding his chooks, as he called the journos who made up his court.

'You boys have been very patient,' Sir Joh said. 'But I haven't got anything else to tell you.' Just then his wife, Lady Flo appeared and said sternly, 'Joh, I thought you weren't doing any more interviews!'

But Joh couldn't resist a chat and though he was all but finished he was unrepentant and he described his parliamentary colleagues to me as 'babes in the woods'.

'They think I'm a ghost you can just chase away. But I'm still there.'

He took us for a walk around his garden and Bob Fenney, ever the wily photographer, asked if he could take a picture of him on the road leading to Bethany.

'Oh no, that would make me look alone,' Joh said. He posed instead on

a seat on the front porch. I am looking at that photo as I write. It adorns a yellowing copy of the front page of the *Daily Sun* for Saturday, 28 November, 1987. 'Lone Retreat to Bethany' the headline, and the caption reads: 'A solitary Sir Joh ponders his future at his Bethany homestead near Kingaroy yesterday'.

By the following week he was gone, resigning on December 1. It was the end of an era and the beginning of a new one.

GERRY BELLINO AND Vic Conte became less frequent visitors to The Cosmo, which remained my field office. I left the paper and started working freelance, writing for everything from pulp magazines to the fashion bible *Mode* as their Queensland correspondent. I covered the opening of World Expo 88 for that publication and have always been rather proud of the fact that I did so without ever leaving my apartment. I sent a photographer over to South Bank to catch the Queen doing the official opening but I stayed in, watched it all on TV and wrote my piece on the basis of that. I was told later my report was tantamount to actually being there. Go figure.

Research was a problem though, not being at the paper any more. It's always handy to have access to a newspaper library. In those days, before the advent of the internet, we did our research ourselves by going through the newspapers files or looking stuff up in books – yes, actual books.

In the newspaper's library fat compendiums of news articles were contained between bland cardboard covers and were recovered for the journos by the people who toiled away in the Dickensian depths of a place where no natural light ever shone.

Since I wasn't an employee anymore I didn't have access, but I figured out a way of getting in anyway. A young colleague, who had been a copy boy before rising to the giddy heights of junior reporter, helped me out. He would do research for me for various pittances or, on many occasions, I would furnish him with the subject I was writing about and he would fish out the cuttings files and photocopy the relevant pages for me.

Once that was done he would secrete the material in a brown manila envelope and leave it with Eddie, the bloke who worked behind the counter at The Cosmo. The envelope remained unmarked.

When my colleague made his drop he would ring me and I would leave my Bowen Terrace eyrie and walk to The Cosmo where I would take delivery of the envelope with a nod and a wink.

This raised eyebrows. After all, wasn't I the guy who was friendly with Gerry Bellino? What was I up to now? What was in those brown envelopes? I would often sit with the envelope in front on me on the table, sipping coffee and smoking with some satisfaction. Surely on the basis of that it was worth calling me before the Fitzgerald Inquiry? With my connections was I not, at least, a person of interest? But the call never came.

Ministers of the Crown were jailed, along with the police commissioner, the government eventually fell and Gerry Bellino was sent to jail for seven years for official corruption.

When I walk the streets of the Valley today it has changed a lot but there are some things that remain the same. The Cosmo is still there, bigger and bustling in the hot, grimy Brunswick Street Mall. The newspaper office is now an apartment building. Working there was bad enough and I shudder to think of actually living there. It retains too many bad memories for me, from a time that was, in so many ways, fraught with angst. All this was years ago, of course – in the last days of Joh.

Phil Brown is the Arts Editor of the *Courier-Mail*. He has written for a variety of other national newspapers, magazines and periodicals. He is the author of two books of poetry, *Plastic Parables* (Metro Community Press, 1991) and *An Accident in The Evening* (Interactive Press, 2001) and two books of humorous memoir, *Travels With My Angst* (UQP, 2004) which was shortlisted for the Arts Queensland Steele Rudd Award at the 2005 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards and *Any Guru Will Do* (UQP, 2006).

MEMOIR

On stealing stories

A letter to the TV journalist

Kathryn Knight

Writers are always selling somebody out.
Joan Didion

I'M WRITING TO you now because I need to tell you how I feel about the way you stole our story. You came into the foreign territory of our lives with your travel pack and your pocket guide, then you grabbed your spoils and left. You took something with you that was not yours to take: a story, which flared up, bright and brief, and faded away as so many news items do. That was our story. It may have slipped your mind now, but I can't forget. Let me remind you.

On a Thursday in March 2013 I caught a train into the city where I registered in the lobby of a tall building and caught a lift up into the sky. It was the day of the hearing, an unfamiliar world of summonses and testimonies, of sessions and tape recorders and hansard. Not long before, I had emailed a submission to the committee, I scuffled it together just hours before the deadline, and then the people from the Senate asked me to come in.

It was the Hearing of the Senate Inquiry into the Involuntary and Coerced Sterilisation of People with Disabilities.

I wrote about my 23-year-old daughter who has an intellectual disability, how she deserves the same rights and respect as her sisters, and that means letting her body function as nature intended. How her coming of age was an occasion for celebration, not despair. How there is no justification for fixing her up so her body will not offend, nor for rendering her infertile so that violations of her will have no visible consequences. How, as her mother and

her carer, my work is not only to tell the story of her rights and personhood, but to guard that story and keep it safe.

I had not known that I would be the only parent to write in who did not want to get their daughter sterilised. I had not realised that this story of ours was so badly needed.

Sterilisation was a relic of the dark past, I thought, of the eugenics movement, when 'ugly laws' were passed to restrict the access of unsightly people to public places, when those with disabilities were locked away in 'homes for incurables', when proposals were put forward to fine parents who produced imperfect children. But I was wrong. And it came as a shock, because I wasn't ready to believe that the parents of young women with disabilities, people I knew, were fighting for the right to get their daughters sterilised.

On that day, in that session, a small group of people gathered in the room, drinking tea and coffee as the senators prepared. You must have been there, maybe somewhere in the shadows, but I did not see you.

While we waited a young man in a suit said to me, 'You look very nervous, it's hard to speak in public when you're not used to it, isn't it?' Ah, I thought, here I am, the mother of a daughter with a disability, all other parts of me collapsed into the narrow confines of that private identity. Not a writer, nor a speaker, nor a researcher, nor a teacher, nor any other part of me that may once have claimed a voice.

We sat behind a line of desks that faced the senators: the chair, Greens Senator Rachel Siewert, and Labor Senator Claire Moore. They were neat middle-aged women in business jackets with serious, sensible faces. We were introduced to the disembodied voice of Liberal Senator Sue Boyce on a teleconference line. This parents' session came at the end of a long day for them, with the previous sessions attended by service providers, rights organisations, medical practitioners, and women with disabilities themselves.

One by one, we told our stories to the senators. I found my voice and briefly said my piece. Then another woman spoke, at length: she wanted the laws relaxed, she said, because it was far too difficult to get her teenage daughter sterilised. That would be in her daughter's best interests, she said, because her menstruation was difficult to manage. The medical specialist and

his wife followed, and they talked about their daughter, who was present in that room; they had organised a hysterectomy for her some years ago. Their daughter did not like having periods, they said, and they knew many people who were worried about their daughters becoming pregnant as a result of sexual abuse. Some had taken their daughters overseas for sterilisation, to countries where the procedure was easier to obtain.

The senators asked us questions, and we answered and argued. I could sense the shifting balance as the senators leant one way and then the other. I could feel them hear me and rally behind me. But an emotional broadside from the other camp could set them reeling. The senators said they enjoyed our session because there was passion and debate in the room.

When the session ended, I felt wrung out. I had a heavy load to balance, of rights, and morality and love; I had to weigh up the value of truth and disclosure against my obligations to protect and keep my vulnerable daughter safe.

On the train home I thought about the reasons those other parents wanted to get their daughters sterilised, and to me they fell short. In our family, the bodies of women were our default landscape: one male among four females. Each of our daughters had been through the transformation from girl to woman, and if one of them needed extra care and help, then so be it. There didn't seem to be a logical connection between fulfilling this obligation, and interfering with body parts.

I suspected that it was a fringe minority that was making all the noise. But you would never get that sense from the submissions to the inquiry. If you were an onlooker, it seemed that all parents (bar one) were clamouring to get their daughters seen to under a surgeon's knife.

I'M NOT A zealot. I acknowledge that there will be circumstances in which a hysterectomy is the best option for a young woman with a disability: a serious medical condition, for example. But it distresses me how the bodies of children with disabilities are medicalised from the moment of diagnosis. Doctors will examine and assess and consider the options for remediation. Families will take their child from doctor to doctor, hospital to hospital, seeking a solution. If the child can't be fixed, it will be sent, like an imperfect

doll in a toy factory, along a conveyor belt through another door to a different destination. Hopefully, there its family will love it in spite of its flaws.

Surgeons cut and stitch and fix, and if they can't, they may reject. So when a girl with a disability reaches puberty, an opportunity arises to fix what was deemed unfixable. The surgeon's power is reclaimed. For parents, hope revives: somebody is going to do something. The disability may not be curable, but the problem of the girl-woman's body is.

Several days after the hearing an email came from the committee, relaying your request to speak with me. I called you, you said you wanted to do a news story on the inquiry. You wanted to talk with me because I had spoken out against the sterilisation of young women with disabilities. You asked me if you could interview my daughter and me for your story.

As we spoke, questions skittered across my brain, about the ethics of exposing my daughter to public attention, about agreeing to her appearing on national television when she didn't have the capacity to consent herself. The issue was important enough to come out, I thought, but the story would have to be handled sensitively and her portrayal would have to be respectful. I needed this guarantee.

We had done this once before, two years earlier. Another TV channel had run an evening news item featuring Amelia, her father Peter and me, about a particularly demoralising experience on a Sydney ferry. One busy January afternoon while we were attempting to board a ferry from Circular Quay to Parramatta, Amelia and I became separated from Peter as a horde of waiting passengers surged forward, pushing past people in wheelchairs and elderly people and us in a scene that was not only disgraceful, but dangerous. Amelia and I managed to get onto the boat, but Peter was left on the dock and was refused permission to board. I couldn't manage Amelia on my own in the crowd nor get her home without the car keys that Peter held. We had to get off the ferry then, in a humiliating scene, and our trip home with our disabled daughter was extended by hours. When our complaints were treated dismissively, I wrote to the minister and the shadow minister and a TV reporter took up the story. There was a broader issue here, about Sydney Ferries' failure to accommodate the needs of more vulnerable passengers and their families, and it was worth making.

This story was different, though. It was about Amelia's body and its functions. It was about her womanhood and her personhood. It was about the private world of our family.

I asked you about your proposed news item. Yes, you said, you would present the material sensitively; your story is important, you said, and needs to be heard. I asked who else would be involved. Just the other families at the session, you said. They'll just be there to say a bit about their views, you said, but my aim is to present the material objectively, and let the viewers make up their own minds.

In the course of the conversation, you asked me what Amelia's mental age was. I answered in the same way I have responded to this question from many people over the years: Amelia's ability doesn't correspond with a phase of childhood development; her take on the world is all her own, a mixture of her talents and impairments. Then you asked me, tentatively, whether someone who has the mental capacity of a child should have to cope with the bodily functions of a woman. But she is a young woman, I answered, who happens to have an intellectual disability.

I should have heeded the bristle of warning I felt then. A sharper one still came when you asked me, 'But aren't you denying your daughter the right to be sterilised?' 'I don't understand what you mean,' I answered. 'It's not a right to be subjected to a medical procedure that you don't need and for which you can't give your consent.'

All the while, I thought you might have been listening.

YOU MUST HAVE read all those submissions. In most of them, the practice of sterilising girls and women with disabilities was condemned outright. Stories emerged from women who had been sterilised without their knowledge when they were girls, under the pretext of other procedures. Others told of encounters with medical practitioners who refused to accept they could be sexually active. Sexual health organisations argued that all people had the right to sexual expression and bodily integrity, and that more education was needed so that these rights were accepted and respected. Disability rights organisations, the most unequivocal, called upon international human rights instruments that identified the practice as a form of torture, and pushed

for the criminalisation of parents who took their daughters overseas for hysterectomies.

It must have struck you that in contrast, parents' submissions were overwhelmingly pro-sterilisation. Parents wrote in about their fears of their daughters becoming pregnant and their own horrors of managing menstruation. They described the processes associated with obtaining an order for sterilisation as arduous and costly. They argued that sterilisation was the simplest and best option. One parent claimed that 'society, and thus government, should feel entirely justified in sterilising people, male and female, with intellectual disabilities'. Another wrote: 'I tolerate a monthly period only because I wish to have children. It is absurd to suggest that people who have little capacity to manage menstruation and no capacity to care for children, should nevertheless suffer menstruation.' But you must know many women, as I do, who will not have children but who nevertheless continue to menstruate, simply because that is what their bodies do.

The battle lines were drawn through those submissions. Several medical practitioners also argued in favour of sterilisation, but it was clear that the chief contenders were the disability advocates and the parents. There was nothing unusual in this: antagonism between parents and advocates is an unfortunate feature of the disability scene in this country, played out in dramas that include schooling and supported accommodation. On the one hand, advocates disparage parents for their lack of understanding of the disability movement and its history, and for being preoccupied with relieving their own burden of care; and on the other, parents accuse advocates of fighting for the rights of people with disabilities, at the expense of the rights of those who care for them. For people like me with a foot in both camps, the stretch is often precarious.

You got back to me later with plans for a film crew to come to our house. You wanted other family members involved: Amelia's father and her sisters. While they supported the issue completely, they were not so keen to appear on television, and their lives were busy with other commitments. I didn't push them: it had been my decision. So on the day, there was just Amelia and me and Bunsen, our family dog and her steadfast bodyguard.

You came with your cameraman and your soundman, and your visit was

not unlike all those visits that have punctuated the passage of our days since Amelia was a baby. You came with questions, but instead of clipboards and assessment forms, there were bright lights and microphones.

Before filming began, we talked about ways of portraying Amelia respectfully: nothing to upset her, nothing too private or too messy. You and the crew were there for four hours, setting up and filming in our living room while Amelia sat next to me on the lounge. The cameraman said, 'I love this job. I get to meet people like you.' I cringed as I chatted with you about the inquiry and you nodded your head and appeared to agree. Then we took a walk through the bush at the end of our street with our dog. I sang to Amelia, 'Waltzing Matilda', our walking song, while the camera followed us along the track. Amelia, I thought, had been just perfect. And all the while, I thought you were hearing me.

THERE'S A DARKER side to this issue that I need to expose you to. You're a tourist in this country, and you've seen some of its topography. But those whose work it is to excavate this landscape will tell you that a deep vent lies beneath the surface, far below the laments of parents and the surgeon's scalpel and rights rhetoric. It deals with the subterranean fears that bubble up when we bring together cognitive impairment with the processes of a woman's body: both lurk outside the acceptable boundaries of the social world.

In her book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982), Julia Kristeva explores taboos around the body and its excretions. Control of these emissions, Kristeva writes, is a necessary step in our journey to personhood. She draws on psychoanalysis to explain how the emerging individual in a patriarchal culture like ours must deliver 'the clean and proper body' in order to make the transition from the body-centred realm of the mother to the language-centred symbolic order of the father. She uses the term 'abjection' to describe the status of bodies that fail to make this transition, that remain uncontrolled.

At the centre of abjection is the woman's body. The woman's body is leaky. Its closeness to nature and its permeability – the way inside and outside get confused – place it in opposition to the controlled body of the (male) symbolic order. Its offending processes, particularly the blood of

menstruation, should be kept invisible. When these processes spill out of the private and into the public sphere, a taboo is transgressed. A sense of horror is unleashed.

Similarly, the disabled body is marginalised; it is not 'normal', and it too, is uncontrolled. Rights theorist Tom Shakespeare has claimed that disabled people are used as 'dustbins for disavowal'. And within the hierarchy of disability, people with intellectual disability are close to the bottom of that trash can. Most typical children will learn to control their bodily functions, to enable their progress to the symbolic order. Not so those with severe cognitive impairments: their bodies, and by association their selves, will remain in this state of abjection. The girl or woman with intellectual disability brings together the horror of both the woman's body and the disabled body. She embodies a double abjection.

THE RELEASE OF the committee's report was delayed until the middle of July. I asked you to ring me to let me know when the story was going to air, then I sent texts and emails to Amelia's friends, family and support workers, who were all excited to be seeing her on television.

Our family gathered around the television. You began with scenes at the home of the woman from my inquiry session: warm family scenes of the teenage daughter together with her brothers and her parents. The woman spoke about the difficulties of managing her daughter's menstruation, how the sight of blood upset her daughter, how she would never be able to cope with this independently, and how solutions other than sterilisation were not an option for her. She spoke about how difficult it was to obtain permission for a hysterectomy: solicitors and boards and court orders. I could see that viewers would be drawn into the world of this loving family and their dilemma.

When I saw this daughter, I was struck by a disjuncture between the way this young girl appeared on TV and the way she had been described by her mother at the hearing. My impression then was that she must be severely disabled with exceptional care needs, but here was a lively girl who was joining in with her family's activities. She was much less disabled than Amelia; I could only reflect on how relative disability is.

The scene switched to the couple at the inquiry, the medical specialist

and his wife, and their daughter, in their comfortable home. The medical man, we were told, was 'eminent'. He informed us gravely of the problems of managing menstruation with hormonal therapy, and both he and his wife said how much better their daughter's quality of life had been since she had a hysterectomy. It was the best thing for her, they said. She no longer had to cope with the indignity of possible accidents in public places, and they didn't have to worry about her becoming pregnant.

It was a well-crafted story. You took viewers by the hand and led them through the dark forest of this issue. The way was well signposted: everyone knew where you were heading. In the safety of their living rooms, viewers could imagine themselves in this predicament, and surely they would respond likewise. They were lucky – they only had to be there for ten minutes or so – then you would guide them back out and they would be safely released.

The screen switched, this time to the talking head of the former Disability Discrimination Commissioner Graham Innes. He spoke about violations of human rights, about bodily integrity. He was, like the medical specialist father, a male voice of authority in this female underworld. He was put in there for some balance, but by then the hearts of viewers had already been won: love and family never made it into his rhetoric. When he declared that sterilisation was a form of torture, his case was lost. Who could think that after seeing those families?

Then your words, 'But not all parents…' came, and there we were, Amelia and I, walking down our scruffy street with our scruffy old dog and my scruffy voice singing 'Waltzing Matilda'. I can't blame you for our scruffiness: that's who we are. We just didn't look as squeaky clean as those other nice families; the sun didn't shine quite the same way through our trees. We were there as the final grab, the obligatory counterargument that wound up the main game. Those four hours collapsed into half a minute, a fraction of the time given to the other families. At least I got a chance to have my sentence heard, about Amelia's rights, her personhood and her womanhood. But then the text messages and phone calls began to come in from friends and family: 'Whatever was that?' they asked.

I downloaded the text version of your story; the title was 'Parents of intellectually disabled girls deny sterilisation breaches human rights ahead of

Senate committee report'. The lead went like this: 'Parents of intellectually disabled girls have spoken out in favour of sterilisation, saying it gives their daughters a better quality of life'.

No wonder you never contacted me afterwards.

NEXT DAY, THE inquiry report was released. The recommendations were for strengthening the legal restrictions on sterilisation of people with disabilities who were able to provide consent independently. Forcibly sterilising someone without their full knowledge and consent – if they could give it – should be banned, the report said. But for women like Amelia, who do not have the capacity to consent independently, the same restrictions did not apply. Families could still apply for permission to sterilise their daughters, and they should be entitled to legal aid for doing this. Amongst several safeguards, the report proposed that an advisory committee be established that included non-medical disability, as well as medical, expertise. And it recommended that laws be passed to make it a criminal offence to take someone with a disability overseas to have a sterilisation procedure.

There was a brief flurry of media. Your angle emerged as a novel one. Your radio colleagues, for example, opened with, 'It may come as a shock to some that people are still being forcibly sterilised in Australia'.

I don't know how we ended up there, in that news item, whether I was mistaken or misled. Because that story was not mine, nor Amelia's: it was *your* story.

News items like yours turn the messy business of life, with all its dilemmas and moral complexities, into neat morsels that are easy to digest; more about convenience and flavour than truth. As Janet Malcolm wrote in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (Vintage, 1990), 'Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is indefensible…he is a kind of confidence man preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse'. You're not a confidence man, and I'm not vain, nor ignorant, nor lonely. And I won't call a small-scale ruse like this 'betrayal': that's far too grandiose a term.

But you've sullied our story, and these stories of ours are much like

bodies: they are a fundamental part of who we are. We grow into them, and they shape us. We have to be careful who we allow to access our bodies, and who we tell our stories to. We have to be sure they will be heard, and in the ways we choose. Those who can't speak for themselves need custodians to ensure the safe passage of their stories.

I am the custodian of Amelia's story. My pledge to her is to guard her story, just as my job is to protect her body. But I failed: I let you into her story. I let you cut it, and stitch it back together in another shape. I let you take something essential from it, something that was never yours to take.

I hope you can take something now, from my perspective on this experience: a cautionary thought maybe, about truth and disclosure and ownership of story. About voice and vulnerability and value. Not for my sake, but for Amelia's.

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MEMOIR

Off shore, near shore and unsure

Clean, safe, insecure work

Rachel Buchanan

THE SOUTHERLY BLEW seawater over the runway. Grey foam streamed down the rocks at Moa Point and our tin roof squealed. On Lyall Bay beach the wind whipped the sand up into vicious twisters and spouts of swirling black grazing grit. The gulls flew backwards. The oystercatchers were grounded.

A plump speck flitted into the harbour heads. Closer it came, the Australian plane. The orange star on the tailgate tilted and dipped, wobbling. The plane dropped low over the sea, ready to hit the short, sodden runway but at the last instant it swooped up again. 'Failed! The Aussie pilot failed to land!' I shouted. 'They'll be spewing.'

My kids rushed over to look. The plane circled back up through the gloom. The walls of our house screamed as the pilot readied for another go. The plane nosed down towards the enormous grey waves that were smashing over the breakwater but again the pilot pulled back, tucked the wheels up inside the plane's battered belly and flew off north.

It was spring, 2012. Seven months earlier, we had touched down on that same wicked runway, a family of five who had left Melbourne to spend a year or so in Wellington close to my parents.

Money was tight and I had reluctantly taken a job as a sub-editor with Fairfax Editorial Services. I sat in an office in Wellington and edited newspapers in regional and rural New South Wales. My job existed because Fairfax had sacked sixty-six production journalists in Newcastle and Wollongong and replaced them with forty others in Wellington. I was on NZ$65,000, about half of what someone with my experience would have earned in a

metropolitan Australian newsroom less than five years ago. (This trans-Tasman pay disparity exists in any field you can think of, including the airline industry. In 2010, a first officer employed by Qantas subsidiary Jetconnect was paid NZ$77,978 while a Qantas first officer earned the equivalent of NZ$126,815. In 2011, Fair Work Australia rejected the Australian pilots' association test case on the issue.)

By taking the offshored Fairfax job, I had become enmeshed not only in the imminent death of newspapers but also the rise of New Zealand as a low-wage economy (save at least 30 per cent in costs over here folks), a little rival to the Philippines and India (save 70 per cent or more over there).

After the storm, I smirked as I told my workmates about the entertaining spectacle of the failed landings. 'My cousin was on that flight,' one of them said. 'She said it was terrible. Everyone was vomiting and saying their prayers!'

Wellington is such a small place and you need to be careful what you say and do there because everyone is connected. This is something I have always understood in theory.

One night, I was having fish and chips with relatives. By then, I was able to joke about my job. We staff on Project Hermes – Fairfax's codename for the NZ offshoring plan – worked in a windowless basement on Boulcott Street so I had plenty of good lines about zombie journalists, typing robots and crypts.

I decided to try my routine out on Uncle Bill, the third youngest of my mother's eleven siblings. I respect Bill. He's a really lovely guy, but he is also the Deputy Prime Minister. Rather than laugh sympathetically at my tales of drudgery and bewilderment, he expressed his pleasure at New Zealand's ability to compete.

I'm not betraying any confidences here. What Bill (English) said to me is the same as what he has said in public. In his role as Finance Minister, Bill has welcomed Australian investment in New Zealand and the jobs that come with it. The logic goes that while lower wages are not good, they do allow New Zealand to compete and competition is one way to close the gap in wages between the two countries. As yet, there is no evidence that this is happening.

I FINISHED AT Fairfax in late December 2012 and we returned to

Melbourne the next month. Since then, the offshoring of Australian work to New Zealand has received plenty of media attention. In Australia, much of it has been negative. One theme is that New Zealand is somehow betraying its Anzac mates by stealing Aussie jobs, but the situation is messier than that.

In the 1990s, hundreds of jobs in food, clothing, cosmetics, pharmaceuticals and software manufacturing left New Zealand for Australia. Now, New Zealand Council of Trade Unions economist Bill Rosenberg said jobs were moving in both directions as companies cut costs across the region by getting closer to bigger markets or cheaper raw materials and workforces.

In 2009, McCain Food closed its frozen food plant in Smithton, Tasmania and shifted production to a factory in Hastings, a small city in the Hawke's Bay. About two hundred people lost permanent and casual work as a result. The same year, though, Cadbury closed its factory in Auckland and shifted production of Moro and Crunchie chocolate bars and Jet Plane, Eskimo and Perky Nana lollies to Australia. Minties and other chewy sweets went to Thailand. Two hundred and sixty five jobs were lost.

In late 2011, Heinz closed its factory in northern Victoria, cut staff at two others and moved production of canned beetroot, tomato sauces and some meals to another factory in Hastings. About three hundred and forty Australians lost their jobs but in New Zealand the angle was that Watties (a New Zealand company bought by Heinz in 1992) was returning production of its tomato sauce to 'the original home in Hastings, eleven years after it took it across the ditch to north Victoria'.

In early 2012, Imperial Tobacco shifted production of cigarettes from Sydney to Wellington. It hired fifty new staff at the company's expanded Petone factory but around the same time Unilever closed its washing powder factory in Petone, sacked fifty-eight people, and moved production back to Australia.

In late 2012, Norwegian paper-making giant Norske Skog announced it would shut one of its two remaining newsprint machines in New Zealand – a decision that meant more than a hundred people lost their jobs – but it also revealed plans to save jobs at its Boyer mill in Tasmania by converting a newsprint machine there into one that made coated paper.

Office work does appear to be moving in one direction across the

Tasman because Australian companies are attracted to the cheaper wages, rent and power bills in New Zealand. They like the loose industrial relations system, the very low compulsory superannuation payments (3 per cent) and the hardworking and obedient staff who speak good English.

BUSINESS PROCESS OFFSHORING (BPO) is an industry term for what is going on. Back office work offshoring is another. BPO encompasses skilled and unskilled work: architectural drafting; accounting; legal services; sub-editing and graphic design; making and receiving phone calls; answering emails; and working with social media. Some of this work happens at contact centres, the places formerly known as call centres.

New Zealand Trade and Enterprise, the government's trade and investment body, boasted New Zealand is 'rapidly becoming a powerhouse outsourced service provider for the region'. This is an overstatement.

The regional powerhouse is the Philippines. In Manila, the contact centre industry is expanding by 18 per cent a year and one trade blogger recently reported that a shortage of staff was actually driving up wages. By 2016, nearly one and a half million people will work in contact centres in the Philippines. In Australia, there are two hundred thousand contact centre 'seats' and in New Zealand there are just over thirty-two thousand.

Most of the Australasian 'seats' are filled by people who answer phones and work computers for clients in the same country (or even building) as them. About three thousand of the seats in New Zealand are for Australian clients based either in New Zealand (outsourcing) or in Australia (nearshoring). Amway was a nearshoring pioneer. The cleaning and cosmetics company set up its regional contact centre in Auckland twelve years ago.

Woolworths, iiNet, Lumo, ANZ, Quickflix and L'Oreal have also sent jobs across the ditch and Fairfax has continued to offshore work to Fairfax Editorial Services, its wholly owned New Zealand subsidiary. Last year, about forty more Australian journalists lost their jobs when the company offshored production of the *Australian Financial Review*, *Good Weekend* magazine and other features and sections pages of *The Age*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Canberra Times*. For the past six months, reports have suggested that IBM would send up to fifteen hundred Australian jobs offshore to Asia and New

Zealand but a company spokesperson told me that for competitive reasons IBM would not discuss details of staffing plans.

David Reece, Salmat's general manager marketing, said outsourcing was now well established in New Zealand and 'recent trends indicate continued significant growth in the sector'.

John Chetwynd, the managing director of Auckland-based Telnet, said his company started doing work for Australia's Sony Ericsson 'some years ago'. Australian companies had been sending office work to New Zealand 'under the radar' for about a decade but the practice had only been talked about openly for the past year. Of their two hundred and fifty staff, forty worked for Australian companies.

Last year, CallActive and Contact Centres Australia both opened centres in Wellington and Unity4 announced it was bringing 'cloud-based' contact centre work to New Zealand too. Public service cuts mean there are plenty of empty offices in the capital.

CallActive started with two hundred seats on a floor of the Guardian Trust building in Willeston Street and when I spoke with chief commercial officer Justin Tippett in mid-January, the company had just leased another floor and was fitting it out with two hundred more spots. The building was to be renamed 'CallActive house' that day. 'We are interested in targeting companies already in the Philippines or India and trying to provide an alternative for them,' Tippett said.

CONTACT CENTRES SPRUIK New Zealand as a place with a strong cultural alignment to Australia, a 'stable, modern infrastructure' and a 'stable political environment'.

New Zealand Trade and Investment is rather blunt about the other appealing factor. 'Labour costs are extremely competitive for a first-world country with a highly skilled and educated workforce,' it says on a webpage headed 'New Zealand's Investment Advantage'.

Every company I spoke with said it paid well above the minimum wage (in New Zealand it is NZ$13.75, in Australia A$16.37). Most said the hourly rate was NZ$17 to $19 and that permanent staff outnumbered temps, but I have not been able to confirm these claims with employees.

While stability may be a selling point for investors, it is not one for staff. As an outsourcing executive told me, off-the-record: 'This work moves around quite a lot as a company tries to find the best location.'

In 2012, for example, Sitel New Zealand hired one hundred and forty-eight people to work in its Auckland contact centre and answer calls for Virgin Australia. In August 2013, the company announced that the staff would all be laid off because Virgin had decided to operate its contact centres from Brisbane and Manila. Fairfax's *Sunday Star Times* reported that Sitel had received more than $200,000 in taxpayer subsidies to hire fifty of these staff off the dole. The government grants were aimed at creating 'ongoing employment'.

The New Zealand Parliament is now working through various amendments to the Employment Relations Act and these changes are likely to make New Zealand even more attractive to investors (and less attractive for staff). One provision sets up ninety-day trials so that for the first three months a new employee has no right to file a personal grievance claim or to appeal an unfair dismissal. Another removes an employers' duty to conclude collective bargaining. Meal and refreshment breaks will no longer be an automatic entitlement and employees have to provide proof of sickness or injury from the first day of leave.

At the moment, the only apparent glitch in the offshoring bubble is the New Zealand economy. It is buoyant, due to a post-earthquake building boom and strong dairy prices.

When Fairfax hired me as an offshored sub, A$1 bought NZ$1.25 but this year, for the first time, the New Zealand dollar is likely to reach parity – or even eclipse – the Australian one. This may make New Zealand less appealing to Australian investors and less stable for offshored employees who know that being cheap and very hardworking are two requirements of their employment.

When I was an offshored worker, I felt lucky to have my job but I also felt insecure. I had taken the work of Australian colleagues. What was theirs was now mine but what was mine could swiftly become someone else's. In

2011, Fairfax sacked ninety newspaper advertising staff in New Zealand and offshored the work to India. Some had worked in the same Wellington building as us. Giddy-up, their empty desks said.

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MEMOIR

My life with Bob Dylan

In five stanzas

Craig McGregor

STANZA 1

I'D HEARD OF Bob Dylan long before I met him.

At the time, in the early '60s, I was reviewing jazz and folk and pop music for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and playing folk songs with my brothers, and I was a good mate of Don Henderson who was establishing himself as the leading writer of contemporary folk songs in Australia. The folk rock wave was in full strength, both here and overseas, and Dylan was acclaimed as one of the key figures in the movement. But the mainstream media and disc jockeys still dismissed him as just another protest singer, and even some members of the folk fraternity were worried about his fusion of popular and folk music. I wasn't; I had listened, hard, to his songs and admired their conjunction of folk integrity (blues, made-over folk melodies) and the almost R&B energy of pop music.

Peter, Paul and Mary and The Byrds had turned some of his early songs into hits, in fact most people knew of his work mainly through other artists, so when Albert Grossman, Dylan's manager, decided that it was time he toured Australia the publicity street posters declared NOBODY SINGS BOB DYLAN LIKE DYLAN. I persuaded John Moses, then news editor of the *Herald*, to let me go and see Dylan when he arrived. So in April, l966 I found myself jumping into a taxi equipped with a reporter's notebook to see Bob Dylan.

Sydney Airport. Early morning. Gulls, bitumen tarmac, hip kids in knee-high boots, camel-hair jeans, Zapata moustaches. Boeing 707, in from Honolulu. Pause. Doors open, the first passengers disgorged, blinking in the

unfamiliar sunlight. Another pause. Then Dylan. I assumed it must be him, though he looked smaller and frailer than I'd imagined. Descending from the gangplank he was talking to some of The Band, but walking across the tarmac he was by himself: a tiny, lonely figure. Customs. Then, at last, into the main hall, where fans besieged him. He gallantly accepted a fifty-foot pop art fan letter glued together from magazine and newspaper clippings, signed himself 'The Phantom'. Black corduroy suit, black suede high-heeled calf-length zipper-sided boots, dark glasses, a halo of long ringleted hair: Dylan, 1966. He held up his hands (look no stigmata!), turned away and made it across to the press room where the TV cameras and reporters were waiting. The Band, wearing dark glasses and sombreros, and the greying bulk of Albert Grossman followed. Dylan was smiling, being obliging. He settled himself down on a sofa for the press conference. The arc lights switched on. I sat down beside him, to his left. Downcast eyes, hooked Jewish nose. The crucifixion was about to begin.

It was soon obvious that nearly everyone there had already made up his mind about Dylan. Or their editors had. He was either a Protest Singer, or a Phony, or preferably both; and they weren't going to be put off by any of that shit about him just being someone who wrote songs. Nobody welcomed him: the first questions were hostile, brutal, stupid. Dylan tried to answer seriously at first, but it was a lost cause. A few mumbles. Nobody listened. A young man from the *Sun* kept interrupting with a line of questions drilled into him by his paper: get him to admit he's a phony, that all this protest stuff is bullshit.

It went on and on; Dylan finally gave up trying to give serious answers and improvised a hilarious spoof of his questioners, but by this time I was laughing too much to take notes. And I had to get home; I'd decided to write something about it all. Next day the staid *Herald* ran on the front page the article I wrote about Dylan. The sub-editors cut it in half, but they kept the title ('Bob Dylan's Anti-Interview') and all the stuff about Dylan putting down the press and parodying the whole performance. They even left the last paragraph intact: 'Like I said to Albert, this boy's got talent. Why don't you put him on the stage sometime? He could be as big as – well, as big as Robert Zimmerman nee Dylan, who happens to be, quite simply, the most creative

and original songwriter in the world today.' I was still at home when the telephone rang. It was Dylan's road manager. Was I going to Bob's concert at the Stadium that night? Hell yes, I was going to review it. Well, Bob wanted to meet me.

Then started my up-and-down relationship with Dylan, which has lasted (sort of) for most of my life. The concert that night was held in the Stadium, a giant ramshackle hangover from the turn of the century, which had been turned into an entertainment centre with a revolving stage. As I walk with my wife into the main arena, Dylan's road manager, who had been waiting at the entrance, catches me by the arm. Come backstage at interval, OK?

We do so. Dylan is squatting down on his heels on the floor, electric guitar already around his neck. Grossman and The Band are there. Dylan mumbles hello. Yeah, he dug what I wrote. People don't understand what he's into. He is jumpy, nervous, unable to keep still. I have to bend down to talk to him, end up squatting alongside like a courtier.

Next night I see the show again, and go up to Dylan's hotel room afterwards. Amazingly, Dylan plays me the acetates of his two-disc album *Blonde on Blonde*, which had not yet been released. His next show is in Melbourne. Then Perth. Last stop in Australia before that climactic tour of England, which Martin Scorsese has filmed so brilliantly in *No Direction Home*. Dylan sends a message to me, via another writer. Try and make it to the States, man.

The States? Oh sure, like fucking hell.

STANZA 2

FIVE YEARS LATER, I was awarded a two-year Harkness Fellowship to the United States and my family and I found ourselves living in an apartment on the edge of Harlem in New York. America was in turmoil: it was the time of the massive anti-Vietnam protests, and Black Power, and the Black Panthers, the civil rights marches, and the hippie/Woodstock/Haight Ashbury movement. In Dylan's memorable description:

There was music in the cafés at night
And revolution in the air – 'Tangled Up In Blue'

Keeping in mind Dylan's invitation, I managed with great difficulty

to find a telephone number for him in Greenwich Village where he was living, and left several messages for him, but never got an answer. Finally, months and months later, I got through to someone and thought I recognised Dylan's voice. But for some reason my professionalism deserted me and I was overcome with my old teenage shyness and instead I left a message with him for Bob Neuwirth, an old music friend of Dylan's, and Dylan hung up.

So much for Craig the intrepid journalist.

Nevertheless I was so admiring of Dylan's music, the sheer scale of his achievement and the intensity of his inspiration, I decided to write a book about him. In the time I had left in the United States it would have been impossible to write a full-scale biography, and anyhow I have always been wary of the biography as a literary form (who can really know another person?) so I thought I would compile a retrospective of all the significant interviews Dylan had done at that stage, and the major essays written about him, and then preface it with a long introduction which I would write myself about the major themes and sources in his work. Everyone I approached was very willing to be included in the book, including Robert Shelton, the music critic from the *New York Times* whose review of Dylan's first performance at Gerde's Folk City set the twenty-year-old songwriter on his way, and dozens of other writers including Nat Hentoff, Studs Terkel, Jon Landau, Lillian Roxon, Nik Cohn, Jann Wenner and Wilfrid Mellers. It was only the second book ever to be written on Dylan and was published in the United States, Australia, Britain and Holland. When it first came out in 1972, titled *Bob Dylan: A Retrospective*, many people asked: 'Why a book on a songwriter?'

They don't ask that any more.

STANZA 3

TWELVE YEARS AFTER his first tour of Australia, Bob Dylan is back again, in Brisbane, sitting curled up in a chair with his long toenails and longer guitarist's thumbnail, scruffy, unprepossessing, laid-back, apparently together, with a four hour realer-than-reality film *Renaldo and Clara* out in the States and a tour of worshipful Japan behind him, and outside, in

the humid police-stricken streets of Brisbane, kids half his age are already lying around the Festival Theatre beneath lights which say BOB DYLAN GEORGE BENSON WRESTLING to see if Bob Dylan is what they think he is, like, you know, idol of millions, spokesman for his generation, genius, trapeze artist.

He looks much the same. Shaved most of his beard off, remnants straggle down the sides of his mouth. Soft, gentle voice. Still got his sense of humour, though it's hard to make him smile. Short pants. Romance? Looks like he needs mothering. Like he keeps saying, he's been through a lot of changes.

'Please, Mr Dylan,' repeat the two girls who have been waiting outside the Crest International for his autograph, no parlour groupies these but high school kids, like many in the audience later that night. 'Not tonight,' says Dylan, and strolls on through the city square. He is dressed, conservatively, in a black-and-white floral shirt, pants with coloured knee-patches, waistcoat and gym shoes. His bodyguard is in white pants and shirt, moustache, brown felt top hat with a joker stuck on the brim, looking like he could have strolled off Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid*, which had Dylan in a similar role. The sound man is in funeral black.

'Jesus, look at 'em!' says a redneck voice from a cab at the lights. Straight Oz, circa 1950. Jeers from other cars. 'They let 'em out once a year'. Beery, raspy, undertone of violence. Yesterday the Queensland cops broke up the women's march, threw truckloads into cells.

Dylan strides on. Yeah, Brisbane reminds him of Mobile.

Oh, mama, can this really be the end
To be stuck inside of Mobile with the
Memphis blues again

Tonight is the opening of his Australian tour, his first since that tense, spaced-out, disaster-edge tour of 1966. Dylan of *Blonde on Blonde*. A frail, anguished puppet in a brown check suit, chemicals in his blood and visions in his brain, just before the crack-up. He's still frail, but cool.

Back in the hotel he looks much the same as I remember him. I remind him of the trouble I had getting through to him in New York. He smiles, shrugs, mumbles something about being 'very busy' at the time. There's a tall black woman, who looks like one of his back-up singers, drifting around in

the background. He wants to know how my book about him went. Alright, I reply. I turn on the tape recorder and ask him: 'What would you like to talk about?'

What follows is the longest interview, and one of the most revealing, Dylan has given. As it goes on I feel my old rapport with him surfacing; he is friendly, fairly serious, straightforward. About halfway through I manage to make him laugh when I ask him, bluntly:

Do you feel very Jewish, Bob?

'I don't know what Jewish people feel like!'

That's a nice answer! For Christ's sake, you know what I mean…as a New York…'

'As a New York Jew?'

Yeah.

(Laughing) 'I'm not from New York!'

That night the concert hall is packed. Hip, moustached, kurta-topped acolytes in their twenties. Onstage a string octet of ladies in long evening gowns and men in dinner suits is playing its Bach out. Australian content (Muso Union rules). They bow. Everyone claps. The oval stage darkens, the band runs on, plugs in, blasts off on a rhythm-and-blues version of 'Hard Rain'. More claps. Enter Dylan: white blouse, grey waistcoat, Regency curls. Ovation. He picks up his guitar and starts into an up-tempo 'Mr Tambourine Man'.

It's a puzzle. The tune is familiar, but the song isn't. Dylan sings it in a deep, fuzzy voice. Then 'I Threw It All Away'. Rock'n'roll version, with a three-girl back-up chorus in the wings and the chords crudified into rock raunch. 'Shelter from the Storm'. He declaims it rather than sings it. Same with several other songs. The audience claps loyally, but they are obviously taken aback. The old, anguished Dylan (and his songs) has disappeared. In his place is Mr Bob Dylan the Conjuror, the Magic Man, Ole Mr Vaudeville with his box of Roles and Tricks, manipulating the songs and scenarios like a Circus Master: I am reminded of Fellini, and all those clowns and masks and illusions of reality, and the Rolling Thunder Revue ('It was like a carnival,' says someone), and Renaldo and Clara, top hats and make-up and make-believe. 'Mankind cannot bear too much reality.' TS Eliot said that.

We have lost Dylan the troubadour, I am thinking. The man who spun songs out of himself. Instead we have gained Dylan the music man, the performer, leader of the troupe, Shakespeare's strolling band of players. The diminution is clear. But the songs…the songs are still among the finest written this century, anywhere, by anyone. Dylan's first film: *Don't Look Back*. He's got more sense than to try to photocopy himself.

INTERVAL. SWEET SCENT of grass in the aisles.

The lights go down again. Dylan starts singing while the crowd is still filing back from the soft drinks. He seems looser, more relaxed, and the band sounds funkier. The concert is beginning to warm up. 'One More Cup Of Coffee' gets a terrific reception.

The turning point is 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright'. It's a classic early song of Dylan's, both slow and bitchy, but he has rearranged it as a jaunty reggae number: and it is such a daring, disrespectful thing to do, so irreverent, Dylan standing his own music on its head and making it funny and mocking at the same time, affectionately satirising the man who wrote it, that I suddenly realise: he's become the Old Master of American music, utterly reworking his original material, making it not better but different, and caring not a damn what he loses in the process, or gains, and what anyone thinks. 'It's life, and life only…' The audience is stunned, elated. It's like watching the Magician, the Magic Man, Captain Goodvibes trapezing along the Never-Ending Wave…

After the show Dylan goes back to The Crest, has a shower, joins the rest of the circus in the downstairs bar. He's pleased with the reception, but tired. Sits around. Doesn't talk much. He isn't travelling with anyone.

I leave him at the table with a half-empty can of beer. The night is coming down. So is the concert high. The bar is emptying. Dylan's the one in white.

'Yeah, it knocks me around. Usually when you're caught up in the turmoil of some personal event, and you can't seem to work it out…you become impatient, and then you decide to get angry… That's what's happened to me, anyway. I still get booted around in my personal life, here and there, but er…I just try to understand that tomorrow is another day.'

He delivers the line with the faintest hint of Scarlett O'Hara/Vivien Leigh anguish. The self-parody is perfect. Going up in the lift, I notice that on the program note he's listed himself as BOB DYLAN, Entertainer. Hmm.

About a month later Dylan is recording his songs for his *Street Legal* album. The last song is entitled, 'Where Are You Tonight?(Journey Through Dark Heat)'. In the first stanza Dylan sings:

There's a neon light ablaze
in this green smoky haze
Laughter down on Elizabeth Street…

Elizabeth Street? Brisbane? He's not gazing out the window of the St James Hotel, as he is in 'Blind Willie McTell' (one of Dylan's undoubted masterpieces) but in a different hotel, in a strange city, writing an agonised love song, which ends, Dylan's voice breaking into high register:

you'll know I've survived…
I can't believe I'm alive…
Oh, where are you tonight?'

STANZA 4

SINCE THAT BRISBANE concert and interview I've heard Dylan perform at each of his subsequent tours of Australia, more as an act of homage than anything else. His voice has deteriorated but he is still writing mature, astonishing songs. The most recent concert I saw was at the Byron Bay Bluesfest. Many people were disappointed at that performance, which is probably the last chance we will ever have to see Dylan alive in Australia, but I wasn't. I accept him for what he is. My brother Adrian wrote me a typically perceptive and ambivalent account of the concert: 'Dylan racing, rasping, at furious speed, and at what seemed almost an identical rhythm, through songs known and unknown, turning the stage lights down after every song, no large screens for those at the rear, and outside people standing in the vast paddock of ankle-deep mud just to be there. To bear witness. And I thought, what a contrast to when you first met him. In Byron we came, we saw, we heard him, but his presence was almost mythic. Maybe he isn't the same man. Who is?'

During that performance I was a fair way back in the crowd and when I finally stood up on a raised platform I was astonished by the reception he was getting. There were thousands of people there, many of them young or middle-aged, shouting and waving their arms in the air, who seemed to know the words of the songs, and when Dylan launched into 'Like A Rolling Stone' the place erupted and the lyrics blasted out of that huge marquee like a multi-voiced tumult of emotion, like an anthem:

How does it feel
How does it feel…
To be on your own
Like a rolling stone

STANZA 5

SOME TIME AGO I wrote: 'Bob Dylan is the greatest songwriter since Homer'. Christopher Ricks, former professor of English at Cambridge University, regards him as an almost Shakespearian figure. Because of the breadth and richness of Dylan's oeuvre (over six hundred songs), his visionary imagination, and his dazzling use of the entire panoply of American music, I am inclined to agree…as far as popular culture is concerned. Dylan turned the pop song serious, and he helped transform it into the most universal art form of our time. These days most poetry is sung – which it always has been, until the invention of the printing press turned it, temporarily, into a written form. The new prophets are the song poets.

But since Homer? Most people don't realise that the epic Homeric myths we know as the Odyssey and the Iliad were actually sung. Leaving aside the question of whether Homer actually existed, or whether it was the name given to the amazing series of song cycles which the Greeks developed over pre-classical times and were synthesised by 'Homer', they represent one of the greatest achievements of the human tradition of sung art.

What about other modern songwriters? In the last century Gershwin, certainly, was a fine composer, but his output was restricted by the same commercial and cultural considerations that restricted the Tin Pan Alley

melodists who followed, such as Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rodgers & Hammerstein, etc. They were victims of narrowcasting, their horizons limited by what they thought pop songs should be about (romance); it took the song poets of the '60s and '70s, including Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen, to liberate Tin Pan Alley. The Beatles? The music critic for *The Times*, William Mann, who once memorably referred to the Beatles as the Beatles Quartet, once claimed Lennon and McCartney were the greatest songwriters since Schubert. Possibly. But Schubert was similarly constrained by the conventions of German Lieder and the Romantic movement which were in their way as narrow as those of the American and English popular song.

The Middle Ages produced a substantial body of folk songs and troubadour songs, some of which had Dylanesque subtexts of social commentary, but few of them have survived musically. Going back further, Hebrew culture created the marvel of the Psalms and the Song of Solomon and much else, but again it is generally regarded as a corpus of work which was the product of a strong oral tradition (like British, Irish and American folk song) handed down from generation to generation. It is not until we reach back to Homer that we arrive at an individual songwriter against whom Dylan's achievement pales.

Dylan's songwriting career has now spilled over into the second decade of the twenty-first century. I wonder, sometimes, what further surprises are in store from the Jewish kid from Hibbing who exploded the art of the popular song and made it capable of dealing with…well, everything in the world.

Craig McGregor's latest book is *Left Hand Drive: A Social and Political Memoir* (Affirm Press, 2013). He is currently writing a novella and another book on Bob Dylan, titled *Twelve Dylan Masterpieces*.

REPORTAGE

Refuge without work

'This is a poison, a poison for the life of a person'

Peter Mares

MY INTERVIEW WITH Mr Syed did not get off to a great start. We'd arranged to meet at the Dandenong library – part of the city council building, a huge, bright orange edifice in the redeveloped heart of Dandenong in Melbourne's southeast.

I was early and kept a close watch on the library's sliding doors as rain showers blew across the civic plaza outside. Various men who might conceivably have been asylum seekers from the subcontinent came and went but none of them proved to be Mr Syed.

Just as I was about to call him, Mr Syed sent me a text. 'I'm waiting at Dandenong library,' it read. 'But it has moved from here and closed.'

The new library, I belatedly discovered, had only just opened. Mr Syed was familiar with the old one, near the market where he does his shopping. I eventually found him about fifteen minutes later. I felt bad about a misunderstanding that had caused him to wait so long in the cold, but perhaps it made it a little easier for us to start talking. Rather than sit down immediately – two strangers across a table discussing painful and personal issues – we took advantage of a break in the weather to walk briskly back to the new library to retrieve the umbrella that I had left behind there. (It was only a $2-shop job and I might not have bothered, but Mr Syed insisted. It was a measure of our different circumstances.)

We talked as we walked, Mr Syed sketching the broad outlines of his life in Australia so far – arrival by boat from Indonesia in October 2012, held in a Darwin detention centre for seventy days, released into the community on a Bridging Visa E. In some ways Mr Syed is lucky. He did not get sent to detention in Manus or Nauru. In other ways, he lucked out. Like other

asylum seekers who reached Australia by sea after 13 August 2012, Mr Syed's bridging visa denies him the right to work.

By the time we meet he has spent almost eighteen months living on a government payment of about $221 per week – equivalent to 89 per cent of the Centrelink Special Benefit. Using standard OECD measures, the Australian Council of Social Services calculates that the poverty line is $358 per week for a single adult. It says anything below this 'equates to a very austere living standard'.

After paying rent in a house shared with up to eight people, Mr Syed is left with less than $20 per day to cover all his other expenses. Somehow he manages to make the money stretch, to keep himself fed and clothed. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has found that some asylum seekers on bridging visas in Australia get by on one meal a day, and will go without food in order to buy phone credit so they can keep in touch with family overseas. When Mr Syed can supplement his income with vouchers and donations from charities like the Salvation Army, he even manages to set aside some money to send home to his wife and children. Living below the poverty line is very difficult but it is not his biggest concern.

The more important issue for Mr Syed is that he is denied the right to contribute. He is a man with a strong work ethic and a strong sense of personal responsibility. The experience of being forced to do nothing and rely on handouts is eating away at his soul. 'We feel ourselves like a beggar here,' he says. 'This is a poison, really a poison for the life of a person.'

THE DENIAL OF work rights to asylum seekers living in the community was part of the Gillard government's response to the 2012 Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers chaired by General Angus Houston – even though the panel's report made no such recommendation. What the panel did recommend was 'the application of a "no advantage" principle to ensure that no benefit is gained through circumventing regular migration arrangements.' According to then Immigration Minster Chris Bowen, this 'underlying principle' was 'the most important recommendation of the Houston Expert Panel'. Preventing asylum seekers from working was, he said, 'consistent' with the 'no advantage' concept.

Mr Syed is one of thousands of asylum seekers affected by this policy – although exact numbers are hard to come by. According to monthly reports on the Immigration department website, in April 2014 there were 24,273 asylum seekers living in the community on bridging visas. Consistent with the lack of transparency that has characterised the administration of Minister Scott Morrison, however, the department could not or would not tell me how many of them had work rights. The terse reply to my emailed inquiry was that the overall bridging visa statistics on the website were 'all that is currently available'.

Labor Senator Kim Carr had more success in getting data when he put a question at Senate Estimates in February 2014. At that time there were 19,353 asylum seekers living in the community without work rights. (Another three thousand or so asylum seekers live in community detention, confined to a particular, designated residence. They are not allowed to work either.)

Most of them, like Mr Syed, have been in this situation for more than a year and there is no prospect of anything changing quickly given current policy settings and the immigration department's processing backlog. As Curtin University researchers Lisa Hartley and Caroline Fleay comment in their February 2014 study *Policy as Punishment,* 'It is likely that asylum seekers living in the community will face months if not several years without the right to work while they wait for their refugee claims to be finalised.'

At a rough estimate, and without accounting for administrative expenses, the cost of providing 89 per cent of the Centrelink benefit to nineteen thousand asylum seekers runs to more than $4 million per week. Even if only half of them managed to find jobs, granting these asylum seekers work rights could save taxpayers more than $100 million per year. In addition, those who did find work would be contributing to government revenue by paying taxes and would become less frequent users of other government services, including Medicare.

To deny the right to work is to deny a fundamental source of human dignity. Work contributes to a sense of self worth that is essential to wellbeing. It can be a vital coping mechanism, particularly for people who have suffered trauma and upheaval. That is one of the reasons why the right to work is enshrined in international treaties that Australia has ratified, including

the Refugee Convention and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. To deny asylum seekers the right to work is to put their mental and physical health at risk. The human and financial costs of such a policy could be very great indeed.

OUR CONVERSATION IS polite, almost formal. He calls me Mr Peter. I call him Mr Syed, although he insists that I use his full name for this article and writes it down for me in an elegant cursive: *Syed Ejaz Hussain Zaidi*. He is a dignified man, educated and softly spoken, but I sense that Mr Syed is under extreme pressure and at times he struggles to maintain his composure. As we sit drinking coffee he explains why he made the difficult decision to come to Australia, leaving behind his wife and five children, aged between four and eighteen. 'I don't know whether I did right or wrong,' he worries. 'Was it a correct decision or a silly mistake?'

Mr Syed is from Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Balochistan province that borders Iran and Afghanistan. He is a member of the minority Hazara community, Shia Muslims in a predominantly Sunni country. 'I had a good life in my city,' he says. 'I earned a good salary and had a small business on the side. I was such a successful person there.'

Mr Syed worked in the regional office of a Pakistan government department. He was the only Hazara amongst the staff in his section. When five strangers came asking for him in August 2012, but refusing to say what they wanted, Mr Syed's colleagues were alarmed. They rang him and warned him not to come to work. After receiving death threats by phone and text, Mr Syed went into hiding and then fled the country. I ask why he chose to seek haven in Australia rather than some other place.

'Because it was easier and cheaper than Europe,' he says. 'At that time Australia was a leading country, welcoming refugees and giving them shelter. I was thinking about the future of my children and thinking about the future of my own life.' At that time too, record numbers of asylum seekers were reaching Australia by boat and the Gillard government was desperately casting around for ways to deter them.

Mr Syed hopes his family can keep themselves relatively safe in Quetta if they remain secluded in the predominantly Hazara suburb where they live.

To travel outside that enclave is to take a grave risk. This is consistent with independent reports on the situation in the city. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan says the city's Hazaras 'have retreated to just a couple of localities in Quetta to avoid being targeted'.

Amnesty International says 'routine targeted killings' are part of 'a long line of brazen attacks against Quetta's Shia population'. In two incidents in September 2012, shortly after Mr Syed stopped going to his office, men armed with rocket launchers and Kalashnikovs halted buses, hauled off all the Hazara men on board, and killed them. (Hazaras are generally easily identified by their East Asian appearance.) On at least two occasions, university buses carrying Hazara students to their studies have been targeted for bomb attacks.

The Sunni extremist group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi often openly admits its role in the violence and has issued public warnings to Hazara Shias to leave Quetta or be killed: 'It is our religious duty to kill all Shias, and to cleanse Pakistan of this impure nation…in all of Pakistan, especially Quetta, we will continue our successful *jihad* against the Shia Hazara and Pakistan will become a graveyard for them.'

Despite such evidence, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi appears to operate with impunity.

In January 2013 a double bombing in Quetta killed almost a hundred people, mostly Hazaras. In protest at authorities' failure to protect them, the community refused to bury their dead. In sub-zero temperatures they staged a three-day sit-in beside the bodies of their loved ones.

In the face of such atrocities, it is hardly surprising that Hazaras in Quetta might be drawn to the promises made by smugglers or that the danger of trying to reach Australia by boat may seem like a risk worth taking. In 2010, a suicide bomber killed more than seventy people at a Shia Muslim rally in Quetta. In news photographs of the aftermath, a large billboard warning against travelling to Australia by boat is clearly visible in the background.

A COUPLE OF years ago I worked on a research project mapping the spatial distribution of inequality in Australian cities over time. In our coloured maps of Melbourne, Dandenong consistently showed up us one of the darkest

or lightest shaded areas, revealing high levels of disadvantage. At the 2011 Census, the unemployment rate was 3.3 per cent higher than the national average, and median household weekly incomes $281 lower. Dandenong had a higher than average proportion of single parent families and lower than average levels of educational achievement. Looking back across five census periods, the same patterns appeared. Disadvantage in Dandenong appears to be entrenched and persistent. On paper it is not the kind of place that you would expect to cope particularly well with an influx of thousands of asylum seekers who have no choice but to live in poverty and to rely on welfare and the goodwill of strangers because government rules have forced them into unemployment.

Yet by and large, the local community has responded with generosity. There are thought to be around three thousand asylum seekers on bridging visas living in and around the Dandenong area. The largest groups are Hazaras from Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tamils from Sri Lanka, and Iranians, although there are many people from other backgrounds as well. 'Considering the number of clients here, there have not been many issues,' one local service provider tells me.

Perhaps it is because the people of Dandenong are not fazed by difference and know what it means to try to rebuild a life in a new land. According to the last census, fewer than four in ten Dandenong residents were born in Australia, compared to an average of close to seven in ten for the Australian population overall. More than sixty per cent of households in Dandenong speak two or more languages at home, compared to only twenty per cent nationally.

The federal government funds organisations like AMES and the Red Cross to provide transitional services to asylum seekers on bridging visas after their release from detention, including initial accommodation assistance and a limited number of English language classes (usually three two-hour classes per week). The funding for these services runs out after six weeks, however, long before clients' basic needs are met. While funding may be extended for asylum seekers who are assessed as particularly vulnerable (due to factors such as age, health or trauma), in reality agency case workers continue to offer support to all comers for as long as it is needed, which could be months or

even years. Case workers stretch themselves to cover the gap in resources and call on volunteers to help out with such things as English tutoring or donations of essential goods like clothing or prams or fridges. AMES and the Red Cross also refer asylum seekers to local charities like the Salvation Army or the St Vincent de Paul Society, and work with other community groups to develop free activities. Around Dandenong there are regular cricket or soccer matches, bicycle maintenance workshops, sewing groups, cooking classes, gym access and swimming lessons on offer to asylum seekers. I hear about one man – 'a shy, normal Aussie bloke' – who takes two asylum seekers to a game at Docklands Stadium each week to introduce them to the delights of AFL.

The work with asylum seekers in Dandenong goes well beyond the not-for-profit sector to involve local government, local businesses, the police and ordinary citizens. I'm told that local schools 'bend over backwards' to help integrate the children of asylum seekers into classrooms; that the library is very welcoming; that real estate agents – often themselves of migrant or refugee background – can be very generous in finding rental accommodation, despite the fact that asylum seekers have no rental history and no credit history.

In a relatively disadvantaged area like Dandenong, this puts additional strain on already scarce resources. Despite the best efforts of many local agencies and individuals, there are problems.

In an assessment of the gaps in Australia's protection system, the UNHCR found that asylum seekers in the community often struggle to find accommodation because they are seen as high risk: agents looking to set up long term lease agreements are reluctant to sign tenants on short term visas. Some landlords around Dandenong are exploiting the situation by crowding asylum seekers in together and charging rent per head, rather than rent for a property as a whole. Charging six people individual rents can double the return on a three-bedroom house that would normally let at $300 per week.

Asylum seekers on bridging visas are competing for a limited range of houses at the lower end of the rental market. In a report on its emergency relief program, Uniting Care notes that asylum seekers often end up in low-quality accommodation with inefficient heating and hot water systems and poorly maintained plumbing. As a result, they can find themselves in

financial difficulties when they are hit with unexpectedly high water and electricity bills.

The UNHCR also reports of asylum seekers working, despite the restriction on their visas, and getting exploited as a result of their vulnerability: 'not being paid, working long hours for a meager wage and having no recourse to remedy these experiences due to fear of being found out.'

Local community workers know this kind of exploitation goes on in Dandenong, but as one person put it to me, 'there is stuff-all we can do about it or will do about it.' As another said, 'you can't tell someone to quit a job paying $10 an hour.' To report the situation would be to put asylum seekers at risk of being sent back to detention, potentially on Nauru or Manus, for working in breach of their visa conditions. A job, even a badly paid job, not only helps asylum seekers put food on the table and pay the rent, it also keeps them occupied, gives them something to do, helps them to stop thinking.

Overall though, the view I hear repeatedly in Dandenong is that the community response to asylum seekers has been remarkable.

As the resident of a more affluent part of Melbourne, Rosa Misitano admits that she had some stereotypical views of Dandenong before she came to work in the suburb. Now she holds the area in very high regard. 'It is very, very welcoming,' she says. 'I often get to see the nice side of humanity.'

Six years ago, dissatisfied with her career in the mining industry, Misitano went back to study, completing a Masters of Education and a Graduate Certificate to qualify as a careers adviser. In the process of retraining she discovered volunteering and an absolute passion to help others to be their best. 'I can use my business experience to do that,' she says.

Misitano has been the manager of the Dandenong branch of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre since it opened in September 2013. The Centre operates from Monday to Wednesday out of a two-storey shopfront on the main street and is financed entirely by donations. A team of thirty-five volunteers provide employment services and eighteen two-hour English language classes per week. When I visit in mid April, the teacher of the more advanced group is sharing a recipe for Anzac biscuits.

The Centre has considerable success in finding jobs for those asylum seekers who do have work rights, despite their diverse backgrounds. 'We've

had prawn farmers, archaeologists, metallurgists and teachers,' says Misitano. The Centre helps asylum seekers with basic skills, including CV writing; provides some occupational health and safety training and offers instruction on Australian workplace culture, such as advice about making eye contact, or about how to respond to an invitation to Friday night drinks if you do not drink alcohol.

Expectations on the participants are high. 'We're tough,' says Misitano. 'They have to apply for twenty jobs per week. They have to get into the habits that they will need in the workforce.' The Centre has helped asylum seekers get jobs at many different businesses including a fertiliser factory, a rose farm and a Toyota dealership.

Misitano sees how work can change lives. She tells the story of a young Afghan asylum seeker who insisted on treating her to coffee and cake after getting his first pay. The young man had been distraught when he first came to the Centre, because he felt that he had to lie about his circumstances when he spoke to his mother on the phone. Now, for the first time in months, he was comfortable calling home, because he knew would soon be able to send money back to his family.

Misitano is upset, however, that she can't do more to ease the distress of asylum seekers without work rights: 'They come to me and say, "I need something to do. It gets dark. It gets me sad."'

Staff I speak to at other community services in Dandenong echo this view. (Some prefer not to give their names because they work for organisations in receipt of government funding.) 'They're in limbo, they can't move on in life,' says one. 'It's a mental health issue and their physical health deteriorates as a result. Over time we're seeing many more incidents of self harming.'

'Would granting work rights make a difference?' I ask. 'It would make a massive difference,' comes the answer.

Evidence gathered by the UNHCR reveals that many asylum seekers find it 'shameful and demoralising' to rely on handouts rather than working. Denial of work rights prevents them having meaningful engagement with the community and adds to a sense of hopelessness and social isolation. The prolonged lack of purpose can be 'devastating for drive, meaning, purpose and mental health'.

Roslyn Leary is the local manager of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture – more commonly known as Foundation House – which provides support to people who have been subjected to torture and trauma. In the current circumstances, she says, the agency has had to re-think the way it works with asylum seekers.

'The basis of trauma work is that a person has to feel safe,' she says. 'With asylum seekers who fear deportation, who fear being put back into detention, who cannot work and establish a new life, the principles of trauma work have been pulled out from under us.'

Leary describes much of the work with asylum seekers as 'symptom reduction' – attempting to alleviate high levels of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation. 'Sometimes it feels as if we have had another good day at work because nobody has killed themselves,' she says.

Leary has spent time on the frontline of the global refugee crisis, working as a refugee determination officer with the UNHCR in Egypt, deciding about who will and who will not be granted the agency's protection. Despite the much greater resources and support available to asylum seekers in Australia, in some respects, she says – particularly the denial of work rights – the situation for them here is worse. 'In Egypt, asylum seekers were not supposed to work either,' she says. 'But there is a big black market economy. Many could at least find some sort of job and feel like they are functioning as a human being. That aids people's sense of dignity.'

Here the lack of meaningful activity means 'endless days, boredom, frustration and anger'. Many asylum seekers have already spent a long time in transit countries or in detention centres. With nothing to do, they can't help but think about those wasted years. 'It has an extremely damaging impact on people's sense of self,' says Leary.

WHEN I ASK Mr Syed how he spends his days, he replies, 'I am walking around the streets like a mad person. We have no access to the social benefit of life. We do not have anything to do. We are in depression.'

For a brief period, Mr Syed volunteered gift-wrapping Christmas presents at Myer, with customers donating money to charity in return for the service. About fifty asylum seekers took part in a project that raised almost

$70,000 for Vision Australia. Mr Syed says it helped to be busy. 'It has a good psychological effect on you.'

Asylum seekers show great interest in volunteering and in April 2014 an audit by AMES concluded that as many as four hundred asylum seekers in Melbourne had volunteered in some capacity in the previous twelve months. Organising such opportunities is far from straightforward, however. Language can be a barrier, as can police checks or working with children certificates. And the federal government has put strict but opaque rules in place, limiting volunteering to not-for-profit or local government organisations that already have a volunteer program and to activities that will 'benefit the community'. Asylum seekers are not to receive any cash or in kind benefits in return for their time and cannot be engaged in any activity that might 'otherwise be undertaken in return for wages by Australian resident'.

Nor can asylum seekers study – unless of course they can afford the up-front full fees that are charged to international students.

'We are keen to work,' says Mr Syed. 'We want to be part of the society. We want to contribute our services. We don't want to be a burden.' He is completely mystified as to why the government would give him money and refuse to let him pay his own way. 'Why are they doing this?' he asks me. I explain about the perception that asylum seekers are economic migrants rather than refugees, drawn to Australia by the attraction of better jobs at higher wages.

'I did not come here for financial benefit,' he insists. 'I came here to get a secure life for my family.' I say that perhaps there is another reason too, that the government is probably hoping that Mr Syed and other asylum seekers will give up and go home.

Roslyn Leary from Foundation House puts it this way: 'The message from the government is very clear: because you came "illegally" you cannot participate in any way in our community. The overall intention is to drive people out, to get them to give up and go home.' Leary says some people are returning: 'People who feel they have to go back to see family, even if they die.'

Returning to Quetta is an option that must have crossed Mr Syed's mind: 'I can't tell you how my children are getting upset mentally. Every time I

speak to them on Skype they ask me "when will we be with you?" What should I answer? I can only say, "it is only God who knows". I am reaching the stage when I cannot face my family any more.'

After more than eighteen months in Australia, immigration department officials have not yet interviewed Mr Syed about his application for a protection visa. His original six-month bridging visa expired long ago and has not yet been renewed, rendering him technically unlawful. According to information provided to Senate Estimates, in February 2014 Mr Syed was one of almost twelve thousand asylum seekers in the community whose bridging visas had 'ceased'. For some (though not Mr Syed) this has created serious difficulties in accessing health services, because without a valid visa they were unable to renew their Medicare cards.

The department had suspended bridging visa renewals 'pending finalisation of legislative and administrative arrangements' for Minister Scott Morrison's Code of Behaviour. Now the code is in place, asylum seekers must undertake not to 'engage in any antisocial or disruptive activities that are inconsiderate, disrespectful or threaten the peaceful enjoyment of other members of the community' in order to renew their visa. The Minister insists that the code is necessary to 'protect' the Australian community. Asylum seekers who breach it risk detention on Manus or Nauru.

When Mr Syed does eventually get to argue his case for protection, he may have to do so without professional advice because the federal government has withdrawn funding for legal assistance for asylum seekers. Mr Syed knows that if he is recognised as a refugee, he is only likely to be granted a three-year 'humanitarian concern' visa, a reincarnation of the temporary protection visas introduced by John Howard. The Senate has twice disallowed the reintroduction of temporary protection visas, but the Immigration Minister is determined to bring them back.

If Mr Syed were to go home to Quetta, despite the risks he faces there, the government would mark him down as a voluntary return. In reality, he would have been forced into that decision by the denial of any other option. 'I would prefer to live in hell with my family than to live in heaven without them,' he says. 'I do not want to die alone. I want to die with my family.'

Mr Syed puts his head in his hands. Rubs his eyes. I look away and stare through the window at the rain outside.

RECENTLY I WITNESSED Julie Bishop giving a leadership talk to a group of undergraduates. When one of the students asked what was the biggest challenge facing the world today, the Foreign Minister nominated 'constraints on freedom' and 'the movement away from democracy' in many parts of the world. She gave the example of Syria as a place where people lack freedom of choice, freedom of speech and the freedom to make decisions for themselves.

It was not my place to ask a question at the gathering but I was silently hoping the students would ask about many of the asylum seekers locked up on Manus or Nauru or Christmas Island: individuals, who, denied freedom in Syria or other similarly troubled places, had exercised what little choice was available to them to seek a better life for themselves and their families.

When the Minister went on to say that she had joined the Liberal Party because it champions self-reliance, reward for effort and hard work, my thoughts turned immediately to Mr Syed, a man who desperately desires to be self-reliant but is denied the right to be so; a man who would work hard at any job, no matter if the reward for his effort was small; a man who came to Australia to try to free his family from the kind of persecution that Julie Bishop abhors.

None of the students asked about the treatment of asylum seekers. If they had, she would no doubt have defended government policy on the basis of preventing the horror of deaths at sea, or by trumping the individual rights she had just championed with another set of rights, based on sovereignty and the democratically expressed desire of the Australian people for the government to control our borders.

Even if we grant the point that there are conflicting sets of ethical concerns at play in the asylum seeker issue, even if we were to go so far as to acknowledge that there may have been a case for using deterrence to 'stop the boats' to save lives at sea, the soul-destroying treatment of Mr Syed and other asylum seekers and refugees can no longer be justified. No asylum seekers have made it to Australia by sea since December 2013. The Abbott

government's strategy of naval interception and of forcing people back to Indonesia in unsinkable, nausea-inducing orange lifeboats has proved to be an effective blockade. As long as the smugglers cannot reach Australia, they have no service to sell to asylum seekers in Indonesia.

As Robert Manne has argued, this gives us an opportunity to help 'save the lives of the tens of thousands of asylum seekers' who are already Australia's responsibility. There is no longer any reason to 'send a message' to potential boat people waiting in Indonesia or elsewhere by denying work rights or family reunion to people who arrived before that naval barrier was put in place. There is no point in extending the suffering of those detained in Manus or Nauru or Christmas Island. Regardless of whether or not it was ever morally justifiable to damage the wellbeing of one group of asylum seekers in order to deter another group from making a similar journey – to use people as means, rather than treat them as ends – there is no longer any point to such punishment. It is just unconscionable cruelty.

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MEMOIR

Ink and blood

Reflections on a sunset industry

Sonya Voumard

JOURNALISM IS IN my blood, my 1960s Melbourne childhood inked with its atmosphere, its tools of the trade, its characters and intriguing ephemera: my father's cuttings and scrapbooks from his days as a reporter with United Press International (UPI); his old press passes and medallions; news photos of him interviewing sports stars; his Underwood typewriter with the yellowing keys that clacked and danced, the machine's hard black, ill-fitting cover and the sheets of thin, pink paper with their delightful chemical smell. Though he left UPI and daily journalism in the early 1960s for a job in television, my father remained forever a freelance writer and member of Melbourne journalism's gregarious tribe and, as an early news junkie, I remained a curious daughter of it. When I was nine, I was finally allowed to try my hand at typing on Dad's Underwood: *the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog; now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party*. Once I'd poked at the shift key and swapped the ink choice from black to red a few times too many, the ribbon would stuff up – 'It's not a toy,' I'd be told – and the rickety thing, its metal, letter sticks, like prehistoric insects' legs, would fly rebelliously out and then back into place as it was whisked away.

Our lounge-room walls were lined with books, classics old and new: Shakespeare, Goethe, Tolstoy, Hemingway, Steinbeck and Waugh. (Books mostly by men, it has to be said.) As a kid, I scribbled all over them thinking I too was engaging in the important practice of writing. Some of those old editions still bear my hasty pen marks and my first efforts to write my name inside them. News events, like the Petrov Affair, and the stories behind such stories filled our house. So too did the firsthand accounts, newsy in their own right, of my mother's family caught up in the twentieth century's biggest story: displaced persons from war-torn Europe with their tales of the Russian

secret police; bodies in the forest; dead relatives; illicit affairs; escapes in the night; scarce, savoured food morsels and refugee camps. My parents' crowd was one of journalists, television producers and scriptwriters. I saw the world through the newsmaker's lens. In 1968, a television news producer family friend hosted the visit to Melbourne of an eyewitness to US Senator Robert Kennedy's assassination. His name was Ray, he'd been *three feet away* and we took him to see the kangaroos at Healesville Sanctuary. This crystallised my lifelong tendency to see the world as one big news story.

The news stories I most feared but fascinated me involved kidnappers and children. As a child born in that decade, the 1966 disappearance of the Beaumont children loomed large in my fearscape. I worried that someone would cut open the flywire of my sister's and my bedroom window and take us in the night. I once saw in the Melbourne *Sun* that a boy my age was murdered in Adelaide. A razor blade was used. Not long after, I found a razor blade in the dirt while playing at the Salvation Army home for children across the road from where we lived in Camberwell. I tried to break it up with my hands so it couldn't be used for a bad purpose. My fingers were covered in blood by the time I ran home. Just as I couldn't explain, my mother couldn't understand what drove me.

In October, 1972 two men kidnapped six students and their teacher from the Faraday Primary School in north-west Melbourne. This was my kind of story. My father and I laid out three newspapers on the kitchen table – the *Sun*, *The Age* and *The Australian*. We talked headlines, layout and background paragraphs. This story ended happily, the schoolteacher leading a brave escape and the children to safety. I knew then I wanted to be a journalist; I was eleven years old.

MY FATHER DREADED the idea of me becoming one. Or said he did. In my earshot I'd heard him say women journalists *grew balls*. This didn't worry me. If balls were what the smart, gregarious women journalists who came to our house had, I bloody wanted them. Whenever we drove past the gunmetal grey Herald and Weekly Times building at 44 Flinders Street, Melbourne, I imagined myself walking in there, story in hand.

People advised me against journalism. 'Do law, like your QC

grandfather,' some said. But journalism grabbed me and wouldn't let me go. When my father died, family contacts in journalism vowed to help me into the newspaper game when I finished school. 'It's very competitive,' they warned me. 'Hundreds apply for a handful of positions every year.' In late 1979, as my Higher School Certificate exams loomed, my mother phoned John Fitzgerald, the then editor of *The Herald* who'd given the eulogy at Dad's funeral. He advised me to send handwritten letters of application off to the Herald and Weekly Times (HWT) and *The Age*. Soon after, I was summoned to the Herald and Weekly Times building for an interview with a red-faced, cigarette-puffing old bloke called Cec Wallace. Cec, who'd been a friend of my dad's and was a former editor of *The Herald*, was all stomach and jowl. His words came out in friendly, crackly rasps. He drew in smoke and asked what I thought of cigarette advertising. The question was put casually but I sensed it was the pointy bit of the rather strange interview. I had no real idea what I thought. But since he was smoking, I guessed he was for it. I mumbled something about freedom of speech extending to advertising and this seemed to please him. I later realised newspapers would have once made great revenue from cigarette advertising. When I finished school, we went on a family trip to visit my mother's relatives in Sweden. We arrived back in Australia on a late January Friday to a letter from *The Herald* offering me a journalism cadetship. I was to start on Monday. I wasn't ready to start my working life so soon and rang my godfather, John Maher, the director of news at HSV Seven, which was then still part of the HWT stable. He'd helped pull the strings to get me in.

'I'm too jet-lagged to start on Monday,' I said.

'You get your arse in there on Monday. You're bloody lucky to have a job,' he snapped down the phone. I obeyed.

DURING THIS TIME journalism at *The Herald* was far from the progressive, intellectual scene I'd envisaged. This was a world where women were explicitly unequal: female cadet candidates might be quizzed about whether they were on the pill; editorial policy banned the use of the title 'Ms', and 'Women's' was actually an editorial department with a separate office accessed through a frosted glass door. Older men on the paper still wore hats. As a

non-graduate, I along with fellow cadets studied journalism part-time at RMIT.

My earliest and most formative experience of the journalist–subject relationship, with me as interviewer, was a university assignment I did on political biography. Most students took the task literally, choosing to interview politicians of varying importance. I went for the then less well-known Australian author Helen Garner. Garner was best known at that stage for her novel *Monkey Grip* and for having been sacked in 1972 by the Victorian Education Department for giving candid sex lessons to her high school students. It would be fifteen more years before she wrote *The First Stone*.

She agreed to talk to me on the condition that the piece was not for publication. When she asked, I also confirmed the interview would not be tape-recorded and that I would send her a copy of it. Over a four-hour lunch, Garner and I talked in depth. I was starstruck as she spoke openly to me as if I were an equal, about feminism, politics, her life, her work and her relationships. I wrote down her answers as fast as I could. Without a second thought I proudly posted her a copy of what I'd written as soon as I'd finished it. I couldn't wait for her reaction.

She was not pleased. On 10 June, 1980, she wrote to outline fifteen (she numbered them) 'inaccuracies' she wanted cut or changed. But it was too late as I'd already handed the work in. I wrote back apologising for the inaccuracies I was prepared to acknowledge and arguing the toss on others. She replied apologising in return to me 'if I was rough or impatient' adding that I was 'too young' to understand some of her nuances.

'It is always traumatic to see the way another person has perceived you, specially when you feel you have talked a little too freely about things which would have needed much more careful explanation. I have learnt a lot, as I probably said, from all this and I think you have to. Please forgive me if I have been offensive.'

When I look back on that assignment and Garner's handwritten letters, which, at eighteen I saw as so patronising, I now know how she felt. I cringe at my spelling mistakes, careless segues, youthful presumptions and, yes – I am now old enough to admit – any inaccuracies and misinterpretations.

The American author Janet Malcolm notes: 'The subject is Scheherazade.

He lives in fear of being found uninteresting, and many of the strange things that subjects say to writers – things of almost suicidal rashness – they say out of their desperate need to keep the writer's attention riveted.'

I pondered the idea of *interviewee's remorse*. Garner and I agreed that we both enjoyed the interview. But, later, as she wrote to me, she felt she had *talked too freely*. This is often the lot of journalists' subjects. The disparity between the way Garner and I had each seen the interview shocked me. It formed the seed of what was to become my lifelong fascination with the psychological dynamics between writers and their subjects. I filed the offending assignment – for which I only got B minus – and Garner's letters away. I knew I would return to them one day. I chose Norman Lindsay for my next political biography subject, partly because he was dead. I got a better mark for that assignment.

I HAD A rocky start to my career in journalism. I hated the *Herald's* conservative culture, was lousy at shorthand and felt the male cadets got favoured treatment over the women. But that wasn't my only problem. Most difficult of all for me were the punishing early morning starts. Rarely could I get to work on time. I staggered through my first year as a cadet in an edgy and overexcited daze.

Our bosses kept secret files about our progress as trainees under lock and key. One Saturday afternoon after everyone had left, a friend and I hacked into the forbidden files to read and photocopy our own and those of some of our friends. Mine said that I had 'poise'. It also said I lacked confidence, which was the first time anyone had made that call. My shorthand was poor and my attitude to my RMIT studies less than perfect. I considered quitting and going to university full-time. In the end I stuck it out and grew into a competent reporter.

I covered the criminal courts in Melbourne where I learned to scurry after busy legal counsel, politely, charmingly seeking vital elements for my stories. I cultivated police and others around the courts to tip me off about upcoming, newsworthy cases. One morning, in a lift at Melbourne's County Court, a tipstaff whispered the number of a courtroom he said I should go to. It was a case about a brutal police bashing of two innocent men in Fitzroy and

my first real page one scoop. No other media were in the court. After three years in the job, for the first time I got praise from my chief of staff. Barely making eye contact, he mumbled: 'We're ploised with you.'

Later I developed my interviewing skills on drought-stricken farmers, self-seeking politicians, celebrities and victims of grief. I experimented with my writing style in a theatre column I wrote freelance for *TV Scene*, the HWT's entertainment publication for which I earned extra money and free theatre tickets. Sometimes I liked my subjects, other times I didn't. I learned to hide my feelings when necessary. At times it felt like acting. I zigzagged from general news reporter to television critic, from state political reporter to entertainment supplement editor. I started to know the addictive pleasure of journalism, the satisfaction of writing, the thrill of by-lines and how your adrenalin kicks right through your body as soon as a big story breaks. It's a feeling that never leaves you. Wherever you are, subconsciously you draw a line from yourself to big stories when they happen. There's always a part of you that yearns to be there. You want to run towards the disaster, find the source and write the pain. Stories about life and death tap straight into whatever drug-like feeling it is to be able to put beautiful or touching or compelling words around what happened so readers' thoughts will swim in your thought stream. You fantasise that your words will help people understand, or help make the world a better place. You want to get your hands on the narrative; the author Primo Levi called it *bearing witness*. Perhaps you will win a Walkley award.

Most journalists believe they are performing a public good. The Australian Media Alliance's 2010 survey of journalists found 93 per cent of us believe this. The general public is less convinced; only 63 per cent of them buy it. Sometimes, in surveys that monitor such things, we get compared to second-hand car dealers. But, when it comes down to it, who doesn't believe in freedom of the press?

The *Herald* was a great training ground. In the days before the digital era, it taught me to think quickly and accurately on my feet, to walk out of a courtroom or a press conference and speak a story down the phone to a copy taker within minutes. The days of phoning in copy have long gone; however, the immediacy of online journalism demands, once again, the same dexterity.

But *The Herald*, when I joined in 1980, was a paper in decline. Its efforts to stem circulation losses – from Page Three girls to competitions to win money – were embarrassing. I wanted to work on a paper of ideas; I wanted to work for *The Age*. In 1985, I applied for and got a job there. It was a different world – a paper that nurtured good writing, treated news photography as an art form and embraced a social justice agenda. It had a healthy heartbeat. It felt like home. And, because it was a morning newspaper, the most common shift started at 10 am and finished at 6 pm or later. These hours suited my body clock better. I could get to work on time.

Soon after joining, I wrote a first person piece for an occasional column in *The Age* called 'Something Personal'. It was about the tenth anniversary of my father's death. Titled 'The 10 years a father never had', it began:

It is now 10 years since my father died. I was 13 then, learning second form French and struggling around in platform shoes. Skyhooks were big and I knew all the words to 'Toorak Cowboy' and most of the words to 'Lygon Street Limbo'… The last time I saw him was through a crack in the door. I had one eye shut and I saw if I could make out his image through the narrow crack. We had already kissed him goodnight. He was going on a trip to Yugoslavia the next day.

That story drew more reader letters and complimentary feedback than anything I'd ever written. One of my colleagues described it as 'a wank' while another asked how I could have been so self-revelatory. Isn't that, I thought, what we ask our interview subjects to be all the time? It was okay to objectify others but turn the mirror on oneself? When I reread the piece today, I shudder at the self-exposure of my grief and that of my family. Looking back, I can't help wondering if I did reveal too much. Especially in lines like this:

We all cried and I went to have a bath. I used the same soap he had used in the bathroom in which he had shaved and showered the morning before he left. His after-shave was still in the cupboard and his clothes were still in the wardrobe in my parents' bedroom. It was hard to believe we would never see him again.

After the piece was published, the local pharmacist, our family doctor's surgery staff, neighbours and others spoke to my mother about it. It was not attention she sought. Writing from life is vexed. But I'm compelled to do it

despite the risks. It feels to me a more real way of telling stories than writing about people with whom you might have a professional transaction but not necessarily a personal connection. My eight years at *The Age* made explorations like that possible and were the most enjoyable of my journalistic career.

MY FALLING OUT of love with journalism was slow. It was the early 1990s and I was working in Sydney, my third interstate posting for the *Age*. The future of the bureau in Sydney seemed in doubt as the newspaper business began to contract. The yet-to-be disgraced Canadian-born newspaper publisher Conrad Black and his Coca-Cola guzzling business pals hovered ominously over Fairfax. Rationalisation was in the air. I'd made Sydney my home by then so it seemed prescient to transfer to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which I did in 1993. It was a tumultuous few years of management changes at Fairfax, an era of heightened career jostling, executive backstabbing and budget cuts.

In 1995, I was working in the state political bureau of the *Herald*, based at NSW Parliament, where yet another election loomed and where I realised I couldn't care less if the image-adjusted, no-longer bespectacled Bob Carr, the great boomer of promises to fix the *waste and mismanagement* in NSW hospitals, was elected Premier of NSW or not. Would anything change? NSW state politics bored me. I was burnt out. Each morning, as I entered Parliament House through the back entrance, I'd pass the parliamentary workers' canteen and its smell of dim sims and other things heated, fried and broiled. The congealed fatty smell would kick off the low grade sickliness I'd feel about the day ahead and the job I'd stopped loving. Like rodents on a one-lane treadmill for forced motor activity, we journalists walked back and forth between the parliamentary press gallery's below-ground offices and its media room for press conferences interspersed by office cricket, dirty jokes and illicit cigarettes in the warm, thick air of the dully lit toilets. Daily journalism had come to feel like a grind – the phone calls, the waiting, the getting, the filing, the checking of soon-to-be-forgotten stories. We talked with solipsistic pride when we 'broke' stories, supposedly outside the set news agenda. There were notable exceptions but often 'broken' stories were just the drip feed being delivered another way by vested interests we'd spent years

cultivating – an exclusive here, a whisper in an ear there. The people who run Sydney know, as well as anywhere, how to use journalists and journalists them. Maybe I was just jaded but vested interests seemed to me to hold more sway with Sydney newspapers than I'd thought to be the case when I worked in Melbourne. It was not uncommon for politicians or business leaders to have words with editorial executives and for unfavourable stories, or parts of them, to be quietly dropped or demoted. In Melbourne, I'd never, to my knowledge, had a story killed off or changed for political reasons. In Sydney, it happened to me and to other journalists I know more than once. It fed a growing doubt and disillusionment about the role of journalism.

Not for the first time in my career I came to think there must be more important things to be doing. I quit my job four weeks before that unmemorable 1995 NSW state election. I went on a poorly-paid journey working freelance; a soul searching, two-year quest to write about things I thought mattered more to me than transport stories and pre-selection battles among political party factions. Only now do I realise many of the stories I chose to write at that time were about death – literal or otherwise: the thoughts of the lawyer defending serial killer Ivan Milat; an artist-in-residence among people facing death from AIDS; the sale by the late Brett Whiteley's hard-up lover, before her suicide, of his portrait of her; interviews with survivors of the Stolen Generations.

Working from home, I wrote for magazines including *HQ*, *Good Weekend*, *Marie Claire* and *The Independent*. I'd spend weeks writing feature articles for fifty cents a word, sometimes less, and only payable on publication, which could be months away. It was more satisfying than writing about state politics but the lack of money was depressing. I cheered up though when I got an overpaid job working for Microsoft Australia as a contract news reporter at the beginning of the dot.com boom. I joined a team of pioneering internet journalists working on the establishment of what later became ninemsn. I rode that money wave for about four years, writing a novel about political journalism in my spare time. After the dot.com crash, I took up teaching non-fiction writing part-time, earning a living as a corporate writer and writing occasional freelance articles. But I've never stopped thinking and feeling like a journalist.

Born against the backdrop of post-war trauma, I loved growing up in the world of Australian journalism in all its gossipy madness, badness and beauty. My once-loved profession, as my journo friends and I once knew it, no longer exists. The death of newspapers seems imminent within a decade. I have occasional flashes of sadness about this, but I've come to realise that I will not mourn their loss. They are skeletons of their former selves and their time has come. Journalism is morphing into something else. It can be more inclusive of the audiences it serves. It may even be better.

Sonya Voumard is a journalist, author and academic whose work has been widely published in major Australian newspapers, magazines and literary journals. Her 2008 novel *Political Animals* was inspired by her time working as a political journalist in Canberra. She now teaches journalism and non-fiction writing subjects at UTS where she is finishing a Doctorate of Creative Arts on the power dynamics between journalists and their interview subjects.