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How I lived, breathed, read, wrote, loved, hated, dreamed and drank men's magazines

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PROLOGUE
In which things go very, very wrong

March 1988: I woke up in a mouth full of broken teeth, a yawning alleyway glistening with incisors of glass. I had no money, no ID, no jacket, no shoes, no cigarettes, and no idea where I was. My chest ached for a cigarette, I was shivering like a junkie, and I had started drinking whisky so I had to finish drinking whisky, and I had not finished because I was awake, so I had to find more whisky and more cigarettes, and I had to find my way home.

I rolled to my feet and limped into the road, wearing an Adidas t-shirt, jeans and white socks. Where were my shoes? How could I possibly have lost my shoes? The houses in the street were cramped and mean, and too close together. I could not see any shops, or any place I knew. It was 1 am.

A knot of men in heavy jackets stood talking in the road. I approached them with a foal's balance, choosing each footfall with care. I asked them where I was. In eunuch voices, they told me the name of the street. Actually, I wanted to know the name of the city.

'Swansea,' they said.

Swansea in Wales. Damn and shit and fuck and damn. I lived in England.

I hugged my arms to keep warm, rubbing tattoos. I said I did not know what had happened to me, and I needed a cigarette, and I could not get

home, and I was looking for somewhere to sleep. They gave me a smoke, lit it for me, then ran away.

I had been stuck on the streets before, and I knew a night lasts a week. Time winks and slouches, your watch laughs at you. You need to drink to sleep and there is no drink so you do not sleep and the longer you stay awake the more you withdraw, and it would be so easy if somebody just came along with a quarter bottle of Bells or a couple of cans of Tennent's Super and a pack of Embassy No. 1. Everything would be alright, and it wouldn't matter about the cold.

What the hell happened to my shoes?

I was twenty-five years old and nothing had gone right for so long I had begun to expect mornings like this one, chilly and inexplicable, with their imagined bruisings and strange pains, but I never expected to be in Wales.

A minibus crowded with police officers was waiting at the end of the road: rows of meat-fat men with buttons for eyes. I decided to turn myself in.

I leant into the driver's window and told him I had been drinking in England and woken up in Wales, and I had lost all my money. Was there any chance he could arrest me, as I needed to spend the night in a cell?

The copper wanted to know if I had committed a crime.

None that I could remember (although I had, in fact, committed several).

He told me the deal with the Welsh police was no crime, no arrest.

Tell that to the striking miners, you bastard. I begged the copper to change his mind. He shook his head. I tried to climb through the window into the cab. Amiably, he swatted me away.

'I'll tell you what,' he said, 'we'll come back here in an hour, and if you still want us to arrest you, we'll do it then.'

That seemed fair, but the temperature was quivering around freezing, so I decided to keep warm by walking in a circle. Within minutes, I was lost. How could the coppers arrest me if they could not find me? The logical thing to do was to go and find the coppers. A taxi driver gave me directions to the police station, to which I reported just outside the hour's grace I felt I had been given.

I presented myself to the desk sergeant to claim my cell.

He told me he could not arrest me unless I was a criminal. Suddenly, I realised I was a vagrant – I had no money, no local address and I was drunk. I asked to be incarcerated under the Vagrancy Act. The desk

sergeant, a kind and patient man, said I could sleep on the bench where people were waiting to report crimes.

This was okay for a few minutes, but I could not lie down, and it was too cold and bright and noisy to sleep. I was fixated by the idea of a warm, dark cell, with a mattress, a pillow, a bucket and a blanket.

Complainants queued at the desk, distracting the sergeant's attention. I pretended to doze, waiting for my moment. When his back was turned, I sprinted across the room and vaulted the desk, aiming for the corridor which I presumed led to the cells. The sergeant intercepted me and pushed me back over to the other side, yelling, 'If you don't fuck off out of here right now, I will fucking arrest you, and you'll fucking know about it!'

Back on the street, I tried to think what could have dropped me to this new low in my chaotic, directionless, hollow, vapid, sporadically violent life.

Oh yeah. Whisky.

I could remember sitting with my mate Chris, drinking a bottle of Scotch under a railway bridge. We were on our way to see The Pogues. We were always on our way to see The Pogues, and we were always drinking.

The plan had been to stay with another mate, JF, in Cardiff, but I did not know if we had ever got there. I assumed I had not managed to reach the concert, and instead had wandered into an alley, taken off my clothes and thrown away my money. Chris, meanwhile, had been kidnapped by aliens.

I looked down at my socks. The soles had disintegrated. As I trudged off to nowhere, I left footprints of blood.

In 1988, The Pogues were the best band in the world. Their music was a madman's howl of Irish folk raped by punk rock and drowned in whisky, piss and beer. When Shane MacGowan, beautiful and repulsive, sang of hurt and loss and drunken sadness, he was talking to me – like The Clash when they recorded their first album, like The Jam when they made 'Setting Sons', and like the voices in my head that told me to go out and murder marketing people.

I am just kidding about the voices.

I drank in eleven Pogues gigs between 1984 and 1990. The first time, at Warwick University in Coventry, the band was so tight MacGowan could play guitar and sing while lying on his back. The last time, at the

Coogee Bay Hotel in Sydney, the best he could do was lie on his back. No matter what song the band played, MacGowan sang the opening stanzas of his bloodshot, pagan hymn, 'If I Should Fall From Grace With God'.

He drank vodka offered by the crowd, collapsed, and eventually wandered off stage, leaving the tin whistle player to take over vocals.

In March 1988, MacGowan only sang 'If I Should Fall From Grace With God' when the rest of the band played it. The Pogues could chill a thug to tears with their sublime Christmas hit, 'Fairytale of New York', and I was the biggest fuck-up I knew.

I guessed there must be dosshouses in Swansea where the homeless could get a bed. I asked taxi drivers – the only people on the streets at 2 am – and they directed me to an unmarked terrace in a bleak road in a cruel area a long way from the centre of town.

I needed somewhere closer. I crammed myself into a piss-stinking phone box, and called the Samaritans, who are supposed to help desperate people over their pre-dawn dread. I explained to the telephone Samaritan that I was lost in Wales, in the middle of the night, without my wallet. I was icy cold, and I was dressed for the beach. I did not understand what had happened to me, I could not even get myself arrested, and I needed to find somewhere to sleep before my feet blackened and froze.

'Yes,' said the gently stupid voice, 'but what's *really* your problem?'

You're my fucking problem now, mate. Are you going to tell me where to sleep, or aren't you?

He was not. His speciality was underlying causes, rather than bandaid solutions.

It took me two hours to find the crash pad. When a tired social worker opened the door, I could have hugged her – but then I could have hugged Hitler, I was so hopelessly, chillingly, teeth-chatteringly cold. I told her my story and she said I could not come in. She ran a 'dry house', and I was obviously drunk. She could, however, offer me a cup of tea and a blanket, and allow me to sleep on the step.

Eventually, she relented. I was to be allowed in the house, but not in the dormitory. I would be permitted to doze on the sofa until 6 am, but I would have to be gone before the 'skippers' rose for breakfast. I must not set a bad example to the tramps.

I had two hours sleep, and woke up to two huge, gaunt, tallow-eyed faces looming over me and muttering. A couple of early-rising Welsh tramps wanted to sit down.

The morning was still a blurry black as I trekked off to Swansea Railway Station, and I still had no idea what had happened.

There was no guard on the gate for the first train to Cardiff. I walked straight through and into a carriage, where I sat, shaking. An inspector asked me for my ticket. I stared at him and shook some more. He shrugged and ignored me. This must be how the mentally ill travel, pursuing their illusory errands, ignored by authority, not expected to contribute, barely visible.

There was a man on duty at Cardiff Station. I walked past him, wordless, quaking. He looked away.

I knew JF lived in Cardiff, but I did not know where. I shuddered into the taxi office to borrow a phone book. The manager asked if I had had an accident. By this time, I had quite a long story to tell, even though I did not know how I had come to be in Wales. She listened with a mother's heart. Perhaps she had a son my age who had one day slipped out for a quiet pint and come back three years later with no left leg, ten kinds of sexually transmitted diseases, a tarantula on his shoulder, and a corporal's rank in the Spanish Foreign Legion.

When I read out JF's address, she put me in a cab and had the driver take me there for free.

I walked into JF's house to find Chris in bed with my brother. They said it had been a great concert and – surprisingly – I had been there. I had kicked my brother in the stomach, then invited him into the bathroom, where I had demonstrated how to use an axe kick to dislodge a sink from the wall. They were not sure where I had gone after that.

JF had planned to see The Pogues with us, but had pulled out when he saw the state we were in when we arrived, breathless with beer, with poker-machine eyes; my brother had come up from home as a last-minute substitute.

Nobody knew anything about my missing clothes.

Chris suggested I ring the gig venue, the Swansea Mayfair. They were frosty and unhelpful, but they confirmed they had a leather jacket, and some shoes. They asked the size of the shoes I had lost. I asked how many people could possibly have left their shoes at a concert. They told me I would be surprised. I said they were size eight tasselled loafers.

I took the train back to Swansea, wearing borrowed shoes and socks, with borrowed money in my jeans. The Mayfair was dark, unfamiliar and closed. A gruff worker led me to a room around the back, where my jacket was hanging on a rack, with my wallet, cards and money all inside.

There had been a misunderstanding about the shoes. The only style they had was size ten, plain slip-on – and they had forgotten to mention there was only one of them.

A week later, Chris and I were walking to the Brighton Centre, on our way to meet my brother and watch The Pogues. Brighton in Sussex is more than 300 kilometres from South Wales, but a t-shirt seller stopped me in the street and asked how I was feeling after Swansea.

He said I had a fight with somebody in the audience, and I was pulled off him by two bouncers, who started battering me. They, in turn, were pulled off me by a big guy with spiky blond hair, who picked me up and carried me outside. I remembered his face, above me like the moon, and his voice asking if I was okay.

The bouncers must have pulled my jacket from my back in the brawl, and a Welsh terrier must have eaten my shoes.

March 7, 1988, was the last time I drank whisky.

ONE In which I get tattooed, pierced, beaten up etc.

A couple of questions still puzzle me about the 1980s: (1) What went wrong with my life? (2) What the hell happened to my shoes?

I am resigned to never learning the answer to (2), but I still struggle with (1).

I was born in Leeds, England, in 1963, to a working-class, Jewish family on their way up. My dad was a good man, much better than I ever realised, but aside from an enormous reluctance to do anything around the house or garden, I had little in common with him.

My dad was born in Liverpool, his parents were Russian. He left school at fourteen, unable to read and in love with football.

My dad's father first met Jimmy, my mum's father, when Jimmy led a cabinet-makers' strike. My Russian grandfather was bussed in from Liverpool to take the strikers' work. That defined the politics of the two sides of my family. The Dapins were Tories, the Benjamins were socialists. I do not know what kind of a man dad's father was – he died before I was born – but Jimmy said he liked him.

Dad did his National Service in the Royal Corps of Signals, stationed at Sherwood Forest during the Korean War. His discharge papers describe his military conduct as 'very good' and say he was 'of sober habits'.

He drank a glass of Drambuie perhaps once a year, and smoked the occasional secret cigarette. I did not love him enough, I never loved anybody enough.

Dad went to work as a cutter in a tailoring factory, a semi-skilled job he held until he was thirty. He met my mum at a dance, they married and she taught him to read. He then took a job as a greetings-card rep, selling to newsagents and gift shops. When his employer went bankrupt, he turned self-employed and did moderately well. The wardrobes in our house were piled with boxes of samples, labelled '18th', '21st' or, mysteriously, 'OK acetate'. He branched out into related novelties, such as a 21st-birthday plastic numberplate that read 'UR21', and a less popular model to celebrate the first birthday of twins, 'U2R1'.

The most important thing in my dad's life was football. He had been an amateur referee since he gave up playing, but could never take the professional referee's examination because he could not read the exam paper. The cut-off age for new referees was thirty, so by the time he was literate it was too late. He refereed every Saturday, for sides based in pubs and community clubs, on open fields near Roundhay Park. If he could not referee, he would be a linesman. On Sundays, he officiated over Sunday-league games. He once refereed a game played by blind people, with a bell inside the ball. He loved *Grandstand*, *Match of the Day* and *Sportsnight with Coleman*. He hated Leeds United. This was unfortunate, since we lived in Leeds, and Leeds United was the most glamorous team in the English First Division, and one of the most successful clubs in Europe.

Dad liked to go to games, but never to the Leeds ground, Elland Road. While Leeds were winning the UEFA Cup (1971), the FA Cup (1972) and finally the first-division championship (1974), we drove together to half-a-dozen dour Yorkshire market towns – Rotherham, Doncaster, the onomatopoeic Grimsby – to watch fourth-division sides play insignificant fixtures, but I did not mind because I loved him, although not enough. My dad had simple ambitions. He wanted a marriage and children, a house and a car, a little love and respect, and enough money.

We saw Leeds United once, in 1974, when they played Liverpool in the Charity Shield at Wembley. I still meet men in Australia who can recite the names of every player in that Leeds team – Harvey, Reaney, Cherry, Bremner, McQueen, Hunter, Lorimer, Clarke (substituted by McKenzie), Jordan, Giles, Gray. They marched onto the pitch – all white men dressed all in white – behind their new manager, Brian Clough, with their long

sideburns and blow-waved partings, and drew one-all with Liverpool. The game was scrappy and vicious, with a brawl between Leeds captain Billy Bremner and Liverpool's Kevin Keegan. They were both sent off, and each tore off his shirt in protest. Liverpool won on penalties, but by this time, my dad had lost most of the simple things he had worked for.

His marriage was broken, he had to remortgage the house, and his children were drifting away from him, emotionally, culturally and geographically.

My mum was born in Harehills, Leeds, and grew up with four sisters in a two-bedroom terrace house. Jimmy, her father, thought an education damaged a girl's chances of getting married, so he burned her 'O' Level results and refused to let her take 'A' Levels. It was shame enough that her sister, Gloria, had won a scholarship to Oxford University. My mum studied shorthand and typing, left home at sixteen, came back, worked first as a secretary, then as a nurse.

My dad must have seen himself in her. She had Russian grandparents on her mother's side, she grew up in a crowded, superstitious community of immigrant poor, and she wanted a husband and children in a house with a garden. They bought a semidetached home, with a hedge and a garage and fruit trees and a raspberry bush in the back.

I think my mum hid the fact that she always wanted more; she, too, felt it might make her unmarriageable. She gave up work when I was born, and four years later she gave birth to my brother. All the while, she was studying for her matriculation with the Workers Educational Association. We started to take in lodgers, and I had to move into bunk beds with my brother. There was a boy from France, a man from Holland, a student from London, and another from Billingham, near Newcastle.

My mum began a degree in sociology and psychology at Leeds University. After three years, she graduated, and a year later she abandoned my dad's house, taking my brother and me with her in a taxi. We drove across town to a flat, where we met again the lodger from Billingham, near Newcastle. He was twenty years old, and I was ten.

My brother and my father were torn to shreds. My mum could barely cope with what she had done. She was a cook and a cleaner, a woman who collected recipe cards, never drank, ironed handkerchiefs and folded towels, and she had run off with a long-haired, bearded student who was not even Jewish. Her parents refused to speak to her, and eventually she had a breakdown.

My dad cried the night before we left, and when we visited his house that used to be our house – was still our house, in those days – the wallpaper and the carpets were swollen with his tears. We stayed up late and watched war films on the black-and-white TV, ate big bags of cheese-and-onion crisps and drank fizzy, red Tizer from the bottle with our arms around each other. They were some of the best times I ever spent with him.

I liked the new arrangement. The student played guitar, and listened to Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones. He papered our flat with posters from rock newspapers. He read American comics, as I did, and Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*, and the poetry of Leonard Cohen. The only unhealthy thing about him, as far as I could see, was that he supported Newcastle United.

He was still at university, and my mum worked only part-time, so we had no money. My dad rented us a TV, on the promise it would be kept in our bedroom, so Mum and her lover could not watch it. To make the TV work, we had to put in a tenpence piece every four hours. It always ran out just before the end of movies, or in the middle of *The World at War*.

After a year, we moved to a housing-association estate in Harehills, between my grandparents' house and the largely West Indian district of Chapeltown, which was soon to burn in Britain's summer riots. I was happier than I had ever been. I could grow my hair as long as I liked – which was very long – I had a big bedroom to myself, I could read comics all night and play football with myself in the alley, making up stories in my head. I was an atheist and a socialist. I did not like being Jewish, and the dull, dripping religion we were raised on was bleeding into the background of more fantastic dramas. I was told we would soon live in London, where there were shops that sold nothing but comics.

In fact, we moved to a garrison town where British Army recruits performed their basic training, and there were as many soldiers as civilians. It was a brutal barracks, with the possibility of violence hanging over every exchange. I got punched in a bookshop, beaten up outside a scout-hall disco, smacked around the head in an alleyway, kicked in the balls on my way to school, chased by squaddies through the town. I adored it, loved being a teenager in a lawless place, growing up with a soundtrack of punk rock music. I remember those years like a kidnapper's collage, letters cut from newspaper headlines, events pasted at random: watching The Clash play an Anti-Nazi League benefit at Brockwell Park, Brixton, with the Tom Robinson Band and X-Ray Spex; watching skinheads smash a punk over the

head with a toilet seat to the imbecilic beat of Crass; running from a party in a hall broken up by the police; running from other parties broken up by fighting; a daytrip to France when we ran first from a bunch of fat drunks from the Black Country, then from a mob of French rockabillies, then from the older men from the garrison town who felt we had let them down by running; piercing my ear with a safety pin, again and again; tattoos crawling up my arms – swords and hearts and snakes and swallows – marking the years. Most of all, I remember the music, and the feeling it gave me as if I was standing on the edge of the world, burning with an anger that bordered on bliss.

Rich, Paddy and I were the first kids to form a band, a punk rock group that eventually became Deadlock. I wrote songs that were complicated and obscure, about things I had never known: valium, wife-beating, the death of a soldier. I could not sing, and I was too shy even to try. Our rehearsals were comically stifled. Nobody could change chords or keep time, and we ended up channelling my radio-cassette player through the amplifier, and miming along to The Jam. The rest of the band pretended to split up, in order to kick me out.

I had a lot of friends, a big gang who went on to form other bands, get married, or die. Dave and Merv committed suicide. Sarah contracted leukaemia. John, Rich and others filled their veins with heroin. Nobody made it as a rock star.

My school was like the town – rough and cold, grey and stupid. Several of the teachers simply chalked the lesson on the blackboard and left the classroom. It was a boys' comprehensive school, and the staff still used the cane. There was trouble in the playground every week, as I huddled with smokers behind the bike sheds, or skipped lessons to go shoplifting in the centre. I was good at lessons for the first two years, until I realised being good at lessons was the same as being Jewish. By the third year, my reports had degenerated from columns of As into a snide platform for staffroom sarcasms. I won prizes in a couple of national writing competitions. My housemaster congratulated me, but wrote 'One cannot live on English alone'.

Many of the boys came from military families. At school, as in the military, the emphasis was on obeying orders, fighting, and everybody looking the same. The uniform was a black blazer and black trousers, a white shirt, grey socks, and a grey sweater in winter. You would get a stiff talking-to for kicking another boy in the head, but you could be sent home

for wearing a blue jumper. Hair could not be too long – at least an inch above the collar – nor could it be too short. A boy who chased the French teacher through the school with a brick was caned, but a boy who turned up with a number-two crop was suspended. We could wear Dr Martens boots – presumably because soldiers wear boots – but only the shorter, less fashionable, eight-hole styles.

One small doubt remained in the hearts of the housemasters: could they really be said to be in control when boys wore *whatever socks they liked*? There was already a *fatwah* on football socks – supposedly for medical reasons – but when Paul Weller and The Jam popularised white socks, the whole system trembled. At the end of one assembly, two teachers were posted at the double doors to check the boys as they filed out. Each pupil had to lift his trouser leg past his eighth hole, and if a white sock was showing he received an 'official warning'. I grew up determined to wear white socks at all times.

Much later, I moved in with D, who hated my sock collection. She said, 'It's a sartorial rule that men wearing dark pants don't wear white socks.'

I think it was the word 'rule' that set me off.

She said, 'Since you insist on *deliberately* wearing your trousers too short, you should at least wear dark socks.'

But the whole point of the shortened trousers was to show off the white socks, like Paul Weller (although even Paul Weller had long grown out of white socks by then).

D responded with the most precise encapsulation of female frustration with men I have ever heard.

'Don't *be* who you are,' she demanded.

I had long stopped being who I was – but I am jumping ahead eighteen years and dozens of pairs of white socks.

I withdrew from school in increments. First, I absented myself from technical drawing, a class I could not understand, run by a man who liked to beat his pupils' buttocks with T squares. He was widely feared and mistrusted, but when he cornered me in a corridor and asked where I had been, he met my confession with sinister kindness. He told me I was the boy with the least aptitude for technical drawing he had ever come across, and encouraged me to stay away.

I stopped attending PE, where red-faced teachers yelled and bawled and shook their fists, and kicked pupils as if they were balls. Every week, I

said I had lost my kit. I was given new shorts and a football shirt, but I lost them again. The teachers pressed their noses close to mine and ranted like drill sergeants, telling me I was not as clever as I thought I was – but I knew I was cleverer than them, and they could not make me do 'Games'. I was called to the headmaster, who told me if I did not play sports I would not be a 'whole man'.

My class was given an exam in religious education, a cursory joke comprising unconvincing stories of happy spastics and American street gang leaders who had repented and found God *after* they had had all the fun of getting drunk, taking drugs and stabbing people. RE was a freeform discipline. In the test, we were told to write whatever we liked. I wrote I could not see the point of RE, and quoted the song 'Bodies' by the Sex Pistols, to show I was an anarchist: 'Fuck this and fuck that, fuck it all and fuck the fucking brat.' I was banned from RE, which was odd, since the subject was compulsory through all English schools. The teacher refused to teach me, and even gave a lesson about me to another class.

I passed my English 'O' Level a year early, with the highest grade, but was made to attend the final-year classes anyway, presumably to piss me off. When I complained about it, the head of English hit me.

After the mock maths 'O' Level, the teacher said, 'Anyone who scored under ten per cent might as well get up and walk out.' Only three of us had achieved such spectacular innumeracy, and I was the only one to walk out. The boy who scored a lower mark than me left school early to join the Parachute Regiment.

I had one generous, supportive English master but, on the whole, I disliked the gentle teachers more than the brutal ones. A fey drama teacher called me a 'thundercunt'. I called him a 'poncy, affected wanker' and the head of my year threatened to kick me down the stairs.

They were my shoplifting days, with nights spent doing nothing in the park: breaking bottles, spitting, smoking, being chased by the police. On winter mornings, when I sometimes smell cigarettes, for a moment I am back there and I realise what I've lost.

In Leeds, my dad had found another woman and remarried. They changed the shape of our house in Leeds. Builders made an extension that crept into the garden where we used to play. Dad chopped down two of the fruit trees, and cleared away the raspberries. His new wife had no children, but her family had some money: her stepfather ran a market stall selling carpets, and her parents owned both their house and the one next door. She

and my dad wanted to raise my brother and me, but said they would never split us up. It was left to me to decide who we would live with when I reached the age of thirteen and became a man under Jewish law. They offered more pocket money, a reward for every exam we passed, and a car when we turned eighteen. I turned them down, in tears over the telephone, and a year later my brother went to live with them anyway. A year after that, he returned to the garrison town.

Mum had married the student, too, and when I was thirteen, they had a daughter, Suzie. My stepdad and I gradually withdrew from contact. There were no angry scenes, no threats or shouting, but I don't think he spoke to either of us the year my brother came back. I slipped out every night at six o'clock, while he was watching the news, and did not come back until eleven o'clock, when he had gone to bed.

While I ignored him, I spent his cash, pocketing my lunch money and anything else that came my way. Mum would give me ten pounds to do the shopping, and I would steal everything from the toothpaste to the chicken. I worked a paper round that seemed to cover for my wealth. My dad never paid much maintenance – I guess he thought if we really needed anything, we should go and live with him – and my stepdad, now a junior civil servant, did not earn a lot. He and my mum dressed in cheap clothes, bought furniture from second-hand shops and books from jumble sales, cut corners, saved pennies, and rarely went out.

I wore Fred Perry polo shirts that cost twice as much as his business shirts, Dr Martens boots and red-tag Levi's. While he struggled to buy a house, run a car, bring up three kids and pay for his season ticket to London, I smoked twenty cigarettes a day and scratched his record collection.

Mum was loving and supportive and endlessly credulous. She would talk about anything, and she enjoyed having my friends around, even when they started to get into the local paper for petty crimes. I borrowed from the library and read everything: first American comics and science fiction, then Orwell, Camus and Kafka.

I took my first adventure into journalism when I was eight years old, and produced the Moor Allerton Crescent News. This was a local newspaper, whose distribution was limited to my house. The cover story featured the arrest of Great Train Robber Ronald Biggs on a golf course. This was also my first 'beat-up', based as it was on the largely unconnected facts that (a) the police existed; (b) Ronald Biggs existed; and (c) golf courses existed.

As I grew older, I had a poem published in a magazine, a story anthologised in a book, a TV review featured in a London evening newspaper. I tried to put together fanzines with my mate, Rich, first devoted to comics, then to punk rock. Although I told the local Careers Service I planned to become a terrorist, I never doubted I was going to be a journalist – although I felt I would probably be a rock star first.

I left school with six 'O' Levels, one of fewer than ten boys to matriculate from the two hundred in my year. I studied for my 'A' Levels at a technical college. I was eager to get out of home, so I crammed two years of study into a single year, in classes partially made up of students doing retakes. I met Guy, who was then attempting maths 'O' Level for the fifth time, and having his second go at history 'A' Level, and who has proved a better friend to me than anyone I have known.

I took the entrance examinations for journalism apprenticeships – which were centrally controlled and administered from a clutch of journalism schools – came third in my intake, and went to an interview with a board that included the editor of the *Evening Standard*. I wore a plastic, adolescent sneer, an enamel 'Sid Lives' badge, and told the panel that I would not perform 'death knocks', in which a reporter doorstops the recently bereaved. I was not offered a place.

The big gang split up. It was partly my fault, because I had trouble with somebody and I walked away. I swore never to join a big gang again, and never walk away – although I was to do both, many times.

I went with Guy to Warwick University to study politics. We chose Warwick because it would accept students who did not have maths 'O' Level (I never took mine, Guy failed his again). I was younger than most people at university, and the only student with twenty tattoos and seven earrings. I parted my hair in the middle and dyed it blond on one side, in the curious hope that it would attract women. I had an argument with a politics tutor, and left the department to study a degree in sociology and social administration. Guy did the same the next year (without the argument). At university, I did nothing but drink and read books. I did not report for the student radio station or write for the student newspaper, and I looked down on the people who did. What did they think they were? Jewish? I had a beer and a smoke and a laugh with my friends, and it lasted three years.

When it was almost over, my personal tutor called me into his office and said it was time to decide whether I wanted to go out into the real world or stay on as an academic. I won a place on the PhD program, but

I was not eligible for a grant unless I got a first-class degree. I did not study, and I did not get a first. My PE teachers were right: I was not as clever as I thought I was. The drama teacher was right: I was a thundercunt.

I graduated with an upper-second-class honours degree, a skeletal employment history, and an unsustainable alcohol habit. I woke up ready for a drink, and spent all day thinking about the first one. That first beer grew quickly from a pallid can of insipid supermarket lager into a mortar bomb of extra-strength Tennent's Super. I guzzled cheap whisky, and it tasted like glue.

I moved in with my girlfriend, Jo, when I was nineteen. We were happy and I was aimless. We played like children. We lived with Guy and other friends, in shared houses and student accommodation. Most students, once they graduated, either went back home or moved to London. I was paralysed, stupefied, and I simply stayed where I was. I could not cope with the fact that it was over.

I was not deeply concerned, however, because I had convinced myself that capitalism was about to collapse, and we would soon be living in a socialist utopia where people would only have to work two hours a day.

I don't know where I got the two hours from, or how I expected to spend mine – in the fields, maybe.

The Conservative government was taking apart the welfare state, which I had been brought up to think of as the highest achievement of British civilisation. It was shredding the guarantees that workers would have free health care and education, council houses, cheap public transport and a decent dole, in exchange for paying their taxes and fighting wars for the rich. If all that the people were left with were the taxes and the wars, it could not be long before they stormed the House of Commons and hung the Conservatives from the lampposts, I reasoned. Instead, they kept voting Conservative, until good medical care became a privilege, and our common property had been sold.

Jo and I moved from Leamington Spa to Coventry, to be closer to the night-shelter for alcoholics where she worked. Coventry was a sour, resentful city. Its heart had been bombed out by the Luftwaffe, its historic buildings replaced by a dour, paved shopping precinct, ringed by sulking suburbs of tower blocks and terraces. Its industry had wasted away, as heavy manufacturing drifted across the world in search of lower wages, less taxes, and a meek and docile workforce. Coventry attracted immigrants – first West Indian, then Indian – but it never welcomed them, and sometimes it killed

them. An Indian youth was stabbed to death in daylight in the precinct. An Indian doctor was murdered outside his home in middle-class Earlsdon. The city despised students and ex-students, young people with prospects and accents, and I wish I had never spent even an afternoon there, but we lived in Coventry for almost three blank years.

My experience of employment until the age of twenty-two had convinced me business was crime. As a kid, I had worked briefly in factories, once with my grandad who, in retirement, joined the ghosts of other cabinet-makers in a shuffling, early morning procession to a timberworks, where we laboured, off the books, making slats for bedheads. At fifteen, I was a canvasser for a double-glazing company. They gave me no training and no information about the products, and told me to knock on people's doors and say whatever I wanted. It did not matter, so long as I persuaded them to make an appointment to see a salesperson. Once he had the lead, a gaudy-tongued, wide-tied highwire walker would unfold himself in the victim's living room, and smooth away any misconceptions an overenthusiastic schoolboy might inadvertently have fostered.

I told old ladies that double glazing would protect their homes from nuclear attack, and one or two agreed to have a man come around and show them how it worked, because they were lonely. One night when I turned up for my shift, the double-glazing company's office was empty except for a disconnected telephone on a bare wooden desk, and my supervisor had disappeared.

Guy, Jo and I did a similarly shady job while at university, for a company that sold 'micro-electronic control systems' for central heating. The 'system' was a microchip in a box that was supposed to save the average householder several hundred pounds a year on fuel bills – I can't remember how. It cost twenty quid to make – as several electronically minded householders told me – and we sold them for twenty times that.

We pretended to be doing a survey to find out how much people were spending on heating, and the last question was something like, 'How would you like to see somebody who can help you cut that bill in half?' Old people, isolated people, stupid people, greedy people and kind people would say yes. If the lead was converted into a sale, we got a bonus. It was not a bad job, on a sunny evening in Stratford-upon-Avon.

When I graduated, I applied for a post as 'trainee manager' of a free newspaper. It turned out to be an advertising-sales position. It was a newspaper without journalists – just the 'editor', who was the manager; his

wife, who was the secretary; and four advertising salesmen. Once again, we were given no training and told to improvise. We rang whoever we could think of, and used whatever argument we could to talk them into buying a display advertisement in a paper few of them had ever seen, because few copies were ever printed.

We were told to lie about our distribution, our circulation, our content. We would ring a hapless pet-shop owner and tell them we were doing a feature about budgerigars, and the people reading it would automatically be gripped by a barely controllable desire to run out and buy caged birds. Where would they find them? From the businesses advertising around this hypnotically persuasive feature. If we gathered enough advertisers around a particular theme, we really would have the article written by a freelance journalist, but the rest of the paper was a contemptuous compilation of unedited press releases, randomly ordered, among lopsided pages heavy with misspelled advertising – often so badly mangled that the customer refused to pay for it.

It was the worst paper I have ever seen. The boss raved about how niggers stank. He hated Pakis, commies and queers. He was the sort of bigoted, twisted, arrogant, dishonest capitalist that I had expected to find managing an office.

We had to be on the telephone all the time. If we were not, the boss – or somebody else – would quip, 'What're you doing? Waiting for them to call you?', which comprises in its entirety the rich humour of telesales.

My boss's boss was a man called Keith, who apparently ran several other despicable parodies of newspapers from an office in the north-west. Keith came down to check out the Midlands operation, and asked me – the new boy – who I had been calling. I said the last business I had phoned was a computer company, and he demanded the index card we were supposed to fill out after each call. We made scores of calls each day, and only bothered to write on the cards if there was anything encouraging in the response. When I told Keith I didn't have the card, he lashed out, sweeping everything off my desk and onto the floor. I do not hate Keith any less now than I did then.

I was quite good at selling ads, but I loathed it. Whenever we had a small success, the typesetters would ruin it with their bizarre layouts and idiotic spellings. No thought was given to anything. I sold an ad on the 'health & beauty page', which ran below a recycled press release about damp-proofing, under the headline 'Creeping Slime Kills'. The beautician

complained, everyone complained, I made no more money than I could claim on the dole, and I quit.

I assumed all business took money from people with lies, and provided no useful service in return. The working world sustained swarming covens of vampires, who drank the blood of the few who did any real labour (the coalminers, or something). If you did away with the advertising guys, the canvassers and the salespeople, and also did away with estate agents, the insurance industry and the British Army, everybody could share out the work that needed to be done, and we would all get to spend two hours a day down the pit. By the time the elevator had taken me to the pit shaft, it would almost be time to come back up again.

Strangely, it was not the double glazing sales industry that was being destroyed, it was coalmining. Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government was determined to break the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the best and strongest trade unionists in the country, and was prepared to the annihilate the mines in the process. NUM leader Arthur Scargill came upon a secret list of pits marked for closure by the government, and called a national strike. The government denied the existence of the list, but years later it turned out that it was real and had included 'pretty much all of them'.

I did a couple of collections for the miners, but I did not do enough.

I had become a communist, albeit a useless one. I joined the semi-Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party (slogan: 'Neither Washington nor Moscow, but international socialism') and became involved in a series of activities that were highly disruptive to my daily routine of getting up and waiting for the revolution until I fell asleep again. The most onerous of these were 'factory sales', for which the party member had to rise at 6 am to be at the factory gates for 6.30 am, to sell the *Socialist Worker* newspaper to bleary-eyed, bad-tempered boilermakers on their way to make boilers, or whatever boilermakers do. At least the boilermakers were used to us, and they either ignored us, muttered 'good morning', or – in a few instances – bought the paper. 'Shopping centre sales' were far worse. Grocery buyers do not tend to think of themselves as the vanguard of the revolution, and regard young people trying to sell them communist newspapers as, at best, amiable lunatics. In response to our catchy slogan 'Socialist Worker! Jobs not bombs!' they would call out 'Get back to Russia!'

At Cannon Park in Coventry, a quiet, staid complex with a Sainsbury's and a Tesco's, where families went to buy bread and milk and meat and not

the *Socialist Worker*, I changed my sales pitch to 'Socialist Worker! Million-pound bingo!' It was my first attempt to introduce mainstream media principles to niche publishing. The only good thing about supermarket sales was I didn't have to get up for them until two o'clock in the afternoon.

Other SWP activities included flyposting – a nocturnal act involving sticking up posters with a bucket of paste and a brush, which I did not like because I got glue on my jeans and kept thinking we would be caught by the police and beaten up – and contact visiting. Contact visiting involved going to see somebody you knew, usually at their house, and gently convincing them to join the SWP. It was a bit like being an atheist Jehovah's Witness or a pagan Mormon, with a better haircut. Luckily, I didn't have to do any contact visiting because almost everybody I knew was either a member of the SWP or had already left the party.

The least onerous of the responsibilities of a party member was attendance at regular meetings. I used to enjoy these before I joined because (a) they were often about interesting historical events such as the Spanish Civil War or the Struggle Against Fascism in Germany; and (b) they were held in a pub. Once I joined, however, I realised turning up for a meeting resulted in being given more political work. Paper-selling rosters were drawn up, and other tasks were handed out in relation to the campaign of the moment: supporting a strike or protest, organising a demonstration or picket, marching from somewhere to somewhere else then taking a bus home.

I quickly sank out of sight of the party and back into 'the swamp', as the SWP labelled the headless body of non-aligned Leftists who refused to submit to its discipline.

I lost interest in everything. I did not want to be a part of capitalism, the system of raging Keiths and red-faced schoolteachers. I formed a theory that everything people did only made a bad situation worse. It was based on a kind of six-degrees-of-separation argument, that every capitalist enterprise was ultimately connected with the arms race, or the torture trade, or something equally immoral.

Even if I finally learned to play guitar and sing, and put tunes to my protest songs, and formed a band, and signed to EMI so as to reach a mass audience with my revolutionary message, and became a bigger star than Paul Weller, and played world tours and benefit gigs for the oppressed of the earth, I would still be contributing to the profits of a multinational conglomerate that would reinvest the money in its armaments division.

For this reason, I decided not to bother learning to play the guitar and sing. I thought I would do nothing instead.

I cut myself off from my father, cruelly and without reason. I vaguely associated him with Keiths and teachers, because he was about their age and he voted Tory. I blamed him for my being Jewish. Dad had only a passing interest in religion when I was a child. He could not read Hebrew, so he could not pray; he ate bacon sandwiches; and he had married my mum, who was an atheist. When he remarried and we moved away, he suddenly became twice as Jewish. He retired from the local amateur leagues and began training and managing Jewish football teams. His new wife worked for the Jewish community. His house – our old house – became linked in my mind with going to the synagogue, which I despised. He grew concerned that my brother and I would grow up as 'Yoks'.

I did not understand why he cared. I do not think he had any belief in God. Years later, I realised he wanted us to remain Jewish because he was Jewish – and if we were Jewish, too, even though we lived far from him, we would still have shared something. We would not be lost.

I had always known I was smarter than my poor dad. Now, with the arrogance of somebody who had never raised a child, I felt morally superior to him because I was a revolutionary. As usual, there was no fierce argument, no bitter words. I asked him for some money, he turned me down, and I stopped calling him. I did not have a telephone, so he could not call me. In five years we only spoke once, and then he died.

I wrote stories for magazines. Sometimes I sold them, and if I did not sell them, I nearly did. Editors were always interested and helpful, and I assumed editors were nice, mentoring people with a lot of time on their hands, who went out of their way for everyone.

I looked for other ways of making money. I could not steal anymore. Years before, I had lost the talent and the nerve. I tried to convert my hobby into my work and become a sperm donor. The sperm bank was four miles outside of Leamington Spa. Inevitably, like the hapless hero of a dirty joke, I turned up at the wrong door. When I offered her my sperm, a helpful young sister at a private nursing home told me where to go – back up the driveway, 100 metres down the road and first on the left. I blushed like a purple throbbing head, and followed her pointing finger.

The nurses at the sperm bank were equally young and friendly. They paid me the equivalent of one-third of a week's dole money just for the blood test, then invited me back to fill a plastic jar the size of a torch battery.

A nurse showed me behind a curtain, past a chest of drawers, and into a cubicle. I knew about that chest of drawers. The boys who had gone before me said it was full of pornography.

They didn't tell me the only thing in the cubicle was a toilet. I stood in front of the bowl, my trousers around my ankles, my eyes tightly closed, imagining I was somewhere else. It didn't work. I was standing up, playing with myself, in a room that smelled of bleach and disinfectant. Where else could I be? Waiting to see the doctor at a sexual-health clinic? Hiding in the cleaners' cupboard in jail? I hitched my Levi's back up to my waist and sneaked out to the chest of drawers. The top drawer was empty. The bottom drawer was empty. There was no middle drawer. There was no pornography. There was only me and the toilet.

It did not matter which punk starlet I thought about – Debbie Harry from Blondie, Pauline Murray from Penetration, Tina Weymouth from Talking Heads, or Gaye Advert from the Adverts – every time I was about to come, I had to slip on the plastic jar, and that was the end of that. Finally, with a great effort of imagination, I managed to squeeze a tear into the receptacle, which I presented shamefacedly to the nurse. These were the days before home banking, but it was possible to contribute to the sperm bank from my flat. Sperm stays fresh for half an hour. I could do the job at home, provided Jo would race me to the clinic in her Mini.

After six donations, the nurses told me not to come back. Apparently, my sperm did not freeze well enough. Basically, I could not organise a wank in my own bedroom.

I enrolled myself in government schemes for the long-term unemployed – sham jobs on short-term contracts, working for the council. I was an unwanted outreach worker for a museum, an unskilled technician with social services, and a never-asked advisor with the environmental health department.

Most of my friends had moved away from the Midlands. For the first time, I was not part of a big gang of mates. My life was shit, but I didn't want anything better. I was not interested in getting rich, or owning a house, or learning to drive, or going on holiday. I would have liked to write a novel, but I had nothing to write about.

I worked a couple of weeks with Guy in London, as a painter and decorator. I remained on the dole in the Midlands, but spent the weekdays down south.

Every Friday night I went on a pub crawl with Chris, who I had known vaguely at university. We had a project, which was to visit each one of

Coventry's 203 pubs. It took us about a year, and when we had finished, we decided to go to every pub in Warwickshire. In the mining village of Bedworth, we were walking across a road at closing time when I saw five white men standing at a bus stop. I said to Chris, 'It's the boys we saw earlier.'

The leader, a heavyweight with a boxing bulldog tattoo, asked, 'What did you say?'

I said, 'We saw you earlier,' and they knew we were not from around there, so they battered me down, blacked my eyes, bruised my cheeks burgundy and kicked through my eardrum – because that was the worst thing: not to be born in their slagheap, their scab-filled sore, their pit village, soon to be without a pit.

A few months after I recovered, I got drunk and run over by a car. I wanted to die, and then my dad did. He went into hospital for an operation on his gall bladder, suffered a stroke under anaesthetic, and died on the operating table. The doctors brought him back, but he was a different man. His skin was orange and his hair was white and spiky, like a punk. He was only comfortable in suffocatingly hot rooms. One day, he came out of the bath and was sitting on the bed while my stepmother combed his hair, and life left him again. He died for the second time in a year, this time for good. I saw him during his final year of half-life, but not enough.

At his funeral, we sat on hard chairs my grandfather had made. My stepmother was very kind to us, and she sent out for cigarettes. I had given up smoking for a year, but I started again.

I had nothing to do with what was happening around me. As my stepmother showed me photographs of my father, she said, 'Of course, you're not really Jewish.'

She meant that, as my father had feared, I had lost anything I had in common culturally with the people who were my own blood.

More than one hundred people came to the service, most of them footballers. Many people loved him more than I did, and I felt as if everybody knew that. My uncle, my father's brother, a bookmaker who had not played much of a part in my life, looked after my brother and me. My uncle was being kind, too, when he told me, 'Your dad loved football more than he loved you.'

It meant I was not so bad. My dad and I were very different, and maybe he did not love me enough, either.

Then came The Thing That Changed Everything. Jo and I were living with two friends in a rented private house in the middle of a council

estate in Coventry. Jo was much more practical, sensible and driven than me. She had a car and a job, and was studying for her professional social-work qualification. Our landlord came for a visit, and announced he wanted to sell the house. As sitting tenants, we were entitled to be offered the first option. We told him we had no money. He offered to waive the deposit, to simply tell the bank we had paid him, so we could get a loan for the rest of the mortgage. All we would need was 250 pounds to cover the solicitors and the conveyancing, but we did not even have that.

I was against buying the house, because it meant we would have a stake in capitalism, and I believed private property had a limited future – so Jo borrowed the cash from her sister and took on the entire mortgage herself. She kept the other three of us on as tenants, paying her a third less than we had given the landlord in rent. Eighteen months later, Jo sold the house at £25 000 profit. She gave back to our housemates all they had paid her in rent, lent money to her sister to buy a house of her own, and beautiful, selfless Jo split the remaining profits with me. I paid off my brother's debts, and returned to Guy £45 I had borrowed – much to Guy's annoyance; when I owed him money, he knew that the world was how it should be.

I had never had any cash in my life, and as soon as I got it, I wanted to spend it. We flew to Hong Kong, took trains through China, spent three months in Thailand, where we ate extraordinary foods and smoked opium in the hills. We met Guy in Bangkok, on his way to join his girlfriend, Lorraine, on a long trip to Australia. Pub-crawling Chris joined us for a while, too. We lingered in Malaysia, scraping curries from banana leaves, and rushed through grimy, pestering Indonesia, from Jakarta to Bali.

Seven months after we started out, we landed in Melbourne, consciously more confident, optimistic, open-minded and relaxed. We found Australia was all those things, too, and from the afternoon I saw a mob of kangaroos crossing the back paddock of my aunty's farm in Victoria, I never wanted to go home again.

TWO In which I get a job, dwarfs get thrown and a World War 2 bomber gets found on the moon

I am not the person I used to be, but I remember who I was.

I loved to spend long nights in the snug of a dark Irish pub with a bunch of mates, talking harmless rubbish until closing time. Jo and D, two women who had little else in common, both told me they liked me best when I was standing at the bar, with a beer in my hand and a cigarette in my mouth, because that's when I looked the happiest. Occasionally, in Coventry, my sadness would rise to the head of my beer and I'd come home and tell Jo how wounded and trapped I felt by everything – the city, the dole, our relationship – and I would wake up feeling like a murderer. I believed my disappointment was something I should keep to myself, because everything was bullshit so it should not matter.

My years of torpor were, in part, a genuine attempt to lead a moral life. I did not want to be party to anybody else's misery; I would rather have left no mark on the world. I was very calm. Day to day, nothing much bothered me. I was unprejudiced and aimlessly well-intentioned. I believed every human life was equally precious – except my own. I wanted to help other people, particularly if it didn't take a lot of effort. I could always get everyone laughing, because everything struck me as ridiculous vanity, a transparent con trick, a surreal sham.

When I was hospitalised after a drunken accident, the nurses invited

me to share a cigarette in their office. They pulled my records from the filing cabinet – notes made during my nights in Casualty after I was kicked unconscious in the pit village – and across the top of my card was written 'a very pleasant gentleman'. That was all I aspired to be, really.

I regret the time I lived in Coventry, because now I know you don't have to stay in an ugly, hating place, so far from the sea. My time in Asia gave me back my life. When I came to Australia, I decided to start myself again, to rebuild from the base. I wore my sleeves rolled down, shed all but one earring, bought a sensible jumper, made up a CV, and started applying for jobs.

Jo and I moved into an apartment in Sydney, behind Kings Cross police station. Chris had rented a unit a couple of blocks away, and quickly started going out with a girl from the backpackers' hostel next door. Guy's around-Australia trip had turned into a disaster: Lorraine had gone back to England – where he was later to marry her – and for a while, he slept on our couch.

I was back with my mates from the old days, part of the big gang of backpackers, and I was melodically happy. King Cross was impossibly glamorous. The bars opened late into the night and had bouncers at the door and prostitutes in the street outside. I could walk around the corner and watch a band at the Kardomah Club in Kellett Street, although I never did. I could drink for twenty-four hours straight in the Bourbon and Beefsteak, and I did not do that either. If I had wanted to, I could have gone out at 4 am to buy a hamburger – but the urge never struck me.

Sydney was about possibilities and, within four days, I had found a job. The year before I left England, I completed a short course in sub-editing at the Polytechnic of Central London, and I suddenly found something I could do. Sub-editors write headlines, captions and introductions in newspapers and magazines. They check the journalist's facts, spelling, grammar and syntax, and cut stories to fit into the spaces allocated in the layout. A sub-editor needs strong English skills, a knowledge of current affairs, and a sense of humour. These were my only three attributes in life, apart from an ability to open bottles with my teeth.

In my fabricated CV, I declared I had worked as a sub-editor on Keith the Terrible's free paper. I went to an interview for a job as a proofreader, and told a gentle old South African called Jim that I was a sub-editor who had just arrived in the country. Impressed by my English accent, my newly sensible appearance, and my honours degree, Jim took me on. He had other reasons to hire me: we worked for the typesetting arm of a design company.

The company produced packaging for cereals and soft drinks, but the typesetters had recently taken on a heavy load of magazine work, and my imaginary publishing experience would help me liaise with these unfamiliar clients.

In those days, most designers and journalists did not use computers. Typesetters keyed in the copy, set the line lengths, loaded the correct typefaces, and added their own errors. Proofreaders were employed to check the typesetter's work against the client's submission. Proofread and corrected columns ('proofs') were then sent back to the magazines' sub-editors.

At first, proofreading seemed a sedate, gentlemanly profession. I read in silence in a room with South African Jim and another South African, also called Jim. The two South African Jims were separated by personal and political differences. Each South African Jim felt he was the more professional and ethical of the two. One had left his homeland because the blacks were oppressed; the other, I think, because the blacks were not going to be oppressed for much longer. South African Jim-tension hung like a dangling participle in the reading-room air, and each was more comfortable talking with me than with the other. They were friendly, gracious men, with pride in their craft. Old Jim was in his fifties; young Jim perhaps twenty years younger. Both seemed settled in their jobs for life. Both were gone within six months.

The company was based in Surry Hills, where most of the typesetting trade squatted around the small publishing houses that spread out from Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd's headquarters in Holt Street. There were at least four typesetting businesses on our street, three pubs and a club. They sat among shreds of the rag trade – garment houses, importers, outlet shops and a few stubborn manufacturers – in the shade of the brooding, apparently empty warehouses that dominated the district.

Typesetting used to be a man's trade. The type was something real that you could hold in your hand, and had to be set, character by character, on metal slugs in a bed of hot lead. The hot-metal days, when letters danced above the baseline like musical notes, had ended when the old technology was replaced by phototypesetting equipment.

Phototypesetters sat at computer terminals that looked like a 1960s space opera's imagining of the workstations of the future: small screens in big frames, with heavy keyboards and glowing type. The system's engine was a large and mysterious machine that contained families of fonts (typefaces) on big, rolling drums. There was still an element of physicality to type: when the phototypesetter needed to change fonts, he would sometimes have to change the drum.

I knew nothing about proofreading, beyond what I had learned on the sub-editing course. I photocopied a list of proofreaders' marks from the back page of a dictionary, and hid it under my desk while I worked. The days were languid and interesting and I was seduced by the minutiae of typography, the arcane lore of the print trade. I was delighted to learn to distinguish one font from another, to identify families of type, to optically gauge point-size and leading. I loved mark-up, the now largely lost language of communication between sub-editor and typesetter. I felt I had finally found an honest job, a quiet vocation with an inherent dignity – but that craft was already disappearing.

In pubs such as the Excelsior or Forresters on Foveaux Street, I drank VB with readers and operators from other companies, and shared the dark whisper that the industry was doomed. It was rumoured that a barely trained schoolboy with an Apple Macintosh could do everything we could do, without the hulking machinery of bromide printers.

We knew newspaper journalists could already create fully laid-out pages themselves. The technology they used was fantastically expensive, but it had mated with what were then called 'home computers', and given birth to a voracious bastard that would grow up to devour us all, desktop publishing. Operators would be eliminated by programs like Ventura and PageMaker, and proofreaders would be replaced by spell-check functions. I could not gauge how much was half-drunk alarmism (typesetters were always half drunk) and how much was a sober assessment of an industry in decline, so I occupied myself with moral questions instead.

Among the publications we typeset for Century Publishing was a bizarre weekly magazine, *The Picture*, which I suspected of being reactionary, with its peculiar cast of very fat people, topless women, talking animals and dwarfs. I was uncertain if I should work on *The Picture*. I asked my typesetter friend, the magnificently named Phil Snoswell, if he had any reservations about setting a magazine that included pictures of semi-naked women. He said it was all work, and he did what he was told. I presumed this was the way real workers behaved.

The Picture gave me an introduction to the reality of magazine publishing, although *The Picture*'s reality was tinged with many kinds of madness. I visited the office every day, to pick up and drop off copy, and I spied on the sub-editors' desk with covert fascination. In the office, we rated each sub according to the clarity and completeness of their mark-up. Privately, I studied every story, absorbed its special vocabulary, and took it

apart to see how it worked. The design of *The Picture* reflected its cocky, undisciplined journalism. The magazine's artists compressed type until it screamed, squeezing out legibility for visual effect. Giant forced italics were splattered across gaudy collages of unlikely photographs, appalling typesetters and proofreaders alike.

The Picture was a sub-editors' magazine – although the sub-editors were called staff journalists. Most of the stories were written by the subs, usually surreally reworked from copy supplied by syndication agencies. The editor of *The Picture* was a man named David Naylor. I knew him only as a balding, vaguely avian head hovering above a partition, seen from behind a window. Naylor had come to Century from Kerry Packer's publishing company, Australian Consolidated Press (ACP). There, he had been editor of *People*, an enormously successful, bawdy, 'barbershop weekly' that competed with *Australasian Post*, which specialised in outback yarns that got more worn and leathery, dry and dusty, with each passing year.

The barbershop weeklies were the thumbed, creased and often lacerated magazines that lay scattered across vinyl-upholstered chairs in every Australian barbershop. The barbershop was a place of boys and men. If a father had no other domestic duties, at least he had to take his son to get his hair cut. In the whole sorry history of postwar father-son relationships, no boy had ever felt his hair was long enough to be attacked with scissors, razor and clippers, and no man had ever considered his son's hair so short that it would not benefit from a little tidying up around the ears.

Generations of young males waited in dismal line under photographs of the Queen, breathing cigarette-smoke air soured with acidic cologne. Their only comforts were the magazines, forbidden at home but somehow permissible in this world without women. They spoke of bloody crimes – slashings, stabbings, mutilations, decapitations – all of which could have been committed by barbers. They warned of a dangerous universe, populated by hostile visitors in flying saucers and man-hungry, homicidal sharks. They whispered of sex, and fed countless confused fantasies.

David Naylor grew up fascinated by the barbershop weeklies, and started work as a sub-editor on what was then titled *Pix-People* in 1976. *Pix-People* had come to share the news values of the British tabloids. It ran stories about the topless beaches of St Tropez, and volleyball and grocery shopping in Queensland nudist colonies. A story was anything that could be run alongside a photograph of a woman's breasts – or, at a pinch, a shark. Amid unlikely ads for foolproof racing systems burned the torrid flames of

'Case History: "I am a Nymphomaniac"', 'Wives Who Sleep Around', 'Sex And Girls Who Live Alone', the chilling 'Bad News About Sharks', and the men's magazine mainstay, 'Amazing Beer Diet: Drink And Lose Weight!'

The covers showed bikini tops slipping in the summer, winking nipples to keep the boys quiet while they waited to choose from the chart of a dozen identical hairstyles.

Naylor was made editor in 1982, by which time *People* was entirely owned by John Fairfax Ltd – also the publishers of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* and the *Australian Financial Review*. *People* used to print a large picture of a girl in a wet t-shirt, and a smaller insert of the same woman topless. Naylor's first innovation was to reverse the order of the two photographs. When Naylor took over, *People*'s circulation was around 140 000. Four years later, it stood at 250 000. Naylor had decided *People* would become 'a larrikin's magazine'. It would stand for larking about, mucking around, blokes getting their boots dirty doing things the Aussie-bushie way. It would be in bad taste like farting through your sister's wedding vows, or shearing her groom on his bucks' night.

In a nation split between Rugby League and Australian Rules Football, Naylor saw a chance to unite sports lovers behind a single code: dwarf-throwing.

Dwarf-throwing began in 1985, as one event in an ironman contest for bouncers at the Penthouse Nightclub in Surfers Paradise. The club's manager, Robin Oxland, had hoped to stage a jockey-throwing match, but no willing jockeys could be found. Dwarfs, traditionally restricted in their employment opportunities to tagging along behind Snow White or being fired out of a cannon, were easier to recruit. Four hundred people turned up to watch Queensland doormen competing to toss 124 centimetre dwarf 'Wee Robbie' Randell across the dance floor. A proud Aussie record of ten metres was established.

An outraged member of the European Parliament introduced a private member's bill condemning Australia. In the US, an attempt to beat the ten-metre record was scheduled at O'Sullivan's Public House in Chicago, but law officials said dwarf-throwing could not be promoted without the proper permit – and no such permit existed.

When Naylor heard dwarf-throwing had reached England, he approached Oxland and said, 'Let's have a Test series between Australia and England, and decide once and for all that Australia is the superior dwarf-throwing nation. We can have a big conference, play 'Hi ho, hi ho, it's off

to work we go' and burn a copy of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, tip it in an urn, and that can be the Ashes.'

They needed other events to pad out the bill, so Naylor came up with the idea of dwarf-bowling. At first, he had hoped to grease the dwarfs and slide them down a lubricated alley to knock over a bank of tenpins at the end, but it did not work in rehearsal. It was difficult to propel oiled dwarfs, so they strapped them to skateboards instead.

The first Test was held in a Brisbane nightclub. The thrown dwarfs were pitched at mattresses by straps around their bodies. The point where their heads landed was deemed the official distance thrown.

The Brisbane Test was to be followed by events in New South Wales and Victoria. England was represented by Lenny the Giant, an Anglo-Indian nude balloon dancer from Birmingham, who weighed 44.5 kilograms – a whole 11.5 kilograms lighter than Australian dwarf Trevor Gray.

The New South Wales Police Minister said the effort was in bad taste, and New South Wales Licensing Squad boss Superintendent Robert Jones warned, 'Licensed premises that hold dwarf events will place their licence in jeopardy.' Victorian police also threatened to act against participating venues.

The Little People's Association of Australia expressed outrage, but Naylor said, 'Nobody has the authority to prevent dwarfs and their throwers from pursuing their chosen sport.'

Naylor chose to emphasise the element of skill in the spectacle. 'The dwarfs have to know how to keep themselves in flight as long as possible, and also how to fall short when it's the opposition's turn to throw them,' he told the *SMH*. 'Not every dwarf can do it,' he added, unconvincingly.

Naylor gave up his dream when he started to receive death threats. The two remaining Tests were cancelled, and England won by default, although Australia did take out the dwarf-bowling crown. In 1995, the Queensland government pathologist, Associate Professor David Williams, performed an autopsy on an unnamed 33-year-old dwarf who had taken part in the Queensland contest. He was found to have dementia pugilistica – the same condition as punch-drunk boxers.

The Picture was born of *People* in September 1988, the year after Kerry Packer bought Fairfax Magazines. At Fairfax, Naylor had been under pressure to accept advertisements from the adult-video industry. Naylor felt this would damage the magazine. He was worried that the editorial content would rush downmarket to meet the advertising, that *People* would lose its eclectic identity and become a cheap alternative to *Penthouse*.

Naylor was unhappy, and his staff imagined themselves snubbed in the elevators and corridors, unwanted socially and unrespected professionally. *People* had only been at ACP for a few months when the former executives of Fairfax Magazines, including John B Fairfax, regrouped as Century Publishing and approached Naylor with an idea. An idea in magazine publishing is usually, 'Let's do the same thing that somebody else is doing (but cheaper)'. Century's idea was, 'Let's do the same thing we used to do again.'

They were prepared to put money behind a weekly rival to *People*, and to assure Naylor they would not accept pornography ads. Naylor left ACP to start *The Picture* from Century's Commonwealth Street headquarters in Surry Hills. Naylor told the press *The Picture* would be 'cheeky, flirtatious and less sleazy than *People* and *Post*. 'We hope to create a better environment for advertisers,' he said, created by Century's decision to ban most 'sleazy sex ads'. He wanted to appeal to 'women who had previously felt uncomfortable with this market' and 'male readers who have previously felt they couldn't leave a magazine like *People* lying around the house'.

No magazine in Australian publishing history strayed so far from its original brief as *The Picture*.

The Picture was younger, dumber, more exuberant and crass than *People*. It was a parody of mainstream journalism; its ridiculous scoops were delivered with po-faced, hectoring self-righteousness.

From the beginning, the magazine embraced the proposition that very fat people are very funny indeed. In the first nine weeks of its history, it published a story about the Fat Pride Conference in San Francisco; a 394 kilogram German who once ate fourteen chickens in a single sitting ('How Fat Albert Ate A Farm'); a 152 kilogram English woman who claimed she did not eat much but drank a lot ('Sponge Woman Gets Fat On Water'); and a 380 kilogram American who had gone on a diet in the hope of finding a girlfriend ('World's Biggest Fatso Slims For Sex').

Later came 'Can you help this human balloon BEFORE SHE EXPLODES?' *The Picture* had borrowed from the UK newspaper *Sunday Sport* the idea of capitalising words mid-sentence. The technique was used to typical effect in the sad tale of 286 kilogram Ruth Lawrence, who was searching for a diet that would save her life:

> Ruth, 47, even volunteered to join a research group studying obesity at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, but the GROSSLY INSENSITIVE team of scientists told her: 'NO THANKS, TUBBY, YOU'RE TOO FAT.' To add to her HUGE feelings of despair they told her to come back later,

WHEN SHE WAS DEAD. By donating her body to science, they said, doctors may be able to help future generations of incredibly overweight people.

The *Sunday Sport* gave *The Picture* more than scattergun capitalisation. Founded in 1986 by multimillionaire pornographer David Sullivan, the *Sport* was the next vulgar step in the debasement of the press that had long been the project of *The Sun*, Britain's biggest selling tabloid. *The Sun* readers loved page three, so Sullivan's idea was a paper with a page-three girl on pages 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11 etc. The *Sport* soon became more concerned with what was going on in space than mundane events on Earth. It met aliens at every improbable juncture. In a pub in Walsall, it came across an American tourist who had been impregnated by an alien ('… And He Stole Our Love Child', which explained the absence of progeny). It found an alien baby in a jam jar, and another killed by a cheeseburger. On 24 April 1988, it scored its biggest scoop, with the front-page headline 'World War 2 Bomber Found On The Moon'. The story was a madman's tapestry of ludicrous journalist-generated speculation, a doctored photograph and invented quotes. The writers gave equal weight to three theories: (1) Adolph Hitler 'in a space suit' had escaped the fall of Berlin in the 1941 Flying Fortress, and had been planning to hijack Neil Armstrong's landing craft in 1969; (2) The plane had fallen through the Bermuda Triangle, which 'explained' how a bomber with a range of 300 miles had made a 250 000 mile trip; (3) The picture was a fake. Two weeks later, when the *Sport* could produce no evidence to support its finding, it produced a further front-page scoop: 'World War 2 Bomber Found On Moon Vanishes!'

The Picture had a topless role model – a barbershop newspaper that was selling more than 500 000 copies a week – but it was not yet entirely ready to jump into bed and romp with her. *The Picture* subs had *Sunday Sport* stuffed into their back pockets, but Naylor was still carrying around *Pix-People* in his head.

Every cover of *The Picture* except one featured a smiling Aussie girl. There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing, which apply equally to *Cleo*, *Playboy*, *Harper*'s *Bazaar* or *Ralph*. Rule Number One is: Beautiful Women Sell Magazines. Thanks to David Naylor, we know Rule Number Two: Crashing Aeroplanes Do Not Sell Magazines. *The Picture* number four had a cover showing two aeroplanes colliding in an air show disaster, and circulation nosedived by fifty per cent. *The Picture* never again ran a cover that did not feature a woman – or, at least, part of one.

On 1 April 1989, *The Picture* carried the 'Astounding Triple Exclusive' of 'My Three Boobs'. The cover showed a three-breasted model taking off her three-cup bra. Even more astounding than the fact that a three-breasted woman had been found was the fact that the same woman had been a *Picture* pin-up just four months before – with only two breasts. The magazine explained her transformation was due to hormone treatment that had gone horribly wrong, and labelled her 'Once, Twice, Three Times A Lady'.

As in the UK, the mainstream media could not understand that a magazine might simply make something up. Channel 9's *A Current Affair* rang *The Picture* to get contact details for the three-breasted freak. The *Hinch* show believed it, too.

The Picture regularly reprised the joke. It later found a four-breasted girl, then a five-breasted girl, who had to have her top three breasts removed by surgery.

We started to typeset *The Picture* in May 1989. I remember the first set of coverlines included:

Nudes Tell Prudes…
'We'll Bare Our Boobs
Or Force Men To Cover Theirs'

It was almost a haiku.

In the next issue was an obituary for David Wilson, a dwarf stuntman who drank himself to death. Wilson had supposedly paid for his beers by going into bars and saying, 'Give me as much money as I can drink tonight and I'll let you throw me as far as you can.'

This gave Naylor a chance to reprise his finest hour, and stage a search for an Australian dwarf who could play Wilson in a movie about his life.

'Dwarfly duties will include dressing in a crash helmet and harness and allowing 16 burly contestants to throw you onto an air mattress,' announced the magazine, with familiar relish.

The staff of *The Picture* were bound together by a feeling that they were the little guys going up against the big bully, armed only with the traditional weapon of the oppressed: a better sense of humour. ACP tried to lure them back with pay rises, and the subs would put their calls on the speakerphone, to let the whole office hear them. They did not take the money, and Naylor was proud of that – so the staff were shocked when, in July, he announced he was going back to Kerry Packer.

They saw his move as treachery, but Naylor believed he was continuing on the same lonely path. At Century, *The Picture* had little advertising

beyond mail-order trades courses, spray-on pheromone scents guaranteed to make 'nine out of ten' men more attractive to women, and a couple of pages of dildos and porn movies. Management were again pressuring Naylor to embrace the sex-video industry, but at ACP, publisher Richard Walsh had promised he could relaunch the *Pix* title, a true barbershop weekly unburdened by ads for '8-inch black veined vibes' and 'Lovable Judy Dolls'.

Naylor returned to Park Street as editor-in-chief of *People* and *Pix*, leaving his former deputy, Gerry Reynolds, as editor of *The Picture*. The staff were happily outraged, wilfully naive. They worked harder, pulled more tightly together, and the magazine's circulation grew like a wart on the nose of publishing.

Reynolds' *The Picture* was like a foaming, feral, brazenly unreliable tabloid newspaper with four pages of page-three girls. It loved streakers, nude sunbathers and topless barmaids, but it gave more space to freaks, fatties, aliens, and now dogs. Issue after issue, dogs were discovered in strange situations: 'Dog Runs Petrol Station', 'Dog Rides Horse', 'Two Dogs Run For Election', 'Dog Eats Backyard', 'Dead Cats Save Dog'.

Reynolds found a fat stripper, Gert Bucket – 'Flabber Ghaster – She's Three Strippers Rolled Into One' – but no thrown dwarves. Under Reynolds, stories started with a photograph, and the subs would write around the image. For example, an innocent picture of a South African midget prompted the story 'World's Smallest Boy Falls Down a Dunny Bowl'.

The difference between Naylor's *The Picture* and Reynolds' could be seen when the magazine again found the king of rock and roll, but this time he was black, lived in a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory, called himself Samuel Billabong, had 'grown his hair and beard, had a medical TATTOO treatment to make his skin DARKER in a reverse of the "pigment buffing" technique performed on US entertainer Michael Jackson, and was learning the language of his NEW WIVES'. He had also disguised his singing voice. The same issue discovered Andy Warhol in a Sydney nightclub.

In September, *The Picture* ran a topless centrefold of Princess Di. It looked as if the artists had cut her head out of a photograph and glued it onto the body of a nude model – which, in effect, they had – but that issue sold 100 000 copies when the average sale was about 70 000. Next came the Phantom Turd Thrower. A man had been dropping shit on pedestrians from a perch in the Brisbane Transit Centre. *The Picture* staged a re-enactment of his crime, from the moment his bowels started moving.

ACP bought *The Picture* in October 1989, for a roumered $6 000 000. The staff were traded along with the magazine. Once again, an outrage had been committed against the subs' bench. For a young title, *The Picture* already had a substantial mythology: it had been expelled from the paradise that was Fairfax Magazines, sold into slavery to the evil pharaoh Packer, broken its chains and had been led to a promised land by Moses Naylor, who had then betrayed them by signing a biblically unprecedented Moses–Pharaoh Pact that forced them back to Babylon – on their existing wages. Of course Fairfax wasn't Paradise, Packer wasn't the Pharaoh and, as was quickly proved, Naylor was no Moses – his children wouldn't follow him back.

When Naylor went to Commonwealth Street to round them up, the subs and designers walked silently past him and into the pub. They held a boozy meeting, and decided they could not be bought. They were workers, not chairs.

Phil Snoswell, my boss and I were invited to the KB Hotel after *The Picture* staff had resolved to stay together and reject ACP's offer. They were thrilled with themselves, bubbling with cheap beer and enthusiasm. The subs' bench felt that they – not the masthead, not the editor, and not the topless girls – were *The Picture*, and *The Picture*'s success would travel with them.

We agreed we would continue to be *The Picture*'s typesetter. Everybody swore loyalty to everyone else – but within a couple of weeks, half the staff went over to ACP. Gerry Reynolds, chief sub Oliver Robb, and Lachlan Brown, probably the best writer among them, declined to produce the first ACP issue of *The Picture*.

The refuseniks put an advert in *The Sydney Morning Herald* saying, '*The Picture* has been sold but the staff have not. Call this number if you're interested in the best subs team in the country'. There were calls, but they came to nothing.

Naylor appealed to Reynolds, pointing to the Phantom Turd Thrower story – 'Look what you've done to my magazine!' he said – but the core of the subs team would not even talk to him. They never crossed to ACP, and have never worked there since.

Naylor struggled to pump out *The Picture* with only half the staff, and with Tony Murphy as the editor. He felt let down by journalists he had considered his friends. Their rejections reflected badly on him at ACP, and the upheaval set the tone for the tumultuous, volatile years to come at Park Street.

We continued to typeset *The Picture* while ACP organised the transfer to desktop publishing, then we lost the contract, as we eventually lost all our magazine work, and I did not think much about *The Picture* until 1995, when I found myself working there.

While I was employed at the typesetters, I wrote a piece for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and the paper bought it. I did not realise how odd it was that an untrained journalist should be able to place stories in the *Herald* – but the same thing had happened to me in the UK, with *The Guardian*.

I had few difficulties adjusting to life in Sydney, but the first time I asked for twenty cigarettes, the shopkeeper gave me twenty packets. I could not bring myself to call a big beer glass 'a schooner'. It sounded like a joke word, baby talk, so I would always point to somebody else's glass and ask for 'one of those'. For a year, I answered the question 'how are you?' with a detailed summary of my health. I could not get used to saying 'see you later' to people I would never see again, and it was a long time before I was brave enough to wear shorts in public.

I loved Australia, and every day I remembered how lucky I was to be here, and how short a time I had on a one-year working-holiday visa. My mates left – Guy went back to England; Chris found an improbable job as an accountant in the Solomon Islands; we slowly lost touch with backpackers and made friends with Australians and New Zealanders. They were easy people to get to know. They had all travelled themselves, bought Thai sticks on Khao San Road and black hash in Brixton, lived in damp Gloucester Road dormitories and shared houses in Earls Court, and they did not care that you were not from around here.

I wanted to know about Australia like I knew about England. I read library books, old magazines and newspapers, and spoke with strangers in pubs: were there skinheads in Australia? Were there teddy boys and punks? Were there riots at the football? Did the army go to Asia? Was there conscription during the wars? Who were the gangsters? Who were the mercenaries? Where did they drink and die? I heard about the Saints, Radio Birdman and Neddy Smith, Tom Domican, Painters and Dockers, Sallie-Anne Huckstepp, Gough Whitlam, Jeff Fenech, Cliff Hardy, police corruption and Vietnam.

I was teaching myself what I would need to know to edit a men's magazine.

THREE In which I get married, write a Forum Letter and watch a porn video

Australian Playboy was the local edition of the US magazine that would have its readers imagine themselves as dinner-jacketed, martini-drinking, politically liberal, sexually successful, cigar-smoking men of the world – while they are masturbating over a photograph of a sixteen-year-old girl lying by a swimming pool. I had read about the Playboy Mansion, with its bunny girls and spas, but it had limited relevance to a dole boy sucking tramp juice in Coventry. However, for a 27-year-old proofreader whose daily diet included the low-fat cottage cheese recipes in *Australian Slimming* and the riboflavin content of Corn Flakes, *Playboy* features were rich, gamey meat.

We used to typeset *Australian Playboy* for publisher Mason Stewart, and the two South African Jims and I would bicker politely over who would read it. *Playboy* was started in the US by Hugh Hefner in 1953. Hefner worked for a publisher of cheesecake glamour magazines, which ran the usual girl-in-spotted-bikini-with-one-hand-behind-her-neck pin-ups and nudists-playing-volleyball-in-the-sunshine stories. He saw a potential market for a more sophisticated publication, and bought a set of Marilyn Monroe nudes for the first cover, which resulted in extraordinary sales. There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Number Three is: Celebrity Nudes Sell Out Magazines.

Playboy's glamour was shot in soft colours, with Vaseline-modulated voyeurism. To legitimise the nudes in his magazine – and to legitimise his own famously licentious lifestyle – Hefner learned to ride the back of the sexual revolution. He presented *Playboy* as part of the culture of the permissive society, and made common cause with the first wave of libertarian feminists. He published fiction from the best US writers – including Truman Capote, John Updike and Saul Bellow – and long, long interviews with political, sporting and cultural heroes from Muhammad Ali to Malcolm X, John Lennon to Fidel Castro, Gore Vidal to Ted Turner. (This led to the *Playboy* reader's celebrated justification: 'I only buy it for the articles.')

Australian Playboy had been launched by ACP in 1979, but Kerry Packer quickly lost interest in the project, and the licence was taken up by small publisher Mason Stewart. Mason Stewart never had enough capital to run a high-profile magazine like *Playboy*. The company was a bottom-line publisher, happy to sit in the lowest quadrant of any genre. It kept costs low and eked out small profits. Material from the US edition was used wholesale, and local content was gradually marginalised.

In the US, the more explicit *Penthouse* coaxed *Playboy* into fighting the 'beaver wars'. As the legs of *Penthouse* Pets edged wider apart, the sales gap with *Playboy* narrowed. *Playboy* briefly tried to match *Penthouse* for gynaecological detail, but withdrew when it became clear the magazine was being dragged into a vaginal Vietnam, a war it could never win. The battle was mirrored in Australia, where *Penthouse*'s most potent weapon was the Pets' inner labia, but its editorial was also stronger. *Penthouse*'s muscular, Australian low-life prose *noir* was better than most of the material *Playboy* could afford.

Australian Playboy's low production values left the cover looking like a colour photocopy, and the discreetly nude women inside appeared faintly jaundiced. It was printed cheaply in Hong Kong, and the colours were matched by film separators who had never seen a white woman naked, and did not realise their skin was not white but pink. For a while, they turned the Playmates a diluted shade of orange.

There were probably only two groups of people in the world who ever did only read *Playboy* for the articles – proofreaders like me, who never got to see the photography, and the blind readers of the Braille edition, which has been distributed by the US Library of Congress since 1970.

The design company where I worked was trying to get rid of its typesetting arm. It could smell the death of the trade, and it coveted the

new Macintosh computers that would revolutionise the design industry. The company regularly enticed managers to run the type shop, and then tried to sell them the business. The new managers hired, fired and fled. Both South African Jims were disappeared by a new regime. In the chaos that followed the coup, I was told to retrain as a typesetter. I could not type, but I learned.

A plausible old digger named Bob came over from England to run the shop. He was an affable, gregarious boss, with a beard like lichen and blood thinned by Foster's.

In the Excelsior Hotel, Bob sat with his mates, including an incomprehensible old Chinese man, a silent Aborigine, a fat Irish bloke, and me – four characters in search of a joke – draining the national supply of tap beer and pipe tobacco. Part of my job was to accompany him to the pub, at lunchtime and in the late afternoon. The Excelsior was a workers' pub that filled up at 3 pm, when the garbos and the taxi drivers knocked off, and was empty by 8 pm.

My working-holiday visa expired after a year. Bob promised to sponsor me to return to Australia as an Apple Macintosh operator, even though I had no idea how to operate a Mac. It was supposed to take about three months for sponsorship to come through, and Jo and I decided to spend the time in the South Pacific.

We flew via Nauru to the Solomon Islands, where we lived for a few weeks with Chris, then went on to Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. We came back to Fiji to pick up my visa, but discovered my application had been turned down.

For the second time, Jo gave Australia to me. She was born in the former RAAF base in Toowoomba, Queensland, but her family had left Australia for Malta when she was six weeks old. We did not realise this qualified her for Australian citizenship until we arrived in the country, and the passport officer asked why she, an Australian, had come to Australia on a working-holiday visa. I could have had residency all along, since I had unknowingly cohabited with an Australian citizen for eight years, but it could take months to prove. I asked the staff at the Australian Embassy what I could do to get back to Australia quickly.

They said, 'Marry an Australian.'

Jo and I then asked the woman behind the desk if she would like to be a witness at our wedding.

We were married in a bandstand in a park. We considered having a

traditional Fijian ceremony, in which the groom wears a fish tied to his head, but settled on a muu-muu dress and a lei for Jo, and a *bola* shirt, *sulu* skirt and sandals for me. It was a lovely day, marred only by a drunk guy asleep in the bandstand, who appears in several of our wedding photographs.

Jo went back to a job as a welfare worker in Australia. I hung around Suva waiting for yet another visa. I resolved to use the time to improve myself. I gave up drinking, started jogging, ate only vegetarian food, went to the gym, and took a driving lesson every weekday. When I was eighteen, my grandad gave me money for driving lessons. I took to the road like a duck to quantum physics. I could not see how it was possible to maintain a safe distance from the both the car in front and the car behind. I gave up after four lessons, and spent the money on beer. My grandad did not mind, since he could not drive, either, and he spent all his money on beer.

My instructor was a gearstick-thin Fijian Indian called Malik. Every morning, he came to my hotel and honked the horn of his small red car. I climbed in, turned the key in the ignition, and stalled.

'Why can't you do it?' he asked me angrily. 'Why do you always stall?' His brow furrowed and he gazed up at the blue skies for inspiration.

Malik had the same revelation, day after day.

'It is because you are an idiot,' he said.

As we drove down the quiet streets of the Fijian capital, I made every possible driving error. I crunched through the gears as if they were Coco Pops. I lost control of the steering. When I parked, I forgot to put on the handbrake. When I tried to reverse, I took the car forwards. 'What am I doing wrong?' I asked Malik.

'It's just that you are stupid,' he told me. 'Try again.'

Malik chatted as we drove. He asked about Australia, and how much money I would earn. When I told him, he was astounded. 'And yet you are such a fool …'

After my first ten lessons, I started to get the hang of driving. I still stalled a lot, but the gear changes smoothed out. Outside the city, on the wide, empty road that runs around the island of Viti Levu, I could steer a fairly regular course, easily avoiding the rare oncoming vehicle. There were no parking regulations in Fiji, and only one set of traffic lights. I felt quietly confident.

Malik refused to acknowledge my progress. Instead, he started attacking me, lunging at my leg with his long, bony fingers, squeezing deep into my muscles whenever I made a mistake, crying, 'Stupid! Idiot! Fool!'

On the day of my test, he drove me to the test centre, a dusty complex of offices outside the city. My examiner assured me that no European had ever failed his driving test in Fiji.

I started the car and I stalled. I started again and stalled again. I started again and the car jerked forward, out of the car park gates and into a rabble of squawking chickens engaged in the time-honoured chickenly practice of crossing the road. I swerved to miss the chickens, and aimed the car directly at a group of schoolchildren on the pavement. The examiner grabbed the wheel and saved their lives. I started again. I brought the car up to a speed of 20 km/h, and tried to change gear. The car made a noise like a giant clearing his throat. I tried again and produced a sound like a lion eating a train. My driving test was supposed to last one hour. In fact, it was over in ten minutes, once it became obvious that I had no idea how to change gear. I had not realised Malik's car had dual controls, and he had been working the clutch for me.

There are fifteen categories on the Fijian driving test marking sheet. Candidates are scored 'poor', 'fair' or 'good' for each one. I received six 'poor' marks (for things such as steering, control, braking and changing gears) and only one 'good' – for weather conditions.

After the test, I told the examiner I needed my licence to start a new life in Australia. 'So you won't be driving in Fiji?' he asked. 'You should have told me. Come back tomorrow, and I'll give you a pass.'

But I returned to Australia unlicensed and married. Bob re-employed me at the typesetters, but retrenched me a few months later. I had given up drinking at lunchtime, and started going to the gym instead, so I was no use to him anymore. As a typesetter, I was underskilled and overpaid, but I would happily have gone back to the reading room if I could have stayed. I had only had one proper job, and had no confidence in ever finding another.

I applied for everything in the paper, without expectation. My manufactured CV looked irrelevant and bare. The time as a typesetter sat oddly beside my fabricated period on UK newspapers. I was terrified we would have to go back to England. We had spent a lot of money in the South Pacific, and had only a couple of months in reserve.

In 1992, I went for a sub's job at *People*, which I thought was a ribald general news magazine. I was interviewed by David Naylor, who said I did not have enough experience, but offered me a tryout shift on *The Picture*, which I refused. I would have drunk my own urine to stay in Australia

(I drank Foster's, anyway, so it would've been no great hardship) but I would rather have been unemployed than a pornographer.

For six weeks, I worked as a bloke who packs books in boxes and a telephone survey guy, until I found a position at POL, a boutique publishing company that produced the *Australian Way*, the in-flight magazine for Australian Airlines (TAA). Instead of an interview, applicants were given a subbing test. I knew my proofreader's marks, had a lazy eye for literals, and I could always press a pun into headlines. I came second in the test, but the journalist who was given the job left within days, and it was passed down to me.

The woman I replaced had been chief sub-editor of the group. The editor-in-chief wanted me to drop the 'chief' from my title, because I did not have any Indians, but I clung on to it like a tramp to Special Brew. I subbed *Australian Way*; *Meridian*, a quarterly magazine for Midland Bank gold-card holders in the UK; and ultimately the self-explanatory *Company Director*. At POL I was careless, creative and popular. The staff became a big gang of mates, and we drank together in the Glengarry Hotel in Redfern, where Aborigines bought slabs of VB to take back to Eveleigh Street, and folk groups played in the back room. I miss that pub. The building is still there, but a pub is the people, and the people are all gone.

I learned a lot – although I tried not to be seen to be learning. The editor of both *Australian Way* and *Meridian* was Maggy Oehlbeck, a beautiful woman in her fifties who immediately became my friend, and let me build a portfolio writing for *Australian Way*. I was thrilled to be working as a journalist at last, doing what I always knew I could do, choosing the right words and sliding them into place.

My brother came out from England to see us. We all wanted to go scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef, but I had an asthma attack, so I had to join the cruise from Cairns as a snorkelling passenger. The trip was designed to take trained divers out past the Great Barrier Reef to an obscure, lesser known formation that could be called the Okay Barrier Reef – or, more accurately, the Crap Barrier Reef.

My brother was happy. He had completed his diving beginner's course in England, in the North Sea, an act similar to pulling a black bin-liner over your head and plunging into a cold bath. He had never seen anything underwater, apart from his hand. To him, the Spartan submerged gardens of the Crap Barrier Reef were lush coral jungles.

We were joined on the boat by an American fisherman, a small gang

of Finnish boys and two women in their twenties. The captain looked like a sailor. His skin was prawn-pink; a nautical cap shielded his fish eyes from the sun. He enjoyed a hearty can of beer for breakfast. The walls of his cabin were decorated with a photo-mosaic of topless women, paparazzied on deck during previous trips. The divemaster affected the burning stare common to psychopaths and men who take themselves very seriously. He guided the divers into the water in buddy pairs. I stayed on board.

The captain tried game fishing and immediately caught a marlin the size of a small child. He reeled it in, whooping and hollering, screaming to the cabin boy, 'Sacrifice the virgin! Bash her! Kill her!' and I realised he was both drunk and insane.

The marlin thrashed around on deck, breathing air like an asthmatic through its gills, while the cabin boy beat it to death with a club. Rivulets of blood run onto the boat's drainage system.

My brother, Jo, and the others surfaced, full of dull stories about the not-particularly-wondrous wonders of the deep. I learned that the Coral Sea was largely composed of water. We pulled up anchor and headed off to our next mooring spot. Darkness fell. The marlin was skinned, filleted and fried and we all sat down to a fish supper – apart from the captain, who had a beer. There were two more place-settings than there were diners. Somebody went off to raise the two women from their bunks. Their bunks were empty.

They were not on deck. They were not in the shower, or the toilet. There was nowhere else on the boat. A realisation slowly dawned. We dropped them off four hours ago and they were still in the water. The shorthand term for this is: dead.

Immediately, the divemaster turned spinmaster and commenced damage control by Big Lie. 'I never saw them go in,' he swore. 'They went in without telling me.' He did nothing to help find the girls. Instead, he hysterically repeated and edited his alibi, out loud and in the middle of the cabin. 'I never saw a thing … I saw them come back on …They must have gone in twice.'

The captain radioed for a spotter plane. Spotter planes do not come out at night because they cannot see anything. Somebody suggested we return the way we came. The captain said the girls would have drifted away by now. He meant he did not know how to plot a course back in the dark. Once he admitted this, the American fisherman took over. He rolled out the charts and explained that we must tack our way back to cover as wide a

passageway as possible. This idea never occurred to the captain and he seemed confused about the mechanics involved.

The sea was as dark as the sky. The boat's engine made a noise louder than screams, so we had to continually shut it off to listen for the cries of women in the water. The Finns called out their names. The night dragged on. The water grew colder. Every hour we searched, it became less likely that we would find them. The American fisherman was completely in command. He ordered the captain around. He ignored the divemaster. He studied the charts until he was convinced we had reached the dive area.

The Finns reported the sound of distant whistles.

Everybody rushed to the prow, crying, 'Where are you?'

Shrill voices replied, but everything was just an echo. The whistling was an echo of the engine winding down; the words were an echo of the young Finns. At one spot, however, the echo continued when the boat was silent. We powered up and headed in the direction of the sound. The voices became clearer.

Our spotlight swept the water and found the two women, strangers this morning, hugging each other like lovers about to part. It was unbelievable that we should come upon them in the dark when they had been drifting at sea for seven hours. They were only 40 metres from the reef. They were safe because a passenger knew more about seamanship than the captain.

The pair said very little when they climbed on board. Each had already told the other her life story, every secret thing. When they realised they had been abandoned, they had inflated their life jackets and dropped their dive weights. The divemaster reprimanded them, almost threatened to invoice them. They said they were happy to continue the cruise; that they had never given up hope.

My brother had worked in the same camera shop since he left school at sixteen. He spent his savings on coming to Australia for three weeks. When he got back to England, his boss made him redundant.

Back at POL, I met D. She was older than me, but she kept herself looking twenty-one using ti-tree oil and sorcery. She had red hair and I fell in love with her, and we started an affair, and my life became a raw, howling lie. I wanted to leave Jo and be with D, but I could not leave Jo. She was the reason I was in Australia. I always felt I was using her money, long after I was earning my own wage and the profits from the house had been spent.

I was a socialist because I believed in fairness. I thought workers should receive a fair share of wealth. I thought white people should give black people a fair go. I thought schools and hospitals and universities should be fair, and nobody should be able to buy privilege. I thought people should treat others with kindness and understanding, and realise that the only message of art, the only lesson of life, is that we are all the same. I thought the worst thing a man could do was to hurt somebody who had not hurt him. I thought it was not right to leave Jo. I thought it was not fair.

Jo and I had planned to go back to the UK for the first time in four years. We had been living off only half our wages, saving up for the big trip home. We were going to travel through Indochina, Korea and Japan to Canada, and across the USA to Europe.

I could not let Jo go home alone. I told D I would do everything I had told Jo I would do, then come back to Australia to be with her. She said she would wait a year for me. I don't know if either of us believed it.

I rang D from Bangkok, after two and a half months touring Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. She said she was trying not to hate me, but she didn't want to see me again for a long time. She was casually dismissive. She no longer felt bound by her promise. In the last ten weeks, her career had jumped ahead ten years. She had found a job as a staff journalist, then another as a magazine editor. She would not suffer on her own, trying to sustain a relationship with somebody who was on the other side of the world *with his wife*. She said she was not going to be a martyr. She said goodbye. My soul screamed.

I was determined never to tell Jo what had happened, not to let it hurt her, but then it exploded inside of me in a cafe in Khao San Road, and Jo laughed because she could not believe what she was hearing, then we cried and cried and cried. I had no plan, no idea of what I, or we, might do now. We decided to continue with our journey, and we flew to Canada, but we could not stop crying and we could not stop smoking and I had to go back and talk to D. I needed to let her know I was not the person she thought I was. Nobody had spoken to me the way she did, as if I were nothing – not since school.

I believed in fairness. I believed when you put pain in the world, it multiplied with each person it touched. When a father beat his son, the son beat all the kids who were smaller than him, who beat all the kids who were smaller than them. If the son had turned on the father, given back what he was given, taken back what had been taken from him, then violence would

have become a circle, not a cycle – and when the circle was closed, it would have been over. I believed revenge was a duty, that the person who was hit first should hit back twice as hard, otherwise it could never be over. D had wanted to hurt me, and I could not stand the idea of that, because I only loved her. I loved her but, now she had attacked me, I wanted to kill her.

On a bus into the city – gorgeous, friendly Vancouver, where I broke my heart and Jo's heart and changed the person I was – I saw a gang of skinheads in khaki flying jackets and fourteen-hole Dr Martens boots. I wanted to tear into them, kicking and punching, to force them to hit me back. I wanted them to kick me unconscious, to knock my spirit out of my body.

I could not bear to be a part of myself. I was sweating in my brain. I could feel it blister and pop. There was a hand around my heart, a fist in my throat, a cancer in my stomach. I felt doubled over with pain, all the time. We had breakfast in a diner. Jo vomited in the bathroom. After a week, we parted the way I had learned from my parents – no shouting, no fighting, no anger, only pain. I caught a plane back to Sydney. I did not know if I was going for a weekend or for the rest of my life.

Chris picked me up from the airport. I needed to talk to him so much, but he went away for the weekend with a girl he had met in a pub, and left me in his Paddington unit, trapped with myself. I had 200 duty-free cigarettes, and I smoked them one after another after another after another, breathing nicotine like oxygen. At first, D refused to see me, but she finally agreed to meet me in the Rose and Crown on Glenmore Road, the street where she lived. She told me she was not interested in me, she had moved on. She did not want to listen to me, did not care that I had come back, did not know me.

I went home to Chris's flat. Jo rang me and I told her I was coming back to Canada, but it was the weekend, I had no credit card, and I could not buy a ticket until Monday.

She said, 'Oh, baby, I'm so happy.'

I stayed awake all night, smoking, drinking, ringing my mates in England, confessing everything to each of them. I thought they would not like me anymore. The next morning I had a beer for breakfast, then went out for a drink with a friend. She listened to my story in the Glengarry, with all her patience and love, comforted me for an hour and a half, then told me she had to go because she felt weak because she'd had an abortion the day before.

Back at Chris's flat, there was a message from D on the answerphone. She said she had changed her mind, and perhaps we could have some kind of relationship. I kneeled by the phone, playing her message over and over.

D came to the flat and I left with her. Within a couple of weeks, we moved in together, in a unit in Chalmers Street, Redfern. And I never phoned Jo back, ever.

She said, 'Oh, baby, I'm so happy,' and I never called to say I would not be meeting her in Vancouver.

I strangled something breathing inside myself, and some nights when I am alone I can still feel my fingers choking my neck.

I thought about killing myself every morning for the next three years. When I woke up, my heart exploded. Suicide beckoned from banal utilities: fire escapes and bathroom cabinets. I would stop suddenly in the street, make a gun out of my fingers, stick my hand in my mouth and pull the trigger with my thumb.

I could not believe what I had done, what I had become. I had left my wife, who had always shown me nothing but love, to move in with D, who seemed to hate me.

Jo said to me, 'You were the light in my world, and now that light's gone out,' and I could not stop crying because I had lived with her since we were nineteen and I knew everything about her and we had shared everything for nine years and most of what we shared had been hers, and she was a lovely, kind, loyal, trusting person and I fucked around behind her back and abandoned her in a foreign country.

I did not know who I was.

One of the first nights I spent with D, we sat in her Paddington house and turned on the TV. I never watched TV, but D wanted to be with the kind of person who did, so we sat together in front of a program made by the feminist writer Andrea Dworkin called *Against Pornography*. Dworkin's thesis was that pornography was violence, that it corroded the souls of men and destroyed the lives of women. She spoke to a former model who had first had sex with men and women, then with dogs and snakes. She'd had a baby, and used it to make more pornography. She raped her baby with a snake.

When I went to bed with D that night, I knew what I was. I was the kind of person who would work on pornography.

Until then, I'd had no idea about porn. I did not even know what it

was for. As a teenager, I'd had a small collection of randomly shoplifted magazines: a copy of *Hustler*, an issue of *Swish* ('the magazine of spanking fun') and a magazine called *Probe*, which disappeared from my schoolbag one lunchbreak.

On my bedroom wall, jaggedly arranged among black-and-white posters of The Clash and The Damned, and a music-paper obituary to Sid Vicious, was a naked centrefold of porn queen Dorothy Stratten, who later died on a bondage machine. I slapped the word 'dead' on her poster, cut and pasted from a newspaper headline. I didn't know what a bondage machine was – I still don't – or how it could kill someone, but I liked the poster because I thought it was 'punk', because a character's walls were papered with similar pictures in the TV version of Sham 69's album 'That's Life', and because Ray Grange worked in a sex shop in The Clash movie *Rude Boy*.

Every summer, when I was a boy, I grudgingly returned to Leeds for a week with my dad. When he and his second wife went out and left me alone in the house. I would sneak into their bedroom and open every cupboard and drawer, climb chairs and scale the built-in wardrobe, lift up suitcases and pull out hidden magazines – *Vibrations* and *Private* – scurry off to my room and take them to bed.

But I wouldn't *do* anything with them. I studied the stories and stared at the pictures, and tried to understand, to find out what women were. I think I took these magazines for a kind of sex aid – something to give you an erection before you went with a woman. When boys at school made jokes about the pages of their magazines sticking together, I had no idea what they meant.

When we were fifteen, Rich and I used to sneak into X-rated films. They never showed close-ups of couples fucking, and offered only rare glimpses of full-frontal female nudity. They confirmed my uneasy feeling that sex was just a rumour.

Australian Penthouse was published by Horwitz-Graham, from offices in Cammeray, on Sydney's north shore. It used to be run from an actual penthouse flat, but one of the Horwitz family had moved in when the magazine grew too large. I had freelanced a boxing story for the editor, Phil Abraham, while I was working at POL. When I returned from Canada, I did not have a job, so I went to ask him for more commissions. I thought I would try to be a freelance writer.

Phil was a shrewd, talented editor, with a love for good writing that was rare in publishing and, I imagined, unique in pornography. He was also a dedicated greyhound owner, and perhaps the only person in Australia ever to have been associated with both dog racing and sex. He suggested I try a few days sub-editing on *Penthouse*. He had just lost a sub-editor unexpectedly when she had found out he was paying her less than another member of staff, and she had thrown his own in-tray at him. The in-tray bounced off Phil's head, and I briefly took over her chair, eager to add 'pornographer' to the letters 'liar' and 'bastard' that I imagined followed my name

I sat between staff-writer Mark and deputy editor Todd, who was later to become editor of *Men's Health*. Mark had a black eye, the result of having slept at the house of another journalist's ex-girlfriend. He had been woken up by the journalist's cowboy boot stomping on his face. He said he had chased the stomper around the living room, naked, and punched him back. Todd had recently left the military, having tried out for the SAS. It seemed like the kind of place where I might fit in, and there was a good chance I could suffer violence. I was hungry for self-harm.

I smoked relentlessly at my desk, as did Todd. Mark only smoked heavily. We each had our own ashtray, where mountains of butts curled up and died like poisoned slugs. At lunchtime, we drank beer in North Sydney Bears, as I tried to hold back emotional collapse. I gibbered maniacally about D, while they shared office gossip and compared theories about Phil. They were both clever and were expected to write and edit dramatic, involving, exciting journalism, which would then be surrounded by pictures of nude models playing with themselves to distract the readers' attention from it.

Sub-editing at *Penthouse* presented certain challenges. Was blow job one word or two? Did it take a hyphen? Did hand job follow the same style? What about nose job, then? When a man ejaculates, he comes, but does he ejaculate come or cum? If it's cum, then why didn't he cum in the first place? And how was it that the rest of the country, and the rest of the magazine, had shifted to the metric system of measurement in 1966, but penis size was still expressed in inches? Why don't men prefer to think in centimetres, since there are more of them to the dick? On these and many other questions, the official reference work, the Australian Government Publishing Service's *Style Manual*, maintained a stuffy, puritanical approach to usage.

Blow jobs and cum mainly came up in the Forum Letters, which opened the magazine in every state but Queensland. The contributors to

Forum Letters never forgot their grade-four English teacher's warning not to use the same word twice in a sentence.

My favourite Forum Letter, from 'Name and address withheld', described female genitalia first as 'brown snatch', then 'pussy', 'doona-tuna', 'firm box', 'aching arch', 'crying chasm', 'cunt', 'inner sanctum', 'hornet's nest', 'come-crater' and 'flaps' – all within five hundred words. He referred to his own cock as his 'jock rocket', 'vein-train', 'lead flute' (it 'played its final tune' when he came) and 'trouser puppet'. His finest moment, however, arrived when he looked over to see his girlfriend having sex with his best friend, while he made love to his best friend's girl: 'Their tongues came together with their lips touching, curling around each other like Spanish dancers while my balls clicked in and out of Tiffany like castanets.'

Nearly all Forum Letters came from the readers, who wrote them in response to an annual competition with a $1000 prize. Apart from the need to compose the occasional short Forum Letter to fill the gaps, the job that separated *Penthouse* staffers from the rest of the journalistic world was the need to write 'Pet lines'.

The *Penthouse* Pet of the Month was always Australian and called, if not by her birth name, then at least a name by which she was known. Some of the other pictorials were bought in, and it was up to the staff to decide who the women would be. The models came from all over the world, and all over the world they were given different biographies by different writers on different magazines. At home, she might be Sonia from St Petersburg who likes Solzhenitsyn and salt herrings; in the US, she could be Sandy from Seattle who enjoys slalom and steak; in the UK, she would be passed off as Sarah from Skipton who is into sausages and spanking, but in Australia she would be Sami from Surfers who loves sand, sea and Stolis.

The only time the writers got to see pictures of naked women was when they had to come up with the Pet Lines. We would go to the light box, pick up the loupe, and stare at the transparencies of the photo shoot, as if we believed that looking at her labia might unlock the secret of the model's imaginary personality. Writers could get quite creative with the Pet lines, especially when ascribing ethnic backgrounds to brunettes, who might easily find themselves half-Mauritian, half-Lithuanian and living in Yass, or quarter-Nepalese, quarter-Slovenian, and half-Laotian, but somehow born in Grafton. We were generous with academic qualifications, regularly handing out BAs and BScs, MAs and even PhDs. The girls grew more exotic and

highly qualified, until Phil was forced to send around a message saying there were to be no more doctorates awarded to nude models.

Penthouse carried terse, funny video reviews, which differed from the reviews in other magazines in that the critic only watched pornos. I had never seen a porn video, and I thought they were an urban myth. The reviewer lent me a film called *Backpackers II*, which I genuinely expected to be about backpackers, but the improbable narrative centred around some kind of outdoor fitness centre. It featured a white guy and a black guy having sex with women, often at the same time. I was astonished that people would do that kind of thing on film. I can't explain how I could have lived my life without knowing this happened, but it was only the previous year that I had met somebody I really believed was gay.

The video reviewer was an enthusiastic consumer of pornography, who was initially thrilled to be paid to watch six pornos a month. As the tapes turned, however, he found it more and more difficult to become aroused by them. After two years, it was something vaguely unpleasant he had to do to pay the rent. He grew bitter about the whole way *Penthouse* portrayed sex, from the formulaic Forum Letters to the polished pictorials. He felt cheated by the lie that was perpetuated by the magazine, and the people who bought it. He wanted to shake them and shout, 'Can't you see that this isn't how life is? Why do you all want to believe that you will have this amazing foursome one day with Swedish air hostesses? You won't. And you will never fuck this girl with plastic tits. And this girl with plastic tits, who looks great after airbrushing, when you meet her, she will be a snaggle-toothed, five-foot-zero stripper with bad acne!' He was a man who took his job seriously.

When there was nothing to do in the office, Phil encouraged me to browse the back issues for story ideas. There was a bookshelf of bound copies in the storeroom. I turned past pages of naked women pouting and writhing through the 1970s and 1980s. It was a forlorn kind of voyeurism, to look and know their bodies would be worn now, their breasts loose and low. It was also faintly alarming. In the 1970s, pubic hair had been lustrous and dense, like a rainforest. This, after all, was what the readers were hunting for: a glimpse of the darkness *down there*. In the 1980s, the rainforest was mercilessly logged, until it became a thin strip of isolated foliage, nothing more than a reminder that once there was jungle here. By the nineties, it had disappeared: all the mystery was gone.

It disturbed me that the hair on my head had followed the exact same path, and if the last reserves of pubic hair could vanish at the end of the

century, my thinning copse could fade away too. Perhaps this was the punishment of the pornographer.

Penthouse's licence did not give the magazine access to much US material, so Horwitz was forced to provide a budget for local words and pictures. The writing was brawny and comic – as I wanted mine to be – and *Penthouse* had a past as a newsbreaking magazine. Unlike *Playboy* – or even *Penthouse*, by the time I got there – it was printed locally, which meant it could cover stories as they happened. It exposed gangsters in the Victorian Painters and Dockers union, in the story that directly resulted in the establishment of a Royal Commission.

There were poignant features by Sallie-Anne Huckstepp, the gorgeous, murdered prostitute, who wrote about her time in the brothels of Kalgoorlie and as a streetwalker in Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross, as well as a funny piece about hiring a male escort ('He whispered, "You are so lovely. Next time we go out, I won't charge you." My only thought was that if there was ever a next time, he'd have to pay me.')

The year before I arrived, Phil ran Todd's two-part story of his (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to get into the SAS. It was the ultimate men's magazine story, incorporating a long period of physical training, an elite regiment, mateship tested and strong men crumbling, in a world without women. For the next couple of years, almost every man I spoke to admitted to having read it.

I worked hard at *Penthouse* – I even wrote half a Forum Letter about two people having sex under water – but my mind was on D and Jo and how things would ever get better. I could not think, not really, not about anything but them. Phil gave me a short story to sub, by a second-division author of Australian literary fiction. It was dense and confusing, with no drama at its core. I worked on it for a day, but it still did not make sense.

I told Phil I could write better fiction. He said if I could, he would publish it. At heart, he wanted to gild his splayed vaginas with fiction by Australian Capotes, Updikes and Bellows – none of whom existed. That weekend, I finished a short story called 'Dog', about a gangster who had just been released from jail. Phil bought it for $1000, which is still the most I have been paid for a short story. 'Dog' was written in the first person, so for several years Todd and Mark called me 'Dog', which should be a warning to anyone thinking of calling a story 'Cock'.

Phil's *Penthouse* was a carefully packaged, almost corporate product. It earned several penthouses for the Horwitz family, because it was all

things to all masturbators. The 'unrestricted' newsstand issue, which could be flicked through at the newsagency and bought by anybody, showed full-frontal nudity. *Penthouse White Label*, a limited-edition Category 1 magazine, offered women with open legs and men with erections. *Penthouse Black Label* was available by subscription only. It showed full penetration, all curiosity satisfied. A special, tamer, topless-only newsstand edition was produced for Queensland, as a result of which Queensland had the highest proportion of Black Label subscribers in the country. There were even two separate editions for New Zealand.

Penthouse also produced the compilations *Best of Penthouse* and *Girls of Penthouse*, and a hairy handful of digest-sized books such as *Forum Letters*. In the early 1990s, there could be twenty *Penthouse* titles on the shelves at the same time, including US *Penthouse* and its offshoots.

Phil had gradually increased the nude-girl count from three to six, sourcing the extra shoots from Europe and the US. Whereas *Playboy* would settle for a coy nipple glimpsed above a silk sheet in its celebrity pictorials, *Penthouse* readers – in the appropriate editions – got the whole inner labia.

Penthouse was often ahead of its time. The staff were choosing Australia's sexiest women in 1992, two years before the launch of *FHM* in the UK, and five years before the magazine was cloned for the Australian market. In other respects, it was as old-fashioned as *Modern Fishing*. When *Penthouse* ran a satirical piece, it flagged it as 'Humour', in capital letters. Once everything in men's magazines was humour, *Penthouse*'s editorial content looked as stuffy and out of touch as *Playboy*'s. It might as well have been marked 'Serious', or 'For Dad'.

For one heaving, sweaty, fleshy fortnight, I worked half the week on *Penthouse* and the other half on *Australian Women's Forum*. *AWF* was a porn magazine for women, *Cosmopolitan* with its pants off, and its fingers wobbling between its legs. It was essentially an offshoot of *Penthouse*, working from the office next door, and edited by former *Penthouse* writer Corrine MacKay.

AWF ran several pages of 'The Good, the Bad and the Ridiculous', Forum-style letters detailing readers' sexual experiences. *AWF*'s letters were hornier than *Penthouse*'s because, in their joyfully prosaic detail, they sounded true – although contributors were paid $50 a piece, so most of them probably were not. The issue on which I worked included letters from a middle-aged woman whose married male friends telephoned at night to suggest she fuck herself with cucumbers and other groceries; a

woman sharing the fact that she masturbated; and a woman who found a lover with a small dick who couldn't get an erection.

AWF had to take certain care with its naked male centrefolds ('Australia's Most Studly') to ensure the magazine was not rated Category 1. Their penises were forbidden to rise above an angle of 45 degrees, which indicated arousal and would have consigned the magazine to a plastic wrap.

I was quite happy working on *AWF*, but intestinally uncomfortable with *Penthouse*. I did not have anyone I could talk to about this. Everyone I knew from typesetting had worked on porn, and all my politically inclined friends had gone back to the UK, so I took the desperate step of consulting socialist folk singer Alistair Hullet, the former singer of local Pogues cousins, Roaring Jack. On Sunday afternoons, Hullet and his acoustic guitar played revolutionary ballads at the Sandringham Hotel in Newtown. I used to take a seat at the bar sometimes, and soak in the socialism and smoke. I contacted Hullet through his record company and arranged an interview. He was happy to talk to *Penthouse*. He rarely got any attention from the media. In fact, he often had to fight for the attention of the dozen or so drinkers at the Sando.

Before I met him, I went for a run around Redfern Park, and dropped my house keys. I searched for them in the grass, but it was like trying to find house keys in a park. I turned up for the interview in running gear, and I looked more like a desperate, sweating junkie than a journalist. Hullet, a generous, trusting person, lent me a pair of trousers and a long-sleeved shirt for my next appointment, and listened impassively as I begged special dispensation to work on *Penthouse*. He seemed puzzled as to why I should think he possessed spiritual authority on behalf of the international working class. From the tone of his songs, I had assumed he was a member of the Australian political equivalent of the SWP. It turned out he was not. He was just this bloke who sang 'The Internationale' once a week in the pub.

In the end, he handed down a judgment. He said it was probably alright to work for the magazine, provided you did not take the photographs. I was ready for that. 'But,' I said, 'I write the *captions* for the photographs.' Nothing I could say would make Alistair Hullet damn me to hell, or ask for his trousers back. I did not know if I should be relieved that I had not committed a mortal sin, or disappointed that I had not debased myself sufficiently. I did not know what I was doing at all.

FOUR In which I get punched in the face, every day for a year

My time in the *Penthouse* offices was supposed to be a trial for a job as copy-editor. Phil gave the position to David Smiedt instead, perhaps because I was transparently insane, but encouraged me to stay involved with the title. From 1994 to 1997 I was a 'contributing editor', a largely ceremonial position that I held in parallel with several other jobs. It meant that I contributed to the editorial, rather than the editing. I wrote tough guy features and the heavily signposted humour, and from 1993–94 I had a column called 'The Big Bout', a sorry mixture of both.

I had smoked since I was fifteen, and drank since I was able. I picked up no athletic skills at school, and throughout my teens my only exercise was shoplifting and running away. I had never played any sport. I was thirty when I decided to become a professional boxer.

I had been interested in boxing since I saw Muhammad Ali fight George Foreman on the TV news in 1974. I was impressed by Ali's 'rope-a-dope' innovation of raising his fists in front of his face, leaning on the ropes and absorbing all of Foreman's punches. Getting punched became one of my preferred fighting techniques from then on, second only to my all-time favourite, running away.

When I was seventeen, I went to a scout hall disco, where I was

sitting on a plastic chair slobbering over one member of an entire generation of garrison-town girls named Karen. I felt a leather thud like a football landing on my lap, and glanced down at the face of Roy Martin staring up from my crotch. He was a year older than me, and a novice boxer. I assumed he had somehow slipped and fallen backwards into this position.

'What're you fucking looking at?' he demanded.

I turned back to Karen, and Roy Martin returned to the other end of the scout hall, from where he stared at me all night, hoping to catch me looking at him again. When the disco ended, Karen and I left the scout hut with the aim of standing in the doorway for ages and ages, kissing goodnight.

Roy Martin came up, placed himself in front of me, and asked what I was fucking looking at. Karen said I wasn't looking at anything, and draped her hand over my eyes to prove it. Roy Martin hit me in the mouth. Instantly, I knew what to do. Like the greatest heavyweight champion the world has ever known, I clenched my fists, covered my face and waited for my opponent to finish punching me. Roy Martin tagged me with a couple of left hooks, drove a right cross straight through my guard, and gave me a black eye.

He must have grown tired of hitting me, because eventually he stopped. At that point, if I had been Muhammad Ali, I would have laughed at him panting after his futile exertion, taunted him in rhyme, chased him across the tarmac, and chopped him down.

Since I was Mark Dapin, I left things at the 'black eye stage'.

I found somewhere to hide and spent the next twenty minutes unsuccessfully trying to work my fingers inside Karen's bra, while I waited for my mate Peter Powell to complete a similar but more fruitful attempt on his girlfriend, Mandy.

Powell was a boxer, who was always trying to talk me into training with him, but I figured there was no point in duplicating functions. He could do the fighting and I could perhaps make up the rhyming taunts. With Powell as protection, I walked home through the kind of dark alley that has figured prominently in my life but I have never learned to avoid.

Incredibly, Roy Martin dropped from a lamppost, landed in front of me and asked what was I fucking looking at. He had two mates with him, one of whom was a fair boxer but not as good as Peter Powell. Powell said if they fought me, they would have to fight him as well. Everyone stared at each other except me, who tried hard not to look at anything. Eventually, the others backed down.

I never found out why Roy Martin beat me up. I saw him at a bus stop a week later and asked him, but he didn't seem to know either.

The Roy Martin incident was my first clash with boxers, although there was a man with a boxer tattoo among the gang that beat me unconscious in Bedworth. I never lost interest in boxing, but it was not until I despised myself that I was willing to put in the effort needed to learn.

Dave Smiedt told me a boxing gym had opened above Joe's Garage in Kings Cross. Joe's Garage used to be the Rex Hotel, and I loved the Rex like an ex-girlfriend. It was my local when I first came to Australia, when we lived in the unit behind Kings Cross police station and I thought I had everything I wanted in life. In 1989, it was a pub full of backpackers. Everybody I knew drank there. You could barbecue your own steaks in the bistro, which seemed impossibly exotic. I have never felt so far from home and yet so at home as I did in the Rex, drinking with Chris and Jo and Guy, all of us suntanned, cashed up and working on the other side of the world.

When the pub became Joe's Garage, the owners planted imitation petrol pumps in the forecourt, to attract the kind of people who thought a petrol station might be a suitable venue for a night out. Most of the backpackers had gone, and the few that were left were strangers to me, another generation of Lancashire girls in glittering waistcoats from Chiang Mai markets.

The boxing gym was a big, bare room with half a dozen heavy punching bags hanging like fat men lynched in a line, and a floor-to-ceiling bag quivering between them. A speedball was screwed into the wall, and the ring sat ominous and empty. Most boxing gyms are museums to themselves, papered with layers of posters advertising forgotten fight nights in police boys' clubs and RSLs. Joe's gym had no history and no future. The pub was to be demolished within a year.

There were two trainers at Joe's, an East European who worked with the NSW state amateur team, and Barry Raff, who had a small stable of professionals. Raff was holding the pads for a huge, sweating heavyweight called Big Jimmy. Raff was a small, thickset man with a battered face, a black moustache and a tiger's smile. When Big Jimmy stepped down, I asked Raff if I could have a go.

For a five-dollar training fee, Raff would do anything.

I performed a bit better than I thought I would. Nearly every time Raff showed me a pad I managed to punch it – although not always with the correct hand. Three three-minute rounds exhausted me, sending every

cigarette I had ever smoked flying back into my lungs like darts. I shed sweat like Big Jimmy, in stinging salty rivulets, and when I had finished punching, my knuckles shook like drill bits.

I returned a couple of times a week, and gradually got worse. I started hitting Raff by mistake. Once I even hit myself. Raff let me loose on the heavy bags, which almost snapped my wrists, and the speedball, which I could not hit at all because it moved too quickly. Back on the pads, Raff took everything with good humour. He started to do funny little impersonations of me, as a man with screwed-up eyes and buckteeth, who winds up his fist then runs away from it. Occasionally, he would hop on one leg to demonstrate my footwork.

Moving was my most awkward problem. I am the man who comes strolling around the corner when you are running towards it. I stop a centimetre short of bumping into you. You step to the left to get past me, I step with you. You step to the right, I do the same. All the time I am shaking my head, apologising. In boxing, it helps to move in the opposite direction to your opponent, so as not to be an easy target.

Even though I was crap, my early efforts gave me confidence. I had mixed motivations for wanting to box. I thought I deserved to be hit, hit hard and hit often, to be doubled over and humiliated and brought down onto my back. I wanted to get up and be hit some more, until I could not rise again. I wanted to have myself belted out of me.

I also wanted to purge myself. I thought boxing would turn me into a different person. I did not want to smoke or drink or do any of the things I used to do, any of the things that reminded me of me. When I perspired, I imagined the badness draining out of me, and when I boxed I could not think about what I had done. And finally, if I ever met Roy Martin again – if, for example, he dropped from a gum tree, or jumped out of my fridge – I wanted to be able to knock him down.

In addition, I wanted a column. Todd and Mark had impressed on me that a freelance writer needed a regular earner. I could not write opinion pieces because my opinions were, I thought, conventional and predictable – like most people I was a critical Trotskyist with vague anarcho-pacifist leanings – so I approached Phil with the idea of a column for which I would spend a year in training then fight a professional boxing match. He was guardedly enthusiastic. He asked several times whether I would go through with it. I assured him I would.

He said, 'It'll be great. I can just see the picture in the last column:

there you are, covered in blood, and the referee's raising your hand in victory.' He did not realise I wanted to be flat on the canvas, punished.

I told Raff about my plan. He did not object because he did not believe me. I asked him how good I was, and he became cagey. 'You're unorthodox,' he said. Then, 'You're very determined.' Then, 'You fucking spit on me all the time.'

The hard men who hung around Joe's gym watched me flay about with a kind of wonder, as if they had heard a dog talk, or seen a cockroach reading a newspaper. After a couple of months of relentless pestering, Raff agreed to put me in the ring with Brad McClutcheon, a quiet, craggy fighter who reminded me of Peter Powell. McClutcheon had fought professionally four times, and won every match.

Raff wrapped my head in padded headgear, gave me a pair of gloves bigger than my face, and told me to go for it. McClutcheon waited calmly as I rushed up to him and threw wild lefts and swinging rights into thin air. After a while, I worked out that he was not moving, and if I just concentrated I could probably get him. I scraped his gloves with a couple of jabs, he blocked my right, then I tapped him with a rare hook. I started to enjoy myself.

Then McClutcheon hit me back. The difference between McClutcheon punching me and me punching him was a matter of reaction; I had one, McClutcheon didn't. He looked as if he could have stood in the middle of the ring weathering my attacks for the next week or so, and maybe dip into a bag of chips and watch a video at the same time. Whenever he hit me, however, the force turned my head around so I was facing the opposite wall.

'Keep looking at him!' shouted Raff, but how can you keep looking at somebody when every time you do he knocks your chin into line with your shoulderblade?

At the end of the first round, Raff whispered, 'Hit him with a left hook,' smiled and patted me as if he were on my side. Then he walked over to Brad's corner, smiled and patted him. Did he think I could not see him, or something? He was probably telling McClutcheon I was going to hit him with a left hook.

McClutcheon gave me the chance to squeeze in some limp body-punches in the second round, but I quickly collapsed into the ropes and gave up. Boxing tore the breath from my lungs, drove rivets into my biceps and shackled my ankles with iron. It drew a curtain over my intelligence,

pumped haze into my brain. There was so much to remember, so very much I needed to do to keep safe. One round was emotionally shattering, two were physically impossible.

Raff instructed me to run in the mornings to build my cardiovascular endurance. I went jogging for a week or so, but then I was too tired to go boxing. I was worried I might leave my fight – which was now only eleven months away – on the road. I abandoned supplementary training and went back to the gym. We worked on body-boxing: a kind of limited sparring in which McClutcheon did not get to punch me in the head. Body boxing went well. I got a couple of punches in, and even managed two or three (okay, two) workable feints.

Raff and McClutcheon were going to the monthly amateur fight night at South Sydney Juniors in Maroubra, so I tagged along. I had never been to amateur boxing. I imagined it was a kind of slapdash affair, with well-meaning but hopeless fighters like myself. It was more like a series of very fit, very fast, very young lads bashing the shit out of each other over very short rounds. Everybody was punching for a knockout, and nobody ever seemed to give ground. Two light heavyweights in particular pounded each other into paste. I would have lasted two seconds, perhaps less. I was glad I was not a light heavyweight.

Raff got hold of some amateur-license application forms, with a list of cut-off weights. I was not a big bloke or a little guy, so I assumed I would fall somewhere in the middle. The last time I stepped on the scales, I weighed 81 kilograms. Middleweight is 71–75 kilograms. So what could I be? There it was, right at the bottom of the list: heavyweight, 81–91 kilograms. I could not believe it. I was supposed to get into the ring with Mike Tyson just because I enjoyed a beer and a burger now and again. I asked Raff how I could possibly be a heavyweight.

'Well,' he said, 'all that piss you drink goes to your legs, and you've got a real big arse.'

In the history of boxing, there have been few successful fat, unfit guys who can't fight. I knew I needed to eat less and exercise more, so I resolved to skip breakfast and lift weights. Missing my morning meal gave me a headache, so I began to cook dinner late at night, in the hope that some of it would still be hanging around my stomach the next day. Indigestion stole my sleep and made me feel even worse. I got obsessive about my 81 kilograms, asking everyone I knew how much they weighed, and demanding waist measurements from casual acquaintances.

McClutcheon was boxing in one of Raff's regular promotions at Marrickville Town Hall. One of the early fights spilled into the crowd, but I missed the trouble because I was sitting with D in the Bay Tihn Vietnamese restaurant around the corner, eating myself into a more dangerous weight division.

It turned out to be Brad's McClutcheon's big night. He was supposed to be somewhere on the bottom of the bill, hidden in the small print along with the promoter's permit number, but one of the main preliminary fighters did not show, and Raff reckoned McClutcheon could step up a notch and take on local hero Kon Pappy.

Kon was a wiry, balding Greek-Australian with a grin like the Parthenon. He entered the ring with a cartwheel. McClutcheon – broader, shorter, silent and unsmiling – stepped through the ropes and looked at the canvas.

Kon was a twisty, slippery, oily fighter, never long in one place and extremely difficult to hit. McClutcheon plodded towards him, throwing short, heavy right hands, and Kon would suddenly pop up beside him, or two steps away from him. The fight went the full four rounds, but McClutcheon said he knew he had lost in the second. Kon turned another cartwheel before the referee announced his victory.

McClutcheon seemed unmoved by the experience. He wasn't hurt, he did not look disappointed, he did not even look tired. The only thing that changed was he started speaking like a sportsman. 'He was pretty quick,' McClutcheon told me. 'He's got a lot of experience. It was a good experience for me. I feel pretty good.'

Kon came into the changing room and hugged Brad. He was brimming with goodwill towards his former opponent and, indeed, everybody else. 'Let's face it,' said Kon, 'there's enough violence in the world. Personally, I don't want to get hurt and I certainly don't want to hurt anybody.'

He gave me his card, which said he was a professional boxer and personal trainer, then walked through the crowd shaking hands with his public, asking if they had enjoyed the show.

Back at Joe's gym, Raff put Brad's defeat behind him, and returned to his favourite pastime of insulting fighters while they were sparring.

I checked the world ratings and discovered that, at a professional level, I would not be classed as heavyweight. I was something called 'cruiserweight', which sounded like a division where a man could cruise along

smoothly, occasionally stopping off to toss out a slow, relaxed punch. I threw a few cruiserweight jabs at the speedball. It nodded lazily and swung back into position.

When I started training, D and I were living in Redfern, in a new Meriton apartment building named, with deluded pomposity, 'Windsor Chambers'. Redfern was in transition from the dump it used to be to the middle-class inner-city suburb it still has not quite become. It was a good time to be in Redfern.

It was safe to walk around at night, up to a point, and in one particular direction. We stayed in a lot, arguing about Marxism, existentialism and my apparent inability to keep anything clean. D wanted us to get married, I wanted to be murdered. Every time Jo rang from the UK, to ask how I was, to try to understand what was happening, I cried for half an hour, which made me feel callous, because I was not crying enough. D was baffled by my tears, which she thought of as a form of insubordination.

The day we moved into the unit, the woman in the corner shop gave D flowers because she was so beautiful. We kept a cat called Captain, talked a lot about writing, and sometimes sat in the spa together, but the waters always bubbled with the same questions. From D, 'If you love me, why won't you marry me?' From me, 'If you love me, why did you finish with me?'

She said she could not believe in me when I was gone, that she was suffering too much, exhausted by the secrecy, angered that she should have to bear the pain – but that was all over, and now we were together, and I should get divorced and marry her, as I had said I would.

I was divorced within eighteen months of coming back to Australia, but I could not say I would marry D because she had hurt me so much, and I could not forget it, could not forgive it – and she kept on hurting me, forcing me, fighting me. For D, the proof that I wanted her would come when I married her. For me, the proof that she wanted me would come when she accepted me, befriended me, and asked nothing from me.

D was my muse, and she kept me together even as she tore me apart. I had to show her that I was valuable – even when I felt I wasn't – that I could not be dismissed like a salesman from the doorstep.

My grandad, Jimmy, had died the week I left England in 1988. I had written a short story, recasting him as an Australian former-POW in Burma, living with my senile grandmother in a shabby fibro in Bondi.

When I finished it, I cried, as I had never cried for my grandfather. When I showed the story to other people, they cried too. I submitted it to *Meanjin*, which was then Australia's most respected literary magazine, and the editor bought it. I sent a copy to British actor Warren Mitchell, who was in Australia doing rep. Mitchell looked like my grandad, and my grandad loved to watch him as Alf Garnett in *Til Death Us Do Part*. I asked Mitchell if he would take the role of grandfather if I turned the story into a film script. He immediately replied that the story had made him cry – and yes, he would. I started an MA in journalism at the University of Technology Sydney. I took screenwriting as an elective, completed a first draft of the script, and won $10 000 development funding from the Australian Film Finance Corporation to take it a step further.

D and I lived in East Redfern, ten minutes from Eveleigh Street, Australia's most famous slum. Waiting for a lift outside Redfern railway station three years before, I had been befriended by a big, caramel-coloured railway guard. He warned me to take care, especially around Eveleigh Street. 'You must go there with a Koori,' he told me.

I had just come out of England, and had never heard of a Koori. I assumed it must be some kind of attack alarm.

When I lived in Redfern, I saw the guard often. He still had time to be personable, because he never took anybody's ticket. People who got off at Redfern station – whether black, white or brindle (although I've yet to see a brindle person anywhere) – tended not to pay the fare. If the back gates were closed, they climbed the fence, but the back gates were usually open and the booth was never manned. The banner saying 'no exit' might as well have read 'no talking'.

There was always somebody in the Commonwealth Bank trying to draw on pension money they did not have. One afternoon, I watched a pale young man trying to deposit a cheque made out to 'Richard H Wilkins' into his account. The cheque was meant for him, he said, but he had changed his name. 'I've kept the same initials,' he assured the teller.

'And what is your name now?' asked the man behind the window.

'Rhinoceros H Wilkins,' said the boy. His burning eyes cast a challenge to further debate.

I did not see whether Rhinoceros got his cash, but many customers left the bank disappointed. More money changed hands in the street, in not-very-furtive drugs deals, and in the pawnshop across the road.

There were two theatres close by, the Belvoir Street Theatre, Surry

Hills, and the Independent Commission Against Corruption. (Why stop at corruption? Why not 'Against Lust' or 'Against Sloth'?) D took me to a Shakespeare play at the Belvoir Street, I dragged her to watch crooked cops roll over at ICAC. It was fascinating to see the way the New South Wales police service had worked. The Drugs Squad sold drugs, the Armed Robbery Squad performed or sanctioned armed robberies, and the Gaming Squad protected illegal casinos. It was as if they had accepted their job titles as their job descriptions.

In Redfern, I learned that whenever a man calls you 'brother', he is after something. (This is even true if the petitioner is your biological brother.) Brothers in the street often pulled me up for cigarettes, more rarely for money, and only once for a bite of my doner kebab. The most concise pitch I ever heard came from a weather-beaten professional. 'Look, I am black and you're white,' he said, without fear of contradiction. 'Give us forty cents.'

I handed over a fifty-cent piece.

'Give us a dollar,' he demanded.

I bought my groceries from the self-styled 'supermarket' opposite Windsor Chambers. Behind the till sat Saleem, a Lebanese giant with a single, aristocratic facial expression. Saleem communicated with barely perceptible movements of his eyelids, and for a long time I assumed his only words of English were, 'Small plastic carrier bag?'

He surprised me with a concerned frown when I came to buy flowers for D. 'You in trouble?' he asked.

I smiled and shook my head (although I was) and rushed home to tell D about our communications breakthrough.

A week later, I went in to buy two kilos of potatoes.

'You in trouble?' he asked.

Raff's plan for my meeting with Kostya Tszyu was seductively simple. 'You can take him out with a good right,' he told me. 'Wait until he goes to shake your hand, king-hit him, then throw yourself on the floor. He won't kick you.'

Tszyu was a Russian fighter who had recently moved to Australia. He had fought 270 amateur bouts for 259 wins, and 11 professional fights without a loss or a draw. He was widely tipped to be next junior-welterweight world champion – and, in fact, he eventually became one of a fistful of undisputed champions of his generation.

Boxers like Tszyu are not often seen in Australia. He is a performing artist, a trick puncher, a canvas dancer. He chooses his marks and he hits them – midriff, ribcage, cheekbone, jawbone – as if he were punching buttons on a console. He punches without taking punches, often without appearing to make any effort to defend himself. He has the power of a heavier man and the speed of a lighter man. Tszyu is an impossibility. In 1993, he was one of the best boxers in the world, and I was one of the worst. Somehow, I got it into my head that I was going to fight him.

Born in Serov in the Urals, Tszyu is part Siberian, part Korean. At twenty-four years old, he was timeless and unplaceable. He had the body of a schoolboy, the face of a pixie, and the smile of a despot. He wore a pigtail that began at his crown and fell to his shoulders, like a young Genghis Khan. He trained under Johnny Lewis at Newtown PCYC, and inspired a small fan club of adoring young fighters who grew Tszyu-style pigtails and strained to keep pace with his ferocious exercise routine. Tszyu was handsome, charismatic, restrained, polite and clinically tough. Everybody in the gym wanted to be him. Nobody wanted to be me.

All kinds of idiots, has-beens, madmen and losers turn up at boxing gyms hoping to go a few rounds with a real contender, to earn a story they can tell at closing time for the rest of their lives. They quickly get hustled out the door – unless they are in the media.

With great courtesy, Tszyu and Lewis allowed me to interrupt their training, pull on the gloves and move around the canvas with the man who was two fights away from his first successful world title shot. Tszyu leaped into the ring, like he always does, bounding over the top rope. I carefully separated the bottom two ropes and crawled through them.

'You should be confident if you go to fight,' he told me. Pointing to his head, he said, 'You win here. If he's good fighter, you should respect him, but not scare. Never. My coach teach me never to scare. I remember when I was young, I lose a fight. I cry. My coach say, "You lose today, he lose tomorrow" … But I think you know about this,' he said. 'I think you know.'

Tszyu did not understand what I wanted from him. His English was fractured and incomplete. At first, he posed for a photograph, and I lunged at him. When he saw I was really trying to hit him, his raised his arms above his head and let me bounce a couple of gloves off his levelled abdominals. After he had amused himself like that for a while, he caught me with one of his hands – I could not actually tell which one it was – and sent me

flying across the ring and into the ropes. He winded me with something that might have been an uppercut, or it might have been a train. Either way, I did not see it coming and I felt as if I had been run over. Within ninety seconds, I collapsed, exhausted.

I asked Tszyu how I could improve my style.

He said, 'You have to learn to punch.'

I stopped for a cigarette in the PCYC car park, and felt a stabbing pain in my side. I checked for bruising, but there was none. The next morning, I still had the pain as I sat on my balcony breakfasting on Winfield Blue. I found I could only take the smoke down to my throat. If I tried to pull it into my lungs, it felt like Tszyu was nailing me again.

I kept nicotine patches in case I had to take long non-smoking flights, or short flights that were hijacked by terrorists. I pressed a patch onto my biceps, drank a cup of tea while my bloodstream recharged, then felt brave enough to go to a doctor.

Like Tszyu, my doctor jabbed me around the body until I yelped with pain. 'You've cracked your second rib,' he said. 'I could send you for an X-ray but it would be academic. We can't do anything about it anyway.' He told me I could not train for six weeks.

What does he know? I thought. He has never had the smell of leather and blood send his nostrils flaring. He has never felt the thrill of a fist raised in victory over the battered body of a senseless opponent. He was a bit like me, in this respect.

I will go to the boxers' doctor, I thought. I will consult Dr Lou Lewis, the ringside physician at nearly every fight night in Sydney. Lewis told me I could not train for eight weeks. He gave me some anti-inflammatory tablets, told me to take it easy, and sent me home.

A few days later, I had a couple of drinks (well, eight) and tried to smoke again. It was pointless. It hurt too much even for a dedicated cancer-chaser like me. I had to return to the nightmare world of the non-smoker, where every loud noise sends your heart pounding, every conversation is a conspiracy to betray you, and every woman standing up on the bus is looking at your bald patch.

The only exercise that did not hurt was a short sit-up. I threw myself into sit-ups with a success that startled me. Every night I draped my towel over the bench and performed my one-exercise workout. At first, I could only do 60, but I soon pushed it to 100, then 150, then 300. By the end of the fortnight, I was doing 600 sit-ups each session. After a month, I could

do 1240. A distinct pattern developed between my waist and my chest, blowing bubbles under my beer gut. I was growing abs.

My roadwork needed a boost. On the occasional morning when I did get up in time to jog around Redfern Oval, I was about as fleet as the average pallbearer. I figured I might pick up speed and fitness if I ran with a partner. Kon Pappy, Brad's opponent in his last fight, had told me he was a personal trainer specialising in overweight old ladies. That seemed to be my pace.

On his first visit to Windsor Chambers, Kon brought a briefcase full of instruments like the ones Nazi doctors used to measure Jewish skulls. He pulled at me with his calipers for a while, then pronounced me 23 per cent fat – 'borderline obese'.

Kon was a great guy to run with as he never stopped talking. He was bursting with dubious stories, instant opinions and boxing gossip. He also taught me a number of wise old Greek sayings – such as, 'The Spaniard shits in the sea and gets it back as salt' – which have never yet come in handy. Most of Kon's stories had Kon as the hero, and a lot of them took place in South-East London, where he played out his amateur boxing career. They were two-fisted tales in the life of an inner-city boxing club dominated by wild West Indians. Kon – small, dark, and thinning on top – usually gave as good as he got.

'You and me, we're not so different,' he told me at the end of one long London memory. I thought that, like him, I came to the boxing game late in life. Like him, I faced tough odds against being accepted. Like him, it would all come together for me once I stepped in the ring.

That was not, in fact, what he had in mind. 'We're both going bald,' he said.

We ran together most mornings, and we sparred and did padwork in the apartment block gym. One morning, Kon arrived with some body armour. 'This is so you can hit me without it hurting,' he said.

The armour – basically a big, ribbed pad – protected him from waist to chest. 'Crouch down and throw an uppercut,' Kon commanded.

I did, and I hit him in the balls.

Kon took a deep breath, turned away from me, squatted like a kind of garden statue, and did not say anything at all. It was his longest period of silence ever.

Between Kon and Raff, my boxing habit was costing me about $120 per week. On the other hand, I had not bought cigarettes in months, and

I dared not drink even one beer on the nights before Kon came, or else I could not get up. With all my extra training, and the fact that my muscles were firming up a bit, I felt pretty confident when Raff put me in the ring with an English bloke to do some body-boxing.

'Use your jab, Mark,' Raff shouted.

Since we were both called Mark, we both did, and our jabs met in the middle.

I waddled around the ring with my guard open as wide as Mark's oddly fanatical eyes. I planted a few limp-wristed punches, but I was soon out of breath. Was I ever going to get any fitter?

Mark and I got in close, throwing rips in the clinch. Suddenly, zing went the strings of my ribcage, and I was back to square fucking one. This time I had cracked one of my lower ribs. When I had fully recuperated, I celebrated the recovery of my ribs by immediately tearing some ligaments in my hand. I wanted to give up. My original plan had been to spar with several great Australian fighters – Jeff Fenech, Jeff Harding, maybe an old-timer like Lionel Rose – and write a series of columns about their different styles, and how it felt to be hit by them. After Tszyu, I lost my nerve. I knew how it would feel. It would hurt, but not the way I wanted to be hurt. I was cruising for a slam like a medicine ball in my face, flattening my features into anonymity, turning me into somebody else. What I got were body punches like steak knives, administered in great, sawing thrusts, that only served to remind me who I was.

I bought a brace for my arm, went to the office to see Phil Abraham and asked if I could give up the assignment. He told me I couldn't. Four columns had already gone to press. I had to continue.

The new pain in my hand meant I could have only limited punching practice, so I looked for a way to improve my elephant-like footwork while the ligaments healed. The answer came in a piece of junk mail: 'Learn to dance,' it said. Dance, I thought, like Muhammad Ali in Madison Square Garden.

Dance, thought the dance teacher, like Paul Mercurio in *Strictly Ballroom*. Anyone who has not been to a dancing class probably thinks a bunch of dorks stumble on polished floors while some screaming queen chants, 'Slow, slow, quick-quick slow.' In reality, a bunch of dorks stumble on polished floors while some screaming queen chants, 'Slow, slow, quick-quick, slow.'

I went with D, who loved to dance. It was one of those inevitably

disastrous attempts to cultivate a common interest, and 'do something together'. Although I could never seem to get my sparring partners against the ropes, I found it very easy to steer my dancing partners into walls. This, like the ability to hold and hit, is not considered an asset on the dance floor. I blushed and tripped and I could not keep time, and I stuttered and I stumbled and I waltzed with the screaming queen, and I hated it more than anything I have done since drama classes at school. It was a horrible, fearsome, humiliating mistake, but at least I knew nobody would recognise me. The whole episode could be a sorry little secret between me, D, and the lady at the door. I was not even going to write about it.

At a break in the class, a friendly, stocky bloke put his face close to mine. 'Don't you do that boxing page in *Penthouse*?' he asked.

Oh great.

Kon came around for me at 6.30 am. He had had a flash of inspiration in the early hours that excited him so much he could not go back to sleep. 'Today, we're gonna wrestle,' he said.

I was surprised, but I am surprised by everything at that time of the morning.

Kon used to be an Australian wrestling champion. We went to the gym and grappled a few rounds. It was a bit like dancing with somebody who was struggling to get away, which had been pretty much the case with the women at the dancing class. After the session, I collapsed. My shoulders were burning with the strain of the wrestling.

'You look like my father's goat,' said Kon, surreally. Back in Greece, he explained, this miserable animal had been hung upside down and drained of its blood before it was roasted on a spit.

I felt like his father's goat.

A couple of days later, we wrestled again. Kon grabbed for my waist, I took hold of him. Kon moved as if to throw me, and I forgot not to resist. I had that old familiar feeling of my skin going one way while my ribcage turned the other. I could almost hear the crack.

At home, D and I boxed and wrestled and danced until we had exhausted each other. I needed to trust her or to hate her to give myself peace, but I could not bring myself to do either. She wanted to get married. I could not see how we could get married when we brawled all the time – in restaurants, in the street, at her mum's house, in bed. She said getting married would put an end to all the arguments. I felt it would trap me inside them forever.

'Why can't we get married?' she asked.

'Why did you finish with me when I was in Asia?' I asked. My hurt never healed. I kept working on it with hot knives, opening it up again, stirring it around.

We went to see a counsellor at Relationships Australia. Her counselling technique seemed to be to ask me about my family then contradict everything I said.

I would say, 'My dad wasn't particularly bright.'

She would say, 'I put it to you that he was.'

I would say, 'My mum married him because he asked her to, and because he was Jewish.'

The counsellor would reply, 'I put it to you that those weren't the reasons.'

I suppose she was trying to strip me of certainty, to help me look at relationships in a new way, but I found it fantastically irritating.

Finally, she said, 'I want you both to take a piece of paper and write how you vision your future.'

In a very quiet voice, I said, 'Envision.'

'What was that?' she asked.

I did not want to repeat it, but I knew I had to.

'"Vision" is a noun,' I said. 'You can't 'vision' something. I think you mean 'envision', which is a verb.'

I think she would have liked to use the rest of the session to counsel D on the best way to leave me – pack a bag and go back to her mother; take out an AVO and evict me from the unit; poison me, chop me up and bury my body parts in a sewage farm – but she pressed on with the exercise.

Five minutes later, I gave her a sheet of blank paper. I could not see any future. Nothing at all.

I went back to my doctor to get a medical for a boxing licence. As part of the check-up, he asked me if I ever had suicidal thoughts.

'Obviously, I wake up every morning and think about killing myself,' I said, 'just like everybody else.' I really thought that was true. I imagined any rational person would lie in bed, rub their eyes, and think, 'Well, I can either brew a pot of coffee, read the paper and take the dog for a walk, or I could lie back in the bath and slit my wrists.' If you did not weigh the amount of pain you were likely to live through that day against the fear of nothingness, how could you even know whether to get dressed? Surely, you would be paralysed.

The doctor sent me to a psychiatrist, who prescribed me some mild antidepressants, which I threw away.

D had a prophet's proclivity for revelations, and one day she realised she could no longer live with a man to whom she was not married, so we moved out of Redfern but stayed 'together'. I went to live in Marrickville, where I could train every day with Kon. D took an empty room at a house her mother rented in Glebe.

It is always the same. You wait ten minutes for a cab, and when it finally comes along, two men jump out of the pub and smash it up with baseball bats.

I was trying to get the taxi from Marrickville to D's place. I had not yet climbed into the cab, and I felt only vaguely guilty as I turned my back and walked away. Marrickville was rough like home was rough, but with more weapons in civilian hands. Everybody Kon introduced me to seemed to have been stabbed.

I was living alone for the first time in my adult life. I had shared a bedroom ever since I turned eighteen, first with Guy, then Jo, then D. I was free to do all those things I had always wanted to do, like sit in the pub on my own. I went out, found a bar and bought a beer. Several days later, I was mysteriously still there. Every night was suddenly Friday night. I went straight from work to the pub, and stayed there until the lights went off – either behind the bar or behind my eyes.

I could not train until my rib healed again. I was worried about my weight – I wanted to fight the lightest possible guy, but that meant I had to be as light as I possibly could. I came up with different ideas about how to diet, like cut out food entirely and only drink white wine, or slash my calorific intake by living on drugs.

Finally, Kon and I started to spar again. Or rather, Kon sparred and I stood in front of him, dressed like a boxer. 'Sometimes I think you're planning to tire out the other bloke by letting him hit you until he's exhausted,' he said.

Kon jabbed and rolled. I lifted my left and he slipped in under my guard.

'Are you trying to hit me with your rib?' he asked.

I gave up drinking.

I arranged lunch with my MA supervisor, Wendy Bacon, in a cafe above Park Street. The meeting took weeks to set up – Wendy was the

most breathlessly busy person I had ever met – and I needed to discuss my dissertation.

We started talking about my topic – British Holocaust denier David Irving – when a black guy at the next table shouted, 'Jew! Jew! Fucking Jew!'

I told Wendy we should move to another restaurant.

'I'm so sorry about that,' she said, as if it had been her fault.

I did not think about the screamer until Wendy left. Then I thought, Why didn't I hit him? Every day I hit people – or tried to – who had done nothing to me. I did not hit him because he was mad, with a demented bellow and golf ball eyes. Not a good enough answer. I did not hit him because I was more interested in talking to Wendy. Not a good enough answer. I did not hit him because he was black. Not a good enough answer.

I didn't hit him because he was black and mad and I was more interested in talking to Wendy. Maybe, but I walked off wondering, Why didn't I punch him? Why didn't I smash him with a chair? Why didn't I throw boiling water over him? and the more cinematically satisfying, Why didn't I duck into the sports shop next door, grab a baseball bat, sprint upstairs to the cafe, and smash him across the face with it? Probably because it took me about an hour to even think of it.

I had always imagined losing my professional fight. It was part of my plan that I would finish face-up on the canvas, staring into the nostrils of the referee as he held up about 200 fingers. It would be the humiliation I deserved. Suddenly, however, I started to become a bit more confident. When I began training seriously, it took me 22 seconds to run 100 metres, and a couple of minutes to get my breath back. I could not do three minutes on the pads without collapsing against the ropes like a limp puppet tangled in his own strings. I could not fight to save my life, which was unfortunate because that is what boxing is – fighting to save your life. Eighteen months later, I could run 100 metres in less than 14 seconds and recover immediately. I could box ten rounds before breakfast. I weighed only 75 kilograms, and something had happened to me.

It was sullenly early in the morning, as usual, and I was training in a church hall when something struck me – and, for once, it wasn't Kon. Kon and I circled each other. I jabbed, he jabbed. I caught his jab and jabbed back. This last move was a recent addition to my repertoire, a modification of me eating his jab and spitting it out. Then, instead of springing back when Kon came for me, I stayed where I was, moved slightly to the side,

and hit him. We worked together in a tight circle, boxing and blocking as if we were following set steps – but we were not.

A choir of angels struck up above me; mysterious, bright light streamed through the stained glass windows; the earth shook. God had allowed me to box, in his house. Everything came together. My feet shuffled. While I mixed it up in close, I remembered what I had learned from the wrestling and did not strain every muscle trying to force Kon to the ground. I stayed balanced and calm, covered up when I was punched, then replied with a couple of combinations of my own. It was amazing.

Days later, I was in McColl's Gym in Glebe. I warmed up by shadow-boxing. I began my cripple's quickstep, feeling as awkward and graceless as ever, but I could tell my punches were flowing faster and harder. I heard one of the older fighters talking about me: 'He's had a couple of fights already,' he said. Maybe he was taking meaning from context. Perhaps he thought I must be a boxer because I was boxing in a boxing gym, but I thought I had him fooled into thinking I could fight. Maybe I could fool an opponent, as well. Perhaps I really could box.

I could not, though. I went to Tony Mundine's gym in Eveleigh Street, Redfern, and sparred a couple of novices. I did better than I would have a year before, but if the cops had picked that afternoon to raid Eveleigh Street, I could have been arrested for impersonating a boxer. All my training with Kon had turned me into the world expert at fighting Kon. That was all. As soon as anybody did anything that Kon did not do – such as stand still and trade punches – I was lost. I was knocked down three times in one day.

The funny thing about boxing is that it is just like the movies. It is so gritty and smoky and crooked and tough, it ought to happen in black and white. My big fight was fixed. I didn't know it, but I should have done.

Six months before, Raff had taken me to a cafe in Kings Cross and told me, 'You'll never make a fighter, mate' – but it's not difficult to get a professional boxing match, even if you are not a fighter. There is always somebody starting out who wants to get into the ring with a mug who can't keep his hands up. Footballers, bouncers and ex-cons fill out the undercards of suburban fight nights. They are fit, tough guys who just don't have the skills. They meet a boxer, and he treats them like a punching bag. Some trainers manage to make matches like these half a dozen times, and their boys quickly build up records that sound good in the pub. In private, they call their opponents 'spastics' and 'clowns'.

A promoter cannot stack a bill with first-round KOs, so some mismatched fighters get carried. They are allowed to go the distance to pass the time, to fill the evening, to give the punters what they paid for. Essentially, that was what was going to happen to me. Except that I was going to win. A promoter assured me he had found me a 'spastic', probably the least experienced man ever to walk on canvas. I found out he had had a couple of fights, and I wondered whether I was being set up to go down. I would not have minded.

After the date was agreed, the promoter promised I would be 'looked after'. He imagined the fight as a kind of pantomime, a bit like professional wrestling. There would be soft haymakers that stopped short, faces twisted in agony from blows that hardly landed, and my 'opponent' had been told he would not get paid if I got hurt.

The idea had some appeal. I was not frightened of being hit, or being hurt, I was scared of looking stupid, like a clown. But how could I sell tickets to my mates, who were all wildly enthusiastic about watching me get my face punched in, when I was not going to get my face punched in at all? I had built up the event into a kind of cleansing ceremony. It would bleach my conscience with its ferocity, sweep out my soul with its violence, leave me transformed and free and ready to start again. Now it was going to be a lie, like everything else. I pulled out.

The hardest thing was ringing Phil and telling him I was not going ahead. The second hardest thing was squaring it with myself. The easiest thing was going back to drinking and smoking.

I thought Phil would never employ me again, but I worked heavily for *Penthouse* in the next couple of years, interviewing martial artists and other conmen. In the 1990s, *Penthouse* changed the way it photographed women, taking its cues from the style of porn movie director Andrew Blake. Blake brought a new sophistication to dirty videos. He dressed his female stars in beautiful clothes and expensive-looking jewellery, had them reclining in the back seats of limousines, sipping cocktails, and being delivered to palatial mansions with ubiquitous swimming pools, where they stripped, shaved off all their pubic hair, and had anal sex with handsome, well-built strangers. This was a big change from the early days of video, when they jumped straight into anal sex with ugly, hairy strangers.

It was becoming less socially acceptable to pose for *Penthouse* and offer such a permanent surrender of gynaecological privacy. Phil missed the days when the chemist's assistant from Parramatta would take off her clothes

and jump in front of the camera for a laugh and an overseas holiday. Now the Pets tended to be strippers or lap-dancers, with bad skin and implants, but *Penthouse* made them up like porn princesses, in unlikely tiaras and collars of pearls, to make their eventual despoilment seem more complete.

Penthouse's corporate advertising faded. Letter-writing campaigns by evangelical Christian groups such as the Australian Federation for the Family scared off international companies like Sony. Born-again preachers targeted pornography and, on their instruction, citizens lobbied their MPs, and pensioners complained to their newsagents. *Penthouse* moved from the front of the shop, where it sat close to the *Bulletin*, to the back, where it disappeared among imported titles bought by the kilo from the US and the UK, distributed illegally and without classification from Queensland garages and NSW newsagents.

In place of lost corporate advertising, *Penthouse* accepted dozens of small ads for the new phone sex industry. They started off huddled together at the back of the magazine, but crawled to the front on their hands and knees, with buttocks thrust into the air. The language in the ads was far more explicit than anything to date, even the Forum Letters. Some of it was probably illegal. Phrases such as 'They used their belts across my bare bottom', 'Fill my dirty, filthy mouth with spunk' and '18 y.o. babysitter licked my cunt as it dripped', were spoken from unconvincing speech bubbles, and 'Bizarre Sex' offered confused fantasies such as 'I'll shower over your erect cock as my friend shags you with a black rubber dildo' and 'Strict lesbian bitches: one spanks you, one teases your cock, one fucks you'.

Penthouse was no longer the kind of magazine you could leave on your coffee table (I had once seen it on a coffee table, albeit in Kalgoorlie, where social mores rarely and barely apply). The veneer of sophistication, always fragile, had been stripped, spanked and tossed aside. First Mark left, then Todd went to Melbourne and took a job running *Desktop*, a graphic design trade magazine.

The magazine that remained was tired and formulaic. The Pets struck all the same poses, and the readers wrote all the same letters. In the end, there is nowhere different to go with pornography and nothing different to do. As Phil said, 'What's new in porn? A fourth fuckable female orifice?'

FIVE In which I become a parasite in The Picture, and work on a magazine for parasites at the Australian Financial Review

D and I would never let anything go. We never let anything go. I never let anything go. We fought and fought, bloodied and howling like wounded dogs, tearing away at each other's personalities, ripping the flesh from our beliefs. D said when I returned from Asia she wanted to make me crawl through broken glass before she'd take me back, and I did, and its shards slashed me open and sank into my veins, were pumped around my bloodstream into my heart.

I knew our relationship was not going to work. I was not going to let it. She had abandoned me and called me a liar. I kept on asking why, as if the question had no reasonable answer, when I came to understand there was every reasonable answer. For a start, I had lied to my wife, then I had abandoned D, and gone off around the world with my wife. I was the bad guy. The worst thing you can be is the bad guy, and know it.

D wanted to get married, to feel settled. She wanted to live in a house she could decorate and care for, and know that she would stay there. She wanted to be happy, and she wanted me to be happy, but I did not want to be happy. I could not even imagine being happy. I wanted to win.

There were stranger impulses coalescing, though. Fashion designer Coco Chanel once said of her lover, Paul Iribe, 'He used to criticize me for

not being straightforward … Iribe loved me … but he wanted to destroy me. He wanted to see me conquered, humiliated, he wanted me to die. He would have felt a profound delight in seeing me entirely dependent on him, poor, reduced to powerlessness, paralyzed in an invalid carriage.' I sometimes felt a little like that about D. I often felt she felt like that about me.

D was a graduate of a human potential course called the Landmark Forum, a descendant of the 1960s therapy cult Est. Est was founded by Werner Erhard, an encyclopaedia hawker, used car salesman, and defector from scientology. It taught what Erhard once called 'dogshit existentialism', a practical, applied existentialism that anybody could understand. At weekend seminars held by Est – and later by Landmark Forum – participants were encouraged to 'Get It'. 'It' was the understanding that the past did not matter, that you could live in the moment, that you need not be limited by your history. You could start again at any time, do everything you dreamed, say who you wanted to be and become that person.

It was an extraordinarily diverse philosophy, drawing from Zen Buddhism, Dianetics and Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Landmark Forum taught that all goals were equally valid – and were, in some way, the same. It dragged quotes out of context from revolutionaries and civil rights leaders, isolated them from any idea of political struggle, and reduced them to general motivational mantras. A Sydney photographer associated with the Forum self-published an expensive book of photographs of a swimming pool, and sold signed and numbered copies to his friends. In his dedication, he pointed out that, like Martin Luther King, he had a dream. That was true in so far as it went, but King's dream was of a fair society and racial equality throughout the US. The photographer's dream was to self-publish an expensive book of photographs of a swimming pool, and sell signed and numbered copies to his friends.

Sydney Forum graduates organised a writers' group, of which D was a member, but many of the dealings between people who had 'Got It' consisted of selling things to each other. The banal dreams they pursued were often the same: to abandon their profession – they were mostly professionals – and start a small business. Even D, who years previously had completed the Forum and abandoned her career in the public service, had been uncertain whether to be reborn as a sub-editor or the proprietor of a shop that sold cats and cat toys. D was defiantly in debt, partly as a result of paying for advanced Forum courses, partly as a result of paying a financial planner to advise her how to get out of debt, and she regularly bought

things she did not want or need – such as expensive self-published books of photographs of swimming pools – to support the dreams of her friends.

D and I argued frenziedly about the Forum, even though she withdrew from it when we started living together. She continued to use the Forum's 'technologies' (i.e. words). There was a whole vocabulary I did not understand, and which could not be explained to me, because the Forum is experiential – you have to do it to Get It.

The Forum taught that if somebody did not or could not do something, it was because, on some level, they did not want to. It combined the crass hectoring of a drill-sergeant sales trainer with a non-specific mysticism: you are in the place you are because you choose to be there. Millionaires choose to be rich, homeless people choose to be poor. I kept asking why so many black people chose to live in Africa and starve, but I was told it is impossible to understand why another person does anything. Their actions cannot be analysed, their reactions cannot be anticipated. You must choose to do what is best for yourself, and other people must make their choices in parallel. Your choice – whether it be to love them or to rob them, to reward them or to rape them – exists outside their choices. In fact, you make your own universe, and everyone else makes theirs.

I was never clear if Forum graduates believed other people were real in the same way that they were, and it can be lonely to live with somebody who is not convinced you exist. It must have been as lonely for D to live with an enemy. I wanted to prove myself right, to make me worthwhile, but it would also prove her wrong, and make her worthless.

D thought that to do something well, you had to commit yourself to it, to believe in it. I did not believe in anything – I had lost my every moral, cultural and political bearing – but I thought I could do anything better than her 'transformed' friends, because I was real. By real, I meant I was really who I said I was when I had met her, and not a liar. I also meant I was a real writer. For the first time since I was at school, I had started to think of myself as talented.

I was deputy editor of a soon-dead travel magazine, *Away*, and a subeditor on the *Sydney Weekly*, which was, in 1994, a lively and credible free newspaper. I freelanced as a writer and a sub, for the *Sydney Review*, *Flight Deck*, *Ita* and *Australian Women's Forum* – all of which have since closed down. I also wrote a little for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, without causing that paper to go bankrupt.

Most of the magazine work in Australia is at ACP. When David

Smiedt became chief sub-editor at *Cleo*, he hired me to help out on the Bachelor-of-the-Year special issue, ringing up eligible, single men, asking them their star signs. Once I was in the building, and learned the computer system, it was easy to move between magazines.

D argued that people who believed in a product were the best at the job, so everyone had to be enthusiastic about their work and their bosses, no matter how stupid their work or their bosses might be. It was better somehow to 'believe' in real estate or financial planning, or pornography, because only if you were properly enthused could you become the finest in your field. I thought that by believing in something worthless, or parasitic, or damaging, you were doing harm to yourself – and since I considered almost everything to be worthless, parasitic or damaging, it was best not to take your job seriously.

I thought I could be better at any kind of writing than any deluded, middle-class share trader with secret dreams of poetry, no matter how often he spoke his affirmations, so I set out – with typically idiotic obsessiveness – to work for every magazine at ACP, and *that* would show D… something.

I am useless at most things – I can't change a fuse, skip a rope, or catch a ball – but I can look at a text and break it down to its components parts, strip it like other people can strip their motorbikes, and use the parts to build something else. I can see how writing works. When I was twelve years old, I read through Robert E Howard's Conan novels. I made a list of the most exotic, most frequently recurring vocabulary, broke down the structures into scenes, and noted what kind of scenes the books seemed to have in common, and created my own sword-and-sorcery story from the severed limbs of Howard's barbarians. I knew I could mimic any magazine's style.

In 1993, I took shifts at the *Australian Women's Weekly*, *She* and *Woman's Day*, but the first place to offer me a full-time subbing job was *The Picture*.

The Picture shared with *People* the 'Sexy Seventh Floor' of Kerry Packer's relentlessly shabby Park Street headquarters. The P-mag boys still felt like outsiders, exploited and reviled. When the Park Street foyer was modernised, Richard Walsh had put up posters advertising all ACP's magazines, including *People* and *The Picture*. *Mode*'s gorgeously airbrushed fashion models hung beside Gert Bucket and her rolling hills of fat. Kerry Packer, who entertained business leaders and prime ministers in the building, demanded that the P-mags be taken down. As a compromise, they were

tucked away by the elevators, where they could not be seen from the street. Even then, the company did not display the actual covers – only bills bearing the titles.

For some reason, the seventh-floor walls were upholstered like vinyl lounges, giving them a wipe-down look that suggested a peepshow booth. All day long the urinals hissed like hecklers, and there was a sour, textile smell about the air.

Chief sub Simon Butler-White showed me how to log in, which tray to pick up jobs from (the one marked 'Subs') and which to put them back into. I shook a photograph out of a job bag, glanced at the instructions, and spat 300 words of pun-loaded schoolboy humour. Butler-White told me it was funny but warned me not to be so hard on the Poms – they were Pommy champions now. When I had last read *The Picture*, in 1990, the Poms were second only to ETs in their alienness and bastardry.

I had some history to learn: *The Picture* regularly celebrated the annual parties held by outlaw motorcycle gangs, where club members and their guests drank Bundy, smoked grass, compared bikes, and ran wild amateur strip shows. The parties, which became known as 'bikie beanos', were a desperately regular source of free pictures for the P-mags, but notoriously difficult to write about, because they were all the same. Essentially, the story was bikers-ride-in-and-drink-beer, women-take-off-their-clothes, bikers-ride-back-where-they-came-from.

Butler-White wrote 'The Mild Bunch', a story about the North Queensland Motorcycle Show run by Renegades MCC. *The Picture* was always careful to point out that bikers were not barbarians, and their parties were just an excuse for a bunch of knockabout blokes to have a good time. In 'The Mild Bunch', Butler-White wrote that the Renegades show was 'less disturbing than a primary school FETE!' marred by 'wimpy stuff like someone FARTING and saying 'Excuse me'' and rumours that 'there may have been SOME HOMOSEXUALS in attendance'.

The Picture suggested the bikies be reported to the Australian Bureau of Standards, and ran a picture of Blonks MC Darwin bikers showing their colours. The Blonks were given speech bubbles, like cartoon characters. One said to another, 'Trevor – I'll see you over by the crochet display', Trevor replied, 'OK ducks – I'll just grab a Perrier!' Above them was the graphic 'Hell's Pansies'.

On 11 October 1990, at 3.30 pm, two Renegades, on behalf of the Blonks, rode down from Queensland, walked into the ACP building past

the security guards, entered then-editor Tony Murphy's office and threatened to break his legs. The Blonks were serious bikers – the club was later swallowed by the Hells Angels – and Murphy was forced to write a cheque for $2000 compensation, while a sub drafted an apology, which ran in the 21 November edition.

The Picture admitted that, as a magazine, it was 'a DISGRACE' with a 'HALF-SMART DICKHEAD ATTITUDE'. It mentioned the Renegades' visit, and their mood of 'restrained aggression'. They ran the actual Renegades' colours: a skull with a Mohawk biting a knife, and the caption 'Our Renegades story was below the belt. We're big enough to admit it. They're big enough to MAKE us.' After the Renegades incident, *The Picture* worked more closely with the biker clubs, even faxing the copy for the bikers to check, to make sure nobody had accidentally implied they might be gay.

Richard Walsh instructed the subs to drop their 'sneering approach to humanity'. Suddenly, everybody – not only bikers – became a champion for *The Picture*. They adopted a wholehearted love for all God's creatures, including 'champion homo-thex-uals', who had previously been the source of much sneering humour. Cane toads, too, were eventually rehabilitated in a 1992 story headlined 'We Were Wrong – Cane Toads Are Top Blokes', which broke the news that cane toads 'could' cure AIDs. They even tried to make a champion out of a junkie, with a competition in which heroin addicts could win a cure 'in fabulous drug-free Thailand'. Staff writer Eric Inch took unemployed heroin addict Roy Hurst to a thirty-day drug dry-out at the Buddhist retreat of Wat Tham Krabok. While Hurst was detoxifying, eight monks were arrested for dealing heroin to patients – and Hurst himself disappeared for several days in Bangkok – but he came out clean, enabling *The Picture* to bill him as 'Our Junkie – Cured'.

Now I understood the new direction, I rewrote my first story, with a softer, friendlier tone, and Butler-White immediately asked if I would like to work there full time. I said 'no', but I did two more stories before I left that shift, which was twice the number most subs completed in a day. In subsequent shifts, I got even faster, until I cleared out the tray. They gave me work for the next issue, then the one after that, then they asked me not to come in again because I had done everything there was to do.

By the 1990s, the barbershop weeklies had become too racy for most barbershops, and the barbershops themselves were retreating from the cities. Stylish young men had their hair cut by razor-thin girls with green nail varnish and red dreadlocks, in unisex hairdressers where they could

listen to dance music, not the horseracing. The culture of Brylcream and Pirelli calendars and condoms under glass survived only in country towns. In Sydney and Melbourne, the boys sat with the girls in chrome-trimmed salons, the tables strewn with fashion magazines and street-press freesheets, and the business names always misspelled with 'z's, and adorned with redundant apostrophes.

These were the Boxall Years, in which *The Picture* editor Brad Boxall came to dominate the men's market to a greater extent than Naylor ever had. Brad's personality – or an element of it, a parody of it, or, Brad sometimes seemed to argue, the direct opposite of it – governed a whole (top) shelf of magazines, from the original broad-based 'P' titles to later, more esoteric publications such as *Picture Premium*, *100% Home Girls* and the magnificent *Me and My Boobs*.

Brad has deliberately brisk manners, and affects a certain ruthlessness. He rightly thinks of himself as The Man Who Can Get The Job Done. He is short and broad, with a shaved head, and the combination of his round glasses and his thin grin makes him look a little sinister. With Brad as the boss, *The Picture* worked like a factory. There was none of the panic that infects other weeklies on deadline day (and most other days). Each product that travelled down the conveyor belt from subs-to-art-to-subs-to-art, was polished, designed, cut, corrected and improved, until it reached the end of the process and went off to the colour centre for separations. There were no women working on the subs desk, and it was a bit boring – especially compared to *Woman's Day*, where there were no other male subs. I sat next to Geoff 'Seddo' Seddon, and talked about *Performance Bikes*, the magazine he was producing from his shed with designer Chris Andrew.

In the early 1990s, *The Picture* had uncovered – if not invented – a hidden suburban culture. As well as its imaginary world of ETs, freaks and monsters, it chronicled a real Australia of broken-down Kingswoods held together with Sellotape and string; Friday-night topless barmaids at the bloodhouse by the video store; beer bellies, beer fridges, Winnie Blues, cask wine and burnouts. It reflected the raucous, directionless lives of young men unrepresented in the media, feared and loathed by the middle classes, and it made them look inviting and exciting.

It was a publication for people who could not read. The stories were short, the headlines were hysterical, the photos were huge, and the captions were jokes. It was the magazine in the mechanics' dunny, the stand-by at the smoko, under the mug in the corporation-workers' tea room.

Although David Naylor was still the publisher of both P-mags, ACP encouraged similar titles to compete. *The Picture* and *People* were, therefore, biting at each other's balls, but *The Picture* had started to show full-frontal nudity, while *People* girls were only topless. Classified 'unrestricted' – which meant it could be sold to any schoolboy – every issue of *The Picture* carried the promise of dozens of pubic mysteries revealed.

Like all editors, Brad was the subject of much speculation and gossip among the subs. Staffing was always a problem on *The Picture*. People who can write ribald humour tend not to be the same people who know where to place a comma, or how to spell Kyrgyzstan. Funny, accurate subs were more highly prized than a slab of cold VB and a tray of hot sausages. Brad joined the magazine as a sub in 1990, and proved to be grammatically accurate, ecclesiastically careful and naturally funny. He was one of the few people in Australia with experience in homegrown pornography. At Federal Publications, where he had been editor-in-chief, he had put together one-man magazines such as *Golden Girls*, *Bra Busters*, *Big and Bouncy*, the Queensland-only *Paradise*, and the awkward *Playgirl for Men*.

Nobody in the P-mags had ever been as serious, organised or ambitious as Brad, and in less than two years, he took over the magazine like Stalin took over the Bolshevik Party. *The Picture* had always been a cheerful, confused voyeur, the bloke staggering down the main street at midnight shouting, 'Get Yer Tits Out!' at traffic lights. Now it became a little more perverted, but in a startlingly childish way, at once brazen and coy. Brad's first competition was 'Post Us Your Pubes and Win $50', a search for the women with Australia's 'BOSS MOSS'. Female readers were invited to clip off a tuft of pubic hair and slip it into an envelope. The competition stated, 'Each sample must be accompanied by a letter describing yourself, the TOOLS used for the quim trim and exactly HOW you cropped your undergrowth for us.' *The Picture* looked forward to the 'first batch of snatch thatch'. When all the entries were in, Brad personally assembled them into a map of Tasmania.

The key to Brad's *The Picture* was what he called 'free-range tits', or women photographed spontaneously undressing – at bikie beanos, or country race meetings, cricket matches or the Summernats street-car festival. They were women who wanted to strip – and therefore looked happy about it – and they were the kind of women the readers might bump into at the bloodhouse. They were attainable in a way the centrefold girls never were, a fantasy the reader could expect to be fulfilled if he had a bottle of

Bundy and a winning smile. Most of all, they were cheap. There were no studio costs, no hair and make-up fees, no lighting and no modelling fees. If somebody gets naked in public, they are in the public domain. Anybody can photograph them and any publication can print those photographs.

Every month, *The Picture*'s sales rose. The staff felt as though they were geniuses, that they had touched a place in the Australian subconscious that nobody had found before. They pioneered a new genre of satirical, idiotic porn. Every week, women sent in clumsily framed photographs of themselves lying naked on the beach, or pouting on the lounge, or looking surprised in the shower, and offered their services as cover girls. They were ordinary girlfriends, wives and mothers, hoping for a little extra cash. They had stretch marks and cellulite, sagging breasts, smudged eye make-up and lank hair, but somebody had told each of them they were beautiful.

Brad thought they were beautiful, too. He knew his readers spent most of their lives wondering what was going on in their neighbour's wife's underwear. He set out to show them, and began to run blurry two-page galleries of homely-looking hopefuls at the back of the magazine. He paid them $50 each, and they were christened 'home girls'. In time, they became affectionately known as 'homies', and less affectionately as 'swamp donkeys'.

There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Number Four is: A Successful Publication Provides A Service. *TV Week* offers program listings. The *Australian Financial Review* prints stock-market tables. *Wheels* reviews new cars. *Bacon Busters* details the best places to shoot pigs. *The Picture*'s service was home girls. The gallery of mundane glamour was repellently compelling. Everyone who picked up the magazine turned first to the home girls. Women, who made up twenty per cent of *The Picture*'s readership, compared their own bodies and saw 'better' breasts or 'worse' bums, but they also saw that every kind of woman was desired and desirable, which was not the message they had been receiving from women's magazines, or had previously expected from men's. Home Girls marked a kind of accidental democratisation of pornography. For male readers, Home Girls satisfied the fantasy of walking into the women's changing rooms, and they eagerly searched the blank, doughy faces for a teller they recognised from the petrol station or the bank.

On the Home Blokes page were snapshots of naked men – initially with their genitals covered but later shown in full frontal (and finally, in the incredibly strange magazine *100% Home Girls*, with penises erect). Home Blokes came at the bottom of every readers' poll, but it would be a strong

reader who could resist the urge to glance across the invisible urinal and peek at the competition.

The Picture invented its own language, partly to get around censorship restrictions that prohibit pornographic magazines from using the words 'penis' or 'vagina' on their covers. Instead, *The Picture* popularised 'smoo', a word for vagina taken from a reader's letter, and 'tockley', a Newcastle word for cock. People who understood the new pornographer's argot felt special, included, and the staff used it with promiscuous abandon. If *The Picture* had not bubbled with photographs of nude women, it would have been difficult to understand what it was supposed to be about.

I was introduced to *The Picture Style Book (Incorporating Fouler English Usage)* one of the strangest reference works in publishing. A sub stumped for a synonym for breasts needed only to turn to the appropriately numbered 'page three' to find eighty alternatives, from apples through breasticles to noras, norgs, norgards, norks and norvilles. Poignantly, it recorded 112 words for 'sex' (including 'sink the salami' and 'exercise the ferret') but none for 'love'. Less poignantly, it included the definition of 'reader' as 'a complete idiot … who drinks lots of beer, watches TV, hates gays and Orientals and likes big tits. They pay our wages, and are therefore champions, but are otherwise frightening people'.

There were other reasons for being nice about everyone in *The Picture*: the P-mags had recently been the target of perhaps the only demonstration against magazines ever held in Australia. Even though he was still editor-in-chief of both *The Picture* and *People*, David Naylor worked from an office in *People* and devoted most of his energy to that title. Suddenly, he had found himself locked in a duel with Brad, whose *The Picture* sales continued to rise every month while Naylor's *People* fell. *People* was wordier than *The Picture* and not as funny. It remained a wacky barbershop weekly, obsessed with oddity and the outback, leering at breasts only when there was no lizard racing at Eumundi. This was the magazine that Naylor had always wanted to edit but, it seemed, readers no longer wanted to buy.

Naylor also had problems with his advertising salespeople, who were under pressure to meet targets set by ACP management that could not possibly be reached without selling pages to the sex industry. The advertising was actually illegal. While it is within the law to advertise R-rated videos in an unrestricted publication, it is an offence to advertise X-rated videos. The difference between R and X is, essentially, penetration. An alien watching R-rated porn (and we have to assume that is something they do regularly)

would assume human beings reproduced by rubbing waists, and men and women had the same genitals.

X-rated movies are often cut to produce R-rated versions, and the videos sold in the advertising pages of *The Picture* and *People* could conceivably have been those versions – but they were not, and everybody knew it. They were mailed from the ACT, the only place in Australia where X-rated videos are permitted to be sold. (In fact, they can be bought from almost any sex shop in the country. The police rarely bother to enforce a law that would have them close down an entire retail industry.)

A few mainstream advertisers used *People* or *The Picture*. Coupon-based promotions attract a strong response from weekly magazines, whose readers like to send away for things and pay them off in instalments. Terrible ornaments such as porcelain cats always found a market. For unfathomable reasons, Dr Seuss books went well. The main thing the readers wanted to receive in the post, however, was X-rated videos, and *People* began to look like a pornographic movie catalogue, the masturbator's *Deals on Wheels* that Packer had envisaged.

At the height of adult-video advertising, the P-mags had twenty clients, all running pages honeycombed with video sleeves. The industry became saturated with cheap product. The big players squeezed out the smaller operations by slashing their prices to $9.95, advertising two free videos for the cost of postage and packing, just to build up mailing lists. Within a decade, the price of a movie fell from $60 to $20, and the vendors began to run out of customers. In the early 1990s, however, the industry was still healthy and growing. The tireless multiplication of shabby, kinky video sleeves in *People*'s pages undercut its pretensions to be anything other than dunny fodder. The rise and rise of *The Picture* brought into question Naylor's commercial judgement.

Brad saw Naylor as holding back *The Picture*, keeping it from being the magazine it could have been. Naylor thought Brad's approach would push the P-mags to the back of the newsagents, where *Leg Show* and *Asian Babes* languished in their shrink-wrapping.

In the end, it was Naylor's own actions that caused the magazines to be marginalised, censored and loathed. He was angry at ACP, and angry at Brad. Just as *The Picture* had succeeded in out people-ing *People*, he set out to out-picture *The Picture*. The issue dated 4 March 1992 featured the so-called 'dog-collar' cover, on which a woman wearing a jewelled collar with a lead of pearls crouched on all fours over the coverline 'Woof! More wild

animals inside'. When a North Adelaide newsagency put up a poster advertising the dog-collar *People*, a group called Women Against Rampant Sexism (WARS) smashed the glass door and threatened to break windows at five other newsagencies if the posters were not removed. Hundreds of demonstrators occupied the foyer of the ACP building on Park Street, and a window there was damaged, too.

The demonstrators felt that all women were insulted by the cover, that *People* saw them as objects, creatures to be fucked and controlled with collars and chains. The dog-collar girl did not even count as human. The strange insert picture – illustrating the story 'Drunk Elephant Gropes Girls' – only added to the feeling that women belonged in zoos. The other coverlines 'Fugitive Cop Spills Torture Secrets' and 'Video Killers Tape Slaughter' made *People* look like a house magazine for sadists. Seventeen pages of sex-industry advertising touted love dolls ('Blow her up, dress her up, take her to a party or give her to a friend. She won't complain and never has a headache'); strap-on penises ('Yours let you down? Try ours'); suspect-sounding mail-order magazines (*Sweet Little Sixteen*, *Teenage Schoolgirls*, *Teenage Sex*); and hardcore videos of every persuasion (including the transsexual blow-job movie *She-Male Suckers*).

After the dog-collar demonstrations, all soft-core magazines were required to submit every page of every issue to the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) for approval. The offending issue of *People* was classified 'Category 2' – which meant it could only be sold in sex shops – and it was supposedly removed from newsagencies, although most of the copies would have been sold already.

Packer was furious with Naylor, whom he regarded as commercially incompetent for not understanding the likely consequences of the cover – even though Walsh had given him approval. ACP was in its early days as a public company, and shareholders twice turned up to its AGMs asking why the dog-collar issue had ever been printed. The company was attacked by feminists and Christian fundamentalists, in a rare and oddly potent alliance. Australia's magazine censorship regime – previously a casual affair in which editors consulted voluntarily with OFLC officers – began to evolve into the baffling bureaucracy it is today. David Naylor, who had been so reluctant to include naked women in his magazines, briefly became Australia's most reviled pornographer.

At *The Picture*, I specialised in funny animal stories, and Brad turned to me in the lift one day and told me how much he had enjoyed a

hamster-and-ferret piece I had written, which parodied my argument with D about financial planners. I told D about my triumph at *The Picture*, how they kept offering me jobs. Surely, this meant I was right. You did not have to believe in something to do it, you simply had to have the ability. No amount of standing up in seminars declaiming 'I *am* a writer!' was going to make somebody a writer. You had to be able to write. D did not take it that way. She implied the reason I was successful at *The Picture* was that I, like its readers, was a pebble-brained, cock-stroking, tinnie-slamming ape.

So I took a job as deputy-chief sub at *Woman's Day*. At least D could never accuse me of being a royals-watching, pattern-knitting, horoscope-reading, celebrity-worshipping housewife.

Brad did not give up on me, however. He asked me to create a character and write a weekly column for him. My column, 'Tapeworm', tended towards funny-animal yarns seen from the perspective of an intestinal parasite, and it had a life about as long as the average tapeworm.

I was always going to get a job at the *Australian Financial Review*, because D once said I could not be a good business journalist, since I did not know enough about business. I thought I knew everything about business: buy low, sell high and lie, lie, lie. The *AFR* was a daily tabloid, decorated with black-and-white pictures of men in black suits and white shirts, telling lies.

Late in 1994, I heard the *AFR* was launching a monthly colour supplement, and Maggy Oehlbeck had mentioned my name to the editor as a possible chief sub. I didn't want to leave *Woman's Day*'s banally surreal world of sex pests and love rats, wedding heavens and divorce hells, diet madness and cruel fat taunts, but I did want to get into Fairfax Newspapers. Fairfax published *The Sydney Morning Herald* in Sydney, and *The Age* in Melbourne. Fairfax journalists were the elite of the trade. They were highly regarded – by themselves, as much as anyone else – for their independence and craft. Most Australian journalists aimed to be Fairfax journalists. The union was strong, management was gentle, and all the papers were bought by the middle class, which meant the journalists' friends would read what they wrote and tell them how great they were.

I had worked in the building before, a graceless 1950s industrial tower on the corner of Jones Street and Broadway. I had completed a month-long internship at the *SMH* as part of my MA. It was friendlier than ACP, and the staff had a different kind of confidence.

The newspapers were printed in the same building as they were written. The lower floors trembled as the presses rolled. Every journalist loves to watch their paper being produced, to smell wet ink on fresh newsprint, and to see their own name repeated, thousands of times – Mark Dapin, Mark Dapin, Mark Dapin, Mark Dapin – as if *they* were the news the readers were paying to buy. At Jones Street, the nearness of the heavy plant to the offices made it seem as though we were creating something solid that would go out and furnish the world, rather than typing words into a computer, packing them into a file, then watching them disappear.

The building was infested with printers – in the canteen, in the corridors, in the stairwells and on the roof – wearing black-stained blue overalls, and sleeping. Journalists had to step over or around prone tradespeople several times a day. Either the presses were overmanned, or printing was exhausting work, or it was something men did in their sleep, like stealing the doona. The sleeping printers lent a working-class feeling to the operation: the canteen served pies and battered meats, roast of the day with chips. Journalists used the back bar of the Australian Hotel on the other side of George Street. Printers drank in the saloon, dour and sullen, still in their overalls and probably still on their shifts.

The Fairfax building was an anomalous birthplace for a magazine dedicated to luxurious living. The editor of the new title was William Fraser, a former deputy editor of *Good Weekend*, the weekly colour insert in the *SMH* and *The Age* William was a big, stylish gay guy, who filled a well-cut suit more beautifully than any man I have seen. He could wear a shirt like a mannequin, and the knots of his silk ties were wound with exquisite care. He hired me on Maggy's word, and we worked from a small, dark room tucked away from the rambling, tangled offices of the newspaper. Fraser's art director was James de Vries, an innovative designer who turned the early issues into coffee-table currency that executives could leave placed in the living room at a considered angle, to impress guests with their casual élan. It looked unlike any magazine in Australia. De Vries deftly used refined illustration and artistic photography, black-and-whites with thick black borders, colour shot through filters, studies with chiaroscuro.

The *AFR Magazine* had an idea. I did not think it was a particularly special idea, but I did not realise how scarce were any sort of ideas in magazine publishing. The fact that the *AFR Magazine* had an inspiration made it stand out in the marketplace like a giant among jockeys, or an art director who can spell. Fraser's vanity was that every page should directly relate

to the central concern of its readers' lives: money. Nobody bought the *AFR* for entertainment, except for the dismal fun to be had from vicariously experiencing other people's financial lives. They bought it because it was about money and they loved money and they wanted more of it, and they thought perhaps by reading it, they might get some ideas about how to make more money to go with all the money they already had.

When the *AFR Magazine* wrote about food, it would examine the business of food; when it covered art, it would study the mechanics of staging an art exhibition. Everything would relate back to the core values of the host newspaper. There would be stories about business people, talking about their wealth: how much they made, how they made it, what they did with it. These often turned out to be drooling hagiographies, illustrated with dark, quirky portraits, elevating the subjects to levels they would not normally have known in life – but sometimes they were solid, well-researched pieces of journalism.

Fraser's formula could have produced a crass, vacuous rag, a simple celebration of a full wallet, a fat belly and the joys of downsizing, but Fraser's own character determined the personality of the magazine. Fraser was an aesthete. He loved painting, opera, architecture and literature. He was uninterested in cars, so the magazine had no motoring pages. He adored gardens, so it boasted a pleasing but largely unread gardening column.

When the magazine launched in March 1995, it was the first tabloid-sized newspaper supplement in Australia. The UK broadsheets had been inserting tabloid magazines for years, but the local versions had been flimsy, A4-sized afterthoughts that never realised their potential for carrying advertising. There had been a cursory attempt at an old-style add-on the year before. It had a brief life as a quarterly, but the content was unexciting and the gaps between issues kept it from building up commercial momentum.

Fraser had argued forcefully for his magazine to be presented on matt paper stock in the large size. He was not in a strong position politically, but he had an ally in John Alexander, who had been removed from his position as editor-in-chief of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and had been appointed editor-in-chief of the *AFR*. Alexander shared Fraser's aesthetic. He was urbane and cultivated. He attended the opera and collected art. He had the lifestyle the *AFR Magazine* would affect to reflect. With Alexander's support, the board was won over to Fraser's vision.

Like Alexander and Fraser, the *AFR Magazine* was more sophisticated than its consumers. With an eighty per cent male readership, it was as

much a men's magazine as *The Picture*. In 1995, there were no mainstream men's lifestyle magazines, and men were thought to buy magazines only if they were looking for a car, a motorbike, a boat, or a wank.

The *AFR Magazine* came free with the newspaper on the last Friday of every month, so readers did not have to make a decision to buy it. The host paper had the youngest readership of any newspaper, and a near-pornographic penetration into the AB demographic, a wet dream for media buyers. It sold, in part, to the young barbarians of advertising and marketing, the pin-eyed, coked-up drunks of banking and finance, the boisterous fools who tore the pockets off each other's shirts in the CBD hotel on York Street. They bought it because they needed it, to keep up with news of their industry. They would rather have read the *Daily Telegraph*. Surveys repeatedly showed they most enjoyed the *AFR*'s strip cartoon 'Alex', and their next favourite read was the *Telegraph*'s gossip column, Page 13.

The first *AFR Magazine* readership survey found the majority of the magazine's readers drank VB, liked to watch bands play in pubs, and followed Rugby League. We gave them a magazine focussed on high culture, with 5000-word meditations on the significance of public buildings, and the history of intellectual property. We treated them as if they had travelled Europe on the Grand Tour, instead of backpacking from the Aussie theme bars of Earls Court to the piss-soaked tents of the Munich beer festival. We talked to them in a vocabulary they did not possess about things they did not understand, as if they attended every gallery opening, and read modern literary fiction – rather than SAS thrillers – for recreation. We gave them a different picture of themselves, or what they could be, and they liked it, perhaps because they thought it might get them laid.

I am not sure whether they read it, however. They were readers in the sense of Gary Morgan's 'readership' surveys, in that they saw the magazine and acknowledged it. Many of the *AFR Magazine*'s stories – including those I wrote – were far too long. Three thousand words is a big magazine feature; 5000 is a chapter in a book. De Vries's design made them look beautiful from a distance, although impenetrable close up, but the *AFR Magazine* was difficult to read for a more fundamental reason: many Australian journalists cannot write.

AFR staff contributed to the magazine for the prestige of having their stories run at length and on matt paper. One writer, the late Robert Haupt, was brilliant; others were good, but the worst wrote with the parched, exhausted prose of people who sweat out each word as if it were a toxin.

The least capable among them were the ones who demanded the closest control of the sub-editing, to ensure nothing could be done to improve their work.

It was in fashion that Fraser's curious genius – his commercially astute aesthetic sensibility, and his ability to sell himself as a man of discernment to people without taste – had its most appropriate outlet. He knew how to dress, and he knew about clothes. He stood out in an office partly staffed by men in crumpled chain store shirts, polyester trousers and novelty ties. He was probably the most elegant man in newspapers, and he produced Australia's most elegant men's magazine, and he was the first to give any real thought to how its fashion pages might service its readers. We ran comparative reviews of plain white shirts, priced between $50 and $350, tested for comfort, quality and fit by a young city trader. It was a service to the readers, something useful we could offer them. Every year they bought half a dozen white shirts, and they had few reference points to ease their choice. We later looked at chinos, navy blazers and brogues: all items Fraser thought essential to a complete wardrobe.

The journalists wrote about the development of the garment, the meaning of the detail, how to spot style in turn-ups, collars and cuffs. We never ran conventional stylist-driven fashion shoots, where male models pouted lasciviously at other male models. For Fraser, it was important not to even show a model's face. He believed women looked at a supermodel in a miniskirt and thought, 'I could wear that,' but men saw a handsome man in a suit and worried, 'The model's got more hair than I have,' or 'That bloke looks like a poofter,' and did not notice the clothes.

Outside of fashion, many of the features were comically dull, but it did not matter. Nobody had to buy the magazine. It existed for advertisers to buy into. The 'environment' created by the *AFR Magazine*'s editorial was perfect for high-end advertisers, because it was a landscape of luxury yachts, rich people, classic paintings, rich people, beautiful gardens, rich people, exquisite photography and rich people. In a move markedly less successful than *The Picture*'s brave decision to allow its readers to write much of the magazine, Fraser even commissioned some stories from rich people.

Soon after the *AFR Magazine* was launched, Fairfax moved into 'the new building'. The Jones Street headquarters was always somehow 'the old building', even when there was nothing to contrast it with, whereas 'the new building' looks brand new today. Every computer terminal was packed up and transported from Ultimo to Darling Harbour, and Fairfax took over

the top eight floors of the IBM tower, on the corner of Sussex and Market streets.

It was an exhilarating place to work, with views across the harbour and out to the Blue Mountains. The printers were shunted off to Chullora, in the distant, unvisited west, and Fairfax shed the last of its proletarian stubble. Whereas the old canteen offered roast of the day with three veg, the new cafe sold focaccias and pasta dishes, and nobody was ever found asleep inside.

The *AFR Magazine* was implausibly successful, a sumptuously dressed shop window for Tag Hauer watches, Louis Vuitton luggage and Argyle diamonds. It minted money for Fairfax and, at its height, added 10 000 to the sales of the host edition of the *AFR*.

D moved to a small house of her own in Leichhardt. I found a place in Balmain with Brian, the father of her sister's child. He spent most nights in his bedroom, surfing the internet, which in those days was something only flamboyantly intelligent people did, even if they were looking for porn. We had a lovely old house overlooking the docks, but only our bedrooms were furnished. The downstairs rooms were hollow and unused, and I hung a heavy bag in the basement and turned the room into a gym. We lived like bachelors. Brian threw all waste vegetable matter into the back garden, on the grounds that it was biodegradable. Nobody ever cleaned the bathroom.

D and I tried to keep alive a relationship that had been hit by a truck then reversed over and crushed. We should have split up when we started to live three suburbs apart, but we were each determined not to be the one who gave up and therefore – somehow – proved the other right. We argued with our customary manic energy, and were left with little strength for anything else. I once read a definition of love as four parts sympathy and one part lust. The lust had been strangled by nightclothes, and we had long discarded any mutual sympathy. We each thought the other was wrong – and, in fact, represented everything that was wrong with the world.

Our lives were shifting apart. We stopped looking for anything in common. She found her comfort in her garden, I found mine in the pub. Somehow, the *AFR Magazine* crew – except for the editor – had become a small gang of mates who hung out together and went drinking all the time. The new art director, the staff writer, the casual sub, the *AFR* reporter who sat at the desk opposite us and I all began to spend long nights at St Elmo's, a pub which – in the great tradition of journalists' bars – had only one

factor to recommend it: proximity. It was thirty seconds walk from Darling Park.

St Elmo's was an empty, soulless pub that seemed to have been conceived as a theme bar, but the theme had been forgotten over time. Upstairs was a lingerie restaurant, whatever that may be. In the basement were pool tables. *SMH* journalists rarely drank in St Elmo's; it was urgently uncool, preposterously dire. Instead, it was favoured by the IT support staff, *SMH* artists and *AFR* subs. Often, Fairfax employees were the only people in there. D did not like St Elmo's, she did not like pubs, but with my friends and a pinball machine, a jukebox, a late-opening bar and felt-upholstered seats, I felt more comfortable than I had since the Rex.

Chris married the woman he had gone away with the weekend I left Jo. A few of us met him at the Pyrmont Bridge Hotel at nine o'clock on the morning of his wedding. We drank a breakfast beer on tables looking out over Darling Harbour. D and I went to the service and the reception together, and when she had drunk enough, she said to me, 'If you don't marry me, I'm going to leave you.'

I had drunk enough to say. 'Fine. Well, let's always stay friends,' hug her and walk away. It hurt me to be with her, and I couldn't stand to hurt myself anymore.

So it had all been for nothing.

In our years together, we had argued about academic qualifications; the admission policy of the bowling clubs; the amount of time it took her to get ready to go out; answering machines; archaisms in prose; Asian food; astrology; authority; backpackers; belching; Bill Clinton; body fat; brevity in journalism; buying vegetables and not eating them; cafes; camping; China; clichés in conversation; coffee; debt; drinking; drugs; the effectiveness of alternative medicine; empathy; English trade union militants; the ethics of capitalism; the existence of an inner life; the existence of the working class; the existence of the jacaranda tree in the quadrangle at Sydney University at such times as that tree was unobserved; financial planners; friends who try to sell you things; the French contribution to global culture; furniture; gardens and gardening; George Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle*; getting out of bed on the weekend; going to church; going to sleep at night; graphic design; Helen Demidenko; herbal tea; holidays in cold climates; honesty; housework; how to cook hot chips; the Hunger Project; in-store credit cards; Jean-Paul Sartre; Jesus; Joanne Whalley-Kilmer; joint

bank accounts; justice and vengeance; lay-bys; lending money; the length of her hair; the length of my hair; the loss of my wedding ring; masturbation; the meaning of Tom Stoppard's play *Arcadia*; moral relativism; motivational speakers; my tendency to introduce a plural subject with the reduced form 'there's'; old people; organic bread; papal responsibility for the holocaust; Pearl Jam; the possibility of objective truth; the price of soft drinks in health food shops; protest songs; punk rock; racist friends; the rationality of owning more than one copy of the same book; reconciliation; recycling; Red Hot Chili Peppers; relationships with ex-partners; religious faith; respect for bosses; responsibility; scientology; a scuba diving instructor who checked out her body; seeing Australia first; self-help books; selling things to your friends; shawls; the size of her vocabulary; state of origin football; staying in touch with former workmates; the slogans used by the African National Congress in the struggle against apartheid; the sugar content of a mango shake in the Philippines; tea-tree oil; television; *Time*; toxins; the trauma suffered by rape victims; U2; unfair-dismissal legislation; vendor bidding at real estate auctions; violence; the way I spoke to my mother; wearing pyjamas; whether children showed deliberate malice; whether fashion trickled down from haute couture or rose up from the street; whether I was being pretentious by reading *Vanity Fair* in the Bagel House; whether I was just like her dad; whether I was just like her ex-boyfriend, Stephen; whether Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of Day* was a political novel or a romance; whether Landmark Education used similar methods to the Communist Party; whether the movie *Strictly Ballroom* was about ballroom dancing or 'about' self-actualisation; whether the reader or the author supplied meaning to the text; whether women could wear long-sleeved shirts over track pants; white socks; why she did not write fiction; why I couldn't be more like her former flatmate, Darren; why I kept checking the postbox; why I preferred certain clothing labels; working environments; the writing of wills; Y-fronts; yoga; young people.

We had fought heroic battles over arcane trivia, shed blood for ephemera and jetsam, exhausted ourselves with banal recriminations, desperate grudges and deliberate misunderstandings. Most of it was my fault.

It was coming up to Christmas 1995, and I decided to go back to the UK for a holiday. I travelled via Nepal, and went trekking in the Himalayas, alone and without a guide. I wrote D a crazed, ungenerous letter, saying everything I did not mean.

SIX In which Ralph is called Ralph

When I returned from the UK I spent eighteen months working as freelance writer and journalism teacher. I wrote long, serious features for *HQ* and *Good Weekend*. I covered mass media for Todd's *Desktop* magazine, and in 1996 I wrote an article on men's magazines. I interviewed Phil Abraham, Brad Boxall and P-mag identity Jack Marx, and we all concluded there was no room for a non-porn men's title in Australia. Australian men bought mags to laugh at and wank over, nothing more.

In 1997, everything changed, like D, over night. Every serious Australian publisher was looking at starting up or buying the licence to a men's lifestyle magazine. Boxall was working on a launch for ACP, and Jack was on staff. The new men's titles had come to Australia after their market-shaking success in the UK. The first of the UK titles was *Loaded*, founded in 1994 by James Brown, formerly a journalist on the weekly *New Musical Express*.

Brown's *Loaded* was a chaotic masterpiece of individual vision. It lent a partially authentic voice to the playground howl of a generation that did not want to grow up. It was aimed at my class in every sense: lower-middle-class kids building frighteningly serious careers, looking for comfort in shared memories of Georgie Best, Johnny Rotten and *Dr Who*; my class at

school – the boys who could read and write; my level of classiness – blokes who had never stopped believing that Sta-Prest trousers, tasselled loafers and a Fred Perry shirt were cool. It cared about the things we cared about – drinking, taking drugs, eating cheese-and-onion crisps, remembering old *Carry On* films and old laughs with your mates. Every men's magazine since has aimed to capture 'what men talk about in the pub', but none has succeeded with the wit and acumen of *Loaded*. The young *Loaded*, like a schoolboy, was not particularly concerned about women. The cover star was as likely to be Michael Caine as a bird (and *Loaded* loved the word 'bird', because it evoked The Liver Birds and Confessions of a Window Cleaner, a generation of fag-smoking, lager-drinking soul boys in high-waisters and platform soles – the readers' older brothers).

Many Australian journalists wanted to produce their own *Loaded*, but they did not understand what *Loaded* was. I knew the magazine-that-became-*Ralph* was in development. Brad invited me to the windowless cell in Park Street where Seddo had been condemned to work on his dummy, then left us together to talk about what I could do for him. I turned over the pages of the secret mock-up book, through stories that all seemed to be about cars, and decided I could not do anything. The project was called 'Burn Out', and looked similar to modified car magazine *Street Machine*, but with a Batchelor-&-Spinster-bumper-sticker, cold-slab-of-XXXX, two-packs-of-Winnie-Blue, meet-youse-at-the-wet-t-shirt-stage feel.

'Burn Out' was a kind of Seddo lifestyle magazine, replete with road trips, bike reviews and lawnmower racing. Seddo was a surfer and revhead, a laidback, earthy, popular bloke with laughing eyes. He lived in a fibro house in the suburbs, and had previously published his own motorbike magazine. Along with Brad and Butler-White, he had attended a seminar given by *Loaded*'s James Brown in Sydney. They came away from it with the idea that soccer was the glue that held *Loaded*'s audience together, and decided the car culture was to Australia what the football culture was to the UK. Young Australian men gave their love to their Falcons, Monaros and utes. The Ford vs Holden battle was Australia's Manchester United vs Liverpool.

Seddo and I stumbled through a typically awkward editor-contributor meeting, at the end of which he said, 'Well, I haven't got anything for you at the moment, but if I think of something, I'll let you know,' and I said the same to him.

I went out with a friend, treated her appallingly, and spent a while on

my own. Brian and I moved to a unit in Louisa Road, Birchgrove. I thought it was the most beautiful street in the most beautiful suburb in the most beautiful country in the world (although I was always irritated by the idea that the other side of the road might be better). From my bedroom window, I saw yachts glide across the waters of Sydney Harbour like feathers over wax. I was hypnotised by calm and soothed by storms. I loved to watch the rain. I started boxing again in the mornings with Kon, as the ferries cruised past Garden Island. Whenever I did not train, I missed the exercise and the challenge, although I did not necessarily miss Kon's glove in my face. In Birchgrove, I boxed twelve three-minute rounds, mostly on the pads, at 7 am, three days a week.

Towards the end of the year, I became gripped by the idea that it was my fault D and I had split up, and I had not given our relationship a chance. D had stopped talking to me, so the idea grew on its own, uninformed by any recent experience. I also became strangely concerned that she would not be provided for in her old age. One afternoon, I rang her to urge her to make contributions to her superannuation fund. I asked her if she would go out with me again, and she laughed in the way a more cruel woman might laugh at a lunatic's trousers falling down in the street.

I then decided to become a new person and win her back.

Obviously, you cannot just become a new person in your living room. I flew to Sri Lanka and the Maldives to mend my ways. There, I gave up smoking and read Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, which I mistakenly believed to be D's favourite book. I sent her letters about how much I liked *The Portrait of a Lady* and elephants (D loved animals, and elephants were the only animals evident in Sri Lanka). I was completely sincere, determined to change. I would become the man she wanted, then we would both be happy.

D had never actually said she wanted a man who wore a suit, but when I came back to Australia five weeks later, I bizarrely presented myself to her in a new suit and tie. I tried not to swear, and talked about my stopover in Paris, the short stories I had written in the Maldives, and the novels – well, the one novel I had read – of Henry James.

We decided to get married, but we split up again three weeks later.

Photographer Paul McIver and I produced a two-part feature about martial arts weapons for *Penthouse*. We found men who had mastered the sword, the chain and the butterfly knife, and some other men who liked to dress up in padded suits and hit each other very hard with sticks. I put on

the breastplate and helmet and let them hit me very hard with sticks, to see what it felt like. It felt like being hit very hard with sticks, and was particularly disorienting when blows landed on my face and head.

The Master of Sticks conceded there were few real-life occasions on which anybody was attacked with two sticks of equal length, but maintained his skills could be used equally well by a man wielding any number of things, including a mobile phone. This intrigued me, and I thought about it often. Mobile phones were larger and more solid in those days, but they still did not look much like sticks.

A few weeks later, I went to the Dundee Arms with a couple of *AFR* journalists. The Dundee was a five-star hotel bar dressed up as an old sandstone pub. It had no regulars and no atmosphere, but since St Elmo's had closed down, and the Shelbourne had not yet opened, it sold the closest beer to the Fairfax building. The journalists were discussing who was the greatest sportsman of all time, and had narrowed the field to Don Bradman or Muhammad Ali. Two English lads slithered into the conversation and started to take the piss, the way English lads do, saying Bradman was a mean boxer and Ali a fine cricketer. When we left the Dundee Arms for the Forbes, a more popular city pub, the English lads came with us.

At the Forbes, one of the lads sat across the table from me and talked about the movie *Independence Day*, which he called a 'load of shit'. It was Hollywood propaganda, and Hollywood was controlled by the Yids, so *Independence Day* made heroes out of Yids and niggers.

'Yids and niggers save the world,' he said. 'What bullshit.'

So I hit him in the face with my mobile phone.

It was as effective as the Master of Sticks had promised. He grabbed his eyes, then jumped to his feet and began apologising frantically. Blood ran pleasingly from the bridge of his nose, and I was gently evicted from the bar by a Fijian bouncer with biceps the width of my thighs.

When I told Kon about it, he could not understand why I had not used my fists. He did not realise I was Master of Phone, and gave me no respect. He spent our sparring rounds trying to wind me up about *Independence Day*, in the hope I would unleash my boxing beast within.

The next time I hit somebody across a pub table, I threw a right cross.

While *Loaded* was winning all the attention in the UK, a newer magazine, *FHM*, was clocking up bigger sales. *FHM* started life as a fashion freesheet given away in boutiques. It evolved into a not very good men's magazine,

three-parts *Loaded*, two-parts water. It was Green Day to *Loaded*'s Clash, Kylie Minogue to *Loaded*'s Aretha Franklin. It was less smart, less sophisticated, less culturally savvy than *Loaded* – but so were most men. *FHM* stumbled upon the real mass market: the hundreds of thousands who do not quite get the joke, but repeat it anyway. It quickly nudged men off the cover, replaced them with the B-list lingerie girls, and stacked its pages with girls, sex and sex advice, while simultaneously playing up its rag-trade roots with advertiser-friendly fashion features. In most men's titles, the fashion legitimises the cheesecake, puts the 'style' into men's lifestyle, distinguishes the magazines from pornography. *FHM* had fashion credibility, which enabled it to move downmarket. It became a very clever product. Like *Loaded*, it directed a furious, tabloid energy to its headlines and – especially – its captions. Like *Loaded*, it built its own lexicon – based on prudish crudity; British seaside postcard humour – in which women were always 'ladies', and while ladies might sometimes go out without 'underthings', no man would leave the house without his 'beer hat'. *FHM* assumed its readers knew nothing about anything and – in its matey, witty way – set out to explain to them how to live their lives. It grew into a men's version of *Women's Weekly*, aimed not at the bloke who imagined he was cool, but at the man who thought of himself as ordinary.

Elements of *FHM* crept into 'Burn Out', which burned out before it was born. ACP publisher Richard Walsh had moved on to launch Packer's magazines overseas, and the company's Australian operations had been taken over by Colin Morrison. Nick Chan, a former classmate of Kerry Packer's son and heir, James, had been second-in-command under Walsh, and found himself again second-in-command under Morrison – even though James was now managing the family company. Nick published an eclectic swathe of ACP titles, including *The Picture* and *People*, *Cleo* and *Big Hit*, *Teletubbies* and *Bob the Builder*. He wanted the new men's title, but he was not allowed to publish motoring magazines.

Brad worked for Nick, and he needed 'Burn Out'. Inside the company, Brad was only known for being good at smut but he knew more about magazines than anyone in the company. He understood why readers bought them. He could choose the photograph that would sell a cover, and compose the line that would sell the photograph. His flair grew out of a rare empathy for enthusiasts. He knew men loved naked women, but they also loved cars, cricket, jokes, dogs and power tools, and some of them even loved their dunny, especially if they built it themselves. Brad could

translate into print men's unconditional affection for life's uncomplicated pleasures – an uncommon talent he shared with James Brown.

Brad had to expand out of porn because, in the end, porn is boring, it is too easy, and it gets no respect. He wanted to run all of the men's titles at ACP, and the new magazine would be his first step. 'Burn Out' ceased to be a car magazine and moved closer to an Australian *Loaded*, which would more naturally be published by Nick, with Brad as editor-in-chief. The new direction demanded a new title. Jack Marx, now associate editor of 'Burn Out', lobbied energetically for 'Jack'. Art director Chris Andrew wanted the strangely Chris-sounding 'Chisel'. Brad was in favour of '303', after the Australian rifle, or 'Dingo'. Other suggestions included 'Pistol' and the brilliant 'Murray Claire'.

The magazine was never going to be called 'Ralph'. 'Ralph' was a joke name, a working title that stuck to the magazine like vomit dried onto porcelain. There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Number Five is: Never Call Your Magazine After A Bodily Function. *Ralph* might as well have been 'Chunder' or 'Puke' as far as advertisers were concerned, and no pouting soap star wanted to lounge under a looming, mocking 'Ralph' logo.

Nevertheless, 'Burn Out' was launched as *Ralph* mid-1997, with an advertising campaign devised by Sargent Rollins Vranken Terakes. The ads showed a woman in lingerie tidying up a filthy room on her knees, while her boyfriend sat with his feet up watching the television. The catchline was 'What's wrong with this picture…? He isn't watching the footy.'

I'm sure Sargent Rollins Vraken Terakes followed ACP's inappropriate brief to the misogynist letter, and the ad won an award. The TV voice-over asked: 'Tired of political correctness? Then pick up a copy of *Ralph*. Because inside every sensitive new age guy, there isn't one.'

'Political correctness' was a tender, inflamed topic in 1997, the year Pauline Hanson launched One Nation. The previous year's election had seen the end of the Keating Labor government, and both Liberal leader John Howard and National frontman Tim Fischer had condemned 'political correctness' in their campaigns. To them, 'political correctness' was a peculiar form of dishonesty – saying what you do not believe so as not to cause offence to people you really do not like (this used to be called 'good manners'). The beneficiaries of political correctness were minorities – usually Aboriginals, Asians or gays – who could no longer be criticised. The victims were straight, white and usually male, and had been robbed of the

language with which to express their prejudices. They could not call a spade a spade anymore, or a coon, a nigger or a boong.

Howard counterfeited political capital by characterising the whole Keating political culture as 'PC', and smeared his attempts at reconciliation with the noxious grease of commonsense racism. The subtext to the sneers was always, 'Nobody really likes Abos/slopes/queers – so why pretend?' The campaign against political correctness became a One Nation policy platform.

Radio advertising on Triple M had to be dropped. SRVT's Kim Terakes said the campaign was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, that it was so over the top it was funny, that it was 'almost' taking the mickey out of men. It was supposed to be ironic. Irony has its place – it sits well in Greek tragedy, for instance – but that place is not in advertising. Worst of all, nobody who saw the first ads for *Ralph* would have had any idea what was in the magazine.

The magazine was 'pre-launched' in Sydney at a classic-car showroom called the Toy Shop, with a funny speech by Libby Gorr, who claimed 'Ralph' was an acronym for 'Reliable and Lovable Piss Head'. At the later Melbourne pre-launch, Nick read out the same speech. What sounded warm and witty from the mouth of a busty, vivacious woman looked like the wrong words had been dubbed into a movie soundtrack coming from Nick.

Daily Telegraph columnist Miranda Devine concluded: 'My straw poll of a dozen 18 to 45-year-old men had sad results for *Ralph*. Most said the magazine failed to emulate the British counterparts because it was too 'smutty' and not witty enough.' It was an uncontroversial assessment. The editor-in-chief of *Ralph* was Brad Boxall, who was also editor-in-chief of *The Picture*. The first editor of *Ralph* was Geoff Seddon, who had been chief sub at *The Picture*. His associate editor was Jack Marx, who had been chief sub at *The Picture*. When Jack imploded, he was replaced by Tim Scott, who had been chief sub at *The Picture*. *Ralph*'s first chief sub was Scott, and its second was Simon Butler-White, who had been chief sub at *The Picture*. The grog writer was Pete Smith, a sub at *The Picture*. Other contributors included Paul Toohey, then chief sub at *The Picture*, Roger Crosthwaite, a sub at *The Picture*, and Boris Mihailovic, editor of the Category 1 *Picture Premium*. The eventual deputy art director was Tony Rice, a former designer at *The Picture*. The junior designer was Danny Bourke, who came from *Sextra*, a defunct offshoot of *The Picture*. The former editor of *Sextra*, Tony Lambert, wrote *Ralph*'s internet column.

All the journalists were good writers, some of them exceptional. Jack has written two fine books, and Paul Toohey won the Journalist of the Year award in 2001 for his writing on Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, and a Walkley in 2002. Some of them had arrived at *The Picture* from newspapers, looking for a place to exercise their sense of humour – but it was inevitable that *Ralph* would inherit something of *The Picture*'s pornographic sensibility. This was not the background of the journalists who launched the UK 'lads' magazines'. They came from the music press, and grew up on the *New Musical Express*'s uncompromisingly socialist Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill. Memories of the Anti-Nazi League's use of pop culture in the fight against the fascist National Front ran deeply through UK music and style journalists. Their counterparts in Australia had, for the most part, no involvement with street politics. They drew the lines in different places.

The *Ralph* team was unclear what kind of a magazine the publisher wanted. They leaned towards an 'Australian *Loaded*' idea – with a dash of *FHM* – but *Ralph* was far cruder than *Loaded*. Subheadings and breakout quotes throughout the first issue included the words 'bastards', 'bastard', 'cock', 'prick', 'blow job' and 'focked'. A commercially catastrophic feature story, entitled 'Posting a dark parcel', was illustrated by a stripper with her buttocks in the air, about to fart onto a torch. This single page included the words 'pry nuggets from his bum with their fingers … browneye … shat in his pants … took a dump … chronic, uncontrollable farting … talking shit and taking the piss … major bodily discharges … typical log … let fluffy off the chain … cut the cheese … drink cow urine …. caribou dung … urine of young girls …excretory … farts himself to death … golden shower … turds … defecating and wiping himself … 'lick my shit' [a quote from James Joyce] … copography, pederasty and defecation … skid marks … cat shit'.

Two years later, advertisers still cited the story as the reason they would not buy space in the magazine.

When I was not gripped by some hysterical obsession, I reverted to the calm person I used to be. Nothing much bothered me. I lived in a closed world of books, pubs, gym and bed, rarely reading the paper and never watching TV. D once said, 'You're so laidback, you're almost dead.'

Louisa Road was beautiful and soothing, and I was going out with Claire, who was also beautiful and soothing. She was twenty-two years old, one of my former students from journalism school, and she could ride a

horse. She grew up in Sydney's far north-west, among orchardists and fruit farmers. Her dad had seven sheds. The men in her life had all been quietly spoken, mechanically competent, spatially gifted people, who could mend broken things and reverse-park sedans. Claire had never met a man who could not drive and she had never eaten Thai food. I introduced her to the exotic, philanthropic pleasure of driving somebody else to an Asian restaurant.

I was still taken by thoughts of a New Mark, a more polished, urbane guy who could do up a shirt without missing two buttonholes, and go out for a drink without ending up undressed in Wales. The New Mark chose not to drive because of his total immersion in the world of nineteenth century literature, not because he could not simultaneously walk and whistle. In pursuit of spiritual peace and weight loss, I became a vegetarian. This lasted about six weeks, since I do not like vegetables. I then read *Madame Bovary*, by the end of which, I figured, the transformation was complete.

I never smoked again after the Maldives. I gave up on 3 October 1996, and I counted the days for five years (counted them incorrectly, in fact, since I have always believed I gave up on 30 October, but my passport calls me a liar). I could not have got through my dad's funeral without cigarettes, or my break-up with Jo. As soon as I split up with D, I started smoking in bed. I reached for my Winfield Blues the moment I opened my eyes, because I loved to wake with that kick in my throat, that jolt in my blood. I had a second smoke with my first cup of tea, another after my shower, and a fourth as I left the house for work.

Smoking reminded me of everything. It was an arm around my shoulder, a smile in the winter, a taste of schoolgirls in summer, but I did not need it anymore. When I jogged in the mornings, it grabbed at my lungs. When I travelled on smoke-free transport, it pulled on my heart. When I hit the heavy bag, cigarettes hit me back.

I was content to forget the feeling of smoking, but it saddened me to lose the resonances, the memories, another link with the past.

I did not go to the pub much with Claire because I did not have a pub anymore. The *AFR* crowd had split up, and St Elmo's had closed down. There were nice hotels in Birchgrove, but I did not know anyone inside.

The New Mark had his roots in the Old Mark. I tried to get back to what it was like when I was a kid, when I did not need a drink to keep warm inside, when I could spend an evening doing nothing in a park – shadow-boxing and jumping between stones, laughing and telling lies – and come

home thinking I would never want to do anything else, live anywhere else, be anyone else. I was searching for the kind of peace you have before anything has happened to you.

Claire moved into a loft in Surry Hills: not a New York-style loft apartment, but an actual loft – the chamber below the roof, where Mum stores your old train set and Dad hides his collection of *True Blue* magazines. Her bedroom was not big enough to stand up in, so we spent a lot of time in Birchgrove. We ate in the kind of restaurants I imagined the New Mark would frequent – restrained, would-be trattorias, with starched white tablecloths and flickering candles. I paid $20 for pastas I could have cooked myself for $2, and never brought a case of Foster's as my BYO, as Chris and I had when we first came to Australia. I drank red wine, because I strongly believed red wine was for boys and white wine was for girls.

Around this time, things started to look promising for my movie about my grandad. I had a script and a star. I had had dinner with Warren Mitchell, and a couple of producers had expressed interest in the project. I was writing exciting stories for classy publications. I had no boss and no routine. Life was like a massage.

Gradually, I became invaded by a sense of ennui. It was the first time I had been touched by a French feeling of any kind. I was disturbed by the thought that I had wasted time in the past. I revisited school and university and Coventry, over and over again, trying to identify turning points. Mentally, I drafted half a dozen alternative autobiographies, which had me winning a journalism apprenticeship at eighteen, or taking up boxing at fourteen, or joining the British army or the Israeli army, or, oddly, the Gurkhas, a regiment of Nepalese volunteers.

I re-examined my motivations for every action and inaction. I wondered if I had done nothing because I was scared I might fuck up if I tried something, if I had deliberately taken a pointless degree because more useful study would have been too rigorous, if I had stayed with my girlfriends because no other woman would have wanted me, if I had remained a worker because I would not cut it as a manager, if I had become a socialist because I could not make it under capitalism.

I was always disturbed by what I was doing; whatever it was, it did not seem right. How could I make up Pet Lines for *Penthouse*, or caption fashion spreads for the *AFR Magazine*, or even write features for *Good Weekend*, when there was a world to be won?

My months in the SWP had shown me I was not very good at winning the world, and perhaps should devote my energies to something else, but I had no faith in the value of anything else. I was drinking with Chris one night in the 1980s, when I began to say, 'As you know, I deeply respect and believe in …' and he finished the sentence for me '… absolutely nothing and absolutely no-one.'

Until then, I had not realised that was true, or that it was so obvious, like a yellow curry stain on my white shirt. In Australia, I tried to tuck my politics into my trousers, and not to let them show.

I had to stop boxing, because I injured my thumb on Kon's head, and I got bored. I became overly rational, continually weighing the benefits of one course of action over another. I spent much of my time finding reasons not to leave my unit, because it was so comfortable. I cut down on seeing friends, and I waited for Claire to visit me.

I did not have a job, a mortgage or a wife. I had shed responsibility for everything. I did not even have a pet (our cat, Captain, had gone to live with D). There was nothing I had to do, beyond write enough to eat and drink.

This was how I had hoped things would turn out. Now they had, I wanted something else. As usual, I felt I had something to prove: this time, that I could be a better boss than any of the people I had worked for. As usual, it was D who had implied that I could not, that I did not understand the pressures they were under, that I had too high an opinion of myself, that I was – just perhaps – a thundercunt.

I decided I would have to edit a magazine. The title I had in mind was *Rolling Stone*.

SEVEN In which I become editor of Ralph, and am almost eaten by Kerri-Anne Kennerley

Whereas *Loaded*'s journalists played the role of cheery, beer-guzzling louts, Jack Marx was a genuine problem drinker. He dressed, drank and shaved like a romantically dishevelled 1950s newshound, or an embittered private eye. He wore a dark suit, suspenders and a trilby, and all the troubles of his chaotic world on his shoulders. Homeless after being evicted from the office where he was living, he began treating *Ralph* as his hotel room, complete with minibar. Each issue of *Ralph* had two pages of 'Grog' reviews, but the grog had to get past Jack before it could be tested. When a case of Lemon Ruskis was sent in to be photographed, Jack came back from the pub and drank it all. Seddo was forced to ring Stoli and say he liked the product so much, he had finished it off, and promised to say so in the review if Stoli would provide him with another case immediately. When the replacement case arrived, Jack came back from the pub and drank it all. He woke up in the morning, horrified, and furiously filled all the little yellow bottles with water.

Jack was sacked three times in the first seven issues, always for being drunk. He came to feel disgruntled about continually being fired. He felt he had been hired as 'Drunk Guy', and thought he was playing a demanding part with a certain aplomb, but his method journalism was ravaging his

health. An early *Ralph* feature stole from *Loaded* the idea of having a journalist (Jack) stage a piss-up in a brewery. The night before, Jack had been in rehab at Rozelle Hospital. The week after, he was back in rehab.

ACP printed 105 000 copies of the first issue of *Ralph*. Brad said he would be happy to sell half that number. In fact, *Ralph* sold 65 000. The team was elated, and Seddo, in particular, felt vindicated. He knew he was not wholly trusted with the magazine – the first launch since James Packer had taken over from Kerry at ACP – but he believed he had delivered.

Ralph number two sold 48 000. *Ralph* number three sold 36 500. As sales shrank, *Ralph*'s staff grew. They had moved to larger offices on the eighth floor of Park Street when Brad invited me to go to see Seddo again. Brad wanted me in *Ralph*. Seddo, once again, seemed nonplussed by the idea, and I was not particularly enthusiastic, either. I wrote a feature under a pen-name. By now I was happy to have my name and picture in Black Label *Penthouse*, but I did not want to be associated with something 'politically incorrect'.

By issue three, there were only 19 pages of ads in *Ralph*, and the magazine had shrunk from 130 pages to 114. *FHM* was now outselling *Loaded* in the UK. *FHM*'s owner, EMAP, had bought Australian *Playboy* publisher Mason-Stewart, and was clearly planning to launch locally. The pressure intensified on Seddo to make *Ralph* 'more like *FHM*', although he had never wanted to produce *FHM*, and had been told he would not have to. *FHM*'s biggest issue of the year carried a bonus magazine, 'The World's 100 Sexiest Women', nominated by the readers. It was typical of the way *Ralph* was published at the time that ACP tried to create a product exactly half as good: *Ralph*'s '50 Sexiest Women on the Planet', nominated by *Ralph*'s editorial staff. The first 'winner' was Liv Tyler.

First-time buyers were disappointed with *Ralph*, while potential new readers were not picking it up because it had a reputation as a sexist rag – largely due to the first ad campaign. Sargant Rollins Vranken Terakes was therefore commissioned to create a new campaign aimed at changing the perception of *Ralph* from the one Sargant Rollins Vranken Terakes had created in the first place.

The second campaign featured a drawing of a stickman reading a magazine and saying 'Wow', with the underline 'Surprising *Ralph*'. The message was supposed to be 'There's more to *Ralph* than you'd imagine' but it looked like 'The stickman reads *Ralph*. Be like the stickman, read *Ralph* too', which would only have made sense in a society that gave prominence and respect to the opinions of stickmen.

Once again, I'm sure the campaign followed the brief – to avoid controversy and concentrate on content – but, once again, it gave few hints as to what the magazine might be about.

Ralph's slide was halted by the move to perfect binding in January 1998. From a print run of 60 000, the first perfect-bound issue, featuring soapie star Melissa Bell, pulled circulation back up to 43 000. Tim Scott, from *The Picture*, became deputy editor of *Ralph*, allowing Seddo to take two weeks holiday. The tension between Seddo and Nick matured into unguarded antipathy. When he came back from the bush, Seddo, still on the salary he had earned as chief sub at *The Picture* but now running a national magazine, asked Nick for a pay rise, which he refused.

Seddo told Brad he wanted to leave.

'Do you want to go this afternoon?' asked Brad.

'How about Friday?' said Seddo.

Tim Scott was made editor, and asked if I would be his deputy. I said I was only interested in editing a magazine. Startlingly, Tim offered to step down. Brad said he wanted an editor who would eat, breathe and dream the magazine. *Ralph* needed somebody to love it. Not for the last time, I wondered what he was talking about. Not for the last time, he was right.

I had breakfast with Brad and Nick. I told them *Ralph*'s early fashion pages were both pointless and damaging. The first issue actually featured women's fashion – women in bikini bottoms and t-shirts posed as if they were being judged in a wet t-shirt contest, with an inexplicable sidebar showing men's boots. Number two showed a busty blonde model in a bikini hanging out men's shirts on a Hills Hoist. At these points, there seemed to be no difference between *Ralph* and its ad campaign. Other fashion pages featured Jack dressed as a cowboy; Barry Crocker with climbing equipment; Kamahl in cricket whites; and Larrry Emdur in a wetsuit. The fashion industry expects magazines to make its clothes look glamorous. *Ralph* made them look cheap. In return, fashion shoots make the magazine look glamorous. *Ralph* shoots made the magazine look cheap.

In his office, Brad asked me how I would create a magazine that would appeal to every bloke in Australia, from stockbrokers to bushies. I said I would not. ACP had missed the point of the men's lifestyle magazines. They were never supposed to reach out to the rural poor. They might write about them, but they did not write for them. The lads' mags were the opposite of the *AFR Magazine*. They were counter-aspirational. In their stories about fighting, fucking and drinking until you dropped, they no

more reflected the readers' reality than the *AFR Magazine*'s lifestyles of the rich and rapacious – but their market overlapped. They offered ordinary men a lumpen, déclassé fantasy, just as the *AFR Magazine* sold them an upper-class dream. Out in the bush, people did not have lifestyles, they had lives. There was no point in trying to interest them in designer clothes, or men's fragrances that cost more than their week's rent. There was a lot of talk about the use of irony in the UK lads' magazines, but the real irony was that few real 'lads' ever bought them. They sold to the hip and educated, not the illiterate and incarcerated. They also did great business in male-dominated societies such as the military, where most men were young and single, and most women were pin-ups above their bunks.

I was offered the job. Things had moved so quickly, I barely had time to construct a complex, self-serving, and fairly stupid argument to allow myself to take it. I needed my own private war – my internal dialogue with D, the feeling I had something to show her – to push me to do anything. I had infuriated her by saying I could run a magazine better than many of the editors we knew. She had enraged me by telling me I could not. I knew I could write, and I had a feeling for design and typography, and a reluctant ability to organise everybody around me into one big gang. I knew I could do it, and I knew it was pointless compared with defending trade union rights, reaching out to the Aboriginal community, or resisting the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, but I was doing none of these things, anyway – I was sitting at home, looking out of the window.

I decided I could edit a magazine – and market it, and sell it – to show D and the world that it was easy, and therefore it was pointless, so other people would no longer aspire to it, and would understand management was an unskilled job that anyone could do, and be inspired to overthrow capitalism. Or perhaps I just wanted to be a magazine editor because it looked like a laugh. If only people realised how difficult it is to be a Marxist of the mind, tirelessly fighting the class struggle with yourself …

The French theorist Baudrillard wrote that there was no escape from capitalism's spectacle: 'All that one could hope to do was retreat into deep cover, taking a position of frozen equanimity within the society which one despised, and participating in its evils so fully and wholeheartedly, that in retrospect one's actions could only be understood as a form of irony.' That was the idea, anyway. I went into the job like a swaggering sailor on shore leave, seducing an ungainly waitress for a bet. Inevitably, I fell in love.

The Friday before I was due to start, Brad invited me to David

Naylor's farewell dinner. This was a historic moment in the story of Australian men's magazines, and one I cannot quite recall. I did not want to get too drunk as I was meeting so many people for the first time, but I need to drink when I am meeting people for the first time, so I decided to order wine instead of beer. Wine is a civilised drink. One takes it with a meal, and it inspires one to elegant conversation about the arts and so forth. I have often tried not to get drunk by drinking wine, and things usually start well enough: it takes a couple of glasses before I even notice I am having alcohol, a couple more before I start to feel dissatisfied with the flat, colourless and non-beery taste of chardonnay, and a few more that I take purely because I have resolved to drink wine, and it would be weak-willed to fracture my resolve so early in the evening.

At Naylor's farewell, I followed this pattern. When I had drunk enough wine to ensure I would remain sober, I switched to Toohey's Dry. This was an excellent idea, as Toohey's Dry had a lower alcohol content than wine, therefore I could drink more of it. Just to top up my sobriety, I chased Toohey's Drys with the occasional glass of white wine.

I remember Naylor's farewell as a finger painting made from rolled thumbprints. Rubber-faced strangers with wobbly bodies led me to conspiratorial tables and told me what had to be done. I declared I was going to run *Ralph* for the benefit of the people who worked there, although I am not sure what I meant by that.

There was a back way out – some stairs or a fire escape – then the hot bowels of the Windsor Hotel. It was a portentous start to life as an editor. The job had obviously gone to Old Mark, not the new model. I do not know how I got home, and I woke up with a hole in my head the size of the evening. The following Monday, I came to work for the first time, and introduced myself to all the same people again.

By the time I arrived, the magazine already had a history, the usual legends of creation and expulsion, its own pantheon and demonology. The good Seddo had been thrown out of the Garden of Eden. The great days of lunchtime drinking were gone. The powers of darkness ruled.

Ralph was bordered by *Dolly* to the west and hemmed in on two sides by Computer Publications. It occupied an undesigned area that had grown up like a shanty town. It was fenced off from the siege of technical magazines by thin partitioning like the walls around the cubicles in the toilets. The editor's office was a windowed cube in the right-hand corner, with a desk on which Seddo had arranged an 'in-basket' an 'out-basket' and –

brilliantly – a 'too-hard-basket'. 'In' and 'out' embraced small collections of innocuous documents, a couple of promising stories and some inter-office envelopes. 'Too-hard' contained a mound of manuscripts speculatively submitted by every member of Australia's trouser-soiling tribes of spittle-splattering, trolley-pushing, newspaper-collecting, street-screaming mentally ill, and a few people who were just stupid. Most favoured the opinion column as their means of self-expression.

The worst of them often offered themselves as regular columnists, feeling sure they represented the normal bloke's point of view on a range of issues stretching from why women are the rape-crying, cock-teasing, ball-breaking, child-stealing, alimony-grabbing, fun-hating rulers of the world, to why straight men are the well-intentioned, misunderstood, discriminated against, emasculated and ultimately endangered sex.

I watched my staff through the glass that separated us. They seemed to have been chosen to represent every male body form in the world. There was fat Danny, slim Chris, movie-star perfect Monster, short, nuggety Dom, mountainous Ash, athletic Alex and chubby James. It was as if I were Noah, chosen by God to save one specimen of each of the ectomorphs, the endomorphs, the mesomorphs and every other kind of morph. Together, we would build a big boat and survive a great flood, at the end of which we would repopulate the world with the full range of physical types, using the only woman, cute little Amanda, the editorial assistant from the country town of Trundle, NSW.

It was an unpromising beginning to my ongoing analysis of the *Ralph* office. Many of the problems faced by magazines arise because the editor believes they are chosen by God.

Brad took me out to lunch at the Tex-Mex tangle of Arizonas, the kind of insipid theme restaurant where administration staff hold their Christmas parties. I told him I did not drink during the day, and recited the story about waking up in Wales and changing my ways, my personal myth of damnation and redemption.

Like Typesetting Bob, Brad did not fully approve of workers who would not drink at lunchtime, but he allowed me to sit with my chemical bombs of Diet Coke while he sipped chardonnay. It was a time of sadness and satisfaction for Brad. With Naylor's resignation, he had risen from subeditor to editor-in-chief of the P-mags in less than four years. In *Ralph*, he had a 'clean' mass-market title for the first time, but he had been caught between obedience to his boss, Nick, and loyalty to his protégé, Seddo, when

each despised the other and neither had the solution to *Ralph*'s problems. Brad knew the magazine was sick, but did not know how to make it well.

He told me what he thought I needed to know about the staff. Art director Chriso, he said, was Seddo's best friend in the world, and Amanda, on whom the future of the human race depended, was also a great Seddo loyalist. I would never win over either of them. Somebody else had stolen something from their last workplace, another would go whichever way the wind blew, a couple of the boys were just 'weird'. I asked why he was telling me this. Obliquely, he replied that I was the new bloke in the village and he was showing me where the dunny was.

I went back to the dunny, puzzled and buzzing with phenylalanine, and one by one I invited the staff into my office, to tell me about their jobs. I explained my plans, and they sat there thinking, 'Who is this idiot with the shiny head?' and 'I wonder if he'll give me a pay rise.'

The advertising sales guys shared the office with editorial. They were friendly, relaxed blokes, but they could not sell ads in *Ralph*, and soon they were gone.

Tim Scott quickly disappeared to edit *The Picture*. I promoted the features editor to deputy editor, because I did not need a features editor. I did not need a deputy either, so he left.

I plundered the too-hard-basket with horror and awe. I felt the way real boxers must have felt when watching me spar. How could anybody be so shit at something so simple? I ran a competition to find the worst freelance story, and to print the winner in *Ralph*. The entries were far better than the rubbish people had sent in.

One would-be columnist from Western Australia rang me to ask what I thought of his turgid, sexist, redneck manifesto, in which he claimed straight white males were regularly passed over for jobs in favour of minority candidates. I looked around my office of straight (if odd-shaped) white males, in a building where almost everybody was white and straight, and I asked him if this was really a problem for him.

There were lots of columns in the early issues of *Ralph*. I discontinued them all. There would be no more opinions – not even mine.

I started at *Ralph* in March 1998. The issue on the stands was a bumper, 162-page number, with Emma Harrison on the cover. They had been forced to publish a magazine that went on sale for six weeks, because *Ralph* had missed so many print deadlines and was in danger of losing a month from its schedule. The big issue was also intended to go up against

the launch issue of Australian *FHM*. Previously, *Ralph* had had one small, poorly funded, amateurish competitor, Next Media's *Max*. Now it was up against a huge, rich, clever, proven professional product.

There was a buzz around men's magazines. Todd had come back from Melbourne to edit *Men's Health*, a very successful US title, the Australian licence to which had been bought by Rupert Murdoch's nephew, Matt Handbury, of Murdoch Magazines. He started a couple of weeks before I did, and we were both asked to go on *The Midday Show* with Kerri-Anne Kennerley. Neil Ridgeway, the editor of *FHM*, would be there, too. I would rather hammer a nail into a rock with my eye than appear on television. I would rather drink sewage. I asked *Cosmopolitan*'s fashion editor – who had just begun working for *Ralph* on the side – to borrow some trendy clothes for me, so I would look like a men's magazine editor.

He found a yellow jacket and tight black trousers, a look that never took off in the wider community. Worse, the day before I was asked to do the show, a barber botched up my $10 haircut and I told him to shave it all off, so I went to the studio with a number-two crop, looking like a bald bumblebee.

ACP hastily arranged an afternoon's media training for me. I was told to look at the camera, exaggerate my gestures, and speak with my hands. I was full of dread. When I was in junior school, I used to spend the whole year fearing the Christmas play, desperately hoping it would be about the birth of Jesus so the Jewish kids would not have be involved. *The Midday Show* was like a nationally transmitted school play, complete with ridiculous costume but without a script.

Neil turned up at the studios with his marketing manager, which showed the enormous difference between *FHM*'s marketing and *Ralph*'s. Ridgeway, a handsome, well-presented surfer and a former editor of *Tracks*, was faintly suspicious of Todd and me, concerned initially to keep some professional distance. Channel 10's make-up artists brushed our faces with foundation, as we all made limp jokes about the green room. Just before we went on, Ridgeway's (attractive, female) marketing manager gave him a big hug for good luck; (attractive, male) Todd and I hugged each other.

Kerri-Anne Kennerley was a friendly, reassuring person with an ordinary-sized mouth. She sat us on a row of stools, like fairground prizes to be shot off our perches with air rifles. I told her I was nervous, she said everything was going to be alright. When the cameras were turned on, Kennerley suddenly became larger, louder and much more frightening, and her mouth grew bigger than her head.

She held up the Maypril cover of *Ralph*, showing Emma Harrison and her impossible breasts. The coverline was 'Emmaaah!' Kennerley turned to me and said, 'Emmaaah!', her mouth now wider than the studio, larger than the world, huger even than Emma Harrison's breasts. I thought she was going to bite me.

She asked me what 'Emmaaah!' meant. I mumbled that I did not think it was supposed to be said out loud, and that was my contribution to the three-minute segment. Afterwards, Neil, Todd and I went to the Glasgow Arms in Ultimo, and got very drunk.

The 'Emmaaah!' issue was the best *Ralph* yet, and it sold almost as well as the first one. It worked because it was a thick, perfect-bound magazine with a famous, big-breasted blonde on the cover. A bonus pamphlet was glued onto the back, featuring 'TV's 12 Hottest Babes'. The design was cleaner and classier-looking than earlier issues, and – because there were still hardly any ads – the magazine was packed with information. Sadly, Barry Crocker appeared again in the fashion pages, this time dressed as an AFL player. Just as no young bloke has ever looked to a stickman to tell him what to read, I do not believe any *Ralph* readers sought out Barry Crocker for tips on how to dress.

There was to be no more of Barry, and no more whining about feminism. This was a commercial decision, as well as a moral one. I have spent thousands of nights in hundreds of pubs. I have talked about everything men talk about – which is not much – and I have never had a conversation about feminism. Few *Ralph* readers would have met a conscious feminist. By 1998, feminism sounded boring, the kind of thing their girlfriends' mothers might be into, like quilting or *The Bill*. It did not make for sensational stories, unless feminists suddenly started growing extra breasts, or marrying hamsters, or throwing lesbian dwarfs.

Magazines are for enthusiasts. They are advocates for their readers. They are not against things. From now on, *Ralph*'s editorial voice – like *The Picture*'s – would be enthusiastic about everything. It would be in favour of all the good things in life: girlfriends, kebabs, twist-tops, parties, pubs, sport, action movies, comedies, robots, aliens, and shaving off your best mate's eyebrows when he falls asleep on the couch. If it did not like something – such as housework – it would behave as if it did not exist. This is more or less what men do, anyway.

I banned words like 'tart', 'slut', 'dog' and 'sheila'. All the women would be babes, and the cover girls would be worshipped as goddesses.

I never wanted to read about 'men's issues'. They are garbage. Nobody cares about how masculinities are constructed in contemporary society. There is no such thing as a new lad, or a sensitive new age guy, or a metrosexual. Young men are the same as they always have been – terrified heroes, dud studs, nervously confident, violently friendly. They want to fight like Bruce Lee and fuck like Tommy Lee, and to know everything without ever having learned a lesson. I knew that, because I never grew up.

That is how I improved the magazine. This is how I made it worse: I had started reading *Might*, a small US magazine which ran pacy, playful, whimsical features based around quirky ideas such as gathering together a number of people called Phil Thomson in the town of Phil Thomson, PA, largely so it could run captions such as 'Left to right: Phil Thomson, Phil Thomson, Phil Thomson, Phil Thomson'. I thought there must be many other magazines like this in the world, and I could turn *Ralph* into a kind of international digest of whimsy. *Might* folded as soon as I started on *Ralph*, but I pursued my stupid dream through other means, buying stories I had read in the British newspaper, *The Independent*, and in the UK *Sunday Telegraph* magazine.

If you scour the world, you can find any story you like. There is always a place where a man wants to marry his tractor, or a woman with two vaginas is cohabiting with Siamese twins. For some reason, that place is usually Turkey. I had the chance to create a magazine that reflected life as it was lived in Australia, so why was I babbling on about Europe?

FHM and *Men's Health* were both full of fraudulent 'Australianised' copy – features lifted from the parent magazine, but with London changed to Melbourne, New York to Sydney, Chevvies to Holdens, and Spice Girls to Kylies. After a few months, I realised I could do something better.

Marketing people often ask, 'What is your point of difference?'

A good answer might be, 'This is,' followed by a crashing headbutt to the bridge of their nose.

However, my point of difference was that *Ralph* was going to be true. The things it said happened in Australia really did happen in Australia.

ACP had cut a deal with US *Maxim*, the market-leading US 'lads' mag'. It was a shocking arrangement, first because it encouraged *Ralph* to plunder irrelevant-but-slick stories, but worse because it did not include any arrangement for buying the photography. If we used too little *Maxim* copy, we were paying ten times the Australian market rate. If we bought too much, we read like a US magazine. Either way, we were hostage to

whatever rate *Maxim* felt like quoting for the pictures. What we really needed from *Maxim* was its covershoots. In men's publishing as in men's lives, the central problem is persuading women to take off their clothes. *Maxim* was more seductive than *Ralph* because it could offer international exposure, it could pay much more money, and it was not called *Ralph*. Under the terms of the agreement, however, *Maxim* would not help us.

Ralph's first cover star, Melissa Tkautz, came courtesy of Richard Bajic, an eccentric photographer who had ingratiated himself with local actors and their hangers-on. Bajic approached *Ralph* with topless shots of Tkautz, but Seddo wanted the *Loaded*-style cheesecake look – so-called because a newspaper editor in 1915 supposedly described a photograph of a Russian opera singer with her skirt hitched up as 'better than cheesecake'. Cheesecake – sensuality by implication – is the look that sells everything from sunscreen to sports cars. Internationally, it was also selling men's magazines again, for the first time since the 1960s.

Ralph was promoted as part of a backlash against feminism, but it could just as easily have been painted as a backlash against pornography. At a time when a desperate US *Penthouse* was responding to the emerging challenge of internet porn by regularly showing naked Pets urinating, *Ralph* girls wore short dresses and swimwear. Bajic reshot Tkautz in a more muted style, and persuaded former soapie star Toni Pearen to go on the cover of issue two.

The women had to seem accessible, approachable, as if the reader might meet them in the street, but photographers instinctively tried to turn them into movie stars. Every stylist wanted the pictures to look like pages from *Cosmopolitan*. *Ralph* needed girls next door, with natural make-up and natural hair, shot under quite flat, full-width lighting, but photographers favoured moody lighting that picks up every tiny flaw on a woman's skin.

Ralph secured an English newspaper shoot of Natalie Imbruglia, which ran on the cover three months before she became a world-famous singer, while she was still just an out-of-work *Neighbours* star. Imbruglia was the first cover model whose breasts Chriso had to enlarge to fill out her bra. She was followed by superannuated *Neighbours* actor Melissa Bell. She posed apparently naked, with her legs folded and her arms across her breasts, but she had just had a baby, so Chriso had to cut deeply into the curves of her thighs, to give her back her pre-pregnancy body.

Then came Maypril, with Emmaaah! Harrison's breasts airbrushed over the neck of her blue dress, and then came me – and I did not have a

clue. I knew *Loaded* made a fuss about soap stars, but I assumed it was an ironic joke. I did not realise there was any continuity of content between the pornos and the lifestyle magazines. I thought the lifestyle magazines were simply a more broadly based offshoot of the music-and-style press – which, at first they were. I told Chriso I was only interested in getting better stories, and the look of the magazine, and the cover girls, were his territory. I asked Chriso why we had girls on the cover at all. He told me that history showed girls sold, men did not. This was an answer, but it was not an explanation. Somebody from Marketing told me the girls were 'aspirational', which I puzzled over for a long time, before I realised 'aspirational' is the only adjective most marketing people know.

Australian women's water polo squad goalkeeper Liz Weekes had recently been voted the 'Sexiest Sportswoman in the World' by readers of a German magazine, and she was to be my first cover. I did not even know water polo was an organised sport. Weekes looked like a classic Queensland beach girl: big-boned pretty, tanned, outdoorsy, athletic and strong. She worked out, which gave her big triceps – so we trimmed them down. Her thighs were large and muscular because she was constantly treading water – so we trimmed them down. The muscle that led from her shoulder to her breast bulged over her décolletage – so we rebuilt the strap then gave her a flatter, weaker muscle. Weekes was famous for playing water polo, but we redesigned her body so it would be impossible for her to excel at her sport. We gave her the same build as Melissa Tkautz. In fact, our aim was to give every woman the same build as Melissa Tkautz.

Modelling agents and theatrical agents, who hated our ad campaign and our name, instructed their clients not to work with us. It was difficult even to buy old shoots from photo agencies, since many were subject to 'publicist's approval'. When the publicist – and no vocation has ever been so misnamed as 'publicist' – in Beverly Hills or Bloomsbury, heard a magazine called *Ralph* wanted to use the pictures, they sniggered and shook their heads, often dislodging the last grains of coke from their nostrils.

We continually returned to the same names, offering more money, and got laughed out of the conversation. While *Ralph* was struggling to entice down-on-their-luck soap stars into the magazine for thousands of dollars, the first issue of *FHM* Australia was released. It had a gatefold cover, starring Mimi Macpherson, Isla Fisher *and* Emma Harrison – and publishers EMAP did not pay them a cent.

EIGHT In which Anthony Mundine chases Solomon Haumono who chases the Pleasure Machine, Mimi Macpherson suffers back problems and the Doner eats its own shit

Editing a magazine is a fantastic, frustrating, exhilarating, all-consuming, intoxicating, terrifying, fascinating, soul-destroying, addictive, magnificent waste of time. A morning lasts a minute; a week is over before you have had time to go out for lunch; a year telescopes into a month. You're on a continual emotional bender, filling and draining yourself, congratulating and flagellating yourself, falling in and out of love.

The next day begins before the last one has ended, as you try to figure out what can be done tomorrow that was not done today, and if you will get to the printer on time even though the art department has twenty pages left to design, and one of the designers is sick, and the art director has to put together an urgent promo for the marketing department, and the advertising salespeople have lied about the number of pages they have sold, and suddenly you have to find a new story and pictures to fill the spread that was reserved for an imaginary motoring client. When you get into the office you can't open the door because for the first time this month you have come in without your keys and for the first time this month security have come around and locked everything, and you log into a journalist's PC and there are emails from the readers complaining that their last-month's subscriber's copy was squeezed through their letterbox a week after it

reached their local newsagency, and your staff arrive, and security arrives, and your phone rings and it's Trixie from a PR company wanting to know if you received the fax about the Big Day Out, and a sub-editor comes in and says she can't take it anymore, you have to do something about the production editor, and it's 9.50 am and the art director hands you a dozen proofs that have to be read before ten o'clock. You glance at them quickly, and the one page you didn't look at on the screen – the only design you did not veto in the whole magazine – is horribly wrong, an abortion of your idea, and the headline is misspelled and the photo caption incorrectly identifies a good friend of the proprietor as a convicted sex murderer, and the fashion editor wants to talk about the clothes for next month, and you know you have to because she has to begin shooting tomorrow. But the phone rings and it's Kylie from a PR company wanting to know if you received the fax about men's face creams, and your boss comes in and folds his arms and legs and he wants a chat, because it is not deadline day for him, because he does not have any deadlines anymore, and he asks how was last night, and you struggle to remember, because it doesn't feel like you have ever left the office, and the art director comes in asking for the proofs back, and marketing comes in, demanding the promo, and advertising rings up to tell you they've sold one page of the two, as long as you don't mind putting an ad for counter-fungal cream in the fashion pages.

Meanwhile your email is filling up with messages from your staff, who want to know when you are going to come out of your office, and Trixabelle from a PR company wants to know if you've received the fax about the new Holden Commodore, and you ring a freelancer and say, 'Can you get me eight hundred words about jelly snakes?' to fill the space where the ad has dropped out, and you email the photo editor to tell him to look for pictures of jelly snakes, and he asks, 'Where am I going to find pictures of jelly snakes?', and Carlee from a PR company wants to know if you've received the fax about the new sanitary towels, and you ask, 'Do you know this is a men's magazine?' She says 'I thought you might be putting together a gift guide for your girlfriend,' and you curse yourself for saying anything, and the tower of proofs on your desk is growing like stalagmites on steroids, but you can't look at them because Marketing want you to look over this fantastic press release they have commissioned from a company called Fantastic Press Releases who have spelled the name of your magazine wrong, and the on-sale date is wrong, and Kristyl from Fantastic Press

Releases wants to know if you got the press release about cheese, and the art director comes in and says, 'If you don't give me the proofs now, we won't make deadline'. The chief sub bursts in holding the story about jelly snakes at least a metre from her nose, as if it smells like the fetid corpse of an ad guy, savagely butchered by an editor and buried in a pit of manure, and says she can't work on this, it's rubbish, and instead of clearing the last six pages, she sits there and tells you why it stinks, while you proofread the cover and talk on the phone. You are almost ready to send the magazine to the printer when the entire computer system crashes.

You ring the IT help desk, but most of the technical-support staff are on a midweek team-building exercise organised by HR, so you spend half an hour sweating and trembling and pacing and frowning, until a pale, gangly nineteen-year-old dressed like Dracula lopes in and fixes everything by hitting six buttons with his virgin's fingers, and the photo editor pops up with a sickle grin on his face because he's found pictures of supermodels eating jelly snakes, they're a bit expensive and he wants to know if he should buy them or not, you say 'buy' and immediately get a call from Advertising expecting congratulations because they have sold the last page – a page which, until that morning, they'd told you had been sold, anyway – so you don't need the jelly snakes story.

Then the publisher comes in and looks at the cover and says, 'You can't do that. Green doesn't sell', and you think he's a fraud, an impostor, a shameless salary sucker, when suddenly he says, 'And Danni is spelt with two 'i's, by the way' and you realise that even though you typed it in as Dannii, the subs fact-checked the name as Dannii, the first proof went out with Dannii, and every semi-literate person in the office knows her name is spelled Dannii, one of the artists accidentally deleted it, then typed 'Danny Minoge' in 104-point capitals across the cover. The subs are leaving, even though there is still work to do, because you are not allowed to pay overtime, and the only people who offer to stay behind are those who would do more harm than good, and it's seven o'clock then eight o'clock then nine o'clock then ten o'clock, and the only thing left to do is take the art director to the pub and drink more beer than any journalist in the history of the press, then you bowl yourself into a taxi and throw yourself into your flat, and fall on the couch and pour One More Beer, when suddenly you realise Dannii's name is Minogue, not 'Minoge', and you know you will get no sleep tonight, not one minute.

Nobody told me how to be an editor. There was no training, and no

job description. I only knew what I had learned from watching editors in the past – but editing is not a particularly visual task. Editors spend much of the day on the phone, and it is hard to tell if they are brokering an international deal for exclusive rights to the new Martin Amis story, or dialling 1-800-WET-MAMMA.

I spent an infuriating amount of time returning phone calls from girls with erotic-sounding names, who were on another line when I replied. When I asked what sort of company I had called, it was always a PR firm – except once, when I was told it was a business devoted to sending other businesses faxes, then calling to see if people had received them. If I meet the man who founded that company, I will tear off his arms and beat him to death with them.

At first, it seemed I was expected to spend much of my time in meetings with people – often the same people – explaining what I was doing, but the more time I spent in meetings, the less I was doing.

Magazines work to tight, daily, rolling deadlines. Every day, stories are read by the editor, sent to art, passed on to subs, or dispatched to the printers. The editor has to approve the story, the layout, the cut and the final proof. This is difficult if the editor is in a meeting with the publisher, the editor-in-chief, the advertising manager, the marketing manager, the marketing assistant, the circulation manager, the research manager, the production manager and the financial analyst. Many of these people do not have tight, daily, rolling deadlines. The publisher has no deadlines at all, and no function beyond calling and attending meetings. There is a gulf like Carpentaria between the cultures of editorial staff and everybody else. Corporate people have careers, which they have to advance, while editorial staff have jobs, which they have to do.

There was a general feeling that *Ralph* had to redefine what it was about. In order to help us decide *Ralph*'s new direction, a meeting was called to which everybody was required to bring an object that represented *Ralph*, and a song that symbolised *Ralph*. Even *The Picture's* fantastically comprehensive guide to fouler English usage did not contain a word to express the sense of futility engendered in somebody trying to produce a monthly magazine when somebody who is not trying to produce a monthly magazine instructs them to take time out to consider what kind of object represents that magazine ('breasticles' seems somehow inadequate).

The meeting was held in a room decorated like the induction class at infants' school. Somebody who did not have tight, daily, rolling deadlines

assembled a collage of photographs, and we all had to choose a picture of the face of *Ralph*.

I could not see why it was important to know which image the advertising manager thought looked most like the *Ralph* guy – although, interestingly, he chose one that closely resembled himself – nor which song was favoured by the marketing manager ('Tubthumping' by Leeds anarchist band Chumbawamba). I could not think of an object to bring, so I stole James the picture editor's object – an old-style TV remote control. Happily, we were not called upon to justify our choices, since I had forgotten to ask his reasoning. I also stole Chriso's song, Regurgitator's alternative hit, 'I Sucked A Lot of Cock to Get Where I Am', although it more appropriately described the meeting than the magazine.

Everybody played with their toys for an hour, had their little jokes, and tried to say the right thing. The best of them struggled to be helpful. The worst of them gyred and gimbled around Nick like slithy toves. As in many such meetings, a popular pastime was inventing new *Ralph* acronyms, such as 'Real Australians Love Pizza Hut'.

I sulked and brooded, presented James's object, and pointed to the guy on the collage that looked most like me. Then I said we would have to drop the idea of being 'politically incorrect'. It made us sound like One Nation, the sort of people who called Aboriginals 'boongs' and Asians 'slopes', and it was no wonder nobody liked us. I said I would not produce a 'politically incorrect' magazine. Anyone who spoke against me looked like they were calling Nick a slope, so nobody did.

Nick said, 'The one thing every Aussie guy wants on his tombstone is, "He was a good bloke"', and he was right. *Ralph* had to stop sneering and leering and heckling, and start to approach life with the bemused innocence, unthinking tolerance and awkward athleticism of a nice guy.

It also needed to become more professional. An attitude had grown up that it was not necessary to do the work to get the story. This began with Jack, the music writer who did not listen to CDs. Jack 'admitted' soon after he left *Ralph* that not only had he not played a review CD for two years, he had not attended the Big Day Out he was supposed to have watched for *Rolling Stone*.

Australian music journalism is indefensible and amateurish, grown out of a street press with no journalistic standards. The clomping, insipid, derivative Australian content of the local edition of *Rolling Stone* stands out against the slick, imported US prose like a thrower in a room full of dwarfs.

Jack was a fine music journalist, but chose to secretly abandon reviewing the songs in favour of reviewing the packaging. Tim had already replaced Jack with a reviewer who listened to records. I told the new guy he was not to compare the band with any other band, especially bands the readers would never have heard of; he was not to comment on the production, or even allude to the producer; he was to say what it sounded like, judge if the CD was any good, and make a joke.

I asked the same of the movie critic. I did not want to know who directed the film, or who his influences were, or from which black-and-white French-language classic he had borrowed the plot. First, I needed to learn what it was about – so I would know not to go if it was about ballroom dancing. Secondly, if it was a thriller, I wanted to know if it was exciting; if it was a comedy, I wanted to know if it was funny; if it was a horror film, I wanted to know if it was frightening.

I thought there were not enough movie reviews in the magazine, so I rang the reviewer to ask if he could do four more. He said of course he could. He would write them right away. I asked if he had seen four more films. He had not, but 'somebody' at *Ralph* had told him that was not important. Whenever he could not attend a screening, he wrote his review from a press release. I told him things had changed, and marked him for dead.

Tim had arranged for a travel writer to supply us with monthly travel pieces. He handed in a piece about great rock-and-roll hotels, which included the Chelsea in New York, where Sex Pistol Sid Vicious had stabbed to death his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen. I had always wanted to go to the Chelsea, so I asked the writer what it was like. He did not know. He had never been there. I allowed his contributions to drop away.

I told everybody that from now on reviewers were to be accountable for their opinions, which they had to form though personal experience. This proved a surprisingly difficult concept to get across. Several months after a DVD reviewer was appointed, he asked for money to buy a DVD player, since he had never owned one. The staffer who cross-tested DVD players also neglected to put DVDs in them, although he had, he assured me, plugged them in and turned them on.

My zeal to force the writers into authentic experiences led us in some groundbreaking directions. Freelance journalist Owen Thomson rang and asked if I would take an article about dog-training. I said I would, but only if he dressed up in a dog suit and undertook the training himself. Owen did so, at Ash's house, and knocked a chunk out of Ash's stereo speakers as he

scampered around the carpet – just like a real dog. The story presented, for the first time, the experience of barking-control and newspaper-fetching from the point of the view of a domestic pet. Every subsequent time Owen offered me a story, I said he would have to wear a dog suit. It toughened him up for the challenges to come.

Brad said I should read every letter that came into *Ralph* – and he read them all himself too. Eighty per cent of correspondence was about the cover girls, and it was a cover girl – Gabrielle 'the Pleasure Machine' Richens – who changed *Ralph*'s fortunes. Richens was a beguilingly beautiful English model who came to Australia for a two-week photo shoot and met Canterbury Bulldogs Rugby League forward Solomon Haumono. When she returned to the UK, Haumono followed her, risking his $200 000 a year contract. East-coast Australia was amazed. This was an event unprecedented in the history of sport and sex. A bloke was risking a world-class footballing career for a sheila. The drama deepened when Haumono's best mate, St George five-eighth Anthony Mundine, flew across the world to bring his mate home.

'I'm going to be in, I'm going to be out,' promised Mundine, his jaw set like a commando. 'I'm going to bring back my brother Solomon.'

The *Daily Telegraph* printed a map of Mundine's epic journey, so readers could follow his progress. It was not a very complicated map, since all Mundine did was fly QF001 Sydney-Bangkok-London. He did not even take a stopover. When he returned with Haumono, it completed a fantastic Aussie folktale. What greater love could a man have for his mate than to bring the wrath of his own coach on his head for flitting off to England when he should have been resting between games?

Both *Cleo* and *Ralph* wanted photo shoots with Richens. Nick was publisher of the two titles, but we did not negotiate a company-wide deal with Gabrielle. We did not share shots. Richens did a *Cleo* cover for nothing, as models often do for women's magazines. She even posed for a blurry topless portrait. *Ralph* paid her several thousand dollars – more than we had offered any model up to that date – to wear a brocade corset on the cover and a partly see-through shirt inside. Richens had been in *Loaded*, so she knew how to work a men's magazine. She managed to look at once seductive and innocent, predatory and vulnerable, exotic and attainable. The only change we had to make to her image was removing the boob-job scar from near her armpit. That winter, every man in Australia wished he were Solomon Haumono. Then Richens dumped him.

Richens sold 63 000 copies for *Ralph*, up 12 000 from the previous issue. House of Fetish, the supplier of the brocade corset, shifted 400 units to men who wanted to dress their girlfriends as Richens, and women who thought the trick was in the underwear. Word came down through Brad that even James Packer liked the shoot. (Previously, Packer's only known comment about *Ralph* was that it was 'shit'). Many of the cover girls we later photographed asked to be shot in the same style as Gabrielle Richens. We won publicity on *The Footy Show* – something Nick had always craved – and even the mainstream press gave us a mention.

Brad urged me to get Richens regularly involved in the magazine, but by this time she had signed up with celebrity agent Max Markson. I had a meeting with Markson, Richens and the inevitable third-person-with-no-discernible function. In real life, Richens glowed even brighter than she did on our highly processed cover. She spoke with the Mars Bar-melting charm of a South London schoolgirl, just common enough to bring her down to only two or three levels above the rest of us. We talked about making her a *Ralph* spokesperson, or giving her a column, but Markson asked for $10 000 a month, more than our entire talent budget for the year. She tried one column of hints about how to please your girlfriend, but she could not come up with much beyond 'buy her flowers', so we had to drop her as a writer. We used her once more, on the spurious justification that she was our 'lingerie reviewer', then she went off and did a nude shoot for *Playboy*.

Richens worked so well because she was the sexual celebrity of the moment, the woman everybody was talking about. *Ralph* had rejoined the national conversation. The only woman attracting a similar degree of attention was poor Mimi Macpherson, sister of supermodel Elle, and reluctant 'star' of a wildly notorious video. The year before, a tape of Mimi having sex with her then boyfriend, Matthew Bennett, was widely duplicated and screened at football clubs and bucks' nights across the country. Mimi denied she was the woman in the video, but Bennett admitted to the *Sun Herald* that he had made the tape. The Mimi video had become available on the internet, which was creeping into everybody's home and office, when Mimi agreed to pose in swimwear for *Ralph* – for twice the record sum paid to Richens. Mimi's terms were complicated and detailed, and included the stipulation that she have her choice of stylist, hair-and-make-up and photographer – Elsa Hutton, who did a lot of work for *Cleo* – and that we fly everyone up to Fraser Island. It broke Brad's heart to spend so

much on a shoot – he wanted to fix the fee at $1500, which was what he paid a cover girl for *The Picture*.

When the prints came back, we discovered the stylist had persuaded Mimi – who had refused to model lingerie – to pose topless with her arms across her nipples. Mimi ran a whale-watching business, so she spent ninety per cent of her time in the ocean. Her back was scaly, like a fish, as a result of what we called 'Mimi Fungus Disease', an apparently common consequence of wearing a wetsuit all day. It cost us thousands of dollars in Photoshopping to cure Mimi Fungus Disease, cover her freckles, and smooth over her sunburn and peeling, but the issue sold even more than the Richens cover.

Ralph had no marketing to speak of. Sydney was strewn with Metrolites, backlit billboards flanking bus shelters and kiosks, and *FHM* hired them every month to show off its new cover. Metrolites were a striking, spectacular form of advertisement that said the magazine was out; it had a certain woman on the cover, certain coverlines, and therefore certain contents. There were no stickmen, or references to housework. At marketing meetings, we would while away the hours discussing idiotic ideas such as paying a third party $250 000 to produce a *Ralph* calendar in which Australia's top models would each dress up as their favourite science fiction character, but Nick would not hear of buying Metrolites. He did not think they 'worked'.

I realised that if we timed our release date to coincide with *FHM*'s, we could use their Metrolites anyway. The ads drove customers to the newsagency, where a pile of *FHM*s sat beside a pile of *Ralph*s. Even though he had intended to purchase the new *FHM*, a buyer – most of whom could not, at first, tell the two magazines apart – might pick up the new *Ralph* instead if it had a stronger cover. There was another reason to match *FHM*'s release dates: many readers bought only one magazine, so every time *FHM* got a first-week sale, it potentially eliminated one of ours. If *FHM* came out earlier in the month – which it did – a lot of people would inevitably see it first and buy it first. When we went head-to-head, *FHM*'s sales immediately suffered and our sales prospered. We knew this because they quickly moved their sales back even further. I insisted we, in turn, move back to meet them, and a battle of nerves ensued, at the end of which both magazines' cover dates were sometimes two months out. 'Cover date chicken' was my sole theoretical contribution to the inexact science of magazine marketing.

The Metrolites – as opposed to stickman advertising – could also reasonably be assumed to 'increase readership'. Readership figures are a publisher's sleight of hand. They are gathered by Roy Morgan Research and disseminated to media planners, who are supposed to believe they more accurately reflect the people who read a magazine; as opposed to sales figures, which only reflect the people who buy it.

To discover how many people read a magazine, the research company shows them a small colour photocopy of the cover. If they recognise that month's cover, they are deemed a reader. These figures are particularly meaningless for a title such as *Men's Health*, where all the covers look the same, or *Penthouse*, which nobody admits to buying.

Ralph regularly scored a higher readership than *FHM*, even when *FHM* was outselling us, because *Ralph* is an easy name to remember and *FHM* is not (even the people who worked on it called it 'FMH'). The Metrolites – giant, glowing representations of the cover – could only help people to recognise the product.

As well as the Metrolites, *FHM* had a deal with the *Sunday Telegraph*, by which the *Telegraph*'s gossip pages promoted each new issue in return for exclusive rights to a preview photograph of the cover girl. *Ralph* had nothing. Our press releases – contracted out to a private company – were farcically misspelled, syntactic spaghetti. It took more time to correct them than it would have to write them ourselves. I asked for a private meeting with Nick, and said *Ralph* desperately needed marketing. He told me I was mistaken. There would always be some people who had not heard of *Ralph*.

I relayed his comments to Brad.

'Yes,' he agreed, sagely, 'in the same way that there will always be some people in Marrickville who haven't heard of the Dalai Lama.'

Meetings never stopped, and action rarely started. The boys I grew up with would have been more honest and perceptive, more creative and useful, than many of the people I was forced to attend meetings with. While I sat through the suggestions of adult middle-class women and a grown-up private schoolboy, I listened to the voices of the half-formed men in my photo album, and I realised I was writing for them. *Ralph* would have been their magazine, a laugh to enjoy with a fag and pint and bag of Smith's chips. I came to be the person that Brad wanted – the one who loved the magazine – because I loved the readers, because they were a part of me.

A man who was supposed to be a magazine genius arrived from IPC London, and gave a speech urging publishers to diversify from their core

product through brand extensions such as bed linen. He believed that magazines, like religions and fertility cults, should have festivals. We shared our marketing people with *Cleo*, and they came up with the idea for a *Ralph* stand at the *Cleo* Festival in Darling Harbour.

Marketing reported back that they had shifted 2000 copies at the festival. Two thousand! If 2000 *Cleo* readers were prepared to shell out $5.50 for a magazine for their men, surely we had gained the respectability and popularity we had been fighting for. It was not until weeks later that I realised they had all been given away. *Ralph* readers were the boyfriends of *Cleo* readers, and hundreds of copies were passed to men who would otherwise have bought them.

Several times, I asked Brad what were my responsibilities as editor.

'Whatever you like,' he said.

He meant I could involve myself in any area I thought I might be useful, but I did not want involvement, I wanted control. I told him I wanted to run Marketing and Advertising, and he gave me a thin smile of aggressive, benevolent tolerance. He said I had no chance.

Every editor has problems with advertising. Editors believe there are a certain number of pages in their magazine that are ad pages, and the rest editorial. Ad staff do not like selling ad pages, because it is too difficult. They like selling editorial pages: casual product endorsements in the story; sly pictures of the brand in the photography; they like regular pages to be 'presented by…' an advertiser.

Advertisers know that readers do not trust advertisements, that nobody is ever going to take notice of, for example, a stickman telling them to buy something, but they do pay attention to journalists' impartial recommendations. Advertising salespeople have no problem with journalists making impartial recommendations, providing they impartially recommend the products of companies who have paid to advertise in the magazine. (Public relations agencies claim any positive editorial mention is worth five times an advertisement – ten times if it is a positive mention of a bank.)

If advertisers cannot sneak into a regular feature, their next most favoured option is advertorial – a page of the magazine that looks like an editorial page, is written in the same style as an editorial page, but is not about something interesting such as hitmen or penguins, but something boring such as tinea or fruit salad. Advertisers believe that because the ad is set in the same typeface as a story, the readers will read it with the same

sort of interest and excitement they would a feature. They think readers are stupid.

Ralph's new advertising staff, Scott and Dave, were dedicated, energetic and resourceful, and had a barely possible job. We fought a lot – as they tried to sell the space around *Ralph*'s every page number to Heineken, or run Mitch Dowd underwear in every fashion spread – but I admired them. They did not give up as they pushed against the largely unyielding media-buying 'industry'. Media buyers hated *Ralph* as if *Ralph* had done something to them personally. Most junior and mid-level media buyers were women, and not prone to crawling around on their hands and knees in a negligee while their man watched TV. They were young, career-driven professionals, who had hoped their boyfriends might grow up and share some responsibility around the house, become more worldly and less sexist. They were being asked to support a product whose ad campaign suggested they were only good for fucking and cleaning, and even then only when there was nothing much on the box.

Media buyers say their industry is 'based on relationships'. There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Rule Number Six is: When Somebody Says Their Industry Is 'Based On Relationships', It Means They Do Nothing Useful.

There is a body of media-buying theory which can be summarised thus: it is best to place the client's advertising in the same media as the client's competitors (herding), or it is not. Media buyers spend a great deal of time analysing what competitors are doing (in effect, what other media buyers are doing) and trying to predict what they might do next year, so they can either do the same thing, or not. Herding is the most popular option, because it gives the buyer one less decision to make.

Clients herded out of *Ralph*: fashion clients, men's fragrance clients and motoring clients. *FHM*, the 'international brand', posed as cosmopolitan where *Ralph* was parochial, sophisticated where *Ralph* was ocker, but still had difficulties establishing itself with media buyers. The only titles the media buyers supported enthusiastically were the niche fitness title *Men's Health*, and Condé Nast's short-lived *GQ*, on which every dollar spent was a dollar burned.

The total media advertising spend in Australia is about $7.5 billion, of which magazines are worth only 7.5 per cent, about $562.5 million. Men's lifestyle titles' share of that figure is 1.8 per cent, about $10.1 million, or 0.13 per cent of all money spent on advertising. The figure has remained

relatively stable since the birth of the genre. The sum spent by advertisers, however, is 10 per cent greater than this, because media buyers take a 10 per cent cut of everything a client spends. Often, media buyers will justify their apparently pointless existence by saying they will use their bulk purchasing power to negotiate the client a 20 per cent discount across all magazines in a year. If they succeed, they earn their 10 per cent plus a bonus. On the surface, they deliver media value to their clients, but they want their clients to keep spending as much as possible, so they can keep getting their commission.

Senior media buyers tend to be in sales; the best negotiators spend their time smooth-talking money out of clients, rather than arguing down advertising rates. They wheedle ad reps to wheedle editors to squeeze the client some 'added value', which usually takes the form of the horribly disguised editorial endorsements.

Ralph needed urgently to win the approval of media buyers. At our many long meetings, we had many long discussions about how this should be done. We agreed to avoid the mistakes of the past – an earlier, typically scatological feature had alienated Glad Wrap, which felt its brand had been cheapened when it was suggested it might be funny to stretch it across a toilet seat; and Chokito, when readers were recommended to drop a bar into a swimming pool, where it would resemble a floating turd. I took all faeces and farts out of the magazine, and even blanked out the 'uc' in fuck. I tried to make the magazine more acceptable to media buyers (and middle-class magazine buyers) by making it read better and smell better.

While these ideas drew no opposition, there was a strong current of opinion that the best way to win over female media buyers was to throw a party and seduce them. The *Ralph* party was to be a lavish celebration of the magazine's achievements, where advertisers and media buyers alike would be overpowered by free canapés and champagne, and another of Nick's speeches. Preparations for the party went on for weeks, with everyone at meetings urged to draw up their own guest lists. When it became apparent that we had too many potential guests, I was asked if it was necessary for my staff to attend.

I was incredulous. I said I would not go if the staff could not go. The corporate people never understood that the staff thought of themselves as the magazine. Seddo had recruited an exceptional team. Most worked tremendously hard. The art department often stayed until 10 pm on deadline week. Alex, the chief sub, worked similar hours. Dom, the lifestyle

editor, never put in less than a sixty-hour week. There was no overtime. Throughout my years at *Ralph*, my staff worked – on average – ten unpaid hours a week, donating the extra time to the company. Mostly, they were not working to get a better job, but because they loved the one they had.

The point of the party was lost in the planning. Everybody was still euphoric that James Packer had been impressed by the Pleasure Machine, and somehow she became incorporated into our arrangements. Advertising seemed to take over from Marketing. The bait for the party that was supposed to hook female media buyers became the chance to have your photograph taken with special guest Gabrielle Richens, and the image turned into a greeting card via a novelty printing process. Hardly any women took advantage of the offer, but that did not matter because hardly any women turned up, but that was not a problem because hardly any women were invited. It became a boys' night out at the MG Garage, a trendy restaurant that also sold vintage sports cars. It was full of existing advertising clients – and my staff.

In the beginning, the *Ralph* boys drank as a team, a gang. I watched them in the Globe – the pub next door – standing in a ring with their schooners in their hands, protecting the pile of sports bags in the heart of their circle. I was reluctant to join them. I did not think people wanted to drink with me. I thought they needed a manager, not a mate. I knew one of the great compensations of working was getting together on Fridays and bitching about the boss, and I did not want to inhibit that. I dreaded seeming like the trendy drama teacher, or the father who asks his kids to call him by his first name (although I did allow my staff to call me by my first name).

As well, I did not want to sell my whole existence to ACP for $80 000 per year and unlimited Cabcharge dockets. I felt I should try to keep a social life outside of *Ralph*. The problem was, I quickly lost interest in talking about anything other than *Ralph*, because I loved my job, too. I fucking adored it. Despite the meetings and the idiocy, it was furiously exciting and extraordinarily fulfilling. ACP merchandisers counted the number of copies of *FHM* on newsagency shelves, so we always knew whether we were outselling the competition. When we were on top, it felt as if we had won the heavyweight championship of the world, or at least of the local police boys' club. Not that I had any idea how either of those things might feel.

It was boring talking to people who did not work at *Ralph*, who could not grasp the nuances in my voice when I talked about Nick, or Brad, or said the word 'marketing'. I started spending more and more time at work,

partly because I felt it was letting the staff down to leave before they did, but also because I could not think of anything better than getting on with the job. I felt obscurely betrayed when people left at the end of the day. What were they going home to? Dinner? TV? Dope? Sex? What could be better than working at *Ralph*, and making up jokes, and trying to beat *FHM*?

I found weekends particularly aggravating. Hardly anyone turned up for work on Saturday or Sunday. Without the art department, there was nothing much to do, but I liked to pop in anyway, read a few proofs, check for reader emails, and see if anybody was lying under the desks asleep.

I began drinking with art director Chriso, who was good-natured, shy and infinitely creative. He knew the audience because he used to be the audience: middle-class, unacademic, outdoorsy, patriotic, mechanically proficient, trendy and – as often as was reasonable – drunk. After a late night in the office, we would walk across Castlereagh Street to the Windsor Hotel for 'a couple of beers', which became a couple of beers an hour for the next six hours. Horribly, the Windsor did not close until 2 am, later 4 am. Even more horribly, Chriso and I were often there when the staff stacked the stools onto the tables.

Ralph owed too much to other magazines. There was a mock advice columnist, the alcoholic and lecherous Dr Pecker, who was very funny, but barely distinguishable from *Loaded*'s mock advice columnist, the alcoholic and lecherous Dr Mick. There was 'Bloke vs Bloke', in which two men in similar or contrasting fields were quizzed to discover who was the most blokey, a larceny of *FHM*'s 'Bloke Test'. These copies added little to the original ideas, but in the field of getting women to talk about sex, *Ralph* led the world. Several men's magazines organised round table discussions in which girls discussed what they did and did not like about men, and whether they would give a blow job on the first date. The participants were generally the journalist's friends, with various degrees of sexual experience and commitment to candour. *Ralph*'s associate editor Dom industrialised the process of talent selection for his monthly panel discussion, 'Babes Behaving Badly'. He advertised in newspapers for women who were prepared to talk about sex and be photographed. He gave each respondent a personal interview, and had them tick boxes to say whether they had ever experienced – and would be willing to comment about – oral sex, anal sex, sex with an ex etc. He then took a Polariod of the candidate, rated her appearance between one and ten and, once she had gone, passed her picture around the office, to ensure his judgment was in line with majority taste.

If the woman scored an average of eight or more – seven, if we were desperate – she made it onto the page with two others with similar preferences, to address questions such as, 'What would you think if a boyfriend gave you a vibrator?'

'Babes' was educational and salacious. It was useful for the readers – the women were usually helpful, explicit and honest – but it was also *Ralph*'s Forum Letters (with pictures!). When one Babe confessed to picking up women in nightclubs for threesomes with her boyfriend, the readers erupted with joy, pouring out emails praising her initiative. After that, I instructed Dom to ask every Babe if she picked up women in nightclubs for threesomes with her boyfriend, but we were generally disappointed.

Dom also produced 'Sporting Challenge', a section in which the journalist actually did what he said he did. Each month, Dom went up against a professional sportsman, tackling a footballer, slam-dunking a basketballer, or punching on with a boxer.

The magazine grew a new vitality, partly due to Carlee, the cadet I had hired when I lost my deputy. Carlee was an eighteen-year-old girl who came in on the end of a conga of bumbling, blustering and bored work experience kids. She wrote a couple of pub reviews that showed more sparkle than any of the rubbish in the in-tray, the out-tray or the too-hard basket, and I offered her the lowest-paid writing job at ACP. Carlee moved down to Sydney from Newcastle, and began a year-long attempt to drink as much as any man at *Ralph* (which was as much as any man in the world). While she was hungover, she did some excellent interviews. She seemed prepared to ask anybody anything – perhaps because she was too young to know any better. I sent her to a *Star Trek* convention, where the Trekkies take life on the Enterprize more seriously than their own nonexistent sex lives, and she asked William Shatner how it felt to have 'shat' in his name. When Spice Girl Geri Halliwell was appointed UN goodwill ambassador for contraception, I sent her to the press conference to demand why she had not stopped Spice Girl Emma B from getting pregnant.

To accompany a story about the life of a prostitute, I had told a journalist to go out on the street with a picture of a hideously ugly bloke, and ask passing women how much he would have to pay to sleep with them. Unfortunately, the journalist tore an ad out of *Ralph* that featured one of the staff of Fox Sports. Responses ranged from '$50 million at least, and I'd have to be really drunk' to 'Oh, he's really terrible,' from a girl who offered him a hand job for $10 million.

By the time I realised we were humiliating one of our few clients, the story had to go to the printer. We did not have any photographs of spectacularly ugly men lying around the office, but we had several pictures of Jack Marx, so we put in one of those instead, and changed the copy to read that we had asked the women how much they would charge to 'perform various disgusting sex acts with hat-wearing journalist Jack Marx'. Jack, meanwhile, was shivering and sweating out alcohol in the detoxification clinic of Rozelle Hospital. When he got out, he walked across the road to the newsagent and bought a copy of *Ralph*. He read that no woman would have sex with him for $1 million, and went straight to the pub.

I had rehired Jack as a casual writer. He was reunited with his spare set of clothes, which he had abandoned under his desk when he left. I felt I owed him a new start. We began the task of populating *Ralph* with an imaginary cast of characters, including talking penguins and 'the Doner', the cylindrical beast from which doner kebab meat originates. I had first asked Carlee to investigate the lifestyle of this elusive mammal, and suggested that falafel was its droppings, but it was Jack who discovered ancient Cappadocian cave paintings showing the hapless creature instinctively rearing on its hind legs when threatened, allowing the hunter to drive his spear directly down the middle of its body until the tip of the weapon embedded in the earth. 'The Doner', Jack wrote, 'remained skewered in this fashion and, once the legs and cumbersome head had been removed, was roasted over a flame and carved on demand'. The custom continues unchanged to this very day.

I sent a photographer out to take a picture of kebab meat turning on the wonderfully named 'kebab machine', but kebab shop owners chased him away, thinking he was sent by a competitor, or the public health department. The Doner – which had the head of a platypus and the feet of an elephant – led a strange and varied life in *Ralph*, surviving even to meet Anna Kournikova.

The readers loved the girl-woman Anna Kournikova. On Brad's brilliant suggestion, we established a dedicated monthly 'Annawatch' page, in which we kept track of what the beautiful young Russian tennista had done the previous month (nothing). Even more than Anna, they adored Catriona Rowntree and Suzie Wilkes, two big-chested Channel 9 presenters who were pretty but not glamorous, famous but not threatening. Month after month, we received letters and emails begging us to feature Catriona or Suzie. Since Channel 9 and ACP were both part of Kerry Packer's PBL

organisation, it might have been thought that the magazine group and the TV station could help each other out. We imagined we might have a better chance of getting Channel 9 girls than, for instance, *FHM*. This turned out not to be the case. Of all the TV networks, Channel 9 was the most hostile to *Ralph*. Channel 9's public relations department was rude and obstructive like no other. Even when we knew, through personal contact, that Channel 9 stars were willing to shoot a cover for us, Channel 9 PR vetoed it. One employee advised us never to call back about anyone again. We shrugged, because everybody hated us, and we kept on asking and they kept on saying no. Channel 9 stars did not do men's magazines.

Then the girls from Channel 9 cop show *Water Rats* turned up on the cover of *FHM*. They had, of course, done the shoot for nothing. Neil at *FHM* was more surprised than we were when Channel 9 agreed. It was a slap in the face for us, as well as a kick in the balls, a punch in the eye, and a tweak on the nose. I pointed out at a meeting that it would have been inconceivable for this to happen in a vertically integrated organisation such as News Ltd. Rupert Murdoch would have worked the 'synergies' (just because synergies is used by stupid people does not make it a stupid word) to the advantage of both his broadcasting and print divisions. Nick, winging it, told me the component parts of the company were unconnected. Channel 9 was not obliged to help ACP, any more than ACP helped Channel 9.

Nick was less concerned with organisational specifics than with general content. He told me he wanted *Ralph* to be 'a cross between *Loaded* and *National Geographic*'. I went home and puzzled over how this could be accomplished, but he quickly discovered a popular science magazine called *Focus*, and declared that *Ralph* should be 'a cross between *Loaded* and *Focus*'. I asked what he liked about *Focus*, and he pointed to a feature on polar explorers. I immediately contacted the writer and bought the feature. Unfortunately, I did not read it. It was written in impenetrable scientific language, had no narrative, few quotes, and was largely concerned with the nutritional content of the explorers' meals. I asked Nick exactly why he had enjoyed the feature. He admitted he had not read it.

Every Friday, by tradition, *Ralph* staff had a social drink in the office, as a prelude to an antisocial drink in the Globe. We were regularly sent cartons of beer by brewers who would not advertise with us. We also received vodka, bourbon, and all kinds of alcopops. One night, I poured a guest a glass of vodka from the mysteriously acquired office fridge, to find the seal

had been broken and the spirit replaced with water. It was hat-wearing journalist Jack Marx, of course, but by this time Jack had disappeared. The last I heard of him came in an indignant memo from Building Services. Somebody had emptied the *Ralph* paper recycling bin into the cardboard cruncher, and, like a crazy, fighting drunk, the machine had spat back half a dozen broken beer bottles in his face. I wrote an apology and said the anonymous culprit was prone to erratic behaviour, and no longer worked at *Ralph*. Building Services sent back a reply asking if it was Jack Marx. I refused to name names, but I did concede the villain was last sighted wearing a hat.

NINE In which I disrespect the competition – Men's Health, Max, GQ and FHM – and the censor

Ralph had been beaten to the launch by *Max*, a monthly from Next Media, publishers of Australian *Rolling Stone*. *Max* was an honest attempt at putting together a British-style men's magazine on one-fifth of the budget that would have been needed to make it a success. It was perfect bound, cleanly designed, crunchy, filling and nutritious.

The scope of *Max*'s ambitions could be gleaned from the fact that its October 1997 issue named the *twenty-five* sexiest women in the world, making it one-quarter as good as *FHM*. When I started at *Ralph*, *Max* was selling in the low 20 000s, and it never did much better, but I admired the way editor Carl Hammerschmidt achieved a credible result with no money. I liked the affable Carl so much that, when I knew I was going to leave, I bought him, and made him my deputy.

Carl's last issue of *Max* carried an interview with sports commentator Neil Brooks. When asked the curious question, 'What animal would you say best describes your sex life?' Brooks replied, 'A bulldog eating custard.' In another answer, he said he wanted to die 'just after telling Claudia Schiffer that I was not her gynaecologist after all'. Incredibly, he lost his job at Channel 7.

Everybody thought the interview appeared in *Ralph*, not *Max*, and even C-grade male celebrities like Brooks became wary of talking to us. *Max* was published until October 1999, when it bowed out with an issue

featuring two unknown models on the cover, dressed in footy gear, and interviewed about football, a sport that neither of them followed.

Another of our early competitors was *GQ Australia*, which modelled itself in part on the *AFR Magazine* but broke the Fourth Immutable Rule of Magazine Publishing: it did not supply a service. It gave the reader little he could not find in a newspaper – little humour, little sex, and nothing to fantasise about but clothes. Advertisers loved it, because in doing little, it did little to offend. *GQ* number one was an astonishing 196 pages, supported by every major fashion advertiser. The content was the same as every other men's magazine, and, indeed, every other men's magazine ever: there was a story about a bouncer, about lesbian fantasies, about Muhammad Ali, about the porn industry in Canberra.

Dead *GQ* walked for eighteen months before Australia's notoriously astute media buyers noticed they were shovelling their clients' money into a grave. Editor Peter Holder had the horribly difficult job of trying to produce a magazine that was more up-market than the rest but he was playing the same cards reshuffled as if they were a different hand. Writers who had served time in the P-mags were almost as likely to appear in *GQ* as in *Ralph*. Peter himself had worked for four years at *People*. His deputy, Fred Pawle, had been a sub on *The Picture* (and was to be again). His contributors included Roger Crosthwaite, a sub on *The Picture* (and *Ralph* contributor), sometime *The Picture* sub (and sometime *Ralph* contributor) Jeremy Chunn, former *People* editor (and *Ralph* contributor) Pete Olszewski, and a former *Picture* sub writing under the pen-name 'Cheeseman'. The irrational lampoon of the P-mags was an academy (and an animal house, and a summer vacation) for these funny, talented journalists, who could write for the trailer parks or the yuppie waterfront – but nearly every men's magazine was being put together from a single pool of staff.

When Peter used women on the cover, they had to be 'classier' than those in *Ralph* and *FHM*, but the field was strictly limited. Media heir Lachlan Murdoch's wife Sarah O'Hare appeared on two *GQ* covers, and media heir James Packer's ex-girlfriend Kate Fisher on another. After that, Australia was out of media heirs with supermodel girlfriends. Pete had promised to quit if his vision failed, and he left when GQ went bi-monthly in 1999. The magazine lurched on for two more issues, then collapsed. Several issues had sold fewer than 10 000 copies.

*

Men's Health was edited by my mate Todd. The magazine had been running since October 1997, but Todd took it over a few weeks before I came to *Ralph*, in 1998. Todd was yet another men's lifestyle magazine editor who had come up from *Penthouse*. With Greg Hunter at *Inside Sport*, and me at *Ralph*, Phil Abraham's prodigies were now running more than half the market. (The editor-in-chief of *FHM* was Andrew Cowell, another former *Penthouse* editor.)

Until very recently, every cover of *Men's Health* featured a black-and-white photograph of a bare-chested male model. Todd estimated the readership breakdown as one-third straight men, one-third straight women, and one-third gay men, but that probably gives bigger numbers to women and smaller numbers to gays.

Todd battled to maintain the heterosexuality of the magazine, in the face of criticism – and even the occasional threat – from the gay community. *Men's Health* often had a higher female nipple count than *Ralph*, but it had the media buyers in its hip pocket. Even more than *GQ*, this was their magazine; there was not an advertiser in the country who could suffer from associations with health and fitness.

Men's Health was the anti-*Ralph*, loved by advertisers and avoided by young, straight males. The only thing the two magazines had in common was idiotic launch advertising drives. *Men's Health*'s campaign was seen by fewer people, since it was decided to run it in cinemas in metropolitan areas, rather than on television. It did occasionally surface on TV later, in a compilation show of the world's funniest commercials. It showed three actors in a bar, talking about their penises the way men never do. One said, 'I call mine Mr Wimpy.' His friend replied, 'I don't have a name for mine.' The third said, 'I call mine Thor,' and leaped onto the bar, waving his arms and shouting, 'Mine is a white spear of energy!' and thrusting his hips at the air. The drinkers around him cheered him on – rather than breaking glasses over his head – the screen faded to black, and the words '*Men's Health*' appeared. Anybody who had come to the cinema to watch *Nightmare on Elm Street 3* would have left believing there was a new magazine about penis names.

Ralph's only real adversary was *FHM*. We were two fighters of the same weight, height and reach, but one of us had chosen a horribly unfortunate ringname. Like *Men's Health*, *FHM* was a very clever magazine, and everything in it had been tested and refined, every accidental discovery turned into a maxim. It had a way of photographing women, a way of writing captions, and a framework that dictated every story had to be 'funny,

sexy, useful'. If it was only two out of the three, an *FHM* editor was expected to add the third ingredient.

FHM's UK publishers, EMAP, had bought *Australian Playboy* publisher Mason Stewart. (EMAP continued to pump out *Playboy* until 1999, then folded the magazine when sales regularly dropped below 25 000). They then proceeded to make with FHM the same mistakes that Mason Stewart had made with *Playboy*. It is as if companies cannot learn, as if management spend so much time engaged in evasions and justifications, they come to believe them themselves. *Playboy*'s staff had always been told it was a good idea – not just a cheap one – to use US material, and *FHM* was now told it was a good idea to take advantage of the tremendous resources offered by EMAP UK.

It was true that Neil could buy a £1500 shoot of an international celebrity for £500, and not have to go through the months of negotiation and disappointment each time. He could use *FHM*'s international name and expertise to get models for the Australian edition. He could makes promises he could sometimes keep – *FHM* would photograph them more professionally than *Ralph*; *FHM* could offer them the chance of appearing in its international editions. *FHM* boasted it never paid its cover girls, but I suspect this was only technically true.

FHM's British connection was also a handicap, however. It meant Neil ran vast amounts of material from the UK, which made *FHM* seem like an English magazine. Often, staff did not so much Australianise material as internationalise it; they simply cut out any reference to where the people in its stories might be from. In their photographs, however, they looked too pale, too fat, too short-haired, too fashionably dressed to be Australian. EMAP stopped shipping the UK edition to Australia within weeks of the launch of Australian *FHM*, but airfreighted copies were still available in newsagents. Readers only had to compare the two editions to see they were being strung along. In an attempt to save costs and maximise profits, EMAP left Australian *FHM* editorial ridiculously understaffed. For years, the magazine did not even have a dedicated sub-editor. These two factors gave *Ralph* its only advantage – the ability to be Australian – just as they had helped *Penthouse* over *Playboy* a decade or so before.

FHM was launched with a good-natured, self-deprecating TV ad campaign, which was broadcast in both Australia and New Zealand. Marketing was one of *FHM*'s great strengths. Anything the magazine did got into the press, because EMAP's marketing people made sure that happened. *FHM*'s

'100 Sexiest Women' had a credibility that *Ralph*'s list never had, because it was supposedly decided by a poll of all the *FHM* readers in the world, and not just me and Chriso. This was an unusual claim to make, since every international edition came up with a different list. While the Australian Top Ten might have been the same as the UK Top Ten, the back sixty contained many more Australian girls.

FHM's most successful early covers featured Shania Twain, Tania Zaetta, Katrina Warren and Nicola Charles. The *Water Rats* cover, which caused me so much pain, was a failure. Neil was offered a $1000 bonus if he could get newsreader Sandra Sully, model Kate Fisher or a certain female politician in the magazine. He succeeded with Fisher, and had the politician flirting on the phone, but then John Howard called an election and she pulled away.

I drank with Neil on the day of our TV appearance with Todd, and again with him and Carl at an evening I organised when Carl was still at *Max* and *Max* was still a competitor. We talked guardedly about the things we had in common, but never fully admitted the crushing pressure we were all under. Neil later told me that he had burst into tears in the street one night because of the strain.

Ralph did not have a cover for the November 1998 issue, so I invented a celebrity. Anna Kournikova had been appointed our 'Sexiest Woman in the World', but she and Liz Hurley were not answering our calls, and their agents had suggested our time might be more profitably spent jumping out of tall buildings or throwing ourselves in front of cars. We had called up every female star on the A list, the B list and the C list. They were all busy washing their hair, polishing their nails, or climbing the highest mountain in Africa. The only list I had left was the shopping list Claire had given me. I was about to start ringing around potatoes (2 kg), apples (green not red) and bread rolls (wholemeal), to ask if they would pose in a bikini, when I looked at some pictures of Samantha Frost. *The* Samantha Frost. Samantha Frost was a part-time model who had appeared in the newspapers wearing swimwear at a Fashion Week parade. She was an approachably glamorous brunette, and we had a photo shoot of her standing apparently topless, and glancing coyly over her shoulder. Was Samatha Frost, we asked, Australia's next supermodel? A fair answer would have been, 'Er... no, probably not,' but we put her on the cover, and declared that her career – like her top – was 'Taking off'.

After Samantha Frost, we realised we could sell without stars. We

invented other celebrities, including two-times cover girl Marea Lambert-Barker, and eventually came up with our own type of celebrity – the winner of *Ralph*'s quest for 'Australia's Sexiest Model'. We could carry the nobodies because we were funny.

We hassled everyone we spoke to. When we interviewed ventriloquist David Strassman, we would only speak to his dummy. We called euthanasia campaigner Philip Nitschke, and repeatedly asked him to help us kill ourselves. We tested the limits of nominative determinism, using a format stolen, I think, from UK *Arena*. We rang people with religious-sounding names and asked if they believed in God. Gloriously, Mr Jesus of Barrack Heights, NSW, said yes. Ms Pagan of Kingsford, NSW, said no.

We had to address people in a different way to the newspapers. If we asked the same sorry questions we would receive the same sorry answers. Stars like to give interviews only when they have something to sell – a new CD, a TV show or a movie – so everybody gets them at the same time. I tried to break us out of the publicist-driven cycle, and call people whenever we thought about it. It worked well with sportsmen, and hardly at all with film actors.

There was another reason for our friendly, jokey tone. No drunk ever met a stranger in the pub and asked, 'What are your musical influences?' or 'Tell me how you came up with the title for your latest release?' It is far better to follow your own inebriated agenda and demand, 'How important is the Hubble space telescope to understanding the origins of the universe?'

The *Trading Post* became a rich source of victims. We found somebody selling a 'Linda Evangelista Walker', a type of treadmill, and treated the listing as though it was a job ad. We rang and asked 'How often would I have to walk Linda?'

I sent Owen 'dog man' Thomson to the annual Elvis festival in the NSW country town of Parkes, which was supposedly swamped by hordes of Elvis impersonators from all over the country, gathered to celebrate the memory of the King.

'Maybe I should go dressed as Elvis,' suggested Owen.

'Maybe you should go as the worst Elvis there has ever been,' I said.

Owen knew no Elvis songs and could not sing. Nor did he look anything like Elvis. He hired an all-white, one-piece Elvis jumpsuit, two sizes too small, along with a questionable wig and fake-rhinestone encrusted belt. Fifty Elvises were expected at Parkes. Only sixteen turned up, including Owen. The other fifteen treated him with contempt.

'What would you say if I told you I was the real Elvis?' Owen asked Elvis Motel.

'Is this going to take long, or what?' replied Motel.

'No,' said Owen.

'Well, I wouldn't believe you,' said Motel. 'You're the worst Elvis I've ever seen.'

'Then why are you impersonating me?' demanded Owen.

An important new column in *Ralph* was 'Penguinwatch', in which the readers were kept in touch with new developments in the world of penguins, of which there were generally none. The very funny Tony Lambert pitched me a tired story called 'What your dog says about you'. I said I would take it if he changed it to 'What your penguin says about you'.

Tony made the macaroni penguin 'the penguin of choice for the sleek urban professional'. Of the Gentoo penguin owner, he wrote, 'Like your penguin – who appears to wear a bonnet – you like hats.'

The readers were at first confounded by the penguins, which multiplied like penguins to appear throughout the magazine. A giant, inflatable penguin (an emperor, I believe) stood almost hidden in the background of a fashion shoot, and was mobbed by half-naked, nubile Babes Behaving Badly. We ran numerous items about how to care for your penguin in difficult situations, and the animals were eventually embraced by *Ralph* fans like women who pick up women in nightclubs for threesomes with their boyfriends.

People assumed I had an obsession with penguins, when I had never given them any thought in my life. My staff started to offer me gifts of plastic penguin toys, and talk to me about Arctic birds as if I gave a fuck. Even I came to believe I was somehow interested in them, and when Claire and I went to see her sister in Melbourne, I insisted we all drive to Phillip Island to check out the penguin parade at the beach at dusk. We watched dozens of little penguins either go into the water or come out of it – I can't remember which – then sat through a penguin-life-cycle presentation at the visitor centre. About five minutes into the lecture I thought, 'What the hell am I doing here?' and I knew then that *Ralph* had taken over my life.

The distinction between magazine and me continued to blur. Would-be contributors and readers alike rang up and asked to speak to 'Ralph'. Even when I told them my name, they would often lapse into calling me Ralph later in the conversation. Sometimes, I even felt like Ralph.

I loved magazines, from the feeling of gloss paper under my thumb to

the smell of freshly printed stock rolling through the presses. I loved typography, photography and illustration (in that order). Most of all, I loved the English language, and the way it can be made to twist and bend without breaking. You never have to say 'envision' when the word you mean is vision.

Men's lifestyle magazines have to be fashionable, and they have to contain fashion – whether the readers like it or not. The fashion in men's magazines legitimises the glamour. It allows men to say to their girlfriends, 'My magazine's the same as yours. I only buy it for the, er, clothes.' It also forces the magazine to look good, to look trendy, to look young, because fashion changes every season. Without fashion editorial, there is no fashion advertising, and without fashion advertising, there is no fragrance advertising, and without fashion and fragrance advertising, there is not much left for men's magazines apart from tinea creams and escort services.

In April 1999, I raised the fashion page count from six to twenty-two. Nick initially objected to the larger section on the grounds that it was 'expensive journalism' (it was not) and I expected a tsunami of homophobic anger from the readers, but after the first issue, I did not receive a single complaint.

To begin with, we used real people in street situations: a fighter from the Boxing Works gym posed as a nightclub bouncer, modelling leather jackets; a guy from the production department standing before a judge, dressed in a suit. I conceived and cast the early pages as dark, gritty and tough.

Those first shoots introduced me to the pleasure of watching my words become pictures, of seeing the photos in my head become the photos on a page. I described the look and the feel I wanted, and Chriso produced it, as if through my eyes. It was like watching my own screenplay come to life in the cinema (at least, I guessed it was – my screenplay was still pacing up and down outside a producer's door, sweating and smoking cigarettes) with the words spoken exactly how I had intended. It was like suddenly finding the ability to paint.

While I was making the magazine funnier and more stylish, Brad was pressing me to make it sexier, by adding more pictures of girls.

'Should we give the readers more of what they like?' he asked. 'Or less?'

There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Rule Number Seven is: When in Doubt, Consider Brad's Rhetorical Question.

I considered it, and began to run more photographs of women in underwear. Brad knew most magazines are for the readers. In none of the dozens of meetings I attended did anyone from any other department ask, 'What about the readers?' any more than executives at a tobacco company might ask, 'What about the smokers?' There seemed to be a corporate feeling that our jobs were about fooling the readers into buying something they did not want or need.

What drives middle managers, the lords of rotten boroughs, the sheriffs of nothing? Were they sustained through their schooldays by dreams of homogenisation, obfuscation and the triumph of the insipid? The worst of them inhabit a syntactically unthinking universe, where ideas are objects you can 'pick up and run with' and a 'ballpark figure' is any number they want it to be. They shackle, brace and cripple language, when they could be making words dance. They are sorry products of corrupt fashions in corporate 'thinking'. When the marketing manager was called the 'marketing' manager, it was obvious they were supposed to manage the marketing of the product. Now they are all brand managers – and what exactly does a brand manager do? How do you 'manage' a 'brand'? There is endless potential to fudge responsibilities, to seek promotion, to do nothing.

When Human Resources were called 'personnel management' or, even better, 'recruitment', it was clear they were supposed to find staff for jobs. HR in publishing firms hardly ever do this, except at the administration level, but nonetheless it was growing. Why do Human Resources exist in companies where all the journalists and designers were hired by editors and art directors? It was obvious what happened at a training centre, but HR at ACP had a 'learning centre'. What was supposed to go on there? I did not need learned staff. I was not looking for writers and designers imbued with the wisdom of the magi. I wanted trained people, who knew the difference between a colon and a semi-colon; a cleaned-up quote and a made-up quote; an invention and a cliché – but since companies started 'learning', they stopped training. There were no true cadetships at ACP anymore, no structured programs of tutelage. As one generation accepted the 'Australianisation' of overseas stories, their heirs simply made things up. A women's magazine might quote '27-year-old Kara', whose boyfriend slept with her best friend on their wedding night, then '24-year-old Rebeka', whose fiancé did the same, and each of them may be figments of the writer's repetitive imagination, aspects of her personality, caricatures of her friends, less real than the Penthouse Pets with their mixed parentage and their PhDs.

All over the world there was an intentional mystification of the straightforward processes of departments such as Marketing and HR, an attempt to cloak basic, common-sense commercial functions in the jargon of an academic discipline, so as to make their practitioners appear more 'expert' and therefore more valuable.

The best thing about pay offices was they were still called 'pay offices' – so it was clear they are supposed to pay people. Nonetheless, a misunderstanding about the nature of its role emerged. Pay offices throughout the publishing world appeared to believe that they created 'pay', which they then dispensed with glorious but discretionary largesse.

I wanted to storm their offices and yell, 'You don't pay these people! They pay you! You only exist because writers and designers make magazines that create profits that make secondary jobs for people like you!'

I did not, though, because that would have been Communist.

I was approached by somebody who worked for an advertising agency, who had heard I was unhappy with Sargent Rollins and asked if his firm could bid for the account. He offered me a free chance to brief them and see what they came up with. I visited their offices in Circular Quay, and they showed me a chart of all the Australian men's magazines, and asked me where I thought *Ralph* sat in relation to the others, and where I wanted it to be. I said people regarded it as close to *The Picture*, but I would like it to share a market with *Inside Sport*. I explained too many people thought *Ralph* was a magazine about not doing the housework, and I wanted to lose the image of the readers as lazy, sexist slobs.

A few weeks later, I was called back to their offices at 5 pm. All the creatives opened twist-top beer bottles using the cuffs of their trousers, so as not to leave rust marks on their shirts. They unveiled a series of mock-ups for their projected advertising campaign, which was to change the perception of *Ralph* in the marketplace. The first was a picture of a filthy dinner plate covered in fat, feasting flies. The catchline was, 'Washing up, *Ralph* style'. I could barely believe it, and they seemed hurt when I walked out.

I tried to keep my distance, to remember it did not matter. Over and again, I told myself, 'Don't get mad, it's only a game.' I regularly spoke with ridiculous people, and realised I should be marvelling at the infinite strangeness of it all, rather than balling my fists under the table and wishing them dead. I tried to divert my cancerous temper by starting a degree in the history of art, through Open Learning. I stared at paintings by

Titian, mentally adding breastage, trimming thighs, and removing visible cellulite.

In early 1999, the Office of Film and Literature Classification censors contacted me to warn that I had almost overstepped their guidelines. There had been a complaint made against the February 1999 issue of *Ralph*, and it was settled in our favour by a vote of three to two. The censor invited me to his office to discuss the matter. The complaint was centred on a six-centimetre high photograph on the contents page, illustrating a story about porn stars, which showed an apparently naked man standing behind a woman dressed in a bra and high heels, who was bent over a couch. A large black circle bearing the page number and a caption obscured the male figure from the back of his knees to his buttocks, and the female's buttocks and lower back.

The complaint was that the picture implied penetration, and the OFLC's committee had taken a vote to determine whether there was actual penetration going on behind the black circle. I expressed my surprise that adults would choose to spend their time this way, and my disbelief that a member of the public would complain about something they imagined might be going on behind a black circle.

Confidentially, he told me, it was not a member of the public as such, but another publisher. I had to be careful, he said, because if the committee had voted for penetration, *Ralph* would have to be sold in a plastic bag.

'If you put my magazine in a bag, I'll put you in a bag,' I countered, reasonably.

TEN In which I meet Chopper Read and Claudia Schiffer, but the two of them don't get along, and I discover an English-speaking people just like you or me

I tried not to write much at *Ralph* – it seemed like vanity publishing – but I had long wanted to meet Melbourne gangster Chopper Read, whose first and best book, *Chopper from the Inside*, was published in 1991. It purported to be the memoirs of a standover man and toecutter, who never hurt anybody, who was not a criminal, and had been 'involved in 19 deaths inside and outside jail'. Since then, Read has backtracked considerably, but at the time it was an astounding claim to make, particularly by somebody who had never been charged with – or even suspected of – most of those crimes.

Read played the drunken grim reaper, dryly recounting the heads he had scythed in the course of his onerous-but-necessary duties, and laughing to keep from vomiting at the memories of the mutilated bodies he had left behind. He passed down observations allegedly distilled from a lifetime in the killing trade, such as, 'Just as a point of interest, every man that I have shot or stabbed, who lived, looked up at me like a beaten puppy and asked, "Why?" Before a man dies, his last word always seems to be, "No." Men from certain ethnic groups cry and scream and go to their deaths like screaming females, crying, "No, No, No."'

The book was beloved by bikies and schoolies, soldiers and crime-fiction buffs, and mild-mannered postal workers with purple, murderous

fantasies. It seemed to describe an Australia that nobody knew, a hidden, dangerous country where a nightclub fight might suddenly turn into a gun battle, and the big guy punching you in the head might bend over your face, suck out your eye and swallow it.

In *Chopper from the Inside*, Read wrote that former Painters and Dockers identity Billy 'the Texan' Longley was under his protection in Pentridge. In a later book, he revealed he had fallen out with Longley – who Read had described as 'a second father … an uncle … my friend … my mentor' – over this allegation. When I heard Longley had begun to speak to journalists, I sent Melbourne writer Andrew Block to find out about his problem with Read. Longley told a long, bloody story about the Painters and Dockers tearing themselves apart in Melbourne in the 1970s, and said Read did not look after him in jail: 'I looked after myself inside, but that's good copy for Chopper,' he said. 'It was [the publisher] who made Chopper a celebrity. John and Chopper have got a multimillion-dollar thing going.'

A couple of weeks after I ran the story, I got a six-page, handwritten note from Read, complete with his address and phone number, and Longley's address and phone number, in case I should think he was an impostor. It was a black, funny letter that claimed Read had only mentioned Longley in his books on Longley's request, that Longley had wanted to write his own book, and Read had offered to ghost it for him, that Longley had always believed Read to be a millionaire – 'which I'm not … however, my lawyers aren't poor' – and that Longley was angry with Read after having been asked by his father to repay 'a small sum of money'. It ended with a Read flourish: 'No, Billy is right, I'm wrong. Billy is alive today because he's so tough, and I'm so bloody pissweak. I had better be damn careful what I say about such a dangerous fellow, or I might end up with a bullet in the back of my skull … Billy, I'm sorry you never made a million bucks out of that book you never wrote, and gee whiz, Bill, I hope this letter don't get me killed…'

I rang Read and requested an interview for *Ralph*. He asked for $500 for his time, and I flew down to Tasmania to meet him.

He was with his mate, Shane Farmer, who owned Men's Gallery, Hobart's only lap-dancing club. We were about to go out for a beer when Farmer warned me, 'Don't let him drink too much… He *changes*.'

But Read insisted, 'I've never shot anyone when I was drunk. It's when I'm sober at five o'clock in the morning, knocking at your door, that you've got to worry.'

Like many retired killers, Read just wanted to be loved. He would like to be remembered for making people laugh, rather than for blowtorching their feet, stealing their money, shooting them in the face and burying them in unmarked graves. 'I don't think I'm a dark and sinister person,' he said. 'I think I'm a very comical person. I used to shoot people in the guts and say, "Gee! I bet that hurts!"' He laughed.

Read laughed the most when he was talking about things that were not funny, like murder, torture and cutting up corpses. When he *was* being witty – which was a lot of the time – his voice was deadpan and flat, his timing as sharp as the icepick that had almost pierced his heart. I wanted to know why he admitted to so many murders.

'I said I was "personally, in company or involved in the planning of" the deaths of nineteen people,' he said (although the actual word he used was simply 'involved'). 'That means if you come to me and say, "How shall I knock off my mother-in-law?" and I say, "Throw an electric fan in her bath" and you go and do it, I'm involved in the planning. It doesn't necessarily mean I threw the fan in the bath. It doesn't necessarily mean I killed nineteen people…When you get down to it, it's been a damned sight more than nineteen. I cut it down to a modest number.'

Read was trapped in the kind of commercial and emotional snare that only bites reformed villains. On the one tattooed hand, he needed the credibility of his death toll to sell his books. On the other, he would have liked to be thought of as a larrikin outlaw poet who was having a lend of everybody.

When I met Read, he was forty-four. He had done twenty-three years inside, ten of them in Pentridge's maximum security H-division. He had been convicted of assaults, burglaries, armed robbery, malicious wounding and kidnapping – but never murder. He had faced the judges for one killing, the shooting of Siam 'Sammy the Turk' Ozerkam outside Bojangles nightclub in St Kilda, which was ruled justifiable homicide on the grounds of self-defence. Nineteen deaths is a hefty claim to make for a man who has barely been on the streets for nineteen months of his adult life. As the books rolled out – there are now nine of them – their relation to fact became increasingly distant. *Chopper 5* was subtitled *Pulp Faction*. *Chopper 7* is a novel.

Once he started drinking – Melbourne Bitter from the bottle – Read quickly struck a rhythm: roughly, one, two, three, empty. He gulped it down like a man who had been locked away from beer for twenty-three years – which he had. He said he used to be a psychopath, but he was

alright now. He insisted his prison war with elements of the Victorian Painters and Dockers was one of his happiest memories. 'You spend so long in jail,' he said, 'a little trigger goes click in your head and you don't care anymore … I thought, "This is my life – prison, get out of jail, shoot a few more, torture a few more, get a bit more money, come back to jail, do a bit more." I had the advantage over everyone else: they hated jail. I thought it was wonderful – iron-barring people over the head every day of the week.'

Read threw back his head and laughed hysterically at the memory. Chrome dentures flashed in his mouth: he smashed his own teeth on the taps of a prison sink, so as to get into hospital. The false teeth are one expression of the way Read's life has changed his body. When he lifted his shirt to show off his famously damaged torso, he traced a map of prison violence on his chest: 'That's where I got stabbed – eight-and-a-half-inch butcher's knife, stabbed up here, icepick through the heart, razor … razor … I got razored here … razored down there …' He twisted his neck around. 'Icepick through the back … bullet-hole through the back.'

Most notoriously, Read had a mate saw off parts of his ears in prison, so as to get him out of his cell and into a mental hospital. The twisted navels where his ears once were look like rudimentary hearing holes, the kind fish might have had before they evolved into humans. He said he did not miss his ears – 'Van Gogh did okay' – but fate played him a malicious trick when his eyesight started to deteriorate. 'I've got glasses at home,' he said, 'but I don't wear them in public because I look like a silly bugger.' Besides, he has insufficient ears to support the frames. 'If I sit perfectly still, they'll stay on,' he said. 'I can't go bouncing around the street wearing glasses, cos they'll keep dropping off.'

Read's father lived in Launceston, his mother near the large Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) Church in Kingston, Hobart. Read was raised an SDA. He said, 'I spent fifteen years in the SDA church. My father used to be an Elder. Those people were complete brain-benders … I remember going to the church with my father on a Saturday morning, and all the blokes would open the boots of their cars and pull out their semi-automatic weapons and examine each other's artillery, because they feared the Catholics were going to come and drive them into the hills, and all they'd be left with was a .303 and a tin of baked beans. They used to see the Pope as the head of the beast as revealed in Revelations. You get brought up with this attitude of "Praise the lord and pass the ammunition." I just stuck with the ammunition.'

Farmer kept warning me to keep Read under control. Read said, 'I have a problem with alcohol … There was an occasion when I went into Shane's nightclub with a can of mace … He says I sprayed mace into his air-conditioning unit, and the whole nightclub had to stand out on the pavement, coughing and spluttering. I don't remember any of this.'

'It *was* you, Chopper,' Farmer assured him.

'I humbly apologise,' said Read.

The previous year, Read's drinking had wrecked the first episode of Libby Gorr's live-to-air ABC TV series, *McFeast Live*. Read turned up pissed on set, and recited part of a poem about a drug dealer he was supposed to have killed: 'Ziggy was a drug fixer/He got laid to rest with a Pink cement mixer.' Read creased with laughter and added, 'That was funny, too. It took us hours to get him in, the bastard. He kept climbing out.'

Hundreds of viewers complained. Read told me, 'I have a few drinks at Hobart airport, a few drinks on the plane, a few drinks when I get to Tullamarine, a few drinks when I get back on the plane, a few drinks at Mascot. Then when I get to the *McFeast* show, they say, "You're on in two hours time." There's a fridge over there.' So I sit there in the green room knocking back Melbourne Bitter, white wine, every other drink they've got in there. It took two people to virtually carry me to the doorway. One had to forcibly remove the can of Melbourne Bitter from my hand. Poor old Lisbeth Gorr hasn't the faintest idea that her next guest is as drunk as a skunk. I've just got out of jail. You don't say, "You're on in two hours time, wait by the fridge."'

Four days later, about the same week as I appeared on *The Midday Show*, Kerri-Anne Kennerley cancelled a scheduled interview with Read, and filled her *Midday* slot with a quiet chat with talkback bigot Alan Jones. Jones was telling the nation about his disgust at the ABC for running the Gorr-Read interview, when the *Midday* floor manager waved a handwritten sign saying Read had called up the show and wanted to speak. Jones offered Read another serve of his trademark moral outrage. Read replied, 'People who throw stones better make sure they don't live in glass houses, Alan … I never got arrested in a public toilet in London.' Jones was stunned into a rare and blessed silence.

The call was ended, and Kennerley later described the episode as 'one of the worst days of my professional life' and said she was 'genuinely surprised' when Read called.

Read told me, 'WIN TV, which is a subsidiary of Channel 9, invited

me. They get me down to the green room in Hobart, give me the special number to ring up, invited on Alan Jones, there he is bagging the guts out of me, they tell me to ring. I ring, they hold up a sign saying, "Chopper on phone". Well, you don't just go to a public phone box and ring up Kerri-Anne Kennerley, and they suddenly put you on television …'

We drank steadily in the club and, in true Tasmanian style, the lap-dancers included Farmer's wife and her sisters. Read showed no interest in the girls. While a dancer slipped out of her G-string, Read's gaze was fixed firmly on the past. 'We can sit here like a pack of imbeciles watching her wiggle her bum all night,' he said. 'In the seventies, we could fuck her.'

As Farmer had warned, Read slowly changed. He became more concerned with me than with the strippers. 'Why don't you ever smile?' he asked. 'What's wrong with you?'

I guess I'm just a miserable bastard.

'Go on, smile. Why don't you smile?'

We left the bar for the back room, where strippers on their break were passing around a bong. Everyone got stoned except Read and me. We left together to call cabs on the cold streets of Hobart.

I spoke to Read a few more times at *Ralph*. He phoned me with a hot tip on a horse. I backed it $50 to win, and it did not even place. When drug dealer, standover man and rapist 'Mad' Charlie Hegyali was shot dead outside his Melbourne home, I asked Read to write an obituary. The last time he had spoken to Hegyali, Read wrote, 'The conversation danced around comic topics such as Charlie's continual bouts of venereal disease, for which he had been medically treated since the age of 14, and his habit of going to the jack clinic for his injections, then picking up whores in the waiting room,' and the philosophical, 'You're always sad when an old friend dies, even though Charlie probably had it coming.'

Read attached what seemed to be a piece of short fiction about him and Mad Charlie when they were young. I told him I wanted 'true crime', but Read implied there was no such thing – and perhaps he was right. As Read's publisher once said, 'All crims are liars, and mine is the biggest liar of them all.'

I sent journalist Denis Brown to bolster the story with some facts. He visited Mad Charlie's local pubs and wrung a quote from the manager of the London Tavern in Caulfield, where Hegyali was supposedly drinking the night he died: 'Mate, don't know him, wouldn't even know him if he walked in here now – which would be a surprise, seeing he's dead.'

I dispatched a photographer, who took it upon himself to scale Hegyali's wall, but he came back with nothing but a mouthful of abuse from the widow. I asked him not to do anything like that again, not least because he might get shot. I was pleased with the way our 'true-crime' coverage was going. This was pub talk at its best: Chopper Read, the nation's most notorious gangster, swaggers into the bar, sits down next to you, leans over and whispers the word about the latest underworld hit.

A year later, when I was editor-in-chief, *Ralph* interviewed 'Rocket' Rod Porter, formerly of the Victorian Police Armed Robbery Squad. In the 1980s, Read had approached Porter with information about various Melbourne drug dealers. Read had hoped to get the same kind of 'green light' as Neddy Smith had been given by Roger Rogerson in Sydney. Read told Porter he had shot Sammy Ozerkam, and when Porter realised it was true, he had Read arrested. Read retaliated by signing more than forty statutory declarations accusing Porter and others of major crimes, including supplying the weapon that killed Ozerkam. Porter said Read's allegations had ruined his career.

Ralph gave Read the right of reply, and his answers gave some indication of how difficult it was – even for Read – to know the truth behind Read's criminal career. Journalist Dave Lornie asked him if he had been an informant. Read said, 'Back then I was certifiably insane. I suffered from a psychotic condition, alright? So they had to explain to their superiors what the hell they were doing with a no-eared, 18-and-a-half-stone mental case…I was under the wrong impression that these blokes had given me approval to carry out certain actions – this was a figment of my imagination, because I was a mental case.' He admitted, 'I did cause Mr Porter a great deal of trouble.'

Read rang me to say if we were going to keep having a go at him, the least we could do is slip him a bit of money. He also sent in some new photographs for us to use the next time we had a go. I gave him a couple of hundred dollars. The movie *Chopper* was released, with Eric Bana's flawless Read impersonation, and Read's bizarre celebrity grew.

The back cover of *Chopper 2* features a quote from Rod Porter about the first volume. 'I enjoyed reading [it],' he says. 'I just wish I wasn't in it.' I felt the same way when *Chopper 9* came out. Read wrote about our evening at the lap-dancing club. He said, 'Mark Dapin had a good night out at my expense – free food, free booze, and Shane Farmer turned the whole club on for the bloke.' This was true in a way, if you discount the fact

that I had given Read $500. 'I don't know what else he got,' wrote Read, 'because I left before he did, but the bloke had a good time. If you were the editor of a national men's magazine and a lap-dancing club owner was doing his best to make you happy, I reckon you'd have a good time, too.' What would Claire think if she read that?

I did not see Read again until 2003, when he was taking a spoken-word show around Australia's bloodhouses, clubs and disco pubs. He told all his favourite toecutting tales, and was accompanied by his mate, former AFL hardman Mark 'Jacko' Jackson. As part of the program, Read auctioned off collages he had made, showing Read in prison, Read with Eric Bana, Sammy the Turk lying in a pool of his own blood, and Sammy the Turk's head with a bullet-hole in the middle. He also sold machetes bought from the local hardware shop, and autographed 'Chopper'.

I was freelancing for *The Sydney Morning Herald* when I got the chance to interview Read and Jacko, and I asked Read why he had lied that he left me with the strippers in the club. Read had become smoother, and he spoke with greater confidence. His laugh sounded less like a graveside gloat, there was a new warmth in his voice – but he did not like being called a liar.

'You stayed behind,' he insisted, 'with a bong in one hand and a bitch in the other.'

I don't smoke dope anymore. I've been slandered.

'You have not been slandered,' said Read. 'You're English and you write for newspapers, how can I slander you? You invented the word "slander".'

Jacko intervened when he could. He said things like, 'Of course, that was then, this is now.' Meanwhile, Read warmed to the idea I was born in Britain. 'I'm glad to see you've been standing a bit closer to the shower, too, since last we met,' he said. 'You were on the bugle.' He screwed up his nose. 'You just got off the plane from England, didn't you?'

Well, Sydney, actually.

'You came down here,' said Read, 'and found out we had running water and soap. You thought, "Gee, how long's this been going on?".'

'I don't know whether he likes you or dislikes you,' said Jacko. 'I'm really confused.'

So, tell me about Jacko, Chopper.

'He [Jacko] played the media like a fine violin,' said Read, 'as I've been doing for the past thirteen years. And you keep falling for it every bloody time, don't you?'

'You can't help yourself,' said the Marks, in unison.

'You're like a dog coming back to revisit its vomit,' said Read. 'You've got to come back and have another lick at it.'

Okay, Chopper, I'm the dog and you're the vomit.

'That's right, mate,' said Read, 'because you don't clean me up. You revisit the scene of the crime. What're we going to do later? Take you to a strip club?'

Jacko tried to calm things down, for the third time in five minutes.

'There's always a different story,' he said, good-naturedly, 'every time [a journalist] comes [to talk to us].'

'You've got what you need,' said Read to me. 'Thank God you've found employment. Quit while you're ahead. Be nice … One day you may need us. You quite obviously don't need us now. That's why you're being so rude.'

Jacko's peacemaking attempts were getting a little half-hearted. 'At least you're honest,' he said to me. 'The fact that you're cross-eyed, and you could follow your nose to Thredbo … Apart from that, I like you. I think you're a *really* nice person. And when the push comes to shove, we're unoffendable.'

'I don't think you take offence easily, do you?' Read asked me.

'We're unoffendable,' said Jacko, this time perhaps encompassing all three of us. 'Everything's been said. And if you did write something that was offendable [sic], people would be quite bored with it, because they've heard it all before … Have you got another question?'

Yeah. Did you scratch his face?

Read had three parallel lines travelling like ski tracks down the length of his right cheek.

'I got scratched by a koala bear at the Healesville Sanctuary,' said Read.

Really?

'Most people believe it, when I tell them that,' said Read.

What was it, then?

'It's none of your bloody business what it was.'

Man or woman?

'It was a barbecue fork,' said Chopper. 'Someone's mother slashed me across the face with a barbecue fork. We were at a barbecue, I endeavoured to pass words with this character, and I picked him up and stuck him head-first into his own barbecue. His mother attacked me with the bloody fork, so I pulled him out of the barbecue and said, "Sorry".'

'Listen,' said Jacko, 'we've had the best journalists in Australia come

to some of our shows, and they can't describe what they see. [In fact, no-one on a metropolitan daily had ever reviewed their show.] It's a brutal, anecdotal comedy night.'

'True stories,' said Read to me. 'Some people find them amusing. Obviously not you. You've never had a laugh in your life.'

I gave up.

My brief association with Chopper Read also spoiled my chances with supermodel Claudia Schiffer, supposedly. The day I met Schiffer, there was a near-total eclipse of the sun. I suspect, however, the earth did not move for her.

At one of countless ACP meetings, distinguishable one from another only by the number of times people said 'top of mind' and whether or not I was told to spend less money on photographs of penguins, Nick announced Claudia Schiffer had agreed to pose for *Ralph*. One of the sponsors of her Australian tour had dropped out, and ACP had agreed to pick up a quarter of Schiffer's expenses if she would shoot covers for *Cleo*, *Woman's Day* and *Ralph* – but she retained the right to change her mind about any of it.

It seemed a strange kind of contract, but supermodels were not exactly hiding in wedding cakes trying to smuggle themselves into my office, so I pretended to believe him, and I nodded and smiled and pencilled myself in to do the interview. I was not certain who Claudia Schiffer might be. I had a vague idea she was married to Richard Gere, and they were both gay. I was told she was, in fact, 'the face of L'Oreal', which apparently was some kind of job.

Cleo set up the logistics for the photo shoot, which was to take place in Melbourne. *Ralph* was allotted one hour of Schiffer's schedule, while *Cleo* had three. I was told her hair and make-up would take at least an hour, so I arrived at the studio forty-five minutes early, in the hope of gathering some invaluable behind-the-scenes colour from her no doubt uninhibited banter with the stylist. Although the stylist was there, the photographer, Tim Bauer, was there and the hairdresser was there, the face of L'Oreal was not. The hair-and-make-up hour passed.

Andy Warhol said, 'Beautiful people are sometimes more prone to keep you waiting … because there is a big time differential between beauty and plain,' so I waited. It looked as though Schiffer's getting-ready time was going to eat into our shooting time. We reasoned she must be coming straight from another photographer and would probably have her hair

done already, and might only need a few touches added to her make-up. Another twenty-five minutes passed. There was no longer enough studio time to do both shoots, even if Schiffer arrived already dressed in her underwear – which seemed unlikely. With twenty minutes of our time to run, the Schiffer entourage strolled into the studio. I introduced myself to Claudia and asked if we could begin the interview immediately. Except she was not Claudia, she was the publicist. Claudia was standing behind her.

Claudia Schiffer did not look like somebody who had been sitting in the make-up chair. She was very tall and slim, but blank-faced and pale, an unremarkable looking Aryan woman with slightly lank hair. (History does not record what she thought of my own battered good looks.)

The real Schiffer had a hasty chat with the stylist, chose a few clothes, and started work on her hair. I asked if I could interview her while she was preparing for the shoot. She said, 'I'm sorry, I will not be able to hear you over the noise of the hair dryer. We'll do it after.' I remember, because those were the only words I ever heard her say.

While I waited for Schiffer's hair to set, a woman from the PR company that was minding her told me Claudia was having second thoughts about *Ralph*.

'But she just said she'd do it,' I said.

No, the minder told me. Claudia had bought a copy of the magazine and was unimpressed.

I realised I had been stitched up, and I had known it was coming all the time. Clearly, Schiffer had not stopped off at the newsagency to pick up the latest issue of *Ralph* – which included the Chopper story. The PR company, which had always known what kind of magazine *Ralph* was, had given her the latest issue and suggested it might not be appropriate. Since there was no time left to do our cover when they arrived, the PR company had probably decided against the shoot long ago – perhaps at the same moment they had agreed to the 'contract'. I suspect whoever brokered the deal for ACP also knew she would not do it, but Schiffer's bill had seemed too high if the benefits only flowed to two magazines, so they had pretended they were going to three. That way, *Cleo* would get its Schiffer shoot, paid for out of a nebulous fund that ACP used to butter up L'Oreal, one of the company's largest advertisers.

Ralph would be out of pocket for my airfare, the photographer's fee and the studio hire, so it would look as though I could not balance my budgets, and was spending too much money on photographs of penguins.

A curious charade followed Schiffer's supposed volte-face. I was asked to courier copies of the last eight *Ralph*s to somebody in Sydney for a final vetting, even though our studio time had already elapsed. I was told it would – obviously – take a while for them to read through the whole stack, so I walked over the road to a gym and hit a punching bag, imagining the publicist. Suddenly, the gym went black. For an instant, I thought I might have struck the most ignoble moment of my pathetic boxing "career" and actually been knocked out by a punching bag, but it turned out that at 5.40 pm on Tuesday 16 February 1999, there was an eclipse of the sun. I stretched, showered, and returned to the studio. Immediately, I was told Claudia had said no.

Back in my office the next day, I received a message to call Ros Reines at the *Daily Telegraph* – somebody else I had never heard of. I rang her back, and she turned out to be a gossip columnist. 'Thisss isss Rosss Reinesss,' hissed a partly human-sounding voice. 'Isss it true that Claudia Ssschiffer refused to ssshoot for *Ralph* because of a ssstory about Chopper Read in a lap-dancing club?'

'No, it isn't,' I said, adding quickly, 'and anyway, I, er … can't talk about it because we're suing L'Oreal.'

I was hoping she might think the matter was sub judice. I rang Nick and asked if there was any chance we might sue L'Oreal. I called back Rosss Reinesss, but she did not answer her phone. I left a message saying I had got the story wrong, we were not suing, and she could call me for clarification. She never replied, but she ran the story of our calls in her newspaper the next day. I cannot complain, I suppose. It is the only time my name will ever be linked with a supermodel's in a gossip column.

I wasted several hours of my time trying to bill *Ralph*'s expenses to the L'Oreal slush fund, but I had no joy. The farce went on for a further couple of months, as Nick had got hold of a t-shirt Schiffer had worn, and he felt we ought to auction it in the magazine. I only had four objections to this: (1) I never wanted to see Schiffer's name in my magazine (possibly the only thing she and I had in common); (2) It was more tasteless than a night out at a Tasmanian lap-dancing club with Chopper Read; (3) Nobody would enter the contest, anyway; (4) Fuck off.

Somebody mislaid the t-shirt, and a few more meetings were blighted by Nick's (finally successful) attempts to get it back if we 'weren't going to use it'.

My biggest non-celebrity problem was ACP New Zealand. *FHM* sold 10 000 copies in New Zealand. When I started, *Ralph* only sent over 3000. At the time, New Zealand copies were officially included in the audit, and therefore taken into account by Australian advertisers. The first issue of *Ralph* did not go to New Zealand. Subsequent issues sold less than 2000 copies out of 10 000 distributed, and ACP did not even bother distributing issue six.

Nick used to be CEO of ACP New Zealand, and he knew the market. He said we were second best because New Zealanders preferred anything British to anything Australian. I figured if we gave them something Kiwi, they might like that even better, and decided to boost the New Zealand content and increase the number of copies that crossed the Tasman.

I encountered massive, determined resistance. I did not understand the New Zealand market, I was told. It was different from Australia, different from anywhere else in the world. Magazines were not even sold in newsagencies, they were sold in dairies, and dairies were not even dairies, they were greengrocers, and greengrocers did not like to take more magazines than they could sell because it meant they had less room for kiwifruit or whatever.

I flew to New Zealand, to see for myself this unique society, so similar yet so different from every other in the English-speaking world. One block from my hotel was a shop that looked very much like a newsagency. The proprietor had a big stack of *FHM*s, and *FHM* posters on his walls, but no *Ralph*s. I asked him why he was out of *Ralph*s. He said the distributors would not give him enough of them. I found other newsagencies, and a chain of bookshops with shelves stacked with magazines. Auckland, the largest magazine market in the country, seemed surprisingly similar to Sydney or London.

I met a manager in New Zealand who told me he loved my magazine. There are Ten Immutable Rules of Publishing. Rule Number Eight is: In Publishing As In Life, When People Say 'I Love You', It Means They Want To Fuck You. He listened to my complaints, told me I was mistaken, politely promised nothing and subsequently did nothing.

When the 1998 audit figures were released, *FHM* outsold *Ralph* by 63 936 to 60 149, entirely due to *FHM*'s domination of New Zealand. This enabled them to say they were the best-selling men's magazine, and was worth tens of thousands of dollars in advertising revenue and publicity.

In my office, Nick noticed a cover proof bearing the line 'John Safran vs Ray Martin'. The story was about the way Melbourne comedian Safran and

Shane Paxton had ambushed Channel 9 presenter Ray Martin, in retaliation for Martin's depiction of the Paxton family as dole bludgers on *A Current Affair*.

Nick asked to read the story, and the week before we went to press, he told me to pull it. What I had to understand, he said, was that PBL was an integrated company. Channel 9 and ACP were two parts of the same family. We had to help each other.

This was the opposite of everything I had been told after the *Water Rats* fiasco. I said I was incapable of the Confucian ideal of holding two contradictory ideas simultaneously (I had always wanted to say that). I resigned, and asked if there were some way I could be let out of my notice period so I could leave the building immediately. I was angry and sad, but the job was impossible. I thought Channel 9 was sabotaging my magazine at every level (even though, in reality, it simply did not care about me or about *Ralph*, any more than I cared about Channel 9). Nick asked if it would help me to know that Channel 9 had nothing to with it, and it was his decision alone. I said that made things worse, but only a little. All I could think about was the contempt in which he must hold me.

ACP, however, was now run by John Alexander, widely known as 'JA'. Alexander had come from Fairfax to be managing director, thwarting once again Nick's ambition to run the company. I came in the next day to clear my desk, and JA called me to a meeting. I had never met him before, but I was impressed by the way his office shelves were lined with books, as if he were an academic rather than a barbarian. JA had a reputation for dressing people down. I assumed he was going to shout at me. I fantasised about hitting him. He was friendly and courteous, and asked if I would stay on if I were allowed to run the Safran–Martin story. I said of course I would. He told me to run it.

I realised then that I might win the war, and it was a war. With my new military orientation, I began to think of myself as the commander of an elite military unit, always on the front line, permanently under fire. The staff of *FHM* were encamped in their own trenches, on the other side of no-man's-land, and soon we were to be sniping at each other over the charred and twisted corpses of men's magazines that had been caught in the crossfire – the headless body of *Max*, the immaculately dressed but soulless carcass of *GQ*, and the sad remains of *Australian Playboy*, the cashiered doughboy, naked from the waist up.

Although *FHM* were the enemy, I knew in my heart that they were

men just like us, and they had not asked for this war, or known what they were letting themselves in for when they signed up. The real bastards were the generals, who dined out on blood-red wine and almost-raw meat in fashionably minimalist restaurants far from the deafening roar of artillery. I particularly blamed our ANZAC allies, the cowardly and duplicitous New Zealanders. At one point, I thought it might be a good thing if the staff could be persuaded to wear a uniform. And carry weapons. I was moderately well armed. I kept an axe under my desk and a Stanley knife in my drawer for close-in work. I was determined that if two bikers came into my office and demanded money and an apology, I would not go down without a fight. (I was, however, equally determined never to offend any bikers.)

Brad often thought and talked in military metaphors, too. He wanted to surround himself with lieutenants he could trust in a war. He and Nick talked about how they could 'take over' *Cleo* with 'a few good men'. They thought of *Cleo* like Castro thought of Cuba; I thought of New Zealand like Hitler thought of Poland.

Unlike Poland, however, New Zealand refused to be invaded. Once it was too late to effect the 1999 audit, I managed to get our quota raised to 12 000 copies, but by then *FHM* was distributing twice that number. I presume the real reason for ACP NZ's reluctance to help us was it – like everybody else – got its fingers burned on the early issues, and it saw its function as a publisher first and an international distributor a distant second. It wanted the shelf space in the dairies for its homegrown titles. More than anything else, the New Zealand experience made me want to leave.

I had turned *Ralph* into a new kind of men's magazine, an Australian hybrid that did not exist anywhere else in the world. It smiled and sipped a tinnie as it squinted into the sun and, in a cover-driven market, it sold more copies than the competition whoever we put on the front. I had changed the editorial tone, the design and the commercial face of the project, and enjoyed myself more than any man in publishing, but I exhausted myself fighting for things that *Ralph* should have had in the first place, I wasted energy and creativity and my miniscule store of guile trying to force through changes to decisions that should never have been made, to win conditions that *FHM* had possessed from the start: a cheerful, inclusive, inoffensive ad campaign; an orientation towards fashion and fragrance advertising; a dedicated, focussed marketing operation; and a New Zealand distribution system that worked for rather than against the magazine. These things were *Ralph*'s by right, and would have given me that 'level

playing field' so beloved by fools. Had we also been able to make use of our natural advantage – our supposedly close relationship with Channel 9 – we would have wiped up *FHM*, and possibly EMAP Australia, too. If we had sunk its flagship, EMAP would have recalled its navy to port. EMAP Australia was allowed to grow into a competitor to ACP only because of the way various sectional interests within the Packer organisation ran according to their own agendas.

I told Brad I had only ever wanted to do the job for a year. I knew we would beat *FHM* in the 1999 audit (although they would still outsell us in New Zealand) then Carl could take over. ACP gave me a pay rise and persuaded me to stay for a few more months, but the thing I wanted most – control – I could not have. And as long as *FHM* beat us overall, I felt like my job was only half done.

Like Lenin, I left behind a testament describing the things that needed to change. I nominated our editorial assistant Amanda to carry on my legacy as fashion coordinator, and recommended *Ralph* take charge of its own marketing budget. Startlingly, these things actually happened – but I was in Mexico by then, drinking Corona and eating tacos.

ELEVEN In which I flee Australia, learn Spanish and seek asylum in Cuba

I did not want to think about men's magazines for a while. I did not want to speak English. I wanted to hide some place where publishing could not get me, so I fled to Latin America with Claire. We had saved enough money to spend almost a year away, and Brad promised me $600 a month to write assessments of each new issue of *Ralph*.

There were men's magazines on the racks in the kiosks in the Mexico City streets – Spanish *GQ* and Hispanic *Maxim* – and they called out to me faintly in their own language: 'Pick me up, *hombre*. Flick through me, *amigo*. Mentally redesign my pages, *compañero*. Take note of my feature articles, *hermano*. Remember the names of my cover girls.'

I walked on by, pretending not to understand. This was particularly easy, since I did barely understand. Before we left Australia, I had tried to learn Spanish using the Linkword (TM) method, as endorsed by the British stage magician, Paul Daniels. Linkword (TM) teaches you to remember a Spanish word by connecting it with an English word. For instance, the Spanish word for 'cow' is *vaca*, so you imagine a cow vacuuming a field. The Spanish word for 'goat' is *cabra*, so you imagine a cobra attacking a goat. It works well with the names of animals, but I've never had a conversation about a goat in any language, and Linkword (TM) is no use for mastering grammar. For that, I turned to Open Learning, the university of TV.

Spanish was taught via a pseudo-soap opera called *Destinos*, which played on the ABC at about the time goats get up in the morning. *Destinos* tells the story of Mexican lawyer Raquel Rodriguez, who combs the Spanish-speaking world for a missing person. Raquel is a courageous, independent, fiercely intelligent brunette, and beneath her polished veneer beats a passionate Latin heart. I fell in love with her, and I practised my verb tables with the diligence of the besotted – until she met the blandly handsome Argentine psychologist, Arturo Iglesias. When she and Arturo shared their first kiss, I lost most of my interest in the show. Armed with an eclectic vocabulary of animal names, legal terms and the language of romance, I arrived in Mexico City uniquely qualified to translate for the defence lawyer in a bestiality case.

One of the first things we had to do was find a laundrette. I knew the words ('*Dónde está la lavandería*?') but not how to pronounce them. Claire and I walked the streets with our dirty laundry, opening the bag and pulling out soiled t-shirts. One old woman examined them closely, smiled and directed us to a market stall that bought second-hand clothes from slum dwellers.

We took a long, long bus ride to San Cristóbal de las Casas, site of the 1994 Zapatista rebellion The locals had turned the Zapatista guerrillas into a tourist attraction. Dozens of market stalls sold cuddly, harmless balaclava-clad Zapatista dolls, often travelling to the revolution in colourful and crowded Zapatista buses.

Claire and I enrolled in Centro Cultural El Puente, where for about $300 we secured fifteen hours a week one-on-one language tuition and seven days bed and board with a local family. We were billeted with Martha. She did not speak to us, and she served our meals with a proud, terse flourish, as if they were delicious Mexican dishes of marinated meat smothered in crisp salsa and served on soft tacos with piquant chilli sauce. In fact, her speciality was the omelette sandwich, a little-known dish comprising two slices of white bread and a flaccid, single-egg tortilla. It tasted like glue, but with more of an overpowering viscosity. We ate her dinners without complaint (we didn't know how to complain) then went out and bought delicious Mexican dishes of marinated meat smothered in crisp salsa and served on soft tacos with piquant chilli sauce.

My classes at the centre involved intensive conversation with a local tutor, who was fascinated by Australia. His main areas of interest were whether kangaroos actually boxed (in the classic sense of being able to put together combinations including hooks, uppercuts, crosses and jabs) and whether the Tasmanian devil really existed. This latter question puzzles

people throughout Latin America, due to the popularity of the cartoon show, *Tasmanian Devil*. Within two weeks, I could say more about marsupials than I could about cows, or even goats.

From Mérida, Mexico, we flew to Havana, Cuba. Brad had arranged to have my monthly copy of *Ralph* posted to me wherever I was, but even genial *Ralph*, the grinning, resourceful Aussie backpacker, could not find his way through the misnamed Cuban 'postal' system. Claire and I rented a private room with a nice family, and I continued my recovery from *Ralph*, pummelling my beer gut with a typically obsessive program of abdominal exercise. I went from performing 50 sit-ups a day to 100, then 500, then 1000, and finally peaked at 2400 sit-ups in thirty-five minutes. My neck locked and the skin scraped away from my coccyx. The pressure on my spine caused by my sloppy technique made me feel like two of my vertebrae had been replaced by boiling ball bearings. I dropped one waist size, and persevered with Spanish.

Our family found us each our own teacher. Mine was Maria, and she was slowly turning white. Her skin was brown, like a beach at sunset, except for an albino thumbprint above her ankle. The light patch was growing, she said. Eventually it would cover her whole body, and then she would die. Cuban doctors are world leaders in the treatment of Maria's disease – or rather, the treatment of foreigners with the disease. Patients without American dollars are turned away from the medical centre, and Maria's only dollars were the $3.30 an hour I paid her to teach me Spanish. When she visited the doctors to discuss her condition, she said they laughed at her. Maria felt betrayed in a way I could not at first grasp.

She was an honest citizen in a city of *jineteros*, or pimps. Tourists walking through the jungle-hot streets of Havana in summer were stopped every few paces by young touts dressed in Fila and Nike sportswear, offering accommodation, directions to a restaurant, or sex. They called, 'Hello, friend, where you from?' If you did not answer, they guessed. They followed you, and they kept on guessing until they got it right. Unless you were from Australia, in which case they never got it right. One *jinetero* tried nineteen nations on me – including the Ukraine and Belarus – before he gave up. The *jineteros* led you to places there is no reason to go – both private rooms and private restaurants are now legal in Cuba. They earned dollars from selling a service nobody taxes and nobody needs.

Maria was a lecturer in English at Havana University. The revolution in the 1950s brought free education for everyone, and she was grateful to

the state for that. Under the pre-Castro dictatorship of Batista, the poor were kept illiterate and indentured. The main English-language textbook for Cuban schools carried a brief description of Australia: 'As in many other capitalist countries, luxurious urban centres for the bourgeoisie co-exist with poor districts and reservations for the native people.' The homework question was: 'Describe one capitalist aspect of Australian society.'

Maria spoke perfect, essayist's English, unaffected by colloquialism and coinage because she had never been exposed to Hollywood. She taught me in a unit raised by a cooperative that included her husband. Everybody who lived on the block built the block. The materials came from the state, and she appreciated that. She had just had a baby.

It was illegal for Maria to teach privately. I was her first and only pupil. I sweated in her apartment, which had no fan. She offered no refreshments because she had nothing in her fridge. She called me *Naranjita* ('Little Orange') after the soft drink I bought midway through each lesson.

Many Cubans wanted to leave Cuba. The toughest route out was to chance their lives on an overcrowded, undermaintained boat to Florida. The easiest way was to marry a foreigner. Every day I spent in Maria's unit, studying the poetry of the Cuban patriot José Martí, wedding parties screeched past her window. Bloated, ugly, white men married beautiful, black prostitutes. To Maria, they were symbols of corruption and decay. She did not want a return to capitalism – none of the Cubans I spoke to did. They wanted the society they were promised when Castro declared his revolution socialist in 1961. They wanted a nation where everybody worked together towards common goals.

When she completed her degree, Maria went into the countryside to teach for free for two years, to pay back the cost of her education. More than a decade later, she still lived out of a ration book. Cubans with US dollars – restaurateurs and hoteliers, pimps, prostitutes, conmen and gangsters – could buy anything in Havana. The dollar supermarkets (Cuban supermarkets that only accepted US dollars) were stacked with Johnny Walker whisky and Ferrero Rocher chocolates. Teachers who earn pesos could buy bread and potatoes and pitiful servings of pork.

The day I left Havana, I gave Maria a copy of *Marie Claire*. I told her life in Australia is not really like the fashion pages: not everybody is rich and lovely. Then I had to explain that it was not like the feature pages, either: not every woman is a sex slave who murders her abusive spouse, or a dominatrix with her own bondage dungeon.

She was thrilled with *Marie Claire*, and the strange dreams it sells through the pictures and the words.

I asked her why the doctors had laughed at her condition. She said they were not being cruel: 'They laugh because there is nothing else they can do.' She told me the good reputation of Cuban medicine is a sham to fool the world that the system works. Cuban medics flew in to help flood victims in Guatemala, and earthquake victims in Turkey, but they would not help her. The treatment for her disease was developed in Havana. It uses substances derived from the human placenta. Maria said: 'When my daughter was born, I gave my placenta for the research.' Now they used her placenta to cure wealthy Italians, and they turned Maria away at the door. That was why she felt betrayed.

I took some pictures of Maria's baby, and promised to keep in touch. Cubans are probably the worst Spanish speakers in the world (apart from me). Half their consonants go missing in their desperate haste to ask if a kangaroo might one day be WBC heavyweight champion, but I left Havana confident I could understand most of what was said.

We flew back to Mérida and travelled south in the heavy heat of the Central American rainy season, fielding queries about Taz and Skippy with jaundiced ease. *Ralph*s posted from Australia occasionally found me, but often the local courier company modelled itself on the Cuban postal system, and the magazine simply disappeared. When I did receive a copy, I went mad.

I could not bear to read it. There was nothing much wrong with it, but I could see chances for jokes missed; and stories I had rejected creep onto the pages; and film reviews crammed with horrible clichés, each one of which I carefully underlined like a schizophrenic street screamer annotating the Book of Revelations. Carl was doing a good job, but reading it made knives jump into my eyes. I had to stride around and around, with my hands plunged into my pockets, trying to burn off the adrenalin, the thrilling, intoxicating, dangerous feeling of being the editor again – albeit after the fact. I was still an addict.

Natural disasters chased us through Central America like biblical punishments hurled from the heavens by a slighted, vengeful God. There were great floods, hurricanes and a plague of mudslides. We were always, however, one bus ride ahead of the worst conditions: the roads ruined by rock falls, the villages washed away, the reunion tour of seventies soft-rock band Air Supply.

When we reached Costa Rica, we decided to stop running. We deliberately set out to climb an active volcano at night. We were shaking a fist at God, saying, 'Come on, Beardy, do your worst.' So he did. He sent us Juan.

Volcán Arenal stands sentinel over the small town of La Fortuna, three hours north of the Costa Rican capital of San José. It has been erupting constantly for thirty years and tourists visit it every clear evening. Juan, our tour guide, arrived in a borrowed four-wheel drive, fifteen minutes late. His half-closed eyes and issued-with-the-driver's-licence Latin American moustache did not conceal his annoyance at having been called out. Juan was stopped by the police on the approach road to the volcano. He whispered 'Shit' several times, which was strange, since he did not speak English. After showing the police his documents, he was allowed to continue, which was also strange, since he was unable to drive.

He careered off up the volcano and slammed on the brakes a moustache hair's distance from another vehicle, which he seemed to blame for the near collision – even though it was stationary, unattended and parallel parked in a designated car park – then declared he was going to show us some reptiles. Unable to find the gate, he broke into the reptile park by uprooting four fence posts and twisting back the barbed wire. A number of Costa Ricans followed us into the park, encouraged by his declaration that he was a guide, ducking under the barbed wire and tramping through mud instead of following the paved trail.

He then climbed into the tortoise enclosure, picked up the largest tortoise and pushed its head into its shell with his thumb. He held it up to my face, so I could examine it closely, then turned it upside down and put it on the ground to demonstrate its inability to move in this position. Passing ecotourists watched in horror.

There was a cage containing about a dozen caimans – sort of half-sized alligators. First he tossed rocks at them, then he reached into the cage, grabbed one by the tail and lifted it into the air. It jackknifed towards him and tried to bite his arm, but he threw it down before it could make contact.

'No teeth,' he told me, confidentially.

This was too much for a middle-aged American hiker, who asked in Spanish, 'Do you work here?'

'No,' he said. Then, proudly, 'I am a guide.' Then, threateningly, 'Why do you ask?'

'Er … it's just that you don't seem very frightened of the animals.'

Emboldened by his reputation, Juan picked up a stick and started

jabbing at a crocodile, which was bigger than a bed and looked like a giant, malevolent gherkin. He prodded it and stoned it and tried his best to get his hand through the wire so he could tap it on the nose, but the crocodile would not react.

Poison-arrow frogs are more or less the national animal of Costa Rica, and the reptile park's frogs were kept in a secure house with only a small window through which their food was passed. Somehow Juan managed to clamber through this window and into the frog house, but despite all his efforts he could not find a frog. It was at this point I realised Juan was a dangerous lunatic – since the frogs really are poisonous – and also utterly, mindlessly, fearlessly drunk.

We returned to the four-wheel drive. He opened up the back to get out the oil, changed the oil, and drove off without closing the back. Hikers shouted and waved as we thundered past them with the boot flapping, but he treated them with studied disdain until he noticed his spare tyre rolling down the trail. He then reversed 100 metres down the volcano at the same speed he had driven up, reclaimed the tyre and roared off again, tearing up a blind corner and missing by a fingernail a vehicle coming the other way.

He led us on a forty-five-minute hike to the volcano's cone, tripping and stumbling but generally setting a cracking pace, reached the point where we could view the eruption, made a bed for himself on the rocks and started hiccupping, occasionally pausing to identify himself as a guide to other tourists.

The eruptions were spectacular. Volcán Arenal shook, sparked and rumbled. It spat fire into the sky, as if it were trying to reach the heavens and pay back God for hiding it in cloud. The display seemed to sober Juan up. By the time we got back to the road, he was ready for another drink. I refused. He tried to convince me it was part of the tour, then resorted to the timeless international drinker's gambit: 'Oh, just one,' he pleaded. 'We are *amigos*.'

And half a crate of Imperial Beer later, we were.

I was happiest in places where *Ralph* could not get me. We flew to Quito, Ecuador, and from there to the Galápagos Islands, which are among the most remote places on earth. The Galápagos had not yet experienced evolution, let alone the men's lifestyle magazine explosion. There was not even a newsagency in the capital.

Claire and I toured the islands on a large, eighteen-cabin, three-suite

cruiser, the *MV Tropic Sun*. It was a fascinating and – in retrospect – very quiet period, a state for which the crew would quickly begin to feel nostalgic. Arnie boarded the boat three days later bellowing, '*Tengo hombre*!' ('I have a man!')

What he meant was '*Tengo hambre*' ('I am hungry') but Arnie was an innocent Benny Hill of the Spanish language, casually mangling his sentences with double entendres. I was delighted. He was a worse linguist than me.

Arnie was, of course, North American – but the bizarre thing was, he lived in Mexico. He roamed the Spanish-speaking world – in fact, the whole world – spreading confusion, and sewing the seeds of mutual misunderstanding where previously there was only peace and harmony.

The *MV Tropic Sun* was like a floating two-star hotel, with all the attendant plumbing and communication problems. The cabins were comfortable, if cramped, the food was ordinary, but the sailing was smooth and the sights were heartbreaking. Galápagos looked like the beginning of the world, with stark but spectacular landscapes of rock, sand and scrub. Wild animals were everywhere, most of them in various stages of lounging, basking and being trodden on. The journey was the highlight of nine months in Latin America, and one of the high points of my life.

If English were German there would be a word that meant the-pleasure-to-be-had-from-spotting-an-animal-that-is-unnoticed-by-a-fellow-wildlife-spotter-even-though-the-non-spotter-is-closer-to-the-beast-than-the-spotter. The first time we made a landing, I went snorkelling off a beautiful, deserted beach (actually, all the beaches in Galápagos were beautiful and deserted) and a sea lion came swimming with me. It was playful and friendly, jumping in and out of the clear blue water around me, twisting its sleek acrobatic body in the air, and ploughing through the ocean with its head above the waves.

So I was told. I did not notice the sea lion because, in the manner of snorkellers everywhere, I was looking downwards. When the people who had seen the sea lion realised I had not seen the sea lion, their delight was doubled, if not tripled – as was the size of the sea lion. When I found that even Claire shared this elation, I understood why humanity is doomed.

It was not until I became the only swimmer to spot a particularly magnificent manta ray that I tasted the strange sweetness of this dark, nameless pleasure. The ray teased me like a matador's cape. It fluttered, I gave chase, it dived under me, I charged, it was behind me, then it was gone. It was a fantastic moment, and one which, tragically, Claire may never experience.

For that first part of the cruise, most of the other passengers were curiously uninspiring. We often shared the deck with Martin from the Channel Islands ('That's interesting'), who had spent the last seven years working in a golf shop ('You must've sold a lot of golf clubs.' 'Why yes, I have.') but after three days, our boat returned to Santa Cruz and picked up Arnie. Arnie did not have a man, he had a woman, Lisa. At dinner, he tried to explain to the waiter that Lisa was a vegetarian, by saying something like, 'I am a cannibal, but my wife cheats no feet.'

Arnie's every meal was marred by his inability to order. He was hampered by the Arnie-confounding fact that the Ecuadorian Spanish word for beefsteak is *bistek*, but beefsteak is often beefsteak of chicken or pig. When an unexpected dish arrived at his table, he mewed like a cat in a frying pan.

Our ship headed out further into the ocean, towards Española, out of reach of the smaller yachts. On the way, we stopped to walk among a colony of blue-footed boobies.

'Haven't they got such *blue feet*!' bawled Lisa. Er, yes.

Noise levels aboard ship rose when Arnie realised that hot water was just a crazy dream. He thundered through the decks, shouting about all the dollars this trip had cost him. It soon became clear that Arnie had paid considerably more than anyone else. He had followed the advice in his guide book, and had travelled to the notoriously dangerous Guayaquil City to buy his ticket. He had had to spend two nights in one of the biggest dumps in South America, and still got 'ripped off' a couple of hundred dollars. Arnie blamed the ship's captain, the guide and the waiters. He stopped just short of blaming the blue-footed boobies. The staff gathered in corners, and whispered about him in Spanish.

Although Galápagos is on the equator (and Ecuador, in fact, means 'equator') the water was chilling. The first time I dived into open sea, my heart froze in my chest and my breath locked in my lungs. All I could see were thousands of jellyfish, floating towards my goggles like malevolent crème caramels.

The next day, our guide brought us to a marine cave, where, he warned, the water was even colder. Only Arnie took the plunge. 'It's freezing!' he cried, grinning through chattering teeth. 'And I can't see anything! Why don't you come in?'

Er, no.

The island of Española is the magical home of the waved albatross. We stopped by some rocks to watch young albatrosses practise flapping their wings, fluttering and floundering until they gained the strength to

soar off on their maiden flight. Once they do take off, they roam the oceans for years, only returning home to breed. Incredibly – and for only the second time in the guide's life – we are there for the moment when a bird catches a current and soars into the sky. It made me want to cry.

I secretly hoped it would follow Arnie around the world, bringing him bad luck.

After two nights in the dining room, I started to feel guilty about disliking Arnie. He was not a bad bloke. It turned out he spent two years in Morocco, speaking spectacularly bad Arabic to bewildered Bedouins.

I felt privileged to be in Galápagos, and very relaxed. Eventually, Arnie relaxed, too. On the last day of the trip, he announced he had decided to stay on board an extra three days. If English were German, there would be a word for the expression on the faces of the crew.

In Galápagos in the nineteenth century, Charles Darwin found clues that helped him formulate his theory of evolution. On my final evening aboard the *MV Tropic Sun*, gazing up at the stars on a clear Pacific night, I had a revelation of my own. I realised just how insignificant the stars were compared to me. There I was, a nationally known journalist, editor and screenwriter, in the prime of my career – and there were the stars, miserable relics of suns long gone; tinkly, pointless memorabilia of irrelevant worlds millions of kilometres away. Unlike publicity-seeking Darwin, however, I decided to keep my theory to myself.

Peru follows Ecuador as sure as night follows day, as sure as that difficult second album follows that scorching debut album, as sure as sub-editors will cut out all your best jokes. *Ralph* tracked me down in Lima, but we fled to remote areas for safety.

There were not many jobs in rural Peru, where unemployment ran at about fifty per cent. One of the few surviving occupations was standing-in-the-middle-of-nowhere-wearing-a-big-hat-and-no-teeth-and-holding-a-llama-on-a-leash. It was a skill chiefly practised by old ladies, who gathered with their animals in picturesque but out of the way spots, hoping for tourists to pay to photograph them. Overlooking the so-called Cruz del Condor (condors' crossing) between the isolated villages of Chivay and Cabanaconde, a band of these women waited by the roadside.

I had been hoping to see a condor. In every restaurant and bar in Peru, diners and drinkers are subjected to half-hourly renditions of *El Condor Pasa*, but nowhere does a condor actually pass you. I now suspect the song to be apocryphal.

Another Peruvian job was guiding-foreigners-up-hills-to-sacred-places-where-they-drop-their-trousers. At the height of the rainy season, we set off on a four-day trek to the lost city of Machu Picchu. Lost cities are lost for a reason. Nobody ever mislaid Paris, Rome or Sydney. Like most lost things, they go missing because someone put them somewhere stupid in the first place. The Incas deliberately built Machu Picchu in the middle of a barely accessible mountain range so as to make pilgrims feel satisfactorily holy about the discomfort they suffered to reach their goal. By the end of the first day, I felt more pious than the Pope.

Half the trekkers were Aussies; the rest were tall, big-toothed, happy Europeans, who were only slightly less irritating than genital herpes. The Aussie walkers could have doubled as the National Trekking Team. There was a triathlete lawyer from Melbourne, a swimming coach from Sydney and a Queensland surfie who had just finished his Army Reserve service. All we needed was a nun playing the guitar and a kid with cancer and we would have had the complete cast of a disaster movie. I had been on the road for six months, hardly drinking, compulsively performing crunches, and carrying my pack like a paratrooper. I felt as if I could have joined the SAS.

The air grew thinner as we climbed higher. With every upward step my body grew heavier, largely because Claire kept unloading more of her luggage onto me, even though I already had a full backpack (or Bergen, as we call them in the SAS). It started to drizzle. The guide pointed out the ruins of Llaqtapata on the ridge below. They were magnificent, awe-inspiring and completely invisible through the mist.

Claire and I were the last to reach camp, which had been set up by our tiny Peruvian porters, who had started out long after us but arrived long before, despite carrying 50 kilograms each and not wearing shoes. The head porter asked if I wanted help with my bag, even though I was coping easily. Idiot.

In our small, cold tent, Claire told me she thought she had the flu. This is why we do not let women into the SAS.

It rained in the night. By morning, the ground was brown and muddy, the sky was black and threatening, and Claire was pink and sniffling. We climbed and climbed. It rained and rained. The track grew narrower and steeper. The head porter offered to have someone take my bag over the highest pass. I gave him the nod. I might need my strength in case I was attacked by alpacas. It was classical SAS thinking.

By now, Claire was walking with a stick. I hung back to protect her. A second group from the same trekking company started off half an hour

behind us. By midday, the youngest of them – a sporty private school boy – had overtaken us. He was followed by his dad, and a couple of unfit-looking English girls. It was an athletic humiliation on a par with being outrun by a power walker or out-kickboxed by a 45-kilogram girl (both of which have happened to me).

There was a miraculous break in the rain when we reached the sacred ruins of Runkuracay. The surfie and the swimmer dropped their daks and mooned for their holiday snaps, and the old gods took their revenge with a storm. It rained so heavily that we were, in effect, climbing up a small waterfall. I had water on the knee, brain, forehead, eyebrows, eyelids, eyelashes, nose, ears, cheeks, lips and chin. I slipped and fell into a kind of vertical lake. It is impossible to describe how wet this made me.

Our knowledgeable but defeated guide was reduced to pointing at a thick haze of rain clouds and saying, 'Below us lie the beautiful ruins of Phuyupatamarca. In better weather conditions, you would be able to see them.'

We camped for the night in a cesspool of bogs and mudflats. Somebody missed the hole in the toilet tent, where turds swam around freely like fat, brown fish. It seemed as if life could not get any worse, so it did. When we woke up the next morning, the rest of the group had left without us. We huddled in our tent, without food or fire. We would soon have to eat each other. Luckily, the head porter realised we were missing, and came back for us. It was another day, another hill. As I slid and slipped up it, my right knee suddenly buckled. It felt as though the patella had slipped out of place. I asked the head porter for the stick he had offered me forty-eight hours earlier.

He urged me to keep climbing, as there was a thirty-minute break at the peak. Claire, soaked and full of flu, had to slow down to keep pace with me. The second group passed us. First came the boy and his dad, then the English girls, then – incredibly – the English girls' parents. When we reached the peak, the break was over. The others were packing up to leave. Tears welled up in my eyes, lost in the dank, dripping crag that was now my face. I could not think of a time when I was more unhappy, apart from the day before.

It stopped raining just as we reached the youth hostel at Winay Wayna, the only modern building along the 82-kilometre hike. Inside the packed restaurant bar, hundreds of saturated, miserable ordinary people and a few insanely smiling, big-toothed Europeans were fighting for beer.

On the final day, we got up long before dawn, because some hippy idiots wanted to see the sun rise over Machu Picchu. The weather was fine. I would have enjoyed the descent into the temple complex had I not had a bad knee and a sick girlfriend, and if it had not been 4 am.

Machu Picchu is magnificent at daybreak. The ruined temples, abandoned by the Incas after the Spanish conquest of Peru, are among the most impressive sights in South America. However, you do not have to go on a three-day pilgrimage to see them. There is a train from a station close to Cuzco that does the trip in two and a half hours. There were more people waiting for the train home than there were seats on the train, but I would have killed a man with my bare hands – or, more likely, my walking stick – before I got left on the platform. We crowded onto the first carriages, along with a flock of locals and their chickens. The old locomotive choked into life, but as we pulled out of the station, the train shuddered and jerked and the back two carriages derailed. This was Peru, so they simply unhooked the carriages and carried on. I hoped the track was littered with happy, strapping Teutonic hikers, and I hoped they were stuck there forever.

A third Peruvian occupation is flying-tourists-in-circles-to-look-at-something-but-nobody-knows-what-it-is. The Nazca lines – a series of gigantic drawings in the sand of animals and men – are visible only from the air, which has led some people (including my brother) to conclude they are a message to alien spacecraft pilots. We flew over the lines in a tiny three-seater Cessna. Our pilot was part-man, part-barbecued sausage. When he caught me staring at the twisted burns that covered seventy per cent of his body, he said he had suffered 'mechanical-pump failure' in another Cessna, and barely survived a 3000-metre plunge into the Amazon jungle. As we took off, I quipped, 'You have checked the mechanical pump, haven't you?' I suspect it was not the first time he had been asked.

The lines are spectacular and mystifying. If they are a signal to UFOs, their text must be something like, 'We have long arms, big lizards and an enormous monkey. Please bring your own condor because we're all out.'

Even though our scenic flight was first thing in the morning, we managed to miss the last bus out of Nazca, and were forced to spend a second night in a one-attraction town. We ate spicy barbecued chicken and drank chilled local beer under a starless desert sky, but by the time we reached Chile, I was happy to be back in the First World.

I was in Argentina when I received a message from my mum, asking me to contact my brother urgently. I knew what it was about: a friend had

died. I had always felt this friend had lived with a noose around his neck, wandering through the forest of his imagined guilt, searching for a tree to hang himself. I felt old and heavy, with the horrible sadness that comes from knowing there are some conversations you will never have again. My sister's boyfriend had recently killed himself, and I had been no use to her, and I would be no use to my mate if he was dead, so I did not call.

Another email came, from my aunty, urging me to phone my brother. I thought she had got confused, and wanted me to phone my sister about her boyfriend. I had already done that, so I did not call. My mum got in touch with me a second time, and said it was very important that I should speak to my brother – but she did not know why.

I phoned him from an international call centre in Buenos Aires. I got through on my second attempt. He asked me what the weather was like in Argentina. I asked why he was so urgently concerned. He said there was something he had to tell me. He was moving in with Jo.

I said, 'What? My ex-wife, Jo?'

He said, 'Yes.'

I said, 'What? Moving in with her like flatmates?'

He said, 'No. Moving in with her like you moved in with her.'

I asked how long he had been seeing her.

'About a year,' he said.

Communist painter Yosl Bergner, who had worked a lot in the theatre, said he always imagined the actors carrying on their act after the scenery had been moved away. 'That's the feeling I've had right through my life,' he said, 'that something has moved, and the people still go on doing the act that they have to do.'

Something had moved behind me, and nobody had told me. I had carried on feeling guilty that Jo was lonely, when she was not lonely anymore. I felt suddenly liberated, as if a life sentence had been commuted to time served – minus one year. I was not angry with my brother, I was not upset, but I wished he had let me know. I could have come out of my cell earlier.

Instantly, I lost the constant, low-level tinnitus of shame that buzzed almost sub-audibly in my brain. I gave my brother my blessing and went out for a steak. All the self-indulgent, undermining grieving was finished. Not only did I not have to be the villain anymore, I could now play the victim if the mood took me: my brother and my ex-wife – how could they do this to me?

Brilliant.

TWELVE In which I get tricked into coming back, and give a few hundred dollars to Kerry Packer, who must have been a bit short at the time

Brad never accepted that I had left. I had resigned, cleared my desk, collected my entitlements and crossed the world, but he kept telling me I was taking leave without pay – I just did not realise it. As usual, Brad was right. He could see I was addicted to *Ralph*, even when I could not.

I had promised I would come back to cover for him if he ever took long service leave and went to Europe. He said he could not go if I was not there to look after his magazines. I did not believe he would go, because he did not like foreign countries. He liked sitting on his sundeck in the summer, with a bottle of chardonnay, and marinated meats grilling on the barbecue.

Brad had risen in the company. Nick now published magazines for women and children, whereas Brad had become publisher of the P-mags, and he soon got *Ralph* too. In addition, he had been given all ACP's sports titles – a strange selection that included, among others, 1980s-style newspaper *Pro Basketball Today*, 1970s-style newspaper *Rugby League Week*, and 1960s-style newspaper *Harness Racing Weekly*. Each of these publications was like a time capsule, buried at the height of its success, and unchanged since. Brad had also won the motoring titles, which included *Wheels*, *Motor* and *Four x Four Australia*. Brad emailed me in Brazil and said I was going

to be editor-in-chief of the group, but I did not want to be editor-in-chief of anything. I was lying on Copacabana beach in Rio, watching the beautiful people strip off for Carnivale, writing a bad novel, and buying ice-cold beer on the street for $1 a can.

Brad sent me another email saying he had finally decided to go to Europe, and would I come home. Claire wanted to come home. I never wanted to come home, have never wanted to come home. I never want to leave the pub, never want to fly back to the airport, never want to stop working, but I had promised Brad, so we came back. He offered us his house while he was away, but before I had left I had bought a tiny one-bedroom unit in Rozelle, which I rented out until we returned.

I imagined I would work at ACP for three months – two weeks with Brad, then ten weeks to cover for his long service. I thought I would earn a publisher's salary, which I hoped might be enough to keep me for the year. After that, I planned to go back to freelance writing.

When I moved into the unit, Claire did too, bringing in-house several non-core services that – in line with current business thinking – I had outsourced to specialist providers. These included cooking, which I had contracted to the Larn Thong Thai Restaurant in Rozelle, and washing, which I had entrusted to Laura's Laundromat in Birchgrove. Before we could cook, however, we had to go shopping. She made a list of things we would 'definitely need' to set up a home kitchen. The first item was 'breadcrumbs'. I did not even know breadcrumbs were considered a food. I thought they were a waste by-product. I have certainly never eaten them. What else were we going to buy? Fish scales? No, coathangers. Coathangers belonged to a non-food category that 'we might as well get since we're in the supermarket'. Again, I had no idea you could buy coathangers. I thought they came from the laundrette. Why would you retail something that everyone – even me – has far too many of? We spent nearly $200 on shopping but, puzzlingly, only had enough ingredients to cook three complete meals. When we came home, we put it all in drawers. Even the carrier bags. Every woman I have ever known has furiously hoarded plastic carrier bags, as if there is some imminent danger of a shortage. They don't cost anything, you get more of them every day, and the amount of storage space they consume is inversely proportional to the minimal joy to be had from owning thousands of wispy little pockets of polythene – but chicks dig them.

I could not find my pen, so I asked if she had seen it.

'It's in the rubbish drawer,' she told me.

The 'rubbish' drawer, apparently, was one drawer up from the plastic bag drawer. It was the drawer with my things in it. The rubbish drawer contained a Walkman, a screwdriver, a camera, shoe polish, a hammer and sticky tape. A more fitting name for it might have been the 'utility drawer', although my attempts to popularise this title met with stiff resistance.

I told this story to Chriso, and he said, 'I bet it's the third drawer down.' It was. He said, 'The first drawer's for cutlery, the second drawer's for big cutlery, and the third drawer's for your stuff.'

My old gherkin jars full of small change were moved out of eyesight, replaced by a shelf of cookery books. Worse, I discovered Claire secretly contributing to my pocket-money savings – by adding two-dollar coins. Two-dollar coins did not go in the gherkin jars! Christ, dollar coins only made it in there a couple of years ago. She also filled the cupboards with labour-saving devices such as a juicer, which removed all the drudgery of pouring orange juice from a carton into a glass by breaking down the process into twelve easy steps – select orange, cut orange, juice orange, repeat four times.

My diet subtly improved, while remaining largely unchanged. She learned to cook the Larn Thong's signature salad dishes better than the Larn Thong. As for the laundry, several early joint attempts to iron shirts ended in frustration. This kind of specialist task went back to the professionals.

Brad's magazines had moved into a new building, Stockland House on Castlereagh Street, opposite the rear entrance to Park Street. It was a newer, cleaner space, but with similarly eccentric elevators. The Department for Women also rented a floor in Castlereagh Street, and the P-mag journalists felt the imaginary scorn of lesbians in their guilty hearts.

I came for my orientation, and discovered Brad had tricked me. He was not taking his long service leave – and, when I thought about it, he had never explicitly said he would. In fact, he was going to the UK, France and Italy for only three weeks, then taking two weeks on his deck to recover with his barbie and chardy.

I was not going to get the massive windfall I had invented for myself, but I was not unhappy to be back at ACP. My mind was bursting under the pressure of nine months worth of unrealised ideas, which had come to me

unbidden and long outstayed their welcome. I felt much freer than before, because my brother was with Jo. I had new energy, now that I did not have to divert so much of my fury against myself.

I was not sure what I was going to do, but I felt confident that I could do it.

People and *The Picture* were hurting. The OFLC's censors had adopted a bully's approach to the implementation of their new 1999 guidelines, and ACP had decided to make a political issue of the so-called 'heal-to-a-single-crease' issue.

The censors held that an unrestricted newsstand magazine was allowed to feature a woman's breasts and pubic region, and a man's limp penis, but every picture now had to be vetted for 'genital emphasis' or 'sexualised nudity containing genitalia'. What this meant in practice was that a soft dick could be shown in all its veiny glory, but if a woman's inner labia were visible, they had to be airbrushed out. Offending models were given a compulsory clitoridectomy; their genitals were healed to a single crease. This made the P-mags insufficiently pornographic for their readers and, arguably, negated one of the few useful social functions of pornography: the removal of mystery and fear.

The magazines received occasional letters from women worried that their genitals were deformed because they had twice as many labia as the average nude. This gave grounds for another exercise in fake politics, in which the P-mags bizarrely posed as protectors of female body image, and argued that sexist censorship was confusing and distressing the female population.

ACP fought the issue to embarrass the censors, who seemed to be taking a harder line against the P-mags than other publications. The P-mags were not allowed to show a even a hint of aureole on their covers, whereas imported magazines such as *Wallpaper* and 'artistic' journals such as *Black and White* could get away with topless shots. As long as the nipples were not intended for working-class eyes, it appeared to be okay.

Throughout the 1990s, the OFLC had progressively banned from covers most of the terms the P-mags might use to advertise the fact they were smut. Coverlines could not include the words 'arse', 'cunt' or 'fuck', nor 'horny', 'root' or 'pubes'. They could not even use 'nunga', a neologism invented at *Sextra* magazine because, although the censors did not know what it meant, they knew what it was supposed to mean.

At the same time, the OFLC was engaged in an idiotic attempt to

force *Australian Women's Forum* to tone down its readers' sexual-fantasy letters, which eventually led, in part, to the closure of that magazine. (Helen Vnuk, the last editor of *AWF*, chronicled the growing militancy of the OFLC in her book, *Snatched*.)

In several states, the P-mags were labelled Category 1, and sold in plastic bags that left only their logos visible. As the P-mags grew cleaner and more difficult to browse, the internet grew dirtier, cheaper and more accessible. A man with an erection and no imagination was more likely to find gratification from free and uncensored images in cyberspace than from magazines whose neutered models had no nipples on the cover and no vaginas inside.

Sales were falling, and advertising revenue was falling too. The mail-order video boom had bust, and the phone sex ads that replaced the movie ads were being legislated out of existence. Commercial phone sex began as a cottage industry. Women – usually based in Melbourne or the Gold Coast, for some reason – would talk from the comfort of their living rooms while men masturbated from the comfort of theirs. If the woman was out shopping, or having dinner, the man had to call back later.

The technology for 0055 numbers developed in the early 1990s. These numbers often accessed pre-recorded sex talk, but callers could also speak to live girls. Operators charged premium rates – $3.95 per minute – and the itemised calls appeared on the user's phone bill. Call centres grew up, packed with old women pretending to be young women, fat women pretending to be thin, bored women pretending to be excited, all describing their underwear or how much loved oral sex. The call centres put the home-based lines out of business, because every call was answered. Even if every worker on the premises was busy, the calls electronically cascaded to women elsewhere.

Phone sex was victimless vice, safe prostitution in the age of AIDS, but the industry was heavily criticised by people who had nothing better to do. Independent Senator Brian Harradine said he would only support John Howard's GST if the government agreed to a new system whereby people who liked to masturbate over the telephone registered themselves as such with the phone company. Only those who had a pin number could use the new service, and the Australian industry collapsed over night. ACP campaigned hard on behalf of its ad clients, even employing a lobbyist, struggling to paint their enterprises as embattled Aussie employers who were providing much-needed jobs for women.

The lines moved offshore, and were run off 0011 numbers from Third World countries. Margins were lower, and some African governments started to refuse to allow profits to be repatriated to Australia. Around the year 2000, the short life of the phone sex industry ended, and the P-mags lost more than 1000 pages of advertising, worth $2 million dollars.

The P-mags business was under pressure everywhere. Opera patron JA was not particularly keen to be associated with pornography, and began to ask rhetorically, 'Should we get out of this business altogether? Or should we go the whole way, and buy up some brothels?' He have would like to have sold the P-mags, despite the profits they continued to bring in for the company, but there was nobody with the money, the interest and the expertise to take them over.

The magazines themselves were not what they used to be. Nobody could edit *The Picture* like Brad, and the P-mags' inexplicable run of very good writers was over when Paul Toohey left *The Picture* for *The Australian* in 1999.

Lastly, there had been a minor scandal inside ACP when it was discovered that more than one hundred subscribers to *Practical Parenting*, a magazine for young families, had instead been sent the Category 1 *Picture Premium*, because the magazines shared the same subscription code.

People at ACP talked of the future of the P-mags in terms of 'managed decline', which made the success of *Ralph* all the more important, both for Brad and the company. Carl had put his life into the magazine. He had introduced new writers, and added regular front-section pieces, including the fantastic Yvonne Firmin column, soon to become the most popular page in the magazine. He came up with the top-selling annual 'Sex & Money' issue. He had also suffered some terrible luck with covers, culminating in Wonderbra model Sophie Falkiner pulling out of a promised shoot, leaving Carl with nothing but a grainy underwear advertising shot to slap on his May 2000 cover. *Ralph*'s sales had climbed for a short period after I left, then stalled. I came back during the last weeks of sale of the Sophie Falkiner issue, which sold worse than any issue in the previous twelve months.

Sadly, *Ralph*'s slide towards the ridiculous had been halted. This was possibly because Carl was not a ridiculous person, whereas I was: there are only so many times you can wake up in a field covered in kebab and still retain the dignity and poise that separates human beings from squeaky

plastic bath-time toys. Some of the *Ralph* interviews had sunk back to the level of the street press, following the agenda of the publicist rather than the magazine. For example, Michael Palin was asked whether the reaction to his show differed in the UK and Russia, the answer to which could only have been of possible interest to sociologists conducting comparative studies of audience behaviour. They were words to fill up space. A return to unjournalism was looming. Brad had asked Ash to write a guide to all the islands of the South Pacific, when Ash had only been to two of them. A freelance writer who had never visited Dubai wrote a piece claiming there was no nightlife in the emirate when, in fact, there were more than 300 bars (and I had once pub-crawled them until 3 am).

ACP had abandoned my tactic of releasing the magazine on the same day as *FHM*, and thus allowed *FHM* to come out first and win the bulk of the early sales. There were several thousand veteran men's magazine readers in the market for a new title – the regular buyers of *Max* and *GQ*, the bottom and top ends of the scale – and they all seemed to have chosen *FHM*. I did not even have to look at *FHM* to see why, I only had to weigh it. It had grown by about 32 pages, whereas *Ralph* had remained the same size for the same price. Any new reader walking into the newsagent and finding two broadly similar magazines would choose the title that was fifteen per cent thicker.

The other obvious problem remained New Zealand. *Ralph* did not even send over as many copies as *FHM* sold (we shipped 15 000 while they were selling 20 000; to sell 20 000, they were probably shipping 30 000). Brad hired me as a consultant, and took me to a meeting with JA and his sidekick, David Gardiner, in which I argued we needed to either secure another distributor in New Zealand, or launch a dedicated New Zealand edition – preferably both. I was told I had not thought enough about the issue, whereas I had actually thought more about it than almost anything else in the world. After the meeting, I wrote them an email saying how 'distressed' I was that they had chosen to receive my comments this way. Brad never invited me to another meeting with them, but I was told I could go ahead and try to build a New Zealand edition.

Brad flew to London, and left me as acting publisher of Ralph and the P-mags for five weeks. The P-mags, he assured me, would take care of themselves. I was to concentrate on 'fixing' *Ralph*. They did not quite take care of themselves, however. Press releases about the 'heal-to-crease' controversy had been sent out, and Brad had flown to London, leaving me

to handle the media. I had not known the issue existed – and, in fact, it practically did not. It was usually easy enough for the designer to choose pictures in which the inner labia were not visible. I was not going to go on TV to pretend to be angry about it, so I passed that job on to Carlee, who at least had labia.

The easiest way to fix *Ralph* was to put Anna Kournikova on the cover. 'Annawatch' was still the best-loved page in the magazine. Hundreds of thousands of Australian men wondered what she looked like in her underwear, and many of them, it seemed, thought about little else. We had no chance of ever securing a shoot with Anna, whose 'people' were thought to hate the magazine, particularly as we had raised a petition to try to dissuade her from marrying her then fiancé, Sergei Federov. *Ralph*'s new '101 Sexiest Women' issue (one woman more than *FHM*) was the best-selling issue of the year, so I decided *Ralph* should produce the 'Book of Anna', a 101 sexiest-women style tip-on where every one of the 101 women was Anna Kournikova.

We called in every paparazzi shot of her, every tennis shot from every sports agency, every PR shot from every product she had endorsed. We separated them into categories, and made a full page out of 'upskirt' shots of her tennis knickers. It was my highest and lowest moment, when I embraced the basest instincts of the worst magazine buyers. I realised how much I had learned from Brad.

None of the images was close to cover quality. We bought a paparazzi shot of her face – breaking every rule of men's magazines by showing no flesh beyond cleavage in a dress – and retouched it more than anything we had retouched before, to make it seem like a studio portrait. We smoothed her skin to a shiny, golden brown, smoothed the highlights on her face, whitened her eyes and teeth, added colour to her lips and removed the bags from under her eyes. We added to the bottom of the picture to extend her cleavage, and moved her pupils to make it seem as though she was looking at the camera (sadly, this only worked with one eye out of the pair). We brightened the blue glow behind her. She no longer looked like a human being. We turned her into a flawless (except for her eyes) digitised Anna. Our 'improved' Anna was later used on a poster for the International Socialist Organisation (the Australian arm of the SWP) advertising a meeting about how the media manipulates women's bodies.

With Brad's blessing, I asked Marketing to book every available Metrolite. For the first time, we had a big, effective advertising campaign,

a big product (magazine + free magazine), and a big name on the cover, all at once. The August 2000 edition of *Ralph* was halfway to being the *Ralph* every previous issue should have been. Massive early sales suggested we had under-printed, and I managed to convince our brilliant new production manager, Mark Hukins, to pump out an extra 20 000. We sold, in total, 122 799 copies: the best any men's lifestyle magazine had done to that date.

I thought I was a genius. I thought I was God. I thought nothing could beat me. Then, a couple of weeks into our sale, Amanda told me the street posters outside the building had been removed. They had been taken down on behalf of our former publisher, Nick, by one of the people who had previously supported his contention that street posters did not work for magazines. They had replaced them with street posters for one of their own titles, *Woman's Day*.

I was furious beyond all expression. I did not trust myself to speak to the person concerned, so I asked to discuss it by email. At first, I was told the sites had been booked four months previously but somehow, mysteriously, the *Woman's Day* booking had not shown up on the group marketing manager's list. My correspondent took 'full responsibility', i.e. was not prepared to do anything about it. They asked me to appreciate it made sense 'for the two sites to be part of [their] overall buy'. Then they asked me to ask myself, 'Are two sites really effective in reaching critical mass?' (This, from people who had previously claimed all street posters were a waste of money.)

I said I found their replies insulting. My correspondent claimed a 'soft spot' for *Ralph*. I said I was tired of hearing about their 'soft spot'. The last time they had mentioned it was when they had asked to use *Ralph*'s free movie-ticket tip-on for *Cosmopolitan*. They said they were tired of my emails. They tried to blame Amanda. The *Woman's Day* poster stayed up, the *Ralph* posters stayed down.

This episode changed the way I thought about work, and about people. I had always felt an imaginative sympathy for everybody else, an overriding conviction that we were – on some level – all the same. I did not feel the same as the people who had taken down my posters. I would not have done that. I could not have lived with the contradiction. If I wanted to do the best for my magazine, I would have to start behaving the way they did, as if nothing else mattered – and I did still think of *Ralph* as my magazine, and I realised I was back to stay. I dropped all pretence of a situationalist attitude to *Ralph*. I just wanted to make the best men's magazine

in the world, because I thought maybe I could. It was a tiny tremor in the history of *Ralph*, but an earthquake in my own life. I never spoke to Nick again, and one day he disappeared, so urgently drawn to pursue unspecified interests that he was gone before there was time to organise an official farewell. Seddo, meanwhile, was back at ACP, editing *Street Machine*, and laughing.

I was given an office with Helen Vnuk's husband, Dan Lennard and Glenn Smith. Dan, Glenn and I were Brad's Special Projects team. My special project was *Ralph*, Dan's was a series of one-shots and the Category 1 magazine *Red Hot People*, while Glenn's was to redesign all sports magazines. We soon became a (very) small gang of mates, who all went to the pub together.

I was officially made editor-in-chief of *Ralph*, and celebrated my new status by buying a good suit. Everyone thought I was a twat for wearing a suit. It looked incongruous when I stood drinking with the others in the pub, as if I had unaccountably wandered over from a group of stockbrokers to embarrass a bunch of skaters. Wherever I was, people assumed I was the bouncer. When I stood close to the entrance at the Edinburgh Castle hotel on Pitt Street, a queue formed in front of me and the leader inquired timidly if he could come in. The Good Suit needed regular maintenance. It was often in the drycleaners, as were my shirts, most of which were left over from the white-shirt shoot that appeared in the second issue of the *Australian Financial Review Magazine*.

One morning I came in to my office and went to hang my shirts on the back of the door, but was left standing in an empty doorway, dangling them in the air like a sad, unfunny mime artist (in other words, like every mime artist who ever lived). First, I noticed the door handle was missing, then I realised the whole door was gone. Brad had given it to Jackie, the production woman, who had complained 'people' were mistaking her room for a corridor, because it did not have a door. This seemed unlikely, since anyone who really thought Jackie's room was a corridor would have finished up walking out of the window, another victim of ACP's alleged suicide promotion policy. Jackie had asked Brad for a door and, since I had never expressed a particularly strong feeling for or against doors, he figured I could do without one. The loss of the door made me feel that nothing in life was permanent, and one day I could arrive at work to discover there was no computer, no desk, no carpet. I began elaborately to praise my

remaining furniture, to make clear how much I valued it. I paid the occasional sentimental visit to my old door in Jackie's office, and once I even hung my shirts from it, for old time's sake.

Brad's fiefdom was an island of sanity in an ocean of madmen's saliva. We appointed our own brand manager, and prevented him from developing sectional interests. We worked with our own, brilliant circulation manager. A new credo of honesty and efficiency was adopted in meetings – which were kept to a minimum – along with plates of strawberries and tiny, cute fruit muffins of the type elves might favour. It became less popular so say 'top of mind', although Brad had developed an alarming tendency to ask for 'marquee names'.

We started to fix *Ralph* by making it bigger. Magazines generally go up in size when they carry more advertising. They are fatter towards the end of the year than at the beginning, because advertisers promote their products more heavily at Christmas. An average issue of *FHM* was now as fat as a Christmas issue of *Ralph*. Our advertising targets had been set too low. I could not increase the advertising targets, since they had been set, along with the advertising staff's bonuses, at the start of the financial year. If we changed them, we would be messing with the very fabric of the universe, we would rend a hole in the space–time continuum, and probably all get thrown back to the nineteenth century, where we would inadvertently murder our great-grandparents and thus ensure that we would never be born. I could, however, alter the calculation on which the magazine size was based. Brad sent Jeanette, the new financial analyst, to investigate its origins, and she discovered it had been invented many years ago by somebody at the *Australian Women's Weekly*, who had based his figures not on some rising scale of profitability, but on 'instinct'.

My instinct differed from his instinct, and *Ralph* began to grow like a model's breasts under an airbrush. Many people in the company liked to cling to the idea that the Australian market was not accepting the men's lifestyle category at the same speed as the UK or the US – partly to give credence to their spurious claims of some particular local expertise – but the fact was *FHM* UK was more than 300 pages thick. If *Ralph* could produce a 300-page magazine, instead of pseudo-economical stick-thin 164-page editions, we would wipe out the competition and double our sales. In corporate Australia, however, that level of investment is reserved for idiotic marketing initiatives, or the expense accounts of kleptocratic

executives. It is inconceivable to spend money to increase market share by greatly improving the product. Nevertheless, Brad gave me another sixteen pages, then another thirty-two.

Meanwhile, other people were pretending to be angry with *Ralph*. An organisation called Suicide Australia, which sounded like a body set up to encourage people to kill themselves, had complained about a fashion shoot in which we showed men dressed in business suits apparently jumping off skyscrapers. It was supposed to be a parody of the cartoon image of tycoons leaping to their death after a stock market crash, but Suicide Australia claimed to believe it glamorised youth suicide. The organisation demanded an apology, and that we should print an article condemning suicide. There was an implication that they would write to our advertisers and warn them not to buy space in the magazine – since anyone who bought their products would, presumably, kill themselves. There was a letter enclosed from a South Australian Green MP, supporting Suicide Australia's contention that *Ralph* was sensationalist, crass, and potentially fatal.

I knew suicide like a friend. When we were young, Merv gassed himself and Dave threw himself from a tower block window. Another mate had hung himself a couple of years earlier. Months ago, my sister's boyfriend had choked on the fumes of his own car. I spent hundreds of mornings imagining pressing a pistol to my head, slicing a knife through my veins, or jumping – yes, jumping – and dying before I hit the ground.

I was not encouraged by pictures in magazines. The idea was ludicrous and patronising and sick, like the parents who blame their children's deaths on Black Sabbath records. It strips life of all its value if you believe somebody can pick up a magazine, turn to the fashion spread and think, 'Hey, that looks cool. I think I'll give it a try.'

I wrote to the organisation and the MP asking them how they dared accuse me of encouraging people to kill themselves – and, incidentally, what commercial purpose they imagined that might serve. I bravely put Carlee on the news to argue my point. Carlee apologised to anyone who was distressed by the pictures, but not to Suicide Australia, which led the organisation to claim *Ralph* was one of the few unrepentant media outlets it had ever approached. When I received no reply from the MP, I wrote again, asking how she had the nerve to waste my time like this. I never heard from her. She was too busy blaming other things on the media.

When the sports magazines – which had previously been in Epping – joined us in Castlereagh Street, Brad moved me to an office in the same

space as *Rugby League Week*. I was supposed to be group editor-in-chief, and I trained up a couple of people on *Pro Basketball Today*, but I was not much help beyond that. I did not know about Rugby League, I knew about magazines. I was as handy to have around as somebody who did not know about magazines but knew about accounting.

Eventually I got my old job back, and took an office in *Ralph*. I had told Carl I would not, but I did. Carl was moved sideways to work on *Emergency*, a launch idea that never happened, and I was both editor-in-chief and editor of *Ralph*. We had a new chief sub, Elisabeth, and she acquired a new sub, Ivan. She acquired him in the way both a chief sub-editor acquires a sub and a dominatrix acquires a sub. Ivan did her bidding – in fact, he did everyone's bidding – got whipped for his pains, and enjoyed it.

Ivan was an inveterate chuckler, a big cheesy grinner, an unconscious gurner and a great bloke to have around. He lightened the mood in the office when everyone was sad that Carl had been moved. He was fantastically enthusiastic, thrilled to be working on a mainstream men's magazine when previously he had edited a trade publication for the double glazing industry. He was a man whose face God had left incomplete, knowing – in his famously infinite wisdom – that Ivan's parents would quickly finish the job with a fetching pair of spectacles.

Ralph, like all magazines, was full of errors, so I invented Eric the workie to take responsibility for them. If a spelling mistake went through, or the pages were not numbered consecutively, or a photograph was miscaptioned, it was always the fault of our hapless work experience boy, who had turned his misnamed 'talents' to another area of production. I needed a picture of Eric, so I chose the ageless Ivan. At first, he appeared wearing his glasses, but the second time he was photographed with his contact lenses in place, and he looked like a vole. He also looked less incompetent. I had the artists graffiti a huge pair of floating spectacles over his face, in the great schoolboy tradition of textbook desecration. From then on, every time Eric appeared, he wore the same pair of massive drawn-on glasses.

As always, I got carried away with this effect, and began drawing glasses on fashion models, the Doner, anything. We invented a new script font, 'Eric Casual', with which to caption Eric's adventures. *FHM* thought Eric was ridiculous. Other journalists in the company could not understand why we were wasting pages of a men's lifestyle magazine scribbling on an idiot, when we could be pointing out that the music of the band You

Am I was derived from an eclectic cocktail of influences including The Clash, Cold Chisel, The Jam and The Sports, or celebrating the cinematic achievements of Francis Ford Coppola. The readers knew, however. The little boys understood. We were saying, 'Look, we're just like you. We think it's funny to draw a cock in the mouth of Isaac Newton in your physics textbook, too.'

Once again, I became entranced by my magazine, the people who worked there, and the terrifying energies it generated. I preferred being at work to being at home, where all I did was compose impossible lists of things to do, and plan the murder of my corporate foes. (Could I make it look like suicide? Maybe I could fool one of them into killing the other …)

I found excuses to visit the office at weekends, and sat at my desk answering emails. I was rarely alone. Dom had always worked a seven-day week. Amanda was usually packaging returns in the fashion office, and Elisabeth regularly rode to work on her bizarrely customised bicycle, to finish proofs she had been unable to complete during the week because she needed to spend the greater part of the day reprimanding Ivan. I often saw my staff seven days a week – every day of the year, except holidays. So, in August, I went on holiday with them.

Chriso and his girlfriend Fi, Claire and I, Ash, a couple of photographers, and door-stealing Jackie and her boyfriend drove down to Falls Creek, for a week in the snow.

We shared a large apartment, cooked together, drank together, sat watching skateboard videos together, and tried hard not to talk about *Ralph*.

I was the only person who could not ski, although most people chose to snowboard. I went onto the slopes with Claire and Fi, who urged me to just sort of stand with my legs apart and sail down the hill. After I stacked for the eighth time in twenty-five minutes, I realised I was not going to be able to teach myself to ski. I had fallen forwards, backwards and to both sides. I had landed on my wrists, my arms, my knees, my thighs and my shoulders. There were no new ways to fall. I asked Fi what I could do to improve my technique.

'Stop crashing into things,' she said.

I was battling the terrifyingly named 'Wombat's Ramble', a gentle beginners' run that meandered down to our chalet. Swarms of five year olds whizzed past my wriggling legs as I kicked at the air like an upended cockroach choking on Mortein. I gave up. I tucked my skis under my arm, dropped them, tucked them under my other arm, dropped them again,

swore, and stomped home through the snow in my ludicrously uncomfortable plastic boots. I caught the chairlift back to the top of Wombat's Ramble, almost blinded a Japanese guy with my ski pole, nearly face-planted Claire as I wrenched myself out of the still-moving seat, and enrolled in ski school.

I booked a personal lesson with an instructor called Peach, from Brisbane ('That's north of Sydney,' she told me). I never saw her hair (it was hidden under a beanie) or her eyes (they were guarded by goggles), but I suspect she was blonde, blue-eyed and in her mid-twenties. She was initially surprised that a 37-year-old could have lived life with all the motor skills of a newborn foal, but she quickly took control.

My first lesson was wildly unsuccessful. The difference between skiing and sliding out of control down a steep hill is the ability to snowplough: to position the skis in a wide V-shape, with the apex in line with your nose. If you cannot make a snowplough, you cannot stop. I found it impossible to turn my feet to the correct angle, and when I finally did make a V, it was so wide I could not move out of it. Peach pulled from her pocket a length of rubber with a clamp at each end. I guessed it was not something normally used with adults when she told me it was called the 'edgy-wedgy'. She tied the tips of my skis together with the edgy-wedgy, but I still could not hold the V. She skied backwards down a slope, holding my skis together with her hands, but even that didn't help. I was a disgrace to the ski school. I made no progress at all. I went out and drank beer until two in the morning, and woke up feeling like a map of the human body. Every sinew throbbed individually, each joint was marked by its own particular pain.

I had another lesson with Peach. She was startled. I'd got better. She said, 'You should go out drinking every night.'

I told her I did. There are ten (of course) rules in the Alpine Responsibility Code. Rule 9 is: 'Do not ski … or undertake any other alpine activity if drugs or alcohol impair your ability.' That was not me, then.

Peach said she'd had a merry evening back at her chalet, telling her mother-in-law she had tried the edgy-wedgy on a grown-up 'and he did not mind at all'. She taught me how to turn, using preschool metaphors: to scrape the snow with the backs of my skis as if I was spreading peanut butter on toast – which I have never done – and to bring down the arch of my foot as if I were squashing a spider. It became apparent that she was relating to me as a toddler. When I turned more easily to the left than the right,

she told me I had 'one mongie leg'. At the end of the second day, I skied all the way down Wombat's Ramble – a twenty-minute run at learner's pace – and only stacked when I hit a patch of mud.

Ski runs all seem to be named after people who have suffered terrible accidents. If somewhere is called 'Harry's Rest', it usually turns out Harry had not stopped for a smoko, he had actually died there, possibly while attending ski school. The mud patch became Dapin's Curve, and was quickly joined in my mental geography of the resort by Dapin's Folly, Dapin's Downfall and Dapin's Plunge.

At Falls Creek, each stage of junior ski school takes its title from a native animal, none of which is particularly known for its alpine adaptability. An absolute beginner is a 'koala' (which would die immediately if you pulled it out of its eucalypt and left it to slide around in snow). Next comes a 'platypus' (which can only live alongside riverbanks). I was amazed at the end of the day to find I had reached 'possum' status, especially since a possum might actually survive on a mountain.

Peach taught me to ski as if she were feeding a baby, chopping up the skills into small, easily digestible portions and slowly spooning them to me. I understood she still thought of me as a preschooler when she yelled delightedly, 'Look at your little legs moving!' as I executed a turn. My legs are hairy, muscular and tattooed. They are not, by anybody's standards, little.

Learning was exhilarating and satisfying, especially when we both had such low hopes. After three days, I told Peach I had not hit anybody on the slopes.

'It's just luck,' she said.

The truth was I had built up enough command of the skis to steer them in the direction I wanted to go, and I could start and stop my descent pretty much as I wished. That day I woke up a possum, but I went to bed a blue possum. Blue possums have all the powers of a possum, plus the ability to exercise them on blue (intermediate) runs.

As a blue possum, I finally realised I had been wearing my ski boots far too tight, and released the pressure. This made the whole exercise indescribably easier, and I found I could handle the intermediate runs with the confidence and grace of the average terrified marsupial.

We began discussing parallel turns, the next stage of my skiing development. Peach, who seemed unable to open her mouth without saying something honest, said, 'I can't believe we're talking about this technical stuff … I thought we'd be talking about pizzas or something.' I couldn't

believe it, either. I looked at Peach with a child's admiration. She seemed to tower above me, even though I was about twelve centimetres taller.

On the final day of our course, I reached cockatoo level (called, for some reason, 'rocky cocky') but I was never to progress to the fat-arsed heights of wombat-hood, because bad weather closed down the lifts.

I learned a couple of new things about my staff at the snow. I found out Ash could throw a snowball 30 metres with an accuracy sometimes attributed to precision bombing, and Chriso could cook fajitas (if Fi helped him). The most useful thing I learned, however, was how to change gear in a car. Ash insisted on taking me for a drive one snowless day. I think he did it for the entertainment value, in the same spirit as you might try to get your dog to bark 'Advance Australia Fair'.

For two hours, we taxied around the car park at Falls Creek, then drove up and down the mountain itself. It was surprisingly easy, compared with skiing, and I acquitted myself quite well until I drove into oncoming traffic on my way back to the car park.

It inspired me to get back behind the wheel at home. I started taking lessons again, this time in an automatic. I made the mistake of ringing around driving schools until I found the cheapest guy. I might as well have gone back to Fiji.

My new instructor was an Asian bloke. It was difficult to understand what he was saying (although it was usually 'Brake!' or 'Nooooooooo!') and he was on edge because he was giving up smoking.

I took one lesson in the late afternoon, and after about thirty minutes sitting beside me as I raced happily up the wrong side of the road, he lit a cigarette. 'It's my first one today,' he said.

My next lesson was in the morning. Again, he lit a cigarette. 'It's my first one today,' he said.

Every time he took me out, he started smoking again. Meanwhile, I was clocking up my required fifty hours in Claire's Laser. She was genuinely shocked that I didn't know what broken white lines meant (maybe they were trying to save on paint) or why there were zigzags painted down the middle of some roads (drunks, probably). She yelled in terror as I tried to overtake a turning bus, swerved into the wrong lane and finished up, as ever, driving into oncoming traffic. My driving instructor made a similar noise on Anzac Bridge when, instead of accelerating, I braked as I changed lanes.

He lit a cigarette. 'It's my first one today,' he said. I wondered how much longer I could keep doing this to him.

I was woken up one night by fire trucks outside the window. All the neighbours were standing around looking at something. Claire asked if I thought we should leave the building, but I have never thought I should leave a building at 4 am. I probably should have, though, because the apartment block was on fire.

On my way to work that morning, I noticed the underground car park had been burned out. Somebody had firebombed the Laser. The exterior of the car had virtually disappeared, and the front bumper had melted into the tarmac. All that remained was a skeleton of a machine, with the steering lock clinging ironically to the useless, roasted steering wheel.

I presumed it was just kids, and not somebody campaigning to keep death off the roads. Elisabeth told me there was a maniac going around torching Ford Lasers in Stanmore, so perhaps the car had fallen victim to a serial killer. Either way, it was obvious the Fates didn't want me to drive.

The skiing holiday was *Ralph*'s only group sporting function, but periodic fitness fads seized the office the way hula hoops and hotpants briefly gripped school playgrounds in the 1970s. One week, all the girls were doing yoga; the next week, all the boys (except James) were lifting weights. Squash had several bursts of popularity, encouraged by Brad, who was – as in all things – a master tactician.

For part of each year, Brad ran a team in a local touch football comp. It won the trophy, of course. Boxing came and went. A trickle of staff attended the Boxing Works gym, which opened a few doors down from the office. Carlee, like me, was going to have a fight, but somehow, like me, she never quite got around to it. One season, Dom and Daz played fourth-grade Rugby Union.

People often came to work with the intention of going for a run at lunchtime, but regularly got no further than the pub. Ash once took Carlee and Elisabeth for a jog, and came back saying the girls ran so slowly he had to look down at his feet to check that they were moving.

Gym drifted in and out of fashion. One year everyone was a member of the Hyde Park, the next we all joined the Catholic Club gym (I was, I think, its only Jewish affiliate). Even particular pieces of equipment enjoyed spurts of popularity, from the rowing machine to the punching bag.

Everybody seemed to be on strange diets. Ash appeared to eat nothing but sushi and tuna. Daz lived on two-minute noodles, because they were cheap. Chriso's diet was equal parts beer and oxygen. Elisabeth had a strange allergic condition that caused her lips to blow up as if they were

Botoxed and her eyelids to swell into ping-pong balls if she ate anything but chicken and potatoes. Chocolate was a particular trigger for her terrifying transformation, and I often left pieces on her desk, in the hope it would make her head explode.

I started training at Boxing Works and realised I had forgotten everything I ever knew, except how to sweat. My only exercise became the walk to the Windsor, which was half a block away. Once again, my belly started to swell like Elisabeth's face. I was 10 kilograms overweight, my surplus body mass composed entirely of the bulges that result from the unique chemical reaction that occurs when curry meets beer.

I decided to lose weight like the stars, to strip off fat like Calista Flockhart, and diet down to a body like Geri Halliwell's. I read *NW* and *Woman's Day*, and figured out that a diet low in complex carbohydrates had the most celebrity cachet. Complex carbohydrates include rice, bread, potatoes and pasta: basically, everything that makes you feel full. Except beer.

On the advice of Ash, I adopted a no-complex-carbs-after-3 pm rule. For six weeks I ate grilled meat and salad every evening. I was hungry all the time. I tried to fill up with sparkling mineral water, which is a bit like trying to gorge yourself on air. Then I turned to beer. A couple of bottles were all I needed to turn chicken-breast-and-lettuce into a satisfactory meal – but eight schooners transformed it into a feast.

I was drunk through most of the diet, but I went to the Catholic Club gym every other day, performed hundreds of sit-ups each morning, and after a month and a half, I had lost four kilos. I began reading diet books and talking to girlfriends about their own punishing regimens. I realised what I had missed in not dieting. I loved following a program, being forced to conform to an arbitrary set of rules to reach a quantifiable goal. It was like being an elite athlete. Sort of.

I was especially impressed by Lisa, who had dropped ten kilos in two months to fit into her wedding dress. She had used the Atkins Diet (as, apparently, had Jennifer Aniston) which allowed no complex carbohydrates whatever. For the first fourteen days of the Atkins Diet, you can eat as much meat, poultry, fish, butter and cheese as you like, and two cups of loosely packed lettuce, capsicum and olives. And that's it. The aim is to send the body into a state of ketosis, to make it believe you are starving so it starts to burn its own fat reserves. In effect, dieters in ketosis eat themselves. With cheese on top. The 'induction' stage of the Atkins Diet

also bans alcohol and caffeine (and probably dancing, singing and mixed sunbathing, as well).

The initial effects were spectacular: I went mad. My staff called it 'chicken rage' – a state of constant, irrational, violent frustration caused by eating nothing but roast chicken all day. I could not concentrate. I thought everybody was forging their expenses and plotting against me. I had all the paranoia and anxiety of a smoker who had just quit. I ordered an air ticket across the world with the stipulation that I came home before I left, then flew into a fury when the travel agent could not book it. Elisabeth had to physically restrain me from attacking the production editor. It might have been alcohol withdrawal; it might have been that complex carbohydrates help the body produce serotonin; it might even have been all the hormones pumped into chickens. Eventually, it passed. In the second week of the Atkins Diet, I felt clear-headed and healthy. To be certain you are in ketosis, you can perform home urine analysis with Ketostix, which are designed to warn diabetics they are about to go into a coma. You pee on a strip of treated paper and hope it turns purple.

'What kind of sicko would do that?' a friend had asked Lisa, laughing.

I did. Every evening. And I loved it. If there's one thing better than a regimen, it is a regimen with equipment.

I was in moderate ketosis by day three, eating myself. I lost another four kilos. It was weight that should have been harder to shift, and I shed it twice as quickly. All in all, I dropped eight kilos in eight weeks and trimmed five centimetres off my waistline.

While I was on my diet, a freelancer called Rich Pelley volunteered to eat nothing but McDonald's for a month, three times a day. (The food group he axed, I think, was nutrients.) His skin went yellow and his eyes turned red – a bit like the McDonald's logo – but he lost three and a half kilos.

Later, Carlee, who had put on half a kilo for every week of her two-month holiday, tried the Atkins Diet, and lasted one and a half days. This was the kind of figure more readily associated with giving up drinking – something else that everyone was always doing. One of the most common exchanges at *Ralph* was:

'Fancy a beer tonight?'

'No, mate, I'm off the grog for a month.'

A month generally lasted four days. It was as if we had started to measure time in dog years. Monster planned to give up drinking for fifty

days, lasted five, and lost a $5 bet with Chriso. I quit beer for the month of January, and had to use my executive powers to declare an early February before the first week was out.

This was by no means the most sweeping, imperious, or even surreal use of executive powers at ACP. Since the establishment of the intranet, we were bombarded by management initiatives and new corporate policies, not one of which made any worker's job any easier, or any magazine any better. They came from all the usual offenders: idiotic codes of practice that might have quite easily applied to their own essentially non-productive departments, but were either irrelevant, inappropriate or crippling on the shop floor.

HR led the way, with its directive that nobody who had worked full-time for the company should be permitted to return as a casual within one year of leaving. I presumed this rule was an attempt to stop people taking huge redundancy packages then coming back as consultants – which might happen in the world of HR, but is almost unheard of in the world of journalism. They were applying an inappropriate corporate model to an industry they did not seem to be familiar with. The rule hit designers and subs, who had left the company to become rock stars or alcoholics. They were usually the best people to fill in when their former colleagues went on holiday, because they knew how to operate the company's desktop publishing systems, and were familiar with the way the office worked, and the house style. They were always looking for casual shifts when EMI sent back their demo by return post, or the pub refused to extend their credit. Instead, HR thought it would be best if we used untried staff who had not recently worked on our magazine, or any other magazine in the company (which included more than half the titles in Australia), making it impossible to build a serious backup for illness, injury or extended leave.

The year lay-off policy was a detailed convention that had been formulated painstakingly, pointlessly and – I would guess – at some length, over a languorous series of meetings. Like most directives, its actual period of influence lasted about two weeks, before it was quietly abandoned as unworkable. Later, I was rehired twice as a consultant – in April 2000 and later in November 2002 – in direct contravention of its principles.

As more and more office practices became offences against an ever-expanding corporate code, I devised my own crimes and punishments for the staff. I declared a crackdown on 'stealing keystrokes', a felony characterised by navigating the screen using the arrow keys instead of the mouse,

and therefore wearing out the keyboard too quickly. I tried to put a stop to 'mousal abuse' – the act of leaving the mouse in any position other than perfectly central on the mouse mat – and I banned James from urinating while standing up.

Brad was always careful to stick to the obdurate letter of each new law. He was an able boardroom lawyer, careful to give nobody a chance to challenge him on procedural grounds. He would usually tell me to implement the changes, then a fortnight later I would speak to Finance and be told we did not have to do things that way anymore.

A decree was issued that effectively stopped subs from earning extra money writing for the magazine at weekends. I followed it for the customary honeymoon period then assumed it had gone the way of all romantic dreams and got fucked. I sent Ivan – in his dual identity as Eric the workie – on a bush-survival course, with the instruction that he had to eat witchetty grubs and ants, and asked him to write it up in his spare time. When I tried to get him paid, Brad refused to sign the form.

I paid Ivan in cash, from my own wallet, because the company would not come up with the money to buy content for its magazines. This gave me a good feeling, but not one I would like to have again. I had hoped it would make me into Ivan's hero, and he would spend the rest of his career embarrassing me in front of other people by bringing up my unbelievable generosity. 'Oh, Ivan, not that old story …' I imagined saying, for the thousandth time, to a table of wide-eyed and nubile admirers.

In fact, he never mentioned it again.

THIRTEEN In which Eric does not lose his virginity to Yvonne, but I lose my temper with New Zealand, and jack it in for good

There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Number Nine is: Writers Who Adopt Alter Egos Eventually Grow into Them. Ivan quickly became identified with Eric – in everybody else's mind if not his own. Even though he was a solid, diligent, talented worker, I began to believe he was a gibbering incompetent. Brad never referred to him as anything other than 'Eric the workie', and I found it increasingly difficult to think of him as Ivan. Sometimes when I looked at him, I would become unreasonably irritated by the fact he was not wearing drawn-on glasses.

The readers enjoyed Eric. They liked to heckle, rankle and bully him. They suggested additional things for which to blame him, and even held him responsible for problems in their own workplaces. In their schoolboy hearts, they would have liked to drag him down to the toilet block and show him the blue fish in the lavatory.

Yvonne Firmin was their true love. They dreamed of taking her hand, leading her behind the bike sheds, and marching their fingers up her skirt. Yvonne was the last in a short line of women writing about sex in *Ralph*. The first was feminist academic Catharine Lumby, who produced a series of concise, literate, funny columns aimed at showing men how women might feel about fighting, oral sex and checking out men's bodies. Catharine was

in a strange position in that she was a serious writer and thinker, and the readers wanted to know when *she* last gave a blow job, and did she swallow? She was very sporting, but I think quite relieved when she was offered a column in the *Bulletin* and had to give up *Ralph*. Next, I gave the column to my friend Madeleine, and asked her to make it more of a diary of her own sex life. Unfortunately, Madeleine did not have a sex life, so her writing was permeated by a sad, flirtatious yearning, and every coitus was interrupted before it began. While I was away, Carl found the woman who signed herself as Yvonne. In some ways, the real Yvonne was our readers' fantasy girl. She loved cars, drove an old Chrysler Valiant, and had its marque tattooed on her body. She went to the Crusty Demons motorcycle stunt-riding show. She was a rock chick with a bigger CD collection than anyone in the office (except, perhaps, Carl); she preferred tradesmen to college boys; and she had worked in porn (at *Penthouse* under Phil Abraham).

She was also a fine writer with a taste in books that ranged from Alberto Manguel through Carson McCullers to Malcolm Lowry (Yvonne Firmin is named for a character from Lowry's novel *Under the Volcano*). This aspect of her character did not translate to Yvonne, who was too busy having sex to read anything but the instructions on the back of a condom wrapper (which she knew by heart, anyway). Yvonne's earliest columns were confused by conflicting expectations. Carl felt they should be funny; Brad that they should be instructional. In the era of Bridget Jones, I was convinced they should be diarised. Yvonne would be the ultimate Babe Behaving Badly, a promiscuous, bisexual, blonde, stacked and shaved Bridget, twenty-three, who did not want to get married.

If Yvonne was in a relationship, she would base the columns on her life. If she was between blokes – as it were – she would look to something in the past that she had either heard about or done. Her style was part-journalism, part-Forum Letter, and part-intimate-phone-call-to-a-best-girlfriend. As soon as the readers got to know her, they began writing in and asking her questions about sex and relationships. They had three major queries: Is my penis big enough? Do I go on long enough? What is the best way to make a woman come? They always wanted to know how to turn friends who were girls into girlfriends, and were puzzled when it did not happen.

Yvonne attracted readers' wolf whistles when she was a strong, independent woman talking dirty, but as the writer built her personality, gave her vulnerabilities and regrets, the readers hugged her to their chests and cried. They sent her long, emotional letters about how they had just got

divorced, and now they were with somebody else, and they were worried what the trauma might be doing to their children. They liked and trusted her. At first, the writer answered their emails, signed by Yvonne but from her heart, then it became impossible. When we printed Yvonne's hotmail address at the foot of her column, she received 300 messages in a fortnight, crashing her machine. When she wrote a group email explaining why she could not respond personally, she received a barrage of 'Fuck you, I knew you didn't really exist' messages in return. From the start, I wanted Yvonne to become a fully-fledged staff member. We had her in the publisher's panel as 'Sex Editor' (Eric's official position was 'Virgin'). She wrote sex guide features, and eventually recommended her 'Top 100 Sex Positions'. Briefly, it looked as if she might pop Eric's cherry (we *knew* Eric wanted it).

Ralph changed rapidly in the latter half of 2000. We shot more ordinary Australian girls, and fumblingly tried to chat them up. I scattered pictures of pretty women everywhere, so the readers could follow them with their eyes, the way they watched sexy office workers in short skirts in the CBD. I dropped girls between the interviews and the movie reviews, the penguin stories and the how-to pages. I wanted the magazine to reflect the thought processes of a young, straight, Australian male. 'What about that movie last night? Um, nice tits. What about the surf at Coogee? Um, nice tits. What about the new Powderfinger single? Um, nice arse.' It was wry and funny and desperately horny.

I was always trying to figure out how we could be useful, how we could help the readers get what they wanted. I launched a flotilla of features in which Dave Smiedt collected tips (always in groups of 100, of course) about sex and relationships, from girls to men. I began regular, comprehensive – if optimistic – guides to the best pick-up joints in Australia. I brought in 'Beach of the Month', in which a photographer and a writer were sent to Coogee, Bondi or Surfer's Paradise to take pictures of pretty girls in bikinis and ask what they were doing there, thinking like a man on the beach.

I started 'Going Off', in which a journalist was sent to a town or a suburb, given $200 and told to visit as many pubs as possible between 7.30 pm and closing time. They had to report on the talent, the atmosphere, any fights or funny stuff, and let the readers know where to find the prettiest girls. The worst towns were always the best. Carlee 'went off' in the desperately drab NSW military enclave of Singleton, and met a local who pulled down his trousers, showed her his arse, and asked if she wanted

to see the gravy. This, apparently, was how they chatted up women in Singleton.

These stories grounded *Ralph* in truth. We were not offering *FHM*'s ice-cream faced England, we gave them Australia. We talked about bars they had been to; photographed girls they had spoken to; chatted with bouncers who had grabbed the drinks out of their hand. Every time we visited Newcastle, Wollongong or Geelong, we built a little extra trust.

During my first year at *Ralph*, when all that separated us from every other men's lifestyle magazine was an inexplicable attraction to penguins and a stalker's obsession with Anna Kournikova, a stupid person told me we made too many in-jokes, and were in danger of alienating readers. I realised then that we had to increase the number of in-jokes, to make the readers work a little to understand what was going on, and reward them with laughs the uninitiated could not share.

Owen Thompson and I invented Captain Stupid, the last honest man in the world. Captain Stupid took everything literally, believed every word he read in the paper, and acted on most of them. When I was working on the property pages of the *Sydney Weekly*, before I joined ACP, a real estate agent had advertised a house under the headline 'Won't Last'. I rang, quite guilelessly, to suggest they change the copy, since it implied the building might fall down. Like Monty Python's Mr Smoketoomuch, the salesman could not see my point. His years of relentless lying had blinded him to the meaning of language.

When the nascent Captain Stupid saw an ad for 'the only beachfront apartments remaining' on the Gold Coast, he called and asked what happened to the rest of them. 'I was up there a couple of months ago,' he said, 'and I could have sworn there were hundreds.' He then called an ad headed 'Broken Head', the name of a seaside resort in northern NSW, and advised the advertiser to lie down and elevate her legs.

With Captain Stupid, we schematised our previously anarchic prank phone calls. Owen combed job ads and small ads, in the daily newspapers and – especially – in the *Trading Post*, tirelessly searching for the wrong end of the stick. We devised a different theme each month. For example, Captain Stupid might get it into his stupid head that he must confront supervillains such as the Savage Centurion, which turned out to be a five-metre fibreglass boat for sale. 'Disguising yourself as a boat won't fool me,' Captain Stupid told the hapless advertiser, and demanded 'a battle to determine the fate of the free world.'

'No,' said the advertiser.

'Have you ever considered using your powers for good instead of evil?' asked Captain Stupid.

'Mate … you're a fuckwit,' said the Savage Centurion.

Captain Stupid's sidekick, Supercat, was rarely seen. It was born after a *Trading Post* ad for 'Supercat Converters', a supplier of performance car exhaust components. The captain duly rang the number and asked if he could use the converter to convert his ordinary cat into a supercat. When he asked about X-ray vision, they said he had the wrong number.

Supercat was a fluffy white toy cat, dressed in a model's bikini bottoms. It sat on a shelf in the office, looking oddly disturbing, until somebody locked it in a drawer. Its only outing came during the Captain Stupid photo shoot, for which we dressed Owen in a rented superhero costume, topped off with a pair of swimming goggles and a propeller hat, and photographed him around town with Supercat tucked under his arm. As soon as we left the building, Captain Stupid was approached by students collecting money for East Timor. We gave them a couple of dollars and celebrated the fantastic truth that, on the day of his birth, Captain Stupid had saved East Timor.

The Captain's most incomprehensible venture came about when we discovered 'Live Rock for Marine Tank'. Live rock is a form of decorative coral, but Captain Stupid firmly believed the ad was promoting a Live Aid-style, all-star international benefit concert in aid of fish tanks. Captain Stupid had no time for ambiguity, for language mangling, deceit or obfuscation. He was a tireless crusader for truth in advertising. More than that, however, he was a device to wind up innocent people whose only known crime was to advertise their second-hand goods in the *Trading Post*.

Owen was an editor's dream of a freelance writer. Just as Carlee would say anything, Owen would do anything. He was a huge, gym-built statue of a man, with a knuckle-crunching, finger-grinding handshake and a broad knowledge of geology.

While he was writing for *Ralph*, he was the drummer in the band Oblivia, which was signed to BMG/RCA, released four singles and an album, toured Australia from Perth to Sydney, played support to the Screaming Jets and Catatonia, appeared on the *Pepsi Chart Show* and *Good News Week*, then split up without anybody having noticed they existed.

His greatest stage performances, however, were under the guise of Crap Elvis, something that had started with his appearance at the annual

Elvis festival in Parkes. Crap Elvis lay dormant while I was away, but he was always on my mind. He staged the first of many comebacks after I noticed a poster advertising an Elvis look-alike contest at the Cat and Fiddle hotel in Rozelle.

Owen was easily persuaded into reforming himself for a one-off reunion gig, especially since I said he could arrive in a Cadillac with a beautiful woman on each arm. Unfortunately, I could not make it to the Cat and Fiddle – even though it was just up the road and I had nothing else to do – but Owen assured me that Crap Elvis received the most rapturous reception of his career, as dozens of people chanted his name over and over again – 'Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap!' – until he left the building.

When Owen offered to do a 'Going Off' pub crawl in Wollongong, I agreed, but only if he dressed as Elvis. Wollongong is a man's town, and Owen was worried about getting his sunglasses crushed under a pair of Blundstones, and his sideburns ripped off and shoved up his arse. In the tradition of the original (or 'earlier') Elvis, he enlisted a bodyguard and, in the tradition of local boxer and bar-brawler Shannon Taylor, he drank in Dicey Rileys and Cooney's Tavern and Bourbon Street. The Elvis costume proved especially popular with the girls. 'Dress up as Elvis and go to the pub' was one of the few scientifically proven chick-pulling methods ever documented in *Ralph*.

Even Crap Elvis had a subtext: it was okay to be useless. You did not have to be a goal-centred people person with seven highly effective habits. You could be the very worst in your field, a hopeless, deluded loser, and people would still love you. In the end, it was the self-conscious Elvises who looked stupid.

I was tired of the unremitting banality of most men's magazines. In 1999, Brad had instructed us to run a 'pigskin preview', a look ahead to the new football season. We did, and so did every other newspaper and magazine, all of them with greater authority than *Ralph*. I felt humiliated that we had come out with the same coverline as *Inside Sport*, and nursed the wound for two years. In 2001, when *Ralph* was the fastest-growing adult magazine in Australia, we again ran a pigskin preview, but this time Owen rang a pig farmer and asked what pigskins would be used for next year. 'All sorts of things,' said the farmer. 'They're cutting up bits and pieces of the pig. They're doing them up and selling them off as dog food, like little sort of snack things.'

With Eric the workie, Yvonne Firmin, Captain Stupid, Crap Elvis,

the talking penguins and the occasional inexplicable curtain calls of the Doner, much of *Ralph* became a chronicle of a nonexistent milieu where powerless superheroes stalked suburban supervillains, and takeaway food had thoughts and feelings. We reduced the number of female nipples, which are scattered through every men's magazine like secret treats, and replaced them with shots of Ivan in women's clothing.

Our lowest sales of the year always came when *FHM* released its '100 Sexiest Women in the World' tip-on. It was one of the most powerful brands on the planet, and received more publicity in a month than we did in a year. In 2001, we went up against it with our own booklet, the '150 Sexiest Women in Australia and New Zealand'. We offered the readers pictures of 150 local supermodels, soapie stars, sportswomen and singers, and asked them to vote for their favourite. Almost hidden among Tatiana Grigoriev and the Pleasure Machine was Eric's sister, Erica: Ivan, repulsively ugly in pigtails and lingerie. We said she was a workie at *Cleo* and, when the votes were counted, she outpolled Elle Macpherson.

The readers' choice of fantasy women, who ranged from newsreaders to the dancers on the preschoolers' show *Hi-5*, made me realise: (1) Young men watch *everything* on TV; (2) They do so with the profound but unspoken hope that the presenters' tops will slip off. We sold 122 931 copies of the Australia's Sexiest issue, as opposed to 80 933 in the same month the year before. When we produced our own 'Sexiest Women in the World' booklet, we nominated 200 women against *FHM*'s 100. From being half as good as the competition, we grew to twice as good. We were setting sales records with every third issue. The weirder *Ralph* grew, the more different it became to *FHM*, the more it sold.

I altered the way our features were written, by taking out the journalist. Unless the writer was involved in the story – if, for instance, he jumped out of a plane, or into the ring – I did not want to hear his voice. Ordinary people can tell their own story with more skill than most journalists. They use a richer, less formulaic language and sharper, more realistic vocabulary. They tend not to view their lives as reducible to a series of convenient clichés.

I had every feature in *Ralph* written in the first person: the journalist transcribed and edited, but he did not augment or analyse. We had prisoners, war heroes, drug dealers, rock stars and disaster survivors all speaking directly to the readers. We invited old soldiers into our saloon bar, bought them a drink and listened to them yarn.

There were only two problems left to solve: Advertising and New

Zealand. The Advertising team was held to be doing fantastically well, continually coming in above budget. This was largely because their budget had been set in view of last year's circulation. We were now outperforming *FHM* in Australia, but the ad guys were only selling three-quarters as many ads as *FHM*'s team. ACP grew impatient with the amount of money I wanted to put into 'the product', but could not see we were under-resourced because our revenue was too low.

I fought with the ad manager, Scott, but I respected him more than any of my other corporate opponents. At least he did his job. An arcane power struggle was taking place among the senior management of the advertising department, and a new appointee took a liking to Scott and his girlfriend. They were among the elite reps invited to a time-wasting camp, where they were hailed as role models for ad managers throughout the company. HR had them fill out a multiple-choice personality-test questionnaire. It was suggested that since they obviously had the right type of personality for ad sales, new ad staff should be hired on the basis of how close they came to their profile when completing the same questionnaire.

Scott wanted to sell pages at the highest possible rate. 'Yield', the average cost per page, was his golden calf. Unfortunately, the one true God was bulk. *Ralph* needed fashion advertising, and fashion advertisers were not prepared to pay our asking price.

FHM gave away spreads to fashion clients, because *FHM* understood what nobody at ACP seemed able to grasp: when media buyers thumbed the magazine, they were not reading the stories, they were looking at the ads. When they saw fashion ads, they saw a suitable 'environment' for every other product from luxury watches to men's fragrances.

The UK men's lifestyle magazines publish seasonal fashion specials. These are ad-driven, packed with high-quality product, glossy, 'creative', and bought largely by the people who buy the ads. They aim to establish their monthly parents as fashion-based style leaders, not pornos with pants on.

In 1999, I began arguing for *Ralph Style*, an all-fashion biannual title which, I hoped, would win backing from the rag trade that would then trickle into *Ralph*. My ad guys hated the idea, with good reason. It was tremendously difficult to sell fashion into *Ralph*. They did not want to waste their time chasing low-yield, notoriously difficult clients who disliked the magazine, when they could be selling expensive ads to the deodorant and foot-cream manufacturers who formed our client base.

They stalled and they furphied and they filibustered. I fought to get a

dedicated fashion ad rep, to match the woman *FHM* had employed since 1997. After an interminable, draining, frustrating and stupid series of consultations with senior ad people, who opposed the project on the grounds that it did not exist, Natalie was hired to launch *Ralph Style* and bulk up the ad content of the fashion section. She tried for a couple of months, then Advertising came to a secret (from me) agreement with Brad that allowed her to sell outside the rag trade, and made her pointless.

By the time *Ralph Style* finally came out, it coincided with *FHM*'s bid at the same market, *FHM Collections*. This would have made the sell much harder for my ad staff, had they actually tried to sell the magazine. They did not. *FHM Collections* was a similar title to *Ralph Style* in every way but one: it carried about 40 pages of ads, about 35 of which were fashion ads. *Ralph Style* carried 18 ads, only six of which were fashion, and only four of which were paid for.

My ad team would not put fashion ads into *Ralph*, so I had to lose the ad manager. First, I refused to talk to him about anything other than fashion. We used to speak or meet a dozen times a week, but all that stopped. He started to send up his deputy, Dave, to ask me things, but I told Dave I would only talk about fashion. Next, I refused to speak English to anybody from Advertising. Whatever they said, I would answer in Spanish. A typical conversation would run:

Ad guy: 'Total Tinea wants two pages of advertorial in the next issue. Can we do it? They need an answer now.'

Me: 'Discupla. No puedo hablar inglés.'

Ad guy: 'Please, this is very important. Can we have the pages?'

Me: 'Tinea no es una ropa. Quiero las ropas en mi revista. Ropas. Entiendes?'

Ad guy: 'Please, Mark, I don't speak Italian.'

Me: 'No es mi problema.'

When it became obvious that I would leave before I would budge, Scott was moved to key accounts. This was my first attempt at ruthlessness, it was wholly successful and gave me a wholly false confidence. I felt sorry for the ad manager because he was good at his job and nobody had stood by him, but I had put the magazine before everything and the magazine had won.

The ad manager's job went to educated, effervescent Dave. Against my judgment, Dave hired the statuesque Nicola as his fashion rep. This showed what appalling judgment I had. Nicola was a fashion-ad-selling genius. Her long legs, big eyes, insistent energy and the fact that she

actually wore fashionable clothes lifted our rag trade profile measurably. Within eighteen months, twenty-five per cent of *Ralph*'s ad revenue came from fashion and fragrance clients, bringing us in line with every leading men's lifestyle magazine in the western world.

Amanda, the editorial assistant who been elevated to fashion editor largely because there were no other candidates, revealed herself as a fashion editing genius, too. She had understood what I wanted from the beginning – male models who did not pout as if they were about to give a boy a blow job, and female models who did. Amanda made the shoots brighter but still interesting, realistic but not ordinary. More importantly, she chose clothes beyond my narrow band of leather and denim. *Ralph* played a huge part in popularising skatewear in the wider market. The small underground brands could not understand why we called in their clothes, since they had no budget to advertise and no ambitions outside their own circles. When the readers saw the clothes, they liked them, and because they trusted *Ralph*, they bought them, and when the skatewear brands grew large enough to buy space, they spent their money with *Ralph*.

We had to give up using normal people on shoots, because the clothes did not fit them. I wanted to show short blokes, fat blokes, muscle monsters and coathangers, but next season's gear is only available in a limited range of sample sizes: men's trousers have 34-inch waists, men's shoes are size eight. Oddly, even most models do not have size-eight feet, and we sometimes had to crop photographs of men in suits to hide the fact they were not wearing shoes. Any South Australian Green MP who blames magazines for only promoting images of thin women should try to obtain even a new-season size-12 skirt for a fashion shoot.

There used to be an organisation called the Australian Society of Magazine Editors. It included the editors of newsstand magazines and newspaper inserts. It gave awards for good journalism, many of which went to the newspaper inserts such as *Good Weekend*, because they are better written than any of the newsstand titles.

The newsstand publishers saw this as unfair competition, withdrew from the organisation, and set up their own Magazine Publishers Association, which included commercial success and – God help us – good marketing in its awards criteria. I did not want to enter these awards – what was the point of being the best of the worst magazines? – but the company supported them. We nominated ourselves for a handful of prizes, and Brad

duly sent an email asking which five members of my staff I would take to the ceremony.

Once again, I said I would not go if everybody could not go. He said every ACP magazine was restricted to five key staffers. I said he could choose five, but I would not be one of them. The company still did not understand: the staff did not simply 'care' about the product, they thought they were the product. They wrote the words, they chose the pictures, they laid out the pages, they put their names on it and their lives into it. It was the way they were judged in the world, from the editorial coordinator to the editor-in-chief. To leave behind any one of them would be to say, in corporate terms, 'We do not sufficiently value your contribution,' or, in human terms, 'You are a worthless piece of shit.'

The awards dinner cost the company about $180 a head. Brad went to see JA, told him we had not had a party to celebrate our circulation increase, and won his agreement that *Ralph* would be the only ACP title with its full complement of staff present. Brad baulked, however, at paying for Ash, who was employed as a casual. I arranged a whip-round, and we each gave $10 for Ash's ticket.

The awards night built *Ralph* into a stronger team than a whole season of abseiling weekends and obstacle courses. We were like an army, albeit a scruffy, undisciplined army that was not very good at fighting (the Dutch army, for instance). We did not win anything, but we marched from the dinner to the pub to a nightclub on Oxford Street, drinking and drinking and drinking until 4 am, and Ash spent at least $180 buying beer for everybody.

At the dinner, I met Phillip Thomas, then managing director of EMAP. He told me that if we had crushed *FHM* at the start, EMAP Australia would not have launched its other titles. He could not see why ACP had not gone in harder. I told him everything was me: I had fuelled the tip-on war, kept down our price when they had raised theirs, changed our on-sale dates to match theirs, increased our magazine size, forced the fashion issue. I was the conspiracy. All me.

A few months after ACP had refused to pay for journalists and designers to attend the MPA awards, the company held a conference for its executive team. It flew all the managers and their partners business class to a five-star resort in Victoria, laid on a couple of joke discussion sessions, paid for their golf and their banquet dinners, and a private performance of the ABBA musical *Mamma Mia*.

Brad put up with a lot, but he and I finally fell out over another senseless directive formulated by accountants who had never worked on magazines. Editors were told they if they needed to look at a particular magazine, they had to order a subscription. This was a money-saving idea on a par with Claire's labour-saving plan of juicing her own oranges to make orange juice. Most of the time, there was no reason for us to buy, for instance, the smaller overseas men's titles. Once every few months, they might run a cover shoot we liked. Instead of paying, say, $8 for that issue of the magazine, I would now have to shell out $80 for an annual subscription. Worse, if a new title came onto the market, I could not buy it at all, since I would have to subscribe from the second issue.

I assumed this particular expression of imbecility would be ignored, bought the latest *Inside Sport*, and was refused a refund. I tried to get my $7.95 back from advertising, who had a virtually unlimited budget to spend on 'entertainment', but even they could not override the directive (at first – it was, of course, effectively abandoned in a couple of months).

I was furious, and wasted half a finance meeting complaining about it. Brad asked if I wanted him to go to JA and specifically request I be made *the only person in the company* with an exemption – as if it would be a badge of dishonour, like a white feather or a yellow star. I said I did. Brad got me my indemnity, and tried to turn it into a curse. He told the other editors they could not get their magazine money refunded but I could, so they were to bring the receipts to me. I suffered a flurry of requests for specialist pornos, and my name went down as the bloke who ordered *Celebrity Flesh* and a publication for men who admired very fat women.

They all forgot to ask me for their money back, so I made about $30. Brad – with some evidence – seemed to feel I was willing to get into a fight about anything, since I had only just resumed the use of English in interdepartmental communications. He began to talk to me only when he had to, and got it over with as quickly as possible.

Brad made up with me at the Christmas party, possibly because he did not have many others to talk with. He had become more isolated, more disappointed. The more people he worked with, the more they let him down. He had always surrounded himself with a small circle of trusted operatives, but that circle had shrunk to the size of a navel. Almost everybody on the P-mags had lost his trust. He had grown bitter with his own success, just as I had.

Sometimes I stopped to think about what I was doing, instead of simply trying to work out the best way to do it. I no longer wanted to waste

my life on something worthless just to prove that my life was worthless. I poured all my energy into *Ralph* – all my words, all my love – and I needed it to mean something.

Although every word in *Ralph* was true – or, at least, truly reported – I worried it told lies about life. Most of the women in the magazine were barmaids, lingerie models, prostitutes and strippers. They were defined by sex. The only men were soldiers, gangsters, hitmen, sportsmen and blokes who had been bitten by sharks. They were defined by violence. This is how I had wanted it to be, these were the demimondes that interested me, but they were not the real world. *Ralph*'s strapline, 'the Aussie blokes' bible', was forced upon us by the readers. Every month, I received more emails saying, 'Your magazine is my bible.'

At first, I was horrified. I thought the media was a con trick, a vehicle for reactionary ideology, a cultural weapon of the ruling class. I assumed 'people' believed everything they read and acted upon it, like a legion of Captain Stupids. I did not give readers the credit of my own intelligence. They were reading *Ralph* for entertainment: for rough, pulpy fun, for one hour a month. When they put down the magazine, they could see that their town was not full of big-breasted bisexual barmaids in bikinis panting for a threesome, any more than it was home to talking penguins or walking kebabs. That said, I was disturbed when one schoolboy wrote in and said he could not wait until he was grown up, so he could drink in pubs, go out with girls and keep penguins as pets.

I joined the march over the Harbour Bridge to say 'Sorry' to Aboriginals in May 2000, stuck behind a banner that read something like 'Drag Queens for Reconciliation'. I became a member of Amnesty International, because of the fierce pleasure I had felt whenever I read in a Latin American newspaper how Amnesty's lawyers were hounding the murderer Pinochet across the world. In my efforts to ensure my own prejudices did not leak into Ralph, dress the girls in berets and bandoliers and drape the penguins in red flags, I probably made the magazine more apolitical than it needed to be. Carl commissioned two strong features – one about the effects of nuclear testing on Australian soldiers in Maralinga; the other the horrifying story of a Hazara refugee from Afghanistan – that I would not have accepted because of the subject matter. I inherited the refugee story, and ran it when the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Two readers sent emails thanking us for showing that boat people were desperate human beings fleeing persecution and death, not benefit-bludging, queue-jumping millionaires.

I said nothing as the government turned 1990s Australia into 1980s England, bought off a generation with the dividends of privatisation, and no thought that the inheritance they were trading was not theirs to sell. I watched another short-sighted, small-minded, cynical suburban populist exploit racial bitterness to win the votes of fools, and blame the poorest for the plight of the rich. It was only in 2001, when John Howard took the country back to 1930s England, where boatloads of Jewish refugees were sent back to Germany to die, that I felt I had to speak. (The country was, after all, going back at a markedly accelerated rate. If I had allowed the slide to continue, we would have been in late-Medieval England by 2006.) I contacted Amnesty International, and offered to be a tattooed, blokey, trusted-by-the-apolitical-masses *Ralph*-editor spokesperson for refugees. I also offered *Cosmopolitan*'s elfin editor Mia Freedman as my female counterpart, although I forgot to ask her permission. Amnesty did not call me back. Nevertheless, my gesture seemed to slow down the national decline to the extent that in 2004 we have only returned to early-1900s England, when concentration camps were invented for Boer women and children in Africa.

The Tampa crisis reminded me that some things were more important than *Ralph*, an idea with which I had become quite uncomfortable.

On Friday nights, I drank at the Globe, and argued happily with former *Australian Women's Forum* editor Helen Vnuk, who was working for various ACP men's magazines including *Ralph*. Helen's position was that *Ralph* was pornography. As she was in favour of pornography, she did not have a problem with that, but she felt I should come to terms with it. I conceded *Ralph* had pornographic elements – and so did *Cleo* or *Cosmopolitan* – but I thought the magazine was more than that. I knew if I had been younger and I had bought it, I would not have used it to masturbate over – which is what I assumed would turn it into pornography. In her book *Snatched*, however, Helen accepts a definition of pornography as 'the explicit description or exhibition of sexual activity', which would only encompass *Ralph* if you accepted the minority verdict of the censors looking under the black spot at the OFLC in February 1999.

I told Helen I was not sure if pornography damaged it users, but it hurt the souls of the performers. I said no woman who had posed for *Ralph* had ever ended up having sex with dogs, like the stripper in Andrea Dworkin's film.

Helen – who, coincidentally, had also once edited *Dogs' Life* – asked me how many strippers I had met who had had sex with dogs. It was the

first time I had considered the question. It's possible it simply does not come up in conversation, but perhaps not many women ever have sex with dogs, or make their babies have sex with snakes. Pornography – at least in Australia – might not be as it was depicted in 'Against Pornography'.

Women often felt hurt by men's lifestyle magazines. Time and again, I was told the magazines promoted the idea that only one body shape was desirable. It is true: we fattened breasts and trimmed fat from thighs, turned real women into Jessica Rabbit. Unlike women's magazines, however, we were not saying to women, 'This is how you should be.' Nor were we saying to men, 'This is what you should want.' We were saying, 'Gwoah, look at her!' or 'Emmaaah!' – and that was embarrassing enough.

For a glimpse at the infinite range of body shapes ordinary men found desirable, there was always Brad's best-loved baby, *100% Home Girls*, the Category 1 monthly in which shaved fat women standing on their heads were presented for truck drivers to masturbate over.

Daz had taken over from James as picture editor, and a new entrepreneurial spirit gripped the department. Daz loved to chase down bargains, negotiate discounts, cut deals, come out on top. It thrilled him to save us $1000 on a shoot, but he was equally happy making 20 cents on a can of Coke. When I returned from South America, he was running a small business, retailing soft drinks at 70 cents when the drinks machine dispensed them for $1. He hoped to earn his Friday-night beer money this way but, classically, he wasted his profits by drinking the product. He expanded his range to include chocolate (in competition with the charity chocolate box) and an unsuccessful line of two-minute noodles, of which he only ever sold two packets.

Daz dealt very well with cover girls, and we hired a former model, Madison, to help him make the initial approaches. Reality TV was a gift to *Ralph*. Suddenly, the girls every man fantasised about were ordinary-looking women without agents or egos. The first *Big Brother* series was huge and it yielded Jemma Gawned and Christina Davis. The readers watched them obsessively, staying up all night for glimpses of their underwear.

Jemma ran in our summer special, a magazine that came about because I had moved our on-sale dates so often that we had to put a thirteenth issue into the year to get back on track. I wanted it to be the best *Ralph* ever, a handbook for life, something wholly for the readers, with no concessions to journalists' egos. It included Yvonne's 100 Sex Positions, Dom's 100 Fight Moves, and Amanda's 100 t-shirts. It showed them how

to fuck, fight and dress. I ran full-page pictures of the top 20 girls from our Australia-and-New-Zealand sexiest poll, and a board game based on Captain Stupid. It sold 156 229 copies – about 100 000 up on my first issue of *Ralph*, and the most copies of any men's lifestyle magazine ever.

The readers were fantastically enthusiastic. They could see how hard we had tried, and they knew we had done it for them.

I had one fight left to win, against ACP New Zealand.

I had had a meeting with somebody from ACP New Zealand soon after JA and Gardiner had said I could look into launching over there. I told him exactly what I wanted: that we should run a number of New Zealand change-pages in each issue of *Ralph*, and pay for the extra content by selling about twenty NZ-based ads. I asked for no staff on the ground apart from an ad manager. I planned to run the editorial from our Sydney office, coordinating with a few NZ-based freelancers.

He agreed to it then did nothing: the preferred course of action of almost everybody in corporate life. I asked him if he could persuade the distributors to take more copies of the Australian editions. He described 'a distinct lack of enthusiasm'. I asked him to tell me outright he did not want to do a New Zealand edition, but he would not. When rumours spread that *FHM* was planning to launch its own New Zealand edition, he sent an email saying, 'I understand our sales director took two ad bookings for *Ralph* yesterday. I am expecting his business plan by the end of the week.'

We never saw the bookings or the plan.

We decided to launch *Ralph* New Zealand on our own, with no ads, no additional copy and no help from ACP NZ. We needed somebody on the ground to organise the launch party, however, and when my contact in New Zealand heard we had consulted ACP NZ's marketing people, he threatened to block them from working with us. I wondered if it might be possible to hire a Maori gang to kill him.

We had persuaded them to take 35 000 copies of the Jemma issue, and they sold 27 888. At 20 per cent, this was too tight a return. The more copies of a magazine that are distributed, the more are sold. An 18 per cent return is considered a sell-out, because it means some outlets will have used up all their stock. I aimed for a 28–30 per cent return. If New Zealand had taken another 5000 copies, they could probably have shifted another 2000. I had run a different cover in New Zealand: the model Nicky Watson, then girlfriend of the owner of the Auckland Warriors. The sale proved that a good local edition, with good local girls, could outsell *FHM*.

Breaking into the NZ market had proved easier than we thought. There was no preference for English titles. There were no distribution issues. Rival distributor Gordon & Gotch gave us a presentation and offered to put *Ralph* in all the same New Zealand outlets as *FHM*, but the company refused.

I became more of a despot and less enlightened. Like Yossarian in *Catch 22*, I took everything personally. I used to think it was funny when people could not or did not do their jobs. They were sticking up two fingers at a society that wasted them on pointless labour, standing up for the human spirit, refusing to be crushed. Now, I had come to think of them in Brad's terms, as 'gibberers' and 'oxygen bandits'. I wanted to gather together all the writers who could not write, the publicists who could not publicise, the distributors who could not distribute, the accountants who could not count the money that was really being wasted and I wanted to load them onto cattle trains, send them to camps, and have them turned into something useful, like lampshades or soap. I had become an idiot-Nazi.

I was always on the verge of exploding, permanently in the claws of chicken rage. I was a table-thumper and a door-kicker. The better *Ralph* performed, the angrier I became. Any small mistake could set me off. I could not speak without swearing. Office life went up a key. Things became more frantic, more physical, as if they were heading to some kind of bloody conclusion. Friendships fractured, flirtations grew more intense. New camps were forming.

Somebody became overexcited one afternoon, cranked up a song he loved on the office stereo, and accidentally spilled some chips. He wanted to turn himself into a human vacuum cleaner, and had Elisabeth lift his legs into the air so he could suck the chips into his face from the carpet. Unfortunately, he kicked her in the head. The same person kicked her in the head when he gave a breakdancing exhibition, and asked her to spin his legs while he balanced on a motorbike helmet. Another time, I found him lying face down on the floor, wriggling and flapping. He was impersonating a Brazilian having sex. When Ivan was looking into an empty cardboard box, Big Ash crash-tackled him, threw him into the box and closed the lid.

Several people came into my office, closed the door and burst into tears. Everybody wanted a pay rise or a promotion or more staff for their department. When he was not locked in a box, Ivan was having horrible phone sex with his girlfriend overseas. Amanda was impossibly busy with the exploding fashion section and *Ralph Style*. I held no meetings, had

no inclination to delegate, came up with almost every feature and front-section idea myself, dictated questions for many of the interviews, wrote the coverlines, worked with Dave on the advertising presentations. Again, I thought I was infallible, multi-talented, God. (Had I not, after all, turned January into February?) I made a few stupid mistakes, but I could do the job in my sleep – and I did. I woke up drawing up the features list in my head, crossing out ad pages in the flat plan.

I thought far too much about New Zealand, and about revenge. I imagined myself under a red flag, clenched fist raised in the air, singing the *Internationale* over a mass grave of executives. Claire grew bored with hearing about it, then angry. I was not going to murder people, so why did I not just shut up? She hated the way I had become obsessed with *Ralph* again, saw that New Zealand was the new Marketing, and that I had to have an enemy. She wanted to talk about other things occasionally – such as what was going on in her life – but all I cared about was this one last thing.

I hired a new editor, and let him put together a magazine while I sulked in the corner. I had more New Zealand girls photographed, but every time I heard the name of their country, I detonated with fury. In the end, I had to ban people from saying it in the office, and New Zealand was always referred to as 'Holland' or 'Taiwan'.

We tried to get our New Zealand cover girls publicised through an ACP NZ magazine. One month, we accidentally sent over the pictures several weeks before the edition reached New Zealand. The magazine asked if they could run them immediately, which would be no use to us. I said they could not, they said they would not, then they did.

I kicked away my chair, stormed out of my office and into the boxing room at the Catholic Club on Castlereagh Street. I stood in front of the heavy bag, gave it a face and a name, and I smashed it like a glass. I hit it like I have never hit anything before, a bare-knuckle rip, an unprotected uppercut, a right cross that thrust deep and buckled the leather. I raced around the bag, thumping, laying punch after punch after punch, feinting and fighting, stalking and cornering and tearing the skin from my fists. I punched until both hands bled, until the bag slipped and slithered in my sweat, then I went home, and did not return to work for two days.

I quit again. I was offered a promotion again – this time to associate publisher – but I had already come far enough away from journalism. I was offered more money, but I was on a huge salary already, and I had far more than I could spend. On my last week in the job, I was called in to explain

to a new executive 'the formula' behind *Ralph*. I said there was no formula, that it had to keep changing to survive. It must always be exciting and young and fresh, like the nineteen-year-old girls it deified. It had to be stylish and fashionable, to make new celebrities, invent new characters, reflect new trends, borrow new slang. Any attempt to formularise the magazine would calcify it and, ultimately, kill it.

'I understand that,' he said, 'but what is your formula?'

Ralph was on deadline. Despite this, and as if he were deliberately delivering me the last page of a book, the executive suggested I call all my staff to a meeting. They could each bring an object that defined *Ralph*, choose a picture that looked like *Ralph*, and suggest words that described the character of the magazine. I refused.

I left *Ralph* for Antigua, Guatemala, found another Spanish school, studied in another colonial city. When the audit figures came out, I had them sent to me by email. We had outsold *FHM* in Australia, they outsold us in New Zealand, but overall we kicked their arses. We spanked them. We thrashed them. We stomped them. We won. I won. Brad won. Kerry Packer won. (James had long since disappeared.) Even Eric the workie won.

There are Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing. Rule Number Ten is: if two titles are of similar size, printed in similar numbers, and have similar marketing budgets spent in similar ways, The Best Magazine Will Sell the Most Copies.

Penthouse humiliated *Playboy* because it was more explicit and better written, better at being an upmarket porno. *The Picture* beat *People* because it was funnier and more explicit, better at being a downmarket porno. *Inside Sport* saw off its short-lived competitor, *Total Sport*, because it was incomparably more sophisticated, and better at being an all-sports review. We beat *FHM* because we were funnier, sexier and more useful, better at being a men's lifestyle magazine.

Ralph was voted the MPA Magazine of the Year. At that point, it was the only men's lifestyle title in the world to beat an international edition of *FHM* in an established market. I sent a message to ACP New Zealand: 'On behalf of EMAP Australia, I would like to thank you for all your efforts in ensuring *FHM* remained the best-selling Australian men's magazine in New Zealand. Now fuck off.'

EPILOGUE

Three volcanoes watched over Antigua: Agua, Fuego and Acatenango. Molten lava licked the slopes of Fuego, lending the night sky the colours of a prehistoric dawn.

I spent the days brushing up my Spanish at La Puente language school. My first teacher was a fascist, a middle-class supporter of the military's genocide of the Maya. I traded her in for Bartholome, who was part Maya.

In Spanish, I told Bartholome the story of *Ralph*. In return, he told me ghost stories about his city. Bartholome had a colour TV and an email address, he liked 80s rock music and wore a World Wrestling Federation t-shirt – but he was the child of peasants; he thought professional wrestling was a sport, and he desperately wanted to believe in spirits.

'I want to talk to them,' he told me. 'I don't have the capacity, and I don't know why.'

It was an hours bus ride from Antigua to the ramshackle village of San Andres Itzapa, where the people still revere the old gods, focussing their prayers on the deity-saint Maximon. A dusty row of jumbled stores led from the bus station to Maximon's chapel. The shops sold a range of Maximon idols, featuring the vaguely Ladino figure in green lounge suits,

black formal wear, indigenous patterned fabrics and campy Mexican mariachi costumes. He often had a cigar in his mouth, and usually a magnum of Krug in his hand. He is the only god I had seen who regularly wore spectacles. There were altars to Maximon in the street, adorned with cheap cigarettes, fresh flowers and rough local rum. Some of these altars he shared with Buddha.

Bartholome said Maximon was a Maya who looked after his people in the time of the conquistadors. The newly Christianised Maya told the Spanish he was San (Saint) Simon the apostle. When the priests realised 'San Simon' was a composite of the old gods, they declared that praying to Maximon was the same as worshipping Judas Iscariot. For this reason, Guatemala was the only place in the modern world where people pray to Saint Judas.

Maximon's chapel was a large, worn building lit by tables of burning candles. A life-size Maximon watched over the room from inside a glass cabinet. He looked distinguished in a black suit, yellow shirt and fedora, with a walking cane in his right hand, but his sophisticated image was dented slightly by the Winnie the Pooh beach towel draped across his knees. 'The last time I came here, he was wearing a Looney Tunes scarf,' said Bartholome.

Beneath the Maximon figure was a painting of the Virgin Mary; next to it was a plaster statue of Judas Iscariot. Outside in the courtyard, a Mayan priest and priestess burned offerings for affluent-looking Ladinos, while drunks, small children and skeletal dogs wandered listlessly between the fires, and a fat man wearing a mobile phone had his aura cleansed with an egg.

I shot a whole roll of film at San Andres. I photographed Maximon in the shops, at his altars and in his chapel. I used my usual camera, but when I had the film developed, something very strange had occurred: every frame had come out, and they were all in focus. This had never happened before.

To Bartholome, raised on the shameful dishonesties of Guatemalan politics, nothing was what it seemed. A Museum of Typical Costume had opened in Antigua, but Bartholome thought it was a front for a shaman's practice, because none of the clothing had explanatory labels and there was an altar to Maximon in the back room.

It turned out he was right. The shaman was a sincere, spiritual Maya, who founded the museum to help visitors understand his cosmology. There are twenty nahuales, or guiding spirits, in the Maya world. Each is named

for an animal. I have always felt shortchanged by Western astrology – being a Virgo (virgin, hippy-looking) – and by Chinese horoscopes – being a rabbit (sexually active but uncool, hippy-looking). I wanted my animal guide to be a panther, or at least a puma.

The shaman looked me up in his book of birthdays.

'Your spirit is the conejo.'

Brilliant. A rabbit.

The shaman wanted to know how he could help us. I told him we would like to feel the power of Maximon.

The next few minutes flashed past in a startling cacophony of quickly spoken Spanish. Somehow I ended up with six coloured candles in my hand, crawling under a wooden bar to get inside the altar. The shaman told me not to be afraid if I suddenly felt cold, as that would be just the energy of Maximon.

I lit my candles and balanced them on a log – which sounds easy until you try to do it – while the shaman addressed the sacred flame in Cakchiquel, his Mayan language.

Whatever the spirits told him, he seemed agitated. At one point, he appeared to be arguing with the sacred flame.

He switched between Cakchiquel and Spanish, between addressing Maximon and addressing me. He said to me, 'You have been hurt very badly by very many people, including a woman, yes?'

Ah, that would be D.

'There is divine justice,' he said, solemnly. 'This is not an easy thing to heal.'

So true.

'There is no quick way to do this,' he said. 'These candles are not sufficient.'

He lit another seven candles for me, and talked to them animatedly.

'There was a death,' he said.

Dave. Merv. My dad. My grandad.

'You are all broken up inside,' he said. 'Your life has no meaning. It just goes around in a pointless spiral.'

Steady on, mate.

I must have looked a bit sulky, because he added quickly, 'It is not me saying this, it is the sacred flame.'

He pointed to the log, where four of my six candles had toppled over. 'Look,' he said, 'Maximon rejects your candles.'

The Shaman booked me in for a full cleansing ceremony one week later, on my Mayan birthday. In the meantime, he told me to ask for pardon from God, my family, my ancestors and my nahual.

On the way home, I went over the conversation with Bartholome, to make sure I understood it properly.

It is easy to confuse the subject with the object in Spanish. According to Bartholome, what the shaman actually said was that I had hurt many people very badly in my life, including a woman, and there was no easy way to make up for this.

When I went to the bathroom, the shaman told him: 'He has a very bad problem with death.' In other words, the shaman thought I had come to see him because I had killed somebody.

'And the woman,' said Bartholome gleefully, 'you probably raped her.'

So I had to pray for forgiveness – because I was a murderer and a rapist – to God, my grandad and rabbits.

Before the cleansing, I visited a Mayan astrologer, just in case my Mayan horoscope said, 'Whatever you do, don't get cleansed.'

There was a priestess with an office in La Casa de Nahuales (The House of Spirits), who advertised her services making maps of the soul. She wore long black clothes and a ring on each finger. She said she would be happy to map my soul, but it would cost me $25. This was because it took a long time to map a soul, 'even though it is easier these days with the computer'.

The computer?

Later, I was eating lunch alone in Frida's Restaurant and Bar, surrounded by reproductions of Frida Kahlo paintings, when I was approached by an American woman. She asked me a question in English – which I answered in English – before asking me in Spanish whether I spoke English.

At first I ignored her, assuming she was part of the worldwide plague of evangelical Christians who target people sitting on their own, but she quickly told me she was the Jewish wife of a doctor doing aid work in Guatemala.

I had not had a real conversation in English for two weeks, so I told her everything that had been happening.

To my astonishment, she quickly took the shaman's side, and said I must have killed somebody in another life.

I told her about my nahual.

'A rabbit,' she said. She thought for a moment, then asked, 'What colour is your rabbit?'

Bartholome and I had a long list of offerings to buy for the ceremony. Maximon and the nahuales – because we were going to speak with all of them – wanted cigars and rum, chocolate and sugar, more than 100 candles, and all manner of native plants and herbs.

We spent a morning in the markets, trying to track down cuilcos – which Bartholome had never heard of ('We'll just ask for them and see what the señorita gives us') – from stores run by toothless old women who watched us as if they knew I was a murderer.

Bartholome and I shared a touching bonding moment. I had felt sick for a week, ever since the shaman said Maximon might visit me in a dream.

'Are you scared?' asked Bartholome.

'A tiny bit,' I lied. 'And you?'

'A tiny bit,' he lied. 'Okay, so it's normal then.'

'It's normal,' I agreed.

Several blocks away, a string of fireworks exploded. Bartholome jumped several inches into the air.

I liked the idea of being cleansed. The year before, I had shaken hands with somebody who had always intended to betray me, and ever since then I had felt my right hand was smeared with shit. On the day of the ceremony, we arrived at the museum with three bags full of tribute. Bartholome, concerned at our previous misunderstanding, asked the shaman to slow down his speech. 'And the spirits also have to speak more slowly,' he said.

The shaman sprinkled the sugar in a circle, and inside the circle drew the Mayan balanced cross. He placed one enormous slab of chocolate at each of the four cardinal points, and arranged the cigars and mysterious sundries into a kind of aromatic bonfire, which he lit using the rum.

The smell was sickly sweet, like incense and wine in a Catholic church. All the burning tobacco, which is sacred to the Maya, gave the impression of a crowd. I knelt before the fire, and the shaman called up the spirits.

My nahuales were sad because I would not accept my dilemma. Nothing I had said had convinced them I was not a killer. The first three spirits asked me to reconcile with my victims.

I threw a handful of cuilcos (which turned out to be plant resins) into the fire.

The shaman asked the spirits to touch us, to let us experience their power. I felt hot, but then I was kneeling in front of an open fire. Kame, the nahual of death, was still pissed at me, but Tizikin the eagle was happy because I was going to get all the money, property and travel I wanted from life. I suspected Tizikin was happy every time he met a foreigner.

Different nahuales required different coloured candles, tossed into the fire rather than lit at the wick. Blood red candle wax melted like lava, and flowed into the courtyard like the tongues of Volcán Fuego. There were spirits in the flames. Anyone could see them. They changed shape and danced, and beckoned me towards the fire.

The shaman told me to burn my pink candles, and beg forgiveness from the nahual who protected women.

I thought of everything I had ever done wrong, and for a moment I swore I could smell my ex-wife's perfume in the air. Like Bartholome – who was waiting with my camera in his pocket, to photograph the spirits when they materialised – I wanted to believe.

The shaman completed my cleansing by dusting me from my forehead to my knees with five sacred leaves, then he filled his mouth with agua florida, a kind of medicinal water, and spat it all over me.

The ceremony took an hour and forty-five minutes. On the shaman's instructions, I ran around the fire three times, five times, then thirteen times more, but I did not see the gods, I did not hear the gods and I did not feel the gods.

I was dizzy, I breathed incense, and there were flames at my feet. Was that a spiritual experience? Maybe it was. Bartholome felt nothing, either. He was disappointed but philosophical.

'Many people have the ability to feel the presence of spirits,' he said. 'Perhaps it's a privilege, perhaps it's bad luck.'

I was still furious in Guatemala, partly because of ACP NZ, and partly because I had given up both complex carbs and alcohol, in the hope of losing my by now customary '*Ralph* gut'. I suffered chicken rage and mild DTs, but channelled it all into exercise. I spoke Spanish all day, and watched Spanish-language television in the evening. I tried to think in Spanish, but I could only think stuff like, 'The fly is fresh' or 'Your nahual demands contrition', so I returned to English in my head.

I planned to meet Claire in London then go on to Spain, where I would talk like Hemingway with bullfighters and bar-owners, and order

the correct dishes in tapas bars. After a month with Bartholome, my Spanish was good enough to allow me to carry on a three-hour conversation with a Guatemalan woman on my flight out to Los Angeles. Even the passport officer at the airport complimented me on my skill.

I changed planes at LA to a flight to London via Frankfurt, I had a drink, fell asleep, and woke up as the flight descended. My ears were pounding, and I tried to equalise the pressure by pinching my nostrils and blowing hard through my nose. My left side cleared, my right side did not. Ever.

I landed in London, feeling as though my knees were shackled, my feet bound, and my head was under water. By the time I reached my hotel, I could not stand up. I tried to check in at reception without standing up, a practice that raises eyebrows even in the squalid Bayswater pubs I frequent.

It was the height of the deep vein thrombosis scare, and the staff, convinced I was suffering from 'economy-class syndrome', called an ambulance. Two cheeky cockney ambos took me to Paddington hospital ('Australia? I've got a niece living over there. Luverley.') and left me in the casualty waiting room.

There were about 400 people ahead of me ('You're lucky, mate. It's pretty quiet for this time of night') so I sneaked out and took a cab back to the hotel.

The next day, I could hardly hear. A doctor came to my room, gave me an injection that made me vomit, and sent me to a specialist. The specialist warned me I might be suffering from a brain tumour, and booked me in for a CAT scan. The specialist had also feared I might have a structural abnormality in my skull that would prevent me from flying again. I made confused, expensive, but quite pleasing plans to return to Australia via Eurostar, the Trans-Siberian Express and the Fairstar Funship.

My skull turned out to be the same shape as anybody else's, and I did not have a tumour, or 'the bends', nor had my eardrum burst. I had suffered 'total cochlear failure', and lost 100 per cent of the hearing in my right ear, about 10 per cent of the hearing in my left ear, and gained a maddening cicada of tinnitus somewhere in between.

The specialist could offer no diagnosis beyond the desperately unhelpful, 'It's just one of those things'.

Claire and I flew to Barcelona, and meandered south to Andalusia. Wherever I went, it was very difficult to communicate with the Spanish, because I could barely hear them.

We hired a car for eleven weeks to drive around France. When people asked, 'Did you face any special challenges driving around France?' I said, 'None at all.' This, of course, was because I could not drive.

Passengering around France, however, I confronted several peculiar obstacles. While Claire lazed idly through her reflexive routine of pedal-pushing and steering, I was an electrical storm of activity, a tireless human whirlwind, dexterously changing the cassette with one hand and balancing the road atlas in the other, while simultaneously imaginatively interpreting French road signs, and offering invaluable advice such as, 'I think you should've turned left back there.'

Were my efforts appreciated?

Is the Pope a Zoroastrian?

My navigation was denigrated and scorned from Toulouse to Verdun. I accepted every vilification with a heroic conviction that history would provide my vindication. In the Age of Discovery, the navigator was king. The name of Vasco da Gama lives on, but who remembers the colourless journeymen who sailed his ships?

Sticklers for detail may point out that Vasco da Gama could read a map – and in this respect, as in his predilection for many-sided hats, the great man and I differed. I could marvel at the magnificent inevitability of a road map's arabesque, in which paths converged and conflated to form a decoration like the calligraphy around the dome of a mosque (but with McDonald's restaurants and service stations marked at the appropriate points). I could not, however, relate the pleasing pattern on the page to the positions of roads and buildings in the corporeal world.

None of this mattered at first, because Claire could not drive the car. We crossed the Spanish border at Andorra, and picked up a Peugeot 406 at Toulouse Airport.

I approached the glossy woman at the airport desk and announced in extremely peccable French, 'The car is here, brothel-owning lady, for us.'

Luckily, she spoke English.

When we found our Peugeot in the car park, Claire could not release the handbrake. She pulled, she pushed, she pressed buttons. She grunted and sighed and almost cried. She handed me the manual and asked me what was wrong.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I can't drive, and I can't read French.'

When the handbrake finally and mysteriously released, it never stuck again, and we had no more trouble with the car for at least a day.

'Remind me to drive on the right,' begged Claire.

She immediately took the first corner out of the car park on the left, and I instantly forgot my sole task as passenger, leaving her to shout to herself, 'Stay on the right! Stay on the right!' like John Howard deciding his position on immigration. She attempted to indicate, but turned on the windscreen wipers instead. This happened every day for months.

We drove first through the heartbreakingly beautiful countryside of the Languedoc-Roussillon, to the walled medieval city of Carcassonne. I was in charge of interpreting signs, and was able to assure a sceptical Claire that 'Aimez vous nos enfants', accompanied by a picture of laughing schoolkids playing by the side of a road, did not, as she thought, mean 'Aim at our children'.

French warning signs are infused with drama, verve and emotion. A plaque on a bridge near Chamonix illustrates the quite complex idea of 'Don't-throw-bottles-over-the-side-of-the-mountain-because-they-might-hit-somebody-sweeping-up-the-snow' with a silhouette of the snow-sweeper throwing up his arms in helpless terror at the sight of the casually murderous glass vessel bearing down on him.

A 'Don't-touch-this-thing-or-you'll-get-electrocuted' sign on the Côte d'Azur combines the comic strip line of Pop Art with the nightmarish howl of German Expressionism. The strikingly detailed figure of the man-who-ignored-the-sign-and-touched-the-thing sizzles and dances at the point of a lightning bolt. He is wearing his zoot suit and flat-heeled boots. The message is clear: he is being executed for his poor fashion sense.

I digress, as Claire often did when she followed my directions. We travelled along winding roads to the Cathar hill fortress of Peyrepertuse. The Peugeot did not take to the climb well, grinding and scraping and generally making strained, tortuous progress. When we reached the castle car park, steam was streaming from under the bonnet, as if the engine were about to explode. We tried to open the hood, but we could not find a trip switch. I examined the manual, but it was still written in French.

I could not really help, because I cannot drive and I cannot read French.

I searched my Collins pocket dictionary for 'bonnet popper', while the driver searched the car and found it by the pedals. By the time we got it open, the smoking had stopped anyway.

A typically alarmist French sign warned us against leaving anything in the car. A giant, hooked hand, an evil black claw, swooped towards a

shattered window to grab a camera. We packed whatever we could into our daypacks and carried it all to the ruin in the afternoon sun. My bag – including a laptop, power pack, tape recorder, cassettes and Discman – weighed about six kilos (which is 10 kilos when you're climbing).

On our first day in Toulouse, I met a man wearing a beret. This and each subsequent time I saw a beret, my heart throbbed with simple happiness, as it did whenever I spotted somebody carrying a baguette. Since every person seems to carry a baguette between the hours of 7 am and 11 am, especially in Provence, mornings were a constant fount of moronic joy. I was especially pleased if I noticed a man in a beret carrying a baguette.

I never actually came across a man in a beret carrying a baguette and wearing a hooped matelot shirt and a waxed moustache, leaping in the air with the sheer exhilaration of being French, but there was one illustrated on the jacket of my Instant French! cassette. This cassette, while unexceptional, proved extremely popular during our first days in the car, since we had no other tapes.

I had assured Claire that all new cars came equipped with a CD player 'as standard'. I had bought fourteen new CDs to listen to on the Peugeot's non-existent CD player, and no music cassettes to slide into its actually existing tape deck. We were forced to default to Instant French! with its not-very-useful constructions such as, 'He disappeared ten years ago', in case somebody should ask us what happened to Typesetting Bob.

Provence, even without a soundtrack, was glorious. Colours are deeper in the Provençal sky, food is more delicious from its fields. Tomatoes are redder, grapes grow to the size of golf balls, olives swell like dates, garden peas are sweeter, and strawberries are riper.

Lettuce, curiously, is the same old crap.

We finally discovered the CD player in Fréjus-St Raphael on the Côte d'Azur. It was hidden in the boot, safe from the giant, disembodied claw that menaces parked cars.

In Aix-en-Provence, where Cezanne repeatedly painted the looming Mount St Victoire, I exercised the passenger's prerogative to get drunk at dinner. Unfortunately, I did not fulfil the passenger's obligation to remember the name of our hotel or its address. I studied Cézanne for my history of art degree, and could tell Claire that Mount St Victoire had inspired a major step in the move towards non-representational painting, but I could not tell her where it was in relation to our bedroom.

Like every city in France, Aix (as we who know it call it) is protected

from tourists by a huge, looping ring-road that ensures its heart is impenetrable to all but the most determined visitors. We missed the exit for our hotel, and had to drive once around the city to get back to it. Then we realised we had been following the wrong signs, and it was not our hotel anyway, so we had to drive all the way around the city again.

No matter how hard I tried, I could not think of the name of the place – I still cannot – and all I really wanted to do was sit and be drunk, occasionally repeating, 'I can't drive and I can't read French' but even I could see this was not particularly helpful.

We eventually found it by accident. It was five minutes from the restaurant, and it took us an hour and a half to get there. This demonstrates the time travellers can save by having their own transport.

We bought books to enhance our cultural experience, novels and non-fiction about French life. I purchased Lolita, mistakenly believing it was set in Paris. We crisscrossed France, my much younger girlfriend and I, driving from motel to motel, like Humbert and Lolita except without so much sex.

The further we went, the more stuff we acquired. As well as the books, we collected clothes, souvenirs, more CDs, and piles and piles of travel brochures. Lolita, of course, bought shoes.

At one point she had five pairs. I did not mind giving her footwear a bit of a holiday, but I could not see why we had to keep the empty boxes. I opened one to demonstrate its uselessness, to find it was stuffed with old plastic bags. Charmingly domesticated Claire had re-created the kitchen plastic bag drawer in the cramped confines of the car boot!

By the time we reached Paris, my job had become largely mechanised. The driver had found the Michelin website, into which she could key in the starting point and destination of any trip, and it would spit out the fastest, most scenic or least toll-heavy route. Its directions had a sickening accuracy – 'Travel NW for 180 metres (0.2 minutes), then NNW for 335 metres (0.33 minutes)' – unlike my own, 'Turn there! No, there! I mean there! There, where we just passed …'

I felt as useless as an ashtray on a skateboard, a learning centre, or a plastic bag drawer in a car.

We met up with my brother. He was surprised I could not speak fluent French. Didn't I study it at school?

'Ouvrez le chien,' he reminded me, helpfully.

Open the dog.

It was the first time I had really seen him since he started living with Jo, but we managed to hardly mention the fact. Instead, we got drunk, sang the old songs and told the old stories, two actors playing the same parts even though the scenery has shifted behind them.

My brother was invaluable in the car, since he can both drive and read maps, so he took over the passengering. Watching him at work, falling into all the same traps as I did, I was able to formulate the Five Immutable Rules of Passengering in the much the same way as I had put together the Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing:

(1) Never apologise, never explain.
There is no answer to any question that begins, 'Why didn't you …?' Except, of course, 'Because I'm a halfwit.'

(2) Never give up.
As soon as you throw down the map and announce, 'I'll tell you where we bloody are! We're lost is where we fucking are!' the driver will calmly turn the next corner and you will be facing the Champs Elysées.

(3) Never blame the map.
The map is not wrong. You are wrong.

(4) Never hesitate.
When the driver yells 'Left or right? Left or right? Left or right?' you might as well just choose one. It is your indecision that is infuriating.

(5) Never attempt to enlist the driver in your own misreading of the map.
Do not ask, 'Doesn't it look like that to you?' because it will not look like that to her; it will look exactly as the cartographer intended. Besides, she has been driving all day and she is tired and it is the only thing she has asked of you this whole trip, and if you cannot just do one tiny thing …

AFTERWORD

I was very good at making men's lifestyle magazines. This seemed strange to me, because I had never been much good at anything else. I would not advocate getting beaten unconscious and left in an alleyway as a prerequisite for success in men's publishing – although I can think of a couple of executives who would benefit from the experience. I would not suggest anybody send their son to a boys' school – let alone a rubbish one – but it did teach male values: the need for vicarious violence, symbolic rebellion, constant humour. No-one – least of all soldiers – should grow up in a garrison town, but at the time it was as exciting and glamorous as New York. I watched the army swagger and sneer, afraid of the town, afraid of women, afraid of each other, and I learned something about men. Men don't grow up in all-male societies. Schoolboys who never have to deal with women never mature. The military is a bunch of kids, still living by playground rules. Men in prison are stunted, bewildered, incomplete people.

I was very good at making men's lifestyle magazines because I knew all that.

I could make magazines for young men because I was brought up differently to most people my age. My stepdad was only ten years older than me. My parents played the same rock records, read the same hippy books,

had the same leisure interests as *Ralph* readers' parents. I felt as close to their generation as my own. I grew up differently too. When my schoolfriends were getting married, I was at university with a gang of mates. When my schoolfriends were having children, I was travelling with a gang of mates. When my university friends got married and had children, I was in Australia with a gang of mates. Now that my divorced friends were fighting over the children, I was going out with a woman twelve years younger than me.

I was very good at making men's lifestyle magazines, but was there any point?

The press sneered when the category emerged but, in the last few years, the print media has become more like men's lifestyle magazines. Lists and trivia are scattered through the tabloids; there are jokes where there used to be none. Interviews were once solemn and respectful; now irrelevant surprise questions are a feature of almost any Q&A. Our influence has altered the broadsheets too. Youth-oriented supplements such as *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s 'Radar' and '48 Hours' lift the entire men's lifestyle format, from the irreverent attitude to the news-value-free 'how-to'/'how-it-works'/'how-it-feels' stories to the reliance on first-person narratives. Jokey captions (or, as one of our readers called them, 'those little stories you put in the corner of pictures') have become so common, it is difficult to know what is going on in photographs anymore.

Men's lifestyle magazines internationally have changed, lost readership, got worse. *Loaded* has become that which it set out to parody, a matt-paper, perfect-bound *News of the World*. Men's lifestyle journalists, like the rest of us, have lost their politics. *Loaded*'s James Brown briefly took over UK *GQ*, included the Nazis on his list of the twentieth century's best dressed men, and immediately parted company with his publisher, Conde Naste. In the US, the unchallengable market leader is *Maxim*, a brilliant, superbly designed product that even its publisher, Felix Denis, admits has no soul. *Ralph* had a soul, though. I never stopped chuckling at Captain Stupid, or giggling at the picture of the Doner, or sniggering at Ivan's face with (or without) drawn-on glasses, or the unusual excuses my staff invented to explain why they had not done what I had asked.

The first words I heard about sex came from a pair of older boys who joined me on the swings in our estate. 'When a woman really likes a man,' one told me, 'she puts his balls in her mouth.' I did not believe this at the time, and nothing that has happened to me subsequently has changed my

opinion – but I remember that confounding curiosity about what people did in bed. I wondered if I could do it too, and if I could do it well, and I sweated through vivid, virginal nightmares, in which women turned out not to be made the way I thought they were.

Through Yvonne's column, through Babes Behaving Badly, through our dating tips from girls to boys, *Ralph* tried to help all the clueless, fumbling virgins forced to strut around like studs. We tried to fill in the gaps. Women learn about men, sex and relationships through a process that begins with *Dolly* magazine when they are ten years old and progresses through *Cleo* and *Cosmo* to *She*. All of them repeatedly address the same questions: What is normal? What is permissible? What can I do on a date/at a party/in bed?

Men learn about women, sex and relationships through the lies of their friends or from naked centrefolds found blowing across public parks. There are many reasons boys use pornography, but one of them is: they think it shows them what women *are*. Boys do not have the support that is available for girls from an imaginary peer group of publications that grows up as they do. From their teens through to their twenties, they secretly turn to their girlfriends' magazines as if they were older sisters, to try to find the truth. Through my last year at *Ralph*, I did my best to help them, to be a good mate.

I got a lot out of men's magazines. ACP was immensely generous to me. If I ever felt my magazine was being treated shabbily, I rarely believed I was. However, the lesson of the pay office is the lesson of corporate life. They do not pay us, we pay them. The journalists, the photographers, the designers, the editors and the subs make the product the rest of the company sells. It is the profit we earn, with our stories and pictures, that buys the company cars for the brand managers, the expense account lunches for the advertising salespeople, the gambling chips for Kerry Packer.

We should be their bosses.

APPENDIX
The Ten Immutable Rules of Magazine Publishing

Rule Number One: Beautiful Women Sell Magazines

Rule Number Two: Crashing Aeroplanes Do Not Sell Magazines

Rule Number Three: Celebrity Nudes Sell Out Magazines

Rule Number Four: Successful Publications Supply a Service

Rule Number Five: Never Call Your Magazine after a Bodily Function

Rule Number Six: When Somebody Says Their Industry Is 'Based on Relationships', It Means They Do Nothing Useful

Rule Number Seven: When in Doubt, Consider Brad's Rhetorical Question, 'Should We Give the Readers More of What They Like? Or Less?'

Rule Number Eight : In Publishing as in Life, When People Say 'I Love You', It Means They Want to Fuck You

Rule Number Nine: Writers Who Adopt Alter Egos Eventually Grow into Them

Rule Number Ten: The Best Magazine Will Sell the Most Copies